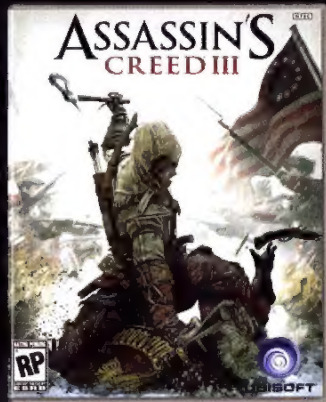


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GOOD THINGS COME IN THREES GOOD THINGS COME IN THREES GOOD THINGS COME IN THREES

THE E3 TRIPLE PLAY PROMOTION



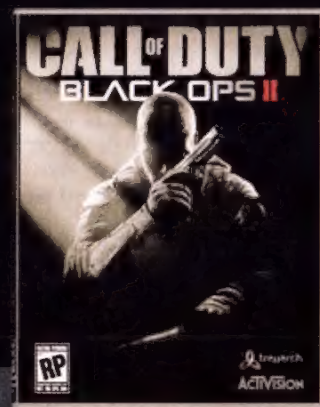
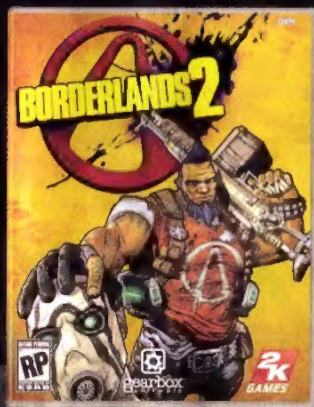
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The Dramatic Death of Single-Player?



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

Read my column or
comment on this letter at
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The announcement that God of War: Ascension would add multiplayer (see preview on page 82) to the classically single-player experience brought forth a number of conflicting feelings from gamers around the globe, including myself.

This is not the first time a franchise known for its single-player experience has walked down the competitive multiplayer path. Uncharted, Mass Effect, Dead Space, Assassin's Creed, BioShock, Max Payne, and even Grand Theft Auto have expanded past the boundaries of single-player.

While some reacted positively to the news of God of War's new addition, many boiled with unbridled Internet rage.

Some proclaimed they wouldn't buy it, and others complained that every game doesn't need multiplayer, but reader Alex Hanavan perfectly summarized the frustration of longtime solo gamers face by asking, "Is multiplayer mandatory now for every single new game?"

Gamers are a smart and passionate group, so it is easy to see why players are wary that the addition of multiplayer could lead to lesser investments in the single-player experience. I, too, can't get that nagging thought out of my brain.

Of course, there is no proof that adding multiplayer to a game reduces a developer's investment in the single-player experience. Since it is basically impossible for a developer to make both at the same time with equal budgets and talent behind the titles, we will never really know the answer to the question.

Gamers in the single-player camp will always point to the millions spent on multiplayer as a waste of money that could have made the single-player experience better, while multiplayer fans will sometimes wonder why there is a single-player experience at all (see Battlefield 3).

Neither group is right or wrong, but I know there will always be a thought in the back of my head when a single-player game falls short (or vice versa), that game developers are trying too hard to appease everyone when focused effort on a single discipline would offer better results. Some developers and publishers are capable of doing it all, as we have seen in many blockbuster titles featuring amazing single- and multiplayer experiences. But whenever someone falls short, gamers will be there to ridicule and cast doubt.

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Gears of War: Judgment

Epic and People Can Fly team up to bring the Gears series back to its high-tension roots. Huge numbers of Locust swarm the screen, a new multiplayer mode introduces class-based gameplay, and the prequel story focuses on a young Baird being accused of military crimes.

By Tim Turi



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Skylanders Giants



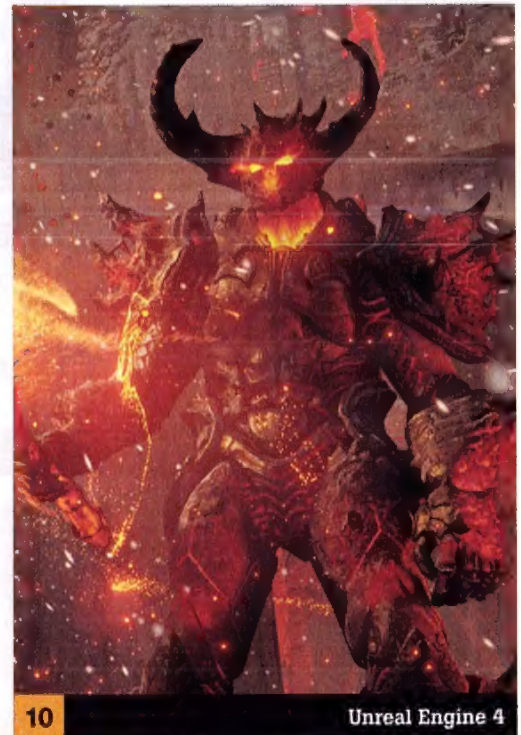
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Assassin's Creed III Liberation



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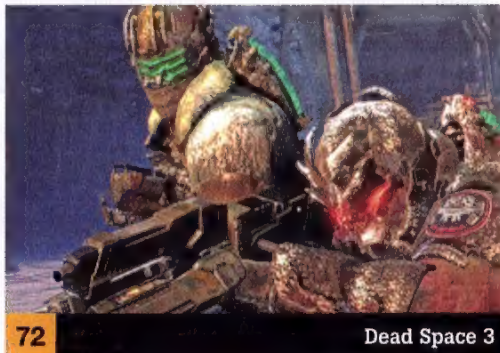


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Dead Space 3

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Readers gush about their profound experiences playing *Journey*, continue to question the ending of *Mass Effect 3*, and sound off on day one DLC.

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We dive deep into the future of gaming graphics with Epic's gorgeous Unreal Engine, rank gaming's most influential infants, and explore games that cross the gap between social and console gaming.

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We take a look at Kratos' newest, blood-soaked adventure, catch up with our favorite transforming robots, and check out the next big thing from the creator of *Black*.

» 96 Reviews

Telltale Games finally knocks it out of the park by combining unique adventure gameplay with the grim world of *The Walking Dead* comic.

by Ben Reeves

» 112 Game Over

E3 is here again, and we're spicing this year's convention up with a game of bingo highlighting the more ridiculous aspects of gaming's biggest convention.



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Top Ten Babies



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God of War: Ascension



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Sniper Elite V2



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The Witch and the Hundred Knights



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This month in Feedback, readers show Thatgamecompany's Journey some love, scoff at the idea of artistic integrity, discuss day-one DLC with delicious burger metaphors, and fall for another Timeline gag.



Welcome Back, Master Chief

I would like to say "Bravo!" on your Halo 4 cover story. I am an enthusiastic Halo fan, and for months I have searched for more information on the game. When I looked through other gaming magazines and blogs, I found very little information, and was left with more questions than answers. When I got issue 229, I was surprised and elated to see Master Chief staring at me. The article answered most of my questions, and gave me some new ones that will make the wait for release all the more exciting. Thank you for the details you provided, and for avoiding plot spoilers.

Christopher Cifuentes
via email

I honestly wasn't really looking forward to Halo 4. Like many fans, I was more than a little skeptical based on the departure of Bungie. As I read your account of the beginning of the campaign, I could hear the banter between Master Chief and Cortana. I could feel the excitement of going into battle as the Chief again. No other game has given me the feeling of being such a complete badass. I couldn't

be more excited for Halo 4 now. I'll be in line at midnight, just like I was for Halo 2 and 3.

Dennis Williams
via email

While we received some letters expressing skepticism over the changes 343 Industries is making to Microsoft's legendary sci-fi series, most readers are eager to see if Halo 4 lives up to the franchise's classic "Combat Evolved" tagline. We'll find out November 6.

An Unforgettable Journey

Thank you for your review of Journey, which motivated me to buy the game. It's the best \$15 I ever spent. I'm 38 years old and I wept like a baby during the last 15 minutes of this absolutely beautiful and very thought-provoking game. The funny thing is, my 10-year-old daughter played it and her exact words upon completion were, "Well, that was short and boring." Oh well. I guess we interpreted it in very different ways. That's part of the wonder of video games.

David
Palmyra, VA

I was very pleased when I read your review of Journey. Some people look at it as a cheap, boring game, but for me, playing Journey was an emotional experience. I have never felt so happy while playing a game. After reading your review, I thought of something. Why does it seem that indie games today are just as good as most disc games, but they barely get any recognition? Would you guys not agree that some of these lesser-known games are incredible and even better than some of the retail games out there?

Frank Barker
via email

We certainly do, Frank. Giant studios aren't the only ones creating amazing game experiences, and it's not surprising that indie developers have come up with some out-of-the-box gameplay you wouldn't see in mainstream titles.

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Kinect-D'oh-Man

I want to thank you for providing me the opportunity to both win an argument with my husband (who is a teacher, which makes it even better), and make him feel like an ignoramus. I was in disbelief when he told me about a cool new gadget called Kinectoman, a life-sized robot you could operate with a controller. I laughed and told him that was not an actual part of the magazine, but a parody called Game Infarcer. He protested to the point of researching Kinectoman online. When he realized the truth, he laughed at himself and had to admit I was not only right, but that he was in fact an ignoramus. Now he knows not to question my gaming skills.

**Katie
Corpus Christi, TX**



We know we covered Game Infarcer last issue, but couldn't pass up the inclusion of this hilarious letter. Thanks for sharing your husband's embarrassing mistake with us, Katie!

A Question Of Integrity

I can't say I'm surprised you gave Mass Effect 3 a perfect score while dismissing the massive controversy surrounding the ending. The fact that fan outcry has led to EA being voted The Worst Company in America according to The Consumerist, and a complaint being filed with the FTC for false advertising should have precluded it from a perfect score. Go ahead and preach "artistic integrity" all you want. The fact is endings have been changed before (Broken Steel, anyone?). Let's not forget that "artistic integrity" is the shelter of hacks, sycophants, and terrible web comic artists to justify never acknowledging any criticism. BioWare should be above that, and the fact that they're responding to this dissatisfaction is a lesson the game journalism industry should take to heart. Incidentally, my latest Game Informer came with a sticker reminding me to renew my subscription. I believe I'm going to pass.

**Eric McNaughton
via email**

Your utter contempt for the concept of artistic integrity certainly explains your

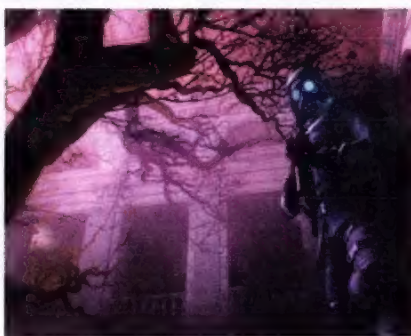
dissatisfaction with companies that don't conform to your opinions. But BioWare shouldn't feel pressured into changing its ending because another company did so in the past, and we're not going to misrepresent how we feel about a game because of upset fans or the threat of canceled subscriptions. Since when do we all need to have the same opinion anyway?

Operation Rebuttal City

After reading your Operation Raccoon City review, I have to agree to disagree. On the negative, the game is simply structured, with no epic score, no amazing graphics, and no fine-tuned control system. But these are all luxuries that Capcom provided us in previous titles that we've grown accustomed to. The fact that this title was developed by a different team means it's not going to be your classic Resident Evil level of quality. I like to think of the lack of gameplay polish as a challenge to a better, more adaptable gamer. Honestly, I hate when controls are so easy I can just breeze through the game. I like the chaos and the challenges included in ORC. Perhaps more people would enjoy it if they

This month we heard from a few readers who came up with creative reasons for liking Operation Raccoon City more than we did, but most responders echoed Kris' disappointment in how the game turned out. We'll keep calling them like we see them, to the dismay and gratitude of our readership.

**Kris Toudouze
via email**



thought of it as a warmer-upper for RE 6...or if they knocked the price down \$20. Regardless, I'm sure enjoying this what-if story.

**Kody Kozak
via email**

As a lifelong fan of both the Resident Evil franchise and third-person shooters, I thought Operation Raccoon City was going to be the holy grail of video games. I have never been more disappointed in a video game in my life. The AI in the game was almost nonexistent, and the quick-time events were so frustrating I wanted to throw my controller. After a few hours of disappointing play, I passed the controller to my 10-year-old son, who gave up even sooner than I did. Luckily, I had read your review of the game, and only rented it. Thanks for saving me 50 bucks. You guys rock.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Am I a nerd for wanting to learn how to play the ocarina?"

A little bit.

"Can't anyone take a joke nowadays?"

Apparently not.

"Who would win in a free for all battle: Gandalf, Dumbledore, or Obi-Wan Kenobi?"

The one that isn't a stupid wizard.

Worst News Tip of the Month:

"Don't have the informer hate the informants!"

Quantified!

Responding to Joe's day-one DLC burger analogy, readers compared DLC to: Lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, a dessert, a combo meal, mayo and ketchup, a milkshake (minus straw), apple pie, a drink (without ice), and pickles. Consider us confused – and hungry.



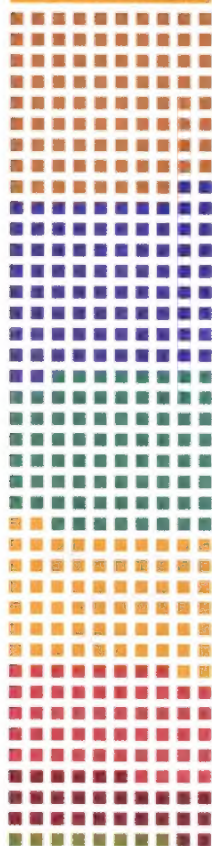
(Left) City Interactive's Stuart Black knows how to play it cool. Kyle? Not so much. (Right) We're not sure what Dan was trying to explain to Irrational Games' Ken Levine, but we bet it was stupid.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

feedback 7

On Your Mind



- Day One DLC Gripes **22%**
- Mass Effect 3
- Ending Complaints (Still) **21%**
- Halo 4 Excitement **19%**
- Depp/Burton Timeline Lunacy **16%**
- Gaming Snack Picks **13%**
- The Secret History of GTA Love **7%**
- Operation Raccoon City Defenders **2%**

Question of the Month:

Does violence in a video game affect your purchasing decision? Why or why not?



Depp Dish

I can usually trust in your game reviews, but your *Dark Shadows* blurb in Timeline (The Reinvention of Johnny Depp, issue 229) is the most idiotic passage I have ever seen in your magazine. I wish you would list who wrote it, because he or she should no longer be employed. Johnny Depp has been in many movies with both Helena Bonham Carter and Tim Burton, including *Corpse Bride*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and a few others. Tim Burton is actually married to Helena Bonham Carter, and works with Johnny Depp all the time. Whoever wrote this article is incredibly ill informed and I do not want them to represent your magazine.

Daniel Rosen
Rowlett, TX

We spoke to Joe Juba and Andrew Reiner, authors of the controversial Timeline blurb, and they assured us that all of the films you named are made up and don't exist in the real world. Nice try, Daniel!

Downloadable Dilemma

Kudos to Joe Juba for his opinion article supporting day-one DLC (The Day-One DLC Defense, issue 229). He presented a hot-button topic in a manner that recognized both the business advantages for the developers and the content advantages for gamers. I want my game developers to focus on the core game first, and I've come to expect DLC in any game that I play. I want DLC to be a quality addition to the game that augments my playing experience instead of standing alone as a new experience entirely. Finally, I want that DLC as fast as possible while I am still enjoying the game that DLC is meant for. The developers put hundreds of man-hours into DLC on top of the man-hours for the initial release. Why shouldn't they expect us to pay for it?

Chris Snyder
Bladenboro, NC

I like Joe's hamburger analogy describing DLC ("When I buy a hamburger, I don't get upset that I'm not given the fries for free..."), but I think he is missing the real issue. Gamers aren't expecting to "get their fries for free," but rather are concerned that developers are pulling the lettuce and tomato off of the completed hamburger and making them pay extra for it. Whether or not this is actually happening isn't clear, but there's a fine line between developing content specifically for DLC, and taking parts out of a completed game and selling them separately. We shouldn't be so naive as to think that publishers won't try to take advantage of consumers.

Bryan Graham
via email

We received countless mouthwatering hamburger analogies this month, all pointing to the same concern: Gamers don't want downloadable content that feels like it's been removed from the main game. As for the timing issue, most agree with Joe that the sooner developers can get quality DLC out to gamers, the better.

GI SPY

continued from page 7

(Left) Harmonix's John Drake tried his best to impress Giant Bomb editors/Rock Band Night judges Patrick Klepek and Alex Navarro. (Right) Gearbox's Mikey Neumann wasn't fooled by our attempt at stealth photography, as Randy Pitchford discussed what's new with *Borderlands 2* during their PAX East panel.



Snack Time

In issue 229, we asked readers what their favorite gaming snack is. To our surprise, readers responded with a pretty even mix of healthy snacks, and things Dan Ryckert would eat. Here are some answers that will keep you in shape. Well, except for the last one.

Because eating something easy like chips can only end with an empty bag and health problems, I prefer to eat pistachios. That way I have to spend the time to crack open each delicious nut, forcing myself to only eat during loading screens.

Mark Wasson

Believe it or not, my favorite snack is carrots. When one is faced with exercising or getting to the next checkpoint, my love handles are an obvious answer to which I choose. So instead, I go for a compromise and reach for a delicious, sweet carrot while I'm mowing down enemies.

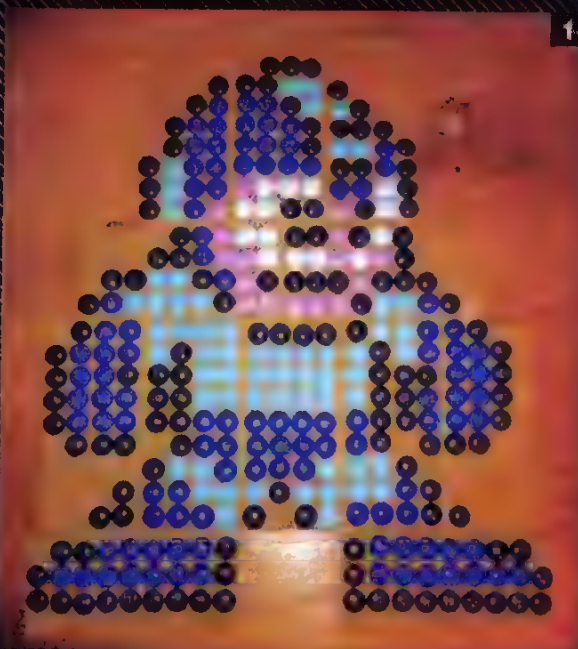
Nolan Noble

What's my favorite snack during a gaming session, you ask? I like to devour my opponents' hopes and dreams, then wash it down with their tears of frustration.

Dave Brouillette



WINNER 1 Dave Dennehy We would have eaten this right when it came in, but we all had Mega Man art on graham crackers for lunch the day before. **2 Charles Atkins** We usually think of Sackboy as a friendly little fella, but he looks pretty amused at his friend's impending doom here. **3 William Clawson** Considering what's happening in the background, Joker should probably be focusing on something a little more important than mugging for the camera. **4 David Metzger** Nintendo's been all about the raccoon tail lately, but we're still waiting for 3D Frog Mario.



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

Send to:

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724 1st St. N.
3rd Floor
Mpls, MN 55401

Corrections:

In issue 229, we listed the Reader Art contest winner as Joey Pendleton. In actuality, the talented artist's name is Joey Pendleton. Sorry about the mix-up, Joey!



(Left) Tim's inner Sonic fan was mighty jealous when he met Super Mario 3D Land director Koichi Hayashida. (Right) Marcus was a little depressed at not being the center of attention when Dan and Tim posed with Epic's Cliff Bleszinski and Wes Phillips.

connect



REVIEWS

- **The Best Systems**
 How cross-platform play will change the way you play
- **Game of the Year**
 Why you should care
- **Top 100 Games**
 The year's best
- **Editors' Choice**
 The best of the best

Start Your **Engines**

Introducing Unreal Engine 4

Are you ready for the
next generation?

L

ike that guest who lingers well after everyone else has left the party, the current generation of consoles just keeps sticking around. Past generations typically lasted five years before technology advances made the jump to a new piece of hardware a foregone conclusion. But with a struggling world economy and the ability to update and enhance their existing platforms, companies like Microsoft and Sony felt no rush to jump into another wildly expensive generation of consoles.

Developers may be able to squeeze better performance out of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, but as the gorgeous PC release of Battlefield 3 showed us last year, the gulf between the current graphics cards being created by AMD and Nvidia and the aging consoles is widening. Couple this noticeable gap with a slowdown in sales, and it's time to start thinking about the future.

With the next generation of video games on the horizon, game developers and publishers will soon enter a new technological arms race, each aggressively leaning on their most talented engineers to exploit the power at the core of the new consoles to produce bleeding-edge graphics. Their goal is simultaneously a collective and individual one. They need to convince gamers to make the jump from their current consoles, while convincing them that their game is the one that best displays the next generation's capabilities.

One of the first games that captured the imagination of gamers last generation was Gears of War. With its stunning graphics, responsive controls, and a co-op campaign, Epic Games' sci-fi shooter helped convince gamers to purchase the Xbox 360 and has gone on to accrue more than a billion dollars in sales over three games. Gears of War showcased Epic's Unreal Engine 3, which has become ubiquitous in the development community thanks to its flexible toolset and advanced graphical capabilities.

Now Epic's gaze is turning once again to the future. To create Unreal Engine 4, the company talked with hardware manufacturers like Intel, AMD, Nvidia, and Qualcomm to get a clear picture of their technological road maps. Working from some informed assumptions about the next generation's hardware capabilities, company founder Tim Sweeney then charted out his company's vision of future game development. With input from its talented engineers, artists, and designers, Epic has created a scalable platform capable of meeting the demands for a new era of game development, from high-end next-gen consoles to the rapidly evolving mobile space. Not bad for a company that Sweeney started in his parents' basement 20 years ago.



The Elemental demo from which these screens were pulled runs on a single Nvidia GeForce GTX 680



TECH SPOTLIGHT

Real-Time Global Illumination

The first thing gamers are going to notice when looking at a next-generation game powered by Unreal Engine 4 is the fully dynamic lighting.

"The real-time lighting capabilities in UE4 go way beyond what we've done in the past," says Epic founder Tim Sweeney. "It conveys an entirely new sense of realism than we had previously."

With a global solution, developers don't have to do a lot of pre-processing or "bake" in lighting onto objects, which means they can get a game world up and running in a tenth of the time. New technical features like glossy specular reflection, light generation from emissive surfaces, and fully lit and shadowed subsurface scattering help light bounce naturally off, around, and through objects. This will make game worlds look much more realistic than they have in the past.

"When I just look at the scene composition, you're not getting that Looney Tunes effect where there's a really nice painted background, and the one thing that's going to blow up looks completely different," says Epic lead artist Wyeth Johnson. "There's that cohesion and believability that comes along with that type of technological shift."

The global illumination will also affect our game experiences.

"When you look at the way that the lighting works and the fact that you can immediately blow off the roof and have the lighting pour in and bounce properly is exciting," says Epic design director Cliff Bleszinski. "You can consider things like realistic day/night cycles, weather effects, things like that that could have a really interesting impact on gameplay."

The Modest Giant

Like many game developers of his era, Tim Sweeney's love affair with programming started with a happenstance encounter with a curious piece of technology. When he was just 10 years old, Sweeney traveled to California to spend a week with his older brother, who had just started his own company. To keep his kid brother busy while he was working, Steve Sweeney introduced him to a state-of-the-art IBM PC and taught him the basics of BASIC, an early programming language. Exceptionally smart for his age, it didn't take Tim long to see the potential of experimenting with this new language. After a couple days of tinkering at his brother's side, a love affair was born.

A self-professed awkward teen, Sweeney spent the majority of his high school years practicing computer programming in solitude instead of socializing with classmates. Over the next five years, Sweeney estimates he spent roughly 10,000 hours honing his craft, learning programming techniques by emulating other applications and making improvements to the baseline code.

Though he experimented making games on his Apple II, it wasn't until Sweeney received an IBM of his own that he started his first commercial endeavor. While studying for a mechanical engineering degree at the University of Maryland, Sweeney would spend his nights and weekends programming. Unsatisfied with the PC text editor he was using, Sweeney started developing one of his own. He got bored during the project and decided to make the cursor into a smiley face. Treating it like a character, he then created other characters he could type that would block the smiley face or move around. This mild diversion eventually evolved into the text-mode graphic adventure game ZZT, which shared similarities to Apogee Software and 3D Realms founder Scott Miller's game Kingdom of Kroz.

In 1991, Sweeney officially formed his first company, Potomac Computer Systems, and released ZZT via shareware. Even early on, he showed a deft ability to create editing tools that helped others make their own games. ZZT met modest success, but its most popular feature was the packaged editor that allowed the community to tinker and create its own extensions to the game. Sweeney was selling three or four copies a day, which was enough to let him forsake his engineering degree and turn game development into a full-time job.

Over the next eight years, Sweeney's modest company grew rapidly. He changed the name to Epic MegaGames (which eventually evolved into Epic Games), released more successful games like *Jill of the Jungle*, moved out of his parent's house and into an office space, and hired several talented people who still play key roles in the company, including vice president Mark Rein and design director Cliff Bleszinski.

At the same time, PC games were booming in popularity thanks to revolutionary titles like *id Software's* *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom*, and *Quake*, each of which was built on the back of the technical achievements of legendary programmer John Carmack. Ever the tinkerer, Sweeney saw some areas where he could improve the 3D experience, and he decided to give it a go himself.

The result was the *Unreal Engine*, a 3D powerhouse that brought a host of graphical improvements, including colored lighting, software rendering, and detail texturing. Suddenly, the *id Tech* engine had a serious rival.

When *Unreal Engine* debuted in 1998, it didn't take long for phone calls to start streaming in from other developers interested in licensing the engine. Sweeney and Rein realized the profit potential and started more aggressively pushing their proprietary technology, adapting it for consoles on the way to selling 38 licenses. Epic no longer just had a reputation as a talented game developer; it was also a big player in the engine space.

The company's continued influence spread with the introduction of the *Unreal Engine 2*, which debuted in the 2002 title *America's Army*. With completely rewritten core code and rendering engine, Epic positioned the engine to be flexible enough to evolve over time, eventually adding support for the *GameCube*, *Xbox*, and *PlayStation 2*. Developers grew to like the toolset, and Epic's engine service proliferated; companies shipped almost 200 games powered by *Unreal Engine 2*, including best sellers like *Splinter Cell*, *Rainbow Six 3*, and *Lineage II*. Two years later, Sweeney's team showcased *Unreal Engine 3*, which was quickly embraced by the industry.

As the visionary behind the engine, Sweeney's expertise was suddenly in high demand. When planning the hardware specifications for the *Xbox 360*, Microsoft frequently conversed with Sweeney to make sure the console would give creators the power they wanted for creating a new generation of games. When Sweeney advised them to double the amount of RAM in the console, Microsoft obliged to the tune of an extra \$1 billion in production costs. While it may have cost Microsoft more money up front, it helped the system deliver highly detailed games like *Gears of War* that solidified the console's reputation as a game changer and convinced gamers to ditch their PS2s and Xboxes.

Now, nine years into the licensing of *Unreal Engine 3*, Epic is the unquestioned leader in engine technology. The licensee list is a who's who of game developers and publishers, including Activision, Take Two, Capcom, Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, and Square Enix. Nearly 300 *Unreal Engine 3* games have shipped on almost every platform on the market, including all the major consoles, handhelds, and mobile platforms like iOS and Android.





TECH SPOTLIGHT

Lens Flares

The new image-based lens flare in Unreal Engine 4 lends scenes a filmic quality and occurs dynamically. "Traditionally, all these flares and filmic effects are mistakes, right? You really don't want them in your film, but when you add them to CG graphics, which are inherently sterile, you have to mess them up to make them look believable," says Epic art director Chris Perna. "It's these little tricks that will actually make graphical fidelity seem more real and therefore the game be more immersive."

Size Matters

With the dawn of the next generation of consoles on the horizon, Epic is once again at the vanguard. But whereas the transition between moving from the PlayStation 2 era to the Xbox 360 era was relatively straightforward once developers got their heads around using multicore processors, today game makers are facing a wildly different landscape.

For many publishers and developers, the last generation saw a drastic increase in both studio sizes and game budgets due to the technical mastery needed to get the most out of the hardware. While Epic has kept its development teams at fewer than 100 people, some publishers have gone on aggressive hiring sprees to guarantee their flagship titles ship on time. Ubisoft had more than 400 people from several different studios working on Assassin's Creed II, and at one point Activision had over 500 people working to keep Call of Duty on track for annual releases.

The increased development times, manpower requirements, and considerable financial backing has also drastically cut down in the amount of creative risks publishers are willing to take. Miss on a few titles in one year like THQ did with uDraw, Red Faction: Armageddon, and MX vs. ATV Alive, and suddenly a formerly stable company could find itself in serious trouble. In THQ's case, the company was forced to drastically restructure by killing off future projects, laying off employees, and closing some studios entirely. Even then, it barely survived being delisted by NASDAQ.

Moving into the next generation, having companies continue to grow at exorbitant rates to meet the demands of working with even more powerful consoles isn't feasible.

"First and foremost you need to have a viable business model for the next generation in order to thrive," Sweeney says. "If every project costs more to produce than it can realistically earn, then the industry will decline because companies will stop making those investments."

To create an environment that mitigates some of that risk, Epic knew it needed to overhaul how games were made.

"You saw what happened when we went from the Unreal Engine 2 to 3 generation in terms of the complexity of making games and the budgets that came along with that," says Epic president Mike Capps. "If we don't want to have 500-person teams on Gears of War 7 or whatever it is, we have to find a way to increase efficiency because you know next generation is going to have cooler graphics, more power, and more memory, and we're all going to want to compete to be the very best looking. We're just not going to win unless we find a way to be more efficient."

Gears of Code

When investigating the bottlenecks in contemporary game development, Sweeney and his team of engineers identified what they believe to be the biggest chokepoint: an over-reliance on programmers. If a creator wants to change something like the way a gun looks when it fires, he or she has to go to the artist to get a muzzle flash, go to a programmer to get the code hooks for the muzzle flash, go to the sound designer to get a gunfire sound, and go to the programmer to get the code hooks for the gunfire. If the designer doesn't like how it looks after everything comes together, he or she then needs to bother the programmer again to tweak the code. This process is laborious and time consuming, and it makes heavy iteration a fantasy.

When Sweeney began research and development on Unreal Engine 4 right after the Unreal Engine 3 shipped, he started brainstorming how he could streamline the development process to remove this bottleneck.

"The biggest improvement in Unreal Engine 4 is philosophical," he says.

"We want designers and creative people to take charge of as much of the game production process as possible."

Sweeney and his team of engineers had a lot of experience to draw from to tackle the problem. The median years of industry experience for Epic's engineering team is 11 years, which allows them to intuitively apply the valuable lessons learned from past successes and failures to their decision-making processes. Having worked on at least two console generations also gives them the mental flexibility to think outside the box and imagine new ways of harnessing the new horsepower afforded by a generational leap.

"Long before we know where next-generation hardware is definitely going to be we're making our own projections and building our technology around where we think it ought to be and could be in a commercially feasible way," Sweeney says. "We went into the Unreal Engine 4 development cycle with a high degree of confidence that hardware would be at a certain level – the teraflop level of performance – in this generation. Of course we don't know exactly where the numbers are going to end up, but we're expecting a big leap and designing for a big leap."

To empower game designers, Unreal Engine 4 creates a clear boundary between the tasks a programmer ought to do and the tasks a designer ought to do. In theory, this makes it much easier to map out a project and rapidly prototype. This revamp started with the interface.

Epic looked at how modern software applications like Adobe Lightroom and the Modo modeling suite created a user-friendly work environment with highly customizable interfaces and a clean layout aimed at improving iteration and workflow. With Unreal Engine 4, the entire creation process is streamlined. Designers can edit and recompile source code without leaving the editor, and take control of the game at any time to see how it plays. The revamped Kismet scripting application even allows users to simulate level and asset scripts to make sure they are working properly, which should drastically cut down the time it takes to debug problems.

Most importantly, the new interface empowers designers to tweak basic programming without having to call over a programmer. Technical artists will be able to create complex assets, and programmers can expose certain values for designers as needed to give them access to simple tweaks, like controlling how the thumbstick reacts or changing hit point values.

"The inability to iterate kills the creative process, because every time you play telephone, something gets lost in translation," says Epic lead artist Wyeth Johnson. "I think there's going to be a lot more collaboration where it's 'Hey, I've got 90 percent here, help me get to the last 10%' rather than 'I have an idea and got to 5 percent by drawing a piece of concept art, can you bring 95 percent?' That's a whole different conversation. We don't even know what our development is going to look like this upcoming generation."

Epic believes that applying this tool to the contemporary game development process could save studios thousands of man hours on a project.

"You're talking about cutting off weeks to months of your development schedule just because you don't have to wait for compiles, you don't have to wait to rebuild lighting," says Epic senior technical artist Ajan Willard. "You see exactly what you are dealing with the whole time."

The time developers save by cutting out the wait for minor programming changes and code compilations can now be applied to iterating the game experience, which should result in more subtle touches in game interactions and a more polished overall experience.

Empowering Indies

Though Epic is still in the process of finalizing the feature set for Unreal Engine 4, it is already excited to see what kind of experiences game designers start making with the new toolset.

"I can make any kind of dynamic change – I can really build my game and test it and tweak and tune and make all these changes without ever leaving my editor," says Epic Games principal artist Shane Caudle.

How empowering is the new interface? It only took Caudle, a designer with no programming knowledge whatsoever, a few days to have several game prototypes up and running, including a sailing game in the vein of Sid Meier's Pirates and a flight combat game.

"To me as an artist and a game designer, I've never felt this unleashed before – being able to do just what I want without having to bother the programmers and get them to do it," Caudle says. "You can just try it and see if you like it and tweak it and it's really fast to just pop in and out."

Epic Games president Mike Capps thinks this could mean big things for indie development.

"I think democratizing the tools by pulling out the programming more and more is great," Capps says. "I'm a programmer and I know that there's a job that only I can do, but I love the idea of folks being able to do a bit of visual scripting and be able to ship a whole game through the toolset. That's pretty awesome. It's the Adventure Construction Set of the 2010 decade."

The Unreal Engine 4 Development Kit still doesn't have a release window, but given the success of the UDK program with Unreal Engine 3, Capps says Epic is planning to bring it to the market much sooner. Once the toolset is in the hands of smaller studios, Unreal Engine 4 could enable the rise of new types of indie studios, where projects are created without a core programmer at the heart of the development team.

Particle Effects

Current-generation games typically top out at around 200 rendered particles. By using GPU acceleration, Unreal Engine 4 is capable of producing over one million particles at once without taking a hit to game performance.

"You think about really high-end, crazy CG rendered stuff you're seeing in movies like *Avatar*," says Epic lead artist Wyeth Johnson. "We're nudging ever closer in that direction by taking this approach. You can fill the scene with motion."

"This should result in the best looking smoke, fire, and snowstorm effects we've ever seen in video games."



Tackling the Uncanny Valley

Making game worlds look believable is an attainable goal in current generations, but it only takes one look at a character's face in any game to confirm that we're still deeply entrenched in the uncanny valley. From the wooden facial expressions to the strangely clumped together strands of hair, people just don't look right. Will Unreal Engine 4 finally cross the valley into realism?


"We have a whole part of our brain dedicated to only parsing faces. Getting past that, we're talking a thirty-year problem, not a two-year problem," says Epic lead artist Wyeth Johnson. "But making believability does that thing look like it's supposed to be there — that's something that we're solving now."



TECH SPOTLIGHT

Destruction

The toughest part of destructibility is often the lighting. With global illumination in place, creating destruction in Unreal Engine 4 is made much simpler. Light will shoot appropriately through walls after explosions, and the Nvidia Apex physics library helps make sure the rubble reacts in a realistic way.



Shifting Playing Field

As much emphasis as the company is making on streamlining the high-end game development process, Epic knows meeting those challenges is only one element of catering to modern-day developers.

"The games industry is changing pretty rapidly," Capps says. "The way people want to consume content — a minute and a half on the iPhone, or maybe free-to-play for a while before they start committing their money to it — is moving away from a pure \$60 console world of six or seven years ago. Our engine is certainly going to follow those trends."

Unreal Engine 3 had the flexibility to cater to both the low-end and high-end game development, but after re-writing the base code with scalability in mind, Unreal Engine 4 is far more pliable.

"We want every aspect of the engine and the game experience to scale to a factor of 40 or so in performance between low-end and high-end," Sweeney says. "This is going to be a key aspect of design decisions we make, not just for the engine but also for our games."

With browser-based gaming picking up steam thanks to Facebook and a re-energized Flash platform, Sweeney envisions a future of playing any game — whether it be PS4 or mobile — from a browser. Unreal Engine 4 is ready for that reality.

But What About the Games?

So how will all of these new tools change the games we play? A lot of that will depend on the hardware Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo settle upon. Given their early exposure to Unreal Engine 4, the team at Epic has a good idea about what to expect. The studio currently has two games in production powered by the new engine.

"I'm hoping when gamers get a first glimpse at the next-generation Unreal Engine 4 title that they'll see something that looks darn near rendered," Bleszinski says. "I'm hoping there will be debates online about people claiming footage from the game was faked. That was actually the target goal for the current generation of consoles, and as we've seen with a lot of pre-rendered graphics like Blizzard cinematics, consoles can't quite render that yet. We're hoping to get right to that point." Sweeney sees developers branching out in other ways, as well.

"The next generation will be about a lot of things besides just next-gen graphics performance," he says. "Today our daily experience involves social networking and being in constant communication with our friends and the Internet at large through Facebook, YouTube, and all sorts of different media. It's vitally important that next-generation platforms fit into that ecosystem that people are a part of as seamlessly as possible. Not just Epic's games, but I would hope everybody should have a much greater degree of connectedness in the next generation than in the past."

When you get Sweeney talking about future possibilities, it's evident just how much thought he's put into prognosticating the direction of the industry. His excitement is palpable.

"Unreal Engine 4 is being designed for a decade that starts with the advent of next-generation consoles," he says. "From there on, the sky is the limit. You ask about whether we anticipate 4K displays being important in that time frame, and my response is why only 4K? Moore's Law is continuing to push all major aspects of system capabilities forward and I don't see any sign of that slowing down. Not just in CPU and GPU speeds, but finally there is also competition in monitor resolution."

"The resolution in an iPhone display right now is just stunning. If you applied that Retina philosophy to a large device that takes up most of your field of view you'd need 8K or 12K. I think in this time frame there will be hardware that is actually capable of powering that sort of thing. We could see a whole lot of upward scalability."

If there's anyone who should know, it's Sweeney. ♦

The Total Experience

How cross-platform gaming will change the way you play

by Kyle Hilliard

In previous generations, a game was a singular experience. You put it in a console, played, and completed it in front of your television with a controller in hand. Today, major publishers see their franchises as entertainment packages to be enjoyed across multiple platforms in multiple locations. They want you to take your games everywhere. Increasingly, these experiences are being delivered on a variety of social and mobile platforms. For gamers, this means that your Facebook and mobile gaming time can now be spent leveling up a character or unlocking new items in the game you're playing on your home console.

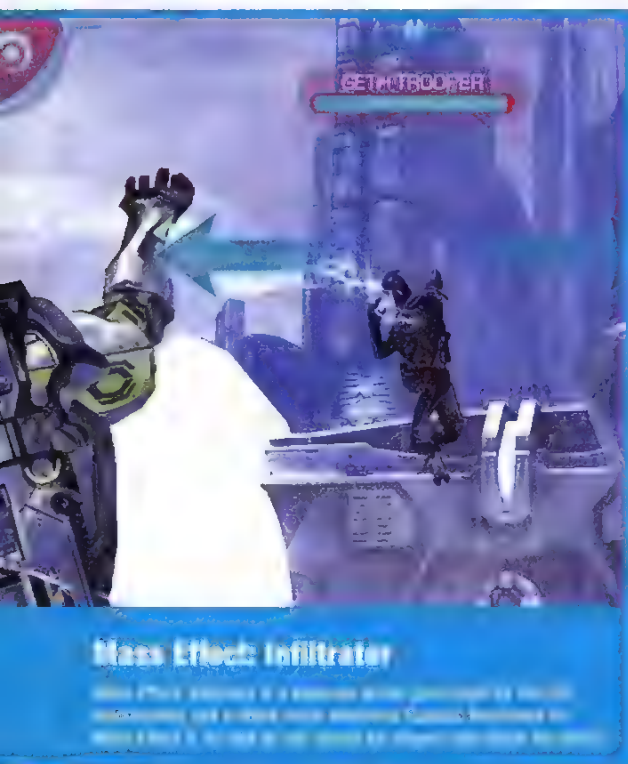
Mobile and social gaming platforms have exploded in popularity in recent years, creating suddenly viable platforms. Companies like Zynga and Rovio have become new power players in the publishing world with games like Words with Friends and Angry Birds. While not all have been quick to respond, many traditional game publishers are starting to establish footholds on these quickly growing new platforms. Rather than spending time and money coming up with new ideas, many companies like Ubisoft are leveraging their known brands like Assassin's Creed and Ghost Recon as a means to break into this popular market.

When Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood released in 2010, Ubisoft decided to do an experiment. Without the benefit of any advertising or marketing, the company quietly released Assassin's Creed: Project Legacy on Facebook. The game allowed players to send out assassins on missions and collect money and experience that could be redeemed by Ezio in Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood, but Project Legacy

was only promoted through in-game text in Brotherhood. "What we were trying to find out at the time is, 'Are there really gamers on Facebook?'" says Chris Early, vice president of digital publishing for Ubisoft. The experiment proved a success, with a strong overlap of 80 percent of gamers playing Project Legacy on Facebook also play-

ing Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood. Early defines this new type of cross-platform gaming across singular franchises as companion gaming. "[Project Legacy] by itself is still fun to play," Early says. "We look at, 'How do we take that same franchise and deliver it on another platform?' because we know that our fans aren't sitting in front of their consoles 24 hours a day. You just don't have as much of the benefit of companion gaming rewards if you're not playing other games in the franchise at the same time or planning on it."

Legacy clearly indicated that Assassin's Creed fans were interested in interacting with their favorite franchise outside of the console experience. Bolstered by its success, Ubisoft started to explore other options to engage the rabid fans of its properties. "Some guys are all about baseball all the time," Early says. "They can quote stats to you, they watch every game on TV, they listen to it on the radio at work. They go to games a bunch, and they wear the team's colors. That's a very engaged fan. There is a lot for them to do. Then there



are those people who maybe only watch the games in the evening on television, or read about the games in the paper." The idea behind companion gaming is to offer the same sort of choices to gamers, except instead of sports teams, everything revolves around fictional video game universes.

Despite being smaller games on less powerful platforms, there is a degree of difficulty in producing these different types of games and allowing them to interact. Microsoft and Sony both currently restrict the cooperation of games outside of Xbox Live and PSN, but they are opening up to the idea. "In terms of restrictions from Sony and Microsoft, there are some, but they recognize that this is the age of cloud computing and I think they're evolving to keep up," says Aaryn Flynn, general manager of BioWare's Edmonton and Montreal locations. "I certainly hope they do,

because there's a lot that can be done here."

"It is technically difficult because you are really spanning game systems that weren't designed to be spanned," Early says. "It's also 'policy difficult.' Xbox Live, for example, has been known for a long time to be a very close-walled garden, so it takes working with Microsoft to get permission to do the things that we're looking to do for our players."

To make these games speak to one another, companies like EA and Ubisoft have to create their own external infrastructures. "In laymen's terms, we take data generated by the gameplay of each game or app that we create, and aggregate it up to a central server," Flynn says. "From there, those games are also free to pull down data generated by the others, and reflect that data back in interesting and specific ways."

Once the infrastructures are in place, developers are starting to find new and creative ways to use this data. The Call of Duty Elite app allows players to customize their assorted loadouts and classes in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, and EA recently revealed that NHL 13 will have a companion app that

allows users to make trades, sign free agents, tweak their lineups, and send messages to other users to set up matches in the new Connected GM mode (see our NHL 13 preview coverage on page 93 for more).

