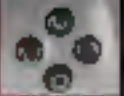




NEXT-GENERATION INDIES
 FIRST DETAILS ON BLOW & GALAXY 2: THE DIMENSIONAL (p. 56)

THE OUYA REVIEW
 IS IT A GAME CHANGER? (p. 51)



gameinformer®

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



Dragon Age: Inquisition
 BioWare's Fantasy Series Comes Roaring Back

**ENTER LUIGI'S DREAMS.
EXPLORE TWO MASSIVE WORLDS
IN A GIANT ADVENTURE.**



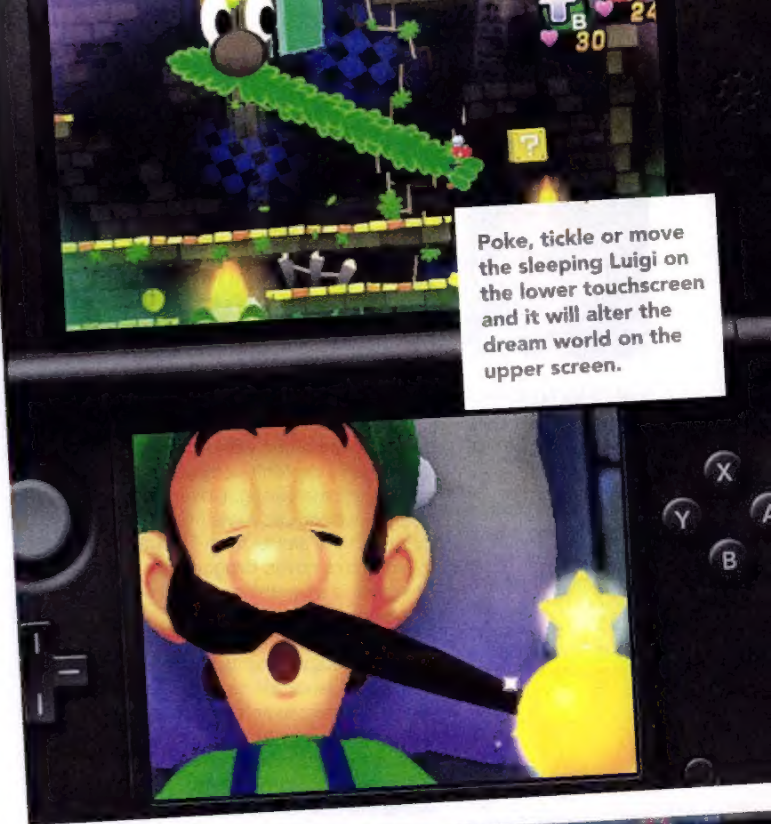
EVERYONE 10+
E
10+
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB
Mild Cartoon Violence

Use Parental Controls to restrict 3D mode for children 6 and under.
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Experience larger-than-life battles with a gargantuan sized Luigi™ that span both screens at once.



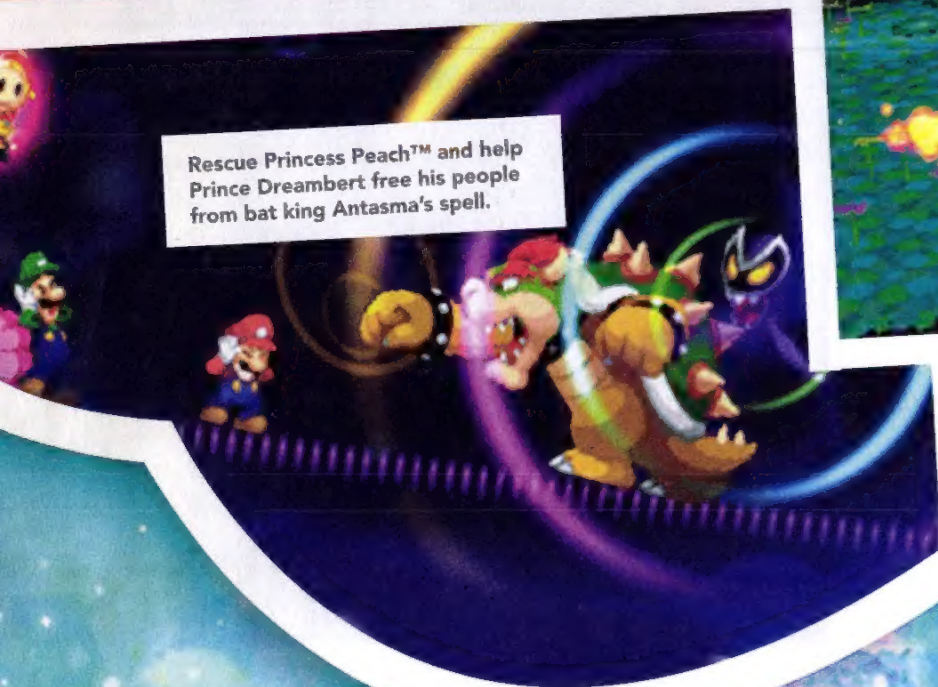
Poke, tickle or move the sleeping Luigi on the lower touchscreen and it will alter the dream world on the upper screen.



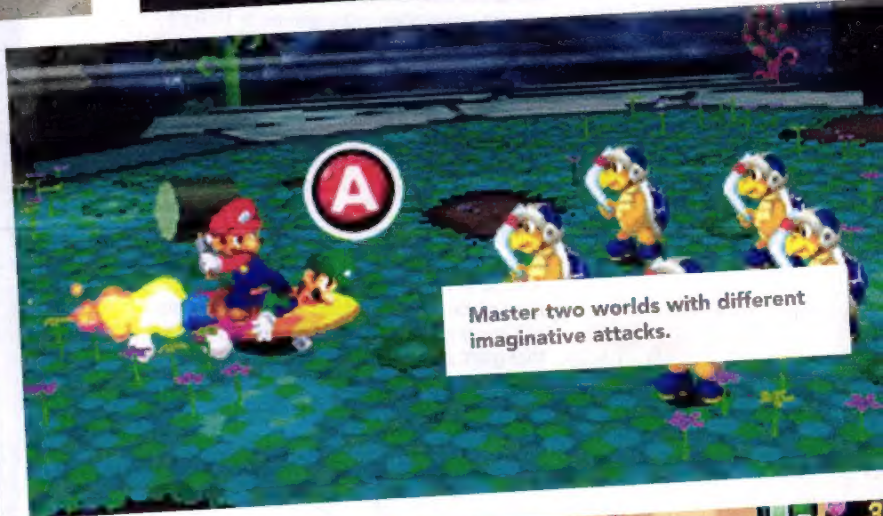
Defeat enemies by morphing hundreds of Luigis into giant hammers, wrecking balls and more.



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

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What is Indie?

Independent game development has exploded over the last few years. It isn't a new way of creating games (that is how the industry got started), but since digital distribution introduced an alternative way to publish games, indie game development has truly become a scene.

Five years ago you would rarely hear someone introduce themselves as independent or feel the need to – indie was just indie. Now that indie games are in fashion, you can't throw a stone without hitting an indie developer. I couldn't be happier.

Don't get me wrong. I love sprawling, budget-busting products from massive teams that span the globe, from *The Last of Us* to this month's cover, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, but there is something special developing in the independent game space.

Indie devs don't have to answer to their marketing departments – they are their marketing departments. Their focus groups are their peers, their fans, and sometimes a beta or two. They have the reins of their own games for better or for worse.

This month, Game Informer is giving the world the first in-depth look at a couple of next-generation indie games in 17-Bit's *Galak-Z: The Dimensional*, launching exclusively on the PlayStation 4, and Capybara's *Below*, an Xbox One exclusive.

Working with these studios is a breath of fresh air, as their enthusiasm for their products is infectious and their love of games and the art of games is easy to see in their projects.

So what is indie? Is it freedom? Is it honesty? Is it just plain old low-budget games? I guess you can say it is everything the establishment isn't (at least for now). But whatever it is, it's a place where gaming is exploring both old ideas and new while bringing us games that giant publishers can't or won't take the chance to make. That is something to celebrate, regardless of the label.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



Dragon Age: Inquisition

The land of Thedas is plagued by war and political bickering. Someone has taken advantage of the unrest and opened a portal to the Fade, releasing dark magic and demons into the world. Only the Inquisition can end the chaos. Using lessons and feedback from the previous games, BioWare is evolving *Dragon Age* for the next generation. **by Joe Juba**



64

Saints Row IV



85



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Perfecting Persona



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Gear: The Ouya Review



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Below



30

regulars

» 6 Feedback

Video games are expanding beyond emotions that can be summed up with the phrase, "That was awesome!" and readers tell us about their newfound feelings. We also find out about your hesitancy in adopting the next generation of consoles, and how Elder Scrolls Online needs to hurry up and get here.

» 12 Connect

For many, the Persona series seemingly came out of nowhere. Before it hit the big leagues in America with Persona 3, Atlus worked hard to bring the atypical RPG to the United States. We also pit Skylanders Swap Force against Disney Infinity, and learn about the game that The Last of Us almost was.

» 64 Previews

We explore Steelport with new super powers in the opening hours of Saints Row IV, discuss why Killzone: Shadow Fall may be your first PS4 title, and learn about the history of XCOM in The Bureau.

» 80 Reviews

The Wii U finally gets a new game worth getting excited about with Pikmin 3, and on the other end of the spectrum, we review the absolutely terrible Ride to Hell: Retribution. We also dive back into the world of The Walking Dead with 400 Days, and see if Plants vs. Zombies 2 is still fun in the free-to-play model.

» 100 Game Over

Metal Gear Solid is a series of insane happenstance, bizarre occurrences, and pure insanity. This month we're testing your Solid Snake smarts by asking you what's real and what's make believe in the Metal Gear universe. Even if you've played all the games, some of these answers might surprise you.



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We'll save your memories.

Your stories and songs.

Your future.

Your legacy.

Your up all night long.

Your soundtrack.

Your passion.

Your reason for living.

We'll save your gift.

So it can keep on giving.

is saving your digital life
just the beginning?

absolutely™

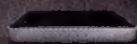
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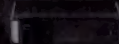
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This month in Feedback, readers question what's in store for next-gen gaming, lavish praise on Naughty Dog's latest offering, confess their digital sins, and make us feel really, really old.

Falling for Titanfall

Dating back to the days of Doom, first-person shooters have always held a special place in my heart. Not so much for the obvious destructive thrills, but more in the sense of exploring unknown worlds in the most immersive perspective digitally possible. Titanfall looks and sounds like the perfect breath of fresh FPS air I've been wishing for in these last few years.

Coming from the minds that brought us hours upon hours of frantic online fun in Call of Duty, I'm already confident in how smooth Titanfall will play. Add in the ability to jump in and out of agile combat/support robots, and you can call me a smitten believer. Xbox One now has my attention.

Andre Esters
Minneapolis, MN

I was mystified when I saw your Titanfall article, as I had never heard of the game, but I read the entire article and enjoyed it immensely. However, as a PS3 owner planning on buying a PS4, I was dismayed to see that the game would only be on Xbox One. Is Electronic Arts planning on bringing Titanfall to PlayStation? I wish that it would, as the game looks extremely epic and interesting.

Enzo Nagao
via email

Wrangling console exclusivity for Titanfall is one of the smartest moves Microsoft has made recently, but Sony fans should not start crying just yet. Neither EA nor Respawn have ruled out the possibility of an eventual PS4 release, stating only that they're currently focused on the Xbox One and PC versions. We wouldn't be surprised if Titanfall shows up on a Sony console somewhere down the road, but you'll need an Xbox One or PC to play it first. For more exclusive info on Titanfall, head to gameinformer.com/titanfall.

Immersed in The Last of Us

It's almost 1:00AM on Wednesday morning. I've just finished a journey across most of the United States, from Boston to Salt Lake City, and back to Jackson County. The Last of Us was one of the most moving media-related experiences of my life. The writers, actors, musicians, and developers of this game struck perfect notes of fear, anger, tension, and love for a child in interactive form. The Last of Us sets a new bar for storytelling, and to top it off, it's also a damn good game. Congratulations, Naughty Dog – thank you for drawing me into a game like no other developer has before.

David Roberts
via email

I want to like The Last of Us, but I just can't. I love the Uncharted series, and have nothing but respect for Naughty Dog. All of the individual elements of The Last of Us are excellent; graphics, level design, atmosphere,

voice acting, characters, and gameplay all add up to an immersive, believable experience. But what I've found is that it's too real. The game does such a good job of conveying a tone of loneliness and desperation, that I actually feel that way when I play it. I just hope this trend doesn't continue. If I start to feel guilty for all the carjacking I'm going to be doing in GTA V, then I'll be very disappointed in myself!

Daniel Reynolds
via email

Games as gritty and uncompromising as The Last of Us can definitely take their toll on your mood, so we won't knock more sensitive gamers like Daniel for not having the stomach to finish it. As for GTA V: The trailer reveals that one of the three playable protagonists, Michael, is seeing a therapist. Maybe you can swing by his office for some virtual guilt relief if things get too heavy for you?



Dub Misstep?

Considering the fact that video games often have much more spoken dialogue than a movie, I'm disappointed that their packaging still fails to list what spoken languages or subtitle options are included. Furthermore, even though it's standard for domestic DVDs of foreign movies to include the original spoken language, it's fairly rare to find the same in localizations of foreign-made games. Regardless of how well-made the dub may be, will game publishers (most notably Square Enix) ever realize that there are many people who dislike dub-only games and that they are hurting their bottom line by not including an original language option?

Jennifer Mattingly
via email

JRPG fans are especially concerned with having an option to listen to the original dialogue in games, and given the dubious quality of some localizations, we can't blame them. Disc size has played a role in the decision of some developers to forgo multiple language options in the past, but the real issue comes down to a perceived lack of consumer interest. If you want the chance to play a game in its native language, you'll have to convince your favorite developer it's worth the extra time and effort to include it – and that's as close as we'll ever come to recommending that someone start an online petition.



Anxious for Elder Scrolls

As a longtime Elder Scrolls fan, the new Elder Scrolls Online MMO has me worried that when it comes out, they will stop releasing console games. Although I appreciate MMOs, I still love playing Elder Scrolls games on my 360. Do you think that with this new game coming out it will hinder any future console games from the Elder Scrolls series?

Taylor Clausen
via email

Don't worry, Taylor – console gamers like yourself have plenty of Elder Scrolls to look forward to. First of all, Elder Scrolls Online is coming to next-gen consoles, so if you plan on buying a PS4 or Xbox One, you can partake in the massively multiplayer festivities. Secondly, ESO is being developed by Zenimax Online Studios – not Bethesda Game Studios, which shows no signs of abandoning its bread-and-butter Elder Scrolls and Fallout RPG franchises.

Left Behind

I've noticed that developers are planning to do multi-gen releases (i.e. games for both Xbox One and Xbox 360), and that concerns me a great deal. I won't be making the jump to next-gen immediately, so I'll be one of many buying games that were designed for a better machine. My question is are these games going to be shells of what the experience is meant to be, or are developers going to make an effort to create quality ports for the older systems?

Nate Pfab
via email

While next-gen systems are set to launch this holiday, don't expect their multi-gen offerings to sport drastically improved experiences over current consoles. Most developers design their games with the weakest supported platform in mind, not the strongest. Simply boosting the graphics or multiplayer count on the more powerful system is a lot easier than trying to rework fundamental game design elements that won't work on weaker consoles. Upcoming multi-gen games like Call of Duty: Ghosts and Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag might look prettier on next-gen consoles, but expect the gameplay to be virtually identical no matter what system you play them on.



Kids Say the Darndest Things

I've been a gamer for about nine years now, and the DS was my stepping-stone into the gaming world. I started off with the DS Lite and New Super Mario Bros., and at the time I thought there was no better game. Your look at the top DS 25 DS Games (Classic, issue 243) reminded me of my adolescence. Hitting bricks with Mario's head has now been replaced by the shrieks of Skeevers, but I'm glad to know that someone still recognizes the oldies even though newer games are now thriving.

Tylar Toro
Queens, NY

Holy crap, we're old.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions:

"Is it okay to not beat a game as long as you had fun while it lasted?"

Yep.

"Is there any truth to the rumor that Watch Dogs on Xbox One will allow you to hack the Kinect cameras of other players and spy on them?"

We're pretty sure that's illegal, so probably not.

"Is anyone at GI a brony?"

We have a strict "don't ask, don't tell" brony policy.

Worst News Tip of the Month:

"My Xbox keeps freezing what sho"

Question of the Month:

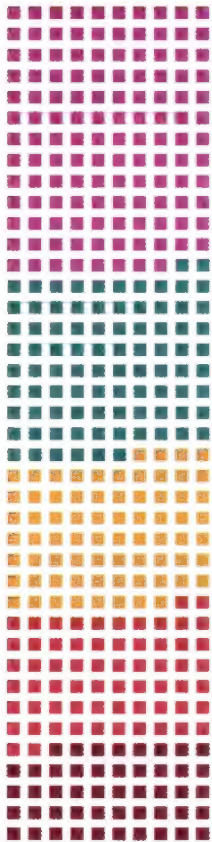
Has a video game ever spurred you to try a new activity in real life? If so, what?



(Left) GI ran into plenty of old friends at this year's E3. First stop for Andy was crashing the Webush/Intel party. Michael Pachter didn't seem to mind. **(Right)** We also ran into United Talent Agency's Blake Rockkind (left) and DayZ creator Dean Hall.

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



- **32%** Xbox One vs. PlayStation 4 Debate
- **22%** Titanfall Excitement
- **18%** Video Game Confessions
- **16%** The Last of Us Love
- **12%** Next-Gen Console Concerns



Confession Time

In issue 243, we asked readers to tell us the worst thing they've ever done in a video game. While their confessions are amusing to us, many expressed a surprising amount of regret for their digital deeds. Here are some responses:

Even to this day I find myself lying awake remembering the time I threw the baby penguin off the map in Super Mario 64.

Jake Reed

The worst thing I've ever done in a video game was shoot Mordin Solus while being a renegade Shepard in Mass Effect 3. I literally had nightmares that same night because I felt so guilty.

Matthew Finck

I got the "Dastardly" Achievement in Red Dead Redemption...without even knowing it existed.

Kyle Richards

The worst thing I've done in a game is rob the shop in The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening. I stole the 980-rupee bow from the store early on, and the game asked me if I was proud of myself. Upon reentering the store, I was met with the "ultimate price," and everyone in the game forever after addressed me as "THIEF." I can't even describe how that affected my childhood.

Nick Pattishall

I accidentally told a Wookiee in Knights of the Old Republic to kill his father. I still get really emotional about it sometimes.

Austin McLaurine

According to my daughters, the worst thing I've done in a video game is kill bunnies in Skyrim. According to me, it was getting every Krogon teammate killed in Mass Effect 1 and 2.

Kyle Wadsworth

(Left) Meanwhile, One PR's Kjell Vistad (left) and NBC Universal's Pete Wanat discussed beard-growing tips. **(Right)** Indie developers held their own press conference during E3, called Horizon. The event took place appropriately enough at the LA Museum of Contemporary Art.





1 Josh Maule

LEARN MORE: A massive alien & a tiny, gold-colored alien.



2 Nathan Blaylock

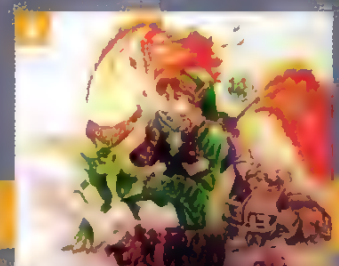
THE LITTLE KING OF TIGER

3 Anthony Tsai

THE LITTLE KING OF TIGER

4 Brian Smith

THE LITTLE KING OF TIGER

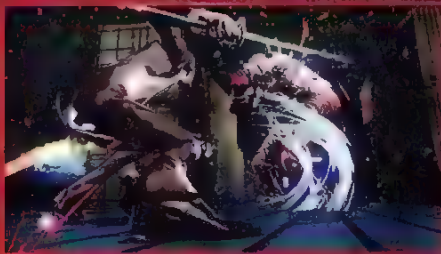


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[Left] GI video producer Ben Hanson decided to torture famed Shenmue creator Yu Suzuki, République director Ryan Payton, and Quantic Dream founder David Cage by sticking them in a room together and videotaping them. Visit gameinformer.com to watch the video. [Right] We're excited for Titanfall as much as the next guy...unless this is the next guy.

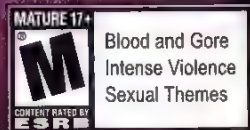
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KILLER IS DEAD



All launch copies come with an 80-page hardcover art book, a soundtrack CD, and bonus DLC content!



Bonus DLC content contains the following in-game items:

1. Gigolo Glasses
2. Alternate costumes for Vivienne and Mia
3. A bonus Gigolo Mission with Betty
4. An additional episode with the vampiric Sebastian

PS3
PlayStation 3



XBOX 360

KILLER

60 Days of Con And

Back when nobody knew about the Xbox One, gamers dreamt about what the next-generation console would be capable of and where it would take them. Now the system has been introduced, and still nobody knows what to expect. Since its public debut on May 21, the system has gone through a rollercoaster of changing features and run the gauntlet of public opinion. In this state of confusion, Microsoft has fundamentally changed its company structure, and a new team is now in place to oversee the system's November launch. This reorganization could influence the system's future in many ways, but Microsoft's more pressing concern is to start back at square one and define the Xbox One to the public.



APRIL 4

MAY 22

JUNE 10

»

»

JUNE 12

»

»

JUNE 6

JUNE 18

JUNE 19

NOTABLES

- perfecting persona
- playing with power
- all ages: dragon vs. mouse
- afterwords: the last of us
- gamer: making paperboy better than new
- gear: the ouya review
- opinion: why i'm still not sold on xbox one



fusion... Counting

APRIL 10

MAY 21

JUNE 27

JULY 1

JULY 24

JULY 11

JULY 3



MICROSOFT'S NEW LINE

Instead of leadership based around specific products and services, Microsoft is now organized around functions like engineering, marketing, finance, etc. This means the Xbox One leadership is effectively split between two groups within the engineering division. The hardware itself is handled by "devices and studios," which Julie Larson-Green oversees, while the Xbox One's user interface governance falls under the purview of the "operating systems" group led by Terry Myerson. Familiar names like Phil Spencer (head of Microsoft Studios) and Aaron Greenberg (chief of staff for devices and studios) remain working on the system under Larson-Green.

In an email to the company, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer outlined the purpose of the reorganization: "We are rallying behind a single strategy as one company – not a collection of divisional strategies. Although we will deliver multiple devices and services to execute and monetize the strategy, the single core strategy will drive us to set shared goals for everything we do. We will see our product line holistically, not as a set of islands."

As head of the devices and studios division, Larson-Green is responsible for orienting all of Microsoft's devices in the same direction. Ballmer also said that Larson-Green is taking control of "our studios' experiences, including all games, music, video, and other entertainment."

Bloomberg reported that former Xbox head Don Mattrick was being considered for the position given to Larson-Green, and sources told business magazine *Fast Company* that his departure was caused by the fact that the reorganization would have denied Mattrick a bigger role at the company.

Larson-Green's background with Windows and Office has given some gamers pause, but Tony Wible, managing director of media and entertainment at financial services firm Janney Montgomery Scott, thinks that a new perspective might be a good thing. "I really don't know that getting somebody new in there is necessarily a bad thing," he says. "Even if they don't have game experience I'd argue that the prior structure didn't do a very good job, either."

"I THINK, HONESTLY, WHAT WENT WRONG WITH THE XBOX ONE IS YOU HAD PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT PRIORITIES WHO DID A VERY POOR JOB COMMUNICATING, IN ADDITION TO NOT UNDERSTANDING THE CORE GAMER."



Regardless of who's ultimately in charge, Wible believes the reorganization isn't a panacea for Microsoft's problems. "I think at the end of the day, what Microsoft needs probably more than anything is streamlined structure where they don't have too many conflicts of interest that exist by people running individual silos," he says. "I think, honestly, what went wrong with the Xbox One is you had people with different priorities who did a very poor job communicating, in addition to not understanding the core gamer."

Wible believes such an internal conflict was the root of the initial decision to have an online requirement in spite of gamers' preference to the contrary, as well as the subsequent reversal. What this reorganization means for the future of the Xbox One is uncertain, but Wible posits that it could be conducive to a larger strategy by the company to try to own the TV space (after its lack of success in the mobile/tablet arena) and funnel other Microsoft products like the Bing search engine through the Xbox One gateway. Microsoft declined to be interviewed about its new structure and how it might affect the Xbox One.

DEFINING THE XBOX ONE

Regardless of Microsoft's larger strategy with the system, its launch remains a more pressing concern. "I think the launch still has a lot of obstacles to overcome," Wible said. "Even if they are going back and trying to ease some of the initial concerns, you can't take back fear and uncertainty that Microsoft won't try and do something silly and stupid again."

Microsoft may have made (at least) some fans happy with its corrections to the Xbox One, but the coming months before its launch could be just as crucial. Is it enough time for Microsoft to batten the hatches and change the prevailing image that it has bungled the leadup to the system's launch? Or will tomorrow bring more missteps and further corrections? And what else about the system will change before it comes out? Could the company lower the system's \$499 price tag and/or include a headset in the box? It's been a crazy two months since the Xbox One was introduced to the public, and Microsoft is still working on its first impression.

For more on the system, check out senior associate editor Jeff Marchiafava's opinion piece, "Why I'm Still Not Sold on Xbox One" on page 42



ALIENS ATTACK!

**BLOSSOM CITY IN TURMOIL
HEROES NEEDED TO HELP FIGHT BACK**

INSIDE

**P2 MEET WONDER RED AND
HIS HERO FRIENDS**

**P3 LEARN HOW UNITE MORPHS
GIVE HEROES AN ADVANTAGE**

P4 JOIN THE FIGHT



HEROES OFFER HOPE

WONDER RED AND HORDE OF HEROES DETERMINED TO CLOBBER SPACE SCUM



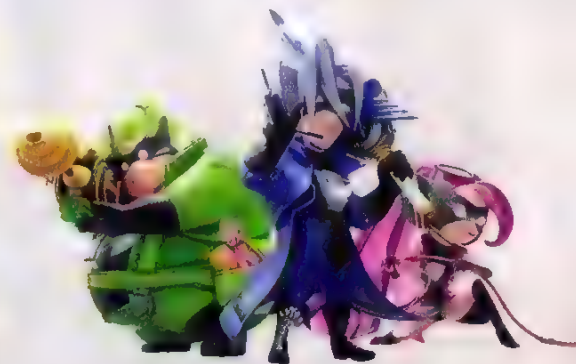
WONDER RED IS NO WIMP

In response to the recent alien invasion, The Wonderful 100 and Blossom City citizens have assembled to fight the enemy. "Something needs to be done to clobber these invaders," Wonder Red said. "I for one will not let these space scum take our beloved city without a fight." Fortunately, Wonder Red and the rest of The Wonderful 100 are not alone. Those with the Wii U system and Wii U GamePad controller have joined the fight as well. "It's been tough so far, especially because when you first see these things coming at you with six or seven hands, you think 'Holy moly, how can we stop them?'" Wonder Red said. But despite early losses, Wonder Red is optimistic that with enough patience, grit, ingenuity and help from Wii U players, the group will be successful. "Saying otherwise would be wimpy talk," he said. "And wimps don't win."



HEROES NOT AFRAID OF ALIEN ENEMY

As fear sets in among the residents of Blossom City, hope survives on the superpowered shoulders of The Wonderful 100 and in the hands of Wii U players around the world. Managing 100 superpowered heroes is a tough job, especially in the face of such an indomitable enemy as the aliens, but Wonder Red is confident that Blossom City will survive. "We're pros," Wonder Red said, referring to the other members of his entourage. "We're confident too. It's tough not to be when you've got Wonder Blue, Wonder Green, Wonder Pink, Wonder Toilet, Wonder Stoplight and Wonder Train working with you to defeat the enemy."



Wonder Green, Wonder Blue and Wonder Pink join the fight.



HEROES TRANSFORM INTO SWORD, GUN, WHIP AND FIST

As the tides of war have turned in favor of The Wonderful 100, even the casual bystander can point out what's working. "It's the hand," an anonymous Blossom City resident said. "You know, when all the heroes Unite Morph into a giant hand to clobber the aliens with - it's awesome!" The hand isn't the only thing Wii U Console and GamePad owners can make the Wonderful 100 Unite Morph into. There's the Unite Sword that slices through enemies and picks locks, the Unite Gun that lets you shoot enemies from a distance, the Unite Bridge, Unite Glider, Unite Chain and Unite Ladder. "Yeah, the Unite Morph abilities are pretty rad," Wonder Red said. "Sure, individually, each Wonderful One is pretty powerful, but when we Unite Morph together we're even better." Wonder Red cannot wait for the new recruits to show up in September and join in the fun. "We're pretty certain that once the new volunteers show up and join us on September 15, the alien invasion will go from attacking mode to running away scared mode," he said. "And I for one cannot wait to see those space pansies highailing it out of our city and back into space to cry about it."



Wonder Red and the Wonderful 100 unite to form a fist to battle an alien rampaging in Blossom City.

TRANSFORMATIONS GIVE HEROES THE ADVANTAGE

WONDER RED WANTS YOU TO JOIN THE FIGHT

As the war against the alien intruders continues, The Wonderful 100 are looking to add to their ranks. "We'll take anybody," Wonder Red said. "Because everybody has something to offer. Everyone has a superpower. Even you." By you, Wonder Red assured me, he doesn't mean me your trusty reporter, he means you dear reader. All you need is the Wii U and the GamePad. "You can shoot, smash, slice and clobber aliens and help us send the aliens back to the smelly bowl of space that they came from!" Wonder Blue said. The Wonderful 100 will accept recruits as long as there's an enemy to fight, but interested people should look at September 15 as a deadline. "We've got big plans for September," Wonder Red said with a glint in his eye. "Join us by then or else you'll miss out on clobbering aliens, and honestly, why would you want to?"





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UNITE A HORDE OF HEROES

Join forces with the Wonderful 100 to help slice, shoot, smash and clobber aliens out of Blossom City.

Available September 15

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TEEN
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CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

Alcohol Reference
Animated Blood
Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes



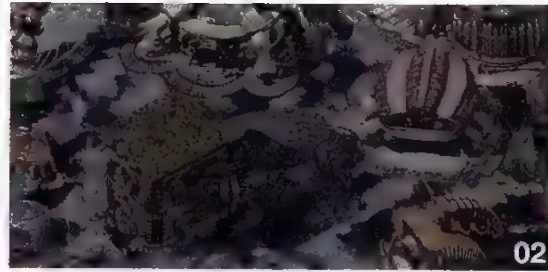


01

Midgar

Final Fantasy VII

Technology and corporate control transformed Midgar into the center of civilization, but not without a price. The city's Mako generators drain the planet's energy, and the Shinra Corporation's military force maintains order. Life is good for a lucky few, but most regular folks live in poverty under a titanic metal plate that separates the slums from the more civilized sections of the city. *Final Fantasy VII* spends its opening hours familiarizing players with this twisted industrial metropolis, and those hours are among the most memorable in any RPG in history.



02

Sigil - Planescape: Torment

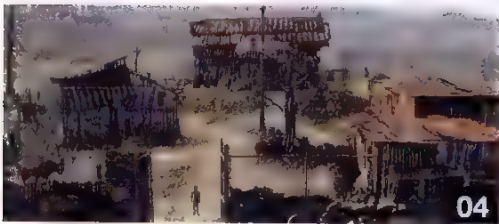
Sigil is the ultimate melting pot, home to beings of all races from various planes of existence. It is also called "The City of Doors," since it contains portals to every corner of the multiverse. The mix of unique characters, creatures, and areas makes Sigil feel like the ultimate cultural hub – which isn't a surprise, since it is literally at the center of everything.



03

Moba - Persona 4

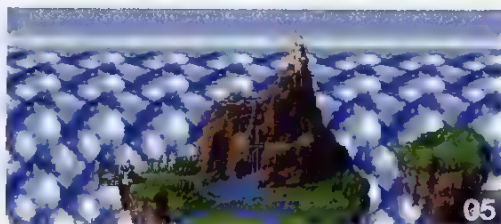
A sleepy town in rural Japan may not have much to offer in terms of spectacle, but that's part of its charm. By putting ordinary locations in the spotlight (like the high school and department store) this quaint little city starts to feel like a real place. However, you should hold off on moving there until the recent rash of murders is sorted out.



04

The Republic of Dave - Fallout 3

This patch of dirt may not look like much, but exploring the sovereign state gives players a funny and disturbing look at life in the wasteland. The egomaniacal Dave is president (and head of the Bureau of Dave-like Activities), and his family members are the only other inhabitants. Voting is usually a formality in this republic; it leans heavily in the pro-Dave direction.



05

Kingdom of Zeal - Chrono Trigger

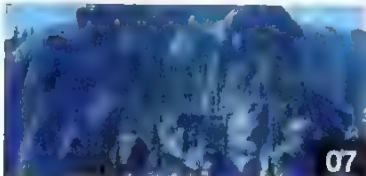
Situated high above the world's surface, the Kingdom of Zeal appears to be an airborne utopia. Beneath the beauty, this techno-magical society is responsible for awakening an ancient evil. The floating continent is Chrono Trigger's most significant location in terms of plot; Zeal is home to all of the most important NPCs like Schala, Janus, and the three sages.



06

North Window - Suikoden II

Players visit towns in RPGs all the time, but how often can they make one their home? North Window and its accompanying castle serve as the home base for your war effort in *Suikoden II*. Thanks to their recruitment efforts, players feel a sense of pride as they watch the once-ruined ghost town expand into a thriving military headquarters.



07

Ironforge - World of Warcraft

If we had to say something nice about the Alliance, it would be that the dwarves have a cool capital city. Carved directly into a mountain, Ironforge is an awe-inspiring sight. You can wander the huge halls and tiny passages for hours, but you can also find any shop and amenity you desire. Lastly, no trip to Ironforge is complete without watching some dummies jump into the lava pits.



08

Bowerstone - Fable series

Bowerstone is the largest city in Albion, but that isn't what makes it remarkable. It embodies the essence of each installment, evolving over time and reflecting the technological state of the world. From medieval shops to industrial slums, one stroll through Bowerstone conveys everything you need to know about the current state of the world.



09

Athkatla - Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn

With its origins in *Dungeons & Dragons*, Athkatla (like Sigil) was already popular among tabletop RPG fans. *Baldur's Gate II* does the city justice, instilling it with intrigue, danger, and mystery. With strongholds to control and various factions to navigate, Athkatla is a perfect example of how to do high-fantasy settings correctly.



10

Radiata - Radiata Stories

The citizens of Radiata have better things to do than stand around waiting for you to talk to them. They have their own routines that can take them from the highest floors of the castle to the murky sewers. This means that tracking down a specific character is challenging, but the city's bustle and activity make it feel practically alive.



Gone Home

The Fullbright Company tests exploratory storytelling

Stories are taking the spotlight in games more than ever before. Whether navigating emotionally driven experiences like *The Last of Us* or delving into complex themes like *BioShock Infinite*, players aren't just talking about intense action sequences, but also analyzing the narrative. We're also becoming attached to polygonal characters, which begs the question: Is gameplay starting to take a backseat to story? In some cases, absolutely. Ask anyone why they're attached to Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, and their answers focus on the characters and twists. But what if you stripped a game of battles or puzzles and made it just about the story – is such an approach worthwhile? The Fullbright Company hopes to find out with its independent PC game, *Gone Home*.

Stories are taking the spotlight in games more than ever before. Whether navigating emotionally driven experiences

by Kimberley Wallace

Gone Home's foundation is exploratory storytelling. Your character arrives home from college to find her entire family gone. To figure out what's going on, you must explore the house for clues like phone messages or notes.

If anyone has the expertise to craft an entrancing world, it's a team including some of the minds behind BioShock. That's exactly how The Fullbright Company's co-founders met. Steve Gaynor, Johnnemann Nordhagen, and Karla Zimonja worked together on the BioShock 2: Minerva's Den DLC together at 2K Marin. "There's a cool, very agile feel to making something small and personal like that," says Fullbright co-founder Gaynor.

The group went in different directions afterward. Gaynor worked on BioShock Infinite for a year, and the others worked on the original version of The Bureau: XCOM Declassified. Gaynor soon realized he wanted to return to Portland, so he approached the others about working together again. Both said yes. "We all had that same feelings that we really wanted to be working on a small team again," Gaynor says. Later, they added Kate Craig as an environment artist to complete their team.

Step one was deciding what type of game fit their strengths and ideals. They reflected on their work with BioShock and games they enjoyed, like System Shock and Deus Ex. What do these games have in common? They are played from the first-person perspective, atmospheric, and have hidden niches to explore. "[What] was interesting to us conceptually was the idea that a lot of these games that were inspirations to us have player-driven exploration of places where you find story in the environment," Gaynor says. "You find objects, images, and audio diaries that tell the story, but it's always the sideshow. The thing that seemed really intriguing to us was the idea of making a game where the game is the act of finding the story in the environment and discovering what happened...who the people were that lived there, and finding out about their lives."

Taking a Chance on the Unproven

Many people enjoy reading messages on the wall or listening to audio diaries in BioShock, but what makes you hedge your bets on an entire game based off that aspect? "Part of it



just is a leap of faith, where we pictured the game and thought that seems like it would be cool," Gaynor says. "Some of it is just a question of scale. Gone Home takes place entirely within in one house. We felt like part of the potential there was that if we gave you the interactive tools to just very deeply investigate every inch of every room of the house. That act of exploration and discovering things is the next step beyond what has been done in almost any other game."

Putting a spotlight on one house and its objects is one thing, but Gaynor and his team wanted to flesh out the details to lure the player in. "There's this level of specificity and investment that you can have in a very small space," Gaynor says. "Just one corner of a room in Gone Home...gives the player enough sense of curiosity of what could be behind every corner to [draw them] through the experience." The team didn't want to make an external reason you were searching; it had to be your own curiosity.

The Gone Home team knows it's taking a risk on this "unproven territory," and it sent out a walkable section to game developers and friends who knew nothing about its ambition. Those people gave them the assurance they needed to keep going forward.

Giving the Home Its Story

Gone Home is set in the mid '90s, and its artifacts reflect that. VHS tapes, magazine covers featuring Kurt Cobain, and a Super Nintendo are scattered about. Stumbling on an iconic element is like a time portal, especially with how the game embraces the riot girl scene. But the '90s setting only surfaced as the team decided how to make an exploratory narrative work.

Gaynor notes how today, searching someone's email or cell phone would reveal everything. That wouldn't lend itself to exploration, so a period where people relied on landlines with answering machines, Post-it notes, and written letters was a necessity. "We wanted to make a game that was set in a familiar time and was relatable and recognizable to people as 'This is like a place I've been to, this could have been the house of anybody that I know,'" Gaynor says. "The [decade] came to life, but it's in reaction to a decision-making process that lead there as opposed to a purely aesthetic decision."

While you control a woman trying to piece together what happened to her family, Gone Home isn't her story – it's her younger sister Sam's. You're discovering her life since you left for college. Although threads about your

parents are present, Sam takes center stage, so much so that her voice is the one you hear while finding important objects. "She is the human connection that you have to the story where everything else is sterile," Gaynor says. "We felt like it was really important for the player to be able to hear Sam tell her own story."

Sam is navigating the complex world of adolescence, but also discovering her lineage. "All of the themes explore relationships between individuals within a family and between individuals who are friends or entering a romantic relationship and the anxiety, excitement, and questions that go along with that," Gaynor says. "What's interesting to us is how those [relationships] change over time and how subtly they can shift based on small incidents and the evidence they leave behind."

Making Story Count

Intrigue is the backbone of Gone Home. Gaynor thinks that by putting the entire focus on story, players are likely to engage in the extras that often get lost. He recalls Skyrim's books and how he never read many of them. "As a player, you have an intuitive feeling for what's important in a game, for what matters," Gaynor says. "For us, the stuff that you're finding and reading and taking in and combining in your head – those are what the game is about." With objects revealing small story segments like Sam's new friendship, it begs you to look at every object. "We do as much as we can to not have a bunch of stuff where you read [them] and [think], 'I don't know why I read that,'" Gaynor says.

Crafting this type of game wouldn't be possible if the team stayed at a large developer. "[This] scale allows you to say we aren't just going to do the expected," Gaynor says. "We're able to make a game that doesn't have any combat or puzzles and is about exploring a place where people lived and finding out about them. It's like a chicken-and-egg thing. You couldn't tell that story if you had these other requirements on you. This is the game we had to make to tell this kind of story, and I'm really excited to be working on games at a time where that's actually feasible."

Gaynor has a point. Games development is currently heading in many different directions creatively, especially in the indie scene. Maybe this path will continue as these games prove their concepts. Gone Home is making an intriguing case for how story can be the main attraction. Time will tell if it's a successful experiment, but it's one that's worth exploring on its August 15 releases. ♦



Perfecting Persona

How Atlus USA Bloomed



by Cassidy Jones

Atius USA has become a go-to publisher for niche Japanese role-playing games, with Persona earning the company its reputation. The mature RPG franchise deals with heavy issues, centering on self-acceptance, and forces characters to confront their deepest fears. The true-to-life writing has earned high acclaim; after all, don't we all hide behind some sort of persona? It also caters to the hardcore RPG player with its traditional, challenging battle system that focuses on exploiting enemies' elemental weaknesses.

The franchise might seem like a no-brainer for localization now, but in the late '90s, it was a risky venture for a small company. While Atlus Japan handles development, it's up to Atlus USA to translate it in English. With plenty of dialogue to translate, only six full-time employees, and mature, potentially divisive material, the American division took a risk. It paid off. This is the underdog's story of how Persona propelled the small team from obscurity to the front of the JRPG pack.



Forming an Identity

By the time the first Persona hit, Atlus USA had been around over five years, but the company lacked a flagship franchise. "We really had everything to gain since we were really in need of a series or game that would define us as a publisher," says former marketing manager Gail Salamanca. "Square had Final Fantasy, Konami had Suikoden, Capcom had the Breath of Fire series. Persona was Atlus' first very real opportunity to grab a piece of the RPG pie in North America."

