We Have Lift Off

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

Xbox One and PlayStation 4 units are finally landing in living rooms worldwide, and what begins as a whisper will quickly turn to a scream. There won't be enough units for everyone who wants one, many of the games won't be as good as we hope, and the online networks that support them will sputter and fail.

And that's just the way launches go. The good news is, in time there will be enough units for everyone with the money to buy one, the games will reach dizzying new heights with each passing year, and the networks will evolve and improve over time.

It's a global battle for our entertainment time, and Sony and Microsoft are going to pull out all the stops to recruit us and make their respective platforms successful. With each glancing blow or uppercut that the two behemoths land in this war, the players and the games that we consume will grow stronger.

Microsoft and Sony will force innovation to win our allegiance, as will the other competitors in the market, be it Nintendo, Valve, Android, or even Apple (if they ever enter the home console game market). All will drive evolution and change in the market, and games will follow suit.

I'm amazed by the changes I've seen in games over the last 40 years, and I can't wait to see what happens over the next decade and beyond. Some pundits say this round of consoles will be the industry's last, and maybe they are right, but just like any prediction, things change as the battle rages on and I truly believe no one knows how this generation will end. I know I don't, but I do know I'm going to enjoy watching the battle unfold and playing the games that are the spoils we all get to enjoy in this fight for living room dominance.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

Andy

contents

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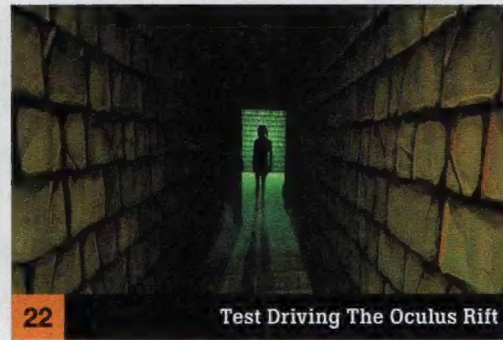## » 46

Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor

The Lord of the Rings has conquered literature and cinema, but it has not had a runaway success in the world of video games. Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor developer Monolith is hoping to change that with a highly exporable Middle-earth and an innovative AI system. *by Matt Miller*

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Valve's Steam machines get the third-degree from a skeptical reader. Others lament their failure to secure a PS4 when they had the chance, and accuse us of console racism. For the record: That's not a real thing.

Answering The Call

If you ever want to hear a 12-year-old kid in the seventh grade scream loud enough for everyone in the neighborhood to hear it, send me another issue with Call of Duty: Ghosts on the cover. Seeing all that Infinity Ward is doing to improve Ghosts is amazing. Call of Duty has always been my favorite series. I am really curious to see how others will react to Ghosts given all the hate the series receives in general. Despite being referred to as a Call of Duty "fanboy," I will always love the series. It's nice to see you guys showing some excitement for Ghosts.

**Kolton Jenkins
via email**

The response to our Call of Duty: Ghosts cover has been predictably divisive. Fans of the series celebrated our first Call of Duty cover since Modern Warfare 2, while the naysayers accused us of being the ultimate sellouts. Remember when people could just enjoy the games they like without being treated like war criminals? Yeah, neither do we.

Unlucky At Launch

Do you have any idea what the deal is with pre-ordering the PS4? I went online a few weeks after E3 in an attempt to pre-order, but just my luck, they were all sold out and pre-orders were put on hold. Sony says anyone who wants one will get one, but most likely not on release day. Do you know what kind of launch goodies I will miss out on because I wasn't quick enough? Will I have to purchase DriveClub? What about DC Universe Online, Blacklight: Retribution, and PlanetSide 2? Will latecomers like me have to spend extra greenbacks on those games that are available at launch?

**Ryan Ibsen
via email**

It didn't take long for Sony to run out of PS4s, and so far the company hasn't stated if and when pre-orders will resume. While your odds of finding one on launch day are probably slim, you don't have to worry about Sony's free launch titles. The PlayStation Plus edition of DriveClub (which was recently delayed out of the launch window) will still be available no matter when you purchase your PS4, and DC Universe Online, Blacklight: Retribution, and PlanetSide 2 are all free-to-play titles, meaning anyone can play them without spending a dime.

What's The Score?

I'll get right to the point: I feel you have allowed console racism to penetrate your magazine. There are almost no articles whatsoever on Nintendo games. Case in point, GTA V and The Wonderful 101 came out at the same time, and have identical user scores on Metacritic. Yet in issue 246, GTA V gets a multi-page spread and The Wonderful 101 gets nothing. Not even a peep. Why? The game is amazing, and people should know about it! There is more to gaming than Sony and MS, and there are still tens of millions of gamers who love Nintendo. I'm not saying you have to devote half the magazine to the Wii U, but at least a few pages would be nice! The Wonderful 101 has been praised left and right by gamers, and again, it's right on par with the almighty GTA V in user scores. Why would you allow this to be ignored?

Jaxon Holden
via email

The absurdity of the term "console racism" aside, we did cover The Wonderful 101 in issue 246; it appeared as a full-page review instead of a preview. As for user reviews: While some gamers take the time to write an honest evaluation of their experience with a game, others use them as a voting mechanism to sway public opinion. GTA V's user score on Metacritic in particular has been skewed by a significant number of zero scores, few of which are accompanied by actual reviews. In short, don't let Metacritic scores (user or otherwise) sway you too much; even a well-written review is still just one person's opinion.

Blowing Off Steam?

Correct me if I'm wrong, but the new Steam machine that was recently announced is basically just a PC in the form of a console, right? I've never owned a gaming PC, but everyone I know says it's a lot of trouble, so I've just stuck with my PlayStation. Could you explain the difference to me?

Andrew Ochoa
via email

Your understanding of Valve's Steam machines is basically correct, though there are a few differences. While PC users will be able to download SteamOS for free, Steam machines are built from the ground up to use Valve's new custom operating system. Steam machines also won't waste system resources on non-gaming hardware support or Windows, which should help gamers avoid some of the headaches PC owners suffer from. That said, PC gaming is a lot more reliable nowadays – but if you're looking for a system that plays PC games like a console, you may want to keep an eye on Valve's hardware developments.

gi spy

(Left) Japan's biggest and brightest developers were in attendance at this year's Tokyo Game Show. First up: Kim with D4's writer and director Hidetaka "Swery 65" Suehiro. (Right) Meanwhile, Tim caught up with GungHo's Dakota Grabowski and Grasshopper Manufacture's Goichi Suda (aka Suda51). Note: Don't sneak up on Suda with a camera.

GI SPY

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY
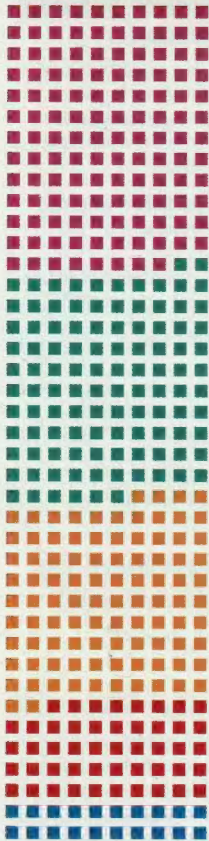
32% PS4 vs. Xbox One Bickering

27% "Call of Duty: Ghosts Rocks!"

24% "Call of Duty: Ghosts Sucks!"

12% Next-Gen Sports Talk

05% Retro Gaming Nostalgia

Badge Of Honor

Your article on the old-school Activision badges (Classic, issue 246) immediately brought a smile to my face. I am an original Atari kid, and I still have my old Atari 2600. I also have all my old Activision achievement badges. When I read the article, I was reminded of all the playtime my friends and I put into earning those badges – and bugging my parents to take the photographs to prove my accomplishments to Activision. The wait was agonizing, but when the badges would finally arrive in the mail, they would bring with them a tremendous feeling of relief and accomplishment – and I have kept mine safe to this day. Modern digital achievements are fun to earn, but are typically forgotten as soon as you move on to a new game. Unlike digital trophies, the Activision badges have stayed with me for most of my life, and they are treasured reminders of a happy childhood.

Chug Kendall
via email

I wanted thank you for the great stories featured in the Classic section of your magazine. Honestly, that is where I start reading each issue. My first game system was the Atari 2600 that my mom bought for my sister and me when I was 7 years old. The story on the Activision badges was a great blast from the past. I loved Activision games, and although I never sent away for a patch, I always shot for those goals. Your timing of this story is amazing as just this past weekend I finally obtained my first patch – a Chopper Commandos patch that was mixed in with a box of Atari games I bought at a local flea market. This classic gamer thanks you for the story.

Alan Brown
Raleigh, NC

Sports Talk

In issue 246, we asked readers what next-gen innovations they would like to see from their favorite sports series. Surprisingly, most fans pointed to off-the-field improvements, such as better refereeing and presentation. Here are some responses.

It may seem odd, but as a huge FIFA fan, I really want to see refereeing AI improve. Small things like judging who pushed who, who got the ball first, whether that second foot came in late – they all make a huge difference to the overall realism and simulation. I'm also super excited about the Ignite engine's "living worlds," so we will see if that lives up to expectations.

Joe Walsh

I am looking forward to next-gen graphics, but not just on the field; I want to see crowds that reflect what I see when I visit Cowboys Stadium. I'm also looking forward to advanced AI that makes logical decisions based on the down, distance, and time left on the clock.

James Starks

I have tried to play games based on most of the popular sports: football, basketball, baseball, soccer, etc. I stink at all of them. I want a good AI coach mode in the games, where the AI calls the plays and I just have to control one of the players on the field/court/pitch/etc. Maybe then I could play them. The closest thing I can remember to this was the "Ask Madden" button, which would give you advice. You still had to switch between coaching and playing, though.

John Enfield

(Left) Lucky for Tim, Metal Gear creator Hideo Kojima was more laid back when they chatted about Ground Zeroes. **(Right)** Ben Hanson recently interviewed PlayStation 4 mastermind Mark Cerny about Sony's next-gen system and the future of the industry. Watch the video at gameinformer.com.
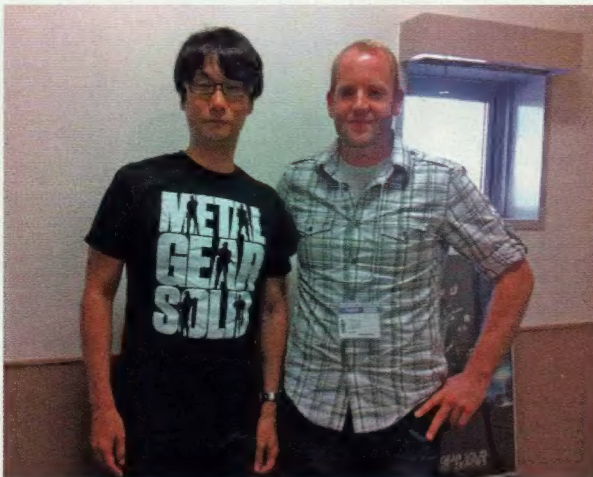
WINNER

1 Houston Sharp
At this point, you can probably throw those sunglasses away, Adam.
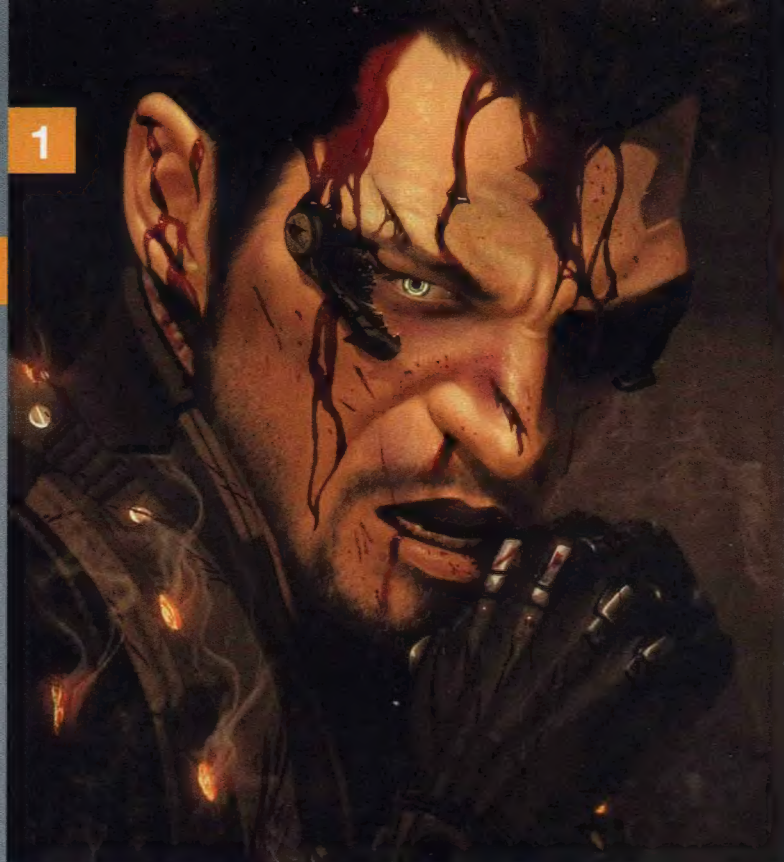
2 Andy Woolwine
Pull yourself together, Ralph. Suspenders can't be that expensive.

3 Khita Knight
Juri keeps a smile on her face, even with a severe case of pink eye.

4 Danny Kissel
With his head perpetually ablaze, Sweet Tooth makes for a perfect Jack-O-Lantern.
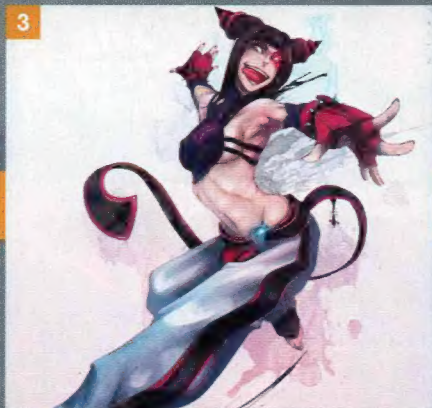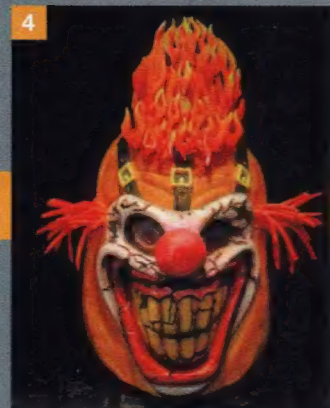
» Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned.
Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest | 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor | Mpls, MN 55401 or Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

(Left) Sony's Aram Jabarri and Media Molecule's Siobhan Reddy and Rex Crowle pose with their newest mascot, Iota.
(Right) Evolution Studios' Jamie Brayshaw, Paul Rustchynsky, and Col Rodgers were really excited to race pretend cars with Tim. Who says imagination is dead?

The Wii U Survival Guide

HOW THE WII U CAN STAY RELEVANT

The next generation of gaming technically started on November 18 when Nintendo released the Wii U, but the reality of the situation was a different matter. The console may have launched before those from Microsoft and Sony, but it didn't signal the vanguard of a new round of home consoles. Rather, the Wii U had to play catch-up in graphics, features, and software to what the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 were already doing. After a year of less-than-stellar sales, the Wii U is in serious danger of losing its relevance among the newer and more advanced next-gen systems. We look at how the console got itself in this predicament and how it can get out.

by Matthew Kato
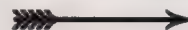
The confusion and apathy from the Wii U's E3 2011 unveiling lingered through the system's launch at the end of 2012. To be fair, Nintendo itself did not assume the console would fly off the shelves as quickly as the original Wii, and this turned out to be the correct outlook. Nintendo says that it has shipped 3.61 million Wii U units worldwide in a little more than six months on the market. The first Wii sold over 3 million units in its first month and a half on the shelves alone. As another point of comparison, Sony says it expects to sell five million PlayStation 4s in under five months on sale. Nintendo has already downgraded its Wii U sales forecast for the fiscal year; adjusting its target of 5.5 million units down to 4 million.

Perhaps a larger problem for the system is its lack of compelling software. While the system's launch window came with third-party support that was stronger than previous Nintendo home hardware, games like Mass Effect 3, Assassin's Creed III, and Call of Duty: Black Ops II were already out or scheduled to appear on other systems, and didn't give gamers a compelling reason to either buy them again or to wait to buy the Wii U version. During a Q&A at a summer shareholder's meeting, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata admitted that the third-party software during the launch period didn't do its job. "There were so many games released by third-party publishers for Wii U during the launch period, but most of them were converted from other platforms and therefore could not enjoy brisk sales."

However, Nintendo's first-party software didn't do much to boost sales of the Wii U either. Titles like Lego City Undercover, New Super Mario Bros. U, and The Wonderful 101 didn't make a significant mark, and Pikmin 3 – released nine months after launch – was the first Wii U-exclusive title to crack the NPD software top 10 for sales.

Unfortunately, the Wii U's third-party software problems will likely persist for the foreseeable future, and some believe it's already too late. "The time for convincing publishers and developers to support Wii U has long past," Pete Hines, vice president at Bethesda Softworks, told GameTrailers, "The box is out."

Nintendo president and CEO Satoru Iwata believes that, once the Wii U takes off, companies will be compelled to make software for it. However, this presents a "chicken-and-egg" dilemma; without compelling software, what will spur sales of the console?

The confused reaction to the Wii U back when it debuted at E3 2011 (many didn't understand whether the Wii U was a new system or merely a peripheral for the Wii) may have told us all we need to know about why the system isn't doing well currently. The questions we had then still ring true now. Does the GamePad really add that much to the gaming experience? Is it worth the price tag? Where's the game that not only shows what this system

is all about, but which I can't live without?

In an interview with Japan business publication Toyo Keizai (translated by Kotaku), Iwata himself seemed to understand that the idea behind the Wii U was being lost on consumers. "You can't just force your way through. By saying 'the point is to be accepted' I mean, if you go to a customer with your idea and you realize they don't understand it, it's more important that they do and you should shift your idea."

"In an industry that offers consumers a lot of choice, Wii U is not viewed by consumers as being special," says Colin Sebastian, senior equity research analyst for Baird Research & Insights. There is also no clear killer app, such as Wii Sports on the predecessor platform.

Michael Pachter, managing director of equity research at Wedbush Securities simply isn't impressed by the system. "The Wii U is not as intuitive as the Wii, the integration of the GamePad controller into the system is awkward (and frequently requires people to hold it in the air in their line of sight), and the price is relatively high given that it is not a huge improvement in power or graphics over the PS3 or Xbox 360."

The bright spot for the console is that the recent release of The Legend of Zelda: The

Wind Waker HD Wii U bundle and $50 price drop has just earned Nintendo and the system a 200 percent increase in Wii U consoles sold in the month of September as compared to the previous month despite the fact that it was only on the market for 15 days. Nevertheless, the system still lost out to the PlayStation 3 in sales that month; meaning Wii U sales were likely below 150,000 units – an average month for PS3 or Xbox 360.

Hopefully the system's price drop and the sales of the Wind Waker HD bundle signal a turn in fortune for the Wii U. But unlike the meaning behind Nintendo's own name – "Leave luck to heaven" – the company must be pro-active and change the way it approaches the Wii U if it wants to change its fate. Here are some of the things that Nintendo can do to put the system on the right course.

SUCCESS THROUGH SOFTWARE

Recent Nintendo home consoles have struggled to engage consumers with quality, consistent software releases. There's no doubt that Nintendo is capable of making good games, but it must avoid the sporadic release schedule and delays that impede the steady flow of titles for the console.

Bayonetta 2 is a good exclusive for the Wii U, but remember: The sales of the first one weren't so hot

Notable Recent And Upcoming Wii U Titles
- The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD (10.4)
- Skylanders: Swap Force (10.13)
- Lego Marvel Super Heroes (10.22)
- Deus Ex: Human Revolution – Director's Cut (10.22)
- Batman: Arkham Origins (10.25)
- Wii Party U (10.25)
- Sonic Lost World (10.29)
- Angry Birds: Star Wars (10.29)
- Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag (10.29)
- Call of Duty: Ghosts (11.5)
- Duck Tales Remastered (11.12)
- Super Mario 3D World (11.22)
- Wii Fit U (12.13)
- Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze (February)
- Mario Kart 8 (Spring)
- Watch Dogs (Spring)
- Bayonetta 2 (2014)
- Super Smash Bros. for Wii U (2014)

Unlike the meaning behind Nintendo's own name - "Leave luck to heaven" - the company must be proactive and change the way it approaches the Wii U if it wants to change its fate.

Moreover, Nintendo needs to execute a multi-pronged strategy that includes both untapped franchises like Metroid and Star Fox and all-new IP if it wants to invigorate the system and avoid going the same software path as the Wii and GameCube before it. Nintendo has a roster of beloved characters and franchises, but it's about time that new faces carry the standard for the company.

Despite Iwata's belief that third-party companies will flock to the Wii U when it becomes successful, Nintendo might not have the luxury of waiting around for that to happen. Whether it's assisting outside developers in working with the system, fostering more indie development, or paying for more exclusives, something needs to be done. Nabbing Bayonetta 2 was a good start for the system, but the fact that the title hasn't come out yet is yet another case of perpetual delayed gratification for Wii U owners.

Although Pachter might not be too high on the system itself, he agrees that software is the one thing that can help. "There is no question that the software is going to get better over time. I'm not sure there is a lot they can do, other than keep the software rolling out."

Titles like Call of Duty: Ghosts lack all the online amenities of the versions on other systems

EXPANDING ONLINE SERVICES

It's good that Nintendo finally got with the program and acknowledged the power of online gaming, but there is still a lot of work to be done before the Wii U can match the functionality and popularity of Microsoft's Xbox Live service or Sony's PlayStation Network.

First of all, there are a number of amenities offered in other services that Nintendo must match. Universal chat, achievements/trophies, video sharing, the ability for users

to re-download their games, accessing your content on other Wii U systems, and a universal friends list from which you can send game invites from is just the beginning. As soon as the new systems are released, both Sony and Microsoft will continue to evolve their services, and Nintendo must do the same.

Going hand-in-hand with the Wii U's software problem is the fact that even when titles are released for the system, some lack services or

an online component altogether. Call of Duty: Ghosts lacks the game's cross-platform clan XP system, and Batman: Arkham Origins has no online multiplayer on the Wii U. First-party games like Pikmin 3 and New Super Mario Bros. U also omit online multiplayer, and the mobile app for Injustice: Gods Among Us isn't supported on the Wii U. Why would gamers who own multiple systems buy third-party titles on the Wii U if they aren't getting the full experience?

WHAT'S THE GAMEPAD GOOD FOR?

Right now the Wii U's GamePad, complete with gyroscope/accelerometer and large center touchscreen is a differentiator between the system and the other consoles. It needs to be better utilized – and not just to display level maps. Speaking to Game Informer at E3 this year, even Miyamoto admitted that the company sees the GamePad as just one of several control options for titles. The original Wii had Wii Sports to prove to the masses how fun it was to use motion controls; the Wii U doesn't have that equivalent – not even the pack-in title NintendoLand – for the GamePad.

A stronger, more innovative push by Nintendo itself to making the GamePad more relevant could help blaze the trail for the controller, showing third parties the system's potential.

Then again, if Nintendo can't make the GamePad crucial, perhaps Nintendo should go the opposite direction and stop packing it in altogether. This could pave the way for a significant drop in price, giving the Wii U at least one advantage over the new systems at retail. ◈
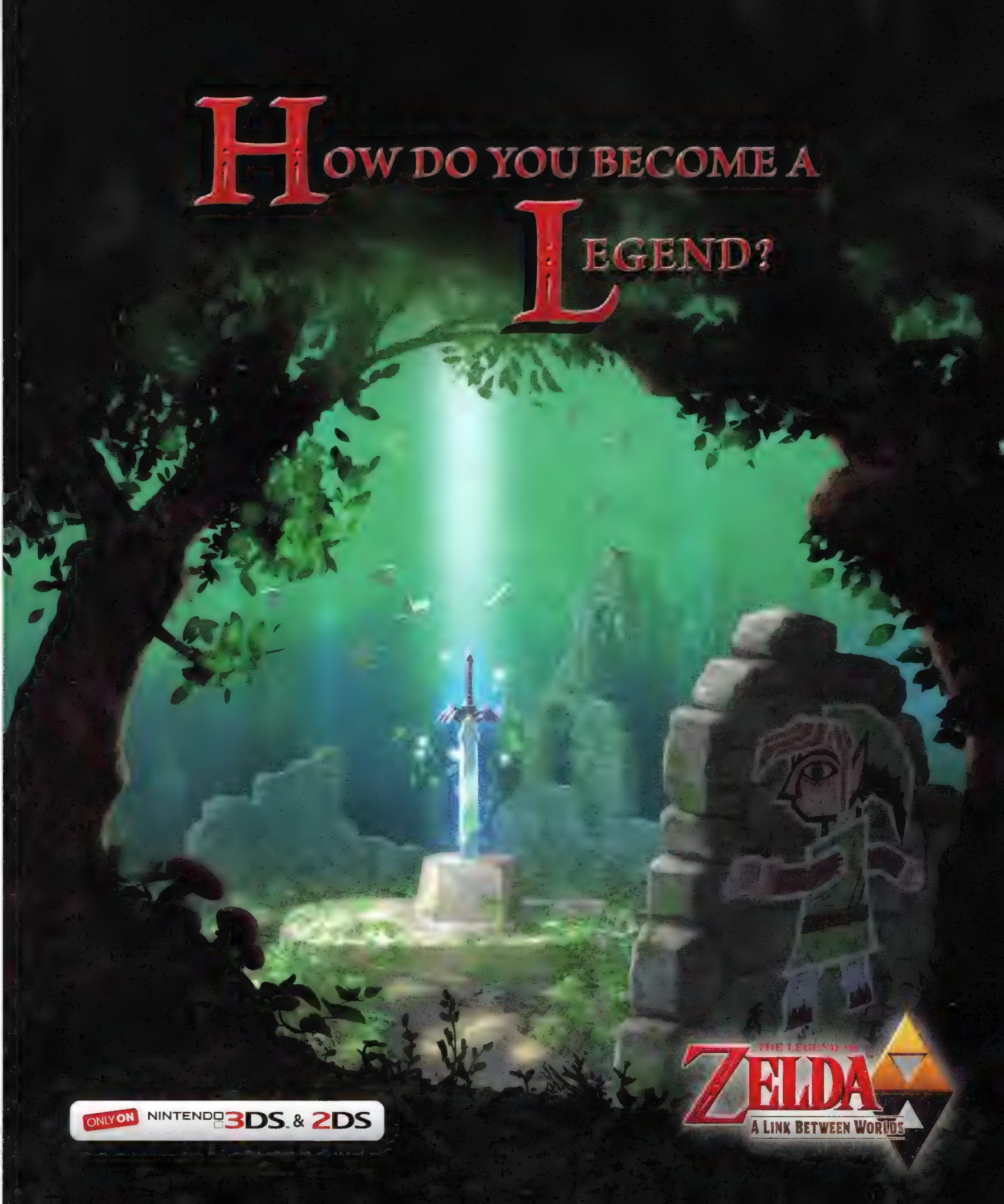
Speaking to Game Informer at E3 this year, even Miyamoto admitted that the company sees the GamePad as just one of several control options for titles.

BY SAVING TWO WORLDS USING POWERFUL NEW ABILITIES

In this new adventure, Link™ transforms into a living painting to cross into a dark, parallel dimension mirroring Hyrule.
You must help him conquer the puzzles, traps, and hidden rooms of deadly dungeons to save both worlds.

Become a Living Painting

Challenging puzzles will require Link to think in all-new ways and use new abilities like his power to merge into walls to move over ledges or through tight spots.

3D World

Bring this 2D world to life with elevation and depth thanks to top-down 3D visuals. This will help Link explore hidden areas or drop down and attack enemies from above.

Brand New Adventure

A brand new adventure awaits Link as he explores new dungeons in not just Hyrule but also the mysterious Lorule found by traveling through special cracks.
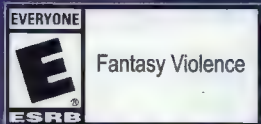
Strategy guides
in an evolving industry

**CONSTANT
COMPANIONS**

by Joe Juba

Almost everything about a game can be found online if you're willing to look. User-run wikis compile all of the important characters and events. Online forums allow gamers to tap into a community to get questions answered. Walkthroughs can get virtually any gamer unstuck – often accompanied by videos illustrating the proper steps. All of these options are even available on mobile devices, so they can be accessed anywhere. For some gamers, the convenience of these Internet resources is enough. However, enthusiasts know that a guide isn't a cheat repository; it's a roadmap to help you enjoy a game to the fullest extent.

Strategy guides have been around almost as long as video games themselves, helping players get the most out of their favorite titles. Full of maps, tactics, and secrets, these books have been invaluable resources to countless gamers. Years ago, official guides were the only way to get exhaustive information about a game. Now, the situation has changed.

No matter how much the industry changes, gamers will always be looking for a deeper experience with the titles they love, and strategy guides offer a single, comprehensive, and curated collection of information.

"We have people who have been writing strategy guides for us for over 10 years," says Mike Degler, publisher at BradyGames. "I would consider them some of the best gamers in the world. We work directly with the people making the game. Sure, you have to pay for this content, but we've gone to great lengths to make sure you're getting the best information you can get between the two covers." The collaboration with developers is a key part of that equation, ensuring that the official guide is as thorough and correct as possible.

The cooperation also opens the door for other supplementary content exclusive to guides, like developer interviews and commentary. This is one of the major ways that guides have evolved over the years; instead of being a series of step-by-step instructions, modern guides offer behind-the-scenes access that caters to the hardcore fans who want to know anything and everything about a title. While the idea of a book containing information about a game may not seem like it leaves much room for innovation, these kinds of additions can add value and separate official guides from user-created content.

Over time, this approach has created products that are much different from the guides players used in the PS2 era. In addition to developer commentaries, an emphasis on visual instruction and more attractive graphic design has emerged. More charts and diagrams help players optimize their characters. Sidebars summarize the background behind historical events represented in game. Touches like these make today's strategy guides more informative and easier to read and navigate than ever.

"All of the ideas that we come up with for a specific title, we carry through to the next one," says Piggyback Interactive managing director Louie Beatty. "So you see a general improvement – a lot of innovation – on our guides as they evolve over time."

With changes in technology and consumer tastes, strategy guides are different today than they were 10 years ago. Because the business is so closely tied to the video game industry, its success relies on adapting to shifts in the gaming landscape. "What we are experiencing is essentially what's happening in the games market," says Debra Kempker, president of Prima Games. "You have your top hit product,

and you have a larger gap in the middle that used to be filled out with more titles. It's as if the games industry has lost its middle class."

Gamers have seen this in publishers' increasing focus on a few blockbuster titles, rather than a stable of games that span a spectrum of cost and quality. For strategy guide companies, this means there are fewer viable candidates than there were 10 years ago. "You could pretty much publish on any game that was releasing and retail would take it," Degler says. "We did guides for Defender at one point in time – it was insane. It was a remake of Defender." These days, companies need to be more careful about the guides they produce, considering a game's popularity and whether or not retail stores will even make shelf space for the finished product.

Even the rise and fall of certain genres affects the strategy guide market. Guides for role-playing games are popular among fans (figuring out how to get every ultimate weapon would be torture without them), but the genre has more a niche audience when compared to blockbusters like Call of Duty or Assassin's Creed. That doesn't mean guides for RPGs are no longer made, but they need to be approached differently than they were during the genre's PS2 heyday. Tapping into Facebook and Twitter to raise awareness for guides covering lower-profile games allows the creators to specifically target the interested gamers. "It might be a smaller market, but it's a smaller market you can still publish to and find an enthusiast crowd," Kempker says. "There's a lot of loyalty there."

Another way to serve a loyal fanbase is by providing rare collector's editions. Tying into the aesthetic appeal of owning a physical book, these versions go above and beyond with their hard covers and high-quality paper. "It's not only the content, but the delivery of that content," Beatty says. "It is a compelling proposition. Gamers can hold it in their hands, it belongs to them, and it enhances their experience." These premium editions also entice hardcore fans with extra bonuses, from promotional items to in-game content. "Gamers are really wise," Kempker says. "You can't just manufacture any items and pack them in and expect people to get excited about that kind of thing."

Strategy guides have come a long way, and they aren't done evolving. In the years to come, gamers can expect them to branch out into even more formats. "[Digital] is our big push right now," Degler says. "We know there is a certain set of fans out there who absolutely want a print book, and they're not going to buy anything but a print book. But we also know there's a different section of people who may not buy that print book; they love their iPad, or Kindle, or getting content on their phones."

