



THE TOP 50 GAMES OF 2011
YOUR GAME OF THE YEAR PG.34

MASS EFFECT 3
THE FIRST SIX HOURS PG.68



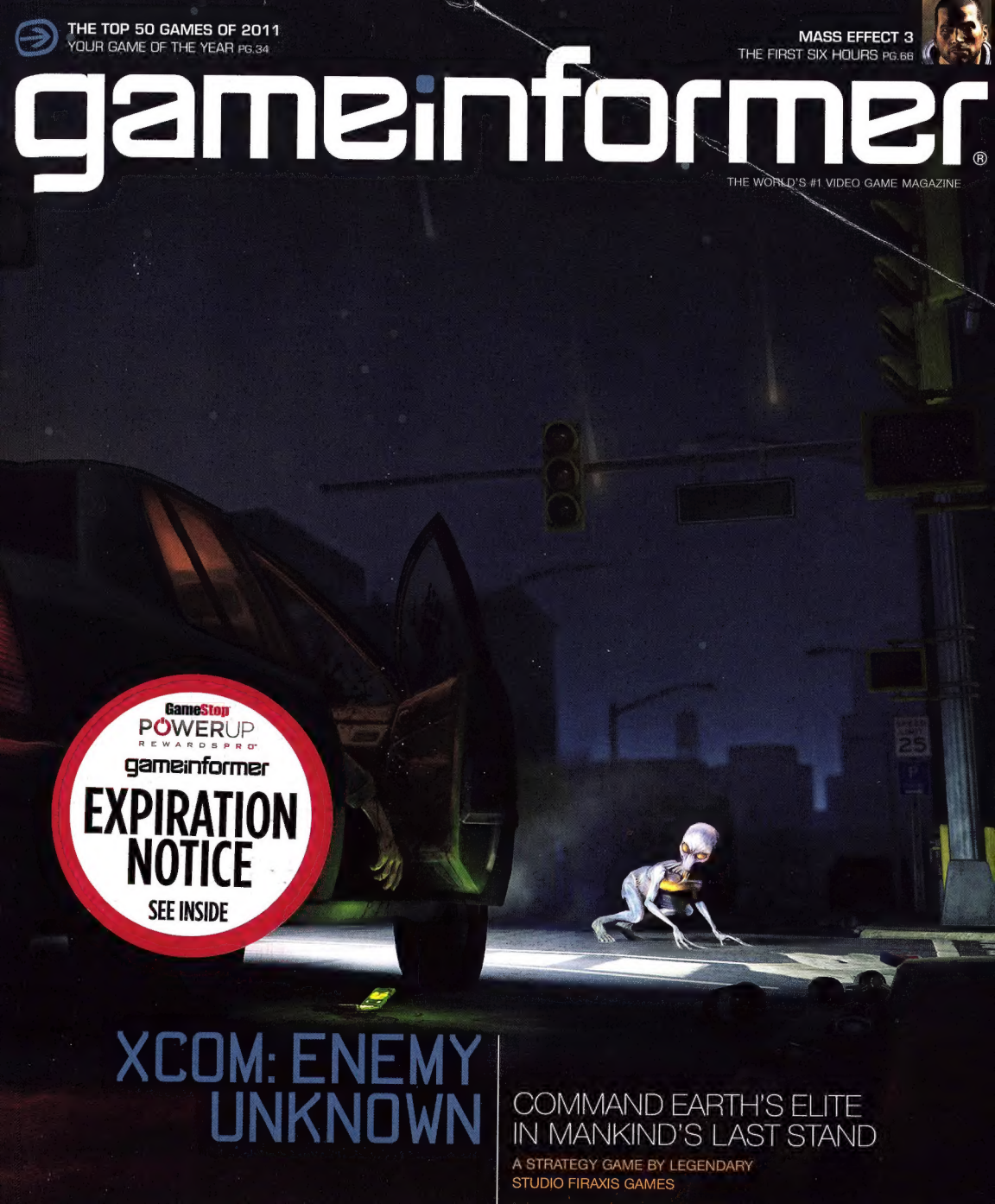
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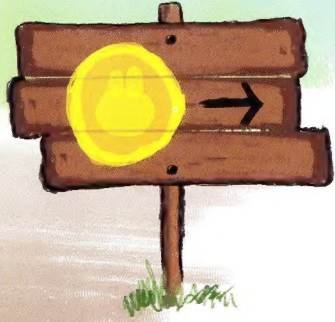
XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

COMMAND EARTH'S ELITE
IN MANKIND'S LAST STAND

A STRATEGY GAME BY LEGENDARY
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The Story of the Year



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

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

I'm not sure how the video game industry ranks when compared with other forms of entertainment, but when it comes to charity and giving back I'm proud of all the work being done out there by gamers at large. (Admittedly, not a lot of it being done by me. Bad me.)

From Child's Play to the dozens of game-a-thons and events that happen throughout the year, gamers do a good job of giving back. By no means do I want to trivialize or diminish these great deeds, but one thing really blew me away this year – the story of Owain's Wish and the wonderful people at PopCap who made it happen.

This 10-year old boy was introduced to PopCap through the Make-A-Wish foundation after being diagnosed with pre-B acute lymphocytic leukemia in 2010. Owain's wish was to make a video game.

I don't know what you were like when you were 10, but I vividly remember taking pen to paper and designing my own games. Sitting and wondering what could be was almost as fun as the games themselves.

PopCap gave Owain his chance to come in and tell them about his game, as his father had told them, "What he really wanted was to hang out with 'real game designers.'"

Little did they know what was to come. In their own words, the PopCap team was "blown away when he came with a PowerPoint presentation and basically walked them through the game." The following is an excerpt from PopCap's own site.

"Here's how his first slide began: 'You are a military genius who has just been released from cryo-sleep. Your brilliance in the Lunar War convinced the A.S.P. (Allied Star Police) to put you in cryogenic slumber, just in case WWII showed up. It's not exactly WORLD war three, more Galactic War one...'

Owain described his game in detail as he went through each slide. He had mapped out pretty much everything; storyline, unit types, fire-power, shields, respawn times. We were blown away. Clearly, Owain was not your average fourth grader."

Owain is far from average indeed. This story hit home on so many levels – from challenges with leukemia within my own family, to my dreams as a kid – and it all culminates in the ultimate power of video games to heal and make the world a better place. Kudos to PopCap for doing something amazing, and here's to Owain for Allied Star Police.

The game is out on iOS now, and it's fantastic. But the story is even better. As of this writing Owain was being discharged, which is the best news of all.

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XCOM: Enemy Unknown

This is the XCOM that fans of the 1994 PC game have been waiting for. Taking command of a shadowy organization seeking to protect a terrified populous from alien invaders means balancing strategic and tactical control of your forces.

by Adam Biessener



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Not Dead Yet



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Skyrim Adventurer's Guide

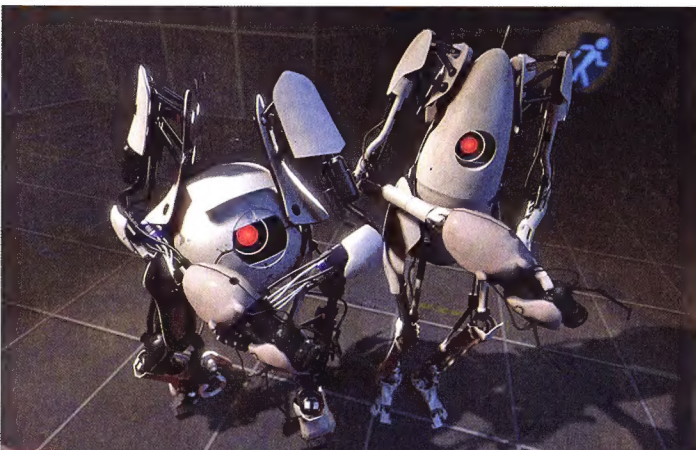


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This month we got our hands on a big, bloody chunk of *Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City*, checked out the console version of fantastic PC RPG *The Witcher 2*, and shed light on *Alan Wake*'s new nightmare

» 86 Reviews

Resident Evil: Revelations gives hesitant gamers another great reason to buy a 3DS, and *Final Fantasy XIII-2* makes some great gameplay improvements while taking a big step backwards in the story department

» 100 Game Over

We squeezed the statistical goodness out of our massive Top 50 Games of the Year 2011, condensing it into a pure, numerical smoothie for your convenient consumption



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Alan Wake's American Nightmare



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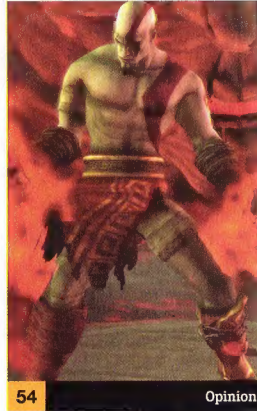


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This month in Feedback, readers fear an app-fueled gaming apocalypse, question the legality of lending a game to a friend (huh?), describe which enemies get their hearts and bladders pumping the most, and complain about every review we've ever written. Happy holidays!

Six Appeal

When I saw the word "Rainbow" and the number "6" on the cover of issue 224, I cried. I've always felt that nowadays shooter titles lack that strategic feel that the Rainbow Six series has so well expressed. I like to feel as though I'm controlling the situation during a gunfight instead of running and gunning Rambo-style. Thank you for giving us strategists a beacon of hope.

**Carlos Cruz
Bayamon, Puerto Rico**

I'm not the target demographic that occupies the minds of game developers. I'm a PhD student, a college instructor, and a female with a strong sense of the feminist perspective. I'm also an outspoken gamer. The Rainbow 6: Patriots cover story by Matt Bertz and Jeff Cork is one of the best features I've ever read. It is not an easy task to address such complex issues, and I want to thank the authors for a well-articulated, professional perspective that I honestly believe advanced an adult conversation – something that has been missing in the childish displays of temper tantrums in mass media. I used this article as an example in two of my courses, and students immediately connected the material from the classes with the themes presented in the feature. This is why I am proud to be a gamer, and I want to take a moment to thank you for helping me demonstrate the relevance of the industry.

**Andrea Button
via email**

Sharing Is Caring

I've had a question for a while and I've looked it up on Google, but haven't found a definitive answer: Is it illegal to lend/borrow video games? And is there a difference between piracy and lending?

**Jim Jun
via email**

Not only is lending a game to a friend legal, it fuels one of the most important factors in video game sales: word of mouth. Don't ever feel bad about lending your favorite game to a friend; as long as you're not making copies of it, you're contributing to the success of a franchise, not harming it.

Just For Kids?

I believe you missed the targeted audience when you reviewed Disney Universe. True, this game is not of the same caliber as Arkham City, Battlefield 3, or Skyrim, but it was never meant to be. As a father of three young children, Disney Universe's basic gameplay and similar level of depth – not to mention repetitiveness – is just right for them. I do agree that if you are a single adult with no little ones this game will not satisfy your need to climb a tower and assassinate a corrupt bishop, or strap on some juggernaut armor and lay waste, but for parents who want to enjoy playing a game with their kids, well, here you go. Just try in the future to keep in mind whom the game is for.

**James Jones
via email**

Actually, Jeff Cork, our reviewer of Disney Universe, is a married father of two who knows the value of a game you can play with your kids. He also knows that games for children don't have to be overly simple or repetitive for little ones to enjoy them. Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars is a great collect-a-thon without the repetition, but if your kids are looking for more Disney-themed fun, check out Kinect Disney Adventures. Kids in the two- to six-year-old range will also enjoy (and learn a lot from) Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Modern Waah-fare

I think it would be very good of you to address that Metacritic user reviews for Modern Warfare 3 are vastly different than critic reviews. What do you think about that? Do you think it is only uneducated trolls or the biased that are making up this majority? Or do you think that critics are being overly kind to MW 3 because it gives Call of Duty fans more of what they want, when perhaps they truly aren't so mindless as to not want a little bit of innovation? I promise that I am coolheaded and not biased, just curious.

**Ty
Hebron, MD**

The massive disparity between Modern Warfare 3's critical review average (81 for PC) and user review average (21 for PC) only demonstrates the willingness some have to forgo honest assessments of a game in favor of trying to make a cheap point.

Wanting more innovation from a title is a valid complaint, but doesn't justify the countless zeros MW 3 has accrued on Metacritic - that's the work of mindless fanatics. Kind of like these two Sonic groupies...



Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Can you tell me when the next Pikmin game is coming out?"

We sure will.

"Why does your magazine smell SOOOOO good?! Should I be worried?"

As long as you stop at smelling, you're okay.

"How can I prove to you that I am from the future?"

If you were from the future, you'd already know the answer to that.



Letters From The Edge

With every bit of respect that I owe you guys, I really need to get something off my head. Why is it that whenever an actual good game, like Sonic Generations or a new Resident Evil or Silent Hill comes out, you criticize it? Yet whenever a new crappy game that has had no changes whatsoever, like Zelda: Skyward Sword or Modern Warfare 3, comes out, you give it a perfect score? I find some of your magazine's reviews horrifyingly biased against certain games.

**Anonymous
via email**

I hate how Tim says that Sonic Generations is a bad game. Even though I only recently started to like Sonic and haven't really played any of his games, that doesn't mean I'm going to take criticisms of any of them lightly. In fact, Sonic Generations should receive a 9 just for being a Sonic game. Besides that, there's a second reason why I feel that it should get a 9: The two levels of Sonic Generations that I played in the demo were great. One last thing: By listing the "bad" things about Sonic Generations, you've only made me want to play the game even more to see if it really is that bad.

**Kyle Allen
via email**

You really showed us, Kyle. Your plan to play a bad game because we criticized it for being bad is a bold new approach to consumerism that we're sure Sega will appreciate.

Best Opening Line to a Feedback Letter:

"You're reading the message of an infuriated Sonic series fan since birth."

Reader Gibberish:

"You guys should package a cereal bowl filled with cereal and toilet paper with every magazine."

Best News Tip of the Month:

"I have a suggestion for top ten dorks of 2011. Dan Ryckert."

gi spy



(Left) The entire team at Obsidian was on hand to greet Dan, Bryan, and Ben Hanson for South Park: The Game. It's the GI version of *Where's Waldo?* (Right) The spot-an-editor fun continues in New Orleans, where Andy and Bertz attended the wedding of the beautiful Mariam Sughayer, of Disney Interactive.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



- Review Page (i.e. "Your Opinions Are Different Than Mine!") **28%**
- Gaming's Most Frightening Foes **25%**
- Rainbow 6 Revival Excitement **19%**
- Skyrim Bug Complaints **12%**
- Online Pass Discontent **9%**
- 'Is [Insert Title] Being Remade?' **7%**

Question Of The Month:

If you had the power to permanently kill one video game franchise, which would it be, and why?



Devil May Cackle

There appears to be a typo in regards to the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly in issue 224. When talking about the Devil May Cry HD Collection, it states "\$39.99 is not a bad price for two good games." However, there are in fact three games in the collection. Could this be a typo, or do you think only two out of the three are good games?

Karen Velasquez
via email

It feels like you're really close to figuring this one out, so we're going to let you think about it awhile longer...

A Launch Day To Remember

I can't describe my excitement for the release of The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. I pored over every Zelda article, review, and of course my favorite, the anniversary article in Game Informer. However, nothing could have prepared me for my daughter's reaction when we picked up the game. In the middle of the crowded mall, onlookers gasped as she screamed and wept openly, hugging her beloved and much anticipated Skyward Sword as if it was a long lost puppy. All I can say is I understand how she felt; I had the same reaction to the release of Twilight Princess in the same video game store. I have passed on the Master Sword to the next generation and I am proud beyond words. By the way, we are not allowed to patronize that mall anymore.

Amanda
Delaware, OH

Thanks for sharing your story, Amanda. The unbridled passion children can have for video games is a beautiful thing...until they get old enough to write hate mail, anyway.

A 99¢ Revolution?

I constantly read articles in both business and tech magazines that declare the impending death of consoles due to the widespread use and easy availability of video game apps. Why has Game Informer not commented on this? This is an important article that Game Informer should write.

Babak Firooz
via email

If we responded to every crackpot prediction of the end of video gaming as we know it, we wouldn't have time to cover the industry events that are actually happening right now. While app-based gaming has evolved a lot over the past few years, we've seen nothing to suggest it can compete with the amazing experiences offered on consoles and PCs. Until that changes, dedicated video game systems aren't going anywhere.

GL SPY

continued from page 7

[Left] We can guarantee this is the classiest Bertz and Andy have ever looked.

[Right] It wouldn't be New Orleans without some masks, beads, and cigars, as demonstrated by Criterion's Richard Franke, Media Molecule's Siobhan Reddy, Fireproof Studio's Barry Meade, and Gl alum Nick Ahrens.



Enemy Mine

In issue 224, we asked readers what video game enemy scares them the most. While *Nemesis*, *Necromorphs*, and *Pyramid Head* caused plenty of trepidation, a certain hissing green enemy ran away with the popular vote.

Without a doubt, I fear the Creeper from *Minecraft* more than anything from any other game. The sheer surge of shock and adrenaline from hearing that telltale hissing...no other enemy has come so close to making me pee myself.

Matthew Barnett

The Flood from *Halo*! I've seen what those little boogers do. They get all up in your body and transmutate your butt. I don't want to be transmuted! And when you've killed a room full of the little ones, more bust through the back door! You can't escape them!!!

Shaine Kruel

Pyramid Head. I mean, holy f---. Need I say more?

Matt Adams

Unagi from the Jolly Roger Bay level of *Super Mario 64* freaked me out as a little kid. Not only does the eel have that potent combination of scanness and deadliness, you also had to purposefully goad it out of its hole, and then chase its undulating whip of a tail for a star. Twelve years later, that eel still gives me nightmares.

Tod Confer



WINNER 1 Ann Olsen We're guessing the plasmid that shoots bees will be an effective strategy against this Big Daddy. **2 Brian Penrad** One of the few moments that *FL* isn't explaining rupees or butterflies to Link. **3 Jorge Ramirez** A member of Noble Team bravely invades a Jackson Pollock painting. **4 Brandy Mazza** And all Isaac wanted to do was spend a quiet night in, decorating his Christmas Marker.



2

CORRECTIONS:

In issue 225, we incorrectly labeled the second opinion for *Assassin's Creed Revelations* as 9.5. The second opinion for the game was actually 9.25, as originally reported online.

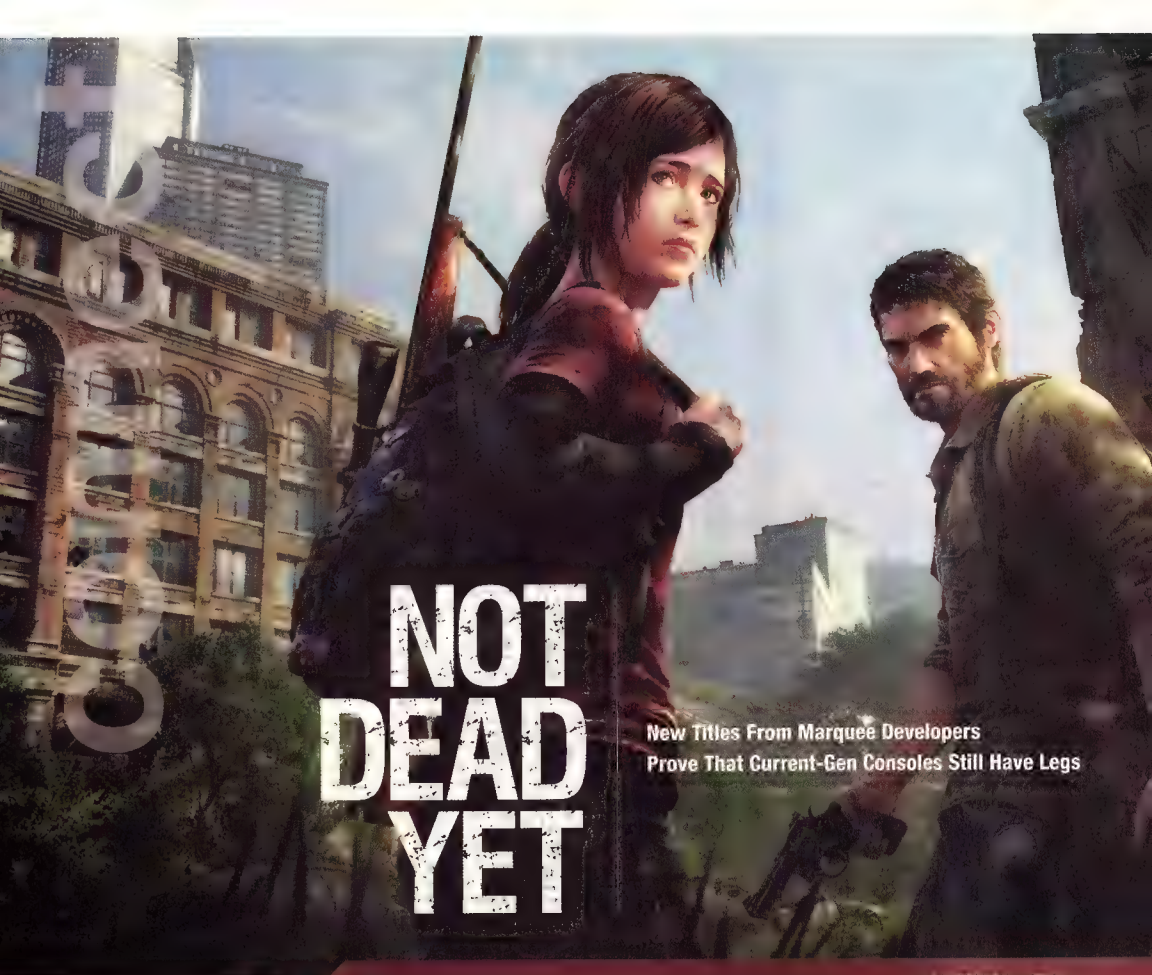
In our Holiday Buying Guide in issue 224, we listed the incorrect price and address for *Squid Kids 10-Dot!* Figures. You can get your anthropomorphic Nintendo-like cartridges here at squidkidsink.bigcartel.com for \$35.

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

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Reader Art Contest
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(Left) Bryan was digging his new Quantum Conundrum hat. (Right) Not so much. (Inset) Miller was happy to play more of *The Witcher 2* when CD Projekt Red's *Macej Szczernek*, *Lukas: Babel*, and *Warner Bros.* Megan Korns brought by the console version. (Inset) Who says winter apparel can't be stylish? Not Matt and Sandbox Strategies' Corey Wade, that's for sure.



NOT DEAD YET

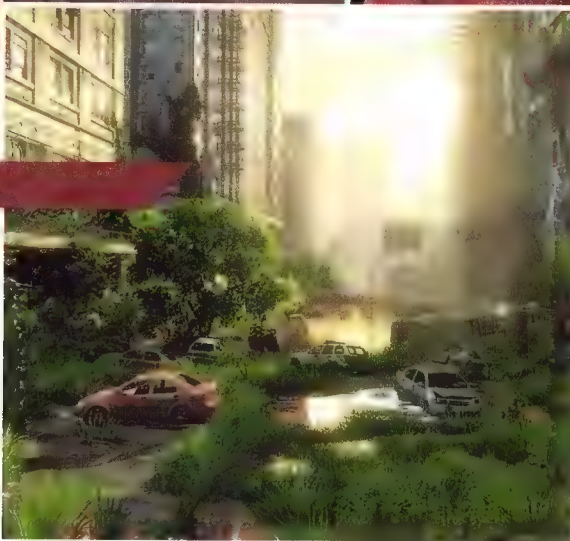
New Titles From Marquee Developers Prove That Current-Gen Consoles Still Have Legs

by Matthew Kato

NOTABLES

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Now that 2011's big holiday games have released, publishers and developers are giving us a preview of the future. The 2011 VGAs on Spike TV showcased a few new franchises from well-respected studios that should bolster the current round of consoles before the next systems hit. Take a look at what's in store from developers Naughty Dog, Epic Games, and BioWare and brace yourself for what's to come.



THE LAST OF US

Fresh off of *Uncharted 3*, developer Naughty Dog returns to the PlayStation 3 with its take on the popular post-apocalyptic theme. The game is set after a deadly fungus decimates the planet and reduces survivors to an austere existence. This includes the main characters Joel and Ellie, whose grim days consist of scavenging for supplies and trying to resist the attacks of the infected. For Ellie, this is the only life she's ever known. "This is our routine," she says in the trailer. "Day and night all we do is survive. It never lets up."

Similar to its successful *Uncharted* series, Naughty Dog says *The Last of Us* blends action gameplay elements with a character-driven tale about Joel and Ellie trekking across the country. Given the developer's strength in getting the most out of the PlayStation 3 to create emotive characters with strong dialogue and great voice acting, we expect this title to be more impactful than your average zombie fare.

Apart from the survival angle, we don't know what the title's gameplay is like, but we imagine that the fungus' effect on both people and animals offers wide-ranging options for enemy types.

The Last of Us is slated to release in late 2012 or early 2013.



FORTNITE

Survival is also the theme of Epic Games' Fortnite, but it's taken in a decidedly different direction: The Team Fortress 2-looking, Minecraft-inspired game tasks players with constructing a fort strong enough to withstand the onslaught of monsters who attack after dark. The game

enables players to freely construct buildings how they want, and we expect it to include a character-leveling system, weapon crafting, and other gameplay elements and modes. Epic hasn't announced a platform or release timeframe yet.





COMMAND & CONQUER GENERALS 2

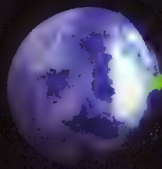
Gamers speculated wildly when a new BioWare studio announced it was working on a new IP. It turns out that game is *Command & Conquer Generals 2*. The brief VGA trailer showcased the destruction made possible by using the Frostbite 2 engine (the DICE-created technology made for *Battlefield 3*). Although it looks like a definitive graphical step up from the traditional isometric *Command & Conquer* presentation, *Generals 2* features the usual assortment of unit types and three warring factions that we've come to

expect from the genre and series.

The near-future game starts with a terrorist attack on a peace conference of world leaders, killing everyone in attendance. Only the military brass are left standing, and they move ahead to combat the terrorists the only way they know how — through sheer force. Given that it's an EA game, we expect the title to come to PC, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3 in 2012. ♦



massive



This Is The Way The World Ends

The Death of
Star Wars Galaxies

like visiting a childhood home after it's been remodeled and repainted, going back to explore Star Wars Galaxies after a seven-year absence feels strange, but when Galaxies released, it was fun to be the character to explore the galaxy for a while. With time, that interest faded and I ventured off to explore other virtual worlds. Others were more loyal than

I return to Galaxies two days before the servers are scheduled to shut down for good. Jumping in after such a long absence isn't easy. The developers overhauled the game mechanics since last I played, and the few features that remained intact from my old tenure have mostly faded from memory. It's all I can do to find my way from one end of a planet to the other.

deepened. Players could craft cities and even build their own quests. By the time I arrive, that's all about to conclude. The Galactic Civil War has raged for years, and today a victor will be named. I'm wandering, confused, through one of Corellia's strangely hushed cities when the announcement comes. Princess Leia's face pops up onto my screen and declares the end of long years of Imperial tyranny, and the first days of the New Galactic Republic. The rebellion has prevailed, at least on this server. Elsewhere, it seems Vader has finally crushed all opposition, each server has its own faction winner.



The other players hustling around me have no such problems. Beneath many names I see tags: five-year, seven-year, even eight-year veterans abound. For these players, this isn't a tourist trip to the restaurant at the end of the universe; years of fun and companionship are about to be erased.

"I am deeply and truly saddened," says Linda Carlson, an eight-year veteran who has been heavily involved in Galaxies since the original beta. She also happens to be the director of global community relations for Sony Online Entertainment. "SWG allowed me to explore a style of gameplay that I'd never seen before, across incredibly fashioned worlds, in many guises and many roles," she says. "I have met some of my finest friends there, and collected a tremendous number of memories. It's not something one can give up easily. It was a wonderful time and we'll never forget it."

For whatever praise and criticism it endured over the years, Star Wars Galaxies was a different beast from its contemporaries. Other MMOs dealt chiefly in battles and quests, but Galaxies counted those features as only subsets of a broader experience. Players could dance and sing in a bar, craft perfectly tailored clothes, build a personal home, and even decorate its interior. For players like Carlson, it was a unique thrill. "[Our guild] took the universe very seriously and sought to dominate the economy," Carlson says. "Yes, the economy. Not battles, not factions. Ours was primarily a crafting, building guild, something completely new to my experience." As the game continued, the complexity of the community involvement

With the war decided, everyone has one final day to revel and say goodbye. I head to the vast deserts of Tatooine to find a supposed final-day event that Jabba the Hutt is hosting. As I run across the dunes, I pass through the well-ordered streets of long-abandoned player cities. It's like some virtual apocalypse has wiped out all the people and left the infrastructure intact. It's lonely, empty, and vaguely disquieting — even in a non-real space.

I run over one last mountain, and an explosion of fireworks points me to my destination. Tents have been erected near the infamous Sarlaac Pit, and Jabba is throwing a gala to end the world. Several dozen players are running about in all matter of strange apparel and body sizes. Sony Online Entertainment allowed some insanity to seep into the galaxy for the end days, giving players the ability to change their appearance and size. I try on a Darth Vader costume and transform into a Rancor before settling on a 20-foot-tall red-cloaked Imperial guard. The classic Star Wars cantina music blares as people type out hugging and dancing emotes. Some players are gathered in small groups sitting on the ground — longtime adventuring buddies? Most people clearly know each other. I'm definitely the stranger.

"Particularly in the latter years, SWG was a game driven and sustained by the player community," Carlson explains. "With the incredible social and economic networks, variety of playstyles (many people never even touched combat), mind-boggling achievements in player housing, and astonishingly well-written player events... I think it's fair to say that this is a game



in which players are personally invested.

With 10 minutes before the servers shut down, I relocate to the city of Theed on Naboo. A few hours ago, one last rebel invasion swept in to retake the city. Alliance capital ships hung over the city as explosions rocked the planet's surface. Like on Tatooine, things are calmer now; only a few dozen players are left. Celebratory emotes evolve into tears and hugs as notifications begin to pop up about the impending shutdown.

Popular culture loves to ridicule people who spend countless hours ensconced in their basements inhabiting a virtual avatar. After almost a decade, Galaxies players seem to typify that lifestyle. What could possibly be worth abandoning so much real-life time in favor of a fantasy land? I'm certainly not qualified to pass judgment, but as I sit with these players while their eight-year journey is about to end, it's clear that they've found something real and worthwhile here — genuine friendship and a sense of accomplishment — even if it is a make-believe space. It's enough to bring them together one last time to watch the timer tick down several final, silent seconds, until Sony unplugs the servers and everyone receives the "Connection to SWG lost" message.

"Everyone is sad and excited at the same

time," Carlson says of the game's conclusion. "The SWG community is incredibly diverse, and I suspect that post-sunset, their desire to explore, create, and participate in online worlds will take them to the far corners of many different genres. It's hard to shake off the sense of accomplishment and belonging that an MMOG affords, but everyone has their own play style, and therefore will engage in a variety of game milieus."

After Galaxies forcibly logs me off, I shut down the program and eagerly type in my login info for the newly released Star Wars: The Old Republic MMO. Early access just opened, and I have a bounty hunter that needs my attention. A new game universe is finding its feet even as the old one dies. The difference is striking. TOR is faster paced and doesn't have the robust social options that Galaxies boasted, but the graphics are appropriately thrilling, and the lightsaber and blaster battles spark with electricity. There's a lot to explore and learn. Players crowd the play space, perhaps logging in for the first time. Perhaps some of them are the same players who just logged out of Galaxies with me for the last time. ♦

Head to gameinformer.com to see video taken from the final hours of Star Wars: Galaxies.

STAR WARS GALAXIES

There are several events taking place today. Do you just want to socialize? Come join Jabba and celebrate at the Sarlacc Pit on Tatooine. Still have some fight in you? Then battle to take the City of Theed from the Empire or defend it from the attacking Rebel army. Also, the Empire is out to take the City of Coronet. Defend it with your fellow Rebels or capture it with the might of the Empire. If PvP is your game, then destroy or protect the shield generator on Endor. The Empire base on Endor controls the shield around the Death Star. Deal the final blow to the Empire or defend it from the Rebel onslaught. The Imperial base is located SW of the Research Outpost near 700, -4500, in the Nub Shanda GCW Contested Zone.

Thank you for playing Star Wars Galaxies. We hope you had as much fun playing our game as we had creating it for you.

Sony	Rebel: 56%	Imperial: 44%
Star Wars	Rebel: 25%	Imperial: 74%
Bloodfin	Rebel: 11%	Imperial: 89%
Wile	Rebel: 63%	Imperial: 37%
Chaacra	Rebel: 43%	Imperial: 57%
Shane	Rebel: 74%	Imperial: 24%
Clippe	Rebel: 69%	Imperial: 31%
Clippe	Rebel: 66%	Imperial: 34%
Clippe	Rebel: 69%	Imperial: 31%
Clippe	Rebel: 77%	Imperial: 23%
Clippe	Rebel: 87%	Imperial: 13%
Sadowire	Rebel: 93%	Imperial: 7%
Sarsider	Rebel: 72%	Imperial: 28%
Sunrunner	Rebel: 4%	Imperial: 96%

Assassin's Creed Revelations

The latest installment of Ubisoft's time-spanning action/adventure series finally closes the book on familiar characters like Ezio and Altair, but not all the new mechanics on display in Revelations were hits with the fans. We asked scriptwriter Darby McDevitt about the changes, and along the way got some intriguing glimpses into the wider Assassin's Creed fiction.



When development on Revelations began, what goals did you have to set the game apart from Brotherhood?

From a narrative standpoint, our goal in Revelations was to finish Ezio's story and craft a tale that focused on his internal conflicts rather than the external, revenge driven plots of the previous two games. We wanted Ezio to face some legitimately difficult decisions about his own life and actions, so we introduced the Altair story moments as a way to let Ezio see what it means to be utterly devoted to the Assassins; not surprisingly it means a lot of heartache and frustration. This is also why we took Ezio to a completely new city and country – it is much harder to play the untouchable hero when you're a stranger in a strange land.

We also wanted to use the conflict in the Ottoman royal family to give Ezio a sense that the line between good and evil, with respect to Assassins and Templars, is very shady and porous. By the end of the game, Ezio is likely wondering if the man who ultimately gains the Sultanate is worse than the man who lost it. As far as our philosophy goes, the Assassins and Templars are not Good and Evil, but rather proponents of "a grass-roots liberty" and a "benevolent dictatorship", respectively. So Revelations works hard to reassure that.

Of course, we wanted Revelations to provide a satisfying conclusion to our two beloved assassins. We always knew we would be leaving a number of questions open for the future, but we felt the time was right to wrap up the stories of Ezio and Altair. I think we struck just the right balance. Fans still have some questions lingering, but not about Altair and Ezio.

A lot of players had problems with the den defense system. In retrospect, are there changes you would have made to this game system?

The Den Defense system was actually quite highly rated in our numerous play tests, so we still believe it's a well-designed minigame. It has a good amount of strategic depth and the number of units and strategies aren't apparent through our tutorial. Admittedly, Den Defense is quite a departure from the normal AC fare. I think the lesson to learn here is that this system feels so far removed from the "Assassin" aspect of Assassin's Creed, that it seems like more of a detour than an upgrade.

