



GameStop
POWERUP
REWARDSPRO
gameinformer
**EXPIRATION
NOTICE**
SEE INSIDE

WHICH
C I V I D
 IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

I WANT GREAT MILEAGE*

I WANT A COOL COLOR

CAR COLOR REALLY ISN'T THAT IMPORTANT

I LIKE LONG DRIVES WITH AWESOME TUNES

HAVE YOU CONSIDERED A USED SCHOOL BUS?

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE COLOR?

I WANT SOMETHING TO HANG OUT IN



COUPE

HOW BIG IS YOUR GROUP?

1-4

5+

THEY HATE DOORS!

HOW DO YOUR FRIENDS FEEL ABOUT DOORS?

THE MORE THE BETTER

HOW DO YOU GUYS SPEND A FRIDAY NIGHT?

HIT UP THE CLUBUUUBBB

GO OUT TO DINNER

CONCERT



SEDAN

SALAD

FRESH GROUND PEPPER?

YES

NO

*28 city/39 highway/32 combined mpg for Sedan and Coupe with SAT. 22 city/31 highway/25 combined mpg for SI. 29 city/41 highway/33 combined mpg for HF. 44 city/44 highway/44 combined mpg for Hybrid. Based on 2012 EPA mileage estimates. Use for comparison purposes only. Do not compare to models before 2008. Your actual mileage will vary depending on how you drive and maintain your vehicle. EX-L Sedan model shown. EX-L Coupe model shown. SI Coupe model shown. Hybrid model shown. HF model shown. ©2012 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

**YOUR SUBSCRIPTION TO *gameinformer* IS
DUE TO EXPIRE IF YOU DON'T ACT FAST!**

RENEW YOUR

**POWER UP REWARDS PRO MEMBERSHIP,
WHICH INCLUDES 12 MORE ISSUES OF GAME INFORMER MAGAZINE, TODAY!**



Visit your favorite GameStop store to renew!

Check out www.PowerUpRewards.com for more details

GameStop

POWERUP

gameinformer
DIGITAL

REWARDS PRO™

Every aspect of gaming is better when you're a PowerUp Rewards™ member, but the ultimate way to game is by going Pro. As a PowerUp Rewards Pro member, you'll see even more amazing benefits, new ways to save, exclusive offers and more.

Among those many benefits is your subscription to Game Informer, the world's #1 video game magazine. And now you can experience it like never before when you upgrade your subscription to Game Informer Digital at no extra cost. Just one more way going Pro can enhance your gaming life.



GO PRO. STAY PRO.

MORE SAVINGS

- ➔ Buy 2, Get 1 Free Coupon on Pre-Owned Games & Accessories
- ➔ 10% Off Pre-Owned Games & Accessories
- ➔ 10% Trade Bonus on All Trades

MORE POINTS

- ➔ Extra 10% Point Bonus on Top of Points Scored with Every Dollar Spent
- ➔ 250-Point Renewal or Upgrade Bonus

MORE EPIC STUFF

- ➔ 12 issues of Game Informer magazine
- ➔ Members-Only In-Game Exclusives
- ➔ Double Epic Reward Giveaway™ Entries*

KEEP IT FOR ONLY \$14.99/YR.

Visit your favorite GameStop store to make it happen.

* Limited to one transaction per day.

GREAT OR REALLY GREAT?

REALLY GREAT

REALLY GREAT? OR REALLY, REALLY GREAT?

HOW DO YOU LIKE TO DRIVE?

I SAID REALLY GREAT.

OK, FINE, REALLY, REALLY GREAT.



LIKE A CHAMPION

HAVE YOU CONSIDERED A HYBRID?

NOPE

WHATCHA GOT?

WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DO YOU LIKE?

LIAR

SI COUPE



HIP-HOP

ROCK

TRIP HOP

HF

COUNTRY

YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER HEARD OF IT



SOUP OR SALAD?

SOUP OF THE DAY

SORRY, WE'RE OUT



HYBRID

We're all different. That's why there are five Civics, like the sporty Si, the 44-mpg-city Hybrid and the high-mileage HF.* So which one is right for you? That depends on who you are.



A blurry, high-contrast photograph of a person's face, possibly a soldier, with the text "ANYONE CAN SEE TYRANNY. MARINES" overlaid. The image is heavily blurred, showing indistinct shapes and colors, primarily in shades of brown, tan, and black. The text is centered and written in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

ANYONE CAN SEE TYRANNY. MARINES



ADVANCE TO STOP IT.



MARINES.COM



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

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

Video Killed No Radio Star

I often witness first-hand the strange fascination gamers have with defending a game or system with zealous enthusiasm – as if it's impossible to like both the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3. It is easy to admire the passion and excitement gamers have for the medium, but at the same time these juvenile arguments are no better than "my dad is stronger than your dad." They are as interesting and engaging as watching a battery recharge.

I often put game developers above such reproach, but as the battle rages between console, PC, handheld, and games on social platforms, I get the feeling that developers themselves are starting to be blinded by their own beliefs and are falling into traps about the delivery system rather than focusing on the ingenuity and innovation of the games themselves.

Free-to-play companies claim without hesitation that all games must be free-to-play, and that games that come with a price tag simply can't exist in the future market. Some industry analysts say no handheld system can ever survive in a world dominated by phones. Social platforms and cloud services claim they will soon make consoles obsolete. Developers can't survive with used games. Piracy is good. Piracy is bad. Digital eats retail. Nintendo is dying. There is fire in the streets and cats and dogs are living together.

Some prophecies will come true as the world continually evolves, but all these prognostications remind me of the Buggles' 1979 hit "Video Killed the Radio Star." I love free-to-play games and I love triple-A blockbusters; why must things be looked at as either/or? Video obviously never killed the radio star, so why do people believe that one fish must always eat the other?

If only free-to-play existed and I had to deal with the annoying game concepts designed to milk every dollar one penny at a time from my wallet, I would go insane. If the gaming world was composed only of the biggest and loudest blockbusters then it would truly be a boring hobby.

We need independent developers pushing the envelope. We need Apple and Facebook introducing millions to gaming. We need platform holders, manufacturers, and publishers creating new products and innovating the ways we consume them. It's all part of the ecosystem that makes gaming what it is today and tomorrow.

Saying there is only one future is shortsighted. Gamers, game publishers, and developers should realize there is more than one way to skin the proverbial cat. Then we can let the silly arguments fade away and focus on the important things in life, like how games will entertain people around the world from now till the end of time.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

0412
contents



» 38

Assassin's Creed III

Ubisoft introduces a new hero, a new setting, and a brand-new take on gameplay with the long-awaited Assassin's Creed III. Already years in development, the third numbered entry in the series has big surprises in store.

by Matt Miller



57 **Game Infarcer**



26



52

Pinball Wizards

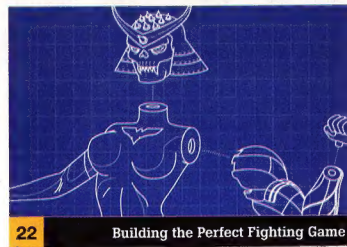


62



12

Marvel Men



22

Building the Perfect Fighting Game

regulars

» 8 Feedback

Readers discuss the demise of Star Wars Galaxies, video game franchises that are past their prime, and our ever-controversial Top 50 Games of 2011.

» 12 Connect

This month in Connect, the talented writers at Marvel sound off on how video games impact comics, we stitch together our dream fighting game, and we rank the Top 10 spiritual successors.

» 62 Previews

Death's quest continues in Darksiders II, new nuggets of information surface for Resident Evil 6, and we've got fresh details on Far Cry 3.

» 78 Reviews

The PlayStation Vita comes with a blowout of handheld game reviews. Can the likes of Uncharted: Golden Abyss, Escape Plan, and ModNation Racers: Road Trip help the Vita enjoy a better launch lineup than the 3DS?

» 100 Game Over

Test your knowledge of Assassin's Creed lore to see whether you're a numb-skulled recruit or possess the prolific wisdom of a mentor assassin.



98



95



70



32

Interview: Markus Persson



79



64

Hitman: Absolution

The AC III Covers

In addition to the gorgeous art crafted by Ubisoft Montreal for this month's cover, we're proud to reveal a second, limited run cover with art by the acclaimed comic book artist Alex Ross. Ross crafted his rendition based on the original cover image created at Ubisoft Montreal. The Alex Ross image will grace a special edition steel box version of Assassin's Creed III which will be available to own if you preorder the game at your favorite retailer. Learn more about the making of this month's cover at gameinformer.com/ac3.



91



88

games index

Alan Wake's American Nightmare	88
Arma 3	75
Armored Core V	72
Asura's Wrath	79
Darksiders II	66
Dota 2	76
Dragon's Dogma	70
Dungeon Hunter: Alliance	95
Escape Plan	92
Far Cry 3	62
FIFA Soccer	94
Game of Thrones	68
Gotham City Impostors	83
Grand Slam Tennis	83
Gravity Rush	69
Hitman: Absolution	64
Hot Shots Golf: World Invitational	91
Journey	86
King Arthur II: The Role-Playing Wargame	87
Little Deviants	93
Lumines: Electronic Symphony	94
Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater 3D	95
ModNation Racers: Road Trip	93
Ninja Gaiden Sigma	94
Quarrel	96
Rayman Origins	95
Resident Evil 6	67
Shank 2	89
Shinobido 2: Revenge of Zen	95
Silent Hill Downpour	82
Silent Hill HD Collection	96
Sleeping Dogs	74
Sol: Exodus	96
SSX	81
Super Stardust Delta	94
Syndicate	80
Tales of Graces f	87
Torchlight II	73
Total War: Shogun 2 – Fall of the Samurai	77
Touch My Katamari	91
Twisted Metal	84
Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	94
Uncharted: Golden Abyss	90
Warp	89
Xenoblade Chronicles	71

This month in Feedback, readers mourn an MMO apocalypse, nominate video game franchises for the chopping block, and discuss all things related to the Top 50 Games of 2011. Oh, some complaining happens, too.



Welcome to XCOM

I fell in love with your XCOM: Enemy Unknown cover story. I hadn't heard of or played the original X-COM. However, I agree that consoles could use more strategic/tactical intervention without the games looking like they came out of a kid's coloring book. As one of your readers said about your Rainbow 6 cover story, thank you for giving us strategists a beacon of hope...again.

Jason Henstley
via email

I want to applaud your magazine for proving me wrong. When I saw the cover story for XCOM, I was disappointed. Not only was it a game I had zero interest in, but Firaxis has yet to impress me with any game they have created. However, I took the time to read the entire cover story. Not only do I want this game now, but it sounds like it could revolutionize strategy games, and it is amongst my most anticipated games of 2012. XCOM now has my interest.

Alex Fletcher
Gainesville, FL

Not only do we share our readers' excitement for the return of a beloved strategy series, but the release of XCOM: Enemy Unknown should serve as an interesting litmus test, revealing whether console gamers are interested in exercising their brains over their trigger fingers. At least we know of two gamers who are up for the challenge.

Debate Club

In last month's On Your Mind section of Feedback, you labeled 28 percent of reader responses as "Review Rage." Are you aware that you dismissed over one-fourth of reader letters as mere rage, implying that they do not warrant a response of any sort? Once you get to the point in a debate where you say "Oh yeah? Well, it's just my opinion," you have failed to defend that opinion. If you had a valid defense for your stance, you would present it. You've revealed that over a quarter of your respondents feel that at least some of your reviews are invalid in some way. What makes you think those people are going to re-subscribe if you're just going to dismiss their criticisms? I know I'm not going to.

John Smoth
Bridgeport, CT

What it reveals is that a quarter of our respondents are confused about what a review is. A review isn't a debate, it's an opinion. As long as you've given a game a fair shot, it's okay for you to like or dislike it more than someone else. Telling someone else what to feel is always a fool's errand – and so is participating in an argument no one can win.

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com



The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

I love your recurring Top 50 Games of the Year article – not only to see the awards and how my favorite games did, but also to see the hate mail from people who are so upset they feel the need to unsubscribe just because Duke Nukem wasn't in the Top 50. Some are so absurd I can't tell if they are trying to be funny or not. I can't wait to see what 2012 has in store.

Kevin Zalewski

Via email

Actually, Kevin, you don't give our readers enough credit. Our Top 50 Games of 2011 feature was met with overwhelming acceptance, and even those who disagreed with some of our picks did so with a respectful appreciation for difference of opinion. Oh, who are we kidding? On to the hate mail!

The Sin of Omission

I've been a subscriber for a while now. You have never disappointed me until now. I have a few complaints – Sonic Generations' 8.75 rating, Skyrim winning Game of the Year 2011 – but my biggest one is Yakuza 4 not making your best of 2011 list. In my opinion, Yakuza 4 is one sexedecillion [originally written in zeroes –Ed.] times better than Skyrim. Yakuza 4 has a beautiful story/gameplay that kept me busy for 14 hours – Skyrim only kept me busy for two hours, and then I traded it in. Stop playing mainstream games and play some underrated ones for once.

Mike Solano
via email

I just finished the Top 10 Heroes of 2011 list and became so very enraged that I had to submit my feedback. You fail to list Link from the Legend of Zelda as a hero! Seriously? Correct me if I'm wrong, but is he not the Hero of Time destined to save Hyrule? However, you did include some random boxer named Andre Bishop on the list, who as far as I know, hasn't saved any kingdoms from an evil darkness, nor rescued a princess numerous times! You would have to be completely absent-minded to skip over Link. There are 10 spots for crying out loud! One of them *must* be reserved for Link.

Jonathan Campa
Via email

We'll add Link to our Top Heroes list when Zelda's savio develops any kind of a personality whatsoever. Until then, he's still just a mute avatar for the player to live vicariously through. There's nothing wrong with that – it just isn't Top Heroes list material. As for Mike's case for Yakuza: Thanks for the laugh. Now on to some serious letters regarding our Top 50 Games article.

Pick of the Litter?

Regarding your pick of Game of the Year 2011, I'm rather confused as to why you chose Skyrim over Batman: Arkham City. Your review for Skyrim was a 9.5, while Arkham City got a 10. I'm not saying I disagree with your choice; I just want to know why you went with Skyrim.

Dylan Duell
Via email

This month we received countless letters asking this question, albeit most not as politely as Dylan. The reason why Skyrim won over Arkham City and Skyward Sword (which also received a 10 this year) is simple: more editors considered it their favorite game of the year, bugs and all. Remember, a review score is the opinion of just one person. Game of the Year is decided by everyone on staff (except for Dan, whose opinions don't count for anything).

What Grinds Our Gears

There were 19 editor Top Ten lists in the February issue. Not a single one of those editors listed Gears of War 3 in their top ten. I actually applaud the fact that most of the editors didn't list any shooters at all, but the editors who chose shooters picked Battlefield 3 or MW 3. Gears of War 3 had the highest rating of all three of these games with a 9.5. So how does Gears of War 3 only receive one award? No love!

Ben Hanfelder
via email

The absence of Gears on our Editor Top Ten lists surprised us as well – we didn't collaborate or discuss our choices, every editor just picked their favorite games from the year, regardless of scores or popularity. Rather than taking it as a knock against Gears, however, consider it a sign of how many truly great games came out this year.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Why are people still talking about Modern Warfare 3 when Modern Warfare 4 has already come out? Shouldn't they be getting over excited by MW 4's new outcome? Help me understand."

You're from the future. Hope that helps.

"Have you ever thought of making you magazine read from right to left?"

..on

"Is it sad that I cried when Star Wars Galaxies shut down?"

It's better than crying at a Legend of Zelda trailer, at least.

Return To Sender:

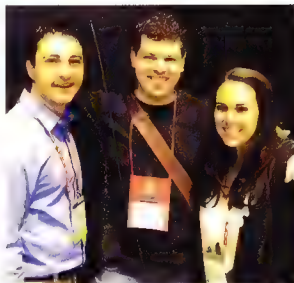
Dear Thomas Cornelius: You accidentally emailed our three-page essay on hydraulic fracturing to us, not your professor. You'd better send it again so you're not penalized for being late.

Logic FTW:

"If Madden is the only NFL game, then EA should be the only pro sport video game maker. Meaning 2K must cease all NBA & MLB games.

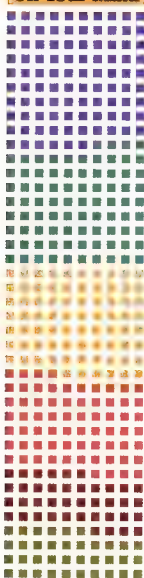
Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"my kids are having a ball with call on duty"



[Left] This year at CES, Ben Reeves became quick friends with Access PR's Scott Pytk and Ashley Barrett, who also voiced the character of Zia in Bastion. [Center] Ben also got in some all-important shooting practice in preparation for the zombie clown apocalypse. [Right] Bertz required something a little more powerful to take down Nazi zombies.

On Your Mind



- Top 50 Feedback **24%**
- Skyrim as GOTY? **21%**
- Franchises to Kill **19%**
- Star Wars Galaxies Love **17%**
- "Like Nuketown/Anders/Groze Is Not A Dark!" **10%**
- Items Missing From Top 10 Trans (Really?) **9%**

Question of the Month:

If you could have any video game animal as a pet, what would it be, and why?

Kill it with Fire!

In issue 226, we asked readers what game series would they permanently kill off and why. Franchise fatigue seemed to be a big factor, as *Call of Duty* was the most popular response, followed by *Final Fantasy*, *Pokémon*, and *Sonic*. Here are some responses.

I would definitely kill off Final Fantasy. It has gotten to the point where they need to put dashed numbers on the end of their numbered titles. Really? Plus, they've sucked since FF VII in my opinion.

Joe Schueller

If you had asked me a month ago, I would have said Rayman and the Rabbids without hesitation. However, after playing Rayman: Origins, I can safely say that I definitely want Ubisoft to continue the Rayman series. Still, I wouldn't mind the Rabbids vanishing into obscurity.

Caleb Siems

If I had the power to kill any video game franchise it would be Red Faction. Oh, wait. Never mind.

Cole Swarkowski



Hating is Hard

I can't believe how you despise and belittled EA. It is for God's sake! (The fact that EA was The Only Game 2011 because it didn't release your fan-oid Am game Electronic Arts, name of MW it's EA. A. If it had 0.0 for MW 3 and 0.0 for MW 4 that's a very good thing. Your despise, I want to hear the game being to EA. EA is a company that does games that are to destroy work. So, you go to EA's website and you see EA's website and EA's website and EA's website. EA's website.

**Steve A
Via email**

First of all, if you don't see how EA hating is defining a product is prevented to paying customers is a bad thing, we feel sorry for you. The fact that EA decided to bring the Am to a lot of consumers is a good thing. EA is a company that does games that are to destroy work. So, you go to EA's website and you see EA's website and EA's website. EA's website.

retrieved from page 9

(Left) This year at DICE, Bertz met up with keynote speaker and Skyrim creative director Todd Howard (Right) Meanwhile Jim Reilly sat back and contemplated the meaning of life with Valhalla Game Studios' Tomonobu Itagaki.



The End of the World

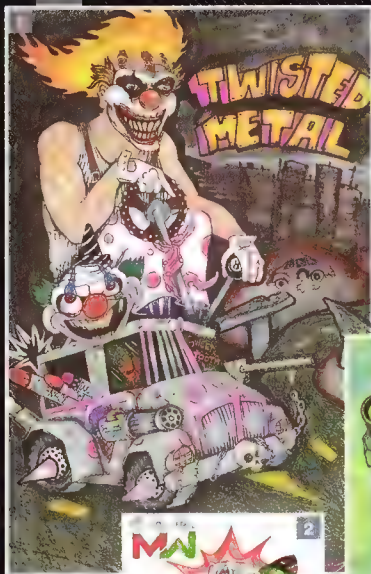
I just finished Matt Miller's article on the end of Star Wars Galaxies (This Is The Way The World Ends, issue 226), and it was excellent. Even though I'm not an MMO player myself, I've spent countless hours on the old Battle.net and can relate to what was said about people developing real friendships and treasured memories. For players, the end of a game like SWG is the same as the end of a particularly loved, long-running TV show or book series. While these aren't real-world experiences, the memories created in a game where you can invest yourself so heavily are most certainly real.

Brandon Blalock
Via email

I have built up disdain for MMOs over the years, and am only just giving one a fair shake with The Old Republic. That said, I feel as though I overlooked something magical based on your Star Wars Galaxies article. Your perspective on Galaxies' demise was the most touching article I've read, anywhere, in quite some time. The imagery of this world coming to a close and the people who will legitimately be changed because of it felt very real. One page of text was enough for me to rethink the nature of online gaming. I've missed the boat on Galaxies, but your closure was poetic and I am glad to have read it.

Chris McGillick
Lacey Township, NJ

This month we received a surprising amount of letters from readers who, like Chris and Brandon, didn't play Star Wars Galaxies but sympathize with its now displaced fan base. We hope all the Galaxies players who aren't interested in The Old Republic's action-oriented take on the Star Wars universe can find a new MMO community to call home.



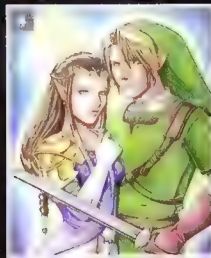
WINNER! Juno

Sedano "Bill Brasky! He drives an ice cream truck covered in human skulls!"

Jermaine Vassel Look out for the blue shell during online rounds of Domination.

Jonathan Contreras Those aren't goggles. Sam just keeps his Pogs in there.

Brittany Corneaux Is that Kristen Bell as Princess Zelda?



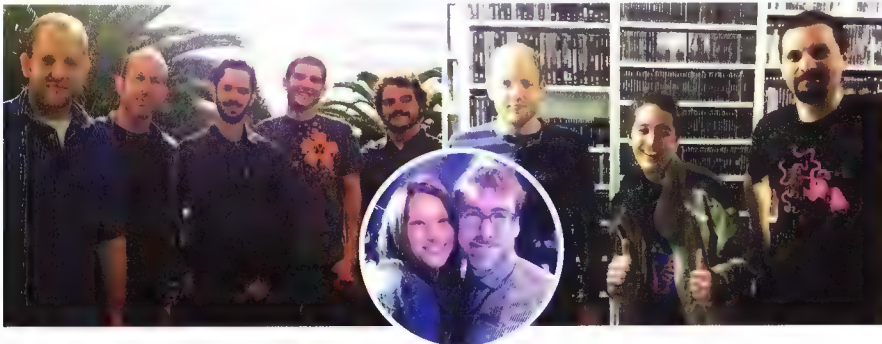
Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best damn art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video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

Send to:

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

CORRECTIONS:

In the Gear section in issue 227 we incorrectly referred to the dynamic tactile keys on Razer's Star Wars keyboard as OLEDs. They are actually backed by an LCD display. We also inadvertently ran an image of a pre-production model of the board. The small toggle panel does not exist on the retail version. We apologize to all the toggle heads out there.



[Left] Tim, Ben Hanson, and Bryan were all smiles in sunny Santa Monica with Naughty Dog's Bruce Straley and Neil Druckmann. [Inset] Game Informer's editor in chief Andy McNamara attended this year's VGAs with his way better half, Amy. [Right] What's got two thumbs, loves video games, and spent his birthday hanging out at the Game Informer office? GI reader Andrew Preble, that's who.



NOTABLES

- 18 middle class struggle
- 20 impulse
- 22 building the perfect fighting game
- 25 top ten spiritual successors
- 26 meeting of the minds
- 36 opinion: gaming the store



MARVEL MEN

A Roundtable With Some of the Biggest Talents In Comics

by Ben Reeves

There is a lot of crossover between comic book geeks and hardcore gamers, so it's not surprising that the creative teams working on some of today's biggest comic books are also huge gamers. Despite the fan overlap between the two mediums, the comic book industry has had to fight for its profits while video games continue to explode across pop culture. Marvel Comics recently announced *Avengers vs. X-Men*, a massive 12-issue series launching later this year that pits two of the company's biggest properties against each other. The story arc is being heralded as one of the biggest events in the company's history, and Marvel thinks this might be the perfect opportunity for gamers to jump on the comic train. We corralled some of Marvel Comics' top talent — writers Brian Bendis, Ed Brubaker, Jason Aaron, Jonathan Hickman, and Matt Fraction — together to talk about their experiences playing *Skyrim*, the influence of video games on the comic industry, and how *Thor* may be a bit like *Dungeons & Dragons*.

MARVEL ARCHITECTS

A special 2014 strategy & behind-the-scenes look into how the comic book industry is using video games to reach new audiences. Featuring interviews with Marvel's top MMO designers and the game developers who are helping them bring their worlds to life.



Brian Michael Bendis

A lot of professionals in the comic book industry are also gamers. What are you guys playing right now?

BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS: Well, I'm actually working on the upcoming Marvel MMO, so while I can't talk about it, I've been playing a lot of that. I also played a bit of DC Universe Online, which was fun, but I kind of didn't want to play as my own created character. Everyone wants to play as the classic DC heroes. I'm kind of glad that old Marvel MMO never happened. Everyone really wants to play as Spider-Man and Wolverine.

ED BRUBAKER: I'm still playing Arkham City. I felt kind of disappointed with the last Assassin's Creed. I think it's fun to parkour and throw guys off rooftops, but I'm just ready for Assassin's Creed III, and I feel like we're constantly going back to the same well.

JASON AARON: I play a lot of games with my son who's six, so that means we play a lot of LEGO games and lots of Mario Kart. I do love those LEGO games.

MATT FRACTION: As contrary as it is to my tastes, I checked out Skyrim because I heard so many ecstatic things about it, and it's pretty great. I think it speaks volumes to the quality of that game that I'm into it. I'm not an RPG guy because I have a very addictive personality and I need to work and see my children and shower. But more than that, I'm not a fantasy guy, I'm not into the spells and dragons and that kind of stuff.

BRUBAKER: Matt has actually yelled at me for talking about Lord of the Rings.

FRACTION: And Jonathan Hickman has shaken his head in great disappointment as I've been unimpressed by things like *Game of Thrones*. Fantasy just isn't my milieu. It's not a ticket that I buy very easily, but I'd heard so many things about Skyrim that I just had to check it out, and yeah, I get it.

MATTHEW HICKMAN: That's such bulls---. Matt, I wish you hadn't said that, because if you like it then that means that [signs] great, now I'm gonna have to buy it.

FRACTION: It's completely changed my idea of what Marvel's theme should be. It's terrific. With *God of War III* you've got that big action-y fantasy theme kind of taken care of, but this is completely unlike anything else, and I can't wait for there to be a true science fiction Elder Scrolls game.

HICKMAN: I'm so terrified about my time regarding that game.

FRACTION: This is how I tricked myself into playing it. It stays off during daylight, and it only comes on at night. Last night I found a field of woolly mammoths. John, you can pick up every single book in the game, and there is writing in every single one. You can read every book in the game! The world is so incredibly rich, and it's only one disc I've been playing for a month, and I have no idea if I'm even close to the end. Some guy just ran up to me and asked me to find this goblin flute. "Okay man, I'm a giant cat man dressed like a knight, but let's go find this flute." I would love to see a Marvel game like this.

HICKMAN: And then Spider-Man swings by, "Hey, could you deliver this letter for me?"

FRACTION: Are you just trying to make more work for me?

FRACTION: Can you put in some quest about hand delivering letters and finding flutes into the Marvel MMO?

BENDIS: Well now it's going to look like we stole it from you, but that quest has always been in there.

You guys are half joking about it, but do you see any video games influencing comic books today?

BRUBAKER: I think video game action scenes have really influenced comic book writing. A lot of the kinetic action scenes from games like *Call of Duty* or *God of War* would come to mind for me when I would sit down to write. Video games make you think of things that you wouldn't think of otherwise, because you can do impossible things in a game. It puts you in a different environment mentally when I was writing the X-Men. I found that I would have ideas for action scenes that I wouldn't have had if I hadn't played *Final Fantasy* or something.

FRACTION: Actually, I'm currently in the middle of writing a [Dungeons & Dragons] arc for Thor. I know that's not a video game, but it's clearly a role-playing game arc where Thor is exploring a cave and there are hexagon tiles on the floor. I thought, "Isn't Thor kind of like D&D? Why not?" It's great. It's very much like I'm playing D&D while writing this. I'm having a blast.

You bring up an interesting topic with D&D. It seems like there is a lot of crossover between people who play Dungeons & Dragons or Magic: the Gathering, fans who read comics, and fans who play video games. Why do you think these mediums are related?

HICKMAN: I think that there are people who like to lose themselves in their head and in other worlds and people who really engage in their imaginations. I think all of that stuff kind of comes from the same well, and it all kind of merges together in today's society where our technology allows our entertainment to be so diverse that we're allowed to digest all this fantasy in a variety of ways. Everything is so accessible to us.

FRACTION: They kind of seek them at the same places too, which reminds me, what was that vampire role-playing game?

BRUBAKER: The one they made the HBO show out of?

FRACTION: No, all I remember was that there was a vampire role-playing game, and there was a whole bunch of different clans, and dudes from these clans would come into the comic shop dressed up as their clan. And there was one clan that never spoke, and one of the kids from this clan would come into the comic shop and conduct his transactions at a comic book shop without speaking, because he had to remain in character. Watching that was one of the funnest and most frustrating things I've ever been a part of.

BRUBAKER: Was it Vampire: The Masquerade?

FRACTION: Yeah, that was it!

Some of you guys have written for games. Brian Bendis wrote 2005's Ultimate Spider-Man game and the Upcoming Marvel MMO, and Matt Fraction helped write last summer's Iron Man 2 game. How do the two mediums compare?

BENDIS: There are actually some wild similarities that some people don't think about. When you're writing a comic book, a lot of comic writers like to pretend that they are in total control of the page, but they're not. Not only are you sharing it with the artists, but you're sharing it with the reader. That space between the panels is shared space. That's where the reader is having a lot of voice in what happens in the movement of the story – in the actions that take one panel to the next. I think you can apply that aspect of comics right over to gameplay. In games, you set up the story and put the player in the environment, but the player has a lot of control, or perception of control, over the story as it moves forward. I actually enjoy that aspect of it a great deal – that invisible collaboration with the reader/player.

FRACTION: In video games, writing kind of comes last. Sometimes it comes at the end after the levels have been designed, but the "writing" is really the game design. In my experience, the writing is somewhat ancillary, and things



Ed Brubaker



Jason Aaron



Jonathan Hickman



Matt Fraction



artwork: Sara Popell

in the company's history, and will have a long-lasting impact on Marvel's continuity

have to get re-written by sound engineers during voiceover sessions so that they work inside game design changes. It's a fun challenge, but unless the writer is in the designer's room from day one, it can be frustrating.

Marvel has taken an active role getting its writers involved in the production of Marvel based games. Do you think this has helped improve the quality of these games?

FRACTION: It certainly hasn't hurt. Brian has been working on the MMO from the get-go, and I think that's the next level. It's one thing to have me work on Iron Man or have Christos Gage help out with the Captain America game. We can come in, polish and tweak and offer advice, but the train is already moving. It's another thing to have a Marvel writer in the room as the game is conceived so that he can help craft the world from the ground up.

BENDIS: It's been my perception that for years game makers have been hiring people like us, or people to imitate us. So now instead of hiring someone who can give you a Chris Claremont feel, why not just hire Chris Claremont? I think that you're always going to get better work that way.

FRACTION: We get to learn how game designers think, and they get to learn how we work. Everyone gets to share strategies, and that's fun. At least for me. The worry for some is getting bored, but there is nothing boring about writing for games.

Comic books have developed all these great characters and stories over the years, and over the last decade mediums like video games and movies finally adapted these stories to great success. Do you think this has helped the comic book industry? Because comic sales haven't really increased.

FRACTION: As long as comics can remain the inexpensive mass leader for multi-billion dollar franchises in the worlds of film, animation, and television, it's great for us. Video games still can't touch us in terms of what we can do. We don't have budgets on that scale and we don't have deadlines.

There is no such thing as too big for a comic. We're only limited by the kinds of things that we can imagine and put on a page. If the world responds by biting off parts and making giant movies like *The Avengers* then that's great for us. We're like spores in the wind

Rocksteady's recent Batman games are hugely popular. Why do you think that game was so well received?

BENDIS: Well, those games were written by DC's own Paul Dini, who is not only a longtime Batman scribe, but is also one of the producers on the upcoming Ultimate Spider-Man cartoon with me, so we've talked about those games a lot.

BRUBAKER: I actually ran into him at the comic shop about two days after that game came out. I'd been playing it for 24 hours straight, and I exclaimed, "Oh my god, that game is so great." He said, "Did you notice the nod to *Gotham Central*?" (*Gotham Central* is a police procedural comic book written by Brubaker. - Ed.) I was blown away. It's somewhat insular, because Dini wrote the cartoon that made me want to write Batman, and then he wrote the Batman game that's like the best Batman game ever, and it references a comic book that I wrote years ago.

Which Marvel characters would you like to see follow Batman's lead?

AARON: I just want to write the LEGO Wolverine game. That seems like a no-brainer. You could have Wolverine slong people up into tiny LEGO blocks. How does that game not exist yet?

BRUBAKER: All of them. But you know, Brian wrote the first Spider-Man game that was totally awesome. In that Ultimate Spider-Man video game you actually felt like you're in the world of Brian's comics, and the character sounded like what you thought the character from the comics would sound like, and you got to save that guy from falling off that building like 900 times.

BENDIS: The one that haunts me is that I was writing the Avengers game - the THQ game that got canceled. I have



artwork: Jim Cheung

a copy of it at the house, and it was a great looking game. It was a fully immersed Avengers game and the world will never see it. It was a [point of view] game, which was different than most superhero games, but you would play the game from the POV of Hulk, Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor, and you could play through the game co-op with four of your friends, so you could build an Avengers team and unlock players.

BRUBAKER: Could you play as Hawkeye?

BENDIS: Yeah, it was super cool.

Marvel recently announced Avengers vs. X-Men. Can you give our readers a quick rundown of the story?

AARON: It's a massive 12 issue series. It's a new expertise We've never done one that's this big and we've never done one with this many different writers. It's been crazy, but I think we have a better story because we have so many guys that have bought in. You definitely want to bring your "A" game when you're working with a team like this... unless you're talking about Hickman, who is obviously the weak link.

HICKMAN: Yeah, that's true

BENDIS: The scope of this story and the pretty wide aftermath that's coming after it is certainly larger than Civil War, and it's certainly larger than anything else we've ever done before. It's intriguing to have this many writers working on a project like this.

Where did the idea for a story of this magnitude originate?

BENDIS: It's been cooking for a couple years. It's an idea that every fan has. You know, "Wouldn't it be cool if these two fought?" But both franchises had to line up, and come to a point organically where they could clash. [Marvel editor in chief Axel Alornz] has been talking about this idea forever. Then, a year and half ago during our Marvel retreats - which is when they have us all come up to New York and



Marvel thinks some of its upcoming books will appeal to fighting game fans

we plan our big ideas for the year – Axel pulled me aside and said, “We’re ready to pull the trigger on this finally.” There wasn’t a story yet, but I think sometimes the best stories come out of, “You know, wouldn’t it be cool if?” I’d personally done a couple of these larger stories before, but I wasn’t personally ready to dive into one by myself again and I thought it would be cool to have all five of us work together on a project this size. I could tell by the smile on Axel’s face that that was what he’d wanted the whole time

Why do you guys think that Avengers vs. X-Men is a good jumping-on point for people who either haven’t read comics before or haven’t read any in a long time?

BENDIS: We think about that a lot. Particularly with these things, because these are the kinds of projects that get seen by the wider media so it’s almost our obligation to make sure that they are very reader friendly for people who only have a cursory knowledge of the Marvel Universe.

AARON: We talked about this the whole time, because the story revolves around the Phoenix Force – this big fiery orb of cosmic destruction, which longtime X-Men fans know a lot about and has always been a big part of the Marvel continuity, but we have to be very conscious of drawing in new fans. You don’t have to read 30 years of X-Men or Avengers to pick this up. This might be the only chance people will have to see these two teams clash like this. They’re not going to appear in a movie anytime soon, and even if they did, it would take like \$100 billion to recreate the scenes we’re setting up in this storyline

What do you guys think about the future of digital comics? Do you think the comic industry could learn

TVs and play their games. And I know that you can do screen rotators, but I kind of feel like somewhere down the line there will be a consensus on whether the optimal viewing angle is vertical or horizontal, and I think that that point in time there will be a very interesting shift in how comics are designed. I think the future of technology will have an interesting impact on how comic books are laid out.

FRACTION: You know why that will never happen? Because all of the retailers would have to buy new racks

HICKMAN: Yeah, but with the “dig tal newsstand,” Matt, I think everything changes.

A lot of people think of game writing as subpar to things like movies, book, and comics. What do you guys think? Any recent games stand out as particularly well written?

BENDIS: Yeah, but with the, 90 percent of anything is crap. I’ve played quite a few games where I thought the writing was outstanding. The first BioShock was really well done.

BRUBAKER: The original Knights of the Old Republic was great, and I thought Assassin’s Creed II was really well written.

HICKMAN: Leisure Suit Larry. The whole Leisure Suit Larry thing was good.

FRACTION: The No More Heroes games are kind of fantastic. They actually made me laugh out loud, which I think is really hard. As hard as it is to execute drama, it’s that much harder to be funny and evoke laughter.

anything from the digital distribution models that the video game industry has started to employ?

BRUBAKER: I think the key to the future of comics will be getting comics into the hands of people who aren’t looking for comics. You don’t encounter many comics on the digital newsstand – you have to go into a specific app to find them. You almost have to be someone who is interested in comics to find them. So comics need to find new ways to have that crossover. I think games are a lot better at that, because you run into games while surfing the app store all the time.

HICKMAN: I don’t think I’ve heard the term “digital newsstand” since the late ‘90s. Nice job bringing that one back up, Ed.

FRACTION: “You know, son, someday you’ll be able to dial up your comics on your telephone. Graphic audio. A world of storytelling is just a 1-900 number away.”

HICKMAN: I think that the advance of the iPad and the Kindle and all of that vertical screen technology will have an effect on the future of comics. I thought for a long time that comics would eventually make a shift to a widescreen format, because that seemed to be the way that people liked to watch entertainment on widescreen

HICKMAN: The LEGO games have been great for that, too. They’re kind of like the old Muppet show, where my son will enjoy it, but I’m laughing at something else entirely.

BENDIS: Tetris was well written too.

FRACTION: And I really liked the songwriting in The Beatles’ Rock Band.

What comics would you suggest someone pick up if they’re not currently into comics?

FRACTION: John Rogers, who actually created the show *Leverage*, is currently writing a Dungeons & Dragons comic based on campaigns that he and his buddies actually played, and it’s fantastic. Given the size and scope of Skyrim and its popularity, there is a pretty good comic out there that some people might find similar.

BENDIS: I’m going to throw out a few names. Jonathan Hickman has some outstanding indie comics coming out, particularly *Red Wing*. Jason is doing what is currently my favorite Marvel comic, *Wolverine and the X-Men*, which is a completely unique X-Men experience. It’s funny and action packed. Ed has a wonderful series of books called *Criminal* and *Fatale* that would be great if you like Rockstar games, especially games like L.A. Noire. And Matt has a wonderful book called *Casanova*, but I also recommend his *Defenders* book, which is a very unique Marvel comic, and I think gamers would love the machness and chaos of it all

HICKMAN: That’s why we keep Brian as a friend

FRACTION: If you’re a fighting game fan you could check out *Infinite Kung Fu* by Kagan McLeod. It’s like 100 pages of ass kicking.

BENDIS: And, you know, if you’re a fighting game fan, I have to say that I think *Avengers vs. X-Men* sounds pretty awesome.

Yeah, if you play Marvel vs. Capcom it’s almost the same lineup. Maybe you should throw Mega Man in there to really sell it.

BENDIS: What do you think the Avengers and X-Men are fighting over?

If you look back 30 years ago, geek culture like video games and comic books were looked down upon. But it’s hip to be a geek now. Why do you think that’s changed?

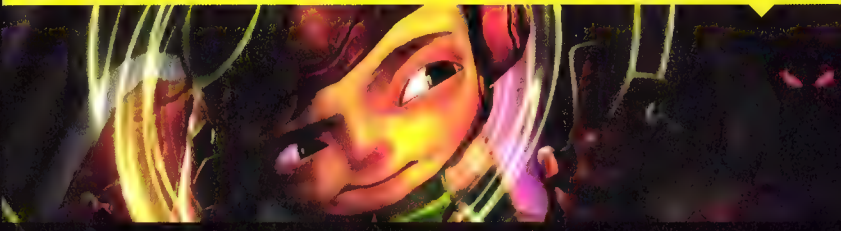
HICKMAN: I think people are drawn to superheroes because they’re better than us. That’s always been the appeal. Though, I would disagree. I think that sci-fi has always been acceptable. I think what’s happened is that we’re in this really cool place where science is so killer that it’s become like magic again, so we’re getting really smart sci-fi that’s bringing our world with the future in slick ways. We all grew up reading all this stuff. I don’t know who coined the phrase, but at some point the nerds took over and we’re in all the creative positions and now we’re turning out all the kinds of stuff that we love.

FRACTION: I think these things have always been cool. You can say “30 years ago science fiction and superheroes weren’t cool. Oh, except for *E.T.*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Superman II*, and *The Empire Strikes Back*, but other than that.” You can list all these world-changing exceptions, and it begins to sound ridiculous

AARON: Don’t forget *Krull*.

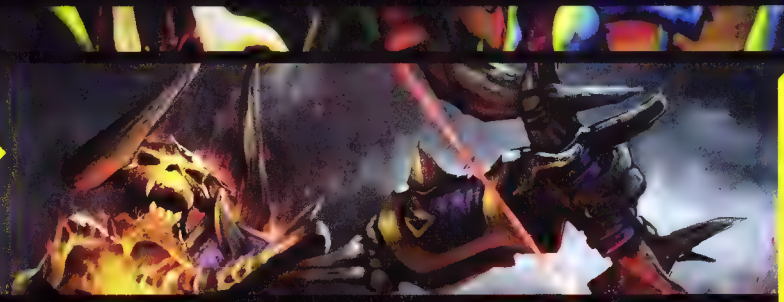
FRACTION: Whether or not you’re talking Indiana Jones or Odysseus or Avengers vs. X-Men, we’ve always looked for myth and legends to tell ourselves stories to entertain and pass the time. That’s what we do. These kinds of escapist parables and fantasies have always spoken to us. Whether or not it has a level of cool or not is irrelevant. Those stories would happen anyway, whether or not it was cool to wear a Wolverine shirt in public. ☺

The Good



MINECRAFT CREATOR Markus "Notch" Persson has expressed interest in funding Psychonauts 2 for developer Double Fine. Fans have been begging for a sequel to the 2005 release, and the fact that Persson is looking into helping the project is great news. That being said, Persson said there are still a lot of ins-and-outs to consider before the sequel could get off the ground. For more on Double Fine, check out their upcoming crowdfunder-funded adventure game on page 21.

The Bad



ACTIVISION BLIZZARD has filed a legal opposition to Valve's application for a trademark on the name "Dota." Blizzard claims that for the past seven years the name has been commonly associated with products and services related to the Dota mods that were created for Blizzard's Warcraft III. Valve is working on an unofficial sequel called Dota 2 (Above. See our preview on page 76 for more info). Thankfully, this opening legal maneuver appears to relate only to the name Dota itself, and not the design or game mechanics of Valve's title. Dota 2 is expected to release later this year.

