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This Time Is Different



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

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

I was one of the lucky ones who got to see John Carmack's virtual reality (VR) demo in a back room at E3 in 2012. This is where Carmack reignited the virtual reality discussion using a then-unknown Palmer Luckey's Oculus Rift head-mounted display to play a custom version of Doom 3: BFG Edition.

Carmack, of course, is best known for being a programming genius, rocket scientist, and father of the first-person shooter. He and his compatriots at id Software released the revolutionary Wolfenstein 3D in 1992, and 20-plus years later FPS still dominates the charts around the globe. Needless to say, when Carmack is giving a VR demo, you go.

The demo came with a laundry list of caveats from Carmack as he discussed the shortcomings of where VR was, but you could hear the excitement in his voice as he explained the challenges and where it was going. Many of those challenges are still not solved today, but you could feel the mind of Carmack crunching the data. While elusive, the answers could be found.

I had heard the story before of how VR was going to change the world, so it was with much trepidation that I attached a duct-taped box to my face. I literally needed Carmack to make sure I didn't fall over as I disconnected from the real world and plugged in a new set of visual and audio information to my brain. That demo wasn't great, but it was promising. This wasn't some 3D movie or TV gimmick; this was surprisingly immersive. But Carmack was right – the technology had a long way to go.

Since that demo, VR has been on a rocket. Oculus has been on a rollercoaster ride, from a hugely successful Kickstarter to a two billion dollar purchase by Facebook. Sony and numerous other players have joined the fight as well. VR is back.

I'm not sold on its commercial viability quite yet, but this is not the experience you remember from the past. Even with all the questions hanging out there, you can put on a head-mounted display and be transported to another world. How long can you stay there? Will it make you sick? Will you, the consumer, even care? All great questions, but it only takes five minutes plugged into a virtual space to see that VR has never been closer to what we have been sold in books and movies than it is now. If a visionary like John Carmack believes in it, you can't help but take note.

I remember how I felt when I first saw Wolfenstein 3D. I couldn't believe that something could look so real. And yes, by today's standard Wolf's graphics and level of immersion are almost comical, which is why when I look at where VR is today I can't help but think that this time it is here to stay.

Cheers,

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Fortnite

Epic's first foray into free-to-play is the ambitious, creative, and wildly fun Fortnite. This month's cover story details all the multi-player mayhem that's possible in the studio's new procedurally generated world. **by Dan Ryckert**



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Readers thank us for our deep dive on Metal Gear Solid, and for giving some coverage to their favorite Let's Players. Readers also ponder what it means to be a gamer, and share their hopes that the single-player adventure will never die.

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This month we have an extended look at a canceled video game starring Star Wars' Darth Maul. We also round up some digital collectible card games, look at the past, present, and future of PlayStation, and share what we heard at the Game Developers Conference.

62 Previews

We have extended looks at Watch Dogs, Mario Kart 8, and Murdered: Soul Suspect this month. We also check out what's next for Spider-Man and Transformers, play some multiplayer in Helldivers, and get our hands on the Vita version of Borderlands 2.

80 Reviews

At some point, spring became as busy as the holiday season for gamers. A number of huge, highly anticipated games get reviews this month, including Titanfall, Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes, Dark Souls II, Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft, and Infamous Second Son.

100 Game Over

While at this year's Game Developers Conference, we had the opportunity to talk to a number of prominent developers and asked them which dormant video game franchises they would like to see make a return.



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Infamous Second Son



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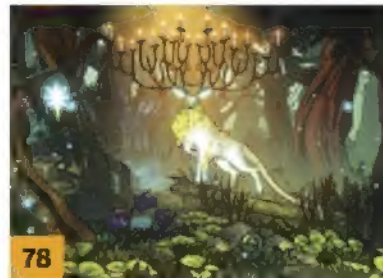


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The Crew



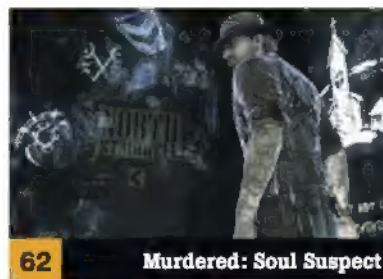
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Murdered: Soul Suspect

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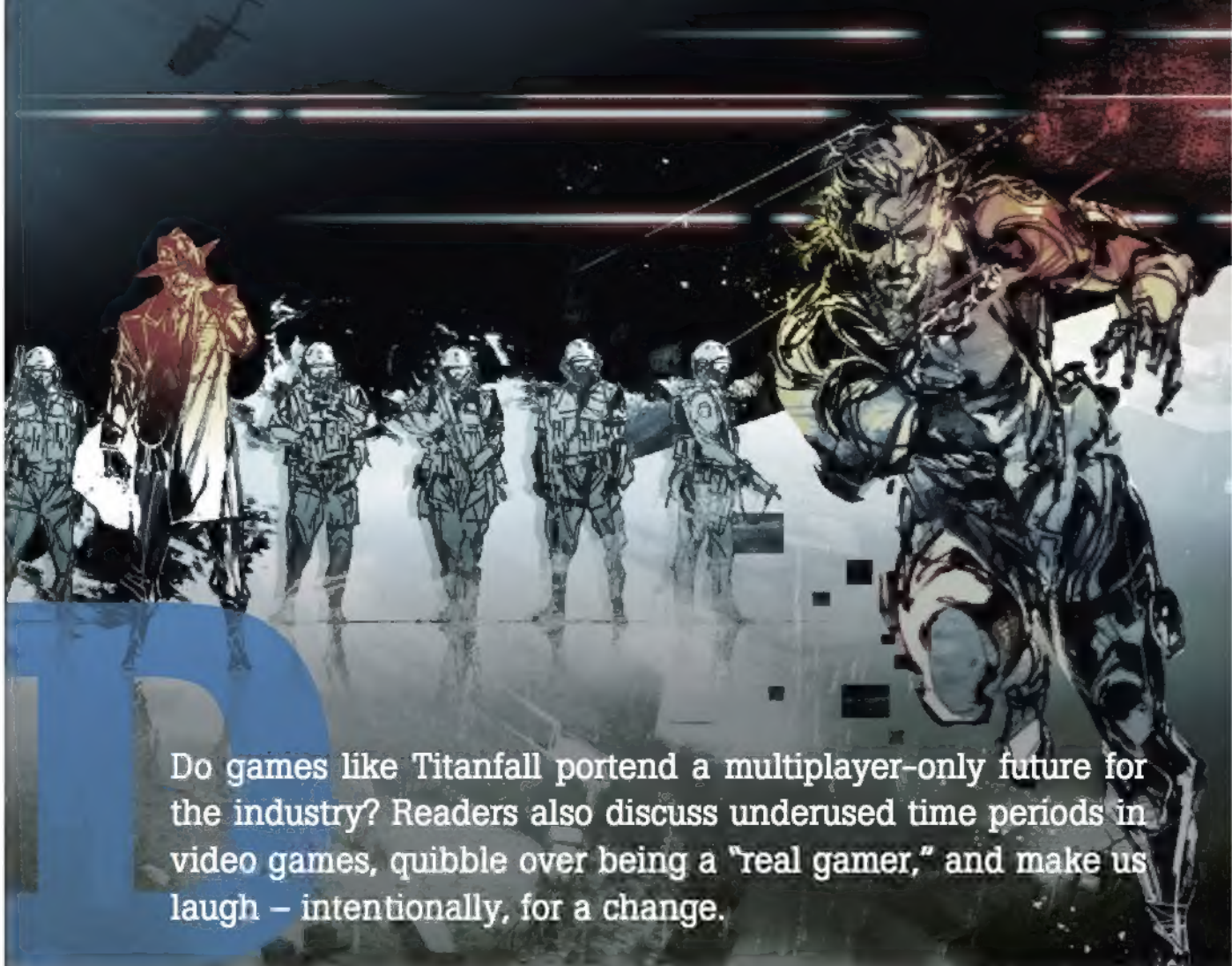
CORRECTIONS: In issue 252, we stated that Star Wars Celebration VII was taking place in Anaheim, California on April 16-19. Don't book your plane tickets quite yet; the fan gathering is set for 2015, not this year. In issue 252's Infamous Second Son preview, we accidentally listed Sucker Punch Productions as the game's publisher, and Sony Computer Entertainment as the developer. In actuality, Sucker Punch is the developer and Sony is the publisher.

GET TO KNOW

THE UNKNOWN

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Do games like Titanfall portend a multiplayer-only future for the industry? Readers also discuss underused time periods in video games, quibble over being a “real gamer,” and make us laugh – intentionally, for a change.

Metal Gear Satisfaction

I want to congratulate you on an amazing Metal Gear Solid V cover. I was feeling Metal Gear fatigue by the time I had heard of MGS V. The casting of Kiefer Sutherland and the rereleases, compilations, and spinoffs added to this feeling. But seeing your cover (quite possibly one of the most beautiful ever) and reading the articles about Kojima, Ground Zeroes, and The Phantom Pain revived my enthusiasm for this series, which I have loved since I was 10. I am now eagerly awaiting both games and keen to start on the Metal Gear Solid HD Collection.

Garrick B.
via email

As a die-hard Metal Gear fan, I let out an audible squeal when I saw the cover of issue 251. Artist Yoji Shinkawa once said that while he excels at depicting stationary subjects, he wanted to master the dynamic action shot, and by God, the man has done it! I wish I had the money to add this cover art to my MGS tattoo collection!

Patrick Velky
Stratford, CT

Featuring an original piece of art from Shinkawa in his trademark style on our cover was the perfect way to kick off our inside look at the development of Metal Gear Solid V. For more on Metal Gear, including a video interview with Shinkawa, head to gameinformer.com/mgsv.

Let's Watch

I thoroughly enjoyed the “Watching People Play” article in issue 251. For a long time, I'd been wondering when Let's Players would get the spotlight in this gaming magazine. I grew up playing video games, specifically Nintendo games, so I never really played PlayStation or Xbox games. It was only a few years ago that I really began to watch Let's Play videos. Because of Achievement Hunter, I grew to love Xbox games, PC games, and much more. You could say that it's thanks to the Let's Play community that I broadened my taste in video games as a whole; I'm now willing to try new games, including ones that I never would have thought to try before. Here's to the future of Let's Play!

Rebecca Lucas
via email

I just wanted to applaud you guys for your article about Let's Players. It was a nice breath of fresh air to hear about all of the people who play games and have fun to the entertainment of a wide audience. It's a way of reminding us all that video games are meant to be fun first and foremost. Thanks for putting the players in the spotlight!

Blake Rasmussen
via email

Who said you have to play video games to enjoy them? Thanks to Let's Play videos, millions of people now enjoy video games without even picking up a controller. They may be missing out on the interactivity of the medium, but if it brings more people into video games, then we're all for it.



Identity Crisis

When I really enjoy a game, I do my best to immerse myself in every aspect of it. I may even spend a few hours researching different aspects of it online or in a strategy guide. Whether it's which combination of vigors is the most effective, or if *Off The Grid* is a more viable stealth perk than *Incog*, I am always looking to improve my gaming experience. I may even buy a t-shirt to proclaim my love for a game. But what about people who play games just to pass the time? You know, the person that spends five hours playing *Skyrim* and doesn't complete a single quest. Is this person a "real gamer?" I theorize that a real gamer must find most if not all of his or her identity in games and gaming culture. I thought you all could give me some clarification.

Eli Klemmeck
via email

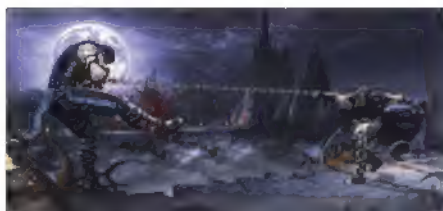
Deriving "most or all of your identity" from video games isn't just unhealthy – it sounds insufferable. The real question is why gamers spend so much time coming up with ways to exclude people who share an interest in their hobby based on their perceived dedication. For more thoughts on the changing definition of "gamer," check out Matt Helgeson's opinion piece on page 40.

Everyone's A Comedian

I'm not sure if you'll appreciate this, but I wanted to share a joke my 11-year-old daughter Libby made up. Here goes: Your mama is so ugly that when she plays *Mortal Kombat*, Scorpion says, "Stay over there." Please let me know if it made you laugh.

Suzanne Garrett
via email

That's actually pretty funny. With wisecracks like that, your daughter may be the first pre-teen we don't mind getting insulted by on Xbox Live.



The Loneliest Number

Am I a dying breed of gamer? It seems that more multiplayer-focused games are being made, and I'm beginning to worry. I'm the kind of gamer who prefers to sit alone in a dark room and enjoy all the wonderful things games have to offer. The story, the character development, the music and sounds – so much effort is poured into a game and I feel like having a guy screaming through a headset dampens the whole experience. Don't get me wrong; I still enjoy getting the guys together for some *Madden* or *Mario Kart*, but 90 percent of the time I prefer to be alone, focused on the screen with the sound up high. Maybe that's because I prefer good old single-player RPGs over first-person shooters, but with more games being made without dedicated single-player campaigns, I'm beginning to wonder and worry how long before the single-player experience is gone altogether?

Bobby Vaicels
Queens, NY

Don't worry, Bobby. Gamers have been lamenting the death of single-player adventures for years, but we're still no closer to such a bleak future coming to fruition. While games like *Evolve*, *Destiny*, and *Fortnite* are built with multiplayer in mind, other games recently featured on *GI's* cover like *Metal Gear Solid V*, *Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor*, and *The Order: 1886* are still single-player affairs. Plenty of players prefer their adventures to be solo – enough that the game industry isn't going to ignore them.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Argonian or Khajit?"

Khajit, obviously.

"Why is Cat Mario yellow?"

We're pretty sure it has something to do with Carcosa.

"What would I have to do to get a magazine? Please reply."

Subscribing would be a good start.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"Enjoyment with online games"

Question Of The Month:

Who's the biggest fool in video games and why?

gi spy

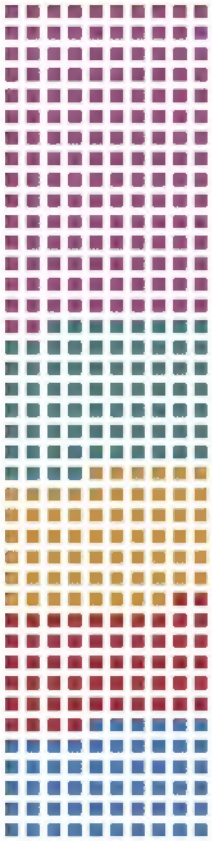


(Left) We caught up with Necrosoft Games' Brandon Sheffield and GDC general manager Meggan Scavio at this year's D.I.C.E. Summit. (Right) Also in attendance: NBC Universal's Pete Wanat and Fortyseven Communications CEO Sibel Sunar.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



■ **38%** Most Wanted Video Game Settings

■ **18%** New-Gen Versus Old-Gen

■ **16%** Gaming Server Woes

■ **14%** Metal Gear Solid V Excitement

■ **14%** Let's Play Love

Bigger Isn't Always Better

I would like to thank Kimberley Wallace for her review of Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc. I had been looking for a good Vita game, and it got a fairly good score of 8.5. After reading her review, I was so intrigued that I went out that day and bought the game. It was just what I was looking for: A suspenseful experience that blends The Hunger Games and Phoenix Wright (both of which I love). If it hadn't been for her review, I wouldn't have found this masterpiece.

Nick Laudati
via email

Thank you for covering more smartphone and tablet games recently. I especially enjoyed The Room 2 Afterwords and The Best Mobile Games of 2013 articles in issue 251. I love playing games on consoles and PC but I've found myself gaming more on my iPad than any other platform over the past year or so. I'm really excited to see what direction this branch of the industry goes in the next few years. Whenever a tablet game graces the cover of one of your future issues, I'll probably have to frame that sucker!

Brad Chiz
via email

Even with Microsoft and Sony's powerful new consoles on the market, many readers seem more interested in indie and mobile games than the next triple-A action game. Luckily, they don't have to choose – we'll keep doing our best to cover every worthwhile gaming experience the industry has to offer, from the biggest blockbusters to the smallest indie titles.



History Lesson

In issue 251, we asked readers what setting or time period they would like to see used more in games and why. Most respondents were stuck in the past, with ancient China being the most popular answer. Here are some responses.

I would love to see the Ancient Chinese Dynastic Period, in particular the Qin Dynasty. This time period was ruled by a ruthless emperor name Qin Shi Huangdi, and he was so powerful that he forced countless citizens to make terra cotta warriors of clay to fight for him in the afterlife. Forget the Warring States period; that makes it too easy to create a story.

Grant Coscia

I would like to see a video game set in Judea A.D. 30. Why? It's never been done, and I wrote an 800-page script for it.

Tim Larkin

Dinosaurs! Well, that's not entirely correct – I guess the Triassic or Jurassic time period – but we need more games that have dinosaurs in them. Don't get me wrong, aliens, monsters, and zombies are great, but it's time for dinosaurs to have their 15 minutes of fame.

Romie Garza

I would just like to see seasons; I have never played a game that depicted the seasons of a planet. It's like every game world I visit just sits still and rotates for day and night. I want to see a true nuclear winter and swimsuit summer nights in the same game. Picture killing off hordes of June-bug-esque insects and then a snowman army that plagues the land in the winter.

Dave Lamoureux

(Left) ID@Xbox director Chris Charla poses with Cohort 19 student Chris Burris, who won the first ever Intel/AIAS scholarship. Congrats, Chris!
(Right) Behold, two of the video game industry's illuminati: Academy of Interactive Arts & Science president Martin Rae and former Microsoft vice president Ed Fries.





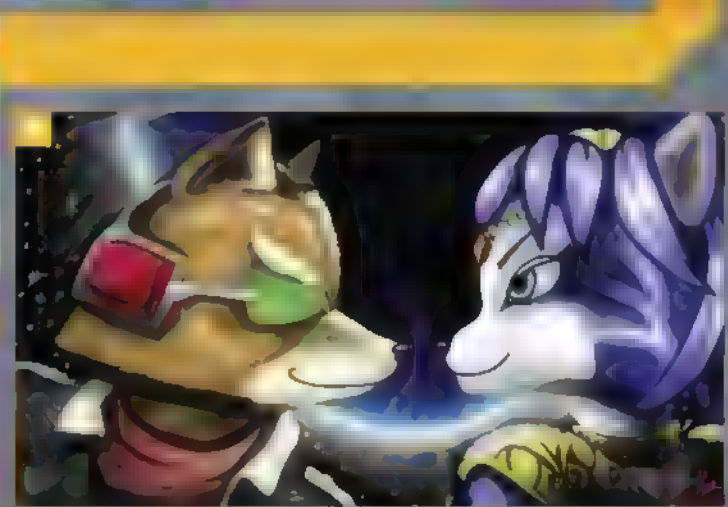
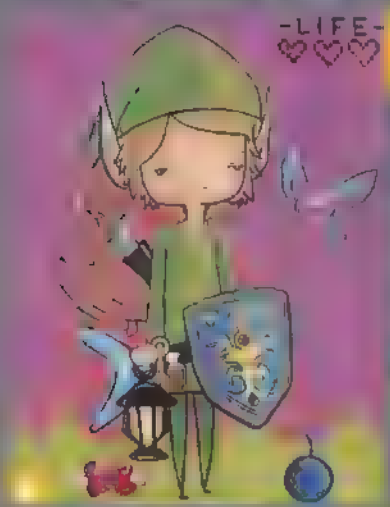
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1 Daniel Jeffries
You might think Garrett is doing something cool here, but he's just really afraid of birds

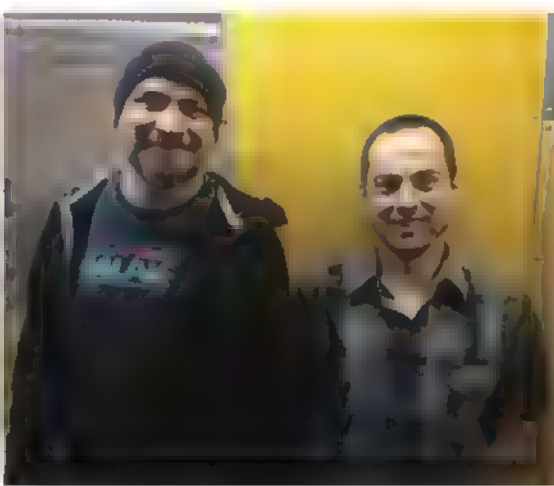
2 Crystal Milecarek
Link is starting to get tired of having to collect the same items every few years

3 Junior Halthazard
You're a world-class fighter, Ryu. Invest in some kneepads

4 Keith Stokes
Not sure how Fox managed to get a girl, considering he's wearing that dopey Google Glass thing



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(Left) A.r.t.ight Games Eric Studer braved the harsh Minnesota winter to show us Murdered Sou Suspect Luckily, he survived (Right) So did 17-Bit's Jake Kazdal who recently stopped by the office with a new build of Ga.ak-Z: The D.imensional.

THROUGH NEW EYES

A wide field of pioneers looks to turn the virtual-reality fad into an industry fixture



NOTABLES

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Just a few months ago, only a few names were synonymous with the current virtual-reality renaissance. Following its successful Kickstarter, Oculus has been the champion of the movement, but others like Valve have shown interest in furthering the technology. Most recently, a number of smaller hopefuls have cropped up with their own head-mounted display prototypes. Sony revealed its own device called Project Morpheus, and Oculus inked a \$2 billion deal with Facebook, potentially changing the competitive landscape in the burgeoning medium.

At GDC in San Francisco, Oculus announced its second Rift developer kit. The "DK2" is the most advanced virtual-reality headset we've seen, featuring a 1080p display and head tracking that surpasses Oculus' "Crystal Cove" unit on display at CES in January.

Instead of exposed LED tracking dots, DK2 is easier to handle thanks to a piece of infrared-permeable plastic covering the front of the device. Oculus has locked in the two-piece system, which includes a camera, as the head tracking mechanism that will be present in the first consumer version of the device.

Along with the new developer kit, which is available for pre-order now and anticipated for delivery this summer, we tried three demos. In the earliest days of the Oculus Rift, the company used a virtual villa called the Tuscany demo to show off the technology. We revisited that space, only now we were able to lean around corners and over the balcony. The head tracking adds a crucial piece of interactivity that elevates virtual reality beyond simply being a field-of-view-filling 2D image.

We also experienced Oculus' first attempt at virtual avatars. While the mannequins are admittedly crude, the Couch Knight demo put us in a living room environment, sitting kitty-corner from our opponent. The head tracking is translated onto the in-game bodies, creating a sense that you are sitting next to a person rather than a stand-in. It's early, but the trajectory of the technology has great promise.

The goal of the game portion is to use diminutive warriors in one-on-one combat. The effect of being in a virtual house with tiny knights battling on the coffee table, floor, and even each other blends our understanding of augmented reality with our traditional conceptualization of being in an immersive, virtual space.

Oculus also showcased how third-person and overhead-perspective titles can work. The final demo was a rudimentary tower defense game in which the action takes place on an inset, table-like environment. Leaning into the play space fluidly zooms in, showing the potential of tactical experiences in a virtual space. Imagine commanding your armies from above the battlefield or shoulder-to-shoulder with your troops, or issuing com-

by Mike Futter

mands to a fleet of space cruisers soaring around you.

Those experiences aren't ready yet, but neither is the hardware. Both have time to mature. "The second developer kit is a huge leap toward [great virtual reality]," Oculus CEO Brendan Iribe says. "It's not all the way there. It's not what we believe is good enough for mass-market consumers."

Iribe, who admits that he is one of the most VR-sensitive people at the company, believes that a consumer model must stand up to regular, long-term use. "We want people to be really comfortable inside," he says. "We want 30 minutes, 45 minutes, an hour to go by and you take it off and say, 'I feel great. This is awesome. I want to go do more.'"

Doors Open For Oculus Following Acquisition

After GDC, news broke that Facebook had purchased the once fiercely independent startup for \$400 million in cash and approximately \$1.6 billion in stock. The day after the announcement, Facebook stock dipped over six percent, revealing trepidation amongst investors.

"The Rift is highly anticipated by the gaming community, and there's a lot of interest from developers in building for this platform," Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in a statement explaining the acquisition. "We're going to focus on helping Oculus build out their product and develop partnerships to support more games. Oculus will continue operating independently within Facebook to achieve this."

The enthusiastic Oculus community had a sharp response to the news. "We assumed that the reaction would be negative, especially from our core community," Oculus vice president of product Nate Mitchell says. "Beyond our core community, we expected it would be positive. I don't think we expected it to be so negative. As people begin to digest it a bit and think about it, you can see that Twitter and Reddit is swinging back the opposite direction. The onus is on us to educate people, and we want to share everything we're doing."

Early negativity also permeated the developer community. Most notably, Minecraft creator Markus "Notch" Persson announced he was breaking off plans to adapt Mojang's wildly popular sandbox game for the Rift saying, "Facebook creeps me out."

For Oculus, the new resources unlock potential for the company's first consumer device and beyond. "There were a lot of things we wanted to do with the Rift, and with virtual reality in general," Oculus founder Palmer Luckey told us. "We had a list of things we wished we could do that weren't financially possible that we are able to do now."

Facebook's investment opens doors for Oculus that were previously barred

The current developer kits and pre-buyout planning called for existing low-cost, well-scaled mobile phone technology. Now, resources exist to commission custom equipment better suited to the ideal VR experience.

"We see the quality and customization around certain components now possible where they really weren't before," Iribe says. "Everything improves going forward with regard to our relationships on the hardware side – being able to scale components, being able to make larger purchases and commitments, and being able to drive the cost down and make a lower margin."

Mitchell says the company has two road maps, and prior to the Facebook acquisition, one was labeled impossible. "All of a sudden, we can do all the stuff on the impossible road map plus more," Iribe says. "The Oculus Rift just became the 'zero compromises' product. It's the best possible thing that can happen."

Sony Steps Into The Ring

When Sony packed a hall in San Francisco's Moscone Center for an announcement of its own, there was little surprise it was to reveal a virtual-reality device. Rumors of the project peppered tech and gaming blogs for weeks in advance, but it wasn't any less exciting when president of worldwide studios Shuhei Yoshida took the stage alongside engineers Richard Marks and Anton Mikhaiov.

"Virtual reality is the next innovation from

PlayStation," Yoshida said as he unveiled the sleek device. The white headset features a lightbar in the front, with two additional tracking lights on the rear of the unit, conveying compatibility with a more mobile experience.

Despite its clean lines and finished form factor, Project Morpheus is still early in development. The display is currently 1080p, with a refresh rate of 60Hz. Moving quickly while wearing the device reveals that there is more work to be done to improve persistence of vision.

Audio is as important to a sense of presence as the visual experience, and Sony is ahead of other VR hopefuls. Project Morpheus currently simulates 60 speakers in an array around the wearer. "Having 'spacialized' sound is really important," Marks says. "If you didn't have that, it would be a cluttered mess inside your brain."

Mikhaiov tells us that Morpheus can simulate more, and the team has pushed the number to over 120 speakers. This is unlike traditional virtual surround sound processing that mimics six to eight speakers. During a demo that placed us on the surface of Mars thanks to data captured by the Curiosity rover, we turned around, knelt on the ground and walked in different directions. With each move, the sound naturally flowed around and above us, even through a stock pair of headphones. It works well, even at this early stage.

VIRTUAL REALITY DEFINITIONS

Persistence of vision is the concept that allows us to watch video footage at 24 frames per second without perceiving a series of individual images. Our brains smooth out moving pictures, creating the appearance of fluidity. In virtual reality, when our brains fill in the blanks it causes a smearing or "screen door" effect, especially while moving our heads. Oculus, Sony, and others are striving for a very low persistence by displaying images for shorter periods, in turn creating a smooth image as we "pan" around an experience.

Presence (often used interchangeably with "immersion") is described as a sense of being somewhere else. Since the VR renaissance, indie developers have been experimenting with a variety of experiences, learning how to get users to give themselves over to the illusion.

Hardware manufacturers are aware that there will be demand for educational, and casual experiences in addition to entertainment options designed for the core gaming market. This could take the form of virtual tourism or environmental simulation (like a beach). Regardless, when putting on a head-mounted display, users will want to feel like they are in the scene. In short, presence is the reason why people are enamored with the idea of virtual reality.



The Future Of Virtual Reality And Challenges To Surmount

Oculus and Sony have more work to do in order to finalize a product suitable for consumer purchase, and there is no specific timeframe for delivery of consumer models. Cost is also an unknown, though both Oculus and Sony envision people using the head-mounted displays in their home rather than having to go to a destination like an arcade.

In order to understand some of the long-term potential and challenges, we spoke with Mark Boas, a USC associate professor in the School of Cinematic Studies' Interactive Media and Game Design program. Boas also serves as the director of the Mixed Reality Lab in the Institute for Creative Technologies, which employed Luckey for about a year. (Note: Boas' company, Fakespace Labs, is a minority shareholder in Oculus.)

With the benefit of academia, Boas' lab has the opportunity to start with very expensive and powerful virtual reality solutions and slowly scale back in service of finding what Boas calls "essential elements," or what might otherwise be considered a minimum specification. Academia leads design of prototypes and eventually consumer models. For instance, lab testing determined a minimum field of view of 90-100 degrees, since applied in both the Rift and Project Morpheus.

USC has worked with the United States Navy, exploring the concept of virtual bridges for seafaring vessels. The benefit would be calling upon personnel with highly specialized skills when they are needed without committing them to a single ship. In order to accomplish this, Boas believes that "social presence" allowing for natural interpersonal communication is crucial. Avatars far more developed than those found in the Oculus Couch Knight demo can be created using a Kinect and highly accurate tracking technology made by a company called Phasespace (accurate to millimeters within the lab's 3,200 square foot space). Boas says that Phasespace's technology can be scaled to cover the whole body or just select parts like hands and feet.

Simulated humans, using text-to-speech, and algorithms for facial expressions and gestures have also been developed. The

combination of virtual human avatars and simulated ones open up the possibility for multiplayer gaming experiences, like an RPG party interacting with NPCs.

When we spoke with Luckey and Mitchell at Gamescom 2013, one of the issues Oculus was confronting is the problem of "simulator sickness." This is the inverse of motion sickness and is caused when your body has the sensation of motion due to the virtual world without actually moving.

In addition, Boas cautions that some experiences will not translate well to the virtual space because of content. "I don't think that first-person shooters can have the level of violence they currently have," he says. "It'll be too much. Right now, it's somewhat abstracted by being on a screen, but when I'm really in it, if things happen or if I do things to people, I'm going to feel a lot of personal agency in both directions."

Boas calls elements like persona space "nuggets." These crucial elements are similar to narrative devices in film that have a great deal of power, like flashbacks. "We're trying to find what that is in the virtual environment," he explains.

Height, social presence, and sense of self are three of the other powerful elements in virtual reality, and Boas suggests that using them properly is key to believable and immersive experiences. He also has a solution for tactile feedback in a virtual world that he calls "passive haptics."

"It's a really fancy term for touching something in the real world and we make that make sense," he explains. "So if we put virtual flat panel displays around you in that virtual environment, all those displays in the real world are just a piece of plywood. If you try and look at it with the head-mounted display and touch it with your fingertips, you think you're looking at a touchscreen display. You're getting feedback to your hands, and it doesn't cost us a dime." Some users could certainly set this up in their homes, but an arcade would be a more economical and logical environment to experience VR with a tactile component as Boas describes.

This is part of an input conundrum that Luckey described to us in a recent interview. "You don't want just an input device," he

CONTENT IS KING

The most amazing virtual-reality headset still won't be worth anything unless there are games and other experiences to consume. Both Oculus and Sony recognize the importance of a thriving indie scene. Yoshida tells us that large publisher adoption will be slower than that of small developers, because big companies need confidence in a willing consumer base.

"The indie guys are so passionate and the creator is the business guy that they make the decision by themselves," Yoshida offers as a contrast. "Also, indies don't want to compete with big companies. They are good at coming up with something at which they can excel, like a new concept. That's a really good approach to VR. Indie guys are so open-minded."

"Made for VR" content, like CCP's *Eve Valkyrie*, will be crucial, but we expect ports of 2D games to also reach virtual spaces. Eidos Montreal created a special build of *Thief* for Sony's Project Morpheus, and Slightly Mad Studios announced that Project CARS will support the device.

Success will require a critical mass of games when consumer devices are ready. Both Oculus and Sony have a long way to go to ensure those libraries are fleshed out.

says. "Something like a Kinect or a mouse, they are very much input devices. You are making something happen in the virtual world, but nothing is coming back out. What you really want is something like the headset that allows you to manipulate the virtual world and feel sensations from and have good haptic sensations from the world."

With its immense resources, USC's Mixed Reality Lab is doing work that Oculus, Sony, and others strive to replicate in a cost-effective manner. As consumer virtual reality nears fruition, those in academia continue to press the field forward. For Boas, that process is self-perpetuating, as he doesn't see a limit on the possibilities of what can be done in a virtual space. "I haven't read a science-fiction book yet, or seen a science-fiction movie about virtual reality that has come up with something I don't believe could happen." ♦

A GROWING FIELD OF ENTREPRENEURS

While Oculus and Sony offered the most compelling VR experiences at GDC, others are attempting to solve the problem in their own ways. We tried headsets from other companies hoping to create a suitable consumer product and get to market soon.

The strongest of this second group is a self-contained unit called the Gameface. The prototype is powered by an Nvidia Tegra 4, with an upgrade to the Tegra K1 (reportedly 1.5 times as powerful as a PlayStation 3) planned. Gameface hopes to cut the cord, supporting Bluetooth headsets, direct-to-device content loading, and wireless charging. The company is targeting an on-the-go market, making it a different proposition than the Rift or Project Morpheus.

We also spent time on our feet. The Sulon Cortex claims to create a "holodeck-like" experience. It was disconcerting using the device, which uses an Android phone as a slide-in screen, while moving. With a top-mounted sensor array, Cortex maps the room, but Sulon hasn't solved the presence problem yet, making movement an awkward experience.

We also used an Oculus Rift in conjunction with the Virtuix Omni VR "treadmill." (left) Teaching ourselves how to walk on the concave surface in special shoes was challenging. The biggest hurdle is that the Omni's saliability relies on a consumer VR product, which is still months off.



Stories From Space

by Daniel Tack





CCP'S EVE ONLINE IS ONE OF FEW games out there in which game decisions and choices bleed over into reality and create the game world. Politics, diplomacy, intrigue, and large-scale space battles shape the world of the game itself. Many aspects of the game are player-controlled and player-policed, from the giant guilds known as corporations to the player-hunting pirates and mercenaries. EVE's stories lend themselves to other mediums, and have recently spawned a comic series, *EVE: True Stories*, that will be available in a hardcover collection in June. Things don't stop there: While story arcs have yet to be nailed down, the EVE universe is scheduled to move into other mediums with a TV show production.

One of the more famous tales is the epic battle of B-R5RB, where a lapsed claim on territory resulted in a 21-hour conflict involving 7,548 unique character participants and 75 titan class ships destroyed. This battle resulted in around 11 trillion ISK (game currency) in damages - which translates to roughly \$300,000 USD.

What drives these stories? EVE's massive single-server MMORPG space lends itself to constant interaction and player-driven events. In one case there is the tale of Lord Rahvin and his quest for a titan ship. At the time this story took place, a titan would take around six months of hardcore gameplay to acquire.

"By most people's standards, Lord Rahvin was a bit abrasive, but he was an excellent fleet commander," says Mark Thompson, AKA transcom caldan and a corporation-mate of Lord Rahvin at the time. "He was drawn to the mystique and power."

Here's where things get interesting. Due to the mechanics behind huge trades, like a titan, players can't simply open a trade window and click a button to hand off goods. There's a whole third-party market in EVE where trustworthy dealers have earned a reputation by handling high-end trades. Lord Rahvin didn't go with one of these, and chose to use his own months of currency collection and corporation assets to buy a titan from a trusted source at a price too good to be true.

"The funds were transferred to the individual in Pandemic Legion, and Rahvin did not receive a ship," says Thompson. "Since the offender was in Pandemic Legion (one of the top corporations at the time) there was no real method of recourse."

With one titan gone and a considerable amount of time and money out the window, Rahvin was not deterred and set off once again to amass the assets needed to obtain one of these prized

ships. During this time some changes happened with the corporations, as Rahvin spent his time soloing for currency and not leading operations, and Rahvin's corporation was essentially rolled into a larger one.

"Word had gotten out that Rahvin was going to bail on the corporation after the titan was completed, and since he was tapping into corporate resources, the leadership had other plans. Rahvin showed up to collect his titan, and was left staring into space as a corporate leader flew off into space in the ship."

For those looking for a quick takeaway from this, that's around a year of titan farming that resulted in a handful of space dust.

Just as interesting are the tales of contract hits, manipulation, spying, and infiltration of Andri Reynir Einarsson's Guiding Hand Social Club.

"I've probably lost at least \$200,000 in ships over the course of the game with my chosen path," says Einarsson.

"We are mercenaries, griefers, thieves, assassins. We had one huge heist that put us on the map, and since then when

you want someone taken out we're who you hire."

Einarsson has multiple characters and personas entrenched into various corporations. He is able to gain intel "on the inside," and has actually played director to major skirmishes and battles from the shadows - with his own actual crew profiting on the sidelines of the orchestrated conflict. Politics, positioning, and infiltration into alliances all play a huge role in carrying out the goals of the Guiding Hand Social Club. Assassinating marks to attempt to gnef them out of the game is just one of the many activities that this shadow corporation engages in. Not surprisingly, playing EVE this way comes with some consequences.

"I was massively betrayed by someone I considered a friend. He outed me, and it turns out he was holding a grudge for four years before he decided to strike back. It sometimes comes back on you. It's never really had any real life repercussions. I mean, someone did pour a beer on me at FanFest (an annual EVE gathering held in Iceland)," says Einarsson. "We're still available for hire." ♣

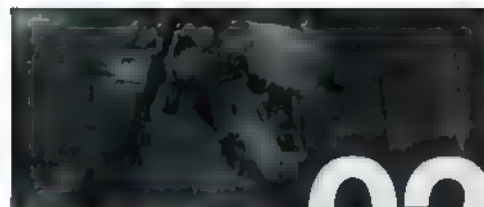


Things We Legally Can't Call Mechs



Vertical Tank – *Steel Battalion*

Let's face it: None of us will ever get the chance to pilot a giant mechanical war suit in the real world. However, *Steel Battalion's* absurd Vertical Tank simulation is the next best thing. The game's \$200 super controller sports two control sticks, three pedals, a gear lever, and more buttons than a NASA Space Shuttle, which brings the hulking machines to life.



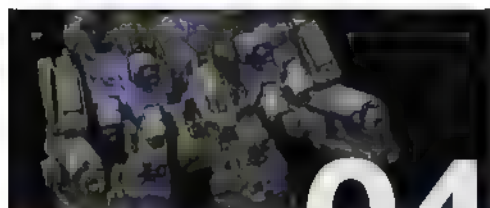
Metal Gear Rex – *Metal Gear Solid 4*

Konami's stealth/action series is full of towering Metal Gears, but Metal Gear Rex is the only one you actually get to pilot. After defeating Rex in the final boss battle of *Metal Gear Solid*, players return to Shadow Moses in *MGS 4* and climb into its gaping maw for themselves. Rex's missiles, rail gun, laser, and dinosaur-like roaring help take down Ocelot's Metal Gear Ray in style.



Atlas – *Titanfall*

The titans of Respawn's new multiplayer-only shooter finally make piloting a giant death machine as awesome as it should be. Catching and blasting bullets back at enemies and ripping pilots out of rival titans puts the sluggish bipedal tanks of other games to shame. The Atlas titan sports the perfect mix of ability and defense, making it our favorite of the bunch.



Odin – *StarCraft II: Wings Of Liberty*

Even in a series full of crazy vehicles, the Thor is an intimidating unit. However, the powerful siege-warrior is just a mass-produced knockoff of its much larger prototype: the Odin. In one memorable campaign mission, players steal Odin and stomp their way across the map with impunity, destroying everything in their path as enemies put up a futile resistance.



Baby Head – *Captain Commando*

Getting your butt kicked by a baby would normally be an ego-bruising affair, but we'll give Captain Commando's goons a break. Thanks to his self-designed battle suit, Baby Head (a.k.a. Baby Commando) dispatches foes with a number of punishing attacks, including Rolling Punch, Elbow Smash, and Knee Rocket, which – as you might have guessed – shoots rockets out of Baby Head's knees.



Magitek Armor – *Final Fantasy VI*

Magic has disappeared from the world of *Final Fantasy VI*, but it doesn't stay missing for long. Borne from dark experimentation, the Gestahlian Empire's Magitek Armor allows its users to emit powerful beams of magic that decimate foes. Players use the armor's overpowered abilities to tear through the town of Narshe in *FF VI's* memorable opening sequence.



Ride Armor – *Mega Man X series*

How do you make a badass robot that sports a plasma-blasting X-Buster even more powerful? Stick him in a set of oversized mechanical Ride Armor. Throughout the spinoff series, X takes control of a variety of animal-themed armor modules, which allow him to dash, jump, and punch his way to victory.



Xenogears – *Xenogears*

Players don't get to control the titular gear of Square's sci-fi JRPG until late in the game, but it's worth the wait. *Xenogears* is so mighty that not only does Fei use its energy to power his allies' gears back to their super omni-gear status, he also uses it to kill the alien god known as Deus. You know you've got a pretty bitchin' war machine when you start killing gods with it.



Earthworm Jim – *Earthworm Jim*

Not all mechanical combat contraptions have to be the size of a building. Shiny Entertainment's wormy protagonist isn't much of a hero until he slithers into his humanoid robot suit. It doesn't make the game's underwater maze level any easier, or help Jim win the affection of Princess What's-Her-Name, but it does make him cooler than every other worm on the planet.



Police Robo – *Tail Concerto*

Protecting Prairie Kingdom from the mischievous kittens of the Black Cat Gang is no easy task. Luckily, police pooch Waffle Ryebread has the Police Robo at his disposal. You might think Police Robo looks adorable, but with a bubble blaster that scoops up kittens and treadmill arms that flap back and forth when it walks – nope, you're right – Police Robo is adorable.

The Good

DOOM is back after Bethesda ditched its original plans for Doom 4. Titled simply Doom, Bethesda is giving away beta codes when you pre-order Wolfenstein: The New Order (shown). No date or platforms were given for the Doom beta or the game itself.