The new first-person Desmond mode was a surprise. Where did that idea come from?

When we were in the planning phase of the game and were deciding which studios would tackle the various chunks of the game, we knew we wanted some gameplay that felt unique to Desmond's location and situation – gameplay that looked and felt like we were inside a rudimentary, synthetic environment. Some of the designers at Ubisoft Massive, our studio in Sweden, had a few ideas that fit perfectly with this theme. We discussed the story with them and they came back with some prototype levels. For various technical and story related reasons we decided that there would be no cutscenes in these levels, but that the story would be relayed through the gameplay itself. So I took a few days to write a Joycecean stream-of-consciousness narrative for Desmond, which Massive then took and turned into gameplay wherever possible. Parts three and four are definitely my favorites. When Desmond is reminiscing about following a river and passing through a forest, the gameplay matches this. Same goes for the sequence in the nightclub; it unfolds really well. It's magical when this sort of synthesis works. So from a narrative standpoint, my only regret is that we didn't go further in this direction.

One notable addition to the franchise from Assassin's Creed II was The Truth, which offered a dramatically different puzzle style and encouraged world exploration. Why did Revelations eliminate this system?

The glyph and rift puzzles from the previous games were fun, but they also had a very specific narrative justification: they were the encoded "pieces" of the hidden Subject 16 A.I. program. So when Desmond completes them all by Brotherhood, he is literally executing a program that reconstructs the Subject 16 A.I. – which we then see the result of in Revelations. Sadly, I had to cut some dialogue that explained this, for reasons of length and sensibility. In any case, the reason we had no puzzles in Revelations is simply because the Subject 16 A.I. is whole again in Revelations. Since it is his destiny, so to speak, to help Desmond survive this coma, he doesn't need to pass on any secrets this time.

Though Revelations finally gave us a clear look at Subject 16, a lot of questions remain unanswered about that character. Will we see more from Desmond's predecessor in the Animus, or do you consider that story arc to now be closed?

As far as we're concerned, Subject 16's story has reached its conclusion, though it's not inconceivable that more information about him might surface. As far as open questions go, it's important to note that 16 was meant to serve as an example of what happens when someone spends too much time in the Animus. They go nuts. So while he did uncover a ton of information about various worldwide conspiracies, not everything he says is necessarily a clue to some future secret. Some of it is just the confused ramblings of a man trying to make sense of too much information. Much of what he says is true, or true-ish, but some of it is confused and not everything is meant to be taken at face value. But we're not yet saying which is which.

Now that we've seen the end of both the Ezio and Altair story arcs, what separates the two characters in personality and world view? Did they reach the same conclusions as older men about the order they serve, or did they come to two fundamentally different viewpoints?

I think Altair was passionately believed in what he was doing for most of his life, even when it led to the deaths of those closest to him. He believed in the Creed, and in its power to bring

the best out of people. Ezio does too, to a certain extent, but I think there was always a bit more cynical brushiness to him, a bit more anger over the fact that his life was fundamentally altered at a young age by forces outside himself. He too wanted to do the best he could for people who deserved it, but as we try to illustrate in Revelations, he has now begun to wonder what he gets out of the deal. Does he get to live a life for himself at some point? Altair managed to organize his life around the Assassins – his wife, his kids... but Ezio just cannot bring himself to drag Sofia into this war. He sees the passion she has for her books and her work, and he cannot imagine asking her to give that up to be the wife of an Assassin.

What questions do you feel that Assassin's Creed Revelations successfully answered for long-time players? What big unanswered questions remain? Before Revelations was released, the most frequent questions we got from our fans were "What ultimately happened to Altair?", "What did Altair see in the Apple when he went back for one last look?", "Who did Ezio continue his bloodline with?", "Is Lucy dead?" and "What ultimately happened to the First Civilization?" All these questions have been answered. Naturally some remain... "Why was Lucy killed?" is a big one. But have no fear. We'll get there.

I should add that as a writer it is important for me to stress that answering questions is not always the way I approach my work. Certainly we want to clear up anything that is confusing to players. But what I ultimately want to do is tell a good story full of empathy, comedy, and tragedy... and this might require leaving some questions open forever. It may also mean that we tell stories that you already know in general, but have not experienced as a full story, with all its rich complexity. Anyone who sees one of Shakespeare's tragedies knows how it will end – everyone dies. But the reason we enjoy these dramas, despite knowing how they end, is because we take delight in how the tale is told. Pulling this off is much harder than churning together a string of mysteries, and I think Revelations manages this in some of its best moments. ♦



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Team Ico

Director Leaves Studio

Key Talent Departs From The Last Guardian

Fans are frustrated that Team Ico's *The Last Guardian* hasn't materialized yet, and recent news that lead developer and director Fumito Ueda is leaving the studio raises even more questions about the long-awaited game.

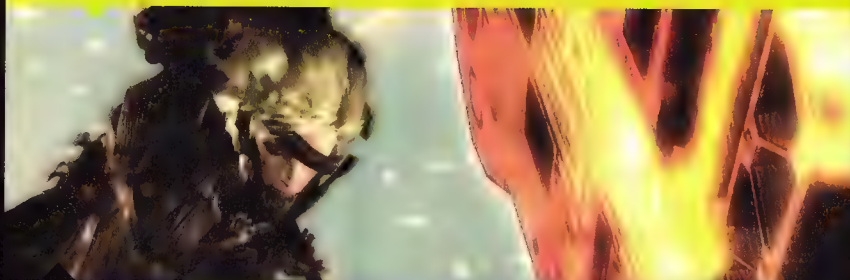
Sony unveiled *The Last Guardian* for the PS3 at the E3 tradeshow in 2009 and it was originally slated for a 2011 release date, but even before Ueda's departure, the game was pushed into an undefined period in 2012.

Ueda has not elaborated on his reasons for leaving the first-party Sony development studio, although Sony confirmed his departure. Ueda says he plans to finish his work on the game as a contractor, but his creative vision – which brought us beloved titles *Ico* and *Shadow of the Colossus* – will surely be missed.

Before Sony confirmed Ueda's exit, another of *The Last Guardian*'s key developers – executive producer Yoshifusa Hayama – also jumped ship. Hayama left to join social gaming company Bossa Studios. It's unknown if the pair's departures are related in any way.

The Last Guardian was not shown at this past E3, and the game has been under wraps for most of 2011. There is speculation and rumors that Ueda left the project as long ago as a year prior to Sony's official announcement – and this was the reason behind its delay – but that has not been confirmed. Although Ueda's promise to see *The Last Guardian* to its completion is encouraging for the game itself, Team Ico has lost one of the industry's great talents. ♦

The Good

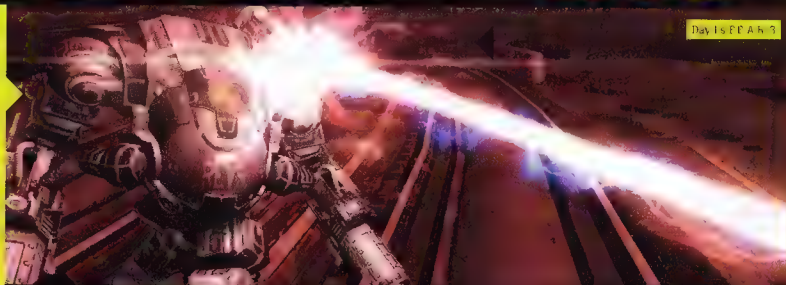


METAL GEAR SOLID: RISING

has gone through as big of a make-over as Raiden himself. The game, now dubbed Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance, has shifted from Kojima Production's internal development team to Bayonetta's Platinum Games — although Kojima Productions is still overseeing the project. We're glad to hear that a studio with such an action focus is taking the reins, but the fact that Rising was so near death is not a great sign.

g.b.u.
THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

The Bad



Day 1 IS FFAA R?

SOURCES TOLD

website GameSpot that F.E.A.R. developer Day 1 Studios has shed a large chunk of its staff. Publisher Konami reportedly cancelled its deal with Day 1 for a Silent Scope game, which has caused dominos to fall. A small core still remains at the developer, working on another project.

SQUARE ENIX

has been hacked for the second time in about six months. First, hackers hit the Deus Ex: Human Revolution website. Now they stole the names and email addresses of 800,000 gamers who signed up for Square's North American and Japanese free members website. No credit card info was taken, but this is obviously a problem for the company, as well as everyone else.

The Ugly



Quotable

"We need to treat our updates with greater care."



Bethesda

acknowledges that even Skyrim's fixes need fixes in a recent blog post

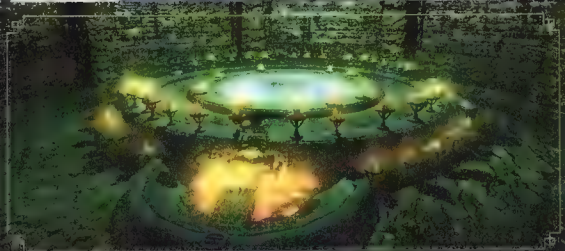


The Adventurer's Guide to Skyrim

The latest installment of the Elder Scrolls series has been out since November, and legions of RPG fans have spent countless hours in the world of Skyrim.

seems daunting. How do you know which missions are cool? Which ones have the best rewards? This guide will help focus your efforts as you explore Skyrim, clearing away the clutter and steering you toward the good stuff.

It is an enormous game, and players can easily accrue dozens of quests to the point that the number of active tasks



GENERAL TIPS

Don't buy horses

They are expensive and die easily (especially when you're fighting dragons). If you really want a good horse, do the Dark Brotherhood quests.

Get a profession

If you want the best gear, you're going to have to smith and enchant it yourself. Smithing is particularly easy to power level: Buy some leather and iron ingots and just manufacture tons of daggers.

Read books

Or at least open them, because many will give you free skill upgrades.

Visit the Greybeards again

After your initial lesson, go back and talk to Arngeir. He will keep pointing you toward words of power that you don't have yet.

Check out the Atronach Forge

It's in the catacombs beneath the College of Winterhold, and if you have the right recipe, it allows you to transmute mundane items into awesome gear like Daedric armor and weapons.

You can't be both...

...a werewolf and a vampire. Keep that in mind if you ever have the chance to become either one.

Beat the game

This sounds obvious, but there's no reason not to finish the main storyline sooner rather than later. You gain some useful abilities along the way, and progressing in the story only opens up the possibility for more side quests. The credits don't even roll after the final battle – your hero is free to keep adventuring.



LOOT

Skyrim has enough treasure to satisfy the greediest adventurers, but these items stand out from the crowd. In addition to Daedric artifacts, adding these to your arsenal should be a priority.

The Skeleton Key

This unbreakable lockpick is obtained briefly during your time with the Thieves Guild. Instead of returning it when asked, you can just postpone finishing that quest and keep the Skeleton Key for as long as you want.

The White Phial

The White Phial is the name of a shop in Windhelm, but it is also a powerful item. Visit the shop and complete the quest for its owner, Nurellon. The conclusion will seem disappointing, but you eventually get a second quest via courier letter. By the end of that segment the White Phial will be in your possession; the unique bottle contains a magic liquid of your choosing (healing, magic resistance, etc.) and automatically refills every 24 hours.

The Gauldur Amulet

To start this quest, find a book called Lost Legends (one copy can be found in Dragonsreach). It is a lengthy undertaking, but along the way, you collect three amulet fragments. They are good items by themselves, but when you forge them together at the end of the quest to form the Gauldur Amulet, you have a powerful item that gives you an extra 30 health, magicka, and stamina.



GETTING HITCHED

Marriage is easy in Skyrim if you know where to look. Talk to the priest Maramal in the temple of Mara in Riften. Buy an amulet from him and wear it – that's how people in Skyrim know you're looking for a spouse. Available individuals usually express their interest when you talk to them, though you may have to complete certain tasks first. After you win them over and tie the knot, the two of you can live in any house you own. Plus, your spouse will start up a shop to keep busy.



GUILDS

Apart from the main campaign, the guilds feature the largest and most involved questlines in *Skyrim*. You can join any of them regardless of your character build; you don't need to be focused on stealth skills to join the Thieves' Guild, for instance. You can also join as many as you want. Each organization has its own story arc, taking you to some of the most interesting locations in the game...not to mention some great loot. Here's where you can join up.

Companions

Skyrim's version of a fighters' guild is headquartered in Whiterun. Enter the building called Jorrvaskr and talk to the Companions inside. They eventually point you toward their leader, Kodlak Whitemane. Talking to him and performing some minor tasks starts you down the path to becoming a full-blooded Companion.

College of Winterhold

The mages' college is the dominant feature in the town of Winterhold. Once you approach the bridge leading to the enormous structure, talk to Faralda and pass her test (she'll ask you to cast a level-appropriate spell). Afterward, you can join the school and undertake quests for its resident mages.

Thieves' Guild

In Riften's market area, you should run into Brynjolf after leaving the Bee and Barb tavern. He'll offer you a job that involves a little stealing and lockpicking, but it's more than petty theft. This quest (and those that follow it) is your ticket into the not-so-illustrious Thieves' Guild.

Dark Brotherhood

If you regularly ask bartenders about rumors, eventually you'll hear one about a boy named Aventus Aretino trying to summon the Dark Brotherhood, a guild of assassins. Follow up by going to Aretino's home in Windhelm and completing his quest, entitled "Innocence Lost." Then sleep in any bed to begin your initiation.



DAEDRIC QUESTS

Daedric quests give you the opportunity to walk away with Daedric artifacts—weapons, armor, and items with extraordinary powers. These quests can be hard to identify, since many of them begin just like regular miscellaneous activities. These are our three favorites, but practically every Daedric quest is a guaranteed good time.

Azura

Approach Azura's shrine in the mountain peaks south of Winterhold and talk to her priestess Aranea. After you complete a few objectives, you'll be forced to choose which version of Azura's artifact you want. Both are soul gems that are not destroyed upon use, but the Black Star can only trap human souls, while Azura's Star can only trap the souls of non-sentient creatures.

Sanguine

As you travel among the taverns of *Skyrim*, (and have reached at least level 14), a guy named Sam may challenge you to a drinking contest. To say anything more would spoil this fantastic quest, but when all is said and done, you get the staff Sanguine's Rose, which summons a demora to fight for you.

Sheogorath

The star of *Oblivion*'s Shivering Isles expansion, Sheogorath appears if you do a favor for the elf Dervenin (who is wandering in front of Bard's College in Solitude). This cool sequence culminates in some bizarre antics on Sheogorath's part, along with your hero gaining possession of the unpredictable magic staff Wabbajack.



OTHER FUN QUESTS

Dragon Priests

Eight ancient dragon priests are scattered across various dungeons and other dangerous locations. They are formidable foes, but the masks they drop have powerful effects when worn. Your reward for collecting all eight masks is a secret ninth one. For a clue on how to claim your prize, search for a dome-like structure near the entrance to Labyrinthian.

Blood on the Ice

Once you've entered and exited Windhelm several times, you may stumble across the scene of a crime in the graveyard near the Hall of the Dead. The ensuing quest is an intriguing murder mystery that has you

gathering clues, questioning suspects, and trying to catch a killer. Keep a new save file right at the beginning of this quest, because you'll want to try it a couple times to see different resolutions.

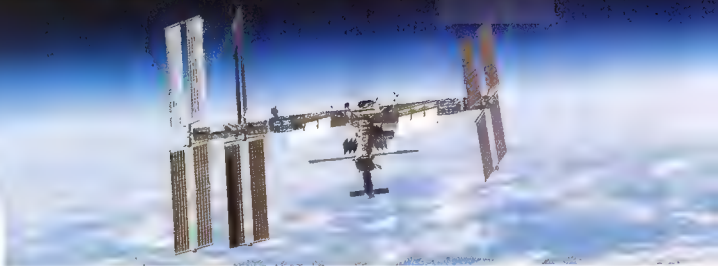
Heart of Dibella

The interesting thing about this quest is the reward. If you get caught in the inner sanctum of the temple of Dibella in Markarth, the priestess Hamal will give you this quest as punishment. After some heroics, your reward is a passive bonus that gives you a permanent 10-percent bonus to damage against members of the opposite sex.



A Man on a

Mission



Richard Garriott is an ambitious man. In addition to creating the legendary *Ultima* series, Garriott has founded three separate development studios focusing on single-player games, MMOs, and social games. Garriot's ambition isn't limited to the digital world – or our world, for that matter. In 2008, he realized a lifelong dream of going to space, spending a sizable amount of his personal wealth to make it happen. He also had a film crew document the entire process: the year-long training regimen in Russia, his time on the International Space Station, and the flight back to Earth. The documentary, *Man on a Mission: Richard Garriott's Road to the Stars*, will release in select theaters throughout January. We recently spoke to Garriott to learn more about the film and what's next for Lord British.

You spent a lot of time and money in pursuing your dream to be an astronaut. What was the main draw for you? Your father was an astronaut...

No question that was a significant factor. I think every kid has at least a brief moment in their youth where they think dinosaurs and space are the coolest things you can possibly imagine. But most kids grow up to realize that dinosaurs really aren't around anymore, and space, while it's obviously still around, is still a pretty darn improbable place to reach. But since I grew up with not only a father who's an astronaut but all my neighbors were astronauts, and everyone in my neighborhood was involved in putting astronauts in space, it didn't really seem that farfetched.

It was really one of the NASA doctors, who one time told me that, "Hey Richard, we see that your eyesight is failing, and therefore you are no longer eligible to be a NASA astronaut." I remember distinctly that was the point in my life where I said, "Well, who are you to be the gatekeeper of access to space?" Just being told I wasn't going to be allowed to go was enough to really set me on the course with a strong intention of going. I've been pursuing it with my personal time and energy, as well as funds, long before I paid for that very expensive actual opportunity.

The movie will have a small theatrical release. Are there any plans for a larger release?
Yes. Of course, any documentary

won't go into every theater in the country...but in addition to the theatrical release, we're doing a nationwide – really an international – cable television release. So most every cable company in the country will be carrying it on pay-per-view. Additionally, we have contracts [to show the film on] a few airlines.

What do you hope viewers take away from the documentary?

For me, the main thread of the story that I hope people walk away with, is if you have a passionate dream – even one that feels as impossible as "I'm going to fly myself to space" – clearly there were a lot of good fortunes that I had that allowed that dream to come true. But if you watch the documentary, you'll realize that there were plenty of times for that dream to have gone away. And what is really important about bold and audacious dreams is if you make a run at some bold and audacious dream which does not work – which is common in the case of bold and audacious dreams – if you know why it did not work, and you can envision another run at it that will rectify that particular problem for why it did not work, it is not a waste of your time. If you can imagine and facilitate an improved attempt, then it's worth doing. Because truly monumental tasks can be accomplished by steadfast and thoughtful tearing down of the barriers between you and that lofty goal.

Now that you've realized your dream to enter space, what's next for you?

Well, I'm a devout believer that exploring the reality that we live in is far, far, far from done. This next summer I'm going back down to *Titanic* for my second trip. One of my big terrestrial trips that I've been trying to get together for some years now is to visit disappearing indigenous populations of the world. Additionally, space is by no means done. My next space activity that I'm working on right now is space diving: to ride a suborbital rocket up to a hundred kilometers or so and jump out with a space suit and a parachute.

Do you have any final thoughts about the movie you'd like to share with our readers?

Yeah. What's interesting about this movie is there have been plenty of great movies about space, but this is the first time a camera has been able to go into Russia, go through the entire training experience, and then travel with someone through the launch, through the time in space, and all the way through the reentry, back to impact on the surface of the Earth. So I think you'll see things in this movie that you will have never had the opportunity to see previously. ♦

For more from our interview with Garriott, including some of the experiments he conducted while in space, head to gameformer.com

Tunnel Vision Uncharted 2: Among Thieves

Drake begins *Uncharted 2* gut shot in a derailed train car teetering off a cliff. This flash forward introduction gains context later in the game with his harrowing caboose-to-engine crawl along the militarized train. Dodging railroad signs, leaping across car roofs, and gunning down a helicopter was fun enough for us to forget about the impending bullet to the stomach.

01



02

Ghost Train Final Fantasy VI

Running through darkened woods with a phantom locomotive on your trail is enough to enfeeble the most macho of warriors. Not Sabin. The strapping hero hunkers down, takes the ghost train by the wheels, and duplexes it back to undeath. Your move, universe.



03

Smash, woods

Red Dead Redemption

Sure you could ride and rob the steam engine trucking across *Red Dead Redemption*, but guess what we did when we first learned you could hogtie innocents? Cue moustache twirling and maniacal laughter.



04

Emboss, emc

The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks

Link proves himself as a capable train conductor throughout *Spirit Tracks*, but the last battle has him running on full steam. The train-off with a demon-faced steam engine may not go down as the best boss fight ever, but it's one of the weirdest.



05

Last Stop

Mortal Kombat

This stage-specific fatality is enough to make you squeamish just hearing the word subway, even if you're just talking sandwiches. The assailant starts by holding his or her victim's face against the side of one passing train before tossing the mangled mess in front of another.



06

Hell on Wheels

Resident Evil 0

What did S.T.A.R.S. operative Rebecca Chambers do while the rest of Bravo Team fell apart in the Raccoon City mansion? She boarded a runaway train infested with zombies, parasitic leeches, and a mutated scorpion. Just another day in the life of a medic.



07

Midway Express

Final Fight

This tribute to *The Warriors'* groovy subway brawl set the standard for side-scrolling beat 'em ups. While tons of other arcade games have subway levels, not all contain wooden barrels filled with ninja swords and roast turkeys.

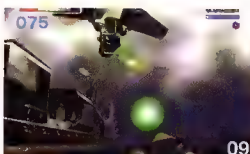


08

The Cole Train

Gears of War

What August Cole lacks in steam-powered locomotion he more than makes up for in enthusiasm. Nicknamed the Cole Train in his Thrashball days for his ability to charge through the opposing defense, this former athlete just won't let his glory fade. Whoop!

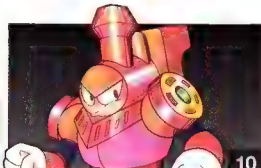


09

The Forever Train

Star Fox 64

Dismantling this aptly named transport is the goal of an entire level in *Star Fox 64*. If Fox McCloud can destroy the mobile fortress car by car, the tricky boss being transported on the train can be utterly ignored.



10

Chame Man

Mega Man V

Dr. Wily wasn't content with building a simple train to transport his evil scientist goods. No, his train needed to be a sentient robot master that shoots flaming coal. Even stupider is the ability Mega Man gains from defeating him — a kick.



Saints Row: The Third

Volition's senior designer Scott Phillips talks farts, zombies, Burt Reynolds, and how they found their way into the hilarious Saints Row: The Third.

Making the story a more focused affair improved the feel of the game. Did it affect the way you approached the gameplay design, and is it a direction you plan on continuing in the series?

It absolutely affected a lot of things gameplay-wise and I think almost exclusively for the better. We had a lot of discussions as we got close to finishing the game about the exact game flow and unlocking of missions. We wanted to provide as much freedom as we could by allowing the player to have multiple missions available through most of the game while also maintaining the more focused storyline and progression. It was tricky, and as with everything, I think I would've done some things differently now that it's done, but overall I'm very happy with the improvements we've made over Saints Row 2. I think the experience is more fun, more intense, and more cohesive than any past Saints Row game, and focusing on a single story played a big part in that. I think it's safe to say that improvements we've made on SR 3 would be continued if there were to be more titles in the franchise. Obviously, none have been officially announced yet.

The series started to carve out its own identity with Saints Row 2. Do you think The Third has helped cement what Saints Row is all about in the public's eyes?

I believe so, yes. We set out on SR 3 with a clear and concise vision for what makes this franchise great and what experience we wanted to deliver, more so than any game in the series. It's exciting to see almost universal recognition that even though we may casually appear to be like other games that we really are a whole different type of experience. It's satisfying from my position to hear that because it was such an uphill battle on Saints Row 2 fighting

against the constant comparisons, now it feels like everyone is on the same page as us as far as Saints Row being a unique franchise that brings new things to the table. It's been great talking to press and players at events and seeing reviews over the past few weeks, as it's awesome to hear their reaction. I think what I've heard the most is the impression that while they had heard and seen the advertising campaign for the game and how it's "over the top," that actually playing the game and seeing all of the crazy moments makes them truly understand for the first time that we weren't putting them on, we really are the most over-the-top, fun, guilty pleasure game out there, no holds barred.

A ton of money is always funneling into the player's bank account, yet there always seems to be something new to buy. Was it tricky to balance the game's economy considering all the upgrades, property, and weaponry you can buy?

It was definitely a very delicate work in progress for much of the game. We started out with a pretty huge spreadsheet and then adjusted and adjusted and adjusted it after each play test we did. We learned a lot each time we'd have players run through the whole game and see how balanced or unbalanced the economy was. That iterative process was invaluable to getting the balance to where it is now. It's got a really great balance of tons of gameplay available to earn money and then lots of great upgrades to spend that money on. I think the systems design guys did a great job. A very interesting thing to do is a very compelling mechanic on its own in addition to the story campaign missions. Rather than recurring players to earn respect to play missions, we instead wanted to let players access

missions at their own pace while also letting them choose to play City Takeover to really power themselves up and get every great upgrade they wanted from the huge amount of fun stuff they can spend money on.

If you take the time to completely level up your character and buy some of the bigger upgrades, you can eventually become unstoppable. Will this affect the difficulty of upcoming DLC?

Some of the ways that the DLC gameplay is being developed will allow us to deal with all ranks of players, from those who just started to those who are fully upgraded. On the other hand we want to be careful to not artificially diminish hard-earned player upgrades. It's going to be a fine balance.

When we were at Volition for our cover story, you claimed the Fart in a Jar was deemed "too over-the-top" for Saints. What changed your mind?

If I was going to be completely candid, I'd have to say it was actually your visit. I know, I know, it sounds like I'm paying lip service, but I'm being honest here. Game Informer's visit was the first time we had shown SR 3 to any press and so it was our first (and very early) chance to get a sense for what we were going to be talking about with the press and fans. Hearing the disappointment that we decided not to do the Fart in a Jar made us seriously reconsider it. If you remember, I said I was on the fence about it when it was first proposed. Our discussion pushed me over the edge the other way. That combined with the fact that we were still almost a year to our street date made it something that was feasible to put into the game. After talking to some people on the team about what it'd take to make and what they thought (they were all on board) we quickly got it on schedule and in game just a couple months later. And thus the Fart in a Jar was re-born.

Playing through the game with the zombie voice provides a whole new source of humor. Was every line from the protagonist recorded with a separate zombie version?

The zombie voice was definitely a fun addition to the game. If you're looking for that next level of weirdness

and disbelief, that voice ensures that every conversation in the game, from funny to more serious, are equally ridiculous. We actually had one zombie voice actor who recorded all of the cinematic voice lines individually, to match the timing, and then the in-game lines and lengths to try and best match the conversations. Since all of the player voices have different in-game lines for every conversation (i.e. the white male voice says different things during missions than the Eastern European female voice) your choice of voice provides you with a different experience since your player character will have a different personality and reaction to situations based on their voice.

You snagged a high-profile cameo for the mayor of Steelport, but Burt Reynolds the first choice, or did you have a laundry list of celebrities to debate between?

Burt Reynolds was at the very top of the list from the get go. We wanted the mayor of the city to be just as over-the-top as the rest of the game, so a real world character being the mayor of the city made a lot of sense. Since Burt agreed we never had to seriously expand the list of mayoral candidates for Steelport. I think our producer Greg Donovan has a special place in his heart for Burt Reynolds, so he can take the credit for making that happen.

It sounds like Volition is really pushing DLC. What kind of content can we expect going forward?

If you played SR 2's DLC and know how much further over-the-top that was than the main game, you should expect a similar level of upping the ante in SR 3's DLC. Take the already available Shark-o-Matic gun, for example. DLC is a fun place to try out ideas and gameplay. We have several items and weapon packs for the hardcore fans that up the ante on overall wackness, as well as three big mission packs that add a ton of new content. Our team is hard at work on those now, and we expect the first big mission pack in January. Ganki Bowl, a sporting tradition unlike any other. Like, totally unlike any other. Like, not even close. You've been warned. ♦

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MMO State of the Union 2012

A LOT OF EXCITING MMOs are set to hit this year, but before we become obsessed with them, we decided to take a look back at some of our old favorites. We talked with the developers behind the best MMOs of years past to find out how they're doing and what they have in store for the new year.

WORLD OF WARCRRAFT

How is it doing? Despite falling subscription numbers and the eagerness of some viewers to pile on the "World of Warcraft is failing" bandwagon, WoW continues to be far and away the most successful MMORPG running. In November 2011, it was reported that the popular game's subscriber base had dropped to 10.3 million from the 2010 peak of 12 million. Nevertheless, Activision's overall profits were up and Blizzard said it expected the dip between expansions.

The game could be on the upswing with the recently released patch 4.3. Game director Tom Chilton says, "We've definitely seen an increase in play activity," though he quickly clarifies that they won't know for a while yet whether it translates into a long-term bump in subscribers.

What's the latest update? The aforementioned patch 4.3 is the latest and final content patch for World of Warcraft's Cataclysm expansion pack. In addition to new dungeons and end-game content, it introduced the raid finder feature, which allows players who aren't in high-end guilds to experience difficulty-tweaked versions of the 25-person raid content.

"Huge numbers of players that weren't previously able to take part in that kind of content are now able to in a nice and convenient way," Chilton tells us. He lauds the latest tier of raid gear, which he calls "some of the coolest art we've ever had." Chilton also says that the new transmogrification feature, which allows players to transfer stats onto different pieces of armor, is proving incredibly popular.

What's coming in 2012? According to Chilton, "2012 is all about the game getting progressively more fun." With the last major patch for Cataclysm already out, that will primarily come in the form of the game's upcoming fourth expansion pack, Mists of Pandaria, which adds the monk class and the neutral Pandaren race. Chilton doesn't have an exact timeline for the new content but it shouldn't be a long wait. "We're certainly hoping to get this expansion out more quickly than we have previous ones," he says. "We're tracking toward that right now. Hopefully it shouldn't be a horrendous wait."

DC UNIVERSE ONLINE

How is it doing? DC Universe Online didn't last a full year before succumbing to the increasingly popular free-to-play model, but that shift appears to have been successful. In its first month of being free-to-play in November 2011, the game received a massive influx of over two million new players. According to Sony Online Entertainment creative director Jens Andersen, the team is "continuing to see a bevy of new players come into the game each day."

What's the latest update? DC Universe Online has received two major downloadable additions since launching early in 2011. The Fight for the Light pack focused on Green Lantern and a new light power set, while the Lightning Strikes DLC centered on The Flash and electricity powers. Andersen says a third DLC pack is currently planned for the first quarter of 2012.

What's coming in 2012? The shift to free-to-play has completely changed the developer's plans for future content. "In a subscription-based game you add to the end game. It's a community of elders, and you cater the content to their level," Andersen explains. "With free-to-play, and new players coming in all the time, we don't want to keep making the mountain higher and delay how long it takes to play with your friends." Rather than focus on end-game content, DC Universe Online updates will span the whole level range.

Andersen also promises a solution for the current hot-button PVP problems plaguing the game. "Despite what internet forums might make you think, most people actually want to be good guys on the Internet," he jokes. Right now they're working on a unique solution to the imbalance issues. "People will get what they wanted with faster Arena matches, but it will really blow their minds from a brand perspective," he says. "I'm excited about the solution, it is so 'DC.'"



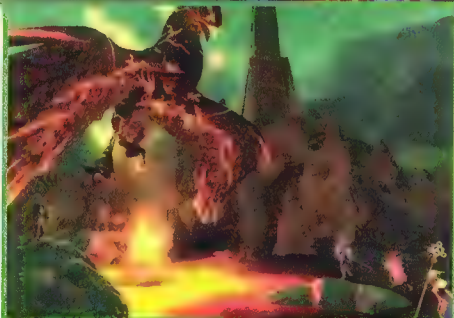
RIFT

How is it doing? Developer Trion Worlds wouldn't provide specific subscriber numbers for Rift, but executive producer Scot Hartsman seems confident. "In general, the game is rocking," he tells us. "We're continuing to hire and continuing to release updates."

What's the latest update? "We just released the biggest update we have released to date," Hartsman boasts. In fact, it was so big that the team split it into two. Updates 1.6 and 1.61 added such impressive features as a new raid, a new dungeon, and even a whole new mini-continent, all aimed at level-capped players.

They also put in the Instant Adventure system, which allows for parties to come together and accomplish goals that shift in size and difficulty dynamically as the group grows or shrinks.

What's coming in 2012? In 2012, the Rift team will focus on "the core stuff that makes the game strong and unique," Hartsman says. In his mind, this includes adventure and combat out in the world, invasions, onslaughts, and world events. He also hints that something special may be coming on Rift's first birthday, which takes place in March.



AGE OF CONAN

How is it doing? Funcom wouldn't provide exact numbers, but the developer reported that at least 300,000 new players signed up in the first month of Age of Conan's shift to free-to-play in June 2011. Game director Craig Morrison confirms this trend: "Activity in the game has significantly increased since moving to the new model."

What's the latest update? In addition to various graphical and technical upgrades throughout 2011, Age of Conan players have enjoyed the Savage Coast of Turan adventure pack since last summer. This pack includes several new instances and raids as well as a whole outdoor area to explore that Morrison calls "one of the most epic locations we have added to the game yet."

What's coming in 2012? Funcom has several major changes planned for Age of Conan in 2012. Morrison describes the "truly massive" House of Crom dungeon as "an entire playfield of its own." New outdoor world bosses are also being planned for those who would rather quest out in the open instead of instances.

Beyond new content, Morrison says the team is planning to completely revamp the trade skills. "The trade skill system is something we know has been lackluster in our game," he admits. "It's time to try to add something to the game that will add a real extra layer of depth for people." Funcom is also working on single-server technology that should make teaming up with your friends easier.



EVE ONLINE

How is it doing? EVE Online is currently resting at around 350,000 subscribers. That may not seem like much compared to the millions that bigger MMOs boast, but according to senior producer Amar Gylfason, 2011 is "EVE's eighth straight year of growth in the eight years the game has existed." That's impressive by any measurement.

What's the latest update? In November 2011, developer CCP Games rolled out the Crucible expansion, which includes new ships, new art, and various tweaks to help push the intergalactic, player-driven war that lies at the heart of this sci-fi MMO. Gylfason is ecstatic about the expansion's reception. "We've been

humbled to see a tremendous amount of excitement and appreciation emanating from our playerbase throughout the last few weeks," he says.

What's coming in 2012? "What Crucible showed us is that there's still plenty of work to be done in improving and iterating on all the amazing content and gameplay we've introduced into EVE in the past eight years," Gylfason says. That work includes improving internal tools and technology alongside new content for players. Gylfason can't provide any specifics on what's ahead, but he suggests fans pay attention to EVE Online's Farfest 2012, which takes place in Iceland in late March. ♦





Ten downloadable games you may have

AS WE ALL HEAD INTO A NEW YEAR of gaming, there is plenty of time to look ahead to the awesome downloadable titles on the way. This month I want to look back at 2011 – a year that saw an explosion of new downloadable games of every variety – and highlight a few that may have been lost in the shuffle. Before anyone cries foul about their absence, I'm not talking about games like Bastion and Crimson Alliance and their like; those excellent debuts received plenty of well-deserved fanfare. Rather, I want to focus on the titles that didn't have the same opportunity in the limelight. Read ahead to find out which of my picks you've already played, and why the others might be worth a look.

