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GAMESTOCK 2012

At

GameStop
power to the players

The In-Between

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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comment on this letter at
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@GI_AndyMc

When judged as the pageant of marketing and hype that ultimately is the video game companies' goal for E3, this year's expo was a flop. When examined with a keen eye, however, this E3 was filled with a surprisingly large collection of blockbuster games that will populate the coming year and define the end of this generation.

This year's E3 being among the worst isn't exactly a surprise. The industry sits on the cusp of change, riding out the last of this generation's games with a display of graphical prowess and developer know-how that can only be found at the tail end of a console's lifespan. Sadly, great games don't automatically translate into a great E3, since most of the products at the show had already been shown to the public.

The shadow cast by the impending next generation of consoles seemed to limit what the big three manufacturers were willing to do at the show. Microsoft and Sony logically held their hands close since a launch for their systems isn't likely until holiday 2013. On the other hand, Nintendo seemed lost and confused by its own messaging. What makes the Wii U special? Why do I want to play the biggest third-party games there? Nintendo didn't address any of its biggest challenges, and left many questions simply unanswered.

In particular, I felt the big three didn't focus enough on the true attraction of any hardware platform: the software. Games, and the lure of upcoming worlds to explore, are the true charm of gaming. We want to be dazzled. We want to be transported to new lands and higher challenges. This element of surprise was the most important ingredient missing from E3 2012. Instead, the console manufacturers devoted effort to showing entries in well-known series, touting business partnerships, and pushing their technological initiatives.

Without next-generation software (save a handful of "high-end PC" surprises), the industry had a hard time saying, "Look at us, we make the best games in the world, and here is a giant list of them!" I think that is the message the video game industry needs to be screaming from the top of every mountain.

Thankfully, we organize the madness that is the expo into our E3 Hot 50, the definitive list of what to watch for in the year ahead. While the industry figures out what to do next (or what TV service to add to your console), we will stick to the lifeblood of this industry: the games.

And I'd like to just throw this little tidbit out there for you, Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft: The people who scour the websites and watch the live feeds want to hear about games, not what new ancillary service you are going to provide. Not to say we won't watch HBO Go on our Xbox, but that is just a bullet point in our lives as gamers. Games are what we care about, and what companies at E3 should care about.

Cheers,

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See all six covers on page 4

E3 2012 Hot 50

This year's Electronic Entertainment Expo lacked exciting hardware announcements, but was jam-packed with amazing games. We've ranked our favorite 50 games of the show, including new screens and info for high-profile titles like Splinter Cell Blacklist, Assassin's Creed III, and The Last of Us.

12   E3 2012: Microsoft

70

54   **Watch Dogs**

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16   E3 2012: Nintendo

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regulars

104 Quantum Conundrum

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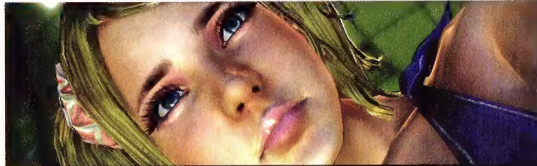
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111 Diablo III

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34 Gear: Xbox SmartGlass

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Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate (p. 98)

Dead Space 3 (p. 50)

God of War: Ascension (p. 70)

Injustice: Gods Among Us (p. 92)

Resident Evil 6 (p. 64)

Splinter Cell Blacklist (p. 58)

Our E3 Hot 50 Covers

So many great games were on display at E3, we figured we should have covers for more than just one. Each is a game that we've never featured on our cover before. Our E3 special edition covers are drawn from the most exciting new games that were on tap at this year's big show in Los Angeles. To read more about our cover games, flip over to the page number listed under each cover image for a dedicated four-page preview, or read through over 60 pages of E3 previews beginning on page 38.

feedback

This month in Feedback, readers praise old-school adventure games, ask for some couch co-op recommendations, disagree with our favorite space marines (surprise), and share their opinions on next-gen consoles.

Elder Scrolls Goes Online

When I saw the cover for issue 230, along with the map of Tamriel stretched across it, I was ecstatic! I hadn't heard much about The Elder Scrolls Online, but after reading the article, I can't wait for the release! MMOs got me started as a gamer, and I'm glad they did. The Elder Scrolls Online is going make all those sweet memories come flowing back and I absolutely can't wait another minute.

Joe Kerska
via email

With the announcement of The Elder Scrolls Online, is it safe to assume that Skyrim is the last single-player Elder Scrolls game, at least for a good long time? The Warcraft real-time strategy series has been pretty much dead since the release of World of Warcraft (fingers still crossed, though). I know they are different developers – and two of the best in the business – but it seems logical that Bethesda will also focus on its new MMO.

Dan Willett
via email

A number of readers wrote us with fears that the new Elder Scrolls MMO will take away from the development of single-player installments of the series. Fear not: The Elder Scrolls Online is being developed by Zenimax Online Studios, not Bethesda Game Studios. The two developers are completely separate, so the MMO won't delay or detract from any of Bethesda's upcoming offerings.

Old-School Adventuring

I was reading your article on the resurgence of adventure games (The Genre That Refuses To Die, issue 230), when I stumbled across the Five Must-Play Classics sidebar. Taking your advice, I downloaded Zork and have spent hours with the game since. I find the text-based medium and matter-of-fact presentation endlessly charming, and am particularly amused by some of the humorous responses the game gives to wrong commands. This game has really opened my mind to text-based games, and I'll undoubtedly be spending hours with Zork and other games like it in the future.

Nick Wardner
Ann Arbor, MI

I loved your recent article on adventure games, especially the Five Must-Play Classics. Of course Myst is great, but the fact that you included my two favorite games, Day of the Tentacle and Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist, makes me love you even more. Those were the first games that started my love of video games, and I try to get as many people I know to play them. I would even put floppy disk drives in my new computers so I could play Freddy Pharkas.

Tayci Stallings
via email

The Couple That Slays Together...

When my husband and I first met, we spent a lot of time getting to know each other over Resident Evil 5. Nothing helps build trust and teamwork like slaughtering Majini together. We played through the storyline on several difficulties and continue to occasionally play the Mercenaries maps. We both enjoy playing other multiplayer games online and sometimes play shooters locally as well, but there are few remaining action games that you can play together from the couch. I'm excited to see that Resident Evil 6 will have local multiplayer. Any other recommendations?

Beth McHenry
New York, NY

My girlfriend and I are searching for a good co-op console game (either 360 or PS3) we can enjoy together on the same system. She is very much interested in games like Diablo, Terraria, and Skyrim – mainly RPGs with swords, magic, and lots of customization. I am more of a generic gamer. I spend most of my time on shooters like Call of Duty, Left 4 Dead, or adventure games such as Red Dead Redemption and Skyrim. Would you guys have any recommendations that would be a good fit for us to play together?

Thomas Viola
via email

If our email is anything to go by, developers ignore the inclusion of couch co-op at their own peril. Every month we get requests for game recommendations supporting local multiplayer. For nonstop killing, check out the Gears of War, Left 4 Dead, and Borderlands series. For peaceful teamwork, check out Minecraft (if you have an HD television, at least) and Portal 2. For RPGs, you might like Crimson Alliance, Fable III, Sacred II, or Dungeon Siege III.

Space Marine Mess-up?

In issue 230, you included Master Chief in your Top Ten Space Marines list. Master Chief cannot be considered a candidate for this list because he is not a Marine. He is actually enlisted in the UNSC Navy not the UNSC Marines, a fact made very clear by his full title, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. He can actually be considered the equivalent of a modern day Navy SEAL in that respect (even more so when you consider that both the Spartan IIs and the Navy SEALs fall under the command of Naval Special Warfare Command). I recommend that the title of the list be changed to Top Nine Space Marines and the Best Space Navy SEAL of All Time.

Nathan T.
San Pedro, CA

I was reading this month's issue, when I got to the Top Ten Space Marines. First off, I noticed the absence of Isaac Clarke from Dead Space. Then I saw that Master Chief was second to the Doom Guy. Really? Lastly, I was annoyed to see that the COG Gears were as low as they were. The one thing that made it a little better was the inclusion of Stormtroopers; no matter how bad they suck, they really are classics. Aside from that, learn your space marines.

Caleb Munden
via email

Our Top Ten Space Marines list once again proved that readers will complain about anything. Our decision-making process for the list was guided more by which characters best capture the essence of the space marine stereotype, rather than their fictional military title. Also, you're arguing about space marines!
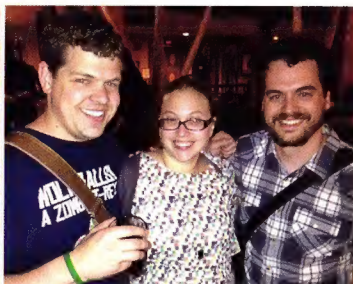
(**Left**) Activision's Aaron Grant looks on as *Friday Night Lights* fan Andrew Reiner meets Game Informer fan Scott Porter. The nerd love was overwhelming. (**Right**) This year at E3, Ben and Bryan caught up with a longtime friend of GI, Gree's Tali Fischer.

gi spy

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
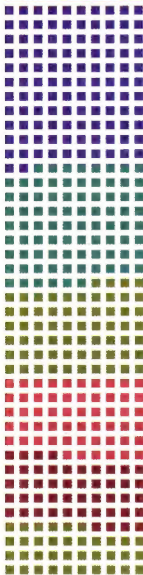
- ■ Next-Gen Consoles
  Debate **28%**
- ■ Elder Scrolls Online Cheers
  and Jeers **21%**
- ■ More Mass Effect 3 Complaints
  (It's Getting Sad, People) **16%**
- ■ DRM Hatred **14%**
- ■ Continued Darth Clark
  Rants **12%**
- ■ RE 6 Ashley/Sherry Birkin
  Confusion **9%**

**Question of
the Month:**

What's your favorite video
game sound effect and why?

Rated T For Tough

A little while ago, I purchased Call of Duty 3, which is a T-rated game.
I'm only 13 years old, and my parents do not let me play M-rated
video games. I respect this, but they don't understand that games in a
franchise can differ in content. So when I came home and showed my
parents Call of Duty 3, they flipped. They think all Call of Duty games
are full of excessive blood, violence, and language. They didn't even
pay attention to the rating, and promptly made me return it. I've tried
to explain to them countless times that Call of Duty 3 is not a Mature
game, but they are too prejudiced to even consider me buying a game
from the franchise. Is there any way to convince them that there is
nothing wrong with owning a T-rated first-person shooter?

**Liam Thomas
via email**

**Sorry Liam, but your parents aren't being prejudicial; they're
simply practicing discretion. ESRB ratings are a guideline, not a
commandment, and your parents have the final say in what con-
tent is appropriate. Just like parents can decide an M-rated game
is okay for their child, they can also decide a T-rated game isn't.
On a bright note, just think how great M-rated games are going to
be five years from now.**

A Dream Come True

I just wanted to thank you for your article on
Quantic Dream's new engine (Manufacturing
Emotion, issue 229). The "console war" started
for me at the ripe young age of 15, when I was
given a choice between two consoles: the
PlayStation 3 or the Xbox 360. This was a very
tough decision for me, but I chose the PS3
because I felt like it had more potential. Quantic
Dream has reaffirmed my belief. I am very, very
excited to see what Quantic Dream has to offer
and I will be an avid Sony fan for years to come.

**Stephanie Winn
via email**

**Quantic Dream has been an important
studio in Sony's stable of exclusive develop-
ers, and based on its Beyond: Two Souls
demo at E3, that won't change anytime
soon (see page 74 for more details). Also,
the console war started for you with PS3
and Xbox 360? Holy crap, we're old.**
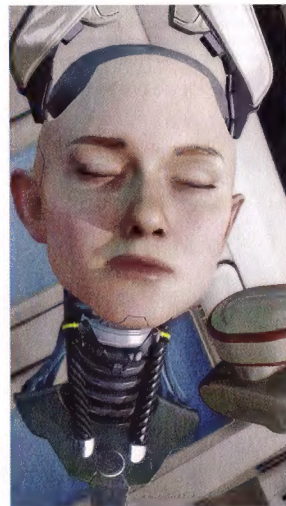
Ready or Not?

In issue 230, we asked readers if they are ready for a new round of consoles. Most respondents stated they hope next-gen consoles are still a couple of years off, but a few want the future of gaming to arrive as soon as possible. Here are some responses.

In all honesty, I fear the next round of consoles will bring about the next video game industry crash. A new generation of hardware is likely to challenge console makers to the breaking point in their ability to deliver more powerful hardware at a price point consumers will accept, and software producers to bring games to the market that utilize the power of the new generation (read: higher overhead on every title) without raising prices.

Benjamin Kuhner

Right now I am excited for news about next-gen consoles, because I know that new consoles can only improve AI and graphics, which will lead to more complex and realistic games. Some people are not ready because they say the new consoles will be too expensive, but if they wait, there will be a price drop and by that time more games will have been released for them.

Spencer Wilson

New consoles?! I've hardly gotten use to the current ones...

Tyler Johnson

I'm not ready for the next round of consoles. I only just bought my Xbox 360 six months ago with allowance money that took me forever to save up. Unless the next Xbox can play 360 games and the PlayStation 4 has the same Vita connection (I'm saving up for a Vita now) as the PS3, I think I'll wait for the next groundbreaking development in gaming before I add more consoles to my overcrowded entertainment center.

Kaitlyn Petrie

gallery

Corrections:
In issue 231, our Tomb Raider preview stated the game is coming to the Wii U. This was an unfortunate template error; Tomb Raider will only be available on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.

(Left) Tony Hawk and Chris Cole (front) took a break from skating to pose with Activision's Jude Moore and Scott Hawkins, and Sandbox Strategies' Corey Wade. Even skaters dress better than Dan! **(Inset)** Kyle tried desperately to convince Airtight Games' Kim Swift that he was smart enough to solve Quantum Conundrum's puzzles. He failed miserably. **(Right)** Telltale's Job Stauffer shared a snack with Ben Reeves after checking out episode two of The Walking Dead. Just once we wish Ben wouldn't resort to cannibalism during E3.

As thousands of game journalists, developers, and retailers once again descended on Los Angeles for another Electronic Entertainment Expo, a sense of uncertainty hung over the conference. With retail game sales on a downward slide and console sales sitting stagnant, many were hoping a next-gen announcement would give the industry a much-needed jolt of electricity. Outside of the already announced Wii U, no platform holders were willing to pull the trigger on announcing any next-gen plans, so most publishers went about their business ignoring the giant elephant in the room. Though most companies were hesitant, a few brave publishers like Square Enix (the Agni's Philosophy demo), LucasArts (Star Wars: 1313), and Ubisoft (Watch Dogs) unveiled tantalizing projects we believe are destined for next-gen consoles.

Outside of these brief glimpses of the future, everyone stuck to the same sequel-heavy script we've seen for years. The predictable march of the next Halo, God of War, Call of Duty, and Splinter Cell games left many show attendees longing for more risk-taking projects promising innovation, but no one could deny the polish these top games exuded. We may not have a lot of surprises to look forward to for the rest of 2012 and early 2013, but there is no shortage of impressive-looking games on the horizon. Read on to get all the news you need to know about E3: the winners, the losers, and all the announcements that made headlines at this year's show.
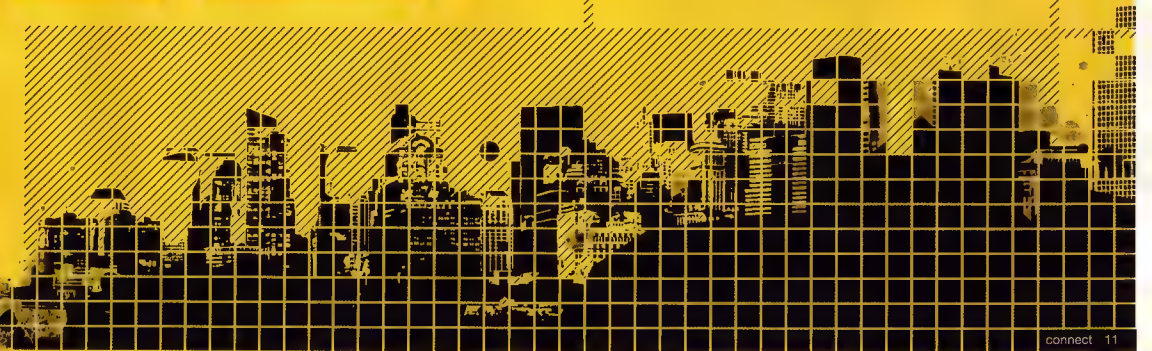
INTRODUCES TABLET AND PHONE INTERACTIVITY,

The last two Microsoft E3 press conferences strongly-ly emphasized Kinect functionality in games and on the dashboard. While Kinect still played a role this year, a new piece of technology has taken the spotlight: Xbox SmartGlass. Instead of making Xbox 360 owners purchase yet another gadget for their console, SmartGlass is a free software download that works with smartphones and tablets that most people already have (iOS, Android, and Windows).

Xbox Live corporate vice president Marc Whitten demonstrated a variety of methods in which portable devices can interact directly with Xbox 360s, including the introduction of Internet Explorer on the console. For videos, consumers can start a movie on a tablet and pick up directly where they left off on TV, and HBO's *Game of Thrones* will display a real-time map that tracks where the current onscreen characters are in the show's sprawling world. Of course, game functionality is in the mix as well, with Madden NFL demoing tablet playcalling, route drawing, and pass target selection, and Halo 4 tying into Waypoint unlocks and multiplayer game invites. For more on SmartGlass see the Gear section on page 34.

Despite all of the SmartGlass talk, Microsoft spent plenty of time on core games. The company kicked things off with an impressive presentation of Halo 4. A live-action trailer showed UNSC Marines aboard the ship *Infinity* getting pulled toward the mysterious planet Master Chief is stranded on, and then things

transferred to a live stage demo showcasing the new Promethean enemies and weapons. Other extended live-demo highlights included Ubisoft's Splinter Cell: Blacklist (which debuted at the event), Square Enix's Tomb Raider, Capcom's Resident Evil 6, and Activision's Call of Duty: Black Ops II. Impressive trailers provided looks at Gears of War: Judgment, Forza Horizon, South Park: The Stick of Truth, and Dance Central 3. Many of the third-party titles in this list also pledged that Xbox 360 would get DLC add-ons before any other platforms for an undetermined window of time.

Kinect got its time on the stage when Electronic Arts presented new voice controls for FIFA 13 and Madden NFL 13, like calling out substitutions on the soccer field and audibles at the line of scrimmage. During the Splinter Cell: Blacklist demo, the devs used Kinect to call out to unsuspecting guards to lure them into a trap. The biggest Kinect-focused title, however, was Nike+ Kinect Training. The workouts don't seem to be all that different from past Kinect fitness games, but it's all built on the polished Nike+ workout-tracking system that originally started in 2006 and now boasts over 6 million online users. The game tracks users' NikeFuel number, incorporates phone data and reminders, and evaluates users every four weeks – doling out separate fitness and athleticism ratings. This data can all be shared with Xbox Live and Nike+ friends of your choosing to help with accountability and encouragement.

Surprisingly, most of the console exclusives came from the Live Arcade arena. Signal Studios, developer of the Toy Soldiers games, showed gameplay footage of Ascend: New Gods, an

XBOX LIVE SCORES MORE ENTERTAINMENT & SPORTS APPS

Microsoft announced over 30 new content-provider partnerships coming to Xbox Live in 2012. This is a list of all of the announced apps that are headed to the United States. Just as with the MLB.TV app that's currently on Xbox Live, all three new sports apps are hamstrung by local broadcast blackout restrictions.

GENERAL APPS	
Ameba TV	Rhapsody
BreakMedia	Slacker Radio
GameSpot TV	SnagFilms
Indie Flix	The AOL On
Machinima	Network
Nickelodeon	The Weather
Paramount	Channel
Movies	The Whistle
Revision3	Twitch TV
	Univision

SPORTS APPS

ESPN: This new update to the existing app will enable live television content through WatchESPN, including ESPN, ESPN2, ESPN3, and ESPNU (Launching later this year)

NBA Game Time with NBA.com League Pass Broadband: Hundreds of live games, highlights, and updated stats (Fall)

NHL GameCenter Live: Over 1,000 live games, social interactivity, and highlights (Fall)

Microsoft's Don Mattrick kicks off the show

SOFT

MORE DLC EXCLUSIVITY

South Park creators Trey Parker (left) and Matt Stone promote their new game from THQ

action RPG featuring asynchronous multiplayer. Twisted Pixel (Ms. Splosion Man) teased its next project, Lococycle, by panning around the titular vehicle in a dark garage and talking about "her" skills in languages, melee combat, and assassination. Microsoft is also working with Hollywood director Gore Verbinski (Pirates of the Caribbean) on a futuristic marble puzzle title called Matter, which somehow involves Kinect. Not exactly headline grabbing projects.

Just as last year, Microsoft trails both Sony and Nintendo in original, first-party content. Microsoft came out of the gates strong with Halo 4, but its only other blockbuster 360 exclusive, Gears of War: Judgment, was limited to a brief trailer

FINAL GRADE:
C+

rather than a live gameplay demo. In the absence of compelling software, Microsoft spent the rest of its time drumming up support for its multimedia initiatives. SmartGlass has the potential to be groundbreaking, but if game developers and video providers don't support it, it will simply become a nice way to navigate to Netflix streaming without having to power up a controller. It'll be interesting to see if Microsoft will help third parties with development costs to get it off the ground.

Usher performed his new single, "Scream," as part of the Dance Central 3 presentation

Several years after Microsoft discontinued the Zune media device, it finally pulled the plug on the eponymous music and video service. The Zune store on Xbox Live is being split into two new services: Xbox Video and Xbox Music. An app called Xbox Games will also appear on Windows 8 PCs and tablets, allowing players to check out their avatar, achievements, and friends (similar to current Xbox mobile apps). Despite the name of the app itself, you won't be able to download and play any Xbox 360 games on either of these platforms.

ZUNE REBRANDED, XBOX SPREADS TO WINDOWS 8

connect 13

SONY

EXCLUSIVES MAKE UP FOR A FEW MISSTEPS

With SCEA president and CEO Jack Tretton once again emceeing Sony's E3 press conference, the company continued its recent trend of eschewing boring sales figures for looks at exciting, platform-exclusive software. This year's 90-minute presentation showed off a number of games only Sony fans will be playing, and the live demos ranged from disastrous to spectacular.

In what was the first of several mixed reactions, Sony opened the show with the unveiling of Quantic Dream's new title, Beyond: Two Souls. Pre-show rumors had gamers hyped for an E3 reveal, and although the debut featured top-notch visuals and an impressive digital performance by Ellen Page, the dialogue-heavy demo took a while to heat up, leaving many underwhelmed.

A live demo of PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale did little to improve the situation, as four players engaged in a few minutes of screen-wide chaos before a winner was named. The match showcased cross-platform play between the PS3 and PlayStation Vita, with the demonstrators split evenly between the two systems. Still, not even the reveal of two new characters – Uncharted's Nathan Drake and BioShock's Big Daddy – got attendees very excited.

After touting its indie downloadable games (see sidebar), the tide started to turn in Sony's favor with a little help from Ubisoft. First came a trailer for Assassin's Creed III: Liberation, which coincided with the announcement of another Vita-exclusive title, Call of Duty: Black Ops Declassified. These two titles are impressive gets for Vita, but otherwise the handheld was virtually MIA at the press conference, which doesn't instill much confidence in the system.

Despite having held its own press conference earlier in the day, Ubisoft saved its best Assassin's Creed III offering for Sony's show. The live demo revealed new ship-to-ship battles, and the naval warfare and storm effects stunned the audience. A four-player co-op demo for Far Cry 3 was less impressive, but there's no harm in Sony associating itself with such ambitious third-party titles. Ubisoft announced that both games will have exclusive DLC on PlayStation 3.

Just when Sony was gathering steam, it took a show-stopping detour in the form of Wonderbook, a new Sony initiative that mixes PlayStation Move with augmented reality-infused reading. SCE president and group CEO Andrew House introduced the 15-minute demo and announced the first Wonderbook: Book of Spells, a Harry Potter-licensed story that J.K. Rowling is collaborating on. Unfortunately, poor motion detection made this "reinvention of the storybook" an unmitigated disaster that went on way too long. At one point it took one of the demonstrators a full minute to unlock a gate with what should have been a simple gesture. On the plus side, Wonderbook looked so boring that it may cause kids to give up gaming in favor of reading actual books.

Just when all hope seemed lost, Sony broke out the big guns with back-to-back demos for two highly anticipated games. The live God of War: Ascension demo marked the return of Kratos, as he sliced his way through a zoo's-worth of human/animal hybrids, including a group (herd?) of savage goatmen and a club-wielding elephant boss. Despite showing off a new ability that allowed Kratos to rebuild some destroyed platforms, the Ascension demo came off as more of the same. For God of War, however, that's not a bad thing.

Sony plunged the audience into darkness for the final demo of the show, a visceral introduction to The Last of Us that proved to be the high note of the

SONY'S NEWEST DIVERSION

SCE president and group CEO Andrew House announced PlayStation Mobile, a new initiative to bring PlayStation Certified games to Android tablets and smartphones. House also announced that HTC will be its first non-Sony partner to create Sony-approved handsets.

You'll forgive us if we don't buy into the significance of the announcement. Sony endlessly hyped 3D last year, but it was a virtual no-show at this E3. We're guessing it will end up like Sony's other flash-in-the-pan initiatives such as Home and Move: a highly touted "game changer" that will flounder straight out of the gate.

Papo & Yo

Beyond: Two Souls

Sony had no shortage of triple-A exclusives at the show, but it also reminded the audience of the work it's doing with indie developers. Jack Tretton revealed

REMEMBERING THE INDIES

that Journey is the number-one selling PSN title of all time, and touted two more artistic DLGs exclusive to Sony: Unfinished Swan and Papo & Yo, both of which impressed us enough to secure spots on our Top 50 list.

press conference. The demo followed Joel and Ellie's journey through a rundown hotel, and featured numerous, desperate encounters with their fellow survivors. The final combat sequence was so brutal viewers barbarically erupted as if they had just witnessed a kill at the Roman Colosseum. As a PlayStation 3 exclusive, Sony couldn't have asked for a more enthusiastic response to wrap its press conference.

PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale

With no hardware announcements outside of two Assassin's Creed-themed bundles for PS3 and Vita, Sony let its software do the talking at this year's press conference, and was better off for it. While some of the new technology demos were underwhelming, Sony had more promising exclusives than the other two console makers. The fact that Microsoft also didn't announce a next-gen system means Sony won't have to play catch-up, and its game lineup for the golden years of the PlayStation 3 looks solid.

FINAL GRADE:
B-

Wonderbook

FAILS TO BUILD MOMENTUM FOR THE Wii U AT A

With the Wii U set to release this holiday season, it was imperative that Nintendo came out swinging at E3. After all, it was its last chance to make an impression at the annual convention before consumers decide whether or not to put the console on their holiday wish lists. For the Wii U to come anywhere close to reaching the sales numbers of its predecessor, Nintendo has to showcase some serious software. But after the booths were packed up and the journalists headed home, it was clear that Nintendo had dropped the ball.

To give some perspective, the Wii wasn't strictly demonstrated with casual fare during E3 2006, months before its November release. Sure, Nintendo had the family-friendly Wii Sports phenomenon, but it also had playable demos of Super Mario Galaxy, Metroid Prime 3, and The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess. Family-focused gamers were wowed by the simple motion controls of tennis in Wii Sports, and longtime gamers were excited about new incarnations of their favorite series. This year, most of Nintendo's software offerings were worse regardless of your tastes.

From the way it was presented, the publisher clearly expects Nintendo Land to be the Wii U equivalent of Wii Sports. At both the press conference and on the show floor, this collection of minigames (which is what they are, regardless of how Nintendo tries to frame them) was given more time and attention than Pikmin 3 or New Super Mario Bros. U. We hoped that Nintendo wouldn't end its presser with a game this basic, which is why we were excited when Reggie said "One last thing before you leave..." When that "one last thing" turned into another quick look at Nintendo Land, it was made painfully apparent that the publisher is going all-in with this one.

Despite the baffling focus on Nintendo Land, playable demos of Pikmin 3 and New Super Mario Bros. U proved that the first-party landscape isn't completely barren for the Wii U. Nintendo fans have been asking for a new Pikmin for years, and it delivered both visually and in terms of gameplay. While predictable, New Super Mario Bros. U presented the series' iconic gameplay in HD for the first time, and it looks and plays fantastic.

Many third-party offerings for the console are ports of games that have already been released. Nintendo fans will finally have access to blockbusters like Mass Effect 3 and the Assassin's Creed series, but it remains to be seen how well these games incorporate the Wii U's hardware. We're hoping for new ways to experience these titles using the GamePad, so it would be disappointing to see straightforward ports that offer nothing we haven't seen before. One third-party publisher that is offering some new titles is Ubisoft, which demonstrated the solid Rayman Legends and the unique ZombiU.

Nintendo also showcased slight alterations to the newly named GamePad controller, with the most notable being the two analog sticks (complete with click functionality) that replace last year's circle pads. Nintendo's engineers added plastic grips to the back of the device, which makes it easier to hold sideways. A new TV button lets the GamePad function as a remote control. Near-field communication capabilities will allow games like Rayman Legends to incorporate physical objects into gameplay, à la Skylanders. Perhaps most importantly, Nintendo announced that the console supports two GamePads at the same time (the company had previously said the Wii U would only support one).

Fans of the social aspects of gaming can use the GamePad's screen to write messages and draw pictures to share in the new Miiverse. Acting as the console's home screen, the Miiverse displays a collection of online Mii characters crowded around what they're currently playing. Gamers can communicate via text and drawings, and share screenshots of their recent gaming experiences.

The name Miiverse doesn't just apply to this hub area; players can also access it in-game at certain points. As an example, Nintendo mentioned a hypothetical jump in a Mario game that proved particularly hard. If you fell over and over again, a Miiverse prompt would ask you how it made you feel. Once you entered your thoughts, it could potentially appear (along with

A TRADITIONAL ALTERNATIVE

When the Wii launched with the Classic Controller, it was primarily intended for use with Virtual Console games. For the Wii U, Nintendo has introduced a control alternative that should perform as well for modern games as it does for NES and SNES classics. The Pro controller resembles the Xbox 360 controller in many ways, outside of the more traditional d-pad and a position swap between the right analog stick and face buttons.

CRITICAL JUNCTURE

PANORAMA VIEW

Several kiosks at Nintendo's booth were dedicated to Wii U Panorama View. This demo began with the ability to select between several real-world videos. One is set in Kyoto, Japan, another is shot from a double decker tour of London, and the one we selected took place during Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. Footage on both the TV and my Wii U GamePad showed dancers and floats parade down a crowded street, and moving my controller changed the perspective. It isn't a game, but seeing the real-world footage was interesting. When aksed whether this would be a full retail release or a downloadable app, Nintendo reps stated no concrete plans are in place.

The Wii U was clearly Nintendo's focus at the show, but a few playable 3DS units (tethered to models) made their way around the show floor as well. Only a handful of games had a presence at E3, including the predictably solid

WHAT ABOUT THE 3DS?

New Super Mario Bros. 2 (with newly announced co-op play) and Castlevania: Lords of Shadow — Mirror of Fate (above). During an after-hours software showcase, Nintendo presented a hands-off demo of Paper Mario: Sticker Star that impressed those in attendance. Many expected Nintendo to announce a redesign and showcase more new games, but they never materialized.

Two weeks after the show, Nintendo pulled the veil off its new super-sized handheld, the 3DS XL. Why didn't Nintendo showcase this new handheld during its press conference? Only the company knows, but it's a welcome announcement nonetheless. With a 90-percent larger viewing area, longer battery life, and a 4GB memory card, this is the new Cadillac of Nintendo handhelds. Many expected the larger unit to include a second analog stick, but the absence of one likely signals the end of publisher and developer support for the Circle Pad Pro. The 3DS XL goes on sale August 19 for $199, and comes in blue/black and red/black color schemes.

In other belated 3DS news, Nintendo also announced that Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask is coming to the handheld in November, and the company plans to release a new downloadable puzzle every day. In 2013, players can look forward to 3DS versions of Fire Emblem: Awakening and Animal Crossing.

other players' comments) at that spot if another player is having the same problem. Nintendo says it plans to have a system in place to avoid spoilers, and that messages would need to be approved by moderators before they go live on the system. This means that posts may take approximately 30 minutes to appear, which is a relative eternity in Internet time. Miiverse messages will eventually be accessible via phones and web browsers, but this feature may not be available at launch.

Nintendo pushed Miiverse as evidence that the company is getting serious about online features, but some big questions were left unanswered. The much-maligned friend code system was never mentioned, but after the press conference Nintendo president Satoru Iwata said they are coming back in a more streamlined form. Other important features were similarly ignored, such as the ability to maintain a friends list, create parties, and easily invite other players to a game. One thing that the publisher did briefly touch on was media apps, confirming that Netflix, Hulu Plus, YouTube, and Amazon Instant Video would be available on the console.

With E3 over, Nintendo fans still don't know when the Wii U is hitting store shelves, how much they can expect to pay for it, or what exactly will be included in the package. Nintendo is still aiming for a 2012 launch, but kept all the specifics under wraps.

Since Nintendo failed on the grand stage in its last E3 before the Wii U launches, it will be interesting to see how consumers react to the lack of buzz. Pikmin 3 and New Super Mario Bros. U are sure to be solid games, but these experiences feel similar to those that have come before, and since both can be played with a six-year-old controller, they fail to leverage the capabilities that make the Wii U unique. In terms of new experiences that are exclusive to the Wii U hardware, Nintendo had next to nothing of significant value to offer. Most games on display were third-party ports of titles that have been long available on other consoles (Mass Effect 3, Batman: Arkham City) or others that felt like glorified tech demos (Nintendo Land, Panorama View, Game & Wario).

FINAL GRADE: D+

Nintendo's E3 showing had a few bright spots amongst the disappointment. Pikmin is back, Mario is as solid as ever, and it's great to see these franchises in long-overdue high-definition resolution. However, the heavy focus on Nintendo Land and the publisher's hesitance to answer big questions regarding online strategy and the console's launch is a shame. As longtime Nintendo fans, we left E3 wondering what the company was thinking. Its strategy with the Wii made sense, as it needed to try something drastically different after the PlayStation 2 and Xbox trounced the GameCube. With the Wii U, Nintendo is chasing a market that won't understand or care about the new hardware capabilities. There's still potential down the road for some creative uses of the GamePad, but Nintendo failed to excite gamers at E3 with anything in the short term.

MIA AT E3

E3 is all about the big games preening in the spotlight, which makes the premier titles that weren't at the show all the more conspicuous. Some of these games weren't at the show by design (Rockstar traditionally does not attend), and others aren't ready or may even be heading to next-gen systems. For a few of these games, not being present could be a sign of trouble.

BioShock Infinite
Irrational Games (PS3 • 360 • PC)
Release Date: February 26, 2013
This isn't a surprise, as Irrational announced that it was holding back the game from the show before E3 – as well as Europe's Gamescom – to better spend time working on the title. Also absent from publisher 2K's booth was the 2K Marin-developed **XCOM**. This FPS is in limbo, with an unspecified release date sometime before March of 2013. Don't confuse this game with Firaxis' promising XCOM: Enemy Unknown (see page 46 for more).

Bungie's Activision Game
Bungie Games
Release Date: TBA
Bungie's first game for the publisher is shrouded in secrecy, and before the show, Bungie confirmed it would not be there.

Professor Layton vs. Ace Attorney
Level-5 (3DS)
Release Date: 2012 in Japan
This game has not been announced for the U.S., but given that both of the series have released multiple games stateside, we'd be surprised if it didn't arrive at some point. Too bad E3 2012 wasn't the coming out party.

Overstrike
Insomniac Games (PS3 • 360)
Release Date: TBA
The novelty of Insomniac announcing its first multi-platform game at E3 2011 has faded, and Overstrike's no-show at this year's convention hasn't helped its public perception. Overstrike publisher Electronic Arts also didn't show Respawn Entertainment's upcoming project (although CEO John Riccitiello did give a shout out to the studio at the EA press conference), or BioWare Victory's **Command & Conquer: Generals 2** (2013).
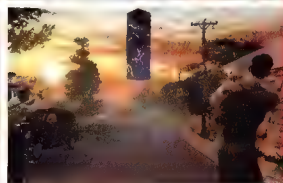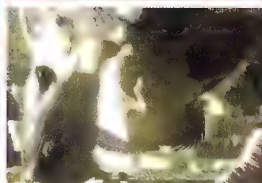
Contra
Konami
Release Date: TBA
Before E3 2011, Konami teased the Contra logo at a press conference, but still hasn't followed up with any details.

Ryse
Crytek (Xbox 360)
Release Date:TBA
It's a shame that Microsoft couldn't bolster its E3 showing and Kinect support with more details for this first-person action title using the peripheral.

The Last Guardian
Team Ico (PS3)
Release Date: 2013
The game has suffered a talent drain and countless delays, so we weren't shocked it didn't show up to the convention. Still, this is a big mistake for a title that is already drawing concern from fans.

Thief 4
Eidos Montreal
Release Date: TBA
Publisher Square Enix is keeping this game tightly under wraps. Recent reports claim that high-level development talent has left the project. For more on another Square Enix no-show, **Final Fantasy Versus XIII**, see page 36.

