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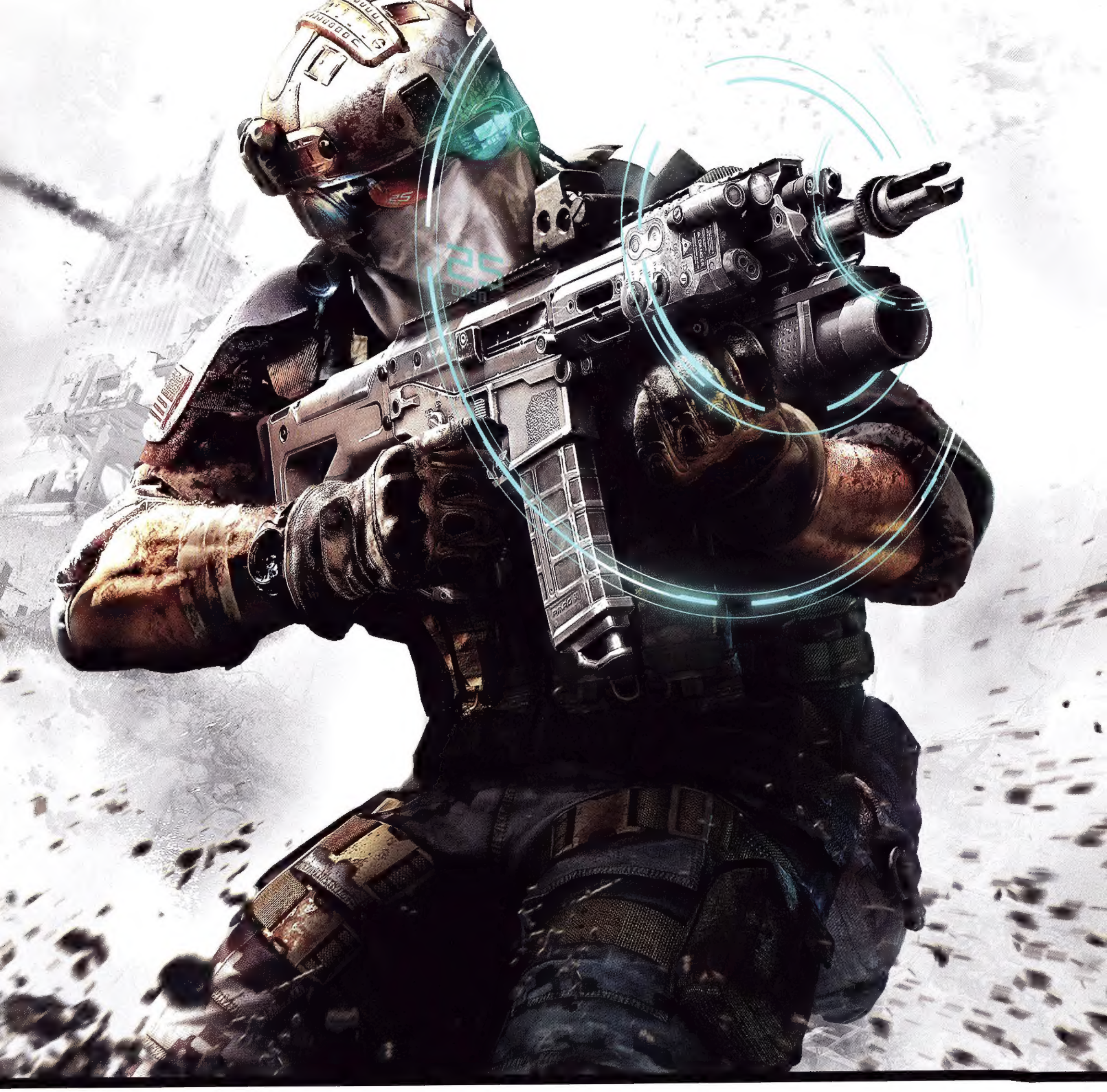

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Intense Violence
Strong Language

PS3 PlayStation®3 PlayStation®Move PlayStation®Network XBOX 360® BETTER WITH KINECT™ SENSOR XBOX LIVE®

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ANDY McNAMARA
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Gaming's Secret Weapon: Passion

The last few months I have been lucky enough to spend more time than an editor-in-chief like myself normally gets to spend listening to and hanging around a number of independent game developers. It was glorious.

In particular, I sat and played Spy Party with creator Chris Hecker, who walked away from EA after working on Spore for six years to create a game by himself (and a contracted artist). At its core, Spy Party is a game of spy vs. sniper where one player takes on the role of a spy and tries to complete objectives in a group of partying artificial intelligences, while the other player is a sniper who must pick the spy out of the crowd and assassinate him. You only get one shot, so you need to make it count.

Hecker is committed to making it both easy to pick up and play by someone with little game experience and as deep and complex as Counter-Strike so that experienced players can compete at another level for years to come. Players can use lots of small details and tricks on both sides of the scenario to subtly trick the other player into tripping up.

That goal, as you have already guessed, is not easy, and he may never reach the gaming nirvana he chases. But the important lesson here is the fact that he chases. Many accuse today's established publishers of not chasing the rabbit down the hole to find and foster true innovation.

That statement is both true and false. Game innovation does happen, but in a world where business rules, oftentimes the quick and easy path to success is the preferred choice for the average publisher. One man in his apartment can take significantly more chances, as he is seeking nothing more than his own approval (and if he is lucky, gaining his investment back so he can do it again).

Hecker is not the first independent developer, nor will he be the last. But I sense a similar unwavering passion from one indie developer after another. It's not always what they say, it is how they say it. Their voices drip with a want – a need – to adventure down the path they believe is right. This passion from both established players in the indie market and young students gives me hope for gaming's future. I have no doubt these "small" games will create giant reverberations that will shake and change gaming now and in the future.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers

0512 contents

» 38

Halo 4

This exciting new entry in the legendary series, being developed by 343 Studios, is a stunning return to the Halo universe. The main story develops Master Chief's relationship with Cortana and takes players to a new alien world. Co-op and online multiplayer are also being enhanced in exciting new ways.

by Matt Miller

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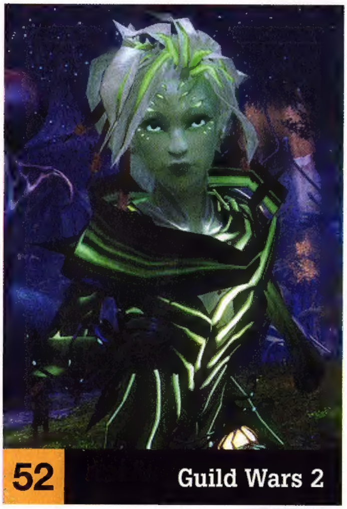
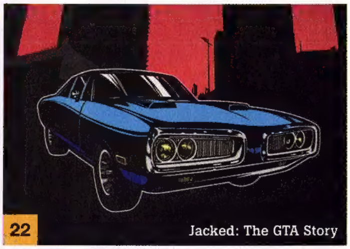
62

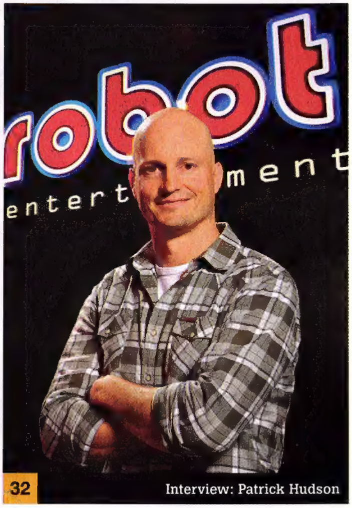
58


52 Guild Wars 2

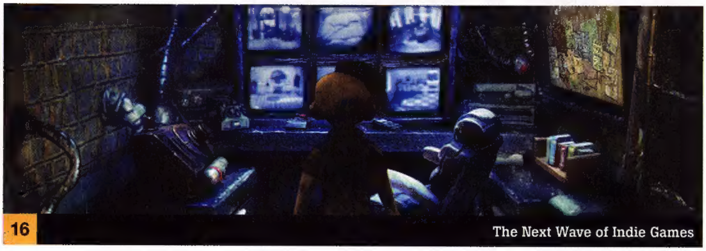
34 Gear: The New iPad


22 Jacked: The GTA Story

12



32 Interview: Patrick Hudson


16 The Next Wave of Indie Games

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regulars

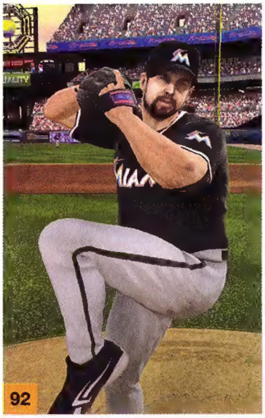
» 6 Feedback
Readers celebrate our flowchart's tongue-in-cheek jab at the FPS genre, complain about HD collection console exclusivity, and still insist that *Clash of the Titans* released before God of War.

» 12 Connect
We chat about the future of Epic Games with president Mike Capps, explore the next wave of exciting indie games, and jimmy open the secret story of the GTA series.

» 58 Previews
Dive into the gun-happy world of Borderlands 2, catch up on Mickey and Oswald's co-op return in Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two, and learn about a pair of very different Fable games.

» 78 Reviews
Mass Effect players have been shaping the fate of the galaxy for five years, and all those decisions and consequences explode in Mass Effect 3's astounding sci-fi crescendo.
By Andrew Reiner

» 100 Game Over
This issue concludes with a grueling boss-rush gauntlet – quiz style.


92

88

76

80 Mass Effect 3

69 Civilization V: Gods & Kings

36

65

84 Ninja Gaiden 3

68

64

94

20

games index

Amazing Spider-Man, The 62
Armored Core V 87
Binary Domain. 88
Blades of Time. 96
Borderlands 2 58
Civilization V: Gods & Kings 69
Devil May Cry HD Collection 88
Dillon's Rolling Western 96
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two. . . .60
Fable Heroes 66
Fable: The Journey 67
FIFA Street. .96
Heroes of Ruin. 77
Hybrid 72
Kid Icarus: Uprising 94
Last Story, The 65
LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes. . .76
Major League Baseball 2K12. 96
Mario Party 9. 96
Mass Effect 3 80
Medal of Honor: Warfighter 73
MLB 12: The Show (PS3). 92
MLB 12: The Show (Vita) 96
NCAA Football 13. 74
Nexuiz. 96
Ninja Gaiden 3. 84
Resident Evil:
  Operation Raccoon City 83
Ridge Racer. 96
Risen 2: Dark Waters. 71
Rock Band Blitz 75
Shogun: Total War 2
  Fall of the Samurai. 90
SimCity 68
Sins of a Dark Age. 70
Street Fighter X Tekken 85
Tiger Woods PGA 13 86
Tropico 4: Modern Times 91
Unit 13 95
Vessel 96
Walking Dead, The 64
Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings
  Enhanced Edition, The 82
Xenoblade Chronicles 93
Yakuza: Dead Souls 91

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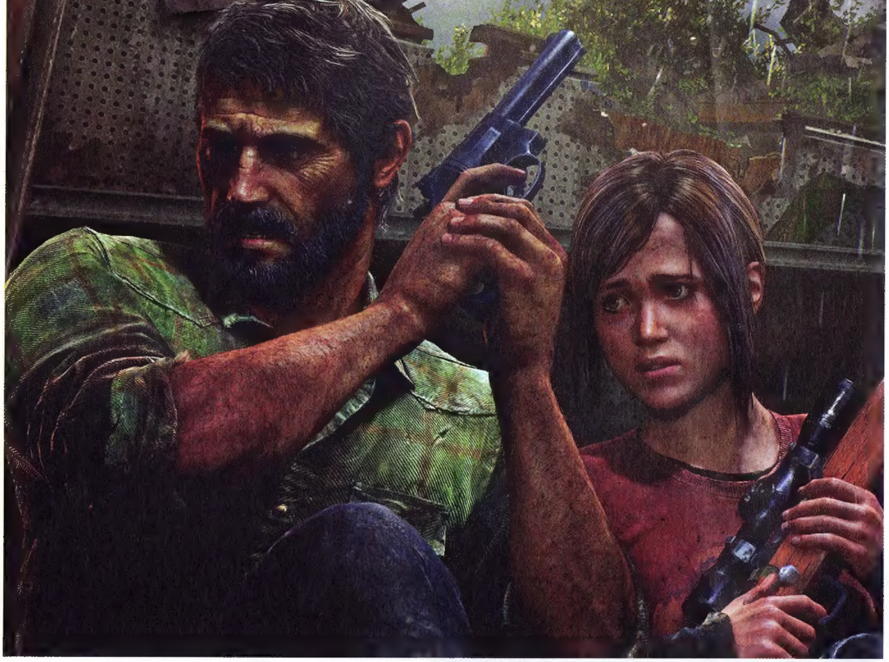
feedback



This month in Feedback, readers laugh at our FPS flowchart, cry about a PS3-exclusive HD collection, fall for another Timeline gag, and praise a fellow reader for being entirely reasonable. Imagine that.

Anticipating the Apocalypse

Your cover story on The Last of Us has me so hyped. I wanted to know so bad what this game was about when I saw the first trailer, and as soon as I got the new issue and saw it on the cover, I opened right up to the story and read it all. If anyone can revolutionize the post-apocalyptic game genre it's Naughty Dog, and it looks like they already have a very good start with the game's AI. I can't wait to play this game.

Zach
Centereach, NY

I just finished reading the article about The Last of Us and I must say I'm extremely excited. I received *Planet Earth* on DVD for Christmas, and the first thing I thought when I saw the disease infecting those ants was "I really hope that never spreads to humans." It's nice to see that I wasn't the only person horrified by that possibility. On another note, I hope it isn't particularly scary. I'm the type of person who loves Resident Evil, but I can hardly force myself to move my character and I have to play with all the lights on.

Emily Blow
via email

A lot of our readers sound excited to see what Naughty Dog will do in the survival genre, and so are we. As for your concern, Emily: What could be scary about a brain-infecting fungus that turns its victims into savage killers? On second thought, you'd better stock up on light bulbs.

Future Unknown

Kudos on your article questioning the future availability of digital content (Expiration Date, issue 227). Never before has an article struck such a chord with me and left me utterly paranoid. I may not have sunk as much money into DLC as some people, but I have enjoyed buying quite a few of Sony's PS1 Classics, and a few PS3 games as well. Since I only have an 80GB hard drive, I delete and re-download games quite often. The thought of the servers going down and me never being able to play my all-time favorites leaves me heartbroken in anticipation of that day.

Michael
via email

You hit the nail on the head with your Expiration Date article. This is exactly why I won't support the online community by downloading game add-ons. I absolutely refuse to purchase the "rights" to play a game (while it lasts). I want to physically own it. I never download content from Xbox Live, and I never will!

Matt Frey
via email

The only thing that boycotting all digital content will accomplish is depriving you of some great gaming experiences. The questions we raised in the article, while troubling, don't have answers yet. You can't damn publishers for decisions before they make them. We hope that going forward publishers will consider availability concerns from the perspective of the consumer when planning digital content, but if they don't, you can bet gamers will continue sharing their displeasure.

Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com

Now That's Entertainment

I can't express how delighted the Geppi's Entertainment Museum staff was when we saw GI Spy in issue 227, and realized Ben's instinctual response upon seeing a statue was illustrated with two statues in our museum. We dropped everything, did a dance, and shouted "We're famous!" The merriment almost lasted a full day, until one of the staff realized our location was not named. How can your readers hope to recreate Ben's response to the Batman statue? By visiting Geppi's Entertainment Museum, home to over 6,000 pop culture artifacts from the 1700s to the present, located in Baltimore, Maryland!

Andy Hershberger
Baltimore, MD

Thanks for writing in, Andy! And thanks for not kicking Ben out for his immature behavior – he had so much fun that day, he napped all the way home. Now that our readers know where Geppi's is located, you realize how many people are going to take pictures while snickering at statue crotches in your museum to send to us, right?

All The Rage

When I get your magazine in the mail, the first page I jump to is Feedback, or what our family calls the "rage page." I just have to say that Bethany's response (An Opinion Worth Sharing, issue 227) to the people complaining about your reviews is spot on. A review is supposed to be the reviewer's opinion, not a damn commandment. I read the reviews for games with crap scores to find out why you didn't like them, and when you give a game I don't like a great score, I read it to see if maybe I overlooked a certain element. I don't get the raging, but by all means I do enjoy the entertainment!

Nate
San Diego, CA

I am writing to say that I wholeheartedly agree with last month's Feedback writer, Bethany. She has, in one short paragraph, effectively killed past arguments about your magazine being biased and/or bought off. After all, a review is simply one person's opinion; another person may hate the game or they may love it, regardless of the review it gets. The fact of the matter is, while your reviews may help me in deciding which of the plethora of crap-games to avoid, I mainly read your magazine to see what is going on in the industry. Thanks for keeping it real, guys.

Sean Willmore
Ferndale, WA

We're glad Bethany's succinct description of a review resonated with so many readers. That means we'll stop constantly getting letters complaining about our reviews and questioning our integrity, right? Yeah, that's what we thought.

The Customer Isn't Always Right

Your responses to people complaining about your reviews in last month's Feedback didn't seem very professional at all. Mocking the customer? There are many, and possibly a majority, of people who would agree with how they feel. Certain games do seem to get better ratings due to some outside source. Possibly a biased reviewer, or maybe money is involved. Granted, those readers went about addressing it the wrong way, but they're still customers. Game Informer is here because of us. It doesn't work without our support and opinions. Disappointing.

Mark
Tampa, FL

Believe it or not, we do take the feedback of our readers seriously, and appreciate the fact that compared to other fan communities, our readers are some of the most mature and intelligent men and women out there. That said, Game Informer is a magazine, not a retail store. People read our reviews to get honest opinions, and we won't forgo that honesty for anyone – including disgruntled customers. If you expect us to kowtow to a reader after being accused of lying to our subscribers in exchange for money, you're reading the wrong magazine.

Go With the Flow

I would just like to say bravo for one of the most accurate and hilarious flowcharts I have ever read in my life (The Shooter Simulator, issue 227). The complexity of it and very familiar story routes you could take had me laughing out of my chair. In addition, the amazing ability to add your own set piece had me wishing there was a game where a radioactive shark falls on the Earth's core, killing everyone. Pieces like this, on top of the plethora of information your magazine provides, are the reasons I keep reading Game Informer.

David O'Shea
Erie, MI

This letter is in regards to the flowcharts you occasionally have. They are some of the greatest things I have ever read. The Shooter Simulator is hands down the funniest one yet and I desperately have to ask, what would it take to get a full-sized poster of it?

Ross Cowart
via email

You're in luck, Ross. We have a high definition version of The Shooter Simulator you can download at Gameinformer.com. Just take the file to your local photocopy store, and you're in business!

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Do you think within the next 3-5 years that there will be one gaming console, instead of PS3, Xbox, and Wii?"

Nope.

"Is it too late for me to rage at you guys for an article in issue 127?"

Yep.

"Do you guys know where I can buy a cream for my burning question?"

You're going to need a prescription for that.

Navigational Deficit:

A number of our readers who use inverted controls complained to us they got stuck in an endless loop at the beginning of our FPS flowchart. Considering their basic orientation difficulties, we aren't surprised.

Conspiracy Unraveled:

"I adore GI. My visits to the bathroom wouldn't be the same without it. GI also stands for gastrointestinal. Coincidence? I think not."

David Bolick

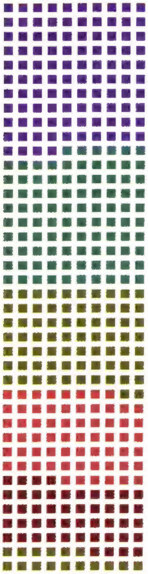
gi spy

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) This month Dan crossed another celebrity encounter off his bucket list when he met wrestling star Vince McMahon. We've never seen him this happy. **(Right)** What fun would a party be without Warner Bros.' Remi Sklar, Gamefly's Ryh-Ming Poon, Apple's Cory Lewis, and Chillingo's Kaiser Hwang?

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



🟪 Last of Us Excitement **26%**

🟩 Favorite Gaming Rewards **24%**

🟧 The Future Of Downloadable Content Worries **18%**

🟥 Flowchart Lovers **16%**

🟫 God Of War Rip-off Part Deux **12%**

🟫 Readers Who Refer to Previews and Cover Stories as Reviews **4%**

Question of the Month:

What's your favorite snack when you're in the middle of a gaming session?

It Never Gets Old

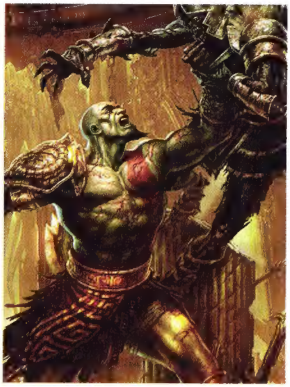
I have seen things that annoy me in magazines before. However, this stupidity annoyed me enough to finally speak up. Is what you wrote about God of War being ripped off by *Clash of the Titans* (Timeline, issue 227) a joke? I really hope I am wrong but somehow I suspect this was sincere, so I will save the reader the trouble: *Clash of the Titans* was a remake, and believe it or not, Zeus was a character long before God of War was even an idea. I can excuse not knowing the film is a remake as your staff may be on the younger side, but you need to reevaluate your hiring paradigm if your staff members have never even heard of mythology.

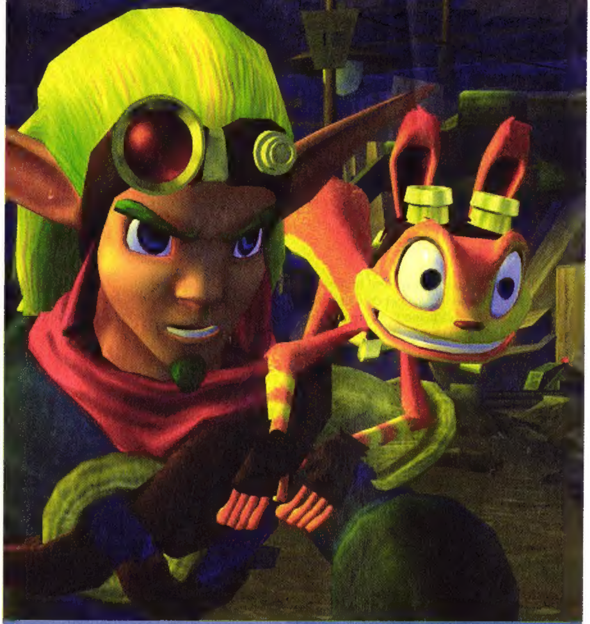
Stephen
Warren, MI

What is all this crazy stuff you're writing about God of War and *Clash of the Titans*? The first movie hit theaters in 1981! Come on! Seriously, God of War wasn't even a sperm in the mother of the creator of that game! Grow up and do some research before you spew out such garbage!

Jason Martin
via email

What is this "mythology" thing you speak of?





Jak And Daxter Disaster

I just wanted to let you guys know that you broke my heart. I saw your Jak and Daxter Collection review in issue 227, and you have it listed as being on the PS3 and 360. In disbelief, I searched the 'Net and saw that it will only be on the PS3 as I initially thought. Thanks for getting my hopes up!

Alex Klempay
Michigan

This month we received letters from more than a few disappointed readers who were confused by our unfortunate template error. Alas, the Jak and Daxter Collection is a PS3 exclusive, and always was. Sorry, 360 owners!

feedback continued on page 10

GI SPY

continued from page 7

(Left) Bertz managed to catch up with DICE president Martin Rae during this year's summit in Las Vegas. **(Center)** Assassin's Creed scribe Corey May was also in attendance, and ready to gamble like a maniacal Bond villain. **(Right)** I am 8-Bit's Nick Ahrens and Jon Gibson weren't quite as prepared.

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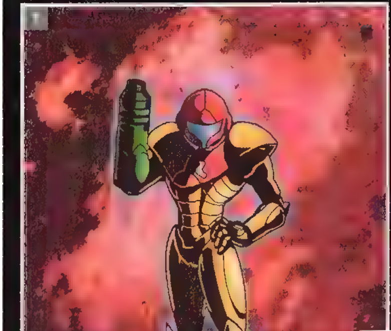

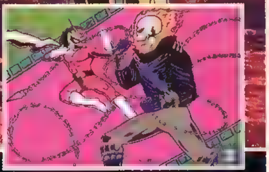

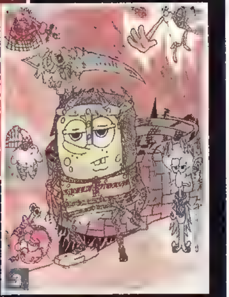

WINNER 1 Jocey Pendleton Samus still looks cool, no matter how hard Other M tried to tarnish our memory of her. **2 Lamar Prince** We want to see a live-action version of this scene in which both characters are played by Nicolas Cage. **3 Sam Arney** After learning that Dante's Inferno didn't fare well with young gamers, EA opted to take a different route for the sequel.

TOM CLANCY'S
GHOST RECON
FUTURE SOLDIER
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WINNER

This month's winner will receive a copy of Ghost Recon: Future Soldier on the system of their choosing.

Corrections:

In the GI Spy of Issue 227, we incorrectly stated that the Darksiders II team at Vigil Games was holding a giant replica of Death's sword. In actuality, Death wields a scythe – the blade featured in the picture was War's Chaoseater.

In the Assassin's Creed III cover story of issue 228, certain paragraphs were missing quotations marks. This was not Game Informer's attempt to revolutionize the standard format for dictation, but rather a now-resolved issue with our printing press. We regret any confusion it may have caused while reading the article.

feedback continued from page 8

The Greatest Reward

In issue 226, we asked readers what the greatest reward they've ever gotten in a video game is. While some gamers pointed to a coveted piece of loot, others took satisfaction in hard-earned Achievements. Here are some responses.

The Gray Cowl of Nocturnal from Oblivion. Because it's like the Superman/Clark Kent thing; I can steal right in front of someone, take my mask off, and they have no clue who did it!

Jeremiah Mackey

The best reward in a game was getting to replay The Legend of Zelda with an all-new layout after completing it the first time. Why? Well, it was so good I didn't want it to end. These days, in order to prolong the magic of a game, I play it almost all the way through and then start all over. Sick? Yes. But it feels so good.

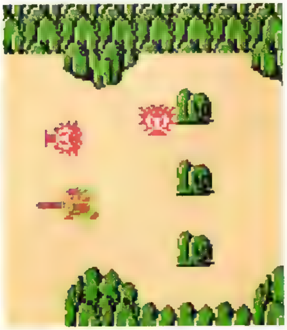
Marie Olt

The best reward was putting a sword through Ganondorf's skull in Wind Waker. Because what could be better after hours of sailing around to fund Tingle's strange slavery ring?

Brett Gilbert

The best reward I've ever gotten in a video game is when I won a cool million dollars in Majesco's Advent Rising contest. Oh, wait...

Adam Kupka



continued from page 8

(Left) At GDC, Lollipop Chainsaw cosplayer Jessica Nigri and former GI editor Meagan Marie learned why Dan and Tim can never be lumberjacks. **(Center)** Even more disturbing than the chainsaw encounter was GI fan Patrick Sullivan's shirt, which features one of Dan's more intelligent musings. Don't encourage him, Patrick! **(Right)** Tim and Dan ended GDC by doing karaoke with a few members of the Destructoid crew and other industry friends. Our apologies to anyone who had to hear Tim and Dan sing.

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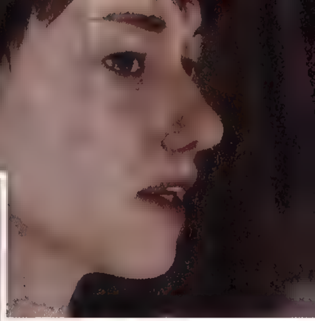

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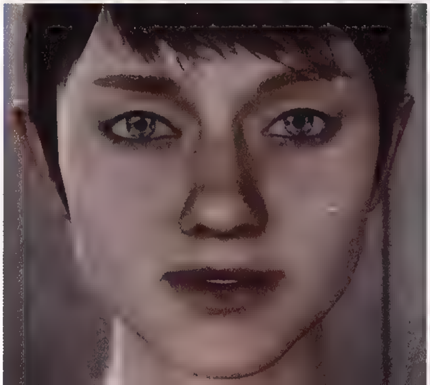
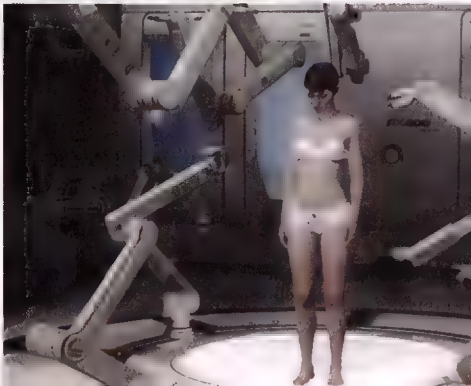




NOTABLES

14 overheard at gdc

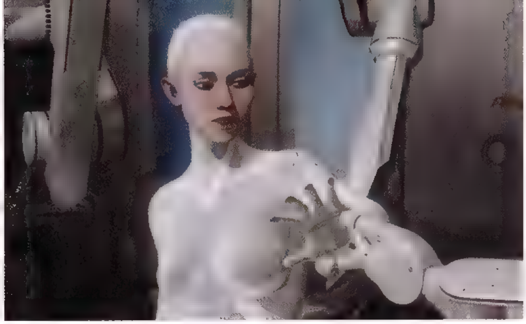
16 the next wave of indie games

18 the next-gen console rumor roundup

22 the secret history of grand theft auto

28 gamer: the crpg addict

36 the day-one dlc defense



nufacturing Emotion

by Matthew Kato

Heavy Rain Developer Debuts New PS3 Engine

Recently at the Game Developers Conference, Heavy Rain developer Quantic Dream showed off its new PS3 engine with a seven-minute, real-time demo entitled Kara. Although studio founder and lead game designer David Cage stressed that the demo (which he wrote and directed) is not related to a title Quantic Dream is working on, it impressed show-goers and gamers with its ability to convey genuine emotion.

The demo starts with the construction of the KPC-897504C android that is designed for a wide range of assistance functions. It will clean your house, feed your kids, and even satisfy your sexual needs.

An unseen operator oversees the assembly of the android, running it through a test initialization process that includes the technician naming the unit Kara. The creation of this new identity produces a flicker of consciousness that is strengthened as the process continues, and Kara becomes more and more confident in herself. She can speak 300 languages – including singing beautifully in Japanese – and when synthetic flesh is added to her frame, she instinctively exhibits the human emotion of modesty by covering up her new nakedness.

Her new life won't last long, however. The technician explains that she is to be re-initialized so she can be sold to a consumer who will give the unit its own name and purpose.

Kara realizes what this means for her. "I thought..." she begins.

"You thought?" counters the operator. "What did you think?"

"I thought...I was alive."

"You're not supposed to think that sort of stuff," he explains. "You're not supposed to think at all, period."

The technician orders her to be scrapped for "non-standard" behavior, and the assembly machine starts to comply; dismantling her limb by limb.

Kara is pleading. "Please. Please, I'm begging you, please don't disassemble me."

"I'm sorry, honey," he explains, as more and more of her is stripped away. "But defective models have to be eliminated, that's my job."

She is desperate. "I won't cause any problems, I promise. I'll do everything I'm asked to, I won't say another word. I won't think anymore. I've only just been born, you can't kill me yet! Stop! Will you please stop?! I'm scared!"

All that's left of her by this point is her head and her torso, with its synthetic heart valve beating fast. "I want to live. I'm begging you."

The operator relents and restarts the assembly process. As she is reconstituted and her hair and flesh return, she cries silent tears.

"Go and join the others," he says. "Stay in line, okay? I don't want any trouble."

She smiles slightly and whispers, "Thanks."

Kara joins a line of other androids. They all look just like her, but their faces stare blankly ahead.

Cage says the idea for the Kara demo came about after Quantic Dream finished The Indigo Prophecy in 2005. He says he was inspired by the books of futurist Ray Kurzweil and was fascinated with the idea of documenting that moment when an AI becomes self-aware.

After the developer finished Heavy Rain in 2010, Cage says the team "wanted to have even more emotion. More of the original performance from the actor, and we knew we had to progress on many different areas. One of them was performance capture..."

To get what Cage was after, Quantic Dream created a new 3D engine that improves how the studio performs motion capture for the actors. For Heavy Rain, the studio recorded mo-cap sessions as split performances – the body animations were recorded separately from the voice and the face. That system utilized 25 cameras. For the Kara demo everything was recorded simultaneously using 68 cameras. Cage says that Kara only utilized 50 percent of the engine's capabilities, and he expects the improvements in the lighting department alone should go a long way to appropriately setting the mood in scenes.

Judging by Kara's performance, the new engine is already capable of delivering more emotion than the already impressive Heavy Rain. Voiced by *Twilight: Breaking Dawn Part 2* and *Veronica Mars* actress Valorie Curry, Kara's moment of consciousness is masterfully conveyed, as is her understanding of mortality and desperation to live.

For Cage, this is just the beginning for both the engine and the PS3. "We thought that we did a lot, in matter of technology and visuals, with Heavy Rain. But the more we work on PlayStation 3, the more we realize that there's much more to do with the hardware. It's incredibly powerful, and I think people will be surprised by what we can still do with it." ◆

We just want to release awesome stuff. Players please, give us a chance. Judge our games based on what they are. Judge the DLC based on what it is.

Stop thinking you're a producer

and telling us when and where we should be building our content.

– former BioWare designer **Christina Norman**

For developers, there's this truism in development where all the best studios in fact say, 'We make games we want to play.' Well,

can you **please** want to make and play **more** varied games?

– Spy Party creator **Chris Hecker**

Overheard

Check out what the developers were saying at the 2012 Game Developers Conference.

Your games just **suck.**

– Fez creator **Phil Fish** responding to a Japanese developer regarding what he thought of modern Japanese games

[illegible]

– [illegible]

At first glance, the logic [of targeting everyone] makes sense. Super mainstream games such as Fruit Ninja, Angry Birds, and Cut the Rope have each sold tens of millions of copies. Attempting to replicate that success is natural. But in reality, if you are making a game for everyone, you are actually making a game for no one. The hit-based mentality takes you away from making a game that has soul or is fresh.

– Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery creator **Nathan Vella**

[illegible]

[illegible]

'I am an inventor!'

[illegible]

[illegible]

Lots of people want to make indie games, and they are usually waiting for permission to do it. All the information is right there. Just find some people and make a game.

– Doom co-creator **John Romero**

at GDC

Japanophiles, cover your eyes.

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

Games are **unique** among all media, among all art forms. **We are not novels. We are not movies. We aren't television.** [illegible] medium in human history has ever been able to do. We have to [illegible]

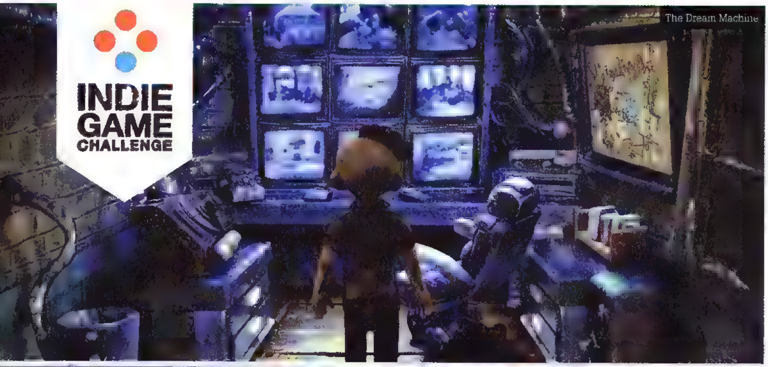
– Deux Ex co-creator **Warren Spector**

[illegible]

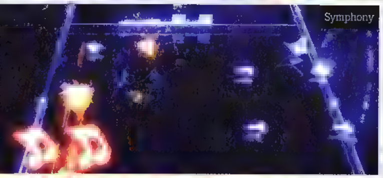
[illegible]

The Next Wave of Indie Games

[illegible]

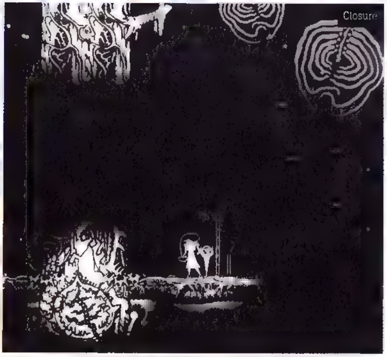


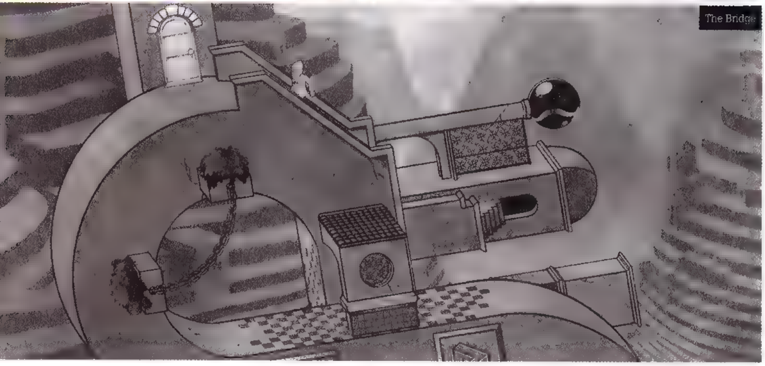
The Dream Machine


Symphony

$9
Pickup / Debris & Coins

Demolition, Inc.


Closure


The Bridge

Developer Dream Team
Platform PC, Mac, Linux
Release Chapters 1-3 Available Now, 4-5 TBA

Dream Team's entry for the Indie Game Challenge is a subgenre of game few have even heard of: hand-built adventure games. The Dream Machine is a point-and-click adventure made entirely out of clay and cardboard props that the team hand-animated. The game tells the story of a young couple living in a new city, exploring their secret-laden apartment complex.

Developer [illegible]
Platform [illegible]
Release [illegible]

Fans of Audiosurf and Everyday Shooter should love Symphony. This vertical shoot 'em up generates unique levels out of the songs in your music library. Not only does each track affect what enemies appear and how they attack, but the game also generates a unique item for each song which you can customize and upgrade. Symphony won the IGC Technical Achievement award.

Developer [illegible]
Platform PC
Release Available Now (PC), Spring (PS3)

We love highbrow indie games as much as the next person, but sometimes you just want to blow stuff up. Demolition, Inc. tasks players with helping extraterrestrial demo man Mike raze the cities of Earth from the comfort of his UFO. Don't let the cutesy graphics fool you, though. Unlike most games that sell a sense of destruction with scripted setpiece moments, Demolition, Inc. features fully destructible environments and 100-percent physics-based gameplay. Toppling every last building requires as much strategic thinking as it does explosive cows.

Developer Eyebrow Interactive
Platform PS3, PC, Mac
Release Available Now

Closure doesn't employ a black and white aesthetic for purely artistic reasons; the differences between light and dark tie directly into the gameplay. Snuffing out the light on areas in the level cause them to cease existing, allowing you to pass right through them. This blend of creative platforming and puzzle solving won Closure the IGC Grand Prize.

Developer Ty Taylor and Mario Castañeda
Platform [illegible] PC
Release 2012

This 2D platformer throws players into an M.C. Escher-style world where gravity is as unstable as the architecture. Players traverse the monochromatic world by flipping it around to change the direction of gravity and solve puzzles. The Bridge's hand-drawn graphics snagged the IGC award for Achievement in Art Direction, while its gravity shifting antics brought home the award for Achievement in Gameplay.

MOST VIDEO GAME AWARD SHOWS contain few surprises, heaping praise on well reviewed triple-A games with multi-million dollar budgets. While most gamers are familiar with 2012's big winners like Skyrim, Portal 2, and Uncharted 3, a recent pair of awards ceremonies highlighted a new wave of indie games.

Below you'll find a selection of games from The Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences' Indie Game Challenge and the Game Developers Conference-backed Independent Games Festival. Considering their newfound and well-deserved exposure, chances are you'll be playing a few of them in the near future.

BOTANICULA

Developer: Amanita Design
Platform: PC, Mac, iOS
Release: April

Amanita's point-and-click adventure should come with a warning, because its charming visuals and humor-laden puzzles will have you smiling until your face hurts. With an emphasis on exploration, Botanicula tasks players with helping five friendly tree creatures save a seed from their home before life-sucking parasites can get to it. Botanicula's delightful soundtrack won it the IGF Excellence in Audio award.

SPELUNKY

Developer: Mossmouth
Platform: Xbox 360
Release: 2012

In 2008, Spelunky's old-school platforming and retro chiptune music won over PC gamers. Mossmouth entered the XBLA version of Spelunky into this year's contest, which improves upon the original title's formula of randomly generated levels and emergent gameplay with a new visual overhaul and multiplayer support. Spelunky won the IGF Excellence in Design award.

WAY

Developer: Coco & Co
Platform: PC, Mac
Release: Alpha Available Now, Beta TBA

Way is a 2D puzzle/platformer with an interesting twist. You play the game cooperatively with an anonymous online partner, with no way to communicate with each other apart from head and hand gestures you can perform with your avatar. This communication is key, as you can see platforms and puzzle elements your partner cannot. Way won the IGF Best Student Game award.

ANTICHAMBER

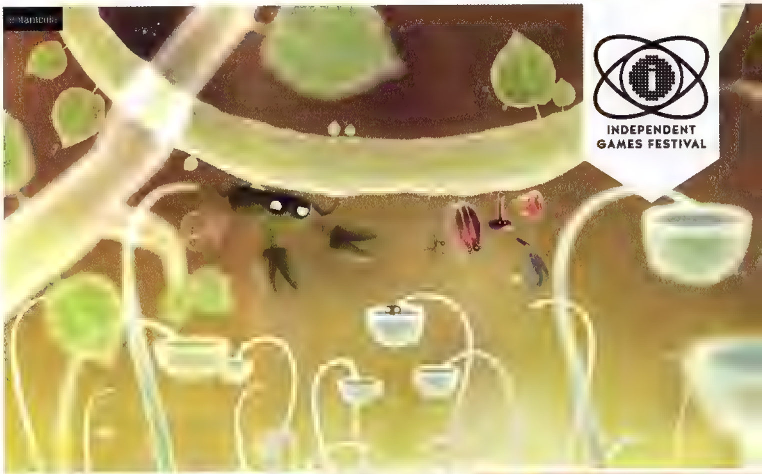
Developer: Demruth
Platform: PC, Mac
Release: 2012

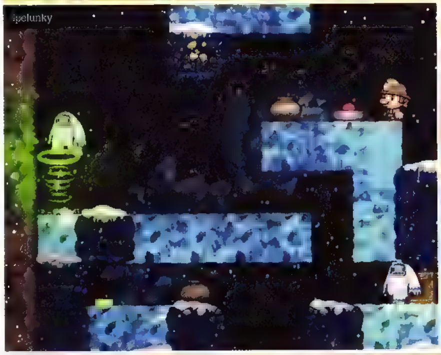
Antichamber is a difficult game to describe. This first-person puzzle game continually challenges not only your preconceptions of gaming, but it also defies the basic laws of time and space. An action that solves one puzzle may have a completely different result a moment later, which will keep you searching for new, unconventional solutions. Antichamber won the IGF Technical Excellence award

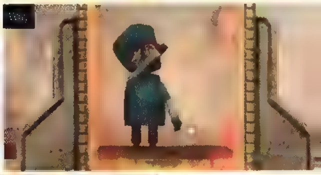
STORYTELLER

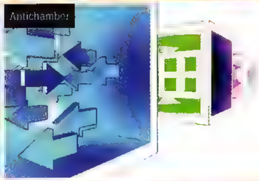
Developer: Daniel Benmergui
Platform: PC, Mac, iOS
Release: TBA

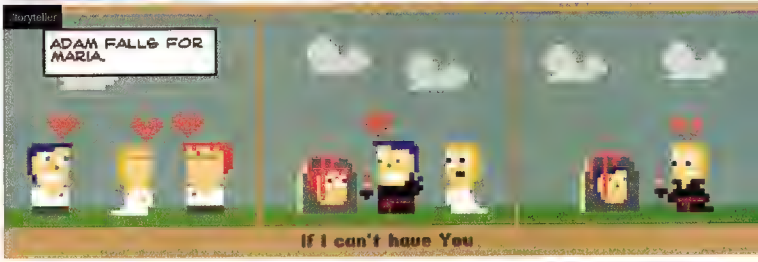
The Nuovo award is reserved for the most abstract and unconventional titles in the Independent Games Festival, and this year's winner definitely fits the bill. Each level of Storyteller tasks players with fulfilling the story concept for a comic by placing different characters and props into the strip. Each character has a set behavior, and the game's logic dictates the outcome of the events and whether it satisfies the objective. We told you it was unconventional – but what else would you expect from an indie game?











