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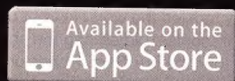
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And It Begins...

On a cold night in February, Sony Computer Entertainment made its first move in the next-generation race. We still have much to learn about the upcoming PlayStation 4 and its chief competitor, the next Xbox, but we are off to a good start.

The importance of empowering independent developers and making the machine easy to access (with quick start and background updating) can't be underestimated. Premium games with massive budgets aren't going anywhere, but to keep gamers engaged the next-generation console makers must embrace and promote different styles of games and publishing models.

Sony gets this, and I'm hopeful Microsoft does as well, but these important additions are not enough. I look forward to learning how game developers and publishers plan to use tablets and mobile devices to expand the gaming experience. Not to say every title needs these added dimensions, but I feel these markets – which are full of new games and new people experiencing our hobby for the first time – must be brought into the fold to show these new people the wonders of high-powered console gaming in the living room where I feel some of the most impressive examples reside.

I'm thrilled that the next generation is upon us, and we will learn much leading up to the holiday release. Next-generation games already look mighty impressive (just check out The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt last month and Thief in this issue). Now let's hope gamers get the pricing and online services that are such important pieces to the success of this next evolution in gaming.

Check gameinformer.com for next-generation news as it happens.

Cheers,

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

2

0413 contents

»40

Thief

The Thief series was among the first stealth games to give players choice in how they tackled the world in front of them. Garrett, the titular thief of the franchise, hid among the shadows favoring stealth over combat long before Sam Fisher or Corvo Attano. The series is getting a long overdue reboot, hoping to revive the improvisational stealth genre that it helped create.
by Ben Reeves
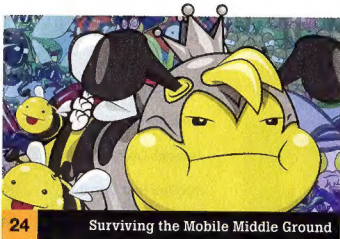
24 Surviving the Mobile Middle Ground

16 Bungie Leaves Halo Behind and Embraces Its New Destiny

70

10

38 Opinion: Destroy All Humanoids?

89

65 Game Infarcer

regulars

92

88

34 Interview: Ophir Lupu

91

58 Defiance

94

30 Debate: Is Digging Through a Franchise's History Worth Your Time?

52 Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

78

72 Remember Me

games index

ANYONE CAN SEE TYRANNY. MARINES ADVANCE TO STOP IT.

MARINES.COM

This month in Feedback, readers rejoice over a family-friendly game, question the mature themes in some not so family-friendly games, chat about next-gen consoles, and jump through an absurd number of hoops to play...Too Human?!

Simply Marvelous

When I got issue 238, I was so happy to see the Marvel characters jumping out at me. Your cover stories are often M-rated games that are strictly off limits to me for a couple more years, and I'm often interested in 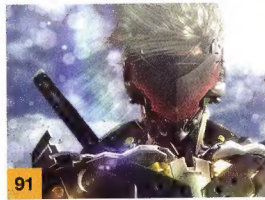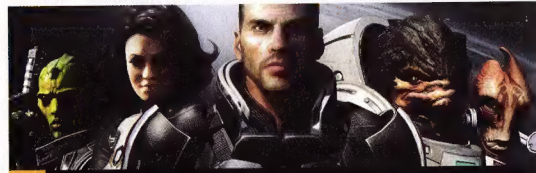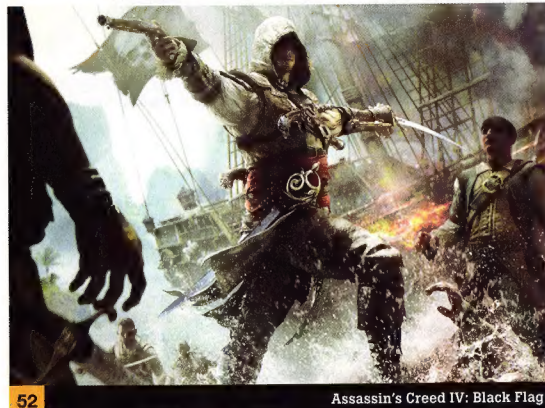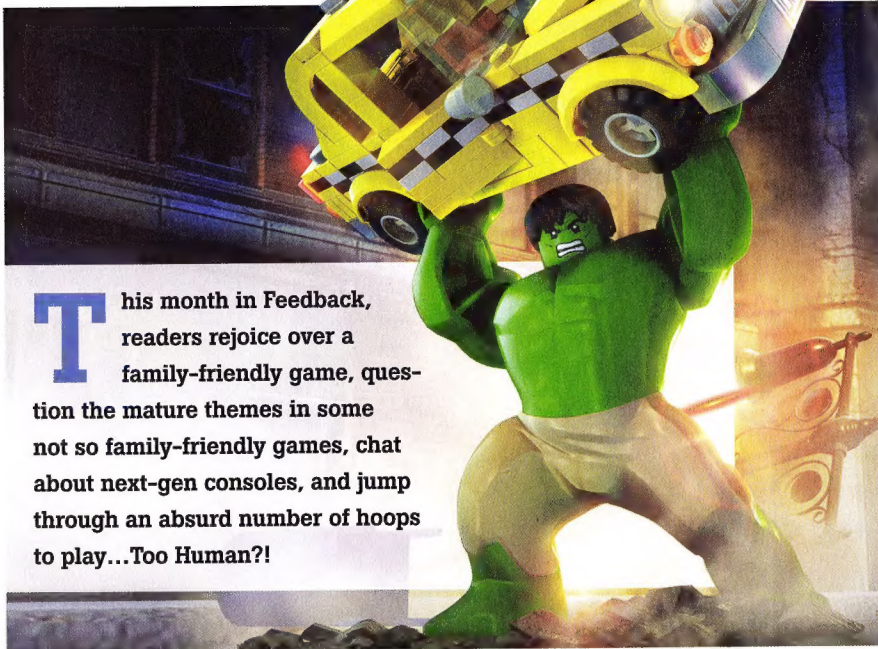them but never get a chance to play them. But that changed when the Lego Marvel Super Heroes issue came to my doorstep. I have been playing the Lego games since I was eight years old. Thank you for putting a game on the cover that younger players can relate to.

Owen Puleston
via email

Thanks so much for your Lego Marvel Super Heroes cover – it was awesome! I have been a Lego games fan since Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga, and was delighted that TT Games decided to include voice acting with Lego Batman 2 and beyond. My oldest son (who's six years old) enjoys playing them with me as well. From the article, it sounds like it's going to be amazing, and I am looking forward to it being in my top three games of the year next to GTA V (of course) and Gears of War: Judgment.

Rashida Merritt-Davis
via email

While some readers wrote in to gripe about us featuring a kid's game on the cover, anyone who has taken the time to actually try a Lego game knows they're fun for players of all ages. We expect Lego Marvel Super Heroes to be no different.

Mega Maniacs

Thank you for the wonderful Classic article on Mega Man (In The Year 20XX, issue 238). I have been a Mega-fan from day one, and reading this article made my whole month! I am glad to see that Game Informer is celebrating the Blue Bomber's 25th birthday in style. It is always a pleasure re-discovering the roots of some of the industry's most iconic characters. On top of everything else, the layout of the article was fantastic and the interviews were great!

Josh Reno
via email

I just wanted to thank you for your Mega Man article in issue 238. When I first read that Mega Man Legends 3 was canceled in an earlier issue, I thought that was seriously the end of my favorite game series. "Salt in the wound" barely begins to describe my feelings toward Capcom on that day. Your anniversary article has restored my faith that one day there may be a sequel on my shelf next to the last two MML games.

Devin Deveaux
via email

While the possibility of us ever playing a Mega Man

Legends 3 seems unlikely, we hold out hope that one day Capcom will adopt a radical business model based on actually giving fans what they want.

A Candlelight Vigil

I was very sad to hear about the THQ layoffs. I know that many of their talented employees have been taken on by other companies like Ubisoft, and that is great to hear, but the one studio that didn't get purchased is my favorite of all: Vigil Games. I know I'm not alone in my feelings about Vigil and their work on the Darksiders series. I want to help in any way I can to ensure the employees that made up Vigil find a home with another publisher, but I don't know what I can do as a fan.

Andrew Forbes
via email

THQ's dissolution is certainly unfortunate, especially for Vigil. However, all is not lost: 35 members of Vigil – including co-founder David Adams – have been hired by Crytek to open up a new Austin-based studio, dubbed Crytek USA. While Crytek has stated that the new team won't be working on a Darksiders sequel, the creative minds behind Vigil will still be entertaining us with new games in the future.

Too Inhumane

After reading that a court ordered Silicon Knights to recall its games that use Epic's Unreal Engine 3, I rushed to the computer to order Too Human and X-Men Destiny. Too Human was not available online, so I had my brother pick up a copy for me at the mall. When I tried playing it, my Xbox froze. I took the disc out and it turns out it was scratched. I tried ordering it online again, and after waiting two weeks I got my new game, but my Xbox said it was an unrecognized disc. Finally, I went for broke and tried to buy it off of the Xbox Live Marketplace, but Too Human had been removed four days earlier. I'm not sure if I should waste money on another copy or just drop the matter altogether.

Samuel Gregory
via email

Let us help you out with a bit of advice, Sam: You should definitely drop the matter. We applaud your commitment, but you've already spent way more time and effort than Too Human is worth.

The More Things Change…

I was just reading through issue 238 and I noticed something incredibly wrong. When I read Feedback (which I always do first) I noticed that there was a lack of people complaining about review scores and the way you rated the Game of the Year. What spurred this glorious change of events? Did people finally realize that your reviews are reflections of your opinions and are meant to guide people with similar tastes by explaining what succeeded and needed to be improved in a game? Or did you simply not print them?

Mason Finstad
via email

Oh how we wish it were the former, Mason. In reality, we think our readers were still too busy playing last year's holiday games to ply us with crackpot arguments over review scores last month. It appears that respite is officially over.

…The More Things Stay the Same

I was shocked after reading your review of Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch and finding out that you gave it a 7. I had high hopes for the game, because I am a big fan of both Studio Ghibli and Level-5. However, after reading several other reviews that praise the game and give scores ranging from 87 to 95, I can only say that your opinion is wrong.

Austin Duby
via email

We received a number of letters complaining about our Ni No Kuni review, but none were as elegantly concise as Austin's. The "shock" over Kim's explanation of why she found the game average; the unwavering dedication to a game without actually playing it; the belief that individual opinions can be collated into an objective assessment of a game's worth; the condemnation of divergent viewpoints – all classic rhetoric that confuses the purpose of a review.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions:

"I'm kinda confused, is the game GTA V gonna be fun like GTA IV?"

That's probably a safe bet.

My friends and I are always fighting over whether the 360 or PS3 is better. Could do a pro/con list so I could prove the 360 is better?

No.

Is it considered "environmentally" safe to start a fireplace using pages ripped out of Game Informer?

Sure, if you can live with yourself afterwards.

Confused Reader of the Month:

"Hi, I'm interested to buy some of your games but I need to know if you can send the games to Mexico, and if you can, how much money I will spend?"

Reader Gibberish:

"i want to have a storrie in one of the maggizines about how im going to get a the acchevements for all of the games."

Question of the Month:

What's the most frustrating moment you've ever experienced in a video game?

(Left) This month Miller rocked out in BandFuse with Reverb's Tracie Snitker and Realta's Jon Heiner. Everything was going fine until Miller bit the head off a dove. **(Right)** Activision's Robert Cooper and Melissa Fricke and Sandbox Strategies' Bill Linn were brimming with Turtle Power after showing us Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows.
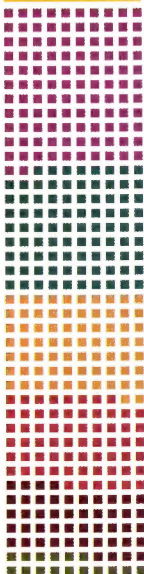
CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

Going Too Far?

Some recent games have dealt with very mature issues. The Walking Dead had a line implying a character had been raped, and in Far Cry 3 it was insinuated that a character was used as a sex slave. Do you think that using the theme of sexual abuse gives ammunition to people who don't understand this form of media, much the way people blame violent games for violence in real life?
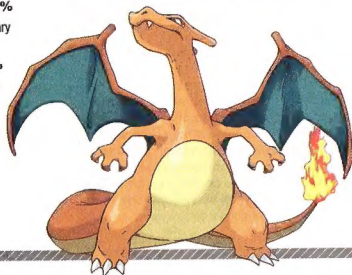
Sean Mahaffey
via email

Tackling mature subject matter in a video game invites scrutiny not only from those who are critical of gaming, but from gaming proponents as well. That's the price developers pay for addressing controversial topics, and questioning and debating those choices isn't a bad thing. Having that discussion is better than avoiding mature issues in video games altogether over fears of backlash.

Dragon Shout

Charizard is not a dragon (Top Ten Dragons, issue 238). He's classified as a "Fire/Flying" type Pokémon and is noted in every variant of the Pokédex as a "Flame Pokémon." Dragonite however, is a Dragon! He's classified as "Dragon/Flying" and has a Pokédex classification of "Dragon Pokémon." Remember to always double-check your facts.

Kris Gaffney
via email

You may have a point, Kris – but we don't really care how Pokémon's nutty classifications work. If you're a giant flying lizard that breathes fire, you're a dragon in our book.

- Next-Gen Console Choices **28%**
- Lego Marvel Super Heroes Excitement **22%**
- Mega Man Anniversary Celebration **18%**
- Review Gripes **16%**
- Bad Choices Opinion Love **12%**
- "Charizard is not a dragon!" **4%**

Decisions, Decisions

In issue 238, we asked readers what next-gen system they plan on buying and why. Sony's successor ended up with a slight edge over Microsoft's next Xbox, while a number of readers stated they plan to stick with their current consoles for the time being. Here are some of the replies:

I am looking forward to the next PlayStation because after going through five Xbox 360 consoles and their red rings of death, I trust Sony more than Microsoft.

Michael Van Beek

I am most likely going to buy the Xbox 720 for my next-gen console. I've played on Xbox consoles all my life, and I don't plan on changing.

Sammy Rider

I plan on buying a PC, because I like having customizable software and hardware. I also like to mod and use a trackball.

Garrett Blackwood

As of right now, I don't plan on buying any of them. I am currently enjoying my Xbox 360 and the wealth of games it currently offers. Much further down the road, after the consoles have been out a year or two, I might consider buying one.

Ken Paschall

{Left} The party was in full swing at this year's D.I.C.E. when Reiner and Bertz caught up with Gamefly's Ryh-Ming Poon, 343 Industries' Kiki Wolfkill, and Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences communications manager Debby Chen. {Right} Also enjoying the party: Hit Detection founder N'Gai Croal and Fortyseven Communications CEO Sibel Sunar.

GI SPY

8

1 Tovio Rogers
Maybe people will take Luigi seriously now that he has Dhalsim legs.

2 Stephen Rodriguez
We're not looking forward to the Big Daddy vs. Elizabeth fund that comes next.

3 Armando Alday
Look, Kojima...if you're going to do Metal Gear Kids, you gotta get rid of Snake's moustache.

4 Brittney Simon
Olimar needs to stop asking his friends to recreate The Last Kiss picture.
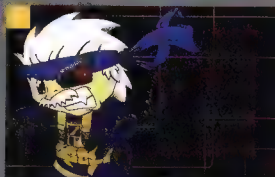
Corrections:
In Issue 238's Gear section, we listed Maze as the publisher and distributor of the NeoGeo X. While Maze is the distributor in Europe, the North American distributor of the NeoGeo X is Tommo.
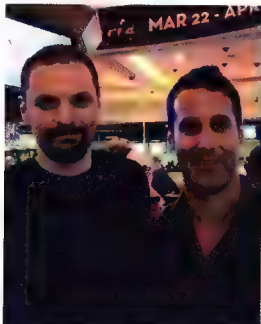
(Left) After ditching his suit and tie, Reiner grabbed some drinks with former THQ president Jason Rubin. (Center) Sony took over the GI office this month. Leading the charge was Sony Santa Monica's Michael Pulst, Naughty Dog's Arne Meyer, and Sony's illustrious Aram Jabbari. (Right) For EEDAR's Jim Reilly, D.I.C.E. provided the perfect opportunity to explain his love of snazzy suits to Hit Detection consultant Justin Blankenship – and anyone else who would listen.

connect

Sony's Next Step:

The Play

NOTABLES

Station 4

New Console Coming
This Holiday Season

At a special event in New York, Sony shared details about its next-generation system unsurprisingly named the PlayStation 4. The console's naming convention may be expected, but it's clear that the upcoming system is an attempt to make a clean break from the PS3. Sony's event eschewed a customary E3 announcement in June, not only showing that the company was trying to wade into new territory in the way it talked about its system, but also representing a difference in how it unveiled its new console. Many details about the PS4 remain unknown, but Sony's introduction of first- and third-party games, as well as the philosophies behind the platform's design, shows that it is ready for the next generation.

by Maxwell Eden

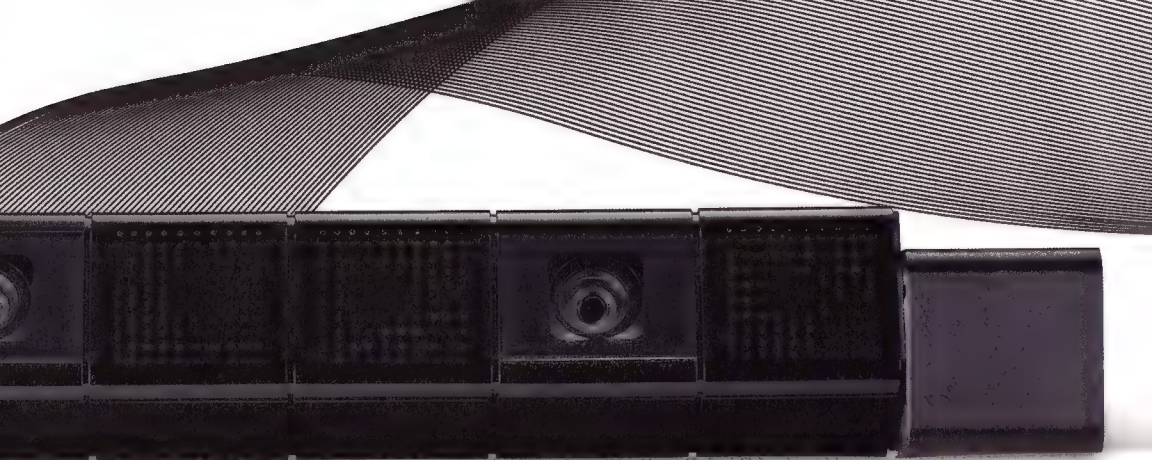ne of the points the company stressed repeatedly was the developer-friendly nature of the PS4 – a key feature if Sony hopes to avoid some of the growing pains the PS3 experienced. Developers were looped into the PS4's creation as early as 2008, and the PC-like architecture gives them a familiarity that eluded the last Sony system. Mark Cerny, veteran game developer and the PS4's lead system architect, says most of those problems stemmed from the Cell processor. "I'm proud of what we accomplished with Cell on PlayStation 3," he said. "But at the same time, the need to radically customize technology can interfere with the design innovation that's so central to game creation."

The PS4 boasts 8GB of unified GDDR5 RAM – a major jump forward from the combined 512MB in the PS3. The memory increase should give developers more latitude in areas like graphics and physics. An Unreal Engine 4 demo showcased a fiery elemental knight running in real-time on prototype hardware, and it used the GPU for impressive particle effects. Later on in the presentation, Quantic Dream's David Cage revealed his company's engine for the PS4 using various features that he said were previously reserved for only CG films.

Cerny also noted that the system's RAM is being used to help the CPU with tasks, as well as allowing gamers to power up the system and quickly resume a game where they left off. Jesse Divnich, vice president of insights at video game research firm EEDAR, thinks this feature is "ingenious," and believes that the system's ability to let people quickly engage with games will help it compete with mobile and tablet titles.

Sony also addressed developers on the other end of the spectrum – the indies – by assuring them that the PS4's marketplace infrastructure is friendly to their needs. Jonathan Blow, developer of Braid, says The Witness will make its console debut on PS4, and Sony will allow self-published games to employ various pay structures (including free-to-play). This could be a major differentiating factor between the PS4 and the Xbox 360 successor if Microsoft sticks to its more closed policy.

The PlayStation 4 presentation also revealed that the new console gives gamers social tools that let them share and connect with their friends. The controller features a Share button that lets players post gameplay video footage in chunks onto social networks. You will also be able to live broadcast play courtesy of Sony's partnership with UStream. The system is capable of reaching out to fellow gamers in various other ways (even if you're both playing different games), including letting friends take control of your game if you get stuck or placing items in the world to assist you. Friends can also offer help in the form of messages posted to your screen.

Last year Sony acquired cloud-based gaming service Gaikai, and at the press conference CEO David Perry took to the stage to talk about the key role cloud gaming plays with the PlayStation 4. Although the console uses a Blu-ray disc drive like its predecessor, the PS4 won't play PS3 games due to the major differences between the core architecture. Likewise, PSN titles and game saves from the previous system won't be transferable. However, Perry talked about a future when players would be able to access previous generations of PlayStation games (from PS1, PS2, and PS3) via the cloud – on any device. Gaikai's expertise is also being used to allow gamers to play PS4 titles on their Vita using a Wi-Fi connection between the two.

PlayStation 4's Specs So Far*

Main Processor
- Single-chip custom processor
- CPU: x86-64 AMD Jaguar, 8 cores
- GPU: AMD next-generation Radeon-based graphics engine, 1.84 TFLOPS

Memory
- 8GB GDDR5

Hard Disk
- Drive Built-in (capacity to be determined)

Optical Drive
- Blu-ray drive 6xCAV (read only)
- DVD 8xCAV (read only)

I/O
- USB 3.0
- AUX

Communication
- Ethernet (10BASE-T, 100BASE-TX, 1000BASE-T)
- IEEE 802.11 b/g/n
- Bluetooth 2.1 (EDR)

AV output
- HDMI
- Analog-AV out
- Digital Output (optical)

*Subject to change

Finally, the system is more tailored to its owner, ranging from targeted ads and game suggestions in the interface (including the pre-loading of games the system thinks you may purchase) to deeper Facebook integration that shares information about your trophies, favorite games, etc. with friends. If you own a smartphone or tablet, these can be used as secondary screens via a PlayStation App, whether for game augmentation or to purchase titles and download them to your system at home. In general, downloading digital content will be easier thanks to the ability to download in the background, play a game before it's fully downloaded, and download games while the system is powered off. As connection-focused as the PS4 is, it doesn't require an Internet connection, though many of its standout features won't be available to offline players.

While Sony gave several concrete examples of what the PlayStation 4 can do, there is still a lot we don't know – not the least of which is what the actual system looks like. The unit itself was conspicuously absent, similar to Nintendo's confusing unveiling of the Wii U at E3 2011. The PS4's price, which we also don't know yet, will be an important variable to the console's success. We're also eager to learn about whether there will be different hardware configurations with varying hard drive sizes, and how the system addresses used games. Sony hasn't explicitly laid out how the console deals with used games, but the company did say in a statement that "PlayStation has a long history of keeping its gamers happy, and we won't make decisions that damage our relationship with them."

Many of the features Sony touted sound promising, but it's possible that some of them may be dropped or altered when the system comes out this holiday season – particularly if the platform is already pushing against its cost ceiling. Gaikai's Perry admitted that the PS4's cloud services would come out "in phases" and that accessing the wealth of old PlayStation-brand games in lieu of native backwards compatibility was a goal and not a given.

With more PS4 details still coming – as well as Microsoft's unveiling of its Xbox 360 successor – it's tough to assess where the PlayStation 4 puts Sony in the next-gen console race. For its part, Sony already seems to have learned some valuable lessons from the PS3, which immediately puts the PS4 and the company on stronger footing. ◈
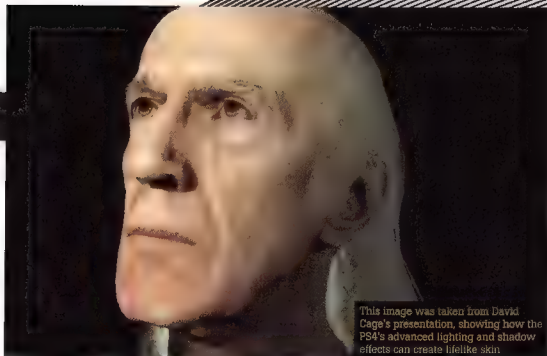
The New PlayStation 4 Controller & Camera

Correcting problems with the PS3 controllers, the rechargeable, Bluetooth wireless PS4 controller features analog sticks with a defined rim and an indented center **(A)**, as well as redesigned trigger buttons **(B)**. A new SixAxis sensor is also included.

The light bar **(C)** changes color based on which player you are in a multiplayer game, and can also be used to indicate status such as your avatar's health. It also works with the PS4 Eye camera to sense the positions of multiple players.

The controller features a two-point touchpad **(D)** and improved rumble. The old Select and Start buttons have been combined into a single Options button **(E)**. The Share button **(F)** lets you broadcast your gameplay in real-time and select your videos to send out to friends.

On the audio front, the controller features a stereo headphone jack **(G)** (the console will ship with a mono headset) and a built-in mono speaker **(H)** that broadcasts sound effects.

The newly designed PlayStation Eye **(I)** contains two cameras, four microphones, and features Kinect-like voice and body movement recognition. It also can be used in conjunction with the Move peripheral, which Sony says will be more accurate with the PS4 camera.

Playing the PS4

Sony showed off a selection of first- and third-party titles in various states of development. Some, like Killzone: Shadow Fall and Ubisoft's Watch Dogs, are launch titles. Others, such as Capcom's Deep Down, were demonstrated more to show off the technological possibilities of the console.

Sony says it is partnering with a slew of third parties for content. A slide showed logos of the usual suspects such as **Electronic Arts, Rockstar Games, 2K Games, Activision, Bethesda**, and **Double Fine**, and a few developers showed up to present their games in person. **Blizzard** announced that it is bringing **Diablo III** to both the PS3 and the PS4 – including a four-player co-op mode. **Square Enix** showed

off its Luminous engine demo from last E3 and revealed it is making a **Final Fantasy** title for the system (which we apparently will hear more about at E3). **Ubisoft** confirmed everyone's suspicions that **Watch Dogs** is indeed a next-gen game, and **Jonathan Blow's The Witness** is a limited-time console exclusive for the PS4. **Bungie** closed out the press conference by teasing more about **Destiny** (see page 16), which, like Diablo III, will appear on the two Sony systems. The PS4 version will come with exclusive content. After the press conference, **The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt** and **Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag** (see page 52) were confirmed to appear on the system.

Killzone: Shadow Fall
(Guerilla Games)
Sony's roster of first-party first-person shooters has dwindled, but Killzone is still standing. In Shadow Fall, set almost 30 years after the first game, Vektans and Helghans live in a divided city similar to Berlin in the Cold War. The gameplay demo featured a terrorist attack against a security checkpoint by disguised Helghan agents. The action included traditional on-foot FPS gameplay as well as a segment where the hero (who is apparently a new character) hangs from a dropship as it flies around the bustling city.

DriveClub
(Evolution Studios)

MotorStorm developer Evolution is taking its love of racing in a different direction. Although DriveClub features a garage full of real race cars lovingly rendered down to the last detail, the real focus is on team-based racing in the first person. Players can set up online race teams and earn rewards for completing challenges. These can be created by anyone at any time; even from your smartphone.

Media Molecule's Move Demo

The LittleBigPlanet studio showed off its next big idea: a sculpting tool that uses the Move controller (which works in tandem with the PS4 Eye camera). The creations shown could then be controlled with the peripheral. While it's unclear how this all fits into a game format, we get the sense that – similar to LittleBigPlanet 2 – the tool is capable of being applied to different genres.

Deep Down [Working Title]
(Capcom)

Capcom is calling on its next-gen Panta Rhei engine to power this new game. The brief video showed a band of armored scavengers going up against a fire-spitting dragon in the beast's lair. It's worth noting that the game shares the same initials as Dragon's Dogma.

Knack
(Sony Japan Studio)

Mark Cerny – PlayStation 4's lead system architect and veteran of series like Crash Bandicoot and Ratchet and Clank – is directing this whimsical-looking adventure featuring the unassuming titular hero who can transform his body mass by drawing in or shedding objects of different shapes and sizes. Knack is going up against the oppressive goblins, and to emerge victorious he needs to assume different forms – including some large and terrifying manifestations – to get the job done. Knack also supports the remote-play feature, allowing gamers to play the game on their Vitas as well.

Infamous: Second Son
(Sucker Punch)

Second Son takes place seven years since Cole McGrath's other Infamous titles. The Department of Unified Protection (DUP) keeps a close eye on the citizens of the country, and Delsin Rowe captures the attention of the authorities when he easily dispatches a small squad of DUP agents with his ability to transport distances like a wisp of smoke and throw deadly fireballs. In a larger context, Sucker Punch says the game explores the dichotomy between freedom and security.

DESTINY

by Dale Hilliard
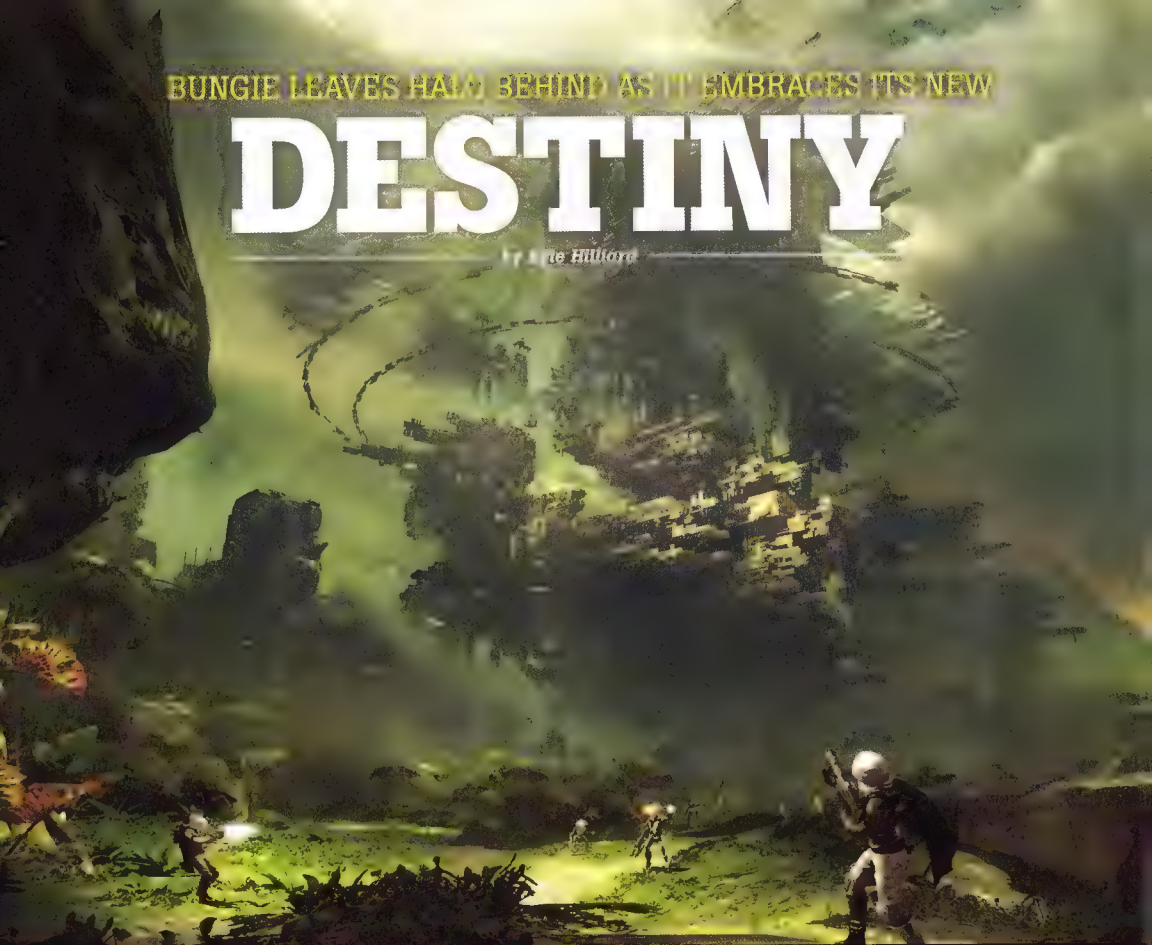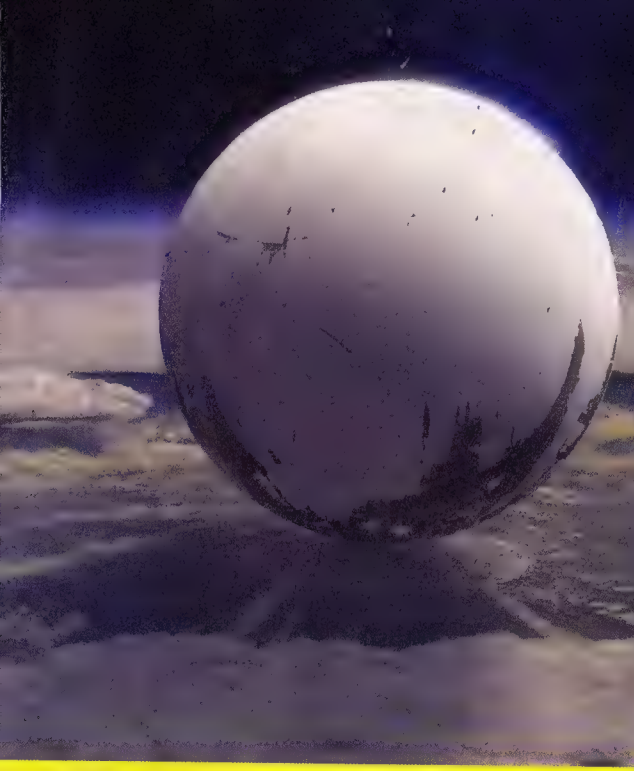
Most video game studios hire talented freelance composers to build its soundtracks, but not Bungie. Martin O'Donnell is a full-time employee with Bungie, and the only people who have been with the studio longer than him are those who started the company. If you've played any of Bungie's Halo games, you know that the soundtrack is one of the most defining elements of the series. For Destiny, O'Donnell has created a whole new soundtrack that heightens the cinematic intensity.

The Destiny presentation showcased lots of visual aspects of the game, including glimpses of the engine and plenty of concept art. For O'Donnell's section of the presentation, he showed a Powerpoint slide with his name and title, and then turned off the projector, dimmed the lights, and played snippets of the soundtrack. Hearing Destiny's music was one of the highlights of the event. Still present are some of O'Donnell's signature flourishes, like the use of choirs, but Destiny's soundtrack is distinct from Halo's. It abandons the heavy percussion focus in favor of a theme that seems to mix John Williams' best science-fiction work with O'Donnell's memorable violin riffs. We heard optimistic tracks presumably written to highlight successful missions, as well as combat music that offered a sense of high-seas ship battles. The stirring tracks easily live up to O'Donnell's excellent reputation of knowing how to enhance a science-fiction story with music.