Rainbow Six: Patriots
Ubisoft Montreal (PS3 • 360 • PC)
Release Date: 2013
Similar to Thief 4, this title has seen an exodus of development talent. Still, since it's being published/developed by a company as solid as Ubisoft, we imagine it'll come out…after a few delays. The company also had a few other high-profile titles not at the show, including **Beyond Good & Evil 2** and the Gearbox-developed **Brothers in Arms: Furious 4**. We wonder if the former project has been laying low because it's being prepped for next-gen systems. ◈

CHECKING THE INDUSTRY'S PULSE

interviews by Jim Reilly

While we didn't see new hardware from either Microsoft or Sony, E3 was packed with new announcements that stretch out this current generation at least one more year. We spoke to some of the industry's key people to get their thoughts on the show's developments, the big titles on the horizon, and

Yannis Mallat

CEO, Ubisoft Montreal

At E3 you announced Watch Dogs. What was the purpose of announcing that project at the show?
We wanted to show it because I think it's important to show the industry what we're doing. Definitely with Watch Dogs we wanted to share our latest progress on this new IP. I think given the reception, we were right with that. There is nothing announced in terms of [next-gen] platforms right now.

You also unveiled Splinter Cell Blacklist from your new Toronto studio.
To me it's a proof of concept studio-wise in how to combine setting up a new studio with a lot of hiring and recruiting. We spent a lot of time on getting those people up to speed on how we make games at Ubisoft. It's a very ambitious objective for a new studio. The reception of Splinter Cell Blacklist proves to me that we were right on how we leveraged the talent and expertise.

The Far Cry 3 demonstration at E3 was very sexual and adult-themed. Why did you decide to lead with that for the demo?
We wanted people to follow the same path as Jason Brody in the game. We need to have this relationship between the player and the main character, especially in the first-person view mode. This insanity should really be part of the experience. That scene is a very efficient way to quickly put the players in Jason's shoes.

You also announced Just Dance 4. The series has been mega-popular for Ubisoft and keeps on going.
I think this brand is the living proof the video game industry is not just for your typical gamer. I think it's the proof that everyone can have fun. The Wii version helped reach a mass audience, but that audience exists. As long as a game is fun, then it's going to be played by millions of people. Don't think about the games industry as a very narrow industry.

Frank Gibeau

President, EA Labels

Where do you see Dead Space 3 going in terms of sales for the franchise? You obviously feel it'll be your highest selling game in the series so far.
I think this will be our best and biggest Dead Space yet. The trick with Dead Space is to innovate but at the same time not change what makes it so appealing to horror fans. You can't go all action with it. At its core it's still a horror game. One of the insights the team at Visceral had was when you go to a horror movie, it's more fun to be with somebody to get scared together. So that's what led us to add co-op.

So that's really the creative risk and challenge that we're going after. We think it will lead to a bigger audience and better unit sales. We'd like to get in that five million unit range in sales.

In Dead Space 2 there was competitive multiplayer. For Dead Space 3 you removed that and are going strictly with co-op. What was the decision behind that?
We put it in Dead Space 2 and it wasn't that popular. It wasn't something fans resonated with. We talked about building out multiplayer again or was there a different idea? We built some prototypes and tested it with gamers. The co-op idea tested much better than trying to make the deathmatch stuff work better.

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Eric Hirshberg

CEO, Activision Publishing

We put in a lot at risk with that. That was a three-year development. We delayed the game an entire year to make sure it was great. We designed and manufactured all of our own toys, and we marketed it with one of the biggest marketing spends of any game last year. So yeah, we had a lot of confidence in it.

Now, that doesn't mean it's a sure thing. Launching new IP is the hardest thing to do in this business. There was no benchmark to show kids are willing to collect toys and play them in conjunction with a video game. What kept us feeling bullish and doubling down on the investment was always the power of what we call, the "magic moment." We have yet to meet a kid who doesn't have their eyes pop out of their heads when they see a toy come to life in a video game.

You're adding new features and gameplay elements to Call of Duty: Black Ops II that the series has never seen before. How much did you think about the risk involved with tinkering with such a proven formula?
This feels like a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" kind of equation for Call of Duty. You're tapping into the epicenter of the creative challenge and dilemma, which is you have to provide innovation. You can't leave everything the same or there's no reason to come back. I think we've done that. With Black Ops II, we're swinging that pendulum a little further. At the same time, you can't mess up the thing that people fell in love with and love about the franchise in the first place. The best thing I can say about Black Ops II is it provides really big, new ideas for the franchise, and yet it still feels, plays, and moves like a Call of Duty game.

Skylanders is one of the biggest surprises of the last year. Did the game's success surprise you?

There were lots of supply issues with the first Skylanders game. I assume you're correcting this for Skylanders Giants?
Our projections and the amount that we manufactured with Skylanders were very ambitious. We were planning for success. The fact that we far exceeded that, I'd call that a high-class problem. So we'll try to get the supply and demand right with Skylanders Giants.

When do you think it's a good time to revisit the Guitar Hero franchise?
To this day, it remains one of the most beloved brands in entertainment. Will the game make a triumphant return to game devices and culture? That really depends on our ability to reinvent it in a meaningful way. It ran out of gas profoundly, as did the entire rhythm/instrument peripheral category all at once. Those are hard-earned battle scars, and if we think we have a meaningful invention that brings it back with new reasons to engage, then we will, but not before.

Jeremiah Slaczka

CEO and Creative Director, 5th Cell

For Scribblenauts Unlimited, when did you first decide you wanted to do this title for Wii U? What's the development time on this game?
I think we were one of the first developers to see the Wii U. Nintendo came to our studio and demoed it to us. A couple weeks later Warner Bros. got to see it, and we said we should do this. This game was originally a Wii title but later moved to Wii U. It's been about two years in development.

I know you're not a programmer, but from what you've seen of the Wii U's hardware, what are your impressions so far?
It's definitely more powerful than Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. It's kind of frustrating to see the rumors and speculation of people going back and forth saying it's weaker or more powerful. It's definitely more powerful.

Do you feel like the market is in dire need of new consoles from Sony and Microsoft?
I think we're getting really close. Especially seeing the press conferences from Sony and Microsoft, it definitely seems like they're holding back and waiting for their next thing. We're kind of at that end cycle. I think new blood needs to come in. It'll be interesting because the market has changed so much in so many ways since the Xbox 360 and PlayStation came out.

Shuhei Yoshida

President, Sony Worldwide Studios

Sony did not announce a price drop for PlayStation 3 at E3. What is the reasoning behind that?

We are very happy about how PS3 is going in terms of sales. We had the best year last year. We have great games coming out for PS3. So we do not necessarily see the need for the price drop.

What's one thing that bothers you the most in the game industry right now?

On-disc DLC bothers the crap out of me. It's customer hostile. You're literally gouging the person. I would not personally ever do it. A publisher could not make me do it. Charging people for on-disc DLC is madness to me. I think that's a really bad trend. I understand why they do it, but I think they could go about it a much better way.

What are some things that impress you or make you glad you're a game developer today?

The game industry is going in so many different ways now. There are so many avenues now and types of game being made. One of the biggest things is that commercial game development is getting narrower where indie is getting a lot wider.

How do you feel PlayStation Vita sales are doing now?

In terms of numbers, it's kind of understandable how things are going. We have a list of things we have to do. People are giving us feedback every day. The number one thing we have to, as people are asking, is more games; more games from third parties and us. We are working on both fronts. We are also catering to smaller indie developers doing PlayStation Mobile titles so more and more people can create smaller contents for PS Vita as well as smartphones.

So the number one priority is to work on more content. We are happy about how the hardware and platform has come about. Our hardware teams are still working on system software improvements. We just announced the support of PSone classics. That effort still continues. Our network services teams are also working hard to get more services on PS Vita. We are working with the hardware guys to use Vita and PS3 in combination and making games that can work on both systems or use the Vita as a controller for PS3 titles.

Nintendo launched the 3DS at $249 and quickly dropped the price to $169 not too long after launch. Were there ever any discussions about dropping the price of PlayStation Vita?

We've been experimenting with creating types of bundles to give more value. Recently, we've been creating bundle offers through retailers. But no, no strict price drop.

The Sony E3 2012 press conference showed very few PlayStation Vita titles.

I got lots of tweets about that! We have 25 new games playable on the show floor. We can't spend more time talking about these titles that are coming up very soon. There are many things that worked in collaboration to have a smaller representation of PS Vita

during our press conference. Our PR team worked really hard to make it shorter. We don't think the long press conference is good anymore. We still have to touch on PS3 titles and third parties' work, Move. All these things we tried to pack into 80 minutes, and during the process we made a choice to not spend that much time on PS Vita.

Something big that you're pushing is cross platform play between certain PlayStation Vita and PlayStation 3 titles, like Sly 4 and PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale. The biggest issue stems from customers having to buy some of the titles twice to play on both platforms. Have you considered different pricing options or models going forward?

We are very aware of what people are looking for. When you look at our titles, we've already released some games like MotorStorm RC where you pay one price and get both versions. We worked with retailers when we launched MLB 12: The Show so people who buy both versions get a discount.

We are looking at the options we have in terms of having PS3 and PS Vita versions of games and we really would like people to try both versions because we're doing something interesting. We haven't announced what we're going to do when we launch PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale or Sly Cooper 4. We're looking at individual cases.

What's the latest with The Last Guardian? Is it still in development?

There are some technical issues being addressed. There's not much to show what it looks like. At this period of time we are unable to give an update, but the game is still in development.

Earlier this year you closed developers BigBig and Zipper Interactive. Can you talk about the decision behind this? Was it strictly financial?

It's a very tough decision that affected a lot of people's lives. But from the business standpoint, it's not like we're reducing the overall effort to make first-party games. We are growing some of the studios; some used to be one team but are now two teams working on different franchises. At the same time we look at areas that are not as profitable as other teams.

As far as the rest of your first-party lineup the rest of the year, Sony doesn't have any mega-blockbusters like Uncharted or God of War coming in 2012. Sly 4 and PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale are coming, but they're not Assassin's Creed or Call of Duty. Was this done purposely?

We'd love to have multi-million sellers for the holiday. But each title needs time to develop, especially new IP like The Last of Us. God of War has always come out in March, so that's a natural time to aim at. Our strategy for Christmas is to go big on family-friendly titles. This is a neglected genre for the PlayStation 3, but as it matures, I think it's really important to have these games on the platform. I think we have a great lineup this holiday to complement third parties' big core games. ◈

Is This Final Fantasy XV?

Square Enix Shows Off Real Time Next-Gen Demo

While plenty of great looking games were on display at E3 this year, the show was notable for its dearth of big game announcements. Perhaps that's why Square Enix's unusual tech demo, showed at a modest cocktail gathering after hours on the show floor, was such a surprise. *by Matt Miller*

Titled Agni's Philosophy, the gorgeous extended trailer was one of the only projects shown at E3 that was openly touted as next-gen. Running off a high-end PC, the tech demo showed Square Enix's impressive new game engine called Luminous Studio. The demo did a beautiful job of showcasing this production environment, revealing increased fidelity in facial animation (particularly in the eyes), flowing hair and cloth animation, and plentiful particle effects.

More significantly, Agni's Philosophy ran in real time rather than as a pre-rendered sequence. Real-time images are created as time passes, meaning that the image quality is representative of what in-game visuals could look like. When the demo was paused, viewers could watch as the camera was rotated around a target, particle effect size and color were adjusted, and several other features were shown that acted as proof to Square Enix's claim.

While a glimpse at the upcoming visual technology from Square Enix was a treat for showgoers, the real buzz surrounded what this demo might represent. Agni's Philosophy was subtitled as a "Final Fantasy Real-Time Tech Demo," which seems an odd distinction for a project that will never see any subsequent

development. In addition, the character of Agni and her detailed costuming smacked of a new heroine in the heritage of Cloud, Squall, or Lightning; the demo virtually begs for a follow-up with more details about who she is and the mission she's on. Finally, the demo exhibited a dramatic change of pace for the Final Fantasy game universe, filled with modern-day vehicles and weapons, soft drink bottles, and other oddities living side by side with Final Fantasy staples like summoned monsters and lightning-shooting mages. In short, the video looked like a direction Square Enix might go to revitalize its flagship franchise for a new generation of consoles. With no outright denials to the contrary during the presentation, it seems highly possible that Agni's Philosophy is our first glimpse at what will one day become the fifteenth numbered Final Fantasy game.

We noted one other surprising element about Agni's Philosophy. While most of the named credits on the tech demo were members of the Japanese Square Enix team, two of the credited concept artists were part of the Crystal Dynamics team, the same studio currently creating the new Tomb Raider game. With Crystal Dynamics now a part of the Square Enix family, could it be helping out with future Final Fantasy projects? Whatever the answer, it will be a long time coming; now that the demo is out in the wild, Square Enix has once again fallen silent on the future of the Final Fantasy franchise. ◈

BREAKING DOWN THE DEMO

The real-time demo video opens on the view of a desert shantytown that wouldn't feel out of place in a Call of Duty game. Armed figures that look like terrorists assault a hidden conclave of magic users as they attempt to summon an unnamed beast. Gunfire echoes through the chamber, and the summoners turn to blast their attackers with lightning. The lead mage is fatally wounded, and passes a mysterious crystal to one of the young acolytes. She (Agni) flees out onto the rooftop as her foes unleash mutated wolf creatures in pursuit. She grabs what looks like a bottle of soda and speaks words of magic, which transforms it into a healing potion that she pours over a bullet wound. As one of the mutated beasts catches her, an eclipse passes overhead, and Agni speaks the final words of the summoning. A towering winged beast bursts from the summoning chamber and crashes down to defend Agni. The demo cuts to some indeterminate time later. Agni mounts the dragon-like creature, and they lift off from the favela and fly toward the horizon. In the distance, a glimmering futuristic city beckons, and viewers are left to wonder what comes next.

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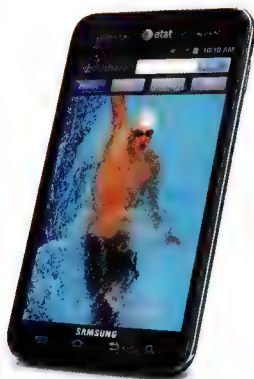
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OVERHEARD AT E3

WHAT THE DEVELOPERS AND PUBLISHERS WERE SAYING AT THE 2012 ELECTRONIC ENTERTAINMENT EXPO

The Good

ELECTRONIC ARTS picked up the Ultimate Fighting Championship license after THQ couldn't make a profit on UFC 3. EA previously tried its hand at mixed-martial arts with the EA MMA series, which produced only one title. The deal is a multi-year, multi-product arrangement, but it's not known when the first title will hit shelves.

The Bad

NINTENDO UNVEILED its Miiverse social structure for the Wii U, but it's not going to be the communication free-for-all you might expect. The company announced that it will moderate any posts in your own Miiverse with three levels of filtering. Nintendo president Satoru Iwata even said that posts could take up to 30 minutes to appear. That's like sending a tweet via the post office.

The Ugly

38 STUDIOS, the developer headed by ex-Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling, has imploded spectacularly. After taking out a $75 million loan from the state of Rhode Island and missing a payment to the state (as well as not being able to pay its employees), the developer declared bankruptcy and investigations by the state of Rhode Island have begun. Furthermore, Schilling is being sued by Citizen's Bank for money he owes. The only people not sniffing around Schilling's shifty dealings are the MLB's steroids police.

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JUMP

Six Downloadable Games You May Have Missed at E3

Ascend: New Gods Ascend (pictured above) gets a nod just for Xbox 360 ///////////// exploring innovative approaches to tying players into each other's games. You control a half-giant warrior on a brutal action/RPG adventure, leveling up, exploring dungeons, fighting bosses, and collecting loot. You dedicate your hero's life to one of three powerful gods. As you play, you'll see ghostly versions of other players in the world, as well as their deific allegiance, and you can either bless or curse them. For an allied player, you might send a health boost or a loot drop. For an enemy, perhaps you unleash a pack of wolves onto them. You won't fight

them directly, but your Gamertag will appear over the heads of the attacking wolves, so they know who is after them, and can pay you back in kind later on. Eventually, your hero will become extremely powerful. You can continue playing with him if you want, or you can sacrifice him to your god and allow him to become an ascended hero. These high level characters now become AI-controlled, and begin to invade other player's games. When you start a new character, it comes with special bonuses that carry over from your first. It's a crazy idea, but I'm excited to see how it all comes together, especially since the game is being built by Toy Soldiers developer Signal Studios.

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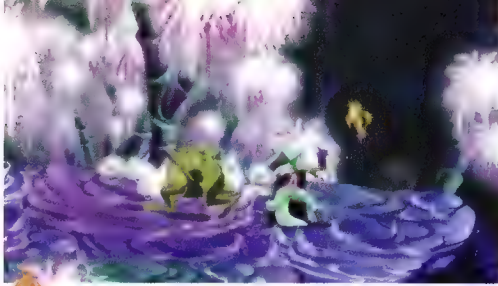
Dust: An Elysian Tail

Xbox 360 ///////////// Some may recall Dust as the winner of 2009's Dream.Build.Play contest. In the years since, developer Humble Hearts has been working in partnership with Microsoft to bring the project to XBLA, and the gorgeous side-scrolling action/RPG is now on target to be one of this year's Summer of Arcade titles. After playing an impressive demo, it reminds me of Vanillaware's sidescrollers Odin Sphere and Muramasa, blending high-detail hand drawn art with challenging action, upgradeable equipment, and fantasy storytelling. You play as Dust, a strange fantasy creature who has taken up the legendary Blade of Ahrah in the world of Falana. The sword's guardian, a flying fox-like critter by the name of Fidget, joins you on the adventure, floating perpetually at your side. Dust engages dozens of varied enemies at one time, and th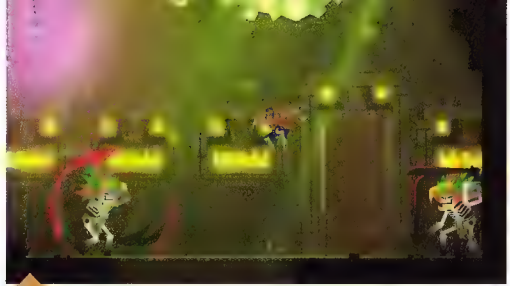e combat system is deep and rewarding. Players level up as they progress in classic role-playing style, with plenty of choices about how to customize their characters. That customization carries over into gear, where different armor, rings, and augments can all make a difference. A crafting system lets you further personalize the experience. As a new developer, it's hard to know if Humble Hearts can deliver on the complexity of the project, but my playtime with the game instilled a lot of confidence.

Guacamelee

PlayStation 3, Vita The developers at DrinkBox Studios (Tales From Space) are introducing a new franchise about a luchador named Juan Aguacate. When El Presidente's Daughter (that's her proper name, apparently) is kidnapped by a skeleton, Juan leaps into action to save the day. Guacamelee embraces comparisons to Metroid and Castlevania, as it has a big focus on exploration and combat across large and winding levels filled with secret chambers and upgrades. The game distinguishes itself in two big ways. The first is the ability to hop back and forth between different dimensions with the tap of a button. Each dimension might have a different set of platforms, walls, and other environmental details, so you'll have to flip between them mid-jump to ascend a high passage or cross a chasm. Guacamelee's other big plus is its zany humor. For instance, to squeeze through tight places, Juan transforms into a chicken. DrinkBox's new game also supports two-player co-op – a second wrestler named Tostada helps Juan when a second pair of hands is needed. The game has made big visual strides in recent months, and is rapidly ascending my queue of anticipated DLGs.

Joe Danger: The Movie

Xbox 360 ///////////// I'm a huge fan of Hello Games' first project, a rollicking platformer-meets-racing title about a grizzled old stunt man trying to get back into the game. The success of that first project has enabled the team to blow out the options in the sequel. Joe Danger: The Movie (inset) is filled with new vehicles and modes, and it plays like a dream. The game banks on its ability to provide dozens of unique gameplay variants, all wrapped around the story conceit of Joe working on different stunt scenes. Jet packs, unicycles, skis, mine carts, motorcycles, and all sorts of other unusual conveyances will be at your disposal. Hello Games claims that most individual contraptions only get used a few times; for example, over the course of the game's 100 levels, only two levels feature skis. Unlike the obstacle course structure of every level in the first game, this new project includes all sorts of crazy movie scenes, from dinosaur escapes to chasing fleeing crooks after a heist. A dramatically expanded level creator looks simple to use while offering plenty of flexibility, and the developer is working hard to improve the level sharing options. Add an extensive multiplayer component and extra "deleted scene" challenge levels, and Joe Danger: The Movie is shaping up as one of the biggest and most ambitious downloadable games we've encountered.

Mark of the Ninja

Xbox 360 ///////////// The creative team at Klei Studios (Shank, Shank 2) is trying its hand at a slightly different genre without abandoning their trademark sidescrolling style. Mark of the Ninja maintains the brutal cartoon aesthetic of Shank, but adds a host of new mechanics more suited to sneaking around than melee brawling. Throw-down fights are generally a bad idea in Mark of the Ninja. Instead, you're aiming to stay in the shadows and remain quiet as you kill with surprise or sneak past enemies. Cool gear like a zipline grappling hook flings you around the screen, and plenty of options exist to distract enemies with noises, or by knocking out a light from across the screen. Every sound you make creates a visible bubble on screen to show how loud you are. Start sprinting and your bubble gets dangerously large and loud, and anyone inside the bubble can detect you. The storyline sounds generic; you play the chosen one from a clan of ninjas who must halt the threat of an opposing mercenary army. However, the fun sneaking gameplay I experienced should more than make up for any plot clichés.

Retro City Rampage

PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, Vita, PC ///////////// I've been looking forward to playing a final version of Retro City Rampage for years now. Developer Brian Provinciano has slaved single-handedly on the project for a long time, but the game may finally be nearing a release this summer. The 8-bit visuals of RCR hide a deep and lengthy experience that parodies many of the most beloved video game tropes and characters, from Super Mario and Mega Man to Contra and Grand Theft Auto. The sections we played were mostly from a top-down perspective, but the game also pops out into a 2D sidescrolling style at appropriate moments. More recently, Provinciano has begun layering in extra minigame homages to some of his fellow indie developers, like a Super Meat Boy-inspired Rad Racer game, or an 8-bit version of 'Splosion Man. That's on top of the game's over 50 missions and dozens of leaderboard challenges. Filled with easter eggs and accompanied by an awesome chiptune music score, Retro City Rampage should be a treat for old-school gamers. ◈

The Year of the Action/MMO

O ne clear narrative cut through the massively multiplayer offerings on display at this year's E3. A lot of companies think that the genre is ready to be taken over by shooters, and they're betting a whole lot of money on it. Here are the standout action-oriented MMOs from the show.

by Adam Biessener

Planetside 2
PC · 2012

The best MMO and PC-exclusive game at this year's E3 put to rest any doubts about its gameplay chops with an extensive hands-on demo. *See page 57 for much more.*

Dust 514
PlayStation 3 · 2012

The shooter companion to CCP Games' long-running space MMO Eve Online was finally playable at the show. The most impressive thing about Dust 514 is simply the fact that it works, putting dozens to hundreds of players together on enormous maps in battles that shape the face of the galaxy. Don't worry about finding your friends; all Dust and Eve players coexist in a single galaxy at all times. This might be the highest-concept game of E3 2012 with how it gives players such unbelievable freedom to create their own experiences. Join a quick match for the chance to earn some easy credits against bots in high-security space, throw in with the revamped factional conflict system to win contested territory for NPC factions in low-security systems, or dive fully into the real null-security endgame of Eve/Dust, where player alliances and corporations draw their own battle lines and secret treaties completely free of NPC interference. Dust 514's first public beta event will have started by the time you hold this magazine, so head to the official site to experience this free-to-play sandbox for yourself.

Planetside 2

Dust 514

Defiance
PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC • April

This sci-fi shooter MMO is remarkable for several reasons: It ties into an upcoming Syfy show of the same name, it's coming to current-gen consoles as well as PC, and it does a good job of leveraging Trion's dynamic-content technology to create public events that draw players together instead of pushing them apart. The shooter gameplay feels great on either gamepad or keyboard/mouse, and both instanced and public content is up and running. Console players in particular should keep Defiance on their radars, as it offers a less unforgiving, more directed experience than Dust 514 while maintaining the huge persistent public areas that we expect out of an MMO.

World of Warplanes
PC • 2012

Brought to you by World of Tanks developer Wargaming.net, World of Warplanes is pretty much the same thing but with aircraft. This free-to-play dogfighting sim drops players into quick 15-on-15 battles between everything from early WWII planes through Korean War jets. One life per match is all you get, Counter-Strike style, so make your shots count. The concept is great – I'm all for more arcade-style warplane shooters – and Wargaming.net's vast experience and success with World of Tanks has me confident that the studio will sort out the problematic controls that were on display at E3. World of Warplanes natively supports keyboard, keyboard/mouse, gamepad, and flight stick input methods, so you should be able to find a good fit. I'm also keenly curious to find out how Wargaming.net's nebulous plans to unify World of Tanks, World of Warplanes, and the upcoming World of Battleships in the future shake out.

Rift: Storm Legion

End of Nations

The Rest of the Field

While shooters took center stage, three more traditional MMOs and a real-time strategy game also looked good this year:

Rift: Storm Legion
PC • Fall

The first expansion to Trion's fantasy MMO triples the game's landmass, offers each calling a new soul, and breaks new ground with outdoor raid boss mechanics.

Neverwinter
PC • 2012

Long in coming, this free-to-play D&D-based MMORPG eschews target lock-on for a more action-oriented style while sticking with an action bar for skills
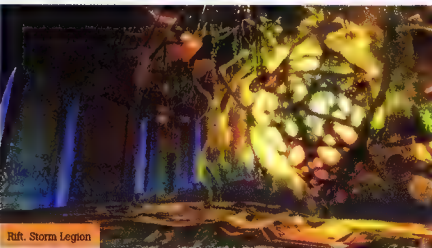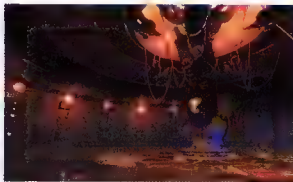
The Elder Scrolls Online
PC • 2013

ESO looked good in video form at the show, though Zenimax Online didn't show anything new since our June cover story See page 88 for more.
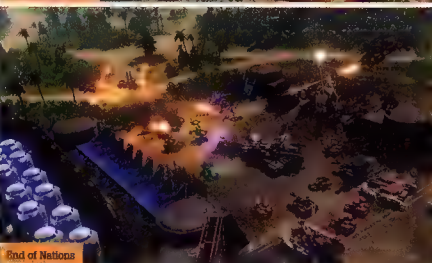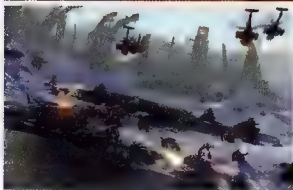
End of Nations
PC • 2012

The MMORTS still looks good, as it has since our hands-on report in issue 229. Expect to see for yourself in a beta later this summer

photo: Brett Beadle

The New Face of THQ

After reorganizing to focus on core gaming titles, THQ has brought in Naughty Dog co-founder Jason Rubin as president to oversee publishing, marketing, and production. We spoke to him about his new role at THQ and what his plans are for the future.

interview by Jim Reilly

How did this come about? Did THQ come to you or did you go to them?
CEO Brian Farrell called me up and asked me to take a look at all the teams and the properties and tell him what I thought. We've known each other for a long time. So I did. I went around and visited every team. The projects are all really cool and I think, especially with the internal teams, the amount of upside potential that's there is great. The external teams live in a slightly different world; they self-govern, so they have their own thing going on. But the internal teams have a huge amount of talent and potential, and I want to help unlock that.

What are your short-term and long-term goals with THQ?
My short-term goal is to go out to the teams and make sure that they have what they need to make the right games and to make sure they're making the right games. My long-term goals with THQ are to focus on a small amount of titles and make those better.

What do you think of THQ's current line-up? Is there anything you want to change from what Danny Bilson's original vision?
Danny's vision was perfectly fine. THQ is a ship and I'm going to steer it, but it's not going to turn on a dime. A lot of the upcoming projects, Darksiders II for example, are nearly final. Great game; not much I could do. It's just a time situation. Some of the other titles I might make some minor modifications. Looking at the entire portfolio, I have to say at this point I think we have the right number of teams, so it's really a question going forward of, "Which are the right properties for us?" In a lot of cases, such as with Vigil, it's figuring out what the right title for them to do next is.

Another title Vigil was working on was the Warhammer 40,000 game that shifted from being an MMO-based title to a single-player focused one. Is this still in development?
As of right now that title is still in development.

Devil's Third has run into some trouble. What's the latest with this game?
Devil's Third is not coming out under THQ.

What about Insane, Homefront 2, and the project from Turtle Rock?
Right now Insane is still under production. The same with Homefront 2. I've played it. It's great. The game from Turtle Rock is absolutely still on. I love those guys and the product.

During E3 it was announced EA acquired the rights to UFC. THQ also confirmed it laid off a number of employees from its San Diego studio. What's the situation?
The studio is still open. We don't have a project for them. They're still under employment from THQ right now. We're actively working to find things for them to do. On UFC, it was before my time, but THQ put into process what effectively was a transfer of the rights to EA. It was good for THQ. THQ got paid, and it was simply a matter of us looking at the title and looking at how the past titles have done. The latest got an 86 rating and did not sell the number of units required to break even. Based on that, THQ thought that perhaps we weren't the correct place for UFC to be done in the future. Being paid to give it to EA, which may very well be the right place with the strong sports brand they have, seems like a win for everybody.

THQ hasn't had a 90-plus rated game in a long time. How do you balance increasing your review scores while not being able to match the marketing and development budgets of some of your competitors, such as EA and Activision?
Let me pull it back from ratings for a second. In general, how do you succeed with games that aren't Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto, and Assassin's Creed? The way the industry has been set up with all titles selling for roughly the same price at retail next to each other is that there's been a race to make the biggest, baddest-ass game. If you walk into a store as a gamer and see a massive $120 million dollar game next to a $30 million dollar game, and a $80 million marketing budget backed that $120 million game up, it's likely you're going to pull that one off the shelf.

Into this came THQ moving from a children's business into that business after everyone else had already started the race to the top. So it was very hard for THQ to enter that massive, encumbered race with these huge titles. Additionally, I think THQ has tended to spread out and do a lot of titles to try to find something that works. At the size of THQ, that is probably not the appropriate way of going about this. If you look at a Naughty Dog-sized game, which I can tell you is not the size of Call of Duty but is still an amazing game that's rated very well, I think we can compete in that area.

As time progresses, the entire industry will move closer to what we see in the PC model emerging now, which is a lot of different-sized games and different types of games that all get a place in the sun because you can buy things that aren't $60 boxed goods. If you look at something like Portal, an excellent game that clearly is not a Call of Duty or Grand Theft Auto, bingo. If you look at World of Tanks or League of Legends, there's any number of these games that are not competing on a graphic level.

The first Company of Heroes was a 90-plus rated game, and done by Relic, one of our internal studios. It's one of the highest-rated RTS games. Why they didn't do another Company of Heroes until now I can't answer for you because I just started seven days ago. I will say this company has in it the ability of making a 90-plus rated game.

The Volition guys; incredibly talented. Under the restrictions that they've been under in this company in terms of the budget and time schedule they've had for their products, to put out a game that doesn't necessarily compete toe to toe with Grand Theft Auto, but comparably, it's amazing what they've done with what they've had. That team, properly funded, properly led, and properly allowed to create, I believe can create a 90-plus rated title.

Vigil; incredible art sense. I believe properly led, given the right framework, and with some of the knowledge I have from making 90-plus rated games, can make a 90-plus rated game. Our other internal studio at Montreal is capable of making a 90-plus rated game. The answer to how you make a 90-plus rated game is you take these people and foster their creations – not make a lot of other titles as well. That's what I plan to do.

When you look at the games industry now, what are some things that excite you?
What excites me is I think the business is going to broaden out. I think it's good for the industry and it's good for gamers, too. I don't think gamers realize how good opening up the rules so that game developers can distribute and price as they want and do whatever they want is, because at the end of the day, the gamer will determine what succeeds and fails because they're the one with the dollars in the pocket. ✎

THROUGH A

Xbox SmartGlass

Microsoft's new tablet and smartphone Xbox 360 integration software was the centerpiece of the company's E3 presentation (see page 12 for more). At its base level, SmartGlass turns your iOS, Android, or Windows mobile device into a remote for navigating menus or entering text into a virtual keyboard on your preferred device. For content providers that adopt the tech, it can do much more.

While watching movies, the remote functionality allows viewers to easily scrub through the film to access any point of it instantly. You can also tap the "Who's on screen?" icon on your tablet or smartphone to display a list of all the actors currently in the scene you're watching. When you tap on an actor's name it brings up a bio, filmography, quotes, and scenes in the current movie. The latter option means you can easily get to your favorite part of a movie without having to deal with predetermined chapter breaks. Say you're watching *Animal House* (not currently confirmed by Microsoft) and want to see the part where Jim Belushi uses mashed potatoes to imitate a zit. You can easily browse all the scenes he appears in and pinpoint it quickly.

Movies and shows are great, but how do games figure in? Mobile-friendly Ascend: New Gods features an "Oracle" that brings up a minimap of the dungeon you're exporing. You can also take a peek at the stats of a new boss or player that enters your world to inform your decision to fight or flee. We also saw an as-yet-unnamed karaoke title that supports up to 8,000 tracks. When one of your friends is singing at a party, others can browse the available tracks and queue up a playlist so there's no waiting around between songs. This intriguing feature has also been confirmed for Harmonix's Dance Central 3. Another neat tidbit about the karaoke game? You can alter the key of the song via SmartGlass to better match your vocal range.

That's all we know about SmartGlass right now, but we'll be waiting in anticipation throughout the rest of the summer for new functionality concepts, media partner announcements, and release date confirmation.

Free   *xbox.com/smartglass*
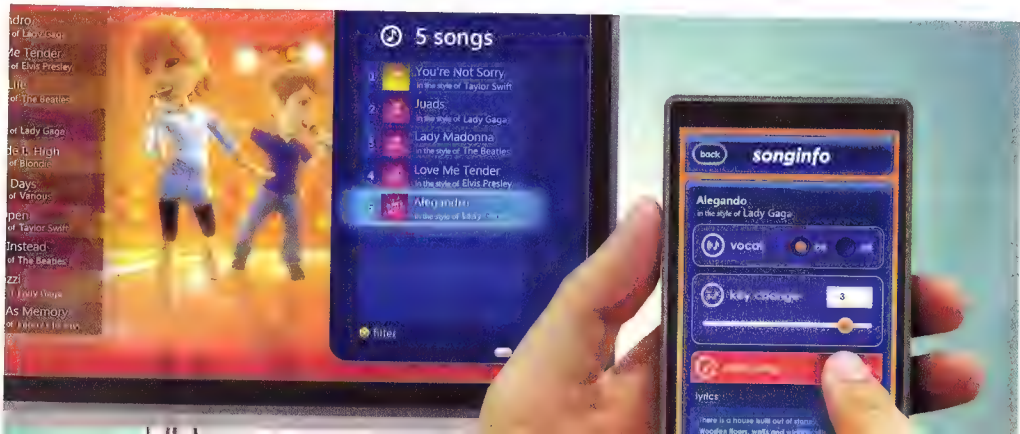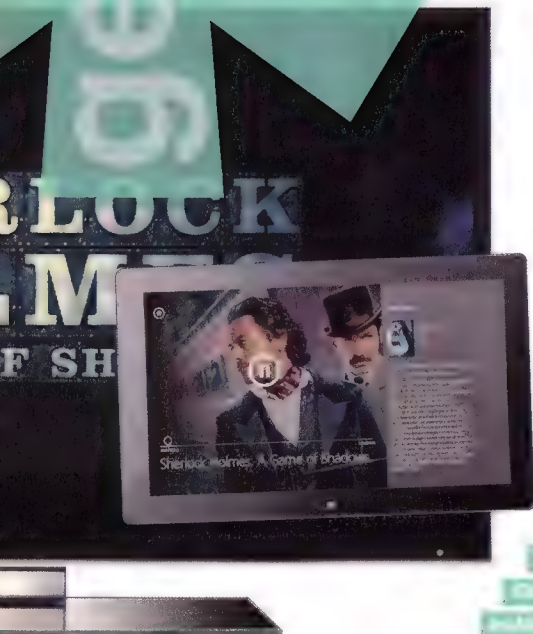
GLASS CLEARLY
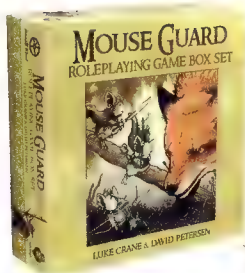
1 Mouse Guard RPG Boxed Set

The makers of the Burning Wheel Fantasy Roleplaying System bring us this great tabletop RPG, which is ideal both for introducing young players to gaming and for experienced players looking for something different. The full-boxed set includes the original game rulebook, a new book of supplementary rules and scenarios, and all sorts of gorgeous extras — including a map of the game world and dedicated mouse dice. Mouse Guard uses an innovative rule set that deeply involves players in their characters motivations and goals. How will you survive this dangerous fantasy world in which everything is bigger than you?

$70.00 *burningwheel.com*

2 Soundfreaq Sound Kick Bluetooth Sound Dock

iPod sound docks are ubiquitous, but now that many consumers use their phone as their primary music device, a problem has arisen: If your iPhone is plugged into your sound dock, it's not available for taking calls, texting, or web surfing. Soundfreaq's Sound Kick solves this problem by allowing you to stream your music from your smartphone to a portable speaker unit. The system has a built-in rechargeable battery, which makes it great for toting along to backyard barbeques or the beach. The Soundfreaq doesn't produce audiophile quality sound, but it has an expandable bass chamber that produces a decent low-end and an internal amp powerful enough to ensure it doesn't distort at top volume. At $99.99, it's also a third of the price of Bose's similar SoundLink system.