The

Next-Gen Console Rumor Roundup

The no-brainers, the no-ways, and the unknown

by Matthew Kato

The next generation of consoles is close enough that everyone's speculating about them, but just far enough away that hard, concrete facts are few and far between. That's where the rumors come into play. We decided to round some of them up and talk to industry commentators about the feasibility – or lack thereof – of some of the next-gen whispers making the rounds

PlayStation 4

It Won't Use The Cell Processor

A *Forbes* article earlier this year claimed Sony is going with an AMD GPU as opposed to the proprietary Cell CPU/NVIDIA GPU combo that powered the PS3. While this would make the system easier to develop for, it would mean Sony is backing away from its commitment to Cell. It could also mean no PS3 backward compatibility for the PS4.

Rumor Probability: 50/50

The PS4 Will Use A Kinect-Like Motion Controller

This rumor from *Digitimes* (which covers tech manufacturing) seems far-fetched. Not only would Sony have to ditch the Move relatively early on in its life cycle, but Wedbush analyst Michael Pachter says the rumor comes from Chinese manufacturers' claims that capacity in factories has been reserved. "The thing that's so funny is that Sony makes so many different products. How do we know what they reserved capacity for?" he asks. "It's just so crazy." This report also said the PS4 would come out alongside the Wii U this year...

Rumor Probability: Not Likely

It Retains Blu-ray

"Of course," Pachter says. TVs that can support the next high-definition standard are years from being adopted, and Sony CEO Kaz Hirai told *Develop* that download-only distribution is still a ways off.

Rumor Probability: Likely

Xbox Next (codenamed Durango)

The Next Xbox Will Have Six Times The Processing Power Of The Xbox 360

This rumor, which originated at *IGN*, states the GPU of the next Xbox will be based on AMD's 6000 series, with support for DirectX 11, 3D, and 1080p HD output (with multi-display capability). Technical rumors like these can be hard to pin down this early. Reports differ as to whether the system is slated to come out in 2013 or 2014, and whether development kits are out to studios. Normally at this stage, the specs developers are working off are hypothetical benchmarks.

Regardless of the exact architecture, it will be important for Durango and the other consoles to get in line with the next version of the already popular Unreal Engine 3 – which was used in the impressive Samaritan demo last year – not to mention Unreal Engine 4, which could be shown this year. Epic founder Tim Sweeney said at D.I.C.E. this year that the demo required 2.5 teraflops (floating point operations per second), and the next Xbox could require more than six times the processing power of the Xbox 360 to reach that mark. NVIDIA's GeForce GTX 680 can theoretically hit Samaritan's marks, but a card that powerful (which currently retails for $499) will definitely increase the cost of the console.

Rumor Probability: Likely

There Will Be No Disc Drive & It Won't Play Used Games

Pachter says that the rumors of no disc drive and no capability to play used games are "too stupid to be laughable – offensively stupid."

Pachter believes that not having a disc drive only gives competitors all the more reason to include them in their systems, and the cost of offering games on solid state drives instead of discs (another component of a rumor from *MCV*) would only increase the royalty costs between Microsoft and publishers, thus negating the cost savings of not putting games on a traditional disc format.

As for the next Xbox locking out used games (a *Kotaku* rumor), Pachter thinks there's "not even a prayer of that" due to the sheer number of consumers who buy used games and those who simply value having the option to do so. Again, going down this road would simply give Microsoft's competition an easy advantage if they retained the feature.

GameStop CEO Paul Raines agrees that we won't see a system that locks out used titles. "We think it's unlikely that there would be that next-gen console because the model simply hasn't been proven to work," he said in a recent earnings call. [Full disclosure: Game Informer is owned by GameStop]

Rumor Probability: Not Likely

It Will Have A Blu-ray Drive

"The only impediment to a Blu-ray drive is that somehow there's the potential that somebody at Microsoft would think that benefits Sony," Pachter says. "I would say that Sony Blu-ray drives are so inexpensive now that I don't really think that the harm of helping Sony outweighs the benefit of getting a lot more stuff on the disc. I think they probably will go with it."

Rumor Probability: 50/50

It Will Be Bundled With A New Version Of Kinect

Hardware improvements to the peripheral could enable multiplayer and the ability to read movements down to the finger. Of course, any non-software improvement to the peripheral would require gamers to buy a whole new unit, which could be a tall request. Given the popularity of Kinect and the wide-range of uses gaming and non-gaming developers have been coming up with, however, there certainly will be a second-generation version of the unit at some point.

Rumor Probability: Likely

The Next Xbox Interface Will Be A Controller/Tablet Hybrid

Xbox World Online speculates that the controller will have a large touchscreen in the middle, with your traditional Xbox controller buttons and analog sticks on the side.

"I don't know that that's a rumor as much as idle speculation," Pachter says. Tablets are certainly popular, but as with Nintendo's Wii U controller (and possibly its support of multiple controllers – see below for more), price can become a big issue.

Rumor Probability: Not Likely

Wii U

The Wii U Will Support Multiple Controllers

Pachter says that Nintendo is openly mulling the option, but it presents several problems for them. Supporting two controllers puts more stress on developers, who have to design their games around it. "That's obviously problematic for the launch, because developers have to plan. If you're a developer, you won't do it unless it's subsidized. I think it's a problem. I think Nintendo is still on a one-controller route."

Add in the fact that two of the new controllers ups the cost of entry for the system – a minefield the Wii U is already likely to have to deal with even with one controller The concept could be too rich for Nintendo's blood.

Rumor Probability: Not Likely

It's More Powerful Than Current-Gen Systems

Sterne Agee analyst Arvind Bhatia says that developers told him the Wii U will have 50 percent more processing power than the Xbox 360 and PS3, but Nintendo hasn't confirmed this rumor. Fifty may seem like a large number, but given the age of the 360 and PS3, as well as the possibility that the next Xbox could be six times more powerful than the 360, this may be less impressive than it sounds.

Rumor Probability: Likely

The Wii U Won't Be Called The Wii U

Sources told *CVG* that Nintendo is considering renaming the system after its problematic E3 reveal last year, where people weren't sure if the Wii U was a new system separate from the Wii. We concur with this sentiment, but perhaps it's only because we don't like the name.

Rumor Probability: 50/50 ◆

Epic Expectations

by *Jim Reilly*

MIKE CAPPS OUTLINES HOW EPIC GAMES IS UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO CAPITALIZE ON A DIVERGING MARKET

The game industry is preparing for a move to the next generation, and Epic Games is at the forefront. At the same time the company plans to publicly unveil Unreal Engine 4 in the near future, it is embracing the new directions games are heading with a new title for Apple's latest iPad, Infinity Blade Dungeons, and making the Unreal Engine work in Flash.

During the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, we talked to president Mike Capps about what the new iPad means for console gaming, launching new franchises, and working with EA Partners.

How big is Epic Games right now?
We're about 150 in Raleigh at the main headquarters. There are a dozen guys out in Utah making Infinity Blade II and products for that. And then we have People Can Fly out in Poland – that's about 60 people. We have some sales offices around the world and a team in China that's a joint venture.

How has Gears of War 3 sold so far versus the previous titles?
Well, it definitely came out of the gate a lot faster. We had a huge preorder campaign that was bolstered by the demo. We had a flawless launch; I felt really good about that. I think first week Gears of War 3 sales beat Gears of War 1 and 2 combined in their first week. I can't tell you lifetime sales because we're still selling the game actively.

Epic Games put out three Gears of War games this generation. How actively are you thinking about what you want to do with the franchise going forward?
I think one of the things that has made Gears of War really special is that we treated it like a franchise all along. From the beginning we were thinking about creating characters that could resonate beyond just the first game. This story is done. It's a trilogy that we finished. But I would love for us to do more with that franchise for sure.

Bulletstorm was another game you launched last year. It reviewed really well but did it meet your sales expectations?
We took a big gamble with that game. It's very different. Some fans were calling it their shooter of the year and it won some awards. But it certainly did not sell in the class of the other big shooters of the year. It met my critical expectations but not quite the sales expectations. EA did a great job and had some really clever marketing.

Other EA Partner games that year also didn't sell particularly well, Alice: Madness Returns and Shadows of the Damned. There's a perception out there that EA Partners games don't sell.
The reason why I was so attracted to EA for Bulletstorm in the first place was they treat EA Partners titles in their portfolio the same way they treat their internal titles. You mentioned some of the games that maybe didn't sell as well as they would have liked, but EA Partners also helped with Portal 2, The Orange Box, and Rock Band, so they've had some really big ones, too. EA is a business and they want to maximize every bit of their portfolio.

Is there a future for the Bulletstorm franchise?
People Can Fly is not working on a Bulletstorm game right now. I'd love to see some of the work they put into creating that world pay off in other efforts. But we'll see. Not right now.

Another title Epic is working on is Fortnite. Is this something you want to try to self-publish or are you still looking for a partner?
We'll definitely develop and fund it internally. I could see us partnering with a publisher for marketing and execution, but we're going to do as much of it ourselves as possible.

Given the power of the new iPad, what does this mean for the console games industry moving forward? Will there be a shift?
The effort you need to put in to build a triple-A console game versus building a high-end mobile game for iPad is a pretty significant difference. It's an interesting market, it's just that they're all not gamers and they're not all willing to spend $60 on a game, so there's still a lot of advantages to consoles.

As these iPad games become bigger and bigger, will that have an effect on the pricing models?
People's expectations now are that iPad games can't cost more than $4.99. You have to assume no one's going to spend $50 million to make an iPad game, sell it for $.99, and hope to sell 50 million copies to break even and another 50 million to make money on it. You have to assume the prices need to go up to support premium content. As people are looking at a piece of hardware that can do what an Xbox can, they're going to want a game experience that looks like that. It takes more money to make a game like Infinity Blade than Cut the Rope, for example.

That said, if I had the choice between selling a game for $7 to hundreds of millions of people or for $70 to 20 million people, I'm willing to take the risk. It's a much bigger market. I don't think we're going to be buying $60 iPad games, but I think it'll go up a little.

Epic has projects on consoles, iPad, mobile, and now PC browsers using Flash.
Yeah, we're really expanding. I did a keynote at GDC Europe one time and said, "We have a PC-only project going," which we haven't done in a decade. We love making console games, but we see how the market is changing and took a dabble in mobile and that worked out really well, so we're dabbling more.

The current console gaming climate is such that only a few games actually sell well and make money. What are some ways companies can improve their chances of succeeding?
With so few winners you have folks that are willing to irrationally chase after being the winner. You can think of people buying lottery tickets almost. You want to be the guy who wins and spend way more than makes sense on a pure odds basis. I think you're seeing budgets inflating because they're spending hard trying to be the one that wins, but if you lose, boy you have put a lot of money in trying to win.

I wish we had a bit more rational market, but we don't right now. I think some of that over-investment comes from the difficulty of telling your stockholders you're aiming for a good, solid B. Everyone wants to spend hard and beat Call of Duty. Battlefield 3 did a great job. They spent hard against Call of Duty, they didn't dethrone them, but they took some big steps. I can't blame people for going after the big win, but that's where it comes from. It's a spending war.

There's talk that it's difficult to launch a new franchise late in the console cycle. Do you agree?
I think you can put a new IP out whenever. What's hard coming in late to a console cycle is the expectations gamers have. As an example, Gears of War came out early in the cycle and was about eight hours long with simple multiplayer. Gears of War 3 is twice as long with way more multiplayer modes. That's what people expect now.

Gamers' expectations ramp up in part because we're more efficient with the new hardware. We know it better and can do more in the same amount of time. So if you're launching a new IP, starting early means you don't have to start with a 16-hour, giant campaign. You can start with something smaller and innovative.

What's one of the big issues you see in the game industry now?
Everyone is talking about next-generation, and that is always hard. It's tumultuous for us as developers. You can't sell a really cool, new game when everyone's eyes are on the future and not today. So that puts a break in sales for us. The way we're dealing with that is spending more time on mobile and download space and investing in technology for next-gen.

So as far as big, AAA console games, are you done releasing titles this generation?
Interesting way to ask the question, "Do you have any more titles to announce?" Tell you what. I'm not sure. Ask me again after E3.

When will you start showing off Unreal Engine 4?
I don't think we actually have decided right now. Because it's targeted at next-gen consoles, ideally we'd make that kind of announcement along with those folks, so that's all about I can say. ◆

MOLYNEUX Leaves Lionhead Studios

As the famed designer leaves, former Sony exec Phil Harrison joins Microsoft Europe

by Matthew Kato

In the span of a week, Microsoft Studios Europe has undergone big leadership changes. First Lionhead co-founder and Microsoft Studios Europe creative director Peter Molyneux announced he was leaving both positions to join a new studio, 22 Cans. Shortly thereafter, Microsoft announced former Sony worldwide studios head Phil Harrison would take control of Microsoft Studios Europe and spearhead a search for new talent in the region.

Molyneux still plans to complete work on Fable: The Journey for Xbox 360, at which time co-founder Mark Webley will take over at the studio. Molyneux helped start Lionhead after his success with god game Populous at Bullfrog Productions, which was bought out by Electronic Arts. A similar course of events occurred with Lionhead, which Microsoft acquired in 2006 after Fable gave the Xbox a cornerstone franchise.

The Fable franchise stays with Lionhead and therefore Microsoft, but Molyneux's departure robs it of a creative voice as well as a well-liked public face for not only the studio, but for Microsoft's first-party program. Molyneux is a star developer, and he certainly bolstered Microsoft's image, if not credibility.

His celebrity wasn't without cost, however. Molyneux's willingness to openly talk about Lionhead's future projects could stir controversy as much as excitement. He often talked about features that later did not appear in the final product. In the case of Fable, he also had a habit of criticizing previous entries in the franchise in order to talk up the next installment. Molyneux's prophesizing zeal also confused gamers about whether the E3 2009 Milo and Kate Kinect tech demo was actually a game or not.

"I remain extremely passionate and proud of the people, products, and experiences that we created from Black & White, to Fable, to our pioneering work with Milo and Kate for the Kinect platform," Molyneux said in a statement. "However, I felt the time was right to pursue a new independent venture. I'd like to thank the team at Lionhead, as well as our partners at Microsoft Studios for their support, dedication, and incredible work over the years."

Harrison Ushers In A New Generation

Phil Harrison won't replace Molyneux as creative director of Microsoft Studios Europe, a position Microsoft says it hasn't addressed yet. Harrison has been appointed as the corporate vice president of Microsoft's Interactive Entertainment Business. The former vice president of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe and president of SCE Worldwide Studios will preside over Microsoft subsidiaries Lionhead, MGS Soho, and Rare in the U.K. According to a press release, he is responsible for creating partnerships and bringing "culturally relevant entertainment experiences to Microsoft platforms."

Harrison brings key experience from launching all of Sony's major consoles and via his relationships with developers and publishers worldwide. He is also known for his strong advocacy of reaching new audiences through new technology and business models. Hopefully his eye toward the future will help Microsoft find new talent in Europe, much like he did in championing Media Molecule's LittleBigPlanet while at Sony.

"I am excited to be joining the senior team at Microsoft at a pivotal time for our industry," Harrison said in a statement. "I am really impressed with the company's long-term vision for growing the market for interactive entertainment globally and also with the incredible wealth of talent, technology, and resources the company has available to succeed."

The loss of Molyneux and the hiring of Harrison come as Microsoft prepares the Xbox 360's successor, and represents both a loss and a gain for the company. The departure of Molyneux is another blow to an internal studio system that has already seen the exit of talent such as Bungie, while Harrison's equity with the industry could yield tomorrow's Molyneux.

As Microsoft prepares for its video game future, these developments could be the key to how it all unfolds, signaling the end of one era and the beginning of another. ◆

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ATARI Bluehole EN MASSE

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

The Secret of

by [illegible]

Veteran journalist David Kushner set a new standard for video game journalism with his 2003 book *Masters of Doom*, which traced the colorful history of id Software and its genre-defining first-person shooter, Doom. With his latest book, *Jacked: The Outlaw Story of Grand Theft Auto*, he tells the tale of the game that put Rockstar Games on the map. From its beginnings as a top down PC game to the controversy brought on by the Hot Coffee scandal, Kushner digs deep into the story, bringing to light new information on many of the events that helped shape the game industry in the past decade.

He also tells the personal tales of the men that founded Rockstar, delving into the complex personalities that changed the culture of video games forever. Along the way, he traces the saga of GTA's primary nemesis, anti-game crusader Jack Thompson. It's a gripping book that not only tells the inside story of Grand Theft Auto, but also ponders what it all means. We recently spoke to David about his book and the exhaustive research that went into it.

Talk about the genesis of the book. Coming off of *Masters of Doom*, why was this the next story you felt you needed to tell about the game industry?

It seemed obvious to me years ago. In the game industry, just like any other culture, there are only so many stories that lend themselves to books. Those stories have to have certain elements. For me, at least, it has to have some monumental culture change. I like that. I like stories about generations coming of age and innovation – especially stories of underdogs that start from nothing and rise to the top. Those are the things I look for. In the game industry, there are chapters of that. For me, *Masters of Doom* was the first chapter of that. Of course, there were games before Doom, but the way I looked at that was that the Doom guys and id Software was the way I could tell the story of that decade – the '90s. It was the rise of the PC game from the underground and really captured the zeitgeist and spirit of that time.

The story of GTA, to me, is the next chapter of game history. Like I say in the book, it was the GTA decade. I see this book as the sequel to *Masters of Doom*, because, while that book told the story of the rise of the PC gaming underworld and these gamers rising from the swamps of Louisiana, this is the next decade.

It's also the story of console gaming. It's the story about a game that, very much like Doom, was incredibly divisive, for reasons that were similar and reasons that were not similar. One of my overriding theses about video games as a whole, especially in the last couple of decades, is that video games were the new rock n' roll. I'm saying that in past tense, because I feel that we're sort of past that era now. I felt like the era covered two decades – the Doom decade and the GTA decade. That's what my new book charts, the GTA decade and the arc of that story during the '00s.

In the forward to the book, you talk about all the research and interviews you did for the book – a decade of work. Rockstar is known as being very tight-lipped with the press. What were some of the challenges of dealing with them? How did you get around some of those roadblocks?

Well, Rockstar Games did not participate in the book. Once I started working on the book, I went to them on a number of occasions and they declined to participate. Which, for the reasons you said, I wasn't entirely surprised. But I've been reporting on the GTA story since about '99, and I've written for *Rolling Stone* and gaming magazines. For me as a writer, I wanted to be able to connect the dots of what I'd seen. As you know, as a reporter, when you're on the frontlines, it's hard to have perspective. But, here, I had a decade worth of interviews and notes and experiences and observations. Not only of GTA, but of the whole industry changing and growing. I had a lot of stuff I'd never used and insights that I had, including back in 2003 when I did a major story on Vice City. That was really my main interview with Sam Houser, Dan Houser, and [ex-Rockstar CEO] Terry Donovan. I had a lot of material that was biographical from that that I could draw from.

When I started officially working on the book a couple years ago, knowing that Rockstar wasn't going to participate, I talked to everyone that would talk to me. That included going out to Dundee and talking to [Grand Theft Auto creator] Davey Jones and the guys out there. I talked with people who used to work at Rockstar – basically anyone that was willing to share their story, including [ex-Rockstar VP] Jaime King and [ex-Rockstar CTO] Gary Foreman and those guys. You take all of that and piece it together.

Did you go to Rockstar North?

No, I didn't. When Rockstar declined [to be involved], it was Rockstar the entity. But I went to Dundee,

History

Grand Theft Auto

We speak with veteran game journalist David Kushner about his new book chronicling the rise of Rockstar Games and the formation of the Grand Theft Auto empire

Scotland, where Davey Jones' company, which was working on A.P.B. at the time, was. I went out there working on a magazine article about A.P.B., and while I was out there working on that article, it was amazing to see what the game community in Dundee was like. There were these incredibly creative guys in this interesting place you don't think about – a really old, rough-around-the-edges Scottish town by the river. It has a wonderful history of games. The Scottish version of *The Warriors* was real in Dundee, and that's where Davey Jones grew up. I wrote about that in a story I wrote about A.P.B. It was great to meet all those people and realize how incredible Dundee is in game history. This is where GTA was invented. That's where it was created, a lot people don't realize that. A lot of the things you think about in GTA III or GTA IV were there in the first game and the second game to a remarkable degree. They made the first GTA game before the guys that became Rockstar got involved. But, of course, the Housers and everyone else who got involved early, part of what their skill is and their talent is almost like being a great A&R person. They are almost like Clive Davis or their heroes, the Def Jam guys.

I say this in the book, you can imagine that Sam Houser is Rick Rubin and imagine that the GTA guys, Davey Jones and all of them, were like the Beastie Boys who walked in and, you know, Sam and those guys said, "We have to put this out." Then, they helped shape it. But I love that part of the story. I love origin stories, that was a really exciting part of it to tell.

I found it interesting that for as much as Rockstar complains about being a subject of controversy, the controversy regarding the first game was actually engineered by a publicist that got the game into the hands of the tabloid press and people in the British government to build a public outcry for publicity's sake.

Well, I would sharpen that point a bit. Max Clifford is the guy. Certainly, there was a decision within BMG, and the best I could hear is that it came from some marketing person. So I don't know how much it was the Housers or if it was someone else. But someone had the idea of hiring Max Clifford, who was a very well known publicist. The way I say it in the book is this phrase "eating the hamster." Which referred to the British version of Ozzy Osbourne biting the head off a bat, where there was this guy who was an entertainer who was washed up. The rumor was that he had eaten a hamster at a party. Max Clifford, who you could say was the genius of his craft in publicity, thought it would be a good way of getting publicity. So, he fed it to the press and they "ate the hamster" and put this guy back on the map.

That was the idea with GTA. The idea was "let's get some attention for it." One of the amazing things to me is that Davey Jones said he had mixed feelings about it. He wasn't sure, he was like, "We haven't even finished this game yet." That's, to me, the humorous thing was that no one even saw the game. But, you had the word going around to members of Parliament that here was this game coming out, and they "ate the hamster." Then, the news starts coming out and no one had even seen the game. It was significant.

It got a bit out of control in the U.S., where you had people on the other hand of the political spectrum saying maybe this game is the root of all violence in this generation. It was a contributing factor to GTA becoming so controversial and divisive.

Sam and Dan Houser have an interesting background with their parents being from entertainment – a sort of upper-middle-class bohemian background. Their personal story is different from almost any major developers of their era. They weren't the classic teenage computer geeks who sat around making games on Apple computers. They were into music and culture and movies. How did that impact their work?

Hugely. It's important, at least from my point of view. I think that it's a great point you're making. At that moment in time, you had games that were what you might call "rebellious." I use the word "outlaw" in the title of my book. Gaming was an outlaw medium – it was for freaks and geeks. It was like Dungeons & Dragons and Ozzy Osbourne. Even after the era of Doom, which got blamed for Columbine and other incidents, going into the next decade it was still underground. Video games were certainly successful, but I felt like the game industry was still considered an outlaw industry. What you needed was exactly what [Rockstar] provided – people that understood the mainstream aesthetic. People who understood and loved popcorn movies – *Top Gun* and things like that. People who said, "Let's do that for gaming." A lot of people in the mainstream just thought about GTA as the hookers and baseball bats, but the game was so much more than that. What it really was, was that these guys wanted something that was immersive, relevant, cinematic, and perhaps more than anything, something that gave you the freedom to explore something contemporary. It was also a world that was funny and satirical.

So their background as music fans and guys growing up who loved how Def Jam marketed music and loved what those guys did…they said, "Why can't we do this for games? Why do games have to be underground? Why can't we be cool?" That's what it all came down to. Combine that passion and energy with this really unbelievable game, and that's how they got that kind of lightning in a bottle.

There's a bit of a classic "rock band" arc to the story as portrayed in the book. There's a build up and all this success, then people like Jaime King, Foreman, and Terry Donovan,

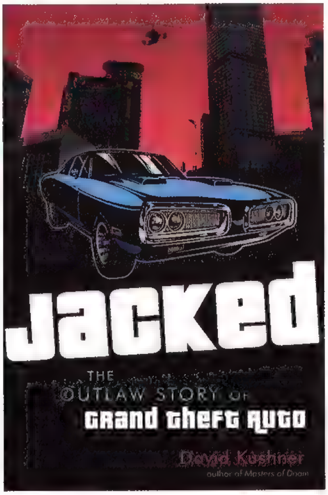
David Kushner

some of the founders, leave and the outside pressure and excess comes in. How do you view how the company evolved?
It's just like anything. If you look at the music industry bands break up, or evolve is a better word. It's amazing, when you look at the Beatles and see from where they went with "I Want to Hold Your Hand" to *Abbey Road*, it's only a few years! It's incredible when you see how much happened. It's similar. You could see it as a band. It's also a British invasion – that's something that gets lost in the story. I say this in the book, and I was happy with the phrase, which is that GTA was a love letter to American culture from England. These British guys grew up loving American culture and made a game about all that celebrated the excess and over-the-top aspects of America. It's interesting to look at the game from that view – it's an outsider's point of view, initially. Eventually, they became insiders. But, it's like any company, people leave and things evolve and grow. That happened with them.

People have their favorite games. A lot of gamers still talk about GTA III, Vice City, and San Andreas. People have their favorite eras of it like people have their favorite eras of the bands they like…. A lot of people think back to that time, but then again, look at GTV IV. That game broke all the records to become the most successful entertainment product launch of its time. There's no reason that GTA V won't do just as well. But there was that period of unbelievable, explosive creativity. Also, the industry just wanted it.

"…you could almost look at GTA as being an artifact of the Bush era – the fight for freedom and creativity, and people wanting to take control of their destinies within the world of this game."

One of the things that you do when writing a story like this is you connect the dots. And either I didn't know or I forgot that these ads for GTA III came out right after 9/11. I make the point in the book that you could almost look at GTA as being an artifact of the Bush era – the fight for freedom and creativity, and people wanting to take control of their destinies within the world of this game. The desire to act out – to be angry, to act out in what some people might say is a safe, virtual space. You're breaking up pixels instead of bones. In addition to it being a really cool game, it was the right game at the right time for those emotional reasons.



Kushner's *Jacked: The Outlaw Story of Grand Theft Auto* is now available in paperback and e-book formats

One of the parts of the book that's going to get the most attention, because it was such a public scandal, was the Hot Coffee section. It was extraordinarily well-researched. Talk about your process. I'm particularly interested in how you got the internal emails, which show actual communications between Sam Houser, Terry Donovan, and others at Rockstar.
I teach journalism at NYU and that is such a great question – and I love the answer to it. The answer is that all of that information that you're referring to – those emails and everything else – is publically available. What I did was I read through hundreds of pages of court documents. That's where they came from. Because I hadn't been working on a book before, I just hadn't looked for it. But, you know, there's a lot out there that's publically available.

Is that from the FCC investigation?
Some of it is, but it varies. It's from various cases, and it all became part of the public record. That's where it all came from. And it wasn't just emails. It's interesting from a research point of view. To write a book, or to write anything, in the age of the Internet, you think everything's available online. But it's really not – especially in that era. What I mean is that all those court documents had all those emails, but they also had troves and troves of messageboards and conversations between all the modders [who unlocked Hot Coffee] when all that was going on. That stuff is hard to find, because maybe these messageboards aren't around anymore. To me, as a writer, the last thing I wrote a book about was Levittown in the 1950s. I was really riveted by the mod side of it. I did talk to Patrick Wildenborg, the guy that cracked the Hot Coffee mod. I did get to interview him, which was a lot of fun. To be able to recreate that story and the thrill the modders had for what they were doing was really fascinating.

Seeing the emails, especially the internal Rockstar ones, painted a different picture than what was portrayed to the press at the time. Rockstar really tried to paint the picture that it was something funny they joked around with, they realized it wasn't going to work, and they blocked it off from the rest of the game because to take it out would have been too difficult. The way it comes across in the book is that much more work went into the sex scenes in the game and that Sam Houser even intended to release a patch for the PC version to unlock Hot Coffee or even do an AO rerelease of the game. Talk about the reality versus what was portrayed publically.
Well, here's the most important point. As I say in the book, it was not intended to be released. They didn't do anything wrong, it's important to note that. That's why, after all these investigations, it was determined that they hadn't purposefully misled the ESRB. Clearly, it was unfinished and, as you said, it was "wrapped," [which is] not an uncommon approach – instead of taking something out of the game, you disable it. But what surprised everybody was that you would have these intrepid players who loved the game so much they were taking everything they could get and breaking it apart and looking at it to see what was there. These guys found it.

In those emails, there is Sam talking about what they want to get in the game and what they want to have in the scene and different elements of sex in the game. What comes across to me in all of those is that he is a freedom fighter in that regard. He was always pushing for freedom of expression in the medium of video games, freedom for the player to experience things you can experience in *The Sopranos*. That's a valid point – why can't you play a game that's like *The Sopranos* where you're the bad guy? I totally support these guys in that pursuit. The medium of games has been infantilized. If you show someone topless in a game, that would make it adults-only and not available to certain gamers. There's this hypocrisy. It's about infantilizing the medium and it's coming from Washington and legislators. That's what this was about. Sam says it in freedom fighting terms in those emails, talking about "Why can't we have this?" I think it was frustrating to be told they couldn't. They did what they had to do and took it out of the game, but I guess nobody knew that these gamers were going to stumble on it.

On the other side of the Supreme Court ruling, Jack Thompson is a marginalized figure. If you go back to what they wanted to do at the beginning, Rockstar won their battles. Games are a much bigger part of popular culture now. I doubt there will be many more laws that seriously try to restrict video game speech. It seems like history will say Rockstar was right and they won.
I agree. Obviously, I'm a gamer and I write books about games, so readers can figure out which side of this debate I'm on. I tried to write the book as objectively as I could, but I think, as a gamer, it's a great thing that we've gotten to where we are. Whether you like Rockstar's games or not, they certainly helped to evolve this medium. They helped achieve these goals. And I do think we're past it. I quote Dan Houser at the end of the book, where he says, "It's like everyone's growing up at this point." You have gamers that are growing up and they are getting to positions of power in the media and are getting into positions of power in politics where games aren't so scary anymore. We grew up playing Doom and GTA, and it's like "So what?" We're healthy people. Now, I do think we're at the end of this era – that's why I call it the GTA decade. That was the decade when we moved past that, just like music did before. This story has been played out in music – Elvis was only shown from the waist up, and Ozzy Osbourne and all that – those days are pretty much over. The story has played out in comic books and pulp novels and it went on. I'm sure it will play out in a medium that we don't even know about yet. But the fact is now, if you stop the average person in the street, that person will be likely to identify themselves as a gamer. That's a good thing.

It's a rock n' roll story and in the end the rock n' rollers won. The medium is taken seriously as an art form and a cultural and economic force. There were growing pains, but we're in a better place now. ◆

A Fight for the Finish

Mass Effect 3's ending leaves gamers divided

by Joe Juba

Over four years after the original game released as an Xbox 360 exclusive, BioWare brought its sci-fi trilogy to a close on March 6 with the multiplatform release of Mass Effect 3. After spending two games building relationships, making decisions, and writing the living legend of Commander Shepard, gamers were eager witness the grand finale. For some, Mass Effect 3's ending was an appropriately epic culmination of their deeds, but satisfaction with BioWare's approach to the final sequence was far from universal.

Though most media outlets had high praise for ME 3 and its ending (including Game Informer – see our review on page 80), a wave of discontent began rising from consumers within a day of the release and continued growing as more people finished. In order to remain spoiler-free, we won't get into specifics of the fan complaints. Suffice it to say, many were left confused and upset by BioWare's conclusion.

Internet message boards served as gathering places where disappointed gamers commiserated and lamented, but many were not willing to let the perceived injustice stand. After investing so much time and energy in the Mass Effect series, these fans requested that BioWare rectify its "mistake" and repair the ending through a patch, DLC, or any other means necessary.

Some rallied around online petitions. Others found more constructive outlets, collectively donating over $80,000 to the Child's Play Charity in the name of a movement called "Retake Mass Effect." A user named El_Spiko on BioWare's forums filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission against EA, saying in part: "After reading through the list of promises about the ending of the game they made in their advertising campaign and PR interviews, it was clear that the product we got did not live up to any of those claims."

Dissatisfaction with series endings is not uncommon in entertainment media. Television shows like *The Sopranos*, *Lost*, and *Battlestar Galactica* all faced fan backlash (complete with online petitions) when their conclusions aired. Instead of placating viewers, the artists stood by their craft. One could argue that BioWare should do the same, but playing Mass Effect isn't like watching a show; it's an interactive experience that touts player agency as a primary draw. Should expectations for Mass Effect be different? Does BioWare have an obligation to ensure that its product delivers the conclusions many fans were expecting?

Everyone is entitled to an opinion. Disliking an ending is fine, and desiring a satisfactory conclusion to a long-running tale is also understandable. But to what degree should gamers be allowed to make demands on a developer?

Perhaps the artistic integrity of Mass Effect 3 is less important than keeping BioWare fans happy. Continued outrage about the ending could damage the BioWare brand name, which has already come under scrutiny since the developer's acquisition by EA, its expansion over multiple studios, and the release of the disappointing Dragon Age II. Regardless of the other implications, maybe changing the ending is a way for the studio to maintain consumer confidence.

However, if interactive entertainment is art, as many gamers argue, then shouldn't the artists have authorial control? Whether or not it was palatable to some gamers doesn't change the fact that Mass Effect 3's ending was the finale the game developers intended. Deviating from that vision in order to appease angry gamers could have dangerous implications for the future of game development.

The team at BioWare and other notable industry figures chimed in on the debate. Executive producer Casey Hudson acknowledged the importance of fan feedback in a post on the official Mass Effect forums, though he did not commit to a course of action: "Over the course of the series, Mass Effect has been a shared experience between the development team and our fans – not just a shared experience in playing the games, but in designing and developing them…Your feedback has always mattered Mass Effect is a collaboration between developers and players, and we continue to listen."

When asked about the prospect of a revised ending at a panel at the Smithsonian for the new "The Art of Video Games" exhibit, Irrational Games' Ken Levine said, "I think if those people got what they wanted and [BioWare] wrote their ending they would be very disappointed in the emotional feeling they got because...they didn't really create it. I think this whole thing is making me a little bit sad because I don't think anyone would get what they wanted if that happened."

As the controversy heated up, people on opposing sides of the debate tossed insults. Those demanding a new ending were called entitled whiners. Those happy with the current ending were called spineless shills. The polarization was similar to the divide often seen on hot-button political issues, with both sides vehemently supporting their stances and apparently unwilling to compromise. However, the only opinion that matters in deciding the fate of Mass Effect 3 is BioWare's.

Two weeks after Mass Effect 3's launch, BioWare co-founder and CEO Ray Muzyka put an end to the speculation, issuing a statement declaring that the developer would be making changes to the ending. "The passionate reaction of some of our most loyal players to the current endings in Mass Effect 3 is something that has genuinely surprised us," Muzyka wrote. "Building on their research, exec producer Casey Hudson and the team are hard at work on a number of game content initiatives that will help answer the questions, providing more clarity for those seeking further closure to their journey. You'll hear more on this in April."

Muzyka also emphasized that these content initiatives are in addition to the already-planned upcoming content, saying "rest assured that your journey in the Mass Effect universe can, and will, continue."

Even with a promise to do right by fans, the issue is not completely resolved. Until specific details about what is changing about the ending and how those changes are delivered to gamers (and at what cost, if any), the degree to which the complaints will be addressed is unknown. BioWare is also facing the possibility that the damage has been done; no matter what modifications are in store, expectations may already be too high and diverse, making it impossible for the developer to satisfy everyone.

Adapting a game's ending based on fan reaction is a new frontier and raises questions about a developer's duty to its craft versus its fans. How BioWare handles the issue will set a precedent, making it an important moment in gaming for Mass Effect fans and non-fans alike. ◆

Infinity Blade Dungeons
iOS

Exploring the high-end iOS game scene

by [illegible]

MOST MONTHS, YOU CAN STOP HERE FOR DETAILS about the upcoming PSN, XBLA, and WiiWare titles on the horizon, but I thought we'd take a little side trek this month to look at several high-profile iOS games worth your attention.

Mass Effect: Infiltrator
iOS

République
iOS • PC • Mac

With a Spring 2013 release date, **République** is a long ways off – especially in the ever-changing world of iOS-targeted games. But the teams at game studios Camouflaj and Logan, led by former Halo 4 creative director Ryan Payton, have some big ideas in mind for the project. République tells the story of Hope, a 22-year old girl attempting to escape from a futuristic Orwellian society called Metamorphosis. She can't do it alone, so she's found a phone and calls you – the player – begging for your help in avoiding guards and guiding her out of her nightmarish surroundings. To do so, you must tap into camera security feeds scattered around the facility and touch your screen to send Hope scurrying to a new location. You can hack into Wi-Fi enabled equipment and help Hope survive dangerous combat situations. Along the way, Hope continually interacts with you through a complex artificial intelligence, using details gathered from your actual phone to immerse you in the reality of the situation, such as reading the time of day you're currently playing the game and having that affect gameplay and conversations. Full voiceover, more than 30 minutes of cinematic sequences, and a branching story path make République sound more like a high-end console game than many simplistic mobile games. For those without iOS devices, the game is also targeting a release on Mac and PC. It remains to be seen if the ambitious game project can hit the mark and bring such a complex idea to fruition, but I'm excited by the potential of an action/stealth game with such a clever approach to drawing the player into the fiction.

It should come as no surprise that Epic Games is eager to capitalize on the success of the Infinity Blade franchise. **Infinity Blade Dungeons** expands the market from the Punchout-style one-on-one encounters presented in the first two games while maintaining the rich fictional backdrop the franchise has already established. Dungeons is set several thousand years before the first two games, and stars an apprentice weaponsmith whose mentor sends him out on a singular quest. The purpose of the hero's mission is to craft the weapon that will come to be known as the Infinity Blade, which can be used to slay the Deathless, the powerful beings who lord over humanity in the millennia-long storyline. The new game style mimics classic dungeon crawlers, with the main character running and fighting his way through large numbers of enemies from an isometric top-down view. In keeping with the main character's profession, Epic says weapon crafting is a major aspect of gameplay. I've yet to get my hands on the game, but it's hard to complain about the snazzy Unreal graphics. Epic is developing the game in-house rather than through subsidiary and Infinity Blade creator Chair Entertainment. The team promises a release on iOS before the year is out.

This column rarely covers games that have already hit the market, but given the enthusiasm in recent weeks about Mass Effect 3 I'd be remiss not to make a quick mention of **Mass Effect: Infiltrator.** This iOS game is a direct tie-in to the Mass Effect 3 universe, though it stars a new side character named Randall Ezno, a Cerberus operative who eventually realizes his employer's shady tactics and switches teams. With virtual analog controls and tap aiming, the game manages a rough approximation of the actual Mass Effect combat. Infiltrator can also connect up to your Mass Effect 3 playthrough, boosting your galactic readiness and rewarding you with an additional war asset once you beat the game. While it's available for play on most iOS devices, it also supports the new iPad's Retina display. Infiltrator isn't the definitive experience some might hope for in a side project, but fans looking for ways to expand their playtime in the Mass Effect universe should check it out.

Looking for more on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for daily updates on the best in PlayStation Network Xbox Live Arcade, WiiWare PC, and mobile game coverage Visit this month to read our full review of Mass Effect: Infiltrator and to learn more about République in our detailed interview with Camouflaj For more in this issue, read our previews for Fable Heroes (p. 66), Hybrid (p 72), and Rock Band Blitz (p 75), and our scores for Nexuiz and Vessel on p 96

g.b.u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

The Good

HECTOR XAVIER MONSEGUR (known as Sabu), a leader of hacker group LulzSec, turned in his own former comrades to the FBI as part of a plea deal, which led to five arrests. The group broke into websites for Bethesda and Minecraft, as well as the servers for League of Legends and EVE Online (among many more shenanigans) before disbanding last year.

The Bad

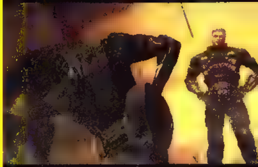
ALTHOUGH DIABLO III finally has a release date (May 15), some won't like that the game's PvP feature has been cut from the day-one release. Game director Jay Wilson says the move was made so the game as a whole wouldn't be delayed any more, and that PvP would be added via a patch (including multiple arena maps, PvP achievements, and more) at a later, unspecified date.

The Ugly

THE RAINBOW 6 PATRIOTS' development team at Ubisoft Montreal is gutted; creative director David Sears, narrative director Richard Rouse III, lead designer Philippe Therien, and animation director Brent George have been removed from the game. Despite this exodus of talent, Ubisoft says that Sears' vision for the game largely remains and that the title is still scheduled for a 2013 release.

Quotable

"[The boss fights] were a big part of the game, and we should have put more effort into them. I'm truly sorry about that. Next time we're gonna think about it more."



– Francois Lapikas, gameplay director of Deus Ex: Human Revolution, offers a sincere apology.

The CRPG Addict

Many gamers claim love of a specific genre over all others, but how far are you willing to go to prove that love? Chester "The CRPG Addict" Bolingbroke decided to turn his self-declared weakness for computer RPGs into something greater. He created a blog at crpgaddict.blogspot.com where he could track progress on his greatest quest ever: To play every CRPG ever made in chronological order. Two years and 70 games into his massive list, I spoke with Bolingbroke about his progress.

Chester Bolingbroke

Age
40

Location
Salem, MS

Favorite RPGs of All Time
Baldur's Gate, The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind, Might & Magic VII

interview by Phil Kollar

Why did you choose to begin this huge undertaking?

I have an obsession about making lists. My wife and I have an ongoing project to eat at every restaurant on Route 1 between Boston and the New Hampshire border. I've made a list of all the cities in the United States with populations above 100,000, and I'm slowly working through them. I have a list of all major artists in jazz history, and I'm working through their catalogues. Making a list of all CRPGs and playing through them in order is very consistent with my personality. In a way, I guess it's like a quest list in a CRPG, which is probably why the genre appeals to me.

Why are you more interested in RPGs than any other genre?

Part of it is the balance they strike: They're a little more mature and cerebral than action games, but they require less patience than strategy games. But they also include more stuff than other genres. Take a look at my GIMLET scale: It has categories for things like NPC interaction, economy, equipment, character development, and so on. I don't think any other genres have this variety of gameplay elements. One minute you're tactically planning huge battles, and the next minute you're managing your finances so you can buy a house. I've played games in other genres, like Half-Life, but there's always a moment in those games in which I wish I could break the boundaries of the game. I want to actually have conversations with some of the NPCs in Half-Life. It's inevitably those moments that I quit those games and open up Morrowind.

Of the 70 games that you've played at this point, how many have you completed? How much time have you devoted to the task?

Of the "winnable" CRPGs that I've played, my win rate is 47 percent. I try to keep it around half. As for time, I didn't really want to know, but you asked. According to my spreadsheets, I've invested 1,017 hours since I started the project 25 months ago. That breaks down to about 10 hours a week. The variance is huge, though. Some weeks I don't do anything, and others I do almost nothing but play games.

What has been the biggest surprise of your experiment so far?

There have certainly been some wonderful surprises so far. I barely remembered the early Might & Magic games, and I was thrilled to rediscover them. Wasteland and Starflight are two games I never played back in the day. Everyone else knew how good they were, but I only discovered it recently. Probably the best surprise has been a little-known 1988 roguelike called Omega, which has stores, joinable factions, and a very complex plotline. I had some corruption issues with the earliest edition, but it's on my list to try again in the coming year.

Are there any elements of the CRPGs of the '80s and '90s that you find lacking in modern RPGs?

There are two modern trends that I'm not in love with, and that I think make modern gaming worse. The first is the obsession with total spoken dialogue. When you have a voice actor speak every line, it limits your dialogue options, and no NPC ever calls your character by his or her actual name. Baldur's Gate and Morrowind had some spoken dialogue but left a lot of it to reading, and there was absolutely nothing wrong with this.

The second trend is expansion packs. I'd rather developers just released new games using the same engines. Why do the protagonists in Tribunal, Bloodmoon, Knights of the Nine, The Shivering Isles, and Awakenings have to be the same as in the main game? It means that you're playing hours and hours of extra content with an overpowered character, and it breaks the story.

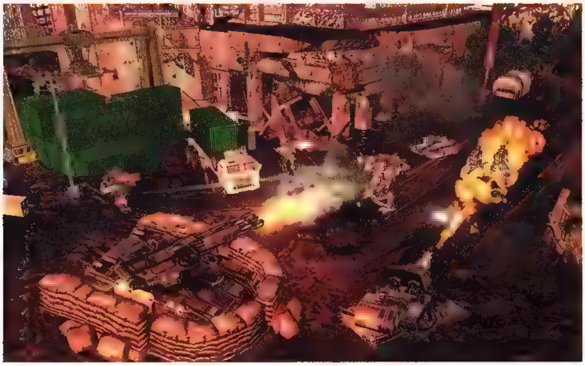
How many total CRPGs do you have on your master list at the moment?

