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ANDY McNAMARA
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New Beginnings

The rise of mobile games and independent developers has had an astonishing effect on the video game industry, challenging traditional business models and delivery systems with new breeds of entertainment. Their introduction also enabled creators to explore previously extinct genres, introduce entirely new ones, and push innovation further and faster in the last five years than we had seen in the previous ten.

It has created some interesting clashes, however. At the Game Developers Conference earlier this year, one could tangibly feel the disgust that many (not all) of these indie and mobile creators have for established triple-A development. Some believe mobile is the only viable business model, and others see big development as the death of artistic design. Valid or not, these feelings demonstrate a clear "us versus them" attitude toward game design.

What's worse, we – as gamers and an industry – still talk about games along these lines, helping to foster a rivalry between blockbuster games and more experimental experiences. I have spoken to gamers (inside and outside of the industry) who despise that the first order of business when discussing a game is its monetization method or how it was created. A great game is a great game, no matter where it comes from – a fact that often seems to get lost.

The discussion of whether PC gaming, console gaming, or triple-A development is dead is worthless, and their resiliencies have been proven time and time again. Last time I checked, they all seemed to be doing very well, with legions of gamers that love them.

Here is the bottom line: People love games, and we will play them wherever we can, on whatever device we have in our possession. The industry will change and continue to evolve, and games and gamers will benefit. The petty battles are pointless; let's just play some games and enjoy all the options we have, because we have more of them today than ever before.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

0714

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Far Cry 4

Taking place in the Himalayas, Ubisoft brings new heroes, new villains, new weapons, new wildlife, new vehicles, and a new world to Far Cry – and we have all the details. **by Jeff Cork**

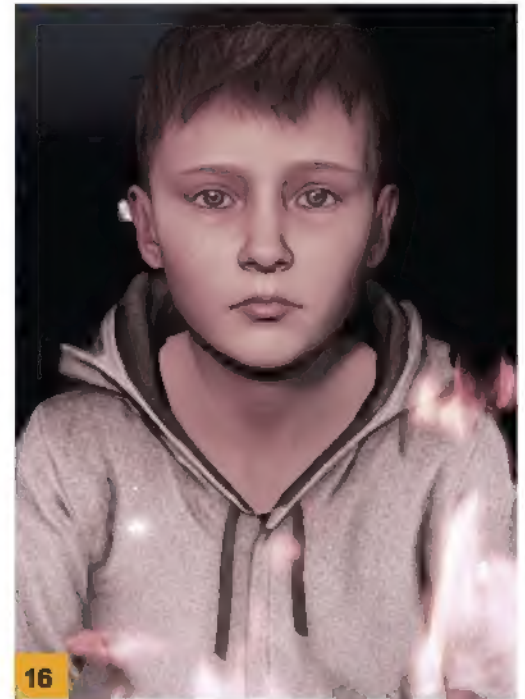


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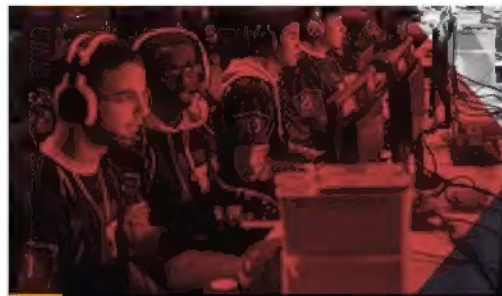


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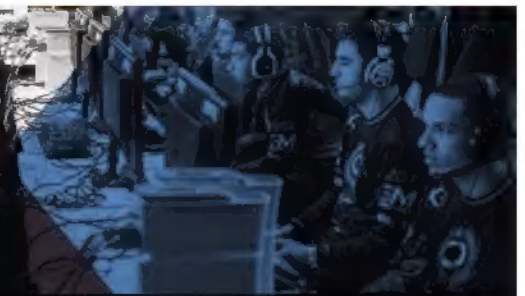
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Readers let us know how much they would have liked to play the canceled Darth Maul video game we detailed recently, defend the term "gamer" as a valid title, and complain about Titanfall. You will also learn the difference between procedurally and randomly generated.

» 10 Connect

This month we find out what happens to retired professional gamers, read deeper into some of gaming's most popular stories, and analyze the Xbox One's distancing from Kinect. We also look at some fantastic video game artwork.

» 54 Previews

We take another in-depth look at Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor, get our hands on Insomniac's Sunset Overdrive, and find out what's next for The Sims. We also have new previews for Batman in both Arkham and Lego forms.

» 66 Reviews

This month has a strong lineup of games we've been equally excited and unsure about. We have reviews for Wolfenstein, Watch Dogs, and Mario Kart 8 – but only one can be game of the month.

» 100 Game Over

Test your co-op knowledge with our partner trivia. Everyone knows Sonic and Knuckles play well together, but who is Cody Travers' partner in crime? Find out if you're a Tango and Cash or more of a Turner and Hooch.