VERY GOOD

$99.99 *soundfreaq.com*

3 Logitech m600

Logitech's newest wireless mouse looks more like an alien artifact than a PC accessory, but we're happy that it crash-landed near our desktop. The m600's standout feature is its Flow Scroll touch sensitive surface, which allows you to scroll across documents or jump back through web searches with the swipe of a finger. The unit's elegant ambidextrous design, adjustable weight, and silent left and right buttons round out the feature set. The lack of macros or thumb inputs doesn't make it the ideal gaming mouse, but it's a great work or travel companion.

VERY GOOD

$69.99 | *logitech.com*

BREAKING BAD: THE COMPLETE FOURTH SEASON

AMC's multi Emmy Award-winning show continues as chemistry teacher turned master criminal Walter White manipulates his estranged wife, DEA agent brother-in-law, and local meth kingpin all in an effort to stay alive.

$65.99
amctv.com

FALLING SKIES: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

That one kid from *ER* stars in TNT's new hit show about the aftermath of an alien invasion. With most of Earth's defenses incapacitated, small bands of survivors struggle for survival on an inhospitable alien-infested planet.

$49.99
fallingskies.com

THE HERO'S GUIDE TO SAVING YOUR KINGDOM BY CHRISTOPHER HEALY

Check out this fantastic new twist on classic fairy tales. After the four prince charmings who saved Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, and Rapunzel are all rejected by their princesses, they uncover a plot that threatens their kingdoms and are forced to become true heroes.

$16.99
harpercollinschildrens.com

LEGO HEAVY WEAPONS: BUILD WORKING REPLICAS OF FOUR OF THE WORLD'S MOST IMPRESSIVE GUNS

Slingshots are old fashioned. This tome features colorful pictures and detailed instructions on how to build 1:1-scale Lego replicas of a Desert Eagle handgun, a compact but deadly AKS-74U, and more. Better still, they actually work.

$24.95
nostarch.com/ legoheavyweapons

Where is **Final Fantasy Versus XIII**?

MANY GAMERS ARE LOOKING AHEAD to the next generation for exciting games, but for one of Square Enix's most anticipated upcoming titles, we have to look backward. Final Fantasy Versus XIII was unveiled six years ago, but remains seldom-seen and mysterious.

Concrete answers about the game's status are rare, so we've assembled this timeline of Final Fantasy Versus XIII's progress, major appearances, and related comments from director Tetsuya Nomura and producer Yoshinori Kitase.

At E3, Final Fantasy Versus XIII is announced as part of Fabula Nova Crystalis, as is Final Fantasy XIII and Final Fantasy Agito XIII. Along with Final Fantasy XIII, it is revealed as a PS3 exclusive.

Nomura says Versus XIII will feature some kind of unique support for the PlayStation 3's Sixaxis controller.

Versus XIII is absent from E3.

Versus XIII is absent from the Tokyo Game Show.

Square Enix releases a new video adding more content to the original reveal trailer, showing a stylish fight and more of the protagonist's powers in action.

Nomura says Versus XIII is on hold while the team helps complete Final Fantasy XIII. Square Enix later denies this, attributing Nomura's statement to mistranslation.

Square Enix announces that Final Fantasy XIII is going multiplatform at E3. The company claims it has no plans to change the PS3 exclusivity of Versus XIII, which is otherwise absent from the show.

Versus XIII is absent from E3.

Gameplay footage in a closed theater at the Tokyo Game Show depicts Noctis running around in various environments, but no combat is shown.

At the Tokyo Game Show, the protagonist's name is revealed to be Noctis, and the woman he was fighting in the previous trailer is named Stella. The first in-game footage is revealed in the form of a conversation between Noctis and Stella. The video shows no exploration or combat.

A new trailer debuts at a Square Enix fan event, showing a new female character battling the protagonist.

Final Fantasy XIII (now multiplatform) releases in Japan. The North American release follows three months later

Nomura reveals via Twitter that players can navigate the world of Versus XIII with an airship.

What Else Has Happened Since Versus XIII's Announcement?

» All three Mass Effect games released
» The entire Assassin's Creed franchise
» The rise and fall of music games
» Four other main Final Fantasy titles XII, XIII, XIII-2, and XIV
» BioShock, BioShock 2 released
» Call of Duty 3, World at War, and Black Ops released, along with all three Modern Warfare titles
» The PlayStation 3's entire life
» The Wii craze
» Sony and Microsoft introducing/releasing their own motion controllers
» Duke Nukem Forever released

Nomura affirms via Twitter that Versus XIII is being developed exclusively for PlayStation 3, saying: "The debate over porting is decided by the management based off the current market and the costs. All I can say right now as a developer is that Versus is being developed specifically for the PlayStation 3."

Voice casting begins in Japan. Yoshinore Kitase says that Versus XIII might not release in 2011.

Versus XIII is absent from E3. Nomura claims that the game's storyline, character designs, and clothing designs are finished.

Listings for battle planner and level design planner positions appears on the recruitment page on Square Enix's website.

Versus XIII is still in the pre-production phase, though Nomura says that the team is making preparations to enter full production. New screenshots are shown to selected press, but are not published or otherwise released to the public.

Square Enix files a new trademark application for Final Fantasy Versus XIII, indicating that the company still intends to move forward with the game under its current name (rather than dropping the XIII, as many had speculated).

Square Enix releases a six-minute trailer highlighting the story, new characters, and the battle system in action. Nomura confirms that Versus XIII will not release in 2011.

Versus XIII is absent from the Tokyo Game Show. Yoshinori Kitase confirms that the game has entered full production.

When asked about Versus XIII in an interview, Nomura tells Game Informer: "We would like to ask for your patience on an official announcement for this title. It always takes time when tackling the challenge of doing something completely new, but we are doing our best to bring information to the fans as quickly as we can. Your patience is greatly appreciated."

Versus XIII is absent from E3. Square Enix gives Game Informer the following comment: "We appreciate the excitement for this title, but at this time, we do not have any new information to share on its development. We are extremely thankful for the continued support for the Final Fantasy franchise and Final Fantasy Versus XIII."

Versus XIII is absent from E3.

Final Fantasy Agito XIII releases in Japan (under the new name Final Fantasy Type 0). No North American release plans were announced.

03.1

03.2

07 Persona 4 Arena

09

12

14 Sleeping Dogs

28 Madden NFL 13

17

14 Darksiders II

21 Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2

August

03.1 Reliving the Metal Booger

Total Recall is a classic film for a number of reasons. The metal booger, Arnold Schwarzenegger's eyes inflating, and, of course, a space chick with three breasts. A remake launches today, hopefully with all of these elements intact. We doubt the new lead Colin Farrell will be as good as Schwarzenegger, but one thing is for sure: He'll have more coherent DVD commentary.

03.2 A New Bourne Film Without Bourne

Matt Damon doesn't have time to star in another Bourne movie. He's too busy trying to ruin his career with films like *We Bought a Zoo* and *Contagion*. So now a new Bourne movie, *The Bourne Legacy*, hits theaters today without Jason Bourne. Instead it stars Jeremy Renner (the Avenger no one likes) and Edward Norton (the Avenger everyone likes). That's like making a Batman movie all about Robin. Is that legal?

07 New Releases
› Persona 4 Arena *(PS3, 360)*

09 Star Trek's Five Captains Unite

All five of Star Trek's TV captains are together for the first time and will appear on stage at this year's Wizard World Comic Con, held at the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center outside of Chicago. The show kicks off today and runs through Sunday. In addition to the strong Star Trek presence, actors from *The Avengers* and pretty much every science fiction and fantasy TV show ever made will be on hand. Even Joey Lawrence is going!

12 Xbox Live Avatar Toys?

Apparently everything bearing the Halo name must be adapted to an action figure. McFarlane Toys' newest Halo action-figure series is based on the unlockable Xbox Live Avatar items. That's right, you can purchase an avatar dressed up as a Halo character. This series of seven figures even offers a flaming ODST helmet. Since this series is packaged in blind bags, you won't know which avatar you are getting until you open up the package.

1 New Releases
› The Hunger Games *(Blu-Ray, DVD)*

21 New Releases
› Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 *(PS3, 360)*

14 New Releases
› Darksiders II *(PS3, 360)*
› Sleeping Dogs *(PS3, 360)*

17 Now With Chuck Norris Roundhouses

Some people thought *The Expendables* starred every prominent action star from the last several decades. While that's mostly true, a few big name actors were not a part of the cast. That's being fixed with the sequel that opens today. Chuck Norris and Jean-Claude Van Damme, two "actors" known for their abilities to kick and do the splits, are joining the team. The only significant holdout now is Steven Seagal, but we said "big name" action stars, so technically this film's cast is complete.

23 Celebrating 1313

LucasFilm's annual Star Wars Celebration invades California's Orange County Convention Center this year. This show usually reveals the year ahead for this beloved universe. LucasArts' Star Wars: 1313 will likely be a part of the festivities. Star Wars legends Carrie Fisher (Leia), Ian McDiarmid (Palpatine), Peter Mayhew (Chewbacca), and Tim Rose (Admiral Ackbar) are on the bill. Star Wars clinger-on Seth Green will be there, too.

28 New Releases
› Damage, Inc. Pacific Squadron WWII *(360)*
› Madden NFL 13 *(PS3, 360, Wii, Vita)*
› Transformers Fall of Cybertron *(PS3, 360)*

31 PAX Prime Begins

The most enjoyable video game convention of the year begins today and runs through the weekend. Dozens of unreleased games are on-hand for all to play if you need to take a break from the gaming, this show is loaded with interesting panels and talks featuring the top talent in video games.

E3 HOT 50

> **W**ith Nintendo finally showing Wii U games and Sony and Microsoft putting off next-gen talk until next E3, the focus of this year's convention was on games. Thankfully, the show floor was packed with them. From future blockbusters like Assassin's Creed III to quirky titles like The Cave, there was something for every type of gamer at the show. We put together 60 pages of new information, screens, and hands-on impressions for the games that impressed us the most. Read on to get a guided tour through the best of E3 2012.

E3 2012
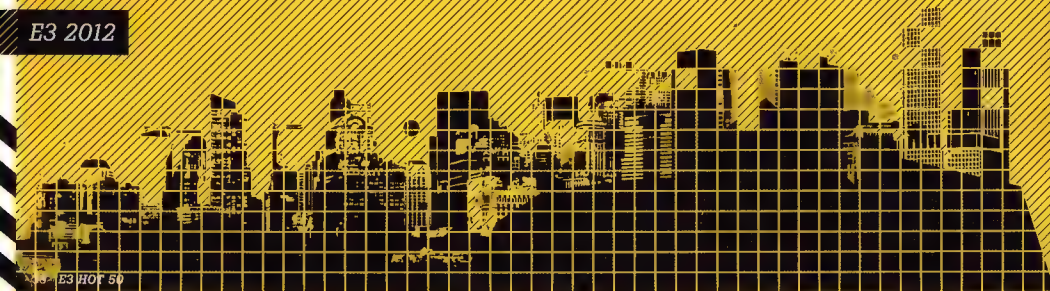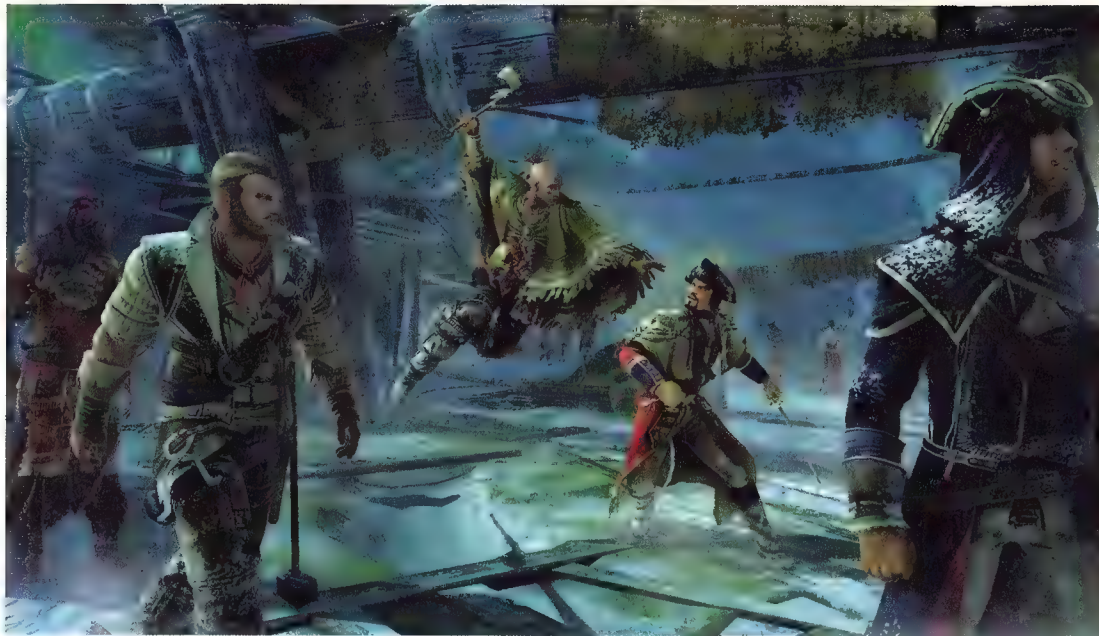
Assassin's Creed III

The Assassins rise to the top

E3 2012 showcased a number of remarkable looking games, but none impressed us quite like Assassin's Creed III. Ubisoft Montreal came to the show with guns blazing, with three distinct single-player demos, playable multiplayer, and a stunning new cinematic trailer. For sheer wow factor, it was a hard game to beat, making good on promises to improve combat, expand the sandbox of navigation, and flesh out a new protagonist. Ubisoft also introduced a new naval combat component, teasing the fantasy of riding the high seas and boarding Templar ships. Perhaps Ubisoft's greatest trick at E3 was its ability to show off so much of Assassin's Creed III and still leave so many mysteries unanswered for when the game releases later this year.

Assassin's Creed III started off the show with a bang at the Ubisoft press conference. An action-packed trailer starred new hero Connor as he single-handedly turned the tide in a battle against the British redcoats. The video sequence got viewers' blood pumping, but the live onstage demo of the game in action was the star. Connor races through a snow-swept forest, leaping from cliff to branch in pursuit of a herd of deer. For the first time, we see the newly implemented hunting system in action as Connor uses his bow and arrow to bring down a buck. As he moves up to skin the deer, a small pack of wolves attacks and a short battle ensues. The pack proves no match for Connor, as he quickly dispatches the circling wolves one by one.

Afterward, Connor trudges through the heavy snow to a nearby encampment, where he turns in the hunted meat to a quest provider; it's an early glimpse into the economic system that fuels exploration in the New World. From the encampment, Connor heads on to a more familiar style of mission, climbing a cliff in search of an assassination target. As he approaches a British fort, Connor starts off with a direct assault, and we're treated to some full-on group combat. Connor opens the fight by flinging out his rope dart, which hoists one of the redcoats onto the same tree branch Connor is dropping from. As the soldiers draw a bead with their rifles, Connor grabs a nearby combatant and

uses him as a human shield. Seamlessly flowing into close quarters, Connor starts tomahawk slicing one foe after another; the smoothly animated fight seems to favor far more offensive tactics than in previous games.

Later, Connor ascends the fort from a backside cliff climb, and it becomes clear how much flexibility Ubisoft Montreal has added to the traversal gameplay. Once inside the fort, our hero sets off a gunpowder explosion, and uses the distraction to hone in on his target, a Templar named Silas. Connor kills soldiers in his way as he runs and barely slows down before descending eagle-like onto his target with a piercing bayonet strike.

Platform
Wii U • PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

Release
October 30

The new Northwest Passage multiplayer level has plenty of hiding places and vertical play options

Ubisoft did not detail how Connor ends up as the captain of a sailing vessel, but we're eager to find out

Naval combat is not on rails; players maintain control of ship movement and weaponry

Connor's frontier adventure sequence was impressive enough, but later that same day at Sony's press conference a second demo contained a big surprise. The addition of naval exploration and combat in Assassin's Creed III is more than a minigame; it's a whole new area filled with gameplay missions along the eastern seaboard of America. The demo had Connor captaining a vessel on the Caribbean Sea in 1778, in pursuit of a Templar target onboard an enemy ship. The player maintains full control of the ship and its weapons, including varied cannon ammunition like grapeshot and chain shot, and can even order crew to take cover as enemy fire comes in. As a storm sweeps in and some awe-inspiring waves begin to slap into the side of the ship, Connor brings his frigate alongside a crippled enemy vessel and prepares for boarding, yet another major component of the naval fighting that remains unseen as the demo ends.

On the show floor, Ubisoft had a third full playable demo showing off the open city of Boston. This colonial city feels more lively and varied than previous cities in the franchise like Rome or Acre, with all sorts of citizens going about their business, and even animals like dogs and pigs moving around. Connor has several new stealth options at his disposal, such as the ability to take cover and assassinate from a building's corner, or leap through a building's interior to trigger a chase breaker. We also witnessed the first hints of how the redesigned Brotherhood system works. At one point, Connor raises his hand and we hear a familiar eagle call. However, instead of a devastating assault from above, the covert action brought in a small squad of fellow Assassins in the garb of redcoat soldiers. In the guise of troops escorting a soldier, Connor could easily slip past enemy checkpoints.

After seeing so much of Connor's adventure, we got our hands on the newly evolved multiplayer game, which maintains many of the fundamental ideas first introduced in Brotherhood. Players still work to remain inconspicuous while attempting to complete objectives and surreptitiously kill enemies. However, the new mode we played, Domination, adds a twist. Players explore the map to gain control of three territories around the board. Spend enough time near the flag, and the base becomes yours. This familiar multiplayer staple is passed through the Assassin's Creed filter, since territory owners are the only ones who can kill targets in that area. To retake a territory, you'll need to sneak in and remain undetected long enough to change the territory allegiance.

This new Domination mode took place in one of the new period-specific maps called Northwest Passage, a large snowy wilderness area filled with several places to hide. Plenty of new character avatars were on display, including a Native American warrior woman and a British army commander. During the round, we noticed some changes to the gameplay, including a third ability slot that is now reserved exclusively for a ranged attack, like the poison dart. New abilities included the invisibility-inducing glimmer and a shield, which blocks an opponent's use of abilities against you.

After all the fun we had exploring Assassin's Creed III at the show, it was easy to forget that Ubisoft is still playing plenty of cards close to the chest. We've yet to hear about how the present day adventures of Desmond fits into the story. What will replace the old economic loop of rebuilding structures and shops? How will the new XP-style synchronization feature factor into gameplay? We're excited to learn more about this mammoth game, but E3 gave us plenty to chew on as we wait. » Matt Miller

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Connor can grab weapons and kill enemies while on the move
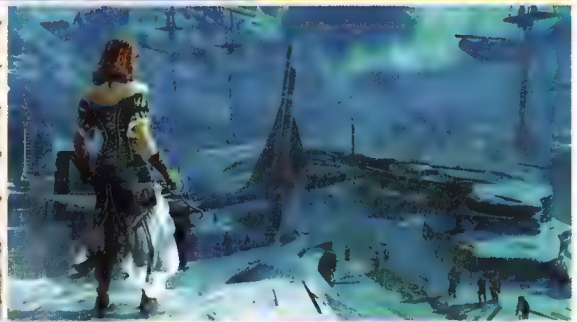
Unlike previous Assassin's Creed heroes, Connor can freely move through wilderness environments, including treetops

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The Last of Us

Naughty Dog's human enemies ground combat in unsettling reality

Among the many quality titles at Sony's E3 press conference, The Last of Us earned the coveted final slot. This can either send the audience away with excitement and enthusiasm or can sour the tone of the whole presentation. Naughty Dog took full advantage of the opportunity and went out with a literal bang, with protagonist Joel blasting a scavenger directly in the face with a shotgun after an already violent trip through a flooded hotel. This gameplay has since been released online and on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, but we attended a behind-closed-doors theater presentation that showed off a completely different approach to the same area that goes much deeper into the level.

In the alternate demo, main characters Joel and Ellie stop to take a look at an old movie poster for something called *Dawn of the Wolf*. It seems that if the player stops and looks at it, Joel and Ellie will start chatting. Ellie is confused as to why people would enjoy gory entertainment since she's so used to it in everyday life. Joel brushes it off as just a "dumb teen movie."

They continue inside and spy a ladder up on some scaffolding. It's highlighted in a strange glow that makes it stand out as a goal/interactive object, mildly breaking the otherwise stark realism of the game. They find a laundry cart and Joel rolls it over and boosts Ellie up. She pushes the ladder down. Joel grabs it, moves it over to another area, and climbs up. It appears that he can move and place it anywhere, so we wouldn't be surprised if Naughty Dog has hidden stashes of supplies or secret collectibles in hard-to-reach areas.

Once they get up to the new area, a group of survivors start searching the place. Joel grabs an empty glass bottle and tosses it into an open window to distract them. One of the guys goes to investigate and the pair moves to another room. Joel sneaks up behind another guy and chokes him. Next they enter a bathroom and find two long-dead corpses in the tub. Joel grabs some bandages out of a drawer and

A couple has ended it all long ago

scavenges a metal pipe off the ground outside. They move up to the next floor and are looking for an exit when they hear some coughing.

Another patrol starts searching this floor as well, and Joel opts for a more offensive tactic. He picks up a brick and smashes the man's face. Another enemy sees it and darts off to warn the others. Joel pulls out a revolver and lets off a few rounds, but the guy ducks away. Out of nowhere, another goon tries to grab Joel from behind. He prompts the enemy with the gun to shoot Joel while he's got a hold of him. Joel quickly reverses the hold and the attacker is shot instead. Then Joel shoots the man with the gun. He flanks around and catches enemy off guard. He throws a glass bottle at his head and dashes at him with a metal pipe. After a brutal beating, this guy is most certainly dead.

The final scavenger tries to escape and Joel chases him with his gun. Suddenly, it seems a little too quiet. Joel creeps through the hall, calling out to the goon. Out of nowhere, he

springs out of a doorway and tosses a Molotov cocktail at Joel, but he misses and ignites the wall. The man charges as Joel stumbles away from the flames. Joel pulls himself together quickly and shoots him down.

Ellie joins up with him and they move toward the abandoned elevator shaft. It creaks menacingly as they jump down onto the roof of a car. Joel boosts Ellie up to an open elevator door and, as the camera zooms in, you can see a sizable gash on Joel's face that is seeping blood. The moment he gets her up the car gives out and Joel falls with it a few stories. When it slams into the bottom of the flooded shaft, Joel bounces violently off the roof of the car and splashes into the water. He manages to swim back to the surface to the sounds of Ellie calling out his name. He says he's okay and flips on a flashlight to wade farther into the darkness. The demo fades to black and we're left to wonder what happens next. » **Bryan Vore**

All demos we've seen so far take place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
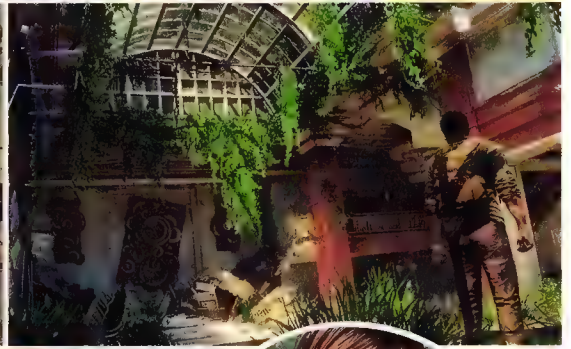
Naughty Dog's exacting attention to detail shows once again

Dishonored

Imagining your perfect revenge fantasy

Sokolov must be taken alive. I'm not told why for the purposes of this hands-on E3 demo, though I'm sure there's a reason embedded in the Dishonored plot that developer Arkane Studios is keeping tightly under wraps for now. All I need to know is that I must make it past tight alleyways and crumbling bridges crawling with guards to kidnap this influential scientist and make it back out alive. How I approach this problem is entirely up to me.

To start, I try scaling the rooftops to avoid conflict. This works well until I run out of roof and need to drop to ground level to progress. Blindly jumping down proves to be a bad move, as a trio of guardsmen easily down me with a few brutal sword and pistol strikes.

I'm more prepared for my second attempt, locating a safe drop zone with a Dark Vision power that highlights bad guys through walls. A few stealth kills later, I'm staring at the heavily guarded front door of Sokolov's mansion. Given how poorly a head-on fight went last time, I shimmy along exposed pipes that carry water to the building, ride a water wheel to an underslung catwalk that leads to a maintenance entrance, and creep undetected into the mansion proper.

Aided by Dark Vision and a few short-range teleports from the blink power, I stay hidden on my way to re-wiring a wall of light to fry enemies who pass through it instead of killing me. I eventually find a service elevator that looks like a handy escape route after abducting Sokolov. I botch possessing a guard to try and make it through a tricky hallway and bring down a half-dozen of them on me, but a quick time-stop lets me effectively vanish into thin air. While they start combing the mansion for the intruder they now know is there, I'm long gone up to the rooftop garden where Sokolov is doing some kind of nefarious science.

The guard patrolling up here didn't hear the commotion downstairs, so I'm able to sneak up and dispatch him from stealth. Sokolov is easily choked out while distracted by his experiment. I loot the place, finding a valuable alchemical potion recipe, several lore objects that detail bits of Dishonored's retro-futuristic world, and helpful combat supplies like crossbow bolts and bullets. With Sokolov over my shoulder, I slowly make my way down toward that service elevator I previously activated.

Dark Vision lets me slip past the still-alerted guards, and the elevator deposits us at the mansion's front door. Only a single, easily stealth-killed guard is left here – I'm assuming the others got called in when I alerted the interior guards to my presence – so I haul Sokolov into the grimy alleys that form the last challenge between me and my extraction point.

Here I finally confront the deadliest enemy Arkane has shown off so far: the stilt-wearing tallboy. After clumsily killing a set of soldiers in a pedestrian underpass by chaining together several time stops, the tallboy strides into view and immediately sends me packing with an explosive barrage.

He can't fit into the underpass I retreat to, so I burn through a half-dozen grenades and special pistol bullets trying to kill him from cover. Nothing penetrates his armor, and every time I approach the exit I'm nearly killed by his powerful weaponry. Stealth is out of the question with the tallboy blaring my location, and so I fire off yet another time stop and try to take down the tallboy with conventional weapons.

After that spectacular failure, I reload to a checkpoint back on the roof directly after knocking out Sokolov. My fully upgraded blink power lets me fling myself over the rooftops on a different route, and I rendezvous with my rowboat escape vehicle inside 30 seconds using this alternate strategy. As awesome as protagonist Corvo is in combat with his supernatural powers and explosive gadgets and grenades, Dishonored richly rewards players who think critically and come up with a plan that suits their play style and powers.

This tiny slice of the game could have been completed in dozens of different ways. I didn't even touch the rat swarm power or half of the gadgets Arkane added to this demo. Extensive routes through sections of the level went entirely unexplored. Who knows how many pieces of the environment with specialized uses I walked right by, and how many secrets and stashes I failed to notice? The only thing I'm sure of is this: Given how wonderfully Dishonored plays, I'm already blocking off a serious chunk of time to dig deeply into it when it comes out on October 9. » **Adam Biessener**
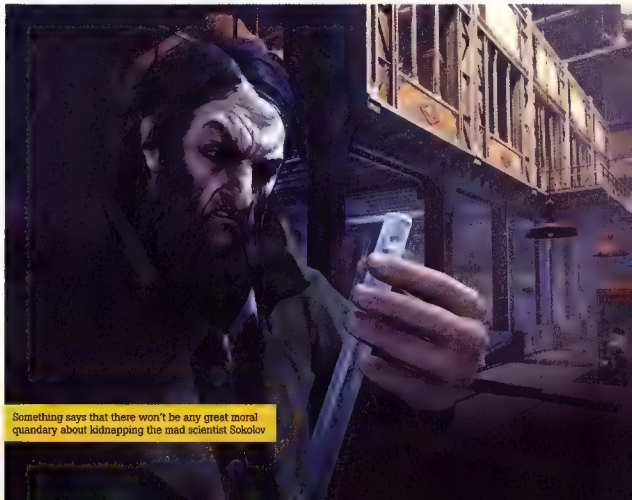
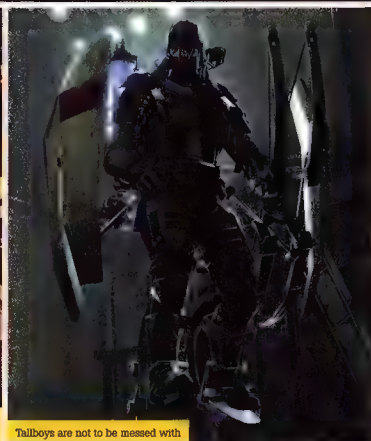Something says that there won't be any great moral quandary about kidnapping the mad scientist Sokolov
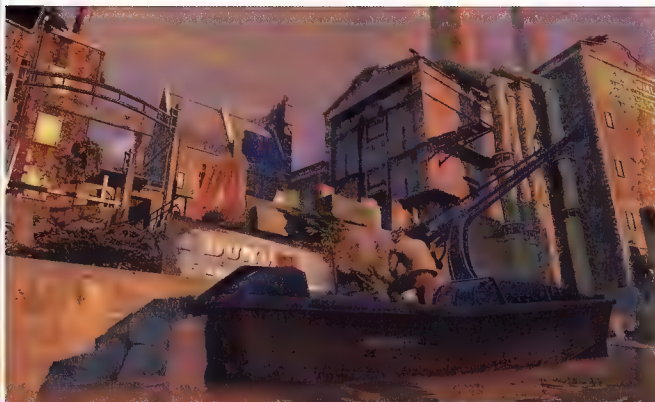
Pistols sound like Tchaikovsky's cannons when they fire. You learn to respect them very quickly in Dishonored

The rat swarm power is gross, but effective in a variety of ways

The parry mechanic works well and feels great when you pull it off

Tallboys are not to be messed with

Levitating sniper. Levitating sniper!

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Another strong showing bolsters our expectations

People talk about the "dumbing down" or "console-ization" of hardcore PC games. Having finally gotten my hands on an extended demo of Firaxis' upcoming remake, XCOM: Enemy Unknown, I can say with conviction that this project is anything but dumbed down or simplified in some futile quest for mainstream acceptance. XCOM is a hardcore, yet approachable, strategy game.

Take the example of a mission set in a Chinese dockyard. I chose to send my Skyranger here instead of to a simultaneous help request from the American government. I send my squad out to canvas the area, bounding from cover to cover and trying to maintain vision in every direction to avoid any nasty surprises. Unfortunately for XCOM's soldiers, the alien menace specializes in nasty surprises. The rookie in the vanguard (why would I risk an experienced squad member as a scout? Good luck, kid) spots a pair of sectoids. The aliens see him as well and immediately take cover in a nearby security-guard shack. Commanding the rest of my soldiers to open fire on the sectoids accomplishes nothing at this range, as they frutlessly spray bullets around half the dockyard. These low-level soldiers equipped with basic weapons are far from accurate. The game

gently reminds me that the heavy who leveled up in the tutorial mission has a new toy to play with, though: the mighty rocket launcher.

Of course, he isn't any more accurate than his squad mates. The rocket misses badly, slamming into the shack a full meter from where I told him to shoot. I didn't expect my dude failing an attack roll to be the event that pushed me head-over-heels in love with XCOM, but when the entire shack explodes and I spot two sectoid corpses among the rubble I know I'm lost.

Throughout the mission, I'm fascinated by how well XCOM plays on the Xbox 360 pad. The movement cursor snaps intuitively to destinations that offer partial or full cover, which are denoted by clear icons. The interface remains uncluttered at all times, with tasteful flyouts denoting friendly and enemy unit status with simple icons and the minimal action wheel only appearing when you open the tactical menu to give an order. Within minutes, I'm expertly flying through turns. Dozens of actions whiz by in seconds: overwatch, double-moves, rocket launchers, grenades, reloads, and regular attacks. The dockyard mission consists of perhaps a hundred discrete inputs from me, and yet I never feel like I'm navigating menus or fighting the UI.

Many strategy games, particularly turn-based tactical ones, push players into trying to find a tiny shred of advantage by manipulating in-game math. In XCOM, good tactics make intuitive sense: Find cover, flank the enemy, don't overextend your squad, and use explosives or indirect fire to solve otherwise intractable problems.

Back at XCOM base, the Americans scream bloody murder at the perceived slight I dealt them while the Chinese show their appreciation by sending me a crack team of engineers to help outfit my soldiers. My demo ends here, but not before I'm treated to a tour of the base. Here, it's easy to both keep track of the global situation and assign priorities for your soldiers, scientists, and engineers.

XCOM's October release can't come soon enough. As much as I want to dig deeper into more mission scenarios like the one I played, the superpowered soldiers Firaxis showed in a second, hands-off demo are even more intriguing. I must mind-control an alien to force him to eat his own grenade, fly a sniper up on a jetpack to headshot enemy after enemy from above, and send an invisible shotgun ninja grappling to the top of a building to surprise a bad guy. I simply must. » **Adam Biessener**

Borderlands 2

Clear your schedule for late September

We've seen Borderlands 2 several times since our September cover story, and it somehow keeps getting us more excited with every showing. We broke down the abilities of the playable characters Salvadore and Maya after we saw the game at PAX East, and at E3 we had a chance to get our hands on the other two characters, Axton and Zero.

Gearbox art director Jeramy Cooke selects the soldier Axton, and I opt for the robotic assassin Zero. For purposes of the demo, each character is granted 20 skill points that you can assign to your desired perks on the skill tree. I focus on making Zero a dangerous melee fighter that remains deadly at long range. In conjunction with Zero's hologram ability, it makes for some exciting combat scenarios.

With a press of the left bumper, I can become invisible as a hologram of Zero distracts enemies. Various mechs and human enemies focus their fire on my doppelganger, allowing me to sprint behind and slash them to death with my sword. I activate a perk that causes me to do more

damage when attacking from behind, which made Zero's slices all the more deadly. Cooke tells me that if a player focuses their skill points on this perk along with shotgun strength, they could effectively become a shotgun ninja. The variety of ways you can build your character is staggering, and should give Borderlands 2 even more replay value.

Gearbox is intent on presenting a genuine narrative this time around, so these firefights have a purpose. After antagonist Handsome Jack exterminates all of Claptrap's fellow droids, our robotic friend has an axe to grind. He decides that one way to strike a blow to Jack's public image is to vandalize the numerous statues of him in Pandora. We approach the first statue and attempt to take it down, but our bullets and rockets don't quite do the trick.

To obtain some more firepower, Claptrap directs us to a disabled enemy constructor and suggests that we hack it. With the press of the X button, the large robot comes to life and begins floating, and we are tasked with

protecting it as it cuts down the bronze statues with its laser. After fighting off waves of robotic enemies and sawing down several statues, Claptrap informs us that the area is free of Jack's image. He tells us to activate our constructor's "dance mode," so we press the indicated button on the robot. It slightly bounces around for a few seconds before exploding. "Oh, it exploded...I guess that's kind of like dancing," Claptrap says.

A huge part of the Borderlands experience is the constant progression, loot collection, and customization, but it is still a blast in a standalone experience like this demo. Gunplay is fast and responsive, and the enemy variety is significantly improved over the original. Considering it's already this fun in demo form, I'm looking forward to sitting down with the final game and developing my character.

Several triple-A games were on the E3 show floor this year, but I'm anticipating Borderlands 2 more than any other title I saw at the annual convention. My hands-on time has me counting the days until its September release. » Dan Ryckert
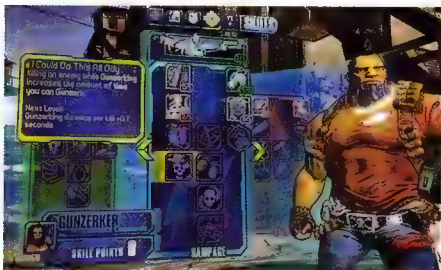
Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

Publisher
2K Games

Developer
Gearbox

Release
September 18

Halo 4

Meet Master Chief's new foe

Halo fans could be forgiven if they entered E3 a little skeptical about the next installment of their beloved franchise. The series creators at Bungie have been the stewards of Halo for a decade; how will this new team at 343 Industries handle the responsibility? Thankfully, all signs at E3 pointed to some thrilling content on the way in Halo 4. While both single-player and multiplayer elements revealed a project deeply rooted in the franchise gameplay and fiction, 343 is also introducing new elements to reinvigorate the series. Over the course of the show, Halo 4 demonstrated deep connections between Master Chief's campaign story, the competitive War Games mode, and the brand new Spartan Ops cooperative adventure.

E3 finally gave us a clear glimpse of the Prometheans. This brand new enemy type is an entire collection of foes, akin to the Flood or the Covenant in terms of breadth and variety. The Prometheans are a variety of Forerunner AI or construct left behind on the Requiem artificial world – presumably, they've been stranded on Requiem for millennia. Three distinct varieties were on display in the E3 demo, each offering a new set of challenges for Master Chief. The Promethean Crawler seems to be the most plentiful and standard enemy unit. Looking like a cross between a giant ant and a wolf, these agile four-legged opponents can easily leap to new vantage points, and are effective in both close-quarters and long-range combat. The Promethean Knight is a major step up – a two-legged combatant with all sorts of tricks up its sleeve. These commanding units deploy hardlight shields on the fly to block incoming fire and some can even teleport around the battlefield. Knights can deploy Watchers, a third Promethean variant that look like flying drones. Watchers can heal and buff other Promethean units, and can also catch and fling back grenades. In combination, the new enemies offer a new set of challenges for players.

John-117's adventures on Requiem look great, but 343 also showed more details on the new cooperative Spartan Ops mode. The Spartan Ops story picks up six months after the conclusion of the core campaign, but in the real world, players will get the first episode at launch. You'll play as a member of Majestic Squad, a new team of Spartan IVs housed aboard the massive *UNSC Infinity* vessel.