Wolfenstein: The New Order

The Bad

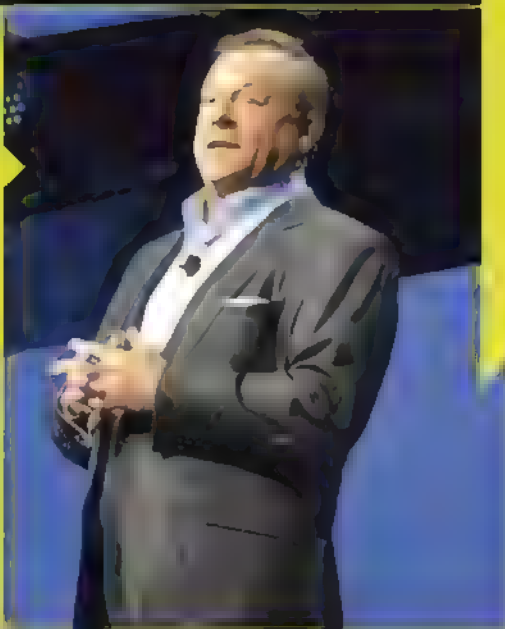


THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT (PC, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One) has been delayed from a fall release to February 2015. Developer CD Projekt RED says it could have put out the game as it originally planned, but decided that a few months for extra quality was worth it instead.

DEV DEPARTURES

rocked the industry this month. Jack Tretton (shown) steps down as president and CEO of Sony America, Microsoft head of Devices and Studios (covering Xbox) Julie Larson-Green is shuffled internally within the company, and Marc Whitten, chief product officer for Xbox has moved on. And that's just the executives. Amy Hennig (Naughty Dog creative director), Koji Igarashi (Castlevania producer at Konami), Karl Stewart (Crystal Dynamics brand manager), and Stig Amussen (God of War 3 director) are just a few of the developers leaving established positions. Good luck to everyone in their new endeavors, and good luck to the teams and companies that have to carry on in their absence. ♦

The Ugly




Quotable

"So when are we going to see that gay protagonist in a triple-A game? Not for a while, I suspect, because of fears that it'll impact sales."



Lucien Souleau, Ubisoft Montréal lead writer



THE STORY OF
THE DARTH MAUL
GAME THAT NEVER
CAME TO BE

by Andrew Reiner

INTO THE SHADOWS

Fear. Anger. Hate. Suffering. This is the transformative experience Austin-based developer Red Fly Studio was hoping to deliver when they were commissioned by LucasArts to create a game starring Darth Maul, the popular Sith Lord who debuted in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*.

The studio envisioned a dark coming-of-age tale, showing a young Maul forced against his will into the Sith hierarchy. “We wanted people to see him as a kid kidnapped by emperor Palpatine and tortured – physically, mentally, and emotionally – becoming this powerful Sith Lord,” says a developer who worked on the project but wishes to remain anonymous. “You got angry, you got frustrated, and you made the same mistakes he did. No one has ever seen how to construct a Sith from kid to adult. We’ve only seen the five-second turn: Anakin Skywalker cries a little bit, and then he’s evil.”

In all six *Star Wars* films, Palpatine plays the role of a shadowy puppeteer, manipulating people into strategic positions for his personal

gain. Red Fly’s pitch would have given gamers a close look at his dark schemes and the role Maul played in them. As the plot progressed, the relationship between master and apprentice would have eroded to the point of Maul raising his double-sided saber – which you, the player, helped him construct – against Palpatine.

“You want to fight him, and of course that’s what he wants,” recalls the developer. “Our story basically bookended at the end of *The Phantom Menace* with Maul’s death. We felt [this story] would be a really solid, large game, maybe two games.”

Red Fly was never given the chance to pitch this vision to LucasArts, but their time with the Sith Lord didn’t end there. The project was injected with a new vision, not once but twice – one idea coming from the *Clone Wars* animated series, and another from George Lucas, who proposed a crazy idea that took everyone by surprise, and would have shattered the temporal fabric of the *Star Wars* universe had it seen the light of day.

Red Fly’s team was taken on a rocky journey, starting with the hope that their unknown studio could make an impact with one of the world’s most beloved franchises, and ending with LucasArts applying a proverbial Force choke suffered by many hopeful developers who believed they had great *Star Wars* stories to tell.

PROVING ITS WORTH

Prior to working with LucasArts, Red Fly Studio’s portfolio consisted of just three Wii games: *Mushroom Men: The Spore Wars*, *Food Network: Cook or Be Cooked*, and the cartoony port of *Ghostbusters: The Video Game* (which Red Fly also brought to PlayStation 2).

In early 2010, LucasArts was at a crossroads with the Wii port of *Force Unleashed II*. Developer Krome Studios handled the Wii version of the first *Force Unleashed*, and although it sold well, LucasArts was not happy with its quality. Rather than sticking with Krome, LucasArts started looking for another partner.

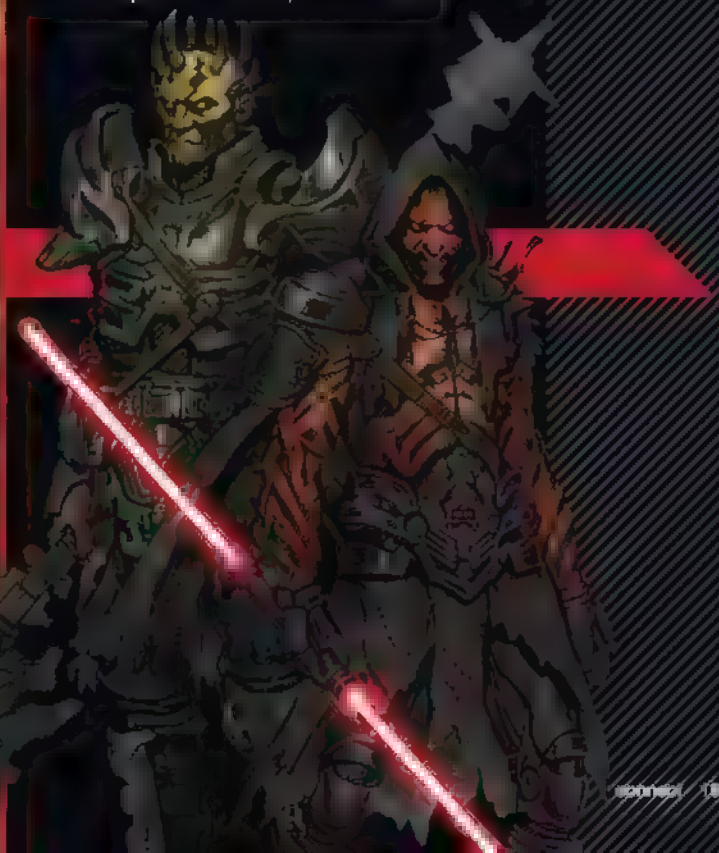
“Not on purpose, we carved out that we were the Wii guys,” says Red Fly CEO Dan Borth. “They wanted [the Wii port of *Force Unleashed II*] to be better, but didn’t know what to do really. We built a demo in two weeks with little assistance from LucasArts. Neil Garrett, their head of external production, thought we should do it.”

With a development team of roughly 50 people, Red Fly began working with LucasArts’ internal *Force Unleashed II* team, but with only nine months between the port’s start date and its proposed release date, the process wasn’t moving fast enough for Borth and his team. Red Fly wasn’t getting art assets from LucasArts when they needed them. Due to the time constraint, Red Fly codenamed its game “Swift.”

“The project moved quickly – way too fast for LucasArts to give us art assets in a timely manner,” says Borth. “So we built almost everything from scratch.”

Despite taking on an immense amount of work, Red Fly shipped its version of *Force Unleashed II* on time. The Wii version netted a Metacritic review score of 71 next to the PlayStation 3’s 63, Xbox 360’s 61, and PC’s 59.

Although LucasArts ultimately viewed *Force Unleashed II* as a failure, Red Fly’s involvement in the project was a success. “They kind of kept us on the hook,” Borth recalls.





"They told us Force Unleashed III was coming, and there were some rumors we might actually get the next-gen versions to prove ourselves worthy, but they just kind of dismissed us as, 'You are just the Wii guys. You can't do that.' When publishers look at you, you have to fit into their wheelhouse or you don't get the job."

Nintendo and LucasArts discussed bringing a new Intellectual property to either 3DS, Wii, or, at the time, the forthcoming Wii U. The negotiations eventually landed on the Darth Maul project, and LucasArts president Paul Meegen knew exactly who to tap for it.

"I got a call from Paul, and he asked me if I would be interested in making a Darth Maul

game," Borth says. "I was like 'Yes, of course, of course.' They signed us to a contract that was basically, 'You guys start working on ideas, start working on demos, start working on mechanics.' It wasn't really a game contract; it was more like a work-for-hire, month-to-month thing. We started to flesh out our ideas and content and stuff like that. I think after about three or four months we entered into the game contract. It got intimate pretty quick."

While Borth wouldn't go into the specifics of the project, other sources that worked on the game confirmed this was the point that the studio dreamed up the origin story of Maul's transformation into a Sith Lord.

REYCON DEATH

Prototyping began on October 9, 2010 under the internal codename "Damage." LucasArts' working title was simply "Maul." Unbeknownst to Red Fly, Lucasfilm had big plans for the red and black tattooed Sith Lord within the *Clone Wars* animated show.

LucasArts didn't provide much direction to Red Fly at the time, but promised that key talent would be brought into the fold to help with the Star Wars lore and general direction of the fiction. Only odd little Darth Maul tidbits were discussed with Red Fly.

"We were told Maul survived his encounter with Obi-Wan Kenobi in *The Phantom Menace*," says a former Red Fly team member who wishes to remain nameless. "We fashioned robotic legs on Maul after being told he had them. Then we were told he had a brother named Savage Opress. He was supposedly green. Again, we were not told of the *Clone Wars* storyline at this time."

From these puzzling elements, Red Fly knew it was unlikely it would be telling Darth Maul's origin story, or any tale predating the end of *The Phantom Menace*. Red Fly's game was starting to look more like an extension of the *Clone Wars* cartoon universe.

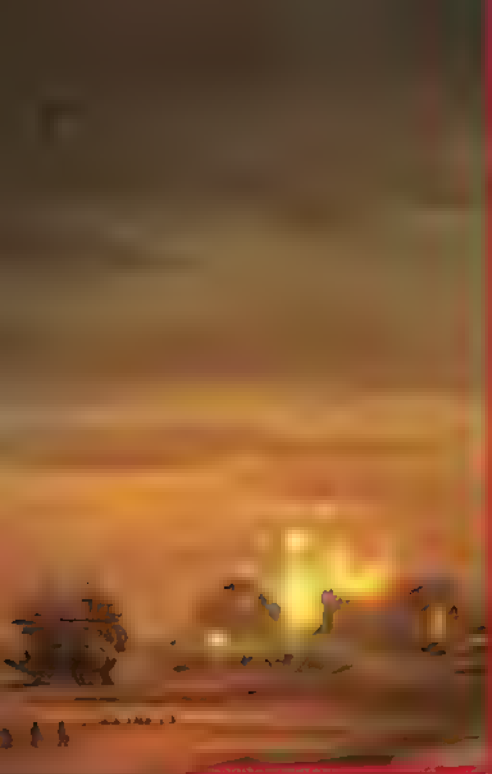
The team also learned that LucasArts' negotiations to bring the Darth Maul project exclusively to a Nintendo platform had fallen through — due largely to Nintendo not meeting financial demands to make it a first-party project. LucasArts decided to shift development to PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC, and Wii U.

Concern of not having a clear vision swept over the development team. "It was tough because we didn't have any information," remembers a developer. "They didn't want to share it. They didn't want to leak any *Clone Wars* stuff. We were like, 'Good God, are we doing this or not?'"

One of the few things LucasArts gave the team to go on for a couple of months was the tagline [and potential name] "Battle of the Sith Lords."



This shot, which was seen quickly through several iterations, was the final version of the game's title screen.



This world's inhabitants live in cities built into the backs of lumbering lizards.

"We were kind of fumbling around in the dark in terms of lore, so we just started making a game instead, which was kind of fun," recalls another anonymous ex-Red Fly employee. "The initial plan was to explore making a stealth game that was action-centric. So instead of a stop-and-wait game like *Thief*, it was more forward stealth, like kill that person before they can actually alert someone, then disappear into the rafters. We also started developing the concept of Maul as a glass cannon. Taking our cues from *Arkham Asylum*, you are insanely powerful and deadly, but one or two hits will take you out."

Although Red Fly was only given two weeks to prototype *Force Unleashed II* for Wii, the team spent months working on prototypes for the Darth Maul game. Gameplay systems and art direction were all coming online. Maul's animations were getting there: He could quickly vault over obstacles in the

environment, and was starting to move as fluidly as his movie counterpart.

A core team of Red Fly employees traveled with their prototype to LucasArts to discuss the next steps. They met with LucasArts creative director Clint Hooking and designer Kent Hudson. One anonymous source close to the talks remembers the takeaway: "We discussed ways to make the core gameplay loop compelling," he says. "We said Darth Maul's connection to the Force was through generating fear. The idea was to f--- with the A.I., and generate fear to build up your ability to use the Force, execute stealth kills, and manipulate the environment. It was exciting, cool stuff. Later on, we learned this was probably a little bit of a misstep."

On a different trip, other Red Fly representatives met with key members of the *Clone Wars* animated team at LucasFilm's Big Rock Ranch, adjacent to the famous Skywalker Ranch. Here the team gained some clarity for Darth Maul's future, but not necessarily their game.

"We were told that after *The Phantom Menace*, Maul ended up in a trash compactor, went crazy, and assembled a spider body for himself out of junk," recalls the former Red Fly staffer. "So we were going, 'Oh God, we have to put a robotic spider body on f---ing Darth Maul! What the hell!'"

Thankfully for the development team, Maul didn't keep his spider legs for long. Red Fly's original guess of him having somewhat normal robotic legs proved to be accurate.

The more Red Fly learned about *Clone Wars*' Darth Maul story, the more the team wanted to distance itself from it. Hopes of potentially returning to the origin story idea swirled throughout the office. At the same time, LucasArts had informed Red Fly that George Lucas was fond of Darth Talon, a female Lethan Twi'lek who debuted in *Dark Horse Comics*' Legacy era stories, and served under Darth Krayt. Rumor had it Lucas might want to get her into the game somehow. He always had a personal interest in the project, but Red Fly didn't know what he envisioned for it.

The amount of confusion in the air made Red Fly feel handcuffed. A developer remembers the frustration well: "LucasArts said, 'There is a lot of crosstalk going on, misinformation. Let's actually sit down and have you guys talk to George.'"

MEETING WITH THE CREATOR

A Red Fly contingent traveled to LucasArts, first meeting with Paul Meegan, studio creative director Frederic Markus, and Lucasfilm president and COO Michelle Chau. The developers weren't prepared for the questions that came next.

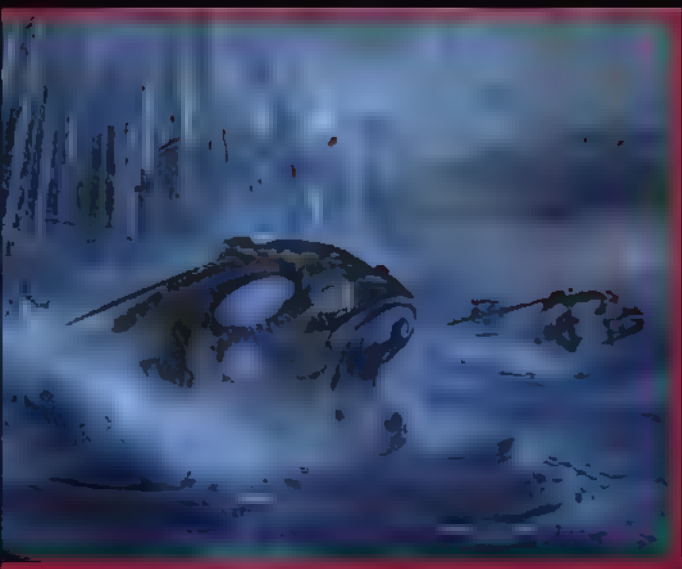
A source with knowledge of the meeting says they were asked, "What's your X statement? How do you sum this game up?"

The team tried to outline the game's strengths, features, and overall design, but they were cut off. Lucas' representatives said "Nope." They recognized that there was something special about the game, but it lacked a cohesive whole, and Red Fly agreed that they hadn't gotten there yet.

A large reason for this was the lack of direction from LucasArts. "For the entire next week, [the team] worked at LucasArts on unifying a vision and coming up with an X statement," says the source. Meegan and Markus took active roles in the project, helping cement its vision. "Fred and Paul were very demanding, but in a good way. They wanted the best out of our people. We learned a lot from them."



Paul Meegan and Frederic Markus declined to comment on this story.



Even without a script, Red Fly's artists dreamed up a number of concepts for Darth Maul in *Force II*.

The next day, Red Fly finally met with George Lucas, but not before being told how to talk to him. Our source says they were told to never say "No" to him, or to say, "Yeah, that will be easy." They were also told not to mention Force Unleashed's protagonist, Starkiller. If he's referred to by George, it will be "that guy." The most important rule, much like not feeding a Mogwai after midnight, was "Don't tell George how the Force works."

Red Fly's representatives arrived at the meeting point early the next day, only to find LucasArts employees rushing Force Unleashed artwork out of the conference room, and replacing it with other Star Wars artworks, including the placement of Sideshow Collectibles statues of Darth Maul and Darth Talon to the table.

A friendly George Lucas entered the room and was eager to hear the pitch from Red Fly's creatives. "Before they could finish their spiel, Lucas cut them off, stood up, walked over to the statues, rotated them to be facing the same direction, pushed them together, and said 'They're friends!' adds the source. "He wanted these characters to be friends, and to play off of each other. He talked about the show

Burn Notice as a reference point. He likened Darth Maul to Sonny from *The Godfather*, and he likened Darth Talon to Lauren Bacall. He actually did an impersonation of her. It was supposedly the weirdest impersonation of a '40s actress going, 'Don't you know how to whistle? Put your lips together and blow.'"

The problem with the idea of Maul and Talon teaming up for a buddy cop-like experience was that they were separated by over 170 years of Star Wars fiction — as ridiculous of an idea as Frédéric Chopin forming a band with Dave Grohl. When this vast time divide was brought up to Lucas' attention, he brushed off the notion of it not working, and said that it could instead be a descendant of Darth Maul or a clone of him.

An ex-Red Fly employee says Lucas focused heavily on the player dictating the narrative. "He wanted the kind of experience where the player could tell the game what type of story they wanted," he said. "It wasn't so much choose-your-own-adventure; it was more of a player being able to act as director, letting the game still respond and react to the player's wishes and surprising the player with new experiences that maybe they didn't expect. Clearly this was not the forward stealth game for Darth Maul anymore."

The Red Fly team left the meeting, which ran for roughly three hours, dumbfounded by the new direction. They spent a few more days at LucasArts' campus working closely with its team to determine how to get this new idea to work.



Red Fly hoped to introduce a variety of Sith Lords — all incredibly dark in design — to Star Wars' expanded universe.



The combat system was inspired by Rocksteady's *Batman: Arkham Asylum*.



Players would have had access to a 'Force' (which was fully controllable) to scout ahead.

THE NEW DIRECTION

Red Fly Studio did its best to adapt to the new story, which pitted Darth Maul and Darth Talon against Darth Krayt and his Sith army.

A developer close to the story discussions remembers, "If we were going that route, the heir of Maul had to be a secret. He could be trained by the ghost of Maul himself in the ways of the Sith, and wait until it was time to 'strike back' at the Sith for polluting the rule of Two: One Master, One Apprentice. We wanted to go with that. It was up to Maul's heir to return the Sith to the balance of two — and of course have Talon be focused into it. We felt this was the best [story] we could make out of the ingredients we were given. We never got to hear if Lucas liked this story or the direction we were going."

Over the next couple of months, Red Fly manufactured numerous prototypes, sometimes daily prototypes. LucasArts' Frederic Marlow believed that the game needed a sophisticated laser deflection mechanic.

"We had this Arkham mechanic with lightsabers, and he wanted us to come up with a mechanic that would allow the player to deflect incoming laser fire, which is not that difficult," remembers a former Red Fly developer. "But at the same time, we had to direct it back, and control it while not breaking combat or using time dilation. That was quite a feat. We almost cracked it, and we came up with something that was kind of a hybrid and almost workable, but we really didn't feel like deflection was a Maul trait. Maul is just about attack. Attack, attack, attack, attack. We had heads flying everywhere."

AN UNEXPECTED END

Knowing the project could use more guidance, LucasArts flew a large number of Red Fly's developers to San Francisco for a boot camp to help with the prototypes. "We went to LucasArts' campus every day and prototyped with Frederic," a developer says. "We learned a lot, did some good work, went back to Austin, but weren't really able to execute on it."

With significant movement forward, LucasArts thought the team was ready to make the game. LucasArts also floated the idea that Red Fly could be purchased and folded in as a subsidiary studio.

Red Fly was in a good position, but without warning, LucasArts stopped communicating with the team.

"We didn't hear from them for two weeks," an ex-Red Fly employee remembers. "Two and a half weeks. No word. Nothing. And when I say no word, I mean nothing. We tried to contact them over and over and over again. We know how slow they move, and we've seen them do this before. We were at least hopeful. But still no word came. We did manage to get some of the guys, the internal producers that were on our project, on Skype, and they looked like they were kicked in the nuts. We knew what was going on. They just couldn't tell us. But we didn't know the extent of what was going on. We thought, 'Okay, they're not going to buy us. Fine.' We didn't know the game would get canceled."

On June 24, 2011, Red Fly's executives received an email with the subject line "Maul Termination Letter." The future of Red Fly was in jeopardy.

The game was dead. Worse yet, without LucasArts funding the project, the studio wouldn't survive.

"Despite the project being canceled, LucasArts treated us very well afterwards," says Red Fly's Dan Borth. "While it was a struggle, they gave us the ability to continue operating."

The studio's doors remained open (and work on new, unknown game projects continues today), but it suffered a massive downsizing, leading to 70 percent of the workforce let go.

Numerous ex-Red Fly staffers believe the cancellation didn't come from the quality or lack thereof in their prototypes, but George Lucas' decision to sell his company to Disney. "It's the only thing that makes any sense," says a former Red Fly employee. "Everything needed to be put on ice."

"A lot of good people on both sides really put their hearts into it," Borth says. "We certainly wish things would have gone differently." ♦

George Lucas envisioned a co-op game that would feature Darth Maul and Darth Talon.

Despite the great effort in developing proof of concept, LucasArts wouldn't sign off on any of the big-ticket items that would allow development to truly get underway. Red Fly's staff was up to roughly 80 people at this point, and the team was churning out content for a game that had no clear direction.

Five fulltime concept artists designed new Stormtroopers, Sith, and Jedi adversaries for Maul and Talon to square off against, and an extensive collection of worlds for the duo to traverse.

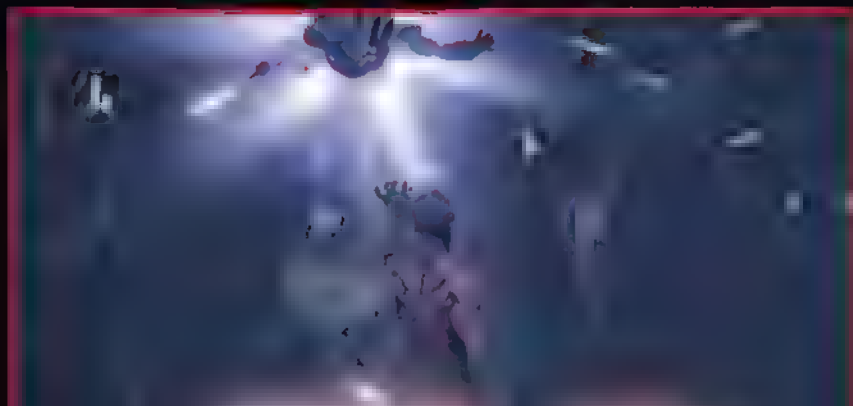
Seen in numerous concept art pieces obtained by *Game Informer*, the team hoped to weave in the Black Sun criminal syndicate. Many of these illustrations show well-known Star Wars species decked out in black trench coats and cloaks, with heavy artillery in hand and holstered (see page 21).

Some of the proposed characters include a lanky, four-armed alien named Darth Inexor, a regal and darkly attired Darth Kroan (who appears to have suffered a nose injury judging by the permanent prosthetic strapped to his face) and a stunning female Jedi adorned head-to-toe in white and black, almost looking like a mime you'd see bothering people on city streets.

Some of the pitched locations fit within the context of Star Wars as we know it, showing familiar-looking vessels docked in hanger bays, and merchants lined up along a street that looks like a dead ringer for Tatooine's Mos Espa. Most of the locations, however, speak of a team trying to bring new and exciting destinations to Star Wars fans. Much like the *God of War* stages taking place on titans, many of these environments wouldn't have been stationary, or even stable. One such example is an ocean-based city that is pulled across the surface by gigantic eels. This idea also extended to land, and is seen in several art pieces showing cities fastened onto the backs of enormous, slow-moving lizards. In one location, the team drew inspiration from

the film *Pitch Black*, taking Maul to an uninhabitable world's surface, scorched by the sun. The citizens live within the shadowed cracks, and only dare visit the surface once the sun sets.

Prototyping continued with these ideas in mind, and a vision for how the game could potentially come together was within sight, but remained blurry. "We had the idea that Talon would be a reflection of the player character in many ways, and would respond to what the player was doing as Maul," says a former source from the team. "We had a bunch of prototypes for different storytelling techniques whereby you could start nudging the scene toward a Talon approach or a Darth Maul approach. We had characters that could take any number of weird situational inputs and could query the world for things, and then make a response that seemed to make sense. But I think there were still people that were in love with the idea of Darth Maul using fear as his root to the Force. It started shooting out in too many different directions at once, unfortunately, and we had a lot of people — we should have trimmed that down to probably 10 or 15."



Rare Medals

People buy games because they like to play them, but those games don't always get played. With a glut of entertainment on the market, it's impossible to take it all in. Even gamers with the best of intentions sometimes neglect great titles sitting on their shelves. Using Sony's trophy data to measure gaming habits, we compiled some gameplay statistics for several of last year's big-name games. Let's see how quickly players abandon a game in favor of something else.

This data likely does not take into account players who do not bring their systems online, nor track players who start playing online but finish a game offline.

by Ben Reeves

TEARAWAY

7%

Sony's adorable handheld title is one of the best reasons to own a PS Vita, but almost eight percent of owners have barely touched their copy of the game. Only 92.6 percent of players have received the trophy for opening their first present — a task that appears only about 10 minutes into the game.

On the other hand, 5.6 percent of players have earned all of the trophies in the game.

CALL OF DUTY: GHOST RECON

60.4%

Call of Duty is one of the biggest franchises on the market today, but do most consumers spend their time with the game's multiplayer? Only 60.4 percent of players received the earliest trophy for killing their first enemy in Ghost's campaign. This means that nearly 40 percent of Ghost's players either never played the campaign or played it for less than five minutes.

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

17.5%

Ubisoft's pirate-themed Assassin adventure was full of treasure to loot and ships to sink, but a few landlubbers barely got their feet wet. Seven percent of people who bought the game and started it never got through the first memory sequence, a tutorial that only takes around 25 minutes to complete.

Just 53.1 percent of players completed every action in a single location, and barely 0.5 percent of players completed everything in the game and got all the other trophies.

40% HIT
AT LEAST ONE TROPHY

THE LAST OF US

44.6%

Only 44.6 percent of players actually finished Game Informer's Game of the Year on any difficulty. 33.8 percent of players earned the trophy for beating the game on normal, while a mere 7.7 percent of players earn the trophy for beating the game on hard. How many people bothered to complete a new game plus playthrough on the hard difficulty? Only two percent.

LESS THAN
1/2
COMPLETED

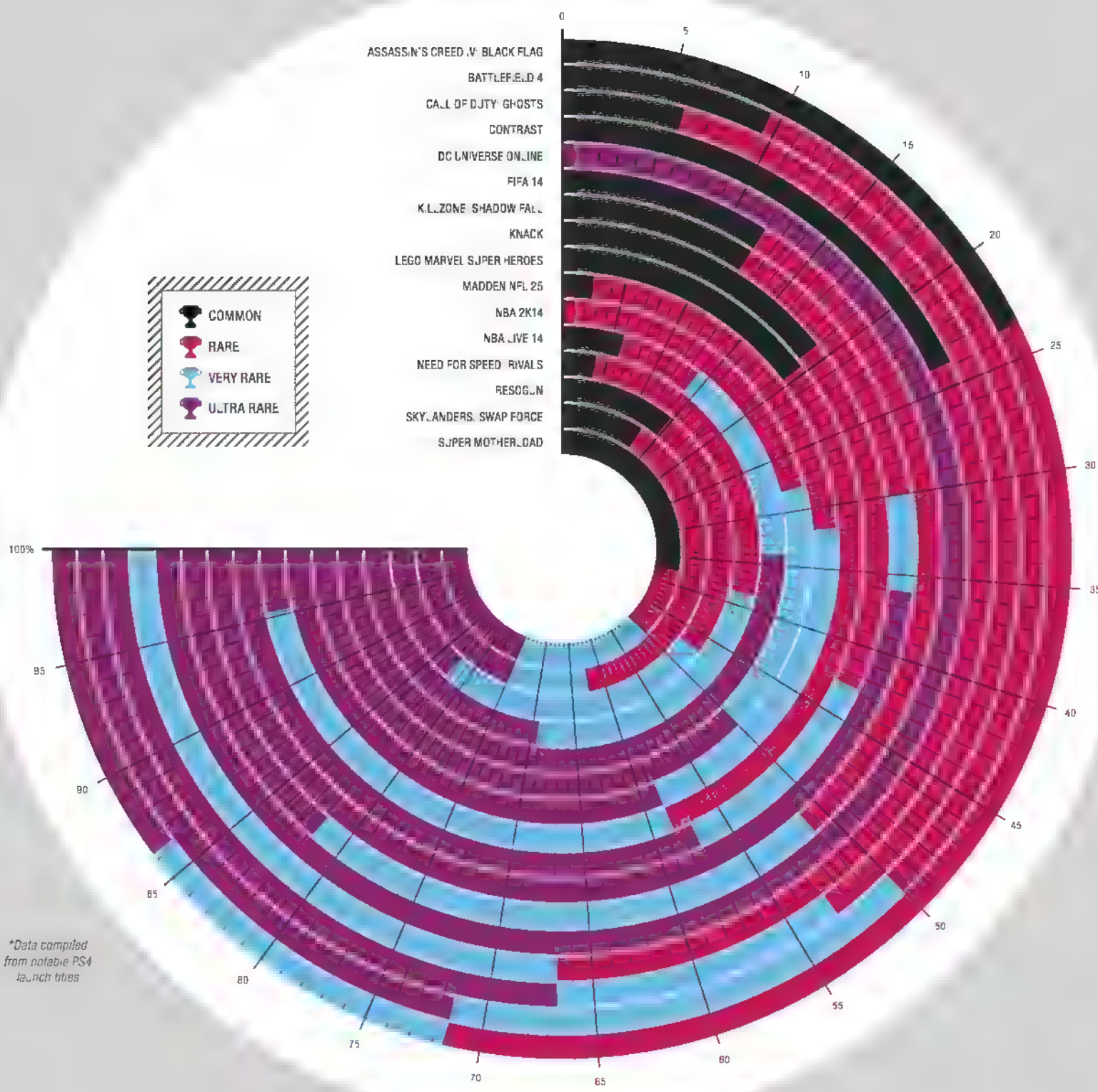
LEGO MANIA: SUPER HEROES

88.5%

TT Games' adorable superhero adventure is great for players of any age, and it's not a challenging game to complete. Even so, only 88.5 percent of players have received the Sand Central Station trophy, which is the trophy you receive after beating the first level of the game.

Almost four percent of players drop off after completing the first level, because only 84.3 percent of players received a trophy for completing their first sky dive, something that happens immediately after the first level.

Players continue to lose interest in the game, and by level 15 (the final level) only a third of the people are still playing — only 32.3 percent of players have this The Good, The Bad, and the Hungry trophy.



*Data compiled from notable PS4 launch titles

Breakdown of trophy rarity by percentage



World of Tanks: Xbox 360 Edition

The slow-motion shooter

After experiencing years of popularity on PC, developer Wargaming has brought World of Tanks over to the Xbox 360 for a new audience. It's not a straight port of the PC game, but was rather built using the studio's proprietary development engine for release on home console. The two versions of the game are distinct in control and interface, but the gameplay is fundamentally the same.

World of Tanks, as the name implies, is a game played with tanks. I went into battle expecting something like Twisted Metal and was surprised to find myself slowly setting up shots like a cautious sniper. World of Tanks is a slow-motion shooter, which is not meant to be an insult. Tanks are slow-moving vehicles, and much of the game involves moving slowly to find vantage points offering worthwhile views and limited exposure. It removes the sprinting and fast aiming necessary for shooters like Call of Duty or Halo, slowing it down to a pace that lets you stop and smell the roses — while firing off incredibly powerful weapons at your enemy.

The most intense moments of my experience in World of Tanks don't involve ripping across a field firing off rounds as I fly through the air, ejecting from hills like ramps. Instead, they are the moments when I creep up the side of a hill and see a much more powerful tank guarding its side behind a building scooping the field below. It only takes one or two well-placed shots to take out your enemy — or to be destroyed — so the drawn-out duels that occur in these moments are intense and exciting.

Despite the intensity of battle, World of Tanks isn't much to look at. You're a destructive tank and making your own path is empowering, until you notice most of the destruction animations are simple. Walls exist in two states: broken and not broken, with little animation occurring in between. Its simplicity serves gameplay, as it's easy to understand when something can be broken, assisting in lining up shots, but it's hard not to notice the subpar physics while plowing

through the destructible environment.

The levels are distinct in layout, each offering different routes and tactics, but placed in front of me as a series of images, I wouldn't be able to tell you the difference between them. World of Tanks thankfully steers clear of dystopian cityscapes filled with nothing but brown and grey favoring bright green fields and valleys, but they're hard to distinguish from one another until you pull up your map.

Since the game is free to download, lots of people are playing, but few are committed. The ones who do strap on headsets are children using the platform to practice newly discovered profanity. A radial dial of quick-commands is available, and you can mark locations on the map, but commands are often ignored. If you want to play tactically, you'll want to bring a team.

Among the five different tank classes available, you begin with the faster light tanks and the medium all-around tanks. Eventually the slow-moving, but powerful tank destroyers and heavy tanks become unlockable as well as the long-range artillery tanks. These tanks allow you to stay back from the fight and fire from afar, but you're reliant on the light tanks identifying your targets for you on the map. My favorites were the medium tanks, which let me straddle the line between long-range sniper, and someone able to move about freely to help call out targets and take part in fire fights.

Progression involves using experience and currency to upgrade your tanks along branching paths, which eventually open up options

to buy other classes of tanks. Progression is frustrating, as before you can pay to unlock an upgrade, you must pay to research that upgrade. Confusion continues when buying a heavy tank, which involves leveling up an entirely separate light tank to a certain level in order to even open up the heavy option. The confusion incidentally encouraged me to stick with single tanks I liked and level them up to their full potential, as opposed to trying to collect a wide variety.

Thankfully, even without spending real money, experience and currency comes fairly quickly. You can purchase the currency with real money, or activate the premium mode for a certain number of days to nearly double what's earned from each round without paying too much out of pocket.

Part of the appeal of World of Tanks is collecting its historically accurate tanks. This aspect of the game is lost on me. I know nothing about tanks and their history, but I still enjoyed my time in its world, even without a knowledge of why owning an American M3 Stewart is more exciting than owning a German UC 2-pdr.

The PC version's three year head-start gives it nearly three times as many tanks as the Xbox 360 version, as well as myriad content and feature updates, which are planned as free future updates for the console version. To dive into the PC version of the game today is intimidating. Xbox 360's World of Tanks is a much more welcoming experience that eases you into tank combat without fear of becoming overwhelmed.

World of Tanks lacks humanity, which diminishes any opportunity for personality. The only human aspect of the game comes from the quickly ignored chatter on the radio. You're a robot lumbering across a green field on a beautiful day taking part in a firefight, but the slowed-down pace is welcome. It opens the game to players learning how to play a shooter, but also appeals to long-time shooter fans who rarely get the chance to appreciate the nuances of firing a weapon at another human player in a virtual space. ♦



Portable Ops

People around the world are getting in shape, making friends, and travelling thousands of miles in the name of Niantic Labs' cyberpunk experience Ingress.

At this year's GDC, virtual reality was on the minds of many. The idea that players could strap on a headset and interact with a computer-generated world is irresistible to everyone from Oculus Rift to Sony. Perhaps as a counterbalance to that concept, some people are using technology not to isolate themselves from the world around them, but to enhance it. They're banding together in large groups and travelling the globe – the real one – to pull off high-tech ops with names like Operation Ursa Major and Operation Blue Whale. Welcome to the world of Ingress.

"It was really designed as much as anything to provide a little extra impetus to go on a walk, get your kid out to the park – and have just enough of a game to have that pull to it," says founder John Hanke of Niantic Labs, a startup within Google. "It's been surprising for me to see the level of commitment that some people have to the game itself."

In Ingress' fiction, the world is filled with portals – often tied to art and other points of interest – which offer a link to a mysterious extra-dimensional energy source, XM. Some people, the so-called Enlightened, see it as a stepping stone toward the next stage in human evolution. The Resistance see it differently, and are working to keep humanity free from the influence of XM and the Shapers, an alien intelligence behind it all. The story is told through comics, novels, and a series of polished news broadcasts on the Ingress YouTube channel.

At its core, Ingress is a simple game. Using the GPS on an Android smartphone, players interact with portals that are scattered throughout the real world. Here's the catch: you have to be within a certain radius of the portals. Once you're within range, you have

several options depending on the portal's status. If the opposing faction has already claimed it, you can attack it. If a member of your faction has claimed it, you can help boost its defenses. You can also link these individual portals

"If there are any three that are linked, it creates a field in between them that captures all of the mind units [a scoring unit that represents people] of the population that are in that triangle for your faction," Hanke says. "The whole metagame is about making these triangles between the two teams. Often, people are trying to make these links between hundreds of thousands of miles, so they'll be travelling between countries or working very closely between people from another country to coordinate those. You have to actually have a key from the portal; you want to make a link in order to make these long links, and you have to get the key at the portal. That means you have to

either visit that portal – if it's hundreds of thousands of miles away, you have to get it – or somebody has to get the key and then shuttle it to you."

These kinds of handoffs can be as simple as driving across town to meet a friend who also plays, to driving to a neighboring airport to join up with a stranger who's passing through. Some missions, called "ops" in Ingress speak, are the result of months of planning and extreme lengths that include chartering planes. The game has more than a million active users, according to Hanke, which is likely to only increase as an iOS version hits this year.

"What's cool about that is that it has nothing to do with your nationality," Hanke says. "We saw a great example of that in the Middle East, where these Enlightened agents from Syria, Israel, and Cyprus were all coordinating to do this thing together, crossing some of the most controversial international boundaries on the planet. And yet, they're on the same team. That's a really positive thing." ♦





PLAYSTATION'S PAST, PRESENT,

FUTURE

A

t this year's Game Developers Conference, *Game Informer* was offered the rare opportunity to speak to three of the most influential men in PlayStation history: Sony Computer Entertainment founder Ken Kutaragi (the creator of the PlayStation), SCEA president and group CEO Andrew House, and PlayStation 4 lead architect Mark Cerny, who is also founder of Cerny Games. We spoke to these three visionaries about matters ranging from the company's humble beginnings in video games to the future of the PlayStation 4. Their answers give insight into the business and development philosophy that has governed PlayStation's past, and will guide its future.

How difficult was it to get the original PlayStation vision through Sony, which had a completely different perspective on gaming?

Ken Kutaragi: [They] thought at the beginning that a video game was a kind of toy. Once they released my first Sony gadget for kids, many people at Sony did not like [the idea] of a toy with the Sony brand name. But I [thought] computers had a tremendous ability to handle real-time entertainment in the future. We're not a toy business, so we wanted to introduce cutting-edge technology into PS1, PS2, and on to expand the game market into the mainstream entertainment market. Right now, this industry is one of the main entertainment industries.

Do you ever get to one of those board meetings now and say, "Oh, look at the income for the video game division?"

Andrew House: I don't think I've told this story before, but when I told my former boss at Sony that I was going to go work for Ken, his first reaction was, "But it's a toy! How can you go work on a toy?" I said that I thought it has more potential than that, but that was exactly the reaction.

KK: We tried to call it the "computer entertainment" industry, but many people had the image of the video game as a boys' toy. [When] Sony bought the movie operation from Columbia and Tri-Star, they named it "Sony Picture Entertainment." The music was "Sony Music Entertainment." That was one of the reasons we created Sony Computer Entertainment as a division. Sometimes, [former CEO

Norio] Ohga-san suggested that, "Sony Computer Entertainment was such a big name, why are you using that – such a grand name – for a video game?" But I personally believed computer entertainment would become a big industry, all around the world, in the future.

Mark Cerny: Do you recall when we first met? I have actually never told this story. We first met in 1993. When you had your T-Rex demo, the dinosaur demo you were taking around. Maybe it was summer CES '93. You were doing your tour to get developers up to speed on the hardware, and I had this very technical question which was, because I had been working with 3DO, and 3DO would take rectangles and kind of twist them to make them 3D-like, but you were just kind of drawing lines. My question was:

"Is PlayStation the first hardware that can do real 3D?" And the answer was "Well, of course it can." The rest is history. [It] changed my life.

How has competition changed within the industry, whether with direct competitors in the console space or forms of other entertainment? What was it like to communicate to a consumer base that was still fairly young versus today's more mature, more educated, more connected audience?

AH: That's a very big question. I think that the landscape for me has shifted dramatically in one way, but certain key things remain true. The direct competitors we have now did not exist when we first started out on this journey. On the other hand, I think what's always been true is – and I think Mark talks to this very eloquently – is that the industry's health is driven by creative talent. Regardless of who the platform holders are, [it's about] really trying to see where that gaming talent is coming from, where those creative impulses are coming from, listening, and trying to deliver the best creative palette to allow that to come to expression. I don't think that's fundamentally changed.

I think what is interesting in terms of how the network has changed things is that we're really just doing – in a different form – what Ken pioneered with the original PlayStation. I remember one of my first meetings with Ken was where he laid out how CD-ROMs were going to transform the business. In a very typical quick-fire presentation, he said, "This is how retail is going to change; this is how development is going to change," and I bought in. I retained that outlook about network distribution. What it's fundamentally done – in its best instance – is give consumers more flexibility and more choice.

I often find myself in debate with analysts – last night, for example – talking about free-to-play. Maybe it sounds overly optimistic, but any of these distribution methods are viable, as long as consumers are responding to it. Our role is to be as flexible as possible. So we tried to design PlayStation 4 to be the console that was most welcoming to the free-to-play model, because – if consumers are saying that's one way in which they want to purchase content or interact with content – we need to embrace it. The risk is that you get tied into an older model and are not willing to rethink that or to feel somewhat threatened by it, where the true goal should be to retain as much flexibility as you can.