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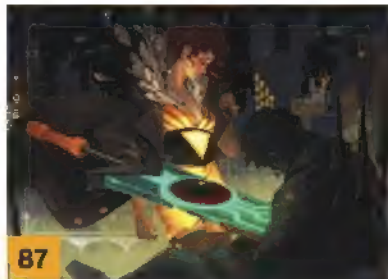
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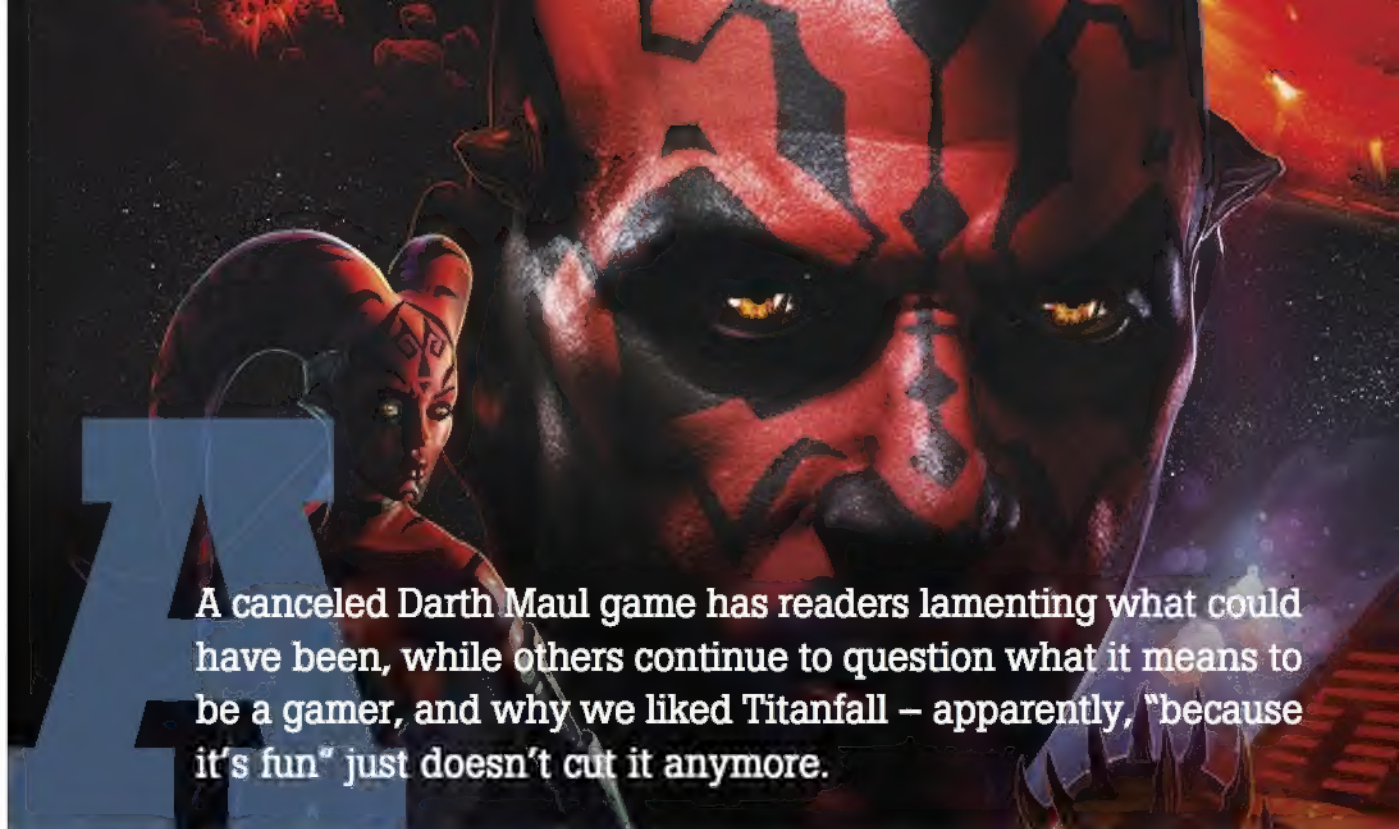
CORRECTION: In our Demon Slayers feature (issue 253), Kim Shashoua referred to Depression Quest as a one-person project, when actually three people worked on the game: Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Isaac Shankler. We apologize for the error.

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LET'S GET CRACKIN'!





A canceled Darth Maul game has readers lamenting what could have been, while others continue to question what it means to be a gamer, and why we liked Titanfall – apparently, “because it’s fun” just doesn’t cut it anymore.

Disturbance In The Force

I just received the new issue of *Game Informer* and came across the article about the doomed Darth Maul game from Red Fly (Into The Shadows, issue 253). I'm nearly 31 years of age, and both Star Wars and video games hold a special place in my heart. I always felt Darth Maul's potential was wasted in *The Phantom Menace*, so I was filled with joy when he made his return appearance. I also prefer the Sith over their Jedi scum counterparts; the fact that such a wonderful concept for a game was sent to video game purgatory was heartbreaking. I was a fan of both Force Unleashed games, but being able to play as Maul himself would have been awesome. My only hope is that the developers at Red Fly find solace knowing that they had a great idea for a game and I hope to see more from them in the future.

Michael Weisse
via email

I want to thank Andrew Reiner for his articles regarding the downfall of LucasArts. I am a huge Star Wars fan, and I was saddened when Disney announced that they'd be closing the doors of LucasArts. But after reading "Fall Of The Empire" (issue 250) and then "Into the Shadows," it almost seems like Disney was doing LucasArts a favor. Thank you for what have been two of the most memorable articles for me.

Andrew Menges
via email

We received more than a few letters from readers this month lamenting the cancellation of Red Fly's promising Darth Maul game. It's easy to understand why; playing a game that focuses on Darth Maul's training would have been a major and exciting departure from most Star Wars games. Here's hoping the new deal between Disney and Electronic Arts provides Star Wars fans with some quality titles to get excited about.

Don't Hate The Gamer

I wanted to applaud Matt Helgeson's opinion piece, "The Changing Definition of 'Gamer'" (issue 253). I do feel that the term "gamer" has its place, but I am not sure what imaginary line I would create to segregate gamers and non-gamers, and I don't feel that I should. At this point we are pretty much all gamers in one way or another, right? It would take a complete retraining in our way of thinking to stop categorizing our peers and ourselves as gamers, and I'm not at the point of dismissing the term yet, but I do believe that a more open approach to "outsiders" entering our hobby is the best way to go. Let your friend play Candy Crush on their iPad while you play Final Fantasy on yours. Enjoy your digital experiences together and the world will be a happier place.

Melissa Funk
via email

I don't think the term "gamer" needs to go away altogether. The world of games has expanded, so it makes sense that the words we use to describe games and gamers expand too. Because games provide such different experiences, those of us who play more "sophisticated" games like *The Last of Us* or *Fable* feel like the term we use to describe

ourselves should not be used to describe someone playing Candy Crush. That's how I feel when I play a game that gets me emotionally involved and provokes real thought, and then go to work and see a four-year-old being pushed in a cart and playing some simple game while his parents shop. While it may still be gaming, I can't see it as the same type of experience. Rather than disappearing, the definition of gamer should be more general with sub-categories to describe the different types of gamers. "Casual" and "hardcore" are terms already being used; why not be even more specific?

Sylvia Skibinski
Dothan, AL

We understand the desire to disassociate your love of gaming from the casual crowd, but it's still just a form of elitism. You don't have to qualify what types of movies you like watching in order to call yourself a filmgoer, so why isn't a gamer just a person who enjoys playing games? Besides, being more inclusive just increases the self-satisfaction you can derive from knowing that you have better taste than the average gamer...



We're Gonna Need A Bigger HDD

I'm writing to request that you guys do an article on a problem that will soon become a widespread epidemic for many new-gen console owners: full hard drives! It seems like a simple solution – just swap it out with a bigger one – but you really have to do your research on the right size/height/specs/etc., and for every five people that do their due diligence, I bet there are at least three people who don't (that's a ballpark guess with no science to support it). I own both an Xbox One and PS4, and I think the hard drives are extremely small in both systems. Since PlayStation is my system of choice for multiplatform games this generation, it inevitably has most of my next-generation game purchases at this point.

Justyn Yahle
Dayton, OH

We're one step ahead of you, Justyn. While Xbox One doesn't yet support hard-drive replacements, we've put together a step-by-step guide for upgrading your PS4 storage space. Flip to page 30 to check it out.



Clash Of The Titanfall

Let's be realistic: *Titanfall* was an overhyped and underwhelming game. It's a fresh perspective from the typical Call of Duty-style multiplayer, has a well-done parkour system, and smooth graphics and gameplay, but these things just aren't enough to make up for the incredible lack of content and A.I.-heavy multiplayer. There are a total of 10 primary weapons in *Titanfall*, and save the smart pistol, they mostly feel like the same weapons I've used over and over in every multiplayer shooter. On top of this, there are so many bots and so few players that it dilutes the multiplayer experience. This game is well done, don't get me wrong, but in no way does it merit the 9.25 it was awarded in your review. It's probably more in the realm of a 7.75 or 8. Stone me if you wish for bashing the beloved *Titanfall*, but I think you have to peel back the hype and really analyze a game for what it is, rather than what people want it to be.