The venture was risky; localization with such a small team and large amount of text is not an ideal undertaking, especially on an untested property. According to Salamanca, Atlus USA also struggled with making a game so infused with Japanese culture relatable to an American audience.

"The localization staff was really concerned about the game being too Japanese and alienating Western consumers," Salamanca says. "So a majority of the references to Japan and Japanese culture were either altered or changed." Characters were also made over; the lead's hairstyle was altered and one character, Masao, was dubbed Mark and had his race changed to African-American.

Additionally, the staff didn't anticipate the uproar from the name Revelations: Persona. "It was one of those things that just sounded cool at the time, and the staff never gave it any thought in terms of the religious implications that it might have had," Salamanca says. "So, we had people calling us, saying that we worshiped the devil because of the name and the demon-esque character on the front of the box."

But Revelations: Persona did exactly what Atlus wanted: the PlayStation release got people talking, and eventually became a cult hit. The title had the exceptional persona fusion system and multiple endings that the series is known for today. With most RPGs adopting fantasy settings, it also stood out for its contemporary backdrop featuring high school students. This lured people in and got them anticipating the sequel.

Atlus split Persona 2 into two games – Innocent Sin and Eternal Punishment, each one side of the same story – but only Eternal Punishment was localized. Rumors swirled that an appearance from Hitler and Nazi-like enemies made Atlus back away from Innocent Sin. According to Salamanca, other factors led the company to pass. "I remember a few things that we were 'told,'" he says. "But, I think it pretty much boiled down to resources and manpower since development was well underway on P2:EP. Having to go back to P2:IS localization probably wasn't factored into the dev team's schedule, so we pretty much had to let it go. Though it wasn't for the lack of b---ing and moaning by the U.S. staff."

Revelations: Persona and Eternal Punishment both did decent critically. Revelations scored in the 7 tier from publications like *GameSpot* and *Gamepro*, and got an 8.75 from *Game Informer*. Eternal Punishment did even better, receiving scores in the 8 range from *GameSpot*, *EGM*, and *Game Informer*, putting the series on the map. But to find a wider North American audience, Atlus still had some hurdles to overcome.



A New Approach

Learning to market a new franchise, especially a dark one like *Persona*, isn't easy. Atlus' missteps aren't surprising, but the company took public feedback to heart and adjusted its localization approach. Instead of running from its niche appeal, Atlus embraced it.

One of the aspects Atlus changed its tune on was its approach to Japanese culture. Previously, the team had changed towns and characters to avoid bombarding the audience with Japanese references, but Atlus took the opposite approach with 2000's *Eternal Punishment*. "We believe that the games take place in Japan, and that most of the characters involved in the story are Japanese," says Atlus USA lead editor Yu Namba. "We actually think of those aspects as assets as well. We [always] try to keep as much of that Japanese element intact as possible."

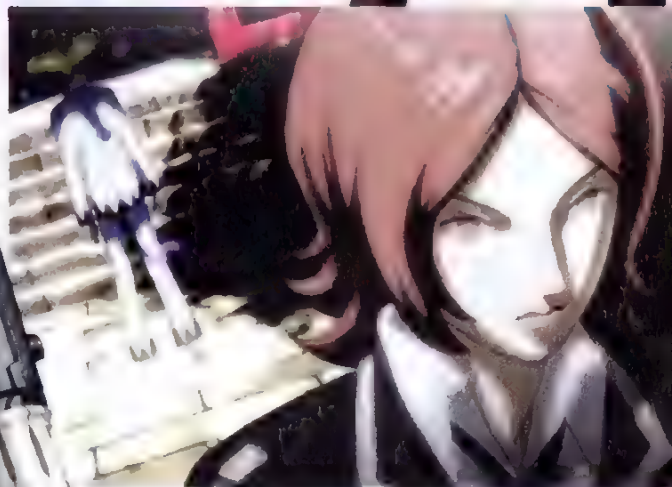
Straight translations read awkwardly, so the team still altered references difficult for Americans to grasp. "We try to find something equivalent here in the States, so there's no meaning lost in the localization," Namba says.

Deciding what needs to be altered is a tough job. "One of the challenges is finding the right balance between respecting the source material and...making it accessible to the audience," says Atlus USA director of production Bill Alexander. "It's clear that a lot of our fans want something that's true to the original and we want to deliver something that the fans appreciate."

The Persona 3 Controversy

Persona 3 wasn't Atlus' first Mature-rated game, but it was the first in the *Persona* series. While Atlus previously strayed away from controversial subject matter, *Persona 3* let the content stand for itself, which caused media chatter when screenshots went public.

Pictures of characters putting gun-like "evokers" to their head to summon their personas rubbed some people the wrong way. "When the U.S. media got access to the images, they thought, 'Why are they doing this? Are we promoting suicide?'" says lead editor Yu Namba. "In the end we thought, 'Yeah, it's pretty graphic, but at the same time, it's understandable as long as you play the game.'"



The Game Changers

Seven years and a console generation transition marked the gap between Persona 2: Eternal Punishment and Persona 3. The wait could have caused a decline in interest, but the Persona 3 release on PlayStation 2 was anything but lackluster. According to Atlus, the game sold significantly more than Persona 2, bringing the series out of obscurity.

"I think you could say that from the earlier games prior to Persona 3, the Persona games kind of fell into this cult classic categorization," Alexander says. "They were really, really popular amongst a smaller number of hardcore fans and then once Persona 3 [launched], the audience really exploded and a lot more people were talking about it."

The new entry introduced social links and a slew of randomly-generated dungeons. Social links, interactions providing deeper insight into secondary characters, are by far the most popular addition. "Social links definitely added a lot of variety to the gameplay. In many ways, it's the polar opposite of the dungeon crawling aspect," Alexander says.

Namba thinks the social links caught on because they meshed with the storyline. "Even from the first Persona, there was the theme of duality, people wearing masks, their persona," he says. "You're interacting with these NPCs who [are] a certain way towards the beginning, but...you actually learn they have a different

side of them. Not having very straightforward, linear, and flat characters...I think that helped further the case of the Persona series from three on to be for a more mature audience."

With buzz growing, Atlus moved on to Persona 4. The next installation on the PS2 built on the third entry by giving players control over the full party. The narrative also presented more challenging subject matter, with one character questioning his sexuality and another struggling to embrace her gender. The content had the potential to narrow the audience, but it worked to Atlus' advantage.

"Games aren't just for little kids anymore, and a lot of our games are targeting an older audience," Alexander says.

"We thought in order for the video game industry to expand, we needed to approach more mature topics and a more mature audience so nobody was left out," Namba adds.

Persona 3 and 4 solidified Atlus' position, bringing the company closer to its goal to be known as a leader in Japanese RPG localizations. Both games have gone on to win Game of the Year awards. Persona 3 won awards from prolific publications such as *GameSpot*, *GameSpy*, and *Gamasutra*; while Persona 4 was donned 2008's Best Role-playing Game by *IGN* and *GameSpy*. Atlus also reported a 33-percent sales increase from Persona 3 to Persona 4.

Crafting a North American Brand

When Atlus localized its first mainline Shin Megami Tensei game, *Nocturne*, in 2004, the company made the decision to add the name Shin Megami Tensei to every title, even spinoffs like *Persona*. "That was pretty much a marketing strategy decision that the company made," says lead editor Yu Namba. The games aren't so different; using similar universes plagued with demons, so Atlus decided to keep all the names under one umbrella to form a brand for English-speaking audiences.

Handheld Success

Persona 3 and 4 brought new fans, and to help them catch up with the series history, Atlus ported the early titles to handhelds. *Innocent Sin's* PSP release was the first time fans stateside had an opportunity to experience protagonist Tatsuya Suou's story and finally releasing it was an exciting moment for Atlus. *Persona 1* PSP also erased Atlus' earlier transgressions, returning to a more faithful localization.

Additionally, Atlus expanded its fanbase with *Persona 3 Portable* for the PSP and *Persona 4 Golden* for Vita. *Golden* went far beyond expectations, surprising Atlus with just how many people bought a Vita for it. *Persona 4 Golden* also had an opportune launch, generating plenty of buzz. "At the time, I don't think there were a ton of RPGs available on the Vita, and it just became a no-brainer for people," says director of production Bill Alexander.



Standing Out in the Future

The Persona series has continued to be in the vanguard of the JRPG subgenre. Not only has it thrived off its modern day Japanese setting, but the realistic characters stand out. "[These characters] are real people facing personal challenges and personal demons," Alexander says. Atlus is already looking to the future, saying it will work its hardest to localize any new titles.

With Atlus Japan recently registering a *Persona 5* domain, a new venture may just be on the horizon. Unfortunately, Atlus parent Index Corporation is undergoing challenging financial and legal times, as the company has reported significant debt and devaluation amidst fraud allegations. Key officials are stepping down, and the impact of the situation on Atlus and its stable of titles is unknown at the time of publication.

The company still has immense faith in *Persona* and takes its legacy seriously. "We don't want the *Persona* series to get watered down for a mainstream audience," Alexander says. "We'd like to see more people step outside their comfort zone and try a game like *Persona*, which does things that other games aren't doing." Over 15 years later, it's hard to believe a niche empire was built on a single risk. ♦

Playing With Power

Think you're good at Super Mario Bros.? This computer may be better

Every year, Carnegie Mellon University holds a whimsical conference where any student, faculty member, or sentient A.I. is encouraged to submit research papers on topics as far ranging and absurd as regret-minimizing algorithms, artificial stupidity, and elbow macaroni. This year Google software engineer Tom Murphy VII wrote a paper called "The First Level of Super Mario Bros. Is Easy With Lexicographic Orderings And Time Travel...After That It Gets A Little Tricky." In his humorous paper, Murphy outlines the process he took in designing an A.I. system that can play classic Nintendo games like Super Mario Bros., Bubble Bobble, and Tetris. Not only does this program play games, it has a knack for discovering unusual methods and obscure bugs that help it succeed. Murphy explains what makes his program tick, as well as what he believes A.I. can teach us about how humans play games.

Where did you get the idea to program a computer that plays games?

I had the idea after realizing how much bigger and faster computers are than the NES. I can literally fit 32 million simulated NESes in my computer's RAM at once. I have some experience with machine learning and I know that often a very simple technique combined with

lots of data or computation can produce surprisingly good results. So I decided to try to see what amusingly simple techniques might work to automate NES game playing. We hold a satirical conference at Carnegie Mellon every year on April 1, and I always write something for it. Many of the papers are jokes. For me, the joke is usually that I really did it.

Can you briefly describe how this program learns to play?

There are two phases, one where it tries to learn what it means to win a game, called Learnfun, and then when it uses that objective to play the game,

Playfun. The first phase takes a recording of me playing the game for about a minute. It runs it through an emulator so it can see what's happening in the game's RAM as I play. It then looks in those RAMs to try to find things that look like a "score" – basically values that go up over time. This could literally be the game's score, or it could be

things like Mario's position on the screen, or what world he's made it to. Learnfun doesn't know what these things mean, and it doesn't care about what appears on the screen. It's just looking for bytes that go up in the NES memory. The second phase is all about exploration. A NES emulator can save and restore states at any frame, so Playfun uses that to explore thousands of different possibilities at each step, rewinding and trying again until it finds the one that makes the "score" go up the most. That's the "time travel" part of the paper's title.

What kind of games is Playfun good at, and what kinds of games does Playfun have trouble with?

Playfun is good at games where there's a clear notion of global progress – the score, or the level I'm on, or my position within the level – that can be observed and improved within a few seconds of gameplay. Games where you just go to the right and avoid dying are perfect, as are games like pinball where everything good gives you points. Lots of NES games are like this. Playfun is terrible at games like Zeida where you have to explore and plan ahead.

What are some of the strangest behaviors Playfun developed while playing games?

Playfun isn't designed to play games normally, just to win. This leads to some creative



strategies. In Super Mario Bros., it learned how to jump through the bottom of falling enemies, and jump off walls. In Bubble Bobble, it found that it can shoot enemies behind it if it's close enough to a wall. In Gradius, bullets fired appear in front of the player's ship, so it positions itself right up against the first boss's shield, and the bullets appear on the other side, instantly destroying the core; game time is a third of a second. It really doesn't like losing, so it often finds creative strategies to avoid having to continue the game. For example, in a hopeless Ice Hockey match, it traps one of the opponent players somewhere off-screen so that the face-off can never take place.

Would it be possible to program Playfun to beat more modern games?

Modern games are just computer programs too, but there are two big obstacles. This approach doesn't work that well unless there is some immediate notion of progress – score or position on the screen or whatever – which tells you how well you're doing at the game overall. Lots of early arcade games were like this, but modern games usually have a lot more long-term planning necessary to win, so I don't think it would work well. Second, I'd need a computer that's about 32 million times bigger than mine.

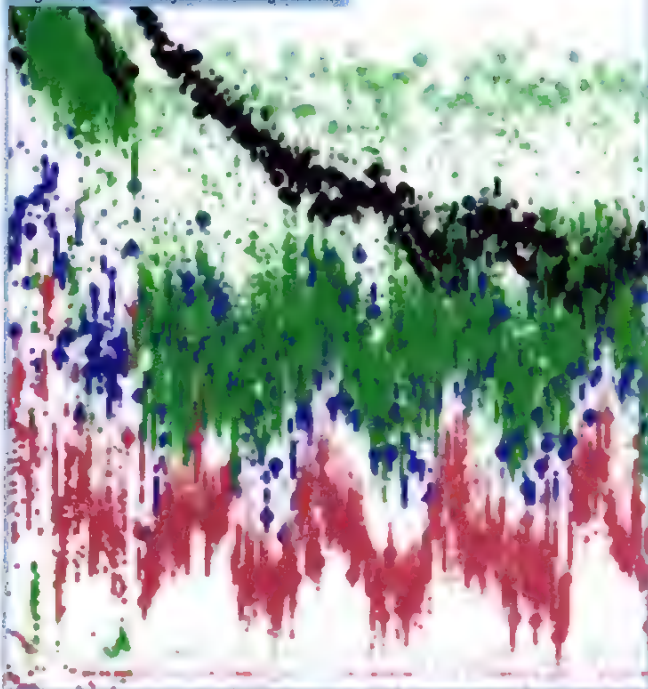
What have you learned from this project?

I think the biggest surprise was how it felt to watch simple computer programs controlling the characters. Even when the program was working very poorly, I couldn't help but identify with Mario and ascribe intent to his actions, as though there was someone really playing the game, or he was playing on his own. Even though I know exactly how the program is working and that it is ultimately very simple and stupid, it's hard to avoid seeing intelligence, like when it uses trick moves in Mario or pauses the game before losing in Tetris.

What do you think projects like this have to teach us about why and how we play games?

That's a hard one. One thing I thought a lot about was: How do humans figure out what the purpose of a game is, and how they tell whether they're winning? Most of us didn't bother reading the manuals as kids, and many games have almost no text in them. But we were pretty good at figuring out what we were supposed to do, even in the many really weird games. I think it's a really interesting question, and one of my next projects is to try to make software that can learn to play a game without any help from a human, meaning it doesn't get to watch me play first.

Murphy used graphs like this one to help diagnose and chart Playfun's learning behavior.



DIRTY LITTLE CHEATER

After letting Playfun play games for several weeks, Murphy discovered that the program had developed several odd behaviors that no human would ever exhibit. Here are some of the most unusual tricks Playfun employed while playing through Murphy's classic NES library.

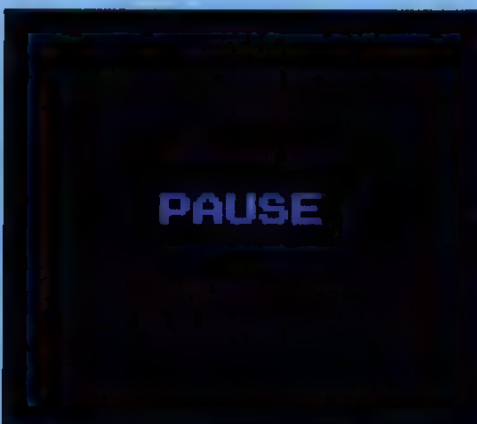
Weaving Between Ghosts

Single-screen games are more challenging for Playfun. Pac-Man is particularly challenging, because the game features no spatial scrolling to help mark Playfun's progress. Playfun knows that eating power pellets increases its score, but it is lethargic about collecting them. Playfun blindly meanders back and forth in place for several seconds before seeking out more pellets. On the other hand, Playfun is very good at avoiding ghosts. In the screen below you can see that the ghosts have advanced on Playfun's position. Instead of moving up the maze, Playfun decides to move towards the ghosts and weave between them as they pass by. Playfun survives this encounter, but comes within a hair of death.



The Neverending Game of Tetris

Like Pac-Man, Tetris is a difficult game for Playfun to understand. The program has trouble getting past the start screen; it enters the options and then backs out to the start screen several times before finally starting a game. Tetris requires a fair amount of thinking ahead, and Playfun's algorithms don't look far enough into the future. After Playfun's game begins, it starts building a giant tower to the sky. Playfun gets about three points for placing one block on top of another block, so it greedily keeps stacking blocks until the Tetris pieces reach the top of the screen. Then, just before the final piece lands and ends the game, Playfun hits the pause button. Playfun knows that losing a game is bad, so it does the only thing it can to avoid a game over screen. The game remains forever paused.



Stomping on Goombas From Below

Playfun performs best while playing straightforward platforming or action games like Super Mario Bros. or Adventure Island. In Super Mario Bros., Playfun is very eager to collect coins but often skips over power-ups. Playfun also likes to exploit a bug in Nintendo's programming that allows it to kill enemies from below. When falling down, Mario is invincible. This means that Mario can allow enemies to fall on top of him, and – if he is also falling – he will squash them. The timing for this trick is highly precise, but Playfun nails it almost every time.



Dragon vs. Mouse

We compare Skylanders: Swap Force and Disney Infinity to find out how much you can expect to pay for the toy/game hybrids

This year, Activision's billion-dollar toy/game franchise Skylanders is getting some stiff competition in the form of Disney Infinity. Both products feature collectible figurines that are incorporated into their respective games. They're each potential wallet drainers, as well. Here's a look at the price of entry for Skylanders: Swap Force and Disney Infinity. This article isn't designed to be a comprehensive look at all of the upcoming figurines and sets, but it should give you an idea of how quickly you'll want to roll your shopping cart through the games aisle.

by Jeff Cork



Skylanders: Swap Force

Skylanders: Giants introduced larger figures to Spyro's world, but this year's game mixes things up further. The title refers to the new Swap Force characters. Players can exchange the special figurines' top and bottom halves to discover new character combinations and gain access to additional in-game areas. The game is compatible with previously released Skylanders figurines, so the money you may have poured into the earlier games isn't lost, either.

The Swap Force starter pack includes the game, three figurines – two new Swap Force characters and a reposed version of Stealth Elf – and a redesigned Portal of Power that connects to your game system. The bundle costs \$74.99, and is coming to the PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Wii U, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, and 3DS.

As before, kids can play the game without purchasing any more figurines. You will, however, need to fork over cash for more figures if you want to check out the additional content such as silly hats, power ups, and extra arenas.

Skylanders are aligned to one of eight elements – fire, water, air, magic, tech, undead, earth, or life. As players progress through the game, they encounter gates that can only be opened by the appropriate type. Swap Force also has new dual-elemental gates, which require either two of the correct figures or a Swap Force combination composed of the right types.

Swap Force characters can also access special areas, depending on their bottom halves. These base types include Dig, Bounce, Sneak, Teleport, Climb, Speed, Spin, and Flight. You need at least eight of these figurines if you want to explore these zones.

As of this writing, Activision hasn't announced its final launch lineup or plans for additional power-up figures. We do know that Skylanders: Swap Force has 16 new Swap Force figurines (\$14.99 each), 16 new Skylanders figurines (\$9.99 each), 8 LightCore characters (\$12.99 each), and 16 returning characters with new poses and an exclusive upgrade (\$9.99 each). Keep in mind, that's a rough price estimate; Activision has traditionally sold characters individually and in discounted three-figure bundles.

To see everything in the game itself – barring all those additional characters – you can expect to spend about \$200. If you're looking to go all-in on Skylanders: Swap Force, it will cost you approximately \$740.



Disney Infinity

Disney is taking a two-pronged approach with Infinity. First, it's selling play sets, which are brand-specific campaigns that play like traditional licensed games. These tell the story of a particular character or set of characters in a fairly straightforward fashion. The toys in those play sets can also be used, along with other figures, in the game's toy box mode. This mode provides more of an open-ended sandbox, which includes game-creating tools, cooperative and competitive multiplayer gameplay, and more.

The Infinity starter pack includes the game, three figurines (Mr. Incredible, Jack Sparrow, and Sulley), three play sets (Monsters University, Pirates of the Caribbean, and The Incredibles), a Power Disc, and the game's base. The bundle is priced at \$74.99 for the Wii U, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and Wii.

Two additional play sets will be available at launch, adding about six to eight hours of story-based gameplay as well as a variety of props and characters for the toy box mode. The \$35 sets are based on *Cars* and *The Lone Ranger*, and they both include two figurines and a special play-set piece that fits on the Infinity base.

Another 10 Disney Infinity figurines will be on shelves at launch, for about \$13 each, as well as three-pack bundles of characters that sell for \$30.

Power discs are Pog-like chips that add gameplay modifiers or other special effects. These are sold in blind bags of two for about \$5. About 20 different discs will be sold in the first wave. If you get duplicates, the discs can be stacked to further enhance some of their powers.

Disney hasn't announced post-launch plans for the game, but characters such as Woody, Jack Skellington, and Buzz Lightyear have appeared in promotional images. Whether they'll be available later or in subsequent versions is unknown at this point.

If you buy Disney Infinity's starter pack, you can access all of the content within each of the play sets. You can get the starter set and both playsets for \$145. To see everything there is to see at launch, however, you're looking at a minimum of \$385 – and that assumes you get lucky with the power discs.



Choose Your Own Adventure

Both of these competing products look similar on a superficial level, but there are fundamental differences between them. Skylanders was first to market, but I haven't gotten a strong sense that Activision has much of a long-term plan. *Giants* felt like more of an expansion than a sequel, and *Swap Force* requires a new portal device. Here's hoping that this new tech was designed with future versions in mind. They do have a tremendous advantage over Disney Infinity in that their games have been out for several years now. The old figurines are compatible with future releases, which could keep families who have invested in the series so far loyal.

Disney Infinity's strengths are two-fold. In my talks with the game's developers and Disney, it's clear from the outset that they've been looking at this as a larger platform with at least a five-year plan. They also have access to a tremendously popular roster of heroes and worlds. Skylanders had to introduce people to a talking clam named Wham-Shell; just about everyone knows who Lightning McQueen is.

Regardless of whatever series you choose, one thing's a safe bet: This is a great time to have a discussion with your children about budgeting and saving. 🎮



THE LAST OF US

Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* is a gripping and emotionally harrowing tale of survival amidst the ruins of humanity. It also features one of the most thought-provoking endings in video game history. We recently spoke with creative director **Neil Druckmann** about his team's development philosophy.

Note: This conversation includes spoilers. *by Matt Helgeson*

The Last of Us has gotten tremendous reviews. What were your expectations? Did you think critics and the audience would respond to the game in this way?

No, the thing when you do a new IP is that you really don't know. You hope for the best and fear the worst, as clichéd as that sounds. It depends on when you asked me during production. If you had asked me a few months out, I would have said that we were going to review poorly and I don't know how it's going to sell. As we got closer to finishing it, it felt like it was all coming together. I remember going into E3, and I was telling [game director Bruce Straley], "I don't think it's going to be received well." I get *Uncharted* – it's got that summer blockbuster feel. It's got the spectacle. Here, it's got this very different, intimate feel to it. There are long stretches where there isn't much action and I don't know how gamers are going to relate to that. The thing that Bruce and I always said was, "Let's make the game we want to play. Let's do a game that isn't out there. It will be the game we want to play, and that's the idea guiding us." That's all you can really do, and hope people will get into it.

This seems to be a case where the marketing of a game can somewhat negatively impact the experience. Because of the marketing, which always showcased Joel and Ellie, it sort of gave away the fact that Tess wasn't going to be around for the long haul. That blunted the impact of that moment.

As far as spoilers, you're always concerned. With this game, I think we were good at showing less than we ever had before. Specifically with Tess, it's a hard one because we knew we were going to introduce this character early in the story and we were going to be demoing levels later where this character wasn't around, so people are probably going to guess that something bad is going to happen to Tess. What's interesting is that, originally in the story Tess took more of a villain role. Tess was betrayed by Joel and took on a mission to pursue him across the country. That storyline never worked out. The storyline shifted and Tess took on this role where she became more of a believer and she helped motivate Joel. We had a tough time understanding why Joel would take this journey – we weren't buying it. We also had a hard time buying that Tess would go on a vendetta. We could

understand her pursuing Joel a little bit, but why would she go for a year around the country? Those things were solved by saying that Tess is going to die when she gets bitten, but her dying wish to Joel is to do this one good thing – help me do this one good thing so my soul can rest because I've done all these horrible things.

Are there any other examples of characters or major storylines that changed over the course of development?

Ellie's arc originally was that she didn't kill any non-infected people until the end, when she was to kill Tess when Tess was torturing Joel. What we realized is that we had to get Ellie engaged more in the combat because when she was disengaged from the action for that long you didn't care as much. So that changed pretty early on. We decided it wasn't going to be about the first time she killed someone, it was more about this coming of age story of the impact that the horrors of violence has on her over the course of the game. That culminates with her conflict with David. That happened pretty quickly, just based on some things we realized about the story and how we had to integrate it into the gameplay.

The game isn't afraid to have a lot of "down" moments, which serve as an opportunity to both see the grandeur of the world and for Joel and Ellie's relationship to grow. Was that something you were worried about not testing well?

The thing that attracted us to this material was the idea of abandonment and nature reclaiming our domain – these quiet stretches where you could just contemplate life. You look at all these buildings we've erected and now they're gone – what does that mean? The giraffe sequence was one of those sequences we knew we wanted to do early on that didn't involve combat, but would let you contemplate some of the beauty that could still exist in this world that has these dark and horrible things happening to it.

The giraffe sequence was my favorite scene in the game. How did you come up with that idea?

I don't remember. We knew Ellie was going to be in the quarantine zone. Once we got out, we liked the idea of these wild animals roaming about. First, it was a herd of deer, then it was a zebra running through a mall. I don't know who thought of it, but this idea of giraffes kind of stuck. It's such a big, beautiful, majestic, animal. We didn't know where to put it in the game. Once we had the David stuff figured out in winter, it became the perfect place to put it. You get this great contrast, because Ellie had just

experienced some really dark stuff. The kid is gone because of the horrible things she's had to do. But then you get that glimpse where the old Ellie comes out, but that moment is fleeting. Once the herd of giraffes is gone, that part of Ellie is gone forever. At least, that's my interpretation.

The game generally kept to realistic scenarios, but it often felt that your companions, Ellie or others, were made "immune" from the rules of the world. They were able to run around and make noise without tipping off the clickers or other enemies.

AI is a super difficult thing to do. It was hard and the thing we worked the longest on in this project. I guess, to put it bluntly, it was something we couldn't perfect. We knew we wanted Ellie and the other allies to be with you during the combat sections and to take part in it. But then there are these moments [when] the pathfinding algorithm couldn't calculate fast enough and Ellie was spotted. Our first idea was, "Well, if Ellie is spotted, combat breaks out." That would have been too frustrating and you would have ended up hating Ellie instead of liking her. We just bit the bullet on this one and decided that while you're in stealth if an enemy spots Ellie or someone else it's not going to trigger combat because everything else the system is doing was worth it. There are moments when it breaks your immersion, but the pros outweighed the cons for us.

The David boss fight felt weird in the context of the rest of the game. He was so stereotypically evil compared to the rest of the game, which portrayed morality in shades of gray.

First, I'm curious if you felt that way from when you met David, or if there was a certain point where that changed?

When I met him, no. Around the time when she's in the cage and she breaks his finger, after that there were intimations of cannibalism and in the boss fight itself he felt a bit too "moustache-twirling."

It's interesting that you picked up on the arc, because he does have an arc to him. The thought process with David was: Here's a guy who's in charge of a group. So, clearly, he has to be charismatic. People have to buy into this guy and be led by this guy. There are some religious hints within the group as well, with some things that he says and some signs that are hung up

around. But with David, it's really important that he's in control of the group and is fully aware of what's happening. He never loses control. There's a mind game between David and Ellie; he's trying to win her over. He's ultimately trying to fully control her, and gets more desperate when his attempts fail. By the end, he wants to win her over by using violence and overpowering her. It's like an abusive person. The more he gets denied, the more abusive he becomes, and that is his undoing. If he didn't pursue Ellie until the end, if he didn't have to win everything, Joel and Ellie would have escaped and he'd still be alive. But he didn't, and ultimately Ellie kills him.

The game purposefully avoids a lot of exposition. We don't really learn that much about the virus itself or the events relating to how it spread. Why did you make that decision?

A couple things. One, at least in games, their approach to this genre has been about it being a government conspiracy or some alien meteor – it's something really intriguing and you're uncovering it throughout the game. That didn't seem as interesting to us, mainly because it's already been covered. The kind of stories Bruce and I are into are much more character driven than conspiracy-driven. We had to figure that stuff out for ourselves; we know how it started and how it spread and where it goes, simply because at certain points the characters uncover that and have to be able to react to that. But, from our standpoint, that's not nearly as interesting as the emotional journey the characters go on. So it's been, "What's the least amount that we have to reveal about the infection, how it started, and the government reaction to it to tell these characters' story?" If it's not necessary, no matter how cool it is, we'll leave it out.

I really liked the way the passage of time and seasons was done. Talk about how you came up with that format?

We knew early on that we wanted the game to take place over a year. Obviously, we don't have enough gameplay for a year, otherwise we'd be making a game for the next 60 years. So, then it was about when and where do you put those breaks? For a while, we had chapter titles like Uncharted, but it felt like the story didn't really need that. Then I came up with the idea of doing seasons, and the seasons represent these larger arcs for the characters. If you think of each

season, Joel and Ellie start in one state and end in another. That's why the end of each season has a really climatic moment. The other thing that structure afforded us is that it left so much to the player's imagination – not everything is spelled out.

You mentioned that the ending didn't focus test well. It was certainly striking. How did you conceive the ending and did you ever think about changing it?

The original ending when we pitched the game was a much more hopeful ending, where Joel and Ellie make it to San Francisco and that is a town run by people who are trying to restore society. Joel has killed all these doctors and lied to Ellie, and Ellie just fully buys into the lie. So, you're left with the idea that they are going to live the rest of their lives in this town. The camera pulls back and maybe everything is going to be alright for these two. I was working on writing, and it didn't feel honest anymore. After everything they've done and everything they've been through, that was letting them off a little too easy – especially for Joel. Also, Ellie has a really good bullshit detector and Joel isn't the best liar. It seems like there would be a challenge there. So, that's the scene where Ellie asks him if it's all true and he says, "Yes," and she says, "Okay." You don't know what Ellie meant when she said, "Okay." But that's the beauty of it, it is open to interpretation – and I've heard so many interpretations of what that last "okay" means. That's the best part.

"When we did focus testing, at least initially, [the ending] tested very poorly."

When we did focus testing, at least initially until some of the hospital stuff started coming together, it tested very poorly. People said it's unclear, anti-climatic, unsatisfying.... A lot of people at the company felt the same way. A few designers didn't like the ending I had in mind. But then, as time passed and they thought about it, they came around and really appreciated it. I think that happened with other people, too.

Was there ever any thought to giving the player the choice of whether or not to save Ellie at the end?

No, although after the fact Bruce and I brainstormed about it a little bit, because it came up so much in focus testing. People wished they had the choice. But, in my mind, there isn't a choice to be made – it would have broken Joel's character. There's no other choice he could make at that time – all he can do is kill that doctor and pick Ellie up. For Joel, his arc is that he's willing to make bigger and bigger sacrifices to save Ellie, and eventually that sacrifice is his life and other people's lives. By the end, he's willing to sacrifice his soul, damning mankind to save this girl. That's part of the trajectory. To give another choice would have gone against what we wanted to do.

What's the message of the ending? Is Joe ultimately the villain of his own story in that he doomed humanity to save a girl that didn't even want to be saved?

That's interesting. It's all a matter of perspective. From the Fireflies' perspective, yes, absolutely. From Joel's point of view, no. Here are these people who were willing to sacrifice a child. Sure, there's a cure or a vaccine there, but at what cost? If you think about almost every single character in the game, they have an obsession and that's the end for them. They are willing to do anything to reach that end. For Marlene, it's about saving mankind. She's ultimately willing to kill a kid to do it. For David and his group, it's surviving, and they are willing to

become cannibals to do it. For the military, it's protecting these civilians, and they are willing to oppress people to do it. Now, are any one of them the villain? It depends on who you ask and which perspective you take.

My approach for Joel has been that when you become a parent, you get a love for your kid that's illogical. You would do anything for them, no matter the cost. From someone else's perspective, he's a murdering monster. ♦



STATE OF DECAY

Zombie lovers got another dose of grim fun with *State of Decay*. Players in the open-world game split their time between managing a group of survivors (and their often conflicting personalities) and smacking corpses with shovels. We spoke with **Jeff Strain**, Undead Labs' founder and *State of Decay*'s executive producer, for more on the project. *by Jeff Cork*

State of Decay does a great job of conveying the sense that your community's survival is hanging by a thread. Was permadeath part of the game from its inception? How about the always-running clock? Absolutely, to both. Meaningful consequences to action have to be permanent ones. Where's the tension and the drama from "oops, reloading?" That's not to say there's no point to playing a game with a save feature, but it's a very different kind of game experience, and one of which there are thousands of examples already on the market. We were going for something new.

The persistent world aspect is another one of those things that hadn't been done on this scale. The game reacts to you and your decisions, but you aren't a god or a puppetmaster. You're a survivor. The world continues to turn no matter what you do, and that's a major source of the game's tension and tone.

Why did your team decide to go with a fairly loose narrative rather than a more guided experience?

We wanted to make a systems-based game and give players the tools to tell their own stories. The narrative arc was for the benefit of people who need a framework

to get going, and to give some context to the people and places around you. We love books and movies about the zombie apocalypse. But a video game is not a book or a movie. There's so much more that can be done besides telling you a story.

On the subject of guided experiences, one of the criticisms levied at the game is its cumbersome user interface. Looking at the game now, would you change anything about the menus if you could?

It's a fair criticism. There's a huge amount of information the game needs to convey about what's going on in the simulation. At the same time, we don't want to clutter the entire screen or bombard you with too much information. We also wanted you to have a sense of being thrown into the world and slowly developing mastery over your environment. Those goals competed, and while we did the best we could, we didn't resolve the conflict as well as we wanted. The good news is we have great tools with the live game, including great input from the community, to help us refine the interface in the future.

State of Decay seems simple on its surface, but there's an incredible amount of depth in

the game. Ideally, how do you balance these kinds of deeply layered systems without intimidating players? Do you think you were successful with the approach you took?

Too soon for an interface joke? Beyond the interface, though, I think we were successful. The depth of the game isn't meant to be rubbed in your face, but work behind the scenes to give you a tremendously fluid experience. When you're too aware of the systems, it detracts from being in the moment and your natural reactions. As a player, you don't need to get a tour of how skills level up, how stamina works, and how fate events interact with morale. You should just notice that if you do a thing, you get better, and that if you don't sleep every so often, you get tired more easily. Sometimes things happen that you didn't plan for, and rising to the challenge feels amazing.

People were pretty harsh regarding the graphical issues and other bugs, and then the first update didn't work as designed. How was the mood at the studio when that was all happening?

We were counting on gamers to be more concerned with innovative gameplay and the depth

of the simulation systems than anything else. Of course we did our best before launch, and we continue optimizing the game to the limits of the engine and the memory allowance. We're proud of the game's style and the world we created, and the things we were able to accomplish with color and light within the constraints of the hardware, so of course it stings a little to know the glitches are distracting from that.

The update was a different matter. That was very frustrating. The random element of the game is much stronger than people realize, so at first we got reports that some things had been fixed. One particular type of change had indeed gone in. But overall, the update did not work, and we further discovered that it was not possible to turn the fix around quickly.

We were actually lucky in the long run. Our community pulled for us, and were very willing to hear our explanations, so we all rode it out. We learned a lot about the process and put in safeguards to ensure it never happens again. Every day is a new opportunity to do better and go further.

The game's been a tremendous success for you guys. Is it safe to say we haven't heard the last of State of Decay? It is very safe to say that. ♦

Making Paperboy Better Than New

Joel Dodd is a lifelong gamer with an affection for the classic arcade units of the 1980s. Along with some friends, he spends his time restoring old cabinets to their former glory, and – in some cases – improving on the original designs. We spoke to him about his excellent restoration of a vintage Paperboy cabinet.

interview by Matt Helgeson

How did the project start?

It started with me looking for a Paperboy cabinet on Craigslist — which is the way most people source their arcade machines. I had played the game a lot as a kid. It was always one of those things where you dream of having your favorite arcade game in the house, you know? And then one came up for sale, locally, in San Diego. It had a busted monitor, and it didn't work very well. But, [inside] it was in good condition. I ran up there with a car, threw it in the back, and brought it home. So that was a little discovery for me. Especially Paperboy, cause it doesn't come up very often. You don't see many around. There were only 3,300 of them made worldwide.

Really? It seemed more popular than that.

Yeah, it was very much an arcade legend. Because it was so original, I think. But there weren't that many made. When I got it home I realized the serial number on it showed that it was number 34 of all of the cabinets made. So it was a very, very early one. It was in really good condition considering its age. I decided, "I'm going to restore this. This is going to be my favorite machine."

I started the project [by] stripping it all down. One of the biggest features of the cab, for me, is the artwork. The original Atari System 2 cabinets like that — which were Championship Sprint and Paperboy — didn't have any side art. They just had some stripes and the word "Atari" on them. They were pretty dull and uninteresting. I completely re-drew all of the artwork on the cabinet. All of the artwork you see on the side

in those photos, none of that existed originally.

So it's not necessarily a replica. It's actually an enhanced kind of restoration.

Yeah, I always liken my projects to car restorations. You've got your guys who like their cars to be factory perfect. You know a car they may have from the '60s or '50s. And then you've got your hot-rodders, who like to turn the car into a tribute to the vehicle. But they want to enhance it. Make it the best it can be. I like to take that approach with some of the restorations that I do. Especially if I feel like the game is a very special game of interest. I like to take it to a level that it wouldn't have had that kind of money and finish spent on it when it came from the factory.

You just used some of the pieces of artwork from the front of the cabinet and drew them much larger?

Pretty much. I scanned the web for as many images as I could get of the Paperboy on his bike and the newspapers. I laid them down as a foundation, and, in vector graphics, just retraced and remade the whole thing. That was about

50 hours of work, just prepping that artwork. I used to be a creative director for about 20 years in the advertisement industry, so that helped. The photo on the newspaper that the boy is throwing is actually Nolan Bushnell, [the founder of] Atari.

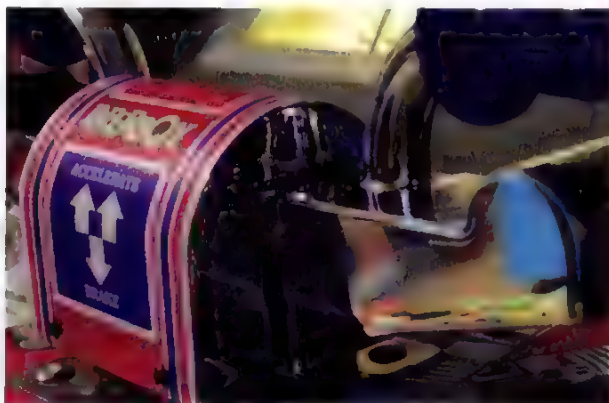
You also had some of the original guys that helped create it get involved.

I already knew the cabinet was going to be something special, but I thought, "Well, what can I do to take this over the top?" So I sat down and thought, "I wonder where these guys are now?" One of the credit screens lists a bunch of the people that worked on the game. I used that as a starting point, and started doing a lot of investigation work, trying to find all of those people that worked on the game back in 1984. I managed to track down nine of the ten people that worked on the game. I [wrote them] an email, explained to them what I was doing, and asked them, "Hey, look, if I make a little plaque with your name on it and the role that you played in the project, would you see fit to sign it and mail it back to me? I'd like to

put it on the machine as a tribute to what you guys did. You changed the face of gaming."

They were super nice. They had plenty of time for me. Ironically, they were really thankful for me doing this project and acknowledging what they'd done, which I didn't expect. Not only did I get the opportunity to contact these people but also kind of made friends with a lot of them over email and swapped some fantastic stories backward and forward about Atari back in the day....They all signed their plaques and sent them back. ♦

To follow Dodd's upcoming projects, go to his website www.facebook.com/ArcadeIcons.





The long-awaited return to Oddworld, and free-to-play hack n' slash on your Xbox 360

One of my favorite games of the '90s was *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee*. The off-kilter world, the unusual twists on puzzle gameplay, and the willingness to put players in charge of a weak and vulnerable hero all combined to make the game unlike anything I'd experienced before. Few games since then have managed to match that engaging formula. Thankfully, the upcoming remake isn't aiming to veer far from the original. **Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty** reimagines the first game in the lauded series with modern technology, but clings tightly to the original's gameplay and storyline.

"When *Abe's Oddysee* first came out, it was a huge departure from what was out there," says Just Add Water CEO Stewart Gilray. "There was no muscular marine running about with big guns. You were the everyman character, pitted against a huge corporate world." Players control Abe, a slave who flees from the meat processing plant where he works after he realizes he and his buddies are the next item on the menu. The subsequent adventure finds Abe running away from danger as often as confronting it, and slowly rescuing (or accidentally murdering) his buddies. Like all the *Oddworld* games, *Abe's Oddysee* includes none-too-subtle ecological and political overtones about environmental overuse and capitalism. Those same themes pervade the remake, *Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty*.

"One of the big differences you'll notice is how much more alive the world around you feels," Gilray says. "From the machinery in the factories to the wildlife in the deserts, there's a lot to see." The Unity 3D game engine is allowing the team to bring added movement and texture to the game world, and all the art and gameplay is being built again from the ground up, with an eye towards updating the style of the original.