Gamers can already get digital versions of official guides, go to the big guide companies' YouTube channels, and even download official supplementary apps (like complete maps and collectible finders) on mobile devices. Even as guides become more integrated with technology, the printed product won't go away; it will just take advantage of the variety of ways gamers can access its information. "I think there will be more and more connectivity between the game, the guide book, and a digital product," says Piggyback managing director Vincent Pargney. "I think we will see a larger number of hybrid products; that's where I think the future is going to be." ◆

Launch Games
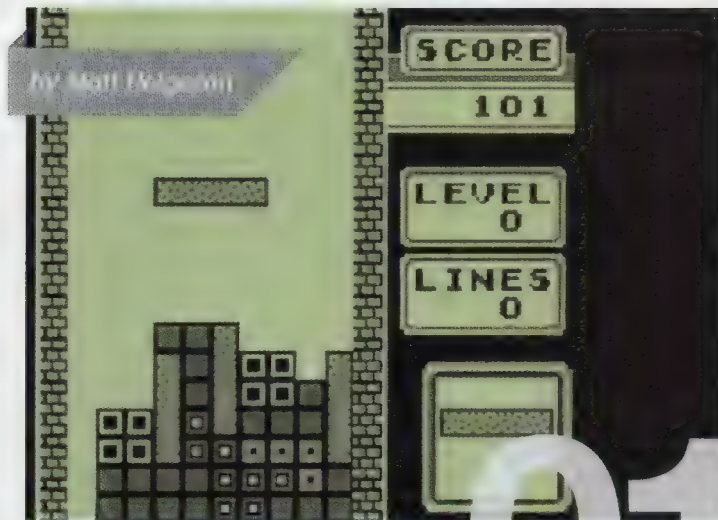
Tetris - *Game Boy*

Though it had been released before, Nintendo hoped Tetris would be the killer app it needed to establish mobile gaming as a staple for the masses. The company packed a copy of the game with each Game Boy, and doing so spurred both Tetris and Nintendo to new heights, topping 35 million copies sold.

Super Mario Bros. - *NES*

Few games can claim to have changed the industry. Super Mario Bros. is one of them. It singlehandedly established the side-scrolling platformer as a staple genre, and made Mario an industry icon. The game's myriad secrets and hidden areas defined game design. The formula still works to this day.

Super Mario 64 - *N64*

Beginning to see a pattern here? Back in the day, Nintendo knew how to kick off a new console. Super Mario 64 brought sprawling platforming worlds into three dimensions, revolutionizing console gaming in the process. Mario 64 still holds up, as evidenced by its excellent DS port.

Halo - *Xbox*

Without Halo, it's possible that Microsoft wouldn't still be in the home console business. Until Bungie came along, no studio had done the shooter genre justice with a controller. It also gave the Xbox a system-selling, blockbuster franchise.

The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess - *Wii*

The Wii doesn't have many classic games, but this GameCube holdover ensured that it had one on launch day. Some critics and gamers even dubbed this epic adventure the best Zelda ever. The Wii version didn't add much, but the game stands the test of time – which can't be said about most of the Wii catalog.
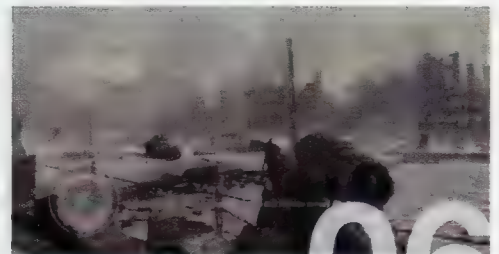
Call Of Duty 2 - *Xbox 360*

Call of Duty wouldn't become a global entertainment franchise until Modern Warfare, but the second game in the series is where it came into its own. Call of Duty 2 was just what Xbox 360 gamers were looking for on launch day – especially in the absence of a Halo game.
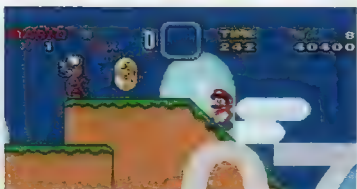
Super Mario World - *SNES*

Super Mario World didn't redefine the series like Super Mario Bros. or Mario 64, but it did refine 2D platforming to the highest degree. Eschewing the animal suits of Super Mario 3, Mario World partnered the plumber with green dinosaur Yoshi, adding a new aspect to the already polished gameplay.

Soul Calibur - *Dreamcast*

Namco took the launch of Sega's Dreamcast as a chance to fulfill one of fighting fans' long-held dreams: a home console fighting game that delivered the look and feel of an arcade unit. Soul Calibur was big on eye candy and easy to learn, making for a game that appealed to both newbies and pros.
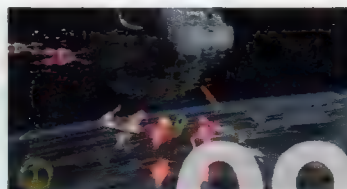
Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader - *GameCube*

Rogue Squadron II comes from an era when LucasArts still existed and the flight combat genre was still commercially viable. Graphically, it was dazzling, and remains a classic flight combat game.
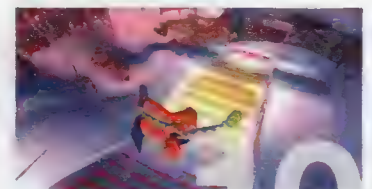
SSX - *PlayStation 2*

SSX wasn't the first snowboarding game, but it made previous attempts like the Coolboarders series seem muddled and slow. The speed of SSX was unprecedented, as were its over-the-top tricks and dizzying mountain courses.

The Good

SLEEPING DOGS

developer United Front Games is working on another entry in the series entitled Triad Wars. The game will be published by Square Enix, and United Front says that it will reveal more about the title next year.
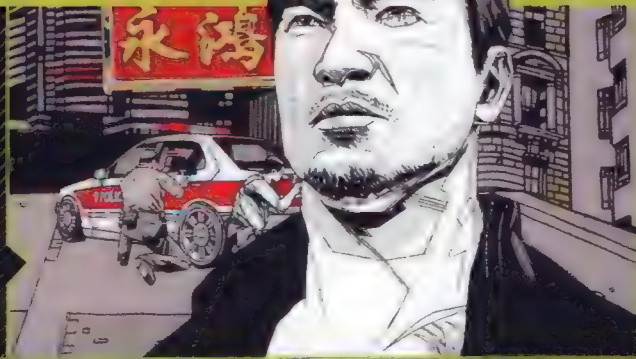
The Bad

PLAYSTATION 4'S LAUNCH
takes a hit with the delay of the first-party game DriveClub (sometime in 2014). Ubisoft also pushed the release of its highly anticipated Watch Dogs (until spring, left) and the open-world racer The Crew. Ubisoft's delays apply to the versions on other systems as well, but the PS4 launch lineup is now running low.

The Ugly

GRAND THEFT AUTO ONLINE'S
launch is marred by players having difficulty getting into the game, freezes, and lost characters, cars, property, progress, etc. Rockstar has released multiple patches to try and address the issues, and has also gifted players $500,000 each of in-game cash to help soothe the situation.

Quotable

"It must have been a very tough time for them. That shows how smart they are, and it shows their dedication to making Xbox One successful."

— **Shuhei Yoshida**, Sony worldwide studios president, talks about Microsoft's Xbox One about-face with *GamesIndustry International*

Test Driving The Oculus Rift

We still don't know when the Oculus Rift will be available for purchase, but that doesn't mean there aren't a variety of unique experiences available right now for those with a developer kit. If you have $300 to purchase a kit from the Oculus website, several free tech demos and very basic games are available to try. Most are rough around the edges, and the developer kits aren't in HD, but I've been impressed by many of these early experiences. If they're any indication of what full-fledged games will be like on the final version of the virtual-reality headset, consumers may be blown away by its capabilities. Here are a few of the demos that can be found online right now.

by Dan Ryckert
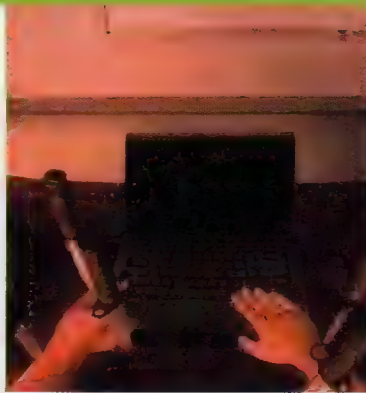
Don't Let Go

Taking place in a well-lit office, you might expect this brief demo to belong to the horror genre. My playthrough was good for a couple jump scares and one particularly creepy sensation that I won't spoil. It only asks one thing from the player: Don't let go of the control buttons. With your actual fingers holding down both keys, you look down in the virtual office to see your polygonal arms and hands in the same position. Bees surround you and a velociraptor steps in for a brief visit, but a couple scarier events occur in the latter moments that will test your ability to stay calm.

Rift Coaster

If your nerves are rattled after Don't Let Go, the Unreal-powered Rift Coaster demo is a leisurely trip through a medieval castle town. No input is required as your roller-coaster cart is whisked along the peaks, valleys, and turns of this trip. Rift Coaster does a good job of imparting a sensation of speed and showing off the tracking ability of the Oculus headset, so it's a great starter demo if you want to show the Rift off to your non-gamer friends.

Dreadhalls

Several tech demos explore the possibilities of horror games using the Oculus Rift, but none are as frightening as Dreadhalls. It places you in a randomly generated dark labyrinth with nothing but a lantern, and you're tasked with collecting oil for it while avoiding terrifying creatures that stalk the halls. It obviously takes inspiration from Amnesia: The Dark Descent, but it's amazing how much dread this demo can produce without the polish and budget of that PC title.

Dumpy: Going Elephants

No controller or keyboard is needed for this colorful journey, as the only thing you have to worry about is swinging Dumpy's large trunk around from a first-person perspective. You're bound to look insane while whipping your head around, but it's fun to swat cop cars and aliens out of the way while you stomp along as an unfortunately named elephant.

Titans Of Space

Resembling an interactive planetarium exhibit more than a game, Titans of Space does a great job of presenting the scale of planets. It shuttles you along the planets of our solar system, teaching you tidbits about them and their respective moons. Eventually, the focus shifts to the sun and other stars. It may sound like something you've seen on a mobile in science class, but I felt my jaw involuntarily drop more than once when being introduced to some of the larger objects in the universe.

Streetview

While not an official download, a quick web search will lead you to instructions on how to enable head tracking while using Google Streetview. It's fairly quick to set up, and there's something novel about being able to type in any address in the world and immediately be transported there. No lag is present, making it a smooth experience to revisit your old college apartment, your childhood home, or take an instant trip overseas.

Epic Dragon VR

Epic Dragon is another hands-free experience, as moving your head around influences the direction of the giant dragon you're riding. You're free to fly upside down and perform barrel rolls as you swoop past large rock spires and collect eggs before the timer runs out. Epic Dragon's non-demanding nature makes it another solid showcase for non-gamers.

Jumping Back Into Half-Life 2

All of these tech demos are fun ways to show off the potential for virtual reality gaming, but none of them are full-on games in their own right. The best way to understand the Rift's potential for gaming is to use it with one of the greatest games of all time, Half-Life 2, which is fully compatible with the device. A little setup is required before spending significant time in City 17, but several online guides offer advice for tweaking specific configuration files (a good start is the Road to VR blog at http://bit.ly/16dPENM). Once I adjusted the aiming to my liking, it became one of the most immersive experiences I've ever had in gaming. As of this writing, I've spent six hours playing Half-Life 2 on the Rift, and it's an experience that will stick with me for quite some time. If a nearly 10-year-old game can leave this kind of impact on a low-res developer unit, I can't imagine how immersive the retail release of the Rift will be when used with modern games.

Super Mega Mega

Almost all of the demos currently available for the Rift are understandably first-person experiences, but Super Mega Mega shows off how well it could work for 2D platforming. You play as a sprite-based character in a space suit who ascends and descends cylindrical columns while attacking enemies. Looking in a specific direction influences where your shots go, making your own head the equivalent of the right stick in a twin-stick shooter. As you climb higher in the column, it can be nerve-wracking to look down and see just how far you'll plummet if you take a wrong step. ◈

CULT CLASSICS

by Kyle Hilliard

As the current console age comes to a close and we look toward the future, prepared to embrace all the new video games that accompany a new generation, it's important to remember those that didn't receive blockbuster marketing budgets but developed strong followings nonetheless.

Cult classic video games are releases that originally failed to get their hooks into the mainstream gaming public, but were gradually embraced by a small, but vocal group of fanatics. Presented in alphabetical order, these are the scrappy titles that rose to prominence through word of mouth.

Alan Wake | 360 · PC

Alan Wake was meant to be one of the Xbox 360's premiere exclusives, but when it released in 2010 (and later on PC), the narrative-driven psychological thriller failed to meet the sales expectations set forth by Microsoft and Remedy. In the past few years, however, Alan Wake has steadily built up an audience, eventually cracking three million in sales. An Xbox Live Arcade follow-up, Alan Wake's American Nightmare, tied a few loose story ends, but it was far from a true sequel. When developer Remedy announced its next project, the live action/game hybrid Quantum Break, fans were outspoken in their disappointment that it wasn't Alan Wake 2 instead. Remedy writer Sam Lake thanked fans for their support, and said the studio hopes to make a proper follow-up when the time is right.

Bayonetta | PS3 · 360

Developed by Platinum games, Bayonetta serves as a wacky spiritual successor to Hideki Kamiya's previous series, Devil May Cry. The two share similar combat, and a level of action absurdity that only Kamiya can deliver. The game saw a reasonable amount of commercial success, but not enough to guarantee a sequel. Fans received a pleasant surprise when Nintendo unveiled that it would bring Bayonetta 2 exclusively to Wii U, allowing the devoted to breathe a sigh of relief and have a reason to purchase Nintendo's new console.

College Hoops 2K8 | PS3 · 360

Sports games release every year, so the idea that one could become a cult classic is surprising, but College Hoops 2K8 fits the bill. The final release in the College Hoops 2K series, the 2008 edition marked the end of a franchise, but fans refused to see this as the end. The game officially died when its online servers shut down late last year, but it lives on with a fanbase of devoted college basketball fans creating updated rosters, even if they can't play together as easily as before.

Deadly Premonition | PS3 · 360 · PC

Perhaps the quintessential cult classic, you either love Deadly Premonition or don't understand its appeal. The controls are terrible, the story and characters are bizarre, some PlayStation 2 games look better, and sometimes a giant dog chases you around the streets at night for seemingly no reason. Nothing else like this campy open-world mystery game exists, and its review scores covered the whole spectrum. Three years after its release, in response to fan demand Ignition Entertainment released a director's cut of the game exclusively on PlayStation 3 (and later on PC), giving a whole new segment of players a chance to experience its bizarre but undeniably engrossing *Twin Peaks*-inspired world.
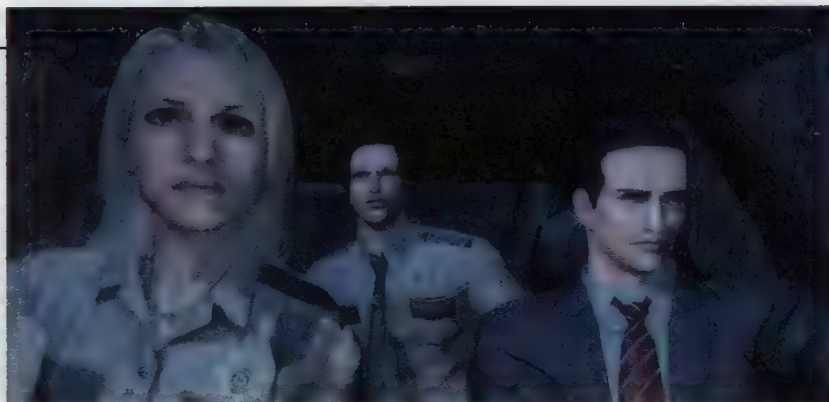
Demon's Souls | PS3

Demon's Souls is either a game that you love and have played for hundreds of hours, or one you played for a few minutes and questioned what the buzz was all about. This action RPG's dark world is unforgiving, but masochists in search of punishing difficulty adore it and make sure everyone within earshot is well aware. Its innovative online multiplayer, which allows players to both hinder and help one another without the need for constant direct interaction, was vehemently defended every time Sony threatened to turn off its servers. The end-date was constantly delayed thanks to fan outcry, and From Software's gave the game an encore with spiritual successor Dark Souls and the soon-to-be-released Dark Souls II.

Earth Defense Force 2017 | 360 • Vita

In Earth Defense Force, you shoot bugs. Not much context exists for why you are shooting said bugs, many of which are gigantic, but do you really need any? That's the argument made by EDF's biggest proponents. The Starship Trooper-inspired third-person shooter was released as part of D3 Publishers' budget line of games with a generic, forgettable space marine firing a gun on the front cover. Despite its bargain-bin pedigree, it found a devoted audience and inspired numerous sequels on multiple platforms.
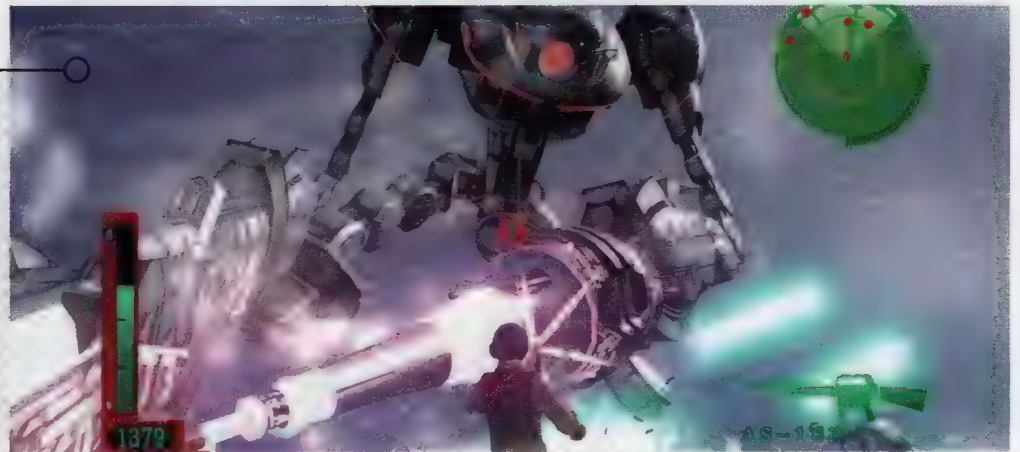
El Shaddai: Ascension Of The Metatron | PS3 • 360

In El Shaddai you play as the great grandfather of the Bible's Noah who wears jeans and must return lost angels to heaven. This beautiful, but shockingly abstract game uses Christianity as its source material, with a substantial dose of artistic license. Most people never bothered to check this game out, but many who have played it are big fans. The game has earned an especially large following in Japan, even if those fans weren't there at the beginning to boost sales. Game director Sawaki Takeyasu's new studio, Crim, recently purchased the rights to make more El Shaddai games from the original publisher, Ignition Entertainment.

Enslaved: Odyssey To The West | PS3 • 360 • PC

Before successfully giving the Devil May Cry series a reboot, developer Ninja Theory worked with noteworthy motion-capture performer Andy Serkis to modernize the ancient Chinese novel Journey to the West. Its focus on story and performance was ahead of its time, but it didn't resonate with every player. Since the game released in 2010, it has slowly gained a following. Namco Bandai has recognized the swell of enthusiasm and is preparing to re-release a premium edition on PlayStation 3 and PC.

Metro 2033 | 360 · PC

Ukraine isn't widely known for its game-development scene, but developer 4A Games changed that perception with the Metro series. Based on a Russian novel of the same name, this post-apocalyptic first-person shooter sets itself apart with a palpable sense of constant dread. When it released in 2010, Metro didn't make a huge mainstream splash, but it inspired enough of a following to convince 4A Games to release a critically acclaimed sequel.

Mirror's Edge | PS3 · 360 · PC

Mirror's Edge was an unconventional project for DICE, a studio that made a successful living on the Battlefield series and racing games. Set in an dystopian city where a totalitarian regime has rendered crime nearly non-existent, players assumed the role of Faith, a parkour courier who makes her living delivering sensitive information by running, climbing, and dodging bullets instead of shooting. Despite the original premise and gorgeous art style, it didn't run into commercial success. The series has slowly grown an allegiance over the years to the point where DICE and EA finally heeded calls for a sequel by teasing a new Mirror's Edge at this past E3.
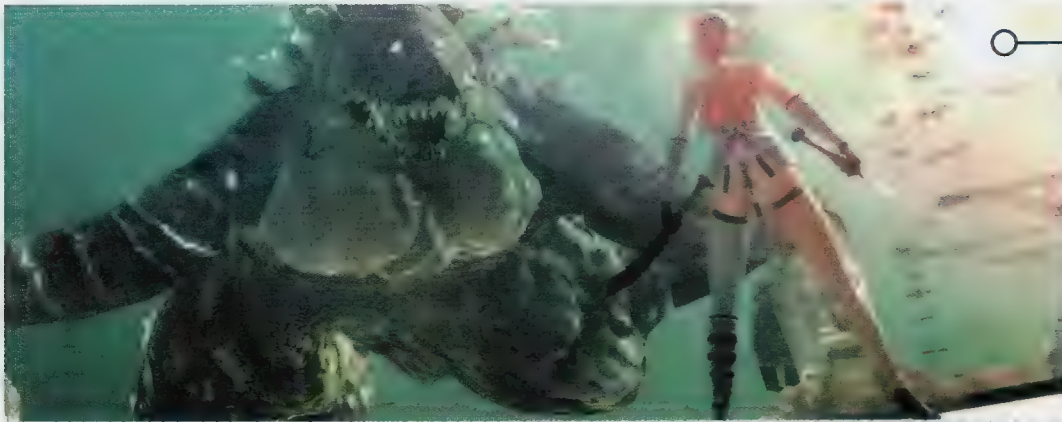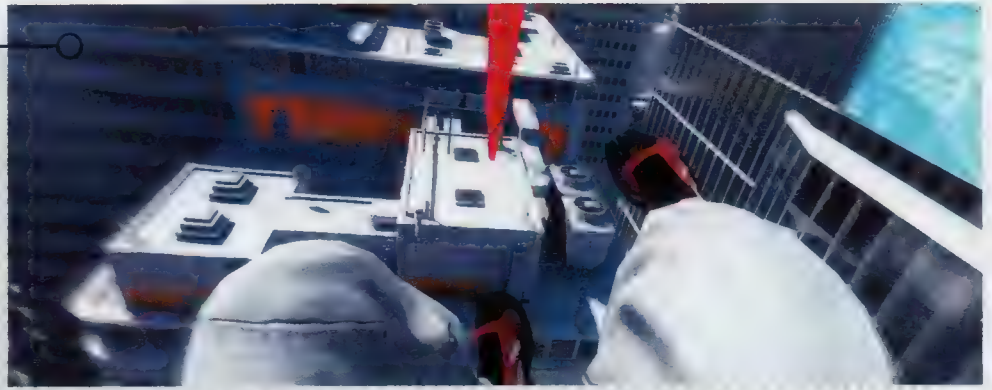
Nier | PS3 · 360

Nier opens with a very vulgar, passionate woman screaming angrily at a sentient book for its inadequacies. This lets you know immediately that you are in for an interesting experience, and the game doesn't disappoint. With satisfying combat and a surprisingly emotional story that becomes ever more impactful during a second playthrough for reasons I dare not spoil, Nier surprises everyone who is willing to devote time to it. The game is hardly a household name, but its fanbase does its best to convince others to check it out by calling it an ignored masterpiece.

No More Heroes | PS3 · Wii

No More Heroes tasks players with combating assassins with an Internet-purchased lightsaber at one moment, and follows up with a watermelon collecting minigame the next. The game was born from the twisted mind of Suda51, who is renowned in the video industry for his ability to craft original, incomparable experiences with bizarre characters and distinct art styles. No More Heroes is arguably his most successful title, as it was the only one of his games to inspire a true sequel. The game flopped in Japan, but saw modest success in Europe and North America. Fans praise it for satirizing video game clichés, while still offering a bizarre story with fun and violent combat. ◈

Valve's Newest Steam Evolution

Developers talk about the Steam Controller and more

The back of the controller has two paddles that Dan Tabar, creator of Cortex Command, says are "pure genius" because they are large but inconspicuous, facilitating a different kind of input than the controller's face buttons

L ast month Valve finally unveiled its latest Steam initiative. The aim of the SteamOS, specialty controller, and gaming-focused PCs designed to Valve's specifications is to deliver the no-fuss, living room-friendly experience of your home console while retaining the power and adaptability of a PC. If users find this proposition appealing, it has the potential to shake up the gaming landscape as we know it. We reached out to a handful of developers who've gotten their hands on the Steam controller to hear what they think about Valve's latest trailblazing effort.

by Matthew Kato

The Controller

The controller Valve presented to developers in a special test session was one of 10 or so prototypes that the company had made, and was created by a 3D printer. The most striking feature of the controller is its lack of analog sticks, which have been replaced by trackpads with haptic feedback. The pads produce inertia movement like a trackball (including being able to flick it into motion and stop it instantly) as well as movement via tracing the pads with your thumbs.

You can feel rumble through the trackpads, with haptic feedback telling you when you're approaching the boundary between the pads' inner and outer zones (designated by a tactile ring near the outer edge of the pads). A game can use these two zones, for example, to differentiate between walking and running. "It almost feels as though there are these giant trackballs under your thumbs, because you're sliding them along, and you hear and feel this sort of ticking going on underneath," says Ichiro Lambe, founder of Dejobaan Games (AaaaaAAaaa…!!! – A Reckless Disregard for Gravity).

Dan Tabar from Data Realms (Cortex Command) described another unique aspect of the

controller. "Both trackpads can blend together so you're using the mouse with both thumbs. You can kind of trade off and walk it across the screen using both thumbs."

The trackpads aren't just about being different from current controllers; they are designed to allow developers to transfer their keyboard and mouse or controller-based titles to the Steam OS successfully no matter what the genre. "It makes the transition from mice and keyboard simple," says Paradox Interactive (the Crusader Kings series) CEO Fredrik Wester.

Tabar doesn't think the Steam Controller has the flexibility to replace specialty controllers like flight sticks or stand up to a keyboard/mouse expert in a competitive setting, but he thinks it's "way better than the regular game controller with analog sticks because of the actual trackpads."

The developers we spoke with tested the controller prototype with Borderlands 2. Although not all of them had previously played the title, they were able to jump right in with an unfamiliar controller that wasn't optimized for the game, but merely had the controls directly mapped onto it. "I was immediately better than I was with any gamepad I played with," Lambe says. Gamers' adoption of the controller may require work on the part of developers to ensure that everything is mapped smoothly, but if you prefer another input method you can use whatever you like. Some gamers may do this seeing as how the Steam Controller's main face buttons are awkwardly placed around the perimeter of the center touchscreen.

The SteamOS Experience

SteamOS is based on Linux, and is being designed to deliver improvements in graphics processing, audio, and input lag. Anyone can download the OS for free, and it naturally runs Steam and plays Linux titles.

Right now, the Linux game library is drastically smaller than the PC Steam library. The list of native Linux games is only a few hundred long, lacking content from heavy hitters like Electronic Arts and Rockstar. Although Linux is not a major gaming OS, the developers we talked to weren't daunted by the task of porting titles to the OS.

To give players more options while the Linux library is beefed up, users can stream their PC and Mac titles from the Steam client through their home networks. No one we spoke to had tested this functionality yet, so we don't know how well it works or what kind of specs are needed from the native machine.

Even with the ability to stream Steam games, all systems need a tent-pole title or two to differentiate them and help convince consumers that the platform is worth getting. "Ultimately, without that must-buy product driving us all towards this stuff, I expect that the industry at large will watch curiously, but remain largely unaffected by anything Steam does along this vector of OS, machines, and controllers over the next two or three years," Gearbox Software president Randy Pitchford told *Gamesindustry.biz*. "If the must-buy product appears driving us there, or sufficient time goes on where an installed base starts to emerge, more and more folks will

move from being curious to being investigative with the possibilities."

Pitchford was even more specific on what Valve should do to make the company's Steam initiative complete. Voicing the thoughts of many gamers, he said, "We all know that product would probably have to start with an H and have a 3 at the end and it would sound like 'Half-Life 3.' But alas, I would be very surprised indeed if we see any worthy movement on that front, as I do not expect another true successor Half-Life game from Valve for quite some time – possibly never."

The Machines

Third parties plan to offer different configurations of Valve-sanctioned, SteamOS Steam Machines at different prices – the details of which have not been announced. You can also put in your own graphics card, install a different OS, or upgrade the

boxes just like a regular PC. If you already have a good gaming PC, you could just install SteamOS on your current PC as well.

The Linux platform occasionally has trouble with graphics cards drivers and other minor technical issues, but the developers we talked with hoped that Valve's involvement would help the problem.

"There seems to be developments in the industry that are likely to shape the future of gaming on Linux," says Kai Tuovinen, marketing developer for Frozenbyte (the Trine series). "Examples that come to mind are the recent moves by Nvidia and AMD, who both upped their driver support for Linux. I expect the audio tech side to be making similar adjustments. Valve seems to be good at driving demand, and getting all these different companies to make adjustments to support their SteamOS." ◈

Portal 2 Bindings

ORANGE PORTAL
RIGHT MOUSE

ZOOM OUT
MSCROLL DOWN

MOVEMENT
QWDSA QLSHIFT ●SP

PARTNER VIEW
TAB

PUSH TO TALK
C

TOGGLE ZOOM
MIDDLE MOUSE

BLUE PORTAL
LEFT MOUSE

ZOOM IN
MSCROLL UP

LOOK
●MMOUSE MB5 ● E ●

COMMUNICATION

GESTURE MENU
G

CROUCH
LCTRL
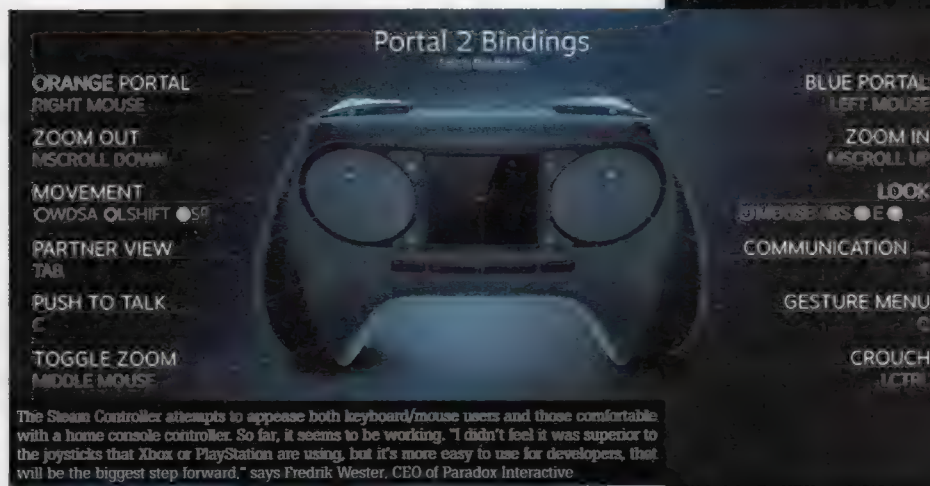
The Steam Controller attempts to appease both keyboard/mouse users and those comfortable with a home console controller. So far, it seems to be working. "I didn't feel it was superior to the joysticks that Xbox or PlayStation are using, but it's more easy to use for developers, that will be the biggest step forward," says Fredrik Wester, CEO of Paradox Interactive

The Creative Breadth Of UbiArt

Many gamers are already familiar with the UbiArt framework, even if they don't know it. Ubisoft's Rayman Origins and Rayman Legends were crafted using the innovative development platform, which lets artists create images that can be rapidly implemented into the game engine. Ubisoft has two new projects in the works that capitalize on UbiArt's strengths, so this month we're highlighting two small but fascinating downloadable games from the publisher.

The beautiful RPG **Child of Light** is emerging from some of the same creative minds at Ubisoft Montreal that brought us Far Cry 3. "I was given a chance to make a pitch and I wanted to do something radically different," says creative director Patrick Plourde. "Fairies in place of insanity, small instead of big, 2D instead of 3D open world. The contrast inspired me creatively because what's the point of doing something safe?" This new vision draws strongly on the storytelling, party building, and battle traditions of Japanese role-playing games, coupling this with cooperative play, an elegant and original art style, and a fairy-tale inspired setting.

The story focuses on Aurora, the daughter of an Austrian duke in 1895, as she awakes in a mystical world known as Lemuria. As she looks for a way home she's joined by a firefly companion named Igniculus, who is optionally controlled by a second player. "The idea behind the co-op mode is to allow you to share an RPG adventure with your loved ones," Plourde says. "As a parent, instead of playing a game designed for children, I wanted to bring my child toward the kind of experience that I like to play, namely Japanese RPGs, without sacrificing depth in gameplay." As a firefly, the second player serves as a literal light in dark surroundings, but Igniculus can also

flit about to find hidden chests or switches. In battle, the first player handles all the tactical decisions, while the second player can mess with enemies, slowing them down within the turn order.

The battle system is directly inspired by the classic JRPG Grandia 2. Characters and enemies move along a timeline at the bottom of the screen, and each action has a designated casting time. "If a character gets attacked while casting, he or she loses his or her turn," Plourde says. "So the player must manage time, either to avoid getting countered, or to counter enemies and prevent them from dealing any damage."

Child of Light's world is a lost continent filled with fairy tale creatures like aristocratic colonial mice, screaming banshees, haunted trees, and "bristle-bearded herbalists who like to smoke mint out of pipes," says writer Jeffrey Yohalem. "There are secrets to uncover about Lemuria's past and Aurora's destiny on your journey through dark forests, floating fortresses, and dusty plains down to the sea."

Along the way through Lemuria, opportunities arise to help citizens, some of whom join your party in return. "Each character has a unique skill tree and specialty when fighting," Plourde says. "You can switch to any character within

your party during combat, so each one has a tactical use when tackling enemies and bosses." Skill trees open up new spells and stat augmentations as you progress along them, and are built to encourage choice; you can only unlock about half the skills in a given playthrough.