I n 2010, Bungie went through a number of radical changes. It left behind its parent company, Microsoft, to become an independent game developer, struck a 10-year deal with Activision, moved into a new studio space, and left Master Chief and the ring-shaped world of Halo behind to begin work on a new universe.

Bungie has always been a secretive company, keeping its projects tightly locked behind keycard-protected doors. Its first new project as an independent developer, codenamed Destiny, has been no exception, but the studio that established some of the most important innovations in online multiplayer gaming and console first-person shooters has finally revealed its bold new universe. The first big disclosure is that Destiny is no longer a codename, but the official title of Bungie's next expansive universe.

Studios often break up their workforces to tackle multiple projects, but Bungie has more than 300 employees entirely devoted to the creation of Destiny. This singular focus speaks to the studio's huge aspirations, as it hopes the new series will become a bigger part of popular culture than Halo.

Destiny takes place on the planet Earth, but well into the future after a mysterious weapon destroyed most of the planet and its inhabitants at the end of humanity's Golden Age. One city remains, however, surviving thanks to the intervention of the Traveler – a gigantic moon-shaped ship that looms over the Earth's last surviving city. No one knows what the Traveler is or where it came from, but it saved humanity by making sure a small population survived.

Players take on the roles of the Guardians, the protectors of the city who receive power from the Traveler. Players create their own guardian and can customize their appearance, class, weapons, and ship. Bungie didn't divulge the differences between each class, but it spoke of hunters, titans, and warlocks. A protector of the city, you live in a persistent and changing world, venturing into the Earth's ruins on missions to explore and collect loot. You can even venture outside of Earth to visit the other planets of our solar system like Venus and Mars. Ambiguous powers emanate from the Traveler, endowing Earth's Guardians with a magical force. It sounds similar to Star Wars' Force powers, but even at this very early stage, Bungie's new world feels distinct.
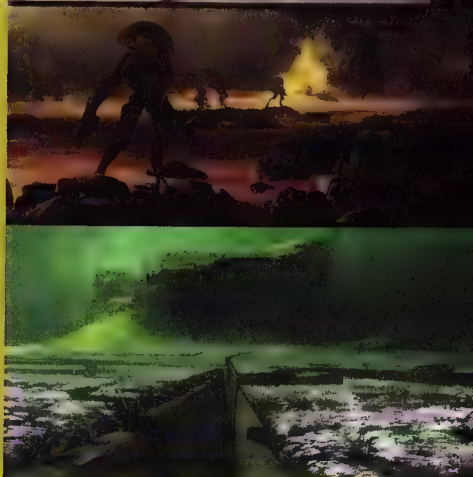
The First Shared-World Shooter

Bungie calls Destiny the world's first shared-world shooter. Similar to the structure of a massively multiplayer RPG, Destiny is always online, with players working together and apart in order to craft their own stories and pursue their own goals. Bungie didn't talk about microtransactions, or even the initial cost of the game, but was quick to establish that although the game will not be free to play, it won't require a monthly fee.

Bungie is a proven expert behind the barrel of a virtual gun, establishing many elements of the genre that are now commonplace. Systems like the limitation of carrying only two weapons and rechargeable health both began with Halo. For Destiny, Bungie is taking a cue from other shooters for a small, but substantial change to its gunplay. For the first time in a Bungie game, it appears that players will be pulling up the iron sights to fire their weapons à la Call of Duty. You have always been able to look down the scopes of sniper rifles, DMRs, and certain pistols in Bungie's shooters, but in the very brief gameplay snippet shown, the player appeared to pull the gun up to his eye to fire.

With Halo 2, Bungie crafted online matchmaking, and it has been perfecting the process of joining players together online for the last decade. Destiny is the next planned evolution of the matchmaking system. Without the assistance of menus or queue lists, Bungie wants players to dive into the world of Destiny with strangers and friends alike to craft their own stories and compete against one another.

Every player is on his or her own adventure, but paths will cross. Bungie didn't show how this process works firsthand, but the closest comparison seems to be the innovative multiplayer in 2012's Journey. Bungie described an elaborate scenario where two guardians meet in the city and decide to head to a location on Mars called the Dust Palace in order to hopefully find worthwhile loot. The pair jump in a space ship and head toward the planet, passing by the Traveler as they head to Mars. Once there, they encounter one of many enemy types called the Cabal. The two hold out as best they can against these powerful enemies, when a player who was also on a trip to Mars joins the fray. As Bungie describes it, this new Guardian's appearance is a product of matchmaking that happens in the background with no intervention from the player. There are no requests or on-screen prompts for either party. The joining player simply traveled towards Mars, saw some Guardians in need of assistance, and jumped into the skirmish. When the enemies are dispatched, they enter the Dust Palace to claim their new firepower rewards.

Destiny seems to be focused on cooperative play, but Bungie says competitive multiplayer is a part of the package as well. The developer isn't ready to share how it fits into Destiny, or how players access these matches.

After collecting a new weapon, which Destiny writer and design director Joseph Staten describes as a gun that "glows like starlight when I prime its magazine," players are given the option to part ways or stick together to head back to Earth. By the time they arrive home, the sun has set and darkness shrouds the city.

Building Destiny

Destiny runs on a brand new Bungie-created engine that required so much work and problem solving that senior graphic designer Hao Chen jokes it turned his hair gray. With day and night cycles that radically change the color and lighting, Destiny's world lives and breathes regardless of the player's actions.

To create this world, Bungie developed a level creation tool called the Grognok World Building tool. This tool gives designers a lightning-fast process for building Destiny's world, which ultimately benefits the player because the team can quickly put together new content. One of Bungie's many goals for its new project is that it wants players to have new experiences with each venture into Destiny. With Grognok, artists and designers have the tools to create and expand Destiny's world at speeds it never could with Halo.

The Hopeful Apocalypse

Video game worlds often showcase bleak, post-apocalyptic worlds. Games like Fallout and Gears of War feature dark worlds where characters don't know what the future holds, and some don't want to know, preferring to focus on the present. Destiny may take place after a major global disaster, but everything from the concept art to the soundtrack represents a hopeful world where humans are doing more than surviving – they are fighting for the future. This is part of Bungie's plan. It wants to create a world that is interesting and inviting to all gamers, even the "impatient and distracted ones," says project director Jason Jones.

Bungie has yet to showcase Destiny's gameplay, but it has established an interesting world and laid the foundation for the expansive narrative. The studio wants to show it can add more to its legacy than Master Chief, and they're going all-in on Destiny. "We hope you'll agree – it's really crazy," Jones says. ◆

WHAT WILL DESTINY CALL HOME?

Bungie says Destiny is coming to Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and PlayStation 4, but made no mention of the next-generation Xbox or PC. Bungie says it makes console shooters, so playing with anything other than a controller seems unlikely. Though Bungie won't confirm other platforms, given the timing of its release, we also expect that Destiny will appear on the new Microsoft machine once it's announced.

The game also has a mobile component. Though details were minimal, Bungie showed off a Destiny app for iOS that allows players to send and accept invitations to play, as well as customize their Guardians.

THE ENEMIES

Destiny has a plethora of different enemies, all with distinct looks, motivations, and weapons. The list of enemy types includes creatures called hellmouth, war rhinos, spider pirates, cabal, evil space zombies (the actual term Bungie used to describe them), and perhaps most intriguing, time-traveling robots. It's unclear why these enemies are fighting Earth's last survivors, but it may have something to do with the power emanating from the Traveler.

BUILDING A NEW HOME

Bungie's COO Pete Parsons says certain locations are perfect for converting into game studios. Bungie created Halo in a studio that formerly housed a grocery store. For its next home, Bungie ripped apart an old bowling alley and movie theater.

No one has offices at Bungie. Instead, the building has a huge, open main development floor featuring desks piled high with monitors and technology. Conference rooms with gigantic glass walls create the second floor perimeter of the main development area overlooking all the employees. Staring over the mass of developers from above, I could see people creating concept art, building levels, and one person shooting at a futuristic tank until it blew up.

When Bungie moved into its new workspace, the floor was raised 12 inches for two reasons. One was so the studio's extensive wiring could run below everyone's feet, and the second was so that all the desks could be placed on wheels for easy relocation. On average, Parsons says they move 10 to 12 desks per week so the developers, designers, and artists can easily work together.

Before reaching the main design floor, I passed a full kitchen, dozens of couches, chairs hanging from the ceilings, an active fireplace, and a full climbing wall. Parsons says that although the climbing group started out small, now more than 100 Bungie employees use the wall on a regular basis.

Bungie kept one of the movie theater screens during its renovations. Along with showcasing development milestones and ideas in the theater, Bungie also has movie nights for employees and their children. The studio also occasionally brings in speakers like NASA employees who worked on the Mars Rover project and quantum physicists to discuss their work with the developers.

In addition to the theater, Bungie also has a full motion-capture studio featuring 22 cameras below the main hub of designers. A sign over the studio identifies the room as "The Spandex Palace."

Bungie takes playtesting seriously, so the studio placed a collection of playtesting stations directly across from the Spandex Palace. Here, the team can put unsuspecting players in front of their games and watch them play. Every individual is filmed and tracked. Bungie watches what the players do with their controllers, monitors how they react to scenarios, examines their facial expressions, and in some cases even tracks eye movement.

BUNGiE

Overheard at D.I.C.E.

If we're wrong, at least it will be spectacularly entertaining as a failure.

..... Valve founder Gabe Newell on the company's future gambits

Anything you know in real life, and that you see in movies or TV series, should be used in a game. Could we make games that deal with human relationships, that deal with feelings and emotion, that talk about politics or homosexuality? Why not? We need to put games at the center of our society and our lives.

Heavy Rain creator David Cage

Games are now in many cases better than movies at telling stories.

Hollywood mogul J.J. Abrams

We are shifting into an enjoyment-based economy. And nobody knows more about making enjoyment than game developers. The world is looking at us to kind of lead them into utopia. Fake marketing bulls--- just isn't going to work anymore.

Jesse Schell

I have no interest in guys who wear armor and swing big swords. I really don't need to go there anymore. I want content that is relevant to my life. That is set in the real world.

.... Warren Spector on his shifting tastes as an aging gamer

[These] are situations where people don't want free-to-play, where people want to pay one price up front and then [they] can do whatever [they] want. Because that is an amazing feeling. That's the feeling of utopia...In utopia, you don't screw people out of nickels and dimes.

.... Puzzle Clubhouse creator Jesse Schell

The pay-to-play concept is done, and it's not about financial analysis or technical advantages or certain gaming platforms. It's about human nature. It's about psychology. Free is good.

.... Wargaming.net CEO Victor Kislyi
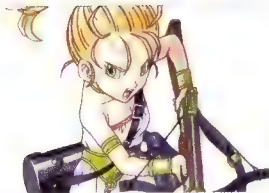
01

Sheik
The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

The fact that Princess Zelda survived in Ganondorf's post-apocalyptic Hyrule is impressive on its own. Even more astounding is that she did so while staying incognito as a bad-ass ninja named Sheik. This iteration of the eponymous princess wins top honors because she also made harp-playing cool.

02

Marle - *Chrono Trigger*

Bored of her posh life in the castle, Marle decided to sneak away to the fair and met a young boy named Crono. She's decent with a crossbow, but the real reason this reluctant royal figure places so high on our list is that she kicked off Crono's time-traveling adventures by brazenly riding a time machine back to 600 A.D.

03

Ashe - *Final Fantasy XII*

This princess faked her own suicide and formed a resistance to help reclaim her captured kingdom. She's one of the strongest and most cunning secret princesses on the list, and manages it all while wearing a skirt with the spatial equivalence of a handkerchief.

04

Tetra - *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker*

Unlike the other pirate princess on this list, Tetra's secret identity was so well kept that not even she knew she was a descendent of Hyrule's royal family. Even after discovering her heritage, Tetra spends her days as a fearless pirate sailing the Great Sea in search of treasure.

05

Garnet - *Final Fantasy IX*

Hiding under the alias Dagger to avoid detection, Garnet is a princess who will stop at nothing to remain independent. She goes so far as to poison every attendant at a huge feast with sleeping weeds, and forces her royal guard to smuggle her out of town in a burlap sack reeking of noxious pickles.

06

Midna - *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*

Nintendo really hoodwinked us with this one. Despite putting a huge hint of Midna's true identity in the title of the game, we still had no idea she was royalty from an alternate dimension. Then again, her adorably demented cat form doesn't exactly scream "princess."

07

Kairi - *Kingdom Hearts*

Another JRPG lass with a wicked case of amnesia, Kairi washes up on the shores of Destiny Islands thinking she's just another teenager. After meeting Aqua, a Keyblade wielder, she learns her pure heart magically qualifies her as a Disney Princess. She didn't even have to sing to earn her crown. What a hack.
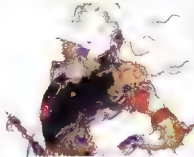
08

Faris - *Final Fantasy V*

Tons of JRPG characters are androgynous, so we understand if you fell for Faris' cross-dressing pirate antics. Faris abandoned her life of royalty for high seas adventure. Similar to Tetra, she attempts to return to the throne but quickly reverts to a life full of "yarrs" and swashbuckling.

09

Silk Fox - *Jade Empire*

Many secret princesses drop their royal sense of superiority when in disguise, but not this two-face. Even when Sun Lian is masquerading as her assassin alter ego, Silk Fox, she's a snob to her allies. While she doesn't drop the attitude, she does eventually lose the veil concealing her face.

10

Samus - *Metroid*

Before you cry foul, bear with us. The enigmatic Chozo injected Samus Aran with their DNA when she was orphaned as a child. This technically makes her the only heir to the ancient extra-terrestrial bloodline, and a bounty hunting princess in her own special way.

What's better?

☑ Faster   ☐ Slower

iPhone 5
downloads fastest
on AT&T 4G

 iPhone 5

——— It's not complicated. ———
Faster is better.

AT&T.
The nation's
largest ... network.

Rethink Possible

1.866.MOBILITY – ATT.COM/iPHONE – VISIT A STORE
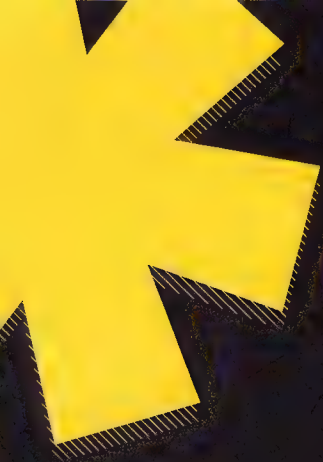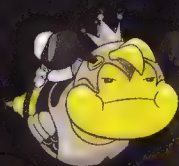
Risky Business

Surviving the Mobile Middle Ground

by Dan Ryckert

M

Mobile gaming is an undeniable and growing force in our industry, with wildly popular titles like Angry Birds, Cut the Rope, and Temple Run turning small teams into massive success stories overnight. With the largest potential customer base and profit margins in gaming history, it's easy to see why developing for mobile is an alluring concept. From the husband-and-wife team that made Temple Run to former triple-A console game designers like Peter Molyneux and David Jaffe, fewer and fewer developers are immune to its appeal.

One of those stories belongs to Matt Cox, the lead designer on the original Scribblenauts who left developer 5th Cell and pursued the dream of mobile success. We've all heard the stories of overnight successes that made millions despite humble beginnings, but Cox's story is the far more common result that's rarely discussed. Despite his solid resume, over $5,000 of his own money, and relatively decent press coverage, Cox and his small team learned how elusive mobile success can be.
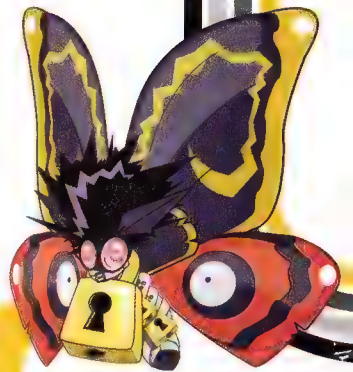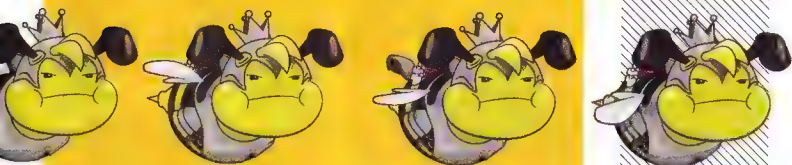
FORKS IN THE ROAD

Like many in the industry, Cox was experimenting with game design long before he was ever paid for it. His paycheck came from an unrewarding day job at a newspaper in Lawrence, Kansas, but his free time was spent writing game reviews and preparing for a career in development. "I was really bored working for [the newspaper]," Cox says. "I realized I didn't want to write for a living. I'd rather create video games."

Without an education in game design, Cox joined an enthusiastic online community of Halo fans to try his hand at creating custom levels. "I was still a little kid dreaming of that one day I'm going to make my own games," Cox says. "I thought I didn't have a chance in hell of getting into the industry because I was a nobody. I didn't know anyone in the industry, and it's really hard to get a design job."

Despite his lack of connections, his growing portfolio of custom Halo levels was becoming more and more impressive over time. Eventually, his body of work made him confident enough to apply for positions with a variety of developers. In 2006, THQ offered him his first paid position in the gaming industry. By Cox's own admission, designing levels for the poorly received Destroy All Humans: Path of the Furon wasn't exactly a triple-A development job, but it was a foot in the door. Moving out of his home state of Kansas for the first time, Cox relocated to Seattle and began his new career.

Two years after the move, it was time to take the next step. During his time in Seattle, he befriended Jeremiah Slaczka, creative director of developer 5th Cell. Cox's resume wasn't extensive at this point, but Slaczka felt that his attitude fit the studio's culture. Scribblenauts was in the early phases of design, and 5th Cell was willing to take the risk of bringing a relatively inexperienced level designer into a lead role. "When I heard the concept of Scribblenauts, I was like 'I want to be a part of this,'" Cox says. "I don't know if it's going to work, but I want to be a part of it if it does."

It worked. Scribblenauts caught the attention of the gaming press at E3 in 2009, and positive buzz continued to grow until the unique DS title's release later that year. Cox had gone from being a level designer on an unsuccessful release to the lead designer of one of the year's most talked-about titles.
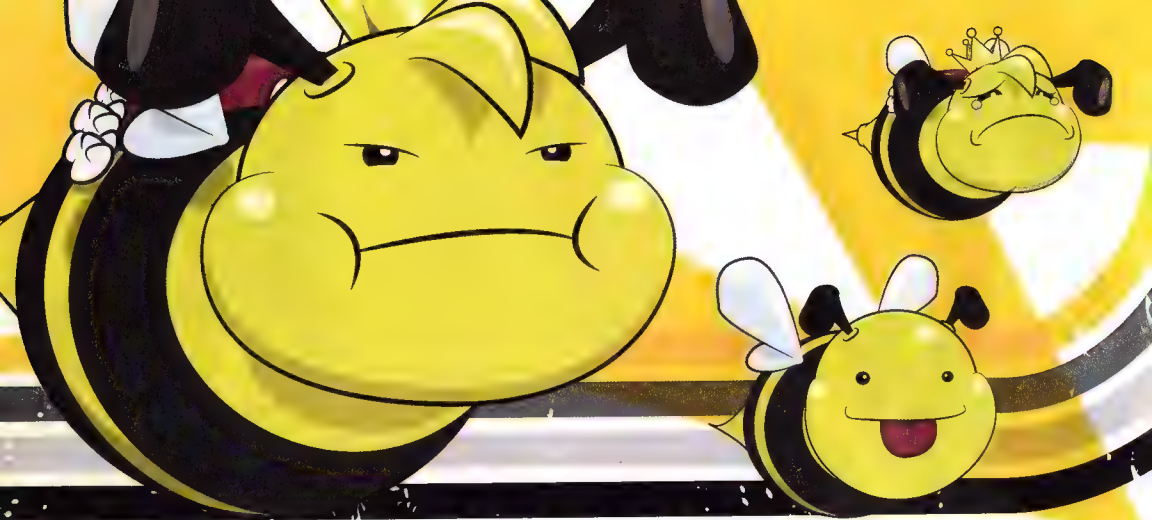
In his position, most designers would relish their newfound success and look forward to even brighter days in the industry. Instead, Cox left the industry and moved back to Kansas. "It makes me sound absolutely psychotic," Cox says. "People will probably joke that I had a 'religious experience,' which is almost the truth."

After arriving in Seattle in 2006, Cox had become deeply involved with a church known as EastLake. He had always been a Christian,

but disliked the stuffiness and intolerant views of churches he had experienced while growing up in Kansas. "[EastLake] was one of those churches that we always wanted in Lawrence growing up, but that kind of atmosphere just wasn't around there."

One of EastLake's pastors left Seattle to start a branch of the church in Wisconsin, and his move inspired Cox to do the same. "[My wife and I] made a decision to be crazy and basically leave paradise," Cox says. "There

was nothing bad about our lives in Seattle. In fact, it was our dream. We loved everything about it, but we felt so strongly that this was something Lawrence needed and we decided to walk away."

His mind was made up, and his family prepared for the move back home. During the process of relocating, his story received one more ironic twist. "On my way out of Seattle, I get a call from Frank O'Connor [franchise development director of Halo]," Cox says. "He offered me a design position on Halo 4 and I had to turn it down. It was such a weird, awful moment. I believed in what I was doing with moving back to Lawrence, but at the same time, that dream I had of working on Halo was being offered to me while I was exiting the industry."
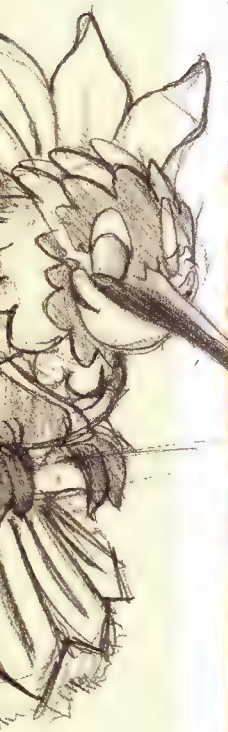
Cox tests a build of Sticky Bees

The team convenes in Cox's basement

BACK IN THE GAME

Declining his former dream position, he went through with the move in 2009. For two years, Cox's focus was solely set on getting his new church off the ground. Even with the passion he felt for his new project, he never discounted the possibility of getting back into game development in some form. "It was always in the back of my mind," Cox says. "If I ever met somebody or if I ever had the resources or the time, I would probably try making some small game. I didn't know if it was going to be DS or mobile, but I knew I might try it someday.

"I had five to ten core gameplay ideas that I hadn't seen before. While I was working in the industry, I thought 'Oh, these might be interesting to try someday.'" One concept for a potential DS game stuck with him after he left the industry. "It was just rocks and sticks, and you guide this rock around with the stylus and bash through stuff to collect a chain behind you."

Rocks and sticks may have formed the original, bare bones DS concept, but Cox switched his focus to mobile and decided to tailor the art style towards the growing mobile market.

"All of these successful mobile titles like Angry Birds and Cut the Rope have a really cute, plushy, and adorable character that's round," he says. "I even thought about the syllables. An-gry-birds. Cut-the-rope. I was really fixated on the marketing. I thought that bees can be really cute, and I didn't see a lot of bees around. What do bees do? They all stick together. Okay fine, I'm doing Sticky Bees."

Players use their finger to control an invincible king bee, who can be bashed through enemy waves of insects for points. Combos are built by collecting "sticky bees," which follow the king around like a game of Snake. It is up to the player to protect the chain of bees, who (unlike the king) can be killed by the insect enemies. Sticky Bees was a simple concept that wouldn't require huge feats of programming, but more complex development potentially could have been difficult as Kansas isn't exactly a hotbed of game developers to recruit help from.

As luck would have it, Cox didn't have to look beyond his church to find a team. Michael Rowland put together an informative app for EastLake, but had never worked on a game before. "He taught himself how to code," Cox says. "He wasn't going to charge us, he just said, 'If you want a church app, here it is.' At that moment, I wondered if he'd be up for the challenge of learning how to do a very simple game concept."

Rowland was in, and so was Brock Brown, another EastLake member who had worked on the app. It didn't take much convincing to get the church's music director, Palmer Davidson on board, either. It was an intriguing proposal for the group. Everyone would be able to remain active in the church, and that dream of "small team releases mobile success" excited them. Cox was the only one in the group to have ever worked on a game before, but the entire team was up for the challenge. They formed an LLC with equal ownership, named it FourFire, and work on Sticky Bees officially began.

For eight months, the four members of FourFire spent whatever free time they could scrape together in Cox's basement or at a local coffee shop working on the game. "We all agreed that any time that's not with our family or work, we're going to set that time aside to make this happen," Cox says. Sitting together with laptops and smartphones, the four tested prototypes and put together the general design of the game. Cox did level design from his Macbook, Davidson put together the soundtrack on his keyboard, and Rowland would keep their phones updated with the latest build of the game. For the art, FourFire relied on Brian McDonaugh, a contractor based in Georgia.

From Cox's perspective, it was a welcome change of pace from the big budget publisher/developer structure. "[With mobile], you bypass the publisher completely," Cox says. "You don't have to worry about distribution, boxing, manufacturing...any of that stuff. That's why it's so popular. Especially if you're going from a big studio that makes one to two bucks on each copy of their game to making 70 percent of whatever you're charging, it's a pretty big jump."
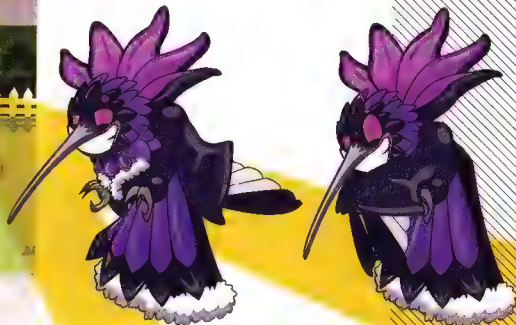
POLLEN: 44   SCORE: 925000

Even the smallest mobile games require a financial investment, and Cox put up over $5,000 of his own cash to fund Sticky Bees' development. "I'm the only one that put in an actual dollar amount," he says. "I had some money in savings, and I believed in the game." None of the members of FourFire were technically employees, but the team had reached a payout agreement in case the game was a success.

How Sticky Bees was going to make its money back was a frequent point of discussion for FourFire. Davidson pushed for the game to be free to play, but supported with in-app purchases. Cox wanted to charge an upfront amount. "A lot of the highest grossing games are free to play," Cox says. "But they just milk that economy and make it addicting in some way, shape, or form."

Serious discussions about monetization didn't happen until late in the development process ("which was stupid," according to Cox). FourFire decided to launch the game at 99 cents, which would be followed by a free version if it didn't take off. In-app purchases also found their way into the game, in the form of power-ups and another key incentive that the team was banking on. If a player dies, they can purchase a "super continue" for a dollar. With it, the screen is cleared of enemies and five bees are added to the king bee's chain.

"This is really stupid, but we were banking on the super continue to be our biggest moneymaker," Cox says. "We wanted to hook that hardcore crowd into getting the highest score on the leaderboard. That way, they didn't have to start over if they screwed up once. It really
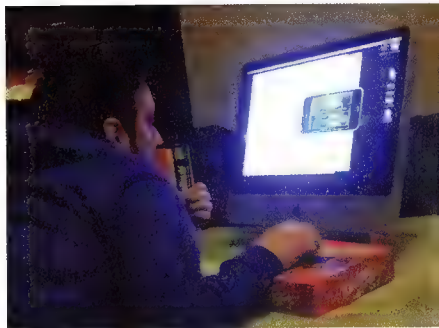
wasn't well thought out, honestly. Money-wise, we should have thought that through way better. I should have educated myself a lot more on what to do there."

THE FINAL PUSH
As the beginning of 2012 approached, the team was preparing for the game's February 2 release. FourFire released a 10-minute "Behind the Bees" clip on YouTube, showcasing the four friends discussing Sticky Bees with obvious excitement. Twitter and Facebook accounts for the game were created, offering new screens and art in exchange for "likes." FourFire launched its own website, with the header image claiming that the team was "Developing the next big handheld addiction at the speed of awesome." It was clear that the team had begun to dream big as the release date neared.

"We felt that it had the potential to catch fire if the initial month was big," Cox says. "I don't think we were ready to buy yachts and retire, but it's really hard not to dream. It's like people who buy lottery tickets. Nobody in their rational mind thinks they're going to win the lottery, but for that Wednesday or that Saturday that you buy the Powerball ticket, you dream a little bit. And it's fun."

Thanks to Cox's previous work on Scribblenauts, several large gaming sites reported on the upcoming release. Local newspapers ran stories about the game designer who left the big budget gaming industry to start a church and subsequently form a modest development team with the church's own members. Considering most of the team had never made a game before, FourFire's excitement at the time is easy to understand. The project that they had poured so many hours and months into was being seen on national websites and in newspapers. On paper, there was no reason that Sticky Bees couldn't be the next big mobile success.

A Lawrence, Kansas coffee shop was one of the main meeting places for FourFire during development

LOADING...

THE BIG DAY ARRIVES

After spending over eight months developing the game, the four members of FourFire woke up on February 2 and prepared to see the results of their work. "It was this nervous, nervous excitement," Cox says. "You don't really find out until the end of the day what your sales were, so we were just sitting around waiting to find out how many sold."

They'd have to wait until day's end for sales numbers, but reactions from gamers and press trickled in throughout the day. "Some people had reviews in the 7s and 8s," Cox says. "There were a couple 6s and whatever, but I was like, 'Guys, you need to be proud of this. You've never done this before.' I was trying to encourage them as much as possible that regardless of what the sales are at the end of the day, you guys should be really proud that you've never done anything and it's getting at least this sort of reception."

At the end of the day, the team finally received the official sales tally. "At first we were like, 'Holy crap, we did like 400 today!' So then we're like, 'Okay, it's going to snowball and snowball,'" Cox says. "It was a great feeling. The whole first week was a really cool celebration atmosphere." For that initial week of release, Sticky Bees was featured on the iOS App Store's New & Noteworthy section. On each of these days, the game was downloaded hundreds of times.

Immediately after falling off of the New & Noteworthy section, things took a dramatic turn. "The week following release, we saw our sales die," Cox says. "They just died. At the end of that second week, I looked at the weekly report and was like, 'Oof...this did not exactly catch fire.' It was kind of a gut punch but I still tried to encourage everyone, saying, 'Guys, regardless...you should be proud.' But I'd be lying if I told you that there wasn't this disappointment in the back of my head."

REALITY SETS IN

After the first week, the dream of Sticky Bees becoming a mobile success story quickly fell apart. It went from selling hundreds every day to selling less than 10 a week almost immediately. Free monthly updates for the game were originally planned, which would dress up the king bee to look like a leprechaun, Easter bunny, turkey, or Santa Claus depending on the time of year. One document that Cox provided us details new levels, enemies, gameplay tweaks, projectiles, and abilities. As interest in the game took a nosedive, the team decided to scrap all of its future update plans.

During the game's release month, the Sticky Bees Twitter and Facebook accounts attempted a social media blitz. Tweets were directed at local news stations, actors from *Firefly*, University of Kansas basketball players, Ashton Kutcher, the Kansas City Chiefs, and more. Outside of a quick mention from a former KU basketball player, none responded. Looking at the @StickyBeesGame timeline, it's clear to see when the team's enthusiasm began to fade. In the span of approximately a month surrounding release, the account tweeted 75 times. From February 14th to August 1st, the account produced zero updates.

That August update announced Cox's original backup plan in case the game didn't take off. A free version would be introduced to the App Store, offering two stages at no cost. "We didn't care," Cox says. "We just put it out there and let our Facebook friends know 'Hey, download this for free if you don't want to pony up the dollar and buy it.'" While it put up approximately the same amount of download numbers as the paid version, the team made virtually no money off of it.

With no money coming in for the game, it was clear that the rest of the team at FourFire wouldn't be buying yachts or retiring off of Sticky Bees' profits. "The idea was, there would be percentages going to everybody once I made my money back," Cox says. "But it never made any money back, so that never even came to fruition."

Cox didn't make his money back on his investment, but he doesn't harbor any regrets about the experience of creating Sticky Bees. "When I say I lost $3,000 doing this, I put it in air quotes," he says. "Yes, I did lose $3,000 on the project, but I don't feel like it. I'm pretty proud of it. For what it is, we still have fun with it. I see my two year-old daughter playing Sticky Bees and she figured out what to do on her own. There are still these spikes of satisfaction out of making something that's at least fun."

Followers of the gaming industry always hear about the gold mine of mobile development. Entire panels at gaming conventions are dedicated to the ease of making money via a hit mobile game, but how often do we hear about the other side of the coin? With hundreds of thousands of games available for download (and thousands more uploaded each day), it's clear that FourFire's experience is the rule rather than the exception. Seventy percent of mobile developers only publish a single game, making it obvious that the process leaves most teams discouraged.

For others that are hoping to create the next mobile craze, Matt Cox suggests that they enjoy the process but remain realistic in their ambitions. "Don't expect success at all. Make sure you have some fun with it and you believe in what you're doing. If you're not going to have fun with your own game, nobody else will."

WHAT'S NEXT FOR FOURFIRE?

Despite his lost investment, Cox isn't ready to walk away from the industry for good. "I still have ideas, and when the opportunity presents itself I'll probably dive right back in," he says. His team is currently flirting with the idea of launching a Kickstarter for a sequel, which could possibly be an endless runner in the style of Jetpack Joyride. "That's actually a better format than making the enemies come from everywhere. That could be a lot more fun."

DIGGING THROUGH A FRANCHISE'S HISTORY:
WORTH YOUR TIME?

Successful games don't often fade into the dimness of history. Publishers eager to build on strong sales and known brands greenlight sequels, spinoffs, and reboots more readily than unproven ideas. In this world of perpetual new Tomb Raiders and Assassin's Creeds, should you make an effort to experience everything a franchise has to offer before diving into its latest and greatest? Like a typical debate club, our editors have been assigned to defend a position whether it agrees with their personal views or not.

PRO

I still remember visiting video stores as a kid and being frustrated when the first entry in a movie series was missing. How can anyone expect to experience a series to its fullest by ignoring sequence? The same concept applies to video games.

The most obvious argument for playing games in chronological order is to keep the story straight. For the last few generations, games have offered players a "previously on…" summary of past entries. Resident Evil 2 may tell you the gist of the infamous Spencer Mansion incident, but nothing compares to living through the horrific inaugural outbreak. Of course, non-sequential series like Final Fantasy aren't limited by this, but that brings me to my next point.

As gamers, we're interested in not only seeing how narrative arcs develop, but also how the gameplay evolves across a series. Does it improve from sequel to sequel? Are there any black sheep entries? Without having played the first Sonic the Hedgehog, how can you really appreciate the convenience of Sonic 2's spin dash move? This applies to series that share themes rather than a single narrative thread, like the previously mentioned Final Fantasy or Grand Theft Auto.