Quotable

"...I spent close to two hours playing it, and after two hours I was still standing at the beginning of the game. I said, 'This is crap. This is an unbelievably bad game. So I put it aside.'"



— Shuhei Yoshida, Sony president of world-wide studios, on his self-confessed mistake of passing on publishing Demon's Souls in North America

The Ugly

VALVE co-founder Gabe Newell has warned Steam users that last year's hack of the service's database and forums may still pose a threat. Newell says that Valve and an outside security firm discovered that the user names, transactions, email addresses, and encrypted billing and credit card info (but not Steam passwords) of users was taken. He cautions people to keep an eye on their bank accounts just in case.



A Middle Class Struggle

How THQ's problems are indicative
of the video game industry

by Matthew Kato

"Think about what we have coming in front of us. Homefront. The next Red Faction. The Warnammer 40K MMO. Saints Row 3. People can say what they want, but we've got a pipeline that I think [EA, Activision, and Take-Two Interactive] would be envious of..."

THQ CEO Brian Farrell was pretty confident when he spoke those words to IGN in early 2010. Unfortunately, only one of those games — Saints Row: The Third — was a success, and two years later the title is arguably one of the only positives the company can claim.

Coming into this year, THQ had high hopes for a number of its initiatives. Homefront was looking to compete in the already crowded FPS market, the uDraw tablet was seen as a way to target its kids' audience in a way that was different from the traditional movie-based licenses the company was even then trying to get away from, and both Red Faction: Armageddon and MX vs. ATV Reflex were being counted on to provide a solid backbone as previously successful franchises. Unfortunately, none of these brought the results the company was looking for. Although the company did have stalwart performers in its WWE and UFC games, with so many other projects underperforming, the company's third quarter losses was three times what they were in 2010. This was underscored most notably by the uDraw failure, which accounted for \$100 million in lost revenue.

In the ugly aftermath of such a disappointing year, the company dropped its uDraw tablet line entirely, implemented organizational changes that will result in the loss of 240 people across the company at large, and

faces possible delisting from the NASDAQ because its stock has traded for under \$1 for 30 days. Is THQ's situation just a product of its own doing, or does it speak to a larger issue in game publishing and development that makes it hard for mid-sized companies like THQ to thrive?

Stuck in The Middle

THQ certainly deserves the bulk of the blame for its collapse, but there is a backdrop to the company's mess that highlights larger systemic problems for mid-sized publishers who are struggling to keep up with bigger competitors like Electronic Arts and Activision-Blizzard.

THQ is a publicly traded company on the NASDAQ, and as such, the pressure to give shareholders a good stock price can affect the company. Billy Pidgeon, senior analyst at M2 Research, says that bigger companies like EA tend to under-promise and over-deliver to their shareholders, while mid-sized companies like THQ tend to do the opposite because shareholders expect it to grow and become the next EA. Being publicly traded can also put too much emphasis on the relative short term, which is at odds with the two- to three-year development cycle for triple-A games and the five- to seven-year one for consoles.

"There are risks, also, to being a mega-publisher," Pidgeon admits, "but it is a tough place to be a mid-range publisher because the pressure and the focus is to move up and become a larger publisher and even a mega-publisher if possible. For a mid-sized studio, it's very risky. Backing specific platforms and filling specific category holes

can cost you big time. You really have to manage your portfolio and assets very carefully and not over-reach." Pidgeon points out that downsizing can be impossible as well because of the painful cuts in personnel and assets that are often necessary.

Despite the shedding of organizational jobs (as opposed to the

of Persia, Assassin's Creed), the Insane collaboration with director Guillermo del Toro, the Saints Row franchise, and more.

Core gamers certainly hope that THQ can execute this strategy, but unfortunately having a slate of potentially attractive games is only one piece of the puzzle. Colin Sebastian, senior research analyst at Baird Research, argues that hunting for a few hits is a losing proposition in this day and age.

"I think scale is very important in this industry," he says. "You [have to] have something that distinguishes you, your games, your platform, and you have a cost structure that matches that like Epic or Valve. As opposed to the old, traditional portfolio approach to publishing where you have this overhead of sales, marketing, distribution, and developers, and are going to put out 10 games and hope that two or three of those are good enough to pay for everything else. That's an outmoded business model in video games." Larger companies may be able to mask their problems through the sheer size of their gaming libraries, but there is little margin for error in most companies' catalogs.

Sebastian says that the shrinking video game market adds extra pressure to the search for hits. "The whole console market is

Although Homefront wasn't a blockbuster, THQ hopes it can turn it into a dependable franchise.



development talent at the studios), THQ has signaled that it still intends to move up rather than move down. The company declined to be interviewed for this article, but CEO Brian Farrell has publicly stated that THQ expects to compete in the core gamer market with original IP such as Homefront (now in the hands of Crytek), titles from the newly created THQ Montreal studio headed by Patrice Désilets (Prince

consolidating to a small number of really large franchises," he says. "It makes it tough for second-tier publishers that have only small- and mid-sized console titles, and that's where THQ fits itself."

Looking at the NPD sales numbers for 2011, it's hard to argue that there may be fewer consumer dollars to go around as this console generation winds down. Software sales in 2011 were down

three percent from the previous year, hardware sales for the year decreased, and sales figures for the industry overall in January 2012 signified the 28th month of decline since March 2009, according to industry website Gamasutra.

Then you must consider the age-old specter of rising development costs and the fact that you have to spend money to make money. "The break-even point for a large-scale console game has gone up," Sebastian says. "It used to be you

The uDraw tablet initiative was a big blow to the company. With 1.4 million units still in THQ's inventory



could make money selling four- or five-hundred thousand copies of a PS2 game, and now you have to sell at least a million units of an Xbox 360 game to break even." This raises the question of whether titles like *Darksiders II* or *Tomonou Itagaki's Devil's Third* — two relatively unknown titles to mainstream gamers that would demand aggressive marketing budgets to raise awareness — even have a shot at achieving mainstream success.

Meanwhile, Pidgeon notes that this is one area where THQ in particular could exhaust itself trying to chase its own tail. Investment fuels growth, but growth has to occur to raise the capital for investment. Pidgeon says that if THQ's employee layoffs ever reach the studio level and developer talent has to be cut, this could affect the games that are supposed to make the company profit. Investment back in the company isn't always easy, but it's necessary. "THQ has to do two things to survive now: Increase revenues and increase profits, and that can be hard to do," he says. "You have to invest to become profitable, and then you have to build and maintain that for a while, and then you can start to bring in the high profit margins, but it does require some investment."

The Future of THQ

With its fate on the NASDAQ uncertain and its organization now considerably thinner, many

question if THQ is better off looking for a buyer than it is touting out its restructuring.

"I think, quite honestly, the best-case scenario for THQ at this point is to get acquired," Sebastian says. "Get acquired by a company with a lot more financial and development resources that can layer on with what they have in the studios. [The buyer can] keep the top three or four franchises and keep the best studios and developers. For those people, they

Demon (by Terminal Reality) and the license-based *Taxi Driver*. When faced with delisting by NASDAQ, the company chose to play small ball, switching its focus to casual fare such as the *Cooking Mama* series and *Zumba Fitness* franchise. Building off the success of those properties, Majesco eventually expanded to iOS and Facebook products — all while its stock price staved off delisting.

Is this a possible course for THQ? Each company has its own set of circumstances, and certainly downsizing THQ's studio system would be a massive overhaul, but at a minimum companies like Majesco perhaps serve to illustrate the rock and a hard place that mid-level companies like THQ can find themselves in.

For its part, THQ does have a strategy to go after the digital commerce market that's geared around microtransactions, add-on

content, a Facebook/iOS title *Margantaville*, a recent publishing deal with mobile/social/casual developer Innovative Leisure, and more. The company reported that its digital revenue at the end of calendar 2011 was up 81 percent. However, it's also worth noting that entering 2011, the company counted uDraw and an extensive online store for *MX vs. ATV Alive* as part of its digital strategy, and both of these failed. Furthermore, THQ is betting on *Warhammer 40,000 Dark Millennium Online*, but THQ is also openly soliciting outside funding help for the MMO.

THQ and other mid-sized companies may only be a failure or two away from having to undergo radical changes or worse, but as much as there are lessons to be learned from THQ's story, there is also a glimmer of hope.

"THQ has done some great stuff," says Pidgeon, specifically mentioning *Saints Row: The Third*. "It really expanded the sandbox category, and that's one of the reasons I'd like to see THQ stick around. Then taking on risks, which the industry doesn't really encourage, has resulted in some great software. I'd like to see that as an example to other companies. But if you do those things and don't do well, you have to cut important assets and the company goes into financial trouble, that's not the takeaway people are going to have." ♦

THQ's Years of Living Dangerously

Feb 4, 2010

Juice Games becomes THQ Digital Studios UK (also known as THQ Digital Warrenton) to spearhead digital games based on existing and new properties

May 5, 2010

THQ announces a market share in fiscal 2010 of 4.9 percent in the U.S., making it the fourth-largest third-party publisher. The company celebrates only losing \$9 million for the year as compared to \$430 million the previous year. THQ has to cut jobs and costs to get there

January 5, 2011

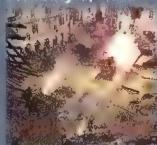
THQ announces a partnership with Mattel for *Hot Wheels, Masters of the Universe, Barbie*, and more products

January 12, 2011



THQ unveils its new logo

February 3, 2011



THQ rethinks its kids' strategy after decreasing the expected revenue from its kids' titles by \$30.3 million. It also announces it is canceling plans for *WWE Online* and *Company of Heroes: Online* (shown).

March 15, 2011

THQ's stock takes a 20 percent dip as lukewarm reviews for *Homefront* come in. The game sells only a million worldwide by the end of March

June 13, 2011

Original *Homefront* developer *Kaos Studios* closes. The series is given to THQ Montreal

July 13, 2011

THQ closes. THQ Digital Studios UK

July 27, 2011



The *Red Faction* series is shuttered due to the last two games being "niche." The company reports a net loss of \$38.4 million

August 9, 2011



MX vs. ATV franchise is cancelled, and 200 employees of its development team are laid off. Two studios in Australia are also closed. CEO Brian Farrell says the move "underscores our strategy to move away from games that will not generate strong profits in the future"

December 09, 2011

THQ lays off 30 employees from the uDraw studio in Angora Hills, CA

January 15, 2012



Industry consultant Kevin Dent makes a prediction that THQ's entire 2012 slate of games is being canceled in preparation for a sale (including *del Toro's Insane*). THQ immediately denies the rumor

February 2, 2012

THQ announces the restructuring of its licensed kids' games (again) and kills the uDraw tablet. It reports a loss of \$55.9 million for the third quarter, and CEO Brian Farrell and THQ's board of directors take a 50 percent pay cut for a year period

Your Monthly Shot of

Downloadable Games

An increasingly fuzzy distinction is beginning to emerge within the world of downloadable games. Where platform listings often used to cite only a single exclusive platform like Live Arcade or WiiWare, many newer games are going for a far broader reach. In particular, rising use of mobile devices for gaming means a lot of crossover between the console download titles and games you can play on your phone. In many cases, the release platform acts as a test bed for a developer, letting them get a game out to retail while the team continues to hammer away at other versions for other systems. This approach is appealing for a reason; not only do developers get some money in the door to help pay for lunch, but it also lets the wider gaming public act as free game testers. This gamer feedback can help inform changes to the eventual ports. Games like *Anomaly: Warzone Earth* are a testament to how well this formula works, and I suspect an increasing number of games will get the same treatment in the next couple of years.



Looking for more on downloadable and indie games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates on the best in PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, WiiWare, and PC downloadable releases. This month, don't miss our exclusive interview with acclaimed developer Jordan Mechner regarding his recently announced Karateka remake. For more on downloadable games in this issue, don't miss our reviews of *Warp*, *Gotham City Imposters*, *Shank 2*, *Alan Wake's American Nightmare*, and *Journey* starting on page 78.

Already out on PC and mobile, Xbox 360 players are receiving a port of this innovative strategy title from 11 Bit Studios that flips the expected tower defense formula upside down. Instead of defending a home base, you command an armored squad that traverses through real-life cities, blowing away the invading aliens as you go. As commander, you must choose your route through the dangerous city streets, as well as the units best suited to bringing down the enemies in your way. As your convoy moves through the world, its only chance for survival is quick thinking on your part, as you need to deploy special abilities on the fly to respond to new threats. The 360 version is enhanced and improved, most particularly through an excellent controller interface that many might prefer over the touch-screen or keyboard options in previous iterations. The developer says the game was originally developed for play using a 360 controller, so it's finally getting the release it was designed for. A full story mode is accompanied by additional

assault modes, totaling several hours of fun tactical gameplay. In addition, the 360 version has six new virtual reality-style tactical trial levels. I'm always enthusiastic about adding a healthy dose of action into a strategic title, so I'm following *Anomaly* with great interest, especially given the already high bar set by its initial release on other platforms.

It's been several months since the initial announcement of *Quantum Conundrum*, and I recently got another glimpse at the promising game. With an Airtight Games team led by Kim

Swift, one of the original minds behind *Portal*, there's reason to believe that the puzzles will be well designed. Played in first-person, *Quantum Conundrum* lets the player shift between five unique dimensions in order to progress through a wacky mansion owned by your eccentric scientist uncle. This month I got a glimpse of the Fluffy Dimension, a strange version of reality in which everything turns into adorable pink plush objects. Beyond the obvious cute factor, the Fluffy Dimension makes normally heavy objects light and easy to move around. As a result, you can throw them across gaps, build your own ladders, reach distant switches or objects, or anything else you can deduce. Other dimensions give you the ability to slow down time or reverse the natural flow of gravity. I love the

game's exaggerated, cartoonish art style, and the dimensional shift concept looks like a lot of fun. The puzzles I've seen do a fascinating job of creating distinct challenges, especially when later levels demand rapid-fire switching of several different dimensions to find solutions.

I have no idea what to make of *World Gone Sour*. One of the more unusual licensed properties in recent memory, *World Gone Sour* is a side-scrolling platformer about the popular movie theater candy treat Sour Patch Kids. With a theme song recorded by Method Man, and narration by Cedric Bratton from *The Office*, the weirdness skyrockets. Defying my initial impression, what I've seen and played so far has been fun. You control one of the goosy little guys as he makes his way through a world of human-sized objects that are far too big to be anything but platforms he leaps upon. Playing like a mix between *Pikmin* and *LittleBigPlanet*, the gameplay has you flinging around smaller Sour Patch Kids to knock over cups or topple barriers, or combining with your little friends to become a super Sour Patch Kid of slightly less minute size. A friendly two-player co-op mode is also a welcome addition. Sure, the game seems like a shameless marketing tie-in product, but based on my brief time playing the game it also is surprisingly amusing. Judge for yourself when the Capcom game releases on consoles later this spring. PC owners can check out the game now. ☞

World Gone Sour
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC



Quantum Conundrum
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC



The Beginning of a New Adventure

The present & future of Double Fine's fan-funded game by Matthew Kato

Tim Schafer and Double Fine have always had a devoted following, but even the developers of cult classics like *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend* were surprised by how many people pledged money to the company's latest project via the crowdsourced funding platform Kickstarter. Just over eight hours after announcing that Double Fine was making an old-fashioned point-and-click adventure title to be funded by fans, the project raised its original \$400,000 goal. As of the time of this writing, the developer has raised more than \$2 million thanks to over 60,000 backers.

The DRM-free game will appear on PC, Mac, Linux, iOS, and select Android handsets in October for anyone who's donated \$15 or more to the project (it will also be available to purchase when released). Apart from the extra goodies that come your way for giving more to the game, Double Fine is going the extra step of showing fans the title as it's made courtesy of video game documentary company 2 Player Productions. This not only includes the usual behind-the-scenes documentary (released in monthly updates), but extends to letting Kickstarter backers make some

decisions regarding the game itself, gain access to the Steam beta, and more.

Since the game has already reached its original financing goal, Double Fine says it is re-investing the extra money back into the project to extend the game to new platforms (like iOS) and provide features like English voiceovers, foreign language text translations, music, and more.

Producer Greg Rice told us the idea for the game came from conversations with 2 Player Productions, who had just finished interviewing Schafer for its *Minecraft* documentary. They pitched the idea of doing a Double Fine documentary, and the idea just evolved from there.

Initially, the developer wasn't sure how much money it could get from the fanbase via Kickstarter, so they scaled it to a size they thought appropriate.

"It wouldn't have been a project on the scale of what it will be now," says Rice. "It would have been a much smaller game done by a team of three or four people over the course of around six months. We thought that \$400,000 was a number that would allow us to make something that fans would enjoy that could be made for the smallest amount of money possible. We didn't want to set a

budget of \$3 million and not get it."

With all the surplus funding, Rice says that the budget is more in line with recent Double Fine titles like *Stacking* and *Costume Quest*.

By relying on the fanbase instead of a traditional publisher-funded model, Double Fine can avoid having to pay a publisher back for its initial investment and keep total control of the IP. Given the poor standing of the adventure genre among publishers, Double Fine didn't see any other viable options for receiving funding. "We actually never even considered pitching this game to a publisher," Rice admits. "Based on games we've tried to pitch before that are a bit out there and a bit risky, I think that we just assumed that it wasn't even worth trying."

The industry at large has already responded to Double Fine's use of Kickstarter and the fan reaction to it. *Twisted Metal*'s David Jaffe, who is leaving developer *Eat Sleep Play* to start up another company, says that he'd consider using crowdfunding in the future, while former *Interplay* founder and *Fallout* executive producer Brian Fargo has already stated he's going to try and make another *Wasteland* title using Kickstarter. Fargo promises that the project will be "100 percent faithful to its roots," and that the process itself



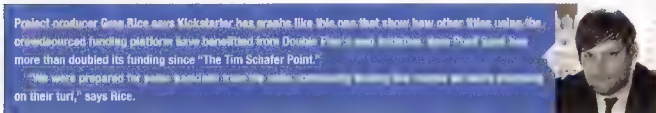
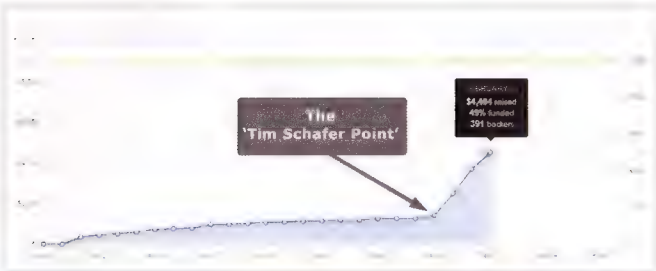
"means we don't have to do it like the publisher wants."

Despite the possibilities, Rice doesn't necessarily think that using Kickstarter or self-funding is necessarily appropriate for all games. "It's hard to say whether we could Kickstarter another project at this point," he said. "I think we will consider it and see what the state of Kickstarter and the industry is at the time we're pitching our next project. If it's a game that has a built-in fanbase like adventure games do, and we feel like we could ask people to pay for it without knowing what the game is or seeing the game, then it makes sense. But I don't think we can force every idea we have into Kickstarter."

Rice also acknowledges that in the bigger picture of whether more games in general can use this process, Double Fine has benefited from the particular situation of being a known developer with a devoted fanbase and a personality like Tim Schafer.

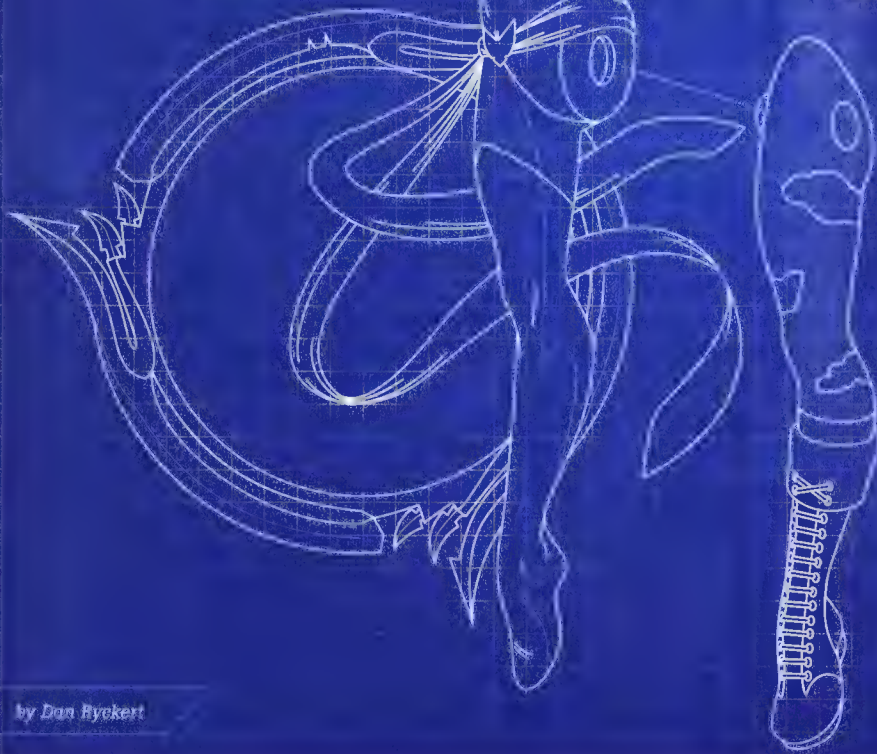
As for how the game itself is taking shape at this moment, Rice proclaimed, "It hasn't taken shape at all!" He says the company is currently working on things like creating the forums for backers and selecting the engine for the game.

"Anytime one of us starts talking about it," says Rice, "we just all have to stop talking because we're waiting for the cameras to be around and the community to be involved before we actually get to work on the game." ♦



For more info on the project, its many rewards, and how you can donate before the March 13 deadline, head over to www.kickstarter.com

Building



by Dan Byckert

the Perfect Fighting Game

Ever since *Street Fighter II* ushered in the genre's first wave of mainstream popularity in the early '90s, fighters have had one of the most vocal fanbases in all of gaming. From the tournament crowd that studies *Street Fighter* hit boxes and frame counts to the Nintendo fans pummeling each other as Mario and Link in *Super Smash Bros.*, the genre has no shortage of varied experiences. With fighting games more popular now than they have been in years, we've attempted to piece together the genre's best elements in an effort to create the perfect fighter.

Special Moves | Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3

It's impossible to understate *Street Fighter*'s impact on the genre, especially when it comes to special moves. While that series' special move inputs still serve as a template for fighting games today, few have incorporated them as effectively as the *Marvel vs. Capcom* series. Special moves are integral to gameplay, extending your combos and helping players achieve maximum damage. They're essential to strategy, and the huge *MvC* roster ensures that the moves are varied, fun, and flashy.

Ultra System | Super Street Fighter IV

Many fighters feature meters that give you access to powerful ultra moves, but some can be overwhelmingly complicated if you're not a hardcore player. *Super Street Fighter IV* manages to make things accessible without being overly complicated, with two basic meters governing ultra, super, and EX attacks. You can use small chunks of your super meter to enhance your special moves, or opt to unleash a more powerful super once it's filled. If you've been taking enough damage throughout a round, your ultra meter will fill and give you access to a visually stunning and extremely powerful attack. Utilizing this system is a key component of the game, and it adds another layer to the already-stellar fighting action.

Roster | Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3

Considering the long history of both Marvel and Capcom, *UMvC 3*'s roster is a dream team for fans of comics or gaming. You can assume the roles of iconic characters like Spider-Man, Wolverine, Ryu, and Dante, or you can tone down the seriousness a bit by playing as Rocket Raccoon, Viewtiful Joe, or Phoenix Wright. All 50 characters feature their own unique styles and amazing screen-filling ultimate attacks, giving fans distinct and entertaining options no matter who they choose.

Modes | Mortal Kombat

The 2011 *Mortal Kombat* reboot is the perfect "desert island" fighter, as it packs in plenty of content even if you don't have anyone to share it with. You can choose to save *Eternalrealm* in a lengthy CG-filed story mode, work your way up the standard one-on-one or tag team arcade ladders, play a variety of mingles, or attempt to conquer the 300-stage challenge tower. All the while, you earn Kongs that you can use to purchase hundreds of items in the expansive *Krypt*.

Graphics | Soulcalibur V

Street Fighter has a striking ink-based art style, *Marvel vs. Capcom* has its insane ultimate attacks, and *Mortal Kombat*'s animations look as brutal as can be, but no fighter has the total visual package like *Soulcalibur V*. It's been a gorgeous series ever since the Dreamcast original, but Namco's fifth entry and first collaboration with *CyberConnect2* is the best-looking fighter ever made. Character models and stages are beautiful, animations are fluid, particle effects complement the action, and the big attacks look like they have some serious weight behind them.

Sound | Super Street Fighter IV

When we think of classic fighting tunes, one series comes to mind before any others. *Street Fighter*'s soundtrack has always been the perfect fit for the fast-paced action that's always occurring onscreen, and its newest entry features a great mix of remixed classics and new, easily hummable tunes. With its iconic music, large collection of battle cries, and fantastic combat sound effects, *Super Street Fighter IV* excels in audio production.

Story | Mortal Kombat

Say what you will about *Mortal Kombat* canon, but you can't argue the production value that went into the 2011 reboot's story mode. Spanning the timelines of the first three *Mortal Kombat* games, this lengthy mode whisks you from one character to another until Shao Kahn is six feet under (at least until his inevitable return). With frequent cutscenes and varied scenarios, this is the most extensive story mode we've ever seen in a fighter.

Unlockables | Super Smash Bros. Brawl

Last year, four *Game Informer* editors decided to break a Guinness record for the longest fighting game marathon. We knew we'd have to pick a title that kept us engaged for a long period of time, and there was never any doubt over which game we'd pick. *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* includes a downright silly number of unlockable characters, stages, trophies, stickers, and more. These can be unlocked via single player or multiplayer, and some of the bigger unlocks don't pop up until you've taken part in hundreds of bouts. If you're looking for a fighter that will continuously give you reasons to keep playing, you can't do better than *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*.

Local Multiplayer | Super Smash Bros. Brawl

Nintendo may not have online play quite figured out, but it's hard to not have a blast when you're playing *Smash Bros.* in a living room with three buddies. With the ability to tweak power-ups, rules, gravity, and more, there's plenty of variety to keep those *Smash* marathons going late into the night.

Online Multiplayer | Super Street Fighter IV

It's 2012, so the large majority of fighters feature some kind of online component. Some are packed with features, while others play consistently without a hint of lag. When both of these descriptions can be used for the same game, you know you've got a winner on your hands. *Super Street Fighter IV* features a solid lobby system, the popular *Endless* mode, a replay channel, and an extensive ranking system. It's impossible to eliminate all instances of lag, but these are few and far between when playing Capcom's fighter online. It's the most robust and reliable online multiplayer system in the genre. ♦



Rift Turns One

MMOs don't wink out of existence overnight just because another game comes out. As Trion Worlds' Rift celebrated its first birthday on March 1 of this year,

we talked to game director Scott Hartsman about weathering the Star Wars: The Old Republic launch, learning from mistakes, and how a game necessarily has to change over time.

by Adam Bressner

Star Wars: The Old Republic is the first real landmark competitor launch you've had to survive. How has that gone for you?

Actually, pretty amazing. As with any game, you definitely see some number of vacationers whether it's a Skyrim or a TOR. It doesn't even have to be an MMO. People will duck away for a time, and then what you tend to see is that they will then come back. We knew that TOR was coming; we had our own plans to make sure that when people were done taking their vacation, they had a great place to come back to and bring their friends. That's paid off for us. Without getting too deep into specifics, we are in fact growing – and we're pretty damn happy about that.

So your paid subscription base is bigger now than it was before The Old Republic? Yes.

You recently started allowing players to lock their experience level in order to stay in a lower PvP bracket, which led to some community outcry over "naturally" leveled characters being steamrolled by so-called "twinks." Do you have any plans to address that?

Judging by the stats, there have not been many cases of that at all. I know that the fear of it

happening was a lot greater than the reality of it happening. Our game, unlike some other games, doesn't have the incredibly broken, overpowered stuff that really causes that problem, and that was an intentional part of the item and spell design. So the fear of it was definitely huge, but in reality it doesn't exist too terribly much. Now, that said, if that ever did happen we'd have no problem – the same way we have rank bracketing at level 50, we could easily do gear level bracketing at lower levels. Our system inherently supports it if we ever need to. But we look at the stats every day, and so far it doesn't look like it.

I hear a lot of complaints by players that servers are underpopulated. Why haven't you done any server mergers?

Looking purely at the stats right now, every server that we have is essentially in a healthy place. I think some of the places that we can do better are communication across all players and letting all players play with other players, which are two of our big research projects over the next year. In our perfect world, if I am a dude who is playing Rift and you are a dude who is playing Rift, we should be able to find a way to play together. I think that's the core goal, and once we get there then everybody gets to have their cake and eat it too, whether you're a player or developer or both.

Another common complaint is regarding how generic Rift's fantasy world is. How do you respond to that criticism?

You can write down all the greatest lore in the world, and if there's one thing that this generation of MMO players has really made crystal clear, walls of text just don't get read. We have so many lore tomes scattered across the game that people can collect; there's even a tab for them in your character sheet, hundreds and hundreds of these tomes. There is a world that has depth and does have an interesting background and has all this material there, and our take away from the feedback is that you can have the most compelling world in the universe, but if you're going to make me go out of my way to read text to get it, I'm not going to pay any attention to that. So I think the challenge is really on us to create more memorable characters and give them more interesting bits of personality in smaller bites... We know that that is a place in the game that's ripe for some good solid improvement. It's definitely something that we've had our eye on, too.

A number of other formerly subscription-model games have been very successful in switching to a free-to-play model. Why hasn't Trion followed suit with Rift?

I think different points in time have different correct answers. At this point in time, the game is doing really well with its subscription model, with the Lite edition, with the mobile edition, to where we're pretty comfortable with where things are now. It depends on any number of things. What's the competitive landscape look like? What kind of gamer's attention are you competing for? All of those factors come together to make what's right right now. We are where we are right now. We're very happy that there are lots of other companies doing things that work for them, and over time I'm sure we'll add even newer and more exciting ways to play. [The recently released ability to play Rift for free up to level 20] being one of those examples. I don't necessarily know what's going to come next right now, but maybe there will be a next. We'll figure that out then. While barrier reduction is an important thing to us, for the moment we're focusing more on the technology side than the business model side. ♦

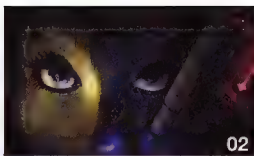




01

BioShock (System Shock 2)

System Shock 2 was lauded for its hybrid gameplay, moody atmosphere, and captivating story. Unfortunately, its poor sales drove many designers at Looking Glass Studios to start looking for jobs at other studios. Years after Looking Glass closed, System Shock 2 co-developer Irrational Games reworked its winning formula into a game that was both critically praised and financially successful.



02

Perfect Dark (GoldenEye 007)

With GoldenEye 007, Rare created one of the greatest licensed games of all time. But when EA bought the rights to Bond, a sequel seemed unlikely. Fortunately, Rare took the technology behind GoldenEye and developed a sci-fi shooter that lacked some of Bond's suavity, but still delivered multiplayer thrills.



03

Rock Band (Guitar Hero)

In 2005, Harmonix Music Systems took a risk releasing a rhythm game bundled with a spendy controller. When the Guitar Hero brand blew up, Activision forced Harmonix out of the band by buying the Guitar Hero rights. Harmonix responded by developing a full band game to compete against the musical phenomenon it had helped create. The rest is rock history.



04

Call of Duty (Medal of Honor: Allied Assault)

In 2002, game studio 2015, Inc. released what is often considered the finest Medal of Honor title to date, Allied Assault. Hoping to earn a better development contract, 22 of those designers split off and formed a small startup called Infinity Ward. This studio continued to refine WWII shooters with Call of Duty. In 2010, the cycle continued as several Infinity Ward developers left to form Respawn Entertainment.



05

Final Fantasy Tactics (Tactics Ogre)

During the height of the PSone era, Square went headhunting for strategy developers. The publisher hired Yasumi Matsuno, whose previous work on Ogre Battle and Tactics Ogre made him one of the country's preeminent strategy developers. Matsuno and his team took many of the elements that made the Ogre Battle series great and spun them into a Final Fantasy title that exploded in popularity.



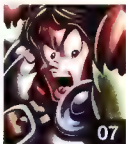
06

Bayonetta (Devil May Cry)

When Hideki Kamiya set out to develop a new Resident Evil game, he inadvertently created the Devil May Cry series. In 2006 Kamiya and his team left Capcom to form Platinum Games, but Kamiya wasn't done creating insane action games. When he left for Platinum Games he took all of DMC's elements – high-octane action, tight controls, and nonsensical story – and refined them with the hair-raising Bayonetta.

Maximo: Ghosts to Glory (Ghosts'n Goblins)

When the industry transitioned into 3D game worlds, Capcom's Ghosts'n Goblins series all but disappeared. Inspired by many of the series' design principles, one of Capcom's U.S.-based developers created Maximo. Despite positive reviews, the Maximo series ghosted from the current gaming landscape, much like the series that inspired it.



07

Dragon Age (Baldur's Gate)

In 1998, BioWare used a modified version of Dungeons & Dragon's 2nd edition rules to create a game set in the Forgotten Realms universe. Years later, the studio wanted to craft another immersive world where players influenced events along an epic timeline, but the studio had to do so without the Dungeons & Dragon's license. The solution was Dragon Age: Origins.



08

Odin Sphere (Princess Crown)

After releasing the quirky Japan-only action/RPG Princess Crown for the Sega Saturn in 1997, many of Atlus' in-house developers left to form Vanillaware. The new studio began work on the gorgeous PS2 title Odin Sphere. The game's mechanics and style were so similar to Princess Crown that everything but the name screams sequel.



09

Demon's Souls (King's Field)

SCEJ producer Takeshi Kaji was a fan of From Software's King's Field series, but when the studio asked him to work on a new game, he didn't want to be tied to King's Field traditions. For Demon's Souls, his team took some of King's Field's design elements – such as the art design, RPG sensibilities, and challenging gameplay – and worked them into a brand new franchise.



10



Meeting of the Minds

by Matt Bertz

Each February, many of the game industry's best and brightest gather to discuss their craft at the D.I.C.E. summit in Las Vegas, Nevada. While developers played poker, shared cocktails, talked shop, met with agents, and signed backroom deals that will shape the gaming landscape for years to come, we tracked down interactive entertainment's thought leaders to gain their perspective on industry trends and their upcoming projects.

5

Questions with Richard Hilleman

Electronic Arts' chief creative officer talks about the future of sports games

You always hear sports fans daydream about EA breaking out of the yearly release cycle and maybe selling roster updates and gameplay patches between games, then releasing sports games every two years with more impactful gameplay changes. Is that a realistic scenario?

It's somewhat realistic, but there are barriers they are not thinking about. The challenge for us in the console business is the total number of iteration cycles we have within the season of a product is pretty limited. Sometimes I can get a patch in six weeks out of a console manufacturer, but most of the time it's 90 days. That means at best I get two update cycles within a sports year, for instance. My ability to fix the game during the year is pretty limited because of the number of bites of the apple I get is pretty limited. You're absolutely right I could change my rosters every year, but what we find is that we have to do other things to make the game play right.

What about the server-side tuning that games like NHL have adopted for making gameplay tweaks?

That works in a very limited way that we spend a tremendous amount of time with the manufacturers to negotiate. It's not what they naturally want to do, and they have good reasons why. They have security things to worry about [that] I completely understand. The second thing is they're after the unity of the experience, and I understand that too. We want our consumers to have the best experience, but by reducing that granularity you give me very few windows to make my product better. Usually when a new season comes we put in a new set of character rosters, but we also put in a bunch of new plays and generally what we do is we spend the next six weeks trying to figure out what we've broken. Part of this is that, with the NHL and NFL as examples, there is too much innovation in the game to really sit still. The AI from year to year is not good enough. So we have to go back and reach that again.

Could we update that in other ways? It's possible. I think we would love to have a more service-oriented, long-term relationship with our customers. I'd love to sell my customer Madden on all the platforms in an integrated experience with the ability to give them other services that maybe nobody had. We're going to try to do that, but right now today simply [doing] the roster updates and the minor code updates would be a disappointing experience for those people. It would be a lot less than they want. We would like to have a more continuous developer relationship on our sports game engine. That's what we would like to do. That's more possible in the online space than it is on the console space, and you will probably see more innovation in that part of our world to try to do that.

One of the big pitfalls for Madden and sports games in general is the transition from one console generation to the next.

One of the cases I made at SIEGE was just the opposite – sports games have a great advantage going into new platforms.

You would think so, but Madden 08 for the Xbox 360 shipped with a fraction of the feature set that the PS2 version had. That game is now considered the black sheep of the entire franchise.

I don't remember the specifics of that and I may not have been here when that happened, but what I can tell you [about] that launch is that it was extremely accelerated and it's very possible we did not have the assets when we needed to do what we needed to do. The only thing more stupid than releasing a less-than-perfect Madden is to not release one until March. So, one of the challenges with sports is they have their seasons and you really don't set outside of their seasons. Sometimes our timing dictates the quality of the product we can ship, especially when hardware manufacturing dictates when we get to start. I do agree with you about that product – we don't accept that.

My plan is for you to never see that again.

Obviously Madden is going through a big transition with much of its senior leadership group – Philip Holt, Ian Cummings, Phil Frazier – leaving EA Tiburon. How does the new team differ from the old team?

The executive producer on the product line is Roy Harvey. Roy's been at Tiburon a long time. He did NCAA, so he knows the product and the system really well. Roy was also building a lot of the online backend systems that supported Madden and the ancillary and flanker products. He's being brought into the team where he's a pretty well understood player and he knows what he's got. The Madden engine is an acquired taste that requires specific knowledge. We brought Cam Weber on. Cam came from Fight Night and some other products. His cousin is Shea Weber from the Nashville Predators. What I like about the new team is that they haven't accepted any of the conventional wisdom about the product. I found that when I went down there a lot and talked about the change I wanted to see in the product I was considered a raving lunatic because I advocated more change than almost anybody else did. I would take bigger risks than anybody else. I think Cam is out of that same cloth. His attitude is "What can I be?" not "What could I lose?" They are doing big things this year. They're making big changes. What we're after is a better defense that's more fun to play. I think Cam will do some pretty interesting things in that space, so I'm pretty optimistic. I've loved the people who have worked on that game over the years. The other fact is Dale Jackson, who ran it for 14 years or something like that, is 35 feet away. So, in the larger scheme of things Dale is still around, I'm still around, Roy is still around, and a lot of the new team is bringing the right kind of ideas. I don't think we're likely to make a terrible mistake, and I think we're pretty likely to do some new things that we needed to do.



Overheard at D.I.C.E.

"Why in the f---k would you choose the medium that has historically, continually, been the worst medium to express philosophy and story and narrative? Why wouldn't you write a book? Why wouldn't you make a movie? Why wouldn't you go on a blog? Why wouldn't you run for f---ing office? Instead, to me, it's the equivalent of being one of the world's best chefs and instead of working at a four or five-star restaurant, you choose to ply your trade at McDonald's. It doesn't make any sense."

— Twisted Metal creator **David Jaffe** on storytelling in video games



One RPG
to Rule Them All:

Skyrim Takes Top Prize at 15th Annual IAA Awards

For Bethesda Game Studios, the accolades keep pouring in like side quests in its epic RPG *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Just a month after being named Game Informer's 2011 Game of the Year, *Skyrim* took home five more trophies at the Interactive Achievement Awards, including the top honors. The only other games with multiple wins were *Portal 2* and *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*, which received three trophies apiece. To see the full list of award winners, go to www.gameinformer.com.

Back to the Future:

Old School Arcade Developers Give Mobile Games a Go

In many respects, the current mobile games market isn't much different than the arcade market of the early '80s. Games are developed quickly with rapid prototyping. They lure in nontraditional gamers who would be intimidated by a more complex control scheme, and if you don't start attracting customers to your game quickly then you will drown in the sea of competition. Given the long list of similarities between the current market and the arcades, a company like Innovative Leisure makes total sense.

Founded by Xbox co-founder and former CAA agent Seamus Blackley, Innovative Leisure is based around an unlikely reunion of Atari generation game developers who are seeking another shot at making games. The lineup of talent Blackley assembled for the mobile start-up is impressive. Who better to create games for the iPad and iPhone than game development pioneers like Richard Adam (*Missile Command*), Ed Rotberg (*Battlezone*), Owen Rubin (*Major Havoc*,

Space Duel), and Ed Logg (*Asteroids*, *Centipede*, *Gauntlet*), who received the 2012 AIAS Pioneer Award at D.I.C.E.

"We are looking at the new arcade, and 99 cents on the iPhone is the new quarter," Blackley told VentureBeat.

Innovative Leisure signed a strategic first rights agreement with THQ, which is dealing with its own financial struggles. THQ gets the first chance to publish Innovative Leisure's titles, but if the publisher declines, the studio is free to pursue another deal. Though they don't have a finalized schedule for its first slate of games, Blackley says you may see their first product reach the market sometime in the fall.

These veteran developers feel right at home in the ultra-competitive space. "If you don't grab the attention of the player, give them fun early on, they'll move on to something else because there's so much else out there," Rotberg said during a D.I.C.E. roundtable. Just like old times.



"I believe that if creativity is the core of what the company does, maybe creativity should be at the core of how that company's decisions are made."

— Activision Publishing CEO **Eric Hirschberg**

"I stopped working weekends'...if you say that in this industry, you're kind of a loser."

— Insomniac co-founder **Ted Price** on improving quality of life

"Most entertainment can give you lots of emotion, but what's the emotion that games can do? The answer is pride."

— Bethesda Game Studios creative director **Todd Howard**

"I think the power is going to ultimately shift from the publisher to the developer."

— Wedbush Securities research analyst **Michael Pachter**

"Call of Duty literally earned a billion dollars a day faster than *Avatar*. Maybe we shouldn't always be trying to aim for the film [with our stories]. And I'm a film guy saying that."

— EA senior CG supervisor **TJ Galda**

3

Questions with Randy Pitchford

The Gearbox Software founder talks about his company's view on licensed games

When we think of Gearbox, we think of original designs and concepts, but as a licensed game, *Aliens: Colonial Marines* sticks out of your current portfolio. What's the future for Gearbox and licensed games once *Aliens* ships?

As a creative interest, we are gamers and game makers who love to play a lot of different types of games, so we will endeavor to make a lot of different types of games. Sometimes there's awesome stuff in the world that other people have created that inspired us. With *Aliens*, it's a no-brainer. Part of the fascination with *Halo* is because it's derivative of the *Colonial Marines* stylings. You can feel [*Aliens* director] James Cameron's influences all over *Halo*. I've been stealing from *Aliens* forever; I'm not ashamed to admit it. What you'll find is in the future Gearbox will in fact create new things. When we do it's usually because there's something that we might identify as a worthy bet that's not covered anywhere else. That's where we'll create new things. At the same time, there's a lot of awesome stuff in the world that other people created. When we finished the first *Brothers in Arms* game, we made a list of these

awesome properties that we'd love to get involved in, and *Aliens* was at the top of that list and we managed to get involved.