The gameplay and puzzles are largely intact, but changes in the visual presentation have required tweaking certain situations. Most prominently, the original game used static backdrop scenes that you'd flip between as you moved across a level. *New 'n' Tasty* instead uses a modern scrolling style. As a result, some events that originally reset when you left the screen are now redesigned around timers. In addition, Just Add Water tweaked the AI routines, and the camera can be used as more of a storytelling tool.

The cool cinematics of the original are being redone for a modern release. "We actually enlisted the help of *Oddworld* inhabitants alum J. Mauricio Hoffmann to help us remake the cutscenes with up-to-date models and

textures," Gilray says. "Everything will be as faithful as possible to the original game, but redone from scratch."

The gameplay of *Abe's Oddysee* remains fun to this day, so the updated tech may be just the ticket to invite new players into the mix. I can't wait to rediscover *Abe's* first adventure; enough years have passed that it should be like playing for the first time when *New 'n' Tasty* comes out in several months.

If *Oddworld* is all about unusual approaches to gameplay, Signal Studios' current project delivers a far more conventional core mechanic. **Ascend: Hand of Kul**, offers classic hack n' slash action, as your hulking warrior charges into battle and smashes enemies with cudgel and blade. The surrounding game structure breaks from convention, encouraging a highly competitive fight for glory against other players, even while maintaining a mostly single-player experience.

Ascend's free-to-play structure is the first feature that draws attention – still a relative rarity on Xbox Live Arcade. During the beta, I made a point to play without any monetary upgrades, and found the experience entirely playable, if a good bit more challenging and grindy without the benefit of expensive weaponry and boosts.

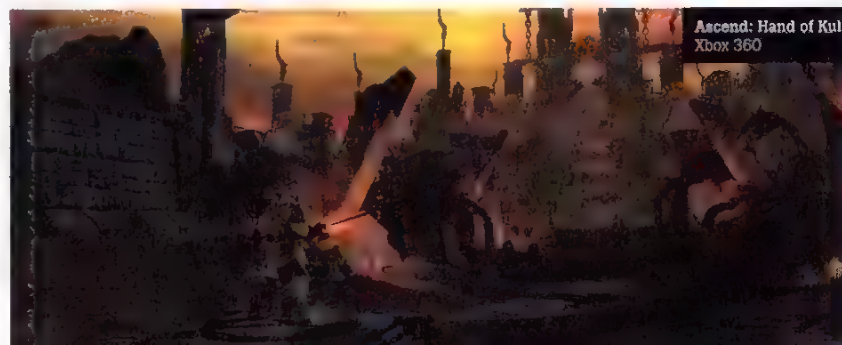
Each player controls a Caos, a towering, musclebound giant many times the size of a normal man. As the game opens, your Caos pledges service to one of three competing gods, and sets about imposing that deity's

will across a barbaric world. Fights send you charging into the midst of trolls, ogres, and more monsters with a fully customizable set of weaponry, armor, and spells at your call. Basic attack and block commands keep the action simple and easy to follow, if a good bit slower than most modern third-person action titles. I love the feeling of being a titan in a world of humans; your battles send you crashing into ramshackle huts, and the tiny humans crawl up onto your shoulders to ride you into battle. The sense of scale and power is impressive.

The surprising elements come between the fights. Reach a certain level, and your Caos warrior can ascend. Your character and equipment are claimed into the *Crusade*, becoming AI warriors that invade other players' games and attempt to take territory from them. Meanwhile, you create a new warrior, carry over a few of your best pieces of equipment from your last life, and start back into the game where you last were, albeit with a lower experience and level total than before. However, your new warrior has a permanent boost from the process, which compounds over multiple lives, letting you build up an ultra-powerful fighter. You'll need it, because it's not long before other players' AI-controlled heroes begin showing up to face you in a duel to the death.

After my first couple of ascensions, I hungered for some more depth to the core combat mechanic. Nonetheless, the seemingly endless options for gear customization and growth are a lot of fun; *Ascend* is sure to be a fascinating game to watch, as players compete for top spots on the leaderboards and guide their gladiator-style warriors to glory. The free-to-play model assures that you can try it to find out if the monetization model and action works for you. The game should be available within weeks of when you read this.

Looking for more info on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates. For more in this issue, don't miss our exclusive first looks at *Below* on p. 56 and *Galak-Z* on p. 60, or our previews of *Castle of Illusion* (p. 73), *Scrolls* (p. 74), *Crimson Dragon* (p. 76), and *World of Tanks* (p. 77). You can also read our reviews of *The Walking Dead: 400 Days* (p. 81), *Shadowrun Returns* (p. 88), *Rogue Legacy* (p. 89), *Towerfall* (p. 90), *Plants vs. Zombies 2* (p. 91), and our scores for *Magic: 2014*, *Deus Ex: The Fall*, and *Breach & Clear* on p. 94



When a Beta Isn't a Beta

by Adam Biessener



massive

Calling your game an "open beta" when the cash shop is open for business is disingenuous at best. When anyone can play your game and you're taking their money for in-game purchases, that's called "released."

The trend of releasing games in so-called open betas but with a business model indistinguishable from a live game has accelerated over the last year. Don't be fooled: This naming convention is pure marketing illusion, designed to lower player expectations while opening their wallets. That's not to say these games can't be fun — I've had some good times with *Neverwinter* and *Path of Exile* recently, for example — but this naming convention is nonsense.

Traditionally, a beta period serves as a testing bed for a feature-complete game to make sure that the code can survive all the unexpected ways players beat on it. For online games, betas also allow the team to put their infrastructure to the test in something approaching a live environment to make sure that they don't crumble once thousands of players start connecting in waves. Balancing can swing wildly from day to day, bugs run rampant, and servers crash without warning.

If everything is going according to plan, the beta period is complete when the developer has reasonable confidence that the game is ready for prime time. The game launches, and the developer starts asking for money. Players have the expectation that the game they're paying money for will be available, functional, and fun.

Opening a cash shop during a beta is a naked attempt by developers to have the best of both worlds: the income from a live game with a blanket excuse for bugs, balancing problems, and other issues that the moniker traditionally implies. But once you're taking players' money for XP boosts and extra drops, you can't argue

in good faith that you don't owe them a solid entertainment experience in return.

On the other hand, games that use Minecraft-like models such as Steam's Early Access program (where a paid pre-order grants access to early, in-development versions of the game) don't evoke the same reaction. Those are clearly communicated — as unfinished, generally have specific launch dates in sight, and players get the full game for their money whenever it comes out.

Introversion's sandbox simulation *Prison Architect* is an example of a paid pre-release version done right. Anyone who purchases *Prison Architect* at its \$30 price point gets access to the current alpha version of the game as well as the frequent updates the developers have been rolling out. Since it launched, the game has evolved from a directionless sandbox with buggy prisoners and a non-functional tech tree to a more fully-featured sim including prison jobs, riot cops, CCTV, and more. Though it has a long way to go to be considered complete, *Prison Architect* has already changed for the better as feedback from customers has guided Introversion's development. Crucially, nobody

is under any illusions about what they're getting out of their \$30: They know they're supporting an early game that sounds promising and could pan out, plus getting the chance to tell the developers what they think while there's still time for that to matter.

Neverwinter, on the other hand, is a prime example of an open beta called such solely to manage consumer expectations. A month or so ahead of being released, Perfect World Entertainment opens up the *Neverwinter* beta to the public with no discernible intentions of seeking gameplay feedback, stress-testing data, or other pre-release necessities. Progress has no threat of being wiped out, and the monetization scheme is in full force. I even like *Neverwinter* as a game, but I fail to see how anyone can claim with a straight face that this beta period had any purpose beyond deflecting criticism. Saying "but it's still a beta!" after rolling back character states by a day or more because you didn't fix an auction house exploit, as Perfect World did with *Neverwinter*, doesn't hold water when you're taking money for experience boosts and fancy purple swords.

I don't have any issues with any publisher trying to make a buck off a high-quality free-to-play game like *Neverwinter* however it can. Besides, running online games is hard, and few companies exist in that space for long without any black marks like *Neverwinter*'s auction house exploit on their records. All I ask is that nobody spills their drink on my leg and tries to tell me it's raining. ♦

interview



Return to Wasteland

As the founder of Interplay, Brian Fargo created franchises such as Bard's Tale and Fallout. Now, thanks to a successful Kickstarter campaign, he's returning to his beloved Wasteland series.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Wasteland 2 is a project that you have wanted to do for not just years, but decades.

It's true – 20 years, no joke, I've been wanting to make this game. Certainly Fallout scratched that itch, but I've been a man without a post-apocalyptic world for 10 years. I've been wanting to get back to [Wasteland], so I'm very fortunate.

Did it get to the point where you felt that it was never going to happen through a traditional game industry route?

I was feeling like there weren't a lot of options. I did a keynote at GDC in China at the end of 2011 about role-playing games. It was, to some degree, about the death of the narrative role-playing game, because all anybody could talk about was the free-to-play model. It was about the friction of telling a story versus trying to get money out of your pocket. I wasn't getting anywhere with anybody. So, when I saw Tim [Schafer of Double Fine] go live on Kickstarter, I was obviously watching like everyone. I thought, "Well, this would be great. Maybe this is it."

Then I started getting [text] messages: "Hey Brian, here's your chance." It was just like...I have to do it. I dared to dream that this was the chance. Even though it's taken a long time, I guess I have to look at it like this: I'm glad the game is being made this way. This is the best possible scenario for me to do this product because I can do something where I'm not having to listen to some other people's vision of what it is. I'm able to make this game out of the vision of how I want to see it done.

Kickstarter has been a boon for a lot of classic franchises. There appears to be a lot more demand for some of these franchises than the publishing industry thought. I was always telling publishers [that] there was not a country in the world that I didn't go to – Korea, Singapore, China, France, Germany, UK, America – where people didn't say, "What about Wasteland? When are you going to do another Wasteland?" It was constant! So, when I [went] to publishers and said, "Look! There's interest there! I get it every time. There's got to be a way to figure something out," that still wasn't enough to leverage it. That's what people love about Kickstarter, because there's a group of people like me who want to make something, a particular game or whatever it is. Then, there are fans who want that thing. There used to be these gatekeepers in between that stopped us. It could have been retail or the publishers with the money. [Kickstarter] has cleared those two obstacles out of the way and allows us to have this direct communication.

In designing Wasteland 2, how do you decide which are the timeless elements of the game and which can be left out?

You have to recognize that there are some really positive things and there are some things we would never do any more. We're not going to make you get out graph paper and map. We need to focus on the good bits and avoid anything that would feel like drudgery today. In the original Bard's Tale, you could only save the game if you were in the city; you couldn't save in the dungeon. I like the fact that it creates a lot of tension – you're three hours in and, if you go too far and die, you've just lost three hours. That's wonderful tension, but in reality people would not accept that. However, we know they like tactical combat. XCOM was a great example of that, so we're taking on those aspects of it. We know they love tactical combat, we know they love moral dilemmas, we know they like good writing, and we know they love reactivity. So we're taking all those bits that we know are sort of universal and putting them together. We're not old school – we're not pretending like we're back in time and that everything that works worked then.

Your initial Kickstarter goal was \$900,000. You raised over \$3 million. Ubisoft probably spends \$3 million on lunch making an Assassin's Creed game.

I know that Blizzard spends \$1.7 million a minute on their cutscenes. So I'm not even up to two minutes of cutscenes for the opening film. We're in this no man's land between the indie developer that has one person or three people and the big stuff, the triple A. We've had to be very clever to make [this] game. Because the scope and scale of this game is going to surprise people. How do we put this much content together? Unity [engine] was a big part of it, especially the Unity asset store. If we need a gas station, do we really need to model another gas station? We're [also] able to reuse assets from our past. We even crowd-sourced the voicework on sites like VoiceBunny. This is a big game for a really small budget. People will be blown away at how much there is.

Once you realized you were going to bring in over three times the funding that you asked for, did the scope of the game change?

Completely. I think most titles that overfund have this in common. Whatever game you were going to make for the initial amount is gone. You immediately scope up based upon the new money, and that's to be expected. That's what that money is for. People are giving you more money to add more music, add more portraits, add more gameplay, add more animations – that's why they're giving you the funds. You're obligated to do so.

A game may not always end up being what the audiences expected. With Kickstarter, there could be an even greater sense of

entitlement with backers. How do you manage expectations?

Well, wherever you get money from there's going to be strings attached. But I wouldn't swap it for anything. It sort of goes with [the territory], but at least with the backers that give us the money, their objectives are 100-percent in line with ours – which is just make this a great game. Sometimes, if you take money from outside sources, you're not always in sync. All these other things come into play that remove the purity of the conversation of putting the game together.

Double Fine has had difficulty staying on budget for its first Kickstarter game, Broken Age. How do you make sure you keep that in order?

We have none of those issues, thankfully. We're not out of money and we're not compromising or shipping any less of a title. We're shipping more of a title, in fact. We're only working on one game. This is it, except for the design team that's doing writing on Torment, but that doesn't affect my production staff. I have to push on coming up with interesting things. The little moments, for me, are just as important as the big ones. I'll chase it all the way down the rabbit hole if I think there's some sort of interesting chain of events that I think the players will appreciate or get a kick out of. But at the same time I have to wear my hat that says, "Get this thing done, Brian. Don't let it outreach your [budget]." That's your job as a producer; you have to figure out where that balance is.

You've been critical of a lot of the modern game publishing industry. Do you have any desire to go back to the traditional publisher/developer relationship?

I hope not. I love what we're doing right now.

You've signed a retail distribution deal with Deep Silver. Can you talk about how that partnership came to be?

A large part of the Kickstarter rewards is delivering physical goods. That sinks a lot of Kickstarters. We have to pick, pack, and ship 20,000 units to people all around the world. It's no trivial matter. I was always going to work with somebody who did that for a living. What better than to work with a company that already does that for a living in the games business? But to make it doubly better is that I'm already making a boxed copy of the game that's going to go to 20,000 people. There's still a lot of people who buy their products at retail. [Deep Silver] can help us with the manufacturing and they're going to help finance it – which helps me put more money into the game. It's going to open it up to a whole bunch of new players since it's going to be on the retail shelf. We are still in 100 percent creative control of our product. I haven't had a single conversation with them where they asked me what's in the game. It's just, "Let me know when you're done, Brian." ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1983
PLAYING AROUND
Fargo forms his development studio Interplay, which would go on to achieve legendary status in the industry

1993
A CAPTIVATING TALE
Interplay releases Fargo's first major work, the groundbreaking role-playing game The Bard's Tale

1995
NOTHING TO WASTE
Fargo releases the post-apocalyptic RPG Wasteland, a game that would come to define his career

1992
THE FIRST SNOWFALL
Interplay releases RPM Racing, the first game developed by Silicon & Synapse, the studio that would eventually become Blizzard

1995
RISE OF THE SHOOTER
Parallax Software partners with Interplay to release the popular first-person flight shooter Descent. Parallax would eventually evolve into Volition Software and create Saints Row

1997
THE GOLDEN AGE
With the release of Baldur's Gate, Interplay enters its golden age, producing classics like Fallout, Shattered Steel, Planescape: Torment, and Icewind Dale

1998
BIG BUSINESS
Faced with debt problems and in need of capital, Interplay launches an initial public offering, with a majority of stock being bought by Titus Software

2000
SAYING GOODBYE
After a falling out with Titus Software, Fargo leaves the company he founded

2002
THE RETURN
Fargo forms a new development studio, inExile Entertainment

gear



THE OUYA REVIEW

by Andrew Reiner

What's in the Box

- Ouya game console
- Wireless controller
- Power adapter
- HDMI cable
- Two AA batteries

One day after Ouya reached its Kickstarter goal of \$950,000, founder Julie Uhrman fired a shot at its competitors in the console business. "Do you realize what you've done?" she asked Ouya's pledgers in a Kickstarter update, "You proved consoles aren't dead. You shocked the world. And us!"

In the 31 days Ouya sought support on Kickstarter, it generated an impressive \$8,596,474 in funding from 63,416 people. To purchase the console and a controller, people only needed to pledge \$99, yet 12 backers paid more than \$10,000 to help this upstart company get off the ground.

In the days that followed, developers jumped at the opportunity to create games for this Android-powered console. Established publishing houses like Square Enix and Sega added Ouya to their development slates, as did indie developers Airtight Games and Minority Media. Over 1,200 "developer units" of Ouya were shipped to game makers across the globe. All eyes were on Ouya.

The months that followed were not so kind to this unique console. A handful of rival Android-based systems were announced in the months after Ouya, giving consumers the choice between GameStick, GamePop, Project M.O.J.O., and Nvidia's Project Shield.

When Ouya's first batch of units was shipped to backers, the hope of an affordable alternative to Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Wii U began to look more like wishful thinking. Complaints about the controller's buttons sticking and the user interface being a mess spread across social networks. Game performance also came under fire, especially for older titles that had already been released on Android-based phones and tablets.

Uhrman was quick to put out the fires, saying the retail versions of the controller and new UI updates would be improved over what early adopters experienced.

Those retail versions are now readily available. Backed by strong developer support and a game library boasting over 200 different titles, Ouya's journey to store shelves is complete.

Retailing for just \$99, is Ouya a game-changing system that can give the console giants a run for their money? No. It's an intriguing entry in the console market, but we have a lot of misgivings about the system as it stands now.

THE SYSTEM

Standing at just over three inches in height, the Ouya console doesn't take up much entertainment center real estate, looking more like a brushed-metal Rubik's Cube than a game system. Without a light on the front faceplate, you may not even know your system is on unless you peer over and look at the barely visible white light on its black top. The screws on the surface give it a slightly cheap look, but are visible for a reason: This console is open to hackers. As Ouya's Kickstarter page highlights: "It's easy to root (and rooting won't void your warranty). Everything opens with standard screws. Hardware hackers can create their own peripherals, and connect via USB or Bluetooth."

Setting up the console is as easy as plugging in a power supply, attaching an HDMI cord, and hitting the power button. The boot sequence is relatively quick, taking no more than 30 seconds to reach the welcome screen the first time (and between three to ten seconds on each subsequent startup).

After creating an account and downloading a small update (mine updated in just over a minute), the Ouya title screen appears. Unlike today's consoles, there are no ads or dancing characters on this screen. It's sleek and offers just four options: Play, Discover, Create, and Manage. For most people, only the first two options matter. Create is for people who want to design their own Ouya games. Manage brings up account and network information.

Discover is the first stop anyone should make. When this menu is entered, a grid of games appears, allowing players to browse through a variety of categories, such as "Ouya Exclusives," and "Trending



Final Fantasy III

Now," and 19 different genre listings. The marketplace is easy to navigate, although an alphabetical option would have been nice. Finding a specific game in a genre category is similar to playing Where's Waldo. The search function is a mess that takes trial and error to figure out, but can help in locating software.

The Ouya is all about downloading games. You won't find a friends list, achievements, messages, or any social functions to explore. Without system-wide communications, online multiplayer is nowhere to be found at this point, yet devs can include this functionality in their games should they choose to do so. Ouya hopes to beef up the online functionality through an update later in the year. For now, the only interactions most gamers will use are download and play.

After selecting a game from the Discover section, a static screen appears,

offering screenshots, a small two to three sentence blurb, and some nitty-gritty details. Although all Ouya games offer a free demo, most of them push players to buy a full version. Oddly, the price of the full game is not listed on the product page. You won't know the cost until you boot up the game and locate the information within its menus.

Free downloads can be queued up easily, and progress bars for each title are displayed on the main Discover page.

All of the games appear in the "Play" menu, which organizes the most recently played games first — a design decision that looks like a random splattering of titles. When dozens of games are downloaded (something most people will do quickly), navigating this menu can be a chore. Rather than filling the entire screen with games, Ouya opted for a clean design and just two rows, which forces the user to scroll.

When the cursor is placed over a title it will either say "play" or "update," should a new patch be available. Games can be deleted as quickly as they were downloaded.

Although the marketplace is an unorganized mess, whenever I visited it, I downloaded a handful of games within a matter of minutes. Part of what makes the Ouya fun is testing out new titles that I've never heard of. The market is filled with them. Although Sonic the Hedgehog 4 and Final Fantasy III are front and center in the Discover section, the majority of the games on Ouya come from indie developers or are ports from previously released Android tablet and phone games.

Ouya Console Specifications

- Case: Sand-blasted aluminum and black plastic
- CPU: Nvidia Tegra 3, 1.7Ghz Quad-Core ARM A9 Chip
- Connectivity: Wi-Fi (802.11 b/g/n), Ethernet port, and Bluetooth
- Memory: 1GB RAM
- Storage: 8GB internal flash storage (expandable via USB port)
- OS: Android 4.1.2
- USB: One USB 2.0 port, One Micro USB port
- Output: HDMI
- Dimensions: 75mm x 75mm x 82mm (2.9" x 2.9" x 3.2")
- Weight: 300g (10.5 oz)

Ouya Wireless Controller Specifications

- Case: Sand-blasted aluminum and black plastic
- Connectivity: Bluetooth
- Dimensions: 163mm x 109mm x 53.5mm (6.4" x 4.2" x 2.1")
- Weight: 275g (9.7 oz)



Final Fantasy III

THE CONTROLLER

Xbox 360 owners should have no problems adapting to Ouya's controller, which has staggered analog sticks, a d-pad, four face buttons, two pressure-sensitive triggers, and two shoulder buttons. The controller fits comfortably into the hands, but its functionality isn't on the same level. Face buttons frequently stick into the faceplate. Within a matter of seconds, I can get all four of them stuck. The analog sticks aren't concave and their material, while feeling rough to the touch, isn't conducive to keeping the thumbs planted. The Ouya controller features a touchpad that

activates instantly when touched, but is finicky, rarely used in any games, and is more of a nuisance than anything.

Developers appear to be confused by Ouya's home button. Some devs are using the home button to pause the game, but a startling number of others are assigning this function to the "B" button. Yes, a face button.

Savvy players avoid using the Ouya controller, and are instead relying on synced PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 controllers. Both work remarkably well with Ouya – much better than the native controller.

THE GAMES & APPS

Out of all the Ouya games I played (and I tried most of them), only one is a must-play: Towerfall (see pg. 92 for a review). This great competitive offline multiplayer game tests your twitch reflexes just as much as it pushes you to concoct strategies on the fly.

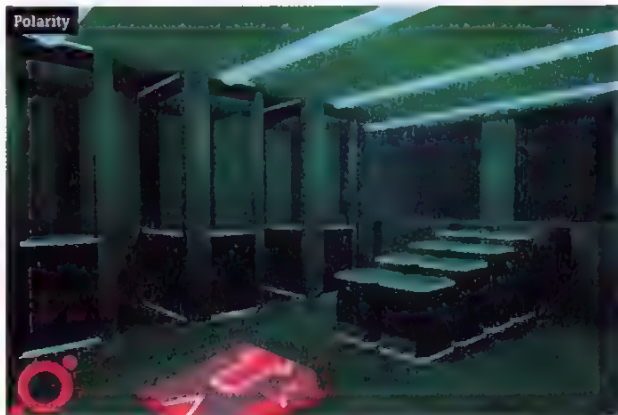
That's not to say Ouya only has one enjoyable game. Ports of *Little Dew*, *Knightmare Tower*, *You Don't Know Jack*, *Deep Dungeons of Doom*, and *Super Crate Box* are all quite good, and should be played if you haven't already done so. The Ouya exclusive title *Polarity*, a *Portal*-esque first person puzzle/adventure game, pumps out excellently crafted challenge rooms using blue and red color spectrums.

The Amazing Frog? and *No Brakes Valet* are also worth a look for hilarity's sake. Both titles are crudely made, drawing laughs from the lack of production values in the animations and gameplay direction.

Three of the top "trending" apps on Ouya are emulators for Super Nintendo, Nintendo 64, and PlayStation. At this point, it's pretty clear that a significant portion of the Ouya audience is using this device primarily to run emulators on their TVs. Legality aside, it's a selling point to a small subset of hardcore gamers, but hardly a model for sustained success in the console business.



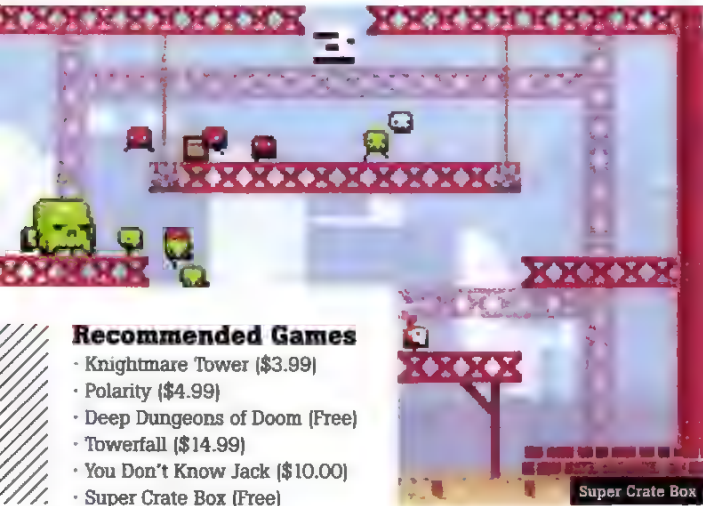
Knightmare Tower



Polarity



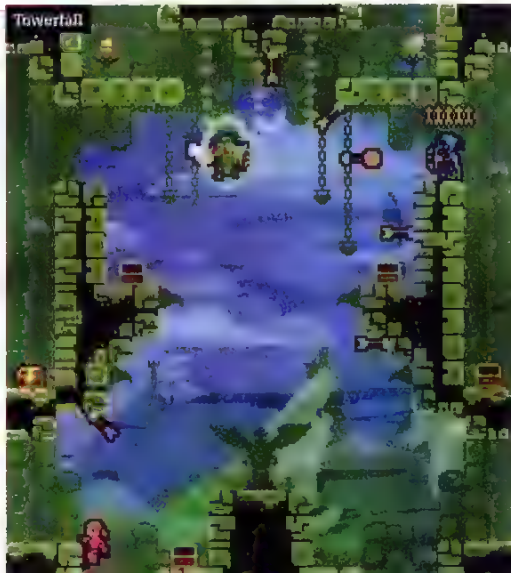
The Amazing Frog?



Super Crate Box

Recommended Games

- *Knightmare Tower* (\$3.99)
- *Polarity* (\$4.99)
- *Deep Dungeons of Doom* (Free)
- *Towerfall* (\$14.99)
- *You Don't Know Jack* (\$10.00)
- *Super Crate Box* (Free)



Towerfall

THE VERDICT

The Ouya is an interesting experiment, however there's a difference between an experiment and a successful console. Kickstarter backers had big dreams for Ouya, and right now many of those dreams are unfulfilled. Its strengths are its low price point and open architecture, which may allow it to be a hotbed of innovation in the future. That isn't the case today. The system offers only a few quality original titles, no social features, and a subpar controller. As of now, Ouya isn't a serious contender in the console market.

LIMITED APPEAL ■■■■■

\$99.99 | ouya.tv



The Good

CAPCOM'S Strider is coming back for both current- and next-gen consoles (as well as PC) in early 2014. The new title retains the series' 2D action, and in Metroidvania style, you explore a large map with the help of upgradable abilities that unlock new parts of the world.

The Bad



MICROSOFT

says the Xbox One won't ship with a headset (it would rather you use the Kinect instead), and although you can still use your Xbox 360 headset with the upcoming system, you'll have to get an adapter to do so. No word on how much the adapter itself might cost, but we're willing to bet it's not free.

The Ugly



EA SPORTS and the NCAA are severing their licensing relationship. EA Sports will continue making a college football title — starting with College Football 15 for the next-gen systems in 2014 — using the Collegiate Licensing Company to garner the rights to schools, bowls, trophies (including the Heisman), conferences, etc. for the next three years in a non-exclusive deal. Currently both EA Sports and NCAA are embroiled in multiple lawsuits from former collegiate athletes who protest their likeness being used without compensation.

g-b-u-r
THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

Quotable

"In none of [the discussions between the government and Microsoft] did Microsoft provide or agree to provide any government with direct access to user content or the ability to break our encryption."

➤ **Brad Smith**, Microsoft general counsel and executive vice president, responds to a report by *The Guardian* that the company handed over Outlook, SkyDrive, and Skype data to the NSA's PRISM spy program.

Why I'm Still Not Sold on Xbox One



by Jeff Morschicko, Senior Associate Editor

A

fter enduring no end of criticism during E3 for its always-online and used-game restrictions, Microsoft reversed course, adopting the offline-friendly policies Sony has planned for the PlayStation 4. While Microsoft's change of heart eliminates a key advantage of its rival, the Xbox One and PS4 are still very different gaming consoles, and right now I'm still not convinced I need to buy the former.

For starters, there's the Xbox One's cost. A \$499 price tag didn't seem unreasonable when Microsoft announced it during its E3 press conference, but when Sony revealed that the PS4 costs \$399 just a few hours later, it raised some valid concerns among gamers. Despite Don Mattrick's declaration that the Xbox One

provides "thousands of dollars of value" to gamers, the company hasn't given any indication of where that value supposedly comes from (and Mattrick has since left Microsoft to work for Zynga). Simply saying something doesn't make it true, and the unique Xbox One features that Microsoft has shared thus far haven't convinced me to shell out the extra cash.

Most speculation points to the upgraded Kinect camera as being the cause of Xbox One's higher price tag, but support for the peripheral was virtually nonexistent at the show; the most impressive use of the camera we saw was Harmonix's *Fantasia: Music Evolved*, which works just fine with the 360's Kinect. I'm not particularly thrilled about having to set up a mandatory camera in my living room just to play games, and the fact that I have to pay an extra hundred dollars for the privilege isn't sweetening the deal. Most developers failed to come up with engaging uses for Kinect in core games this generation, and despite the impressive technological advancements the new camera features, so far Microsoft hasn't shown any games to convince me that the next-gen Kinect experience will be any different.

Cloud computing is another aspect of the Xbox One that has unproven benefits to players. Microsoft has been championing the importance of cloud computing, and recently invested \$700 million in its Iowa-based server farm. That certainly sounds impressive, but Microsoft still hasn't demonstrated how "the cloud" is going to make my gaming experiences better. In late June, Respawn Entertainment stated that Microsoft's Azure cloud will provide dedicated servers for *Titanfall* and additional server CPU for more physics and AI. These aspects have yet to be demonstrated to the public, and sound more like incremental improvements than the next-gen game changers Microsoft's "infinite power of the cloud" hyperbole promises. *Forza 5*'s "Drivatar" feature, which creates an AI racer based on your driving habits that competes against other players while you're offline, sounds more innovative. However, we won't know how much of an impact it will have on *Forza 5* until the game is out. Now that Xbox One can be used as an offline console, I wonder how other developers' plans for cloud computing will be affected. Will they be less likely to rely on the cloud knowing offline gamers won't have access to it?

Microsoft's unveiling of Xbox One was criticized for focusing too much on television, sports, and other nongaming entertainment. The company's strong title line-up at E3 proved it can still land big exclusives, but the fact remains that many of the console's features are geared towards a nongaming audience. Microsoft has dedicated 3GB of Xbox One's 8GB RAM to its entertainment functionalities. As someone who has no interest in watching television on my gaming console or pulling up

a web browser on my screen when I'm stuck in a game, these features are an unnecessary yet mandatory drain on the system's resources.

Like most players who own multiple current-gen systems, I gravitate toward Xbox 360 for multiplayer-focused games due to the superiority of Xbox Live. However, Microsoft's inexplicable decision to not package a headset with Xbox One makes me question the quality of voice chat on the system, when the majority of players will rely on Kinect to broadcast their voice – along with their music, barking dogs, and any other ambient noises in their living rooms – during multiplayer matches. Sony stunted its online community this generation by not including a headset with the PS3, and is rectifying that problem by including one with the PS4. Why Microsoft is eager to learn that lesson for itself is beyond me, but if Sony can improve the quality of PSN's social and messaging functions – which early video demonstrations suggest it has – we may witness a sea change in where gamers go for online multiplayer.

Microsoft's one major saving grace has been locking up triple-A exclusives for Xbox One, such as *Titanfall* and *Dead Rising 3*. However, its indie lineup remains practically nonexistent at this point. In late July, we learned Microsoft will finally allow developers to self-publish downloadable games. This is great news for indie developers and gamers alike, but we've still seen very few indie games for Xbox One, aside from a new version of *Minecraft*, and *Capybara's Below* (check out our first look on page 56). In comparison, Sony boasted eight upcoming indie games that are debuting exclusively on PlayStation 4 at this year's E3, and had 33 playable indie games on the show floor. The role indie games play in the industry will only grow more important in the next generation of systems, and at this point Microsoft has a lot of ground to make up and fences to mend.

The issues I've outlined aren't necessarily deal breakers; like many gamers, I'm predisposed to buying new hardware if it means I can have a better gaming experience, and I'll likely end up getting an Xbox One eventually despite my current reservations. However, as a consumer, I still expect Microsoft to make an effective case for why I should buy its system. Microsoft changed my mind on SmartGlass during this year's E3 with demos that showed how the technology adds real gaming value to titles like *Dead Rising 3* and *The Division*. So far, the company hasn't provided similarly convincing examples of some of Xbox One's core features, and hasn't justified why consumers should pay an extra \$100 more than the PS4. While some audiences may already be sold on Kinect and the console's support for television programming, I'll remain on the sidelines until Microsoft shows me some concrete examples of why its vision of the future of gaming is the right one. ◀

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

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



03
Rayman Legends



04.1



04.2



06

17
Grand Theft Auto V



10
NHL 14



24
Scribblenauts Unmasked:
A DC Comics Adventure



15
The Wonderful 101



27

September

03 New Releases

- Atelier Meruru Plus: The Apprentice of Arland (Vita)
- Diablo III (PS3, 360)
- Dead or Alive 5 Ultimate (PS3, 360)
- Rayman Legends (Wii U, PS3, 360, Vita)
- Total War: Rome II (PC)
- Valhalla Knights 3 (Vita)

04.1 Villains Month

DC Comics' rogues gallery is in the spotlight this month. A different villain appears on the cover of each of the New 52 books. Each cover features a 3D motion image on the front and back. The stories tie into a new "Forever Evil" story arc.

04.2 The Star Wars

George Lucas' rough draft of Star Wars was different than the vision that ended up in theaters. Dark Horse Comics and LucasFilm are bringing this original vision to comic books, starting today. What can you expect? Luke Skywalker is a Jedi general who helps a young Annikin Starkiller find his place in the galaxy far, far away.

06 Riding the Sequel Train

If you loved *Pitch Black*, but thought *The Chronicles of Riddick* went off the rails, you'll be pleased to hear that today's theatrical release, *Riddick*, brings the series back to the

blood-soaked darkness. From what we can tell, this film is about idiots with flashlights waiting to see who kills them first: Riddick or giant bats. With another *xx* and *Fast and the Furious* film in pre-production, odds are we should be seeing Vin Diesel in a *Pacific* sequel any day now.

08 Boardwalk Empire Returns

September is jam-packed with television premieres. HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*, a favorite of the Game Informer staff, kicks off its fourth season today. Other GI favorite return dates: *Bones* (Sept 16), *New Girl* (Sept 17), and *Eastbound & Down* (Sept 29).

10 New Releases

- Killzone: Mercenary (Vita)
- Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix (PS3)
- NHL 14 (PS3, 360)
- Puppeteer (PS3)
- Young Justice: Legacy (Wii U, PS3, 360, PC, 3DS)

14 Boston Festival of Indie Games

Held at Boston's MIT Stratton Student Center and Johnson Athletic Center, this summit focuses on indie video games, tabletop games, location-based games, and live role-playing games.

15 New Releases

- The Wonderful 101 (Wii U)

17 New Releases

- Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs 2 (DS)
- Deadfall Adventures (360)
- Grand Theft Auto V (PS3, 360)
- MechWarrior Online (PC)

19 Tokyo Game Show

Over 200,000 people are expected to attend this year's Tokyo Game Show event, running from September 19-22. Microsoft and Sony will likely debut new Japanese games running on the Xbox One and PlayStation 4. We're crossing our fingers for a Mistwalker announcement.

24 New Releases

- Allen Rage (PC)
- Armored Core: Verdict Day
- FIFA 14 (PS3, 360, Wii, Vita)
- Scribblenauts Unmasked: A DC Comics Adventure (Wii U, 3DS, PC)
- Ys: Memories of Celceta (Vita)

27 Food Humor

We have no idea what the sequel *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs 2* is about. It looks like an animated list of food puns. Shrimpanzees, mosquito-toast, tacodile, and watermelephant are a few of the groan-inducing jokes coming your way. Anyone can do this. Here we go: cantelope, moosse... uh...chicken? No. Hmmm. We're in way over our heads here. You win this round, Meatball writers.



**Dragon Age:
Inquisition**

CREATING ORDER FROM CHAOS

by Joe Juba

- » PLATFORM
PlayStation 4 • Xbox One
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC
- » STYLE
1-Player Role-Playing
- » PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts
- » DEVELOPER
BioWare
- » RELEASE
Fall 2014

When talking about a new iteration in a popular series, developers focus almost exclusively on new features and additions. During our visit to BioWare's Edmonton studio, the team behind *Dragon Age: Inquisition* eagerly highlights the innovations and improved technology driving the game. However, almost every discussion of something new is couched in something familiar from BioWare's previous titles – tactical combat, exploration, meaningful choice – reflecting the studio's desire to blend its proven concepts with new gameplay opportunities. Though it is influenced by the past, *Inquisition* is anything but a step backward. BioWare is taking the series toward a new generation of role-playing while also bringing it closer to its roots.

LOOKING TO THE PAST

When *Dragon Age: Origins* launched in 2009, it was met with critical acclaim and commercial success. *Dragon Age II* followed only a year and a half later, changing many of the core elements from *Origins*. An action-oriented combat system replaced the pause-and-play mechanics of its predecessor, and the framed narrative gave players fewer opportunities to make impactful choices. Being different is not the same as being bad, but some fans and critics regard *Dragon Age II* as a disappointment due to these departures.

The team at BioWare doesn't discredit those opinions, but takes a circumspect view of what each of the previous installments have contributed to the growing *Dragon Age* franchise. "We've heard a lot of feedback, positive and negative, on both of the previous games," says executive producer Mark Darrah. "You have to look at both sides of that. People really like the responsiveness of *Dragon Age II*, but they didn't like a lot of the other things: the encounter design, the lack of a more tactical gameplay aspect – which they felt they had in *Dragon Age: Origins* and then lost."

Dragon Age: Inquisition addresses many of these issues, but not because the team is scrambling to respond to complaints. "There's no need to be apologetic about *Dragon Age II*," says creative director Mike Laidlaw. "A lot of the decisions we're making are about *Dragon Age* and what this generation of RPGs will look like." With a future that includes new hardware and DICE's Frostbite 3 engine, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is BioWare's next big RPG, and a reflection of what to expect from the studio in the years to come.



WORLD IN CHAOS

As *Inquisition* opens, the land of Thedas is in disorder. The Chantry and the mages are at war. The Seekers of Truth and the Templars have both broken away from Chantry rule. Ferelden, the setting for *Dragon Age: Origins*, is still recovering from the darkspawn Blight that ended over 10 years prior. In the west, the nation of Orlais is embroiled in civil war. In short, just about every group with the power and authority to confront evil is pre-occupied – and then the sky opens up and demons start pouring out.

The tear in the sky links the real world to the Fade, where all magic and demons originate. Whereas

demons usually need a mage host in order to enter the world, the rip in the veil means that they can cross the barrier freely. The tear in the sky isn't the only location where this is happening. Demons and abominations are running free, and no one seems able to put their differences aside to confront the threat.

"In the wake of that breach opening up, with all of the nations of the south and the major organizations – the church, the Templars, the mages – all being rendered somewhat impotent by their infighting, it starts to emerge that there is a suspicious level of chaos in anticipation of this event," Laidlaw says.

Who could orchestrate such a plan? What purpose

does it serve? Why did it succeed? To answer these troubling questions, players reinstitute the Inquisition, an ancient organization that answers to no outside power. Setting its sights on all involved parties – the Chantry, the Grey Wardens, the Orlesians – the Inquisition puts aside petty politics and extracts answers. Of course, once you get to the bottom of the mystery, you still need to address the issue of the breach.

"With *Inquisition*, it's about looking into what conspiracies happen, what kind of dastardly deeds could occur, when people are weak and naturally torn apart," Laidlaw says. "What is the nature of someone who could rise above that?"

The Multiplayer Mystery

Role-playing games embody the single-player experience, allowing players to craft personal stories over the course of dozens of hours. That style of gameplay does not traditionally mesh with a multiplayer mode, but *Mass Effect 3* demonstrated that it can be accomplished with great success. BioWare won't directly confirm or deny whether *Inquisition* has a multiplayer component, but when faced with the question, team members immediately turn to praising *Mass Effect 3*'s approach. "It was surprising how well it was received in *Mass Effect*, and we were really happy with how that worked out," says creative director Mike Laidlaw. "The team knocked it out of the park."



Varric and Cassandra are traveling together after the events of *Dragon Age II*

THE INQUISITOR

At the head of the Inquisition is your hero. Players don't control a foot soldier; they lead the organization. This ascension occurs very early in the story, when you are left as the only survivor and witness to the events that result in the opening of the breach in the veil. To avoid ruining the story, BioWare isn't saying anything more about the circumstances than that.

The Inquisitor is yours to create and guide. You choose from three classes (warrior, rogue, and mage) and at least three races (see Races Return sidebar). Your character does not have a pre-set name, is fully voiced, and can be male or female. Your exploits unfold as you perform them rather than being relayed by another character after the fact. In other words, the Inquisitor's legend is built like the Warden's from *Dragon Age: Origins* rather than Hawke's from *Dragon Age II*.