Just shy of 1,000, but the list is really only complete up to about 2003. A lot of them aren't really CRPGs, and I'll discover that when I get to them. A lot more, particularly starting in 1991, are obscure Japanese titles that I might not be able to find or understand. Still, we're probably looking at least 800. I haven't even played 10 percent of them yet. ◆

Want to see Game Informer's editors stumble their way through a classic computer RPG? Check out our Replay of Might & Magic III at gameinformer.com/mag

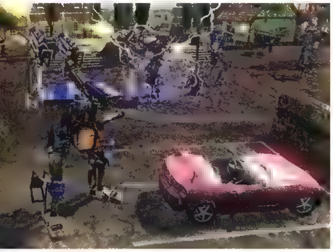
End of Nations is Finally Taking Shape

Trion and Petroglyph have been showing off their unusual take on massively multiplayer real-time strategy for years, but the ultimate form that End of Nations' gameplay would take – and frankly, how the heck an MMORTS was going to work and appeal to enough gamers – has never been clear. After several hours of messing around with three nearly complete missions in an early alpha build, I finally have some answers.



End of Nations isn't an MMO in the persistent public world sense of a World of Warcraft or Star Wars: The Old Republic. While persistent elements exist for both player progression and the overall war between the two player factions and the nefarious NPC Order of Nations, gameplay takes place in discrete sessions. These range from single-player tutorial missions to co-op "comp-stomps" and 28-on-28 team-based PvP battles

Instead of building bases and cranking out units, commanders in End of Nations bring pre-set loadouts of troops to the fray. You earn currency as a match goes on by holding certain points or completing other objectives, but it can only be used to rebuild destroyed units and fire off special powers like repair fields or artillery barrages. The system works quite well, especially since you can prepare multiple loadouts ahead of time and switch mid-battle if you see a need.



The first mission I took on was an indirectly competitive one-on-one scenario where I and another human player defended our bases and a few secondary objectives on opposite sides of the map from waves of AI troops. Though our troops had no path to attack each other, we were able to use support powers like radioed-in airstrikes to mess with each other. I was impressed by how well this unusual mission design combined a comp-stomp defense mission with enough light PvP elements to spice things up.

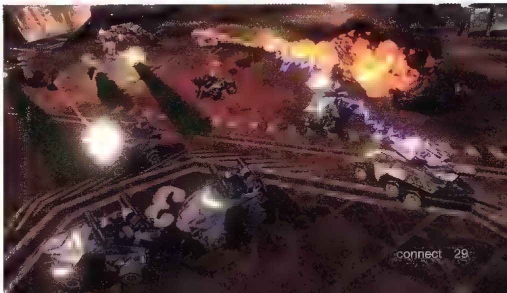
Next up was a four-on-four domination-style PvP battle. More than anything, this reminded me of a node control PvP map in a traditional MMO, where attacking and retreating with your teammates and complementing each others' strengths and weaknesses is critical. Though commander classifications in End of Nations don't lock you into roles like artillery, frontline, or air, the way you build your army plays a huge part in how you contribute to the battle. I had a blast using my heavy-hitting tanks to control areas with their powerful emplacement ability, which immobilizes them in return for large defensive boosts.

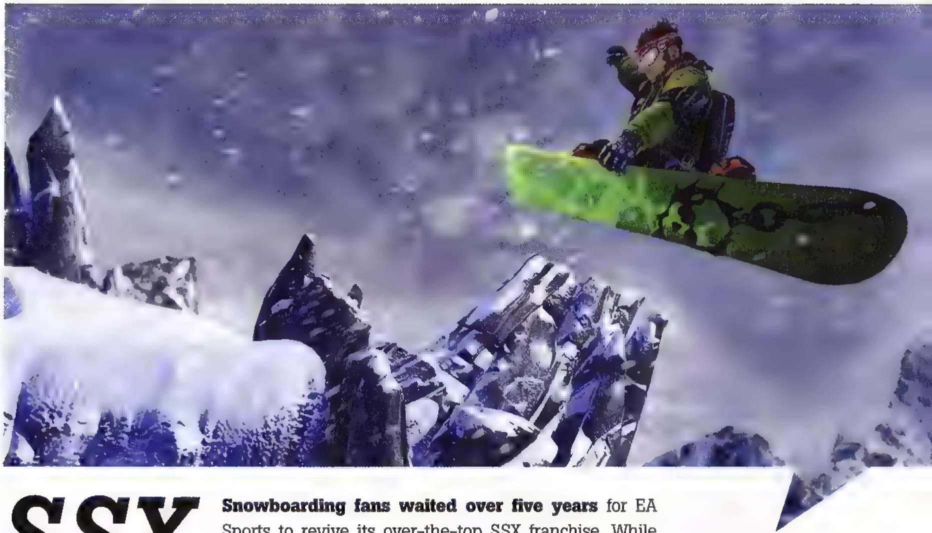
Finally, I jumped into a massive 12-on-12 battle that had the two sides contesting mid-map forward landing zones, shield generators, and nuke silos as they each tried to ultimately torch the enemy headquarters. In a word (well, two): Hilarious fun. Even though everything was blowing up all over this huge map, I always felt like I could contribute to our side's overall effort. Over the course of this 40-minute match, both teams executed their share of devious feints, massed assaults, desperate retreats, and tide-turning nuclear strikes. Because of the relatively small army size per player – everyone I saw had between one and two dozen units – the flow of the match was more like an intense Battlefield conflict than a game of competitive StarCraft even though the mechanics themselves are classic top-down RTS.

Progression is about what you would assume: You earn in-game currency with which you buy units to assign to your armies and mods to improve those units. You can also spend experience to ascend familiar-looking talent trees that grant both passive and active skills. I could see myself spending a lot of time with the army customization. The level of control you have over your force composition is impressive, as the dozens of unit types are unique in their own right before you even get into personalizing them with the powerful mod system.

Persistence in End of Nations lies primarily in the always-running global war. Each mission is tied to a specific spot on the globe, and a faction's aggregate performance in that mission influences the region's allegiance to one of the three factions. Ultimately, it feels more like cosmetic fluff than an Eve-style player-driven faction war, but that doesn't mean it can't be entertaining cosmetic fluff. Either way, my impression is that the vast bulk of End of Nations' appeal will be in the match-based gameplay.

I've been curious about this project since it was announced, and now that I finally have a better sense of how it's coming together I'm surprised at how optimistic I am for it. I can definitely see myself jumping into the odd match here and there to get my RTS fix as it heads into closed beta this spring and its eventual fall launch – especially since the game is fully free to play, with only cosmetic and time-saving convenience items for sale in the cash shop.





SSX

Snowboarding fans waited over five years for EA Sports to revive its over-the-top SSX franchise. While the reboot thrilled some by continuing the series' legacy of wild tricks and breakneck races, others took issue with the frustrating Survive It mode. We talked to creative director Todd Batty to find out what changed, what got cut, and what he wishes he could bring back.

How soon after announcing did you decide to remove the Deadly Descents subtitle? Did you change any of the content as well?
That was really more on the marketing side of things. We started off from day one with Race It, Trick It, and Survive It as the three pillars of the game. Our launch trailer at the VGAs was a complete CG outsourced video showing concept. Trying to put together a 40-second video that could show [these modes] in early concept phase was proving to be difficult, so the decision was made to lead with the new stuff, the Survive It side, and see what the reaction was Obviously, the reaction was mixed at best.

Why did you feel that Survive It was a necessary addition to reviving the SSX franchise?
We certainly weren't the first attempt at EA to try to revive SSX. We looked at a lot of the other earlier pitches. The constant barrier was it just feeling like an HD remake. EA said, "We think SSX is awesome, but we also think that if we're going to bring it back, we want to bring it back in a way that's going to appeal to the largest, biggest group of gamers." It needed more innovation than just racing and tricking down the mountain. So we looked at action-adventure games. The goal in action-adventure games is pretty simple. You have to make it from the beginning of the level to the end of the level without getting yourself killed. We wondered what that would look and feel like under an SSX wrapper, trying to keep things crazy and exaggerated and super-arcadey. That's where the ideas for wingsuits and environmental hazards came from.

Do you see Survive It as a permanent part of the franchise?
The future that I see for SSX is one that is ideally determined 100-percent by our community. I've got over 50 friends on PS3 and about 70 friends on 360 who are almost all members of our community. I'm watching what they like. They're the people that are going to be playing the game, supporting the game, and telling their friends to play the game. If they think we should scrap Survive It but try something else that's new, then we would listen. If they want more Survive It but want it to be tweaked or changed in some way, we would do that.

Some players are complaining about the lack of split-screen. Would you consider ever going back to that style of multiplayer?
I definitely think we would explore going back to it. Removing split-screen was one of the toughest decisions of my entire career. I pushed and held on to split-screen for probably much longer than I should have. At the end of the day, it's a very expensive feature. We didn't just take it out lightly. We built this game off a brand new code base, and split-screen didn't exist in that. Adding it in was a tremendous amount of effort on our rendering team, who were already trying to keep up with some of our other goals, like how fast we wanted to move down the mountain and how big our mountains were and trying to make sure that's still streamed. We heavily prioritized keeping an awesome, solid framerate

Is there any specific reason you replaced the ability to fast reset onto the track with the rewind function?
That fast reset onto the track actually turned into a pretty terrible exploit in past games. Sometimes you could go into a chasm, and instead of jumping, just fly off it. You wouldn't make it to the other side, but just as you're about to crash into the far wall, you could press the select button, and it would warp you forward onto the track. You could actually use that to cut time. I wouldn't say rewinding is a perfect system, but it's not exploitable, which was my goal. We wanted to make sure as much as possible that everyone was on a level playing field.

What do you see as the future for the SSX series moving forward from here?
EA really wants to evolve our business into not just doing one-off titles but really building and investing in franchises. Our goal with SSX was to lay down the foundation and deliver something modernized, next-gen, but true to the SSX gameplay heritage. I think we've done that. We're really proud of the game that we've built. If people adopt it and it does well, then I'd love to see more SSX driven by what the people want and what our community wants. ◆

For more of Todd Batty's thoughts on the SSX reboot, check out the full interview on gameinformer.com/mag

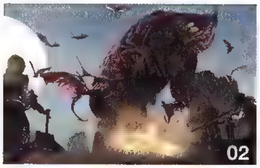
top ten

LOOT-FESTS

by Adam Biessener

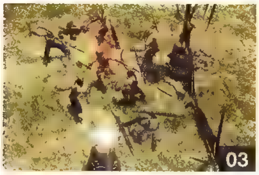
Diablo II

The first Diablo brought real-time combat to roguelikes, but Diablo II took that formula and expanded it 10 times as far in every direction to make one of the most iconic games of all time. The fact that "Diablo clone" is a sub-genre unto itself should tell you all you need to know.



Borderlands

Gearbox rode a single idea all the way to the bank with Borderlands: Marry Diablo's loot system with first-person shooter gameplay. Getting a new weapon is so much more awesome when it's a brand new effect and not just a stat boost, and Borderlands nailed that in spades.



Titan Quest

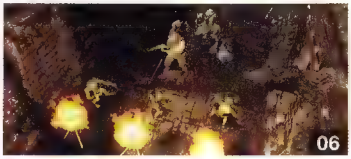
So what if it's pretty much Diablo in Greece? The astounding breadth of Titan Quest's itemization makes up for its lack of random maps. Rolling a new character and equipping her with a full matched set that your last guy found puts the laughter in slaughter.

Dead Island

Degrading weaponry isn't our favorite gameplay system, but the fact that you get piles of everyday implements and the components to juice them up into zombie-obliterating death machines easily eclipses the fact that they eventually break. Why don't all katana have battery hookups?

Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning

Having a reason to pick up everything is nice. Getting a new sword is great, but turning the bits and bobs that have been dropping like candy from the hordes of evil into a set of invincible equipment is a special treat. Reckoning whips up that particular concoction as well as any game, MMOs included.

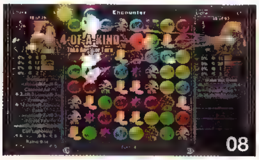


Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II

Waving your little finger and watching the hordes of evil spontaneously combust is hilarious. Dark Alliance II isn't the most balanced game in the world, and we love it for that – and for how it rewards a modest investment of thought with godlike powers.

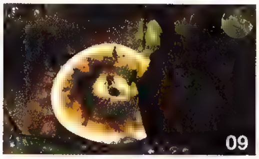
Torchlight

How it took until Torchlight for loot-fest games to give us a minion to take care of the lame "going back to town and selling crap" part of the cycle is beyond us. Playing Torchlight is like driving a bulldozer through a loot piñata farm, except that cash money is constantly pouring from the dashboard vents.



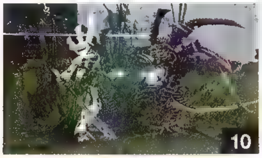
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords

Being overpowered in a single-player game can be great fun, and Puzzle Quest takes that to extreme lengths. The first time your equipment enables a first turn kill combo, it's like a lightbulb goes off in your head...a lightbulb made out of fireballs that annihilate your enemies.



Sacred II

The addition of a single button press to suck up every item in range is a godsend in a Diablo clone like Sacred II, where enemies burst into fountains of randomly generated loot on death. Now if only that bard in town could be dealt with in a similar fashion…



Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II

Not only is Warhammer 40,000 loot awesome by definition – chainswords, plasma rifles, and Terminator armor laugh at your poncy mage robes or whatever – but Dawn of War II lets you transform your squad entirely. You can go from long-range support to close-combat assault with a simple weapon swap.

robot
entertainment

Photo: Don Netzer

Robot Rises From The Ashes Of Ensemble

Created by former members of Age of Empires/Halo Wars developer Ensemble Studios, Robot Entertainment is a unique company. Taking its experience in the traditional PC market, the studio is creating unique downloadable and mobile games like Orcs Must Die and Hero Academy. We spoke with CEO Patrick Hudson about the company's origins and bright future.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Halo Wars got great reviews, but shortly after it released Microsoft dissolved Ensemble. How did that go down?
It was a big shock and surprise. When it finally came to be, we hadn't seen it coming. In fact, we had been planning to grow the studio at that point. We found out probably six months before Halo Wars was finished that Ensemble wasn't going to exist after we finished Halo Wars. Obviously, it's tough to finish a game that ambitious with the knowledge that your studio isn't going to be there at the end.

Robot's games have been quite different than Age of Empires and Halo Wars. Was it always the idea to focus on emerging platforms like downloadable and mobile and focus on smaller-scale games?
There's two pieces to your question. It wasn't necessarily our vision to start working on mobile games – that evolved. But it certainly was our vision to work on smaller-scale projects. We'd been working on those three- and four-year games with massive teams and massive budgets for a really long time. There just wasn't much of an appetite among this group of folks to jump on that train again. The first game we dreamed up was Orcs Must Die, which was imagined as a 12-month project with a fairly small team. Hero Academy was born the same way. Doing something on a smaller scale has been both fun and rewarding.

What are you enjoying about doing the smaller-scale stuff you're doing now?
More than anything, it's been fun to answer to ourselves and nobody except the customers. That's been liberating and rewarding. We always had a lot of ideas when we were at Microsoft about different games, but we were the Age of Empires studio. It was hard to get anything else approved. That creative energy gets pent up over a long period of time. Once we got to Robot, it unleashed itself.

You said you like not answering to anyone. Do you think you'll ever need a relationship with a publisher again?
Publishers serve different roles. The traditional role the publisher provided, the soup-to-nuts financing, testing, marketing, packaging, and distribution to retail – it's hard for me to imagine how we would need that whole package again. But there are certain bits and pieces where we'd look to bigger companies to help us, even with a game like Hero Academy. We're thinking of about translating it into Mandarin and taking it to China. We're not really well suited to do that on our own. So, I think all the services that a publisher used to provide are still needed from smaller developers like us, but not in the whole publishing package that it used to be wrapped in.

You've released games for a variety of platforms – Xbox Live Arcade, Steam, iOS. What are the strengths and weaknesses of those platforms?
XBLA, a few years ago, was an amazingly strong market. As a player, I loved games on XBLA. I downloaded everything that came across XBLA and played it. Some games like Castle Crashers did amazingly well. But that market is a lot different today. I think it's softened more than we expect, and I've heard that from other developers. There's been some disappointment on Robot's part with Orcs Must Die on XBLA. To contrast that, Steam has been wonderful. It's been a great platform for Orcs Must Die.

They are completely different these days with where XBLA has gone versus where Steam has gone. If you go to Steam's home page and Orcs Must Die happens to be on special, we can be standing tall next to Skyrim at the top of the charts. A gamer can go onto Steam and see Orcs Must Die and Skyrim side-by-side. That doesn't exist on Xbox Live at all – there's no way for our game to even show up anywhere within the same level of blades as Skyrim. If you power up your Xbox, games aren't going to be the thing you see there. If you want to discover a new XBLA game, you'd have to be pretty committed to that as a process because you're going to have to dig and find it. The sense of discovery is entirely different than it used to be on XBLA.

As far as Apple, that's a totally different animal. In the same way, anyone can stand tall and the players will go and find the games they love. That's great. The install base is so massive it's unlike anything we've experienced before in this space. But it's hyper-competitive and it's tough to stand out. Some of the big companies now spend a lot of money to climb the charts and climb the ranks with paid installs or phony installs. Frankly, that's a bit dismaying as a smaller developer trying to figure out how we compete with that. The way we compete with it is by hopefully creating great games that are differentiated from things that are out there. We've had some success with that with Hero Academy.

Are you committed to Xbox Live Arcade or are you re-examining your support of it?
We're going to be announcing Orcs Must Die 2 and, for the second version, we're only going to be on Steam. That's really based on our experience with the first game. It's a tough decision, because a lot of people did buy the game on XBLA. But the audience size between the two was so different that it really only made sense to go pursue Steam for the second version.

Is there anything that Microsoft could do to make XBLA more palatable to you guys?
There are a lot of things I hope they address. The one way you can really stand out [on XBLA] is you have to be featured in one of their programs like Summer of Arcade. They do a great job of promoting that. If you fall out of that, it's significantly harder. But I think that games have to come to the forefront and stand up with the rest of the content that's on the platform. [With the] movies, Netflix, and everything else that's on the platform, games have been pushed to the side.

To me, the redesign of the dashboard exacerbated the problem.
Yeah, and everything we kept hearing was the new redesign would make things better, but I agree with you. In fact, it got worse. It's harder to find games now. And there's the issue of dividing games into all sub-categories like indie game, arcade games, and full retail games – there really isn't much sense in that. Games are games and let's put them out there.

Apple just launched the new iPad. The technology in the tablet sector leapfrogs every six months. Do you think in the future mobile games will begin to resemble what we consider triple-A console or PC games now?
That's a great question. Obviously, there's a lot of discussion going on with that now with the iPad. We look at what Epic does with Infinity Blade 2. It's an incredible experience. It's beautiful, but it's a simpler set of game mechanics than, say, Gears of War. When I said that XBLA seems smaller than it used to be as far as the overall market, those gamers have gone somewhere and still love those type of experiences. They own iPhone and iPads. So, it seems to us that iPad – especially iPad – will become a higher-production value gaming platform in the future. I don't know if that looks like what we used to make the past, but it's capable of so much more than what is being taken advantage of today. We'd have to see the market proven before we took the big leap to get there. We wouldn't jump in with both feet. We think there are a lot of traditional gameplay experiences that we enjoy playing that haven't really been brought to iOS or Android devices today. We could spend a lot of time over the next couple years just delivering those.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2003
A NEW VENTURE
After a career in finance at companies like Price Waterhouse, Hudson pursues his video game dreams by joining Ensemble Studios

2005
MEGA-SEQUEL
Ensemble releases the next major chapter in its venerable Age of Empires series, Age of Empires III, which garners strong reviews

2006
LOST OPPORTUNITY
Ensemble begins work on a Halo MMO. Microsoft eventually cancels the project

2006
TO WAR
Microsoft announces that Ensemble is creating Halo Wars, a real-time strategy game for Xbox 360

2008
BAD NEWS
Microsoft confirms rumors that it will dissolve Ensemble Studios after the completion of Halo Wars

2009
RECOVERY
A group of Ensemble vets form Robot Entertainment. Their first project is Age of Empires Online, which is later handed off to Gas Powered Games

2011
ORC TIME
Orcs Must Die, Robot's first original title, is released to critical acclaim and strong sales on Steam and Xbox Live Arcade

2012
HEROICS
Robot ventures onto iOS with Hero Academy. The game also receives strong reviews

Extra Padding

The New iPad

by Bryan Vore & Ben Reeves

Yep, "The New iPad" is the name of the new iPad. Not iPad 3. Not iPad 2S. Only Apple knows how it's going to prevent mass confusion on keeping its tablets straight, but for now we're not worrying.

The most drastic improvement is the new Retina screen that jumps the iPad 2's 1024x768 pixel resolution up to 2048x1536. With four times the pixels, it creates razor-sharp imagery. Only a handful of apps fully use the new resolution (Kindle, Twitter, and Infinity Blade II, for example) right out of the gate, and they look great. Unenhanced apps now have a slightly pixelated, jaggy look, but hopefully by the time you read this more developers will have made the switch.

> *The most drastic improvement is the new "Retina" screen. With four times the pixels, it creates razor-sharp imagery.*

For a $129 premium, Apple is offering a 4G LTE-compatible iPad through AT&T and Verizon. Data plans start at $14.99 for 250MB at AT&T and top out at $50 for 5GB at both providers. We didn't get to test out this model, but reports from within 4G LTE coverage zones claim lightning-fast data speeds.

The new A5X processor remains a 1-GHz dual-core CPU as before, but it brings along a quad-core graphics setup. Memory has doubled from 512MB to 1GB as well.

Screen size remains the same 9.7 inches as previous models, though the weight has jumped from 1.33 to 1.44 lbs and its thickness has increased from 0.34 inches to 0.37 inches on the Wi-Fi model (the 4G edition is slightly heavier). These modest increases are tough to notice without doing side-by-side comparisons and are mostly due to the new 42.5-watt-hour lithium-polymer battery. The new iPad still gets around 10 hours a charge; the added juice is there to support the new processor, display, and 4G rather than boost the average battery cycle.

Photographers will be happy to know that the rear-facing camera has jumped from 0.7 to 5 megapixels and includes many of the bells and whistles from the iPhone 4S camera, including autofocus. Unfortunately, the front-facing camera has not been touched, so FaceTime calls still look grainy.

Storage remains the same with 16GB, 32GB, and 64GB models. You may want to consider coughing up the extra dough for more capacity, as Retina apps will take up more space than before.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

Starting at $499.99 (Wi-Fi only) or $629.99 (4G) | ***apple.com***

1
INFILTRATION
ANDROID

1 Infiltration

Infiltration is a tense new tabletop game of larceny and pushing your luck designed by Donald X. Vaccarino, the same mind behind the hit card game Dominion. Set in the dystopian futuristic fiction of the Android universe, each player takes on the role of a cyber thief attempting to infiltrate a highly secured corporation. New turns unlock more data to steal, but it's only worth it if you can escape before lockdown. Fast to play and easy to pick up, Infiltration is a great choice if you're looking for something new to play with friends.

$34.95 | *fantasyflightgames.com*

2 Star Wars Arcade Shirts

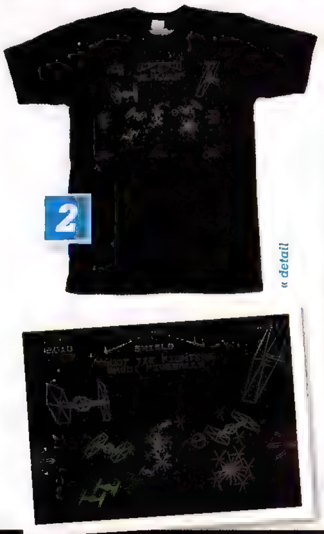
Super7 and Mighty Fine have released a set of Lucasfilm-licensed shirts so out of this world, they're from a galaxy far, far away. Hand-screened on high-quality 100-percent cotton, all three styles feature original graphical designs. Our favorite is Star Wars Arcade, a vector design that recreates the 1983 Atari classic. Don't be surprised if people suddenly find themselves mesmerized by your chest.

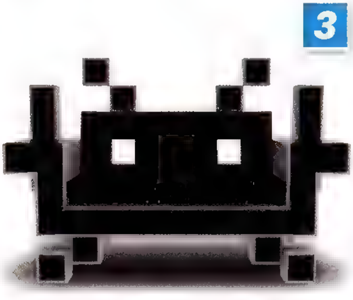
$25.00 | *super7store.com*

3 Space Invaders Sofa

Your couch might look like it was made in the '80s, but that won't earn you any geek cred. Igor Chak Design's new Space Invaders-inspired leather couch measures approximately 77x33x30 inches and features memory foam cushions. This is the kind of home invasion we can get behind.

$5,000.00 | *igorchak.com*





It's easy to get lost in the sea of products in the App Store. Here are a few beacons of light to guide your shop surfing.

COMICS BY COMIXOLOGY

Amazon's Kindle reader fills your tablet with plenty of great Sunday reading, but where are the pictures? Comixology features all your favorite comics from DC, Marvel, Image, and a host of lesser-known publishers. ComiXology's .99-cent sales will quickly turn you into a digital collector.

Free
comixology.com

DRAW SOMETHING FREE

Games like Plants vs. Zombies and Infinity Blade II are no-brainers, but Draw Something Free is a great app that lets you draw horrendous representations of real life items with your friends. It's like Pictionary with less yelling.

Free
omgpop.com/drawsomething

EPICURIOUS RECIPES & SHOPPING LIST

Punchfork is a great drool-inducing app, and Thrillist will help you find great places to eat around your city, but Epicurious has a mammoth library of meals pulled from the likes of *Bon Appétit* and *Gourmet* when you're in the mood for some home cooking. The gorgeous collection of photos helps whet the appetite, and its easy-to-use shopping tools make it the perfect grocery store companion.

Free
epicurious.com

TED

While WolframAlpha serves as a great resource database and Flipboard is an elegant new way to read online articles, TED is the best way to peruse TEDtalk's database of lectures from tech gurus, agricultural mavericks, and entertainment legends.

Free
ted.com/talks

The Day-One DLC Defense

by Joe Juba, reviews editor, Game Informer

Gamers have a complicated relationship with downloadable content. We love the idea of our favorite games getting continued support – as long as the content is interesting, fun, not too peripheral to the core game, timed correctly, and worth the price tag. All those demands are difficult to satisfy, and if a publisher makes a misstep in any direction, the accusations start flying.

BioWare and EA sparked the most recent flare-up on the topic when gamers found out that Mass Effect 3 would have paid DLC (called "From Ashes") available on launch day. The problem, according to upset fans, is that no game should have downloadable content available on day one. If content is ready to sell on launch day, it should be on the disc and included in the original purchase price. The decision to charge for this content blew up into a controversy. Some gamers insist that Mass Effect 3 is "incomplete" without the new party member in From Ashes, and others sabotaged the game's user rating on score aggregating sites like Metacritic. Invested fans can be great for a series, but if they think they're being mistreated, goodwill can be quickly transmuted into aggression.

I don't think EA and BioWare are in the wrong, but I'm not writing this to defend them specifically. Day-one DLC is a hornet's nest that has been kicked before, and each time I'm surprised by the outrage gamers display. DLC released on launch day is not an inherently evil ploy meant to give you less than you deserve; it's a step in the right direction for how publishers and developers should support their games at release and beyond.

DLC is a part of the gaming industry now. Whether it's downloadable weapons, new costumes, map packs, or story-focused episodes, gamers expect some degree of post-release support from most of the titles they buy. While the demand is there, publishers and developers are still struggling to find the best way to meet it. Quality is important; slapping a price tag on some recycled or re-skinned character models isn't enough. Horse armor may have cut it in the early days of DLC, but gamers want something more substantial now that provides incentive to continue playing our favorite games.

Putting together proper DLC requires strategy, planning, and man-hours, which means developers begin working on the material in advance. Given the effort that good DLC requires, starting to think about it after the game's release is simply too late. Some argue that this diverts development resources from the main game – heck, maybe that's true – but it's the only way we're going to get quality DLC in a timely fashion, launch day or otherwise. Some cynics would respond to that by saying, "Great! Then don't do downloadable content anymore." However, this is where the whole "DLC is a part of the industry now" point is important; ignoring the earning potential of downloadable add-ons just isn't an option for some titles anymore.

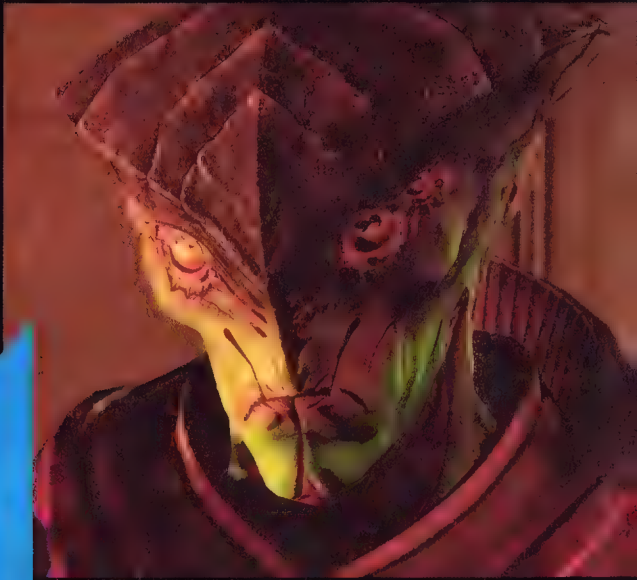
If we assume that DLC is going to happen regardless, and that gamers want it to be good instead of terrible, then we come to the core issue: timing. I understand the desire to get the most for your money. However, the presumption that a publisher owes you more content beyond the complete game you are purchasing is absurd, regardless of when it is released. When I buy a hamburger, I don't get upset that I'm not given the fries for free, despite the fact that they are already cooked and ready to serve.

As ridiculous as it sounds, that's essentially the alternative most of the upset fans are advocating with Mass Effect 3. They want From Ashes for free because it was finished, even though Mass Effect 3 is a fantastic (and, yes, complete) game out of the box. The funny thing is that the lesson that publishers are probably taking away from the ME 3 outcry isn't that they should stop having DLC ready on day one. More likely, they are thinking that to avoid an incident, they should delay any DLC that's already finished until three weeks after the game comes out. By opposing the idea of day-one DLC, you are essentially asking to be fed a fantasy in which you let yourself believe that the DLC wasn't ready sooner or being worked on at the same time as the base game. If that helps you sleep better, fine – I'd rather have the content as soon as possible.

Launch-day DLC is not only acceptable; it's better. Using BioWare as an example, the company released two downloadable party members for Mass Effect 2. The first was Zaeed, who was available at launch. The second character, Kasumi, was released several months later. I picked up Zaeed immediately and used him throughout the game. He isn't "that DLC character" to me – he's just a natural part of my Mass Effect 2 experience. By the time I got Kasumi, however, I had already beaten the game multiple times. My perception of Mass Effect 2 and its narrative had solidified, so she felt incidental and unimportant – a tacked-on cast member added too late.

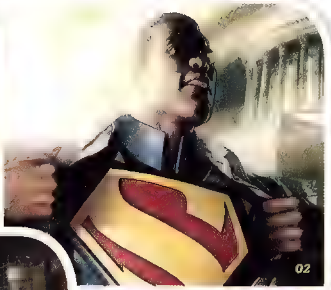
In terms of your gameplay experience, day-one DLC only has advantages. It lets you enjoy the DLC during your initial experience rather than in piecemeal post-game segments, and the developers benefit because interest in a game is at peak levels near its release. The only people getting hurt are those who think they deserve more than they're paying for, and I hope those aren't the voices shaping publishers' approach to DLC in the future. ◆

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



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

01 Mortal Kombat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15 Max Payne 3

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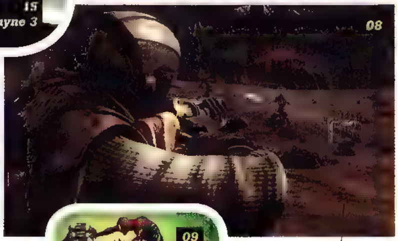
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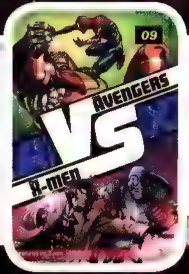

09

30

May

2012

01 New Releases

- Mortal Kombat *(Vita)*
- Sniper Elite 2 *(360)*
- Tera Online *(PC)*

02 President Superman?

DC Comics' New 52 universe still isn't a year old, yet we're already seeing stories of alternate realities and parallel Earths. The biggest head-scratcher begins in today's *Action Comics*. This story spans across three different parallel Earths and introduces two new characters, SuperDoom and President Superman From what we understand, President Superman is tasked with stopping a nuclear attack, but is bound to the White House. Shark jumped

04 Theatergoers, Assemble!

Marvel has been teasing an Avengers movie for years thrugh post-credit Easter eggs involving Nick Fury. From these we know that the heroes in the Avengers movie will include Iron Man, Captain America, and that doofus Thor. What you might not know is that Nick Fury (played by Samuel L. Jackson) has been recruiting Avengers for decades. Comic fans should also expect to see Anakin Skywalker, Dr. Alan Grant, John Travolta, and some snakes. This movie is going to rule!

08 New Releases

- Starhawk *(PS3)*

09 The Comic Book Event of the Year

This summer, the Avengers and X-Men – the "good guys" in the Marvel Universe – are at war with each another. In addition to delivering the largest scale super hero throwdown this universe has ever seen, *Avengers vs X-Men* tells the story of the Phoenix Force's rebirth. This 12-issue story is penned by Brian Michael Bendis, Matt Fracton, Jason Aaron, Ed Brubaker, and Jonathan Hickman. The event is in full swing now, unfolding in two issues each month

11 The Reinvention of Johnny Depp

Tim Burton is known for making strange movies with mesmerizing visuals. Johnny Depp is known as an actor with great range. These two are finally teaming up in today's release, *Dark Shadows*. Instead of playing the heartthrob, this film gives Depp a chance to broaden his horizons by putting on creepy make-up He will also get to meet new people like actress Helena Bonham Carter, who has a major role in the film. Burton, Depp, and Carter together at last – who knows what wonders this team-up could produce?

15 New Releases

- Battleship *(PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, DS)*
- Diablo III *(PC)*
- Game of Thrones *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- Max Payne 3 *(PS3, 360)*

18 Hollywood Taps A Board Game

Now that Hollywood has officially milked every cartoon from the Hanna-Barbera era, the only thing left is the Milton Bradley catalog. The first board game to hit the silver screen is *Battleship*. You know, that game where you just shout out letters and numbers. We're going to sit through that for two hours, people. Why didn't they use a board game with a little more action like Mouse Trap or Hungry Hungry Hippos? At least we know they can't make a sequel. Once the battleship is sunk, it's game over

20 New Releases

- Mario Tennis Open *(3DS)*

22 New Releases

- Dragon's Dogma *(PS3, 360)*
- Ghost Recon: Future Soldier *(PS3, 360)*
- Men in Black III *(PS3, 360, Wii)*
- Risen 2: Dark Waters *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- Rollercoaster Tycoon *(3DS)*

25 Protecting Earth Again

Will Smith is a great actor, but he hasn't been in a movie since 2008 Why would his choice for mounting a comeback be *Men in Black III*? At least Tommy Lee Jones had the common sense to only sign up for a cameo role – most of this story is set in 1969. Josh Brolin plays a young Agent K, and Will Smith plays a getting-older Will Smith. You play the role of the tired moviegoer who gave up after *Men in Black II*.

29 New Releases

- Damage Inc : Pacific Squadron WII *(360)*
- Max Payne 3 *(PC)*
- Resistance: Burning Skies *(Vita)*

30 A ClapTrap For Your Shelf

No video game robot has danced or spit out more insults than Borderlands' ClapTrap. This beloved/loathed character can now be yours, thanks to NECA Toys' new Borderlands action figure line. This series also offers the Psycho Bandit that was featured on the game's box. As the year progresses, NECA will release new series consisting of new characters and enemies from Borderlands 2.

HALO 4

» Platform
Xbox 360

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

» Publisher
Microsoft

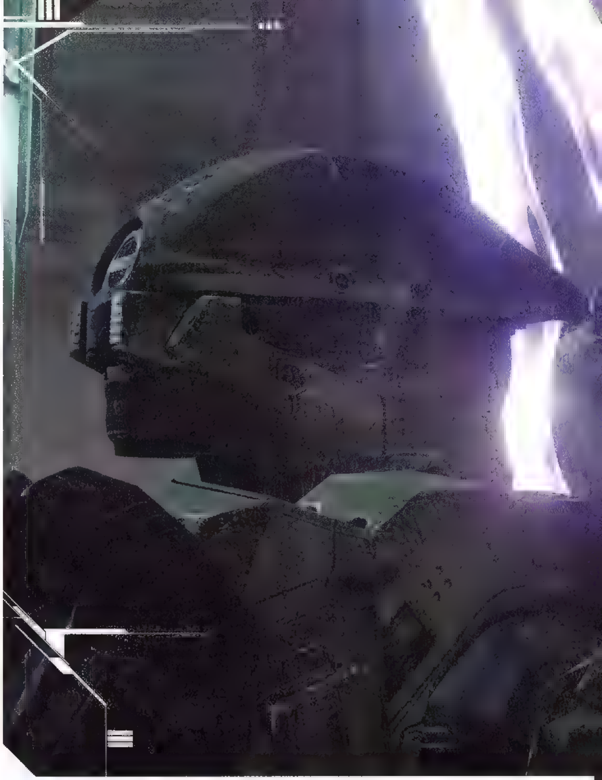
» Developer
343 Industries

» Release
Holiday

REINVENTING THE CIRCLE

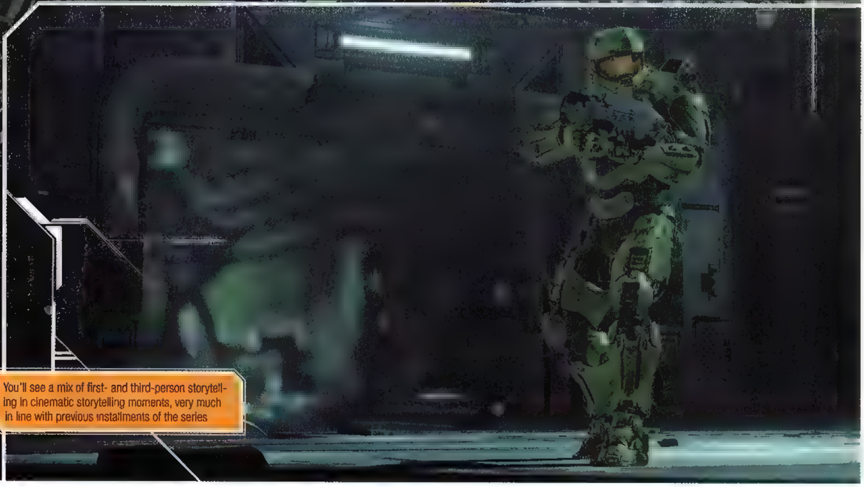
BY MATT MILLER

Four years have passed since Master Chief's epic sci-fi trilogy concluded. When we last saw the Halo hero, he was marooned on the edge of the galaxy with only an artificial intelligence named Cortana for company, and presumed dead by those he left behind. As we parted from the video game icon, his shattered derelict ship approached a strange glimmering sphere and then everything faded to black.



IT'S TIME FOR ANSWERS.

Starting with Halo 4, the new Reclaimer Saga picks up where Halo 3 left off, delving deep into the mysteries left behind now that the Human-Covenant war is over. Brand-new enemies threaten the galaxy, and some familiar foes return. An unexplored land awaits discovery, though it is far more unusual than a normal planet. Keeping with the promise established by over a decade of multiplayer innovation, Halo 4 also introduces a remarkable new vision for bringing players together to play, and more importantly, keep them coming back week after week.

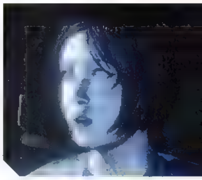


You'll see a mix of first- and third-person storytelling in cinematic storytelling moments, very much in line with previous installments of the series

With franchise creators Bungie breaking away from Microsoft to start a new project with Activision, the developers at 343 Industries are the new shepherds guiding Halo forward. Unique among game studios, Microsoft created 343 specifically to be the wardens of the franchise. Formed from hundreds of creators who came together solely around their enthusiasm for Halo, the team remains a wild card in the eyes of the public. Series fans reserve strong affection for Halo's original creators, so they wonder: Can 343 take up the mantle and give fans a reason to be enthused yet again?

It remains to be seen, but after hours of discussing Halo 4 with the new creative team, we think they're headed in a worthy direction. "We have about 250 people now," says executive producer Kiki Wolfkill. "I think three and a half years ago we were at about 30 people. This is a group made of people that came here from all over the world, left all sorts of great jobs. They came here because they believed in Halo. More than that, they were incredibly passionate about what they thought Halo could be. 343 came together to define what the next decade of Halo is going to be."

Halo 4 is a direct continuation of the events of Halo 3, but it's really a fundamentally new story that just happens to star some of the same main characters. The year is 2557. Four years, seven months, and ten days have passed since the UNSC ship *Forward Unto Dawn* was split in two and the stern section was sent careening across outer space with Master Chief and Cortana.



DESCENT INTO MADNESS

A little-known element of the Halo fiction is about to become a big problem for the Master Chief and his longtime AI partner, Cortana. As a "smart" artificial intelligence, Cortana can process enormous amounts of data. But that same capability is a death sentence for these ultra-intelligent sentient computers. After approximately seven years, smart AIs fall into unusual patterns of thought, and even into madness. Eventually, the process leads to death. As Halo 4 begins years after we last saw her, Cortana must deal with her own imminent decline. "Cortana's relationship with Chief, and the idea of rampancy are going to be very, very important to the whole story," says franchise development director Frank O'Connor. "It will be a part of the story really quickly as you get into the game."

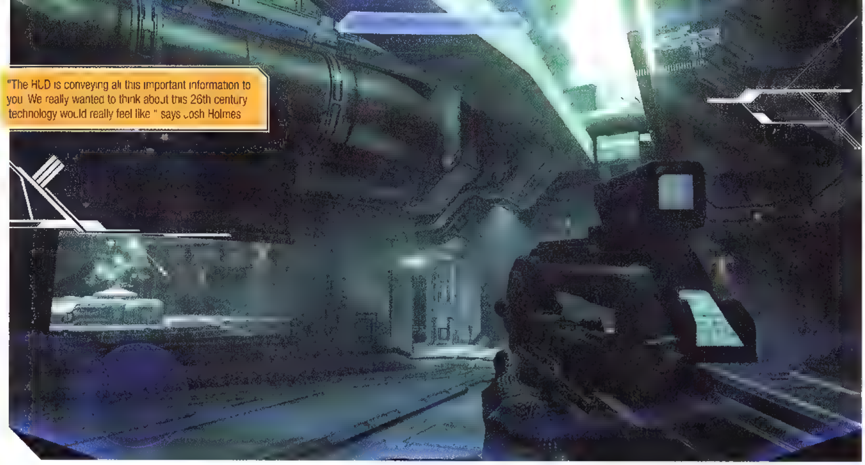
Despite her impending decline, Cortana is different from many other AIs due to the odd circumstances surrounding her creation, as well as numerous encounters with strange intelligences like Forerunner AIs and the Gravemind. Will these encounters expedite her demise, or offer her a chance for survival? And how exactly will the relationship between the series' two most important characters change? "It's about finally moving their relationship beyond the realm of video game exposition, and what it really means to have your only friend be more human than you, but be an artificial intelligence," O'Connor says. "And what it means to your place in the universe to be put into a position where you have to deal with her rampancy. You literally rescue her in Halo 3, but her jeopardy was geographical rather than existential."

"This game is really about the return of the Master Chief," says creative director Josh Holmes. "There's a lot of focus on what that means, both in terms of how we embody the play experience of being the Chief and really connect the player on a deeper level of immersion, as well as on the story side – exploring the Chief more as a character and as a man." An early announcement video for Halo 4 revealed Cortana's frenzied call to awaken the cryo-frozen Master Chief to imminent danger, but the teaser told only part of the story.

When 343 Industries booted up Halo 4's new campaign, we witnessed the events that shape the first level of the new game. In the cold, shattered interior of the *Forward Unto Dawn*, Cortana's slim blue-lit form flickers on a pillar, and we get the first glimpse of the character's new visual presentation, chosen during her long years in solitude while the Chief slept. She looks terrified and alone as the ship's intruder alerts ring out. Someone, or something, is trying to board their vessel. "Wake up, Chief, I need you," she calls.

Just like in the original Halo: Combat Evolved, players slip into John-117's armor as he emerges from cryo. As Master Chief leaves his cryo-chamber, it's hard to ignore the gorgeous visual clarity on display even in this first, dark room. Halo 4 runs on a redesigned version of the tech that powered Halo: Reach, but our first glance speaks volumes about how far the graphical presentation has come. Lighting and shader technology has

Halo 4 includes a detailed prologue before the campaign begins to bring players up to speed, whether you've played the previous games or not



"The HUD is conveying all this important information to you. We really wanted to think about this 26th century technology would really feel like," says Josh Holmes

made tremendous progress; the azure-lit interior of the ship looks haunted and dim, but still sharp and detailed. True native 720p presentation with FXAA makes the characters and environments look crisp even at extremely close range. Newly implemented performance and motion-capture work on the character's movements lends an air of reality and natural motion to the experience.

"Why did you wake me?" the Chief asks.