Follow the Money

Companion games may allow fans to engage their favorite franchises when they're away from the consoles, but they are also new revenue streams for pre-established brands. Many of these apps are currently free, such as the Call of Duty Elite app, while others allow players to speed up a leveling process by purchasing in-game currency or experience. Mass Effect: Infiltrator, a standalone iOS game that feeds into Mass Effect 3, is comparably priced to other premium games on Apple's App Store.

"Each one of the [companion] games are stand-alone businesses if you want to think of it that way," Early says. "We hope that one seeds another and the interested fan plays a variety of those games. Each one is a business in and of itself. That said, we are a for-profit company and each of the games we write, whether it's on a console, Facebook, or PC, are designed

to be profitable ventures. We are looking for a business return to all those games."

Therein lies the possible danger of companion gaming. With the increasing budget sizes of today's triple-A video games, publishers are pursuing any and all means to monetize their brands outside of the initial adoption at the retail level. Some consumers worry that you may no longer have access to the full experience of a console game in the future, especially if a profit-hungry publisher decides consumers need to purchase a mobile app to have access to everything in the base game. Mass Effect 3 allows players to build up their galactic readiness by playing multiplayer on the console, downloading the free Datapad iOS app, or the paid Infiltrator iOS game. How long until publishers require a single paid app for a similar experience?

Publishers also run the risk of diluting their brands with inferior mobile and social products. For instance, EA pulled the free Battlefield 3: Aftershock from the App Store in March due to the amount of negative user feedback. If rabid fans download an app related to their favorite brand and the companion game fails to meet their expectations, it may leave a sour taste in their mouths and make them second-guess making similar purchases in the future.

Different Strokes

While Ubisoft saw an 80 percent overlap of Project Legacy players playing Brotherhood on consoles, not every publisher has found such a symmetry between their console and social offerings. Whether it was a difference in marketing or in the type of gamer who was interested in the games, Flynn saw something else.

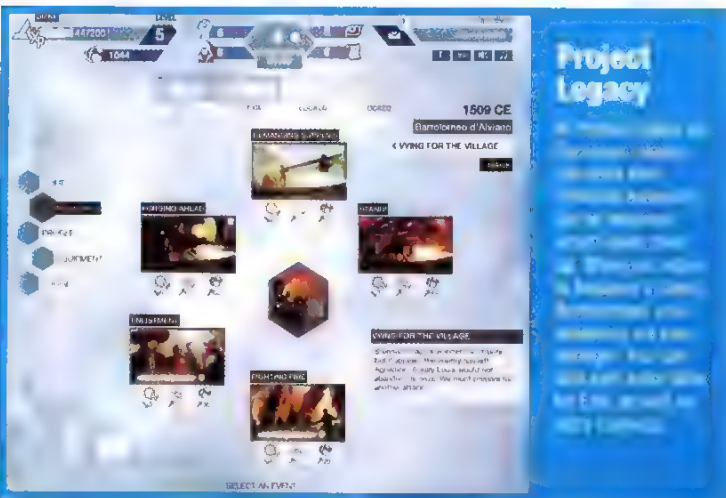
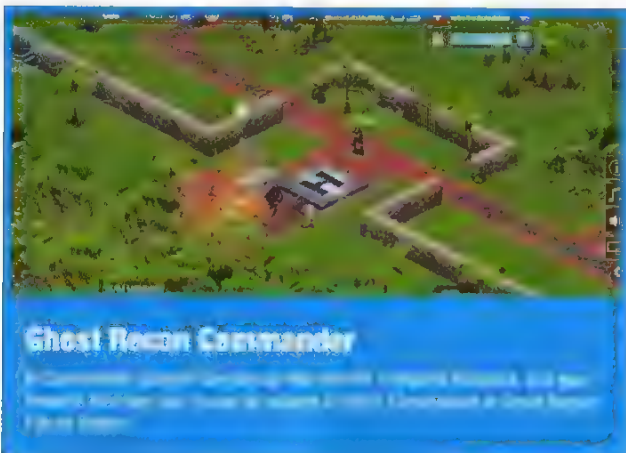
Both Mass Effect 3 and Dragon Age 2 have companion games, but BioWare found little to no overlap between the console audi-

ence and the companion game audience. "I'm not sure we've parsed all of the data yet to be more specific, but personally I think they're different audiences," Flynn says. "Sure, we have players on our console games who also play social games, and vice versa. But given the relative sizes of those two audiences I think there isn't a great deal of overlap."

Others are experimenting in ways to take these two different audiences, the console gamers and the mobile gamers, and allow them to work together. The upcoming Human Element game from former Call of Duty developer Robert Bowling and his new studio Robotki allows console gamers to team up with those playing the mobile version to exchange supplies. This means players of both versions will benefit from one another regardless of their platform of choice (check out our coverage of Human Element on page 26).

Whether gamers play franchise-specific social games, stick to the console version, or play both simultaneously, publishers see a large audience waiting to be tapped. "I think the big focus will be less on the platform and device, and more about getting that all-important data to the cloud so other games and apps can plug in to it," Flynn says. "Once that's there, the data is ready for whatever new platforms evolve. That said, personally I hold out hope for a Twitter game."

With the next generation of consoles expected to be even more connected than their predecessors, many publishers and developers we've spoken with recently expect cross-platform gaming to become more prevalent in the coming years. When asked if companion gaming would be a strategy for other Ubisoft games moving forward, Early says, "I know it will be." ♦





Dan McCarthy with his wife Meghan and sons Maxwell (left) and Dexter.

Trials Evolution

We reached out to RedLynx, creators of the Trials games, to talk to one of their best Trials Evolution players. The team came back with Dan McCarthy, active community member, high leaderboard ranker, and custom track designer.

Dan McCarthy

Age
27

Location
Buffalo, NY

Shout outs
Dosto707, ShiftySamurai
FatShady Live

Interview by Bryan Vore

Time trials:

"As far as Trials HD goes, I definitely have put in over 1,500 hours," McCarthy says. "Evolution, the first day it came out, I probably put in a good 10 hours straight. On average I'd say I play maybe 15 to 20 hours a week. Wow, that sounds like a lot. That's like a part-time job."

The best bike for the job:

"It kind of depends on the track," McCarthy says. "A lot of the more technical tracks where you're starting and stopping or doing super hill you use the Phoenix, the more acceleration [focused] bike. If it's more of a high-speed track, then the Scorpion comes in handy for those kinds of things."

Custom tracks:

McCarthy was very involved in the Trials HD creation community, helping out on fansite TrialsHD.net for a time. Here, players can swap custom tracks and leaderboard times since HD only allowed track sharing between friends. McCarthy loves Evolution's open track sharing system, leaderboards, and replays for custom tracks. As of press time, he's created only one track, called "The Beginning."

Real life:

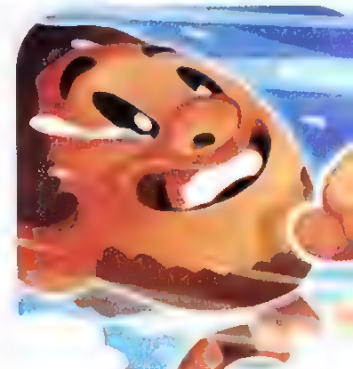
McCarthy and his wife, Meghan, are proud parents of 15-month-old twins Maxwell and Dexter. He works as a broker importing shipments through customs, and enjoys photography.

Most hated track:

"I'm going to have to go Gigatrack, the longest one," McCarthy says. "I have tried to platinum that, which is to go through it without faulting in under seven minutes, and I'll fault maybe six minutes and 30 seconds into it. That made me want to pull out some hair and throw my controller at the TV, but eventually I got it."

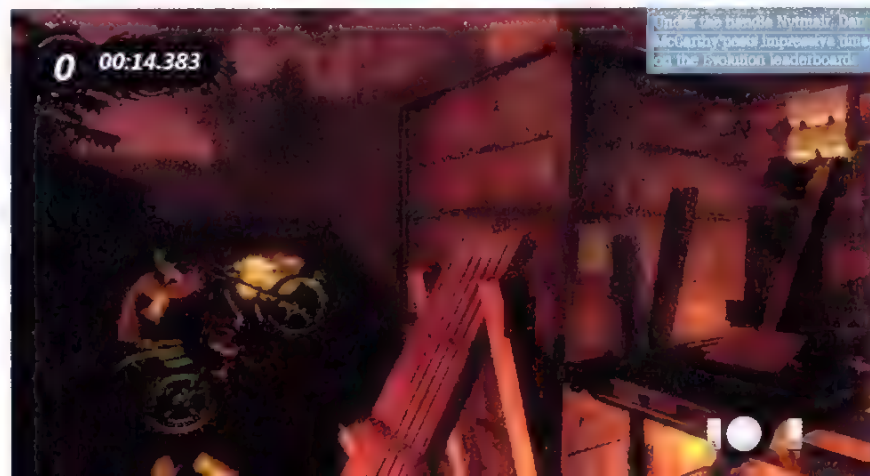
Don't forget about replays:

"If you're having trouble on a certain obstacle or if you're just not able to go fast enough to get a certain medal time, I always go to check the top five leaderboard replays and they'll show you the little tricks and techniques that you might not have noticed," McCarthy says.



Another RedLynx achievement:

McCarthy is currently number one on the leaderboards in RedLynx's iOS game, 1000 Heroz. In this platformer, players dash a hero through a short level, of which there is a new one available every day for 1,000 days. Players only have 24 hours to get on that day's leaderboard before it closes. "I've been following the game for 330-something stinkin' days in a row," McCarthy says. "It's addicting. I love it." ♦



Head to gameinformer.com/mag to see a video of Dan McCarthy's Trials skills in action.



A 5-blade, hydrating, customizable power tool. That also shaves.

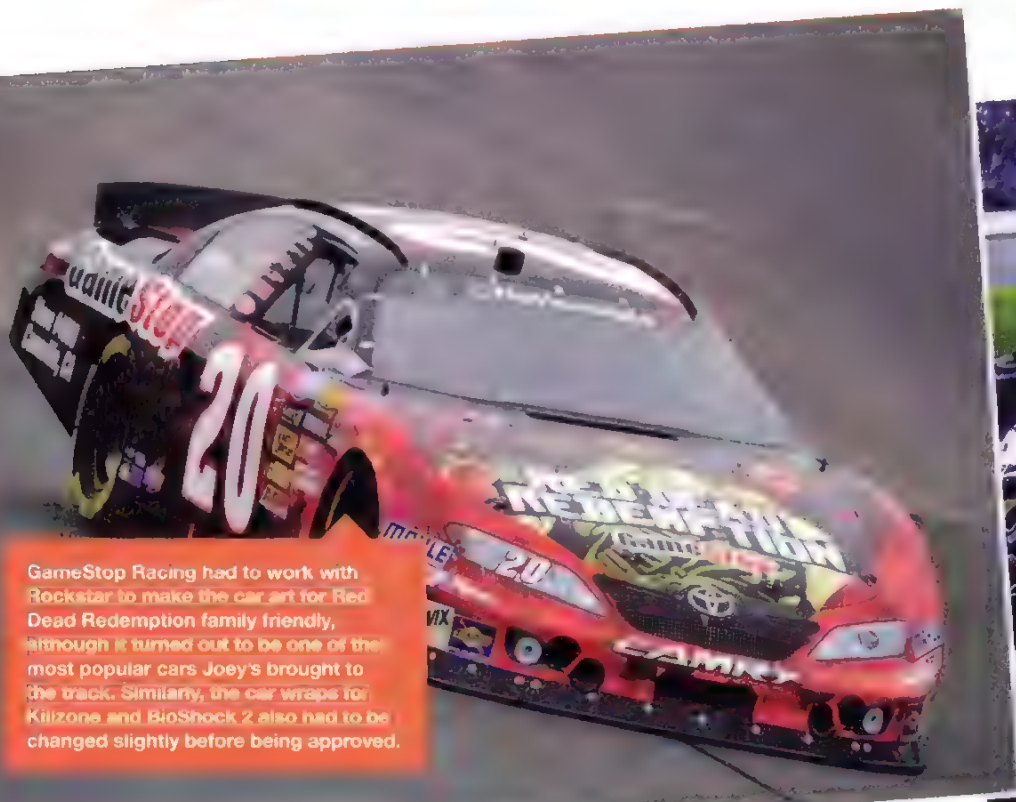
Schick
HYDRO
5
POWER SELECT

New Schick Hydro Power Select™ razor lets you customize our best shave for your skin. Water-activated gel hydrates your skin throughout each shave to help reduce irritation. Comfort Control, with 3 levels of vibration, allows you to select the setting that feels best for you.

FREE YOUR SKIN®

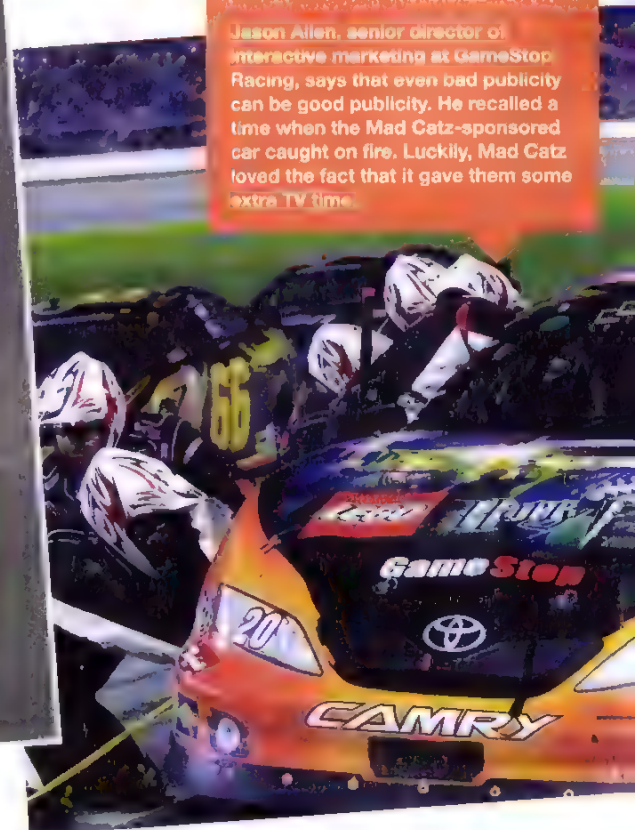


Taking the Checkered



GameStop Racing had to work with Rockstar to make the car art for Red Dead Redemption family friendly, although it turned out to be one of the most popular cars Joey's brought to the track. Similarly, the car wraps for Killzone and BioShock 2 also had to be changed slightly before being approved.

Jason Allen, senior director of interactive marketing at GameStop Racing, says that even bad publicity can be good publicity. He recalled a time when the Mad Catz-sponsored car caught on fire. Luckily, Mad Catz loved the fact that it gave them some extra TV time.



[Full Disclosure: Game Informer is owned by GameStop]

Special thanks to Jill Lain at GameStop Racing and Rob Fleischer at Sandbox Strategies

FROM THE VIDEO GAME TO THE RACE TRACK

Steve deSouza, vice president of Nationwide operations at Joe Gibbs Racing, starts with a car design created by an artist that is broken out into the different panels of the car, such as the hood, sides, roof, etc. about a month before the race. 2-3 Then it's sent to The Decal Source where all the graphics are printed onto adhesive-backed sheets of white vinyl. These are applied to the car using propane torches to stretch the vinyl wraps around the contours of the car, squeegees to smooth out air bubbles, and knives to cut out areas for the grill, etc. The cars are fully decaled (including other sponsor stickers) about two weeks before the race. While they look like works of art, the wraps aren't kept since they're usually shredded during the race. 4 This particular design was a hit since it helped propel Joey Logano to victory at Talladega, where he beat Kyle Busch by .034 seconds with a thrilling last-second maneuver.



1

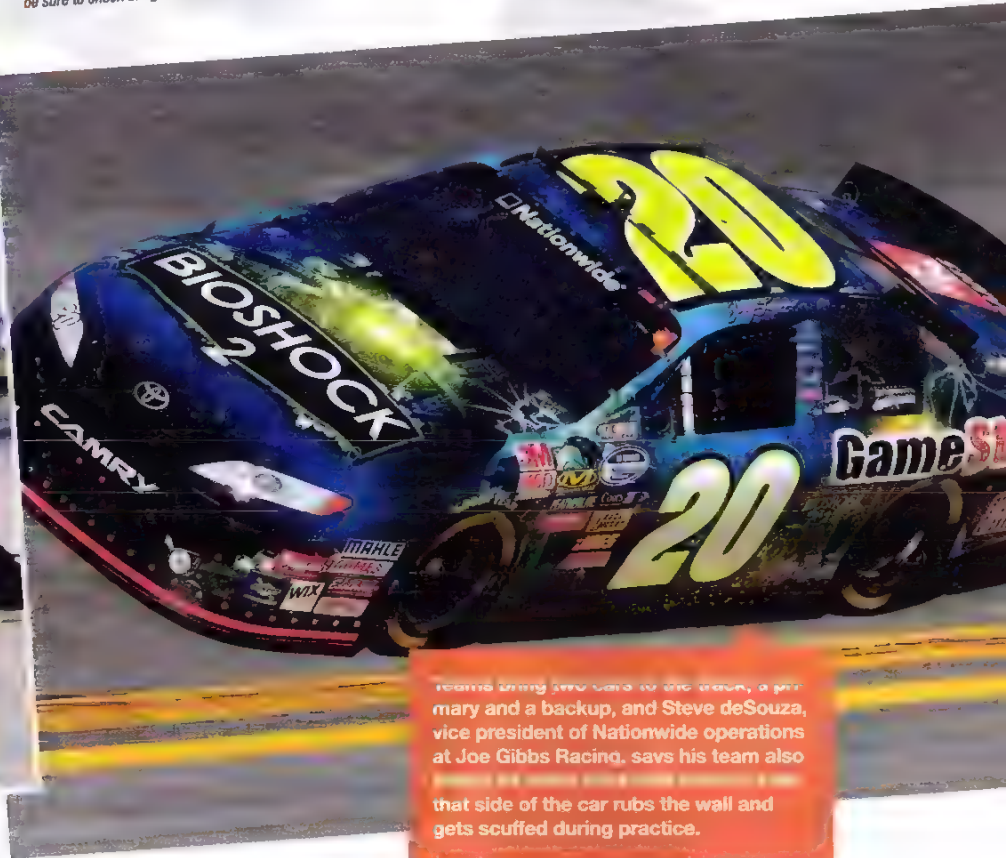
A car wrap consists of approximately 22 to 25 yards of white vinyl

Flag

by Matthew Kato

Joey Logano burst onto the scene in 2008, becoming the youngest-ever Nationwide series winner in just his third race. Logano has always garnered attention at the race track – especially when he’s racing his #20 GameStop Toyota in the Nationwide series, which has often featured video game paint schemes. The #20 has been host to games such as BioShock 2, Mario Kart, Skate 3, Red Dead Redemption, God of War III, Metroid Other M, and more. We talked with Joe Gibbs Racing and GameStop Racing to get a look at the process of creating these cool video game-sponsored cars.

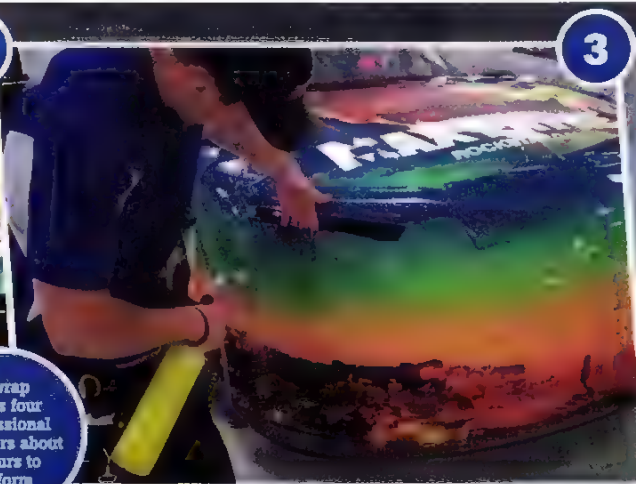
For more shots of some of Joey Logano's GameStop cars, a look at the wrapping of the Mortal Kombat car, and an interview with Joey Logano himself, be sure to check out gameinformer.com/mag



teams bring two cars to the track, a primary and a backup, and Steve deSouza, vice president of Nationwide operations at Joe Gibbs Racing, says his team also that side of the car rubs the wall and gets scuffed during practice.



1



2
A wrap takes four professional installers about 3 hours to perform

3



4
The typical wrap weighs 15-20 lbs.

4

Taking On the

Human Element

Robert Bowling sheds light on leaving Call of Duty, starting a new studio, and his new zombie project



A

fter spending six years working on the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare franchise at Infinity Ward, former creative strategist Robert Bowling decided to quit and form a new independent game company called Robotoki. His team's first project, Human Element, aims to explore the greatest threat in a zombie apocalypse.

We spoke to Bowling about his decision to leave Activision, details on Human Element, and where he hopes to take Robotoki in the future.



What's the story behind your departure from Activision? It seemed pretty abrupt. How long have you been thinking about the decision?

Well there's no preplanning about it. It's something that just happened naturally and organically. Most importantly, it's something you can't let any other decision or deciding factor make that decision for you. It can't be about how much money you're being paid. If you come to that point creatively, you just have to make the decision based on the merit for that alone. That's literally what happened to me.

Over the course of working on one property for six years, regardless of how much you love what you're doing on that property, you have two lists. You have a list of experiences, characters, moments, or gameplay mechanics that you love and think will be great but maybe just don't fit that universe. They don't fit with the story you're trying to tell. And over the course of seven years that list gets longer and longer, and the list of things you're passionate about within that universe gets smaller and smaller because you're checking them off.

At a certain point when the list of experiences you want to deliver is larger than the things you're passionate about within that universe, you have to make a decision creatively. That's what I decided to do. I didn't necessarily know the specifics about what I wanted to do, but allowing yourself to step back and dive in lets you figure that out. When I made the decision to leave, I knew one thing for sure. I knew what I didn't want to do. I knew how I didn't want to do it. And that led to clarity of how I did want to do it.

There was a lot of speculation when Respawn Entertainment formed that you'd leave Activision to join that studio. Was that ever something you considered doing or did you always want to do a new studio?

I was very clear with Vince and Jason from the beginning when they left and started Respawn

that I would never apply there. And it's not because I don't love them. I honestly think they're some of the best game creators in the industry. What I wanted to do was very different in philosophy and direction. There were things I wanted to achieve that were drastically different than what was done in the past. And not knowing what they were planning to work on, it felt like it would be better to step back and put yourself in the unknown, which allows you an unbiased, outside perspective on where you want to move in the future without being influenced by existing conditions.

Your job title went from community manager to creative strategist in 2008. Did that transition give you confidence you could start your own game studio? What did you learn from that experience that you're now applying to Robotoki?

My role at Infinity Ward as creative strategist was a unique position that allowed me to be involved and work with every department and every discipline of the creative. I was one of the only business-facing roles. I worked in that buffer between dealing with the corporate and business side of the aspect in addition to the creative, which allowed me a unique perspective to figure out how to do things right and wrong based on how the business decisions are impacting the creative talent and creative decisions.

I was able to see that friction and therefore adapt philosophies and strategies on how to minimize that friction. When you sit back and think about it from a business objective, it's to make money and profit first. You can't approach that from a creative standpoint. They have to work very differently from each other, but they need to be supportive of each other's goals. My transition into that role allowed me to be exposed to that and have access in a way that you typically don't get purely being on the creative side.

What's it like going from a multi-million dollar product on a hard two-year development

cycle that sells millions of copies to Robotoki? What emotions are you going through?

It's an extreme sense of relief. You're no longer confined by anything. It's a literal clean slate and it allows you to now learn from what you've done in the past through experience and now execute on that in a completely different way. It allows you to approach your design philosophy and process differently. That's what was most important when setting up Robotoki: sitting back and determining that. That's why it was so important to me to not rely on millions and millions of dollars of someone else's money to fund that. I wanted to self-fund and get ourselves up and running with my own money so we could do it on our own terms. Once I created that foundation, which is what we have done now on our own terms, then it allowed us to approach things how we felt they needed to be approached and work with partners who felt the same way and could build upon that foundation with us with that in mind.

What's the story behind the name Robotoki?

I don't know if I'll ever go into what the literal meaning of what Robotoki is, but the general philosophy is we wanted to create a name that was unique and didn't have a real-world meaning. That allows our universes, properties, and unique studio culture to define that personality and to give that work meaning through our actions and the way we approach game development. It was important that we came out with something that did not exist. What I love about the name is it can be pronounced and perceived in so many different ways.

How big is Robotoki right now and what are your expectations for growing in the future?

Right now we're just getting our core team together. We're nailing down that core team of five guys. I hope to expand that in the next four or five months to a solid team across the disciplines of 16 [people]. Our plan now is over the course of the next year to be at 80 people.



An exclusive first look at Human Element



Eighty people is where I'd like to stay. I think that sweet spot between 80 and 100 is really where you stick to being focused and working well without that excess and the worry of stretching too thin.

most to you. And if we can allow them to have that one thing, it gives you one thing you can be invested in and it's okay to make sacrifices in other places because you believe in that one thing so strongly.

about it in terms of priority of process not priority of quality. So just because you're focusing on establishing the universe first doesn't mean the game mechanics are less important or should suffer because of that process.

"I think we have a lot to learn on how to treat creative talent."

Where did your studio philosophies and culture come from? Did you develop them through past experiences and talking with other developers in the industry?

It was through experience, but not only at our own studios. I first started out in entertainment in music and film, and seeing how drastically different creative talent is treated in different mediums. It seems like music gets it right the most and film does very well, too. I think we have a lot to learn on how to treat creative talent. In a creative field, they're not just workers, they require a specific type of emotional and intellectual investment in the products that they're making in order to make quality products. It's not a mechanical process. What I learned from experience is you can't have everything you want. It's just not possible. But you can have that one thing that means the

Explain your development philosophy of creating the universe first, experiences second, and gameplay last.

It's about approaching development differently because we're looking at creating universes that are platform- and genre-agnostic. You can go in and say, "Okay, we want to make a great shooter game." But you're now inherently limiting the mechanics of your game and the ability to connect with that universe down to that one mechanic. That mechanic might be great on consoles, but it won't be great on tablets because that's not what the strengths of that are. We're focusing on creating the universe first. If you're connecting on tablet, it's a very different experience than what you're getting on console, but they're all feeding into the same common experience within this universe. It allows us to not be restrained on the experiences we're delivering. The thing is you have to think

What's your overall thought on the games industry right now?

I think we're in a very unique position as an industry right now. I think the important thing for us to realize is, and what we're doing with Robotoki, is that it's not about one experience

anymore. That's why I think it's important to approach the universe first. It gives you the flexibility to be nimble and look at how you can change your approach on how your players are engaging your universe, and more importantly not forcing your players to enjoy it how we traditionally think they should experience it.

I think that's the key difference. We're realizing as an industry that there are a wide variety of types of players who are looking for different things out of their games. I think we've moved past the era of telling players how to enjoy our games. It's much more our job to create a platform to let them dictate the experience for themselves and we guide the overall experience but the specific game mechanics should be in their control. That's what we're focusing on with our first IP, Human Element.



What can you tell me about Human Element?

The whole universe first, experience second, gameplay mechanics last, that whole philosophy on how we plan to design games just sets up the back end of this universe that we're currently creating.

That universe is set on this whole premise of, "What is the greatest threat in a zombie apocalypse?" If you're conditioned with the entire zombie culture it's the infection, it's the zombies. But in reality, they're the walking dead. They're weak. They're really not a physical threat to you in a lot of ways. Their greatest strength is the fear that they instill in us, the survivors. They lead us to do unreasonable things to survive. By that logic, the greatest strength in a zombie apocalypse is the human element. The other survivors who are smart enough to kill you and take what they want and to threaten you and to do things like that. Think of this as a zombie game that isn't about zombies. This is 35 years after the event has taken place. What the event was is fairly irrelevant, but we're living in this world now and we need to deal with it and we need to survive. It's much more about that human element than the reason how we got here.

What are some influences for this game and its universe?

The influences were looking at how this universe has been depicted in the past, this core zombie universe, and taking the zombie elements out of it. Being inspired by the scenarios they would

put us in, but now looking at it in a more reality-based scenario. Take the sci-fi element of zombies in *The Walking Dead* out of the equation. While it's still there it's not the focus, and thinking about the moral, emotional, and intellectual level is what was really inspiring for us. That's from a story/universe standpoint.

From a gameplay standpoint, what was inspiring was the rise of mobile and social gaming, and the rise in the different ways you can now play games and engage within the universe that will make the Human Element so unique. Because the key thing is, you're sitting in front of your TV playing that first-person, immersive experience and playing how you want to. Then you get up and leave your house. You're traveling with your iPad. If you load up the Human Element on your iPad, you should still be able to connect to that universe and contribute to it and continue with your character and engaging in that world, but playing off the strengths of that specific device.

What we do now is, we're pulling in your GPS data and the Google Maps API and we're overlaying all that into the world of Human Element. So now you're literally out scavenging and seeing real-world businesses and locations that

you can now scavenge for supplies. And those supplies and benefits you're getting from that are feeding back into the progression and character in the console, at-home experience. What's great about that is they can stand independently of each other. If I'm a console gamer and want to sit at home and put hundreds of hours into that experience and just play it for the action. Say I get hurt; I need supplies and need certain things I don't feel like doing, but you're an intelligence class player but you don't have time to play on console, so you're playing on your tablet and that's all you play on. I can create an alliance with you, so you're doing the scavenging and feeding that back into your alliance. So I'm benefiting from your work and you're benefiting from the buffs that I give you as a strength class. Even though we're not playing the same experience, we're contributing to the overall goal of survival.

What platforms are you aiming for your new universe?

Next-gen consoles, PC, mobile, and tablets.

When are you expecting to ship the game?

Right now we're aiming for Q3 2015. ♦


Building Character

Bowling says Human Element contains three main attributes players will choose from when creating their character: class, identity, and persona.

Players can choose from class types including action, intelligence, and stealth, with each offering a number of different abilities. For example, action-based players focus on fighting and physical attacks, while intelligence players can do things like barter, build more complex fortifications, and create alliances. The stealth class provides new quest options and allows you to evade basic defenses.

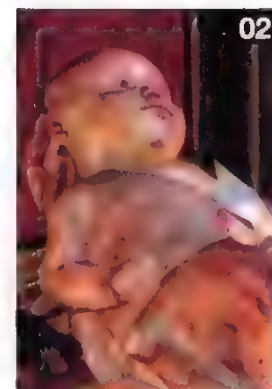
When selecting your identity, you choose from a solo adult, partnered adult, or adult with child. This acts the same as selecting a difficulty at the start of the game. "We don't want to scale AI intelligence or damage or health," Bowling says. "That's not how we want to scale difficulty. We want your identity, your specific scenarios determine the difficulty you're going to have surviving purely out of responsibilities."

Lastly, Bowling says persona determines a player's sex and race. "How you choose to start in the world will determine how you can engage and impact in the scenarios you will be presented with on a physical and moral level that you approach this world."




01

Baby Pac-Man
Namco didn't authorize this unofficial Pac-Man spinoff from Bally Midway, but their legal dispute over the franchise is our gain. Sure, Baby Pac-Man may look lame, but this rare arcade cabinet was a unique video game/pinball table hybrid. During normal rounds of Pac-Man, players can enter chutes at the bottom of the screen which activate the pinball mode, allowing them to gain power-ups to be used back in the video game.



02
(Assassin's Creed II)
Ezio Auditore has become one of gaming's most popular protagonists, but it's easy to forget he started the Assassin's Creed series as nothing more than a bare-assed baby. After watching Ezio's mom give birth to him, players take control of a tutorial that has baby Ezio kicking his little feet and swinging his arms. Before long, he's stabbing people in the skull with his hidden blades. They grow up so fast.



03
Mortal Kombat is synonymous with gruesome violence, but when shrunk down to baby size, even soulless mutated killers like Scorpion and Baraka are adorable. Last year's MK reboot improved upon the bizarre Babality finishers with custom animations for each fighter, such as baby Raiden scaring himself with a lightning bolt, and baby Sub-Zero slipping on a puddle of his own pee. Who says video games aren't art?

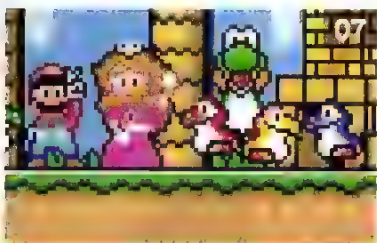
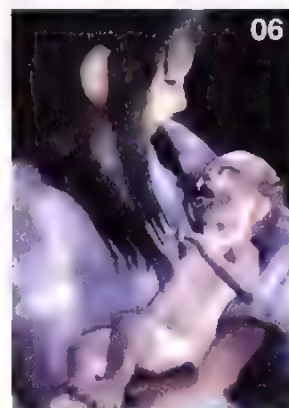
04
Creeping Necromorphs (Dead Space 2)
Here's a pro tip: If you ever see a baby with an upside-down head and a bloated, glowing sac on its back crawling towards you, don't pick it up like it's a normal baby. These pint-sized necromorphs have a penchant for blowing up anyone foolish enough to indulge their parental instincts. In a series full of shocks and scares, these demented newborns hold their own.



05
Unbaptized Babies (Dante's Inferno)
Mutant alien babies aren't the only creepy infants in video games. In one of the more memorable moments of Dante's Inferno, the poet-turned-warrior makes his way into limbo where he must fight unbaptized babies wielding scythes for arms. We figured hell would be an unpleasant place to visit. We had no idea.



06
Shadow of the Colossus Baby
The end of Shadow of the Colossus contains a startling revelation in the form of a crying, horned baby. Not only does this conspicuous infant reveal the fate of Wander, but it also ties the game's universe to the critically acclaimed Ico, which outlined the troubling fate awaiting children born with his affliction.



07
Baby Yoshis (Super Mario World)
Everyone knows that baby Mario is a blathering pain in the butt. Baby Yoshis, on the other hand, more than make up for the care they require. In infant form, these adorable lizards swallow any enemies in their paths. After gulping down five foes, they transform into adult Yoshis, complete with special powers based on their color.



08
Redheaded Baby (Earthbound)
This redheaded baby from Earthbound may only be comprised of a few pixels, but he hides one heck of a reward. Speaking to the little newborn only elicits typical baby cooing, but if you use your telepathy power, the baby reveals that he too has psychic abilities. He'll then teach your party teleport, a handy power that allows you to fast travel to any location you've previously visited.



09
Baby (Super Monkey Ball)
What's cuter than a monkey rolling around in a ball? A baby monkey rolling around in a ball! Collecting bananas by the bushel with this tenacious baby monkey will always elicit smiles from onlookers, but put a real baby in a plastic ball and you're a monster. Talk about double standards.



10
Baby Boomer
As any horrible parent can testify, mixing babies and guns equals pure entertainment. Baby Boomer was an unlicensed (surprise) NES game that tasks players with protecting a runaway baby with the console's light gun. But seriously: If you see an infant crawling towards something dangerous, pick it up — don't try to shoot the obstacles out of its way with a pistol. Sheesh.

The Good

THQ'S South Park title is still alive, and is now called South Park: The Stick of Truth. Unfortunately the game has been delayed into next year.



THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

g-b-u-

Quotable

"EA releases an indie bundle? That's not how that works, EA. Stop attempting to ruin everything, you bunch of cynical bastards."

The Bad



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

hits a double dose of delays.

The home console version has been delayed from its original October 16 release date until February 26, 2013, and the developer says the title won't be shown at summer conventions such as E3 and Germany's Gamescom.

Meanwhile, the Vita version of the game, which was announced at last year's E3, is being put on the back burner because Irrational is too busy. Speaking to *Wired*, Irrational's Ken Levine also mentioned the possibility of the Vita version being transferred to a different studio.

The Ugly



IT'S BAD ENOUGH

that Star Wars: Battlefront II has been MIA since developer Free Radical (TimeSplitters) closed its doors in 2008, but studio co-founder David Doak revealed just how bad things were in an interview with Eurogamer. Calling unnamed employees from LucasArts "psychopaths," Doak said the publisher tried to sabotage both the project and Free Radical by withholding milestone payments and fighting the developer every step of the way. When Free Radical folded in 2008, the project was given to Rebellion (who didn't finish it either). Free Radical was bought by Crysis developer Crytek, and is now known as Crytek U.K.



— Minecraft creator **Markus "Notch" Persson's** unexcused take on EA releasing a bundle on Steam featuring games such as *Shank 2* and *Gatling Gun*.

The Newest Hotness in Downloadable Games

Games like Angry Birds have no trouble attracting fans, but more devoted gamers could be forgiven if they're looking for something a little more robust. Enter *CastleStorm*, a new game from Pinball FX creators Zen Studios that is looking to capitalize on that familiar and fun gameplay loop while adding action, story, plus progression and growth over time.

Players take on the role of Sir Gareth, a cartoonish hero who protects the kingdom from threats near and far. When an evil Viking warlord threatens the kingdom, Gareth sets out to hold back the tide. The game's central mechanic involves the use of a ballista to destroy enemy fortifications and buildings, as well as take down individual enemy soldiers that are charging your gates. The different projectiles each have their own special uses, from homing eagles to apple grenades. You can send out your own axe-throwers, knights, griffins, dragons, and all sorts of other troop types to hold back the opposing armies, and even take control of a specialized hero to charge forth and do damage yourself. Mission objectives change over time, from capture-the-flag scenarios, to battles against towering enemy bosses, and of course the need to topple the enemy's fortress. You also get to completely customize your own castle. Different rooms each provide special bonuses, presuming they survive the assault.

CastleStorm includes a full campaign story, but it also allows for multiplayer competitive or cooperative play. Gamers will be happy to hear you can play all the multiplayer modes either split-screen or online. When it releases this fall, it will support 1080p at 60 frames per second on PS3, 360, and Wii U (when the system is out). The colorful game is also on its way to Vita and

PC, with a different version eventually planned for 3DS, Android, and iOS.

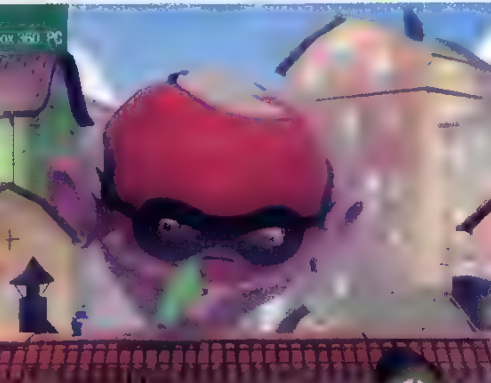
After the success of Bionic Commando Rearmed, several of the developers involved in the project splintered off and founded their own studio. Cut to today, and the team at Might & Delight is hard at work on a gorgeous looking new platform/puzzle game called *Pid*. *Pid* stars a boy by the name of Kurt, who through some strange twist of events is transported from the bus he's riding home on to a strange alien planet. There he acquires a gravity beam that lets him change the flow of gravity in a particular area. The gravity beam lets Kurt float himself up to high platforms, move distant objects to be within reach, or even interact with other onscreen characters. With that tool in hand, he sets out to conquer the world's many dangers and find a way home.

The gravity beam is the fundamental hook of the game, but other tools accentuate Kurt's abilities, like a slingshot that lets him shoot the gravity beam to inaccessible areas of the screen. *Pid* includes a variety of enemies to confront, like the dangerous planet ruler who is determined to let no one leave his domain. While first glimpse suggests a pure platformer,

Pid hides a deep puzzle element that forces the player to navigate labyrinthine levels, flinging out new gravity shifts at surfaces in order to survive.

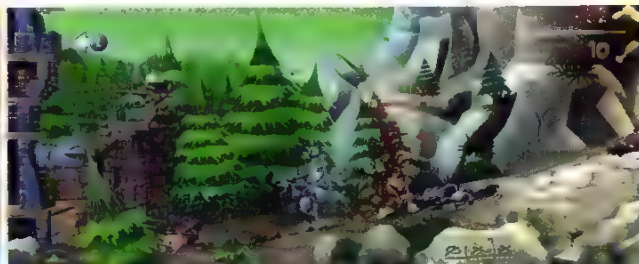
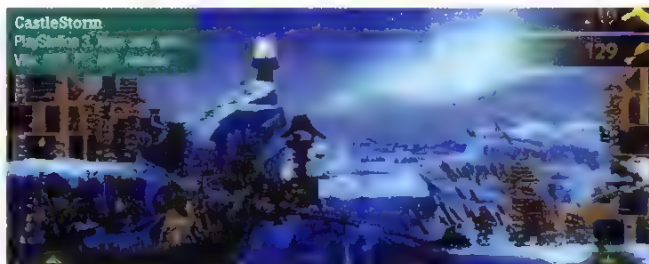
I'm charmed by the visual style of *Pid*, which is all 3D, but filled with simple, solid color objects without textures. The developer cites inspiration from properties like *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, the Studio Ghibli films, and games like *Uforia* and *Little Big Adventure*. The videos and screens we've

seen so far seem to match the aesthetic you'd expect from those pieces, exuding a surreal and dreamlike quality, with more than a little touch of melancholy hiding behind the colorful exterior.



I was also happy to hear that Might & Delight is thinking ahead about the option to play with a friend; a second playable character, a cute robot named Audrey, will allow for a second mind to participate in the challenge. Might & Delight is looking to self-publish their game on XBLA, PSN, and PC later this summer.

Need more info on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for an interview with Might & Delight's managing director, Wendy Young, for more info about *Pid*, and keep an eye out for daily updates on the best in PSN, XBLA, WiiWare, and PC download. For more in this issue, read our preview of *The Unfinished Swan* on p. 88, and don't miss our reviews of *The Walking Dead* (p. 99), *Fable Heroes* (p. 105), *Botanica* (p. 106), *The Splatters*, and *Awesomenauts* (p. 108).





Massive

A New Way to Fight

There's a lot of cool stuff in this game, but the combat is the real highlight.

It pains me to see Korean import Tera make such impressive strides in improving the longstanding mediocrity of hotbar-driven MMORPG combat, nail genre conventions like guild support and convenient travel, and drown it all in some of the blandest content I've ever seen.



Tera hangs its hat on its dynamic, positional combat. Without autoattacks or automatic targeting, it's up to you to line up your swings and shots and avoid incoming assaults. Playing a direct class like the dual-wielding warrior is unlike any MMO combat I've experienced to date. I've never felt so engaged in moment-to-moment battle as I do when dodging monster attacks manually or with the evasive roll skill, and laying waste to everything around me with wild swings and powerful strikes. The more indirect classes like the pet-oriented mystic provide a less demanding playstyle while still requiring a much greater sense of battlefield awareness and positioning, even while soloing, than a traditional MMO like World of Warcraft.

Group fights are even better. Though Tera cleaves tightly to the tank/healer/damage "holy trinity" model of MMO parties, the individual gameplay of each role is intense and rewarding. Holding threat isn't terribly difficult as a tank, but blocking (lancer) or dodging (warrior) big attacks is imperative. Heals are mostly area-based and denoted by glowing circles on the ground or smart-targeted, so healers are able to focus on the battlefield instead of solely playing the UI by staring at portraits all encounter long. Damage classes require a fair amount of manual dexterity to maximize their output, as well as the situational awareness to avoid attacks, prioritize targets, and grab what area-effect heals they can.

Engaging in group content is made simple

by the generally solid looking-for-group tool and other social interfaces. Instanced dungeons themselves are interesting, if linear, sets of encounters, but the large variety of public raid bosses and dungeons is a nice change of pace from recent MMOs.

Getting to these legitimately fantastic parts of the game can be a chore, though. Solo leveling is archaic, requiring you to collect doodads and kill fozzles in the most uninspired quests imaginable. The scenery is gorgeous, but everything about the solo experience from writing and story to quest objectives is bland and boring. It took about five levels for me to stop even pretending to care about why this lieutenant wanted me to kill ten of these or collect eight of those. The UI is set up to let you skip the non-voiced walls of text if you like, with succinct descriptions of objectives and relevant map markers, but the fact that the bandage over this gaping wound is well-made and skilfully applied doesn't make it an ideal situation.