Finally, many gamers are completionists. Whether you're climbing all the radio towers in Far Cry 3 or catching up on the first three Sly Cooper games before playing Thieves in Time, they both serve the same master. Completing the entirety of a series sequentially is no different from going for all the achievements in a game: We do it for bragging rights and a sense of accomplishment. Sure, you could've skipped Devil May Cry 2 because you heard it was awful (it is), but watching those end credits roll earns you respect as a gamer for having stuck through it just for the sake of it. » **Tim Turi**

CON

Games are getting better all the time. I love the hobby's history more than most, but brilliant developers are building amazing new experiences on the foundations of the geniuses who came before them every day. Older titles worth playing in their own rights (Dragon Age: Origins or Resident Evil 4, for example) are one matter, but I see little point in forcing myself to play what is in many cases an inferior game just so I can say I've beaten the whole series for some kind of intangible geek cred.

We are drowning in the latest and greatest creations of an evolving medium for interactive creative expression. Not enough hours in the day exist for one person to play all the best games as they come out; I should know. Spending my precious few gaming hours immersed in middling games within a franchise at the expense of the newest masterpiece from either an established team or an up-and-coming indie strikes me as foolish.

Purists will scream at my disregard for multi-game storylines and spoilers, but the honest truth is that the overwhelming bulk of video game stories are mediocre. Even the better stories like Assassin's Creed can be easily digested by skimming the wiki and a quick trip to YouTube if necessary. Not only that, but developers take great pains to make each game's plotline stand on its own merits even in the most connected franchises like Mass Effect.

There is no reason to put up with the goofy combat of the original The Witcher, or the sloppy balancing of Xenosaga Episode II, or the endless repetition of Torchlight just to pin a feather that nobody cares about in your cap, even though those are all games that I personally loved when they came out. We walk in a wonderland as the pinnacle of the hobby is redefined around us every day. Don't miss out on history being made around you because you're walking through it backwards. » **Adam Biessener**
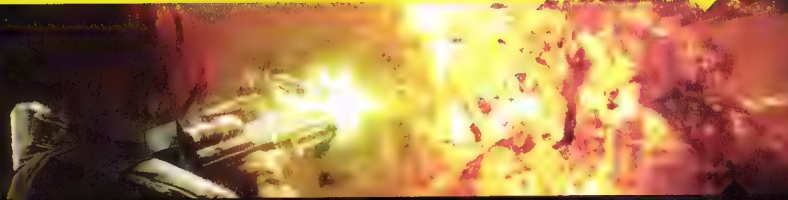
The Good

NINTENDO DECLARES

2013 is the year of Luigi, with a variety of content for the 3DS and Wii U including new announcements for Mario & Luigi: Dream Team (3DS, shown), Mario Golf: World Tour (3DS), and New Super Luigi U. The latter is DLC for New Super Mario Bros. U that takes the campaign and re-imagines it for Luigi. The two 3DS titles hit this summer, while the New Super Luigi U DLC will show up sometime this year.

The Bad

DELAYS HAVE STRUCK

The Last of Us (now out on June 14, see page 70 for more), Insomniac's Fuse (some time before June, shown), and the Wii U version of Rayman Legends (early September). The story regarding Rayman Legends is particularly interesting. Ubisoft announced the delay for the Wii U version of the game while simultaneously declaring that the former console exclusive will now also appear on the Xbox 360 and PS3. This move has angered Wii U fans as well as creator Michel Ancel, who has publically urged Ubisoft to release the game for the system on time as originally planned.

Quotable

"[I] bet there is not one gamer who's going to sit out of Grand Theft Auto V hoping that something down the road is going to come along that's better. Grand Theft Auto V is going to blow everyone away, and it will be in the market in September."

— Grand Theft Auto V gets a later-than-expected September 17 release date, and Take-Two CEO **Strauss Zelnick** squashes the hope that the game will also appear on the next-gen systems
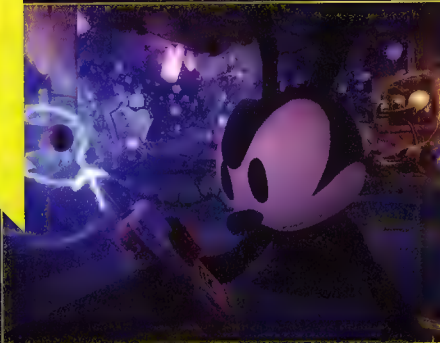
The Ugly

DISNEY HAS CLOSED

Epic Mickey series developer Junction Point Studios (featuring Warren Spector). Given that Disney has stated in the past that it wants to move away from big-budget titles toward mobile games, this isn't particularly surprising. Moreover, both Epic Mickey games garnered poor reviews, and the second title in particular didn't sell well.

The 'Splosion Man Creators
EMBRACE THE CRAZY

by Matt Miller

You can't question Twisted Pixel's originality. Whether it's Comic Jumper, The Gunstringer, or Ms. Splosion Man, the developer has released some of the weirdest, funniest, and most surprising titles of the last few years. After a mysterious announcement at E3 last year, the team has been fleshing out its latest creation, LocoCycle – the story of a sexy sentient motorcycle on a road trip of destruction and mayhem. Does it stand up to the studio's reputation for unusual and innovative ideas? My playthrough of an extended demo level left me confused, laughing, and curious to see more.

LocoCycle stars I.R.I.S., a talking motorcycle on a trip to a biker rally, much to the chagrin of her creators at the Big Arms Academy's School of Assassination. She's malfunctioning, and doesn't seem to know it, and is dragging her Spanish-speaking mechanic, Pablo, along for the ride. Unfortunately, her translation software is one of the damaged systems. As Pablo screams for help in a never-ending stream of terrified exclamations, I.R.I.S. assumes he's making friendly conversations about things like the relative quality of the Weekend at Bernie's films.

This insanity serves as the backdrop to a gameplay system that Twisted Pixel describes as a meeting point between Spy Hunter and Bayonetta. It leaves the initial impression of

an arcade racing game, as your motorcycle careens down highways at breakneck speeds, dodging slow-moving cars while you drag a wailing man behind you. When enemy vehicles filled with black-suited men with heavy weaponry show up, you start whittling away each car's health with blasts from your forward-mounted machine guns. Soon enough, rocket pack soldiers fly into view, and things get really odd. I.R.I.S. gains the ability to leap high into the air and engage in improbably long combos of melee attacks as her wheels and handlebars flip about like a ninja.

The charm of the game comes from the rapid-fire changes to the action every minute or two. In the level I played, I.R.I.S. leaps off the Nevada highways and begins to flip and

drive along the walls of canyons as helicopters fire missiles in her direction. Brief quick-time events demand timed button presses to enact ridiculous action sequences that play out like violent dances between I.R.I.S. and her opponents, with the hapless Pablo being flung around the entire time.

Between levels, players can dig into the deep upgrade system that offers everything from better health to new combat melee moves. Better performance in each level nets you more upgrade purchasing options at completion.

After my brief time with the game, I still hadn't totally wrapped my head around how LocoCycle will play in the long term. One level offers an intriguing mix of third-person combat in the midst of high-speed arcade racing and shooting. The idea has plenty of novelty, but we won't know until the game releases if that novelty can maintain across many stages. Twisted Pixel won't share yet which systems LocoCycle is headed to, but the developer is now a Microsoft studio, so expect some combination of Xbox 360, PC, or maybe a next-gen console when platform details are finally released. ◇

Looking for more on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates on the best in Nintendo eShop, PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC, and mobile releases. For more in this issue, don't miss our preview of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows (p. 77), our reviews of Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien (p. 92), and AntiChamber (p. 93), and our score for Beastie Bay (p. 96).

The Game Agent

As the representative for Ken Levine, Cliff Bleszinski, Dave Jaffe, and many others, United Talent Agency's Ophir Lupu is one of the most powerful agents in video games. We spoke to Lupu about the role an agent plays in game development and his views on the industry.

interview by Matt Helgeson

For our readers who might not be aware, what does a video game talent agent do on behalf of your clients?
What a video game agent does is pretty analogous to what an agent in any other aspect of entertainment does. You represent the best interest of your client, you seek opportunities for them, you protect their abilities and their creative freedoms, and you help maximize their potential outside across the board in their careers. When I sign a client, I see this as at least a 10-year relationship. This, to me, is an investment in you, your future, and your career trajectory, and to me it's at a bare minimum that we are going to be in this for 10 years. As an agent, I wake up every day and I have the ability to go work on behalf of the client and look out for their best interest and make sure that they are put in the best possible position to succeed.

I'm sure every case is different, but what are some of the general concerns and obstacles that you help overcome for your client when negotiating with a game company?
Unlike the sports business or more traditional media businesses like television, we don't have guilds or unions or preset deals that just need numbers to get filled in. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on which side you are on, we really start from scratch.

It would be hard for me to give you specifics other than things you would always look out for. You need to make sure that the client is protected in the outside, you need to make sure that the client has creative freedom to go out and do the things that the client knows how to do best and that they're able to create an incredibly innovative and immersive experience. At the end of the day, that's the only thing that matters…. In the case of great success, make sure that the client is protected and reaps appropriate rewards for that.

After the project is in development, do you stay involved with that process, maybe helping your client advocate for more time or money for development and those sort of ongoing concerns as a game project goes through the pipeline?
Absolutely. I am not the guy who comes in, makes a deal, goes away, looks forward to my free copy of the game, and hopefully an invite to the launch party. When you're making a deal for these big triple-A titles to get made, what you're really signing up for is two, three, four years of a relationship between the publisher, the developer, and the client. You need to make sure that you've got really great market intelligence on who you're potentially pairing your client up with, what their outlook on the business is, how they do things, but more importantly, that you've got really deep relationships with those places. This is not a perfect art. Things don't always work out as planned. You need more time; you need more money; you have an issue with somebody internally. These are things that absolutely I am involved in, and I am helpful with. But I also understand where there are times that I don't need to be involved.

The conventional wisdom over the past couple years is that the traditional console model, which you've been most involved in, is in peril of being overtaken by iOS, free-to-play games on PC, or other emerging models. Is the business as we've known it since the original PlayStation in jeopardy? Or is that overplayed?
In short, I think it's a little overplayed. As I see it, we're no doubt seeing a sea change in the business. I think it's ultimately for the better. You talk about going all the way back to PS1. It was very clear in those days where you could play games. You had systems that hooked up to your television, or you had a PC that sat on your desk. That was pretty much it. In 2007, you saw the introduction of the iPhone. Facebook, I think, reached their 100 millionth user in 2008. Zynga was founded in 2007. When you lay it on paper, that hits exactly the point where you started to see the bottoms drop out of the middle of the console market. That middle was a really important element to the survival of a lot of game publishers.

Some were able to pivot rather quickly. Some were not. What you have now is actually a really exciting time in the business, which is more people playing games than ever before, across multiple devices. People are always interested in the story that the sky is falling. I think the really great story here is that it doesn't matter what platform you're on, what matters is the quality of the experience that you put forth.

You know the guys at Bethesda. I think if you told them that the console business is dying, they'd have a gas at that. Skyrim was a massive success for them. You tell King.com that Facebook games are dying and I think they'd have a gas with that. Candy Crush Saga is a massive success for them. It's because these experiences are really fantastic. The most recent Call of Duty had the biggest opening in the history of the franchise. Halo 4 – fastest selling title in the history of the franchise. These are really awesome, quality experiences, which is the only thing that's going to move the needle.

In retrospect, was it a mistake for Sony and Microsoft to let this generation go on so long?
It's too early to tell. I don't know what they are going to present to the world when they're ready to present it to the world. It may turn out, actually, that they were really smart to wait. I think there's a lot of learning to be had from seeing user habits around free-to-play titles, on tablet, on smartphone, and on PC. A lot of user habits and data that I'm sure they're collecting [about] social titles on Facebook and the like, and a lot of insight they probably have with respect to consumer behavior on their own platforms. I think that it's way too early to say that they made a mistake doing that because we frankly just haven't seen what they're putting forth.

The talent agent role seems best suited towards the traditional triple-A development process because you're the bridge and advocate between somebody that's a highly paid professional and a large publisher. Are these emerging, crowd funding mechanisms like Kickstarter that allow smaller teams to kind of go directly go to their audience a potential threat to your business?
Not at all. I think it's really exciting for the business as a whole. In a world where it seems like the market is sort of correcting itself, and evolving, there is a nice place for things like Kickstarter, and Steam Greenlight to live. It gives opportunity for folks who want to band together and go out and crowd fund a one, two, three, four million dollar project.

I think that's really interesting. Does it pose a threat to my business? Not at all. I want to see as many interesting, independent, creative thinking and innovative groups of developers out in the world as possible. That's only good for our business. It's only good for my business. When those groups want to go out and do something bigger and better and need my help, I'm here for them. So it doesn't really pose any sort of risk for me. I think it only shines a bright light on the future of our business.

So you would almost see it as, I'm trying to use a Hollywood analogy, Christopher Nolan, who did *Memento* on the independent scene. Eventually, he went on to the Batman film.
It's a great example. You've got incredible talent in the world of game makers. You've got universities that have exceptionally well-run programs that are churning out students that are super qualified that can go work at any publisher they want to, to the extent that they want to band together and put together some small titles, and raise some money on Kickstarter, that's an awesome thing not only for our business today, but for the future of interactive entertainment.

Origin
EON17-SLX 3D SLI

While most of the technological world continues to trend smaller and thinner, gaming laptops seem to be growing fatter. Origin's EON17-SLX 3D SLI gaming laptop is the perfect example. While the EON17 is heavy enough to be used in weight-lifting and lacks the design style of some of its competitors, it is the most powerful laptop we've tested to date.

Our build came packed with an Intel Core i7 3740QM quad-core 2.70GHz processor, 8GB of DDR3 RAM, and dual 4GB GDDR5 Nvidia Geforce GTX 680M graphics cards overclocked by the professionals at Origin. This beefy hardware powers through games like PlanetSide 2 and Far Cry 3 without dropping a frame. Thanks to Onkyo speakers, a built-in subwoofer, and the Sound-Blaster X-Fi MB2 software suite, the EON17 makes games sound as good as they look.

The system's keys feel great and have a lot of adjustable backlighting options. The EON17's crisp 17.3-inch screen has a glossy finish that only produces a small amount of glare. Sadly, it's not a touchscreen. It is, however, a 3D display (the system comes with a free pair of NVIDIA Vision 2 Glasses).

Our biggest gripe about the EON17 is its battery life. While playing PlanetSide 2 at full settings, we got little more than two hours of game time out of the system. Between that and the system's heft, you might find it more worthwhile putting your money down on a desktop, but if you need a gaming powerhouse on the go, look no further.

VERY GOOD ▪▪▪▪▪▪▪▪▪▪▪

$3,672 (Starting at $1,882) | *originpc.com*
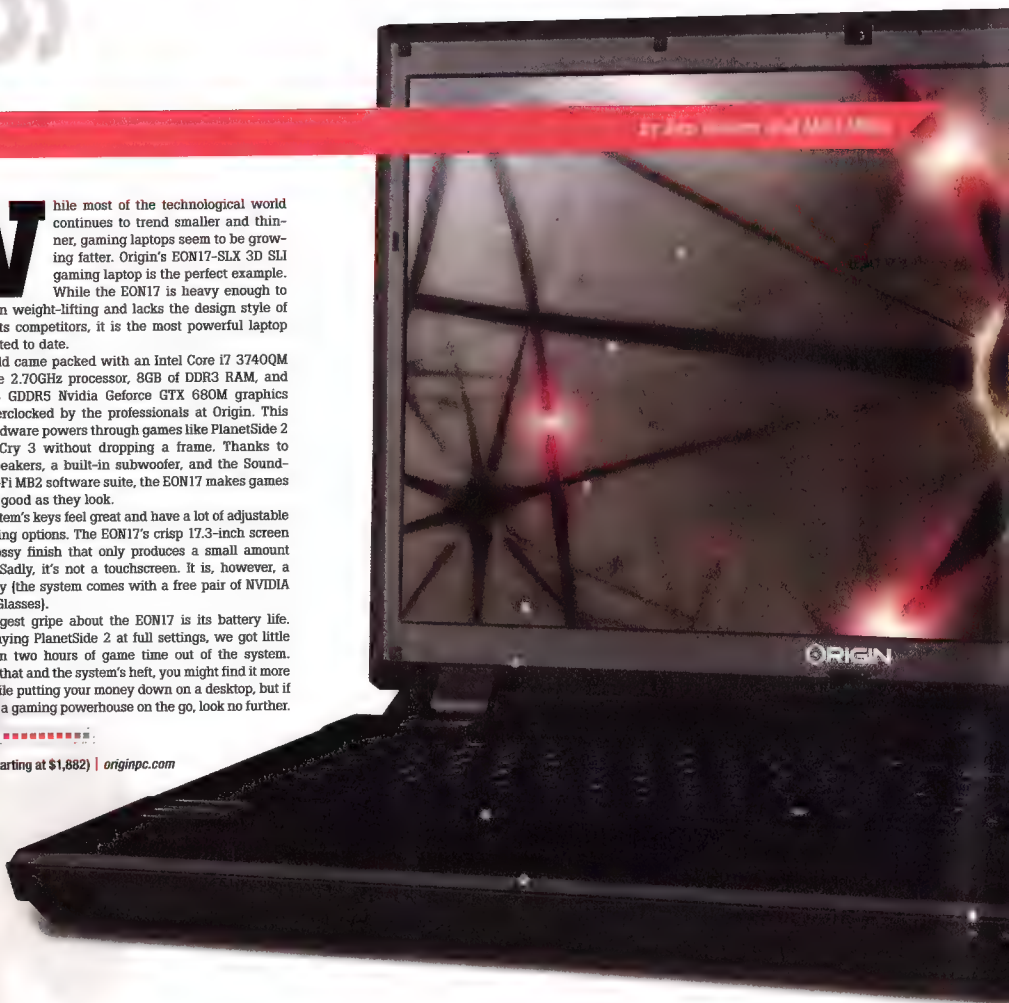
1 Eye-Fi Pro X2

For true shutterbugs, even the largest SD cards on the market fill up fast. Eye-Fi's Pro X2 helps solve this problem by integrating Wi-Fi into a standard SD card. Using a wireless network, the Pro X2 automatically transfers and sorts photos from your camera onto your computer. We found it easy enough to automatically publish photos to Facebook, Flickr, or a number of other social networks. We also appreciated how the Pro X2 could save space by automatically deleting photos off the camera once they had been uploaded. You can also use the Pro X2 as a hotspot to transfer photos to your phone while you're out of the house, but this requires a bit of tinkering to set up. It's a shame you can't browse and delete photos using the Pro X2's mobile app. The Pro X2 adds some extra battery drain to your camera, but having an essentially bottomless SD card will make this a worthwhile purchase for many.

AVERAGE ⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛

$79.99 (8GB) $99.99 (16GB) | *eye.fi*

2 Jawbone Up
Lifestyle-tracking Wristband

Similar to the Nike+ FuelBand, Jawbone recently released an improved version of its Up lifestyle monitor – a wristband with a built-in accelerometer that measures your daily activities and movements. However, where most activity monitors just observe and record, the Up tries to get you up and out of bed with a vibrating alarm clock. Other vibrating alerts notify you throughout the day if you've been inactive for too long. But the most useful aspect of the Up band is the companion iOS app, which tracks your daily sleep, exercise, and calorie intake.

$129 | *jawbone.com/up*
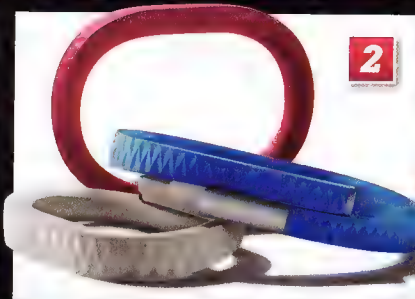
3 Quarriors

If you take the creature collecting and battling of Pokémon, but imagine that each creature is represented by a custom six-sided die, then you have a pretty clear idea what to expect from Quarriors, the brilliant dice-building game from the folks over at WizKids. Up to four players compete to collect different creatures with their own special abilities. Players collect an ever-growing pool of dice out of a set of 130 that come with the game, and then use those dice to battle other players and grow their creature collection even further. This fast-playing game is ideal for families or more experienced gaming groups. If you love it, three expansions are already available, including the recent Quest of the Qladiator.

$59.95 | *wizkidsgames.com/quarriors*

THE ART OF BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Blizzard Entertainment has produced some of the most influential and critically acclaimed PC titles of the last couple decades. This art book celebrates Blizzard's creative process by giving players a glimpse of over 700 pieces of concept art.

$75.00
insighteditionscreative.com

HAWKEYE VOLUME 1: MY LIFE AS A WEAPON

Matt Fraction and David Aja's work on *Hawkeye* is the perfect example of why "that dude with the bow" from The Avengers is one of Marvel's premiere badasses. After SHIELD recruits Hawkeye, he must intercept a packet of incriminating evidence before he becomes the most-wanted man in the world.

$16.99
comicstore.marvel.com

SOUND CITY – REAL TO REEL

Dave Grohl's directorial debut recounts the 40-year rise and fall of Sound City Studios, the illustrious recording studio that helped artists such as Johnny Cash, Guns and Roses, Metallica, and Rage Against the Machine record some of the most influential rock albums of the century.

$24.99
buy.soundcitymovie.com

WRECK-IT RALPH

One of the best video game-themed movies of all time, Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph* is sprinkled with enough gaming references to make any player dizzy. Thankfully, it also tells a heartwarming and humorous story of a video game villain who aspires to achieve something great.

$39.99
disney.go.com/wreck-it-ralph

Media Shelf

Destroy All Humanoids?

by Jeff Cork, senior associate editor, Game Informer

I am tired of looking at everyone like they're targets. I'm bored with a gun being my primary way of interacting with the world. And if I have to slit someone's throat from behind one more time, I think I'm going to scream.

I love gaming. It's been my favorite hobby ever since I played the newly released Donkey Kong in an arcade. As I've grown, the industry has grown as well. Games have steadily become more graphically impressive, online multiplayer has given me a chance to reconnect with faraway friends, and once-ignored facets like sound design have finally been given the credit that they deserve. One thing hasn't changed, however: the industry's obsession with violence.

Quantic Dreams founder David Cage spent much of his presentation at the annual D.I.C.E. event saying that it's time that games grow up. I agree with his sentiment, and I'm an advocate for games that shift away from space marines and walking cannons with crew cuts. Cage himself isn't immune to his own criticisms; the first showing of his upcoming game Beyond: Two Souls featured telekinetic powers, a SWAT team, and a motorcycle chase. That's not to say the game won't be good, it just doesn't seem like the serious, mature story that he wants developers to measure up to.

Whenever the subject of gaming and violence is brought up, you can count on several tired counterpoints. First, defenders bring up ancient Rome and gladiatorial battles. We've always been infatuated with bloodsport as entertainment, goes the argument. Then comes the obligatory, "Well I play games and I haven't killed anyone" line of reasoning.

My point isn't whether or not playing games contributes to real-world violence. Instead, I'm getting increasingly bored with the gaming industry's "kill kill kill" mentality, and I'd like to see games that expand the scope of what we have now.

Journey was my 2012 game of the year pick. It is beautiful, and it tells an allegorical story that actually dredged up emotions while I was playing it. I suppose you could argue that your character's encounters with Journey's large dragon-like beast were violent – he cut your scarf shorter with each hit – but that's a pretty big stretch.

As gaming becomes even more established, I'm a firm believer that developers need to mature as well. Publishers usually counter arguments about the lack of variety in triple-A games by saying that those are the games that sell well. That's certainly true, but not because wide audiences are only interested in those games. Games that fulfill adolescent fantasies are indeed popular, but I believe that it's because a large (and lucrative) segment of the population looks at Red Barrel Blaster 5 and simply dismisses console gaming outright.

Games are arguably the most powerful way to tell a story. The medium's potential is also squandered with every game that uses punching as a substitute for storytelling, or headshots replacing humanity. Games don't need to be bloody murderfests that appeal to the lowest common denominator. People crave stories, and they get them from books, television, and movies. Unless (and until) our storytellers in the gaming industry move out of their comfort zones and try to craft experiences that everyone can appreciate, we'll continue with the status quo. Perhaps that's all we deserve.

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

02
Defiance

16
Injustice: Gods Among Us

03

16
Painkiller: Hell & Damnation

16

03.2

19

23
Star Trek
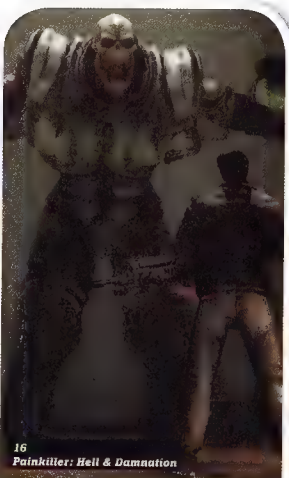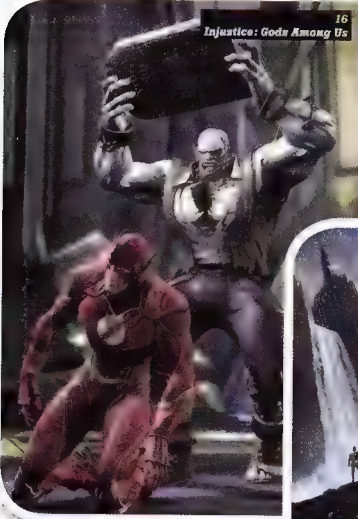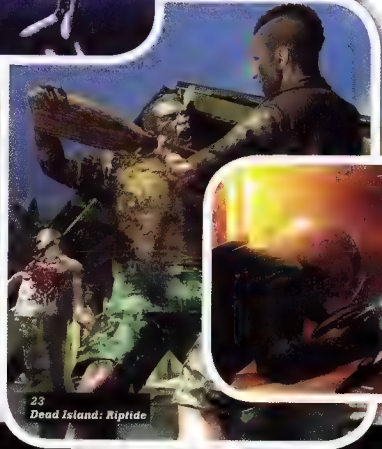
23
Dead Island: Riptide

April

02 New Releases
> Defiance (PS3, 360, PC)

03 The Marvel Event of the Year
Age of Ultron, Marvel Comics' universe-spanning mega-event, continues today, as the maniacal robot Ultron advances his plans to conquer Earth. Superstar writer Brian Michael Bendis leads the charge in this 10-part story with a rotating team of artists including Bryan Hitch, Brandon Peterson, and Carlos Pacheco.

03.2 The Emerald Archer Finds a Pulse
DC Comics' hottest writer, Jeff Lemire, is the new voice leading Green Arrow, a book that has switched creative teams more than Lady Gaga changes costumes at a concert. In Lemire's first story, Green Arrow returns to the island of his origin to uncover his father's past.

05 Night of the Living Dinosaurs
If you've been waiting for a night to do a double feature, here's your chance. The Evil Dead reboot and Jurassic Park 3D both premiere tonight. You probably want to see Evil Dead first, as it looks scary as hell. After that, lighten the mood by laughing at Seinfeld's Newman taking a wad of dino-spit to the face.

14 HBO's Vice President Returns
Julia Louis-Dreyfus' HBO comedy series Veep returns for its sophomore season today. The show's first season delivered big laughs and ended with a surprisingly serious cliffhanger. We can't wait to see what comes next for this dysfunctional V.P.

14.2 Dust Off Your Pokéballs
The last Pokémon Video Game Spring Regional Championship is held today in Athens, GA; Madison, WI; Salt Lake City, UT; and Foxborough, MA. The winner receives a bye for the first round of July's championship event. All contestants must bring their own game system and cartridge to compete.

15 The Next Syfy Hit?
Syfy Channel has been trying to create another sci-fi epic with the staying power of Battlestar Galactica without success. That may change today with the premiere of Defiance, a futuristic alien invasion story. The show looks good in trailers, and fans have the chance to explore the universe more in the video game that releases earlier in the month. For more on Defiance, turn to page 58.

16 New Releases
> Injustice: Gods Among Us (Wii U, PS3, 360)
> Painkiller: Hell & Damnation (PS3, 360)
> Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner – Soul Hackers (3DS)

19 A Live-Action Wall-E?
Tom Cruise stars in Oblivion, today's big theatrical release. He's returned to a post-apocalyptic Earth for whatever reason. Lo and behold, bad things start happening and he's forced to yell at people and shoot guns. Thankfully, Morgan Freeman plays the wise old man, a role we've never seen him take on. Think of it as Mission: Impossible in Space with that guy who narrates all of the penguin documentaries.

23 New Releases
> Dead Island: Riptide (PS3, 360)
> Star Trek (PS3, 360)

30 New Releases
> Soul Sacrifice (Vita)

2013

connect 39

Free to Steal
in a City of Chains

Thief

by *BEN REEVES*
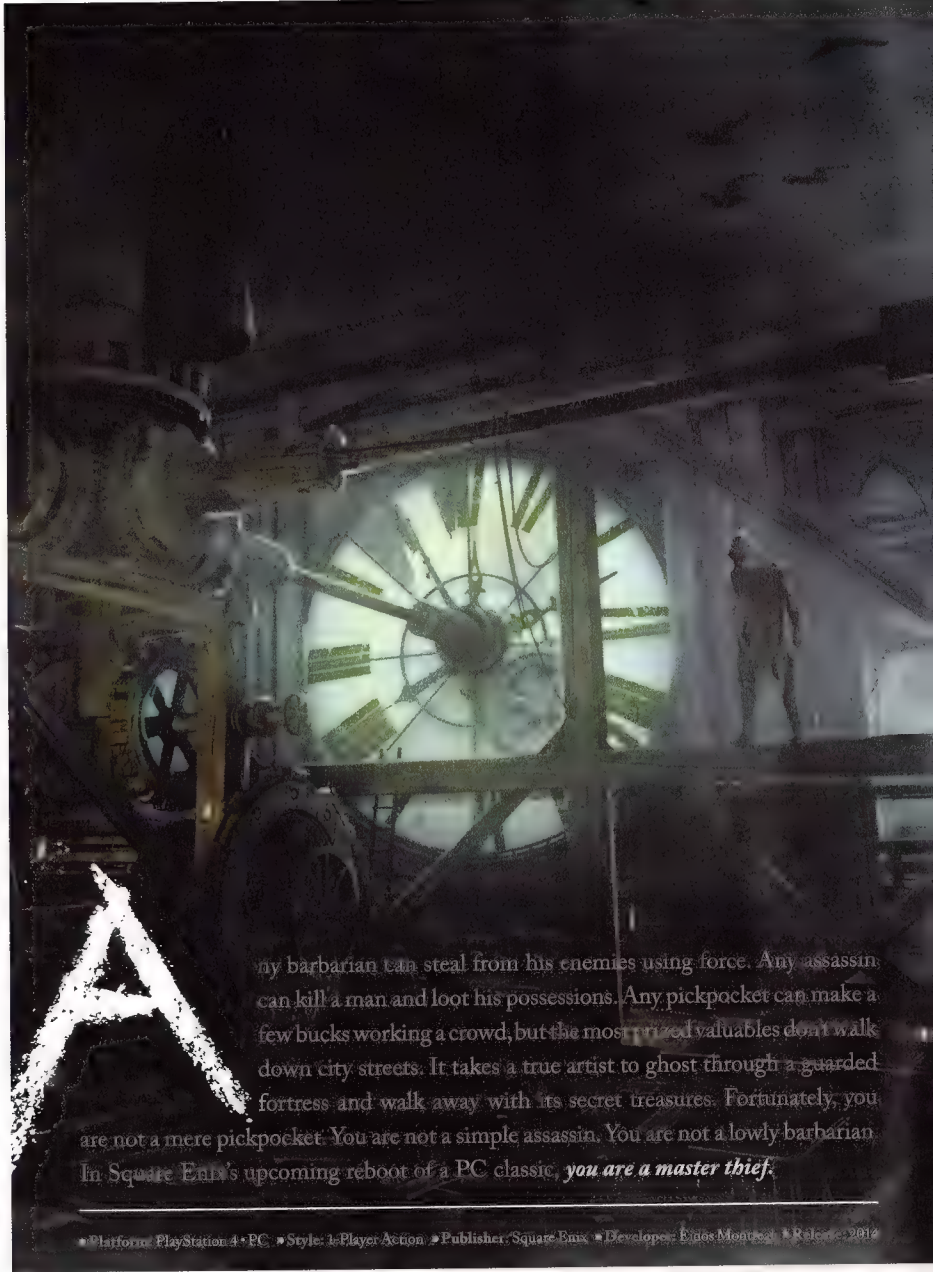
A

ny barbarian can steal from his enemies using force. Any assassin can kill a man and loot his possessions. Any pickpocket can make a few bucks working a crowd, but the most prized valuables don't walk down city streets. It takes a true artist to ghost through a guarded fortress and walk away with its secret treasures. Fortunately, you are not a mere pickpocket. You are not a simple assassin. You are not a lowly barbarian. In Square Enix's upcoming reboot of a PC classic, *you are a master thief.*

• Platform: PlayStation 4 • PC • Style: 1-Player Action • Publisher: Square Enix • Developer: Eidos Montreal • Release: 2014
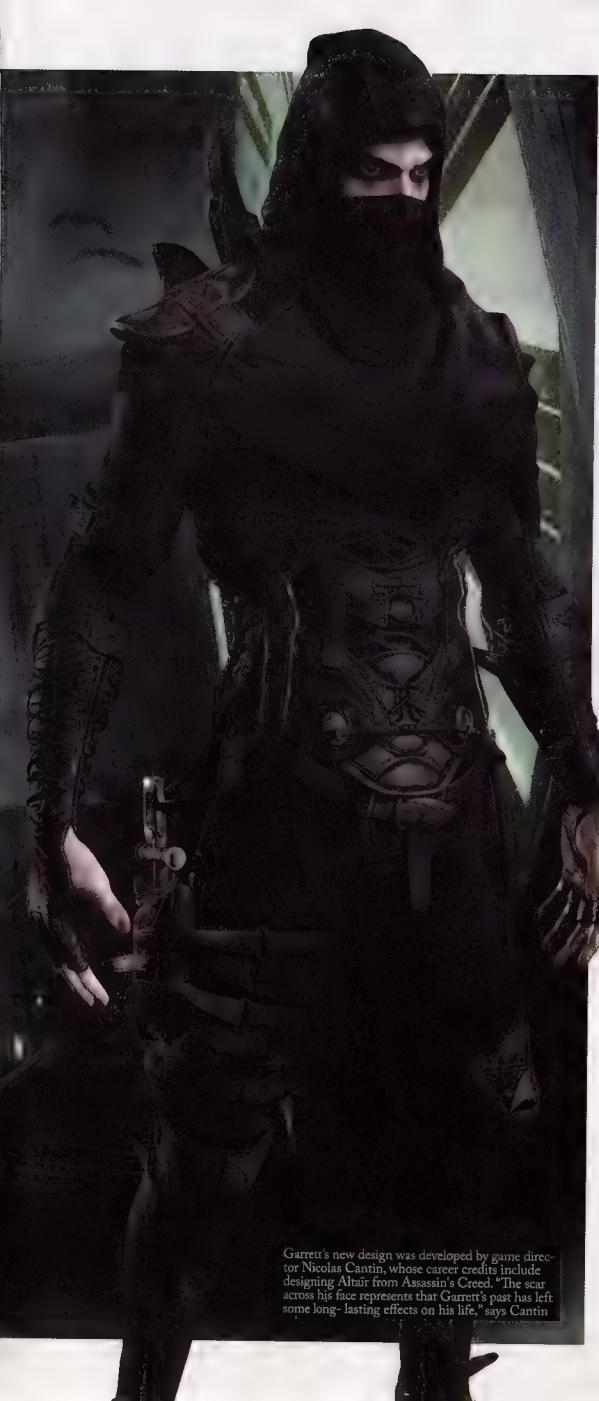
Garrett's new design was developed by game director Nicolas Cantin, whose career credits include designing Altaïr from Assassin's Creed. "The scar across his face represents that Garrett's past has left some long-lasting effects on his life," says Cantin

A RETURNING ANTIHERO

Garrett has been away from his hometown for a long time. When he finally returns to the industrial metropolis simply known as the City, he discovers a city of melting prosperity. The region has come under the rule of an iron-fisted Baron, who crushes its citizens under the boot of a militarized watch. Propaganda posters speak of prosperity, but this good fortune comes only to the elite. Garrett isn't interested in being this city's hero, but he'll use the political chaos as an opportunity to get rich.