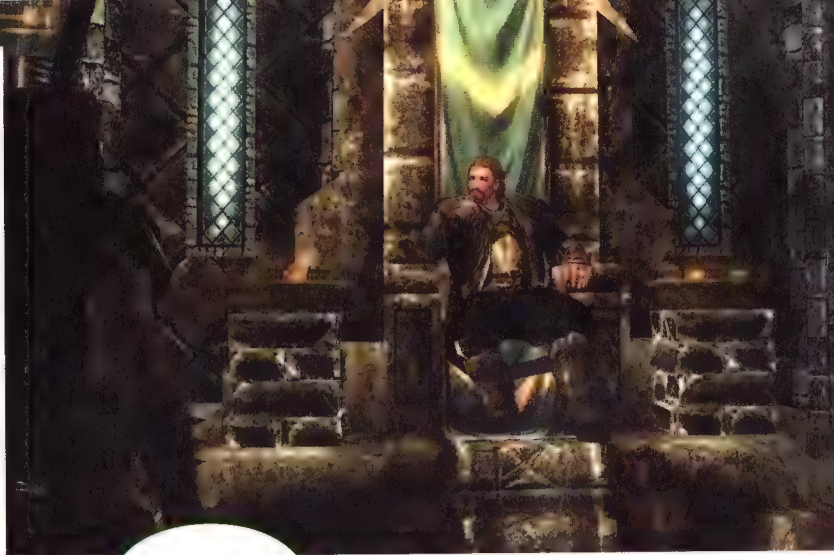
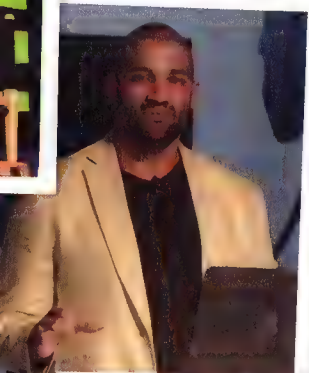
What were some of the other names on that list for licenses that you wanted to work on?

I did a deal with New Regency and Michael Mann for *Heat*. I think there needs to be a good heist game. I don't think there really is one. There have been people that have made some attempts. Most heist stories in passive entertainment, like television and film, are usually about the elaborate plan and if it goes well, there's actually the absence of conflict. *Heat* had hockey masks and AK-47s, and that was a reasonable strategy in that one case, to go at it face first. Eventually other things started to cover it. Kane and Lynch tried some things. What I thought was great was basically the *Heat* mission in *Grand Theft Auto IV*. We had some other priorities at the time and I wasn't able to do anything with *Heat*. We also looked at *Sin City*, a couple other Frank Miller things, and *Blade Runner*.

What's the status on the *Heat* game license? Who owns it?

We did a deal so we had a license to create a video game based on *Heat*. I haven't looked at that license in years. I'm sure there was a term on it. It's probably expired. It was never a project, but there was intent. If the deal would have gotten done three months earlier than it had, that's where our attention would have gone. I eventually told New Regency we missed the window after the deal got done. I think it would be cool to play an awesome heist game. That property lends credibly to it. It's a nice word; you can picture it on the box. Because of what that movie represented, it tells us this approach to a heist game isn't going to be "passively work out the secret plan," this is going to be an in your face action game, which is the way we wanted to approach it. I also like how the movie *Heat* looked at it from both the point of view of the sociopathic killer and the law enforcement. It's fun to use the safe medium of a video game to explore the dark side kind of things. I'm always a good guy, too. I always pick the hero. I like that the property would have allowed us to naturally make a game where it's expected you're playing in parallel the hero and villain side of that conflict.





3

Questions with Todd Howard

The Bethesda Game Studio's creative director talks about Skyrim bugs and transmedia

Before Skyrim came out last November, how aware were you of the bugs that people began to run into shortly after release? Is the game just so big that trying to QA test it to perfection is nearly impossible and you just have to wait until millions of people begin to play it to get additional feedback?

We can always do a better job. All of our internal and external data show that it's our most solid release, including the PS3 version. But it's also our most successful. The percentage of people that have a problem on any particular system ends up being a low percentage, but the raw number ends up being larger than we would have expected.

We learned a lot about this. In particular with the PS3 version, it was "Why aren't we seeing this?" We saw some of it that we were able to solve very quickly, but we eventually had to go to the consumer and ask

for their saved game files. You're looking at saved games where, not everybody, but certain people played for hundreds of hours. There were a lot of different reasons it was happening. Fortunately, we were able to fix it with the latest update.

Hopefully, it's a much smaller number now. When you put all this time into something and someone can't play it, you feel terrible. They have every right to be pissed off. We already have more updates out for this than Fallout 3 and Oblivion in their lifetimes. We're really committed to fixing everything.

How much of a learning process was this for you? People tend to joke that while Bethesda's games are great in the end, players come to expect the products will have bugs.

The main thing we [realized], now that we have the beta program on Steam with 10 million people playing

the game and their saves are in all sorts of states, is that no matter what we do internally, even if we test something to the nth degree, we're still looking at this microcosm of everybody's current live game. So that was new for us. Our fans have been awesome. They have been great with us and they're helping us do that. What we do in the future I don't know yet. It's something we're going to look into.

Do you ever think about exploring the rest of Skyrim's world through other forms of media?

With that stuff we look to merchandising type things. I'd like to keep the content itself in the games. For example, if people like the dragon priests and what they do, then let's maybe get that in some downloadable content. I'm making that up right now, but I'd rather it be that avenue than a comic or something like that.

What Developers Want in Next-Generation Consoles

by Jim Reilly

With the Wii U slated for release this holiday, the next consoles from Microsoft and Sony can't be too far behind. But if this current console cycle taught us anything, it's that graphical power is no longer a central focus for hardware makers. Gamers want to be connected. They want

to share their experiences with friends. They want to be able to access content on any device at anytime. During the DICE conference in Las Vegas, we asked a number of game developers and publishers what they wanted to see in the next-generation consoles.

"I would really like to see motion control that has been developed with the game in mind. Skyward Sword is an amazing example. I would love a lot of developers to take more inspiration from that and realize motion control can work."

— **Phil Larson**
Halfbrick Studios

"I just want more and more connectivity. I want to be connected to the world. I want to play somewhere where I feel like I'm not isolated and feel part of the rest of everything that's happening out there."

— **Ru Weerasuriya**
Ready at Dawn Studios

"I think we're on the verge of delivering cinematic-level emotional impact in stories. I'm a huge fan of being moved by film. We're almost there graphically. That's going to be great. Storytelling in the next-generation is pretty exciting."

— **Michael Condry**
Sledgehammer Games

"As a player, I would love to see more online capability. Although we develop mostly on PC, we don't only have to be there. If the console had better online capabilities and allowed us to service a live game, that could be exciting for us."

— **Min Kim**
Nexon

"The more powerful the better."

— **Tomonobu Itagaki**
Valhalla Game Studios

"I absolutely want to see more power, deeper graphics, and the ability to draw more life-like characters and get more emotion out of them. More power makes it easier to develop and gives us more opportunities."

— **Danny Bilson**
THQ

"The next-gen consoles really need to focus on cloud gaming. That's the space I'm in right now. So I'm incredibly biased."

— **David Perry**
Gaikai

"I would love a clear way that digital games could be a big part of this always-connected console that you could very easily access content from big, triple-A studios to small independent ones."

— **Amir Rao**
Supergiant Games

"Instant load times."

— **Ted Price**
Insomniac Games

"I think the ability to play anywhere and anytime. Find some way to bring that all together that I can play what I want to wherever I am."

— **Rod Fergusson**
Epic Games

I want to be able to see
the atmosphere.
I want to believe
what I'm seeing
on the screen.

"I would like to see always-on connectivity. The ability to do more micro-transactions, and more flexibility with the business side of things. Because of the App Store and this rise in mobile gaming, we're designing our games very differently. It would be nice to design a game and take it to all these different platforms instead of having to redesign them for all these walled gardens that are dictated and run by a specific publisher. I think the big console platform publishers are going to take all these things from Facebook and mobile platforms and they'll look at all these features and find ways to work them into their platforms."

— **Matthew Lee Johnston**
PopCap Games

"As a gamer, no more buttons. I think there's enough. As a developer, I'm looking forward to all the power we'll be able to get and bring the next bit of realism to our games. I want to be able to see the atmosphere. I want to believe what I'm seeing on the screen."

— **Glen Schofield**
Sledgehammer Games

"Honestly, I'd like it to always be on like my PSP or DS. A barrier of entry for me as I get older is sitting down and turning on my machine and going through all the logos and loading bull---t. If I could have one thing, besides advancements in technology, that would be it. Always-on consoles."

— **David Jaffe**
Eat Sleep Play

"I'd like to see a really, really easy, simple, and clean way to download games."

— **Greg Kasavin**
Supergiant Games

"I want more power. I think we've got these high-definition screens. Within the next console generation we're probably going to see UD screens, which are four times the resolution that what we have now. So we'll need more power if we're going to have high-fidelity images. Ultimately, what I'm interested in is having as close as a relationship with customers as possible. I want everyone to be connected, not just the small percentage of people that subscribe to the services. I want our games to bring us all together."

— **Randy Pitchford**
Gearbox Software

"As a player, I would want something faster. Not having to wait for load times and having to load different data. The faster the better."

— **Brian Reynolds**
Zynga

"Epic likes to push consoles to the maximum. We want raw processing power. For us it's about teraflops. The more graphics power they deliver us, the more depth we can add to our games and the more we can impress players with the graphics."

— **Tim Sweeney**
Epic Games

interview



photo: Lyds Wilens

Moving Beyond Minecraft

CAREER
HIGHLIGHTS

With his innovative, creation-oriented sandbox game Minecraft, Mojang's Markus Persson (a.k.a. Notch) seemingly came out of nowhere to become one of the industry's newest visionaries. We recently spoke with Notch about his development philosophy, the indie game scene, and Mojang's future plans.

interview by Adam Bissener

You've always said Scrolls is a [Mojang co-founder] Jakob Porser game, not a Notch game, but what makes it a game that you are excited to have as part of Mojang?

The core idea is something that me and Jakob have been discussing for a long time, since we were at King.com. It's definitely the game we initially thought we were going to make together. When we started Mojang we thought that we could make both Minecraft and Scrolls. Very soon after, we decided that it should just be Jacob working on [Scrolls] because I was so busy with Minecraft.

Did you ever consider changing the name of Scrolls in order to avoiding dealing with the Bethesda lawsuit?

I personally was so angry with the whole mentality of suing people that I decided we were going to fight it. It's a bit naive and idealistic, perhaps, but I am that way.

Do you think of Mojang as an indie studio, or is it something else?

Well, you have to define what "indie" is to answer that question. I don't really consider Mojang to be indie, in a sense. We still develop games for the sake of making games, but we're not just four people sitting at home anymore. We have almost 20 people. But, we don't have any external funding or investors; we don't have any publishers. So, depending on your definition of the term, then yeah, we are indie. When I came up we had this culture of garage developers, which was people making games in their homes for the sake of it. That's become "indie" now. According to that definition, I don't think we are indie now.

You've been a big champion of indie games since you've been in the public eye. Why do you feel so strongly about indie games?

I don't think I necessarily do. A game is a game, whether it's made by a big company or a small company. I think the smaller company benefits more from mentioning them; more people will hear about them if I tweet about it. That drives me to talk more about them. As a result of the type of companies that make those games, they are often more innovative and more original because they don't have investors forcing them to play it safe.

You're also very vocal about the issues of piracy and digital rights management. A lot of forces are pulling things in different directions. Where do you think it's going to land and where do you hope it's going to land?

Unfortunately, those are two different answers. [Laughs] There are so many evil companies that want to control the flow of information

because they managed to do so for 20 years, and they want to do it forever. That's not really how information behaves. Copying something on the Internet is a free process, and it's easy to do. You literally cannot install a game without copying it. Everything is copying, all the time. Trying to control that is counterproductive. If you really want to control it, you have to have hardcore, technical solutions to it. So, you have futile attempts like DRM. It gets more and more intrusive... I think [the Internet is] fine as it is; I'm making lots of money off it. Piracy isn't stopping us. Sure, we'd prefer if people bought the game, but there are enough honest people out there. So, just focus on the honest people.

What types of externally developed games are you interested in publishing at Mojang in the future?

I think games made by passionate studios that actually own the rights to the IP. We don't want to be one of those publishers that take the IP rights. We want them to make games that they want to sustain for a long time, like we are trying to do with Minecraft. I'd rather work with passionate people than the most moneymaking sequels.

Without owning the IP, what do you get out of publishing a game as a company?

There are two things. One, we build brand awareness because we choose which games to work with. Then, of course, there's the revenue sharing.

Are you involved in the Xbox Live version of Minecraft?

In the development, no. That's 4J Studios. But we get test builds sent to us. I get to see it and have feedback on it.

Working with Microsoft as a publisher seems out of character for Mojang. Did you ever consider using XNA or self-publishing it to throw your weight behind those distribution and creation channels?

No, we never considered that. They approached us and we started talking to them about what kind of deal we could get. We ended up getting a very good deal. So, we have full creative control. They are actually very easygoing to work with as well.

Minecraft has benefited from constant updating, but that's not something that you can really do with Xbox. Will that mean that the Xbox Live version diverges significantly from the PC version of Minecraft because of the way that title updates work on Xbox?

Yeah, I think it's inevitable that it's going to diverge. But I think it makes sense to do that. As an Xbox player, when I play Xbox games I want to have a different experience from when I play a PC game. Since we can't do so many updates and because the controller is different,

we have to concentrate on making a game that fits the platform, not just a straight port. We are trying to keep that in mind, that it is going to be different and embrace that.

Minecraft has enjoyed a lot of community involvement, but bad actors can cause problems like the recent incident with a racial slur briefly appearing on the Minecraft title screen in the Afrikaans translation. Do you ever worry about the consequences of inviting so much community involvement into your product?

I didn't until that happened. I think we put too much trust in them. That went out in the week-long build, which only goes out to power users, but if something like that went out in an official release, it would be very damaging. We have to be more careful. But 98 percent are perfectly friendly and good - it's the two percent that's the problem.

How do you strike that balance of trying to control the bad people without limiting the good community members?

If someone makes a mod that's bad but people have to download it themselves, that's sort of fine, but as soon as we get to the level where we publish something - like the translations - we have to be more careful and look things through. In general, having it be open and free - as in liberty - it's sort of self-balancing. But as soon as we get into putting it out ourselves, we have to have some kind of review process.

You stepped down as the lead on Minecraft, but you're still an active programmer, right? Do you want to work on larger scale things now that Mojang is so successful or is your heart still with the smaller, author-driven game model?

I'm actually not the programmer for Minecraft. I was going to [keep working on it], but I haven't. It feels more like [Minecraft lead] Jens Bergensten's project, and I'm afraid of stepping on his toes. Also, I'm a bit lazy. What I really want to do is make another game in the same way I made Minecraft. Obviously, it's not going to be the same level of success. It would be great if it was, but I don't think it will be - but that's the type of game that I want to make.

There were no expectations for Minecraft. No one knew what it was or who Mojang was when you started. Now, everybody knows Minecraft, and all eyes are on your next project. Does that affect you at all?
Obviously. [Laughs] I try not to pay attention to it, but I find myself thinking about it a lot. Not everyday, but when I start thinking about what game I want to make, then I find myself thinking about "How will the press react to it? How would the players react to it? What should I tweet about it?" It turns into this bigger thing, which is weird.

2003

THE WORM TURNS
With friend Rolf Jansson, Notch begins work on an ambitious project, the indie MMO Wurm Online

2005

KING ME
Notch takes a position as a programmer at the online game company King.com. There, he works with eventual Mojang co-founder Jakob Porser

2006

BIG MOMENT
Wurm Online is officially released and earns a loyal following online

2008

COMPETING
Notch creates the game Breaking the Tower for the Ludum Dare contest, which challenges contestants to create a game in 48 hours. Notch continues to be involved in Ludum Dare events

2009

NEW ADVENTURES
Notch quits King.com to form Mojang Specifications with his co-worker Jakob Porser. Development on Minecraft begins

2010

BETA MAX
Mojang begins selling the beta version of Minecraft online. The game's groundbreaking creation tools quickly earn it millions of fans

2011

A GATHERING
Mojang's massive success (over four million sales to date) spawns MineCon 2011, a convention for game devotees. At the inaugural MineCon, the official "finished" version of Minecraft is released

2011

A LEGAL MATTER
After Mojang's next game, Porser's card-game inspired Scrolls, is announced, ZeniMax Media (which owns Bethesda and The Elder Scrolls franchise) sues over the use of the word "Scrolls." Notch challenges Bethesda to a game of Quake III to resolve the matter

Mad Catz **MLG** Pro Circuit Controller



The biggest draw for this new controller is the modular design, which allows players to switch components around.

New third-party controllers come out nearly every year, but none have convinced us to replace the controllers that came with our consoles. Some feel cheap, others have uncomfortable ergonomics, and even the good ones aren't feature-packed enough for us to justify spending cash that could otherwise be put toward purchasing another game. The MLG Pro Circuit Controller comes close to changing that equation. With a sturdy build quality, tight analog sticks, and responsive triggers, this is the best controller Mad Catz has ever made.

The biggest draw for this new controller is the modular design that allows you to swap the analog stick and d-pad around or switch your thumbsticks from convex to concave. This is a great feature for those who prefer the Xbox 360 controller layout when playing on the PS3 or vice versa. Mad Catz plans to sell modules individually as well, which gives aggressive players who burn through analog sticks the option of buying affordable replacements when their thumbsticks wear down instead of dropping cash for a brand new controller. It also comes with an adjustable weight system.

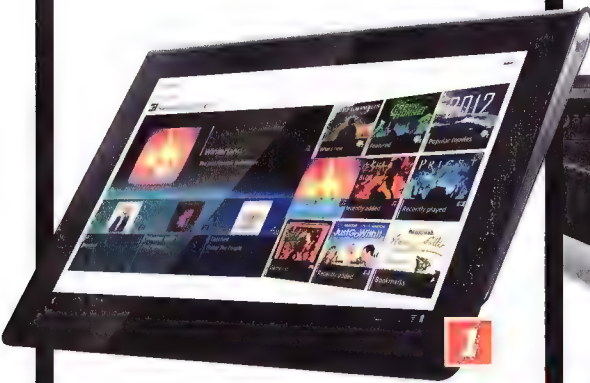
The MLG Pro Circuit Controller is available for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, with the only major difference between the two being that the PS3 model has a Reverse Trigger Mode. This feature, which is activated by holding down the start and select buttons, swaps the functionality of the shoulder and trigger buttons, allowing shooter fans to use the triggers for firing even in games that don't allow you to change their configuration in the menus.

As great as this controller sounds, it has a few shortcomings. The PlayStation 3 version lacks force feedback and Sixaxis — questionable omissions for such an expensive controller. The start and select buttons are placed too high on the controller, which is problematic when spotting enemies in *Battlefield 3*. The biggest drawback for many will be the lack of a wireless model. Mad Catz says it created a wired-only model because MLG requires all controllers to be tethered, but many consumers may find it hard to go back after cutting the cord years ago.

If Mad Catz releases a model that rearranges the start/select buttons and adds wireless capabilities, perhaps our controllers may finally get replaced.

VERY GOOD ■■■■■■■■■■ 4.5
\$99.00 | madcatz.com

by Matt Bertz, Ben Reeves, and Tim Turi



1 Sony Tablet S

Android fans should take note of Sony's latest attempt to breach the tablet market. Tapping and swiping the gorgeous 9.4-inch, 1280x800 display feels great, and Sony's UI is simple yet efficient. The new form factor resembles a folded-back magazine, which makes diving into e-books feel lovely. Along with all the standard browsing, music, and video suites, the device also functions as a universal remote for all your home electronics. If touchscreens controls aren't your thing, this PlayStation-Certified tablet allows you to connect a DualShock 3 for use with Crash Bandicoot and other PSone and PSP titles available in the PlayStation Store. We got roughly four hours of battery life out of the device when playing games and watching movies, which is notably less than the iPad 2 and higher-end Android tablets. The biggest drawback to this otherwise capable companion, however, is its laggy wi-fi connection. It sometimes took a full minute to recognize networks even when it's instructed to remain connected. If you can live with the lesser battery life, the older Honeycomb operating system, and touchy Wi-Fi, the Sony Tablet S is a portable pleasure.

AVOIDANCE ■■■■■■■■■■

\$399 (16GB) \$499 (32GB) | store.sony.com

2 Yamaha YHT – S401

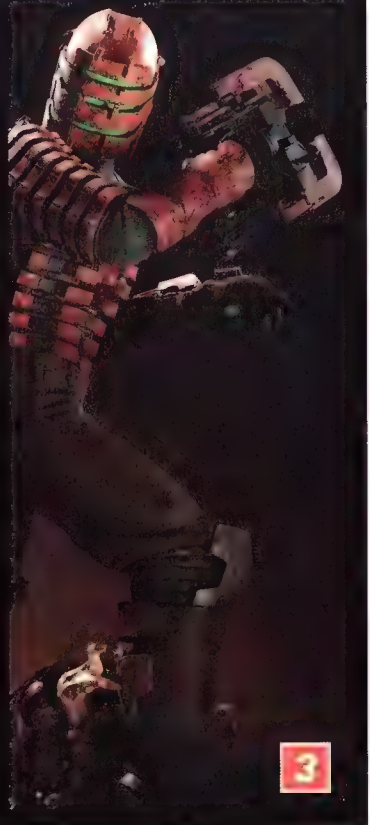
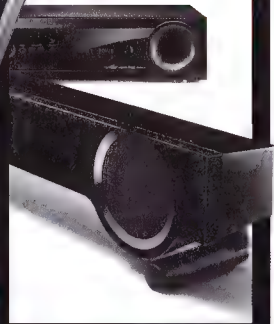
A universal problem with big speaker setups is that they are...well, big. Soundbars are the obvious solution for gamers living in claustrophobic environments. Yamaha's new YHT – S401 soundbar and receiver/subwoofer deliver powerful 7.1 simulated surround sound despite their compact frames. The system's surprisingly slim receiver/subwoofer is powered by a 100W built-in digital amp, which kicks out bass better than most soundbars. It's easy to connect your iPod or iPhone to this stylish unit through the system's USB terminal, and the soundbar's height-adjustable feet help it slide into any entertainment center.

\$699.95 | usa.yamaha.com

3 Dead Space Isaac Clarke Statue

Isaac Clarke has had a horrifying life. Brighten up his day by putting him next to that plant your cat always pees in. In this Sideshow Collectible figure, Isaac raises a plasma cutter over the dismantled corpse of a mutant Necromorph. The figure stands over 16 inches tall and features a brilliant light-up helmet.

\$274.99 | sideshowtoy.com



THE DARKENING DREAM

In this new dark fantasy novel written by Naughty Dog co-founder Andy Gavin, a young woman sets out to solve a murder and uncovers a mystery that involves a 900-year-old vampire, a trio of disgruntled Egyptian gods, and a demon-loving Puritan minister.

\$14.99
all-things-andy-gavin.com

DA VINCI'S GHOST: GENIUS, OBSESSION, AND HOW LEONARDO CREATED THE WORLD IN HIS OWN IMAGE

Toby Lester brings the Vitruvian Man to life in this story about how Da Vinci took ancient Roman philosophes and spread them across modern culture in everything from coffee cups and T-shirts to corporate logos and international spacecraft.

\$26.99
tobylester.com

GAME OF THRONES: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

In a world where winters span decades, the only thing colder than the weather is betrayal. HBO's adaptation of George R.R. Martin's fantasy epic remains as true to the source as a fan could hope. Let the struggle for the Iron Throne begin.

\$79.98
hbo.com

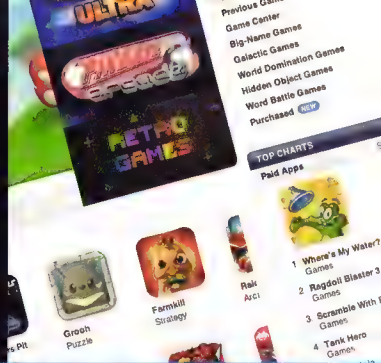
ULTIMATE COMICS SPIDER-MAN BY BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS – VOLUME 1

After Peter Parker dies, Miles Morales – an inner city kid – finds that he suddenly has most of Spider-Man's powers, as well as a few new ones. Marvel's re-launch of Ultimate Spider-Man made us forget all about Parker or Pekar or whoever that other kid was.

\$24.99
marvel.com

Gaming the Store

Apple's App Store rankings are not always what they seem



Given the relative lack of exposure and limited marketing budgets to raise awareness about apps, rankings play an incredibly outsized role in obtaining visibility. A top spot in the rankings can make or break your game. The dynamic is self-perpetuating: Once you're there, more people see your app while browsing the store, which leads to more sales. If you're not in the top 25, it's incredibly difficult to crack it.

Most people perusing the app rankings assume that they are as fair a reflection of a game's popularity as weekly movie box office numbers. But with the stakes of getting to the top of the app store so high, game publishers would be foolish not to consider any and all possible tactics to get there.

As it turns out, Apple does not have a transparent set of criteria, in the absence of which publishers must speculate on the rules based on the results they see in the marketplace. Whereas Android's app rankings seem to factor in downloads, frequency of app usage, and length of time it stays installed on a user's device, Apple's appears to be (almost) entirely driven by installs. Publishers can manipulate the rankings in several ways, and they're practiced routinely. To this point, Apple's responses have seemed uncharacteristically delayed, often leaving publishers and marketers scratching their heads wondering when the Apple hammer will drop.

The Power of the Price Drop

The most common way to skew the rankings is to temporarily discount the price. This spikes downloads from deal seekers, driving the game up the rankings. Within days, the app returns to full price while sitting in a highly visible spot near the top of the app store. Users presume that the app is well worth the full price, considering the ranking spot. At no point is this practiced more than immediately prior to Christmas, when Apple freezes the rankings. The sales come fast and furious in the days immediately prior to Apple's freeze, as publishers jockey for a top spot through the all-important holidays, when folks get iPhones, iPads, and iTunes gift cards.

This tactic is hardly limited to only the scrappiest, small publishers. Rockstar released Grand Theft Auto III on the App store on Dec. 15 at \$4.99, and instantly was top of the charts. Five days later, the natural decline started, and they found themselves at #8 overall on Dec. 21, on a trajectory to be well out of the top 10, and possibly out of the top 25, during the Apple freeze. So, on Dec. 22 – just one week after launch – Rockstar dropped the price to \$2.99. They shot back up to #4, and were locked in at that prime spot until the freeze ended on the 28th. Great for them. Not so great for the folks who paid full price during the first week.

Interestingly, the music industry has responded to a very similar discounting trend. The likes of Lady Gaga and many others benefited massively from one-day promotions that sell albums at a heavily discounted price (as low as \$.99). In response, Nielsen Soundscan – the sales authority behind the Billboard rankings – has ruled that it will not count sales priced below \$3.49. It will be interesting to see if Apple ever announces a plan to factor in these deep discounts to how heavily each install counts toward the rankings.

The Appayola Store

With free games, you can't drop the price – so theoretically you might think the rankings are more transparent. However, were all those downloads legitimate? Or were they spurred by the latest iteration of the old payola scheme when record companies bribed DJs to play certain songs in heavy rotation to get to the top of the charts?

Services have cropped up that offer publishers a guaranteed spot in the top 25 for \$5,000-10,000. (Depending on the deal, this could be Top 25 overall, or Top 25 within a category like Simulation, Adventure, etc.) These services claim to have sophisticated marketing techniques but by all accounts seem to use bots to generate roughly 50,000 downloads – just enough to crack the top 25. Because of these bots you'll see games skyrocket out of nowhere or suddenly chart in new categories (like an educational game appear in the arcade category weeks after release) and then disappear just as suddenly –

but not before garnering enough legitimate downloads from their brief exposure at the higher ranking. As an advertising professional, I can tell you that this is only possible in two ways – big, expensive, advertising campaigns or bots, which are a heck of a lot cheaper.

Apple's Response

On February 7, Apple responded to this practice, warning developers, "Even if you are not personally engaged in manipulating App Store chart rankings or user reviews, employing services that do so on your behalf may result in the loss of your Apple Developer Program membership." Still, with the rewards so high, the risk for many will still be worth it.

The same week that Apple addressed bots, another wart sprouted on the App Store. How does a game published by Hoolai Game Ltd, that is entirely in Chinese climb to #3 on the U.S. Top Grossing Chart? Is it a breakthrough hit with addictive gameplay that transcends microtransactions? It appears not. Instead, it's the latest example of hackers at work. More nefarious than bots, these hackers allegedly steal massive batches of user account information to initiate downloads and expensive (as high as \$99) in-app purchases. Given how immediately these scams arose, the attention of chart-watching publishers, developers, and consumers, you would expect swift action from Apple – at the very least flagging the app and keeping it out of the official rankings while they review the situation. But at the time of this writing, there has been no official response.

Apple has previously shown the ability to belatedly crack down on another tactic – incentivized downloads. Until last year, it was possible for users to be in an app, want more in-app currency, and then get to them from an offer wall, often in exchange for installing another different free app. Those installs, fueled in part by users' interest in something completely different (another game's currency), were massively influential, changing the face of the rankings and therefore the entire app landscape. Apple's warnings that such practices would no longer be tolerated have marginalized this tactic, resulting in less influential variations. This is a good step, but not so effective that it could be considered a perfect model for rooting out the other forms of manipulation infesting the App Store.

In the short term, gamers benefit from getting games at low prices, allowing them to explore the marketplace more than they otherwise could. But in the long term, publishers, marketers, and gamers alike would benefit from clear guidelines to a rankings policy that would prevent the possibility of gaming the store.

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



03 **Xenoblade Chronicles**



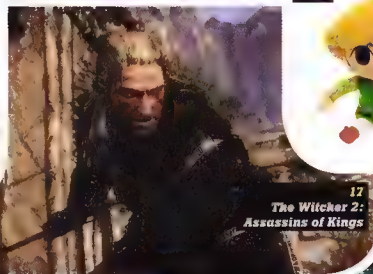
04



06



20



13

17 **The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings**



24

Prototype 2



25

April

01 **Game of Thrones Returns!**

HBO's remarkable retelling of George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* novels continues today with the second season of *Game of Thrones*. The first episode picks up right where last season left off, with Westeros in the throes of civil war and everyone's favorite Lannister, the dwarf Tyrion, power hungry and drunk. If you're not watching this show, throw away your nerd card.

03 **New Releases**

- Devil May Cry
- HD Collection (PS3, 360)
- Heroes of Ruin (3DS)
- Mortal Kombat (Vita)
- Pokémon Collection (Blu-Ray)
- Xenoblade Chronicles (Wii)

04 **Heroes and a Wounded America**

Today marks the release of *The Secret Service*, a new comic series from Mark Millar (*Kick-Ass*) and Dave Gibbons (*Watchmen*). In 1967, Millar asked Gibbons to draw one of his stories. The *Secret Service* is their first collaboration together. Millar hasn't spilled many plot details yet, but we know it centers on a North London kid learning to become a secret agent, and in an odd twist, the kidnappings of actors from pop/paranormal fiction movies.

06 **Getting the Gang Back Together**

When *American Pie* originally came out in 1999, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* recently released in theaters, Limp Bizkit

was popular, and gamers were addicted to *EverQuest*. Today, the *American Pie* cast returns in *American Reunion*, and not much else has changed. *Phantom Menace* is in 3D now, gamers are playing *World of Warcraft* instead of *EverQuest*, and Limp Bizkit is somehow still releasing albums. The good news: We still have Slifer.

13 **Cuddles From Hyrule**

You could purchase your child a stuffed animal, or you could give them geek cred early on with this Link plushie based on his cat-shaded look from *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker*. This adorable cuddle buddy is available today for the low price of \$7.99.

17 **New Releases**

- Deadliest Warrior
- Ancient Combat (PS3, 360)
- Disgaea 3: Absence of Detention (Vita)
- The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings (360)

20 **Get Your Mass Effect Figures & DLC**

The hottest craze in video games is collectible action figures. Stores can't keep Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure figures in stock, and starting this month, Mass Effect fans will have to buy action figures to see everything *Mass Effect 3* has to offer, too. Each of the eight *Mass Effect 3* action figures comes packaged with unique DLC that unlocks new multiplayer characters, weapons, boosters, and upgrades.

24 **New Releases**

- Prototype 2 (PS3, 360, PC)

25 **Mass Effect's Story Continues**

Commander Shepard's story is expected to end in *Mass Effect 3*, but that doesn't mean that the *Mass Effect* universe will cease to be. Lead writer Mac Walters is continuing *Mass Effect's* story in a new ongoing Dark Horse comic series that focuses on Shepard's crew. Each issue takes a look at a different character. The first story is about James Vega.

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

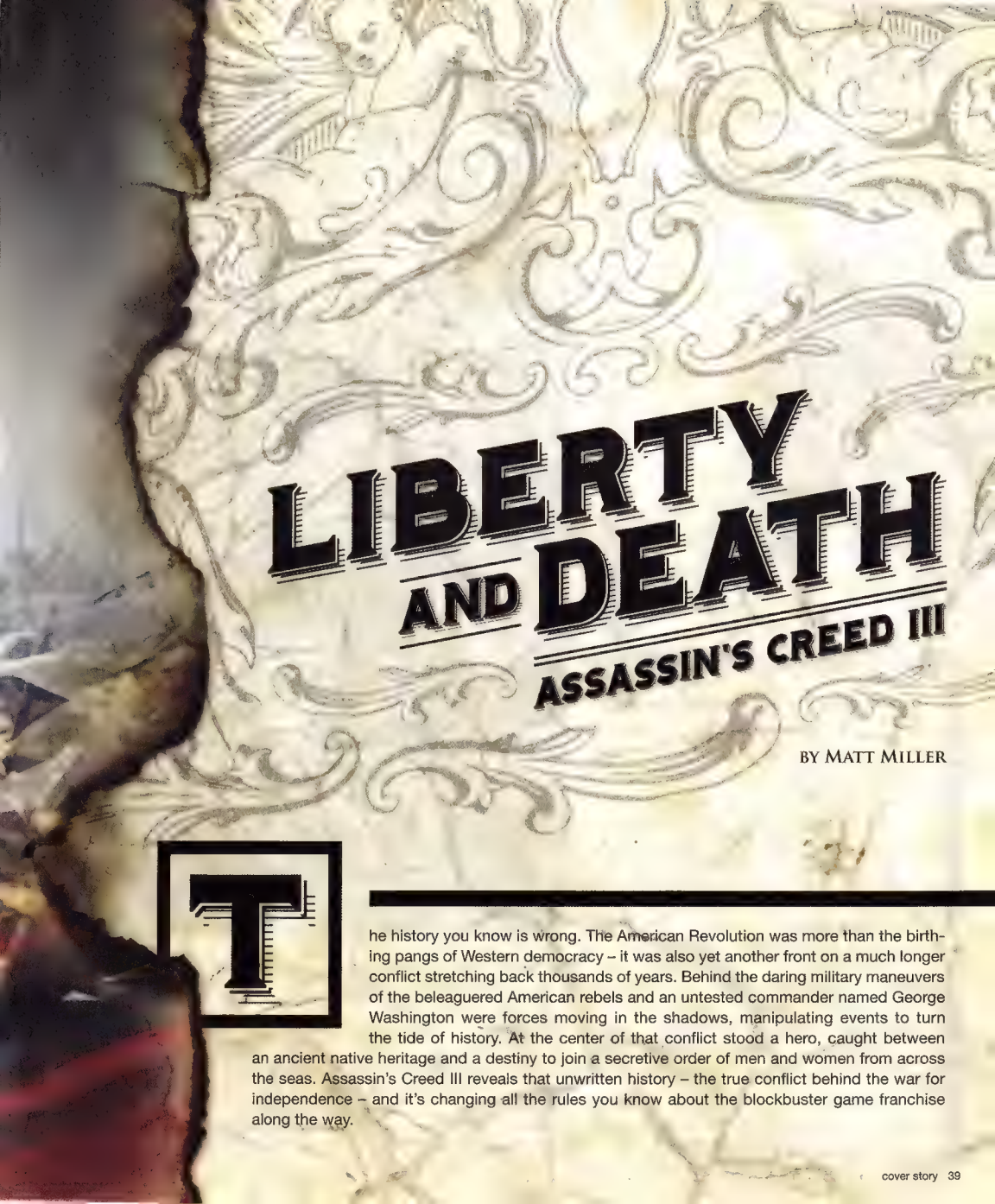
» **Style**
1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
October 30





LIBERTY AND DEATH

ASSASSIN'S CREED III

BY MATT MILLER

T

he history you know is wrong. The American Revolution was more than the birthing pangs of Western democracy – it was also yet another front on a much longer conflict stretching back thousands of years. Behind the daring military maneuvers of the beleaguered American rebels and an untested commander named George Washington were forces moving in the shadows, manipulating events to turn the tide of history. At the center of that conflict stood a hero, caught between an ancient native heritage and a destiny to join a secretive order of men and women from across the seas. Assassin's Creed III reveals that unwritten history – the true conflict behind the war for independence – and it's changing all the rules you know about the blockbuster game franchise along the way.

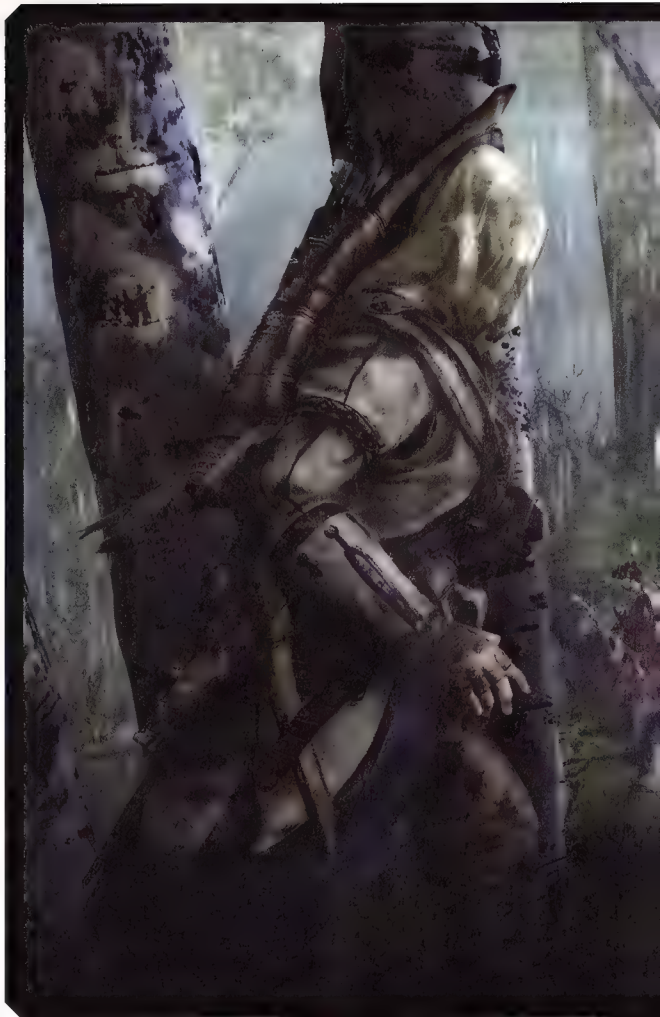
"LIBERTY. WHEN IT BEGINS TO TAKE
ROOT, IS A PLANT OF RAPID GROWTH."

GEORGE WASHINGTON



After three games in as many years,

Assassin's Creed had settled into a rhythm. Each title continued to up the ante of cinematic presentation, telling the memorable story of an Italian nobleman's quest for revenge, wisdom, and meaning in his life of endless fighting and murder. Along the way, the scope of the game fantasy narrowed, offering glimpses into cities from hundreds of years ago, but also an increasingly familiar set of missions, activities, and experiences. While gamers dug into Brotherhood and Revelations, a senior team of game designers and programmers who broke away after Assassin's Creed II were busy reinventing the franchise and creating a jumping-on point for new players, while trying to ensure they didn't lose touch with what longtime fans cherished most.



"We have this goal to do something completely new, but still remain true to the franchise," says creative director Alex Hutchinson. "People want that familiarity, but also something radically new. So we have the familiar pillars of fighting, navigation, and social stealth, but brand-new environments and brand-new ways to use them and extend them."

With two years of work behind them and several months to go before the planned release this fall, the team has a game they hope provides the answer. An ambitious setting catapults the series forward into the 18th century to witness the dawning of democracy in the New World. A new protagonist answers Ezio's bravado and elegance with a vision of quiet heroism and rugged pioneer skill. A redesigned approach to traversal has players leaping and climbing trees and mountain cliffs with the same ease with which they'll still clamber along churches, forts, and city walls. Combat flows with a new ferocity, driven by momentum and speed, finally putting players on the offensive against foes. Behind it all, a new version of Ubisoft's acclaimed Anvil tech engine powers some of the most impressive visual displays of this generation, depicting thousands of troops engaged in bloody battle as easily as highly detailed cinematic facial close-ups. For gamers who have been biding their time waiting for the next big step forward for Ubisoft's flagship series, that time has come.

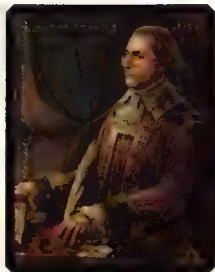
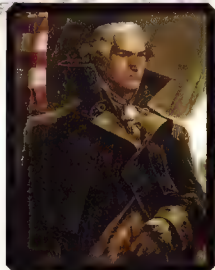
THE CAST

"We have the best secondary cast of any AC game thus far," declares creative director Alex Hutchinson. "There are so many people in this period of history that are relevant to players." Unlike previous installments of the series, a large majority of characters you meet during the course of the game are based on historical record—actual individuals whose paths through the events of the period are well documented. "For most of the founding fathers, we know where they were week to week," Hutchinson says.

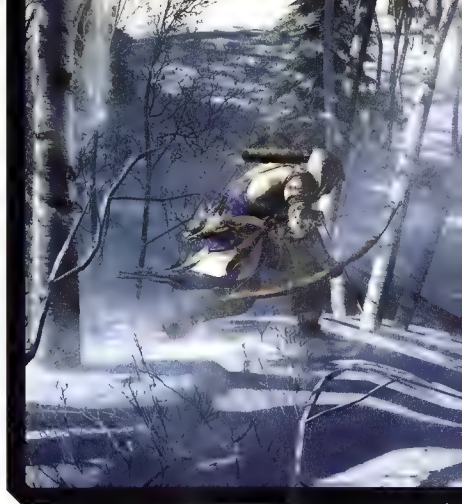
Players will meet an uncertain George Washington as he hesitantly takes command of a ragtag army that must somehow hold off the most powerful military force of the era: the British redcoats. The player's interaction with Washington is one of the core relationships of the game.

Benjamin Franklin also plays an integral role, though the team assures us he won't be some carbon copy of Leonardo Da Vinci from previous games—the convenient inventor concept is not on the menu.