Leveling alts is even worse. With only one path through its leveling content, Tera is even more of a chore on subsequent trips to level cap. Exploring the mechanics of a new class is fun, but snoozing through the same lame zones again becomes tedious long before level cap arrives.

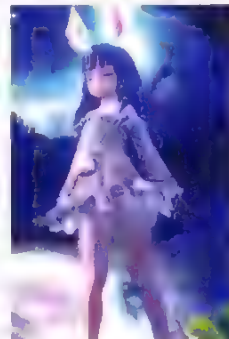
The technical foundation of the game ranges from competent to excellent. Tera is obviously beautiful (if uncomfortably pervy at times; see sidebar), the UI functions as expected, and the

developers have clearly played MMOs before and have a solid grasp of quality-of-life issues that players commonly bring up like fast travel and inventory management.

Tera's endgame still holds some promise, though the lack of an interesting PvP metagame seems like a terrible waste of the combat system's potential. The political endgame, where guilds can vie for leadership of the game world's provinces, is a neat idea that will hopefully work out in practice. I dig Tera's style, but asking players to trudge through dozens of hours of paint-by-numbers content to make it to the level cap where the real game starts is a tough proposition. <

Donning your battle lingerie

There's no dearth of female characters in Tera, and they're as attractive as the most beautiful strippers in Las Vegas. The concept of female feminization of the female form, even if it's not the most gamers have ever seen before, however the awfully young-looking, thin race gives you an idea that any dresses cross well into the realm of bad taste. I'm not one to go on crit ads about gender politics, but the visual design of the character design is over the line. On Masse's workbench, the default, along with armor models, which is a step in the right direction, but the minor changes under discussion strike me as closing the barn door weeks after the cows have run away.





Jason West (left) and Vince Zampella

Jason West and Vince Zampella

The creators of the multi-billion dollar Call of Duty franchise on their shocking dismissal, the court case, and the future.

We recently had the opportunity to sit down with Respawn Entertainment's Jason West and Vince Zampella, the one-time heads of Infinity Ward and creators of Call of Duty. During our conversation we finally got to hear their version of the events surrounding their dismissal from Activision and the bitter legal battle that

has carried on for two years.

This is the most personal account of the Infinity Ward story to date, and the insights of their lawyer Robert Schwartz gives us a more accurate and detailed picture of the conspiracy they allege Activision engaged in to bring about their firing. As of this printing, the civil case is scheduled to begin on May 29.

interview by Andy McNamara

Why don't we start with how this rift began? Could you sum it up in terms of why Activision is going after you in the suit? What does it entail?

JASON WEST: I've never really been clear on that one. I'm not sure what they're claiming. I know they are suing for a billion dollars and they haven't specified if they want it from EA or from me. [Editor's Note: Activision and EA settled this suit the following day, agreeing "to put this matter behind them."]

VINCE ZAMPELLA: They say that Modern Warfare 3 would have been a much better game and would have made 700 million more dollars for them and they want us to pay that.

WEST: We deprived them of our services by being fired and therefore we owe them money.

ROBERT SCHWARTZ: They have an expert. I don't know if this guy is going to ever see the inside of a courtroom, but he is going to testify that he did an analysis of all of their games and came to the conclusion that these guys and the 40 who left made better games for less money than anybody else at Activision. If they had not been fired, Modern Warfare 3 would have done somewhere between \$2.8 and \$3.3 billion in gross revenues. He vetted it through [Activision Blizzard COO] Tom Tippel and someone else in the chief financial office. He says, "Well, that's what the game would have done, here's what it did do. So here's all the profit that Activision lost because they

didn't have those services." And – oh, by the way – Sledgehammer would have been available to do Fog of War and that would have made more profits, but they couldn't because they had to fill in for the Infinity Ward team.

That's the damage part of the case. The liability is the flip side of our case against them, where we say Jason and Vince were fired without cause. Activision's saying, "Oh no, absolutely there was cause. These guys were disloyal, breached their fiduciary duties to the company by talking to EA, they conspired with EA to raid Infinity Ward and set up a competing studio, and that's exactly what they did. As soon as it became clear to them that EA would give them a 'happy home,' they set about to misbehave so much that they engineered their own firing."

WEST: They said, "He orchestrated his own firing" – I will never forget that.

ZAMPELLA: We're geniuses, apparently.

WEST: I said, "Don't give me 100 million dollars – fire me! That would be awesome."

SCHWARTZ: "Let me leave behind all the tech I've spent eight years working on, the 100 million dollars I've earned, the momentum in my career, my team, and let me start all over with a small team and development budget on a game I haven't even thought about that no one has seen or bought." Yeah, that's a good idea.

Basically Activision is saying that they are bad guys [who] needed to be fired, and Activision had a contract for their services and was deprived of the value of not getting better games.

WEST: It's especially crazy because they gave us the right to do a new IP. So there is nothing that we could have conceivably gained by not being [at Activision].

You had recently signed a new contract with Activision, right?

WEST: Yes, and that contract gave us the right to make whatever game we wanted after Modern Warfare 2. Apparently, they didn't want to live up to that.

They say that you were being pursued by EA. Anyone that makes successful games is always being pursued. That's status quo if you are a person with a proven track record of making games.

WEST: They are going to try to prove that's not true in court.

ZAMPELLA: You mean like Sledgehammer, who was pursued by Activision? [Editor's Note: Activision hired Dead Space developers Glen Schofield and Michael Condrey away from Electronic Arts in 2009.]

WEST: They're pretending video games are like banks or Wal-Mart.

“...a settlement could be more than money. I do have an issue, letting them get away with it and do it to the next guy.”

JASON WEST

ZAMPELLA: What is this? You mean people get recruited? It's weird!

WEST: They act like they have no concept of that and now we have to prove it.

So after Modern Warfare 2, you could make any game you wanted?

WEST: Well, they signed a contract that said that.

SCHWARTZ: Not any game [Jason and Vince] wanted, but [they] could decide what it would be. [Activision] couldn't say, "It has to be a Modern Warfare game."

So what drives you to EA?

SCHWARTZ: [Activision is claiming] a better deal, IP ownership, and higher bonus rates.

What leads up to your termination?

SCHWARTZ: [West and Zampella] were negotiating [a new contract with Activision]. [Activision has] Harold Brown, a top-flight Hollywood entertainment lawyer. They were making progress. They're giving up their right to do their own game [of their choosing], they're going to do Modern Warfare 3. This is February 2010 – a month before they got fired. So, fine – the same bonus arrangement, same everything. Activision guarantees them a big chunk of bonuses if the game is delivered on time and gets a 90-plus Metacritic score – so it's not much of a guarantee. At the end of the game, Activision will let them go off on their own and be independent. By the way, their contracts would have been up anyway, so it's not giving them anything. The dispute they are trying to get around is that these guys are saying, "Look, when we set up a new company we'd like to hire up to 10 people from Infinity Ward."

These people should be free to go wherever they want. And, if they leave, all the stock options and whatever – they should vest and they should not be hurt if they are going with us to make games for [Activision]. It should be a non-event. Activision is saying, "No, no, no." And, by the way, Activision is saying you have to sign new employment agreements for these remaining two years.

This is the third day of meetings between Activision's lawyers and their lawyers. Their lawyers go over, and Activision comes out of their lawyers' office and they are talking and talking. Their lieutenant counsel says, "I just don't think we can come to an agreement on this. Give this to Jason and Vince." He shoves across the table a piece of paper.

What does the piece of paper say? "You are hereby being notified that you are being investigated for improper conduct and breach of fiduciary duty. You may not talk to anybody about this and must cooperate in full or that in itself will be potential grounds for termination. We haven't made any decision about what we're going to do in this investigation – whether there is any discipline to be had or termination – but you better take us very seriously. Thank you very much."

WEST: The thing that blows my mind is that they showed up to the meeting with that thing printed out in their briefcase already. It wasn't an email. It was hours of conversation, then reach in and pull out the paper. This was all

very surprising, by the way. You're waiting for the call to be like, "Did they take the offer?" Well, actually, they gave me this piece of paper. That was a surprise. [Laughs]

SCHWARTZ: In court they said this is a completely neutral investigation – "We just wanted to get the facts and see if these guys had done anything wrong because we were concerned they might have been talking to a competitor and we needed to know where we stood." Well, they started a secret investigation about a year earlier called Project Buzz and later was called Project Icebreaker. It was a secret task force. It was to look at what these guys were doing and see if they should fire them [and] if we fire them, who's going to take their place?

This is a task force that has paperwork?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, Project Icebreaker. They have these PowerPoint slides in October and November that say, "Here's what we project the Modern Warfare 2 launch quarter bonuses to be for Infinity Ward studios. Here's Jason and Vince's share that we save if they are not there anymore. Here's what we need to do to retain the other guys that might leave if these guys aren't there anymore."

How is this even going to court?

SCHWARTZ: Spin – lawyers will spin.

VINCE: When they handed us that paper across the table, they already had a room booked the next day and they started showing up at the studio and pulling people out of the studio.

SCHWARTZ: They'd already hired the law firm. The whole Icebreaker group that had been investigating them for months rounding up all the data, the documents, the emails, and whatever, and in a matter of days dumped it all on the law firms, including a 19-page, single-spaced [list of] questions to ask these guys – by topic – all ready to go. That's not very independent, or neutral.

They told the investigators who to talk to, when to talk to them, what to ask them, what issues to talk about.

What else can you tell us about Project Icebreaker?

SCHWARTZ: You'll love this. Summer 2009 – May 2009. Before E3, the big [event] for Modern Warfare 2. Do you know who George Rose is? He was the head lawyer for [Activision].

So George Rose goes into the office of this guy named Thomas Fenady. He's some kind of IT whiz at Activision. He's sitting in his office and has no idea what is going to walk in his office. [Rose says], "Hey, this comes right from the top. I have a project for you from [Activision Blizzard CEO] Bobby Kotick. Jason and Vince – you know those guys? We're really sick of them. We want to get rid of them; we want to fire them. You need to break into their computers and dig up dirt to be used to justify firing them." [Fenady] testified to this.

So Fenady gets really nervous. He goes to

his boss and his boss finds out about it and his boss says, "You should not get involved in something like this – this doesn't sound right." George Rose finds out about this, comes into his office, and goes, "Look, this comes from Bobby Kotick. If you do this, Bobby will protect you if anything happens. But remember, the number one priority is do not get caught." So he tries to break into the Infinity Ward server to read emails. He sees there is a firewall there, but he breaks through the firewall. He's now seeing their email server, but he can't make any sense out of it. So he calls Microsoft and says, "Hey we have this Microsoft Exchange server out at Infinity Ward. Can you help us figure out how to break the password and read the emails?"

Microsoft said, "Do you have a court order? This makes us feel very uncomfortable."

What happened at that point?

SCHWARTZ: Then he goes to a vendor that does penetration testing called InGuardians and they said, "Hmm, this sounds like some black



A picture from the early days of Respawn Entertainment, an independent company that West and Zampella formed after parting ways with Activision

bag operation, we'll help you but you have to give us an indemnity and a get out of jail free card against any criminal or civil liability." Then, they realized they can't do anything unless they have physical access to the premises.

They then go to the facilities guys and they say, "Look, we need to get into Jason and Vince's computers and the other computers at Infinity Ward. Can you stage a mock fire drill or something to get them out of the building so we can go in and grab the computer's image [Editor's Note: This refers to the process of cloning a computer's contents] and get out before they know what's happened?"

They tried to keep that evidence out. Two weeks ago they had a motion in front of the judge and said, "This is a sideshow, this is bull----." We said, "No, this is the core of the case, your honor. This tells you that everything they've been telling you and want to tell the jury about why they fired them is complete bull----. It had nothing to do with EA. EA didn't even call these guys up until two months after that."

There's more stuff. In January 2009, now you're 14 months before they get fired. This is after World at War. It's from [Activision executive vice president of worldwide studios] Dave Stohl to [Activision president of publishing] Mike Griffin,

and he's saying, "I heard from Bobby that [Activision Blizzard co-chairman] Brian Kelly told you that he's so over Jason and Vince. Is everybody ready for the big PR blowout if we kick them out? What are we going to do to finish the game? Maybe we should just wait." This is 14 months before they get fired.

This is when they decide that Treyarch can handle it on their own?

SCHWARTZ: I guess...and they are pissed off because these guys were unhappy with how they marketed World at War. They felt it was a violation of the contract – and it was. So there was this massive conspiracy going on at Activision.

WEST: They didn't want to live up to the rules they set up under the contract.

SCHWARTZ: Here's what we think: If you go back to when they signed the contract, March 2008, it was a moment in time when these guys have leverage – for one of the few times in their relationship with Activision. What's their leverage? Their contract is up in less than seven months and Activision wants Modern Warfare 2. Modern Warfare just blew away their expectations and was a great



have got to get their permission. That's what they bargained for, and I don't think Bobby ever intended to honor that until he had to honor it. They were in breach of it the day they signed the contract – they were deeply in breach of it already by giving the Modern Warfare 1 multiplayer assets and schedules. Their hands were already dirty.

WEST: I think they just wanted the game, and were like, "Tell these guys whatever you need to."

Did EA approach you?

SCHWARTZ: They went up and had lunch with [EA CEO] John Riccitiello, EA actually chartered a private jet for them, and they went on it.

WEST: The only time we've ever been on a private jet.

SCHWARTZ: [EA] wanted to make a big impression. So they went to [Riccitiello's] house, they had lunch. [West and Zampella] told him "we're under contract, so you can't hire us," but [Riccitiello] knew that going in. In October or November their lawyer and their agent got a phone call from EA saying, "Hey, are they interested? Would they be interested? What's going on?" Activision



could you guys have sustained it through this gap?
WEST: Basically, their plan was to not go to trial, to [string it out] and run us out of money. That was why it seems like they've done crazy things that you would never do if you were going to go to trial. All the guys, everybody's had to cut to the bone to just try to get paid.

ZAMPELLA: That's what's really, really crappy.

WEST: And that's everyone all the way down.

The others that left Infinity Ward were never fired. Did they all just walk away?

ZAMPELLA: Well, they walked away because they were told they weren't going to get paid...

WEST: "You're not paying me so I have to quit, because you're not paying me, and I have a problem with that." And they have to spend their life savings to try to get paid.

SCHWARTZ: Activision says, "No, that's not true. We offered them a better deal than what they had under their existing contract, and they didn't take it." And it's like, well, I don't call this fine print, but doesn't your deal say that essentially if they stay for two years, and if they agree to work on Modern Warfare 3, and Modern Warfare 3 makes its milestones, and if it comes out on November 15, 2011, and if it's a successful game, then by the time that game comes out you will have paid [the employees] all of their money that you already owe them for Modern Warfare 2, you just spread it out over a longer period of time, and you'll give them some additional cash for Modern Warfare 3? [So Activision says] "Yeah, but still, that's a better deal, because when [West and Zampella] were fired, the contract was now torn up, and any bonus was discretionary."

ZAMPELLA: They came in and said, "We owe you this money, but we're not going to give it to you unless you work two more years and make us another game."

[Editor's Note: On May 15 – the day before this interview – Activision paid out \$42 million to the 38 ex-Infinity Ward developers. This, however, is not a settlement, as the plaintiffs are still seeking damages.]

How has this case affected Respawn? Do you guys think you can pull it all back together? No offense, but you guys look tired.

WEST: It's very distracting. I look forward to when this is all over and we can talk about Respawn stuff.

ZAMPELLA: The combination of all of it. Doing something so successful, not getting paid, getting screwed...

If all this didn't go down, you would have had the opportunity to do Modern Warfare 3. Would you have done it?

ZAMPELLA: It would have depended – we were looking at doing a new IP. I don't even know if we can say all that... It would have depended on what it was – maybe we would have done a new IP, maybe we would have done Modern Warfare 3, or maybe we would have done a new IP and then Modern Warfare 3. Resting a brand isn't a bad thing.

No, it's a great thing.

ZAMPELLA: We saw it as protecting it. And it's like, we're always working, it's not like we're going to sit around and do nothing for a while. So it's like let's do something else that will be good for Activision, and then go back to that. ☺

game. They're in the middle of this merger with Vivendi. There's a provision in the merger agreement that says none of their executives or key employees have any plans to leave. That's a representation made by Activision to Vivendi. [Jason and Vince] are told that they have leverage – and they do, because they want this game and these guys can leave.

Our view is that there was no way they were not going to tie these guys in to get Modern Warfare 2. They were willing to promise them practically anything. What these guys wanted was two things: One, they wanted to control their destiny and be independent. They wanted control over the franchise that they'd been nurturing, and they wanted fair compensation. The real killer was the control.

There's this one sentence – that [Jason] fought for – that is the key to the whole contract. One sentence says, "Activision cannot commercially release a Modern Warfare game without their written authorization." Then it says, "In that regard, all exploitation or other licensing of the Modern Warfare brand and IP." Not only that, there's another sentence that says Activision cannot do a Call of Duty-branded game post-Vietnam without their permission. They can't do Vietnam, post-Vietnam, near-future, distant future without [Jason and Vince's] approval. What that means is, they finished Modern Warfare and Activision wants to use the multiplayer mode and perks and all this stuff and put it into Black Ops – they have to ask their permission. And, if Activision wants to do Call of Duty Asia as an MMO with Modern Warfare assets, they

was under serious negotiations with them, so they sent a phone call back saying, "Look, we're trying to work things out with Activision, so we're not going to be able to respond to that, thank you very much." And that was it.

So you were dismissed for insubordination. Do they have anything specific listed?

WEST: They gave me and Vince the exact same list, I think, even though we're different people with different jobs.

Are you 100 percent confident about the lawsuit? Are there any concerns?

SCHWARTZ: No, you can never be 100 percent confident, you can probably be no more than 80 percent. There are just too many things, there are so many different variables, you can try as hard as you can. [Activision] brought a new lawyer in last week, Beth Wilkinson. She's one of the best lawyers they can find, and she's exceptionally good. [Editor's Note: Wilkinson is best known for successfully arguing for the execution of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.]

If Activision came to you with a settlement, would you take it? Does it depend on the dollars, or is it personal?

WEST: Well, a settlement could be more than money. I do have an issue, letting them get away with it and doing it to the next guy.

If you didn't have money from Modern Warfare 1,

As of this printing, the case was headed to Los Angeles civil court. Follow the latest developments at gameinformer.com



DUNGEON QUEST:

THE HUNT FOR YOUR NEW PC

A lot of modern high-end PCs will set you back several thousand dollars, but that doesn't mean you have to drain your savings account to play today's hottest new PC releases. We rounded up a selection of PCs that can grind through Diablo III and other modern PC titles, but won't cost you a ton of loot.

Gateway FX6860

Pros: With 2TB of storage and a hot swap hard drive system that lets you transfer large amounts of data quickly, this is the system to have if you churn through a lot of media. The FX6860 can also power through games like Crysis 2 and Diablo III on high settings. The system's Intel Core i7-2600 Quad core is the heartiest CPU of the bunch. The FX is also the only machine here with 16GB RAM (all the others featured 8GB), and we appreciate the system's selection of micro SD and other front-loading memory card slots.

Cons: Nvidia's GeForce GTX 560ti graphics card is slightly outdated, but the system's stronger CPU and extra RAM help it outpace Origin's system. We just wish it had something comparable to the liquid cooling setup of the Millennium or the Salvo.

Verdict: This is the most well-rounded PC of the bunch, and provides the best bang for your buck.

★★★★★
\$1,499.99 | gateway.com



1 V3 Gaming Salvo

Pros: V3 Gaming's Salvo isn't a beauty, but its Nvidia GeForce GTX 570 makes it the beastliest of our PC litter. With this much power, you should be able to game for a few more years before upgrading. You'll also be thankful that the system doesn't come pre-loaded with a bunch of extra software you'll need to delete to make room for games.

Cons: The system's big boxy case isn't much to look at, and it won't be much fun to cart to your next LAN party. Your forearms will also get a decent workout removing all these screws the next time you want to upgrade. It also wouldn't hurt to have more than 500GB of storage.

Verdict: The Salvo doesn't have a lot of bells and whistles, but if you're only concerned with power, it's a solid choice.



\$1,499.99 | v3gamingpc.com

2 Origin Millennium

Pros: Origin likes to put together powerful machines, so even their low-end Millennium configuration can hold its own. This machine plows through titles like The Witcher 2 and Crysis 2. None of the machines we tested will win any design contests, but at least the Millennium isn't a visual embarrassment.

Cons: Like the Gateway, the Origin's Nvidia GTX 560ti graphics card could use an upgrade, but that's not slowing this system down yet.

Verdict: Origin has put together a great gaming machine, but the price seems a little inflated.



\$1,699.99 | originpc.com

3 HP Pavilion h8-1010

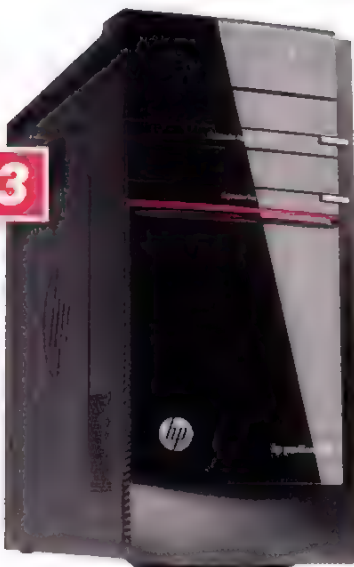
Pros: HP's system is light and portable. It's also easy to open and install new parts...which you'll need to do almost immediately. Then again, the system is so cheap that you'll be able to save some money and do just that.

Cons: AMD's Radeon HD 6450 will technically run Diablo III on low settings, but don't expect this machine to hold its own with next year's titles.

Verdict: If you're just looking for a cheap system to get you through the year, the Pavilion is a reasonable choice.



\$729.99 | shopping.hp.com



BATMAN VOL. 1: THE COURT OF OWLS

After a series of brutal murders sweep Gotham, Batman discovers that one of Gotham's oldest urban legends might be more than a myth.

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Revenge may be delicious, but so are lemon cakes. This new cookbook based off the bestselling A Song of Ice and Fire saga brings the smells and tastes of Westeros to your dinner table.

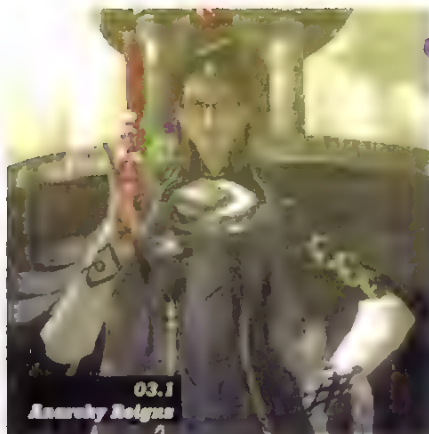
\$35.00
randomhouse.com

TIM & ERIC'S BILLION DOLLAR MOVIE

Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim's humor is not easy to predict. After the duo blow a billion dollars making a 15-minute movie, they end up on the run from the mob. Hilarity is the only thing you can expect next.

\$34.98
magnetreleasing.com

Media Shelf



03.1
Anarchy Reigns



31
**Kingdom Hearts 3D:
Dream Drop Distance**



03.2



10
NCAA Football 13



24
Growlanser: Wayfarer of Time



20

THE LEGEND OF HEROES



25



28



31
Risen 2: Dark Waters

July

03.1 New Releases

- Anarchy Reigns (PS3, 360)
- B-Units Build It (Wii, DS)

03.2 Spider-Man: Now and Then

People didn't like the last Spider-Man movie, so Hollywood decided to reboot the wall crawler to make him popular again. *The Amazing Spider-Man* swings into theaters today with a new director and an entirely new cast. Spider-Man is now played by *That Other Guy* From the Facebook Movie, and his love interest is Gwen Stacy, played by anyone but Kirsten Dunst. The main villain is a lizard in a lab coat. That may sound ridiculous, but remember, the previous trilogy expected us to believe Kirsten Dunst was likable.

06 Get Your Game On at Omnicon

Consisting of video games, anime, comic books, and music, Omnicon is a cosplayer's dream come true. Just make sure your costume is designed to deal with the intense heat of McAllen, TX. This show offers tournaments, live music, an art gallery, and vendors galore. A two-day pass costs \$45. The event is held in the McAllen Convention Center.

10 New Releases

- Ice Age: Continental Drift (PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS, DS)
- NCAA Football 13 (PS3, 360)
- Rhythm Thief & the Emperor's Treasure (3DS)

12 San Diego Comic-Con Kicks Off!

The success of Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* may end up being the comic book event of 2012, but San Diego Comic-Con is still the place to be for comic book fans. Most of the biggest creators in the biz will be on hand to sign autographs and give a glimpse of things to come. Hollywood and video games are also well represented with sneak peeks of new films and games. The show starts today and runs through July 15.

13 The Ice Age Will Never End

The Ice Age movies appear to be real films. They have a cast of Hollywood stars, a studio handling animation, and theatrical debuts. Despite these trappings, we don't know a single person who enjoys them for anything other than the *Scratch* shorts. *Ice Age 4: Continental Drift* opens today, but you should feel free to ignore it completely. Everyone else does.

20 The Batman Saga Concludes

There's only one thing you need to do today: Go see *The Dark Knight Rises*, the third and final installment in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy. We haven't watched any trailers or read anything about it because we don't want a single heart-pounding moment ruined. The Batman-versus-Joker dynamic was awesome in the last movie, and we can't wait to see that rivalry expand and intensify this time. Joker is still the main villain, right?

24 New Releases

- Growlanser: Wayfarer of Time (PSP)
- Prototype 2 (PC)

25 Darth Maul's Here to Stay

Although Darth Maul was sliced in two and thrown into a thousand-foot pit, he somehow survived and made his return a few months ago on *The Clone Wars* animated show. His story continues today in Dark Horse's *Star Wars: Darth Maul - Death Sentence* comic book. Maul is a wanted man on the run from mercenaries and Jedi. Their search leads them to the Outer Rim, where Maul and his brother Savage Opress wait!

28 A Show For Arcade Enthusiasts

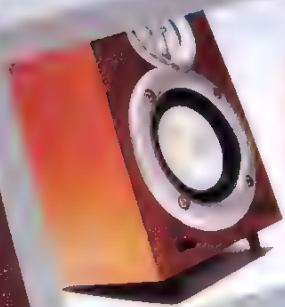
With all vintage arcade and pinball machines set to free play, California Extreme is the place to be this weekend. Held at Santa Clara's Hyatt Regency, this celebration holds hundreds of machines, including prototypes that you may have never seen before. A weekend pass will set you back \$60.

31 New Releases

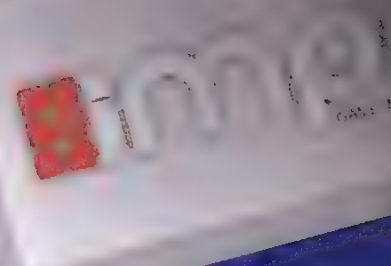
- Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance (3DS)
- Risen 2: Dark Waters (PS3, 360)
- Transformers Prime: One Shall Stand (DVD)

2012

replay



THE GAME INFORMER SHOW



gameinformer.com

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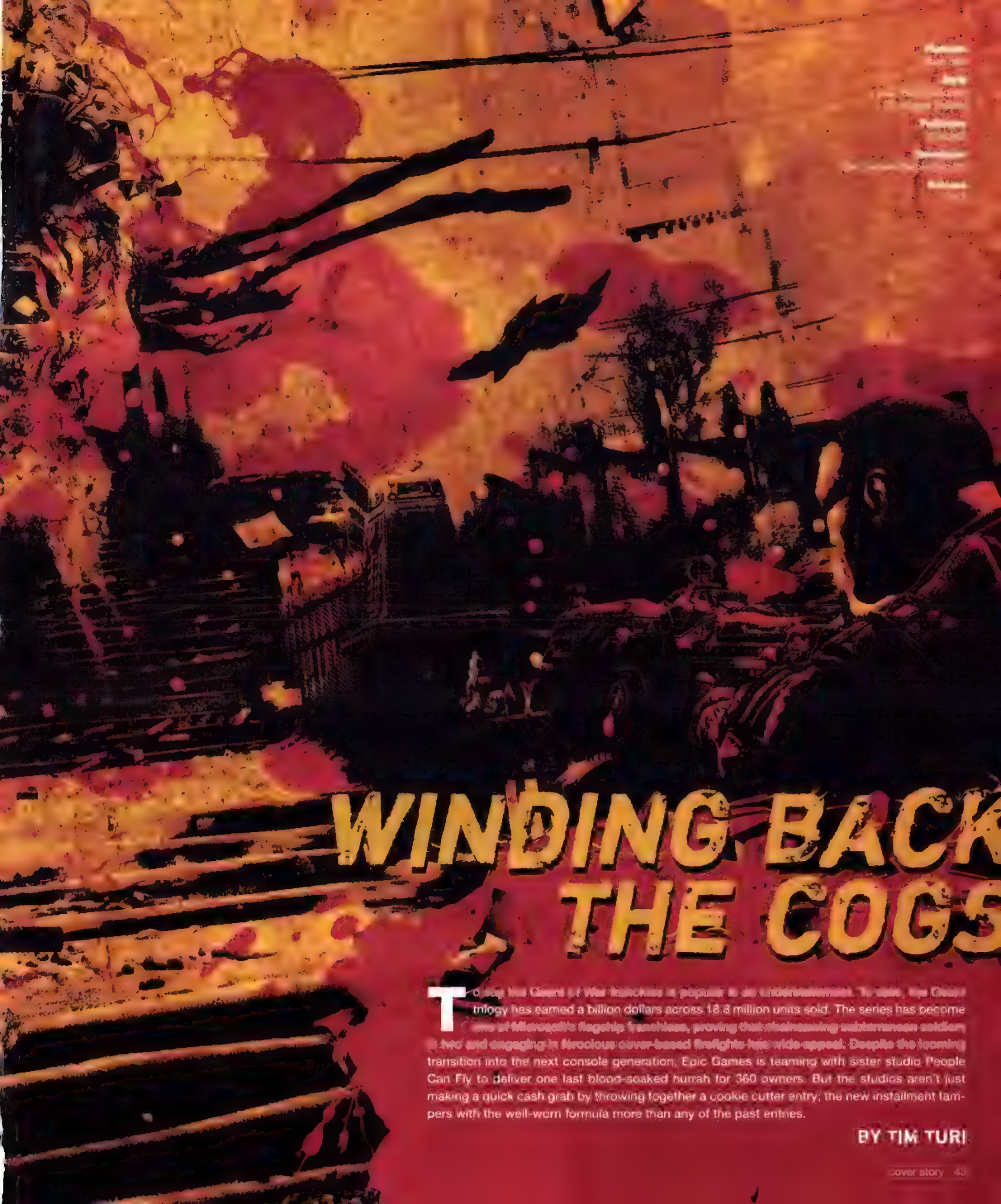


TEST CHAMBER

FEATURES

GEARS OF WAR JUDGMENT

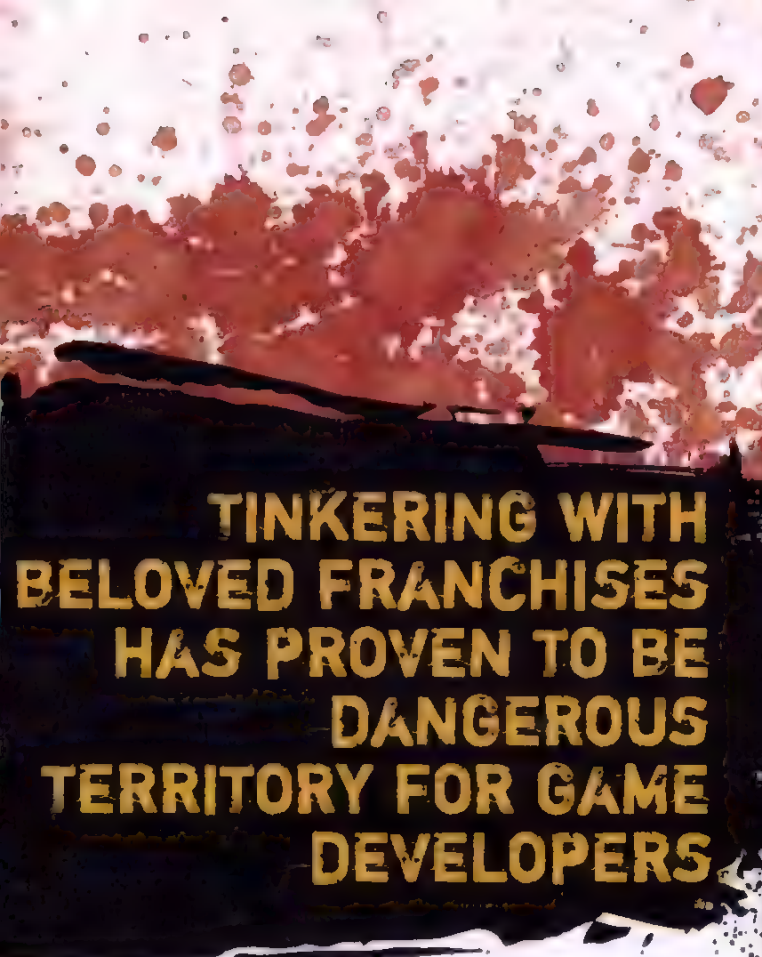




WINDING BACK THE COGS

Today, the Halo 3 War Machine is a popular pop phenomenon. To date, the Halo trilogy has earned a billion dollars across 18.8 million units sold. The series has become one of Microsoft's flagship franchises, proving that chain-sawing subterranean soldiers is fun and engaging in a visceral, cover-based firefight. Despite the looming transition into the next console generation, Epic Games is teaming with sister studio People Can Fly to deliver one last blood-soaked hurrah for 360 owners. But the studios aren't just making a quick cash grab by throwing together a cookie-cutter entry; the new installment tampers with the well-worn formula more than any of the past entries.

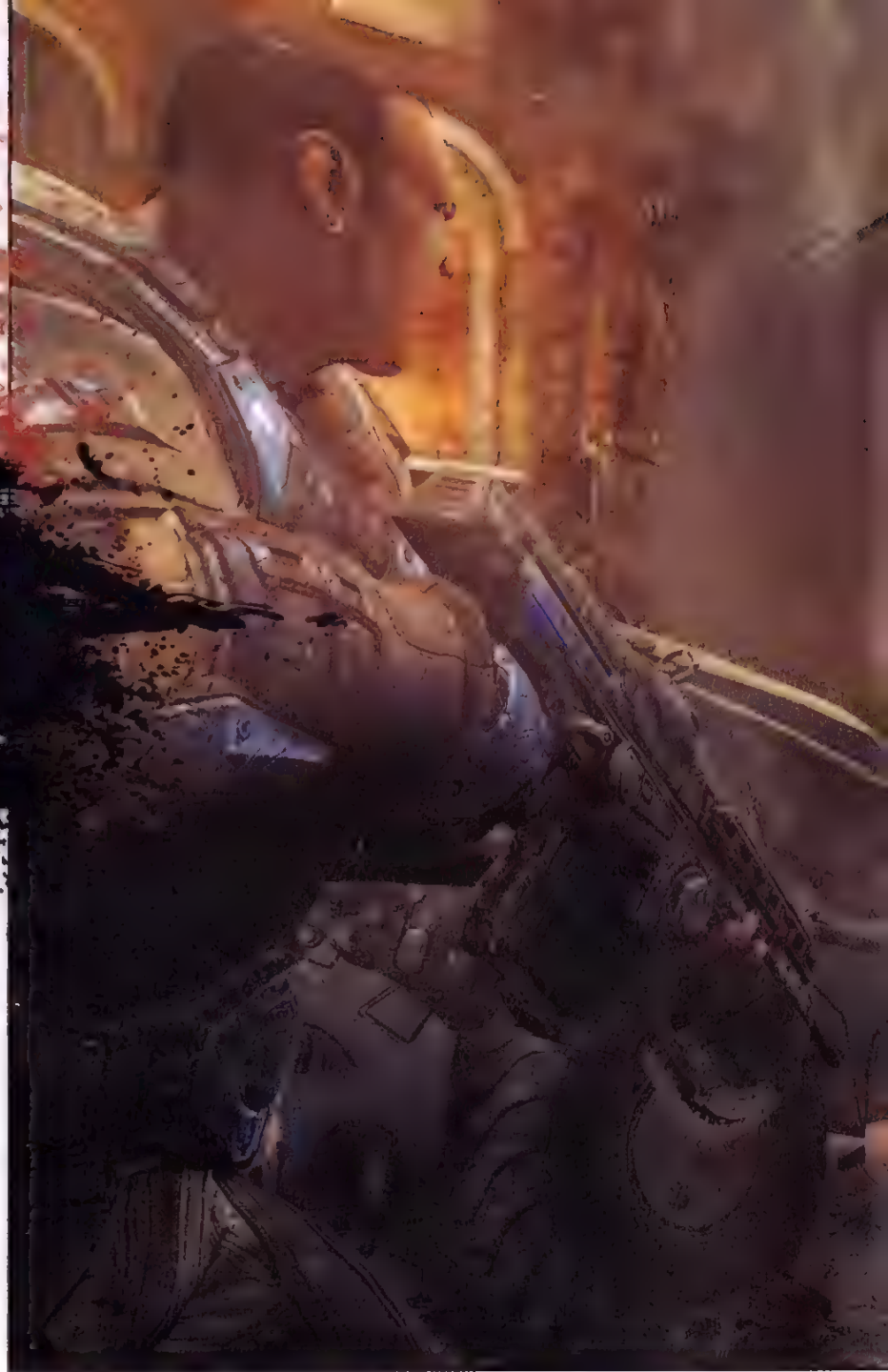
BY TIM TURI



TINKERING WITH BELOVED FRANCHISES HAS PROVEN TO BE DANGEROUS TERRITORY FOR GAME DEVELOPERS

Fans cried foul when *Devil May Cry*'s Dante turned his white hair black, pretty boy Raiden replaced the grizzled Solid Snake, and Samus leaped into first-person. It's natural to expect fans to question Epic's decision to make the latest entry a prequel without ex-con Marcus Fenix as the protagonist. Epic is also scaling back lengthy cinematics to inject punchier action, tweaking the controls, stepping back from *Gears of War 3*'s new Lambent enemies in favor of overwhelming Locust hordes, and incorporating a class-based multiplayer mode. Like any *Gears* fan, we had plenty of questions heading into Epic Games' North Carolina studio. The team met our curiosity with hours of hands-on time with single- and multiplayer and explained why they decided to shake up the formula.

"Whenever you grow a franchise there's a certain level of betrayal," says Epic Games' director of production Rod Fergusson. "If you don't betray the customer a little bit, then it's not changing enough and people feel like it's becoming stagnant. But if you betray them too much then you lose them. You've always got to keep it fresh. By being outside the Marcus Fenix story, we're going to have more opportunities to do new things."



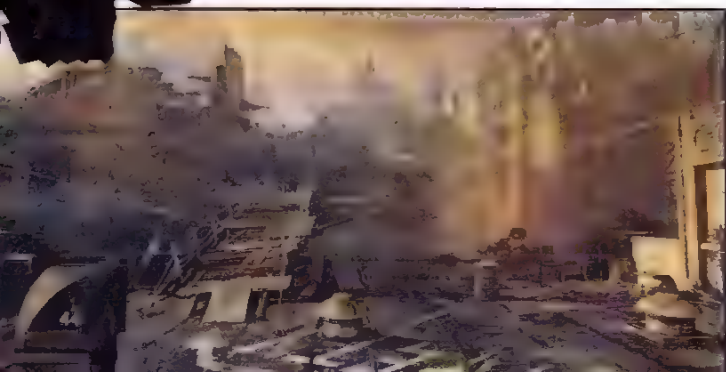
Gears of War 3 marked the unquestionable end of a trilogy. If you played through the game, you understand why Marcus and his crew's dramatic answer to the Locust and Lambent threat doesn't leave the door open for a direct sequel. Fortunately for Epic, prequels aren't limited by such finality. But instead of telling the tale of how Marcus got thrown in jail at the beginning of *Gears of War*, Epic chose to focus on another soldier who's also in hot water for disobeying orders in order to save lives: Baird.

Damon Baird is the *Gears* series' smart-mouthed mechanic. Bestowing leading-man responsibilities upon the comic relief character who spouts off jerky one-liners may come as a surprise to some. For Epic, it was an easy casting job.

"Baird was a natural choice to us as the hero of the story because he's a fan favorite," Fergusson says. "We've done surveys, and

even with just the fan reaction to *Gears 3*, it's clear that Baird is a fun character in and of himself. When you look at the stories we've told over the *Gears* trilogy, everybody else had their moment. The trilogy itself was Marcus' story, very clearly we told Dom's story, and even in *Gears 3* we had that flashback moment for Cole when he got to go to his locker room and he relives his past a little bit. But there's never been insight to Baird's character. We felt like this was a great opportunity to look back and see what happened with Baird."

Judgment begins 15 years before *Gears of War*, with Baird and the rest of Kilo Squad standing trial for transgressions against the Coalition of Governments. The testimonies are being overseen by Colonel Loomis, a by-the-books COG leader who accused the team of desertion, cowardice, trespassing, theft of experimental military tech, and treason. The





The COG convoy is on its way to a surprise Locust ambush.

impetus for this case? When a giant menace threatened humanity, Baird chose to handle things his way. Baird's good friend Augustus "Cole Train" Cole and newcomers Sofia and Garron Paduk (see sidebar on page 47) round out Kilo Squad.

The missions are set a short time after E-day, when the Locust first emerged from underground. The Pendulum Wars were only over a short time before the Locust made their move topside, so Baird and the rest of the COGs are frantically adjusting to the new, monstrous threat. Because the gameplay segments of Judgment take place early on in humanity's fight against the Locust, you face more enemies onscreen than ever before. Lieutenant Baird and the rest of Kilo Squad narrate their versions of the events as players relive them via flashbacks.

"For 79 years the COG have been fighting

a human enemy," Fergusson says. "They've gotten into the World War II sensibilities of what it means to fight, what war means. They have this specific way of fighting humans much like America went through from World War II to then having to fight in Vietnam, which was completely different. There were completely different tactics and a completely different enemy. That's sort of the way we feel this is. This war presents a wake-up call to the COG that World War II tactics against a

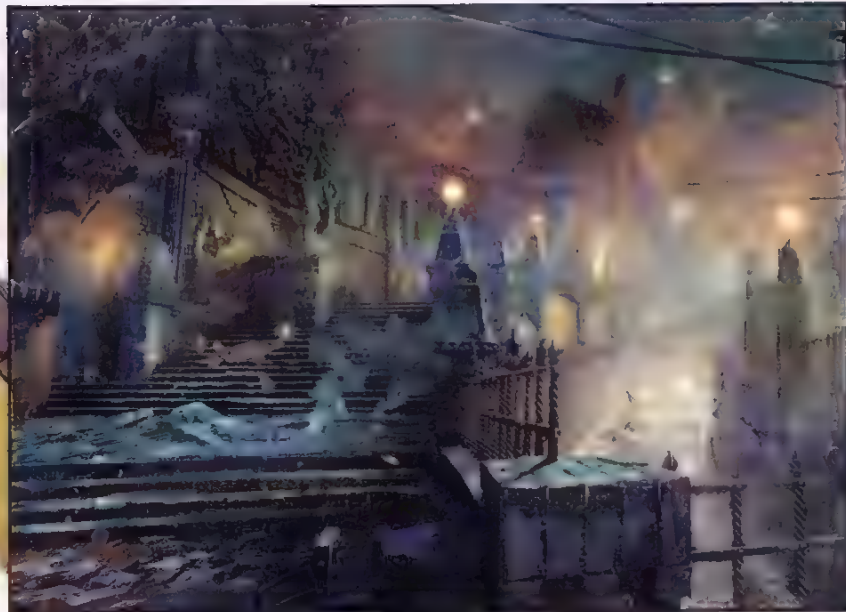
Vietnam-esque enemy won't work anymore. It's Baird who has the enlightenment that, "You guys are doing this wrong, we need to do it differently."