Spartan Ops will roll out as a weekly episodic series that comes free with Halo 4. Each week will bring a brief CG movie and five brand-new cooperative game missions, most of which will use new level geometry and locations distinct from Master Chief's story. We got to play one brief mission that pits our squad against some dangerous Covenant in search of an ancient

Forerunner artifact. As the demo continued, Promethean enemies joined the fray, and we tried out one of their cool new weapons: the Scattershot, which is basically a shotgun with ricocheting, bouncy rounds.

We also tried the competitive multiplayer. In Halo 4, all competitive play is meant to be part of a series of war games conducted on the

Master Chief's new armor is the most detailed seen in the series to date

343 has not offered a name yet for this new hulking UNSC vehicle
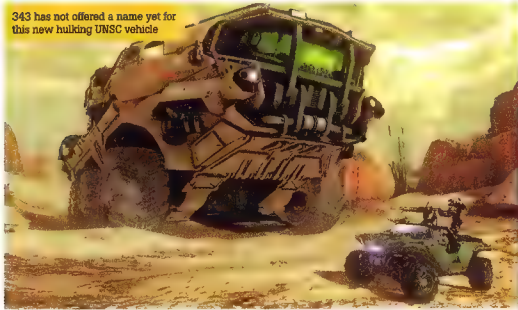
It looks as if Master Chief won't be riding solo for the entire campaign

Infinity's combat deck. We played on the new Longbow map, a large polar environment built around a towering mass driver. Competitive play feels tight and well balanced, and the tempo of fights should feel just right to long-time Halo players. We took special note of the remarkable audio design work throughout our hands-on time – weapon sound effects are punchy and terrifying, and explosions are equally impressive. The game also uses atmospheric music near the end of matches to add tension to the fight.

Across all the game modes, players gain points to build their own personal Spartan. These points can be spent for both cosmetic and functional improvements to your character, and we're hopeful that this system encourages players to cross-pollinate between the different modes.

Some fans might never accept the fact that Halo 4 isn't made by Bungie. However, our experience with the game indicates that 343 Industries may be just the fresh blood this franchise needs to get back on top. » Matt Miller

The Promethean Knight is a Forerunner AI construct with tremendous destructive power

Dead Space 3

>> Visceral Games' newest fright
fest chills us to the bone

Zero G returns, but details are still under wraps

Dead Space 2 fans may be surprised to see Ellie's makeover

wo hundred years before the events of Dead Space, a small government outpost on the frozen planet of Tau Volantis suffered a necromorph outbreak that decimated its colony. Isolated from civilization by its icy winds and frequent blizzards, the necromorphs of Tau Volantis went into hibernation – an outbreak preserved in cold storage.

Two centuries later, Isaac Clark and Ellie Langford invade the frozen wasteland looking for the truth behind the marker conspiracy. The red marker uncovered on Aegis VII during the original Dead Space was only one of a number of replicas of an alien artifact secretly created by the

government and then buried. After the events of Dead Space 2, Isaac discovers that Tau Volantis holds some of these government secrets, and allegedly the key to stopping the Necromorph plague once and for all. Unfortunately, many of Tau Volantis' other secrets scurry through air vents and mutilate the flesh of their human hosts.

When we previewed Dead Space 3 last month, we dug into the action-packed co-op gameplay. This month, during our exclusive E3 demo, we went deeper into the game and explored its more traditional corridor-based horror.

After Isaac crash lands on Tau Volantis, his first priority is finding the tools he needs to survive

the harsh arctic climate. Isaac heads for a nearby building, called the Way Station, in search of a temperature-controlled snowsuit. As soon as he enters the building, we hear something scratching around in the dark.

Isaac pushes forward into another room and confronts one of Dead Space 3's early puzzles. Isaac can still use telekinesis (TK) to put objects and enemies into a temporary stasis or pull distant objects towards him, but now he can also rotate the objects he picks up with TK. To activate a generator, Isaac uses TK to rotate the generator's circuit boards and complete an electrical loop. The generator roars to life, and the

07

The new feeder enemy is created when humans eat necromorph flesh

Way Station slowly wakes up.

Though the generator is on, the lights are still dim. That's probably a good thing; in the next room, we catch a flash of two glowing eyes. An emaciated form is hunched in one corner of the room. This is one of Dead Space 3's new enemies: the feeder.

Feeders are created when a human eats the corrupted flesh of a dead necromorph. The old colonists of Tau Volantis were isolated for so long that they eventually resorted to this sick form of cannibalism, and they slowly mutated into feeders.

The feeders inhabiting the Way Station have been trapped in the dark so long that bright lights hurt their eyes. They navigate through sound and attack in waves when startled. Isaac has a couple options when approaching a nest of feeders. If he has enough resources, he can charge head-first into their numbers and hope to

come out ahead when the smoke clears, or he can sneak by or throw objects across the room to lead a feeder off his scent. A smart player will scope out the environment and lay a few traps before he picks a fight with a feeder, because once enraged, feeders send out a call to their brood, and the hordes come streaming through every doorway, vent, and grate in the room.

Our hands-on time with Dead Space 3 left us impressed. The aiming feels tight, the enemies are clever, and the frights come just as frequently as series fans expect. Only Dead Space 3's new cover system feels a little odd. Isaac automatically takes cover when he's near a qualifying object, but his back doesn't snap against his bunker like in most cover-based shooters. This is because of Dead Space's abundance of melee-susceptible enemies. Isaac often has to deal with close quarter enemies even during shootouts, and Visceral found that this kind of open cover system works better than a standard snap-to mechanic.

Visceral Games plans to start talking about its new weapon upgrade system as we move

closer to this summer's Gamescom convention in Germany, but we don't need to know much more about this title. We're happy to let Dead Space 3 surprise us. **Ben Reeves**

For our full interview with creative director Ben Wanhe and an exclusive screen gallery go to gameinformer.com/hot50


Carving out Isaac's Partner

Our time with Dead Space 3 reassured us that the game should be just as terrifying as previous titles, but players who want to experience a different flavor of the game can tackle the single-player campaign with a friend. Isaac's partner in Dead Space 3 is Sergeant John Carver, an EarthGov army grunt. We revealed Carver in our feature last month, but creative director Ben Wanhe gave us some deeper insight into Carver's character at E3.

"Underneath it all he's a family man who is just not good at it. He's a horrible father; he's a horrible husband," Wanhe says. "He's kind of torn up inside, but he's not the kind of guy who wears his emotions on his sleeve. Much like Isaac, Carver has his past buried inside. As you play through the game you start dredging up some of what makes Carver who he is and what's haunting him."

Carver witnesses a necromorph outbreak on the planet Uxor, and it's possible that he came in contact with a marker during this event. Carver's motivations are still mysterious, but he seems to be on a hunt for his family and could be suffering from the same hallucinogenic episodes that have tormented Isaac for months.

Feeders are sensitive to bright light, and will attack in packs when startled
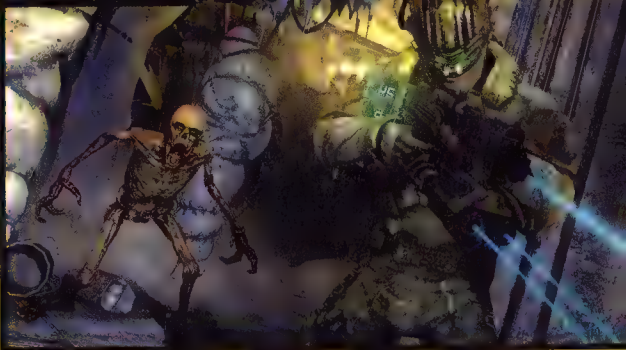
The Original Co-op Plan

Some fans spoke out against EA's decision to add co-op to Dead Space 3, fearing that the addition of a partner could dilute the frights. However, what many people don't know is Visceral Games originally intended to include co-op in the first Dead Space. "We had a working prototype with Dead Space 1 and it was actually quite a bit of fun," explains creative director Ben Wanhe. "But the technical problems it brought up, in terms of the density of the artwork included in the environments and all that, were issues that we were not well equipped to handle at that time, so we punted it." We'll have to wait and see if Dead Space 3 remains as ter- rifying in co-op as it is playing solo, but in some ways, Dead Space 3 fulfills the original vision better than fans realize.

Watch Dogs

Information is a weapon in Ubisoft's exciting new IP

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

Release
TBA

In an E3 year that contained few surprises and a wealth of sequels, Watch Dogs stands out as one hell of an exception. This new IP from Ubisoft Montreal wowed gamers with a live gameplay demo complete with high-tech espionage, close-quarters combat, and an intense shootout in a crowded city intersection.

Watch Dogs is an open-world game set in a modern-day Chicago that is controlled by a central operating system, dubbed CTOS. This system runs all of the city's networks, including subway lines, traffic lights, surveillance systems, and electrical grids. CTOS also connects these systems to the personal data of its citizens, which it mines from various information networks. The result? "A computer now controls a major city," the demo teases. "But who controls the computer?"

We still don't know who the titular Watch Dogs are, but Aiden Pearce, the game's antihero, is a skilled hacker capable of accessing and manipulating CTOS at will, adding a new layer of options to the normal activities we expect in open-world action titles.

Pearce displayed some of his abilities during the demo, which had him tracking down acquitted murderer Joseph DeMarco to a downtown art gallery. As Pearce walks down the crowded city street, data points pop up above some of the citizens standing in line for the show. Standing off to the side, Pearce interrupts the bouncer's phone call by jamming the reception of all nearby phones. The bouncer swears as he checks his signal, walking out onto the sidewalk in hopes of finding better coverage. It's just the window Pearce

needs to slip into the gallery unnoticed.

Once inside, Pearce meets his contact, revealing that the eccentric artist is his target and that Pearce is acting as the bait to draw him out. It's working; the other attendees have recognized the mysterious protagonist and are whispering about his presence. Pearce's contact slips him a gun and disappears. All that's left to do is to wait for DeMarco to appear.

To make sure things are going according to plan, Pearce must identify DeMarco's associate. To do so, Pearce uses another one of his digital tools, dubbed the Profiler. The Profiler can scan individuals and display personal information about them pulled from information networks. Pearce scans the nearby individuals: a registered voter, a cable subscriber, and a woman who's been charged with plagiarism. One man has a low credit rating. Another is HIV positive. Finally, Mary Blass pops up as an employee of DeMarco. Pearce listens in on her current phone call; she's alerting her boss that Pearce has crashed the show.

DeMarco reveals that he's driving to the gallery, and to not let Pearce leave. Blass reassures him that security is on it. It's time to move.

As Pearce walks toward the exit, Blass alerts security to his presence, another call the protagonist is in on. The guard in front of Pearce pops up on his network, indicating his probability of violence. Pearce beats him to the punch, pulling out a telescoping baton and quickly rendering him unconscious. The baton is Pearce's melee weapon of choice, and the

encounter points to quick, brutal combat.

Back on the street, Pearce waits in the rain for DeMarco to arrive. He pulls a bandana over his face and taps into the traffic-light grid. As DeMarco's ride approaches, Pearce switches all the traffic lights at the intersection to green. The target's SUV T-bones an unsuspecting car, and is quickly trapped in gridlock. Dazed motorists began exiting their vehicles, and onlookers rush to the assistance of a shaken driver. A fire erupts at a nearby gas station.

As Pearce approaches DeMarco's vehicle, a guard opens fire – looks like the bandana didn't help preserve his anonymity. Pearce aims his gun at the attacker and time slows down slightly, allowing the protagonist to take him down with a single shot. More gunfire erupts from nearby guards, and Pearce runs to cover behind a stalled car. He opens the passenger door and pulls out a scared civilian, telling him to stay down.

The on-screen minimap reveals a group of gunmen to the north. Pearce flanks them, shooting down one assailant before seamlessly sliding over the hood of a car and taking down another. He picks up the slain attacker's assault rifle and makes short work of the remaining henchmen. The flaming gas station explodes in a column of fire that fills the screen and sends Pearce rolling to the ground. With no one left in his way, Pearce walks up to DeMarco's car, shatters the window, and pulls his target onto the street.

"This is suicide, you understand that?"

Pearce's Profiler tool allows him to pull up personal information on the people he encounters

DeMarco yells from the ground. "You kill me, and you open a door you'll never close."

Pearce tells DeMarco that he's going to deliver a message for him, which DeMarco is more than willing to agree to. The message, however, is a bullet to the head – a clear indication that Pearce isn't messing around.

With helicopters hovering in the background, Pearce hops into a car and speeds down a side street. He facilitates a clean getaway with one last demonstration of technical prowess; by activating a drawbridge to open as he drives towards it, Pearce gives himself just enough time to make a cinematic jump to the other side, leaving behind the pursuing police cars.

As Pearce drives to safety, the camera pans out to a figure watching from a rooftop, with the username Bixxel_44 hovering over his head. A voice instructs the second character that he wants everyone to track and protect Pearce – at least for now. A last-second flyover of the city shows several other usernames populating the area. It's a clear hint at a multiplayer component for Watch Dogs, but what will it entail? Ubisoft isn't clarifying. Despite this and other lingering questions, we saw more than enough to get us excited for this new open-world action title » Jeff Marchiafava

The demo showed Pearce seamlessly interacting with objects in the environment, including sliding over the hood of this car

Tomb Raider

Lara's bad vacation continues in impressive E3 demo

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Square Enix

Developer
Crystal Dynamics

Release
March 5

Crystal Dynamics' reboot of the long-running Tomb Raider series won't see its release until March, but the developer offered a new look at the survival-themed title at E3. Set shortly after her ship crashes, Lara gets put through the ringer for nearly 30 straight minutes.

Fresh out of college, the 21-year-old aspiring archaeologist finds herself overlooking the wreckage of her ship at the outset of the demo. Scrambling to find any potential survivors, she begins blindly exploring this unknown environment. Lara walks over fallen trees and carefully climbs across a small, crashed plane before eventually finding a pile of supplies that may belong to her unfortunate group.

Attempting to communicate via a radio she found in the supplies, her queries are met with nothing but static. Night falls, and her breath becomes visible as she struggles to stay warm. She finds a single match in the wreckage, which she uses to start a small fire and survive the night.

When morning comes, Lara's need for warmth has been replaced by an immediate need to eat. While further exploring the area, she discovers a decaying body hanging from a tree. Normally this would be reason for concern, but all Lara seems to care about is the bow attached to the corpse. She climbs a tree and knocks the body down, falling hard herself in the process. With her new weapon, she's now able to hunt.

Lara takes down a deer with a couple of arrows, and is rewarded with XP upon skinning the animal. This experience system allows her to upgrade her items and weapons, and also grants new survival skills. These upgrades include Hunter, a perk that makes edible animals stand out, making them easier to hunt.

With her hunger temporarily satisfied, Lara heads inside an abandoned outpost. She climbs down a ladder and encounters a room filled with rotting meat. With a look of disgust, she pulls a tool out of one of the animal carcasses. Crystal Dynamics refers to this tool as her pry axe, and it can eventually be upgraded and strengthened as more XP is earned.

She exits the building to encounter one of her fellow survivors at a fire next to a shady-looking man with a crutch. He feigns friendliness before holding Lara's friend at knifepoint. As he escapes with the girl, Lara fails in an attempt to hit him with an arrow. She tries to pursue the man, but becomes ensnared in a bear trap.

With her leg rendered immobile, Lara is forced to defend herself against a pack of hungry wolves that leap through the tall grass surrounding her. Once Lara takes several of the animals down, the rest of the survivors appear, including expedition leader Dr. Whitman, and help free her from the trap. Whitman and Lara then set off to find the captain of the ship.

The two adventurers climb stone stairs on their way up a mountain, and eventually come across a new camp. Wolves attack once again, and Lara and Whitman confront more dangerous-looking men once the animals are taken out. Lara is tackled and bound, then dragged to a

location that houses the rest of her (also bound) crew. She manages to elude her captors, and runs off with her hands still tied.

One man shoves her up against a wall, but Lara takes him down with a knee to his groin and a painful-looking bite of his ear. With the man knocked down, she scrambles to disarm him. He pounces on top of her, she struggles to point the gun at his head, and then shoots him directly through the skull. The man convulses on the ground, making nonsensical noises for a few seconds until finally dying. Clearly distraught over killing a man for the first time, Lara looks like she's ready to vomit. She stands up with the gun in her still-bound hands, and the demo ends.

It's a shockingly gruesome scene, especially for a franchise that has never been known for graphic violence. Considering this all happens so early in the game, we can't imagine how much more pain Lara will endure when the game releases next March. » **Dan Ryckert**
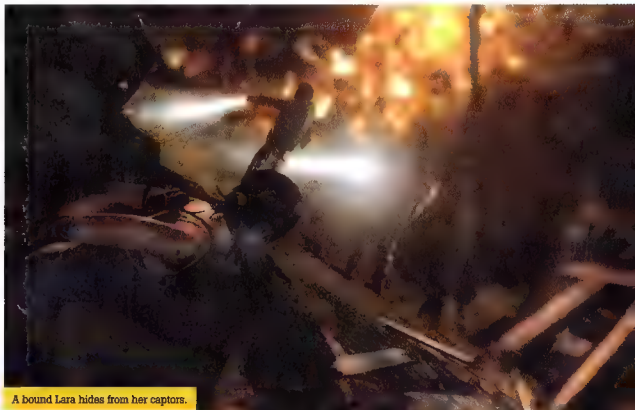
A bound Lara hides from her captors.
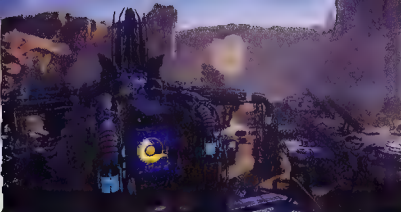
Working together as a team is as important as in any shooter

Planetside 2

Come on in, the shooting is fine

Have you ever left a shooter lobby wanting more, even in this age of kill:death ratios, perks, and prestige? Having your performance matter in a larger persistent context is a dream that the shooter genre has been chasing for years with mixed results. Planetside 2 does away with discrete matches in favor of a constant three-sided war that stretches across entire continents, but makes no sacrifices in triple-A shooter gameplay along the way – and it's entirely free to play.

After signing up for one of the three factions vying for resource nodes and fortified installations, loading up a fully customizable kit and dropping into a fierce battle is only a few clicks away. Gameplay is exactly what modern players expect out of a sci-fi shooter, with a selection of vehicles and aircraft complementing the vast array of infantry armor types, weaponry, and gadgets. I loved the combination of a versatile assault rifle and a jetpack when I played Planetside 2 on the E3 show floor, but I saw dozens of other players using the turrets, miniguns, and deadly sniper rifles to great effect.

Great shooters give players room to employ creative tactics, and Planetside 2 does not disappoint in that regard. In one memorable sequence, I spent a few of my personal resources to spawn a light assault hovercraft. One strafing run later, my craft was in dire straits thanks to the volume of enemy fire I attracted. On fire and with a half-dozen alarms blaring through the cockpit, I sent my craft on a suicide charge at an enemy vehicle, ejecting moments before impact. Though the impact of falling from a few hundred feet will splatter anyone unwise enough to take that plunge, careful air-braking with bursts from my jetpack allowed me to control my descent well enough to land intact on top of a tower near the resource node we were fighting over. My assault

rifle's scope helped me score a few more kills before an enemy tank took notice of my exposed position and put a decisive end to my run with a high-explosive shell.

All of that chaos took place in about 30 seconds. Planetside 2 is unapologetically fast-paced, and expects players to respawn dozens of times in a play session. The speed could be a problem in an online game of this scale. The faster the gameplay, the more sensitive it is to latency – and we're talking about hundreds of players actively participating in a single battle, which is just one of many that are occurring simultaneously on the same server. The total lack of latency effects while playing Planetside 2 at E3 was a pleasant surprise.

Planetside 2 offers deep progression and customization. You can tweak your loadouts with all the gadgets and weapons you've unlocked, and your ever-growing pool of skill points can be used to boost dozens of skills, from tank driving to rifle accuracy. The system is intended to be tall enough that there's room for dedicated players to make names for themselves as the best dropship pilot on their faction, for example, or for squads to specialize in particular types of combat through character progression.

The free-to-play concept can be both a blessing and a curse, but Sony Entertainment Online is approaching Planetside 2's business model in a tried-and-true fashion. You can enjoy everything the game has to offer and compete on an even playing field without spending a dime. Real-money investments can be made in cosmetic items (armor colors

and patterns, clan logos, etc.), sidegrade weapons (a pistol with higher damage but a slower reload, for example), boosts (extra XP or currency gain for a day), and other player convenience items.

The original Planetside had similar goals, and delivered an exceptional experience on those rare occasions where sufficient concentrations of players were engaged in relatively even battles. As impressive as the game's E3 showing was, it tells us nothing about how well Planetside 2 will handle that critical challenge. All of my conversations with creative director Matt Higby assure me that he and his team are well aware of the importance of incentivizing players toward fun activities, though, so I'm reasonably confident in Planetside 2's prospects. Just don't expect to play it on this generation of consoles. » **Adam Biessener**

Sony Online hasn't optimized the game for budget machines yet, but it's awfully impressive running on a high-end PC right now

10

» Platform
PC

» Style
Massively Multiplayer
Online Shooter

» Publisher
Sony Online
Entertainment

» Developer
Sony Online
Entertainment

» Release
Late 2012

Splinter Cell
Blacklist

he public premiere of Splinter Cell Blacklist was one of the few big announcements at E3 this year, and Ubisoft capitalized on the opportunity by showing off an impressive demo of the game in action. Blacklist aims to capitalize on the successes of previous installments while continuing to expand into new gameplay directions. The result is a game characterized by deep playstyle choices between stealth and action, an integrated single player and multiplayer framework, and a number of new elements added to ratchet up the tension, drama, and realism.

Killing on the Move
Blacklist's most potent gameplay advancement improves the mobility of its protagonist. The Mark and Execute mechanic from Conviction returns, but players now have increased flexibility and involvement in how Sam Fisher carries out the attack. Specifically, he can now move into an area and kill targets as he runs without slowing down. It's the difference between watching an old Bond movie where a guard gets choked from behind, and the more kinetic vibe of a Jason Bourne movie, where the hero takes over a space and defeats his opponents while remaining active and dangerous. Both options are still available to players, but the latter will frequently be more fun and engaging.

"On Conviction, my big thing with Sam was I wanted him to be more agile," says creative director Maxime Beland. "Now that we've got that, the next step ahead is to make Sam more fluid." Beland describes three fundamental features that help to communicate the sense of Sam Fisher in smooth motion as he goes on the attack. The first one is active sprint. "You run, you sprint, and you automatically jump over stuff," Beland says. "If there's a door, you bash the door. If there's something to climb, you climb automatically. We're making traversing the environment super easy." If you're moving and you press Y to execute, Sam keeps his momentum. This dynamic movement also integrates hand-to-hand takedowns. Instead of stopping to do a hand-to-hand kill, Sam can slice right through the guy and keep going.

This new sense of kinetics takes center stage during the extended demo. Sam crouches behind the cover of a tent flap as several dangerous terrorists stand outside, oblivious to his presence. Sam marks three of them, and then charges into action. He exits the tent and seamlessly leaps over a crate. At the tap of a button, he methodically dispatches three opponents with clean headshots. A fourth bad guy is scrambling to react as Sam continues his run and stabs him in the neck. Without slowing, Sam slides across the hood of a pickup truck, and as he moves he's already marked his last two foes. He slams one in the stomach to stun him while he shoots the other who is farther out of reach, and then a final shot sends his reeling opponent to the ground. It all takes 15 seconds.

Sam's mobility extends beyond kill scenes. Taking a page from its Ubisoft cousin, Assassin's Creed, Sam Fisher now faces traversal situations more frequently, like a cliff climb in the E3 demo, that offer a brief break from the normal routine. Taken together, Sam's new mobility makes the game feel more flexible and real, and less tied to static mechanics that are unique to the game franchise.

Fourth Echelon
Sam gave up the spy game after Conviction, and Third Echelon is dead. In order to bring him back to the table, the president is forced to let her master operative do things the way he wants. In Blacklist, Sam is the leader of a new group called Fourth Echelon. Based aboard a fortress of a plane that can move wherever it's needed around the world, the new group has complete freedom to do what is necessary to protect U.S. interests and homeland security.

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 · PC

Style
1–Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft Toronto

Release
Spring 2013

11

Thanks to increased visual fidelity and some powerfully acted dramatic scenes, interrogations are more tense than ever

At its top level, Fourth Echelon is a collection of Sam's trusted colleagues. CIA agent Isaac Briggs brings added muscle for the fight, Charlie Cole takes up the necessary hacking duties, and longtime colleague Anna "Grim" Grimsdottir manages operations from the base.

More than window dressing to the story, Fourth Echelon offers in-game help through situations Beland calls Fourth Echelon moments. "We don't want to go into a squad-based style of gameplay or anything," he says. "We love the idea that Sam is surrounded by amazing people that have different talents. Whenever it fits the story or the gameplay, we have the team that comes in and is like, 'Hey Sam! I'm here. I can do this for you!'"

In the E3 demo, we witness a moment when Sam gets pinned down by a heavy machine gun mounted on the back of a truck. Enemy combatants are flanking to either side Grim offers to lend a hand to take out the truck. When Sam sends the signal, a massive bombardment takes out the whole area around the truck, and Sam can move on with the mission. The idea isn't to offer scripted events that trigger when Sam crosses some invisible line. Instead, players can trigger these set piece moments if and when they want. Sometimes they are big, explosive moments that pump up the violence quotient. But in keeping with the goal to expand both action and stealth features, Fourth Echelon moments can also be quiet and strategic. "Instead of being a rocket in the sky, it could be Grim hacking into an electricity system from a building," Beland says. By tapping into his allies' capabilities, Sam ends up with an increased chance of remaining hidden.

The centerpiece to Fourth Echelon is the SMI, or Strategic Mission Interface. From a story perspective, Sam Fisher uses it to track the efforts of his new organization. From a gameplay angle, Ubisoft Toronto uses it to tie together all the elements of the game. "We have this concept of the SMI and blurring the lines between co-op and adversarial. And that's what we're doing," Beland says. "We're not making three games that are separate. My goal is I'd like to ship with no main menu. I'd like you to start the game, get a little intro, and then you're in the plane, you're in front of your SMI, and that's your menu."

The SMI also serves as a tool to offer players a sense of progression across their game experiences. By playing any of the single-player or multiplayer modes, players gain money that can be spent to acquire new weapons and equipment, upgrade existing tools, or even alter Sam's tactical suit to better fit their play style. You can also expand upon Fourth Echelon's abilities, and the ways in which your allies can aid you.

Sam can now kill on the move by marking targets and taking them out as he moves into an area

Ubisoft Toronto is expanding on the game's stealth elements, but action and shooting are seeing equal attention

High Drama

The Blacklist demo also showcases an increased focus on cinematic storytelling. Ubisoft Toronto is investing big on motion and voice capture techniques, and the dramatic scenes on display at the show were proof of its efforts. An exchange between Sam and a U.S. agent gone rogue popped with tension. Facial close-ups are emotive and detailed. Small hand movements telegraph intentions. All of these moments flow without a break in and out of player-controlled gameplay, and there's no difference in visual quality.

While some fans may be disappointed that Michael Ironside is departing from the iconic role as Sam Fisher, new actor Eric Johnson brings an athleticism and energy to the character that matches well to Blacklist's high octane, pressure cooker vibe. Max Beland credits scenes between Johnson and veteran actress Kate Drummond (the new voice of Grim) for some of the coolest moments in the new game. "We've got those moments where, because we're doing performance capture, they don't need to talk; sometimes they can just look at each other. And then you get everything. And what's cool is we've got that tech now, we can translate it to the game."

Top Secret

Splinter Cell Blacklist made a big splash at the show, but there's lot we have yet to learn about the project. In particular, though Spies versus Mercs is returning, details about the promised cooperative and competitive gameplay modes remain largely under wraps. Blacklist is the first full project to release from Ubisoft's Toronto branch. If our time seeing the game in action is any indication, it will be a studio worth watching; Blacklist is approaching the stealth/action hybrid in thrilling ways, and we can't wait to see more.
» Matt Miller

Want to learn more about Splinter Cell Blacklist? Read our complete interview with creative director Maxime Beland and see exclusive new game screens at gameinformer.com/hot50.

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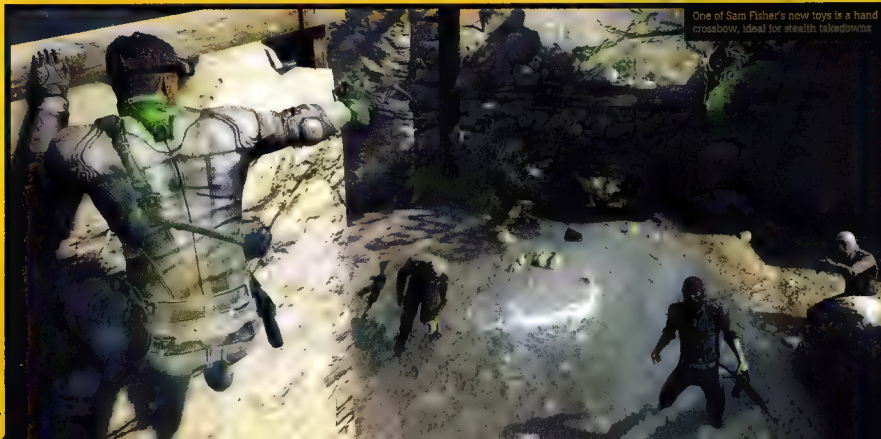
One of Sam Fisher's new toys is a hand crossbow, ideal for stealth takedowns
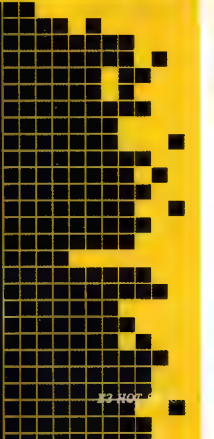
South Park: The Stick of Truth

Obsidian shows off the funniest game of E3

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Role–Playing

Publisher
THQ

Developer
Obsidian

Release
March 5

When we visited Obsidian for our January cover story, we weren't sure what to expect from South Park: The Stick of Truth. Writers Trey Parker and Matt Stone are known to uproot the entire plots of South Park episodes at the last moment, and we didn't know how well these tendencies would translate to game development. Coupled with news regarding layoffs at Obsidian, there was reason for concern when it came to Parker and Stone's first legitimate entry into the medium. Despite a delay that pushed the game into 2013, the duo appeared on stage during Microsoft's press conference and let the audience know that The Stick of Truth is still very much in progress. After seeing the game in action at an after-hours Microsoft event, the progress is reassuring for series fans.

Obsidian's E3 demo begins with the introduction of South Park's new kid. When the child arrives in South Park, his parents' first priority is to "christen" their new living quarters. The father dismisses the player by telling him to go find some friends, before making a speedy trip to the bedroom. When the new kid attempts to enter his new home for the first time, the now-naked father opens the upstairs window, this time screaming, "Go make some friends!"

The new kid can take a hint, and leaves his home to explore the neighborhood. South Park regulars including Stan are battling in fantasy gear, but they don't pay any mind to the town's unknown face. After walking around a bit, the new kid stumbles upon the doorstep of the perpetually friendly Butters. LARPing as a paladin, "Butters the Merciful" informs the new kid that he must visit the wizard if he hopes to join in on the role-playing fun. Unfortunately, the wizard is revealed as the sociopathic Cartman.

Cartman introduces the new kid to his backyard, which he refers to as "The Kingdom." Clyde peddles weapons in the armory, and the diabetic Scott Malkinson manages the stables (which consists of Cartman's cat). Vaguely important relics like the Pool of Vision (a kiddie pool) and the Rock of Insanity (a standard rock) litter the backyard, and Cartman makes it clear that he takes his kingdom seriously.

After showing him the sights, Cartman prompts the new kid for his name, which allows players to enter whatever they wish. No matter what is entered, Cartman responds with "You entered 'Douchebag.' Is this correct?" When the player chooses "No," Cartman ignores the request and lands on Douchebag as the new kid's official title.

Douchebag is granted a wooden weapon known as the Sword of Solace, and Cartman sets him on a quest towards the Kingdom of City Wok for a serving of Kung Pao chicken. Douchebag's first objective is interrupted by an unexpected elf attack on Cartman's kingdom.

As children dressed like elves bully Cartman's friends and urinate in the Pool of Vision, Douchebag sees the perfect opportunity to prove himself. A battle breaks out, and it immediately resembles the timed encounters of Paper Mario and the Mario & Luigi series.
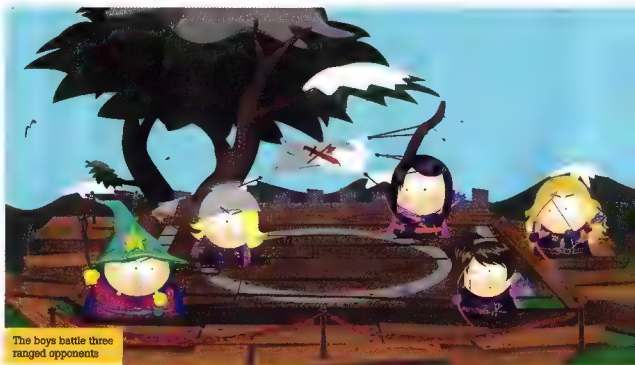

The boys battle three ranged opponents
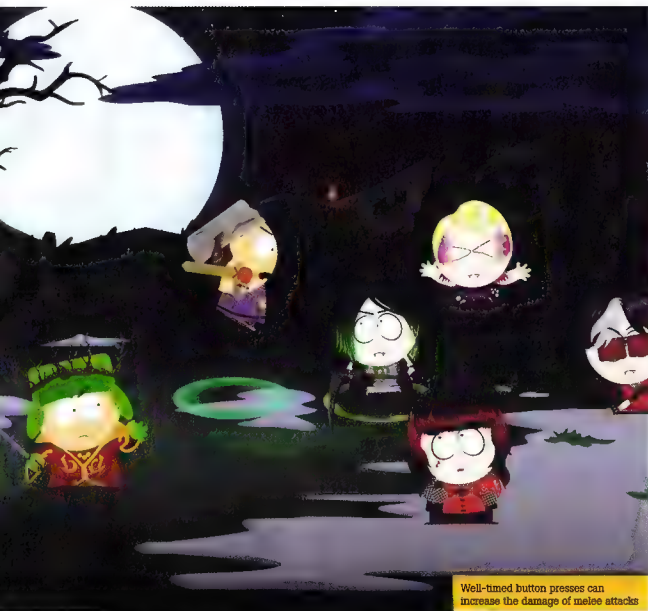
Well-timed button presses can increase the damage of melee attacks

Attacks like the swing of a baseball bat become more powerful if a meter is stopped at the right moment, and special items like a revive taco can be used if one of your allies falls in battle.

Once the elves are taken care of, the demo shifts to a new area. Vampire kids have set up shop in the cemetery, and Cartman and the new kid approach them for a fight. A boss character surrounds himself with lackies, which Cartman promptly takes out with his flame-assisted fart attack. The new kid attacks the stragglers with his Vibroblade sex toy weapon and Dragon's Breath sparkler

attack, which is followed by a summon of Mr. Slave. Once Mr. Garrison's pet is selected, he jumps directly on top of a selected enemy. If you've seen the Paris Hilton episode of the show, you have a decent idea of what follows. The player is tasked with jamming the A button to "get 'em in there," which means exactly what you think it does. Once the enemy is fully enveloped in his new tomb, Mr. Slave sheepishly walks out of frame. A standard RPG end-battle screen pops up, granting the player more XP, gold, and the progression from "Douchebag" to "Butthole."
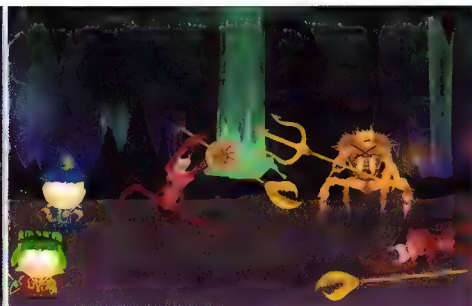
Based on the trailer shown during Microsoft's press conference, plenty of familiar faces will pop up throughout the game. In the two-minute clip, we saw glimpses of the Mongolians, Crab People, the Woodland Critters, a UFO attack, a Godzilla-sized version of Clyde, and a Jesus summon.

South Park: The Stick of Truth's gameplay may not revolutionize the role-playing genre, but its E3 demo kept us laughing. With Parker and Stone putting their full comedic weight behind the project, we expect the final product to be nothing short of hilarious. » Dan Ryckert

Players will explore tons of familiar locales

Resident Evil 6

>> Capcom offers three campaigns
and four-player co-op

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1 or 2-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

Publisher
Capcom

Developer
Capcom

Release
October 2

The next installment in the Resident Evil saga features one of the biggest casts yet. So big, in fact, that Capcom has split the campaign into three separate storylines, each playable from the beginning. I got to spend over an hour plowing through bio-organic weapons and tinkering with the game's new shooter-friendly gameplay during E3 2012. Capcom also divulged the first details on Resident Evil 6's unique implementation of four-player co-op.

I started off the action as Leon S. Kennedy in the small American town of Tall Oaks. The president was scheduled to deliver an anti-bioterrorism speech to the town's population before he and most of its residents were turned into flesh-eating zombies. Leon and his partner Helena's only job was to protect the president, but that duty ended when Leon put a bullet through the commander-in-chief's brain. Now the two are focused on getting out of the government building and searching for answers as a new outbreak begins to spread.