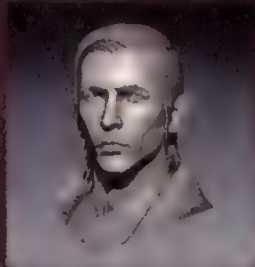
Depending on the player, the Inquisitor may be sympathetic to other causes, but does not owe allegiance to anyone. You aren't taking orders from the mages or running errands for royalty; this independence allows players to shape the values of the Inquisition and align it with whatever groups they wish. "It's very important to me that we're not forcing you into any stance about how you think about mages, Templars, or what you think about the role of magic," Darrah says. "That's going to be left to the player to decide." This freedom also allows players to gravitate toward whatever leads they deem promising.

Your organization technically has the authority to investigate freely, but other groups may resent that fact and refuse to pay the Inquisition the respect it is owed. For instance, the disarray of the Chantry and its failure to contain the conflict between the mages and the Templars partially necessitates the formation of the Inquisition, so church officials aren't thrilled with the prospect of an independent entity looking into its shady dealings. Overcoming this resistance is one of the challenges you face as Inquisitor, but as the Inquisition gains power and respect, your job gets easier. Turning away a ragtag group from a castle gate may be easy, but an entire army is a more intimidating prospect.

"If you get to a fortress and they don't want to let you in, you can use your Inquisition to lay siege to that fortress, help them break down the doors," Darrah says. "What happens beyond those doors is up to you. You lead the charge; they're going to keep the small soldiers out of the way, but you have to deal with the battle and the central conflict."

The Inquisition provides players with a reason to travel across Thedas, but it also presents an opportunity for BioWare to impart a sense of progression and ownership. As you complete objectives, gather items, and help people, the Inquisition's reputation and strength increase. "What you want to do is grow your power through military action, through the acquisition of secrets, blackmail, ancient lore, or through your connections," Laidlaw says. "It's fundamentally about giving an organization the same kind of progression you might expect out of a character. It's about seeing growth on a level that exceeds the personal. Yes, you have lots of cool gear and new talents and spells, but what's it like if I can take an organization and give it a character – give it a feel and a tone?"

As you advance, your Inquisition gets more powerful and highlights the choices you have made, but BioWare isn't revealing how players experience that sense of improvement. Such a large and significant organization must have a base of operations, right? "No comment," is all the team would offer on that topic. However, a central location to consolidate resources, offer services, and demonstrate the growing might of the Inquisition would be a natural extension of the concepts already in play.

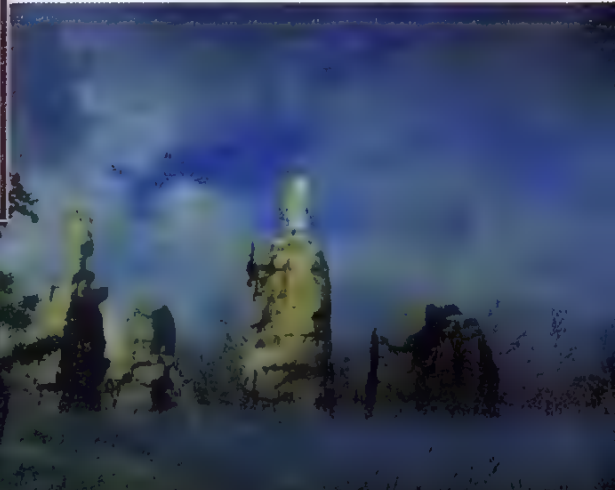
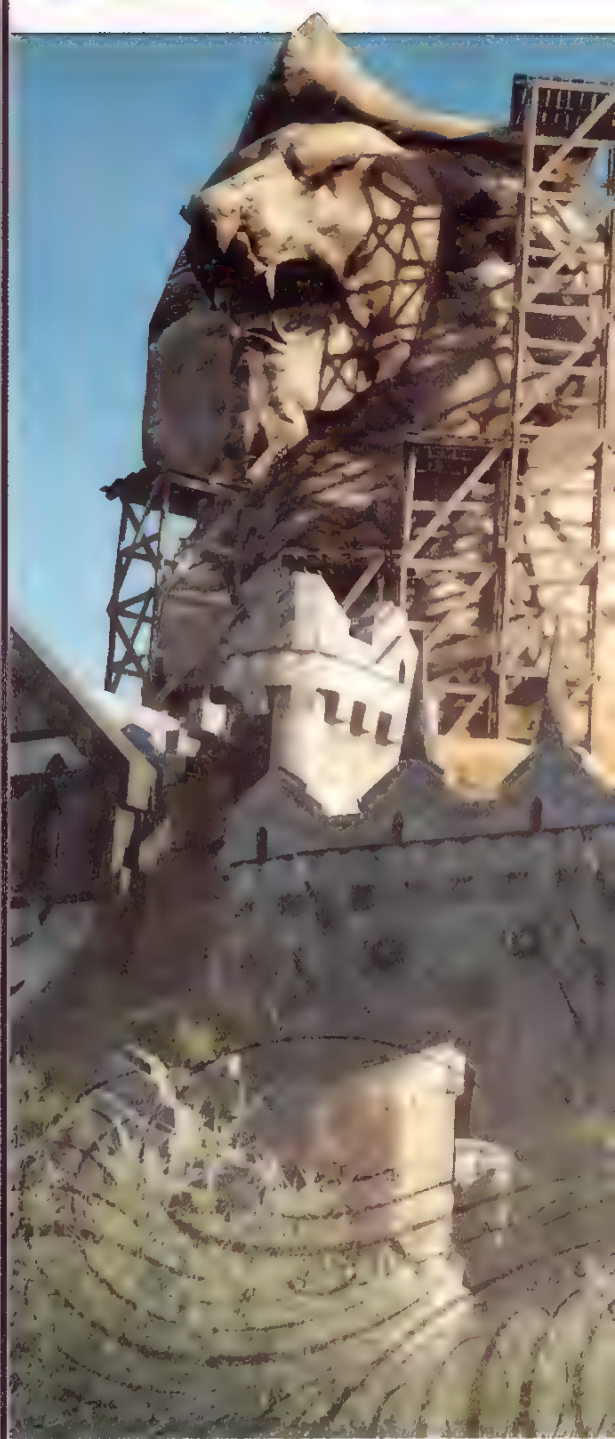


Races Return

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, players could select the hero's race.

In *Dragon Age II*, Hawke was a human, and players couldn't do anything to change that. For *Inquisition*, BioWare is bringing back the option to choose between human, elf, and dwarf. "Races are something that were always our intention to bring back," says executive producer Mark Darrah. "I think it's really important; we have lot of players who are very passionate – dwarven players are extremely passionate – about their racial selection."

The starting point for all characters is unified from a story perspective, but your racial choice still colors your interactions with others. For instance, elves may be persecuted in some areas, but an enclave of elves is more likely to open up to one of their own. Dwarves remain unable to select the mage class, but make excellent warriors and rogues. Right now, BioWare is only willing to confirm three races, leaving the status of the qunari undecided. "Do we go to four?" Laidlaw asks. "I don't know. Definitely these are the safe bet."



Players choose whether to explore areas by night or day

The qunari are not confirmed as a playable race, but they still look awesome



OPTIONS EVERYWHERE

The problems facing Thedas are widespread, with symptoms in every major nation. The Inquisition would not be effective if it couldn't respond to threats in all corners of the world, so players cover more ground than ever before. The action isn't confined to a single city or even a single country; the arms of your organization have a long reach, and you travel to multiple large locations in several different regions.

This increase in scope results in a return to the structural style of *Dragon Age: Origins*, where players have access to a large world map split into many areas of interest. Don't expect to see the exact same formula, however. Instead of four long sequences that you choose to play in any order, the key story beats are accessed by reaching specified levels of power with your Inquisition. In order to obtain that power, you need to explore. It isn't about completing a set of quests in a

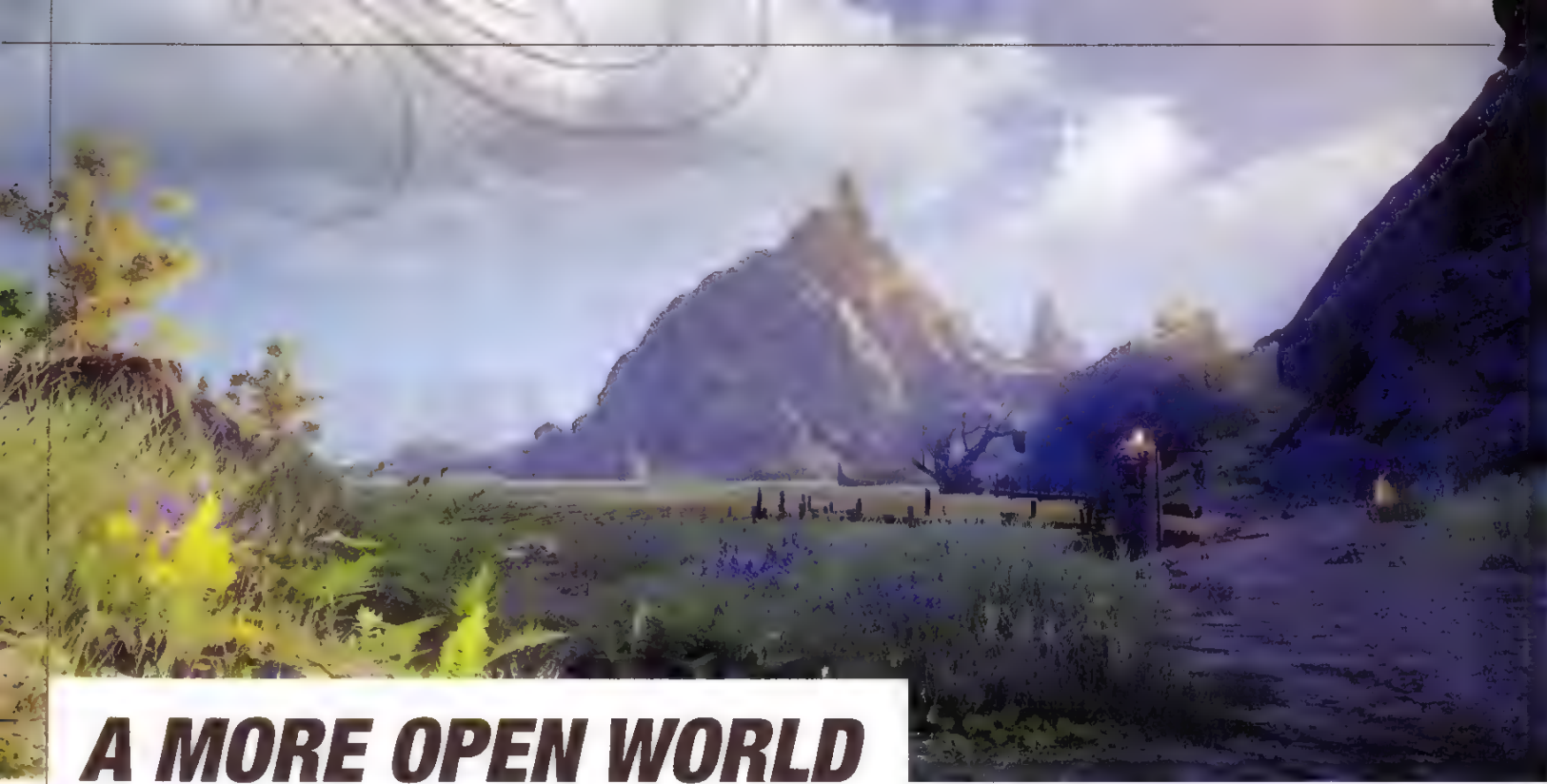
specified order. The team wants players to search the world and engage in the content they find interesting, and the Inquisition automatically receives the benefits.

"We're trying to give you the freedom to pursue the goals and objectives that you want, toward an overall theme and structure," Laidlaw says. "I really like the word 'campaign' for what we're doing. It kind of brings it back to the old-school tabletop thing. It's not just about thinking moment to moment, or what the story is. It's about the experience."

You can collect magical relics, solve mysteries, fight dragons, and help people in need during your adventure. Some of them are placed in front of you as objectives, and others you discover through your own exploration. You don't need to do all of them; you just need to do enough to sufficiently bolster the Inquisition's reputation. Once you hit the threshold, you can access the next major plot sequence and progress to the next phase.

BioWare tried a similar approach with *Dragon Age II*, gating off an early expedition to the Deep Roads by requiring players to amass a certain amount of gold. The problem? Gold is the same currency required to improve your character, making players choose between improvement and plot advancement. With *Inquisition*, that choice is no longer an issue. The resources you use to obtain better equipment are different from those that allow you to continue the story.

Ultimately, the goal of this arrangement is to allow you to guide your own experience by pursuing the content you find interesting. Whether you prefer hunting down Fade shards or building stronger alliances with your party members, everything you do has an impact. That can be immensely rewarding for the player, but the challenge on the development side is providing environments that are vast and rich enough to accommodate that kind of discovery.



A MORE OPEN WORLD

Players have quick access to significant areas through the world map, but you can't always trek from one to another seamlessly. "You'll be going from eastern Ferelden to western Orlais," Darrah says. "That's a big swath of land. Obviously, we're not going to build a million square miles of space, so that means we're not truly open-world in the way some people think. But each of the areas we're building is larger than anything we've built before."

These huge levels are among the most noteworthy changes from Dragon Age II. Because of the importance of exploration, repetitive environments (like those during Hawke's adventure) are nowhere to be found in Inquisition. Players aren't just funneled down narrow corridors. During our demo, we saw a bog, desert, and mountain range – all enormous – being freely explored in third-person. Even better, interesting gameplay threads are sprinkled throughout the areas, waiting to be uncovered. You might find a mysterious pile of corpses as you reach the top of a sand dune, or an arcane device that lets you pinpoint the location of magic items. You may even uncover hidden entrances to brand-new areas. Investigating these anomalies can kick off unique quests that lie apart from the main story, rewarding players who are curious about their surroundings.

"I've been trying to drive exploration, something we used to have more of in our games," Darrah says. "It's something that, frankly, BioWare hasn't done in a while... In a lot of ways, I'd say we're a lot like what you saw in the Baldur's Gate series, with areas that existed in part just to be spaces that you went to, but they had a story of their own."


"I want to make sure that there are a sufficient number of caves in this game that are unique, and that no one tells me to go into them," Laidlaw jokes. "There is an absolute, elemental, and primal joy in cresting a hill and seeing something that you had no idea was over there, and potentially finding things that your friends never found. And in taking the initiative – being the player who is the agent and protagonist, the one who finds things... that is where a more open design shines."

The locations you travel to are essentially contained

open worlds, full of items to collect and content to discover both during the day and at night. Players have so much ground to cover that the team is implementing a mount system (which is more involved than simply riding a horse around) in order to make it easier and more entertaining to navigate the massive world. Even mounted, you need to be careful where you tread; very little of the content is scaled to your level, which means you can encounter monsters – dragons, for instance – that are vastly more powerful than you, tempting you to come back later after gaining some experience.

Despite the changes, BioWare isn't turning Dragon Age into a standard open-world fantasy. Freedom is

important, but the team is not willing to sacrifice a directed narrative in order to provide it. "We definitely need to make sure that we can still tell the kind of story that we want to tell," Darrah says. "Have followers be emotionally engaging and still have those kinds of moments that we're so proud of in our games. You still have to allow, in these bigger worlds and more exploration-driven gameplay, the spaces to have time with themselves. That balance has been one of the biggest challenges that we've been working on. Balancing strong critical path, strong follower narrative, and then a more organic narrative told by the environments and the spaces themselves."



The Inquisition faces all kinds of foes: demons, undead, and even other civilized races

SWITCHING TO FROSTBITE

Dragon Age II runs on a modified version of BioWare's Eclipse engine – a tool that has its roots in the original Neverwinter Nights. Many of Dragon Age: Inquisition's new features and improvements are made possible by leaving Eclipse behind and moving over to the Frostbite 3 engine, the same technology that powers DICE's upcoming Battlefield 4.

"Frostbite is a real paradigm shift for BioWare, and even more so for Dragon Age," Darrah says. "We'd been developing for the Eclipse engine for a long time...it's a little long in the tooth, with a lot of things it couldn't really do – really large areas with a lot of interactivity. Frostbite unties our hands and lets us investigate a lot of possibilities in that space, specifically with the ability to have an influence on the environment and on the world."

The massive, open areas in Dragon Age: Inquisition are a direct result of the move to Frostbite 3. The engine handles this workload naturally, but other areas have required more specialized attention. "It's been a tremendous effort by all of the BioWare studios – especially Dragon Age – to convert an FPS engine into a RPG engine," says Aaryn Flynn, general manager of BioWare Edmonton and Montreal. "We're very happy with what we can do with the technology."

When people think of Frostbite in the context of the Battlefield series, they think of destructibility – cover being blown apart and buildings crumbling. While those kind of effects have a place in Dragon Age: Inquisition (like taking out the support beams under

a platform loaded with archers), the team is more focused on building than blowing up. With a mage in your party, you can use a spell to reassemble a crumbled footbridge and reach a new area. You can also restore a ruined desert outpost and convert it into an Inquisition stronghold.

"It's a bi-directional thing," Darrah says. "If you can destroy something, you can construct something. We can investigate things from both directions. It lets you build up the world as opposed to just breaking it apart."

Frostbite 3 also makes it easier to develop on five platforms simultaneously. Because Dragon Age: Inquisition appears on current and upcoming hardware, calling it a full next-gen RPG is a stretch. While the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions have better visuals, they won't differ substantially in content from their current-gen counterparts.

"Frostbite 3 is intended to bridge the gap between current-gen and next-gen," Darrah says. "From a graphical perspective, you might have a really high-polygon bridge on next-gen platforms, and a lower-polygon version of that same asset on current-gen. One thing we're striving really hard to do is not affect the gameplay itself, so the experience you have on all platforms is recognizable and as similar as it can be."

The multiplatform nature of Dragon Age: Inquisition isn't cause to get less excited; the improvements of the new engine over the old one allow for an array of new features that weren't possible in previous installments. From combat to customization, the team is preparing some exciting surprises for fans.

The PC Experience

Console players will notice some graphical differences between the current- and next-gen version of Inquisition, but PC gamers are getting a version of the game optimized for their platform. "The PC actually is different, especially from a controls standpoint," says executive producer Mark Darrah. "The encounter construction will be the same, but you'll have a mouse and keyboard. Dragon Age: Origins had a very tailored experience for the PC, and we're really trying to recapture that." This approach stands in contrast to Dragon Age II on PC, which did not follow in its predecessor's tradition of catering to a mouse-and-keyboard control scheme.

Health doesn't automatically regenerate after encounters, so managing your risk and resources is important



A NEW BATTLEFIELD

An Inquisitor's life isn't all mysteries and wide-open spaces. You meet plenty of resistance along the way, and you need to be prepared for battle in order to advance your goals. The pace of combat in *Inquisition* rests in a place between the two previous entries; it isn't always a pause-and-play affair, but neither is it exploding with gonzo action.

"I look at strategy and tactics as a natural outgrowth of something that *Dragon Age* has delivered in spades," Laidlaw says. "The concept of the fully controlled party – in our case, doing it with that hybrid real-time or pause-and-play – has always been a thing that we saw as part of our legacy and something we want to make sure is key...but we want to make sure we haven't lost the reactivity and speed – the crispness – with which a character follows their orders. I see that as part of modern gaming."

When controlling a character directly, you will notice similarities to the controls from *Dragon Age II*. You can switch freely between all characters in your party, and set AI behaviors for allies if you'd rather leave them on autopilot. Commands are executed instantly at the push of a button, lending the feeling of a third-person action game. While that responsiveness is important, BioWare wants to make the action less frantic and more deliberate, returning to a more tactics-oriented approach to encounters. Part of this is simply slowing down the speed of attacks across the board, but even more important is designing enemies that force the player to examine the battlefield and choose actions carefully.

"We've got that mesh of action and RPG," says senior designer Josh Stiksma. "We're getting lots of focus on timing.... We're really trying to ensure that the player who is playing our game for action can have things to

react to. If a creature is about to unleash a really powerful ability, it's important to know how much time I have to react to that ability. Is this actually a window? Maybe it's a weak point and I can go in and attack him."

Battles veer away from button mashing toward a structure where observation and reaction take precedence. This is made possible through a drastic revamp of how encounters are designed in *Inquisition*. Instead of enemies swarming players and acting independently, the Inquisitor's foes have specialized roles that work together and force players to size up a battlefield and prioritize. For example, the prowler-type enemy is agile and capable of stealth, but retreats when confronted head-on, making it difficult to defeat. Prowlers also try to hide and sneak up behind the Inquisitor in order to perform a crippling backstab maneuver.

That doesn't sound too bad on its own, but prowlers are just one of several enemy types that can be thrown at you at once. Imagine trying to immobilize and take out a disruptive prowler while you're also being shot at by archers, evading swipes from a bruiser's two-handed axe, and worrying about the enchanter in the back who is buffing all enemies on the field. Not only that, but the enemy AI is more sophisticated than ever, ensuring that battles are intense.

"They're making these tactical decisions based off of player location, cooldown time, and how much health they have left," Stiksma says. "They're also able to find points of interest in the area...it's quite a complex structure, but it's immensely powerful. We're able to have these creatures do things we really couldn't do in our previous games."

Seeing the combat in action, we are reminded of the shift in design that occurred between *Mass Effect 2* and *3* (though those titles were made by a different

team in Edmonton). Enemies aren't just spawning and mindlessly attacking; they appear to make coordinated assaults based on their strengths, and work together in logical ways. An archer hiding behind a shielded guard can keep the player at range as the duo slowly advances, and the axe-wielding bruiser keeps players occupied while a group of prowlers slowly creep up from behind. Staying aware of your surroundings is key to staying alive. While the team won't rule out occasional enemy reinforcements and ambushes, you won't regularly see waves of new bad guys appearing out of nowhere to extend encounters.

The Inquisitor has an array of new tricks to counter the enemies' evolving strategy. Of course, you still have several skill trees, specializations, and abilities to invest in (following in the style of *Dragon Age II*), but each class also has powers with tactical significance. Warriors, for instance, can launch a grappling chain at enemies to pull them close – a maneuver that messes with enemies (like prowlers) that rely on positioning for advantage. It works differently against shielded guards; the chain pulls their defenses down momentarily, which can easily disrupt an advancing archer/guard duo.

Enemies aren't the only ones with complementary abilities; party members can work together to achieve better results. Imagine you're fighting a massive, armored dragon. One strategy is to target a leg and send a warrior into melee range to bash off its armor. Once it's off, a rogue can sneak up and poison the exposed limb. The damage from the poison causes the dragon to falter and stumble, at which point the entire party can unload with spells and abilities as the beast recovers.

This kind of variety and cooperation are at the heart of a renewed tactical focus for *Inquisition*'s combat. It also allows for versatility in how you choose to play; the team insists that you can approach combat with an all-action philosophy, all-tactics, or anywhere in between. We wouldn't be surprised if players once again have the option to direct the action from a more pulled-out, isometric camera angle – though BioWare would not comment on the possibility. Even if *Inquisition* isn't capturing the exact pause-and-play approach of *Dragon Age: Origins*, its return to party-based tactics and complementary powers is great news for fans.



Unlike *Dragon Age II*, *Inquisition* makes sparing use of enemy reinforcements





Familiar Faces

After two full games and multiple tales in other media, the Dragon Age universe has developed a sprawling and intriguing cast. Fans are undoubtedly wondering whether or not their favorite characters return in *Inquisition*, but BioWare isn't ready to unveil every cameo and reference you may encounter. However, a handful of appearances are confirmed: Cassandra and Varric from *Dragon Age II* are both playable party members.

The E3 trailer revealed that Morrigan is back for *Inquisition*, but BioWare wants to set an expectation for her right out of the gate. "I think it is probably just fair for people to understand that [Morrigan] will not be a party member," says creative director Mike Laidlaw. "That's going to disappoint some people, but I think it's important for us to just be upfront about that."

That doesn't mean that her role is a small one. "It's not a cameo," teases lead writer David Gaider.

Those are the only three confirmed returning characters at this point, but others are certainly in the works. We saw evidence suggesting that a certain red-haired Orlesian and a fan-favorite knight-captain could be poised for a comeback.

FRIENDS AND FOES

Fighting alongside your allies and learning their abilities is one way to get to know them, but your primary connection with your party is still formed through dialogue and story sequences. While some returning characters' quirks will already be familiar to players (see Familiar Faces sidebar), the writing team is crafting a new ensemble of companions.

One of the Inquisitor's allies is a mage named Vivienne. She was in line to hold the prestigious position of first enchanter in the Circle of Orlais, but the mages' rebellion against the Chantry and the Orlesian civil war happened before she could formally assume the position.

"That is a character that has a very specific view on the role of circles and the Chantry," says senior writer Luke Kristjanson. "As someone who is extremely pro-circle, what is left for that person when that entire system crumbles?"


The question illustrates an interesting element of BioWare's process when creating characters: The writers analyze the main themes and conflicts at the core of the story, and then build certain characters around them. "Party members allow us to humanize the issues, distill it down to one person," says lead writer David Gaider. Because mages and their role in the world are a central issue in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, having an ally

represent that theme gives players a personal stake. You might not care about mages in general, but maybe you do care about Vivienne.

On the other hand, if you're the kind of player who thinks that mages are ticking time bombs and you act accordingly, you're going to have a hard time getting along with Vivienne. "We don't put everyone in the party so you can like them all," Kristjanson says. "Some people get very, very concerned about 'How do I make all these people like me?' Well, that's part of it, but part of it is also you making the decisions you want to make and suffering the weight of those decisions."

Vivienne isn't the kind of party member you just pick up in a tavern; she's a woman with status and influence, and represents the caliber of companion the Inquisitor generally attracts. High-ranking mages, soldiers, and other socially significant individuals contribute their talents to your cause – especially if it looks like you will be the group left standing when the dust settles. Who these other new allies are – and where their loyalties lie – is information BioWare is not ready to divulge yet.

Another mystery is who exactly the Inquisitor is fighting against. The demons pouring out of the sky are an obvious threat, but you learn early on that a single mastermind is behind the breach and all of the chaos surrounding it. As Loghain from *Dragon Age: Origins* demonstrated, a good villain can be even more compelling than a traditional party member, adding moral ambiguity alongside a clear-cut goal to work toward. Unlike the situation with Loghain, however, you don't learn the identity of your target immediately in *Inquisition*. All players know is that they have a single adversary – an equal – working in opposition to their efforts, and part of the story involves getting to the bottom of the schemes and unmasking your foe. Whoever it turns out to be, we can't wait to meet them. "I think one of our strongest suits is having characters you either care about or absolutely despise," Laidlaw says, "but you rarely forget them."



BioWare says that new players can pick up *Inquisition* without being familiar with the events in previous games, comics, or novels



INQUISITION AND STYLE

Weather effects appear in many areas, impeding exploration and even causing damage

All of the companions have unique visual designs that help make them memorable. No matter how cool a character's initial look might be, one of the fun parts of an RPG is finding new equipment and optimizing it for the entire party. With *Inquisition*, players can ensure that the hero and the party are properly equipped without sacrificing any characters' signature style.

This is possible through an expansion of the crafting system. Taking materials that you find in the world and collect from defeated foes, you can create and customize armor for you and your allies. By focusing on creating cool equipment (instead of potions and runes), players have more of an incentive to experiment with crafting this time around.

"Crafting goes beyond, 'Oh, I made some stuff,'" Laidlaw says. "Crafting in *Inquisition* is about customizing yourself, your character, your looks.... By the end of the game, if I've engaged in crafting at a sufficient level, I should be able to look like any suit of armor that I've acquired, but have the best stats. If I can wear it, I can make it – and I can make it amazing." That means that if you love the look of the armor you start the game wearing, you are eventually able to create a version of that armor – colored any way you like – that is on even statistical ground with late-game loot.

This philosophy is a change from previous installments, which have had several armor-related mishaps. From ridiculous-looking mages to companions whose gear you couldn't change, this is an area of *Dragon Age* that has been begging for attention from the beginning. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, it was even possible for the entire party to look practically identical if they happened to be wearing the same pieces of armor. That



In addition to the three main classes, players once again have the opportunity to learn unique abilities in new specializations

isn't happening in *Inquisition*.

"[Party members] will keep their iconic look," Darrah says. "If you take a character like Cassandra, for example: She has an iconic look with a trenchcoat almost, with armor underneath that. If you put heavier armor on her, she'll look very different, but still keep that silhouette where she has a long piece of fabric behind

her. Anyone can wear this armor, but it's going to have a visual impact that keeps them iconic but still reflects what you're doing."

Having a hero who look interesting is a key part of getting players invested, but when the *Inquisition* goes out scouring Thedas for corruption, they have bigger decisions to worry about than what to wear.

NO EASY CHOICES

Conflict in the Dragon Age universe is not driven by clear good and evil. Decent people have moments of failure, and terrible people have redeeming qualities. This refusal to adhere to a traditional moral spectrum leaves you with more interesting resolutions to conflicts, since you aren't just picking an alignment and following it. Complicated issues, like the security versus freedom debate that arises from the existence of powerful magic-users, don't necessarily have an optimal solution.

"Dragon Age has always been about hard decisions, where there's no clear moral path," Gaider says. "If we can successfully argue either side of an issue and not feel like a sociopath doing so, then that is a good avenue for us to explore." Like its predecessors, Inquisition forces players to make choices in the face of dilemma. While these decisions are challenging, they aren't necessarily dark; players are not continuously choosing between equally awful options. Instead, the goal is to have players consider the consequences of their actions, and live with those consequences afterward.

Your choices are made through a dialogue wheel similar to the system from Dragon Age II, but with a few improvements. The main problem to address is clarity; some players were upset when their dialogue selections resulted in surprising (and unintended) responses or actions. To give players a better idea what to expect, the team is working on an optional addition to the wheel that gives you a better idea of what to expect from the immediate actions that follow. That may ease decision-making for some, but don't expect to learn details regarding the long-term repercussions. The results of your choices ripple throughout the world in multiple ways, and you have to discover those on your own. "There are significant encounters and significant

portions of the game that are determined by what choices you've made earlier on," Laidlaw says. "It's an investment on our part, and one that I think pays off."

Revealing specific scenarios would rob them of their impact, but players should expect many choices to deal with themes and mysteries that have already been established in the Dragon Age canon. "Loose ends are a constant problem," Laidlaw says. "Any given franchise can support X amount of things that are

mysteries to be left unresolved. We have a responsibility to resolve at least some of them if we're going to introduce new ones.... I think, right now, the franchise is in a place where there are a few too many loose ends. We need to resolve more of them."

Players can expect more clarity – if not full resolutions – on topics like Red Lyrium, the activities of the Grey Wardens, and the nature of the witch Flemeth, and the fate of Morrigan.



MAKING YOUR MARK

Bigger environments, better armor, and more choices are all great areas for Dragon Age to expand, but those fall within expected boundaries for a new installment in a series. What about Inquisition represents the future of the franchise? Unfortunately, the answer to that question is difficult to address without spoiling large chunks of the story, but it boils down to making an indelible mark on the world of Thedas.

"One of the big hallmarks of Dragon Age is choices with impact," Flynn says. "Making large this idea that the choices you make as a player are going to be really impactful in the world. The world is going to feel what you do, what your decisions are, and it's going to react and change based on what you're saying and doing." Taking this concept to a new level, Dragon Age: Inquisition features even more ways for players to feel the effects of their actions.

"This is where it comes from: The idea that you have a physical impact on the world," Laidlaw says. "That levels are changing, spaces are different. That you are unlocking new content because your Inquisition has had an impact on the world. It's not just a couple level changes; it's something that permeates the whole game. We're trying to be a lot more visual with how we're trying to show the repercussions of what you've done. We're trying to put more of it into the game and into the story. You did this at one point in the game, and that's going to come back and bite you in the ass."

Pulling this off involves a varied mixture of choices with short- and long-term consequences, as well as

the capability to transform the world and have it reflect those choices in ways that are both meaningful and irreversible. If you make one choice, then reload a save game to make another choice, you should see more than slightly different reactions. "There's a downside when players do the reload, but don't see anything different," Laidlaw says. "It's like, 'Wow, that was fake.'"

The full extent of this reactive system won't be known until the game releases next year, and we're curious to see what other surprises surface between now and then. During our visit to BioWare, the team freely acknowledges shortcomings in the previous titles, and emphasizes the ways in which Inquisition represents an effort to find the right balance between the franchise's PC roots and its next-gen future.

"What we wanted to do with this project was get back in touch with our fans and help them help us to bring the games forward," Darrah says. "Look at where the genre is going in the future. Look at things they didn't like, things they did like, and bring that all together into something we could use to make a game as grand in scale and vision as Inquisition."

Whatever your opinions were on the first two games, BioWare listened. The Inquisition team's respect for Dragon Age fans is only surpassed by its passion for the intriguing universe surrounding the series – and that universe is on course to become even better. ♦

Learn more about Dragon Age: Inquisition at gameinformer.com/dai, where you can find interviews with the writing team, exclusive info about combat, and a roundtable discussion with BioWare about its vision for the future of RPGs

Bringing the World Forward

The move to new platforms complicates the inclusion of players' previous choices in Inquisition, but BioWare is working on the problem. "It's very important to people and it's very important to us," says executive producer Mark Darrah. "We don't want people to feel like they can't buy a new console or change the platform they're buying this game on simply because they want to make sure their saves are maintained."

In other words, just because the PS4 won't read your Xbox 360 save file, don't worry that Inquisition doesn't reflect your choices. It does.

"If it's something that's really big and really central to the game, I think it's vital that you respect the player's choices and decisions," Laidlaw says. "Otherwise, why did you let them make them?" With those concepts in mind, the team is currently investigating ways to maintain that consistency in choice, but is not ready to reveal specifics.



BELOW

Capbara leads the indie games charge on Xbox One

by Bryan Vore

As the clouds part, they reveal an unexceptional, greenish brown island alone in a blue, rippling sea. A minute rowboat, no larger than a grain of rice from this far-off distance, slowly glides toward the landmass. Pulling up to the beach, a silent adventurer fastens the craft to a post on the shore. Moving inland, he scales a sheer cliff as the wind whips his cloak. Signs of habitation appear up ahead in the form of a rocky trail and hand-carved stone stairs. The path leads him to his destination – a towering cave at the summit. He draws his sword and enters the pitch-black passage. Who is this wanderer? Why is he here? Most importantly, what lies below?

» **Platform**
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action/Adventure,
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Capybara Games

» **Release**
TBA

Underground Origins

The mysterious and foreboding atmosphere of *Below* should be familiar to fans of Toronto-based Capybara Games' previous action/adventure title, *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*. Made in collaboration with *Superbrothers* and composer Jim Guthrie, the game debuted to rave reviews on iOS in 2011 and later migrated to PC, Mac, and Android devices. Players controlled a character called the Scythian, who explored a mythical and imaginative world that blended point-and-click adventure with *Punch-Out!!* style reactive combat. It won numerous awards, including runner-up for iPad Game of the Year from Apple. The quickly growing following of fans eagerly awaited Capybara's next project.

On the heels of this successful collaboration, Capy (the studio's oft-used nickname) switched gears with *Super Time Force*, a manic action game that combines over-the-top *Contra*-style running and gunning with time-manipulation powers. The early concept caught Microsoft's attention at the 2012 Independent Games Festival, and it offered Capy a publishing deal on Xbox 360. Satisfied with how things were going with *Super Time Force* (due to release this year), Capy brought its next project, *Below*, to Microsoft and worked out another publishing deal.

"We've been around the block enough that we're not going to go into deals that we don't think have a lot of big-time benefit for us," Capy president Nathan Vella says. "In this case, being published by Microsoft

Studios gave us access to [the Xbox One] early. It gave us the chance to be on stage at E3."

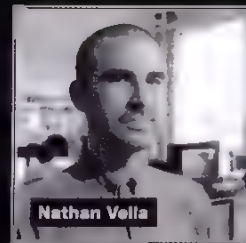
Below debuted at Microsoft's press conference between heavy hitters *Battlefield 4* and Black Tusk Studios' untitled project. The road to the E3 stage was a long one. Creative director Kris Piotrowski dates the birth of the project to 2009, well before *Sword & Sworcery*. A fan of roguelike games since playing *Angband* many years ago, he got the itch to make one after immersing himself in the genre with Raigan Burns, a friend and co-creator of *N+*. For the unfamiliar, roguelikes are known for a few key traits: randomly generated stages, permadeath, and turn-based combat. The name comes from the first game to set the rules, 1980's *Rogue*.

"There were a lot of roguelikes in my brain at that time, and at the time nobody was really exploring it," Piotrowski recalls. "Now everybody's exploring it."

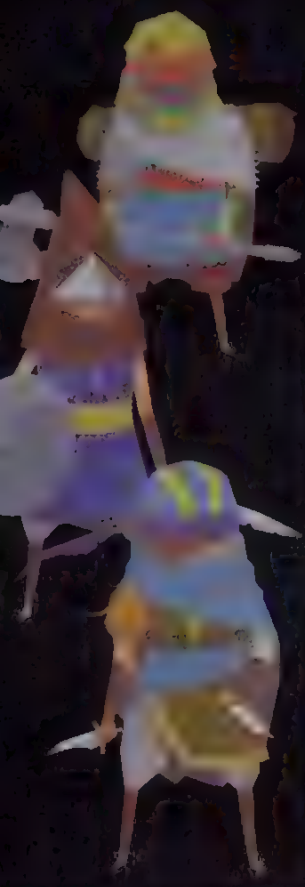
Titles like *Demon's Souls*, *Spelunky*, and *FTL* incorporate the themes of roguelikes to varying degrees and offer unique twists on the rules. "It bummed me out a little bit when *Demon's Souls* came out specifically," Piotrowski says. "There were so many similarities in the design philosophies in that game and the game that I was trying to figure out that it did sort of bum me out for about two months. But on the bright side it made us feel a lot more confident in what we were doing. We feel good about what we're making now thanks to those games."



Kris Piotrowski



Nathan Vella



A New Take on the Roguelike

Capy's take on the roguelike sticks very close to genre conventions in some ways and blows them apart in others. Players control a character the team currently calls The Wanderer, who is susceptible to permadeath. Fortunately, there is an endless succession of other wanderers willing to explore the island once the previous one dies. "You are playing an extremely capable character, but a character that's also very fragile, that's sort of one mistake away from death," Piotrowski says. "It's not a game about a main character. It's a game about a lot of little characters over time working together to solve the mysteries of this world."

This progression of new characters after deaths is a rising trend in both the roguelike genre (Rogue Legacy) and outside of it (Infinity Blade, though later revelations offer a twist). When characters die they really die; they don't simply warp back to a checkpoint. This approach is quite appealing to those with more realistic sensibilities.

Even though players return to the enigmatic island with these new characters over and over again, the levels constantly change. Outside of several key rooms, most of the environments are randomly generated. Traditionally, this results in a bland-looking world with few details and copy-and-pasted floor and wall imagery. Capy is doing its best to avoid that.

"That's been one of the biggest ongoing challenges that we've had," Piotrowski says. "A ton of development effort has been about creating random level layouts that aesthetically feel the same as the areas that aren't randomly generated. [Our levels] look more like cave systems that are built out of natural randomness, but they don't have that kind of old-school, tiled look."

Another way the team is curbing the potential player disenfranchisement that could creep in with permadeath is to foster a sense of progression. Each time one of your characters dies, it won't be a hard reset back to square one. "Even though your character's life is a very short and fleeting effort, whatever it is that you've managed to discover or complete or change in the world is something that your next character will be able to build on," Piotrowski explains.

Battle Tension

One area where Below diverges from traditional roguelike tenets is in the combat. Since any move could result in death, classic games have featured turn-based battles so players can strategize and have complete control over battles. Capy's taking a real-time action approach, though it won't be anything like the hack-and-slash combat seen in games like Diablo and Torchlight. For players to succeed, they must evaluate the enemy's capabilities, the surrounding environment, and the best moves and attacks provided by their currently equipped gear. The soul of roguelike battle planning and strategy is still there; you just have to do it on the fly.

"The guts of combat is relatively simple," Vella says. "You don't have this massive amount of weapons to choose from and moves to go through. It's about this simple and relatively small number of choices, but because the pressure or the impact of those choices is higher, it does require you to think them through, to master them. I think that the combat is very fair. You're never going to get screwed into dying. You're going to die because you made a mistake or because you didn't know what this enemy was going to do. But the next time you see them, you'll know. At the same time, it is definitely difficult and challenging."

Characters only have three inventory slots to work with. Generally, the left hand is for defensive items like shields, the right hand carries the primary offensive weapon like a sword, and your back holds a large weapon or special item. A straightforward loadout would include a sword, shield, and bow and arrow on the back. For faster attacks you could equip daggers in both hands, but this comes with the trade-off of weaker defense. Giant hammers and axes offer more damage per hit, but slow attacks down. Capy remained vague on whether or not players have much choice on starting equipment and how often they get chances to swap weapons while inside the dungeon.

The total number of weapons players can choose from is limited. "It's not a loot grab at all," Vella says. "Weapon choice is substantial. It's meaningful. As much as I love me some Torchlight, the weapon path and selection is almost inconsequential because of how frequently you have options to change those paths."



Multiplayer allows players to team up with complementary skills

THE POWER OF XBOX ONE

With mega-budget games like Titanfall, it's easy to see how the developers are leveraging the increased horsepower of the Xbox One. But in smaller, less-flashy titles like Below, it's not as cut- and-dried. Capy president Nathan Vella explains how the team is taking advantage of Microsoft's new console.

"Even though the game looks relatively simple, there's a whole lot of stuff going on under the hood that uses a lot of the firepower," he says. "But that's kind of secondary to it. Both the persistent elements and multiplayer are using a lot of the features that are not presently available to us in any current-generation stuff. I think the push towards more connected, more 'stuff happening in the cloud,' allows us a lot of opportunity to do really cool stuff."

WORKING WITH JIM GUTHRIE

Capybara connected with composer Jim Guthrie through Superbrothers' Craig Adams and instantly hit it off. His soundtrack to *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* was widely respected and led to a gig scoring *Indie Game: The Movie*. Capybara creative director Kris Piotrowski started planting seeds with Guthrie to score *Below* as early as the *Sworcery* wrap party. It's a good thing he did, because Guthrie's schedule is extremely busy these days. For more on Guthrie's career, his work on *Below*, and much more, read our interview with him on gameinformer.com.