Judgment is even more focused on nonstop action than Gears of War 3, which included over 90 minutes of cinematics. Epic still plans to use short, essential cinematics to break up the intense gameplay, but the plot is primarily delivered via narration so the player never has to stop moving. You can say goodbye to

HALVO BAY

The setting for Gears of War: Judgment is a wealthy city that the Locust targeted shortly after Emergence Day. Halvo Bay is home to the Onyx Guard academy, a school responsible for training the COG's elite soldiers.

"Halvo Bay is the San Diego of current times or the San Francisco of World War II," says Epic director of production Rod Fergusson. "It's a city that has a strong military base influence on it."



leisurely radio chats where characters meander slowly through environments with a finger pressed to their ear.

"We wanted to have some more freedom in how we tell stories," Fergusson says. "There are two main ways we're doing that. One is embedded storytelling. We're trying to push a lot of the story into the environment that if you take the time, look around, and see what's in the environment, you can see the stories play out for you. The other is the idea that because

there's a testimony, we wanted characters to narrate their own part of the puzzle."

We see an example of this environmental storytelling in a section of the city that was attacked by Locust while citizens were celebrating the end of The Pendulum War. Destroyed parade floats line the street, dirty confetti litters the ground, and sagging banners hang from the buildings. But before Kilo Squad encounters this mess, they must defend an important COG landmark and their very history.

STAND AND DELIVER

My hands-on time with the four-player co-op campaign begins with Baird recounting an event that left a COG convoy a flaming mess. Kilo Squad temporarily halts a mission to secure the COG's Museum of Military Glory after hearing a terrible noise back from the direction of the convoy. "Sounds like something scary just got eaten by something scarier," Baird exclaims. Whatever beast issued the horrendous cry is gone by the time Kilo makes it back, but numerous Locust forces are swarming the burning remnants of the vehicles.

"We're really excited to bring the scare of the Locust back," Fergusson says. "After fighting the Locust for six years they became the Germans in a World War II game. They became very familiar. We want to bring back the sweaty palmed, tense nature of the gameplay, but also how the characters react to the Locust."

While Baird and his crew react with dismay as the Locust close in, the ensuing battle should sound familiar to fans. Soldiers slam up against waist-high cover, blasting away at enemies as they pile out of E-holes in force. Judgment returns the combat to its roots, evidenced by the need to seal E-holes by lobbing grenades into them. Chucking explosives is now much easier thanks to the game's new first-person shooter-style control scheme. Players use the left shoulder button to quickly toss a grenade, swap between primary weapons using the Y button, and hold it down to draw their pistol. These may sound like extreme alterations to hardcore fans, but removing the clumsy d-pad from weapon selection is a welcome change.



Baird is abducted and dragged before Colonel Loomis

challenge in a prequel," Fergusson says. "Over the previous three games we've built up this huge repertoire of creatures and we don't want to get rid of it, but at the same time we don't want to break the canon. One of the great things with declassified testimonies is that you can have secrets in the world that weren't known because they were classified."

While Epic isn't talking about the specific incentives players receive for accepting declassified missions, completing these modifiers scores you in-game rewards that impact gameplay. Failing to satisfy the new challenge now results in game over. My team struggles against the waves of exploding nuisances, and slowly but steadily fights its way up a long, narrow staircase. Handling the sheer numbers of Wretches would be difficult even without the added volatility. We find luck with a strategy involving Baird and Paduk picking off the little buggers with longshots while they chase Cole and Sofia.

After fending off the Wretches we take on a new challenge – cleaning out droves of Locust in front of the museum within four minutes. During our first attempt we huddle together behind one side of the museum's huge stairway. An uncomfortable number of hulking, grenade-launching Boomers emerge from the E-holes. We manage to take out a few before one nabs all four of us with an expertly placed round. Hardcore difficulty is hard. We try the same mission again, but this time the Boomers are replaced with quick, pesky Tickers and Therons wielding bows with explosive arrows. We fight to claim a mounted turret in the middle of the museum's stairway and spread out. The tactic works, and we manage to turn the last foe to jelly with a mere two seconds on the clock.

"One of the pillars of the game is high replayability, and that's part of what we call the Smart Spawn System, or S3," Fergusson says. "Basically it looks at how you're playing and it will adapt. It sees if you've played a section before and it mixes up the enemy variety."

The AI system will take into account player movement, position, and even the difficulty setting when orchestrating enemy attacks. Changing the difficulty in past Gears games only affected player and enemy health, but in Judgment it will alter the amount of Locust that enter the fray.

Kilo Squad is greeted by the Onyx Guard when they finally make it into the museum. These highly trained elite warriors look down their noses at Baird's ragtag crew, but begrudgingly accept the help. The Onyx soldiers task Kilo Squad with protecting the museum's east hall. A handful of portable sentry guns are scattered around the hall, ready to be placed in prime defensive locations. After setting up the

"We allowed for the evolving gameplay to impact the controls," Fergusson says. "One of the things you notice when you play Judgment's campaign and multiplayer is the gameplay is much faster. With higher lethality you don't want to stand up out of cover, wind up a grenade, and throw it. You're dead before you finish the first spin."

Kilo Squad eventually beats back the imminent Locust threat and continues towards the museum. On the way back I spot a glowing skull icon emblazoned on a wall. Examining it cues up an optional modifier, called a declassified testimony, for the next fight. Accepting these bonus challenges causes the narrating character to recall a specific detail that wouldn't otherwise be mentioned. In this instance, Baird remembers normal Wretches didn't attack Kilo Squad; it was combustible, imulsion-infused Dark Wretches.

"Enemy variety is especially going to be a



The Locust surge into Sera on mass

MEET KILO SQUAD



DAMON BAIRD

Before this sarcastic, genius mechanic went on to help Marcus Fenix save the world, Baird worked his way through the Gears ranks. He's always quick to joke, but Judgment suggests there's more to his character than being a comedian.

A former Thrash Ball player-turned-soldier, the "Cole Train" became famous in Sera for his on-field performance and boisterous demeanor. Cole met Baird soon after enlisting, and the two quickly became best friends.



AUGUSTUS COLE



GARRON PADUK

A militia refugee from the Union of Independent Republics, Garron comes from the other side of The Pendulum Wars. He brings a new perspective and brash personality to Kilo. Garron is the devil on Baird's shoulder that says, "Let's blow stuff up."

A cadet from the Onyx Guard academy, Sofia is more in line with Colonel Loomis' by-the-book approach to combat. E-day halted her path to graduation from the academy, but she's still a worthy soldier. She's the opposite of Garron, ready to suggest informing superior officers of every deviation from protocol.



SOFIA HENDRICKS

perimeter we hunt for new guns and ammo caches, and hunker down for a brutal onslaught.

"Horde is loved by the Gears community and we wanted to find a way to bring that experience into the campaign," Fergusson says. "It's not just a separate, isolated mode. We already knew these defense scenarios were popular. The Alamo in Gears 1, Anvil Gate in Gears 3, these missions were always highly rated. We wanted to allow more of that in the campaign."

We blast and chainsaw through waves of varying enemies while struggling to plug grenades into the E-holes. After each push we take a brief respite to reload, reposition sentry guns, and get in position. The sweaty palmed, hold-the-line action offers a great change of pace from the standard game flow, and the option to spice things up with declassified testimonies makes the battle even more interesting. After

securing the east hall, Baird and company trek to the west hall and accept the extra challenge of protecting a set of historic COG tags.

A mounted turret greets Kilo as they enter a long room littered with ancient COG relics, blazing machine gun fire shattering display cases. After multiple failed attempts to flank the gunman from the side, Sofia decapitates the fool with a longshot and we commandeer the heavy artillery. On the fourth attempt we successfully protect the historic national treasure. After the dust settles, we're greeted by what Epic is referring to the new "big bad." The team is staying tight-lipped regarding specifics on this new enemy, but they insist it is quite literally big and bad.

The new antagonist begins wreaking havoc outside the museum, and calls for help begin blaring through Kilo Squad's com-links. The team decides the quickest route to the battle is

through the museum's archives, which brings them underground. As they step down into the dank corridors of the basement, Baird quips about how going underground during a war with subterranean enemies is a bad idea.

We accept a challenge to find and destroy 10 egg clusters laid by the Locust's Serapedes – giant, mutant centipede beasts. After searching high and low we finally find the last egg sac on the ceiling. It's a good thing we went through the trouble, too, otherwise the next battle would've been damned near impossible. A pair of Serapedes and way too many Wretches welcome us as we enter the archives. The huge creepy crawlers serpentine around tall file cabinets, attempting to catch us in their electrified pincers. Each of us takes turns fleeing the pests while the others shoot and kick their vulnerable behinds, destroying their segmented exoskeletons bit by bit. The fight against the Serapedes is a tough one, but marksmanship, teamwork, a handful of retries, and lots of cussing eventually lead to victory.

An hour with Judgment's campaign indicates the series is returning to the no-frills intensity that made the first Gears of War great. Players may have battled the Locust many times in the past, but Judgment promises to match Baird and his team's desperation by cranking up the enemy numbers and adding extra challenges. After going a few rounds with the Locust in Judgment, you'll understand why a soldier would risk life in prison to eradicate them by any means necessary.

A new central character, an adaptive AI system, and a leaner narrative could breathe new life into Gears of War's aging formula. The developer is laser focused on making young Baird's tale an intense one, but it's also taking the next important step to evolve Gear's highly acclaimed multiplayer.

PEOPLE CAN FLY

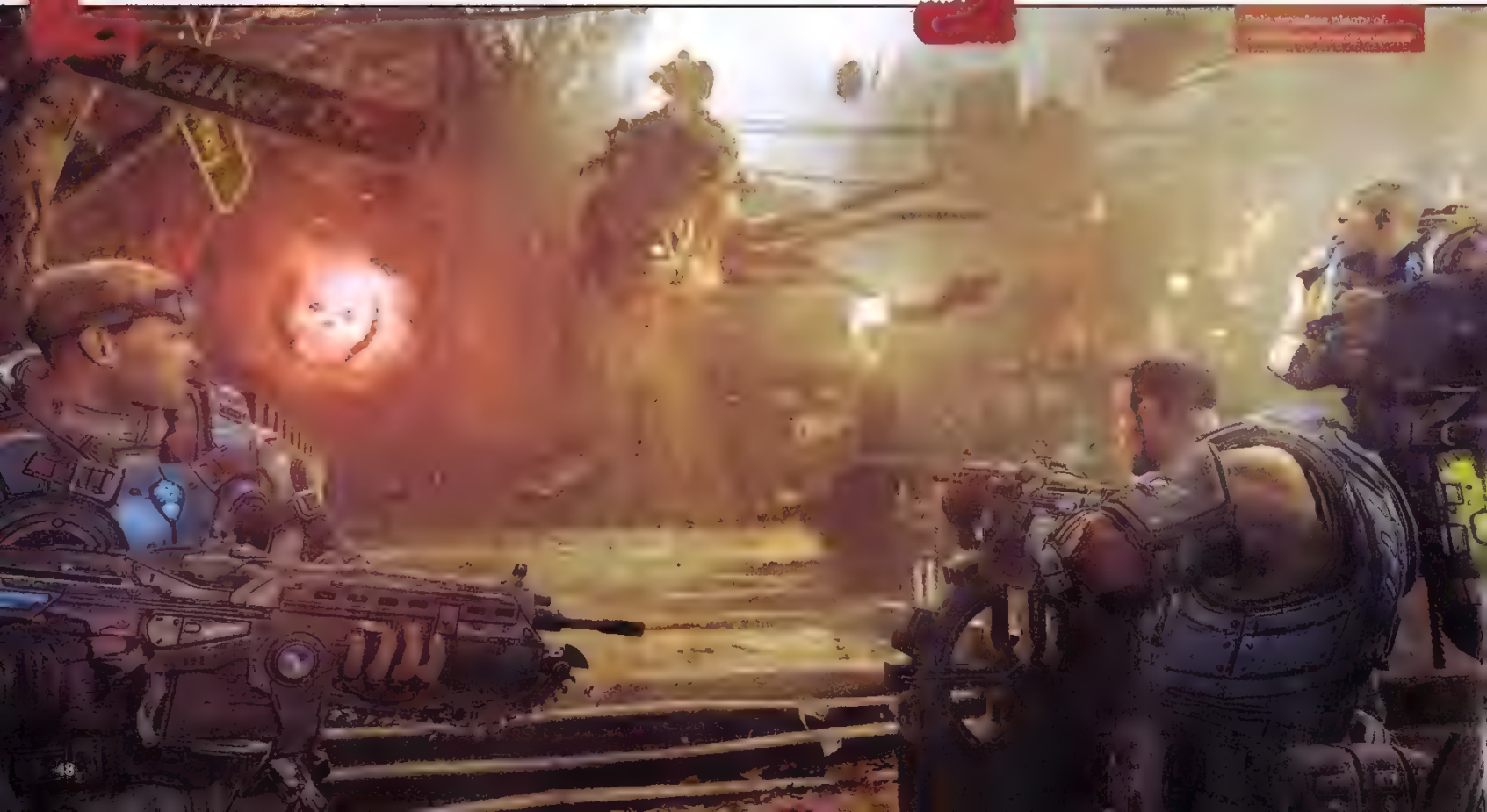
The Polish development studio got its start on the Gears of War franchise by porting the game over to the PC. Epic was so impressed that they purchased PCF in 2007. Bulletstorm, PCF's first all-new IP under the Epic banner, received positive reviews but performed poorly in sales. Epic's faith in PCF remains unshaken, and the developer is now heavily involved with Gears of War: Judgment. We asked Adrian Chmielarz, founder of People Can Fly and creative director for Gears of War Judgment, a couple questions about working with Gears.

On PCF's feelings towards Gears of War in general:

"My love for Gears is pure. We loved Gears before we had the slightest idea that one day we would be a part of Epic. What I loved about the game was that there was one word I could use to describe Gears 1: Raw."

On PCF's involvement with Gears of War: Judgment:

"People Can Fly is heavily involved in both the campaign and multiplayer, but especially the campaign. This is something we have initiated. We proposed the story and the gameplay hooks. Basically everything about the campaign was initiated by People Can Fly. Obviously there is heavy involvement from Epic. I like to think about this as the best of both worlds. On one hand we can bring something fresh to the franchise, but on the other hand we have the original creators making sure it's still Gears."





War rages on in the sea surrounding this island map.



A TOUCH OF CLASS

Gears of War 2 began an industry-wide trend with its inventive Horde mode. Teaming up with three buddies to repel waves of angry Locust became an instant hit. Many games have emulated these savage shootouts, but few match the innovation of the Gears series. Gears of War 3 added an addictive tower defense element to Horde, and also introduced Beast mode. This new mode turned the tables, allowing players to control the Locust during their mad dash to wipe out the humans. Gears of War: Judgment takes the next logical step for the series: merging Beast and Horde into a new mode called OverRun, which also adds class-based combat, retooled Locust monstrosities, progression, and a stronger demand for teamwork and strategy.

"When we did press for Gears of War 3,

everybody kept asking why we had this co-op Horde and co-op Beast, and how come we didn't just make it competitive," Fergusson recalls. "When we started looking at Judgment we decided that was something we should play around with more. We tried it initially for Gears of War 3 and realized it was too hard of a problem to solve for that game. Working with People Can Fly and having them focus on OverRun, we've been able to get the mode working, play through it, and tune it."

OverRun consists of two timed five vs. five rounds, each team taking turns as the COG and the Locust. The COGs must defend three key objectives from the rampaging Locust: Two sealed E-holes and a generator. Epic says it plans on replacing the generator with a Hammer of Dawn beacon in the final game, which will decimate the Locust with space

The ruined beauty of the Gears universe returns.



lasers if successfully defended. Each time the Locust liberate a sealed E-hole, Kryll flood the map and reduce the COG to bloody puddles, and the hole becomes the new Locust spawn point. If both teams break past the COG and destroy the generator as the Locust, overall victory is determined by whoever did it the quickest.

Defending your territory from homicidal dirt dwellers as the COG begins with selecting a balanced team. Epic doesn't want five medics running into the fray at once, so players can see which classes their teammates are selecting, and can reselect after each death to shore up a team weakness. The four classes all have unique abilities and weapon loadouts (see sidebar on page 52). While players are bound to discover a favorite role, I enjoyed experimenting with them all.

DISPOSABLE HEROES

Epic invited us to play more than eight hours of OverRun. During my time as the COG I initially gravitated towards the soldier class. The soldier is equipped with a lancer and boomshot, and can resupply his teammates by tossing down grenades that morph into ammo crates. You have to constantly be ready to toss

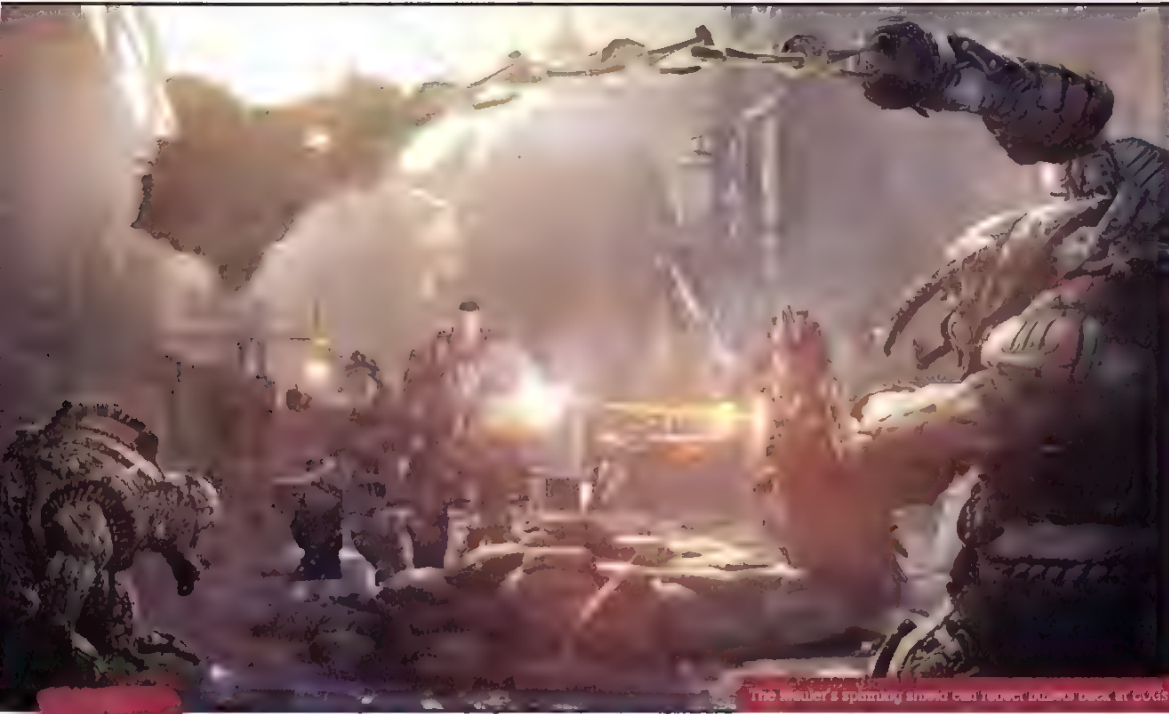
grenades or swap weapons in OverRun, and the improved control scheme makes keeping up with the fast pace manageable. I loved splattering a pack of charging Tickers with my boomshot then immediately replenishing my own ammo using the special ability. Epic wants to ensure players abuse their special abilities, so most must cool down for only 5-15 seconds after they expire and can be used again.

As the engineer I found myself impatiently jamming on my special ability button, which lays down an auto-turret instantly. These useful sentries are great for shredding charging Wretches or destroying a Serapede's weak hind quarters when placed from behind. Plopping down turrets is great, but I found the most satisfaction using my blowtorch to repair the precious spike barriers keeping the Locust at bay. A good engineer can spell the difference between victory and defeat, and becomes even more valuable with a soldier feeding him ammo so he never has to reload his blowtorch.

I struggled the most playing as the medic and scout. Tossing stim-gas grenades into a group of allies regenerates their health and can even revive a downed teammate. However, I found myself foolishly laying one down near an enemy (which the stim-gas doesn't affect), then sprinting into the health-boosting fog with my lancer's chainsaw screaming. In the right hands, the medic is a boon, tossing health towards hard-working engineers and scouts perched up high.

The scout's bread and butter is the longshot. Given the fast-paced rhythm of OverRun, I found myself struggling to line up solid shots. However, scouts can still help teammates by tossing beacon grenades, which grants all COGs a limited radius of X-ray vision used to track foes. Given his ability to climb perches for sniping leverage, the scout is often somewhat detached from the crew. However, medics and soldiers can toss up health and ammo from below, prolonging a vigilant sniper's life.

Protecting sealed E-holes and the generator from the unrelenting Locust was a fun, challenging task that usually resulted in utter failure. While repeatedly getting bulldozed by the Locust may sound miserable, switching sides and exacting revenge is a delightful exercise in sadism.



The leader's spinning shield can't protect himself from COGs

LOCUST MONSTERS

WRETCH



Role: Leap over hazards, climb perches

Special Ability: Stunning scream

Tip: Travel in packs and stagger screams for maximum stunning power

Role: Hammerburst rifle, heal friendly units, ride Bloodmounts

Special Ability: Chain heal

Tip: Support valuable units like Corpser and Mauler with healing

TICKER



Role: Eat fortifications, eat grenades, detonate

Special Ability: Speed boost

Tip: Can be kicked over barriers by Grenadiers

Role: Lancer rifle, ride Bloodmounts

Special Ability: Frag Grenade

Tip: Throw grenade at COG turret to cause deadly explosion near enemies

GRENADIER



KANTUS





red Serapede's electrified prongs make short work of COGs and fortifications

DEATH FROM BELOW

Beginning each Locust round with a rush of Tickers is a safe strategic bet. The nimble, disposable little beasts quickly chew through COG barriers, and you can take out enemies by exploding like walking land mines. Controlling the pesky devils is surprisingly fun and addictive, especially when a Locust Grenadier punts you over enemy lines to take your foes by surprise. In addition to helping Tickers gain ground, the Grenadier can also feed them grenades, which doubles their explosive ability. Epic is

putting in due diligence to ensure every unit is a blast to play, and a big part of that is adding special abilities.

"There were two kinds of Ticker in Gears of War 3's Beast mode: The Savage Ticker and the regular Ticker," says multiplayer director Quinn Del Hoyo. "One could eat fortifications and die, and the other couldn't eat fortifications but could explode and kill people. Why have two Tickers that aren't that fun individually when we can try to make every single class fun and valuable? When you don't have enough points

to buy a stronger class, you can still be an awesome Ticker."

Ticker rushes get even more brutal with a Wretch charging in ahead of time to bound over barriers and unleash a stunning scream. The Wretch's bellow temporarily incapacitates COGs, which can give Tickers an opening to rush in and self-destruct on top of a sealed E-hole. Like scouts, Wretches can climb into areas inaccessible by other units, perfect for causing chaos behind enemy lines.

Like Beast mode, playing as bottom-tier

CHAMPION TIER (UNLOCKED WITH POINTS)

BLOODMOUNT

Role: Melee enemies/fortifications, be ridden by Grenadier and Kantus

Special Ability: Halve the cooldown time on rider's special ability (passive)

Tip: Carry a mounted Kantus behind cover while his heal recharges

MAULER

Role: Devastate fortifications and COG soldiers with flail and shield

Special Ability: Spinning spike shield

Tip: Aim the reticle at enemies while shield spins to deflect bullets back at COGs

Role: Demolish fortifications and COGs with heavy melee

Special Ability: Burrow and move underground

Tip: Armored legs reduce damage from the front

CORPSER

Role: Eat through barriers, destroy COGs, ranged support

Special Ability: Spit poison

Tip: Have two Serapedes overlap to protect one another's vulnerable rears

SERAPEDE



Get down the Kantus to halt the Reddingorock's creation

Locust earns players points that can be spent to unlock beefier bad guys. Both Grenadiers and the healing Kantus can ride Bloodmounts, granting them an express lane to the frontlines and halved cooldown times for special abilities. Serapedes are experts at dispatching COG soldiers, and their armored fronts make them great for chewing down barriers. Corpser and Maulers are the Locust's heaviest hitters. The spider-legged Corpser pummel obstacles, COGs, and E-holes mercilessly, and can burrow into the earth when their health drops too low. The Mauler wields a punishing flail and bullet-deflecting shield. Activating its special ability causes the spiked shield to spin rapidly, ricocheting bullets back at COGs and gnawing through barriers.

Discovering new strategies is part of the allure of playing the Locust in OverRun. Our team found luck saving up for two Maulers, a Corpser,

and having the two remaining teammates go with Kantus. Playing as the COG, I knew just how intimidating it is seeing a mob of heavies lurch towards your base. Bashing through an enemy encampment shoulder-to-shoulder with your hulking teammates comes with the feeling of complete empowerment. Crowding around an E-hole and pounding it until thousands of Kryll escape and slice the COGs to bits is one of the most rewarding experiences I've had playing the Gears series.

Creating balanced, enjoyable maps is crucial when developing a new multiplayer mode, especially one as unique as OverRun. Looking to other successful class-based games is an important part of Epic's plan to make OverRun fun.

"Team Fortress is a great class-based game, and there's clearly inspiration in there," Del Hoyos says. "Anybody who is making a class-based

game should examine what other games in the genre do well."

Epic draws inspiration from other great class-based multiplayer games. The team appreciates the streamlined map design of multiplayer online battle arena games like DOTA, which feature a limited number of paths for players to take. Similar to DOTA, OverRun maps will largely have two main routes, which will allow players to focus on developing strategies rather than terrain memorization.

We played on two maps, one set high atop city rooftops, and another on a militarized island. The rooftop map featured more narrow chokepoints, a great sniper perch, and plenty of hidden ventilation ducts for Tickers to use. The island map is much more open, with one common battleground revolving around a demolished pickup truck Grenadiers can hide in to lob grenades behind COG lines. Near the Locust side at the end of each lane, poisonous ink barriers inflict instant death on any COG soldier brash enough to attempt spawn camping. People Can Fly is putting in a lot of work to make OverRun's maps great, and the developer's skill shows.

Epic isn't ready to spill the beans on OverRun's progression, but the developer insists it will be much more than a number and some cosmetic upgrades.

"Not only are you leveling yourself, but you'll level the individual classes and creatures," Fergusson says. "You can actually invest and grow what you start out with so that you can be an even better Ticker, or even better medic -- that kind of stuff."

Another example involves the engineer's sentry turret becoming stronger as the player levels up.

COG CLASSES

ENGINEER / BAIRD

Weapons: Gnasher and Blowtorch

Special Ability: Sentry Turret

Tip: Blowtorch repairs damaged fortifications

SOLDIER / COLE

Weapons: Lancer and Boomshot

Special Ability: Deploy ammo crates

Tip: Toss ammo near a working Engineer to give him infinite Blowtorch ammo

MEDIC / SOFIA

Weapons: Lancer and Snub Pistol

Special Ability: Stim-gas grenade

Tip: Toss stim-gas at downed allies to revive them

SCOUT / GARRON

Weapons: Longshot and Snub Pistol

Special Ability: Beacon grenade

Tip: Climb perches for better sniping leverage



Wretches can bound over hazards to cause COG

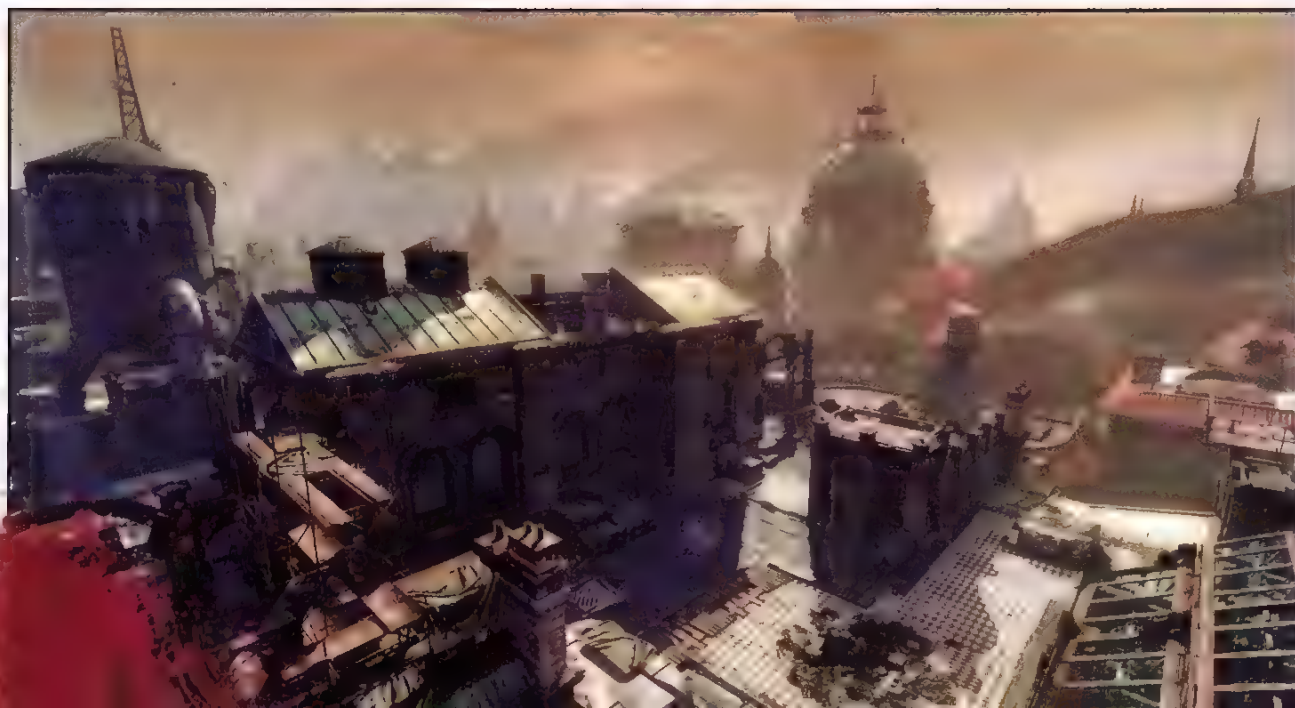
Even without the progression system in place and being limited to two maps, we had a hard time putting down the controller after playing OverRun. The competitive fusion of Beast and Horde offers drastically different gameplay on both sides of the ball, and the class-based mechanics fit into the Gears universe perfectly. The interplay between the Locust and COG classes hint at layers of strategic depth aching to be discovered by creative players. As far as traditional Horde and Beast modes, Epic isn't ready to comment on how (or if) they'll play

into Judgment.

With a high-tension campaign that aims to trim the narrative fat while funneling in tons of enemies and a multiplayer mode that combines the best of past Gears titles, Epic is set to deliver the definitive entry in the Gears of War series. Giving players new innovative challenges means shaking off the thin layer of rust and dried blood that's formed on the series over the last six years, and some fans may feel threatened by the change. We spent hours familiarizing ourselves with the series' new

overall direction, and Epic's prequel is shaking up humanity's fight against the Locust in great ways. ♦

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We have so much Gears of War: Judgment content it's bleeding out of the magazine and onto our website. Over the next month we'll be rolling out additional videos, interviews, and articles at gameinformer.com/gearsjudgment. Check out our personalized tour of Epic Games' North Carolina studio hosted by Cliff Bleszinski, see the developers explain why they're happy Baird is the new leading man, and read in-depth articles about OverRun and Epic's Q&A process. All this and more is on the way in the coming weeks.



THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

DAWNGUARD

THE FIRST SKYRIM DLC SHOWS



ITS TEETH

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

» **Style**
1-Player
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
Bethesda Game Studios

» **Release**
Summer (Xbox 360),
TBA (PS3, PC)

The world of Skyrim is packed with people to talk to, locations to explore, and quests to undertake. Sinking hundreds of hours into Bethesda Game Studios' sprawling RPG is surprisingly easy given the wealth of content. Skyrim is getting even bigger this summer with the release of Dawnguard, the game's first downloadable content pack. The team at Bethesda is delivering an array of new features and quests in Dawnguard, most focused on letting players delve deeper into Skyrim's most unholy inhabitants: vampires. *by Joe Juba*



TWO PATHS

The story of Dawnguard involves the return of a vampire lord named Harkon, who seeks to put a stop to his greatest enemy: the sun. Harkon intends to use the untold power in the ancient Elder Scrolls to accomplish his goal, while an order of vampire hunters (the titular Dawnguard) hopes to stop him. The conflict puts players in a position to choose sides; fighting alongside the Dawnguard to defeat Harkon is one option, but you can also join forces with the undead and expand your own vampiric powers. Like the civil war quests in the base game, your choice changes the quests you undertake. "We present players with both sides of the storyline pretty early in the DLC," says lead artist Matt Carofano. "There is a lot of unique content depending on which side you choose."



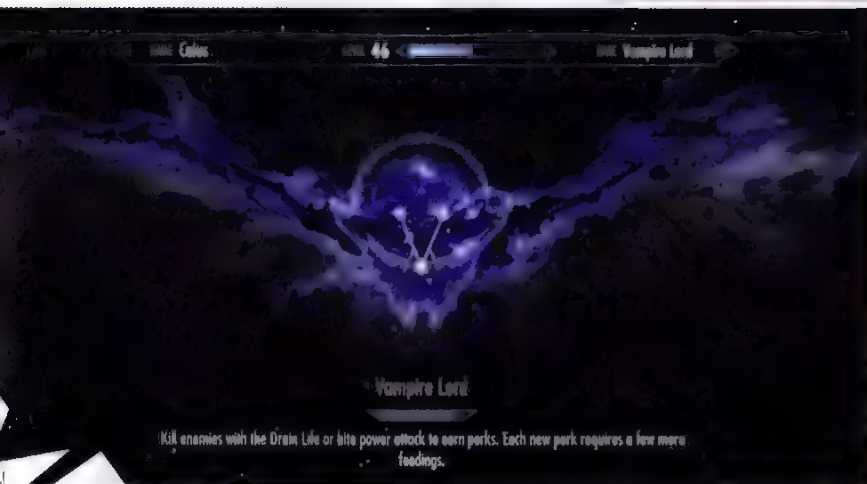
NEW HOMES

Regardless of who you side with, your choice gives you access to one of two new homes in Skyrim. Teaming up with the vampires opens up Castle Volkihar, an appropriately gloomy and intimidating island stronghold. Fort Dawnguard, a keep surrounded by trees and rocks, will be your base if you oppose Harkon. These fortresses aren't just new places to sleep – they have other bonuses, too. "Each fort will provide the player with unique benefits," says Carofano. "The Dawnguard will build new weapons and armor to fight vampires, including crossbows. The vampires can grant the player bonuses to vampiric powers and give blood potions, which heal and count towards feeding."



TRANSFORMATION

As a payoff for your loyalty to the vampires' cause, you can become a vampire lord – the paragon of the vile species. Like the werewolf power gained during your quests for the Companions, assuming the mantle of a vampire lord is a transformation. While you are a vampire lord, you have access to new powers but still pay a price: Townspeople will attack a vampire lord on sight, though this no longer happens if you are just a "regular" vampire. Players can exit the vampire lord form at will, unlike the werewolf transformation.



THE PERKS OF POWER

In the base game, the advantages to being a vampire are negligible when compared to the drawbacks. Dawnguard evens out that equation, giving vampire lords additional powers rooted in their ghastly new form. One ability, vampiric grip, suspends an enemy in the air with telekinesis as you drain its health. Other powers include hovering above the ground and turning into a swarm of bats.

To balance out this expansion of vampiric capabilities, werewolves are getting their own unique perk tree, complete with abilities with names like "animal vigor" and "savage feeding." One power, called "totem of the moon," lets players summon ally werewolves with a howl.

Just as in the base game, you can either be a werewolf or a vampire, but you can't be both. In either case, you earn new perks by engaging in the appropriate beastly activities. By killing foes with your powers, you can continue to learn new vampire or werewolf skills. This approach means that all players can see what these forms offer, despite the fact that gaining standard perks might be difficult (or impossible) for high-level characters.

MORE DRAGONS

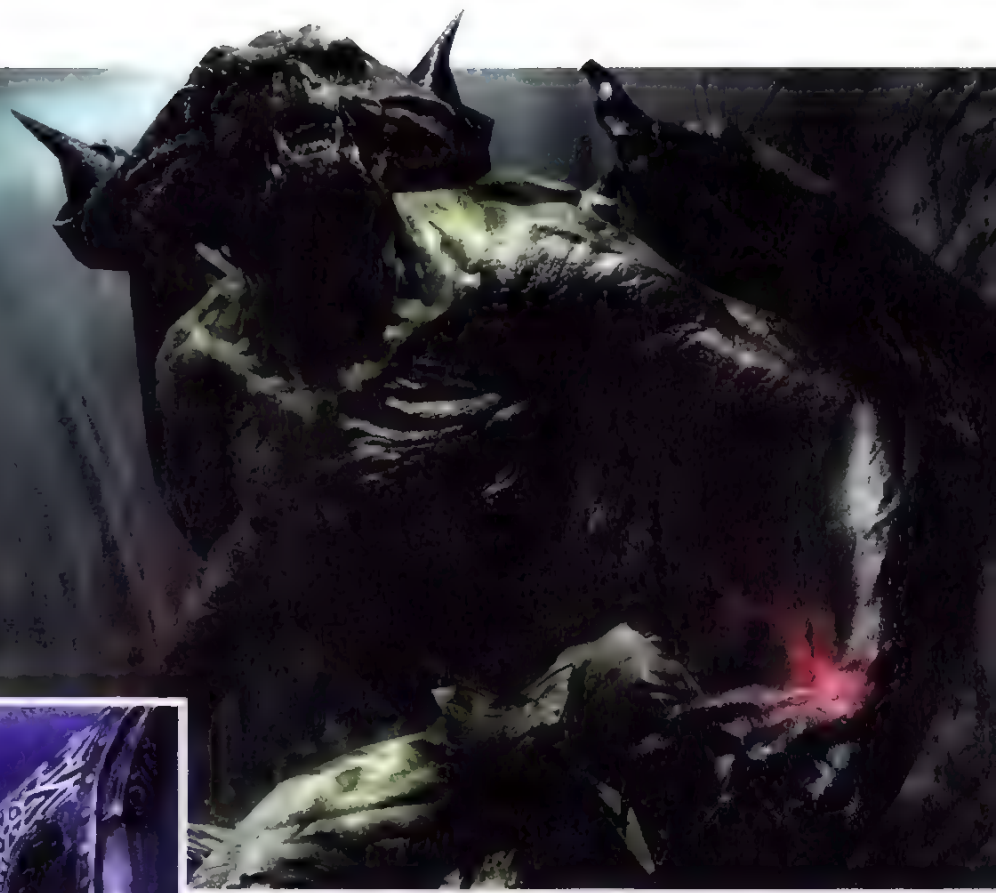
Vampires are the focus of the Dawnguard DLC, but the most terrifying enemies from the base game are also getting some extra attention. Legendary dragons are new high-level beasts that are even more challenging than the ancient-class dragons that powerful characters currently encounter. Bethesda wouldn't clarify what exactly makes these foes difficult – they may require different tactics, or they may simply have more hit points than other dragons.

In addition to legendary dragons, players will also encounter new breeds of enemies like gargoyles (pictured here), death hounds, and armored trolls.



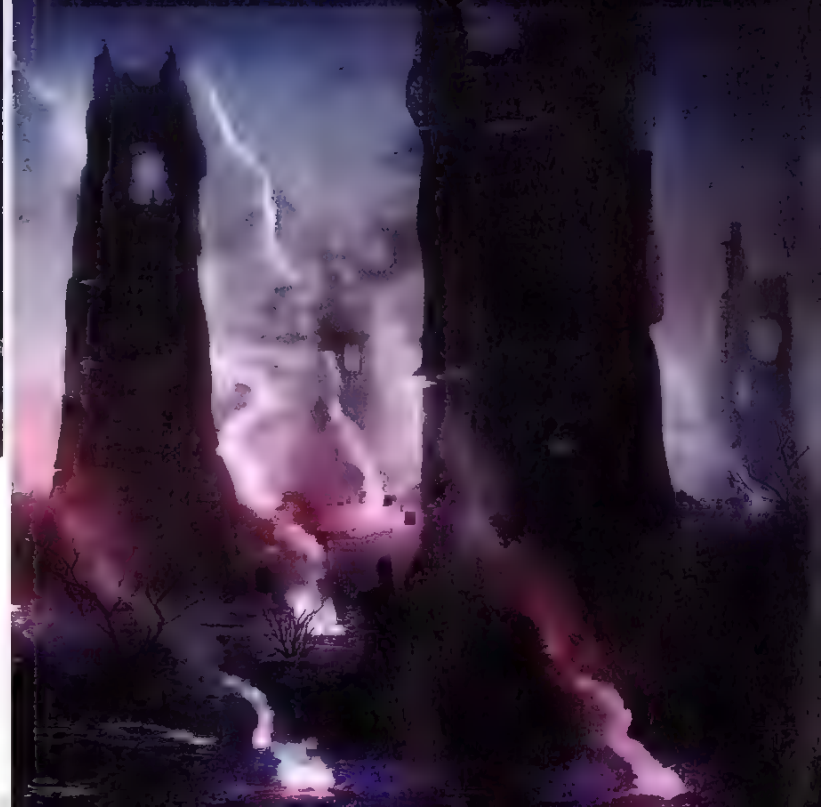
THE NEW ARCHERY

Instead of relying on a bow for your ranged combat, Dawnguard adds crossbows to your arsenal. "The crossbows have a different feel from bows," says Carofano. "They will remain loaded while running through the world and provide a quicker shot. They are, however, slower to reload. Another benefit is that each shot has a chance to stagger your opponent." All of the perks you spent in archery still apply to crossbows, so your skills with a bow will easily transfer to the new weapon.



BACK TO OBLIVION

Your quests for the Dawnguard and vampires will take you to several new locations, and one of them is a realm of Oblivion – the plane players traveled to multiple times in *The Elder Scrolls IV*. Unlike the fiery fields of that game, Dawnguard's piece of Oblivion has a ghostly, ethereal visual style. Dubbed the Soul Cairn, this haunting realm of trapped souls offers a change of scenery from the stark, Nordic surroundings of *Skyrim*.





THE RATWAY MAKEOVER

"The ability to change your character's face was something that came up often in fan feedback," says Carofano. In response to those requests, Dawnguard adds a character hidden down in the Ratway of Riften who can alter your appearance. Race and gender are still locked, but you can tweak your other facial features in case your hero doesn't look as awesome as you initially thought.

WHERE TO START

A new base and an array of powers may sound tempting, but new players shouldn't try to tackle Dawnguard as soon as they escape captivity. The DLC isn't meant for low-level players. "Dawnguard is designed to work with any characters who are past level 10," says Carofano. Go on some adventures first, learn about shouting, and get some perks in your preferred style of combat before undertaking the quest. When you're ready, listen for rumors about the group of vampire hunters who are recruiting, and ask town guards to steer you in the direction of the Dawnguard.

KEEP SHOUTING

New shouts are also part of the Dawnguard package, letting you continue to expand your mastery of the draconic language. Soul tear is one of the new shouts players can learn, which allows you to steal the soul of a defeated foe and raise that foe as an undead minion. While Bethesda wouldn't specify how the new shouts are integrated into the campaign, they are likely tied to Dawnguard's unique locations rather than new word walls popping up across Skyrim.

MOUNTED COMBAT

Are you sick of feeling helpless on your horse? Mounted combat is coming with Dawnguard, allowing players to use their weapons while on horseback. Not only is this a more convenient way to deal with enemies on the road, but it will also give you a chance to try out a newly crafted set of Dragonbone weapons – another addition in Dawnguard. Unfortunately, your attack options while mounted are limited to weapons; if you want to cast spells, you still need to dismount.