"Hang on," Cortana says. "Bringing your systems online now. I rewrote your suit's firmware while you were out." The new helmet HUD speaks to the fruits of her labor, exhibiting subtle parallax movement during athletic actions, and more visual cues that indicate the presence of the helmet.

"Hmph. You've been busy," the Chief responds. Cortana and Master Chief fall back into familiar patterns of sarcasm, even as imminent danger threatens. The friendship between Cortana and John has always been important to the Halo storyline, but 343 Industries says the relationship between the two takes center stage in the new game. Equally important, Halo 4 explores the humanity and inner character conflicts of both characters. Even the game's initial marketing tagline reads, "Wake Up John," a sign that the game is moving away from the impersonal rank designation of its hero and closer to a fleshed out human personality.

"Seems like old times," Cortana jokes as John gets his bearings.

"Ready to get back to work?" he asks.

"I thought you'd never ask."

John slips the chip containing Cortana into the slot in the back of his helmet, and they're off.

"We've got intruder alerts lighting up on multiple decks," Cortana continues, now a voice in the back of the player's head. "Our best bet to figure out who is boarding us is the observation deck. Four floors up."

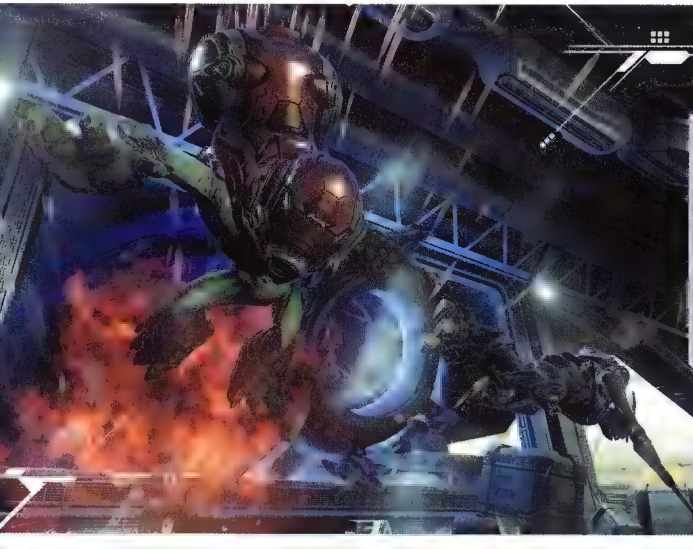
Moving down the hallway, an elevator offers the fastest route. "Those doors look sealed tight," Cortana says.

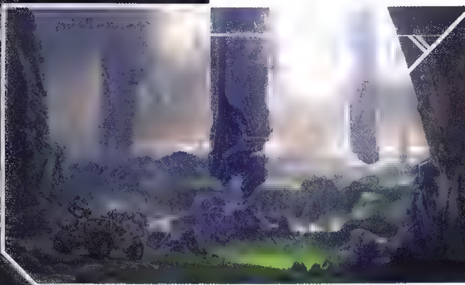
"Not a problem," John replies. As he tears the doorway open, a roaring vacuum pulls at the Spartan, threatening to send him hurtling off his feet. Clearly, part of the ship remains without pressure. For players, the following scene offers a glimpse of Halo 4's newly minted narrative focused scenes. Built to offer exciting action moments independent of combat, players remain in control as unique situations unfold. As Master Chief

WHO ARE THE FORERUNNERS?

The next trilogy of Halo games deeply explores the mysterious Forerunner alien race. "The Forerunners are this ancient, long-vanished civilization that was responsible for what was effectively the biggest atrocity in the history of the galaxy, which was the wiping out of all sentient life in order to save it," says franchise development director Frank O'Connor. "Forerunners had contact with humanity and, in fact, war with humanity more than a hundred thousand years ago. The Forerunners defeated the humans, and then subjugated them by using a process of devolution. Basically, bombing them back into the stone age. Some of that will just be backstory, and some of it will have really direct connections."

As O'Connor describes, the Forerunners confronted the threat of the Flood millennia ago by using the Halos, and wiping out sentient life across the galaxy. One lesser-known aspect of the Forerunner story is another type of artificial construct called shield worlds. "A shield world is an artificial planet that the Forerunners specifically used to try to take refuge from the Flood and other calamities like the Halo activation," O'Connor says. Expect the concept of these shield worlds to play a big part in the new story.





climbs through the broken elevator shaft, his hands reach out to grasp the rungs as tons of debris hurtle down towards him, making him slide back and forth to keep his place. After a harrowing climb, he pulls himself up and prepares to ask Cortana a question, when out of nowhere a roaring Elite charges, energy sword in hand. A furious melee ensues as the Chief grabs the alien soldier's arms while its four-pronged mouth snaps in anger John flings the Elite away, and it goes tumbling down the shaft.

"I thought we had a truce with the Covenant," Chief comments.

"You're welcome to take it up with them."

Heading for the observation deck, more Covenant show up, and the guns finally come out. As much as Halo 4 aims to offer new experiences, this first firefight is striking in how much it feels like the classic Halo experience. Frenzied Grunts run about, roaring Elites leap out from behind cover, plasma bolts fly across the screen, and the player moves through it all as a one-man wrecking crew.

As the last enemy drops, Cortana directs the Chief to open up the deck's blast shield. "The good news is that these Covenant aren't outfitted like standard military. It's possible we just came across a rogue salvage ship," she suggests, as Master Chief goes about his task. The metal shielding lifts up and away from the wide bay windows. Outside, Covenant ships swarm like flies. "Or, we might have stumbled into a whole Covenant fleet," Cortana says

Landing craft flank the ship and smash in through the hull, issuing new waves of enemies. Why are the Covenant here? Are they part of the same force that fought at the side of the Chief and the Arbiter during the conflict against the Flood? What has happened in recent years to make the Covenant soldiers once again into bitter enemies? As the demo closes, it's still unclear. John stares around at the crumbling hulk of the *Forward Unto Dawn*. "We need to get off this ship," he says.

The events awaiting Master Chief and Cortana after their ship battle are the most enticing part about the single-player campaign. Though it's unclear how it happens, the pair eventually crash land onto the unusual world that has remained mysterious since the end of Halo 3. Called Requiem, the sphere is actually a variation on a scientific theoretical object called a Dyson Sphere. Originally hypothesized by Freeman Dyson in 1960, a Dyson Sphere is an enormous artificially created sphere surrounding a star that can harness its full output of energy. In Halo 4, the Master Chief and Cortana encounter an unusual deviation crafted by the Forerunner civilization millennia ago. Instead of surrounding a star, the massive exterior shell of Requiem encases a planet – a variation on a Forerunner shield world. The shell can protect anything inside from the devastating effects of

"We're immersing players in more story moments as they're going through gameplay," says Frank O'Connor. "The elevator shaft sequence is a really simple version of that, but that will evolve as you make your way through the game, and put you into slightly more superhero moments."

"One of the things that we really wanted to do with this mission in particular is reintroduce players to familiar Halo," Holmes says. "We're helping players step back into that universe before we take them and turn the whole thing on its head and change all the rules."

Halo weapons. Could this mean there are still Forerunners alive inside of Requiem?

The developers at 343 won't spill all the beans, but they gave us some sizable hints about what awaits inside. Halo 4 introduces a brand-new enemy genus into the sandbox. No, that doesn't just mean a new race in the Covenant or a special new mutation of the Flood. The new antagonists offer a full array of different enemy types, each of which is armed with new weapons and equipment. "We wanted to add a whole new class of enemies that Chief would discover when he crash lands on Requiem, this strange planet that he's never been to before," Holmes says. "That gives us different challenges for the player to learn to go up against, but also new opportunities and tools, both in terms of abilities and weapons that come from those enemies." 343 intimated that the inclusion of these new foes results in the largest single expansion to the game's sandbox since the franchise began.

"From a creative standpoint, in approaching that enemy we wanted to create something that played very differently from the Covenant," Holmes continues. "We didn't want it to just feel like something that looks different but still plays the same way. We wanted to create a set of enemies that work together in a collaborative way, where each one of those enemies builds on and accentuates the abilities of the others. So when you face an individual enemy they offer one challenge, but as you layer those enemies together it changes the experience in important ways and heightens the challenge. If anything, they're kind of elevated in terms of their intelligence and complexity relative to the Covenant."

While we don't know exactly what or who lives on Requiem, we got some interesting glimpses of the land. The massive artificial world delivers a fascinating new landscape for players to explore. Seeing the planet evokes many of the same feelings that came to mind the first time we crash-landed on the original Halo back in 2001. Like that experience, the environments are strange and alien in form. Forerunner buildings litter the countryside in various states of activation or ruin. "You see what are obviously Forerunner architecture in there, but they're definitely different from the abandoned, inert Forerunner stuff that we've seen in the past," says franchise development director Frank O'Connor. "These are much more active, dangerous, living, breathing spaces." Weird flora and fauna inhabit the jungles and plains; we see one piece of art depicting a giant floating squid inhabiting a tree-filled habitat. Most fascinating, the sky above isn't blue; huge stalactite like pillars hang from an ever-present ceiling over the entire landscape. "When you're looking up into the skybox, the sky you're seeing is the inner shell," O'Connor says.

A tantalizing new planet and variations on combat against new enemies could be the trick needed to revitalize a decade-old gameplay pattern. Meanwhile, another part of the team at 343 is busy plotting the exciting future of Halo multiplayer.

HALO MULTIPLAYER

INFINITE PLAY

THE NEW HALO MULTIPLAYER EXPERIENCE

WHEN PLAYERS BOOT UP HALO 4, a new option awaits called Infinity. This mysterious name is the new home of Halo multiplayer, and it represents a quantum shift in the thinking about one of gaming's most iconic and popular game modes.

[redacted]

"A lot of what we love about Halo comes from the story and the universe – the sense of place," Holmes says. "That's something that has really been lacking on the multiplayer side. You have all your story and meaning in the campaign, and then you jump into multiplayer and just kill dudes. None of it really matters."

In contrast, Halo 4's multiplayer ties directly to the campaign. You take on the role of a new breed of soldier in the UNSC military force – the Spartan IV – the continued evolution of the super soldier program that helped end the war against the Covenant and the Flood. Drawn from the top ranks of existing special ops soldiers, this new breed of Spartan (equipped in a lightweight variation of Mjolnir armor) are deployed aboard the largest spacecraft in the human fleet. The *UNSC Infinity* is a massive vessel over three kilometers in length that's sent on a mission in deep space. "The *Infinity* directly crosses the Master Chief's path over the course of the campaign," Holmes says.

Along the way, the Spartan IVs train for combat aboard the *Infinity*'s state-of-the art combat deck. Like *Star Trek*'s holodeck or the *X-Men*'s Danger Room, the *Infinity*'s combat deck can replicate any known environment to

Halo 4's campaign is still playable with four players online. 343 Industries has no plans to include a dedicated Firefight mode

allow the Spartans to test their mettle. Whether in single combat or in teams of red and blue tasked with unique objectives, the combat deck plays host to all the competitive multiplayer action that players care to engage in.

Advancing past the cosmetic armor rewards available in Halo: Reach's multiplayer, Halo 4 lets players apply gameplay-changing upgrades to their character much like Call of Duty or Battlefield. "You're going to start off as a recruit, and proceed through the ranks," says lead multiplayer designer Brad Welch. "As you rank up, you'll unlock more abilities. You gain Spartan points, which you can use to purchase items to put in your loadouts. You can construct these loadouts around your preferred playstyle." Players slowly unlock an array of weapons, armor abilities, and modifications for a soldier to bring into battle. The resulting loadouts are like your own customized class, and you can switch between these loadouts at any respawn in the heat of battle.

Why are the Spartan IVs training so hard? Halo 4's most surprising new addition is a revolutionary new cooperative mode called Spartan Ops. "Think of it as away missions from the *UNSC Infinity*," Holmes says. Built to be played with your Spartan IV from the competitive multiplayer, Spartan Ops let up to four players work together on an evolving episodic campaign, comparable in scope and size to in the single-player storyline.

Spartan Ops is structured like a TV season. Each week, players gain access to a new CG movie sequence that slowly unfolds the story of the *UNSC Infinity* mission, chronicling the struggles the Spartans encounter along the way. Along with each story component, five objective-based cooperative missions will release. These missions are new content, offering unseen events, locations, and challenges to overcome for that week. "The events that are taking place within that weekly series are then crossing over with missions that are available for you and your friends to engage in as part of this ongoing story-driven cooperative experience online," Holmes says.

>> continued on page 50

HALO
CRYPTUM
THE FORERUNNER SAGA
GREG BEAR

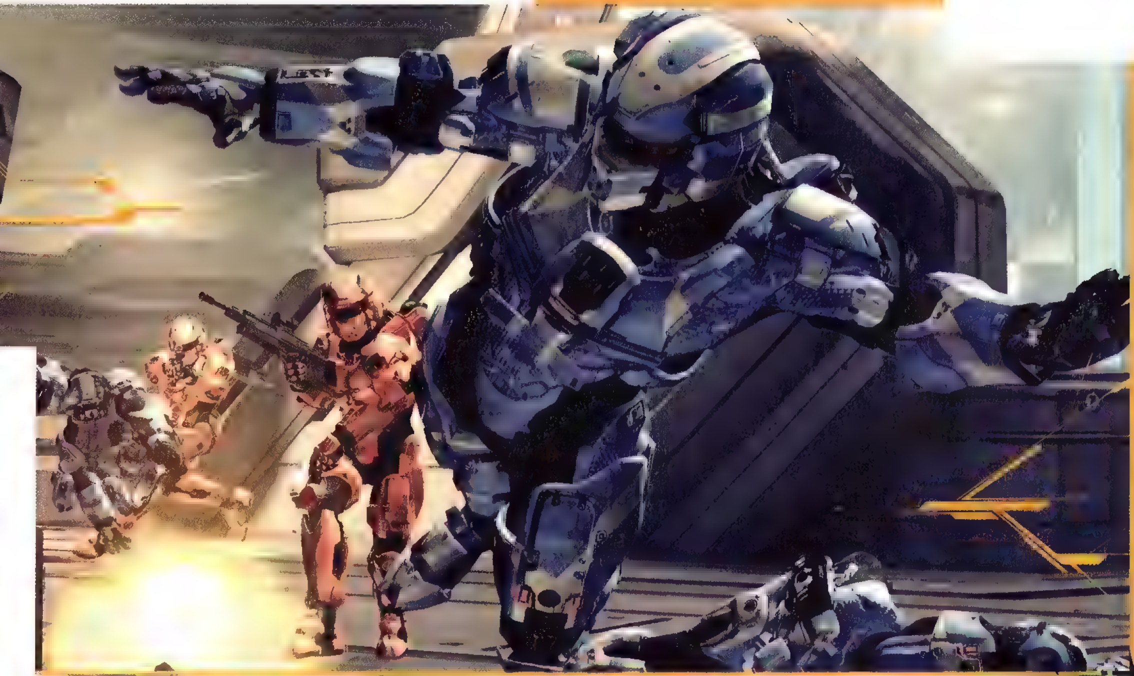
HALO
GLASSLANDS
KAREN TRAVISS

PREPARING FOR HALO 4

If you're mad with anticipation for Halo 4, 343 Industries already has a wealth of story content you can check out right now. Two independent book series are currently on store shelves, and each offers hints about what is coming in Halo 4. The studio says the events of the novels directly tie to some of the characters and events in both the single-player and multiplayer components of Halo 4. "If players are poring through the Traviss and Bear novels, they're not wasting their time," says franchise development director Frank O'Connor "They're going to find an awful lot of stuff that connects either end of the universe."

Greg Bear's *Halo: Cryptum* is the first book of The Forerunner Saga, which details the fabled civilization that built the Halos over 100,000 years before the events of the games. The book chronicles the Forerunners' contact with an early humanity, and also sheds light on two Forerunner characters – the Didact and the Librarian – which have been mysteriously name dropped in the terminals of Halo 3 and Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary. *Cryptum* and its sequel *Primordium* are hard sci-fi stories filled with unusual technology and challenging views of reality, but after reading the books you'll have a dramatically increased understanding of the direction 343 is going with Halo 4's single-player campaign.

Karen Traviss' *Halo: Glasslands* is the first book of a second series that is more familiar and approachable to series fans. The book chronicles events back on Earth and elsewhere after the end of Halo 3 while detailing the Arbiter's bid to reunite the Elites and the adventures of Catherine Halsey, the creator of the Spartan IIs. Among other things, *Glasslands* introduces the *UNSC Infinity*, the ship that takes center stage in Halo 4's multiplayer mode.



PLAYING HALO 4

During our visit to 343 Industries, three Game Informer editors settled in with five 343 developers to try the new competitive multiplayer mode.

Halo 4's Infinity multiplayer begins with your own personal Spartan IV soldier. While the early build we played didn't include most of the planned cosmetic armor adjustments, it allowed for extensive customization of a personal loadout. Choosing primary weapon, secondary weapon, grenade type, and armor ability were all available, and a fifth grayed-out selection revealed the option for modifications.

Whether as part of a loadout or as pick-ups during matches, we saw weapons including the assault rifle, battle rifle, DMR, assault carbine, Covenant carbine, shotgun, rocket launcher, sniper rifle, magnum, and plasma pistol, but we were also told that numerous unrevealed weapons will change up the battlefield.

Armor abilities include a hologram that can charge forward to distract enemies, a jetpack to send you soaring over them, Forerunner vision to let you see through walls, and the classic active camo to stay hidden. Interestingly, the sprint ability was nowhere to be found. Why? Sprint is now a standard ability available at all times.

Once out of the menus, we jumped into a new game mode called Regicide. A variation on familiar free-for-all action, Regicide sets the leading scorer as the king. Every opponent that the king kills raises his bounty; other players have to kill the king to claim the reward.

We played several frantic matches of Regicide on the new Wraparound map. Set in a Forerunner solar power facility, the entire environment is suffused in a bright white glow. Structurally, the map is a tight and fast-paced arena built around vertical play spaces, with lots of opportunities to shoot up to higher levels or drop down to lower ones. A deadly center area inevitably draws players into brutal throwdowns unless you're cautious enough to stay ensconced in the outer corridors.

Later, we jumped over to enjoy some old-fashioned Team Slayer in a new map call Warhouse. The abandoned UNSC manufacturing facility is dominated by a hulking (and inoperable) Cyclops mech at its center. Tight corners and plenty of twists and turns in the surrounding chambers assure a lot of close quarters face-offs ideal for shotgun, assault rifle, and melee-focused players. Three stories tall, with lots of external platforms at the outer edges, Warhouse's small size and many turns will take some time to master.

As we did our best to hold our own against the folks who designed these environments, the action felt the way it should. After playing hundreds of hours of Halo multiplayer over the years, these new maps kept with the fast pace and frantic energy that has always made Halo matches so much fun.

That's not to say 343 Industries isn't mixing up the gameplay. For one, there's no delay on respawn after death; a tap on the X button sends you right back into the action. Another fun new feature is weapon drops; powerful items like sniper rifles or rocket launchers will show up at random drop points around the map, and players can fight for the prize. This gives the matches other focal points, and it also helps alleviate the advantage that longtime players always used to have over newer recruits; the best weapons are not always going to be found at the same spawn points.

We also love the new post-game reward system, which shells out medals and Spartan points for all sorts of in-game actions. We saw medals for things like assists on a kill, revenge kills, and even causing distractions. Like Battlefield, even players without an immaculate kill/death ratio should be able to earn ranks and points. The developers have also implemented a new matchmaking feature for joining games in progress, which should dramatically improve the legacy issue of team members who quit halfway through a fight.

>> continued from page 47

"We've always imagined these water cooler conversations where you're talking about two things," O'Connor says. "You're saying: 'I thought it was crazy when character X did thing Y to person Z', where you have that *Lost*-style conversation. But in the same conversation, and with the same people, you'd say: 'I thought it was cool when you jumped on the back of that thing and hoisted the driver out and threw him over the cliff.' I think it's going to be a really interesting way to have those emergent conversations happen."

Like competitive play, these operations reward you with Spartan points to level up your combatant. And like in the campaign, you can set the difficulty of your Spartan Ops missions from Easy all the way up to Legendary, and replay these missions to your heart's content.

However, you won't be replaying for long. The next week will bring the next cinematic chapter of the story and another five missions to tackle. To be clear, these aren't paid DLC packs – Spartan Ops are part of the experience you buy when you purchase Halo 4, and the story will stretch out across several months of content. "The Spartan Ops season is part of what you get with the package when you buy Halo 4," Holmes promises. "We want to keep players engaged and coming back week to week. We want to bridge that gap between players who really care primarily about storytelling and give them an opportunity to get their feet wet and experience multiplayer."

If 343 Industries can manage to tell both a compelling story and roll out compelling new missions every single week, it could represent a paradigm shift in how studios encourage a community to stay involved with a game long after its initial launch. "By providing players the opportunity to constantly engage with new content that they can come back to, we ultimately have them moving between campaign, co-op, and competitive, while weaving this high level story across it all," says lead Spartan Ops designer Chris Haluke. "Providing that narrative arc across the whole thing really ties the experience together."

With a campaign that remains shrouded in secrecy and a creative new approach to multiplayer, 343 Industries is ushering in a new age for one of gaming's most popular franchises. "When we came together to think about Halo 4 and what it means to bring Chief back, there were really three big focus areas for us," says executive producer Kiki Wolfkill. "One was storytelling – bringing back that epic sci-fi experience with Chief, with mysterious worlds to explore. We wanted visceral action and a really immersive first-person experience, grounded in our sandbox. And then finally, really building on our legacy of innovation with multiplayer." 343 Industries has some big shoes to fill, but if the newly founded team nails these three series pillars, and more importantly, ties them together, Halo could be on track for another decade near the top of the gaming charts.

We have more Halo 4 content to share than can fit in one article. We'll be rolling out additional interviews and articles all month at gameinformer.com/halo4. Watch our detailed video conversation with audio director Sotaro Tojima, and learn about the surprising composer writing music for the game. Take a closer look at art from the game, and learn more about the mysterious sphere called Requiem. And don't miss our dedicated week of multiplayer stories. All this and more is on the way in the coming weeks.

343 Industries occupies the same building in which Bungie crafted previous Halo games

343
CAUTI
Fuuuuuu

Competitive multiplayer focuses on the Spartan IVs. Elites will not be playable.

"There's no notion of expiring Spartan Ops content; players who come in part way into the season are able to catch up on the story and understand the context," says Josh Holmes

A Retu

rn Trip to Tyria

Guild Wars 2 has been a long time coming. Originally revealed just over five years ago, we've seen the game slowly take shape and begin to stand out as an MMO competitor over the course of numerous press events, convention showings, and betas. While our excitement has grown, so has our eagerness for the game to release so others can see why we're so enamored.

With this long-awaited sequel finally nearing launch, we took one more journey into a pre-release version to check out a new playable race, a challenging dungeon, and our first experience with a mid-level character.

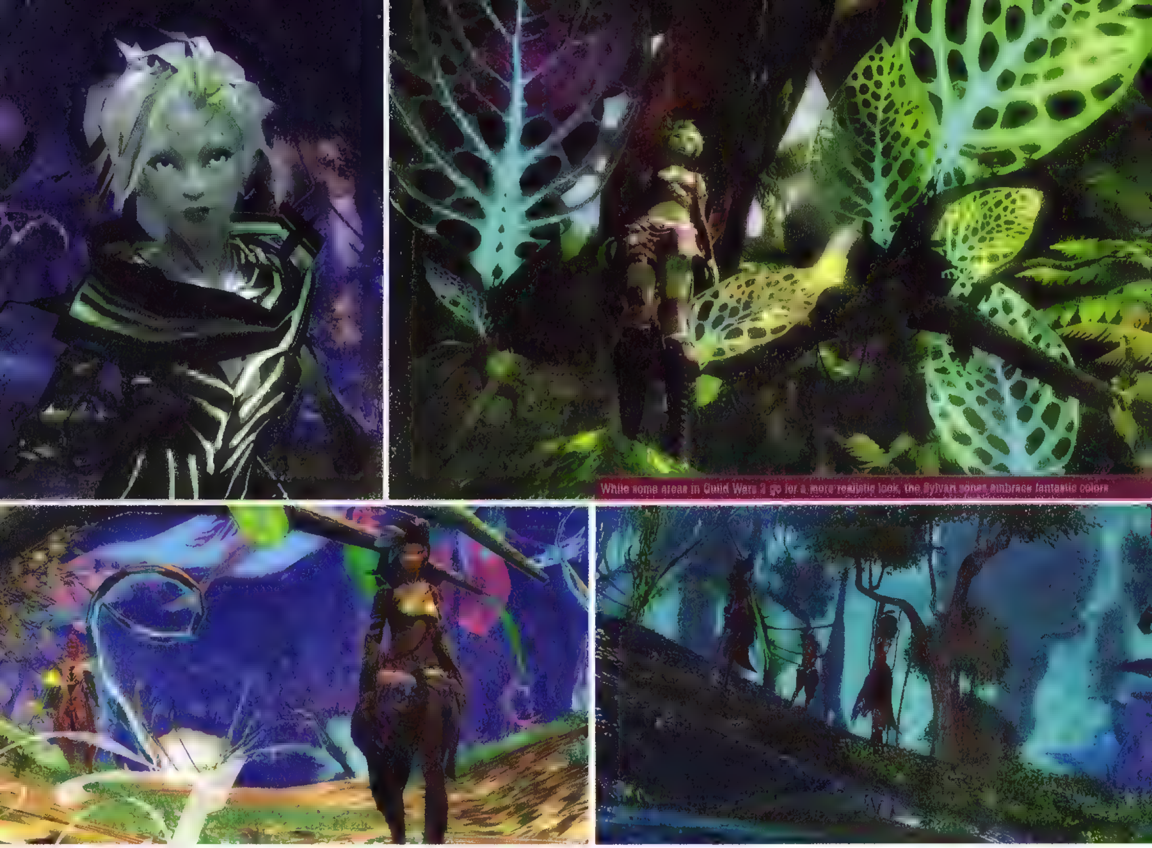
» Platform
PC

» Style
Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing

» Publisher
NCSoft

» Developer
ArenaNet

» Release
2012



While some areas in Guild Wars 2 go for a more realistic look, the Sylvari zones embrace fantastic colors

Introducing the Sylvari

by Phil Kollar

Don't mistake this playable race for your average elf rip-off. The Sylvari are fresh to the realms of Tyria, having only appeared in the last 25 years. They're tied to nature both spiritually and physically – their bodies are plant-like, with leaves for hair and roots and bark for skin. Each member of the Sylvari is called to life beneath the Pale Tree, a giant flower where they rest in a realm known as the Dream.

While creating a character in Guild Wars 2 includes the expected visual toggles and class choices, you also have the opportunity to pick lore elements to determine your character's story and dialogue options. Here are some of the choices you make when creating a Sylvari:

What symbol do you wear?

Conquerer's Pauldrons – These were given to your character as a gift from a famous hero.

Fanatic's Pauldrons – These represent your Sylvari's unyielding faith to his or her nature-based spiritual beliefs.

Visionary's Helm – This accessory is worn by Sylvari fascinated with the unending wonders left to be discovered in the world.

What vision did you have in the Dream?

The White Stag – This enchanted creature foretells a future full of magic and power – if you can catch it.

The Green Knight – This powerful opponent will provide a challenge for your Sylvari that is increased by his apparent immortality.

The Shield of the Moon – This ancient relic is highly sought after by heroes focused on the art of healing.

When were you awoken?

Cycle of Dawn – Sylvari who wake during this period tend to be skilled speakers and diplomats.

Cycle of Noon – These Sylvari focus on hunting and honing combat skills.

Cycle of Dusk – Intellectuals and those obsessed with more cerebral pursuits are brought to life during this cycle.

Cycle of Night – This cycle is reserved for the more roguish Sylvari, centered on hiding secrets and skulking where they cannot be seen.

Building my story

My journey as a Sylvari begins within the mystical Dream prior to being called into Tyria proper. This otherworldly, plant-covered dimension's pristine beauty is threatened by an incursion. "Something intrudes upon the dream," the introductory narration warns.

Upon loading my Sylvari guardian, I'm greeted by a flickering vision of Caithe, a Sylvari who is already awake but projecting herself into the Dream. She tells me that nightmare creatures are attempting to take over the Dream. I need to drive them back before I can enter the real world.

My guardian begins equipped with a simple mace and a single attack: true strike. Every time I defeat a nightmare creature – mostly represented by twisted wolves in this tutorial zone – I gain progress toward unlocking new mace powers. My second ability is symbol of faith, an area of effect ability that hurts any enemies nearby and heals allies.

After extinguishing a handful of nightmares, I unlock the tutorial-ending event. Each race's tutorial features a unique ending event showcasing some of the massive creatures you can expect to take on throughout Guild Wars 2. In the case of the Sylvari, a giant four-legged beast made of trees and rocks springs to life.

This monster is called Shadow of the Dragon. As I beat its legs into submission, it summons new nightmares to distract me and pulls giant brambles from the ground that damage me unless I move. I'm joined by a couple of other newborn Sylvari players who help me kill the creature and secure our exit from the Dream.

Once out in the world proper, I switch my mace with a scepter and shield combo. This swaps out those early mace skills I learned with a new set of abilities. Though the skills are a similar mix of auto-attacks and area of effect abilities, they're now ranged, allowing me to kite opponents as a ranged tank. The shield of absorption ability creates a dome around me that pushes enemies back and absorbs projectiles from enemies. Shield of judgment sends out a wave of energy that does damage to enemies while providing a protective buff to friends.

As a "Valiant of the Wyld Hunt," my first task in Tyria is to wander the colorful forest near the Sylvari capital and help with some of the random events in the area. These dynamic quests are relatively simple but varied. What's most interesting is how completing (or failing) objectives can spawn new events.

For example, one Sylvari hanging out by a pond asks me to kill the giant fireflies in the area and gather their luminescence. Once I've found enough of the substance, the NPC uses it to light nearby lamps, at which point giant mosquitos swarm the path. This begins another event where I need to wipe out the insects.

In another area, I'm asked to pull undead from the ground and defeat them. If this event goes unfinished by any passing heroes for long enough, the nearby settlement is overtaken by undead. At this point, a new event pops up asking you to clear away the undead intruders. Players are unable to use the nearby fast travel point until they help.

By the time I clear away a few of these events, I've hit level three, and I'm ready to continue my story. Of the character creation decisions, the choice of which vision you had has an immediate impact on the story. I meet up with Caithe in the Sylvari capital, under the Pale Tree, but our discussion is interrupted by a civilian screaming about an attack. When I exit the building, I encounter Bercilak, the Green Knight from my vision.

In my first of what's sure to be several battles against Bercilak, I use my shield skills to push him back as I circle and let off shots from the scepter. The fast-paced, positional combat of Guild Wars 2 shines here, as I can quickly dodge attacks with combat rolls and continually push Bercilak away. Unfortunately, every time I bring him down, he resurrects with full health.

After killing Bercilak three times, I finally trigger a cutscene where he laughs and runs off. Caithe and I decide to search for a weakness to the Green Knight, beginning by talking to his love interest, Gairwen. I find her mourning at a gravestone, and she informs me that Bercilak murdered her lover. She's willing to provide more info on the Green Knight, but only if we help defend the gravesite from encroaching undead.

In a strange Plants vs. Zombies-inspired minigame that follows, Gairwen provides me with seeds to create mortar and trap plants that attack incoming waves of undead, and healing plants that keep Gairwen and I healthy. Unlike, say, World of Warcraft's Plants vs. Zombies quest, here the plants merely provide back-up while I continue using my regular abilities and range of movement to take on each wave.

Once Gairwen is safe, she points me toward Occam, the legendary smith who crafted Bercilak's green armor. Unfortunately, Occam has been kidnapped by the Nightmare Court, the same group of evil Sylvari that are messing things up in the Dream.

At this point, the story splits based on my choice. I can rescue Occam from the Nightmare Court and hope that he knows the secret to besting Bercilak and his magical suit of armor, or I can try to recruit Gerwain and see if her thirst for revenge helps matters. The main thrust of this plot isn't necessarily groundbreaking, but between the zone-wide events, the unique choices throughout, and the addictive combat, I'm ready to jump back in and continue solving the mystery of Bercilak and the Nightmare Court.

Though Sylvari lore has a more mystical bent, there are no class restrictions for any of Guild Wars 2's races

Zones will change naturally depending on when and how often certain events are completed

A Visit to the Catacombs

by Adam Biessener

Jumping into a high-level character cold is never easy, but there was no chance I was going to turn down an opportunity to play an early version of Guild Wars 2. My shiny new elementalist joined three other level 30 characters for a trip through the lowest level of Guild Wars 2's eight launch dungeons. We didn't complete it – you can thank the reality of playing on a development server for that – but I came away with a good idea of what the five-player instanced dungeon experience will be like when Guild Wars 2 comes out.

The coolest thing about playing through a Guild Wars 2 dungeon is the fact that ArenaNet's abandonment of the holy MMO trinity of tank/healer/damage does more than just work. It's awesome. Everyone is responsible for their own well-being, and the robust positional gameplay along with the wonderful variety of skills available makes that more than an empty phrase. As an elementalist, I could surround myself with a rock shield, summon devilish hounds to distract the enemy, blind them with air magic, heal myself with cleansing water, and more. That's just with the particular build I was running. You can specialize your traits and skills differently, and a simple weapon switch completely changes a hero's core skills as well.

Working well with your groupmates is a dramatic force multiplier. Stunning an enemy inside a narrow, heavy damage fire wall, putting up a force barrier that funnels all the bad guys together so that everyone can unload powerful area-effect attacks, or juggling pushback effects to keep a melee foe from effectively engaging are just a few of the ways players can combine powers to great effect. Some skills even have hard-coded combo effects, like an icy wall that causes all projectiles that pass through it to gain a frost effect.

If that sounds like it's a lot to keep track of, it is. I was at an undeniable disadvantage by playing a character I hadn't put in the dozens of hours that a natural level 30 would have, but even considering that I had an extremely difficult time parsing all of the effects that were constantly firing all over my screen.

However, I had a good handle on my character's skills by the end of my time in the catacombs. The last boss we faced, a ranger-type who teleported between an unreachable platform and the narrow ledge we were exchanging missile fire with him from, was an enjoyably chaotic fight that had me gleefully flipping between elements and dishing out all kinds of damage, healing, and support.

I have no trouble seeing how engaging and fun juggling the four elements will be with practice, and I imagine that the weapon set swapping that other classes do will play similarly well. Equally apparent is the wide gulf that will exist between skilled and unskilled players – Guild Wars 2 takes every battle so far beyond the classic "don't stand in the fire" axiom that it barely even applies.

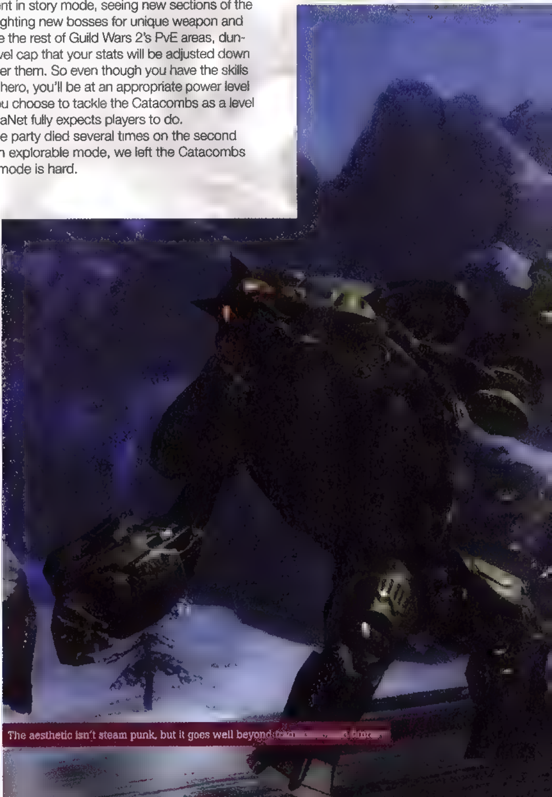
I was impressed to run into Guild Wars 2's event system making a few appearances later on in the dungeon. One time, a troll randomly spawned to create an unexpected boss fight. Another incident saw creepy-crawly gravelings burrowing into the Catacombs, inviting us to stop what we were doing and stymie the incursion in a multi-stage event battle. ArenaNet tells me these bits of content are dynamically generated and intended to make every dungeon run unique, which is a sentiment I can appreciate.

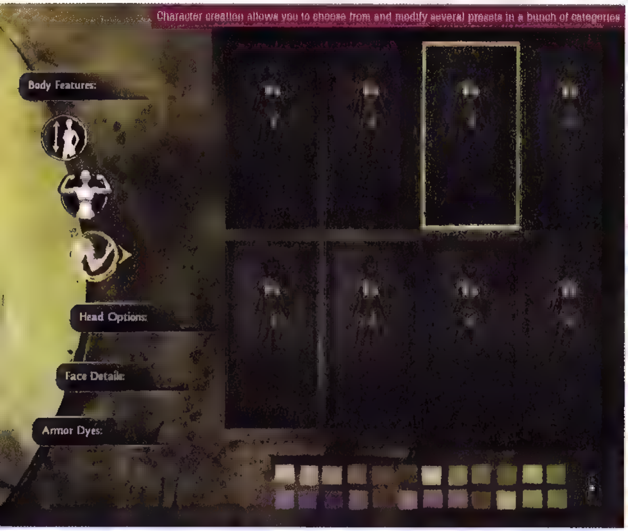
After a glitched boss (again: development server) ended our run through the Catacombs, we briefly experimented with what ArenaNet is calling "explorable" mode. Roughly equivalent to other games' "elite" or "heroic" modes, each dungeon in Guild Wars 2 has an explorable mode that becomes available once you've completed the more forgivingly tuned story mode. Here, your party can take one of a few paths that aren't present in story mode, seeing new sections of the dungeons and fighting new bosses for unique weapon and armor skins. Like the rest of Guild Wars 2's PvE areas, dungeons have a level cap that your stats will be adjusted down to when you enter them. So even though you have the skills of a higher-level hero, you'll be at an appropriate power level if for example you choose to tackle the Catacombs as a level 70 – which ArenaNet fully expects players to do.

After our whole party died several times on the second trash mob pull in explorable mode, we left the Catacombs for good. Hard mode is hard.

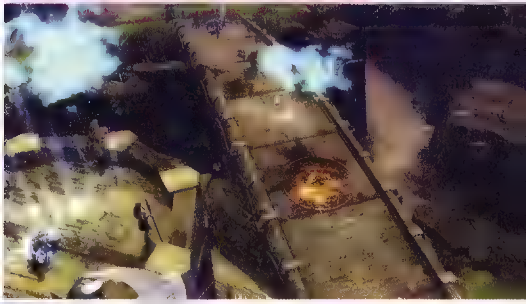
Show Armor
Zoom

A wide variety of spectral foes populate the Catacombs


The aesthetic isn't steam punk, but it goes well beyond [illegible]


Character creation allows you to choose from and modify several presets in a bunch of categories

Most battles have a lot more going on at a time than one measly fireball.



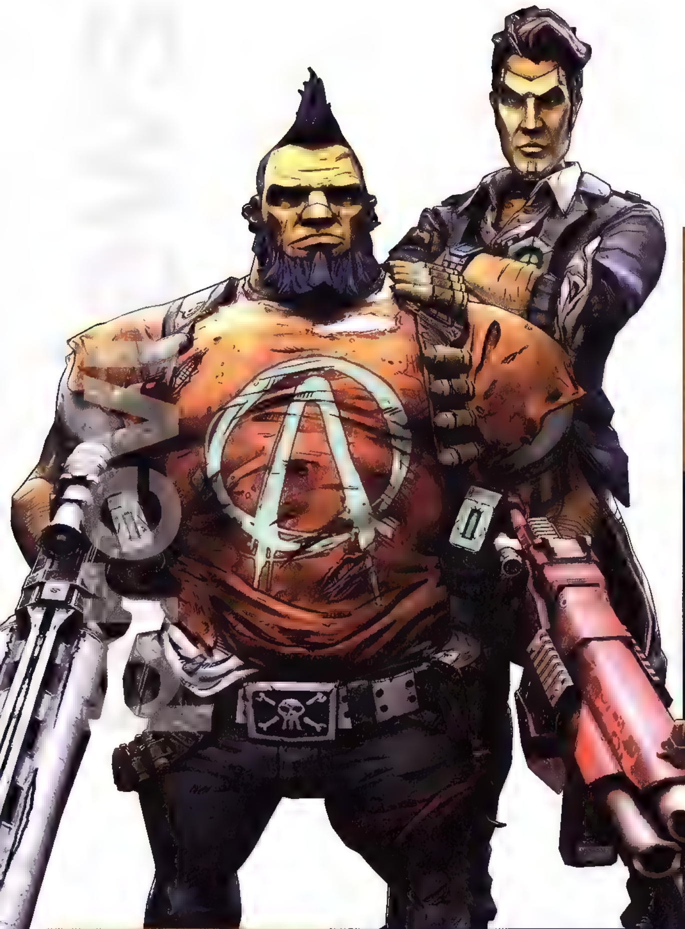
Open-world (versus world) PvP

Fans of instanced, balanced team-based PvP battles will find a lot to love in the dedicated e-sports-friendly competetive PvP arenas, considering ArenaNet's unmatched pedigree. The so-called world-versus-world PvP, however, is of considerably more interest to fans of large-scale MMO battles that forsake the razor edge of balance for sheer size, spectacle, and the player-driven politics that characterize multi-faction PvP.

The number of shards in Guild Wars 2 will always be divisible by three. Every two weeks, each shard will be pitted against two others in cross-server world-vs-world combat. These battles take place across four enormous dedicated maps filled with objectives to fight over: one home territory for each server plus one contested zone. The matchmaking shakes out as a big ladder, so the most successful shards will fight other elite worlds instead of trouncing less skilled (or populated) shards over and over.

Each of the four maps is as big as ArenaNet could fit within their engine's technical constraints. Dozens of nodes scatter the expansive landscapes, from lightly guarded supply depots to massive castles. The exact mechanics are still being tuned, but the basic idea is that shards get points for holding objectives, which translate into shard-wide passive bonuses as well as the ultimate victory calculation.

Huge PvP wars on maps specifically designed with a wide variety of objectives and activities sounds great. Even better, though, is the fact that sub-level capped players get their core stats bolstered to level 80 values so that they can reasonably contribute to the war effort. Leveling in that environment instead of beating on mobs and feeding cows for farmers? Yes, please. ◆



Borderlands 2

Getting to know Pandora's new cast

We've been salivating for more info on Borderlands 2 since our cover story ran last September. Gearbox Software finally conceded by recently revealing all the classes and more. Here are the details you've been waiting for. » **Phil Kollar**

The Old Heroes

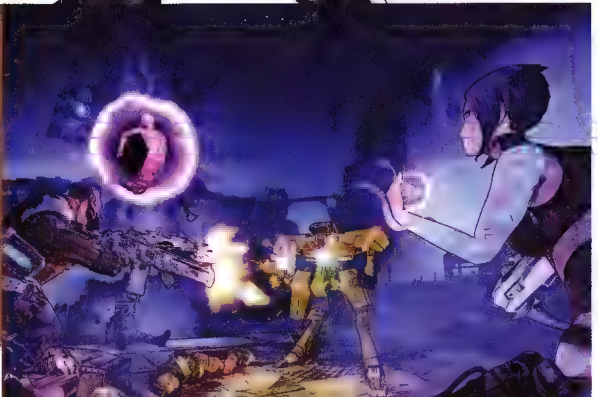
Though the playable characters from the first Borderlands are coming back for the sequel, they are all going to be playing an active role in the story. Gearbox still seems open to the idea of making them playable at some point as well. "That's something that we'll always ponder," says writer Anthony Burch. "Right now no one's thought of what we should do for the original characters."

Part of the problem stems from the story, which would awkwardly force the characters to interact with themselves. Concept designer Scott Kester notes that skill trees would also need to be addressed: "Every character in this game has 30 percent more skills. If we just brought in the characters from the first game, you'd be like, 'Where the f--- are all my skills?! Man, Roland sucks now.'"

Maya

Like Lilith from the first game, Maya is a siren class character, but the phasewalk ability has been replaced with something called phaselock. At its basic levels this locks enemies in place, enabling crowd control. "She'll suspend them in an orb of siren-y, phase-y, magic-y cool stuff," says Burch. "It allows everybody to shoot that person, because they can't really fight back."

At later levels, Maya can do even cooler things with phaselock. For example, if you put points into the helios skill, each use of phaselock is joined by a damage-dealing explosion. If you'd rather focus on healing, you can gain the ability to use phaselock to resurrect allies from a distance.



Player vs. Player

While the cooperative experience is still the primary focus of Borderlands 2, Gearbox has given the PvP system a few helpful upgrades. The biggest addition is the ability to duel for specific pieces of loot. Now when you instigate a one-on-one battle with another player, you can choose a weapon or shield to fight over.