Nontraditional Multiplayer

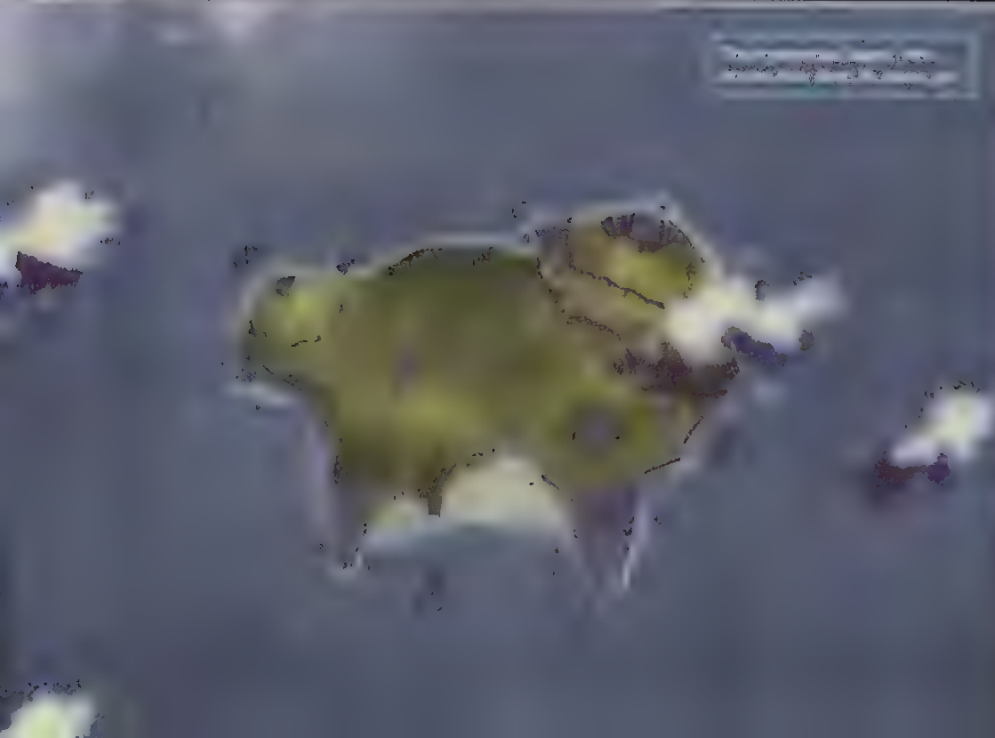
Viewers who watch the debut *Below* trailers closely may have noticed more than one wanderer battling onscreen in some scenes. The game does support multiplayer, and while Capy isn't sharing much about it at this juncture, we know it won't be the traditional experience where you team up with your buddies in the lobby and start questing. Capy stresses that *Below* feels like a single-player game, but being connected to other players online has some benefits. "Certain parts of the world are changing only based on your own progress," Piotrowski says. "Other aspects of the game are actually connected to the overall progress that characters are making on the network."

Capy's goal of keeping onscreen messaging, tutorials, and user interface elements to a bare minimum in service to immersion in the world applies to multiplayer as well. "You just play the game and every once in a while multiplayer things happen. You don't have to worry about it," Piotrowski says. "You just go in and you start playing. You're exploring, and all of a sudden you might find yourself not quite alone in the depths."

Xbox One Exclusive?

Capy is reluctant to put any kind of release date estimate on *Below*. Microsoft's flexibility with Capy given its previous successes allows the team to spend the time necessary to get the game polished to its high standards. But what about players who may not be buying an Xbox One?

"We're definitely huge fans of picking a platform and focusing on it, Vella says. "Simultaneous development on multiple platforms means less people working on making a great game and more people working on the less fun stuff like porting, platform scenarios, and technical requirements. We've always been about making something super rad for a platform, and hopefully that game is desired enough to take it somewhere else after a certain period of time." ♦





- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)
- » **Publisher**
17-Bit
- » **Developer**
17-Bit
- » **Release**
2014

GALAK-Z: THE DIMENSIONAL

THE OLD-SCHOOL SHOOT 'EM UP
GOES NEXT-GEN

BY
JEFF MARCHIAFAVA





Nowadays, gamers needn't look far to find an indie studio working on an ambitious project that it hopes will be a breakout success. After a four-year development cycle, 17-Bit released its first game, *Skulls of the Shogun*, last January. While financial stardom eluded the humorous and entertaining strategy game, glowing critic and user reviews marked 17-Bit as a developer to watch. Now the studio is taking its smart game-design sensibilities to the final frontier with *Galak-Z: The Dimensional*, an open-world 2D space shooter that taps into the visual hysteria of '80s space anime.

Like any good love letter to a bygone era, *Galak-Z* isn't shy with its inspirations. From the guitar-heavy title intro to the "We'll be right back" loading screen, *Galak-Z* is presented to players as if it were an '80s anime cartoon. The game includes campy commercials, a cheesy theme song, and missions that are introduced as episodes. Anime series like *Macross* and *Star Blazers* are obvious inspirations, but once 17-Bit CEO

Jake Kazdal jumps into the gameplay, it's apparent that Western sci-fi series like *Star Wars* and *Battlestar Galactica* also inform the action.

I'm reminded of the latter series when Kazdal describes *Galak-Z*'s premise. Players take on the role of one of the last remaining human survivors of a devastating war between your fleet and the Imperials, a warmongering race of aliens. As a hotshot pilot, you travel around star systems fighting invaders and gathering resources to repair your mother ship and warp to new areas of space. These resources also tie into *Galak-Z*'s economy and RPG elements, which provide access to new weapons, abilities, and ships.

ENTERING UNCHARTED SPACE

The open-world levels in *Galak-Z* are a mix of procedurally generated space that contains ever-different combinations of asteroids, debris, enemies, and other objects of interest, and hand-designed planets, which provide more scripted missions. Players are free to play around in the open-world areas for as long they want, and even though missions present a more focused narrative, Kazdal says the story is meant to support the gameplay, not impede it. "I think there needs to be enough fun story to set up missions and give you purpose for everything that's going on, and add a lot of personality," Kazdal says. "But the reason you're playing this game is for the adventure and the action."

Kazdal describes an example of the narrative structure that revolves around a series of entertaining rivalries players face. "There are these barons who lord over the armadas," Kazdal says. "Imagine Lord Vader looking for Luke Skywalker—they meet a couple of times over the course of the films before they have their big showdown. It's about building up a really fun rivalry—knowing this guy, knowing you don't like him, and that he's a total d---. Instead of just killing him right away, you'll get in a fight and maybe he wimps out and runs off, and you think, 'Oh God, next time...' It's about just playing with those tropes and these goofy bad guys."

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X 10

EAST MEETS WEST

The fact that both *Skulls of the Shogun* and *Galak-Z* sport Japanese themes isn't a coincidence. Mixing Eastern and Western culture and game design is a fundamental goal for 17-Bit. Multiple staff members have experience working in Japan; Kazdal worked for Sega in Tokyo for four-and-a-half years, and other members of the team come from Q Games and Square Enix.

Early next year, 17-Bit is relocating to Kyoto in an ongoing effort to become a multinational studio. For Kazdal, it's an important step that he hopes also improves the quality of their games. "I've done a lot of American development and a lot of Japanese development," Kazdal says. "Both philosophies are very different, and have different strengths and weaknesses. So if you can combine them and focus on the strengths of both sides and minimize the weaknesses, I think overall the product will be a lot stronger."

Planets and massive ships scroll by in the background, hinting at what's in store for your next warp destination

ANOTHER INDIE EXCLUSIVE FOR SONY

We weren't the only ones impressed by Galak-Z. When Kazdal showed Sony an early build of the game, the company liked it so much that they not only snatched up launch exclusivity of Galak-Z for the PS4, they asked Kazdal to perform an onstage demo during Sony's E3 press conference. Kazdal says 17-Bit is just starting to experiment with the PS4's unique features, but has some interesting ideas on how to use the DualShock 4's touchpad, and plans to incorporate video sharing and weekly challenges into the final game.

As you travel around a level, parallax-scrolling ships and planets loom ominously in the background, hinting at what your next warp destination entails. Some areas may be too dangerous when you first encounter them, offering an incentive to return to previously unexplored areas at a later time, similar to Metroid. "There are big, scary dudes out there that you really shouldn't deal with until you're more powered up later," Kazdal says. "They kind of patrol the perimeter of the asteroid fields, so you've got to watch out for them, but taking them on leads to huge rewards and riches."

PREPARE FOR BATTLE

After the brief synopsis, Kazdal hops into a test world to demo Galak-Z's controls. All of the action is physics-based, and ships and objects maintain their inertia as they fly around the 2D levels. Although Kazdal says the open-world format and exploration elements make Galak-Z as much of an adventure game as an action game, combat is still the main focus, and enemies are far more advanced than those in the typical top-down space shooter. "Everyone's conditioned to just have enemies blindly attack them," Kazdal says. "I was like, 'What if we took modern AI and made each one of those little pilots a dude with an agenda and squad tactics and all this other stuff?'"

To achieve this, 17-Bit is using a high-end AI middleware called Cynitent, which also simulates vision- and sound-detection cones for individual pilots. In addition to flanking players and teaming up with their fellow wingmen, enemies are also smart enough to take cover, call in backup, or flee to fight another day if the battle isn't going in their favor. Space pirates make up the third faction in Galak-Z, and will liven up battles between the humans and Imperials. These autonomous raiders don't play well with either side. "The space pirates are a *Mad Max*-y, sort of very loosely aligned federation of cutthroats and no'er-do-wells who also hate the Imperials," Kazdal says. "So there will be a lot of fun mission structure, bouncing those guys off each other — like in Halo when you're fighting the Flood and Covenant. I love that kind of flow."

Comparing Galak-Z's combat to Halo may seem strange, but the similarities ring true. Like the sci-fi FPS series, ships in Galak-Z feature recharging shields as well as a health bar that requires power-ups to replenish. Kazdal says the team is also playing with the idea of having enemy weapon pickups that players can switch to on the fly. The most important similarity, however, is that battles play out

Similar to Halo, your ship has a shield that automatically replenishes if you can avoid taking damage for a few seconds

The hand-drawn explosions look like they were taken straight out of an anime

differently every time, and require players to change up tactics depending on the makeup of enemy forces.

As Kazdal fights, his pilot changes expressions and spits out lines of voiced dialogue in the lower left-hand corner of the screen. Kazdal says enemy avatars also pop up during dogfights, taunting the player, barking commands at their wing mates, and shouting as they go up in flames. This added layer of interaction should help sell the feeling that players are going up against other personalities, and not just shooting down endless waves of mindless clones. "Inherently, a tiny little spaceship doesn't have a lot of room for expression," Kazdal says. "But by having those faces onscreen and doing a lot of outscenes where they pop in, shout at you a bit, and then zip right back out, you'll know what the guy looks like, and what he's talking about. It will build up these personalities around these different enemy types." Given Galak-Z's homage to '80s anime, all dialogue is available in both English and Japanese.

Watching Kazdal play gives us the opportunity to soak in Galak-Z's gorgeous visuals. While it's hard to tell from screens, all of the environments and effects are hand drawn, and the game features an intricate lighting system that can illuminate specific surfaces, giving the 2D images a 3D feel. The effect is impressive; as Kazdal shoots out homing missiles in tangled streams, the ensuing explosions light up the screen and look like they were taken straight out of an anime. Galak-Z also features complex particle systems, which emit smoke and debris in 3D, further elevating the action beyond the 2D plane.

DESIGNING SOUND FOR SPACE

While dogfights in space technically wouldn't make much sound, blowing up an enemy ship isn't fun without an appropriately large bang. Galak-Z's sound effects are being handled by Wesley Slover, an accomplished sound designer and huge anime fan who Kazdal met by chance thanks to Superbrothers founder Craig Adams. "[Adams] was in Seattle hanging out, and I was showing him [Galak-Z]," Kazdal says. "We went to dinner with a couple of the guys he uses for sound effects, and [Adams] was like, 'Hey guys, Jake is looking for [someone for] sound effects. His game is kind of like *Banana*. And this one guy at the table perked up and was like, 'What? Can I come down to your studio tomorrow? I'll do it!'" Slover's enthusiasm for sci-fi shines through Galak-Z's warbling ship engines and the retro chirps of health and morale pickups.

On the music front, Andy Rohrmann (known to music fans as *Scientific American*) is providing a synth-heavy sci-fi soundtrack inspired by John Carpenter's work in the '80s. Rohrmann's work in the video game industry includes music for Superbrothers: Swords and Sworcery's Moon, Grotto remix and Crackdown 2. Kazdal says Rohrmann's soundtrack for Galak-Z is procedurally generated, ramping up and down based on the onscreen action, providing the perfect complement to Slover's sound effects.





Enemies employ squad tactics and know when to take cover, making them much smarter than foes in the average shoot 'em up



FULL SPEED AHEAD

After a brief demo that makes dogfighting in Galak-Z look all too easy, Kazdal hands me the PS4 controller. The controls are deceptively simple. The left analog stick controls your direction, while L2 and R2 triggers apply rear and front thrusters, respectively. R1 adds a boost to whichever thruster is currently depressed, and recharges over time. Much of the intricacy of Galak-Z's controls lies in your ship's inertia; once you build up some momentum, you can cut the thrusters and freely rotate your aim to target nearby enemies and asteroids without affecting your trajectory.

Getting a hang of navigation takes me a while, partially because it requires forgetting the accommodating conventions of twin-stick shooters — being able to independently adjust aiming and movement in modern shooters has made me soft. However, the growing pains pay off; maneuvering in Galak-Z feels more like what you would expect piloting a spaceship to feel like, and adds another layer of complexity and skill to dogfights.

While bouncing off a few asteroids, a patrolling Imperial scout spots me, and the squad of fighters it radios in gives me my first taste of Galak-Z's combat. My ship's blasters provide a limitless stream of glowing-red projectiles that prove useful for taking down enemy shields. Missiles come in handy for more powerful ships; holding down the missile button brings up a laser targeting cone that locks on to any enemies within its field. I also make good use of Galak-Z's juke maneuver, which allows players to momentarily dodge out of the playing field, hopping over projectiles and enemy ships if timed right.

After taking down a few roaming squadrons, I head toward the large planet at the center of the level and descend into one of its caverns. Inside its narrow passageways, combat becomes more a game of cat and mouse, with environmental hazards providing strategic opportunities. "[There are] lots of things in the environment that you can use to your advantage in combat," Kazdal says. "There's all kinds of weird bugs and plants, and everything does something."

In one area, an organic sac sprouts from the wall. Shooting it causes a burst of spores to release, which attach to ships and slow them down — perfect for creating an ambush on ensuing foes. Deeper in the planet, a lake of lava requires more careful navigation, but when I shoot the surface, fiery explosions bubble up and engulf my enemies. Kazdal wants these environmental features to encourage exploration and experimentation, and says that not all of the creatures you run into are inherently aggressive.

Eventually, I'm cut down by a giant, neon sword-wielding mech, but my hour of playing Galak-Z consisted of steady improvement and few frustrations overall. The tense, multifaceted combat is already apparent, even though the current build lacks any of the extensive ship upgrades and customization 17-Bit has planned. "It's early yet, and a lot of it isn't set in stone," Kazdal says. "But I can imagine

that before you go out on a mission, you're in your hanger and you can be like, 'Alright, I'm going to be a little more stealthy, so I'm going to put on this quieter engine and a long-range laser that's really good,' or 'I know this is going to be a heavy combat mission; I need really fast thrusters and lots of shields.' Being able to mix and match a bit and choose the loadout that works the best for you."

Like the upgrade system, much of Galak-Z is still in the planning stages. Our demo didn't feature any of the narrative-driven missions, the random mini-missions that take place in the procedurally generated portions of space, the economy that allows players to buy and trade equipment and ships, or Galak-Z's multiplayer components, which Kazdal says are appropriately next-gen. That said, what we did play is already a lot of fun. 17-Bit has nailed the core flight mechanics, and has an entertaining gameplay formula in place that made me hesitant to give back the controller. If the other features come together like Kazdal has planned, 17-Bit could have a major hit on its hands — one that offers PS4 owners a lot of replayability when the game launches in 2014. ♦

Head to gameinformer.com to see our video interview with Jake Kazdal and to check out the first trailer for Galak-Z.

PONDERING PERMADEATH

17-Bit still hasn't decided what the penalty for dying in Galak-Z is going to be. Kazdal says blowing up may return you to the beginning of the level you're on, or the game may save your progress after completing certain objectives. However, Kazdal says he wants to give hardcore players a permadeath option to see how far they can go on a single run. While that might be too frustrating for most players, Kazdal says Galak-Z's replayability should lessen the sting of starting over. "I play this level over and over and over, every day, and I never really get tired of it," Kazdal says. "And if I do lose, I think, 'I can do it better next time, I know I can.' So I want to have [a permadeath option] in there to some extent."

Saints Row IV

Volition expands its ludicrous playground



- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Deep Silver
- » **Developer**
Volition
- » **Release**
August 20

My brief time with Saints Row IV at E3 left me wanting more of its insane open-world gameplay, so I was thrilled when a preview build arrived at the office. Without any time constraints, I was able to explore its open world, participate in diversions, and play through a few missions. Each experience I've had with the game has made me more confident that this fourth entry will be the best in the series, and this preview build makes it a near certainty.

As a masked member of Saints Team Six, I invade a desert compound filled with terrorists. I arrive via helicopter in homage to *Zero Dark Thirty* (the mission is called Zero Saints Thirty), and waste no time in blasting away at America's enemies. Exploding barrels send foes flying and my finger rarely leaves the trigger, as I advance toward a target known as Cyrus.

A sign on a door reads "Approved Terrorists Only," and I bust in to confront the terrorist leader. It doesn't take long to finish him off, as a kick sends him flying into lava below. A "thumbs-up" reference to *Terminator 2* later, and America is safe from the terrorist threat. At

least, that's how it seems until a nuclear missile takes off from the compound. I run to the warhead and leap onto its side as it ascends into the sky, and dismantle it via quick-time events while Aerosmith's "I Don't Want to Miss a Thing" blares. After destroying several electric panels, I dive off as the missile safely detonates in the sky. I plunge downward and crash-land through the roof of the White House, directly into the President's chair in the Oval Office. A "mission accomplished" screen informs me that I just unlocked the Presidency of the United States, as well as the adoration of the country.

This would have been a crazy, explosive ending to other action games, but it's merely the setup for Saints Row IV. When time flashes forward in the next mission, my character is the acting President as he struts through the newly named White Crib. Strippers hold trays of liquor, congressmen smoke blunts in the hallways, and actor Keith David plays himself as the Vice President. It seems like a pretty sweet setup, but the party is cut short by an alien invasion within minutes of my first experience controlling the President.

Crashing through the White Crib roof, the invading Zin creatures immediately make their intent to enslave humanity apparent. Members of my staff are abducted as I desperately try to hold off the aliens with assault rifles and a red, white, and blue missile turret. A tense encounter with the Zin leader ends with me being knocked out, and I wake up in a completely different world.

My character, now adorned in a sweater vest and freshly ironed slacks, appears to be in a suburban house in the 1950s. My default movement animation has been replaced with a jaunty stroll. Sliding down the handrail of the stairs, my wife greets me with a fresh plate of pancakes. Upon leaving the house, I drive to the quaint downtown area and wave to excited citizens ready to greet the President. This pleasant experience ends quickly, as it becomes apparent that something is very wrong. Citizens appear glitchy, and everyone suddenly turns hostile. A sheriff becomes a parody of Agent Smith from the Matrix movies, and I find myself in another shootout.

When this fight ends, I learn that I'm in



Kuzze cowers before Zinvaic, the Zin leader



the prison that the aliens have enslaved the President in. It's a full virtual recreation of Saints Row: The Third's Steelport, and none of the rules of reality apply. The game wastes no time in presenting you with your first two superpowers: super sprint and super jump, which allows you to leap up and over buildings by holding the jump button. By collecting data clusters (essentially the same as Crackdown's orbs), you can upgrade your powers to allow for faster speed, higher jumps, and added abilities like air dashes and a gliding. Getting around the city is an absolute breeze, making me wonder how often I'll drive cars in this game.

This recreation of Steelport features plenty to do, and includes versions of many of the diversions seen in the past. Tank Mayhem now puts you in control of a laser-sporting alien hover tank, which is quickly made available to you at any time. UFO Mayhem is similarly destruction-focused, but grants you a nimble, powerful alien aircraft. Insurance Fraud was always my favorite Saints diversion, and it's significantly better with the added superpowers. If you enjoyed ragdolling into traffic before,

you'll love flinging yourself at super speed into buildings and across the city.

A freeze blast is the only offensive superpower I acquire in the preview build, but its usefulness is immediately apparent. Larger, shielded enemies can be frozen and made vulnerable with the blast, making standard ammo twice as effective. Looking at future upgrades for this power, added elements like fire and mind control can be unlocked. Later powers like telekinesis also have upgradable elements, and this is in addition to all the standard player upgrades seen in Saints III.

My preview ends with a mission that takes my character to the real world – another homage to *The Matrix* with its nude, unconscious human captives. Covered in a gooey substance, my character stumbles through sterile hallways in some kind of alien structure.

I take a few Zin down with their own weaponry, then escape the structure in one of their crafts in a scene reminiscent of the Millennium Falcon's escape from the Death Star in *Return of the Jedi* (all while Haddaway's "What Is Love?" plays in the background).

In just a few hours of playing Saints Row IV, I was bombarded with a seemingly endless supply of parody and goofy humor. Like its predecessor, however, there's also an awesome game beneath the silliness. The added superpowers feel like a step up from those seen in Crackdown and Prototype, and the customization options ensure that they improve as the game goes on. Volition is taking the over-the-top tone of Saints Row: The Third to its absolute limits with this sequel, and I can't wait to spend dozens of hours playing the final release. » Dan Ryckert



Killzone: Shadow Fall

Why this might be your first PS4 game

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Guerrilla Games

» **Release Date**
Holiday

The PlayStation 4 launch lineup features some strong games, so early adopters will have to make hard decisions about what which ones to pick up on day one. While we're still several months out from release, *Killzone: Shadow Fall* is shaping up as a top contender. Whether you've been a fan before, or you're deciding if it's time to jump onboard, here are the features that make us excited about *Shadow Fall*'s impending arrival.

Cold War Story

Killzone: Shadow Fall is set 30 years after the end of *Killzone 3*, and Guerrilla Games is using the jump in the fictional timeline as a fresh start. Even so, longtime fans needn't worry; all the events of previous games remain sacrosanct.

If the initial *Killzone* trilogy echoed the trench warfare and urban conflicts of World War II, *Killzone: Shadow Fall* draws inspiration from historical moments that followed several years later. The story is like a sci-fi reimagining of the Cold War, featuring tense, deniable ops between two overwhelming superpowers, a

fragile peace that could be shattered at any time, and even the direct corollary of the iron curtain. "The idea of this iron curtain really spoke to the imagination," says game director Steven ter Heide. "It felt very visual. It helped create this story that has a little slower pace, but still maintains tension and the sense of an ongoing escalation."

Three decades after the destruction of Helghan, many things have changed. Other planetary colonies outside of Vekta and Helghan are aghast at the damage wrought in the vicious war. The victorious colony of Vekta has become a haven for the refugees of its greatest enemy, with half of the planet set aside for the authoritarian Helghast people. Nowhere is the dichotomy of culture starker than in Vekta City, the primary setting of *Shadow Fall*. A massive wall divides the two sides of a great city hanging in the shadow of a giant dam. *Shadow Fall*'s story sees players shifting back and forth between the two sides of the wall, witnessing the civilizations and cultures that have arisen on both sides.

A Standout Hero

In previous *Killzone* games, the main characters were grunts in a giant interplanetary war. Even when they took on heroic roles, they were part of a conflict bigger than they could perceive. *Shadow Fall* switches gears with a more central hero character who guides events in a more direct way. "One of the strong suits of the franchise has always been the enemy," ter Heide says. "For this installment, we want to create a stronger, more formidable hero character that can stand up to these enemies. The enemies are going to have to share the screen with him."

Lucas Kellan is a young shadow marshal, the Vektan Security Agency's equivalent to the CIA's black operatives. Kellan is loyal to Vekta, but he's never known life before the dramatic influx of Helghast refugees. Where previous entries often had the player working with a squad, *Killzone* missions more often depict solo combat situations. When Kellan is working with a team, he's still at the center of the story and action.



The OWL is a robotic companion that offers some great tactical ways to approach a battle.



Shadow marshals are the Veikan equivalent of black ops/CIA operatives. Players control the young shadow marshal named Lucas Kellan throughout Shadow Fall's story.

A Theme Park, Not a Rollercoaster

Previous installments of Killzone were both celebrated and derided for their relentless action. While Guerrilla's early demos make it clear that big action scenes are still a vital part of Shadow Fall, the team wants to create more dynamic play spaces where the player has more agency to make a change rather than just watching everything blow up as a passive observer.

"If we put you on a rollercoaster, which is more along the lines of what we did with Killzone 2 and 3, there's very little down time," ter Heide says. "So we went from rollercoaster to something more like Disneyland. There are still rollercoasters there, but you can pick and choose when to go on one." Players make choices about when and where to engage with the action. Many levels are large and open, with multiple objectives and sub-missions active at any one time. "It's not just about altering the flow of combat, but being able to alter the flow of a level," ter Heide says.

In the demo we watched, Kellan must escape from behind enemy lines by stealing an enemy aircraft. Go and meet up with your team first, and they'll come along in subsequent combats. Alternately, knock out the communications tower, and you'll assure that your foes can't call reinforcements once more serious engagements begin. Elsewhere, disabling the AA guns also brings you near to an armory of high-end weapons. Your choices shape the way you experience the mission.

Next-Gen Robotic Companion

Until you see the OWL in action, it's easy to assume that the concept of a robot helper will be just like similar characters in previous sci-fi games — a tool to unlock doors and move the plot forward. However, the innovations the OWL brings are far more than window dressing.

The OWL is a floating drone that accompanies you throughout your journey. The multi-purpose robot can be commanded into a variety of situations, including attack, stun, zipline, and shield functions. A swipe on the DualShock 4 touchpad sets your chosen ability, and so you're never pulled out of the action into a menu.

Sweet Weapon Comes Standard

Any FPS is in part defined by its weaponry, and Shadow Fall returns to a strategy that helped shape the origin of the franchise.

"We're bringing back secondary fire on our weapons," ter Heide explains. "That's something that we had only in the first Killzone, but it's something that we're quite keen on returning. We're trying to offer you more options to outgun your enemies."

The highlight of the new guns is the shadow marshal rifle, Kellan's go-to default for most of the campaign. The short-range, silenced sub-machine gun allows players to remain relatively quiet while advancing on an enemy position. Switch to secondary fire, and the shadow marshal rifle becomes a sniper rifle as powerful as it is loud. This fire mode consumes huge amounts of ammunition power with each blast, but can be worth it to bring down the right foe.

In addition to the shadow marshal rifle, players can carry one other weapon at any time, supplementing the broad flexibility of your main weapon.

Customizable Multiplayer

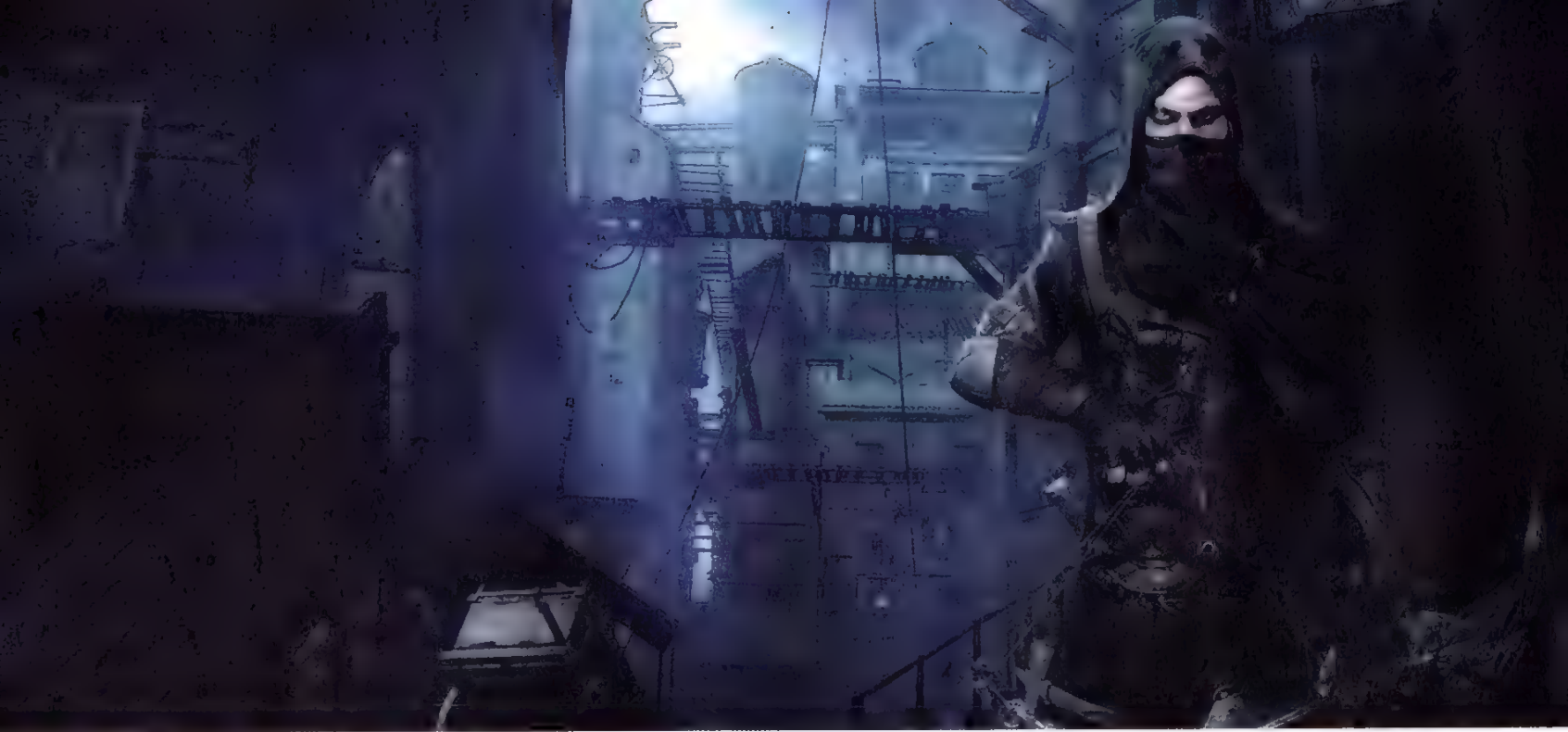
Guerrilla remains cagey about many of the big features that set its new multiplayer apart from the competition, but we know that there's a big focus on customization, both in building up your characters and in the way matches play out. "The biggest goal for us is to have it be fun from the moment you start playing, but also keep it fun when you're 100-plus hours in," ter Heide says.

Shadow Fall multiplayer features a dedicated class system, each class brings its own powerful abilities to the fight, like the support class and its ability to set spawn beacons and air-support drones throughout the map.

Guerrilla is also excited about spotlight moves, a new evolution of the cinematic-style match conclusions seen in Killzone 3. At the end of a round, the winning side's best player gets to perform a victory move on the best player of the losing team. Shadow Fall features a variety of unlockable spotlight moves, and Guerrilla says many of them are appropriately over-the-top and humiliating. — Matt Miller

Most of the story takes place in a massive city beneath a dam; the metropolis is split by a great wall dividing the Veikan and Helghast citizens.





Thief

Skulking through the shadows

Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Square Enix

Developer
Eidos Montreal

Release
2014

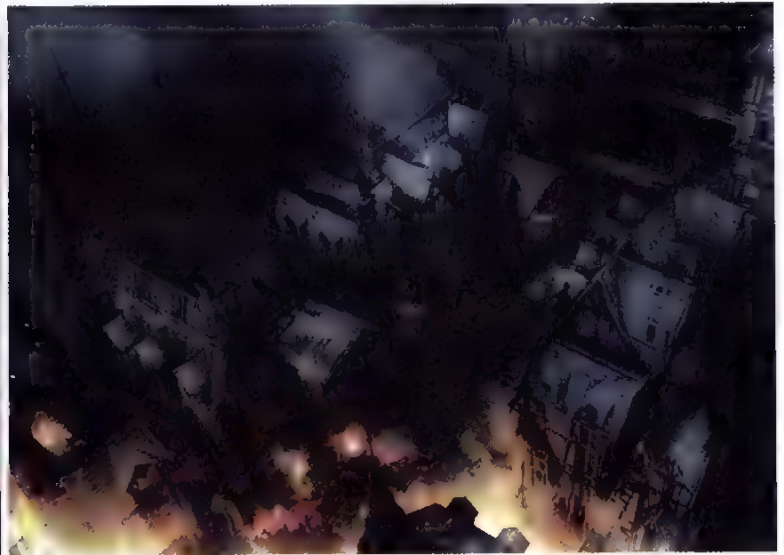
If you've seen a heist movie, you know that even the best laid plans can go awry. Good thieves are adaptable, reaching into a deep bag of tools and skills to adjust their kleptomaniac tendencies. Garrett, the star of Eidos Montreal's next-gen continuation of the classic first-person stealth series, has a host of abilities to tap for tough jobs. We tested Garrett's elemental arrows, sneaky swoop maneuver, and more in a trek through a mansion courtyard.

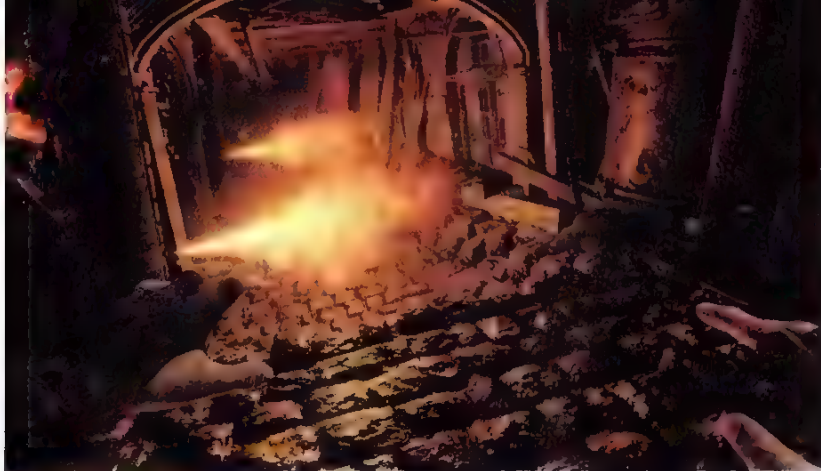
The fires of revolt spread across the city as upset citizens push back against a malicious baron. The chaos allows Garrett to infiltrate the Baron's mansion perimeter, but security is tight in the courtyard in preparation for an attack from a revolting mob. Garrett can choose to

dispatch or evade patrolling guards, sneak past well-lit passageways, and select his path into the mansion to steal a precious heirloom.

Garrett begins his mission by dropping quietly onto the soft grass of the courtyard. Running across cobblestone creates louder footfalls, so sticking to the soil is key. A guard patrols nearby as Garrett presses close to a pillar for cover. His hands glide across the stone support in the first-person view, connecting players to the environment. He waits for the guard to turn his back and makes his move. A button tap lets Garrett deftly close the gap, swooping in to take out the guard. Think of the swoop ability as a slow teleportation skill, which allows you to cover short distances unnoticed.

With the first threat neutralized, Garrett can choose to climb the stone archways or sneak along the ground-level bushes and crates. We pick the high road. Garrett scales a trellis and slinks above the sentries' lines of sight. The elevated path allows the burglar to sneak past several enemies, but he eventually encounters a well-lit path manned by two guards. A Light Gem indicator in the corner of the screen and a hazy shroud around the border of the screen lets players know when they're visible. The stationary guards and glowing torch mean Garrett needs to get crafty. The thief produces water arrows from his quiver, takes aim on the flame, and quenches the light source. Other arrows at his disposal include broadhead arrows, fire arrows that can be shot at puddles





Often times hiding from guards is the surest way



Garrett readies a strike with his blackjack



of flammable liquid, blunt arrows that can shatter glass objects for a distraction, and rope arrows for hasty escapes. His bow may not be the best offensive weapon, but it's an invaluable tool for stealth.

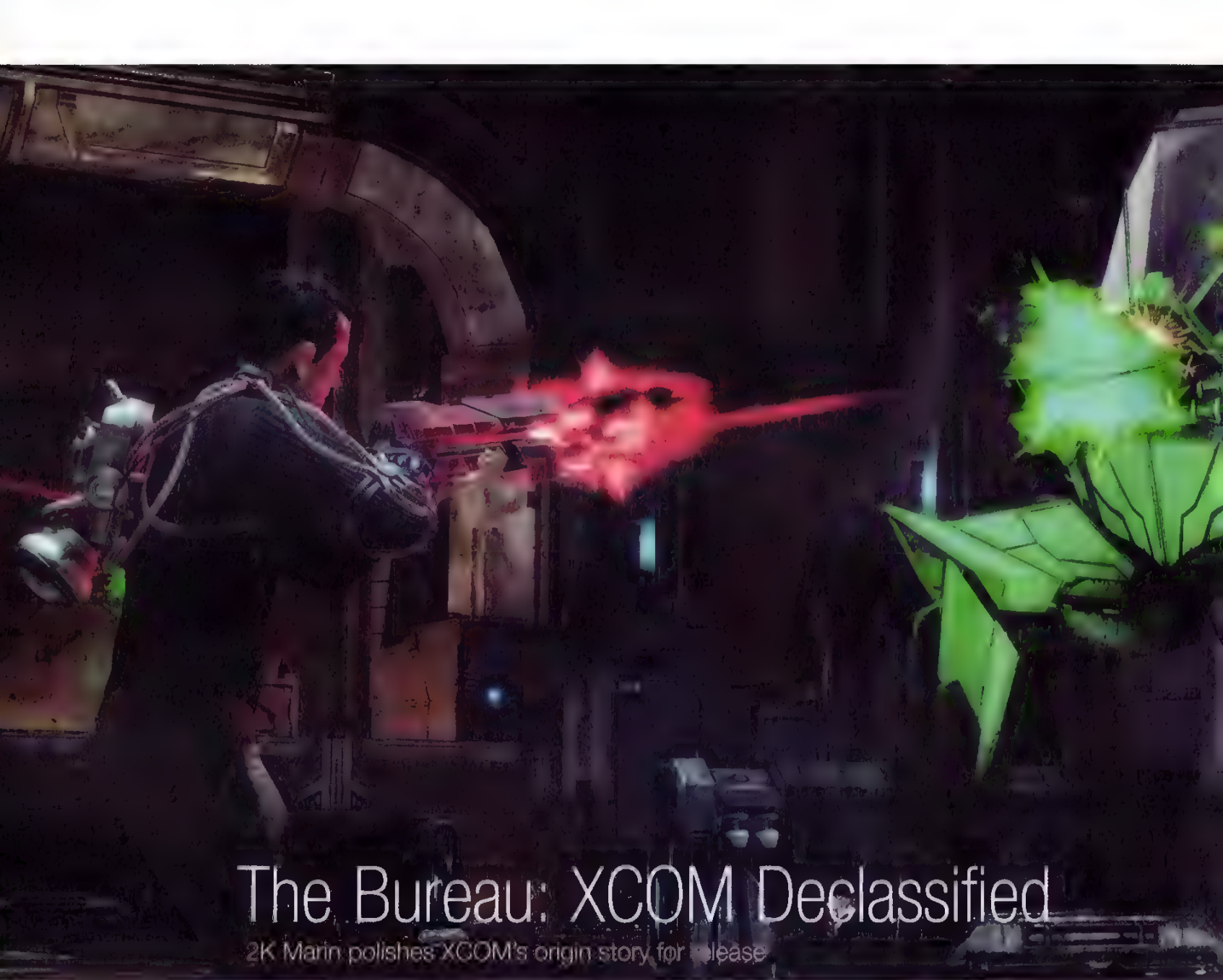
Accessing the Baron's mansion involves sneaking up to the courtyard's second level. Garrett can either slink up heavily patrolled stairways or find a way to shut off a fountain pouring from the higher level. We decide to sneak into a cellar, which is barred by a brief, standard lockpicking minigame. Players can spend some of Garrett's finite focus energy to unlock the door faster. Pressing a switch behind the door shuts off the waterfall, granting access to a balcony and eventually the mansion. Within, the thief creeps through narrow corridors, sneaks around booby-trapped pressure plates, and eventually acquires the Baron's Heart of the Lion gem.

This particular playthrough went smoothly, but Garrett can defend himself when spotted by guards. He swings a blackjack and can block attacks, but he's no soldier. The best course of action is to ward off immediate threats and retreat into the shadows, hoping to shake your enemies. Garrett has the limited ability to track enemy movements through walls, which helps gauge the security of a chosen hiding spot after fleeing.

The fires of the revolution eventually spread to the Baron's mansion. Flaming timber and collapsing floors present a tricky escape path for Garrett to leap and sprint through. Our glimpse into Eidos Montreal's next-gen adventure ends as the burglar escapes the flaming estate. Whether or not Thief will live up to the lofty expectations of the series' hardcore fans is not certain, but so far it's lining up with this generation's first-person stealth trend.

• Tim Turi





The Bureau: XCOM Declassified

2K Marin polishes XCOM's origin story for release

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

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
2K Marin

» **Release Date**
August 20

When we last previewed *The Bureau: XCOM Declassified*, I was dropped into a later mission with fully-outfitted soldiers and high-level tactical options. I felt confident in my strategic maneuvering after taking down shielded Outsiders and even a rampaging Muton. For the new demo, 2K Games took me down a peg and started me from the beginning.

I opt to play on the veteran difficulty level rather than the new commander tier, which offers even more challenge and some restrictions on mid-mission squad changes. As the story begins, Outsider forces attack the American military base at Groom Range. Here I learn about protagonist William Carter, alien sleeper agents, and the secretive Bureau that becomes the only thing standing between the invaders and the human race. Carter's sudden indoctrination into the mysterious alien-fighting agency is a surprise only to himself, as we learn that Carter was pre-selected by the nonsense XCOM director Myron Faulke.