Their slow trek through the dim, creaky building is an example of Resident Evil 6's occasional focus on revisiting classic horror ambience. Booming thunder couples with blinding lightning to startle players and their onscreen counterpart. At one point the storm outside whips so violently that a gale from an open window causes a chandelier to fall and shatter in the middle of a banquet hall. Guttural undead moans echo from unseen locations. Enemies are few and far between in this segment, keeping players tense until the next encounter.

The two agents eventually find a hysterical man hunting for his lost daughter. After offering their help, the man leads the way. The three of them eventually find the freshly bitten young lady. They all decide the parking garage is the best escape route and head for the elevator. My favorite moment from Leon's scenario involves the lights conveniently flickering out on the elevator just as the infected daughter turns on her father. The result is an intense close-quarters scuffle. Leon and Helena's time concludes as the duo desperately blast away at a huge wave of zombies in the parking area.

Jake is Wesker's son

Capcom says the Ustanak is unrelated to Nemesis

Zombies in Resident Evil 6 are more agile and intelligent than the Romero-style walkers, but aren't quite as skilled as the Ganados or Majini from Resident Evil 4 and 5. They leap, lunge, and crawl after the flesh on your bones. Shooting a zombie's legs out will only delay its pursuit and drop the foe from your peripheral vision. I was startled upon being yanked to the ground by a crawling zombie. I used the new roll mechanics to scramble out of the way and line up a headshot.

Rolling around on the ground with zombies is exciting, but the portion of the game I played starring Chris Redfield truly showed off the overhauled controls. Taking place weeks before Leon's ordeal in Tall Oaks, something awful has happened to Chris. The former hero has been drowning his misery in booze and getting

kicked out of bars in Eastern Europe for the past six months. Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance officer Piers Nivens confronts Chris and convinces him to join the fight against bioterror in Lianshang, China.

Fast-forward to a ramshackle rooftop in China. A more sober Chris teams up with Piers to combat the spawn of a new viral strain. The C-virus has created J'avos, bio-organic freaks that start out humanoid and mutate as you deal damage. The clown-masked goons rush the scene toting AK-47s and immediately open fire. J'avos are better shots than any armed foe in Resident Evil history, demanding new tactics.

Players can now take cover against any waist-high structure or convenient corner to avoid incoming fire. Popping out to fire off a few assault rifle rounds feels good alongside the new control's emphasis on fluidity – a nice contrast to the grounded rigidity of Resident Evil 5. Distant foes become blurry when you crouch behind protection – an annoying gimmick I hope gets axed by the final version. Before you gasp in terror at the thought of the Resident Evil series becoming a cover-based shooter (let's pretend Operation Raccoon City didn't happen), keep in mind that the J'avo aren't so handy with their guns once you start blowing off appendages.

Ada Wong appears to be the main antagonist

Leon and Helena are suprised to see Sherry in Resident Evil 6 as we are

J'avos undergo location-specific mutations depending on where you blast them. Shredding their arms off makes them sprout two beefy, bulletproof limbs they use to shrug off bullets and pummel you. Rendering their legs useless causes terrifying, moth-like wings and an insect-toid tail to unfold from within. Gigantic wings carry the upside-down J'avo through the air, its clutched firearm dangling uselessly in hand.

These anatomical mutations force players to flee from cover and face them more directly. I enjoyed pummeling the flying freak with Chris' punishing melee blows, concluding with the BSAA soldier dramatically tearing the J'avo's tail off (Melee attacks are still powerful, but a stamina meter prevents players from spamming too many hits). These mutations, along with the J'avos' ability to grow a super-stretchy arm that can grab players out from behind cover, should keep players on alert at all times.

The J'avo are one of the series' most adaptable, deadly enemies. Thankfully, the overhauled controls make dispatching them more intuitive. Aiming and movement in Resident Evil 6 initially feel much looser than its predecessors. The fluid controls feel more in

line with modern third-person shooters, steering away from the rooted feeling of Resident Evil 5. Moving and shooting is fast, reliable, and a natural fit. I missed the laser sight from most Resident Evil weapons since RE 4, but I eventually acclimated to the new reticle-based aiming. It doesn't feel like any Resident Evil game before it and will take some getting used to, but that's not a bad thing.

I played through the bulk of the demo with a co-op partner. He controlled Piers, Chris' friend and the BSAA's crack-shot sniper. Chris and Piers spent most of the trek through Lianshang shooting J'avos shoulder to shoulder, but like Resident Evil 5's divergent paths, the duo splits up at times. One moment the two are zip-lining across rooftops, the next an RPG blast sends Chris careening toward the pavement below, grasping for scaffolding on the way down. An uncomfortable number of J'avos take aim on Chris as he shimmies helplessly across the scaffolding, legs dangling. It's up to Piers to snipe these enemies as they pop up. Sections like this mix up the gameplay and offer a fun diversion.

Speaking of branching paths, sometimes two sets of characters cross paths in the game. Capcom isn't content with players simply watching these allies join forces in cutscenes; you can engage in four-player co-op sections. If you choose to partake in the optional four-player action, behind-the-scenes matchmaking will pair you and a buddy up with two random strangers. The example we saw had Leon and Helena teaming up with Sherry Birkin and Jake Muller. Leon and Sherry's Raccoon City reunion is cut short by a new boss monster called the Ustanak. This hulking, Nemesis-like abomination is a bio-organic weapon with a mechanized arm and sadistic-looking cage on its back. The four heroes collectively unload on the beast as it snatches at them with its extending arm. Here the new backward dive mechanic works great, allowing Uranak's arm to pass harmlessly above the intended victims while they shoot comfortably from the ground. When the Ustanak successfully grabs his victims, he crams them into

Capcom Talks Multiplayer

Resident Evil 5 implemented a competitive version of the popular Mercenaries mode, and SlantSix's dubious Operation Raccoon City offered a slew of uninspired multiplayer options. However, no numbered Resident Evil game has ever featured a truly fleshed-out competitive multiplayer mode. Resident Evil 6 producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi says the campaigns are the main focus of the game, but adds this:

"We understand that gamers out there enjoy a little player-versus-player action. We understand that it's important to them. While I can't go into any specifics, just know that we understand that it's an important aspect of gaming, so don't worry."

UN staff are being held hostage in the tall building

his torturous backcage if teammates don't intervene quickly enough. These four-player co-op moments are a first for a numbered Resident Evil game, and should give players something to look forward to while playing through the campaigns.

The Ustanak also rears its ugly head throughout Jake and Sherry's entire segment. The action kicks off with a heated chase through a snowy corridor somewhere in the European Republic of Edonia. The camera shifts to face the characters as they sprint away from the charging enemy. Situations like this were usually restricted to quick time events in RE 5, and being able to sprint and vault over objects yourself is a nice change of pace.

The duo eventually tumbles into a condemned warehouse. Chunks of ceiling crumble to the floor as they search every square inch for useful items. A healthy amount of the series' iconic herbs are found among the rubble. Players can once again combine red and green herbs, but this time the fusion produces a handful of health pills that can be consumed with the press of a button. Avoiding inventory menus for health recovery keeps the game flowing nicely. Switching weapons and grenade types with the d-pad is also much snappier than in RE 5. My favorite change to item management is independent loot for each player. Say goodbye to clumsy resource management with your human or AI-controlled robot partner – item drops are no longer shared. That means both players can pick up that box of 9 mm rounds. I spent too much time cursing Sheva in RE 5 as she burned through my resources; RE 6 promises to make playing solo enjoyable.

Jake finds some remote bombs and Sherry discovers a gigantic Magnum before they head for the door in the back of the warehouse. Right on cue, more ceiling collapses and the tremendous Ustanak drops down. This time there's no place to run. The thing is after Jake's blood, but Sherry isn't about to let it get a drop. Sherry takes potshots at the hulking beast with her

high-caliber pistol, staggering it long enough for Jake to place remote bombs. Jake detonates the bombs as the pursuing Ustanak tramples over them. The duo continues the routine and makes short work of the threat. A cutscene shows one of the feeble structure's support pillars buckle loose, crashing toward the ground. A huge chasm opens up beneath Jake, Sherry, and their stalker, concluding my time with Resident Evil 6.

I've been a fan of the series since first stepping foot in that legendary mansion and struggling with the clunky tank controls. I embraced the

dramatic shift toward action with Resident Evil 4, despite the departure of strong horror elements. Resident Evil 6 presents yet another evolution of the series, which may give some fans pause. The integration of snappier controls, increased mobility, and three individual campaigns make this a very different type of Resident Evil, but Capcom's managed to succeed while making drastic changes to the series in the past. » Tim Turi

More intel on the latest bio-terror outbreak is on the way. Check out exclusive Resident Evil 6 screenshots and read an interview with producer Yoshiaki Hirabayashi at gameinformer.com/hot50.

Expect a lot of cheesy one-liners from Jake

Hitman: Absolution

Agent 47 kills with creativity in IO's impressive Hitman reboot

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Square Enix

Developer
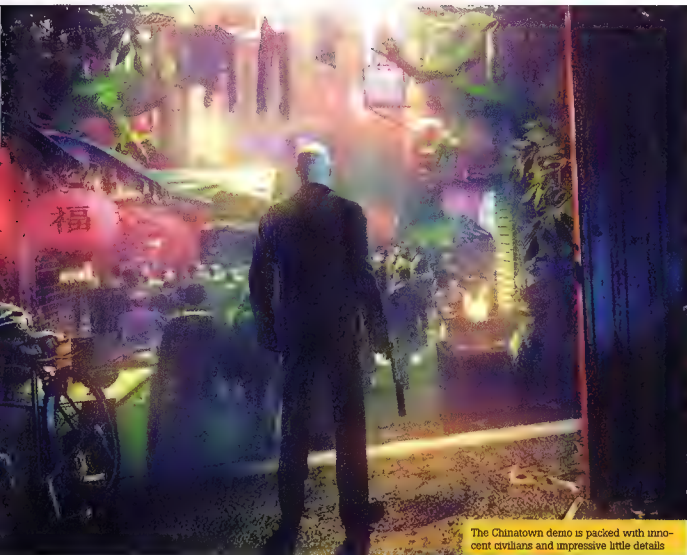IO Interactive

Release
November 20

Don't be distracted by the recent Hitman: Absolution trailer featuring Agent 47 beating on a convent's worth of sexy nuns. IO Interactive shouldn't need to manufacture controversy to get fans excited for the upcoming reboot. Hitman's classic mix of action and stealth gameplay speaks for itself, as evidenced during our hands-on demo.

The quick E3 mission tasks Agent 47 with eliminating the King of Chinatown, a well-dressed drug lord located in a crowded marketplace. It doesn't take long to realize that 47 has learned some new tricks during his six-year hiatus from gaming, which will help him on his new adventure.

His most significant new ability is dubbed Instinct, which causes his target to glow red and secondary threats such as bodyguards and police officers to glow yellow. These silhouettes show up through walls, and trails on the ground reveal enemy patrol routes. These abilities sound heavy-handed, but using Instinct is optional, and it beats staring at triangles on your minimap as you wait for an enemy to walk into your trap.
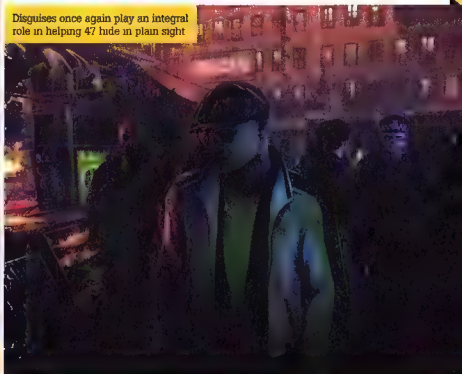
Finding the King isn't the problem, as he's conspicuously standing in a pagoda in the center of the market. Killing him isn't a problem, either; at any point you could simply walk up to the hotheaded kingpin and shoot him with your trademark Silverballers. Killing your target without raising suspicion has always been the challenge of the Hitman series, and hiding in plain sight is 47's specialty. Blending in with a crowd is easy enough, as Chinatown is packed with wandering pedestrians. It's an impressive technical feat, but it also adds up to a lot of potential witnesses.

Later games in the series capitalized on the enjoyment of figuring out elaborate and creative ways to eliminate your target, and the level of Absolution we played offers you even more options for taking down your foe. You could always use the sniper rifle in a nearby apartment for a quick, public assassination, but why not go for something a little more elegant? Like using a poisonous fish from a local food vendor to taint the King's food or cocaine supply. Or planting a bomb underneath his prized ride and luring him into blasting range by setting off the car alarm. Or shooting the rope on the pallet of

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Gears of War: Judgment

Five reasons Epic's prequel looks great

Platform
Xbox 360

Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)

Publisher
Microsoft Studios

Developer
Epic Games /
People Can Fly

Release
2013

We already blew the lid open on Epic Games' prequel in last month's cover story, but we want to remind you why this one's worth getting excited for. » Tim Turi

OverRun Mode

Gears of War 2 introduced the world to wave-based co-op with the first ever horde mode. Gears of War 3 implemented beast mode, letting players attack the defending COGs as the Locust themselves. Judgment combines these two concepts with OverRun Mode, a five-on-five, class-based multiplayer mode. OverRun promises hours of chaotic, round-based fun, whether you like supporting your fellow COGs with stim-grenades as a medic or shredding enemy fortifications as a slithering Serapede.

An Early Look At The War

Judgment is set 15 years before the first Gears of War, with Baird, Cole, and the rest of Kilo squad standing trial for their unorthodox military tactics. The gameplay is delivered as the characters testify, allowing you to relive their harrowing moments while they recount them in the courtroom. This presents an interesting look at the days shortly following the first Locust attacks on E-Day.

Overwhelming Odds

Judgment delivers sadistic difficulty by cranking up the number of onscreen Locust even higher than its predecessors. Dozens of deadly enemies can emerge from underground during a single attack. The increased enemy numbers mean you're going to have to work even harder as a team to survive the early days of the Locust invasion.

Declassified Testimonies

Players can choose whether they want characters to recall specific details of their testimony as they're being told. These new details layer an extra challenge onto the action. For example, a pack of attacking Wretches may become infused with combustible emulsion energy, making the entire encounter more difficult in exchange for rewards Epic isn't ready to divulge.

New Control Scheme

Past Gears of War games required players to clumsily cycle through weapons and grenades using the 360 controller's mushy d-pad. Epic has remapped the controls to be much snappier so players aren't overwhelmed by the more intense gameplay. The Y button is now dedicated to weapon swapping, and grenades have been mapped to a shoulder button for easier access.

The Chinatown demo is packed with inno-
cent civilians and impressive little details

grain sacks hanging auspiciously over him when he stops
to take a leak. Or throwing some gasoline on a flaming
wok as the King walks by, lighting both him and the
unfortunate chef on fire. Or you could act like a profes-
sional and nudge him into an open storm sewer, a fatal
accident no one will know you orchestrated if you time
it just right. You get the idea.

Figuring out the most efficient (or imaginative) kill plays
out like a macabre puzzle. Plenty of challenges, rewards,
and a scoring system that encourages rivalries with your
friends ensure players will revisit each level multiple times
until they've nailed the perfect assassination. After all, 47
is the consummate hitman; killing your target is a given.
Killing with style is what counts. » Jeff Marchiafava

Some of the kill opportunities are a little obvious,
but pulling them off is entertaining nonetheless

Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

Publisher
Sony Computer
Entertainment

Developer
Sony Santa Monica

Release
March 12

Throughout the God of War series, Kratos has single-handedly torn through armies, brought Titans to their knees, and gone toe-to-toe with members of the Greek Pantheon. All the while, Kratos has walked over, manipulated, and used the people around him to get what he wants. Sony Santa Monica game director Todd Papy sees this as a problem for the series.

"The way that God of War III ended, Kratos was an a--hole," Papy says. "He wasn't a very likable character. Whereas in God of War 1 he was ruthless, but there was still a side to him that you could relate to. That was something that I

wanted to get across again, and I felt the best way to do that was through a prequel."

God of War: Ascension takes place before the first God of War, picking up roughly six months after Kratos is manipulated into murdering his wife and child. Papy believes this gives Sony Santa Monica a chance to explore Kratos' humanity and provide more context to his descent into the frothing mass of hate he becomes in later games.

"The whole idea behind the story is how do you undo selling your soul to the devil?" Papy says. "That is the question we are answering

in this story. It's something that has never been explained in any of the games. Obviously, it's not something that you go in and you're like, 'Oh hey, I quit, Ares.' Where does Kratos pick up after he killed his wife and kid? What's his mental state? That's how our story starts."

At this point in his story, Kratos is still enslaved to Ares, but he has already renounced his devotion to the god and began looking for a way to break free of his bonds. Kratos sets off on a journey to hunt down the mythological Furies, a group of female deities who punish anyone who swears a false oath. They are bond-keepers, and

God of War: Ascension

>> The origin of a god killer

"That sword is so unrealistic. Who would use a blade with ridges?"
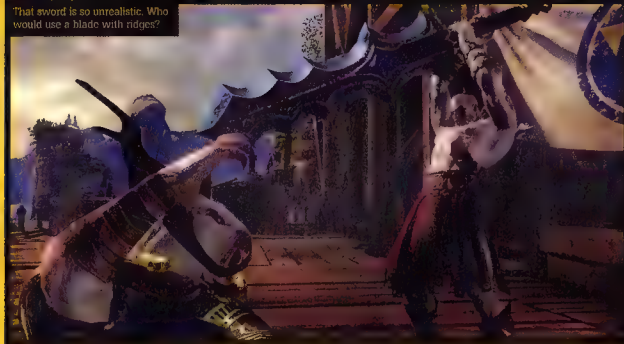
if Kratos can kill them, he can break free of Ares' bondage without consequences.

Creating a God of War prequel also allows Sony Santa Monica to imagine new challenges for Kratos. Battles that might not have given the Greek warrior pause in the later games will feel much more epic this time around and leave Kratos with lasting scars. Sony Santa Monica may be looking into the past for this story, but as it tinkers with the series' underlying combat, puzzles, and world traversal systems, it also hopes to create a God of War game that feels fresh. Papy walked us through Ascension's notable improvements.

World Weapons

Kratos' iconic Blades of Chaos are an integral part of his identity. Players have enjoyed using these weapons so much that it's been hard for the developer to craft new weapons on par with Kratos' chained blades. Instead of giving

Kratos a handful of alternate main weapons, Sony Santa Monica has decided to give him access to an array of weapons scattered across the environment.

Throughout his journey, Kratos can pick up a variety of weapons from the ground or stuck into fallen foes. These weapons act as supplements to the Blades of Chaos. He can carry them around the world and use them in battle until he finds another weapon that catches his fancy.

Kratos can also stun his opponents by throwing these weapons at them. "You'll be able to weaponize certain characters," Papy explains. "For example, when you throw a sword at the satyr captain, it stuns him, and he gets a gold halo over his head. You can run up to him, grab him, and then spin him around almost like a hammer toss. It might hit other guys, which would cause the satyrs to drop their weapons – because you can knock their weapons out of their hands and then they'll fight bare-handed."

A lot of enemies designs for Ascension seem based on animals

See that guy in the back watching everyone fight? What a perv

Tethering

The God of War series has experimented with grappling in the past, but Ascension's new tethering system takes it to a whole new level. Kratos can harpoon certain enemies with his Blades of Chaos and then drag them across the battlefield or swing them into other enemies like a wrecking ball.

"In the past we allowed you to pull an enemy to you or even get yourself closer to an enemy as a combo starter," Papy says. "Tethering is now a way to start combos but it's also a transition point. I can tether into someone and I can grab them and continue to wail on a big guy while I have him tethered, and when I want to, I can send him flying into a group of

attackers. Basically, the blade is in his gut and he's your puppet."

The Life Cycle

Kratos has always gained new abilities from fallen foes, such as the Medusa's Head, which was used to petrify enemies. In Ascension, Kratos gains a power called the Life Cycle from one of the bosses. This item disperses an aura of green energy that reverts environmental objects to a previous time state.

For example, at one point in the game, Kratos approaches a dock just before it explodes in a shower of kindling. Kratos then uses the Life Cycle power on the debris to rewind it. However, instead of taking the dock all the way back to

its original state, Kratos chooses to freeze the bits of wood halfway to completion and then use these wooden planks – frozen in mid-air – as platforms to climb up to a previously inaccessible ledge.

This Life Cycle power can also be used in combat. "If somebody is coming at you and you're feeling surrounded, then you can pop one of those off and kind of free yourself to figure out how you want to get back into the fight," Papy says. "For example, if you have an elephantaur and a bunch of grunts around you, you could put the elephantaur in stasis and clear out some of the grunts, or you could choose to put the grunts into stasis so you could focus on that elephantaur."

Navigation

Kratos has always been able to climb up walls and swing across ceilings, but in previous games this was a fairly straightforward palette cleanser designed to break up the action. "In the past, we called it the freeway on the wall," Papy says. "To me, it just didn't really fit into the environment that well. So we've gone toward a point-to-point navigation system very similar to Assassin's Creed or Uncharted."

The navigation sequences in Ascension still break up the game's intense action, but now they should be a more fluid experience. Papy says they have other navigation improvements that they're not ready to show off yet, but it will be nice to see a more organic design to the game's platforming moments instead of watching Kratos climb up a series of specially textured walls.

Beating the Odds

The God of War series is stuck in a battle of one-upmanship; each entry tries to be more spectacular than the last. At the same time, the series is already so refined that some studios might crack under the pressure of trying to live up to expectations. Sony Santa Monica isn't ready to implode.

"While making games, there are always those moments where you think 'aww s--- we should have done this, and it would have made the game much better,'" Papy says. "In God of War 1 we wanted to do Icarus wings. We got to do that in 2. We wished we could have fleshed out the Titans more in God of War 2, but we were able to do that in 3. We always have those kinds of things in our back pocket. I think the big challenge for us in this game is making sure that the multiplayer feels like God of War, but we have other elements in the single-player story that are equally as big."

Meeting fan expectations and exceeding the series' standards sounds like a Herculean task, but if anyone can square up against a tough challenge, smash its skull over a rock, and drop-kick it off a cliff, it's Kratos. · Ben Reeves

Go to gameinformer.com/hot50 for more info from game director Todd Papy and a closer look at some of the game's concept art

True fact: Elephants hate dock workers

Beyond: Two Souls

Quantic Dream goes on a spiritual journey

Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Sony Computer
Entertainment

Developer
Quantic Dream

Release
2013

Different colored auras denote some of the actions
you can perform on those people or objects

Before E3, rumors circulated that Heavy Rain developer Quantic Dream would announce its latest PlayStation 3 project. Many believed it would be tied to the stirring Kara demo that studio founder David Cage showed off at GDC, but no one was prepared for what the developer had in store for them with Beyond: Two Souls.

Beyond merges the quick-time event driven gameplay and emphasis on story and characters of Heavy Rain with an intriguing action component. The game tells the story of Jodie Holmes (played by Ellen Page) and her life-long struggle to deal with her connection with a mysterious spirit she calls Eiden (Jodie pronounces it "Eye-den," but Cage refused to clarify how it is spelled). Beyond tracks Jodie at various stages throughout a 15-year period, with the choices that you make in one part of her life echoing in the others.

Eiden is always with her, but the relationship between the two is not simple. Jodie communicates with Eiden, but the spirit has a mind of its own. Players control Eiden at specific points, and in the E3 demo in particular, the spirit is an integral part of Jodie's survival. At the beginning of this sequence, Jodie is a young woman on the run from the police aboard a train. Although

we don't know what events led her to this unfortunate circumstance, it's clear that her connection with Eiden has prevented her from living a normal life.

Players control Eiden in specific sequences, and the spirit can travel a fixed distance from Jodie and even phase through solid objects (which is helpful when performing recon). More importantly, players can manipulate objects in the environment with Eiden. This ranges from the whimsical (waking up sleeping passengers or knocking over objects) to the life-saving (possessing a SWAT sniper about to shoot Jodie and taking out soldiers around you). When players aren't embodying Eiden, they're controlling Jodie, who navigates and manipulates the environment via free roaming, QTEs, and the occasional

intervention by Eiden.

This is amply demonstrated when the police stop the train to search for Jodie. A series of QTEs unravel as she flees from the cops, throwing obstacles at the chasing police, frantically opening train car doors, and grappling with officers on top of the speeding train. Twice Jodie calls for Eiden's help, and the spirit resolves the conflict without player control: It opens a hatch enabling Jodie to scramble out onto the roof of the train, and later envelopes Jodie in a protective force field as she leaps from the train.

Jodie's subsequent scamper through a dark woods with the police and their dogs in hot pursuit reveals that Beyond is a graphically stunning game. The detail of the forest is exquisite, and the lighting and shadow play on

the foliage as police flashlights and a roving helicopter above scan for Jodie is evocative. Jodie's facial expressions also lend an emotional impact to the game. Cage says he specifically wrote the part for and recruited Ellen Page, knowing that only a grade-A motion capture and vocal performance would suffice.

After making it through the forest and into a town, Jodie is once again surrounded by hostile forces, only this time it's a SWAT team that has come to town to supersede the local sheriff office's parochial concerns. Naturally, the SWAT team brings in the big guns, including snipers, armored cars, and numerous foot soldiers. They corner Jodie on the street, and what follows is one of the more intriguing parts of the demo.

While cornered, players gain control of Eiden. From here, players have several choices in how to allow Jodie to escape. You could blow out lights to confuse the soldiers, blast cars, choke SWAT members, or possess an enemy. This last option is particularly handy, as it allows Eiden to crash a patrolling helicopter, make a soldier shoot his squad mates, send an armored car careening into a building, and throw a grenade toward a nearby gas station to create an explosion.

Cage says that in a setting like this where the players have several options, the AI enemies will react realistically to your actions, which should make events seem fluid and unpredictable. It's unknown how much control the player has when possessing other characters and to what extent Eiden can manipulate each situation, but Cage says that players will lose control of Eiden if the person it is controlling is physically touched. NPCs also become suspicious of the possessed, as their eyes are noticeably glazed over.

It remains to be seen how Jodie's life on the run influences the rest of her life in Beyond, but once again developer Quantic Dream has captivated us with its commitment to telling interesting stories and presenting intriguing gameplay choices. » **Matthew Kato**

Some situations will use the familiar QTEs from Heavy Rain

Quantic Dream's David Cage says that he wrote the game with Ellen Page in mind, and later on enticed her to join the project

Quantic Dream promises different ways to resolve situations

New Super Mario Bros. U

The Mushroom Kingdom, now in HD

Platform
Wii U

Style
1 to 4-Player
Platforming

Publisher
Nintendo

Developer
Nintendo

Release
Holiday

Originally introduced last year as New Super Mario Bros. Mii, Nintendo has changed the name to New Super Mario Bros. U. It looks to be another fantastic entry in the rejuvenated 2D Mario lineage.

The Wii U GamePad's unique applications aren't entirely ignored, but the game is clearly meant to play like a classic 2D Mario title. Like the massively successful New Super Mario Bros. Wii, it allows up to four players to team up on a Goomba-stomping adventure. The art style looks similar to the rest of the New Super Mario Bros. series, but it's nice to see the iconic characters and environments in HD for the first time.

During the three stages I played, I didn't see anything particularly unexpected for a Mario game. As always, it centers on stomping enemies, grabbing coins, and collecting power-ups. One such power-up is the brand new flying squirrel suit, which grants its user the ability to slowly and safely glide through the air. A shake of the controller causes an updraft, which puts previously inaccessible areas within reach. It feels like a mix between Super Mario Bros. 3's raccoon tail and Super Mario World's cape, and it fits right in with the feel of the series.

Since you and your friends can play the game with four Wii remotes, it almost feels like a direct sequel to New Super Mario Bros. Wii. However, the Wii U GamePad can be brought into the equation if you feel like mixing things up. One player can use the GamePad in assist mode, which allows him or her to create platforms by tapping the screen. These can help other players collect hard-to-reach star coins or cross difficult gaps, and they turn into coin blocks when tapped twice. The GamePad player can add up to five blocks onscreen at once, although they all disappear after a matter of seconds. The GamePad can also be used to control a regular character in a traditional fashion.

New Super Mario Bros. U looks to maintain the series' high bar of quality by sticking closely to the gameplay that made it a phenomenon in the first place. I'm sure Nintendo is including some innovative tweaks to the formula in Mario's forthcoming 3D outing on Wii U, but for now it seems we can look forward to more of the fantastic 2D platforming we've become accustomed to. » Dan Ryckert

SimCity

Maxis breaks ground on a new project

Platform
PC

Style
1-Player Simulation
(Multiplayer TBA)

Publisher
Electronic Arts

Developer
Maxis Emeryville

Release
February

SimCity has been out of the limelight for a while, but the E3 demo signaled that it's on track to come back in a major way. By blending accessibility with plenty of depth, the city builder looks to attract both newcomers and faithful fans. We spoke with lead producer Kip Katsarelis for more details. » Bryan Vore

What can you tell us about the new multiplayer mode?
Multiplayer is a key focus of SimCity, and players are part of the SimCity world. Everything you do at your city level and your region level bubbles up, and you're all connected through leaderboards, through global markets, and through challenges that you can compete in. In SimCity, cities can specialize. So there are going to be several archetypes of cities you can build.

Are these archetypes something you select at the outset, or do they arise out of the way that you play your city?
We're definitely going to surface those city types to players up front. You're going to be able to pick your path as you play along. Some of it's determined by your starting city. There's the tourist city, which is going to be really focused on bringing tourists into your city. The other city we're showing is really focused on harvesting coal and resource gain. It's going to look different, play different – [it's about] building coal mines, and either selling that coal on the global market, trading it with other players, or turning it into manufactured goods. You'll be able to smelt it into metals or use it in coal plants.

These different city types can work together to build larger works?
The cities are all situated in a region, so think of it as a map, and there's going to be some number of cities within a map. We'll have some that are small, two or three city maps with a single great works site where players can choose which great work to build. They'll have leaderboards, so the coal player has their own leaderboards, missions, and achievements. Playing alone, you're only going to get to a certain level. Your coal business and your city are only going to be so successful. Working on these great works together, that's going to put you into the upper echelon of those cities and boost you. An international airport, for example, will allow the coal player to ship goods into and out of their city. For the tourist cities, without it, you can only get so many tourists into your region. Even though you've got your sports stadium all set up, your public transportation networks set up to funnel the tourists in, but you're going to need that international airport to really pull in the tourists.

Star Wars: 1313

An impressive placeholder announcement

I n the book *Boba Fett: Maze of Deception*, Boba Fett adopts the alias CT-1313 in an undercity of the planet Aargau. At this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, LucasArts pulled the curtain away from its latest project, Star Wars: 1313, a game set within the seedy underground of Coruscant on level 1313. Who is the game's protagonist? LucasArts isn't willing to say just yet, but the game's name, and LucasArts confirming that "players will take on the role of a lethal bounty hunter" point toward a certain bounty hunter with a ding in his helmet stepping into the role.

The characters featured in the demo – a snarky 20-something with serious agitation problems, and a grizzled bounty hunter who loves to spit out spiteful one-liners – are just placeholder, used solely to show off the development team's full-body performance capture and facial-recognition technologies, both of which were most recently used by Industrial Light & Magic to capture The Hulk in *The Avengers*. Almost every nuance in an actor's performance is translated, even little details like lips sticking together at the corners for a split second as the mouth opens. The visuals looked good…almost too good for this generation.

LucasArts representatives wouldn't say whether or not the game was in development for current- or next-generation machines, but did confirm that the demo was running on a high-end PC using a heavily modified version of Epic's Unreal 3 engine. This isn't the first time LucasArts has shown off impressive technology at E3. The company's Digital Molecular Matter demonstrations were fantastic, yet when inserted into The Force Unleashed games, became faint shadows of what was promised from the outset.

Star Wars: 1313's demo actually appears to be a game, however – a game many E3 attendees jokingly called "Uncharted in Space." The team is drawing obvious inspiration from Naughty Dog's famed adventure series to deliver a thrilling ride for the unnamed bounty hunter. The demo begins with a ship on the sun-soaked surface of Coruscant descending into a vast tunnel that seems to have no end. The tunnel almost appears to be a skyscraper turned inside out, brimming with technology and lit windows along its walls. Inside the vessel, a dangerous piece

of cargo is being transported by the two bounty hunters. The cargo of note is a container holding a captive, an unidentifiable alien who makes a dash for freedom, but is quickly contained again. As the vessel descends deeper into Coruscant's bowels, another ship enters the picture from above, moving silently into attack position.

The bounty hunters aren't aware of their soon-to-be assailants, but realize that something isn't right. They draw their blasters and approach the cargo container. The older of the bounty hunters makes a suggestion, "Let's che–." An explosion rockets through the cargo hold. The bounty hunters and cargo containers are sent flying. The younger bounty hunter rolls on the ground with ringing in his ears. As he tries to gather himself, a robot emerges from the smoke and grabs the container with the prisoner, dragging it slowly on the ground as troopers break off from behind him to provide cover fire. The two bounty hunters fight back.

This is where gameplay starts. Much like the Uncharted games, the story sequence bleeds seamlessly into action. The younger bounty hunter (controlled by a LucasArts representative) ducks behind a cargo container for cover. After firing one blind shot, he rises to dispatch a foe with a flurry of shots. Another blind-fire shot sends a second assailant into cover. The bounty hunter sprints to his location and lifts him over a container, finishing him off with a quick snap of the neck. Just when it seems the battle has ended, another trooper leaps off of the second

ship through the breached hole, and is quickly jettisoned from whence he came via an alternate-fire concussion blast.

With their ship plummeting further into Coruscant's depths, the older bounty hunter levels the playing field by throwing an enemy and a thermal detonator into an escape pod that he launches directly into the enemy ship. It looks to be in worse shape than their ship, but the bounty hunters decide to board it by leaping onto its burning exterior. An explosion sends the young bounty hunter flying back to a wing. As he tries to scale it, pieces of metal rip off in his hands. He's tossed around like a ragdoll in wind. This sequence brought back a flood of memories of an injured Nathan Drake scaling a train dangling off of a cliff. This is also where the demo ends. It's a quick snapshot of a game, but an impressive one that got everyone at E3 talking.

We don't know who the game's protagonist is. We don't know what systems it's in development for. We don't know when it's coming out. The one thing we do know is that this is a different Star Wars than we've seen before – free of Jedi and the Force. LucasArts also adds that Star Wars: 1313 is the first "mature" Star Wars game. This doesn't necessarily mean we'll be showered in blood and guts, but rather this is a project that allows LucasArts to explore "darker themes" in the Star Wars universe. Darker themes suited for a bounty hunter. » **Andrew Reiner**

> **Platform**
> TBA
>
> **Style**
> TBA
>
> **Publisher**
> LucasArts
>
> **Developer**
> LucasArts
>
> **Release**
> TBA

None of the characters featured in this demo (or these screenshots) are the main protagonist. LucasArts hasn't announced who this character is yet. The "1313" seems to imply it will be Boba Fett, as he once used the alias "CT-1313"
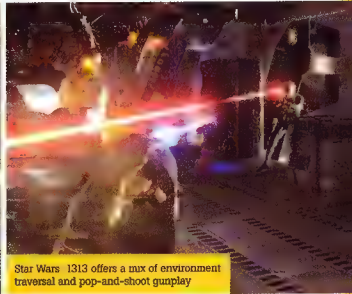
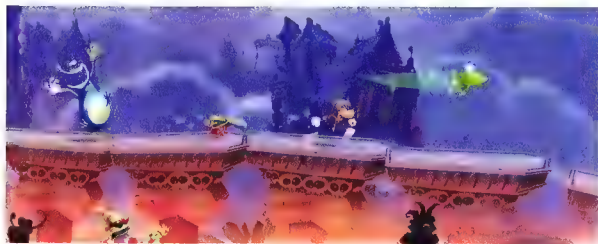Star Wars 1313 offers a mix of environment traversal and pop-and-shoot gunplay

Rayman Legends

Rayman showcases the Wii U controller's potential

The smiley floating green guy is Murphy, and he is controlled by the player with the GamePad

Platform
Wii U (Additional TBA)

Style
1 to 4–Player Platforming

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft Montpellier

Release
TBA

We know Rayman Legends has the same gorgeous animation and visuals of last year's excellent Rayman Origins, but its major selling point is a new cooperative mode built specifically for the Wii U that allows a second player to participate by using the touch-screen on the GamePad.

During the E3 demo I never controlled Rayman directly, but I still had fun playing a secondary role. I used the Wii U GamePad to cut through grass to expose new areas, create platforms by cutting ropes, pull up walls for Rayman to bounce off, and touch Lums to increase their value. Almost everything in the level responds to your touch in some way.

I focused entirely on the tablet in my hands,

while the player controlling Rayman concentrated on the action on screen. The only occasions when I had to look up at the television were two scenarios where I manipulated rotating platforms using the Wii U GamePad tilt functionality. These segments were fun, but the real highlight was the rhythm game/platforming hybrid sequence.

As the player controlling Rayman moves through a high-speed platforming sequence, the tablet player tags along in an Elite Beat Agents-style minigame, tapping and swiping on elements of the environment to create platforms or remove obstacles in time with the music. Occasionally, guitar-playing grannies on flying surfboards fly by for the tablet player to poke into oblivion. When you miss a prompt

to remove an obstacle, Rayman can knock it down himself, but at the expense of losing precious seconds – which you know is a big deal if you've played any of the treasure-chest-chasing levels in Rayman Origins.