Charles Lee is also a central figure. "Lee was arguably a much better choice to be commander-in-chief than Washington," suggests writer Corey May. "One of the big differences was that Lee wanted money. He also was less of a politician. He had a reputation for not cutting his hair or shaving, dressing in rags, and being sort of gruff with people, because he was focused on waging war and not doing political B.S." Historically, Lee ended up as a fractious force in the American army, and his eventual capture by the British nearly spelled disaster for the Americans. His final role in relation to the Assassins remains a mystery.



Players will once again witness entire decades of a character's life, including playable periods of the main character's childhood



t the center of Ubisoft's ambitious upcoming installment is a new hero. The new Assassin calls himself Connor, though among the people who raised him he is called Ratohnhaké:ton (pronounced Ra-doon-ha-gay-doo). Connor has big shoes to fill. From the stoic Altair Ibn-La'Ahad to the debonair but tempestuous Ezio Auditore, fans have high expectations for any new hero in the Assassin lineage. Connor brings something new to the table. Born of a white English father and a Native American mother, Connor grows up outside the confines of any one cultural world. "We want to explore this notion of duality," Hutchinson explains. "He's of neither culture. If we're going to talk about the American Revolution, we didn't

want you playing Mel Gibson from *The Patriot*, and we didn't want you in a military uniform. The AC universe is one step back from all that."

Raised among the Mohawk, players will experience Connor's childhood on the American frontier, including the devastating toll paid by his tribe in their encounters with white colonists. That conflict hits a fevered pitch with the destruction of Connor's village. Instead of a quest for vengeance, the catastrophic events direct

THE BLEEDING EDGE

Assassin's Creed III runs on a brand-new version of the vaunted Anvil tech engine. The core engineering team that once worked on Prince of Persia: Sands of Time and the first two Assassin's Creed games shifted gears immediately after AC 2 to create the advanced tech engine powering the third numbered installment. "It's a scary thing to say, but I think the goal was to look next-gen on current-gen," Hutchinson says. The results are apparent watching just a few minutes of the game in action. Silky smooth animation transitions, new wilderness environment traversal, and gigantic crowd battle scenes are all testaments to Ubisoft Montreal's technical imagination and expertise.

Connor to confront tyranny and seek justice. "We wanted Connor to be more of a freedom fighter. He's not out for personal revenge. If he sees injustice, he will help," Hutchinson says. Troubled by the inequality he faces all around him, the accomplished frontiersman seeks to right those wrongs, and in so doing his path merges with the order of Assassins

Though the white hood and coat remain intact, Connor is far from a re-skin of previous protagonists. "He's much lower to the ground – more of a predator," Hutchinson says. As he tracks his prey, Connor's movements call to mind a lone wolf on the hunt. The impression is only strengthened when you see him in combat. Dual-wielding a tomahawk and knife, he is deadly and precise, always moving around and beneath enemy attacks. Every one of Connor's thousands of animations have been created especially for him – there's no carryover from previous games. In speech, Connor appears thoughtful and intense, often letting the words he doesn't say speak as loudly as those he does.

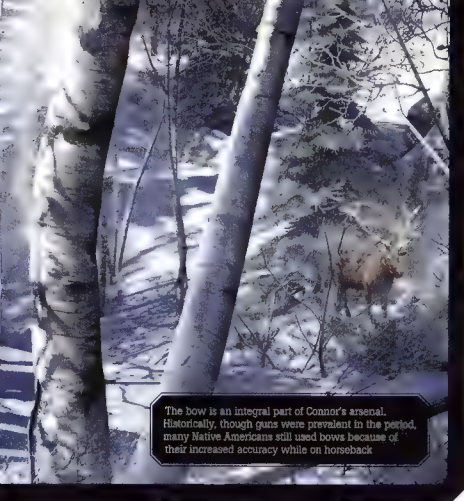


Connor steps out onto one of the most dramatic stages of history. Set between 1753 and 1783, and centered in and around the cities of Boston and New York during the momentous events of the period, Assassin's Creed III can draw on hundreds of potential battles and other events in Colonial-era America. "You're going to see cities that you've probably visited.

This idea that it's your history is super powerful," Hutchinson says. Though Ubisoft is careful not to spoil story points, history buffs will point to the midnight ride of Paul Revere and his fellow patriots, the harrowing siege of Boston by Washington's small army, and the frantic American nighttime retreat from New York City as a few of many moments ripe with storytelling potential

The period is awash in characters and dramas waiting to be tapped and reinterpreted through the lens of the Assassin's Creed fiction. "It's not just going to a historical building now; it's going to a historical event," Hutchinson says. "You will see the great fire of New York. You will visit Valley Forge as a location that is currently occupied by Washington's forces. You will visit these places in the moment that they were important, and hopefully, experience the reason why we know where they are today. That's the goal." Connor bears witness to and participates in many of these events, and it's hard to ask for more explosive set piece moments than those provided by famous battles like Bunker Hill, Saratoga, or Valley Forge. Far from passing around the periphery of these conflicts, we witnessed scenes that had Connor in the heat of battle. Lurking behind boulders as lines of redcoat British troops fire off their rounds, Connor weaves among dying American rebels as cannonballs and grapeshot zoom past. "We now have a couple thousand guys on screen," Hutchinson says. "Whereas before it was capped at around 100."

For all its focus on the heroics and battles of the American Revolution,



The bow is an integral part of Connor's arsenal. Historically, though guns were prevalent in the period, many Native Americans still used bows because of their increased accuracy while on horseback

"TYRANNY LIKE HELL IS NOT EASILY CONQUERED YET WE HAVE THIS CONSOLATION WITH US. THE HARDER THE CONFLICT, THE MORE GLORIOUS THE TRIUMPH."

- THOMAS PAINTE



Connor's interaction with George Washington will play a significant role in the story



Assassin's Creed III is not the story of that conflict retold through convenient twists of the historical record. Rather, this new entry in the franchise focuses on a story behind that world-shaking event, an emerging front in the New World of the ongoing struggle presented throughout the series. "The story we're telling is the story of the Assassins versus the Templars," Hutchinson says. "He will be caught up in the Revolution throughout the story, but it's not about winning the Revolution. It will cross over, but the narrative is about Connor's journey."

In this tale, not all the American colonists are good guys, nor are the British cast exclusively in the role of evil oppressors, and the team hopes

to use the game to highlight how the Assassins' and Templars' viewpoints both exist on a gray moral spectrum. Hutchinson continues: "We try very hard not to have the Templars be some fist-waving villains trying to bring about the end of the world - they really think they're saving the world. They're just saving it by controlling it." The story is equally nuanced regarding other forces involved, from the French to Native Americans of the period. Connor's story weaves in and out of the battles and political upheaval, on a quest that has powerful import to a far distant descendant named Desmond. Like previous games, the historical events of Assassin's Creed III will be framed within a larger story set in the present day. Why are Desmond and the modern-day Assassins so interested in the events of Connor's life? Ubisoft's not telling, but you can bet it has something to do with the strange location in New York where Desmond arrived as Assassin's Creed Revelations concluded



hat modern day site in upstate New York shares an important similarity with many of the most important locales of the American Revolutionary War; they're not found in a city. Any game set during the period would feel lacking without the vast wilderness that lies between Boston and New York. That space is the Frontier, a vast open world of forests, mountains, cliffs, rivers, lakes, and even settle-

ments such as Connor's Mohawk village and the colonial settlements of Lexington and Concord, which are all open to exploration and adventure. "The Frontier for us is sort of a compressed version of the American Northeast," Hutchinson tells us. "The map of the frontier is 1.5 times bigger than the entire map of Brotherhood. It has this sense of exploration about it, which I don't think we've had before." Unlike the largely empty Kingdom wilderness of the first Assassin's Creed game, the Frontier boasts a full third of the game's missions and gameplay content.

"This new wilderness playground brings major changes to the game. "The big evolution for us in terms of navigation is wilderness environments," Hutchinson says. "Cliffs, trees, uneven surfaces, crazy hills. That's the goal - to have this character who is not only comfortable in those environments - he's more effective in them. So we can have situations where the redcoats are struggling in the woods, but the character is actually a predator. He's perfectly at home."

You'll leap between branches of trees and slingshot around the trunks as you jump forward to monkey bar across the forest. You'll climb giant landmark trees that have stood for hundreds of years and gaze out from their highest points across snow-covered valleys. You'll ascend mountain cliffs and leap into turbulent rivers. You'll also have a full ecosystem of animals to track and hunt if you desire. Bear, deer, wolves, elk, rabbits, and more move about the Frontier, and like any pioneer worth his salt, you can gather pelts and other resources by hunting them. Mirroring similar ideas in combat against human NPC opponents, the quality of your kill determines your reward; kill a bear in one deft strike, and his pelt will be worth more than if you engage in a bloody battle. We witnessed a thrilling in-game sequence where Connor finds a dead body out in the snow. Seeing Connor as a threat to its food, a nearby bear attacks, and a brief but furious melee ensues that ends with Connor's hidden blade deep in the bear's neck.

As you move through the wilderness over the course of the three decades in which the game takes place, the world will change around you. Battles will take place in their historical locations one year, but months later you'll only find the shells of encampments left behind. Day

and night will come and go, but so too will winter and summer; every environment in both the Frontier and the cities is built so it can appear in the bright greens of summer as well as under a cold blanket of snow in winter. "The weather is all maps all the time," Hutchinson says. "So if there's Boston, then there's Boston in winter and Boston in summer. The world changes." Moving through the snow, Connor's animation shifts to match the depth in a given location; it's not a texture on the ground, but a fundamental change in the terrain. In the worst weather, enemies will trudge and stumble through the drifts, even as Connor's predatory speed and mobility let him circle in for the kill from the trees above. In the coldest months, lakes and rivers will freeze over, offering new ground to navigate.

As Connor explores the many possibilities and gameplay opportunities inherent to the Frontier, the game pays attention to his actions and responds accordingly. Assassin's Creed III plays host to a number of clubs and small groups who will take notice of your actions and invite you to join them in feats that match your enthusiasm. "The club system is a layer on top of the missions," Hutchinson says. "We want you to have other tasks. If you're hunting a bunch of deer on your own, at a certain point a guy will come up to you and say, 'You're an amazing shot with that bow - why don't you join our hunting society?'"

It's not hard to imagine some of the other possibilities the team might have in store. Mountain climbing? Tracking? River crossing? The club concept ensures that players interested in exploration and discovery across the Frontier have gameplay systems that reward their efforts.



"WE FIGHT. GET BEATEN. RISE, AND FIGHT AGAIN."

NATHANAEL GREENE





A young Connor faces off with the historical figure, Charles Lee. It remains to be seen how the seemingly antagonistic relationship develops in adulthood.



IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.
A DECLARATION
BY THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
GENERAL CONGRESS ASSEMBLED.
Bovel's story 45



CONTINUING THE LEGACY

Many of the familiar features of the Assassin's Creed series are changing or evolving, but some of those elements remain largely under wraps for now. Here are some of the game features currently in the works.

ECONOMY:

"We still have money, and there's a new system for making money. But for the things that are really important to gameplay, or side missions, it goes to a goods economy," says creative director Alex Hutchinson. What kind of goods? Among other things, the new Frontier area allows for the acquisition of pelts for trade.

PROPERTY:

"It's much more significant than it was before," Hutchinson says. "It's more narratively driven," adds writer Corey May. "It's fair to say you don't go through Boston and New York buying shops. We have a system that speaks to the same fantasy and mechanic, but it's presented in a new and better integrated way."

PRESENT DAY:

"There will be significant events involving Desmond," Hutchinson says. As the most important carryover character from previous installments, you can bet Desmond plays a big part this time around. Finally free of the coma that dominated his scenes in Revelations, Desmond has some important work to do. Some predictions place the end of the world in 2012, and that time is approaching in both the game's fiction and the real world.

THE TRUTH:

After the events of Revelations, don't expect more mysteries from Subject 16 anytime soon. But that doesn't mean the team is abandoning this popular concept entirely. "In relation to the puzzles, I'm a big fan of them," May says. "We want to scratch the same itch, but ideally in a way that is just as refreshing and exciting but will not be an identical copy-paste."

THE ANIMUS:

The new Animus 3.0 premieres in this installment, and the software has a new visual style to signify the change. The popular Animus Database feature also returns, offering historical perspective through the cipher of in-game character Shaun Hastings' wry wit. "Since the character of Shaun Hastings in the present is British, he'll be able to offer a snarky commentary about the British perspective of the Revolution," May says.

MULTIPLAYER:

Ubisoft remains tight-lipped about multiplayer features, but series fans could make a few educated guesses. Those who completed Revelations' multiplayer story know that your character has reached the peak of his training, and it's time to do work in the field. We predict a major change in the central conceit behind multiplayer when it is eventually revealed.

PLATFORMING LEVELS:

Whether called dens or lairs, the popular platforming-focused levels remain something of a mystery in this new installment. Even so, we know they will be back in some capacity. "People like those. We like those. It's not something we'd remove," May says.

SYNCHRONIZATION:

The concept of full synchronization returns, albeit with some major tweaks. First, missions now have checkpoints as you fulfill sync conditions, so you're not stuck repeating things you've already done. More significantly, the simplistic 100-percent sync concept has evolved. "You'll get significant rewards for doing these tasks, rather than just a 100 percent," Hutchinson says. "Imagine a leveling system in an RPG, except there's a finite amount of XP to find. The more in-sync you get, the more you fill your sync bar. Within each mission, each activity you complete has a value." And yes, you can replay everything to increase your score.

THE BROTHERHOOD:

Ubisoft Montreal acknowledges the popularity of developing and calling your brotherhood of fellow assassins into the conflict. While we were assured that a new mechanic offers similar rewards, exactly what it is, as well as how the Assassins will function in this new time period, remain unknown.

FACTIONS:

The presence of aligned groups has been eliminated, but something new replaces them. "It's a radical departure for us," Hutchinson says. "We're not going to have clusters of thieves or Romani. There will still be the concept of using people to do things, but no more of the alternate guilds."

NOTORIETY:

A variation of the notoriety system returns, but it sounds as if it will be more behind-the-scenes than before. Some areas will be more or less suspicious or dangous, but the team is working hard to assure that you're not penalized for exploring risky areas.

FAST TRAVEL:

"There's going to be more travel in the game," Hutchinson says. "But we have a whole new system for unlocking fast travel." Like many of the game's legacy systems, fast travel will be more integrated into the natural flow of the game as you progress.

TOWER DEFENSE:

Ubisoft is known for innovation and trying new ideas, but that means sometimes things don't work out as well as originally hoped. Revelations added a variation on tower defense to the AC Formula, but few players enjoyed the diversion. Don't expect the feature to pop up again in Assassin's Creed III.

UPGRADES:

Simply put, they're back. You can customize Connor's gear, as well as his costume, as the game moves forward.

"ARBITRARY POWER
IS LIKE MOST OTHER
THINGS WHICH ARE
VERY HARD. VERY
LIABLE TO BE BROKEN."

ABIGAIL ADAMS



Assassin's Creed III adds a whole new style of wilderness gameplay, but a large part of the game is still set within urban settings like New York and Boston.



Even as Ubisoft Montreal explores new territory with its natural setting, the studio openly recognizes that it can't abandon the gameplay the series was built on. Boston and New York have been recreated with an intricate eye to authentic building placement and urban life of the period, utilizing documents, blueprints, and street diagrams that survive to this day. City gameplay has taken suitable leaps forward to match the potential fun of playing out among the trees. We witnessed a stunning in-game demo of Boston brought to life in which Connor moved through a crowd far more interesting and realistic than those of Damascus, Rome, or Constantinople. A merchant marks Connor from afar and approaches to try and sell his wares. A boy stands along the dock and calls out for passersby to buy newspapers. A dog skulks from an alley, alert to any food that might have fallen. The Old State House, the site of the Boston Massacre in 1770, looms at the end of the street. Ahead, a wary squad of British troops blocks the road. When Connor refuses to halt at the checkpoint, a chase begins. New navigation options send Connor seamlessly leaping over moving wagons in the street or sliding under obstacles. Moving objects are now fully integrated platforms for navigation, and the sprint animation automatically moves around objects in the way. Scrambling up above street level, he flings himself through an open window and past a startled woman, and then out the window at the far end of the house. As Connor moves from window, to tree, and on to a nearby church

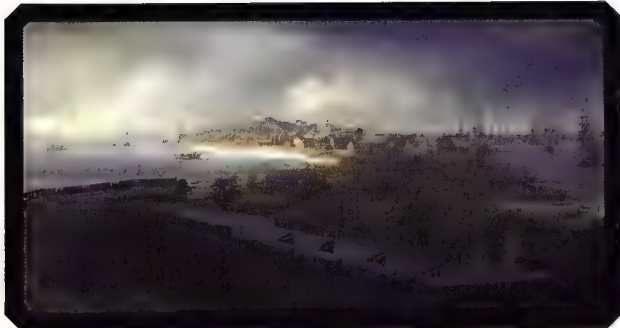
roof, it's clear that gamers' days of free running through and on top of historical city recreations are far from over.

Rather than run from confrontation, many AC fans would rather dig in for a good fight. Like the Assassins before him, Connor is a warrior of unmatched skill, but the battles have been redesigned with an eye toward more fluid and aggressive fights.

Connor enters battle with a weapon in each hand, and the tactical options this presents make him better prepared to take on groups of enemies and stay on the attack. "We've clarified the controls. Your controls in a fight are the same as your controls out of a fight," Hutchinson says. You tap the B or circle button to counter, but the constant presence of two weapons (like a tomahawk and knife) opens the possibility for double counters when multiple enemies attack at once. In these cases your acrobatic counter now takes them both down at once, beginning a chain of kills that you can carry over to other enemies in the area.

Whether armed with a hidden blade, a tomahawk, or any other weapon combination, the game encourages more offensive play than previous installments. As you attack, the game now automatically detects your targets without the need for any clumsy target locking. Counter and defense are mapped to the same button, so you can't turtle up under a flurry of blows; Connor's grace bends his tactics towards constant movement and assault. New context-sensitive actions allow you to perform moves like grabbing enemy soldiers and using them as human shields when other troops fire their muskets. A wide array of secondary weapons is mapped to the Y or triangle button, like the one-shot flintlock pistol, adding further chaos to the fight.

A new dynamic camera rotates naturally to the best view of the action, and automatically zooms nearer as one enemy after another falls to your expertise. When it's down to one-on-one, the camera zooms so close it's almost like witnessing a fighting game exchange. The fluidity of combat extends to the ability to move in and out of the fight. By holding sprint down you can instantly turn and move away from the fight at high speed. Momentum and continuous movement even characterize assassinations that have you charging a protected target. Now when your assassin runs through a crowd of defenders to reach his prey, he won't stop at each kill, but instead leap and catapult off of each victim of his blade as he makes a beeline for his actual target. "Connor is always in motion," Hutchinson says. "Whether he's climbing or fighting or anything else, a good player should be able to keep moving all the time."





The game now includes a context sensitive stealth system. In certain situations, Connor will remain hidden when walking, allowing increased opportunities for how you might approach a target.

"I think there's an over-idealized notion of the founding fathers and the American side of the war. In general, it's more nuanced. These were not super-perfect divine beings," says writer Corey May. "They were very human. A lot of them had rather fundamental flaws, and I think when we whitewash our history we do a disservice to everyone."

More than any individual element, the animations of these new combat sequences sell the experience. In the demo we witnessed, everything Connor does in a fight connects seamlessly with his next movement. Connor dips and weaves among enemy combatants in a flurry of movement, even as his opponents try to bring their unwieldy bayonets to bear in close quarters. More than previous installments, a cinematic flair dominates combat sequences, but rather than pulling control away, the player is even more in control than before thanks to the changes and a wide array of new attacks.

"THE PRESERVATION OF THE MEANS OF KNOWLEDGE AMONG THE LOWEST RANKS IS OF MORE IMPORTANCE TO THE PUBLIC THAN ALL THE PROPERTY OF ALL THE RICH MEN IN THE COUNTRY."

JOHN ADAMS

"EVERY GOVERNMENT DEGENERATES WHEN TRUSTED TO THE RULERS OF THE PEOPLE ALONE. THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES, THEREFORE, ARE ITS ONLY SAFE DEPOSITORIES."

— THOMAS JEFFERSON



he cinematic presentation extends beyond combat into a new and complex approach to storytelling. All of the game's many character scenes — around two and a half hours in total — are being fully acted and recorded for inclusion in the game. "It's kind of scary when you're used to having your attention on the game part, and then you realize you're shooting a movie as well," Hutchinson says. Voice

recording, motion capture, and facial capture are all completed simultaneously on a set built to approximate the objects and locations of the in-game locales, so that movements are authentic to the experience being depicted, like climbing stairs or leaning against a large stone. The resulting scenes reveal levels of nuance, particularly in facial and eye movement, unprecedented in the series to this point. A drive for authenticity includes historical script consultants on all the dialogue, not to mention the casting of Native American actors in appropriate roles and voice recording in the actual Mohawk language in certain scenes. The conversations and cinematic sequences we saw sold the fantasy of frontier-era America in the same way a film might.

"It's the longest cycle of development for any of the AC games we've done since AC 1," explains senior producer François Pelland. "Because we started so early, we wanted to have a very early alpha so we could take time to polish." With nearly three full years to iterate, the team is already in place to complete an early version of the game in the coming weeks, opening up months to make adjustments.

"We've been working on this game through the development of ACB and ACR, and now we have another 9 or 10 months before release. Our goal is to ship AC 3.5," Hutchinson says. "To finish 3, and then go back and say, we can do a little bit more. Talk about things that are hard to do, like pacing. Like, this sequence is too long, or the reveal here doesn't work." With twice the production capacity in work hours and financial

investment as the most recent game in the series, it's clear that Ubisoft has high hopes for Assassin's Creed III. Many questions remain unanswered, but the game on display months before release is undeniably a profound leap forward for the series.

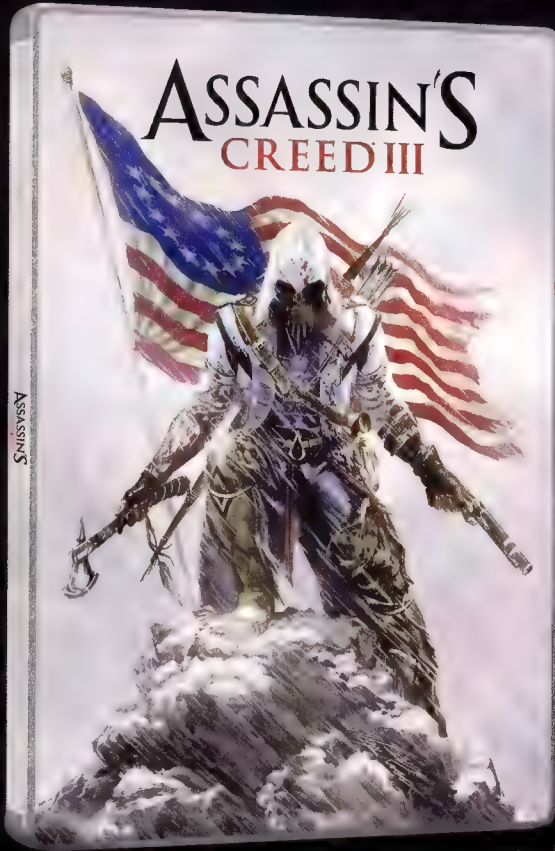
While built from the beginning as a fresh jumping-on point to draw in new fans, longtime players may be in for the biggest treat with Assassin's Creed III. The lingering questions of a long-dangling story thread loom large. Desmond's story has always been set in the final months of the year 2012, when several plot elements coalesce toward a catastrophic worldwide event. As this latest game arrives during those same months, real world and in-game events will collide, and both new fans and old will finally uncover the root of a conspiracy years in the making. ♦

////////////////////////////////////
Can't get enough information about Assassin's Creed III? We've got a full month of online coverage planned at gameinformer.com/ac3. Our blowout coverage of the game includes interviews with the developers, a closer look at Connor, expanded details on the new Anvil engine, and even a reading/watching list of books and film to help get you ready for the new game. Check back throughout the month to get the full picture.



FREE COLLECTIBLE CASE*

TAKE IT HOME TODAY WITH PRE-ORDER



LIMITED
QUANTITY
ONLY AVAILABLE
IN STORES

GameStop
power to the players

ART DRAWN BY
AWARD-WINNING COMIC ARTIST
ALEX ROSS



*Limited Quantities, While Supplies Last.

© 2012 Ubisoft Entertainment. All Rights Reserved. Assassin's Creed, Ubisoft, and the Ubisoft logo are trademarks of Ubisoft Entertainment in the US and/or other countries. "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks and "PS3" and the PlayStation Network logo are trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Kinect, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox Live, and the Xbox logos are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies and are used under license from Microsoft.



UBISOFT

WAGNA
SAVE

KUNBERTH

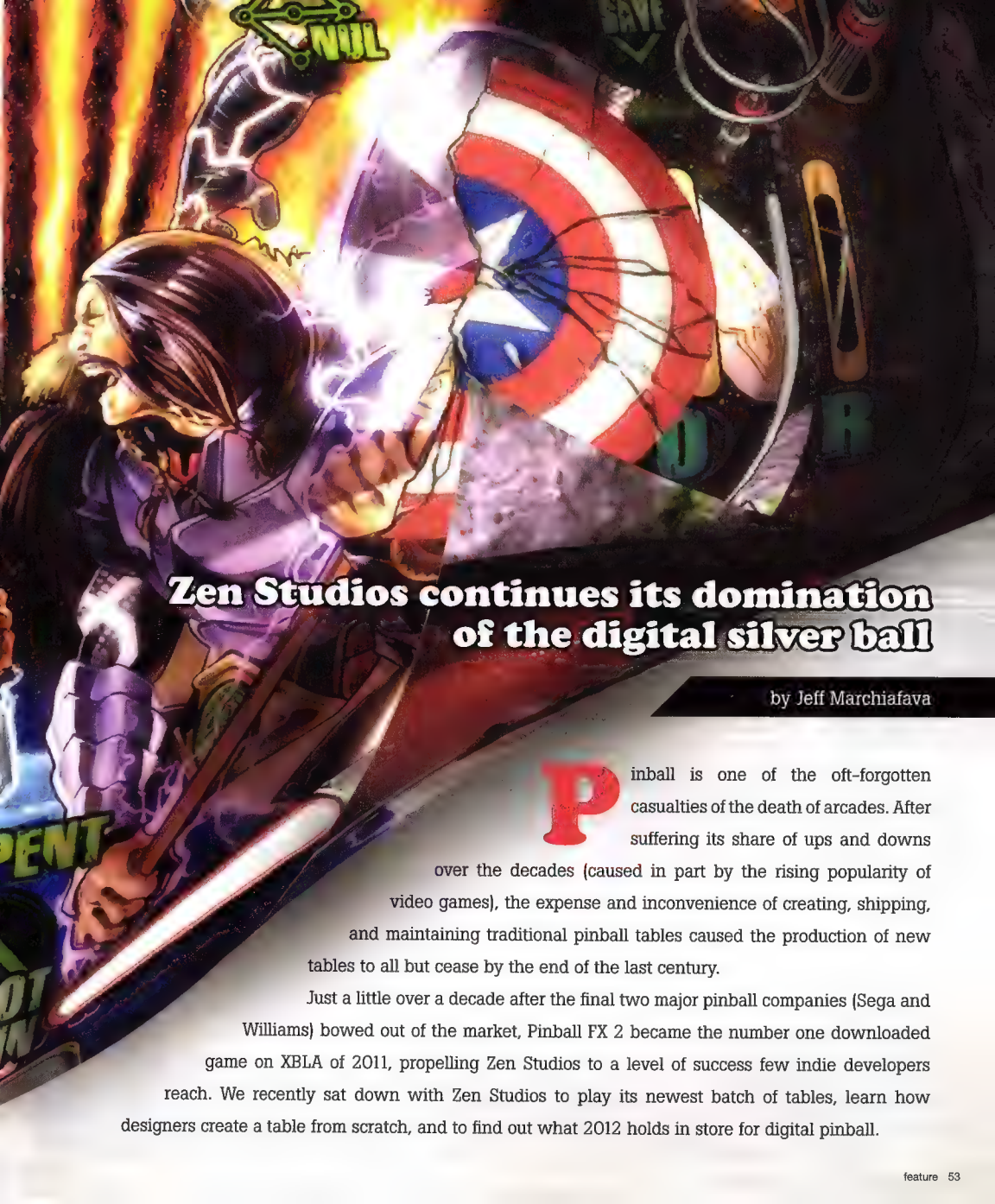
PINBALL WIZARDS

DESIGN: ZOLTÁN VÁRI
ARTWORK: GERGŐ "KOCKA" KOVÁCS
MECHANICS: SKOT
VIDEO FX: MELLÉNYULÁSZ MÁTYÁS
MUSIC: ATTILA HEBER

zen

SER

SHO
AGA



Zen Studios continues its domination of the digital silver ball

by Jeff Marchiafava

Pinball is one of the oft-forgotten casualties of the death of arcades. After suffering its share of ups and downs over the decades (caused in part by the rising popularity of video games), the expense and inconvenience of creating, shipping, and maintaining traditional pinball tables caused the production of new tables to all but cease by the end of the last century.

Just a little over a decade after the final two major pinball companies (Sega and Williams) bowed out of the market, Pinball FX 2 became the number one downloaded game on XBLA of 2011, propelling Zen Studios to a level of success few indie developers reach. We recently sat down with Zen Studios to play its newest batch of tables, learn how designers create a table from scratch, and to find out what 2012 holds in store for digital pinball.

The Devil's In The Details

While the previous Marvel tables paid homage to the characters they were based on, Zen is packing the new tables in the Avengers Chronicles Pack with even more fan service. Each table features myriad heroes and villains from Marvel's massive stable of characters, and Zen is implementing more outscenes similar to the intro for Moon Knight. The Infinity Gauntlet table alone contains 129 voiceover lines, and all the dialogue is taken straight from comic books. Marvel's licensed games manager Chris Baker pointed out a variety of small details on the World War Hulk table, including a cover based on an obscure issue of *The Punisher* and a Marvel vs. Capcom reference that only diehard fans will get.

Origin Story

Despite the popularity of Pinball FX 2, Zen Studios is still far from being a household name. Based in Budapest, Hungary, the developer started as a four-man group. The company's first foray into pinball was Pac-Man Pinball, a project chosen based on CEO Zolt Kigyossy's love of pinball and a recognized lack of competition on the marketplace. Namco killed the project before it was released, so the studio turned it into an original title called Flipper Critters. It released on DS in 2005 with little fanfare. "It was a budget of like \$40,000," Zen's creative director Neil Sorens recalls. "The characters were ugly, the tables weren't realistic...I don't know how many copies it sold, but it was off the radar, not a very good game...but it was a stepping stone for us to get onto Xbox Live Arcade."

Its first console pinball title was Pinball FX, which caught a lucky break early on in development. "The only reason Microsoft approved us on Pinball FX for Xbox Live Arcade was because we had support for the Xbox Live Vision camera - you could use your arms for flippers," Sorens tells us. "So we went through the Xbox Live Vision team rather than going through the standard approval process. So, you know, if Totemball could make it onto the Arcade, so could we." As it turns out, Zen's newest pinball game proved much more popular with players than Microsoft's free XBLA offering.

A Winning Formula

Pinball FX was a surprise success for Zen, tapping into a neglected market of old-school pinball fans.

"One of the reasons pinball failed was because it wasn't a good value proposition for people," Sorens says. "You had to pay 50 to 75 cents per game and go all the way to the arcade, or buy a multi-thousand dollar toy for your house. But a game at \$10 for four tables that you could download onto your Xbox is very convenient,

and turned out to be a value proposition that people were looking for."

Through DLC and new titles like Zen Pinball and Pinball FX 2, the studio honed its addictive formula into a business model that's hard to resist for gamers. Downloadable tables are cheap and offered a la carte; in-game score alerts and automated friends list messages encourage rivalries and keep players coming back for more; and regular online tournaments foster the developer's large and dedicated community. These aspects, along with a complex physics simulation that reproduces over a dozen different materials to capture the feeling and replayability of real pinball, have resulted in success on every platform Zen has released on. In addition to Pinball FX 2 topping the XBLA charts, Zen Pinball was the number four indie title on PSN last year, Zen Pinball 3D has been one of the most successful games on the 3DS eShop, and the iOS and Android versions are set to break two million downloads combined in the next few months.

The Marvel Connection

Zen Studios created a few licensed tables based on IPs like Rocky & Bullwinkle and Street Fighter with the original Pinball FX (though Zen is the first to admit they're not nearly as good as the tables the company is creating today). Sensing a great opportunity, at the end of 2009, the company made its biggest and riskiest partnership by creating a series of tables based on Marvel's iconic comic book characters. Zen Studios had already worked with Marvel on the overlooked PlayStation 3 FPS *The Punisher: No Mercy*, and Zen Pinball had just released to good ratings.

"We knew internally that pinball was kind of a low-hanging fruit to begin with," says Chris Baker, Marvel's licensed games manager. "It just made sense to go to the people that were making the best pinball game, and we already had a really good relationship based on The

Punisher game that we did." The two companies struck a deal to release Marvel-themed tables as DLC for Pinball FX 2, and as a standalone Marvel Pinball game on PSN.

The first four-pack was based on some of Marvel's heavy hitters. Wolverine, Spider-Man, Iron Man, and Blade all received their own tables, each featuring various confrontations with characters from their rogues galleries. Zen then released standalone Captain America and Fantastic Four tables, followed by a second four-pack entitled Vengeance and Virtue, featuring Thor, Ghost Rider, Moon Knight, and an X-Men table. Zen proved it wasn't afraid to tap lesser-known characters, sometimes to the surprise of Marvel.

"In the case of Blade and Moon Knight, our initial reaction was, 'Really?!'" Baker says. "But that's where their passion for what they feel would make a great table comes through. I think if you go play either of those, Blade definitely feels like the Blade character and has a great vampire motif going on, and then Moon Knight was my personal favorite of the Vengeance and Virtue tables, which I would not have predicted."

The themes for the next round of tables, another four-pack entitled Avengers Chronicles, were chosen the same way as the previous ones: through a back-and-forth dialogue between Zen's designers and Marvel, as well as input from the fans.

"The customers liked the tables based on characters, but they wanted to see some variety," Sorens says. "The storylines are a way of providing that." As such, the next four tables are not based solely on Marvel characters, but rather popular comic book events. The pack will be available this May, and contain tables based on Doctor Strange and Civil War Hulk, and Fear Itself, along with a fourth based on the upcoming film version of *The Avengers*. Zen is also working on Doctor Strange and Civil War tables, which will be released later down the road.



Doctor Strange



Civil War

Intelligent Design

Many of Zen's tables are so complex it's hard to tell where a designer starts. As part of the debut of the new tables, Zen walked us through the design of World War Hulk from concept to final product, while Marvel's Chris Baker provided insight on the comic book company's influence.

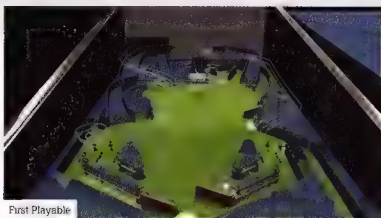
First Playable: Every table starts on paper with a design document. The first step is choosing key features and modes for the table. "The main components can be geometry, the way the table flows, the number of ramps it has, the dimensions – the playfield toys are always a big thing," says Zen Studio creative director Neil Sorens. "[These features] are how we make the table unique, but also how we connect the table to the theme."

Zen then consults with Marvel. For World War Hulk, Marvel suggested changing a boss fight between Hulk and Cyclops to Hulk and Wolverine, as it was the more classic matchup. After tweaking the design document, the basic geometry is created and tested to make sure the flow of the table is fun. Marvel doesn't even look at the first playable build. "In our heads," Baker says, "every other table they've ever done serves that purpose. They know what they're doing."

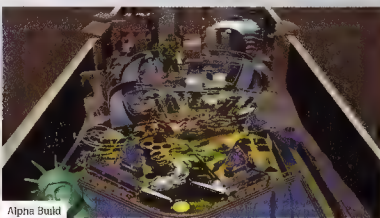
Alpha Build: By this phase, an early version of the table art has been implemented, as well as background geometry. Some 3D character models are in place, but animations are still rudimentary. All of the table's modes can be played in alpha, though the table logic, music, and dot matrix messages are still placeholders from other tables. While Marvel plays the alpha build, its feedback is still minimal. "We just basically want to see that the game is functioning," Baker says. "There's still not a lot for us to specifically comment on, but we get a good sense of the feel of the table. That's all we really need to see at alpha."

Beta Build: The beta phase features the actual music of the table, along with 90 percent of the final art. By beta, the character models have been approved by Marvel and feature better animations. Marvel makes the majority of its suggestions during beta. For example, Zen originally had Hulk always facing his adversaries in the same order as he did in the comics, but Marvel suggested forging the chronology for enjoyment purposes. "This is where I think it helps to have an outside perspective," Baker says. "We know most people probably aren't good enough to beat everybody...so we suggested to have it so you can pick who you fight. I think that makes it a little more fun, to have your options."

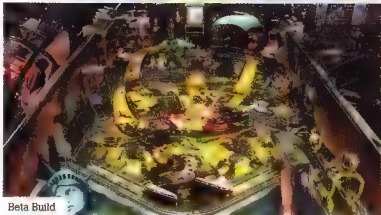
Final Build: The final build is where everything comes together. All of the voice samples have been added, along with the final lighting and special effects. For World War Hulk, there were still a few last minute art changes that needed to be made before the table is ready for consumers. During this build, Baker also shared with us news of World War Hulk's wizard mode. "At the end of the comic, Hulk is beaten," he says. "That's kind of a crappy way to win if you're playing from Hulk's perspective. So we do have that – if you're beaten in the wizard mode, it ends like the story ends, but if you win, then it's kind of an alternate, what-if ending."



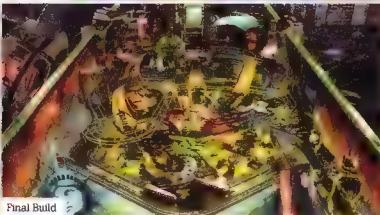
First Playable



Alpha Build



Beta Build



Final Build

The Future of Pinball

Despite Zen's massive success in the pinball realm, the studio shows no signs of resting on its laurels. Zen's vice president of marketing Mel Kirk told us they are currently working on versions of Zen Pinball for Vita, Windows Mobile 7, PC, and Wii U. On the DLC front, the company just struck a deal with PopCap for a table based on one of the company's most popular games, and Kirk told us of two other major deals they have in the works based on huge entertainment franchises. In the meantime, Zen's latest original table, Epic Quest, gives a glimpse of one direction the developer plans to take with new tables, by providing a pervasive XP system that carries over from one game to the next.

Kirk told us the company is also working on Pinball FX 3. Although he estimates the game is still at least a year from being finished, Pinball FX 3 will provide improved tutorials and table guides, new tournament structures, a deeper level of social interactivity, and a meta-game progression system that will hopefully give players an incentive to keep playing after a lousy first ball. Best of all, Kirk says the game will import your previously purchased content in the same way as Pinball FX 2. This ensures that you don't have to rebuild your library, and keeps the community from splitting amongst different titles.

Once a four-man team, Zen Studios now has 40 employees, 25 of whom are working on pinball. The others are working on new downloadable projects that you can expect to hear more about later this year, but Kirk ensures the company isn't looking to abandon its bread and butter. "I think we've proven that we can do things outside of pinball," he says. "Our next projects will take that to the next level, but we're happy being known as the pinball guys." ♦

Living The Fantasy

Although Zen takes pride in its complex physics simulation, the developer hasn't been afraid to forgo realism in favor of fun. The new tables won't change that formula, and include a variety of fun-to-learn and entertaining features.

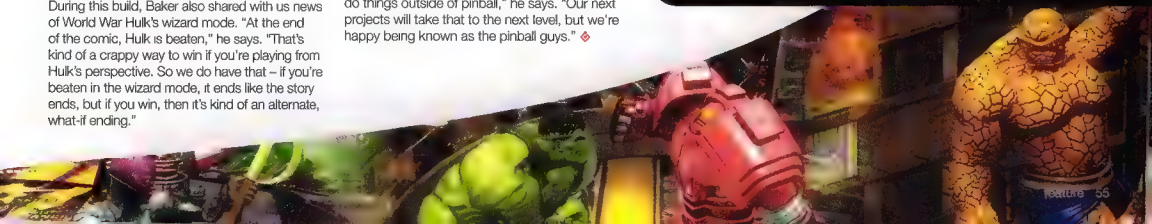
Fear Itself (seen on page 52 and 53) contains a secondary outcome with player-controlled magnets that allow you to propel the ball in consecutive loops for huge points.

For Infinity Gauntlet, each of the story's iconic Infinity Gems causes a new mind-bending effect. The Soul Gem causes the player to travel through a wormhole to a different play area for a magna-save minigame. The Mind Gem causes the flippers to default to the up position, requiring you to hold in the triggers to bring them down. The Reality Gem caused the most radical change: it turns the entire table upside down for a brain-breaking multiball mode.

While these features may alienate pinball purists, Zen stresses the need to continue providing new and entertaining experiences. One of the reasons traditional pinball died was because players ignored newer tables in favor of the legendary Addams Family and Twilight Zone tables. When arcade owners realized they could continue making money on the classics, they stopping buying new tables, which caused manufacturers to go out of business. Something tells us Zen won't have that problem.