Bit.Trip Flux · Wii

WiiWare didn't blow me away in 2011, but there are some notable exceptions in this otherwise underdeveloped platform. Case in point: the final installment of the six-part Bit.Trip series. High on difficulty and style, Bit.Trip Flux redefines the classic formula of Pong through trance-inducing pixel graphics and thumping musical beats. Consider this a recommendation to not only try this last piece of the puzzle, but also all of the other charming and innovative twitch games in the franchise.

Clash of Heroes HD · Xbox 360

Brawler and fantasy fans owe it to themselves to dig into this incredible remake of the old classic, crafted by the original developer, Treasure. With multiple branching story paths and levels, as well as complex movsets that share more in common with fighting games than anything else, it's a fantastic revival of a beloved game with some tweaks and graphical upgrades that make all the difference.

Magicka · PC

Paradox Interactive took an unusual and entertaining side trek from its typical strategy fare with Magicka, a rollicking adventure best played cooperatively with friends. By letting players combine their wizards' different elemental powers, like lightning and ice, the game encourages an exciting emergent quality in which you feel like you're making the game your own. Throw in some fourth-wall breaking humor that demonstrates the game isn't taking itself too seriously (the expansion heads to the Vietnam War, of all places) and Magicka is unlike any other title this past year.

Orcs Must Die · Xbox 360 · PC

Not enough people played the original DS release of this excellent strategic RPG, and I'm convinced the subsequent console port didn't get the attention it deserved either. With a beautiful graphical overhaul, Clash of Heroes is my top suggestion to gamers who enjoyed 2007's

Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords. Players build armies of units that must be stacked in particular formations to attack and defend against enemy forces. The guileless storyline may not change your world, but it offers a suitable framework for some great battles, a fun adventure, and a unique core mechanic.

Orcs Must Die · Xbox 360 · PC

Few game names offer such a complete and succinct gameplay description as Orcs Must Die. One of the several excellent variations on the tower defense formula that released this year, Orcs Must Die distinguishes itself through some hilarious (and bloody) traps to halt the oncoming orcs' hordes, as well as the option to engage in some hacking and slashing of your own by descending into the fray.

PlayStation 3 · PS4

Rochard gets a lot of credit for its surprising hero and plot. John Rochard is no super-charged space manne – he's an overweight space miner looking to save his coworkers. However, the real reason to play Rochard is its innovative and fun approach to affecting the environment to solve puzzles, like the ability to alter the strength of gravity with a press of the button and go rocketing through the air with a simple jump. Smart puzzles and an original premise make Rochard an overlooked gem.

PlayStation 3

It was easy to miss this excellent 2D platforming/puzzle game about an ever-growing alien



by Matt Miller

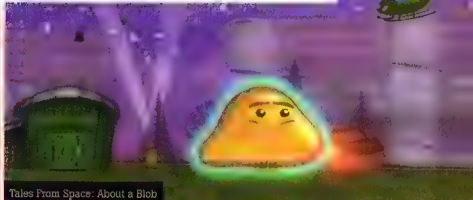
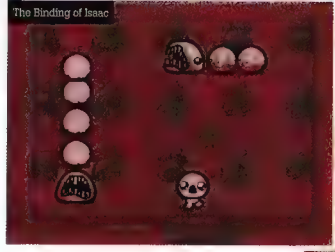


missed in 2011

blob thanks to the PSN outage. With those dark days behind us, players should check out the smart puzzles, cartoon visuals, and clever physics mechanics on display in this great little game. Part Katamari and part Mario, About a Blob mixes classic platforming with fresh gameplay to great effect.

The Binding of Isaac

The Binding of Isaac · PC
One of the creators of Super Meat Boy brings us their own inimitable style of evisceration, and their own inimitable style of evisceration, and their own inimitable style of evisceration. Combining the dungeon exploration of The Legend of Zelda with the randomness of a classic roguelike, The Binding of Isaac is as weird and wonderful as it is challenging and twisted.



The Dishwasher: Vampire Smile

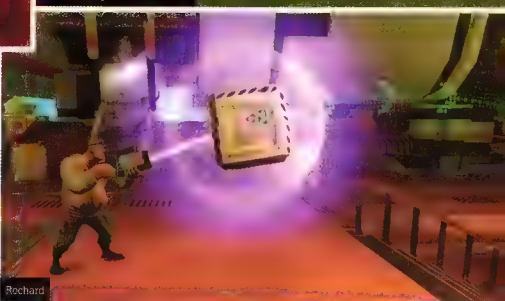
The Dishwasher: Vampire Smile · Xbox 360
Advancing the macabre style and tight gameplay of its predecessor, Vampire Smile is a tense and bloody affair tailored to the discerning action gamer. With two playable characters that each use their own inimitable style of evisceration, there are solid reasons to play through this harrowing adventure multiple times. Along with a highly focused, atmospheric art style and some of the tightest action controls I've encountered, Vampire Smile continues the positive trend of this great series.

Trenched (Iron Brigade)

Trenched (Iron Brigade) · Xbox 360
Double Fine is known for its quirky and humorous approach to games, and Trenched (since renamed Iron Brigade) maintains the reputation, but adds in some solid tower defense-style

action into the mix. In a world overrun by evil televisions, only your mechanized, mobile, World War I-style trench stands in their way. Challenging, varied levels and an enormous variety of upgrade options for your character and machine help this title stand apart. ♦

Want more on downloadable and independent games? Check out game rater's column for daily updates and remains on the best games on the way for PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, WiiWare, and PC. For more in this issue, read our previews on Alan Wake's American Nightmare on p. 78, and Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD on p. 80. Don't miss our reviews of Rockband on p. 90, and Time 2 on p. 91.



interview



www.italianmagazine.it

The Evolution of Microsoft

CAREER
HIGHLIGHTS

As corporate vice president of Microsoft Studios, **Phil Spencer** guides the company's vision for internal game and interactive entertainment development. We recently had the chance to speak to Spencer about the future of Kinect, Microsoft's internal studios, and Halo 4.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Kinect has been a great sales success, but it hasn't offered much to the people who love Halo and Gears of War to get excited about.

I turn it around a little bit. What we've been able to do with Kinect is unlock gaming on your TV to millions of people that never looked at that as something they would do. For our partners, for our creators, that's a good thing. Games that never could have existed on our platform now exist. [To] the question about the core, I start back with the thought that we have a very good core infrastructure. Xbox Live is a good place to go play online, I love our controller. The Xbox and content we get from our third- and first-party creates a very strong portfolio. With Kinect, I'm more careful, because I'm not trying to create a gimmick. I'm trying to create scenarios that make sense in a system that is very good today at playing core games like Halo or Forza or Call of Duty or Mass Effect. If we just went in and created scenarios that broke what was working so well, that wouldn't help anybody.

It's safe to say, given that Xbox Live is an ongoing service that's been retooled to support voice, that something like Kinect will be a part of any future Xbox systems.

We believe that the functionality that's in Kinect, from voice to gestures, is fundamental to today's and the future's entertainment scenarios. When we see how the dashboard update works, and you start to navigate and interact with your content, the gestures, we think that those fundamental additions to the gaming and entertainment space that came with Kinect are long-term plays for us in this industry, absolutely.

Outside of Gears of War, there hasn't been a lot of new IP from Microsoft this generation. Moving forward, is establishing new IPs in the traditional, triple-A console space a priority?

Absolutely. Creating core IP, as many first- and third-parties have seen over the years, isn't an easy thing. I went through the process of creating Gears with Epic and I know the sweat, time, and effort that went into it. I also worked on things like Alan Wake, Too Human, Crackdown, and stuff that didn't hit the same level of success, but had an equal amount of sweat equity and heart go into getting it created. So it will continue to be something that we focus on with new partners like Crytek and new people that aren't announced yet. We do think that it's fundamental that core gamers look at 360 as the place they want to play games. I do think that it's [about] quality and impact, not number of releases in a year.

You partnered in Japan on games like Blue

Dragon and Lost Odyssey. Those bets didn't pay off in terms of sales. Are you letting that Japanese-focused stuff go?

Working with Sakaguchi-san on Lost Odyssey and Blue Dragon was more about RPGs all around. One of the areas where we thought we were deficient in on the original Xbox was RPGs. We wanted to invest in making sure that RPGs are important to our platform. We went out and acquired Lionhead and worked with Sakaguchi. Now, when I see things like Skyrim and Fallout come out and the great sales of those games on our platform, I do think the strategy worked, to make sure that we had a good stable of RPGs on our platform. We have some stuff going [in Japan] with Suda51 now and Project Draco and other things. There are partnerships for us there in the future.

Rare, in the days of GoldenEye and Perfect Dark, were considered one of the great, triple-A studios in the industry. This generation, they've worked on different things like Avatars and Kinect Sports. I think longtime fans are disappointed.

Do you ever see them getting back into proper game development?

[Laughs] That's a disparaging way of putting it.

That sounded more negative than I intended. I meant that the audience that loved them because of GoldenEye and Perfect Dark - Avatars and Kinect Sports isn't what those people loved Rare for.

Yeah, and not to be flippant about it, but the thing I care a lot about is what Rare loves Rare for. In the end, I'm going to get the most and best creative work out of a studio where teams are really passionate. Things like Viva Pinata and Banjo - which I was proud of, from a creative standpoint - they didn't hit the market reaction that we wanted. People want to work on things that have broad impact. What Rare did, which is a testament to them, is they started to bootstrap from the beginning, saying, "We're going to build the content we want to build, here are the things we think the platform has to include."

I think some people have the impression that Avatars and Kinect Sports was foisted on them, but you're saying that those were Rare-driven things.

Avatars specifically, and some of the early Kinect work - they were actually doing some motion work on the Xbox Vision Camera, the little RGB camera accessory we had. That was all incubated by Rare. They basically built the Avatar system that shipped in the New Xbox Experience a couple years ago in conjunction with the platform team. That's them, and what they really love to do. I [wouldn't] go in and say, "I need you to create Killer Instinct because the fans are asking for it," if the studio didn't believe in it. As head of studios I'm not someone who tells studios what they should do. I

try to listen to what they want to do and try to map it to what we need as a platform.

We're a way down the road from Bungie leaving and Halo is now in the hands of 343 Industries. Can you talk about that transition and how difficult it was and assess your position now with 343?

Bungie, even today, the guys are good friends of mine. I have nothing but high praise for them and hope they continue to make great hits. The truth is they had worked on Halo for a very long time. They were interested in going to do something else. The relationship had reached the point where the best thing for both of us was for me to build a new team to work on Halo and for them to go work on something they wanted to go build. I spent all day at 343 yesterday. The team is a really amazing team. The thing I love about it is that it's a team of people that voted with their feet and their resume to work on Halo. I know that 343 are there for one reason, because they have a passion for Halo.

In broad terms, what can we expect from Halo 4? Is it in the template of what Bungie did or are they taking the franchise in directions that people might not expect?

I was talking with [Microsoft's] Kiki Wolfkill about this yesterday, and she had a real interesting way of putting it that I will steal. She said that, as the team was created, the sole goal was how do they fill this box called Halo that Bungie created? That's a daunting task. As the team has come together they've filled that box and they became comfortable enough that they are creating a bigger box that is 343's Halo. That's not a negative statement on where Bungie was, but it's the evolution that the team's psyche has gone through. It's important that people like Frank O'Connor are there and people that have a long history with Halo. You also have a lot of new thoughts and ideas in the franchise. The franchise does need to evolve.

Halo Anniversary is out and seems to be well-received. Sony has done a great job with HD rereleases and collections of some of their last-generation games. Is that something you're looking at doing more of?

Halo Anniversary wasn't created with that in mind. I agree with you, Sony's done a great job with looking at their back catalogue and selling those games again. For us, this was the 10th anniversary of the launch of the Xbox and Halo. Halo wasn't a Live game, and we thought that it would be a great way to celebrate with the community and make it a native 360 game with all the technical features a 360 game has today. It was more a celebration, it wasn't the beginning of an HD remake line. I [don't] want to get into a world where people felt like I was just trying to sell them things that they've already played. ♡

1986

THE GREAT NORTHWEST

Spencer begins his college education at the University of Washington. A childhood computer enthusiast, he majors in computer science

1988

INTERNING

While still attending university, Spencer scores an internship at Microsoft working with multimedia CD-ROM products like Encarta and Cinemania. He later gets a full-time job at Microsoft

2001

JOINING THE TEAM

At the launch of the original Xbox, Spencer joins Microsoft Game Studios, helping oversee internal publishing and developing with Ed Fries

2001

PROJECT EGO

Spencer's first project is working with Peter Molyneux's Lionhead Studios on Project Ego (which would become Fable) and a game called B.C. that was never released

2005

MOVING UP

Spencer is promoted to Microsoft Game Studios' head of production. He works with Epic on a project called "Warfare," which eventually becomes Gears of War

2007

GOING CONTINENTAL

Spencer relocates to Europe to help integrate the recently acquired Lionhead Studios into Microsoft Game Studios. He also works with Rare following the departure of founders Tim and Chris Stamper

2008

BACK HOME

Spencer returns home to Microsoft's American headquarters and becomes general manager of Microsoft Game Studios

2009

LEADING

Spencer is promoted to corporate vice president of Microsoft Game Studios



1 Burton Moto Boots
 Burton's Speed Zone laces will have you strapped into your board and on the chairlift before your ski buddies have finished tightening up their boots. The Moto's heat-moldable Imprint liners also conform to your unique footprint and provide your feet with a warm, glove-like fit. Moto's reduced boot print also helps lessen toe drag, and might help keep your face out of the snow.

\$149.99 | burton.com

2 The North Face Madplaid Triclimate Jacket

Even if your trip coming off the chair lift, at least you'll look good doing it in North Face's Madplaid Triclimate Jacket. This 4-in-1 jacket features a plaid shell made with waterproof, breathable, fully seam-sealed fabric. The Madplaid's interior is both reversible and removable, and stays warm with 100g Heatseeker Eco insulation. Hopefully you won't need the Recco avalanche rescue reflector system, but it's there if you're emboldened enough to venture into the backcountry. This jacket is available in multiple color patterns.

\$360.00 | thenorthface.com

3 GoPro Camera HD Hero2: Outdoor Edition

Gear mountable, waterproof, and capable of capturing 170-degree wide angle 1080p video or 11-megapixel photos at a rate of 10 photos per second, GoPro's HD Hero2 is one of the toughest outdoor sports cameras in the world. If you want to catch that sweet shot of your buddy performing a backside rodeo flip — and then that second shot of him eating powder two seconds later — go pro.

\$299.99 | gopro.com



THE ART OF FLIGHT

Travis Rice and a few fellow professional snowboarders brave the wilds of Alaska, Patagonia, Romania, and Austria to make one of the most transfixing and highly produced snowboarding documentaries ever recorded.

\$29.95
artofflightmovie.com

DIABLO III: BOOK OF CAIN

Deckard Cain is no stranger to the world of Sanctuary — he wrote the book on it. This is his firsthand account of the epic conflict between heaven and hell, which provides the foundation for Diablo III's fiction.

\$35.00
insighteditions.com

JUSTIFIED: THE COMPLETE SECOND SEASON

Timothy Olyphant is U.S. Deputy Marshall Raylan Givens, a modern-day gunslinger who delivers renegade justice in a corrupt, backwater Kentucky county.

\$49.95
shop.fxnetworks.com

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: WAR IN THE NORTH ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK

Warner Bros.' recent Lord of the Rings game might have fallen flat, but there isn't a single sour note in its soundtrack. Inon Zur's epic compositions are rich and complex in ways that the game wasn't.





\$9.98
watertower-music.com

www.fox.com

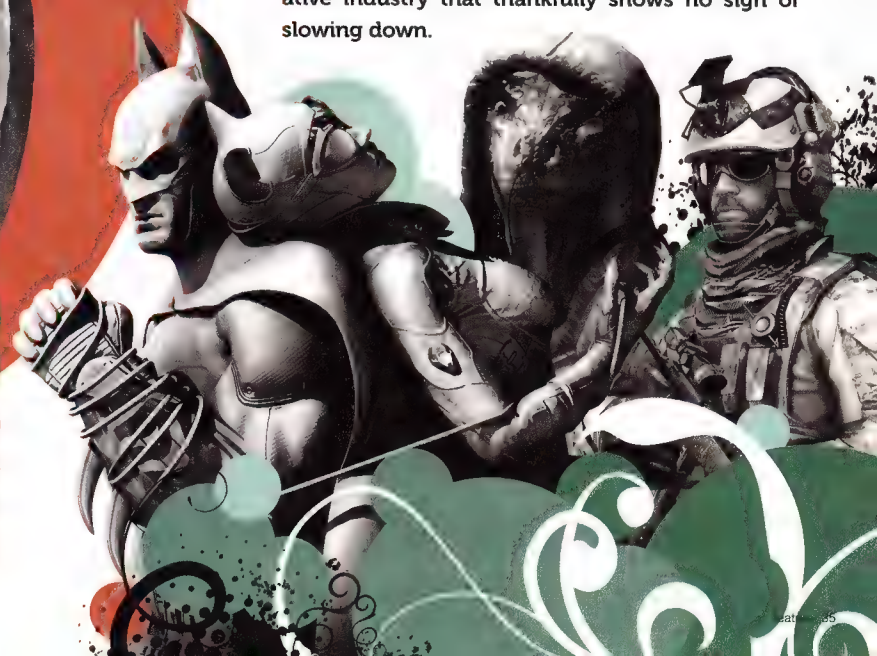
TOP



GAME



Last year brought no shortage of great games. Over 100 titles received a rating of 8 or above from the Game Informer staff – and that doesn't even include the avalanche of great mobile and tablet games we enjoyed. You could summarize 2011 by calling it the year of the shooter. With the contentious *Modern Warfare 3* vs. *Battlefield 3* showdown, high-profile console exclusives like *Gears of War 3* and *Killzone 3*, plus three other marquee gun games on our Top 50 list, shooter fans had more targets in their sights than they had bullets in their pistols. Platforming fans, whose options have been limited in past years, also enjoyed a relative embarrassment of riches thanks to impressive showings by *LittleBigPlanet 2*, *Rayman Origins*, and *Super Mario 3D Land*. In the following pages we pay homage to yet another banner year for interactive entertainment, a creative industry that thankfully shows no sign of slowing down.

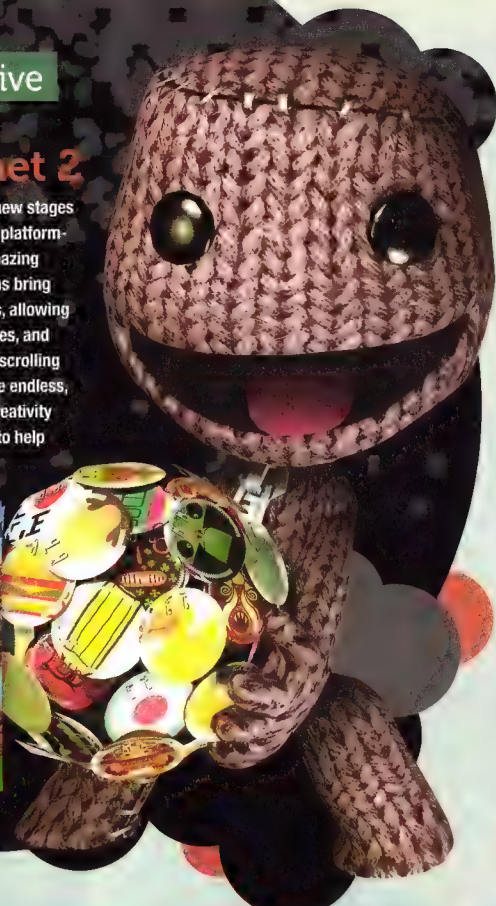


BEST PS3 Exclusive

LittleBigPlanet 2

LittleBigPlanet 2 doesn't just bring new stages to Media Molecule's clever brand of platforming. The star of this sequel is the amazing creation mode. The expanded options bring user-created content to new heights, allowing players to program AI, craft cutscenes, and dabble in genres ranging from side-scrolling shooters to RTS. The possibilities are endless, and LittleBigPlanet 2 lets players' creativity rule while providing the inspiration to help ideas flourish.

01.18 • PS3



01.11 • DS

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Ghost Trick features some of the best DS animation we've seen, but Capcom's adventure game is more than just a looker. Interesting characters breathe life into a well-realized setting that splits time between the land of the living and the ghost plane. In an industry full of unfulfilling finales, Ghost Trick memorably concludes by leaving no loose ends. Unfortunately, you are forced to replay puzzles at every failure, but it's a small complaint for one of the better DS games in 2011.



01.25 • PS3, XBOX 360, DC

Dead Space 2

Dead Space 2 may not have done a lot to separate itself from the original, but that's okay. All we wanted was to experience terror in space all over again. Dead Space 2 gives Isaac a voice, a reason to keep fighting, and throws him out into space with jet-powered boots for good measure. Amazing set pieces like the destructible tram ride and the space flight from one end of the Sprawl to the other make Dead Space 2 memorable enough to keep it fresh in our minds even though it released at the beginning of the year.

TOP 10 DORKS



1

WHEATLEY
Portal 2



2

DUKE NUKEM
Duke Nukem Forever



3

GROOSE
The Legend of Zelda



4

STAFF SERGEANT KNOX
Operation: Flashpoint: Red River



5

GRANT ALEXANDER
X-Men: Destiny

Wheatley is a small, white, spherical robot with a blue eye and a single antenna. He is the primary antagonist of Portal 2, a character who is both hilarious and terrifying. He is a classic example of a dorky character who is not to be underestimated.

Duke Nukem is a character who has been around since the early 1990s. He is a classic example of a dorky character who is not to be underestimated. He is a character who is both hilarious and terrifying.

Groose is a character who is both hilarious and terrifying. He is a classic example of a dorky character who is not to be underestimated. He is a character who is both hilarious and terrifying.

Staff Sergeant Knox is a character who is both hilarious and terrifying. He is a classic example of a dorky character who is not to be underestimated. He is a character who is both hilarious and terrifying.

Grant Alexander is a character who is both hilarious and terrifying. He is a classic example of a dorky character who is not to be underestimated. He is a character who is both hilarious and terrifying.

it isn't tongue-in-cheek, you're supposed to take him seriously.



02.15 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds

While a new Ultimate edition has integrated tons of new characters, this predecessor puts Capcom's frantic superhero-infused fighter back on the map after a decade-long absence. The tight controls and tag-team gameplay give hardcore fighting fans plenty to sink their teeth into on a tournament level. Casual fighters shouldn't hesitate either, as the drops of revealed gaming and comic heroes and intuitive high-flying combat offer a lot to newcomers. The fighting genre's second coming lives on.



02.16 (XBOX 360), 03.15 (PS3)
PS3, XBOX 360

Hard Corps: Uprising

As frustrating as it is to explain that this is a Contra game every time we talk about it, we'll take beneheaded naming conventions any time when the gameplay is this good. It perfectly balances classic Contra elements with new directions while keeping things surprising and challenging. Plus, Hard Corps pleases both old-school fans and modern players with two distinct game types: the classic hardcore Arcade Mode and the new Rising Mode that finally brings a permanent upgrade system to Contra.



02.22 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

Bulletstorm

In the first few hours of Bulletstorm players attack an enemy ship in deep space, pilot a mechanized (and weaponized) T-Rex, and navigate through a collapsing dam. What's impressive about Bulletstorm, however, is that those incredible scenes aren't much more memorable than the moment-to-moment enemy encounters. If it's a crime to enjoy flinging bad guys into cacti with our energy whips, you may as well haul us off to jail right now.



02.22 • PS3

Killzone 3

More than capable of competing with the best shooters on the market, Killzone 3 delivers thrilling action, gorgeous visuals, jaw-dropping set pieces, and a unique twist on multiplayer. During a year in which Sony and Microsoft both struggled to find a place for their new motion controller options, Killzone 3 gives players a reason to utilize Move – and maybe even enjoy it more than a traditional controller



02.122 • DS

Radiant Historia

A dream come true for fans of 16-bit RPGs, Radiant Historia is a fond and fitting tribute to a bygone era of gaming. The story is packed with surprises without relying on the same cookie-cutter characters and subplots you've seen dozens of times. The battle system adds modern twists to classic turn-based concepts, feeling simultaneously familiar and innovative. If you enjoyed titles like Final Fantasy IV, Earthbound, or Chrono Trigger on SNES, don't miss Radiant Historia.



03.01 • PS3, XBOX 360

Fight Night Champion

Previously, story-based sports titles have fallen flat, but Fight Night is a perfect fit for a Rocky-style drama. The game's Champion mode molds good voice acting, a well-paced story, and attractive cutscenes around the franchise's already great – and improved – boxing mechanics. This smart integration makes the mode more than just a tacked on experience – it's a thrilling new way to experience a sports game.



03.01 • PC

Rift

The debut game from Trion Worlds doesn't reinvent the polished MMORPG formula made popular by World of Warcraft, but it does something most other MMOs can't hope to do against Blizzard: compete. With a compelling blend of fantasy and technology, dynamic world events, and a constant stream of content-packed patches, Rift provides plenty of good reasons to step away from Azeroth.



03.15 • DS

Okamiden

Nintendo fans are going nuts for The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword nowadays, but they shouldn't neglect Capcom's Zelda-inspired Okamiden from PlayStation 2, this DS sequel includes a sprawling overworld, plus several impressive dungeons, puzzles, and enormous bosses. The key difference, outside of the cutesy art style, is using a stylus to draw the signature ink attacks and abilities instead of an awkward analog stick.



6

MS. SPLOSION MAN

Ms. Splosion Man
Ms. Splosion Man is like a million teenagers smashed into a single hyperactive freight train of annoyance. She has a vacant grin, recites dumb song lyrics, and is obsessed with her appearance. Unlike most teenagers, though, she's never going to grow out of it.



7

AMAROS

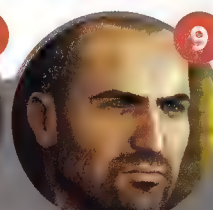
El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron
Imagine this: You're a powerful fallen angel with dominion over an entire ethereal realm. What do you do with your power? If you said, "Dress up like Michael Jackson, then dance and prance as much as possible," then you're Amarus. You're also a loser.



8

ANDERS

Dragon Age II
If you want a companion who acts like a crybaby about everything, Anders is your man. After years of effort, BioWare has perfected dorkiness; Anders is a bigger winner than Alistair and whines even more than Carth, making him a true pinnacle of failure.



9

DARIUS MASON

Red Faction: Armageddon
He eats nails for breakfast! He punched through a planet! Just kidding – Darius Mason didn't really do that. It's a pity, because someone clearly wanted people to think this generic doofus was hardcore. Just slapping on tattoos and a shaved head doesn't cut it.



10

THE FOUNDING FATHERS

The Conduit 2
You only need to know one thing about The Conduit 2: At the very end, you open up a Stargate and Abe Lincoln and George Washington come out decked out like space marines. Why didn't this make it into any history books? Oh, right – because it's stupid.

Total War: Shogun 2

Solid technical implementation has never been Total War's calling card, but Creative Assembly finally locked down the performance with this massive grand strategy game. Taking over feudal Japan is equal parts diplomatic intrigue, clever resource management, and bloody real-time combat. At long last, digging into Total War's outstanding gameplay – which is better than ever in Shogun 2 – doesn't feel like being part of a beta test.



TOP 10 HEROES



1

Lord Kato
 The game's most iconic hero is Lord Kato, a samurai warrior who serves as the player's primary advisor. He is a highly skilled tactician and a loyal ally, providing the player with valuable insights and advice throughout the game.



2

Lord Tokimune
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Follow 9

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03/22 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

Crysis 2

Finally, console gamers get to see what all the PC gamers were talking about. Like its celebrated PC predecessor, Crysis 2 carves a niche for itself by giving gamers amazing tools and letting them play the game however they want. The sequel replaces the jungles of Southeast Asia for the urban jungle of a decimated Manhattan, but delivers the same fantastic nanosuit-powered action as the original. As a bonus, this time the multiplayer doesn't suck.



03/22 • PS3, XBOX 360, Wii, PC

LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars

Traveller's Tales' return to the Star Wars franchise proves its LEGO formula still has room for growth. A huge campaign, ridiculously comprehensive character roster, and the addition of light RTS gameplay make it the best LEGO game yet, and one of the greatest family-friendly releases in recent memory. It's worth a look even if you think Clone Wars-era Star Wars is as appealing as walking barefoot across a pile of plastic bricks.



04/19 • PS3, XBOX 360

Mortal Kombat

When Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe released in 2008, longtime fans were disappointed by the toned-down violence. With this reboot, NetherRealm returns to the series' bloody roots and ups the gore factor further. Fatalities are ridiculously graphic, the great roster of the first three games returns, and the entire package comes with far more content than the typical fighting game. Like Street Fighter IV, this new Mortal Kombat brings the series back in the best way possible.



04/19 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

Portal 2

Portal surprisingly stole the show on The Orange Box, but nobody was sure it would work as a full standalone game. It only took a few seconds with Wheatley asking you to say "apple" to know that the sequel is something special. The best comedic writing in video game history is paired with brilliant puzzles that somehow make your brain hurt while simultaneously making you feel like a genius. Add a new multiplayer element that demands the full cooperation of all involved, and this is one of the best experiences of 2011.



05/17 PS3, XBOX 360, Wii, 3DS, PC

L.A. Noire

After over seven years in development, Team Bondi's period epic finally released in 2011. A groundbreaking facial capture system powers a unique brand of cinematic gameplay that casts players as flawed LAPD detective Cole Phelps. Phelps looks ahead into the graft and deceit at the heart of the city, making contact with dozens of memorable characters as he interrogates them to sort truth from lie. Love it or hate it, no other game in 2011 was quite like L.A. Noire.

BEST PC Exclusive

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings

IGN.com

IGN.com

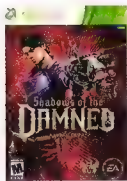




06/07 • PS3

Infamous 2

New characters and a new setting set Infamous 2 apart from the original, but the real stars are the new powers. Cole's ability to manipulate ice and the ambiguous darkness powers, combined with the electrical powers carried over from the first game, make him a force to be reckoned with. Nothing compares to ripping up a city block with a tornado, or propelling yourself into the air with a column of ice. The game was worth playing twice just to see all the powers and both endings.



06/21 • PS3, XBOX 360

Shadows of the Damned

This under-advertised third-person shooter from eccentric developer Suda51 and former Capcom luminary Shinji Mikami may be the best game hardly anyone played in 2011. From the tight action to the juvenile-but-hilarious writing, Shadows of the Damned deserves a larger audience. The mainstream may not have noticed, but we won't forget our adventures through Hell with Garcia Hotspur and Johnson, his perversely talking skull of a sidekick.



07/20 (XBOX 360), 08/16 (PC) XBOX 360, PC

Bastion

It's rare that a debut project from a new developer draws as much praise as Supergiant's stunning downloadable action/fantasy. Great level design, balanced combat, stunning art, and a standout musical score can be the difference between good and great, and Bastion has them all in spades. Layer on an innovative approach to in-game narration, in which a grizzled old man unravels the plot as you progress, and Bastion quickly rises toward the top in a year crowded with strong downloadable releases.



08/16 • PS3, XBOX 360

El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron

Compared to other action games, El Shaddai doesn't have the tightest or deepest gameplay, but delivers some of the most striking visuals this year. Its shifting watercolor style feeds into the flow of combat and simple platforming segments. The experience is rounded out by bizarre but memorable characters and an epic Biblical story. El Shaddai is a must-play that will leave your brain confused and your eyes amazed.



08/23 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

Eidos Montreal rejuvenates the Deus Ex series with Human Revolution, a riveting social commentary about mankind using technology to evolve. As power-hungry corporations try to force change upon the world, the player ultimately has the final say in how the future plays out. Beautifully designed player freedom is integrated into almost every combat scenario and social interaction, making this a game you'll want to play through numerous times to see how events unfold through different actions.



09/06 • PS3, XBOX 360, WII, PC

Driver: San Francisco

Driver: San Francisco's story expertly rides the fine line between stupid and clever, screaming through its twists and turns and just barely staying on the track. A post-crash coma doesn't stop Tanner from cleaning up the streets, thanks to his new out-of-body powers that allow him to hop from car to car in real time — all delivered with a wink and a smile. It's a great gameplay conceit bolstered with exhilarating action that would stand up even without the supernatural twist.



09/07 • XBOX 360

Crimson Alliance

Dungeon crawlers are a dime a dozen, but excellent iterations are a rare treat. Certain Affinity balances three distinct character classes and multiple difficulty settings to ensure fast and exciting action no matter whom you decide to play. The smart upgrade system (which is built on equipment collection rather than levels) is intuitive and easy to grasp. It may be a familiar formula, but Crimson Alliance assures a fun weekend with friends at your side.

TOP 10 MOMENTS



1

LUNACY

Portal 2
As it turns out, Cave Johnson's rants about moon dust weren't just filler. In the game's final moments, Portal 2 players learned the true power of their portal devices.



2

NEEDLES

Dead Spaces 2
Sometimes you need to hang out with friends or hit the gym to help get over the memories of a former lover. Other times you need high powered, manually operated surgical equipment to get over it. Just don't blink.



3

IT'S MORNING ALREADY?!

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Whether you've been killing time at the forge or queuing your brains out, one thing's almost certain: Time loses its meaning in the frosty wilds of Skyrim. You may as well call it sick at this point.



4

CHILLIN' WITH MR. FREEZE

Batman: Arkham City
We all know Batman is the world's greatest detective, but this battle against his frosty nemesis shows just how resourceful Mr. Wayne truly is. Players have to think like a hero and take full advantage of the environment to survive this boss encounter.



5

VIRTUAL REALITY

Saints Row: The Third
As the Third Street Saints take on the tech-savvy Deckers gang, they find themselves inhabiting noshie virtual space. This iron-like environment features homages from gaming's early days to contemporary tropes. It being Saints Row, there's also a toilet.



06/10/11 • PC

Tropico 4

One of the best city builders in recent years, the PC version of Tropico 4 makes massive strides within the genre in interface, presentation, and player direction. The lengthy campaign is still a series of sandboxes where you can be whatever kind of dictator you want, but events and crises that come in both random and scripted players will keep you on your toes. Managing economy, tourism, and an often rebellious populace in Tropico 4 is a unique experience you won't find anywhere else.



08/31/10 • OS

Jetpack Joyride

In a year filled with massive, sprawling experiences, Jetpack Joyride finds success by offering quick bursts of action. On first glance, it appears to consist of nothing but moving up and down to avoid lasers. Spend time with it, however, and its nuances become apparent. Learning the movement and strategy of the six different vehicles, tackling unique challenges, and deciding when to pull the trigger on that Second Chance or Final Blast make this one of the most addictive games of the year.