Rayman Legends may have virtually identical visuals to Rayman Origins (we're not complaining; the game looked phenomenal), but it is a brand new game. Its interesting blend of co-op, platforming, and rhythm make it the Wii U experience I am most excited about. Platforming fans can enjoy another great Rayman romp, and more casual fans intimidated by the challenging jumping sequences can instead participate by taking control of the easy-to-use GamePvad. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Devil May Cry

Shining a light on DMC's demonic underworld

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

Style
1–Player Action

Publisher
Capcom

Developer
Ninja Theory

Release
January 15

A secret order of demons quietly controls our society. They watch from the sidelines, manipulating our media with invisible strings and b rainwashing large portions of the population through consumer goods. During Devil May Cry's E3 demo, we watched Dante take the fight to the demons' doorstep as he barged through the entrance of a nightclub owned by a demon named Lilith.

As soon as Dante enters Lilith's club, the demoness yanks Dante into Limbo – the ether that exists between our world and the demon realm. It is a dimension of sharp edges and shadowy figures, and Dante's enemies are able to terraform Limbo's environment in ways that endanger Dante.

"Lilith is testing Dante's abilities and kind of sizing him up," says Tameem Antoniades, chief designer at Ninja Theory. "She's doing that by putting him through a series of game-show-like challenges that get harder as Dante moves deeper into Limbo."

Fortunately, Dante has a few new tools that help him survive. Since Dante is half-demon and half-angel, he has access to both demonic and angelic weapons. Each weapon performs differently in combat. The demonic axe we played with is powerful and knocks enemies back with a sickening crunch, while Dante's angelic scythe is fast and a great option when working through crowds of enemies.

While Dante's basic sword is a great, balanced

weapon, some foes will only be vulnerable to either demonic or angelic attacks, and players will have to switch between these three weapons while juggling their foes through the air if they want to become the most effective demon hunter.

Dante also has a demon pull attack that lets him yank enemies toward him or pull out sections of the environment to create platforms, while Dante's new angelic lift ability allows him to zip towards enemies or objects in the environment. It will take some time to master all of Dante's combat tools, but once you get the hang of switching between these angel and demon states, DMC's combat feels fast and rewarding.

Inside one of Lilith's challenge rooms, Dante battles a gang of undead across a flashing disco floor. When the tiles flash red, Dante must switch over to his demonic powers, but when they're blue, he needs to tap into his angelic side. If Dante fails to switch over in time, he takes extra damage from the floor. This sounds simple enough, but the sequence is designed to force

players into different playstyles, and tracking the floor during heated combat sequences requires intense concentration.

"DMC 1 pretty much invented the genre," says Antoniades, "and we wanted to bring back that essence of freedom and speed, so that when you finish playing this game other games would feel like molasses."

It's an ambitious goal, but DMC's action already moves at a lightning clip, and we quickly fell in love with the game's bombastic combat. Let's hope the January release also moves fast, because our taste of the title at E3 has left us hungry for the finished product. » **Ben Reeves**

The Cave

Two adventure game legends reunite to great effect

Tim Schafer and Ron Gilbert are responsible for creating incredible adventure games, from Maniac Mansion to The Secret of Monkey Island. Lucky for us, Gilbert is developing his new game, The Cave, at Schafer's Double Fine studios. Not to be confused with the developer's famous Kickstarter project, The Cave is a quirky new tale of seven adventurers searching for something important in a sentient, talking cave. The downloadable game combines 2D platforming and exploration, expressive and colorful visuals, and goofy puzzles that could only come from a team led by Ron Gilbert.

The game's stars include a monk seeking his master, a scientist hoping to help the world, a love-hungry hillbilly, a set of spooky twins searching for their parents, a knight hunting for a blade, and a time traveler questing to undo a mistake one million years in the making. Players select three characters to form their ragtag crew, and Gilbert encourages folks to play through the game multiple times to see what each member of the cast has to offer. Each character has a unique ability that is necessary to solve certain

puzzles, such as the knight's invulnerable shield and the hillbilly's ability to breathe underwater indefinitely. In one instance, the knight absorbs a dragon's fiery breath with his shield, allowing the scientist to sneak up from behind and steal a piece of gold.

Much like Trine or The Lost Vikings, players switch between the three characters at will to solve environmental puzzles. The presentation I saw involved the hillbilly, knight, and scientist trying to lure a dragon under a crane. After much humorous trial and error, the hillbilly gets in position at the controls of a claw machine, the knight readies himself at an attention-grabbing bell, and the scientist grabs a hot dog from a vending machine. Once all the pieces are in place, the knight lures the dragon towards the hot dog by ringing the bell, which brings it just underneath the claw machine, allowing the hillbilly to snatch up the monster and clear the way. Double Fine's wacky imagination is in full effect, and the results are hilarious.

Point-and-click adventure games haven't aged incredibly well, so The Cave implements new

elements that make it more palatable to modern gamers. Instead of selecting your characters' destinations and waiting as they walk across the screen, The Cave allows you to take direct control. Light platforming elements make traversing the vast cave more rewarding, though difficult jumps aren't part of the equation. Each death only sets the character back to a few seconds before they died; The Cave wants its visitors to reach their goals.

Multiplayer is also implemented into The Cave, allowing up to three players to search the mysterious caverns together locally. We didn't see the co-op in action, but it sounds like a good way to hammer out tough puzzles with friends.

The Cave reminds me of a colorful, humorous mash-up of The Lost Vikings and Limbo. Like Limbo, players carefully examine their surroundings in order to solve puzzles without fretting about a finite reserve of lives. Like The Lost Vikings, the unique talents of three characters are used to accomplish the often-zany tasks. » Tim Turi

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1 to 3-Player Adventure

Publisher
Sega

Developer
Double Fine

Release
2013
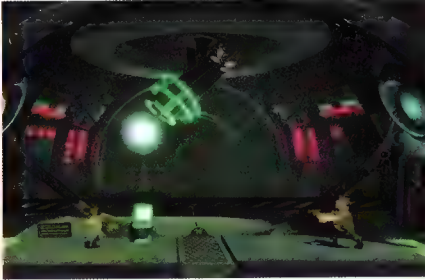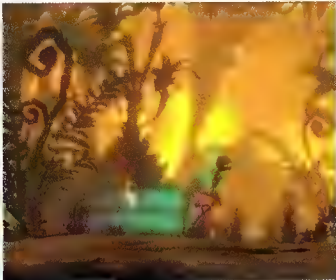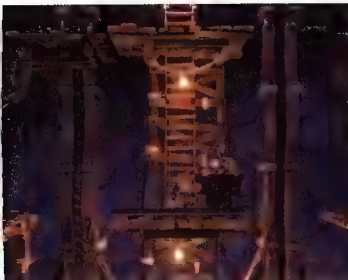
Metro: Last Light

Standing out from E3's avalanche of shooters

In an E3 filled with new shooter trailers, it was refreshing to see 4A Games' "bid to combat shooter fatigue" amongst the pack. The developer's global brand manager Mark Madsen used that phrase to describe Metro: Last Light at the beginning of his presentation, and the demo backed up his claim of presenting a different breed of FPS.

As they did in Metro 2033, players assume the role of Artyom as he struggles to survive amid the destruction of Eastern Europe. In this radioactive environment, he's forced to don a mask and constantly replace its air filter. Artyom's watch was always visible in the demo I saw, and it counts down the quickly draining air supply.

Air filters aren't the only thing you need to keep tabs on. Your head-mounted light needs to be manually cranked on a regular basis. Your mask will frequently be covered with debris and blood, and you need to wipe it off with a dedicated button. If your mask cracks too much, you need to find another. Staying alive takes more than firepower.

The E3 demo saw Artyom exploring the ravaged remains of a European city. Radioactive rain falls as he scavenges. At one point, he steps into the plane's wreckage to find a cabin full of skeletons. Artyom makes his way to the cockpit, which triggers a flashback. Two pilots are chatting when an unknown disturbance suddenly shuts down the plane's engine. As the plane plummets through the clouds, the pilots panic in an attempt to figure out how to prevent the imminent crash. Breaking through the clouds, a red sky littered with mushroom clouds is revealed before the plane impacts the ground.

Artyom exits the plane, ending the flashback sequence. A flying demon swoops down and picks him up, slashing at his face before losing its grip and dropping the protagonist to the ground. Before Artyom knows it, he's assaulted by a pack of the werewolf-like creatures. In an attempt to find shelter, he sprints down a set of stairs to a subway station. There, fellow survivors fire flamethrowers at the creatures as a giant metal door closes shut. As the demo comes to an end, the survivors are temporarily safe.

While the demo made Metro: Last Night appear very linear, it was intense to watch even without having my hands on the controls. With survival horror elements and a haunting post-apocalyptic setting, this follow-up to Metro 2033 aims to affect gamers' heart rates just as much as their trigger fingers. » **Dan Ryckert**

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Shooter

Publisher
THQ

Developer
4A Games

Release
2013

FIFA 13

Adding drama and unpredictability to the pitch

FIFA 12, our 2011 sports game of the year, won us over with precision dribbling that gave you more control in tight spaces and the addition of physical interactions like jostling between players fighting for possession. To take its premier sports franchise to the next level, EA Canada wants to inject FIFA 13 with more unpredictability and a new level of AI intelligence.

This year your AI-controlled teammates will analyze the space around them to make smarter runs and – more importantly – act with intent. This should give you more support in the final third of the pitch and open up more passing channels. EA claims its players can now think two plays ahead, putting themselves in advantageous positions. In my hands-on time with the game, the renewed sense of offensive responsibility was evident, as backs and wingers moved more quickly to give my center midfielder attacking options. Hopefully this will also cure the lackadaisical nature of players who fail to pounce on free balls in the goal box when it deflects their way.

EA also made another pass on the dribbling system to give you 360-degree control, but the most important new addition to the possession system is a first-touch mechanic that creates more unpredictability when trapping the ball. Users must now consider how they want to receive the ball; trying to run through an aerial pass instead of easing up to trap the ball with a degree of control could cost you possession. Depriving every player of perfect touch slows down the overall pace of the gameplay, and the mis-touches create unexpected opportunities (or nightmare scenarios) on both sides of the pitch.

FIFA 13's improvements also extend to improved physics, off-the-ball battles, new tactical free kicks, and a deeper EA Sports Football Club experience that allows you to spend your XP to unlock things like throwback kits for your favorite clubs. Like its cover athlete Lionel Messi, FIFA looks to be at the top of its game. » **Matt Bertz**

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

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

Publisher
EA Sports

Developer
EA Canada

Release
Fall

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

Raiden is reborn (again)

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Konami

Developer
Platinum Games

Release
Early 2013

Metal Gear's Raiden has been pulled from the brink of death numerous times, but his latest return might be his greatest resurrection yet. Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima and Kojima Productions abandoned the project before Konami handed the development to Bayonetta developer Platinum Games. The katana slicing mechanic – which was all the project was initially – has been retained, and the demo I played at E3 proved that Revengeance is no one-trick pony.

I don't know if the demo was taken directly from the game or if it was constructed just for E3, but it clearly demonstrated variety. The demo opens with a tutorial sequence involving stationary objects and cyborg enemies, whom I dispatch using a variety of slicing techniques. Standard X/Y button presses cut up foes in a third-person camera, while holding the left trigger and using the right analog zooms the camera in over Raiden's shoulder, slows down time, and initiates blade mode.

Blade mode isn't just a stylistic way to tear through enemies; it allows you to perform precise strikes via colored, rotating planes that show the path of the blade. This can be crucial when you're trying to slice a specific body part, or in the case of the demo, avoid hitting innocent people held as human shields. While in blade mode you can also perform gruesome contextual kills when prompted to press a specific button, such as the spine-ripping Zandatsu finishers.

Whether using the face buttons or in blade mode (which expends rechargeable energy), Raiden's katana feels fluid and responsive. Running around the ruined environment, I agilely use both modes, although I'm occasionally disorientated when switching among multiple targets (I'm not sure if the game has an enemy lock-on for the third-person camera). I'm also curious whether Raiden can defend when in blade mode.

Even when Raiden's playing defense, he's on the attack. The demo's miniboss battle against a Gekko proves that even the cyborg ninja can meet his match. The Gekko is a thrilling foe, not only because it's one of the best creations in the Metal Gear universe, but because the beast unleashes a variety of attacks. Blocking, dodging, and counter-attacking takes quick instincts, and it's fun to get the timing right and see Raiden hold back the towering Gekko's powerful foot stomp.

After defeating the Gekko and using Raiden's ninja dash to evade a missile salvo from a helicopter overhead (you can also use it to deflect oncoming bullets), I enter a ruined temple in a clearing that serves as the staging ground for the battle against the vehicle. Two stashes of homing missiles enable me to punish the helicopter, but my finishing move is the real fun. After depleting the helicopter's health bar, it fires a last-gasp barrage of missiles. Using the ninja dash, I jump and run up them as they approach. Landing on the cockpit, I slice the fuselage of the chopper into pieces.

I'm curious to see how Revengeance's combat evolves and what other gameplay mechanics or situations Raiden will encounter. Perhaps the demo itself holds a clue to the rest of the game – it teasingly ends with a glimpse of Raiden facing off against a giant Metal Gear.

» Matthew Kato

Far Cry 3

Losing your mind in the jungle

Since its inception, Far Cry 3 has been all about insanity and how it can affect you. Far Cry 3's showing at this year's E3 gave us a glimpse into how crazy the game can get, and also let us get our hands on the smooth gunplay.

The demo begins with a new female character seducing you, doing a very good job of convincing you that you will be the one to kill Vaas, her insane brother. You turn to find an entire army of shirtless tattooed soldiers chanting at you, encouraging you to go after Vaas.

The camera fades to black, and I find myself in the jungle with a machete and a bow and arrow. I dive off a large cliff and make my way toward a man dumping a dead body off of a dock. As I look around underwater, I see all kinds of sea animals in the clear blue water, including a shark. After stealth killing the man on the dock and pulling him into the water, I make my way toward Vaas' headquarters, making silent work of anyone I come across in the jungle.

Once Vaas knows I am in his base, all hell breaks loose. I throw a grenade at two soldiers taking cover behind a jeep, blowing up the vehicle and effectively ruining their day. As I sprint through a large building that's doors are quickly closing, Vaas starts yelling at me over the loud speaker. I'm inside and there are TV screens everywhere, some with Vaas' screaming face, others with strange words and propaganda.

Vaas suddenly appears, stabbing me in the chest before I can react, which sends me into a bizarre hallucinogenic-fueled sequence where I find myself walking across a pathway of televisions displaying nothing but snow. It is strange, but absolutely absorbing.

Far Cry 3's setting and gunplay look and feel great, but the biggest reason I'm excited to play the full game is to learn more about Vaas. The man has a level of insanity and charisma that rivals Batman's Joker, and I'm eager to see what he has in store for us. » Kyle Hilliard

> **Platform**
> PlayStation 3
> Xbox 360 • PC
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> **Style**
> 1-Player Shooter
> (Multiplayer TBA)
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> **Publisher**
> Ubisoft
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> **Developer**
> Ubisoft Montreal/
> Massive
>
> **Release**
> September 4

The televisions, along with Vaas' commentary, is reminiscent of the Batman Arkham games in the best way

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Crysis 3

Prophet brings a bow to a gunfight

Platform PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC   **Style** 1-Player Shooter (Multiplayer TBA)
Publisher Electronic Arts   **Developer** Crytek   **Release** February 13

Though Crysis 3 isn't coming to store shelves until next February, Crytek was so confident in its progress that they allowed the press to play the game behind closed doors at E3.

The centerpiece of the demo experience was the new compound bow protagonist Prophet has at his disposal. While attempting to foil the Cell Corporation's devious plan of harvesting the alien Ceph technology underneath the Liberty Dome shrouding the remnants of New York City, Prophet can pluck unsuspecting enemies without ever coming out of his stealth cloak. The bow has four different types of ammunition: a standard arrow, an explosive arrow, a timed grenade arrow, and an electric arrow that comes in handy when a group of baddies is standing in shallow water.

Powered by the fidelity of the impressive CryEngine 3, Crysis 3 was one of the better-looking games at E3. If Crytek can hone the gameplay and endow the AI with some smarts, Crysis 3 could be one of the early hits of 2013. » Matt Bertz

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Lost Planet 3

Interesting mech gameplay comes to franchise's rescue

Platform PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC   **Style** 1-Player Shooter (Multiplayer TBA)
Publisher Capcom   **Developer** Spark Unlimited   **Release** 2013

Huge mech suits have always been a part of Capcom's Lost Planet series, but they've never played such a compelling role until now. Jim, the protagonist of Lost Planet 3, relies on his huge bipedal Rig for weathering brutal ice storms, mining for E.D.N. III's valuable T-Energy, and fending off gigantic Akrid.

Players spend a good deal of time in and out of the Rig. At one point Jim trudges into a gigantic freezing storm that covers his mech with a thick coat of ice. Our hero must rappel from his cockpit and shoot off the restricting icicles using his rifle. Naturally, a pack of angry, wolf-life Akrid emerge from the snowy haze and attack. Jim must choose whether to take these foes out on foot, or hastily chip his Rig free and dispatch them using its tremendous claw and drill.

Developer Spark Unlimited (Turning Point: Fall of Liberty, Legendary) doesn't have the most impressive track record, but Lost Planet looks wonderful. This could be the game that breaks its streak of mediocrity. » Tim Turi

Need for Speed Most Wanted

Criterion revisits paradise with a new ride

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1 or 2-Player Racing
(12-Player Online)

Publisher
Electronic Arts

Developer
Criterion Games

Release
October 30

Criterion Games developed Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit in 2010, but perhaps the game that Most Wanted most resembles is the studio's Burnout Paradise from 2008. Need for Speed Most Wanted drops players in an open world where you are encouraged to cause damage, burn down every road, and explore to your heart's content. As long as you can evade the police, of course.

The beauty of Most Wanted's world is not the variety of experiences, but that it seamlessly integrates its many different objectives. Escaping from the police down city streets blends effortlessly with trying to get the fastest speed by bombing down a street with a speed trap set up. Or perhaps you'll spend your time crashing through all the billboards you find or trying to find the biggest jump humanly possible. If you've got an APB out for you, simply switch cars in an alleyway Jackspot or change the color of your car on the fly by going into a drive-through. Everything you do earns you Speed Points, which fuels your Notoriety and propels you up the Most Wanted list.

The updated version of Autolog lets you compare yourself against friends and see what new times or stats they've accomplished for you to beat. If you want to put them down in person, you can always meet up in the world and run through a playlist of multiplayer events (sorry, no

cops in multiplayer). Apart from the back-to-back nature of the playlists, in between events (like freeform checkpoint races, longest jump contests, etc.) the game will set up a meeting point somewhere in the map that everyone drives to instead of waiting in a menu. While you're traveling there and waiting for the next event to start, you can explore the map and rack up Speed Points at your leisure – yet another nod to Burnout Paradise that erases the line between online and offline play.

Criterion's racing chops aren't just formulated on their excellent feature sets, but also through the feeling they impart to players. The sense of speed in the demos I played was great, and while the cars control well, in Criterion games you're only a split second away from spectacularly crashing into a wall or another car as you push your machine to the limit. In Most Wanted if you destroy another racer or cop, you get credit for a Takedown.

Electronic Arts has segmented its Need for Speed franchise into different subsets that are supposed to speak to different kinds of racing fans, whether it's the sim-based NFS: Shift 2 Unleashed or the story of NFS: The Run. But with Criterion behind the wheel of Most Wanted and the game's freeform, open-world structure, the developer may be creating the most complete Need for Speed yet. » Matthew Kato

Pikmin 3

Miyamoto's quirkiest franchise makes its long-awaited return

Platform
Wii U

Style
1-Player Strategy

Publisher
Nintendo

Developer
Nintendo

Release
Holiday 2012

intendo fans are accustomed to seeing familiar faces like Mario and Zelda at the publisher's press conference, but they were greeted with the return of a lower-profile franchise this year. To the delight of GameCube owners, Shigeru Miyamoto opened the show by announcing a new game in the fan-favorite Pikmin series. After playing the game at Nintendo's booth, I came away confident that this installment will retain the charm and entertainment value of its predecessors.

Early in Nintendo's press conference, it was revealed that players do not assume the role of previous protagonist Captain Olimar. While the E3 demo didn't elaborate on his whereabouts, it's likely that he's lost or captured. In his place, Pikmin 3 introduces four as-yet-unnamed "leaders." Nintendo implied that players can swap between the four characters on the fly, but this mechanic wasn't available during the demo.

Collecting and using Pikmin is handled in the same fashion as the GameCube titles. Your leader can whistle to assemble nearby Pikmin, who will then follow him throughout the level until they're thrown or killed. My demo required the use of the Wii remote and nunchuk as the primary controller, with the GamePad functioning as a map. A Nintendo rep confirmed that you can play the game exclusively with the GamePad, but the recommended method is still the remote and nunchuk. For the purposes of the demo, the GamePad was propped up at an angle below the TV, and I found that having access to a large, adjustable map at all times was handy.

Managing your army of Pikmin feels familiar, as does the basic gameplay. You won't be collecting parts of a ship as in previous installments, but you'll be directing your Pikmin to collect fruit and destroy enemies the same as ever. I only had access to two types of Pikmin in this demo: the standard red version and the new rock Pikmin. The latter are exactly what they sound like – standard-sized Pikmin shaped like tiny rocks. They follow you around just like any other breed, and they're especially useful for destroying hard glass-like structures that block paths or hide fruits.

Rock Pikmin were particularly helpful once I encountered a large boss creature. This cater-pillar-like enemy was armed with sharp pincers and protected under a hard shell. By directing a barrage of rock Pikmin at his exterior, I shattered it and exposed the skin beneath. Once I had his head and tail uncovered, I made sure he was covered in red Pikmin. As my red buddies stuck to his skin and assaulted him, I continued with a steady stream of the rock variety. This combination of attacks proved to be too much for the boss, and his death signaled the end of the demo.

Fans of the first two Pikmin games should definitely look forward to this long-awaited sequel, even if it feels familiar. It doesn't seem to use many of the Wii U's control options, but the HD nature of the console makes for one of the prettier Nintendo games we've seen. Nintendo hasn't revealed the narrative, and the brief demo offered just a glimpse of the gameplay, but I walked away feeling that Pikmin 3 will be one of the early standout titles for Wii U. » **Dan Ryckert**
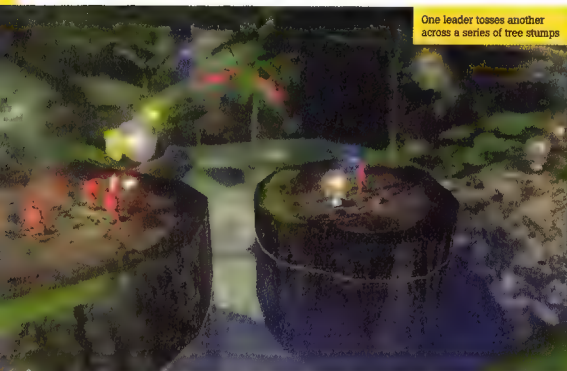
One leader tosses another across a series of tree stumps
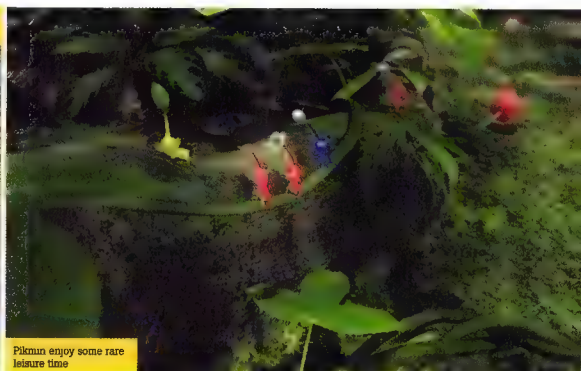
Pikmin enjoy some rare leisure time

Call of Duty: Black Ops II

Activision holds off on new Black Ops II info

In last month's issue, we gave you the first in-depth look at Call of Duty: Black Ops II. We detailed the futuristic setting, the new Strikeforce missions, and a chaotic single-player mission set in downtown L.A. For its E3 showing, Activision showcased this material publicly for the first time. While the publisher didn't reveal any information we didn't cover last month, they did release a few new screens set in Singapore and Yemen.

Reactions to the series' new direction were mixed on the show floor, with some complaining about franchise fatigue and others praising the changes to the formula. If you find yourself in the camp that still gets excited for the annual November release, take a look at these new screens while we wait for news regarding the promised shake-ups to the series' multiplayer. » Dan Ryckert

Strikeforce will allow players to inhabit a variety of soldiers and robots

An enemy soldier is taken down in Yemen

The 2025 setting allows for some interesting futuristic aircraft

Platform
Playstation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

Publisher
Activision

Developer
Treyarch

Release
November 13

33

Madden NFL 13

Madden finds its big play ability

Platform PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360   **Style** 1 to 4–Player Sports (6-Player Online)
Publisher EA Sports   **Developer** EA Tiburon   **Release** August 28

The Madden franchise is in need of an overhaul, and it looks like this year's game is delivering it. Apart from a revamp for the passing game similar to the one in NCAA 13 (see our review on page 108), Madden NFL 13 also introduces a new physics engine that institutes multiple points of contact for better tackles, as well as an RPG XP system and new franchise structure called Connected Careers. This all-encompassing mode means there is no difference in feature sets between online and offline franchise mode, as well as Superstar mode. You can create a player or coach (and switch between the two), earn XP, and upgrade the attributes of your players as they complete short- and long-term objectives. It's one thing to make a few necessary tweaks, but Madden NFL 13 is looking to run up the score with an ambitious feature set that could make this the best version of the game in a long time. » Mathew Kato

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The Elder Scrolls Online

Bringing Tamriel to life

Platform PC   **Style** Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
Publisher Bethesda Softworks   **Developer** Zenimax Online Studios   **Release** 2013

Now that more people have seen Elder Scrolls Online in action thanks to its behind-closed-doors showing at E3, a wider audience has confirmed what we already knew when we featured the game on our cover – this Zenimax Online project has promise.

The Elder Scrolls Online's animations lend its world a life that seems missing from screenshots. While Zenimax Online hasn't shown anything that we didn't already report on in our June cover story, the positive reactions from others who saw the game has been gratifying for the developer.

The studio still has our full confidence that it can bridge the gap between familiar MMO mechanics and traditional Elder Scrolls freedom. Hopefully a beta will lend more weight to those statements in the near future.   Adam Biessener
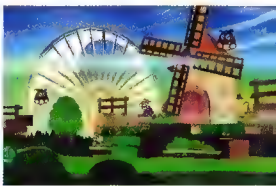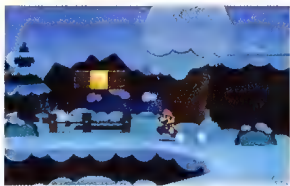
35

Paper Mario: Sticker Star

The first hard details emerge on the long-in-development RPG

Platform
3DS
Style
1–Player Action/
Role Playing
Publisher
Nintendo
Developer
Intelligent Systems/
Nintendo
Release
Holiday

It seems like Nintendo has released quite a few Paper Mario games throughout the years, but Paper Mario: Sticker Star is only the fourth game in the over decade old series. Normally, Paper Mario occupies the home console space with Mario & Luigi RPGs taking up the similar duty on portables. With Sticker Star, the flattest character in all of gaming is crossing over to handhelds for the first time.

During an event called the Sticker Fest, Bowser mucks things up as usual and disperses all six Royal Stickers across the world. Mario teams up with a small sticker fairy named Kersti (get it?) to get them all back. She'll most likely do all the talking and provide the comic relief while Mario performs the heavy lifting.

In the demo area we saw, a powerful wind blocks the path forward so Mario heads around the back. He finds the culprit: A huge, realistic 3D fan that stands out in the flat paper world. He turns it off and puts it in his inventory.

The turn-based combat incorporates active button presses as always, except now players queue moves by selecting one-time-use stickers from Mario's album. Options include Mario's classic jump and hammer attacks, kicking a koopa shell, and shooting fireballs to take out goombas lined up in a row. Using the right attacks against certain enemy configurations figures heavily in constructing an effective strategy.

Next, Mario finds Toad crying over his wind-ruined flower bed. With a tap of a button, Mario "paperizes" the game screen, turning it into what looks like a flat photograph lying on a desk. Dotted line squares hover over the soil, and Mario can grab fire and ice flower stickers from his book and place them in the slots. When the normal screen is toggled back on, the flower stickers spring to life and Toad rewards Mario with more stickers and a permanent health upgrade. Paper Mario doesn't have an experience-based progression system. Instead, players must help people, solve puzzles, and search for hidden areas to progress their character.

Mario then hauls his new fan over to a special wall in town that changes realistic objects into useful stickers (other examples include scissors, a trumpet, and a faucet). Mario brings his new sticker over to a motionless windmill. In paperization mode, another dotted line square is visible. After sticking the fan there, a strong gale kicks up to unlock the path forward. These simple examples are the core puzzle mechanic of the game, but Nintendo promises that things will get much trickier. We can't wait to see more. » Bryan Vore
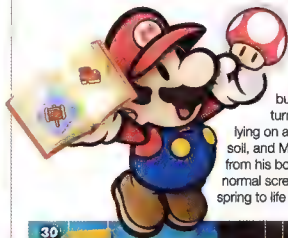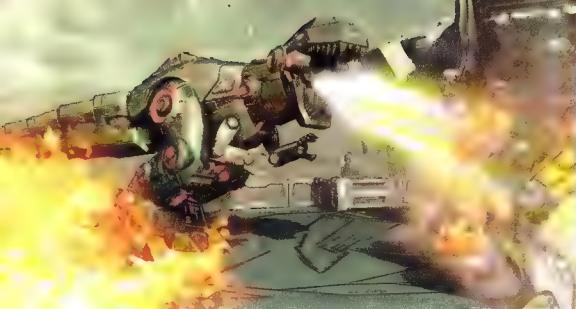
Prime can call on Metroplex using a special ability with a cooldown, the air strike of missiles that results can wipe out whole squads of bad guys

Transformers: Fall of Cybertron

36

Now including a fire-breathing robot dinosaur

Each time we see Fall of Cybertron, it continues to look stronger, and the trend continued with an excellent showing at this year's big show. High Moon Studios made the case that its upcoming Transformers game should please Transformers fans, but perhaps more importantly, that it offers a worthy play experience for the wider audience of action/shooter fans.

The game banks on its ability to deliver a number of unique gameplay styles that work well individually and flow seamlessly from one to the next. High Moon showcased four different demos at the show. Starscream's level combined stealth sequences and high-octane jet fighting across a series of platforms. Optimus Prime's demo played more like a traditional military shooter, including the ability to summon air strikes. In his case, this meant calling down the might of the city-sized Transformer called Metroplex. The Dinobot Grimlock plays as a melee juggernaut, mowing through hordes of enemies with sword and shield before transforming into a rampaging T-Rex. A fourth demo showed off the helicopter attack abilities of Vortex as he moved freely back and forth between ground and air shooting sequences.

No matter the character, we were impressed with the breadth of weapon and equipment options available. Many offered awesome visual effects and potent destructive potential, from a disc-blade that bounces off walls to a gun that creates black hole-like rifts in space.

High Moon is remaining quiet on some of the other major features; we've yet to see much of the competitive game in action, though High Moon confirmed that it supports six-on-six battles. However, the gameplay we've seen so far hints that it should have the reach to draw in a bigger audience than its predecessor. In a smart move for Activision, Fall of Cybertron releases at the end of August, hopefully assuring potential new players will have a chance to try it out before some of the other big holiday action games hit. » **Matt Miller**

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action
(12-Player Online)

Publisher
Activision

Developer
High Moon Studios

Release
August 28

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation

37

An impressive showcase for Sony's handheld

Despite being destined for Sony's latest handheld, Liberation looks like a full console Assassin's Creed title. The game features the open world, impressive visuals, and excellent animation that fans expect from the series, plus some Vita-specific features.

Like Assassin's Creed III, Liberation takes place during the colonization of America. New Orleans is in the middle of a rebellion against the Spanish, who received the state of Louisiana from the French. The citizens of New Orleans are not happy about the trade pacts between Spain and France, and they are in revolt.

The E3 demo begins with Aveline, the first female protagonist in the Assassin's Creed series, making her way from rooftop to rooftop. She comes across a series of soldiers and jumps to the ground, easily dispatching one just like we've seen Ezio and Altaïr do a thousand times. After taking a few more soldiers out using Assassin's Creed's familiar defensive combat style, the game pauses, allowing the player to use the touchscreen to tap all the remaining enemies. Once the game resumes, Aveline takes out each of the selected enemies one by one with no input from the player. Reminiscent of Splinter Cell: Conviction's Mark & Execute feature, as Aveline performs kills and assassinations it charges up the Chain Kill Bar, allowing her to perform these special kills.

The demo also featured a horse-drawn carriage sequence where the player taps the screen to speed up the horses, but the most impressive feat of the game was seeing Aveline climb the St. Louis Cathedral, pan the camera around the city, and jump to the bale of hay below. It is nearly indistinguishable from its Assassin Creed's console brethren. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Platform
Vita

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft Sofia

Release
October 30

Liberation is built from the same engine as Assassin's Creed III. The Vita version is scaled back graphically, but only slightly

The Unfinished Swan

Giant Sparrow creates a finger painter's dream

Platform PlayStation 3 **Style** 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Giant Sparrow **Release** 2012

Last month we talked about the opening levels of The Unfinished Swan, which put players in a stark white world, tasking them to find their way around the environment by throwing paint on the walls to reveal the world's geometry. At E3, we had a chance to go deeper into the game.

One of the levels let us explore a castle courtyard painted in stylistic tones of black, blue, and white. Instead of throwing black paint, we threw blobs of water. After finding a green seedling, we were able to tease the plant up the side of a wall by throwing water in the direction we wanted it to grow, and these vines could be used to climb up to previously inaccessible areas.

The Unfinished Swan's use of color is as stunning as its premise, and the game provides a constant sense of wonder and discovery. We can't wait to see how the rest of the game sketches out this intriguing premise when it hits PSN later this year. **Ben Reeves**

Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion

The best of the old and new

Platform 3DS **Style** 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Disney Interactive Studios **Developer** DreamRift/Junction Point **Release** November 18

It only takes a few minutes of playing DreamRift's new handheld Mickey game to recognize its inspiration; from the way the character moves to the style of the backgrounds, Power of Illusion is intimately tied to the original Sega Genesis Castle of Illusion and its sequels.

Mizrabel the Witch is kidnapping familiar Disney characters, and Mickey must traverse her illusions to save them. As you adventure, you'll also be drawing and erasing objects on the lower screen that appear within the game, which is a fun twist on the expected sidescrolling style.

Power of Illusion was one of a few handheld titles that caught our attention at the show. Between the nostalgia factor and the accessible and fun all-ages platforming crafted by DreamRift, Power of Illusion deserves a look. **Matt Miller**

New Super Mario Bros. 2

Mario becomes Nintendo's literal golden boy

Platform 3DS

Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming

Publisher Nintendo

Developer Nintendo

Release August 19

If you're not playing close attention, it's easy to get New Super Mario Bros. 2 confused with the other plumber platformer, New Super Mario Bros. U (see entry #18). This portable title is a completely different game rather than a scaled-down version of the home console title. The main differentiating factor of NSMB 2 is the obsessive focus on gold coins.

Mario can now pick up a new gold flower power-up that turns him into the sparkly precious metal and enables him to shoot golden fireballs that change all destructible blocks and enemies into coins. In fact, one of the primary goals of the game (outside of rescuing Princess Peach, of course) is to collect one million coins. With power-ups like this and various high-value coin denominations, this shouldn't be as daunting as it sounds.

NSMB 2 also includes a new Coin Rush mode that tasks players with grabbing as many coins as they can across three levels and then trading top score challenges with friends via StreetPass. I played through an entire Coin Rush block and earned over 1,800 coins total.

The first stage features a constant barrage of flying Cheep Cheeps. I got the classic raccoon Mario power-up from Super Mario Bros. 3 (not the full Tanooki suit), but couldn't try it out without plenty of sprinting room to fill up the p-meter. The second desert-themed level provided ample surroundings for full tail-powered flight. Mario traveled beyond the top of the screen this time, and we're sure there will be plenty of secrets in the sky throughout the rest of the game. Part three was a vertically scrolling castle environment populated with skeletal Dry Bones. The miniboss at the end was an old triceratops friend, Reznor, not seen since Super Mario World back on the SNES.
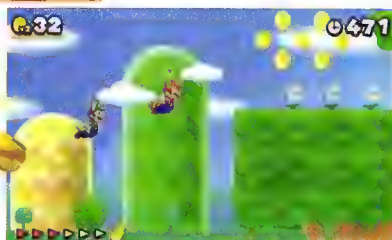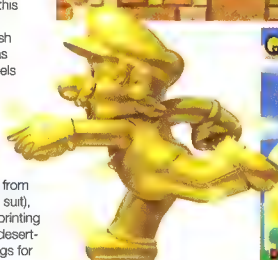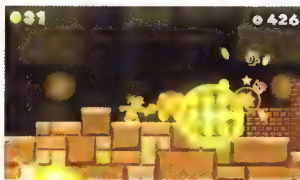
After E3, Nintendo revealed that additional downloadable Coin Rush level packs like these will be available post-launch.

Though we didn't get to try it, NSMB 2 also boasts a simultaneous two-player mode with Luigi throughout the entire normal game, bringing the feature set closer to the home console titles. Unfortunately, multiplayer is local wireless only, so give up on your dreams of playing Mario online.

New Super Mario Bros. 2 looks to live up to the high quality bar the series is known for, and with an August release date it will provide Nintendo fans a Mario fix long before the Wii U edition's holiday release. **Bryan Vore**

Darksiders II

Death's journey begins

E3 offered nothing new in terms of mechanics for Darksiders II, but it did give us our first glimpse at the game's opening and some playtime with all the new features we've been hearing about since our cover story back in July of 2011.