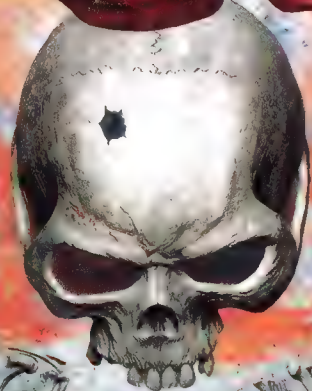
Infinity Gauntlet



04.24.2012

RISEN 2

Dark Waters



MATURE	17+ ™
M	Blood Strong Language Use of Alcohol Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org	

WWW.RISEN2.COM

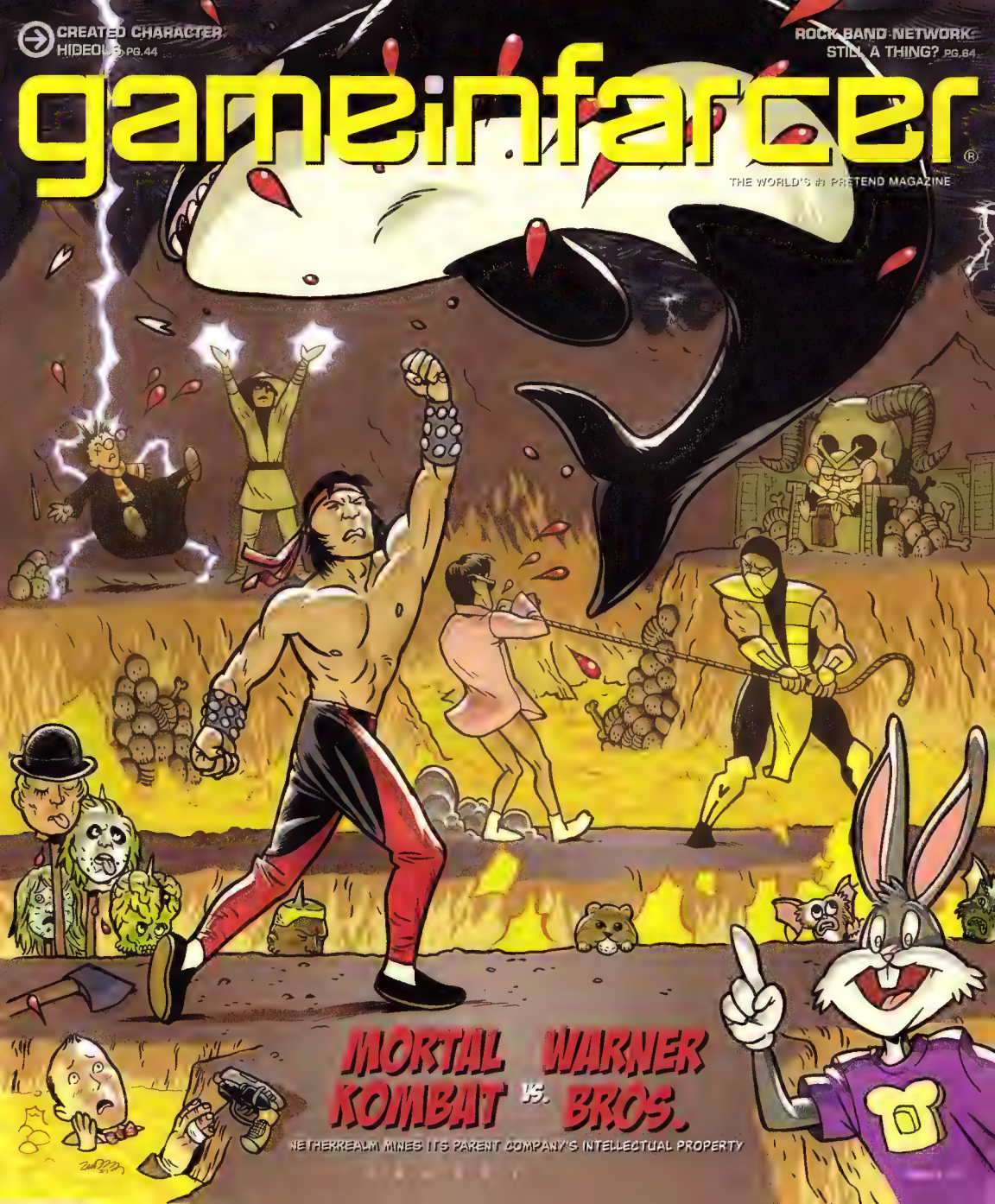


CREATED CHARACTER
HIDEOUTS, PG. 44

ROCK BAND NETWORK
STILL A THING? PG. 64

gameinfarcer

THE WORLD'S #1 PRETEND MAGAZINE



MORTAL KOMBAT vs. WARNER BROS.

NEITHER REALM MINE ITS PARENT COMPANY'S INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

East Versus You



DARTH CLARK
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Read my column online
or follow @G_Darth

Which system is the best? What does it mean to be a gamer? Sometimes I feel like the big questions in the gaming industry are only debated because I don't have time to articulate my opinion on every issue to make everyone understand. Today, I'll put a matter to rest that people have been fumbling with for months: Is Japanese game development dying? The answer is "yes," and you're killing it.

I know you. You sit at home on your couch and stuff your face with cheese balls, ignorant about the world around you. Let me help broaden your horizons: The gaming industry as it exists today was born in Japan. Nintendo? Sony? Mario? Solid Snake? All Japanese. You're not a professional gaming journalist like me, so maybe you don't understand how these kinds of things work, but if you want Japanese companies to keep making games, you need to buy them.

Gamers aren't holding up their end of the bargain. Sales are lagging, studios are struggling, and even famous developers in Japan are commenting on how the country is falling behind. Games from once-great companies like Capcom, Sega, and Square Enix aren't finding the supportive audience they deserve. You can try to pass the buck by blaming the publishers for putting out mediocre games, but eventually you'll have to face the truth: This is your fault.

Being a crybaby about outdated mechanics or anime tropes doesn't change the fact that Japanese games deserve to succeed not based on their quality, but on their heritage. Games from Japan are automatically better than the rest. This doesn't just apply to games, either; movies, toys, food, and spouses are all better if they are Japanese. Objective measures of quality don't matter — things from Japan are exotic and not mainstream, and therefore superior. You owe them your support, so stop making excuses.

Cheers,

Darth Clark

1 Hori Kinectoman

Do you ever want to play Kinect games without embarrassing yourself? The Kinectoman is the answer. This accessory from Hori is a life-size, fully articulated robot that you control with a regular Xbox 360 gamepad. Just put Kinectoman in front of Microsoft's motion camera, then pick up the controller and relax as your robot does all the work. At last, you can play games by sitting back and simply pressing buttons.

\$150 | horiusa.com/robotservants

2 Vita Xyrcele

Nintendo's release of the 3DS circle pad was an attempt to catch up to the Vita's dual sticks, but Sony is determined not to lose ground. "The new Xyrcele Pad attachment delivers all of the triple-analog actions hardcore gamers crave," says SCEA president Jack Tretton. "Along with the analog sticks and two touch-sensitive surfaces, Vita is now the unquestioned market leader in number of input types available on a single device." No game supporting all these inputs has been announced yet, but face it: You know it's gonna be *Monster Hunter*.

\$70 | playstation.com/fixingvita

1



2

Indie Cred Kit Hits Xbox Live and PSN



Blockbuster games may be popular, but they don't have the arthouse indie charm of smaller downloadable titles. That's changing this month with the release of the Indie Cred Kit, which allows you to layer stylish audio and graphical effects over any game you play. Tired of feeling like a sheep for playing mainstream series like Assassin's Creed? Use the Limbo Effect to turn the detailed visuals into simple silhouettes, or the Bastion Effect to add a wizenad narrator to your exploits. Other options include turning the world into Minecraft blocks, adding Torchlight's loot system, and replacing all dialogue with quips written by Double Fine's Tim Schafer. No matter what you're playing, the Indie Cred Kit ensures you're thumbing your nose at convention.



TIE Fighter class comes to Star Wars: The Old Republic

BioWare and Electronic Arts have announced the introduction of a new playable class for Star Wars: The Old Republic. The TIE Fighter class is a non-Force-using character that specializes in ranged combat and features a variety of screeches and whooshes fully voiced by Nolan North. Its storyline begins in a manufacturing plant, but when the facility is raided by

Trandoshan slavers, the TIE Fighter must escape and find its place in a galaxy rife with conflict. The TIE Fighter is obviously an Imperial class, but BioWare hasn't revealed what the corresponding new Republic class will be. However, lead designer James Ohlen teased that fans of that really dumb-looking thing from A New Hope's cantina scene will be "quite pleased."

DataFile

Nintendo 3DS?

According to a manufacturing plant report, every Nintendo 3DS produced since the system's launch has a faulty 3D display. The slider on the handheld (which is supposed to control the 3D intensity) has no effect, forcing gamers to play every 3DS game in 2D. Anyone attempting to use the 3D effect should have noticed the malfunction immediately, but Nintendo has yet to receive a single complaint about the "problem."

One-Man Team Develops Terrible Game

Challenging the notion that games must have big budgets and huge teams behind them, a computer science student spent three years (and his own money) developing Busy Bubbles in his tiny apartment. The game features crude visuals, myriad control issues, and a seemingly never-ending list of bugs. The unplayable game debuted last month, selling zero copies and garnering no acclaim — a true unsuccessful story

Activision taking it slow after Skylanders' success

Skylanders was one of the must-have items of the holiday season, proving to be a lucrative gamble for publisher Activision. However, rather than scrambling desperately to cash in on the enthusiasm, the publisher is displaying its trademark restraint.

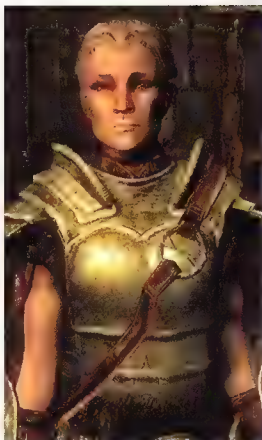
"We're waiting to see how the market develops," explains Activision CEO Bobby Kotick. "Guitar Hero and Tony Hawk didn't get to be the blockbuster brands they are today by us just grasping for easy money." Kotick says he is proud of what Skylanders developer Toys for Bob accomplished with the ambitious toy/video game crossover project, but wants to make sure the studio has all of the time, money, and support it needs to craft a suitable follow-up. Activision may, however, release a "few more" action figures for the original.

While we shouldn't expect a sequel next year, Activision is prototyping other uses for Skylanders' innovative portal, which scans objects in real life and puts them into a game. For instance, Treyarch's upcoming Call of

Duty title uses the device for all weapons and ammunition. Do you have a rifle sitting on your gun rack at home? Put it on the portal and watch it materialize in your character's hands. Did you run out of ammo in a critical boss fight? Go to your local sporting goods

store to buy a few extra boxes, dump them out on the portal, and you're back in business. Kotick claims that CoD's core audience will love this realistic business model: "Imagine the intensity: If you have to pay for every bullet, every shot counts."





Gamers all around the world have been exploring Bethesda's vision for the world of Skyrim, but how does the fantasy compare to reality? We spoke to **Adelaisa Vendicci**, a resident of Skyrim, about how the game represents the world she inhabits.

Do you ever see towns in the game and think, "That's completely wrong"?
Oh, my friends and I laugh about some of the little things. Like, in the game, the inside of the Bannered Mare is actually the interior of Filthy Jasper's – a local tavern that wasn't included. The real Bannered Mare is an animal brothel, so I can see why that was changed, but overall Bethesda recreated Skyrim with surprising accuracy.

Does it bother you that the game representing your homeland has so many bugs?
I'm sorry, Bugs?

Yeah, like glitches. Mistakes.
Oh, I didn't notice anything like that when I was playing. I was just impressed at all of the little details. For example, dragons in most fantasy worlds fly facing forward, but where I'm from, they fly backwards. That is faithfully represented in the game. Bethesda did its research.

But what about all the objects clipping through each other, or people sitting on invisible chairs?
You've never been to Skyrim, have you? I frequently find my neighbors waist-deep in the road, their limbs

flailing hilariously. Sometimes my route home from work is blocked by dragon carcasses that pop into existence in front of me. These kinds of things are business as usual in Skyrim, and Bethesda used them to create a realistic simulation. The team even included the loudron-over-the-head trick that our nation's sneathieves are so fond of using.

On a different topic, are you an adventurer through each other, or people sitting on invisible chairs?
Because I used to be an adventurer, until I took an arrow –
This interview is over.

Half-Life 3

Finally, the most anticipated game of all time...hold on a second



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

» **Style**
1-Player Tease

» **Publisher**
Valve

» **Developer**
Two guys who usually refill the snack bar at Valve

» **Release**
12.12.2012

Valve, the publisher/developer/false deity responsible for Steam, Counter-Strike, and Left 4 Dead is finally returning to the lauded Half-Life series after five long years. Foregoing conventional options like another episodic entry or direct sequel, Valve announced it will be releasing Half-Life 3D. Initial fan enthusiasm on the Internet (due to no one noticing the "D" in the logo) quickly gave way to despair when Valve's Gabe Newell confirmed the game is just a 3D version of the original Half-Life and its unpopular expansion, Half-Life: Blue Shift. Yeah, the one where you play a guy named Barney. As of press time, Newell is listed as being in critical condition. After the riots, I had some hands-on time with the title; apart from the free pair of Gordon Freeman-style 3D glasses, my initial impressions are that this is a very dumb idea. » **Darth Clark**

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

Raiden gets passed off again



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

» **Style**
1-Player
Almost-A-Game

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Changes Daily

» **Release**
20XX

Metal Gear fans were shocked when Platinum Games took over development of Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance and overhauled the mechanics. In response to the outcry surrounding the change in direction, series creator Hideo Kojima has shifted the game's focus yet again. Development duties (and creative control) have been passed to Halibrick, the studio behind Fruit Ninja and Jetpack Joyride. "Halibrick knows about cutting. And jetpacks," Kojima explained. "Those are really the only two things we know are going to be in the game at this point. Oh, and watermelons. You're really going to love what we're doing with watermelons." » **Darth Clark**



Cave Johnson Story

For science!

Style Video Game **Publisher** Nicalis **Developer** Studio Pixel **Release** Eventually **ESRB** 0 for Old-School

9

PC

» **Concept**
Take Cave Johnson and add the word "Story" to the end of his name

» **Graphics**
Literally everywhere you look you will see graphics

» **Sound**
JK Simmons returns as the ornery and awesome title character

» **Playability**
Things happen when you push buttons, but yelling at the screen returns no results

» **Entertainment**
If you like games with two names mashed into a single name, you'll love this

» **Replay Value**
It's "yalper" backwards

Two games that are great individually may be even better when combined, and this theory proves true in Cave Johnson Story. You play as a young version of Portal 2's Cave Johnson as he goes spelunking in assorted lunar tunnels in search of moon rocks. The gameplay is practically identical to the original Cave Story; you collect a variety of upgradable weapons along the way (my favorite was the Combustible Lemon Launcher), and get screwed over when you trade them away too early for lame substitutes like the Shower Curtain. The Metroid-style exploration and gunplay is as fun as ever, and some of the boss fights (like the one against Dark Caroline) are full of classic thrills. I also like the addition of the toxicity meter, since it adds urgency by showing how close you are to dying of moon dust poisoning. The final few hours are absolutely epic, and though I don't want to spoil anything, here's a hint: Ever wonder where the Companion Cube came from? » **Darth Clark**



HD Collection Collection

Together at last, again

Style 1 to 12-Player Pile Of Stuff You've Played Already **Publisher** Everyone **Developer** Back To The Well Studios **Release** Constantly **ESRB** E-M

10.25

PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **Concept**
Because you haven't had enough

» **Graphics**
Just like before, but more high-defly

» **Sound**
The music is completely different. Psychel! It's exactly the same

» **Playability**
Outdated, clumsy, and just as perfect as I remember

» **Entertainment**
You love these games! Prove it by buying them a third time

» **Replay Value**
Eternally

Publishers practically struck gold when they realized that they could resell their ancient games with a new coat of paint. Nostalgia-heavy compilations from Sony, Ubisoft, and Konami have been successful, so the companies joined forces to provide the definitive collection of HD collectors.

In case you missed the original games and their subsequent rereleases, the HD Collection Collection proves that the third time's the charm. The complete adventures of Jak, Snake, Dante, Sam Fisher, and more are now available for you to replay on a single disc (PS3) or a 47-disc set (Xbox 360). I'd like to say that these games have changed, or gotten better with age, but that would be a lie. Regardless, I'm awarding the HD Collection Collection a high score. Sure these game are very old, but saying anything bad about them is basically video game treason. It doesn't matter how bad the controls are or how poorly the design has aged — if you have anything less than complete reverence for these classics, you forfeit the right to call yourself a gamer. » **Darth Clark**

game over Nintendo Courts the Hardcore Crowd with WiiU Tweaks

While successful with "nontraditional gamers," the Wii was often mocked by real gaming audiences for catering too much to kids and soccer moms. To combat this criticism, Nintendo has announced several changes to the WiiU controller to make it more appealing to its new audience.

Dual Monster Energy Drink/protein shake dispenser

Buffalo Wild Wings air freshener

Free streaming UFC content

Sweat glands



T-Shirt launcher

Optional decals

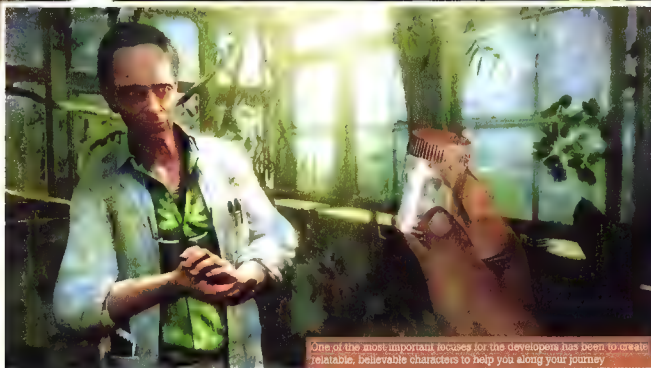
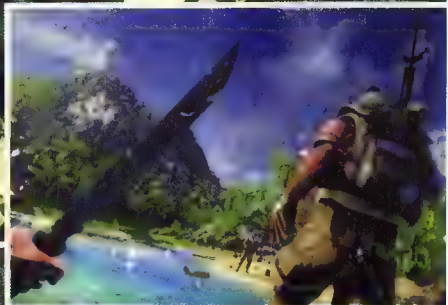
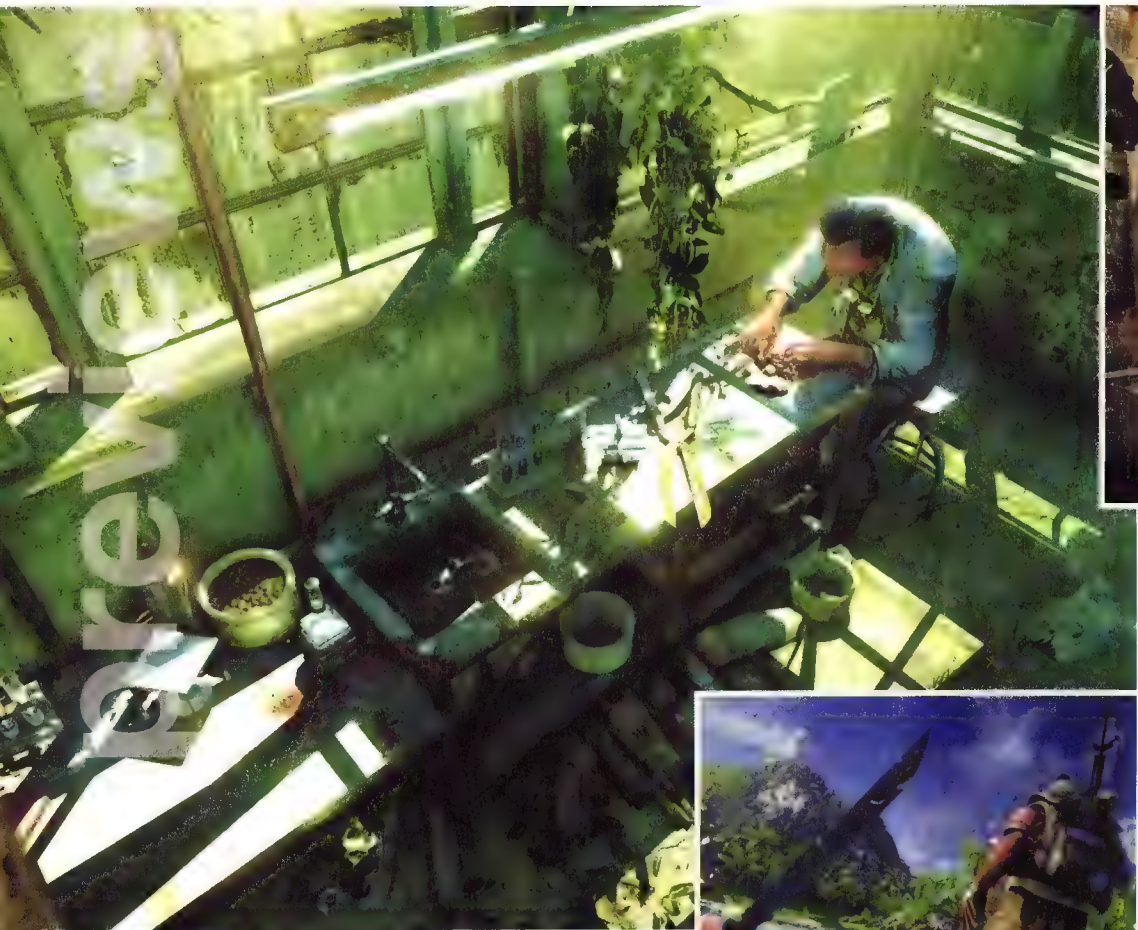
Pre-loaded apps

The movie 300

Every episode of Entourage

Dane Cook discography

Jock Jams collection



One of the most important focuses for the developers has been to create realistic, believable characters to help you along your journey.



Far Cry 3

A mosaic of dysfunction across an entire island.

Far Cry 3 is leaving the browns and grays of Africa behind and heading back to the bright greens and blues of the island jungles that defined the first game. Much like the disparate storylines of the first two games, Far Cry 3 has no characters or plot details tying it to either the first or the second installment. It's a new hero, a new island with new villains, and a new theme of insanity.

In Far Cry 3, you play as Jason Brody – a normal guy with no military or combat training who accidentally stumbles into a dangerous situation while backpacking with friends on a tropical island. His appearance piques the interest of a man named Vaas. We met Vaas at E3 last year, when he asked a restrained Brody if he knew the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Vaas then tied Brody to a cinder block and kicked him into a ravine filled with water and what appeared to be dozens of other floating dead bodies tied to cinder blocks. Vaas had clearly done this before. From that point on, Brody's only mission is to find his friends, get off the island, and survive. "He's not trying to save the world, he's just trying to survive the next five minutes," says Far Cry 3 producer Dan Hay.

In order to survive, you must foster friendships with the island's inhabitants, but it's clear that spending time on this island will drive anyone insane. These characters are not insane in a comical sense, but rather in a way that is hopefully relatable to the player. Hay wants the player to meet these characters and see recognizable emotions within them. The team wants these characters to feel real, and in order to foster that, Ubisoft Montreal is actively avoiding the science-fiction elements that appeared in the first Far Cry. "You won't see any mutated monsters or feral super powers in Far Cry 3," Hay says. "It's much more credible if you are scared of something that is real." He wants the game to deliver a sense of intensity that will "push the player to the edge of their ability." The player should meet these characters and befriend them as needed, but Hay hopes that players will think, "If I end up on this island for too long, will I end up like this character? Which one will I be?"

Moving back to a tropical island wasn't necessarily an attempt to recall players' fond memories of the first game. When going to the drawing board and listing the elements the team wanted to present in Far Cry 3's setting, it

needed to have a remote, distant, beautiful setting full of discovery. The more adjectives the team attributed to its ideal setting, the more it sounded like a tropical island.

Hay describes the layout of the island as one full of rabbit holes. It's an open-world game full of areas to explore, but then there are scenarios described as "palate cleansers" that take the player in unexpected directions. "We have some characters that say, 'Hey, you know what? Why don't you put the gun down for five or ten minutes and go off on a completely different experience,'" Hay says. There are long stretches in the game where you won't be shooting anything, but according to Hay, when player testers went through these sections they never even noticed that their guns had left the corner of the screen.

Despite these changes of pace, Hay assures us there is no need to worry if you are looking for the tactical shooting you enjoyed in the first two Far Cry games. "You're going to have an open-world experience, you're going to have a compelling shooter experience, but there's also going to be a few surprises that you're going to be saying, 'this is unique to Far Cry 3,'" he says.

— Kyle Hilliard

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
September 4



Far Cry 3's open-world setting means you can zipline your way into the action.



Far Cry 3's open-world setting means you can travel in boats and gliders.

Hitman: Absolution

Agent 47 forms his own splinter cell

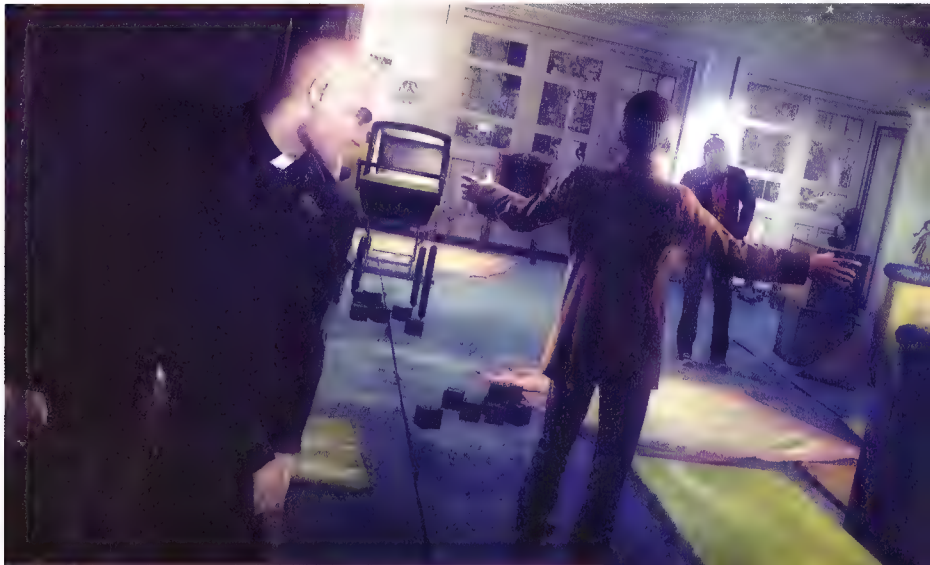
» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
IO Interactive

» **Release**
Summer



Diana Burnwood has been one of Agent 47's handlers for as long as fans of the Hitman series can remember. Throughout the years, Diana has given the agent numerous ICA assassination contracts. The two were not allowed to meet in person, but they violated that rule on a few occasions, and slowly built a budding friendship over the years. In Hitman: Absolution, Agent 47 is ordered to betray that relationship and kill Diana. Being the obedient

soldier that he is, Agent 47 fulfills the contract. However, as Diana dies in Agent 47's arms, she whispers the name Victoria into his ear, begging him to find the young girl because she is a key player in a worldwide conspiracy. With little more than the handguns in his holster and the wish of a dying friend, Agent 47 sets out to find a young woman he's never seen or heard of before.

Much like Agent 47, IO Interactive is hoping to set players free to cut their own path through

Agent 47 is a very skilled assassin. He can take out a kid at McDonald's.

Absolution's large open levels. Players will be able to approach each area using either ninja-like stealth or John McCrane's brand of brashness. In the demo we were shown at this year's CES, Agent 47 tracks Victoria down to an orphanage only to find out that several mysterious masked gentlemen have beaten him to the institution. These well-dressed men ransack the building as Agent 47 infiltrates the orphanage hoping to beat his mysterious opponents to his target. Agent 47 isn't the only person looking for this girl, and the hitman aims to find out why.

As soon as the demo starts, Agent 47 uses a small child's toy to create a distraction to sneak past a few armed thugs. The assassin then edges silently up behind a guard and chokes him to the ground while quietly whispering "shh" into his ear. Every time Agent 47 silently takes out a guard like this – or performs some other stealthy maneuver such as hiding a body – he fills up an instinct meter. This meter can be spent to activate Agent 47's instinct vision, a hyper sense mode where all of Agent 47's enemies appear as black shadows. Instinct vision allows the assassin to discover his enemy's positions through walls and track their patrols via flaming trails along the ground.

Stealth isn't always the easiest way to cut through a level. Those who prefer violence over



Agent 47 isn't just a body spray. He's also a strategic killer.

A Sordid Affair

At the end of 2006's Hitman: Blood Money, the ICA was destroyed by a rival organization. Agent 47 and Diana are the company's only survivors, but part ways as Diana reforms the ICA. IO isn't talking about what happened between the two games, but Agent 47's contract on Diana would suggest that he's taking his orders from someone else these days.



Little jokes like these Christian tracts are spread across the levels



silence can approach each level with their finger pressed against the trigger. We watched Agent 47 conquer the same orphanage level in a second playthrough, but this time the contract killer made a whole lot more noise. Instead of picking up a kid's toy to distract a few enemies, he grabbed a nearby fire axe, crept up behind one of the guards, and took him out at the knees. This alerted another nearby enemy, so without pause, Agent 47 tossed the axe across the room and it tomahawked into the alerted enemy's skull.

Another use for Agent 47's instinct meter is point shooting mode. While in this mode, time slows down and Agent 47 can tag enemies and objects for a quick spray of gunfire. We watched Agent 47 enter a room with nearly half a dozen enemies and activate point shooting mode before tagging several enemies and a few gas canisters as targets. As soon as time resumed to normal speed, Agent 47 went on a rampage, shooting everyone in the room and causing several explosions that sent his foes flying into the walls.

We've had our eye on Hitman: Absolution since its stunning demo last year at E3, and it looks like the game is coming along nicely. We're eager to get our hands on the title so we can see how the action feels when we're directing the gunplay. **Ben Reeves**



With 47's a priest, you're getting the job done



Darksiders II

The Makers make their mark in Vigil's massive world

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Wii U • PC

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
THQ

Developer
Vigil Games

Release
June 26

The Makers created everything, from the splendors within the Garden of Eden to the serpent holes that thread throughout the underworld. But after centuries of engineering untold wonders, their race began to die off. When Death first encounters what's left of the Maker race in Darksiders II, they are a small band of tinkers who have secluded themselves in a small corner of the Abyss.

Death arrives in the Makers' Realm looking for passage to the Tree of Life. Unfortunately, this area is blocked off by massive crystalline growths called the corruption. This plague has slowly spread across the Makers' Realm, turning what was once an ecological wonder into a giant graveyard. During Death's journey through the Makers' village he uncovers legends of a massive stone colossus, called the Guardian, which the Makers built centuries ago in order to fight the corruption. However, as the Makers began to die off, they were unable to finish this monumental project and the behemoth now sits unfinished on the edge of the realm. If Death can find the three heartstones that power the goliath, then he might be able to finish what the Makers started centuries ago and purify the land.

Last month we detailed Death's journey through part of the Makers' Realm, but during our most recent demo I got to pick up the controller and head straight to the area's final dungeon, a massive complex of ruins of what was likely once a great Maker foundry. One of the first rooms I enter looks like some kind of medieval silo. A tangle of chains suspends a semi-truck-sized war hammer over a lava pit. This hammer rests ominously in the center of the room; it is an omen of things to come.

Inside the dungeon, I put Darksiders II's platforming to the test. Death clambers across the

environment with the speed and grace of an undead monkey. However, the controls don't always feel as smooth as Death's animations look. While running along a wall, Death sometimes comes across a wall nub that he needs to launch off to continue forward. To prevent Death from falling these sequences, players must time a button press with Death's leap off the nub. This active platforming feels slightly unnatural. Hopefully Vigil can add in some kind of visual cue or rumble to remind players to act.

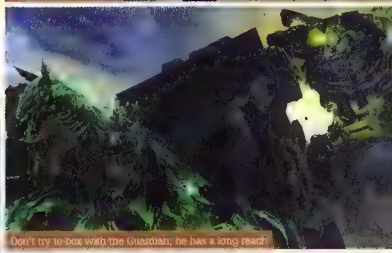
In the center of the dungeon I place three heartstones inside the monstrous Guardian construct, and the giant shudders to life. Unfortunately, one of the heartstones was corrupted, and it seems to be affecting the Guardian's behavior. The giant's movements are erratic. It stands to its full height of around 10 stories and smashes through several dungeon walls before lumbering toward the Makers' village. I race after the Guardian, pausing only briefly at the dungeon's first room to notice giant chains swinging silently over a lava pit. The oversized hammer is now missing.

When I arrive, the Maker village has already been decimated. A few NPCs still mill about in case I want to sell off loot or hone my skills, but I don't have much time to waste — I have a rogue mechanical giant to catch. I meet up with the construct in a field just outside of the village. Death calls his horse to his side, and the beast rises up from the ground in a flash of green fire. Then I begin circling the construct, plotting my plan of attack.

Until now, Vigil has been hesitant to show off any of the main bosses in Darksiders II. These sequences feature the biggest fights in the



Somebody wants a hit!



Don't try to box with the Guardian, he has a long reach.



You'll need to collect three heartstones to power the Guardian.

game. The Guardian battle is a bit like taking down a colossus in Shadow of the Colossus. I circle around the Guardian until, exhausted from attacking, he pauses to prop himself off the ground with his fists. This gives me the opportunity to quickly climb up his arm and smash one of the heartstones that power him. After this, the Guardian changes up his tactics. He begins firing giant balls of corrupted energy at me, and I have to avoid them until I get lucky enough to lure one of them towards the Guardian. After the Guardian takes a hit from his own corrupted energy, he takes a knee on the battlefield, and I have another minute to climb up to a second heartstone. If I'm too slow, the giant regains his composure and knocks me off his back. After all three heartstones shatter, the Guardian thunders to the ground in a shower of ancient metals. The demo ends before I find out if this explosion takes out the corruption within the surrounding countryside.

This boss battle signifies the end of the game's first zone — an area comparable to the entire world map from the first Darksiders. Vigil says Darksiders II comprises four zones of similar scale. The game is unquestionably large, but I wonder if Vigil has bitten off more than it can chew. The game still needs a fair amount of polish before its June release, but if Vigil can pull it off, Darksiders II could be one of the successes of the year. **Ben Reeves**



That's one dead president you've got there, Leon

Resident Evil 6

A fresh injection of new screens and details

Fans of Capcom's long-running horror series cheered when a gorgeous trailer for Resident Evil 6 hit in January. The video showed off familiar faces like Chris and Leon battling zombies and other mutated freaks in the crowded Chinese city of Lanshiang and a sleepy American town called Tall Oaks, but we had few details beyond what we could glean from the trailer. Now Capcom has unleashed a new batch of gruesome screens and a few new details.

Fans speculated about the exact year in which Resident Evil 6 takes place based on the trailer, but Capcom has squelched the discussion by confirming that it is set in 2013. This places the events after Resident Evil 5. While we still don't know the mysterious new protagonist's identity, we now know his adventure takes place in Eastern Europe.

Resident Evil 6 also marks the return of zombies to the main series, but now they can run, jump, and even wield weapons. The new mutating enemy, called J'avo, share some similarities with the Las Plagas and Majini from Resident Evil 4 and 5, respectively. The more human-like foes can communicate, work as a group, and use weapons. The J'avo have the ability to regenerate, and they undergo grotesque mutations depending on which body part recovers damage. In one screenshot we see what appears to be a J'avo growing a long tentacle arm that grabs Chris behind cover.

Capcom also confirmed that players can finally move and shoot at the same time—a feature gamers have wanted for years. The redesigned control scheme also allows characters to slide, roll in any direction, and perform enhanced melee attacks. The 3DS' Circle Pad Pro peripheral combined with Resident Evil: Revelations offered us a glimpse of how great agile marksmanship feels in the series, and we can't wait to get more. » **Tim Turi**

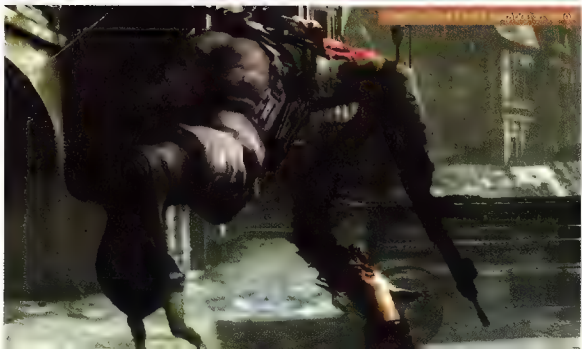
» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 2-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
November 20



Game of Thrones

When you play the game of thrones, you win or die

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

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Atlas

» **Developer**
Cyanide Studio

» **Release**
May 15

With the age-old question of why games based on licensed properties usually aren't very good, perhaps the answer lies in the need for developers to split effort between making something true to the license and making something that actually works as a video game. With *Game of Thrones*, the new RPG based on George R. R. Martin's popular *A Song of Ice and Fire* books (as well as the HBO television series they spawned), French developer Cyanide Studio is openly leaning on creating something for the fans, but there's some hope that satisfying gameplay will follow.

Rather than retell a bastardized version of the story from the books, Cyanide has worked with Martin to create a new tale set around the same time as the second half of the first book. The game jumps back and forth between two new characters, Mors Westford and Alester Sarwyck, friends who were part of the rebellion that serves as a historical precursor to the political dealings of the books.

Mors is a brother of the Night's Watch who begins the game hunting down a deserter from his group. Mors also happens to be a warg—a human with the ability to send his consciousness into his dog—which makes tracking particularly easy for him. At certain points in the game, Mors can take over his dog's mind, allowing him to follow scent trails from the perspective of the animal. Sometimes this will be used for quests, and other times it will lead to side areas and treasure.



In addition to familiar settings like the Wall and King's Landing, *Game of Thrones* features two areas new to the series—Riverspring and Castlewood. Alester begins his story in Riverspring, where he returns to his family after many years away just in time for his father's funeral. In his time away, Alester has become a red priest: a proponent of an unpopular religious faction obsessed with fire. He starts the game by butting heads with his family, who are upset by his long absence and his newfound beliefs.

In true *Game of Thrones* fashion, publisher Atlas promises that these two old friends are set on a course that will eventually bring them together on opposite sides of a morally gray conflict. The game features multiple endings, and as fans of the series would expect, it's unlikely that any of them are particularly happy.

The gameplay clearly comes second to the storytelling in *Game of Thrones*, but it doesn't look bad. The combat system is reminiscent of *Dragon Age*, with multiple party members that can be swapped between and various abilities on cooldowns. You cannot actually pause the game to issue commands, but you can slow the action considerably, giving you a bit more time to think through what you want to do next. As the developer sees it, the no-pause rule forces players to think on their feet and keep moving, which keeps with the frenzied tone of battles in the books.

Each character features three classes to choose from

with fairly obvious differences. For example, Mors can be a magnar if he wants to dual wield, a hedge knight to focus on two-handed weapons, or a landed knight to use a shield and one-handed weapon. Upon reaching a certain level, characters unlock a second set of skills beyond this initial class choice. The game uses traditional RPG stats such as strength, agility, luck, and endurance, but it has one unusual system. During character creation, you can choose specific powerful buffs known as strengths—such as "Born Leader," which provides a constant seven percent damage buff—but they must be balanced out by permanent debuffs called weaknesses, like "Alergic," which makes the character extra susceptible to poison.

Based on the title I've seen of *Game of Thrones* thus far, it seems like a passable *Dragon Age* clone with a George R. R. Martin paint job. That's not necessarily a bad thing, although I'm worried about how linear and relatively try the game looks. Atlas claims it will last 30-40 hours, but sidequests are supposedly quite minor and will not lead to new areas.

Whatever concerns I have, Atlas seems focused on reiterating that *Game of Thrones* is not really for RPG fans alone—it's for *A Song of Ice and Fire* fans. Anyone who loves the HBO television show will be happy to hear that James Cosmo and Conleth Hill will be providing voices and likeness for Jeor Mormont and Lord Varys respectively, and Lena Headey's likeness will be used for Cersei, though her voiceover is handled by a sound-alike. That parity with the show should help provide an enjoyable side story for the dark fantasy series. Whether or not it will actually help make the game any good remains to be seen. » **Phil Kollar**



Gravity Rush

Falling down never felt so exciting

Gravity Rush is one of the strong players in the Vita's lineup, and even though it has slipped from the launch window, it's still worth keeping an eye on.

Our demo begins with players taking control of Kat, an amnesiac with weird clothing who talks to cats. Losing your memory occurs in video games about as often as you reload your clip in Call of Duty, but the story crutch serves its purpose by offering a mystery to solve and a valid excuse to hold the player's hand through a tutorial. Little of the story was offered in our demo, but it seems unlikely that it will be the force that keeps players motivated to complete the game. That job is in the hands of the gravity control.

With a tap of the shoulder button, Kat can eliminate the gravity from around her, making herself (and whatever is surrounding her) float into the air. If you're standing next to a group of people, they will rise into the air and float around helplessly. While floating midair, you can look around with the right stick, take aim, and press the shoulder button again to go barreling towards your destination. You essentially remove gravity, and then rotate it depending on your chosen destination. This gravity manipulation only applies to the area surrounding Kat, so even though you will fling yourself toward the side of the building and begin running up the wall, you will still see regular people walking around on the street as the laws of physics intend.

You can also shift gravity for combat purposes. Instead of simply flying toward a destination with the tap of the shoulder button after removing gravity, you can press the square button to send yourself feet first toward an enemy. Outside of this empowering attack, the combat seems simple in a welcoming way. Just tap away on square to kick everything that poses a threat.

Along with an interesting gravity shifting mechanic, the game also has a unique art style. It's comparable to other Japanese games with cel-shaded anime-style art, but Gravity Rush separates itself with its color scheme. It favors deep, dark reds and purples in lieu of the bright primary colors seen in games of a similar style.

Moving gravity around to serve your own purposes feels like flight, but in a way that doesn't offer too much freedom. The restrictions of having to shift gravity as opposed to simply flying into the air lend a dangerous weight to the world. You're not flying into the air, you're falling upward, and that means that if you don't catch yourself, things could go terribly wrong.

Most of the offerings on the Vita are familiar but enjoyable games like Uncharted and Katamari. I'm more than happy to play new versions of those games on new hardware, but Gravity Rush feels different than anything I've played on any system, and I can't wait to dive up into the air and spend more time with it. » Kyle Hilliard

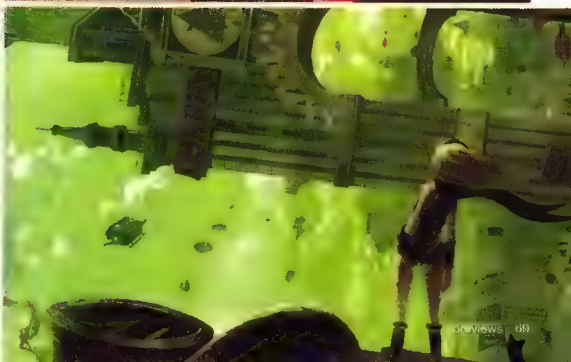
- » **Platform**
Vita
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment
- » **Developer**
SCE Japan Studio
- » **Release**
May 29



When shifting gravity, the palette of colors shift to deep reds and purples.



Life floating above the... of the routines of gravity you can manipulate the Vita to adjust your views.





Dragon's Dogma

The important nouns of Dragon's Dogma

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
May 22

If you've already finished all of Skyrim's major side quests (assuming that's possible) and are looking for another fantasy-themed open world to capture your attention, Capcom is prepping its epic fantasy tale, Dragon's Dogma, for release this spring. In the game, players set off on a quest to retrieve their heart from an organ-thieving dragon. Jumping into a quest of this magnitude can be disorienting, so we put together this quick primer to give you all the relevant detail you'll need before entering the world of Gransyus.

Gran Soren

Dragon's Dogma takes place within the fictional world of Gransyus. Gran Soren is the country's capital city, which also functions as your main hub. Gran Soren is a lively city with a vibrant atmosphere. Here you can talk to over 200 inhabitants, recruit new pawns to your party, and acquire a multitude of side quests. More than a few treasures can also be found while exploring Gran Soren's rooftops. If you need new weapons and armor, check out Caxton's Armory. Looking to stock up on potions? Head over to Camellia's Apothecary. You'll also want to stop by Devyn's Barbershop for a shave in order to change your character's look.