After escaping Groom Range with the aid of

two senior agents, Carter arrives at the new XCOM base. The paint is still drying on the walls as he is shown around the war room, communications center, Skyraanger hanger, and the rest of the underground encampment. Strip away the sci-fi sheen, and it's easy to see the base as an RPG town filled with small narrative side-quests that enhance the experience.

Once I choose two team members from the available roster (which maxes out at eight additional soldiers), it's time to get back into the field. Each class offers only a single active ability at first. Coping with the loss of mines and turrets I had at my disposal in the previous entry, which pair nicely with crowd control skills like Scatter and Taunt, I shift my tactics to movement and flanking.

Running and gunning doesn't work, as I find out quickly. Even charging a single remaining Sectoid leaves me severely wounded. They fight to the bitter end with superior weaponry. In a situation with multiple Outsiders and quick-moving little grey men, using the time slowing Battle Focus power wheel, even just

to get a breather and survey the landscape, is crucial.

In addition to allowing players to queue up powers, Battle Focus is also their avenue for directing teammates on the field. XCOM: Enemy Unknown players should recognize the navigation symbology. Blue and red shields denote areas that are safe or dangerous, respectively, for squad members.

Since my last preview, 2K Marin has enhanced the user interface. Now, if a location is unsafe, flowing arrows indicate from which direction fire will be taken. This eliminates the need to pan the battlefield to identify the reason for the cautionary icon, thereby speeding players back into combat.

As I progress through a small town filled with corpses and catatonic "sleepwalkers" infected with an alien contagion, I stumble across patrols unaware of my presence. Finding the best locations before engaging is crucial to weathering a firefight with superior numbers.

Other times, invaders conduct surprise attacks by drop pod. These small spawn



points serve a tactical purpose, as destroying them thins later waves of Outsiders. They are well armored, and focusing one or more teammates on a drop pod is a risk that has the potential to yield significant rewards during pitched battles.

Moving forward, I encounter citizens covered in thick black goo and suspended from light poles. This foreshadows future encounters with Silicoids, and enhances the eeriness of a vibrant town suddenly hushed.

Approaching the local university uncovers more of the aliens' plans for our world and their immense level of preparedness. Hard-edged metallic structures have been erected on the quaint streets, with enormous anti-aircraft guns causing problems for my air support.

As my way is blocked, I must move through a bank to find an alternate route. There, I find survivors hidden in the vault below. This leads to a small narrative interlude in which I can choose to help the refugees or abandon them.

These decisions with minor characters have minimal influences on the broader tale (though



there are a few larger branching paths), but they help create a sense of player agency and a touchstone to the civilian state of mind in otherwise lengthy missions. Secondary missions typically last about half an hour, but the primary story encounters can be as long as 90 minutes. All told, we are in for approximately 15 hours of play.

Once outside, the battles become more challenging as a looming, enraged Muton engages my team. Thanks to tactical maneuvering and clever use of skills, he finally falls. Thinking I'm near the objective, I move through the building before encountering my toughest fight yet.

The aliens have a walking tank, and it proves to be too difficult for me over multiple tries. The Sectopod is normally a challenging

foe, but I've made bad squad choices that compound my problems. He's susceptible to Taunt, but I haven't brought a commando with me. Reaching the weak spot on his back is still possible, but it means putting one of my teammates at risk.

As my time with the demo runs out, the Sectopod's armor is cracked and I'm running low on ammunition. One of my squadmates is incapacitated and needs medical attention now. I don't make it in time. I don't have much opportunity to mourn him either, as the Sectopod turns its cannon on me.

As my vision dims, I know that I can do better, and I'm eager to try again with a cooler head and smarter squad selection when The Bureau arrives on August 20. — **Mike Futter**

Roll Call

In the lead up to The Bureau's release, 2K Games filmed and released a series of live-action shorts that build upon the Burn Room reveal trailer. The publisher enlisted the help of actor Dominic Monaghan (Lord of the Rings, *Lost*) as Bureau agent Ennis Cole, who suffers a personal loss during an event in Pima, New Mexico.

Monaghan says that he chose carefully when venturing into video games. "The Bureau is cool, dark, and fun. I love it," he says. Monaghan also has interest in growing his involvement in games, tapping on the shoulder of writer/director David S. Goyer (*Call of Duty: Black Ops* and *Black Ops II*) for inclusion in a script. "I play video games, and the medium's progression has been fascinating to watch. I'm developing a few now, so watch out," he says.

We know that The Bureau: XCOM Declassified will eventually receive downloadable content, but 2K Games is mum right now on whether Monaghan and his character are featured in it. When we asked, they simply agreed that it would be an interesting idea.



Madden NFL 25

The end of an era and the beginning of another

Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

Publisher
EA Sports

Developer
EA Tiburon

Release
August 27
(PS3, Xbox 360)
November
(PS4, Xbox One)

No matter whether you buy Madden 25 for your current home console or the upcoming systems, both versions are filled with features for Madden players of all stripes. Usually when a game releases on two different console generations at the same time there's a risk of producing a sadly watered-down, identical product or one that's clearly inferior, but both products look to be strong in their own right this time around.

Next-Gen Precision

Great-looking graphics are expected of games on a new system, and judging by what we've seen of the next-gen version, Madden 25 won't disappoint the eyes. One thing that is indiscernible from these screens is how the game promises to deliver more atmosphere to the game via active sidelines and crowds. Players on the sideline will be more detailed and less anonymous and cookie-cutter, and they will move out of the way as a player heads out of bounds. You'll even see an owner on the sideline during the Super Bowl.

The Xbox One and PlayStation 4 versions run more computations for all the players on the field and take into account the multitude of different variables that affect all of them while you're playing. This manifests itself in defensive players reading and reacting to take smarter angles to the ball carrier, blockers executing their assignments at the line and on the second level, and the game taking players' size and mass into account when they collide. This additional layer of calculations also extends to player momentum and physics. Cuts and changes of pace should make backs like Adrian Peterson explode upfield. In the past the franchise has unsatisfactorily tried to address these issues, so we hope that the new systems can throw enough horsepower at these problems to solve them for good.

From the Owner's Box

Owner Mode returns for Madden 25, expanding the decisions you can make to propel your franchise forward. Becoming a team owner is one of the optional backstories for last year's

Connected Careers (now known as Connected Franchise), and everything you do is ultimately geared toward making the franchise profitable. Whether you're upgrading an aging stadium or managing the expectations and satisfaction of your fan base through hiring a coaching staff, talking to the media, and offering reasonable concession and merchandise prices, everything in the mode is a balancing act.

Just like the real NFL, stadiums are a paramount concern for owners, and relocation is an option. Should you choose this route instead of negotiating with the city to build a new stadium, you can move the team to one of 17 viable markets and pick from fan-selected team names and stadium designs of varying price tags.

To aid you in making the important decisions on your desk, the mode appears to have a helpful interface, and a team of advisors guides you through the process. Don't worry, there are only millions of dollars at stake and the hopes and dreams of an entire fanbase on your shoulders.

The Handoff

The staggered release between Madden 25 on the current slate of systems and the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 doesn't mean that your progress in Ultimate Team mode will be lost between the generations. Players can make a one-time transfer of up to 1,100 Ultimate Team items (45 players, 55 active roster items, and up to 1,000 from your reserve) from your current-gen Madden 25 title to the next-gen version (Xbox 360 to Xbox One or PS3 to PS4). Even after you make the transfer, you can still use the items and players on your current-gen console, although they can't be auctioned or traded. Finally, owners of the current-gen Madden 25 Anniversary Edition get six additional All Pro packs for Ultimate Team when they start the mode up on the PS4 or Xbox One. — Matthew Kato



Castle of Illusion

Conjuring up a Genesis classic

Last November, Monster Tale developer DreamRift partnered with Disney Interactive Studios to deliver Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion. The 3DS title combined the paint-to-life gameplay of Junction Point's Epic Mickey Wii games with the 2D platforming of the Sega Genesis classic, Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse. It didn't live up to the expectations of gaming Mousketeers, but now Sega is developing a

side-scrolling, high-definition reimagining of Castle of Illusion for PS3, 360, and PC.

Castle of Illusion isn't a one-to-one remake of the Genesis classic. It updates the Disney magic of the original while maintaining the same challenging gameplay. Minnie is still captured by the evil witch Mizrabel, but the story is now fleshed out by a narrator and colorful pictures. Mickey travels across familiar levels like an enchanted forest and living toy

land, but they've been redesigned to deliver a new experience and bring the world to life. The grumpy tree boss from the first stage now appears throughout the level, foreshadowing the battle to come. New 3D sequences spice up the game, like a bramble patch maze or boss fight with a demented Jack-in-the-box.

Platforming through these vibrant worlds feels similar to the Genesis original. Holding down the jump button causes Mickey to bounce off enemies high into the air. The extra boost helps players reach secret areas filled with collectibles, like gems to unlock new levels or projectiles to throw. Mickey can lob apples, marbles, and candle flames at foes like marching toy soldiers or evil fungi. Don't let Castle of Illusion's charm and kid-friendly mascot fool you; this adventure maintains the challenge of the 16-bit era.

Sega has a treasure trove of terrific Disney-themed Genesis titles, and we're happy to see them get dusted off, updated, and delivered to fans via download. **— Tim Turi**

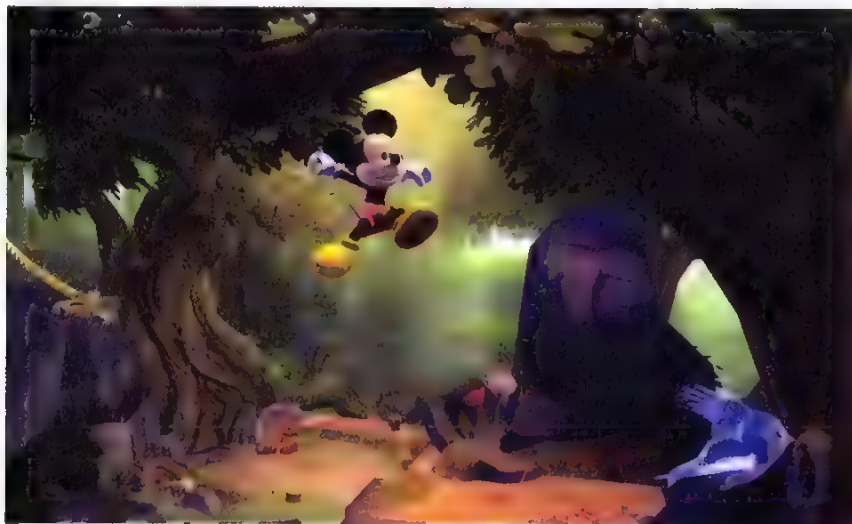
Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

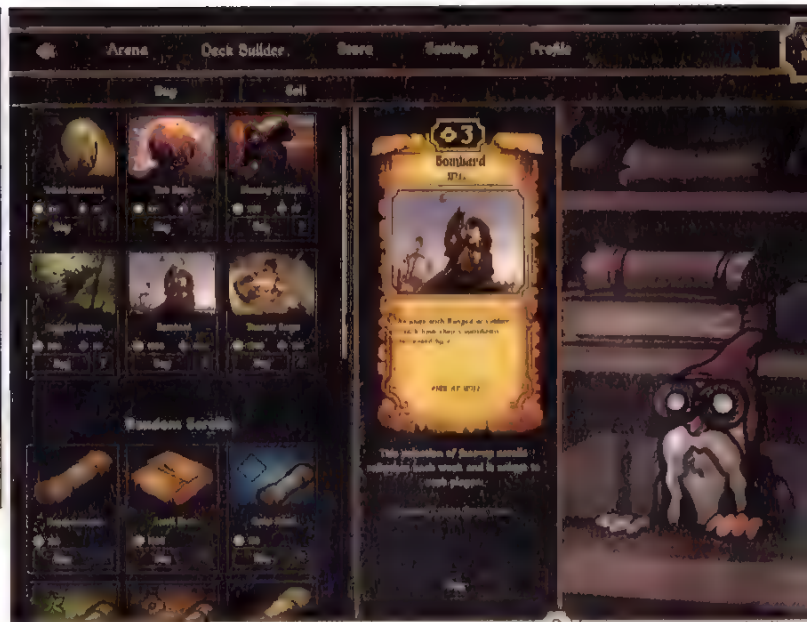
Style
1-Player Platforming

Publisher
Sega

Developer
Sega Studios Australia

Release Dates
September 3
(PlayStation 3)
September 4
(Xbox 360)
September
(PC)





Scrolls

Good ideas in search of refinement

- Platform
PC
- Style
1-Player Strategy
2-Player Online
- Publisher
Mojang
- Developer
Mojang
- Release
TBA

This card-based dueling game is the first bid from the Minecraft creators at Mojang to prove the company is capable of moving beyond a single hit, no matter how gigantic it is. The two titles couldn't be more different, with Scrolls' competitive strategy completely at odds with Minecraft's low-key exploratory and creative gameplay. Based on the near-finished "open beta" (available to anyone who buys the game) Scrolls is currently in, it still has a ways to go.

Scrolls' basic framework is similar to many dueling games that have arisen since Magic: The Gathering took off in the early 1990s. Two players summon creatures and cast spells, each represented by a single card, in an effort to smash through the opponent's defenses and destroy their precious totems. However, Scrolls neatly avoids the dilemma that has plagued Magic from the start by letting players sacrifice cards to build up their resource pool or draw more cards. You never lose a match in Scrolls because you draw too many or too few land.

A simple hex-grid layout gives Scrolls a tactical element that physical card games generally lack. Each unit inhabits a hex, and creatures can move one space per turn to attack or defend a specific lane, or to hide behind an immobile structure so they don't die when the enemy attacks. Many of the best moments

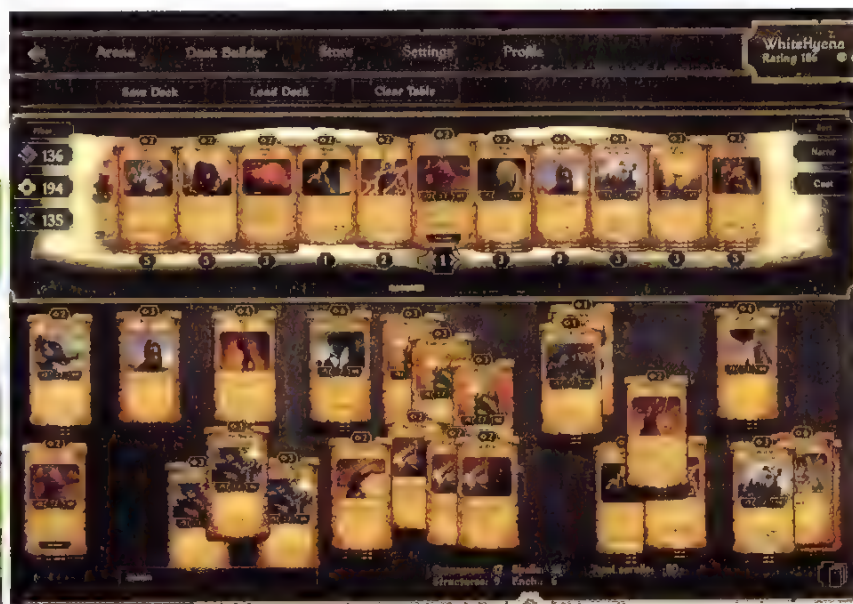
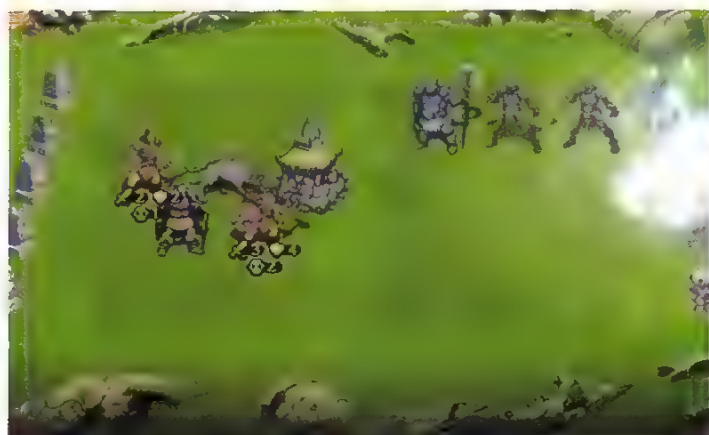
come from lining up attacks and spells to punch through a tough blocker and blow up a key enemy bruiser, or baiting your foe into clustering forces that you can obliterate with a follow-up spell.

These strong and clear mechanics form a sturdy skeleton around which a fantastic game can be built. Unfortunately, the card design itself is uninspired and lacks the diversity and cleverness that greatness requires. Most creatures are minor variations on "does X damage every Y turns and has Z health," without any further interactions with each other. Spells powerful enough to straight-up kill a creature are on the high end of the power curve; board-clearing effects or other bombs that dramatically affect the course of a match are almost nonexistent. Because every card doubles as a resource and card-draw generator, the card pool starts out somewhat homogenized. On top of all that, winning a match requires blasting a huge amount of damage past your enemy's defenses.

The net effect of all these elements is that matches tend to be slogs where players slowly grind through their opponent's army and totems, with whomever draws the better two cards in a given turn gaining a temporary advantage. The eventual victor tends to be the player that has more of those turns on balance. A short match is 20 minutes long, and only a handful of turns out of the dozens mark any real turning points in the battle.

Despite the problems Scrolls currently faces, its underlying system is strong enough that it could still achieve greatness on its own merits. The business model is reasonable, where you can purchase additional starter decks but the best cards have to be earned by playing the game. Online play works well, the presentation is high-end for its \$20 price point, and the mechanics are clear and streamlined. Right now, though, the slow pacing and boring card pool make this a beta worth waiting out rather than jumping in on the ground floor.

—Adam Biessener





Ratchet & Clank: Into the Nexus

Single-player Ratchet is back

Insomniac has been tinkering with the Ratchet & Clank series recently. Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One took the duo, Quark, and Dr. Nefarious on a four-player co-op adventure, and Ratchet & Clank: Full Frontal Assault focused on competitive multiplayer. Fans have been without a new single-player Ratchet game since 2009, and Insomniac is making up for the absence with Ratchet & Clank: Into the Nexus. This PlayStation 3 title delivers new zany weapons and brings zero-gravity gameplay into the mix.

Insomniac describes Into the Nexus as an epilogue to the Future trilogy, so expect

characters like Captain Quark and Zephyr to return. The game begins with Ratchet and his robotic pal Clank transporting dangerous criminals, but something goes wrong and the ship goes down.

After the pair crash-lands on a new world, players acquire new weapons like the Winterizer, which turns enemies into snowmen, and a gun that unleashes foes' worst fears against them, like clowns or severed eyeballs. Weapons can once again be upgraded simply by using them, and the achievement-like skill points make a return.

Side-scrolling levels similar to those seen

in the original PlayStation 2 games return to diversify the action. Clank also has some solo adventures with the occasional puzzle sequences. Spacewalks appear to mix up the formula, as the trailer shows Ratchet floating through the stars among ship debris. The Gravity Tether delivers more floating fun, letting Ratchet place tractor-beam-like tunnels in the environment to solve Portal-esque situations.

Ratchet & Clank: Into the Nexus is coming to the PlayStation 3 this fall for \$29.99 in both downloadable and disc formats. Insomniac isn't ruling out the possibility of a Vita version, but the developer is focused on making the best PlayStation 3 game it can for now. Whether it comes to Sony's handheld or not, it's good to see the return of the Ratchet we used to know. — Tim Turi

Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1-Player Action

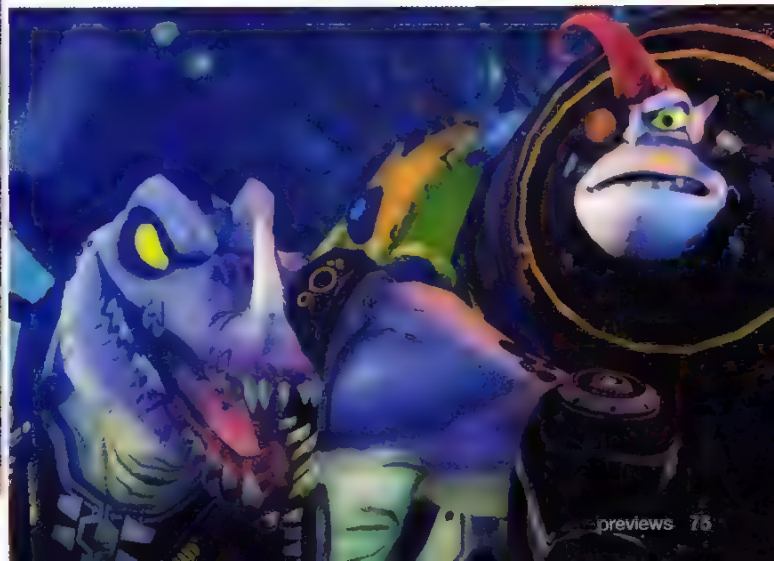
Publisher
Sony Computer Entertainment

Developer
Insomniac Games

Release Date
Fall



Clank helps Ratchet float through the air.





Crimson Dragon

Guarding the skies on your own dragon

Platform

Xbox One

Style

1-Player Action

Publisher

Microsoft Studios

Developer

Grounding Inc.

Release

Holiday

At first, second, and even third glance, Grounding Inc.'s upcoming Xbox One game looks a lot like the Panzer Dragon series. Both games feature a human pilot astride a monstrous dragon, battling equally fantastical creatures. Those dragons are infused with weaponry that allows players to lock on to (and obliterate) multiple enemies with the swipe of a targeting reticle. They also share the same creator, Yukio Futatsugi. Let's just call it a spiritual successor and move on.

In *Crimson Dragon's* world, humans have traveled far away from Earth to the planet Drago. As fate would have it, the planet is rich in resources – and danger. While huge monsters naturally garner much of the colonist's attention, something far smaller and more insidious works against them as well.

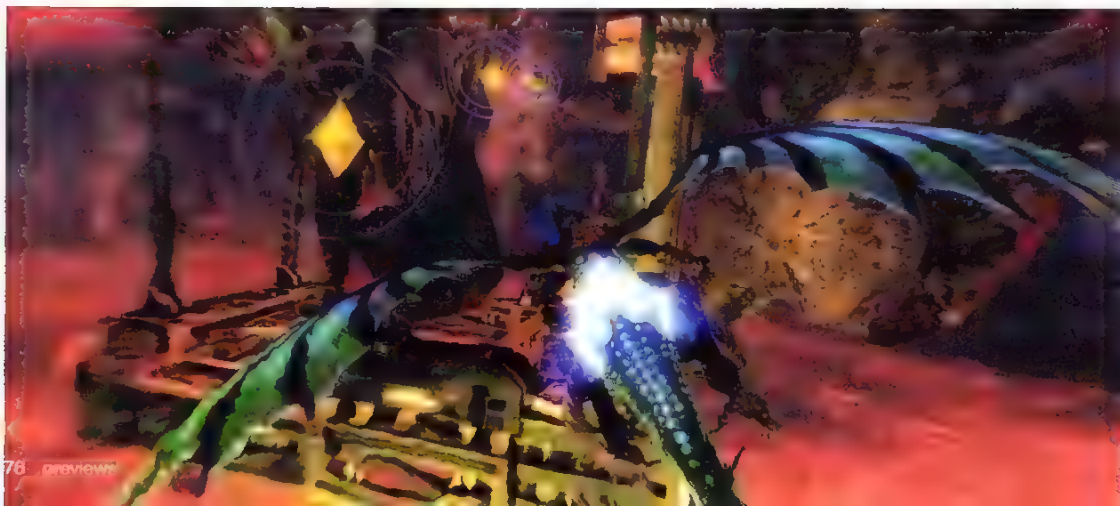
A disease, known as crimson scale, kills the vast majority of people it infects. Those who survive, however, gain something greater than immunity from further outbreaks. They gain the power to communicate with the planet's dragons, and are able to ride the beasts.

Players can raise their own dragon, which visually changes as it becomes stronger. Dragons hail from several different tribes, and their attacks and attributes vary depending upon their lineage. They may be inclined toward different strengths and weaknesses, but players can tailor their mounts to their play style. "Let's say there's a dragon that's really good at quick turning, but the attack ability is a little low," Futatsugi says. "You could use that dragon and train the attacking so that the dragon will learn to fight in your favorite way." Panzer Dragoon veterans may have perked

up at the mention of turning. Unlike those games, *Crimson Dragon* features free-flight sections. The entire game isn't designed with complete freedom in mind – Futatsugi joked that would be too much like *Grand Theft Auto* with a dragon – but players can control their own flight during the larger boss battles.

I fought in one such mission against a segmented creature in a lava-filled cavern. The long beast had rows of weak spots, which meant that every wave of attacks I threw his way was preceded with a series of targeting blips that were nearly as satisfying. Futatsugi says a lot of work went into details that players may not even consider. For instance, that giant worm dives in and out of the lava. To counter the toll that incredible amount of heat takes on its skin, it's constantly melting. That melted exterior acts as a temporary heat buffer. Sure enough, look closely and you can see the shimmering slime. Another dragon is deceptively large – after battling it you learn that much of its size is a façade. The inspiration for that one? According to Futatsugi, it was the Japanese singer Sachiko Kobayashi, who's known for her elaborate costuming.

I only played through a single section of a level, but I left the demo optimistic and eager to try more. The game was originally set as a Kinect game for Xbox 360, and I think Microsoft and Grounding made the right move by pushing it to the next generation using a traditional control scheme. The cavern was tight and I did my share of bouncing around, but I can't say whether that was from my deficiencies as a dragon pilot or the controls. I've never contracted crimson scale, which may be a factor. — Jeff Cork





World of Tanks

The tanks invade American soil

World of Tanks is one of the largest free-to-play titles in the world, but it's never caught fire in North America. In order to crack into this elusive market, Belarusian publisher Wargaming decided it needed to make the jump to consoles. The company found an unlikely partner in Microsoft, whose Xbox 360 console opened its doors to free-to-play games last year with ToyLogic's Hay Day.

The premise of World of Tanks is simple – you take control of a World War II-era tank and try to shoot other tanks. As you rack up kills,

you gain currency used to customize your tank or buy a new one. Following the typical free-to-play financial model, impatient players can also spend their real-world money on tanks and upgrades.

To ease the transition to consoles, Wargaming tapped the console expertise of Wargaming West, formerly known as Day 1 Studios, which has shipped F.E.A.R., Fracture, and F.E.A.R. 3 on the Xbox 360. Wargaming West smoothed the transition from keyboard and mouse to a standard controller and revamped the HUD to make use of larger TV

screens (compared to the average PC monitor). The game runs on the studio's proprietary Despair Engine, but both the art assets and server infrastructure are being ported from the original version.

It remains to be seen whether American audiences will embrace tank-on-tank skirmishes when they have options like Battlefield that feature combat combining tanks, air support, and infantry. But the glory of the free-to-play model is that it won't cost Xbox Live Gold members a dime to see if the gameplay appeals to them. » **Matt Bertz**

» **Platform**
Xbox 360

» **Style**
30-Player
Online Action

» **Publisher**
Wargaming

» **Developer**
Wargaming West

» **Release**
Summer

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Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix

The Magic Kingdom goes high definition

Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

Publisher
Square Enix

Developer
Square Enix

Release
September 10

Kingdom Hearts fans are a demanding bunch. For many years, priority one has been pressuring Square Enix to make Kingdom Hearts III. Now that Square announced it at this year's E3, the crowd can turn its eyes toward the second most requested goal: HD remakes of the previous games. Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix contains the original Kingdom Hearts game (PS2), Re:Chain of Memories (PS2), and all of the cutscenes from 358/2 Days (DS). All of these entries can be accessed from the start, but we've listed them below in order of chronology and importance.

Kingdom Hearts (2002)

The crown jewel of the collection, Kingdom Hearts takes players back to where it all began. After seven games and more than 10 years of complicated and twisting storytelling, it's refreshing to start over and simply absorb the tale before you.

From Sora's first steps on the pristine beaches of Destiny Islands, it's clear that a

lot of love went into this remake. The visuals look surprisingly good for a game this old. The simple cartoony art style lends itself well to an HD upgrade, as many of the original textures weren't extremely detailed in the first place.

This edition marks the first time that western players can experience the Final Mix version. This formerly Japan-only director's cut adds in new enemies, weapons, abilities, and plenty more. On top of these Final Mix bonuses, Square streamlined the controls for modern times. The camera is now controlled with the right stick instead of the shoulder buttons, and environmental interactions and summons are far easier to access.

Kingdom Hearts Re:Chain of Memories (2007)

This marks the second time Square has re-released Chain of Memories. Originally a sprite-based 2D card battler on Game Boy Advance in 2004, it jumped to PS2 with 3D characters and environments a few years later. This is an HD version of that second edition,

and not much else has changed. Chain of Memories' card system remains the series' most different and at times frustrating combat mechanic. The story covers Sora's journey between Kingdom Hearts I and II.

Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days (2009)

I never thought I'd have to explain how to pronounce this game ever again, yet here we are. Say it like this: three-five-eight days over two. This entry contains none of the original gameplay. Apparently, upping the resolution of the DS visuals wasn't as simple and cost-effective as with the other two games. Instead, players get HD cutscenes with added facial expression and more voicework for scenes that only used to contain word bubbles. The videos run just under three hours, which sounds like a slog. But when you compare it to playing the entire game again you're shaving off about 20 hours. Besides, if you haven't bothered to play 358/2 Days after all these years, the story is probably all you're curious about anyway. *Bryan Vore*



Sonic Lost World

Sonic takes a cue from his former rival



Sonic is back again in a 3D adventure coming to both the Wii U and 3DS. This time the blue blur zips, leaps, and wall runs across a variety of Mario Galaxy-style planets, busting up robots along the way. A new group of threatening foes calling themselves the Deadly Six appears, forcing Dr. Robotnik and Sonic into an improbable alliance.

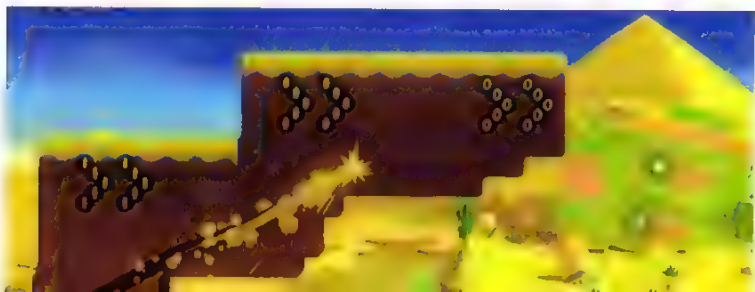
Each world in Sonic Lost World is composed of smaller planets. Sonic jumps, runs, and does parkour stunts across these individual planets, and blasts off to the next using springs or cannons. Similar to Super Mario Galaxy, Sonic can run in a full circle around certain floating masses, opening up several routes to the finish. Holding down a shoulder button makes Sonic go faster, allowing him to run along walls or avoid pit-falls. The color powers from Sonic Colors return, which turn Sonic into a laser beam or let him drill through the ground. A second player can also pick up a Wii remote and assist Sonic using one of Tails' remote-controlled vehicles to pick up stray rings or hit enemies.

Sonic is no stranger to varied, colorful worlds, and that trend continues here. The blue hedgehog speeds across a colorful, Green Hill Zone-inspired area, a casino area filled with rolling poker chips and pinball machines, and a side-scrolling section composed of licorice pathways and truffle cannons. Each area is filled with familiar enemies like the crabs from Casino Night Zone and lady bugs from Green Hill Zone.

The 3DS versions features 3D gameplay similar to its Wii U counterpart. Sonic explores similar worlds, but also visits some areas unique to the 3DS title. One example is a side-scrolling level set in a pyramid, where Sonic solves simple puzzles to throw switches and activate staircases. Developer Dimps botched its long run of solid handheld Sonic games with 2011's Sonic Generations on 3DS, so hopefully this is a return to form.

Sonic's 3D offerings have been a disappointment this generation, but the Super Mario Galaxy inspiration may be what the series needs to correct its course.

—Tim Turi



» **Platform**
Wii U • 3DS

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player
Platforming
(Wii U)
1-Player
Platforming
(3DS)

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Sonic Team (Wii U)
Dimps (3DS)

» **Release**
October 13



Disgaea D2: A Brighter Darkness

Laharl, Etna, and Flonne are back in high resolution

The beloved cast is back to entice gamers with more strategy and plenty of Prinnies. The group from Disgaea: Hour of Darkness are taking on a brand-new quest that picks up where the original PlayStation 2 game left off.

Laharl may have finally become Overlord, but not many demons even know that he's taken the title. Laharl is determined to show his power and make demons respect his authority. His plan? Placing monuments of himself across the universe. Flonne, who now lives at the castle after being cast from her home as a "Fallen Angel," is along for the ride. Laharl's favorite vassal, Etna, also joins them. Etna gets the prinnies to create statues of Laharl that capture his great antenna, but don't highlight his iconic scowl.

Disgaea's trademark quirkiness is evident even from my short hands-on time. Banter between Laharl and Etna is sharp as always, like a sister teasing her little brother. Flonne's innocence and happy demeanor makes the party dynamic even more hilarious. At the start, she's trying to figure out why her plants don't grow, only to have Laharl ugly up her field.

The demons don't exactly love Laharl's monuments, so Laharl does the next best thing — beat them into submission. The gameplay hasn't changed much; Disgaea remains a grid-based strategy/RPG with heaps of customization and leveling. New additions like a mounting mechanic for special attacks (replacing magichanges), a cheat shop, character conversations during battle, a sea angel class, and demon dojo for raising statistics add some new paint on the NIS standby. Protect attacks also let teammates with high likeability guard a nearby character from incoming attacks.

The high-res sprites make Laharl and company look the best they ever have. With systems to tweak and characters to level, Disgaea D2: A Brighter Darkness is packed with content to entice diehards to reach level 9999. — Kimberley Wallace

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
NIS America

» **Developer**
Nippon Ichi Software

» **Release**
October 8





gameformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

91 Plants vs. Zombies 2

Mobile titles rarely beat out their console and PC brethren for Game of the Month, but PopCap's impressively approachable strategy title is special. Adorable character art, clever enemy design, and some fun era-spanning levels make this a surprisingly deep tower defense title. Plants vs. Zombies 2 isn't a mobile game you'll want to play in line at the grocery store. You'll want to carve out plenty of time to tackle PopCap's newest masterpiece, because once you start kicking zombies off your lawn, you'll have trouble putting this game down.

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.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming heaven, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.

5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be unmissably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	The Ouya controller.

AWARDS

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

The Walking Dead: 400 Days

Still shocking without Clementine or Lee



Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Telltale Games **Developer** Telltale Games **Release** July 2 **Rating** M

400 Days' appeal is made up of brief, striking moments. With this special episode's glimpses into five different lives, it's not a strong attachment like Clementine's that keeps the emotional investment. Instead, it's the plight of the situation, the choices that represent humanity, and what people will do to survive.

At one point, I felt transported to the actual conundrum: Should I kill and betray my conscience, or run and risk my safety? As the choice lingered on the screen, emotions roiled inside me. The heart-pumping decision had no right or wrong answer, as both were unappealing, but it mattered so much that I paused and stared at each choice for a minute. The doubt that surmounts in these moments are when 400 Days is at its best, and thankfully, it has enough of them to keep these small slices of story afloat. Expect plenty of grim situations and don't anticipate walking away happy or feeling secure — that's exactly the way a zombie apocalypse should feel.

While Telltale Games preps the second season of last year's breakout story, 400 Days caters to fans by connecting to season one while alluding to what's in store for the next

season. But with five new characters and around 20 minutes for their introductory episodes, it's tough getting to know them. That's part of the beauty. All that's revealed are glimpses, yet the writers still provide strong identities. Off the bat, it's clear that Shel would do anything for her younger sister and that there's more to Vince's story than being a murderer. No matter how many shades of gray are evident in each main character, they all remain likeable and intriguing.

Although the stories are slim, they still have depth. One explores how a young girl is hardened by the cruelty of the apocalypse; another has you against a man losing his sanity. Dialogue remains natural and witty, and inserts some humor for levity. That said, some of the five stories, like Shel's, hit the emotional chord harder than others. For instance, in Wyatt's story, the "big choice" lacks impact; his arc is entirely forgettable. One theme remains the same, however: somberness. Most of the final choices echo through you long after the encounter finishes.

Gameplay once again is a very minor portion of The Walking Dead, which isn't a bad thing. The effort to create suitable tension

is noble; you dodge gunfire, shoot at a moving car, and pull a weapon from the ground with only seconds before you're found. The speed at which you have to perform these actions is what makes them function well, not the actual execution or action, which always feels second-rate compared to the plot.

The dialogue choices and decisions are the highlight, but it's impossible to escape feeling forced into some choices that bridge to gameplay. For instance, in one scene, something sneaked up on my character. I hesitated at striking because I wanted to make sure it wasn't somebody I knew; I quickly found the "Game Over" screen. In my next attempt, I struck, and my previous observation was correct. Instead of being rewarded for correctly anticipating a circumstance, I was instead forced to play in a way I wouldn't have.

The only other shortcoming is the abrupt endings to the stories. At the end of the episode, it tries too hard to wrap up some lingering questions quickly, and it feels like you're being read a laundry list. These conclusions are just as sad as some of the outcomes in the stories, and seeing this expanded on screen would reinforce the devastating consequences. As rushed as the ultimate ending feels, it does get you thinking about The Walking Dead's next move with season two.

Ultimately, 400 Days is worth playing for invested fans. Some of these stories had me in frenzied thought, while others left me underwhelmed. Either way, 400 Days feels like a preparation for what's to come. As this DLC ups the shock factor, it makes it clear that Telltale has no boundaries, and you should prepare your emotions for season two accordingly. — **Kimberley Wallace**

8

» Concept

Bridge seasons one and two of The Walking Dead with five new characters

» Graphics

The graphics look comparable to season one, with expressive characters reacting to the situation at hand

» Sound

Voice acting fits characters to a tee, but some spoken lines don't feel natural. The music also matches the intensity of what's on screen

» Playability

The point-and-click controls are easy to grasp, but aiming with a controller can be tricky during the sparse action segments

» Emotional Investment

The top-notch writing is back with intriguing characters, lingering cliffhangers, and unpredictable moments

» Replay Value

Moderate





Ride to Hell: Retribution

A new contender for worst game of the generation

2

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Eutechnyx **Release** June 25 **Rating** M

Concept

Drive, shoot, and fight in a quest for revenge against a rival biker gang

Graphics

Everyone's necks are horrifying, and everything else looks like it's from 2004

Sound

Constant loops of generic guitar riffs (or porno music when you're having sex)

Playability

There isn't a single action in this game that controls well

Entertainment

As terrible as it is, there's no denying that it's hilarious to play and watch

Replay Value

Low

Ride to Hell: Retribution occasionally resembles an actual video game. You can sometimes move around and shoot enemies without a hilarious and game-breaking bug getting in the way of the experience. Despite this infrequent adequacy, the rest of the game features every core flaw imaginable. Driving controls are terrible, gunplay is loose, checkpoints are inconsistent, awful quick-time events abound, environments are riddled with glitches and pop-up, enemy AI is mindless, and the story is terrible. These elements make for a bad video game, but Ride To Hell: Retribution goes above and beyond in its pursuit of awfulness.

Just when you think you've seen all that can go wrong, it surprises you with another piece of absolute garbage. On more than one occasion, I was forced to restart my Xbox 360 thanks to a hard freeze. Protagonist Jake makes fun of an enemy's ponytail, despite the fact that no one in the vicinity actually has a ponytail. Onscreen prompts have spelling errors. Vehicles randomly explode. Objective indicators often do

not indicate objectives. Cutscenes feature important textures that don't fill in until over 10 seconds have passed. Load screens are lengthy and constant. Checkpoints will activate fractions of a second before dynamite instantly kills you. Instructions on hand-to-hand fighting are sometimes displayed while you're in a racing level. The legs of enemy motorcyclists magically grow ten feet, causing you to compete against a freakish, convulsing giant. At one point, my entire body disappeared and I was nothing but a floating miner's cap that could fire a gun. A tutorial screen explains that any woman that you help out will automatically

have sex with you and restore your health. Incidentally, when these sex scenes occur, all characters involved go through the motions fully clothed.

With the exception of some Kinect and Wii games that flat-out don't work, this is the worst video game I've played this console generation. Thankfully, it's terrible in such a way as to make it absolutely hilarious. As I played, curious co-workers stopped by to gawk at its unbelievable ineptness. Ride To Hell: Retribution is awful, broken, offensive, ugly, poorly written, and a never-ending source of unintentional humor.

Dan Ryckert





Dragon's Crown

A massive adventure rooted in nostalgia

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/RPG (4-Player Online) Publisher Atlus Developer Vanillaware Release August 6 Rating T

8

The many arcade brawlers of the '80s and '90s offer fun but concise cooperative adventures uniquely suited to popping in quarters for a quick playthrough. Before I began playing, I worried *Dragon's Crown* might be equally brief, and less appropriate for modern platforms. My concern was unwarranted. *Dragon's Crown* is a lengthy, rich adventure filled with enough quests to complete and skills to unlock to keep a player busy for dozens of hours. Its breathtaking art style made me stop more than once just to admire the backgrounds, and the gameplay is simple and hard to put down. Even with some structural missteps, I'm amazed how much I'm still enjoying the game with over 30 hours on the clock.

The legacy of the '90s-era brawlers looms large in *Dragon's Crown*. That simple gameplay carries over, focusing on side-scrolling action stages, simple controls, and a varied collection of enemies and bosses to confront. Flashy spell effects and area-clearing shockwaves make each character exciting to play from the beginning, but keeping track of the onscreen action is sometimes impossible as the colors and explosions start to fly.