09/06/11 • PC, XBOX 360, PS3

Dead Island

Few games capture the desperation and overwhelming dread of a large-scale zombie outbreak like Dead Island. The solid melee combat and intriguing character progression breathe new life into the rotting zombie genre, giving players more motivation than ever to lop off undead heads. Four-player co-op lets you survive the horrors with friends, but even going solo is an entertaining trip through hell.

BEST Xbox 360 Exclusive

Gears of War 3

Gears of War 3 wraps up Marcus Fenix's story, but that's not the real reason to play the game. Epic Games' unwavering commitment to flawless co-op and competitive multiplayer has never borne such wonderful fruit. This is Gears' already-excellent gameplay sharpened to a razor edge, with a near-perfect online backend to make sure tearing into the meaty shooter gameplay is as simple and straightforward as chainsawing a Locust in half.



09/12/07 • XBOX 360



6

THE GAME-CHANGER

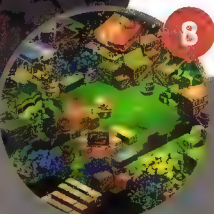
The Witcher 2. One of them is a terrorist fighting to free his people. The other is a fascist secret policeman trying to mold society together. Far from a dark buddy cop movie, these are the mortal enemies you must choose between working with – and the next 20-plus hours of the game depend on your choice.



7

OLD MAN ALTAIR

Assassin's Creed Revelations. Even hobbling up a hill as a hunched and tired old man, the original assassin still has what it takes. As Altair ibn-La'Ahad makes one final ascent through the mountain fortress of Masyaf, all the wisdom, power, and lethality of the character is on display. Everything is permitted, indeed.



8

THE FINAL CHOICE

Bastion. If you stared at your screen for a few minutes before deciding the fate of Bastion's world, you weren't alone. A textbook dilemma, the Kid faced two world-changing options, equally destructive in their own way.



9

THE NO-WIN CONCLUSION

Mass Effect 2's Arrival DLC. Mass Effect 2 never forces you to be evil, but the Arrival DLC presents Shepard with a high-stakes, no-win scenario. Regardless of your paragon or renegade preference. Doing what it takes to temporarily save the galaxy will not leave you with a clear conscience.



10

THE END

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. In a game full of great boss battles, Skyward Sword makes the final fight feel epic, dark, and even a little creepy. The ending subtly ties all of Zelda series games together, making it clear that this is the first story in the timeline, and manages to sneak in a surprise as well.



09/27 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

FIFA Soccer 12

In many ways, FIFA 12 is the fulfillment of the series' long-held promise. Improvements in offensive and defensive controls, along with a bump up in AI and players' physical interactions make the game more challenging and sometimes unpredictable on the field. Combine these improvements with the revamped career mode and excellent online mode, and this is the most complete FIFA title to date.



09/27 • PS3, XBOX 360

Pro Evolution Soccer 2012

Although rival EA is known for making dual analog control in its sports games popular, Konami's Pro Evolution 12 makes use of it to great effect, letting players control off-the-ball players to set up defense-busting runs. This new control scheme plays to the strength of the franchise, which is its creativity in producing offensive opportunities. The series still lacks enough team and player licenses, but there's more than enough here to feast on.



10/04 • PS3, XBOX 360

Dark Souls

From Software had one goal in mind while creating Dark Souls, the follow up to 2009's Demon's Souls: Make the game even harder. The world is much bigger and more connected than before, and there are way more enemies, weapons, and spells to play around with. While it had some online issues initially, Namco has since ironed them out, creating a smoother play experience. Dark Souls might not be one of the best-selling games this year, but it's certainly one of the most memorable.



10/04 • PS3, XBOX 360, PC

NBA 2K12

The NBA lockout may have cost basketball fans a large chunk of this year's season, but NBA 2K12 provided an oasis in the midst of the hardwood desert. The poor online performance has angered fans, but Visual Concepts scores with the best presentation of any sports game, a strong Association mode, and a drastically improved My Player mode that fixes the progression system, starts you in the NBA immediately, and expands the off-court activities in meaningful ways.



10/18 • (PS3, XBOX 360)
11/22 • (PC)

BEST Action

Batman: Arkham City

Remember when all Batman games were terrible? That seems like a distant memory now, especially after exploring every nook and cranny of Arkham City. This highly anticipated sequel takes the impressive foundation of the original and enhances it in just about every aspect. With rewarding combat, amazing boss fights with Batman's best villains, a highly detailed and fully explorable world, and clever references to Batman lore, Arkham City is easily worthy of the perfect score we awarded it.



10.04 • PS3, Xbox 360, PC

Rage

With its first new franchise in years, *Id* demonstrates that the FPS godfather hasn't lost its knack for the genre. *Rage* features intense gunplay that greatly benefits from the new *Id Tech 5* engine, allowing for insanely realistic animations and gorgeous visuals (all running at a smooth 60 frames per second). Despite a weak ending and some ho-hum vehicular sections, this shooter still impresses thanks to its unique arsenal, impressive production values, and engaging battles.



09.06 • Xbox 360, Wii, PC

Forza Motorsport 4

Forza 4 is a must-have racing game, period. Its newly modified single-player campaign (which is nicely tied to the multiplayer) is malleable enough to let you customize the experience, and yet it's also structured so you're not driving aimlessly. Similarly, the multiplayer is well crafted, encompassing plenty of community and competitive elements. All of this serves as a framework for exhilarating racing and sexy cars.



10.16 • PS3, Xbox 360, Wii, PC

Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure

A charming game with a diabolical business model, *Skylanders* brings back *Spyro* and a menagerie of heroes with a kid-friendly blend of *Diablo*-style looting, exploring, combat, and puzzle solving. With a portal base that allows real-life toy figures (sold separately, natch) to enter your game and store your individual game data, the merchandising is brilliant. This business plan helped make *Skylanders* one of the hot Christmas toys of 2011, but it's the solid game mechanics that wins our praise.

TOP 10 VILLAINS



1

KATHERINE MARLOW

Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
As much as gamers love the *Uncharted* games, the series has never been known for memorable villains. This dead-ringer for Helen Mirren seems to have endless resources and an uncanny knack for screwing Nathan Drake over at every turn.

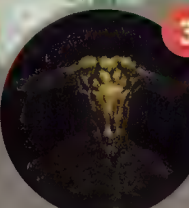


2

MR. FREEZE

Batman: Arkham City

He may not be the central antagonist of *Batman: Arkham City's* story, but the ice-minded doctor is to thank for the game's best boss fight. In a memorable battle, Freeze forces the *Caped Crusader* to utilize all of his skills in a single room.



3

CAPRA DEMON

Dark Souls

Dark Souls is notorious for being one of the most difficult games of all time, and this boss signals the moment that many gamers realized just what they were in for. His one-hit kill hits don't allow the player any time to formulate a strategy, resulting in many frustrating deaths.



4

LETHO

The Witcher 2

This *Witcher* isn't a typical villain in the mustache-twirling, world-domination-plotting sense of the word. His plot does put him at odds with Geralt, however, and his comparable powers make the player realize just how frustrating it can be to go up against a *Witcher*.

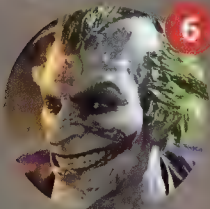


5

DRAGON PRIESTS

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Unlike the plentiful skeletons, frost trolls, and other baddies of *Skyrim*, these relics from the past only appear a handful of times. When you run into them, you know two things — you're in for a tough fight, and you'll be rewarded greatly upon taking them down.



6

JOKER

Batman: Arkham City
Batman's longtime arch-nemesis utilizes his entire bag of tricks in *Arkham City*, manipulating the *Dark Knight* into scrambling for the antidote he needs. Even after working with him for most of the game, *Joker's* motives are never quite clear to the player until the surprising end.



7

HARLAN FONTAINE

L.A. Noire

This smooth-talking psychiatrist is willing to deceive anyone to get what he wants, including his own patients. His persuasive skills and access to morphine allow him a level of control over certain individuals, which significantly plays into the wider plot of *L.A. Noire*.



8

ISAAC FROST

Fight Night Champion

If *Fight Night Champion's* story takes cues from Rocky, then the menacing *Isaac Frost* is Ivan Drago. The tattooed world champion is a monster in the ring, destroying anyone who steps between the ropes. Taking this beast down is akin to landing a knockout punch to Mike Tyson back on the NES.



9

CREEPER

Minecraft

Like a bully on the beach that steps on your sand castle, these hissing baddies can take down hours of work in one explosion. As soon as you see the surt going down, the threat of a *Creeper* appearance should have you scrambling to get inside and surrounded by as much light as possible.



10

ISAAC'S MOM

The Binding of Isaac

Based on the Biblical story of Abraham, this dark story places you in the role of a child that must escape religious sacrifice at the hands of his own mother. After locking her son in his room so he can avoid the evils of the world, she serves as the final boss in a disturbing and bloody battle.



10.18.1PS3

Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One

All 4 One proves that it's possible to have your co-op cake and eat it too. Insomniac Games latest entry in the 3D platformer keeps what makes the series great – memorable characters, funny dialogue, and bizarre weapons – while adding the ability to bounce around gorgeous cartoony worlds with your friends. Considering how good it is, rounding up three pals shouldn't be too tough.



10.25.1PS3, XBOX360, PC

Battlefield 3

The single-player campaign adheres too closely to the Call of Duty formula and the co-op falls flat, but DICE's latest shooter delivers where it matters most – in multiplayer. Battlefield 3 harks the return of the amazing 64-player battles on PC, and most of the maps downscale well to the 24-player console battles as well. Add the impressive lighting and destruction of the Frostbite 2 engine, an improved progression system, and the return of jets to the large-scale warfare, and you have a shooter worthy of the multiplayer crown.



11.01.1PS3

Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception

With Uncharted 2, Naughty Dog redefined what it meant to deliver a cinematic game experience. If the follow up doesn't feel quite as fresh, Nathan Drake and co. still deliver loads of memorable set pieces. From horseback desert raids to platforming out of a sinking ocean liner, Uncharted 3 has it all. Tying it all together are emotional voice-acting performances and one of the world's best graphics engines. Top off all that with a comprehensive multiplayer component, and this is triple-A game development at its finest.

TOP 10 REISSUES



1

Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together

According to the original developers, this is the definitive version of Tactics Ogre. With retranslated text, redone art, redesigned progression, plus new characters and systems, it's hard to disagree with them. You can also revisit important narrative choices to discover where the story could have gone.



2

Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary

The multiplayer integration has missteps (no indestructible warriogs or overpowered pistols?) but the re-imagining of the original Halo single-player campaign is impressive. As a constant reminder of just how far the game has come in 10 years, you can switch back to the original graphics at any time.



3

Ico/Shadow of the Colossus HD

Two of the best games of the last generation finally run with the HD treatment and silky framerate each deserves. You can unlock co-op in Ico and decode the previously foreign language of Iordra. The video features included on the disc also chronicle the development of both games.



4

Metal Gear Solid HD Collection

Metal Gear Solid 2 and 3 in HD are nice, but Peace Walker is the real sell of this collection thanks to better controls and online co-op. With the PlayStation version, you can even switch back and forth between the console and handheld version if you so desire.



5

Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D

It may look the way you remember it, but don't let that fool you. Nintendo rebuilt the entire game to keep up with the 3DS' graphical and 3D capabilities. You can also unlock the Master Quest after beating the game, a feature previously only available to players who reserved Wind Waker.



6

Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection

Final Fantasy is no stranger to re-releases, but this is the complete package. HD graphics, new cutscenes, and an epilogue game, and Final Fantasy IV: The After Years (previously only available on WiiWare in the North America) are all included on the disc.



7

God of War: Origins

If you missed these stellar PSP games because you didn't own the handheld, you no longer have an excuse. Sony gives these games the remastered treatment with this PS3 collection featuring HD graphics and 3D (where available).



8

Starfox 64 3D

This rebuilt version of Starfox 64 looks nicer, plays in 3D, and offers motion control. The lack of online multiplayer is unfortunate, but if you're in a room with a few other 3DS owners the local multiplayer is still a good time.



9

Beyond Good & Evil HD

Many missed this highly regarded Michel Ancel masterpiece from the last generation of consoles. This HD re-release seeks to fix that. Outside of the HD upgrade and widescreen capabilities though, Ubisoft didn't add much to the game.



10

Resident Evil 4 HD

Resident Evil 4 looks good on its own, but seeing the game in HD with the option for widescreen made jumping back into Leon's leather jacket all the more appealing. Just make sure to change those controls to the modern settings.

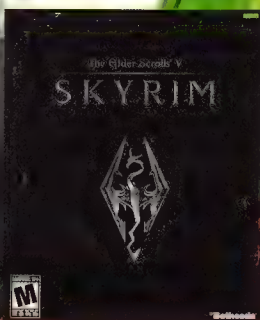


BEST Role-Playing

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

A gamer can't ask for much more when it comes to Skyrim. From major quests to minor diversions, Bethesda Studios has covered all the bases with cool characters, terrifying foes, and a treasure trove of hidden secrets. The massive, breathtaking world is teeming with peril, and the rewards for exploration are many. With so much to do, you can easily slip 100 hours into this masterful RPG and not see everything that makes the adventure so irresistible — but you don't need to play for years like a few hours to see why Skyrim is our Game of the Year.

XBOX 360



Reader & Editor Pick

GAME
OF THE
YEAR



Super Mario 3D Land

The 3DS launched with a weak game lineup of rereads and disappointments, but that all changed when Super Mario 3D Land hit. Mario's latest adventure is a fantastic hybrid of the series' 2D and 3D gameplay styles with a mix of classic references (tanooki suit and airships) and new elements (Escher-esque puzzle rooms and the boomerang suit). Most impressively, many editors at G1 play it with the 3D effects cranked up because it actually adds to the experience. If more developers can crack that nut, the 3DS may have a bright future after all.



Assassin's Creed Revelations

Ezio is old, and he leads the Assassin order. Altair is dead, and has been for hundreds of years. Desmond is unconscious, trying to keep his mind intact. The fates of these three characters finally converge in Revelations, giving fans the answers to many mysteries. While not every addition is an improvement (looking at you, tower defense), the foundation of Assassin's Creed remains solid, providing entertaining missions and intriguing plot twists in cool historical settings.



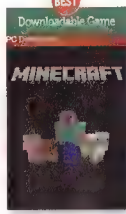
Rayman Origins

Forget Rayman Origins' gorgeous visuals, adorable characters, and exceptionally catchy soundtrack—a difficult task, to say the least. What's left? A platforming experience that keeps pace against the giants of the genre. Its detailed animations don't slow down the game's brisk flow, and there's enough variety to keep each stage fresh. It even pulls off one of the more difficult challenges around—successfully delivering fun-to-swim swimming levels. Wherever you've been, Rayman, we're glad to have you back.



Saints Row: The Third

The Saints Row franchise began as a Grand Theft Auto clone, but it's evolved into a gonzo, adult version of Looney Tunes thanks to this sequel. Whether you're beating a hot dog mascot to death with a giant purple phallus or distracting gang members with your own bottled farts, Saints Row: The Third is one of the most absurd (and fun) open-world titles we've ever played. Tight controls, entertaining missions, and a surprisingly deep upgrade system make it as rewarding to play as it is to laugh at.



Minecraft

After a nearly year long beta, gamers are finally playing the official release of Mojang's digital sandbox and couldn't be happier. Don't let the addition of a final boss fool you; Minecraft isn't a game about winning. Instead, the main appeal stems from exploring your own unique world and making your mark on it however you choose. YouTube is inundated with videos of ingenious Minecraft creations, and with four million sales under its belt, we're guessing Mojang won't stop giving players new content to play with anytime soon.

TOP 10 DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT



PINBALL FX TABLES

Single-handedly reviving our interest in pinball, FX 2 kept our interest with a seemingly endless flow of new tables and challenges throughout the year. From licensed Marvel tables to original concepts like Mars and Paranormal, Pinball FX 2 has us jockeying for high scores just like in the heyday of arcades.



PEER REVIEW

Portal 2's mind-bending puzzles are some of the best in years, so it's hard to argue with a free update that adds even more to the mix. A new cooperative expansion challenges players that have already perfected the base game, and GLaDOS's new dialogue alone makes Peer Review worth a download.



THE DA VINCI DISAPPEARANCE

Assassin's Creed Brotherhood brand new story missions and multiplayer modes bring new life to Ezio's adventure in Rome, including a priceless scene with the lovely but deadly Lucrezia Borgia. Plus, keen-eyed gamers can get a sneak peek of some big story reveals and locations on the way in the inevitable Assassin's Creed III.



ARRIVAL

The Reaper invasion of the galaxy is imminent, and only Shepard stands in its way. Setting the stage for the events of the upcoming sequel, Arrival does something we wish more DLC could manage—create a meaningful storyline that links together two major installments of a franchise while simultaneously feeling impactful all on its own.



THE FESTIVAL OF BLOOD

The stand-alone expansion to Infamous 2 throws continuity and morality out the window to present an over-the-top story of vampires and a desperate race to save Cole MacGrath's soul. More importantly, Festival of Blood introduces a thrilling flight option for our hero, teasing some awesome potential in future installments of the series.

BEST Shooter

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Considering that the Call of Duty series has delivered annual installments for nearly a decade, you couldn't be blamed for feeling wary about Modern Warfare 3. Despite the worries of franchise fatigue, however, Infinity Ward and Sledgehammer's collaboration meets the high bar of quality that fans demand. With a re-worked and improved killstreak rewards system, a fast-paced and conclusive campaign, entertaining co-op modes, and some of the deepest multiplayer on the market, this shooter series still manages to impress after all these years.



11 | 18 - PS3, XBOX 360, PC



11 | 20 - Wii
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword

Skyward Sword is more than just a great Zelda game; it's a game that proves the worth of the Wii and motion controls in general. Every aspect of the gameplay, from sword-swinging to aiming a bow to flying a bird, is a tied to simple, smart, precise movements that make excellent use of the Wii Motion Plus technology. Skyward Sword also boasts some of the best dungeons and boss battles in the franchise's history and an emotional origin story that ties it to previously released games in the series.



12 | 01 - iOS
Infinity Blade II

Infinity Blade wowed owners of iOS devices with its stunning graphics, robust item selection, and rewarding swordfights. With this sequel, developer Chair ups the ante with more branching paths, a heavier emphasis on story, battle-specific XP challenges, and an augment system similar to Final Fantasy VII's materia. This mobile experience offers far deeper gameplay than the majority of titles on the App Store, a welcome sight to hardcore gamers.



12 | 20 - PC
Star Wars: The Old Republic

It's only been out for a few weeks, but BioWare's return to the Star Wars universe already has us enthralled. With eight unique character classes to discover, and whole planets to explore, The Old Republic offers plenty of content to enjoy. The game's ability to draw us into the RPG elements of story and morality while maintaining the deep multiplayer options of an MMO is commendable. Do you follow the path to the light or the dark side? We plan to spend months answering the question.



BATTLEFIELD
 More missions and vehicles to treat, but getting to see some of our favorite classic Battlefield may mislead in the Frostbite 2 engine that's priceless. Four remastered and remastered multiplayer levels are all on display, each vulnerable to the deathmatch and team deathmatch.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V
 Taking us back to the early days of the war against the Los Angeles Police, Leon's Shadow's chief surprise comes through the playable characters on display. Not only you control a new squad of GOG robbers, you also get to indulge in our bursts of unreal power as you control the bloody city streets. General Raam.



THE WOLF OF WALL STREET
 Fallout: New Vegas
 New Vegas' third major expansion is a standout success, telling the intriguing story of Big Mountain and the many secrets it hides. Dealing with pre-war records, we slowly unravel a tale of experimentation gone wrong, and then set about to find out what once what matters.



LEGENDS SHOWCASE
 NBA 2K11
 When a sports game is this good, you drop hundreds of the best players in league history into new game modes. It's time to re-live your conquests and get back on the court. The Legends Showcase gives us the flexibility we want with the legends of the game, and finally lets us take the historic teams included with the base game online.



DOUBLING A DANCE CATALOG
 Dance Central 3
 Even while other action games steal the limelight, the world's premiere dance video game has continued to quietly release new tracks. From James Brown to Rihanna, Harmonix's intuitive sense for great rhythmic dance tunes kept the beat humming throughout the year.

TOP 10 PUBLISHERS



1 Electronic Arts

Last Year: 1

For the second year in a row, EA's deep stable of impressive titles earns it the top slot. From early year successes like *Fight Night Champion* and *Dead Space 2* to late year blockbusters like *Battlefield 3*, the publisher proved it's still a power player. Tack on the (mostly) impressive sports lineup, the MMO contender *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, and its aggressive approach to growth in the mobile and social spaces, and EA looks poised to continue its impressive run well into the decade.

2 Sony Computer Entertainment

Last Year: 5

The PlayStation 3 may have treaded water as the third-place console in 2011, but its exclusive lineup was second to none. Stellar titles like *LittleBigPlanet 2*, *Infamous 2*, *Kilzone 3*, and *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception* earned strong scores throughout the industry, proving that Sony is a great cultivator of studio talent.

3 Warner Bros. Interactive

Last Year: N/A

Like the Caped Crusader himself, Warner Bros. swooped down out of nowhere to earn the third spot in our publisher rankings. *Batman: Arkham City*, one of two games to earn the coveted perfect rating from GI this year, led the charge, but the publisher also scored hardcore gamer points with the surprising, downloadable title *Bastion* from Supergiant Games, and the ultraviolent *Mortal Kombat* revival.

4 Ubisoft

Last Year: 7

Ubisoft celebrated its 25th anniversary with yet another strong lineup. Critically acclaimed titles like *Assassin's Creed Revelations* and *Rayman Origins* saluted the hardcore gamers, and the unrelatable *Forza Horizon* was just *Dance 3* raked in no-missile sales on the casual front. A few under the radar releases — *Driver: San Francisco*, *Outland*, and *From Dust* — also impressed.

TOP 10 DEVELOPERS



1 Rocksteady

This studio came out of nowhere in 2009 to deliver the greatest *Batman* game ever created. This year, the unassuming Brits proved it wasn't a fluke with a stunning sequel that built upon the greatness of the original and took the *Dark Knight* in exciting new directions. We can't wait to see what Rocksteady does next.

2 Mojang

The minds behind *Minecraft* found themselves in the spotlight throughout the year as their unexpected blockbuster grew to the point that Notch finally gave the green light to move it out of beta and christen a 1.0 version. Four million in sales? Not a bad start.

3 Nintendo

Nintendo has a remarkable track record of preserving the tried-and-true gameplay that made *Mario* and *Zelda* household names and tweaking the formulas in subtle ways to re-energize each series. This year, the developers mastered motion controls with *Skyward Sword* and gave *Mario* another dimension in *Super Mario 3D Land*.

4 Valve

Valve's reputation as a top-tier game developer couldn't be better. This year *Portal 2* became the centerpiece of discussion in message boards and podcasts across the world thanks to its ingenious comedic timing, strong writing, brilliant puzzles, and groundbreaking cooperative mode. You'd be hard pressed to find a more polished game this year.

TOP 10 DISAPPOINTMENTS



1 Hacking and Security Scandals

Online gaming has done many wonderful things for the industry. However, the reality is that the hacking and security breaches that plague other industries online are a real threat to gamers. After the scandalous PSN hacker attack, which forced Sony to take the service down for nearly a month, other services like *Steam* and *Xbox Live* were also subject to attacks. Sadly, this is a trend that will likely continue for as long as games remain online.

2 3DS Launch Lineup

Steel Diver, *Pilotwings Resort*, *Nintendogs + Cats* — what the hell, Nintendo? You call that a launch lineup? With *Ocarina of Time*, *Super Mario 3D Land*, and *Mario Kart 7*, we finally have some good first-party software for the 3DS, but it sure would have been nice to have one of those to play at the system's pathetic launch — which was so bad it forced Nintendo to do an emergency price drop within a few months.

3 Duke Nukem

Forever
We thought *Duke Nukem Forever* would never be released. After playing the version of the game that Gearbox rescued from the dustbin of history, perhaps 2K had it right the first time. Duke's aging gameplay and now-dated sense of humor made the once badass seem like an aging frat guy trying to pick up 20-year-olds at his old stomping grounds. Maybe some lost gamers are better off staying lost.

4 Dragon Age II

Even as we marveled at the advancements in the *Mass Effect* series, longtime BioWare fans loved *Dragon Age: Origins* for sticking close to the company's turn-based, epic fantasy past. However, the rushed and misguided sequel felt like a slap to that core audience, with its stripped-down, shallow button-mashing combat, small world, repetitive dungeons, and poor storytelling. This was the rare BioWare title that felt rushed and — even worse — halfhearted.

Bethesda

Last year: N/A
This year marked another up and down year for Bethesda, but the up was sky high. The expansive RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* took over the world (and the GI offices), earning it the prestigious Game of the Year award. Meanwhile, it's new title, *Rage*, received mixed reviews in the office, and both *Splash Damage's* Brink and *Hunter: Demon's Forge* fell flat.

Nintendo

Last Year: 3
Nintendo succeeds by giving fans what they want – more *Zelda*, *Mario*, and *Mario Kart*. The Japanese publisher delivered wonderfully on all three fronts, and its two Kirby games also found willing audiences. Then why is the company ranked this low, you ask? It blew the 3DS launch lineup.

Activision

Last Year: 2
This publishing powerhouse is still fueled by the biggest games on the planet – *World of Warcraft* and *Call of Duty*. Outside of these perennial performers, however, the company struggled to match its previous output. *Skylanders Spyro's Adventure* became a must-have game for kids over the holidays, but Activision seriously damaged its *Spider-Man* series by forcing an overly aggressive development cycle on *Beano*.

Microsoft

Last Year: 5
Like Activision, Microsoft's dwindling game catalog needs a serious injection of new titles, but the few it released in 2011 fared well. *Gears of War 3* provided fans with the epic conclusion they craved, and *Forza 4* won over gearheads with its vast car collection and solid online infrastructure.

Take-Two

Last Year: 4
It was a much slower year than the past few for Take-Two, with only two high-profile releases. *L.A. Noire* matched consumer and critical expectations, but the long-anticipated release of *Duke Nukem Forever* proved some lost projects should stay in development purgatory. *NBA 2K12* reviewed well, but the post-release online performance disappointed many and the NBA lockout didn't help the game generate enthusiasm.

TO THO

Last Year: N/A
THQ makes its first appearance on the publisher list in years thanks to the hilarious antics of *Saints Row: The Third*. Another under the radar game, *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine*, also reviewed well. Though its new shooter franchise *Homefront* didn't meet expectations, it sold well and the unique setting gave the game enough juice to justify a sequel. That's a win for a publisher looking to grow its catalog.

5 EA Canada (FIFA, NHL, Fight Night)
Often unheralded due to its heavy output of yearly sports iterations, EA Canada had a banner year in 2011. The studio located just outside of Vancouver struck gold with *FIFA 12*, held the quality bar for its vastly underrated NHL series, and injected new life into boxing games with *Fight Night Champion's* narrative-driven single player campaign.

6 Bethesda Studios
You can knock Bethesda Studios for the litany of game-breaking bugs and lack of polish on its titles, but you can't help but marvel at its overall achievement. With *Skyrim*, the studio delivered a living, breathing world as large and full of surprises as any title ever released. No game created more water cooler moments for the GI staff this year.

7 CD Projekt Red
Many games advertise player choices as a critical element that determines the plot's direction, but due to the heavy workload that creating two distinct and divergent game paths demands, many developers cut corners. Not CD Projekt Red, who said "screw it, let's get crazy," when making the epic *The Witcher 2*. We thank them for their ambition and execution.

8 Epic Games
(Gears, Bulletstorm, Infinity Blade)
The Epic Games family, which includes the original North Carolinian team, Poland-based People Can Fly, and Utah-based Chair Entertainment, delivered on all fronts. *Gears of War 3* lived up to expectations, *Bulletstorm* injected energetic new gameplay mechanics to the first-person shooter experience, and *Infinity Blade II* pushed the boundaries of mobile and tablet games.

9 From Software
Thanks to 2009's *Demon's Souls* and this year's *Dark Souls*, the studio once known for creating the *Armored Core* series now has a new reputation as the most sadistic developers on the planet. From Software loves to challenge its players with ridiculously tough enemies and unforgiving environmental hazards that demand you pay attention. It's a bold direction, but for this studio being harsh has paid off immensely.

10 Volition
While Rockstar has increasingly implemented more serious narrative plot devices for its open world games, Volition has run giddily in the opposite direction, mooning us and giving us the finger along the way. By shunning sophistication and embracing the juvenile instinct to create the most absurd open world action game on the planet, the studio created its finest work with *Saints Row: The Third*.

9 Online Passes
Becoming the Norm
Faced with ballooning budgets and sagging sales, game publishers took aim at the lucrative used game business – and consumers got caught in the crossfire. Companies used "online passes" to discourage the circulation of second-hand games. While this clearly punishes gamers strapped for cash, it also means the rest of us have one more rapid-fire method to complete (after the usual paid updates) when buying a game.

8 Wii U Unveiling
After you unveil a new console at E3, if some gamers have questions about whether it is a new system or just a new controller for your old console, you've got problems. That happened when Nintendo revealed its new touchscreen controlled Wii U. Couple that with the fact that Nintendo did not show any new Wii U games, and word parties announcing mostly ports of current-gen blockbusters, and you have a major misstep on the part of the Japanese giant.

7 Capcom Screws Mega Man Fans
Capcom engaged its rabid fan community in the development of the long-hoped-for *Mega Man Legends 3*. The MML 3 "Development Room" online community encouraged fans to submit ideas and concepts for the upcoming game. That was great, until Capcom unceremoniously cancelled the project. To rub salt on the wound, its European Twitter account then had the gall to accuse fans of not being involved in the game's creation.

6 NBA 2K12
Online Disaster
NBA 2K12 built on the foundation of its predecessor, crafting amazing gameplay, the NBA's Greatest mode, and a great single-player experience. However, the effort to replace the Dreamcast-era online code couldn't have gone worse. Broken matchmaking plagued gamers, and the "My Crew" mode was missing altogether. Even the online Association mode was marred by inflexible rules regarding season progression.

5 Call of Duty Launch
Activision's *Call of Duty: Elite* service offers a ton of community, stat-tracking, and clan features for hardcore players. As a result, subscriptions to the service sold briskly – perhaps too briskly. The demand for *Elite* throttled Activision's servers, meaning *Elite* was largely offline or inaccessible to gamers when *Modern Warfare 3* launched. To make it up to angry fans, Activision extended the period of time that you could register for "Founder" status.

4 Elder Scrolls Bugs
We love *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. It's our Game of the Year for a reason. You know what we don't love? Having to keep 100 different save files because we spend our time in *Skyrim* in constant fear of random, quest-breaking bugs. From skeleton dragons flying backwards to giants sending guards hurtling into orbit, we've seen it all when it comes to bugs in this game. While patches have helped, your time in *Skyrim* may always be a buggy experience, and that's a shame.

Reader & Editor Picks

Game Informer has made its claim to the best games of the year, but what do our readers think? Visitors of Gameinformer.com were polled about their favorite games, and the results have been tallied here. See how your votes compare with ours for the best games of 2012.

R = Reader

E = Editor

Reader & Editor Pick

GAME OF THE YEAR

Best Shooter



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Battlefield 3

Best Platforming



Rayman Origins

LittleBigPlanet 2

Best PC Exclusive



Minecraft

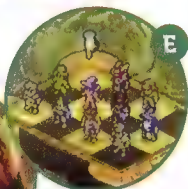


The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings

Best Reissue



The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D



Tactics Ogre

Best DLC



Mass Effect 2: Arrival



Pinball FX 2

Best PS3 Exclusive



Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception



LittleBigPlanet 2



Best Strategy

Total War: Shogun 2



Best Mobile
Infinity Blade II



Best Rhythm/Music
Dance Central 2



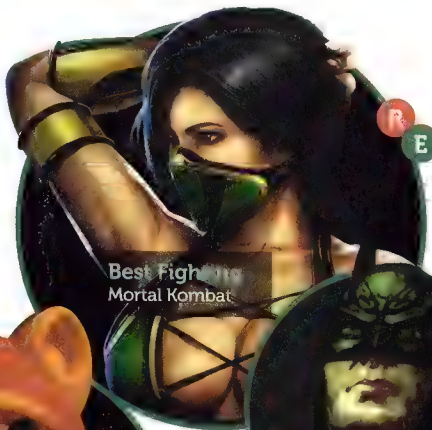
Best Racing
Forza Motorsport 4



Best Downloadable
Minecraft



Best Sports
FIFA 12



Best Fighting
Mortal Kombat

Best Wii Exclusive
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword



Best Handheld Exclusive
Super Mario 3D Land

Best Action
Batman: Arkham City



Best Xbox 360 Exclusive
Gears of War 3

TOP 10 EDITOR PICKS



Andy McNamara

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 Portal 2
- 3 Batman: Arkham City
- 4 The Ico & Shadow of the Colossus Collection
- 5 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 6 Infamous 2
- 7 Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- 8 Dead Space 2
- 9 Star Wars: The Old Republic
- 10 Assassin's Creed Revelations



Andrew Reiner

- 1 Batman: Arkham City
- 2 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 3 Portal 2
- 4 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 5 Star Wars: The Old Republic
- 6 The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
- 7 Dead Space 2
- 8 Dark Souls
- 9 Saints Row: The Third
- 10 Dead Island



Matt Helgeson

- 1 Portal 2
- 2 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 3 Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- 4 Batman: Arkham City
- 5 L.A. Noire
- 6 Bulletstorm
- 7 Fight Night Champion
- 8 Bastion
- 9 Tales from Space: About a Blob
- 10 Pinball FX 2



Matthew Kato

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 L.A. Noire
- 3 Forza Motorsport 4
- 4 Portal 2
- 5 Fight Night Champion
- 6 Assassin's Creed Revelations
- 7 Pro Evolution Soccer 2012
- 8 Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- 9 Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters
- 10 FIFA 12



Matt Bertz

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 Portal 2
- 3 Battlefield 3
- 4 Batman: Arkham City
- 5 L.A. Noire
- 6 FIFA 12
- 7 Crisis 2
- 8 Rayman Origins
- 9 NBA 2K12
- 10 Deus Ex: Human Revolution



Adam Biessener

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
- 3 Portal 2
- 4 Star Wars: The Old Republic
- 5 Total War: Shogun 2
- 6 Rift
- 7 Tropico 4
- 8 Minecraft
- 9 The Binding of Isaac
- 10 Dungeons of Dredmor



Joe Juba

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 Portal 2
- 3 The Ico & Shadow of the Colossus Collection
- 4 Radiant Historia
- 5 Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- 6 Saints Row: The Third
- 7 Dead Space 2
- 8 Batman: Arkham City
- 9 LittleBigPlanet 2
- 10 Assassin's Creed Revelations



Matt Miller

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 Batman: Arkham City
- 3 Star Wars: The Old Republic
- 4 Portal 2
- 5 Bastion
- 6 The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
- 7 Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- 8 Dead Space 2
- 8 Assassin's Creed Revelations
- 10 Rayman Origins



Ben Reeves

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 Portal 2
- 3 Batman: Arkham City
- 3 Dead Space 2
- 4 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 5 Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- 6 Super Mario 3D Land
- 7 Assassin's Creed Revelations
- 8 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
- 10 L.A. Noire



Jeff Marchiafava

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 Batman: Arkham City
- 3 Dead Island
- 4 Portal 2
- 5 Infamous 2
- 6 Dark Souls
- 7 LittleBigPlanet 2
- 8 Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- 9 Battlefield 3
- 10 Pinball FX 2



Tim Turi

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 Portal 2
- 3 Batman: Arkham City
- 4 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 5 Dead Space 2
- 6 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
- 7 Star Wars: The Old Republic
- 8 Super Mario 3D Land
- 9 Dead Island
- 10 Infamous 2



Bryan Vore

- 1 Batman: Arkham City
- 2 Portal 2
- 3 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 4 Super Mario 3D Land
- 5 Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- 6 Dead Space 2
- 7 Hard Corps: Uprising
- 8 Assassin's Creed Revelations
- 9 L.A. Noire
- 10 Rage



Jeff Cork

- 1 Batman: Arkham City
- 2 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 3 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 4 Portal 2
- 5 Pinball FX 2
- 6 Assassin's Creed Revelations
- 7 Saints Row: The Third
- 8 Dead Rising 2: Off the Record
- 9 LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars
- 10 Tiny Tower



Phil Kollar

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 3 Bastion
- 4 Portal 2
- 5 Batman: Arkham City
- 6 Rayman Origins
- 7 Shadows of the Damned
- 8 El Shadda: Ascension of the Metatron
- 9 Dark Souls
- 10 To the Moon



Dan Ryckert

- 1 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 2 Portal 2
- 3 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 4 Saints Row: The Third
- 5 Mortal Kombat
- 6 Batman: Arkham City
- 7 Dead Space 2
- 8 Battlefield 3
- 9 Super Mario 3D Land
- 10 Rayman Origins



Jim Reilly

- 1 Dark Souls
- 2 Jetpack Joyride
- 3 Batman: Arkham City
- 4 Deus Ex: Human Revolution
- 5 Rayman Origins
- 6 Portal 2
- 7 Shadows of the Damned
- 8 Bastion
- 9 Resident Evil 4 HD
- 10 Superbrothers: Sword & Sorcery EP



Ben Hanson

- 1 Portal 2
- 2 Rayman Origins
- 3 Minecraft
- 4 Batman: Arkham City
- 5 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 6 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 7 Jetpack Joyride
- 8 LittleBigPlanet 2
- 8 Super Mario 3D Land
- 10 Rochar



Kyle Hiliard

- 1 Portal 2
- 2 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword
- 3 Dead Space 2
- 4 Batman: Arkham City
- 5 Infamous 2
- 6 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 7 Shadows of the Damned
- 8 Ms. Splosion Man
- 9 Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective
- 10 Super Mario 3D Land



Jason Oestreicher

- 1 Batman: Arkham City
- 2 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- 3 Saints Row: The Third
- 4 Shadows of the Damned
- 5 The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
- 6 Portal 2
- 7 Infamous 2
- 8 Dark Souls
- 9 Bastion
- 10 Gods Eater Burst

A Developer's Fan Boy's Take on 3D Gaming

by **Adrian Chmietarz**
Creative Director,
People Can Fly

I know what you are thinking. You have seen *Avatar* in 3D, you have played with the Nintendo 3DS for a bit, and you have probably even tested one or two 3DTVs or PC

monitors at your local big box retailer.