Vocations

Vocations are essentially player classes. Dragon's Dogma features a rich character creator, and after you've settled on your avatar's physical features you get to pick your vocation. At the beginning of the game you can select from one of three basic classes: fighter, mage, and strider. Strider is essentially an acrobatic class

with strong martial arts abilities and skill with ranged weapons such as the bow. Later on you can visit the Union Inn in Gran Soren and explore some of Dragon Dogma's more advanced classes. You may wish to become a Magick Archer who imbues his arrows with magical powers or creates homing arrows that follow enemies as they move across the battlefield. Or you may want to explore life as an Assassin, a capable fighter who is the master of all weapons and can perform sneak and counter attacks.

Pawns

Pawns may look like everyday humans, but they are actually nomads from other worlds who have traveled to Gransyus through the Rift. While pawns are capable in battle, they lack free will and emotions, so military generals often employ them on the field of battle. A main pawn will accompany you throughout your adventure, and you can customize their appearance and fighting style to complement your own. Up to two additional support pawns can be recruited to your party, but you have less control over their abilities.

The Rift

Dragon's Dogma isn't the only world in the universe; a spectral plane called the Rift connects these various planets. If you find a rift stone in the world of Gransyus you can enter the Rift and recruit new support pawns to your team or send your own pawn out to assist other players. While

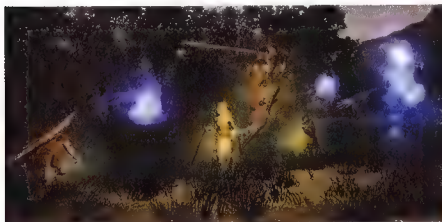
your pawns are away, they will gain valuable experience. When they return, they will be more efficient in battle and may have knowledge about secrets within areas you haven't yet visited.

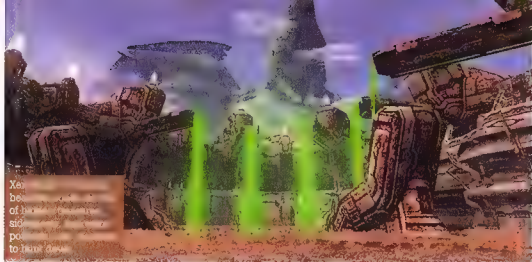
Combat

Dragon's Dogma features a twist to the standard action formula. Unlike most games where players are forced to hack at a giant's ankles until they die of blood loss (or humiliation), in Dragon's Dogma you can grapple large enemies and even climb onto their backs to inflict devastating blows against vital parts of their anatomy.

Quests

Dynamic missions will hopefully set Dragon's Dogma apart. During one early quest, you have to protect a cart as it races towards safety. If you have a range-capable team, you can power through the mission by picking off many of your attackers before they get in too close. Alternatively, you can kick the ox pulling the cart to make it run faster. This will cause the ox to lose health, and if the ox dies you fail the quest. However, if you have a healer, it can constantly rejuvenate the ox while you kick it towards a photo finish to safety. » Ben Reeves





Xenoblade Chronicles

Why you should care about the latest Japanese RPG revival

Xenoblade Chronicles has been readily available in most major gaming markets in the world other than North America for a while now, and RPG fans have been raving about it. Here are just a few of the reasons you should pay attention to this April release:

The Wii has never looked this good. It's easy to complain about the lack of HD on Nintendo's consumer-friendly console, but Xenoblade Chronicles proves that you can still put out some stunning standard display visuals. From the detailed character models and animations to the gorgeous environments, the only games on the system that come close to looking this nice are Nintendo-developed releases like Skyward Sword and Mario Galaxy.

If you were put off by the linear corridor crawling of Final Fantasy XIII, Xenoblade Chronicles may be just what you're looking for. The massive world is open for exploration. The towns and outdoor areas sprawl in every direction, and all are full of secrets to hunt down. You can do quests for locals, hunt rare and difficult monsters,

or look for collectibles that can earn you other bonuses. The main story is relatively linear, but there's a refreshing amount of freedom to do what you want when you're between cutscenes.

Combat is fast and engaging. Unlike many Japanese RPGs, you can't complain about the combat being too slow or just requiring you to hit the attack button over and over. In Xenoblade, skills are laid out in a bar on the bottom of the screen. As battle progresses, you can swap between skills on the fly, using different abilities as others are cooling down. Different powers are more effective at different angles, so you need to continue positioning yourself throughout the course of battle. If you just auto-attack and don't move, you'll get destroyed quickly.

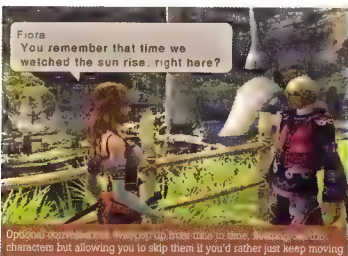
The plot is darker than you might expect. While there are some Japanese RPG clichés at work here – a main character with a dark and mysterious past, an attack on the protagonist's hometown providing motivation for a journey, etc. – Xenoblade also features some surprisingly dark themes and shocking twists. While you

begin in the midst of a fairly peaceful life with best friends Shulk, Reyn, and Flora, don't expect the harmony to last and don't be surprised when characters you've grown to like are suddenly and violently removed from the story.

The voice acting is almost never annoying. Perhaps one of the reasons for the decline of popularity of the Japanese RPG is that in an age where most games feature full voice acting, most main characters in this genre tend to be whiny and unlikable to a degree that's aggravated by shrill, ear-shattering voice work. Xenoblade Chronicles, on the other hand, features a subdued script spoken by a pleasantly British cast who sound unique, bearable, and even enjoyable. It helps that Shulk and his companions are a down-to-earth, non-melodramatic bunch as well.

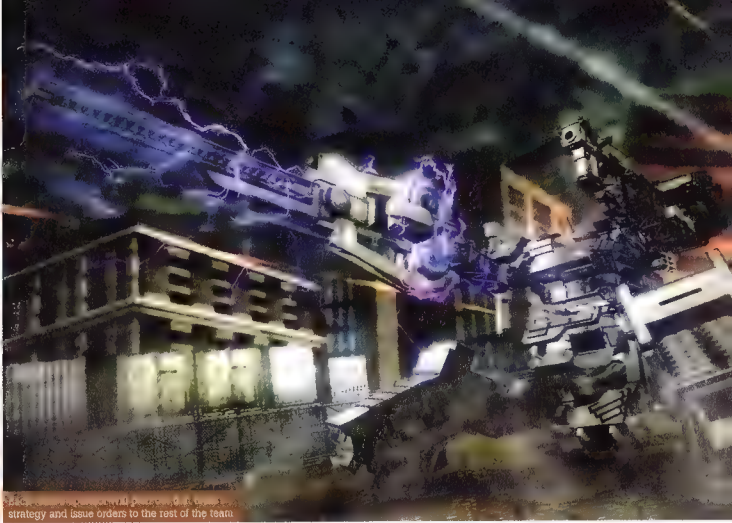
So now you know some of the reasons that everyone else is singing its praises, but will we do the same? Check back for Game Informer's review of Xenoblade Chronicles next month. — Phil Kollar

- » **Platform**
Wii
- » **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Monolith Soft
- » **Release**
April 6



Optional character models were used to bring many of these beautiful, new characters to life, but allowing you to swap them if you'd rather just keep moving.





Armored Core V

Armored Core advances across the online battlefield

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(10-player online)

» **Publisher**
Namco Bandai

» **Developer**
From Software

» **Release**
March 20

Optimus Prime, C-3PO, T-1000—Western audiences have always had a love affair with robots. But Japan's rabid enthusiasm for walking mechs makes our interest in the subject look like grade school romance. While the Armored Core series has made it to the top of the sales charts in Japan, it usually only achieves scattered applause in the States. That likely won't change with Armored Core V, but this series reboot offers newcomers the great opportunity to take one of Armored Core V's mechs for a spin around the battlefield.

The series has always featured robust customization options, and Armored Core V is no different. In this fiction, battle mechs are called ACs. You begin the game as a pilot who can customize his AC to a great degree. You can swap out your right arm cannon with a grenade launcher that features a wider blast radius, tinker with your engine's assembly, adjust the output of your thrusters, or paint the entire mech to match your eye color.

Once you take the battlefield, the changes From Software is making with the franchise become evident. For this entry, the team is stressing multiplayer. Players join a group of

five to engage other mechs, tanks, and aircraft in the main campaign. While players can join an AI-controlled squad to complete some of the same content offline, the game is built to be played online. From Software hopes players will connect with their friends, as thousands of players battle over various objectives on a persistent world map.

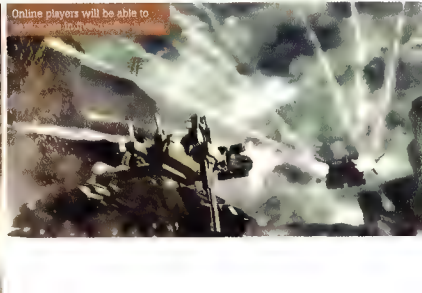
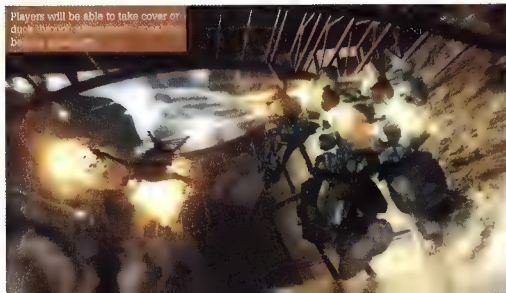
This emphasis on multiplayer affects the entire Armored Core experience. The game presents players with gameplay challenges that require more teamwork and cooperation. The epitome of this philosophy is the operator class. Even though every AC team consists of five players, only four team members pilot mechs on the battlefield. The fifth player functions as the unit's operator. From the safety of a command station, operators oversee a tactical map to remotely monitor other players' vital stats and keep their team informed about approaching enemy units. This unique vantage point allows them to coordinate team strategies and issue commands to the rest of the units.

On the battlefield, players controlling ACs can take advantage of a variety of new ground

tactics. The ACs in Armored Core V are markedly smaller, faster, and more agile, giving players the flexibility to interact with the geography in new ways. ACs easily take cover behind buildings and maneuver through alleys, lending Armored Core V an element of stealth play.

While sneaking around in Armored Core V could help players gain ground in the global war, an AC's best defense is an offensively overpowered weapon. "Overed" weapons are Armored Core V's most powerful artillery, and they range from giant missiles to weapons like the grind blade—a rotating saw that does massive amounts of melee damage. Overed weapons tear through opponents but require long recharge times, so you must use them strategically and be prepared for enemy retaliation between deployments.

Armored Core V's story is a confusing mess, but it's far from the main attraction. From Software's frenetic mech combat, multitude of customization options, and tactical multiplayer might just convert a few Western gamers to the Japanese style of mech enthusiasm. » Ben Reeves



Torchlight II

Three reasons to track this action/RPG

If things went according to the original plan, Torchlight II would have released in the middle of last year's busy holiday season. For players overwhelmed with games, Runic's delay was perhaps a double blessing. In addition to the incidental benefit of providing breathing room from that crowded period, the delay has given the team more time to make the best possible sequel.

"I think everyone is anxious, and they know intellectually that it pays off to finish a game correctly," says Runic co-founder and CEO Max Schaefer. "That last little bit of polish doesn't look like that much, but it's the difference between your game being a hit and just being okay."

If you haven't been following development on the action/RPG, here are a few reasons why Torchlight II should be on your radar.

Multiplayer

Torchlight was an immediate sensation when it launched on PC in 2009, but it left dungeon crawlers with one nagging question: Where the heck was multiplayer? With Torchlight II, it's in the game.

"You can play with your friends online, you can play with your friends over a local area network, or you can play single player — all with your same character," Schaefer says. "You don't have to make a new character; you can freely move between the modes of play."

Size

Torchlight II features a much larger world than the original.

"The game is basically broken down into three acts," Schaefer says. "You go through about as much content in Torchlight 1 well within the first act. So it's just a much, much bigger universe."

That increased size includes beefed-up elements from the first game, including more dramatic boss encounters and both indoor and outdoor areas. The game also has more varieties of pets, including hawks, bulldogs, and panthers, plus special upgradable gear. Pets can still run back to town for you and sell excess loot, but now they can pick up items for you that you request from a shopping list.

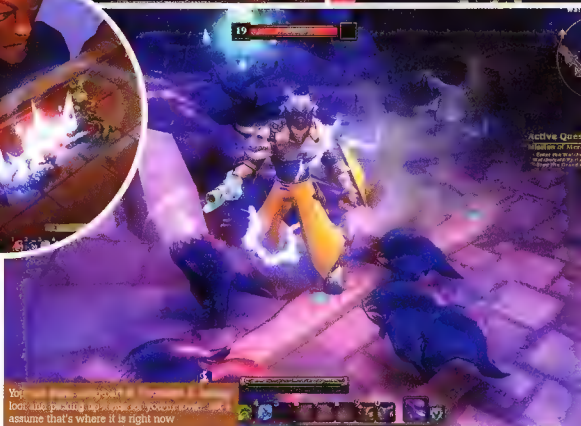
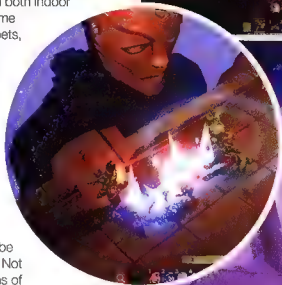
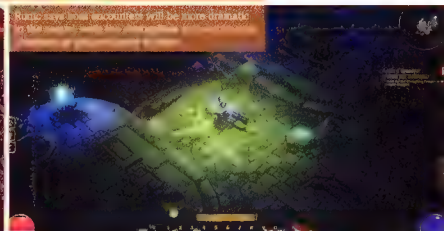
Value

"I think the third cool thing about it is that it's going to be \$20 again," Schaefer says. Not bad, considering the dozens of hours we sank into the first game.

Now we just need to know when it's coming.

"We're notoriously bad at estimating these things," Schaefer jokes. "We're good at knowing when the game's done, we just aren't good at estimating how far away that is."

We'll have to be satisfied with a vague 2012 release date. For now. — Jeff Cork



Platform
PC

Style
1 to 4-Player Action/RPG
(4-Player Online)

Publisher
Perfect World

Developer
Runic Games

Release
2012

Sleeping Dogs

True crime gets a second chance

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
United Front Games

» Release
2012

T rue Crime: Hong Kong was originally scheduled to release in 2010, but publisher Activision delayed it until 2011 before finally cancelling the project. However, work on the game didn't go to waste. Developer United Front Games had practically finished the title before Activision dumped it, and Square Enix bought the publishing rights to the project. Since the company didn't buy the True Crime name, United Front's effort is now called *Sleeping Dogs* – same game, new name.

Players follow the exploits of the police officer Wei Shen, who has gone undercover in an attempt to take down the Triads in Hong Kong. The exotic setting serves as the backdrop for open-world action, giving Shen neon-lit alleyways to explore and bustling streets to drive through. Since Square Enix hasn't announced any sweeping changes beyond the name, it's safe to assume that the game's previous design remains; Shen drives, shoots, and fights his way through the criminal underworld as he completes various missions and tries to keep his cover intact.

While the formula sounds similar to dozens of other games, Square Enix is banking on the melee combat setting *Sleeping Dogs* apart. Hand-to-hand combat is typically a last resort in open-world action games, but United Front has made it a central aspect of how Shen fights his enemies. The fighting system is also important to capturing the cinematic martial arts battles people associate with Hong Kong action films. *Sleeping Dogs'* combos, counters, and environmental takedowns may convince gamers to intentionally put away the guns in order to enjoy the melee.

Just when you think that gamers are getting tired of drive-and-shoot affairs, another one comes out and captures our hearts. *Voltion* did it last year with *Saints Row: The Third*, and you can bet that our love of open worlds won't stop there. *Sleeping Dogs* definitely has a potential audience in the wings, assuming that United Front can deliver the fun and immersive experience gamers demand from the genre. » Joe Juba





Val
Just see this... it's a... it's... it's...
across the huge island of Lirance

Arma 3

A military shooter with stones

Independent Czech developer Bohemia Interactive is a testament to doing things the hard way. Publisher Codemasters retained the trademark to Bohemia's critical and commercial hit debut, Operation Flashpoint, when the two companies parted ways after that title. While Codemasters eventually released a follow-up by a different developer in 2009, Bohemia had already released two far more impressive, ambitious, and successful sequels in Arma and Arma 2 on its own. The Arma series has maintained Operation Flashpoint's commitment to hardcore military realism and enormous open maps while layering on impressive technical advancements in graphics and player counts. The common criticisms leveled at Bohemia's efforts since the studio's inception have always revolved around bugs and flaky AI, but that's not stopping the developer from aiming higher than ever with Arma 3. We asked creative director Ivan Buchtta to shed some light on his upcoming project. **» Adam Bissener**

How does developing only for PC allow you to make a better game than you would be able to do on consoles?

On the PC, we are able to make a military simulator instead of a shooter type game. PCs provide much better hardware performance and a larger amount of controls and peripherals compared to consoles. The power of a PC allows us to have big worlds, very detailed graphics and a large number of assets that would probably be impossible to achieve on a current console platform. Extended controls means that we can give more opportunities to players, more varied gameplay, and some interesting features that would have to be removed if Arma 3 were to be a console game.

What do you believe is the biggest thing that sets Arma 3 apart from other mainstream shooters?

Arma 3, as well as its predecessors, provides challenges of a different kind. In the Arma series, the same mission can run a little differently every time it's played, and players are given the freedom necessary to accomplish it and cope with

the random course of events. Contrary to the linear "cinematic" experience that is commonly associated with the most recent military FPS titles, our missions and campaigns provide a great deal of replayability.

Talk about Arma 3's cooperative play – what kinds of scenarios and objectives can co-op players look forward to?

We will probably be able to give the cooperative military-sim connoisseurs a bit of everything that Arma 3 has to offer. The robust mission architecture and great AI allows us to turn most single-player scenarios into multiplayer ones by simply adding more playable roles. The co-op scenarios will certainly let players use the new features of Arma 3, e.g. combat divers and submersible pilots, artillery or unmanned vehicles, anti-personnel mines, and customizable weapons and uniforms. Of course, the strengths of the previous Arma titles remain: players would be able to use various vehicle types, communicate on several radio channels, use suppressive fire, travel long distances, scout the terrain, and combat challenging AI opponents.

How many players do you expect the largest Arma 3 servers to be able to handle?

There is a quite high soft limit of 255 players, but the real numbers achieved in multiplayer sessions are currently much lower – the highest amount of participants is reportedly little more than 100. The final figures depend on the

amount of success we will have with improving the multiplayer code in the upcoming months

Why did you choose to add swimming to the game?

Underwater was the last part of environment to conquer. In the previous Arma titles, players could travel on the ground, fly aircraft or para chute, but swimming has been impossible or very simplistic. Adding this new freedom allows us to show players some new challenges and give another interesting perspective of modern combat, especially the covert operations.

Can you engage in any combat underwater? As in, are there any weapons that work when you're underwater?

Sure, there are assault rifles capable of shooting supercavitating ammunition underwater, explosives, and Swimmer Delivery Vehicles. Although the skirmishes probably wouldn't be as dramatic or elaborate as those on land, I am sure the special atmosphere of underwater warfare will find its fans. Perhaps we will even add an underwater deathmatch scenario.



Arma 3 is definitely best to...
of



Platform
PC

Style
1-Player Action
(Up to 100-Player Online)

Publisher
Bohemia Interactive

Developer
Bohemia Interactive

Release
Winter



Dota 2

Faithful or archaic, depending on your definitions

- » Platform PC
- » Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online)
- » Publisher Valve Software
- » Developer Valve Software
- » Release TBA

With the Dota 2 beta in full swing, tens of thousands of players are online at any given time slugging it out in the classic five-on-five overhead perspective matches. Since the innovative social, community, and learning features Valve has previously promised haven't been implemented yet, however, the Dota 2 beta is really just Dota-Allstars with modern graphics and an improved interface.

This isn't a re-imagining or a follow-up to the biggest mod sensation since Counter-Strike. Dota 2 is a straight-up copy of the Warcraft III mod that is responsible for an entire subgenre, Dota-Allstars, which Valve hired Allstars developer IceFrog on to help create. The interface gets less in the way than it used to – having dedicated keybinds for the courier, for example, and better inventory and shopping management – but gameplay is practically identical.

Non-player character armies continually spawn at each team's base and smash into each other in the middle of the map. Players, each of whom controls a single hero, compete for killing blows to earn the cash and experience they need to power up their hero and eventually destroy the enemy base. Along the way, dozens of battles ranging from one-on-one skirmishes to surprise four-on-two ganks and full-blown five-on-five brawls naturally occur. Advantage often swings back and forth between the teams as those play out.

The room for strategy, tactics, and skill in execution beyond that base level of "kill the bad guys" is nearly infinite, which is the primary reason for Dota's incredible longevity and the vibrancy of

its community. I've played hundreds of hours of Dota and Dota-likes like League of Legends, and I'm barely at a level that the average Dota player would call competent. From your build order (which items and skills you buy and when) to map awareness and consumable usage, there's always somewhere to improve your game.

The team's slavish devotion to Dota-Allstars isn't a bad thing, though League of Legends players and those new to the subgenre will have a rough time going back to some of Dota's more fiddly design decisions and timing quirks. Animations determine the responsiveness of your hero, which can be frustrating when you're used to games that subordinate most animation to player input. Moving across the map can feel downright sluggish at times, making being caught out of position a disaster. Battles are extremely deadly, so you'll regularly die in the course of a single stun without having a chance to respond.

All of that can be worked around, of course. Dota fans will be the first to tell you that the proper response is to not get stunned in the middle of a bunch of enemies, to not get caught in the wrong place, and to plan your commands around your hero's animations. Before, during,

and after enlightening you with that advice, they'll also call you a variety of derogatory names, insult your lineage, and mock your skills. Dota 2's community can best be described as toxic, xenophobic (which, given the game's global player base, means that everyone is guaranteed that someone hates them), impatient, and worse. Having a regular team or even a buddy or two to play with helps mitigate the worst aspects of it, but I would happily take the dregs of the Call of Duty player base over the average Dota player.

The one thing that Dota 2 improves upon in a big way already is its observer system. The ability to observe live games going on around the world and see the best players do what they do is a wonderful addition. The dynamic camera system needs work, but manual control works fine and the robust interface stands up well against top-tier systems like StarCraft II and League of Legends.

The final piece of the Dota 2 puzzle – the social and coaching features Valve talked about at length when Game Informer unveiled Dota 2 to the world last year – are still inactive in the beta as of this writing. Dota 2 is already a fantastic competitive game, but given how much the community feedback Tribunal system helped the League of Legends player base drag itself out of the gutter, those features are going to define Dota 2's appeal to a larger, more casual audience. Hopefully we'll see them soon. **Adam Bissener**



Total War: Shogun 2 – Fall of the Samurai

We all gain by the samurai's noble sacrifice.

With Total War: Shogun 2, Creative Assembly finally figured out how to let players enjoy its games without having to navigate a dense jungle of technical issues. I recently sunk a few dozen hours into a similarly bug-free preview build of this standalone expansion and came away convinced that Fall of the Samurai is going to be the hands-down best Total War experience yet. From what I saw in this early look, the developers have expertly layered the complexity that Shogun 2 sometimes lacked onto the rock-solid foundation of the base game so ably provides.

Fall of the Samurai takes place a few hundred years after Shogun 2's setting, replacing the grand free-for-all of the Sengoku Jidai with a more binary 19th-century conflict. The emperor has opened Japan's ports to Western merchant ships, who threaten the traditional Japanese way of life even as they bring the wealth of the world to the island nation. The shogun has declared this a traitorous act, and the land has erupted into civil war over the issue.

Though each clan is an entity unto itself just as in the base game, the new influence system creates a divide between those clans loyal to emperor and shogun. Not only do diplomatic relations worsen between clans of opposite alignment, but the people of each province have their own loyalty ratings and become unruly when governed by a differently aligned clan – just like how religion works in the base game. Manipulating the political landscape by spreading your influence through agents is a key part of any strategy in the expansion, which creates a whole new vector for intrigue and conflict that enriches Shogun 2's already strong diplomatic layer.

The expanded unit roster is another critical improvement in Fall of the Samurai. The influx of Western weapons and tactics means that you're

no longer fielding armies that consist primarily of two or three unit types outside of the very early game. Battles on both land and sea often resemble Empire: Total War's diverse conflicts more than Shogun 2's medieval melees. Just as in real life, the appearance of the cannon changes warfare forever. Field guns come into play near the beginning of the campaign and remain critically important from then on. Because this is set at the tipping point just as gunpowder weaponry starts to dominate warfare, though, traditionally trained warriors can and will acquit themselves with honor on the battlefield. Striking the right balance of medieval and modern weaponry in your armies as your clan modernizes during the course of a campaign is a tough tightrope to walk.

Modernization is the final column of Fall of the Samurai's innovation. Some buildings and technologies add points that increase your clan's level of modernization, add unhappiness due to social upheaval, or both. This mechanic has appeared in previous Total War games, but I found it less of a headache here, as unhappiness in general is easier to manage than in previous titles. Keeping your people from rioting isn't trivial, but the larger issue is in choosing between buildings and technologies that give your clan awesome bonuses now and ones that increase your modernization and therefore your clan's longer-term power. The decisions are rarely easy, but every time you

get a new tech researched or a critical structure completed, it's a significant boost.

The only caveat to my otherwise gushing enthusiasm for Fall of the Samurai is that the AI doesn't appear to account for cannon effectively yet. In one battle, the enemy was content to let my cavalry annihilate his undefended big guns as the rest of his army parked comfortably on a nearby hill; in another he declined to rally from his castle to make a stand against my outranging cannon that decimated both his army and fortifications. Shogun 2 has a reasonably solid tactical AI, though, and as of this writing Creative Assembly has several weeks to get any issues ironed out before the expansion's March 23 release. What I've played has me expecting nothing less than the best Total War to date, caveats and all. **Adam Biesenew**

Platform

PC

Style

1-Player Strategy
(8-Player Online)

Publisher

Sega

Developer

Creative Assembly

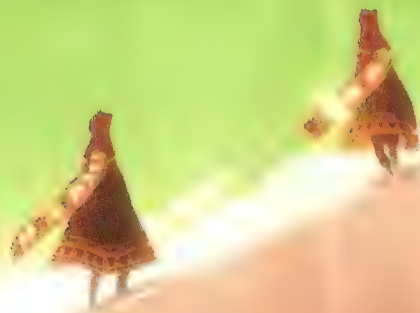
Release

March 23



A ton of new artistic touches shake the main

REVIEWS



★ GAMES MONTH

86 Journey

Thatgamecompany takes us on another imaginative adventure, this time into a beautiful land of sweeping sand dunes and long-buried ruins. Journey's breathtaking combination of imagery and music set the meditative tone, while an innovative approach to multiplayer is unlike anything you've played before. Read our full review on p. 86

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	"John Cena is my stepfather" fan fiction. This actually exists.

AWARDS

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

Asura's Wrath

Anger management isn't in this hero's vocabulary



Asura's tale of revenge is filled with bizarre moments, like this battle on the moon.

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** CyberConnect2 **Release** February 21 **ESRB** M

Asura isn't happy. The demigod has been cast out of the heavens after being framed for a treasonous murder. To make this betrayal even more personal, his wife has been slain and their daughter kidnapped and exploited for her own unique powers. Rather than simply brood about it, Asura taps into his feral nature and punishes his former comrades in an epically scaled tale of revenge.

Asura's former friends comprise a unique vision of a godly pantheon, marrying elements of extreme technology and Eastern mythology into something fresh. Each of the seven demigods fills an archetype – mentor, mastermind, beauty-obsessed sadist, etc. – with Asura's primary attribute being his short fuse. Seeing how mortals are being exploited by the demigods only serves as another motivator for him to pound them into oblivion.

The combat may not be as deep as other hack and slash offerings, but it does a great job of making Asura feel (and play) like the unhinged demigod that he is at the expense of a degree of

finesse. It sells the concept of Asura as a powerhouse who uses his strength like a maul rather than a scalpel, but players who like methodically dismantling enemies with juggles, cancels, and other technical flourishes may be left cold by the mash-heavy engagements.

Whether it was a conscious decision on CyberConnect2's part or not, the bulk of enemies simply don't put up much of a fight, either. Instead, combat sequences are framed around building Asura's burst gauge. Once it's filled through pummeling enemies and performing well in QTEs, players can unleash Asura's full fury with a quick press of the right trigger. That's basically the "end combat sequence" trigger; until you activate that burst mode, the majority of battles will continue indefinitely, with enemies respawning on a loop or simply refusing to die. When it's activated, you're treated to a reliably impressive sequence of Asura giving someone the business in a comically over-the-top beatdown.

Over the top is as mundane as it gets in

Asura's Wrath. This is a game where your character sprouts (and loses) additional pairs of arms without anyone giving it a second thought. You will get impaled with a weapon that is longer than the diameter of Earth. Heck, before the credits roll, you will literally punch a planet right in its face. While I was expecting these kinds of ridiculous moments from the game, I was surprised to see that it wasn't just a revolving freakshow-like series of big moments. Instead, Asura's Wrath is grounded by one of the more interesting stories I've seen in a game, focusing on human suffering and how even the noblest of intentions can be corrupted.

Asura's Wrath isn't as brainless as it may want you to believe. The ridiculous moments and likable characters kept me smiling, which was odd, considering it's essentially a story about misery. It's a nice change of pace from other hack-and-slash games, featuring an interesting story that's not blocked off by insurmountable difficulty. » **Jeff Cork**

8.5

PS3 » 360

» Concept

Extract revenge from your former demigod comrades using your six arms and an endless supply of rage

» Graphics

Characters are drawn with a striking woodcut effect, and they look great even as the game's scale explodes into the stratosphere

» Sound

Asura seethes with the best of 'em, and a varied musical score nimbly keeps pace

» Playability

Combat is relatively simple, but satisfying. Rail-shooter segments break up the action

» Replay Value

Asura's Wrath offers a unique world and characters, plus plenty of bombastic combat to keep things moving briskly

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Previously On Asura's Wrath

Asura's Wrath is broken into several missions, each ending with a dramatic "to be continued." Curiously, new episodes start with a preview of what's to come, including spoilers of some of the more interesting battles. If you like surprises, do yourself a favor and skip these intros



Syndicate

The revered strategy title makes the jump to FPS

Style 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) Publisher Electronic Arts Developer Starbreeze Studios Release February 21 ESRB M

8

S3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Transform the sci-fi strategy classic into a first-person shooter

» Graphics

Portal-like futuristic environments, grimy undertones, and plenty of onscreen data readouts

» Sound

The Hollywood voice cast of Brian Cox and Rosano Dawson shines

» Playability

Creative gameplay tweaks like breaching and applications shake up the standard FPS formula

» Entertainment

The single-player story arc goes exactly the way you think it will, but it's a decent ride. Multiplayer is co-op-only, so players can actually experience meaningful upgrades

» Replay Value

Moderate

Back in 1993, Peter Molyneux's Bullfrog Productions released a now-classic PC strategy title in which players commanded a squad of four agents working for a super-corporation on a multitude of missions to dominate the world. Now Electronic Arts has resurrected the franchise after many years, transforming it from an isometric strategy game to a first-person shooter. If you're a hardcore superfan of the original who has an issue with this decision, nothing anyone says is going to change your mind. But if you're open to an FPS reinterpretation with loads of references to the old games, or if you've never heard of *Syndicate* and like sci-fi shooters, this may be the game for you.

Rather than put you in the role of a commander like the original games, *Chronicles of Riddick* and *The Darkness* developer Starbreeze puts players in control of Miles Kilo, a Eurocorp agent enlisted in the company's experimental new DART 6 chip program that gives him the ability to subvert the chips in other people's heads and hack the environment around him. The story follows a predictable arc, with oppressive corporations simultaneously empowering and controlling much of the populace with implanted chips while an underground resistance fights back in the year 2069. Kilo starts out as an errand boy for shady Eurocorp boss Jack Denham (played by Brian Cox) performing assassinations, surveillance, and the like all with the goal of keeping the company on top. While there are no "Jenny on the couch" moments here, plenty of well-acted scenes play out while you're strapped to a chair or hoofing through a level.

Players will spend the first chunk of the game shooting up rival syndicate factions with elegant backdrops inspired by *Blade Runner* and *Mirror's Edge* (there's even a massive floating city raft). You and the rest of the highly skilled agents in the world wear snappy trench coats like Neo from *The Matrix*, but act more like the deadly, emotionless agents. Your partner, Agent Merit, practically goes out of his way to shoot civilians, and you can too without penalty if you want. Eventually, you'll take on unchopped resistance fighters in the grimy streets who have invisibility suits and other toys. While they don't have any chip powers to use against you, they can't be manipulated by yours either.

All of the onscreen HUD elements and agent powers come courtesy of the DART 6 implant. At a press of the shoulder button, players turn on DART vision, a temporary overlay filter that highlights all enemies in orange while the world turns a digital gray. While in this mode foes slow down, you take less damage, and your weapons are more effective. The DART 6 chip also has three different apps that you can use to persuade goons to fight for you, make them blow themselves up, or backfire their weapon (which makes them fall out of cover and become more vulnerable to attacks). Performing well in combat allows the apps to recharge faster.

The most-used DART 6 power by far is the



standard breach. This allows you to remotely unlock doors, reprogram turrets, and disable the armor of minibosses. The breaches and apps require you to get in close to the action and add in the tension of watching the progress bar fill up above the enemies' heads as you hold the button down. Some foes are invincible until you breach them, so there's an interesting dynamic of breaching and hiding while a big guy with a minigun flanks your position. Once his armor is disabled it's time to come out of cover, turn on the overlay, and unload. It's a nice volley of attack and defend.

Early missions task you with assassinating a rival syndicate's key scientist and then dealing with one of its vengeful agents. Killing high profile targets allows you to gruesomely extract their chips and use them to upgrade your health, accuracy, the length you can use DART vision, and other abilities. You can upgrade skills in any order, but you get minor health bonuses if you beef up abilities located next to each other on the board. You can't respect or fully upgrade everything, so choose your investments carefully. One time I upgraded my app recharging speed, and the very next level disabled app use for quite some time. When things are this inflexible, players are inevitably going to feel remorseful about a choice at some point in the campaign.

The single-player campaign offers some entertaining set pieces, like shooting at a flying craft from atop a speeding train and battling a variety of super-powered agent bosses. Most of the missions are spiced up with new guns, enemies, and abilities, but the last 20 percent of the game gets stale as you battle endless waves of goons. The final boss shakes things up and is suitably challenging, which is always a tricky thing to pull off in an FPS.

The career can be beaten in less than 10 hours, and while it didn't blow me away, I enjoyed Starbreeze's take on the future of combat. The mix of over 20 weapons (my favorite is the laser beam) and chip abilities gives you plenty of options when faced with conflict. Even though the story is extremely predictable, the key characters and intriguing backdrops keep you engaged.

Syndicate's cooperative mode is completely separate from the story campaign, and it also shares the most similarities to the source material. The nine maps contain many direct references to the original, including an Atlantic Accelerator stage. Up to four players team up as part of new syndicate Wulf-Western to complete missions like stealing hard drives and assassinating targets.

The progression system is widely expanded in co-op, with a few extra chip upgrades in addition to those that appear in the single-player mode and nine more apps. These new powers include shareable power-ups like team damage bonuses and more creative apps like a virus that drains enemy health over time. Players also earn separate weapon and application tokens by completing missions, which they can spend to research advancements in both categories. Strangely, the guns start out severely nerfed in co-op, making players spend lots of time upgrading their favorites just so they reach the default level of effectiveness in the single-player mode.

Playing through co-op is enjoyable with a full four-player roster, but playing with a smaller group isn't advisable. The challenge jumps significantly when you're down to three people, and is nearly impossible with two. In several missions you're supposed to transport four items to your dropship, meaning if you have anything less than the full roster you have to make multiple trips.

Though the look of the maps changes significantly, the missions don't. The co-op settles into a predictable loop of shooting guys, regrouping to open a door, and shooting more guys on the way from point A to B. After you've made it through all the maps you can play them again at higher difficulty levels for more rewards, but it's tough to justify coming back once you've seen all the game has to offer.

I went into *Syndicate* with very few preconceptions and came out pleased. EA's lackluster promotion of the game implied that the publisher might have been trying to sneak out a sci-fi shooter disaster, but Starbreeze managed to add another unique spin to the FPS genre that's worth checking out if you're not hung up on the property's legacy. » **Bryan Vore**

SSX



Style 1-Player Sports (4-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Canada Release February 28 ESRB R

When EA originally unveiled this SSX reboot under the title *SSX: Deadly Descents*, many long-time series fans scoffed at the dark look of the new game. SSX used to be about doing crazy, unrealistic stunts and defying gravity in absurd ways. Why did this reveal trailer feature grinning snowboarders jumping out of helicopters in a scene that looked straight out of *Call of Duty*?

Perhaps sensing the negative buzz, EA changed the name and refocused the game's marketing on the more familiar parts of SSX. Unfortunately, the gameplay additons remained, and they drag down what is an otherwise welcome revival.

The main problem in SSX is a new mode called "survive it." These courses require special equipment, such as armor for staying alive in rough terrain, oxygen tanks for surviving in thin atmosphere, and pulse goggles for seeing your way through whiteouts.

Each piece of equipment comes with its own complications. For example, using oxygen requires occasionally tapping a button to make your character breathe. The longer you go without breathing, the more the screen whites out until eventually your character passes out and you lose the event. Especially cold mountains in Antarctica force you to equip solar panels that need to be recharged by staying away from shaded areas. Spend too long out of the sun and you freeze to death.

No matter which add-on you're stuck with, all of the "survive it" challenges share a common trait: They aren't very fun. The SSX series has always empowered players to pull off superhuman tricks while spinning around in the air at light speed. Suddenly finding yourself in realism-based, trial-and-error situations where you're constantly dying and restarting doesn't capture

the classic SSX feel at all. The limited rewind ability fails to ease the frustration much.

These annoying events are especially unfortunate given how fun the old-school SSX tracks feel. Race and trick runs successfully capture the exhilaration I felt when I first loaded SSX Tricky into my PS2. Every run in the game is based off of a real mountain, but the level designers have wisely populated the courses with crazy pipes to grind and strange debris to trick off of.

When you first begin SSX, the game forces you into World Tour mode, but don't stick around in this lame single-player portion any longer than you have to. World Tour allows you to unlock new characters, but even the standbys from previous games have been robbed of their personalities. The only serious reward for playing through World Tour is a series of laughably bad motion comics. The real meat of the game is in Explore mode.

Explore mode is overflowing with content — over 150 drops in all — but it's disappointing how many of these I didn't want to touch because of the survival element. Even if you ignore any specifically designated "survive it" runs, many of the courses are designed with survival in mind, which means they're peppered with bottomless pits and other health hazards. Make a single bad jump or don't time the use of your wingsuit right, and you're stuck reloading and starting from the beginning (or rewinding and incurring serious penalties). I want to feel like an insane snowboarding legend when I play SSX, not like I'm trying to memorize a difficult platforming level.

Despite its many problems, I'm still tempted to recommend that long-time SSX fans check out this relaunch. The tracks that click with the old formula are fantastic, and they're supported by one of the most impressive and robust online challenge systems ever. Inspired by Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit's Autolog, SSX's Hidenet constantly updates with new score and time challenges from friends, recommends which events you're closest to beating someone in, and even earns you in-game credits while offline for every time a friend fails to beat your records. This asynchronous online system has the potential to make SSX a game that sucks fanatics in for a long time, and it would make it a must-buy if it didn't have so many bad tracks.

As someone who's waited years for a new SSX game, the frustration I discovered in EA Sports' latest snowboarder stings. Between the strong online infrastructure and the excellent controls, the foundation is here for the SSX reboot the franchise deserves. I can only hope that this team gets another chance to go for the gold and cuts out all of the unnecessary realistic flourishes next time. **» Phil Kollar**



7.75

PS2 • XBOX

» Concept

Resurrect the over-the-top snowboarding franchise with real-life mountains and new survival courses

» Graphics

The varied locales look great when they aren't pitch black or being covered up by annoying whiteout weather effects

» Sound

A boring soundtrack and limited voice work make for a far less interesting audio experience than previous games

» Playability

The new control scheme works well and the classic control scheme is available, but courses often call for more precision than is possible

» Entertainment

SSX feels great when it's focused on the crazy tracks and big air that the series is known for, but too many tracks have cheap death traps and annoying equipment requirements

» Replay Value

High

Playing well with others

In addition to the regular asynchronous multiplayer mode, *SSX 3: Hot Pursuit* is a mode called Global Events. Events run 24/7 and can have up to 100,000 people competing at the same time (though you'll only ever see four others). Players can do an event over and over until the timer runs out, tweaking runs to get the highest score possible and improve their position and the amount of money they take home at the end. Keep in mind that you won't collect any credits won in Global Events unless you have an online pass, which is packed in with new copies of the game

Silent Hill: Downpour

Foggy with a chance of mediocrity

7

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

An attempt to return to the moody atmosphere and visceral combat of past entries that results in hollow scares and clunky enemy encounters

» **Graphics**

Environments and enemy designs look great, but the facial animation and sloppy textures leave much to be desired

» **Sound**

Dexter composer Daniel Licht does an excellent job capturing the town's spooky essence, but the voice acting isn't great

» **Playability**

Puzzles are straightforward and rewarding, but the cumbersome combat will have you dodging every monster or swearing at your controller

» **Entertainment**

Don't look here for big thrills; the scares are few and far between

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Konami Developer Vatra Games Release March 13 ESRB M

Like a fleshy mannequin creature emerging from a nightmare world, the Silent Hill series has been trying to claw its way back to prominence since the PlayStation 2 era. Silent Hill: Homecoming attempted to empower players with a combat-savvy protagonist, while Silent Hill: Shattered Memories removed fighting from the equation altogether, pleasing few gamers in the process. Silent Hill: Downpour is a more balanced effort, but an unfocused story, miserable combat, and general lack of creepiness restrict the game to a limbo of mediocrity.

Similar to other Silent Hills, Downpour ignores past storylines in favor of a new tale. Players learn about protagonist Murphy Pendleton's shady prison stint through scattered files and vague flashbacks. The game gets points for

having the most coherent story in franchise history, but fumbles trying to weave two narrative threads. The straightforward yet clichéd tale of Murphy's loss is cheapened by a tenuous surprise twist in the third act. I saw two of the game's four endings, and neither left me feeling satisfied.

While I was initially impressed playing early previews of Silent Hill: Downpour, in the end the combat system leaves much to be desired. Enemy variety is downright shameful. I must have encountered the same screeching banshee lady three dozen times. Juking enemies in horror games is usually done to conserve precious ammo, but I ran from the horrendous combat system. Attacking and blocking with degrading weapons is boring and sloppy, made worse by a camera that goes crazy whenever you're trapped in a corner. Murphy must have some debilitating carpal tunnel syndrome, because the man can't hold a firearm steady. Poor marksmanship may make for a believable average Joe, but steering a quivering reticle is agonizing. The game boasts one of the most interesting and well-executed final boss encounters in the series, but that doesn't forgive the core combat.