GIVING XBOX AN EDGE

Dawnguard is coming to Xbox 360, PS3, and PC, but only Xbox 360 owners get to play it this summer. The DLC is a timed exclusive, meaning that the PC and PS3 versions will be released after an undisclosed amount of time has passed. Bethesda took a similar approach with Fallout 3; in that case, the DLC packs didn't arrive on PS3 until several months after their original releases on Xbox 360 and PC. This approach for Skyrim's DLC was announced well before the game released last fall, but considering all of the PS3-specific technical problems in the base game, playing Skyrim on Sony's console is a losing proposition. At least PC players have the creation kit and mods to keep them busy. ♦

AND INTO THE FIRE



The last time we saw the new, younger Lara Croft, she was sequestered in a dim underground cave, fighting for her life against a crazed, ritualistic madman. Her ship had crashed on a mysterious island, and she had no idea what awaited her as she emerged onto a picturesque coastline scattered with the hulks of wrecked ships and shattered planes.

After her initial appearance in our cover story over a year and a half ago, Lara Croft has largely disappeared from the spotlight. With barely a glimpse of what lies later in her new adventure, fans have been left to wonder what comes next.

Meanwhile, the developers at Crystal Dynamics have remained hard at work crafting a new vision for gaming's most familiar heroine. At long

last, we've seen what happens next, as an injured and inex-

perienced Lara Croft sets out across a terrifying wilderness.

by **Matt Miller**

TOMB RAIDER

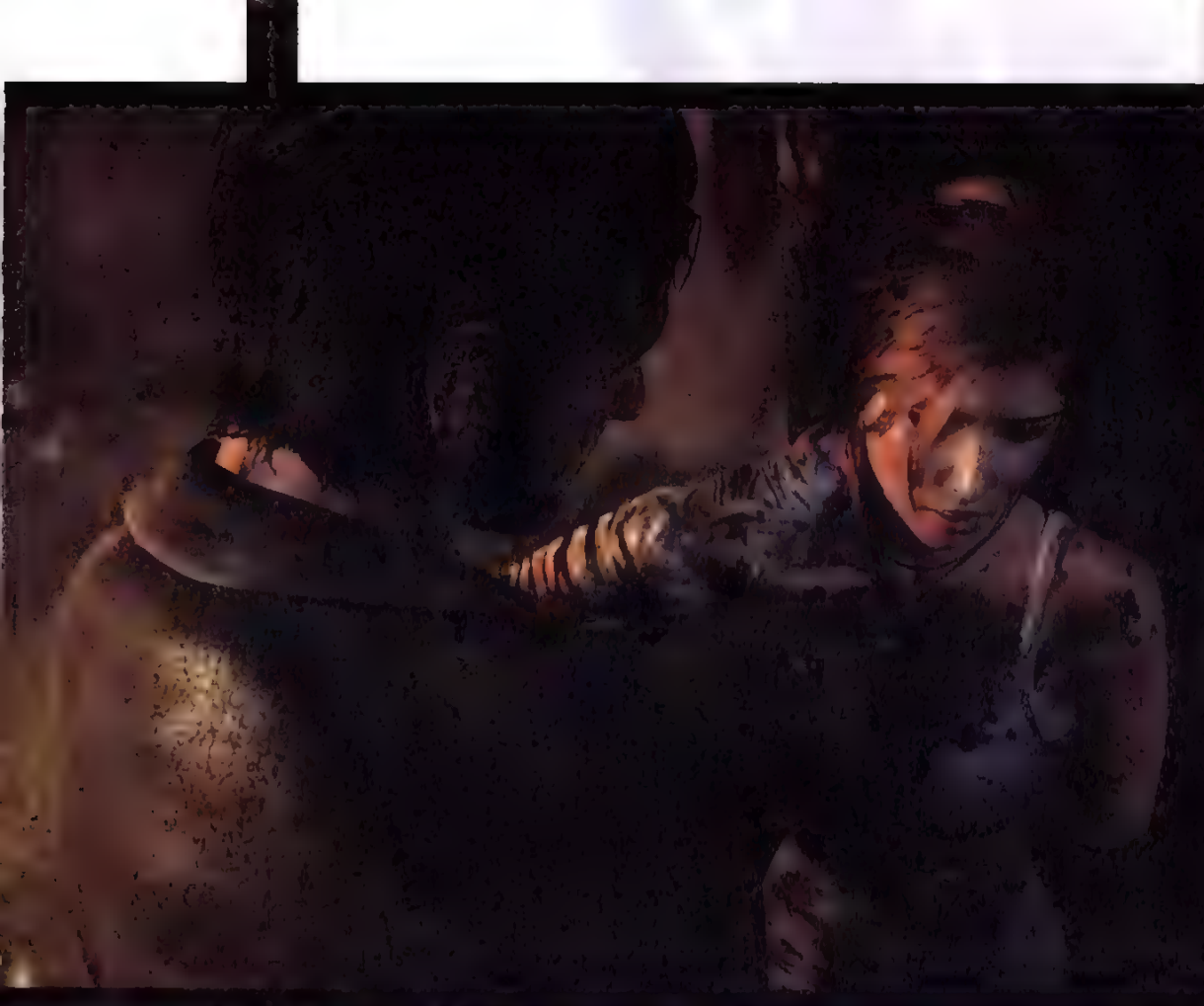
Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Wii U

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Square Enix

Developer
Crystal
Dynamics

Release
TBA



First Steps

The early hours of Tomb Raider depict Lara's transition from the scared girl whose ship has run aground to the cunning survivalist and fighter we'll see later in the game. Crystal Dynamics also uses these early, story-driven sections of the game as an opportunity to teach the player about the game's many interacting systems and styles of play.

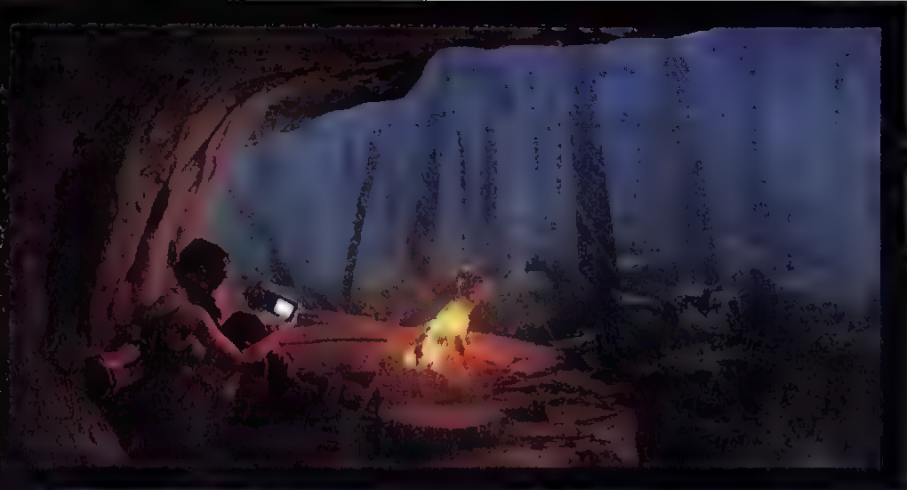
After her harrowing encounters in the underground den, Lara sets off along a cliffside path. To her right, the land drops away into a wave-tossed sea. Everywhere around her lies the detritus of former crashes. She's bleeding, one arm held tight to her torso where she's been hurt. The path ahead is washed out, and Lara must walk across the fallen tree that bridges the gap. It's no new feat in video games, but what sets the moment apart is the careful attention to the emotional terror of the protagonist. As she moves, Lara is constantly whispering to herself, urging herself forward, or emitting a shout of panic as her foot slips. Camera angles shift to show the nauseating drop awaiting her if she falls. "We want to show her injured, afraid, alone – going through these moments that any human being can relate to in a very personal way," explains Karl Stewart, global brand director for Crystal Dynamics. "By having her do things like walking across the log and [thinking], 'Oh my god... don't look down' – you can relate to that. The more emotionally attached we can get you to the character early on, the better we believe the experience is of going through the

character arc."

Past the gap, Lara finds another obstacle. A rusting World War II-era bomber hangs precariously from the mountainside, and there's no choice but to climb across. Lara leaps to a hanging strut of the plane, and begins to scramble across. It's a glimpse of some classic traversal elements, but Stewart says not to expect much more of the old linear platforming. "We've moved away from having the entire game be that binary ledge system exploration, where you're having to go from point to point," Stewart tells us. "We're now giving the player the opportunity to go into a space and choose their own path. Where we take you across the ledge of the B-52 Bomber, that's a tutorial. Once you move away from the plane, everything is basically open, dynamic traversal where the player has the freedom to roam around and jump from location to location with ease, including things like air steering, direction control, speeding her up, and speeding her down depending on the distance of the jump."

Not far past the plane, Lara finds reason for hope – her friend Sam's backpack, along with some helpful supplies. Though the woman who owns the backpack is missing, Lara pulls a two-way radio from the pack, and straps it to her belt. She also grabs a mysterious video camera – it's the last we'll see of the item during this demo, but likely hints at some unannounced game features. There's also a matchbox, but only a single stick remains inside. Heading off in what she hopes is pursuit of her friend Sam, Lara leaps to a nearby ledge. It breaks loose, and she goes tumbling down into the chasm below.





On the Hunt

Thoroughly beaten down, shivering in the cold rain as night falls, Lara is at the end of her rope. She sees a rock overhang near where she's fallen, and a forgotten campsite firepit in the relative shelter of the outcrop. With her precious single match, she lights some brush and settles in for a rest.

After warming up, Lara heads down a path into an open, forested glen. A dead body hangs upside down from a nearby tree. Climbing its branches, Lara can barely reach what drew her interest – a bow hanging from the limp form. She tumbles from the tree as she makes a grab, but comes away with her prize. Along with some nearby arrows, Lara sets out to explore.

It's here that the game begins to open up, offering the first glimpse of the exploration and

freedom later sections of the game will provide. "There is a linearity to the story – you have to go from point A to point B – but there's junctures in between where we want the player to feel like they're true explorers. We bring you these non-linear hub spaces that you can come back into again and again at different times of the day," Stewart says.

The enclosed forest has numerous hills and boulders, scattered copses of trees, and hidden nooks and crannies. Rabbits and deer bound through the area. Each is an independent AI that spawns randomly on the map. "We want the island to feel like it's a living, breathing place," Stewart declares. "If players go into the forest to hunt, it doesn't feel as alive if you stand in the same place and a deer comes by on the same path over and over again. It feels alive when you come around the corner and there's a deer standing there that wasn't there the last time."

Lara sights down a buck, and lets an arrow loose. As the deer dies, Lara's XP clicks up a few points – hunting for food is just one way players can gain experience in the game world. Lara sets to work carving some meat from the deer with an arrowhead – her facial expression speaks to her discomfort surrounding the necessary butcher work.

Back at camp with food to sustain her, Lara's radio crackles to life. Her friend and mentor, Conrad Roth, is alive, and he gives her directions to meet up. Lara heads out and finds an abandoned hut, eerie Asian music wafting from inside. As Lara heads into the interior, and climbs down into a ramshackle underground bunker, it's the first time we notice that we've barely seen any load screens. Crystal Dynamics has done a remarkable job of streaming content in behind the scenes, creating a seamless flow between emotional cinematic sequences and tense action moments. "We try not to have loading in the game at all. We bring you back to basecamps to do things such as use your XP and heal yourself. During those times, it will be loading in the next part of the game," Stewart says. "We smartly place our loads in the backside of the system so the player won't fully see or feel them."

By the time Lara climbs back to the surface on the far side of the passage, she's picked up a makeshift pickaxe that had been sitting by an aging gramophone producing the strange music. Like the bow, the pickaxe is another of many tools and weapons you can upgrade over the course of the game (see sidebar). It acts as a last ditch melee option, but it's also used to pry open doors or rotate mechanisms.

At long last, Lara hears voices up ahead, and rounds a corner to see her close friend Sam conversing with a suspicious man. He claims to be another survivor of the ship. Lara's never seen him before.

Setting Up Camp

As a castaway on a forbidding island, Lara can't spend all her days and nights on the run. As the game progresses, she'll set up camps around the island – places to rest, heal, eat, and warm up by the fire.

From a design perspective, the base camps of Tomb Raider will serve as the central hub for all the game elements that would feel out of place while wandering across the island. "We want to make it a very simple basecamp system where you can go in and say, 'I've done all this stuff on the island, now I can go the basecamp and re-equip myself,'" says Karl Stewart.

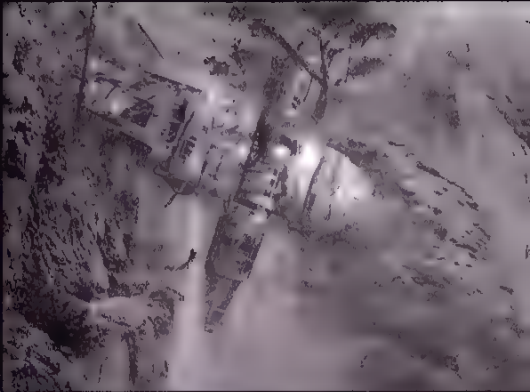
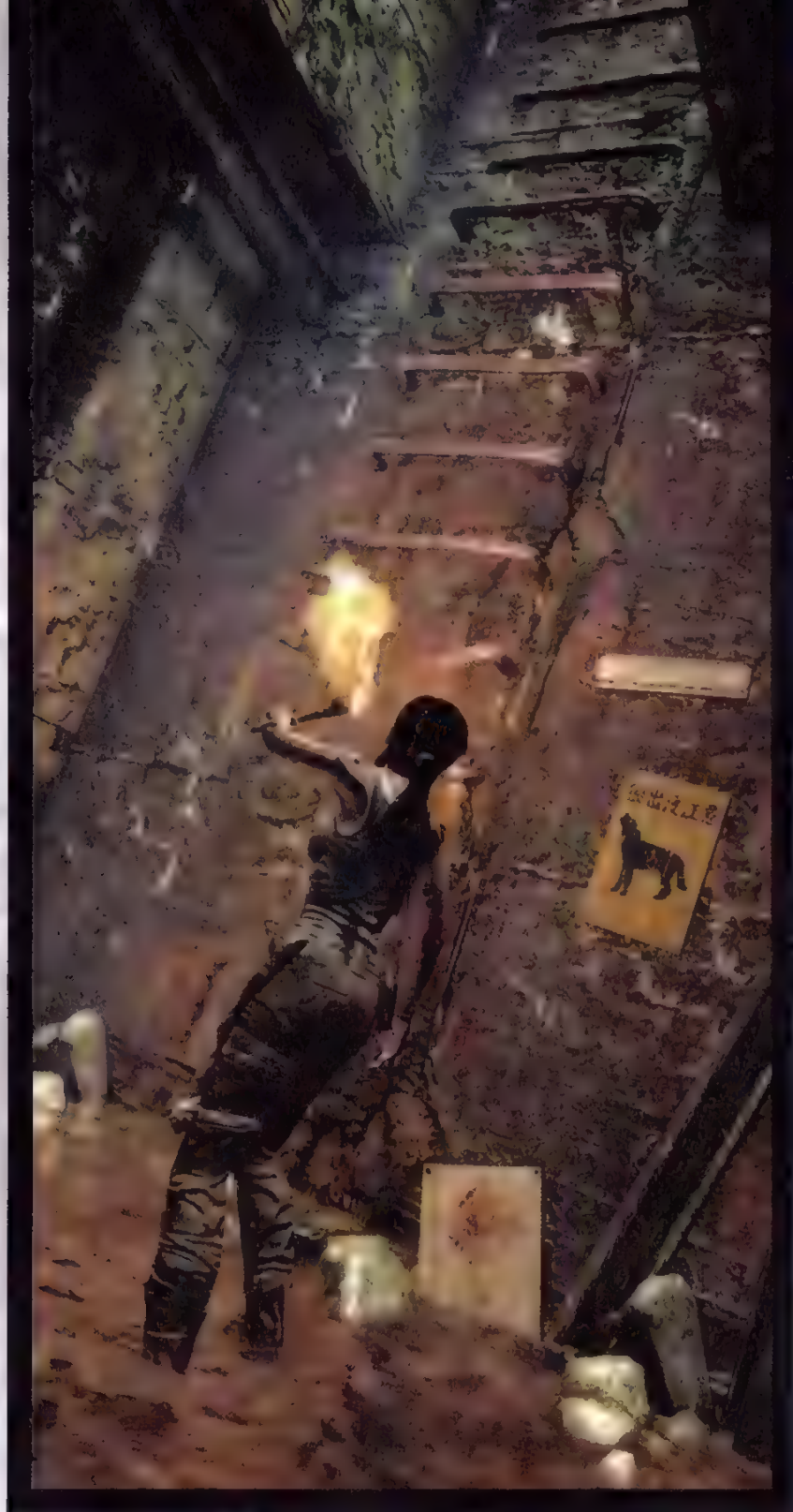
While in camp, players have access to a menu with three important features. In the middle is the fast travel option, allowing instantaneous movement to any of the previous camps established around the island. On the left, survivor skills upgrade Lara's basic abilities using individual skill points acquired during the game. Skill points come from XP acquired by completing actions in the game, from reaching a new location to hunting and killing an animal. On the right, a third option opens up to upgrade Lara's survival gear. Gear requires scavenged materials to improve existing items.

"The early stages of upgrades are about relevance to what the player has been doing," explains Stewart. Players will have limited options the first few times they access the upgrade system, like the ability to carry more arrows for the bow, or shoot those arrows quicker. As the game continues, your choices dramatically expand, letting you shape Lara's growth to match your playstyle.

Taken together, the base camp elements aim to offer a deep and rewarding sense of progression, and offer the keys to exploration by making it easier to move back to previously blocked paths, now unlocked through subsequent gear and skills.



Hunting earns XP that can be put towards upgrading Lara's skills



To Become A Killer

Sam may have bought the man's tale, but Lara's suspicion shows on her face. She tries to draw Sam away to safety with an excuse, but the duplicitous man isn't having it. He grabs Sam and puts a gun to her head, and begins to back out of the clearing. Lara rushes after, but gives a scream of pain as her foot sets down onto a bear trap. Sam and her captor

disappear into the forest, leaving Lara trapped and alone. As she struggles to free herself, there's a growl from nearby bushes. The leaves stir. Lara brings up her bow just as a feral wolf leaps from cover for her throat. As the wolves spring, time slows while Lara draws a bead with her bow. One after another they charge; Lara's quick thinking and aim save her life. It's one of several scenes during the demo that demonstrate Crystal Dynamics' commitment to context-specific action moments. "These are one-off experiences that we believe are core to the story and core to the character development," says

Stewart. "In this moment with the wolves, we wouldn't try and replicate that again, because once you've done it and it was done in the right place, it has impact."

Another motion in the underbrush pulls her attention, but this time it's a welcome arrival. A small group of survivors from her ship approach, and free her from the painful trap. Lara relays her experiences to her shocked companions, including an accounting of Sam's kidnapping. Most of the group sets out in pursuit. Lara stays behind with a bookish professor named Whitman for a few hours of rest.

With her leg bandaged and on the mend, several hours later (moments for the player) Lara and Whitman set out to explore the forest. More wolves wander the area, necessitating intermittent fights. Lara ascends one raised platform to discover a blocked passage with no way to progress. It's the first of many closed-off locations in the game that seem initially impassable. "It's about coming into a space and having an objective, but always realizing that space can unlock many more mysteries, and there's reason to come back and have a look. As players progress through the game, the equipment they've picked up will allow them to go back to spaces and unlock other areas," Stewart explains.

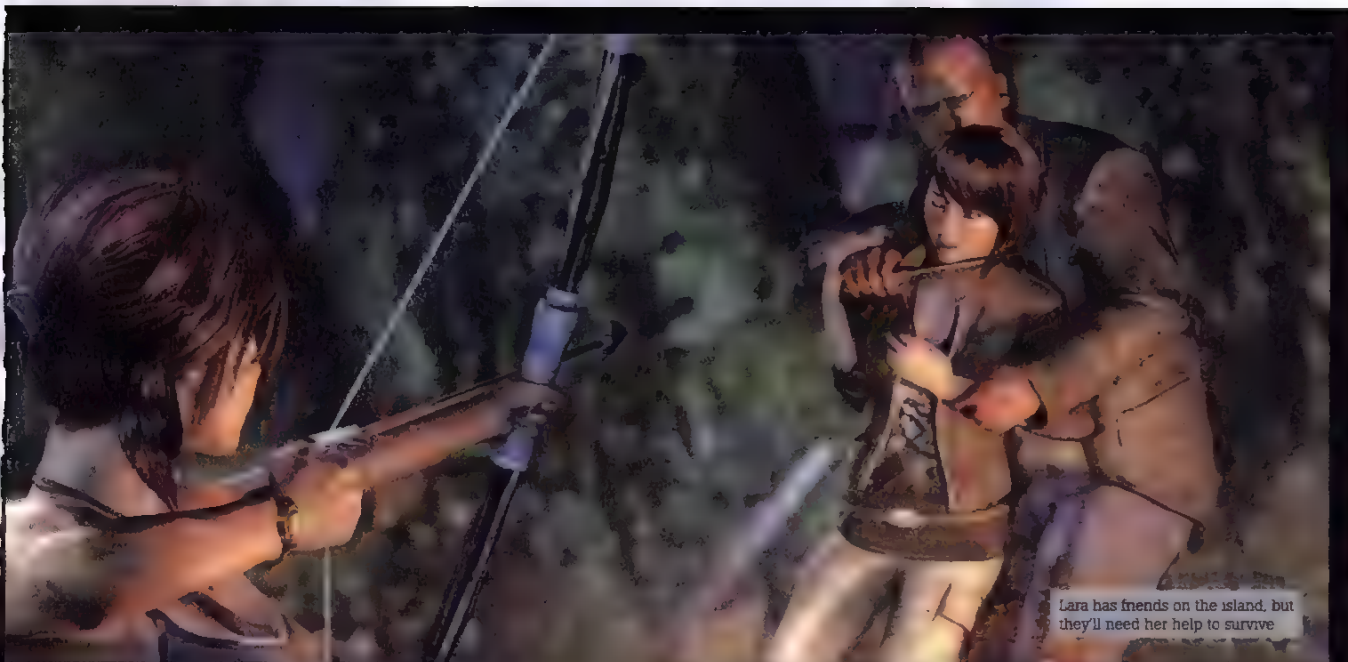
Elsewhere, Whitman has found a strange door covered in symbols and hieroglyphs. He's fascinated by the idea that scavenging survivors from previous wrecks on the island might have gone native, and created the markings. Lara is more concerned with opening the pulley door blocking the way. Her pickaxe is too weak to handle the strain of turning the crank, so she scavenges the area for supplies to improve her tool. After a stop at camp to make improvements, the two survivors open the door. The passage beyond is dim and covered in more symbols. Even as Whitman muses about whom these scavengers are worshipping in the scattered shrines, the pair is ambushed. Lara is infuriated as Whitman meekly gives up his gun, and the two are hauled away.

In the final sequence of the demo, Lara wakes to find her hands tied. She's been thrown to the ground amid other victims of the team of scavengers. The forest flashes with fire as the men try to burn out other potential prisoners. One of Lara's fellow survivors leaps to his feet, makes a run for it, and gets a bullet in the back for his trouble. Screams erupt. The prisoners scatter. Their captors pursue, occasional gunshots announcing the fate of those who fled. Lara is momentarily forgotten in the shadows.

As flashlights glimmer through the flame-swept forest, a brief stealth sequence begins. If

Death Isn't Pretty

A few times during our demo, we witness what happens to our heroine when she misses her shot, tumbles off-balance, or loses the struggle against an armed opponent. If you're looking for a reason why Tomb Raider is headed toward a Mature rating, look no further. The game doesn't shy away from the gruesome fate awaiting Lara when things go wrong. For most players, it will be a potent way to instill tension in already frightening encounters. For others, it may offer a reason to purposefully fail, just to see what happens.



Lara has friends on the island, but they'll need her help to survive.

one of these strange scavengers sees her, she'll get peppered with arrows. Instead, she sneaks into a ramshackle hut and hopes they pass her by. A dirt-caked Russian captor walks by, gun in hand. There's too little cover to stay hidden. The man pulls her roughly out against the wall, and leers at her, stroking his gun against her cheek. A set of button prompts pop up, enabling Lara to fight back. She kicks hard, and bites off a portion of the man's ear. He furiously wrestles her to the ground, the gun hovering between their two faces. The weapon goes off.

The man's limp body rolls off of her, half his face blown off. Lara rolls up from the ground, bloody and horrified. Weeping and in shock, she stares down at her first human kill. Then she picks up the gun.

"It's the turning point of our character," Stewart claims. "Up until this point in time, Lara had gone through the arc of fighting for her own survival but not knowing what the threat was. A natural instinct kicked in to get her through. But now she realizes she's not alone. Her friends are on the island. She needs to find them and save them. And she's willing to do what it takes to survive."

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To learn more about the scavengers assaulting Lara on the island, read our interview with Crystal Dynamics at gameinformer.com/mag



► **Platform**

PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

► **Style**

1-Player Shooter (Online TBA)

► **Publisher**

Activision

► **Developer**

Treyarch

► **Release**

November 13





CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

Treyarch Takes Call of Duty Into The Future

by Dan Ryckert

After developing two by-the-book Call of Duty entries set in World War II, Treyarch finally flexed its creative muscles with Black Ops. That installment introduced a new Cold War setting, a more focused narrative, and a well-received currency system for multiplayer. These alterations to the series formula were celebrated by fans, and Black Ops subsequently set sales records upon its release. After the massive success, Activision seems comfortable with letting Treyarch take much bigger risks with Black Ops II. A near-future setting and significant changes to the campaign experience are just two of the factors that make this sequel the biggest shake-up in the series since Call of Duty 4.



In a move that few saw coming,

Black Ops II primarily takes place in 2025. Players assume the role of David Mason, the son of the protagonist from the original Black Ops. This won't be the only Mason you control, however, as his father Alex appears in flashback sequences set in the 1980s. As a direct sequel to Black Ops, Treyarch promises the return of familiar faces, including Frank Woods, who was presumed dead. The grizzled veteran accompanies Alex during a flashback sequence in Afghanistan. Treyarch studio head Mark Lamia says he appears as a "very old man" in 2025 as well.

In researching the future of global conflict, Treyarch reached out to military expert Peter Singer (author of *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century*) to explore the factors that may likely lead to future wars. Treyarch learned that the resources most

likely to cause tension are called rare earth elements, a theory backed up by a recent speech by U.S. President Barack Obama on the subject. These rare metals are vital for the production of personal electronics (iPhones, televisions), alternate energy resources (wind turbines, hybrid cars), and advanced military technology (missile guidance systems, stealth bombers). In real-world 2012, China is the supplier of 95 percent of these elements. In the narrative of Black Ops II, the demand for these materials is the basis of a new Cold War.

With tension between the United States and China at an all-time high, it's the perfect time



for a sinister opportunist to make his move. Raul Menendez serves as your primary foe, but game director Dave Anthony is hesitant to reveal many details about the Nicaraguan militant other than to say that Treyarch used Tony Soprano as inspiration. "He's the main character of [*The Sopranos*], but he's essentially a villain," Anthony says. "He's a murderer, he's cold-blooded, he's ruthless...but he's somebody you understand as a human being. You'll find yourself understanding him as a human being and empathizing, but in the next moment, you'll see him do something utterly outside the realm of anything you could contemplate doing."

Throughout the story of Black Ops II, Menendez uses near-future technology to cause further unrest in the unstable geopolitical climate. One late-game mission sees the antagonist using an armada of unmanned drone aircraft to attack the G-20 summit in downtown Los Angeles. The Chinese know they didn't send the drones, and their confusion is amplified when U.S. drones are sent to attack their homeland. We don't yet know Menendez's motives, but the mission in



In near-future engagements, soldiers will be only one part of the assets that militaries will have at their command.



Players use a multitude of near-future weapons, including the quadrotor

The scene on the streets makes Michael Bay movies seem subtle, with dozens of aircraft, numerous armed vehicles, and countless foot soldiers contributing to the overwhelming chaos. Mason's vehicle narrowly avoids numerous explosions and crashes on its way to the city, but eventually finds itself in a nasty collision. Crawling out of the wreckage, Mason spots an AA gun on top of an army vehicle that's perilously perched over a hole in the highway. He mounts the gun, locks on to seven enemy drones at once, and shoots them out of the sky. Mason repeats this process for several other groups of drones before it becomes clear that the vehicle he's on top of is about to plunge through the highway to the ground below. After leaping to safety, our protagonist grabs his electrically charged (as opposed to gunpowder-based) assault rifle and prepares to take on Menendez's ground forces.

Within a few seconds of Mason's feet hitting the ground, I see something unusual for a Call of Duty game. Near the edge of the collapsed highway are two markers labeled "snipe" and "rappel." Both options involve battling Menendez's army, but players can choose their approach. Rappelling leads to the player sprinting from cover to cover and taking out the enemy in typical Call of Duty fashion, while sniping offers the chance to use some futuristic technology. If you opt for the latter, you get to try out a sniper rifle that can see through walls in a manner similar to Perfect Dark's Farsight gun. This gives Mason a tactical advantage while sniping enemies through cover, but the weapon has the disadvantage of a slow recharge time. Even with this slight annoyance, the sniper option offers a more novel (and tactically safer) approach to the battle.



Once the immediate threat is contained, Mason hops into a nearby vehicle and resumes his beeline to the summit. Enemies flip over the car's windshield and are crushed beneath its tires as it speeds down Figueroa past familiar sights like the L.A. Convention Center (home of the annual E3 convention) and Staples Center. After a semi truck plows through several cars while attempting to escape the city, Mason's progress is blocked. He hops out of the car and continues to blast enemies on foot until he encounters a new enemy – the CLAW (Cognitive Land Assault Weapon). This four-legged robotic foe features mounted weapons and poses a significant risk until its legs are taken out. After using this tactic to disable the robot, Mason sprints towards cover in a nearby shopping mall.

the demonstration makes his destructive capabilities more than apparent.

With half of L.A. in flames, the mission begins with David Mason protecting the female President of the United States in the back of a transport vehicle. Treyarch wants the future in Black Ops II to seem plausible, so the skyline resembles modern-day Los Angeles far more than the kind of futuristic cityscape you'd see in *The Fifth Element*.



Is New Multiplayer In Store?

Virtually all of the Black Ops II information Treyarch gave us centered on the campaign, but game design director David Vonderhaar teased the developer's evolving multiplayer philosophy as well. He claims that "one size doesn't fit all anymore," and that they're trying to determine "which cows are sacred, and which cows can be sacrificed." These vague comments should make more sense when the developer showcases multiplayer later in the year, but they indicate that a shake-up is in store. One thing that won't be changing is the reappearance of the popular Zombies mode, which Treyarch plans to expand with new modes and features.

A pitched battle in downtown Los Angeles features military tech fighting with you and against you



The GLAW, an AI-controlled mobile assault platform, is just one of the many weapons that players encounter.

Expert Opinions

When designing the new villain Raul Menendez, Treyarch turned to the creator of Heath Ledger's Joker from *The Dark Knight* for help. Screenwriter David S. Goyer is best known for writing the three Christopher Nolan Batman movies, *Dark City*, and the *Blade* trilogy, and he assisted Treyarch in developing the antagonist of *Black Ops II*. To get a first-hand account of what it feels like to be in the presence of a foreign military leader, Treyarch reached out to retired Marine Corps officer Oliver North. In probing him with questions regarding his experiences with Manuel Noriega during the Iran-Contra affair, Treyarch gained a better idea of how to approach Menendez's character. In addition to Goyer and North, longtime *Call of Duty* military advisor Hank Keirsej returns to ensure *Black Ops II* has as much authenticity as possible.



Call of Duty: Black Ops II features a wide variety of interesting gameplay including fighting from horseback. The developers at Treyarch motion captured a horse to ensure authenticity.

There, he uses a touchscreen on his wrist to summon two flying turrets, called quad drones, to assist him. With three guns blazing instead of one, mowing down Menendez's men seems temporarily easier. Support from the sky is welcome against these enemies, but it proves to be no help when a massive hotel topples down in front of Mason. In a scene that *Call of Duty* fans are familiar with, the player is knocked out and comes back to consciousness in a haze.

After the collapse, the scene in Los Angeles is eerily reminiscent of New York in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks. Streets and vehicles are covered in dust and debris, with a thick cloud of ash lingering over everything in sight. Mason wanders for a bit before being instructed to enter the cockpit of a military VTOL (Vertical Take-Off and Landing), with a voice over the radio assuring him that the onboard

computer will take care of most of the hard work. A nearby friendly vehicle is transporting a VIP (possibly the President), and the Harrier-like aircraft proves to be a valuable asset for clearing the path. In the process, it destroys a parking garage and causes a massive crane to crash into a skyscraper.

Eventually, the drones in the sky are deemed the primary threat. At this point, the aircraft switches from hover mode to jet mode, and a full-on dogfight begins. The player is given complete control over the plane, and the ensuing battle resembles something from *Ace Combat* rather than the on-rails air sequences from previous *Call of Duty* games. Mason's mid-air fun comes to an abrupt end when an incoming missile forces him to eject from the craft, causing his body to violently slam into a building before continuing his descent to street level (and ending

the demonstration).

Even with the series' long history of over-the-top action, this mission stands out as particularly chaotic. Thinking back over my time with each previous *Call of Duty* game, there aren't many missions that feature more sheer mayhem.

While the overall experience should be of comparable length to other installments, Treyarch is introducing new elements that should entice gamers to play through multiple times. Dave Anthony was a huge fan of "choose your own adventure" books as a child, and he wants to bring that experience to *Black Ops II*. Branching paths affect the storyline and ending of the game, and the decisions you make are much more important than whether you chose to snipe or rappel in the Los Angeles stage.



Bridging Two Generations

In the missions set during the 1980s, Frank Woods appears noticeably older than he did in the original *Black Ops*. As expected, he'll be nearing the end of his years when the narrative shifts to 2025. Treyarch studio head Mark Lamia elaborated on what his role will be in the future. "In the year 2025, David Mason is going to visit old man Woods in a place called 'the vault,' he says. "It's where the CIA keeps their retired assets that they can't allow to be out there, because they know a little too much. Because [David Mason] is trying to unravel the situation with Menendez's pending attack in the year 2025, he needs to know what's going on. He learns that Woods and his father Alex Mason had encountered Menendez back in the first Cold War. You go to the vault, you visit Woods, and through his eyes he tells you about some of those missions where they crossed paths with Menendez. This will be important as it propels the story forward in the future."



Call of Duty: Black Ops II includes close-quarters urban fights in streets all over the world



Characters can permanently die at predetermined points, and your actions in a brand-new mode can permanently alter your campaign path.

Strike Force missions are presented throughout the course of the campaign, and they're unlike anything seen before in the series. At certain points, players are presented with a choice of several missions that affect the overall global conflict. You can't do all of them in one playthrough, so multiple completions of the game are required to experience everything. The simple act of selecting between these missions isn't the most novel aspect, however.

Call of Duty's missions are often criticized for being too linear, with characters and onscreen indicators leading you by the hand from objective to objective. By contrast, these Strike Force missions are more sandbox in nature and let players complete objectives in any order they desire. We saw one in action, with the endgame being the destruction of a large transport ship that's about

to leave a dock in Singapore. An airstrike is necessary to fully destroy the shipment, but three free electron lasers make the nearby airspace too dangerous for friendly aircraft. Players are dropped into action as a nameless soldier, and they're free to take out the lasers in any fashion they deem appropriate.

Your choices aren't limited to objective order; you can pull the camera out into Overwatch mode at any point and inhabit any friendly character. You can also assume control of flying quad drones, heavily armored CLAW robots, or anything else that happens to be on your side. If you feel like having more control of the overall skirmish, you can even play the entire mission in Overwatch mode, ordering squads and units around the map to your liking.

This mission operates on a 20-minute timer, and you fail if the shipment manages to leave the dock. If you can't complete your objectives, the game doesn't simply reset you to a previous

checkpoint – failure is permanent and affects the story. Studio head Mark Lamia says players will experience "radically different endings" depending on their performance in Strike Force missions.

Black Ops II is the ninth entry in the core Call of Duty series, and the changes Treyarch is making to the campaign structure are among the most significant yet. Fans have been calling for the series to make a substantial step forward for several installments now, and all signs point to it happening in this fall's release. ♦

To see a timeline of the Call of Duty series' history, visit gameinformer.com/mag

HELL,



FROZEN OVER

DEAD SPACE 3

► **Platform**

PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

► **Style**

1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

► **Publisher**

Electronic Arts

► **Developer**

Visceral Games

► **Release**

February

Isaac Clarke has experienced unspeakable horrors. His exposure to an alien artifact known as the Marker has left him psychologically unhinged, making him a target for medical experimentation and betrayal. He has been haunted by the spirit of his girlfriend, Nicole Brennan, nearly losing his own life through her manipulations. Through it all, he's had to battle the necromorphs, a terrifying alien threat that repurposes organic life, corrupting and twisting its hosts into mind-bending forms. Through the series, players have been left with a number of nagging questions. Where did the black Marker come from? How does it work? With *Dead Space 3*, Visceral Games is not only providing answers, but it's delivering an installment that will make players look at *Dead Space* in a whole new light.

by Jeff Cork



ISAAC AWAKES WITH A START, COUGHING. HIS EYES DART AROUND FRANTICALLY AS HE TRIES TO GAIN HIS BEARINGS. HE'S SUSPENDED UPSIDE-DOWN, AND HIS FACE IS BANGED-UP AND BLOODIED.

More disconcertingly, his hair is dusted with a layer of frost. He's in a confined space made from walls of twisted metal beams and paneling, and flames lick through small gaps. His breathing is labored, and he strains to free himself. After a few agonizing seconds, he drops down, and the camera spins to meet him on the ground.

The impact frees a few icicles from the misshapen ruins of what's now clearly a crash site. Isaac rises to his feet and activates his suit's helmet, which slides over his head. The camera pulls back, giving us the first full-bodied view of the engineer. A low-health beacon flashes on his back, providing visual confirmation of what we already figured out: Isaac Clarke isn't doing so well.

He takes a few tentative steps out of the flaming scrap, and he's enveloped in a powerful blizzard. The wind howls and whistles as snow obscures the wreckage in his immediate vicinity. He trudges forward, holding a forearm up near his face in an effort to block the wind. "Ellie?" he calls

out desperately, hoping his *Dead Space 2* companion has also survived the event.

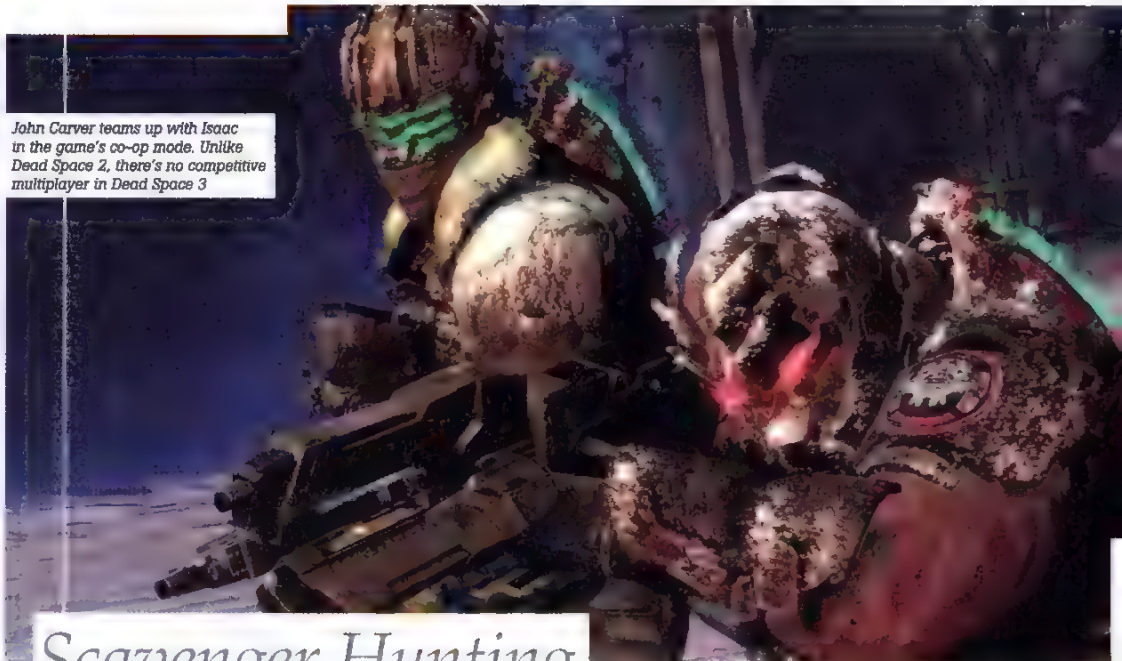
Welcome to *Tau Volantis*. This inhospitable planet is the stage for our gameplay demo. It's desolate and brutal. An unrelenting wind scours the surface, making trips of otherwise mundane distances a gamble. This is the second chapter of the game's story, which picks up a few months after *Dead Space 2* left off.

Isaac lurches on, knee deep in the snow, which is also accumulating in spots on his segmented helmet and shoulders. As a precaution, he pulls out his trusty Ripper, a rotary saw that carves through flesh as easily as the rock it was once intended for. Ahead, he sees an opening in the snow framed by a swinging gate – a sign of civilization. Suddenly, a ghastly sight pierces the haze. A creature with a glowing orange, grimacing face rushes out, and Isaac quickly dispatches it with a few well-placed blades. Isaac isn't alone.



Isaac faces weapon-wielding enemies for the first time in *Dead Space 3*

John Carver teams up with Isaac in the game's co-op mode. Unlike *Dead Space 2*, there's no competitive multiplayer in *Dead Space 3*



Scavenger Hunting

It's an unmissable beauty, really. It's got a lot of... *Dead Space 3* is a... *Dead Space 3* is a... *Dead Space 3* is a...

When you're in the game, you're... *Dead Space 3* is a... *Dead Space 3* is a... *Dead Space 3* is a...

The game is... *Dead Space 3* is a... *Dead Space 3* is a... *Dead Space 3* is a...

A NEW ENEMY

Inside the cavern, Isaac is insulated from the elements, but he's certainly no safer. A few corpses in yellow parkas lurch upright as Isaac approaches, and the Ripper is once again called into action. Necromorphs. As he blasts these new Fodder enemies apart with his weapon, we see one of *Dead Space 3*'s new features. The Fodders transform from their biped forms into one of two other abominations depending on how they're attacked. After one enemy has a leg dismantled, four large spidery legs burst from the bottom of its torso and it skitters forward. Isaac drops the beast as it charges, dragging its remaining, useless leg behind it. Another Fodder enemy gets its top half ripped off, and it responds to the destruction by growing four tendrils near its exposed spinal column. This variant is particularly aggressive, and Isaac barely has time to dismember the creature before it slashes him apart with its whipping arms.

Isaac makes his way through the cavern, dropping a few necromorphs that pop out of the snowdrifts and collecting valuable ammo and health packs. They're nowhere close to piñata-like showers, but ammo drops are more plentiful this time around, says lead gameplay and combat designer Ben Walker. Before you think that's an invitation

to fire blindly and hope for the best, consider this: Your errant shots could end up clipping an unseen Fodder, twisting it into a form that's difficult to deal with.

Eventually, Isaac's way is blocked by an abandoned excavator that's stopped next to a sphincter-tightening drop. He opens the door, and the body of its driver slides out, plunging into the darkness. He's only able to enjoy the refuge of the vehicle's interior for a moment before it lurches toward the abyss with a groan. Now Isaac has to climb up and out of the vehicle, which has listed precariously on its side. He inches up slowly, steadily, gripping the seats and working toward the steering wheel. After a few agonizing seconds, Isaac slams the frozen driver's side door open with his shoulder, escaping seconds before the machine disappears into the void.

Isaac has been doggedly traveling forward, but that isn't the only way to play, says Visceral Games' head and *Dead Space 3* executive producer Steve Papoutsis. "*Dead Space 2* and *Dead Space 1* were very linear games. If you think about it, you start the game and go from point A to point B, and it's fun and awesome. With *Dead Space 3*, we really wanted to open it up a bit. You'll still have that really consistent and linear experience if you choose to experience the game that way, but if at any moment you want to go off the rails so to speak and see what's around, you'll have the ability to explore the environment and find unique beta missions that aren't required for the completion of the game."