A whimsical and picture book art style enhances the fairy tale vibe, as does the script, which is being written entirely in rhyme. I've also heard some of the classical-inspired, piano-heavy soundtrack as it moves between delicate moments of exploration, and larger orchestral/choral bombast during battles.

Child of Light is coming to PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U, and PC in early 2014.

Child of Light

The subject matter of this other UbiArt project, **Valiant Hearts: The Great War**, couldn't be more different. Set during World War I, this side-scrolling adventure tracks three unsung heroes and one trusty dog as they work together to help a young German soldier named Karl find his way home to his beloved wife.

"We chose the Western Front as the back drop, so it made the most sense to include characters from this region," says content director Yoan Fanise. "Each character is of a different nationality and has personal objectives and puzzles to solve, but they'll end up helping each other out. All of our characters will eventually cross paths." Emile is a former POW cook who confronts the challenges of the war to help his son-in-law, Karl. A nurse named Anna and an American volunteer named Freddie complete the group, and each of them having special abilities that let them solve specific puzzles.

No matter which character you're controlling, you often have the help of a canine companion. "We meet the dog for the first time in the German camp where Emile is being held prisoner," Fanise says. "He belongs to a German medic, and the dog ends up saving Emile after Neuve-Chapelle is leveled by a bombardment. It's the beginning of the character's – and,

also, the player's – close relationship with this canine helper."

Gameplay focuses on problem solving, alternating between carefully planned environmental puzzles and frantic action scenes brought on by the ongoing violence all around you, like the scene depicting a hulking poison gas machine. "You have to find a way to get through a battlefield with poison gas belching out of the ground, make your way to the source of the gas – a giant, screeching machine – and then figure out a way to disarm it and get out of there alive," Fanise says.

Since the setting offers constant grim reminders of this awful time period, the team opted for a caricatured, presentation filled with pretzel-munching Germans and beret-wearing Frenchmen, even as some of the horrific historical events of the war play out in the background.

The story unfolds through comic-book style bubbles over the characters' heads filled with pictograms instead of words, helping to

emphasize the way individuals in the war often spoke different languages but still needed to communicate. Actual personal correspondences from the war are included, helping to establish the tone and emotional range that characters faced during the conflict. "The letters that have inspired us are very moving, and just by reading a few lines, you feel like you're in the trenches," Fanise says. "We also have letters and postcards sent from family members to soldiers on the front, which gives us a different perspective on the war as it was experienced by civilians, and has helped inform the personal narratives that appear in the game."

Arriving on the centennial of World War I's opening battles in 1914, the Ubisoft Montpellier development team is approaching this project as much as a tribute to the past as an entertainment product. Either way, I'm fascinated by the melding of comical and tragic tones at play in Valiant Hearts, which is making a potent case for the artistic potential of UbiArt. ◊

Valiant Hearts

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn

by Joe Juba

Same world, different game

The original incarnation of Final Fantasy XIV was a mess. It wasn't fun, got poor reviews, and drummed up a lot of bad buzz from disappointed fans. That's all relevant information, but you probably don't need to be told why you didn't play Final Fantasy XIV three years ago. However, you should know why it's worth giving a second chance.

After some major staff changes and redesigns, Final Fantasy XIV has reemerged as a fantastic and entertaining MMO. While the contrast to its previous failure makes the improvement more noticeable, the transformation isn't just impressive because of how far the game has come. Taken solely on its own merits, Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn is the best Final Fantasy of this hardware generation.

The biggest single factor in my enjoyment of Realm Reborn is the pacing. Everything is masterfully distributed, from the flow of important quests to the frequency of rewards, ensuring that players always have something fun and interesting to do. Specialized class quests open up every five levels, and other aspirational perks (like earning advanced classes or getting your own chocobo mount) give you a reason to crank out just one more level.

To gain experience, you don't just stand in one zone and grind monsters; the quest givers are plentiful, and their tasks gradually introduce you to the game and its mechanics. Those quests are usually basic "deliver this message" or "kill these monsters," but once you know the ropes, you branch out into more interesting territory. Each class has a hunting log that rewards you nicely for killing specific beasts, and Guildleves are repeatable quests that earn a hefty chunk of experience. Those are fun, but the real payoff comes from focusing on Fates – cooperative world events. Fates involve players working together to complete a goal within a time limit, like defeating a strong foe or a large number of weaker ones. Upon victory, you're awarded money and experience based on the weight of your contribution.

No one of these things seems groundbreaking alone, but taken together they provide a steady stream of worthwhile content. If you get bored of one activity, you move on to another. This slows down considerably as you hit the level 30, so you don't ride the wave all the way to the cap of 50 – but it lasts long enough to get you invested in the world and your character.

Leveling up is satisfying, but the real purpose is to feed into the cool job system fueling your abilities. You start by picking a single class (I went with the Thaumaturge, focused on offensive casting), but can switch to another one after level 10. The advantage to switching is that certain skills can carry over from one class to another; after switching to Conjurer (healer), I was able to learn the Cure and Protect spells and use them when I went back to being a Thaumaturge. The number of abilities you can carry over is limited, so you can't have a single character who can use every class ability. However, you also don't need to create new characters to try out different playstyles; you're better off using a single character and benefitting from the extra skills (and an experience boost) that comes with experimenting with other disciplines. This system fully captures the fun of the job system found elsewhere in the series, like Final Fantasy V, allowing for a great deal of customization.

Combat works well, veering away from the need to auto-attack while waiting for cooldown timers. Classes have a good selection of abilities to keep players involved in the action, but a lot of fights boil down to routine.

Some enemies use special attacks that have a highlighted zone of effect, and moving out of the way adds a small element of mobility to the action, but most of the time you are just going through the motions. Of course, situations get more complicated when you're tackling the dungeons and bosses.

Realm Reborn is generally solo friendly, but a handful of story missions require a party, which you can assemble yourself or use in-game matching. The only frustration I had on that front was the wait; as a damage-focused class, I easily waited 30 minutes or more for an open slot. In a group, each class fills one of three roles familiar to any MMO veteran: tank, healing, and damage. The interplay between these roles is predictable, but coordinating a strategy with your party members is still fun. This is especially true of boss battles; they demand the same kind of cooperation and precision that a hardcore MMO player would expect. The highlights are the battles against primals – creatures like Ifrit and Titan – that are visually stunning and tactically challenging. I was also impressed that during these tense encounters I was still able to control the action using a gamepad (with a keyboard to handle typing). Mouse-and-keyboard is still easier, but a non-broken gamepad interface is a step in the right direction for the genre.

I've sunk dozens of hours into Realm Reborn, and have been having a great time. I haven't hit the level cap yet, but some players in the community have voiced disappointment at the sparse endgame offerings. After completing the main story, the flow of quests stops and players are instead left to grind for better equipment, level up other combat classes, or delve into crafting. I wasn't impressed by the crafting system at all, so I can understand why some players are upset by the lack of diversity at the end of the line. Even so, progressing to that point is rewarding, and an array of iconic elements like Magitek Armor and Chocobos gives the journey an unmistakable Final Fantasy vibe. ◈

Hail To The Kings

This fall, MOBA fans celebrated the third season of Riot Games' League of Legends World Championship tournament. The 14 best League of Legends teams from around the world faced off over the course of three weeks, culminating in a final showdown between Korea's SK Telecom T1 and China's Royal Club. In front of 13,000 fans at the sold out Staples Center in Los Angeles, SK Telecom T1 swept Royal Club 3-0, snagging the coveted Summoner's Cup and walking away with the $1 million grand prize. We spoke with the team about their previous gaming experiences, the tournament, and their plans for the future.

From Left to Right:
Bae "bengi" Seong-ung
Chae "Piglet" Gwang-jin
Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok
Lee "PoohManDu" Jeong-hyeon
Jung "Impact" Eon-yeong

interview by Jeff Marchiafava

What was the first game that led you to playing games professionally?
Lee "PoohManDu" Jeong-hyeon: Playing and watching Starcraft on television made me think about pursuing a career as a pro gamer, but I wasn't good enough at games like Starcraft. Then, I came to play an AOS game [AOS stands for Aeon of Strife, the first popular MOBA in Korea –Ed.] named Chaos and thought AOS games suited me better.

Why League of Legends instead of other MOBAs?
Jung "Impact" Eon-yeong: I used to play Dota and Chaos, but after two-to-three years I became tired of them. I looked for other AOS games that I could enjoy, and that's when League of Legends came into my eyes.

Do you think League of Legends is a good MOBA for players who are new to the genre?
Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok: I really do think that League of Legends is a good game for beginners. LoL is the easiest game of its genre, I think. Also I think that Riot Games tries to make the game immersive for beginners by patching it that way.

How much time do you spend training in an average week?
PoohManDu: If I'm not sleeping, I'm practicing.

You lost your second game in the tournament to OMG. How did that affect your approach to the rest of the tournament?
Bae "bengi" Seong-ung: Well, we all had a sense of crisis on the first day. We barely managed to win the first game against Lemondogs, and lost to OMG in our second game. That made us analyze thoroughly and be more prepared in other games.

How did you prepare for your showdown with Royal Club in the finals?
PoohManDu: Royal Club was in the other bracket in the quarterfinals, so we arranged a scrimmage with them. Also, we were able to gain a good understanding of Royal Club by analyzing their games in the quarter and semifinals.

A huge number of people turned out at the Staples Center for the championship. What was it like playing in front of that many people?
Faker: It was a fantastic experience. I thought it was an honor to be there.

Are you surprised at the amount of enthusiasm international fans have for your team?
Chae "Piglet" Gwang-jin: I was very amazed to see the crowd cheering for us and felt very thankful for their support. It made me really happy.

How does it feel to be world champions?
Piglet: The joy of becoming world champion only lasted a moment. We're trying not to cling to that feeling because we have other competitions coming up. I went back home and had meals with my mom, dad, and older brother. It would have been better if the vacation had been longer.

What do you plan to do with your share of the $1 million prize?
Impact: I'm going to save it in the bank for now. In the future, I may spend money doing what I want to do. I want to try DJing, learn English, and travel abroad by myself.

What's next for the team?
Faker: We'd like to win the qualifier for the World Cyber Games and then WCG itself. We also aim to win the OGN Champions Winter tournament.

Any final words for your fans?
PoohManDu: We'd like to express our gratitude, and we will try hard to give you good performances. ◈

photo: Grasshoper Manufacture Inc.

From The Mortuary To Next Gen

Japan is famous for the gonzo visuals and storytelling of its manga, anime, and video games. It takes a truly eccentric Japanese developer to stand out from a country known for the absurd. Goichi "Suda51" Suda, with risky titles like No More Heroes and Lollipop Chainsaw, is one such man.

interview by Tim Turi

How did you first get into video games?
Video games started when I was a kid, and I was just pulled into that world. It was something I was very interested in. I used to go by myself to arcades when I was a kid, which usually you're not supposed to do. You're supposed have an adult with you. It was just something that I couldn't stay away from. One of the first games that pulled my interest was Atari Star Wars. I saw that and thought, "There's a world in this box that's completely different from the world where I live in," and that was something that really intrigued me.

What made you consider going from a fan to creating games?
I really didn't think I would join a video game company, because I didn't know how to get into one. Back then they didn't really have any human-resource department that was looking for people. I didn't have the skills to do it. I had an image in my mind of video game companies with people wearing white doctor suits, working like scientists basically. That was the disconnect I had; it was that wide.

I was working at a funeral service company, and didn't really think of myself becoming this video game person. But I was looking at a human resource magazine for job openings and saw Human [Entertainment]. I knew Human as a video game company and they were looking for people. I figured I might as well send in my résumé, because even though I didn't have any knowledge of how to make a game or had a career in video games, I knew a lot about wrestling. I was sure I knew a lot more than most people, and I thought as long as [Super Fire Pro Wrestling 3 Final Bout, Suda's first game] is based on professional wrestling I'd be able to contribute a very big chunk.

What prompted the leap from working at a funeral home to applying for a position at Human Entertainment?
The initial reason why I was working at a funeral services company was because the pay was good. Especially because not a lot of people like working at a funeral, obviously. I was mostly contract-based, initially. I would go to different funeral homes every day to work there and get to know people. There was this one funeral home that kept on asking me to come back, and one day they wanted me to join as a full-time employee, which means you get even a better salary. Back then, I was already married and I had to provide for my family, so I figured, "You know, I'm just gonna do this as a career." I was ready to do it. I'm sort of confused why I started working in the video

game industry in the first place. That was sort of the life I was leading up until I joined Human [Entertainment].

How did you sell yourself to Human Entertainment?
I created a one concept document of a wrestling game. I probably went into a lot of detail with the wrestling part. That's how I sold myself saying, "Okay. I like video games, I like wrestling, and a game like this would probably be awesome if you could make it." And I sold that to Human, and I guess Human picked it up.

Wrestling is really over-the-top, theatrical, and ridiculous. Did that in any way influence your gonzo development style?
Yes, definitely, for the short answer. But basically I used to watch American wrestling. I used to watch European wrestling. It's very different from Japanese wrestling, because Japanese wrestling is more combat-based. It's about fighting. It's about one guy versus another guy. U.S. wrestling is more about entertaining the fans and having everybody have fun. So I definitely thought that was very different, and it definitely had some kind of effect on me as a child while growing up.

Who is your favorite wrestler?
Bruiser Brody.

What was it like getting mainstream attention when Killer7 hit the GameCube?
Killer7 was definitely a turning point for Grasshopper [Manufacture] as a company. Initially, Shinji Mikami at Capcom came to me and said, "Let's make a game together, and let's try to get it out to the global market." That was the big challenge for Grasshopper, and probably back then for Capcom, where they had to cater to global government. Up until then they were very local, very domestic. That was one change, and the good thing about working with Mikami was he believed in my vision and what I wanted to do. He was always supportive. He said that I should get support for whatever I wanted to create. Basically, it was his job to support me so I could make something I wanted to make. I definitely had a lot of freedom in that game, and it ended up becoming Killer7, which was very popular in the U.S. as well.

Grasshopper Manufacture had a long line of Nintendo-only games, but in recent years has been working on Sony and Microsoft's systems. Do you see that trend continuing into the next generation?
No plans on focusing on one or two consoles. Definitely we're always thinking multi-platform. One of the main reasons we have been going with our current console [choice] is that we wanted to utilize the Unreal Engine. And, obviously, Unreal works

really well with Sony and Microsoft stuff. That was one of the main reasons why we shifted towards that. But it's not like we're excluding a platform. We're always thinking about all platforms as well as Android and iOS devices. Everything inclusive, we think is multiplatform, does include iOS and Android devices. We're always open to everything.

Do you have any core design philosophies you closely adhere to while making games?
The main thing that I want is to be careful of when making a game is the emotional rhythm that the player will have. I don't want it to be offbeat or anything, I want it to stay smooth. If there's movement, I want it to be gradual.

It's very abstract, but I want the player to remember the rhythm when they play the game. After they've finished the game, or they're playing another Grasshopper title in the future, they're able to remind themselves of what kind of rhythm the previous title was. That's a key point I want the players to take away from the game.

You're known for creating games with crazy stories and oftentimes bizarre visuals. Do you ever feel constrained by your reputation?
I realize that I have a unique style, and that's sort of the Grasshopper brand. It's known for that. So, for the last five [games], it's felt like a lot of people wanted that, so that's why I've been working on it. But definitely I want to try out new styles and experiment, and I think as a creator that's one of the main missions that you have – that I have to work on, especially just in recent years. I do want to break off from that and try new things.

How is your vision for the PS4 title Lily Bergamo different from your past titles?
As you may know, Grasshopper titles have never really had a strong online feature. In terms of Lily Bergamo being different from previous games, it'll be the online features that we have. We've always wanted to try online in previous titles, but we didn't have a chance to do it. Now that we've teamed up with GungHo Online Entertainment – which as you can see has "Online" in the title – it's definitely one of the strong suits of GungHo. We'll definitely try to implement that. That'll probably be the biggest difference. We'll have companion apps, which we announced at the Sony's [TGS 2013] press conference. You can play Lily Bergamo on the console, on TV at home, but you'll also have an app that you can play just by itself without playing the console version. That is one of the big points that we're pushing. ◈

To learn about Suda's idea to make next-gen multiplayer a more emotional experience, visit gameinformer.com/mag

HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE 2013

The malls are stuffed tighter than a holiday bird, and that means it's time to start wrapping presents for your loved ones. You probably already have one or more of the new consoles on pre-order, so this could be an expensive year. But you don't have to break the bank buying a bunch of junk that your friends and family will fake a smile over. Fill your shopping cart – and wish list – with the kinds of games, gadgets, and geek gear that won't get traded in for store credit.

by Ben Reeves

$25 AND UNDER

*"Here's a thing to show
I didn't forget about you."*

1. StarKade Wrestling Prints

James White is the talented artist behind the neon-soaked Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon posters. Now he's applying his skills to prints of '80s wrestling icons. Each poster in this five-set series measures five-inches square and features the stylized physique of legends like Hulk Hogan, Ultimate Warrior, and Jake the Snake.

$10.00 (signalnoise.bigcartel.com)

2. Los Santos Sheriff Trucker Hat

You've spent enough time running over thugs in Los Santos that it's time you were deputized as an honorary lawman. This green and white mesh cap features a Los Santos County Sheriff badge in front and a small Rockstar Games logo on the back. Maybe those punk kids down at the five-and-dime will finally give you the respect you deserve.

$15.00 (rockstarwarehouse.com)

3. Star Wars Black Series Boba Fett Figure

Recreate some of the most memorable Star Wars moments with Hasbro's newest line of collectable six-inch figures. The full series includes characters like Han Solo, R2-D2, Anakin Skywalker, and the the legendary bounty hunter Boba Fett. Warning: Boba Fett is a choking hazard for all baby Sarlacc; this stoic Mandalorian warrior will not stay down their giant, multi-fanged gullets.

$19.99 (hasbro.com)

4. World of Warcraft Trivial Pursuit

Is your copy of Trivial Pursuit older than your grandfather's bell bottoms? Get a copy of the classic trivia game you'll actually use more than once a millennium. This official World of Warcraft-themed trivia game contains more than 100 trivia cards with 600 questions covering six categories: geography, player characters, lore, loot, enemies, and encounters.

$24.99 (blizzard.com/store)

$25 - $50

"Hey we're friends, right?"

1. Marinko Milosevski Video Game Posters

If most of your friends' wall art features creases from back when it was folded inside in a DVD box set, it might be time to upgrade to art that is actually worth framing. Marinko Milosevski takes classic video game franchises like Metal Gear Solid, Metroid, and Star Fox and gives them a classy motion picture-inspired poster treatment.

$35.00

(marinkomilosevski.bigcartel.com)

2. Sportique Retro EA Sports Tees

If some of your friends' fondest sports memories happened with a Genesis or SNES controller in his or her hands, then check out these 16-bit throwbacks. These officially licensed EA Sports-themed shirts cover everything from soccer and basketball to boxing and golf, but our favorite is the "Blood On Ice."

$35.00 (sportiqe.com)

3. Figma Link and Samus Figures

Two of Nintendo's most iconic heroes may be mute (We're trying to forget about Metroid: Other M), but we can't shut up about how cool they look on a bookshelf. Japanese toy manufacturer Max Factory is finally releasing its line of high-end Figma figures stateside. Figma's plastic joints make each figure very flexible, so you can twist these five-inch figures into a series of awkward poses and Link won't be able to articulate a single word of complaint.

$49.99 (bigbadtoystore.com)

4. Nerf N-Strike Elite Centurion Blaster

Practice elite sniping skills on loved ones with Nerf's new sniper rifle equivalent. This high-caliber blaster comes with its own removable bipod stand and six oversized darts. The Centurion also has an unprecedented firing range of over 100 feet. Action figures don't stand a chance, and neither will coworkers.

$49.99 (hasbro.com/nerf)

1. Eldritch Horror Board Game

Inspired by the tabletop classic Arkham Horror, Eldritch Horror lets up to eight players team up as paranormal investigators who must travel the world and hold back an ancient evil. Players gather clues and solve mysteries while holding off otherworldly monsters and the threat of insanity, ultimately trying to subdue a darkness that threatens to overwhelm humanity. Challenging and varied scenarios offer tons of replay value in this story-focused cooperative adventure.

$59.99 (fantasyflightgames.com)

2. Travel Boy Carry On Luggage

Nintendo's Game Boy was a trusted travel companion, and that doesn't have to change just because we've grown up. Masters of the impulse purchase, ThinkGeek has modeled a slick carry-on suitcase after Nintendo's classic handheld. This 20-inch tall case features an aluminum telescoping handle, a three-digit TSA combination lock, and an interior zipper divider to help you keep all your gaming equipment organized in-flight.

$69.99 (thinkgeek.com)

3. Batman: Arkham City Deluxe Action Figure: Solomon Grundy

Even the bravest Dark Knight figure might feel weak in the joints with this 13-inch Solomon Grundy towering over them. Designed after his appearance in Batman: Arkham City, this oversized Grundy figure from DC Entertainment features a removable heart and chest plate, neither of which will improve his temper. He also goes well with DC's new line of Arkham Origins figures.

$89.95 (shopdcentertainment.com)

4. Roku 3

Roku's newest model lets you stream movies, TV shows, sports, web series, and games to any HDTV. The Roku's new headphone jack lets users soak up entertainment late into the night without disturbing housemates. Most gamers already have a console that does most of this, but the Roku is ideal for streaming Netflix, Amazon Instant, HBO Go, Hulu Plus, or Pandora to a lonely TV that doesn't have a console companion.

$99.99 (roku.com)

$100 - $500

"I hope you spent this much on me."

BOOKS

1. Pebble Smart Watch

The Pebble smartwatch is one of Kickstarter's biggest successes, raising more than $10 million over its initial campaign. Once you strap it onto your wrist and pair it with your iOS or Android device, it acts as a handy go-between for a user and his or her phone. You can set it up to provide notifications for incoming calls, text messages, and other alerts (complete with vibration), which lets you stay connected without having to constantly dig your phone out of your pocket. Third-party developers have used the Pebble's design tools to create their own apps and watch faces, to varying degrees of success. The Pebble is a winner in our book, regardless.

$150 (getpebble.com)

2. HTC One

Thanks to its 1.7 GHz Snapdragon 600 quad-core processor, Beats Audio sound performance, and a design sense that rivals Apple, the HTC One is the premier Android phone of 2013. The HTC UltraPixel Camera is one of the better phone cameras on the market, and the 4.7-inch 468 pixels-per-inch screen makes every shot (not to mention every game and movie) look amazing. Get the Google Play edition for the authentic Android experience, free of HTC's unnecessary digital skin.

$199 (htc.com)
2-year contract required

3. Corsair Voyager Air Portable Wireless Drive

The Internet is nearly everywhere, but that "nearly" part really frustrates us when we're miles from civilization and can't stream our favorite shows and music off the cloud. With Corsair's high-performance media hub, you can store up to 1TB of data (approximately 800 HD movies) and then stream it to any TV, tablet, or phone via its built-in wireless network. You could also stick this hub in the center of a home network and use it to consolidate and share data across every device.

$199 (corsair.com)

4. Google Nexus 7

Google's own Android slate remains one of the best pound-for-pound tablets on the market. This year's model is thinner, lighter, and faster. Weighing less than a pound, this seven-inch tablet is feather light but still capable of churning out 3D graphics thanks to its Qualcomm Snapdragon S4 Pro processor. The screen looks great, thanks to Google cramming 323 pixels into every inch of the display.

$229 (play.google.com/store)

Battling Boy
by Paul Pope

Comics creator Paul Pope (*Batman: Year 100*) returns with a new sci-fi graphic novel. In a city under siege by monsters, the people's only hope is a young boy from another world who is armed with magical T-shirts.

$15.99 (us.macmillan.com)

Capcom 30th Anniversary Character Encyclopedia

From Ada Wong to Zero, this hardcover tome details the facts, statistics, and historical information for over 200 of Capcom's most beloved characters.

$16.99 (us.dk.com)
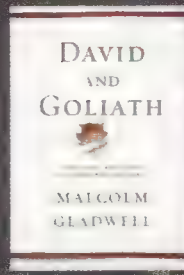
David and Goliath
by Malcolm Gladwell

The prized author of *Outliers* and *What the Dog Saw* challenges our assumption about obstacles and disadvantages, then shows how beauty can arise from suffering and adversity.

$29.00 (hachettebookgroup.com)

The Heavens Rise
by Christopher Rice

New York Times bestselling author Christopher Rice crafts a tale about three friends forced to confront an ancient evil rising to the surface of the Louisiana bayou.

$26.00 (books.simonandschuster.com)
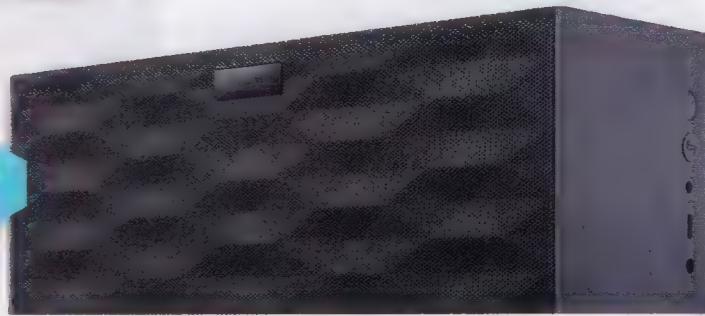
5. Geth Pulse Rifle Full Scale Replica

Mass Effect's go-to alien rifle is highly accurate and finely balanced to produce low-recoil. Triforce's replica of the Geth Pulse Rifle measures 33-inches in length, weighs 20 pounds, and features working LED effects. This replica doesn't fire anything other than the plasma blasts in your mind, so its usefulness in a firefight depends on your level of biotic mastery.

$243 (projecttriforce.com)

6. NetGear Nighthawk AC1900

If a loved one's house looks like a spider's web of Ethernet cables, it may be time to upgrade them to a wireless router with some muscle. NetGear's Nighthawk has been juicing like an NFL linebacker. This duel-band router's internal dual core 1GHz processor helps prioritize bandwidth for streaming videos, music, and online gaming. An EZ Mobile connect feature allows guests to scan a QR code to connect to the network, while Netgear's genie mobile app allows power users to customize their home network and monitor problems.

$199 (netgear.com)

7. Big Jambox

Jawbone may call its speaker system Big, but since it measures only 10-inches long, it's still small enough to take anywhere. Featuring dual passive bass radiators and LiveAudio software that optimizes the audio, the Big Jambox lets you wirelessly stream audio from any mobile device for up to 15 hours. Since each Jambox is made to order, you can mix and match color schemes to find the perfect look for a friend.

$299 (jawbone.com)

8. GoPro Hero3+ Black Edition

Even photographic memory can't compete with the GoPro's 4K-resolution camera and ability to capture 12MP photos at up to 30 frames per second. If you want to show off your friend's wicked snowboarding or skydiving abilities, then pick them up a GoPro so they can upload their hijinks to social networks using the system's built-in Wi-Fi. GoPro's Hero3+ is waterproof to 131 feet underwater and has an automatic low light mode. It's like having instant replay for your entire life.

$399 (gopro.com)

Mister Max: The Book of Lost Things
by Cynthia Voigt

Newberry medalist Cynthia Voigt is back with another magical children's tale. After Max's parents go missing, he goes into hiding, only to discover that he has a knack for finding lost things. This leads him on a series of unexpected adventures.

$16.99 (randomhouse.com)

Of Dice and Men
by David M. Ewalt

Since its release in 1974, Dungeons & Dragons has had a profound impact on our culture, as well as the gaming landscape. This is the chronicle of the men behind its creation.

$26.00 (books.simonandschuster.com)

S.
J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst

In J.J. Abrams' first turn as a novelist, a young woman responds to the notes left in a stranger's book, ultimately starting a conversation in the margins of a book as mysterious as the adventure she's about to have.

$35.00 (mulhollandbooks.com)

Superman: The Silver Age Newspaper Dailies Vol 1: 1959-1961

Superman's silver age newspaper strips have never been reprinted, until now. Superman battles aliens, super villains, and Lois Lane's heart in these oft-forgotten tales of suspense and slapstick.

$49.99 (shop.idwpublishing.com)

$500 - $1000

"You can't put a price on family!"

VIDEO

1. Pioneer SP-PK52FS

Turning a living room into a home theater is usually expensive and time consuming. Thankfully, Pioneer has made picking a sound system easy as well as inexpensive. This update to Pioneer's budget 5.1 channel surround sound system comes complete with a 100-watt, 8-inch powered subwoofer that produces the kind of high quality sound that you'd expect from a speaker set twice its price.

$549 (pioneerelectronics.com)

2. ZBoard Classic

Walking is exhausting, and Segways are jokes on wheels. ZBoard combines the mobility of a motorized scooter with the rebellious attitude of a skateboard. The weight-sensing triggers allow boarders to simply lean in the direction they want to travel, and the onboard motor pulls them along at a top speed of up to 15 miles per hour. Finally, a skateboard that can travel uphill without all that calorie burning.

$649 (zboardshop.com)

3. Panasonic Viera S60 50" HD Plasma TV

Even if you already have an HDTV, the clarity of Panasonic's impressive plasma screens might entice you to upgrade. With deep blacks and strong off-angle fidelity, this is one of the better-looking televisions under $1,000. The Smart Viera's built-in Wi-Fi gives the TV access to streaming apps like Hulu Plus and Netflix, and the Swipe & Share system makes it easy to toss movies, photos, and webpages from your smartphone or tablet onto the display. A free remote app for Android and iOS allows you to keep flipping through channels even if the standard remote is lost between couch cushions.

$699 (shop.panasonic.com)

4. Xi3 Piston Console

If you can't wait for Valve's Steambox to make it to market, Xi3's Piston is a tempting alternative. Using the strength of what must have been a million black holes, Xi3 took a 3.2 GHz AMD Trinity Processor, a Radeon 7000-Series GPU, and 8GB of DDR3 RAM, and compressed them into a diminutive four-inch cube. The Piston's native triple-monitor support lets you surround yourself in your games – pretty impressive for such a small package.

$999 (xi3.com/piston)

Breaking Bad: The Complete Series

This massive replica money barrel set contains all six seasons of AMC's award-winning drama about a science teacher turned meth dealer, a two-hour documentary about the show, and 55 hours of special features.

$224 (breakingbadstore.com)

Dexter: The Complete Series Collection

Dexter Morgan isn't just an awkward forensics expert for the Miami Police, he's also a serial killer who hunts down other killers.

$251 (store.sho.com)

Elysium

District 9 director Neill Blomkamp envisions a future where the majority of the population struggles to exist on a ravaged Earth while humanity's elite keeps them under heel from a luxurious space habitat called Elysium.

$28.99 (itsbetterupthere.com)
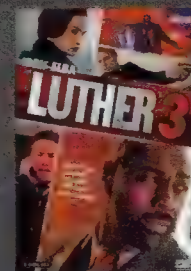
Luther 3

In this psychological thriller miniseries from the BBC, a psycho fetishist starts targeting young women in London, and detective John Luther must solve the case while dealing with an internal affairs investigation.

$34.98 (bbcamericashop.com)

1. Nikon D7100

One of Nikon's flagship cameras, the D7100 shoots crisp photos at up to six images a second, which can instantly be shared via the WU-1a Wireless Mobile Adapter add-on ($59). The D7100 also houses a specially designed 24.1-MP DX-format CMOS sensor that can capture 24.1 megapixel images and 1080p video at 30 frames per second. Pair this with a high-end Nikkor lens and this complicated piece of technology will either deliver the best pictures you've ever taken, or steal peoples' souls.

$1,199 (nikonusa.com)

2. MSI GS70 Stealth

Just because you travel a lot doesn't mean all your mobile gaming has to take place on a four-inch phone. MSI's newest Windows 8-based, 17-inch laptop houses an Intel Core i7-4700HQ Processor and a NVIDIA GeForce GTX765M, which should take care of all your gaming needs. Less than an inch thick and weighing less than six pounds, the Stealth isn't a pain to lug through the airport. Once you get home, you can use the Matrix display feature to hook this laptop up to three other monitors at once.

$1,699 (msi.com)

3. Origin PC Genesis 4K-Gaming Ready BattleBox

Ultra HD displays produce an image that is roughly four times more detailed than traditional HDTVs. But in order to take advantage of this kind of display you need a computer that can churn out images that data-rich. Powered by a 3.4GHz Intel Core i7 4930K Hex-Core processor and a GeForce GTX 780 graphics card, Origin's new BattleBox is up to the task. The BattleBox will give you the best gaming experience while playing next year's biggest releases like The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt and Titanfall. Hook this beast up to an Asus PQ321Q Ultra HD Monitor or Sony XBR Ultra HD TV to experience 4K gaming in all its glory.

$3,699 (originpc.com)

4. Mission R Electric Motorbike

Ride into the future with this high-tech crotch rocket. This eco-friendly bike goes from 0-60 in only three seconds, and can reach a top speed of over 150 mph — all while hardly making a sound. This beastly beauty is powered by a 160-horsepower electric motor, which can travel 140 miles on a single charge. Upgrade to the tech package to receive a wireless helmet with heads-up display, turn-by-turn GPS navigation, and an HD camera for capturing those illegal street race victories.