Garrett slips into the City's Stonemarket district in the back of a covered wagon. From the shadows, he watches the bodies of plague victims pile up on street corners. Guards quell small civil disputes with excessive force as wealthy men stroll by with entourages of bodyguards. Would-be revolutionaries preach to deaf ears while men in stockades slowly waste away. This is a city of a million stories with vibrant contrasts. However, the only tale that catches Garrett's interest is a conversation between two guards talking about a wealthy man named Eastwick.

Theodore Eastwick is well-known around the City. As the town's principle architect, the Baron commissioned him to build many of the City's towering, Gothic structures. Eastwick is one of the City's richest men, and according to the local guards, tonight the tycoon is visiting a pleasure house on the other side of the city. A prized bird has come out of his cage, and Garrett sees this as a chance to pluck the golden goose for all he's worth.

Eastwick is headed to the House of Blossoms, an underground cathouse that serves the City's elite. Garrett must hurry if he wants to meet up with his new mark, because the gates in front of the House of Blossoms close at midnight. Garrett moves with practiced swiftness. He crouches behind a few crates and a dark tint cloaks the edges of the screen, signifying that Garrett is safely hidden from the guards' view. The thief grabs a nearby glass bottle and throws it across the alleyway to distract the guards, then runs behind them to climb a pipe up the side of a building.

From the roof, Garrett can see the red lights of the House of Blossoms off in the distance. The clock at the center of town clangs midnight; Garrett must hurry to reach the brothel before the gates close at the bell's final toll.

Garrett barrels over the city's skyline, diving from roof to roof until he slides down to street level again. He bounds over merchant tables and under wagons, then dives through the window of a nearby building, using this apartment as a shortcut to avoid circling the block. Reaching his destination in the nick of time, Garrett watches Eastwick pass through the secret entrance into the House of Blossoms.

This tightly choreographed sequence perfectly displays Garrett's skill as a master thief. It would make a fine opening cutscene for Eidos Montreal's reboot to the Thief franchise, except it's not a cutscene. Eidos Montreal is working hard to empower players and make them feel like a skilled master thief. The team has the basics of sneaking down to a science, which is good, because the series it is working to revive helped invent the modern stealth genre.

A THIEF'S LEGACY

In December 1998, Looking Glass Studios released Thief: The Dark Project for PC. It had not been an easy development. Due to financial pressures, the game faced cancellation twice. During one seven-month span, the producer, project director, lead programmer, lead artist, and lead designer all left the project before it was completed.

However, the game that finally released offered players a unique experience unlike any other game. Thief played from the first-person perspective, but it wasn't a shooter like Doom, Quake, Half-Life, or any of the other adrenaline-fueled first-person games on the market. In Thief, players moved slowly, avoided conflict, and were practically penalized for killing people. Players had to improvise as they skulked through medieval castles and searched for priceless treasure. It was a tense but rewarding experience, and even though games like Metal Gear Solid and Tenchu: Stealth Assassins had given console players a taste of stealth gameplay earlier in the year, there was nothing like Thief on PC. The game required players to pay attention to their surroundings, peek around corners, and

listen to audio cues in order to remain hidden. It was a more realistic stealth game in many regards, and a fresh experience.

Thief found enough critical and commercial success to warrant a sequel, but after Thief II: The Metal Age released in March of 2000, Looking Glass Studios folded under its financial burdens. Many former employees moved over to Ion Storm Austin to develop the long-anticipated third entry in the series alongside industry veteran Warren Spector, who had also worked on the first Thief game. Unfortunately, shortly after Thief: Deadly

Shadows shipped in 2004, Spector left the studio and Ion Storm eventually closed its doors, too.

As one of the pioneers of the genre, Thief could have been one of the industry's most prominent stealth franchises. But while Hitman, Splinter Cell, Assassin's Creed, and Dishonored continued to prove that people wanted gritty stealth games, the franchise that helped define modern stealth gaming faded from the public eye. Thief would have to wait in the shadows for a new developer to come along and make it relevant again.

What Can I Play This On?

Eidos' official statement is that "To date, Thief is confirmed for PC, PS4, and other next-generation consoles." We're not sure if someone other than Microsoft is also planning to announce a next-generation console, but you can probably take this as confirmation that Thief is also headed to Microsoft's next systems.

True to Its Roots

The last Thief game released nearly a decade ago, so many console players aren't familiar with the franchise. Given this fact, it makes sense that Eidos Montreal would reboot the series entirely, but the developer may be holding true to many of the franchise's core story elements.

The original Thief told the story of Garrett, a highly disciplined but cynical thief who only wished to be left alone but became unwittingly embroiled in a dark plot to destroy humanity. Garrett was raised by a secret society of thieves called the Keepers, but after being expelled, Garrett struck out on his own. After a god-like deity known as the Trickster betrayed Garrett, one of Garrett's eyes was ripped from its socket and later replaced with an experimental mechanical prosthetic.

Eidos was vague about how faithful it would remain to Thief's original lore, but did say that it would tone down many of the series' magical elements. Players won't likely encounter undead monsters or prowling dinosaurs as they did in the early Thief titles. However, Thief's concept art clearly shows that one of Garrett's eyes is a different color than the other, so it's possible that Eidos considers at least part of Garrett's original history as canon.

THE HOUSE OF THIEVES

Garrett enters the House of Blossoms unnoticed. Rich patrons in the thrall of opium highs sprawl across oriental couches. Scantily clad women saunter by and flirt with men in expensive finery. Above all the decadence, the Houses of Blossoms' proprietor, a transvestite named Xiao Xiao, greets guests.

"It is my great pleasure to greet you all on this auspicious occasion – the anniversary of my birth," Xiao Xiao says. "Some of you might notice the additional protection this evening.

They are only here for your safety and will not disturb you. Those of you who have something particularly valuable you wish to secure may speak to me personally and I'll see them stored in my office strongbox. Gentlemen, enjoy your evening."

Garrett loses Eastwick in the crowd, but a flip through Xiao Xiao's logbook should tell him where the architect has holed up. Garrett also wants to get his hands on whatever is in that strongbox, so he heads in the direction of Xiao Xiao's private room.

A general navigation beacon directs Garrett where to go, but Eidos Montreal wants players to explore the environment as they see fit. Nearly every room has multiple entrances and exits, and players have multiple options in which to approach nearly every stealth problem.

"For me, freedom is not just in creating an environment that is so large you are free to go any direction you want, but in that the player is free to play the way they want to play," says producer Stephane Roy. "We want to make sure that you really feel like you are free in this universe. The game isn't heavily scripted, so you will be able to play with your environment to create many opportunities to steal and sneak."

For example, when Garrett approaches one entrance locked down by guards he could take the time to sneak up behind the guards and systematically take them out one by one. If he wants to avoid bloodshed, he could stick to the shadows and carefully time his movement, waiting until a patrolling guard passes through and opens up the security checkpoint.

"It was really important to us to make the City feel epic," says game director Nicolas Cantin. "On the macro level we want to convey the idea that the world is larger than it is. Then on the micro level we wanted that anytime you enter a room it really feels like someone lives there. It tells a story."
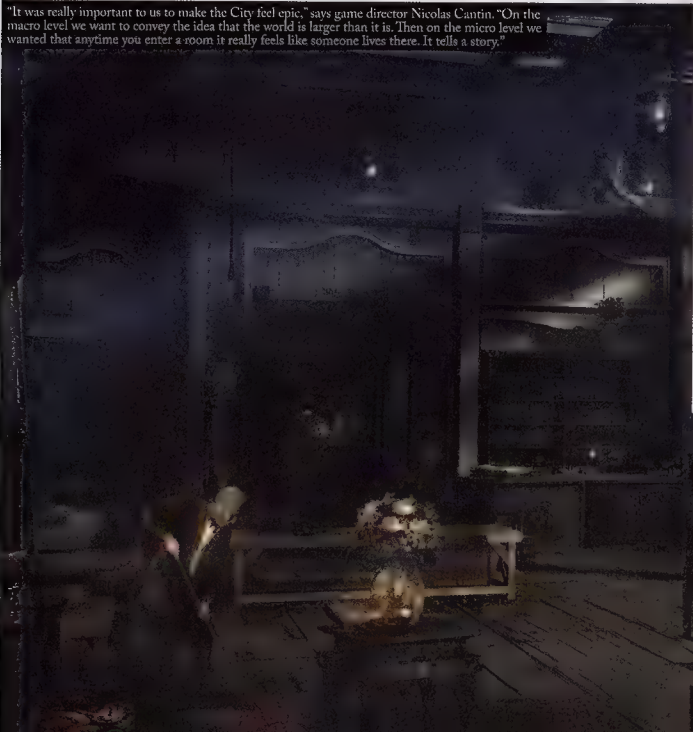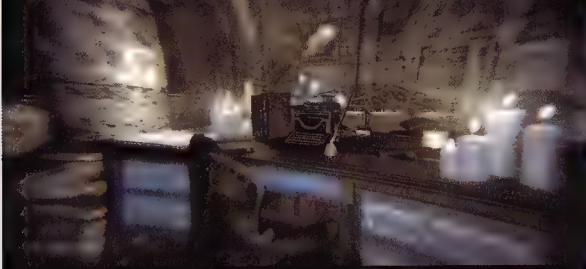
Garrett's Focus allows him to see which objects he can interact with. Eidos is still tuning the mechanic, but currently stealing objects in the environment and pickpocketing helps refill this resource

The House of the Blossoms is an underground, high-class bordello for the rich and famous

If he spends more time exploring the environment, he could possibly discover an unguarded tunnel leading into the building's kitchens.

"I love the visual of a lot of guys standing around a grate saying, 'What! He came in through there?'" says narrative director Steven Gallagher, who worked on films like *Entrapment* and *Gladiator* before moving over to the game industry. "Garrett's the kind of guy who would use the exhaust port on the Death Star. He sneaks through the cracks. We want to give players that same sense of empowerment."

One of the many ways Eidos Montreal is empowering gamers to feel like a master thief is with a gameplay mechanic called Focus. Focus is a resource that has a variety of uses, but one of its primary functions is to aid Garrett's vision as he navigates through the open levels.

"Focus lights up the screen and highlights pipes you can climb or candles you can put out to darken the room," says game director Nicolas Cantin. "As you upgrade your Focus you will get a bigger radius of things to see. We have a fingerprints system that will give you hints on which drawers are worthwhile to look in. Every drawer in the room is accessible, but you use your Thief skills like *CSI* to figure out where the valuables are."

Garrett nicks a number of valuables off the patrons in the House of the Blossom – a jeweled cup off an end table, a gold watch from an opium-addled gentleman, and even a pair of diamonds from the earlobes of a high-class call girl. If Garrett activates Focus while pickpocketing, time slows and he can swipe up to three times as many items from his unsuspecting mark. All of these valuables add up, and at the end of each mission, Garrett can spend the money he makes each night to upgrade his supplies and equipment (see Tools of the Trade sidebar).

After filling his pack with the House of Blossoms' valuables, Garrett ghosts through the building and makes is way up to Xiao Xiao's private office. A quick flip through the logbook tells Garrett which bedroom Eastwick has occupied, but before he fleeces his target, the master thief decides to lighten Xiao Xiao's strongbox. A lockpicking minigame has Garrett aligning the tumblers of a lock until it opens. Before Garrett can crack the lock, the wall of Xiao Xiao's office slides open and the brothel's owner steps into view.
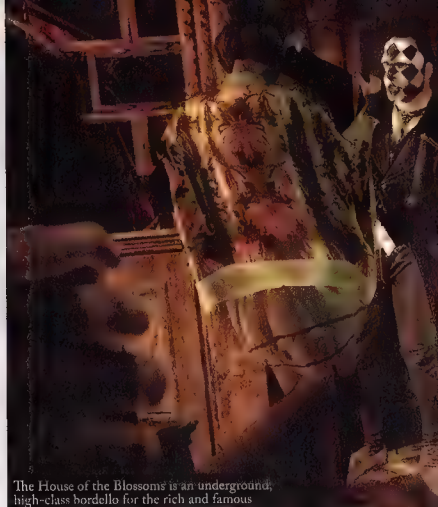
WORKING FROM THE SHADOWS

When Looking Glass Studios closed its doors, publisher Eidos scooped up the rights to Thief and allowed Ion Storm to produce the third entry in the series, Deadly Shadows. After Ion Storm went the way of Looking Glass, Eidos began searching for a new studio that could hold onto the reins of the Thief franchise. The publisher finally settled on its internal Montreal studio – a new and unproven team that the company built from scratch. As early as 2008, the studio hinted that it had acquired the Thief franchise, and in May of 2009 it officially announced it was working on Thief 4. Then the project went dark.

In 2011, Eidos Montreal proved that it could respectfully reboot existing properties when it released Deus Ex: Human Revolution. However, Thief fans were beginning to worry about the state of their favorite stealth franchise. The game was taking an unusually long time to develop. It had already been over three years since the company had announced that it was working on the title (an entire development span for most games), and the company still hadn't released any

relevant information. Was Eidos still working on the title? Was the developer struggling with the game's concepts? Fans began to fear the worst as news outlets leaked rumors about Thief 4's troubled development.

Development inside the studio wasn't dire, but the project hadn't been completely stress free. Eidos Montreal compares game development to a high-speed train collision between art and technology. Sometimes this collision creates a spellbinding display, and sometimes it results in a flaming wreck that costs a company millions of dollars. In order to ensure that the latter didn't happen, Eidos kept its Thief team small and stayed within the concept phase of development for a longer period of time.

The Thief team was given carte blanche to reinvent the series, but that wasn't an easy task. How do you make a stealth game appeal to a modern audience that is constantly bombarded by fast-paced franchises like Call of Duty, Uncharted, and God of War?

Eidos Montreal experimented with creating a new character for the franchise or turning the game into a third-person title that focused on either tactical gameplay or environmental clambering à la Assassin's Creed. At one point in development, the game had so many third-to-first-person transitions that the constant camera shifting was making people sick. During the first three years of development, the team performed a lot of experiments, but not all of them had proved fruitful.

"Concept was a really cool time," Gallagher says. "There were a lot of ideas. It was very creatively energetic, but there was a lot of stuff that went on the table and was quickly taken off the table, and then placed in a dark room never to be seen. Some of the early concept stuff had Garrett a little too soft in his approach. That was a fine line to walk. I had a lot of problems with some of the early focus tests because I had turned his movements up too much toward the female spectrum."

As the months continued to tick by, Thief's extended development began to wear on the team. The studio was losing sight of what it wanted to accomplish. The team knew it had to find its focus soon if it didn't want to get caught with a mess on its hands.

Garrett's hands help him navigate his environment. Eidos Montreal says that its character models are so detailed that you can zoom in on Garrett's hands and see his fingerprints

Tools of the Trade

Garrett's most important tools are his hands, which help him feel his way through the shadows and pick both locks and pockets. However, sometimes even a master thief needs specialized tools. Here's a quick look at Garrett's tool belt.

- **Blackjack:** Small and concealable, this leather-wrapped club is a valuable resource. Garrett can use this when sneaking up behind guards to knock them unconscious.

- **Bow:** Garrett's bow is a powerful tool, and not only during combat. We watched one sequence in which Garrett fired an arrow at a bottle in another room to lure a guard away. He then let a second arrow fly, which triggered a switch to close a gate to trap the guard inside.

- **Specialty Arrows:** Garrett can find a variety of specialty arrows that have a range of uses. So far we only know about the dry-ice arrow, which can be used to snuff flames from a distance, and the smoke-starter arrow, which provides both cover and a distraction.

- **Claw:** In previous Thief games, Garrett used a rope arrow to access high points. Now he has the Claw, a throwable grapple that attaches to certain points in the environment and allows Garrett to get out of sight quickly.

Garrett keeps a stockpile of lockpicks, like any self-respecting thief

NOT GETTING CAUGHT

Xiao Xiao strides into the office as Garrett slides his lockpicks out of the strongbox and rolls into a darkened corner. Xiao Xiao doesn't notice him, but it seems like Garrett has missed his chance to acquire whatever was inside that chest. Fortunately, fate offers a second chance. One of Xiao Xiao's girls knocks on the door, complaining about a creepy patron. Xiao Xiao leaves to deal with the situation. With only seconds to spare, Garrett activates Focus, which speeds up his lockpicking ability. The lock's tumblers practically fall into place for him. Garrett can hear Xiao Xiao arguing with the girl as he lifts a jewel-encrusted heirloom out of the chest. Special artifacts like this are scattered throughout Thief's levels, which Garrett uses to decorate his hideout.

"What gets Garrett out of bed in the morning – what gets him out of bed in the evening – is the challenge," Gallagher says. "It's not about the money anymore, it's about the fact that he feels more alive when he's stealing something that no one else can take. When he takes something of emotional value, it's not just a ring to him; it's what the ring may have symbolized. It's almost as if he's stealing what he's not able to have in real life because he's so independent."

With Xiao Xiao just outside the door, Garrett can't go out the way he came in. He explores the wall that opened to let Xiao Xiao in, and he finds the secret button that causes the wall to slide open and reveal a hidden passageway.

Using the House of Blossoms' network of backdoors, Garrett discovers Eastwick's room. However, Eastwick isn't enjoying the pleasures of one of Xiao Xiao's women. Instead he is intently examining the walls of his room muttering, "it has to be this one."

Without pause, Garrett slips into the room and nabs an expensive looking medallion that Eastwick placed on a nearby table. A number of ancient runes are carved onto its unique metal surface. Garrett should be able to turn a hefty profit if he can find the right fence. However, instead of immediately leaving, Garrett's curiosity gets the better of him and he uses Focus to look at the wall Eastwick is still examining.

While using Focus, Garrett can clearly see a mysterious symbol written on the wall in blue energy. This symbol corresponds to one of the runes written on the medallion, and as Garrett turns a band of the medallion to line up that rune with an arrow, the medallion begins to glow with a similar blue energy. A quick exploration of four adjacent rooms reveals four more symbols for Garrett to line up on the medallion. After Garrett spins the final symbol into place, the medallion whirs with kinetic energy and spins in his hand. This hunk of metal is either worth a lot more than Garrett initially thought, or it's extremely dangerous.

Before Garrett has time to reflect on the glowing mystery in his hand, The House of Blossoms stirs with frantic activity. Eastwick has discovered that he's been robbed and calls for help. Through the walls, Garrett can hear Xiao Xiao ordering the guards to search everywhere. Garrett has missed his window for an easy exit.

Eidos Montreal got help from a couple of New York-based fashion designers who made a real-life version of Garrett's in-game attire. These fabricators helped Eidos craft a leather costume that would actually make less noise while moving

FINDING FOCUS

About a year ago, Stephane Roy joined the Thief 4 team, which by then had been re-titled simply Thief, as its producer. He had cut his teeth working on the Splinter Cell series for Ubisoft, and Eidos hoped Roy would be able to help the Thief project find its focus.

"My job when I started was to figure out what the original mandate for the game had been," Roy says. "I noticed that when I asked several directors about the original mandate, there was no clear answer. When you try a lot of things, sometimes it's difficult to keep the focus. You try this and you try that and you forget what the game is about. It happened a couple of times where we were wrong, and that was tough on the team, but at the end of the day, people on the game really believe in Thief."

Roy admits that it was hard to keep the team motivated after working silently on the same game for four years. However, he also believes that that early concept work helped fuel the game's creative energy, and its mistakes have helped the team figure out what doesn't work.

"I love Garrett dearly for how complex he is, but I don't love him dearly for the challenges he sometimes brings to writing him," Gallagher adds. "He's a very closed-off individual. He doesn't trust a lot of people. He doesn't talk to a lot of people, but he's very talkative inside his own head. He's a funny guy, but he wouldn't necessarily crack a lot of jokes. This all sounds like someone who's not going to be a lot of fun to play as in a game, but to be honest, the contrast he brings to the narrative brings him a lot of interesting texture, and that texture brings a lot to the gameplay."

Eidos Montreal's experimentation with Thief's DNA helped the studio find what it now believes to be the magic formula for designing a great stealth game: Force players into a series of impossible situations and then give them the tools to escape.

The corners of the screen darken when Garrett is hidden. Eidos calls this mechanic the Cloak
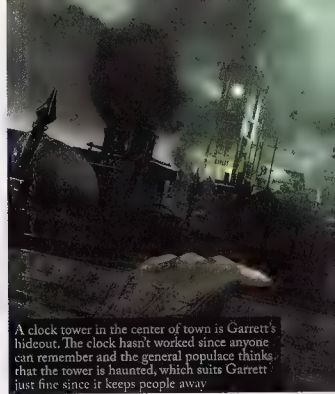
A clock tower in the center of town is Garrett's hideout. The clock hasn't worked since anyone can remember and the general populace thinks that the tower is haunted, which suits Garrett just fine since it keeps people away

THE ESCAPE

Garrett isn't a fighter. He's capable in a scrap, but engaging four or more guards in open combat is near-suicide. The master thief is more comfortable in the shadows, and it's better that his enemies don't see him coming. Unfortunately for Garrett, Thief's AI doesn't make it easy to stay hidden. Guards and other NPCs are aware of the level design, so they know where a person might try to hide if, for example, he had just stolen something extremely valuable.

"If you're trying to hide from the guards, it's more convincing to see them look for you in an interesting way," says lead AI programmer Eric Martel. "You don't want a guard to go next to a wall and look there; his investigation needs to work well with the level design. Garrett's enemies understand the topography of the level and which areas could be useful for hiding. Different NPCs will look for Garrett in different ways."

As Garrett works his way back through the House of Blossoms, guards pour out of the woodwork. The crowd has become nervous – ready to point out the first sign of unusual activity. Garrett has to be extra careful as he slides past the bordello's bedchambers. If only there was some way to calm down the crowd.

Recalling a conversation he overheard earlier, Garrett makes his way to one of the House of Blossoms' back rooms. While working his way up to Xiao Xiao's office, Garret heard two serving girls talk about a catastrophe that once followed after the ventilation system was accidentally overfilled with opium. A heavy dose of opium sounds like the perfect way to calm fevered nerves. After sneaking past a few guards, Garrett dumps the house's remaining stock of opium into the vents and cranks open the flue.

Hypnotic vapors flood the House of Blossoms and send everyone into a deep sleep. This optional side quest makes it easier for Garrett to beeline to the exit, but he'll have to hurry and reach fresh air before he faints from holding his breath. In his haste, Garrett runs headfirst into a group of guards.

"We have worked very hard to give you the tools to protect yourself," Roy says. "Ten to fifteen years ago, you'd have to watch the guards patrol and wait for a moment to move. If the guards saw you, it wasn't really game over, but it was almost like you might as well just press

Life Imitates Art

When Eidos Montreal began development of Thief, the team felt it was important to achieve a certain level of verisimilitude. In order to make the elements of its game more believable, the studio turned to some real-life experts. Eidos Montreal commissioned a local blacksmithing forge, Les Forges de Montréal, to create a real-life version of Garrett's bow. However, when the forge received Eidos' digital render for the bow, they found that it was unfit for practical use. After over 600 man-hours solving the mechanical problems of getting a collapsible titanium bow to be functional, the forge delivered the weapon to Eidos' offices. The team at Eidos was so impressed with the forge's work that they changed the bow's in-game design to reflect the changes the forge had made.

Machinist Dan Nyborg and his blacksmith partner Mathieu Collette helped design Garrett's real-life bow
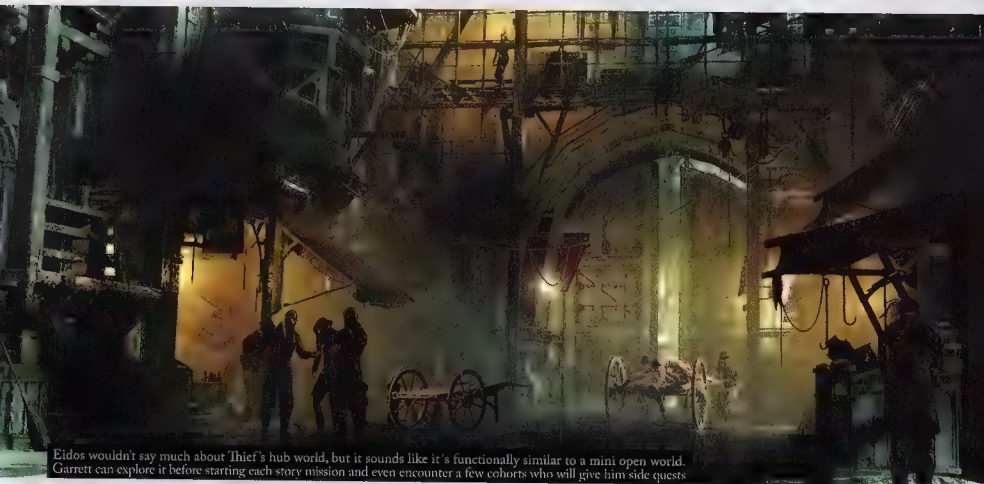
Eidos wouldn't say much about Thief's hub world, but it sounds like it's functionally similar to a mini open world. Garrett can explore it before starting each story mission and even encounter a few cohorts who will give him side quests

the reset button. The big difference today is that players don't want to play the same sections over and over again. Our job is really to make it so that when you are seen you have options to move through or stumble the guards and then jump back in the shadows."

Several guards circle on Garrett, and the master thief reacts almost without thinking. He retreats into the opium fog and uses his bow to fire an arrow at a statue hanging above a doorframe. The statue falls and crushes two guards. Another guard pins Garrett against a wall, so to buy himself time to think Garrett enters Focus mode.

While in combat, Focus displays a number of attack points on Garrett's enemies. Garrett can select one of these points, the chest for example, and do a quick push that buys him some time to dash off into the shadows. Alternatively, he can string together a number of these points, which uses more Focus, and

perform a more debilitating attack.

Using a chain attack, Garrett grabs the guard's arm, jerks it back behind his shoulder, and then plants a heel against the guard's knee. Bones snap with a sickening crack, and the man collapses against the stone floor in agony. Eidos Montreal has modeled these stylish Focus maneuvers after the boxing scenes from Guy Ritchie's recent Sherlock Holmes films.

"We're trying to find a balance between making combat enjoyable and allowing you to enter into combat if you want, but at the same time not letting you completely clear a room that way," Roy says. "We want you to play as a thief, but we don't want to force you to play as a thief. You can play the game aggressively if you want, but it won't be as easy."

Breaking free from the final guards, Garrett grapples onto a nearby vent and rappels down into the depths of the the City's sewers. Garrett's exploits at the House of Blossoms

are over, but the glowing medallion in his pocket hints at a larger plot. Garrett's journey through that mystery has only just begun.

Eidos Montreal doesn't plan to release Thief until 2014, but all of the title's major mechanics are in place and the developer's Focus is slowly shifting to polishing the experience. The combination of Garrett's array of tools, open-ended missions that encourage improvisation, and a Focus ability that can get Garret out of any jam should make every player feel like a master thief. Eidos' reboot of the Thief franchise has had an extended incubation period, but the sun will eventually set on Thief's development. For a kleptomaniac who thrives in the dark, that's just fine. ◈

Reveal more of Thief's hidden secrets at gameinformer.com/thief, where you'll see video interviews with the Eidos Monreal team, get a closer look a Garrett's new design, and find out how Eidos designed Garrett's bow

UNCHARTED WATERS

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

Since the dawn of Assassin's Creed in 2007, the series has followed a set of established ground rules. Players assumed the role of Desmond Miles, a present-day hero in the center of a secret war between Assassins and Templars. He controls ancestors in a device called the Animus to unravel modern mysteries and help the Assassin cause. The needs of Desmond's order have always required him to move further along in history, but that time is over now. Desmond's chapter is closed, and with it many of Assassin's Creed's conventions.

After a trilogy of titles chronicling the life of Italian assassin Ezio Auditore, Assassin's Creed III signaled a fundamental shift with a new era and hero. With the fourth installment, it's happening again. Instead of continuing Connor's story, the franchise is shifting back in time to the days of his grandfather, Edward Kenway. Players steer this pirate captain through dangerous waters to greatness in the West Indies as he merges his swashbuckling ways into the world of Assassins and Templars. In addition to showcasing all-new expansive cities in the Caribbean, the latest entry introduces an open-world ocean to explore and fully realizes the ship mechanics that were, in hindsight, merely teased in the last game. Welcome to Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, a new course for Ubisoft's blockbuster franchise.

by **BRYAN VORE**

The Real Pirates

The development of Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag began back in September 2011. By the time ship combat was conceptualized and proven for AC III, the Black Flag team members believed they could build out the mechanic as a core concept of an entire game. "When AC III was in development and we knew we were doing this Haytham-Connor, father-son story, we realized if we went back just a few decades in time we'd be right at the golden age of piracy," says lead scriptwriter Darby McDevitt. And so Edward Kenway was conceived.

The father of Haytham and grandfather of Connor, Edward grew up poor in Britain and got married at a young age. When class and family issues came between the couple, he set out to the West Indies to seek fortune and make a name for himself. He served as a privateer for a while, but once the monarchies of England, Spain, France, and others signed a series of treaties around 1713, the contracts dried up. After a few years of peace and poverty, Edward and the rest of the now-struggling privateers began working for themselves as pirates, raiding ships and hauling in loot throughout a ten-year span when pirates ruled the Caribbean.

As with all Assassin's Creed games, Black Flag is based on historical record. Between 1715 and 1725, pirates like Blackbeard, Calico Jack, Charles Vane, Benjamin Hornigold, and Anne Bonny became legends. In Black Flag, these colorful characters cross paths with Edward during his adventures.

Don't expect the cartoonish Captain Jack Sparrow from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The development team isn't interested in clichés like fantastical talking parrots and hooks. "If it didn't occur or if it wasn't prevalent, then we're just not going to do it," McDevitt says. "What's real is already amazing. We don't need to resort to any of the fake stuff."

In addition to historical sources, the developers are using more grounded entertainment for inspiration. Movies like *The Mission* and *Master and Commander* and TV shows like *Deadwood* may not directly connect with pirates, but they nail the tone the writers are targeting. On the gaming side, they looked to Red Dead Redemption, hoping to do for the pirate fantasy what Rockstar did for cowboys.

Black Flag is not solely a pirate game. At the beginning of the story Edward is immersed in the swashbuckling lifestyle, but he soon comes into contact with Assassins and Templars. "Assassins are compassionate anarchists, and Templars are benevolent dictators," McDevitt says. "We realized we could actually go further along those extremes. With the pirates, it's an even more extreme version of the Assassin philosophy. We liked widening the scope of that conflict. Edward's innate seafaring and combat skills are further honed with Assassin training, but he struggles to reconcile his selfish, cavalier pirate attitude with the two competing higher ideals.

MULTIPLAYER

While Ubisoft didn't talk specifics, it confirmed that competitive multiplayer is returning. "We're giving a pirate fantasy to all of the multiplayer," says game director Ashraf Ismail. "We'll have new characters, new maps, and new game modes." While the development team never indicated one way or another, it would be an incredible missed opportunity to not include ship battles in multiplayer this time around since they are so essential to the pirate gameplay. Hopefully, we'll get confirmation on this before too long.

Naval Warfare

Ubisoft bills Black Flag as the "first true naval open-world game." While we haven't seen the high seas exploration in action, combining the visuals and mechanics from the previous game with an ambitious open-world plan fills us with excitement. Whereas AC III had linear, contained, and scripted missions at sea, Black Flag features a massive ocean that connects 50 different unique land locations in the Caribbean. These waters aren't simply a method of transportation; they serve as one of the core pillars of new gameplay mechanics.

If you thought there was lot to do in AC III, Black Flag ratchets up the amount of activities. At any time on Edward's ship, the *Jackdaw*, he can pull up a spyglass and search the horizon for points of interest like an uncharted island. Onscreen, players see a list of grayed out items, only displaying the basic details once you dock at the landmass for the first time. These locations include hidden coves, fishing villages, jungles, Mayan ruins, plantations, and large cities like Kingston, Havana, and Nassau. "We don't want players to feel like all these varied locations are separate maps that you have to load into," says game director Ashraf Ismail. "It's very important for us that the game feels unified, that this is one world and that players really get immersed.".

To that end, players can sail to any island, get out, and explore it without any loading breaks (traditional large cities still need to load, however). You can even jump off the boat anytime and go for a swim. The primary purpose of going overboard is to experience the new underwater exploration segments. Using a diving bell (a large metal structure that holds air in its cavity as it submerges) the diver can descend into the depths of the ocean, swim out to nab treasure, and return for a fresh gasp of air without heading to the surface. Edward uses this to search wrecks for lost treasure and hidden secrets while trying not to drown and get eaten by hungry sharks. Great whites aren't the only aquatic life he encounters. Concept art at the studio revealed a whale-hunting mechanic, which should be quite profitable if you can succeed.

The true danger and opportunity on the open seas is the wide array of other ships. The trusty spyglass can reveal what kind of cargo is onboard and what kind of defenses a ship has. Depending on the risk and payoff, some ships might not be worth going after, but practically every vessel players see can be attacked. These range from smaller sailboats to lumbering warships, each with recognizable behavior traits. Ubisoft offers the "Charger" as an example, which prefers ramming you at full speed to a strategic cannon battle.

Ubisoft wouldn't detail the changes it's making to the core naval combat, but stressed that boarding has received a complete overhaul. Edward can command the crew to use grapple hooks to pull the two vessels together from any angle. Instead of boarding using the same repeating cutscene from AC III, players can choose any tactic they wish. Edward can assault the other crew in straightforward gun/melee battle, jump into

"The immersion [in the jungle] is very different than in a North American forest," says art director Raphael Lacoste. "It's extremely dense. It's very oppressive."

the water and swim around to sneak up on the rear flank, or even climb his mast, hop over to the other, and perform an aerial assassination on the enemy captain. Just be sure to keep an eye out for patrolling military ships before raiding. These well-equipped craft rush to fight off any marauders.