Ahead, he sees another tunnel. With any luck, that doomed vehicle was near an outpost. Isaac advances, taking out a few scattered necromorphs along the way. After clearing his way through the snowy burrow

he emerges in front of a massive wall. Guard towers and spotlights line the structure, which at least implies that the location could be secure from the body-stealing necromorphs.

Shelter could provide more than a psychological break from the elements. Visceral wouldn't specifically say how the cold affects Isaac, though senior producer Dave Woldman says the setting is more than window dressing. "You have a natural assumption of what that could mean for the gameplay and it's our goal to deliver or exceed on that." It seems likely that players will have to keep track of Isaac's body temperature in the unforgiving cold or suffer the consequences, similarly to how oxygen management is a critical part of certain space sections in previous installments.

ANOTHER SURVIVOR

Isaac spies a figure on top of the wall. "Carver!" he shouts. "I'm down here!"

"Clarke!" comes the response. "How the hell did you... never mind." Their conversation is cut short when John Carver's seemingly safe perch is compromised by a swarm of Fodder. Isaac rushes to a door set at the post's base with the hope of meeting up with Carver and any other crash survivors.

There's a lift on the other side of the wall, but Isaac first has to power up a nearby generator. He does so using his new telekinetic torque ability, which allows him to spin objects within his telekinetic grip — in this case, the generator's flywheel.

Isaac's ride up the wall is interrupted when a large creature, known internally at Visceral as the snow beast, pries

Shared Scares



Unitologists pose a unique threat in *Dead Space 3*, and Visceral added a cover system to account for the gunplay

open the lift's roof with its talons. The lift isn't large, which makes it tough for him to dodge the tentacle-like tongue that's emerged from the creature's gash of a mouth. The snow beast does its best to get Isaac, stabbing at him through the lift's exposed sides, until its weight shifts and the structure collapses in the snow below.

Once on the ground, we get our first good look at the beast. It's huge, and it looks more like a bug than anything else. As Isaac prepares himself for combat, tentacles erupt from its back. Each has a large, orange nodule on it – nice, soft targets. Unfortunately, Isaac is only able to shear off a few of the tentacles before the beast charges and grips him in its claws. In true *Dead Space* form, we're then treated to an extended look at Isaac's demise. His limp body is pulled close to the creature's gaping mouth by a pair of hand-like jaws. They crush him into a ball of meat before finally swallowing the bloodied chunk.

Now the elevator sequence picks up again, only with a second player joining Isaac. Instead of disappearing on the wall, Carver is at Isaac's side.

"Ellie," shouts Isaac.

"Keep it down," Carver responds brusquely. "As long as we're on this side of that wall, we're sitting ducks."

"She's in there, and we're not getting in through the front f---ing door," Isaac counters, sounding more than a bit unhinged.

Before Isaac can kickstart the generator, Carver blocks the doorway with his large frame. "Let's get one thing straight, Clarke. We came to this frozen s---hole to stop the Markers. And nothing – not you or your obsession with Ellie – is going to get in my way. You got that?"

The lift is ready, but Isaac takes a moment to change out of his damaged engineering gear into a snow suit. The suit looks similar to Isaac's engineering outfit, though there are obvious inspirations from classic 1930s mountaineering gear, including leather straps and pouches, a fur-trimmed collar, and spiky ice-gripping crampons on his boots.

With *Dead Space 3*, art director Alex Muscat says his team is working on more of a vintage look, with plenty of CRTs, dials, and knobs. For example, door mechanisms aren't hidden behind panels – you can see the wheels and lock bars as they're sprung into motion. They're capped off with electronic panels, marrying that old-school look with refined digital sci-fi. Tau Volantis is isolated, and the cold and wind have deteriorated the site's low-slung buildings.

THE CO-OP CONNECTION

After the lift is compromised and then trashed, Isaac and Carver take on the snow beast together. Here, we see how well co-op fits into the *Dead Space* formula (see Shared Scares sidebar for more details). Isaac blasts the snow beast with stasis, which temporarily slows it. At the same time, Carver whirls behind the creature and fires at the orange nodules. Enraged, the snow beast charges at Isaac, who narrowly avoids getting stabbed by quickly rolling out of the way – another new maneuver in his move set. Isaac and Carver need to be more mobile, considering *Dead Space 3*'s more open environments. The creature eventually realizes that it's outclassed by the pair, and it scampers up and over the wall. In its hasty retreat, it loosens some scaffolding, which creates a makeshift ramp.

Isaac and Carver work their way through a snow-lined corridor, and we gain some understanding of what is going on. This area was once an archaeological site, and we spy the frozen remains of a few horrific creatures. Surprisingly, none of them spring to life in a now-familiar jump scare. Instead, the tagged corpses provide a chance for Isaac to look at necromorphs in harmless – but still creepy – repose. Unfortunately for the people originally working at this facility, they unearthed something substantially more active.

"Tau Volantis, without getting into too much detail, was the site of an expedition in the past," Papoutsis says. "An expedition had gone on and then it had uncovered something very wrong and [they were] trying to take note and do what archaeologists do." While Visceral wouldn't confirm what was found, another Marker fits that description.

Walking through a corridor in the facility, their radios burst to life.

"Everyone, spread out," says a mysterious voice. "Clarke is out there somewhere. If you see him, shoot to kill."

The pair emerge in a courtyard of sorts, with a series of Quonset huts providing shelter from the growing blizzard. A few people spy the intruders, and they move into attack positions. Isaac takes cover behind a stack of supply crates and returns fire. Judging from the arcane symbols and Marker pictographs scrawled on their snowsuits, Isaac and Carver are dealing with Unitologists. The cult, which believes that the madness-inducing Marker provides the path to heaven, has been an increasing threat to Isaac over the years.

The firefight ends quickly, with Isaac and Carver

Foreign, Yet Familiar

methodically advancing toward the group. Their military-grade weapons are no match for Isaac's repurposed tools, which rip limbs from sockets and decapitate humans with ease. Unlike the necromorphs, uninfected humans don't drag themselves around when they're torn apart. Dead is dead. Usually.

We see the exception to this rule as a pair of Dividers slither toward a few decapitated humans. The creatures, which look like heads with tentacles, orientate themselves into position, and then jab themselves deep into the spines of their new hosts. The victims lurch upright, puppets to their new necromorph masters. Each of the former humans was armed with a submachine gun, and they awkwardly fire them in Isaac's direction. Their attacks come in wide, clumsy arcs, but they're no less deadly. Carver eliminates one foe, but the other Divider shows why it's a particularly fearsome threat; the necromorph uses its host's arms to wrench itself free from the body, and hurls itself at Isaac. Isaac has to quickly remove the Divider from his own face before becoming another meat puppet.

THREE-WAY BATTLES

Isaac and Carver barely have time to catch their breath before stumbling onto a battle in progress. A group of humans are doing their best to take out a similarly sized cluster of slashers. As the humans try to stave off the lashing necromorph attacks, Isaac and Carver hang back, taking potshots at both factions. Players are free to target one side or the other as the Unitologists and necromorphs fight, and then take out the wounded survivors.

Once the battle is over, Isaac walks through the carnage, pausing to stomp on the human corpses he passes. The humans won't come back to life through their own volition, but the earlier encounter with the Dividers was proof that it's best to err on the side of caution.

Finally, Isaac and Carver come to an interior chamber. The circular substructure is dominated by a massive rotary drill, which has come to a stop in front of the exit. Judging from the sparks and the fact that it's flopped to its side, the machine has seen better days. Still they need to keep moving. Isaac turns the machine on, and it stirs to life. A recorded message counts down in a warbling recording, instructing personnel to clear the deck – easy to say, but difficult to respond to once the gate slams shut and the necromorphs pour in.

The encounter is tense and brutal. Isaac and Carver have to survive the necromorph threat while also avoiding the machine, which courses over the ground like a maniacal floor waxer. Carver provides cover while Isaac slows the machine with a stasis blast. Now the machine's

weakness is evident: a glowing core module, which activates a failsafe shutdown. A few shots later, the rotary drill is lifted up.

Now we see a few of the Feeder enemies, which have a unique origin in the Dead Space universe. The creatures are more humanoid than other necromorphs, and there's a good – if not completely disgusting – reason for that. "A Feeder is what happens when a human isn't actually infected by a Swarm or by a Divider head, but by necessity ends up eating the flesh of a turned necro," Woldman says. "That's the fiction of what happens when you see a dead necro there and start to chow down on it as if it was chicken." Was that flesh eating something that the original members of the Tau Volantis expedition resorted to after food reserves were depleted? Or is that a part of a perverse Unitologist communion? Until Visceral is ready to spill more details on the story, we'll have to weigh both equally nasty options.

Before Isaac and Carver can get too comfortable, the

drill seizes back to life. It's obviously worse for the wear, as it's tilted on its side. The diamond-tipped bits are no less deadly, as it blindly scours the ground, showering the area in sparks. Enemies who are unfortunate enough to get pushed into its maw are immediately reduced to a stew of gore. After a few more volleys of fire, the device is finally destroyed.

Isaac and Carver emerge from the machine's chamber relatively unscathed, but clearly beaten down. "F— this planet," Carver mutters, "Come on. Let's get out of here."

A BIGGER BEAST

The pair wander toward their warehouse goal and stumble upon a few fellow survivors, who are just finishing up a fight against a few necromorph stragglers. The friendly reunion is interrupted by a centipede-like necromorph called the Nexus that dwarfs any creature Isaac has ever seen. Isaac is barely able to exclaim, "What the hell," before the beast, which has to top at least 30 stones, shakes the planet's surface with an unearthly roar. It slams the snowy surface with its bus-sized claws, and hunches down toward the group. Its lungs must be similarly scaled, as it draws a deep breath in, sucking crates, snow, and people into its disgusting face. Isaac frantically grips onto an icy stalagmite, but it's all in vain; he's pulled toward the beast, and it seems he can do nothing to stop it.

Before we see how Isaac can get out of this predicament, the demo is over.

The Nexus poses an interesting question. Based on what we know of the necromorphs, the species takes over the bodies of unwitting hosts and changes their form. Was the Nexus some sort of life form that was indigenous to Tau Volantis, or is it the ancient, ancestral form of a necromorph? Papoutsis wouldn't answer, but the thought of seeing completely new varieties of necromorphs – especially if they're analogues to Earth's dinosaurs – is exciting.

Even with the new setting, Dead Space 3 has that unmistakable Dead Space vibe. As Papoutsis says, Visceral created the series and has a fundamental understanding of what makes it what it is. Simultaneously, the studio has to know that what's worked in the past few games won't necessarily feel as fresh in the third main entry. Winter is a brutal and isolating season by itself; add reanimated corpses and you've got something that will give Isaac plenty of reasons to shiver in his suit.

The new feeder enemy type shows what happens to you if you're desperate enough to eat necromorph flesh



Assassin's Creed III

The first 10 things you

If you're excited about the upcoming release of Assassin's Creed III, it's time to sit up and pay attention. Another game in the series is also on track for release at the same time. Assassin's Creed III Liberation is a full-fledged entry in the series, expanding upon the Revolutionary War time period through a new hero, unseen locations, and a different storyline. Coming exclusively to PlayStation Vita from Ubisoft Sofia, Liberation aims to dramatically outdo previous handheld entries in the franchise. Our early glimpse of the game in action indicates that Ubisoft is pulling out some big guns to make the project an appropriate companion piece to its big holiday release. These are the 10 things every Assassin's Creed fan should know about this exciting new installment.

1 You're Going to the Big Easy

How familiar are you with the New Orleans of the late 1700s? New Orleans has a fascinating history during the period, which is often overlooked during American History classes in favor of the events occurring in the east coast colonies. That makes it a great setting for Assassin's Creed, exposing a new angle on past events that many players have never considered.

"Assassin's Creed III Liberation is set in New Orleans between 1765 and 1780, in the period between the end of the French and Indian War, up to the middle of the American Revolution," says producer Martin Capel. "We decided that we wanted to look at the period surrounding the American Revolution from a new and unique angle - that of a New World colony that wasn't one of the 13 colonies, and could approach the topic with the view of being outside looking in. For this, New Orleans had its own culture, history, and characteristics that made it the perfect setting for our game."

2 It's a Rebellion You Probably Don't Know About

Like all the Assassin's Creed games,

Liberation targets a very particular place and moment in time and attempts to remain authentic to the major historical events. This first Vita installment in the series tracks a tumultuous period of rebellion in New Orleans, and the events that followed during the Revolutionary War.

"The catalyst for many of the events actually occurs just before the game," Capel says. "In 1763, the French and Indian War ended. This war affected the whole eastern seaboard of North America: France ceded Canada to the British, and also ceded Louisiana to Spain, including New Orleans." The New Orleans population didn't take well to the news that they now belonged to Spain, and a short-lived rebellion flared up in 1768.

After that rebellion, New Orleans became an important port for the colonies. France and Spain filtered supplies through the city and on to the eastern colonies, and all three powers were fighting against a mutual enemy in the British.

Liberation's plot also involves an unusual cultural practice of the day called plaçage. "New Orleans and its surrounding areas was also famous for its slave trade and its system of plaçage, whereby wealthy French and Spanish men entered into an arrangement with a woman of African, Indian, or Creole descent," Capel describes. "This was a form of temporary marriage that lasted until a



Liberation

need to know by Matt Miller

'more acceptable' wife could be found. This system allowed for some women, or placées, and their children to gain their freedom, wealth, and positions of power within society."

3 The Protagonist is a Woman

Aveline is the first female lead for the series. Modeled off several distinct citizens of New Orleans in the 18th century, Aveline occupies a position of wealth and respect within the city, giving her broad influence and resources to pursue her clandestine path as an Assassin.

"Aveline is an Assassin of mixed heritage. She is the daughter of a wealthy French merchant and his African placée bride," Capel explains. "Aveline is raised with privilege and love, even after her mother disappears and her father marries her step-mother. As Aveline grows she develops into a strong-willed young woman and starts to take notice of the contrasts around her – wealth and poverty, freedom and slavery – and while torn between the different values she inherited from her parents, she forms her own set of values, including a vehement anti-slavery stance."

» **Platform**
PlayStation Vita

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Sofia

» **Release**
October 30





4 This is True Assassin's Creed Gameplay

We saw a brief demo of Aveline in action, and we can attest that Ubisoft is delivering a gameplay experience with similar beats to the console games in the series. Running along rooftops, leaping between tree branches, and even driving a carriage through the rubbish-strewn streets of New Orleans, Aveline's adventure takes place in large gameplay areas with plenty to explore. "I can confirm that you can run, climb, fight, and explore the entirety of New Orleans without loading a new area," Capel says.

Thankfully, Aveline isn't just a re-skin of the movesets from other Assassin heroes of the past. "We have a team of animators dedicated to ensuring that Aveline moves as people expect a strong, female Assassin to move," Capel says. "This in itself presented its own challenge, and it took us several attempts capturing different actors before we felt we had even just the right basic movement for Aveline."

5 You Have a Mentor

Beyond Aveline, we don't know much about the characters in Liberation. However, Ubisoft revealed one important figure: Agate, an escaped slave who figures prominently in the story.

"Agate is the leader of the Assassins in New Orleans. He recruits Aveline into the Assassins and acts as her mentor throughout the game," Capel says. "Aveline and Agate have a relationship that can be tempestuous at times. Agate finds Aveline impulsive and does not always trust her judgment. He is quick to lose his temper when Aveline acts without consulting him, but he is always quick to forgive."

6 You'll Visit the Bayou

As Connor wanders the frontier wilderness of Assassin's Creed III, Aveline has her own expansive world to explore outside of New Orleans. "The Bayou is an area of swamp where dry ground is rare and the trees might be not only the fastest way of travelling from one place to another, but also the safest," Capel says. "Within this region, the player will encounter smugglers and other outcasts from New Orleans living in their own settlements and following their own rules." The most exciting feature of the Bayou will almost certainly be one of its well-known residents; alligators wait on the banks of the swamp or hide beneath the murky waters. Wise players will know to avoid the potent predators.



7 Combat Should Be Familiar

Battles in Liberation are based on the system being utilized in Assassin's Creed III. "This allows Aveline to wield two weapons at the same time, and is based much more around player skill and timing," Capel says. "We have also created our own enemy archetypes and missions to ensure that combat presents both a challenge and an opportunity for players, where striking at the right moment will clear your path of opponents much faster."

In the demo we saw several familiar button options in the upper right of the screen, like the counter and kick. Aveline also seemed to have an interesting ability to mark targets of her attacks to create chains of devastating blows. In addition, the character had a wide array of tools and weapons to pick from two separate weapon wheels, but we only got to see some of these implements in action.

8 There Are Lots of New Weapons

"New Orleans was very much a melting pot of the Old and New World at this time, with people from different cultures arriving from every direction," Capel says. "Combined with Aveline's mixed heritage and privileged upbringing, this gave us a wealth of modern and traditional weapons to draw upon for our new Assassin."

Among the more unusual of the traditional weapons is a blowpipe. Allowing for silent kills, the blowpipe lets Aveline drop her targets from a distance and sneak away unobserved. Also on tap is a vicious-looking sugarcane machete. Kills we witnessed make the weapon appear like a brutal tool, part slashing and part beating enemies with the serrated blade.

In addition, Ubisoft promises pistols, muskets, grenades, swords, and knives. All that is on top of the obvious; Aveline will have her own set of hidden blades for the most delicate of assassinations.

9 A Present-Day Link Exists, But Not the One You'd Expect

Liberation does not connect to the story of Desmond, the present-day hero who has been living out the lives of his ancestors. Even as Desmond learns about a new historical hero named Connor in Assassin's Creed III, other people are now using the Animus to glimpse into the past. Liberation is an actual product created by Abstergo for the public — you the player are its target audience. "The game has been released as a propaganda tool by Abstergo, who want players to experience a gray area of the Assassin/Templar conflict as an Assassin rather than a Templar," Capel tells us.

10 It's Only on Vita

This new installment in the Assassin's Creed franchise is exclusive to the Vita, and several of the features take advantage of that platform's unique capabilities, so it's unwise to hold your breath waiting for a release on other systems. Guaranteed features include geolocation, motion detection, camera functionality, and touch controls.

While the exact way each of those tools play into the game remain under wraps, Capel offers at least one instance to whet our appetites: "An example of how we are using the Vita's touch controls is in our new pick pocket routine," Capel tells us. "This uses both the front and rear touch controls, and allows you to precisely select a victim and pick their pocket. The more skilful and subtle you are, the more rewards you can steal without being detected." ♦

To read our complete interview with Martin Capel regarding Assassin's Creed III Liberation, visit gameinformer.com/mag.

Five Things We Don't Know

- 1 -

WHAT'S THE ECONOMY SYSTEM?

Assassin's Creed games typically feature complex gameplay loops tying together the acquisition of money, the renovation or creation of new buildings, and the conquering of the play space. Ubisoft has yet to confirm Liberation has these features, but assures us there is a functional economy system.

- 2 -

HOW WILL MULTIPLAYER WORK?

Ubisoft won't say how, but Capel promises "a multiplayer specifically tailored to the Vita experience." We're crossing our fingers for the opportunity to assassinate other player's characters if we manage to get close enough to where they're playing in the real world.

- 3 -

WHAT OTHER LOCATIONS WILL YOU VISIT?

New Orleans and the Bayou sound intriguing, but most full-blown Assassin's Creed games offer some other options. We don't know any specific locations, but we did get a big hint. "Liberation will also take players across the Gulf into Mexico," Capel says.

- 4 -

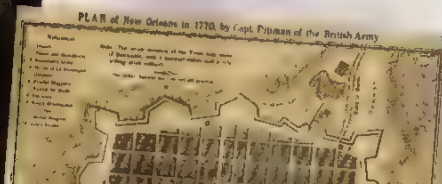
HOW ABOUT THE BROTHERHOOD SYSTEM?

Beginning with Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood, the series has included a mechanic to interact with and command other Assassins. Whether or not any version of this mechanic is making its way into Liberation is unknown.

- 5 -

HOW WILL IT TIE INTO ASSASSIN'S CREED III?

Liberation is coming out on the same day as its console cousin, so it's easy to presume the two games will intertwine. "I can tell you that Aveline and Connor do meet in Liberation, but I can't go into any further details at the moment," Capel reveals. The nature of the relationship between the two protagonists remains unrevealed, so any guesses we make are nothing more than conjecture. However, Connor's intent focus on liberty and freedom and Aveline's ties to a French family make us wonder about the franchise's future directions in later 18th century events, most notably the French Revolution.





God of War: Ascension

Sony unveils the series' multiplayer debut

When news of *God of War: Ascension*'s existence leaked, many wondered what they'd see when Sony officially spilled the beans on the prequel. I attended a recent preview event for the game, and there was no shortage of chatter and predictions amongst journalists before the presentation began. Would the game take place before Kratos' family died? If so, would he still have his trademark Blades of Chaos? What antagonists can he take down after slaying so many gods? When the presentation came to an end, we still didn't have answers to these questions. Instead, we were shown a glimpse of the new multiplayer mode.

When game director Todd Papy began the demonstration, it was clear the team planned on teasing the crowd with some misdirection. The familiar image of Kratos' face graced the menu screen, and the camera pulled out to reveal his body without his trademark ash-covered skin. He carried a large sword in lieu of his traditional blades, and pulled a mask down over his face. Suddenly, a cyclops burst out of a nearby door and began swinging his club wildly at Kratos. A battle ensued that resembled those of past games, with Kratos slashing at the creature's legs while evading the swings of his club. Another masked human appeared and began fighting the Cyclops, which everyone in attendance assumed to be a co-op mode. The duo teamed up to bring down the beast, with Kratos

gutting him from the front while the other slashed his neck from behind.

Once the cyclops was dead, the two humans ziplined down to another battlefield. Numerous combatants swiped at each other with swords and hammers while the massive one-eyed Polyphemus (Poseidon's son, a cyclops who was featured in Homer's *Odyssey*) struggled to free himself from chains in the background of the arena. Suddenly we realized that we were watching a full-on multiplayer battle, with two teams of four eviscerating each other in a mode known as Execution – essentially a spin-off of Domination modes in other multiplayer games.

The multiplayer combat retains the dramatic flair of past *God of War* games, with the camera zooming in on brutal kills that split enemies from shoulder to stomach. When the character we were watching had a chance, he ran to a set of blue-tinted gears and rotated them until they turned red. After repeating this process with another set of gears, the glowing Spear of Olympus plummeted from the sky onto the battlefield. The red Spartan soldier grabbed the spear and began throwing it at the blue Trojan warriors, then worked his way towards Polyphemus in the background. On his way there, he was forced to dodge fire and spike traps sprung by the opposing team.

Once the Spartan reached Polyphemus (who Papy refers to as "the Megalops"), he began slashing at his giant fingernails until the beast



lurched forward in pain. A Spartan soldier then reapt onto the beast's face and slashed down across his lips, splitting his mouth in two vertically. At this point, the rest of the Spartan soldiers threw chain blades into Polyphemus' single eye and pulled him closer to the edge of the platform they were standing on. The final image of the demo was of a Spartan soldier leaping toward the cyclops with a spear, ready to plunge it through the beast's massive eye.

While the demo began with the image of Kratos, the future God of War does not appear in the multiplayer mode. Papy explained that he didn't want online play to consist of a team of green Kratoses going up against a team of yellow Kratoses, and he also didn't want to give a single player the benefit of controlling him. "Nobody wants to be Robin, and we would have had a bunch of Robins," Papy said.

Instead, players create a character and align themselves with a god. Your choice of worshipping Zeus, Poseidon, Ares, or Hades determines which unlocks, perks, and special abilities your character gains. As you progress through the ranks, you gain access to more abilities and items, including customized armor sets. Papy said there won't be any female combatants in the game, as they "do not look pretty" with the traditional combat equipment that multiplayer characters wear.

Sony Santa Monica plans to include approximately seven multiplayer maps, with five large, unique environments (such as the Polyphemus stage we saw) and two smaller arenas. Split-screen support and drop-in/drop-out play are not included, and players can slightly alter the mostly fixed camera. The team said it is more concerned with quality than quantity, so they

want to keep the number of modes limited so as not to segregate the player base.

This first look at Ascension was intriguing, but the crowd seemed disappointed after they realized we wouldn't be learning anything about the single-player portion of the game (although Papy confirmed that the game includes one). Bringing multiplayer modes into a third-person action game presents different challenges than first-person shooters, which was made more than apparent in the awful online play of Ninja Gaiden 3. On the other hand, Sony has always ensured that this franchise meets a high quality bar, and I imagine it expects the same from multiplayer. Gauging the depth and fun factor of Execution after one brief demo is difficult, but it left me eager to learn more about God of War's multiplayer debut. » **Dan Ryckert**

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
(8-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment
- » **Developer**
SCE Santa Monica
Studio
- » **Release**
TBA



Skylanders Giants

The collection grows

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

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Toys for Bob

» **Release**
October

Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure emerged as a genuine phenomenon for gamers and collectors alike. Eight months have passed since the game's release, and retailers are still struggling to keep the game's figures in stock. Collectors are turning to secondhand markets to pay top dollar for the rarest figures. The translucent variant of Wham-Shell is selling for over \$500 on eBay. The limited edition Toy Fair version of Cynder is fetching a cool \$250. Even newly released figures – which are not short stocked – are selling for \$50 to people who cannot wait to find them on store shelves.

Activision, a company well versed in yearly sequels, is wasting no time giving collectors more to hunt for. Skylanders Giants will release this October with 16 new figures, eight of which are of a new Giant variety. These figures tower

over the standard assortment, and will undoubtedly cost more. All of the original Skylanders toys are compatible with the Giants game, and in case you were hoping you'd get the chance to purchase them for a second time, Activision is releasing LightCore variants of these figures, as well as reposed versions of the first game's most beloved personalities.

When a LightCore figure is placed on the Portal of Power, specific parts of the figure light up. Toys for Bob's producer and chief-of-staff Alex Ness explains: "Prism Break is one of the LightCore Skylanders. When he is placed on the Portal, all of his crystals light up. Our Giants will have this feature, too. We didn't only want to innovate in-game elements of Skylanders Giants – we also wanted to innovate the toys themselves."

While the LightCore technology produces an

effect purely for show, the Giants figures have an actual effect on the gameplay. They share the same levels as the standard figures, yet only the Giants can perform the game's new Feats of Strength. "We have some floating islands that are connected together by a huge, long chain," Ness points out. "A Giant can pick up the chain and pull in the floating island towards himself. The Giant can just walk over to the newly pulled-over island and explore whatever awaits."

These gargantuan beasts are also exceptional combatants. A great example is a Giant named Bouncer. Like all Giants, Bouncer can run through walls and towers over foes, but his size isn't his primary strength. He's a Tech Skylander, and his powers stem from gadgets. Bouncer can shoot bullets out of his fingertips and launch rockets from his shoulders. "He's quite famous for various

The New Skylanders

Only four of the 16 new figures have been announced, one of which is a reposed character from Spyro's Adventure. Here's a breakdown of each of these characters' known powers and origin stories.



Tree Rex

Type: Giant **Element:** Life

Before Tree Rex was a giant wielding an arm cannon, he was a majestic tree. When the Arkeyans built a factory next to his forest, his roots sucked in the factory's pollutants, and he mutated over time. He is now on a quest to destroy anyone who threatens the planet.

Cynder

Type: Dragon **Element:** Undead
Cynder is a fan-favorite from Spyro's Adventure, and her popularity has led to an increase in Giants. This new version of her offers increased stats, as well as a new "Wow how" upgrade power.





The Giants are considerably larger than the standard figs

Giant Origins

Alex Ness details the backstory behind the lumbering beasts of Skyland:

"They were huge like dinosaurs, and they also just completely disappeared one day. Back then, an evil race of magical, technological beings called the Arkeyans ruled over Skylands with an iron fist. And I mean that literally. The source of all the Arkeyans' power was an enchanted iron fist. It was the Giants who banded together to free Skylands from the evil Arkeyans' reign. This final battle between the Giants and the Arkeyans is what led to the Giants being blasted to Earth, where they were buried for centuries. When Kaos (resident "bad guy" of Skylands) manages to reactivate one of the old Arkeyan war machines, the Giants become unearthed, and must return to Skylands to deal with this ancient threat once again."

ricochet trick shots with these blasters," Ness adds.

Ness also pointed out that having larger characters in levels will not affect how the game is played, even for cooperative play, which remains a couch-only affair. Will the series eventually adopt online play? Possibly. "Our primary focus is really getting people in the same room to play together," Ness says. "But...I'm sure online co-op and battle mode could be pretty sweet, so it's probably something we'd like to explore in the future." The only changes made to cooperative play will not be noticeable to most players. The development team is working to keep players together in more natural ways. "There are definitely some good co-op lessons we learned while making Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure, so we're applying those learnings to Skylanders Giants every day," Ness says.

If you've already leveled up your Skylanders

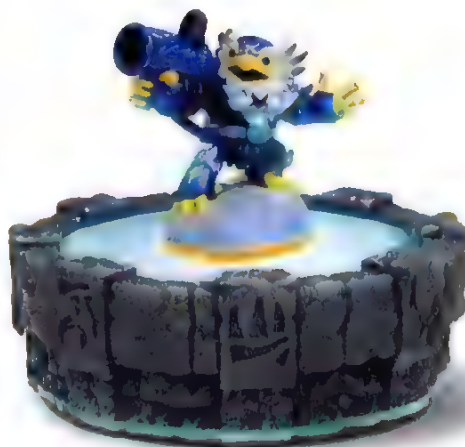
to the max level cap of 10, don't retire them just yet; Toys for Bob is expanding the cap to 15. Character customization is not expanding beyond the collectible hats. However, players will be able to customize the Hub world, which is now an airship. "Where Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure had players returning to the same location every time, Skylanders Giants is a bit more of a road trip," Ness says. "Players will embark on a long journey via this amazingly unlucky airship – piloted by Flynn – and return to this airship after each level and then fly the airship to the next level." This airship changes as the game progresses. As to how deep this customization is, we'll have to wait and see. • **Andrew Reiner**

To read our full interview with Alex Ness, head to www.gameinformer.com/mag



Jet-Vac

Type: Regular **Element:** Air
As Jet-Vac's name implies, he's basically a flying vacuum cleaner. The vacuum device he wields gifts him with the ability of flight. As a member of the Sky Barons, Jet-Vac should have wings, and he did at one time, but when his homeland fell under attack, he gifted them to a mother so that she could transport her children to a safe location.



Bouncer

Type: Giant **Element:** Tech
With his love of technology, you'd think Bouncer would originate from a lab or science experiment, but he was actually Skyland's version of a jock. He was a star robo-ball player until the Arkeyan Empire destroyed his hometown and the robo-ball fields. The sport no longer exists. Bouncer's bid for revenge is fueled by his heavy firepower.



Transformers: Fall of Cybertron

Hands-on with the robots in disguise



Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

Style
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

Publisher
Activision

Developer
High Moon Studios

Release
August 28

Whether you spent your youth transforming toy robots and humming along to the cartoon theme song, or you just love a good sci-fi action game, you have reason to be excited. Fall of Cybertron is coming along beautifully as it sets its targeting lasers on a late August release. After witnessing several new levels and finally getting our hands on the game in action, it's easy to conclude that the latest Transformers game offers one of the most varied gameplay experiences in the genre.

The game is banking on the appeal of that variety. With numerous playable protagonists, each with their own powers and styles of interaction, the game offers a wide breadth of experiences. From flying and driving to shooting and

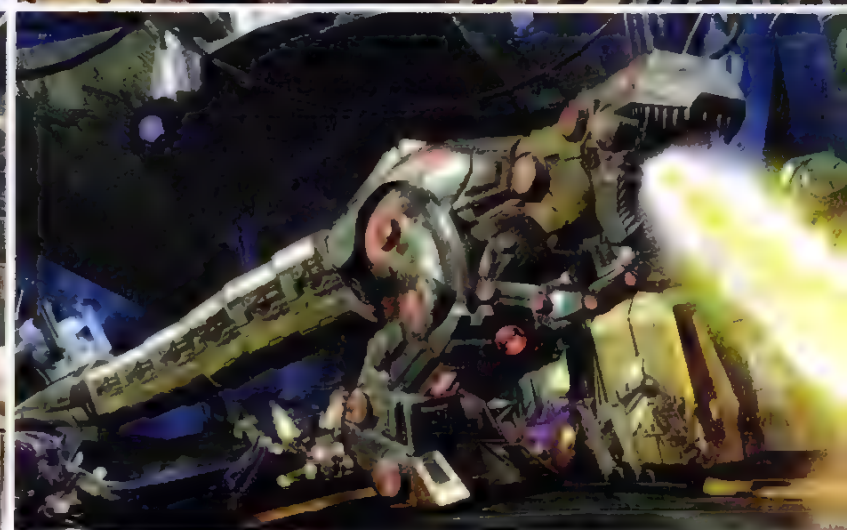
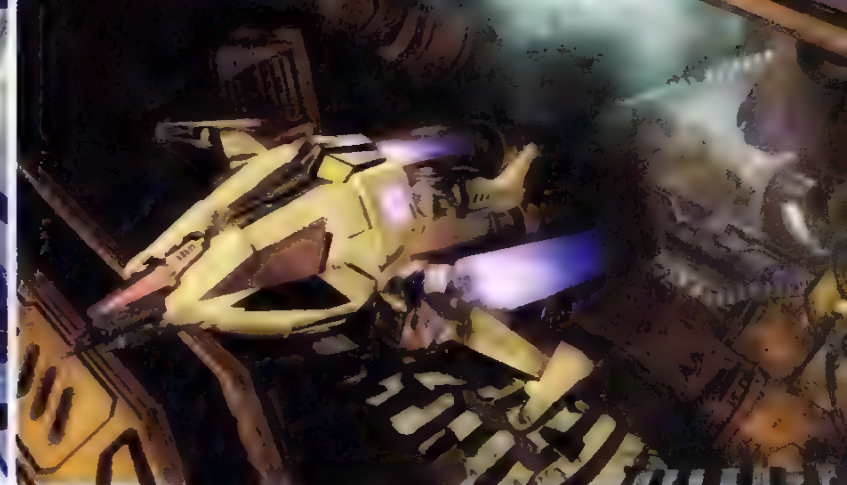
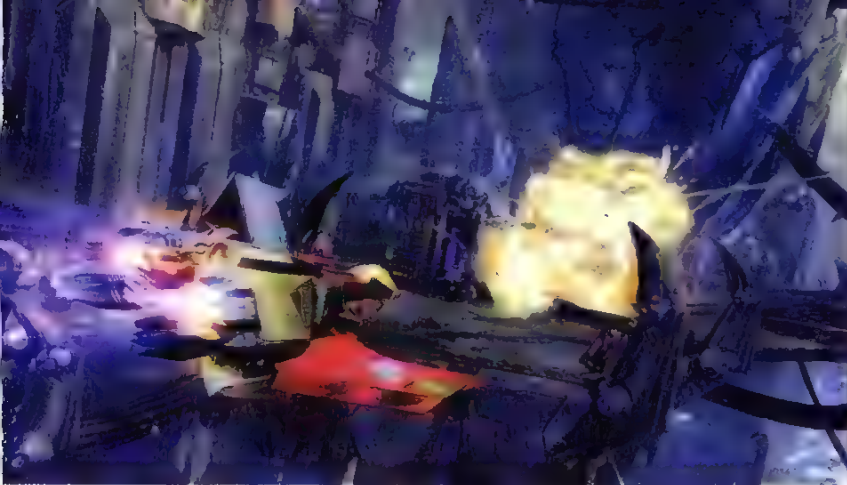
melee – and even stealth – the game switches things up all the time. While Fall of Cybertron has abandoned the cooperative campaign play of its predecessor, the increased focus on a crafted single-player experience has paid dividends. A deep upgrade system lets players improve the many unusual weapons, and the action is tailor-made to cater to each character's strengths.

We saw a new sequence starring Starscream, the Decepticon flyer with delusions of leadership. The robot comes equipped with a stealth field and a sniper rifle, offering some amusing variations for bringing down the hapless Autobots. As the robot jets between sky-high platforms, he regularly approaches under invisibility, sneaks behind enemies, kicks them between the legs,

and as they reel, slaps on a detonation pack to finish them off. If an area is too packed with enemies, a few rounds shot from a distant rooftop even the odds. Elsewhere in the level, a special nod to franchise fans shows up; hidden as an easter egg in a distant building, Starscream can find and then wear a familiar crown, first seen in the 1986 animated movie.

After witnessing some bad guy action, we see an extended scene with Optimus Prime. The Autobot leader is a devastating force on the battlefield, but with the skyscraper-sized Metroplex on back-up, he's unstoppable. A timer counts down between opportunities to call down an artillery strike on enemy troops. When the button is pressed, you can see the distant, towering bot





fire off missiles that home in on your targets to obliterate them. As Prime nears the giant cannon he must destroy, he calls in Metroplex, and the giant transformer appears overhead and shreds the looming cannon into pieces.

After witnessing these demos, the guys from High Moon pass us the controller, and we get into the fight. First up is the opening scene of the game — a dramatic outer space ship-to-ship battle that doubles as the game's tutorial. Amid explosions and laser blasts, we navigate Bumblebee through the fight, picking up instruction as we go. Controls feel like a natural evolution of the previous games, but shooting is tighter and more reactive, and the camera is panned closer to the character to accentuate the gorgeous animations. Bumblebee's opening scene ends with a climactic battle between Megatron and Optimus Prime. When our little yellow hero leaps into the path of one of Megatron's attacks, he is critically injured. As the light fades from his eyes, it serves as the narrative excuse to jump back to six days earlier, where the bulk of the game's story takes place.

Part of that story is playing as the melee powerhouse Grimlock. As the team promised months ago, the character is built to provide plenty of up-close brawling. The melee system is simple yet satisfying, as the robot swings a gleaming energy sword, or brings up a towering shield to block Insecticon assaults. Another button picks up one of Grimlock's teeming attackers, and we can throw it back to destroy more. After we rack up enough carnage, we trigger Grimlock's rage-fueled transformation into a robotic T-Rex. Here, the controls remain the same, but the destruction factor is amped up even more. While we only play a

brief section, it's clear that Grimlock will be a potent distraction from more careful, strategic gameplay in other levels.

Our last hands-on section puts us in control of the Decepticon Vortex. The transforming helicopter sends bombs careening down onto Autobot tanks. When he sets down to engage in ground combat, his special ability sends an energy shockwave out that devastates multiple foes in an instant. We complete our demo before Vortex meets up with his teammates to combine into the juggernaut known as Bruticus, but we're assured those sections are still planned as playable sequences in the final game.

Having only played bits and pieces of each character's full sequences, it's impossible to tell if High Moon's gamble on so many playable characters will pay off. In the best-case scenario,

the flow between different characters will be smooth and the changes between control schemes will be intuitive and well-explained. In the worst case, the different characters will feel too different from one another to create a cohesive gameplay experience across the breadth of the campaign and multiplayer. While it's certainly a danger, we left our time with the new Transformers game feeling hopeful about its prospects. Action was fast and fun, the characters we played were easy to control and pick up, and the game was positively brimming with nods to the wider fiction. — **Matt Miller**

What about multiplayer? During High Moon's visit to the GI office, we also got to try out some of the redesigned cooperative multiplayer mode called Escalation. To see our hands-on video of Escalation in action, visit gameinformer.com/mag

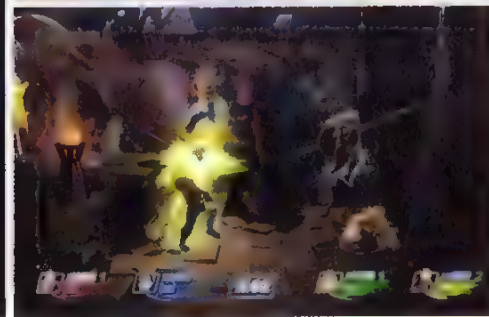


Tristram Gray

Scattered throughout the game, and players will enjoy the idea that it's not just the planet-wide computer network that's broken here, but also the energy grid. The upgrade system is a permanent one, rather than a one-time purchase. It's a good idea, but just a few of the things Cybertron has an extremely large and varied arsenal, and each upgrade for a given piece is an impressive improvement to its capabilities, like a 50 percent damage boost on a rifle. Weapons are reminiscent of a game like Resistance, in which dramatic special abilities can change the shape of a battlefield. In short, weaponry and a sense of progression are two of the biggest areas to see advances over the previous game in the series.

PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale

Sony's heavy hitters duke it out



Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1 to 4-Player
(4-Player Online)

Publisher
Sony

Developer
SuperBot Entertainment

Release
2012

Rumors of a Sony fighter in the style of Super Smash Bros. have been swirling for quite some time now, and the publisher finally let the cat out of the bag at a recent showcase event. PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale features a cast of characters from the brand's 18 years in the gaming industry, and I played it using a restricted selection of combatants.

Sony unveiled Kratos, Sly Cooper, Parappa the Rapper, Fat Princess, Sweet Tooth, and Killzone's Colonel Radec as playable characters. The demo included four stages: Hades (God of War), Sandover Village (Jak & Daxter), Dreamscape (LittleBigPlanet), and Metropolis (Ratchet & Clank). Unlike the singularly focused stages of Super Smash Bros., most of these stages eventually morph to showcase trademarks from another PlayStation series.

Hades is set in the Underworld, with the name-sake god performing shockwave attacks on the

playing field. The background eventually shifts to a Patapon stage, and the dancing creatures begin throwing spears at players. The grassy islands of Sandover Village are visited by golfers from Hot Shots at certain points in the round, and they begin showering golf balls from the sky. Metropolis is a futuristic city that features an appearance from Captain Qwark. His visit is cut short thanks to the Hydra from God of War, who bursts through the stage and sends the bumbling superhero flying. Dreamscape feels different than the other stages, as it's set in the level editor of LittleBigPlanet. You see Pop-it bubbles and creation elements spring up throughout the fight, which creates different platforms to battle on. Keeping with the hybrid stage theme, it eventually turns into an impromptu game of Buzz!

Quiz. A PlayStation-related question appears on the screen, and the fighters have to stand on the platform that corresponds with the correct answer to avoid taking damage.

Like Smash Bros., each character has a variety of moves accessed via a directional input in conjunction with an attack button (square, circle, or triangle). Every character has approximately two dozen attacks in their arsenal, and they vary wildly. Kratos has his trademark blades, Radec stays at range with his sniper rifle and other guns, Sweet Tooth controls space with land

mines, and Parappa relies on the karate moves he picked up from Chop Chop Master Onion.

None of the game elements stray from the Smash Bros. formula, but the scoring method has notable differences. Attacking foes fills an AP bar at the bottom of the screen, which grants three levels of a super attack once filled. You can attack an opponent all day, but the only way you can score a point is by knocking them out with a super attack. Level one attacks are usually limited, such as Parappa's spin kick. Once you get to level three, however, you're almost guaranteed a couple of points with screen-clearing attacks. Parappa breaks into a rap performance that annihilates nearby opponents, while Sweet Tooth transforms into his robot form for an insane damage boost.

Considering the importance of super attacks, managing your AP becomes the focus. Items like rocket launchers and the Spear of Destiny from God of War are occasionally dropped onto the battlefield, and they can be used to reduce the super meter of opponents. AP orbs can be granted by certain moves, such as Parappa's Boxy Boy boombox ability.

Nintendo's popular brawler clearly inspired PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale, but I had fun playing the game. Sony's characters may not fit the colorful, family-friendly mold of Nintendo's creations, but their differences make for some entertaining and varied attacks and play styles. While plenty of roster reveals are inevitable before Battle Royale is released, I can't help but wonder if it'll compare to the variety in Super Smash Bros. That said, we wouldn't be surprised to see big names like Nathan Drake, Sackboy, Jak, and Ratchet join the fray (Crash Bandicoot is likely excluded due to the fact that he isn't Sony-exclusive anymore). It's far from a novel idea, but All-Stars Battle Royale is a fast paced and fun four-player experience. » Dan Hyckert





Darksiders II

The Horsemen's dark and violent history revealed

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were once part of a larger race called the Nephilim before taking on their roles as Horsemen. The Nephilim were not created by the gods of the Darksiders fiction. After discovering that the four horsemen were responsible for the genocide of their own race in Darksiders II's opening cut-scene, we join Death as he begins his mission to clear his brother War's guilty name by seeking the Crowfather's help.