We begin the game on horseback, which quickly distinguishes it from the original Darksiders. In War's journey, we didn't get a mount until much later in the game. Death moves much faster than War, jumping from enemy to enemy during battle, and scaling walls like he belongs in a Prince of Persia game. Along with the handhold-to-handhold

wall scaling you may expect, Death can also run horizontally along walls just by jumping toward them.

Combat allows for fast-paced combos with easy switching between Death's main weapon, his scythes, and his secondary weapon, which differs depending on your style. In this demo, I had a large imposing hammer. Flailing away at enemies makes numbers spout from them like blood. The numbers dictate how much damage you're doing, giving you an immediate sense of how powerful your weapons are. You can elect to change into Death's larger and more powerful Chaos Form as you could in Darksiders as War,

but you will also see Chaos Form appear periodically in the middle of combos.

The other new element of Darksiders II that makes an appearance is loot. During the course of the demo, my boots, gloves, and secondary weapon needed changing because I had found a more powerful version of them dropped by the assorted skeletons and monsters I destroyed.

With an August release date, Darksiders II is closer to release than most of the games shown at E3. That is great news, because the game feels ready to go, and I walked away wanting to play more. » **Kyle Hilliard**

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Lego City Undercover

Grand Theft Auto in bricks

A Lego Grand Theft Auto game may seem ridiculous, but that's essentially what Traveller's Tales' Lego City Undercover is. Within a sprawling brick metropolis, undercover detective Chase McCain is tasked to take down Rex Fury and his gang of criminals.

Chase can commandeer over 100 different vehicles, ranging from sports cars to helicopters. He can also go undercover to open up new paths and infiltrate Rex's ranks. Holding true to the concepts that drive Traveller's Tales' array of licensed games, these disguises play out like different character classes. The firefighter outfit allows him to put out fires, whereas the miner is

equipped with dynamite. Chase even becomes a robber (with a crowbar tool) for specific missions. His basic move set is heavily influenced by parkour, allowing him to scale fences, flip across poles, and slide kick to trip up enemies.

The GamePad screen displays a detailed map with key locales, and can also be used as a 3D scanner. When the GamePad is held up to a screen, the player sees a wireframe version of the city. Enemies previously hidden to the eye are illuminated with a red hue. Chase can lock on to their location and go in for the bust.

Lego City is the longest-running Lego toy line, and Traveller's Tales is bringing many of these

sets to life in the game, including the popular (and expensive) modular buildings. The game even takes players under the city into a mine, a linear level that plays out like the Lego games of old.

Lego City Undercover is a Wii U exclusive currently slated as a holiday 2012 release. Wii U's E3 software lineup didn't impress, but I thought Lego City Undercover looked fantastic, and should be on the radar for everyone looking to purchase a Wii U this winter. » **Andrew Reiner**

Head to gameinformer.com/mag for a video walkthrough of Lego City Undercover

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Injustice: Gods Among Us

>> DC's titans face off in
NetherRealm's new fighter

ast year, NetherRealm made waves with its fantastic Mortal Kombat reboot. This year, the veteran team surprised fighting fans once again with the reveal of Injustice: Gods Among Us. Unlike 2008's Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe, this superhero-centric fighter ditches the gruesome series that NetherRealm takes its name from. Operating on a highly modified version of the Mortal Kombat engine, Injustice focuses more on over-the-top comic book action than decapitations and bloodshed.

The playable demo on the E3 show floor introduced six characters: Superman, Batman, Solomon Grundy, Wonder Woman, Flash, and Harley Quinn. The large character-select screen implies that we can expect many more announcements in the future. In the demo, these superheroes pummeled each other back and forth across two iconic environments: the Batcave and the Fortress of Solitude.

Ed Boon and his team want the environments to be just as much a part of the action as Bruce Wayne or Clark Kent. Interacting with the various stages is such a crucial element of combat it has its own dedicated bumper button. Press it near a button in the Batcave, and it causes the Batmobile to fire missiles at your opponent. Press it on a city street, and you might cause Superman to smash a car over his opponent's head.

Every environment promises to have several tiers, as well. At one point, I kicked my opponent into a Batcave elevator. This triggered an animation of the elevator rising, its metal walls bending as a non-interactive fight occurred inside. When the combatants spilled out, they were in an entirely new area of the Batcave. A similar concept is present in the Fortress of Solitude, although it's far more dramatic. If you kick your opponent into a portal, you'll send him or her careening through the Phantom Zone, crashing through the images of trapped villains in the

92

process. Only two stages were on display at the show, but the variety of DC locales should ensure some novel environmental attacks.

Injustice mixes up many trademarks of the genre, from its control scheme to its super meter. With the A, X, and Y buttons dedicated to light, medium, and heavy attacks, B is left free for hero abilities. NetherRealm says they don't have an official name for these abilities yet, but each character has a special function that sets him or her apart from the others. Batman can summon floating batarangs that he can direct towards opponents, even in mid-combo. Superman goes into a berserker mode that increases his damage. The Flash's ability is sure to frustrate opponents, as it slows down enemies. While they move in slow motion, Flash can get in plenty of fast-paced offense.

The super meter is broken into four segments, and players can unleash a ridiculous attack once they're all full. Superman knocks his opponent into space and then slams them back to Earth. Solomon Grundy pulls a tombstone out of his chest and breaks it over his opponent's head. Flash runs around the entire Earth to build up a light-speed haymaker to the face. They're Injustice's equivalent to Mortal Kombat's X-ray attacks, and they're just as dramatic (even if they don't match the gore factor).

If you feel like sacrificing part of your meter to escape a particularly damaging combo, you can activate the clash system. These clashes begin with the combatants trading character-specific taunts before charging at each other. Players can choose how much of their super meter they're willing to wager during this animation, and whoever bets more wins the clash. If the defender comes out on top, the entire damage of the combo is recovered. It's an interesting bet. Players with a full super meter will probably win if they bet all four segments, but they'll have to decide if the damage recovery is worth the loss of their super attack.

NetherRealm's partnership with DC prevents the gory fatalities Mortal Kombat fans love, but the developer's love of unlockables and extensive single-player modes should lead to a feature-packed fighter. With E3 2012 in the books, fighting fans can now look forward to the wealth of character and stage reveals that will surely lead up to Injustice's 2013 release. » **Dan Ryckert**

For more info and exclusive screenshots showing off the cool heroes and villains of Injustice, visit gameinformer.com/hot50

Harley Quinn tests Batman's armored suit with a revolver round

Superman activates his hero trait

>> An Interview with Ed Boon

Ed Boon has been a well-known name in the gaming industry ever since Mortal Kombat became a cultural phenomenon in the early '90s. Despite having almost two decades of experience in the genre, Injustice is his first fighting game that exists entirely outside of the Mortal Kombat universe. We had a chance to speak with Boon about his plans for the game.

How obscure are you looking to get with the character lineup? Are we going to get a lot of characters that only hardcore comic fans will recognize, or is it mostly going to consist of mainstream names?
I think the majority will be pretty mainstream, but we definitely have appearances that some of the more hardcore guys will be happy with. Obviously with a game like this when we're launching a franchise, fingers crossed, we want to appeal to as many people as possible with recognizable characters. But at the same time, we certainly aren't going to forget that these characters started out as comic book characters. They've expanded into a number of different media of course, but at their core these guys were comic book guys and we want to satisfy those fanatics.

Did DC have any input on what characters they wanted to include, or did you guys approach them with a list of who you were hoping for?
They definitely suggested some, but I don't think they ever said to us, "This person has to be in it." We started this conversation quite a long time ago and we were aware of the New 52 launch that was coming, and we knew which characters were being

put center stage. We wanted to be consistent with that, because we're definitely not going to forget the comic book fans. But they never said to us, "You have to have Superman in the game, you have to have Batman," even though we would have done it for any other character.

Do you have a certain amount of freedom with the story?
The story for why they're fighting each other is completely original. We aren't following the timeline of the New 52 or any of the other timelines for the DC characters. The character designs are ours…the version of Superman is ours, the version of Batman is ours. It went through the whole DC approval process, certainly, and we worked with them with the story as well as the universe that we're creating, which is a NetherRealm version.

How violent are you allowed to get with these characters?
Understandably, a lot of people ask, "Are you going to have fatalities? Are you going to do this?" That's specifically because we are NetherRealm Studios, we did Mortal Kombat, we have done a bunch of Mortal Kombats, and I think there is an assumption that this is part of every game that we do. But the real message

is that this is brand new, that this game has its own identity and we don't feel like we have to follow any kind of previous template of Mortal Kombat. While we are very proud of the Mortal Kombat legacy we have, it's certainly not part of this game. This game has its own identity.

How do you balance the powers of the characters? Is the story going to explain why Bruce Wayne can stand up against Superman in this universe?
Absolutely. Since we are trying to do a realistic interpretation of these characters, we aren't trying to make them look like the animated characters or anything like that. You see a game like Marvel vs. Capcom and it has Thor, this gigantic, Superman-like character fighting someone like Ryu or Ken or Mega Man. Not many people question that, because it's presented in such an animated way. But our stuff seems to be more like, "Okay, well seriously, how will Batman fight against Superman?" We definitely explain it in the story, and we try to keep it on some level of believability.

Considering that both the Arkham games and Injustice are under the WB banner, are you basing the

look of the Batman characters on that series, or are you going your own direction with it?
We are going off in our own direction. The Arkham Batman is awesome, I'm certainly a huge fan of it, but we definitely did not want to say that this is the Arkham Batman that you already have seen.

Some longtime Mortal Kombat fans complained about the lack of fatalities and gore in MK vs. DC Universe. Now that the Mortal Kombat name and the characters are out of the picture, do you think that those fans are going to be a little more accepting?
I certainly hope so. You know, that game did well for us. It was unfortunate that it came out while Midway was falling apart, but the game actually sold really well. I think the expectations came from both sides. Certainly with any game that has the name Mortal Kombat in it, there is an expectation of violence that's so strong it even warrants journalists to ask the question, "How violent are you going to make this game?" just because we made Mortal Kombat. While Mortal Kombat vs. DC had the name Mortal Kombat, it didn't have the over-the-top violence because it was a teen rating. I don't think any of us even wanted to rip Batman's head off or cut Superman's head off, you know? We were just answering the question "what if?" as far as the two universes colliding. From the Mortal Kombat side, I think there was an unrealistic expectation that we couldn't fulfill as far as violence was

concerned. I'm certainly hoping with this game that if you remove the Mortal Kombat from it, we just want to make a very intense, epic, superhero experience. I think we are on our way to doing that. As time goes by, I believe people will see this game as its own identity when there are more features revealed.

It seems that the violence is less blood and guts and more about comic book action. Tell us about how that plays into the environments of Injustice.
We replaced gratuitous violence, like blood, arms and limbs being cut off, and all that with spectacular, over-the-top events. In Mortal Kombat you might swing a sword at somebody; in this game you'll throw a car at somebody. In Mortal Kombat you might see blood come flying out from somebody when you punch them; in this game the person could fly through a building when you punch them. That's really the identity of this game – an over-the-top, extreme battle of the gods-type experience with interactive backgrounds. We want these arenas to let players perform these over-the-top events that have something to do with the fighting, that make you care about where you are in the arena in regards to what opportunities are existing and mixing up that whole thing. I think that's going to really be what this game is.

Your team introduced environmental attacks in Mortal Kombat: Deception in which opponents could be instantly killed if they were kicked into the right trap. Are there any instant-kill environmental attacks in Injustice, or are they strictly about doing damage?
I don't think we're going to have ring outs so to speak, where you hit somebody over the edge of something and you've basically won the match. With Deception allowing 3D movement, it's not like you could be instantly backed into a corner and killed, because you could walk in 3D and remove that threat. In this game, it is a 2D fighting plane. There are edges, and while we definitely want opportunities and

danger zones, we probably won't go as far as to end the round when you kick somebody into something.

Tell me about the custom abilities that are tied to the B button for each character.
We wanted to have a feature for each character that was unique to that character. We didn't want everyone just to have the Batman version of this thing, the Wonder Woman version of this special move. We wanted a button that was completely accessible, right on the face of the controller that would be something that was custom to all characters. Each character almost feels like they are from a different game in regards to the function of that button. For someone like Grundy, it will be like this throw button and he has all of these chainable throws that can beef up his defensive or offensive features. There's this whole kind of metagame inside of this button for Grundy. With Wonder Woman, it changes her fighting style. It literally changes from a floating fighting style to a sword and shield style with its own set of attacks. With Batman, he has a number of ways of controlling these bats that kind of fly around him that can be used in combos or for creating a shield around him. With Superman it will power him up. We have gadget characters, we have power characters, they interact with the backgrounds differently, and they have different functions for that button. We are looking for extreme variety in this game. These characters are just so radically different from each other, not only in their abilities in the universe, but also their abilities in this game.

Tell us about the super meter. Will we be seeing things like enhanced moves and breakers again?
Yes. Absolutely. Pretty much both. We definitely don't want it to use the exact rules of Mortal Kombat, but our kind of super moves are the equivalent of the X-rays that were in the previous Mortal Kombat.

At one point during the demo,

I saw the clash system that lets you wager bars of your super meter. Can you tell us a little bit about that?
When you're playing a game with a super meter that has these kind of segments in it, they become a kind of commodity that you're saving up. You can either use them in increments as you get them to enhance the move or breakers or whatnot, or you can use the strategy of saving them up. We're introducing this new mode where you basically have to bet, in a sense. If you have four bars and I have four bars and we go into this mode, it's kind of like, "Okay, well how important are those bars to you? Is it worth losing this clash? Is it worth taking the damage that you're going to take from losing this clash?" We really wanted to mix up in the players' heads what they are willing to bet to win a clash. I think people will obviously make different choices. If you're saving up for a super and all of a sudden you go into a clash and you have very little power, it's like, "Okay, can I withstand the damage of this clash and continue fighting or do I sacrifice this super and bet all four?" That's the kind of mind game we want to introduce with that mode.

What kind of tweaks have you made to the Mortal Kombat engine?
It's running off of a highly modified Mortal Kombat engine. Another thing that this game has that Mortal Kombat didn't is multiple arenas. With this game the physical arena that you're fighting in has something to do with your fight. Like, if I'm in the Batcave I know that there are these rockets I can use on the left side. I can use these grenades. But then there's a whole other arena in the Batcave that has a different palette of things and functions that you can do scattered throughout. To allow us to switch between those two, we

obviously modified our engine to accommodate that.

The demo didn't feature the standard "Round 1, Round 2" format we're used to seeing. Tell us about the health system.
I'm not sure if you're familiar with a game called Killer Instinct, which came out many, many years ago. It's kind of similar to that where, story-wise, this game isn't a tournament, so it's not as much like rounds. Basically, you can almost think of it as two health bars and whoever depletes the other's two health bars down wins the entire match. We have a pause in between when you lose one, just to kind of break up the monotony and let yourself regroup and re-orientate yourself and whatnot. The version that we had at E3 doesn't represent the entire experience in terms of what event is going to happen when you deplete the person's first bar and what's going to be happening in between all of that, but the idea is that we're not resetting everything when someone loses a bar. We're just kind of giving them a moment's pause, a little breather.

One of the things that people really liked about the most recent Mortal Kombat was the huge assortment of modes. Can we expect to see that same wealth of single-player content in Injustice?
Absolutely. One of the messages I've been trying to communicate and talk about with this game is exactly that. I think that was probably one of the things that we were very much given positive feedback. You know, telling an elaborate story, giving very long missions to someone who plays single player. We aggressively attacked that with Mortal Kombat and we certainly feel like that was a positive lesson that worked out well. People appreciate that and we plan on continuing that tradition.

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Scribblenauts Unlimited

Maxwell and co. invade the big screen

Platform Wii U • 3DS • PC   **Style** 1 to 4-Player Puzzle   **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer 5th Cell   **Release** Holiday

When 5th Cell explored how to bring its Scribblenauts series to a home console for the first time, the Wii U was a natural fit. The art looks great in HD, it's easy to enter in text on the touchscreen, and there is practically no limit to the number of objects players can put onscreen. On top of that, players can create their own objects for the first time.

We saw wheels and a saddle added to a toaster to create a toaster mobile. Players can alter loads of properties, including jump height, speed, and what happens if it falls into liquid. And you can share these creations with friends online

Unlimited also tells the story of Maxwell's backstory for the first time, introducing his twin sister, Lily, and showing how he scored his magic notepad. Throw in drop-in/drop-out multiplayer with up to four people, and this looks like the total Scribblenauts package. » Bryan Vore

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Forza Horizon

Hitting the open road

Platform Xbox 360   **Style** 1 or 2-Player Racing (Online TBA)
Publisher Microsoft Studios   **Developer** Playground Games   **Release** October 23

The Forza series is known for its sim-racing, but Horizon takes things in a new, open-world direction that mixes traditional race formats with free-roaming possibilities. The game is centered around the Horizon Festival hub, complete with competing racers, an auto show where you buy cars, car customization, plenty of atmosphere, and much more. You get Horizon Points for anything you do, from challenging a racer you meet in the streets to exploring, which is how you climb the ladder. The game is set in Colorado, and as such it provides beautiful scenery and differing kinds of terrain. After experiencing Horizon, will we ever be able to race on a track in Forza again? Matthew Kato

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Papo & Yo

Imagination runs wild in Minority's upcoming PSN exclusive

Platform
PlayStation 3
» **Style**
1-Player Action
» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment
» **Developer**
Minority
Release
Summer

Sony showed off a number of triple-A exclusives at its E3 booth this year, so we can forgive you if you didn't hear about Papo & Yo. This PSN exclusive mixes platforming and puzzle solving in a surreal world where anything can happen.

Papo & Yo stars a young boy named Quico, who lives in a South American favela with his gigantic friend, Monster. Most of the time Monster makes for a fine (if somewhat easily-distracted) companion, and can help Quico solve the various environmental puzzles they'll come across. But whenever Monster eats a poisonous frog – an unfortunate addiction Quico is trying to help the beast shake – he becomes a dangerous and frightening figure that the small boy must escape.

The pair's relationship presents a novel experience to gamers and is based on creative director Vander Caballero's memories of growing up with an alcoholic father. Caballero is a industry veteran who has worked on series like FIFA, Need for Speed, and Army of Two, but grew tired of making games that regurgitate the same experiences. He told us he couldn't bring himself to make yet another shooter.

The demo we played took place in a large courtyard, and tasked us with finding and turning gears on certain buildings. Doing so would make the one-story homes stack up on a central tower in the middle of the level, which we could bend around the environment and use as a makeshift bridge. Other out-of-reach areas were accessible by coaxing Monster near them with fruit, and then using his belly as a springboard. Other moments, such as pulling up strips of the level and dropping into the glowing, nebulous areas underneath, taught us early on not to take anything for granted when trying to solve Papo & Yo's puzzles.

Despite being a downloadable indie game, we were impressed by the scale of the level we saw, and activities like bending the massive apartment tower to our will

Monster towers over Quico, but usually the two get along

proved that awe-inspiring moments aren't exclusive to retail games. Caballero says Minority's goal for Papo & Yo is to create the epic adventure of a triple-A title for five percent of the budget, and cites games like Ico and Shadow of the Colossus as his main inspirations. So far, this downloadable gem appears to be on the right track.
» Jeff Marchiafava

Medal of Honor: Warfighter

Carving a niche in the competitive multiplayer space

C oming up with a strategy to differentiate Medal of Honor from its military competitors Call of Duty and Battlefield isn't easy. While Call of Duty multiplayer focuses on fast-paced close quarters combat, Battlefield embraces scale, delivering teamwork-based matches featuring jets, tanks, and amphibious assaults. For Medal of Honor: Warfighter, developer Danger Close is once again poaching elements of both games to find a happy medium.

Warfighter embraces the smaller theaters of war found in Call of Duty, but injects an element of team play to encourage players to fight cooperatively. Rather than group you in a squad of four like Battlefield, Warfighter places you in a two-player fire team. The advantages of working together should convince even lone wolves to allow a partner to tag along. Once you choose a partner, his position is always visible to you on the battlefield. Fire team members can spawn on one another provided they are out of the line of fire, and if your buddy gets shot down and you take out his killer, he can automatically respawn on you instead of waiting through the countdown. Warfighter also rewards you with experience for working together and ranks your performance as fire teams, providing more incentive to embrace the buddy system.

To vary the multiplayer experience, Warfighter features six types of soldier classes: demolitions, assaulter, sniper, point man, heavy gunner, and spec ops. Once players choose one of the 12 Tier 1 operator groups to represent, they can begin unlocking these classes, each of which has unique weapons and special abilities.

As the second shooter to use DICE's Frostbite 2 engine, Warfighter looks amazing. After a pedestrian outing with the 2010 Medal of Honor game, we'll have to wait until Warfighter ships in October to see if Danger Close has improved its approach to single-player campaigns. What we've seen so far adheres closely to the corridor meat-grinder template employed by the majority of modern shooters.

The concepts of fire teams and skill-based classes in multiplayer or roller-coaster campaigns aren't revolutionary, but if Warfighter can leverage the considerable power and refinement of Frostbite 2 to deliver a unique experience it could satiate the rabid military fans looking for a diversion from their everyday shooters. » Matt Bertz

> **Platform**
> PlayStation 3
> Xbox 360 • PC
>
> **Style**
> 1-Player Shooter
> (10-Player Online)
>
> **Publisher**
> Electronic Arts
>
> **Developer**
> Danger Close
>
> **Release**
> October 23

NHL 13

EA Canada tightens up its laces

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

T hough only a few weeks passed since EA Canada showed us NHL 13, the team made significant strides in polishing the exciting new True Performance Skating mechanics. Taking control of the L.A. Kings on the E3 show-floor, I could immediately tell that the defensive controls were tighter so it's not as easy to get caught flat-footed.

Another noticeable change is the improved team strategies. If you want to play dump-and-chase hockey with your third line and a possession-style game with your skill players, you can adjust the line strategies accordingly.

EA Canada also took in the initial fan feedback in regards to the player ratings and relented to create a wider gap between the elite NHL players and the third-line pluggers. Grinders will be rated in the 70s instead of the 80s this year, which should contribute more to player differentiation.

Couple these changes with the GM Connected mode, and NHL 13 looks like a highly coveted prospect. » Matt Bertz

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Skylanders Giants

Bigger characters, greater challenge

Platform PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • Wii • 3DS   **Style** 1 or 2-Player Action
Publisher Activision   **Developer** Toys for Bob   **Release** Fall

B etween now and the launch of Skylanders Giants this fall, you should take the time to progress all of your characters to level 10. Toys for Bob polled players of Spyro's Adventure and found that one of the most common requests is for a greater difficulty level in the sequel. Should players want a harder challenge or reason to play the game again, Toys for Bob

has created multiple difficulty levels for Skylanders Giants.

Toys for Bob hopes players spend more time in each level. New collectibles are hidden in each stage, many falling into secret areas that can only be accessed by specific class types. Optional elemental zones are much bigger in the sequel, and their art styles are better tailored to the element in play. » Andrew Reiner

Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate

>> Dracula's curse spreads to the 3DS
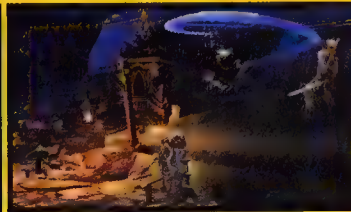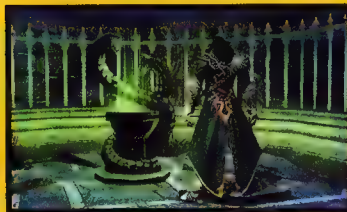
Three-dimensional Castlevania games were almost always disappointing before MercurySteam's Lords of Shadow came along, but fans could always turn to handhelds for reliable, 2D castle-crawling action. Six excellent, Symphony of the Night-inspired games released across the Game Boy Advance and Nintendo DS, each touting more polished gameplay and crisper sprites than the last. MercurySteam is developing the next portable Castlevania, but vampire slayers hoping for another game exactly like past titles should curb those expectations; Mirror of Fate incorporates 2.5D graphics, Lords of Shadow-style combat, and a storyline that follows the Belmont's bloodline.

I spent countless hours squinting at Castlevania: Circle of the Moon when it first arrived on the non-backlit GBA. Since then, I've devoted dozens of hours retreading the footsteps laid by Alucard in Symphony of the Night. While I consider those games untouchable classics, the series has settled into a comfortable rhythm. For that reason, I'm equal parts anxious and excited that MercurySteam is injecting the Lords of Shadow DNA into the series' side-scrolling legacy.

If you haven't played Castlevania: Lords of Shadow, I urge you to put down this article, play through it, and then continue reading. If you're not worried about spoilers (or have already seen the revealing Lords of Shadow 2 trailer), then continue.

At the end of Lords of Shadow, Gabriel Belmont becomes Dracula. While the legendary vampire remains the protagonist for Lords of Shadow 2 (see page 101), he's the antagonist in Mirror of Fate. Initially set 25 years after Lords of Shadow, players control four generations of Gabriel's kin on a quest through Castle Dracula to slay the monster.

If you don't remember any mention of Gabriel and his wife Marie having kids in Lords of Shadow, it's because the game didn't touch on it. "This was something we were going to include in Castlevania: Lords of Shadow, but in the end we decided it wasn't necessary at that time and would have been another story twist too many for most," says series producer Dave Cox.

Players start off as Trevor, but also control Simon and Alucard. The half-man, half-vampire's presence raises the interesting question of who

Platform
3DS

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Konami

Developer
MercurySteam

Release
Fall

50

you basically have it figured out. Trevor uses a mix of wide-arcing light attacks and focused strong attacks to soften up his foes. Tap the jump button and the action goes aerial, making stylish flurries a breeze. You can also roll-dodge away from enemies' clearly telegraphed attacks with a tap of the left shoulder button. The skeletons collapse into a pile of quivering bones, requiring one final, ground-shaking smash to banish them forever. Combat doesn't feel like the snappy action you're used to in portable Castlevanias, but it delivers visceral, satisfying battles.

With the animated skeletons dispatched, Trevor breaches the castle and begins exploring. Platforming plays a key role in Mirror of Fate, but like the revamped combat it feels a touch weightier than usual. Trevor's double-jump ability allows him to leap onto high ledges or across chandeliers. Like Lords of Shadow, Trevor grasps the edges of platforms before pulling himself up and uses his whip to swing across gaps. Leaping around the environment feels solid overall, but I was put off by the occasional inability to control Trevor's trajectory mid-fall. I noticed another odd deviation from the side-scrolling Castlevania formula when I fell a considerable distance from the top of a room and died from the impact of hitting the floor. The penalty for falling long distances usually means backtracking, not death. Keep in mind that the build I played was very early and these elements could change by release.

MercurySteam promises plenty of classic Castlevania-style exploration. You'll see inaccessible sections of the castle that must be revisited later when the necessary skills are acquired. You can use the 3DS' touchscreen to mark notes on your map for helpful reminders. In one instance I notice a locked door, but have no immediately obvious means to open it. Later on I stumble upon a lever while exploring some underground catacombs. Pulling it causes the camera to pan up to show the locked door swinging open on its rusty hinges. Disembodied ticking begins, cueing the player to begin the race to the passage. A series of perfectly timed whip swings and jumps are necessary to reach the door before it slams shut. Challenging tasks like these help inject variety into the game when you're not smashing in monsters' skulls.

A whip isn't the only implement for destroying evil – sub-weapons make a return. At one point Trevor enters a room with a glowing purple altar at the far end. The illuminated object is a bladed glaive with boomerang properties A pack of huge vampire bats bust in through the windows and advance on Trevor. Pressing a dedicated button quickly tosses the boomerang, while holding it down charges up the throw. Once it makes contact with one of the bats, the sawblade-like weapon clings to its body, dealing damage over time before returning to Trevor. The bats don't last long against the new weapon, and the adventurer carries on.

The demo concludes with a fight against a gigantic executioner boss. This shackled foe is dragged onscreen by two flea men carrying its chain leash. The huge monster realizes he's much larger than his captors and quickly demolishes them. The skull-faced beast throws one flea man towards the camera, creating a cool 3D effect if you have the dial cranked up. The axe-wielding executioner delivers a series of shockwave-producing ground stomps, swipes, charges, and leaping dive attacks. The boss' attack cues are cleverly communicated and easily memorized. I enjoyed rolling under the leaping juggernaut then turning around to deliver

a series of whip strikes. Eventually the boss' life bar is drained and Trevor approaches a glowing green treasure chest that contains a permanent upgrade to his life bar. It appears Mirror of Fate eschews the traditional level-based progression in exchange for upgrades scattered around the map, as in God of War.

This exchange of experience points for upgrades hidden in the environment, along with all the other departures from the handheld Castlevanias, may have hardcore fans scratching their heads. Instead of rushing to Internet forums to voice their harsh dissent, those fans should have faith. I remember playing Lords of Shadow for a preview at E3 2010. Only the game's first few stages were playable, which were mediocre at best and boring at worst Imagine my surprise when I reviewed the final product and was blown away by the fantastic game MercurySteam had crafted. Lords of Shadow went on to become the most successful Castlevania ever made We had our concerns back then, just as I have now regarding Mirror of Fate. The only difference now is that MercurySteam shut us up once, and they could very well do it again. - **Tim Turi**

Prepare yourself for the age-old fight against Dracula by checking out additional Mirror of Fate screens and watching a video discussion about the future of the Castlevania series at gameinformer.com/hot50

Gabriel courted after becoming Dracula. The fourth offspring remains unknown.

Players work through each character's storyline chronologically. Gear and select abilities are passed down to new generations as they take a crack at killing Dracula Certain abilities are exclusive to specific characters and can't be passed down, such as Trevor's double-jump, Simon's spirit guardian-summoning, and Alucard's mist transformation. In the classic Castlevania series, the Belmont family tree fought a freshly resurrected Dracula across tons of games with convoluted or nonexistent stories. The concept of exploring the family's hereditary, vampire-hunting curse over the course of a single focused narrative is exciting.

The hands-on demo I played begins as Trevor races toward the tremendous gate of Dracula's castle. Don't let the blown-out gameplay footage or enlarged screenshots fool you – the 3D character models and environments look great on the 3DS' little screen. The vast majority of the game has a side-scrolling view, but the camera zooms out as Trevor jogs across the hold's massive drawbridge to show off the overwhelming size of the castle and the daunting task ahead of him. It may not look like your favorite portable Castlevanias, but the visuals impress.

A pack of undead skeletons immediately block Trevor's path – perfect fodder for getting acquainted with the combat system. Action in Mirror of Fate is a vast departure from portable Castlevanias. Take the combat system from Lords of Shadow, shove it onto a 2D plane, and

The Prince of Darkness Takes the Throne in Lords of Shadow 2

Castlevania fans have been hunting and destroying Dracula for years. This dark ritual had cemented itself as a series tradition with few deviations all the way up until Lords of Shadow. That's why I sat stunned as the game's end credits rolled for the first time – spoilers incoming – there was no final fight with Dracula. My confusion turned into shock when the post-credits cinematic revealed Gabriel becomes Dracula himself, complete with a hint that a sequel would take place in modern day. A year and a half later we finally have some answers in the form of a trailer and some tidbits from producer Dave Cox. After battling Dracula since Castlevania's debut in 1986, gamers play as him for the first time ever in Lords of Shadow 2.

The trailer shows the vampiric Gabriel stalking the halls of his medieval castle. He still looks very human in the video, but the stoic vitality in his face

is replaced with pale sadness. A huge army of armored knights accumulate at his doorstep. Gabriel morphs into a smoky reddish mist and teleports onto the battlefield. He extends his arm and a glowing, red, impossibly long energy whip extends, cutting huge swaths through the soldiers' ranks. Hundreds of hapless knights fly into the air as Gabriel uses his mist form to shift around the one-sided battle.

Eventually a huge, mechanized colossus rises from the earth behind Gabriel. The vampire plucks a beaten but living soldier from the ground by his head. He brings the victim's neck to his mouth in a fluid motion, drains the life from his veins, and discards him. Konami wants to provide the full Dracula experience, and confirms that bloodsucking plays a role in Lords of Shadow 2's gameplay and health system. Revitalized, Gabriel morphs into a tremendous smoke dragon and flies

towards the behemoth before the trailer cuts to black.

Konami is reticent to reveal too much about Lords of Shadow 2 beyond the trailer, but has offered a few more details. Producer Dave Cox says it will wrap up Dracula's story with a "very satisfying conclusion." Cox appears eager to provide fans with a compelling trilogy, and aims to finish things up before the welcome is worn.

Lords of Shadow 2's story comes after plenty of story build-up in both Lords of Shadow and Mirror of Fate. Cox wants to make Dracula's origin story memorable, which is why the team dedicated the entirety of Lords of Shadow's story to setting up the rest of the series.

"We needed to show his world before the darkness," Cox says. "We needed to show the day before the night, so to speak. We couldn't just set the game in a castle, we had to show a world and [dance] within it. I think when people take all three games in the trilogy together they will see the big picture

and recognize that the journey of Gabriel becoming Dracula is a profound one and certainly we intend to go to a very dark place indeed. Once all is said and done, this will feel much more like what people expect from a modern retelling of the Castlevania story."

The Lords of Shadow 2 trailer also got fans buzzing because of a surprise appearance of a pale, dark-clad figure that looks an awful lot like Alucard. Not limited to his appearance in Mirror of Fate, Alucard has been confirmed for Lords of Shadow 2. We're not sure whether the hybrid is playable or simply a supporting character, but he appears to have business to settle with his dear old dad.

We wish there was more to share on the final exciting chapter in the Castlevania's new lease on life, which hits 360 and PS3 next year. Despite not seeing the game in action or actually getting our hands on it, we already know the thing that should keep fans excited for Lords of Shadow 2: You are Dracula.

gameinformer PC
GAME OF THE MONTH
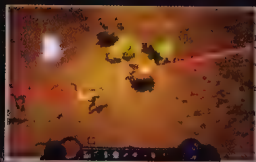
Diablo III

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH   **108** NCAA 13

NCAA 13's revamped passing game and new scouting options for your Dynasty opens up the title and helps you succeed in new ways on and off the field. These additions and more help make the game a standout for the franchise.

SCORING

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.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
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.
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.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.

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.
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.
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.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	38 Studios Finance Simulator

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

SANDERS 21

Quantum Conundrum

This game is filled with puzzles, but buying it shouldn't be

8.5

PC

» Concept
A Portal-style game that lets players warp the density of objects, slow down time, and alter gravity. Mastering these dimensions will help you navigate a neurotic professor's labyrinthine mansion

» Graphics
A simplified cartoon design gets the job done, and it's fun to see how the design of environmental objects – especially wall paintings – changes through the four different dimensions

» Sound
Actor John de Lancie does a great job portraying Professor Fitz Quadwrangle. The game's music is playful if largely unmemorable

» Playability
Plaforming moments could use some work, but cycling through dimensions and testing how they work is easy and fun

» Entertainment
It's a lot of fun to switch through four different dimensions (five if you count our own) and experiment with how they play off each other. Solving some of the challenging late-game puzzles is also highly rewarding

» Replay Value
Moderate

SILVER

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Airtight Games **Release** June 21 **ESRB** E

The thrill of a good puzzle is something of a mystery. Many gamers enjoy brainteasers, but the act of solving one is rarely enjoyable. A good puzzle makes us stretch the analytical parts of our brain in ways that sometimes feel like work. An unsolved puzzle makes us feel stupid and incapable. Being stuck without a solution is uncomfortable, and yet after we reach that "Eureka!" moment, all is forgiven. All those uncomfortable moments spent pulling our hair and biting our nails were worth it, because that brief second of insight has proven how clever we are. Quantum Conundrum is a game filled with these seconds. It gives your brain a workout, but you'll love it.

It's hard to talk about Quantum Conundrum without drawing comparisons to Portal. Not only is the game's creative director, Kim Swift, one of the DigiPen students Valve originally hired to create the Portal series, but the game has you wandering through a series of rooms and solving physics-breaking puzzles while a disgruntled, disembodied voice walks you through the experience.

Fortunately, Quantum Conundrum has enough going for it that it stands on its own. The main protagonist is a 12-year-old boy who comes to visit his uncle, the brusque Professor Fitz Quadwrangle, at his mansion laboratory. A failed scientific experiment has trapped the professor into a pocket dimension. Using the professor's latest invention, the Interdimensional Shift Device (IDS), you work your way through his twisted mansion, solving puzzles by flipping through a series of oddball dimensions, and eventually returning the professor to reality. The professor talks you through the history of his manor with some occasionally amusing dialogue, but the narrative isn't this game's strong suit.

Quantum Conundrum's main attraction is its dimension-jumping puzzles. Using the IDS device, you can shuffle through four different dimensions, each with its own unique properties. For example, the fluffy dimension turns everything softer than a roll of Charmin, while the heavy dimension makes everything 10 times denser and heavier. The puzzles make creative use of

these dimensions. In one room you might have to reach a high ledge. If you switch over to the fluffy dimension you can drag large pieces of furniture over an industrial floor fan and hitch a ride as it floats towards the ceiling like a feather. I loved discovering how these dimensions worked in conjunction with one another. To get across large gaps, for example, you can switch over to the fluffy dimension, pick up a heavy object and throw it, then switch over to a dimension where everything moves at a snail's pace and use the suspended object as a floating platform. These dimensions work together in a number of ways, but figuring out how they play off each other is half the fun of solving Quantum Conundrum's brainteasers.

Serious puzzle fans will be happy with some of the late-game challenges, which require thinking outside the box. I just wish the game relied more on creative thinking and logical problem-solving, because many puzzles involve a significant amount of manual dexterity, requiring you to time your throws or land on a specific platform. I enjoy platform jumping, but the platforming isn't as polished as the dimension-altering mechanics. A number of times I missed a jump because the controls didn't feel tight enough to facilitate this kind of gameplay.