In combat, Edward draws from the traditional Assassin playbook with dual hidden blades, swords, and pistols. This long-range option is now free aim, so you have more control over what you are targeting. Don't worry about Assassin's Creed turning into Gears of War, however. Guns still only hold a single shot and require the same cumbersome reload time as in the previous game, though Edward carries four pistols on him at all times. While Connor dual-wielded smaller weapons, Edward is the first Assassin to double up on swords.

This plundering and pillaging results in cargo holds full of goods and gold, but any smart pirate knows you have to invest in your business to increase returns. Black Flag's economy encourages players to spend most of their riches on upgrading the *Jackdaw*. Offensive, defensive, and navigation add-ons can make your ship more formidable against a wider array of ships. Some particularly tough warships camp out at intriguing islands and attack any curious under-equipped vessels. Barriers such as this keep your experience more focused in the early part of the game and offer incentives to participate in activities, earn loot, and buy upgrades so you can surpass them later.

Present Day

O f all the changes that Black Flag is introducing to the Assassin's Creed franchise, the new take on the modern time period is the most drastic. "Desmond's saga ended with AC III," Ismail says. "We had to ask players to believe you are playing a guy named Desmond who is playing a guy named Altaïr, Ezio, and so on. Because [Desmond's] story is over, we wanted that one level closer in. You're not playing another guy. You're playing yourself in this world."

The player assumes the role of an Abstergo Entertainment research analyst who's digging into the life of Edward Kenway using an Animus. Since you're not part of Desmond's family line, fans may raise an eyebrow at the fact that a non-relative can experience the memories of another. Ubisoft assures there are story foundations for this teased in AC III. The most likely scenario would seem to be tied to Desmond's conversation with his father, William, late in the game after the old man is rescued from Abstergo. When Desmond asks if the Templars got to him, William replies that he was able to resist, but it may not have been enough. "I know they've been working on ways to extract memories and let others sift through those memories," he says. "Maybe they're even analyzing mine right now."

William's fears are confirmed after the end credits, when players begin controlling Connor as someone other than Desmond. An unknown voice directs your quest to find pivots within the Animus. Once you're successful, the voice celebrates, "Holy crap. We did it. It's done. His data's uploading to the cloud. Vegas baby! Vegas!" The player's real-life gamertag is then shown to be "synchronized with the cloud." Is

LEARNING FROM PAST MISTAKES

At launch, Assassin's Creed III had obvious problems with bugs and glitches. Ubisoft promises to do better this time. "We're working with the management side of things to be very aggressive about making sure we polish stuff, and we're giving ourselves a really big buffer at the end of the game," says game director Ashraf Ismail.

What about the notoriously lengthy introduction sequences before the full game is opened up? "This game starts off with a bang," he says. "We really wanted to make sure that the pirate theme is thrown in the player's face very early on. It doesn't happen right away, but pretty quickly into the game the world opens up. At that point you can do whatever you want wherever you want."

Fast-travel locations were a pain to unlock in the cities of Boston and New York, and were easy to miss in the frontier. For Black Flag, Ubisoft is taking a straightforward approach. All you have to do is visit a location and you can instantly teleport there whenever you like. This will be especially useful in the vast ocean world.

this William Miles' data? Is the voice on the line an employee of Abstergo Entertainment?

Playing the role of yourself as an Abstergo agent isn't completely new. The Assassin's Creed Revelations multiplayer rewarded fans with first-person videos of what it was like to climb the ranks within the Templar organization. AC III's multiplayer videos showcased Abstergo Entertainment propaganda, while further unlocks revealed hacker group Erudito's altered takes on the videos. AC: Liberation on Vita was also an Abstergo product, though it didn't contain present-day gameplay outside of some messages.

Playing as the Assassins' enemy worked in a separate multiplayer setting, but it seems strange that the single-player is going to the dark side as well. The team assures that it's not that simple. "You start the game being an innocent employee just doing your job," Ismail says.

"For new people, we want to reintroduce the conflicts of the present day," McDevitt adds.

"They'll be like, 'Oh this is my job.' For people who know the franchise, working for Abstergo might be a little weird, but that's part of the joy of discovery. It's like, 'What kind of weird s--- are my employers up to?'"

Even though most of what you knew about the present day timeline is absent from Black Flag, the ongoing tale will continue. "We pick up right where the old story left off," McDevitt says. "But because you are the character, we have to introduce you into the world in a different way. It'll be full of surprises. All of the things set up by the ending of AC III, those continue as well."

Hopefully, this opens the story to a new, more personal scale, though it's difficult to imagine how the writers are incorporating the all-powerful goddess Juno into a sterile Abstergo office building. We're hopeful that this new present day direction leverages the tossing of Desmond's present-day baggage without removing the soul and personality that a fully written character provides.
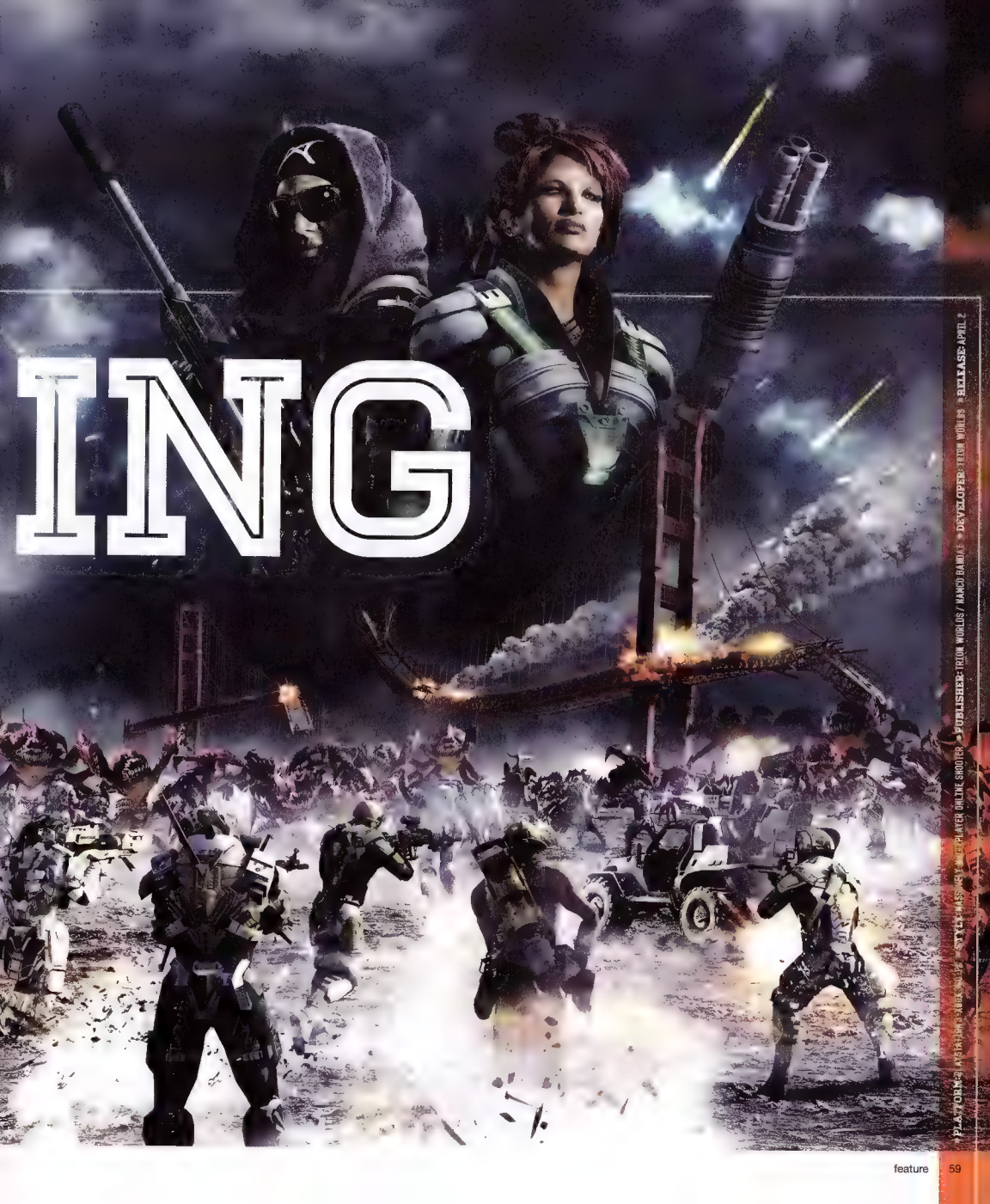
DEFIANCE

COLLIDING WORLDS

Plenty of science fiction and fantasy properties over the years have capitalized on the potential of drawing a fictional universe back and forth between mediums. Books, movies, games, comics, and more all play host to an ever-widening array of properties in search of that holy grail of true transmedia fan involvement. In pursuit of that goal, Trion Worlds and Syfy are attempting something new: an integrated story that unfolds simultaneously in a video game and a TV show, and continues to adapt in tandem over the months and years that follow.

In advance of Defiance's show and game premiere in the coming weeks, I explored both projects. The two separate approaches to this new sci-fi fiction share more than a storyline – both revealed themselves to be ambitious and entertaining in their own right, but the cross-pollination between them may spark a new way for the two entertainment mediums to inform one another.

BY MATT MILLER

ING

Defiance is built around a near-future science fiction with a number of intriguing distinctions. The world is post-apocalyptic, but not bleak. The story tells of aliens coming to earth, but not as invaders. The characters feel historically anachronistic and familiar, but many of them aren't human.

"The concept came up of aliens immigrating here from a solar system that they had to flee," explains game senior producer Rob Hill. "And coming here, they didn't come as conquerors, because we also didn't want to go down the alien-invasion route. They came here just to migrate and find a place to live because it's the only place they found, and on their way they realized that we were already here – modern-day humans." Despite initial progress on colonization plans, a series of assassinations at the United Nations rapidly devolves into more widespread violence, and the Pale Wars begin between the colonizing Votans (a collection of seven distinct alien species) and the native humans of Earth.

As the war rages, devastating terraforming technology plummets down from the massive ark-like ships of the aliens, completely reshaping life on Earth, including everything from geography to plants and animals. After years of conflict, humans and Votans come together and unite to survive, revolting against their leaders at the Battle of Defiance. "Because of all these new things that appeared with these colonization machines that are a cross between earth and Votan stuff, the aliens and humans had to start learning to live together to survive all these new things that were threatening them," Hill explains.

By the time the game and show start, these many races have been living together on a reshaped planet Earth for many years. Much of the previous civilization is in ruins, and small bastions of order exist separated by wide swaths of lawless wilderness. Somewhere between frontier Old West and futuristic alien technology, the Defiance storyline finds its beginnings.

THE GAME FOCUSES ON LARGE-SCALE COOPERATIVE PLAY, WHERE DOZENS OF PLAYERS CAN JOIN TOGETHER TO CONFRONT DYNAMIC EVENTS IN THE WORLD

WEAPONRY RUNS THE GAMUT FROM FAMILIAR SHOOTER STANDARDS TO STRANGE ALIEN TECHNOLOGY, LIKE THIS GUN THAT SHOOTS LIGHTNING
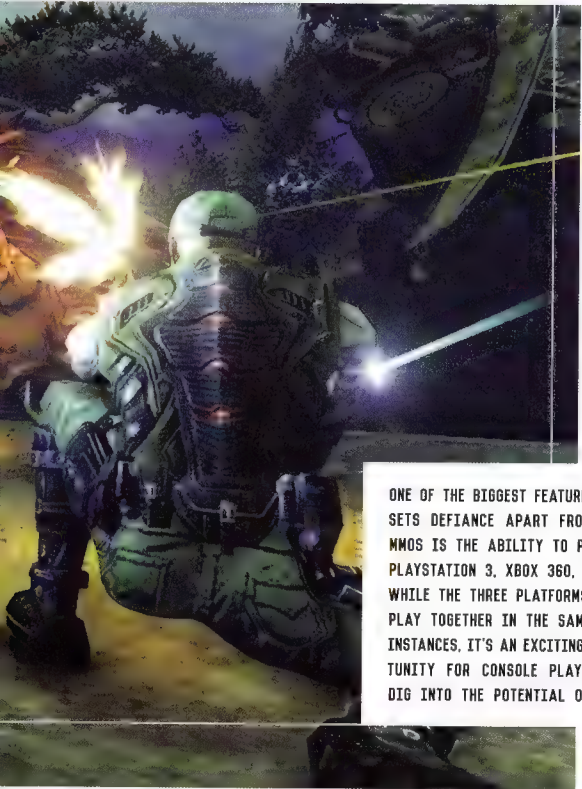
THE INTERACTIVE SIDE

The interactive half of the Defiance franchise is a new MMO that opens its doors to players in early April. Knowing little about the project, I dug into an early alpha version of the game.

After character creation, which lets me customize my character's species, appearance, background, and starting equipment, a brief intro sets the stage; years after the Battle of Defiance, I'm an ark hunter – an experienced fighter out to track down fallen pieces of alien technology in the ruined remnants of the San Francisco bay area. My employer has gone missing, and the drive to track him down and subsequently help him to complete his hunt for lost technology encompasses the early hours of play.

Defiance lives in a middle ground between popular MMOs like World of Warcraft and single-player third-person shooters like Mercenaries, Just Cause, or Red Faction. Running through the world, I'm soon shooting pistols, shotguns, and sniper rifles to bring down enemy soldiers. Fights are frantic and mobile as I gun down dozens of enemies. The aiming feels tight, and the different armaments are varied. Familiar human guns give way to strange Votan weaponry, like a gun that shoots out continuous streams of electricity, or a frightening device that infects foes with explosive boils that hatch into scampering attack creatures.

The game world is an unusual mix of familiar and unearthly. Cobbled-together buildings and shattered technology calls to mind the wastelands of the Fallout world, but bright alien flora lends an otherworldly quality to my surroundings. Human raiders charge me with guns blazing, but I'm also confronted by scampering giant hellbugs and clanking robotic mechs. I'm intrigued by the potential for exploration and discovery.

Less than an hour into the game, I get my "mount," a rugged looking ATV four-wheeler that lets me zoom across the hilly landscape, jumping off cliffs and running down monsters. A tap of my map brings up all sorts of options. The main story missions unlock one by one, but countless secondary missions offer opportunities for additional experience and treasure. As in Trion Worlds' other MMO, Rift, I regularly see dynamic events pop up, in which I can join up with dozens of other players to confront an arkfall filled with technology loot as it's swarmed by monsters.

As I play, an alien artificial intelligence implanted inside my body, called an EGO, boosts my abilities to superhuman levels. In practice, the EGO is Defiance's way to allow upgrades and special skills. I focus on upgrading my sniping human survivalist's cloaking technology and related skills, and slowly begin unlocking improvements.

Only a few current MMOs are exploring the potential of massively multiplayer shooters, but Defiance is unique among them for its focus on story-telling and cooperative-oriented player-versus-environment structure. The game cries out to be played with a group of friends, even if it can still be adequately played solo. Missions are teeming with enemies that come from all angles, and the game scales encounters to match the number of players.

ONE OF THE BIGGEST FEATURES THAT SETS DEFIANCE APART FROM MOST MMOS IS THE ABILITY TO PLAY ON PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360, AND PC. WHILE THE THREE PLATFORMS WON'T PLAY TOGETHER IN THE SAME GAME INSTANCES, IT'S AN EXCITING OPPORTUNITY FOR CONSOLE PLAYERS TO DIG INTO THE POTENTIAL OF MMOS

The PvE focus won't leave more competitive players out of luck. Traditional PvP arena battles are available, but the more interesting option is the ongoing Shadow War that occurs out in the persistent game world. Wandering around, I have the option to join in on these conflicts, or I can opt out by continuing on my way. Set in strategically interesting locations in the game world, these sudden skirmishes appear much like the dynamically generated arkfalls, but are focused on large player groups going to battle against one another.

After several hours over many days, I step away from this early build of Defiance eager to play the final release. Most of my time in the game is spent alone, thanks to the limited player base currently testing the game, but upon public release, I can imagine the potential of engaging in battles with dozens of players. While the game doesn't deliver the highly scripted battlefields and action of games like Halo or Killzone, the potential for massive cooperative play is tantalizing.
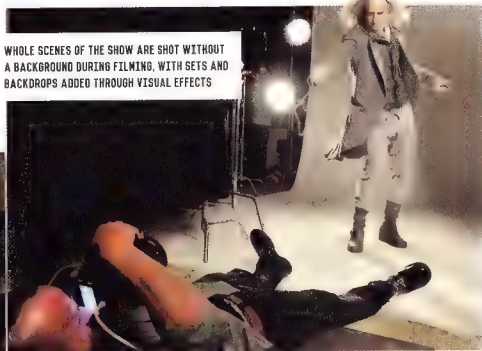
WHOLE SCENES OF THE SHOW ARE SHOT WITHOUT A BACKGROUND DURING FILMING, WITH SETS AND BACKDROPS ADDED THROUGH VISUAL EFFECTS

CROSSING OVER

Even as ark hunters wander the wilds of a ruined San Francisco, far away in what was once St. Louis stands the frontier township called Defiance. Named after the defining battle that ended the war, Defiance is the main setting for the Syfy television series that debuts a few weeks after the game launches.

"It is a series dealing with alien races, but it's also grounded both literally, and figuratively. We spend a lot of time in a small town. It's a frontier show at heart," says composer Bear McCreary, who is crafting the score for the show and game. "A lot of the tropes, a lot of the tension, and a lot of character arcs could be transplanted into a western. It's not the first series, obviously, to try and deal with this, but what is so interesting is it's not so much about outlaws or cowboys and Indians, but it's really taking the complicated racial relationships and transplanting them so that they're not dealing with humans and other races."

I got an early glimpse at the *Defiance* series by viewing an early cut of the hour-and-a-half pilot. The show centers on Jeb Nolan (Grant Bowler), a veteran of the Pale Wars who has fallen to the nomadic life of an ark hunter. He travels with his adoptive alien daughter, but bad luck brings them into the town of Defiance, where we're met by an ensemble of humans and aliens living together under a cautious and fragile peace. As outside forces begin to threaten that peace, Nolan is forced to step up into the role of local lawman. The familiar reluctant sheriff premise is made unconventional because, even as it plays out, we're learning about the Votan species' cultures, personality traits, and abilities. Despite the sci-fi trappings, even that first episode plays like an immigrant drama, punctuated by scenes of alien monsters and plasma weaponry-fueled battles.

Defiance comes from an established team of longtime TV sci-fi veterans. Executive producers include Rockne S. O'Bannon (*Farscape, Alien Nation*), Michael Taylor (*Battlestar Galactica*) and showrunner Kevin Murphy (*Caprica, Desperate Housewives*). In fact, a significant collection of production team members have found their way over to *Defiance* from the acclaimed *Battlestar Galactica*, including visual effects supervisor Gary Hutzel. "Kevin Murphy, the producer on the show, is very open to new ideas and very open to us coming to him and saying, 'What if we expand this element into the visual effects realm and we can give you more action?' He's very receptive to trying out new ideas. It's a fantastic project in that sense," Hutzel says. The pilot is filled with integrated effects work, from towering energy shields to oddly shaped shambling alien creatures. While the tone of the show is a far cry from *Battlestar*, it's not hard to notice stylistic production choices that echo that popular series.

The impression of familiarity for *Battlestar* fans extends into the audio, thanks to the recognizable style of McCreary, who also wrote the scores for *The Walking Dead* and *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. "So many of my friends from *Battlestar Galactica* were getting involved with the show," says McCreary. "It felt very much like this incredibly challenging group of people were reuniting once more, and I just had to be a part of that."

McCreary has created a fascinating soundscape for the show pilot, integrating traditional scoring techniques with background music he has written for the various cultures on display in the show. "There was a musical heritage that I was allowed to take part in. I wrote songs, I wrote ceremony pieces, I wrote source music, I wrote pop music, I wrote classical music," McCreary says. "I know what all these things sound like, so it makes these cultures very real and genuine."

The team's broad roots in sci-fi television may be enough to convince many fans to give the show a try. However, can the show's unusual premise keep those watchers hooked in the long term? A big part of the strategy involves looping at least part of the crowd into the game that's unfolding at the same time.

Both show and game are meant to function independently, but also feed into each other in meaningful ways over time. "One of the things that's important to know is that you're not required to watch the show and play the game to get a good experience on either side," says Hill. "But you will be seeing things like a character leaving the show and coming to the game, leaving the show as a person that's not to be trusted, as a criminal, coming into the game, getting redemption, and going back into the show. They're actually a different character when they come back than when they left."

Over time, patches to the game can reflect events that unfold in the TV show. Major changes to the world occur in both properties. More than many MMOs, the potential exists to craft a living world that fans can follow along with on the show, and participate in through the game.

That type of integration presents all sorts of challenges, but it's clear from my conversations with both teams that each is looking to the other for inspiration and innovation. "We had an episode with hellbugs, which are prominent in the game, and we were able to get a sense of the nature of these creatures and how they move in the game," Hutzel says. "It literally drove the way that I wanted to lay out the scene where one of our characters is attacked by the hellbugs."

Both the game and pilot were in early form, and after a few hours with each, I feel like I've only scratched the surface of what the universe has to offer. It's also too early to make any final determinations about either product's quality. However, I can confidently say that the world of Defiance stands out as distinct within the sci-fi world – a daring and engaging idea that has me ready to learn more. And for a science-fiction enthusiast, that's enough to make me step through the door and give Defiance a shot. ◈

To read our full interviews with senior producer Rob Hill, visual effects supervisor Gary Hutzel, and composer Bear McCreary, head to gameinformer.com

TWO MAIN CHARACTERS FROM THE SHOW APPEAR BRIEFLY IN THE BEGINNING OF THE GAME CROSSOVER CHARACTERS WILL BE COMMON AS THE TV SHOW AND GAME PROGRESS SIDE BY SIDE
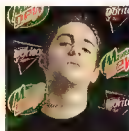
gameinfarcer

THE WORLD'S #1 PRETEND MAGAZINE

The Walking Dead: Night Into Daycare

Telltale plays to its strengths in a reboot that's all childcare, all the time

Stop Enjoying Your Games

DARTH CLARK
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

For the correct opinions about the video game industry, follow @GI_Darth

Who can forget the first time they played a video game? The weight of the controller, the array of pixelated graphics, the intangible joy of guiding the action. I'll be the first to admit that video games were once full of happiness and child-like wonder, but the industry has changed since those days. If you're still living in a fairy-tale world where gaming is a source of entertainment, it's time for you to grow the hell up.

As the most successful form of media, video games have a responsibility to reflect the world around them – and the world is a serious place. I'm sorry if you just want to have a good time and unwind by shooting monsters, but that isn't what video games are anymore. You have to ask yourself, "What does this game say about humanity and modern society?"

Finding and addressing these cultural issues is my sacred duty as a video game journalist, no matter how absent they may appear to be. You might not see how Halo 4 is a metaphor for the New York City draft riots of 1863, but I do. By adding some context and injecting my own views into the discussion, I have the journalistic power and responsibility to steer the conversation toward more mature, intelligent topics.

You don't think a game is about gender equality? Then you probably didn't go to college like I did. You don't think a game is racist? Then you obviously didn't notice that several characters have different skin colors. By relentlessly pushing these issues, I hope I can suffocate the outdated notion that playing video games is a fun hobby intended to be entertaining.

Think about it this way: I've given up a normal life and a normal job so I can be on the front lines and direct the course of this painful, joyless industry. I believe gamers should thank me for the sacrifices I've made for the sake of video gaming – but I'll settle for their respect.

Cheers,

Darth Clark

P.S. If you are a documentary filmmaker interested in chronicling my struggle as the lone trustworthy voice in game journalism, please contact me.

1 Koei Tecmo Musouya

Nvidia and Valve made headlines at CES with their forays into console territory, but they weren't the only ones showing off new hardware. Situated in a sparsely populated corner of the convention floor, Koei Tecmo unveiled a prototype of its new console, the Musouya. "No other company can compete," said Koei co-founder Yoichi Enkawa. "The Musouya is the only system capable of streaming nothing but Dynasty Warriors titles." All 26 entries in the series will be available at launch. When asked about the possibility of making a console devoted solely to Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Enkawa smiled and said, "Please look forward to future announcements."

$450 | koeitecmoamerica.com/neverstopslashing

2 A Fine Day to Laugh: The Double Fine Joke Book

Tired of making games praised primarily for their humor, developer Double Fine has created a product that highlights the company's real talent. Inside Double Fine's new joke book you'll find dozens of double entendres about swordplay, five flower/flour puns, and a few old pieces of concept art from Brütal Legend that the company really wanted to use somewhere. Sadly, Double Fine ran out of jokes mid-development, and was forced to crowdsource the remaining limericks to complete the project.

$20 | doublefine.com/doubledover

Oscillating Fan

When he's not keeping rooms cool, **Oscillating Fan** likes to blow off steam playing video games. His latest accomplishment was beating Lionhead's Kinect game Fable: The Journey. We spoke to Fan about his experience with the game and got some tips.

We saw that you earned 1,000 gamerscore playing the game. What achievement was the most challenging?
[Whooshing sound]

Did you have any problems with Kinect recognizing your inputs?
[Whooshing sound]

Would you play another Kinect-based Fable game?
[Slowly shakes head "no"]

Microsoft Reveals
Next-Gen Plans

Microsoft's new Xbox console has no disc drive, controller ports, or other gaming-related features

Microsoft's president of Interactive Entertainment, Don Mattrick, fired a shot across the next-generation bow with the official announcement of the Xbox 360's successor. The console promises to usher in a whole new world of interactive entertainment.

"Netflix and Hulu fans will find plenty to love," says Mattrick. "The streaming-video services work hand in hand with Bing, making it easy for viewers to find new content with their voices." If that's not enough, the Kinect 2's advanced motion-tracking tech monitors blinking and can be used to bypass all of Xbox Live's suggested videos.

Social networking remains a focus for Microsoft, and the updated Web browser streamlines the Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter experiences. "Cloud storage, Pandora, Instagram," recites Mattrick mechanically. "Pinterest, Flixster, Meetup, Pinterest."

The presentation concluded with a surprise concert from recording artist Sting, accompanied by Felicia Day pretending to play the sax.

Whether or not the system has any gaming capabilities is unknown, but it can be controlled with an iPad, sort of.

Zynga Rips Off THQ's Going-Out-of-Business Model

After laying off staff, cutting support for a dozen games, and posting a $209 million loss last year, Zynga is looking to its competitors for ideas on how to handle the company's imminent failure.

"We've had great success in ripping off the games of other companies," says a Zynga employee while hurriedly loading a box of office supplies into her car. "So when we realized that we blew all of our money on ridiculously overpriced developers and IPs, we knew we needed to find the right company to steal our going-out-of-business plan from."

Zynga's upper management ultimately decided the recent and spectacular implosion of THQ was the way to go. "First, we'll reassure our fans that our bankruptcy filing is just a formality, and we'll return stronger than ever," says CEO Mark Pincus. "Then we'll attempt to quickly sell the company off to a private investor, get shot down by the courts, and eventually sell off individual assets to anyone willing to pay for them. I've got the rights to Mafia Wars right here in my pocket – 15 bucks and they're yours."

01 LittleBigPlanet Vita

02 Gravity Rush

03 Settings

04 Assassin's Creed III: Liberation

05　**06**　**07**　**08**　**09**　**10**

Final Fantasy: Chocobowling
Square Enix introduces macrotransactions

Hit Pins?
$500 BUY

» **Platform**
iOS
» **Style**
1-Player
Balance Transfer
» **Publisher**
Square Enix
» **Developer**
Kweh300 Studios
» **Release**
Unnoticed

In an effort to exhaust the last traces of goodwill among Final Fantasy fans, Square Enix has announced Final Fantasy: Chocobowling, a mobile game implementing the company's new "macrotransaction" model. This means gamers pay a steep up-front entry cost, followed by even higher price points for add-ons and in-game purchases. "Given our previous pricing model on mobile games, it's clear we've been building toward this for a long time," says Square Enix president Yoichi Wada.

The gameplay in Chocobowling consists solely of flicking the screen to send a ball-shaped bird careening toward pins. Every step of the way, players are prompted to pay real money. Pin resets, ball returns, and scoring pencils are examples of the individual and expensive purchases required to keep playing.

"I wish we lived in a world where gamers could pay one reasonable price for a game, and thereafter be free to access all of its content," says Wada. "But, as I understand it, that is not how the game industry works." Chocobowling releases at a $99 price point, with additional content costing between $400 and $8,000. » **Darth Clark**

Dad Island
One ticket to paradise

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC
» **Style**
1-Player
Tropical
Vacation
» **Publisher**
Deep Silver Fox
» **Developer**
Techland
» **Release**
Father's Day

We were all intrigued by the slow-motion, time-reversed trailer for Dad Island in which one lonely dad un-mows the lawn to The Eagle's "Hotel California," but now Techland is revealing more info about the title.

Escaping from the stress of everyday life, your playable dad retreats to Dad Island for a relaxing weekend of dad-centric activities like golf, grilling meat, and finally fixing the damn mailbox. You unlock more dads as you progress, like Rappin' Dad, Recliner Dad, and Harley Davidson Dad (motorcycle not included).

The character creation system features a plethora of loafers, high pants, leather jackets, and tucked-in T-shirts. Upgrade Workbenches are scattered around the island, and they hold any of your unfinished dad projects for up to 12 in-game years. » **Darth Clark**

Batman: Gotham '66

Rocksteady's unnecessary nod to the past

5

PS3 • 360 • 35mm

With the Arkham games, developer Rocksteady demonstrated a clear love and understanding of the Batman character. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm for the DC icon isn't doing any favors with its latest title, Batman: Gotham '66.

Based on Adam West's big-screen debut as the Caped Crusader, this misfire never quite matches the gritty tone and tense action that its predecessors excelled at. Even the series' trademark stealth gameplay is wonky, with one particular sequence on the Penguin's ship being particularly frustrating. No matter how gingerly I attempted to step around various booby traps, Batman was repeatedly launched out of a window and onto an exploding octopus.

New gadgets like the Bat-Shark Repellent Spray are rarely useful, and the sidequests involving dodging nuns while holding a massive bomb quickly grow tiresome. The Riddler's brain teasers are also disappointing, as most of the solutions are obvious ("P.N. Guin" is actually The Penguin). The Caped Crusader may have trouble getting rid of a bomb in the face of arch villians, but Rocksteady sure didn't have any trouble releasing one. » **Darth Clark**

» **Concept**
Save the United World Organization from destruction and teach young Robin the perils of drinking

» **Graphics**
Adam West's motion capture performance leaves a bit to be desired

» **Sound**
It's just that damn theme over and over

» **Playability**
All of your enemies are terrible fighters

» **Entertainment**
Punching that shark in the face during a quicktime event is admittedly pretty funny

» **Replay Value**
BOFF!

BioShock Infinite Bro Edition

Women and pansies need not apply

10

PS3 • 360 • ESPN

Ken Levine got a lot of flak when he explained that BioShock Infinite's cover art was designed to appeal to frat boys, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. BioShock Infinite Bro Edition revamps every aspect of the game for us dudes, and it rocks even harder because of it.

For starters, the lame blimp city of Columbia has been replaced by the infinitely cooler Freedom Town – it's still a city in the sky, only it's being suspended by turbine engines and bald eagles. Also, that Booker DeWitt guy sounded like a real nerd, so he's been replaced by Brewskie McKillgore, who wails on the city's hippies with all kinds of awesome weapons. Elizabeth has gotten a personality makeover as well – she wears a smoking hot bikini now, and her constant boner jokes are hilarious!

Bro Edition's gameplay is mostly the same, except for one major improvement: Vigors have been replaced by beers, and you can wield two of these power-ups at a time by loading them into Killgore's beer helmet. My favorite combo is Burp Blast and Yellow Torrent, which come in handy for putting out the flames on Screechbeast (who replaces that wussy-sounding Songbird from the lame version). All things considered, BioShock Infinite is the best thing to happen to video games since the movie *Noobz*. » **Chad**

» **Concept**
Make a BioShock for real gamers by taking out all the speeches and artsy-fartsy crap

» **Graphics**
Elizabeth's boobs are HUGE!

» **Sound**
Insane Clown Posse provides a stellar soundtrack and the slide-whistle performer really nailed the nutshot sound effect

» **Playability**
Every button shoots a different weapon – in other words, the controls are perfect!

» **Entertainment**
This is what Saints Row: The Third could've been if Volition wasn't so damned politically correct

» **Replay Value**
YOLO, baby!

American History
According to Assassin's Creed

Think you know history? Think again! Assassin's Creed III revealed the real version of the iconic events surrounding the origins of America, and these trivia questions will test your knowledge of the truth.

1. Who single-handedly threw all of the tea overboard at the Boston Tea Party?
a) Connor
b) Achilles
c) Some Homestead Loser

2. Who really took control of the horse during "Paul Revere's" famous ride?
a) Connor
b) Paul Revere
c) Lucy Stillman

3. The Battle of Bunker Hill would have been even worse for the Colonials if not for whose intervention?
a) Connor
b) Trained Soldiers
c) Military Strategists

4. Whose advice shaped an uncertain George Washington into a peerless leader?
a) Connor
b) Rodrigo Borgia
c) Charles Lee

5. Benjamin Franklin's famous almanacs would have been lost forever if they hadn't heroically been retrieved by whom?
a) Connor
b) A Kindly Chimney Sweep
c) Reader's Digest

The Last of Us

Naughty Dog debuts the infected horror

Previous demos of The Last of Us have centered on the danger that Joel and Ellie's fellow survivors present as the pair scrape their way through the dangerous streets of Pittsburgh. All the while, a more sinister threat has loomed in the distance, seen only in glimpses until now. Our newest look at the game has the protagonists on the outskirts of Boston, and unveils two of the infected enemy types – and Naughty Dog handed the controller over to me to experience the terror first-hand.

Joel and Ellie are accompanied by a new character, a middle-aged woman named Tess. Tess is Joel's partner in crime; the two make their living by supplying weapons and items to the black market inside one of Boston's oppressive, military-controlled quarantine zones. In this instance, Joel and Tess have been hired to smuggle Ellie out of the city to the Fireflies, a resistance group trying to establish a new society that isn't run by a brutal police state.

Escape from the city requires cutting a path through a partially collapsed building. As I turn on my flashlight to survey the area, Tess points out a mutilated corpse next to an adjacent doorway. The building is overrun with the infected.

The survivors have mapped out the complete life cycle of humans infected with the deadly, cordyceps-like fungus, and each stage serves as a different enemy type. Runners are in stage one of the infection, and as their name suggests, they're fast on their feet. Clickers are in stage three of the infection, and trade speed for considerable strength. Clickers have been completely blinded by the infection, and instead rely on echolocation to identify targets. If you hear a clicker's distinctive call, you had better be behind cover.

My first encounter with the infected aptly demonstrates their deadliness. While Tess and Ellie hang back behind cover, I run into a pack of runners and my action-game sensibilities get the best of me. Shooting the first enemy alerts the other two to my presence – before I know it, the six bullets I've scavenged thus far are gone. I sprint out of the room in desperation, knocking my attackers out of the way only to run straight into a fourth runner in the hallway; mashing on the square button pries him off of me, but not before being brought to the brink of death.