The game begins with Death on top of his mount riding towards an imposing temple on a snowy path as the wind whips snow and ice through the air. Death dismounts and begins his climb. The original Darksiders was often compared to God of War and Zelda, and Darksiders II invites another comparison. Moving around the environment feels like the 2008 Prince of Persia, and shares a similar death mechanic. Death cannot really die, so when you fall into a pit, he immediately flies into the air, resetting back to his last point of solid ground. He latches onto and runs along walls just by jumping toward them, and grabs handholds to propel himself up and across walls.

I meet my first enemies after scaling a few walls, and numbers fly from their bodies with each consecutive hit. The numbers dictate how much damage I'm dealing, and the ice monsters flash yellow to show that they are receiving damage. Both the numbers and the flashes of yellow can be turned off if you want an experience free of statistical reminders that you are playing a video game.

As I climb higher and higher, I meet a gigantic ice monster larger than any I had previously encountered. He doesn't provide much of a challenge for Death, but the fight takes considerably longer than the smaller ice monsters. These creatures are referred to internally at Vigil as "nosses," which is short for "not bosses." They're big, impressive, and dangerous, but not

quite a miniboss or a boss.

Continuing my climb, I fight more ice monsters and collect assorted weapons and armor. By the time I finally make it to the top, I'm sporting stronger gloves and boots and a stronger secondary weapon, which I have changed out twice. The loot you collect in Darksiders II can be equipped or sold to a merchant as you would expect, but you can also feed it to possessed weapons. Possessed weapons start out weak, but gain in power and reflect the attributes of the items they are fed.

The Crowfather is an old man, shackled to a glowing green amulet at the top of the structure. Death seeks the old man to help him save War, but he refuses to help Death because of the torment he has put him through. Death and his Horsemen brethren killed the Nephilim, but Death forced the Crowfather to carry their souls by refusing to destroy them, and the mythic figure now contains the Nephilim souls in the glowing green amulet. The Crowfather has been driven insane by their endless crying. He seeks vengeance for the fate given to him by Death, and changes his appearance to look like War before attacking him. Death makes short work

of the disguised sorcerer, but the amulet of souls breaks during the tussle and Death accidentally absorbs the spirits, leaving a garish scar on his shoulder.

Death is "a bit of a d---," says Simon Watts, THQ's global communications manager. He is not concerned with honor like War was, and is willing to lie, threaten, and trick in order to get his way. In his exchange with the Crowfather, he even laughed, making a small joke about his predicament. He is more casual with his approach to his mission. For Death, the ends justify the means, which is why he seeks to reset humanity, rendering his brother's crime null and void, rather than prove his innocence.

Darksiders II received a disappointing delay recently, but it was an elected delay on the part of the team at Vigil. Darksiders II is content-complete, meaning everything is in place and ready to go. Vigil just wants more time to polish its sequel and make it as close to perfect as it can. My hands-on time ended right after defeating the Crowfather, but I made every effort to grab the controller back and continue playing. I didn't want to put it down. » **Kyle Hilliard**

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
Vigil

» **Release**
August



The Unfinished Swan

Giant Sparrow brings its blank canvas to PSN

Platform
PlayStation 3

» Genre

1-Player Adventure

» Publisher

Sony Computer Entertainment

» Developer

Giant Sparrow

» Release

2012

Housed in Sony's Santa Monica studio, indie developer Giant Sparrow recently unveiled *The Unfinished Swan*, an upcoming PSN exclusive. The opening animation tells the story of a young boy named Monroe who has a mother who starts (but doesn't finish) paintings. Among her 300 unfinished paintings, Monroe's favorite is the swan. The boy wakes one morning to find the swan is gone, and he sets out in search of the titular creature.

When players assume control, they're presented with nothing more than a white screen. Designer Ian Dallas explains that many players are thrown off by this novel beginning, and they begin hitting every button on the controller in an effort to make something happen. From the game's first-person perspective, the R2 button causes Monroe to toss a black ball of paint in the direction of your small reticle. This supply of paint seems to be unlimited in the demo; players can toss as much or as little of it as they want. Painted surfaces and white space appear starkly contrasted; I've never seen a game feature an art style quite like this.

As these paintballs begin to cover the environment, the space around Monroe becomes clearer. Walls and ceilings are suddenly visible, and objects like fences and plant life indicate when you step out into nature. At one point, a gigantic frog appears when it is struck with paint. As you navigate the environments with standard FPS controls, this mechanic gives *The Unfinished Swan* a distinct sense of discovery.

Monroe finds his way to a statue garden maintained by a character known only as the King. Tossing paint around this area reveals large statues of a chicken, a piece of bacon on a fork, and the King himself. Dallas says the King is a recurring character throughout the narrative, appearing at various stages of his life. All we know about him at this point is that he was going through what Giant Sparrow referred to as his "Salvador Dali" phase, complete with pencil-thin mustache.

After painting a portion of the statue garden, Monroe walks up some stairs to an overlook. Here, he can see the entire path he took to get there. Everything is white except for the spots that have been painted, and everything from the initial room to the fenced path is visible. This interesting visual demonstration of player progression indicates what kind of play style was used. If you use paint sparingly, you'll see a few black spots dotted across a white background. If you prefer to cover your surroundings in paint, you'll see a more complete picture of where you've been.

Initially hiding the world from gamers is a novel concept, and exploring the surroundings yields rewards like collectible toys. We saw a section in the main menu that was dedicated to these, but Giant Sparrow wasn't ready to show them off yet.

Monroe turns from the overlook and spots a red letter T, which he hits with a paintball. This expands into a full page from a storybook to tell a tale about the King. The narrative continually unfolds in this fashion as players progress to reveal plenty of surprises. Some gamers may draw comparisons to other artsy downloadable titles like *Journey*, *Limbo*, and *Braid*, but *The Unfinished Swan* plays like nothing I've seen before. When I asked Dallas if Monroe would ever earn new colors, he said they're focusing more on introducing new game mechanics, and declined to elaborate further. For a game that's so focused on discovery, surprise is a large part of the appeal. — Dan Ryckert



Monroe's favorite painting is the swan.



Monroe's favorite painting is the swan.



Monroe encounters a frog early in the story.



The Witch and the Hundred Knights

The creators of Disgaea move into the action RPG

Nippon Ichi made a name for itself with Disgaea, the turn-based strategy tactical RPG with an inviting art style and deep gameplay that drew in fans of triple-digit playtime clocks. The Witch and the Hundred Knights is a bit of a departure for the team. It's an action/RPG, so foes don't take turns planning out strategies. Players control a knight under the command of a witch, slashing away at enemies and pulling off combos.

In the world of The Witch and the Hundred Knights, the Forest Witch and the Swamp Witch have been fighting for the past hundred years. Players take on the role of the Swamp Witch, but that doesn't necessarily mean she is the protagonist. You can be a good witch and help non-playable characters you meet along the way, or you can kill and pillage if you want. Players have a lot of choice when it comes to interacting with the non-enemies of the game. The ultimate goal, however, is to restore peace and stability. It's up to you if that means helping those in need or simply taking what you need.

Artist Takehito Harada, whose work will be familiar if you have played any of the Disgaea games or Phantom Brave, is behind the look of the game. Those titles have all featured two-dimensional hand-drawn sprites, but The Witch and the Hundred Knights is a fully 3D game with polygonal environments and characters.

Combat takes place from an overhead perspective in a stage covered with the fog of war. Exploration reveals the layout of the stage as well as hidden passages, villages, and dungeons. There are two headquarters in each stage, your own and the enemy's. The enemy's headquarters are supported by a series of magical pillars and one large main magical pillar. Your goal is to destroy all the pillars and defeat the boss who protects the main pillar in each stage.

Your movement around the stage is limited by a numerical representation of the Swamp Witch's power. As you move, the number runs down. If it goes down to zero, you can continue fighting, but you won't be able to automatically

regenerate health. To get that ability back, you have to take out the pillars.

The Witch and the Hundred Knights has the look of Disgaea, but the gameplay and player choice of western RPGs. Disgaea has always appealed to a very passionate, but very specific sub-set of gamers. The Witch and the Hundred Knights may be an attempt on Nippon Ichi's part to appeal to a wider, more international audience. The Witch and the Hundred Knights will be a PlayStation 3 exclusive, and should be available early in 2013. **Kyle Hilliard**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Type**
1-Player Action/RPG

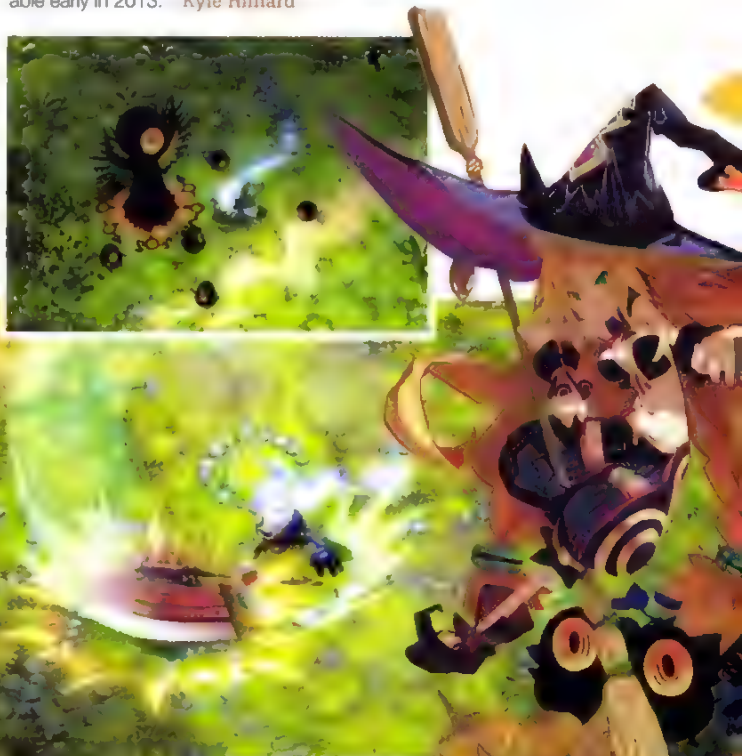
» **Publisher**
NIS America

» **Developer**
Nippon Ichi Software

» **Release**
2013



The stage number in the top left dictates how far you can travel before losing your ability to regenerate.





Persona 4 Arena

Persona steps out of the RPG genre and into the fighting ring

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Arc System Works

» **Release**
Summer 2012

The Persona series has always consisted of role-playing games. Persona 4 Arena is the first time the franchise is taking a step out of its comfort zone into the world of fighting. Arc System Works, the developer behind titles like BlazBlue and Guilty Gear, is behind the game, so you can expect high-quality animation and fast-paced action.

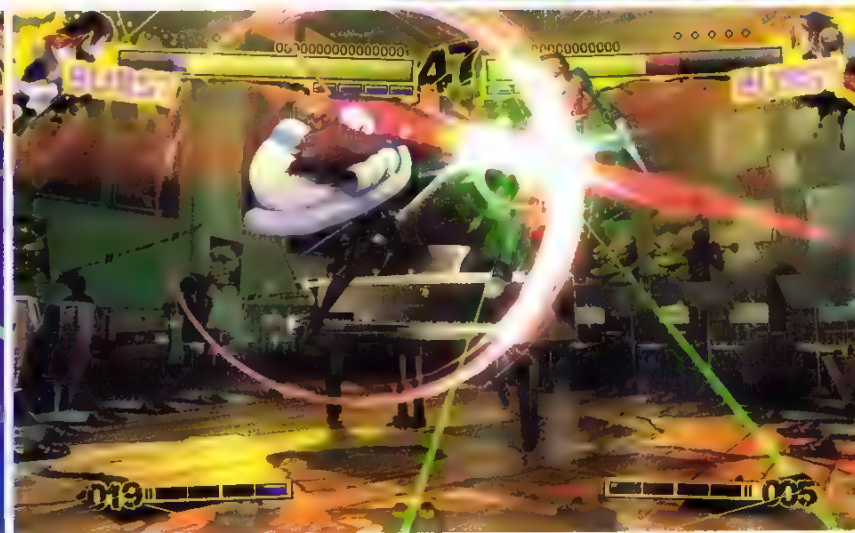
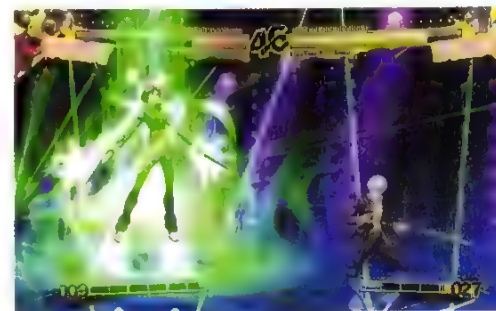
Persona 4 Arena picks up its story a few months after the events of Persona 4, and a few years after the events of Persona 3. When Teddie, the half-clown, half-teddy bear creature from Persona 4 disappears, the gang decides to look for him. They find him announcing the P-1 Grand Prix fighting tournament on the Midnight Channel, which has been created to decide who the ultimate Persona user is. Everyone enters to find out what is going on with Teddie, and also to find out who among them is the best Persona

user. Each character will have his or her own separate storyline.

The majority of the roster will be characters from Persona 4, but a few characters from Persona 3 will also make appearances with updated character models to reflect the years that have passed since Persona 3 in the fiction.

Persona 4 Arena is a 2D fighter with hand-drawn sprites. The Persona series has always had a great art style, and the characters look at home on a 2D plane. Characters are controlled directly with two of the standard attack buttons, and your Persona can be called in with the other two attack buttons. Both the player character and its Persona can take damage. If your Persona takes too many hits, you won't be able to use it until it can recharge. Your Persona will also make appearances in the middle of combo strings to augment your attacks.

Persona 4 Arena has already released in Japan on consoles and in arcades. Thankfully, we won't have to wait too long to see the game here in North America. The game will be available on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 this summer. **Kyle Hilliard**





NHL 13

EA Canada puts the speed back in skating

The old maxim "you can't teach speed" applies just as much to hockey as it does any team sport. Players blessed with an extra gear like Rangers forward Marian Gaborik can use their gift to burst through small openings, blaze past defenders, and create break-away opportunities. Previous NHL games made a distinction between the fast and slow, but even the developers at EA Canada admitted the players lacked explosiveness. To inject more excitement into the skating for NHL 13, the team started over from scratch.

Last year you couldn't blow past defense-men even if you had a head of steam. With the new True Performance Skating, top-end speed is much more noticeable. By skating straight ahead or pressing the L3 button, you can reach full speed, but once you're flying down the ice your options are limited. Only the elite players can shoot accurately at top speeds, and if you try to turn sharply you may wipe out. Most players fare better by reaching their top speed and then using their momentum to glide into position where they want to shoot or pass. You also have the option to press the left trigger to start skating backwards at any point on the ice. This significantly changes the cat and mouse game between forwards and defenders. Defenders can either turn and skate with a player or pivot into a back skate. Making the wrong decision at the wrong time will leave you flat footed and open

the chance for an odd-man rush.

The other major change to the gameplay in NHL 13 is a revamped AI, dubbed EA Sports Hockey IQ. The dev team knew fans weren't satisfied with player smarts, so it put a lot of time into making sure players read situations correctly.

"This year we've invested more effort in AI than in the last three years combined in terms of effort," says NHL 13 producer Sean Ramjagsingh.

Both goalies and skaters now react appropriately to odd-man rushes, and EA says there is a better sense of player differentiation between skill players and fourth liners. New AI sliders have been added for each line, so you can tweak your forcheck and how much you want a particular line to dump and chase, cycle, or shoot at will.

The improved teammate AI should come in handy when you take your skills into the revamped Be A GM mode, which EA calls Connected GM in NHL 13. As you can guess by the title, the GM mode now boasts online capabilities, allowing a multi-user dynasty experience with up to 30 human-controlled teams over 25 years.

Players can experience Connected GM in several ways – you could play standard versus games, co-op with a friend, six-on-six online team play, act as a hands-off general manager, coach the team by selecting line changes and configuring team strategy, or just play against the

CPU. The commissioner controls how quickly the league advances, and a messaging system keeps players abreast of join requests, trade offers, and waiver activity.

The offseason has a free agency period that features seven bidding windows, but the draft may leave fans wanting. Users scout players throughout the regular season and create a prospect priority list, but the draft ultimately runs automatically and makes your selections based on the list.

If you're playing Connected GM solo, you should have a much better experience thanks to the new GM Brain guiding the CPU logic. Last year the logic was a mess, with teams stashing veterans in the minors, letting top prospects slip into free agency, and offering ridiculous one-sided trades. The new system allows the game to do what a general manager would do in real life, which is evaluate his talent, predict how his players will perform in the future, and use that information to make decisions on how to best prepare his team for the present and the future.

EA Canada believes these fundamental redesigns to skating, player logic, and the franchise mode make NHL 13 the biggest year-over-year improvement in the series history. If the development team is right, NHL should find itself back in the sports game of the year conversation. **Matt Bertz**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 6-Player Sports
(PS3), 1 to 4-Player
(Xbox 360) (12-Player
Online)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Canada

» **Release**
September 11





Company of Heroes 2

The bloodiest battles of World War II in tactical form

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
Relic Entertainment

» **Release**
Early 2013

Taking the War Online

Relic didn't want to tell us much about the game's multiplayer features, but the developers were adamant that online remains a primary focus for the franchise. Company of Heroes 2 uses Steamworks to handle a lot of things on the backend. This means a Steam account is necessary to play the game online or off, but the positive side is that Steamworks has a good track record over the last few years and using that platform frees Relic to focus on gameplay. On the design side, the developers wouldn't confirm the existence of any armies besides the German and USSR forces, but it would be a huge surprise if multiple factions aren't included out of the box. Relic also expressed enthusiasm for the existing Company of Heroes community's fondness for co-op "compstomp" play, which is an easy statement to read between the lines of

Nearly half of the overall deaths in World War II happened along one front of Nazi aggression, and it had nothing to do with the celebrated Allied landings in France and Italy. The eastern front, comprised almost entirely of German soldiers on one side and Soviets on the other, is estimated to be responsible for as much as 30 million out of 70 million total deaths in the war. This long, bloody theater of war is often neglected in Western media, but Relic is using the Red Army's disastrous early defeats and eventual capture of Berlin as the backdrop for Company of Heroes 2. This sequel doesn't change anything fundamental about the critically acclaimed and still-popular RTS core of the original, but technological improvements to the underlying engine open up some new, fascinating gameplay possibilities.

As in the first game and its expansions, Company of Heroes 2 puts players in command of a diverse set of World War II units fighting over resource nodes and other points of interest on a moderately sized map. The dynamic cover system, where houses burn down and artillery gouges craters in the landscape, is critically important to infantry operations. Armor facings and ammo types make every tank battle a chess match. Powers like calling in airstrikes, paratroopers, or artillery barrages from off-map provide dramatic pyrotechnics. These details reward skilled tactical micromanagement better than even Starcraft, and strong unit AI and target prioritization let players focus on interesting decisions like throwing grenades and flanking enemies rather than making sure each rifleman's gun is pointed in the right direction.

The single-player campaign explores the saga of the eastern front through the eyes of a Russian journalist, and Relic is attempting to expose gamers to the brutal reality Red Army soldiers faced. Under-equipped, untrained, and fighting the peerless German Wehrmacht, the first weeks of the war saw the USSR forces losing hundreds of miles of territory from the Baltic Sea in the north to Hungary and the Black Sea in the south while suffering catastrophic casualties. It wasn't until Stalin decreed that not a single further inch was to be surrendered to the invaders – and empowered political commissars attached to army units to use deadly force to enforce his edict – that the Soviets were able to stall and eventually reverse the tide of the eastern

front. The harsh Russian winter did its part to slow Hitler's blitzkrieg as well, though it also exacted a heavy toll on the Red Army.

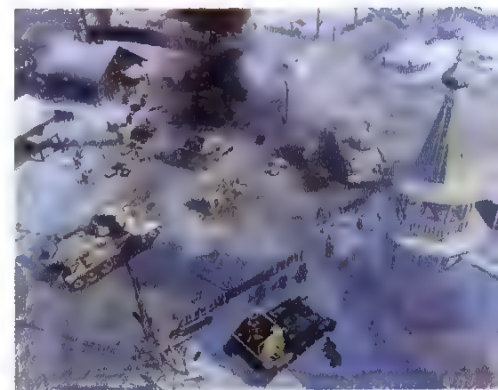
Though you won't be shot for failing a mission, Relic is using all of the usual tricks to sell the time and place Company of Heroes 2 is set in. One short in-engine cutscene the developers showed in a recent visit to the GI offices depicts a unit of sharpshooters being gunned down by their own support troops for having the audacity to retreat from a hail of Wehrmacht bullets. I expect more videos along those lines, as well as the typical interstitial story bits between missions, but Relic hasn't shown anything so far that raises my hopes for a revolution in RTS storytelling.

The biggest push Relic showed us for this sequel is in the technology. The developer has always had some of the best RTS engines in the business, from Homeworld through Company of Heroes and Dawn of War. The next revision, created for Company of Heroes 2, is unsurprisingly the best yet. Snow played a huge role on the eastern front, and it has significant gameplay effects. Tracks persist through an entire match, so an observant player can gain useful intelligence by watching the ground. The way the engine models snow depth looks cool when your army is trudging through it, though the drifts also affect their movement speed. Extensive physics modeling makes vehicles behave naturally on different surfaces, like tanks having an extremely hard time accelerating or turning on ice. Dynamic smoke plays into the reworked 3D fog of war, where burning vehicles or structures have just as serious of an effect on vision as smoke grenades. Every one of these improvements is a visual upgrade – and even the early build I saw running looks impressive – but more importantly, they have real effects on strategies and tactics.

The AI is another technical improvement that fans should welcome. Relic freely admits that its previous RTS campaigns have largely been scripted affairs, with events or timers triggering specific enemy behaviors

and often presenting a puzzle to be solved rather than a dynamic battle to be fought. The company is working on making its skirmish AI (which controls AI players in multiplayer-style battles) the best it has ever produced, and then using that within the single-player campaign instead of the typical scripted events that the vast majority of RTS campaigns from Warcraft: Orcs & Humans to Dawn of War have relied on. Bringing in elements that contribute to the stunning longevity of Company of Heroes' online community, like back-and-forth tactical battles over resource nodes and misdirection on a strategic level, could be a welcome shot in the arm for CoH 2's single-player campaign if Relic pulls it off.

Company of Heroes deserves every one of the many accolades thrown its way, and Relic has proven itself to be one of the world's premiere strategy studios over the last decade. I can't think of a better way to revisit World War II as a game setting. » **Adam Biessener**





Enemy Front

Introducing the spiritual successor to *Black*

Just a few short years ago, it seemed like every other game had you shooting Nazis in World War II. *Enemy Front* makes no claim to be wildly different in theme from those games, but it does strive to be a better shooter.

Stuart Black, creative director of *Enemy Front*, acknowledges the abundance of World War II first-person shooters, but has a few ideas in place that he hopes will set his game apart. After the release of Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, developers seemed to be only interested in the timeline of the war that was represented in that film. *Enemy Front* takes inspiration from films like *The Dirty Dozen* and *Where Eagles Dare* from the late '60s, where the characters have little backstory and the narrative is all about the mission. *Enemy Front* takes place pre-Normandy when the U.S. wasn't on the winning side of the war just yet. Players take on the role of one of the first OSS agents working behind enemy lines.

Starting a new game brings up three modes: Hope, Honor, and Glory. Each of these modes represents a different way to play the game. Hope offers a play mode similar to *Call of Duty*

with rechargeable health. Honor litters the world with health packs and no rechargeable health. *Glory* offers health packs, and takes away your HUD and crosshairs for the most cinematic experience. Each mode has additional small changes and are customizable so players can play *Enemy Front* in the way that they are most comfortable playing shooters.

Black says that in the crowded first-person shooter market, there are only five or six games that are really good. When it comes to B-grade shooters, most try to compensate quality with extraneous modes or forgettable gimmicks. The team at City Interactive is focusing on the most important element of the game; the thing you will be doing 99 percent of the time: shooting your gun. Black hopes that this focus on the core element of the game will set it apart from comparable shooters.

Players don't fling the cursor across the screen picking off enemies left and right. The game is focused on isolated shootouts, where you are worrying less about your position and more about shooting your weapon. The battlefield is littered with explosive vehicles and barrels. Look-around speed has been toned down significantly to allow focused aiming. Levels are being designed and AI is being programmed to prevent unfair ambushes that require frequent 180-degree turns to compensate. The game feels similar to one of Stuart Black's previous cre-

ations, *Black*, which released on PlayStation 2 and Xbox in 2006 to mixed reviews.

Black says that much development time has been devoted to tweaking Cryengine's AI to fit more comfortably into the game City Interactive is trying to make. There will be 10 different enemy types. You can count on the standard soldiers with varying combat expertise, but medics also run around the battlefield fixing up the enemies you neglected to completely finish off. In some instances, enemies will run off to alert others of your presence. They will fire off flares or begin blowing whistles to call for back-up, which coincidentally alerts you that your fight is about to have a lot more enemies. Black admitted to being a selfish developer. He wants to create games that he wants to play. By making the AI smart and unpredictable, he is able to play his own game without having a detailed knowledge of exactly what every enemy will do, and he wants the player to have the same experience.

Enemy Front will have 11 levels total, each lasting 40 minutes to an hour. Black wants to get away from the five- to six-hour campaign often featured in single-player first-person shooters. He says a campaign that short ends just as you are really getting into it.

The game is designed with a controller in mind, according to Black, and the consoles offer the best experience, unless of course you are playing with a controller on a PC. Black jokes that he may stir up some controversy and not even allow PC gamers to use mouse-and-keyboard control. He laughs, and quickly reassures us that he was kidding. *Enemy Front* is on track to release near the end of this year for PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC. — Kyle Hilliard

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter

» Publisher
City Interactive

» Developer
City Interactive

» Release
Winter



Reviews



1000-20

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

100 Max Payne 3

Rullet Time has never been better, and Max has never looked worse. The third installment in this series – the first developed internally by Rockstar Studios – revels in slow-motion warfare, and delivers an exciting, rollercoaster ride of a story.

No Diablo III?
 Due to the timing of its release, we were unable to include a review of Diablo III in this issue. Check next month's issue or gameinformer.com for our full impressions of Blizzard's hack n' slash loottfest.

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	Error 37.

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

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Ghost Recon: Future Soldier

A veteran shooter starts to show its age

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

The Ghosts come out of hiding with a slew of high-tech gadgets

» **Graphics**

Noticeably dated graphics break the sense of immersion

» **Sound**

The chatty Ghosts smartly verbalize the locations of enemies in their sightlines

» **Playability**

Adequate controls, but having two different zooms feels antiquated and you sometimes get hung up on cover

» **Entertainment**

Future Soldier excels when missions become puzzles of taking out enemies as quietly as possible, but too frequently the gameplay relies on convention

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Red Storm/Ubisoft Paris/Ubisoft Bucharest **Release** May 22 **ESRB** M

A lot has changed since the Ghosts' last tour of duty. In the five years since *Advanced Warfare 2* shipped, *Battlefield* has entrenched itself as a major contender in the console space and *Call of Duty* took over the world. The Ghosts have a lot of catching up to do to stay relevant in the hyper-competitive military shooter genre, but after a troubled development and several delays, this *Future Soldier* looks more like a military game of the past.

The *Future Soldier* campaign, which focuses on the Ghosts' attempt to thwart a Russian coup, succeeds when it sticks to the tactical approach of its predecessors. The game is at its best when you treat the micro sandboxes like puzzles, keeping your squad camouflaged and picking off unaware enemies in groups of four using the innovative Sync Shot mechanic without alerting other targets. Your teammate AI is sharp enough to move without being spotted, and they wisely call out enemy positions as they see them, so there is no disadvantage to playing through the campaign by yourself. You can also play through it with three friends, but I recommend increasing the difficulty.

With several high-tech gadgets like active camouflage, drones, and a remote-controlled robot armed to the teeth with an unlimited supply of missiles, churning through these enemies is much easier than it was even in the *Advanced Warfighter* games. Sneaking through enemy encampments like the Predator, using drones to mark tango positions, and lining up simultaneous kill shots is empowering to the point of being overpowering. The technology makes the early

missions easy, but the battles even out later in the game when a Russian Special Forces team uses similar gadgets and disrupts your technological advantage with EMP blasts.

Ubisoft occasionally diverts from sandbox levels to mix up the action, but the majority of these sequences falter due to their overreliance on genre clichés like corridor-based level designs and mandatory gun turret sequences. I'd rather spend my time trying to master the micro sandbox puzzles than performing *Rainbow Six*-style breaches, VIP escort, and stealth follow missions. One sequence even leaves your Ghost team behind as you tackle a Medal of Honor-style infiltration job. These missions betray what makes *Ghost Recon* unique and ultimately feel like a step backward in game design.

Future Soldier also looks aged. Ubisoft seemed to channel all the graphical horsepower into creating particle effects like sandstorms and smoke. While they look impressive in certain scenarios, the ugly textures, pop-up, and cardboard cutout grass that pierces straight through your prone soldier are much more prevalent and break the sense of immersion. Held up against the high graphical benchmarks of the genre, *Ghost Recon* looks technologically malnourished. The invasive HUD also mars the sensory experience. Having your ammo count, teammate positions, enemy positions, ammo crate locations, objective location, and data about your current location all on the screen at once is information overload.

The third-person control scheme, while adequate, could also use refinement. Rather than streamline the controls, Ubisoft chose to

preserve the awkward zoom system from the previous games. Holding the left trigger gives you a third-person zoom, and pressing R3 provides a first-person ironights view. Having to click the R3 button to go in and out of ironights is cumbersome and gets you in trouble, especially during frantic multiplayer firefights. The stickiness of cover is also inconsistent, and I found it tough to aim around the corners of cover objects.

Multiplayer has always been a big draw for the Tom Clancy shooters, and *Future Soldier* preserves that legacy with a robust suite featuring five competitive game modes, class-based progression systems, highly customizable weapons, and a Horde-like mode called *Guerrilla*. Most of the modes are boilerplate, but I enjoyed *Conflict* mode, a timed competition that rotates the location of objectives throughout the map.

The point system smartly awards players for working together, but the clunky user interface and unrefined controls may turn off shooter aficionados. Thanks to poor design, navigating the menus to unlock new gear takes longer than you have in between matches, and Ubisoft doesn't let you customize matches as in past *Ghost Recon* titles.

Tom Clancy shooters have always drawn in military enthusiasts, but after a five-year hiatus *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier* is facing a much different battlefield. The co-op campaign and competitive multiplayer offer adequate experiences, but the aged graphics, unrefined controls, and cliché-ridden campaign betray the *Future Soldier* premise and compromise the game's ability to compete with more technologically refined shooters. » **Matt Bertz**

The Walking Dead Episode One: A New Day

Telltale's zombie franchise freshens up the genre with a new spin

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Telltale Games Developer Telltale Games Release April 25 ESRB M

8.25

PS3, X360, PC

» Concept

An adventure game focusing on story and player choice based on the popular comic series

» Graphics

Telltale nails the comic-inspired look. The game looks great and the visuals mask some awkward character animations

» Music

Music is sparse and some of the voice actors sound a little junior varsity. The actor behind the main character delivers a stellar performance

» Playability

The game is definitely designed around a controller. Most of the action is context sensitive, so the combat isn't complex

» Recommendations

Though it feels like one long cutscene with interactive dialogue, a few stellar story sequences and clever interactive moments sell the experience

» Replay Value

Moderate



Telltale Games hasn't always been able to live up to the promise of its licensed properties, but not for lack of trying. The company stays true to the heart of each franchise; the Sam & Max and Strong Bad titles tap into the unique humor of both franchises, and Back to the Future feels like a real trip back in time. These titles weren't bad, but they held little appeal to anyone other than diehard fans of the properties. The Walking Dead, on the other hand, might be the company's first game that is good enough to reach beyond an already devoted base and earn a broader audience.

The game opens in the back of a police car. You are Lee Everett, a convicted felon whose crimes are ambiguous. As you banter with the sheriff behind the wheel, it quickly becomes clear that something terrible is happening within the city behind you. Police convoys wail towards the city, and the shortwave radio sitting in the front of the car is squawking with activity. Eventually, disaster strikes your transport, and you are set free – free to survive a world gone to hell. The Walking Dead is an artfully told narrative; Lee's backstory and crimes are slowly revealed, and watching this character evolve throughout the episode is one of the most compelling aspects of the adventure.

This first installment – and presumably the rest of the five-episode series – is about struggling to survive in a world gone mad. How do you find sustainable food sources in a world that wants to eat you? The comic and the show do a good job of exploring this topic, and Telltale's adventure slides neatly into the series fiction. Lee quickly teams up with a small crew of survivors and bonds with a young girl who's lost her family. The game even offers Walking Dead fans a chance to interact with franchise mainstays like Hershel and Glenn.

Many games about the zombie apocalypse feature frantic action and gunplay, but the majority of Telltale's experience is crafted around making quick decisions. Most of

the dialogue choices – and all of the important decision moments – come with a time limit. Wait too long to choose and characters assume you're opting for the silent treatment. Hesitate to act when people need your help, and they die.

The full effects of these choices likely won't be seen until two or three episodes down the road, but Telltale's splintering narrative is certainly intriguing. These choices carry extra weight because of how they affect the story's progress. If you stand up for someone during a fight, that person will remember your loyalty and thank you later. If you don't stick to the truth and your story starts to contradict itself, someone might pull you aside and call you out on your lie. The cast varies depending on who you assist during crucial story moments. Thankfully, no matter who you end up with, the ensemble is always interesting even if the voice acting is a little uneven. Every character is well written, featuring a mix of heroic traits and flaws.

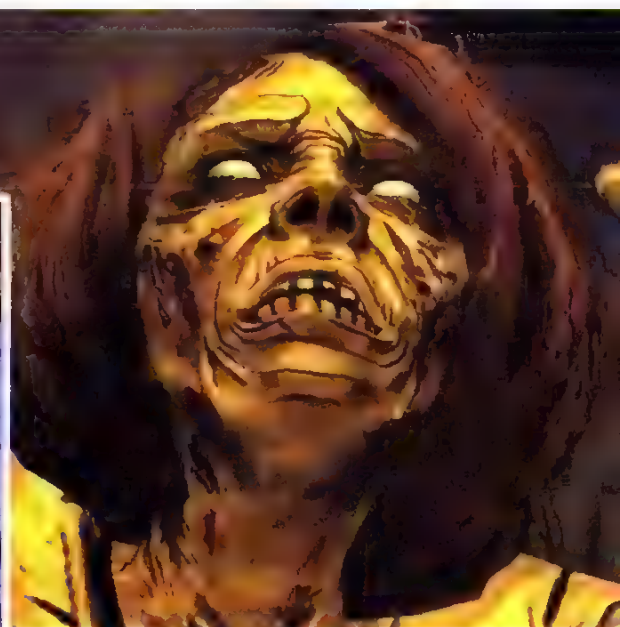
The Walking Dead's narrative is strong, but the title shambles along in a few other areas. Players have few reasons to explore the small, self-contained environments due to the limited

number of interactive objects and a meager selection of items. Some of these tools also function as weapons, but you won't feel empowered while using them.

The Walking Dead isn't an action game, but taking down a zombie rarely feels rewarding because the combat is overly simplistic. Occasionally, you'll go toe-to-toe with one of these flesh eaters, but all you have to do during these sequences is highlight the area you want to attack and tap a button. In this way, combat boils down to clicking over a zombie's skull while holding a hammer or an axe or some other destructive tool. Fortunately, combat is rare, so its faults don't detract much from what the story does well.

Puzzles are few and far between, but unlike combat, they're enjoyable. Rather than solve a block puzzle or rearrange chess pieces on a desk, you must overcome environmental challenges. For example, how do you clear out a street full of zombies so that you can run across the street? How do you take down a group of zombies with a sparkplug, a pillow, and a gun without making a ton of noise and attracting a larger horde? I enjoyed working my way through situations like these, but they aren't frequent enough. I wanted more puzzles to balance out the narrative-heavy experience.

With The Walking Dead, Telltale's experimentation with an unusual formula pays off. With its focus on dialogue choices and puzzles that more naturally fit into a narrative, The Walking Dead is a unique experience. In less than three hours, the game delivers a thoughtful, character-driven story that takes a refreshing look at the zombie apocalypse. And like any great episodic show, I'm eager to see what happens next. » **Ben Reeves**



Max Payne 3

The new, same old Payne

9.25

PS3 • 36+

» Concept

Max Payne 3 fires direct hits with both its story and gameplay, and will keep you playing with its robust multiplayer offering

» Graphics

Gore meets beauty – headshots deliver cringe-worthy explosions of brains and blood, and no details are spared in making the world look as realistic as possible

» Sound

The band Health contributes a wonderfully dark and atmospheric score.

James McCaffrey nails his performance as Max Payne. All of the voice work is exceptional

» Playability

The gunplay fits like a well-worn glove, yet is enhanced through smart encounter designs and big set piece moments

» Entertainment

The campaign is a fantastic ride, and Arcade mode (scoring challenges) adds longevity to the single player mix. Multiplayer is as enjoyable and deep as any other package on the market

» Replay Value

High

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (16-Player Online) Publisher: Rockstar Games Developer: Rockstar Studios Release: May 15 ESRB: M

Max Payne's opening shots bear no resemblance to the series' iconic imagery of a black trench coat flapping in the wind as a hail of bullets whiz by in slow motion. Instead, the game begins with four snapshots of a much different Max: sitting alone in an apartment with a bottle of whiskey at his side; standing bald, bearded, and bloodied over a horribly mangled body; delivering flowers to a grave; and the most shocking portrait of all, dressed for show in an expensive suit as he mingles with the rich.

Despite his radically different appearances, Max's state of mind is always the same: He's a cynical jerk with a biting sense of humor. He's older, wiser, and at times, appears to be someone who has found peace. As much as I laughed at his quick wit and hilarious inner monologue, the game continually reminded me that he wasn't okay. He still carries his demons with him, and he's doing his damndest to suppress them. Most of the game's transitional moments are bridged with montages of Max drinking extensively and popping pills. The entire game is riddled with graphical distortion meant to illustrate Max's struggle with addiction. I can see these effects becoming problematic for some players, as they are jarring, but I think they do a fantastic job of reminding you of who Max is and plant the seed that if he wasn't intoxicated, situations may play out differently.

As much as Max Payne 3 is a fascinating portrait of a man, it tells a great, action-packed story that runs in-stride with Max's inner turmoil. Thanks to an invitation from an old friend, Max finds himself working in the shady world of private security in Sao Paulo, Brazil for real estate tycoon, Rodrigo Branco. Max is tasked to keep a protective eye on Branco's wife, Fabiana, an out-of-control party girl with an entourage in tow. Fabiana's lifestyle often takes Max to places where he can sit back and enjoy a drink. In fact, the game's first gameplay sequence is set in a swank bar that overlooks one of San Paulo's poverty-stricken neighborhoods. The second chapter picks up in a nightclub. As Max relaxes with a drink, Comando Sombra, a gang tied to Brazilian drug trade, infiltrates the party and opens fire on the guests. Fabiana is kidnapped. Max gives chase, but despite leaving the bar littered with Comando Sombra corpses, is unable to reclaim her. What unfolds next is a thrilling pursuit loaded with twists and turns, excitement and tension, and smoking hot gunplay every step of the way.

We see a different side of Max in this game, but when his gun is drawn, he instantly morphs back to the Max of old, a bullish gunslinger who can run into the middle of a lobby and down a handful of foes without seeking the aid of cover or taking a hit. This is all thanks to Max's greatest ally, Bullet Time, an ability that allows him to slow down the world and move a hair faster than his foes. Although many games have adopted similar slow-motion gunplay



throughout the years, this is the most fun I've had with this ability. The gunplay is smooth and polished, and almost every combat scenario becomes a game of "how many enemies can I drop at once." Rockstar Studios also forces Max into Bullet Time for over-the-top scripted sequences that you'd think were designed for a new Jason Statham *Crank* movie. All of the targeting mechanics (hard lock, soft lock, and free aim) are beautifully implemented.

Animation plays a large role in intensifying the firefights. If Max dives too close to a wall, he'll smash into it, leaving him vulnerable for a few seconds before he rights his aim from the floor or rises. Little touches like Max trying to cover his face as he lunges toward a wall or tuck his arms under his body as he rolls are impressive.

Most environment surfaces hit by bullets crack or shatter in different ways. The explosion of glass on a framed picture looks fantastic, and most of the cover Max can seek refuge behind can be chipped away or outright destroyed. The cover mechanic works without a hitch most of the time, however, I did run into five or six instances of Max's gun running into collision problems with cover, causing his gun to point toward the ceiling and fire shots upward.

The campaign is a fun ride that rarely slows. The script, an area Rockstar always seems to knock out of the park, takes Max to interesting places, doesn't follow a predictable path, and is loaded with amazing dialogue. Once the bullets start flying, the game doesn't load. Much like the *Uncharted* games, story sequences bleed directly into gameplay. On several occasions I had to scramble to fire shots.

Max Payne may not seem like a franchise that lends itself well to multiplayer, but Rockstar

has found a way to keep Bullet Time alive and well for deathmatching purposes, and uses it to anchor a robust offering of competitive modes.

Deathmatch and team deathmatch prove to be fun, gnunder-like experiences with average lives lasting for 20 to 30 seconds. Becoming Max or Raul Passos (an old colleague of Max's) in Payne Killer mode delivers that "how many foes can I down before I fall" thrill. This mode starts with a standoff between all of the players in the match. The first player to land a kill becomes Max. The player that was killed becomes Raul. These two characters are more powerful than the others and must work together to earn as many points as they can before they are taken out. The player who takes out one of these characters takes their role.

The coolest multiplayer mode offered is Gang Wars. This mode pits two teams against each other and incorporates story threads from the campaign to shape the five rounds. How a round ends dictates what the next objective will be, a design that keeps the battles fresh.

The same great gunplay from the campaign is replicated in the multiplayer modes, and immense depth is tied to the ranking system (with a level cap of 50) and slew of unlockable guns, skins, and items. Rockstar also provides a great crew system that tracks world ranks, kill-to-death ratios, and first place finishes for each crew.

No matter what gameplay mode I chose, I had a great time playing Max Payne 3. The gameplay doesn't explore uncharted territory, but delivers a retro charm that fans of the series should appreciate. It's a new day for Max Payne, and at the same time, a return to his glorious past. » **Andrew Reiner**

Game of Thrones

Creating more problems for Westeros



Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Atlus Developer Cyanide Studios Release May 15 ESRB M

The setting for *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin (and its accompanying HBO series, *Game of Thrones*) is bleak. Betrayal, murder, and underhanded scheming are major components of the franchise's winning formula. These themes make Westeros an intriguing and dangerous place, a fact that is accurately reflected in this RPG from Cyanide Studios. Unfortunately, the rest of the experience is littered with technical and design issues so frustrating that they must have come from the unhinged mind of Mad King Aerys II. Like the Mad King's reign, this spin on Martin's fiction is ruinous for Westeros.

Similar to the point-of-view characters in the novels, the narrative in *Game of Thrones* is split into chapters, and control alternates between two protagonists. Alester is a red priest returned from a 15-year exile in the east, and Mors is a skinchanger in the Night's Watch. Though the two plotlines are initially unconnected, each story arc is full of interesting developments and surprising twists, making their eventual convergence satisfying. The structure mimics the books' appeal well, switching characters at moments of high tension and leaving you excited to pick up the thread later. Since the overall plot is the only thing the game has going for it, I

won't reveal specifics except to say that the tale is exceedingly grim – even more hopeless than the novels. The events take place parallel to the first book and the show's first season, so you don't need to worry about any series spoilers if you've gotten that far in either form.