$29,999
(mission-motorcycles.com/r)

Monsters University

Mike Wazowski and Sulley are training to be professional Scarers at Monsters University, but their competitive spirits get the better of them in Pixar's prequel to the classic animated film *Monsters, Inc.*

$29.95 (disneystore.com)

Oldboy: 10th Anniversary Edition

Dae-su is an ordinary Seoul businessman who is abducted and held in a private prison for 15 years. After he is released, he hunts down his mysterious wardens in this dark Korean revenge tale soon to be remade by Spike Lee.

$34.98 (palisadestartan.com)

Pacific Rim

When Godzilla-sized monsters known as Kaiju emerge from the sea to trample Earth's cities, humanity's best course for retaliation is skyscraper-sized robots called Jaegers.

$35.99 (pacificrimmovie.com)
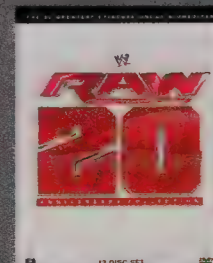
WWE: Raw 20th Anniversary Collection – The 20 Greatest Episodes

Commemorating the 20th Anniversary of WWE's premier wrestling show, this collection of Raw's best episodes features some of the most memorable highlights and historic milestones of the last two decades.

$89.99 (shop.wwe.com)

Next Gen's Media Problem

by Matt Helgeson, Senior Features Editor

Microsoft and Sony both have big plans to integrate a wide range of on-demand, live, and streaming entertainment into their new consoles. The problem is that these types of services won't be a big selling point for consumers in the next console generation.

Since Microsoft's May 21 Xbox One reveal event, which showcased the Xbox One's enhanced TV and media capabilities, it's clear that the definition of "game console" is changing. Xbox One allows you to Skype with a friend, watch a Netflix movie, keep tabs on a live soccer match, and play a game – all at the same time. The company is so committed to this instant switching between media apps that it specifically designed the Xbox One's OS to handle multiple apps at once, just like your laptop. It's even created a studio division devoted to creating new entertainment and TV-style programming, as well as hybrids like Remedy's Quantum Break.

While Sony has been enjoying the fallout from some of Microsoft's recent PR blunders and is dutifully portraying itself as the console maker that "still cares about games," it's also going all in on entertainment. Let's not forget that Sony, much more than Microsoft, is a worldwide entertainment company with substantial divisions invested in music, movies, television, and consumer electronics. You can bet that Sony will have every entertainment app that it can get its hands on, and confirmed it is adding more content with new partnerships with companies like Flixter and Redbox.

Sony is also venturing into content creation for its console. Though it was announced without much fanfare, Sony did say during its E3 press conference that it was going to create new entertainment content specifically for PlayStation Network through its Sony Pictures and Sony Music divisions. It's also going to keep expanding the presence and scope of its own Video Unlimited service.

In many ways, this is good news. If we can stop posturing about Microsoft for minute, let's all admit that Netflix Instant has been one of the greatest entertainment inventions of the past decade and I – like many of you – was introduced to it through my Xbox 360. I love it, so do my wife and my daughter. Having more options for entertainment on the next-gen consoles is great. However, I don't believe it's going to be, for most consumers, a factor in the decision to buy an Xbox One or PlayStation 4.

Let's look at the last few generations of hardware. From the beginning, Sony recognized the potential of combining a game machine and other forms of media. The original PlayStation played CDs, a feature that I used a lot in the days before iTunes. The PlayStation 2 added DVD support, a format that was then red hot. The PS2 was actually a fairly affordable DVD player at the time, and came with the added benefit of being a game machine as well. For millions, it was an easy decision – the same goes for Blu-ray and PlayStation 3.

Microsoft benefitted from recognizing the power of streaming media (and its generally superior Xbox Live network structure), becoming the box that, for many of us, brought Netflix Instant into our living rooms. Once Nintendo got on board with the service, the Wii became a fairly low-cost option for many who wanted streaming movies on their TV. I know people who bought a Wii specifically for Rock Band and Netflix.

That won't be the case this time around. As my colleague Matt Bertz said to me the other day, "I'm pretty sure my toaster runs Netflix Instant." A friend of mine spoke to a developer at Netflix, and he said that the company has ported Instant to 300 platforms. That's platforms – not devices. The number of devices that run Netflix Instant runs into the thousands. Most TVs and Blu-ray players

come equipped with "smart" functionality that allow them to access wi-fi and run apps like Netflix, Hulu Plus, and Vudu natively. Roku and Google's new Chromecast offer low-cost ways to get all the video content that you access through your game console to your television for a fraction of the price.

Microsoft is pushing toward further integration of television and live cable TV through the Xbox One's ability to interact with your cable box. However, one of the main reasons I canceled my cable was the fact that I spent so much time watching streaming TV through Netflix and playing games on my console. I know I'm not alone.

I suspect that Microsoft and Sony know this, and that's why both companies are pushing to create unique content. In Microsoft's case, it's also attempting new game/television hybrids like Remedy's upcoming Quantum Break. But here's the thing: Content creation is hard. The investment is huge, and the possibility of failure is high. Both companies have already learned this in game development. Netflix, which has done a pretty decent job so far, has experienced its ups (*House of Cards*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Arrested Development*) and downs (*Lillyhammer*, *Hemlock Grove*).

At least Sony can rely on the talent it has in its other divisions; this is new territory for Microsoft. Frankly, I don't see either company building up a roster of "must-see" shows that inspire audience loyalty (and spending) like HBO or Showtime.

So, while I'm sure many will gladly use Xbox One and PlayStation 4 to access their favorite entertainment content, the systems will be just one of many devices in their lives that serve the same function. Being able to switch between live TV and Netflix is a cool feature, but not one that inspires me to spend hundreds of dollars. This time around, the fate of these next-generation consoles will be determined by one thing: the quality of the games. ◈

06 Gran Turismo 6

03

11.1

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11.2

13.2
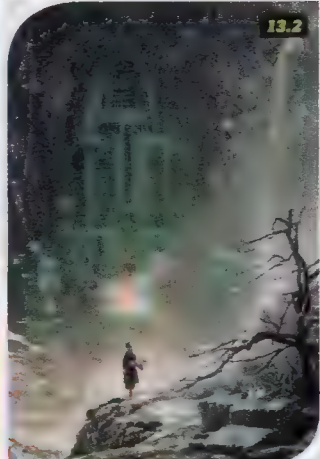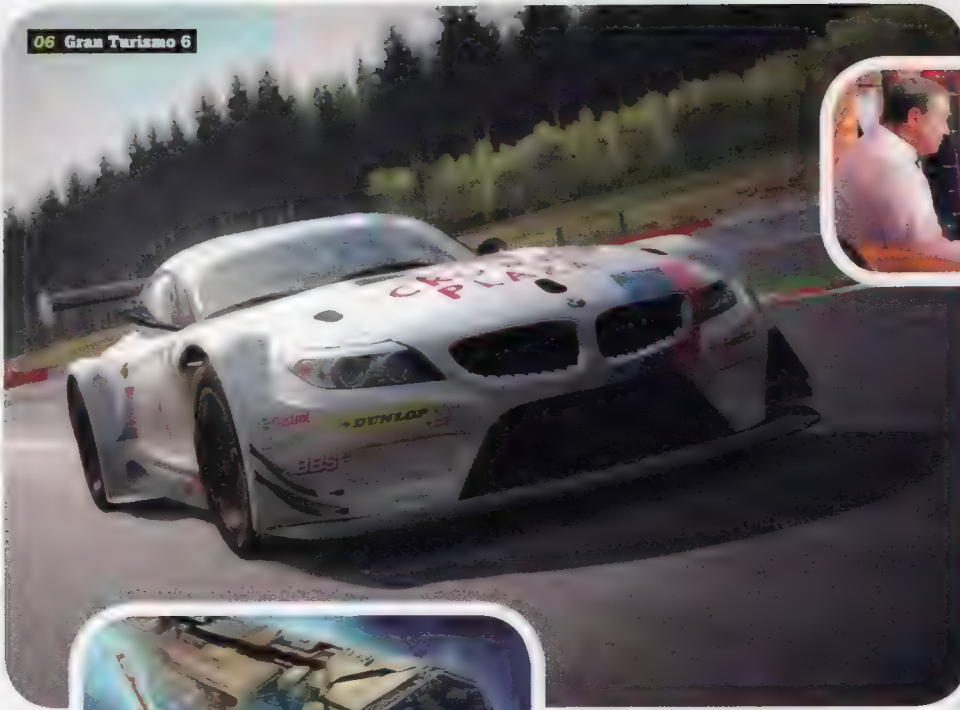
Game Informer Crew
The World's No. 1 Computer and Video Game

13.1

psych
THE MUSICAL

24

15

December

03 Game Connection Europe
Starting today and running through December 5, team members from Naughty Dog, Ubisoft, Sony Online Entertainment, and many others descend upon Paris for Game Connection, an industry-focused expo that allows the brightest minds in the game industry to share their development stories and lend advice. One of the most interesting talks listed is "Chasing Rabbits, What I Learned From Prototyping With Nintendo" by Epic Games' Fred Markus.

06 New Releases
› Gran Turismo 6 (PS3)

11.1 Inhumane Superheroes
Marvel Comics isn't taking a break from its universe-shaking events.

The aftermath of Infinity leads to Inhumanity, a new standalone limited series that kicks off today. The Avengers are thrown right back into the action. Their target? Karnak. He's learned the secrets of the Inhumans.

11.2 Halo's Ongoing Tale
Christopher Schlerf, head writer of Halo 4, is at the helm of Dark Horse Comics' new ongoing Halo: Escalation comic series. This story begins with a Covenant attack against the UNSC flagship Infinity. Can the Spartans stop them?

13.1 Friday Night Game-A-Thons
We're looking for people to be a part of Game Informer's Friday Night Game-a-thons. A different game is selected for each event. Grand Theft Auto Online, Battlefield 4, Call of

Duty: Ghosts, Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, and many others are in consideration each week. If you're interested in being a part of an event, check out Andrew Reiner's blog on gameinformer.com for details.

13.2 Bilbo Keeps Walking
The Lord of the Rings may be J. R. R. Tolkien's most famous trilogy, but not many people know about the three Hobbit books. That's because there weren't three Hobbit books, but as it demonstrated with Harry Potter and Twilight, Hollywood insists on drawing out the story and milking fans for as long as possible. Assuming The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug (in theaters today) succeeds, brace yourself for the inevitable The Silmarillion dodecaology.

15 The Latest TV Musical
The comedic detective drama Psych is ending its seventh season tonight with a two-hour special that places Shawn and Gus – one of the best tandems on TV – at the heart of another mystery, this time on a stage for a musical. The musical worked for Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Here's hoping it works for Psych.

20 Stay Classy, San Diego
The cast from one of the funniest movies of the last decade returns to theaters today in Anchorman 2: The Legend Returns. Think about this: Since the release of the original Anchorman, Steve Carrell started and finished his run as Michael Scott on The Office, Will Ferrell has pretty much done everything an actor can do, and Paul Rudd still isn't popular.

24 The New Face Of Justice
DC Comics' New 52 universe is at the mercy of its villains, most notably the Crime Syndicate composed of vilified versions of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. Why have they waged war on Earth? What secrets are they holding? In today's Justice League comic, we'll finally get some answers.

25 Grumpy Old Boxers
Sylvester Stallone and Robert De Niro duke it out in today's theatrical release, Grudge Match, a movie about two retired boxers getting back into the ring. This film is poised to set Hollywood records – not for box office receipts, but for featuring the oldest, shortest, and mumbliest actors ever seen in a single film. The previous record holder was Cocoon.

Middle-earth:
Shadow of Mordor

The Greater Doom

Few fictional universes have the cultural clout of Tolkien's Middle-earth. As the foundation of most modern fantasy storytelling, *The Lord of the Rings* and its related works have informed generations of writers, game developers, and movie makers. Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor is a new experiment in the playground of this vaunted fantasy universe. Most Tolkien games have hewn close to the central stories of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, retelling the familiar tales of the Fellowship, or offering up side stories that run concurrent with major moments depicted in the books and movies. Shadow of Mordor reaches further, creating a new narrative set between the years of Bilbo Baggins' adventure and the grand quest undertaken by his nephew, Frodo. Developer Monolith is crafting this story inspired by the huge body of Tolkien's work, as well as drawing from the visual cues of Peter Jackson's movie retellings. In the process, the studio is introducing a remarkable approach to next-gen enemies, questing, and storytelling, built around player choice and emergent gameplay.

■ Platform
PlayStation 4 • Xbox One
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360 • PC

■ Style
1-Player Action

■ Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

■ Developer
Monolith Productions

■ Release
2014

by Matt Miller

Monolith's vision is a striking third-person open-world action game that takes players deep into the enemy territory of Mordor in the days before it decays into a blasted hellscape. "Sauron has been away for thousands of years, and over that time Mordor has been settled by different people, races, and wildlife," says Michael de Plater, director of design at Monolith. "It's a wild and chaotic frontier."

Watching over that frontier is a dedicated garrison of rangers who stand senti- nel along the Black Gate, Morannon. Talion is one man among many who brave the wilderness to hold the line against a long-absent foe. When Sauron returns to reclaim Mordor, his first act is to send forth his black captains to capture this vital pass. Sauron's evil lieutenants slay the guardians on the gate, put Talion's loyal mentor, loving wife, and valiant son to the sword, and then, laughing, strike down Talion as well. "After 2,000 years, Sauron returns to Mordor and takes everything from him," de Plater says. "His family, the garrison – even his own life." But a greater doom awaits Talion. He mysteriously reawakens after death, filled with a desperate call to vengeance, even as he reels from the loss of all he holds dear and comes to terms with his supernatural revival.

"This is someone who's never had any notion of any- thing magic or supernatural in his life, and suddenly this catastrophic event descends on him," de Plater says. "He wakes up simultaneously not understanding what has happened, or understanding why he's being denied the peace of being with his family, but also pursuing answers and vengeance against those that took every- thing from him."

As he fights his way into the depths of Mordor, play- ers shape the unfolding story in a way we've never seen before, crafting a personalized story that reacts to the specific enemies he kills and those he leaves behind. Every foe remembers him and his deeds, and responds dynamically within the game world. "The nemesis system is the name we've given to the idea that through your gameplay, choices, and interactions, any enemy in the game can become a villain, and all the things that you'd associate with that – with a boss, in another game," de Plater says. "Strengths, weaknesses, abili- ties, smack talk, great last words, memorable missions, having their own henchmen – all of those things you associate with a good villain, you're actually creating

those dynamically through your actions in the world." This fascinating approach to enemy and encounter design helps answer part of that looming question for gamers: What stands out about the next generation of software from the perspective of gameplay?

Our demo begins shortly after Talion's remarkable return from death, which occurs because of an inexplicable link to a wraith of vengeance. "In Middle-earth, as we see with the army of the dead, or the barrow wights, or the ghosts in the Dead Marshes, being a restless spirit – a specter – is associated with things from life that aren't fulfilled," de Plater explains. When Talion dies, the mysterious entity joins with him in a bond of vengeance – a curse that keeps Talion from moving on into a restful afterlife with his family. "This spirit within him is another entity," he says. "It has its own identity, its own agenda, its own questions. It also doesn't know exactly what it is, but they're both bound and cursed to be together, and driven to work together to find answers to the reason for their curse, and what they have to do to end it."

The strange tie between these two individuals is apparent in the first moments of our demo. Talion stands near a ruined fortress in the heart of Udûn, the central province of Mordor just beyond the Black Gate. With a button press, the view shifts from the physical world to the wraith world, a gray and windblown landscape that is familiar to anyone who remembers Frodo wearing the One Ring in the Lord of the Rings movies. Inhabiting the wraith world allows Talion to find the location of his target, a filthy Uruk orc by the name of Ratbag.

The Avenging Ranger

Before the game begins, Talion has spent his life as a ranger of the Black Gate; he's part of a garrison that stands guard at the very edge of civilization. "There are definitely secrets in his past that we'll learn about as we go along, as to what led to him spending his life so far away from the center of civilization," says director of design Michael de Plater. After the death of his family, his bond with a spirit of vengeance brings him back from death, and he becomes a monster to the monsters who took his life. But the nature of the wraith remains mysterious. "Through the course of the game, Talion and the wraith will learn the identity and the secrets of who the wraith is, what brought these two characters together, and also learn how that's connected to the larger story of Middle-earth," de Plater says.

sentry, and kills the guard before he's seen. The new vantage point gives the ranger a good view of Ratbag and the other nearby orcs. Talion balances his way out onto a tightrope-like cable between his building and another until he's hanging over his foes, and then leaps down into battle.

Monolith's approach to combat draws strongly from another Warner Bros. property. Talion's rhythm-based button presses and engagement with large groups of enemies plays very much like the Batman: Arkham games, albeit with a far more fatal edge. Talion leaps from one orc to the next, slashing with his sword and stabbing with his dagger. Counter button prompts pop up as a foe raises his weapon to attack, and Talion slips underneath the raised blade to brutally gut the orc. Another button press sends Talion forward to stun one attacker, before he shifts direction and tackles another foe to the ground. A tap of one of the shoulder buttons throws a knife, but hold that button down, and he enters wraith mode. Time slows as Talion draws back his bow and zeroes in on specific enemy body parts. "It's very visceral and lethal," de Plater says. "Talion and the wraith are both masters of their respective weapons."

When Talion takes too many hits, he stumbles to the ground, and the player has one final timed button press opportunity to prevent death and turn the tables. Alternately, skilled combat increases a multiplier counter, opening up additional powerful moves to deploy, like a devastating shockwave of terror from the wraith that sends all nearby enemies reeling. By combining the martial might of Talion with the supernatural rage of the wraith, the duo is a nigh unstoppable force.

By now, Ratbag has realized he's outmatched and makes a run for it. Talion sprints after, casually

Every one of hundreds of enemies in Shadow of Mordor has a name, its own abilities, immunities, vulnerabilities, and fears, as well as its own place within the hierarchy of the orcs. Moreover, each of these enemies remembers its encounters with you, and will even independently interact with other orcs to jockey for higher and better positions. "It's a combination of gameplay systems, technology, AI, character art, and

storytelling mechanics," de Plater says. "Each one of those systems has to work together so that any enemy you find in the world – they all have the seed of their own identity in them."

Ratbag is a bodyguard to our real target, a towering orc named Orthag that Talion burnt with fire in a previous encounter. Talion can use the connection between the two orcs to his advantage. He climbs a nearby wall, clambering up the side until he reaches an unwary

Some fell so daunted by the terror of his eyes that they needed no chains more, but walked ever in fear of him, doing his will wherever they might be...and he rejoiced, seeing therein the seed of many dissensions among his foes

J.R.R. Tolkien, The Silmarillion
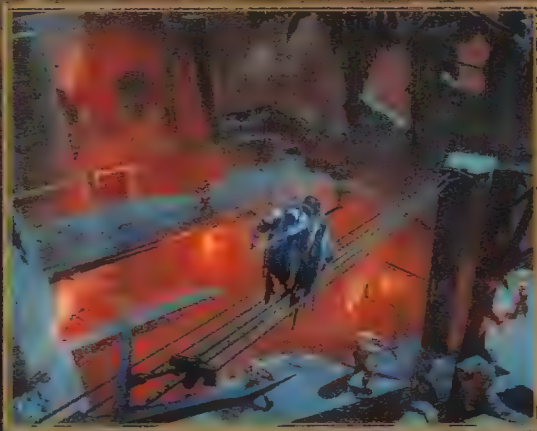
dropping the orc with an arrow to the leg. "We blend seamlessly from an epic battle into a chase, on into ranged combat, and then into stealth, flowing dynamically back and forth between the different styles of gameplay," de Plater says.

Approaching the terrified creature, we get a look at Talion's domination abilities. Grabbing up the orcish soldier, Talion's face begins to shift as the wraith emerges, demanding the obedience of the orc. Players have a choice regarding what to do with a dominated foe. Ratbag can be used to spy, giving Talion information about Orthag's location and vulnerabilities. Alternately, Ratbag can be set free to carry forth the story of your encounter, terrorizing subsequent orcs in the area, ensuring they'll be more scared of your appearance. Instead, Talion opts to send Ratbag into position to assassinate Orthog. At an opportune moment, the orc bodyguard will turn on his master. Even if Ratbag doesn't kill Orthog outright, the attack will soften the warchief up. The wraith's spectral hand imprint is left on the dominated orc, and Ratbag scuttles forth to do our bidding.

The demo leaps ahead to a rainswept night by a towering fort. Talion creeps through an empty moat beneath the drawbridge as scores of orcs enter the structure. By now, Ratbag isn't the only dominated foe; many of the orcs entering the gathering are under your sway. Talion sees an archer on a high parapet and enacts the shadow strike ability; in the blink of an eye Talion's wraith ability sends him zipping into place to backstab the archer, and simultaneously sets him on top of the fort. "Shadow strike is basically death from anywhere, rather than the classic death from above," de Plater says. "You can target your enemies, use them as grapple points to traverse the enemies, and take them down in one fell swoop." Below Talion's new vantage point stands a motley gathering of Mordor's finest, all paying heed to their pacing leader on a raised platform. Orthag proclaims his lordship over them, and shouts his defiance of the "gravewalker" for the horrible burns that Talion left on his face in their previous encounter. Ratbag skulks behind his captain, waiting for your command.

Talion activates his sleeper agents all at once, and chaos erupts as the orcs below turn on their compatriots. Ratbag draws his curved dagger and shanks Orthag. The furious captain ruthlessly murders Ratbag, but your enemy's health is now dropped by a third. Talion shadow strikes down into the fray, and we see the full potential of the battle system, as dozens of combatants scuffle with one another. Orthag charges into the fight, and a furious duel ensues between the ranger and the orc, until at last Talion's blade beheads the dangerous Uruk. Orthag's remaining followers flee in terror, and it's impossible to know which ones will hold a grudge against Talion for the assassination, or even which one will rise to take Orthag's place in the enemy hierarchy.

Within the wraith world, players can track enemies across long distances, or slow time to get a good bow shot

The Nemesis System

Our first look at Shadow of Mordor paints an exciting picture of the potential for crafting your own battles, enemies, and rewards, but does the system actually work when not following a pre-scripted path? A second playthrough of the demo gave us the answer.

Sneaking among the fallen stones of ancient castles, Talion spies a squad of orcs on patrol. Using stealth, Talion slits the throat of the rear guard before the others are aware of his presence, and the remainder of the gang is dispatched in a quick skirmish. The final orc submits to Talion's domination, and we see into his mind, where the full hierarchy of orcs in the area is visible.

The team at Monolith gives us the choice of how to proceed, and which orc to uncover information about. We choose one of the captains at random, a creature named Mogg Man-Eater. We learn that Mogg is obsessed with showing his cunning by finding Talion, that he's vulnerable to stealth, and terrified of magic. Unfortunately, he's also immune to combat finishers and jump-overs, so a frontal assault is probably a bad idea.

By switching into the wraith world at regular intervals, Talion tracks down Mogg. The nemesis system is constantly generating dynamic events that the orcs engage in without your interference. "They are given jobs and positions," de Plater says. "They might have to tend the slaves, they might be gladiators, they might be out on beast hunts, or they might be responsible for cooking." We find Mogg in the midst of a deadly duel with another orc, during which he's injured. After leaping into their midst and dominating him, Mogg turns out to be a "squealer," meaning he reveals info about not one but two of the nearby warchiefs – the highest tier of enemy soldier in the area.

After finishing off Mogg, an interesting twist is thrown in. A large group of orcs happens to be passing nearby, making for a nearly impossible battle. Talion tries to fight rather than run, but a grunt named Ûkakûga viciously stabs Talion in the back and kills him.

In another game, this would lead to a checkpoint restart, but Talion is

the gravewalker, and the world continues to develop even when he dies and subsequently returns. "Because you are a spirit of vengeance – a revenant – when you die, you are cursed to return, but that takes time," de Plater says. "Time's going to move forward. The thing that makes that particularly interesting is the way it combines with our nemesis system. Uruk society is also a living thing, so your personal enemies are also going to move up in the world, or possibly die, or get promoted."

Talion reappears in the world some distance away, and we learn that Ûkakûga has been advanced within the hierarchy. In fact, he's off celebrating his defeat of Talion with a barrel of grog and his new subordinates. "The other really important element is that they have memories. As you meet them, if they defeat you, they flee from you, or you flee from them, all of those build up a history that they can speak to and remember," de Plater says. Monolith gives us the option; do we continue after our original target – one of the great warchiefs – or hunt down Ûkakûga to teach him a lesson?

The answer to that is easy, and Talion soon finds himself sneaking into an enemy camp, where an arrow from his bow detonates the explosive grog that is the orc's preferred drink. Ûkakûga gets what he deserves, and then Talion sets out to choose which warchief to bring down next.

Thanks to the nemesis system, the opportunities for emergent and customized gameplay in Shadow of Mordor are mind-boggling. Players can freely hunt down the soldiers of Mordor in one bloody battle after the next, or create carefully orchestrated assaults against an enemy warchief while using dozens of dominated agents. Kill an enemy captain, or let him slip away from a fight, after which he'll grow stronger and level up to offer a more substantial XP and rune reward upon eventual defeat. Use stealth, ranged attacks, and direct combat to match an enemy's weakness, or simply find another foe with different vulnerabilities that more closely match your style.

Behind the nemesis system, Monolith promises that Shadow of Mordor includes all the features you'd expect in a open-world action game. Players can look forward to extensive side missions, like hunting down packs of wargs, freeing slaves from the orc mines, tracking hidden collectibles and secrets, as well as a full campaign of dedicated story missions. All the activities are wrapped around the nemesis system, and use its capability to craft a player-driven narrative. "When you're on a side mission assaulting a fort, the guys you're going to encounter on that mission aren't just some placed enemy you've seen a thousand times before," de Plater says. "The guy you're going to meet is someone you know personally, or he knows someone you killed personally." If all works as planned, every playthrough of the game should play out in a dramatically different way than last time.

WARCHIEFS
Senior leaders maintaining control with the constant threat of violence.

BODYGUARDS

CAPTAINS
Officers of Sauron's Army
Constantly backstabbing each other

Orthag's death leaves the player with two tangible rewards. The first is a glowing rune that helps to enhance the power of Talion's weaponry. In his journeys through Mordor, Talion wields three weapons, and each serves a distinct purpose. His ranger's sword is his primary tool for close combat, the broken haft of his murdered son's blade serves as a dagger that is used in stealth kills, and his ornate bow comes in handy for ranged assassinations. Depending on the method used to kill an important enemy like Orthag, you get a rune tied to one of those three weapons. Since Orthag was killed in open combat, Talion receives a rune for the sword that boosts melee damage, but at the cost of a lowered regeneration rate. Several of these runes can be slotted into each weapon, and the more powerful the enemy, the greater the rune. That's why it might be in a player's best interest to sometimes allow enemies to escape and gain power and prestige; their eventual rune reward becomes all the sweeter. "The level, strengths, and weaknesses of your enemy directly feed into the strengths that you'll get from a rune, and how you defeat them will inform what that reward is as well," de Plater says. "Just like we have a huge variety of enemies, we'll have a huge variety of different powers to put onto our weapons."

That same formula applies to the other major reward received upon Orthag's death: XP. Following in the tradition of hundreds of games before it, Shadow of Mordor features an XP system to help measure character progression. However, rather than provide a flat value for the death of a certain foe, Shadow of Mordor offers dynamic XP values that shift in response to many variables.

Had Talion killed Orthag in their first encounter, he would have been worth a paltry sum of XP. But, by escaping (albeit badly burned), Orthag leveled up, losing some of his vulnerabilities, gaining new immunities, and increasing in both health and attack power. He also gained a fear of fire. By the time Talion kills him, Orthag has become a warchief worth a significant XP payout.

On top of the enemy's level and strength, XP also shifts in response to your actions. Successfully complete a stealth kill, and you get a big bonus for remaining hidden. Chain together a number of close-combat attacks, and you get an increased multiplier on your final XP bounty. Nail that enemy guard with a headshot from your bow, and you're rewarded for your accuracy. Each action leads to a suitable compensation, so different play styles are all encouraged. "We want to make sure that players can build up their character in a bunch of different ways, so it's not just focused on the

Stealth is one of many viable options to complete your objectives
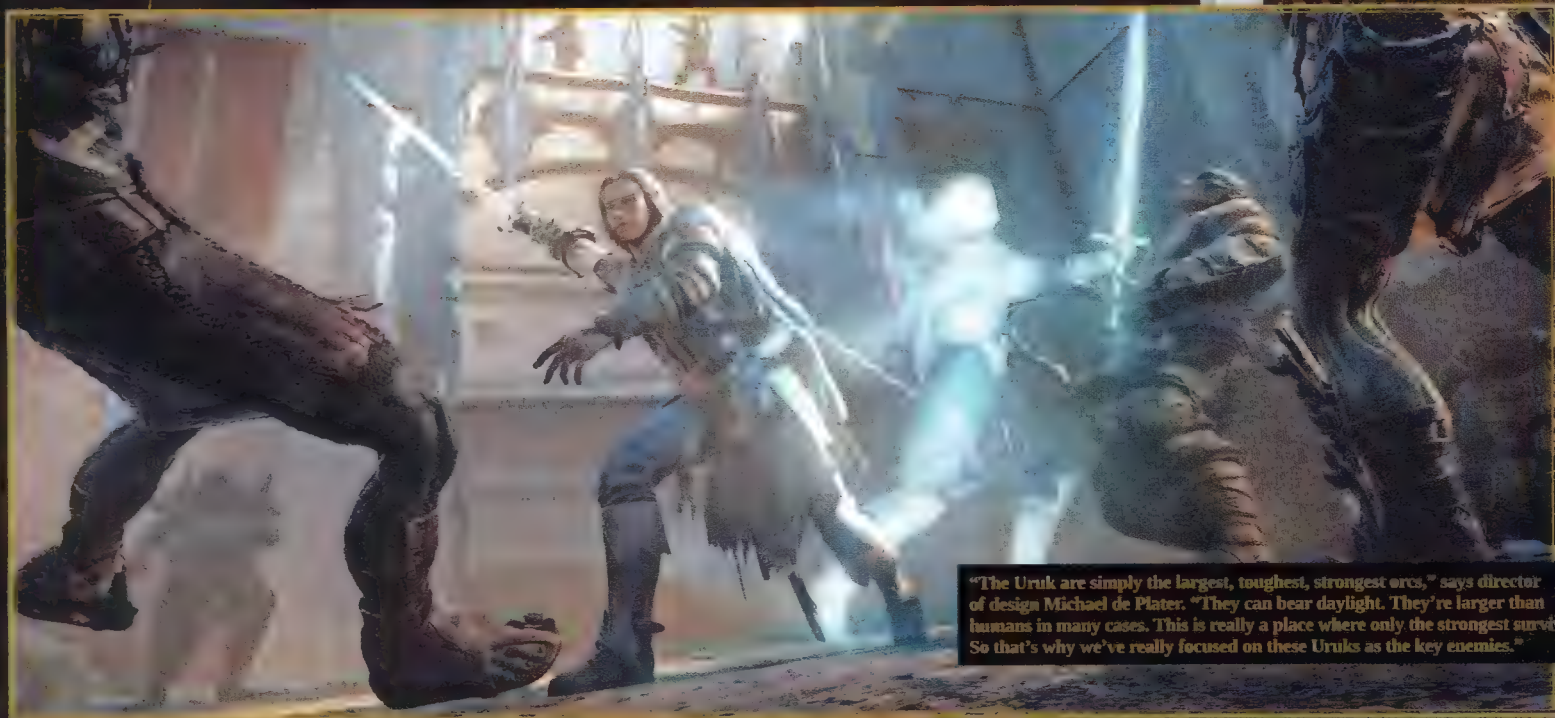
"The Uruk are simply the largest, toughest, strongest orcs," says director of design Michael de Plater. "They can bear daylight. They're larger than humans in many cases. This is really a place where only the strongest survive. So that's why we've really focused on these Uruks as the key enemies."

combat," de Plater says. "There are really good awards around playing stealthily, using the environment, turning your enemies on each other, and more."

Collect enough XP and you will earn a single skill point, which can be spent on two distinct trees that must each be developed independently. "The main principle here is that the skill system represents the duality, the two sides of our character," de Plater says. The ranger skill tree increases Talion's mortal abilities, while the wraith skill tree offers new supernatural powers to add into the mix.

Ranger skills are varied, and the ones we saw in action have us eager to see more. One ability turns a standard stealth kill into a brutal five-stab attack into the enemy's chest, perfect for building up a strong start to the combat multiplier before a melee gets going. The

shoulder charge ability lets Talion turn a sprint into a bull rush, potentially knocking enemies off a cliff or into a fire. A third ability triggers only when Talion has been badly beaten and is near death. When the final blow threatens to finish him off, this power lets Talion dramatically counter the attack for a one-hit kill.

Wraith abilities are similarly varied, but offer opportunities that go beyond mortal capabilities. A basic power lets Talion grab hold of an enemy from a distance, lifting it from the ground to drain energy, which then fuels other wraith powers. The aforementioned shadow strike is perfect for quick stealth kills as well as being a quick way to teleport around the battlefield. The detonate power gives Talion's arrows an explosive quality. Another special power causes the wraith to separate from Talion and attack another target on its own. These

early powers in both the ranger and wraith categories are impressive and exhilarating to see played out on screen, and leaves open the tantalizing question of what abilities await at the end of each skill tree.