The indie game market and our willingness or our very heartfelt desire to reach out to a new community of developers is another aspect of that. If new talent is emerging from mobile, why wouldn't you welcome that into a console environment?

You had a great launch for PlayStation 4. Did it go as you planned?

AH: It's certainly gone very nicely. I think that the most encouraging thing for me around the PlayStation 4 launch has been the degree of player and consumer engagement. When we were reviewing the interface for the PlayStation 4 and the degree to which it was a heavily networked device, heavily dependent on people being engaged and connected with each other, I said, "What if we throw the party and no one shows up?" They reassured me it was all going to be fine.

Fortunately, there is this whole community out there that has been very engaged with the platform from day one, broadcasting their gameplay, sharing their experiences, broadcasting themselves very often using Playroom, using these things we had planned as an opportunity to have games connect people in a different way than perhaps they had before. Seeing how people have responded in the millions, seeing the fastest ramp-up of any launch we've seen on a console, has really blown us away.

When we talked at the launch, your goal was five million by March 31, and you've blown that out of the water. Looking back, was that a conservative estimate?

AH: "Hindsight is 20/20," to quote the old phrase. It's easy now to look back and say, "Oh, they were being so conservative about it." It's a vastly changed landscape than when we launched previous consoles. Consumers are engaging with a much broader array of devices for gaming and connectivity than ever before. I think that we tried to take a reasonable view of where we thought the market would be. I think some things took us by surprise. We underestimated the degree of which camera adoption would be a big, big part of the early adoption of this launch. We underestimated the power of something like Playroom. We took the step of bundling that into every single unit we had worldwide, but we didn't think it would end up being a broadcasting platform for users to connect with each other.

The reality is millions of people are waiting for PS4 and currently enjoying playing PS4 games, and that is such an exciting [thing] for me. I had nothing to do with any of that, but as the father of PlayStation, I am so happy."

— Ken Kutaragi



KK: Personally, I was so amazed. So many game players have been waiting for the PlayStation 4. Everyone in business is saying, "Oh, next." They say they're making smartphones or something, but the reality is millions of people are waiting for PS4 and currently enjoying playing PS4 games, sharing gameplay, and that is such an exciting [thing] for me. I had nothing to do with any of that, but as the father of PlayStation, I am so happy.

MC: Ken, when you were creating PlayStation, I think you were looking at the potential of powerful custom graphics hardware, powerful custom systems, rather than off the shelf [hardware]. So there is a technological dream at the core of what was being created. When we worked on PlayStation 4 there was, of course, technology there, but also we were thinking about how a device could connect people and how people could connect with that device. Hardware is very important, but I think today it's a smaller part of overall what we are trying to create than perhaps what it was many years ago.

Now that you've gotten it out of the door, is there anything you see you would have done differently?

AH: I don't mean to sound complacent, but with so many aspects having resonated so well it's hard to pick on certain things that one would have done differently. I was talking with Mark yesterday and we looked at a few key points where the decision we made was correct. I'll cite a couple of them. [There were] memory choices that we made. That was the subject of very long and deep debate within the team. Mark's smiling, because he and I were a large part of going back and forth and making that decision. It turned out to be one that was absolutely correct. It's not a major one, but I was a big advocate for the PlayStation camera and that it was going to be a bigger part of the landscape than we were anticipating. Not to be critical, of some folks in our organization, but I think there was a bit of conventional wisdom that said, "If you look at most console launches and look at the adoption rates of a core peripheral, they tend to be very low." I think we did sort of subscribe to that a little bit. As a result,

we underestimated the potential in that area.

But as I said earlier, the critical thing in the new environment with connected consumers is your ability, once you see the product in the market, is to shift strategy and respond very quickly to the things that are resonating most with your players, as opposed to having something that is set in stone.

MC: On the decision to have 8GB [of RAM], I was smiling because our roles are very competitive. I'm supposed to look at the hardware and talk to the developers. I am not a business guy. There is an organization Andy runs, which is the business organization. So you don't want to speak up too soon. If you speak up too soon it's like, "That's a billion dollars we are talking about. Mark is good with the bits and the bytes but he doesn't understand this whole business thing." I very intentionally waited. They asked, "What do you think Mark?" I said, "Well, let's get feedback from the developers." I did not speak up until the very final meeting on the topic, and then I said, "I think we have to do this."

You held that ace. You said, "If I am going to win one argument, this is going to be the one at the end."

MC: You do not want to express a casual opinion.

AH: And he didn't express a casual opinion, because when he finally did get his opinion, he had a PowerPoint presentation prepared, a list of feedback from developers with reasoning behind this. He certainly made a case when he made his case. And it was a good one, and we were gravitating toward that decision.

MC: That was bigger in its impact than I thought it would have been.

Without listening to the industries that tried to make a case for their own technology, the result...the onus is on us as a company to ensure that doesn't happen here."

— Andrew House





AH: I think I'd be remiss in not mentioning some of the decisions the competition was making at the time around the ways that they envisioned the consumer engaging with the network or around the issues of used games. We are proud of the fact that, at the heart of PlayStation 4, we had a mantra: "Consumer focused and developer-inspired." That sounds like a great slogan, but it was really at the heart of what we did. We used it as a guiding point to guide us on these key decisions. Being more flexible on how we saw the consumer engaging with the network, that was part of being consumer focused and it felt true to what we were trying to bring with the device.

Looking at the way in which we engage with games, how does PlayStation Now change the relationship? It seems like a shift – in talking with developers and talking with publishers – from a monetization perspective, in the way consumers engage with product and changing the ownership proposition.

AH: Right. I have two thoughts on that area. One is that, in my view, the reason that we are engaged with PlayStation Now is a realization of how the network is going to almost continually shift distribution models. It's shifted music, film entertainment, and television, with a streaming model as being a much more prominent part of the landscape. I sense that that could well be a new method of distribution or interaction with games.

The key for me, though, is that I'm excited about PlayStation Now because it's going to be beneficial to the industry if it removes barriers to entry to a wider base of consumers. It becomes additive to the market overall. What I mean by that is, if you can offer the kinds of level of experience without the need for a dedicated device, then that does create

an opportunity to bring in new users. That's got to be a good thing for the health of the industry overall.

What we need to do is work out a fair and equitable way where there's a value exchange, where the consumer is paying for something that they feel has value and the publisher and the developers are [still] equitably compensated around that. That's for us to work out as a business and an industry. But the point is we drive the industry forward by experimentation and by trying to challenge these new models and challenge the current thinking, not by trying to ignore it and say that change will never come. Without wishing to sound critical, other industries that tried to be too protective of the current wisdom and current distribution models suffered as a result of that. I think the onus is on us as a business and as an industry to ensure that doesn't happen here.

I read that when it got down to the final decision on industrial design of PS4, you got two physical copies of the final design options and looked the two over to make a call.

AH: I actually did choose the design of the console, and I lost sleep over that decision. The full story was that the original design – with all due respect to [PS4 industrial designer Tetsu] Sumii-san – I was not all that happy with at all, so I sent him back to the drawing board. I gave him a few things I was looking for. One was that it [needed to be] a design that was true to the PlayStation DNA. To his credit, he came back with not two, but actually half a dozen designs that all did fulfill the remit. They were in sketch format.

I said, "I love these two, but you have to mock them both up, because until I can touch and feel and see the physical [object], I can't make a decision." So he



did that, and then I took the two away out of the meeting room, put them in my office, and then they sat there for about a week. I kept looking at them and kept coming back to them. One of our executive team [members] who I was talking to for advice said, "Console decisions and designs are an entirely personal issue." So he was more or less saying, "You're on your own!" [Laughs] Once the design was fixed Ken came to the office and looked at the design, but he didn't tell me what he thought.

Did he make the right choice?

KK: That is up for you. [to dec de] [Laughs]

Certainly, having a successful E3 last year was important, but I would say this year's E3 is even more important.

AH: Thanks Andrew, just pile on the pressure. [Laughs]

Well, this is where the rubber hits the road, right? This is where the software really comes and the developers have to show what the hardware can do. Obviously there

have been some impressive games early on, but it's difficult to make games in that early timeframe. What do you need to do at this year's E3?

MC: If Andy agrees, this the headline: "Andy House at E3 2014 is where the rubber hits the road."

AH: I think you're right, the second year in a console life cycle is critical and is about delivering on the content promise that's laid out around the vision of the platform. I think that, for me, we're already on a good path. I look to the comparison chart of previous platform life cycles, and the degree to which ourselves or other publishers are launching major new IP, and it's a good story on PlayStation 4.

Whether it's Watch Dogs, Destiny, or The Order, we're seeing already in the early part of the life cycle people not just delivering iterations of great franchises, which is hugely important for the health of the business as well, but also branching out and wanting to deliver very ambitious and new experiences. I think we'll have a very good story to tell about that at E3. <>

OVERHEARD

at
GDC

More than 1,000 attendees came to this year's Game Developers Conference talk shop and glean insight from the industry's best and brightest. Many headline-grabbing talks explored the technology and crossing social barriers like sexism, racism, homophobia, and stereotypes in video games. The session also delved into particulars like narrative, kickstarting games, and the internet hate machine. Here are some of the notes from the conference that stood out.



"George [Lucas] had simple rules for us: 'Stay small, be the best, and don't lose money.'"

— Steve Arnold on the early days of Lucasfilm Games

"When you create a Kickstarter, to a certain degree you are cashing in on people's goodwill and belief in you. If you breach or violate that you can't go back."

— Scaev co-creator Steve Swink

"I've never realized how much of my personal sense of self was tied up with, 'I am a game developer.' Now, what do I put on my credit card applications? That's been a surprisingly steep hurdle that I'm not actually over yet."

— Deus Ex co-creator Warren Spector, who has transitioned into teaching

"In older generations, Japanese made things work by being creative, not by being resource-rich. I feel like that situation is similar to where we indies are today in Japan. We may work better with restrictions and limitations because, when that situation is in front of us, we are very creative. I feel like the indie situation today will push our nation in a much more creative direction. Perhaps we will find the next Japanese video game creator hero in this era? I feel that there is a small light that will grow into something bigger in the future. I hope we can push that forward."

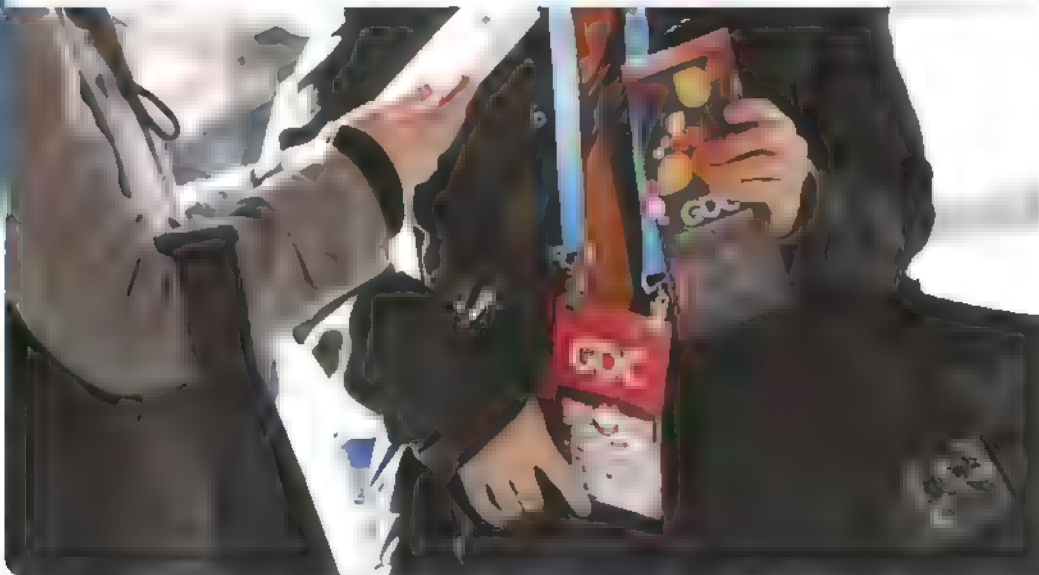
— Mega Man co-creator Keiji Inafune

"Of course I want to make one. If I have the right opportunity..."

— Yu Suzuki on the possibility of making Shenmue 3

"A renewed focus on Windows and PC gaming inside Microsoft is definitely happening. You will see more focus from us -- not to go compete with what Valve has done, but because we also understand as the platform holder it's important for us to invest in the platform in a real way. We're fundamentally committed to that."

— Microsoft Studios head Phil Spencer



"Now that I've gone independent, I can create things as I wish and not adhere to the company's wishes. If there is a desire, I believe I will be able to turn that into reality."

— former Castlevania producer Koji Igarashi

"Plot is highly overrated...focus on the things that users will retain. Focus on character."

— Riot Games narrative lead Tom Abernathy

"We believe that the time is absolutely right for an independent publisher to blossom. We think that we are that independent. We have the majors, as I call them, and a very active independent scene. But we are a global publisher that can fill a gap that other companies have filled in the past, but aren't around anymore. The market needs someone like us."

— Deep Silver CEO Klemens Kunderlitz

"Life is too short to worry about anonymous Internet negativity. What these people are saying and doing is a reflection on their life, not yours. It only matters if you let it. Never forget that it's meaningless noise...fighting back on their level is pointless."

— former Microsoft creative director Adam Orth



"When you're taking something from the slot machine industry, you really have to ask yourself what kind of moral ground you're standing on. This trend [of Skinner Box design] is actually not only morally reprehensible, but actually bad for business if you just design down the hole leading to addiction."

— New School journalism professor Heather Chaplin

"We live in a time when a young black child can envisage becoming the president of the United States or a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, but not a game developer. Even the indie scene has a huge problem with diversity."

— NuChallenger game designer Shawn Alexander Allen



Three Intriguing Indie Fantasy Games

by Matt Miller

I've enjoyed every one of DrinkBox Studios' games, including the Tales From Space series about alien blobs, and the humorous luchador-meets-Metroid-themed Guacamelee. This month, the indie team gave us an exclusive look at the next big project on its horizon – a fascinating action/RPG called **Severed**.

"Severed is a very different game from our previous ones," says animator and concept artist, Augusto Quijano. "It looks quite different since it's not a side-scroller, a first for us, and the tone is much more immersive." Instead, Severed is played entirely from a first person perspective, with touch-based controls that are used to explore a dreamlike world and combat its many denizens.

"The main character is a distraught warrior," Quijano says. "She is lost in this surreal place and it's up to the player to figure out what's happening. The world blends the past and the present as the player pieces the story together." As she explores, she improves her abilities along a prescribed path. "Over the course of the game your character's basic stats grow, but it's RPG-light, more akin to Legend of Zelda – you're not stopping gameplay to micro-manage every time your character improves," says lead designer Greg Lesky. "The goal was to give the player a solid sense of growth and progression without forcing them to allocate time to choose how to level up."

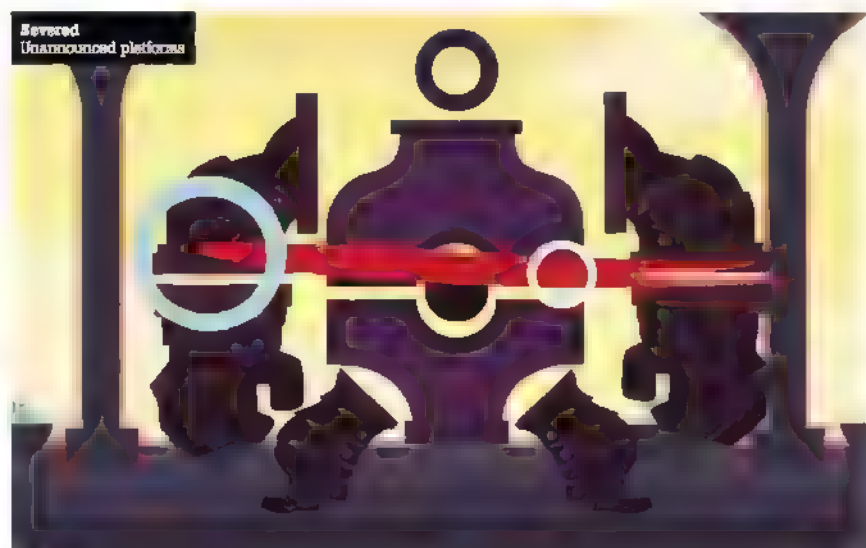
The bulk of the game is made up of several open exploration areas that can be investigated in any order. While these areas can be tackled when the player desires, some offer more challenging enemies better suited for later visits. The team likens the combat to games like Infinity Blade, where touch-based swipes and taps are used to bring down your

foes. However, in Severed, multiple enemies can be confronted at one time. "We wanted the controls to feel intuitive," Lesky says. "It's vital in combat situations when surrounded by multiple enemies, as you'll need to quickly strategize and attack enemies while defending and dealing with different threats."

Careful observation can offer helpful clues to weaknesses in an enemy's defenses, similar to the classic Punch-Out games. "If a player charges in blindly with blades flying, they'll do some damage, but not nearly as much as if they were to find a weak point," Lesky says. "More aggressive players also risk taking more damage as you need to be careful to plan your defense." New abilities

unlocked through the progression system can further aid you in combat. "Like in Mega Man, powers you earn from one part of the world could provide an advantage in another part," Lesky says.

Severed remains in a very early state as of this writing, and even the images on this page represent target visuals rather than actual in-game screenshots. However, I'm impressed by DrinkBox's ambition. Platforms remain unannounced, but the touch-based control system implies the strong likelihood of systems like 3DS, iOS, or Android. Severed won't release until 2015, but DrinkBox is already working hard to prepare playable demos that should begin to hit the big gaming shows throughout 2014.



Looking for more on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, news, previews, and reviews. For more independent games in this issue, check out our previews of *Helldivers* (p. 72), *Hohokum* (p. 73), *Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues* (p. 75), and *Pier Solar HD* (p. 77), and our reviews of *Luftrausers* (p. 89), and *Towerfall Ascension* (p. 89).

Hyper Light Drifter looks to be a fascinating project in its own right, and its inspiration is equally compelling. Developer Heart Machine is headed by Alex Preston, who has openly discussed the way *Hyper Light Drifter* arose from his own severe medical issues throughout his life. "It's always been something I have wanted to pursue, but I didn't have the right motivation until my health declined rather rapidly over the past few years," Preston says. "Near-death experiences and disability tends to lend perspective and urgency to those who suffer from it."

The game follows a drifter moving through a distant future world ravaged by a long ago war. The drifter suffers from an intense illness, and much of his journey centers on his search for a cure. Gameplay mechanics draw on old classics like *Zelda* and *Diablo*; your character moves through the game world engaging in combat and exploration, and slowly discovering the history of the place.

Players acquire materials and technology that can be turned in for upgrades at a central hub, and you'll also unlock new skills with which to utilize an array of cool equipment. "You always have your melee weapon, a hyper light sword," Preston explains. "This will quickly dispatch most enemies, but it remains a dangerous option when faced with large crowds. You will have the option to equip two secondary items, such as a flesh-melting railgun, various explosives, and drones that seek out enemies. You also have a quick dash and rapid wall climb to remain mobile." In addition to your combat equipment, you're also accompanied by a sprite that manages inventory, downloads map data, and alerts you to secrets. "It's also adorable and never says, 'Hey! Listen!'" Preston says.

I'm excited to explore the world Preston describes for the game, which includes enemies like toad people, explosive birds, and poison wolves, moving through environments like a "massive water shelf overtaken by monstrous toxic plant life" and "a deep forest rife with phase-shifting crystals." The distant future setting helps set *Hyper Light Drifter* apart, and the 16-bit art style is beautifully presented. *Hyper Light Drifter* is targeting PC first, but Heart Machine also plans for a release on PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, and Vita - look for it before the end of 2014.



I also had a chance to explore an early demo for Discord Games' **Chasm**, a 2D fantasy adventure rooted in the traditions of *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, but with procedurally generated levels. Players control a soldier returning home in response to a letter threatening his family, but he becomes trapped in a strange mining town he seems unable to escape. He delves into the nearby mines to figure out what strange magic is affecting the settlement.

True to the expected form, *Chasm* has players jumping through vertical and horizontal caverns, slashing at monsters, collecting treasure chests, and occasionally returning to the surface to resupply. Unlike most games in the genre, the layout of the underground is new and abynrth every game. "We hand-design all the rooms in the world, and create a big repository of possible rooms for each area," says producer James Petrucci. "When the player starts a new game, a large map is generated for each area utilizing the hand-made room templates. Enemies, treasure, and traps are then placed into them procedurally, giving you a new, different experience each time you start a new game. There are still fixed points in the world where the procedural parts connect together."

As you explore, you uncover new power-ups that expand both your moveset and the locations you can visit. "As you play, you will find

new acrobatic abilities such as sliding, ledge-grabbing, wall jumping, and flipping," Petrucci says. "We also have some cool equipment to find like snorkels, lanterns, and more." Combat focuses on close-up melee with your sword, including various swing combos and charge attacks, but you also gradually unlock spells that add a ranged component.

Beneath the cursed town of Karthas awaits a widening web of distinct locales. Beyond the mines is a creepy set of catacombs filled with necromancers and skeletons, and even further along you can reach a lush underground jungle garden. All told, *Chasm* has six sprawling underground zones in store for intrepid explorers.

Discord hopes to release *Chasm* on Windows, Mac, and Linux before the end of the year. While my brief playable demo only gave me about 10 minutes to explore, it was more than enough to put the game on my future play list. ♦

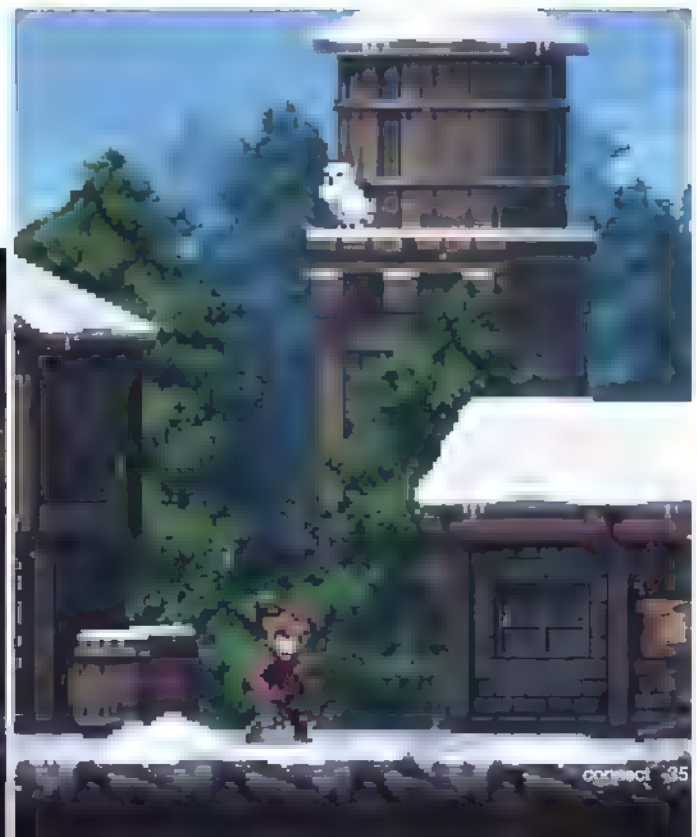
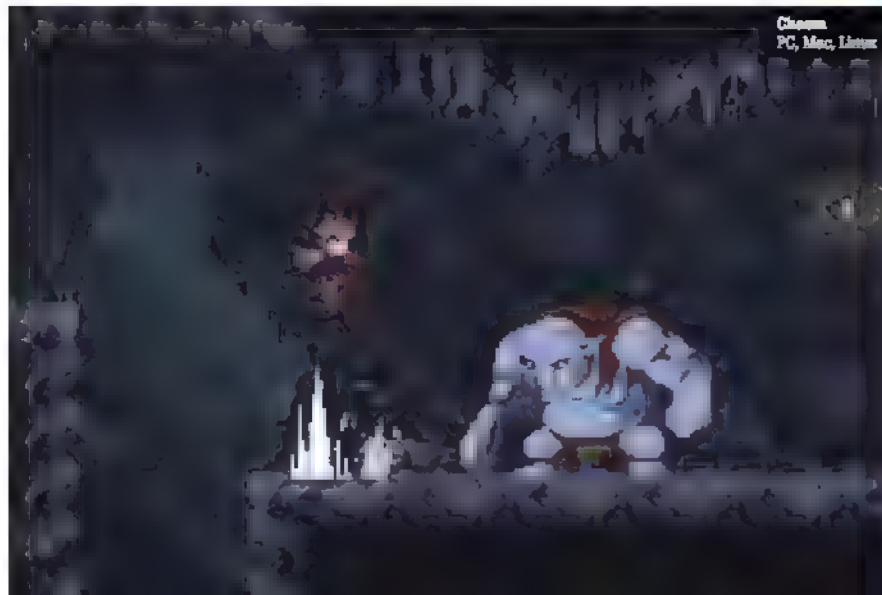




photo: Jason Henry

A Virtual Sensation

Palmer Luckey and his virtual reality headset, Oculus Rift, have caused major waves in the gaming landscape with the news that Facebook acquired the company. We spoke to Luckey about the deal and how it will affect his plans for the Oculus Rift.

interview by Matt Helgeson

You'd been approached by larger companies looking to buy Oculus Rift before and had turned them down. Why did you feel differently about the Facebook deal?

The main thing is that the companies that had approached us – and we'd been approached by many – were looking to use our team, technology, and brand to promote whatever they were doing, to rip apart what we've built and use the pieces to build their own thing. We had zero interest in that. Especially if you're going to work with an established player in the game industry, where they already have a market, they have a brand, and they have a business plan. They don't actually want to build something that's going to destroy everything they've built around that. Facebook doesn't really mind if we destroy traditional gaming, or if we heavily impact it. They're not in the traditional games space, they're not a console manufacturer, they're not an electronics manufacturer, and they're not a hardware company. There is a lot of room for them to let us do what we do

So they offered you the ability to continue business as usual?

Business as usual with whatever we want to pull out of Facebook if we need it. We're going to be the same – the same team in the same building, doing the same thing, building the same product the same way, except better, faster, and cheaper.

Why will it be cheaper?

It's [about] what you can do within financial reality. If you're a small company and your only revenue source is selling hardware, you have to make margin on the hardware. Otherwise you're not going to be able to pay people and you'll go out of business. When you are part of a huge company like Facebook, we can focus on making the product as good as possible and as cheap as possible without making margin on the hardware. That lets us get it to as many people as possible without having to compromise.

It's obvious that Facebook would want you to explore different applications of virtual reality besides games, be that social networking VR or other forms of entertainment VR. Does this acquisition push those things higher up on your priorities list?

Not really. It's always been on our priorities list. We always knew that communication and all those other things like architecture, travel, film, and the like will be very important for VR. But, at the beginning, games will still be what drives virtual reality. It's still the only industry that's equipped to build interactive, 3D environments and that's not going to change in

the near term. The games industry really is in the driver's seat right now.

Are there any changes or improvements to the Oculus Rift that were out of reach before that you'll be implementing because of the resources that Facebook has?

There are a huge number of things, from hardware to software to people. Our roadmap has been built on what's possible. We have a wish list of things we want to do but were just impossible without huge piles of cash – hundreds of millions of dollars. These are things you can't do unless you are a multi-billion dollar company. We're going to be able to do pretty much all of those things now. It's not just in the long term; even in the short term, the consumer Rift is going to be a better product that sells for a lot less money. That should get it out to a lot more people. I believe that if a product is not affordable, it might as well not exist for a huge number of people. The number of people that the Rift is affordable to, just massively increased.

Could you speak specifically about some of the hardware or software improvements that you're thinking about now?

I can't talk super specifically, but in terms of hardware, one of the things that's really enabled the Rift to become so good so fast is piggybacking off the mobile phone industry, which has put out a lot of incredible technology. But the fact remains that we're still dealing with the scraps of the mobile phone industry. Now we have the resources we need to build all custom hardware wherever we need to – to build things that are optimized for virtual reality, not for mobile phone use. That is going to make a big difference in the hardware we can deliver. It also lets us make bigger, bolder investments in content – first-party content and third-party content – to try to get as many virtual reality experiences out there as possible.

The ultimate goal is a Rift that is not tethered to a PC and has its own internal hardware that can produce the virtual reality graphics and experiences?

That's the ultimate goal. It's not what is going to happen for the first consumer product, but that is the ultimate goal.

Oculus Rift came out of a culture of very hardcore gaming enthusiasts and electronics hobbyists. Some of the reactions to this deal in that community have been very negative, especially in terms of the association with Facebook. Was the reaction more negative than you expected?

I expected a negative reaction, and I can't really blame a lot of these people. Facebook isn't an obvious partner for Oculus, unlike a company like WhatsApp or Instagram where

you see where they fit together perfectly. But I think that, as time goes on, people will realize that the sky is not falling, that Facebook has the same vision for VR as we do. They are going to leave us alone to do what we think is best. They're not going to come in and change us to be an advertising platform. They have so many resources – from talent to money to partnerships to connections – that are going to let us do things that people are going to be convinced by. I'm 100 percent convinced that, a year from now, almost everyone who might be upset today is going to look back and say, "Wow, that really was the right decision. I see why they did that."

Notch tweeted that he was canceling Minecraft for Oculus Rift. Have you had any other developers express concerns about the Facebook deal?

Not really. Every developer we're working with has been super excited. They want to know that VR is a thing they can bet on, and that it will have a large audience that they can use to pay their bills. Notch is one of the few people who has not been happy. I think he's a super cool guy and I hope he changes his mind. But keep in mind that he's had a Rift for over a year and he hasn't really done anything around Minecraft and VR. It's easy to cancel a project that hasn't been started. I think he'll see what we're doing and come around.

Is there the concern that as Facebook steps in that indie developers might get shunted to the side?

It's kind of a crazy thought. People assume that because Facebook is a big company, the indies are going to be crushed. That doesn't make sense. If you look at the people that make Facebook games, it's not triple-A developers like EA and Ubisoft making games for them. It is largely indies. In our case, we already have a huge indie community. If anything, it lets us invest more in our indie community, in a financial way but also in better developer tools, better developer relations, and better publishing initiatives.

You've said that you ultimately want to create a connected virtual reality experience. Facebook is already connecting millions of people, so is there a way you can leverage its existing infrastructure or use its expertise in that area?

There's talk about it, but that's way farther down the road. There's no clear path for Facebook as it exists today being part of the Rift experience. It wasn't designed for VR; it's a completely different thing. That's going to change over time as we figure out how to do these types of experiences. But, like I said, the focus right now is to ship what we've always wanted to ship, which is focused on gaming. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2009

THE GENESIS

Luckey, who'd already been designing prototype VR headsets, posted on a 3D enthusiast message board his intention to create a 3D VR headset and fund it through Kickstarter.

2012

THE BIG SHOW

At E3 2012, Luckey and his partners show off Oculus Rift, which garners a lot of attention from attendees and the press.

2012

KICKSTARTED

Luckey and his partners launch a Kickstarter campaign for his prototype VR Oculus Rift headset. It blows by its modest \$250,000 goal, eventually raising over \$2.5 million.

2013

LEGEND ON BOARD

Founder of id Software and programming genius John Carmack, who had been involved in the project since its inception, joins Oculus Rift as its chief technical officer.

2013

BIG MONEY

On the heels of its successful Kickstarter, Oculus Rift secures \$75 million in funding from the firm Andreessen Horowitz.

2013

BIG IMPROVEMENTS

An updated version of Oculus Rift is shown at E3 2013. Its new 1080p display functionality is hailed as a huge step forward for the unit.

2014

CRYSTAL CLEAR

A new Oculus prototype with much less motion blur, codenamed "Crystal Cove," is on display at the Consumer Electronics Show. It wins best of show honors.

2014

NEW BLOOD

Atman Binstock, who formerly headed up VR development at Valve, joins Oculus Rift as chief architect.

2014

SINCERE FLATTERY

On March 25, Facebook acquires Oculus Rift for \$2 billion in cash and stock. Under the terms, Oculus management and structure will remain unchanged.



XBOX ONE STEREO HEADSET ADAPTER



The release of new consoles offered many gamers an excuse to buy a new gaming headset. But if you feel like your current set still has a lot of life left, then you might be reticent to throw down a big chunk of your paycheck on a new pair. Unfortunately, Microsoft's Xbox One controllers use a proprietary headset port, meaning they don't work universally with most headsets on the market. Thankfully, Microsoft just released an adapter allowing last-generation headset hardware to talk with your brand-new console.

An update released in early March enables this adapter to work with Xbox One controllers, but you'll have to plug your controller into your console using a USB cable and update the firmware manually (via the Settings menu). Once the firmware is installed on your controller, the headset adapter can be used with most stereo gaming headsets that feature a standard 3.5mm audio jack. The majority of the headsets we had on hand worked with the adapter. However, Tritton's Warhead and Primer headsets are not compatible with the adapter, and neither are Xbox 360 wireless and Bluetooth headsets.

The unit's built-in controls make it easy to adjust the volume or mute your mic. These buttons also allow you to mix audio – you can diminish voice chat so you can focus on the game or bump up your companions' audio allowing you to coordinate a strategy. While the adapter doesn't seem to affect a headset's audio output, we occasionally got reports from other players that our microphone was washed out or stucky.

It's unfortunate that Microsoft didn't have this adapter available for the console's launch, but many online gamers will be glad it's finally available. The Xbox One Stereo Headset Adapter isn't a perfect solution for incompatible headsets,

but it's a cheap fix that will meet many gamers' needs.

AVCRAGE 
\$24.99 xbox.com





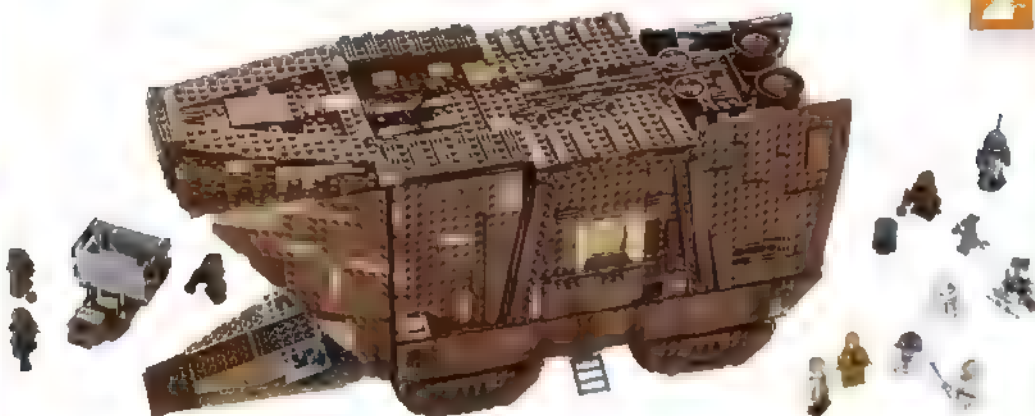
*price varies based on contract

1 Sony Xperia Z1 S

Look past this phone's boxy, sterile design and you'll find a powerful little device with a lot of gaming potential. Sony's waterproof Xperia Z1 S features a 2.2GHz quad-core Snapdragon 800 processor and 2GB of RAM and 26GB of internal storage, which makes it a breeze running Android 4.4.2 Jelly Bean. You can pair a PS3 controller to the phone and play great games such as *Switch Galaxy*, *Life of Pixel*, and *Chimpact* via Sony's PlayStation Mobile app. The system's hefty 3,000 mAh battery keeps the phone charged through a full day of use, and all of the pictures we took using the 20.7-megapixel camera looked fantastic on the phone's crisp five-inch HD screen. Unfortunately, the Xperia Z1 S is a T-Mobile exclusive, but considering its potential, we hope Sony will bring this line over to other providers soon.

VERY GOOD 

Starting at \$599* | sonymobile.com



2 Lego Star Wars Sandcrawler

LEGO's new Star Wars Sandcrawler is composed of 3,296 pieces and measures nine inches high and 18 inches long, so putting it together quickly requires a strong connection with the Force. The set comes with seven minifigures — including Luke, Uncle Owen, and four Jawas, as well as eight tracks complete with steering functions. The Sandcrawler's front ramp opens and the top is removable, so you can check and see if you ever found those droids you were looking for.

\$298 | lego.com



3 Xbox One Media Remote

If you're tired of yelling at your Xbox four or five times before it pauses your movie, then Microsoft's first officially licensed media remote for the Xbox One might save your voice. The remote's matte, silicon finish feels great, and a gyroscopic sensor lights up the face buttons — which is handy when you're fumbling for the remote in the dark. Unfortunately, the slim design sticks to the bare media essentials, so you won't find any numbered buttons or Xbox One controller face buttons on this device, which

makes apps like YouTube impossible to use. Thankfully, the remote still interfaces well with other streaming services like Hulu and Netflix. The Xbox One Media Remote is handy for media playback, but users may want to wait for a more fully featured remote.

AVERAGE 

\$24.99 | xbox.com



BRAVE WAVE: IN FLUX

East meets west as Mega Man composer Manami Matsumae joins *Ninja Gaiden* composer Keiji Yamagishi, *Spelunky* composer Erik Suhrke, and *Sword & Sworcery* composer Jim Guthrie for an original 12-track video game-inspired album.

\$10.00

store.bravewave.net

GAME OF THRONES: A POP-UP GUIDE TO WESTEROS

Based on the Emmy Award-winning opening sequence to HBO's *Game of Thrones*, this crafty pop-up book recreates popular locations such as Winterfell and King's Landing. The magnetic binding even allows the book to be unfolded and laid out like a 3D map.

\$65.00

store.hbo.com

MICHAEL JORDAN: THE LIFE BY ROLAND LAZENBY

Drawing on interviews with Jordan, his coaches, and his family, sportswriter and educator Roland Lazenby charts the athlete's rise through the NBA as well as the flaws that make him human, such as a gambling addiction.

\$30.00

hachettebookgroup.com

SAGA, VOL. 3 BY BRIAN K. VAUGHAN & FIONA STAPLES

The winner of the 2013 Hugo award for Best Graphic Story continues the tale of two soldiers from opposite sides of an intergalactic war who fall in love and go AWOL to raise their child. Unfortunately, they discover that war is hard to run from.

\$14.99

imagecomics.com

The Changing Definition Of "Gamer"



by Matt Helgeson, Senior Features Editor

Every Tuesday, I co-host *Video Games Weekly*, a radio show on the local sports talk station in the Twin Cities. During our last show, we got a call from a young listener which got me thinking about how the term "gamer" now means something very different than it did when I grew up.

After going through the week's big releases and news items, we generally take listener calls and questions in the second half of the show. This past Tuesday, we got a call from a nine-year-old girl (the producer obviously thought it would be cute). I'll omit her name, but she had a question that I couldn't answer: "Who Invented Campus Life?"

I had no idea what she was talking about, so I quickly googled on the studio computer and found the game on its Google Play store page. Basically, it looks like a point-and-click sorority simulator, and not exactly the most inspired example of game design. We asked her why she liked it and she said, "Well, you can go to parties and have boyfriends and push a bunch of buttons and stuff." (Keep in mind, she's nine years old.)

After the show, I thought about her call and how I've observed my niece and nephews playing on their iPads or PC during family get-togethers. As far as I can tell, there's a secret economy of simple, free-to-play games and apps like *Campus Life* that are pretty much unknown to anyone over 14 or 15. My niece always seems to be playing one. My nephews have a PlayStation 3 used mostly for *NHL 14* (due to their recent entry into youth hockey) and *Minecraft*.

It started me thinking about the definition of the term "gamer." If you're reading this, it's likely that you consider yourself one, as do I. But it occurs to me that, as this industry continues to grow and change, so should our definition of gamer. While part of me was a bit depressed by the fact that so many kids are growing up playing games as casual and shallow – to my mind – as *Campus Life*, the more mature part recognized that this feeling was more due to my own anachronism and resistance to change.

Who am I to say that her experience with *Campus Life* is any less valid than my formative experience with *Kung Fu* for the NES (which, frankly, would probably seem laughably primitive to kids today). It's not as if *Kung Fu* is some sort of deathless classic. If she's having fun going to virtual sorority parties on an iPad, is that somehow inherently less worthwhile to her than playing *Skyrim*? While many "hardcore gamers" turn up their noses at social gaming, is playing *Candy Crush Saga* on Facebook really that different than playing *Tetris* on the original Game Boy?

The fact is that, for many kids in elementary school, their first and primary experience with gaming is going to be on a parent's tablet or phone. This generation might embrace consoles or PC gaming, but their primary gaming device is likely going to be a touchscreen device of some sort. Some will move onto more "sophisticated" games and some won't. In either case it's likely that the gaming icons like Mario and Link that many of us hold dear won't mean any more to them than Pong means to me.

I thought further back, to an interview I conducted with Howard Scott Warshaw years ago. Warshaw was one of the most gifted game designers at Atari in the heyday of the 2600, and is

famous for creating the classic *Yar's Revenge*. He was also unfortunate enough to have drawn the assignment of creating the infamous Atari E.T. game in a matter of weeks.

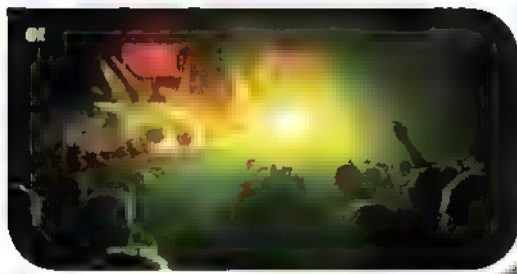
When speaking with Warshaw about the game industry and how it had progressed over the years, I asked him what he thought of the current crop of more graphically intensive and sophisticated games. To my surprise, he bristled at the suggestion that they represented progress at all. In his estimation, any game that wasted time on fluff like storytelling and fancy graphics was gimmickry – distractions like narrative had no place in a medium that Warshaw felt should be devoted to pure gameplay. In his mind, the single-screen, simple arcade games of the late '70s and early '80s most purely represented that ideal. Cutscenes, dialogue, complicated progression system, and convoluted control schemes just served to dilute the pure gaming experience.

While I don't agree, his conviction was apparent. That was his definition of what "real gaming" was; I had my own. Ironically, many of the popular iOS and Android games of today – derided by "real gamers" as shallow – have a lot in common with the ancient arcade units that Warshaw loved. They are designed to be instantly accessible, hard to master, and, in the case of many free-to-play games, entice the player to part with as much of their money as possible. In some ways, it feels like we're coming full circle.