"It's nice, but I don't really need that."

So why do I believe that 3D is here to stay?

From the beginning, game developers have constantly tried to make their game worlds more believable. Some of you may remember the first time you saw a polygonal character cast a shadow. Mind-blowing. Non-gamers were not particularly impressed; they just waved their hands in front of you, demonstrating that casting a shadow is an obviously familiar experience. But for the rest of us, that pixelated digital shadow was a moment of illumination, a telling sign that "virtual reality" was right around the corner.

And it is. It is called 3D gaming.

I remember the moment when I became a believer. A friend at People Can Fly kept yapping about his new 3DTV, the 3D Blu-rays he had seen, the 3D games he had played. I wasn't convinced. Just like you, I've seen *Avatar*, and it was great but not necessarily something that made me rush to the nearest store to buy a 3DTV.

I eventually caved because my current TV was getting old. With the prices of big screen TVs going down I decided "size does matter" and bought a new 60-inch LED. The 3D feature was merely a bonus.

Along with the new TV I bought my first 3D Blu-ray movie, *Resident Evil: Afterlife*. The first 3D video I watched, however, was a sampling of a documentary about underwater life. It lasted for about 10 seconds, and I watched it about 20 times, excited and giggling like a little boy who had just fired up his first game console. The realism of the scene was breathtaking. My TV was no longer a TV, but an aquarium full of scary snake-like creatures.

Resident Evil didn't disappoint, either. The 3D effects were pretty standard, but it still knocked me off my feet. Images in 3D look sharper and more detailed than in 2D; I don't exactly understand why, but they just do. TVs are also brighter than cinema projectors, so even when wearing 3D glasses (which always make everything a bit darker) I had a better picture quality than if I saw the same movie in the cinema. Milla Jovovich has never looked prettier.

Then I played my first 3D game — the *God of War: Origins* Collection. After playing *Chains of Olympus* for 10 minutes I paused the game,

climbed the highest mountain, and screamed from the top of my lungs that my third eye had just opened and now I understand the meaning of life. And by that I mean I sat in front of my computer and sent a message across all the social networks I use saying, "I have just seen the future of gaming."

These 10 minutes with *God of War* were magical in a way that is so incredibly rare these days. They allowed me to be a child again, a happy little boy who just hid inside a wardrobe and found himself in a different world. If you think I am exaggerating, then you probably haven't experienced true 3D yet.

Most modern games are developed, without a doubt, in 3D. But they are built by people using 2D monitors and played by people looking at conventional TVs. Current 3D-on-2D gaming feels like listening to a stereo CD album through your kitchen radio's single speaker.

Without going into brain-twisting technical details, 30 frames per second (30 different images displayed in a second) is the acceptable minimum for video games. If the framerate goes any lower, the game feels choppy and laggy, like that YouTube video you have problems streaming.

3D displays two separate images at the same time, one for your left eye and one for your right eye. Look at something with one of your eyes closed, then do the same with the other eye, and you will notice that the object moves.

If a game has only enough power to produce 30 images per second, then what happens if it has to produce twice as many images for the 3D effect? The framerate drops to 15 frames per second, which we have already established is not acceptable because then the game becomes choppy.

The HD remake of *God of War: Chains of Olympus* does not suffer from this problem, because it's a game ported from a weaker console (PSP) to a way more powerful console (PS3). All that extra power has been utilized not only to lock the game in glorious 60 frames per second, but also to incorporate anti-aliasing (the smoothing of edges of 3D objects) as well.

The end result is that I enjoyed smooth, pleasant visuals that were made for and tested in 3D. My TV was no longer an animated painting; it became a window to another world.

If game developers are serious about 3D — and they'd better be, or else — they have to work in 3D. When they do, the results can be spectacular.

I know you will try to resist 3D for as long as you can. There will be tons of excuses. "I have to wear glasses to watch anything or play? No way," you'll say, as if you need to multitask when you lay on the couch playing the Latest Big Game. "I tried it once and my head hurt," which makes as much sense as trying the cheapest wine and saying that all wine sucks. Or maybe you'll be like my wife, whom I handed the 3D glasses with my shaking hands, all boiling inside, certain that I am about to open a new world to her. "Nice," she said, and then left the room to call a friend and play more *CityVille*.

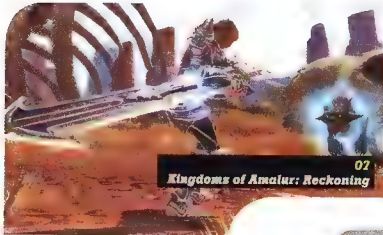
It doesn't matter, because you have already lost that war. Try buying a new big screen TV that is not 3D — good luck with that. Peter Jackson is filming *The Hobbit* in 3D, and that's kind of going to be big. Most triple-A games already support 3D, and nowadays even indie games have 3D settings in their menus. Played *Trine 2* already? See it in 3D and weep, my friend, let those tears stream down your face. It's okay. No one here is judging.

3D is here to stay. Don't fight it. Love it. It already loves you.

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

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





02 **Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning**



16



14 **Twisted Metal**



22



15



21 **Asura's Wrath**



19



February

07 New Releases

- Bailoon Pop 2 (3DS)
- Binary Domain (PS3, 360)
- Combat Wings: The Great Battles of WWII (PS3, 360, Wii)
- The Darkness II (PS3, 360, PC)
- Devil May Cry HD Collection (PS3, 360)
- Fallout: New Vegas Ultimate Edition (PS3, 360, PC)
- Inversion (PS3, 360)
- Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning (PS3, 360, PC)
- Resident Evil: Revelations (3DS)
- Tales of Graces r (PS3)

08 DICE Kicks Off

The video game industry's best and brightest gather in Las Vegas to brainstorm new ideas, celebrate Epic Games' Tim Sweeney with a lifetime achievement award, and reward last year's top games at the Interactive Achievement Awards.

10 Reliving the Pain

Remember how disappointed you were when you left the theater after seeing *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*? Now, you can be let down all over again, except this time you'll also walk out with a headache thanks to the added 3D effects. This is what you deserve for encouraging George Lucas to keep doing these re-releases.

14 New Releases

- Hakuon: Damon of the Fleeting Blossom (PSP)
- Mario & Sonic: London Olympic Games (3DS, DS)
- Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Survivor 2 (DS)
- SSK (PS3, 360)
- Tales of the Abyss (3DS)
- Test Drive: Ferrari Legends (PS3, 360)
- Twisted Metal (PS3)
- UFC Undisputed 3 (PS3, 360)

15 The Future of New 52

If you've been reading DC Comics' amazing New 52 comic books, you're in for a treat today. Most of the introductory story arcs conclude today. The events unfolding in Justice League #6 will impact its characters for years to come. We may also learn a thing or two about that mysterious woman who was hidden in each #1 book.

15 A Great Time to Jump Aboard the Spider-Train

Today marks another re-launch for The Amazing Spider-Man. Marvel Comics is billing this new #1 as a great jumping on point for newcomers. This issue marks the return of Morbius the Living Vampire.

17 The Nic Cage Streak Continues

People say we make fun of Nicolas Cage far too often in this Timeline section. We're sorry, but we can't help ourselves. Moves like today's Nic Cage vehicle *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* invite mockery. How on Earth did this sequel get made? The original was terrible. Didn't the producers see it? Oh. Of course not. No one did.

19 A Curtain Call for Kenny Powers

The third and final season of *Eastbound & Down* kicks off tonight on HBO. Will profane fireballer Kenny Powers return to the major leagues or will he find spectacular new ways to fail? We can't wait to see how this series concludes.

21 New Releases

- Asura's Wrath (PS3, 360)
- FIFA Soccer (Wii)
- Heavy Fire: Afghanistan (360)
- Hot Shots Golf: World Invitational (Wii)
- Little Deviants (Wii)
- The Lord of the Rings Online: Menorah Edition (PC)
- Modification Racers: Road Trip (Wii)
- Outdoors Unlimited (PS3, 360, Wii)

• Pro Evolution Soccer 2012 (3DS)

- Reality Fighters (Wii)
- Resistance: Burning Skies (Wii)
- Syndicate (PS3, 360, PC)
- Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 (Wii)
- Uncharted: Golden Abyss (Wii)
- Wipeout 2048 (Wii)

22 Behold! A Handheld with Two Analog Sticks!

Sony's next generation of handheld gaming kicks off today with the launch of PlayStation Vita. It's the most technologically sophisticated handheld ever released, featuring a host of control mechanics including two analog sticks, a front touchscreen, and a back touchpanel. With a solid launch lineup and amazing PS3 connectivity, can the Vita be the handheld that finally takes control of the market from Nintendo?

28 New Releases

- Birds of Steel (PS3, 360)
- Blades of Time (PS3, 360)
- Damage Inc: Pacific Squadron WWII (360)
- Isekai 3D Prime (3DS)
- What's Your Type? (DS)



They're here.

An unknown alien menace is wreaking havoc, abducting people in broad daylight according to a plan only an extraterrestrial intelligence could hope to understand. Mankind's desperate governments have pooled their resources, creating an autonomous secret agency with no rules or restrictions except a mandate to do what they cannot: Fight back.

XCOM:



ENEMY UNKNOWN

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

» **Style:**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher:**
2K Games

» **Developer:**
Firaxis Games

» **Release:**
Fall

by ADAM BIESSENER



As the faceless commander of the extra-governmental XCOM organization, the player is in charge of every shot fired, every alien dissected, and every satellite launched in Earth's defense. XCOM's secret underground base is expanded, research and development are directed, and soldiers dispatched on the pausable real-time global strategy layer. Once the enemy is encountered on the ground, the threat must be eliminated through tactical turn-based combat that demands intelligent use of cover, special abilities, fantastic technology, and destructible environments to minimize the inevitable casualties. XCOM continually cycles between these two modes, making players responsible for both putting the boots on the ground and making good use of them when they land. The alien threat is growing over time, and humanity's best and brightest have an impossible task just keeping up.



Any object in the world can serve as cover, but can be blown up with a big enough gun.



2K Marin (BioShock 2) is working on a previously announced prequel to XCOM: Enemy Unknown. That character-driven shooter has been delayed until 2013, however, leaving this Firaxis game to relaunch the classic franchise alone later this year. 2K Marin's game shares little with the 1994 Microprose original that fans wax poetic about, trading the global strategic view and squad-based tactical combat for ground level, story-driven, first-person shooting action. Firaxis' game, on the other hand, is a strategy title through and through that aims to recreate the experience of the award-winning original without being beholden to design philosophies from 1994.

The original X-COM came as close as any game ever does to sweeping its Game of the Year awards back in 1994, winning effusive critical praise and a fanatical following with its player-driven global strategy and deep turn-based tactical battles. The series has never taken the next step since its brilliant debut, however, with publisher/developer Microprose pumping out several sequels (of which series creator Julian Gollop worked on only one; see our Classic GI feature from issue 224) that never reached the same level. Microprose went under years ago after failing to capitalize on its strong X-COM, Civilization, and Falcon franchises, and until now no publisher has stepped in to resurrect Gollop's beloved vision.

Today, we finally have a publisher and a developer fully committed to doing right by one of gaming's most revered licenses. 2K Games is throwing its weight behind the project, and legendary strategy development studio Firaxis Games is at the helm. Civilization creator, Firaxis founder, and overall gaming luminary Sid Meier has shaped a game development culture in his own gameplay-first image at Firaxis, and the studio's resume is second to none when it comes to strategy games.

The team at Firaxis is led by X-COM superfan, longtime Sid Meier lieutenant, and XCOM lead designer Jake Solomon. "The original, in my opinion, is the perfect game – but there's a perfect-er," Solomon laughs. These hardcore XCOM devotees are ensuring that every decision the player makes has meaningful rewards and consequences. Those choices are explicit in the strategy layer: Investigate this UFO landing or that one, research xenobiology or alien weapon tech, help China or France. The player can't save everyone, build every weapon, or stop every attack. Crush an alien raiding party, though, and XCOM's scientists can examine



any recovered artifacts and bodies so that the engineers can incorporate their discoveries into ever-better arms, armor, and base facilities.

THE SATELLITE'S EYE VIEW

A typical early game situation might look like this: XCOM's patchwork satellite detection net has a UFO on radar over the U.S.A. and another over southern Europe. The European bogey is a fast-moving, high-altitude craft that XCOM's primitive Earth-tech jets are unlikely to catch. The American UFO, however, is a prime target for interdiction and so XCOM scrambles its fighter jets to intercept (which will play out as a minigame if they catch the UFO). Meanwhile, abductions have been reported in Kansas and South Africa. The player decides to send his Skyrainger transport to bring a squad of soldiers to the Kansas contact and leaves the African situation alone, hoping that country's populace won't panic too badly.

The player must also keep a careful eye on the global situation. In this instance, Japan has sent a message asking for a set of the laser rifles XCOM has recently developed in exchange for a half-dozen of its best engineers. African morale is down the tubes, as UFOs have been landing with impunity since XCOM's incomplete satellite coverage leaves large sections of the continent dark. In a rare stroke of luck, few UFOs have targeted the Australian mainland, so that source of funding is secure

despite no effort on the player's part.

As the Skyrainger departs, the player takes a look at XCOM base. Research on alien alloys looks more promising than dissecting Sectoid corpses in the hopes of developing psionic defenses, so the scientists buckle down to analyze an artifact brought back from a previous mission. Japan's request for laser rifles looks likely to go unfulfilled in the near term, as XCOM's workshops are better utilized fabricating a robotic SHIV (see sidebar page 60) for now. The barracks are home to a couple of soldiers recovering from wounds sustained on their last mission, and it'll be two weeks or so before they're ready for duty again. XCOM's top-rated sniper just made Sergeant rank, though, and the officer training school is hard at work turning his experience into a useful battlefield doctrine with a global bonus that might be something like making all soldiers less likely to panic when an enemy is killed.

Even in this tiny snapshot of an XCOM game in progress, the player must make several decisions that will hugely affect XCOM's future. Dismissing Japan's request means a reduction in future engineering capacity in trade for a powerful robotic ally in combat. Picking a research direction has obvious consequences. Dumping the significant resources required for the morale upgrade means that they can't be used expanding the base, accelerating research or development, or any of their other myriad uses.



THE XCOM FILES
BY BEN BRESLERS

// CASE # 15864

// SUBJECT: SECTOID

SIGNIFICANT DETAILS: The Sectoids are the first known species to make contact with Earth. While no Earth government has officially acknowledged their existence, over the years a number of public sightings have shaped the urban legends surrounding these "Grays." Sectoids tend to run in packs, and can be identified by their high-pitched, almost insect-like speech patterns. This species has an emaciated frame and stands only a few feet tall. However, what these creatures lack in physical stature they make up for in mental fortitude.

FIELD STRATEGIES: Lab dissections have revealed an advanced neural net running throughout the Sectoid's cortex and spinal column. These neural fibers allow the Sectoids to establish a psionic link with one another—a kind of mind merge where one Sectoid can boost the combat effectiveness of his ally. It is believed that flanking these units and terminating the Sectoid initiating such a link will result in the total necrosis of both creatures. Early field tests have proven this theory sound.



Healing is available to anyone through medpack items, but only the support class can make truly game-changing use of it

of the map in darkness, any portion of which could house an alien threat thanks to randomized enemy spawns. The Skyranger has landed near a shuttered gas station, and the soldiers fan out to canvas the area around the gas pumps for threats. The two factions alternate turns, with each unit receiving a move and an action (or a double-move) each round. As the point woman takes her second move, the action pauses for a quick cinematic cut showing gray humanoid aliens digging into the entrails of a sprawled corpse. The three extraterrestrials scuttle into cover, and the battle begins in earnest.

Tactical combat has a single goal: eliminate the enemy with creative use of weapon attacks, limited-use items, and special abilities. The heavy weapons specialist opens fire with his

suppression ability, pinning one of the aliens behind a parked car. The sniper uses a special grappling hook ability to jump up onto the roof over the gas pumps, while the point woman in the assault role chucks a grenade at the pinned alien and the support soldier takes an advance position behind heavy cover (denoted by clear icons displayed over the terrain).

The humans having moved, the aliens get their turn. The pinned Sectoid (see sidebar page 59) has to skip its turn due to the heavy's suppression

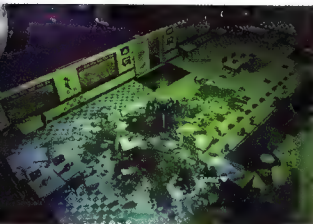
ability to boost the capabilities of the third, who wounds the XCOM support soldier with a well-placed shot. At the end of the alien turn the XCOM grenade explodes, taking out the pinned Sectoid and badly damaging the car it was hiding behind.

Flanking the final two aliens is a simple task for the elite XCOM forces, and the other two Sectoids are easily dispatched since they are denied the significant benefits that cover provides. The combat isn't over yet, though, so the humans regroup and move on the gas station. As the support soldier opens a door into a second interior room, the action again cuts away to a brief three-second cinematic. The brutish, armored Mutons are the next threat on the menu.

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Mutons (see sidebar) are disciplined shock troops who fear nothing and use their considerable bulk and impressive armament to beat XCOM at its own squad tactics game. In this particular case, the first Muton immediately opens fire on the hapless human who foolishly ended his turn in full view of the aliens. The camera cuts to a cinematic view of the support soldier being obliterated by unnatural alien weaponry, his blood painting a macabre mural on the ground behind his lifeless body.



THE XCOM FILES

//: CASE # 25658

//: SUBJECT: MUTON

SIGNIFICANT DETAILS: Mutons are a tribal warrior race distinguishable by their pink skin and brutish green armor. Mutons move across the battlefield like apes, but they hit like Mack trucks. Coordinated, clever, and prepared for the worst, Mutons are essentially an intergalactic Special Forces unit.

FIELD STRATEGIES: Soldiers who have survived Muton engagements have commented on the aliens' knack for advanced strategy. Mutons often communicate with one another during firefights, initiating coordinated suppression and flanking maneuvers. Rookies should be aware that Mutons often attempt to strike terror into the minds of their foes by visibly shrugging off otherwise crippling wounds. Support troops will sometimes howl in what has been termed a "Blood Call," a screeching battle cry that excites surrounding Mutons into a kind of animalistic fury. Soldiers should not engage Mutons in hand-to-hand combat.



XCOM's valiant support soldier isn't unconscious, or knocked out, or otherwise incapacitated. He was hit square in the chest by a plasma rifle. He's dead. Furthermore, since he bought it courtesy of a particularly destructive weapon, his equipment is so badly damaged that it can't be salvaged. Later, at XCOM base, the player will have to replace him with a green rookie and whatever weapons and other items the XCOM engineers have been able to fabricate.

Shocks like having a squadmate killed in battle are rough on the psyche of any soldier, and can lead to disastrous panics in the survivors. Like in the original, a panicked soldier could leap out of cover and open fire in a berserk rage, flee away from the enemy, throw a grenade with shaky

hands, or take some other action outside of the player's control. "Panic is one of those things I just couldn't part with," Solomon explains. "It creates those fantastic moments in combat. When those guys panic and they're cowering in the corner, and they just happen to take a lucky shot and blow away the last alien, those are the moments you keep with you."

Panic isn't intended to be an insurmountable punishment for the player, though. "We've tried to make it the sort of thing that won't catastrophically end combat for you, but it is the sort of thing that you have to manage," Solomon says. Dealing with the wrenches that panicked soldiers throw into previous plans is a big part of surviving XCOM's lethal battles, but in this case the player gets lucky and all of the soldiers on

the field successfully keep their cool.

Though the player has seen the two deadly Mutons holed up in the gas station's garage, losing the unfortunate support soldier means that they are invisible thanks to the constant fog of war limitation. The sniper maintains overwatch, saving his action to immediately fire on any enemy who enters his line of sight. Heavy weapons guy moves up, taking a covered position behind a van that gives him open lines of fire on both exterior garage doors. XCOM's assault soldier climbs on top of the gas station itself, hoping to use an unexplained hole in the garage's roof to gain an unexpected firing solution on the Mutons inside.

Having been engaged in combat, however, the Mutons' tactical AI leads them to advance forward to annihilate the threat instead of passively waiting to be flanked and destroyed. Though they're not aware of XCOM's positioning – the only soldier they've seen got wasted before the Mutons moved – they know they're better off making a tactical assault than staying put. One maintains a defensive posture while the second bursts through the garage door.

The heavy lying in wait opens fire as a reaction to an enemy entering his line of fire, but the Muton's formidable armor prevents the majority of the damage. The alien discharges a barrage of its own, breaking the heavy's suppression and wounding the XCOM soldier in return, though he is able to duck behind cover to keep his organs where they belong.

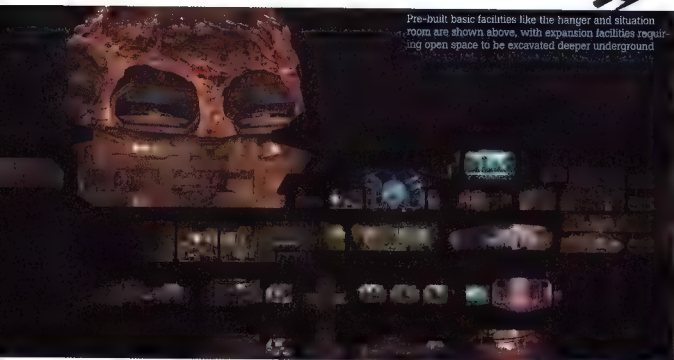
The Mutons are large, impressive, and dangerous – but they're still made of flesh under all that armor. XCOM's assault soldier uses her Run and Gun ability to double-move to the roof edge behind the advancing Muton and tears it to shreds with a full rifle burst to the back of its head. The heavy puts out his rocket launcher, with which he blows a gaping hole in the garage



XCOM obviously has deep PC roots and a hardcore fanbase with strong feelings about strategy franchises moving to consoles. It's natural for them to worry about a game like XCOM being dumbed down during the transition from keyboard to gamepad. Everything that Firaxis has shown so far indicates that any "dumbing down" is limited solely to removing over-designed rules. For example, the original's Time Units (which governed how many actions and moves a unit could take per turn) have been removed for a simple move + action (or double-move) turn for each unit. The idea is to let players still make the same decisions – move here, shoot that – without having to precisely calculate steps taken and type of shots fired in order to optimize that final five percent of combat efficiency.

And fear not, PC players – Firaxis is planning to take advantage of the platform's unique capabilities to provide an enhanced interface. Lead designer Jake Solomon uses *Dragon Age: Origins* as an example of what he wants to happen with XCOM. He suggested a zoomed-out full-map view of the tactical map as the kind of feature that PC players can expect that might not make it into the console versions.

Finally, if you're an XCOM devotee from the old days, take comfort in the fact that the hardest difficulty is simply called Classic mode.



Pre-built basic facilities like the hanger and situation room are shown above, with expansion facilities requiring open space to be excavated deeper underground.

hiding the second Muton. That alien's overwatch stance does him no good as the XCOM sniper uses his superior range to take a full-turn precision shot to his head, ending this alien threat for good.

The XCOM forces could have made better use of destructible environments, suppressive fire, overwatch, and all of the other tactical options available to the player – but all in all, this could have turned out much worse.

BACK TO BASE

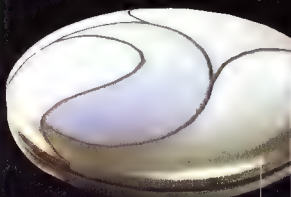
Following this tactical victory, the player's view returns to XCOM base on the strategic layer. Losing a squadmate, while entirely understandable given the brutal combat situation they were thrust into, disqualifies the rest of the soldiers from an experience bonus. However, the Sectoid corpses and Muton armor fragments recovered in the aftermath provide many opportunities for the scientists to dig into. The American government is naturally grateful, and the U.S. populace is slightly less freaked out thanks to XCOM's heroic actions.

Even without the bonus, the sniper leveled up again. As always, he has a choice between two abilities exclusive to each other. This time it's

Squad Sight (which lets him fire at any enemy squadmate can see) or Snap Shot (which lets him take a quick shot after moving, an ability normally restricted from sniper rifles).

The dead support soldier needs to be replaced, as does the injured heavy weapons specialist while he recovers from his wounds over the next two weeks. A minimal investment of cash brings two rookies into the fold, and loading them out with useful equipment is a simple matter for XCOM's engineers. They're not as powerful as their more experienced squadmates, but they can still shoot an alien in the face when the opportunity presents itself.

In order to encourage players to experiment with different squad setups instead of locking onto one particular composition and using it for the whole game, players aren't able to hire a specific class of soldier. Rookies are classless, revealing their role specialization when they acquire enough experience for their first level-up. This may seem harsh, but hiring more rookies is a simple matter – and XCOM will be going through a lot of them, since attacking aliens far beyond humanity's technological level has a high mortality rate no matter how clever a tactician is in charge.



// CASE # 98267

// SUBJECT: CYBERDISC

SIGNIFICANT DETAILS: Little is known about these enigmatic creatures. These mysterious flat discs were long thought to be alien spacecraft. It is now believed that these metal plates may themselves be sentient beings. Cyberdiscs have two known forms: a flat saucer shape, and a form that resembles a spider-like assault platform. While multiple Cyberdiscs are rarely seen together, these spaceworthy tanks sometimes work in conjunction with other species, such as the Sectoids.

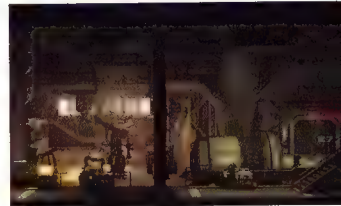
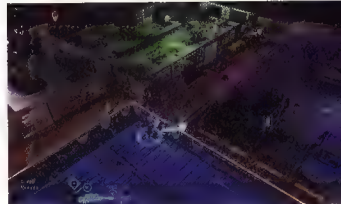
FIELD STRATEGIES: Cyberdiscs pack the arsenal of an aircraft carrier into a form the size of a small car. While bottled up in their saucer form, Cyberdiscs are nearly indestructible, but the Cyberdiscs must open up to attack, and this is when it is most vulnerable. Field agents should be advised to watch out for a Cyberdisc's large-area attack – dubbed the Death Blossom – which has been known to eliminate entire squads.



Ammo isn't a consumable that needs to be fabricated between missions, but reloading does cost a soldier's turn.



Special items like the Battle Scanner (basically a grenade that extends XCOM's line of sight) can open up new tactical possibilities.



Time has passed on the global strategic layer while XCOM was engaged with the bad guys in Kansas. The UFO over Italy has passed out of detection range, a missed opportunity and a likely hit to European morale. More bogeys have appeared over Europe, and the rest of the world is clamoring for XCOM's protection. Beyond that, XCOM has a huge web of decisions to make. How should the available cash reserves be deployed? Excavating deeper caverns in order to expand the underground base, increasing capabilities from fabrication to

research? Launching another satellite to cover more of the world, securing a broader funding base for the organization? Putting the engineers to work cranking out more advanced weapons to increase XCOM soldiers' chances on the battlefield? Retooling the fleet of interceptors for better odds of shooting down UFOs? The game is wide open, and any set of choices could lead to victory or defeat.

"We don't want to eliminate challenge as a major feature of the game, but we've worked very hard to say that it can be challenging, but it

has to be fair," Solomon says. "You're not going to lose your first four soldiers [before you have a chance to react]." The alien menace doesn't pull its punches just because the player isn't doing very well, except perhaps on the easiest difficulty setting. XCOM isn't expected to win every engagement, much less keep all of its troops alive. The game is designed to allow for mission failure just like Civilization expects players to lose armies in combat. Just as an enemy empire will gladly conquer your capital if the player lets them in that game, though, the aliens



The weapons available to each soldier are determined by class, but armor and armor can be used by anyone.

absolutely will eliminate all human capability for resistance in XCOM. It seems likely that the endgame will involve some kind of invasion of XCOM's secret base just as in the original, but Firaxis stopped short of confirming that despite dropping strong hints.

The player always has access to the godlike save and reloads, which Firaxis doesn't intend to curb in any way. Solomon hinted at the possible inclusion of an optional "Ironman" setting (which one would assume a set of achievements is based around) that would remove the ability to reload earlier saves, but stopped short of confirming it.

WINNING THE WAR

The war rages on through dozens of these tactical-strategic cycles, each bringing new capabilities to XCOM to combat the growing alien threat. Firaxis declined to speculate on much beyond what we've shared. We're still waiting to find out about the precise nature of the alien technology XCOM can incorporate into its war effort, what directions the narrative might go (see sidebar page 60), the rest of the alien roster, and any implementations of multiplayer or persistence between games. One thing is sure, however—sooner than later, any given playthrough's tactical battles will have more in common with Star Wars than Tom Clancy. As XCOM gets its hands on unbelievably powerful alien-tech weapons and even worse foes appear for the organization to fight, the modern era is quickly left behind.

Are console audiences ready for a triple-A strategy game? Firaxis and 2K believe so, and have for some time. The team has been iterating on playable prototypes for over three years, testing one design element after another and throwing out the vast majority of them until they ended up here. The game is in an alpha state now, meaning that it's fully designed and playable to completion. From now until XCOM's fall launch, the designers will be working on balance and polish full-time while the art team fleshes out the game's skeleton. Combined with Firaxis' outstanding track record, that's a recipe to instill confidence in the final product.

Believe it: This is the XCOM you're looking for. Firaxis isn't so much rebooting the 1994 strategy classic as they are reimagining the game's core concepts with the benefits of modern technology and design techniques. The intervening 17 years have seen innumerable improvements in every discipline from combat systems design to user interface and, of course, audiovisual presentation. It's hard to imagine a better way for XCOM to return than in the hands of one of the world's finest strategy game studios, backed by a major publisher, and under the direction of the original's self-proclaimed biggest fan. ♦

Best game designer conversation for 1 month of exclusive XCOM Enemy Unknown coverage. You'll be able to discuss video interviews with Mike Storz and more folks from the XCOM team. We'll also do a Sit Me'er interview, deep dives on the game's complex tactical interactions, and more allowing you to explore the XCOM origin story. And more.



THE XCOM FILES

/// CASE # 324324

/// SUBJECT: THIN MAN

SIGNIFICANT DETAILS: The Thin Man is strikingly similar to the Slender Man myths. It may be that some morphogenic race has been secretly studying humanity, and has sent these human facsimiles to Earth as spies. Unnaturally tall and slender, Thin Men are not perfect replicas. Detailed photo analysis has revealed skin discoloration around the eyes and wrists, but from a distance, a Thin Man might easily blend in with a crowd.

FIELD STRATEGIES: Once engaged in battle, a Thin Man will perform acrobatic maneuvers, unlike any human. Thin Men are capable of covering large swaths of ground in a single bound. Snipers should be wary of the Thin Man's ability to jump up several stories in a single leap. Once engaged in close quarters, the Thin Man unhinges its jaw and vomits forth a spray of corrosive putrescence. Be advised: upon expiration, a Thin Man will explode in an acid shower, damaging nearby equipment and field personnel.

MASS EFFECT



» Platform PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC » Style 1-Player Shooter/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)

» Publisher Electronic Arts » Developer BioWare » Release March 6

» www.electronicarts.com/mass-effect » www.bioware.com/mass-effect

MASS EFFECT 3

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

It's all been building up to this.

From hunting down the rogue Specter Saren in the first Mass Effect to

teaming up with the sketchy paramilitary organization Cerberus in Mass Effect 2, Commander Shepard's various adventures have had one clear focus: saving the galaxy from a powerful machine race known as the Reapers.

Now the Reapers have arrived on Earth, and Shepard must embark on one last-ditch effort to unite the various sentient races and discover a seemingly impossible solution to the war. As I sit down for my first hands-on time with three complete missions from Mass Effect 3, I'm about to witness how high the stakes are and how greatly my choices will impact the fate of the galaxy this time around.

by Phil Kollar

SPOILER WARNING

Given the nature of my play session and the things that are most important to the Mass Effect franchise, this article contains spoilers for a few of Mass Effect 3's story missions. However, keep in mind that what I describe here is only one possible outcome; the whole structure of a mission can change depending on what you choose to do.