No matter how Talion chooses to gain experience, or what skills he acquires as he explores, he has an impressive open world to explore along the way. Appropriately, Shadow of Mordor plays out across the vast nation of Mordor, carved out millennia ago as a home for Sauron and his minions. However, since Sauron was seemingly defeated and lost the One Ring centuries ago, some semblance of life has returned. With Sauron's reappearance, that glimmer of light is about to be snuffed out again, but Talion enters while the land is still changing from a lawless frontier to a blighted landscape of death and smoke.

Familiar locales abound, but they appear different from what we've come to expect in the later years of the War of the Ring. Mount Doom threatens in the distance, a smoking volcano that has yet to erupt, still blanketed in vegetation along its stony slopes. The Black Gate is bleak, but isn't as scarred from recent battles. The ancient Gondorian castle of Durthang is only recently taken by Sauron's forces, not yet littered with the detritus of Sauron's occupation. The impossibly high tower of Barad-dûr may one day be Sauron's stronghold, but as the game begins it still lies in ruins. Brave, dispossessed humans still try to eke out a life on the plains of Mordor, but they're rapidly being overtaken and flung into slavery as the game begins.

Visually, Mordor looks to several real-world locations as inspiration. The stark, volcanic mountainsides of eastern Washington state offered photo reference, as do the grasslands and distinct geographical landmarks of Yellowstone National Park. While Monolith isn't aiming to craft an idyllic vacation site, the Mordor seen in the game juxtaposes harsh natural beauty against an impending engine of war that has already begun to transform the landscape. "It's going from a place that was very wild and isolated, to a place that is now going to become transformed, and come under the heel of this totalitarian regime," de Plater says. "Throughout Middle-earth, there's a very strong relationship between geography, terrain, and nature with history and story. So the actual environment itself is transforming in a way that reflects the story. The land itself is reacting to Sauron's return."

While Talion's journeys often bring him into contact with the orcs and other sentient soldiers of Sauron, he is also forced to contend with the wild creatures of the land. Feral trolls roam freely through the countryside. Gore crows fly overhead, genetic precursors to the dragon-like

For an instant the wizard looked out. Arrows whined and whistled down the corridor as he sprang back. "There are Orcs, very many of them," he said. "And some are large and evil: black Uruks of Mordor. There is no hope of escape that way."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

Many creatures other than orcs lie in wait within the shadowy realm of Mordor

Monolith is crafting its own distinct vision of Middle-earth, but that doesn't mean the team hasn't looked to established visual treatments of the world for inspiration. While the recent movies offer a wealth of cool moments and scenes to draw from, Monolith cited the following three moments as impactful to ideas presented in Shadow of Mordor.

Aragorn and Lurtz

The vicious orc scout named Lurtz is a terrifying foe who murders Boromir. Afterwards, Aragorn offers no quarter to the creature – the fight echoes the duels we saw between Talion and the powerful Uruks of Mordor.

Dark Galadriel

When Frodo offers the ring to Galadriel, we see a brief glimpse of the duality of her nature, and the awful power she could wield. This duality is central to the presentation of Talion, the protagonist of the new game.

The Orcs of Cirith Ungol

When Frodo is captured by orcs, Sam pursues into the dark recesses of the Tower of Cirith Ungol, and there finds that the orcs have fallen to savage in-fighting. Similarly, your enemies in Shadow of Mordor are often their own worst enemies, and Talion can capitalize on their evil and duplicitous nature.

fellbeasts that the Nazgûl will one day ride into battle. The wolf-like wargs serve as orcish mounts, or run free in packs. Monolith is also introducing a new ferocious feline into the mix – the terrifying caragor. "Caragors are some of the alpha predators in Mordor." de Plater says. "They are to lions what a warg is to a wolf."

Throughout these battles, the mystery of the wraith looms, and Talion must come to terms with the curse that keeps him from finding rest with his family. The story also explores the mysterious origin of the rings of power. That tale unfolds through the writing talents of Christian Cantamessa, one of the chief writers and designers behind Red Dead Redemption – a sign that we're in for some intriguing storytelling.

While Talion's journey is ultimately a lonely one, Talion meets a host of side characters as he journeys. While most of their identities remain secret, Monolith says one familiar face is on the way. According to the established fiction, the ghoulish character Gollum shows up in Mordor in this same time frame, inadvertently drawn here as all evil creatures are flocking to Mordor. "Because he's had the ring, Gollum has also had this experience of seeing into both the physical and the wraith world," de Plater says. "The two of you enter Mordor with a few things in common. You're also there searching, looking into these two worlds for hidden secrets. When the two of you meet, there are opportunities for each of you to help the other in unveiling these mysteries and carrying the story forward."

Gollum's importance to the story speaks to the broader subjects Monolith hopes to explore through Talion's tragic tale. "Tolkien said there can be no story without a fall; that's hugely important to us." de Plater says. "The theme of power, and of people who set out to do the right thing and end up going down a dark path. Characters like Boromir, Saruman, and Gollum. Gollum turns a really interesting light on Talion, because he also has this nature of duality; Gollum and Smeagol – we see these two characters in one. That reflects something about Talion and the wraith within him." Talion's adventure is clearly not a happy one, but it does present questions about the dark workings of vengeance and the potential for redemption, even while simultaneously embracing the excitement of a narrative of righteous vengeance.

Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor is a surprising take on Tolkien's lore. With its focus on brutal combat and a conflicted and violent character at its head, some may balk at the liberties being taken to tell a new story at the expense of some of the heroic ideals present in The Lord of the Rings. However, in the past, that unwavering need to retread familiar ground has made many previous games set in Middle-earth suffer. Our time talking to the developers at Monolith established the deep affection the team has for this beloved fiction, and publisher Warner Bros. Interactive has earned some credibility with its licensed work on the recent Batman games. Beyond the storytelling, Shadow of

Mordor immediately captures the imagination with its next-gen approach to enemies, and the enormous flexibility for a player to shape their own adventure. For the opportunity to finally have new stories and explore in Middle-earth, we're ready to take a chance on a new perspective. ◆

BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea Episode 1

From glorious Rapture to splicer-infested hell

When Irrational Games co-founder and creative director Ken Levine revealed players would return to Rapture for BioShock Infinite's two-part narrative DLC adventure, Burial at Sea, fans were giddy. Few settings are as memorable as BioShock's underwater objectivist paradise. This time, we get to see what life was like under the sea before rampant addiction to gene splicing undid Andrew Ryan's life's work.

Burial at Sea Episode 1 begins in the familiar office of Booker DeWitt. Instead of turn-of-the-century New York though, DeWitt resides in mid-century Rapture as a private detective. On this fateful day, a more mature Elizabeth walks through the door with a job. She enlists DeWitt's help finding a young girl named Sally. Booker knows this child, but we'll leave it for you to find out how. As we follow Elizabeth out onto the promenade, we're treated to a new sight.

This is Rapture in its prime. The city isn't leaking, and people mill about, shopping and conversing about life under Andrew Ryan's rule. Big Daddies can be seen repairing the city and keeping things working. Little Sisters are only briefly glimpsed, but by eavesdropping we

get the sense that the average citizen isn't terribly comfortable with their vacant eyes.

We also learn that Rapture's culture accepts all manner of personal choice; the worth of someone's labor is most important when judging the character of a man or woman. Activities that might cause one to be shunned in Columbia are openly exhibited on Rapture's streets.

The opening section of Burial at Sea Episode 1 is devoid of combat. This narrative exercise is best experienced slowly and deliberately. Listening to the conversations on the

street provides a better understanding of how residents view the conflict between Ryan and Frank Fontaine. As punishment for Fontaine's criminal activities, his department store has been turned into a prison and sunken to the bottom of the sea.

On your quest to find information about Sally, expect to encounter a familiar character from BioShock. This child trafficker dupes Booker and Elizabeth, sending them down to Fontaine's department store to continue their quest.

At this point, BioShock returns to its combat roots. The action feels largely like BioShock Infinite, though the original weapon wheel is back. The hacking minigame has been removed, and the plasmid selection is more streamlined. Irrational added a new upgradable weapon called the Radar Range and a new plasmid, and Infinite's gear takes the place of gene tonics. Playing smart, hoarding ammo and eve, and staying alive will ensure that players have enough cash to invest in these purchases.

The prison is inhabited by splicers, but their addiction is not so far advanced that they have gone insane. They work together to keep Booker and Elizabeth on their heels. For this reason, stealth and resource management are far more important than in Infinite.

Getting the jump on a group of splicers with a plasmid trap or something from Elizabeth's tears can mean the difference between life and cash-draining death. Ammo is scarce, but Circus of Values and Ammo Bandito machines can help resupply.

The first episode of Burial at Sea should take players three hours (shorter if they rush through the first part instead of taking in the sights). The combat is fierce and the narrative is compelling, which is what we expect when returning to Rapture. » **Michael Futter**
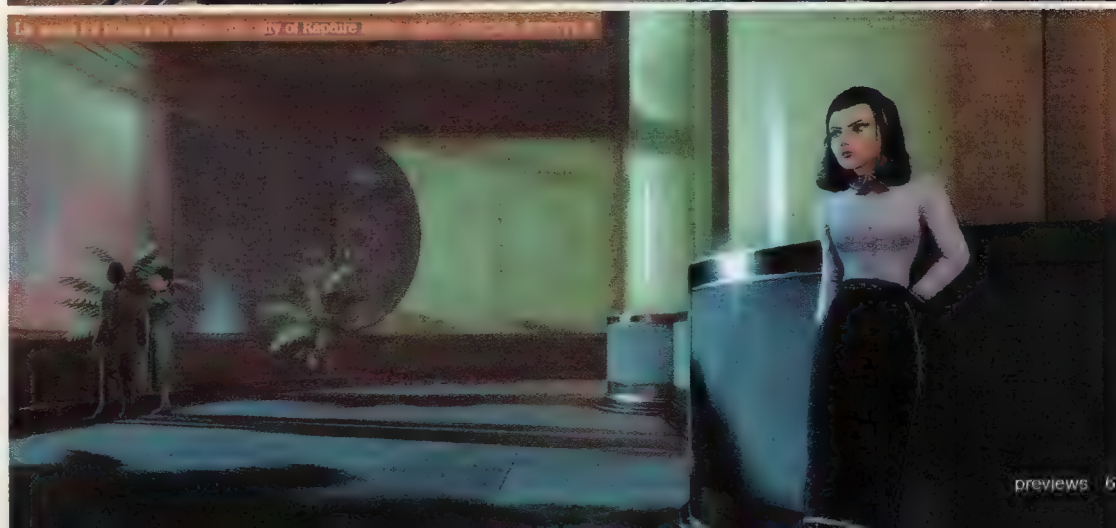
Killzone: Shadow Fall

Behind enemy lines

Killzone: Shadow Fall was one of the flagship titles shown during Sony's PlayStation 4 reveal event in February. The extended gameplay demo showed the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack on Vekta City, and the protagonist's explosive response. As we learned later, action was pieced together from several different chunks of the game's fourth level – which I was recently able to complete myself.

I begin in a transport shuttle high above the devastation. While we descend on a nearby office tower, I'm briefed on my mission. The terrorist leader behind the attacks, a Helghan named Tyran, has taken civilian hostages, and it's my job to go in and help the ISA with their rescue. As Shadow Marshal Lucas Keller, I'm trained and equipped to work alone – though I certainly appreciate their support.

The building is a maze of cubicles and offices, but I'm able to use my pulse scanner to see the locations of hostages and their captors. I can take aim at the terrorists' glowing silhouettes and blast through walls to take them by surprise. My AI allies are helpful, though I rely more on my robotic OWL companion's toolset to get through some of the rough spots – particularly his cover-fire ability, which is both a great way to thin out crowds and a useful diversionary tool.

Shortly after untying the last captive, I spot Tyran and give chase. He manages to escape, heading back over the wall that runs through Vekta City like a scar. That leaves me with only one option: I'm going to need to enter the Helghan side posing as a refugee.

By now, I've played Killzone: Shadow Fall a couple of times. At E3, I played an open-air section that let me take out Helghan forces head on or with ghostlike stealth. I sneaked into the tower as best I could, but my quiet approach quickly turned into a satisfying, close-quarters shootout. The next portion I played was something else entirely – Shadow Fall is nothing if not filled with variety.

I begin the level shuffling along with other refugees in line. Spotlights and the red beams from laser sights occasionally sweep across the screen, letting everyone in the corridor know that they are being watched closely. Even with that amount of scrutiny, there are whispers of mutiny. One potential instigator is shushed into silence, though it's clear that not everyone is on board with compliance.

The eerie section reminds me of Half-Life 2's City 17. A husband and wife are divided by the masked Helghan, and when I stop to hear her pleas, I'm forced to move ahead – the camera control temporarily taken away from me, in a nice touch.

I'm eventually led aboard a train, which is where our plan springs into action. I press a button and activate an EMP device (the Helghans really should consider upgrading their checkpoint scanners), and grab a guard's weapon in the ensuing chaos. I tear through a few checkpoints, disarming the alarms that come in my wake, and eventually find myself in Containment City.

As the name implies, it's an area built with shipping containers and exposed I-beams. Where Vekta City proper is a gleaming gem of polished glass and green space, this is an ugly artifact of industry. It's densely packed, and its inhabitants are rightfully wary of my incursion. I don't exactly blend into the surroundings, as evidenced by the way the people look warily at me. Tyran comes across the city loudspeakers, telling everyone within earshot that there is an intruder among them. He encourages them to stop me by any means necessary.

Containment City is a cluttered mess of girders and boxy containers, which makes it especially tough to deal with snipers. I scan the area for their heat signatures, but I find that they often teleport away before I get a chance to fire off a shot. Instead, I use the low-tech solution of keeping my eyes peeled for telltale laser beams and proceed from there.

Eventually, Tyran's taunts take on a personal tone. Instead of telling people to go after me, he asks why I'm in Containment City in the first place. "You are an asset," he snarls. "No more a person than the weapon you hold." It's food for thought, but I'm able to sneak up on him between transmissions. I catch him as he's engaged in a conversation with someone who's obviously his superior. Before they can finish the discussion, which is focused on the delivery of a weapon, Tyran spots me. The demo ends with a melee battle, where I'm tossed over the edge of the structure.

The more I've seen of Shadow Fall, the more I'm impressed. I've never been a huge fan of the series, but Shadow Fall's variety, scope, and polish have put it on my list of must-have PS4 launch titles. » **Jeff Cork**

Thief

Prowling Thief's streets with a brand new control scheme

We've been following the progress of Eidos Montreal's Thief reboot since we first revealed it as our April 2013 cover story. Since then, the studio has allowed Garrett to step out of the shadows, revealing more about the world he inhabits and the people important to him.

I recently spoke with narrative director Steven Gallagher, who painted a picture of a city falling on hard times. Garrett has been gone for a while, and when he returns, he finds an illness called The Gloom, tyrannical law enforcement, and precious objects to steal from the city's wealthy.

My demo begins as Garrett returns to his hideout in a clock tower. Everything is covered in dust, except for innumerable small bricks scrawled with messages from a fence named Basso.

Upon leaving the clock tower, I am presented with a small section of the city to explore. Instead of heading straight for Basso, I prowl about, experimenting with different arrows. Water arrows extinguish torches. Blunt heads make noise and distract. Rope arrows give you access to higher ground.

I pry open windows, steal carelessly strewn valuable objects, and listen in on conversations that reveal just how miserable the city has become. After poking around a bit, I check in on Basso, who assigns four menial jobs.

One of the things that stands out about Thief is the control scheme, which is different than most other first-person titles. Instead of a jump or cover button, most of the dynamic movement is handled with the left trigger.

Holding the trigger engages something similar to Assassin's Creed's free run mode. Garrett makes more noise, but he vaults over obstacles, grabs onto ropes, and scrambles up the sides of buildings.

Garrett is at his best when he's unseen, and Eidos-Montreal has made it easy to stay hidden. The A button on the Xbox 360 controller allows him to perform a strafing swoop. These large movements in any direction can quickly move the master thief into the shadows or sidestep a blow from an enemy. The control scheme takes getting used to, but once I get past the desire to jump for a rope or to grab a ledge, things begin to fall into place.

The four jobs are quick affairs that rely on finding the right way inside, quietly disposing of any potential threats with a melee takedown, and procuring the valuable target.

Some of these are more straightforward, but there are occasionally cerebral, puzzle-solving elements that come into play. In one job, I am tasked with stealing a gift received by a young maiden from a suitor.

When I enter the house through the bedroom window, I find the girl asleep in her bed. Reading her diary exposes that her father is offering her hand in marriage as a way to take gifts from eligible bachelors for himself. The young girl's writing reveals that she has scratched the combination to her father's safe somewhere.

Sneaking downstairs, I find the grifter. His back is to me, so I knock him unconscious. He was standing by a painting, so I investigate. This triggers an interaction that allows me to look for a hidden switch behind the frame.

I use the analog sticks to move Garrett's hands around the border until an indicator lights, signaling that I've located the trigger. Pressing a button reveals a safe behind the artwork.

Looking around the room narrows down only one place the girl could have hidden when her father opened the safe: a closet. I duck inside to confirm my suspicions. She has scratched the combination into the wall. I open the safe, steal the goods, and quickly make an escape.

The jobs (and a side-quest I uncovered by prowling about) are enjoyable, but it isn't yet clear how Garrett's thieving ways will progress the story. We're looking forward to seeing how the pieces come together in advance of the game's launch in February. » **Michael Futter**

Tales Of Xillia 2

Fighting against time

Tales of Xillia proved Namco's franchise hasn't lost its charm or trademark combat, but it also showed that the developers are brimming with ideas to take Tales in new directions. That trend continued as I explored the opening hour of the import version of Tales of Xillia 2. The choice to both shape the narrative and foster character relationships during skits is the most noticeable addition in next year's follow-up.

Tales of Xillia 2 opens with the new main character, Ludger Will Kresnik, fighting against a mysterious, shadowy figure. You're thrust into the action, throwing hits and combos. But it's no use. The dark figure casts an almighty mystic arte, and Ludger meets his demise, or so you think… It was all a dream. He soon

awakens, greeted by one fat kitty; the token animal character for this adventure.

Soon after, you meet Ludger's brother, who resembles the shadowy figure. Immediately, a choice appears on screen if you want to refer to him casually or formally; you make your decision by choosing L1 or R1. He wants to test your combat skills and ability to navigate a dungeon.

Entering combat, I notice Ludger is much faster than previous protagonists. With his duel short swords, he rapidly slices through enemies. The most obvious difference is that elemental weaknesses play a bigger role this time around, as the leveling up system is based around different equippable orbs that provide skills. Each skill these orbs teach is tied to one

of the six elements, of which various enemies are weak or strong against.

Soon enough, I tragically meet the other main character, Elle, who watches her father die before her eyes. Ludger and Elle's paths collide when they both take a train in Elympios. Xillia veterans will remember Elympios from Xillia's end. The city looks the same, and Ludger even lives in the same apartment building as Alvin's relative.

While Xillia 2 features a new protagonist, that doesn't mean characters from the original won't be making an appearance; it seems they're heavily involved in the story. The opening cutscenes feature the likes of Jude, Milla, Elise, and that crazy talking doll, Teepo.

Namco Bandai hasn't revealed much about the localization of Tales of Xillia 2, but one thing is clear from my play time: Ludger isn't your average main character. Not only is he a passionate cook, he has the ability destroy alternate timelines. How this will impact the story is anyone's guess, but Namco Bandai has emphasized making choice important for this entry. Unfortunately, we have to wait until next year to see how Ludger and Elle collide with the cast from the first game. » **Kimberley Wallace**
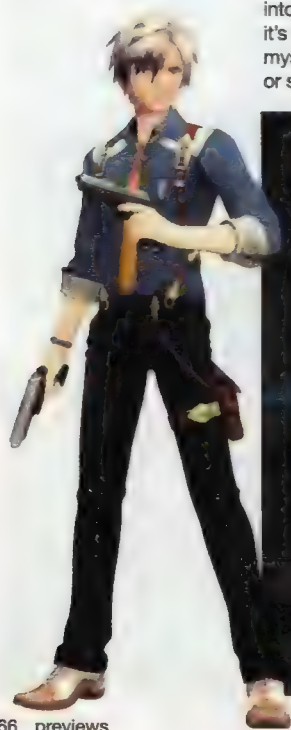
much more important this time around

Drakengard 3
Square Enix's twisted world is coming stateside

Square Enix is a company in flux. In the past year, it has largely shifted its console game development to its Western studios, made bigger strides in mobile in Japan, and revealed plans to pursue more regional (rather than worldwide) development. Given this segregation, we're pleasantly surprised to learn that Drakengard 3 is coming to North America next year.

We spoke with producer Takamasa Shiba, who explained why Square Enix was revisiting Drakengard after an eight-year hiatus (not counting the spin-off Nier). Shiba says that the decision to make Drakengard 3 was to go against the grain and provide an experience for console gamers in a market that is becoming more casual. "Instead of creating more JRPG games, we were making games just for casual gamers," he says. "We were only helping the market to shrink."

In this prologue tale, players assume the role of Zero, a magical goddess who formerly controlled the world with the power of her singing. After being abandoned by her five sisters, she pursues One, Two, Three, Four, and Five in order to kill them. Though sororicide is the end game, Shiba says this is not a revenge tale.

"Typically in JRPGs, you'd expect a hero that's fighting for justice," Shiba says. "In Drakengard 3, we have an antihero. It's a dark fantasy and a mature game. Zero is not out there for revenge... She just wants to kill them."

The combat moves at a frenzied pace as Zero strings together combos. As Zero cuts through enemies, blood collects on her clothing and the Intoner blood gauge at the top left of the screen fills, which she can activate to slow down time for everyone around her.

Zero often has companions in tow, who are as twisted as the rest of the story. The first one players encounter is Dito, who often makes veiled (and not-so-veiled) sexual innuendos. Other partners include an extreme masochist, a sex addict, and a more traditional Final Fantasy-type hero that just gets everything wrong.

The most important companion is your dragon ally, Mikhail. He is a young dragon, but nonetheless enormous and powerful. He can be called in to assist during fights, and the moments riding the beast look exciting. In a new move for the series, players can stay on the ground with their dragon mount to rush and stomp on enemies.

Our first look at Drakengard 3 revealed a lot of promise. The combat looks slick, and the story pushes deeper into curious, mature directions. In 2014, we'll find out if this is a winning combination. » Michael Futter

» Platform
PlayStation 3

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
2014

Zero hunts down her five sisters

Mikhail is Zero's dragon companion

Ratchet & Clank: Into The Nexus

Insomniac preps a solid conclusion to the PS3 trilogy
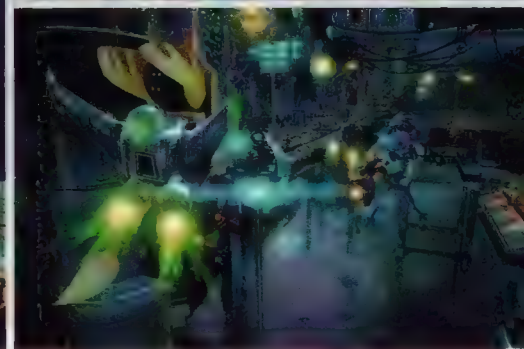
» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Platforming

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Insomniac Games

» **Release**
November 12

nsomniac announced the fourth installment to its Ratchet & Clank Future series at this past E3, but we haven't heard much about the game since. Into the Nexus may be an epilogue to 2009's Crack In Time, but after getting my hands on the title, I came away assured that Insomniac has crafted a robust single-player experience that should stand on its own.

The game starts with the notorious space witch Vendra Prog escaping from a prison transport. After blowing up Ratchet and Clank's ship, she leaves our heroes floating in the dead of space. Thankfully, they stow away on one of the villain's scout ships, and infiltrate the sorceress' secret base on the planet Yerek.

I join the duo once they set foot on Yerek. This hostile planet is not a safe place for a Lombax and his robotic pal. Yerek was once a thriving cosmopolitan planet, but was abandoned years ago when evil spirits started haunting the entire world. Something about this story doesn't smell right, and I set off to get to the bottom of what happened.

I run into a bobble-headed scientist who gives me a device called the Grav Tether. This device can activate certain targets scattered across the planet and create Grav Streams, which act like tractor beams, allowing Ratchet and Clank to float from one platform to another. When earthquakes rock the planet, causing ravines to suddenly form underfoot, I use the Grav Tether to navigate through one of Yerek's mines.

Before long I've stored up enough bolts, the in-game currency, from blasting Vendra's goons to buy a new weapon. The Temporal Regulator – a shotgun that uses quantum energy – looks tempting, but the Nightmare Box wins out. This handy little gadget fires out small cubes. As enemies approach these Nightmare Boxes, a mechanical "ghost" pops out and scares them like some kind of evil alien Jack-in-the-box. Not only is the Nightmare Box hilarious, it's useful for distracting enemies and taking some of the heat off Ratchet.

While snooping through an abandoned orphanage, I pick up several voice recordings that give some backstory about Vendra, and then run into the friendly scientist who gave us the Grav Tether. He has another gift, irradiating Clank with a rare dimensional energy that allows him to track down cracks in the space-time continuum.

Once he finds a crack, Clank can enter through the purple fissure and play a 2D platforming minigame. During these sequences, Clank controls the direction of this universe's gravity with the right analog stick, which allows him to easily avoid certain pitfalls or cause blocks to fall in unusual directions and activate wall switches. These minigames are brief, but seem like they could be some of the most entertaining segments of Into the Nexus.

Once Clank returns to Ratchet, the time fissure explodes, creating a hole in the wall that allows them to progress to the next area. Clank has also learned one important tidbit while visiting the alternate dimension: The ghostly spirits that drove away most of Yerek's population are entities from this alternate dimension. I solved one mystery, but still have to figure out how this is all connected to Vendra and her evil schemes.

The demo of Into the Nexus comes to a close more quickly than I wanted; the adventures of Insomniac's eccentric duo remain as entertaining as ever. Into the Nexus is full of slapstick humor, colorful characters, and a truckload of creative weapons. » **Ben Reeves**

Sony just announced that Into the Nexus...

Fable Anniversary

Revisiting the original, from cover to cover

When a franchise has been around for nearly a decade and spanned a couple of hardware generations, sometimes even its fans have a hard time keeping up. Fable Anniversary lead designer and franchise director Ted Timmins relayed a recent conversation that summarizes it nicely.

"When I was speaking with someone at PAX, I said, 'Well, Theresa from Fable II is actually your sister from Fable 1,' and it just blew their mind – they had no idea that this character had such a rich and important history back in Fable 1," Timmins says. "They had so many questions about it, and I was just like, 'Wait to play the game. There's no way I'm going to spoil it for you if you've already waited 10 years.'"

Fable Anniversary, coming a decade after the original game launched on the Xbox, is being designed to tell the original tale (and the content from The Lost Chapters) to new players, while giving the rest of us a reason to revisit the Albion of long ago.

The game now runs on Unreal Engine 3, and Timmins says the artists have gone out of their way to ensure that it delivers more than an HD texture pack. "In my mind, Final Fantasy XII is still the greatest-looking game of all time," he says. "Whenever I go back to it I always go, 'Oh my god, I don't remember it being like this!' I want players to say, 'This is exactly as I'd remembered it.'" That means reworking and polishing everything from the textures, models, animations, and particle effects, while staying true to the original style and design.

Once Lionhead nailed the look, it began revisiting aspects of the original that weren't sacrosanct. "There are things that are charm, and that players expect from the original game, but there are also bugs and general features

that could be improved," Timmins says. "I'm still in contact with Dene Carter, the original creative director on Fable, and when I first told him about Fable Anniversary, the first thing he said was, 'Please, for the love of god, tell me you've changed the save system.'"

The team added in mid-mission checkpoints, so players can now take a break and not lose valuable progress. Tiny improvements are dusted throughout as well, such as giving players the ability to equip newly acquired gear without having to wade through an inventory screen.

Most notably, however, is the introduction of Fable II-style controls, which map magic, ranged, and melee attacks to separate buttons. "Purists don't have to worry – they still can switch to the original Fable control scheme at any time – but because we felt it had such an improvement to the actual combat without us having to risk changing the combat itself, we felt it was the appropriate change to make," he says.

Timmins thinks the decision to bring Fable Anniversary to the Xbox 360 was a no-brainer because it basically closes the Xbox 360 chapter of the series. The story will continue in Xbox One's Fable Legends, but that's a tale for another time. » Jeff Cork

» **Platform**
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Lionhead Studios

» **Release**
February

The enhanced Anniversary version can be turned off for those who want to make it seem larger and more impressive

Players can use a SmartGlass app to do a side-by-side

Assassin's Creed Liberation HD

For the jump to consoles, Ubisoft makes changes across the board

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation released on PlayStation Vita last year, but many franchise fans never partook in Aveline's adventures through 18th century New Orleans. Ubisoft Sofia is crafting a new HD port of the game for download on home consoles and PC, and the team has more than a jump in graphics quality in mind.

"For Assassin's Creed Liberation HD our goal was to refine and update all the gameplay features, as well as adapting them to home consoles in order to bring the most polished experience possible," says producer Momchil Valentinov Gindyanov. The team has rebalanced enemy encounters, combat timing, and damage. From a traversal perspective, Ubsoft updated or rewrote from scratch all of the navigation pathing. A stronger tutorial better introduces the core concepts to new players, and story panels throughout the plot offer a deeper understanding of the narrative.

On the technical side, Ubisoft polished both combat and navigation animations to fit in with the newly upgraded visual styling. "Every object in the game has been updated to HD quality – geometry, textures, and materials," Gindyanov says. "All characters in the game were remodeled and we created new skeleton rigs for them so they look more natural. Every cinematic in the game has new cameras and the facial animation was done from scratch which results in a much better cinematic experience." In addition, the programmers optimized the engine to achieve a smoother framerate.

Perhaps most exciting, the developers gathered critical and fan feedback from the original release and used it to re-constitute every mission, including both the central story and side missions. "Those modifications include, but are not limited to, objectives, pacing, and difficulty to deliver a challenging and fun experience," Gindyanov says. In addition to the existing missions, the HD version adds 15 new side missions focused on Aveline's three personas – the assassin, lady, and servant.

All of the Vita-exclusive features have been remapped onto a traditional controller, which suggests that longtime Assassin's Creed console players should have little trouble slipping into Aveline's shoes. It remains to be seen how these changes affect the touch-to-kill mechanic that allowed Aveline to one hit combo strike several enemies at once.

Ubisoft Sofia clearly wanted a second shot at perfecting its venture into the Assassin's Creed universe. We're curious to see how it performs given that it's releasing on the same platforms as Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag only a few months later in early 2014. But given the size of the fan base, it has a fighting chance. » Matt Miller

To Connor's adventures in Assassin's Creed III

New Orleans is the backdrop to another chapter in the ongoing war between the Templars and the Assassins
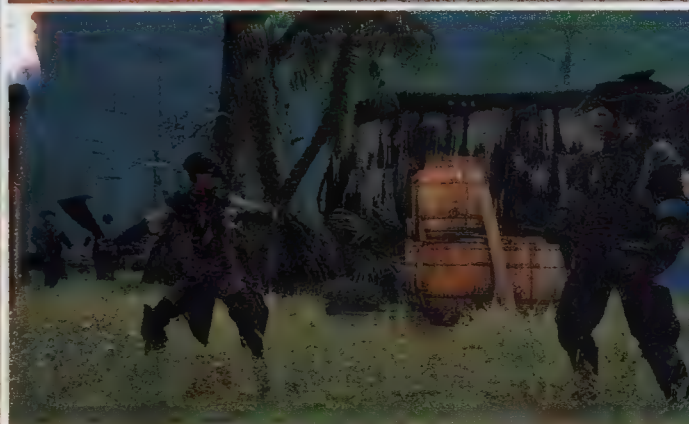
The Long Dark

Making games in the cold Canadian wilderness

After Raphael van Lierop finished work on Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine at Relic, he felt that he was at a crossroads in his career. "I had the post-partum process that you always seem to go through when you finish a game," he says. He decided to leave Relic, relocate his family, and start something new. He opened a small independent development studio, Hinterland, and began work on The Long Dark. "I didn't want to give up on my dream of working on great games with great collaborators," he says.

After settling in Vancouver, van Lierop began assembling his team and gathering funding. Hinterland got a recoupable advance from the Canada Media Fund, which promotes innovation in film, television, and games in the Canadian industry. Hinterland also recently completed a successful Kickstarter campaign, which raised additional funding for the game's development.

"[There is] a trend that I'm sure you've seen in the industry generally, of established triple-A developers that have decided that they want to do something different," he says. Van Lierop and the members of his team all fall into this group of creative risk takers, and van Lierop's passion for his project made it easy to inspire talented developers with impressive resumes to join his team.

The Long Dark is not a survival-horror game. Instead, van Lierop refers to it as a survival-simulation game. In a cold, snowy world that recently experienced a mysterious apocalypse that made all modern electronics useless, players must learn to survive and interact with an unforgiving world. You won't have super powers, and you won't be fighting off zombies. Instead, you're doing your best to simply stay alive in the face of wildlife, an unforgiving environment, and other survivors in the same predicament. In the Long Dark, staying warm and counting calories is just as important as counting bullets.