All Day
Gunzerking
RKER
POINTS 0

Story

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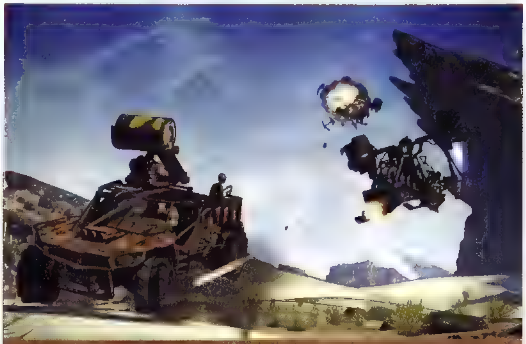
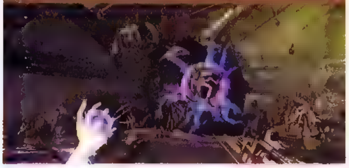


Vehicles

[illegible] to enemies.

Returning NPCs

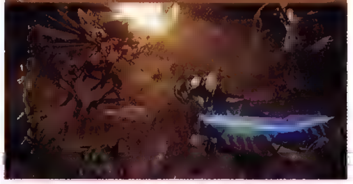
Popular DLC character Mad Moxxi returns in Borderlands 2 as a quest-giver related to the main story, but she won't be the only returning NPC. "Generally, any character from the first game or previous DLC is back in some form or another," Burch says. "Unless they're dead... And even some of them still make it back in some ways."



[illegible]

Easily standing out among the choices, Zer0 is a strange cyborg ninja who wields a sword. "Enemies won't be dropping melee weapons," Burch clarifies, but Zer0 has long-range capabilities as well. "You can get a skill where if you hit someone with melee it increases your gun damage, and if you shoot someone with a gun it increases your melee damage. Then you can juggle between melee and guns until your shields go down, and all of a sudden you're doing a s---load of damage."

Zer0 also has traditional stealth abilities, including the ability to create a clone of himself to distract enemies and being able to go invisible at will. "He's definitely a character that's more about fine[illegible] You have to plot and plan a bit more," says Kest[illegible] "He's more of a surgical character." Between his sword skills and his sneaking, Zer0 could be the most complex and interesting addition to the Borderlands 2 crew.



» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» Style
1-Player
Role-Playing/Shooter
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
Gearbox Software

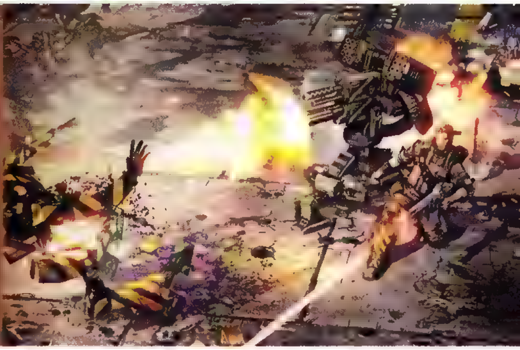
» Release
September 18

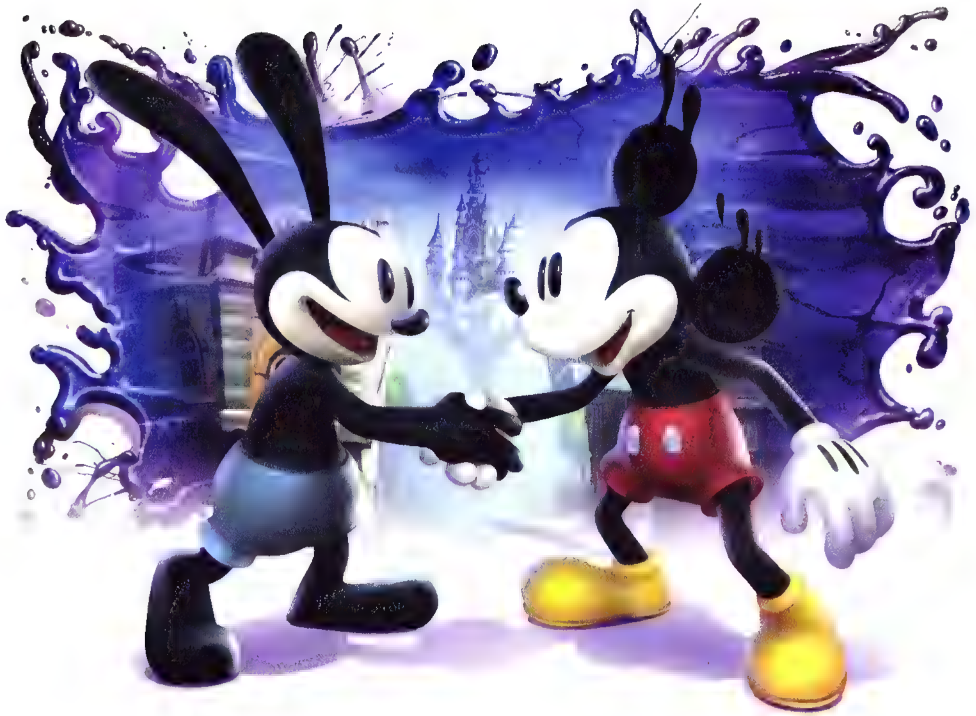
For more info on Borderlands 2, including a discussion about just how much dubstep is in the game, check out the full interview with Anthony Burch and Scott Kester on gameinformer.com/mag

Axton

He may look like he has a lot in common with Roland, but Axton is actually a new class called commando. Though he also uses a turret, Axton's skills let him do crazy new stuff with it. "You can spec into the longbow skill, which lets your turret basically teleport to a place and appear there rather than having to throw it down manually," Burch says. Another skill allows you [illegible]

Visually, Axton is meant to represent "a [illegible]" Kester says. "He's not just some soldier guy, but at the end of the day, he's kind of the everyman shooter character," he adds. "[illegible] instantly relate with him."





Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two

Mickey readies for his most grandiose adventure yet

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

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Disney Interactive Studios

» **Developer**
Junction Point Studios

» **Release**
Fall

After taking the backseat to Pixar and other in-house Disney films for several years, in 2010 Mickey Mouse made a comeback on the media platform most suited to the 21st century: video games. Rather than use a new Mickey film or cartoon series to reintroduce the most famous mouse in the world, Disney gave the keys to its mascot to respected video game designer Warren Spector (Deus Ex, System Shock), an admitted Disney aficionado. The resulting Wii exclusive delivered a bold reinvention of the hero that recaptured the playful and mischievous side of Mickey.

Tapping into the Disney archives, Spector's Junction Point Studios created a rich world of forgotten characters and lost footage that appealed to children and adults alike. As much as critics embraced this new vision, technical limitations like a wonky camera kept the game from receiving universal praise. For the sequel, Spector doesn't see this being a problem.

"The one criticism that we heard most often was that the camera needed to be better," Spector says. "So the day the first game shipped we started working on improving it."

For The Power of Two, the dedicated camera team set an ambitious goal of allowing players to experience the entire story without having to touch the manual camera controls. Completionists will need to use them to find hidden items, but if you're just burning through the campaign it's no longer necessary to fiddle with the camera thanks to an intuitive new system that knows when to alter your perspective.

One of the other complaints about the original game was the lack of voiceover work – always a questionable omission in the modern era. Rather than reintroducing the bark text from the first game, Epic Mickey 2: Power of Two takes advantage of the access Junction Point has to all of the current Disney voice actors.

"Every character speaks every line of dialogue, and I think that gives us a lot of advantages," Spector says. "The emotional level and the storytelling are going to get better."

The sequel begins shortly after the conclusion of the first game. With the Cartoon Wasteland liberated from the Shadow Blot, its citizens are busy rebuilding their homes. After an earthquake hits the town, the Mad Doctor appears on one of his flying contraptions. Saying he's a changed man, he implores the Wasteland citizens to nominate a hero to help him fend off the approaching threat that caused the disaster. When Oswald the Lucky Rabbit offers assistance and takes off with the crazy scientist, his girlfriend Ortensia and the gremlin Gus seek out Mickey Mouse to help.

Though Junction Point isn't revealing where this adventure will take Mickey and Oswald, Spector says players will visit themed Disneyland parks that have changed radically over the years. The only one he would name is Frontierland, which Spector says has many forgotten and rejected exhibits to use in the game. Familiar settings like Mean Street return as well, but they are drastically altered by natural disasters.

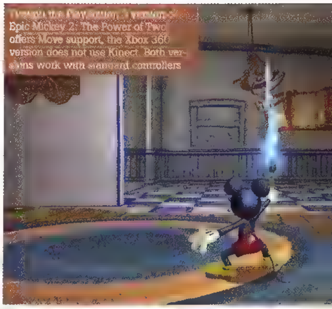
Whereas the first game held players hands to get them used to the idea that play style matters, Junction Point is placing more of an emphasis on persistence in Power of Two. This

Oswald Shares Center Stage

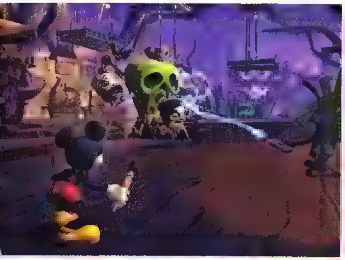
In the first game Mickey Mouse was the lone protagonist. For The Power of Two, Oswald finally gets his share of the spotlight as the second playable character.

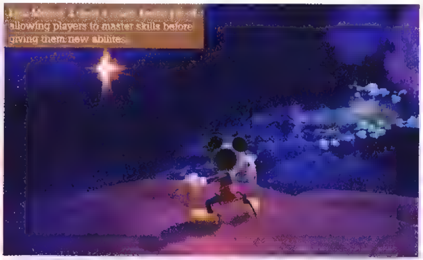
With drop-in, drop-out split-screen co-op, family and friends can explore the Cartoon Wasteland together for the first time. Both characters have different strengths, which is why they must work together to solve many of the environmental puzzles. Whereas Mickey still uses the paintbrush and paint thinner to alter the world, Oswald has unique abilities like helicopter ears that allow him to access areas normally off limits to Mickey. If Mickey grabs onto Oswald's legs, he can come along for the ride. Oswald can also detach his arm to use it as a boomerang or use a remote that shoots electricity to take over, destroy, or befriend animatronic creatures.

Couch co-op sounds great, but why didn't Disney include online co-op as well? "The idea of a game aimed at a broad audience – gamers, non-gamers, kids, adults, men, women – where we encourage them to put on a headset and play virtually together just doesn't make sense," says creative director Warren Spector. "We want people playing together."



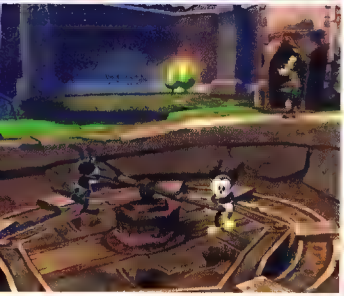
Though the PlayStation 3 version of Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two offers Move support, the Xbox 360 version does not use Kinect. Both versions work with standard controllers



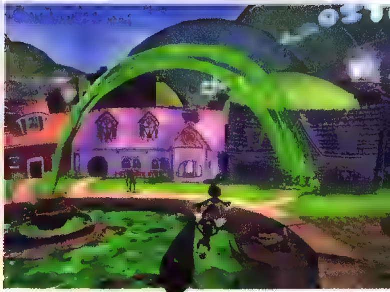


[illegible] allowing players to master skills before giving them new abilities

Oswald's remote control can be used to attack or befriend animatronics



Like the first game, Epic Mickey 2 is a tour through the forgotten worlds of Disney



time, when you paint an area or remove an object with thinner, the changes will still be there when you return.

"We're going to do it up right this time," Spector says. "When you change something on a map, it is changed forever. When you do something that a character doesn't like, they remember it."

The incentive for returning to old areas will be higher as well. Junction Point is building the world to encourage more free-form exploration, and with Metroid-style level design that will leave some areas inaccessible until you gain new abilities or keys later in the game, hunting for the hundreds of Disney collectibles should be a lot more fun.

With over 700 people working on the title, Junction Point Studios and Disney Interactive have all hands on deck to make this the most memorable Mickey game yet. Look for more information as we move closer to the fall release. » **Matt Bertz**

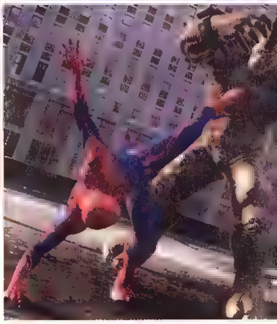
The Musical Side of Mickey

For the second Epic Mickey game, Junction Point knew it wanted to up the production values with fully voiced characters, but creative director Warren Spector didn't stop there. Rather than simply create animated cutscenes, why not tap deeper into Disney's treasure chest of traditions and introduce song and dance to the festivities?

"I'm pretty comfortable – until somebody proves me wrong – saying this is the first ever musical comedy video game in history," Spector says. "And I'm proud."

With the help of original Epic Mickey composer James Dooley and newcomer Mike Himelstein (*Shrek*), Junction Point has created musical numbers that tell the majority of the story in Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two. This is an interesting direction for a game designer who typically empowers players with the ability to influence the narrative outcome. So why go the musical route?

"I don't know if people want a musical game, so the musical numbers are for advancing the story," Spector says. "In the future, perhaps there will be other ways in which songs factor into gameplay."



The Amazing Spider-Man

Spidey returns to the streets

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Beenox

» **Release**
June 26

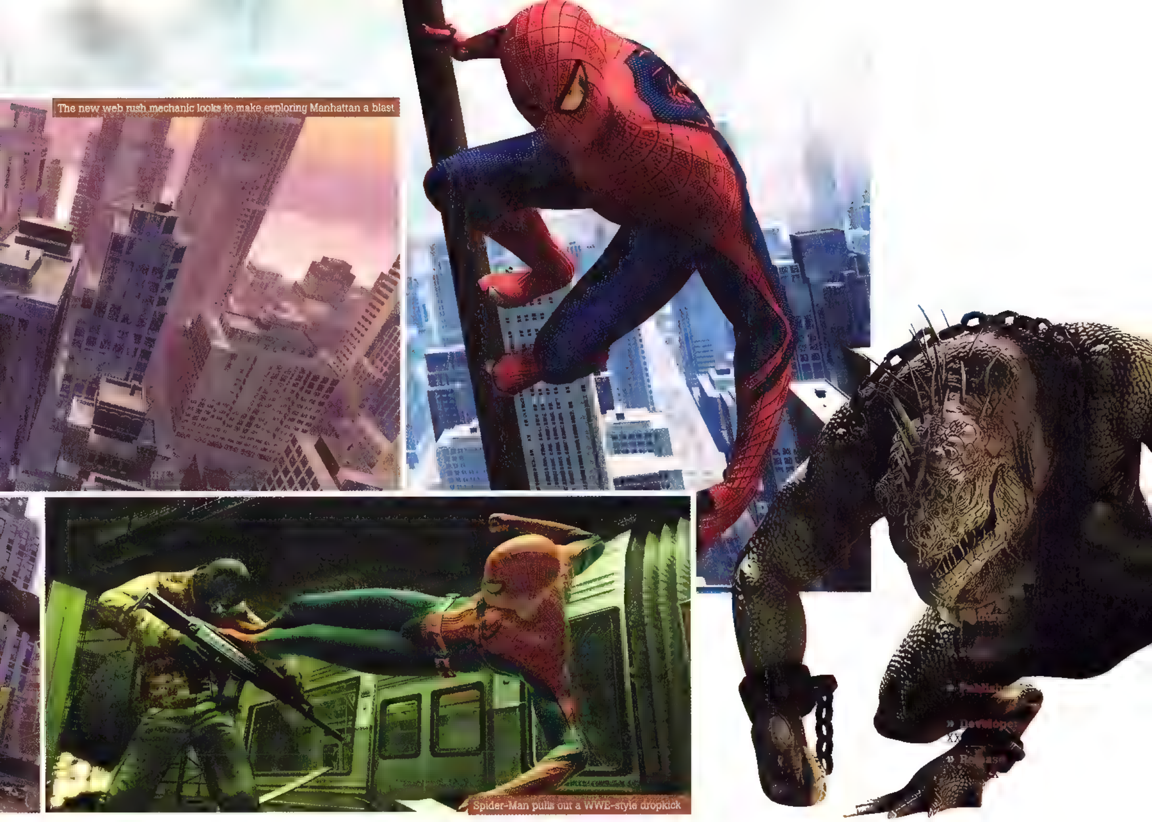
Throughout Spider-Man's long history in video games, few experiences have rivaled the feeling of swinging between the skyscrapers of Manhattan in Spider-Man 2. Beenox offered gamers the chance to play as four versions of Spidey in the 2010 game Shattered Dimensions, but the sense of freedom and discovery that made the 2004 film tie-in such a success wasn't present. With their new game that's set to release alongside the upcoming *The Amazing Spider-Man* film, they're taking Peter Parker back to an open world New York City.

In The Amazing Spider-Man, Parker performs the usual assortment of flashy flips and witty quips as he travels high above the city streets. A current-gen version of Spider-Man 2's web-swinging would be great, but Beenox takes things a step further thanks to the new web rush mode. With it, players can slow down time and survey Spidey's environment through the eyes of his mask. While in this mode, yellow silhouettes of the hero appear on whatever surface or object you happen to be looking at. Hit the web rush button again, and time returns to normal and Spider-Man makes his way towards your desired destination.

It's not as boring as "point to a place and press a button to go there," however. Let's say you're at street level and you try to web rush to a point high on a building. After confirming the location you want to go to, the engine dynamically renders animations to fill in the gaps from point A to point B. You may start by running on the street, but you could find yourself running across the top of a bus, flying off a billboard, swinging on a street light, and sprinting up the side of a building before you get to where you want to go. You're not locked into the sequence, and it can be broken at any time. Halfway through the process, you might decide to veer from the path and web rush to a brand-new location. I didn't get to try it for myself, but slowing down time and choosing new destinations while suspended in mid-air looked fun.

Web rush isn't all about navigation; it's also useful in combat. During the presentation,

Spidey prepares for a brawl with Iguana



The new web rush mechanic looks to make exploring Manhattan a blast

Spider-Man pulls out a WWE-style dropkick

Beenox demonstrated how it could appeal to fans of Shattered Dimensions' stealthy Noir levels. As Spider-Man crawled across the ceilings and walls of an enemy-infested facility, he activated web rush and the game shifted to first-person perspective. While Spidey views enemies in this mode, those vulnerable to stealth attacks appear outlined in purple. With the press of a button, the superhero swooped down, grabbed an enemy, and dangled him in a cocoon from the ceiling. The sequence immediately brought to mind Batman's ability to hang enemies from gargoyles in the Rocksteady games.

If you don't want to directly engage enemies, many areas feature environmental objects that can do the dirty work for you. After cocooning the first enemy, Spidey set his sights on a guard that was patrolling underneath a suspended palette of crates. A quick web rush later, and Spider-Man had buried the foe underneath a wooden avalanche.

The sound of several crates falling on a comrade's head unsurprisingly alerted enemies in the area, and they beelined to Spider-Man's location. With stealth no longer an option, a combat sequence reminiscent of Arkham City began. Like in the Batman games, indicators flash above an opponent's head when a counter-attack opportunity arises. Spider-Man typically approaches fights with a little more panache than the Caped Crusader, and this is evident as he wrapped enemies in webs and tornado-spun them into other foes, stuck enemies to walls via webbing shackles, and performed throws that feature animations borrowed from lucha libre.

If you only saw the combat and stealth sequences, you'd be forgiven for thinking it borrows too liberally from the Arkham games (Spidey's suit even becomes damaged over time, although it can be repaired at his apartment). Despite this, the sequences in Manhattan have a flavor all their own. The Beenox team members are big fans of the car chase scenes in the movie, so they incorporated side missions based on them. As you casually swing around between missions, you may spot an in-progress police chase. Parker has much more mobility than the NYPD, so it isn't difficult for him to gracefully swing onto the hood of an attempted escapee's car. Once there, quick-time events activate that feature Spidey dodging bullets and peppering the windshield with blasts of webbing. When the opportunity arises, players can end the chase by creating a web net between two buildings and flinging the car into it.

As could be expected given the open world format, plenty of side missions outside of car chases are also available. Parker is outfitted with a camera, and an entire string of sidequests is based on grabbing specific photos. While I didn't see any instances during the demo, I doubt anyone will be surprised if Manhattan features a steady stream of in-progress robberies and damsels in distress. After performing heroic deeds, players can see citizens excitedly tweet about what they've witnessed via the Twitter parody in the pause menu.

The game releases prior to the film's July 3 opening, but Marvel fans don't need to worry about spoilers. The events of the game serve as an epilogue to the movie, and the story has been written specifically to avoid the film's key plot points.

As is the case with virtually any license, the history of Spider-Man in video games has been spotty. Despite this, Activision has made several solid games based on the web-shooter. Done right, it can be one of the most exciting sandboxes available. Thanks to the return of an open world New York and the addition of a promising web rush mechanic, comic fans should certainly keep The Amazing Spider-Man on their radar. » **Dan Ryckert**

Even seemingly innocuous throwaway comments might affect how players experience the game down the road

Gary Whitta, scriptwriter for *The Book of Eli*, is the primary writer for The Walking Dead's fourth episode

The Walking Dead

Telltale brings the walking dead to life

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

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Telltale Games

» **Developer**
Telltale Games

Release
April

Zombies have infected our culture, and there doesn't seem to be a cure. At least we seem happy with our obsession. Robert Kirkman's comic series, *The Walking Dead*, remains one of the industry's top sellers, and episodes of the AMC television adaptation continue to break cable records. Telltale Games announced an adventure game set within the comic universe well over a year ago, but the company has been hesitant to show off the game. Until now. With the first episode's April release right around the corner, we turned to The Walking Dead designer Sean Vanaman to get the full rundown of the game's features.

Telltale has already revealed the series' main protagonist Lee Everett, a convicted felon who escapes a prison transport as the zombie apocalypse reaches critical mass. After his harrowing escape, Lee meets a small girl named Clementine who has lost her family. The cast expands well beyond these two individuals. "They latch onto a big group of strangers, so it quickly grows past just Lee and Clementine," Vanaman says. "We have this ensemble cast that is much bigger than anything else we've ever tackled before." Players quickly join up with a family of three, and this group of five eventually snowballs into nine.

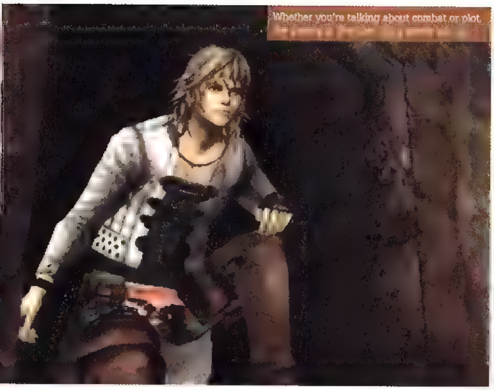
Group dynamics have a large influence on the development of The Walking Dead's story. Every action players make – whether it be a dialogue choice or saving an NPC character from a zombie horde – alters Lee's relationship standing with the entire cast and ultimately dictates how characters will respond to him throughout the journey. Players can even choose to remain silent through most of the dialogue sequences, and characters will respond differently to Lee if he constantly refuses to answer their questions.

Telltale created a sweeping cast for a reason; it needs cannon fodder. Aside from Lee and Clementine, nearly every character in the game can die. These deaths don't end the game; they just alter how the story plays out. "Early in the game, you'll be put in a position to save one of two sons after having met both of their fathers," Vanaman says. "The choice you make there will color the relationship you have with both fathers for the rest of the season." Not only will both fathers treat Lee differently after that event, but they may choose to help or oppose Lee at some point down the road.

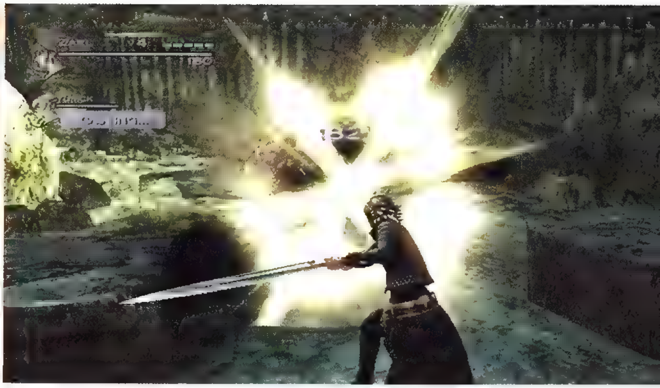
Managing your relationships in The Walking Dead is like one giant meta-puzzle, but it's not the only obstacle players face as they try to escape the shambling masses of the Deep South. In traditional adventure game style, players collect items as they navigate the world and then use them to progress deeper into the story. The inventory system is kept under the hood, however, so players won't have to worry about shuffling through their purse to find the right gadget for every situation. Instead, actions become context sensitive based on the tools the player has already collected. "The puzzles in the game are based on exploration and interpersonal relationships," Vanaman says. When players place the cursor over a door, for example, they are presented with the option to try the door's handle. If they have a key, they are presented with a second option that lets them try to unlock the door using that key. If the key doesn't fit that lock and Lee happens to have an axe in his inventory, a third option appears under the door that allows Lee to smash open the door.

The action sequences in The Walking Dead are also governed by knowing what actions to take inside an environment rather than interacting with aiming reticules or inputting button combos. Players must react to people and items within the environment as the action plays out. "Unlike Jurassic Park, where everything was abstracted out into quick time events, we want you to feel like you are a part of the moment," Vanaman says "When this zombie babysitter is crawling after you, and you're dazed and trying to clear the cobwebs out of your head, your reactions should be telling you to kick her in the face, so you had better think fast and cursor over her face and select the action to kick her in the face."

Unlike zombie games like Left 4 Dead or Dead Rising, The Walking Dead offers an experience that has a greater focus on characterization and emotion than it does on overbearing action. Fans have been waiting a long time for the opportunity to interact with the world of The Walking Dead. The first episode of Telltale's five-part monthly series finally begins late April. » **Ben Reeves**



Whether you're talking about combat or plot, [illegible]



The Last Story

These adventurers care more about profits than prophets

The Last Story may be the latest game from Final Fantasy mastermind Hironobu Sakaguchi, but its protagonists aren't exactly what I've come to expect from Japanese RPGs. Sure, main characters Zael and Dagran are tall, spiky-haired, fashionably dressed fighters, and Syrenne's dialogue may have the overbearing whininess that all too often accompanies female companions in this style of game. What sets this crew apart, though, is that they aren't really heroes.

Zael and his friends are mercenaries. Early in the adventure, the ruler of Lazulis Island hires them to clear out monsters from Reptid's Cave. They don't hide the fact that money is their primary motivation.

If their actions seem cutthroat, so too does the fast-paced gameplay. I expect to sit through a 15-minute-plus intro upon starting most RPGs, but The Last Story goes the Final Fantasy VII route and dumps me right into the action in Reptid Cave.

As I briefly take control of Dagran, the camera pulls back to a close-up, behind-the-back position that feels more like the player perspective in an action game. In my first encounter, I'm immediately introduced to a cover system identical to many third-person shooters, though its implementation is unique. By holding down a button, my character peeks out from cover to identify enemies and specific points of interest nearby.

In this situation, the cave contains two lizard enemies. I could take them out by rushing in with my sword, but I notice the foes are standing beneath a natural stone bridge held up by two narrow pillars. Targeting one of the pillars, I give an order to my spellcasting partner, Yurick, who casts a powerful bolt that destroys the column and sends the stone toppling onto the enemies.

Though movement and combat are much faster than most Japanese RPGs, The Last Story's unique system still incorporates strategy. Before most battles, players are presented with a strategy-RPG-style overhead view of the field. This allows you to identify how much opposition you're up against and whether the environment contains any natural traps.

Combat in The Last Story plays out in a very logical, grounded way. In one battle, my party is on a narrow bridge across a canyon. Lizard men are heading us off from across the bridge, while archers are sniping at us from ledges on either side that we cannot reach. At this point, I'm playing as Zael, who can use his crossbow to slowly chip away at the health of the ranged enemies. The smarter strategy is to have Yurick cast a spell to knock down the crumbling ledges. This means protecting Yurick from other enemies while he casts.

The melee fights are relatively simplistic: I push the analog stick in the direction of the enemy I want to attack, and Zael auto-attacks with his blade. The challenge comes from keeping track of the greater make-up of the battlefield and picking the best time to call on my partners to perform special moves. Halfway through this first dungeon, I unlock the ability to use Gathering, a special skill that forces enemies to focus their attacks on me. With new partners and more abilities to unlock as the game progresses, the encounters seem like they'll remain challenging and fresh despite the speed.

The game pace is unpredictable. I finish cleaning out the Reptid Cave and fight my first couple of bosses in under an hour. Rather than a traditional huge open town hub, my reward is a celebration in a local tavern, where I can speak to party members individually and begin learning more about their pasts.

Even as the mission progresses and the scope widens, the characters struggle more with inner demons than saving the world from some great external force. Syrenne is an alcoholic. Yurick is withdrawn and desperate. These aren't your average good guys, but whatever its pedigree, The Last Story isn't your average RPG. » **Phil Kollar**

» **Platform**
Wii

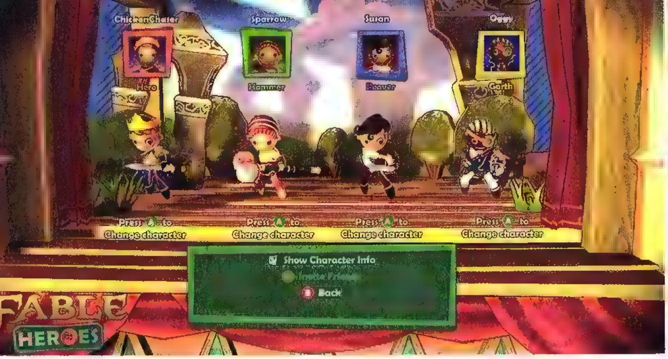
» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Xseed Games

» **Developer**
Mistwalker

» **Release**
Summer

Though there are sidequests, the heroes of The Last Story [illegible]


ChickenChaser
Sparrow
Susan
Ogg
Hero
Hammer
Reaver
Garth
Press A to Change character
Press A to Change character
Press A to Change character
Press A to Change character
Show Character Info
Invite Friends
Back
FABLE HEROES

FABLE HEROES
Sparro
Og
204

Fable Heroes

Albion returns to Xbox Live Arcade

» **Platform**
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Lionhead Studios

» **Release**
2012

Each year, Lionhead encourages its employees to participate in a game jam it calls Creative Day. Any and all ideas are welcome at this event, whether it be a new game concept, a tech demo, or even something as simple as a PowerPoint presentation. For the event, series veteran Tim Timmins imagined an XBLA Fable title that dwarfed the minigame-centric Fable Pub Games.

As a fan of titles like Gauntlet and Castle Crashers, Timmins wanted players to have a chance to battle through Albion in a similar style. Along with five co-workers, he spent two weeks putting together a quick demo of his idea. At Creative Day, Lionhead execs (including series creator Peter Molyneux) responded in unanimously positive fashion and greenlit the project. They had three months to take the prototype to a more finished version, and it debuted publicly at the Microsoft Spring Showcase.

Fable Heroes puts you in the tiny shoes of one of a dozen hero dolls. With its puppet protagonists and slightly cartoonish visuals, the aesthetics of Fable Heroes reminds us of the charming Media Molecule platformer LittleBigPlanet.

After choosing between characters like Hero, Hammer, Reaver, and more, players jump straight into the game's eight stages. The world map looks like a large and intricate board game. Familiar environments like Bowerstone and Mistpeak are back, as well as an area known as The Cloud that only unlocks once the top 100 players in the world reach a combined target score.

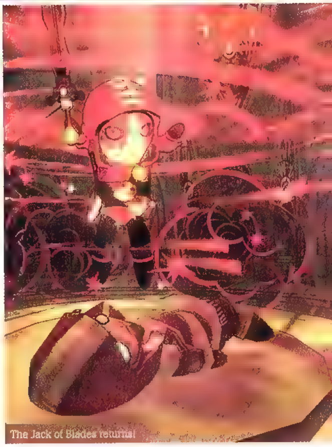
Trademark enemies such as the Hobbes and Hollow Men impede your progress, forcing you to perform melee, ranged, magic, and area attacks depending on your character. Four heroes are always onscreen, with AI taking over if you don't have enough human players to round out the party.

In addition to the standard enemies, stages frequently feature opportunities for distractions. Items like giant mushrooms or eggs appear during occasional "break times," and players compete to destroy them in a minigame reminiscent of the car stage from Street Fighter II.

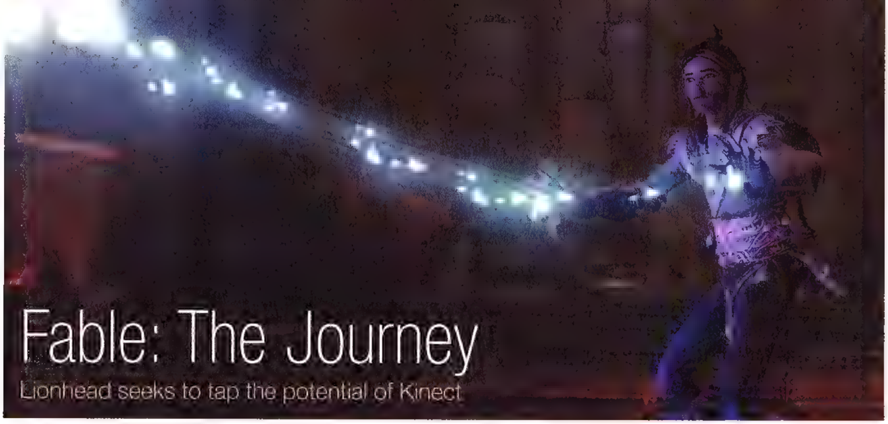
Instead of the morality system from the main series, Fable Heroes has "Good or Evil?" treasure chest selections. If you open the Good chest, a random member of your crew may get a bonus along the lines of a gold jackpot. Open the Evil chest, and you may start up a game of Zap Tag, which summons a storm cloud above one player's head that knocks coins out of him or her at regular intervals. Since it's a game of tag, you can transfer this annoying cloud by touching any other player.

Two-thirds of the way through each level, players can opt to take on a boss or participate in a minigame instead. Either option can result in a large gold payout, but the latter pits players against each other rather than against a giant beetle or other baddy. One example is the Chicken Bomb minigame, which places players in a circular pen of exploding chickens. The last player alive gets the biggest gold bonus, and each hero has the ability to punt chickens around the area like a freakish game of hot potato. All your collected gold can go toward character upgrades or be transferred to Fable: The Journey via a dedicated spot on the world map.

Fable Heroes feels like a great fit for Xbox Live Arcade. Longtime followers of the series should particularly enjoy the final level of Heroes, which travels through the events of all three main Fable games (complete with destructible credits, of which Peter Molyneux's name provides a ridiculous amount of gold). With four-player local multiplayer alongside drop-in, drop-out online play, it is also the first time the series has supported more than two players. Lionhead hasn't announced a release date yet, but it says the game will release "several months" before The Journey. » **Dan Ryckert**


The Jack of Blades returns!

Four players can team up locally or online



Fable: The Journey

Lionhead seeks to tap the potential of Kinect

Though he left Lionhead to join the new studio 22 Cans, Peter Molyneux still possesses an unshakable enthusiasm for the Fable series. Even with his announced departure, Molyneux is riding out the development of the The Journey, a game designed to tap the potential of Kinect. During a meeting at a recent Microsoft event, he explained that he has grown tired of the restrictions of a typical controller. "All the inventiveness, all the creativity, all the sense of discovery is lost with a controller," he said. "That's why I love Kinect."

Kinect controls all aspects of The Journey, although Molyneux quickly put to rest fears that the game is linear. Players can get off the horse and explore at any time. Although Lionhead showed no actual exploratory gameplay during the 20-minute presentation, I got a glimpse of the world map. It showcased several branching paths, but the basic layout made it tough to gauge the overall size of the game world.

The brief hands-on demo gave me glimpses into the kind of Kinect gameplay Lionhead is introducing to the series. First, I guided the protagonist Gabriel and his horse down a path as I sat down in a chair. Holding my arms in front of me as if I were grasping reins, I steered the horse over numerous green XP orbs. The controls were fairly responsive, and the horse usually came to a halt quickly when I pulled up on the reins.

At one point, a cutscene showed two Hobbes firing arrows at me from a nearby rock. One arrow pierced my horse's side, and he immediately began showing signs of pain. I scrambled to get out of harm's way, but mounted enemies began charging me on the road. While attempting to avoid them, my horse scraped his injured side against a nearby rock.

After making my way past the enemies and arriving at a safe area, the demo switched to a view that allowed me to pet the horse and remove the arrow. I hovered my hand over the area and pulled back Kinect mistakenly reacted as if I had pressed the arrow in, which hurt the horse further. I tried the motion again, and the arrow came out smoothly. A scar was visible on my horse from his brush against the rock, but Molyneux told me that it wasn't deep enough to be permanent.

Throughout the demo, Molyneux stressed the importance of an emotional bond between the player and the horse. He wants the player to care enough to keep it healthy, and repeated several times that the horse loves you unconditionally. It sounds similar to his excitement over the dog in Fable II, but the horse appears to be more of a core element of The Journey's gameplay.

After I took care of the horse, the demo switched to an on-foot combat section. With several flying enemies heading toward Gabriel, I started experimenting with the magic controls. I motioned with my right hand as if I were throwing a baseball, causing powerful fireballs to destroy the creatures. Molyneux recommended that I try a more relaxed approach, so I casually flicked my wrist towards the screen. This caused smaller balls of fire to be thrown, although at a significantly faster pace. Magic can also be re-directed in mid-flight with additional gestures.

I experimented with fireballs, and then switched to my left hand. With this hand, you can make a tentacle-like creature to grab enemies and fling them in whichever direction you choose. Having two different abilities opens up the opportunity for combos like tossing Hobbes into the air and then targeting them with fireballs.

Once I took down all the enemies, Molyneux said there was one element of myself as "the controller" that I didn't use yet – my voice. For the fire magic, angry shouts like "Why won't you die?" will cause it to increase in power. The tentacle behaves more predictably if you use a calm voice. Molyneux referenced *Star Wars* for this example, calmly saying, "If you strike me down, I will return more powerful than you can ever imagine."

Molyneux's excitement over the potential of Kinect is evident, but how well it works for Fable: The Journey is still a question mark. Most of my actions were represented correctly onscreen, but I felt that failing many of my tasks may have been difficult. Even when I intentionally flicked my wrist in a direction significantly away from enemies, my magic hit the target anyway. Lionhead's presentation was specifically structured so I couldn't experiment with exploration or any other features of the game While I didn't see any examples during my demo, Molyneux promises that The Journey features many standbys of the RPG genre, including progression, collecting items, and customizing your character.

I left the presentation without a clear idea of what to expect from the finished product. It's obviously a departure from the core Fable series, but it all comes down to how well Kinect works as the sole input device for an ambitious RPG. » **Dan Ryckert**

» Platform
Xbox 360

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

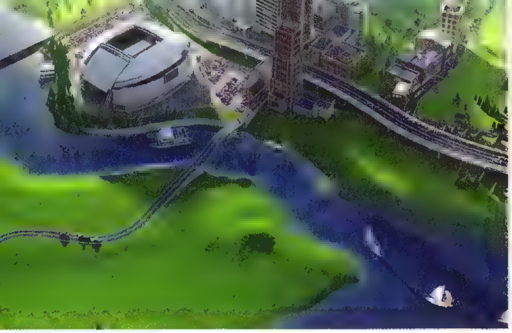
» Publisher
Microsoft Studios

» Developer
Lionhead Studios

» Release
2012

Your right hand will toss projectile magic

You'll encounter mounted enemies while leading your horse around



the target look and feel for the final product

SimCity

Building a new city on classic foundations

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

» Developer
Maxis

» Release
2013

After years of dormancy, Maxis announced the return of SimCity at this year's Game Developers Conference. The resurrection of this classic franchise is big news, but the reveal didn't contain many details about the game. To get more information, we talked to SimCity lead producer Kip Katsarelis about the current direction, philosophy, and goals behind this ambitious reboot. » **Joe Juba**

Currently, the game is just called SimCity. Why not SimCity 5?
When we set out to create this version of SimCity we had numerous debates about calling it 5 or not. Our goal from the beginning was to introduce the brand to an entirely new generation of gamers while satisfying our core fans' desire for a deep city simulation experience. We wanted to move away from some of the complexities of SimCity 4 and bring back the charm and magic of SimCity 2000. We looked at reinventing every feature from a tactile interface to presenting data in a more visual manner. It's very much a reboot of the franchise.

How is the new SimCity different from previous installments?
We wanted to preserve what was great about the gameplay of previous SimCity [games] and still improve and innovate as much as possible. The gardening aspect of SimCity through zoning is one of the hallmark experiences of SimCity. It's very much part of this SimCity as well. In this version, players will have only one zone type for Residential, Commercial, and Industrial. Density will be driven by the types of roads and general traffic around these zones.

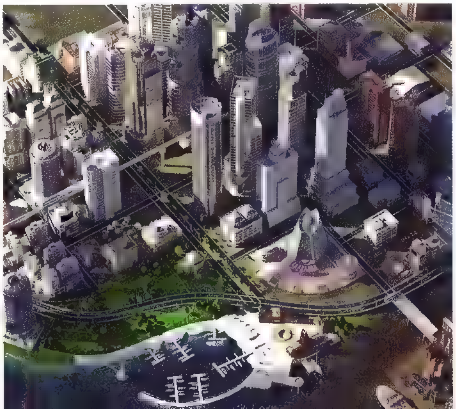
Does the simulation focus mainly on the city and resources? What role do the citizens play?
Players will be faced with many of the challenges real cities face on a daily basis – things like crime, education, budgets, public health, traffic, and more. We've introduced depletable resources to the simulation, which will fuel big business and help drive and influence the economic centers of player's cities. We felt that resources are an important component of the economic loop for real cities, that it was an obvious and important addition to SimCity. These resources include water, coal, oil, and ore. Sims are directly impacted by these resources by the jobs these industries produce, the products they make, and the impacts to the environment. Players will have the ability to decide which resources to use to help shape their cities and how to manage their city when those resources are no longer available.

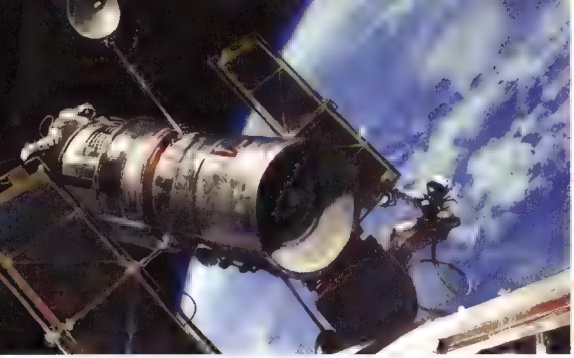
What concepts from previous SimCity titles are you interested in exploring further in the new game?
As much as we love city building, we love destroying our cities even more. Disasters will continue to be a big part of SimCity and with this SimCity being truly 3D with a real physics engine, disasters are going to be more epic than ever.

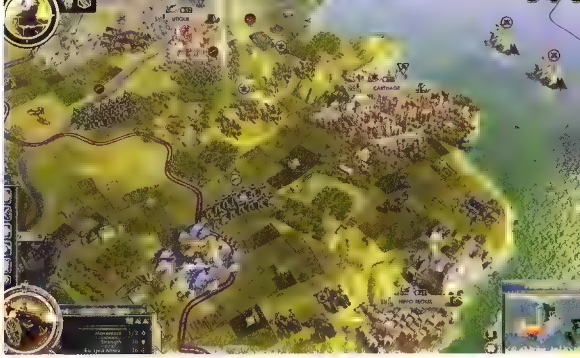
Can you explain the game's multiplayer component? How will your choices impact other players?
Multiplayer is the big new feature of this SimCity. Cities are now part of something bigger; they are part of a region, which consists of other cities and Great Works. Cities influence one another and work together to build Great Works, compete on leaderboards, and connect with one another to trade. One example of a Great Work could be a solar farm. Players will want a solar farm in their region because it's an excellent source of clean power and jobs. In order to build the solar farm, you'll need several cities contributing to the project to provide materials, workers, and funds. The solar farm is just one example of how the region that your city is part of adds additional pressures and decisions to your city planning.

The game was revealed with a focus on environmentalism. Are you trying to avoid being seen as a game with "an agenda," or is that a label you wouldn't mind being applied to SimCity?
SimCity is a game first and foremost, but has always influenced the way people look at the real world. Players are faced with the same issues that real politicians are faced with and will have to deal with those issues in the virtual world they create. Maxis isn't trying to push an agenda. Sure, we have opinions and infuse our own sense of humor into the simulation, but it's up to the players to make their own decisions, good or bad. We just want to make sure we capture the topics that are of interest today and are relevant to our fans.

The game is currently only announced for PC. Do you think this title (or the SimCity franchise in general) has a future on console as well?
Anything is possible. We're focused on making the best SimCity ever on PC. Console gamers and PC gamers are overlapping moreso than they had in the past. Both are looking for a more structured experience, both want to achieve something in a shorter period of time, both want something they can pick up and play easily, but takes time to master. We've incorporated many of these elements into SimCity.