I blindly run through a maze of rooms, sliding over desks and bouncing off of doorways as I attempt to lose my attackers. I finally duck behind an overturned cabinet and take stock of my situation. A lone runner wanders into the room and this time I manage to sneak up from behind and slowly choke him as the camera pans and zooms in to highlight the brutal action.

After scavenging a few items from the environment – including a helpful-looking two-by-four – I try pushing aside a cabinet that's

you can and only take shots if you have to

...is easy to di... ... they quickly become dangerous in groups
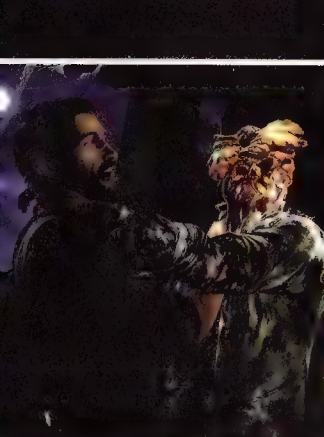
blocking the exit, but the noise sends the remaining infected scrambling to my location. The first runner goes down with a few hits from my new melee weapon, but the others are close behind him. I run back into the darkness, retreating to the room where I was first ambushed. I scavenge a few more bullets off of the corpse I killed earlier, and grab a nearby brick as the pursuing runners burst through the doorway. I down the first one with my two-by-four, but it breaks in the process and I'm forced to use precious handgun ammo on the final attacker.

Joel calls out to Tess and Ellie, telling them the coast is clear. After looting some more items, I stop to examine the simple but incredibly helpful crafting system.

Unlike most crafting systems, items looted from the environment feed into several generic categories, so you're never looking for a specific item to complete a recipe. After looking over the options, I craft a health kit and a Molotov cocktail, and upgrade a baseball bat I found moments earlier. Opening the crafting menu doesn't pause the game, however, so you want to make sure you're in a safe place before restocking.

I continue through the dilapidated building until I come upon an open office teeming with clickers. With my upgraded bat in hand (which now has a pair of scissors taped to the end of it), I sneak my way into the hall, only to bump into a runner feeding on a corpse. I take him down with a single, gruesome blow of my bat, but a clicker kills me with equal lethality; the camera zooms in to show the deformed creature pull back a mouthful of skin and tendons from my neck just before the screen goes black.

During my next attempt, I use a new ability Naughty Dog calls "listen mode." By holding down the right trigger, Joel is able to identify nearby figures and footsteps through walls and objects, while moving at a greatly reduced pace. I also take advantage of the bottles and bricks strewn around the environment to lure enemies out of the way, but the severity of the situation quickly becomes apparent; the room is a maze of desks and cabinets, and the terrifying calls of clickers echo all around me as they grope in the darkness for my location. I find a shotgun and three shells by one desk, but using it would be suicide given the odds.

A tense game of cat and mouse unfolds as I zigzag through the room, always one misstep away from certain death. None of the action feels scripted, and there is no clear path through the environment. Unlike last time, Ellie and Tess have been at my side the entire time, effortlessly navigating the environment and avoiding enemies as I scour the darkness for a way out, a reassuring sign that Naughty Dog has crafted competent AI for the characters accompanying Joel.

Salvation comes in the form of a ladder in an adjoining room at the far end of the complex, but a final clicker stands in our way.

Throwing a bottle to distract it would run the risk of attracting the other enemies we've managed to sneak by. I desperately weigh my options, but there is no time – another infected is approaching Tess from behind and she's forced to open fire. I quickly switch to my shotgun and take down the other clicker as Tess shoots down her assailant. The three of us move to the ladder, but more infected are streaming into the cramped room; we have no choice but to make a stand.

I use the last of my shotgun shells on two more clickers and effortlessly switch to my bat to take down an approaching runner. More clickers appear, and Tess proves the better marksman as I take a few wild shots with my remaining revolver bullets. I hurl my one and only Molotov at two infected climbing through a broken window, who collapse to the floor in flames. Tess shoots down the remaining creatures. The three of us capitalize on the ensuing moment of silence and climb the ladder.

I take one more look below. The rush of surviving the standoff is dampened by the realization that I've used all of my supplies and ammo. I contemplate going back down for the few glowing items lying at the base of ladder, but decide to push on.

Naughty Dog has proven itself a master at creating tense setpiece moments, which translate particularly well to hands-off demos. My hands-on time with The Last of Us only has me more excited for the final game. The world feels alive and loaded with details, the characters are engaging and believable, and the gameplay is a tense mix of stealth, strategy, and explosive action. » Jeff Marchiafava

Remember Me

Taking control and changing minds

New franchises are hard to find near the end of a console generation, but Capcom is delivering some fresh ideas with Remember Me. The game takes place in the future, where power-hungry corporations have refined the technology to influence politicians by tapping into their thoughts. My hands-on time begins several stages in, assuming control of a woman who once possessed the power to reshuffle people's minds.
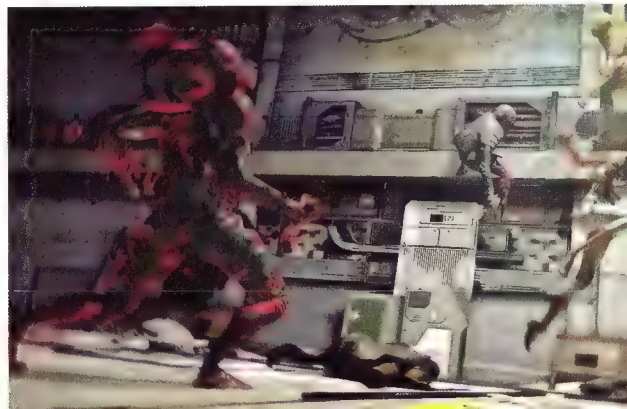
My extensive demo starts with Nilin, the main protagonist, being dragged out of a casket-like pod in the dredges of Neo-Paris. Gangly memory-wiped abominations haunt the seedy underbelly of this 2084 version of Paris, hunting for anything that can give some sort of memory. Nilin can't remember who she is either, but a voice in her head tells her that she was once a trained memory hunter. Memory hunters are like mental assassins, rewiring or erasing the minds of political enemies. The voice in her head is Edge, a mysterious man who wants to help her rebuild her former memories. She recalls enough to defeat a pack of freakish enemies, then Edge tells her to travel toward a bar run by Headache Tommy.

Capcom previously showed off Remember Me's unique combo-creation system, but this is the first time I tried it out myself. Nilin recalls her former fighting prowess by leveling up, and players unlock attacks as she does so. These attacks are slotted into custom combos, which can be optimized to deal damage, restore health, or reduce the cooldowns of special abilities. Button mashing is unacceptable here. Players must time their strikes carefully in order to deliver dramatic, slow-motion takedowns. Enemies

will move in to attack Nilin, and exclamation marks above their heads cue players to dodge them. The rhythm of combat feels similar to Rocksteady's Batman titles, but with a more technical edge.

When players aren't knocking out groups of brainwashed mutants or private police squads, they traverse the busy architecture of the futuristic, Orwellian city. Nilin's path to Tommy's bar is treacherous, filled with perilous jumps and electrified hazards in addition to all the goons. Shimmying across ledges and jumping between high-rise balconies feels similar to the Uncharted games. One sequence involves sidling across a huge vertical support for a gigantic, dynamic billboard. Slats rotate sequentially to reveal a new ad, which players must speed past to avoid being knocked down.

Eventually, Nilin arrives at Tommy's Bar by following Edge's advice. Tommy seems familiar with Nilin, but his face isn't ringing any bells in her addled mind. After a warm yet awkward welcome, Tommy directs Nilin towards a room where she changes into her old memory-hunter clothes. Her old get-up comes complete with a stylish black arm sleeve. This combat glove bestows Nilin with the unique power to tap into people's memories and alter their past. Tommy just begins to warn Nilin that a bounty hunter may be after her when someone suddenly nabs her from behind and presses a blade to her neck. It's Olga Sedova, a deadly hired gun made even more dangerous due to her desperate need to acquire funds for her husband's medical condition at Memorize (Nilin's former employer and the party responsible
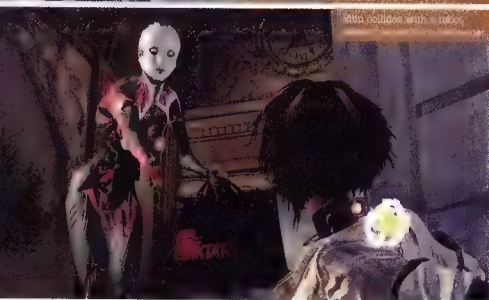
Anaesthetic Mask
Untie
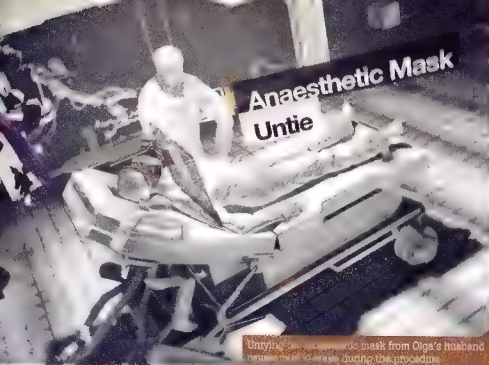
Untying the anaesthetic mask from Olga's husband causes him to wake up during the procedure

Nilin collides with a robot

Anaesthetizing her patient again, Nilin can...

for wiping her brain).

Nilin takes advantage of Olga's proximity by tapping into her recent memories with the combat glove. In the flashback, Olga is strapped and hooked up to one bed in a hospital room, while a gray doctor hovers over her sedated husband on the other side of a transparent partition. The doctor is apparently giving Olga's sick husband a memory transfusion, syphoning past experiences from her mind into his. The game prompts me to fix Nilin's predicament in the present by manipulating Olga's recollection of past events, which will make Olga remember a sequence of events more suited to Nilin's goals: the doctor killing her husband instead. Rotating the left analog stick rewinds time, allowing Nilin to interact with the technology present in the procedure

room. I begin by reversing the memory transfusion machine. Upon playback, Olga screams and convulses as the emptiness of her husband's brain spreads into her own. I corrupted her mind to the point of death. Mission failure. For my next attempt I disable her husband's anesthesia, tinker with his IV fluids, disengage a wrist restraint, and scoot a robotic instrument tray behind the doctor. When I play things forward, Olga's husband reacts violently to the faulty IV fluid, jolts awake without the sleeping gas, and reaches out to grab the doctor's throat with his free hand. The doctor stumbles backward, crashes over the tray, and calls an emergency order to kill the rampaging patient. Mission success.

Warping back to the present, Olga suddenly releases Nilin. A switch has flipped

inside her. Seconds ago she wanted to exchange Nilin's life for money to fund her husband's care at Memorize. Now, following the horribly botched procedure, she wants to make Memorize pay. It's a win-win for Nilin. She's freed from the clutches of the bounty hunter and gains an ally in the hunt for her own memory.

All of Remember Me's individual components make it an intriguing new IP, from the unique premise to the custom combat system. But the memory remixing session inside Olga's mind stands out as a fascinating new gameplay experience. I'm excited to see how Capcom's ambitious new title shapes up as a whole, but I hope to rewire many more characters' pasts by tinkering with their fragile minds. » Tim Turi

Transformers Universe

The robotic war goes massive

Transformers fans have had it good in the last few years, with a couple of excellent games from High Moon Studios, a strong new TV show on The Hub, and plenty of new toys. Jagex hopes to follow up those successful ventures by bringing the Transformers into the massively multiplayer fold. The United Kingdom-based developer is one of the premier companies working in the free-to-play browser MMO space, thanks to games like Runescape. Transformers Universe has the ambitious design and the built-in fan base to be a big hit, but can it deliver something those fans want to play?

"The Transformers brand means something to a massive portion of the world today; it's staggering just how many people know what a Transformers character is," says chief creative officer Alex Horton. "What that image of the Transformers brand means depends on where you experienced them, be it the playground, your console, or the movies." Jagex is reaching out to that broad spectrum

of players by tapping the fundamentals of the franchise, including characters that can change form, a focus on combat, and team-based play where players must rely on each other for unique skills.

The game fits into the massively multiplayer genre, but shares few similarities with the hotbar focus of role-playing oriented titles. Instead, Transformers Universe is a player vs. player shooter built around playing (and unlocking) a variety of robotic characters, equipping a wide array of different weaponry, and skirmishing across a persistent world. "We want multiplayer with a broader reach, where you're part of a massive, interconnected army that's fighting wars on multiple battlefronts, facing and dealing wave after wave of attacks," Horton says. "There is a strategic element that's more than your average action game; you're collecting and maintaining your custom squad of Transformers characters to take into battle, for freedom or tyranny."

That last point is an important one. Instead of building a single customized avatar, Transformers Universe offers players a whole stable of robots that you unlock over time. When one character goes down in battle, you choose which of your other 'bots to bring into the fight. While you won't be building your Transformer character from scratch with extensive customization tools, the game channels the collectability of Transformers toys, as you gather an increasing variety of purpose-built avatars that each has its own weaponry and special abilities.

That weaponry is one of the big areas in which players can customize their experience, including melee attacks, lock-on weapons, area damage attacks, and more. More advanced character types demand more precise and careful usage. "Your ability might be damage over time, but when it's first activated it damages you and you need to transfer it to an enemy before it winds up killing you," explains lead designer Ben
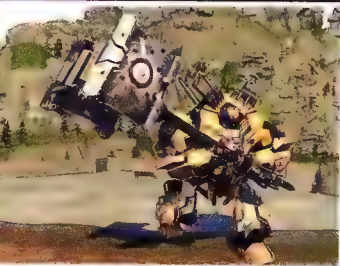
The game is set in the same Transformers timeline as the recent Fall of Cybertron game, and the popular Transformers Prime CG cartoon.

Action is focused on PvP, but there are PvE elements built in as well.

The game features high-end graphics, but plays entirely in your browser.

Skelly. "This adds a more tactical element to how you manage your equipment."

Transformers Universe includes microtransactions, but Jagex is being careful to make the pay features focus on convenience, not unbalancing the game for those who do or don't shell out cash. "We're conscious to avoid models that tease players by only giving them 'X,' but in order to progress or get anything meaningful out of the game you need to spend money," Skelly says. "You will be able to play Transformers Universe entirely for free if you want to. As long as you've got the time to dedicate to it you'll be able to get the same items as those that choose to pay."

Unlike many MMOs, Transformers Universe drops you into the action right away. The browser-based structure means you can go to the game's website, press play, and dive in. Can that browser experience compete with client-based MMOs? We'll know before the year is out. » Matt Miller

Grid 2
A world of racing

They say you can't be everything to everyone, but that's what the Grid series is about – putting you behind the wheel of a variety of different cars and experiencing a full spectrum of racing. Despite the series' wide scope, any racing game fundamentally relies on very basic premises: steering a car and coming in first place. But what is simple in nature is often complex in execution at a high level, and Grid 2 will define itself by how well it responds to five years of expectations since the first title, the loftiness of its goals, and how good it feels on the track.

One of the great things the original Grid did was put a shiny wrapper around what is ostensibly just a series of races. Grid 2 continues this in its own way with the introduction of World Series Racing (WSR) – a fledgling organization run by the game's Patrick Callahan. The WSR strives to answer the question: Who is the best racer on the planet? The only way to find out is to race against teams around the globe adept at various racing styles (like drifting, open wheel, etc.) and subsequently recruit them for the WSR. You then face off against the world's best racers in a series of different disciplines to find out who is the absolute best.

The WSR experience is fleshed out with ESPN video segments (including set footage from Bristol), an evolving garage hub, and a growing legion of fans who swell with the accomplishments of you and the WSR. These not only fuel how the events look on race day, but also your sponsors. In each season of the game you can earn up to six major sponsors that escalate in prestige, and these come with different race objectives to meet, which in turn earn you fans, who thereby open up new sponsors and optional promotional races.

With the backdrop of the WSR, Grid 2 is not a game about collecting cars – it's about racing them to victory. The 50 cars in the game are spread out among four tiers, and each one represents better vehicles and new challenges. In this, the game tests your skills and helps you evolve as a racer. Since there are no assists or upgrades to rely on (Grid 2's distinct multiplayer mode will let you upgrade), the game hopes its car-handling system is subtle enough to make the cars within a tier feel different from each other, and yet complex enough to grow with players as they make their way up the tiers.

The goals of Grid 2 aren't hyperbolic. This isn't about reinventing the genre, but about doing it right. That's not an easy task. Matching the original Grid in scope while also upping the ante will be tough. Crafting human-like AI and dialing in a wide range of cars are huge challenges on their own. If it can do all these things, Grid 2 could indeed be a game that nails every turn. » **Matthew Kato**

Racing in the WSR

Codemasters let me get behind the wheel of Grid 2 on three tracks representing different stages of the game

Barcelona

Whoever is in last place when the timer counts down is bounced out of the race, and going up against this Elimination club in a BMW E30 M3 is tougher than usual. I could have used a Flashback or two, but they weren't included in this early build of the game. Rest assured, however, they'll be in the final product. Codemasters says the feature is being refined to get players back into the action more quickly.

Red Bull Ring

This track featured a field of BAC Mono tier-three cars, which are both fast and grippy. The competition is tough in this race, and a few times cars collided and spun out spectacularly in front of me, throwing up dirt and debris in unscripted, hard racing. The game's damage system features tire punctures, engine problems, and more

Chicago (above)

This checkpoint race was quite addictive. The leaderboard measures how many feet you can accumulate before you run out of time (which is earned by passing through checkpoints). The course features plenty of hard turns, and precise drifting in the Camaro is the key between a good run and a great one

We'll have to see if the turtles' personalities play as much of a role as they did in the films
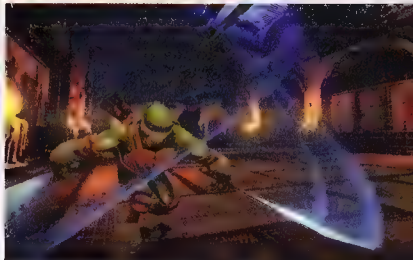
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows

Activision aims to harness turtle power in a new downloadable game

Gamers of a certain age are undoubtedly familiar with the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. The heroes in half-shells were impossible to avoid, dominating toy shelves, movie theaters, clothing racks, and even pies and other baked goods in the early 1990s. Now Nickelodeon is bringing the foursome back in a big way via new shows, toys, and other merchandise, and Activision is aiding in the resurgence.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows is an all-new downloadable game set for a summer release. We got an early look at the game, and it seems as though it offers something for new fans as well as old-schoolers.

It's tough to look at the game without drawing comparisons to the classic arcade brawlers based on the license. The presentation is updated – a rotating camera replaces the strict 2D vantage points of yesterday – but the combat looks like a logical extension of those past releases. That doesn't mean it's a quarter-sucking button-masher, however. In our demo, we saw some of the game's combos in action, as well as how teamwork makes its way to the game.

After looking at past Turtles games, developer Red Fly felt they didn't take full advantage of the character roster. They were either single-player affairs, or players were locked into a specific character once they made their decision. With Out of the Shadows, the entire team is getting its due. Activision isn't talking about other characters, but they would say that some old friends – and foes – appear in the game. Whether that means they'll be cheering or booing in the

background or as part of the action remains to be seen.

Players can now swap between each of the turtles with a press of the d-pad. Activision says each turtle plays differently, so a character like Raphael is smaller and faster with his sais, as opposed to the beefier (and stronger) nunchuk-wielding Michelangelo. The combo system allows players to extend the amount of damage they deal to enemies by swapping characters in the middle of their barrages. We saw a team move in action, too, where two of the turtles bashed their shells together – smashing a Foot Soldier in

the process.

We only got to see one environment – a dank sewer – but Activision promises more variety for the finished game. Levels are more than cosmetically different, too. The turtles can swing on poles and other interactive elements during their mission to clean the streets of the Foot.

Activision has a multiyear contract with Viacom, which means we may be seeing more of the quartet in the future. In the meantime, turtle fans – both new and old – could have a reason to emerge from their shells with Out of the Shadows. » **Jeff Cork**

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

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

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Red Fly Studio

» **Release**
Summer

The Foot Clan is no match for Donatello's bo staff. Then again, who is?

Yoshi Wii U [working title]

Nintendo strings us along for another Yoshi game

Kirby's Epic Yarn is notable for two reasons. First, it features an adorable visual style where everything in the world is constructed out of fabric. Second, it is impossible to die in the game. Despite this relaxed gameplay, Epic Yarn still won over fans who enjoyed its collectible-fueled platforming and stress-free action. During a recent Nintendo Direct press conference, the publisher announced Good-Feel's spiritual follow-up to Kirby's Epic Yarn. This new game features many of the elements that fans loved about Epic Yarn, with one major difference: Yoshi.

During Nintendo's 10-second glimpse of this new Yoshi game, Mario's favorite dinosaur runs through a scrapbook world and jumps on enemy's heads in classic platforming style. The demo may have been brief, but it teased one interesting gameplay element. Yoshi starts out as a simple yarn outline, but after he eats an enemy, he stiches himself into an egg

and quickly emerges with a 3D beanbag body. Nintendo didn't go into detail about any of the game's mechanics, so we don't know what benefits Yoshi's beanbag form imparts, but we imagine that it supplies Yoshi with some extra abilities that he doesn't have in his out-line form. For example, previous Yoshi games (see sidebar) allowed the dinosaur to drag a row of eggs behind him, which he would throw at enemies or use to solve puzzles, so we wonder if this new Wii U title features a similar mechanic.

Further details about this new Yoshi game are threadbare, but we might get some hints

at its gameplay by looking at Epic Yarn. In his game, Kirby manipulated the environment by pulling on zippers to reveal hidden areas or pulling on a string that causes the cloth-like background to bunch up and shorten gaps. We suspect that Yoshi can manipulate his environment in similar ways.

Many have started to call this new game Yarn Yoshi, but Nintendo hasn't announced an official title yet. In fact, Nintendo still has a great deal of information to announce regarding this game. Even after seeing only 10 seconds of gameplay, we're eager to learn more. » **Ben Reeves**

Three Great Yoshi Games to Play While You Wait
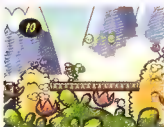
Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island
(SNES, GBA, Virtual Console)

The original Yoshi's Island established a formula that we hope the new Wii U title tries to emulate: expert platforming, stunning hand-drawn back-grounds, and an inventive mechanic that has Yoshi producing an arsenal of eggs to throw at enemies while he escorts baby Mario to safety

Tetris Attack
(SNES, Game Boy)

Though it's nothing like the new Wii U title, Tetris Attack is a fantastic puzzle game in its own right. You flip blocks to line up rows of matching gems as the screen slowly scrolls upwards. This title featured many of the characters and settings from Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island. Can't find the original game? Check out its easy-to-find succes-sor, Planet Puzzle League for the Nintendo DS.

Yoshi's Island DS
(Nintendo DS)

Yoshi's Island DS improves on many of the ele-ments that made the original Yoshi's Island such a classic. The series' gorgeous visual, classic platforming, and inventive puzzles are all here, but now Yoshi has five different babies to carry through each level, and each one grants him a new ability.

Based on this screenshot we wonder if Yoshi will invade the real world at some point in the game.
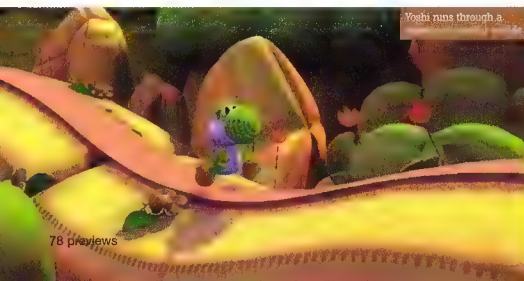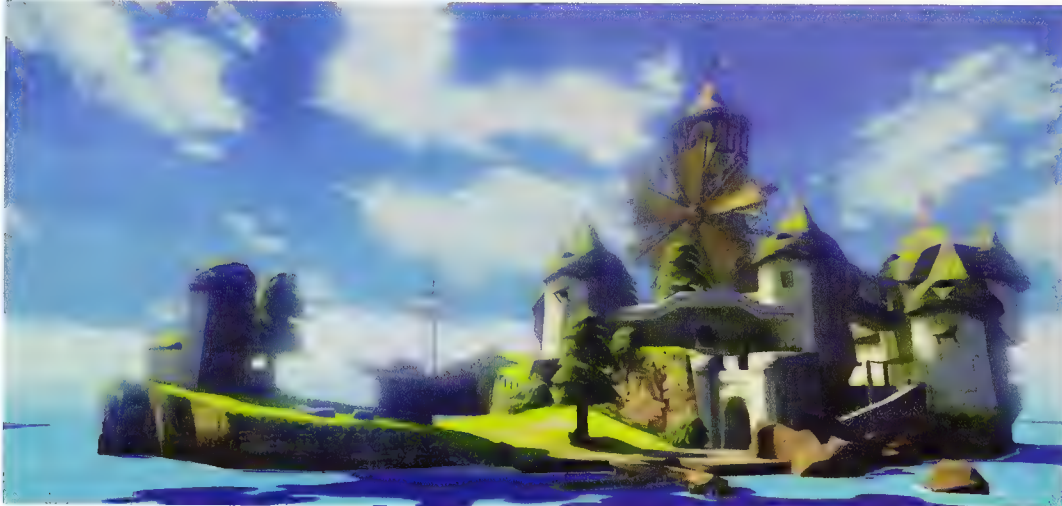

Yoshi runs through a

The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD

Link is back in an updated wide-eyed adventure

Nintendo still isn't ready to unveil a completely new entry in the Legend of Zelda series, but it recently revealed something that could tide fans over in the meantime. The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD revisits the 2003 release, providing a visual overhaul to the beloved GameCube game.

When it first arrived, Wind Waker was a surprising departure from its predecessors. Nintendo first showed a tech demo of what a Zelda game might look like on the then-unreleased GameCube back in 2000. Visually, it was an extension of what players had experienced in Ocarina of Time and Majora's Mask; a stylized, yet somewhat realistic take on Link and Hyrule. Two years later, when Wind Waker was released, fans were taken aback by the wide-eyed version of Link and his toon-shaded world. Nintendo moved the franchise back to more familiar territory in subsequent releases, though the DS games in the series revisited the Wind Waker's now-beloved look. Wind Waker HD retains this style, but improves to a resolution more suited to modern displays.

Nintendo is being cagey about sharing information regarding the GamePad's functionality. The original release allowed a second player to join in Link's adventure thanks to connectivity with the Game Boy Advance. This mode, called Tingle Tuner, allowed the second player to give Link potions, magical shields, and other items, as well as drop-in navigational waypoints. The Wii U's GamePad is a great way to incorporate that into Wind Waker HD, though that would mean the first player would have to give up the system's flagship controller for another input option. Then there's the possibility that the smaller screen could be used to juggle inventory and mapping. Navigation was cumbersome in the original release, so any streamlining there would be a welcome upgrade.

Some of the more dedicated Wind Waker fans delved into the original game's code and found a pair of unfinished dungeons. Considering the trouble that Nintendo is going through to enhance the game for Wii U, we wouldn't rule out the restoration of this content in the HD version. After all, the company added a new dungeon for the GBA rerelease of A Link to the Past.

It's telling that the reaction to Wind Waker HD's announcement has been overwhelmingly positive. Aside from a few grumbles about the more prominent shading and light-blooming effects, fans seem excited to revisit the water-logged Hyrule again. » **Jeff Cork**

» **Platform**
Wii U

» **Style**
1-Player
Action/Adventure

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Nintendo

» **Release**
2013
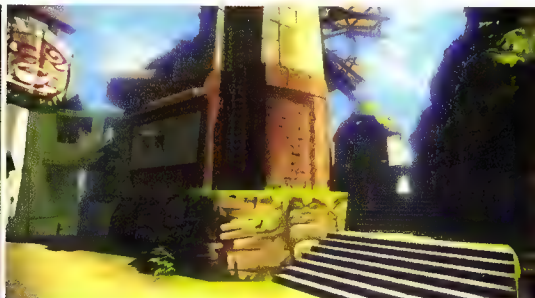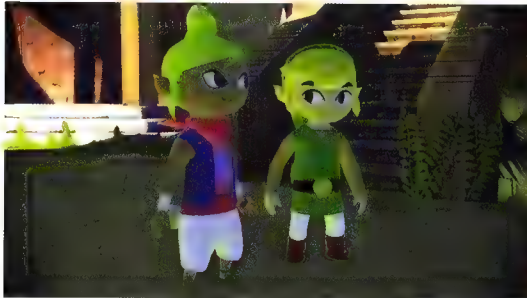
Outlast

Indie horror you may not survive
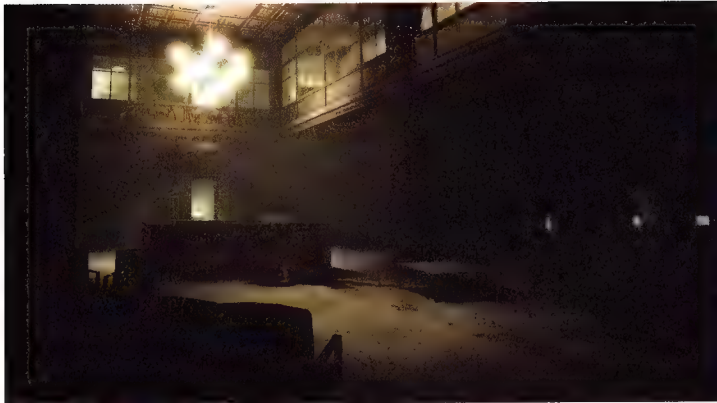
Any bullet supply would be a welcome relief in Outlast, no matter how limited. Scavenging the occasional battery to keep the camcorder running might let you record the atrocities within this nightmarish asylum, but the scarce comfort of pushing back the darkness temporarily with its short-range night vision is the real goal. Publishing this story with proof could win you a Pulitzer, but the terror and mortal danger contained in Outlast's sanitarium make any awards likely to be posthumous at best.

The wracked bodies of inmates are grim warnings and threats. The lucky ones are skeletally malnourished, dimly aware of their surroundings, and prone to homicidal outbursts. Less fortunate are the inmates who bear the scars of invasive, experimental surgery like angry red zippers across their flesh. Their pain is transitory – the majority I discovered in my playthrough of an early demo were already dead.

My encounters with two characters that still had the power of speech were much, much worse. The enigmatic priest-costumed guy with his vague hints at a larger purpose to the events at the asylum was bad enough, but the hulking monstrosity who hunts me while growling about the horrible things he's going to do to the "little piggy" is terrifying. I don't know what gave him his superhuman strength, but based on the condition of the asylum and his single-minded dedication to death and destruction, I'm guessing that "twisted experiments with bone-chilling side effects" is just the beginning.

The asylum itself is an oppressive edifice full of headless bodies, troubling messages scrawled in blood and viscera, and worse things that I'll avoid spoiling here. Red Barrels uses lighting to great effect, drawing your gaze to the horrible things in every setting until they don't and something truly twisted surprises you from the shadows. Audio cues are deployed with equal skill, creating mood with a violin roughly sawing

a single note until the tension explodes in a shocking reveal in some scenarios, while other scares come unannounced.

The camcorder mechanic is inspired. The limited night vision it imparts peters out after a few meters, but is invaluable nonetheless. The grainy, monochrome full-screen effect while looking through it makes scenes all the more surreal and unsettling. Its batteries are a precious resource and take several tense heartbeats to change out – I've never cursed the reload process in a shooter as loudly or earnestly as I begged the camcorder to power back on in Outlast.

I can forgive the linearity of the adventure I experienced in Outlast's demo on the merits of its exceptional craftsmanship. Searching for the one unlocked door that leads to the security key I need to access the office I'm trying to get into doesn't even qualify as basic puzzle-solving, but that's okay when I'm terrified at every step along the way. The best horror games instill a dread that makes every step forward a battle because you know something horrible is going to happen, and the entire half-hour demo I played lives within the sweet spot of giving players that knowledge but still surprising them with nearly every scare.

I'm a little worried that some of the tension will be lost thanks to a generous check-pointing system that let me respawn a few rooms back without having to re-do any objectives I'd accomplished when I died, but many horror games have had similarly mild punishments for failure and remained tense and scary nonetheless. The nine-person team at Red Barrels Games may not have the backing of a big publisher, but Amnesia: The Dark Descent proved that skilled developers can make a brilliant horror experience with very little budget. What I've played so far gives me no reason to put Outlast in any lesser category than that excellent thriller. » **Adam Biessener**
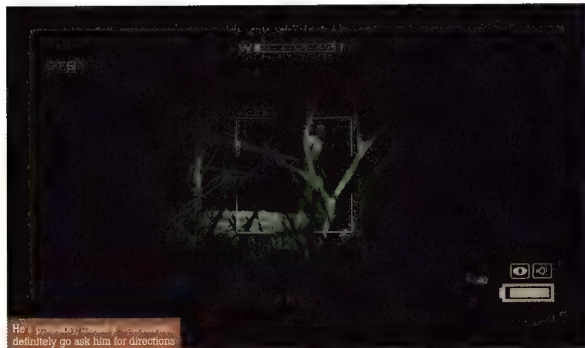
Total War: Rome II

Surviving the barbarous tides of history

The developers at Creative Assembly are pushing their much-loved Total War strategy franchise forward into the past with this revisiting of the late-period Roman Empire. Their last game, Total War: Shogun 2, scaled new heights for the series by narrowing its focus and polishing its take on feudal Japan to a mirror sheen. The studio's goal for Rome II is to keep that level of polish while broadening the game's scope to encompass most of Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East and the many cultures (and therefore armies) therein. A recent visit to the Game Informer offices offered a glimpse into how that plays out on the battlefield.

A live hands-off demo of one of Rome II's historical battles showed a lot more of the game than the pre-recorded tease Creative Assembly released months ago. A traitorous Roman general has sold out the legion he serves to Germanic barbarian hordes, and the player takes control of the surprised column as howling tribesmen materialize in the woods to both sides of their march. Flaming boulders roll down hillsides, tearing gaping holes in the Roman formations. Bowmen rain harassing fire down from the bluffs above while lightly armored infantry crash down on the legion in waves, retreating to catch their breath as their allies take their place on the front lines.

There is no way to win this battle; the only victory possible is to flee and fight another day. And so, step by step, the Romans push toward the edge of the forest. Entire companies of men are abandoned to drown in the barbarian sea when they can't disengage in time, buying precious moments for their countrymen as they fight to the last. Powerful cavalry units are lost after riding out to disperse flanking bowmen, their return path suddenly full of yet more enemies appearing from the hostile woods. Still, the legion's eagle banner advances toward sunlight and safety.