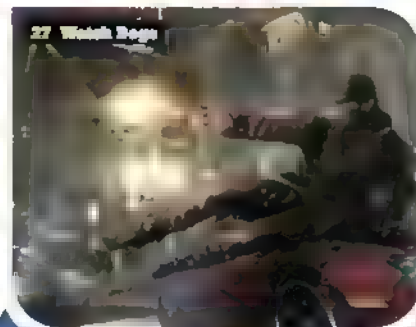
The point is: There is no one definition of "gamer" and there's no one type of gaming that's better than another. In a world where almost everyone plays games, maybe it's time to retire the term altogether. ♦

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

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



20 Wolfenstein: The New Order



27 Watch Dogs



30 Mario Kart 8



01 Eve Online Fanfest 2014

Stories of epic wars and universe-defining moments have come out of Eve Online, but we have a feeling some of this game's best stories come from its fanfest, starting today in Reykjavik, Iceland. Throw away any notion of this three-day expo being nothing more than gamers sitting in front of their computers. The events include a pub crawl with a dev, Blue Lagoon hangover party, concerts, and of course a huge PvP tournament.

02 Stunfest 2014

Running annually since 2006, Stunfest is a video game gathering held in Rennes, France. Home to the "biggest fighting games competition in Europe," attendees can soak up nostalgia through arcade machines and events catering to retro gaming. This event runs for three days.

02.1 New Releases

• Kirby Triple Deluxe (3DS)

02.2 Spider-Man 2 For The Second Time

Tobey Maguire must have made some powerful people upset. Hollywood's push to erase him from our memories continues today with *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. We hear new leading man Andrew Garfield will soon be replacing Tobey in other high-profile reboots like *Pleasantville 2015*, *Seabiscuit Runs Again*, and *The Amazing Cider House Rules*. Frankly, we won't miss him.

05 Jack Bauer Returns

The first episode of *24: Live Another Day* airs tonight. This two-hour episode is the first installment in a shortened 12-episode season that picks up four years after the series conclusion with Jack Bauer on the run in London. Turns out there's a global-scale threat at play, too.

06 New Releases

• God of War Collection (Vita)
• MLB 14: The Show (PS4)

07 DC Comics Five Years In The Future

Comic continuity warning sirens usually go off when time-travel or parallel realities come into play. Imagine what happens when both happen at the same time, which is the case with DC Comics' next big New 52 event, *Futures End*. In this standalone series, Earth battles another Earth, and a time-traveling Batman Beyond returns to the past to try to prevent the apocalypse from happening.

07.2 NeuroGaming Conference

Oculus Rift is obviously a big focus at this year's NeuroGaming Conference, but it's just one of many new technologies being explored for mind and body's use in gaming. The conference is held in San Francisco, CA, and runs May 7 and 8.

13 New Releases

• BlazBlue: Chrono Phantasma (Vita)
• Orange Is the New Black (Blu-Ray, DVD)

14 Amazing Spider-Man: Year One

Recent months of the *Superior Spider-Man* comic book have moved away from Peter Parker as the titular hero. In today's release, *Amazing Spider-Man #1.1*, Marvel promises to return us to the glory days of the hero with a glimpse at his first 60 days as a super hero. This five-issue arc is penned by Dan Slott, with art by Ramón Pérez, and covers by Alex Ross.

16 Breaking Godzilla

Remember when Matthew Broderick's *Godzilla* was going to be the biggest thing ever? It sucked! Don't let that bad experience sour you on giant radioactive lizards forever. Gareth Edwards' *Godzilla*, opening today, looks awesome. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White is in it, so the giant creature is probably mad about a drug deal gone bad...or the closing of his favorite Los Pollos Hermanos joint.

20 New Releases

• Wolfenstein: The New Order (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)

23 Welcome To Cameo City

The biggest challenge facing the heroes in today's theatrical release, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, is not some world-ending threat. It's cramming all of the different actors and their egos into a single movie. You'll see Patrick Stewart, Ian McKellen, Jennifer Lawrence, Hugh Jackman, Halle Berry, Anna Paquin, Peter Dinklage, and that dude who played cement. With so many characters, does this movie even have a story? Who cares? More Magneto, please.

27 New Releases

• Mind Zero (Vita)
• Sly Cooper Collection (Vita)
• Watch Dogs (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)

30 New Releases

• Mario Kart 8 (Wii U)

30.1 Seth MacFarlane Does It All

You probably know Seth MacFarlane as the voice of Peter Griffin from *Family Guy*, and the man who blackmailed Mark Wahlberg into being in *Ted*. Instead of just hearing his grating voice, you get to see him in his latest movie, *A Million Ways to Die in the West*. It also stars Charlize Theron and Neil Patrick Harris, and highlights the numerous perils of life in the Old West. People die unexpectedly from splinters, photography accidents, and bull stampedes. It's kind of like *Final Destination*, but funnier.

2014





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NEW ERA

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EPIC

Over the course of the last year, we've seen a lot of change in the world of esports. From the rise of new titles to the growth of the industry, it's been a year of rapid evolution. In this special issue, we take a look back at the year that was, and forward to the future of the industry. We'll explore the challenges we've faced, the opportunities we've found, and the exciting possibilities that lie ahead. It's a year of transition, and we're excited to see what the future holds for esports.



Fortnite: Surviving The Storm p. 41
An Epic Transition p. 56





Fortnite

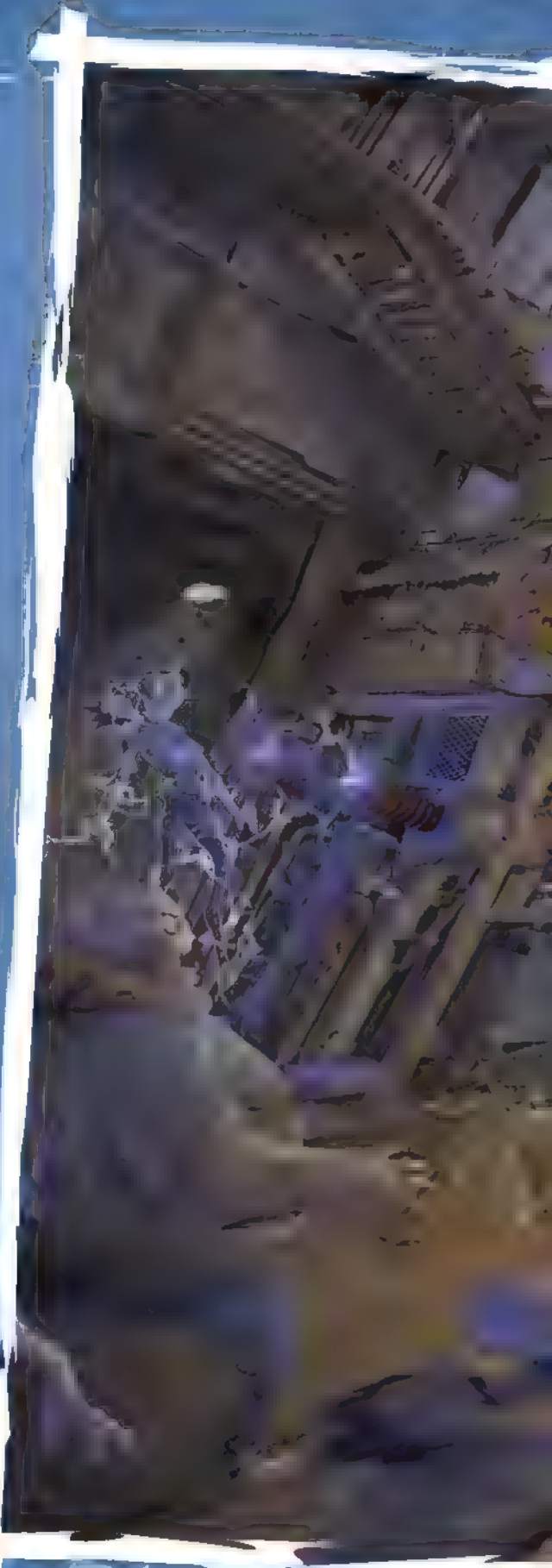
SURVIVING

the

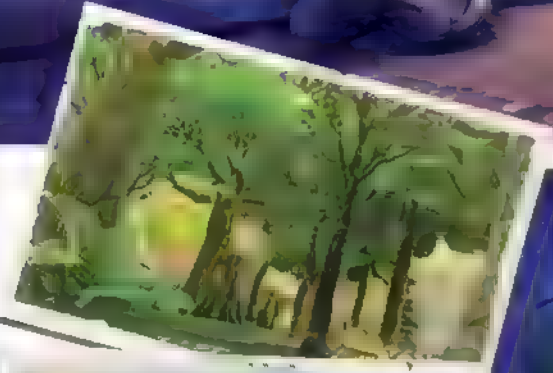
STORM

Fortnite: Battle Royale is a free-to-play, battle royale game developed by Epic Games. It is a survival game where 100 players are dropped onto an island and must fight to be the last one standing. The game is set in a post-apocalyptic world where players must build structures to survive and fight against other players. The game is available on PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and Nintendo Switch. It is a highly popular game and has become a cultural phenomenon. The game is known for its fast-paced action and strategic gameplay. It is a must-play for anyone who enjoys survival games. The game is a great example of how a free-to-play game can become a success. It is a game that has captured the imagination of millions of players. It is a game that has become a part of the gaming culture. It is a game that has become a part of the pop culture. It is a game that has become a part of the world. It is a game that has become a part of the future.

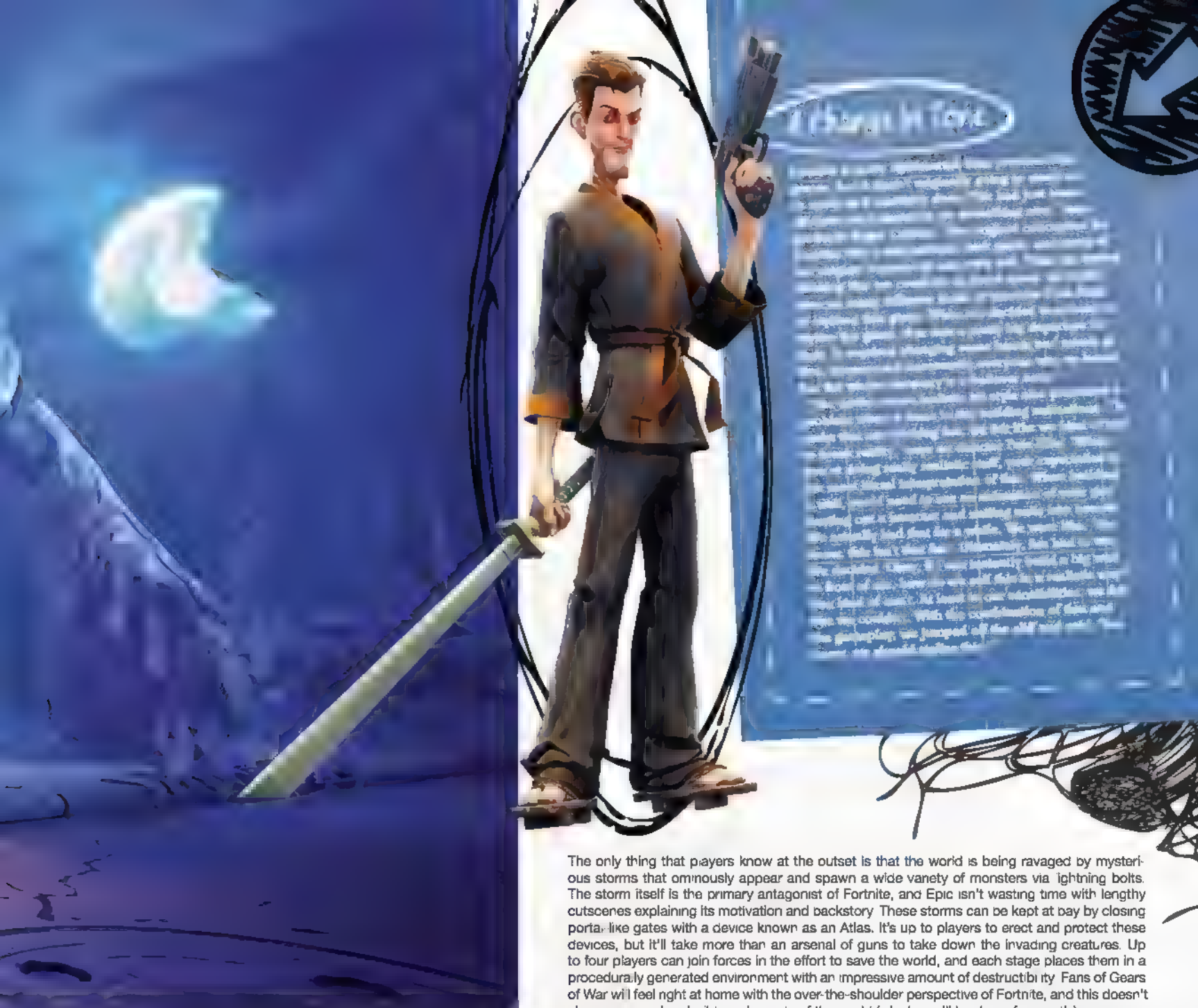
- PLATFORM: PC
- STYLE: 1 to 4-Player Action (Multiplayer TBA)
- PUBLISHER: Epic Games
- DEVELOPER: Epic Games
- RELEASE: 2018







Both males and traditional firepower are reflective of keeping the husks at bay



The only thing that players know at the outset is that the world is being ravaged by mysterious storms that ominously appear and spawn a wide variety of monsters via lightning bolts. The storm itself is the primary antagonist of *Fortnite*, and Epic isn't wasting time with lengthy cutscenes explaining its motivation and backstory. These storms can be kept at bay by closing portable-like gates with a device known as an Atlas. It's up to players to erect and protect these devices, but it'll take more than an arsenal of guns to take down the invading creatures. Up to four players can join forces in the effort to save the world, and each stage places them in a procedurally generated environment with an impressive amount of destructibility. Fans of *Gears of War* will feel right at home with the over-the-shoulder perspective of *Fortnite*, and this doesn't change even when building elements of the world (which you'll be doing frequently).

At its heart, *Fortnite* revolves around exploring the environment and harvesting materials in an effort to protect yourself from the storm's monsters. Variations of this formula appear in different game modes, but this is a fort-building game first and foremost. Preparation is key if you want to

close the gates, survive another day, and begin the process of rebuilding the world that's been ravaged by the storm. Players begin with a simple board with a nail sticking out of it, which can be used to pick apart trees, rocks, cars, and much more. The environments we saw were quite diverse, with rolling hills, canyons, caves, and town centers that can be explored to find materials and treasure chests that gift you new weapons and the occasional schematic—a blueprint that allows you to build an impressive tool or weapon after you harvest the appropriate resources. With just a board and a good amount of patience, we eventually leveled an entire police station by taking out its supporting walls and columns. In the process, we earned enough wood and stone to craft a variety of objects and structures.

Players won't fight through the same set of circumstances time and time again. The length of the campaign can be altered at the start, with Epic expecting the three current variations to take approximately 10, 20, and 50 hours to complete. Campaigns include a procedurally generated world map made up of hexagon tiles, each of which represents a stage.

Determining where to focus your effort is critical in the early minutes of a stage. Crafting a pickaxe takes time, but it pays off greatly in the form of increased harvesting speed. Taking down structures like mailboxes and cars rewards players with steel that can be used to craft defensive measures like sentry guns and spike traps. Weapons are a critical element whenever monsters rear their heads, so that's another item that players must make sure is on their checklist. Crafting weapons frequently uses different materials than building your fort, such as batteries, machine parts, and more. If you're already well-armed, gifting weapons and resources to teammates is as simple as a few mouse clicks.

AN EVOLVING GAME

In late 2011, the studio released a brief teaser trailer of *Fortnite* before going dark with any new information. It wasn't entirely clear what the gameplay would consist of, but the minute-long pre-rendered clip showed a group of people creating a makeshift shelter before monsters arrived at night. Gamers weren't exactly sure what to make of it, which is fitting considering Epic had yet to decide on many critical elements of the game itself. The developer had recently shifted from a more serious art style and tone (see sidebar), but the release format and pricing structures were yet to be determined. The team didn't know if it would be a downloadable title on consoles, a full retail release, or free to play. We recently spent significant time with the game at Epic's North Carolina headquarters, and can finally reveal what exactly players can expect to be doing in the game.

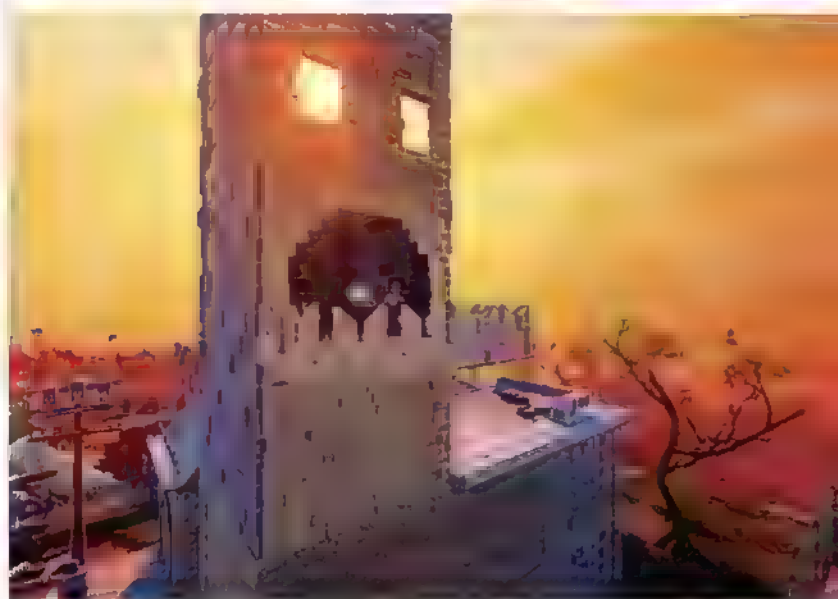
Fortnite is right on story, so much so that the development team simply refers to its setting as "the world."



Want to set up selective darkness?



Trying out different approaches to building facts is easy with the tools provided.





As your fort needs to be stationed around the gate to stand a chance, you won't always have the luxury of ideal terrain. We ran into one gate that was in a cavern of sorts, burrowed below the ground level. To compensate for this awkward placement, we had to build a series of stairs leading out of it and close the cavern off to prevent husks from easily hopping down and taking out our Atlas device.

Powered by Unreal Engine 4, Fortnite's enemy A.I. is advanced enough to smartly navigate around geometry and determine the best route to get into your base. Because of this, foresight is a requirement if you want to keep your fort standing. Some gate locations actually benefited our team, such as one that was placed near a cliff. We knew that the storm was coming from the direction of the cliff's drop-off, so we focused our traps on that side and launched husks to their doom within seconds of their spawning. As we watched the various enemies get caught up in our spike traps, we stayed safe in our elevated position and rained bullets down on the hapless foes. Eventually, our team's ninja had to jump down to ground level to keep husks at bay as they began to work their way through our walls. Despite thinking our plan was foolproof, we were still surprised and impressed at the enemy A.I. that managed to eventually break through our death pit and begin their assault on our fort with an ever-increasing amount of monsters.

DRAFTING A SURVIVOR

Before joining the fray, players select from one of four starting classes available at launch, and can customize their characters to their liking by selecting gender, vanity items, and upgradable skills that unlock as you level up. "We've hired a lot of guys from the RPG space that add a whole different flavor to the Epic DNA," Colm says. "Fortnite is going to have the traditional Epic point-and-shoot, fun, tight, and quick action, but they'll also get progression and the other things that people like about RPGs. It's very neat and very different."

The early levels we played followed the standard "build at day, defend at night" structure, but we saw more variation once we moved out of the early rounds. One was less constricted by time, as the storm's arrival wouldn't trigger until we actively engaged the Atlas device placed on the level's gate. Another started as an escort mission before the base defense elements began, tasking us with defending a walking radar bot until it reached a particular spot on the map. Once it arrived, we had to build a radar tower and defend it until the storm subsided.

Progressing through stages clears the fog of war from the hexagonal world map, allowing you to choose which path to take in your effort to reach the final goal tile. Even though each stage is procedurally generated, players encounter a variety of biomes as they push the storm back. Levels feature themes such as mountains, grasslands, suburbs, industrial areas, and possibly even seasonal areas near the holidays.

Each map is assembled upon entering the level, although the procedural generation is just part of the story. Epic developers have traditionally handcrafted every portion of their games' stages, and their experience isn't going to waste. Many larger structures and sections of the map are pre-built by the team, but their location within the world is determined by a complex system that ensures that their placement makes sense. You won't see a large industrial area on the side of a mountain, for example.

"There's been a period where we had to make it work before people started to believe it could work, because of course we knew how to do scripted content as a company," says Epic vice president of product development Paul Meegan. "We had people who were really experts at creating that carefully crafted moment to moment. There was a 'trust us' phase where everybody sort of had to say, 'We're going to do this and we're going to make it work.' It took time, but the fundamentals of the game were always good so it was easier to believe that we would get there because we didn't have to solve the fun problem. Over time, it emerged and started to become evident that there is this really nice middle ground where there are elements that are crafted and sculpted



and yet there's a huge component – probably 80 to 90 percent – that is procedural. But exploration, discovery, that feeling of possibility, those are all big parts of the game and the upside for the player is huge."

This impressive level of procedurally generated content is made possible largely thanks to Epic's new engine. "Fortnite demonstrates a lot of important engine capabilities," says lead designer Darren Sugg. "First of all, it's a large online game with a completely dynamic environment. The problem of handling many thousands of dynamic objects in an environment that fits is that just about everything in Fortnite is procedurally generated and can be destroyed, so there are really valuable combinations of technology there. You know the art style isn't really realistic, but it's pushing the rendering technology in some interesting ways."





HOME IMPROVEMENT

Players can take part in more than one campaign at a time, and all of their experience goes towards their overall account level that spans across the entire game. Fortnite can be played alone but has a clear focus on community and multi-player, so Epic is making sure that the infrastructure supports easy drop-in and drop-out co-op. If you're working on a campaign by yourself, notifications appear to let you know when your buddies are available. Hopping into their game should be simple, and you bring along all of your character's upgrades and schematics when you arrive in their world.

Each player has a home base, which is currently planned to feature an isometric view (though the development team has discussed the possibility of a 3D version that can be explored in third person). Here, players construct buildings using different resources than the in-game forts, such as fuel and machine parts. Your overall account level dictates which buildings you have access to build. Options include an armory, hospital, lumber mill, command center, dojo, and more. You slot your various class characters into these buildings, and their level will impart statistical benefits like increased harvesting rates and reload times to you and your fellow players while questing in the world. Making sure the appropriate class goes into the appropriate structure is important, as a commando in the armory is more effective than the same character in a dojo. As the classes max out at the relatively early level 20, staffing buildings also gives your veteran characters a purpose while you work on upgrading new ones.

Outfitting your home base greatly benefits your team—a lumber mill staffed by skilled constructors boosts the whole crew's wood harvest rate, and placing high-level ninjas in the dojo increases your squad's melee damage. With this system, Epic hopes to avoid balancing issues brought about by having players of different levels teaming up. A level 20 commando won't mow through enemies in a level five commando's game, but he or she brings the benefits of their experience if the home base is substantially upgraded.





This early concept art has glimpses at how the game looked before Spike changed the tone



Concept art for the game's early, more colorful and less grimy aesthetic



IF FOCUS ON THE FANBASE

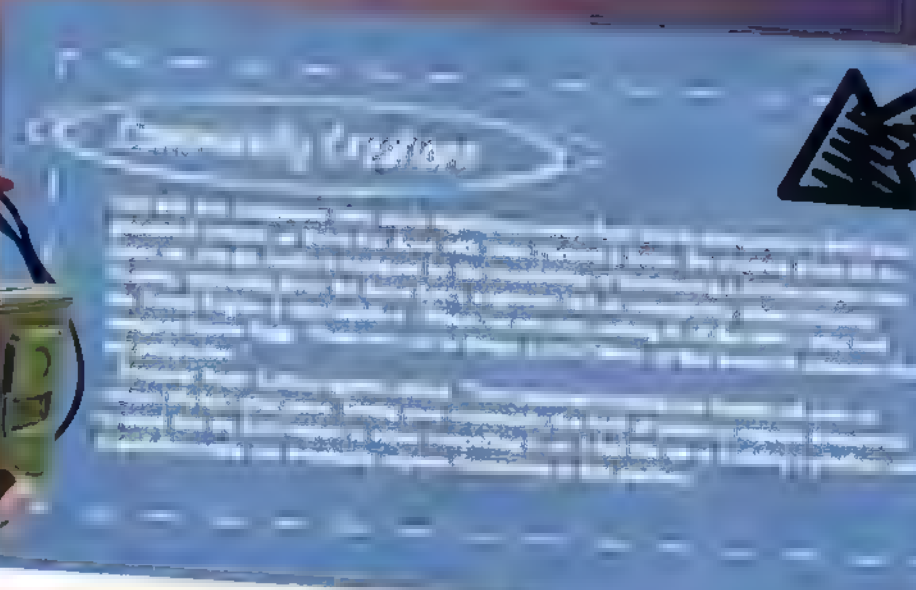
The construction and exploration aspects of Fortnite set it apart from many of Epic's previous trigger-happy releases, but its biggest departure comes in the form of its release method. Rather than being released as a \$60 title like Gears of War, Fortnite is completely free to play. The studio has never shied away from risky moves, and they're confident that they can embrace the new format without alienating fans with unpopular methods like "pay to win" and aggressive prompts to get their wallets out again.

"We haven't figured out all the details, but some of the things we're looking at are the way Riot and Valve do it," Meegan says. "A card pack model would be one example, where if you want to play the game and discover things and find loot and build up your inventory and create your home base and upgrade everything through time, you can, but if you want to buy card packs you might get more schematics, more heroes, vanity items like backpacks, or other unique things that are valuable to you as a player. Those are available for purchase if you don't have the time or you want to collect things more rapidly. Those are the kinds of things we're looking at, but there's a lot of ground we have to cover still."

"This is another area where I want to say that probably sometimes we'll get it wrong. When we do, the approach we're going to take is that we're going to listen and we're going to try to make it right. Gamers will tell us what works for them, and if we can do that then I think we'll succeed."

Sugg agrees with this sentiment. "There's a certain threshold in that you want to make sure your community is really happy before you launch a game," he says. "That is the ultimate truth of anything, it's the first truth before money, it's the first truth before publishing deadlines — if your community is deeply satisfied and happy, and they're going to tell their friends about the game, then

Strafers are one of the biggest threats that the music have to offer

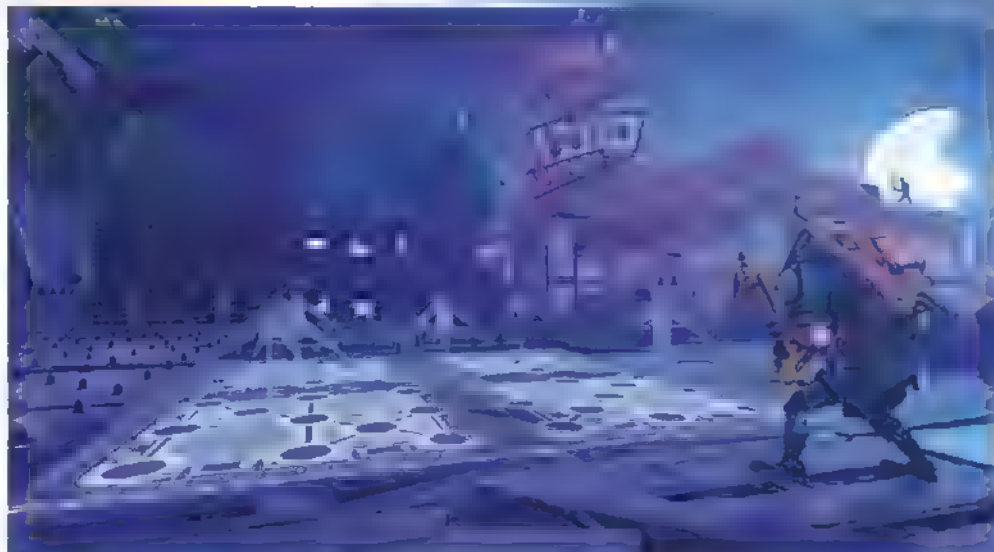


that's the metric for success. As a design team, that's awesome. Making a good game will make people happy and they'll come and play, and everything else falls out of that."

It's a bold move for Epic, but recent years have seen big studios succeed in the free-to-play space. They see this release as a marathon instead of a sprint, with an estimated 7- to 10-year life cycle. Considering that the studio has found success on PC, on consoles, and on mobile, there's no reason to doubt their ability to adapt to a changing industry.

Gamers can get their first chance to experience the game at various trade shows this year, and signups for the alpha are now available at Fortnite.com. The game's free nature and blending of several popular mechanics proved to be a fun experience in our hours with it, and should make Fortnite an intriguing product for consumers when it finally sees release. It's a bold move for the company, but it's exciting to see Epic attempting something entirely unlike any title they've developed before. ♦

Check out gameinformer.com/fortnite for a month's worth of exclusive Fortnite videos and additional coverage.







After a company tastes the spoils of success, change can be hard to embrace. After all, why would you drastically alter your approach when the current strategy delivered? But the reality is industries are always evolving, and those who don't embrace new methodologies often find themselves in compromising positions.

The video game industry is no exception. The cold indifference of change is a reality all companies must face, but it can be especially chilly for private companies standing on their own two feet with no safety net to fall back on. Over the course of its 22-year history, Epic Games has always been keenly aware that it's one or two mishaps away from diminishing in relevance like 3D Realms, failing outright like LucasArts, or being faced with the tough decision to integrate with a larger entity like id Software did with ZeniMax Media.

"We've been really successful at times, but we've also gone through rough times," says Epic Games founder and CEO Tim Sweeney. "During the development of Unreal, the company was funded by Mark Rein's American Express card, which was eventually taken away. That whole process of going through generational transitions in the past has been really humbling."

Moving from the Xbox 360 era to a new generation, Epic had every right to be complacent. Over the course of the last eight years, the private company created a flagship franchise for the Xbox 360, Gears of War, which sold more than 22 million units over the course of four games, and dominated the engine licensing business with Unreal Engine 3. But despite these triumphs, when the console transition started ramping up, Epic still conducted an honest assessment of whether or not it was still on a growth trajectory.

"It's part of our DNA now to expect that every decade we're going to need to make some dramatic changes to adapt to the new course of the industry," Sweeney says. "If you look at the overall industry, there are very few companies who are 22 years old or more. Most of those companies will do well for a while, and then there'll be some sea change in the way the industry operates and they'll be unprepared for it and they'll either go away or be taken over by another publisher or lose relevance. We're constantly paranoid of that possibility."

Instead of staying the course, Epic underwent a self-imposed transformation that resulted in a complete overhaul of its company priorities. It sold a large minority stake of its business to Tencent, the Chinese web services company that dominates gaming in its home country. Several of the figureheads who came to define Epic Games over the course of the last decade left the company. Perhaps most dramatic of all, the company threw its old game development playbook out the window, abandoning the traditional publisher/developer model to embrace the free-to-play/games-as-a-service approach that has been successful for companies like Riot Games (League of Legends) and Valve (Team Fortress 2, Dota 2).

Epic is no longer invested in making corridor-based, highly scripted games built around narrative arcs. Its new approach is much more open ended, focused on building a compelling interactive experience that will keep gamers coming back not for hours, but for years to come. The games are no longer about the stories they tell you; they're about the stories you create through gameplay experiences. Fortnite is Epic's first title to adopt this approach.

THE CHAMELEON COMPANY

Epic is no stranger to change. In 1991, when Tim Sweeney started the company out of his parent's house (then called EpicMegaGames), it operated as a shareware business much like id Software, 3D Realms, and Ambrosia Software. This economic model offered players a chance to try a section, or "episode," of the game for free, and purchase it only after they determined it was worth the money to complete the experience.

"We began as an early business where you're selling games directly to the customer, and there's absolutely no chance of success unless people love one part of the game and want more," Sweeney says.

With the creation of Unreal in 1998, the company transitioned into the traditional retail PC space, delivering both single-player focused experiences and multiplayer arena games like the popular Unreal Tournament series.

In 2004, Epic foresaw the console market growing dramatically, specifically with regards to the 3D shooter genre the company had honed an expertise in over the last half decade. Sensing a growth opportunity, Epic partnered with Microsoft to deliver Gears of War, one of the flagship franchises of the fledgling Xbox 360. By the end of the generation, Epic had made four successful Gears games.

But as the Xbox 360 era winded down, Epic found itself a part of a much different landscape than it saw seven



helped form a new 2K Games studio in San Francisco, and now finds himself back with the Gears of War franchise after Microsoft purchased the license from Epic and hired him to direct the new game. People Can Fly's Adrian Chmielarz and two other founders of Epic's Polish partner studio, which created Bulletstorm and worked closely with Epic on Gears of War Judgment, left to start a new indie studio called The Astronauts.

In October, Cliff Bleszinski announced his departure from Epic Games. Over his 20 years at Epic, Bleszinski played an instrumental role in the development of both the Unreal and Gears of War series. He also became arguably the most visible game designer in mainstream entertainment, with appearances on the late night television circuit and serving as a profile subject for *The New Yorker*. A few months later, president Mike Capps resigned as well. Capps is also well regarded across the industry, serving on the board of directors for both the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) and Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences (AIAS).

When this many people leave at once, it's easy to speculate that something is amiss within the company. After all, many of these big names cut their teeth on making traditional gaming experiences like Unreal and Gears – perhaps they weren't on board with the new roadmap? But Sweeney says there wasn't one specific reason or decision that drove each of them to leave the company.

"There were different factors," Sweeney says. "When we did that deal with Tencent, it was the first time in Epic's 21-year history that we had taken an outside investment, and that ended up being a life-changing event for some really long-time members who were shareholders in Epic. That gave everyone an opportunity to reevaluate what they wanted to do. Everyone was in a different situation."

"Cliff had been with Epic for 20 years. He worked extremely hard during that time and accomplished an enormous amount, and at that time he had just gotten married and he really wanted some time to think about his future and to figure out the next chapter in his life and he felt that would be a good time to move on. I think it's really awesome he was at Epic for 20 years starting at age 17. When Cliff decided he was going to move on, he got up in front of the company and gave a great talk. He talked about the things he had learned and gave some advice to the guys for the future. It was really a touching – a classy way to go."

years prior. Mobile games increased in both quality and prominence, indie gaming had given the PC platform a reinvigorating jolt of momentum, and some bold game developers like Valve and Riot were now focused on developing free-to-play, online-based titles that continue to receive new content rather than shipping boxed products and jumping from project to project. At the same time all this outward growth was occurring, some at Epic wondered if the arms race of bigger budgets and giant staffs in the high-end console space could eventually price out independent companies.

"One thing in common with all these triple-A projects is that they're almost all developed internally at publishers," Sweeney says. "I think the economics are a part of that. We also at the same time saw a cool transition in the industry toward really accessible games like Riot is doing with League of Legends – very player friendly games that have low barriers to entry and can be played by anybody. We're really attracted to that model. We thought that could be a great outlet for Epic in the next generation, bringing our combination of triple-A production values and our game development sense to a market that was rapidly emerging."

IN TURBULENT TRANSITION

Around 2011, the studio leadership began weighing its options. Not everyone in the company agreed that Epic should abandon its firmly entrenched console expertise and wade into the free-to-play arena. Some advocated for courting a more traditional and permanent publishing partner, which Epic also explored.

"We chatted with a number of different companies as kind of exploring the possibilities," Sweeney says. "We talked to some publishers in hopes that there could be some sort of arrangement where we could control our destiny but work with them on distribution. We'd also talked to Tencent and a number of other online companies."

As they continued to analyze the options, Sweeney kept returning to Tencent. A relative unknown to North American and European gamers, the Chinese company had swiftly rose to prominence as one of the preeminent Internet companies in Asia. With a vast array of business interests ranging from web portals and social networking to e-commerce and multiplayer online games, the company is bigger than Facebook, valued at more than \$100 billion in 2013. Two of its Chinese games, CrossFire and Dungeon Fighter Online, place number one and three respectively in the worldwide rankings of online game revenues. Number two? League of Legends, whose parent company, Riot Games, sold a majority stake to Tencent in 2011.

"Tencent struck us as a company that really thinks and operates like we do at Epic," Sweeney says. "They might be a \$100 billion company, but [the founder] Ma Huateng and the other executive level folks there, they're just a bunch of operating and business guys who want to do the right thing for their customers. They want to support building great games and they're very honest about what it takes to succeed in that business. It's not a marketing-centric business. Customer satisfaction takes precedence. It looks a lot more like a Riot or Amazon – all these really generous proactive companies – than a more traditional retail publishing marketing outlet."

In June of 2012, the two companies struck a deal. Tencent agreed to purchase a 48.8 percent stake in Epic Games for \$330 million, equating to 40 percent of total Epic capital inclusive of both stock and employee stock options. The unprecedented windfall changed the lives of a lot of Epic Games veterans, and cemented the company's change of direction.

Over the next year, Epic started hemorrhaging talent, many of them the public faces of the business. In August, director of production Rod Fergusson, who played a key role in the Gears of War series, left to help Irrational Games wrap up BioShock Infinite. He eventually left Irrational,

Through all of the transitions Epic Games has undergone, the one constant is founder, CEO Tim Sweeney



WHY GAMES AS SERVICE

To ease Epic Games' transition into a new model of game development, Sweeney hired a familiar face, Paul Meegan, to take over as vice president of product development. Prior to becoming president of LucasArts, Meegan had co-founded Epic Games China. Over the course of his four years overseeing engine-licensing deals in Southeast Asia, Meegan had a front row seat to watch the games-as-service model develop into a successful platform. Part of Meegan's job was helping wary Epic staff members see the potential of this new approach.

"The change is hard," Meegan says. "Don't get me wrong; there was a lot of heartburn. We've had a lot of discussions and company meetings to work through what it means to reinvent Epic all over again and move to the next chapter in the history of the company. It's taken a huge amount of energy to do it. But people are like, 'Okay, cool, Tim's still in it.' He's still the pillar of the company."

For Sweeney, the move to games as service didn't seem so unconventional considering how the company operated when it started with the shareware model.

"I felt that it would provide a really interesting return to our roots," Sweeney says. "Anybody can try [the game], and if you like it we have a means of earning money from it. Going directly to customers without going to this giant retail launch cycle and marketing - going back to a world where our game's success is solely determined by how much fun users are having and not by marketing budget and retail channel management and other complex factors like that."

The leadership group understood that if it could

combine its considerable game development talent and apply that to this new economic model, it had the potential to not only survive, but thrive. New sister studio Riot Games generated \$624 million in revenue just last year from League of Legends, according to SuperData - the profit potential was there. With both studios being partially under the Tencent umbrella, Epic now had the luxury to consult with Riot on all the new facets to the business it would have to learn to bring Fortnite to the market.

LEARNING THE ROPE

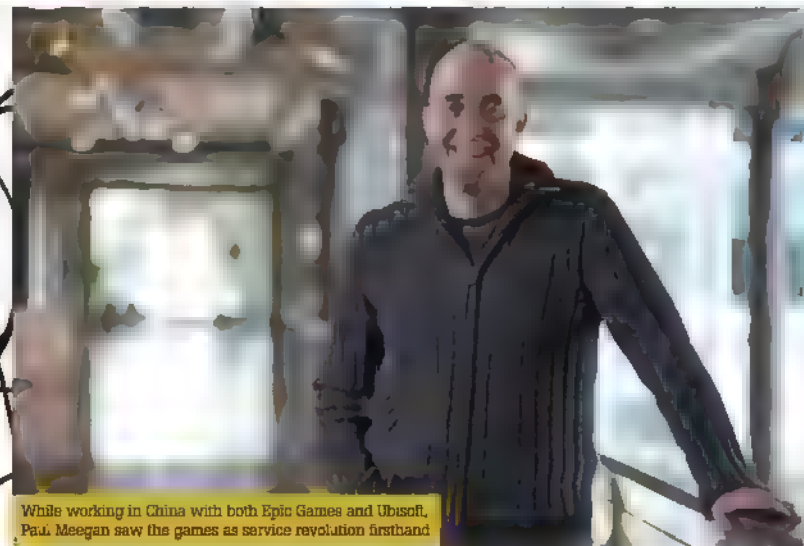
Epic may know game design, but before starting Fortnite, it rarely had to worry about the infrastructure surrounding its games. Gears of War ran on Microsoft servers, and Xbox Live architecture provided most of the other services necessary for the game. For Fortnite, Epic would need to build the technology to deal with website management, account creation, billing, customer service, staging for game updates, friends lists, native VOIP, matchmaking - in short, it had to learn several entirely new facets of the business.

"For a game company to get into the heavy infrastructure operation business, there are a lot of challenges, whereas there are awesome companies who have been doing that for a decade who can achieve a much higher reliability," Sweeney admits.

To aid in this cause, Epic has gone on a hiring spree, bringing in experience from outside the company to make sure the services are up to par. Delivering sound functionality is almost as key to making the game an accommodating experience as the actual gameplay. If you have unwieldy menus, bad matchmaking, overloaded servers, and poor customer service, players may just walk away. Epic's underlying philosophy as it relates to these technological challenges is simple.

"We're all gamers, so we look at it from the perspective of people who play games and we think what would we want and how would we want to be treated?" Meegan says. "How would we want to pay for games? How would we want to deal with community and events? If something goes wrong with our billing, how would we want to be treated? Would we want the cable TV experience where it's nearly impossible to cancel your service, or would we want to be able to have a way of reaching out and easily connecting with the company and having the right thing happen?"

If this sounds daunting, it's because it is



While working in China with both Epic Games and Ubisoft, Paul Meegan saw the games as service revolution firsthand.

"It is more risky and it is harder," Meegan says. "We went through the process of deciding this is what we're going to do, and we all know that things do go wrong in those models and you don't have the ability to say, 'Okay that's behind us, now we move on.' You have to actually own it and fix it. You have to do the right thing for the people that play the games."

Then there is the tricky nature of nailing down the economics of these types of games. Epic is aware of the shrewd and borderline evil tactics some game designers employ to extract money from its user bases, and it wants nothing to do with these aggressive approaches. Tencent agrees.

"In every meeting we have with them, they say, 'Look, we know we're a \$100 billion company, but trust us, don't be greedy. Just do the right thing. If you do the right thing every time over the long term, it pays off,'" Meegan says. "That's what we're trying to do. You see a company like Riot, which has taken a lot of that innovation and applied it here. The cool thing is it's a model that isn't exploitive and it isn't fundamentally about brain hacking and having paywalls. It's about changing the way you look at creating value and providing games for people. If it works and they are enthusiastic about it, yeah, they can get more deeply involved."

THE PROVING PERIOD

Over the course of the next few months, Epic will get its first taste of running a game as a service. Fortnite is starting with a limited closed alpha, and the development team plans to gradually grow the test user base as the systems all come online. This is a smart move when you consider the litany of games that have shipped recently with sketchy online performance, including Battlefield 4, Grand Theft Auto Online, and NBA 2K14. Epic wants to take it slow on purpose.