The war comes home

As I begin the first mission of Mass Effect 3, an Earth escape sequence, I realize that BioWare has already shown off this level at E3 and various other events last year. In it, my female engineer version of Shepard is called to meet with the Earth's defense council. She has been relieved from military duty after the events of Mass Effect 2's Arrival downloadable content, but the council requires her expertise. Colonies in the solar system have stopped responding after the appearance of some "incomprehensibly powerful" force.

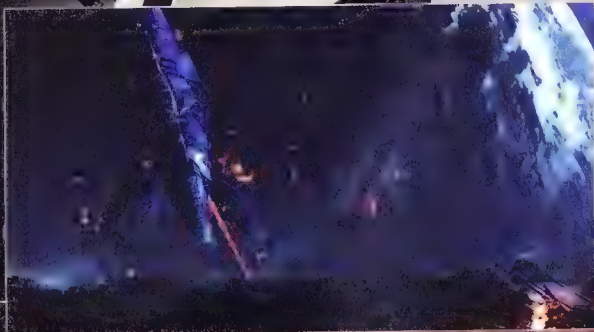
The defense council building is attacked, and Shepard escapes with long-time ally Captain Anderson. I notice a persistent theme of loss and sadness reverberating throughout the level. This emotion is particularly felt in the poignant appearance of a child three times throughout the course of the mission.

Shepard first sees the child standing outside the defense council building before the Reaper invasion, playing with a toy spaceship. Then she encounters him hiding in a ventilation shaft, but the child chooses to run away, screaming, "You can't help me!" Finally, Shepard witnesses the child climbing aboard an escape shuttle that is immediately shot out of the sky by a Reaper laser. A look of shock comes across Shepard's face as she watches this, a silent realization that she's in another conflict where she can't save everybody.

According to executive producer Casey Hudson, these scenes exist for more than getting across the stakes and the scale of devastation the Reapers are about to unleash across the galaxy. "[We're] exploring the idea of getting the player to understand and feel what Commander Shepard is experiencing versus just reacting to other characters," he explains. "We're trying to tell a little bit of the story Shepard would feel and seeing if the player feels that as well.... I think that's going to be one of the things people remember."

As Earth erupts in chaos and millions of civilian casualties happen around her, the only choice available is to barrel forward to the *Normandy* and escape in order to regroup and come back with an army prepared to battle the Reapers. To do so, Shepard is forced to leave Anderson behind. Anderson restores Shepard's rank and provides what's likely to be his final order: "We need every species and all their ships."

It seems like an impossible, hopeless mission — even more so than the suicide run of Mass Effect 2 — but before we can get started, we need to take a detour.



Red menace

As new recruit James Vega complains about being taken from the battle on Earth, Shepard and Kaiden receive a call from Admiral Hackett. He asks the crew to stop by Mars before heading to the Citadel. A group of Earth scientists has been studying Prothean ruins on the red planet that could hold secrets to how to defeat the Reapers, but communications have gone dark.

The *Normandy* drops off Shepard, Kaiden, and Vega just in time for them to notice an approaching sandstorm that will soon cut off contact with the ship. Before entering the research facility, they encounter a group of enemy soldiers, and it becomes clear why the ruins are silent. Shepard's one-time allies at Cerberus are attacking, searching for the same information Shepard wants.

After fighting through a few waves of Cerberus troopers using various types of grenades and the incinerate ability, I stumble upon a familiar face. Former Mass Effect party member Liara T'Soni was called to the ruins to study plans for a Prothean device that could wipe out the Reapers. She informs Shepard that the Protheans ran out of time before they could finish building this device, and they will need to recover the data before Cerberus if they don't want to suffer the same fate.

Shepard orders Vega to guard the entrance, and we move forward with Liara taking his party slot. The ruins provide a great example of the new focus on more varied level design in Mass Effect 3. Shepard can climb up small barriers and ladders, jump across gaps, and generally explore the environment more thoroughly, and these tools allow BioWare to mix up the gameplay in interesting ways.

"Once we added all those tools to the toolbox, we challenged the designers to figure out ways to make the missions and the story unpredictable," Hudson says. "In Mass Effect 2, often you would see where you're going down at the end of the hallway and know, 'That's settled, that's where I'm going.' In Mass Effect 3, we constantly try to change your perception of what you need to do."

In one hallway, I race after a group of Cerberus opponents at the other end, but rather than stick around and fight like their brethren, they slam the door shut in my face and lock it, forcing me to search for a new path.

I notice several rooms that aren't as obviously built for combat as areas in Mass Effect 2. I find myself taking cover behind overturned desks or couches more often than conveniently placed chest-high barriers.

During one memorable set piece, I have to ride a tram from one end of the research facility to the other. Halfway through the ride, Cerberus soldiers shut down my carriage and ride one of their own over, attacking me as they sweep by. I leap across the tiny gap between the two trams and take out two of the soldiers with the game's improved melee combat while Liara and Kaiden take care of the other two.

Once the tram arrives on the other side, I have to take cover in it as more Cerberus operatives attack. I can't stay in hiding for long, though. A new enemy type called the Guardian storms the tram without fear. These bad guys come equipped with body-sized shields that protect them from incoming fire. I can use a grenade or Liara's pull ability to make them drop the shields, or if my aim stays true, I can shoot them through the tiny visors they use to see where they are going. I take down one enemy this way and laugh as a tracker pops up for an achievement titled "Mail Slot."

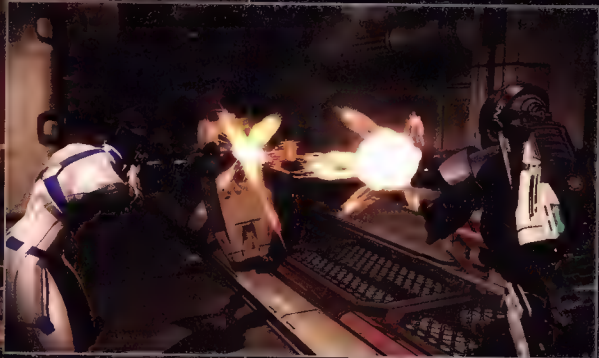
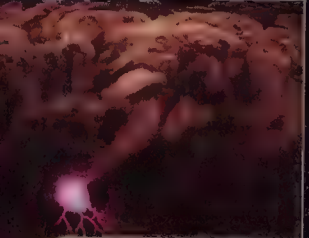
As I near the end of the Mars mission, Shepard and crew encounter a dead Cerberus soldier whose helmet has been removed. The operative's face is twisted and his eyes glow blue, making him look sort of like a husk—humans who've been tainted by the synthetic Geth race. "Cerberus is experimenting on its own troops," Kaiden guesses. He assumes Shepard knows more than she is saying from her time working with Cerberus, and his trust is wavering.

Thankfully, we don't have to wait long for answers. We reach the center of the facility and encounter the Illusive Man, the Cerberus leader, in his notorious hologram form. He threatens Shepard, telling her to stay out of his way. When she asks what he's after, he responds, "What I've always wanted." He explains that where Shepard and her allies seek to destroy the Reapers, Cerberus wants to discover a way to control them and use their power to raise humanity's profile in the galaxy.

The Illusive Man also makes a mysterious mention that he "doesn't need Shepard anymore." An off-center shot shows someone standing in the room with the Illusive Man. It's unclear who this figure is, but I wonder if it might be a more focused villain to answer one of the few common criticisms of Mass Effect 2. Hudson won't tell me but admits, "We're introducing a clearer target for Shepard, a clearer foil."

After the Illusive Man vanishes, I get another taste of Mass Effect 3's newfound mission variety. We discover the ruins were infiltrated by a Cerberus spy named Eva who has begun transmitting the Prothean data off-world. A chase sequence ensues, with the undercover scientist revealing a robotic form and superhuman speed. After minutes of leaping across gaps and bounding over obstacles, we corner Eva at her shuttle. Before she can escape, Vega crashes into her ship, preventing the rest of the data from being transferred.

Eva climbs out of the busted shuttle and almost immediately grabs Kaiden, squeezing the life from him. A slow-motion shootout begins, with Shepard taking down the metallic menace as she calmly walks toward her. Kaiden is gravely injured, but they escape and head for the Citadel.



NEW WAYS TO PLAY

When you boot up Mass Effect 3 for the first time, you'll be asked to choose from three possible game modes. These modes represent the different types of players BioWare has realized are all trying to enjoy its games. Here's how it breaks down:

Roleplaying

This is the traditional Mass Effect experience, providing deep story choices where you're in full control and challenging combat tuned to normal difficulty.

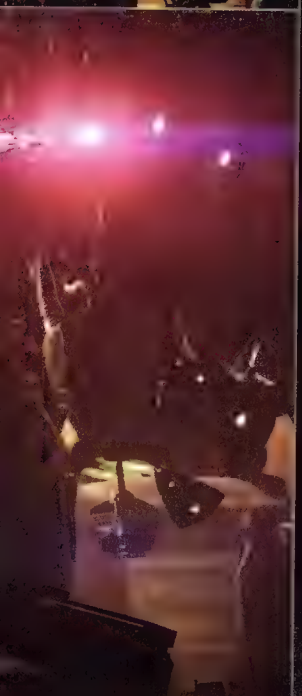
Action

This mode turns on automatic dialogue, a new feature that will get rid of conversation options, turning Mass Effect 3 into a more linear shooter experience. "It's not that they don't like the story," Hudson says of the players this mode is targeting. "They love the story. In fact, the story is so important to them that they feel like the choices are intimidating." Hudson explains that action mode provides a mix of paragon and renegade choices, creating a "default path that gives you access to a lot of cool things."

Story

Given Mass Effect 3's focus on narrative, it's no surprise that some gamers would prefer to stick to this part of the game. Hudson describes this group: "We have a lot of feedback from people who say, 'Your games look really cool, and I love the idea of the story and the characters. It looks awesome when I watch it on YouTube, but I'm just not that coordinated with a shooter. I would play it if I could figure out how to do combat.'" Story mode is BioWare's answer. In this mode, combat is dialed down to be extremely fast and relatively easy. "Generally, if you're trying, you're not going to die," Hudson says.





A possible future

BioWare has previously shown off a mission that involves escorting a rare female Krogan, Eve, to safety as Cerberus attacks. For my final Mass Effect 3 level, the developer loads the follow-up to that mission, which takes place on the Krogan homeworld of Tuchanka. Eve has been secured and Mordin – assuming he survived your playthrough of Mass Effect 2 – is working on a cure for the genophage plague that has prevented Krogans from easily creating offspring for centuries.

While fixing the genophage problem would ensure Krogan support in the war effort, not everyone wants this. Behind their backs, the Salarian government – the body that originally helped create the genophage – has offered to work with Shepard to fake the cure. In the first of many heartbreaking conclusions to arcs that have been building since the first game, Shepard must choose whether to appease the Salarians or tell the truth to Mordin and his old Krogan teammate Wrex.

I choose to be honest, but before Shepard can explain what's happening, the group is attacked and separated. While Wrex and Mordin move forward with Eve, Shepard splits off with returning party members Gamus and Lara.

The group enters a series of catacombs that lead to the City of the Ancients, an abandoned Krogan domain that points to the race's once-glorious past. We stumble onto a painting of a giant worm that reveals two important pieces of information: The Krogans once had a more advanced culture, and a huge thresher maw named Kalros exists somewhere in this area.

Shepard and crew fight through waves of Rachni and Marauders – Turians who've been infected by the Geth – on the way to meet up with Mordin at the Shroud. This giant tower sits in the middle of Tuchanka and is the one place where they can spread the genophage antidote into the planet's atmosphere, curing as many Krogan as possible. Unfortunately, it's also under attack by a Reaper.

As we inch closer to the Shroud, Mordin and Wrex come up with an insane plan: We'll summon Kalros to attack the Reaper. Wrex reasons that the massive thresher maw has just as much reason to want to defend its planet as the Krogan, but I'll need to get dangerously close to the Reaper to draw Kalros' attention.

During this tense sequence, I weave between pieces of cover while dodging laser blasts from the Reaper. I get close enough that the foe can stretch its metallic legs

over and crush me if I'm not careful. A number of large, heavily armored brutes attack, but I ignore them and rush to hit two signals on either side of the tower. Once activated, the sands begin to shift, and Kalros appears.

In an impressive cutscene, the giant thresher maw and the Reaper battle it out. Despite the latter's powerful technology, Kalros comes out on top. The Shroud is now open for Shepard and Mordin to enter, but it has been heavily damaged in the attack. Mordin announces that he needs to go to the top of the Shroud to spread the cure. The tower is nearing the point of collapse, and Shepard tries to stop him, but it's too late.

"Had to be me," Mordin says to Shepard as the elevator doors slide shut. "Someone else might have gotten it wrong."

This emotional close to the mission is only one of many possible endings depending on what happened in your Mass Effect 1 and 2 playthroughs and what choices you make throughout this game. Hudson beams with pride at the number of possible outcomes available. "There are some really obvious things that are different, and then lots and lots of smaller things, lots of things about who lives and who dies, civilizations that rose and fell, all the way down to individual characters," he says. "That becomes the state of where you left your galaxy."

All good things

If it delivers on its promise, Mass Effect 3 is poised to be a revolutionary first for the game industry. We've seen plenty of plot-heavy video game trilogies, but never has a franchise tied together so many complex and variable stories across three games, weaving a web of player choices that pulls you ever tighter to the narrative and your effects on its conclusion.

As I talk to Casey Hudson about this impending finale, I can't help but notice how tired he looks. His voice is hoarse, and he's clearly been spending many late nights with the rest of his team finishing the game. It's been a long, dramatic eight-year journey for Commander Shepard, the developers at BioWare, and Mass Effect fans, but the conclusion it has all been building to is finally almost here.

"I think it will all be worth it in the end," Hudson reassures me with a knowing smile. ♦



The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings — Enhanced Edition

Significant additions are headed to console

» **Platform**
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
CD Projekt Red

» **Release**
Spring

By now, console owners may be tired of their PC-playing buddies singing effusive praise for *The Witcher 2*. Luckily for the rest of the game-playing world, the excellent action/RPG is headed to 360 this spring, along with some big improvements. I played the new console port and came away confident that the excellent game is receiving the transition it deserves.

For those not in the know, *The Witcher 2* is a third-person game of fantasy battles and political intrigue starring a mysterious monster hunter named Geralt. The number “2” on the

title shouldn’t scare anyone away, as the new story stands largely independent from its predecessor and is a perfect jumping on point for new players.

The PC version of *The Witcher 2* already plays well with a gamepad, and developer CD Projekt Red has used the last few months to make the controls feel even better. A new optional camera system follows the player and rotates the camera without the need for manual control, always moving to an angle that offers a good view of the action and where you’re going. At the same time, players can still use the right stick to alter

their view and can turn off the automatic camera if desired. Battles now have an excellent lock-on mechanic that keeps your focus on a single target, and a flick of the right stick switches to other enemies. Overall responsiveness in battle has been improved, and the team is currently locking in a new inventory management system, though it wasn’t in place for our demo.

Beyond improvements to gameplay control and mechanics, the console version has a wealth of new story content. CD Projekt Red added new CG cutscenes throughout the game to deepen the plot, from opening movies that delve



Geralt uses two sword types: One is designed for fighting people, and a second to slay monsters.



The Witcher 2 has some great action, but the political intrigue is equally exciting.



The 360 version adds several new missions and battles to the already lengthy game.

into the characters and world to closing movies that summarize the results of your various decisions throughout the game.

Best of all, CD Projekt Red added over four hours worth of new missions that feature new characters and locations. The new plot circulates around locating some royal heirs with the help of an alluring spy named Brigida, who had once posed as their caretaker. In playing through a lengthy part of this mission, I fought a number of battles versus brigands and mages aligned against Geralt's efforts to find the truth and saw several new conversation-driven role-playing

sequences, like a plot to embroil a nobleman in the kidnapping. Like the rest of the game, these sections are characterized by excellent writing, smart dialogue, and morally ambiguous character choices.

PC players have been excited about The Witcher 2 for a reason; the complexity and breadth of choices you face as a player are like nothing else in modern RPGs. If development continues apace, expect The Witcher 2 to draw some big attention from console gamers this spring. » Matt Miller



Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City

Walking a mile through Raccoon City in Umbrella's boots



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Slant Six Games

» **Release**
March 20

We've experienced the pivotal Raccoon City outbreak through the eyes of Jill, Chris, Leon, and Claire, but what was it like for the Umbrella operatives? Operation Raccoon City puts players in the shoes of Umbrella's brutal task force as they attempt to scrub the city clean of the devious company's fingerprints. Playing through the first four missions of Operation Raccoon City's four-player campaign allowed us to get a good feel for the new brand of zombie killing, and also granted us an intriguing look at the malicious tasks Umbrella was executing while everyone was just trying to stay alive.

Everyone's Gonna Die!

The introduction of Resident Evil 2 showed a task force of Umbrella agents recovering the G-virus from scientist William Birkin. In Operation Raccoon City, we experience this botched mission from the inside. In this what-if scenario, my fellow Wolfpack members and I rendezvous with the infamous Hunk just as his crew begins moving its way through traitorous Umbrella mercenaries. This trek through Umbrella's sprawling underground lab to find Birkin is ultimately a flashy tutorial filled with cover-based firefights. Snapping in and out of cover is automatic, making sprinting into position a breeze. Taking aim with the myriad weapons feels smooth and responsive, and I immediately got the hang of the controls.

Eventually the squad descends on Birkin's inner lab, but we're forced to listen to the scuffle from outside as Hunk's team guns the scientist down, who then injects himself with the G-virus. We hear grotesque groans and shrill screams as chaos erupts in the lab and the mutated genius begins stalking the agents. We spend much of this section fleeing from the hulking monster as he chases us through narrow hallways littered with flaming ruptured gas pipes. We make our final stand at the end of a hallway while waiting for a door to open, tossing incendiary grenades and unloading every last bullet into the beast to stagger his pursuit. After suffering several brutal deaths we escape the

lab, leaving the deformed scientist's disposal to Leon and Claire's exploits in Resident Evil 2.

Scorching Corruption

Next, my squad and I work our way into Raccoon City Hall. Unfortunately, so had the virus. We shift our firefight-focused tactics to take on the new undead threat. At first it's easy to clean out the handfuls of shambling zombies scattered between the rooms with deliberate, well-aimed headshots, but they soon outnumber us. While a couple of my less-disciplined peers resort to panicky point-and-spray gunplay, I rely on my capable close-quarters combat skills. Holstering my firearm and pulling out a blade is as easy as hitting a button, instantly turning me into a melee killing machine. Fending off hordes of zombies with a volley of slashes and kicks is as easy as pointing the analog stick in the direction of the next enemy - very satisfying in contrast to the clunky knife of the classic Resident Evil games.

After dispatching huge groups of zombies and U.S. Spec Ops forces, we make our way into the City Hall's archives, where we are ordered to set fire to Umbrella's paper trail. Finding the sensitive documents while avoiding the trap mines is easy enough, but what happens next nearly wipes out the whole team. An endless pack of lickers descend upon us as an explosion tears through the building, instantly setting our location on fire. Freeing my teammates from



the lickers' lasso-like tongues while making a break for the exit is a harrowing experience, but we manage to make it onto the Raccoon City streets alive.

The Return Of Nikolai

With Umbrella's facility blueprints smoldering behind us, my task force and I want to ensure that no word of the outbreak could leave the city. The easy way to suppress panicked emails and phone calls is to sabotage the Raccoon City power plant. The path to our goal is littered with zombies, spec ops, and the usual hazards, along with one new threat: Nikolai Ginevaf.

The shifty antagonist from Resident Evil 3: Nemesis returns, and he's still willing to take out anybody who stands in his way. Our battle with the Russian mercenary takes place in a large courtyard, with him sniping down at us from a nearby building. We feverishly chuck grenades into the windows while taking cover below, but our tactics don't stop me from taking a bullet. Nikolai laughs as my bleeding wound draws a horde of blood-crazed zombies to my location. Thankfully my teammates skillfully pick off the zombies chasing me while suppressing Nikolai's sniper fire. The random element of becoming living zombie bait incorporates an exciting element of surprise into the gameplay. The marathon shootout concludes with Nikolai fleeing, presumably to go and bug Jill Valentine somewhere.

We continue on to the power plant with the goal of planting explosive charges on each of the three generators. Bombing the first one is easy enough, but as soon as we hit the switch to raise the second generator from its protective tomb, a door bursts open unleashing waves of zombies and spec ops soldiers. The zombies do a good job of keeping both us and the spec ops busy, so exchanging fire isn't a huge priority initially. One of the undead gets the best of me, winning a frantic quicktime-based struggle and biting my neck. The fresh infection depletes my already scant life and my character writhes and twitches as she becomes a zombie. I watch helplessly as my zombiefied Umbrella agent sprints to my flustered teammates, spreading panic along with the infection. One clever Wolfpack agent kills the infection with a special spray, quickly reviving each fallen comrade afterward. Resident Evil fans have been mostly limited to seeing the aftereffects of the virus, so I loved watching the virus spread like wildfire



amongst a firefight in real time. Seeing how one little bite or scratch can change the flow of an entire battle is exhilarating. After the final charges blow, Raccoon City is off the grid.

Nemesis Unleashed

Nikolai isn't the only threat from Resident Evil 3 that needs dealing with. Another mission has us infiltrating a secret warehouse to get one of Umbrella's most precious weapons under control: Nemesis. This biohazardous assassin is malfunctioning when we encounter him. Fortunately, we had previously extracted a controlling agent from a Tyrant, which we now inject into the Nemesis' bloodstream. The trench coat-wearing abominator fires a devastating gatling gun at us while we scramble for cover on the catwalks above. Feeling overwhelmed is common in Raccoon City. Juggling the spec ops forces, zombies, and Nemesis is as demanding as it is entertaining. Strategy is key here, with two of my teammates focusing on suppressing the zombie horde and enemy soldiers while the rest of us empty assault rifle rounds into Nemesis's cranium. Battling the infamous menace once again is a treat, but his lack of mobility removes the sheer terror I felt in Resident Evil 3's dramatic chases. After absorbing enough ammo, the titan topples, leaving us just enough time to get him back under Umbrella's influence. With that, he drops the mingun, picks up his trademark rocket launcher, and wanders off into the City while groaning "S.T.A.R.S.!"

What happens after this duel with Nemesis is



These parasite embryos take a page from the tree huggers in the Alien films.

a mystery, and we're eager to see where this alternate Resident Evil timeline goes. Slant Six has incorporated solid tactical shooting into a universe brimming with cool locations, a rich story, and creative enemies. While the combat feels good, we couldn't help but notice the human AI's lack of awareness, a common complaint from the developer's previous SOCOM titles. Oftentimes our enemies would stand motionless or attempt to hide behind cover while remaining exposed, making them painfully easy to kill. Fortunately, there are enough zombies and biological weapons to deal with that the spotty AI didn't become too distracting. Hopefully these issues are eradicated when we return to the streets of Raccoon City as Umbrella early next year. » Tim Turi



Mr. X rests up before his big battle with Wolfpack.





MLB 12: The Show

You may end up purchasing it twice

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Vita

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Sports
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony Computer
Entertainment
San Diego

» **Release**
March 6

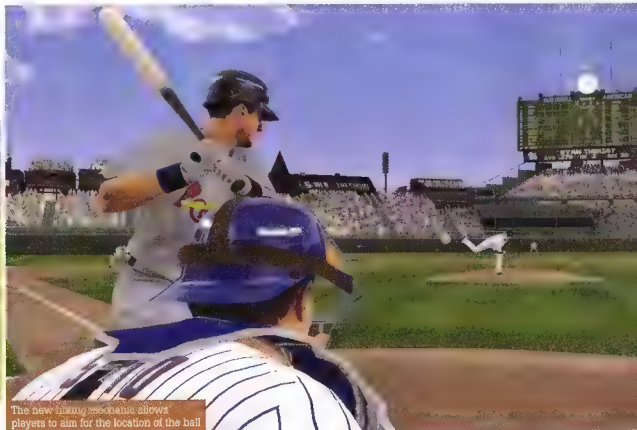
The 2012 baseball season has already delivered more drama than a daytime soap, and players haven't even reported to Spring Training yet. Ryan Braun, the National League MVP, failed a drug test and may be suspended 50 games. Albert Pujols, the star of the reigning World Series champion St. Louis Cardinals, opted to follow the scent of money to Anaheim rather than defend his title. The Chicago Cubs, a team desperately seeking a solution to a 100-year championship drought, hope former Boston Red Sox general manager Theo Epstein can work his voodoo to remove The Curse of the Billy Goat from Wrigley Field.

While video game baseball is free of the doping,

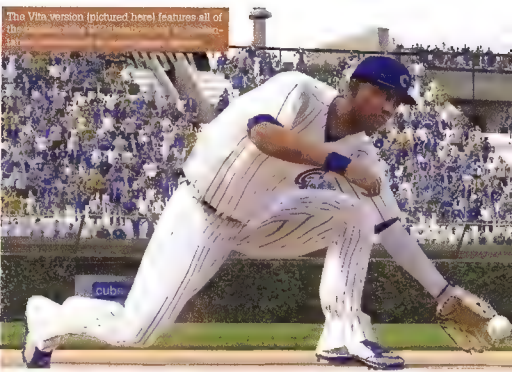
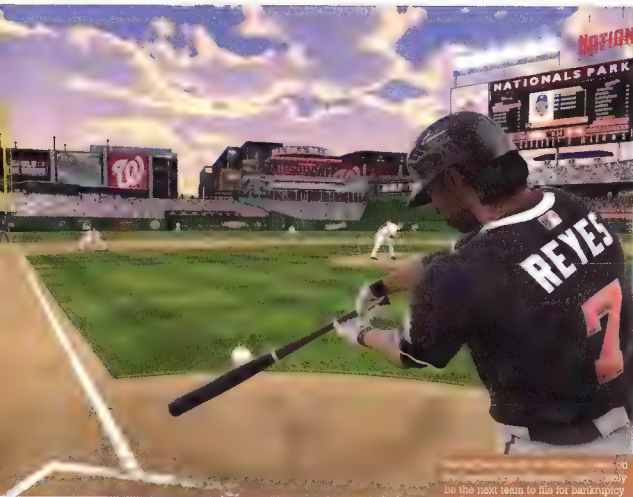
betrayal, and the hundred years of suckitude found in its real-life counterpart, developer Sony Computer Entertainment San Diego is making its own headlines with MLB 12: The Show. I spoke with senior producer Jason Villa about the additions and changes made since last season. Along with shedding light on broad changes like new control mechanics and small nuances like

tweaked CPU trade logic, Jason talked at length about a new feature that should excite gamers of all walks. As ludicrous as this may seem, it starts with purchasing the game twice.

"If people own both the PlayStation 3 and Vita versions of the game, we didn't want them to start over if they are playing Road to the Show or Franchise," Villa says. "Our big feature this year,



The new training mechanic allows players to aim for the location of the ball



between PS3 and Vita, is cross-platform cloud saves." When playing in the Season, Franchise, or Road to the Show modes, players can start their franchise on the PS3 version, save their file to a cloud, and take it with them on their Vitas.

As history has shown with the PSP versions of The Show, Sony doesn't treat the handheld versions of its baseball sim like redheaded stepchildren. Most of the content found in the PlayStation 3 version is also in the Vita version, but it's tailored to meet the playing tendencies of handheld gamers. "We know people play handhelds for 15 to 30 minutes at a time," Villa says. "They usually don't sit down and play a handheld for three hours. We knew we had to make the games quicker." By trimming down the visual presentation, games can be completed in 20 to 25 minutes tops.

Conversely on the PlayStation 3, presentation has received a major overhaul. The game already offered broadcast-quality presentations, but the dev team felt it could be dramatically improved upon. "What we're really trying to do is blur the lines between our baseball game and what you see on television," Villa adds. "This includes new camera cuts, AI routines, street-mapped cameras, taking some old cameras out, and really showing you the same thing you'll see on a FOX broadcast or on a MLB.com broadcast."

This doesn't mean you have to sit through commercials between innings or watch a fan

unknowingly on camera stuff an entire hotdog down his throat as a batter adjusts his batting gloves. Sony is using camera transitions to make the experience feel more lifelike. For instance, after a ball or strike is thrown, you won't always watch the catcher throw it back to the pitcher. Instead, the camera may cut to show the pitcher's reaction or show other player or dugout activity.

A large part of achieving a true broadcast simulation rests on the lips of the commentary team. This year, Matt Vasgerian, Dave Campbell, and Eric Karros speak more to events tied to your season and less about team history or what happened in real-life last year. Like the highly lauded contextual commentary in the NBA 2K series, these announcers live more in the moment, talking about the Cy Young race during your franchise season or commenting on players having breakout years.

On the baseball diamond, Sony has reworked a large portion of the control mechanics. If players want a more challenging or realistic experience while batting, they can now control the location of their swing on the game controller. The right analog stick controls stride and swing, and the left stick handles the aiming.

Sony is also making subtle tweaks to the analog pitching mechanics, but the biggest change on the mound is the implementation of "Pulse" pitching. This new system tests your timing using the X button. Players must time their

The Vita version (pictured here) features all of the new features and enhancements of the PS3 version.

button presses to get an on-screen display to determine pitch accuracy.

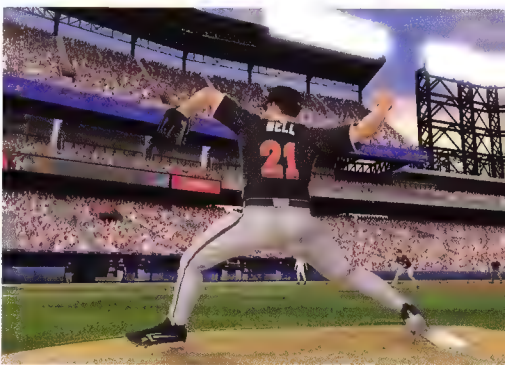
No matter how you play the game, it has a different feel than last year thanks to completely reworked ball physics. For the first time in series history, balls will slow and die in alleys, and actual math is factored in when a spinning ball hits a surface. Depending on how the ball bounces or how the wind carries it, users may find themselves in a world of hurt thanks to the new player collisions that play out in the outfield and on the base paths.

With so much attention being paid to introducing new game controls and improving the presentation, Sony hasn't added much new content to Franchise mode this year, opting instead to focus on improving the trade, line-up, and player generation logic. Changes to Road to Show mode are minimal, as well. Rather than starting out as a player who designated hits in a game or comes in for an inning of mop-up relief, your rookie is immediately a starter — "that hot shot rookie who doesn't sit on the bench," Villa adds.

My talk with Villa ended with a tease. "We also have a brand new mode. It's unlike anything you've ever seen in a sports game. It's a unique look at baseball and we really think people are going to latch onto this mode and enjoy it." I have no idea what this mode could be, but the good news is we don't have long to wait to find out. MLB 12: The Show hits store shelves on March 6. — **Andrew Reiner**

Get Moving on the Base Paths

MLB 12: The Show introduced Move support with the Home Run Derby. This year, Sony is going even bigger with motion controls. "We had people asking us why they couldn't play the remainder of the game with Move," Villa says. "We've added that this year." The entire game can now be controlled with the glowing wand and navigation controller. You won't just see a bat floating in home plate; either The player controls the hands of the batter, which I'm sure will make for some questionable uncoordinated swings on Ichiro's part. Pitching supports two motion-based options, one for those who want to be lazy and just want to aim and tap a button, and those who want to stand up and see if they can throw 100-plus mph pitches as a starter. Base running puts players in the role of the base coach, who must wave players around the bags or tell them to hold up. For fielding, users have to catch the ball with the Move controller by timing when the Z button is pressed. If you're timing is off, the player may bobble the ball or drop it





Alan Wake's American Nightmare

In tonight's episode of *Night Springs*, fiction becomes reality

- Platform
Xbox 360
- Style
1-Player Action
- Publisher
Microsoft Game Studios
- Developer
Remedy
- Release
2012

American Nightmare bears the Alan Wake title, and it is releasing after the original. Alan Wake, but the story and gameplay make the Xbox Live Arcade exclusive more of a side story to Wake's expanding battle with darkness. "It's definitely not a sequel to Alan Wake," says Oskari Håkkinen, head of franchise development for Remedy. "It's a standalone spinoff experience that anyone can pick up and play."

My hands-on time begins with Alan's former manager Barry Wheeler sleeping in a hotel room. Since Alan's mysterious disappearance, Barry has become the manager of the band The Old Gods of Asgard. The camera pans past Barry and to a television playing an episode of *Night Springs*, and the show's credits reveal that the episode was written by Alan Wake.

I see a live-action version of Alan wearing a plaid shirt and jeans standing amidst a dark fog, flashlight and gun in hand as the *Night Springs* narrator explains that he is a champion of light. The narrator goes on to explain that the darkness has created an evil version of Wake named Mr. Scratch. The real Alan shouts that he will catch Mr. Scratch eventually, but Mr. Scratch responds saying that even if he does, everything he loves will be ruined.

"Story is not the main focus here," Håkkinen says. "If [the original] was two-thirds story and one-third action, then I guess American Nightmare is two-thirds action and one-third story." When I pick up a flashlight and a gun to reacquaint myself with the controls, Remedy's

action-focused sentiment quickly becomes apparent. As I make my way past an oil rig, it starts spewing out the Taken, the primary enemies in Alan Wake. After picking off a few, a text prompt reminds me that standing under street lamps restores health and keeps me safe from the darkness. I see more of the Taken emerging from the oil rig, so I take the hint and head toward the nearest lamp.

Once I reach safety, I meet a woman doing some auto-repair work in a garage. She seems sure that she has met Alan before, but after a confusing exchange, I realize that that the man she thought she recognized as Alan is actually Mr. Scratch. We part ways after she offers me an herbal suppository, which I decline.

From that point on, I was let loose into an open, non-linear desert area surrounding the garage. In order to enact the events that Alan had already written about in his manuscript and make fiction become reality, I had to collect specific items and bring them back to the oil rig I passed earlier. While searching, I come across a television playing a live-action short depicting Mr. Scratch threatening Alan. I also stumble upon a radio broadcasting an on-air interview with Barry Wheeler as he talks about managing The Old Gods of Asgard. The host of the show presses Wheeler about what happened to Alan, but Barry angrily avoids the topic by saying that he wants to talk about The Gods of Asgard, not his old job as a literary agent for Alan Wake. Even though Alan exists in a sort of secondary universe where his fiction is reality, it seems that it maintains ties to the real world.

I encounter many enemies and weapons that were not in the original game. One enemy, the splitter, breaks into two smaller enemies when you light him up, and then those two split into two even smaller enemies. What begins as one large enemy turns into many more before I finish the foe. Along with the standard pistol and shotgun, I also come across a nail gun and a sub-machine gun. The nail gun feels like a weakened version of the pistol; it fires faster, and ammo is more plentiful, but it deals less damage. The sub-machine gun feels particularly powerful, since it lets players spray enemies with tons of bullets, something we never got to do in the first game.