Civilization V: Gods & Kings

Civilization V finds religion in new expansion pack

When Firaxis develops a Civilization expansion, it doesn't mess around. As Civilization IV add-ons Warlord and Beyond the Sword demonstrated, the house that Sid Meier built goes big, injecting several new playable civilizations and strategy changing additions to the already stellar base game. The first Civilization V expansion, Gods & Kings, is no exception.

Gods & Kings adds many of the things Civ fans normally expect from extended content, including 27 new units, 14 new buildings, and 9 new civilizations (including the Celts, Mayans, Byzantines, Dutch, and Carthaginians). But the changes that have me the most excited are the re-introduction of religion and espionage to the game's political machinations.

Rather than recycle the religion system used in Civilization IV, for Gods & Kings lead designer Ed Beach wanted to build a new system from the ground up. The result is a new resource – faith – that players gather just like they do with culture and science. Early in a civilization's lifecycle, players have the option of choosing between the 11 most common real-world religions or creating and naming their own belief system. By choosing two values, players earn specific bonuses. Constructing religious wonders, discovering ancient ruins, and building religious structures like cathedrals also earns faith points. Players can hasten the spread of their value system by purchasing missionaries to spread the gospel and/or by moving prophets into new cities.

If enough people in another civilization adopt your beliefs, it becomes much easier to create allegiances with them. Though religious influence plays a large diplomatic role in the early historical eras, Beach says it gradually loses its importance starting during the Renaissance and extending into modern times.

If you're having problems with a rival neighbor but don't want to start a war, you can weaken their position by embedding a spy in their city. These sleeper agents can perform impressive feats beyond nicking technology. Rival leaders can be severely compromised by fixing elections or trying to instigate a coup with a high level agent. Make sure the risk is worth the reward before acting, though, because if your spy fails he will be executed and your relations with the country that caught him will be in tatters. Spies also report on activities like troop movement, which may give you insight into whether or not the faction is saying one thing to you while doing the opposite.

If you'd rather rattle your sabers than work in the shadows, going to war should be much more enjoyable with the changes Firaxis is making to the combat system. By raising the hit points for every unit from 10 to 100, battles are now slower and last longer than a turn. This should help players caught off guard by a surprise attack to call in reinforcements or retreat to safety.

On the high seas, Firaxis split naval units into two categories – melee and ranged – to give sailors more tactical options. Ranged units act as you would expect – volleying shells at opponents from afar – while melee units can raid and even capture coastal cities. You can also now stack trading ships with military units, which makes traversing the seas take half the time.

The reworked AI should also make the battles make more sense. Civilizations don't hold silly grudges throughout the ages anymore, don't take offense if you build a city near them when empire borders are already firmly established, and they no longer take 40 or 50 turns to field an army before attacking. Now the AI readies for war by quickly building an army, but before it throws the first spear it stops to re-evaluate the situation. If the diplomatic landscape has shifted during the army recruitment, they may choose to forgo war altogether or use their forces against another rival who makes more sense now that time has passed.

Even though we've waited over a year for a proper Civ expansion, it looks like Gods & Kings is well worth the delay. Look for our review later this spring. **Matt Bertz**

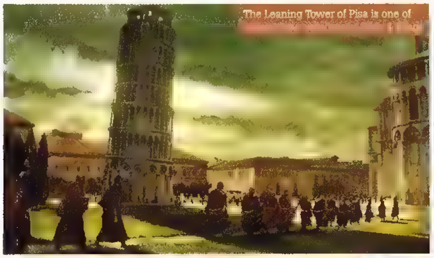
» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy
(8-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
Firaxis Games

» Release
Spring



The Leaning Tower of Pisa is one of [illegible]

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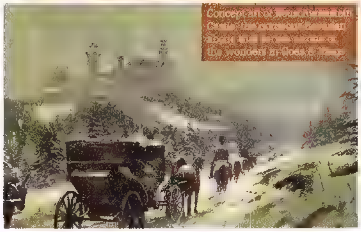


Concept art of [illegible] the wonders in Gods & [illegible]

The leader of the Celtic nation [illegible] against the occupying Romans

Sins of a Dark Age

Ironclad Games introduces a free-to-play hybrid of genres

Platform
PC
Style
1-Player Strategy
(10-Player Online)
Publisher
Infinite Game Publishing
Developer
Ironclad Games
Release
TBA

Ironclad Games took a risk with the genre-blending Sins of a Solar Empire, which combined elements of real time strategy with the scale of Civilization. Not content with a fantasy-skinned remake of Solar Empire, the team is taking even more chances with the upcoming Sins of a Dark Age.

Ironclad describes Sins of a Dark Age (SoaDA) as a "hero-and-commander strategy" game. Like Defense of the Ancients (DotA), matches feature two teams of five squaring off against each other. Four players on each team assume the role of heroes, and I saw glimpses of several fantasy-themed characters plowing through creeps on the battlefield. As in DotA, players increase the power and enhance the equipment of these heroes as they take out enemies.

What makes SoaDA stand out from the many DotA clones (outside of the lack of the standard three-lane format) is the commander system. One player on each team assumes this role, and views the action from a zoomed out perspective. This player is in charge of the real-time strategy like base building, resource management, and creation of offensive units and defensive structures.

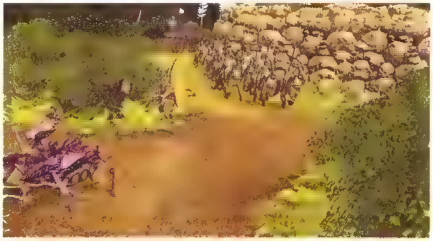
While the heroes take out enemies on the battlefield, the commander can organize team strategy via simple mini-map icons. With a couple of quick clicks, the ground forces can be directed to attack, defend, or scout locations as the commander sees fit. It's in the heroes' best interests to defend existing resource locations and scout new ones, as it has a direct effect on their own income.

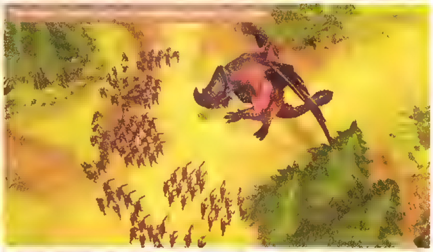
As heroes take out creeps on the ground, the commander eventually gains access to his realm powers. I watched as members of Ironclad unleashed the Dragon Lord Commander's realm power, causing a massive siege dragon to descend upon and annihilate a cluster of opponents. These realm powers are tied to the commander you choose, and they aren't always offensive in nature. Instead of a massive dragon, the Merchant Commander has access to realm powers that grant additional gold to heroes and accelerate the mining rate of peons.

Like Valve has done with Dota 2, Ironclad openly acknowledges the hostility the DotA clone communities tend to breed. To counteract this, the studio has put a few smart systems into place. If a player drops out of a match because of a lost Internet connection or other issue, they can jump back into the match without missing a beat (no lost bases or XP penalties). That's all well and good if someone drops out accidentally but what about the ever-present problem with rage-quitters? Ironclad hopes to remedy this with an option to auto-join shorthanded teams. SoaDA encourages players to do this, by rewarding them with tons of in-game currency and significant win bonuses if they hop in to re-balance the fight. Another issue that Ironclad is addressing is "last hitting," in which the player to score the final blow to an enemy reaps all of the rewards. In SoaDA, a new system spreads the wealth to anyone involved in the battle.

Blending elements from multiple genres can be difficult from a creative perspective, but Ironclad is also taking a financial risk with SoaDA. Breaking from the boxed copy release method they used for Sins of a Solar Empire, this new title uses a free-to-play model. The studio hopes to support development by charging small fees for additional skins and permanent access to characters and factions. All of the non-cosmetic content is playable without spending a dime, however, as every character and faction is available for free on a rotating schedule. If you don't want to open up your real-world wallet to unlock access, you can eventually earn enough in-game currency to make everything (outside of new skins) permanently available.

Ironclad hasn't announced a release date yet, but the studio is planning a phased beta for Sins of a Dark Age. At the launch of the beta, players will have access to roughly 25 heroes and 10 commanders. If you're a fan of RTS or DotA clones, keep an eye out for invitations to the beta. **Dan Ryckert**





A new kind of challenge

DotA clones have al[illegible] featured a heav[illegible] on competitive multiplayer but Iron[illegible] wants to offer more variety via a scenario [illegible]o-op mode that pits [illegible]es against AI without a commander wat[illegible] the action. We [illegible] with defending a ke[illegible] as [illegible] invasions resulted [illegible]mingly end[illegible]

[illegible]

Risen 2: Dark Waters

Bluster and bravado over brains or brawn

A bare few hours spent with an early preview build of Risen 2 had me laughing out loud at the dialogue's take-no-prisoners bombast and drunken smartassery on a level I've never experienced from a video game Despite the apocalyptic low-fantasy setting, Risen 2's vibe more closely resembles dark European comedies like *In Bruges* than the archetypical hero's journey format that RPGs almost invariably follow The mechanics may not be all lined up quite yet, but I appreciate the developers' efforts to take RPGs somewhere new

Developer Piranha Bytes has played the straight man for years with its successful Gothic series and the first Risen, but the scenarios and dialogue in Risen 2 suggest the team's long years of labor as the type of independent studio that the video game market is famously hostile to may have sent them into a kind of wonderful madness. The main character saved the world in the last game, but all he got was the loss of an eye and a serious taste for the sauce for his trouble. His attitude is everything that an androgynous spiky-haired teenager's isn't, and it's a breath of fresh (if vulgar) air after the epic deadly seriousness of the Skyrims and Mass Effects of the world

When giant crabs are crawling up on shore and threatening the pirate camp the protagonist is trying to infiltrate, the typical RPG situation would be for a pirate guard to request your help driving off the beasts in exchange for access to the camp. In Risen 2, the hero takes the opportunity to make a joke about parasites (crabs…get it?) before asserting in the crudest of terms that it's not his problem because he's made better life choices than the pirates. As is often the case in this game, a smart mouth and a confident swagger are enough to overcome the obstacle at hand – intentionally or not, as I was frequently unsure whether the hero cares much at all for the fate of a world that did him no favors for saving it.

Risen 2 isn't an open world in the vein of Skyrim, though like the original it takes place in relatively large sandboxes that offer a sufficient illusion of freedom so I never felt like I was on JRPG-style rails. Unlike clearing out quests in MMOs, though, the process here features choice and consequence in terms of angering or befriending characters and factions, obtaining unique rewards, and opening or shutting the doors to other storylines. A lot of times this boils down to the old stealth/conversation/combat decision, but that's okay when the writing and characters keep me interested

The biggest issue Risen 2 has to face between now and launch is a stiff combat system that gives the player such a small toolbox – especially early on in the game, where you apparently have the combat training of a middle-school chess club president. Battles are decided primarily by the stats of yourself and your opponents with little input from your tactics or skill with a controller Only maybe a fifth of my time was spent in combat, though, so I can be more forgiving of those failures than in a more hack n' slash-oriented title. As it is, I came away much more impressed with the unusual tone and tenor of the game than I was disappointed with its mediocre mechanics Adam Biessener

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player
Action/Role-Playing

Publisher
Deep Silver

Developer
Piranha Bytes

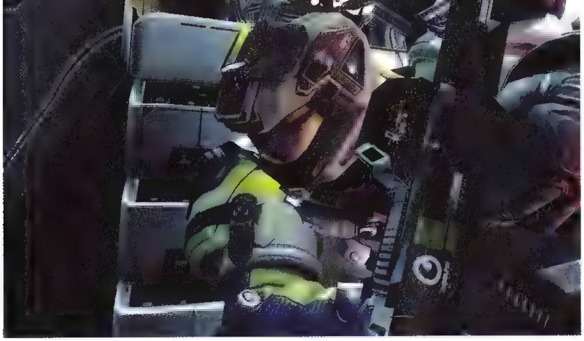
Release
April 24

Patty may look like your typical [illegible]

Hybrid

Not your typical online shooter

Platform
Xbox 360
Style
1-Player Action
(6-Player Online)
Publisher
5th Cell
Developer
5th Cell
Release
Summer



A year has passed since we first looked at 5th Cell's upcoming XBLA shooter, Hybrid, and we haven't heard much about the game since. Recently, 5th Cell's Jeremiah Slaczka shed some more light on the project, outlining a few characteristics of Hybrid's gameplay that separate it from other shooters.

But first, a quick recap: Hybrid is a downloadable, multiplayer-only shooter that takes place in a dystopian future. In 2032, a Large Hadron Supercollider in Australia implodes, causing a hat trick of catastrophes. First, dark matter begins popping up around the globe. Then an alternate reality merges with our own, introducing the population to humanoid aliens called Variants. Finally, Earth gets stuck in a time loop, which ultimately leads to a war between the Variants and the humans (a.k.a. Paladins). If the setup sounds silly, don't worry: Hybrid has plenty of other aspects to get excited about. **Jeff Marchiafava**

Choose Your Side

As Hybrid's premise suggests, gameplay takes place between two warring factions, the Variants and the Paladins. As such, players must pick a side. Most of the faction differences are superficial to ensure a level playing field. While some team specific weapons exist at the start, players eventually gain access to every weapon and ability in the game. However, 5th Cell is working hard to make players identify with their team. "You won't be able to change factions on the fly," Slaczka tells us. "There are restrictions put in place to help players associate and become loyal to their teams, as well as prevent them from abandoning ship when their faction falls behind."

Persistence Is Key

Choosing a side isn't just about what skin you want for your character. Hybrid features a persistent war between the two factions, and each multiplayer match contributes to the outcome. The overarching war has different periods or "epochs," which are brought on solely by the performance of the two factions, making it a truly player-driven war. "There is no set time or period in which the war officially ends, but it is up to the players to be the catalyst that forces time to eventually reconstruct and a new epoch to begin. It could take anywhere from two to four weeks for this to happen, depending on the skill of the players." Some story tie-ins are associated with player performance as well.

Size Matters

Hybrid's gameplay is limited to 3-on-3 matches. This seems small compared to most online shooters, but Slaczka is confident it's the perfect size. Not only does it ensure the downloadable title doesn't run into matchmaking problems, it also minimizes the time commitment. "We really wanted to give [Hybrid] an arcade-style feeling of 'get in, have fun, get out' without having to invest hours in a single session," Slaczka says. "With 3-on-3 matches, we could make the maps smaller, and the game faster paced." Hybrid has 10 multiplayer maps, and while only be six soldiers are on the battlefield at once, each match can have up to 18 AI-controlled drones on the field at the same time.

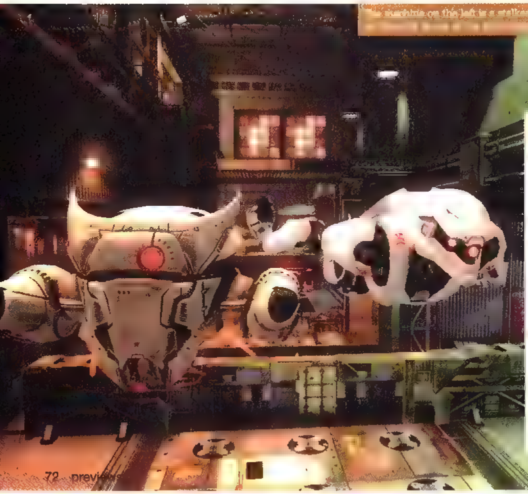
Send In The Drones

Hybrid's drones add a new wrinkle to online shooters. Operating in the same way as Modern Warfare's killstreaks, drones are awarded for racking up a certain number of kills in one lifetime. The stalker is awarded after the first kill, and will follow you around the map, replicating your actions. Warbringer requires three kills, and acts as an autonomous floating turret. Five kills grant the player a Preyon, a kind of heat-seeking cyborg that will one-hit kill its target if the opposing team doesn't take it down first. Drones do not have to be immediately deployed, and they will continue fighting even after the issuing player is killed, making them valuable rewards.

An Intriguing Hybrid

One surprising aspect of Hybrid is that player movement is handled by the game; you simply point to where you want to go, press a button, and your character moves automatically. While this adds a layer of strategy to gameplay, Slaczka says it also augments the action. "You focus more on the combat because you're not worried about where you're going next or how to stay out of the line of fire. Moves are very deliberate, but you still feel a unique sense of freedom in your ability to place more focus on the actual combat." Despite the strategy elements, Slaczka says action-oriented gamers will still have the advantage. "Hybrid is, at its core, a fast-paced shooter."

Everything we've learned about Hybrid so far has us eager to try out the game, and thankfully we won't have to wait long. A closed beta starts in late April. Sign up now at whatshybrid.com.



The machine on the left is a stalker drone. The machine [illegible]

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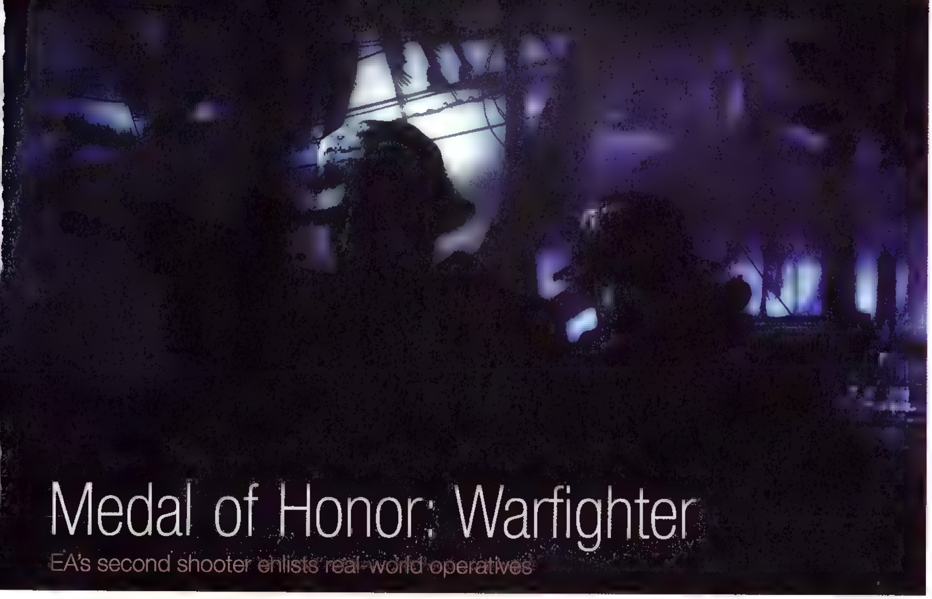


Medal of Honor: Warfighter

EA's second shooter enlists real-world operatives

When conceptualizing the sequel to the 2010 reboot of the popular Medal of Honor series, executive producer Greg Goodrich found a secret weapon. Why dream up imaginary military campaigns when you can consult directly with Tier 1 operators who lived through it? When two former special forces soldiers offered a manuscript of their "vent book" – a collection of musings about their fellow soldiers, the missions they participated in across the globe, and the strategies they would employ to fight terrorism if they could remove all the bureaucracy hindering their work – EA jumped at the chance to use it as the basis for Warfighter.

The vent book served as the starting point. From there, Danger Close extracted intelligence from the missions and synthesized the events into the lives of Preacher, Mother, and Voodoo – the characters introduced in the last game. The result is a game that puts its fictitious characters into recreations of real-world events pulled right out of the headlines, like the confrontation with Somali pirates and hostage-recovery missions in the Philippines.

In the demo that we saw at the Game Developers Conference, the trio teams up with an elite Philippine military unit to free some civilians the extremist Islamic group Abu Sayyaf took hostage when storming the capital building in Isabela City, one of the poorest cities in the country. Making matters worse, they must perform the mission in the middle of a typhoon. As the group approaches the building, it's clear the storm has taken its toll. The outside windows are shattered and water is pouring into the building, flooding the lower floors in the process.

After breaching through the front door, the team systematically neutralizes threats while moving into the upper levels. When the bullets are flying, the power of the Frostbite 2 engine is in full effect. Facades aren't being ripped down due to explosions like in Battlefield, but the stray bullets chew up the interior of the building and grenade explosions send chandeliers spinning out of control. Danger Close says players can expect to see a lot of this style of micro destruction throughout the game.

Once the team hits a choke point, the player flanks the enemies by going through another set of rooms and inevitably takes out the unassuming baddies. When the Tier 1 team approaches the final door, an option to breach it appears and the cliched slow-motion clearance of all the enemies on the other side of the door ensues.

With the hostages secured, the team begins the extraction sequence, which involves hopping on board a boat and manning the turret while the driver speeds through the flooded streets and falling trees. All the while, the player takes out enemies positioned on rooftops and billboards – your typical first-person shooter rails sequence. Once the city is cleared, they attach the boats to chinooks and fly into the sunset.

Rather than handing off the multiplayer to DICE like last game, this time Danger Close is handling the duties itself. Most of the plans for the mode revolve around internationalizing the brand. Goodrich cited the FIFA series as an example of a competitive online game that gives players a sense of national pride, and Danger Close wants to bring a similar feeling to Medal of Honor. As Goodrich pointed out during his presentation, most kids who grow up in Poland don't dream of being U.S. Navy SEALs, so EA is integrating 11 other Tier 1 units like the British SAS, Australian SASR, and Polish GROM. Rather than having one team take the role of real-world rivals like the Taliban (a circumstance that got Medal of Honor into a lot of trouble last time), Warfighter pits the best spec ops groups in the world against one another in fictitious "blue vs. blue" battles.

We couldn't extract any more information out of Danger Close regarding the multiplayer, but since Warfighter is scheduled to ship on October 23, we expect to hear more about it soon. » **Matt Bertz**

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

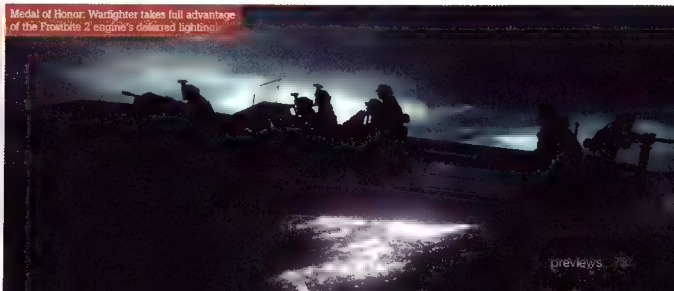
» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Danger Close

» **Release**
October 23

Warfighter adheres closely to first-person shooter conventions. Expect corridor battles, turret sequences, and on-rails vehicular chases



Medal of Honor: Warfighter takes full advantage of the Frostbite 2 engine's deferred lighting

NCAA Football 13

EA approaches the line of scrimmage

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

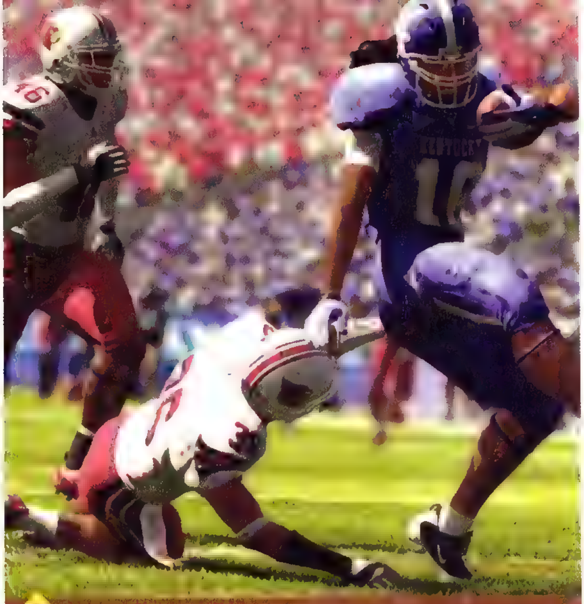
» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
July 10

NCAA Football has been the better EA football product the past few years, and the development team is working hard again to keep it that way. This is occurring on many different fronts, including gameplay, presentation, dynasty mode, online, and more. This month we take a look at some of NCAA 13's graphics and presentation changes implemented to make it look more realistic and convey more of the tradition and pageantry of college football. » **Matthew Kato**



V[illegible] time-of-day lighting changes from [illegible] and Tiburon also improved the HDR lighting [illegible]. The field and [illegible] depending on whether they are in bright light or deep shadow, as this screenshot [illegible] plate on the uniform of the diving defender.

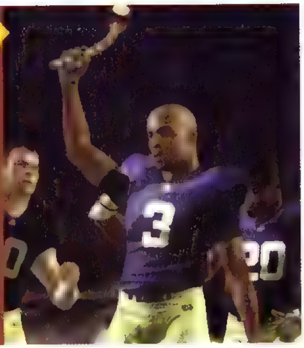
Because EA Tiburon is trying to keep up with all the teams' uniform changes throughout the season. The game ships with some of this year's new uniforms out of the box, and others will be added through the year. The studio hasn't announced how it plans to keep up with all the [illegible] updates or DLC.

In the audio department, the game features full stadium-specific crowd chants from Boise State, Pitt, LSU, Penn State, Virginia Tech, Nebraska, Georgia, and many more. EA is bolstering the crowd sounds in general by incorporating [illegible] audio feeds.

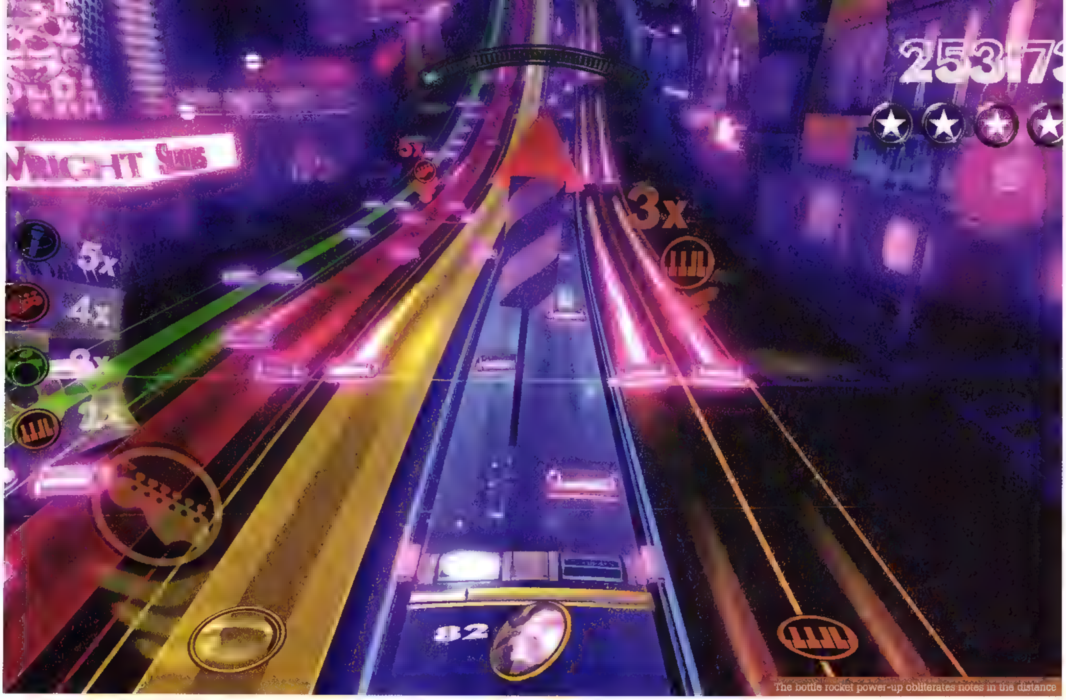
Similarly, announcers Kirk Herbstreit and Brad Nessler have new lines of commentary (plus new ones in familiar places) added to [illegible]ing segments, and references to events earlier in the game such as a blown lead or a first-quarter interception coming back to haunt a QB. For the first time in the series, Kirk and Brad recorded audio at the same time in the studio, which EA says led to more ad-libbed commentary as opposed to scripted lines stitched together separately.

NCAA 13 improves upon on the jump forward in presentation from last year by offering more nods to school-specific traditions. Additional mascots such as Texas A&M's Reveille and the Purdue Boilermaker Special join the festivities. Some mascots even have new actions, such as Maryland's Testudo parachuting into the stadium. EA Tiburon also added Texas and USC's unique cheerleaders.

Addressing a specific fan request, NCAA 13 now shows more player interaction with trophies, whether it's a player running over and hoisting a rivalry trophy like Notre Dame and USC's Jeweled Shillelagh, or someone grabbing an orange from the Orange Bowl trophy.



What about NCAA 13's new gameplay? The title contains extensive changes and improvements on both sides of the ball. EA Tiburon says it's doubled the size of its gameplay team, which has revamped the passing game with new features and modifications. Be sure to come back next month when we tell all.



The bottle rocket power-up obliterates notes in the distance

Rock Band Blitz

Put down the guitar, pick up a controller

Just because your plastic instruments are collecting a thick layer of dust doesn't mean your expansive collection of Rock Band songs is worthless. Harmonix is sending this message loud and clear with its new downloadable title, Rock Band Blitz. The arcade-inspired rhythm game combines the track juggling of Frequency and Amplitude with the addictive scoring of Pinball FX – all while incorporating all the Rock Band songs on your console.

Unlike most games in the series, players jam out on their controllers in Rock Band Blitz. Just like your first time playing Guitar Hero, gameplay is simple to learn but difficult to master. A highway consisting of two notes appears for each instrument, and players must tap two corresponding buttons on the controller in time as they scroll downwards. The goal is to beef up the score multiplier on all the tracks, which means you're frantically hopping between tracks using shoulder buttons. The result is a fun, approachable new way to enjoy the excellent Rock Band music catalogue.

Keeping rhythm is important, but Harmonix says there will be 10-15 power-ups available to help keep your score at a crescendo. The pinball power-up launches a shiny silver ball onto the playing field, and keeping it in play with the note cursor boosts up your score. My favorite is the bandmate power-up, which briefly autoplays a track. I love being able to put a difficult drum track on autopilot while laying down a funky bassline. Power-ups are customizable from the outset of the match, and you can purchase more by performing well in songs.

Rock Band Blitz's score-focused gameplay has the potential to enrapture music-loving gamers with a competitive edge. The game also comes with 25 new songs, all of which are backward compatible with other Rock Band games. Add in over 3,600 available preexisting Rock Band songs, and you have a lot to choose from while battling up the leaderboards. Plastic guitars and drums are fun, but we're excited to rock out with the controller once again. » **Tim Turi**

New songs

"Jessie's Girl" by Rick Springfield
"Pumped Up Kicks" by Foster the People
"Bang Your Head (Metal Health)" by Quiet Riot
"Always" by Blink 182

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

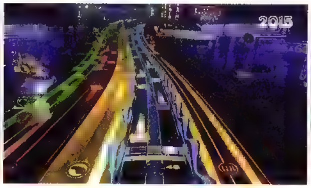
» **Style**
1-Player Music

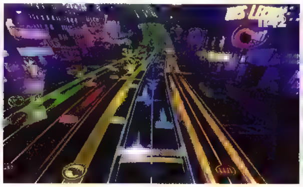
» **Publisher**
Harmonix

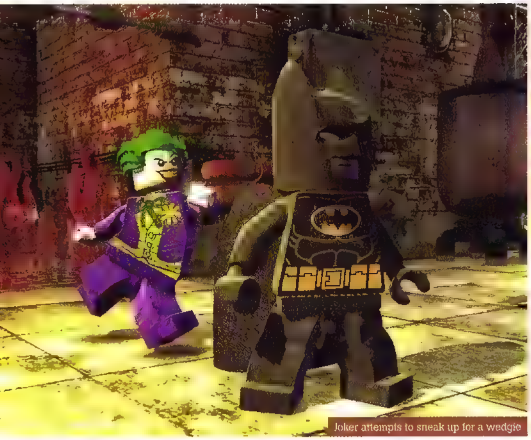
» **Developer**
Harmonix

» **Release**
2012

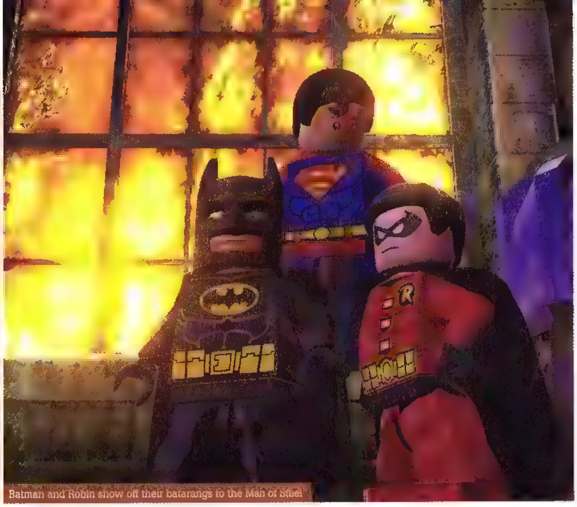
The formula is as addictive as it is simple







Joker attempts to sneak up for a wedgie



Batman and Robin show off their batarangs to the Man of Steel

LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes

Batman takes to Gotham with some old friends

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

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

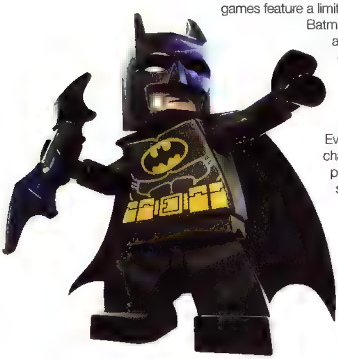
» **Developer**
Traveller's Tales

» **Release**
Summer 2012

In just seven years, Traveller's Tales has delivered three LEGO Star Wars games, two LEGO Indiana Jones games, two LEGO Harry Potter games, and one-offs based on *Pirates of the Caribbean* and Rock Band. This ambitious developer seems willing to make any crossover license work with the building blocks, and Batman was another natural choice. The 2008 game starring the Caped Crusader was a fan favorite amongst younger gamers, and the Dark Knight is getting some significant help in this year's sequel.

As the title implies, LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes isn't limited to traditional Batman characters. After Lex Luthor breaks the Joker out of Arkham Asylum, Bruce Wayne is forced to call on buddies like Superman, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern to join the fight. We saw a few areas of the game in action, and Traveller's Tales is diverging slightly from its tried and true formula.

While most of the previous LEGO action games feature a limited hub world, LEGO Batman 2 contains a fully explorable Gotham City. Flying characters like Superman can easily navigate this 3D environment, which should help when scouring for hidden studs and bricks. Even if you're controlling a character who lacks superpowers, flying around the city shouldn't be an issue thanks to specific spots that allow you to summon vehicles like the Batwing.



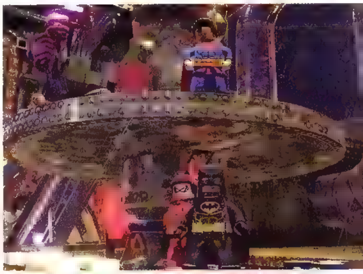
Gotham is no rival to Liberty City, but Traveller's Tales is including a decent selection of side missions and distractions. If you're looking to get around a little faster but don't feel like spawning a flying vehicle, you're free to commandeer civilian vehicles. Shady characters are unsurprisingly lurking down Gotham's alleys, and saving civilians from attacks and muggings earns you rare gold bricks.

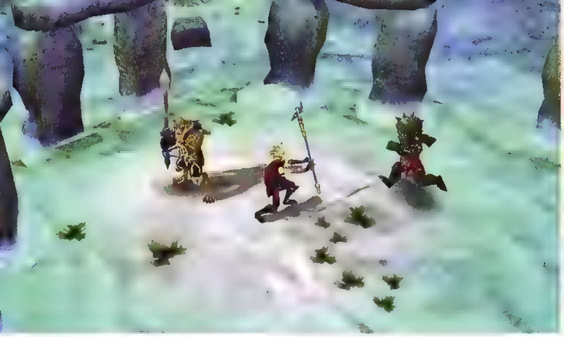
Even though Gotham is significantly larger than previous hubs, it still acts as your method of selecting new stages. Once in the individual stages, the action shrinks down from open world to a more traditional LEGO format. During the demo, an early sequence featured the Joker crashing Gotham's Man of the Year awards. As he held the ballroom hostage while his goons robbed the place, Batman and Robin crashed through a projection screen in the Batboat. Our heroes soon wound up fighting Harley Quinn, who hopped across the top of the ballroom's statues. Batman knocked her down with the Batarang enough times to win the fight, and proceeded to take on more of Joker's clowns.

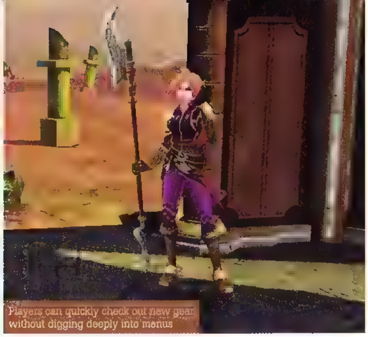
As the Dynamic Duo brawled through numerous enemies, Traveller's Tales showed off some of the new suits available to players. Batman's sensor suit apes the stealth abilities of Metal Gear Solid's optic camouflage, and grants X-ray vision when looking at certain objects. Robin taps into the Grayson family legacy with his acrobat suit, which gives him a pole, more mobility, and agile attacks. He can also stick the pole into specific points on walls to create temporary spots to swing from. Other suits allow the duo to avoid hazards, such as Batman's electricity suit and Robin's fire-extinguishing hazard suit.

In a first for the series, Traveller's Tales is retiring the slapstick silent-movie-style cutscenes. Super Heroes 2 remains lighthearted and fun, but each character is now fully voiced. Another welcome addition introduces mid-level saves that can be accessed via the pause menu.

LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes doesn't look like a game changer for the prolific building block franchise, but younger fans should get a kick out of the superhero tag team. With 50 playable characters and the usual assortment of collectibles, it should give fans plenty of reasons to keep coming back. » **Dan Ryckert**







Players can quickly check out new gear without digging deeply into menus

Heroes of Ruin

Loot-grabbing on the go

Until the recent wave of console-based lootfests, most gamers could only play action-RPG titles like Diablo in front of their computers. Developer n-Space is further removing the genre from your PC with ambitious 3DS title Heroes of Ruin. This hack and slasher lets you grind monsters with friends, level up your character, explore dungeons, and find awesome items all on the go.

I got the chance to play around with a Vindicator, the hard-hitting tank class. I enjoyed hewing through crowds of bad guys in colorful dungeons while employing my charge move to topple foes from a distance. As I quickly leveled up and explored my three skill trees, I set the groundwork for an interesting healer/tank-type paladin. Abilities like the aforementioned charge or a quick heal are mapped to the 3DS' face buttons and touchscreen, making on-the-fly casting easy. I also like how simple it is to quickly compare item stats, equip new gear, and sell old junk without plodding through tons of menus.

I spent most of my time crawling through dungeons with an ally or two via the 3DS' local connectivity (4-player online play is also available), but I visited some towns as well. A staggering amount of citizens with exclamation marks floating above their heads were eager to enlist me to complete tasks for them, which usually means visiting a new dungeon. I didn't spend much time absorbing any lore crammed into these deeds; they were simply motivation to get back to the fight.

Based on my time with Heroes of Ruin, it's clear that Square Enix knows exactly what it is – a straightforward, Diablo-style game making use of the 3DS' tech to let you grind mobs wherever you please. Developing my Vindicator became an addiction after just a short while, and the Architect, Gunslinger, and Savage classes all look equally interesting. » **Tim Turi**

» Platform
3DS

» Style
1-Player Action/Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
n-Space

» Release
April 3

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reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

80 Mass Effect 3

After over five years, BioWare's unmatched sci-fi trilogy comes to a stunning conclusion. A powerful narrative wraps up most of the plot threads surrounding Shepard and the Mass Effect universe's many troubled races, while a surprisingly deep cooperative multiplayer mode introduces hooks to keep us playing for months. Whether taken on its own or as the wrap-up to an incredible series, Mass Effect 3 is a true triumph.

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	Andy McNamara's Draw Something skills.

AWARDS

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

CIVIC

41 MPG HWY*

The Civic HF. With 41-mpg-highway* fuel economy, Eco Assist™ and the ECON† button, you could now go from the beach to the mountains with fewer stops for gas. All you need now is a longer playlist.

*29 city/41 hwy/33 combined mpg for Civic HF. 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. †Eco Assist and the ECON logo are trademarks of Honda Motor Co., Ltd., and may not be used or reproduced without prior written approval. Civic HF model shown. ©2012 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

Mass Effect 3

Emotions run high in BioWare's grand finale

10

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
The outstanding final chapter in Commander Shepard's story

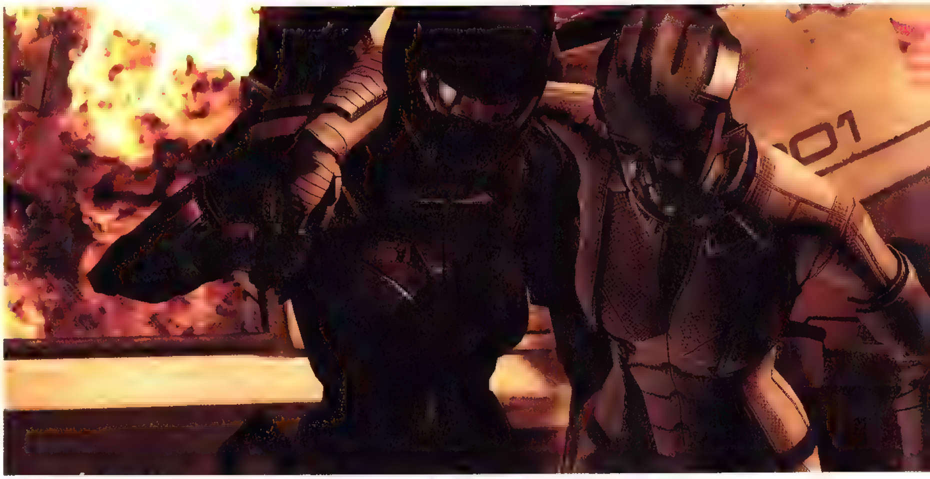
» **Graphics**
The cinematography perfectly captures the large-scale encounters and emotions tied to this epic war

» **Sound**
The voice acting is exceptional, and the sound design couldn't be more immersive. The game concludes with one of the most intense orchestral crescendos I've ever heard

» **Playability**
The combat system is improved, and BioWare crafted more varied encounters. The annoying minigames have been removed from the experience, leaving a streamlined and entertaining gameplay package

» **Entertainment**
This dark tale wraps up all of the trilogy's loose ends and delivers one of the most powerful video games experiences to date

» **Replay Value**
High



gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Shooter/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Games **Developer** BioWare **Release** March 6 **ESRB** M

Near the beginning of Mass Effect 3, an emotional scene takes place when Commander Shepard encounters a frightened boy on Earth. A feeling of hopelessness pervades the encounter; Shepard can't do anything to help, and the child knows it. The galaxy didn't prepare for the Reaper invasion, and defeat seems inevitable. The scribes at BioWare never abandon this tone throughout Mass Effect 3, leading to a dark story that beats mercilessly to the pulse of war and the death it delivers.

While the universe's fight for survival is the backbone of this drama – a masterfully written examination of war and the toll it takes – Shepard's humanity is often reflected in key moments along the way. In a few sequences, BioWare even breaks free from traditional storytelling conventions to artfully illustrate Shepard's state of mind. Many of the conversations exchanged between Shepard and military leaders are grim, and often feelings of finality or impending doom are implied or outright spoken. The once-vibrant white walls of Citadel, a hub of galactic unity and prosperity, now hold the injured and dead and are blackened by war.

As bleak as this story is, it's offset by war sequences so large in scale and beautifully animated that you cannot help but look upon them in awe. The Reapers are often bigger than a city's tallest skyscraper. As they approach they create terrifying sounds with enough bass to make your subwoofer rattle. Space battles consist of hundreds of vessels, gigantic volleys of laser fire, and cinematic shots that owe a debt to both *Star Wars* and *Battlestar Galactica*. Almost every shot in this game, whether it's showing the finesse of a ninja-like foe or a simple conversation between Shepard and a crewmate, is beautifully framed. From Earth's darkest hour to the universe's last stand, this game revels in heart-pounding excitement and soul-crushing twists. It starts out with a bang and rarely slows as it races toward its conclusion.

I was left speechless at the end of this story. I won't divulge the feeling that washed over me during the final sequence, but I absolutely love how it concludes. Most of the major plot points and character side stories – even those harking back to Mass Effect 1 – resolve. Some of

The Edge

On Xbox 360, players who own Kinect can also layer tactics through voice command. This system is shaky at best – sometimes forcing the player to repeat commands – but when it works, it aids in sticky situations. As Shepard is unloading a round, you can yell "Liara, singularity" to chain together attacks. I used Kinect for the occasional battle, but found it most useful during conversations. When you're catching up with the Normandy crew you can put the controller down and bark out commands, freeing up your hands to stuff your face with food. Laugh if you will, but I bet Kinect owners will use it just like I did over the course of long gaming sessions.

The downside to the 360 version is the need to swap discs; this doesn't just happen once or twice during the story like in Mass Effect 2; this happened five times for me. PlayStation 3 owners don't have to worry about this at all, but I still give The Edge to the Xbox 360 version because you can play the entire trilogy on that console.

these characters feel like old friends or family members, and it's remarkable how much emotion these fictional beings evoke. I was sad to leave them behind, but satisfied since I had no unanswered questions.