Richard Harper
via email

In the recent edition of *Game Informer*, you all reviewed *Titanfall*. This game is simply no more than Call of Duty with robots; it's boring to play, watch, and does not have any uniqueness to it compared to other games. It certainly doesn't have high replay value. Granted, *Ghosts* wasn't any better this year for the Call of Duty franchise, but I believe you all blew *Titanfall* up in this magazine to sound better than what it really is. Giving it a 9.25 rating...really? It's okay to call it your opinion, but *Titanfall* has a long way to go in order to compete with the big boys.

Bradley Shinn
via email

There's nothing like a triple-A release to make some people feel the need to tell you how wrong you are for enjoying a game. Keep on fighting the good fight, guys; if there's one thing the video game industry needs, it's more jaded contrarians.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Can you start printing bi-monthly issues?"

Only if months become twice as long.

"Am I going to live the rest of my life without playing the *Too Human* trilogy? Was the first game THAT terrible?"

Yes and YES.

"How much do video game developers REALLY listen to the fans?"

You mean philosophically?

Best Typo In A Feedback Response:

"I've been thinking about innovation and how it's suppository dead in the industry..."

Question Of The Month:

Which video game character has the best outfit and why?

gi spy



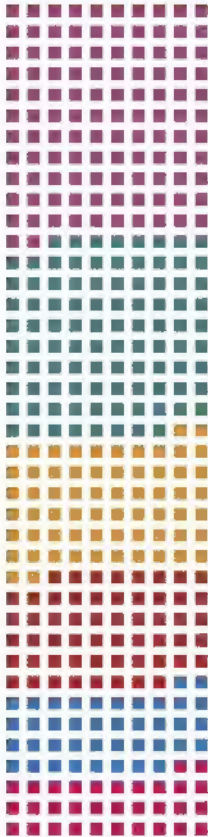
(Left) At a recent Bandai Namco event, CyberConnect2's Hiroshi Matsuyama and his translator Mikio Nagura got really excited about the new *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja* installment.

(Right) *Ace Combat Infinity* producer Kazutoki Kono and his translator Ayumi Takeuchi were a little more reserved.

GI SPY
continued on page 8

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- **28%** Defining The Term "Gamer"
- **24%** Gaming's Biggest Fools
- **16%** Darth Maul Depression
- **14%** Fears Of A Multiplayer-Only Future
- **10%** "You Scored Titanfall Too High!"
- **08%** "You Scored Titanfall Too Low!"

Following Procedure

Would you please kindly tell me the difference between "procedurally generated" and "randomly generated?" I have been seeing the terms used quite a bit lately but do not know what they mean exactly.

Bill Arbiter
via email

Procedurally and randomly generated content are becoming more and more popular, in part due to the rising popularity of roguelikes. Both techniques piece together unique content by drawing from a library of potential elements. The difference is that randomly generated content selects and tweaks the attributes of those elements randomly, while procedurally generated content uses a series of underlying rules or guidelines to create more directed content. That's why procedurally generated worlds in Minecraft are comprised of forests, mountains, rivers, and other recognizable geological features, and not just a random mishmash of blocks.



Fool Me Once

In issue 253, we asked readers who the biggest fool is in gaming. While a few readers picked actual game characters, many were ready to point the finger at their fellow players. Here are some responses.

The biggest fool in video games is Bowser. He captures Peach, and then without fail, Mario comes in and rescues her. He dreams up these big plans like creating his own galaxy or locking her away in a castle, yet he never seems to take into account that Mario will always be there to rescue her. If you ask me, he needs to capture Mario and Luigi first, lock them away in a castle, and then go for Peach.

Justin Brakebill

Commander Keyes in Halo 3! I really hate that character. Keyes thought she could rescue Sergeant Johnson from Truth? Yeah right! Besides, both Master Chief and The Arbiter were getting close to saving him, but no – Keyes had to come in only to get killed by Truth. Thanks for killing her off, Bungie.

Robert Humphrey

I think the biggest fool in the video game industry is the person who buys broken, glitchy, and generally bad games knowing that they're terrible.

Parker Luckenbach

(Left) Ben Hanson and Tim challenged Double Fine's Brad Muir and Brandon Dillon to a giant smile contest while visiting their office in San Francisco. Tim lost.

(Right) Tim also caught up with Hidetaka "Swery" Suehiro, who is hard at work developing the Xbox One exclusive D4.





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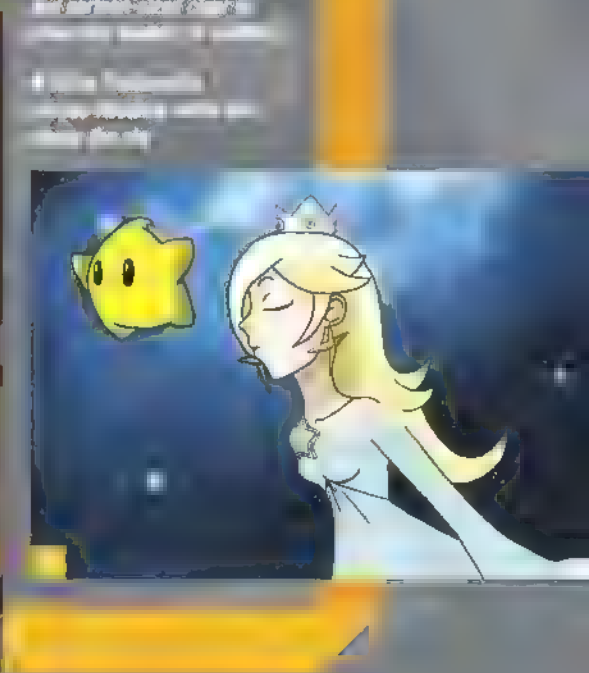
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(Left) Meet the heads behind Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare: Activision CEO Eric Hirshberg and Sledgehammer Games' Glen Schofield and Michael Condrey (Right) Pro wrestler David Otunga humored the GI crew with an honorary 2K belt during a WWE 2K14 tournament. Unfortunately, he wouldn't beat up Dan, no matter how much we bribed him.

Journal

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LIFE AFTER GAME OVER

What do pro gamers do when they hang up their controllers?

by Matt Helgeson

Professional gaming, the local camaraderie of leagues, organizations, and tournaments that fall under the large umbrella of "eSports," has experienced dizzying growth in the last decade. Once little more than glorified LAN parties with some sponsors and prize money, the popularity of watching the world's best players compete in games like StarCraft II, League of Legends, and Dota 2 has turned professional gaming into a bona fide industry. An influx of corporate sponsorship dollars and a rapidly growing audience that watches live matches online has created a new breed of professional gamers. These young, driven players push their reflexes to the limit in live audiences of thousands and online audiences of millions, raking in money from tournament prizes and endorsement deals. The best can earn a good income living the dream of every kid: doing nothing but playing video games.