I found a few extra manuscripts, and the items I needed to act out the events of the manuscript page, and headed toward the oil rig. A cutscene shows a satellite crashing down on



the oil rig, apparently as a result of Alan's actions (though it wasn't well-explained). It collapses in an impressive display of physics. I then regain control of Alan and begin to outrun flaming debris. The demo comes to a close as a huge group of Taken approach me, one of which looks twice the size of Alan and is carrying a large circular saw.

Depending on how deep you want to dig into the extra content like radio broadcasts, manuscripts, and messages from Mr. Scratch, Håkkinen says the story campaign should clock in around five hours. He also believes the pricing will be comparable to other Xbox Live Arcade games, so \$15 is a good estimate.

Along with the story campaign, Remedy is also including a Horde-like mode called Fight Till Dawn, where Alan attempts to survive as long as he can fighting wave after wave of Taken to attain a high score. You receive multipliers for successful dodges and kills, but it will reset as soon as you take damage. The opening level: I played was easy, but Remedy assured me that as you get further and unlock new levels, it becomes much more difficult to survive until the end. Discovering manuscripts hidden throughout the single-player game also unlocks extra weapons in this new mode.

Since Alan expected a full-fledged sequel, Alan Wake's American Nightmare is a strange direction for the franchise. Though it's more focused on action over narrative, it still feels like it's staying true to the series. Elements from the first game, like excellent licensed music and odd characters, carry over into the XBLA title. It doesn't look like American Nightmare elaborates or expands much on the narrative of the original, but it does provide a larger dose of Alan Wake's unique breed of action. » Kyle Hilliard



Xenoblade Chronicles

The best Japanese RPG in years is finally coming to North America

If you look at the game of the year candidates in Japan in 2010 and Europe in 2011, there's a common title that missed the North American lists for both years: Xenoblade Chronicles. Despite rave reviews and endless begging from U.S. gamers in the form of online petitions and Facebook groups, Nintendo waited until the end of last year to tell us that this excellent game from Monolith Soft is finally coming to our shores. I've played a good chunk of the European release, and I can confirm that it will be worth the wait.

Japanese games are known for having slow starts, but Xenoblade gets players into the action almost immediately. A brief cutscene introduces an empty world where two great Titans – the Bionis and the Mechonis – are engaged in an endless battle. Then players are thrown into the midst of a huge battle during a years-long war between humans (known as Homs) and machines (called Mechnon).

Players first step into the role of Dunban, a powerful warrior wielding the Monado, a gansh red blade that is one of the only weapons in the world with the power to hurt Mechnon. Battles in Xenoblade Chronicles take place in real time, with the player primarily controlling one character. When battles begin, a bar of abilities pops up on the bottom of the screen, similar to what

exists in most MMOs. Players choose which ability they want the character to use while he or she auto-attacks freely.

Reusing abilities is based around cooldown timers – there's no mana or magic points, so choosing when to heal or use a major attack is more about timing. Many attacks are heavily dependent on positioning. For example, I can use backstab at any point, but if I use it while behind an enemy, I get a huge damage bonus. Other attacks add debuffs if I'm positioned to the side of an enemy.

The Monado also grants its user the ability to see the future. If an enemy is about to perform an attack that will kill a party member, the battle pauses and a psychic vision of the attack flashes on screen. Once it has played out, a bar appears letting you know how long you have until this attack happens. This gives you time to change the future by casting a shield spell, healing, drawing aggro to a different character, or killing the enemy in question before it attacks. The future-vision also plays into questing, letting you know when you pick up a piece of loot you need for a quest that you haven't received yet.

After a few easy Mechnon battles that introduce me to some of these mechanics, the game goes back into a cutscene that shows Dunban losing control of the Monado. He barely survives the



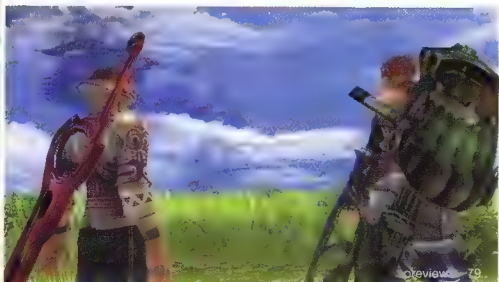
battle, and the camera pulls back to reveal the game's first big twist: The people, creatures, and robots of Xenoblade Chronicles actually live on the two titans that were shown locked in battle in the opening scene.

At this point the game jumps ahead a year and puts me in control of the true protagonist: an 18-year-old boy named Shulk who resides in Colony 9. From here I can continue along the main plot path or pick up tons of sidequests by talking to residents who have the usual exclamation point above their heads. These quests are relatively simple – kill a certain number of creatures or find collectibles – but quests are automatically completed without having to return to the quest giver, making it an easy way to build up extra gold and experience points while adventuring.

Questing is the first of many elements in Xenoblade that feel heavily inspired by the user-friendly design philosophy of Western games. The world is huge and open, but you have an extensive fast-travel system and you can save the game anywhere. None of these decisions are revolutionary, but they make the experience fresh and approachable in a way that most JRPGs haven't been in years.

Based off my first 10 hours with Xenoblade Chronicles, this smart, self-aware design sticks out to me the most. I'm not ready to say that Monolith Soft has reinvented the Japanese RPG, but they've certainly brought it in line with a modern audience's expectations while retaining an art style and tone that sets it apart from the average Western RPG. It's crazy to imagine Nintendo sitting on this gem of a game for so long, but be thankful it's finally headed to the U.S. this year. I fully expect it to appear on "best of" lists for the third year in a row. » Phil Kollar

- » **Platform**
Wii
- » **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Monolith Soft
- » **Release**
April



Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD

Kickflipping it old school



Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

Style
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

Publisher
Activision

Developer
Robomodo

Release
Summer

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater was a revelation back in the PlayStation era, wrangling in both skateboarding fans and gamers who couldn't maintain their balance on a board in real life. The excellent gameplay steadily improved over the first few iterations, which added combo-extending manuals and reverts. Unfortunately, in later years the series veered wildly off track, thanks to embarrassing Jackass-style antics and the notorious Tony Hawk Ride peripheral.

After letting the franchise cool its wheels for nearly two years, Activision is jumping back in the half-pipe. This time around, instead of trying

to come up with yet another silly gimmick for Pro Skater, Activision is going back to what made the original series great. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD is taking the best levels and characters from the first few games, adding online multiplayer, and wrapping it all up with a nice HD visual update. In short, this is the Tony Hawk game fans have wanted for a long time.

Fan favorite levels such as Phoenix's Downhill Jam, the School from Pro Skater 2, and the Warehouse are in the game. The team at Robomodo isn't merely eyeballing those classic levels, either. Neversoft provided the studio with the original game files, which means that

every ramp, rail, and funbox is in its proper place. Since this is a remix, players can keep their combos rolling by using manuals and other tricks in levels that didn't originally support those moves. Other little tweaks include replacing the collectible tape icons with more contemporary DVDs. The game looks gorgeous, especially after seeing an Activision rep play the Warehouse level on the original PS1 before then switching to the updated HD version (spoiler: Tony Hawk's Pro Skater doesn't look quite as nice as you may remember).

The roster is a mix of both familiar faces and modern skaters. Veterans include favorites Rodney Mullen, Andrew Reynolds, and, of course, the birdman himself. Pros like Nyjah Huston and Chris Cole join the roster as well. Fans can expect to see some of the more bizarre characters from the series, too, such as Ollie the Magic Burn and a pixelated Tony Hawk that's sure to make old fogies feel right at home.

The first Tony Hawk's Pro Skaters delivered memorable music, with ska, rap, punk, and hardcore jams accompanying the skating. Activision says the game won't feature the original soundtrack at this point, but if it's being overseen with the same level of care as the rest of the early version we saw in action, we're prepared to turn our stereos up.

Activision plans on releasing this downloadable mash note sometime this summer. Now that fans have had time for their scabs to heal, it's looking like a great time to get back on board with the game that started it all. » Jeff Cork





Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

Film and game powerhouses collide

Role-playing games have been taking visual cues from animated movies for years, but Ni no Kuni's edge puts it above the average anime-inspired adventure. The development team at Level-5 (known for series like Professor Layton and Dark Cloud) is collaborating with Hayao Miyazaki's renowned animation house, Studio Ghibli (responsible for acclaimed films like *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*). This PS3-exclusive RPG is the result of the combined efforts of these creative forces.

Ni no Kuni's story revolves around Oliver, a boy

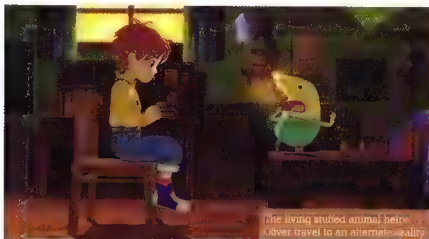
who lives in a fictional American city. Grieving after the loss of his mother, Oliver's tears magically bring a stuffed animal to life. This newly sentient companion shows him how to travel to an alternate reality, complete with parallel versions of the inhabitants of Oliver's world. Among them, Oliver hopes to find a living version of his mom. The premise seems somber, but the emphasis is on Oliver's journey and the friends he makes.

Oliver and the worlds he visits are beautifully realized through Studio Ghibli's signature art style. The characters and environments look like they are pulled from one of Miyazaki's films, and you see plenty

of bizarre creatures thanks to Oliver's primary combat strategy. He can summon a variety of beasts to fight for him, complementing his ability to cast spells. Battles play out in real time, leaving you free to maneuver around the encounter area as you attack and defend. It's a tried-and-true approach, but not every RPG needs to push the boundaries of the genre.

Ni no Kuni clearly takes inspiration from classic RPG traditions. It has a large overworld, towns to explore, and we've seen the party flying around on a dragon's back. Along with the real-time combat, stunning visuals, and promising pedigree, this is a title that fans of Japanese role-playing games should track closely. » Joe Juba

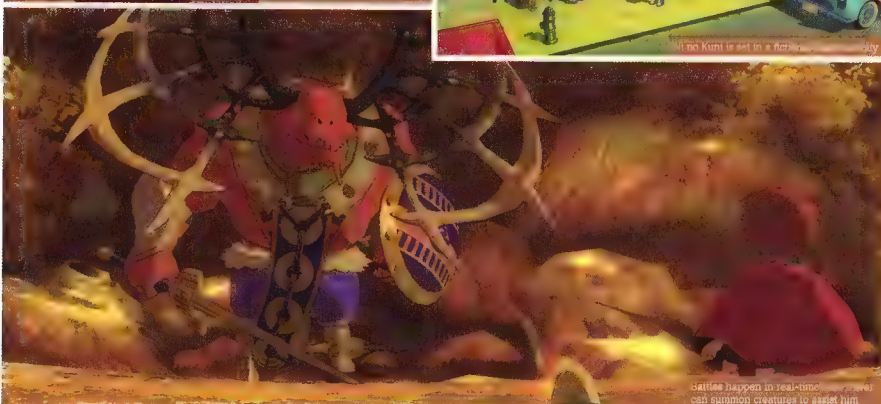
- » Platform PlayStation 3
- » Style 1-Player Role-Playing
- » Publisher Namco Bandai
- » Developer Level-5, Studio Ghibli
- » Release 2012



The living stuffed animal helps Oliver travel to an alternate reality.



Ni no Kuni is set in a fictional city.



Battles happen in real-time, and Oliver can summon creatures to assist him.



Another Version

In North America, Ni no Kuni is exclusive to the PlayStation 3. However, the game came out in Japan on DS in 2010. According to Level-5, though the two games share the same basic story, they have different mechanics, plot developments, and (obviously) graphics. The DS version will probably remain Japan-only, but considering the gorgeous visuals of the PS3 installment, it looks like we're coming out ahead.

Battleship

War on the shore, minus the game board



- » Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
- » Style
1-Player Shooter
- » Publisher
Activision
- » Developer
Double Helix/Magic
Pockets
- » Release
May

Battleship has patrolled the video gaming waters for decades, most recently via EA's Hasbro Family Game Night. That version played it safe, delivering a faithful adaptation of the classic board game. Now Activision is navigating more treacherous seas, licensing the rights to the upcoming movie and creating a completely new action-strategy hybrid. One thing's for sure: You won't be shouting A5 in this one.

Activision is quick to point out that while the game is based on the film's license, it's not a movie-based game. Players won't cozy up to Liam Neeson or Brooklyn Decker while battling aliens in the Pacific. Instead, developer Double Helix took the movie's premise—aliens invading Earth and constructing a massive energy dome over the Hawaiian archipelago—and are using it as a backdrop for an unconventional first-person shooter that's otherwise unrelated to the script.

After seeing a short sequence where our hero, Cole Mathis, storms the sands of Ni'ihau island from a landing craft, the action switches to a traditional first-person view. It looks like a typical military shooter, with Mathis ducking behind cover, taking potshots, and chucking grenades

at the alien interlopers. As a member of the Navy's Explosives Ordnance Disposal unit, he's perfectly equipped to size up and take down large targets. Battleship's big gameplay twist centers around all those alien vessels and Naval ships battling off the coast.

Players can switch to a command mode on the fly, which gives players a birds-eye-view of the action. (In a nod to the franchise, the in-game display is based on a grid, with intersecting numbers and letters.) From here, Mathis can command Navy ships around to provide support from sea, attack alien vehicles, and help with other objectives. Alien foot soldiers drop random tokens, which serve as power-ups in the command mode. With a few clicks, he can repair a damaged vessel or call in an artillery strike. One of the coolest tokens we saw gave Mathis direct control of a Naval destroyer for 20 seconds, letting him lay waste to aliens while temporarily doing double damage with its cannons.

From the demo, it looks as though players must maintain a solid balance between both modes of gameplay. In addition to engaging Mathis on the sands, the aliens are also hammering away at the human fleet. Ignore their

dwindling health meters too long, and players will hear the demoralizing sounds of sinking ships. Staying on top of capture points at sea is also critical for earning support bonuses (and, just as important, preventing aliens from doing the same).

Battleship is certainly an unexpected take on the property. Perhaps just as surprising is that Activision isn't adding any multiplayer modes. Instead, Double Helix is focusing on a tightly constructed storyline and gameplay progression. We'll have to wait to see if they can deliver on that promise, but the game is definitely on our sonar for the time being. — Jeff Cork





The Sims 3: Showtime

Sims gain virtual fame and fortune

In *The Sims 3*, your characters can already become sports legends, astronauts, and international super spies. But what if they crave even more attention and recognition? Enter the *Showtime* expansion, which adds new career tracks that allow your sims to be bigger showboats and gives players new ways to interact with the Sims community.

In the new town of Starlight Shores, your sims can pursue their dreams by exploring *Showtime*'s performance-focused career paths: singer, acrobat, and magician. While you could dabble in music before, these jobs are now full arcs; you start at the bottom of the barrel with thankless jobs like delivering singing telegrams, and gradually rise to stardom. *Starlight Shores* is filled with various new venues for you to showcase your talents, and you have the power to customize these stages with props and special effects.

Apart from the expected additions of new items and interactions, *Showtime* also integrates new social features that allow players to help each other and share their accomplishments. Using the SimPort option, you can send your sims into another player's world to perform. Though you won't have any control of your sims while they're on tour, they can earn skill points and complete challenges by performing. If they accomplish a noteworthy task, you can share it on your player wall—an online-enabled feed that keeps players connected and lets them broadcast their achievements to their friends.

If you just want to play solo without messing with the online functionality, don't worry. Even without those features, the team tells us that *Showtime* provides more content than any previous *Sims 3* expansion pack. Whether you love being the lone puppetmaster or the socially connected braggart, *Showtime* looks like it gives you and your sims a chance to shine. » Joe Juba

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
The Sims Studio

» Release
March



Ghost Recon Future Soldier

The tactical Tom Clancy shooter goes back to the future



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

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Shooter
(16-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Paris

» **Release**
Spring

When Ubisoft first revealed Ghost Recon Future Soldier at the 2009 E3, a sense of dread came over me. As a longtime fan of the series, the idea of linking up with three other squad members to form an invisible human caterpillar seemed ludicrous. Not only would this soldier caravan turn nearly invisible, Ubisoft touted a link-up feature that allowed the squad to move automatically so players could just focus on firing their weapons. This was a far cry from the stress on true military tactics that gave this franchise its identity.

My worries eased slightly when I saw the game again at this past year's E3. After a year in development, the game started to take on characteristics of traditional Ghost Recon games, albeit with a streamlined tactical approach made possible by better squad AI. After a recent hands-on session with four different campaign missions,

I'm starting to think Future Soldier may make its biggest move forward by looking into the past.

The first few missions I played were very streamlined affairs in closed environments. Whether I was in Bolivia trying to extract a turned CIA informant, stealthily stalking a weapons dealer in Zambia, or chasing after a fleeing target on a gridlocked street in Peshawar, Pakistan, the missions played out largely the same. I moved from cover to cover, used a sensor grenade to identify targets, and gunned down the hostiles with the help of my largely autonomous teammates. But when Ubisoft fast-forwarded me to a later mission (one of 13 in the campaign), suddenly it felt like I went back in a time machine to Ghost Recon's glory days.

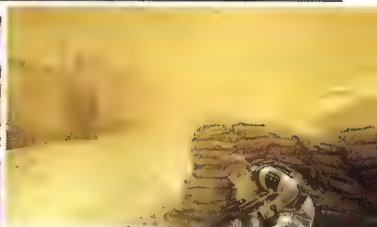
This advanced mission opens in the middle of a Russian forest. At this moment in the campaign, a Russian civil war has erupted after a

coup attempt, and the Ghosts are sent in to protect a loyalist general from an ambush. Though I still have access to advanced technology like the Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter titles, the wide-open environments feel closer in spirit to the original Ghost Recon games. My squad of four soldiers has acres of land before them, and moving cautiously is key to avoiding detection.

Crouching or going prone automatically activates the intelligent camouflage system, the near-future technology that masks the soldiers to match their surroundings. As long as I don't move too quickly or open fire, I am nearly invisible to enemies. Moving slowly to avoid detection, my team and I come across a sawmill that's been re-appropriated for military use. I could move in immediately to engage enemies, but instead I choose to stay back and scout the base with my drone.

When playing the campaign cooperatively, players are able to share intel, such as the location of enemy weapons or recon objectives. It's your perspective.





Once my recon instrument is in the air, I have full control over its movement, including its vertically. Carefully hovering over the compound, I designate four targets that can be taken down without alarming the rest of the soldiers stationed there. With that prompting, my teammates move intelligently into position to line up the shots, staying in camo the entire time. Once they are in position I line up the fourth shot. From here I have two options. I can issue a command to have them shoot their three targets, or I can pull the trigger on the enemy in my sights and they'll automatically synchronize their shots to mine. All four meat bags hit the ground simultaneously, but a patrolling soldier who I didn't spot with the drone sees one of the bodies fall and suddenly the base is swarming with enemies. This was not part of the plan.

Like Assassin's Creed's Synchronization system, each mission in Future Soldier features a series of challenges that encourage you to play in a certain way. If you go off script (or blow your cover like I did) you aren't punished in any long-term way, but you may have to face more reinforcements than if you were neither seen nor heard.

Once the bullets start flying it's time to see how my teammates fare in battle. By clicking

the left bumper while an enemy is in my sights, I designate the most immediate threats, and the Ghosts prioritize their targets accordingly. They smartly stay behind cover, never exposing themselves irresponsibly to gunfire. Given their stellar performance in these missions I don't expect to be hauling ass across the map to heal them like I sometimes had to do in GRAW.

While they stay in cover I pull out a sniper rifle outfitted with advanced heat-seeking ammo. Much like using a heat-seeking rocket, once I get a lock on a target I can return to the safety of cover before pulling the trigger and the bullet will still find its intended target. With this kind of idiot-proof technology at play, forget about having to hold your breath to line up a shot.

After grabbing some intel in the sawmill, my team is redirected to destroy a nearby AA encampment. Several enemies are entrenched behind piles of logs and in buildings, but this area provides several flanking options. Using the drone I mark the enemies with vertical advantages for my squad to take down, then I work my way around the side of the enemy position using the new cover moment functionality.

While moving your reticle over the environment, a blue circle appears behind other areas of cover. By holding down the sprint button while

this icon is showing, your soldier will automatically vault his current cover and move aggressively to the new position – think roadie run from Gears of War. It's a fast and effective way to advance your position without dealing with the clunky cover stick mechanic present in many third-person shooters.

Once I've eliminated the hostiles and set the charge on the AA weapon, the demo comes to a close and I feel pleasantly surprised. I wasn't sure what to expect given the long development time and the questionable features touted early on, but Future Soldier feels more like the traditional Ghost Recon games than I expected. Given that you can play through the entire campaign cooperatively with four players, fans of co-op shooters have another viable option come spring.

I still doubt Ghost Recon Future Soldier has the firepower to go toe-to-toe with the elite shooters like Call of Duty and Battlefield, but gamers looking for a more tactical experience should keep their eye on this Clancy title. Ubisoft says the Xbox 360-exclusive multiplayer beta should begin sometime in the next few months. — Matt Bertz



REVELATIONS



gameformer HAUBHELD
GAME OF THE MONTH

92 Resident Evil: Revelations

Since its inception in 1996, the Resident Evil series has gradually mutated from eerie, slow-peaced horror into a guns-blazing, explosion-riddled blockbuster. Resident Evil: Revelations, the newest worthwhile title for the 3DS, improves the fantastic gameplay established by earlier entries while rekindling the dread and survival from the earlier games. Jill and Sherry's journey into the treacherous, claustrophobic Resident Evil world is one we've played in years.

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	Played. 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	Plain. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Essentially 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 gaming experience.	1	Lower than a one-star average game.

AWARDS

PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.76 and 10
GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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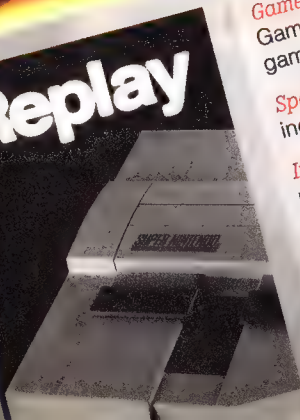


cos blog

GAMER CULTURE

Replay

FEATURES



Final Fantasy XIII-2

Fixing the little problems while the big ones gets worse

8

PS3 360

Concept

Keep the battle system everyone loved from Final Fantasy XIII, but change everything else – and not always for the better

Graphics

The in-game character models look great, which is fortunate since they are used in almost every cutscene. Prerendered cinematics have been drastically reduced

Sound

My least favorite soundtrack in the whole series, with too many poppy songs and genre lyrics about changing the past and not giving up hope. Apart from the battle themes, the instrumental tracks aren't much better

Playability

Combat still flows smoothly, and the complicated aspects of the menu interface have been simplified

Entertainment

If you can detach yourself from the absurd story, the wealth of content and fun mechanics are extremely satisfying

Replay Value

Moderately High

Thankful for the Little Things

The battle system from Final Fantasy XIII returns, but it has undergone a few small changes for FF XIII-2. While none of these tweaks have a large impact individually, they do add a highly refined experience when taken together.

- Party member death is no longer a permanent state
- Annoying paradigm shift animations are gone
- Paradigms can be tuned to focus on single or multiple battles
- Serah and Noel each learn all six classes
- No more summons that turn into vehicles
- Shroud items (like Aegiss) have been removed
- The concept of TP is gone



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Square Enix Developer Square Enix Release January 31 ESRB T

When I think back on the Final Fantasy series, my favorite moments are tied to the characters and the story surrounding them. Celes on the post-apocalyptic island. The return of Rydia. Sephiroth in Nibelheim. This franchise has built its following on creating memorable worlds and narrative twists that stick with gamers for years.

Final Fantasy XIII is an exception to the rule; that entry's greatest achievement is on the battlefield, while the story is a convoluted mess. When Square Enix announced a direct sequel, I hoped that Final Fantasy XIII-2 would repair the broken half of that equation, elevating the narrative to reach the heights attained by the outstanding battle system. Apparently, I expected too much.

Gamers are willing to forgive one mistake, but after completing FF XIII-2 (after about 30 hours), I'm worried that absurd storytelling is the future of the series. This game takes the lamest characters from the last entry (like Serah and Hope) and puts them center stage alongside an annoying moogle and new protagonist Noel. Meanwhile, the best characters (like Lightning and Fang) are relegated to background and cameo roles.

The plot surrounds the cast with an anything-goes premise focused on time travel. This is where things get really bonkers; time-travel and alternate realities are easy excuses to have a bunch of crazy stuff happen (or not happen) whenever it's convenient. Why is that giant flan blocking my path? Why is that person acting

strangely? Here's a hint: the answer to almost every mystery in the game is "a time paradox did it." This catch-all crutch makes it impossible to get invested in the characters or their actions. You just need to detach yourself and say "Okay, whatever," and go along with it.

To make matters worse, you aren't even getting a complete story. The canonical ending (there are multiple other "what if" endings) concludes with the words "to be continued," and it's not a scenario likely to be resolved with future DLC. After the credits, I sat in disbelief, wondering if I had done something wrong or somehow missed the true ending. I didn't. Square Enix intentionally left the story incomplete. The announcement of Final Fantasy XIII-3 is inevitable.

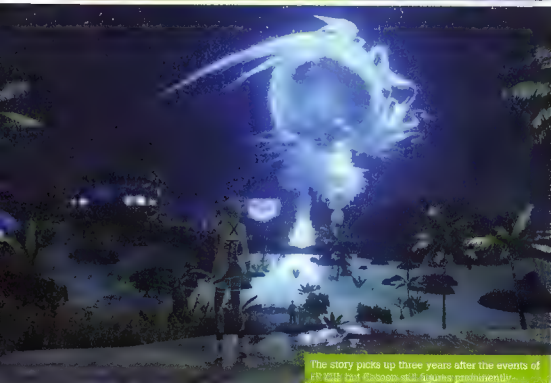
I know I'm dwelling on the negative here, but storytelling is an integral part of the RPG genre, and FF XIII-2 screws it up at almost every turn. The saddest part is how that disaster is going to mark this title in fans' memories, because FF XIII-2 is phenomenal in other ways. I'm not just saying that to temper my harsh comments about the story; practically every other part of the game is excellent, to the point that I'm looking forward to playing it again in spite of my disappointment in the plot.

The combat of FF XIII returns in a familiar yet improved form, resulting in my new favorite battle system in the Final Fantasy series. Fights require a satisfying mix of strategic management and direct control, forcing you to switch your tactics and adapt to changing conditions. Quickly shift to a defensive paradigm when a boss is about to use a powerful attack, or use a buffing/debuffing

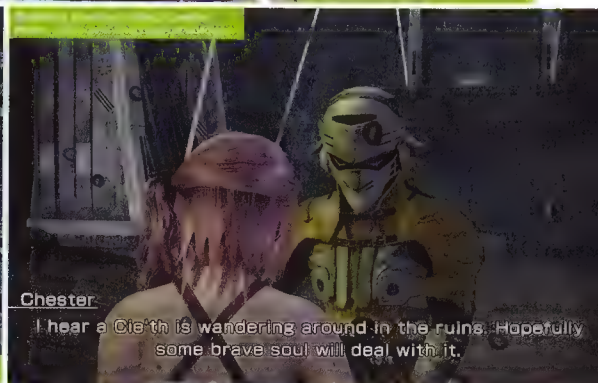




Brass and lightning are important to the story, but Noel and Serah are the main characters.



The story picks up three years after the events of FF XIII, but focuses on a figure prominent in



Chester:

I hear a Cie'th is wandering around in the ruins. Hopefully some brave soul will deal with it.

paradigm to prepare for a long battle. It's a little easier than the last one, but remains fun and fast-paced, without the minor annoyances that got in the way in FF XIII (see sidebar).

The biggest addition to battle is monster collection, which isn't just an optional side-activity. You'll always have Noel and Serah in your party, and the third slot is occupied by a monster that you've caught by defeating (no Pokébals necessary). Each monster has a role that you can level up and use to build your paradigms. For instance, Feral Behemoths are commandos, Blue Chocobos are ravagers, and Cait Siths are medics. You need to consider these roles along with Serah's and Noel's aptitudes when forming your paradigms. This adds a level of customization and versatility that you didn't have with your party before. Plus, finally obtaining a powerful monster that you've been hunting delivers an extremely satisfying thrill.

Among the most prominent criticisms of FF XIII was its linearity, and the team clearly sought to rectify that in the sequel. With a few exceptions, you control how and when you progress through

the main quest with the Historia Crux. The Historia Crux lets you travel to about 10 different areas, but many have past, present, and alternate incarnations that you can unlock. Certain mission-critical areas must be completed, while others are optional and often contain cool side-quests, rewards, and cameo appearances. If you get bored or frustrated, you can always return to the Historia Crux and try something else. The only limiting factor is that you need special items — Wild Artefacts — to unlock optional zones, and they are rare and often hidden. Even so, I loved the newfound freedom that the Historia Crux allows.

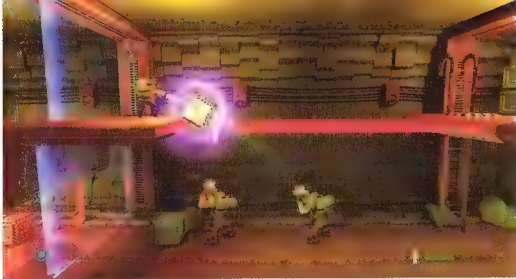
With the linearity issue handled, smaller concerns from FF XIII are also addressed in FF XIII-2. The artificial level caps on the Crystarium have been removed, so you don't need to worry about hitting a wall until post-game. To that point, you can keep playing after the credits roll, continuing to level your characters, play through undiscovered areas, and collect monsters. Though you won't find a true New Game+ mode, you can reset individual areas once you've cleared

them in order to replay their stories. The ability to save anywhere is handy, and the cinematic action events and conversation options add more life to what used to be static cutscenes. These are all minor improvements, but they add up to a highly polished and more streamlined gameplay experience.

Listening closely to fan feedback can be dangerous for developers, since gamers have different — and often contradictory — opinions of what needs improvement. Final Fantasy XIII was a divisive entry in the series; from the story to the battles, every element of the game had its champions and detractors. In most respects, the team at Square Enix did a great job singling out and addressing the chief problems. Progression is player-driven, combat is even more entertaining, and an array of other adjustments makes it one of my favorite RPGs from a mechanical perspective. I just want all of that integrated with a story that isn't laughable and borderline insulting, and that's where Final Fantasy XIII-2 falters. **— Joe Laba**

The Edge

Final Fantasy XIII-2 is a great game, but it's not perfect. The story is a bit weak, and the combat is a bit repetitive. However, the game is a great example of how to take fan feedback and make it work for you. The game is a great example of how to take fan feedback and make it work for you. The game is a great example of how to take fan feedback and make it work for you.



Rochard

Environmental puzzles meet simple fun with a gravity gun

8.25

PS3 • PC

» Concept

A 2D platformer that mixes gravity control with environmental puzzles

» Graphics

Rochard's cartoony visuals don't ooze personality, but they get the job done

» Sound

The voice acting is solid and the clever mix of songs helps make up for its otherwise boring soundtrack

» Playability

The platforming controls sometimes feel floaty, but manipulating objects with the G-Lifter is spot on

» Entertainment

Rochard's puzzles don't provide much challenge, but they are fun to solve and the characters are occasionally amusing

» Replay Value

Moderate

Style 1-Player Platform/Puzzle **Publisher** Sony Online Entertainment **Developer** Recoil Games **Release** September 27 (PlayStation 3), November 15 (PC) **ESRB** T

Most heroes are cut from the same cloth. Gamers usually prefer saviors who keep their six packs in their abs, not dribbling down their cheek. This is why John Rochard is such an unusual protagonist. This barrel-bellied, blue-collar worker with a southern accent and a penchant for oddball analogies is a character with real character. Even with all his eccentricities, John Rochard is a lovable redneck and a refreshing change of pace — much like the game named after him.

When space bandits attack Rochard's space mining rig, this lovable miner straps on his tools and defends his livelihood. Rochard's favorite tool is his G-Lifter. Functioning a bit like the gravity gun from *Half-Life*, the G-Lifter was originally commissioned to assist miners as they moved heavy mining equipment, but Rochard repurposes the device to help him navigate through his space rig and fight off an invading army of pirates.

Rochard could be labeled a 2D platformer, but Recoil Games would rather have you solve a puzzle to get to the other side of a room's. Many of the game's puzzles task you with navigating past a series of force fields. Some force fields block organic material, while others block inorganic matter or energy, so you might need to place boxes along an organic force floor to jump across it or shoot fuses through inorganic force fields to start generators.

Rochard's other handy tool is his ability to control the environment's gravity. At any point in the game, Rochard can turn a room's gravity down to Moon-like levels. This trick changes Rochard's approach to puzzle solving in a variety of creative ways. With reduced gravity, not only can Rochard jump higher and survive longer falls, but it extends the firing trajectory of every item he picks up with his G-Lifter, lets Rochard float skyward while standing on air vents, and lets him use the G-Lifter like a grappling hook to swing off bolted objects. I particularly liked jumping through the air in low gravity and then firing a box downward to give myself a double jump-like boost. Recoil Games shaped a surprising number of puzzles around only a few gameplay elements, and thankfully the mechanics never feel stale.

While Rochard's puzzles kept me intrigued, the enemies closing's hallways often felt like they were in the way. Rochard's AI rarely does anything more than casually stand in front of you and fire from the hip as you nudge their bodies with bullets or drop heavy crates on their heads. The platforming also feels loose, but fortunately the game rarely requires precision platform jumping, and the few missed ledges you make are fairly free of consequences so I was never frustrated by the floaty controls.

These small complaints don't ruin the game's larger experience. Rochard's humorous dialogue, intriguing setting, and clever puzzles round out a package that is as unique and special as its titular hero. — **Ben Reeves**



The Adventures of Tintin

Better than the average licensed game

7.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Take the upcoming Spielberg film based on a European comic and deliver an experience that feels like a budget version of *Uncharted*

» Graphics

Cutscore animation is rough, but gameplay animation looks great. It has a colorful style, but doesn't exceed any expectations

» Sound

The music accents the action nicely. Voice acting is cartoony, which works well in the case of Haddock. Everyone else just gets a passing grade

» Playability

The game plays best from the 2D perspective, but other sections that have you blasting planes and motorcycles, and exploring a 3D environment are decent additions

» Entertainment

It's a simple platformer with an oddly paced story, but it is better than the average movie tie-in

» Replay Value

Moderate

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montpellier **Release** December 6 **ESRB** E10+

You may have never heard of Tintin, but it's a big deal in Europe. Since this highly regarded Belgian comic book series created by Hergé debuted in 1929, it's been translated into more than 80 languages and has sold more than 350 million comics. Now the famed Belgian reporter is getting his moment in the spotlight statewide thanks to the new animated film directed by Steven Spielberg.

In the game, Tintin strives to uncover the treasure of the Unicorn, an old ship that was sunk by its own captain. The awkwardly told tale lacks any emotional connection; things just sort of happen, characters just sort of meet, and everything happens seemingly by circumstance. Despite the story, Tintin is an enjoyable character, and Haddock, the descendant of the captain of the Unicorn, is well acted.

Players spend the majority of the game platforming through 2D environments, but they also solve puzzles, fight enemies in hand-to-hand combat, and even do some sneaking. It's immediately understandable, easy to grasp, and it plays great. Both Tintin and his dog Snowy move well through the environments, and Ubisoft did a great job of adding clever touches that give the game a distinct personality. Defeated enemies collapse in humorous heaps on the floor, and throwing found objects like ricocheting beach balls to take down multiple enemies and hit switches is entertaining.