Halfway through the mission, a cutscene interrupts the action. The cowardly Roman commander abandons his legion, taking the remaining cavalry on a desperate ride away from the main column. He is quickly tracked down and killed, but the remnants of the legion still standing rally around the banner and continue on as control returns to the player. Though the main ambush has been escaped, some barbarians stand between the legion and safety. Soldiers lift their shields overhead to protect against arrows as they charge across the landscape, lowering them as they enter melee. A quick toss of their limited javelin supply augments their assault, and the ragtag barbarian infantry melts before battle-tested Roman tactics. A final charge of war dogs and bare-chested berserkers claims half the remaining Roman forces, but the eagle banner itself and a handful of wounded allies achieve the forest's edge to earn a Pyrrhic victory for the player.

Though this all takes place in a moderately scripted historical battle sequence, the framework these events are built on is shared by the primary campaign mode. Cultures like the Germanic barbarian tribes field vastly different troops than Roman factions, demanding different approaches to combat on either side. Tricks like the flaming boulders are part of the expanded deployables system, where armies that prepare for combat on the strategic map are rewarded with the ability to place traps such as the deadly boulders or caltrops that slow movement to a crawl. Ambushing an enemy on the strategic map lets you deploy your troops however you like on either side of favorable terrain, while your opponents start combat strung out in an ineffective marching column.

Creative Assembly also let a few tidbits of strategy-layer improvements slip. Generals have dramatically deeper skill trees for stronger specialization, and can unlock powerful abilities like making the Inspire ability affect all units in an area. Armies board their own transport boats at ports, lessening the need to babysit every minor amphibious move with a dedicated navy. Roman factions can send their important characters to the Senate rather than to the provinces as generals, improving their ability to surf the ever-shifting tides of intrigue in Rome and turn the expanded event system and the eventual civil war their way.

Total War: Rome II is a huge game, as all Total War titles have been. Between the promise of a wider focus and all the variety it brings, the polish Creative Assembly showed it is capable of with its last game, and the boundary-pushing engine that powers Rome II's incredible presentation, tempering expectations for this project is as difficult as waiting for its release later this year. » **Adam Biessener**

You'd never play from this kind of camera angle, but the models are detailed enough for you to

Flaming boulders are just one of the surprises ambushing armies can have in store for their prey

Command & Conquer

A step forward for RTS that not everyone was asking for

Electronic Arts' stewardship of Command & Conquer over the last decade has been a mixed bag for fans, with excellence like C&C 3 standing next to the disappointment of C&C 4. This project has already hit both extremes before even releasing: Its original announcement as Command & Conquer Generals 2 was met with much rejoicing, only to draw equal measures of scorn from purists when EA revealed its transformation into a free-to-play online game with no single-player campaign. EA and Victory Games are betting that this new model can resurrect the beloved franchise for a new gaming era, and at the very least the developers have some interesting ideas for what real-time strategy can be in 2013.

The project is meant as a perpetual platform for all things C&C, even though the initial release takes place in the Generals universe. Victory Games intends to keep its entire staff on board and in full development mode after

launching Command & Conquer, regularly releasing additions to the Generals setting and later incorporating other C&C settings like the Tiberium wars and the gonzo Red Alert alternate-history timeline.

The initial launch is meant to be a return to the series' roots in many ways, which EA hopes will introduce a new generation to the magic that made Command & Conquer such a powerful, lasting franchise in the first place. Three dramatically asymmetric factions – the tech-heavy European Union, rabble-rousing Global Liberation Army, and swarming Asia Pacific Alliance – engage in the massive battles the series is known for with a huge variety of near-future weaponry. Near-godlike commandos steal units and blow up buildings with ease. Huge piles of resources power the lightning-quick base construction and army fabrication this brutal battlefield demands.

Unlike previous games, however, a second

resource (oil) is introduced to allow Victory Games to create more interesting maps and in-match development choices. Infantry are now commanded on the squad level, but still fight and die on an individual basis. By far the biggest change to gameplay, though, is the expanded and refined Generals system.

Players choose a single General to lead their forces in battle before the match begins. Each is identified with one of the three factions and brings his or her own array of special powers, unique units, and passive bonuses to the fray. A General might replace a light tank with a vehicle more suited for anti-aircraft duty, or have special infantry who are exceptionally capable raiders, or extra-tough harvesters for a hardened supply line. In addition, powers like calling in airstrikes from off-map or temporarily boosting health regeneration unlock and improve as your General levels up during the match. Finally, passive effects like tougher tank armor or faster aircraft affect your entire army.

Generals are balanced against each other, but choosing a General who fits your playstyle is a great way to start a match off on the right foot. More are unlocked as you play, giving you options to choose from but no more additional raw power. EA is taking a hard line on making sure Command & Conquer avoids any pay-to-win situations; a player who kicks in real money may have more Generals to choose from or boosted currency acquisition to unlock more things faster, but once the match starts everything is equal.

As dirty of a term as "free to play" may be in some circles, I'm hopeful that Victory Games can open a worthwhile new chapter in Command & Conquer's history – even if it isn't the single boxed product with a strong storyline that some gamers would prefer. I'm particularly interested in the two non-deathmatch modes at launch; I can easily see myself losing hours in cooperative objective-based defensive Onslaught scenarios and capture-the-flag Domination matches. It may not be your older brother's Command & Conquer, but hopefully this new entry can stand on its own. » **Adam Biessener**

The Global Liberation Army would not have a

Traditional base building

It has been five years since our project began... and now, Amami City has grown to become the envy of the entire world.

Sukukaja

ATLUS/ If it is your bidding, Master!

Siegfried · ATLUS · Heimdall · Nemissa · EMPTY
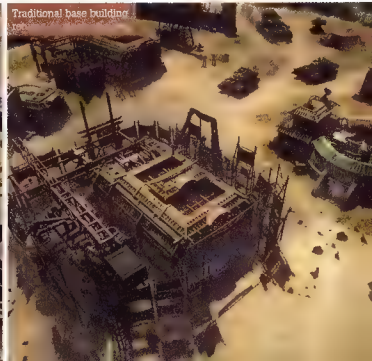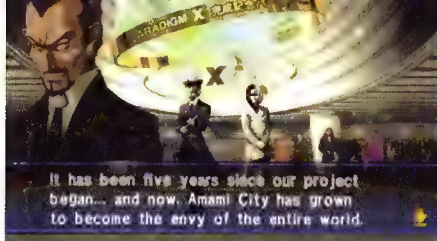
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner – Soul Hackers

A lost classic finally finds us

Persona fans rejoiced when Innocent Sin, the lost entry in the series, finally reached North America in 2011. Now Devil Summoner faithful are receiving similar treatment with Atlus bringing over Soul Hackers. This is a long time coming, considering North American fans missed out on experiencing it twice – first for the Sega Saturn in 1997, and then for the PlayStation in 1999. Thankfully, the third time's the charm as the enhanced 3DS version launches on April 16. We recently talked to Atlus about what to expect from Soul Hackers' debut.

Embracing cyberpunk, Soul Hackers is set in Amami City, where technology is integrated seamlessly into people's everyday lives. It was a successful endeavor... until demons enter the equation. Now they are roaming the digital world, and breaking through the virtual barriers into the real world. The protagonist enlists a group of hackers to discover the demons' intentions, which reveals that the city holds some disturbing secrets.

Having a story written in the '90s about technology's future provided some challenges for the localization team, but only minor tweaks were made, like having the city's operations run on a city-wide intranet instead of the country's only networked computer system. "The game's creators opted not to rewrite their own history, and instead decided to let the game stand as if it were a 'World of Tomorrow' brochure from decades ago that you happened to pull out of a time capsule," says Atlus editor Clayton S. Chan.

Despite Soul Hackers' anachronisms, the characters feel modern. Unlike more recent SMT protagonists, they aren't high school students, but they're still young adults maturing along the journey. These hackers stand out for how they confront difficult situations, turning to logic instead of panic. "This approach of actually figuring out what's happening instead of running around hitting things until they somehow fix themselves is a refreshing take on your standard heroic party," says Atlus editor Mike Meeker. Soul Hackers also breaks the RPG mold by integrating the protagonist's parents into the storyline. This is refreshing, considering parents rarely have active roles in RPGs.

Soul Hackers is a dungeon crawler, featuring both real-world locations and places that exist online within the game's resident MMO, Paradigm X. Additionally, story sequences come during the dungeons, allowing the gameplay and story to work together seamlessly.

Soul Hackers embraces the traditional battle system with SMT's standard demon-recruitment feature. Persuading demons to join your team becomes just as strategic as choosing battle actions. Not only must you figure out what pleases different demon types for recruitment, but later you can also fuse demons to create newer, enhanced combatants.

Even though developers opted to keep the classic feel of Soul Hackers intact for the 3DS port, they also included new innovations. Extra voice acting, an updated fusion system, a bonus dungeon with character cameos, and improved controls and shortened load times make it accessible for its new audience. If anything, admission to a journey we missed out on in an esteemed franchise is more than tantalizing. It's a feat in itself. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Atlus

» **Release**
April 16

Bite the Dust

Frost/ If it is your bidding. Master/

Murmur · ATLUS · Cerberus · Nemissa · EMPTY

[Lunch] So, it's all good as long as he doesn't, then. We'd be a lame hacker group if we all just used standard equipment.

[Carol J] Hey hey, it's Carol J/ You saved me the trouble of having to go find you myself.

Mudola

Murmur · ATLUS · Cerberus · Nemissa

Killzone: Mercenary

Blood money

» **Platform**
Vita

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Guerilla Cambridge

» **Release**
September 17

The Killzone franchise chronicles the struggle between the ISA and the Helghast, but there is a third side in Killzone: Mercenary – your own. You fight for whatever side is willing to pay, and there's plenty of work to be had. The title takes place after the first Killzone and Killzone: Liberation (PSP), but as is fitting for its debut on the Vita, it's different than previous iterations in the series.

Money means a lot to a mercenary, and it's the driving force in the game. Players gain money for the way they kill enemies – whether that's by a headshot, by racking up kill combos, or with melee attacks – and the money is spent on an impressive arsenal of weapons. First and secondary weapons are augmented by the powerful Vanguard system that lets you carry out one of eight special attacks on a cooldown timer. The Mantys Engine is a remote-controlled flying bot that gouges enemies with its metal pincers. The Porcupine is a shoulder-mounted homing missile. The Carapace throws up a defensive force field.

Each level in the game is a mission you undertake on behalf of the ISA or Helghast, and money can also be earned through optional sub-contracts offered after you complete the main mission. These re-use different portions of the level, and contain new objectives focused on different gameplay styles. For instance, the Covert contract rewards stealth kills, while Precision gives you money for long-range kills.

One mission on behalf of the ISA tasked me with repurposing the arc cannons on Pyrrhus so they'd target the Helghan fleet over the planet. Given the size of the level and the weapons at my disposal (loadouts can be changed at designated points), there were different ways to tackle the situation. The Vita's dual analog sticks made the first-person shooting feel both free-flowing and precise, and I was pleasantly surprised how satisfying the brutal melee kills felt as executed by the front touchscreen.

It's only fitting that any money, weapons, Vanguards, etc. you've earned in either the single-player or multiplayer portions transfer to the other, because to a mercenary the situation is always fluid. The objectives may change, but the money never gets old. » **Matthew Kato**

Soul Sacrifice

A tough choice to make

» **Platform**
Vita

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Marvelous AQL,
SCE Japan Studio

» **Release**
April 30

As a slave to a cruel sorcerer, you are about to be sacrificed when a demonic book appears and promises to grant you the power to defeat your captor. All you need to do to gain these skills is open up the tome. As with any human-skin bound book with a creepy, blinking eye, the tales inside paint a picture of dark fantasy and evil sorcery. The book allows you to relive these tales first-hand, and the experiences bestow you with new arcane powers.

Taking the place of traditional weapons and classes, players have an ever-expanding pool of spells at their disposal. Wielding ice-imbued swords, shape-shifting into a massive boulder, or burrowing beneath the battlefield are but a few of the tricks up your sorcerer's sleeves. You don't have to manage magic points, but your resources are finite. Each spell has a set duration or specific number of uses.

Downing an opponent presents the choice for you to sacrifice or spare them, which grants a bonus to power or defense, respectively. The tough decision comes when you need to make that similar choice with a fallen teammate. Will you revive them to have another warrior on the battlefield, or will you serve them up as an offering, giving you an ability boost?

Aside from the numerous non-player characters you recruit in the book, you can also enlist three other co-op players to join you. Partying up is strongly encouraged, because some of the larger bosses require solid teamwork – or martyrdom, as the case may be.

Soul Sacrifice's third-person action, instanced missions, huge boss battles, and focus on multiplayer all call to mind Capcom's popular Monster Hunter series. But the macabre setting and interesting sacrifice mechanic help set this game apart. » **Jason Oestreicher**
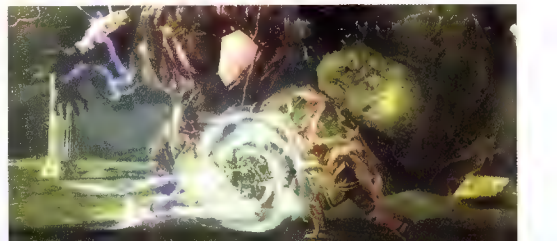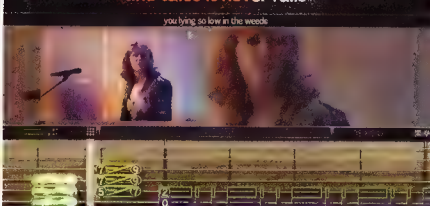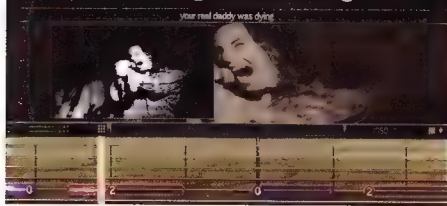
BandFuse: Rock Legends

For the music game faithful

I had no idea what to expect from Realta's new music game until I sat down and played it for the first time. Coming over a year after Ubisoft's Rocksmith, and over two years since Harmonix's Rock Band 3, it's easy to conclude that BandFuse is coming late to the party. Regardless, I witnessed the foundation of an excellent music game in this new title, which is trying and seemingly succeeding at a number of feats yet to be mastered in the genre.

BandFuse lets players use any electric guitar or bass to plug in and play, and comes with all the necessary connections needed to link up to your console. Right off the bat, strumming and picking away at my guitar, I'm impressed that the latency issue that has plagued music games for so long seems to be largely resolved. I can barely hear a separation between when I hit a string and when it sounds in the game. It's the first of a number of features that makes me sit up

and pay attention. The in-game polyphonic tuner makes alternate tunings a snap, and the customizable amp and pedal settings can be adjusted in-game to set the exact tone you want to hear.

Over 50 songs come on disc, with about another 100 promised as DLC on day one. Rather than going for the animated customizable band that characterized the Rock Band and Guitar Hero experience, BandFuse offers a less game-like presentation. The top of the screen shows off music videos or live performances from the original artists, while the bottom of the screen depicts an excellently designed real-time numeric tablature presentation of oncoming notes – the exact same notation system many guitarists learn and use around the world. Five difficulties ramp up from simple one string picking on "easy" to the full actual guitar part when cranked up to the "real" difficulty, so everyone from

beginners to experienced players can find a comfortable place to start.

More than anything, I'm impressed by BandFuse's focus on teaching guitar and bass through its in-game tutorials and interactive systems. The built-in "Shred U" includes multiple ways to learn techniques and individual song parts, including over 2,000 guitar licks that can be tackled at increasing speeds, and video lessons from guitar and bass legends like Slash and Bootsy Collins. While the game supports four-player guitar/guitar/bass/karaoke play, I envision a lot of gamers trying this game for its solo educational potential. After playing several songs, I'm intrigued by the game's flexibility and clarity of presentation. » Matt Miller

Is BandFuse for you, even if you're a beginner? We put one of our interns who has never played guitar in front of the game, and he details his experience at gameinformer.com

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player
Rhythm/Music

» **Publisher**
Mastiff

» **Developer**
Realta
Entertainment Group

» **Release**
Spring

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

90 Tomb Raider

Lara Croft has a new lease on life. Explore a mysterious island filled with hidden tombs and crazed cultists, and gradually transform a young girl into the unrelenting and indomitable adventurer we all know. Stellar production values, tight combat, and heart-stopping action scenes make Tomb Raider one of the best adventures in years. Read our review on p. 88.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	**5**	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	**4**	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	**3**	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	**2**	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	**1**	Patch day. A game as frustrating as the servers being down until 9:00 p.m. on your day off.

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

Tomb Raider

Old name, new series

9.25

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Square Enix
Developer Crystal Dynamics/Eidos Montreal **Release** March 5 **ESRB** M

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Begin a new adventure with a young heroine as she finds herself through adversity

» Graphics
Beautiful animation and an incredible array of detailed locations

» Sound
A delicate central musical theme weaves in and out to great effect, and Lara's voice acting is especially strong

» Playability
Excellent controls, precise combat aiming, and a steady learning curve

» Entertainment
A fantastic campaign that should put Tomb Raider back on the top of gamers' must-play lists

» Replay Value
Moderately High

The gaming world has much to say on the idea of reboots and relaunches. They're the best way to keep a series relevant. Or they're the death of all things new and creative. Opinions abound, but when a fresh start to an old series is as engaging and exciting as Tomb Raider, it's best to just sit back and enjoy a brilliant new release on its own merits.

Tomb Raider begins with a focus on narrative and atmosphere, and in a rare feat, maintains that focus for the many subsequent hours. Lara Croft is a young but uncertain adventurer out with a documentary crew searching for a lost island off the coast of Japan. When her ship mysteriously tears itself apart in a storm, she and a small band of survivors are cast away on a dangerous island filled with ritualistic cultists and inexplicable weather events. Whether it's the opening cave sequence, outrunning a crashing airplane, or tumbling down a whitewater river, the cinematic flair excels at engaging players without taking control away. The story takes a few predictable turns, but it's easy to forgive as the tale weaves through exotic locales, fun character interactions, and amazing set-piece moments.

Lara is a great lead. Emotional, nuanced voice acting and stellar animation for the character help make her believable, even if that focus on authenticity is at odds with Lara's seemingly inhuman ability to suffer wounds, falls, stabs, and burns and still marshal on. Even so, few games have managed such a likeable and relatable protagonist, scaling up from vulnerable ingénue to hardened survivalist.

Tomb Raider strikes a near-perfect balance between traversal, exploration, and combat, and it does so by letting players set that balance themselves. While the critical path is mostly linear, stages are large and have plenty of options for shaping gameplay. Like stealth? The game does an admirable job supporting quiet melee kills, enemy distraction, and distant bow shots that send opponents silently tumbling from cliffsides. Want more action? The gunplay is precise, headshots are appropriately rewarded, and mobility is encouraged as you dodge and leap between cover points. Looking for puzzles? Most of Tomb Raider's best puzzles are set aside in optional tombs, available whenever you want a break from the fighting.

Tomb Raider distinguishes itself from similar third-person action games in two ways. First, a deep system of gear and character upgrades encourages players to go after high XP kills, hunt down salvage, and choose early upgrades wisely. Second, the game allows players to take breaks from the forward momentum of the story and fast travel back into previous locations. Almost all areas include several gear-gated nooks, secrets you might have missed, or hidden treasures and journals that offer insight into the island. In big and little ways, Tomb Raider embraces the joy of discovery, and the player can't help but be pulled along for the ride.

A big part of me wishes that the game started and stopped with the single-player offering, but that's not the case. The multiplayer isn't awful, but it feels like a whole different game in everything from the muddy textures of environments to the sloppy feel of the action. Asymmetric matches demand separate objectives for the competing survivors and their island cultist opponents, which are implemented and balanced well. However, the combat feels loose and frantic, and character animation is choppy. Explosions are hard or impossible to detect, and often result in cheap deaths. The interesting idea of platforming during a multiplayer session is hamstrung because it just exposes you to a quick death. I enjoyed upgrading weapons and unlocking characters, but these systems don't deviate much from expected standards. Other dedicated multiplayer experiences are more worth your time.

The lackluster multiplayer is absolutely no reason to avoid what is otherwise one of the best action adventures I've ever played. Crystal Dynamics has nailed a pitch-perfect new vision for one of gaming's most recognizable characters, and revitalizes her for what I hope will be many more installments. Whether or not you've embraced the previous games that went by this moniker, this is the time to take another look at Lara Croft. **» Matt Miller**

Crysis 3

Crytek gives gamers a preview of next generation graphics

Style 1-Player Shooter (12-Player Online (Consoles) 16-Player Online (PC))
Publisher Electronic Arts **Developer** Crytek **Release** February 19 **ESRB** M

Modern science fiction is filled with wondrous alternate realities showcasing awe-inspiring technologies, but good stories are hard to come by. The Crysis series, with its rotating cast of sterile protagonists and questionable hard sci-fi plot twists, is just as guilty of this deficiency as the majority of Syfy shows. While the nanosuit is an amazing asset capable of transforming players into deadly hunters, the narrative vehicle for this great gameplay mechanic has been so badly damaged over the course of the last three games that it barely runs.

Though it's still saddled with the plot baggage of its predecessors, Crysis 3 is the most cohesive story in the series. The game opens with Crysis 2 protagonist Prophet being rescued from captivity by Psycho (the hero from Crysis Warhead), who has joined a dissident group fighting against the evil corporation that quarantined a decimated New York City to harvest alien technology for its own nefarious purposes. Psycho, who no longer dons a nanosuit, expects Prophet to turn the tide against the overreaching corporation, but his former commander has his own agenda. While in captivity he saw visions of the end of the world, which comes courtesy of the Alpha Ceph alien that lies dormant under Manhattan. Prophet will stop at nothing to prevent this extinction-level event.

Crysis 2 traded the wide-open jungles of the first game in favor of a series of smaller micro-sandboxes. This approach still allowed players to use the attacking tactic of their choosing, but some players longed for the freedom the first game provided. Crysis 3 delivers a better balance of these two design philosophies. Many battles still take place in controlled spaces that limit your movement, but the action eventually opens up. The best missions, which come later in the game, feature multiple objectives you can tackle in any order, a healthy mix between standard infantry enemies and menacing heavies like the Pinger, larger tracts of land, and an array of vehicles the player can choose to use or ignore in favor of a stealthy approach.

Whatever tactic you use, Crysis veterans should turn up the difficulty if they want a serious challenge over the course of the six-hour campaign. With a customizable nanosuit that allows you to tailor the suit's powers to your play style, a new compound bow that you can use in stealth mode, and several high-powered alien weapons at your disposal, Prophet is more deadly than ever before. The AI is more competent than it was in Crysis 2, but it still has trouble tracking a cloaked enemy. Those who have mastered the nuances of the nanosuit will have no problem breezing through the game on the basic difficulty setting. The exception is the jarring boss battles, which require repeated playthroughs to decipher how the game expects you to emerge victorious.

If you take your time moving through the missions, you have more opportunities to admire the amazing sights provided by CryEngine 3. From the gorgeous water effects and global illumination to the detailed character animations and photo-realistic environments, Crysis 3 is one of the best-looking games on the planet. I often found myself activating the cloaking device while in the presence of enemies just to watch a frog hop along the jungle floor or to regard the wind effects on a canvased shipping container.

This impressive graphical fidelity takes a serious hit in the transition to multiplayer. Though Crysis 3 has some of the better-designed maps in the series, the muddied textures are a far cry from the jaw-dropping visuals of the single-player campaign, especially on consoles.

With 50 levels, a progression system of unlockables, and your standard array of modes, the multiplayer doesn't feel much different from its predecessor. The new Hunter mode, which pits a small team of nanosuit-wearing stalkers against a larger force of human operatives, captures the thrill of being the predator and prey, but I still preferred the classics like team deathmatch or domination. The sketchy hit detection (of which there is ample evidence on killcams), questionable respawns, and some problematic terrain navigation need to be addressed if Crytek wants to compete on the high end of the multiplayer spectrum.

Crysis 3's evolutionary enhancements don't move the needle for the series very far, but the core nanosuit-based gameplay is still thrilling. If you have a rig that can run the PC version of Crysis 3, I strongly recommend you go this route. The high-resolution textures, realistic lighting, and detailed facial animations give you a taste of the graphical fidelity we expect to be standard in next-generation consoles. » **Matt Bertz**

Aliens: Colonial Marines

Not the kind of bug hunt we were looking for

4

PS4 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Tell the story of what happened between *Aliens* and *Alien 3* in a canonical FPS

» **Graphics**
Textures are a garbled mess, popup is constant, and the animations are laughable and distracting

» **Sound**
The staccato delivery of the pulse rifle and the motion tracker's thumping pings sound fantastic

» **Playability**
Weapon upgrades only serve to make your arsenal less worthless

» **Entertainment**
Aliens fans should be inoculated against disappointment by now, but this is even too much

» **Replay Value**
Low

All the parts were there. Five years ago, Sega announced that Gearbox was going to develop an FPS based on the Aliens franchise. The studio had demonstrated its chops through the Brothers in Arms series. Not only that, but Aliens: Colonial Marines had Fox's blessing to tell a canonical story that bridged *Aliens* and *Alien 3*. It looked pretty good in demos, and for a moment it seemed as though, after being disappointed for decades, Aliens fans were finally going to get the game they deserved. Unfortunately, the result of the long wait is something that feels like an abandoned mod.

As for Colonial Marines' much-hyped story, there's clearly a reason why a canonical bridge between the films didn't exist: Absolutely nothing of any consequence happened. A bunch of no-names walked through the aftermath of Aliens (Nuke? What nuke?), fought some more xenomorphs, and met up with a familiar face in a ridiculous bit of revisionism. Plenty of nods to memorable events pop up, but it feels like walking through a funhouse with the lights on. It makes once-powerful moments seem shabby and low-rent. It's great to see Bishop (or part of him at least) in a hangar, but at the end of the day, it's just a pair of gooey pants. Colonial Marines understandably wants fans to soak up their favorite moments, but it doesn't offer any new thrills in return.

Take the xenomorphs, for example. In the films, the creatures are unrelenting and terrifyingly fast. Here, they're a nuisance. The first time you spy them, there's an anticipatory thrill – you've seen them before, and you know what they're capable of. Then you blast a few dozen apart, and you start to notice the problems. They look great when you can't really see them, but you end up seeing them a lot. After a few encounters, I couldn't help but start to pick it all apart. When they rush at you from around a corner, it's as though they've been pushed onto a stage by an unseen hand; they're oddly off balance, and they seem to be just as startled to be there as you are to see them. The ones who fall from the ceiling tiles do so with all the agility of a scarecrow. They're hardly the graceful monsters the films introduced us to, and that one detail sucks a tremendous amount of oxygen from the experience.

The entire xeno life cycle is represented, including chestbursters (who can pop right through armor plating!) and facehuggers. The facehuggers in Colonial Marines are silly pests who seem as though they're just going through the motions. At one point, I yanked one off me and flung it onto a crate, where the still-living creature lost all interest in me. Apparently I hurt its feelings.

Colonial Marines also introduces a few new xeno types, but they don't do much to alleviate the overall sense of sameness. One large triceratops-like beast charges around, leaving his soft back parts exposed. It's nothing you haven't seen before. My favorite new alien type came during a forced stealth section. There I was, stuck in a sewer with a crowd of gray, husk-like xenos. Only they weren't dead! Sometimes, they'd spring to life and patrol their immediate area. The only way around them was by holding still until they passed. Their prancing walking animation (think little kid impersonating a T-rex) was the funniest thing I've seen in a long time, and it literally made our video producer fall out of his chair laughing.

Then there are the people. I was stunned at how ineffective my squadmates were, particularly my pal O'Neil. I don't know how this mouth-breather managed to squeak through basic training. He'd routinely sweep a room by darting into the nearest corner and keeping a close eye on both walls. There were moments where I'd glance at him in a firefight, and he'd just be staring off at nothing, the tip of his Smartgun clipping through a snarling xeno's domed head.

Fortunately, the Weyland-Yutani goons that eventually show up aren't any brighter. I can't recall seeing worse AI this generation. I lost count at how many times I'd open a door, only to see a completely oblivious enemy facing me a few steps away. I almost felt guilty killing them, but once I remembered that they were standing between me and the end of the game, I got over it.

Any real difficulty comes from the underpowered weapons. The arsenal is familiar, with pulse rifles, shotguns, flamethrowers, and that Smartgun. Aside from the Smartgun, the loadout is weak to a fault. It's not so bad at close range, but when you're stuck trying to plink away at distant targets, weapons are unforgivably terrible. There's a goal-based upgrade system in place, but those upgrades only make the weapons slightly less bad.

Multiplayer holds a glimmer of hope, and could provide a temporary distraction for folks who pick up the game. Players control colonial marines or xenomorphs in a variety of matches, ranging from standard team deathmatch to a territories-like mode, and a tense battle to simply stay alive before time runs out or your squad is dead. The problems that plague the single-player campaign persist in multiplayer, however, so be prepared to see dopey alien animations. Players who select the xenos can expect to see screen-obscuring wagging tails and doorways that have to be entered at precise angles. Overall, I had the most fun with the multiplayer, but even that couldn't salvage Colonial Marines.

I've been playing Aliens games since the days of Doom mods, and for all the technological advances we've seen, this stands among the worst – including the Jaguar version. I love this universe, and I even enjoyed Rebellion's Aliens vs. Predator. For my money, the Colonial Marines' campaign in that release is exponentially stronger than Gearbox's attempt, even though it was merely one third of the overall AvP package.

Take away the Aliens license, and you've got a shooter that has no reason to exist. It would be like stripping the terraforming from Fracture or playing Inversion without its gravity-defying gimmick. At its best, it's barely mediocre. The license is all there is. Aliens has cast a long shadow in the gaming world, inspiring plenty of excellent games throughout the decades. It's a shame that the actual license isn't spawned anything approaching those levels of success. Aliens: Colonial Marines' odious mess can be smelled from low orbit, and only the most ardent Aliens fans will find anything redeeming. » **Jeff C**

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

Clouds gather over Raiden's day in the sun

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Konami **Developer** Platinum Games/Kojima Productions **Release** February 19 **ESRB** M

Raiden has come a long way from the inexperienced wuss who disappointed fans everywhere. His transformation into an unstoppable cyborg ninja was revealed in Metal Gear Solid 4, where he dispatched enemies with improbable cinematic flair. After that, fans forgave him for replacing Solid Snake in MGS 2, and the unthinkable happened: Raiden became cool. Players *wanted* to control him. Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance finally puts his stylish and brutal repertoire at your fingertips, but this cyborg ninja continues to linger in the shadow of his betters.

Revengeance capitalizes on over-the-top combat in the vein of Bayonetta and Devil May Cry. Raiden faces off against hordes of robots and cyborg soldiers, chops them into bits with a high-frequency blade, and generally looks awesome while doing so. He fights weird bosses, gains new weapons, and purchases new moves and upgrades. I know all of that sounds perfect, but the pieces don't fit together properly. Revengeance seems engineered to look like a great action game from a distance, only to fall apart upon closer inspection.

Combat is entertaining, but "style over substance" is the defining theme. The graphics are fantastic, the moves look cool, and the framerate is smooth, but battles aren't demanding. Raiden has a decent selection of special attacks, but the lack of variety in enemies and encounters means that you aren't required to master them. Basic button mashing is usually fine, since few foes need to be approached with specific tactics. The formula for success gets old quickly: slash away until you see an enemy telegraph an attack, block, and resume slashing.

Blocking is easier said than done, since it isn't assigned to a single button. You need to tilt the stick toward your enemy and press attack simultaneously, which causes Raiden to throw up his defense. If your timing is off, he swipes his sword at thin air, which is the worst possible alternative to blocking. You can't just hold a direction while performing regular attacks and expect to block; each one requires the stick to be moved from a neutral position. With practice, you can master this clunky mechanic and make it work reliably, but that doesn't make it good – especially since it's your main way of avoiding damage (despite a cumbersome dodge-attack move).

Since you have limited control over your own defense, staying on the offense is important. You earn multiple special weapons, but you have to pause the action to bring up an item selection screen (which does not open if you are jumping, attacking, or being attacked) in order to use them. Since you can't swap out weapons on the fly mid-combo, they don't ever get to work together. For instance, Raiden gets a weapon capable of a long-range grapple (like Dante's angel pull in the latest DMC), which grants increased mobility. However, you can't simultaneously equip that weapon with anything but Raiden's basic sword. The same thing goes for the high-damage pincer sword or the area-clearing polearm. This keeps Raiden's arsenal segregated, preventing players from experimenting with combinations and harnessing his full power.

The big gimmick, Blade Mode, allows Raiden to chop off pieces of his foes. It's a rewarding slow-mo flourish that punctuates your kills, and seeing your enemies fall apart exactly where you cut them doesn't get old. However, the mechanic doesn't evolve; you

attack enemies normally until they get covered in blue static, and then you slice them up. If you can hit a specific area, Raiden gets all of his health back. The limb-severing technology is impressive, but I wanted to see it used in more interesting ways than what amounts to a brief minigame.

Narrative in this genre rarely rates better than absurd, and Revengeance is no exception. However, this game bears the Metal Gear name, which carries certain expectations. If you have any hopes for this story building on Metal Gear lore or giving you a chance to reconnect with characters you care about, you will be disappointed. The new characters are uninteresting and poorly developed, and the old characters are practically non-existent. The plot doesn't even address the most basic questions a Metal Gear fan would have, like why did Raiden leave his family to become a cyborg again? What is Otacon up to? Is Snake really dead? We get no satisfying answers. On the other hand, the weak story means that your time with Revengeance isn't consumed by lengthy cutscenes or codec conversations. The combat, though imperfect, is always in the spotlight.

I'm a longtime Metal Gear fan, and Bayonetta is one of my favorite games of this generation, so I was elated when Konami and Platinum Games announced their partnership for Revengeance. However, this title isn't Bayonetta wearing a Metal Gear skin; whether you are hoping for a meaningful expansion of the Metal Gear universe or a gratifying action experience, Revengeance falls short. Brutalizing cyborgs and hacking giant mechs to pieces is fun, but the restrictive design and lack of precision keep Raiden from capturing the best of both worlds. » **Joe Juba**

Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien

Gaijin crafts the best auto runner yet

9

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Gaijin Games **Developer** Gaijin Games **Release** February 26 **ESRB** T

PC

» **Concept**
Expand every aspect of Bit.Trip Runner, make it more accessible, and bring it to a ton of platforms

» **Graphics**
Classic pixel graphics and esoteric storytelling have been replaced with an appealing cartoony 2.5D presentation

» **Sound**
Fez composer Disasterpeace handles some catchy tunes while Mario voice actor Charles Martinet narrates

» **Playability**
Movement variety expands over time without becoming overwhelming

» **Entertainment**
Even if you've never touched a Bit.Trip game or auto running title, Runner2 is great for anyone with a platforming bone in their body

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Gaijin Games' six-game Bit.Trip series on WiiWare (and later on PC and 3DS) has a certain reputation for old-school looks and challenge. Bit.Trip Runner was one of the standout entries, but it still punished those who didn't have the best reflexes. With Runner2, the first direct Bit.Trip sequel, Gaijin has pulled out all the stops to make a game that anyone can love, regardless of skill level.