But what happens when it's over? As in traditional sports, the time comes when every player's career ends. Unlike established sports like football or baseball, there hasn't been a clear career path for retired pro gamers. Like so much about eSports, ex-players are writing their own rules, and finding creative ways to stay involved with the game.



Major League Gaming's Chris Puckett (left) and Ryan "Fwiz" Wyatt (right)



Sean "Day[9]" Platt

The Dream And The Reality

While history tends to focus on the superstars of any given sport, the reality is most of those who pass through the professional eSports ranks don't achieve the heights of fame or bring home multimillion dollar prize money. Ryan "Fwiz" Wyatt is one of them. Like many young men, he grew up obsessed with gaming, and grew his skill on tactical PC games like Team Fortress and Counter-Strike.

At the age of 14, he began playing Counter-Strike competitively well enough to have some success in tournaments, but even by his own admission he wasn't a major factor in the scene. "[With] Counter-Strike, I never played at a high enough level to earn any serious income," he says.

In 2008, Wyatt moved over to playing Activision's Call of Duty and continued to have some success as a competitor. However, even as Call of Duty was becoming the world's most popular franchise, the eSports scene around

it was in its infancy. "When I got involved with Call of Duty the space was so new," he says. "We were competing, but for bragging rights with no economic structure in place. You could win these small-prize tournaments of \$250. It was difficult to make any kind of legitimate income playing Call of Duty at that time."

Still, Wyatt loved the world of eSports and knew it was destined to grow. And, for a college student at Ohio State, it had its benefits. "It was beer money," Wyatt recalls.

Wyatt eventually earned a spot on the up-and-coming OpTic Gaming Call of Duty team, and later served as a coach during the team's rise to prominence. As he approached the end of his four years at Ohio State, Wyatt began to realize that a long-term pro gaming career was probably not in the cards, but he knew eSports had a bright future and wanted to stay involved. It brought him to a decision point that – sooner or later – all professional gamers face. What should you do when you hang it up?

The Accidental Pro

Speaking with professional gamers about their careers, you begin to notice a pattern – most of them never expected to have a career to begin with. With a few exceptions, the circuit of professional gaming tournaments wasn't large enough to support more than a handful of players worldwide until recent years.

Dennis "Thresh" Fong was one of the earliest stars of the emerging competitive gaming circuit, specializing in then-popular shooters like Doom II and Quake. He's considered by many to be the first professional gamer, and says he earned over \$100,000 annually in prize and sponsorship money during his peak years.

"Back in the day with my brothers, we grew up with computers, and we used to play on LAN at home," Fong says. "My dad worked for HP, so we had five computers. I didn't realize that I was that special." Fong later

ended qualifying for a Microsoft tournament for Doom II through an early, dial-up online multiplayer service called DWANGO, and won \$15,000 – a huge prize for those days.

The American scene continued to grow throughout the '90s, largely focused on deathmatch competitions in the popular first-person shooters of the day and a handful of 2D fighting games like Capcom's Street Fighter II. However, the current worldwide appeal of competitive gaming is an outgrowth of the South Korean professional StarCraft scene. Starting in the early 2000s, the massive popularity of StarCraft and its offshoot Brood War brought in corporate sponsorships and 24-hour television coverage that helped establish a much more organized scene than the disparate American circuit of tournaments and competing leagues.

The organization and large-scale tournament structure spurred on by the Korean pro gaming phenomenon started to have an impact on kids in the West. Sean Platt (aka Day[9]) recalls the early StarCraft scene being largely social, a way for him and his brother to meet other fans in online communities centered on forums and message boards.

"Getting into the competitive scene was very much a social thing," Platt says. "StarCraft was immensely popular. When one person in the community learned about a big tournament, he'd spread the word, and everyone would begin training for that. It [wasn't] about glory or money, because there wasn't an established way to get into it as a profession." Eventually, the emergence of large-scale tournaments began to breed a more structured professional gaming industry in the West. Organizations like Major League Gaming and World Cyber Games and its Pan-American Championships provided a path forward for many aspiring American pros. Platt says, "It was a clear structure – anyone could wrap their head around how you won your qualifier, your national event, and how that led to the international event."



A New Generation

This rapid expansion of a worldwide eSports infrastructure means we are now seeing the first crop of professional gamers who have come up through the ranks with the assumption that eSports could be a viable source of income.

"It changed so drastically," Wyatt says. "[Before] it was only a net positive return if you placed top four with all the travel expenses. Now, a lot of sponsors are covering travel and hotel costs."

Michael Chavez, a Halo player now training for a comeback at the ripe old age of 24, is one of this new wave of players. Unlike the older generation, who had never dreamed of making a living, he was actually drawn to the sport through the promise of big money prizes.

"I played Halo 2 and I heard about a competition called MLG," Chavez says. "I didn't know what it was, but I heard that people were making six figures from professional gaming. I liked video games, and I wanted to take a stab at this six-figure salary that people were making."

"The majority of players are assigned to teams or a personal sponsor," says Rod "Slasher" Breslau, who is GameSpot's eSports reporter and co-host of the eSports web show *Live On Three*. "In the West, teams had been created kind of like football clubs, where it's just a guy with a bunch of money. Evil Geniuses are the biggest Western team in the world. They started from just a Counter-Strike team and guy named Alex Garfield who was an enthusiast. Now, it's grown into a multimillion dollar business; he has teams in Dota, League of Legends, StarCraft II, World of Warcraft, Quake, Counter-Strike, Call of Duty, etc.... Salaries are never reported to the public, but top-tier guys in the West can make \$80,000 or \$90,000 a year on base salary. A lot of guys make \$20,000 to \$40,000 yearly."

Breslau estimates that between 100 and 200 professional gamers worldwide earn enough through team salaries, prize money, and endorsements to support themselves by gaming and practicing full-time. Thanks to the increased visibility of tournaments (now able to be broadcast online to audiences of millions), professional gaming has spawned a new class of electronic athletes with legions of fans just like their counterparts in traditional sports.

This new generation of professional gamers better understand how to market themselves, and have made eSports a largely personality driven industry. "In traditional sports, you often find regional loyalties," Wyatt says. "I'm from



Cleveland, so unfortunately I'm a Cleveland Browns fan. With eSports teams, you don't have that kind of allegiance. So you end up attaching yourself more to players because you find them relatable - I like this guy when I watch him stream and he reminds me of someone I want to be friends with."

One of America's most successful teams, OpTic Gaming, has created both individual stars like Matthew "NaDeSHoT" Haag (who currently has 585,000 Twitter followers) and a strong team brand. Though it's been successful in competition (the team won first place and \$400,000 at the first Call of Duty \$1 million championship in 2011), OpTic actually makes most of its money through streaming on YouTube and the official MLG site.

Team owner and founder Hector Rodriguez says this was by design. "We had established ourselves as a premier Call of Duty entertainment organization by providing video content for our fans," he says. "I decided to go back and do competitive gaming for Call of Duty...I went after somebody I thought was going to be good at being put on camera, and [NaDeSHoT] was this guy. For a whole year I sat down with him and we went over things that could work and better ways to grow his brand to a level so that he could be a YouTube star. He has become one of the biggest personalities in eSports."