"I think the lesson that we've learned from looking at what's happened when other companies have rolled out games is that it's ideal if you can have a gradual approach to scaling a game," Meegan says. "Instead of having a retail-focused big monolithic launch event where you have one or two or three million people show up on a day, we're seeing how can we gradually bring people on and only expand the game as we can give people a good experience. That way we can fix problems as well; we want to avoid that because it can be frustrating. Even though people want to have access to a game as soon as they can, they also don't want it to be broken and they don't want to have the kinds of problems that have plagued really great games where the dev team probably did all the right things, but problems don't emerge until you flip the switch."

Another element Epic wants to get right before it launches Fortnite to the masses is the player experience. In consulting with Tencent, it learned that when you're making a game of this magnitude that you envision existing over the course of a decade or maybe more, you need to nail the core gameplay formula before you launch. The game needs to provide some value immediately if you want to bring someone back.

"One of the things they've educated us on is the science of player retention," Sweeney says. "They say that they don't want to launch a game until the internal beta achieves a certain percentage of retention of players from month to month because that's the absolutely objective, opinion-free way of measuring whether or not people are really happy with your game. Do they keep coming back and playing it? If you get to a certain point where most of them do, then you can be very successful. If you don't achieve that, then there is something wrong with your game and you need to identify that and try to fix it. It's a very iterative process. They've always viewed game launch as just the starting point for building on layers which is a complete shift from our philosophy developing games like Gears of War. The moment we got feedback we had very little we could do other than incremental tweaking of online play because the game has been developed and it's done."

To help the development team understand what works and what doesn't, Epic built a user experience lab in its Raleigh, North Carolina headquarters. These sort of tests are common in the industry, but are typically handled by a publishing partner or offsite third-party company. That approach creates a distance between the tests and the designers, which can make it easy for the development teams to casually disregard feedback. Epic wants its designers to take the feedback more seriously.

"The hard part is that if you get the advice or insight but you don't live close to it, it's really hard to value it," Meegan says. "You can coach someone through everything, but when you watch somebody play something and struggle or not have fun and you're on the other side of a piece of glass, you have to come to terms with the fact that it doesn't work the way you wished it did or it wasn't as obvious as you hoped. That's the benefit of having it in the building. It's one of those investments that it's hard to see upfront, and it can be a little intimidating and threatening to people because it feels like sometimes it takes away some of the control. We would never want to be a company that designs by A/B testing or crowdsourcing what is good, but it's also good to say we're going to make something that's creative that we really believe in, but then we're going to be really honest about evaluating if it works or not."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Though the winding path Epic is taking to return to its roots is fraught with potential pitfalls, its leadership believes embracing this change is a necessary journey to keep the company healthy. Yes, the studio lost a lot of its top talent during this transition, and having an outside company like Tencent so heavily invested in the company's future could introduce complications if Fortnite and Epic's other projects stumble out of the gate.

But now that the transition is full speed ahead, we could sense enthusiasm and confidence in this new direction from every person we spoke to in the studio, from art directors and producers to the game test lab and marketing departments. Getting everyone on board with such a drastic makeover isn't easy, but Epic has always had one powerful unifier in its arsenal.

"I think that the one constant in Epic has been Tim [Sweeney] since day one," Meegan says. "Coming from the outside and seeing the fact that Tim is fearless about saying, 'Okay, this is what we want to do and this is what we think is important' -- absolutely not sure how to do it, but burn the ships. There's really this sense of saying, 'This is the right thing to do and we'll figure it out.'" ♦



...services have thrived on that platform...
...on any platform you can play it...
...generation that wasn't necessarily...
...never seen before...
...development...
...on a platform -- consoles...
...because that's a way to...
...people, we'll do that too.





Murdered: Soul Suspect

Paranormal Investigations

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Airtight Games

» **Release**
June 3

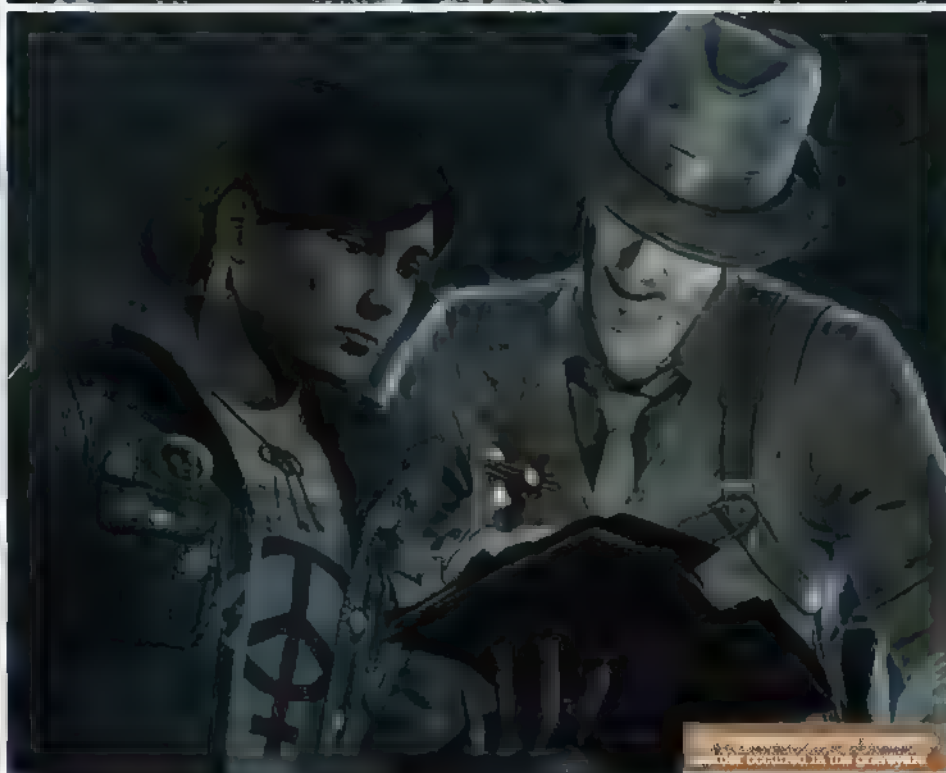
Being murdered is a stressful experience. Things get even worse for Detective Ronan O'Connor, who needs to solve the mystery surrounding his own death before he can move on to the afterlife. Airtight Games set me loose in its moody version of Salem, Massachusetts to start piecing things together. I investigated crime scenes, evaded soul-sucking demons, and explored a graveyard filled with wayward spirits.

Ronan and his enigmatic psychic friend, Joy, arrive at the Ashland Cemetery to investigate the paranormal activity there. The graveyard was originally the site of a quarantined sick house, later embracing

fate and becoming a full-time burial ground. The ghost of a dead girl flees deeper into the cemetery, as if beckoning the duo to explore further. Joy's intuition indicates a murder happened near the entrance to the cemetery, and begins shining her flashlight around. This segment involves thoroughly searching the area for clues about a corpse that washed up via the nearby river. I draw connections between found objects and mysterious evidence, choose descriptors of the crime scene to unlock new clues, and talk to the undead denizens for leads. Ronan can also possess characters to read their thoughts, influence their actions with clues,

and look through their eyes.

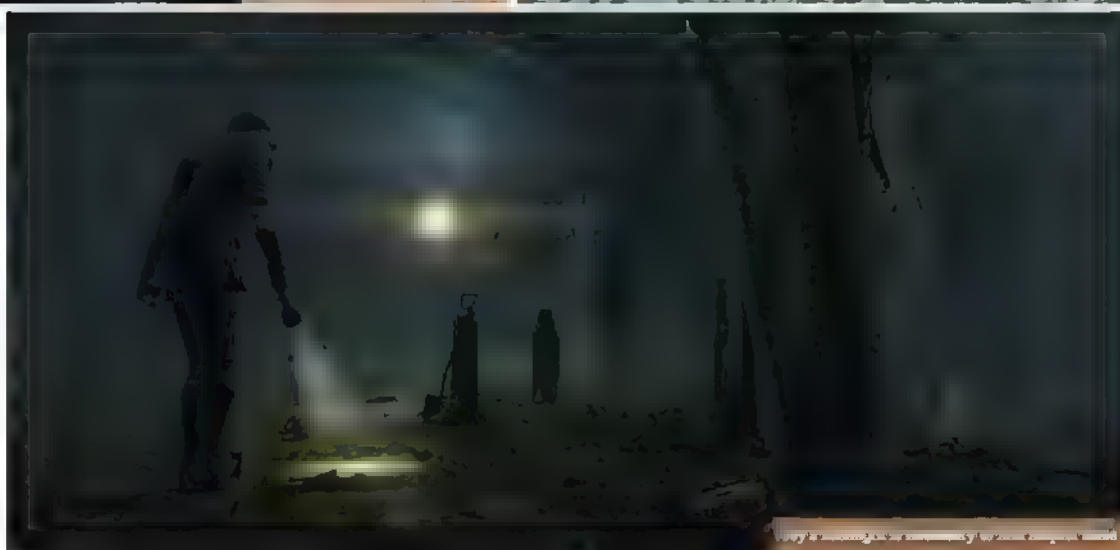
Joy and Ronan's hunt through the graveyard leads them to a section filled with nasty, prowling demons. Ronan hunts for closure to move on from purgatory, but these evil souls feed on other ghosts with the belief that it will end their eternal torment. These enemies often block Ronan's path, requiring him to find a route around them or take them out. Dimensional tears exist in the world, which Ronan can zap into to dodge demons. I choose to take out the threats by teleporting between these tears as demons wander near them. I target a group of crows with the distract ability. Their caws lure the demons and



expose their backs to me. Holding a shoulder button and a quick button press lets me banish the spirit. Creeping by these wandering foes is tense, and a unique way to break up the investigative gameplay.

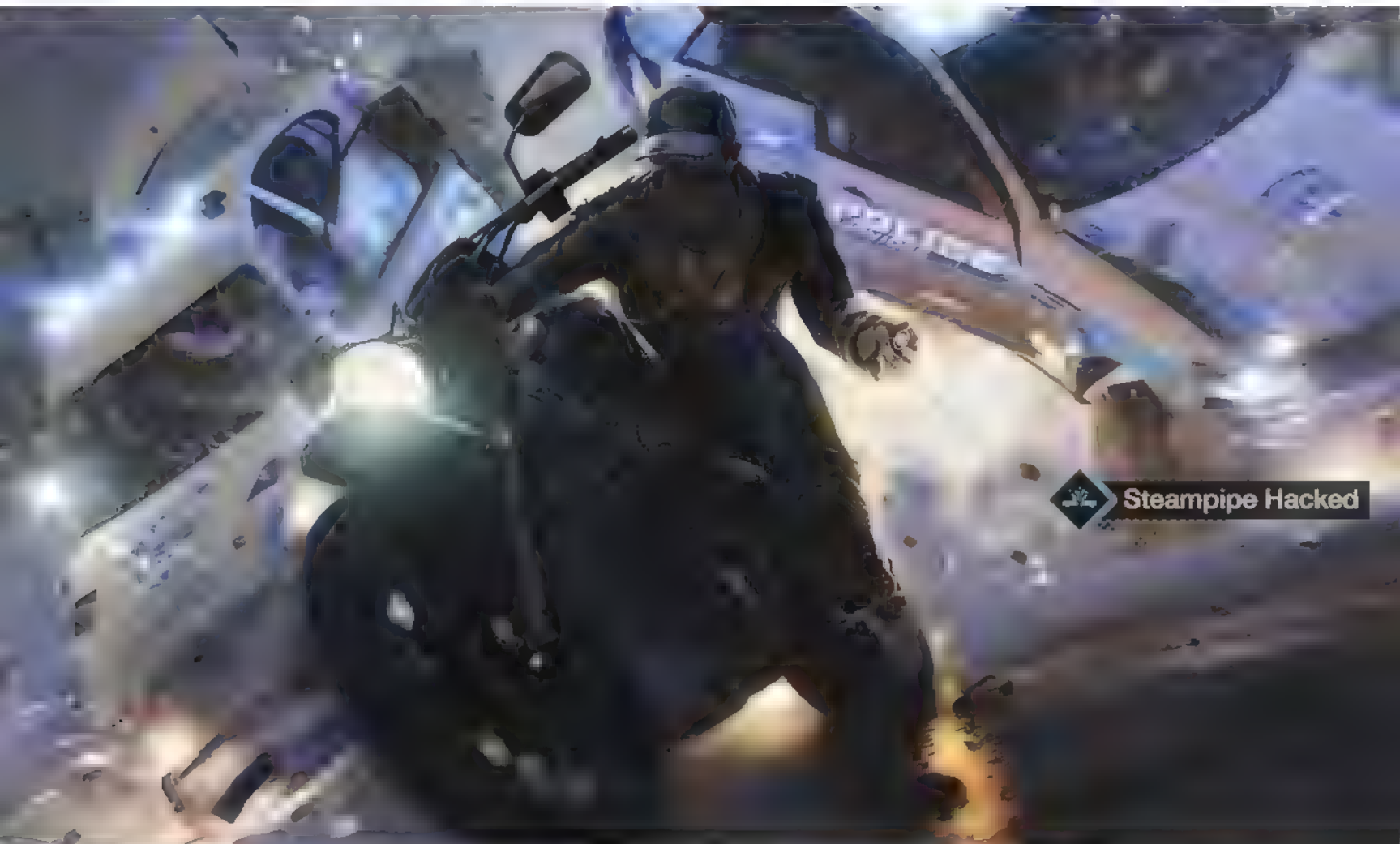
The trek through the graveyard concludes with Ronan confronting the girl's ghost spotted near the entrance. Interacting with the frightened apparition reveals new clues about Salem's mysterious Bel Killer, who may have something to do with Ronan's own death. Images flash showing the girl being killed in something resembling a witch trial, suggesting a link to Salem's dark past. I won't ruin your experience with the supernatural murder mystery by revealing anything more.

Murdered: Soul Suspect's focus on exploration and story is a tempting enough package on its own, but the frightening demon evasion elements sweeten the deal. Whether you've moved on to new-gen consoles or not, this is one to keep an eye on. — Tim Turi



Watch Dogs

Exploring Chicago as Aiden Pearce



 Steampipe Hacked

Platforms
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action
(8-Player Online)

Publisher
Ubisoft

Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

Release
May 27
Wii U • TBA

With the exciting premise of bending The Windy City to your will via hacking, Watch Dogs has received plenty of buzz since its announcement at E3 2012. Positioned to make a similar mark as Ubisoft's successful Assassin's Creed franchise, Watch Dogs aims to take open-world games to a new level. And yet Watch Dogs has remained under wraps for some time; outside of appearances at last year's E3 and Gamescom, the game has remained mysterious. The plot thickened when it missed the launch window of the new consoles, causing many to question what was going on with Ubisoft's "next big thing." Ubisoft confirmed at a recent press event in Montreal that the team ultimately decided to take a few extra months to add polish, ensuring their original vision. Now with a new May 27 release date, Watch Dogs is finally ready to be unleashed. After spending time at a recent hands-on event, here's what to expect when you step into Chicago.

Who Is Aiden Pearce?

Watch Dogs puts you in control of Aiden Pearce, a man on a quest for revenge. You

decide how and when to take on missions, hacking your way through the city. Aiden, however, also has a main storyline to provide a glimpse into the vigilante with the hacking prowess. So who exactly is the man we're controlling?

Aiden grew up on the mean streets of Chicago; his family are Irish immigrants who aren't exactly rolling in riches. Soon enough, Aiden falls into gangs and learns how to protect himself on the streets, but new opportunities arise as technology advances. Forced to grow up fast and be the man of the family for his mother and sister, Aiden realizes a way to help carry the financial load: hacking. After teaming up with someone who shows him the ropes with petty crimes such as credit card fraud, Aiden goes on a riskier mission. The job goes so horrendously bad that his niece ends up getting killed. "That's what is haunting him," says lead story designer Kevin Short. "He feels utterly responsible for what happened, and to an extent he is... but he's determined when we meet him at the beginning of the game to find out who attacked his family."

Aiden's journey is hardly cut-and-dried though, as his mission to avenge his niece's

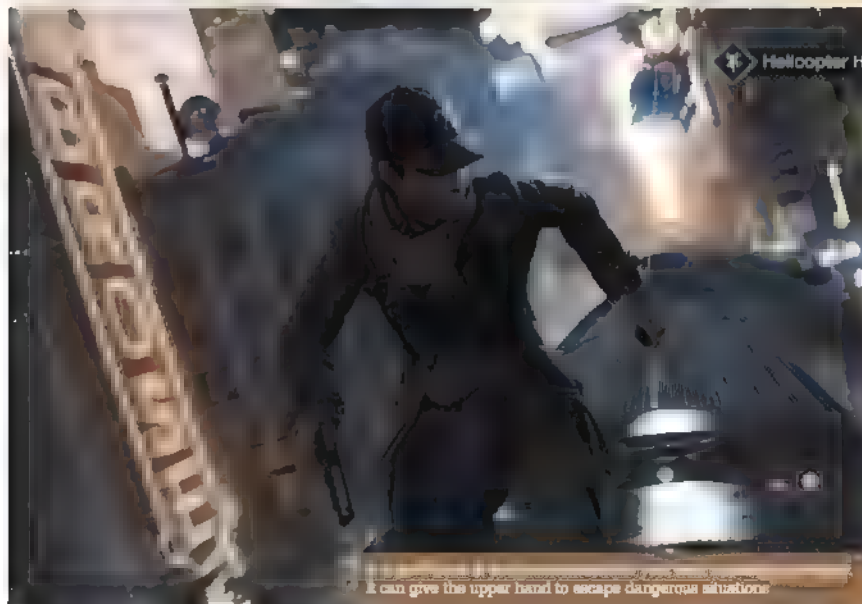
death and protect his family takes some unexpected turns. "As the game gets going, new threats do emerge and soon things are going to end up spiraling out of control for [Aiden] where the past comes back to haunt him," Short teases. That's only the beginning, as Aiden encounters various personalities with their own motivations and secrets, like an unpredictable Iraq war veteran who you don't want to encounter when he's on a coke binge. Aiden's family is on the line and trusting other hackers, lawbreakers, and street dealers isn't going to be easy.

Making An Impact On The City

When you enter this high-tech Chicago, a slew of options beg for your attention, whether it's to hack a nearby traffic light or steal a sweet new ride. You can even hack civilians for extra funds, but beware that you will also learn personal tidbits about them. This extends to how much money is in their bank accounts and recent life events, like if they were recently convicted of a crime or diagnosed with cancer. That's not the only way you can engage with NPCs, however. Crime happens around every corner, such



Steal from the rich? Avoid those going through tragic events? The choice for who you hack is in your hands.



It can give the upper hand to escape dangerous situations.

as robberies and murders; you can prevent them by getting a grip on the situation before things turn ugly. The more you help the city and appear as a hero on the local news, you gain the trust of citizens. Locals are more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt and not call the cops if they see you committing a suspicious act. However, if helping the city isn't your goal, you can slap phones out of the hands of civilians before they alert the police.

Watch Dogs carries a Grand Theft Auto feel with its driving and various side activities, such as finding hot spots, participating in drinking games, and playing around in Virtual Reality. But what separates Watch Dogs is how much control you have over the city. Cops on your tail? Hack a nearby traffic barrier and block them from following you. Want to get past a group of guards? Cause

some electrical wires to spark to distract them. Missions allow you to be as stealthy or lethal as you want; I found myself alternating between the two approaches and finding an equal amount of success. The skill trees also allow you focus on what areas you want to exploit; the main focuses are hacking, driving, and combat, and each one offers some nifty skills, like L-train control or ATM hack boosts.

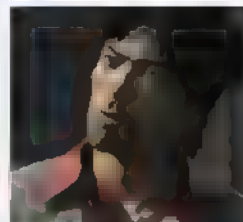
Watch Dogs' open world has more than enough to keep you busy and Ubisoft is putting plenty of freedom in your hands. An answer for how to solve a mission is always around you, or you could just risk force to make your way through. The decision is yours, and soon enough Chicago will be in your hands. How will your Aiden Pearce make it through? • Kimberley Wallace

The Other Faces of Watch Dogs



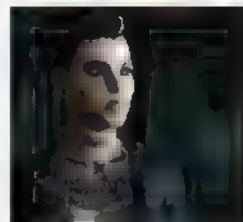
T-Bone Grady

T-Bone has been learning the ropes of the Internet and hacking since its beginnings. The more something is off limits, the more he wants access. That's not to say this desire hasn't come with some consequences.



Jordi Chin

Need a mess cleaned up? Botched a crime? Things go awry? Jordi is the man you call to make it all go away. Of course, he expects payment for his services. Whether someone's on your last nerve or you need to get rid of a body, there's no job Jordi won't take.



Clara Liu

Clara knows her way around technology and she's exceptionally sneaky at getting the information she needs. However, this intelligent woman won't take any guff. She knows her worth and what she wants, making you always worry she's going to expose your next big secret.



Delford "Iraq" Wade

Iraq is a war veteran who now leads a group called the Black Viceroy, prepared for the digital war that's unraveling. A loudmouth who knows how to get his group inspired, Iraq knows no battle of the future can be won without technology. But Iraq also has a drug of choice: cocaine. Catch him in the wrong moment and don't be surprised if he threatens your life.

Mario Kart 8

New faces, new races



Platform

Wii U

Style

1 to 4-Player Racing
(12-Player Online)

Publisher

Nintendo

Developer

Nintendo

Release

May 30

Wii U owners have been waiting for Mario Kart 8 since it was announced at E3 2013. The series has been a major force for driving platform sales for Nintendo, and if our preview is any indication, the upcoming eighth entry in the series will move some hardware.

We spent a few hours with a new build of the game, featuring four grand prix covering classic tracks and brand new raceways. The cast is filled with familiar faces, but seven new racers join the competition.

The Koopaings, first introduced in Super

Mario Bros. 3, make their first appearance in a Mario Kart title, marking the first time they are playable in any game. Joining them are newly announced returning racers Metal Mario, Shy Guy, and Lakitu.

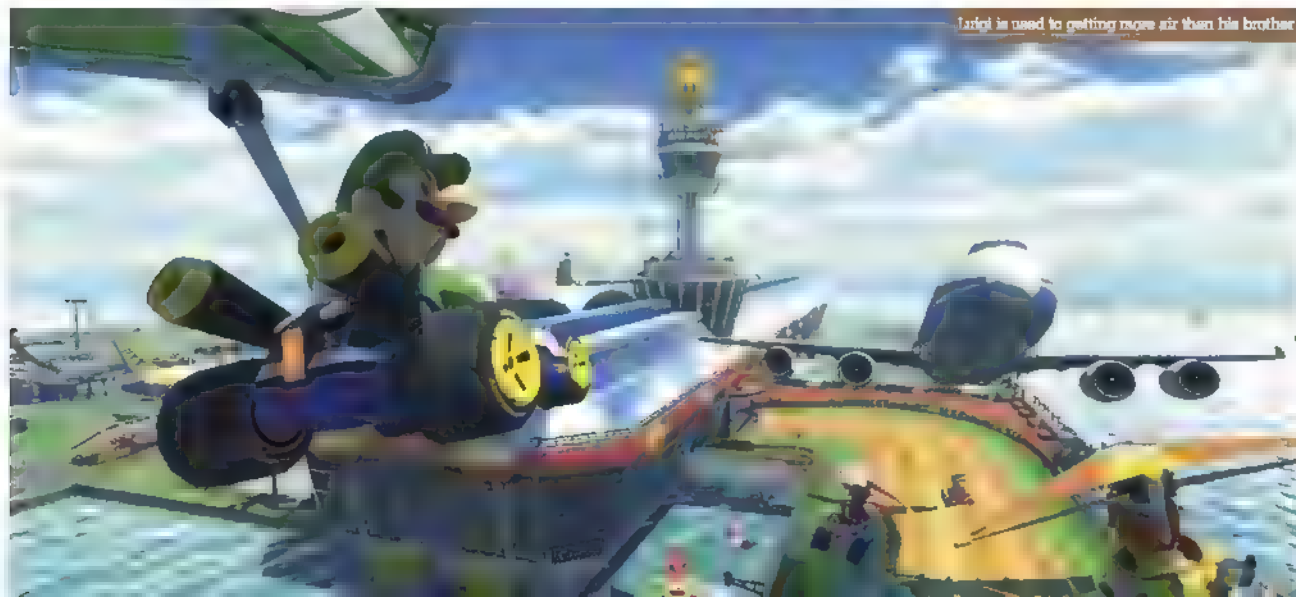
We had access to 16 different tracks, including eight fresh courses and eight spruced-up classics. The latter have been revamped to incorporate Mario Kart 8's new anti-gravity feature.

As players cross blue zones, they enter a hover mode. This isn't simply cosmetic, as shortcuts are often tied to anti-gravity.

Additionally, ramming another player will give you a speed boost in these areas.

One of the most pronounced inclusions of the anti-gravity feature in a classic track is the updated version of Mario Kart 64's Toad's Turnpike. This rush hour romp allows players to take the HOV(er) lane by driving up on the walls and avoid the cars and trucks that litter the raceway.

The new courses, like Water Park and Twisted Mansion are built around the verticality that anti-grav offers. Driving up swooping, curved roads or across the undulating walls





of a Boo-infested abode is brilliant, especially with the gorgeous HD visuals.

The controls are tighter than the last home version in the series, giving players the opportunity to use traditional thumbstick-and-button controls or motion-based driving. The GamePad and the Wii Remote allow both schemes, and the Pro controller can be used as a traditional input device, as well.

I tried using the Wii Remote with the Racing Wheel peripheral and found it to be a drastically improved experience over the Wii iteration. It did take some getting used to, but in no time, I was hopping and power sliding around curves.

Mario Kart 8 introduces two new items. The piranha plant attaches to your kart, snapping at opponents and track detritus like banana peels and goombas. Each snap rewards you with a burst of speed, making this new item one you'll be glad to see.

The boomerang pickup gives you three tosses that hit and stun everything in their path. The first two shots come back to you, but the last careens away. If you space yourself out well, you can hit a single opponent twice: once on the way out, and then again on the way back.

Mario Kart 8 is on the way to being the installment we've wanted since Double Dash on the GameCube. With the inclusion of video sharing via Miiverse and 12-player online competition (with an option to include a second local racer), this is one for which Wii U owners should be excited. — Michael Futter



MLB 14: The Show

Time matters

PlayStation 4
PlayStation 3 • Vita

Style
1 or 2-Player Sports
(2-Player Online)

Platform

Sony Computer
Entertainment

Developer
Sony Computer Entertainment San
Diego Studio

April 1 (PS3/Vita)
May 6 (PS4)

Roughly 30 minutes is required to complete a full game in Madden NFL, FIFA, or NBA 2K on default settings. For MLB: The Show, players need to dedicate approximately an hour and a half to wrap-up a nine-inning game. Yes, baseball is a slow-moving sport, but it doesn't need to be in video games.

One of the biggest focuses for this year's MLB: The Show is reducing game time. Developer Sony Computer Entertainment pinpointed two areas where this can be accomplished.

The first option is called Quick Counts. Using two years worth of statistical data pulled from MLB.com, the game generates a count based on the batter versus-pitcher match-up and the current situation of the game. This means that the player won't see every pitch Bryce Harper could step to the plate with a 1-2 count against Matt Harvey, and strike out looking on the next pitch thrown. In this particular at bat, the player only vests the time for one pitch.

Ramone Russell, MLB 14: The Show's game designer and community specialist, says Quick Counts can lead to "games played in a half hour or less." Sony retooled all of the pitcher A.I., stamina, and logic to accommodate more pitches thrown during the unseen simulations.

The second option used to speed up the clock is inspired by the popular Road to the Show mode. Rather than playing through every at bat, a new option called Player Lock enables role playing on one specific player, which leads to roughly just four or five at bats per game, and a few fielding moments. Sony looked at potentially allowing for up to three players to be selected via Player Lock, but couldn't get it to work in time. This change will likely be addressed next year.

Using Player Lock, games can be finished in roughly 10 minutes. If Player Lock and Quick Counts are combined, that time plummets to less than five.



The effort you put into Road to the Show or franchise modes won't be lost when MLB 15: The Show rolls around next year. For the first time in sports game history, saves carry over year-to-year. You can pick up right where you left off in the previous year and carry on with the latest iteration's new feature sets and changes. Most players likely never saw a Road to the Show player's career through to the end, or built a dynasty team that won multiple World Series without simulating every game. These aspirations now appear attainable if Sony keeps this feature going through the PS4's lifespan.

Sony has gone to great length to enhance the look of the PlayStation 4 edition, including minute details like beards modeled down

to their individual strands, and jersey fibers being authentic. Crowds are receiving a major facelift, and now consist of over 1,000 unique heads compared to the 42 that are in this year's PlayStation 3 version. Of these 1,000 different people, children are included for the first time.

The action on the field showcases a handful of meaningful changes, too, such as completely redone catcher and base running animations. If a player changed his stance during last year's MLB season, Sony made sure to reflect it in this year's game - adding up to 160 re-captured batting animations for existing players. On top of this, Sony is adding 90 new stances, 50 new fielding animations, and 30 new pitching motions. Due to technology limitations on PS3, Sony couldn't implement slap-hitter-like animations into the PS3 games. This is no longer the case with PS4. Players like Ichiro, who are practically out of the batter's box before making contact, now do so in the game.

Road to the Show, the most popular destination in this long-running series, no longer leads players down predetermined advancement goal paths. The player you choose to create can also be modeled after an existing MLB player, not for appearance, but his toolset. Once that player is created, he won't automatically be entered into a draft. He must first compete in Topps' Amateur Showcase, unfolding across several games against other top prospects.

To ensure that all players land on the right difficulty level for their skillset, Sony created an optional dynamic difficulty adjustment system that evaluates pitching and batting skills individually and adjusts on the fly.

The PlayStation 4 version won't be ready to go for the start of the MLB season, releasing a month later on May 6. The PlayStation 3 and Vita versions are available on April 1.

• Andrew Reiner



The Crew

Cruising for a fight



Ubisoft isn't known for its console racing titles, but upcoming racer *The Crew* is synthesizing some major ideas to produce a game that can compete with the established series in the genre. Developers Ivory Tower (including talent who worked on the *Test Drive Unlimited* games) and Ubisoft Reflections (*Driver* franchise) are teaming up to provide an open-world experience where your next challenge – either alone or with your crew – is never far away.

Roadtrip

The Crew features a representation of America from coast to coast and all points in between, and you can drive around with no clear agenda or tackle things in a more linear fashion. However you choose to play the game, there's no shortage of things to do. Apart from set missions, the game contains a plethora of shorter challenges (lasting no more than 30 seconds) where you go up against ghost cars representing friends and

other players. Challenges can be anything from performing a particular long jump or high-speed run to a hill climb, and can be tackled using any car and setup you own. The better you do in the challenge the better parts you get for your cars.

Another diversion you'll encounter in *The Crew* is the police – whether you're just cruising around the world or as part of a specific mission. They'll use road blocks, chase you off road, and even call in a helicopter if you're fast enough. In general, the A.I. utilizes dynamic routines so races aren't repetitive if you have to retry them.

Your Crew

You can assemble a four-person crew to complete missions in the game, and the crew's composition – including a mix of friends and strangers – can be changed as you see fit. Missions won't be harder if you're in a crew, but members get different objectives. For instance, if you're tasked with

escaping the police, other crew members will have to protect you.

You can go up against another crew in PvP events (such as races) that incorporate the different car types in your garage. To facilitate crew play and the game's social component in general, you can fast travel to where your friends are (provided you have opened up that area already) so you can create a crew and start racing.

Handy With A Wrench

There are certainly a number of cars you can buy to suit your needs, but the core of the title revolves around tuning your car for a specific purpose such as street or off road racing. From here you can upgrade in different ways. Chassis upgrades improve how the car handles, while engine upgrades improve acceleration. In addition, the game features cosmetic enhancements such as custom plates, decals, body parts, and even interiors.

As you open up the map, you'll establish garages around the country in major cities. Naturally, garages not only let you access your cars and tune them, but also play a role in recruiting for your crew and act as fast-travel locations. • Matthew Kato

Platform

PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

Style

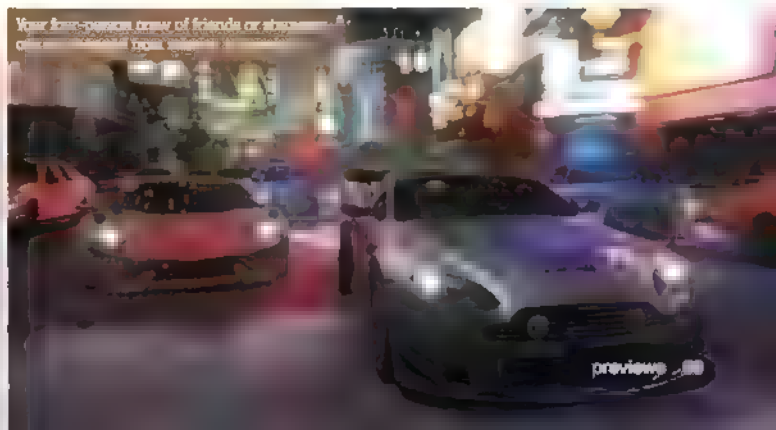
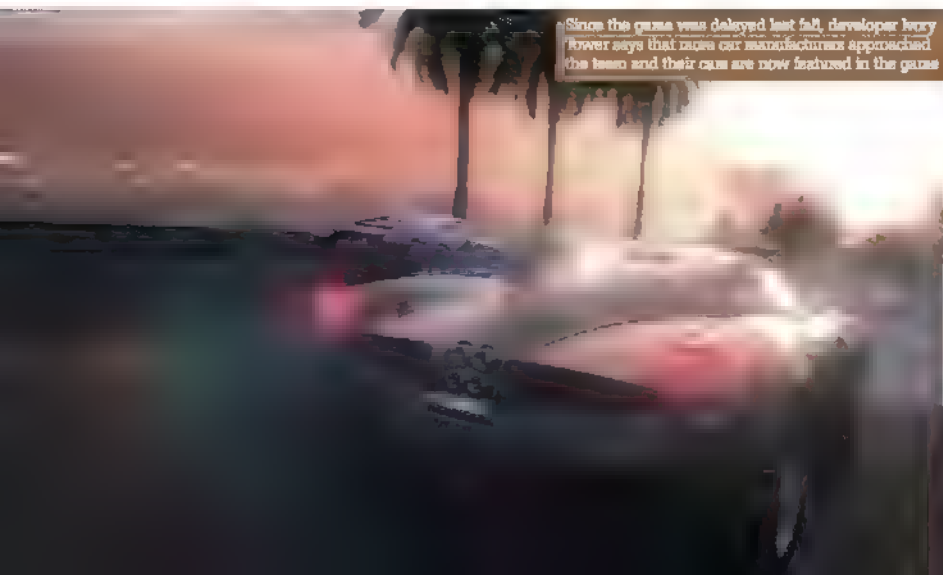
1-Player Racing
(4-Player Online)

Developer

Ubisoft
Ivory Tower,
Ubisoft Reflections

Release

Second Half 2014





The Amazing Spider-Man 2

What kind of a Spider-Man are you?

Platform
 PlayStation 4
 Xbox One • Wii U
 PlayStation 3
 Xbox 360 • Wii • PC
Style
 1-Player Action
Publisher
 Activision
Developer
 Beenox
Release
 Apr. 29

Beenox has been working on the Spider-Man license for some time now, slinging out games including *Edge of Time*, *Shattered Dimensions*, and, most recently, *The Amazing Spider-Man*. For the game based on the new film, the studio is revamping everything from the way Spidey gets around to what he does once he gets there.

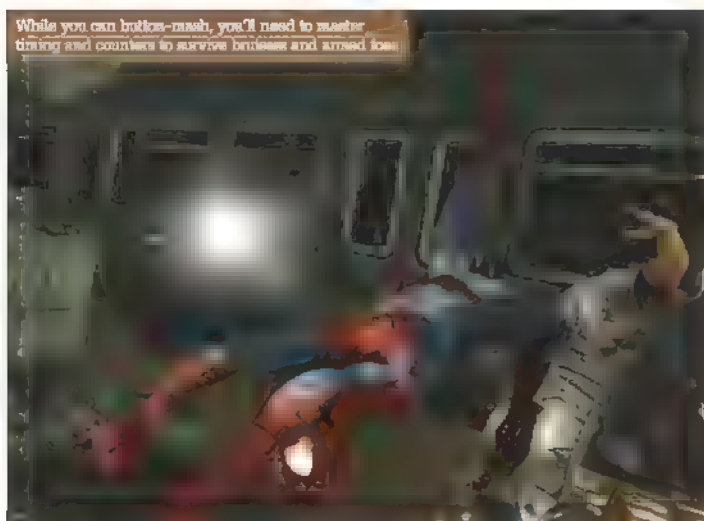
In previous games, Spider-Man would effortlessly swing above the streets of Manhattan via an automated web system. It worked, but holding down a button and steering on a course didn't really nail the fantasy of being the red and blue hero. Now, webbing is tied to the left and right triggers. Hold left down, for instance, and you swing forward for a bit before gaining altitude and listing to the left. To move forward in a controlled and speedy pace, you need to alternate between left and right web shots. It's jarring at first, but I quickly got into the rhythm of things. It's more satisfying to get around, since you're timing when you

alternate your webs and when you release them to gain and maintain the maximum momentum. Spidey spends the majority of his time above the skyline, so anything that improves that aspect of his characterization is welcome.

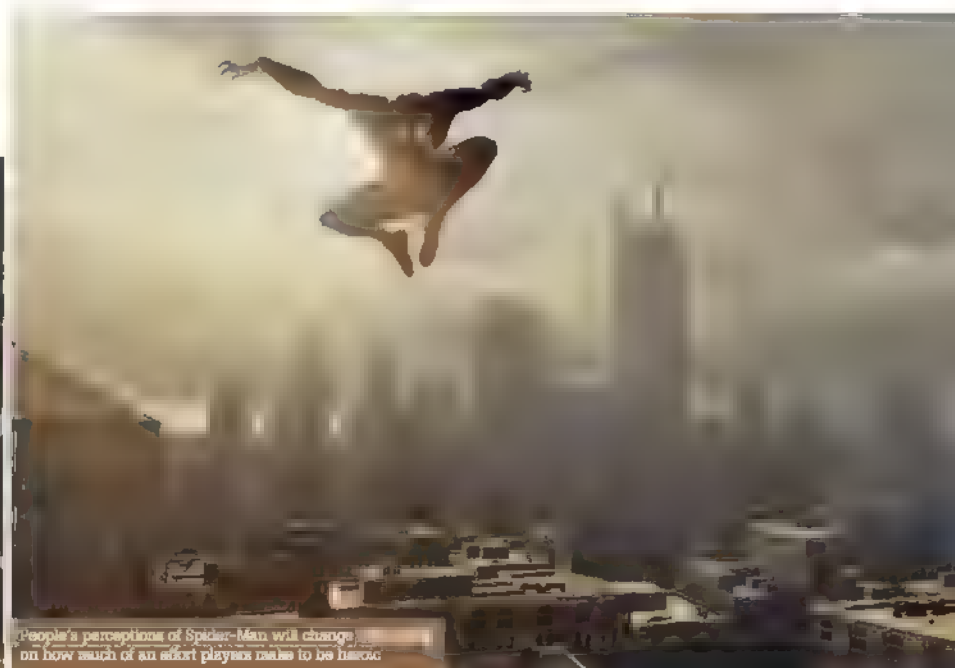
Spider-Man is seen as a hero by some, and a threat by others. A new hero system has been implemented into the game now, which should keep players on their toes. Missions will pop up on the minimap as players progress through the campaign. They can be ignored, but at a cost. If you encounter a building engulfed in flames, for instance, Spider-Man can play the hero by using his spider senses to navigate through the smoke and carry out unconscious victims.

His bravery is recognized through a special segment on the Bugle Channel, featuring anchor Whitney Chang. It works the other way, too. Fail at a bomb-disposal mission, and J. Jonah Jameson takes to the airwaves, wondering why Spidey didn't call the police instead of trying to figure it out himself.

As players gain more acclaim or notoriety, they are treated differently. Civilians clap when they see the heroic Spider-Man, but they run at one that's seen as a public menace. Oscorp sends out drones to attack Spider-Man, and he even faces penalties to damage and other stats. In other words, it doesn't pay to blow off the people of New York. They need a hero, and you're the closest thing they have. — Jeff Cork



While you can button-mash, you'll need to master timing and counters to survive business and armed foes.



People's perceptions of Spider-Man will change on how much of an idiot players make to be heroic.

Transformers: Rise Of The Dark Spark

Two universes collide



Even as Transformers fans cross their fingers that Michael Bay's next movie iteration turns out well, Activision is moving forward with a new video game for the robots in disguise. For a few years now, we've become accustomed to new Transformers game iterations that were either part of the War For Cybertron arc, or other (usually less compelling) installments connected to the movie universe. New developer Edge of Reality is breaking that trend, with an entry that attempts to link the two fictions together.

"The player controls Transformers characters on both Earth and Cybertron," says producer Andy Owen. "Each character looks different and true to lore in each environment. The two worlds are connected by the mysterious, ancient relic known as the Dark Spark, which acts as a portal of sorts to flash the story back and forth between them." In this new twist on the established fiction, the Dark Spark is an antithesis to the Matrix of Leadership commonly carried by Optimus Prime. "It allows anyone who wields it to bend the fabric of the universe to their will," says Owen — helping to explain how these

two seemingly disparate timelines connect up in the story.

In the movie universe, the story is clearly meant to be set around or after the events of the upcoming *Age of Extinction* movie. Meanwhile, back on the robots' home planet, Owen explains that this new game occurs before the resolution of *Fall of Cybertron* — which concludes with the majority of the cast departing the planet. "Fans really love Cybertron, and we really love the environments," says Owen. "We thought there were still interesting stories that could be told within the context of the war and with the great cast of characters, so we've kept it anchored before the Ark launches."

Gameplay hews closely to the style established in *Fall of Cybertron*, presenting a discrete single-player story focused on third-person action and shooting, with regular shifts between a multitude of characters. Rise of the Dark Spark also brings the return of the cooperative Escapade mode, in which a team of robots defends against increasingly challenging waves of attackers. Between the two modes, Rise of the Dark Spark includes over

40 playable characters, although it's fair to assume that at least some of those characters are re-skins of established heroes and villains in the two different universes.

While it sounds like Edge of Reality is maintaining many of the central gameplay elements that made High Moon Studios' games so much fun, the new studio is also exploring a few innovations. "One of the best [new features] is the unified leveling system, where you can play the game in either Campaign or Escapade mode, and all of your levels and unlocks carry over," says Owen. XP is earned through defeating foes, but also by completing distinctions and challenges. "Distinctions are small combat-related feats you can complete, and challenges are more level-based," says Owen. In addition to providing increased XP rewards, these tasks also unlock gear boxes that include new items, characters, weapons, and weapon upgrades.