The Long Dark follows the journey of pilot William Mackenzie. Something happens to the world's satellites and electronics while Mackenzie is mid-flight, causing him to crash-land in a snow-covered environment. In a world without modern electronic conveniences, Mackenzie has to learn to survive.

Van Lierop does not consider the game a survival-horror title, and was somewhat surprised to see the online community describe the game as spooky when it was first revealed. He describes it as atmospheric and moody – not scary or horrifying. His focus is to create a survival simulation, as opposed to a survival-horror experience. You won't find jump scares or fictional monsters in The Long Dark, but the nature of survival in a snowy wild lends a certain amount of unavoidable spookiness to the experience.

The Long Dark represents an ambitious game from an experienced, but unproven developer. We're curious to play the final product to find out if surviving in the wilderness will be exciting and invigorating, or feel too close to the real thing. » **Kyle Hilliard**
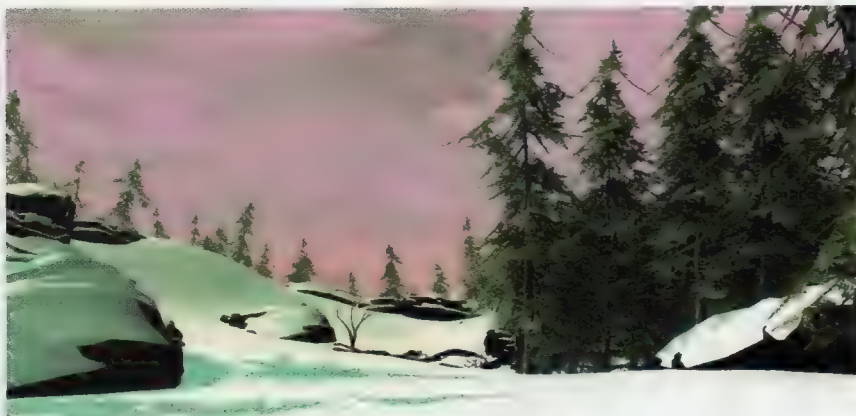
There are no potions or spells in The Long Dark, but the game's creator Raphael van Lierop, is hoping the world feels magical in its cold, quiet splendor

You are not a soldier, so creatures like wolves pose a serious threat

Previous Titles Hinterland's Developers Have worked On:

- Baldur's Gate II
- Company of Heroes
- Dawn of War
- Far Cry 3
- God of War
- Jade Empire
- League of Legends
- Mass Effect
- Red Faction
- Saints Row
- Sly Cooper
- Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
- The Unfinished Swan
- Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine

Tropico 5

Five major changes awaiting El Presidente

Over the past few years, Haemimont Games has been slowly convincing sim fans that being the mayor of a virtual city isn't nearly as much fun as being the supreme ruler of your own banana republic. Tropico 4 and its subsequent Modern Times expansion built upon the developer's complex mix of nation building and politicking, favoring small, incremental improvements over sweeping changes.

While Tropico 5 doesn't rewrite the rules of being an island dictator (dictators tend to make their own rules, after all), Haemimont is introducing some substantial changes that should excite fans.

The Beginning Of A Dynasty

Tropico 5's centuries-spanning campaign takes armchair dictators from colonial times to the modern era and beyond. As such, you need a little help cementing your legacy for the generations to come. Tropico 5 allows players to create their own dynasty by placing El Presidente's family members into positions of power. Unlike Tropico 4's Ministers, your despotic kinsfolk are more than just powerless figureheads. They earn experience and unlock new skills depending on their leadership roles, and can provide your nation with global benefits. Once El Presidente meets his or her demise (be it timely or otherwise), one of your relatives can even step in to take the reins – democracy is no match for a little old-fashioned nepotism.

Where No Tyrant Has Gone Before

Despite Tropico 4's complexity, many of the campaign scenarios led players down the same building progression path. To alleviate the monotony, islands in Tropico 5 are shrouded in a fog of war, requiring players to send out scouting expeditions to discover what precious resources their tropical paradise contains. They also have to contend with new dangers while venturing in the wilderness, such as hostile animals and native tribes. Haemimont says it's crafting a wealth of unique events that pop up during the game to push players in new directions.

Paradise Never Looked So Good

Tropico 4 featured only minor visual improvements over its predecessor, leading many to refer to the sequel as Tropico 3.5. While no one plays city sims for mind-blowing graphics, Haemimont is prepping a complete visual makeover for Tropico 5. This includes modeling over 100 unique buildings, some of which unlock new mechanics such as diplomacy and advanced industry as you progress through the ages. Unlike in Tropico 4's Modern Times expansion, players can still use their older building in subsequent eras – just don't expect your citizens to be happy with your island's aging infrastructure.

Systems Check

A number of Tropico's other main mechanics are getting an overhaul. Haemimont is reworking its unit simulation, which will make citizens seem less like automatons and grant them more free time to pursue other interests. Haemimont says that while citizens' needs are largely the same, they go about satisfying them in different ways. Tropico 5's trading system is also being expanded, allowing players to choose their trading partners and the number of ships assigned to each trading route. Players can also schedule the frequency of freighters.

Calling All Dictators

Tropico 5's biggest addition is one you won't have to tackle alone. For the first time in the history of the series, up to four players can play together in a variety of cooperative and competitive multiplayer modes. Players form up their tyrannical nations on the same island, and can choose to wage war or work together, sharing resources and citizens. Players can also build a separate, persistent dynasty in multiplayer. Selfish dictators won't have to worry, however; Haemimont says Tropico 5's campaign mode is still a strictly single-player affair. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Spreading out across the island may involve contending with dangerous wildlife or native tribes

Dungeon Defenders 2

Defending the Eternia Crystals was only the beginning

keep the horde from assailing the castle

Tower defense games have found a comfortable home on touchscreen devices, but the strategy sub-genre also has a solid base on the PC. Trendy Entertainment's Dungeon Defenders found success launching on Steam, Xbox 360, and PS3 to the tune of more than one million copies sold, but for the sequel it's sticking to the PC platform.

Dungeon Defenders 2, which was originally conceived as a MOBA, has evolved into something more akin to the original title. The base game has four different classes, each with their own defenses and abilities, a loot system, and strategic gameplay that is better with a full complement of four players. Enemies march toward the home base, facing defenses like barricades and magic-missile towers, while players actively engage the goblins, orcs, and dark elf archers to cull their numbers. Like any good sequel, Dungeon Defenders 2 improves on the formula while staying true to its roots.

The original four heroes from Dungeon Defenders – the squire, the apprentice, the huntress, and the monk – have all grown up since their last adventure. Having accidentally unleashed the Old Ones, the quartet must protect the land from beasts and monsters.

Trendy has made some changes to the formula, and though the build I played was pre-alpha, it seems to be coming together well. Dungeon Defenders' heroes now have access to two separate mana reserves. One is used for barricading lanes and placing offensive towers, while the other fuels active abilities. In the original Dungeon Defenders, these all pulled from the same mana pool. In the sequel, the split ensures that players can remain active in battle without sacrificing their ability to build, upgrade, and repair emplacements.

Physics play a more important role this time out. For instance, freezing an enemy makes them more vulnerable to blunt damage from cannonballs and susceptible to gravity. A whirlwind trap hurts an ice-encased foe more upon impact. This makes teamwork and communication even more critical than before.

Players also have important sub-objectives to protect in each level. The castle map has two gate locks. Each one protects a lane from opening up. Failure to defend these makes later waves much harder.

The enemy assortment looks familiar so far, but with the resource pools split up, players will be able to engage them without worrying about sacrificing defenses. In our brief time with this early build, this is just one of the changes that made Dungeon Defenders 2 feel fresh. We're looking forward to learning more over the coming months. » **Michael Futter**

» **Platform**
PC • Mac • Linux

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
Trendy Entertainment

» **Developer**
Trendy Entertainment

» **Release**
2014
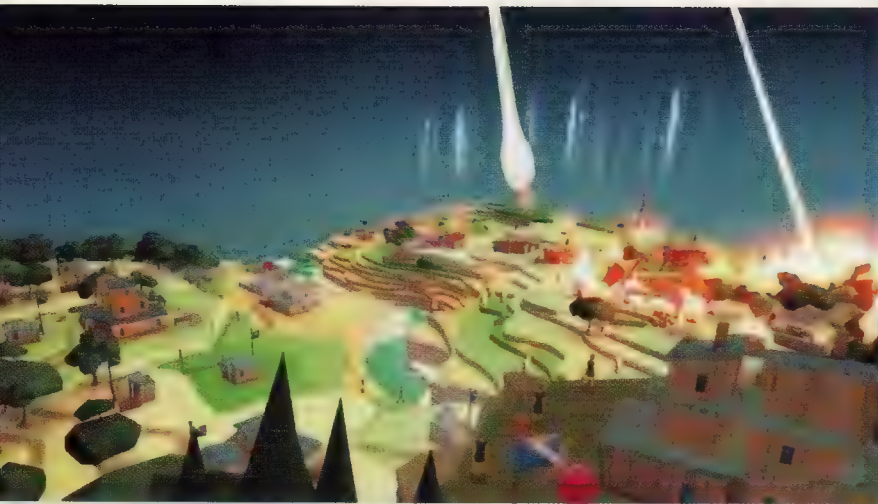
Godus

Peter Molyneux returns to the god-game genre

In 2012, Peter Molyneux announced that he was leaving Lionhead Studios and the Fable franchise behind to begin work on small-scale, experimental projects at a new development house, 22cans. Molyneux left behind the world of large-scale budgets, console exclusives, and narrative-driven RPGs to eventually come back to his roots: god games.

The first game from 22cans was a mobile game called Curiosity – What's Inside the Cube? In the game, players from around the world worked together to slowly chip away at a gigantic block by tapping it, peeling away layers to find out what was inside. Molyneux – who is known for his grandiose proclamations – promised the reveal would be life changing for whoever was lucky enough to get inside first. That person was Bryan Henderson, an 18-year-old graphic design student from Scotland. Soon after Henderson's stroke of good fortune, Molyneux revealed that Henderson would not only earn a percentage of Godus' profits, but he would also be the first god to control its world.

Henderson's deity status is not permanent; after a six-month period, his rule can be challenged by other players. When the game launches, however, Henderson will be in charge. He can make widespread decisions that affect the economics and value of certain supplies, decide on moral dilemmas like whether your workers deserve time off, and control the weather.

Other players take on the roles of minor deities tasked with making the world livable for its inhabitants by terraforming the land. Using belief, the currency of Godus, the land can be pulled, stretched, and destroyed in order to clear areas for people to build homes. As the population grows, you gain access to greater tracts of land, revealing new supplies to create new types of structures, better homes, and temples.

As the livable area expands and your population grows, you move forward through the ages, like the bronze age, unlocking cards that grant special powers. Unlocking the Smart Sculpting card, for example, allows you to double-click to destroy and create land, which is faster than dragging the land where you see fit. Players are all expanding their civilizations on the same globe, so it is possible to eventually collide with another player, at which point they can decide to work together or wage war.

Players can begin playing Godus right now by purchasing the game through Steam's Early Access program. At this early stage of development, Henderson has not taken his throne as god, so it's unclear exactly how much of an effect he will have over the players of Godus. The game's biggest selling point is how players interact with one another, as well as Henderson and his lineage, but it is difficult to analyze that community and its implications without seeing it in action. It's both exciting and terrifying to imagine what kind of chaos a real person with ultimate power could have on your world.

» **Kyle Hilliard**

Godus has clean and attractive visual design. It's a simple art direction, but
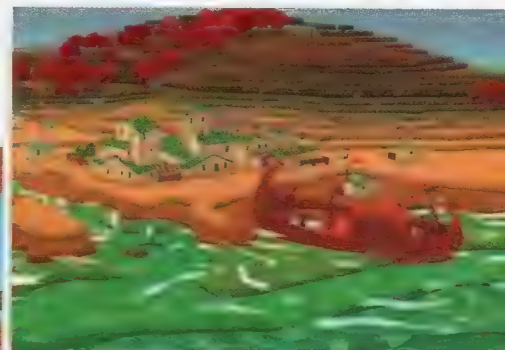
Routine

Sci-fi horror shoots for the Moon

Following the success of Amnesia: The Dark Descent's flight-over-fight design, the indie scene is becoming a breeding ground for worthwhile first-person horror. High among these titles is Lunar Software's Routine, a first-person ordeal set on an abandoned moon base.

Routine draws inspiration from sci-fi films like Alien and 2001: A Space Odyssey. Instead of sterile hallways and touch-enabled holograms, the tech is grounded with 1980s analogs. Players interact with the dated operating systems on boxy computer monitors while noisy hard drives boot up. Floppy disks are even used to upgrade your all-in-one Cosmonaut Assistance Tool.

The CAT is your flashlight, nightvision, PDA, and firearm all rolled into one. It only carries two batteries, forcing players to choose whether to discharge one firing the CAT at a patrolling killer robot or continue using their flashlight. Floppy disks can make the flashlight brighter and improve the refresh rate on the nightvision screen (some objects may be closer than they appear).

The inspired sci-fi setting and Swiss Army knife-like CAT separate Routine from other indie horror titles. Amnesia's combat-free design did well to strip first-person horror down to its essence, but Routine promises to put power back in players' hands without killing the tension of being alone and hunted by machines on a lifeless rock. » **Tim Turi**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Lunar Software

» **Developer**
Lunar Software

» **Release**
2014

game:nformer
GAME OF THE MONTH
93 The Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds

New Zelda games are typically a cause of...

THE **SCORING** SYSTEM

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

AWARDS

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

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

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Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

Pursuing the root of all evil

8.25

PS4 • Wii U • PS3 • 360

» Concept
A hotheaded pirate and his crew gain wealth and infamy on the high seas

» Graphics
The water looks amazing, but the framerate is unstable on current-gen platforms and Wii U

» Sound
The fantastic collection of sea shanties make this my favorite soundtrack in the series

» Playability
Changes to the fast-travel and weapon selection significantly tighten up the on-foot controls. Sailing usually works well, but steering a ship in combat is often more frustrating than fun

» Entertainment
Fun when you're chasing down your interests, but the enthusiasm deflates when working through the campaign missions

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal **Release** October 29 (Wii U, PS3, 360), November 12 (PS4) **Rating** M

Edward Kenway isn't like the previous heroes in the Assassin's Creed series. While they pursued abstract goals like justice, freedom, and revenge, Edward's motivation is more tangible. He wants money, and lots of it. He gravitates more toward the "everything is permitted" half of the Assassin's creed, killing and plundering for his own self-interest. Edward's devotion to the pirate's life (and the coin that comes with it) creates a unique high-seas adventure, but Ubisoft Montreal's desire to craft a different experience may have taken priority over making a refined one.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag replaces the towering cathedrals and expansive wilderness from previous entries with worn shanties and open water. The new setting, full of historical figures and an array of

mysterious locations to explore in the waters of the West Indies, suits the series well. Ship sailing returns from Assassin's Creed III, but as the centerpiece instead of a side activity. Almost everything you do – finding hidden treasure, attacking naval convoys, raiding warehouses – earns you money and resources you can funnel into upgrading Edward's ship, the *Jackdaw*. As the ship gets better, you can sail to even more dangerous (and rewarding) areas, giving you extra loot to spend on more improvements. This loop made me want to explore every corner of the map, since it ensures that the various pirate exploits all have satisfying payoffs. Blasting through an enemy fleet behind the wheel of a heavily armored, multi-cannoned *Jackdaw* makes the toil worthwhile.

As fun as it is to watch your ship become

more formidable, I wish I had more ways to acquire resources required for upgrades. Money isn't in short supply, but other materials like cloth, metal, and wood also need to be collected. You can't buy these items, so the main way to obtain them is to plunder other ships by boarding them (instead of destroying them) to steal the resources. The problem is that this process gets old quickly; I must have boarded 100 ships, and it plays out the same way each time. It's time-consuming and boring, but a necessary step if you want your ship to stand a chance in more difficult encounters.

Navigating your vessel has improved considerably since the last entry, with tweaks that make it easier to juggle the various offensive options. The weapon you fire is dictated by the direction the camera's facing, so looking

Unlike Ezio and Connor, Edward is a hired...

78

to the side means that the broadside cannons are active, while looking over the back gets the fire barrels ready to drop. These controls work great when you're up against an enemy ship or two, but fall apart when things get more chaotic. Because you can't attack in one direction and look in another, getting a full picture of the battle is difficult. A fight that involves attacking a fort while fending off attacking ships or surviving a storm quickly becomes an aggravating mess. Thankfully, those fights are rare; most of your time on the water is spent casually sailing between destinations and attacking any ships unfortunate enough to be in your way.

Once you're on land, familiarity takes over. Edward climbs, stabs, and shoots like his predecessors. He collects various items scattered throughout the islands, does side jobs (make sure you complete the five "Templar Hunts" for some cool armor), and crafts new items and outfits. These tried-and-true elements of the franchise are still fun distractions, and you may be more desperate than ever for an excuse to delay the next story mission. Black Flag is a major disappointment when it comes to variety; the main missions all feel the same, with a tiring abundance of lame "tail the guard" and "eavesdrop on the conversation" objectives. I enjoyed the more exciting scenarios and assassinations when they surfaced, but they are vastly outnumbered by these filler tasks that highlight the imprecise stealth mechanics.

The story isn't much better than the missions. Edward's obsession with money and lack of personal conviction are all a part of his character arc, but those traits make the plot haphazardly bounce around for the majority of the game. Apart from his goal to find an ancient site called the Observatory,

Edward doesn't have any loyalty, purpose, or a compelling antagonist. His friends in one mission may be his enemies in the next, but the transitions are abrupt and poorly explained, as if several expository scenes ended up on the cutting-room floor. Only a few of the supporting characters are given proper development – Blackbeard is especially entertaining – leaving you wondering why you should care about various events as they unfold.

Apart from Edward's tale in the Animus, life continues in the present day after the events of Assassin's Creed III. You control a cipher employed by Abstergo Entertainment, but this whole section just treads water from a plot standpoint – don't expect any significant developments. The gameplay is even worse, as you wander your office in first-person and almost exclusively work through half-baked hacking minigames. Most of this is mercifully optional, and I couldn't hop back into the animus fast enough.

Despite my issues with the paths that are laid out before you, Black Flag is great fun when you let your impulses guide you. Whether you want to hunt animals or unearth Mayan relics, it caters to obsessive gamers with a multitude of objectives to cross off the checklist. Plus, so many different activities are available that I could hardly sail between destinations without getting sidetracked three or four times on the way. Even though you don't amass an empire that pays you dividends over time, hunting down the big sources of money is still rewarding.

Black Flag is ultimately better than Assassin's Creed III (which I did not formally review). Some elements seem crafted directly in response to criticisms about the previous

game. You get to the piracy rather quickly, without the need for several hours of tutorial missions. Weapon switching happens immediately thanks to the d-pad assignment, and fast-travel locations are convenient and plentiful. However, some of the same complaints resurface with a vengeance: frustrating stealth, numerous glitches, and poor performance (the framerate is all over the place on the current-gen incarnations). These flaws, combined with the disjointed story and repetitive main missions, make Black Flag a game that fails to live up to its full potential. Though Edward's voyage isn't all smooth sailing, the choppy waters don't sink the ship.

Joe Juba

We were only provided review code for Assassin's Creed IV on the platforms listed above. The game is also releasing on Xbox One and PC on November 19.

More Multiplayer

Despite the pivotal role naval combat plays in the single-player campaign, you won't find any ship-to-ship battles in multiplayer. Instead, Black Flag offers an experience similar to the last installment – though you can still find some changes like new characters and maps. You can also create and share your own modes. More of the same may be enough for the hardcore fans, but Black Flag isn't likely to rope in new initiates.

Batman: Arkham Origins

The younger, less experienced bat

8.5

gameinformer SILVER

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
A prequel story that details Batman's first encounter with the Joker

» **Graphics**
Gotham City is an architectural wonder, dazzling the eye with its century-old buildings. Most of the dramatic story moments are captured in stunning cinematic sequences

» **Sound**
People who don't read video game news likely won't notice that Mark Hamill and Kevin Conroy don't reprise their roles as Joker and Batman. Troy Baker and Roger Craig Smith recreate these iconic voices without the slightest error

» **Playability**
Most of the gameplay from Arkham City is recycled or presented in a slightly different way. The shock gauntlets break the combat's balance

» **Entertainment**
Joker's origin story is the highlight, but plenty of fun can still be had beating the snot out of low-ranking henchmen

» **Replay Value**
High

Gotham City is oddly silent on Christmas Eve. No taxis shuttle last-second shoppers to toy stores. No children visit Santa Claus to make sure he knows exactly what they want to see under their trees. The only commotion on the city's streets is the fluttering of snowflakes, warning of a storm.

Even with Gotham's citizens embracing the warmth of their homes on this joyous night, Batman is hard at work. Black Mask, the head of the city's largest crime organization, infiltrates Blackgate Penitentiary to snuff out police commissioner Gillian Loeb. As Batman races to save Loeb's life, he learns that Black Mask's plot extends to another target: He wants Batman dead. A sizeable purse goes to the assassin who delivers his corpse. Eight of Gotham's most feared killers receive this invitation, and Batman knows they are coming for him.

This is an intriguing premise for a Batman story. Gotham's sworn protector isn't eliciting fear into others on this night. He's the prey. He's on edge. He knows he's a target. He just doesn't know when or how he will be attacked.

I was fully onboard with this premise, but it never truly takes root as the central focus. Other story threads pollute the hunt; a thin lead puts Penguin in the crosshairs, the Falcone family gets involved, conflict arises with Gotham City's police department, Anarchy seeks citywide mayhem, Black Mask becomes a part of a greater mystery. Batman has his hands full. The assassins are pushed to the back of the mind, and most of these deadly foes become stopgap boss battles

(two of these bouts even take place in a dedicated combat arena). That's not to say that the various story threads are unwanted or void of compelling events. I enjoyed most of these arcs, but for the first third of the game, there isn't a cohesive narrative to follow; it's more a scattershot of mini-tales.

But just when it seems this story could become even more convoluted through additional developments, a sinister smile creeps across the screen. At that point, the plot is given new life filled with clarity and excitement. Some of the other threads continue on, but the Joker takes over and it becomes his game.

He's revealed in a plot twist that is shades of Scooby Doo silly, but most of his story is mesmerizing, diving deep into his psyche to illustrate his disturbing first moments as Gotham's clown prince. Actor Troy Baker

(replacing the great Mark Hamill) does a remarkable job mimicking Joker's haunting voice from the first two Arkham games. Roger Craig Smith's interpretation of Kevin Conroy's Batman is also incredibly close. The title "Arkham Origins" speaks mostly of these characters' first encounter, which is a new take outside of the comic and movie lore.

Voice acting aside, the most impressive form of imitation comes from developer Warner Bros. Montreal, which is faced with the tall task of creating a prequel game to Rocksteady's incredible run with the Bat. Although we're looking at a younger Bruce Wayne, he's the same physical specimen we've come to know over the years, relying on a familiar arsenal of gadgets to topple his opponents and explore his fair city.

Combat scenarios play out with the same levels of grace and brutality that we've seen

Mad Hatter's mission is one of the best in the game

in the past, pushing the player to use attacks, counters, cape strikes, and an array of gadget abilities to strategically chain together impressive combos. New animations are peppered in, but it's very much the same satisfying song and dance. Traversal once again combines the Bat-claw, glide, and dive bomb techniques as a means of soaring across Gotham. Detective Vision is used frequently for stealth sequences, and to reveal secrets hidden from plain sight.

The gameplay rarely breaks free from being more of the same. Warner Bros. Montreal uses this formula to deliver sizable thrills, but many sections use recycled gameplay techniques ad nauseam. Batman's cryptographic sequencer, for instance, is tapped so often that it almost becomes comedic. Before Gotham was turned into a prison, it was apparently a password-protected nightmare.

The gadgets come across as Warner Bros. trying too hard to emulate Rocksteady's

formula. The glue grenade, which replaces the freeze grenade, handles the same function of gumming up deadly steam vents, and, well... "I need to use my glue grenade to make a raft," Batman says. A glue raft? Is that even scientifically possible?

In the later stages of Batman's quest, he obtains a pair of shock gauntlets that are similar in concept to BAT mode from Arkham City's Armored Edition. No foe can withstand the might of these kinetically powered devices. Shield carriers, larger heavy units, and any foe you come across in standard combat situations can be knocked down with one shock gauntlet strike. Sure, it's enthralling to control a version of Batman that doubles as an electrically charged pinball on the battlefield, but above all else, the shock gauntlets break the careful balancing of combat. Finding windows to disarm shield carriers and stun heavy units is an integral part of Arkham's intense combat. Removing those elements leads to mindless brawling, and that's what this becomes in its final leg.

The most enjoyment I got out of Arkham Origins came from Joker's story, and a few of the scenarios tied to specific villains. Mad Hatter takes Batman on a crazy adventure that showcases fantastic environment designs. An encounter with Firefly unfolds across unstable terrain and impressive setpiece moments. I also liked Warner Bros. Montreal's new take on investigations. They favor science fiction-like ideas over traditional sleuthing to show us

exactly how the crimes were committed. They get fairly complicated, and give us a good look at how Batman breaks down a crime scene.

Gotham City is considerably larger than Arkham City's walled-off version, but that doesn't mean more time is lost to gliding between destinations. Fast travel stations are placed in each borough, and the city is designed in a way that allows Batman to stay airborne with the Bat-claw. If you don't use fast travel, Gotham Pioneers Bridge is enormous and takes a considerable amount of time to navigate.

This world is littered with secrets and villain-specific side activities. Riddler returns as a welcome foe that has hidden hundreds of extortion files across Gotham. For those of you who will track them all down (a doable feat with a handy in-game locator) and aspire to hit 100-percent completion, Challenge mode is loaded to the hilt, pushing players to collect 288 gold medals. And if you really want to dive into this game, New Game Plus is unlocked after the story concludes. There's also I am the Night mode, which only offers one life and no saves.

Arkham Origins delivers more of what made Rocksteady's games great, but doesn't break much new ground. Like a youthful Bruce Wayne, it isn't as crafty and takes its dings during combat, but still puts on a hell of a show when it needs to. Once Joker steps into the spotlight, it becomes a hard game to put down. » Andrew Reiner

Don't Bother With Multiplayer

You won't be missing anything if you never click the "Online" option. After finding moderate success with Monolith Productions' Gotham City Impostors, Warner Bros. has enlisted the talents of Splash Damage (the studio behind Brink) to re-envision a Batman multiplayer experience. While offering the unique set-up of 2 vs. 3 vs. 3 (Batman and Robin versus three of Joker's henchmen versus three of Bane's), the shoddy gunplay kills the experience. Sure, stealthily taking out players as Batman or Robin is fun, but most of your time is spent as the inept villains. Playing as Joker and Bane (who can be controlled by one player mid-match) is empowering to a degree, but overall, this multiplayer package brought back nightmares of fighting other players (and the controls) in BioShock 2's competitive component.

Stealth can once again be used to clear out specific interiors

Call Of Duty: Ghosts

A fresh start with a familiar feel

8

Xbox One • PS4
PS3 • 360

>> **Concept**
Introduce gamers to Call of Duty's new universe and characters

>> **Graphics**
The engine does an admirable job of handling many scenes of total chaos no matter which console you play on

>> **Sound**
Shootouts sound realistic, but the voice-over performances are as generic as the characters

>> **Playability**
The gunplay is as smooth as ever, without any major improvements

>> **Entertainment**
Ghosts is polished and fun, but fails to push the series forward in any major ways

>> **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (18-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Infinity Ward
Release November 5 (PlayStation 3, Xbox 360), November 15 (PlayStation 4), November 22 (Xbox One) **Rating** M

Since 2008, every Call of Duty release has featured a Modern Warfare or Black Ops subtitle in its name. After finishing the Modern Warfare story with the decisive conclusion of its third entry, Infinity Ward had every chance to inject the long-running series with new life. With Ghosts, the developer introduced a new universe, populated it with a new cast, and brought the franchise to a new generation of consoles. One thing the studio hasn't done is introduce significantly new elements to the gameplay experience.

Even using the enhanced power of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, Ghosts feels like any number of previous Call of Duty games. Most of its predecessors featured at least one big hook that made them stand out. For example, Modern Warfare 2 greatly expanded on the killstreak system, and Black Ops II offered branching campaign paths and smartly streamlined loadouts with the Pick 10 system. Ghosts simply doesn't have its own hook.

Sure, it contains a handful of new multiplayer modes. Grind mixes Halo's Headhunter mode with Call of Duty's own Kill Confirmed match type, and it results in some tense moments as you struggle to return dog tags before you're killed. Blitz is fast-paced and fun, tasking players with sprinting into a designated scoring zone before enemies stop them with a hail of gunfire. Search and Rescue is a smart variant of a series favorite, and gives players hope to return after being eliminated. These new match types can be a lot of fun, but the only thing that feels different is the method of scoring.

Infinity Ward touted environmental destructibility in Ghosts' multiplayer maps, but these moments rarely have an impact on the matches. A gas station may fall over, some doors can be opened and closed, and specific sections of walls are destructible, but these events never feel like an organic (or necessary) development of shootouts. The most significant tweak to multiplayer is the toning down of air-based killstreak rewards. Without choppers, fighter jets, and drones constantly buzzing above you, there are far fewer instances of dying seconds after spawning.

Squads is a new multiplayer mode that aims high but simply isn't much fun to play. Players have the ability to create 10 different soldiers, each with their own specific loadout. These squads can be put to work in a variety of match types, most of which involve one or two human players in rounds otherwise populated by bots. Unsurprisingly, spending a ton of time in menus as you tweak characters for AI-filled matches isn't nearly as fun as participating in shootouts filled with real opponents.

While Squads misses the mark, the new Extinction mode is a great co-op distraction. It may be limited to one large map, but teaming up with three friends to take down increasingly difficult waves of aliens and their hives is a blast.

For better or worse, Treyarch took risks with Black Ops II's campaign in the form of branching paths, alternate endings, and the disappointing Strike Force missions. Rather than continuing down that path, Infinity Ward chose to play it safe with the story of Ghosts. New characters are devoid of personality, and the plot is so clichéd that it plays out like a South Park parody of action movies. You've got your badass soldier flipping his

The Edge

While the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions of Ghosts feature some impressive lighting, you won't be at a major loss if you haven't upgraded to the next generation of consoles yet. Both the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 versions look sharp, and they include all of the features and modes of their next-gen counterparts. Outside of some less impressive lighting and the occasional framerate drop, they perform near the level of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions.

captors the bird, the tough-but-loving father whose two boys are "all he's got left in this world," the melodramatic death speeches, and the once-noble soldier who's gone rogue and joined the bad guys.

As stupid as the story is, I found myself enjoying it for exactly that reason. This is a big, dumb action game, and it makes no attempt to be more than that. Instead of the convoluted techno-babble of the Modern Warfare series, Ghosts' campaign is simply about blowing up everything you see in progressively bigger ways. It's short and wastes no time with character development, opting instead to shuttle you along to the next exploding satellite station or chaotic chase scene.

Ghosts had potential to be more than it is. As the first series entry on new consoles and the first of what will assuredly be a new brand, I was disappointed to see it resemble its predecessors even more than the franchise typically does. Even without its own significant hook or sense of identity, however, Ghosts is still fun thanks to Call of Duty's polished and reliable backbone that's been established for years. » **Dan Ryckert**

Most multiplayer maps place combatants in close quarters

Battlefield 4

Holding the line

8.75

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept
Continue evolving the addictive multiplayer in subtle-but-meaningful ways, and start over with a brand new story campaign

» Graphics
The Frostbite 3 engine looks great on PC, but the current-generation consoles suffer from environmental pop-up and muddy shadows

» Sound
DICE produces the most visceral gunshot effects in the industry. When you hear that "thwack" in your ear from a sniper bullet buzzing by, you know it's time to seek cover

» Playability
Battlefield 4 controls largely the same on PC, but the console controls have been tweaked to promote team play. If you're having trouble piloting choppers and planes, but you can revert to the old controls

» Entertainment
DICE successfully defends its position as a major player in competitive multiplayer, but another wayward single-player campaign begs the question of why the studio even bothers

» Replay Value
High

As someone who originally enlisted in Battlefield 1942, tracking the series' trajectory has been interesting. What originally started as a multiplayer-only hardcore PC shooter has steadily evolved over the last decade to achieve mass success. Along the way, developer DICE has built on its solid foundation of team-focused air, land, and sea battles with impressive new features like destructible environments and deeper progression systems. At the same time, the studio has struggled to branch out with engrossing cooperative or single-player experiences. As if acting off muscle memory, Battlefield 4 follows this same pattern, with another strong dose of large-scale multiplayer and a forgettable story campaign.

Battlefield 4's multiplayer largely takes its cues from the pre-existing playbook, mixing some long-lost ideas with a few innovations that enhance teamwork. To help console players better communicate with one another without the need of a headset, DICE carried over the commo rose from PC to consoles. By holding the right bumper (which handles spotting as well) players can request ammo, health packs, and repairs. To encourage soldiers to play the objectives in team-based games, DICE also tweaked the point system. Flag captures and M-Com arming aren't all-or-nothing propositions anymore, so players earn points incrementally. If you get capped at the last second when trying to disarm an M-Com station, at least you get rewarded for trying to save your team.