The Life

With money, fame, and the accolades that come with professional eSports competition, it's not hard to see its appeal for a young person raised on video games. However, the realities of maintaining a top-level professional gaming career are more daunting than you might expect.

Johnathan Wendel, who became one of the world's most famous Quake III Arena players under the name Fatal1ty in the early 2000s, described his regimen prior to a competition. "You're talking eight, fourteen, sixteen hours a day," he says. "And then also working out and being physically fit. I do a lot of stuff to be energetic and making sure my reflexes are good."

For Platt, who began competing while still attending college full-time, the challenges were even greater. "I was just doing the usual college thing; attending classes and spending five to six hours a day training StarCraft" he says. "I actually used to get up very early in the morning, around 2:00 or 3:00 a.m., to train with Korean players up until breakfast, then I'd begin a normal day for a college student."

Throw in the stresses of live competition, often broadcast to millions, and the demands of traveling to events, and you've got a lifestyle that's every bit as pressure-packed as that of any other professional athlete or entertainer - and one where much of your income must be fought for on a monthly basis through play.

Some of the more successful teams, like OpTic, live together in one "team house" to cultivate the highly refined skill and coordination required to be a successful team. As with any house filled with young men in their late teens and early 20s, it's a spartan and raucous existence.

"We started out in a house that had almost no furniture - all it had was the desks the guys play on and the office chairs," Rodriguez says. "They all have air mattresses, they haven't even bothered to go buy regular beds. All they do every day is work on their craft, which is helping their careers. Whether it is practicing eight hours a day and recording or entertaining live, that's what they do. Everything is a competition: who drinks their nutrition shakes quicker, etc. We've had fights happen. There's always going to be a clash of who's the best or who's more popular."



Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel



While the grind is excessive, all the current and ex-pros I spoke to felt it was a necessary part of pursuing a career in professional gaming. "If you're trying to compete at anything—sports, gaming—at the upper one percent, it requires an incredible amount of time," Wyatt says. "To be the best at what you do in anything in life requires you to put more time in than the next guy. You see these guys streaming on MLG.com and they are putting in nine or ten hours a day. That's no different than it was six or seven years ago. Six to eight hours a day is required to stay on top of your game."

However, the relentless pace does come at a price that seems to escalate as the player moves through his 20s. Whether it's lost career opportunities, declining skills, neglected relationships, or sheer burnout, pro gamers seem to drift away from competitive play as they approach 30.

The End Of The Line

As in any competitive endeavor, a time comes when all players finally put down the mouse and keyboard for good. For many, this time occurs at a point in life when many of their contemporaries have just emerged from college and are beginning down their own career paths.

Having never made a sustaining income from competition, Wyatt knew his time was soon up. "Had I been 16 at the time doing it, it would have been completely different," he says. "Being 22, I thought, 'I have to make a move here.' Something had to happen sooner rather than later."

He eventually pivoted from competing in Call of Duty to running the online tournaments and refereeing events. "I looked at this as an opportunity to get some groundwork in the space to set up for a career," he says.

According to GameSpot's Rod Breslau, this is a dilemma most professional gamers will face as they age. "Mid-to-late twenties has been the general cap for players to stop playing," he says. "Player skill, as you do get older,

it does deteriorate a good bit from when you were 15 or 16. I don't know when exactly it is, but sometime around 24 to 26, it is noticeable. You don't have the same APM—actions per minute—on a keyboard. You don't have the same mechanics and speed as you once did when you were younger. A lot of players have to adapt in terms of strategy."

When I covered Blizzard's unveiling of StarCraft II at the 2007 Blizzard Worldwide Invitational, some of the Korean pro gamers, no older than their very early 20s at the time, expressed similar sentiments about their declining skills in relation to the up-and-coming crop of teenage players. However, other former pros scoff at the notion, like Johnathan Wendel.

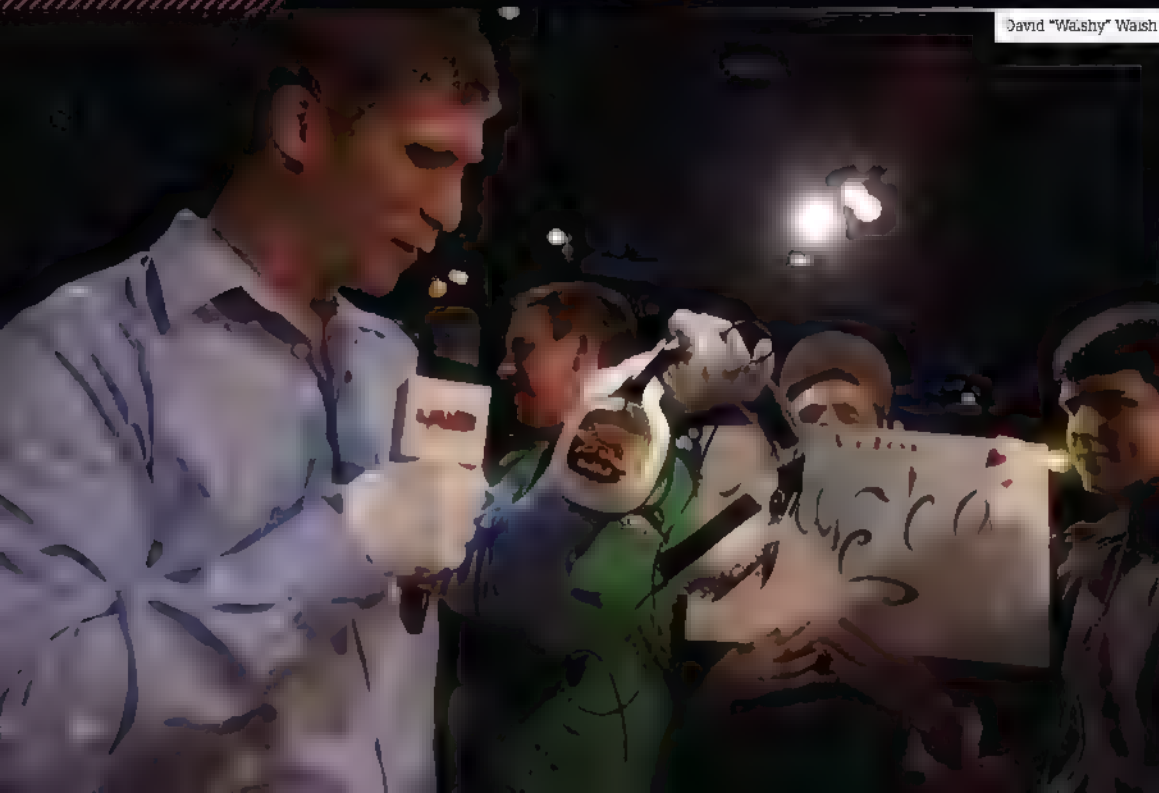
When asked, Wendel responded, "I don't know. It's not like we're playing a professional sport" he says. "It's not like we're running around and our ankles are giving out. You look at the top pitchers in the world or top quarterbacks, they're playing into their thirties. They're playing in a really tough environment. So knowledge and experience is going to trump a lot of the reflexes. I was 26, certain sponsors were out there saying, 'Fatality's a dinosaur. He won't ever win again.'—all this stuff. And then I went on to win the most money ever in gaming history."