Escapade mode also includes some new twists, such as offensive and defensive installations, as well as a new addition called power foes, in which your cooperative team must occasionally contend with named boss encounters. "You might be fighting a wave of enemies, and all of a sudden you're facing off versus Megatron himself," says Owen. Rise of the Dark Spark also includes a new gameplay-altering feature called hacks, which in practice sound like the skulls of the Halo games, letting you set universal behaviors like higher enemy health or exploding robots upon death.

Given the positive reaction I've had to the Cybertron games, and the questionable storytelling that characterizes the movie fiction, I'm wary of this move to mix the two together. Even so, I'm hopeful that the best story ideas and gameplay dynamics can rise to the top, even as we all continue to wait and hope for a true sequel to High Moon's *Fall of Cybertron*.
— Matt Miller

Platform

PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style

1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

Developer

Activision
Edge of Reality

Release

June



Handheld Strategy

Details are scarce, but Activision has also brought on developer WayForward to create a separate 3DS game that bears the same title — a tactical RPG starring the Autobots and Decepticons. "This version features a compelling twist allowing fans to play through a tactical strategy game," says producer Andy Owen. "Players will plot their next move on detailed strategic maps and then engage in epic one-on-one 3D battle sequences featuring over 50 Transformers characters."





Helldivers

Like a snowball's chance in hell

Platform
 PlayStation 4
 PlayStation 3 • Vita
Style
 1 to 4-Player Shooter
 (4-Player Online)
Platform
 Sony Computer
 Entertainment
Developer
 Arrowhead Game
 Studios
Release
 2014

Arrowhead Games isn't concerned with telling an involved story in its new top-down shooter, *Helldivers*; the developer is focused on shaping a universe that tells its own story. The game's missions center on a group of intergalactic specialists who dive through the orbit of several alien home worlds and collect resources for a starved Earth. However, each campaign feeds into an intergalactic online war that features triumphs and heroes that are impossible to script.

Up to four players can team up and tackle many of *Helldivers*' missions. After selecting a drop point and loadout (see sidebar), your soldiers march across procedurally generated alien landscapes, activate oil-drilling platforms, and firebomb alien nests before facing a final onslaught at the extraction point.

"*Helldivers* uses sort of an MMO backend where conquered planets are reported to the server," says Arrowhead CEO and game director Johan Pilestedt. "As players fight, the Super Earth frontier is pushed towards the enemy home planet. If all enemies are eradicated, the *Helldivers* community wins and a new, more challenging season will begin, but if Earth's defenses fail, a slightly less challenging season will start."

Previously, Arrowhead gave us a look at the giant crustacean locusts known simply as the Bugs. These enemies attack in swarms with giant pincers. However, during a recent demo, we saw a second alien species called the Cyborgs. These separatists were once human, and were driven to the

backwaters of the galaxy after they started augmenting their bodies. The Cyborgs' thick armor and heavy arsenal force players to seek cover.

"The Cyborgs use a lot of projectile weapons," says Pilestedt, "which results in a 'bullet-hell' kind of gameplay, such as *Garaga*. You need to learn patterns in the middle of combat, but at the same time, play a top-down shooter."

Helldivers isn't a walk in the cosmic park.

Your companions take friendly fire, ammo is a precious resource that must be carefully managed, and cautious strategies can quickly turn into chaos if you're not careful. *Helldivers*' action is so intense that the discussion between our four player party often grew heated. In the end, however, *Helldivers* is good fun, and we're looking forward to the fights that will erupt between our friends when the game releases later this year.

— Ben Reeves

Loaded For Bear

Ambitious *Helldivers* face a number of impossible challenges after they touch down on a new planet. Thankfully, these combat specialists can call down extra supplies and equipment, which Arrowhead is calling stratagem. Here are a few examples of the weapons and equipment that help these *Helldivers* overcome the odds.

AR-19 Liberator — The AR-19 is a fully automatic assault rifle — a reliable classic that is optimal for taking out most threats and surviving the tidal waves of oncoming Bugs.

SG-225 Breaker — This low-maintenance automatic shotgun holds only a small number of shells, but it is ideal for taking down unarmored opponents and tearing your foes apart at close range.

EAT 12 Expendable Anti-Tank — Even the biggest enemies have trouble standing after you send one of these anti-tank missiles their way. Each payload comes with only two rockets, so use them sparingly.

Automated Defense Turrets — Turrets are an essential ally for *Helldivers* as they help secure locations and watch a group's back. Once deployed, the Automated Defense Turrets target any moving objects in their attack radius and lay down a torrent of fire. Be careful where you walk, because these turrets don't discriminate between friend and foe.

Mechs — *Helldivers* have a fleet of advanced vehicles. One of the most frequently deployed is a mechanical armored biped that wreaks havoc on the battlefield. The standard mech is equipped with a Gatling gun and a grenade launcher pod.

Hohokum

The creation and completion of Honeyslug's unique project



We've offered a few quick looks at this whimsical, flying snake adventure game over the past year, but this is the first time we've had a long conversation with artist/designer Richard "Dick" Hogg and Honeyslug cofounder/programmer/designer Ricky Haggett. — Bryan Vore

How did the project begin?

Ricky Haggett: Dick [Hogg] and I were friends before we started making this game. One day Dick sent me a picture of a crazy machine of some kind and said, "Hey, let's make a game. I've drawn a picture. Here you go." And the original design was this abstract thing that was going to be like if Photoshop or Illustrator, these graphic editing tools, were more playful, more like a game.

Richard "Dick" Hogg: I'd never worked on video games before. I was working as an illustrator/graphic artist and I had this idea of, "What if we could make something that feels like a drawing package on a computer, but is sort of stupid as well and kind of playful?" I guess the game we ended up making isn't really that and, weirdly, in the meantime some other people have made things that are that. One example is Ted Martens' *Hexels*, which is like a really crazy drawing package where you can only use hexagons.

The various levels feel distinct, yet tied together. How did you go about that?

Hogg: One analogy we use a lot when we're talking about the game is going on a holiday. Maybe you go for a weekend in Barcelona. One day you might check out the flea market and the next day you might go around looking at all the art nouveau buildings. But it still feels very Barcelona. And I guess that's how Hohokum feels to me.

Haggett: I think the other big part of the aesthetic that drives a lot of pretty much everywhere is the sense of mystery. The

game never really tells you what's going on and it's kind of up to the player firstly to figure out what things they can even do and then to sort of piece it together. Some things are more important and add up to something and other things are more incidental. The game never really steers you at all in that way.

Hogg: One of our challenges of Hohokum is making people realize that it's okay to not worry about the fact that [some puzzles] are just cool things that are happening and some are things that you need to find in order to add up to something bigger. It's been an interesting challenge to make people feel relaxed around that. Not stress out about, "Oh, have I seen everything here? What if I missed something really important and didn't get to go to that bit?"

Are there any notable differences between platforms?

Haggett: It runs at 1080p, 60 fps on PS3 and PS4 and 60 fps on Vita. There's not like extra art on PS4 because that's not a thing that we need. The main difference with PlayStation 4 is the controls. It's the fact that you've got a touchpad on the controller and a right bar. I think we're really excited about the share button as well.

How do PSN trophies fit in with the non-traditional, relaxed gameplay?

Haggett: I personally really like the fact that trophies exist and that they exist at the level of the operating system outside of the game. It's a way that we can have some hardcore traditional videogame things in there without the game directly doing that stuff. I like the idea that we're able to do that in a way that doesn't feel like it's in the game's canon or universe.

How close are we to seeing the final game?

Haggett: Mostly what we're doing right now is running playtests. We're watching people absorb the language of the game. We're trying to tune things. Sometimes it's the case of making an animation more obvious or sometimes it's like adding an extra step that has to happen so that people become aware of things a bit more.

Hogg: We're still having new ideas though, still putting new stuff in. I'm really into trying to have fun making a game the whole way through right to the very last day. Games are supposed to be fun, and if you're not having fun making it then I think it will show in the finished product somehow.

For a look at Hohokum in action, watch the Test Chamber at gameinformer.com/mag

» Platform

PlayStation 4
PlayStation 3 • Vita

» Style

1-Player Adventure

» Publisher

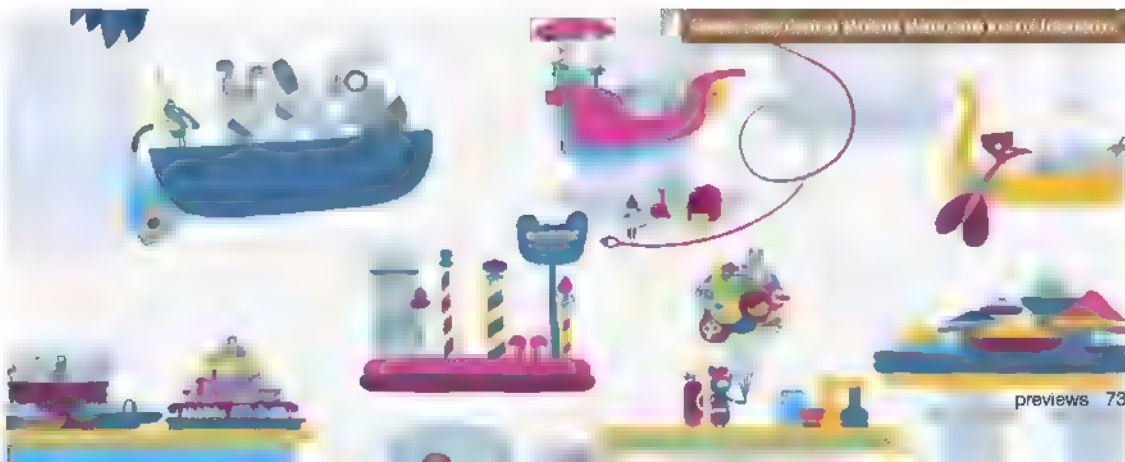
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» Developer

Honeyslug

» Release

2014





WildStar

Something for everyone

- » Platform: PC
- » Style: MMORPG
- » Publisher: NCSoft
- » Developer: Carbine Studios
- » Release: June 3

WildStar may seem ambitious with its traditional box cost and subscription model, but the systems in play are designed to provide a top-notch MMORPG experience for casual players, player-vs-player competitors, and hardcore raiders looking to test their mettle against serious challenges. Catering to everyone can be tough, but Carbine Studios is implementing ways for different player types to find value by embracing other forms of play.

If you're a hardcore raider type, look no further – WildStar is here for you. The five-man dungeons feature punishing mechanics and difficult boss encounters, and are designed with core players in mind. Dungeons are optional, and intended for an audience looking for real challenges. While dungeon-level content is intended to be difficult, raids step things up even more, and will feature full-on 40-person encounters for the hardest of the hardcore. If you feel that raiding in current-gen MMORPGs has lost its way, WildStar is taking things back to big challenges and epic rewards for guilds looking to show off their skills.

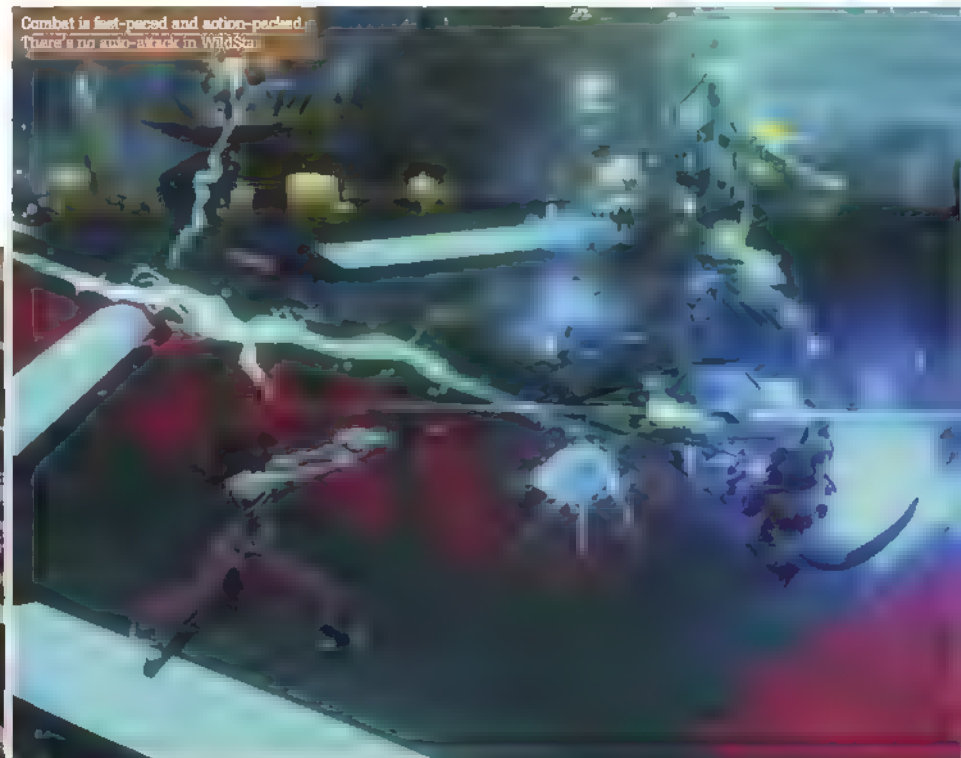
What if you're only interested in PvP? Guild-vs-guild competition will be fierce, and maybe

you're not interested in dungeons or raids. Your guild may have separate teams for PvE and PvP, but they can still boost each other in some interesting ways. Rare drops off of bosses let you call forth the bosses themselves to enter the PvP zone to guard your base and lay waste to opposing armies.

Let's talk about housing. Players can decorate and create all sorts of interesting things on purchased plot space, from swanky indoor bars to outdoor minigames and amenities that provide bonuses and make useful items and consumables. The décor stat on various accessories and decorations adds to a player's experience gain, so players of all kinds have incentives to explore the housing system. This provides significant benefits even after level cap, as players acquire other

forms of currency for experience gain once they achieve maximum level.

Core players will likely engage in all of these activities on some level, but WildStar also focuses on activities for those who don't want to participate in structured PvP or raid culture. The current "endgame zone" is enormous, and full of questing and development opportunities for a solo player. World boss encounters and small-scale quests designed to be done in pairs or small groups make up WildStar's take on the "public quest" system. These experiences are more challenging than solo play and allow players to pop in and out of more casual groups to complete objectives and earn rewards. Providing something for all playstyles can be a challenge, but it's certainly a goal worth striving for. — Daniel Tack





Shroud Of The Avatar Forsaken Virtues

Ultima returns

Richard Garriott's spiritual successor to the Ultima series, *Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues*, is "both a look back and a look forward." The Kickstarter-funded role-playing MMO is scheduled to launch around the end of 2014, and is currently in early access. The title will feature an initial cost, but no subscription fee – extras like housing and cosmetics will keep servers and content going after launch.

The scope of the first episode takes players into Lord British's New Britannia, where players discover new powers and forces such as the Oracle, a sort of "Big Brother" figure that plays a significant role in the adventure. It's a tailored experience that can have more than one outcome based on player deeds and actions.

Players can specialize in a wide variety of combat and non-combat skills, with various

types of magic that can be combined to create new and powerful effects. Gathering and crafting can play a large part in the game for players who wish to explore that route.

"A lot of role-playing games these days you can play in more or less a braindead state," Garriott says. "You don't need to pay attention to what anyone's saying. We want to bring back true discovery and exploration to role-playing games. One of the things we're doing is how players will interact with NPCs. You actually type real phrases and inquiries – NPCs will parse what players are saying and respond appropriately. And we're doing analysis on everything that gets asked, and will improve the NPCs over time."

One of the interesting things that separates *Shroud of the Avatar* from other MMO titles is that players can play selectively. That is, you can play completely solo, only with friends, or in open multi-player via a selective multiplayer system. This allows a player to truly choose their own level of engagement with other players or treat the game as a completely solo adventure without "forced" player interactions.

"We're trying to fine-tune the PvP in concert with the players," Garriott says. "If you recall *Ultima Online*, it was a very open game in regards to PvP, which could be very tough on new players and role-players. I'm in search of a more blended answer than full separation. We're between a rock and a hard place. What we're looking for is something where people looking for safety can find it, but the world will have places that players will voluntarily accept risk and move into areas that may be open PvP. We're working with the community to determine what method we're going to use, and trying to find a solution that both the PvE and PvP communities can get behind."

» Daniel Tack

» Platform
PC

» Genre
MMORPG

» Publisher
Portalarium

» Developer
Portalarium

» Release
2014

Preparing for adventure at the town inn



Divinity: Original Sin

A fresh start for the classic franchise



Platform: PC
Style: 1-Player Role-Playing (Online TBA)
Publisher: Larian Studios
Developer: Larian Studios
Release: Spring

Divinity: Original Sin is bringing a lot to the digital tabletop, rooted in concepts from old school PC RPGs like Baldur's Gate and adding in slick combat and serious customization options. Players have access to the same tools as the game creators and can use them to construct custom campaigns, dungeons, and adventures.

Players have the rare opportunity to participate in situations without any sort of artificial restrictions. Meet a goblin on the road? You can talk to the goblin in the tried-and-true fashion, ambush and kill the goblin without a word, or even have one of your skilled party members use the "Pet Pal" skill to talk to the goblin's pack animal. Whatever route you choose, you can still complete the game, but things may turn out differently.

A troll cave beckons. Do you go in with weapons drawn or seek a stealthier approach? Perhaps you decide not to even bother with the trolls at all, instead waging war on main cities by becoming an outlaw king, skilled at escaping from prisons and not reliant on the wares of society and civilization. The options are there, and with dozens of non-combat skills like Perception to find secrets and standard fare like Lockpicking, players can come up with a wide range of solutions to any problem.

The relationship system within the game allows several different approaches to conversations. Players may attempt to intimidate, charm, or reason with many of the NPCs they meet on quests. Some methods are more effective than others depending on the target, and player choices made during these dialogue strings can have effects that echo throughout an entire playthrough. Some drunk guards demand that you come

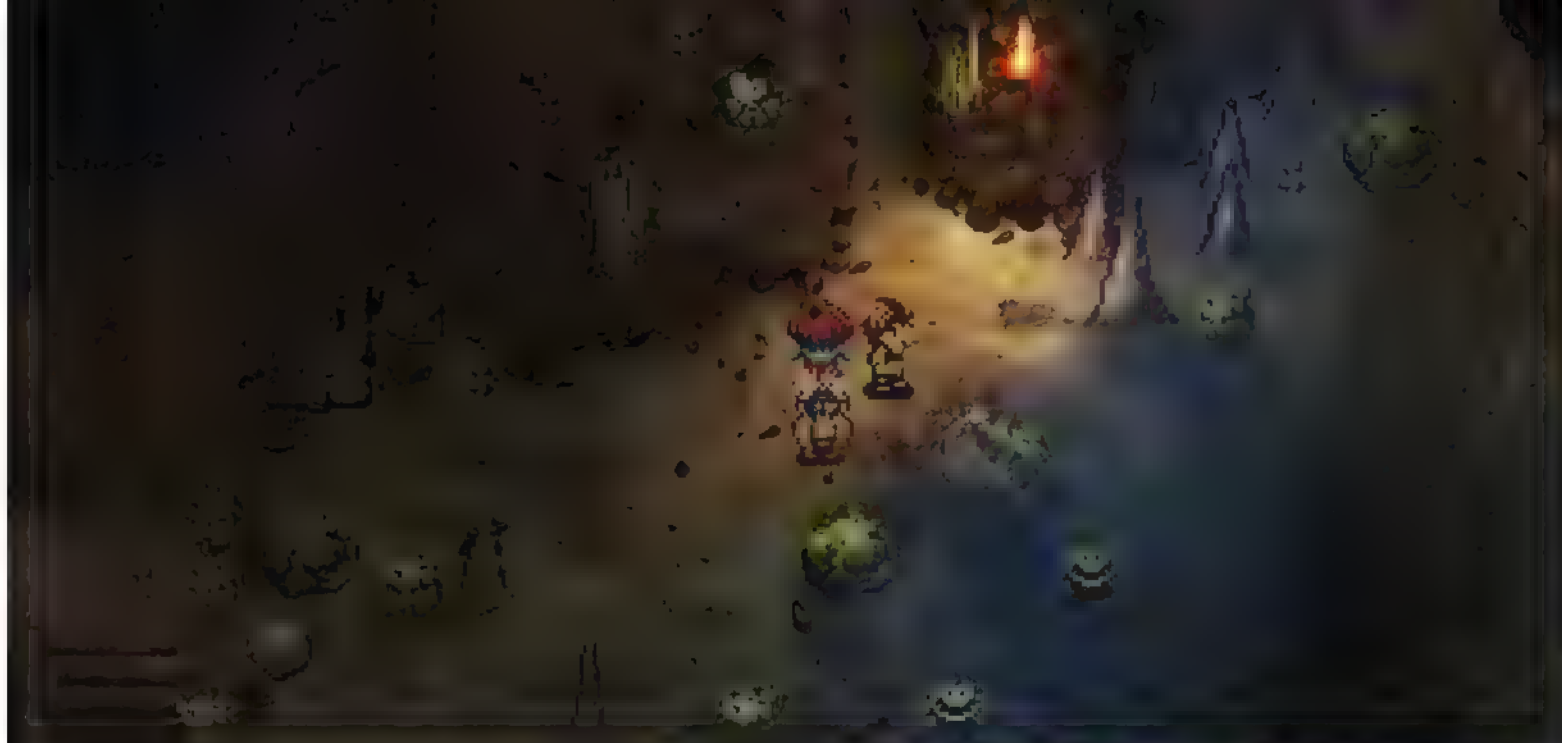
with them – do you give in to their demands or draw staves and swords? In multiplayer, players actually have conversations in-game about choices they are making. Is your friend callously mowing down townsfolk? Question that kind of behavior! You can always load up a save file if things get really out of control.

The turn-based combat is elegantly designed, with a point system and heavy emphasis on location and elemental combinations. Telekinesis spells and many other attacks can move units around the battlefield. In its most basic form, location tricks are handy for keeping your units away from the ogres

and giant club swings, but the combat goes a good deal deeper than that. Elemental attacks combine to create terrain hazards and battle-turning powers. Shoot a patch of water with a blast of lightning to create an electrical trap, or put out a burning ally or douse an opposing fire elemental with a rainstorm. With its deep customization, choice-driven progression, and tactical combat, Divinity: Original Sin has the potential to be everything a classic PC RPG fan could ask for. — Daniel Tack

Original Sin is currently available on Steam Early Access and is expected to launch this spring.





Pier Solar HD

Making old-school new again

Pier Solar stands amid a distinguished company of great role-playing games for the Sega Genesis, like Phantasy Star, Shin Rng Force, and Shadowrun. The big difference is that those titles released during the heyday of the Genesis, while Pier Solar originally came out in 2010 – more than a decade after the end of the console’s lifespan. Now, the unique RPG that released on a dead system is about to get a new life of its own.

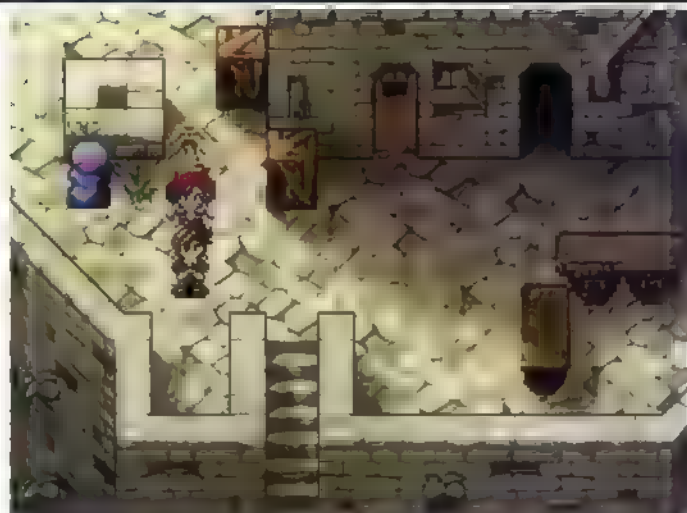
Don’t worry if the name Pier Solar isn’t familiar. Developer WaterMelon only released the game on physical cartridges in limited quantities. Though hardcore RPG fans might have scored copies, the scarcity kept the title from hitting the mainstream. The story follows a young man named Hoston, a botanist on a quest to save his father from an illness. He teams up with his friends and begins a journey that takes them to strange places and brings them face-to-face with colorful characters.

The premise may sound familiar, but it’s intended to be more homage than derivative

A turn based battle system, plenty of items and accessories, and clever enemy designs keep players engaged throughout the adventure. The team at WaterMelon cites big-name RPG classics as inspiration: Chrono Trigger, Wild Arms, Phantasy Star, and Lunar, to name a few.

Pier Solar HD is a remaster that brings the tale to a larger audience on a wider array of platforms – 11 in total. It’s getting a physical re-release on Dreamcast, as well as on PC, Mac, and Linux (which are currently on Steam Greenlight). On the other systems, it’s a downloadable digital title. The Wii U version even uses the gamepad as a second, interactive screen.

“I admit that Pier Solar appeals a lot to the nostalgia effect, since RPGs evolved in time and these days they can be much different from their ‘90s ancestors,” says WaterMelon president Tulio Adriano. “But if anything, Pier Solar can be a bridge between these two eras, containing some modern concepts but



avoiding certain complexities included on new RPGs that I sometimes find unnecessary.”

The HD edition of Pier Solar keeps the battle system and main beats of the original, but is getting enhancements that weren’t possible in the game’s previous incarnation on a cartridge. “There are the gorgeous new graphics, which will be able to portray in much more detail what we wanted each location to look like,” says Adriano. “Then there’s the Director’s cut, which will extend the story, tying a few knots and giving the player more insight on the plot and characters. Finally, there’s the gameplay improvements, some HUD elements, improved battle A.I., and menus.”

In the age of Elder Scrolls and Dark Souls, releasing a 16-bit inspired RPG on the Genesis may seem crazy – and re-releasing it years later may seem even crazier. However, traditional role-playing games still have a devoted following, and new distribution methods mean that they might even see a comeback in the coming years. “A genre doesn’t exhaust just because it’s old,” Adriano says. Pier Solar could easily be mistaken for a long-lost gem of the SNES and Genesis era, and this HD version has the potential to transport fans back to the good old days again. • Joe Juba

» Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Dreamcast
PC • Mac • Linux
Android • Ouya

» Genre
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
WaterMelon
» Developer
WaterMelon

» Release
Spring





Fantasia: Music Evolved

Battle of the bandleaders

Platform
Xbox One
Xbox 360

Style
2-Player
Rhythm/Music

Publisher
Disney Interactive
Studios

Developer
Harmonix
Music Systems

Release
2014

Harmonix has shown off a bit of its new music game *Fantasia: Music Evolved* over the past year, but those looks have focused on the single-player game. At this year's Game Developers Conference in San Francisco, the studio gave us an opportunity to check out the multiplayer component for the first time.

The mode begins with a clever touch: The second player joins the game by shaking player one's hand. Once both players are ready and a song has been selected from the array of classic compositions and contemporary hits, it's time to face the music.

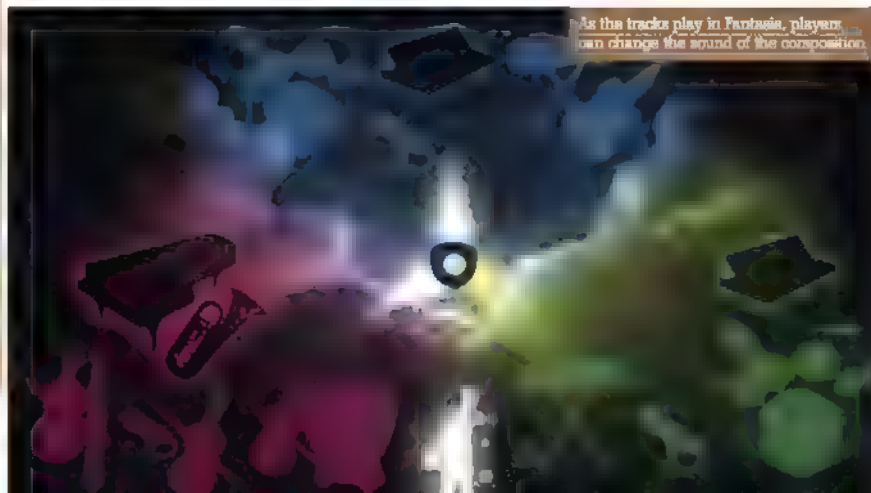
We pick Nicki Minaj's "Super Bass," and immediately the screen lights up with an abstract array of light and color. It starts off sounding like what you may have heard on

the radio, but things get interesting in short order. We use our arms to swipe the arrow shapes and push our hands toward the circles that appear on screen — the game does a good job of tracking depth by the way — and then we encounter our first mix switcher.

Fantasia does something remarkable with music, and it's difficult to adequately describe it. At regular intervals throughout each song, the screen divides into three sections. Each segment represents a different musical element, say strings or percussion, or even a style like synth or chiptune. Players have an opportunity to pick from one, and the song seamlessly transforms in response. The way you interact with the music changes, too. If you select modifications that are jazzy, expect to make broad, sweeping motions with your arms. More percussion might also add more quick, poppy motions. You can use this to your advantage in multiplayer, too. If you notice your opponent isn't great at hitting some of the strikes, you'd be foolish not to take advantage of that — even if you can't otherwise handle the sound of smooth jazz sax.

It's not strictly competitive, even though your scores are tallied at the end. Geometric lockboxes called composition spells also appear, and both players have to team up using synchronized gestures to open them. They're worth the effort. There are several spells, and they allow players to take an even more active role in the music. Some of them have you pulling your arms in and out as a rotating band stretches taut and expands. In others, you move a cursor over gem-like icons, representing various drums and cymbals. There's a bit of a call-and-response element, with each player getting a chance to affect the music. When both players are satisfied with their loop, they put their arms at their sides and the melody is incorporated into the song. It's amazing stuff, really.

Even though I was bested, I didn't feel like snapping a baton over my leg. The Xbox One's enhanced Kinect really shines here; the times I botched it were because I was off rhythm or missed the visual cue. The fact that I got to hear (and actually participate in) a couple of super weird remixes didn't hurt things, either. — Jeff Cork





Star Wars Pinball: Heroes Within

Zen Studios ends its Star Wars run with four nostalgia-laden tables

Pinball fans have been waiting patiently for Zen Studios to announce its next big DLC pack, but the past few months have only brought the one-off releases of Doctor Strange and Super League Football tables. Thankfully, the developer has been hard at work on the next installment of the Star Wars Pinball series, which features four new tables from the golden age of the iconic sci-fi franchise.

Like previous Star Wars pinball packs, Heroes Within features an eclectic mix of tables. Episode IV: A New Hope is the most traditional table; the center of the playing field features a semicircle design comprised of six ramp and orbit shots that make big

combos a breeze. A New Hope breaks up its various modes based on iconic scenes from the movie, such as Obi-Wan's showdown with Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker's final trench run on the Death Star.

The other three tables focus on specific aspects of the Star Wars series. Droids tasks players with helping C-3PO and R2-D2 escape from a Jawa Sandcrawler, and features a large open playing field with a multitude of winding ramps. Masters of the Force highlights the eternal conflict between the Jedi and Sith, allowing players to sway the balance of the Force to the side of their choosing during the series' biggest lightsaber duels. Finally, Han Solo is a tribute

to the galaxy's most charismatic smuggler. Players will hide cargo in the secret compartments of the *Millennium Falcon*, shoot Greedo (first!), and rack up big points in a Kessel Run musical mode.

As fans have come to expect, every table in Heroes Within is loaded with nerdy references to the beloved sci-fi series, and features classic musical numbers, character likenesses, and dialogue from the movies. Zen Studios is targeting a late April release date, which should ensure fans have something to play when Star Wars Day rolls around on May 4. » Jeff Marchiafava

For more hands-on impressions, head to Gameinformer.com

► **Platforms**
PlayStation 4
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Vita
PC • Mac
iOS • Android

► **Style**
1 to 4-Player Arcade

► **Developer**
Zen Studios

► **Release**
April

Borderlands 2

A small package with a lot of loot

Five years after the events of the original Borderlands, a maniacal madman named Handsome Jack takes over the Hyperion Corporation and declares himself dictator of Pandora. This egomaniac even sets up a base on Pandora's moon and begins killing any adventurer who dares to look for the vault – a

powerful cache of alien technology hidden somewhere on the planet surface.

PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC owners were able to put Handsome Jack's reign of terror to an end when Borderlands 2 originally released in 2012, but Iron Galaxy Studios – the developer of indie fighting

game Divekick – is helping Gearbox bring this massive shooter-looter to Sony's PS Vita handheld.

Not only has Iron Galaxy managed to compact Borderlands 2's full 4-player co-op campaign and massive arsenal of exotic weapons onto a handheld system, but the Vita version also includes all of the season pass DLC, including Mr. Torgue's Campaign of Carnage, Captain Scarlett and Her Pirate's Booty, the Psycho and Mechromancer character classes, all of the extra weapons and gear from Ultimate Vault Hunter Upgrade Pack 1, and the added character customization options of the Collector's Edition Pack.

Borderland's cartoonish art style lends itself well to a slight downgrade in fidelity, but the Vita version still looks great. One of Iron Galaxy Studios' few concessions is that, in order to save system memory, enemies now explode when they die, so you'll no longer see bodies of your fallen foes littering the wasted countryside. Otherwise, the game is a remarkably good-looking Vita title.

Players who abandoned their campaign the first time around on PS3 can pick right back up where they left off thanks to the Vita's cross-play functionality, so this might be the perfect time to revisit Pandora and make sure your loot stash is still safe. » Ben Reeves

► **Platforms**
Vita

► **Style**
1-Player Shooter/RPG
(4-Player Online)

► **Developer**
Iron Galaxy Studios

► **Release**
May 6



Reviews

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH
84 Dark Souls II

Dark Souls II represents the near-perfect culmination of From Software's years of experience creating dark dungeons and deceptively cryptic. Weaving together concepts from Demon's Souls and the original Dark Souls, this action/RPG immerses players in a grim, atmospheric adventure that inspires triumphant victory howls as impossible bosses are conquered with precision and perseverance.

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	Fleeced. 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 revealed its head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Mixed. 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. Barely playable. 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	You're in Careena now.

AWARDS

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

Titanfall

The drama of competition

9.25



Style 1 to 12-Player Online Shooter Publisher Electronic Arts Developer Respawn Entertainment Release March 11 Rating M

Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Wage futuristic war as a free-running soldier or a towering mechanized tank

» Graphics

From the fire of an exploding titan to the intricate texture work on a derelict ship, Titanfall's artistic sensibilities surpass most multiplayer games' by a mile

» Sound

Excellent music and sound effects, and the narrative flow of a match is provided by consistent and well-timed voice work

» Playability

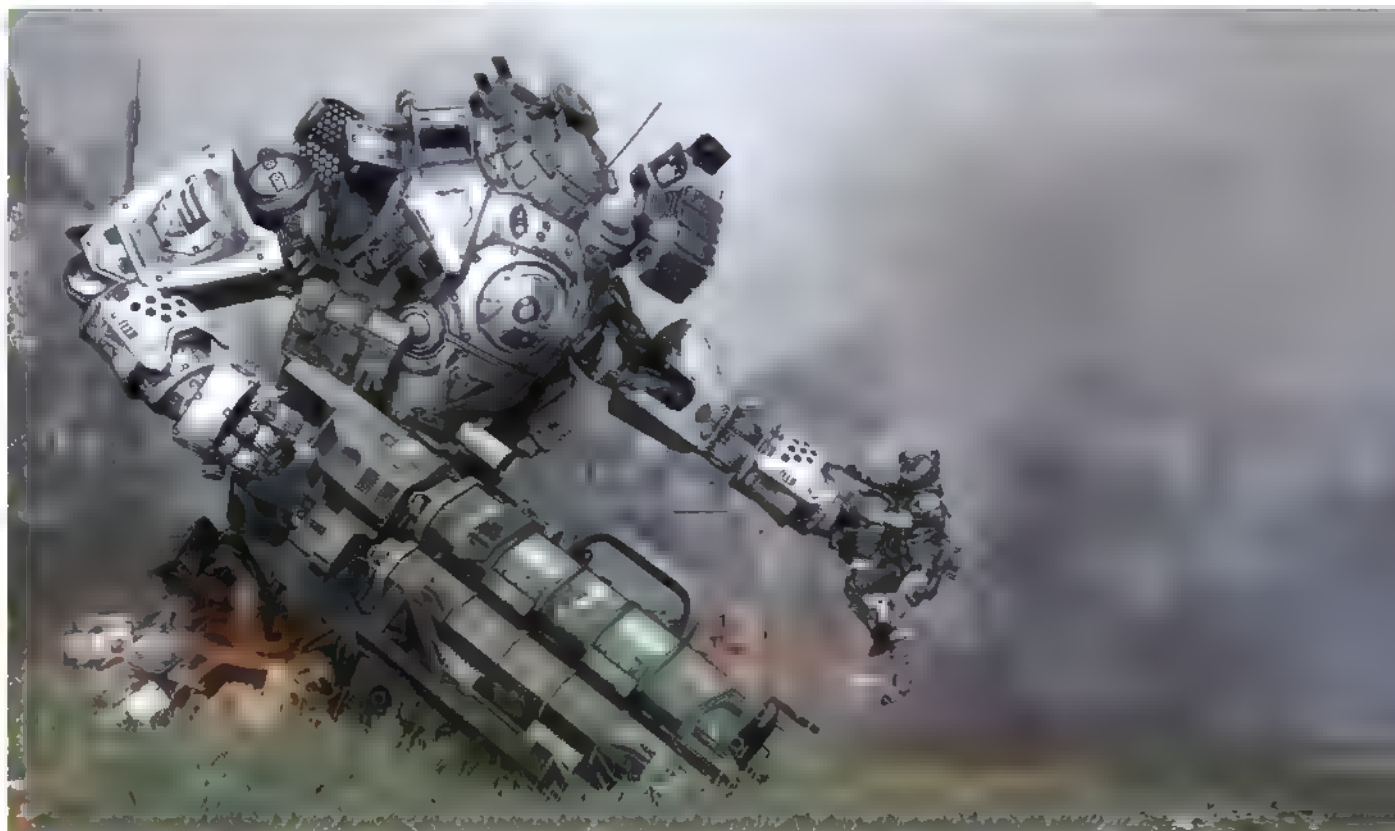
For a game that lets you do so many different things with your pilot or Titan, the controls are surprisingly intuitive and easy to grasp

» Introduction

A fitting introduction to what the new generation of multiplayer gaming can achieve

» Replay Value

High



For years, competitive shooters have struggled to introduce context into a genre centered on brief flashes of action repeated ad infinitum. Much has been made of Titanfall's mysterious campaign multiplayer, where story and competitive action seamlessly intertwine. In practice, the brief campaign of two futuristic armies clashing on distant planets is a limited framework for storytelling. The more notable narrative innovation introduced by Titanfall is the match structure itself. By providing an organic form that includes a beginning, middle, and end to virtually every match, Respawn Entertainment ratchets up the dramatic and competitive potential of the online shooter.

Each mode has its own twist on the experience, but most of Titanfall's matches present the same escalating tension you'd expect in a good action movie. The fast-paced conflicts start out small as pilots drop into battle and rush to take position. As the minutes pass, the first titans begin to drop, adding increased danger to the scene. By the end, massive explosions rock the whole battlefield as nuclear detonations and missile barrages burst to life. Finally, the defeated party rushes to escape via dropship—closing out the fight with one last chance for glory on both sides. The changing dynamic of a battle does wonders for keeping you on your toes, and demands constantly shifting tactics.

The structure works so well because of Titanfall's other major success—its two

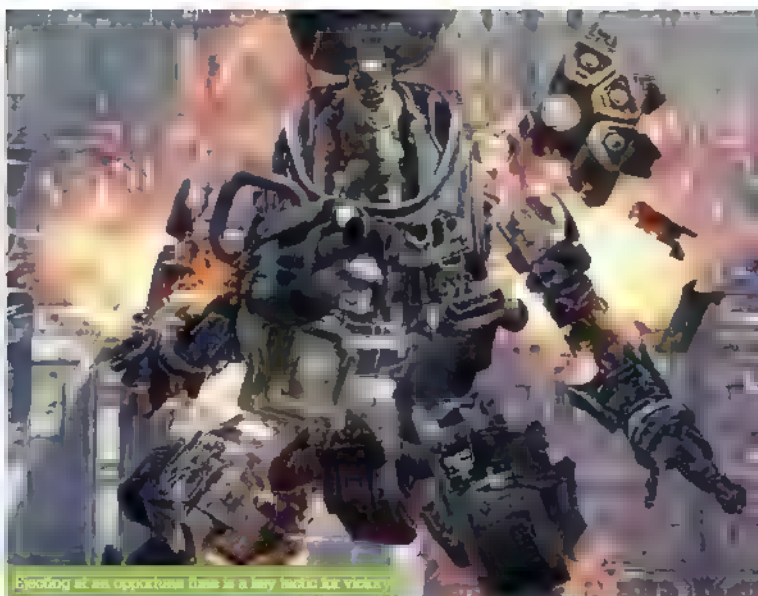
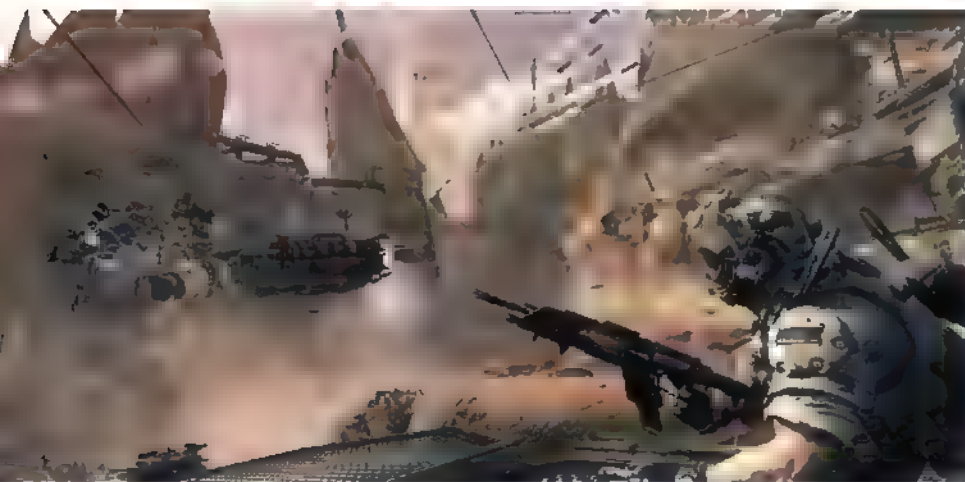
competing and immaculately balanced scales of size. The free-running pilot moves with ease through the large maps, leaping along exposed panels, and easily clambering to sniper points on rooftops and towers. Tight corridors and sheltered cliffs provide cover from your massive mechanized foes, but not from other fast-moving pilots wielding shotguns and auto-targeting pistols. Meanwhile, titans provide a sense of undeniable power, as you crush pilots and minions underfoot and crash into other titans in raging gun and fist fights. The contours of a map take on a different shape in your mind when you must navigate with these towering engines of destruction.