Silent Hill: Downpour shines brightest when you're exploring murky, poorly lit buildings and solving puzzles. The best brainteaser in the game involves playing stagehand for a macabre production of *Hansel and Gretel*, in which you crank levers and provide effects. Another highlight involves searching for clues in a workshop scattered with loud machinery that enemies

randomly activate, impairing your hearing and providing a decent fight. Unfortunately, Silent Hill's unsettling transformation into the iconic, rusty nightmare world is reduced to lame chase sequences in Downpour. Fleeing from an ambiguous floating void was interesting the first time, but the thrill is gone for these formulaic chase sequences. Don't go into Downpour expecting scares comparable to this generation's great horror titles like *Dead Space* or *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*.

Roaming the foggy streets is usually a staple of Silent Hill games, but town exploration is mainly reduced to vague side quests in Downpour. I spent a healthy chunk of time combing the ruinous roads, but to my frustration I only found one optional task to complete. I came across plenty of keypad-locked safes and other supposed riddles, but never had enough information to complete them. Unless the idea of knocking on every door in Silent Hill sounds like fun, through no fault of your own you may come out feeling like you didn't see everything the town has to offer.

I don't regret my time with Silent Hill: Downpour, but mediocrity hung over most of my playthrough like a fog. Vatra Games shows real potential for becoming a developer that can tell great stories, but nurturing one narrative yarn would be better than juggling two ho-hum tales. I left this Silent Hill with the same feeling I have after walking out of most haunted houses near closing time—a little annoyed at having cages lazily rattled at me. » **Tun Tun**





Gotham City Impostors

Platform: PC, PS3, Xbox 360

Style 1-Player Shooter (12-Player Online)
Publisher Warner Bros Interactive **Developer** Monolith
Release February 8 ESRB T

8

Full-fledged multiplayer FPS experiences have typically been confined to retail releases, with a few downloadable exceptions such as *Section 8: Prejudice*. With *Gotham City Impostors*, the team at Monolith has developed a solid shooter experience that draws on elements from genre favorites, while still adding enough unique features to make it a recommended download.

Outside of a training sequence and a collection of single-player trials, this is a strictly multiplayer experience. Batman and The Joker are nowhere to be found in this vision of Gotham; instead there are two feuding teams of wannabes that go by The Batz and The Jokerz. Three online modes are available: Team Deathmatch, Fumigation (a variation of *Call of Duty's* Domination mode), and *Psych Warfare* (a version of *Sabotage*). While the modes aren't unique, the weapons, gadgets, and characters add a fun twist to the proceedings.

Mobility in many modern shooters is limited to jumping, sprinting, crouching, and going prone. *Gotham City Impostors* adds a comic-book sensibility to the action by giving players access to grappling hooks, spring boots, roller skates, glider rigs, double-jumps, and more. You won't have to worry about looking for a staircase or ladder to change your elevation, as a nearby trampoline or well-placed grappling hook shot will help you get around the map with ease. If you have the glider rig equipped, it's a blast to fly into the air (via one of the numerous air vents) and swoop down first-into into an unsuspecting enemy's face.

Customization plays a huge role in online play, and *Impostors* has clearly taken some cues from *Call of Duty* in this regard (not that they're anywhere near the first FPS to do so). As you rank up, you'll unlock Fun Facts (perks), weapon mods, custom classes, new costume elements, and plenty more. XP is earned throughout every multiplayer round, and you can also gun for bonuses from action and weapon-specific challenges.

While some gamers may be turned off by the hundreds of dollars worth of day-one DLC, I felt that the \$15 download offered a full experience on its own. The large majority of DLC is cosmetic, except for the ability to purchase double-XP time for yourself or your team. It's hard to argue the value included with this title, as it contains a substantial shooter experience, unique weapons and gadgets, and more than enough incentive to keep playing. FPS fans who have tired of the typical shooter formula should find plenty to like about this high-flying, slapstick heavy download. — Dan Ryland



Concept
 Take frequently used elements of the genre and place them in the comic-book world of Batman and The Joker

Graphics
 Exaggerated Team Fortress-like characters fit right in with the Gotham-based maps

Sound
 There are some recycled lines, but the quips do a good job of reflecting the game's comic roots

Playability
 Everything from shooting to gliding and skating around the maps feels great

Entertainment
 The wacky gadgets, impressive customization, and fast-paced multiplayer make it well worth the download

Replay Value
 Moderately High



Grand Slam Tennis 2

Platform: Wii

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (2-Player Online)
Publisher EA Sports **Developer** EA Canada
Release February 14 ESRB E

8

While the title would suggest it's a sequel, the original *Grand Slam Tennis* was a middling, Wii-only title with cartoonish graphics and a casual approach. *Grand Slam Tennis 2* is a hardcore sim that attempts to present a realistic brand of tennis with a broadcast TV-style presentation. ESPN graphics, dramatic camera angles, and insightful (if repetitive) commentary by John McEnroe and Pat Cash make this the first game that really delivers the glamour and drama of the pro tennis circuit. A strong roster of current and classic pro players includes the "Big Three" — Djokovic, Federer, and Nadal — along with the Williams sisters, and retired legends like Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe, Stephan Edberg, and Martina Navratilova. You can also reenact classic past *Grand Slam* moments in the ESPN *Grand Slam Classics* mode. The career mode is fairly standard, balancing training sessions, tournaments, and exhibition matches. It's notable for being the first tennis game of this generation to have all four *Grand Slam* events — which makes it a game that truly delivers the feeling of competing on the pro circuit.

The new all-analog control scheme is clearly inspired by *Fight Night*. For the most part, it works great. The directional control makes it easy to place your shots, and performing top spin, slice, lobs, and drop shots quickly becomes second nature. After a few matches, I rarely even thought about the control scheme, which is perhaps the highest praise I could give it.

Unfortunately, *Grand Slam Tennis 2* has an Achilles' heel in the form of the AI. Unlike the challenging *Top Spin*, *Grand Slam's* AI opponents are pushovers — even when you face a legend like Pete Sampras. It's far too easy to recklessly charge the net, using an outdated serve and volley style to sleepwalk to victory. While my matches tightened up in my second complete season, going through an entire year to test your skills is tedious. You can adjust the difficulty level in the frontend options, but even moving up to Pro difficulty didn't solve the problem. It's more frustrating because this ease of play is usually accomplished by your opponents failing to play correctly. You'll see them miss easy shots, get completely out of position, or just flat out not attempt to run down a shot.

While it's not a perfect product, EA knows how to make deep, full-featured sports games with high production values. In *Grand Slam Tennis 2*, developer EA Canada applies some of the lessons learned from the company's other franchises to create a game that excels in many areas while coming up short in a few important ones. — Matt Helges

Concept
 Finally unites the four *Grand Slam* events in one game, while giving tennis the full feature set and TV-style presentation we expect from EA Sports

Graphics
 The real-life pros are accurately modeled, and the venues and crowds are extremely detailed

Sound
 Finally, a tennis game worth playing with the sound turned up! John McEnroe and Pat Cash are a great commenting team

Playability
 I came to like the all-analog control scheme. It's a shame the difficulty curve and opponent AI are so erratic

Entertainment
Grand Slam Tennis 2 is a solid step along the path to the ultimate tennis game — with a little more polish, this franchise could supplant *Top Spin* as the genre leader

Replay Value
 High



Twisted Metal

Classic car combat makes its exclusive return

8.5

Controls
Bring vehicular carnage back to consoles

Graphics
Massive maps, flashy attacks, and destructible environments look great, and everything moves at blistering speed

Sound
White Zombie, NWA, and Sammy Hagar fit the onscreen action perfectly

Playability
Classic controls meet smart tweaks to make this the best-controlling game in the genre

Entertainment
Slightly disappointing detours aside, it's hard to play this game without a smile on your face

Replay Value
Moderately High



gameformer
SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Action (16-Player Online) Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment Developer: Eat Sleep Play Release: February 14 ESRB: M

The Twisted Metal series will always have a place in PlayStation history. In the early years of the PSone, the successful vehicular combat game brought attention to a console trying to establish its identity. After creator David Jaffe left, the series floundered with two disappointing 989 Studios installments before returning with the hit Twisted Metal: Black. After a 10-year hiatus from consoles, how does it stack up in a vastly different gaming landscape largely devoid of vehicular combat games?

In terms of classic Twisted Metal gameplay, this

is the best the series has ever been. When the game drops a handful of vehicles into a gigantic, destructible playground littered with weapons, it's a blast. Most of the classic weapons are back, although developer Eat Sleep Play altered some things slightly. Each vehicle now has two special attacks, remote bombs can be shot forward, and new weapons like the stalker and swarmer missiles operate with a simple charge mechanic and deal massive damage if timed correctly. Abilities like reverse turbo and alternate sidearms also help mix up your strategies.

Perhaps the most convenient change to the gameplay is the way players access energy attacks. In previous games, sequences of three to four d-pad presses were required to access secondary abilities like freeze, landmines, shields, and rear fire. In this new installment, you access all of these with one press of the d-pad. Firing an EMP at an enemy is as easy as pressing up, while your missiles can be fired behind you by pressing down. This simple tweak significantly improves ease of use.

Twisted Metal saves its most notable changes for the single-player story mode. Previous titles typically featured over a dozen characters with unique endings. This new title ditched that approach in favor of a single linear story featuring Sweet Tooth, Mr. Grimm, and Dollface. Each of these segments follows the formula established in Black. You first learn their motivations for entering Calypso's tournament, receive a story update halfway through the game, and then witness the results of their granted wish when they finally confront Calypso. Told through stylized vignettes that mix live action and CG visuals, these stories are campy at times, but each is interesting and well produced. Given their quality, it's disappointing to have such a limited selection of narrative perspectives.

Most of the story mode is solid from a gameplay perspective, but there are moments when Twisted Metal oozes from its strengths. Classic deathmatches are always fun, and a couple of the boss fights are great. However, things go awry when the game introduces checkpoint races and non-traditional boss battles. One race is completely unwinnable if you





fall off any one of its numerous skyscrapers, and two poorly designed multi-stage bosses really tested my patience.

Thankfully, the multiplayer is pure Twisted Metal. Deathmatch modes place you in one of the game's numerous massive maps, and it doesn't take long for things to turn into an all-out warzone. Nuke mode is chaotic and entertaining, with two teams capturing their enemy's leader and launching him or her at a massive effigy of the opposing team. Hunted and Last Man Standing are also fun, but can't compete with the insanity of Nuke. Gamers irked by the "die five seconds after you spawn" experience from titles like Call of Duty should enjoy the longer lifespans of Twisted Metal's online play. On the other side of the coin, shooter fans used to extensive progression systems may be disappointed with Twisted Metal's bare-bones ranking system. Though it has an XP system, all you can unlock are sidearms, vehicles, and skins that are already offered in the story mode.

When Twisted Metal embraces the series traditions, it delivers the best action ever seen in the franchise. When it departs from convention, it becomes a hit-or-miss affair. Whether or not vehicular combat can strike a chord with gamers in 2012 the way it did in 1995 remains to be seen, but Twisted Metal is a blast when it's fining on all cylinders. » **Dan Ryckert**



Journey

Beauty trumps complex.

9

gameformer
GAME MONTH

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action [2-Player Online] Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer thatgamecompany Release March 13 ESRB E

Concept
Cross the desert to reach a distant peak in a thoughtful and beautiful vision of another world

Graphics
Remarkable sand and character animation gives the game an uncanny sense of flow and movement

Sound
A standout musical score soars from triumphant highs to minimalist silences at all the right moments

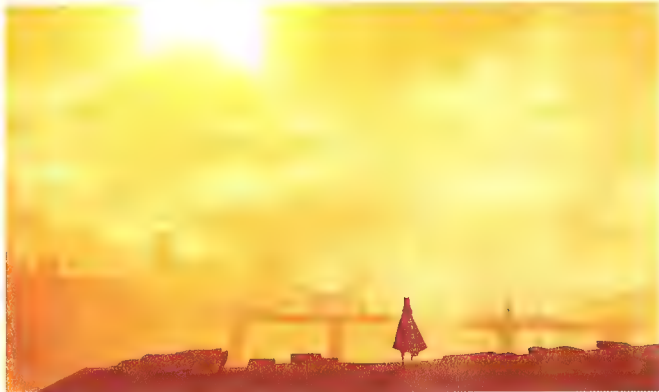
Playability
Seamless and simple, players of any age could pick up and understand the controls in moments

Entertainment
An artistic tour de force of limited interactive complexity

Replay Value
Moderately High

One of the chief creative voices at thatgamecompany, Jenova Chen, once described his earlier game, *Flower*, in an intriguing way. He said it was to big disc-based games what poems are to novels. I can find no better description to apply to his follow-up, except to say that if *Flower* was an abstract haiku about the fragility of nature, *Journey* is a narrative ballad defined by discrete images and places. *Journey* offers players a brief but memorable glimpse into another world, and through the confluence of music, images, and play, a quiet meditation on solitude and the interconnection of people

As you might expect, a lot of what makes a game called *Journey* so engaging is the slow unraveling of mystery as you learn more about where you are and what you're doing. To that end, I'd be spoiling things to describe too much. It's enough to say that you play an unnamed red-cloaked figure who finds him or herself in a vast desert as the game begins. The only landmark in sight is a distant glowing mountain peak that serves as your destination. Along the way, you'll uncover secrets and slowly increase your ability to navigate freely through semi-permanent pick-ups in the world.



Simplistic puzzles bar forward progress, mostly built around learning the properties of the world and the creatures that live within it. Most of the time, you'll be pushing forward across the sands, or flitting over it like a leaf in flight as your character grows more agile.

As the journey unfolds, a cryptic tale reveals both a backstory to the world and its many ruin, and some semblance of who you are and why you're traveling to the mountain. Without words or text, this narrative remains up for interpretation through its conclusion and is likely to frustrate those looking for more concrete answers. The real story is about the places you visit as you travel and the sense of isolation the game evokes as you go.

Journey's most innovative feature is the way it lifts that sense of loneliness through cooperative play. If you play online as you travel and come to a spot where another player is also exploring, you can interact with them. Join them as they continue, or split off and leave them behind. Take them to hidden secrets you have found, or solve a puzzle together. There's even a simple form of communication – a sort of chirping call that can be used to “speak” back and forth. When playing together, you'll quickly notice the way you can help to recharge each other's energy, and by working together you'll have an easier time moving through the world and its challenges. It's not a subtle metaphor, but it is a powerful one.

I recommend playing the game both ways. That is, consider unplugging your online connection and playing by yourself at some point, and then plug in and find someone in the game world to join. It's surprising how different the game feels based on your choice.

Journey is a visual stunner thanks to some remarkable sand movement technology and excellent animation work, both on the main

character and the strange creatures encountered along the way. For a game all about dry, harsh deserts, the way things move in the world make everything feel much more like a vast ocean. The graphical beauty is accompanied by an equally breathtaking musical score, which responds to character actions and changes in location with ease.

The artistic and technical excellence of *Journey* make it worth your time, but no one should have illusions about uncovering a complex gameplay experience. I find no fault with simple, accessible design, but the lack of any real challenge over the course of the game lessens the impact of the journey's conclusion – how am I meant to feel like I've just come through an arduous quest if nothing ever made me really think or work hard? In the pursuit of highly scripted moments of beauty, the game loses a sense of player agency and choice. At the end of the day, it's a trade-off: I'm okay with, but less linear pathing through the events might have increased my involvement in the experience.

If you judge a game solely by its complex battle systems, intricate puzzles, or branching upgrade systems, *Journey* is likely a disappointment. If you're open to that often nebulous realm of how a game might elicit emotion and the artistic potential of interactive narrative, *Journey* is an absolute must-play. During the course of covering the game, I completed it at least three times, with one entire playthrough being with a partner. Each time, without fail, individual moments (particularly the final level) managed to give me goosebumps, and those moments have remained on my mind for weeks afterward. Give *Journey* the same attention you might bring to a musical concert, a well-directed film, or a long-awaited book, and its rewards are substantial. **—Matt Miller**



Tales of Graces f

A story of friendship and JRPG clichés

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Namco Bandai
Developer Namco Tales Studio
Release March 13 **ESRB** T

7.75 //

Tales of Graces f follows the story of Asbel, his childhood friends, and a mysterious amnesiac girl he found on a hill near his hometown. You begin the game as a child, and after a terrible incident which will remain vague in the interest of avoiding spoilers, Asbel jumps forward seven years to pick up the story as a young adult, living with his choices. It's this jump forward in time where the story begins to get interesting, but it takes about eight monotonous hours of gameplay to get to.

Thankfully, the story never becomes a journey to collect seven parts of a crystal to defeat an evil monster or anything like that. Later in the game it even begins to dip heavily into science fiction. I wasn't expecting this, but I happily accepted it.

The world feels small compared to other RPGs, which is both a blessing and a burden. On one hand, there are plenty of opportunities to learn and appreciate the world and its fictional cultures. On the other hand, you are visiting the same locations frequently to perform simple tasks that involve no more than talking to specific people.

The combat feels similar to other Tales titles with its lock-on mechanic that limits 3D movement. You have your standard base attack, but mostly you will use special attacks that are activated by holding the left stick in a certain direction and pressing a face button. Graces is all about identifying enemy weaknesses and exploiting them. You can easily check what enemies are weak against, and even change your special attacks mid-battle to compensate if needed. You do have some limited options in controlling your partners – for example, the ability to set a character to focus exclusively on healing abilities – but for the most part they work on their own.

Along with the standard equipment and weapon collection RPG tropes, you can also gather hundreds of titles for all of the characters. These titles offer assorted bonuses and sometimes even new attacks that can be unlocked over time as they are equipped. You can deal with the titles manually or, thankfully, have the game intermittently change them out for you.

Like many Japanese RPGs, Tales of Graces f takes 10-15 hours before it starts getting good. It moves slowly and never reaches a level of pacing beyond walking from point A to B. I found myself snapping my fingers at the screen telling these people to move it along while they explained the meaning of friendship and how much they care about each other with melodramatic dialogue. I like these characters, and I can sympathize with their plight, but there is never a sense of urgency in their mission.

There is something here for you if you're willing to stick it out, but you have to commit without rolling your eyes at all the melodrama to truly appreciate it. » **Kyle Hilliard**

PS3

» **Concept**
 An expansive story that takes place over many years that is full of anime and JRPG clichés

» **Graphics**
 The character designs and locations are sharp and colorful, but are almost indistinguishable from other Japanese RPGs

» **Sound**
 There are only a few tracks that stuck out musically. The voice acting falls in line with what you would expect to see from a well-produced anime

» **Playability**
 The combat doesn't allow for much creativity, but it stays reasonably fun throughout the game

» **Entertainment**
 The story is what will pull you lock through to the end, but the combat is interesting enough to keep you entertained along the way

» **Replay**
 Moderate



King Arthur II: The Role-Playing Wargame

Lack of depth limits this fantastic idea

Style 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **Publisher** Paradox
 Interactive **Developer** Neocore **Release** January 27
ESRB T

7 //

PC

» **Concept**
 Unite a dark-fantasy medieval Britain against invading demonic hordes, and lead the forces of man and Sidhe in massive real-time battles

» **Graphics**
 King Arthur II makes Total War: Shogun 2 running on Ultra settings look last-gen, though that comes with a high hardware requirement and brutal load times

» **Sound**
 The inspired score is just as crucial to selling Britain's spooky forests and demonic fireballs as the solid voice work

» **Playability**
 This won't win any awards, but everything works as well as it needs to in a turn-based/pausable real-time setting

» **Entertainment**
 The core premise is extremely strong, but lackluster AI sucks all the challenge out of the battles long before the lengthy story is over

» **Replay Value**
 Moderate

Adventuring across a beautiful strategic map of Britain, recruiting powerful warriors, and solving quests to unravel the mystery behind Merlin's disappearance and Arthur's mortal wound gives King Arthur II a compelling premise. Even better, it puts you in command of massive Total War-style battles as you try to turn back the demonic tide overwhelming the land. Both sides of the coin suffer from serious shortfalls, though, and ultimately the AI proves to be a boring, unworthy foe.

Don't let the screenshots fool you – King Arthur II is an RPG with tactical battles, not an empire-building strategy game. The choices you make on the turn-based strategic layer are extremely limited. In the absence of province-based income or upkeep costs, all you're really deciding is which quest to embark on at a given turn. Players have a few other extremely minor decisions to make, like which five percent boost to build in which province, but the strategy layer is very constrained.

Outside of the regular appearance of choose-your-own-adventure text-based interludes – which are well written, competently voiced, and tell a solid dark fantasy – the bulk of the game is contained in the tactical battles. Directing 1,000-plus soldiers and legendary heroes across huge maps is great fun. Working the usual cavalry-infantry-archers triangle is a delightful mental exercise at first, especially with all the wrenches that King Arthur II throws into the mix. Unfortunately, the AI is entirely incapable of being even a minor speedbump once you learn how to play the game.

At first, your opponents seem competent enough. They protect their archers from cheap flanking tactics, throw spells at reasonable targets, and successfully use cavalry charges to overwhelm lesser units. Around the time your heroes hit ninth level, though, you can stack enough bonuses and modifiers to become nearly unbeatable as the AI fails to properly control powerful spellcasters. You have to put in a real effort to lose; exploiting the spell shield system is trivial, a 40-second cooldown spell can wipe out any regular unit, and you have three heroes slinging deadly magic.

I play a lot of this type of game, but I'm hardly Sun Tzu. When the AI can't make me pay with a little attrition with a map stacked heavily in its favor, finding value in the tactical battles is difficult. This is a shame, because the framework is in place for an excellent experience. If and when Neocore patches the AI into respectability, I'll be the first one to jump in and dump a hundred hours into King Arthur II. For now, I'll play something that's at least half a step beyond shooting fish in a barrel. » **Adam Blessener**

Alan Wake's American Nightmare

The mystery deepens for the champion of the light

7.75

380

Concept
Alan Wake's mystery deepens at the expense of the engrossing atmosphere being strpped away

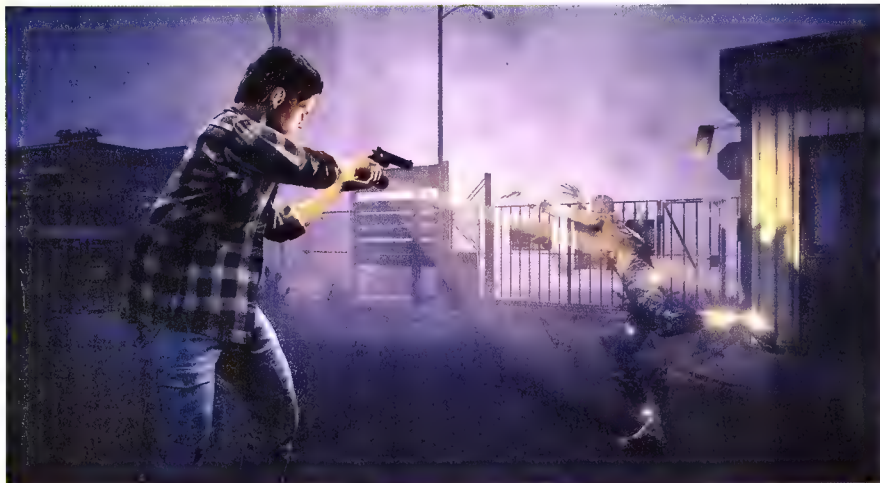
Graphics
The lighting effects are outstanding, and small details like the realistic movement of Alan's flannel shirt are found all throughout the game; however, the world is a non-entity and does little to enhance the atmosphere

Sound
Suspense tied to the sound design is scaled way back this time around. Licensed music is used at the right times to add a kick to specific combat encounters. Alan's and Mr. Scratch's voice work are once again excellent. The rest of the crew...not so much

Playability
The same great light/gunplay returns and is made better by a more powerful arsenal and a wider variety of enemy types

Entertainment
The story is weird and poorly paced, but it's loaded with morsels for Alan Wake theorists to eat up and debate

Replay Value
Moderately High



Style 1-Player Action Publisher: Microsoft Studios Developer: Remedy Entertainment Release: February 22 ESRB T

In the first installment of the Alan Wake series, developer Remedy Entertainment invited gamers to experience a mystery with no end. After leaving Alan in a precarious position at Cauldron Lake, gamers flocked to message boards to provide clarity to this game's story: Was Alan an asylum escapee conjuring demons in his mind? Was he a writer whose typed words magically altered the world? Or was he fast asleep and trapped in a nightmare? Any one of these theories – not to mention a handful of others I've discussed with fellow Alan Wake fans – could be the answer guiding this tormented protagonist into the heart of hell.

After I completed *American Nightmare*, the first sequel in the series, coworker Joe Juba didn't ask me the usual, "How was it?" He instead led with, "Does it explain anything?" Not since the TV show *Lost* have I seen people more concerned about plot revelations than the quality of the product.

American Nightmare expands upon the mystery and fuels the fire behind almost every theory out there, but ends up coming across as the second chapter of a lengthy book. If the first game in the series can be viewed as the introduction to the mystery, this sequel shows us just how crazy, deep, and confusing it can be. Story content surrounding the mysteries is deep and layered, allowing new theories to be generated and old ones to still exist, but don't expect to walk away from this game with any sort of understanding as to what is happening to Alan.

Remedy is taking us deeper into the rabbit hole, with Alan trapped in a time loop and forced to relive the same moments of his life over and over again. In an interesting twist, Alan isn't

the only person experiencing déjà vu. All of the inhabitants of small Arizona town Night Springs are cognizant of the time paradox and most are willing to lend a hand to Alan to figure out how to stop it. At the heart of the problem is Alan's evil doppelganger, Mr. Scratch, a villain who mostly appears on screen as a real human being played by Finnish actor Ilkka Villi. He delivers a strong performance and makes for a great antagonist.

The story that Remedy spins is both engaging and exciting, but is too quickly paced and doesn't take the time to flesh out the secondary characters or establish Night Springs as an attention-grabbing location. Those great slow moments in the first game (Alan first arriving in Bright Falls, the cabin, the asylum) are nowhere to be found in this sequel, though cutting the long, eventless stretches of highway driving is welcome. Conversations with Night Springs residents are mostly focused on the events at hand, and there isn't much in terms of exploration or wandering. The most memorable story moments came from hidden documents that Alan had written (which are much easier to find this time thanks to them being highlighted on the mini-map).

The speed with which Alan can move from one story sequence to the next also has a negative effect on Remedy's decision to repeat entire gameplay sequences. I know that the feeling of repetition is intentional, but when the environments and people I interacted with along the way were uninteresting the first time, my disenchantment with them only grew on the second and third visits. Remedy does a great job of conveying Alan's growing knowledge of the events at hand for each subsequent visit, but the moments

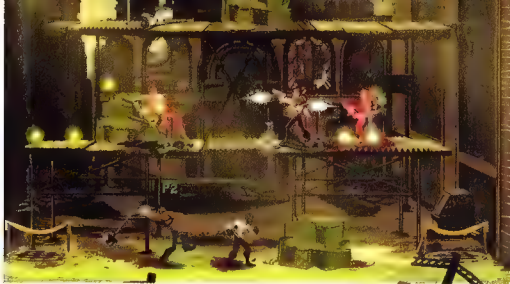
were pedestrian to begin with and the variations made to them are minor.

Alan's exploration of his surroundings is a more concentrated experience, which works in favor of the gameplay but against getting immersed into the world. The three areas he visits (and visits again and again) are smaller in size, more guided in the direction he must go, and loaded with excellently crafted combat encounters.

Alan's most powerful weapon is still his flashlight, the only tool in the world that can burn away the evil presence affecting Night Springs' townsfolk, but he also wields a more robust selection of firearms. Chewing up adversaries with a machine gun or carbine rifle feels fantastic and is a testament to Remedy's excellent gun play design.

The selection of enemies is much better this time around as well. Yes, enemies are repeated often, and I ended up killing more firefighters than New York City probably employs, but Remedy does a nice job of changing up the adversary formations and scaling the difficulty tied to each. The combat system shines the most in the game's new Arcade Action mode, which pits Alan against increasingly difficult waves of enemies over a set amount of time. The player's goal in this mode is to chain together kills to raise a scoring multiplier. Arcade Action is surprisingly deep, consisting of 10 maps and a lot of fun.

I didn't feel as connected to Alan's world or story, which were the main draws for me in the first game, but the gameplay is streamlined and improved. *American Nightmare* is not quite as gripping of an experience, but I certainly got my mystery-laden, flashlight-burning fun out of it. **— Andrew Reynolds**



Shank 2

Blinded by bloodlust

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer Klei Entertainment
Release February 7 **ESRB** M

The first Shank was a gorgeously animated action game that suffered from some badly designed levels. Given a second chance at creating a gory tale of vengeance, developer Klei Entertainment has fixed a lot of tiny problems in Shank 2, but the major frustrations from the first game largely stick around.

The biggest shift in Shank 2 comes in the form of much smarter controls. Instead of the attack button also grabbing healing drinks, there's now a dedicated button for picking up health drops, so you won't use them accidentally while fighting. The mostly useless block button is now gone entirely, with a smoother and more reliable dodge move mapped to the right stick.

While I felt significantly more in control than in the last game, the developer has balanced out the newfound precision by throwing out more (and denser) waves of enemies. By the final few levels, every encounter becomes a slog to see if you can survive another 20 or 30 enemies with infrequent checkpoints. Eventually there are too many bodies on screen to keep track of the action, which is a major problem when enemies wielding guns or Molotov cocktails pop up in a faraway corner.

Even if you appreciate the combat, one thing you certainly won't find in Shank 2 is a compelling motivation for all the bloodshed. The supporting cast is larger now, but the brief and soulless cutscenes don't provide any reason to care about the characters. If developers are devoting time and resources to the story, they should be able to do better than this.

Thankfully, narrative isn't a concern for Shank 2's best feature: the wave-based cooperative survival mode. This type of mode exists in tons of modern games, but it gels nicely with Shank 2's fast-paced action, allowing you to quickly build up a huge score and money to purchase bonuses between rounds. I just wish there were more than three maps to play on.

While I continue to respect Klei Entertainment's art style and devotion to bloody fantasy above all else, it needs to design less frustrating levels and encounters before its games click for me. The upgrades in Shank 2 are a lot like the act of revenge: it feels satisfying in the short term, but in the end you're left with the empty feeling that maybe it didn't improve that much at all. » **Phil Kollar**



Warp

A promising concept that never picks up steam

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer Trapdoor **Release** February 15 **ESRB** M

6.75

Among the many arcade ports and re-releases on Xbox Live Arcade, the service has also played host to numerous innovative titles like Braid, Limbo, and Splotson Man. At first glance, Warp appears to possess similar qualities as those hits. It features unique gameplay mechanics and a distinct art style, but the experience becomes tiresome after the first couple of hours.

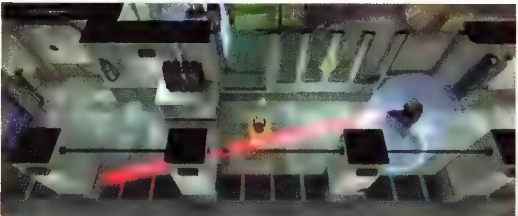
You play as Zero, a cute alien creature that awakens on a lab table to find himself being experimented on by humans. The sterile laboratory environments and the "escape the facility" endgame both call to mind Valve's popular puzzle game Portal. All you have to work with initially is Zero's short-range warp ability, but it's enough to teleport through doors and other obstacles.

Many sections of the game are puzzle-based, most don't require a lot of brainpower. Typical puzzles include blowing up power nodes to open new paths, warping through walls while avoiding power-draining water, and taking down a few bosses with newly acquired abilities.

Stealth also plays a role in escaping the facility. Guards with simple A.I. patterns are on patrol throughout the facility, and you can warp inside barrels to stay out of their line of sight. Silently moving onto the next room is an option, but you can also take the violent route by warping inside the guards and bursting through them in a shower of blood. Having options is always nice, but the A.I. is too simple to make stealth rewarding.

Zero earns other abilities as he progresses, which help to shake up the gameplay. You can spawn a controllable hologram of Zero, swap places with objects, and eventually launch barrels at enemies, land mines, or other hazards. While these powers add variety, they aren't very entertaining or interesting.

Warp is charming at first, but the simple A.I. and basic puzzles aren't enough to make it an XBLA standout. Completionists may find replay value in the collectible grubs, basic upgrade system, and challenge rooms, but anyone looking for deeper stealth or puzzle-based gameplay should look elsewhere. » **Dan Ryckert**



7

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
 Revisit the titular character's rage-fueled quest for revenge with some welcome tweaks to the gameplay

» **Graphics**
 As with the first game, Shank's colorful art and fluid animation are the high point

» **Sound**
 The music remains forgettable and the voice acting sounds too unenthusiastic to belong to these violent characters

» **Playability**
 Remapped controls make the moment-to-moment action in Shank 2 less annoying than its predecessor

» **Entertainment**
 Despite some improvements and a fun new co-op mode, this sequel still packs in too much unnecessary frustration

» **Replay Value**
 Moderate

360

» **Concept**
 Teleport around a facility as a cute orange blob

» **Graphics**
 Zero is cute, and the lab environments remind me of Portal

» **Sound**
 Extraterrestrial mumbblings and screaming scientists make up most of the soundtrack

» **Playability**
 Zero controls fine, and the simple enemies aren't much trouble to get around

» **Entertainment**
 Warp is promising at first, but it becomes more tedious as it progresses

» **Replay Value**
 Moderately Low

Uncharted: Golden Abyss

A solid adventure that comes up short

8

Vita

Concept

This prequel adds touchscreen gameplay to the Uncharted formula while giving gamers a lengthy Central American adventure

Graphics

There are some subtle differences, but this can stand beside the PS3 games. It's the best-looking handheld game ever made by a long margin

Sound

The voice acting, score, and ambient sound is top-notch

Playability

The basic controls work just fine, but all of the new camera and touch controls seem gimmicky and tacked on

Entertainment

This game spends a lot of time trying to add new gameplay to Uncharted and in the process fails to deliver the truly epic moments that I expect from the series

Replay Value

Moderately Low



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Sony Bend Studio Release February 22 ESRB T

Uncharted is one of my favorite series of this generation. Based on what I'd seen of Sony's new handheld, I was confident it was powerful enough to deliver a true Uncharted experience. In some ways, Golden Abyss lives up to my expectations and in some other important ones, it fails.

Let's start with the positives. Golden Abyss is visually stunning. Sony Bend clearly has a good handle on the Vita hardware and delivers with graphics that are nearly indistinguishable from the PlayStation 3 games. You might notice some small differences in the facial animations, but when shrunk down to the Vita's small, vivid screen they are hardly worth talking about. I never thought I'd see handheld graphics like this in my lifetime.

The lengthy adventure delivers on most of the basics that longtime fans expect from the Uncharted series. Platforming, puzzle solving, and gunplay are all found in abundance. However, if you've had frustrations with the series' gun mechanics in the past, those complaints are now magnified by the loose feeling of

the Vita's analog sticks. I recommend tweaking the aiming sensitivity in the options menu just a bit higher than the default setting.

The plot—which is set prior to the original Uncharted—is the usual faux Indiana Jones boilerplate, with Drake, love interest Marisa Chase, and obnoxious New Jersey-bred treasure hunter Jason Dante exploring ruins in Panama in search of the secret behind an ancient Spanish religious sect. A military dictator named Roberto Guerro makes the quest a bit more challenging.

As a prequel, most of the characters you're familiar with are missing (save for a fourth-quarter appearance by a beloved regular), so Golden Abyss feels slightly disconnected from the rest of the series. The dialogue also isn't as well written as usual (there's a running bit using the "that's what she said" joke that is particularly bad), which isn't surprising since Naughty Dog and lead writer Amy Hennig weren't as closely involved in this game. Drake and Marisa generate some genuine chemistry, but overall Golden Abyss left me cold. I was also disappointed that, perhaps due to technical constraints, the game takes place entirely in Panama, robbing it of the epic, globetrotting feel that was so crucial to Uncharted 2 and 3.

Sony Bend clearly intended for the game to be a showcase of the Vita's unique hardware functionality, implementing a raft of touchscreen, camera, and tilt-sensor gameplay to mixed results. You use the touchscreen heavily in puzzle solving and the acquiring of artifacts. Common examples include using the touchscreen to take charcoal rubbings of symbols on various totems you find or cleaning off dirt from items you find. It's neat the first couple times you do it, but grows tedious. You can use the touchscreen for more basic gameplay as well, like rubbing the back touch panel to climb a rope or trace your path along a series of handholds while platform-

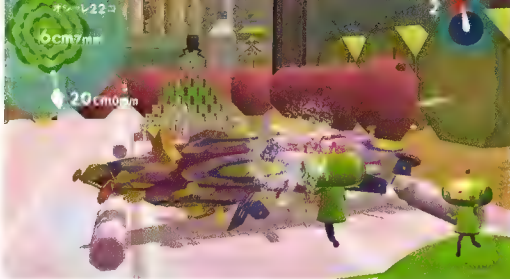
ing. Most of the time, I found myself reverting to the traditional mechanics since the touch didn't add much to the experience. The worst new feature is the ability to "aim" your gun with the tilt sensor, which barely works at all. The touch controls also mar the hand-to-hand combat in the form of "swiping" quick-time events that you use to pull off special moves in a fistfight. This is a step back from Uncharted 3's hand-to-hand mechanics, which were the best in the series to date. I also grew tired of having to use the tilt sensor to balance Drake whenever he traversed a log or walkway.

It's easy to ignore these new gameplay gimmicks, but I can't help but wonder if they came at a price. For one, all these new mechanics must be introduced to the player, which means that instead of kicking off with an explosive action set piece, Golden Abyss forces you through a host of tutorials. This gets at my real misgiving about the game: It fails to deliver the big moments I've come to expect from the series.

Uncharted has never been a game about mechanics. At best, its platforming and gunplay have been competent—a means to an end. The series hooked me because it consistently delivers jaw-dropping moments. Here, the action is divided between standard platforming and simple "shoot your way in, shoot your way out" tomb raiding. Not a single sequence here would make my list of all-time Uncharted moments.

That's a shame, because there's much to recommend here. For the first time, you can play a handheld game with the scale and production values of a home console title. The base level of craftsmanship on display in Golden Abyss means you'll get your money's worth—but not a penny more. I wish all the perspiration expel-ling in making the game was complemented by more inspiration. —Matt Helgeson





Touch My Katamari

Namco proves the Katamari formula is still malleable

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Namco Bandai
Developer Namco Bandai
Release February 22 ESRB E10+

7.5

Vita

- » **Concept**
Roll a sticky ball around, picking up objects and getting bigger
- » **Graphics**
Objects are stylized as in past installments, but they're sharp and well defined. Occasional hiccups in draw distance don't affect gameplay
- » **Sound**
The series is known for its strong soundtracks, and Touch My Katamari's blend of peppy tunes keeps that streak going
- » **Playability**
After you get used to morphing your katamari, you'll wonder how you lived without it
- » **Entertainment**
The Katamari series has been rolling on momentum for a while now, but Touch My Katamari adds enough new content to justify a new entry
- » **Replay Value**
High



Touch My Katamari contains the closest thing to innovation that the series has seen since Katamari Damacy rolled out in 2004. When that slice of progress is the ability to squish your ball of junk in two directions, it's a telling reminder of how stagnant things have been for the Prince. Fortunately, that morphing ability is surprisingly more than just a gimmick to show off the Vita's touchscreen – it actually makes the game's ball-rolling action feel fresh again.

One of the previously unavoidable things about katamari rolling is that picking up junk created a dilemma. While it was nice to grow and be able to pick up larger items (and a huge part of the concept, as it turns out), the additional bulk made it impossible to squeeze into previously accessible areas. In Touch My Katamari, the Prince can now morph the ball vertically or horizontally, which solves that issue. It sounded silly until I experienced how useful it was. Drawing my two fingers apart on the touchscreen pulled the ball into a rolling-pin shape, perfect for sliding under beds or spanning the width of a street. In the katamari's vertical configuration (think bicycle wheel), it's easy to slip inside doorways or wind between obstacles. I found myself routinely switching shapes throughout levels, and it quickly became second nature. After playing through Touch My Katamari, I don't know how easy going back to pre-morph versions will be.

The game delivers most of the Katamari experience that you'd expect. The King of All Cosmos is there in all of his weird, vaguely sexualized glory. Barely related, barely animated outscenes bridge levels, though they seem more desperately weird than naively quirky at this point in the series' lifespan. The soundtrack is predictably solid, with peppy tunes accompanying the screams of little people who don't much want to be rolled into a ball. Best of all, the Vita's twin sticks control like a dream.

Touch My Katamari is just about everything I'd hoped for, and not just for a handheld version of Katamari. I was a bit disappointed that it doesn't deliver the satisfying finale that I've grown accustomed to (continents, landmasses, and stars don't get rolled up in game's final moments), but it offers enough other things to soften the blow. The game provides a nice incentive to replay levels, either by trying to max out scores or through unlockable twists such as a faster katamari. There is also a host of leaderboards and connected features for those who like to compete (or collaborate) with friends.

If you never clicked with the series' ball-rolling insanity, Touch My Katamari isn't likely to win you over. However, I do think that the morphing is a significant enough tweak to warrant giving it another shot. — Jeff Cork



Hot Shots Golf: World Invitational

Once a hot shot, always a hot shot

Style 1-Player Sports (30-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony
Computer Entertainment Developer Clap Hanz Limited
Release February 22 ESRB E

7.5

Vita

- » **Concept**
Add Vita functionality to the usual Hot Shots golf formula
- » **Graphics**
The game looks cutely sharp as always
- » **Sound**
The caddy accents always raise an eyebrow with me, if you know what I mean
- » **Playability**
Alternate swing modes and the new Vita features add something for long-time vets to experience
- » **Entertainment**
The Hot Shots series is always fun, but having said that, there's not a lot that differentiates this title from the others
- » **Replay Value**
Moderately High

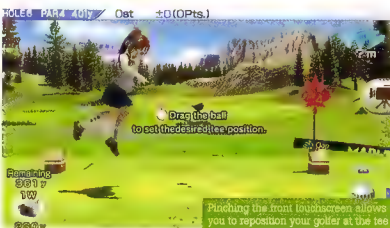
Launching with a Hot Shots title is a rite of passage for any new Sony platform. Because of this, I can always count on at least one title at launch that doesn't disappoint. Be that as it may, the Hot Shots franchise's role as a launch stalwart seems to be in a stasis; its Sisyphian duty to support a new console forever keeps it from being anything greater than that.

More likely, the Hot Shots franchise is stuck in a rut because it has already dialed in its gameplay and engaging career formula with its fans. World Invitational is more of the same, notwithstanding the new Vita features and some solid online features such as a friends' leaderboard and a promise from Sony of downloadable courses, costumes, and characters.

As with other Hot Shots games, I was easily seduced into its myriad unlockables, loyalty system with its golfers (where different shots are available the more you play with a particular golfer), and tight gameplay. I love getting into a groove with the classic three-click swing mechanic and trying to hit the correct beats in order to pull off super backspin shots and flag-rattling Flying Bells. I equally enjoy the different course perimeters (also included in online tournaments) that sometimes pop up, like extra penalties for hitting into the rough, no spin rules, or shot timers.

The Vita-specific features are nice, but are peripheral to the core gameplay experience. Using the AR and motion capabilities to look around the virtual golf course (while moving the Vita itself) is nifty, as is tracing on the back touchscreen to plot out various ball trajectories, but they don't add enough to the game to elevate this version of Hot Shots above the others. You can also nudge the Vita at impact for a super power shot.