To break up the platforming, players occasionally pilot planes, drive motorcycles, sword fight, and explore 3D environments. Most vehicle segments handle well but are undermined by their simplicity. You will also ride in the sidecar of the motorcycle and do some on-rails shooting as Haddock controls the vehicle. These sequences and up being the most frustrating, as enemy vehicles bring unavoidable obstacles in the road that are difficult to destroy, and Haddock refuses to drive around them.

The Adventures of Tintin also features a two-player cooperative mode where players control Tintin and Haddock. This separate experience has a standalone story that begins when Haddock hits his head and falls into a dream. Players are transported into Haddock's unconsciousness, an odd setting that Ubisoft leverages to create bizarre levels and scenarios. Unfortunately there is no online multiplayer option for this mode.

Most licensed games that release simultaneously with counterpart films are destined for the bargain bin, but The Adventures of Tintin is better than most. The 2D platforming is clever, and the co-op game separates itself from the main game in an interesting way. Ubisoft has succeeded in making a fun complement to the upcoming Spielberg film that fans should appreciate. — **Kyle Hilliard**

Kinect Versus Move

Ubisoft implemented an entirely optional Kinect motion-games title that advantage Kinect, Xbox 360, and Move on the PlayStation 3. These retooled sections pulled from the main game are sword fight, airplane piloting, and multiple games related to the motorcycle sequences. The Kinect controls work well with these games, and I found myself having fun without too much embarrassment. The Move controls are easier to use than their Kinect counterparts thanks to the presence of an actual controller. As with most motion-based mangle games, though, the fun is fleeting. I wouldn't recommend buying the game for the Kinect or Move features, but both are interesting additions



A simple upgrade system rewards careful exploration with the option to acquire new and improved moves.

Trine 2

Big improvements across the board



Style 1 to 3-Player Platforming Publisher Atlas
Developer Frozenbyte Release December 7 (PC),
December 20 (PS3), December 21 (360) ESRB E10+

It's always gratifying to see a good game make the changes it needs to become great in a sequel. That's the happy scenario with *Trine 2*, one of this year's most beautiful, rewarding, and downright fun downloadable titles. With online or local cooperative play, slick puzzle design, and a whimsical fairy tale tone, *Trine 2* is a year-ending treat you shouldn't miss.

Like its predecessor, *Trine 2* stars three fantasy archetypes as they platform and puzzle their way through a lush fantasy storybook. The knight, wizard, and thief are called upon to save the kingdom once again, and the lighthearted banter between the characters keeps the otherwise clichéd story rolling. The game's greatest strength lies in the distinct abilities of each of the characters. The simple-minded knight's sword waving fends off the most dangerous monsters, while his hammer smashes walls. The clever thief's grappling hook sends her hurtling up to hard to reach places, while her bow hits distant spear-throwers. The cowardly wizard conjures new platforms and boxes out of thin air, or levitates nasty goblins out of reach.

With such varied movesets, *Trine 2*'s central gameplay concert concerns figuring out when to use which abilities to solve a puzzle. Often, there are multiple answers to the question, most of which reward creative thinking and cooperation. Perhaps you can reach that high platform with a well-timed grapple? Or maybe the wizard can just create a pile of boxes to reach the elusive ledge?

Puzzle design is clever, but stops short of frustration. The most elusive puzzles are reserved for optional pick-ups that can be bypassed in favor of a faster pace. Combat is infrequent and borders on being overly simplistic, but as brief exclamations in the midst of a longer puzzle level, the battles fit the bill.

Though the levels are identical in single- and multiplayer, the game experience is drastically different, and well worth a play-through both ways. The pace is slower and the challenge higher in single-player, where every puzzle must be solved with only a single character onscreen (a button press cycles between your options). Two or three-person cooperative play makes it easier to fudge your way through difficult puzzles, but the fun of juggling all three characters more than makes up for the loss. The physics-based interactions and appropriately floaty jumping add some big laughs as you and your buddies stumble ahead. Multiplayer can rapidly devolve into a comedy of errors filled with misplaced boxes and tumbling boulders, but it only adds to the fun, especially since a checkpoint is always near at hand.

Though *Trine 2* shoots for humor and storybook simplicity in its storytelling, there's nothing funny about the breathtaking visuals. *Trine 2* embraces pure fantasy, filling the world with oversized snails, phosphorescent mushrooms, and lush, luminous forests. From spider-filled caves to wave-wracked beaches, the wide variety of environments keeps the levels from fading to background visual noise. Onscreen characters hit the sweet spot between realism and cartoon exaggeration, so both fights and level navigation play out as dynamic thrill rides.

By adding in well-implemented online cooperative options to join the equally viable local multiplayer, Frozenbyte gives players the feature most requested after the original game's release, and every other element of the franchise moves forward in meaningful ways. Coming as it does at the tail end of a roaring holiday game season, *Trine 2* is the dessert you deserve to close out your year of gaming, or a great appetizer to set the stage for next year. — **Matt Miller**

8.75

PS3 • 360 • PC

- » **Concept**
Explore a lush fantasy world with three colorful and distinct heroes
- » **Graphics**
Glowing flora and giant fauna are depicted in vibrant glowing hues
- » **Sound**
Too much repeated music, but the voice acting is amusing
- » **Playability**
You have to learn three different characters' movesets. After that it's a breeze
- » **Entertainment**
Whether solo or with friends, this is a legendary tale worth the telling
- » **Replay Value**
Moderately High



Find Your Fit.





Resident Evil: Revelations

A new revelation with a 3DS

9

gameformagazine.com
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameformagazine.com
GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher: Capcom Developer: Capcom Release: February 7 ESRB: M

Concept
Deliver a console-caliber Resident Evil experience on a handheld

Graphics
The rich animations, detailed environments, and solid cutscenes make this a visual stunner

Sound
Some of the best music in the series, and disturbing monster noises help get you into the game. Keith and Quint's voice actors will make you hate your ears

Playability
This controls just as smoothly as its console predecessors, and the slick new dodge mechanic makes it even better

Entertainment
A perfect blend of action and survival are driven home by a gripping episodic narrative that will have you struggling to put down your 3DS

Replay Value
High

Resident Evil: Gaiden, released for the Game Boy Color back in 2002, featured characters from the series fighting zombies on a cruise ship as they searched for the origins of a new viral threat. It was terrible. Considering that the setting for Resident Evil: Revelations is nearly identical and it's also on a handheld device, any hesitation on your part is understandable. I'm here to ensure you that Resident Evil: Revelations is one of the finest entries in the franchise to date. The game packs improvements to the series' reliable gameplay, impressive visuals, and a story that puts the last two main series entries to shame. Revelations is enough to please both diehard fans and 3DS owners looking for the next system-defining title.

The story picks up sometime after the events of Resident Evil 5. Jill, Chris, and their new partners seek to uncover the truth about the destruction of a city called Terrorgiria and combat a brand new virus. We also learn more about the BSAA (Biohazard Security Assessment Alliance), the previously enigmatic organization Chris and Sheva work for in Resident Evil 5. Shedding light on this organization, the FBC (Federal Biohazard Commission), and the leaders behind them brings new weight to the series' sagging story. The narrative is delivered in digestible, TV episode-like chunks, complete with helpful recaps between chapters. This structure allows Revelations to incorporate intriguing flashbacks, parallel storylines, and some unexpected twists and turns.

The episodic structure isn't just great for storytelling; it also makes for perfect pacing. Your time is divided between methodically exploring the cruise ship as Jill and playing through action-packed flashbacks or diversions as other characters. You spend most of your time tackling Jill's harrowing mission on the ship, and it's a fantastic shift back towards the series' traditional survival horror roots. Unlike RE 4 and 5, ammo is scarce,

reviving the satisfaction of each recovered bullet. Resourceful survivors can use the nifty Genesis scanner to search the environment for hidden items, adding to the thrilling feeling that you're a scavenger trying to make it out alive. While I would've been happy just playing through Jill's ordeal, Revelations has the habit of leaving her quest at a cliffhanger while putting you in the boots of another character. Whether you're playing as Chris in a snowy mountain pass or reliving the Terrorgiria incident as a FBC member, these higher tempo sections are almost always focused on action instead of survival. Blasting through hordes of hunters, infected wolves, and other monsters is as fun as ever.

Resident Evil fans have already had the chance to experience the series' satisfying gunplay on the 3DS with Mercenaries 3D, but Revelations boasts multiple improvements while retaining the first-person aiming. The choppy enemy animations from Mercenaries are gone, replaced with appropriately creepy enemy movements. The d-pad is used to switch between all your items, a simple but useful function when cornered by a pack of zombies. My favorite addition is the dodge ability. One well-timed flick of the circle pad lets you evade enemy attacks. Out-maneuvering monsters is priceless in a

game where choosing your battles is both crucial and fun. Revelations also incorporates deep weapon customization in the vein of Call of Duty. Want a shotgun with augmented power, a wider spread, and gigantic clip size? No problem. Considering how precious ammo can be, tailoring weapons to your specific playstyle is a dream come true for survival horror fans. You can customize weapons in both single-player and co-op. While the cooperative Raid Mode doesn't allow you to play through the entire campaign with a pal, you'll get addicted to earning new weapons and upgrades by playing through a host of bite-sized missions.

Revelations is a savior for the 3DS, but it comes with a few flaws. BSAA agents Quint and Keith (codenamed Jackass and Grinder) are easily the worst characters in the series' history. Between their grating voices, Quint's eye-roll-inducing, stereotypical computer geekery, and Keith always saying something "blows," you'll be tempted to puncture your eardrums with the stylus. Many of their jokes land flat due to a larger problem of inconsistent translation. Several lines of dialogue, upgrade descriptions, and story-expanding files read poorly due to rough localization. Additionally, enemy variety is a bit lacking compared to previous entries. Thankfully, the sour tastes these missteps leave in your mouth are washed away rather quickly thanks to the game's overall quality.

Resident Evil: Revelations is just what fans of the series and bored 3DS owners needed. The story is interesting with the added bonus of actually being coherent for once, the gameplay feels perfect on the 3DS, and it's one of the greatest-looking portable games I've ever seen, especially with the 3D cranked up. The campaign sports the heft and depth of one of the main series entries, a deal made even sweeter by an empowering New Game+ and worthwhile co-op experience. Stop twiddling your thumbs waiting for Resident Evil 6 and get them on a 3DS. **DIM DIT**



What about the Circle Pad?

While I'm not a scientist that the all-over-the-place, inconsistent use of the d-pad to America, we don't get a chance to try it out with Resident Evil: Revelations at the time of the printing. Keith, your eyes, please, or comment on our site, as we now the game plays about the added control. When we get our hands on the game, we'll report back on how well it works. In the meantime, the game has left me wanting for an extra circle pad.





Corpse Party

Horror fans should brace themselves for a bit of

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Xseed **Developer** Team GrisGris
Release November 22 **ESRB** M

Fans of slasher films know that the joy of a great, campy horror flick isn't the destination; it's the blood-spattered journey. Figuring out the trick to conquering some otherworldly power that has been slaughtering innocent teenagers may be the resolution, but most of us are just there to watch the massacre. Corpse Party developer Team GrisGris clearly understands this twisted secret to shock cinema and puts it to expert use in this downloadable PSP game.

Corpse Party begins innocently enough, as a group of Japanese students and their teacher gather together to say goodbye to a friend who is transferring. One of the students is obsessed with the occult and introduces the group to a ritual that will ensure they stay friends forever. Unsurprisingly, something goes wrong, and the crew quickly finds themselves separated and fighting for their lives in a dilapidated mirror image of their high school full of ghosts, murderers, and dead bodies.

Visually, Corpse Party resembles a 16-bit RPG more than the grim, grainy footage you might expect from the plot description. However, the game plays out more like an old-school adventure game. You find keys, solve simple puzzles, and figure out the exact order to do things to make the relatively linear

narrative progress. The story is split into five chapters, each of which features one real ending and a variety of terrifying "wrong ends." The game successfully pushes true horror enthusiasts to make bad choices just to witness what disgusting consequences the developers dreamed up.

Though Corpse Party pulls off scary and intense moments, it does have a handful of flaws. The dialogue is sometimes more absurd than the gravity of the situation warrants, and a couple members of the rotating cast of playable characters fail to develop any likable or memorable characteristics. More damning for some, hitting a wrong end results in going back to the last saved game and replaying sometimes-lengthy dialogue segments. Save points appear frequently, but this would be much less of a problem with an option to speed up dialogue or skip the talking sequences.

The pace doesn't always keep your blood pumping, but by the end, Corpse Party's clever and unique style rises above those minor complaints. Gamers with a weak stomach or lack of patience should stay away from the cursed grounds of Heavenly Host Elementary, but if you have an appreciation for gory splatterfests from the theaters, this is one forbidden ancient ritual that you should take part in. — **Phil Kollar**

8

» Concept

The gameplay of a classic adventure game meets the setting and surprises of a Japanese horror film

» Graphics

The top-down perspective and pixel art look like something out of an old Final Fantasy game; scattered animations of important scenes round out the package

» Gameplay

Intense music and subtle sound cues build a sense of dread as you explore haunted hallways

» Playability

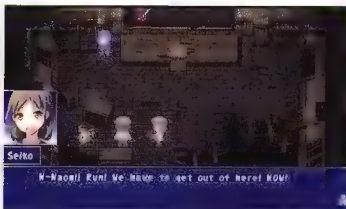
Replaying dialogue sequences will challenge your patience more often than the simple puzzles challenge your wits

» Entertainment

Despite the sometimes restrictive gameplay, Corpse Party successfully emulates the horror movie formula better than most big-budget horror games

» Replay Value

Moderate



The Media Institutes of Madison & Minneapolis present

Game Art & Animation

Associate's Degree

Careers Include:

- Video Game Developer
- Character Animator
- 3d Modeler
- Digital Artist

Program Highlights:

- Motion Capture Studio
- Game Animation Skills
- Creation and integration of assets and animation into the Unreal III game engine
- Utilizing Maya, Cortex 2, Motionbuilder, Photoshop®, Aftereffects®, Zbrush, Painter, and MEL scripting

Additional Emphasis:

- Story Development
- Cinematography
- Performance
- Color Theory

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PLAYSTATION 3

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Alice Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12
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 Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12
Call of Juarez: The Cartel	4.5	Sep-11
Captain America: Super Soldier	7.5	Sep-11
Cars 2	1.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Oryx	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
DiGress 4 A		
Promace Unforgotten	8.25	Oct-11
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Driver: San Francisco	5	Nov-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Siege III	6	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
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12

FEAR 3

Fancy Pants Adventure, The	7.5	Jul-11
FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
God of War: Origins Collection	9.5	Oct-11
GoldenEye 007 Reloaded	7	Jan-12
Green Lantern		
Rise of the Manhunters	6.5	Aug-11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2	8.5	Sep-11
House of the Dead: Overkill Extended Cut	6	Dec-11
Top & Shadow of the Colossus Collection, The	9.75	Oct-11
Infamous 2	8.75	Jul-11
Jurassic: Park: The Game	5.5	Jan-12
L.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan-12
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean	7	Jul-11
Lord of the Rings: War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
Midwest NFL 12	7.5	Oct-11
Magic: The Gathering - Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Metal Gear Solid HD Collection	9	Jan-12
MX vs. ATV Alive	7	Jul-11
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
NCAA Football 12	9	Aug-11
Rise 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	8.5	Dec-11
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Flage	9	Nov-11
Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One	8.75	Dec-11

9 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 8 ESRR M Issue January 12

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

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
Resistance 3	7	Oct-11
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Rocksmen	9.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Shadow of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11
Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11
Sonic Generations	8.75	Dec-11
Spider-Man: Edge of Time	6.5	Dec-11
Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition	7.75	Aug-11
Thor: God of Thunder	4.5	Jul-11
Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11

Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	8	Jan-12
Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception	9.5	Dec-11
Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine	8	Nov-11
WWE '12	5.5	Jan-12
X-Men: Destiny	7	Nov-11

XBOX 360

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Adventures of Shuggie, The	8.25	Aug-11
Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12
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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
Dead Island	8.5	Oct-11
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
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FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Forza Motorsport 4	9.25	Dec-11
Frost Dust	8.75	Sep-11
Fruit Ninja Kinect	8	Oct-11
Gating Grass	8	Jul-11
Geas of War 3	9.5	Nov-11
GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12

the score

8.5 | Joe Danger: Special Edition

Platform 360 Release December 14 ESRB E

Joe Danger: Special Edition offers enough new content for a fan of the original to enjoy, but it's a must-download for Xbox owners that never had a chance to play it. Various bells and whistles improve the experience, but the new Lab levels make the biggest splash by far. — Dan Ryckert

6 | Kung-Fu High Impact

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 22 ESRB T

If you're not averse to the idea of making a fool out of yourself, it's hard to not get at least a couple of laughs out of Kung-Fu High Impact. Once the initial laughs are over, however, this is a short and relatively one-note experience with its fair share of control issues. — Dan Ryckert

5.75 | Mario & Sonic at the London 2012 Olympic Games

Platform Wii Release November 15 ESRB E

As a party game, London Games succeeds rarely, but its implementation of recognizable (and unrecognizable) characters from Mario and Sonic is perfect. It definitely has all of your favorite characters in it, but that's not enough of a reason to play. — Kyle Hilliard

7.75 | King of Fighters XIII

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 22 ESRB T

Nearly every bit of negative feedback about the last game has been addressed here, resulting in distilled fan service in disc form. Devout King of Fighters fans left wanting last time won't have much to complain about here. And while the tutorial and missions mode offers some guidance for casual players, I can't recommend this over other superior fighters on the market. — Tim Turin

6.5 | Shinobi

Platform 3DS Release November 15 ESRB T

Outside of a few interesting set pieces, the game lacks distinct environments or characters. Later stages are especially dark, making it tough to see what the hell you're supposed to be doing. — Bryan Vore

7.75 | Serious Sam 3: BFE

Platform PC Release November 22 ESRB M

I'd be more likely to keep Serious Sam 3 in my regular shooter rotation if there were more than two Survival maps, or if I could find a regular group to play with. I can see a certain subset of nostalgic shooter fans having a total blast with Serious Sam 3, but you have to be pretty enthusiastic about old-school co-op shooting to get your \$40 worth. — Adam Biessener

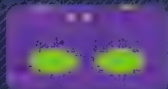


PRESS START TO PLAY

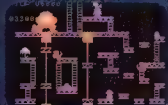
Which game console had the best launch lineup?
We look back to find out.

The launch of a new video game console is a moment of hope and excitement. Sometimes the optimism is rewarded with wonderful new game experiences. Other times we suffer disappointment and buyer's remorse. Which outcome you experience is largely due to the games available for that system that first day you rushed to the store and put down your hard-earned money*. Not all console launch lineups are created equal, so we took a look at past console launches to analyze their performance.

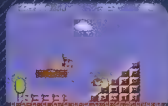
by *Matthew Kato*



Combat - Atari VCS



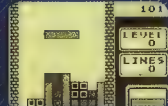
Donkey Kong - ColecoVision



Super Mario Bros. - NES



Altered Beast - Genesis



Tetris - Game Boy



Atari VCS

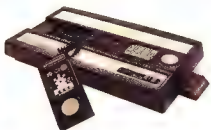
(October, 1977)

Launch Grade: **B+**

Atari's history-making console (which was known as the VCS before switching to the 2600 moniker) came with Combat - a title that offered 27 different variations of warfare, from tanks to planes. It and Indy 500 were strong titles that helped the console become legendary.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Air-Sea Battle, Basic Match, Blackjack, Combat (pack-in game), Indy 500, Star Ship, Street Placer, Surround, Video Olympics



Mattel Intellivision

(1980)

Launch Grade: **B-**

Intellivision's graphics were great for the time, and the console tried to take advantage of them with a sports-heavy lineup - a game genre that Mattel bragged the competition was incapable of rendering.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

ABPA Backgammon, Armor Battle, Basketball, Electric Company: Math Fun, Golf, Hockey, Las Vegas Poker and Blackjack (pack-in game), Las Vegas Roulette, Major League Baseball, NFL Football, Sea Battle, Skiing, Soccer, Space Battle, Tennis



Coleco ColecoVision

(September, 1982)

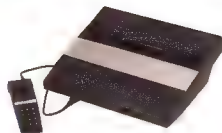
Launch Grade: **B+**

At this point consumers were excited by the prospect of playing games in their homes, but everyone knew the experience wasn't the same as in the arcades. ColecoVision excited gamers because its versions of Donkey Kong and Zaxxon offered comparable home experiences of their arcade counterparts.

The launch of the console also offered more titles via the \$60 stand-alone Expansion Module #1 peripheral that enabled the ColecoVision to play Atari 2600 cartridges (which Atari legally contested).

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Carnival, Cosmic Avenger, Donkey Kong (pack-in game), Lady Bug, Mouse Trap, Smurf: Rescue in Gargamel's Castle, Turbo, Venture, Zaxxon



Atari 5200

(November, 1982)

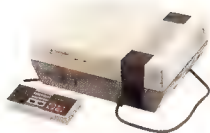
Launch Grade: **F**

Despite being the follow-up to the wildly successful 2600, the 5200 was rushed out and its software was simply updated 2600 games. Atari discontinued the 5200 two years later.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Super Breakout (pack-in game), Gaixian, Space Invaders

*Which games were actually available on day one was often unclear, and this article would not be possible without consulting Leonard Herman's *Phoenix: The Fall & Rise of Videogames*, Wikipedia and various internet sources



Nintendo Famicom

Nintendo Entertainment System (NES)

(October, 1985)
[N.Y.]/1986 [Nationwide])
Launch Grade: **A**

Like other systems of the time, the NES debuted in a major test market before it was released nationwide at a later date. The actual day-one lineup of the fabled NES (which was out first in Japan as the Famicom) is hard to pinpoint because we're not 100 percent certain whether the legendary Super Mario Bros. was at the New York launch of the system. Regardless, Super Mario Bros. was also later offered as a pack-in title for the console.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

10-Yard Fight, Baseball, Clu Clu Land, Donkey Kong Jr. Math*, Duck Hunt (pack-in), Excitebike, Golf, Gyromite (pack-in game), Hogan's Alley, Ice Climber, Kung Fu, Macn Rider*, Pinnball, Soccer, Stack-Up, Super Mario Bros. (later packed in with the system)*, Tennis, Wild Gunman, Wrecking Crew

*Available at the NES' national launch in 1986



Atari 7800

(June, 1986)
Launch Grade: **F**

The Atari 7800 was originally supposed to come out in 1984, but the Great Video Game Crash of 1983 caused the company to shelve it for two years. That mistake is readily apparent in its paltry day-one selection of three titles. The 7800 could play 2600 games, but at this point who would want to?

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Asteroids, Joust, Ms. Pac-Man



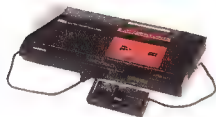
Nintendo Game Boy

(August, 1989)
Launch Grade: **B+**

It's easy now to scoff at the black-and-white screen, but the presence of one of the greatest games of all time - Tetris - as a pack-in title no doubt was one of the keys to this system's phenomenal success.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Alleyway, Baseball, Super Mario Land, Tennis, Tetris (pack-in game)



Sega Master System

(June, 1986)
Launch Grade: **C-**

Although the Master System later found success with Alex Kidd in Miracle World, Phantasy Star, and more, its launch was unassuming. This was no doubt due, in part, to Nintendo's exclusivity deal with many third-party publishers.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Hang On and Safan Hunt (pack-in games), Snail Maze (a hidden title built into the system)



NEC TurboGrafx-16

(August, 1989)
Launch Grade: **C+**

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Allen Crush, China Warrior, Dungeon Explorer, Keith Courage in Alpha Zones (pack-in game), The Legendary Axe, Power Golf, R-Type, Victory Run, Vigilante



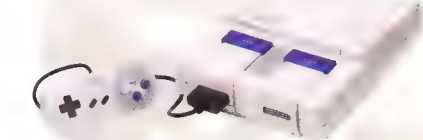
Atari Lynx

(October, 1989)
Launch Grade: **C**

The size, battery consumption (six AAs), and price (\$189.95) were some of the dings against the Lynx, even with its color, backlit screen.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Blue Lightning, California Games, ElectroCop, Gates of Zendocon

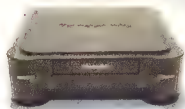


Sega Game Gear

(April, 1991)
Launch Grade: **C**

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse, Columns (pack-in game), G-LOC: Air Battle, Psychic World, Revenge of Drancoon, Super Monaco GP



The 3DO

(October, 1993)
Launch Grade: **C-**

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Alone in the Dark, Myst, Star Control II



Atari Jaguar

(November, 1993)
Launch Grade: **D**

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Cybermorph (pack-in game), Raiden, Trevor McFur in the Crescent Galaxy



Sega Genesis

(August, 1989)
Launch Grade: **B**

The Genesis' superior graphics to the NES allowed it to gain ground with its sports games and arcade ports, even if the only sport available at launch was baseball.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Altered Beast (pack-in game), Last Battle, Space Harrier II, Super Thunder Blade, Thunder Force II, Tommy Lasorda Baseball

Nintendo SNES

(September, 1991)
Launch Grade: **A-**

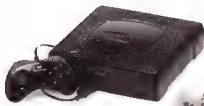
Despite the presence of only three titles on launch day, the NES follow up didn't disappoint fans by packing in the legendary Super Mario World (which we gave a perfect 10 in a Classic GI review in 2000).

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Super Mario World (pack-in game), F-Zero, Pilotwings

Software Prices Through The Years

- 1972 Magnavox Odyssey circuit boards **\$5.95**
- 1977 Atari 2600 cartridges **\$30**
- 1986 NES cartridges **\$30-\$50**
- 1986 Sega Master System **\$25-\$30**
- 1989 Sega Genesis **\$50**
- 1989 Game Boy **\$30-\$40**
- 1990 Neo Geo cartridges **\$199**
- 1991 SNES cartridges **\$50-\$60**
- 1991 Game Gear cartridges **\$25-\$29**
- 1995 PlayStation **\$40-\$60**
- 2000 PlayStation 2 **\$50**
- 2005 Xbox 360 **\$60**
- 2006 Wii **\$50**



Sega Saturn

(May, 1995)

Launch Grade: **C+**

The games available at the Saturn's launch were overshadowed by the debut of the system itself. Sega was planning a September release of the Saturn (dubbed "Saturday") to go up against Sony's soon-to-launch PlayStation system, but decided to get a leg up by releasing the Saturn directly after Sega's E3 presentation in May. This surprised retailers and third-party publishers, which were preparing for a fall launch. This left the system with only six titles (all Sega-made) on day one.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Clockwork Knight, Daytona USA, Panzer Dragoon, Pebble Beach Golf Links, Virtua Fighter (pack-in game), Worldwide Soccer



Game Boy Advance

(June, 2001)

Launch Grade: **B**

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Army Men Advance, Castlevania: Circle of the Moon, ChuChu Rocket!, Earthworm Jim, F-Zero: Maximum Velocity, FirePro Wrestling, GT Advance Championship Racing, Iridion 3D, Konami Crazy Racers, Namco Museum, Pinobee: Wings of Adventure, Pitfall: The Mayan Adventure, Rayman Advance, Ready 2 Rumble Boxing: Round 2, Super Dodge Ball Advance, Super Mario Advance, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2



Sony PlayStation

(September, 1995)

Launch Grade: **C**

The launch of the PlayStation didn't betray its later success, although Game Informer gave good marks to Ridge Racer (9) and Battle Arena Toshinden (8.5). Unlike some systems, PlayStation's day-one software was soon followed up by quality titles. The month of November 1995 saw the release of games such as Twisted Metal, Tekken, and Destruction Derby.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Battle Arena Toshinden, ESPN Extreme Games, Kileak: The DNA Imperative, NBA Jam Tournament Edition, Raiden Project, Rayman, Ridge Racer, Street Fighter: The Movie



Nintendo GameCube

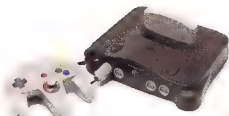
(November, 2001)

Launch Grade: **B-**

Unlike previous Nintendo home systems, the company decided to pad out the GameCube launch with some third-party titles. While this approach was admirable, the exclusive titles like Luigi's Mansion and Rogue Leader remain the only stand-out games.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

All-Star Baseball 2002, Batman: Vengeance, Crazy Taxi, Dave Mirra Freestyle BMX 2, Disney's Tarzan Unlamed, Luigi's Mansion, Madden NFL 2002, NHL Hitz 20-02, Star Wars Rogue Leader: Rogue Squadron II, Super Monkey Ball, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3, Wave Race: Blue Storm



Nintendo 64

(September, 1996)

Launch Grade: **A-**

Similar to the SNES before it, it was quality not quantity for the launch of the N64. Super Mario 64 introduced the 3D platformer, although it's hard to defend Pilotwings 64 now when you look back at it.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Pilotwings 64, Super Mario 64



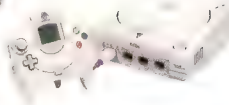
Game Boy Color

(November, 1998)

Launch Grade: **C**

Titles Available on Launch Day:

Contipede, Game & Watch Gallery 2, Pocket Bomberman, Tetris DX



Sega Dreamcast

(September, 1999)

Launch Grade: **B+**

Gamers were excited for the technologically advanced Dreamcast with its VMU screen and built-in modem, but these day-one titles didn't offer much outside of some alluring graphics. This was Sega's console swan song, but at least the Dreamcast's launch gave us Soul Calibur

Titles Available on Launch Day:

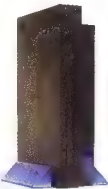
Aero Wings, Air Force Delta, Blue Stringer, Expendable, Flag to Flag, House of the Dead 2, Hydro Thunder, Monaco Grand Prix 2, Mortal Combat Gold, NFL 2K, NFL Blitz 2000, Pen Pen Triclon, PowerStone, Ready 2 Rumble Boxing, Sonic Adventure, Soul Calibur, Tokyo Extreme Racer, Truckstyle, TNN Motorsports Hardcore Heat

PlayStation 2

(October, 2000)

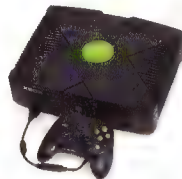
Launch Grade: **C**

Despite boasting the largest number of launch titles here (29 games), no doubt because of the brand equity of the PlayStation moniker, the PS2's launch was largely forgettable. The biggest reason was a noticeable lack of Sony-developed, first-party software.



Titles Available on Launch Day:

Armored Core 2, DOA 2, Hardcore, Dynasty Warriors 2, ESPN International Track & Field, ESPN Winter X Games Snowboarding, Eternal Ring, Evergrace, Fantavision, GunGriffon Blaze, Kessen, Madden NFL 2001, Midnight Club: Street Racing, MotoGP: NHL 2001, Orphan: Scion of Sorcery, Q-Ball Billiards Master, Ready 2 Rumble Boxing: Round 2, Ridge Racer V, Silent Scope, Smuggler's Run, SSK, Street Fighter EX3, Summoner, Swing Away Golf, Tekken Tag Tournament, TimeSplitters, Unreal Tournament, Wild Wild Racing, X-Squad



Microsoft Xbox

(November, 2001)

Launch Grade: **B**

In its console debut, Microsoft put some noticeable first-party effort behind the launch. Although almost all of those franchises are now gone, without Halo: Combat Evolved Microsoft might be out of video games by now.

Titles Available on Launch Day:

4X4 Evo 2, AirForce Delta Storm, Arctic Thunder, Col Damage, Dead or Alive 3, Fuzon Frenzy, Halo: Combat Evolved, Mad Dash Racing, NFL Fever 2002, Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee, Project Gotham Racing, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2

The Attendance Award Goes To...



...The Tony Hawk franchise! Activision's skateboarding franchise has been a day-one software participant seven times through the years for various platforms. Tony Hawk beat out Namco's Ridge Racer by a hair (six games), although in the future, Ridge Racer should pull even given that Ridge Racer will be at Vita's launch in February.

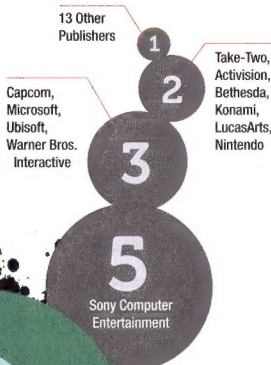
TOP 50 Games of 2011

by the Numbers

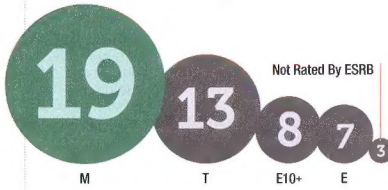
We took our Top 50 Games of the Year list, crunched the numbers, and came back with these statistics about how the games broke down by system, platform, genre, and other categories.



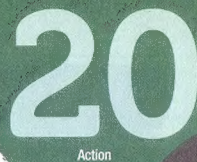
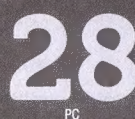
by Publisher



by ESRB Rating



by Platform



Action



Shooter



RPG



Sports

by Genre



Puzzle, Strategy




Fighting, MMORPG, Racing, Simulation

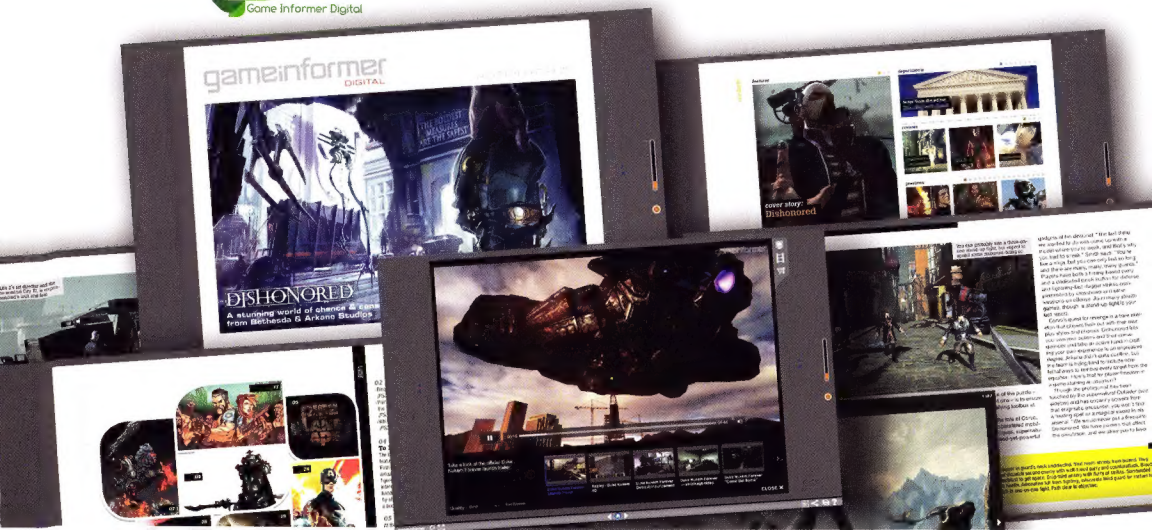
9
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