The 10 new maps deliver a nice variety of environments. During any given mission, you wind through urban streets, roll through fields in a tank, and make amphibious assaults via boats. Each level features a "Levolution moment," which is essentially an opportunity for DICE to showcase its technical prowess.

The quality of these experiences wavers from impressive to gimmicky. When the tsunami kicks up in Paracel Storm it makes shooting from boats much more challenging, testing the skills of the best machine gunners. In other levels, I wish DICE had left the maps alone. Watching a skyscraper fall is cool the first time, but as you play more matches in Siege of Shanghai, you realize the map is so much better with the tower standing tall. Some of these fallen buildings are also tough to navigate, as your soldier often gets caught on the awkward geometry.

While the best maps, like Hainan Resort, work no matter which of the seven modes you are playing, some maps were clearly designed with one style of play in mind. If you like Team Deathmatch or Domination, you may enjoy Operation Locker, but the corridor design makes it a terrible option for the new Obliteration mode.

Perhaps the best new mode to be introduced to Battlefield since Rush, Obliteration places a bomb in the middle of the map. From here, teams must vie for possession and then try to detonate it at one of the opponents' three objectives. The first team to detonate all three wins. The best way to win this tug-of-war is to coordinate with teammates, picking up the bomb carrier in a vehicle and rushing across the map in a convoy. These matches have a great sense of urgency and almost give you the sensation of participating in a team sport.

The second new mode, Defuse, is a Counter-Strike style, five-on-five competition where each player only spawns once. You can win by either eliminating the other team or by detonating a bomb. This game mode goes quickly, so it's a great change of pace from the lengthy conquest and rush modes.

The infantry-focused modes like Team Deathmatch and Domination aren't nearly as

compelling. Simply put, not many of these maps stand up to the offerings from competing games like Call of Duty, and they also mitigate the value of splitting players into different classes. The engineer class is hardly useful in these battles, and the game doesn't have the same attraction when you remove vehicles from the mix.

One of the big problems previous Battlefield games faced was the steep learning curve of more complicated vehicles like helicopters and jets. To help soldiers who would rather learn how to operate vehicles without the threat of constant fire, DICE added a test range for practice. This should cut down on the amount of battles where a soldier hops into a helicopter and crashes it immediately. However, since you can't have more than one person in the test range at a time, players still need to join live-fire battles to master subtleties like knowing when to fire countermeasures.

No matter what mode or class you are playing, you continually earn rewards thanks to the deep and varied progression system featured in Battlefield 4. The variety is staggering, with more types of sights, grips, knives, rocket launchers, and camo than any previous Battlefield game. Some are unlocked by ranking up your class or weapon, and others can be acquired at random in a Battlepack, which you receive roughly every three levels. Battlepacks offer the chance to get a great attachment early on, but the randomness comes with a price. Since the items contained in a Battlepack are determined by pure chance, you may receive attachments for several weapons you haven't unlocked yet.

Ever since it was abandoned following Battlefield 2, a subset of hardcore fans has lamented the loss of Commander mode. DICE resurrected the mode for Battlefield 4, with several significant alterations. As a

commander you don't spawn into the world like a normal soldier. Instead, you make all of your decisions from a tactical map, which makes it an attractive option for players using tablets. From here you can launch UAVs to reveal enemy locations on the map, create EMP blasts to neutralize the UAVs of the opposing team, and direct squads to attack or defend specific locations. Your other options are controlled by how well your team is performing. If they lock down several control points in conquest, then you are given access to powerful ordinance like cruise missiles and AC-130s that can turn the tide of battle. Not many commanders were present in the majority of my matches, so it's tough to gauge how impactful they are in a match's outcome.

Commander or no, the deep multiplayer stands in stark contrast to the forgettable single-player campaign. DICE promised an emotional connection with its star characters, but not even the magnetic Michael K. Williams (*Boardwalk Empire*, *The Wire*) could find success with this B-movie-level script.

The story follows a squad of American soldiers caught in the middle of the action when a civil war erupts in China. On a mission to extract a couple VIPs from Shanghai in the midst of the madness, the crew shoots its way back to its fleet, only to find the U.S. aircraft carrier stationed off the coast completely decimated. From here, they shoot their way through Chinese airfields, prisons, and remote outposts. The story culminates with a choice-driven ending, but given my lack of attachment to the characters I hardly felt engaged enough to weigh my options seriously.

The combat is improved from Battlefield 3 thanks to the removal of quicktime events and the inclusion of Crysis-style micro-sandboxes that let you choose how you want to engage the enemy. You can give the squad at your side basic attack commands, but in most cases you can wipe out an entire

brigade alone before your allies can take one enemy out, so I often left them to their own devices. The bullet-fodder AI hardly presents a challenge, and often pop in out of thin air right in front of you. I would expect an army that has that kind of technology to be much more formidable. Thankfully, the campaign is short, clocking in at roughly five hours.

Battlefield 4 doesn't advance the series in any significant way, but the subtle improvements provide enough incentive for multiplayer fans to invest heavily in the land, air, and sea battles. Given the underwhelming performance of yet another story campaign, maybe DICE was on to something in ignoring single-player altogether in Battlefield 1942. Imagine what the studio could do if it invested all that manpower into making its already good multiplayer experience even better.

Matt Bertz

Battlefield 4 is also releasing on PlayStation 4 (November 15) and Xbox One (November 22). Though we played these versions, we were not able to fully test all features to the point that they could be included in this review. As a result, this text pertains only to the platforms listed.

The Edge

If your PC can handle the considerable workload demanded by Battlefield 4, playing on that platform is a no brainer. The PC version looks drastically better, supports 64-player conquest battles, and has a much better Battlelog implementation. The current-gen console versions suffer from muddy shadow textures, frequent environmental pop-up, and caps out at 24 players.

Lego Marvel Super Heroes

Lego heroes, assemble

9

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Assemble a massive force of Marvel's biggest heroes to take on Doctor Doom and his evil cronies

» Graphics
The best-looking Lego game yet, from big boss encounters down to the tiniest character animations

» Sound
A solid cast pushes the action while providing plenty of laughs along the way

» Playability
Heroes and villains wield a stunning variety of useful powers and abilities. One of the most addicting hooks is unlocking new characters and testing them out

» Entertainment
Traveller's Tales latest is an obvious labor of love and a must-play for anyone with an interest in Marvel comics or Lego games

» Replay Value
High

One of the best lines in *The Avengers* comes in an exchange between Loki and Tony Stark. "I have an army," the trickster god gloats. "We have a Hulk," comes Stark's deadpan response. Not only does Traveller's Tales have a Hulk with Lego Marvel Super Heroes, but it has a Thor, a Spider-Man, a Captain America, a Wolverine, and a closet filled with Iron Man suits. As Marvel fans know, there's no shortage of heroes and villains in the comics universe, which is something Lego Marvel Super Heroes takes advantage of in ways I haven't seen since Marvel: Ultimate Alliance.

Traveller's Tales is through tinkering with the series' core gameplay, and now it's all about refining what works. Levels take you through iconic areas like Stark Tower, Asgard, and the Savage Lands, where your heroes face off against a who's who of villainy. The battle against Sandman in the opening level is of a size and scale that would normally be reserved for end-game boss encounters, and it only grows from there. I won't spoil Doctor Doom's ultimate plan is, but he's in cahoots with one of the universe's biggest threats.

The rosters in the Lego games have always been impressively robust, but they've largely been padded with character clones and nobodies. For every Legolas or Batman, there's a generic archer or construction worker. That bumps up the number of choices that players have – almost always a good thing – but it also makes it clear who the real heroes are in each title. Lego Marvel Super Heroes smashes through those boundaries, offering more than 100 different characters that are actually worth playing. It's impossible to miss the amount of love and care that went into each of those characters.

Iceman glides along in long strides, arms tucked behind him like a speedskater. Sandman transforms into a cannon for long-range attacks. Even Spider-Man's mercurial boss J. Jonah Jameson brings a unique style to battle, attacking enemies with a barrage of newspapers – not bad for what's essentially a throwaway gag character. Marvel Heroes has some deep cuts on the roster, too, and unlocking and playing as some of these obscurities (Howard the Duck or H.E.R.B.I.E., anyone?) is particularly fun.

In addition to taking your favorite characters into previously beaten levels via free play, you can roam around the New York City hub world. The closest comparison would be Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes' version of Gotham, though Lego Marvel's city is a much calmer locale. You aren't constantly on the defensive from leagues of bad guys, which makes exploration less annoying. A variety of points of interest are dotted throughout the map, which include combat challenges (New York isn't completely toothless), races, and puzzles. Another highlight is the Deadpool-narrated bonuses. These goofy, quickie levels take place in smaller, more focused areas. They're home to some of the funniest moments, too, and they're worth the effort that comes with tracking down the elusive gold bricks you need to unlock them.

Ultimately, Lego Marvel marks the first time I've had as much fun in the hub world as in the story-based missions. Variety abounds, and the split-screen lets players explore the city on their own. I made it my mission to find bricks and solve the unexpectedly clever puzzles to unlock extras, while my son was happy to rampage through the streets as Venom.

Traveller's Tales continues its streak of making every one of its games better than the last, and I recommend it to anyone looking for a lighthearted game with plenty of replay – whether or not they have a closet filled with polybagged first editions. » **Jeff Cork**

We were only provided the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions of the game for review, but Lego Marvel Super Heroes is also available for the Wii U, PC, Wii, Vita, 3DS, and DS. It will also be available for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One at each system's launch.

How did the villains board S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Helicarrier? You have to play the game to find out

Skylanders: Swap Force

Interchangeable fun

My living-room floor resembles a battlefield on the Island of Doctor Moreau. Severed legs and torsos from various animals are scattered across it; warriors with weapons raised high stand triumphant over the grisly tableau. Making like the Doctor, I rummage through the sea of body parts, attaching the tentacles of a squid to the upper body of a parrot. I place the spliced abomination on the Portal of Power and it comes to life, a mighty beast possessing the powers of both wind and water. Tentacles streak across the terrain, thwacking any foe foolish enough to get in his path, and razor-sharp wings dance furiously to fend off any attacks from the flank. My created beast excels in close quarters but has no way of defending itself against volleys from afar. Maybe I'll swap the parrot parts for those of a gun-wielding snake.

No matter what bizarre creature is placed on the Portal, Skylanders: Swap Force handles the empowerment of playing god convincingly. Creating my own monsters – even if it is as simple as snapping two pieces of an action figure together – is more fun than I expected. I spent a fair amount of time experimenting with these hybrids, seeing which upgrade paths best fit their unique dynamics, and made a contest of unleashing the most ridiculous-looking beast possible (the owl-snake wins).

Even if you've assembled a hefty war chest of Skylanders figures from Spyro's Adventure and Giants, you're going to feel the itch to run out to the store to purchase more of them – and you have to if you want to see everything this game has to offer. In addition to the eight elemental types and the Giants, this installment introduces eight new "ability" zones that can only be entered by Swap Force figures. These areas are not extensions of the levels like we've seen with the element types, and are instead standalone minigames – all of which are quite enjoyable.

The Swap Force sections reward the player well with hidden items, as well as stars that feed into the new Portal Master rank. Leveling up the Portal Master allows you to activate more Legendary Items, which carry various attribute bumps like +10 armor.

You need the help from those bonuses; this is the most challenging Skylanders game yet. Kaos' desire to "evilize" everyone produces a more lethal crop of foes. Many of them are armed to the teeth with weapons that rain down death. Others soak up immense amounts of damage. Some are heavily shielded. All of these foes demand different strategies, and make you work for your experience.

All of the Skylanders are now equipped with the ability to jump, which is used frequently to navigate elevated terrain and platforms, but is most effective in giving the player a new way to dodge ground-based blasts. It's a nice addition that gives combat another layer of skill and strategy. I rarely could plant myself in one spot in battle sequences.

Although most encounters are exciting, the level designs are often rote, clinging for dear life to the "everything in video games has to happen in threes or more" cliché. A nice sense of scale accompanies most stages, but isn't enough to shake the feeling of repetition that eventually hits halfway through most of them. Several stages lean heavily on concepts from previous entries, such as redirecting light to doors, and pushing blocks in the right sequence to create passages. A tedious new lock-picking minigame also rears its head far too often.

Despite the environments sapping some of the fun out of this adventure, Vicarious Visions has crafted an excellent continuation for this annual series. The story unfolds across beautifully animated sequences loaded with hilarious Kaos and Flynn banter. The most impressive aspect of this installment is the focus to deliver a more challenging experience, one that pushes the player to experiment and find strategies that work best for specific scenarios. And that plays right into this title's hallmark feature of building Frankensteined monsters to meet these demands.

I feared of franchise fatigue, but this installment shows us that a few great ideas can keep this action figure-based experience alive and well. » **Andrew Reiner**

8.5

Wii U • PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Rip apart your beloved toys and reassemble them as new beasts to tackle the series' most demanding combat scenarios

» **Graphics**
The visuals have a softer edge, sometimes looking like claymation. Each environment is teeming with beautiful touches like flowing grass and a giant Godzilla-like beast lording over your movements

» **Sound**
Patrick Warburton gets plenty of face time and is funny as always. Chaos is frequently visited by a surprise guest who rattles his cage, leading to great banter between the two. Familiar Skylanders melodies join catchy new tracks that follow this adventure's frantic and slow moments nicely
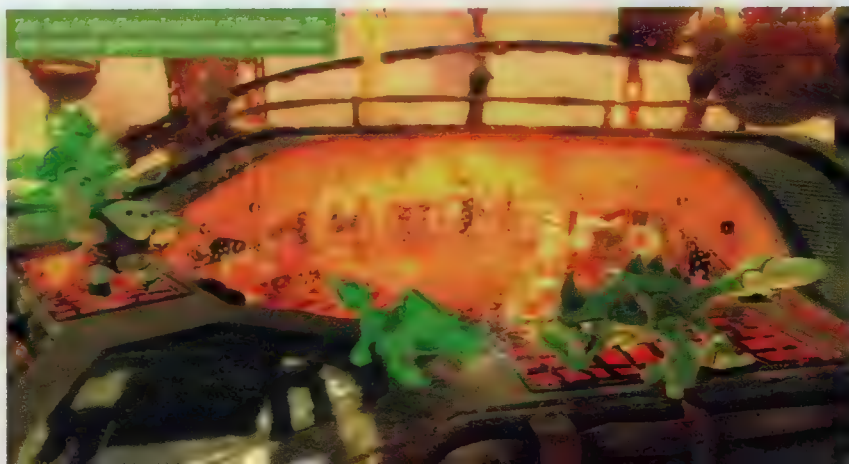
» **Playability**
The jump ability elevates combat, and the new minigames challenge players in different ways. Lock-picking puzzles continue to annoy

» **Entertainment**
I didn't know if this series could handle annual releases, but this entry shows that it's still building up a head of steam and has plenty of life left

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

WWE 2K14

The showcase of the predictably entertaining

8

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Dive into WrestleMania history in the same manner as last year's tribute to the Attitude Era

» **Graphics**
Many faces still look awkward

» **Sound**
Jim Ross and Jerry Lawler provide plenty of historical context for these legendary battles

» **Playability**
Controls are just like last year's iteration, and the minor additions to the in-ring action rarely surface

» **Entertainment**
It's great to play through so many good memories, but the rest of the experience hasn't evolved

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Though the Smackdown vs. Raw series went through a reboot two years ago, the true upgrade in quality came last year with the fantastic WWE '13. In place of its predecessor's annoying and unrewarding Road To Wrestlemania mode was the Attitude Era mode. This love letter to wrestling's boom period was a treasure trove for longtime fans, with plenty of recreated matches, retrospective video packages, and tons of unlockables. To follow up on that great addition to the series, developer Yuke's (now under the 2K banner instead of THQ) has widened its historic lens to focus on the 30-year history of The Showcase of the Immortals, WrestleMania. It's handled with the same amount of love and knowledge as the Attitude Era mode, but it comes with a few disappointments as well.

Pulling the roster from 30 years of wrestling history provides a higher concentration of legends than focusing on a few years in the late '90s, meaning you see more Randy Savages and fewer X-Pacs. Most of the big names of WrestleMania history are here, with a few exceptions. You can't tell the story of WrestleMania without Randy Savage, Ric Flair, Ultimate Warrior, or Hulk Hogan, and you find them all grimacing and flexing on the character select screen.

The roster may be packed with Hall of Famers, but the wider scope comes at the expense of a predictable dive into wrestling history. WWE 13's Attitude Era mode featured plenty of big, iconic matches that are etched into the minds of wrestling fans, but it also came with the occasional "Oh yeah, I totally forgot about that!" moment that uncovered some forgotten nostalgia. Given WWE's obsession with reminding fans of the grand history of WrestleMania, almost every match in 2K14's campaign comes with a certain amount of predictability. You know you're going to slam Andre the Giant, you know you're going to kick Ric Flair into

"retirement," and you certainly know that The Undertaker is never going down for the count. Despite its predictability, these matches are still a blast to play. 2K's attention to detail is evident in the recreations of each WrestleMania arena, font, logo, and wrestler attire. Matches from the '80s and '90s even feature a visual filter to simulate the lower video quality of the period.

Most of the historical objectives in these matches work well from a gameplay perspective, but some feel like chores. Triple Threat matches can be a mess thanks to the added AI character, and the Rock vs. Cena rematch from WrestleMania XXIX ends the mode on a sour note. After completing numerous historical objectives and hitting The Rock with multiple finishers, he's magically granted infinite finishers. The player is granted this as well, but Rocky wiggled out of the Attitude Adjustment every time I attempted it. Reversals weren't a problem throughout the rest of my experience, but this particular moment felt broken and forced me to play the

match over a dozen times.

Most of 2K's focus was on the campaign mode, because the game is similar to last year's offering once you venture into other options. Universe mode feels identical outside of minor options like setting the duration of rivalries and applying themes to pay-per-view events. The creation suite is still extensive, but its additions are mostly relegated to new logos and clothing. Even the core gameplay feels familiar, as additions like the catapult finishers rarely come up organically in matches.

WWE 2K14 has some issues, but I still enjoyed the majority of my time with it. THQ attempted similar historical themes in the past with Legends of WrestleMania and WWE All-Stars, but 2K14 complements its historical angle with deep mechanics.

2K's first stab at sports entertainment is a lot of fun (especially for history buffs), but the feeling of déjà vu left me wanting the developer to move the full experience forward with the same enthusiasm that it embraced wrestling's past. » **Dan Ryckert**

Razor Ramon proves to Shawn Michaels who the true Intercontinental Champion is
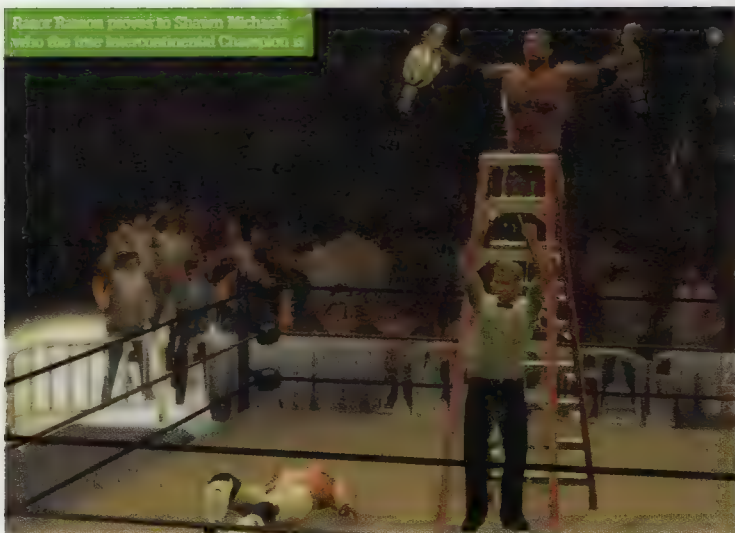
The Heartbreak Kid lays into the Macho Man at ringside

NBA 2K14

Hail the king, for better or worse

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Sports **Developer** Visual Concepts **Release** October 1 **Rating** E

Touted as the second coming of Michael Jordan as early as his junior year of high school, LeBron James has shouldered the burden of outlandish expectations his entire life. But four MVP awards and two championships into his storied career, he still has more than his fair share of haters. Most of this ill will springs from the public relations gaffe where LeBron rebuffed his hometown fans on national television and announced his intentions to take his talents to South Beach alongside Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh. After back-to-back championships some of that hostility has abated, and NBA 2K14 serves as another step in the rehabilitation of his reputation.

In the LeBron: Path to Greatness mode, players assume control of King James to try and best Michael Jordan's six NBA championships, which is the benchmark many NBA fans expect the Miami Heat forward to reach if he wants to supplant Jordan as the best player of all time. You can take two tracks to achieve this goal: either stand tough in Miami or join LeBron on a "fantastic journey" where he takes his talents to New York and eventually returns home to bring a championship to Cleveland.

Visual Concepts gives Path to Greatness as much attention to detail as the stellar Jordan Challenge from NBA 2K11, creating running storylines and providing contextual commentary throughout the experience. The craftsmanship of these what-if scenarios is impressive, but it comes off as a public relations stunt built to communicate that LeBron's successes should be celebrated by all NBA fans – including the shunned masses in Cleveland.

If you're not a LeBron James fan, NBA 2K14 doesn't bring much else to the table in terms of game modes. The Association mode is showing its age with curious GM AI behavior that offers mystifying trades and does a poor job with team construction.

One rebuilding team offered me the center it just drafted number two overall in exchange for a package centered around my backup small forward. The popular My Career mode, which is still a destination mode, is largely untouched, and relegating the restored five-on-five Crews mode to pickup blacktop games is a missed opportunity.

On the court, NBA 2K14 continues to improve its game. This year's primary change comes in the form of a reconfigured right analog stick, which now handles all dribbling and shooting moves without the need for a trigger modifier. This system works well once you learn the subtleties of switching between dribbling (where moves are activated by tapping the stick quickly in any direction) and shooting (holding the stick in any direction).

Freeing up the trigger allowed Visual Concepts to surface freestyle passing. Pulling off highlight reel no-look passes is as simple as holding the trigger and pushing the right analog stick in the direction of the intended player, though your success rate is largely dependent on the skills of the passing player. On the other side of the ball, blocking shots is easier, and players defending off the ball move with more urgency than in past iterations.

Elsewhere, the on-court action needs refinement. Players clip through one another too frequently when battling under the basket, balls warp strangely into players hands during some transition animations, and defenses tend to sink too far into the paint, leaving perimeter shooters way too much room to operate.

Like the superstar who graces its cover, NBA 2K14 features an undeniable sense of greatness. Its presentation is the best the sports genre has to offer, and the gameplay refinements improve an already stellar game. It's a shame Visual Concepts didn't put the same level of effort into improving the popular My Career and Association modes. » **Matt Bertz**

In Path to Greatness mode, you write LeBron's best-case-scenario legacy

The Wolf Among Us: Episode 1 – Faith

Making the wolf in you hunger for more

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Play the Big Bad Wolf in an episodic murder mystery using Bill Willingham's *Fables* universe

» **Graphics**
Watching *Fables'* seedy world come to life is a high point; Telltale nailed the art style from the comics

» **Sound**
The quality music keeps with the '80s era and has a detective vibe. The voice actors are top-notch and make their parts believable

» **Playability**
The controls are easy to grasp, but the QTEs might not be accessible for those without quick reflexes

» **Entertainment**
With great dialogue, quirky characters, and an intriguing story, this is one of Telltale's best offerings

» **Replay Value**
High

Faith, the debut episode of Telltale's The Wolf Among Us, has a primary theme running through it: "Expect the unexpected." That's appropriate considering that Bill Willingham's *Fables* – the comic on which The Wolf Among Us is based – is all about twisting everything you think you know about fairy tales.

In Fabletown, a secret community in New York where famed characters conceal their true identities with magic, nothing is as it seems and everyone has something to hide. Expect alcohol-indulging flying monkeys and former heroes fallen from grace. The dark interpretations of these fairy tales are gripping, and Telltale never forgets that hook. Plenty of merciless fights, foul language, and unfortunate circumstances unfold in the first episode when a fellow Fable turns up brutally murdered. As sheriff Bigby (a.k.a. the Big Bad Wolf), you must solve the case with the strong-willed Snow (White) along for the ride. The two have blazing chemistry, to say the least.

The tale isn't happy, but it is intriguing due to its outrageous personalities, like a chain-smoking pig as your main confidant. The biggest lure, however, is role-playing as Bigby. He has plenty of swagger, but he also faces an interesting problem: trying to prove he's past his big bad ways. How do you convince people to trust you when at one point you tried to eat them? Do you give up and use force, or try to show these Fables a softer side of Bigby? That's a decision that Telltale allows you to make throughout.

The choices don't just extend to dialogue, but also where you go. Telltale places two equally important crises in front of you, stopping the action completely for contemplation. For instance, I had to decide between two different places to visit. One had Toad, who

called to say he was in trouble; the other place had hot evidence regarding the murder. Consequences come no matter what decision you make. The big choices are standout moments because they make you second-guess and wonder about the outcome of the other, encouraging multiple playthroughs.

The fights are bigger, faster, and rougher than previous Telltale projects. The controls mirror The Walking Dead, with the face and directional buttons driving quick-time events. While the controls feel responsive and forgiving, the action unfolds quickly, giving you little time to react. You must dodge objects thrown at you, and at certain points you can pick up your own, like a pool stick, for vicious and satisfying hits.

When you're not fighting, you're investigating. This involves researching the dead Fable using the magic mirror, tracking down suspects, and examining various locations.

Telltale struggled with making the point-and-click portions engaging in The Waking Dead, but it's improved here. Examining objects often allows you to catch characters in lies. Unfortunately, investigating feels overly linear. Not much is hidden, and it turns into a click-every-possible-object-to-advance plot. At least I was intrigued enough to piece together the clues.

While the gameplay is still second-rate compared to the story, Faith succeeds most because of its unpredictability. Even longtime *Fables* fans will be shocked by some of the revelations. I read the *Fables* comics – which aren't required for this prequel – and was still blindsided. The episode ends perfectly, leaving plenty of intrigue on the table to bring you back. I've been agonizing ever since, trying to figure out exactly what Telltale is planning after this standout opener.

· **Kimberley Wallace**

A tender moment with the Big Bad Wolf

The Edge

The PC version looks and runs better, with little in the way of load times. I also had an annoyance in the 360 version where the game would pause briefly to load some of the high-action fights. The PS3 version doesn't have as many load issues, but still isn't as smooth as the PC.

XCOM: Enemy Within

Firaxis polishes a prized alien alloy

9.25

PC

Last year's reboot of the XCOM series was a masterwork. Its deep strategy and intense firefights required careful scheming, but putting a bullet through the last invader's overgrown skull was one of my favorite moments of 2012. The game was so finely balanced that I thought adding to it would disrupt its strategic flow, but Firaxis has released an expansion that slides between Enemy Unknown's cracks, filling in some gaps I didn't even realize existed, further diversifying the tactics without disrupting XCOM's delicate balance.

If you played Enemy Unknown, you're already familiar with XCOM's dual nature: You alternate between commanding a squad of soldiers in turned-based combat and managing your limited resources to defend against alien invaders. Both layers of the game are highly rewarding in their own right, and Enemy Within cleverly adds to both.

The most important addition is a currency system called Meld. With it, any soldier can receive biotic implants, granting them a variety of superpowers such as the ability to jump to previously unattainable heights, sense unseen enemies, and emit psionic feedback on any alien that tries a mind meld. The augments help diversify your options on the battlefield and open up new strategies that weren't available in last year's game. Having trouble flanking alien squads? Equip a skin mod that makes one of your Assault members nearly invisible in high cover. Tired of watching your squaddies throw grenades at their friends after they become mind controlled? Beef up their psionic defense with a brain mod.

Biotic mods are a useful tool, but Enemy Within's new MEC class quickly became my favorite use for Meld. These cybersuits are Enemy Within's new character class. They can't take refuge behind cover, but they often don't need to. Their high-impact Gatling guns and devastating physical attacks mean that

enemies don't stick around long when these hulks are on the battlefield. Some MECs have extended mobility, which makes them effective scouts, and the mech's upgradability gives it an extended arsenal that includes grenades, flamethrowers, and EMP blasts. MECs are such a highly versatile new unit that now I can't imagine an XCOM playthrough without them.

With all these great trooper augments, Meld never remains in the bank for long, which kept me on a greedy hunt for more every time I entered a new level. It is found inside canisters during each ground mission, but the containers are on a countdown timer. If you don't find them quickly, they explode, destroying their contents. I was often in such a rush to acquire more Meld that I pushed my troops deeper into the map, placing them into sticky situations that required clever footwork to escape. You have to start a new game to take advantage of Enemy Within's new content, but Meld is an enticing and dangerous carrot that adds a beautiful wrinkle to a game already fraught with sweat-inducing decisions.

XCOM's new toys are a lot of fun, but they don't make things too easy. The alien invaders have a few new tricks of their own, like new units called Seekers. These flying robotic squid cloak themselves, then materialize out of the air and start strangling your soldiers with their prehensile limbs – slowly squeezing the life out of your teammates until they are rescued. This means snipers are no longer safe on the roof of a gas station across the street. However, Mechtoids are even more terrifying. The alien answer to MECs, these goliaths have massive health bars, and their twin cannons can fire twice each round. These new enemies round out the existing units, and often forced me to rethink the tired strategies I developed playing the core game.

Aliens aren't the only enemy you face this time around, either. Enemy Within contains

a meta-narrative about a group of human extremists called Exalt who are convinced that the aliens will improve humanity's way of life, and they set out to combat XCOM at every turn. These battles are a change of pace from the alien encounters, since fighting Exalt is more like fighting an evil version of your own squad. They have equivalent powers and technology, and I enjoyed gunning them down just as much as the invaders.

Even though I enthusiastically devoured all of Enemy Within's new content, there were moments where I felt like I was playing last year's game. Despite Firaxis' improvements, the developer wasn't able to fix the line-of-sight issues, which often grant enemies full or partial cover even when you should have a clear shot. Acquiring new squad members still feels unbalanced; since you can't assign your soldiers' roles, and they only learn their specialty once they've ranked up, it's easy to end up with holes in your squad. By the end, I had an abundance of heavy units and was sorely in need of a support squaddie.

Enemy Within's minor flaws shouldn't be enough to distract anyone from diving back into Firaxis' well-tuned expansion. The game often throws you curveballs; you can easily have a rookie wander too deep into the battlefield and suddenly alert three units of enemies. However, dealing with the bad hands you're dealt is what makes XCOM's battles so exciting – and often leads to creative problem solving. Enemy Within adds more troop customization options, fearsome enemy units, and new levels to explore. Anyone who loves an intense firefight should test their mettle on Enemy Within. » **Ben Reeves**

2K Games could not provide us with pre-release console versions of Enemy Within. This review pertains only to the PC version, which requires XCOM: Enemy Unknown. On PS3 and Xbox 360, Enemy Within is a standalone product; owning last year's game is not required.

» **Concept**
Add new enemies, a new class, and a variety of new ways to combat the alien threat in this expansion to last year's hit strategy title

» **Graphics**
XCOM is far from the best-looking game on the market, but the detailed environments and cinematic camera pull you into the action

» **Sound**
Your soldiers now speak in their native language, which helps believability. The music also gets your blood pumping before each battle

» **Playability**
Firaxis hasn't fixed the line-of-sight issues, but XCOM remains a highly polished and supremely balanced strategy game

» **Entertainment**
Enemy Within isn't easy, but its complex strategy and clever enemy AI provide a highly rewarding experience

» **Replay Value**
High

The Stanley Parable

A pleasing web of possibilities

8.5

gameinformer **SILVER**

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Galactic Cafe **Developer** Galactic Cafe **Release** October 17 **Rating** NR

PC

» **Concept**
Create an amusing interactive experience that plays with your preconceptions of game design, player choice, and storytelling

» **Graphics**
The simple environments and 3D models don't detract from the experience in the slightest

» **Sound**
Kevan Brighting's step-by-step narration sells the many jokes and secrets
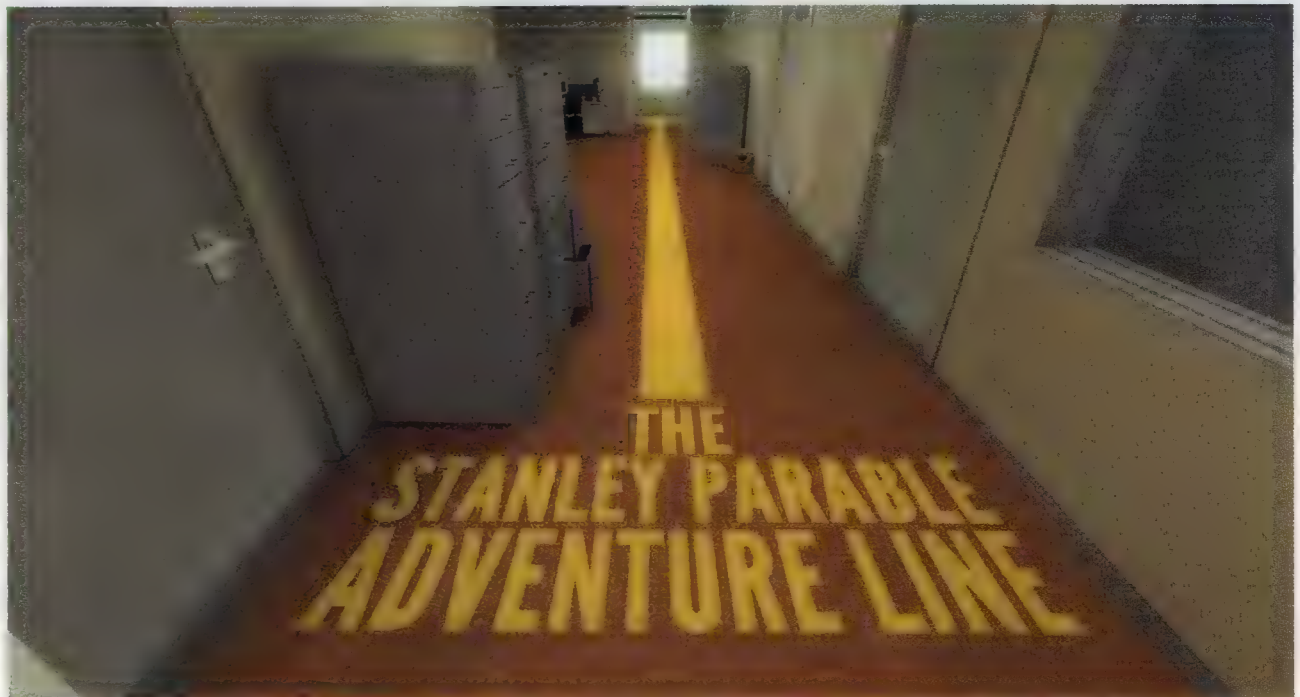
» **Playability**
The controls are basic, but provide everything you need to explore the branching narrative

» **Entertainment**
I was constantly surprised and entertained by The Stanley Parable's numerous endings and humorous twists

» **Replay Value**
High

THE STANLEY PARABLE ADVENTURE LINE

Originally released as a Half-Life 2 mod back in 2011, The Stanley Parable is best described as an experiment in interactive storytelling. Through the simplest of first-person control schemes, players respond to a variety of choices laid out before them by a disembodied, all-knowing narrator. While your interaction with the world doesn't evolve beyond wandering around an empty office opening doors and pushing buttons, the clever scenarios and amusing narration entertain for dozens of playthroughs.