Many of the best moments of Titanfall come through the interactions between the small-but-agile pilots and the mechanized tanks they control. You leap off a high rooftop and away from enemy fire to drop into your titan and fire back. As your titan explodes, you're flung high into the air, and careful aim brings you down on the back of the titan you defeated, and you finish it off with a few frantic blasts from your pistol. As a titan, you single-handedly defend an objective point from half a dozen human attackers with a few blasts of your artillery rifle. By making both pilot and titan play enjoyable in different ways, Respawn keeps the action fresh for match after match.

The six-on-six team battles at the heart of Titanfall are bombastic enough without a higher player count. Between automated

Titans, dozens of NPC robotic spectres and military grunts, and automated defense turrets, the large maps feel action-packed, even if respawns or wrong turns can sometimes separate you from the skirmish. If you are cut off from the action, both titans and pilots can easily close the distance in seconds, getting you back into the thick of the conflict. The maps have more space to breathe than many competing shooters, and a single life can sometimes last a long time with a measured approach to the fight. I appreciate the way the game uses its dim-witted AI soldiers to communicate the sense of a larger battle. Allied soldiers run in the direction of hot points, spouting exclamations that empower players. Enemy NPCs offer easy kills in between the heated twitch throwdowns against another player. The overall effect is one of frantic motion everywhere you look.

Titanfall offers a limited selection of match types, and no way to customize those matches. However, I enjoy each of the five styles of play. The core Attention mode offers the truest expression of Titanfall's battles, and comfortably supports various play styles, from stealthy close-quarters assassination to a strategic targeting of enemy minions to bolster team score. The challenging Pilot Hunter mode is for those who want a more classic deathmatch experience, where bringing down enemy pilots is the sole path to victory. The fast-paced Hardpoint Domination sends



players dashing to hold small territories scattered around the board, with the added twist of potential enemy titans between you and your objective. Similarly, the iconic capture the flag experience feels quite different when a fighting fast player hops into a titan with your flag. The more I played it, the more I warmed to the one-life fun of Last Titan Standing, in which the game's dramatic structure is reversed. The battle opens with everyone already mounted up, and ends when one team loses all its titans. I love the jockeying for position in these matches, as small teams of allied titans spread out across the board, trying to outmaneuver the enemy.

The success of these different modes makes some of Respawn's design decisions in campaign multiplayer harder to understand. In a series of nine battles (which are the same for each side of the conflict), we're served a tale of the plucky militia and increasingly villainous IMC, and upon completion we're awarded the two additional custom titan chassis. Battles play out on the same maps as normal multiplayer, but with some additional voiceover and intro and outro sequences. Unfortunately, every match is either Attrition or Hardpoint Domination. These matches certainly aren't any worse than normal competitive matches, but the campaign needs more unique content, objectives, and branching events to feel worthwhile.

Progression is rewarding and briskly paced,

whether playing campaign or classic multiplayer. New pilot and titan loadout options open up all the time, and you have good reasons to try out all the fun new kits and weapons — many of which allow for altered approaches to play. While weapon mods are scarce, almost all of the armaments for both pilots and titans add something meaningful to the mix. Even so, the majority of content unlocks in a few dozen hours; devoted players could explore the prestige-like generations system for an ongoing sense of growth, but without additional unlock options some may not see incentive to do so. The one-off burn cards come in almost faster than you can use them, encouraging players to constantly add their bonuses into a combat strategy; it's an engaging system that helps set Titanfall apart, and choosing new cards gives you something interesting to do as you wait between matches.

The more I explore the impressive collection of 15 maps included, the more I like them. Each environment does a great job of supporting both human and titan movement and battle scenarios, and they're each beautifully rendered science-fiction environments. Thanks to the pilot jump jets, every map gives equal thought to the vertical and horizontal planes, creating environments filled with lots of multi-leveled buildings, rooftop hiding points, and underground passages. It takes dozens of matches to truly understand a map's twists and turns.

As an online-only multiplayer game, game performance is always going to be a shifting target. By and large, Titanfall is performing admirably in its first few weeks of public use. I've witnessed lost connections and a couple of crashes, but most of the time server connection remains solid. On Xbox One and even mid-tier gaming PCs, I saw noticeable frame stutters when onscreen action got especially intense. While I'd love these scenes to run smoother, it should not discourage players from diving in.

Respawn took a chance with Titanfall, embracing what it knew best with a multiplayer-only experience and pushing the envelope with its imaginative twists on classic competitive play. The result feels like a new breed of multiplayer that is inviting to established shooter players, but also compelling for people intrigued by everything from the free-running to the giant robotic titans. Titanfall is enormously entertaining, with long legs that should have players exploring its depth for many months to come. — **Matt Miller**



Dark Souls II

Praise the fun

9.75

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

As one of the cursed, explore a mysterious and majestic world in search of your salvation

» **Graphics**

Use of varied environments gives From Software a chance to show off

» **Sound**

An epic boss soundtrack and appropriate clanks and clangs fit perfectly

» **Playability**

Getting used to the controls isn't an issue, but getting used to how combat itself works in Dark Souls II can be challenging

» **Entertainment**

An epic adventure from start to finish packed with wondrous environments, imaginative and terrifying foes, and the continual adrenaline-apprehension rush of passing through each fog gate make this title a must-play

» **Replay Value**
High



GAME OF THE MONTH



PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Namco Bandai Developer From Software Release March 11 Rating T

The Souls games are infamous for their high difficulty, little direction, and even less forgiveness. Some players are scared off by the punishing systems, including death penalties, fragile characters, sadistic traps, and brutal status effects. However, pushing through hardships players become grizzled veterans and find a true sense of achievement in a gaming world that tends to reward golden trophies for the simple ability to press Start.

Dark Souls II retains the signature challenge and style of the original, but adds quality-of-life improvements and slightly more transparency regarding how various mechanics and systems work. Elements such as the main hub town of Majula playing home to a majority of vendors and NPCs, bonfire fast travel, a streamlined introduction, and some clarity behind

covenants go a long way toward making the title more inviting to new players. After a warm welcome, it's business as usual. Players new to the Souls franchise will quickly learn that Dark Souls II plays quite differently than most mainstream titles today; it is an incredible experience anchored in exploration, immersion, discovery, defeat – and ultimately triumph.

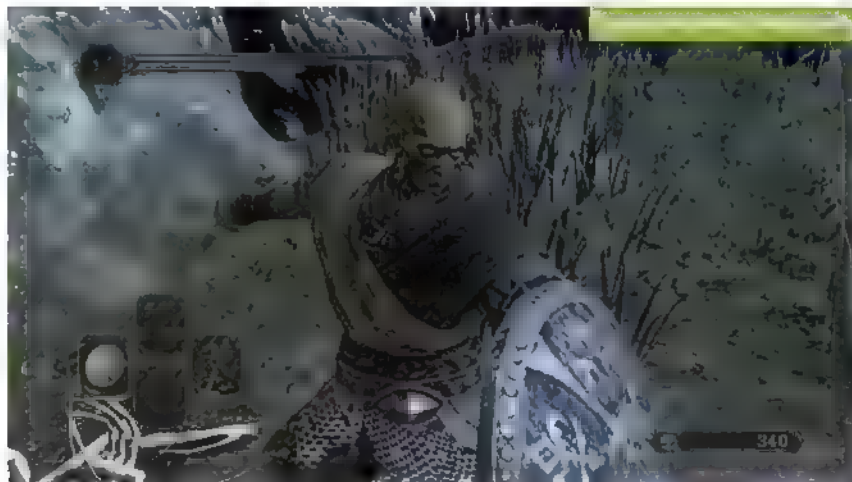
Combat in Dark Souls II is familiar, but has some significant changes. The core blocking, rolling, sprinting, parrying, and attacking all rely on the ever-important stamina bar. You cannot mash the button and win; exhaust your stamina bar in the thick of combat and you are dead. Vigor joins vitality and endurance as a third key skill, so players have to spread their stat point allocations out a bit more. Rolling is still a viable and important tactic, but it no

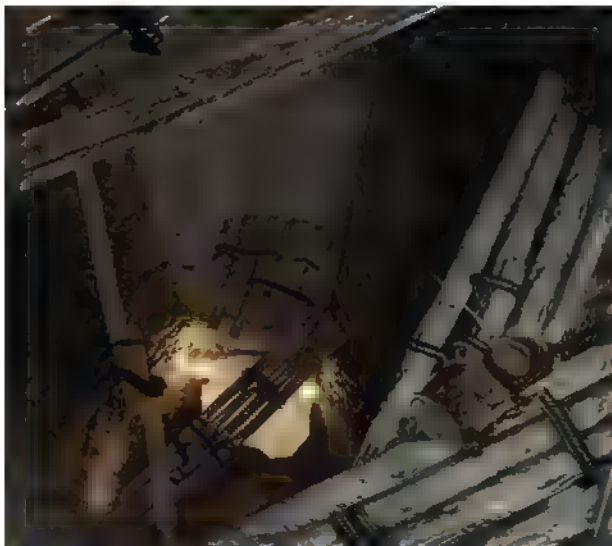
longer grants abusive invulnerability frames, so don't count on it to pardon the length of a knight's blade.

Players have their choice of class at the beginning of the game, but class is essentially a selection of starter gear. After a few hours of gameplay, point distribution can make any starting class into something completely different. Starting as a knight doesn't hurt if you're planning on being a slow melee character, but you may wish to add magic to your arsenal or build for some dexterous weapons. The addition of Soul Vessel respec items let players truly experiment with different builds if they so desire. If you're a brawler type that wants to try some healing magic and put some points into the faith stat, you can get those points back with a Soul Vessel. However, these items are rare (I found a total of four on a complete 45-hour playthrough), so a full respec is not a decision to make lightly.

Dark Souls II has many stones to explore, and it does so without any heavy-handed explanation or dialogue. The main story is far removed from the original, so newcomers don't have to worry. However, players who have played Dark Souls will find some familiar encounters and faces. The atmosphere is all about showing rather than telling, and some of the realizations are wonderful. The game often presents a string of subtle lore breadcrumbs to nibble on before finally serving up a main course. Ever wonder what those statues near the well in the starting city are all about? Players who make their way down below may discover the horrifying truth.

The areas you explore are visually stunning and distinct. Each cluster of zones has unique aesthetics, creatures, and challenges.





Dark Souls: Free

While playing the original *Dark Souls*, I used guides for things like snagging the Drake Sword, shortcuts, secrets, and boss hunts. For the sequel, I went through without any wikis, walkthroughs, or guides, and it makes the experience even better. At the core, the game is all about discovering and exploring the breathtaking environments, getting chills during the cinematic reveal of a grandiose new boss, and finding solutions and solace after all hope appears lost. If you can, I'd highly recommend that you experience your first playthrough the same way — it's downright magical.



You never have time to become complacent or relaxed, since the rules constantly change as you move from area to area. After completing the earliest part of the game, the open-world experience that follows largely hinges on player choice.

My own curiosity took me deep into some zones at three hours of gameplay that would have been better to explore at around 20, but you're largely free to roam in various directions at your own peril, and there's more than one way to access many areas. For example, it's hinted that you may want to find a ladder to travel down Majula's well, but an ambitious jumper with a fall damage ring may be able to bypass traditional methods.

One significant change in *Dark Souls II* is that foes no longer respawn after being killed many times. Players can no longer grind souls forever in basic zones, but it allows them to plod forward into a difficult area a dozen times picking off difficult spawns in order to make the trek easier. This happened once to me, as my build was incredibly vulnerable to enemies in that area. While this won't make bosses any easier, it can be used as a time-consuming,

inefficient way to move through a particularly challenging area.

When many think of the Souls games the conversation inevitably turns to discussion of difficulty. The baseline difficulty is on par with its predecessor, but there are new ways to bolster the challenge for the hardcore via a covenant and bonfire items. New Game+ modes are available as well. However, focusing strictly on the challenge takes away from much of the brilliance that comes from creating a

dark, atmospheric adventure that assumes that players don't need their hands held throughout the experience.

Dark Souls II respects you enough to assume you can figure things out, despite having perhaps lost some of these sensibilities by playing other titles that walk you through on tether from start to finish. As a result, the rewards and achievements are that much more satisfying. It's only March, but *Dark Souls II* stands tall as a potential game of the year. — Daniel Tack



The Online Experience

The core of *Dark Souls II* is the solo campaign, but it has some multiplayer elements, like player invasions and summoning others to assist with bosses. These features were not functioning prior to the game's launch, so this review pertains specifically to the offline, single-player experience.

Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes

In need of reinforcements

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Konami Developer Kojima Productions Release March 18 Rating M

7

PS4 • Xbox One

PS1 • 360

► Concept

Give fans an early taste of Metal Gear Solid V, but don't provide anything of substance

► Graphics

One of the best-looking games released to date, no question

► Sound

Kiefer Sutherland does a fine job as Snake, but for anyone who has seen *24*, it's impossible to not hear Jack Bauer since the two characters find themselves in such similar situations

► Playability

Metal Gear controls have always been a little clumsy at first, but everything runs smoothly once you get acclimated

► Value

The content is too thin to be satisfying. It moves the Metal Gear plot forward so little that even hardcore fans could justify taking a pass

► Replay Value

Moderately High



Before the announcement of *The Phantom Pain*, *Ground Zeroes* appeared to be the next full Metal Gear game. Once Konami and Kojima Productions clarified the scope of *Ground Zeroes* – a prologue to *The Phantom Pain*'s larger tale – I was still excited to get back into a sneaking suit and see the beginning of a new chapter in the life of Big Boss. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm didn't last long after picking up the controller. *Ground Zeroes* looks and plays like Metal Gear in some ways, but it feels hollow in others, resulting in a disappointing and unsatisfying glimpse into the future of this series.

Ground Zeroes makes a fantastic first impression. It is gorgeous, from the facial capture to the environmental textures. Even the little touches, like lens flare and particle effects, are impeccable. The camera angles are cool, the art direction is interesting, and the production values are high. Snake's mission in the prison camp is undoubtedly a feast for the eyes, but if you want meaningful content, you're going to leave hungry.

Your mission in Camp Omega is to find and extract Chico and Paz, two key characters from Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker. Of course, infiltration missions are never so straightforward; something always comes out of left field to complicate the situation and force you to modify your objectives – except this time, it doesn't. Your goal is as simple as it first appears: You extract Chico, extract Paz, then watch the credits roll. The mission clock on my first playthrough stopped at 87 minutes.

Short games are not bad. Quality isn't about price or how long a game takes to complete. It's about how well the game uses the time it has, and that's where *Ground*

Zeroes stumbles. If it were 87 great minutes, I wouldn't mind at all. Unfortunately, this game isn't particularly dense, exciting, or deep. Apart from the two cutscenes that bookend the action, no standout moments punctuate your time as Big Boss. You don't have any boss fights, memorable dialogue, or interactions with new characters. You sneak from point A to point B in the camp, shoot (or tranquilize) guards who get in your way, and you're done.

On subsequent playthroughs – which the game encourages – you can round up collectibles, rescue POWs, and scour the camp for more interesting weapons like sniper rifles and rocket launchers. They're neat to try out, but none of them have a significant impact. Additional playthroughs also let you discover alternate approaches to your objectives, since you have some freedom in how you reach certain areas. For example, you can hide in the back of a truck as it drives into a restricted area, or you can sneak around until you find the side door. This kind of experimentation can be fun, but ultimately, they are just brief detours before you're back on track.

Once you're tired of the main mission, you can delve into the side ops, which are separate operations that take place in the same single-map location. Each of these focuses on a central goal, like escorting a strangely familiar intel operative, destroying AA guns, or taking out specific enemies. The side missions are straightforward and unimaginative, but if you're determined to get 10 hours or more out of *Ground Zeroes*, you could play all of them to perfection. While that level of replayability is technically present, *Ground Zeroes* exhausts its store of compelling content quickly.

For all of the ways this installment disappointed me as a fan of Metal Gear, *Ground Zeroes* gets some things right. Even if it doesn't take you to interesting places, the stealth gameplay is polished and tense; the lack of enemy tracking radar means you can get caught at any moment, which adds to the thrill. If you are seen, the new "reflex mode" gives you a few precious slow-motion seconds to neutralize any guards who could alert command. This addition (which can be disabled if you're a punst) is my favorite new mechanic, since it adds little spikes of excitement while still allowing you avoid full-blown combat. I also enjoyed the ability to get feedback from Kaz (a.k.a. Master Miller) at the push of a button, eliminating the need for long codec conversations on a different screen.

The nudge forward that *Ground Zeroes* gives the story happens in the final cutscene, which takes the series to some dark and gruesome (and potentially offensive) places. It's not for the sensitive or squeamish, but one way or another, it certainly made an impression on me. I expected the coma, but another plot development means that the world of *The Phantom Pain* will be slightly different than I thought.

Even for longtime fans of the Metal Gear franchise, *Ground Zeroes* may not be worth playing. It spreads its strengths thin over too little space, relying on the repetition of a handful of unremarkable missions in the same area. That's the bad news. The good news is that the core stealth is fun, and the innovations on the gameplay front are promising. When supported by enough variety, progression, and story development, these mechanics could form the foundation of a fantastic game. *The Phantom Pain* could eventually be that game, but *Ground Zeroes* is definitely not. » Joe Juba

The Edge

Ground Zeroes looks great on any platform, but the PS4 and Xbox One versions are unsurprisingly superior to their last-gen counterparts, with more detailed textures and a better framerate. As for choosing between the Sony or Microsoft systems, the main factor is which extra mission you prefer. PlayStation 4 and 3 owners get a mission that recreates key scenes from the original Metal Gear Solid. Xbox One and 360 owners control cyborg Raiden (but with no sword) in a nod to Kojima's *Snatcher*. I enjoyed both extra missions, but neither one is cool enough to tip the scales.



Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare

Rooted in shallow soil

Style 2-Player Shooter (24-Player Online) Publisher Electronic Arts Developer PopCap Games Release February 25 Rating E10+

Gamers were dumbfounded when PopCap announced it was transplanting the Plants vs. Zombies series from the backyard to the battlefield. To say the multiplayer-shooter spinoff is a huge departure for the casual game developer is an understatement, but the aesthetics and lighthearted tone are a wonderful change of pace for the violence-obsessed genre. Dig beneath the surface, though, and you find some fundamental flaws that hold back this family-friendly shooter.

PopCap is known for making highly polished games that virtually anyone can pick up and play. Unfortunately, that equation only rings half true for Garden Warfare. The developer's simplified approach to the genre does away with basic concepts like sprinting, melee attacks, and limited ammo, making it easy for anyone to get into the swing of battle. However, the gameplay is uncharacteristically buggy; players get hung up on other characters and geometry, corpses twitch on the ground, and even the slightest bit of network lag renders some abilities (like the all-star zombie's dash attack) ineffective. A variety of classes and unlockable characters add some nuance to the simple fun, but PopCap's limited mode offerings hamstring replayability.

Garden Warfare only features two main competitive modes: Team Vanquish (i.e. team deathmatch) and Gardens & Graveyards. Gardens & Graveyards is clearly the main attraction. Maps have unique themes, and capture points are built around interesting locations that facilitate large-scale confrontations. Every map features a unique final objective, such as sneaking five zombies into Crazy Dave's mansion or destroying the roots of a giant sunflower growing inside of a lighthouse. Gardens & Graveyards provides hours of fun, but eventually you'll get tired of assaulting or defending the same points on the same handful of maps, and Team Vanquish does little to alleviate the boredom.

Garden Warfare's co-op offerings are equally uninspired. Garden Ops is a four-player horde mode, which tasks players with defending a garden against 10 increasingly difficult waves of zombies. Aside from the occasional zombie boss or special wave, there's not much to get excited about or return to once you've beaten a few matches.

Garden Warfare's most interesting twist is

how it incorporates the series' tower-defense elements into matches. Players can spawn zombies or plants in designated locations on the map, which then attack opponents autonomously. Unfortunately, these characters are treated as consumable items that players must purchase before matches using Garden Warfare's microtransaction-ready economy.

The vast majority of Garden Warfare's content is locked behind its PvZ Coin currency. Support plants and zombies, customization items, weapon upgrades, and even new class characters are bought with the coins you earn from matches. However, you can't just buy what you want; instead you must purchase card packs of varying prices. Consumable card packs give you a handful of zombies and plants to summon during matches, while more expensive packs provide random upgrades or character stickers – though you have to collect all of the stickers for a character before you can actually play as them. Like any good pusher, EA gives you a couple packs for free, but after that you have to grind for coins.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the economy is that there's no option to purchase coins with real money, but EA says it may institute such an option in the future. Frankly, I can't imagine a world where that change doesn't happen, but it doesn't really matter. The progression system and tower-defense elements are already broken to accommodate the possibility. Garden Warfare is designed like

a free-to-play game, despite the \$40 price tag.

PopCap's approach to class progression also plays out for the worse. Instead of gaining experience points, you level up classes by completing a series of challenges. Things start out easy – deploy five potato mines, kill three plants with rockets – but more specific challenges distract players from what's best for the match and make leveling up a pain. Killing two scientist zombies with a sun beam or shooting down three garlic drones seems easy enough, but what if the other team isn't using those characters? I went entire matches making zero progress with characters simply because the right elements weren't on the battlefield. Some challenges are downright devious; spawning five conehead zombies first requires you to buy consumable card packs until you randomly receive enough of them to complete the challenge. Luckily, you unlock all of the abilities for a class in the first few levels anyway, so you can abandon the progression scheme after that.

Before the tedium set in, I had fun with Garden Warfare. Spending a few hours with the accessible combat and charming world was entertaining, but the random card packs and achievement-style leveling system killed my desire to keep playing. Garden Warfare's simplified gameplay and limited map selection can only entertain for so long – without rewarding progression, there's no carrot (or brain) at the end of the stick. » Jeff Marchiafava

6.5

THE GOOD

» Concept

Create a family-friendly shooter based on PopCap's cartoony tower-defense IP

» Graphics

PopCap has done a great job of translating its lovable characters into 3D

» Sound

The music is catchy but repetitive. The plant and zombie voices are entertaining as ever

» Playability

The controls aren't as polished as your average shooter, and the questionable stability of EA's servers results in some janky moments during matches

» Entertainment

Already-limited offerings are diminished by a quasi-free-to-play monetization scheme

» Replay Value

Moderate



The Console Difference

While both versions have their share of problems, the Xbox 360 incarnation fares considerably worse. The increased load times, pop-up, and embarrassingly blurry visuals don't ruin the experience, but are significant enough to earn the Xbox 360 version a lower score.

South Park: The Stick Of Truth

A funny and faithful adaptation



3.5

3.5
SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Ubisoft Developer Obsidian Entertainment Release March 4 Rating M

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Bring the world of *South Park* to life in its first good game

» Graphics

Obsidian accomplished its goal of making the game look like a genuine *South Park* episode

» Sound

Trey and Matt's voice work is as consistent as ever, but old songs are frequently re-used

» Playability

The game would be fun to play even without the humor and license

» Entertainment

Impresses as both a game and a comedy piece

» Replay Value

Moderate

In the 17 years that *South Park* has been on the air, it's never received a video game treatment that felt like more than a quick cash-in on the name. With *The Stick of Truth*, the residents of the sleepy mountain town have finally arrived on the gaming scene with the franchise's humor intact. This is made possible thanks to the heavy involvement of creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, and the result is a highly enjoyable and unique RPG.

Your "new kid in town" character starts interacting with series favorites like Butters, Cartman, and Kenny right from the beginning, and you run into just about every notable character from the show by the time the end credits roll. It's hard to walk across a screen without seeing a handful of references, and the series' tendency to utilize shock humor is in full effect.

All the fart jokes and Chnpokomon references in the world wouldn't mean anything if the gameplay weren't up to snuff, but *The Stick of Truth* manages to impress as a game on top of being frequently hilarious. Fans of *Mano's* RPG outings will be happy to see similar gameplay mechanics in *South Park's* combat. Your character and his various buddies have a variety of melee, ranged, and magic abilities that can be enhanced with well-timed button

presses, and Parker and Stone have injected plenty of humor into the fights themselves. A traditional RPG may have attacks that poison your enemies, but *The Stick of Truth* features moves like farting into a foe's face to cause them to vomit uncontrollably between turns.

Each of the four classes features a handful of abilities that are all activated with QTE prompts. Attack types are functionally the same as a standard RPG, but everything has a charming, childlike twist to it. The mage's "lightning" comes from a car battery, the warrior assaults enemies with a baseball bat, and ranged attacks come in the form of dodgeballs and suction-cup arrows. In a genre filled with dramatic storylines and brooding characters, the lighthearted nature of *The Stick of Truth* is refreshing.

Leveling up is achieved via a traditional experience system, and you can enhance various elements of your abilities (damage dealt, number of enemies struck, etc.) as you rank up. A separate system is based on how many Facebook friends you accumulate as you explore the town, and you are rewarded with permanent statistical perks as you become more popular. It's nothing revolutionary or specific to this title, but it does its job of making

you want to advance your character's skills.

The humor isn't confined to fart jokes, as it regularly pokes fun at the video game medium itself. Trey and Matt's love of gaming is well-documented, and their fandom shows when they're mocking frequent tropes of the industry. Turn-based combat, random audio logs, and basic RPG quest structure are all fodder for jokes that gamers will appreciate. These aren't just lazy design decisions covered by a throwaway gag—they're smart jabs at an industry that tends to repeat itself on a regular basis.

While many of the references are expected (Hey, remember the crab people? How about Lemmings/Mongolians/Underpants Gnomes/ManBearPig/etc.?), they're usually short and fun enough to avoid wearing out their welcome. Another element that helps with that is the running time, which shouldn't take gamers more than 10-12 hours. Even in a relatively short amount of time (for an RPG, at least), players go to many interesting areas that are different from anything I've previously seen in the genre. If you find yourself tiring of one particular area or theme, odds are good that another unique and bizarre situation is on the way.

The only technical issues that I ran into were occasional visual hiccups. On a few occasions when exiting indoor areas, certain visual elements like bushes, garage doors, and my character's skin or outfit would be invisible. This never lasted long, as the game would correct itself in a few moments or whenever I entered a new area.

I can't think of a better way to bring this franchise to gaming consoles. The RPG format allows for a ton of funny items and sidequests, the objectives are unlike anything else in the genre, everything moves along at a solid pace, and the overall feel is distinctly *South Park*. It's one of the most faithful adaptations of a license I've seen, and it ranks among the best comedic games ever released. — Dan Ryckert

The Edge

I didn't have many technical issues with any of the three versions of the game, but the few that popped up were less pronounced on the PC version. On console, the game occasionally stutters a bit when entering new areas, load times are more significant, and the overall visual package doesn't look quite as crisp. If you have the option, playing on PC offers a slightly smoother experience. If not, I didn't find the console versions to be broken by any means.





Luftrausers

Aerial supremacy



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Devolver Digital Developer Vlambeer Release March 18 Rating E

World War II was the golden age for aerial warfare. Fighter jets, aircraft carriers, and anti-aircraft guns evolved rapidly, and victory in the sky became as crucial as conquering land and sea. Flying aces emerged from their respective nations, single-handedly gunning down hundreds of enemy planes. *Luftrausers* is a frantic, sepia-toned 2D shooter by developer Vlambeer (the studio behind the mobile hit *Ridiculous Fishing*). It places you in the cockpit and makes you feel like one of history's soaring champions.

Flying your speedy, maneuverable jet feels like *Asteroids* with gravity. Simply managing to stay out of the water is a challenge at first, but you are dive-bombing battleships and dogfighting enemy planes soon enough

Becoming an expert takes time, especially while evading the dense tapestry of gunfire woven by enemy air and sea units. Your health only regenerates when you lay off the fire button, creating an exciting risk/reward factor when deciding whether to finish off a foe or flee. Bullet hell becomes even more hellish when fighting against the laws of gravity, but constantly compensating for the Earth's pull makes flight feel satisfying and genuine.

Players rack up points and level up by chaining together kills and taking down high-profile opposition. Completing challenges (like "kill X boats without dying" and "kill X enemies while falling") also aids progression. Leveling up unlocks new weapons, armor, and engine parts for your customizable craft. Vlambeer has taken fun creative liberties with these

outlandish technological upgrades. Combine a beefy engine and heavy armor for a fast cruiser with a slow turn radius. Apply a laser beam and hover engine to become a floating UFO of death. Each aircraft piece comes with its own set of challenges, and they combine to form over 125 combinations. Tinkering with builds and finding what best fits your playstyle is a big part of the fun. Unfortunately, a large selection of these creations end up being duds.

The airborne chaos doesn't end when you demolish the enemy's tremendous battle zepelin; on the leaderboards and an insanely difficult bonus mode keep the action fresh. *Luftrausers* is one of the most satisfying, enthralling arcade shooters to hit the market in recent memory. **» Tim Turi**

8.5

PS3 • Vita • PC

» Concept

Intense, smooth 2D flying combat that makes you feel like the greatest fighter pilot of all time

» Graphics

Minimal retro graphics make identifying enemy types crucially simple. The sepia color palette sets the 1940s war footage vibe

» Sound

A catchy, chiptune soundtrack changes along with your plane build. The marching beat and ominous melodies effectively set the tone

» Playability

The flight controls feel just right, but take plenty of getting used to. Expect to crash and burn often early on

» Presentation

Silky controls and consistent aircraft upgrades kept me coming back for more

» Replay Value

High

Towerfall Ascension

Multiplayer mayhem comes to the masses



Style 1 to 4-Player Action Publisher Matt Makes Games Developer Matt Makes Games Release March 11 Rating E10+

One of my favorite games of 2013 was *Towerfall* on Ouya, though it was often a frustrating experience through no fault of its own. When I got three friends together with the intention of playing it, the Ouya couldn't reliably recognize my controllers or keep them synced at the same time. With the release of *Towerfall Ascension*, I'm finally able to play a game I love without having to worry about any obnoxious technical issues.

If you haven't played *Towerfall*, understanding the concept doesn't take long. You're one of four pixelated characters, and you need to kill the other ones. On default settings, each player starts with three arrows, and they take out opponents with a single hit (head stomping also works). This simple concept can be augmented with a wide variety of modifiers, including power-ups that make your arrows drill through walls or explode after hitting their target, tense features like exploding corpses or the ability to return as a ghost, or a deadly option that kills you if you try to shoot an arrow when your quiver is empty. The original version featured many of these modifiers, but *Ascension* adds several more and smartly includes the option to save match type presets. This eliminates the necessity of jumping into the Variants menu every time you want to

play by your favorite set of rules.

Loadout presets and being on functioning platforms aren't the only new features in *Ascension*, as a Quest mode allows you to team up with a buddy to take down waves of enemies. It doesn't shake up *Towerfall*'s "jump around and shoot arrows" gameplay much, but it's still fun to see the game's take on AI enemies. They're nothing particularly exciting, but learning the patterns of grim reapers, jumping blobs, and flying beasts is a nice change of pace from screaming at your human friends. Things start out relatively simple, but later stages turn into entertaining tests of survival

as you work through increasingly difficult and numerous creatures.

When you have some friends together, *Towerfall* is about as pure fun as multiplayer gaming gets. It doesn't offer much as a solo pursuit; the Quest mode isn't nearly as much fun alone, and basic target trials with training dummies don't capture any part of what makes *Towerfall* great. If you can get a few friends in the living room with you, however, this game is one of the immediate classics of local multiplayer. If you have a PlayStation 4 or PC and some friends, you must have this game at the ready on your hard drive. **» Dan Ryckert**



PS4 • PC

» Concept

Bring the riotous Ouya title to platforms that people actually own

» Graphics

Retro, 16-bit-inspired visuals may be overdone, but the style fits the simple gameplay

» Sound

Nothing that will get stuck in your head, but the soundtrack is solid

» Playability

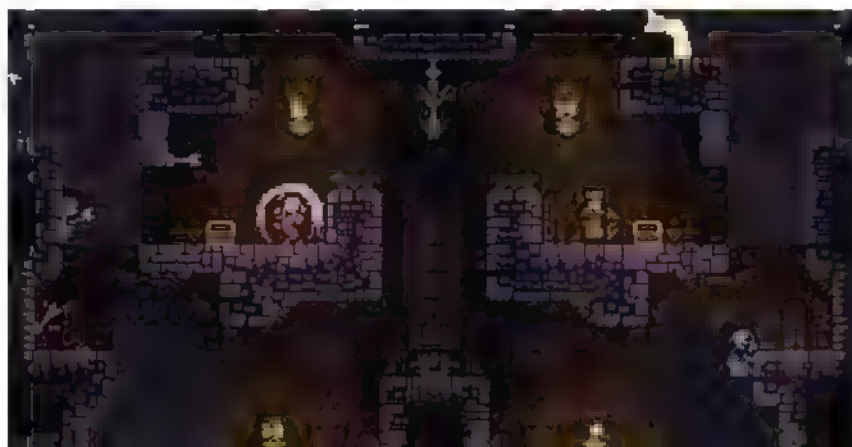
The PlayStation 4 controller is perfect for the fast-paced action, and many controller options are available on PC

» Presentation

There isn't much to do solo, but few games are as entertaining with friends

» Replay Value

High



BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea – Episode 2

Discovering where sea meets air



Style 1-Player Action Publisher 2K Games
Developer Irrational Games Release March 25 Rating M



8.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

► Concept

Conclude the story-based DLC for BioShock Infinite by further exploring the connection between Rapture and Columbia

► Graphics

The core game and the first episode of Burial at Sea looked great, and nothing has changed

► Characters

Familiar actors reprise their roles as key characters from the BioShock series

► Playability

Straightforward controls hold no surprises for anyone who has played BioShock Infinite

► Presentation

Elizabeth has a stealthier and more tactical playstyle, which is an interesting change of pace

► Replay Value

Moderately Low

Irrational Games created two of the most memorable settings in gaming history: the underwater utopia of Rapture and the airborne city of Columbia. We saw these two fantastical worlds intersect in the first episode of Burial at Sea, but how are they connected in the larger BioShock universe? The second episode answers that question, picking up the story immediately where the last one left off.

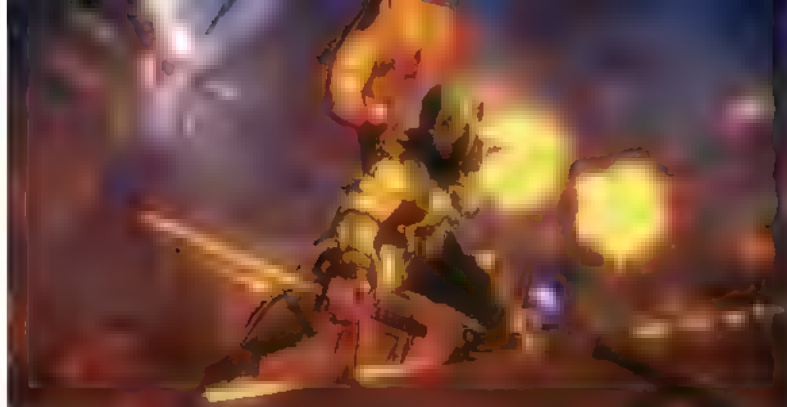
In the first episode, Booker delivered scaled-back mechanics from the base game. You control Elizabeth this time, and it requires that you change your whole approach. She lacks Booker's offensive options, and she also doesn't have a friend tagging along to throw her health and ammo when the situation gets grim. The result is tense and deliberate stealth-focused action that has a lot in common with the classic Thief games (a connection made even clearer by the non-lethal "1998 Mode" homage).

The gameplay shift opens up new opportunities for powers and weapons. A tranquilizer-laced crossbow bolt is ideal for single-enemy situations, but your mission isn't always so easy. If a room is full of splicers, you can fire a noisemaker to make them crowd together, then shoot knockout gas to take them all out of commission. Combined with old and new powers, your skillset has plenty of flexibility.

Elizabeth's coolest ability allows her to see enemies and notable objects through walls. She can also use this power to turn invisible. I spent more time isolating and avoiding enemies for knockouts than I did in full-blown combat. The stealth adds more of a cat-and-mouse flavor to your encounters, but you still have the tools to fight if you mess up. This is still a BioShock game (don't expect to be memorizing patrol patterns or anything so intricate), but the additions build on the old mechanics in ways that we didn't see in the previous installment.

This episode concludes the Burial at Sea story arc, which is one of the highlights of the whole experience. I don't want to ruin anything, so I'll just say that fans of the series will enjoy the returning characters and the way the worlds of Rapture and Columbia intertwine. Finishing Episode 2 is bittersweet, since it's the last piece of content created by Irrational Games as we know it. However, Burial at Sea also ties together the landmark creations of the talented team in a satisfying way, making it an appropriate curtain call for this amazing studio.

— Joe Juba



Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z

Team Ninja gets around to the zombie trend

6.5

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Tecmo Koei
Developer Team Ninja, Concept, Spark Unlimited
Release March 18 (PS3, 360), March 21 (PC) Rating M

PS3 • 360 • PC

► Concept

A Ryu-hating cyber ninja battles zombies

► Graphics

The cartoony art style sets it apart from the main Ninja Gaiden series

► Controls

Dialogue is essentially all perky one-liners

► Playability

The battle system works well, but it can be easy to lose track of your character in larger battles

► Presentation

Don't be afraid to crank it down to easy mode for a dumb, fun first playthrough

► Replay Value

Moderate

The concept for Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z could have come from a 12-year-old's sketchbook. Still, I kind of respect Tecmo Koei and Keiji Inafune's Concept for having the guts to re-release a retail game about a cyborg ninja fighting zombies. It's equal parts silly, gory, and stupid.

Anti-hero Yaiba Kamikaze gets killed by the noble Ryu Hayabusa early on and is revived with machine parts by wealthy weirdo Rico De'Gonzo and overly sexualized scientist, Miss Monday (This is Team Ninja—don't pretend to be surprised). Yaiba spews constant eye-roll-inducing one-liners like, "He's the head of a corporation and a d---. That makes him a d---head."

The game structure is essentially a series of arena-wave battles connected by lame puzzles and quick-time platforming. Strangely, you can only jump in special circumstances—it's not an option in battle. Yaiba's attacks include a fast blade, heavy cyborg punch, and a Kratos-like chain flail. Mixing up these three buttons unleashes a wide variety of combos, but the fact that they're tuned in menus makes them a pain to learn. The most satisfying attacks involve combining various elements like electricity and fire for explosive results.

Battles get increasingly frustrating the deeper in you go. Enemies take and dish out a lot of damage and your starting health bar is small. This, paired with an unreliable counter system and mid-to-high-tier enemies that rarely get stunned by your attacks, means you're forced to dart around constantly, chipping off a little damage or risking heavy retaliation.

The arenas keep getting larger and crammed with more enemies, so it's difficult to spot your character in the wide camera view. If you try the closer camera option, then you're screwed by attacks that fly in from off screen. When you die, you have to stare at a lengthy load screen and start all the way back at the first wave no matter how far you progressed in that arena.

Like its second-fiddle protagonist, Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z resides in the shadow of many other better third-person action games, but it's not terrible if you're specifically looking for a schlocky Saturday. — Bryan Vore

The Edge

If you have the option, definitely play Yaiba on PC. The textures, resolution, and framerate are noticeably better.





Infamous Second Son

A new direction and thirst for power



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Sucker Punch Release March 21 Rating T

8.5

PS4

Concept

A choice-driven experience that turns new protagonist Delsin Rowe into a powerful hero or villain as he searches for answers across the rain-soaked streets of Seattle

Graphics

From the detailed architecture to the swarms of particles that crowd the screen, Infamous Second Son is a showpiece of stunning details. The fluidity and little touches tied to Delsin's animations also impress

Gameplay

With the exception of Delsin's sometimes cringe-inducing dialogue, the voice work is exceptional. The moody, distorted tones of grunge-inspired guitars complement the atmosphere and action

Playability

Delsin can unleash a superhero team's worth of powers. All of these abilities are fun to use and open up a wealth of traversal and attack methods

Value

For the third time straight, Sucker Punch has crafted a game that is worth playing through twice

Replay Value

Moderately High

At the end of Infamous 2, Cole MacGrath's heroics paved the way for a future in which humans and conduits could peacefully coexist. That dream died with him in New Marais. In the years that followed, fear and paranoia swept over the world, forcing the Department of Unified Protection to imprison all conduits, and brand those not locked behind bars as bioterrorists. Today, the conduits' only hope for freedom lies with 24-year-old street artist and delinquent Delsin Rowe.

Delsin is quickly established as a rebellious and somewhat obnoxious lead who uses his graffiti art to mock the DUP. He's the type of character who uses humor to defuse tense situations, humor when talking to himself, and, you guessed it, humor to communicate with every person he meets. He's a canny person at heart, though – a trait the scribes at Sucker Punch do a terrific job of conveying through his tight bond with his brother and family friends. We learn that he has a lot to lose.

Sucker Punch plays that card early on, and doesn't hold back from creating emotional turmoil for this new protagonist. Within the opening moments of Infamous Second Son, Delsin is confronted with a bombshell of a choice involving the people in his life. The director of the DUP has tracked an escaped conduit to Delsin's location, and is demanding information on the prisoner's whereabouts. The fate of numerous lives hangs upon Delsin's response. The decision he makes (determined by you) leads him down the path of being a hero or villain. The outcome of this moment forms the backbone of the story, and Sucker Punch doesn't lose focus on it, delivering a solid arc from start to finish with nice payoffs and progression for both the good and evil paths.

The majority of this tale unfolds in Seattle, WA – the first real-world location used in this series. The DUP seized control of the city to weed out the escaped conduit, and Delsin is here to search for answers and more.

Most conduits manipulate matter to generate their abilities. Delsin, on the other hand, is a power sponge. If a conduit makes physical contact with him, he gains the unique traits of

that conduit, much like Rogue from Marvel's X-Men – only Delsin keeps them permanently.

This is a clever idea that effectively turns Delsin into a weapon wheel of a character. Rather than being stuck with the same core abilities for an entire game – as is the case with most super-hero-based titles – Delsin becomes a different character with each new conduit he touches.

Although he only comes into contact with a handful of conduits, the pool of abilities siphoned from them makes it look like he shook hands with a dozen DC Comics characters. I have to tip my hat to Sucker Punch for thinking outside of the box with the power types. A hero who channels neon colors may sound like the second coming of Jubilee, but Sucker Punch turns this strange ability into a surprisingly powerful toolset. Achieving similar success with smoke and the other power types – all while delivering a diverse move set for each – is an impressive feat that leads to a decidedly different super-hero experience than we've seen before.