To update the classic formula, Vanillaware added a city hub where players buy equipment, acquire character skills, resurrect allies, and trace a threadbare fantasy story of royal succession and ancient dragons. The town hub adds depth and customization to the experience as you shape a character to your goals. Different upgrade and equipment choices change the nature of your attacks and defenses, lending an RPG flair to the otherwise action-focused experience. If playing solo or below the four-player team size, AI-controlled allies can join you on each mission, further customizing difficulty and the degree of onscreen mayhem. I love the variety of upgrade and play modification choices, especially since each of the six classes has a distinct set of abilities, combat maneuvers, and spells to explore. Some classes, like the fighter and amazon, offer a more traditional hack-and-slash experience, while the archer and wizard are more strategic; all are balanced and enjoyable, even if the differences might not be enough to justify a playthrough of each.

The nine lengthy levels run the gamut of fantasy tropes, including a trek into the lost woods, a climb up the mage's tower, and an expedition into the ruins of a timeworn city. Intriguing monsters populate these levels, many of which employ distinct tactics to keep you on your toes. Cultist wizards are able to teleport, and vengeful ghosts are only vulnerable to light and fire. However, the end-of-stage bosses steal the show. One battle has you slashing away at a kraken as its tentacles flail and tear down the environment around you. Another sets you against a horde of vicious pirates, with a genie's magic lamp thrown into the mix for whichever side can grab it first. You redo these stages and bosses several times in the pursuit of different quests and higher levels. The grind is noticeable, and can be a turn-off. The repetition is alleviated by two factors. First, monsters and their placement changes up for subsequent playthroughs. Second, once you get about a third of the way through the main quest, a second path opens up in all nine stages, complete with new boss fights.

I love the core gameplay loop of battling in the wilderness, and then returning to town to recharge and improve. I wish I could be as enthusiastic about some of the structural constraints. Four-player local play is open from the beginning, but only the first player's character advances through the story progression. If you happen to be in the second or third player slot, your character advances in level, but not through the story. Meanwhile, online play remains locked until you reach an arbitrary point several hours into the storyline. With such potential for enjoyable multiplayer, these two barriers are tragic.

While they don't affect enjoyment nearly as much as the multiplayer nonsense, I was also confused by the scoring and treasure system. Vanillaware offers little explanation to these systems or their importance to your character's growth, and I often found myself wondering why I got a certain treasure rating, or why one level's score (which connects to your earned XP) seemed so much higher than another. I recommend glossing over these confusions and focusing on the fun of beating up monsters.

Dragon's Crown is filled with small touches to enrich your play time, and these features layer in every few hours to help keep the experience fresh. Treasure hunting with an onscreen pointer offers an optional way to get more loot, even if it distracts from the action. Rune magic lets you explore spell effects hidden in the level backgrounds. Later still, cooking between adventures provides a way to refuel characters without returning to town. Finally, after beating the game, a new hard mode offers dramatically more challenging versions of the familiar levels and bosses, effectively adding a new game+ option.

It's clear that Vanillaware has a fervent love for the roots of the role-playing genre. Nods to old tabletop gaming abound, up to and including a dungeon master-like narrator who carries you through the story. Even so, *Dragon's Crown* needn't be a niche title; its accessible combat and rewarding upgrades are great fun for any action fan. In particular, if you have fond memories of days spent gathered in dim arcades with friends, wasting enemies and quarters in equal measure, then this is a surefire hit. *Dragon's Crown* is proof that the cooperative brawler isn't dead. **Matt Miller**

Concept

Update the classic brawler formula through RPG leveling mechanics and a sizable, challenging adventure

Graphics

Hand-drawn character, monster, and background art are beautiful to behold, even if a couple of the hypersexualized character models are ridiculous

Music

Neither the standard fantasy music nor limited voiceover work do much to elevate the experience. Battle sound effects are appropriately exciting

Playability

Excellent controls give players plenty of options for how to play, but the menus, treasure, and scoring system are poorly explained

Replay Value

A grand adventure squarely targeted at fans of old-school beat 'em ups, with enough modern features to hold its own

Moderate





Tales of Xillia

Coming back stronger

8.25

Concept

Fight to stop powerful technology from destroying innocents while bonding with party members

Graphics

The graphics are dated, but small touches like the blue-green skies of Fennmont stand out. Unfortunately, framerate issues are noticeable

Sound

Music adds life to cities and play, while higher difficulties test those who want to master every combat element

Playability

Smooth battle mechanics make it easy to pick up and play, while higher difficulties test those who want to master every combat element

Entertainment

Frantic battles, great character interactions, and a rollercoaster story make Tales of Xillia hard to put down

Replay Value

Moderate

Tales of Xillia made me realize why I fell in love with RPGs in the first place. It has the elements that make them tick: making you feel like you know the characters, enticing you to find every hidden chest, mastering the battle system, and finding it hard to put the controller down because the next revelation draws you in even more.

This entry marks the first Tales with two selectable characters whose stories unfold through their perspective, allowing you to see some different scenes and character viewpoints. Milla is a naive, strong-willed spirit summoner, while Jude is a do-good, passive medical student. The way these two learn from each other is an interesting dynamic, especially as a powerful weapon falls into the wrong hands and they experience the sacrifices that war demands.

Character interactions are Tales' hallmark, and this entry doesn't disappoint. A plethora of insightful scenes develop their personalities, and most characters have intriguing backstories that fit well into the plot. Even characters that start off annoying – such as a talking doll – become more meaningful as they progress through their unique arcs. The narrative also keeps you guessing and invested. No revelation appears too early; the writers are good bluffers whether they're making you guess about a character's trustworthiness or who's really at the root of all the evil. Xillia's greatest asset is its ability to balance tragic and lighthearted moments (like characters fighting about cats and dogs).

The action battle system is strong thanks to the addition of the link system. You can link two characters up to flank opponents, and the linked character also blocks attacks and provides bonuses. The boost is useful, but

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Namco Bandai Developer Namco Bandai Release August 6 Rating T

the choices you make in the heat of battle are what keep you hooked. For instance, if a monster is healing itself with an item, you can create a link to a character whose perk is to steal items. You can also link to negate your enemies' strengths, like teaming up with the character with magic guard to take on a monster with powerful spells.

The choices don't stop there. In a first for the series, now you can choose which artes and skills you want by using a system similar to Final Fantasy's sphere grid. This player-driven system allows players to choose when they learn important magic like resurrection, or focus on buffing a combat-oriented character with more strength.

Regular enemies are pushovers, giving you a place to experiment. Boss battles are downright punishing if you don't strategize; defending, chaining attacks, and precise timing are vital. The action is quick, akin to a fighting game, as you can also jump and dodge. I usually hoard my items in RPGs, but here I had to rely on them. The tension of walking into a boss fight is hard to top.

Part of preparing for boss battles is making

sure you explore the world, as there are tons of hidden items you can climb up vines or duck under small nooks to find. In addition, treasures are alluring because materials can be donated to expand shops for new equipment and discounts. Area design needs work, though; most roads you travel feel the same, just with a different coat of paint. Dungeons aren't much better. It feels like Namco Bandai was stretching for ideas by adding simple box-moving puzzles. In a mine, you can excavate new parts of the dungeon, but it is simply tapping "X" to break a rock, which isn't fun. Plenty of areas come off hollow and uninspired, exacerbating the repetition.

Last year, Tales of Graces f rekindled my love of the series, but it left room for improvement. Xillia entered the realm looking to surpass it, and did. It isn't a panacea, but it tells a more engaging tale, weaving in more meaningful characters. It doesn't just improve its writing; Xillia also has an enhanced battle system where all the parts work together well. It may not have the production values of Final Fantasy, but Xillia makes up for it in charm and gusto. • [Kimberley Wallace](#)



Pikmin 3

A little help from my friends



Style 1 to 4-Player Strategy Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release August 4 Rating E10+

9



Game designer Shigeru Miyamoto told us a while ago that *Pikmin 3* is a game about cooking. Fortunately for the squeamish, it's not in the literal sense; you won't be julienning the titular creatures and tossing them in a stew. But just as simultaneously preparing several dishes in a kitchen requires deft multitasking skills, players must juggle three new pilots and their unusual friends. It's a busy, tense, and occasionally frustrating process, but as with a good meal, the results are deeply satisfying.

Pikmin 3's crew is on a mission to find food for their home planet, Koppai. Their search leads them to planet PNF-404, a dead ringer for Earth that happens to be filled with delicious fruit. The team of explorers prepares to land, but their ship crashes in the process. The team is separated, and it's up to the players to reunite them, fill their ship's pantry with food, and help them make their way home. It's a tall order, but they have a few hundred helping hands.

Pikmin 3's core is familiar enough. You move your tiny astronaut around, commanding the pikmin—helpful little plant creatures—to pick up items, move obstacles around, and battle less-welcoming residents. The game introduces a pair of new pikmin types, but the chief change to the game comes when Alph, Brittany, and Charlie are reunited.

The game does a good job of easing players into the transition, first teaching them how to gather pikmin with the tweet of a whistle and issue commands. The tiny creatures dutifully respond to the best of their ability. Direct them onto a pile of ceramic fragments, and they'll move in formation to assemble a bridge, holding the outsized chunks overhead like adorable leaf-cutter ants. Throw them on top of a marauding beetle, and they'll cling to its carapace, pounding on the creature until it shudders and dies. In past installments, players had to manage the troops with a single general. Now there are three.

Aside from the obvious benefit of being able to spread out on the map and explore a larger area, players can throw their buddies

to otherwise inaccessible ledges. The world is dotted with fruit, and since the crew can't directly interact with anything in the environments, players need to learn how to prioritize and manage their tiny armies. All pikmin aren't created equally, which complicates matters. Red pikmin are fireproof and aggressive, for example, while the yellow types are immune to electrocution. New flying and rock types can soar over hazards and break glass panels, respectively. The game has a nice puzzle aspect to it, as well as a tantalizing sense of desire at seeing a huge melon or apple just out of reach. You may not have the required pikmin type when you first spy it, which makes going back to retrieve it later all the more satisfying.

When pikmin carry fruit back to your ship, it's converted into precious juice. Your crew consumes one tank of juice each night, so you need to make sure you have a good amount stockpiled. *Pikmin 3* is more forgiving than its predecessors, though. A typical in-game day is over in about 15 minutes, which is more than enough time to locate and retrieve a good amount of fruit. In a particularly helpful move, you can select waypoints

on the GamePad and automate your crew. After all, what's the point of having three playable characters if you have to micromanage each one?

The biggest challenge I faced was dealing with the default controls. The GamePad lacks the precision you need to interact with some of the enemies. Everything's fine when you're moving treats around and building bridges, but a battle against even some of the low-grade foes is unnecessarily frustrating. Flying bugs and quick-moving enemies are difficult to track with the analog stick. I found the delightfully grotesque boss battles more difficult because I couldn't draw a consistent bead on their obvious weak points. Plug in a Wii remote and nunchuk, and those issues go away, at the expense of refined camera controls. That's a compromise well worth making. Another annoyance came with the pikmin themselves. Their pathing AI is good, until it isn't. One moment I'd marvel at a complex circuit of lily-pad hopping pikmin, the next I'd watch helplessly as they needlessly drowned attempting to cut a corner.

While the campaign doesn't offer co-op, you can play a few special missions locally with a partner. These are based on either collecting as much fruit or defeating as many enemies as possible within a time limit. I had a blast with these, and consistently found myself shouting things like, "I'm on the apple, you take the underwater sand wall!" Up to four players can face off in a split-screen bingo battle mode, which is a clever riff on the game. Players are given cards with icons of different items on them. You then have to complete a line first by bringing the necessary loot back to your home base. I also found myself shouting a lot during this mode, but I can't repeat what I was yelling here. I will say that it's a great deal of fun.

Pikmin 3's control issues are buoyed by solid improvements to the series and easily accessible alternative inputs. It's adorable, and if you're a Wii U owner, consider this an essential game. — Jeff Cork

» Concept

Command an army of tiny creatures to collect fruit and help your crew find their way home

» Graphics

Everyday objects like flowers and apples look positively gigantic, thanks to the depth of field effects

» Sound

The score slowly shifts from pleasant to unnerving as dusk approaches. The squeals of *Pikmin* in peril may make you feel like a terrible guardian

» Playability

You're going to either want to pull your Wii controllers out of storage or buy some new ones. The GamePad is functional, but lacks precision

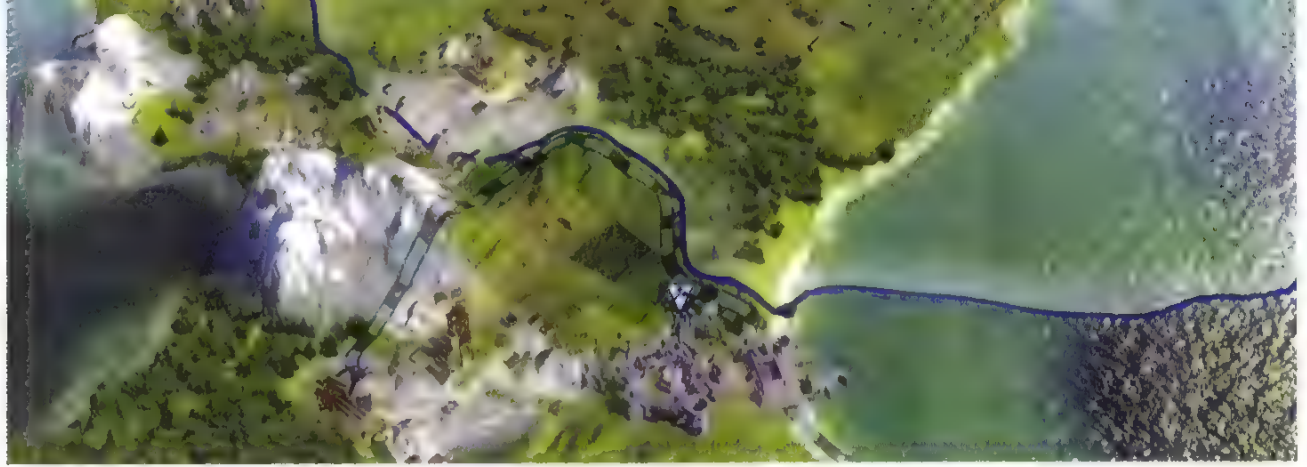
» Entertainment

Managing three pilots is tricky at times, but the rewards are worth it

» Replay Value

Moderately high





Civilization V: Brave New World

Available on PC, Mac, and Linux

9.25

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy (Up to 8-Player Local or Online) Publisher 2K Games Developer Firaxis Games Release July 8 Rating E10+

» Concept

Flesh out the peaceful side of the human-history strategy epic with new diplomatic options and a revamped culture war

» Graphics

Civilization V's presentation still stands head, shoulders, midsection, and legs above similar strategy games

» Sound

The score, while well-chosen, is not extensive enough to remain entertaining over the lengthy playtime Brave New World deserves

» Playability

The interface remains a genre-leading model of usefulness, though a few long-standing blind spots still haven't been addressed

» Entertainment

This second expansion cements Civilization as the marquee strategy title in all of gaming

» Replay Value

High

World-conquering wargames are nearly as old as the video game medium. Dozens of polished variations on the theme have entertained us for decades. Such expansive empires are exceptions to the rule of human history, though. Modeling the kind of soft power through which Venice built its trade hegemony and Denmark stamped an outsized influence on European politics has historically been much more difficult. Civilization V: Brave New World pushes the latest incarnation of the legendary strategy franchise in that direction with great success.

Brave New World follows in many Civilization entries' footsteps by pulling out themes of human history and crafting around them, rather than embarking on a Quixotic quest to accurately model unbelievably complex interactions. In reality, the United Nations doesn't meet every 60 years to debate two proposals that could include a global embargo on a major power, but that implementation makes a vastly more fun and interesting game mechanic than a largely impotent body that great powers ignore with impunity.

The revamped cultural victory path is the best part of Brave New World. Splitting the new tourism rating off of the existing empire-wide culture score lets empires pursuing cultural hegemony engage in a slew of new interactions that otherwise-occupied nations can safely ignore while focusing on their own goals. Saturating the world with explorers digging up ancient artifacts once Archaeology is discovered creates new diplomatic pressures and production priorities that are more fun to navigate than the old "build a bunch of Museums, beeline for Radio, and mash end turn" cultural victory. Segregating cultural Great Person generation from the others is a wonderful change that lets one to three cities focus on that, and removes the punishing need for cultural nations to focus exclusively on artist specialists. The cultural endgame is much better delineated in the tech tree, so a culture-pursuing empire develops quite differently than any other as it must invest in expensive late-game buildings to multiply its tourism score.

The addition of trade routes is another change that encourages you to look outside

your borders through a lens other than conquest. Crushing barbarians is more important when they roam neutral territory between your empire and a trading partner, since that extremely expensive and valuable route can be easily destroyed by any unopposed military. Having your trade lines cut by a hostile civilization is devastating. Fighting over control of critical shipping lanes is a welcome addition to combat, which previously took place almost exclusively around fortified cities. Firaxis also smartly left in a safety valve that keeps hostile neighbors or a trade embargo from being an economic death sentence, allowing you to assign your trade capacity to boosting production or growth in your own cities – though reaping the money from foreign routes is generally preferable.

The diplomatic victory improvements are less of a resounding success. Winning a world-leader vote still ends up being a simple matter of buying off as many city-states as possible more often than not, but the addition of the World Congress creates an exciting new vector for peaceful interactions for any kind of playthrough. Sending diplomats around the world to procure votes for a pet project is great fun, and a powerful way to shape the world without going to war. Bribing enough of the world to hit 51 percent on the vote to institutionalize your religion or ideology as the official world system could be well worth the cost – but then again, you might not care if you're planning on spreading your ideas at swordpoint anyway.

Like Gods & Kings before it, Brave New World's greatest success isn't in its new systems. The trick that Firaxis has managed for a second time is in not upsetting the existing game. The World Congress is not so powerful that warmongers have to drop everything they're doing to deal with it, and tourism is not an overwhelming tide of city-flipping offensive culture that forces you to abandon your space program to combat its effects. I don't enjoy the poor interface for swapping Great Works with rival empires, but that entire minigame can be completely ignored by any ruler not racing for a cultural victory – and following that path isn't nearly as time-consuming as managing a war, so culture-pushing leaders have the attention to spare.

The new factions are more strongly themed than many other civilizations. Portugal must use its powerful Nau super-caravel to quickly explore and generate piles of money, or fall forever behind more generally advantaged civs. Venice has an impossible task ahead of it if forced into expensive wars, as its puppet-state empire runs on money – but its ability to instantly puppet city-states changes the entire face of the game. The Shoshone are my favorite, as their super-scouts and instant land-grab power makes quick expansion a no-brainer. The stable of new leaders is a good injection of variety overall, even if I personally prefer less pigeonholed civs like Poland and Shoshone.

The biggest knock on Civ V has always been the AI's difficulty in managing its one-unit-per-tile warfare, and that remains a weak spot. The AI has slowly gotten better at it over the course of patches and expansions, and that progression continues here. I still see boneheaded management of ranged units on a regular basis, but less often. Naval combat largely eludes the AI's grasp, but at least it builds ships and defends its own shores when threatened sometimes. The computer is much better at conquering cities now, and I see militaristic civs conquering entire continents on a regular basis in Brave New World.

Multiplayer is dramatically improved in Brave New World. Firaxis badly needs to release the "Pitboss" server software as a standalone program so that one Steam client doesn't need to be dedicated to running the server instead of the game – which the company has said is coming – but the reworked architecture under the hood works much better in online games. I still find multiplayer to be a less-than-ideal way to play a turn-based game like Civilization, but the community that enjoys it should hopefully finally get what they've been begging for for years with Brave New World.

I have few complaints about this second and final expansion to Civilization V. My favorite game in recent years is better than ever thanks to Brave New World. The way Firaxis has fleshed out the thin areas of the game without screwing up the many things it does right is impressive. Peaceful no longer means passive. — Adam Biessener

Dota 2

Valve raises the bar without moving it



Style 1-Player Action/Strategy (10-Player Online) Publisher Valve Software Developer Valve Software Release July 8 Rating NR

9

PC

» Concept

Build a shiny new wrapper for the Warcraft III mod that started the multiplayer online battle arena genre all those years ago

» Graphics

You can only do so much with a zoomed-out isometric view, but Valve does a good job making the furious action readable at a glance

» Sound

Someone should build a special Hall of Shame for some of the voiceovers, especially given how often you hear them, but announcements like "top is missing" are great to have in audio form

» Playability

Dota 2 emphasizes finicky micro-level control like no other game out there, but it gives you the tools to get the job done. Your mistakes are your own

» Competitive/Esports

Valve did an incredible job expanding Dota into e-sports and providing an excellent online backend for matchmaking, ranking, and all kinds of tracking. The design itself retains all of its shining genius and maddening flaws

» Replay Value

High



How do you improve a game that has millions of active players, spawned an entire genre, and introduced new words into the gamer vernacular while it was still a mod for a decade-old strategy game? Valve chose not to, instead approaching Dota 2 more like chess. The game itself is sacrosanct and not to be changed, but everything else, from the infrastructure behind online matchmaking to its graphical presentation, is fair game for updates and improvements. The result, unsurprisingly, is a world-class service for a game that is just as brilliant and frustrating as it was when I fell in love with it four PCs and nearly a decade ago.

Just as in the original, two teams of five heroes apiece vie to turn the tide of battle as constantly-spawning NPC armies clash at the river that divides the two halves of a functionally symmetrical map. A thick jungle filled with dangerous monsters and secret vendors occupies the space between the three lanes the armies travel along. Powerful towers mark waypoints along the lanes, quickly smashing all but the largest of invading forces. Heroes level up and develop devastating powers as the match wears on, boosting their powers to godlike levels with composite artifacts that cost thousands of gold. Armies and towers that once controlled the map become speed bumps as heroes hunt each other down while battling for control of strategic resources. Eventually, one team overwhelms their rivals through cleverness, teamwork, and skill. Rankings are adjusted, points are awarded, and social rewards are unlocked in the postgame analysis.

Everything changes in the next match, as 10 players pick 10 different heroes out of the roster of over 100. Friendships form as a strong showing earns you an invite to a recruiting clan. Meta strategies evolve as heroes and team compositions fall in and out of favor from week to week. A popular professional player throws a tournament pool into

disarray by choosing an unconventional item progression, and everyone from mid-tier rankings on up scrambles to adjust.

If there's a limit to how far the rabbit hole of skill and strategy in Dota 2 goes, millions of daily players have yet to find it. There is always a way to improve your game. Something as simple as swapping the order in which you purchase two items, or picking up a situational support ability earlier, can have ripple effects across an entire match. The limit at which manual skill can keep improving your results is well beyond human physical abilities; there's always another creep to last-hit, skillshot to avoid, or area-of-effect to dance out of. Play a single hero in nightly matches for a month straight, and you'll learn something new as you reflect on the latest game while writing the next rent check.

Because of this unmatched skill ceiling and lengthy 20-45 minute matches, victory and defeat in Dota 2 are some of the biggest peaks and valleys I've ever experienced in games. A well-executed plan to follow up a minor victory with killing the big bad monster and using that to snowball into a win is a major high.

The impossible height Dota 2 can rise to also creates its greatest flaw: The game is often arcane, indecipherable, difficult, and actively hostile to new players. The wonderful variety in item builds – which potions, weapons, armor, and trinkets you buy in which order and when you combine them into what artifacts – comes at the price of a store that takes up half the screen with three tabs' worth of tiny grids full of unique items. Knowing how to make those decisions requires hundreds of hours of gameplay experience.

Navigating the intricate hierarchy of item dependencies and counters is the most intimidating part of Dota 2, but it's only the first foothill of the expansive mountain range of core Dota 2 competencies. Do you know what a support hero is, what kind of lane partner it should be paired with, and when

it's acceptable to last-hit creeps in your lane? How about what special ability to expect from the boots that the melee carry in your lane is likely to buy during the laning phase? These are intentionally jargon-filled questions, but they're part of the baseline of knowledge that your team will expect you to have in anything beyond training matches. Dota players think this way because their game is intricate and demanding, and because a single weak link on a team often spells doom.

Do not expect a congenial atmosphere in Dota 2 unless you're playing strictly with people you know personally. The community is often abusive, racist, and hostile. While Riot has at least gotten the majority of the poor sports who play League of Legends to keep their ill-tempered thoughts out of chat with community ratings and by following through on ban threats, Dota's system has only mitigated the very worst offenders. Ignoring players is easy enough, but the caustic community remains one of Dota 2's biggest problems.

The entire e-sports package, from spectator mode to tournament integration, is incredible. Extensive support from Valve and other organizations ensures that professional play is here to stay for years. No title makes watching live games, replays, and accessing high-quality commentary and discussion easier than Dota 2.

Choosing between Dota 2 and its competition – primarily League of Legends – is a classic chocolate-versus-vanilla argument. Some players love denial (finishing off friendly units to deny enemies the kill bonus) for making Dota 2's early game more interesting, others find the absence of the mechanic in LoL a necessary refinement. I find the LoL community's better behavior to be the tipping point myself, but I have friends who have no problem muting abrasive teammates.

Valve studiously avoided reinventing the wheel with Dota 2, and given how beloved the gameplay is, that is undoubtedly the best thing for the game, the community, and the genre. The infrastructure for matchmaking, spectating, and everything else that surrounds actual matches is executed on a level only the best studios can rival. I'll still be playing and following League of Legends for my multiplayer online battle arena needs, but I can't find any fault with other players choosing Dota 2. — Adam Biessener



Shadowrun Returns

Modern gameplay with a classic feel.

8.5

PC

» Concept

Revisit the brilliant fantasy future of Shadowrun in a game that harkens back to the glory days of the computer RPG

» Graphics

2D backgrounds are vibrant without abandoning the gritty tone of the setting

» Sound

Music is reminiscent of the earlier Shadowrun console games, but gets repetitive. Dialogue is text-driven with no voiceovers

» Playability

A simple point-and-click interface handles all tasks admirably. A stronger tutorial would be a welcome addition

» Entertainment

One of the most unusual and original fantasy settings around finally has a worthy digital entry for the first time in nearly 20 years

» Replay Value

Moderate

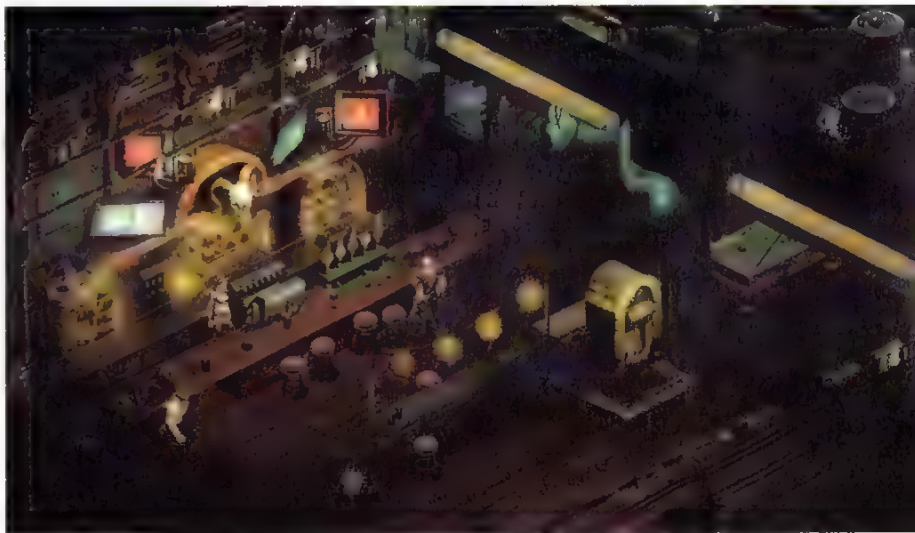
gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Harebrained Schemes Developer Harebrained Schemes Release July 25 Rating NR

In the first decade of the 21st century, the world was humming along to the accelerating tune of technology, little knowing the dramatic change of beat about to hit. The Awakening brought magic back to the world; elven and orcish children were born to human parents, dragons re-emerged from the shadows, and gifted individuals wove spells and summoned elementals. By 2054, magic and technology are playing in concert. Magic-fueled megacorps run governments, and technomancers work the shadows between the virtual and mystical realms. Shadowrun Returns drops players headfirst into this richly realized fiction, combining classic role-playing storytelling with modern tactical battles. The production values are more modest than many contemporary RPGs, and the breadth and length of the adventure is limited, but running the shadows has never been more fun.

Shadowrun Returns' isometric view, turn-based combat, point-and-click controls, and text-driven dialogue deliver a jolt of nostalgia for longtime PC gamers. Fifteen years ago, games like this established the foundations of today's Western RPGs. Even so, there's nothing here that should turn away newcomers thanks to smart updates to the formula. The challenge level is accessible, with a steady ramp up in difficulty that may be too easy for experienced tacticians. The leveling system is flexible and easy to grasp, letting you shape your character by doubling down on one or two skill sets, or by becoming a jack of all trades. While the story is rooted in the established lore of the Shadowrun universe, this is a fresh jumping-on point; the locations and characters that nod to fans are enjoyable whether you recognize their significance or not.

With original Shadowrun designer Jordan Weisman guiding the ship at Harebrained Schemes, those same devoted fans will find a faithful presentation of the world. The story plays and reads like a hard-boiled detective novel, from your Marlowe-esque hero to the mysterious woman in the red dress. Investigating a friend's murder escalates into high-stakes corporate espionage and world-threatening cults. Part of the thrill of Shadowrun is the vocabulary and tight-knit culture of these wry, sometimes-misanthropic heroes. Those elements come through loud and clear without distracting from the plot.



The gorgeous backgrounds and mildly exaggerated character art accentuate the setting's charm, which lies somewhere between the neon lights of *Blade Runner* and the spellcasting and sword-swinging of high fantasy.

Shadowrun Returns moves at a deliberate pace, with the expectation that players take the time to talk to characters, read dialogue, and solve some simple puzzles. That makes the battles feel all the more exciting when they occur, and I found myself looking forward to the different twists combat would throw at me. Players of the recent XCOM: Enemy Unknown will instantly grasp the fundamentals, which are heavily emulated here. Characters take turns spending action points to maneuver into flanking positions, duck into cover, and fire off bullets or spells. Your main character levels up as the story continues, but every mission also sees you hiring other shadowrunners to join you. Each character class brings something exciting to the table, from the rigger's ability to control robotic drones to the mage's wide variety of lightning bolts, healing spells, and mana blasts.

Battles often provide intriguing choices and opportunities. Did you obtain the zebra meat from earlier in the level? Maybe you can distract the hell hounds that would otherwise attack you. Those turrets bringing you

down? A well-defended decker can jack into the cyber-landscape of the Matrix and take control of the guns. The fights are always interesting, even with some occasional problems. Enemy AI sometimes leaves itself far too vulnerable, and misses opportunities to exploit your mistakes. Despite how pretty they are, the 2D backgrounds often obscure characters, making it hard to see what you're doing. A limited breadth of spell and character animations also compromises some of the excitement. Ultimately, these quibbles are modest concerns when placed beside the varied objectives and surprising locations of each combat scene.

The initial campaign offers a great adventure, but it's easy to feel hungry for more when you're done. Thankfully, Harebrained Schemes has included a highly useable editor to let players create their own content. Enterprising module creators are already digging into the toolset, and I'm hopeful about the potential for expansion.

Even if you never played the tabletop game or the original Shadowrun console games, Harebrained Schemes has crafted a potent argument for joining in on the fun. Here's hoping this reawakening is just the beginning of a new lease on life for the Sixth World.

Matt Müller





Rogue Legacy

Making death and grinding fun

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Cellar Door Games
Developer Cellar Door Games **Release** June 27 **Rating** NR

8

PC

» **Concept**
Imagine 8-bit Castlevania with a random castle, random powers, and a small reward after every one of the deaths that come so easily

» **Graphics**
The simple, cartoony visuals fit Rogue Legacy's style

» **Sound**
The soundtrack is surprisingly catchy, if limited

» **Playability**
A high-quality gamepad is a must, and I don't mean an old Xbox controller with the crappy d-pad

» **Entertainment**
This isn't the best challenging platformer in recent years, nor is it a replacement for Symphony of the Night and its ilk, but it's an interesting experiment with a compelling reward loop

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

What if those moneybags in Castlevania made a difference beyond incrementing the score counter nobody cared about, and instead let you buy a longer health bar and a more powerful whip for your next trip through the castle? Rogue Legacy attempts to answer that question while taking cues from Mega Man, Ghosts 'n Goblins, and others. The gameplay isn't tightly tuned enough to raise this to the level of those classics, but this indie action/platformer is a worthy love letter to the punishing games of yesteryear.

Get ready to die. Constantly. My first quest to avenge the king's assassination failed before passing through a single room. My heir made it through three. Her heir died in the second. After that I started to make some real progress, but Rogue Legacy remains lethal for its entire length. The side-scrolling action is right in line with the norms set forth decades ago by Castlevania and the like, but the difficulty is even higher than the brutal games the NES generation grew up on.

That may not sound like great fun, but Rogue Legacy's genius comes in after you die. The first step is to choose an heir from three possible heroes of different classes, who also come with often-amusing foibles like cursing coprolalia sufferers or colorblind heroes whose runs are played in greyscale. More importantly, the fortune your previous character accumulated can be spent to unlock better stats, stronger equipment, new classes, and special abilities. Dying five rooms in isn't such a bad thing when the 150 gold you earned buys 10 more HP for every subsequent run, much less a double-jump or vampiric attacks. Spend everything you can, though, because the balance is lost as soon as you start the next run.

This sense of progression works well, and keeps me playing Rogue Legacy despite several flaws that plague the experience front to back. The action is average at best, working on a basic level while suffering from loose controls and inconsistent hit detection that have no place in a reflex-driven action/platformer. Your hero lacks the mobility of X or Zero, the versatility of Alucard, the survivability of Samus, and the firepower of Soma. He or she is always a generic sword-swinging adventurer with a single, usually useless, magic spell and slightly different stats based on character class. Enemies are similarly uninspired, and severely lacking in variety.

Rogue Legacy doesn't come close to replacing Metroid or Castlevania in my heart, but it isn't supposed to. It's a fun popcorn game, fine for killing 15 minutes here and there or eating an afternoon with a series of runs if you're in the mood. Don't expect any story or epic adventure so much as a neat little action game with a compelling upgrade system, and you'll find plenty to love here. — Adam Biessener

Leisure Suit Larry: Reloaded

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Replay Games, Inc.
Developer Replay Games, Inc. **Release** June 27 **Rating** NR

6

PC

Larry Laffer is one of gaming's more infamous characters, at least among the people who still remember him by name. As the hero of the Leisure Suit Larry series, he was one of the first characters to bring adult humor into games. The character devolved from a pathetic goof in his debut to a joyless pervert as he trudged from sequel to sequel. Replay Games is attempting to resuscitate Larry in a reboot of the original adventure game, adding new content and visuals for lounge lizards new and old.

When we first meet Larry, he's a 40-something virgin ready to make his mark in Lost Wages. The player must explore the city, meet the right woman, and somehow convince her that it's a good idea to exchange bodily fluids with this loser. It's all done in a traditional adventure game, with objects to pick up and manage, and locations to explore.

The more tedious aspects of the original game return as well, which is disappointing. I know that cab rides weren't ever designed to be entertaining, but in Reloaded they're a multistep hassle that's amplified by the sheer amount of backtracking that the game requires. For a game set in a Las Vegas clone, gambling remains a surprising low point. Saving and reloading between each hand of blackjack or pull of the slot machine brought back memories, but not fond ones. And because Larry finds his finances drained several times throughout his adventure, you have to repeatedly build up your bankroll.

If you chuckled at the earlier Lost Wages/Las Vegas gag, you're exactly the kind of person this game was designed for. Its humor was always on the "wakka wakka wakka" side of the spectrum, with a dash of creepy borderline misogyny. To be fair, it came out in 1987, and you can say with a straight face that our culture is different now. Gameplay has evolved as well. With Leisure Suit Larry: Reloaded, Replay Games faced a daunting task: pleasing old-school fans while also introducing the raunchy series to new players. The reboot is faithful enough to the original — warts and all — to please the faithful. If you don't have any nostalgia surrounding Larry and his plight, however, you may be left wondering why anyone bothered digging him up again. — Jeff Cork

» **Concept**

Point and click your way through the dirty streets of Lost Wages on a mission to find love — or something like it

» **Graphics**

The original game has been rebuilt and animated from scratch. Whether or not it was a conscious choice, Larry doesn't visually fit in with the rest of the game's cast

» **Sound**

The entire adventure is voiced, so every lame punline is delivered directly to your eardrums

» **Playability**

The designers added a variety of new puzzles and encounters, but left many of the original game's issues alone

» **Entertainment**

Newcomers may find the gameplay and core concept as chafing as a pair of sweaty polyester slacks, but Leisure Suit Larry: Reloaded will likely please the people who backed it on Kickstarter

» **Replay Value**

Low



Towerfall

Instantly fun multiplayer madn

9

Ouya

» **Concept**

Fill your friends with arrows in fast-paced multiplayer action

» **Graphics**

A sprite-based art style fits the simple gameplay well

» **Sound**

Nothing to write home about, but nothing distractingly awful

» **Playability**

The Ouya controller can be rough, but playing with a different one is great

» **Entertainment**

It's immediate, undeniable fun

» **Replay Value**

High



Style 1-4 Player Fighting Publisher Matt Thorson Developer Matt Thorson Release June 25 Rating NR

Fewer and fewer titles in modern gaming are entertaining within minutes of picking them up. Many are filled with slowly paced tutorial sections or long cutscenes, so it takes a while to get to the good stuff. Towerfall wastes no time. By the end of my first multiplayer match, the group I played with was screaming, laughing, and immediately falling in love with the Ouya exclusive.

Four-player competitive gameplay brings memories of Smash Bros. to mind first and foremost, but Towerfall's one-hit kills and constant intensity also conjure up moments from classic Bomberman. By default, characters begin with three arrows in their quiver. One wrong move can mean instant death, and one well-placed shot can end a match.

Towerfall involves a decent amount of strategy – it isn't just about jumping around and flinging arrows at each other. Treasure chests grant abilities like wings, invisibility, or a shield. You can acquire arrow types that explode, grow brambles, or bounce off walls.

Tons of enjoyment can be had with the basic options, but a large list of variants helps if you want to tweak things. Handicaps can be turned off, corpses can be set to explode, players can start with one arrow instead of

three, and big heads allow for larger targets.

With this suite of variants and dozens of versus maps, Towerfall offers plenty to keep the action fresh. Though it features a variety of single-player trials that task you with destroying dummies in a set amount of time, multiplayer action (even without online play) is the clear focus of this Ouya launch title. It's one of the most riotous multiplayer games I've seen in a long time. This is a required purchase for any Ouya owner. **Dan Ryckert**



Plants vs. Zombies 2

PopCap's mobile strategy sequel kicks grass

gamerformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gamerformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Strategy Publisher Electronic Arts Developer PopCap Games Release August Rating 9+

9.25



When the original *Plants vs. Zombies* was ported to iOS, its success was unsurprising. The zany roster of plants, accessible gameplay, and clever strategy proved to be a fresh take on traditional tower defense that appealed to a wide market. Even though PopCap can't guarantee the sequel will be as popular as the original, the company has sown the seeds for another hit.

When Crazy Dave – your companion from the first game – decides that he wants to go back in time and eat his favorite taco once again, he builds a machine that accidentally sends him skipping across time like a stone over water. Wisely, PopCap doesn't cram a verbose story into this silly package; Dave has a few cheeky lines of dialogue, and then you're off to ancient Egypt to kick zombies off the Pharaoh's lawn.

Like the first game, zombies steadily advance toward you, and you have to plant rows of vegetation in order to combat the encroaching hordes. Each time period poses its own unique challenges. The yards of ancient Egypt are full of tombstones, which block some of your attacks until they are smashed. During the pirate era, you defend a ship from boarding parties of zombies that swing in before dropping onto your ship's deck. However, I was particularly fond of the mine carts in the Wild West level. You can only place one plant on a mine cart, but you can move the cart vertically across the screen, which creates a mobile offensive force. This adds another layer of micromanagement to PvZ 2's gameplay, but because you can't plant on mine cart tracks, it also means you have fewer places to deploy your defensive plants. I loved these levels because

they force you to be extra clever with your floral arrangements.

No matter which time period I found myself in, I couldn't wait to see what kind of rewarding challenges awaited me on the next level. In Egypt, Ra zombies forced me to nab my sun quickly before they snatched it up. In Pirate Cove, I shored up my defenses because cannonball zombies constantly bombarded my back rows with undead midgets. In the Wild West, I had to keep my offenses mobile, because piano zombies can make other zombies dance and occasionally two-step their way to adjacent rows.

Fortunately, PvZ 2 constantly rewards you with new plant types to overcome these challenges. Plants like the Bloomerangs, which whip boomerang pedals back and forth across the screen, help round out the returning cast. I also love Pea Pods, which can be planted on top of each other, adding more peas to each pod until the max of five peashooters on a single square creates a Gatling gun effect. However, my favorite new plant is the Bonk Choy. These inexpensive plants do massive close-range damage, and become nearly invincible when coupled with a good defense plant. Only occasionally did I discover a new plant that I didn't enjoy. Lightning Reeds, for example, are only useful against flocks of zombie chickens.

The innovations don't stop with new plants and new zombies. You collect plant food as you play, which can be used to temporarily power up your plants in a variety of ways. Managing this resource is both thrilling and helpful. Pouring plant food on a sunflower produces a useful burst of extra sun. Adding plant food to an offensive plant usually gives it a powerful, row-clearing super attack.

Touchscreen powerups also let you electrify zombies or squash them between your fingers. Not only are these power ups a clever way to utilize the touchscreen interface, they are so powerful I sometimes felt like I was cheating.

Each time period features an overhead world map. You randomly collect keys from each mission, which can be used to unlock new areas filled with minigames, new plants, and upgrades such as the ability to hold more plant food. The in-game store also allows you to purchase new plants and upgrades via microtransactions. Some of these plants can only be unlocked by spending real money (as opposed to being earned in-game), but these "premium plants" are all from the original *Plants vs. Zombies* (such as Snow Peas and Torchwood), and you can beat the entire game without having to purchase anything. I never felt like the best seeds were being withheld, or that I was being baited into spending real money.