David "Walshy" Walsh, who was one of the world's best competitive Halo players, agrees. "I still believe, had I put time in and enjoyed the game, I would be on top," he says. "It might just be because I'm cocky, but I still believe. These up-and-coming kids are phenomenal, but I don't think it had anything to do with losing my reflexes."

In eSports, where careers can often begin in a player's mid-teens and demand a huge investment of time, a period of re-assessment often occurs. "I don't miss that feeling of sacrificing everything," Platt says. "When there was a big tournament that I cared about I'd be practicing eight or nine hours a day and get my schoolwork done [while] trying to stay focused and not lose social connections. Then, I go to a tournament and make a dumb mistake and get eliminated. You're sitting there thinking back on these four months and you say, 'I am such a failure.' I think every pro gamer has had that."

"You get to a certain age and girlfriends come into play," Rodriguez says. "Yeah, it's cool that you're gaming and living in this house with your gaming frat buddies, and you have six mattresses—but what about her? As a girlfriend, she's not going to be okay living in a place with no furniture and a mattress."

For others, changes in the professional circuit and the marketplace force a change. Unlike football or baseball, which are essentially unchanging through the years, the competitive gaming audience's taste are constantly evolving, often leaving behind once-dominant games. The early days of professional gaming in the U.S. was ruled by the popular shooter, most descended from Id Software's seminal Doom. However, in the last decade, shooters have lost ground to the runaway success of StarCraft as well as the meteoric rise of MOBAs like Dota 2 and League of Legends, which now are two of the biggest games on the circuit. Halo, once the dominant shooter in the U.S., lost popularity as a result of unwelcome changes in Halo: Reach and has been supplanted by Call of Duty. As the popularity of a game decreases, so do cash prizes at tournaments and the sponsorship dollars available to



David "Walshy" Walsh



ex-pros Jatt and Kobe24 as official casters and David "Phreak" Turley as its community manager. Capcom tapped tournament player Peter "Combofend" Rosas to replace its departing community manager, Seth Killian. Michael Chavez has put his gaming skills to work doing strategy guides on games like Halo 4 and Titanfall for Prima Games.

Johnathan Wendel and Dennis Fong, benefiting from being part of a less-crowded era in pro gaming, were both able to parlay their fame into lucrative business opportunities. Wendel has partnered with companies like Creative Labs and ASRock to create a line of Fatal1ty branded gaming products, from headsets to PC motherboards. "In 2002, I said, '[Sponsors are] not showing me any commitment. I'm going to go out and create my own product.'"

Fong, seeing firsthand the power of Internet-connected gaming, founded industry-related technology companies like Gamers.com, Xfire, and the social network Raptr, where he serves as CEO.

David Walsh has tried his hand at a number of endeavors, including commenting for Major League Gaming, a clothing line called Kleenato that he's no longer associated with, a charity organization he co-founded, and his work with the Electronic Consumers Association. He's currently enrolled Grand Valley State University in Pennsylvania studying computer science. "I want to learn how to program and go into game design," he says. "I hopefully want to do multiplayer balance on a top eSports title like Call of Duty or Halo."

Still, you don't have to talk to any of them too long before you get a hint of the competitive fire that drove them to the top of professional gaming. When I ask Sean Plott if he missed competitive gaming, he says, "All day, everyday. There's no feeling that replaces the joy of trying to push yourself hard and trying to win. I'm making it sound more bitter-sweet than it actually is. Yes, I miss it, but I can play a game with my brother and it's just as fun."

"I don't really think any professional gamer ever really retires," Wendel says. "If they were offering salaries like a baseball player where you have five or six-year contracts that are seven figures, there'd be no reason to quit."

But for now, former pros like Wyatt are finding that staying involved with eSports in other ways is a fulfilling — and lucrative — alternative. ♦

players who specialize in those games.

For Johnathan Wendel, who dominated the U.S. shooter scene in the early 2000s, these economic realities were a big part of his decision to step away. "The sponsorship money starts going away and all of those possibilities go away," Wendel says. "Today in professional gaming, the money is all in MOBA games... I would play all day every day and train my lights out if I had a professional contract like an NFL player. You give me a serious contract, I will perform for you. If I'm competing for \$10,000 to \$15,000 a year in a game that's dying or already dead, there's zero motivation there. What's the point of winning more tournaments? This is from my point of view. I feel like I've already done it all in eSports."

Making The Transition

After a player decides to step away from his competitive career, he or she faces the question that all pro athletes eventually confront: What now? Many of the top players have found ways to stay in and around the scene long after their playing days.

The most commonplace way that top ex-pros earn a living is livestream "casting" or doing commentary at live events. Along with personalities like Artois and Tasteless, Day[9] has become one of the web's most successful StarCraft II casters, doing both commentary of competitions and instructional videos that teach StarCraft strategy on his YouTube channel.

"I think there are a lot of options," Wyatt says. "I would tell [pro players], 'If you're going down this route as an entertainer or player, you should start building out your YouTube presence and building out our social presence and monetize your ability to play.' NaDeSHoT has built out a social presence that will allow him to segue into being a content creator and entertainer when he quits competing. He's amassed a big enough following that he can continue to play video games or go do something different. But they've got to build out a skill set that can help them in the real world."

This strategy has paid off well for Wyatt. He established himself early on in the rise of Call of Duty as an eSports game, and has had a hand in organizing, refereeing, producing, and broadcasting live competitions for companies like Major League Gaming and Machinima. Recently, he left Machinima to return to Major League Gaming as vice president of

programming — all at an age when many of his contemporaries are still emerging on to the post-college job market.

Sean Plott echoes these sentiments. "When StarCraft II came out, I began to try my chops at analyzing that, because I had 10 years of mental tools from playing StarCraft that I could apply to StarCraft II," he says. "Then, all these tournaments began to spring up; the first one I went to was the Intel Extreme Masters in Gamecom, and then BlizzCon was having their event. Since I had been doing my own show five days a week, the tournament organizers said, 'Let's invite him to do commentary at our event.' It was the first time I started thinking, 'You know what? This could actually be a career. This could be the thing I do all day when I'm done with grad school.'"

Along with the income from his YouTube channel, Plott has a consulting business that helps organize events and produce video content. He's also joined forces with Artillery Games to help create a browser-based RTS game currently being developed under the codename Project Atlas.