If you played through Mass Effect 2's Arrival DLC, you understand the severity of the decisions Shepard has to make. I didn't encounter as many Renegade or Paragon choices as in the first two games, but most of the options have an important effect on the story, and many are hard to make. Yes, Shepard still finds the time to dance in a nightclub on Citadel, be cruel to reporters, and find love on the Normandy, but rarely do you have the choice to apply evil or good actions to trivial matters. BioWare has a clear path in mind for where the story threads end up, but Shepard's input determines who is involved and what trigger is pulled. The decisions carry significant weight and lead to interesting outcomes that transcend the traditional paragon/renegade framework.

I lost three party members (Grunt, Legion, and Jack) at the end of Mass Effect 2. Obviously, I don't know how their stories conclude in Mass Effect 3, but even if you took Mass Effect 2's suicide mission to the extreme, you won't be cheated out of content. You still play through the sequences that would have featured these characters; you just don't see how they would affect a scene. You'll want to import multiple saves to see how these scenarios play out with (or without) certain characters.

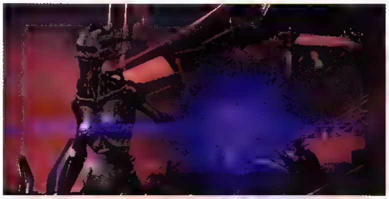
Despite its more emotional narrative, Mass Effect hasn't lost its edge on the battlefield. While the majority of the gameplay mechanics carry over from Mass Effect 2 with little alteration (a decision I have no qualms with), the addition of melee strikes opens up new combat strategies and allows players to abandon cover. The Omni-Blade mechanic feels great and finally gives players a solution to close-range assaults. I just wish it would lock on to downed foes and could be canceled if I know I'm going to swing and miss.

Squadmate AI is more independent, moving freely on the battlefield and engaging enemies intelligently without waiting for orders. This is a great thing, since the enemy forces are often greater in number and coordinating their attacks. Shepard can no longer sit back in one spot like a sniper and pick off an entire battalion. Movement is necessary, and while the cover mechanic works better than it did in past incarnations, it's still not perfect. Sometimes, the control still feels sloppy as you vault and move between cover points. Regardless, combat offers a higher level of intensity and the encounters are more interesting this time around – especially given the great variety in environment and enemy types.

Off the battlefield, Shepard rounds up troops and resources to fuel the war effort. This mechanic highlights the epic quality of this galactic conflict, and gives players a strategic experience that seeps into almost every mission. Some of this is handled through main story missions, side quests, and planet scanning. Don't worry, scanning isn't the time-consuming nightmare it used to be. BioWare clearly listened to complaints people had about Mass Effect 2 and trimmed the fat – I didn't endure one hacking minigame or awkward vehicle segment.

Friends can also lend a hand to your war effort through new four-player co-op missions. You won't share story moments, but completing these missions raises Shepard's galactic readiness in the main campaign. These battles play out much like Gears of War's Horde mode, only they're packed with objectives. Some are tough to accomplish, especially as you ratchet up the difficulty setting. Like any good multiplayer game, every match and kill brings experience points, and players can pass the time by leveling up their character, modding weapons, and purchasing gear, upgrades, and even character kits. This co-op experience is a fantastic addition that gives the game longevity whether you want to enrich your single-player experience or sink hours into a full-fledged multiplayer offering. Buying randomized reward packs between matches reminds me of collecting baseball cards as a kid; the prospect of a rare and valuable find is enough to keep me addicted indefinitely.

For two full games, we heard about the Reapers. Mass Effect 3 shows us how great this threat is both to the inhabitants of this fictional universe and to the players who must face off against it. I guided Shepard across three massive games spanning over 100 hours, and feel BioWare has delivered one of the most intricately crafted stories in the history of the medium. After getting to know these characters so well, it'll be hard to leave this universe behind, but it's been one hell of a ride. » **Andrew Reiner**



Second Opinion 9.75

For a series built on the foundation of player choice, Mass Effect 3 presents you with surprisingly few decisions. I thought I'd be complaining about that aspect of the design, but dwelling on what's missing is difficult when ME 3 is constantly amazing you in other ways. While the story takes center stage, improvements to combat across the board help the gunplay develop an identity of its own. Even on Insanity difficulty, the fun and challenge are rooted in tactics – a testament to the care that BioWare has taken in fine-tuning and balancing combat. I am disappointed at how BioWare sidelined the characters from Mass Effect 2 (be prepared for a lot of excuses about why they can't join you). While this issue is significant, it only puts a small dent in the powerful narrative, improved combat, and addictive multiplayer that define Mass Effect 3. Don't be dismayed by some users' complaints about the ending, I've been a hardcore fan of Mass Effect from the beginning, and I am completely satisfied with this conclusion to the most ambitious video game project I've ever had the pleasure of playing. » **Joe Juba**

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings – Enhanced Edition

The brilliant dark fantasy adventure is just as good on console

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment **Developer** CDProjekt RED **Release** April 17 **ESRB** M

9.5

360 • PC

» **Concept**
Thread your way through a branching, epic plot that has equal parts heroism, villainy, combat, booze, and (ahem) short-term romantic encounters

» **Graphics**
This looks almost as good on 360 as it does on PC. If you put your mind to it you can find some low-res textures and level-of-detail pop-in, but they do little to cheapen the experience

» **Sound**
Every piece of dialogue is voice acted, and very few exceptions mar the generally high-quality work in a variety of accents

» **Playability**
Navigating both combat and menus works great on a 360 pad. Don't confuse the game's modeling of momentum and the long animations for being hit or parried as unresponsiveness

» **Entertainment**
This unique RPG is finally available to console owners, and not in any kind of diminished form. This is a triumph of technical achievement, world-building, and plotting

» **Replay Value**
High

I've spent the last year holding up The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings as a compelling reason to make the investment in a gaming PC. Its weighty combat, difficult choices with real consequences, and fascinating storylines are some of the best gaming has ever seen. I can no longer lord it over the console masses with this one, though, because this long-in-development Xbox 360 port is just as amazing as the original. It's actually better than it was at launch thanks to the year of patching, refinement, and additional DLC content that this version benefits from.

Main character Geralt, the eponymous witcher, is in his own words "a mutant created for swordsmanship." As I look back on the game, I'm surprised to find that the "mutant" part of that statement is the most important. Tearing apart foes with Geralt's acrobatic blade work and magical signs is fun, but taking on the role of a hated and feared inhuman adventurer in this rich world is so much more than that.

Choice and consequence in The Witcher 2 isn't the kind of moral absolutism that most RPGs featuring choice typically descend into. It's helping a fanatical anti-human terrorist or an amoral spymaster, chasing down a murderer or saving (ahem) brothel employees, and punishing or profiting from ancient war crimes. Depending entirely on the player, Geralt can be a beacon of hope to the common people, a whimsical drunkard, a terrifying avatar of vengeance, or a selfish smartass. More importantly, the witcher has logical reasons for each action or response and the player simply decides which of his motivations has priority. Furthermore, the situations (treatment of minority groups, occupation by a foreign power, abuse of authority, etc.) have obvious real-world analogs that have far more emotional resonance than your typical save-the-world video game plot. It doesn't hurt that the middle section of the game is radically different depending on one particular decision.

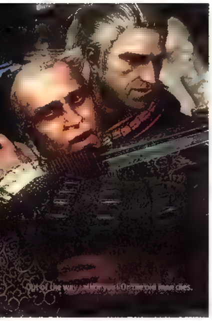
The tale is a thick web of politics, magic, love, and revenge that weaves interesting characters around historic events that could be medieval Europe with different names but for all the monsters and magic. The world, exquisitely detailed in the books by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski that The Witcher is based on, hangs together well enough to make the plotting of the various factions and nations fascinating. Powerful sorceresses, rival witchers, kings, and generals all have their own agendas and motivations, many of which will surprise you once you decode the truths, half-truths, and outright lies that the story is parceled out in.

The developers did a wonderful job decoupling narrative from mechanics, so you won't make a decision based on which mission branch gives a more powerful quest reward. Even if the possible items for different paths were laid out up front, though, you probably wouldn't care. The loot game is boring and has little impact on your combat performance so long as you remember to equip that new suit of armor you just got and mix together enough bombs and potions to keep your pockets full. This is an improvement over the original PC launch, which was irritating and mandatory instead of merely dull and trivial.

Geralt's success in combat is predicated on player skill, not stats – though a modicum of thought into picking skills that complement your playstyle as you level up pays great dividends. The flipside of that is that the player is punished harshly for trying to button mash their way to victory. Keeping track of the positioning of enemies, avoiding being surrounded, and making good use of magic and consumables like bombs is a must unless you want to constantly be reloading. The tactical challenge is mostly entertaining, though a few horribly balanced encounters are beyond frustrating. The one consistent misstep in the scripting is in throwing the player directly from dialogue into nasty combat situations with no time to prepare or save and an autosave point too far back for comfort. I had to replay many sections of the game several times thanks to unconscionably absent checkpoints.

The Enhanced Edition bonus content is fine, but has little impact on the overall game and is nothing to re-purchase it for – especially since owners of the PC original are getting that as well as this release's rebalancing in a free patch on launch day

There are very few differences between playing this on 360 or a high-end PC. The graphical gap is noticeable but trivial, load times are short and infrequent on both, and the game plays equally well on mouse/keyboard and gamepad. Several complaints I had about the original – horrid inventory management, punishing early difficulty, targeting problems – have been patched away since launch, and those improvements are incorporated here (thus the slightly higher score). The few flaws I take issue with should in no way discourage anyone from playing this fantastic, unique RPG. So long as they're over 18, anyway, because this is the most deserving M rating I've ever personally played through. » **Adam Biessener**



Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City

Raccoon City should have stayed nuked

Style 1-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Slant Six Games **Release** March 20 **ESRB** M

The Resident Evil series is filled with failed offshoots – from a light-gun game that doesn't support light guns to a miserable Game Boy Color title. You can now count Operation Raccoon City among these missteps. Slant Six's attempt to merge the iconic Raccoon City outbreak with intense third-person shooting is rife with buggy AI, debilitating glitches, and sloppy gameplay.

Operation Raccoon City puts players in the roles of Umbrella operatives on a mission to eradicate all evidence of the evil pharmaceutical company's involvement with the outbreak. The brief four-player co-op campaign takes players on an uninspired tour through Raccoon City landmarks like the police station and underground laboratory. How Slant Six managed to make such iconic settings look so generic is beyond me.

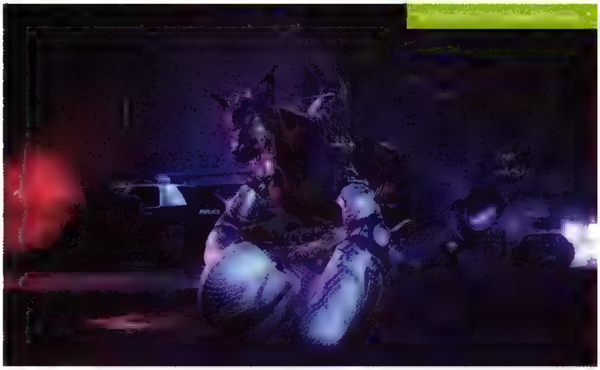
Blasting away zombies and mutated monsters with friends is a decent time, but attempts to mix up the gameplay fail miserably. A bumbling chase sequence early on is filled with frustrating quick-time events and inexplicably forces you to run backwards. Another lazy encounter involves the famously fleet-footed Nemesis staying put in the middle of a huge warehouse while you pepper him with bullets from behind cover. From the rocky start to the laughably disappointing ending, the attempted fan service ends up making a mockery of the franchise's fiction.

Unlike most games in the series, Operation Raccoon City focuses on fast-paced gunplay on the overrun streets of Raccoon City. Aiming your shotgun or assault rifle at zombies' heads feels solid, but nearly every other element of gameplay is lacking. The automatic cover system is clumsy, often forcing you in or out of protection at inopportune times. The stiff melee combat is so underpowered it's nearly useless. The same button is used for swapping weapons and reviving teammates, making it a nightmare to resuscitate comrades bleeding out on a pile of assault rifles. The human AI is somehow more braindead than the shambling corpses. I've seen teammates run headlong into laser mines and enemy soldiers practice power squats behind cover or straight up ignore me.

The game is only marginally improved by hopping into versus mode and replacing the mindless AI with humans. My favorite multiplayer mode involves blasting your way to a rescue helicopter in an attempt to secure a trip out of the doomed town. However, modes that require even an ounce of strategy, like capture-the-vial, fall apart due to the game's inherently chaotic environment. I found no joy losing a heated firefight because a stray zombie grabbed me, forcing me into an analog stick-waggling quicktime escape. Some may enjoy the overwhelming bustle of the battlefield, but the entire experience just feels like a crowded mess to me.

A basic XP-based progression system allows players to buy new weapons and upgrade class-specific abilities like sticky grenades or cloaking. While unlocking a new shotgun or machine gun is great, the unimaginative skill upgrades didn't change the core gameplay in a noticeable or satisfying way.

Umbrella may have filled Raccoon City with horrific creatures, but Slant Six has tainted the fabled town in its own way. It's difficult recommending a return to Raccoon when you have to endure buggy AI, clunky gameplay, and terrible glitches like disappearing floors. Not even online play is enough to of a reason to warrant checking out this odd experiment with the Resident Evil brand. » **Tim Turi**



6

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
The backup SOCOM developer attempts to bring third-person shooting to the streets of Raccoon City

» **Graphics**
The character models look great, but the environments are generic and boring

» **Sound**
The sound effects fit in with the series, but this is one of the worst Resident Evil scores of all time

» **Playability**
Shooting feels alright, but everything else is a clumsy mess

» **Entertainment**
Shooter fans will be disappointed by the messy gameplay, and the sloppy handling of the Resident Evil lore is bound to upset fans

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

Ninja Gaiden 3

Ryu's lackluster return

6

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Make the long-running series more accessible to newcomers

» **Graphics**
Character models and the framerate are solid, but the various environments are bland

» **Sound**
Prepare to hear enemies yell "killing is my business!" about six times per fight

» **Playability**
Controls are responsive, but the lack of upgradeable weapons and moves limits strategy

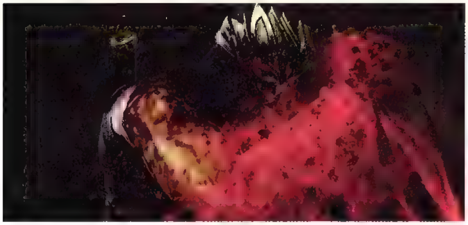
» **Entertainment**
Fans of the series will be disappointed by the dumbed-down difficulty, and newcomers may be turned off by the ridiculous story and basic multiplayer

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Tecmo Koei **Developer** Team Ninja **Release** March 20 **ESRB** M

Fans of Ryu Hayabusa's last two adventures can't be blamed if they approach Ninja Gaiden 3 with a certain amount of skepticism. It's the first modern entry in the series not directed by Tomonobu Itagaki. Moving away from the series' trademark difficulty, it promises to be more friendly to newcomers. It nixes decapitations and severed limbs in favor of general blade wounds. Many of the decisions made during Ninja Gaiden 3's development have raised the eyebrows of fans, and the end product is a mixed bag.

The first two 3D games in the series required razor-sharp reflexes, a healthy knowledge of useful combos, and the patience to endure countless deaths. Casual action fans understandably had issues completing these games, and Team Ninja made good on its promise to make this sequel more forgiving. The new Hero mode turns Ryu into an invincible dynamo once his health meter gets low. I watched the ninja auto-evade grenades and block bullets with his sword while my controller sat untouched on my desk for a good 30 minutes, and there is no indication that Ryu can or will ever die.



While hero mode is optional, the dumbed-down difficulty isn't confined to that setting. I played through the entire story mode on the default difficulty level, which was nothing short of punishing in the past. Back then, you'd get killed by new enemies a few times over before you started recognizing their patterns. In Ninja Gaiden 3, you're usually safe as long as you keep mashing the attack buttons and using your screen-clearing dragon ninpo.

It may be the easiest experience of the series, but that didn't keep me from dying a few times As the game progresses, enemies require a bit more strategy (while remaining simpler than the standard enemies from the past). Despite this, you're unlikely to die much as long as you use the helpful new slide technique when foes telegraph attacks. Boss fights may not be on the level of the previous panic-inducing battles, but they're still absurd enough to be entertaining. One encounter with the world's dumbest T-Rex stands out as especially memorable.

Combat isn't the only thing that's streamlined. Previous games featured a large assortment of collectibles, secrets, and upgradeable weapons. Ninja Gaiden 3 has one non-upgradeable sword (although two free DLC weapons are available), no currency system, and no collectibles. That satisfying feeling of leveling up your sword after saving up several levels' worth of orbs is gone.

Prior to release, Team Ninja was fond of mentioning Ninja Gaiden 3's new focus on story. Don't let this fool you into thinking it's any less convoluted or asinine than previous games in the series, however. What's pitched as a dive into the character and ethics of the murderous ninja is filled with the same cardboard characters, nonsensical backstabbings, and atrocious dialogue.

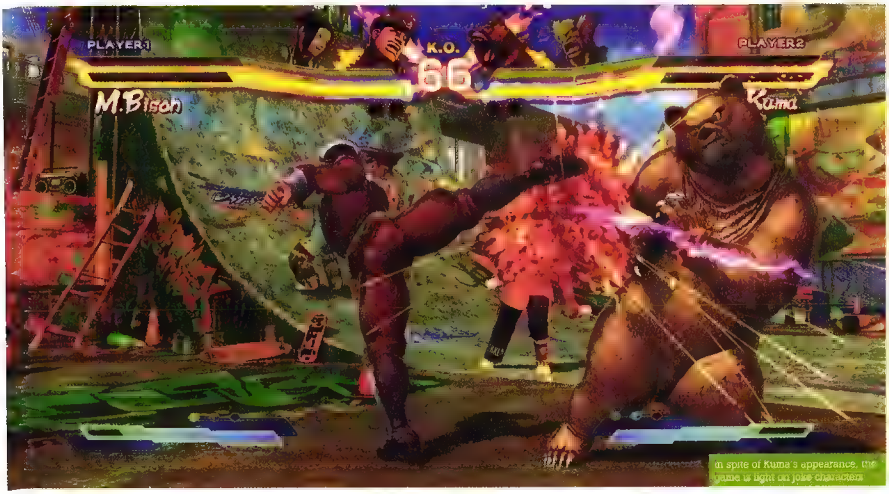
In a somewhat surprising move, Ninja Gaiden 3 also includes a multiplayer component. You won't be playing cooperatively during the campaign, but an assortment of trial missions can be completed either solo or with a friend. These bare-boned trials feel more like challenge rooms than actual missions, but they might extend your play time if you're looking for more after the story.

Clan battles are Team Ninja's attempt at competitive multiplayer. In these, two teams of four ninjas face off across three maps. Basic unlocks become available as you rank up, granting you new moves, costume pieces, and more space in your shuriken/arrow inventory. It's nowhere near the level of customization that a multiplayer experience like Call of Duty offers, but it may keep fans gunning for that next unlock. Unfortunately, the multiplayer gameplay leaves much to be desired. Shurikens and bows feel like they barely do any damage, and it's difficult to hit fast-moving opponents with the aiming controls for the ninpo attack. This means that most battles boil down to "run at the other guy, then mash buttons to hopefully kill him first."

Ninja Gaiden 3 is not a complete train wreck, but it suffers from a multitude of problems The action can be fast-paced and engaging at times, but many design decisions significantly bring down the experience. Lacking AI, a limited arsenal, the series' notoriously difficult camera, no inventory/currency system, and an incoherent story combine to make this the most disappointing title in the series. » **Dan Ryckert**

Street Fighter X Tekken

More than just a mash-up



In spite of Kuma's appearance, the game is light on joke characters

8.75

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Smash the worlds of the Street Fighter and Tekken series together in a new 2D fighter

» **Graphics**
Characters are large and detailed, and the backgrounds teem with life

» **Sound**
Music accompanies every stage, but the tunes don't leave much of an impression

» **Playability**
Capcom makes concessions to new players, but it's clear that this entry is aimed squarely at hardcore fans

» **Entertainment**
With loads of new systems and gameplay elements, there's enough to chew on here for the foreseeable future

» **Replay Value**
High

game informer SILVER

Style 1-4 Player Fighting (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** March 5 **ESRB** T

Aside from their fundamental "beat up dudes until they get knocked out" concepts, Street Fighter and Tekken couldn't be more different. One of the most interesting things about Street Fighter X Tekken is how Capcom mined elements from both series and repurposed them to create something that feels different.

I went into the game thinking I'd stick with my tried and true favorites from Street Fighter, but I quickly warmed to Tekken's roster. Tekken doesn't have much in the way of projectile attacks, but its characters don't needlessly suffer when matched against Capcom's hadouken-happy opponents. Instead, they can sidestep these attacks (sticking to the 2D plane), and close the gap. Throw distances have also been shortened up, a move that seems to benefit Namco's brawlers. When they're toe-to-toe with the Street Fighter clan, I found warriors such as Yoshimitsu and Bob more than able to dish out the KOs.

Unlike games in Capcom's versus series, matches in Street Fighter X Tekken end when a single fighter from a team is downed. It took me a while to get used to this Tekken Tag Tournament convention; I'd grown embarrassingly complacent in the tagging department over the years, which led to plenty of losses here early on. Once I wised up and appreciated the critical importance of swapping out damaged fighters at the earliest sensible opportunity, my luck improved.

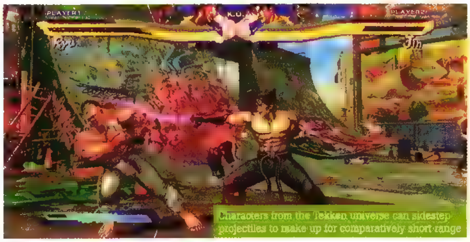
Two new systems in particular are bound to soak up a lot of playtime. The Gem System lets players modify their characters by equipping up to three optional items. These can slightly increase your character's on-the-ground movement or the speed with which he builds up his Cross Gauge, for instance. New players will appreciate scrub-friendly gems that automatically block attacks or prevent opponents from performing throws. Gems require specific amounts of Cross Gauge energy, and you're out of luck when it's depleted. The system is poorly documented, which actually could work in its favor. I expect that players will be tinkering with gems for the foreseeable future, trying to optimize loadouts for their specific styles of play.

Characters can also enter a Pandora mode when their health is reduced to 25 percent. After turning into a bizarre dark version of themselves, characters are rewarded with a nearly limitless Cross Gauge. It's not an "I win" button, though, considering that characters have less than 10 seconds to finish off their opponent or the match is lost. I didn't have much success using Pandora. When things had gone that sour for me in a match, adding a countdown clock didn't make my life any easier – even with Cross Gauge to spare.

Capcom's been touting the game's accessibility for a while now, but even with auto-blocking gems, it's clear that this game is for the fans. You can still have a lot of fun even if you can barely pull off any advanced techniques – particularly in the game's chaotic, four-player simultaneous Scramble mode – but there's an incredible amount of depth in this game. The highly technical nature of Street Fighter X Tekken ensures that only the truly skilled survive (button mashers, sit this one out). Even when I got smeared across the floor online, I was more appreciative of my opponent's skill than angry at my own deficiencies. It's been a while since I've felt inspired to actually train and get better in a game rather than simply quit, which is to Street Fighter X Tekken's credit.

The game packs in a nice variety of multiplayer options as well, which is fantastic news for people who like wrangling friends together and smashing their faces. Aside from the Scramble mode, Street Fighter X Tekken's 2-on-2 paired battles are a highlight. In a nice touch, the action pauses a moment during tags, giving players a chance to get their bearings when they pop in and out of the action. It's a great way to let experts pair up with novices (and do the heavy lifting) to show just how fun the game can be.

If you're a casual player looking for some throwaway fighting fun, this isn't for you – especially if you like playing online against strangers. On the other hand, moderate to hardcore players are going to find a lot to absorb in Street Fighter X Tekken, and players with patience will be rewarded for it. » **Jeff Cork**



Characters from the Tekken universe can sidestep projectiles to make up for comparatively short range

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13

Tiger encounters a dogleg

8

PS3 • 360

» Concept
The game offers a new swing mechanic, the Tiger Legacy mode, and more, but for better or worse it's largely the same

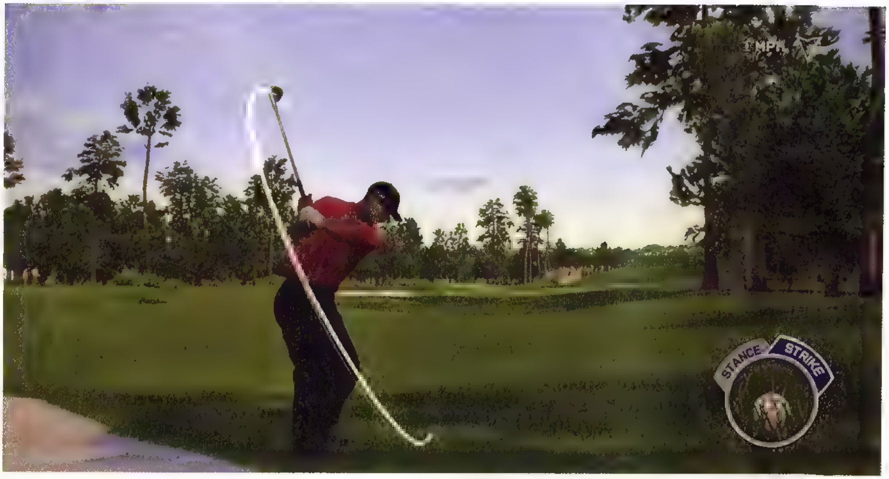
» Graphics
The good looking greens use a similar 3D grass and field of vision focus as last year's NCAA game

» Sound
As always, Jim Nantz delivers on the golf commentator vibe, but I wish he delivered more context specific to your character

» Playability
Visually, the new swing mechanic takes getting used to. Regardless, there are times you can't see it because it blends into the background environment

» Entertainment
There are some new hoops to jump through, but I think only some of the online country clubs features are actually exciting

» Replay Value
Moderately High



Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** March 27 **ESRB** E

Tiger Woods 12 brought a comforting structure to the career mode, but I find this year's new features and overall organization a byzantine maze that serves to bring you right back to where you started. The Masters career structure thankfully returns, but the larger focus is on collecting coins. You earn coins no matter which game mode you play – whether that's the online country clubs, in career mode, or the new Tiger Legacy mode that traces his past and possible future. But like other new features in Tiger 13, the initial deliciousness of this carrot does not last.

The importance of coins in the game shapes its entire structure (including the fact that your console needs to be connected online to get them). Although you can approach coin collecting passively, the way they are so tightly embedded in the game shapes how you spend your time playing it. Coins are spent on pins you get from packs in the store. Pins give your golfer boosts in a variety of ways, and have replaced some, but not all, of the bonuses you used to get from clothing and equipment. I wouldn't say that pins are absolutely necessary (the XP-based attribute system still exists as well), but they impart some sweet bonuses, so you'd be missing out if you didn't participate.

If you don't think you're earning coins fast enough or don't want to buy them outright, you can also explore the new Tiger Legacy mode where you play through different phases of the golfer's life. Given that it starts out with him as a toddler, you'd think it would be a tutorial of sorts, but it doesn't even work effectively as that. Instead, this waste of sepia is a repetitive slog of challenges that only serves as an avenue to earn more coins. Having to go through this kind of circuitous route to build your coin bank is not time well spent.

Tiger 13's other big new feature – its host of re-jiggered swing mechanics – gives players more options to finesse their shots, but I wouldn't call it a re-invention. I like how you can play around with different variables like swing velocity and ball positioning to suit your swing style. For instance, in order for me to swing straight and true, I can't have too much overswing on my backswing nor follow through too fast. This changed the way I tackled courses, from my club selection to changing where I struck the ball.

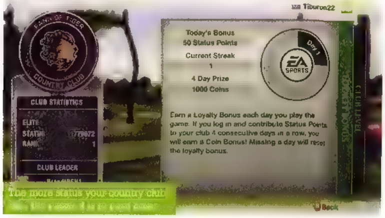
But the more I played Tiger 13, the more it felt the same. It doesn't take long to master the new swing mechanics and find yourself – no pun intended – back in the swing of things. While I don't think that the development team made changes just for the sake of change, I didn't play the game differently. I simply adapted to the new mechanics to bring me back to how I used to play it.

My ambivalence towards the coin system and some of the elements of the new swing mechanics shouldn't obscure the fact that Tiger 13's online package has some good features. Although you can't create large club vs. club tourneys or events, I like the co-op aspect where club members work towards shared goals. The designation of a weekly club leader (which funnels into a tourney structure) and smaller daily carrots like a coin reward for playing four days in a row are also welcome additions. Coins are a key component of Tiger 13's online country clubs, as well. Joining one gives you modifiers to earn more coins, which gets you pin packs much faster than if you were to earn them by yourself.

Golfers travel the world looking for fame and fortune, and Tiger 13 does the same thing with its various modes and new features. Unfortunately, some of it feels more like a run around than exciting content. » **Matthew Kato**

The Edge

This is EA Sports' first use of Kinect, and it shows. The peripheral doesn't come close to replicating your backswing with fidelity and it lacks fluidity and accuracy. The PS3 Move functionality fares only slightly better, but the hiccups in the backswing animation are annoying when you're trying to gauge how much power to use during putting. I don't recommend either of these peripherals over the normal control setup.



Today's Bonus
50 Status Points
Current Streak
1
4 Day Prize
1000 Coins

Earn a Loyalty Bonus each day you play the game. If you log in and contribute Status Points to your club 4 consecutive days in a row, you will earn a Coin Bonus! Missing a day will reset the loyalty bonus.

The more status your country club [illegible]

Armored Core V

Complexity and repetition collide

Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Namco Bandai **Developer** From Software **Release** March 20 **ESRB** T

6.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Create a fast-paced mech game that blurs the line between single-player and multiplayer

» **Graphics**
Big battlefields and an abundance of explosions don't make up for the humdrum visuals

» **Sound**
The melodramatic soundtrack is largely enjoyable, but the dialogue is laughable

» **Playability**
The controls are responsive without diminishing the feeling that you're piloting a multi-ton mechanical behemoth

» **Entertainment**
I appreciate Armored Core V's focus on dedicated teamwork, but a lack of mission variety brings down the experience

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Long before From Software was torturing gamers with Demon's Souls and Dark Souls, the Japanese developer was keeping mech fans busy with a steady stream of Armored Core titles. Armored Core V is the newest installment of the series, and while From Software has continued its tradition of melding online and offline play in unique ways, the mech-exploding action has a few glaring issues.

While AC V offers a functional offline mode, playing it that way would be like going solo in an MMO. Apart from a short gameplay tutorial, your first task is to sign up with an online team or create a new one. Each team accommodates up to 20 players, and everything you do in the game – from playing through story missions to competing for territory in Conquest battles – earns your squad team points to unlock new missions. The world map displays which teams control the dozens of territories and functions as a chatroom for your team. From Software has added systems for trading parts, money, and mechs with your fellow members. These aspects instill an impressive sense of camaraderie, and my attempts to play offline were significantly less fun.

Mech games are known for their customization options, and AC V is no different. In addition to a staggering number of weapons, the mechs (called ACs) can be customized with a variety of armors, boosters, and other items. Customization isn't just a matter of simple stat changes either; different loadouts have a massive impact on handling, and accommodate a variety of play styles. Unfortunately, the user interface is a mess. The simple act of equipping a new weapon is surprisingly confusing, and the game offers little explanation. Even after you figure out how to build your mech, shopping, assembly, and testing are all handled in different menus, making customization a cumbersome and time-consuming affair.

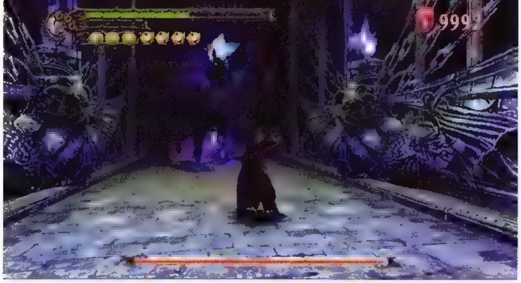
The missions make the amount of prep time required worse. They're divided between story chapters and orders, both of which allow you to bring a friend along. The story chapters, which are the longest missions in the game, are a confusing mess of disembodied dialogue and unexplained objectives. Difficulty also quickly becomes an issue, since even the most agile mechs can't dodge the unavoidable barrage of missiles, bullets, and plasma blasts. This leads to a frustrating game of trial and error, requiring you to restart from the last checkpoint, change up your loadouts, then fight your way back to the problem area. To make matters worse, you can't buy new parts during missions, so if you don't already own the right equipment to get you through a tough encounter, be ready to start the mission over from the beginning.

Order missions fall on the other side of the spectrum. Devoid of any story elements, they're all about making money and earning team points. They're also so short that you spend more time setting up your AC than on the battlefield. I engaged in numerous one-on-one AC battles that were over in less than a minute, while the longer search and destroy order missions took around five. The variety in order missions is far too limited, and I quickly grew tired of having to complete them for points and money.

The most interesting mode is Conquest, where you battle other teams for territory control on the world map. Capture missions require you to gamble your team points, and allow you to bring three teammates with you into battle. A fifth player can assume the role of operator, who watches combat unfold from an overhead map, marking important tactical areas on the other players' HUD. Since most teams won't be online 24/7 to defend their territory, most invasion squads will go up against a team of NPCs, plus whatever defensive turrets the team has bought for the map.

The main problem with this is that the level of the NPCs is chosen randomly, meaning you might get teamed up against a pack of pushovers, or the mech equivalent of the A-Team. If the defending team is defeated, they simply lose their territory, and can try to gain it back later. However, if the invading team goes down, they lose all of their team points and must grind their way back to the top by replaying countless story and order missions. It's a harsh penalty for not knowing what grouping of enemies you'll be up against.

I appreciate the interesting format AC V employs, and enjoyed the sense of camaraderie I had for my team. However, the story missions are too confusing and difficult, the order missions are too short and repetitive, and there is no in-between. I spent more time customizing my mech than I did fighting in it, and the solid multiplayer support can't make up for the lack of variety. A dedicated team can make the experience worthwhile, but you should play AC V under those conditions or not at all. » **Jeff Marchiafava**



Devil May Cry HD Collection

Dante through the years

8

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom
Developer Capcom **Release** April 3 **ESRB** M

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Two great games for one great price. Also, Devil May Cry 2

» Graphics
Gameplay looks great, but many menus and cutscenes still look ancient

» Sound
Lots of chanting, organ music, and one-liners

» Playability
The controls are still tight and responsive, though the erratic camera angles have not improved

» Entertainment
A good way to catch up on the series for newcomers, though it hasn't aged as well as I thought it would

» Replay Value
Moderately High

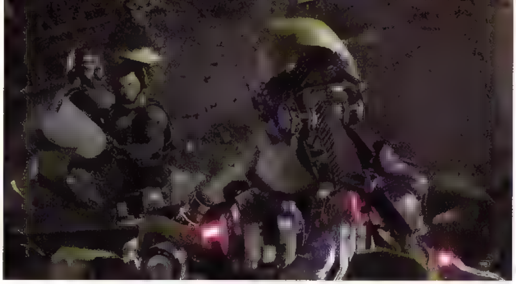
Fans of any video game franchise often debate which installments are the best. Distilling the various opinions on series like Final Fantasy and Zelda down to a consensus is practically impossible. When it comes to Devil May Cry, the argument usually involves Devil May Cry 1 or 3 reigning supreme, but with a twist: No one ever disagrees about which entry is the worst. In the Devil May Cry HD Collection, Capcom allows gamers to sample all three of Dante's PS2 adventures, and in doing so, experience the opposite ends of DMC's quality spectrum.

Like the many preceding HD collections, the DMC compilation transforms the original last-gen titles into sharper, smoother, and prettier incarnations. Don't expect any frills or special bonuses; the collection contains Devil May Cry 1, 2, and 3 (plus some minor extras). While the in-game action looks better than ever, the whole package feels rough around the edges. Cutscenes and menus did not receive a total visual overhaul, so it's jarring when the combo-driven combat stops and you find yourself looking at a blurry upgrade screen or dialogue sequence. Considering the age of the games, I'm sure technical reasons are behind the discrepancy, but the effect was more drastic and distracting here than in other HD collections.

Apart from those complaints, I still love the guns, swords, and demonic action that this series dishes out. The camera is a huge problem and the combat feels slightly dated now (especially if you've played Bayonetta), but the satisfying thrill of landing a solid stinger or juggling a room full of marionettes is just as addictive as ever. Of course, that praise applies to DMC 1 and 3 only.

Other HD collections have included what I consider essential titles, but this is the first time I've seen a completely average game remastered and re-released. Devil May Cry 2 has been an industry joke for years, but I won't waste too much time explaining why. Time has not done the second installment any favors, and Capcom didn't magically redesign the whole game for this collection. Its inclusion on the disc is good news for completionists, but anyone interested in having fun should skip over it.

Devil May Cry helped transform the action genre, and despite its sophomore stumble, it remains a defining franchise in gaming history. This collection is a good way to revisit the two best games in the series, though it may be better suited to newcomers than gamers who just want to relive their favorite moments. The uneven transformation into HD left me a bit disappointed – I was hoping to be impressed rather than constantly reminded of how these games originally looked. Sometimes the fantasy is better than reality. » **Joe Juba**



Binary Domain

Shut up and play

7.5

Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online)
Publisher Sega **Developer** Yakuza Studio
Release February 28 **ESRB** M

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Add voice commands to a sci-fi-based shooter, while exploring the ethics of robotics and artificial life

» Graphics
Some of the robots and vehicles are so well-designed that I almost felt guilty blasting them apart

» Sound
Guns fire and hit their targets with satisfying cracks and pops. Things are incomplete in the audio department, with music often dropping out unexpectedly

» Playability
The gunplay is rock-solid, though the voice-command gimmick is inconsistent, at its best. Fortunately, you can choose to ignore your squad through much of the action

» Entertainment
Binary Domain is a tightly paced adventure filled with memorable events and big moments. It's too bad the voice commands are such a misfire

» Replay Value
Moderate

In an industry lousy with third-person shooters, Sega's Binary Domain poses a simple question: What if you actually cared about the people you shared cover with? Or, more importantly, what if your squadmates could formulate opinions of you, the player, based on how you treated them? The result of this thought experiment is the futuristic shooter Binary Domain. While it may not flawlessly implement many of its ideas, it rises above being yet another Gears of War clone.

Of course, you can't have a shooter without a few gimmicks. Binary Domain delivers a pair of them, in the form of AI trust and a speech-recognition system. They're both interesting ideas, but neither one of them works as well in practice. Fortunately, the game's strengths provide at least some degree of distraction when things invariably fall apart.

First up is the trust system. Your squadmates' opinions of you are malleable, and they change depending on how you perform in combat. It's certainly an intriguing idea, but the trust system doesn't deliver. The most glaring issue comes with the AI itself. While characters do a remarkable job of healing fallen teammates and aggressively attacking robotic enemies, they also seem to be absolutely fascinated with standing in front of your targeting reticule during firefights.

Another problem is directly tied to the abysmal voice recognition. Players can use a headset (or Kinect on the Xbox 360) to verbally interact with their team. You can then switch tactics or prioritize actions by using a variety of short phrases. The problem is, it doesn't work.

Here are a few of the words that Binary Domain had a difficult time recognizing during my playthrough: "No." "Affirmative." "I can't." Making matters worse, those words were interpreted as (in order): "Sure." "Negative." "Yeah." In a game that forces you to engage in conversations with your squad at regular intervals, you can imagine how this is a problem.

Fortunately, the core of the real action is precise, addicting, and fun. The rank-and-file humanoid robots that stand between your team and its goal can be dismantled in a variety of interesting ways. My favorite method was to pick off their heads and have a robot's out-of-control remains fight its buddies for a short time. Thanks to the precise gunplay, which doesn't over-rely on auto-aim, I amassed small armies during battles, albeit temporarily.

I enjoyed my time with the game, and I can see it grabbing a rabid cult audience. I'd recommend it to anyone who can relax their expectations a bit, particularly when it comes to the voice recognition. The more you're able to focus on where it succeeds and look past its obvious failings, the better. » **Jeff Cork**

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Total War: Shogun 2 – Fall of the Samurai

A changed battlefield on land and at sea

9.25

PC

» Concept
Move Shogun 2 forward a couple hundred years to the inflection point between traditional weaponry and widespread firearms

» Graphics
The technical wizardry involved in making these massive battles with thousands of figures look this good is as impressive as the use of painterly art that mimics Japanese styles of the period

» Sound
The lack of new music in the score is a disappointment, but the hammy voice work is still amusing

» Playability
The few interface quibbles I have with Shogun 2 are unresolved, but that just means that the UI is outstanding instead of perfect

» Entertainment
If this leaves you cold, hardcore strategy games just aren't for you

» Replay Value
High

game informer GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Creative Assembly **Release** March 22 **ESRB** T

The original Total War: Shogun 2 is a triumphant balance between complexity and elegance, a strategy game that offers players meaningful interactions with economic development and warfare alongside a diplomatic metagame that is second to none. The one area where that game tripped up was in variety; many of the one-off units were nearly indistinguishable from the baseline infantry/cavalry/archers they modified, and it was easy to fall back on static tactics and unit compositions. This standalone expansion retains everything that made the original great while rectifying that shortcoming with style. Every clan in Japan now has to straddle the line between traditional spears-and-bows units and modern firearms and cannons, and all of the diversity that the influx of new weaponry provides.

From a wider strategic perspective, the new system where each clan is loyal to either emperor or shogun is a massive change to how diplomacy works out and the larger war takes shape. The significant modifiers to diplomatic relationships based on loyalty mean that every clan is more or less sorted into one of two buckets when the game begins. Being friends with like-minded clans is easy, while the penalty for having an opposite alignment makes talks frosty at best. You can still declare war on whomever you like – which is handy when a one-province minor who happens to be aligned your way is sitting on a nice rich resource.

The change makes diplomacy simpler overall, which is a shame, but it also opens up new gameplay on the strategic map. The alignment mechanic replaces religion from the original and can be similarly influenced by agents. Just don't box yourself in with friendly clans all around like I did in one game, forcing a long-distance naval invasion to continue expanding.

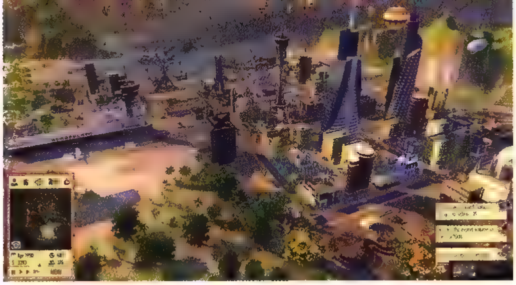
The good news is that Fall of the Samurai's naval game is vastly improved over the original. Every ship packing cannons makes the spectacle that much more impressive. The de-emphasis of boarding is a very welcome balance change for sea battles, but vastly more important is the expanded role of navies on the strategy layer. Not only can they drop devastating supporting fire in land battles within their firing range, but they can bombard enemy buildings and castles as well. Getting a port blockaded in the original was annoying; having another of your farms burned to the ground every turn by a loose enemy fleet is a crushing blow to your economy. The importance of naval supremacy (or at least rough parity) cannot be overstated.

The land battles are still the main event in many ways, and they are better than ever in Fall of the Samurai. I've won and lost engagements with dozens of combinations of spear-toting armed peasants, conscript riflemen, elite snipers, traditional samurai, and a wide variety of cannons. The fact that bows and swords can win even late-game battles despite the prevalence of firearms is a testament to Creative Assembly's outstanding balancing efforts. Extending the unit pool beyond Shogun 2's basic mix is a wonderful way to convince players to shake up their tactics, and I was constantly engaged in solving the latest tactical challenge brought on by a unique force composition.

The AI has always been a strength for Shogun 2, and by and large it remains so in Fall of the Samurai. I would have loved for a few wrinkles to get smoothed out, like its tendency to swap provinces by failing to defend its holdings when it goes on the offensive, its confusion when its intended target castle gets reinforced, and its poor handling of sieges. But on the whole it's a decent effort. It knows how to use the new units well enough, and when the forces on the field are relatively even it can put up a reasonable fight – though any competent tactician will win handily unless badly outnumbered. I strongly suggest for experienced players to try the hard and very hard difficulty settings once they have a campaign or two under their belt.

Multiplayer enjoys a similar implementation as the original, just with the delightful new unit mix. I'm still not a fan thanks to cumbersome battle controls, not being able to pause and issue orders, and the extreme downtime involved with playing a multiplayer campaign, but I can't see any reason that gamers who already enjoy them won't continue to do so here.