Being predictably solid is both a blessing and curse for the Hot Shots series, and at the end of the day I try to not overthink the fact that World Invitational is simply a fun experience. I approach it a lot like my real-life golf game, where I just try to enjoy being out in the sunshine and not get too wound up at the numbers on the score card. — Matthew Kato



Escape Plan

Leather, puzzles shy guys, and fart sounds

7.75

Vita

» Concept

Make a puzzle game designed around the Vita's unique features, as opposed to just adding them later

» Graphics

One of the Vita's best looking games. The art direction is the game's greatest asset

» Sound

Classical music and interesting sound effects set an appropriately bizarre mood

» Playability

You have to use the front screen, the back touch panel, the motion controls, and the analog sticks – sometimes all in tandem. This makes the game difficult to control at times

» Entertainment

Escape Plan oozes style and creativity, but interaction can be a major problem

» Replay

Moderate

When it comes to the Vita, the majority of the games available upon launch are ports, sequels, or offshoots of recognizable franchises. Very few new games are in the mix, which is why Escape Plan has always stuck out during preview events. It's also one of the few games custom built for the Vita that feels like it belongs on the handheld, rather than one that just happens to appear on it with Vita functionality shoehorned in.

Escape Plan stars two characters whose names match their distinguishable size variation. Lil is the smaller sidekick who can sprint while on a caffeine high and inhale helium to float around the environment. The lumbering Laarg can break through wooden barriers and trigger heavy switches. The duo's goal is to escape the facility that the evil Bakuki is holding them in. It's a simple story, but it has some emotional resonance thanks to the mournful, bondage-inspired art direction. All the humanistic and animal characters resemble shy guys from Super Mario Bros. wrapped in leather and drawn by Tim Burton, and it gives the world a sense of oppression.

Fun Bits Interactive lightens the dark mood with flashes of humor and levity. An applause track plays to reward puzzle solving, and the developers also shoved a fair bit of sexual innuendo, farting sound effects, and a random "intermission" cutscene in the middle of the game that features the enemies of Escape Plan dancing to classical music. It's bizarre, out of place, and one of my favorite parts about the game.

Players must direct Lil and Laarg through a series of obstacles without dying. Sometimes you control both simultaneously, but mostly you control them independently as they make their way through their own rooms. You tap the



screens to create platforms to walk across, rotate fans to move poisonous gas and cool lava to create navigable paths, and rotate the system to control a floating Lil. Traps are repeated room to room, but they are organized in a way that makes each puzzle feel distinct, even if they all look fairly similar.

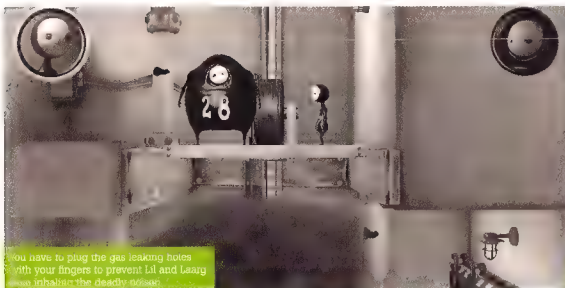
The game isn't particularly difficult, but I frequently died thanks to the back touch panel's inaccuracy. In order to move certain platforms away from the foreground, you must physically tap them. To push them back into the foreground, you have to tap them from the back panel. It's an interesting mechanic, but it needs refinement. I died often thanks to missing the block I was trying to tap forward.

Escape Plan's other major gameplay issue is one that plagues many touchscreen games. When you touch the screen, your finger obscures the playing field. This can be troubling when the game requires you to block multiple pipe leaks by holding your fingers over them while controlling the camera with the left and right sticks. You also must frequently squeeze Lil to make him

perform special actions, which requires you to place one finger on the touchscreen and another on the back. I never found a comfortable way to perform this frequent action without moving my entire hand. It's even more difficult if the system is plugged in and charging or if you're using headphones (something I recommend since the music is excellent).

Challenge modes that require the player to get through the game with as few deaths as possible, hidden items, and possible three star rankings that can be earned for each level help extend the length of the game. Escape Plan is short, but the lower \$14.99 price tag compared to other Vita games makes its brevity difficult to complain about.

I love the way Escape Plan looks, the way it sounds, and how puzzles are complicated in an interesting way without ever becoming overwhelming. Physically interacting with the game is where it falls short. I still consider it a worthy addition to your early Vita library – especially when there are so few original titles for the handheld. » **Kyle Hilliard**



You have to plug the gas leaking holes with your fingers to prevent Lil and Laarg from inhaling the deadly noxious.



Once Lil inhales helium he floats into the air and you have to rotate the Vita in order to control him.



Little Deviants

Like the technology buried in a lot of minigames to exist

Style 1-Player Party **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Bigbig Studios **Release** February 22 **ESRB** E10+

6

Vita

» **Concept**
Create a bunch of shallow minigames that showcase Vita's various control methods

» **Graphics**
Taking a page from the Rabbits' handbook, the art style is appropriately cartoony and gooty

» **Sound**
From the music to the sound effects, the audio is unremarkable all around

» **Playability**
Not a single game uses conventional controls, so you'll be spending a lot of time tilting and using the touch surfaces

» **Entertainment**
The simple act of using unconventional controls isn't enough to redeem the bland design

» **Replay Value**
Low

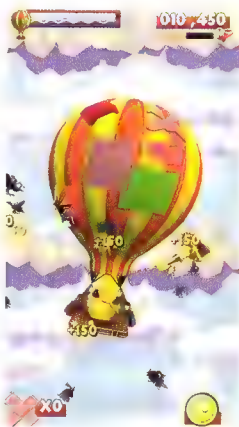
The Vita has a lot of gizmos built into it, and judging from the back of Little Deviants' package, developer Bigbig Studios wanted to use them all. Informational boxes advertise the implementation of the microphone, touchscreen, rear touchpad, motion sensor, and rear camera. These hardware features may offer gamers a way to show off the capabilities of their new handheld, but Little Deviants isn't supposed to be a tech demo. It's a game, and not a good one.

The parade of minigames in Little Deviants is all about making players use the hardware in different ways. Marble Madness-style levels have you gingerly tilting the unit, while others have you pressing the rear touchpad to deform the environment. A singing challenge detects the pitch when you hum, and a whack-a-mole activity makes you touch both surfaces to defeat robots. Each one only takes a few minutes to play, but they start to wear thin even sooner.

Objectives are dull (usually variations on "collect stuff" or "race against the clock"), and the gameplay is painfully shallow. I was initially impressed by the variety of activities, but the second half torpedoes that by constantly recycling minigames. Even worse, the most frustrating ones tend to be the repeat performers, like steering a spaceship while being chased by a giant whale robot. While I had trouble with some of the controls (especially those involving tilting), most of games handled their unconventional inputs well.

While the technology is impressive, its failure to create an entertaining experience is at the heart of Little Deviants' problems. When you talk about your favorite games, how often do you say, "The best part was how the controls functioned as intended"? Unfortunately, that's the highest praise I can give to this slog. A majority of the minigames are not fun, and give you no reason to play them apart from unlocking more boring games and beating previous high scores. You also unlock five different Deviants, but they're all effectively identical with no special powers. You don't even choose which one you control (they're assigned to specific minigames), so there's no gratification or depth to be found.

Considering its aggressive use of Vita's bells and whistles, Little Deviants was probably a good choice to include in Sony's bundle for early adopters. It certainly proves that the system's various control methods can be successfully implemented on a technical level, but that doesn't excuse the lack of substance when it comes to the content. **Joe Juba**



ModNation Racers: Road Trip

...best and worst of kart racing

Style 1-Player Racing (4-Player Local) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** SCE San Diego Studio **Release** February 15 **ESRB** E

7

» **Concept**
Bring ModNation Racers to the PlayStation Vita, taking advantage of its unique hardware features

» **Graphics**
Not up to par with the PS3 version, but still impressive

» **Sound**
The catchy soundtrack is the only thing that stands out

» **Playability**
Thanks to the Vita's dual control sticks, steering your kart feels great

» **Entertainment**
Players will have no shortage of tracks to check out, but the lack of online multiplayer is a major disappointment

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

The original ModNation Racers was a flawed but entertaining attempt to innovate in the kart racing genre. Its easy-to-use toolset for creating and sharing content has produced over a million user-made tracks, karts, and racers for players to download. While Road Trip's touchscreen support makes fashioning your own creations easier than ever, some old and new missteps make playing this handheld version significantly less fun than the original.

As with all Vita launch titles, San Diego Studio placed a lot of effort into using the handheld's unique features, primarily the front and back touchscreen panels. A wide range of gestures let you place, resize, and rotate objects and decals, lay down and shape roads, and even bank turns with ease.

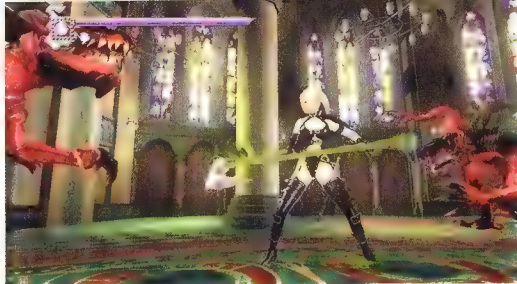
The solid controls carry over to gameplay as well. The Vita's small control sticks are responsive, and using the shoulder buttons for the gas and brakes instead of triggers is a non-factor. A number of new weapons spice up combat nicely.

For every improvement, however, there's a frustrating downside. The developer crafted all-new tracks for Road Trip, but stripped the career mode of the cutscenes introducing your rivals and highlighting your achievements. The announcers also hit the cutting room floor, leaving the career mode less of a career and more of a string of races.

After enjoying the first two competitive circuits, the action quickly takes a turn for the annoying. The later tracks, while impressive on a technical and creative level, are packed with so many obstacles and pitfalls that races devolve into chaos. This pandemonium is compounded by the worst rubberband AI I've ever seen; I won the overwhelming majority of my races by just a few tenths of a second, and lost many more at the finish line. Having your opponents always on your heels may ratchet up the intensity, but it also requires flawless racing to finish first, which Road Trip's frenzied action simply doesn't support. All of this makes racing against the computer less fun. This is a big problem.

The biggest of Road Trip's drawbacks is inexcusable: There's no online multiplayer support. You can still create and download user-made content — including everything from the PS3 version — but if you want to race against humans, the best you get is a four-player ad hoc mode or downloadable time trial ghosts. Even the PSP version of ModNation Racers has six-player online support. What was Sony thinking? Downloading user-made courses is simply not as enjoyable when you can only play them in one-off races against the computer.

ModNation Racers remains a bastion for creativity, and it can only hope its focus on user-made content influences other kart racers and the racing genre as a whole. Road Trip's new touchscreen controls further refine content creation, but they aren't a game changer. Unfortunately, the lack of online multiplayer is. **Jeff Marchetava**



Ninja Gaiden Sigma Plus

7

1-Player Action **Publisher** Tecmo **Developer** Team Ninja **Release** February 22 **ESRB** M

Re-release 2004's *Ninja Gaiden*. Again

Graphics
Sigma's HD visuals are better than the Xbox original but not as impressive as other Vita launch offerings

Sound
Wailing guitars and clashing of swords...basically exactly what you'd expect

Playability
Combat is still rewarding and deep, but the camera and platforming can be problematic

Entertainment
Ninja Gaiden is still a solid game, but its age is showing

Replay Value
Moderate

When Tecmo released *Ninja Gaiden* in 2004, you would think Team Ninja would have needed a break from ninjas after the notoriously long development process. Instead, the developer continued to update and re-release the game in the form of *Hurricane Packs*, *Ninja Gaiden Black*, and *Ninja Gaiden Sigma*. Just in case we haven't played the game enough times, it's back once again in portable form. Whether this latest iteration of Ryu's 3D debut is worth playing again depends on how much you already enjoy the series.

Gamers who only played the original release will welcome the tweaked camera and bonus Rachel stages, but even the adjusted camera from *Black* can be problematic. It's not the only feature clearly showing its age: Platforming is wildly inaccurate; I missed jumps just as often as I made them. Enemies respawn as you double back on rooms, which isn't a problem with lower-level enemies but can be frustrating as you progress further in the game.

Like the rest of the launch titles, Tecmo made a few new alterations to take advantage of the Vita's unique hardware. Players can tap the screen to go into first-person mode and then move the handheld around to survey the environment. It's a nice feature, but I found myself accidentally tapping the edge of the screen as I used the analog sticks, unintentionally sending me into first-person mode in the middle of swordfights. One added feature, the ability to complete tiny minigames with the rear touchpad to enhance your Ninpo attacks, feels forced. Gamers who had a hard time with the original game's difficulty should find the new Hero mode more to their liking, as it enables

auto guard and evasion assist once your health is low. In addition, it grants the player infinite Ninpo attacks, which should be enough to clear almost any area of enemies.

Other than a couple Vita-specific features, an easier difficulty level, and a collection of trial missions, *Ninja Gaiden Sigma Plus* doesn't offer anything new. If you loved the original game enough to play through its numerous updates, then you may enjoy taking this new version on the go. However, action fans accustomed to the polished games of this generation may become frustrated with the eight-year-old mechanics. **Dan Ryck**



Vita

7.75

Platform Vita Release February 14 **ESRB** E

FIFA Soccer for the Vita takes after *FIFA 11*. It may do a good job showing what the new system can do, but it could do a better job with offering a tighter gameplay experience. — **Matthew Kato**



7.75

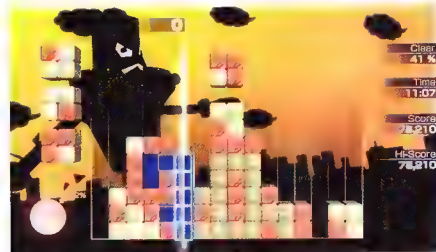
Platform Vita Release February 22 **ESRB** T

Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 is best suited for those obsessed with the series who can't tolerate having it out of arm's reach or anyone looking for a good fighter who hasn't played it yet. If you've even spent a single night with *Capcom's* comic crossover, you've already experienced everything the old workhorse has to offer. — **Tim Turi**

8

Platform Vita Release February 15 **ESRB** E

Even wrapped in some new features and an excellent soundtrack, it's just more *Lumines*. This musical puzzler is a solid choice for new Vita owners, but it isn't a must-have title in the larger gaming landscape. — **Joe Juba**



8 | Super Stardust Delta

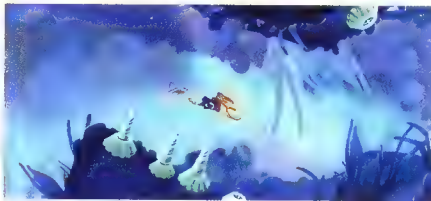
Platform Vita Release February 22 ESRB E

Super Stardust is a bit limited compared to its big brother, but it's still a thrilling ride. Housemarque's latest entry is a great showcase for the handheld's beautiful screen, and a wealth of modes will keep you blasting aliens until your batteries run dry. — Jeff Cork

8 Rayman Origins

Platform Vita Release February 14 ESRB E10+

Rayman Origins doesn't take a visual hit on the way to the Vita; it features the same stunning visuals and levels. A few extras, including an additional collectable type, don't make up for the puzzling lack of multiplayer. Though it's still a great lone-wolf game, this port feels incomplete without it. — Jeff Cork



6.25 Shinobido 2: Revenge of Zen

Platform Vita Release February 22 ESRB M

As a stealth game, Shinobido 2 is successful and rewarding. I could even confidently recommend it to Metal Gear fans looking to scratch a sneaky itch in the beginning of the Vita's life cycle. Outside of sneaking up behind people to perform kills, the game feels unpolished and not entirely thought out. — Kyle Hilliard

5 | Dungeon Hunter: Alliance

Platform Vita Release February 14 ESRB T

If you're going to create such a clear-cut clone without any identity or soul of its own, the least you can do is put the time in to make sure it's polished and runs well. Gameloft hasn't even done that much with Dungeon Hunter: Alliance. This dud is full of enough bugs, framerate slowdowns, and online problems that it makes you never want to set foot in a dungeon again. — Phil Kollar



Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater 3D

Snake's least successful mission

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Konami Developer Kojima Productions Release February 21 ESRB M

7.5

Metal Gear's story weaves through eight canonical games and has many surprising twists. Clones, sentient computers, and nanomachines occasionally take the plot in incomprehensible directions, making the series daunting to approach for first-timers. The fact that Snake Eater's story stands well on its own was probably the major reason Kojima Productions decided to bring it to the 3DS, but gamers who want to play Snake Eater are better off leaving this 3D incarnation on the shelf in favor of another version.

The core game hasn't changed; you are still Snake, a top-secret operative infiltrating the Soviet Union during the Cold War. You sneak through jungles, eat local wildlife to survive, and unravel a plot that threatens the safety of the world. The story is cool, and the way it serves as the genesis for the rest of the series' events makes it a great place to start.

Unfortunately, the unique features of this 3DS port do more to hinder the experience than enhance it. The tilt sensor gimmicks (like balancing as you cross a bridge) feel out of place, and using the buttons to control the camera and aim is awful — especially during boss fights. The touchscreen interface is functional but clumsy; I quickly stopped using it in favor of d-pad menu navigation, which still isn't as elegant as previous versions. Some people may say it's unfair to compare handheld titles to those on console, but given that Snake Eater 3D is essentially the same game as its console-based brothers, the comparison is inevitable.

The visuals look good, and the 3D effect works fine — though the chuggy framerate doesn't stack up to the 60 fps of the HD Collection version. The only substantial improvement here is the addition of MGS 4's crouch walk, which allows Snake to retain a degree of cover while moving and aiming.

I'm not saying that Snake Eater is an inferior game; it's my favorite in the series. However, this version is only

worthwhile for people who have no other choice. Even then, with the \$40 you'd spend on Snake Eater 3D, you could probably buy an old PS2 and the original game, or the HD Collection on 360 and PS3. If you want the real Snake Eater experience, those are far better options.

— Joe Juba

Snake's trip to the Soviet jungle gets smaller and more awkward

• **Graphics**
Looks as good as you remember, as long as you haven't played the Metal Gear Solid HD Collection recently

• **Sound**
Great music and exceptional voice work

• **Playability**
The basic controls don't transition well, and the 3DS exclusive features, like tilting and using the camera to generate camo, are just novelties

• **Entertainment**
The story and mechanics at the heart of Snake Eater are still fantastic

• **Replay**
Moderate

The Circle Pad Difference

Games with the Circle Pad attachment are granted a reprieve from many of the peripheral control issues that plague the version in addition to dual-stick aiming, the face buttons revert to their default functionality, so you don't need to press the d-pad to climb trees or go forward. With them and weapon macros on the triggers, you don't need to spend less time nonsensifying with the awkward button layout interface. But the Circle Pad doesn't solve all the problems in Snake Eater 3D, and the changes don't make the controls less distracting.



PLAYSTATION 3

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Adventures of Tintin, The	7.75	Feb-12
Alien: Marauder Returns	8.75	Jul-11
All Zombies Must Die	7.5	Mar-12
Army	3	Mar-12
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12
Banquo-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	7.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Crysis	8.25	Dec-11
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11
Darkness II	7.5	Mar-12
Dead Island	8.5	Oct-11
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	8.5	Nov-11
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	8.5	Oct-11
Dirt 3	8.75	Jul-11
Diggies 4		
A Promise Unforgotten	8.25	Oct-11
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11
Duke Nukem Forever	8.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons & Dragons		
Daggerside	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	9.95	Jan-12
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Fancy Pants Adventure, The	7.5	Jul-11
FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12
God of War: Origins Collection	9.65	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: Overall Extended Cut	8	Dec-11
loo & Shadow of the Colossus Collection, The	9.75	Oct-11
Infamous 2	8.75	Jul-11
Jak and Daxter Collection	9.25	Mar-12
Jurassic Park: The Game	5.5	Jan-12
King of Fighters XIII	7.75	Feb-12
Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning	8	Mar-12
Kung-Fu High Impact	6	Feb-12
L.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan-12
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean: Lord of the Rings	5.5	Dec-11
War in the North	7.5	Oct-11
Madden NFL 12	7.5	Oct-11
Magpie: The Gathering - Duels of the Planewalkers 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
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Feb-12
NeverDead	4	Mar-12
NFL Blitz	8	Mar-12

8 | Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC Release February 7 ESRB M Issue March '12

Despite its problems, Reckoning is a very good game with a lot of stuff worth checking out, but even with all of the talent backing it, it's just on the edge of being something much greater than it is. - Phil Kollar



NHL 12	8.75	Oct-11	Super Street Fighter M: Arcade Edition	7.75	Aug-11	Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise	7.75	Sep-11	Thor: God of Thunder	4.5	Jul-11	Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale	6	Jul-11
Okabu	8	Dec-11	Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11	Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon	8	Aug-11
Payday: The Heist	6.5	Dec-11	Tine 2	8.75	Feb-12	El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron	9	Sep-11
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11	Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	8	Jan-12	Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.95	Jan-12
Rage	9	Nov-11	Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception	9.5	Dec-11	F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One	8.75	Dec-11	Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine	8	Nov-11	Fancy Pants Adventure, The	7.5	Jul-11
Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11	WWE 12	5.5	Jan-12	FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Red Faction: Armageddon	7.25	Jul-11	X-Men Destiny	7	Nov-11	Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11				Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11				Forza Motorsport 4	9.25	Dec-11
Resident Evil Code: Veronica X	9.5	Nov-11				From Dust	8.75	Sep-11
Resistance 3	7	Oct-11				Fruit Nuts Kinect	8	Oct-11
Richard	8.25	Feb-12				Gating Gears	8	Jul-11
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11				Gears of War 3	9.5	Nov-11
Rocksmonth	8.25	Dec-11				GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12
Sainte Flow: The Third	9	Dec-11				Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters	8.25	Aug-11
Shadows of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11				Guardian Heroes	6.5	Dec-11
Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11				Gunslinger, The	8	Oct-11
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11				Half-Minute Hero		
Sonic Generations	6.75	Dec-11				Super Mega Neo Climax	8.25	Sep-11
Soulcalibur V	8.5	Mar-12						
Spidey-Man: Edge of Time	6.5	Dec-11						
			Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11			
			Adventures of Shuggy, The	8.25	Aug-11			
			Adventures of Tintin, The	7.75	Feb-12			
			Alios: Madness Returns	8.75	Jul-11			
			All Zombies Must Die	7.5	Mar-12			
			Army	3	Mar-12			
			Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12			
			Banquo-O HD: Missile Fury	7.75	Jul-11			
			Batman	9.25	Sep-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	7.75	Aug-11			
			Catherine	7	Aug-11			
			Child of Eden	8	Jul-11			
			Crimson: Alliance	8.75	Oct-11			
			Dance Central 2	8.25	Nov-11			
			Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11			
			Darkness II	7.5	Mar-12			
			Dead Island	8.5	Oct-11			
			Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	8.5	Nov-11			
			Deus Ex: Human Revolution	8.5	Oct-11			
			Dirt 3	8.75	Jul-11			
			Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11			
			Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11			
			Duke Nukem Forever	8.75	Aug-11			
			Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11			
						EvilWid Anniversary	6.5	Jan-12
						Harry Potter and the Inheritor	8.5	Sep-11
						Half-Minute Hero	8	Sep-11
						Inferno Twisted Shadow Planet	1	Dec-11
						Jong Doo: Special Edition	8.5	Feb-12
						Jurassic Park: The Game	5.5	Jan-12
						Just Dance 3	6	Dec-11
						Kinect Disneyland Adventures	7.5	Jan-12
						King of Fighters XIII	7.75	Feb-12
						Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning	8	Mar-12
						Kung-Fu Panda 2	5	Jul-11
						Kung-Fu High Impact	6	Feb-12
						L.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
						LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan-12
						LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean: Lord of the Rings	7	Jul-11
						War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
						Madden NFL 12	7.5	Oct-11
						Magpie: The Gathering - Duels of the Planewalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
						Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	8	Nov-11
						Ms. Splosion Man	8.75	Aug-11

9.25 | Jak and Daxter Collection

Platform PS3 Release February 7 ESRB E-T Issue March '12

Naughty Dog's work in this franchise endures thanks to great characters, finely tuned gameplay, and a restless inventiveness. Though some aspects of the games are dated now, the Jak games stand up as epic adventures. - Matt Helgeson



8.5 | Quarrel

Platform 360 Release January 25 ESRB E

Minor issues aside, Denki has created a wonderful, addictive game that I'll be returning to throughout the year. Whether you're a dictionary-reading diehard or an armchair general, Quarrel has enough depth and charm to keep most gamers smiling. - Phil Kollar

6 | Sol: Exodus

Platform PC Release January 25 ESRB RP

I didn't expect this little indie game to replace Starlancer or TIE Fighter in my heart, but I'm disappointed that it struggled to strike a single chord with my cherished memories of those classics. - Adam Bessener

8 | Silent Hill HD Collection

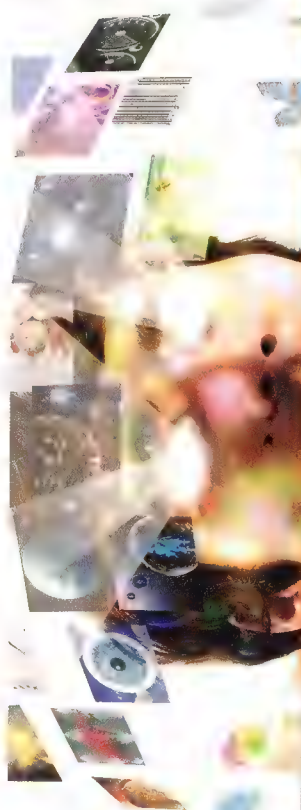
Platform PS3 • 360 Release March 6 ESRB M

Hardcore survival horror fans itching to return to the corrupt town of Silent Hill in the second and third games will enjoy the enhanced graphics and all new, improved voice acting. Gamers unfamiliar with the era's clunky controls and aimless wandering are better off hunting for more modern thrills. - Tim Tur



Find Your Fit.

Master of Science Bachelor of Arts Bachelor of Science LEARN



MX vs. ATV Alive	7	Jul-11
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
NCAA Football 12	9	Aug-11
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
NeverDead	4	Mar-12
NF: Blitz	8	Mar-12
NHL 12	8.75	Oct-11
Overwatch: Excellent	3.75	Jan-12
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Rage	9	Nov-11
Raving Rabbits Alive & Kicking	5	Jan-12
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
Ries of Nightmares	5	Nov-11
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Rocksmith	8.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Sesame Street		
Once Upon A Monster	8.5	Nov-11
Shadows of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11
Sims 3 Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11
Sonic Generations	6.75	Dec-11
Soulcalibur V	8.5	Mar-12
Spider-Man: Edge of Time	6.5	Dec-11
Super Street Fighter IV		
Arceus Edition	7.75	Aug-11
Thor: God of Thunder	4.5	Jul-11
Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11
Trenched	7.5	Aug-11
Trine 2	8.75	Feb-12
Tropico 4	7.75	Nov-11
LFC Personal Trainer		
The Ultimate Fitness System	5	Sep-11
Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	8	Jan-12
Warhammer 40,000		
Space Marine	8	Nov-11
WWE 12	5.5	Jan-12
X-Men Destiny	7	Nov-11

Wii		
B1 Top Complete	8	Oct-11
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Fortune Street	8.5	Jan-12
Kirby's Return To Dream Land	8.5	Dec-11
Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, The	10	Dec-11
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean	7	Jul-11
Mario & Sonic at the London 2012 Olympic Games	5.75	Feb-12
Spider-Man: Edge of Time	6.5	Dec-11
PC		
A Game of Thrones: Genesis	6.75	Dec-11
Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Battlefield 3	9.5	Dec-11
Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12
Call of Jubah: The Cartel	4.5	Sep-11
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Dos Ex: Human Revolution	8.5	Oct-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons of Dredmor	8	Sep-11
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Jurassic Park: The Game	5.5	Jan-12
Magia: The Gathering - Dusk of the Paneswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Might & Magic Heroes VI	8.25	Dec-11
Minicraft	9.25	Jan-12
Playday: The Heist	8	Dec-11
Postal II	1	Mar-12
Rage	9	Nov-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Richard	8.25	Feb-12
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Senuus Sam 3: BFE	7.75	Feb-12
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11
Stronghold 3	4	Jan-12
Swords of the Stars II		
Lords of Winter	3	Jan-12

Time 2	8.75	Feb-12
Warhammer 40,000		
Space Marine	8	Nov-11
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings, The	9.25	Jul-11
NINTENDO DS		
Aliens: Infestation	8.25	Nov-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Dragon Quest		
Monsters: Joker 2	7.5	Oct-11
Kirby Mass Attack	8.5	Oct-11
Professor Layton and the Last Soactor	8.5	Dec-11
Salsazaroo: Red the Hunter	7.5	Dec-11
PSP		
Corpse Party	6	Feb-12
Final Fantasy IV		
The Complete Collection	8.5	May-11
LEGO Star Wars II: The Clone Wars	6.5	May-11
Patapon 3	6.75	Jun-11
3DS		
Cartoon Network Punch Time Explosion	4.75	Jul-11
Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection	8.5	May-11
Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D, The	9.25	Jul-11
LEGO Star Wars II: The Clone Wars	6.5	May-11
Patapon 3	6.75	Jun-11
Resident Evil: Mercenaries 3D	8	Aug-11
Resident Evil: Revelations	9	Feb-11
Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11
Star Fox 64 3D	8.25	Oct-11
Tetris Alex	8	Nov-11

gameinformer

Volume XXII • Number 4 • Issue 228

STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com

Editor in Chief
Andy McNamera andy@gameinformer.com

Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com

Senior Editor
Matt Helgeson matt@gameinformer.com

Senior Associate Editors
Matthew Katz katz@gameinformer.com
Adam Biesonen adam@gameinformer.com
Joe Jaba joe@gameinformer.com

Matt Miller mml@gameinformer.com

Content Manager
Matt Bartz martz@gameinformer.com

Editor
Jeff Corke jcorke@gameinformer.com

Associate Editors
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Ryan Vore ryan@gameinformer.com
Jeff Macchia jmacchia@gameinformer.com
Tim Turi turt@gameinformer.com
Phil Kollar phk@gameinformer.com
Dan Ryckert dan@gameinformer.com
Kyle Millard kxm@gameinformer.com

Video Producer
Ben Hanson bhanson@gameinformer.com

Video Editor
Jason Guevrekian jason@gameinformer.com

News Editor
Jim永利 jim@gameinformer.com

Director Director
Jeff Karavik jkavik@gameinformer.com

Art Director
Thomas Blustin tblustin@gameinformer.com

Production Director
Curtis Fung cuf@gameinformer.com

Graphic Designer
Lelah Acropolis Tabin ltabin@gameinformer.com

Contributing Artist
Zander Cannon

Consulting Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com

Information Systems Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paulhed@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Born rob@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Sales Director
Damon Wasden damon@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Sales Director
Suzanne Lang suzanne@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Associate
Janey Strasser jstrasser@gameinformer.com

Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Hinerbach rachel@gameinformer.com
Mark Burger mark@gameinformer.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE

For renewal address change and Power Up Rewards Pro details:
Visit www.gameinformer.com
Email: customerservice@gameinformer.com
or send correspondence to:
724 North First St., 3rd Floor
Minneapolis, MN 55401 • Attn: CIS Dept
For subscription inquiry ONLY
1 (866) 844-GAME (4263)

Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer Magazine, 724 North First St., 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names or trademarks of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of Electronic Publishing Liability. The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors of omission or commission in connection with an advertisement is limited to reproduction of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any money paid for the advertisement. INDENTIFICATION: The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to define and identify the publisher's agency and all liability, fees, or expense arising from claims of fraud, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademark, copyright, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.



Member Audit Bureau of Circulations

Please see www.ual.edu/efacts for the latest information about degree program performance, placement and costs.



The Ultimate Tribute to the NES

We speak to the creators behind the new 8-bit sensation Abobo's Big Adventure

Tributes to the NES era are all over the Internet, but the Flash-based Abobo's Big Adventure (abobosbigadventure.com) is the most ambitious love letter to 8-bit gaming we've ever seen. Stages are based on classics like *Zelda*, *Mario*, *Mega Man*, and *Contra*, but sprites and enemies come from everything from *Kung Fu* to *Pro Wrestling*. When played with a controller, Abobo's Big Adventure feels like it could have been a genuine NES title, albeit one of the most insane you've ever seen.

Designer Roger Barr hatched the idea for the game, with coding and artwork help coming from his friends PestoForce and Pox. Upon its release on January 11, it received plenty of attention from blogs and old-school gamers thanks to its wicked sense of humor. We spoke with Barr about the hilarious and impressive project.

Abobo's Big Adventure looks and feels a lot like a full NES title. How long was the development process?

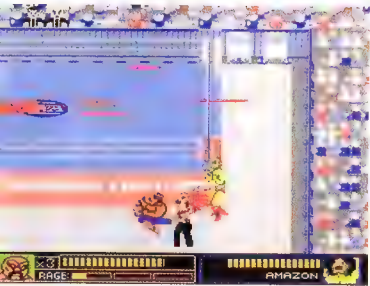
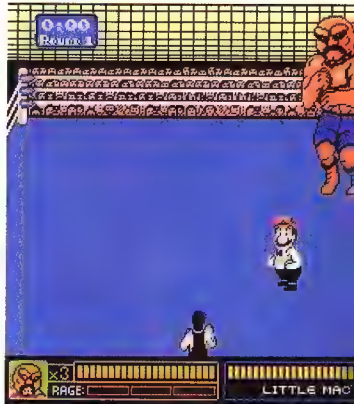
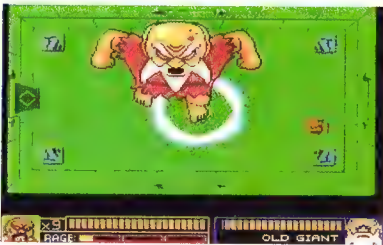
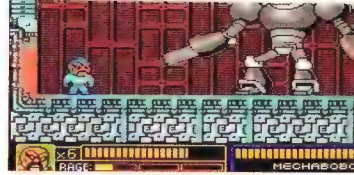
I originally started on the game way back in 2002, but ended up putting it on the back burner when I started working on other game projects such as *Domo-Kun's Angry Smashfest*. In 2006, I had been working with PestoForce and Pox on some games when I talked to them about working on Abobo's Big Adventure and they liked the idea. Since the original game demo was very dated by then, we started over from scratch, working up a much larger story for Abobo to brutalize his way through. We worked on the game regularly from 2006 to 2012, but we also worked on other games that weren't quite as large.

Why Abobo? Was he your first choice for a protagonist, or were other semi-obscure NES characters under consideration?

Abobo was always my favorite NES character. To this day, I've never seen an angrier-looking face, and that's what I love about him. He seems to exist solely to destroy anything in his path, whether it's a brick wall or your face. There were no other characters we considered for the protagonist of the game — it was always Abobo. Even his name is fun to say. Abobo. ABOBO!



by Dan Ryck



Many of the characters and stages are instantly recognizable, but there are times when there's so much happening onscreen that it's tough to process what game everything is from. What are some of the more obscure references you squeezed into the game?

All three of us had characters who we definitely thought needed to make appearances in the game. It's great to see the popular characters we all know and love, but I think it's just as rewarding to see cameos from characters most people haven't thought of in a long time. The game is absolutely loaded with references, so chances are if there's a game you played on the NES, we found a way to work some element of it into Abobo. I'm really happy we worked in obscure characters like Kid Niki, Tom Guycott, and Karnov. Hell, if you look at him, Karnov even looks like he could be a distant relative of Abobo.

We did a video playthrough of the game on our website, but I can't help but think that we missed some Easter eggs and secret areas. Can you tell us about some of the more hidden elements of the game?

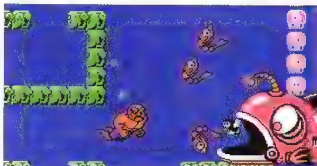
We had a blast watching you guys play through the game actually. The only thing better than getting emails and blog comments about how much people enjoyed the game, is actually getting to see their reactions from moment to moment.

And yeah, there are a lot of Easter eggs. One of the ways we tied in the old 8-bit NES feeling with modern gaming (other than trying to improve on some of the original controls) is we included an achievement system in the game. Sometimes you get medals for doing something good, and sometimes you get medals for dying in a particular way. It was our way to basically ensure that the game had loads of replay value and that everybody would see just how much work went into this project. Also, you can look up what medals you've unlocked at any time, and if there's something you missed on a particular stage, you can go replay it by using the level select option. That's one of the ways we clue people in on the Easter eggs that exist in the game.

I'll tell you about a few of my favorite Easter eggs. On level two, after you've moved forward a bit, you can swim back to the beginning of the level to find a little dance number taking place. In the dungeon on level four, there's a wall on the south side of one of the rooms with a crack on it. You can blast a hole in it and find a funny little cutscene. I won't spoil it for you, but it's splatterific.

Did you guys approach this as something of a portfolio builder, or was it strictly a labor of love?

It was always a labor of love from the very beginning. We



Virtually everything onscreen comes from NES sprites. Was there ever any concern about copyright issues, or were you able to get around legal action by making the game free-to-play?

We've been making parody/tribute games for a long time now, and never had any problems from Nintendo. They've always been really cool about it, which is why so many parody games exist. It makes sense, too, if you think about it...people play our game and they're reminded of all these great NES classics, so then they get an itch to go replay them. And how do they do that? They log on to their Wii systems and purchase the old games via the Virtual Console. So really, it's just free advertising for them, and introducing younger generations to some excellent games they may have missed out on. If we were actually selling the game, that'd be another story, but since it's a free web game, everybody knows it's just a labor of love

Also, there's a lot of original artwork and sound in the game. On the first level, you encounter Beary Barrel, who never existed before. Aboboy (Abobo's son) is also our own character. I know there are plenty of simple sprite rip games out there, but we really wanted to take it much further than those to show our love for those games, and to set ourselves apart from all the other ones that have little-to-no original art in them. There are a lot of huge cutscenes in the game and crazy rage moves on each level, and none of them existed on the NES. We were being touted as the "ultimate tribute to the NES" and "Game of the Forever," so we really wanted to go all-out with this project so we could meet or exceed people's expectations. Keep in mind, every stage in Abobo's Big Adventure is a completely different game...that's a hard thing to code and tie together.

grow up playing these games and did a lot of research to make sure everything fell right and to make sure we didn't leave anything out. Even though it was a huge undertaking, it was a lot of fun for us to make. I can't tell you how excited we were when the big ending was completed, because we knew it would feel a lot more rewarding than many old NES conclusions that simply said "Congratulations! You win!" If you're gonna put hours into a game, you should get a bigger payoff than that. We're all overwhelmed by how well-received the game has been. Seeing such a positive response to the project after years of work really makes it feel like it was all worth it. It feels so good to see people smile and laugh at all the crazy moments in the game. If it leads to us getting more work, that would certainly be wonderful, but that's just icing on the cake. A cake that Abobo will still want to punch into oblivion.

What's next? Any chance of a love letter to the 16-bit era, or are you planning on something completely different?

What's next? You mean other than paying off our hospital bills from all the beatings Abobo gave us? Never say never to a 16-bit tribute, but I think right now we're interested in making some more original games rather than another parody. There's never a shortage of ideas, as I have a notebook full of them. It's just a matter of finding the time to turn the concepts into reality. The real dream is to start our own game company so we can work on projects like these full-time. We already made one dream come true by completing Abobo's Big Adventure, so hopefully we can make the other one happen as well.

game over

Know the Creed

Answer Key: 1 - b, 2 - d, 3 - a, 4 - b, 5 - b, 6 - c, 7 - a, 8 - c, 9 - c, 10 - d

- 1. What is the first name of Ezio's father?**
 - a. Federico
 - b. Giovanni
 - c. Domenico
 - d. Mario
- 2. The Apples of Eden feature prominently throughout the Assassin's Creed franchise. Which of the following is not one of the other known pieces of Eden?**
 - a. The Shroud
 - b. The Crystal Skull
 - c. The Ankh
 - d. The Ring
- 3. How many collectible flags were hidden in the original Assassin's Creed?**
 - a. 420
 - b. 100
 - c. 250
 - d. 60
- 4. Who killed the Assassins' Mentor in the year 2000?**
 - a. Warren Vidic
 - b. Daniel Cross
 - c. Desmond Miles
 - d. Lucy Stillman
- 5. What is the plotline of Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines?**
 - a. The novel is a retelling of Ezio's journey through Assassin's Creed II
 - b. The game follows Altair's journey to Cyprus and relationship with Maria Thorpe
 - c. The short film details the final days of Ezio Auditore
 - d. The comic tells the story of the Russian Assassin, Nikolai Oreltov
- 6. Abstergo is the modern day front for:**
 - a. The Assassins
 - b. The First Civilization
 - c. The Templars
 - d. The Animus
- 7. Who did Altair slay on the fields of Arsuf?**
 - a. Robert de Sable
 - b. Manuel Palaiologos
 - c. Cesare Borgia
 - d. Al Mualim
- 8. Where was Altair's secret library, unlocked hundreds of years later by Ezio Auditore?**
 - a. Underneath Rome
 - b. Underneath Constantinople
 - c. Underneath Masyaf
 - d. Underneath Cappadocia
- 9. Which of the following is not one of the Three Tenets of the Assassin order?**
 - a. Stay your blade from the flesh of the innocent
 - b. Hide in plain sight
 - c. Freedom is the right of all sentient beings
 - d. Never compromise the brotherhood
- 10. Who was not one of Ezio's many paramours?**
 - a. Caterina Sforza
 - b. Cristina Vespucci
 - c. Sofia Sartor
 - d. Lucrezia Borgia

Scoring & Rank



0 - 1

Recruit



2 - 3

Apprentice



4 - 5

Disciple



6 - 7

Assassin



8 - 8

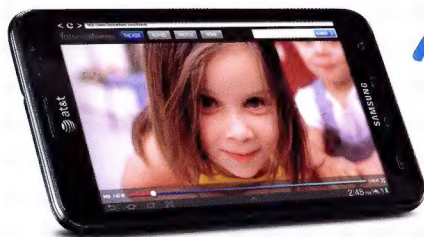
Master



10

Mentor

4Gargantuan



**AT&T. The nation's
largest 4G network.**

*Stream video, upload pictures, and download music fast,
in more places than ever, on the nation's largest 4G network.*

4G speeds not available everywhere. Learn more at att.com/network.

Rethink Possible®



ATT.COM/NETWORK

Screen images simulated. ©2012 AT&T Intellectual Property. Service provided by AT&T Mobility. All rights reserved. AT&T and the AT&T logo are trademarks of AT&T Intellectual Property. All other marks contained herein are the property of their respective owners.

ASSASSIN'S
CREED
III

US \$19.99 (19.99) / £14.99 (14.99)



Issue 228 • April 2012

www.gameinformer.com

Made with love by

RETROMAGS

Our goal is to preserve classic video game magazines so that they are not lost permanently.

People interested in helping out in any capacity, please visit us at retromags.com.

No profit is made from these scans, nor do we offer anything available from the publishers themselves.

If you come across anyone selling releases from this site, please do not support them and do let us know.

Thank you!