The insight and knowledge of a game and its community that comes with playing at the highest level makes ex-professional gamers a valuable talent in the industry. In addition to Wyatt and Plott, League of Legends has hired





Eye Of The Beholder

Strange video game story interpretations

by Ben Reeves

Video game storytelling has grown by leaps and bounds in the past few decades, and as game narratives evolve, players can interpret the plots in numerous ways. Did the events of your favorite game play out literally as depicted, or is it possible that some of the more involved stories hold a subtler – and sometimes more profound – message? We explore some alternate theories claiming that your favorite series might not have played out exactly how you thought. (Spoilers ahead!)



Mass Effect 3: Alien Mind Wipe

STORY RECAP ■ The Reapers are an alien race who revisit the galaxy every 50,000 years to consume all organic life. However, during the Reapers' most recent invasion, a human commander named Shepard discovers the Reapers are actually managed by an A.I. system called The Catalyst, created millennia ago by a progenitor race who hoped to prevent synthetic life from consuming all organic life.

Unfortunately, this plan backfired when The Catalyst determined the best way to preserve both forms of life was to reset technological progress every 50,000 years kicking off the Reapers' cycle of death and rebirth. Shepard's final act is to end this cycle by taking control of the Reapers, destroying them along with all synthetic life, or fusing organics with synthetics.



RE-INTERPRETATION ■ Mass Effect 3's ending is fairly controversial, and quickly led to a popular theory that the final moments actually represented a conflict that takes place entirely in Shepard's mind due to the indoctrination effects of the Reapers. Throughout the third game, Shepard has repeated visions of a young boy running through a forest who Shepard was unable to save back on Earth at the beginning of the game. Some theorize the boy never really existed, since no one else in the series seemed to notice him. These hallucinations are seen as the Reapers' attempt to weaken Shepard's mind. At the end of the game, The Catalyst even assumes the image of this boy when talking to Shepard. During the final battle, Shepard is momentarily knocked unconscious. Some believe everything that happens after this sequence takes place only inside Shepard's mindscape – and little details, such as Shepard's pistol having infinite ammo or the fact that the character seems to acquire wounds dealt to others throughout the series, are brought forth as evidence to support this bizarre theory. When viewed through this lens, the final choices involve Shepard accepting or resisting the Reaper influence.

BELIEVABILITY: 3/5 ■ While the indoctrination theory sounds plausible, many of the issues it raises can also be explained through good game-design decisions (i.e., it was easier to give Shepard unlimited ammo for that short gameplay sequence rather than have players deal with resource management). Furthermore, while the extended cut BioWare released didn't entirely disprove the theory, it did take much of the wind out of its sails.



Far Cry 3: Vacation Nightmare

STORY RECAP » After a tropical vacation goes awry, Jason Brody and the rest of his young upper-crust friends are kidnapped by local pirates. The mentally unhinged pirate leader, a man named Vaas, plans to extort a ransom from their parents before selling the kids into slavery. However, Jason escapes, quickly gets to work turning the local wildlife into wallets, and then joins the local island natives in a rebellion against the pirates. By the end of the game, Jason must ultimately choose to either save his friends or join the woman he loves in leading the island into a new era of leadership.

RE-INTERPRETATION » Many have argued that Far Cry 3 is full of tired clichés centered on the “white man savior” and his influence on a savage wild. Jason Brody and his friends come from wealthy Western families and could be seen as culturally superior compared to the poor natives that inhabit the ramshackle shanties of Rook Island. Jason himself knows nothing of combat when the game begins, but is quickly taken in by the local culture and even given a tattoo displaying his strength as a warrior who fights for the people. The game even features an exotic and dangerous female who works her wiles on the hero. As the game continues, Jason liberates the island, which is something the natives weren’t capable of doing on their own. Many have argued the game is an analogy for a Western power invading a smaller poverty-stricken country and freeing the indigenous population before setting up a new regime. Jason even maps out the land, which could be seen as installing local infrastructure. The locals seem to welcome, even praise these actions. When Jason first wakes up after escaping from Vaas, he meets a native named Dennis who tells him that everything he sees is his for the taking; the rest of the game is Jason using his powers as a “white savior” to take what he wants.

BELIEVABILITY: 1/5 » Anyone who played the game to completion knows there are holes with this theory. At the end of the game Jason faces a choice showing these island natives aren’t as innocent as they initially seemed, and have instead been manipulating Jason in an effort to get what they want. The name Rook Island is even a wink to the idea that the game is more about manipulation than salvation.



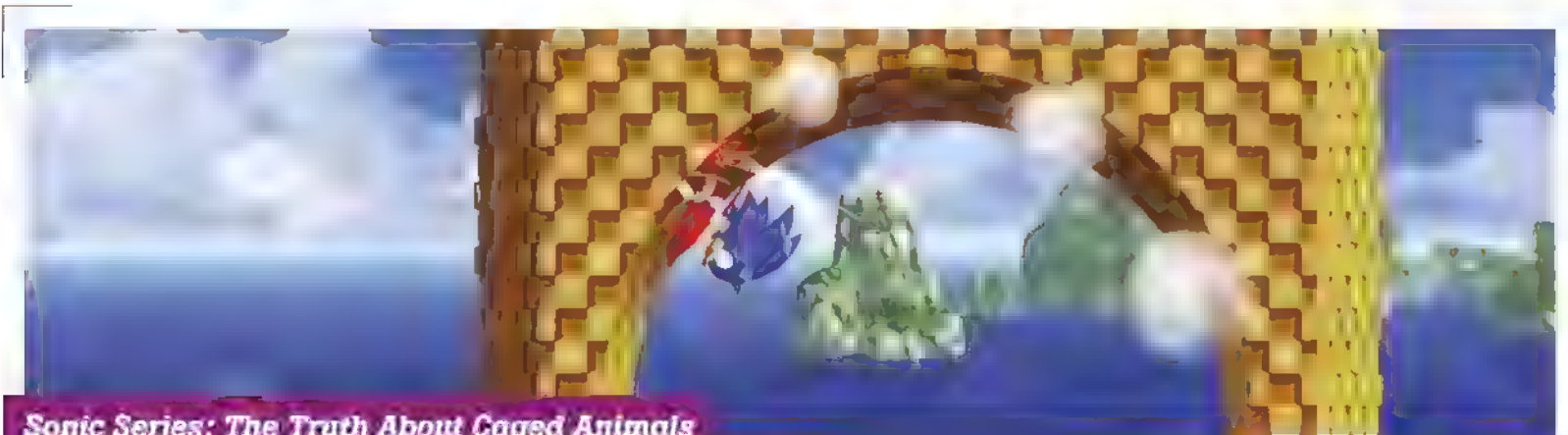


The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask: Link's Power Of Imagination

STORY RECAP » Set several months after Ocarina of Time, the game begins as Link wanders a mysterious forest looking for a "long lost friend." Link soon encounters a mysterious masked figure named Skull Kid, who steals his horse and ocarina. During the ensuing chase, Link falls down a hole only to discover that he has been transported into a land called Termina. Link soon learns the moon is on a collision course with the planet, and will reach impact in three days. Our hero then sets off on a quest to retrieve his equipment and free the cursed land in order to prevent the apocalypse.