Delsin can morph from physical form into a puff of smoke that is sucked up through a ground-based vent that leads to a rooftop. From this higher vantage point, he can fire cinder shots at DUP troops, or absorb the neon from a storefront sign, giving him the power to rain charged energy beams onto DUP troop transports – a move that will likely take out some of the other soldiers in the blast. When the DUP forces hone in on his location and retaliate with a hail of bullets, he can vanish in a second – either using his neon power to dash off like the Flash, or absorbing another power source to cloak.

Control over this mayhem is beautifully realized, allowing for attacks and movements to be chained together in an array of strategic and visually dynamic ways. Conflicts often showcase high levels of destruction. Towers crumble, cars explode, bodies ragdoll, and the sky is usually scorched with a ridiculous amount of particle effects. It's a symphony of chaos, and the game handles it all with only the slightest of framerate drops.

The story clicks and the action is engaging, but Infamous Second Son runs into a few major problems that derail the excitement and connection I had with the world.

The biggest stumbling point this game makes is tied to the open world. Seattle is a fun city to explore, offering a wide variety of architectural differences and points of interest. Sucker Punch paints all of these sights with high levels of realism, impressing even on the smallest of levels.

You won't spend much time in any particular area, however, as most of the side activities can be completed in seconds. Delsin takes out hidden cameras, locates undercover targets, knocks down Tracker Drones, wrecks DUP equipment, and tags walls with art. All of these tasks are clearly labeled on the map, and can be completed so quickly that I felt like I was speedrunning through the game. Some of these activities require nothing more than firing one shot to disable a camera, or hitting attack once to smash a device. The diversions aren't necessarily bad, but in the absence of more compelling side content, they make the experience feel somewhat empty.

Combat encounters tied to open-world activities are repetitive, consisting of moderately sized DUP legions, a handful of drug dealers, and just a few cops. There aren't many curveballs thrown in these encounters, and there are a lot of them. Conflicts tied to story missions don't run into the same problems, as they continually dish out new enemy types, varying conditions (such as limited power sources or dense fog), and the enemies don't hold back from giving Delsin a run for his money.

I like the way that Infamous Second Son splinters off from the first two entries in the series. Delsin's conduit ability creates uncertainty in the gameplay mechanics, and the choices he makes apply similar levels of ambiguity to the narrative arc. I never really grasped what was coming next from this tale, outside of knowing that the open world activities and encounters would be repeated ad nauseam.

— Andrew Reiner

Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft

Blizzard's bold play on the card game frontier

9

PC • Mac
GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Online Strategy Publisher Blizzard Entertainment Developer Blizzard Entertainment Release March 11 Rating T

PC • Mac

» Concept

An accessible take on the collectible card game. Build decks and battle opponents

» Graphics

Colorful and quirky, the graphics do an excellent job of capturing the feel of the Warcraft universe

» Sound

Cards are packed with flavor, from Leeroy Jenkins' signature entry to Nat Pagle's fishing prowess

» Playability

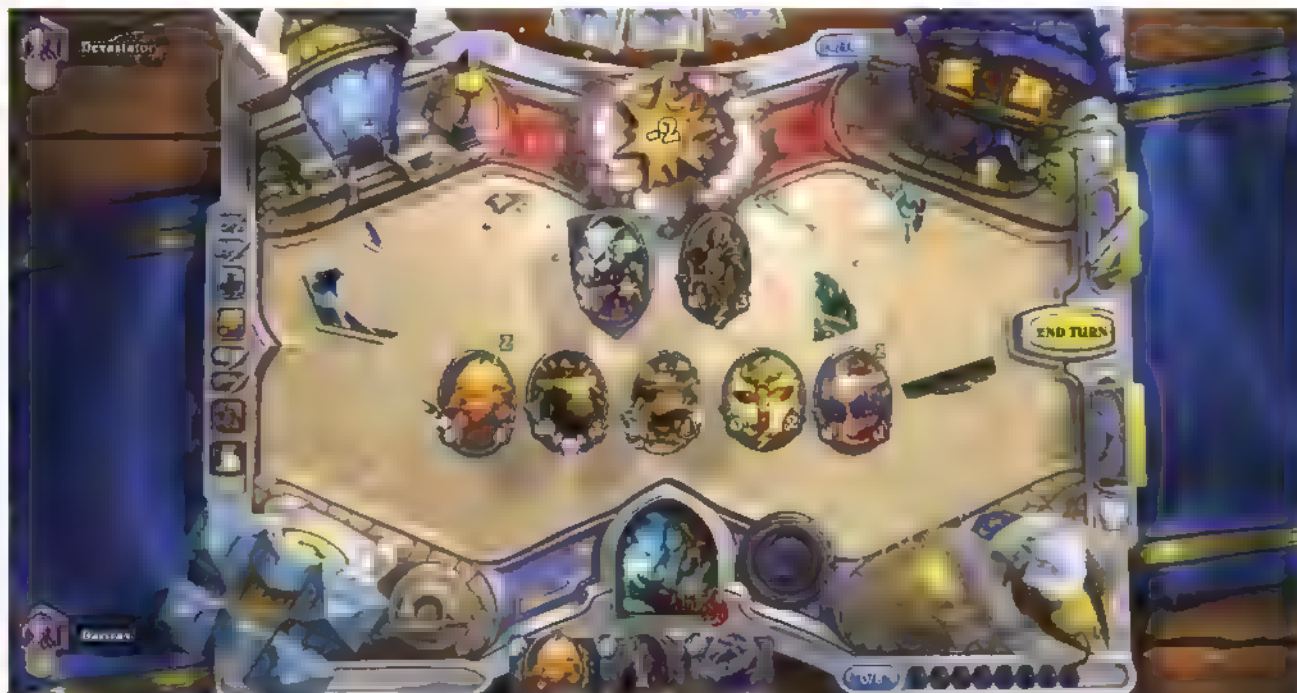
The most accessible and intuitive digital card game to date

» Addictive & Entertaining

Addictive and entertaining for free-to-play players, competitors, and collectors, the game brings the oft-daunting digital card game genre into the spotlight

» Replay Value

High



Blizzard's foray into the burgeoning free-to-play digital collectible card game market is an ambitious one. Drawing upon many of the staples of collectible card game design with a focus on accessibility and modern sensibilities, Hearthstone succeeds as a standout example of where CCGs are headed. The genre has traditionally had knowledge and price entry barriers, but Hearthstone does for card games what World of Warcraft did for the MMORPG; it creates an accessible entry point with enough complexity and polish to cater to both casual and hardcore players.

New players are treated to a tutorial and as much comp-stomping against A.I. as they want, but the action officially starts with simple mechanics and a UI that's unbelievably welcoming. Almost all interactions that players have with cards and objects on the board are intuitive. Hearthstone "feels" like a physical card game in digital space as players pick up, drop, and flip cards on the online table.

The basics of the game are simple – 30 card deck size, reduce the opponent's life from 30 to zero before they do it to you. Players that can no longer draw cards take damage every time they would draw.

The resource system is streamlined. Players don't need to play cards that give resources, they simply acquire one extra mana each turn. This sets a pace for each game that generally has both players ramping up into endgame win conditions while jockeying for board control and position. One may think that this sort of fixed resource gain would lessen the viability of rush decks or ramp decks that focus heavily on either side of the card cost spectrum, but Blizzard appears to have balanced things out masterfully, largely due to the addition of hero

powers to fuel specific deck compositions.

You play as one of nine Warcraft hero archetypes, each with their own special cards specific to the class and a unique hero power. Hero powers all cost two mana, so they come online early in the game and can act as replacement plays if your hand is full of high-mana cards, and they can also weave into standard turns to save cards and gain an incremental advantage. The Warlock, for instance, is ideal for creating an aggressive deck, since the hero power allows a player to draw additional cards and keep the pressure on after playing a fistful of small "rush" creatures.

Games are short – between five and fifteen minutes, depending on circumstances. Some of this is due to the fact that Hearthstone does not have any interaction with the opponent during their turns. Players only take action during their own turns, which creates a fast experience that will translate well to mobile platforms when the game launches on them later this year.

One of the excellent decisions Blizzard made with Hearthstone is the way it has set up its limited format, the Arena (which I expect to see in many digital card games moving forward). In the Arena, players pay an entry fee of in-game currency or real cash to build a deck out of an assortment of cards and then play until they score 12 wins or 3 losses – whichever comes first. This is a wonderful change from the traditional card game tournament structure, which has players stuck in the event from start to finish – a process that can take many hours, including waiting for other players to finish rounds. In Arena, players are free to leave whenever they wish, during both the deckbuilding process or between matches, and come

back anytime to continue. A player can get a few wins and a loss, log off for days, and come back and continue the series. It's an incredibly convenient take on one of the genre's most popular formats.

Players complete daily quests and play matches to earn in-game currency that can be used to purchase packs or pay Arena entry fees. Players can earn gold by playing, or opt for real-money purchases to quickly build a collection. The tournament and competitive scene has already taken off, with a heavy contribution coming from the game's visibility on Twitch. Hearthstone's short, exciting match format makes it a compelling game to watch in snackable bites as a streaming offering. As some prominent players have already displayed, it's entirely possible to become a top-ranked player without making any real-money purchases.

The digital card game genre will be seeing a lot of action in 2014 and beyond, and Hearthstone will be leading the charge as the genre gains more visibility in the PC and mobile space. If you've ever been curious about collectible card games but didn't know where to begin, Hearthstone is the place to start.

» Daniel Tack

Interviews & Critiques

Hearthstone will launch Adventure mode sometime in the future. This single-player experience pits the player against various A.I. encounters that come with special card rewards. Dedicated players with 500 ranked wins within a class unlock golden portraits and special animations, and a variety of card backs unlock through various achievements. A love of World of Warcraft isn't necessary to enjoy Hearthstone, but WoW players earn a special mount by winning a few rounds of Hearthstone.





Smite

Of myth, mayhem, and MOBAs



Style Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Publisher Hi-Rez Studios Developer Hi-Rez Studios Release March 25 Rating T

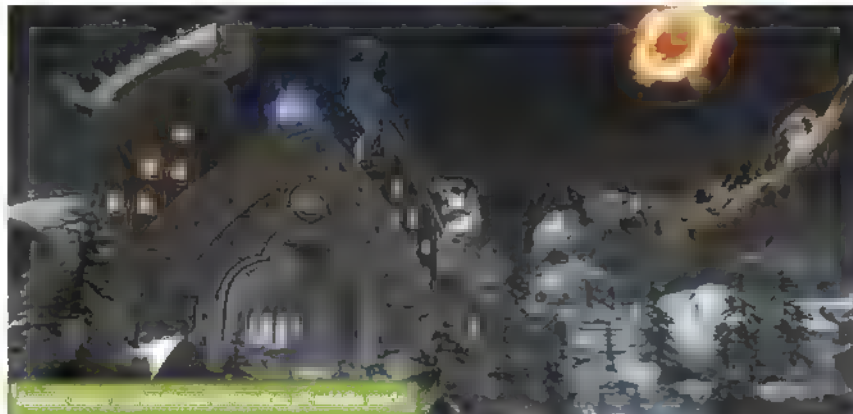


Hi-Rez Studios' free-to-play Smite occupies an interesting space in a genre that's going to see a deluge of new titles in 2014. Most multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) titles feature top-down, isometric action, but Smite gives players the chance to play in third-person with a first person shooter feel. Even auto-attacks are skillshots, making combat feel different from other MOBAs. Smite also features significant mode variety, allowing players to compete in unique death matches or themed games.

Smite puts you in the role of an ancient god; the character pool currently draws upon Greek, Norse, Chinese, Egyptian, and more, a loving Hi-Rez a nearly infinite pool of flavorful characters with appropriate abilities. Thanatos can sense death and has a skillset focused on assassination, paired with an ultimate ability that allows him to execute a weakened player in a single, long range dive. Zeus comes with all the powers you'd expect a thunder god to have, and Poseidon has the signature ability to "release the Kraken," doing heavy AOE damage. The colorful cast of characters is interesting, and each god and goddess feels unique in terms of skillsets and style.

Smite's third person design changes things significantly from the top-down isometric MOBA paradigm. Every attack requires skill, so you can't just rely on auto-attack to do your work. Everything from the basic slash of an axe or magic from a staff needs to be carefully timed and aimed in order to land. The range of each move is generally shown after a skill has been highlighted, and then you direct it to land in a specific area. Smite presents a huge change from games that often have "click aimed" skills and abilities, and each character has specific nuances to master.

Smite features a classic competitive mode that mirrors the structure of the go-to MOBA



map creeps spawn in three lanes and are assisted by players pushing, ganking, and team fighting to the opposing base. Smite has an all-random, all-middle mode that many other MOBA titles are embracing. While the standard mode is certainly the go-to for competitive league play and balance, Smite's Arena and custom modes make it stand out from competitors.

Arena mode is similar to deathmatch; it's a small space where players have no room to hide, and a single lane stretches from base to base. This distills the game down to a quick play five-vs-five brawl with faster leveling and gold accumulation. This mode removes the laning, ganking, jungling and other aspects that are often associated with a traditional MOBA match, constantly serving up nothing but the core of genre: the teamfight. The clashes between players are the best parts of any given MOBA match, and Arena lets you focus on them exclusively in fast-paced games that require a different playstyle. This mode is the best Smite has to offer, and players who gravitate toward it can also find

ranked, competitive league play.

Smite also features a "daily match," a non-competitive themed fight that pits zany god combos against each other. Maybe it's an all-Poseidon water brawl, or a massive turret all-Vulcan battle. With a ton of cool possibilities in the daily match, it's a great format for goofing off.

The majority of MOBA titles on the market today feature the option to make a la carte purchases with in-game currency or cash. Players are free to use that mode in Smite, but if you plan on investing a lot of time, the option to just "buy" the whole game is available. This unlocks all past, present, and future characters, so it transforms a free-to-play title into a more traditional one-time purchase. Players are then free to spend their in-game coins on skins and cosmetics.

Smite is an excellent addition to an expanding genre, and one that distinguishes itself from the rest of the pack with decidedly different gameplay, a quirky and lighthearted take on classic mythology, and a variety of interesting modes. — Daniel Tack

PC

» Concept

Battle with ancient gods and mythological figures in a third-person multiplayer online battle arena

» Graphics

A slick and stylized take on ancient gods and goddesses with campy, quirky visuals

» Sound

A variety of iconic phrases and callouts are associated with different characters and abilities. Players become familiar with signature shouts and catchphrases like "Release the Kraken!" from Poseidon or "I have you now!" from Ares

» Playability

Controls are easy to use and understand. Players can opt to have skills and item purchases taken care of automatically with a checkbox, making it accessible even to genre newcomers

» Value

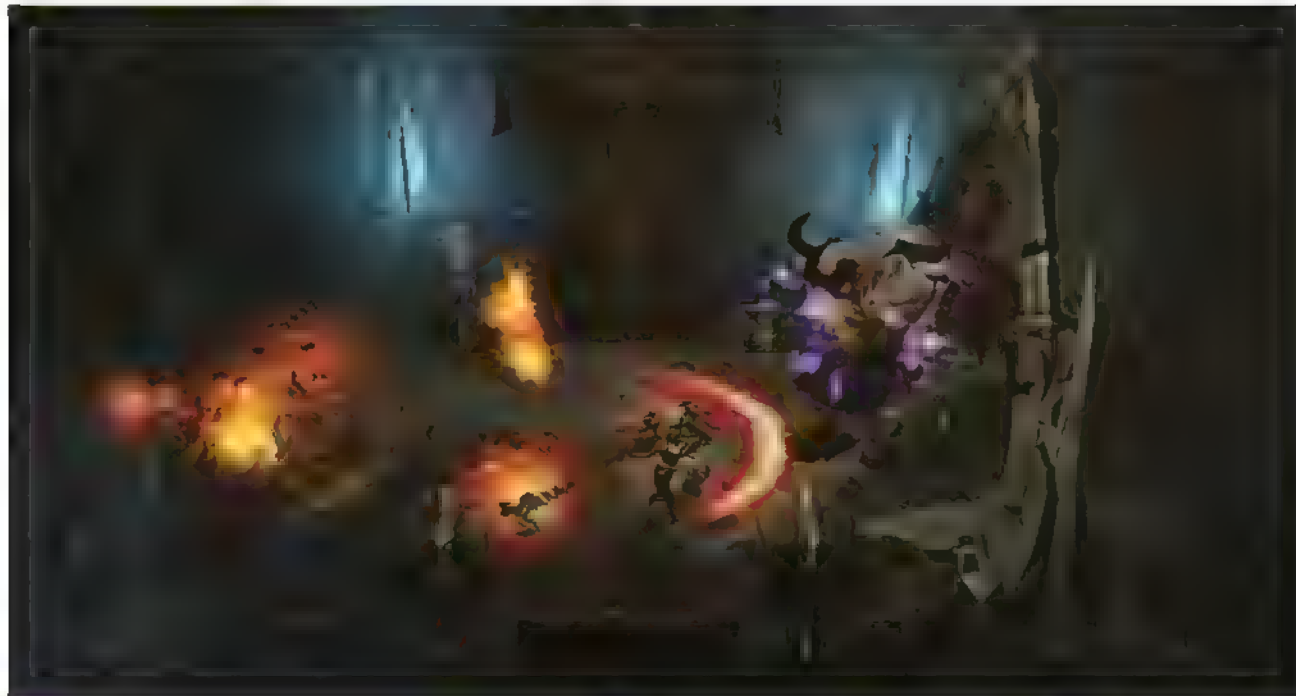
A wide variety of modes (distinctly different from other MOBAs) and a healthy roster of interesting characters make Smite a great option for players of all skill levels

» Replay Value

High

Diablo III: Reaper Of Souls

To hell and back again



9.25

gameplay.com
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) Publisher Blizzard Entertainment
Developer Blizzard Entertainment Release March 25 Rating M

PC

» Concept

Continue the battle against evil with a new class, new act, and new gameplay modes

» Appearance

Act five architecture and design are interesting enough. Core graphics are the same as the original title

» Sound

Monsters being smashed, crushed, burned, and hit with giant rocks from the sky. The sound of a legendary amulet dropping

» Playability

Easy-to-use controls and the at-a-glance item system allow players to quickly sort for upgrades

» Gameplay Changes

Sweeping changes to a game that was in dire need of resuscitation do not disappoint. Dynamic game modes keep players coming back for more

» Replay Value

High

Diablo III's Reaper of Souls expansion is one of the most significant turnarounds in gaming. Out of the ashes of a boring, auction house-centric grind comes a dynamic and addictive system that encourages grouping and rewards players with continual upgrades and challenges. Almost every facet that players rightly attacked in the original game has been refined and revamped, transforming the title into an enjoyable action/RPG experience.

The new Crusader class, abilities, levels, act, and final boss are only the surface-level selling points of Reaper of Souls. If you're expecting a scintillating story to go along with the new content, don't. It's the same hackneyed fare that's almost comical at this point. Based on the time I spent leveling a Crusader to 70, fans of Diablo II's Paladin will find plenty of hammer-hurling holy fun. Act five has more content than other acts – including many optional areas – but pushing through it doesn't take long. The new final boss fight is slightly more difficult than the iconic red vilain of the franchise, but it's nothing particularly special or interesting.

They are nothing compared to the massive replayability and dynamic dungeon delving that bounties, rifts, and Adventure mode (unlocked by completing act five) provide. The real revolution comes not with any completely new content, but with the way recycling content is handled.

Adventure mode breaks things up to keep the game fresh. Players have always been able to pod linearly through areas and acts, but Adventure mode breaks up content into manageable slices and provides additional

rewards. Instead of moving from point A to B to C and nauseam, players are presented with varied tasks in each act that can be completed in any order to unlock treasure caches and items to access the Nephalem Rifts.

The loot-centric action/RPG is always going to be battling against repetition and tedium, and these methods of serving up gameplay are most welcome. Players with a few minutes can crank out some bounties, while players with more time can jump in with friends and tear into Rifts. Once I moved on to these experiences, I didn't look back to the main campaign for gameplay.

Rifts are randomized areas with a variety of monster types and tilesets from throughout the game, and are loaded with elite mobs and bosses. Rifts are "the endgame," and while they can be completed solo, they shine in a group setting. When the monster-kill meter inside the Rift is full, the boss spawns and players bring it down for a glut of loot, gold, and experience. Rifts can take a while to complete as a solo player, and are at their best with a group of three or four. Playing with a team increases your magic find, and you are able to take on harder difficulties for additional chances at legendary drops. Players can even trade gear for a limited time, so if you don't need a particular legendary, you can pass it on to a friend. You need to farm items to access these Rifts, and since one entry fee can get a whole group inside, teaming up reduces the hassle for everyone.

I've completed 100 bounties and a handful of Torment 1 difficulty Rift runs with friends, and they are more interesting and rewarding than anything in the core game.

Many changes that went live recently are integrated to the Reaper of Souls experience. With the Loot 2.0 and paragon level changes, players find their inventories overflowing with usable gear, so making builds designed around certain abilities is easier. Paragon leveling provides small bonuses like health, move speed, and stats to let players continue to grow forever after the level cap. The bonuses from each paragon level are small, but they add up and bring an element to the game that lets players continue to progress outside of the gear grind. In the core version of Diablo III, a player could go months without finding a legendary item – or be forced to purchase gear from the auction house to advance. The orange glow is still special, but now you see it regularly during gameplay.

Along with all the new loot, players have access to more options involving that loot. Crafting has been redone, and you can track down a plethora of legendary recipes. These special recipes require specific components that drop off rare monsters. You acquire some of these naturally if you choose to engage in Adventure mode, as the missions often involve tracking down these named spawns. During act five, players unlock the Mystic NPC. Did that awesome item drop but it had a stat that didn't mesh well with your build? The Mystic allows players to reroll certain item characteristics, providing a new optimization route and resource sink.

With a staggering revamp that touches upon almost all aspects of the game and modes that keep things interesting, Reaper of Souls isn't so much an expansion as it is a completely new game. » Daniel Tack



Yoshi's New Island

An uninspired return

Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming Publisher Nintendo Developer Arzest Release March 14 Rating E

Whether you consider it a part of the core Mario series or not, few gamers can deny that 1995's *Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island* was a beautiful and solid platformer. Its sequels on Nintendo 64 and DS didn't quite live up to the quality of the original, but Nintendo hasn't given up on Yoshi's quest to escort Baby Mario to his parents. *Yoshi's New Island* certainly feels like a sequel to the first game, but it seems a bit too comfortable with sticking to what worked almost 20 years ago without bringing much new to the table.

On a technical level, I can't complain about *Yoshi's New Island*. Platforming, fighting bosses, and gobbling up enemies all works well throughout the six worlds. Elements that were novel in the original return in similar form; giant Chain Chomps chase you through certain areas, and Yoshi can transform into a variety of vehicles and objects. If you haven't played the original game, this new entry is a pleasant little platformer.

If you were a fan, however, you will only notice downgrades. They're minor, but the fact that *Yoshi's New Island* adds a most nothing and makes other things slightly worse is

annoying. An easily avoidable frustration is an animation hiccup that occurs when you're throwing eggs. If you're moving in the slightest, the aiming and throwing mechanism feels just as crisp as it did on *Super Nintendo*. For some reason, there's an animation pause that occurs if you toss an egg while standing still. It's only a split second, but I found it annoying enough to make sure I only aimed eggs while I was in motion.

The art style is a more omnipresent downgrade. Whereas the original was crisp and vivid, the visuals of *Yoshi's New Island* are muddier. It's not a game-breaking issue by any means, but it's another example of this installment not measuring up to the original.

There are really only two new ideas in this game. One is the ability to eat the occasional giant enemy, granting Yoshi a huge egg that can burst through elements of the environment. The other is motion control, which is activated when Yoshi turns into items like balloons, mine carts, and a jackhammer. These simple sections control fine, but aren't particularly fun or memorable.

Nintendo is typically unparalleled when it comes to putting a novel twist on long-running

franchises. Some gamers frequently complain about constant entries in the Mario and Zelda series, but each new game almost always has its own identity and feel. *A Link Between Worlds* is designed to bring back nostalgic feelings of *A Link to the Past*, but it wasn't content to just make the same game again. It introduced entirely new concepts and features—something that *Yoshi's New Island* fails to do, which is surprising and disappointing given Nintendo's history.

Another way that *Yoshi's New Island* apes the original is the inclusion of a selection of two-player minigames. These weren't particularly noteworthy back then, and they're just as unremarkable now. If you're not finding yourself having fun with the single-player, these simple minigames won't do anything to change your mind about the game.

I've wanted a solid follow-up to *Yoshi's Island* for years, and this game is the third in a trilogy of follow-ups that range from half-baked to decent. Considering how unimpressed and apathetic I was towards most of *Yoshi's New Island*, it might be time to just be happy with my *Super Nintendo* memories of the series. — Dan Ryckert



Concept

Babysit Mario as a collection of Yoshis

Graphics

Not offensively bad, but a downgrade from the crisp visuals of the original

Sound

Some hummable tunes but nothing particularly memorable

Playability

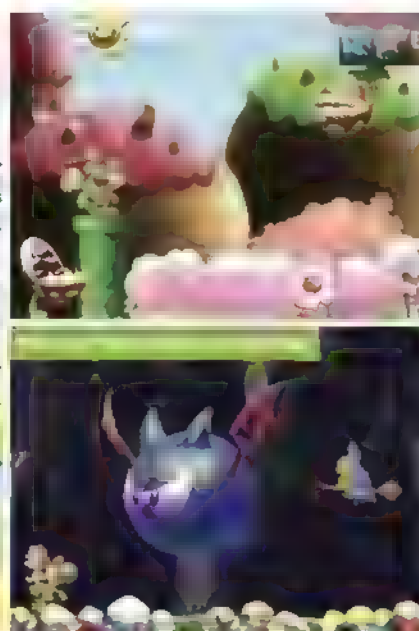
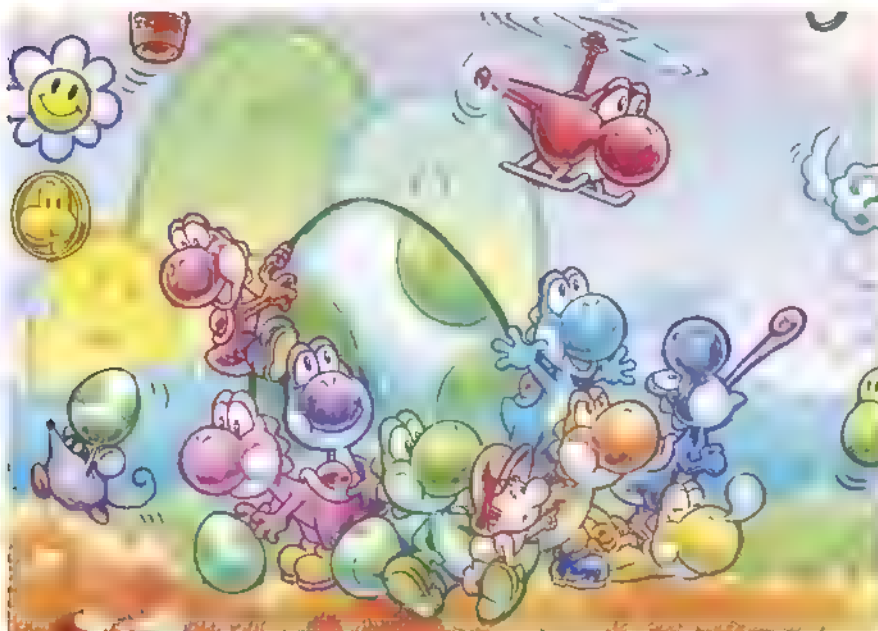
Everything controls fine, but an animation pause disrupts the egg-tossing process

Time-to-Mastery

Perfectly playable and sometimes a nice challenge, but lacks its own identity

Replay Value

Moderately Low



PLAYSTATION 4

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag	8.25	Dec-13
Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Contrast	7.5	Jan-14
Doki-Doki Universe	7.5	Feb-14
Kilzone: Shadow Fall	8	Jan-14
Knack	8.25	Jan-14
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Thief	8	Apr-14
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Super Motherload	6.25	Jan-14
Thief	8	Apr-14
Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition	9.25	Mar-14

Zoo Tycoon

Zoo Tycoon	7	Jan-14
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PLAYSTATION 3

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Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z	7	Mar-14
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Final Fantasy XIII-2 HD Remaster

Final Fantasy XIII-2 HD Remaster	9	Apr-14
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Walking Dead: Season Two - Episode 1: All That Remains

Walking Dead: Season Two - Episode 1: All That Remains	8.5	Feb-14
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Diablo III	9.25	Oct-13
Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z	7	Mar-14

6.75 | Deception IV: Blood Ties

Platform PS4 • Vita Release March 25 Rating M

It's been almost a decade since Tecmo released the last entry in the Deception series, and not much has changed. The new categories of traps (Humiliation, Sadistic, and Elaborate) are fun, but the series' traditional "run around and hope the bad guys step on your trap" gameplay is still basic and repetitive. Despite this, stringing together long combos of violent traps remains satisfying. — Dan Ryckert

8.75 | Shadowrun: Dragonfall

Platform PC Release February 27 Rating N/A

Dragonfall's fundamentals haven't changed enough to justify a play if you actively disliked Shadowrun Returns, which is a required purchase before enjoying this new expansion. However, if you were simply hungry for deeper role-playing options, Dragonfall makes major strides. — Matt Miller

7.75 | Tengami

Platform iOS Release February 20 Rating 4+

Nyamyam's new offering folds a pop-up book world together with exploration and subtle puzzles. If only it played as good as it looked, I like the gorgeous visuals and puzzle variety, but they are held back by tedium and iffy design. — Tim Turi

7.75 | TxK

Platform Vita Release February 11 Rating E

TxK moves at the pace of a strobe light on high settings. Even with only a handful of easily dispensable enemies moving toward you, an inescapable panic is generated from the light and sound show accompanying the spectacle. If you can find your groove, though, you won't have a problem hitting start immediately after getting a game over. — Kyle Hilliard

4 | Rambo: The Video Game

Platform PC Release N/A Rating M

If you want to watch John Rambo mow through waves of baddies in violent and satisfying fashion, watch the final half hour of the 2008 film. Don't spend your money and time to recreate any moments in this cheap, broken wreck. — Dan Ryckert

8.75 | The Walking Dead Season Two - Episode 2: A House Divided

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC • iOS Release March 12 Rating M

It has everything that made season one so gripping, like important relationship development, tragedy, and stunning revelations. This episode puts you in a no-win situation and makes you wonder what you could have done differently. — Kimberley Wallace

7 | Atelier Escha & Logy: Alchemists of the Dusk Sky

Platform PS3 Release March 12 Rating T

The urge to make one more item, explore more of the world for new materials, or to best a boss rarely dims. Escha & Logy may have some flaws, but it's good at providing a formulaic experience that rewards you with seeing your progression play out before you. — Kimberley Wallace



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SEGA DOES WHAT NINTENDO DON'T

How Sega's aggressive marketing took on the Nintendo giant

The fiercest rivalry in video game history has nothing to do with Battlefield versus Call of Duty or PlayStation 4 versus Xbox One – it was between a blue hedgehog and an Italian plumber. Even younger gamers are likely familiar with the battle between Sega and Nintendo in the early '90s. The Sega Genesis – the underdog – offered then-dominant Nintendo its first serious competition, and it was due in many ways to its aggressive advertising. The tagline "Genesis does what Nintendo don't" was synonymous with Sega, but it was a slogan with which Sega's Japanese management was never fully comfortable.

by Kyle Hilliard

The genesis of Sega America

Before taking on the role of CEO of Sega America, Thomas Kalinske made a name for himself in the toy industry. After buying Matchbox out of bankruptcy and selling it for a profit, Sega chased him. Former President of Sega, Hayao Nakayama, followed Kalinske to Hawaii, intercepting him while he was on vacation with his family to ask him to take a look at the company's 16-bit technology currently in development. After seeing the Genesis and early Game Gear test units, Kalinske was impressed enough to accept the position of CEO of Sega America, with one condition: "I've got to do this my way – the American way," Kalinske told Nakayama.

Kalinske wanted to lower the Genesis' price from \$200 to \$149, replace the included game

Altered Beast with Sonic the Hedgehog, and take on Nintendo in advertising. "We're going to make fun of Nintendo," Kalinske recalls telling the Japanese board in a pitch. "We're going to position them as the little kids' toy video game machine, and we're going to be the sophisticated, teenage and college-age video game machine."

The board did not like his ideas, and he listened to them discuss his presentation in Japanese while a translator whispered into his ear. "It was clear they didn't agree with any of this," Kalinske says. "I thought, 'This is the shortest career anyone has ever had.'" Despite the hesitancy of the board, Nakayama decided to override their pessimism and approve Kalinske's plan.

Culture clash

Sega America's director of marketing Al Nilsen played an important role in shepherding the aggressive advertising Sega so bravely pursued. "I was the person who launched Genesis, introduced the world to a blue hedgehog, and defeated Nintendo. I was there when Sega America was literally about five people in 1989," Nilsen says. Sega's Master System had been struggling, and it was Nilsen's job to spearhead Sega's Genesis marketing so the console could compete with Nintendo. Nilsen brought on an advertising agency and told them Sega's goal was to showcase not why the Genesis was a good system, but why it was a better system. "Basically, my job was to position Nintendo as the toy you grew out of," Nilsen says. "We, at that time, had no



Today, Thomas Kalinske is on the board for Leapfrog educational software, and is working to help improve education in China.



GENESIS DOES WHAT NINTENDON'T.

ARCADE GAMES:



Super Monaco GP



Mr. Big in Michael Jackson's Moonwalker



E-SWAT

ACTING GAMES:



Joe Montana Football



Pat Riley Basketball



James 'Buster' Douglas Knockout Boxing

ADVENTURE GAMES:



The Sword of Vermilion

DYNAMIC GAMES:



Columns

DYNAMIC GAMES:



Dynamite Duke

Get the hottest new video games going. Arcade, sports, adventure, strategy and action hits available only on the 16-bit Genesis System by Sega.

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There's only one true 16-bit system and it's got the hottest video game hits going. You can only play these on Genesis by Sega. Genesis does what Nintendon't.



fear of going up against Nintendo. We were the little guy, so anytime we could go and poke Nintendo, it was something that we were happy to do."

In the United States, competitive advertising is something we're accustomed to. Ads pitting Coke against Pepsi and PCs against Macs have always been part of our culture, but not in Japan. "We heard, 'We don't do competitive advertising in Japan,'" Nilsen says, recalling Sega's messaging from Japan. With the Genesis campaign, the United States was marketing a Japanese product in a way the company's upper management was simply not used to. Nilsen says, "We decided to go run the ads first and ask for forgiveness later."

Sega America was not required to get approval from Sega Japan for its ads, but while the home branch never asked for an ad to be pulled — there was always a fear "There is a line, and maybe you're approaching a line where we are a little uncomfortable, but nothing bad," says Nilsen. "As opposed to when we did the dog commercial with Game Gear a couple of years later."

That ad compared a Game Boy to a dog drinking water out of a toilet, and while it was eventually pulled, it wasn't at Sega Japan's request — it was at Nintendo's. "I think they did take that one to the FTC," says Kalinske.

"We did stop running that one because they complained so violently."

"We were a little careful," Nilsen says. "We didn't show things in advance to Japan. We showed them after the fact." The idea behind the decision was if Sega Japan wanted an ad to be pulled, and even if the ad was pulled, the impact would have already been made. "There's the saying: 'You can't un-ring a bell,'" Nilsen says. The marketing team was confident they were making the right choices in their advertising — and they were right. At its height, Sega was doing about \$1.5 billion worth of business in the United States. Before Kalinske came on, Sega was only doing about \$70 million. Japan may have been uncomfortable with the advertising direction, but they couldn't deny it was working. "Japan was very happy because our products were selling," Nilsen says.

The competition has subsided

Today, Microsoft and Sony — which famously butted heads in competing press conferences at E3 2013 — continue the console wars, but the matchup hasn't generated the same heat

as the rivalry between Sega and Nintendo. As console exclusive games become rarer and system features become increasingly similar, the acrimony has dissipated, causing gamers to look back on Sega and Nintendo's rivalry fondly. "We're still blown away by people talking about 'Sega does what Nintendon't,'" Nilsen says. "They're talking about these things 20-plus years after the fact." Sega's fight is a difficult one to put into context today, Nilsen points out. "No one thought you could beat Nintendo, but by the end of 1992, we had a 60 percent market share, and Nintendo had a 40 percent market share." Nintendo may have ultimately won the war, but Sega won a difficult battle against great odds. ☘

Professional Rivalry

Expectedly, Nintendo did not appreciate Sega's advertising, or its move on Nintendo's position as the dominant force in the console market. The battle extended beyond advertising, causing Nintendo to file frequent complaints with the Federal Trade Commission and send Sega cease-and-desist letters. "Nintendo was furious. Absolutely furious," says former Sega America CEO Thomas Kalinske. "As I understand, they had a dart board with my face on it that they used to throw darts at." When asked if Kalinske ever had uncomfortable personal interactions with Nintendo, he replies, "Oh God, yes!" In particular, Kalinske recalls Peter Main, executive vice president of sales and marketing for Nintendo, being angry with him. "Main, most of the time? He was livid with me. It was very seldom that he was not mad at me."

GENESIS DOES



Requested Franchise
Resurrections

We all have franchises we wish were still pumping out new entries. The rise of crowdfunding via Kickstarter has given some of these dormant franchises, such as Shadowrun and Wasteland, a much deserved second chance. With plenty of love in the air at GDC for franchises past their primes, we asked industry insiders which games are on their wish list for a revival. **by Kimberley Wallace**



"You don't want to get me started on this. I'm a huge tactical-RPG goober. I've played through the original Final Fantasy Tactics four times, including the full deep dungeon and finding Cloud Strife and every hardcore thing you can possibly get. I was actually so into it that I wanted one of my friends to play with me, so I took two PlayStation controllers and spliced them together so that I could control half the characters and he could control half the characters. My ultimate dream fantasy someday in the future – and in this fantasy land I wouldn't have to care if it made any money or not – I would make the ultimate modern Final Fantasy Tactics reboot."

– **Undead Labs founder Jeff Strain**



"Well, I would say Thief, but they did it. I haven't played it yet, but I hope it's really good. Thief was one of my favorite games. I can't think of any particular old games that they're not making anymore. One of the things that I like is to move on to the next game; as a developer I don't like to work on the same game over and over again, so I like to see new games as well as a player. I'm not a huge fan of going back to previous subjects. Whenever I've done that, the game has only been great to me in that time and that place and it's always rose-colored when I look back on it. I prefer to keep it in that way."

– **Papers, Please creator Lucas Pope**



"I would resurrect the SSI gold box games like Pool of Radiance, Secret of the Silver Blades, Curse of the Azure Bonds, and Pools of Darkness – any of those. That style of turn-based combat and navigating the world from a first-person view I love. It would be great for the iPad or like a nice small game on Steam. If they rebooted Heroes of Might & Magic III I would be down with that, too."

– **Sekret Agents founder Corey May**



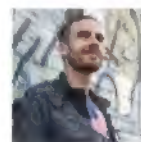
"It's kind of weird, but I'm a big fan of The Colonel's Bequest...the Laura Bow series. That would be fun to see. I love that sort of cozy mystery vibe."

– **Gabriel Knight creator Jane Jensen**



"Haven't they all been resurrected now? Didn't Kickstarter make everything viable again? I have a couple in my head. I have some that I know will never get resurrected because I know who owns the IP... but dormant franchise resurrected? SkiFree is an exceptionally great game. You know, the game that shipped on Windows 3? I want an Oculus SkiFree with a Wii balance board and you're just skiing and then a Yeti is chasing you. That's what I want...SkiFree 3D, please!"

– **Campo Santo co-founder Sean Vanaman**



"I'd revive Power Stone. With the resurgence in local multiplayer (thanks Towerfall, Samurai Gun, Sportsfriends, etc.) it would be great to see Capcom bring this ultra-freaking-fun arena fighter back."

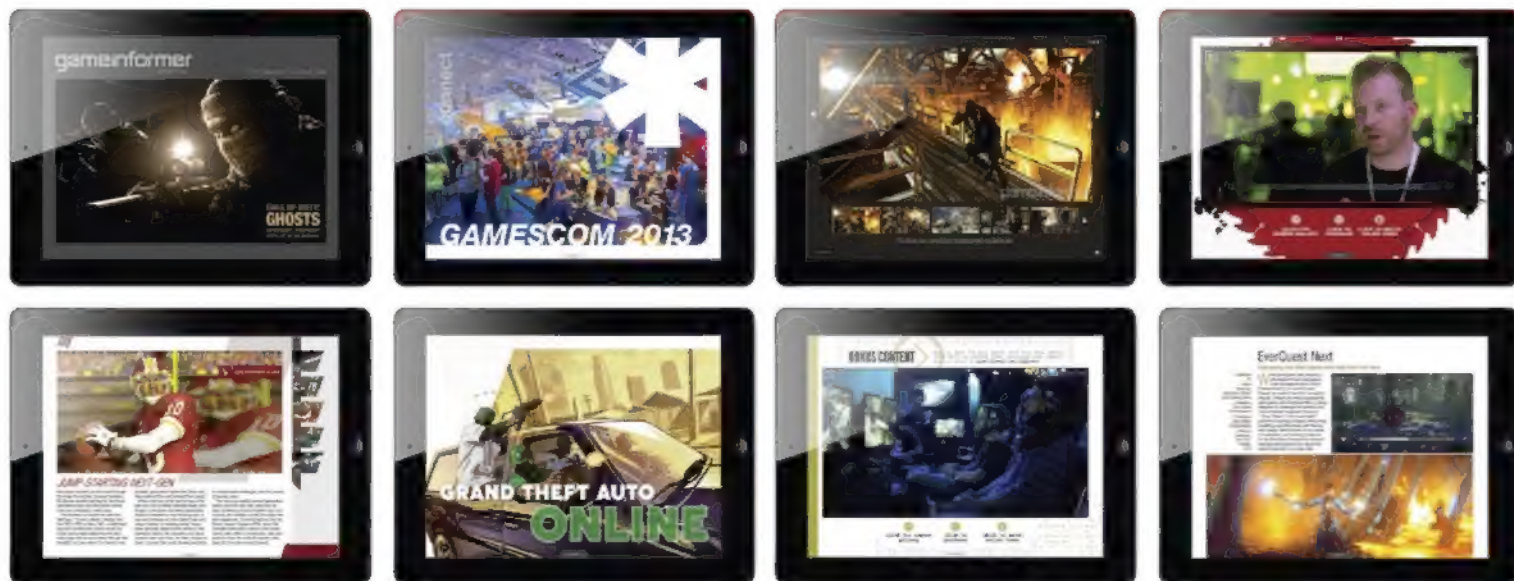
– **Capybara Games president Nathan Vella**



"I kind of miss Burger Time. I kind of think I should be able to play Burger Time any time I want. We could have special sauces now – there are so many burger chains we could have Burger Times actually sponsored by Five Guys, In-N-Out. I'd build those burgers."

– **GDC general manager Meggan Scavio**

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