Plants vs. Zombies 2 gives serious strategy players and casual mobile gamers a lot to love. The new plants, zombies, and powers make it feel like a full-featured sequel, and the whole package comes with an amazing price tag (i.e. free). Hardcore strategy fans might hunger for a deeper challenge, and I wish there was a way to unlock the some of the original PvZ plants without spending real money. Even so, when one of my biggest complaints about the game is that I got a cramp from holding my iPad for too long, it's clear that *Plants vs. Zombies 2* is just as addictive as the original. — Ben Reeves

105

» Concept

The sequel to PopCap's cute and addictive tower defense strategy game from 2009, adding hordes of new zombies and plants

» Graphics

Visuals are still lively and pleasant, but the character models are more rounded and smooth and have lost some of their hand-drawn charm

» Sound

The soundtrack is fun and chipper, and only occasionally grating. I still love the slow guttural groan of PopCap's undead

» Playability

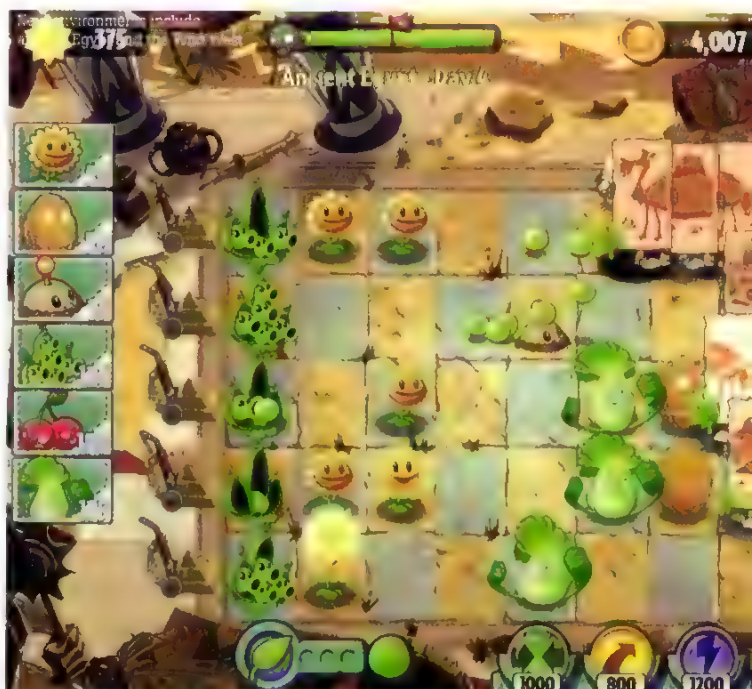
The simple mechanics don't require a lot of finger work, and PopCap has made a few simple interface improvements

» Entertainment

A clever strategy framework and goofy characters make this nearly as hard to put down as the original

» Replay Value

High



Shin Megami Tensei IV

Changing the world isn't easy

8.5

3DS

» **Concept**
Collect demons to fight through Tokyo and decide the world's fate

» **Graphics**
Character designs have flavor, but the various regions could be better differentiated

» **Sound**
The voice acting is done well and fits the characters, while the music is diverse and appropriate

» **Playability**
The difficulty can be overbearing, but easy mode allows casual players a point of entry. Getting timing down and fixing the camera when turning corners is tedious

» **Role-Playing**
Capturing demons is entrancing, and shaping your alignment by answering philosophical questions is fulfilling

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



gamesformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Atlus Developer Atlus Release July 16 Rating M

How much willpower do you have? Can you jump from battle to battle hundreds of times, staying one step ahead of the enemy? Do you thrive on a maddening level of challenge? This is the essence of Shin Megami Tensei IV. It tests your perseverance in a demon-cluttered world, but also forces you to make difficult choices between law and chaos – then makes you evaluate your confidence in them.

Chosen to be a samurai of the Eastern Kingdom of Mikado, your character meets two other samurai, Jonathan and Walter. They represent law and chaos and attempt to sway you to their side as you're presented with choices. Should you keep a demon alive or slay it? Jonathan and Walter have different opinions, like an angel and a devil on your

shoulders. The downside to using characters to embody ideals is that they don't feel like real people – they're almost one-dimensional.

Uninteresting characters can be a death sentence for an RPG, but it works because the most compelling parts of the tale are the decisions you make. Questions about religion, hierarchy, and humanity and what's "right" abound. Is singling people out because they're different okay if their differences give them an advantage over others?

Simply pondering the issues is entertaining, but seeing the impact provides the most fulfillment. At the 20-hour mark, tougher questions emerge and the narrative picks up steam. For example, two groups handle demons in different ways; the Ashura-kai have a leader who has decided to work and coexist with the demons, while the Ring of Gaea believe in survival of the fittest, regardless of the victor. You can side with either group, but the whole time the game is presenting an Adam/Eve decision. Will you be tempted by complete free will or blindly follow orders? What price will you pay for doing either?

Between story moments, you're trekking through dungeons, recruiting demons, finding treasure, and taking on side quests. Battles play out traditionally, selecting actions for your main character and demons, while one human party member is AI-controlled. Exploiting weaknesses and landing critical attacks grants you extra turns, making it a key part of victory. However, the enemy can exploit the same systems, leaving you at a disadvantage. The system is simple but keeps you paying attention and strategizing to get the maximum use out of each turn; it's one of

the best traditional systems around.

Creating a balanced party is equally important, and that's where demon recruitment and fusion comes in. Fusing a party with diverse skills, strengths, and weaknesses is essential, and is particularly engaging. Finding new demon fusions and transferring skills becomes an obsession; as soon as I gained a level, I looked to see which demons I could create.

While the battles didn't frustrate me, figuring out where to go next did. Directions are cryptic at times, causing you to wander. Talking to a specific NPC might give some guidance, but other times you have to figure it out yourself – a process made harder by a high encounter rate in dungeons and the overworld. The amount of backtracking is also a major issue. A destination marker would have eased the guessing games, as back-alley passageways or secluded stairways are easy to miss in the urban sprawl.

Regardless, SMT IV is still hard to put down; it puts enough small decisions in your hands to stay entertaining. For instance, you can transfer abilities from your demons to your main character, though you're limited on how many you can equip. Additionally, as you level up, you get points to disperse into different perks, like restoring MP between battles. Even during boss battles, demons taunt you with questions, and your answers provide perks or drawbacks.

Despite any shortcomings, SMT IV is a handheld adventure that RPG fans are sure to embrace for hours on end. While it doesn't go in too many new directions, it makes some bold story moves that kept me reflecting long after I stopped playing. • [Kimberley Wallace](#)



Mario & Luigi: Dream Team

Far from a pop-over

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Nintendo Developer AlphaDream Release August 11 Rating E10+

8.5

3DS

» **Concept**
Explore the surreal dreams of Luigi in another RPG adventure

» **Graphics**
The dream sequences look great as backdrops for the traditional Mario & Luigi style

» **Sound**
Leisurely seaside towns and intense boss battles are accompanied by fitting tunes

» **Playability**
Some battles test you, but the combat system is tight and fair

» **Entertainment**
Dream Team is a long ride, but it's worth the time investment

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Nintendo's stellar track record with the Mario franchise has spanned multiple genres, from finely tuned platforming to casual party games. Thanks to the talented team at AlphaDream, the plumbers' names are also tied to the consistently entertaining Mario & Luigi role-playing titles. The series' 3DS debut lives up to its reputation of clever writing, engaging battle systems, and gameplay variety.

The plot wastes little time in diving into the absurd, as Mario and Luigi find themselves learning about an ancient race of pillow creatures on Pi'illo Island. A new villain known as Antasma has trapped many of these creatures within dreams, and Luigi's apparent skill at napping on command makes him the perfect candidate for freeing them. Dialogue is as funny as the series has always been, although I was a little sad to see Bowser take a back seat after his hilarious starring role in the last game.

Dream Team's overworld is reminiscent of previous titles in the franchise, but hopping into Luigi's dreams shifts the action to a 2D perspective. As you explore his subconscious mind, more platforming is present than has traditionally been seen in the past. Perfectly-timed leaps and feats like wall jumping

aren't necessary, but it's still nice to see a throwback to Mario's roots.

While in dreams, the sleeping "real world" Luigi can be manipulated on the bottom screen when indicators appear on the top screen. With these, you can fling the dream version of the plumbers with Luigi's mustache, create gusts of wind by itching his nose and making him sneeze, affect gravity by rotating a raft that he's sleeping on, and more. Throughout the game, it constantly introduces new ways to interact with Luigi's dream world. With their novel tweaks to the standard platforming, they are a great addition to the mix.

Platforming may be more present this time around, but combat is still confined to the timing-heavy turn-based system of the past. Dodging and counterattacking are still important strategies, and they've been enhanced by allowing the plumbers to move during some enemy attacks. With the variety of enemy types and attacks to be seen, I never dreaded jumping into frequent battles.

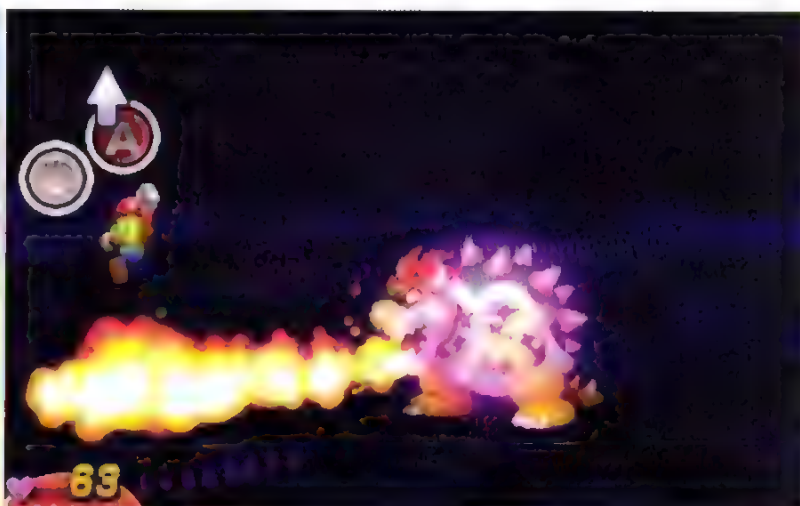
Core elements like combat, humor, and variety are handled well in Dream Team, and it also does plenty of little things right. A giant list of battle challenges is silently updated in the background, rewarding you with coins

for impressive feats. Leveling up occasionally awards you with a new rank (Mushroom, Flower, Star, etc.) that comes with permanent and useful upgrades (new gear slots, HP/attack bonuses, etc.). A fun badge system is in place that lets you mix and match the brothers' items for various benefits like instant revives and damage boosts. Side activities like finding stat beans and assembling photographs offer a nice distraction from the main story.

Even if you ignore most of the side activities, Dream Team will likely clock in around 40 hours. If you're a completionist, a playtime upwards of 50 isn't out of the question. This is the most substantial entry in the series, and I was consistently surprised when I thought the ending was in sight, only to learn that I was nowhere near it. Getting your money's worth won't be an issue, but I did feel like I was ready for it to end for the last five or so hours.

AlphaDream has come through again with Dream Team, an entry that lives up to the great reputation of a series that now spans three generations of Nintendo portables. It may be surprisingly long, but the dozens of hours of gameplay are filled with laughs, exciting battles, and plenty of charm.

Dan Ryckert



PLAYSTATION 3

Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Anarchy Reigns	7.5	Mar-13
Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel	6.5	Jun-13
Assassin's Creed III	9.5	Dec-12
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Dead Space 3	9.75	Mar-13
Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut	7.75	Jun-13
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Devil May Cry	9	Feb-13
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen	8.5	Jun-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse	4.5	Feb-13
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
God of War: Ascension	8	May-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Guacamelee	9	Jun-13
Guardians of Middle-earth	7.5	Feb-13
Injustice: Gods Among Us	9	Jun-13
Knytt Underground	7.5	Mar-13

Last of Us, The	9.5	Aug-13
Lego The Lord of the Rings	8.5	Jan-13
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13
Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance	7.75	Apr-13
Metro: Last Light	8.5	Jul-13
MLB 13: The Show	8.75	May-13
MLB 2K13	4	May-13
Mud - FIM Motocross World Championship	6	Apr-13
NBA 2K13	8.75	Dec-12
NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
Need For Speed: Most Wanted	9	Dec-12
Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch	7	Feb-13
Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale	7.5	Jan-13
Ratchet & Clank: Full Frontal Assault	7.5	Feb-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time	9	Mar-13
Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed	8	Jan-13
Star Trek	5.75	Jul-13
Terraria	8	Jun-13
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14	8.5	May-13
Tomb Raider	9.25	Apr-13
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12

Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
WRC 3 FIA World Rally Championship	7.75	Jun-13
WWE '13	9	Dec-12

XBOX 360

Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Anarchy Reigns	7.5	Mar-13
Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel	6.5	Jun-13
Assassin's Creed III	9.5	Dec-12
BattleBlock Theater	9	Jun-13
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
CastleStorm	8.25	Aug-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Dead Space 3	9.75	Mar-13
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Devil May Cry	9	Feb-13
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Dollar Dash	6	May-13
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen	8.5	Jun-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim - Dragonborn, The	8.5	Feb-13
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13

Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse	4.5	Feb-13
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
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Forza Horizon	8.5	Dec-12
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
Gateways	9	Dec-12
Gears of War Judgment	8.5	May-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Guardians of Middle-earth	7.5	Feb-13
Halo 4	9.25	Dec-12
Half Yeah! Wrath of the Dead Rabbit	8.5	Dec-12
Hitman: Absolution	8.75	Dec-12
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NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
Need For Speed: Most Wanted	9	Dec-12
Omerta: City of Gangsters	6	Apr-13
Phantom Breaker: Battle Grounds	8	May-13
Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
Poker Night 2	6	Jul-13

Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Sanctum 2	8.5	Jul-13
Skulls of the Shogun	8.5	Feb-13
Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed	8	Jan-13
Star Trek	5.75	Jul-13
State of Decay	7	Aug-13
Terraria	8	Jun-13
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Tomb Raider	9.25	Apr-13
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Walking Dead: Survival Instincts, The	5	Jun-13
WWE '13	9	Dec-12

Wii U

Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Chasing Aurora	6.5	Feb-13
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
Game & Wario	8	Aug-13
Lego City Undercover	8.5	Apr-13
Little Inferno	8.5	Feb-13
Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate	8.75	Jun-13
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	May-13
New Super Luigi U	8	Aug-13
New Super Mario Bros. U	9.25	Jan-13
Nintendo Land	7	Jan-13

7 | Layton Brothers: Mystery Room

Platform iOS Release June 27 Rating 12+

Mystery Room departs from the Layton series' signature elements, and can't measure up to the other interactive novel titles it attempts to emulate. The story and characters are interesting at times, but aren't strong enough to keep the whole experience afloat. Mystery Room has bright spots, but the uneven execution and shoehorned-in Layton connection make the case go cold. — Joe Juba

7.5 | Magic: The Gathering — Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC • IOS • Android Release June 26 Rating T

If you're new to Magic: The Gathering, Duels of the Planeswalkers remains the best way to learn how to play without the intimidation of other players. Even with the online connection issues and additional purchases tied to making the most of Sealed mode, this is the best version to date. — Michael Futter

6.75 | Deus Ex: The Fall

Platform iOS Release July 11 Rating 17+

The technical feat of getting a game of this pedigree up and running on iOS is impressive. Without competent combat, however, all that work is for naught. — Matt Bertz

2 | Dark

Platform 360 Release July 9 Rating M

I've played a lot of bad Xbox 360 games for achievements, but hardly any are as unpolished and poorly executed as Dark. It's easily one of this generation's worst titles. — Andrew Reiner

6 | Dynasty Warriors 8

Platform PS3 • 360 Release July 16 Rating T

Dynasty Warriors 8 attempts to change the series' long-standing formula with the addition of the Ambition mode and history-altering storylines. Combat is tedious, however, and it still defines the majority of the experience. — Kyle Hilliard

6.5 | Breach & Clear

Platform iOS Release July 18 Rating 12+

Although strategy plays less of a role than I would like, Breach and Clear's combat is still fun. However, the progression system and customization options fall flat, and the game needs more than one simple mode and 15 maps to remain entertaining. — Jeff Marchiafava

geeked at birth



Rabbids Land	4	Jan-13	Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13	Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask	8	Dec-12
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13	Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13	Project X Zone	7.75	Aug-13
Scribblenauts Unlimited	8.25	Jan-13	Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien	9	Apr-13	Resident Evil: Revelations 2	9	Feb-11
Transformers: Prime	6.5	Feb-13	Sanctum 2	8.5	Jul-13	Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner - Soul Hackers	8.75	Jun-13
ZombiU	6	Jan-13	SimCity	6.5	May-13	Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11
Wii								
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Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13	Swapper, The	9.25	Aug-13			
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Antichamber	9	Apr-13	Valley Without Wind 2, A	6.75	May-13			
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13	Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12			
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13	Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13			
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13	3DS					
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Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13	Animal Crossing: New Leaf	8.5	Aug-13			
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13	Brain Age: Concentration Training 6	6	Apr-13			
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Don't Starve	7	Jul-13	Crimson Shroud	7.5	Mar-13			
Dungeon Hearts	8	Jun-13	Dillon's Rolling Western: The Last Ranger	7.75	Jun-13			
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Impira	5	May-13	Mario and Donkey Kong: Minis on the Move	6.5	Jul-13			
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Metro: Last Light	8.75	Jul-13	Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates to Infinity	6.75	May-13			
Monaco	8.75	Jun-13						
Omeria: City of Gangsters	6	Apr-13						

VITA

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation	7.75	Jan-13
Call of Duty: Black Ops: Declassified	3	Jan-13
Glucamelee	9	Jun-13
Knytt Underground	7.5	Mar-13
Muramasa Rebirth	7	Aug-13
Persona 4 Golden	8.5	Jan-13
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale	7.5	Jan-13
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time	9	Mar-13
Soul Sacrifice	7.25	Jul-13
Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward	8.75	Dec-12

iOS

Beastie Bay	7.5	Apr-13
Cut the Rope: Time Travel	8.5	Jul-13
Draw Something 2	7	Jul-13
Dungeon Hearts	6	Jun-13
Haunted Hollow	8.75	Jul-13
Hundreds	8	Mar-13
Iron Man 3	8.5	Jul-13
Joe Danger Touch	8.25	Mar-13
Kingdom Rush: Frontiers	9	Aug-13
Middle Manager of Justice	8	Mar-13
Scurvy Scallywags	7.75	Aug-13
Warhammer Quest	7.75	Aug-13
Year Walk	8.75	May-13

ANDROID

Cut the Rope: Time Travel	8.5	Jul-13
Iron Man 3	6.5	Jul-13

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The Amazing Adventures of Captain Nintendo

The curious origin story of the classic '80s cartoon

The Saturday-morning lineup of the '80s included a host of cartoons based on video games properties. Games like Frogger, Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, Q*bert, and even Namco's arcade racer Pole Position all got their time in the small-screen spotlight. But in the fall of 1989, a new kind of video game-related cartoon debuted: *Captain N: The Game Master*. Captain N was a show about video games, but it didn't feature characters from any single video game property, or even a single video game publisher. Instead, the protagonist was a teen from the real world who found himself magically transported into a game world filled with a Smash Bros.-style jumble of characters from Nintendo, Capcom, and Konami. As wacky as Captain N was, his origin story is even more bizarre, and his humble beginnings can be found in the pages of Nintendo's in-house magazine, *Nintendo Power*.



by Ben Reeves

Origins of a Hero

In July 1988, Nintendo transformed its quarterly newsletter, *Nintendo Fun Club News*, into a full-blown monthly magazine, rechristening the publication *Nintendo Power*. The publisher acquired its new editorial staff by harvesting writers from its game counseling department. Nintendo game counselors worked for Nintendo's help line; their job was to become instant experts at all of the popular games of that day, then assist frustrated gamers through challenging sections whenever they called into the help line.

Randy Studdard – a former photo-finishing lab manager – had only worked as a Nintendo game counselor for a few months before he was tapped to help write for the new magazine. One of Studdard's first submissions was an article titled "The Electrifying Adventures of Captain Nintendo," a borderline fan-fiction story about a Nintendo game designer with mystical video-game superpowers. While working late one night at his video game lab, this designer was caught in an explosion that merged his body with the bioelectric circuitry of the game he was working on. This fusion granted the technician the unusual ability to pull video

game objects and characters out of their cartridges and into the real world. Unfortunately, since Captain Nintendo was working on a new Metroid game at the time, the series' villainous Mother Brain was also released into the world.

Studdard's editors liked the idea enough to publish a short series of these stories within early issues of *Nintendo Power*. The tales usually began with Mother Brain releasing a video-game villain from their plastic prison and then hatching some world-threatening evil scheme. Captain Nintendo would then recruit the hero from the same game and the two would team up to save the day. Studdard saw the recurring feature as a fun way to market new games for his company, as well as a

roundabout way to provide fans with tips and tricks for the game featured that month.

However, Studdard had ulterior motives for creating Captain Nintendo. "There were rumors floating around the Nintendo offices, at the time, that the heads of the company were looking for a spokes-character that could be used as a marketing tool for all of Nintendo's games," Studdard says.

Mario had become Nintendo's de facto mascot, and the company had already used him in its marketing materials, but Mario's squeaky-clean image made him an awkward mouthpiece for grittier, more mature titles. Studdard believed that his Captain Nintendo superhero could do what Mario couldn't.

"Since he was going to be a spokesperson for all these games, I also thought he would make a really dandy Saturday-morning cartoon," Studdard says, "because whatever game we wanted to promote at the time, that's who would have their adventures with Captain Nintendo that week. It was dimensional marketing. There were layers and layers and layers of marketing benefits."

Studdard wrote a nine-page prospectus outlining Captain Nintendo's origin, powers, and marketing benefits. The plan included a budget for an actor to dress up in costume and travel around the country visiting hospitals and sick kids. At the time, Nintendo was taking heat from PTAs and parents groups across the country who believed that video games were distracting kids from responsibilities like chores and schoolwork. Studdard felt this kind of marketing strategy would create much-needed goodwill for his company.

The young editor brought his proposal to one of Nintendo's marketing managers. "He read the first two pages and his eyes narrowed," Studdard says. "He looked over at me and said, 'Would you mind if your ideas went somewhere and you didn't get compensated for them?' I was stunned, but I said, 'Wouldn't you? I expect that whatever I do here would be reflected in my career here.' I think that he took that to mean that I didn't expect compensation."

As it would turn out, many of Studdard's ideas would come to fruition, but the writer says he would not receive any compensation for them aside from his normal hourly pay. (Nintendo declined to comment on this story.) However, before Captain Nintendo made his Saturday-morning debut he would go through a drastic metamorphosis. While Studdard had been busy working on his Captain Nintendo idea, a production company across the country was working on another treatment for a wildly different video game cartoon. The two concepts were about to collide.

Oh Buddy Boy!

The idea to make a Nintendo-based Saturday morning cartoon didn't originate with Studdard. In the late '80s, Nintendo had commissioned the international film and television production company DiC Entertainment – which had already produced classic children's shows like *Inspector Gadget*, *The Real Ghostbusters*, and *Pee-wee's Playhouse* – to produce three shows for Nintendo. The first two shows would be based off *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*, but Nintendo wanted something more offbeat for the third show.

Nintendo gave DiC a console and a stack of games and told them to figure out what that third show could be. The production company immediately began drafting ideas. "[Executive Producer Richard Raynis] wanted to have a human protagonist, and found a suitable candidate from the game *Paperboy*," says ex-DiC concept artist Fil Barlow. "My original pitch art with all of the characters was titled *Paperboy*, but Nintendo rejected it. I heard it was because that game wasn't their strongest title at the time, so in an attempt to save all of my pitch art, Richard changed the project's name to *Buddy Boy*."

In the show's concept pitch, Buddy was still a paperboy, but he was a boy from the real world, and he interacted with all kinds of various video game characters after he discovered a magical elevator, complete with bellhop, inside his closet. The twist on the show was that all of the game characters found reality just as addictive as real kids often found video games, so these video game characters were constantly riding their bikes, reading, or playing sports. In the pitch DiC worked up for Nintendo, Buddy would interact with a diverse cast that included *Donkey Kong*, *Kid Icarus*, *Mega Man*, and *Punch-Out's King Hippo*.

"One of *Paperboy's* defenses was to hand newspapers to game monsters, who would get caught up in reading the news and forget all about him," says Barlow. "We were going to



Captain N: The Game Master. Kevin Keene falls



have Mega Man be the game-world version of Buddy Boy, with parents and pets who were all Mega."

When DIC made their Buddy Boy pitch to Nintendo, the production company came back with a series of notes. Nintendo liked the idea of the real world colliding with the video game world, but any mention of video games being addictive had to go; video game addiction was still too much of a sore spot with parent groups. DIC could also keep most of its cast, but Nintendo wanted the main character to be older, and it wanted Mother Brain to be the series' main villain. Finally, the publisher wanted to call the show *Captain Nintendo: The Game Master*.

The Show Must Go On

Once Captain Nintendo was green-lit, DIC hired Hollywood scriptwriter Jeffrey Scott to pen the series' first draft. Scott, who had worked on cartoons like *Muppet Babies* and *DuckTales*, submitted a script about an average Californian high-school kid named Kevin Keene who was obsessed with Nintendo games. One day Kevin and his dog are inexplicably sucked into the world of Videoland – a digital network of video game worlds that are constantly under siege by Mother Brain's evil schemes. Kevin quickly joins forces with the princess of Videoland and other video game heroes such as Kid Icarus, Mega Man, and Castlevania's Simon Belmont (Nintendo had worked out licensing agreements with

Capcom and Konami for the use of those characters). Other holdovers from the Buddy Boy concept, such as Kid Icarus' Eggplant Wizard and King Hippo, functioned as Mother Brain's henchmen.

Kevin quickly discovered that his NES peripherals were powerful weapons in Videoland. His NES Zapper fired real lasers, and his controller – affixed to his belt – granted him special powers. For example, the start button allowed Kevin to temporarily freeze time, while the d-pad allowed him to jump incredible heights or quickly slide out of harm's way. Despite all of Captain Nintendo's newfound powers, he still couldn't overcome network executives who wanted to change the name of the show.

"The series was initially called Captain Nintendo: The Game Master," Scott told *The Unofficial Captain N Home Page* back in 2002. "But it wasn't long before we got word from the network that we needed to eliminate the Nintendo name. At the time, there was a big outcry that Saturday-morning cartoons were becoming commercials for toys. To have the Nintendo name in the title was just too much for the networks. It would have been like naming a show Mattel's Barbie. So 'N' was as close as we could get."

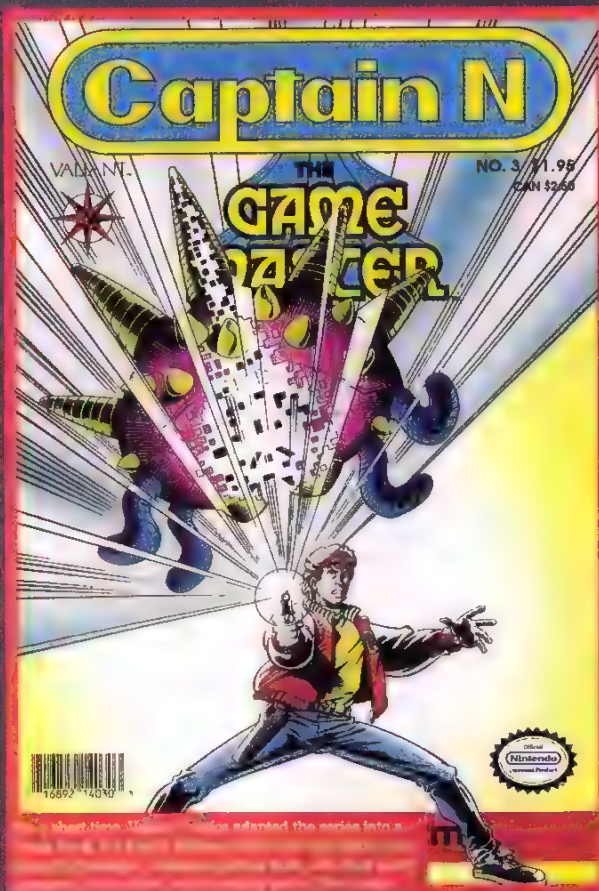
Captain N: The Game Master debuted on Sept. 9, 1989. The show was less useful at giving players tips about the games they were playing than Studdard had initially envisioned, but it was no less useful as a marketing tool. "The sales during my first year and a half at

Nintendo were 2.3 billion dollars in revenue," Studdard says, "and they said that about 80 percent of that came from the success of the cartoons and the magazine."

During the show's three-year run, viewers were treated to a series of bizarre and often irreverent interpretations of many of video games' biggest stars. Scott admits that he was never a gamer. "It wasn't important that I be a fanatic and know everything about a game," Scott says, "because we had decided that the stories would only be loosely based on the game environment. We wanted to tell stories about the people and explore parts of the world that were not part of the game itself. I used just enough locations and characters and hardware references to keep the flavor of the games."

This loose approach to game fiction is apparent to anyone who watches old episodes of Captain N. Many of the show's characters act like warped doppelgangers of their video game counterparts. Simon Belmont is a self-absorbed goon. Mother Brain is a giant brain floating in a glass test tube that wears a clown closet's worth of makeup and talks in a shrill voice. Mega Man isn't even blue; he's a squat, green android with the grizzled voice of an 80-year-old smoker who says "mega" nearly three times every sentence.

Oddly, Nintendo didn't care about the show's inconsistent portrayals of the games. "Nintendo gave us no reference to work from, so I used the game manuals and what was on the screen to design the characters," Barlow says. "I really



wanted to stick as close to the pixel versions as possible. Nintendo, at the time, seemed kind of embarrassed by the pixel versions of their characters, misrepresenting them on their box art with fully painted illustrations. I liked the little pixel guys and wanted to capture them as best I could. However, I got Mega Man's suit color wrong and set him as green, rather than blue, which has bugged people ever since. I was largely relying on memory, however. Nobody at DiC or Nintendo noticed, either."

Many of Captain N's episodes featured thin or unusual video game references. In one episode, Kevin contracts a video virus and his friends shrink down to microscopic levels in order to jump inside his body to battle with the virus. Another episode is a parody of *Three Men and a Baby* set in the Dragon Warrior universe. The second season of the show even introduced a new recurring character: Game Boy – a giant sentient Game Boy handheld that spoke in computer blips much like R2-D2.

The world of children's television is a volatile and continually evolving market, and after three years of strange video game-related plots, Captain N wasn't achieving the ratings the networks wanted to see. The licensing agreements with Nintendo, Capcom, and Konami made the show more expensive to develop, so Captain N was canceled. However, a three-year run as one of television's strangest video game-related shows was far from Captain Nintendo's most impressive achievement.

A Real Hero's Tribute

While Studdard says he never saw any compensation for his contributions to the Captain Nintendo brand – aside from his usual hourly pay – the character became his alter ego. People around the office even called him Captain. As he continued his career at Nintendo, Studdard took on the duty of answering some of the thousands of handwritten fan letters the company received each week. Studdard even signed his letters as Captain Nintendo.

At one point, Studdard began corresponding

with a child who was battling cancer. The child was a Nintendo superfan, and he wanted to know if Captain Nintendo could help him get his hands on a copy of Super Mario Bros. 2. He had seen the game advertised everywhere, but he couldn't find a copy anywhere.

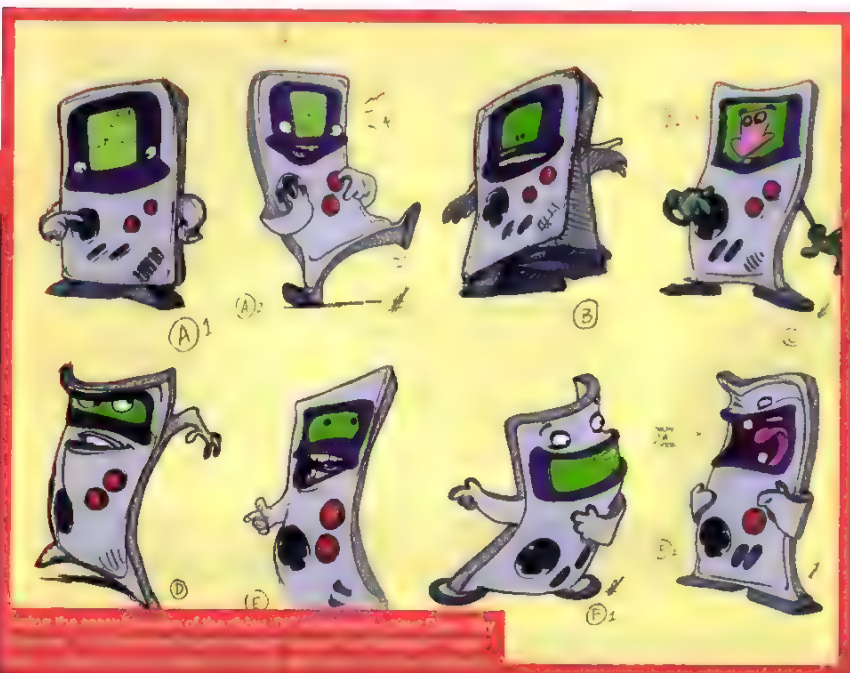
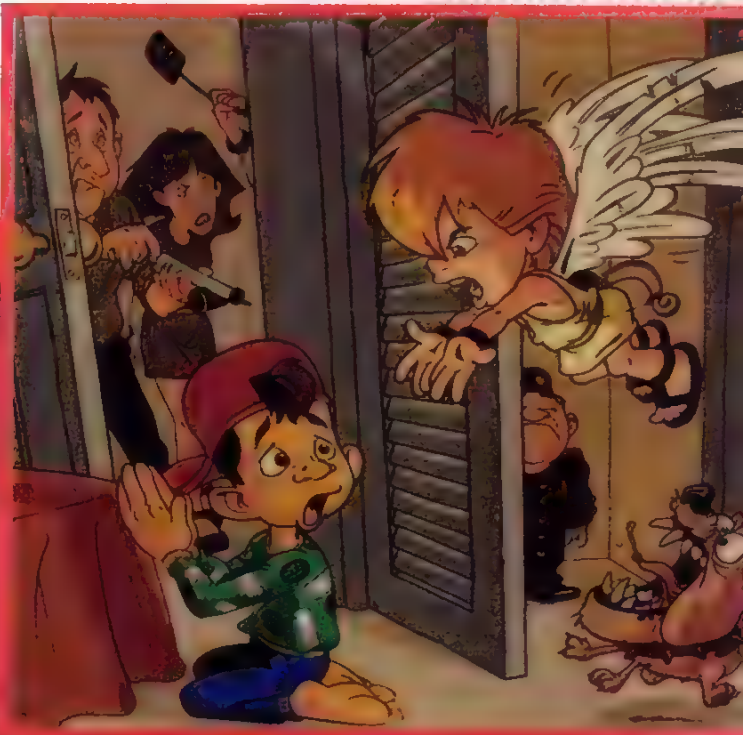
Unfortunately, the game wasn't out. Even though Nintendo had done some heavy pre-promotion for Super Mario Bros. 2, the release date for this highly anticipated title had been pushed back another summer because Nintendo was worried about oversaturating the market. Studdard then learned that the child's doctors didn't believe this young boy would live much past Christmas, so Studdard petitioned his bosses to get an early copy of the game. Nintendo was reluctant to release an early build of the sequel to its hottest brand, but after Studdard pleaded his case before the Japanese management team – even going so far as to threaten them with bad press – the company finally agreed to release a small run of the game for employees. Studdard was allowed to send one to his young friend.

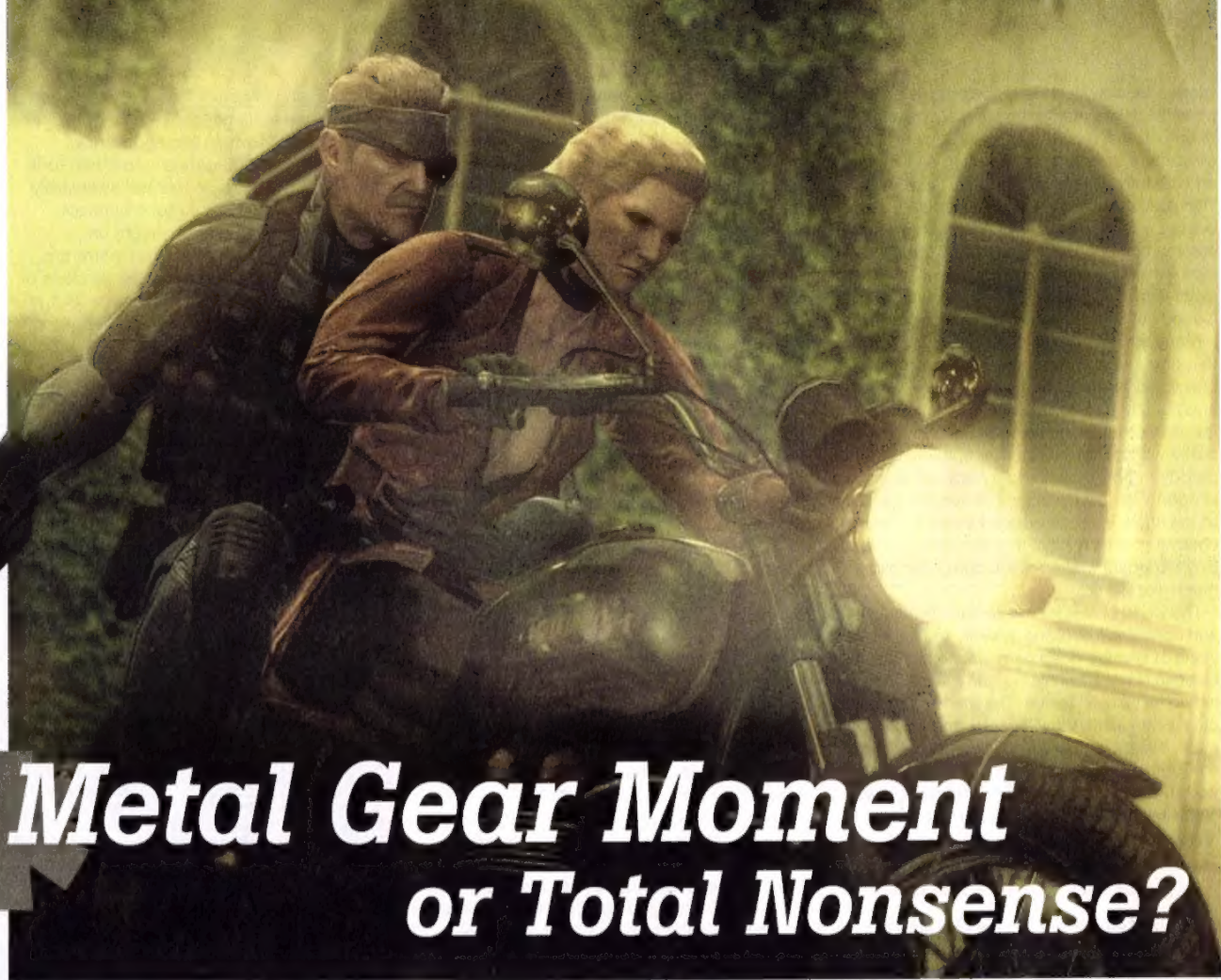
Not only was the boy ecstatic, but his doctors soon noticed that his medical condition turned a corner. "They said it was a miraculous recovery," Studdard recalls. "They said, 'His immune system kicked in and overpowered the cancer. We really don't know why. Nothing was working. The only thing that seemed to turn him around was this Nintendo stuff.'"

Despite good memories such as this one, looking back on Captain Nintendo is hard for its creator. "I really don't think about that time much," Studdard says. "It isn't really productive. You do what you do at the time because you think it is the best way to conduct your life. I've already done my introspective 'lessons learned' years ago. Personally, I know now that I would have retained an attorney in order to protect my creations and my rights. I'm not bitter, but, sad to say, I'm not near as trusting these days. However, I wouldn't change a thing if I thought it might have impacted how the character helped others in ways I don't understand."

The history of Captain Nintendo is a long

and sprawling narrative. The character started life as a marketing concept – a long-forgotten series of stories within Nintendo's now defunct in-house magazine – and then took on a new form when he merged awkwardly with a failed Paperboy cartoon concept. Millions across the country might only remember Captain Nintendo as a strange, old cartoon that featured twisted versions of their favorite video game characters. But to Randy Studdard, Captain Nintendo embodies something a little more hopeful. ♦





Metal Gear Moment or Total Nonsense?

Many video games feature insane storylines and colorful characters, but few franchises have done it on such a consistent basis as Metal Gear. Can you tell which of these 10 moments are true events in the series, and which are pulled out of thin air?

1. A soldier with mechanical octopus arms (each holding a submachine gun) grabs Snake and climbs to the top of a tower, where they do battle after a monologue about the dangers of human growth hormone.

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

2. In a timed boss battle, Snake has to kill an enemy sniper before the moon comes out. If 10 minutes elapse in the boss battle, the enemy turns into a werewolf and becomes much more difficult to defeat.

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

3. Raiden engages a former President of the United States in a swordfight on top of the U.S. Treasury building in New York City.

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

4. Snake enters a cave and confronts a man that can shoot bees out of his mouth and use the insects to create a decoy of himself.

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

5. Snake discusses his fear of Dracula.

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

6. A seven-foot-tall psychopath with cybernetic dreadlocks temporarily blinds Snake, who has to use audio cues to narrow down the villain's location.

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

7. One of Snake's associates describes a nightmare in which a tank made out of feces turned trees, people, and buildings into feces with its "turd missiles."

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

8. A morbidly obese, manicure-loving man sprays cologne on numerous bombs, then hides them everywhere.

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

9. Genetically-modified twins attempt to use their mind control powers to make Snake jump to his death, but he's saved by an arms dealer and his pet wolves.

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

10. Raiden and Rose engage in a nearly 15 minute-long Codec conversation about the correct pronunciation of "tomato."

Metal Gear Moment Nonsense

by Dan Ryckert



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