Just like before, hero Commandervideo automatically hustles forward while you control jumping, sliding, kicks, and shields so as not to hit anything in the environment. A trail of gold bars and red score-boost powerups gives players something to collect while attempting to survive. The difficulty and complexity is expertly paced throughout the whole quest, with new moves and environments constantly keeping things fresh. You still fail with one misplaced jump, but the new checkpoints and flexible difficulty toggling lessens the frustration tenfold. Hardcore players looking for the ultimate challenge can simply crank it up to "Rather Hard" and score a point bonus for refusing checkpoints.

The visual presentation has received a drastic overhaul. Cutscenes now resemble classic cartoons with a more kooky story than the spaced out, vague entries of the past. The number of levels has more than tripled, pushing over 100, and stages are now grouped into appealing themed world maps resembling Super Mario Bros. 3. Each stage contains plenty to keep you coming back (including alternate paths and secret exits) and this format makes it easy to return to clean up.

If you collect all the standard pickups in a level, you'll earn a Perfect rating and get to shoot the good Commander out of a cannon at a massive dart board for bonus points (online leaderboards are supported). If you score a bullseye, you'll earn a Perfect Plus. Truly dedicated fans won't be able to rest until every stage is marked up with this rating for all three difficulties. You also hunt for keys, treasure chests, and Famicom carts to unlock new costumes and special retro pixelated levels.

Throughout the campaign, you naturally unlock new characters as well, who all have their own strange and silly animated personalities (Reverse Merman stands out for an obvious reason). Even though Runner2 is a single-player game, it's fun to trade off levels with a friend simply to appreciate the finer details, like the different way every character dances or when bigfoot lumbers into the background. You just can't absorb this stuff when you're laser-focused on sweet, sweet survival. » **Bryan Vore**
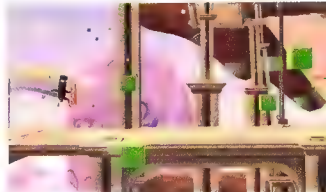
Other Platforms?

Runner2 will also appear on PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and the Wii U eShop. We weren't able to play the game on these platforms as of press time. Once these versions become available we'll post separate reviews online if there are any major discrepancies. Otherwise, consider this our definitive review.

Omerta: City of Gangsters

Mashing up two styles into a mess

6

Style 1-Player Strategy **Publisher** Kalypso Media **Developer** Haemimont Games **Release** January 31 (PC), February 5 (360) **ESRB** M

360 • PC

» **Concept**
Spread your illicit businesses around Prohibition-era Atlantic City between tactical encounters with rival gangs and the cops

» **Graphics**
The serviceable graphics can't overcome the wide zoom level to make an overall look anything north of bland

» **Sound**
The gangster voiceovers are painfully repetitive. The musical choices are period-appropriate, but lack variety

» **Playability**
Tactical combat works just fine outside of some weird cover points, but the strategic level is an unorganized mess

» **Entertainment**
You need a deep love for the premise to get past the total lack of opposition to your inevitable victory

» **Replay Value**
Low

This hybrid strategy/tactics gangster simulation tries to be two games in one, but uninspired combat and a complete lack of challenge or threat in the strategy layer prevent Omerta from reaching excellence in either, much less present a compelling fusion of the two.

Omerta sets its sights on being an early 20th-century take on XCOM, with gangsters and coppers taking the place of Kevlar-suited commandos and psychic aliens. Players grow their criminal empires in a real-time overhead view of one of Atlantic City's many districts,

then go to the mattresses by descending upon single-building maps to blow away opposing gangs, cops, and even the National Guard in turn-based tactical combat when the situation demands it.

The main trouble with Omerta is an utter failure to push or punish the player on the strategic level. The only consequences to standing pat and waiting for your business ventures to pile up the cash you need for your next objective are your gangsters' trivial daily salaries and the slowly growing heat of police investigation, which eventually demands a miniscule bribe to reset the meter. District simulation has no depth, so you don't have to worry about bankrupting the locals or dealing with larger federal investigative threats outside of scripted story moments. Go ahead and put your brewery on the other side of town from your nightclub; it doesn't make any difference to the constantly running money train.

Combat is much stronger, but suffers from its share of problems as well. The rules are simple enough while still offering tactical creativity. Melee weapons play an important role, as characters equipped with bats, knuckles, and knives inflict debilitating conditions on foes while ignoring cover bonuses. Destructible objects offer little protection from shotguns or tommy guns but plenty of cover from pistol and rifle shots. Coming out on top against 3:1 or worse odds by taking advantage of these systems is a great feeling, though it is cheapened by AI that seems to choose targets and abilities at random with no thought to efficacy or tactical goals.

The story campaign is the only game mode with any value whatsoever, and its flat characters and predictable narrative leave much to be desired. I appreciate the quick pace at which it introduces new concepts, but I never shook the feeling that I was waiting for the real game to start, even as the ending credits rolled. The strategy layer problems make the four sandbox maps into sad jokes even on the hardest difficulty, and I cannot imagine a reason anyone would spend any time in the barebones tactical-combat multiplayer offering.

Omerta could have been great. I adore the premise, the era is underserved in gaming, and I have a lot of love for Haemimont's work on the Tropico series. As it is, perhaps silence is better than any further conversation about this disappointment. » **Adam Biessener**

Antichamber

A lesson in originality
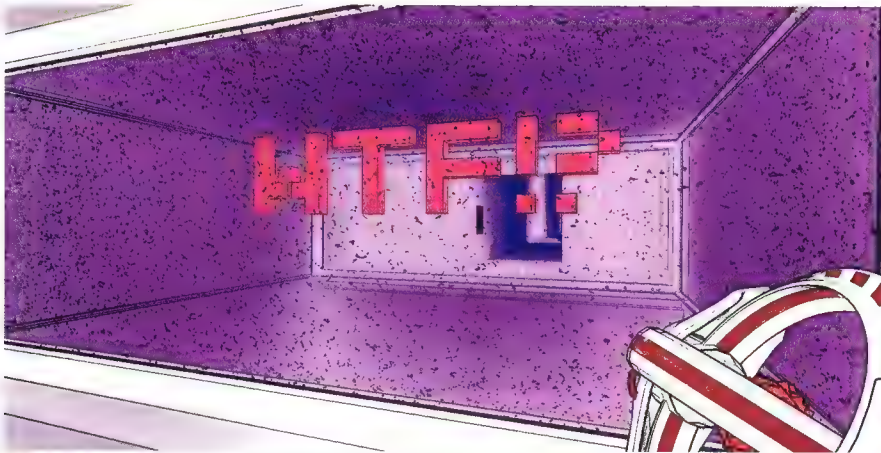
gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Demruth **Developer** Alexander Bruce **Release** January 31 **ESRB** N/A

Antichamber has been racking up awards at indie game conferences since 2009, and stumbling my way through the game made it easy to see why. This indie puzzler establishes creator Alexander Bruce as the M.C. Escher of game development, providing players with a sprawling and satisfying network of challenges that require novel thinking to overcome.

Like Portal, Antichamber's puzzles exist in an environment where the laws of nature don't apply, allowing players to think in ways that reality doesn't require. Whereas Portal "only" bent the rules of space, Antichamber throws everything you know out the window, stripping you of your preconceptions before building you back up with a new set of skills and rules to play by.

An early puzzle teaches me the importance of not taking anything for granted. After walking down an L-shaped corridor, my path diverges into two choices: a blue staircase that leads upwards and a red staircase that leads downwards. I choose the blue stairs, which lead me up to another L-shaped hallway. When I turn the corner, I'm confronted by the same two staircases. I spend the next few minutes alternating between the two paths, but no matter which one I choose, it leads me back to the same stairways. Confused, I begin walking towards them again, then pause in a moment of clarity. I turn and walk back the way I came, peering around the corner. Lo and behold, it now leads to a new area.

Each time you solve a puzzle in Antichamber, you come across a plaque with a saying that sums up the lesson you've just learned, many of which have real-world value as well. These lessons are the core of Antichamber, and it teaches you everything you need to know with virtually no on-screen instructions. Instead, you learn from your failures, and every time you expose a trick the world has played on you, your knowledge base grows a little.

There's no hint system in Antichamber, so if you get stuck on a puzzle, you have two choices: bang your head against the wall until you figure it out or tackle one of the other branching paths that make up the ambiguous laboratory/compound you're trapped in. Thankfully, you can exit to the map room at any time (once you figure it out, anyway) and fast travel to the puzzles you've discovered. You do this a lot. Sometimes your progress is hindered by a tool you've yet to acquire. Sometimes you botch a puzzle and need to reset it. Sometimes a path simply leads to a dead end. Despite these pitfalls and abstract puzzles, I rarely ever felt stuck or frustrated by a lack of progress – a testament to Antichamber's pacing and design.

The gameplay evolves when you discover a gun that allows you to collect and place cubes in the world, providing you with the literal building blocks you need to overcome challenges. You upgrade the gun several times, building on your abilities and the complexity of the puzzles you're confronted with. The upgrades also make redoing many of the earlier puzzles a breeze, easing the pain of backtracking through environments while searching for missed secrets and abandoned puzzles.

It wasn't until the very end that tedium began to set in, as I tried to hunt down the last few paths I had missed. That boredom was erased as soon as I entered the multi-roomed gauntlet of puzzles standing between me and Antichamber's enigmatic ending, a final test of the lessons I had learned. Regardless of the lack of story, overcoming those challenges filled me with a greater sense of achievement than the countless "save the world" missions I'm used to taking on in video games. Gamers would be hard pressed to find a more unique, engaging puzzle game. » **Jeff Marchiafava**
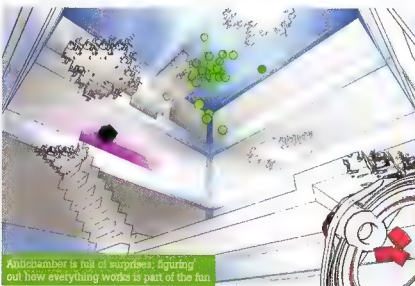
Antichamber is full of surprises; figuring out how everything works is part of the fun
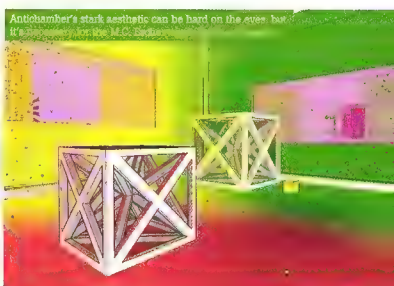
Antichamber's stark aesthetic can be hard on the eyes, but it's necessary for the M.C. Escher-

Lego City Undercover

Proof that sandbox games don't have to be dirty

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** TT Fusion **Release** March 18 **ESRB** E10+

One of Nintendo's surprise announcements when it debuted the Wii U a few years back was an exclusive Nintendo-published Lego game. Its title, Lego City Stories, immediately made me think about Rockstar Games' Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories. The name was later changed, but that early association proved to be more accurate than I would have guessed. Lego City Undercover delivers the majority of the same thrills and action that you'd expect to see in any open-world game.

When we begin, our hero Chase McCain returns to Lego City after a long leave. Officer McCain's old rival, Rex Fury, has busted out of the clink, and it's up to McCain to recapture the thug. His return is also an excuse for McCain to try and rekindle a romance with Natalia Kowalski, a former flame. The story is, of course, filled with twists and double-crosses, which ultimately provide players an excuse to explore the streets and outskirts of Lego City.

Lego City Undercover features an entirely new storyline and character roster, based on classic Lego themes such as town and space, and it's great. Chase's sidekick, Frank Honey, is a buffoon who mounts a horse backward (thinking the front is the back), and then comments on the horse not liking the apple he was trying to feed it. The chemistry between the characters is great, and I actually looked forward to watching every cutscene for a change.

The Wii U's GamePad is used as a communicator between Chase and his friends at police HQ, and I completely fell for the gimmick. I love how easy it is to get around town, too; you scroll around the GamePad minimap and tap your destination, which is then plotted on the TV via a line of ghostly Lego studs. The 360-degree scanning portions aren't quite as fun, even though using it to locate and listen in on reliably funny character conversations is worth it. Most impressive was the camera; it's a one-off device in the campaign, and it highlights just how good the GamePad's screen really is.

The gameplay is split between a hub world and more traditional level-based gameplay, but calling Lego City a hub world does it a disservice. It has plenty of variety, including rural zones, harbors, and a bustling downtown. I got a kick out of just hopping in the nearest car and going for a drive. The level of detail is impressive, right down to the way vehicle damage is shown; drive your monster truck into enough walls and other cars, and you see the tiny pistons pumping away in the engine.

Chase earns new suits as he progresses through the story, each with a set of corresponding abilities. Lego City Undercover is strictly a single-player game, so you can expect to do a lot of costume swapping. I liked seeing the cosmetic changes that came with each outfit, but the insistence on wardrobe changes is a pain. To give you a sense of what you're up against, you might approach a boarded-up door that requires a fireman suit to open. Seconds later, you have to fix an electrical panel as a construction worker to clear a path for a criminal-suited Chase to pry open a safe with a stethoscope. These never offer any challenge or strategy, and the fact that you routinely have to chain several swaps one after another in seconds-long bursts makes it even more tedious.

TT Fusion has absolutely nailed the best parts of sandbox games, which is great news for parents. Exploration is a big part of heavy hitters like Grand Theft Auto and Saints Row, but most of the content is hardly appropriate for younger players. Lego City Undercover wisely poaches many of the destructive elements behind those adult games. Kids get to experience all sorts of mayhem, and they're rewarded for it all. Since McCain is a police officer, the heat stays away from him (unless he's deep undercover in a story mission). That means he can commandeer a car and then drive on sidewalks, smashing lightpoles and fire hydrants, and earn super bricks in the process.

Those new super bricks are a big part of Lego City. These collectable elements are scarcer than studs, and they're used for what TT Fusion calls super builds. These large builds include relatively simple creations like helicopter pads, to more complicated structures such as bridges and space shuttles. They're still built automatically – no piece-by-piece building here – but their scale made the Legomaniac inside me twitch.

Like some other developers in the genre, TT Fusion seems to have a problem figuring out what to do with this giant world. Additional missions appear as the story progresses, but I never felt motivated to try my hand at the latest driving challenge or hop around buildings in a parkour race. Citizens mill around, seemingly going about their Lego business, but I never found anyone who needed my assistance, aside from folks I met along the game's critical path. Loads of hidden bricks and super builds are still scattered throughout the world, but I would have liked more variety.

It isn't perfect, but I can't think of another Wii U game that I'd recommend more than Lego City Undercover. It's the most interesting and highly polished game in TT Games' large repertoire, and it fills an important game gap. Now kids (and their parents) can tool around in a big town where people smile even as you almost run them over in an ice-cream truck. » **Jeff Cork**

1,502,480
Chase Medals Collect

Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate

A fresh take on the portable bloodline

8.5
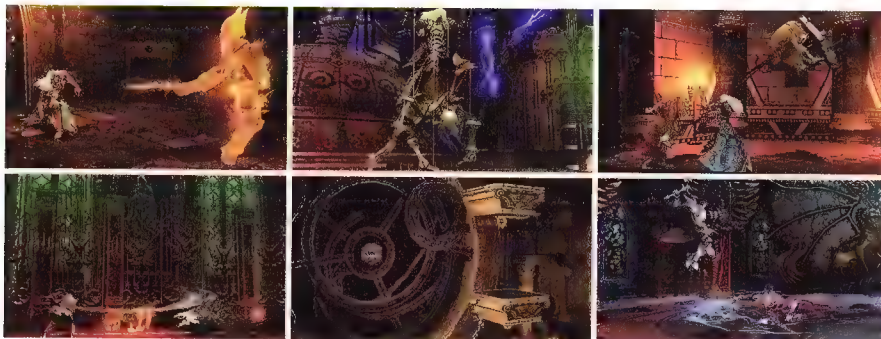
game informer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Konami **Developer** MercurySteam **Release** March 5 **ESRB** M

Set aside all your preconceptions about handheld Castlevania games before diving into Mirror of Fate. This is not a successor to Symphony of the Night or the subsequent titles in the same vein. Mirror of Fate takes its cues from MercurySteam's 2010 console title, Lords of Shadow, and mixes in some light Metroid exploration elements. Once you've got your head around that, you're in for an adventure that successfully fuses Castlevania's new flavor with the franchise's 2D roots.

Like its console predecessor, Mirror of Fate's combat is all about pulling off flashy combos and using helpful magic abilities. Swinging the whip feels weighty whether dealing heavy or light attacks, and landing hits feels great. The left shoulder button is used to dodge and block, which feels natural from the start. You level up by killing enemies and discovering secrets, which unlocks useful new moves like air juggling or extended combos. I love Lords of Shadows' combat, and it feels fantastic in this 2.5D framework. The spectacular boss fights highlight the combat system's strengths, especially during the climactic Dracula battle.

Players control three separate characters throughout the game: Simon Belmont, Alucard, and Trevor Belmont. Each character gathers special items unique to their section. For example, Simon can absorb damage with his magic familiar, Alucard's mist form allows him to phase through enemies, and Trevor's light magic heals him when he deals damage to enemies (my favorite). I liked all these abilities, but your time with them feels too short. Just as I started getting into the rhythm of Trevor's light and dark magic, his act was over. Thankfully some core abilities, such as the double jump or grappling hook, are carried across characters. Some may adore the fresh starts with new characters, but I would've appreciated more time with each monster hunter.

While your character may change, the whole game is spent exploring a singular castle by leaping across pits and climbing up ledges. Like combat, platforming and swinging from your whip feels weighty, but it works. My favorite sequence involves fleeing a gigantic bell as it crashes after you down the clock tower. Timing is key, since one missed jump can turn the player into a broken mess on

the castle floor, but forgiving checkpoints keep frustration at bay. Several conveniently placed portals make backtracking to previous areas easy, but it isn't worth the effort. Most of the enticements for exploring previous areas involve lackluster bestiary scrolls and XP caches, with the exception of a health or magic upgrade.

Mirror of Fate nails many of the elements its console predecessor did so well, with lame puzzles being the big exception. Whether you're adjusting mirrors to reflect light beams or solving a block-pushing puzzle, these sections are tedious. The zoomed-out camera perspective strains the 3DS' resolution and adds to the headache. Fortunately, these sections are brief and you can often cheat by using in-game tips.

Mirror of Fate is a worthwhile endeavor for any 3DS owner, and should make Castlevania fans consider picking up the handheld if they don't have one already. The impressive cutscenes flesh out the Lords of Shadow fiction with fun twists, and should be required reading before Lords of Shadow 2 arrives. » **Tim Turi**

PLAYSTATION 3

Title	Score	Date
Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12
Anarchy Reigns	7.5	Mar-13
Angry Birds Trilogy	7	Dec-12
Assassin's Creed III	9.5	Dec-12
Awesomenauts	8.5	Jul-12
Birds of Steel	7	Jun-12
Borderlands 2	9.75	Oct-12
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Counter Strike: Global Offensive	8	Nov-12
Darksiders II	9	Oct-12
Dead or Alive 5	8	Nov-12
Dead Space 3	9.75	Mar-13
Devil May Cry	9	Feb-13
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Double Dragon Neon	8.25	Nov-12
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12
Dyad	8.25	Sep-12
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
F1 2012	7.75	Nov-12
Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse	4.5	Feb-13
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
FIFA 13	8.75	Nov-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Guardians of Middle-earth	7.5	Feb-13
Hell Yeah! Wrath of the Dead Rabbit	8.5	Dec-12
Hitman: Absolution	8.75	Dec-12
Inversion	6	Aug-12
Jet Set Radio	6.5	Nov-12
Karateka	8	Dec-12
Knytt Underground	7.5	Mar-13
Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lego The Lord of the Rings	8.5	Jan-13
LittleBigPlanet Karting	8	Dec-12
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Madden NFL 13	8.25	Oct-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13
MLB 12: The Show	8.75	May-12
Mugen Souls	5	Dec-12
NASCAR The Game: Inside Line	7.25	Dec-12
NBA 2K13	8.75	Dec-12
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Need For Speed: Most Wanted	9	Dec-12
NHL 13	8	Nov-12
Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	7	Feb-13
Papo & Yo	8	Oct-12
Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12
Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale	7.5	Jan-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2013	8.75	Nov-12
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Rainbow Moon	7.75	Oct-12
Ratchet & Clank Collection	9.25	Oct-12
Ratchet & Clank: Full Frontal Assault	7.5	Feb-13
Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12
Resident Evil 6	8.75	Nov-12
Retro City Rampage	7	Dec-12
Retro/Grade	8	Nov-12
Ridge Racer Unbounded	8.75	Jul-12
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Risen 2: Dark Waters	5.5	Oct-12
Rock Band Blitz	8	Oct-12
Skullgirls	8	Jun-12
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12
Sleeping Dogs	7.75	Sep-12
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time	9	Mar-13
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12
Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed	8	Jan-13
Sorcery	6.75	Jul-12
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Starhawk	7.5	Jul-12
Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13	8	May-12
Tokyo Jungle	7	Nov-12
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Unfinished Swan, The	8	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 1: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 2: Starved For Help, The	8	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Way of the Samurai 4	8	Oct-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12
WWE '13	9	Dec-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12

XBOX 360

Title	Score	Date
Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12
Anarchy Reigns	7.5	Mar-13
Angry Birds Trilogy	7	Dec-12
Assassin's Creed III	9.5	Dec-12
Awesomenauts	8.5	Jul-12
Borderlands 2	9.75	Oct-12
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	8	Nov-12
Dance Central 3	8.75	Nov-12
Darksiders II	9	Oct-12
Dead or Alive 5	6	Nov-12
Dead Space 3	9.75	Mar-13
Deadlight	8	Oct-12
Devil May Cry	9	Feb-13
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Double Dragon Neon	8.25	Nov-12
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12
Dust: An Elysian Tail	8.75	Oct-12
Elder Scrolls V: Skynm: Dragonborn, The	8.5	Feb-13
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dawnguard, The	8	Sep-12
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
F1 2012	7.75	Nov-12
Fable Heroes	4	Jul-12
Fable: The Journey	5	Dec-12
Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse	4.5	Feb-13
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
Fez	9.25	Jun-12
FIFA 13	8.75	Nov-12
Forza Horizon	8.5	Dec-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Gateways	9	Dec-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Guardians of Middle-earth	7.5	Feb-13
Halo 4	9.25	Dec-12
Hell Yeah! Wrath of the Dead Rabbit	8.5	Dec-12
Hitman: Absolution	8.75	Dec-12
Hybrid	6	Oct-12
Inversion	6	Aug-12
Jet Set Radio	5.5	Nov-12
Joe Danger 2: The Movie	8.25	Nov-12
Karateka	8	Dec-12
Kinect Star Wars	5.5	Jun-12
Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lego The Lord of the Rings	8.5	Jan-13
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Madden NFL 13	8.25	Oct-12
Mark of the Ninja	9	Nov-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13
Minecraft Xbox 360 Edition	8.75	Jul-12
NASCAR The Game: Inside Line	7.25	Dec-12
NBA 2K13	8.75	Dec-12
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Need For Speed: Most Wanted	9	Dec-12
NHL 13	8	Nov-12
Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness 3	8	Sep-12
Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12
Pid	6.5	Dec-12
Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2013	8.75	Nov-12
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12
Resident Evil 6	8.75	Nov-12
Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Feb-13
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Risen 2: Dark Waters	5.5	Oct-12
Rock Band Blitz	8	Oct-12
Sine Mora	8	Jun-12
Skulls of the Shogun	8.5	Feb-13
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12
Sleeping Dogs	7.75	Sep-12
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12
Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed	8	Jan-13
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Spelunky	8	Sep-12
Splatters, The	8	Jul-12
Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor	3	Aug-12
Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD	7.5	Sep-12
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
Trials Evolution	9	Jun-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Walking Dead Episode 1: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 2	8	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings – Enhanced Edition, The	9.5	May-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12
Wreckateer, The	7.5	Oct-12
WWE '13	9	Dec-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12
Zuma's Revenge	8	Sep-12

Wii U

Title	Score	Date
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13

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the score

6 Brain Age: Concentration Training

Platform 3DS **Release** February 10 **ESRB** E

The Brain Age series has a certain charm, but this installment is my least favorite. If the new Devilish Training exercises were confined to some unlockable throwaway mode, I'd be okay with it. As the main new concept in a series, however, it makes the experience more annoying than it is entertaining or educational. — Dan Ryckert

7.25 Corpse Party: Book of Shadows

Platform PSP **Release** January 15 **ESRB** M

Book of Shadows holds plenty to love if you enjoyed the first game, but the wavering quality holds it back. Think of it like a good book, you turn the pages with fervor, awaiting the next big reveal, but the problem is you're yawning through boring parts just as much. — Kimberley Wallace

7.5 Beastie Bay

Platform iOS **Release** February 7 **ESRB** 4+

Kairosoft's fusion of creature collection and island simulation is charming, but shallow combat and repetition kill the desire to catch 'em all. — Joe Juba

6 Mud – FIM Motocross World Championship

Platform PS3 · 360 **Release** February 26 **ESRB** T

Even though Mud is the official game of the FIM Motocross series, it's a title without a real identity. I thought it was a shill for Monster Energy – that's just how uninspiring and unmotivated much of this game is…I commend the developer for including different modes, but their inadequacies reveal a title that doesn't fully develop any one aspect of itself. — Matthew Kato

gameinformer

Volume XXIII ○ Number 4 ○ Issue 240

The Pitfalls of
Atari Development

A retrospective on the industry's first platformer by Ben Reeves

During the stone age of console development, humans were rarely featured as video game protagonists. Gaming's all-stars were tanks, spaceships, and yellow ghost-eating circles. Early video game consoles didn't have the horsepower to draw human-shaped avatars, but Pitfall! creator David Crane dreamed of making a game that accurately represented an articulated person. This dream would not only drive Crane to create one of the most beloved Atari 2600 titles of all time, but light the creative spark that fueled an entirely new genre of gaming.

Solving an Elusive Problem

David Crane was no stranger to solving programming problems. He came out of high school programing computers in three languages and then designed a computer that could play tic-tac-toe in college. After graduating with an engineering degree, Crane decided that he needed a more rounded education, so he applied for a job at National Semiconductor just so he could get hands-on experience designing integrated circuits.

Crane eventually landed a job at Atari and helped co-found the first third-party video game developer, Activision (detailed in issue #239). However, throughout his gaming career one particular programming problem nagged him: How could a programmer fit a fully articulated human in a game using existing hardware?

"I spent a couple years trying to make that happen," Crane says. "I'd walk around the lab and I would freeze in a position and sketch the position of my leg, and try to figure out how to do that at eight pixels. Pitfall Harry was the culmination of all that work."

That work ultimately spanned a number of years as Crane worked on a series of games for both Atari and Activision. Crane would work on this dream project for a bit, grow frustrated, and eventually move on to his next project. But the idea of putting an articulated human into a game kept drawing him back. Finally, after finishing Grand Prix for Activision in early 1982 Crane decided that he needed to make his dream project a reality.

"I said, 'Alright, I've got a little running man, but where's he running?' I took a little piece of paper and drew a stick figure and then a path for him to run on. I said, 'Where's the path?' So I drew some trees and then the path was in the jungle. Then I sketched some things to be running after, chasing, collecting, and in about 10 minutes I had a sketch that would represent the game.

Crane drew inspiration for his game from everywhere. *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* had just released in theaters, and that film had an undeniable influence on the development of the game, but it wasn't the only source of pop culture Crane tapped. The programmer thought it would be funny if the game would produce a noise similar to Johnny Weissmuller's Tarzan yell of the 1930s whenever Pitfall Harry grabbed a vine. Crane tried to emulate this iconic yell in electronic tones, but many of the people he showed the game to didn't get the connection. Even so, the sound became iconic to the series.

Other references were even more obscure. "I remembered a cartoon called Heckle and Jeckle from the '50s that featured two talking magpies," Crane says. "In their lead-in for the show, they showed a series of alligators with their mouths open, and one of the birds ran through the mouths as they snapped shut, and he would just barely escape before they closed. I saw that and I thought, 'Running across the heads of alligators, this would be kind of cool.'"

Crane had a solid vision for a game, but he still had a lot of work ahead of him. "It only took me 10 minutes to sketch out the game, but I had to program a thousand hours to make it happen."

Outsmarting the System

To understand Pitfall's technical achievements, you first have to understand how the Atari 2600 worked. Console gaming wasn't a big market at the time, but Atari thought it could make money by porting its most popular arcade games over to a system that people could play on their TV. According to Crane, Atari designed the Atari 2600 to play Pong and Tank (renamed Combat for the 2600) – its two most popular arcade games of the era. Initially, Atari was concerned only with getting those two games into people's homes. If its programmers designed some additional games for the system, that would just be the icing on the cake. This resulted in a system that was far from programmer friendly.

"The Atari 2600 was the most challenging machine ever to write games on," Crane says.

One of the many reasons Atari games were so challenging to program centered on how the console interacted with television sets. Modern video game consoles construct a full image from a game, and then the TV draws that image. In turn, television sets start at the top of the screen and draw each line of that image pixel-by-pixel. These images only appear to move because our TVs, and game systems, are producing between 30 and 60 images per second.

The Atari 2600, on the other hand, couldn't construct a full screen for any of its games. At any given moment, the system could only output a single row of pixels. This meant that during the milliseconds it took for a television's beam to finish drawing the first line of pixels on its screen and move back into position to start the second line, the Atari 2600 had to figure out what was happening in the game on that second row of pixels. The console's processor was so busy drawing the screen that it limited the number of computations a programmer could use for important gaming actions such as enemy and player movements, charting projectiles, and even processing controller inputs.

Programming a game for the Atari 2600 was further complicated by the fact that the console only had enough data storage to display up to five objects. This forced Crane to invent some clever programming tricks that would allow him to produce a game screen full of sand pits, swinging vines, hungry alligators, venomous scorpions, and priceless treasure.

For example, Crane used the data storage center that had drawn the ball in Pong and "stretched" it to create Pitfall's jungle vines – basically redrawing a green pong ball on each line of the screen so that it looked like a swinging vine. The missiles from Combat were used in a similar manner to display the number of lives a player had at the top of the screen. Dozens of tricks like these were used, and they all added up to make Pitfall! one of the best-looking games Atari 2600 players had ever seen.

Crane's final feat of innovation came when he had to lay out the game's levels. To make the game fun, Crane knew that he had to create several screens for players to run through, and that each screen had to offer a new set of challenges. Unfortunately, this entire multiscreen world had to be constructed using less than four kilobytes of information. Today, four kilobytes of data would display less than a 1/100th of an image taken with an iPhone camera; Crane had to create an entire game world within those data constraints.

To solve this problem, Crane wrote a program that automatically generated a list of numbers. Each screen of the game had its own set of numbers, and these numbers dictated what would appear on each screen. For example, the first few numbers in the set would determine which graphical tree line appeared in the background while another few digits determined if a player ran into a pit of quicksand in the center of the screen or a pool of alligators.

Using this technique, Crane auto-generated 250 playable Pitfall! screens. After that, the designer merely had to sort through the images and determine which screen would be the ideal starting point for players. Pitfall! had suddenly become a game. Better still, it was a lot of fun. Now Crane just had to figure out how to cram his masterpiece into one of Atari's tiny cartridges.

Last year, for the Pitfall! 30th anniversary, Activision released a free-running iOS game, but David Crane had nothing to do with that project.
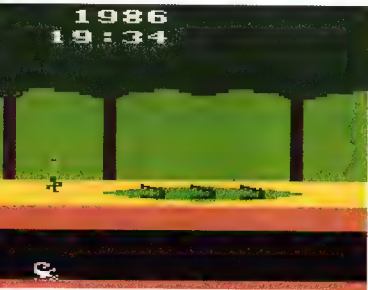
The World Falls for Pitfall!

At the time of the release of Pitfall! Atari's game cartridges could only hold four kilobytes of information. The games were so small that the entire Atari 2600 catalog can fit onto a 1MB flash drive. That also meant that Atari 2600 titles were notoriously difficult to finalize.

"Every 2600 game made was a master work of computation," Crane says. "You could write a code that used a lot of RAM and saved ROM, but you have more ROM than RAM so you're always writing things that waste ROM to save RAM and you only got so much of everything. We would get to the end of a program and get every feature into a game and then realize that we had a three-kilobyte program [we were trying to fit] in a two-kilobyte ROM, so then we would have to go back through the code rewriting it just to save a byte. We had to do that a thousand times for each game."

By September of 1982, Pitfall! had slimmed down enough to fit into its cartridge. The game released and was an instant success. It spent 64 weeks at the top of the best-sellers list, and went on to sell over four million copies on the way to becoming Activision's best-selling Atari 2600 title. In the end it was the second most successful Atari 2600 title of all time, right behind Pac-Man.

During the height of its popularity, Pitfall! spawned a series of board games, coloring books, and a short run of Saturday morning cartoons. Crane even recalls having to hire a staff of seven full-time workers to open and respond to the 14,000 Pitfall! fan letters Activision was receiving each week.

Over the decades, Pitfall's fame has dwindled from a blazing inferno to a couple of glowing embers. Pitfall! isn't regarded as one of the world's most popular platforming franchises anymore, but it was the first game that allowed players to run through a series of environments and jump over obstacles as they collected treasure. For that reason, popular modern franchises like Mario, Sly Cooper, and Super Meat Boy owe a debt to a pioneering game that was born out of one programmer's desire to solve a complex problem. ◆

Think you know your gaming history? These ten questions range from the 80s to the present day. Test your knowledge and see how your mind stacks up against those from the gaming world.

by Dan Ryckert

1. Which God of War featured an unlockable fish costume called the "Cod of War"?
a) God of War
b) God of War II
c) God of War III
d) God of War: Ghost of Sparta

2. Mike Tyson's uppercuts in Punch-Out!! knock you out with one hit until the clock reads what time in round 1?
a) 2:10
b) 2:30
c) 1:30
d) 0:30

3. Which of these games did not receive a re-release on Wii?
a) Super Mario Sunshine
b) Resident Evil 4
c) Okami
d) Bully

4. Which musical act did not have its own video game?
a) Britney Spears
b) Spice Girls
c) Jennifer Lopez
d) N*Sync

5. Which real-time strategy game featured paratrooper bears?
a) Total Annihilation
b) Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3
c) Age of Empires III
d) Company of Heroes

6. Which series has not received an HD collection?
a) Legacy of Kain
b) Prince of Persia
c) Sly Cooper
d) Metal Gear Solid

7. Who provides the voice of Woody in the Toy Story games?
a) Nolan North
b) David Hayter
c) Tom Hanks
d) Jim Hanks

8. Which of these characters was not in the original Mortal Kombat?
a) Sonya
b) Liu Kang
c) Baraka
d) Reptile

9. Which game had the subtitle "Legend of the Gobbos"?
a) The Mark of Kri
b) Croc
c) Gex
d) Chameleon Twist

10. Which character takes the most versus matches to unlock in Super Smash Bros. Brawl?
a) Wolf
b) Toon Link
c) Jigglypuff
d) R.O.B. ◈

Score & Rank

0-3 Correct: Boogerman

4-6 Correct: Slippy Toad

7-9 Correct: Otacon

10 Correct: Gordon Freeman

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