Martin himself collaborated with Cyanide to create the story, but given the poor quality of the individual scenes, I'm guessing the author's involvement stopped at a high-level conceptual phase. The dialogue is standard fantasy fare, devoid of personality and made worse by stilted voice performances. As if that weren't enough to drain away the drama, bad animation and serious technical problems distract from scenes that are supposed to be climactic. Seeing characters phase through walls, appear out of thin air, or wordlessly open and close their mouths transmutes any potential emotional impact into unintentional humor – an unforgivable problem when you're trying to tell a grim, dark fantasy tale.

The situation doesn't improve on the battlefield. Combat plays similarly to the console version of *Dragon Age: Origins*, but with less polish (and remember *Origins* on consoles was already sloppy). You set up actions in a three-slot queue, then watch your commands get carried out in sequence. Apart from your basic attack, no abilities are mapped to any face buttons, so you frequently need to pause (though the action doesn't stop entirely) and pull up an ability wheel to issue new orders. Your powers are cool, especially those involving Mors' dog and Alester's affinity for fire, but the stop-and-go feeling keeps fights from gaining momentum.

Even when you win, you won't get any tactical satisfaction. Every enemy in the game is just a dude in some armor (with a single late-game exception), and they aren't military geniuses. Archers often attack at point-blank range, stupidly trying to fire arrows while flanked by swordsmen. Guards stand oblivious while their comrades are slaughtered in huge battles only feet away. You can usually cruise through fights against these idiots without a problem, but the difficulty can spike unexpectedly, overwhelming you and leaving you with no way to grind out a few extra levels. In these instances, it helps to adjust the difficulty on the fly to survive the poorly balanced fights.

In many RPGs, good rewards can soothe the sting of an uneven battle system. That doesn't happen in *Game of Thrones*. Nearly all of the good items from shops are unattainably expensive until the game is practically over, leaving you to scavenge for gear suited to your particular armor and weapon specialties. Leveling your characters isn't much fun, either. The attribute and skill system only bestow imperceptible bonuses (like raising your hit chance from 84.7 percent to 86.1 percent), meaning that you rarely have a sense of your characters' growing power.

At its worst, *Game of Thrones* is difficult to tolerate, but the burden of its many problems isn't enough to render the experience worthless. For those already familiar with the franchise, the story of Mors and Alester is consistent with the world and provides insight into events beyond the reach of the regular series cast. However, you must be a forgiving and devoted fan to enjoy the best that this game can offer. Otherwise, you're better off following the words of Genna Lannister: "Better to mock the game than to play and lose." **Joe Juba**

6

» Concept

An RPG revealing an untold story in George R.R. Martin's rich fantasy world

» Graphics

There's no kind way to say it. From textures to character models, no part of this game looks good

» Sound

The awesome theme from the TV show is here. So is painfully wooden voice acting

» Playability

Combat is clunky, due largely to the constant need to pull up an ability wheel

» Entertainment

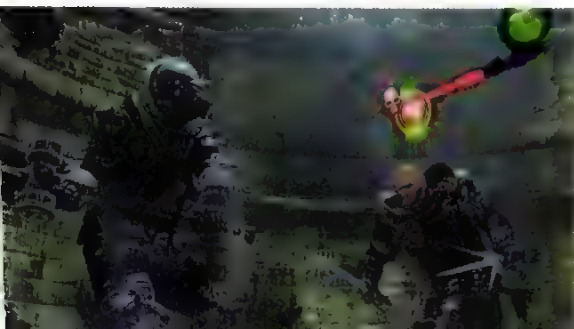
Enjoying the story requires a high tolerance for boring combat, unsatisfying character development, and pervasive technical issues

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

Do I Know You?

If you've ever hit *Game of Thrones*, you'll recognize how few of the faces of *Iron Mountain* vary, and some appear in the game. Other characters are conspicuously absent from the events (Is it better to have no Robert Baratheon or to know that unfamiliar ones?), but at least the game does a little to shoehorn inappropriate characters into the story, just for the sake of fan service. Unless you count the maester modeled after George R.R. Martin



Sniper Elite V2

A slow-motion view to a kill

8.25

Style 1-Player Shooter (2-Player Online) Publisher 505 Games
Developer Rebellion Release May 1 ESRB M



ES • 300

» **Concept**
Combine visceral X-ray bullet damage with solid WWII sniping to satisfying yet wince-worthy results

» **Graphics**
Macabre sights like blowing off a rival sniper's fingers are detailed with a sickening degree of love

» **Sound**
Sustained violin notes and lots of repeated German dialogue

» **Playability**
Bullets colliding with invisible barriers and inconsistent pacing can be frustrating, but lining up shots just feels right

» **Entertainment**
Watching the devastating carnage a single bullet inflicts on your enemy never gets old

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

More hounds are easy to spot. We're the ones that clap when a horror movie slasher tears into its teenage victim or laugh when some poor sap's head explodes into pink mist in a first-person shooter. Sniper Elite V2 is a game for such sadists, with some of the most grisly, groan-inducing kills I've ever seen in a game. Luckily, it's a pretty capable World War II sniping game to boot.

When you're not trotting around in

third-person, you're staring down your scope, and handling your trusty rifle feels like it should. Leading shots, compensating for bullet drop, and holding your breath are all part of the game's entertaining attention to detail, save for the rare instance where a bullet hits an invisible barrier.

Sniper Elite V2's standout feature is the slow-motion, Mortal Kombat-style X-ray kill shots.

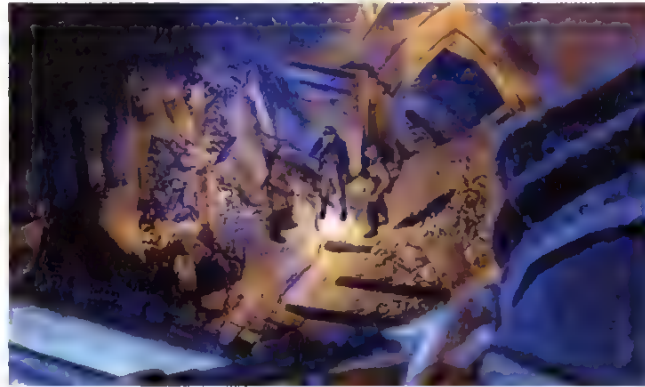
Watching a bullet blast through a Nazi's rifle scope and the eye peering through it is a brutal and satisfying reward for lining up the perfect shot. Watching testicles explode and skulls shatter may be a bit much for the squeamish.

Sniper Elite V2 allows you to be the gunman you want to be, whether that means crawling on your belly and silently taking down guards or engaging in intense shootouts from a guard tower. I savored

moments when I could successfully mislead guards with a thrown rock and then sneak past, but this war hero is no Solid Snake. Enemy line of sight is wildly inconsistent. Too many attempts to be stealthy were shattered by eagle-eyed enemy soldiers you'd think have binoculars glued to their faces.

The game shines brightest when you're timing shots with roaring thunder, dialing in a Hail Mary on a tank's gas tank, or taking out high-profile members of the Third Reich. These moments allow gamers to be a bad-ass sniper, and there are plenty of them. Inviting a friend along to play through the entire campaign and a handful of other solid co-op modes only makes the experience even better. Does it get better than timing simultaneous headshots on a pair of aloof Nazis with your best friend?

I went into Sniper Elite V2 with one desire: Disfigure Nazis from hundreds of meters away. The game delivers on this core mechanic beautifully. While I would have preferred enemies with less superhuman-like vision and better stealth options, at the end of the game I couldn't recall a scenario I didn't enjoy. Sniper Elite V2 is a must for anyone interested in a smart shooter with an emphasis on gore. — **Tim Turi**



Dirt Showdown

Turning into dust

7.5

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (8-Player Online) Publisher Codemasters Developer Codemasters Racing Release June 12 ESRB E10+

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Combine more physical forms of racing with Dirt 3's hoonigan gymkhana events

» **Graphics**
The colors pop and there are plenty of bystanders around. Also, the crashes are jarring and different events occur during day, dusk, and nighttime

» **Sound**
The in-game announcer gets very annoying. Turn him down and go back to the revving engines and squealing tires

» **Playability**
Cars can get wobbly in the air, but the handling is generally more forgiving than previous Dirt games

» **Entertainment**
Dirt Showdown adds some wrinkles to the Dirt formula, but the thrill doesn't last too long

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Dirt Showdown tries to tackle a tall order, and not because the game's aggressive driving is a slight tweak on the sim-based off-roading of previous titles in the franchise. The progression path of a game like Gran Turismo entices gamers with a trickle of new cars, but since Dirt Showdown has to keep and hold players' attention with exciting and unconventional ways to race, the stakes are higher. While Dirt Showdown creates a fun new avenue for the franchise, it's hard pressed to sustain its surprises throughout the entire experience.

As you make your way up the career ladder, you'll hoot and holler at events like 8 Ball (the track folds in on itself and creates opportunities

for jarring T-bones), demolition derbies such as Knockout (you drive opponents off a raised platform and earn double points in a last-minute frenzy), or Hoonigan's Head 2 Head races that mix enclosed rally-cross tracks with gymkhana objectives. I expected this to be just the beginning, but as I progressed up the career tiers and wanted the game to expand and offer new race types and experiences, I was disappointed that this didn't happen to the extent that I was hoping it would.

For its part, multiplayer does add some options. You can play any of the game's race types in eight-player free-for-alls or with teams, or participate in multiplayer-only events like

Smash and Grab (similar to Halo's Oddball). The freestyle gymkhana compounds also return with multiple areas to open up and loads of objectives to knock down. Unfortunately, these free-form gymkhana areas are not open to multiplayer apart from leaderboards.

Despite Showdown's limitations, as it has with its other games, Codemasters has provided this title with a solid foundation. The handling of the cars is thankfully easier than the base Dirt series (including in the Hoonigan events), and the balancing on the Boost ability is great. Codemasters' first try at this offshoot series is decent. It's limited more by its execution than its premise. — **Matthew Kato**



Starhawk

This battlefield is not for foot soldiers



Style 1 or 2-Player Action (32-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** LightBox Interactive **Release** May 8 **ESRB** T

LightBox Interactive's spiritual successor to Warhawk takes to the cosmos with a novel mix of real-time strategy and third-person shooting. While I appreciate the large player counts and wide-open battlefields, the on-foot battles and lack of multiplayer modes are disappointing.

Starhawk features a sci-fi western theme reminiscent of the cult television hit *Firefly*, minus the charm and memorable characters. The environments are impressively large and open, though your interactions with the world are limited apart from the structures you order down from space. The inanimate parts of the environment look fine, but character animations and other visual details pale in comparison to most modern shooters. Outcasts (the story mode's enemies and one of the multiplayer factions) are particularly ugly thanks to their constant blue glow, which is caused by rift energy, the main resource you fight over for the duration of the game.

The new single-player campaign has been a major talking point for LightBox, but it accomplishes little beyond introducing players to Starhawk's fairly complicated gameplay. You play as Emmett Graves, a gun for hire who protects rift mines from invading Outcasts. While the setup is interesting enough, every level is built on a multiplayer map, and your objectives boil down to defending an area from incoming waves of bad guys on land and in space, before moving on to the next location.

Most levels require a healthy mix of on-foot shootouts, land- and air-based vehicular combat, and strategy-oriented base building. I was impressed by how easy it is to switch between these gameplay styles; you might gun down a

squad of enemies, build a few auto turrets and walls for defense, and then jump into a Starhawk for an impromptu dogfight all in a matter of minutes. While I had fun creating choke points and mowing down rows of mindless foes with auto turrets, some missions drag on far too long (including the final, ridiculously drawn-out boss battle), and I ran into a few frustrating checkpoints. Throw in some cheaply made animated cutscenes, forgettable characters, and dumb AI, and I was happy to move onto multiplayer by the time the credits rolled.

Unfortunately, I have mixed feelings for Starhawk's multiplayer as well. On one hand, I appreciate the wide-open battlefields, 16v16 match sizes, and strategic elements. However, the emphasis on building structures and vehicular combat makes the ground game the least compelling component, which is a problem for a third-person shooter. Aside from the ever-entertaining spawning mechanic that has you rocketing down to battle in a launch pod (and hopefully pancaking an enemy in the process), being on foot with an assault rifle and pistol feels downright impotent when up against rocket-equipped Starhawks and heavily fortified bases. When your best chance to help your team is to build a wall around your base or place an auto turret, Starhawk's sense of achievement pales compared to that of other team-oriented shooters.

For better or worse, the gameplay cycle of multiplayer also heavily favors the team that works together. Successful teams earn more rift energy, which allows them to build more structures. These structures provide more weapons and vehicles, which in turn makes it easier for them to kill more enemies and get more

energy. While I played a few matches with late game turnarounds, most matches were heavily one-sided affairs – or stalemates if both teams focused on building up their bases.

My biggest surprise and disappointment with multiplayer was the lack of modes: Besides the standard deathmatch and team deathmatch, Starhawk only offers capture-the-flag and the domination-style Zones mode. There's also a boring (and sometimes broken) two-player co-op horde mode, which no one would blame you for skipping. CTF and Zones are as fun as they are in any other online shooter, but given Starhawk's interesting mix of gameplay, I would have enjoyed some more creative scenarios for competitive play. The lack of modes is even more perplexing given Starhawk's robust online support, which includes character customization, clans, leaderboards, an event/tournament calendar, and plenty of options for setting up your own matches.

I really wanted to like Starhawk, and got some enjoyment out of the open battlefields, RTS elements, and large-scale matches. However, the lackluster single-player campaign is entirely forgettable, and without some more creative modes, the multiplayer's lopsided (albeit entertaining) action keeps Starhawk grounded on the launch pad. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

7.5

PS3

» Concept

Mix third-person shooting, vehicular combat, and light RTS elements in a multiplayer-focused action title

» Graphics

The environments and vehicles are impressive, but the characters and animation are second-rate

» Sound

Underwhelming on all fronts. The voice acting, sound effects, and music all get the job done without doing anything memorable

» Playability

While the on-foot controls feel imprecise, jumping from one gameplay style to the next is quick and easy

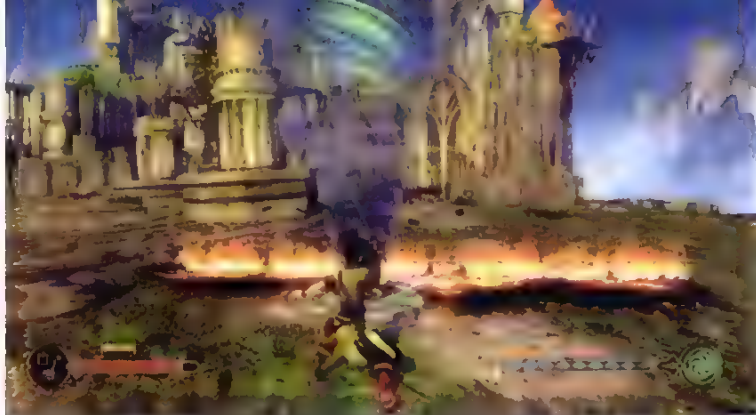
» Interest/Innovation

Starhawk lacks the production values of a top-tier shooter, but contains some interesting ideas and gameplay hooks

» Replay Value

Moderately High





Sorcery

A worthwhile experience in spite of Move

6.75

PS3

» **Concept**

Showcase the Move with a story-driven action game about a young sorcerer and his cat

» **Graphics**

Good character animation is hindered by poor facial animation. The art style shines with interesting character and environment designs

» **Sound**

An excellent score, quality voice acting, and magical sound effects make the sound design one of the best elements of the game

» **Playability**

The Move controls are a hindrance, adding unnecessary challenge to an easy game

» **Entertainment**

I had fun with Sorcery, but I would have had more fun without the constant nail-hammering pantomime

» **Replay Value**

Low

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** The Workshop **Release** May 22 **ESRB** E10+

Sorcery was announced at E3 2010, the year following the Move's unveiling. It was presented as a showcase for Sony's motion controller, but it's taken two years to finally make it to store shelves. Even though the Move controls are front and center, Sorcery's best and most surprising feature is the story.

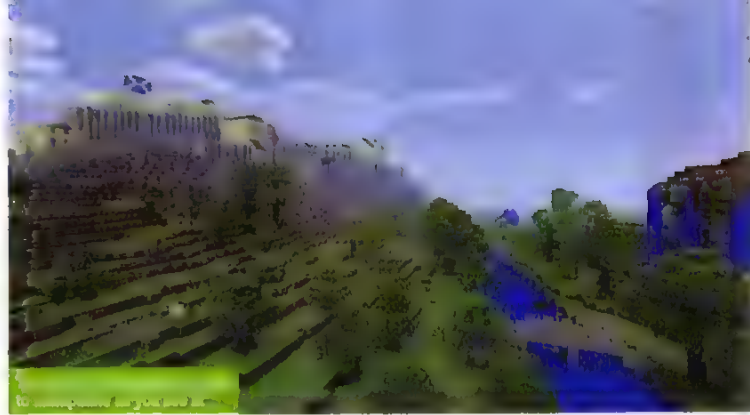
You play as Finn, an overconfident sorcerer's apprentice who gets himself into trouble much to the enjoyment of your teacher's pet cat, Erline. She convinces you to enter a dangerous cave in hopes of scaring you, but you find a magical amulet inside that reveals Erline is more than just a cat. The story is not without its clichés, but I was surprised and impressed by the turns it takes. It's not Enslaved or Mass Effect, but the voice acting and characterization are effective, conveying emotional moments.

Flicking the Move controller like a magic wand casts spells. You have full control of Finn with the navigation controller in one hand, and you conduct attacks with the Move controller in the other. The basic attack of the game is to wave the wand like you're hammering a nail into a wall, a boring motion you repeat constantly. Some light aiming is involved, but auto-aim mostly directs your attacks.

Finn moves from area to area along a linear path taking out waves of enemies and casting spells to create bridges and open new pathways between fights. A few bosses are littered throughout, and taking them down requires some logic and spell change-ups. A giant tree creature infected with evil, for example, required me to freeze his limbs before I could deal any damage. The combat is fun and even exciting at times, but that has nothing to do with the implementation of the Move controls.

Hitting square would have offered the same excitement (and less fatigue) as waving a wand, and selecting your spells with a d-pad would have been better than pausing the game and performing specific motions with the Move to inconsistently select new spells.

I like Sorcery, but the Move controls hold it back. It could have been a fun action game with an engaging story and environmental puzzles. Instead, Sorcery prepares you to hang framed pictures in your house by making you pretend to hammer a wall for five or six hours. » **Kyle Hilliard**



Minecraft Xbox 360 Edition

Construct your own adventure

8.75

Style 1 to 4-Player Simulation (8-Players online) Publisher Microsoft **Developer** 4J Studios **Release** May 9 **ESRB** E10+

» **Concept**

Put players in an open sandbox, provide the tools to survive, and let 'em loose

» **Graphics**

Don't let the 8-bit inspired graphics fool you; once you're absorbed in its world, Minecraft offers some truly spectacular vistas

» **Sound**

The score is simple and unobtrusive. You'll never forget the sound of a creeper hissing its way toward detonation

» **Playability**

The retooled UI works on a gamepad, and I was mining and building within minutes

» **Entertainment**

It doesn't have everything from the latest version on PC (and worlds are significantly smaller), but I didn't miss much of that content

» **Replay Value**

High

The indie darling Minecraft has now forged its way onto consoles, giving those players a chance to see what all the fuss is about. To its credit, Minecraft Xbox 360 Edition is largely the same fascinating game as its PC counterpart, giving players an open world and the tools to make the most of it.

If you're not familiar with Minecraft, let me quickly break down the basics for you. You start out in a massive, randomly generated world with only your wits and a map (a nice starting bonus for console players). The game is divided into days and nights, and you'll quickly learn that the difference is more than cosmetic. You start by punching trees to collect wood, which can then be crafted into planks and sticks. You combine those materials with other scavenged materials, like stone, to make better tools and structures. During the daylight hours, you can accomplish these tasks hassle-free, but the freaks come out at night (unless you're playing on the game's peaceful difficulty setting).

When I fired up my first world, I squandered much of that initial day roaming around massive sand dunes, towering waterfalls, and clusters of bleating sheep. By the time the sun went down, I was woefully unprepared. I had to frantically dig in the sand to stay safe from the encroaching zombies, giant spiders, and notorious creepers. Even though the only penalty for dying would be losing my meager possessions, I was determined to at least live through my first virtual day. After spending an excruciatingly long evening in a hole, I was determined to get to work. I climbed atop the tallest dune I could find and started work on my palace. Fortunately, I found enough trees and stones in a nearby glade to get me up and running.

Purists may scoff at the fact that the 360 port sheds the original's "this plus that does what?" crafting mystery, but I didn't miss it at all. For me, Minecraft is more about exploring the environments and making the most of your world rather than bungling through arcane recipes. Better still, the entire game can be explored with four players via splitscreen on one console, or with up to eight players online.

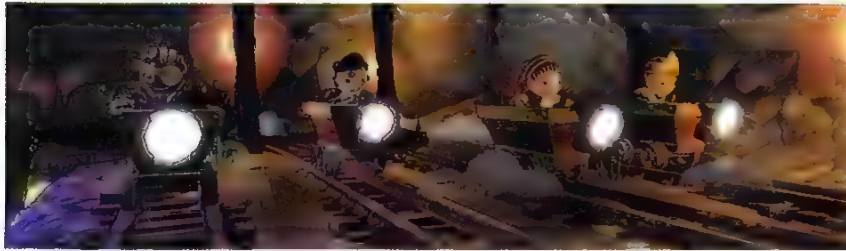
I've always been a fan of games that emphasize exploration and freedom, and that's what Minecraft is at its core. I absolutely love the feeling I get from scaling a blocky mountain and seeing a wide-open expanse of pure possibility in the distance. It was revelatory when it was released on PC, and Xbox 360 players now have a chance to experience all the wonder that Minecraft offers. » **Jeff Cork**

No HD, No Split Screen

If you're playing on an HD display, you're going to have to play this one solo. Minecraft Xbox 360 Edition only supports split-screen multiplayer on HD displays.

Fable Heroes

Lionhead can't save these heroes from themselves



Style 1 to 4-Player Action (4-Player Online) Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Lionhead Studios **Release** May 2 **ESRB** E10+

I suspect that Fable Heroes is Lionhead's attempt to capture the thrill of modern downloadable beat 'em ups like Castle Crashers and blend it with the charm of LittleBigPlanet. However, something terrible must have happened during the journey from concept to reality, because Fable Heroes falls short in nearly every department.

This downloadable disaster doesn't even feature a story; players are given no context for why several anthropomorphic voodoo dolls are prancing through train set-sized models of various locales from the Fable series and lazily slashing at cartoon versions of some of Fable's classic enemies.

Every level follows the exact same pattern. You

walk forward until an invisible wall stops you, fight a bunch of enemies that spawn around you, collect the coins they drop, and then start walking forward again. Sometimes a second group of enemies spawns after you beat the first one, but there isn't much variety to the formula otherwise. Even the bosses are reading the same script: They all stand in one corner of the screen and do large area of effect attacks while you furiously attack their torso, and then occasionally disappear after spawning small groups of enemies.

Thankfully, the gameplay and visuals aren't charming enough to sucker anyone into playing for more than five minutes. The art is so generic that it could be placeholder art for a work in progress, and the combat is so drab I'd rather listen

to old people complain about their feet. You have one major attack button that you spam unceasingly, and one flourish attack that takes so long to unleash that it's useless.

Even leveling up is hollow thanks to how Fable Heroes handles its progression system. At the end of each level, players tally up the coins they've collected from their fallen foes and are awarded a number of dice rolls based on their loot. Players then roll the dice and move forward along an upgrade board. The idea is unique, but also frustrating because you can only upgrade a certain skill if you land on that square. At the end of the game, I had a pile of unspent coins because I hadn't landed on the squares worth the investment.

Fable Heroes continues to function outside of the norm by spreading a series of minigames throughout its levels, but these are in rougher shape than the rest of the game. One has players kicking exploding chickens at one another, which sounds exciting, but aiming them is challenging and dodging them is easy, resulting in long and boring battles. The arena survival minigame is so easy and boring that you could probably draw it out forever; my fellow players and I voluntarily killed ourselves just so we could end the fiasco.

Player choice has always been a key feature for the Fable series, shaping a hero based on your decisions and actions. In Fable Heroes, the only choice is a forked path at the end of every level. One path leads to one of the game's repetitive boss battles, and the other takes you to a mind-numbing minigame. Sadly, both choices are wrong. When you find yourself standing at this fork in the road, reach for the power button and turn off your system. • **Ben Reeves**

4

Concept

Design a bare-bones beat 'em up around the unmemorable hero dolls from the Fable series

Graphics

Fable games usually feature wonderful art style, but Fable Heroes has no style. The game's art looks so awkward even its mom would hesitate to put it up on the fridge

Sound

The music and sound effects sound like they were recorded off a jack-in-the-box

Playability

Combat is frustratingly slow and repetitive, but easy since none of the enemies pose a challenge

Enemies/Bosses

The vacant, soulless expressions of these puppet heroes match the depth of the game's combat

Replay Value

Low

FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY

THE POWER TO CREATE

Game Art

Game Development

Game Design

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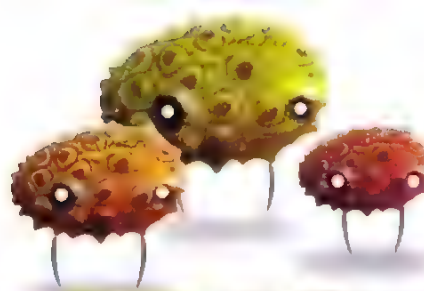


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Botanicula

A world of whimsy and wonder.



8.25

PC • Mac • Linux

Concept

Five bug-sized friends set off on an adventure across the tree in which they live

Graphics

The creatures and plants in this tiny world are full of life and humor, thanks in large part to their artistic presentation and animations

Sound

Charming music and nonsense voices add tremendously to the smile-inducing scenes

Playability

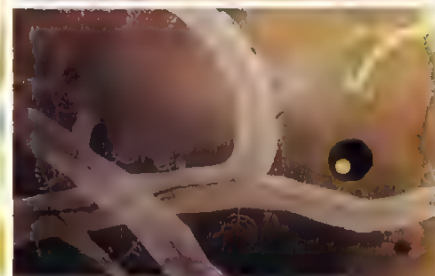
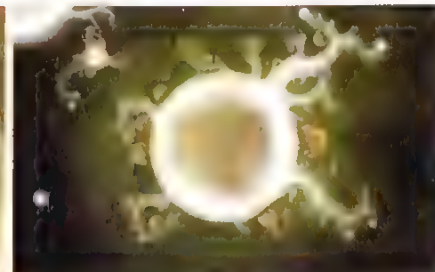
Things can't be much simpler than moving a mouse around the screen

Entertainment

A classic and well-designed point-and-click adventure wrapped inside a modern visual and audio presentation

Replay Value

Moderate



Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Amanita Design **Developer** Amanita Design **Release** April 19 **ESRB** N/A

If charm and whimsy were the defining traits by which we evaluated games, *Botanicula* would get a perfect score. As it is, those elements carry the game a long way, but the rest of the credit goes to some clever implementation of some very old-school adventure game concepts like hunting for clickable objects on screen or finding the right item from one place to utilize at another location. These simple (some might say tired) mechanics are given fresh life in *Botanicula* through puzzles that walk that fine line between too easy and overly difficult.

A lone seed has fallen into the branches of its parent tree, and only the inhabitants of that tree have the wherewithal to get this new life into the soil before a menacing spider creature devours it. Five friends – Mr. Lantern, Mrs. Mushroom, Mr. Poppy Head, Mr. Feather, and Mr. Twig – come together to get the job done. In an unusual twist, players control the entire group of bizarre heroes as they pursue their adventure. Each mouse click sends the eclectic group skipping off to a new location. Sometimes, only one of the five has the unique skills needed to gather a well-protected feather, pluck a distant flower bud, or save a baby chestnut and return it to its mother. Most

of the puzzles along the adventure are intuitive and offer some unique twist on expectation. One forces you to shake your mouse back and forth to scatter the seeds of a dandelion. Another demands you tilt the frames of paintings in the background to find what hides behind them. Even later in the game, most of the interactions remain simple, even when puzzles require significant consideration and thought.

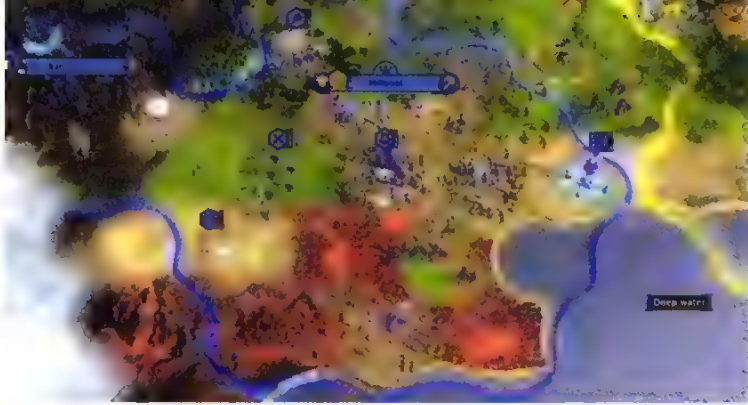
The world of *Botanicula* is enchanting, brimming with personality and humor. Like an extended Pixar short film, no words or writing are needed to communicate emotion or the childlike narrative. Instead, a wonderful score of strange sounds and nonsensical voices combine with an ecosystem of creatures and plants to create an unforgettable environment. Like the best fantasies, *Botanicula*'s world is grounded in human feelings and easily identifiable character motivations, so when the game shoots into wild flights of fancy and surreal imagery, the player is happy to go along for the ride.

As delightful as *Botanicula* is at times, it goes wrong in a few important ways. A handful of puzzles are based on trial and error, and don't reset after departing the room, so you can make things worse for yourself just by experimenting.

A few other situations, (one particularly nasty maze comes to mind) require too much mouse agility for a game that is otherwise about careful thinking and observation. Finally, presumably in an effort to make the latter levels feel more advanced, navigation between areas becomes maze-like. Moving between screens at this point is more distracting and frustrating than it is enjoyable.

By its nature as an exploration-focused adventure game, *Botanicula* has a deliberate pace, and the lack of direct control over character actions might irk some players. Old-school adventure gamers are in for a treat, and should absolutely put this on their playlist. In fact, if those same gamers are ready to pass their enthusiasm on to the next generation, *Botanicula* seems tailor-made to be enjoyed by a parent and child. » **Matt Miller**





Warlock: Master of the Arcane

Less than the sum of its parts

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Paradox Interactive
Developer Ino-Co Plus **Release** May 8 **ESRB** E 10+

6.5

PC

» Concept

Make a fantasy 4X empire-building game that focuses more on combat than research and development

» Graphics

The look and feel is an obvious ripoff of Civilization V, down to the placement of UI buttons

» Sound

Turning the music off in a strategy game is not unusual for me. Muting the sound entirely thanks to awful, grating voiceovers is a new one

» Playability

The lack of hotkeys is unforgivable. Even though the game is turn-based, the interface is still annoying

» Entertainment

This manages the core mission of building armies and conquering the world with them, but not much else. Then again, strategy fans can do worse for \$20

» Replay Value

Moderate

Warlock's emulation of Civilization V cannot be overstated. Significant portions of the game, from the interface to the combat model, are direct translations of its design to Warlock's fantasy milieu. The basic loop of founding cities, specializing them to produce a particular resource or unit type, and then channeling that production into creating an unstoppable fighting force is intact. In this case, though, you're building armies out of noble humans, flesh-hungry undead, and beastly monsters, and supporting them with powerful global enchantments and summoned monsters.

City development is shallow compared to other 4X titles. After a short learning curve (by strategy game standards) of a dozen hours or so, placing cities and deciding how to specialize them becomes automatic. Once that choice is made, the city is locked into that path thanks to extremely binding building limits and long dependency chains. Warlock is devoid of mechanics like Civilization's happiness to curb development, so building a strong infrastructure is a matter of stacking similar modifiers together to maximize output.

With the housekeeping of empire development out of the way, you're free to dig into Warlock's meaty combat. Between archers and mages bombarding from afar, steel-clad soldiers holding the line, and spectral wolves tearing at the enemy flanks, warfare has a lot going on. Your personal magic spells can upend the balance of a war, forming a huge earth elemental behind enemy lines or tearing an entire army to pieces with a dramatic firestorm. The AI is capable of defending its own cities reasonably well given relatively balanced armies. Assaulting cities is another matter; even if the AI brings enough units to eventually win, a conscious tactician should be able to enforce crippling attrition in the process.

War being such a strong point is a good thing, since it's the only meaningful interaction between factions. Diplomacy is practically non-existent, as the AI is perfectly happy to declare war at the drop of a hat – which makes sense, since there's no reason to work together except to secure a border while beating down on another rival.

Warlock has its fair share of bugs, like the inexplicably broken "demolish building" function, but the larger issue lies in its underdeveloped systems. Other planes of existence await brave players to exploit their unique resources, but why bother? The significant force necessary to explore those dangerous dimensions are better deployed against the opponents you're sure to be at war with directly. Why bother caring about what the gods think of you when there's no consequence and trivial rewards for divine favor? As fun as combat is, it's not enough to have me engaged in Warlock beyond my professional obligations. » **Adam Blessener**



Mario Tennis Open

Mario Tennis gets back to basics

Style 1-Player Sports (4-Player Online)
Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Camelot
Release May 20 **ESRB** E

8

3DS

» Concept

Mano scales back the more gimmicky aspects in favor of responsive, arcade-style tennis

» Graphics

The game makes the most of the hardware with crisp visuals

» Sound

The sound effects and music are what you'd expect: forgettable

» Playability

With the focus off of unbalanced power shots, the action feels more realistic and fluid

» Entertainment

It's a quality game, though I wonder how much more Nintendo can do with a simple game like tennis

» Replay Value

Moderately High

It's been a long time since we saw a new Mario Tennis game. The series' last release was Mario Power Tennis: New Play Control in 2009, a Wii re-release of the GameCube game featuring enhanced graphics and new motion controls. I enjoyed Power Tennis (both times), but the balance-breaking power shots were far too vital to winning. In response, Camelot has scaled back the wackiness with Open, which translates to a casual tennis game that plays it fairly straight.

While the courts are still themed after past Mario games, they are free of any gimmicks or moving parts, so winning or losing is based on skill alone. Though the gonzo power shots of Power Tennis are gone, special shots are implemented by placing colored markers on court when your opponent hits a weak return shot. Each color corresponds to a different shot, which varies from wildly arcing returns to drop shots that die upon bouncing. While they are certainly important to master, they don't overtake the flow of the game. First, they are positional, so you have to be able to get to the spot to use them. Second, you're definitely able to return them if you play them correctly – much more so than the power shots in Power Tennis.

This 3DS game doesn't make too much of the system's capabilities. It supports StreetPass (is anyone still using that?) and Miis (which you can customize with a variety of unlockable gear that adds to your stats). However, Camelot mishandled the 3D effects. You can access a zoomed in, behind the player view by holding the unit upright, which automatically disables the 3D. If you hold it flat, you get a traditional isometric view that technically displays in 3D, but adds little depth or impact. After experimenting with the options, I played with the 3D slider turned off.

The expected minigames return, though there are not as many as in Power Tennis. Galaxy Rally (where you must rally with your opponent to hit a certain number of returns), Ink Showdown (where the giant squid ball machines will obscure your view with ink blobs), and Ring Shot are fairly standard stuff. However, the Super Mario Tennis mode is ingenious. The original Super Mario Bros. is displayed on the backboard, and it scrolls as you hit coins, blocks, and enemies with the ball. You can even hit warp pipes to travel up and down to hidden areas and aim at the flagpole to end the level. It's just another example of Nintendo's endlessly inventive method of recycling its past.

For the first time in series history, Mario Tennis Open offers full online multiplayer – both singles and (impressively) doubles. It also has local wireless multiplayer. Based on my experience, both modes work smoothly. This isn't the tennis revolution that some might have hoped for, but it's a solid new feature in a franchise that's built its popularity on slow, incremental improvement. » **Matt Helgeson**

PLAYSTATION 3

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11	Jak and Daxter Collection	9.25	Mar-12	Shrek 2	7	Apr-12	Asura's Wrath	6.5	Apr-12	Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning	8	Mar-12
Adventures of Tintin, The	7.75	Feb-12	Journey	9	Apr-12	Silent Hill HD Collection	8	Apr-12	Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11	Kung-Fu High Impact	6	Feb-12
All Zombies Must Die	7.5	Mar-12	Jurassic Park: The Game	5.5	Jan-12	Silent Hill Downpour	7	Apr-12	Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11	LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan-12
Amy	3	Mar-12	King of Fighters XIII	7.75	Feb-12	Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11	Binary Domain	7.5	May-12	Lord of the Rings		
Armored Core V	6.5	May-12	Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning	8	Mar-12	Blades of Time	8	Jun-12	Blades of Time	4.5	May-12	War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12	Kung-Fu High Impact	6	Feb-12	Burnout Crash	8	Dec-11	Burnout Crash	7.5	Nov-11	Major League Baseball 2K12	6.75	May-12
Asura's Wrath	8.5	Apr-12	LEGO Harry Potter Years 5-7	7.5	Jan-12	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12	Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11	Lord of the Rings: War in the North	5.5	Dec-11	Crysis	8.25	Dec-11	Dance Central 2	8.25	Nov-11	NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11	Major League Baseball 2K12	6.75	May-12	Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11	Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11	NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
Binary Domain	7.5	May-12	Mass Effect 3	10	May-12	Darkness II	7.5	Mar-12	Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11	Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
Birds of Steel	7	Jun-12	Metal Gear Solid HD Collection	9	Jan-12	Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11	Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12	NeverDead	4	Mar-12
Blades of Time	4.5	May-12	MLB 12: The Show	8.75	May-12	Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12	Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11	Nexuz	6	May-12
Burnout Crash	7.5	Nov-11	NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11	Disney Universe	6.5	Dec-11	Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12	NFL Blitz	8	Mar-12
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	9	Jan-12	NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11	Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11	Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12	Ninja Gaiden 3	6	May-12
Crysis	8.25	Dec-11	Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11	Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12	Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11	Otomedius Excellent	3.75	Jan-12
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11	NeverDead	4	Mar-12	FIFA 12	9	Nov-11	Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12	Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Darkness II	7.5	Mar-12	Nexuz	6	May-12	FIFA Street	7.25	May-12	FIFA 12	9	Nov-11	Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11	NFL Blitz	8	Mar-12	Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12	FIFA Street	7.25	May-12	Quarrel	8.5	Apr-12
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12	Ninja Garden 3	6	May-12	Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12	Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12	Rage	9	Nov-11
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Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11	Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11	GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12	GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12	Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	9.5	Jan-12	Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12	Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12	Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12	Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11
FIFA 12	9	Nov-11	Rage	9	Nov-11	Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12	Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12	Resident Evil: Operation	8.5	Nov-11
FIFA Street	7.25	May-12	Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One	8.75	Dec-11	House of the Dead: Overkill Extended Cut	8	Dec-11	Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12	Resident Evil: Operation	8.5	Nov-11
Final Fantasy XIII-2	8	Feb-12	Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11	House of the Dead: Overkill Extended Cut	8	Dec-11	Guardian Heroes	8.25	Dec-11	Raccoon City	8	May-12
God of War: Origins Collection	9.5	Oct-11	Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11	Ice & Shadow of the Colossus Collection, The	9.75	Oct-11	Halo Combat Evolved Anniversary	8.5	Jan-12	Rise of Nightmares	5	Nov-11
GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	7	Jan-12	Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11				Halo Combat Evolved Anniversary	8.5	Jan-12	Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12	Resident Evil Code: Veronica X	8.5	Nov-11				Hulk Hogan's Main Event	1	Dec-11	Rocks'n'Roll	8.25	Dec-11
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Ice & Shadow of the Colossus Collection, The	9.75	Oct-11	Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11				Just Dance 3	6	Dec-11	Once Upon A Monster	8.5	Nov-11
			Rocks'n'Roll	8.25	Dec-11				Kinect Disneyland Adventures	7.5	Jan-12	Shank 2	7	Apr-12
			Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11				Kinect Star Wars	5.5	Jun-12	Silent Hill: Downpour	8	Apr-12
									King of Fighters XIII	7.75	Feb-12	Silent Hill: Downpour	7	Apr-12
												Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11

XBOX 360

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
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Alan Wake's American Nightmare	7.75	Apr-12
All Zombies Must Die	7.5	Mar-12
Army	3	Mar-12
Armored Core V	6.5	May-12
Assassin's Creed Revelations	8.75	Jan-12

8.5 | Tribes: Ascend

Platform PC Release April 12 Rating T

Nostalgic and innovative at the same time, speed and scale are what set Tribes: Ascend apart from comparable shooters.

There's a barrier to entry gaining access to all the classes and learning how to "ski" properly, but it's worth the time investment. — Kyle Hilliard

6 | Risen 2: Dark Waters

Platform PC Release April 27 ESRB M

Seeing the promise that occasionally shines through Risen 2's many flaws is disheartening.... As much as I wanted to love it, Risen 2 ends up as another entry in the long list of games with a great premise, a few interesting ideas, and an unforgivable anchor dragging the whole thing down. — Adam Biessener

6.75 | Ridge Racer Unbounded

Platform PS3 • 360 Release March 27 ESRB T

Falling somewhere between a traditional Ridge Racer title and a Burnout game, Unbounded fails to fully succeed at creating either, ending up in between the two racing franchises in terms of quality. — Kyle Hilliard

8 | The Splatters

Platform 360 Release April 11 ESRB E

The Splatters' simple mechanic of flinging liquid to destroy bombs feels like a cross between Angry Birds and Peggle in all the right ways. You have a lot of control over the direction of your flying splatters, but an element of luck (maybe too much) determines how many bombs you are able to take out. When you mess up, blaming the game is easy, but the successful runs make it worth trying again over and over. — Kyle Hilliard

8.5 | Awesomenauts

Platform PS3 • 360 Release May 2 ESRB T

Awesomenauts may look like a Mega Man-inspired 16-bit throwback, but it's actually a 2D, pared-down version of popular MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) games like League of Legends. The three-on-three battles are easier to get your head around, but there's still a ton of depth in balancing your team and each character's various power-ups and load outs. It's one of the year's early multiplayer highlights; don't miss it. — Matt Helgeson



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STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com

Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com

Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com

Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com

Senior Features Editor
Matt Helgeson matt@gameinformer.com

Digital Editor
Bryan Vore bryan@gameinformer.com

Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com

Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com

News Editor
Jim Reilly jim@gameinformer.com

PC Editor
Adam Blossener adam@gameinformer.com

Senior Associate Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com

Associate Editors
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Jeff Marchiava jefm@gameinformer.com
Tim Turi tim@gameinformer.com
Dan Ryckart dan@gameinformer.com
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com

Art Director
Thomas Biustin tom@gameinformer.com

Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com

Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com

Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com

Video Editor
Jason Oestreicher jason@gameinformer.com

Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com

Information Systems Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paulhedgpeth@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Born rob@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Sales Director
Suzanne Lang suzanne@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Associate
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com

Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Nimerfroh rachel@gameinformer.com
Mark Burger mark@gameinformer.com

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Wandering the Wasteland

Many modern gamers may think of Fallout when they hear the term “post-apocalyptic,” but Wasteland preceded that series by nearly a decade. The beloved role-playing game from Interplay and Electronic Arts has lived on in gamers’ hearts since it broke new ground on the Apple II, PC, and Commodore 64 in 1988. Rich text descriptions of the run-down world, permanent death and consequences for the player’s Desert Rangers, a deep dedication to non-linearity, and multiple solutions to problems make Wasteland a historic landmark in the progression of the role-playing genre.

Twenty-five years later, much of the original team is getting back together for a Kickstarter-funded sequel that better than tripled its initial \$900,000 goal with nearly \$3 million raised. We chatted with Interplay founder, Wasteland producer/designer, and Wasteland 2 lead Brian Fargo about what made it special then and why it continues to resonate a quarter-century later.

Interview by Adam Bliessener



The Desert Rangers, protagonists of the original Wasteland, return for the sequel

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