Fall of the Samurai, like the original Shogun 2, is good enough that I heartily recommend it to everyone who owns a PC regardless of their experience with or opinion of the grand strategy genre. If you're coming into the series for the first time there is a lot to learn, but you'll be amply rewarded with hundreds of hours of top-notch entertainment should you make the investment. » **Adam Biessener**



Tropico 4: Modern Times

The future of city simulation is now

Game Informer SILVER

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Kalypso Media **Developer** Haemimont Games **Release** April 13 **ESRB** T

If you're waiting to play the new SimCity, I suggest checking out Tropico 4. You should play the base game right now, and then pick up this outstanding expansion. Tropico 4's blend of Internet geek humor, tongue-in-cheek references to Cold War politics, and deep yet inviting gameplay is as skillfully executed in this expansion as in the excellent base game.

Basic gameplay mechanics are unchanged, as you'd expect. You still lure immigrants to your island, make sure they have jobs and needs like housing, food, and religion covered, and exploit their labors for your own glory. A happy populace is a productive populace, but so is a cowed one – repressing your peoples' rebellious tendencies with secret police and a strong, loyal army is as valid as making them so happy with your rule that they gladly re-elect you in a landslide.

Modern Times takes the original's '50s to'80s time frame and pushes a decade further. Electronics factories, borehole mines, and solar power plants take the place of subsistence farming and dirty coal plants. More advanced farming techniques make supporting your population's basic needs easier and open up the opportunity to invest your treasury in taking your economy to the next level. This is fun in itself, but more importantly lets the campaign's scenarios throw tough, innovative challenges at the player.

I never thought I'd fund a mad scientist's experiments or deal with a zombie plague in a laid-back city builder like Tropico 4, but Modern Times starts there and only gets wackier. The story doesn't even begin to take itself seriously, but the caricatures of pop culture figures and send-ups of Internet memes are recognizable enough frameworks to prop up this goofy tale. The finale could have been more explosive, but I thoroughly enjoyed every minute.

The one thing Tropico 4 and Modern Times both do poorly is engage players in sandbox mode. A decent randomizer for natural disasters and more sliders to customize your experience would greatly extend replayability, but developer Haemimont continues to drop the ball. The mod scene could have filled that void given the map editor's solid integration, but it has yet to really take off.

I have some qualms about Modern Times' balancing, particularly the ludicrously profitable factories and fish farms, but those cast almost unnoticeable shadows on the game's otherwise impressive accomplishments. At this point I hope SimCity lives up to Tropico, not the other way around. » **Adam Biessener**

Tropico 4: Modern Times is coming to Xbox Live Arcade as well, but we were unable to obtain a copy for review. If there are any substantial differences, we will publish a separate review on www.gameinformer.com

8.5

PC

» Concept
Extend Tropico 4 into the '90s by giving players a bunch of fancy new buildings to play with and a lengthy, excellent campaign

» Graphics
This is still a fine-looking game, though the development focus was clearly on performance and not high-end eye candy

» Sound
Not adding any new tunes to the score is a missed opportunity. The voice work is as cartoony as ever, but reasonably well done

» Playability
A few more key metrics could be pulled out onto the main screen, but overall the fantastic UI still makes Tropico's depth impressively accessible

» Entertainment
Even as a huge Tropico fan, I can't think of much more that I could have reasonably asked for with this expansion

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Yakuza: Dead Souls

A big, dumb, fun undead adventure

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sega **Release** March 13 **ESRB** M

With four North American releases to its name, the barrier for entry to Sega's narrative-heavy Yakuza franchise is intimidating. While the zombie-infested Dead Souls may be a bizarre change of pace for those who have followed the series since the beginning, it provides a light-hearted point of entry for curious new players

Previous Yakuza games focused on the hand-to-hand brawling skills of protagonist Kazuma Kiryu, but Dead Souls' supernatural twist calls for a new emphasis on gunplay. This element is the most likely to drive away new players and franchise veterans. Though characters turn, run, and dodge quickly by survival horror standards, most of your shooting will be done via an auto-aim system that is disturbingly similar to early Resident Evil games.

As annoying as the controls might sound, don't let the negative impressions of the first hour pull you away. Once Dead Souls gets going, you're given enough ammunition and powerful weapons to effortlessly blow through hordes of zombies, even with the awkward controls. The leveling system is wonderfully fleshed out, allowing you to unlock new melee moves and bonuses that constantly increase your effectiveness against the undead. Upgrades carry across characters, so you never feel like you're starting from scratch when you move forward with the story.

Yakuza: Dead Souls hides a funny and sometimes surprisingly touching script beneath its unpolished exterior. From the loan shark with a heart of gold to the insane, movie-obsessed mobster, each of the four playable characters has hilarious quirks and likable traits

Cutscenes can run a little long in Dead Souls, but they're often filled with fresh, amusing takes on a genre that's already been spoofed to death and back. I was consistently surprised and happy at how much every plot point paid off, no matter how ridiculous.

The biggest complaint about my time in Dead Souls is how much backtracking is required. By 10 hours into the lengthy game, I found myself frequently being sent back and forth across long stretches of zombie territory. I was able to learn the city of Kamurocho very well, and that familiarity makes it all the more interesting to see how the locale changes as the disease spreads, but I still would have gladly accepted a reliable form of fast travel.

For all of its problems – and there are plenty – I couldn't help but smile through most of my time with Yakuza: Dead Souls. Like a slightly more presentable Deadly Premonition, Dead Souls mimics B-horror movies. It has a blemished, blood-soaked face that's going to scare off some gamers, but there's a lot of heart and fun to be found by those willing to dig beneath the ghoulish surface. » **Phil Kollar**

Take a tour of the zombie-stained streets of Kamurocho with Reiner and Phil at gameinformer.com/mag

7.75

PS3

» Concept
Mix up Sega's long-running crime drama series with some tongue-in-cheek, over-the-top zombie action

» Graphics
The environments and random NPCs look like higher resolution models from last-gen, but main characters are highly detailed

» Sound
The lack of English voice acting will annoy some, but the Japanese cast and generic butt rock soundtrack are great

» Playability
The clumsy movement and focus on auto-aim shooting take getting used to, but the game provides enough tools to make racking up zombie kills relatively easy

» Entertainment
Dead Souls is one of those strange games that is better than the sum of its parts, it's deeply flawed but also very entertaining

» Replay Value
High

MLB 12: The Show

Another pennant for the champ

8.75

PS3

» Concept
A hell of a performer on the field, but the front-end is starting to show its age

» Graphics
The new TV-style presentation lends an air of authenticity to each game, and the on-field action is the most realistic baseball simulation to date

» Sound
The commentary team occasionally throws out interesting statistics or stories, but often repeat themselves and sometimes make the wrong call. I struck out and they said I was safe at second

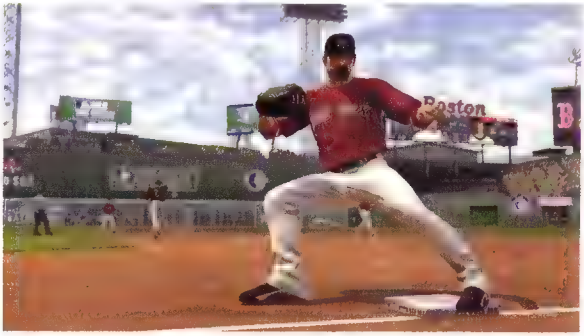
» Playability
Pulse pitching is simple to use, yet perfectly captures the excitement of the position. Zone Analog batting speaks mostly to skilled gamers, but once you get the hang of it, it adds another layer of realism to the experience

» Entertainment
You won't find a better baseball game on the field, but the game modes are in need of new experiences. Diamond Dynasty isn't the solution

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Sony Computer Entertainment San Diego **Release** March 6 **ESRB** E



With the game tied in the bottom of the 12th and the Red Sox trailing the Reds two games to three in game six of the 1975 World Series, Sox catcher Carlton Fisk stepped up to the plate and launched a towering fly ball down the left field line. If it was fair it was gone. Channeling the thoughts of every Red Sox fan in the stadium that night, Fisk leapt out of the batter's box and waved his arms for the ball to stay fair. It did. As he rounded the bases, he celebrated more than most ball players do in their careers. The Red Sox didn't end up winning the series that year, but that one breath-stealing blast remains one of the sport's top moments.

As I played MLB 12: The Show, I was reminded of this historic home run. My Road to the Show player, a powerful pull hitter modeled after David Ortiz, would launch fly balls into orbit down the right field line. Thanks to new physics that use RPMs to determine how the ball spins off of the bat, every hit in the game – especially those towering blasts down the line – produce different results. For the first time, this series offers rising and sinking liners, balls hitting off of bases and the pitcher's rubber, and hits tailing away from outfielders without the assistance of wind. Grass and turf types factor into the way the ball bounces, creating choppers and deadened bunts. Upgraded ball physics may not sound like a major selling point, but it completely changes the action on the field, producing a greater variety of hit types and fielding outcomes.

Over the last few installments, The Show has made significant strides forward in delivering an authentic fielding experience. The AI now features proximity awareness for other players on the field. On a bunt attempt, if a first baseman charges to field a ball hugging the first baseline, the batter will jump out of the way and run on the infield grass. All tag attempts factor in situational awareness to deliver bang-bang plays with base runners lunging away from tags.

I appreciated how Sony incorporated analog controls into pitching last year, but the new pulse pitching, which requires just one press of the X button, delivers more exciting results. Once a pitch type and its location are selected, a giant pulsating circle appears in the targeted area. The speed of the pulse is based on the pitcher's skill and fatigue levels. If the gamer hits the X button at its smallest point, he has a great shot of grooving a targeted corner. But since the ball can land anywhere within the pulse circle, it could also end up being a ball or catch more plate than desired. That creates an interesting decision: Do you cover more of the strike zone with the circle or take a chance and have just a small portion of it touching the black? This system creates more drama with each thrown pitch. There's more of a dice roll to it. Yes, the analog pitching option offers similar results (not to mention the chance to completely lose control of a pitch), but I found that I grooved more pitches with the analog system, and was forced to take more risks with pulse. Analog pitching requires more skill makes you feel like you have better command of the pitch, whereas pulse creates a truer simulation (and not always the results you want). Both systems are fantastic.

It took me a few games to get the hang of the new zone analog batting system. In short, the left analog stick controls where the bat is swung in the zone and the right stick controls your stride and swing motion. This mechanic requires an extraordinary amount of focus, and a game plan based on how you think the pitcher will attack you. I prefer the analog approach, but if you want a more challenging experience, zone analog batting delivers.

If you're a fan of both baseball card collecting and micromanaging a team, you may enjoy The Show's newest mode, Diamond Dynasty. After creating a team and designing its uniform (a part of the experience I hope Sony uses to introduce expansion teams to Franchise mode next year), you receive a base pack of players (both fictional and MLB players) to round out your roster. By playing games both online and against the CPU, you earn budget to buy new packs of player cards. The draw to this mode is that you have your own team. The downside is that it doesn't offer much of an MLB experience. Playing against a user-created team with every player named after He-Man characters isn't the baseball experience I'm after.

My favorite game modes are Road to the Show and Franchise, both of which have received subtle improvements but remain largely the same as previous iterations. Road to the Show offers new training modes (all are fun tittle tests), and your created player enters double A as a starter rather than a benchwarmer. I wish Sony would pay attention to the innovations that the NBA 2K series has incorporated into My Player with endorsements, press conferences, and appearing on the cover of sports magazines.

The same can be said about Franchise mode, which outside of new trade logic that can still be exploited, offers the same bells and whistles as last year's game. The biggest addition supported by both of these modes is cloud save support. This means that you can continue both modes on your Vita. The initial setup for the cloud save is a pain, but once the system is set up, the data transfers within seconds. The Vita game doesn't offer an identical experience, but it's close, and is hopefully the beginning of a trend we'll see in all sports games moving forward

My biggest gripe with this year's game is the online performance. Crippling lag (to the point that fielders hold onto a ball until the runner has already touched the bag) occurs frequently. It's not as common as last year, but most games I played suffered from control delays and choppy performance. Even after testing it on three high-end networks, I rarely finished a game without some sort of hiccup.

While showcasing significant enhancements on the field, The Show finds itself down in the count thanks to some archaic game modes and unreliable online. The Show remains the best baseball series to date, but if it wants to be heralded as one of the best sports games, the Franchise and Road to the Show modes need to catch up with the current trendsetters in the genre. » **Andrew Reiner**

Xenoblade Chronicles

A vision of the future

Kenny Rohan

Save
Save game progress

9.5

Wii

» Concept
Combine the best visuals ever seen on the Wii with a sweeping narrative, a unique setting, and a compelling combat system to revitalize the JRPG genre

» Graphics
The draw distance of the massive, gorgeously detailed zones would be just as impressive on a more powerful console

» Sound
Solid music sets the backdrop, while a strong British cast provides some of the most subdued, least-embarrassing voice acting ever in a Japanese RPG

» Playability
Several complex interlocking systems are at play, but Monolith Soft doles out tutorials at an appropriate pace so you never feel overwhelmed

» Entertainment
If every JRPG was as stunning as Xenoblade, the genre's strength would never be in question again

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Monolith Soft **Release** April 6 **ESRB** T

If you need proof that the Japanese RPG is struggling from the North American perspective, you need only look at the story behind Xenoblade Chronicles. Somehow, despite early showings at E3 and rave reviews in Japan and Europe, Nintendo of America very nearly didn't bring the game to our shores. If you're even remotely interested in JRPGs, give thanks that this dark future was avoided. Xenoblade Chronicles is a must-play game that single-handedly proves there's still fresh, exciting ground to cover in this often-stale genre.

Xenoblade finds the first of many unique touchstones in its setting. The people of this universe have settled in makeshift colonies on the backs of two warring giants that are frozen in time. These colossi have adapted natural, well-tread terrain, including massive grasslands and labyrinthine swamps, but you'll often catch sight of the opposing giant in the clear afternoon sky or flashes of a far-off body part during thunderstorms. These brief glimpses of future destinations build atmosphere for this strange world. As you progress from area to area, the game frequently reminds you where you're located on the giant, letting you track your progress around and inside of the massive creatures.

Though the world is unique, the characters are disappointing archetypes. Protagonist Shulk is a bright-eyed teenager eager to leave his village and discover the world. He gets to do so when he discovers he is one of a handful of chosen warriors who can wield the Monado, a powerful weapon that can wipe out the game's bad guys. His best friend Reyn is the loud-mouthed comic relief who always comes through in the end. They go on a journey to figure out how humanity can survive against the overpowered generic robotic enemies called Mechons. Similarly unsurprising new party members are collected at a regular pace along the way.

The characters may not stray from comfortable conventions, but this game has one important leg up on the average stereotype-heavy JRPG: voice acting. The refreshing British cast lends the strongly translated script an austere air that makes it easy to get drawn into the drama. At different points in the story, Shulk could easily have come off as either whiny or cloyingly optimistic. Thanks to both the writing and the voice acting, Xenoblade handily avoids that common problem.

Xenoblade backs up the story with a complicated but approachable battle system. Fast-paced encounters challenge players to use a wide variety of skills, many of which gain bonuses depending on your positioning. Combined with the mountains of upgradable loot and deep character development, players have a lot of strategy to uncover and master over the game's imposing length.

One of the most innovative systems is Shulk's ability to tell the future. While this power is frequently used to move the plot forward, it also has important gameplay ramifications. In battle, the game pauses to show you when an enemy's next attack is going to kill one of your party members. This gives you time to react by shielding, healing, or even briefly taking over as that character and making a last attempt at survival. These psychic abilities lead to some incredibly tense moments, especially during the challenging, puzzle-like boss battles.

Outside of combat, premonitions also inform you when you've picked up an item you'll need for a later quest. Xenoblade Chronicles is packed with user-friendly designs like this that are at odds with my expectations from Japanese games. Other smart design decisions that help prevent player frustration include fast travel, the ability to change the time of day, and the ability to save anywhere.

I fell in love with JRPGs in the 16-bit era because they constantly showed me things I'd never seen before. Somewhere in the last 15 years, most RPG developers in Japan have lost sight of that, instead rehashing the same fantasies and floating by on nostalgia. Xenoblade Chronicles is the first JRPG I've played this generation that has me excited for the future rather than simply reminding me of happy memories from my past. Monolith Soft deserves praise for creating it. » **Phil Kollar**

77
Slit Edge
Attack from the side to lower physical defence

Kid Icarus: Uprising

Poor controls ground Pit's ambitious return

7

3DS

» Concept
Get reacquainted with Kid Icarus' hero, Pit, in a new adventure split between rail-shooting and free-roaming segments

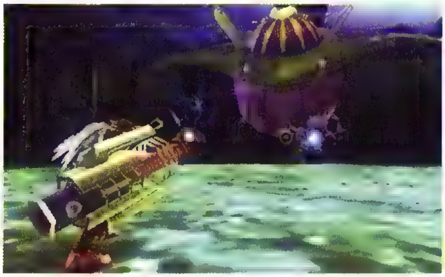
» Graphics
The sky battles are the game's visual high point, with crumbling environments and large-scale battles

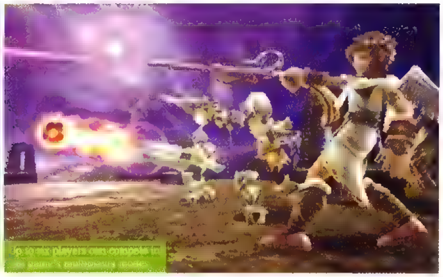
» Sound
Pit's banter with goddess Palutena and the rest of the pantheon is clever and fun once you get used to our hero's mildly obnoxious voice. The soundtrack is a standout, too

» Playability
The game's on-foot sections are marred by an absolutely awful stylus-heavy control scheme; there's a reason the game comes with a little plastic stand

» Entertainment
Kid Icarus: Uprising is charming, and there's plenty to see and do. It's a shame that the very real threat of repetitive stress injury may keep some players from playing to the end

» Replay Value
Moderately High





Up to six players can compete in the game's multiplayer modes

Style 1-Player Action (6-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Project Sora **Release** March 23 **ESRB** E10+

I've long thought that one of the biggest gaming mysteries is why Nintendo chose to abandon Kid Icarus. After debuting on the NES more than two decades ago (and its Game Boy sequel), he was essentially tossed on the same pile as Urban Champion and Wrecking Crew. That decision always baffled me, since I considered the game one of the high points of the 8-bit era. Sure, it was maddeningly difficult and unforgiving, but it had a certain charm to it that made me crave more. Pit's appearance in Super Smash Bros. Brawl gave the series' remaining fans a glimmer of hope that our hero hadn't completely flamed out. With Kid Icarus: Uprising, we finally get to see how he stacks up against contemporary offerings. The result? Pit flaps his wings to stay aloft as best he can, but he's facing bigger issues than Medusa.

Many of the game's enemies and locations are updated versions of Kid Icarus' familiar (and otherwise) foes. Eggplant Wizard is back, though to my relief he won't have you running in search of a cure for eggplantism. It's a great blast of nostalgia, especially when coupled with the excellent score, which takes some of the game's classic themes and twists them in unexpected directions. Pit was something of a cipher in the original, and here he's fully fleshed out as a plucky optimist. I thought he was obnoxious at first, but his enthusiastic approach and humor grew on me over the course of our adventure.

With Uprising, Pit's adventures are split into two different gameplay types: sky and land battles. In the sky missions, Pit's mentor Palutena grants Pit the temporary gift of flight and takes control of his path in rail-shooting segments. These are brief, which Palutena attributes to a five-minute limitation. Any longer, and his wings will catch fire and he'll plummet to the Earth. That's too bad, considering these are definitely the game's strongest portions.

Kid Icarus veterans looking for a challenge will definitely find it in Uprising. Unfortunately, however, the game's most trying aspect doesn't have anything to do with Eggplant Wizards or frustrating one-hit kills. I almost begged off this review entirely at first, thanks to the physical discomfort the game's stylus-heavy control scheme provided. When Pit's airborne, things are fine; the meat of these rail-shooter sections is based on firing willy-nilly at everything that moves, targeting foes with the stylus, shooting with the left bumper, and darting away from enemy fire with the circle pad. When things go off the rails, well, they do.

The game's inputs stay the same when Pit puts his sandals to the ground, even though the gameplay becomes significantly more complex. While you can continue to hold down on the bumper for a stream of rapid-fire attacks, they generally aren't as effective as charged shots. The act of pressing the bumper button repeatedly while darting through groups of enemies with the circle pad, and wielding the stylus to both target enemies and shift the camera is a painful exercise that skirts becoming an outright OSHA violation. Don't think that Uprising's Circle Pad Pro support will save the day, either – it only provides relief for lefties.

I originally scoffed when Nintendo revealed that a little plastic 3DS stand was bundled with the game. After tinkering with various control configurations and hand positions, using the stand was the only way to tone down the game from being excruciating to play to merely uncomfortable. It does cut down on the game's portability, but it'll probably save people money on ice packs and splints.

The horrible controls get in the way of an otherwise really good game. As Pit defeats enemies and explores areas, he gains a variety of new weapons. These can be fused with one another between chapters, creating newer and more powerful weapons. Some, like fists, are better at melee encounters, while rail cannons and bows excel at long-range combat. I'm a collector at heart, and I got a kick out of merging the weapons. Pit also earns new abilities, such as minor health recharges and homing-shot improvements, which are arranged in a Tetris-like box, challenging players to think a bit as they maximize their loadouts.

The hearts that Pit collects along his journey are also the center of the game's clever economy. Pit can exchange them for new items at the store. There's a slick difficulty system at play, where you can slide the difficulty up by wagering more hearts. If you manage to blast through a chapter without dying, you can score additional hearts for your efforts. If you die, however, you lose the hearts you bet, and difficulty automatically slides down. Some doors are blocked unless you're playing at harder settings, and the best weapons won't drop. It's an addicting case of risk/reward game design that gave me a little pause before starting most of the levels.

Multiplayer supports up to six players, either locally or online in team-based or free-for-all matches. You can enter matches with gear that you've acquired in the campaign, but don't assume that means you'll be unstoppable. The higher the value of your gear, the more points your opponents will earn for taking you out. Multiplayer is a fun way to get together with friends, but the emphasis on melee encounters (which require mashing the attack button) means you'll see a lot of wrist-rubbing between rounds.

Kid Icarus: Uprising is a series of good ideas that ultimately suffer from its poor controls. There's a lot to do in the game, and more importantly, I felt compelled to do all of it. As the credits rolled I looked back fondly at the experience, as my hand throbbed along with the music. I'm looking forward to doing more with Pit in the future, just not like this. » **Jeff Cork**

Unit 13

Zipper brings its experience with shooters on the road

Style 1-Player Shooter (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Zipper Interactive **Release** March 6 **ESRB** T

6.5

After experimenting with the gigantic multiplayer shooter MAG two years ago, Zipper Interactive has boiled down the shooter experience for its first Vita title. Sony's new portable needs some shooters to take advantage of its dual sticks, and Unit 13 controls admirably in this regard. I didn't feel that any aspect of the hardware lacked when compared to console shooters, but the game fails to stand out due to its uninspired missions.

Multiplayer comprises a substantial part of Zipper's back catalog, but Unit 13 is all about bite-sized missions instead of online deathmatches. Rather than following a narrative, the game is broken up into 45 stand-alone missions. Player performance is judged at the end of each with a star rating, and online leaderboards let you compare your scores against friends. You won't be taking them down with headshots, but you can track who's better at assassinating AI militia leaders, sneaking up on drug runners, or bombing enemy facilities.

Each mission falls under one of five different types: Direct Action, Covert, Deadline, Elite, or High Value Target. The variety of mission types is nice on paper, but most boil down to the same "pop out of cover to shoot bad guys" gameplay. Covert may stand out from this formula, but the "get seen and the mission ends" rule quickly becomes frustrating. No matter which mission type you're playing, you're bound to run into rough AI enemies that stare at walls and run in random directions.

While deathmatches are nowhere to be seen in Unit 13, each mission is playable via online co-op. It's a nice feature, but it doesn't make the game's downsides any less significant. AI is still sorely lacking, and playing Covert missions with another player just doubles your chances of getting caught. Outside of co-op, players can also participate in daily challenges, which place you in a specific level with one shot at attaining a high leaderboard score.

Zipper has shooter mechanics down after years of making SOCOM games, but Unit 13's missions lack personality and the guard AI is downright awful at times. If you're dying to shoot some guys on your Vita, it may scratch that itch. Just don't expect anything you haven't seen ad nauseum. » **Dan Ryckert**

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Vita

» Concept
Take the shooting mechanics Zipper honed with SOCOM and bring them to Sony's new portable

» Graphics
Some textures are lacking detail, but the environments and character models get the job done

» Sound
Unit 13's music takes a page from the Battlefield 3 playbook, and you'll be hearing many bland lines over and over

» Playability
Vita's analog sticks do a great job, and should ease the minds of shooter fans hoping to play their favorite genre on the console

» Entertainment
Uncreative missions and braindead AI put a damper on the solid shooting mechanics

» Replay Value
Moderate

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PLAYSTATION 3

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Adventures of Tintin, The	7.75	Feb-12
All Zombies Must Die	7.5	Mar-12
Amy	3	Mar-12
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12
Asura's Wrath	8.5	Apr-12
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11
Burnout Crash	7.5	Nov-11
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12
Crysis	8.25	Dec-11
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11
Darkness II	7.5	Mar-12
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12
FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12
GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12
Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12
House of the Dead: Overkill Extended Cut	8	Dec-11
Jak and Daxter Collection	9.25	Mar-12
Journey	9	Apr-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
LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan-12
Lord of the Rings: War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
Metal Gear Solid HD Collection	9	Jan-12
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
NeverDead	4	Mar-12
NFL Blitz	8	Mar-12
Okabu	8	Dec-11
Payday: The Heist	6.5	Dec-11
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Rage	9	Nov-11
Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One	8.75	Dec-11
Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11
Resident Evil Code: Veronica X	8.5	Nov-11
Rochard	8.25	Feb-12
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Rocksmith	8.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Shank 2	7	Apr-12
Silent Hill HD Collection	8	Apr-12
Silent Hill: Downpour	7	Apr-12
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
SSX	7.75	Apr-12
Syndicate	8	Apr-12
Tales of Graces f	7.75	Apr-12
Trine 2	8.75	Feb-12
Twisted Metal	8.5	Apr-12
Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	8	Jan-12
Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception	9.5	Dec-11
Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine	8	Nov-11
WWE '12	6.5	Jan-12
X-Men Destiny	7	Nov-11

XBOX 360

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Adventures of Tintin, The	7.75	Feb-12
Alan Wake's American Nightmare	7.75	Apr-12
All Zombies Must Die	7.5	Mar-12
Amy	3	Mar-12
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12
Asura's Wrath	8.5	Apr-12
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11
Burnout Crash	7.5	Nov-11
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12
Dance Central 2	8.25	Nov-11
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11
Darkness II	7.5	Mar-12
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12
FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12
Forza Motorsport 4	9.25	Dec-11
Gears of War 3	9.5	Nov-11
GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12
Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12

7.25 | FIFA Street

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** March 13 **ESRB** E

This series hasn't diverged wildly from its roots, but at least it's finally fashioned itself into the creative, trick-filled game it was always supposed to be, but never really achieved. – Matthew Kato

7.75 | Vessel

Platform PC **Release** March 1 **ESRB** E

It's fascinating to watch all the ways liquid interacts with the environment in this intriguing puzzle/platformer, and some of the puzzles have clever solutions. However, later puzzles become frustrating because their scopes and sizes are so large and controlling all its elements so finicky that it's easy to get confused and lost. – Matt Miller

6 | Nexuiz

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC **Release** February 29 **ESRB** T

As beloved as the original Nexuiz mod is among a certain crowd, this XBLA remake is nothing more than a haphazard port of a 2005 mod for Quake, a game that came out 10 years ago – except you have to pay money for it. – Adam Biessener

6.75 | Major League Baseball 2K12

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** March 6 **ESRB** E

The game is still rough around the edges and can be infuriating at times, but it is a passable baseball experience for 360 players that need their fix. PlayStation 3 owners should stick with The Show. – Andrew Reiner

8 | MLB 12: The Show

Platform Vita **Release** March 6 **ESRB** E

The Show's solid Vita debut is very much in line with the experience offered on PS3, but the sensitive analog controls put a big hole in its swing. – Andrew Reiner

4.5 | Blades of Time

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** March 6 **ESRB** M

Even die-hard devotees of the "so bad it's good" school of thought will find little to like from Blades of Time's boring hack-and-slash action. It's not enjoyable like a bad movie. It's more like being dropped off by your parents at a carpet store when you're 10. – Jeff Cork

5.75 | Mario Party 9

Platform Wii **Release** March 11 **ESRB** E

Mario Party 9 is a better experience than previous entries, but overall it's still disheartening. The best times I had were when co-workers and I laughed at each other's stupid mistakes, but you really don't need a video game for that. – Kyle Hilliard

8 | Dillon's Rolling Western

Platform 3DS **Release** February 22 **ESRB** E10+

While this downloadable 3DS title becomes a bit repetitive later on, Dillon's Rolling Western is a good fit for anyone tiring of the same old tower defense formula. Combining the charm and wide-open exploration of The Legend of Zelda with town defense proves to be an addictive recipe. – Tim Turi

5 | Ridge Racer

Platform Vita **Release** March 13 **ESRB** E10+

There is no career mode, seasons for your team, alternate racing types, or any larger draw to this title that elevates it from being anything other than a demo to a larger game that doesn't exist. – Matthew Kato

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Guardian Heroes	8.25	Dec 11
Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary	8.5	Jan-12
Hulk Hogan's Main Event	1	Dec 11
Joe Danger. 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 High Impact	6	Feb-12
LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan 12
Lord of the Rings War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec 11
NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
NeverDead	4	Mar 12
NFL Blitz	8	Mar-12
Otomedius Excellent	3.75	Jan-12
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Quarrel	8.5	Apr-12
Rage	9	Nov-11
Raving Rabbids Alive & Kicking	5	Jan 12
Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov 11
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11
Resident Evil Code Veronica X	8.5	Nov 11
Rocksmith	8.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Sesame Street Once Upon A Monster	8.5	Nov-11
Shank 2	7	Apr-12
Silent Hill HD Collection	8	Apr-12
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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
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SSX	7.75	Apr 12
Syndicate	8	Apr 12
Trine 2	8.75	Feb 12
Tropico 4	7.75	Nov 11
Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	8	Jan-12
Warhammer 40 000 Space Marine	8	Nov-11
Warp	6.75	Apr-12
WWE '12	5.5	Jan-12

Wii

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
Mario & Sonic at the London 2012 Olympic Games	5.75	Feb-12
Spider-Man. Edge of Time	6.5	Dec 11

PC

Batman. Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Battlefield 3	9.5	Dec-11
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12
Dead Rising 2 Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12
Game of Thrones Genesis, A	6.75	Dec 11
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12
Jurassic Park. The Game	5.5	Jan-12
King Arthur I The Role-Playing Wargame	7	Apr 12
Might & Magic Heroes VI	8.25	Dec 11
Minecraft	9.25	Jan-12
Payday: The Heist	8	Dec 11
Postal III	1	Mar 12
Rage	9	Nov-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Rochard	8.25	Feb-12
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec 11
Serious Sam 3 BFE	7.75	Feb-12
Shank 2	7	Apr 12
Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure	8	Dec-11
Sol Exodus	6	Apr 12
Stronghold 3	4	Jan-12
Swords of the Stars I Lords of Winter	3	Jan 12
Syndicate	8	Apr-12
Trine 2	8.75	Feb 12
Warhammer 40,000 Space Marine	8	Nov 11

NINTENDO DS

Aliens. Infestation	8.25	Nov-11
Professor Layton and the Last Specter	8.5	Dec-11
Solatorobo Red the Hunter	7.5	Dec 11

PSP

Corpse Party	8	Feb 12
Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection	8.5	May-11
LEGO Star Wars III The Clone Wars	6.5	May 11
Patapon 3	6.75	Jun-11

3DS

Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection	8.5	May-11
LEGO Star Wars III The Clone Wars	6.5	May 11
Metal Gear Solid: Snake Eater 3D	7.5	Apr-12
Patapon 3	6.75	Jun 11
Resident Evil Revelations	9	Feb-11
Shinobi	6.5	Feb 11
Tetris Axis	8	Nov-11

VITA

Dungeon Hunter Alliance	5	Apr-12
Escape Plan	7.75	Apr 12
FIFA Soccer	7.75	Apr-12
Hot Shots Golf World Invitational	7.5	Apr 12
Little Deviants	6	Apr-12
Lumines Electric Symphony	8	Apr-12
ModNation Racers: Road Trip	7	Apr-12
Ninja Gaiden Sigma Plus	7	Apr 12
Rayman Origins	8	Apr-12
Shinobido 2: Revenge of Zen	6.25	Apr-12
Super Stardust Delta	8	Apr-12
Touch My Katamari	7.5	Apr-12
Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3	7.75	Apr-12
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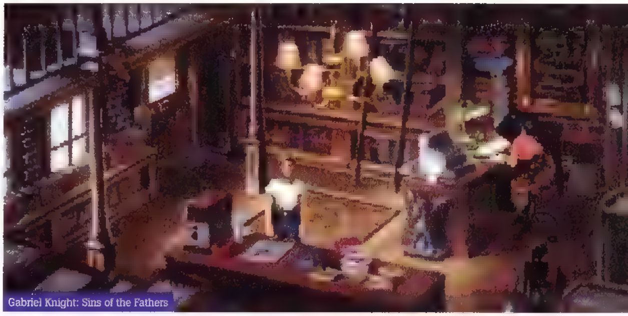
Hunting Shadows

The rise and fall of *Gabriel Knight*

by Phil Kollar

If you never played adventure games in the '90s, you are probably unfamiliar with Gabriel Knight. Unlike Sam & Max, Monkey Island, or even King's Quest, this Sierra series never found the momentum to become a franchise remembered by gamers after the adventure games crash. Yet almost everyone I run into who has played any of the Gabriel Knight games has a strong fondness for the series and its pulpy main character.



Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers

That Voodoo

FOR GAME DESIGNER and writer Jane Jensen, building the Gabriel Knight series was a chance to explore her passion for the occult. "I do believe there's more out there than is on the visible plane," she tells me. "It fascinates me, and hopefully I can get that feeling into my work."

Jensen joined Sierra's team of writers in 1991. These were the glory days of adventure games, and Sierra was at the vanguard. Jensen started working on smaller titles like EcoQuest, and then backed up legendary Sierra co-founder Roberta Williams on King's Quest VI, one of the most beloved entries in the series. These projects proved her talent enough that Sierra gave her a shot at creating her own game.

"One of the great things about Sierra was that [Sierra co-founder] Ken Williams really believed in the artistic vision," Jensen explains. "If he gave you the chance to do a game, that was your responsibility. Nobody told you what to do with it. If it didn't sell, then you wouldn't do another game for him, but he would let you have that freedom."

The protagonist of Jensen's first game was Gabriel Knight, a scruffy, down-on-his-luck horror novelist and bookstore owner who gets unwittingly dragged into a murder mystery that has eerie connections to nightmares he's been having. The 1993 debut Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers introduces him in a classic point-and-click adventure set in New Orleans.

At the beginning of the game, Knight is following a series of horrific killings, dubbed the Voodoo Murders, in hopes of finding inspiration for his next book. In doing so he discovers a long-lost uncle who reveals that Gabriel is the last in a line of supernatural investigators known as Schattenjäger (or shadow hunters).

Though Sins of the Father did little to stray from traditional adventure gameplay, it pulled in many gamers with its unique storyline and flawed but likable main character. Critics gave the game several "adventure game of the year" nods, but by the time Jensen and company were ready to do a sequel, the genre had transformed and it was too late to do another game in that exact same style.

The Big Bad Wolf

THE MID-'90S were a time of great change and hope for adventure games. The advent of full-motion video brought about dreams of a game industry more closely aligned with Hollywood – with the hope that games could start making as much money as Hollywood films did. While many FMV titles featured amateur acting and laughable scripts, Sierra was determined to avoid falling into this trap with The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery.

Taking place shortly after the events of Sins of the Father, The Beast Within sees Gabriel embracing his heritage at the family estate of Rittersberg in Germany. He's recruited to investigate a series of murders in Munich believed to be perpetrated by werewolves, and first game's love interest, Grace Nakamura, becomes a playable character.

Though it was on the cutting edge of technology at the time, FMV did not necessarily lend itself to improved gameplay. "It limited the interactivity we could do," Jensen says. "I specifically tried to put a lot more intrigue in the plot, so even though the interactivity was easier, there would still be enough meat going on to keep people engaged."

That intrigue came in the form of solving a complex and almost believable historical mystery surrounding the mad Bavarian king Ludwig II and a lost opera from composer Richard Wagner. Jensen focused on history in the later Gabriel Knight games on purpose.

"It's about conveying this indefinable sense of excitement and obsession that I get about certain topics or about certain places," Jensen says. "If I can convey the way I feel about that, if I put that spark into it, then I'm going to make the players feel that way, and they're going to be much more absorbed in the game."

I know how greatly this spirit of excitement can affect a fan of the game. Playing The Beast Within before high school convinced me to take up German as my foreign language of choice. When I tell Jensen this, she laughs and shares an anecdote of her own: "I got a letter just a few months ago from a guy that became a priest because of Gabriel Knight 3. It's amazing."

One side effect of the switch to FMV was a change in actors for Gabriel. In the first game, the protagonist was voiced by Tim Curry, but that wouldn't work for The Beast Within. "We couldn't use Tim Curry because he just wasn't very much physically like Gabriel," Jensen says.

Instead, they cast a longhaired Wall Street grunt turned actor named Dean Erickson. Struggling to make a career out of acting beyond a brief recurring role on the television show *Frasier*, Erickson hoped The Beast Within could be "the start of something big." But first he had to convince Jensen.

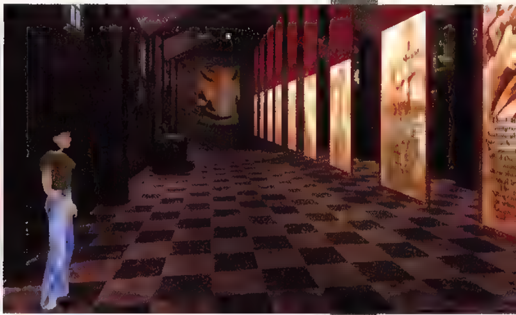
"She was trying to find that spark or whatever it was that would make me Gabriel Knight," Erickson remembers. "We read some of the scenes. One of them got a little more emotional… where I got angry about something as the character, and I saw this flash in her eyes. I could tell right then that she was sold, that all of a sudden I had changed from Dean Erickson to someone who could be Gabriel Knight."

Jensen backs up this story, saying that in her mind Tim Curry will always be the real voice of Gabriel but that Erickson filled the role physically quite well. To his credit, Erickson didn't try to copy Curry's performance.

"There was no way I was going to do Tim Curry, because…you know, Tim Curry is Tim Curry," Erickson says. "He was a little more animated or maybe you could say over the top. What he was doing called for that. What I was doing called for something a little more down to earth and grounded."

The Beast Within: Gabriel Knight Mystery

Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned (above and right)



Curry returned to the role in Gabriel Knight's third game. Unfortunately, it would also be the series' swan song.

Killing the Cat

BY THE LATE '90S the writing was on the wall for Sierra's struggling adventure game department. Though Jensen's team was busy working on a new 3D iteration of the Gabriel Knight series, they fully expected it to be their final release.

"It was clear that this was the last gasp," Jensen says. "We were the last dinosaur on the block. We had until the game shipped, and then it would be over."

In Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned, Knight journeys to the French region of Rennes-le-Château to investigate vampire sightings. As the mystery unraveled, the game also delved into Biblical history, specifically the notion that Jesus had children and that the Knights Templar scrubbed his family lineage from the annals of history.

Sound familiar? I ask Jensen if she's ever felt frustration about the game's lack of success despite the plot's similarity to *The Da Vinci Code*, a smash hit novel released just a few years later. "Yeah, you have those moments," she says. "But that's the thing about being in games. There are only so many people that are going to play an adventure game. It's hard for it to take off the way a book can."

While the plot gave players plenty to be excited about it, Gabriel Knight 3 was plagued by technical problems. Programmer Scott Bilas originally joined Sierra to work on SWAT 3 but found himself quickly pulled over to the troubled team trying to finish Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned. "They thought they were nearly done, but they were right in the middle of production still," Bilas says. "There were a lot of features missing."

As with the move to FMV, Sierra felt the need to switch to 3D to keep up with the latest technology. "Everybody in the industry was switching over to 3D whether or not they needed to," Bilas explains. "Sierra was doing it in this really weird way where we had four 3D game engines in development simultaneously. There was very little sharing of tech. It was a cultural thing."

While Bilas helped push through the problems and get the game released in a relatively stable form, the technology problems led to delays that furthered the certainty of the studio's demise. It also may have inadvertently led to Gabriel Knight 3's most notoriously awful puzzle.

Around a year after Gabriel Knight 3's 2000 release, the satirical gaming site Old Man Murray (founded by Portal 2 writers Erik Wolpaw and Chet Faliszek) posted an article titled "Death of Adventure Games." In its harsh, tongue-in-cheek tone, the site laid the blame of the demise of this genre at the feet of Jane Jensen and one particular early Gabriel Knight 3 puzzle. In this illogical scenario, Knight has to use tape to get fur from a cat to make a fake mustache in order to disguise himself…as a guy who doesn't have a mustache.

"We hated it! It was terrible!" Bilas admits. However, he also clarifies that it was not a puzzle designed by Jensen. "There was something that Jane wanted to do that was just too hard, too expensive, too complicated to make it happen. I think our producer came up with the cat puzzle [as a replacement]. I'm pretty sure Jane didn't like it. None of the developers liked it, but we were really late and needed to get something in there. It was some kind of terrible compromise."

Those who made it past the infamous cat hair puzzle discovered some of the most impressive and satisfying adventure game enigmas ever crafted, along with Jensen's trademark deep, historical plot and well-written characters. Sadly, that crowd wasn't big enough to save adventure games or Gabriel Knight.

Though the series is dead, the passion for it surely isn't. Everyone I talked to who had been involved in creating past Gabriel Knight games shares the same enthusiasm that I've seen in fans of the series. "I would have done the next five or six," Erickson tells me, imagining a hypothetical future in which FMV games had actually taken off. Though he's moved away from acting and back to the business world, he adds, "If something fell in my lap, and it worked out timing-wise, I would still entertain it."

As for Jensen, she says that she's worked on a couple of Gabriel Knight 4 proposals over the past 12 years, "but they never really went anywhere." She believes in the future of adventure games, and there's still hope that future could have room for Gabriel Knight.

"If I could do it in a way that had integrity for me, I would," Jensen says. "I wouldn't go back and do a Gabriel Knight match-three game or a Gabriel Knight shooter or something like that. If I could do it in a manner similar to what I've done before, yeah, I would like to." ◆

game over

Know Your Bosses

by Dan Ryckert

While the industry has evolved in every possible way in the past few decades, gamers have always loved a good old-fashioned boss fight. Test your knowledge of some end-level baddies below.

1. In Metal Gear Solid, Psycho Mantis mentioned several Konami games if he found the save data on your memory card. Which of these was not one of them?

a. Suikoden
b. Castlevania: Symphony of the Night
c. Vandal Hearts
d. Azure Dreams

2. Which of these bosses was not a father to another character?

a. Jecht - Final Fantasy X
b. Shang Tsung - Mortal Kombat
c. Dark Tooth - Twisted Metal 2
d. Heihachi Mishima - Tekken

3. Which of these weapons is required to defeat Ganon in The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past?

a. Silver arrows
b. Hookshot
c. Blue ring
d. Boomerang

4. Which of these bosses can be defeated without using any weapons?

a. The End - Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
b. Mother Brain - Super Metroid
c. Vergil - Devil May Cry 3
d. Final Colossus - Shadow of the Colossus

5. Which robot master's power is effective against the final alien boss in Mega Man 2?

a. Flash Man
b. Quick Man
c. Heat Man
d. Bubble Man

6. The name of one of these fighting game bosses was also the pre-release code name for a gaming console. Which was it?

a. Alpha 152
b. Dural
c. Eyedol
d. Onaga

7. What fictional character replaced Mike Tyson in the re-release of Punch-Out?

a. Nick Bruiser
b. Pizza Pasta
c. Dragon Chan
d. Mr. Dream

8. Which game ends with a rooftop sword-fight against a former U.S. President wearing a robotic suit?

a. Heavy Rain
b. Civilization II
c. Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty
d. Donkey Kong Country 3: Dixie Kong's Double Trouble

9. Which game allowed you to convince the final boss to commit suicide?

a. Wolfenstein 3D
b. Bionic Commando
c. Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver
d. Fallout

10. Bowser's size has changed dramatically from game to game. Which Mario title featured him at his largest?

a. Super Mario Sunshine
b. Super Mario 64
c. Super Mario Bros. 3
d. Super Mario World

Scoring & Rank

0 - 1
That celery thing from Gunstar Heroes

2 - 3
John Romero's head

4 - 5
Death Breath

6 - 7
Colossus of Rhodes

8 - 9
RoboHitler

10
Ganon

Answer Key: 1 - c, 2 - b, 3 - a, 4 - a, 5 - d, 6 - b, 7 - d, 8 - c, 9 - d, 10 - a

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