You play as the titular Stanley, a white-collar button-pusher who finds himself mysteriously alone in his office one day. As you investigate the building, the narrator shepherds you from room to room, describing your actions before you actually take them. Whether you follow his guidance or stumble off the beaten path is your choice, but each playthrough only takes a few minutes, and no matter what ending you come to, the story restarts. The result is a *Groundhog's Day*-like loop of you making your way through the changing office building, employing different choices to obtain different outcomes.

Much of the enjoyment comes from your interactions with The Stanley Parable's wry narrator, voiced by British actor Kevan Brighting. Every choice you're presented with offers a new opportunity to obey or defy your handler, who responds in unpredictable and amusing ways. Go through the wrong doorway, and he may give you the benefit of the doubt, bending the story to accommodate your errant action. Continually disregard his directions and he may call you out in an angry diatribe or magically alter the environment to force you into following his lead. As you challenge the narrator's expectations, the game challenges your own, dropping you into odd situations that defy the lessons you've learned from countless games, with hallways that double back on themselves, buttons that do nothing, and no-win scenarios you're simply meant to experience, not solve.

Galactic Cafe's creativity keeps the basic gameplay interesting. Each narrative twist and humorous soliloquy inspired me to test every branching path in hopes of uncovering new endings, of which there are many. Some are throwaway gags that made me chuckle (I never thought standing in a broom closet could be so amusing). Other times, the narrator's musings made me stop and think. The developer isn't afraid to break the fourth wall, questioning traditional game design, the value of player choice, and many other conventions we don't think twice about.

The Stanley Parable is built upon a single, simple premise, and only offers a few hours of entertainment. That said, those few hours were unlike any I've experienced playing games before. If you're a fan of experimental indie projects or just in the mood for a fun detour from your typical gaming adventure, look no further. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

YOU WIN!!
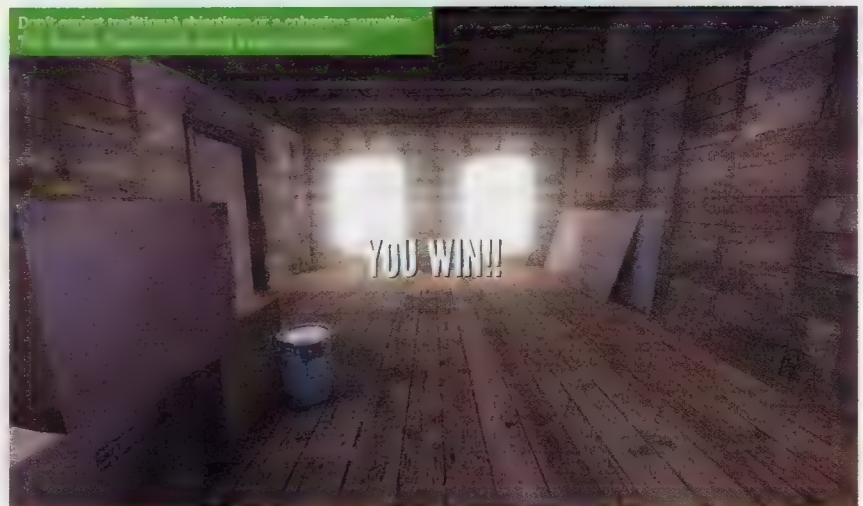
The Legend Of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds

Everything a fan could hope for
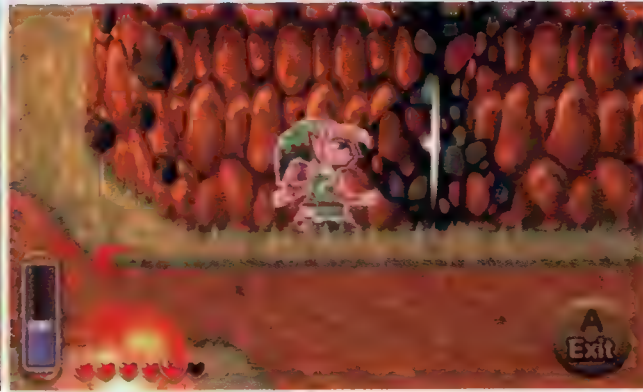
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH   **gameinformer PLATINUM**

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** November 22 **Rating** E

When Nintendo announced that it was returning to A Link to the Past's version of Hyrule for A Link Between Worlds, I expected a nice, nostalgic homage to the SNES classic. I didn't think it would blow me away. I was wrong. This isn't just a tribute; as amazing as A Link to the Past is, I can't think of a single thing A Link Between Worlds doesn't do better.

Series traditions are back and better than ever, but I was surprised at Nintendo's willingness to shake up formulas that have been in place for years. Early in the game, a rabbit-like creature called Ravio invades Link's home and sets up a shop inside. There, Link pays a small fee to rent any item he wishes, including series standbys like the bow, boomerang, hammer, and hookshot. These items operate on a regenerating meter, so the days of harvesting arrows and bombs are over. While A Link to the Past featured cool items like the fire rod, I rarely used them because they depleted my magic meter. With the regeneration, you're now free to use any item as much as you want.

If you've rented any items, Ravio takes them all back when you die. Later on, you're given the option to permanently purchase these items for a higher price. This system breaks from tradition in a major way, as Link's item screen can be loaded up early on. Some Zelda purists may cry foul at such a major shift in formula, but I loved it. After spending hundreds of rupees to rent items, it becomes genuinely scary when you're about to fall in battle. Considering that most items are available at any time, I was impressed that the various heart pieces and collectibles still require plenty of thought to obtain.

Items aren't the only part of the old formula that's been changed. Maps are a thing of the past, as the dungeon layouts are visible from the moment you step in the front door. If you're afraid that this dumbs down the experience or makes it simpler, don't be. These numerous dungeons are filled with devious traps and incredibly clever puzzles, many of which make great use of the mechanic that allows Link to turn into a 2D drawing and walk along walls. I'd stare at a puzzle and deem it

impossible to solve, only to remember Link's new ability and use it to find an alternate path through an area. Unlike a specific item or weapon being used in obvious places (shooting an eye switch with an arrow, for example), this is an ability that forces you to look at things differently throughout the entire game.

Dungeons are so well-designed that even a dreaded water temple is a ton of fun to play through. As if some of the best dungeons in Zelda history weren't enough, they typically end with some of the best bosses Link has ever encountered. Since the special items are always available and are no longer regulated by a finite meter, you are free to experiment with different methods of attack. Some of these baddies are returning foes from A Link to the Past, but many are brand new. To top off the experience, the quest ends with a suitably challenging and unique final boss fight.
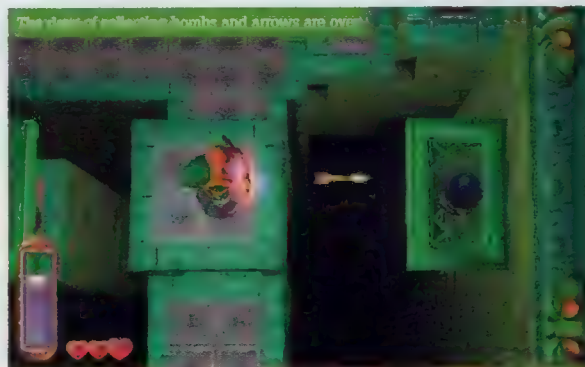
In another break from tradition, players are given more choice when it comes to what order they want to tackle the dungeons in. No number system is in place to tell you where to go next, and no characters try to push you in any particular direction. It's freeing to simply wander the map and explore new areas and dungeons at your leisure. When one boss was giving me a particularly hard time, I was able to leave, gain some more heart containers by defeating other dungeons, and then return stronger to defeat it.

The connection to the past is always obvious, from the fantastic new versions of

classic tunes to the returning sound effects. Even though Hyrule is laid out in the same general manner as A Link to the Past, Link Between Worlds is not just a copy-paste job. Smart tweaks have been made to aid exploration. Fast travel opens up early on, and occasional caves or breaks in treelines make it easier to reach areas that previously required more legwork.

Zelda may be one of my favorite series, but I admit its faults when they're present. However, I wouldn't change anything about this game. The new item system is a welcome change of pace. The lifted restrictions on dungeon order offers a great sense of freedom. The dungeons and boss battles are all excellent. The presentation is stellar, with gorgeous, vivid visuals, and one of the best soundtracks in gaming. I want to let the experience roll around in my brain for a while before I decide where it ranks among the best entries in the franchise, but I can say with confidence that it should be spoken in the same breath as A Link to the Past. In every way, A Link Between Worlds is exactly what you want out of a Zelda game. » **Dan Ryckert**

Two aspects of A Link Between Worlds were unavailable for our pre-release review: StreetPass multiplayer and the hint ghost system. Multiplayer involves a deathmatch-style multiplayer mode that allows other players (playing as Shadow Links) to inhabit your world with a selection of weapons. The hint ghost system allows players to pay ghosts in 3DS Play Coins in exchange for tips.

Pokémon X & Y

Seeing Pokémon from a new angle

8.75

3DS

gameinformer **SILVER**

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Game Freak **Release** October 12 **Rating** E

» **Concept**
Build a more attractive version of the standard Pokémon game, with a number of changes both big and small

» **Graphics**
Seeing the world and creatures in rich new detail makes the universe all that much easier to get lost in. Character and Pokémon animation are excellent, especially during battle

» **Sound**
Remixed and new music offers some hum-worthy tunes, but you won't be missing out on an important part of the game by playing with the sound off

» **Playability**
The ability to finally move diagonally makes your trainer far more comfortable to control. It finally feels like you are moving a person instead of a chess piece. Menu navigation and battling remains largely unchanged

» **Entertainment**
I haven't had this much fun with a Pokémon game since I explored the Johto region in Pokémon Gold and Silver

» **Replay Value**
High

The Difference Between X & Y

X & Y are identical in most regards, but there are a few things that separate the two and will influence your purchasing decision. As is the case with almost every Pokémon release, there is a different legendary Pokémon exclusive to each version. The other big distinction is the types of Mega Evolutions for Charizard and Mewtwo. Those Pokémon have different Mega Evolution forms in each game, and it's up to you to decide which one you find the most aesthetically pleasing. There are other minor differences between the two, but Nintendo is keeping them a secret.

Pokémon hasn't made a concerted effort to step outside of its comfort zone ever since it first released in Japan in 1996 – and for good reason. It found its hook nearly 20 years ago and has held on firm for better and worse. In this way, changing things in Pokémon presents a certain degree of uncomfortable risk. X & Y offer no significant changes in direction to the Pokémon series, but this is the most drastic step the series has ever taken.

Pokémon X & Y looks far different from previous Pokémon games. Pokémon are no longer restricted to 2D sprites, and participate in combat as fully modeled creatures. Instead of making a couple of two-dimensional images butt heads, you now see creatures with their own idle animations and combat moves come to life on screen. It may be a cliché to say they, "come to life," but the new models make a difference. The Pokémon now feel more real than they ever have. The polygonal models also allow the camera to move around the combat arena making every battle more engrossing.

The world itself also benefits from the new dimension. This isn't the first time we've walked around in a modeled, non-flat Pokémon world, but this is the first time that the full game has been presented this way. As a result, the world feels more fluid, consistent, and explorable.

The path through the game and its interconnected cities and towns is more rigid in X & Y, with fewer branches and opportunities to get lost. Pokémon fans who love exploring dense maze-like regions are going to be disappointed by the lack of opportunities to veer off the beaten path, but it helps the pacing tremendously. It also makes the world more inviting to new players and those who have stepped away for a few years and are interested in returning.

Despite the smartly implemented world constrictions, walking around and tracking down wild Pokémon in the tall grass is still exciting. That exciting feeling of coming across a brand-new Pokémon you've never seen before, or finally catching that one that has been eluding you still comes through, and is aided by the new look. And watching them evolve into new forms continues to be the ultimate reward for leveling your team.

Many familiar pocket monsters return in X & Y, which is exciting as you get to see them in their new 3D models. Some of the new Pokémon are laughably bad, like Kefki, who is literally a ring of keys. However, the new Pokémon who are meant to be cute (like Bunnelby) are exactly that, and the cool and ferocious Pokémon like (Tyrantrum) are worth adding to your team. Even the bad ones are fun to discover and show off.

Mega Evolutions are one of Pokémon X & Y's most publicized new features, and while they are cool, they don't drastically change combat. Once you find the appropriate item and attach it to the appropriate Pokémon, mega evolving can be performed during battle, and does not eliminate a turn. It's a free move to make your fighter stronger, and seeing the additional evolutions are exciting. The one downside to the Mega Evolutions is the necessity of sitting through their animations each time you use them – which is often.

Pokémon X & Y does not break the mold of what we expect when we play a Pokémon game. It goes down the check list of important Pokémon features, neatly ticking them off one by one. It still feels like a Pokémon game, but the ease of player control, the updated art direction, 3D graphics, and the scaling of the world make everything more inviting, attractive, and fun. It's a great starting point for new trainers, and a worthwhile continuing adventure for those who know what to expect. » **Kyle Hilliard**

94 reviews

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Dual Destinies

Phoenix Wright fights to stay alive in the courtroom

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Capcom
Developer Capcom **Release** October 24 **Rating** M

8

3DS

» **Concept**
Bring the courtroom drama to life with fully animated 3D characters

» **Graphics**
The characters and backgrounds look better than ever

» **Sound**
As usual, the soundtrack is excellent. Drums and bass in particular sound more realistic and funky than in previous titles

» **Playability**
Like most adventure games, the simple inputs are not the focus

» **Entertainment**
The charm is still there, but the reused story structure is getting stale

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

It's true; the latest Ace Attorney is only available via download in the Nintendo eShop. Just because Capcom is scared to lose money on physical copies doesn't mean you should let Phoenix Wright's return pass you by.

In Dual Destinies, you can't help but notice the new presentation. Familiar locations like the courthouse and detention center have received a facelift (don't worry, the guards haven't moved a muscle), and the characters all still look hand drawn while performing more complicated motions than were remotely possible before.

The classic, zany tone is spot-on, with a weirdo witness who refuses to leave a cardboard box and an astronaut who pretends to suffocate when his oxygen hose comes loose. Most of the fun is meeting this rogues gallery of strange characters and villainous suspects while keeping your fingers crossed for cameos from your favorite Ace Attorney alumni.

Phoenix Wright returns to his lawyering job, sharing the starring role with Apollo Justice and newcomer Athena Cykes. Athena's new mood matrix device senses subjects' emotions during testimony, and it's up to you to pick out what doesn't match (like someone being happy when a bomb goes off). It doesn't reinvent the wheel, but it and classics like the Psyche-Lock are sprinkled in to shake up the standard press-statement-and-present-evidence loop.

Investigations get a boost via new 3D crime scenes in which you can rotate all around the room. This adds more interesting options to what the developers can do and makes the environments feel more like a real place instead of an interactive painting. It's also easy to get directly where you need to go as opposed to the old convoluted travel system. A new task list highlights what you need to do to progress. I never felt lost, which was relatively common in past games. Conversations are all saved in a log that you can access any time. It's nice to be able to double-check your facts, though sometimes text boxes show up empty in the occasional annoying glitch.

Cases all have their own charm and loopy resolutions that you would never expect, and it still feels great to nail a cocky suspect to the wall in court. Even though the last two connected cases kept me glued to the screen, I'm getting tired of the overall structure. Early cases have small connections to the one big mystery, which is connected to another big mystery from seven years ago that happens to involve many of the characters. This reused device is the only element that hasn't received some kind of upgrade. For a series that's constantly struggling to grow beyond a cult audience, it needs to fire on all cylinders. » **Bryan Vore**

Rated M For Murder

While this is the first Ace Attorney to receive an M rating from the ESRB, I didn't find it to be any gorier than usual. I think the impressive new cinematics may have pushed it over the edge with fully animated murders and dripping blood.

Device 6

The next step in interactive fiction

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Simogo Games
Developer Simogo Games **Release** October 17 **Rating** 12+

> She browsed the bookshelf. It was full of books about chemistry, mechanics, physics and mathematics. They were all out of date, just like everything else in the room. A calendar on the wall claimed that it was September 1946.

A museum then?
That would explain a lot.

She left the room.

8.75

iOS

» **Concept**
Solve the mystery of how you got to a strange island through a clever blend of animated text, sound effects, and puzzles

» **Graphics**
Words are your building blocks, with little animated videos and other visuals serving as the mortar

» **Sound**
Effects are timed to ratchet up the unsettling atmosphere, and are used sparingly. Peppy spy-movie music doesn't mask the creepiness beneath it all

» **Playability**
There isn't much here beyond rotating your iPhone or iPad, scrolling through text, and solving puzzles. That doesn't make it any less riveting

» **Entertainment**
Device 6 is an adventure game stripped down to its essence, featuring some of the most interesting puzzles I've seen in a while. It's Myst for graphic design nerds

» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low

You awaken in a strange cylindrical room without a recollection of how you got there. Your head hurts. Judging from the view from a window, you're in a tower. You head downstairs, open a door, and turn. At least, that's what your character, Anna, is experiencing; for you, the player, things are just as disorienting.

You see Anna's story displayed on your screen in text. You swipe down as you read, and see a small graphic of a window inset into the text. As Anna sees that she's in a tower and makes out a lighthouse, you've scrolled the text down far enough for that lighthouse to appear in the window frame. The words stack like stairs as she begins her descent. When she opens the door at the bottom and heads to the right, the text turns as well – and you turn your iPad to keep up. You never take direct control of Anna. Instead, you swipe along branching paths of text, solving puzzles and reading about her fate along the way.

Because each chapter is self-contained, you usually have access to everything you need to complete each one within a few minutes. Of course, that assumes that you've been paying close attention. The puzzles are stripped down as much as the visuals, usually only requiring button presses between two options. They're no less satisfying than those with full visual inventories, however, and my internal "Hell yeah!" moments were just as loud as in any other puzzle-heavy game.

Many of the recordings that you hear in the game reminded me of those mysterious numbers stations heard on shortwave radios. There are light touches throughout, too. Anna leaves crunching footsteps as players scroll, and sound effects seemed to have been timed perfectly for when my eyes would hit the appropriate moment. It's a visually sparse experience, and the audio helps to fill in some of those atmospheric gaps.

I wasn't expecting to discover that one of my new favorite point-and-click adventure games would feature so little pointing and clicking, but that's what Device 6 has done. I felt more than a little silly rotating my iPad around to read Anna along a new path, but her story was worth it in the end. » **Jeff Cork**

the score

PLAYSTATION 3		
Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel	6.5	Jun-13
Beyond: Two Souls	7.75	Nov-13
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons	8	Oct-13
Bureau: XCOM Declassified, The	7.5	Oct-13
Castle of Illusion	7.5	Oct-13
Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut	7.75	Jun-13
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Diablo III	9.25	Oct-13
Disgaea D2: A Brighter Darkness	7.5	Nov-13
Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
Divekick	6.5	Nov-13
Do Not Fall	6	Oct-13
Dragon's Crown	8	Sep-13
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen	8.5	Jun-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Dynasty Warriors 8	6	Sep-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
FIFA 14	8.75	Nov-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
God of War: Ascension	8	May-13
Grand Theft Auto V	9.75	Nov-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Guacamelee	9	Jun-13
Ibb & Obb	7	Oct-13
Injustice: Gods Among Us	9	Jun-13
Killer Is Dead	6	Oct-13
Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix	8.25	Oct-13
Last of Us, The	9.5	Aug-13
Lost Planet 3	6	Oct-13
Madden NFL 25	7.75	Oct-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Metro: Last Light	8.5	Jul-13
MLB 13: The Show	8.75	May-13
MLB 2K13	4	May-13
NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
NHL 14	7.75	Oct-13
Payday 2	8.25	Oct-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2014	8.25	Nov-13
Puppeteer	8.5	Nov-13
Rain	6.5	Nov-13
Rayman Legends	9	Oct-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
Saints Row IV	8.5	Oct-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Star Trek	5.75	Jul-13
Tales of Xillia	8.25	Sep-13
Terraria	8	Jun-13
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14	8.5	May-13
Tomb Raider	9.25	Apr-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
WRC 3 FIA World Rally Championship	7.75	Jun-13

XBOX 360		
Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel	6.5	Jun-13
BattleBlock Theater	9	Jun-13
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons	8	Oct-13
Bureau: XCOM Declassified, The	7.5	Oct-13
Castle of Illusion	7.5	Oct-13
CastleStorm	8.25	Aug-13
Charlie Murder	7.5	Oct-13
Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dark	2	Sep-13
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Diablo III	9.25	Oct-13
Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
Dollar Dash	6	May-13
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen	8.5	Jun-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Dynasty Warriors 8	6	Sep-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
FIFA 14	8.75	Nov-13
Flashback	3	Nov-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
Gears of War: Judgment	8.5	May-13
Grand Theft Auto V	9.75	Nov-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Injustice: Gods Among Us	9	Jun-13
Killer Is Dead	6	Oct-13
Lost Planet 3	6	Oct-13
Madden NFL 25	7.75	Oct-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Metro: Last Light	8.5	Jul-13
MLB 2K13	4	May-13
Monaco	8.75	Jun-13
NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
NHL 14	7.75	Oct-13
Payday 2	8.25	Oct-13
Phantom Breaker: Battle Grounds	8	May-13
Poker Night 2	6	Jul-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2014	8.25	Nov-13
Rayman Legends	9	Oct-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
Saints Row IV	8.5	Oct-13
Sanctum 2	8.5	Jul-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Star Trek	5.75	Jul-13
State of Decay	7	Aug-13
Terraria	8	Jun-13
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14	8.5	May-13
TMNT: Out of the Shadows	2	Nov-13
Tomb Raider	9.25	Apr-13
Walking Dead: Survival Instincts, The	5	Jun-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13

Wii U		
Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13

6 | Wii Party U

Platform Wii U **Release** October 25 **Rating** E

Like taking your kid to an amusement park or going on a cruise, Wii Party U is more fun in theory than in practice. As the name suggests, this is a 50/50 mix of Wii Sports and Mario Party, and is just as simplistic and slight as you'd expect. Even an interesting mode that uses the GamePad for tabletop two-player action falls flat. – **Matt Helgeson**

8 | Star Wars Pinball: Balance Of The Force

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** October 15 (PS3), October 16 (360) **Rating** E

Zen Studios' second Star Wars table pack doesn't have the same punch as its inaugural swing at George Lucas' beloved sci-fi franchise, but that won't stop pinball fans from getting plenty of enjoyment out of the new offerings. – **Jeff Marchiafava**

7.5 | Etrian Odyssey Untold: The Millennium Girl

Platform 3DS **Release** October 8 **Rating** T

Millennium Girl has plenty of small enhancements (and one big one) to make things easier for players of all skill levels, but the series could use some refinements to keep the tedium at bay. – **Kimberley Wallace**

7 | Rune Factory 4

Platform 3DS **Release** October 1 **Rating** E10+

At times, I couldn't put Rune Factory 4 down. At others I found myself disappointed, wanting more than small tweaks. The lackluster dungeons and bosses and the hoops veterans have to go through for many hours aren't fun. – **Kimberley Wallace**

7.25 | F1 2013

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** October 8 **Rating** E

Sometimes during a race you're simply conserving your fuel and tires, content where you are. F1 2013 feels like it's in such a rut. The game features a few new additions, but it feels like it's coasting on Codemasters' laurels too much. – **Matthew Kato**

6 | Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate

Platform Vita **Release** October 25 **Rating** T

When Blackgate is at its best, exploration is slow-moving and tedious, yet you're making progress. At its worst, trekking through Blackgate is a punishing process of backtracking to find a needle in a haystack. It rarely delivers moments that live up to the legacy of this franchise or the Metroidvania style of games. – **Andrew Reiner**

5 | Sonic Lost World

Platform Wii U **Release** October 29 **Rating** E10+

Imitation is the highest form of flattery, but Sonic's mimicry of Super Mario Galaxy's planet-hopping formula is an embarrassment. Lost World is a confused mash-up of finicky platforming, aggravating level design, and some of the most aggressively annoying villains ever. – **Tim Turi**

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THE SHIP MASTER

Strange tales from Nintendo's warehouse

by Ben Reeves

When he joined the company back in the early '80s, **Howard Phillips** was the sixth person on Nintendo of America's payroll. Even though Nintendo's U.S. branch was moving large quantities of valuable product, the corporation functioned more like a start-up than a multi-million dollar entertainment company. Phillips quickly became the warehouse manager, the Fun Club president, and Nintendo's public face for gaming shows and public interviews. In 1982 and '83, he processed over 150 shipping containers a week, making him the largest shipper in the port of Seattle – beating out even Boeing, the aerospace and defense giant. We asked Phillips to share some of his most memorable stories from working in Nintendo's warehouse during that era. ✦

NIGHT KONG

"We did repairs on the arcade cabinets that Nintendo sold," Phillips says. "One time, one of the Donkey Kong cabinets had a short that caused the magenta-colored girders in the game to disappear, so it looked like Mario was walking on air. We'd all played Donkey Kong so many times that we had the level memorized, so we would challenge each other to see how far we could get based on our memory of the levels. We called it Night Kong. Mr. Arakawa [Nintendo of America's president] came by and saw what we were doing, and he told the Japan team how excited we were about the disappearing backgrounds.

"A few months later, Miyamoto sent over Mario Bros. [the original arcade cabinet, which had Mario and Luigi exterminating turtles in the sewers by flipping them on their backs and then kicking them – Ed.]. We discovered that on the higher levels of Mario Bros., the backgrounds would drop out and you'd have to play them by memory. That was the start of Nintendo of Japan listening to the U.S. team for influence on the development of their games."

BABIES EAT BATTERIES

"On the back of Game & Watch was a little tab you could slide off and then put in these little batteries. Well, someone higher up had decided that babies were going to eat those batteries. I had just counted that we had 120,000 Game & Watch devices in our warehouse when Mr. Arakawa told me, 'We need to put baby-don't-eat-the-battery dots on the back of each one.' So we had to take every single Game & Watch we had, unpackage them all, and place these little orange stickers over the battery case to prevent babies from sliding open the system and eating the batteries."

DIRTY CONNECTORS, DIRTY MINDS

"The connectors for the NES would sometimes cause missing or corrupt data if they were dirty. In 1989, we released an official NES Cleaning Kit to help users clean malfunctioning cartridges and consoles, but this was really a response to a phone call we got from a mom who had called Nintendo's Game Counselor hotline about her son's Duck Hunt game. She had walked by and seen her child playing Duck Hunt, but the title screen didn't say 'Duck,' and it didn't say 'Hunt.' I'll let you use your imagination, but let's say they were words that a mother wouldn't be happy about. We ran back to the testing room and tried messing with the connectors to the NES, and sure enough we were able to reproduce the problem, but the game had already shipped, so there wasn't much we could do about it."

KNITTING WITH POWER

"One day, we got a box from Japan, and when we opened it up there was this big white knitting machine that could hook up to an NES. I was surprised, because we had a lot of cool games coming out at that point, but here was this strange knitting machine. I went to Mr. Arakawa and said, 'There is this big knitting machine in the warehouse.' He said, 'Yes, you need to give a demonstration, because the head of Toys "R" Us is coming in tomorrow.' I had to learn how to use this knitting machine overnight, which was just awful. The NES would display a map on the TV of how the strings should be laid out, and then you'd string up the device, push go, and the loom would motor over. Then you'd have to adjust the strings again and do it all over again. It was horribly boring. I guess Toys "R" Us wasn't interested, because that thing never really went anywhere."
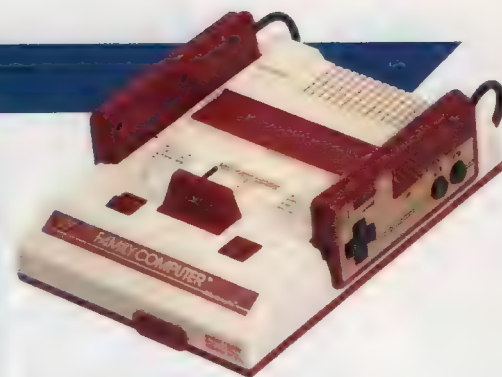
MYSTERY BOXES

"Every day I would get new boxes from Japan, but the bill of lading would be in Japanese and it would just say 'Toys and Games' on the outside. It was always like Christmas because I never knew what I was going to get until I opened it.

"One day, in the summer of 1983, the Famicom [Japan's version of the NES] showed up. It was really ugly, but it was really cool, because it could play Donkey Kong dead on to what was in the arcade. This was impressive, because back then arcade games were so much more powerful than what we could do on home machines. I said, 'Holy cow! This thing is great!' and I told Mr. Arakawa, 'We've got to release this because it's going to be the next big thing!' But he said, 'No, the market's not ready for it,' because retailers were so worried about getting shipped another E.T. – another game that would sit on shelves and not sell. So we stuck with the arcade business, and Nintendo didn't release the NES in America for another two years."
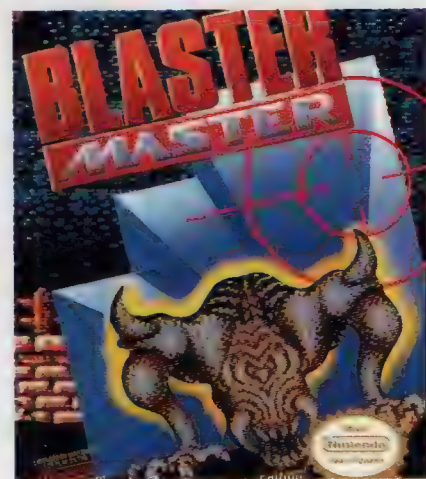
BLASTER MASTER

"We were constantly testing all the games to see what was good and what shouldn't be released here in the states. One day, the game Blaster Master showed up. It had already come out in Japan, but it was waiting for approval for U.S. release. So, I'm playing the game, and I get to the end boss, and I notice that he's, let's say, well endowed – below-his-knees well endowed. I made a tape and took it to our legal department and asked them to look at it because maybe it was supposed to be a tail or something. Imediately they said, 'That's a penis.' So we faxed Sunsoft, the developer, and when they resubmitted the game, the extra limb had been lopped off. Maybe that's why he was so angry."
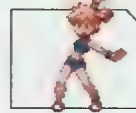
Who's That Pokémon?!

by Andrew Reiner

T he most successful Pokémon trainers have encyclopedic knowledge of Pokémon. They can tell you which elemental types have the best success in specific situations. They know the percentages tied to Pokémon appearances in specific zones. They even know how to make 90-degree turns on bikes. The easiest test for them is identifying a Pokémon. This test will determine if you have what it takes to be a great trainer. Match the images with the names to see how you rank!

A   B   C   D

E   F   G   H

I   J   K   L

M   N   O   P

1. Aerodactyl _____
2. Aggron _____
3. Celebi _____
4. Chimchar _____
5. Hypno _____
6. Meloetta _____
7. Mr. Mime _____
8. Ninetales _____
9. Quagsire _____
10. Raichu _____
11. Raikou _____
12. Slurpuff _____
13. Snubbull _____
14. Tornadus _____
15. Venusaur _____
16. Xerneas _____

Score & Rank

0	1-3	4-6	7-10	11-13	14-15	16
Magikarp Salesman	Bug Catcher Wade	Gym Leader Misty	Boss Giovanni	Dragon Trainer Lance	Red	Arceus

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MIDDLE-EARTH
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