With its physics-warping mechanics, thoughtful brainteasers, and playful atmosphere, Quantum Conundrum should appeal to the legions of Portal fanatics. Some may complain that it's not as funny or as clever as Valve's hit series, but Quantum Conundrum is a unique experience that deserves attention nonetheless. **» Ben Reeves**

What about PSN and XBLA?

Quantum Conundrum also releases on PSN and XBLA later this year, but we didn't receive these versions before this issue went to print. We'll evaluate both versions at a later date and publish a separate review if either version warrants one. If not, please consider this the definitive review

(Editor's Note: Quantum Conundrum won one of our Best of E3 awards, and would have been included in our Hot 50 if not for its presence in our reviews section this month.)
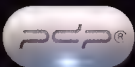
Lollipop Chainsaw

Don't wade into this zombie horde unprepared

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Warner Bros. Developer Grasshopper Manufacture Release June 12 ESRB M

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
A high school cheerleader chops up waves of zombies in a B-movie-inspired adventure

» **Graphics**
Every visual element, from character animations to environments, looks outdated by several years

» **Sound**
A bizarre combination of music genres, like punk and oldies, forms a surprisingly fun soundtrack

» **Playability**
The controls are sluggish, but the game rarely demands more than it can accommodate. Loading screens are annoyingly frequent

» **Entertainment**
Hit-and-miss humor and repetitive combat lead to uneven enjoyment, but the characters and premise make steps toward redemption

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

I have spent a significant (some might say embarrassing) portion of my life watching bad zombie movies. I say "bad," but my fellow horror fans know the term is more affectionate than derogatory. These films may fall short by all objective measures of quality, but the formulaic gore and campy humor strike a charming chord for those willing to forgive some glaring faults. Bringing the same mindset to Lollipop Chainsaw is the only way to appreciate the best the game has to offer.

The premise is purposefully ridiculous. You control Juliet, a zombie hunter/high school cheerleader who carries around (and chats with) her boyfriend's enchanted severed head. It has a bit of a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* vibe, with a cavalier Juliet fretting about typical high school problems as she slices through an army of the undead. This scenario leads to plenty of funny moments during the approximately six-hour campaign. Not all jokes hit the mark, but they shine brightest when they focus on the contrast between innocence and violence.

Though the writing can be entertaining, Juliet spends the bulk of her time slaying zombies. Combat doesn't have the depth of a game like Bayonetta, but it requires more than simple button mashing. You string together combos using the chainsaw and pom-poms, chopping off heads in an entertaining series of stylish and acrobatic contortions. The soundtrack accompanying the action is an eclectic mix that works surprisingly well – I laughed out loud the first time I activated Juliet's super mode and Toni Basil's "Mickey" started playing.

You progress through blocked-off arenas that require you to kill a specific number of zombies before proceeding, though sometimes you get to do something different. These diversions range from amusing (driving a combine through a zombie-filled field) to dreadful (protecting your boyfriend as he runs bases in a ballpark), and each time I was thankful to return to the normal undead dismemberment. The gameplay is straightforward, but something about simultaneously decapitating a crowd of zombies amid a shower of rainbows and hearts remains satisfying all the way to the end.

Performing multiple kills earns you bonus medals, which are used to purchase more moves as well as upgrades for stats like health and strength. After buying certain powerful moves, Juliet's effectiveness in battle skyrockets, but I didn't feel like her ability progression was well paced. I wish she knew more moves from the beginning; buying basic and unimpressive combos only delays players from getting to the good stuff, which isn't even available to purchase until you reach specific points in the story.

Super-sexualized women are nothing new to gaming, but Lollipop Chainsaw doesn't stop at displaying a busty protagonist in a short skirt. Dialogue often crosses into the realm of misogyny,

from zombies who call Juliet a wide variety of crass and unprintable female-specific names to classmates who express thanks by saying "I never thought I'd get rescued by someone with such great t---!" Instead of adding shock value, this constant abuse is distracting and pointless – and feels like it was written by a kid who just learned about bad words and is eager to try them all.

Not all of the dialogue is a problem. The exchanges between Juliet and her family are among the game's high points. I wanted more interactions with Juliet's dad and younger sister and less ham-fisted vulgarity from the bad guys. That approach could be more *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* than the developers intended, but it might have made Juliet feel more like a real character rather than a kooky concept.

After finishing Lollipop Chainsaw, I was left with the same feeling I had after playing other titles from creative director Suda 51. Like Killer 7 and No More Heroes, the premise is exciting and imaginative, but the gameplay execution has too many holes to embrace completely. However, also like those previous games, I'm glad I played Lollipop Chainsaw. · **Joe Juba**

Life After The Credits

Though the core campaign is short, Lollipop Chainsaw does a good job enticing you to replay levels. The volume of unlockables, from combat abilities to costumes, means that you won't see it all if you only clear each stage once. Going back to rescue every classmate (which is required to see the best ending), collect medals, and beat your dad's high score all provide incentives to return to the action

106   reviews

Spec Ops: The Line

A powerful but uneven descent into madness

7.75

Over the course of the last 20-plus years, I've blasted though countless waves of gun-toting virtual humans with nary a thought of the Geneva Conventions. Nine times out of ten these encounters begin with the enemies shooting at me, so I have no philosophical qualms about shooting back. Sometimes an innocent civilian catches a stray bullet, but most shooters don't make you think about the ramifications of your actions. Spec Ops: The Line does.

Spec Ops begins with the opulent city of Dubai in shambles. After a series of deadly sandstorms hit the luxurious desert oasis, the 33rd U.S. battalion was sent in to help with the evacuation. They never came back. Roughly six months after they were ordered to lead a caravan of survivors out of the city, the military receives a strange audio transmission from the acting commander, Colonel John Konrad. To find out what went wrong, the military sends in a cocky three-person Delta team led by Captain Walker, a Konrad protégé.

Allusions to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and its spiritual cousin *Apocalypse Now* are evident throughout the narrative. Some work at creating the chilling mood, like Konrad's warped philosophical ramblings. Others fall flat, like the out-of-place Vietnam War-era music blasting from radio towers in a time where most soldiers would probably be listening to hip-hop and metal. Like the two works of art it pays homage to, Spec Ops chronicles the protagonist's struggle with psychosis as he tries to understand why Konrad has ceased communication with the military, declared a permanent state of martial law, and kept his battalion in an unsustainable, hostile environment.

The mission quickly goes from recon to rescue when your Delta squad finds some butchered American troops on an abandoned road. But when you first encounter your fellow Joes, it's not the reunion you expect. As you navigate the derelict hotels, malls, and high-rise apartments, you're forced to take arms against groups whom armies normally protect, like the stranded refugee population and the U.S. soldiers you were sent in to find. As you explore the decimated city, audio recordings fill you in on how this city spiraled into hysteria.

This compelling set-up fuels the single-player campaign and ultimately forces you to make tough decisions about the excessive use of violence, who to trust, and how you remain sane in an insane situation. Some of the scenarios offer the hollow, binary "morality choice" posed by many games, but other actions you take have stunning unforeseen consequences that impart a real sense of guilt. Eventually the gauntlet of disturbing situations the squad encounters erodes their valorous determination and their camaraderie begins to shatter.

While the story remains riveting up to its questionable conclusion, the minute-to-minute gameplay is uneven. The basic third-person shooter mechanics are loose but adequate, the only distinguishing factor being you get one second of slow-motion bullet time if you land a headshot. Guns lack the visceral pop of top-tier shooters, the touchy cover mechanic can fail you at inopportune times, and your AI-controlled squad is anything but battle savvy. You can designate priority targets at the tap of a bumper, but often they aren't smart enough to carry out orders. I once sat for five minutes watching my dynamic duo try to take out a lone gunman positioned behind a turret. I also saw them chuck grenades through walls and take cover on the wrong side of an object, leaving them completely exposed to incoming fire.

Players spend the majority of the game moving through straightforward corridors that offer the occasional flanking position. At times you will come across a window holding up a wall of sand. Shooting out the panes creates an avalanche that can take out multiple enemies at once. This environmental hazard is fun at first, but by the seventh time you use it, its luster wears off.

Sand plays an integral role in multiplayer as well. Each map is susceptible to sandstorms during the middle of a match, during which your character moves slowly and your map bugs out, and there are several environmental hazards you can activate to bury your enemies. Outside of this unique mechanic, the offerings are rather boilerplate. Spec Ops features a healthy selection of conventional modes, and includes a decent collection of perks, weapons, armor, and kits to unlock as you rank up to level 45.

Spec Ops makes an admirable attempt to inject morality into a standard shooter experience. The narrative unravels at the end and the controls feel subpar compared to the top-tier competitors, but the journey into madness is unlike anything I've played before. **» Matt Bertz**

» Concept
Shoot your way into the dark heart of a storm-ravaged Dubai

» Graphics
The desert setting gives Spec Ops a unique look amongst modern shooters

» Sound
Though it brings *Apocalypse Now* to mind, the Vietnam War-era rock is an ill fit for this modern drama

» Playability
The shooting controls are adequate, but the cover system and teammate AI need work

» Entertainment
A rare narrative-focused shooter that asks gamers to analyze their actions

» Replay Value
Moderately low
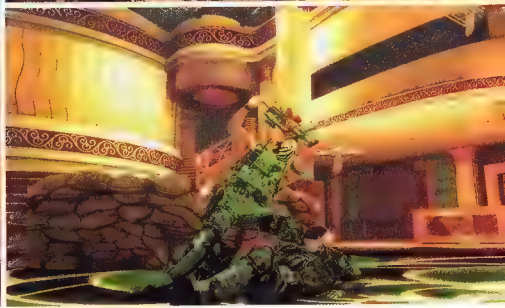
NCAA Football 13

EA Tiburon makes a fourth-down conversion during a crucial drive

8.75

GAME OF THE MONTH
SILVER

> **Concept**
> Subtle tweaks to the gameplay and feature set move the chains in a way that hardcore fans will notice

> **Graphics**
> The motion blur is understated enough to not get in the way, but it is a nice addition

> **Sound**
> Nessler and Herbstreit return, but they still have no chemistry. The commentary can be out of context and absent in key moments

> **Playability**
> The changes to the passing game make NCAA fun again

> **Entertainment**
> NCAA 13 is a refined experience that mainly appeals to the year-in-year-out crowd

> **Replay Value**
> High

If you've been waiting for the NCAA franchise to hit its stride and capitalize on the time developer EA Tiburon has had with the current generation of consoles, that moment has arrived. I don't think this applies to the casual fan, but if you've been playing this series for as long as I have, you're going to be heartened by some of the changes and additions in NCAA 13.

The passing game is revitalized by a slew of improvements that make slinging the ball less frustrating and more fun than ever before. Even with an average quarterback, I like being able to throw to many different parts of the field through a combination of factors like the new ball trajectories, added placement control, and variable throwing speeds. Timing deep balls is still a little tricky, but it's good to know that you can throw to more routes than ever before. Elsewhere, the improved play-action, new quarterback avoidance moves, and quick pass animations also bolster the aerial attack.

The passing game is also improved because the linebackers' jumping abilities have been toned down. This means you can finally throw medium-ranged routes around the middle of the field with confidence. That being said, defenses aren't at a loss in NCAA 13; you have to be careful with the ball. When a defensive back is visually tracking the quarterback and the receiver, they'll aggressively jump routes for interceptions. This is great, but the flipside is that receivers are still too passive, never challenging for the ball and thus having a disadvantage in jump ball situations. NCAA's offensive and defensive balance is also maintained by the fact that receivers drop more balls outside of their normal catch radius and lose more contested balls than in previous years.

The on-the-field gameplay sells this game, but scouting in NCAA's Dynasty mode is another important addition. The mechanic is straightforward, where you're granted information for the more time you put into it, but I like how scouting and recruiting work together. You can uncover gems and busts, which in turn influences where those players are on your recruit board.

However, I still think the recruiting feature needs more points distinction among the different pitches you give recruits, and overall Dynasty mode needs to be injected with some color and personality.

Similarly, both Road to Glory and the new Heisman Challenge (where you can play and unlock Heisman campaign seasons for historic winners of the trophy in a player-focused format like Road to Glory) introduce a new mechanic that offers a limited boost. Reaction Time is a replenishing resource based on your players' awareness meter that lets you slow down play in real-time. I didn't mind this gimmick in the Road to Glory/Heisman Challenge context, because at least it makes these modes more fun than they normally are.

NCAA games are always different from year to year, but this year's additions are noticeable improvements. NCAA 13 doesn't take the kind of giant leap forward that will be noticed by the masses, but it's an installment that will be built upon and which we may look back at as a key moment in the franchise's larger history. » **Matthew Kato**
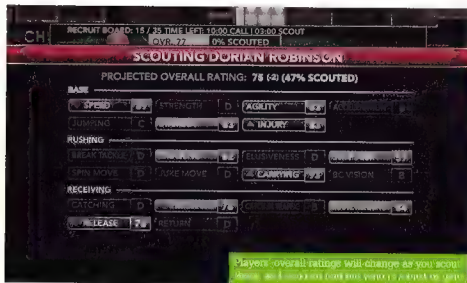
The Heisman Challenge lets you play as past winners in a format similar to Road to Glory
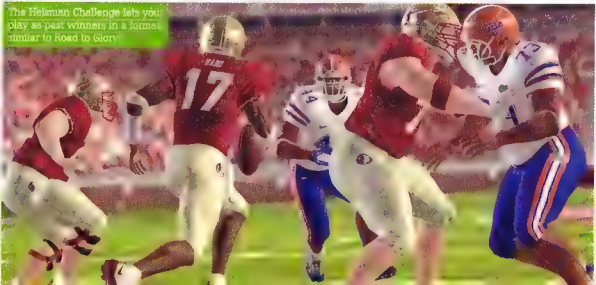
Inversion

A mediocre shooter weighed down by its gimmick

6

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Drop gravity manipulation into an otherwise unremarkable third-person shooter

» **Graphics**
Much of the game is unpleasant to look at, even for a game largely set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland

» **Sound**
Feel free to put this on mute. Nothing in the game, from its soundtrack to the voice acting, stands out

» **Playability**
Other games have toyed with similar mechanics, with more satisfying results

» **Entertainment**
There are too many shooter alternatives out there to recommend this to anyone

» **Replay Value**
Low

Whenever you see a happy family in a game's opening act, chances are the children are going to be abducted, infected, or worse before the credits roll. Inversion follows the increasingly popular vengeful dad template, with a missing daughter giving Davis Russel the motivation he needs to do a lot of crazy stuff.

A mysterious force has invaded his home turf, and in the ensuing chaos Russel's wife is killed and his daughter has gone missing. Russel, a police officer, and his partner Leo Delgado set out to find her while uncovering the mystery behind the assault. Who are these hulking monstrosities? Where did they come from? And where are they taking Earth's children?

Russel leaves no stone unturned during his rescue mission. Fortunately for his lower back, he quickly gains access to the invaders' Gravlink technology, which allows him to manipulate gravity at will. It's a powerful tool, or at least it is conceptually.

Using it, Russel and Delgado can either reduce or increase the gravitational pull in a small area. Affected objects are then temporarily made weightless or yanked down to the ground. You can also pull off a couple of additional maneuvers, such as blasting nearby enemies with a concentrated dose of deadly

gravity or covering yourself with a puny shield. Most of the time, I used the Gravlink to pull enemies out of cover and fling them away. Thanks to their limited range of animation, they don't seem to mind much when you render them weightless.

Inversion's gravitational gimmick extends beyond the scope of your arsenal. Some levels feature glowing gravity pools, which rotate the world when Russel and Delgado step on them. Suddenly, the floor becomes another wall, and enemies are firing at you from what was once the ceiling. It's disconcerting at first, but at least it's a little interesting. The same can't be said for Inversion's horribly tedious bosses. They're cheap and frustrating, and most of them are the same guy, who you end up killing several times over the course of the game.

By the time the final boss encounter came around, I wasn't looking forward to a satisfying conclusion. I was just ready for the game to conclude. Other games have toyed around with gravity in the past, and most of them have had more success. As far as Inversion goes, it's a mediocre shooter that's actually weighed down by its distinguishing gimmick. » **Jeff Cork**

Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes

A bigger and better Lego Gotham

8.25

PS3 • 360

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** Traveller's Tales **Release** June 19 **ESRB** E10+

The days of Batman mutely stalking Arkham Asylum's escapees are behind us; the Caped Crusader finds his voice in Lego Batman 2. Despite being made entirely out of plastic pieces, this version of the character closely mimics the Batman from the animated shows. He speaks in deep tones, is cold and calculating, and above all, reminds us how he hates Superman.

This is the first time characters have spoken in a Traveller's Tales Lego game. The series' brilliant use of pantomiming to deliver story may be missed, but don't think for a second that the humor is gone. The banter between characters is funny, and the animators are responsible for a handful of great sight gags. The dialogue exchanged between Batman and Superman is the high point, and nearly worth the price of admission alone.

Switching to spoken dialogue helps deliver a coherent narrative, something the first Lego Batman didn't do. The story draws parallels to Batman's animated shows; the Joker rudely interrupts Gotham City's swank "Man of the Year" award ceremony, and Bruce Wayne, who is a nominee, ducks out to change into his Batman costume. From here on, the plot revolves around the ensuing chase.

As Joker rampages across Gotham and more villains are thrust into the spotlight, Batman eventually calls upon Superman and his Watchtower-based friends for help. This escalation of events is divided into three acts (although the game doesn't label them as such). The game starts with Batman and Robin working together for a few levels, shifts to Batman and Superman (the World's Finest) for a few stages, and then concludes with a small group of DC's mightiest heroes (the Justice League) working together.

Although Lego Batman 2 still drops players into linear levels filled with construction-based puzzles, 10 hidden Minikits, and rooms filled with Lego objects that can be smashed, this is the first Lego title set within an open world. Lego Indiana Jones 2 explored the idea to a degree, but this game represents the full realization of that concept. The entire city can be explored from the outset, and is loaded with hundreds of secrets.

Soaring across Gotham's skyline as Superman is a treat, especially since the Superman movie theme kicks in as soon as he takes flight. The flight controls work well in open spaces, but can be troublesome near buildings or in tight areas. Screaming down Gotham's streets in the Batmobile (a thrill I hope to experience in a Rocksteady Batman game someday) is equally exciting, but rarely used for anything other than driving from the Batcave to the mission.

As beautiful as Gotham's architecture is (much of it including giant, metal Lego titans), the activities in the overworld are repetitive and lacking the creative spark Traveller's Tales has shown in its Lego games. If one gold brick is found behind a steel plate only Superman can remove, you should be on the lookout for a dozen more. Many of the gold bricks are hidden in the same ways, and it becomes a laborious task to hunt them all down. Don't worry, this isn't Grand Theft Auto – you don't need to search high and low without guidance. All of the hidden bricks, unlockable characters, and citizens in need of help are highlighted on the map. Traveller's Tales has even included a handy marker that will lead you to your desired location.

The most enjoyable secrets to track down are tied to Batman and Robin's different suits – which often require a platform-heavy ascent up a skyscraper. The suits in the first Lego Batman game clashed with the Batman mythos. In this sequel, Robin's hamster-ball power is a head scratcher, and I don't know why Batman would ever engage any villain without invisibility on, but for the most part, the new multipurpose suits fit into the universe. Robin wears a hazmat suit to clean up Joker's chemicals. He also wields Mr. Freeze's ice gun. Batman once again has his heavy armor and makes good use of his cape for gliding.

Playing as the different Bat-types is fun, but their usage for puzzles and secrets is repeated far too often. The Justice League characters bring a wealth of new powers, but they are mainly used in the final stages and for the post-story secret hunting. The Justice League characters are a blast – I just wish they were a larger part of the game. Flash's speed is harnessed beautifully, and Superman is the unstoppable juggernaut we've always wanted him to be in video games. This isn't saying much, but Lego Batman 2 is the best Superman game yet.

Traveller's Tales took some chances with Lego Batman 2. The addition of spoken dialogue paid off well, and I hope it becomes a standard for all of this developer's games moving forward. Moving the classic Lego gameplay into a vast overworld is also a success, but the redundancy in secret solutions in this play space hurts the experience, almost turning it into a mundane collect-a-thon. Thankfully, the classic Lego gameplay dominates the main game, making Lego Batman 2 another goofy brick-building blast. **» Andrew Reiner**
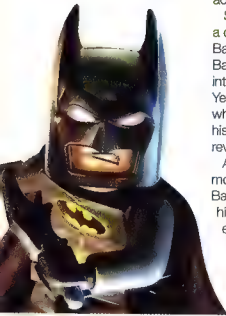
Diablo III

A new high water mark for action/RPGs

No game in my memory has inspired such passions between announcement and release as Diablo III. The follow-up to one of the most popular PC games of all time was destined for a historic level of scrutiny to begin with, and one controversial decision by Blizzard after another poured jet fuel on the already blazing bonfires of fan anticipation and outrage. The auction house, radical skill system redesign, and always-online requirements pose serious questions to fans. The ultimate tally comes out well in Blizzard's favor, but not without reservations.

The first five days after launch were rocky for would-be heroes as server problems, extended emergency maintenance, and bouts of crippling lag rendered Diablo III unplayable during peak hours – exactly what fans had feared would happen after less-than-stellar results from pre-release stress tests. Players who prefer to confront hell's minions alone were rightfully furious that Blizzard's decision to remove traditional offline single-player from the game locked them out of the game they had dropped $60 on. The servers have been rock-solid since launch week and the rough start will hopefully be forgotten, but players with no interest in multiplayer have every right to be angry.

Server problems aside, Diablo III is an excellent action/RPG that carries the genre's torch well and sets a new standard. The story is finally respectable, even if it's not BioWare-caliber, and much better integrated into the gameplay. Combat is still the heart and soul of the game, and hits all the notes fans expect. Skills that would be laughably overpowered in any other game start unlocking before level 10, and they're not just ultimate attacks – many are what pass for regular attacks in Diablo III.

The ability to respecialize your character with no restriction or cost still divides the Diablo community, but I wouldn't have it any other way. One of Diablo III's foremost joys is experimenting with new skills and runes and the tactics they allow. I've switched primary attacks on my wizard a dozen times, and every time it's almost like playing a different class.

Don't expect to spam one skill over and over and win with any regularity. The most impressive aspect of Diablo III is how its enemy design forces players just far enough out of their comfort zone to make them think on their feet without completely screwing over any one build or archetype. Regular monsters employ dozens of variations on ranged attacks, nasty melee strikes, teleports, buffs, debuffs, and zones of death on the ground. Minibosses come with randomly generated special abilities, like mortar foes who launch devastating fireballs and frozen enemies' deadly frost mines. Story-based bosses are reminiscent of MMO bosses, with different phases and attack patterns players must survive while chewing through their epic health pools.

I'm currently playing my wizard as a crowd-controlling passive attacker who lets blizzards and venom hydras slow and poison entire armies of foes while avoiding incoming attacks – a useful tactic in later difficulties when monsters can tear heroes apart in seconds. Compare that playstyle with the glass cannon fireworks of my friend's wizard, who relies on extreme-damage disintegrate beams (which he affectionately calls "LAZORZ") to obliterate his enemies before his rotation of defensive cooldowns ends. While we play the same class, our styles are completely different and complementary.

I've never played a game that encouraged co-op so strongly and made joining up with friends or random Internet people so effortless on a technical level. The emphasis on co-op extends beyond the outstanding interface for meeting friends, though. Normal difficulty is trivial, but co-op makes harder modes much easier when, for instance, one player is slowing and freezing everything and another is LAZORing it to death. You can progress by yourself, but you'll have a much better time with a friend at your side.

Diablo III's combat is the best the genre has ever seen. The loot game, on the other hand, is brought down somewhat by the presence of the auction house. Sets and legendary items are almost entirely restricted to the level-cap game, which removes one of the better hooks from the first 40 hours you play any given character. The enormous player base ensures that you can almost always find a level-appropriate item with nearly optimal stats for a relatively trivial cost at the auction house, which removes much of the thrill of finding the perfect loot drop on your own.

For all the gnashing of teeth over the real-life auction house, the heavy cut that Blizzard takes out of every transaction restricts the vast majority of its use to super-powerful high-level items. It is also trivial to avoid if you're opposed to paying real money for in-game loot.

Diablo III is a great game, and every bit the landmark achievement in the genre that everyone expected out of Blizzard. The presentation and combat are second to none, and the co-op focus is well executed and a natural fit for the genre. It's a shame that the online requirement is a deal-breaker for some, whether because of a moral stance or a crappy Internet connection. The cheapening of good items thanks to their ready availability on the auction house is a bummer. Whether or not you stick with the game for the long term through Inferno difficulty, though, I can't imagine the gamer that wouldn't have a great time with Diablo III for a trip or two through the story. **Adam Biessener**

Civilization V: Gods & Kings

Still the king of strategy

8.5

PC

» **Concept**
Add religion and espionage to Civ V while changing some balance issues and fleshing out previously underserved eras like World War I

» **Graphics**
It looks great. This expansion maintains the strong, clear iconography and interface design that sets the bar for strategy games

» **Sound**
The sound and music are simple and unobtrusive, which is pretty much ideal for a game like this

» **Playability**
The new additions are slotted into the existing interface perfectly, presenting their information and options without adding clutter

» **Entertainment**
This is the new definitive Civilization experience, and comes highly recommended to all but the most diehard Civ V haters

» **Replay Value**
High

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** Firaxis Games **Release** June 19 **ESRB** E 10+

My love for Civilization V is enthusiastic and unapologetic. Gods & Kings is an outstanding expansion for players like me who found reasons to sink 200-plus hours into the base game. The major features it adds, religion and espionage, integrate smoothly into the Civ V experience and add interesting options without introducing unnecessary tedium or micromanagement.

One of Civ V's strongest aspects is how forthright and direct the consequences of your decisions are, and Gods & Kings maintains that core design tenet. Each belief incorporated into a religion or skulduggery undertaken by a spy has an obvious, powerful impact. Instead of adding together minor multipliers to tweak your research efficiency, you're rigging city-state elections, stealing technology outright, converting whole cities to new beliefs, or enabling entirely new religious buildings.

Gods & Kings' greatest success is how it enhances the Civ V experience without adding appreciable complexity. With rare exceptions, the player's input into matters of religion and espionage are limited to single decisions every five to ten turns or so. As streamlined as it is, Civ V is still a massively complex strategy game. The way that the expansion keeps the player's attention on big-picture global politics and empire development is a significant accomplishment.

Fleshing out a great deal of diplomatic nuance that the base game lacked is Gods & Kings' third pillar. Though your responses to rivals' statements are still binary in most cases, most have real consequences now. Chiding a belligerent empire's aggression toward a friendly city-state could spark a war, while forgiving their actions dramatically hurts relations with that minor nation. Breaking a promise to stop expansion near a neighbor has wide-reaching negative diplomatic effects. Rather than the often-obtuse decisions by AI leaders in the base game, you can usually see the path of reasoning that led to the current state of geopolitics. Additionally, the quests given out by city-states to win their approval are much more varied, and foster richer interactions.

Balance is different in the expansion, and I'm torn on whether it's an improvement or a step back. The addition of new luxury resources as well as the ready availability of happiness boosts through religion makes it much easier to maintain civic order. This makes expansion far simpler, and unfortunately the AI often can't keep up. Even with a large, sprawling empire, I have been able to maintain happiness in the 30s and higher (levels unheard of in vanilla Civ V) while largely ignoring happiness buildings like colosseums and theaters. As in the base game, AI leaders regularly leave vast swathes of territory inexplicably uncolonized and consequently get buried under larger empires. Rapid expansion has always been the dominant strategy in Civilization, and the change to happiness in Gods & Kings swings the needle farther in that direction after the base game went to such pains to ensure that smaller empires had a viable path to victory.

The Civ V AI that many players despise is improved in Gods & Kings, but not by a lot. It still fails to capture cities it should easily roll over thanks to baffling tactical stupidity, and it still doesn't expand as far as it should in most cases. At least you don't run into unimproved tiles around AI capitals in the mid to late game anymore, and it's much better about upgrading its units instead of sending warriors to die uselessly against crossbowmen.

My enthusiasm for Civ V has continued unabated for a full year now, and this expansion adds new fuel to the fires of conquest that still burn in me. Despite the days of playtime I've put into the base game, I can't imagine going back after a few rounds with Gods & Kings. I strongly recommend this expansion to all Civ V players – though you may need to jump a difficulty level to account for how powerful the new toys are. » **Adam Biessener**

Unit relative strength has been rebalanced, giving previously underpowered units like spearmen a powerful role

Gravity Rush

Down becomes up in Sony Japan's Vita debut

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Sony Japan Studio **Release** June 12 **ESRB** T

8

Originally planned as a PS3 title, Gravity Rush has finally found its way to the Vita (despite missing the system's launch window). With an intriguing gravity mechanic and relative lack of gimmicky motion controls, Sony's Japan Studio has created one of the more enjoyable early titles on the Vita.

You play as a young girl named Kat, and the game doesn't waste much time in introducing you to the unique gift she possesses. Thanks to the aid of a mystical cat named Dusty, she's able to bend gravity to her will, allowing her to travel the airborne city of Hekseville with ease. Utilizing the R button to shift gravity (changing which direction is "down"), Kat is free to collect hidden gems and take out hostile monsters. Most of these baddies feature specific weak spots, and you shift gravity until you have just the right angle for a flying kick. This makes for some interesting combat scenarios, but it also makes the very act of navigating the city enjoyable.

As you progress, the 21 episodes do a good job of mixing up the action. You may find yourself fighting a constant stream of monsters in one episode, followed by a platforming-heavy section that limits the use of your gravity mechanic in the next. The hidden gems you collect along the way are used to upgrade Kat's health, increase the length of time she can manipulate gravity, or make her attacks more deadly.

Kat's gravity-shifting powers are the star of the show in Gravity Rush, as the story struggles to maintain focus. Characters are constantly introduced and dismissed throughout the narrative, leaving you wondering who's important and who's disposable. Despite this, the upgrade system and gravity mechanic kept me engaged throughout Kat's adventure. **Dan Ryckert**

> **Concept**
> Guide the protagonist Kat through a gravity-bending adventure
>
> **Graphics**
> Gravity Rush's anime-like art style suits the game perfectly
>
> **Sound**
> Poppy and upbeat tunes accompany you throughout the city of Hekseville
>
> **Playability**
> While occasionally disorienting, the gravity mechanic is a lot of fun to play with
>
> **Entertainment**
> It may not feature constant jaw-dropping moments, but the game remains entertaining throughout
>
> **Replay Value**
> Moderate

one of several antagonists

Sins of a Solar Empire: Rebellion

The definitive Sins experience

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Stardock Entertainment **Developer** Ironclad Games **Release** June 12 **ESRB** T

8

This expansion to the real-time strategy game from 2008 that fuses galactic empire-building with impressive tactical spaceship battles is a fantastic reason to revisit one of the better recent franchises in PC gaming. The elements it adds – enormous Titan-class ships, tiny corvettes, and minor differences between six sub-factions – are squarely aimed at experienced players, but the package is so good that there are very few PC gamers I wouldn't recommend this to.

Sins of a Solar Empire's stately pace allows the game to feel halfway to Civilization or Master of Orion while remaining real-time. You colonize new planets, build sprawling trade networks, spread your culture through the stars, and construct massive fleets full of varied ship types and sizes. The purpose of this entire enterprise, though, is war. Grand space battles pitting empires against each other are both awesome and inevitable.

Sins was a deep, complex game when it initially released. The two micro-expansions since (both included in this release) added a lot more, with huge customizable starbases and richer diplomatic interactions. Rebellion's additions feel about the size of those two combined, and make the total package a vast game that takes weeks of exploration and experimentation to understand, much less master.

The new ship types, one larger and one smaller than those previously available, add diversity to fleets. Titans are mostly fun because they're a fleet unto themselves, and who doesn't like smashing an opponent with a planet-sized ship? Corvettes give brand-new tactical options in battle, like the ability to disable and otherwise mess with enemy fleets. I'm not convinced that Sins needed more ship types, as the existing frigate-cruiser-capital triangle works so well, but longtime players will appreciate having new tools to play with.

Each of the three races now has two sub-factions with slightly different tech trees that specialize farther in one direction or another. TEC players, for example, choose between advanced capabilities in system defense or raiding. The variations are minor, but again present a nice change of pace for veteran players.

Rebellion isn't a massive departure for Sins of a Solar Empire, but it's a good enough reason to get back into the game or to discover for the first time one of the more interesting evolutions of the strategy genre in recent memory. **Adam Biessener**

> **Concept**
> Add two new ship classes and three sub-factions to the grand real-time space strategy game
>
> **Graphics**
> Stardock insists that the engine is significantly improved, but I can't see it. Not that it matters; Sins is still a fine-looking game
>
> **Sound**
> More audio cues for the many goings-on in the mid to late game would be nice, but that's a minor quibble
>
> **Playability**
> You usually don't notice the interface, which is a high compliment for a game like this
>
> **Entertainment**
> Building space empires and smashing massive fleets together has never felt so good
>
> **Replay Value**
> High

the score

3 | Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor

Platform 360 **Release** June 19 **ESRB** M

Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor is as fun as fumbling around for your keys in the dark while being pelted with billiard balls. The mech-combat genre isn't overflowing with alternatives, but they do exist. Save yourself the aggravation and pick any one of those. – Jeff Cork

6.5 | Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** July 3 **ESRB** E

The combination of a solid racing framework with the Ferrari license could have worked out, but this is a zero-sum game that appeases nobody. Ferrari Racing Legends does not exhibit the best of what the sports car brand nor the developer have to offer. – Matthew Kato

6 | Heroes of Ruin

Platform 3DS **Release** July 17 **ESRB** T

Heroes of Ruin has technical issues, poor economics balancing, and combat that can't quite keep up with its own speed demands, but there is enough loot to collect to keep you fighting if you're looking for a cooperative diversion. – Kyle Hilliard

7.75 | Metal Gear Solid HD Collection

Platform Vita **Release** June 22 **Rating** M

Konami seems to be making a focused effort to wear out fans' patience with this handheld HD Collection. It isn't ideal for newcomers or for longtime fans, diminishing both its audience and value. – Joe Juba

7 | Resistance: Burning Skies

Platform Vita **Release** May 29 **ESRB** M

While the visuals won't sell you on the handheld's power like Uncharted: Golden Abyss, this Resistance campaign packs the big boss fights and unique weaponry you expect from the series. As long as you're not hoping for a console-quality multiplayer experience, Burning Skies should satisfy fans. – Dan Ryckert

7 | Pokémon Conquest

Platform DS **Release** June 18 **ESRB** E

Pokémon Conquest places Pokémon into the world of tactical turn-based strategy with little kicking and screaming. Unfortunately, its simplicity will turn away tactical purists, and its complexity and management demands will turn off fans of the traditional Pokémon RPG. – Kyle Hilliard

My First Game

Rod Fergusson: *Microsoft Train Simulator*

Before he helped create the Gears of War series and became director of production at Epic Games, Rod Fergusson cut his teeth crafting a less violent affair. Microsoft Train Simulator may not evoke the same blood- and testosterone-soaked images of the Gears of War series, but Fergusson and his development team stared death in the face on more than one occasion. Producing the locomotive PC title would open the door for Fergusson to start working on Xbox games, but first his crew would have to chase trains and avoid being electrocuted.

+ Training Days

"If you can work on a Microsoft simulation game, you have it made – because the thing that's important about them is it has to be real. For every train we selected, we got to go to that location and photograph it. We even recorded the wheels on the rails. I've recorded every foot of track in Montana for 10 hours. Microsoft flew me to Venice to ride the Orient Express overnight to Paris, where we had our own private car. I was hanging an engineer off the back of the car, recording the wheels. You know, the waiter is coming in asking, 'Would you like tea, sir?' And I'm like, 'Not right now, we're recording!'

"We also pulled a prank doing the Orient Express. We made a stop and our sound guy [Matt Johnston] got out, and he's like, 'Okay, I want to get the wheels starting up as it goes to pull out.' He's decked out with headphones, recording gear, and he's got the boom mic. So the train pulls out and he starts recording the sound of the wheels. Then we were supposed to stop and pick him up, but of course, we don't. So he starts running down the train tracks, trying to get on. It was awesome."

+ Big in Japan

"I got to go to Japan, and we were trying to get the sound of the electric arm raising to touch the wire on the bullet train, and the Japanese people around us were freaking out. They were sure it was going to arc onto our sound guy's graphite pole. So we're all basically waiting for the sound guy to explode. We kept expecting this spark to go across the mic boom and blow up. It was hilarious.

"One of the things our sound guy had was a microphone which was a mannequin head that has two microphones for the ears to capture accurate spatialization. We were in the train car with this head on a pole, recording the ambiance. He went up to a piano guy and asked him to play this certain song, because he wanted to get some ambient recording for the game. The piano guy goes, 'I can't play that song.' He's like, 'Is something wrong with it?' and the piano guy says, 'I swore I'd never play that song. That was my dad's song, and he died, and I'll never play that song again.' It was just weird stuff like that."

+ Off the Rails, Into the Water

"I was sitting there trying to figure out the ratios of the train's airbrake–compression system. There's the compression ratio and stuff, and I'm doing all this math trying to figure out how we would do it with the freight trains. I get a phone call from my developer working on Blood Wake [an Xbox boat combat game], and they're like, 'Hey Rod! What're you doin'?' I'm like, 'Uh, trying to figure out airbrake–compression ratios, what're you doing?' And he goes, 'We're just blowin' s--- up! It's awesome!' I'm like, 'Bastards!' So it was quite different having this very hardcore simulation and then moving onto gun-boat warfare." ◆

Head over to gameinformer.com/mag to see a video interview of Rod reflecting on Microsoft Train Simulator

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