RE-INTERPRETATION » While The Legend of Zelda's stories are often bizarre, the events of Majora's Mask line up perfectly with a theory suggesting the entire game happens inside a young boy's imagination as he struggles to deal with the loss of his friend (possibly the fairy Navi from Ocarina of Time). The game can be interpreted as a clever metaphor for the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Denial is expressed in the townsfolk who casually plan for a Carnival of Time festival despite the fact that an evil-looking moon is slowly consuming their sky. Anger is seen in the city of Woodfall, where Link discovers its king has been gripped by an irrational fury and is prepared to punish an innocent monkey for kidnapping his daughter. Bargaining is seen in the land of Snowhead, where Link encounters a ghost who pleads to be brought back to life. Depression is modeled in Great Bay, where Link meets a creature named Lulu who is consumed with sorrow over her lost eggs. Link never shows these emotions himself, but if these events take place inside his own head, these creatures might be manifestations of Link's psyche as it works to sort through strong emotions. This interpretation is particularly compelling, as it's not uncommon for young children to invent fantastical situations, or even imaginary realities, when dealing with trauma. People sometimes even build new identities or pretend to be superheroes in order to deal with grief. Coincidentally, throughout the game, Link continually acquires new masks that help him hide his true identity and grant him magical power. The one thing Link never finds is his long lost friend.

BELIEVABILITY: 5/5 » While it's probable that Nintendo didn't intentionally design the game with this message in mind, a surprising number of analogs back up this viewpoint, and viewing Majora's Mask as a metaphor for the five stages of grief actually makes more sense than the original story.



Sonic Series: The Truth About Caged Animals

STORY RECAP » Somewhere on South Island, Sonic the Hedgehog's animal friends have started to disappear. An evil cybernetics engineer named Dr. Eggman (Dr. Ivo Robotnik in the West) has been snatching up innocent wildlife and turning them into evil robots in an attempt to get his hands on a legendary treasure called the six chaos emeralds. However, after collecting the chaos emeralds before Eggman can get his hands on them, this anthropomorphic hedgehog with a spiked haircut and power sneakers uses the gems to restore the land to its natural state.

RE-INTERPRETATION » Sonic's environmental themes are far from concealed, but some have argued the themes cast a much darker environmental message than most players pick up on. While Sonic defeats Eggman in most of his games, the obstinate villain always returns and begins trapping animals again. Sonic CD even predicts a dystopian future when technology has run amok. This implies that Eggman never really loses his battles against Sonic; history keeps repeating itself.

More disturbingly, all of the levels Sonic traverses throughout the series are filled with robotic components. Early areas in the series might be called Green Hill Zone, but these nature-themed levels are filled with unnatural loops, levitating platforms, and mechanical boost panels that help Sonic run faster. Even the grass and rocks have uniform patterns, implying they might not be what they appear to be. Is it possible the world that Sonic exists within is composed entirely of machine parts? This theory would suggest Sonic is continually running a maze created by Eggman himself. While Sonic runs wild, trying to free trapped animals from Eggman's clutches, he himself is merely an animal trapped inside a much larger machine.

BELIEVABILITY: 4/5 » While this theory is much darker than Sonic's usual plotlines, it does do a nifty job of explaining why Sonic's grasslands are littered with loops and springs... something the Sonic fiction never overtly explains. ♦



INTO THE PIXEL CELEBRATES THE ART OF VIDEO GAMES

Each year the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences stages the Into the Pixel gallery at E3. The exhibition displays some of the best video game art of the past year.



Some pieces are concept art, others are created to establish a general look and vibe for a particular game. Here are five of the pieces that will be displayed this year. As you can see, as the industry continues to grow more diverse, so does the art that inspires it.

arning... Your system has become unstable.





//

Mathieu Leduc, Art Director, Watch Dogs

Your Watch Dogs piece is very different from most video game art. How did you approach the project?

Very early in the project, when we started exploring Chicago's visual design, we realized how Dedsec (the hacker collective) would be able to add flavor to our urban landscape and at the same time, carry, in a cryptic way, some of the game's themes. We quickly identified the two main pillars on which we could establish and communicate Dedsec's branding. The ASCII tech signature was the first channel we created, but Dedsec's members are also activists so we knew we had to dress up the world with some edgy pieces of street art in order to get their visual propaganda out there. It was an interesting way for us to go beyond the information overload that we usually find within a contemporary metropolis. We started looking at graffiti and defaced advertisements, exploring what's present on the East Coast – the New York, Chicago and Detroit underground scenes – and then opened up to other parts of the world. The team and I spent a lot of time brainstorming in order to come up with interesting concepts, which, in the end, are spread everywhere throughout our world.

Did you work exclusively on computer for this or do you use traditional materials like paint as well?

Most of the concepts were first created with digital tools, although after a while, some of them were adapted in stencils or stickers mainly because we wanted to plaster our surroundings.

Did you have any specific inspirations?

Naturally, we got our inspiration from a wide array of artists and styles: graffiti, stencils, one-liners, art installations, and anamorphic art. Over the last decade, street art has become one of the most popular and vividly discussed art forms on the contemporary scene. It's hard not to be fascinated by the sophisticated images found in city streets around the world today, sometimes packed with social and political messages but other times plainly peculiar, shocking, funny, or simply amusing with captivating aesthetics.

What do you hope this piece of art expresses about the game itself?

For us it's all about all how a little piece of technology – smart phones – has changed our daily lives. The influence of this technology on our society contains the good, the bad, and also the grey in between. In the end, we sincerely hope those little pieces will intrigue players and make them stop and get out of their main path in order to contemplate some of these details in the world.

How do you feel about the state of video game art today? Could it be more creative?

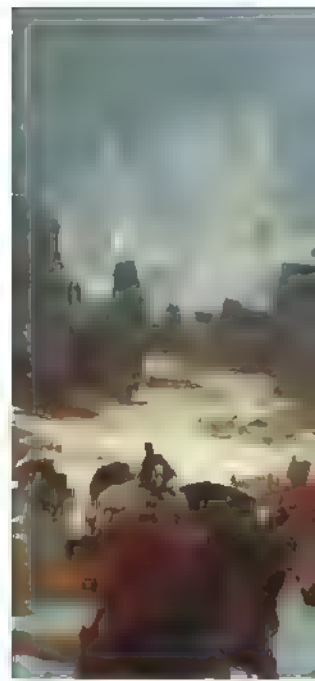
All projects have their share of creative space, some maybe more than others, but the industry is evolving. With triple-A getting bigger and bigger, the new mobile market and the always vibrant indie scene, the video game industry is attracting more and more specialized artists which bring more depth to the artistic process. From pure illustrators all the way to architects, we are so very fortunate to be working with an amazing variety of artists whose craft is definitely helping the richness and depth of the worlds we create. We can experience so many games these days that are clearly influenced by modern design, industrial designers, stylists, fashion designers, street artists, and more. Amazing artists that are contributing their craft to the medium and this, for me personally, is one of the reasons why I think our industry is maturing as an art form.

game: WATCH DOGS

developer: UBISOFT MONTREAL

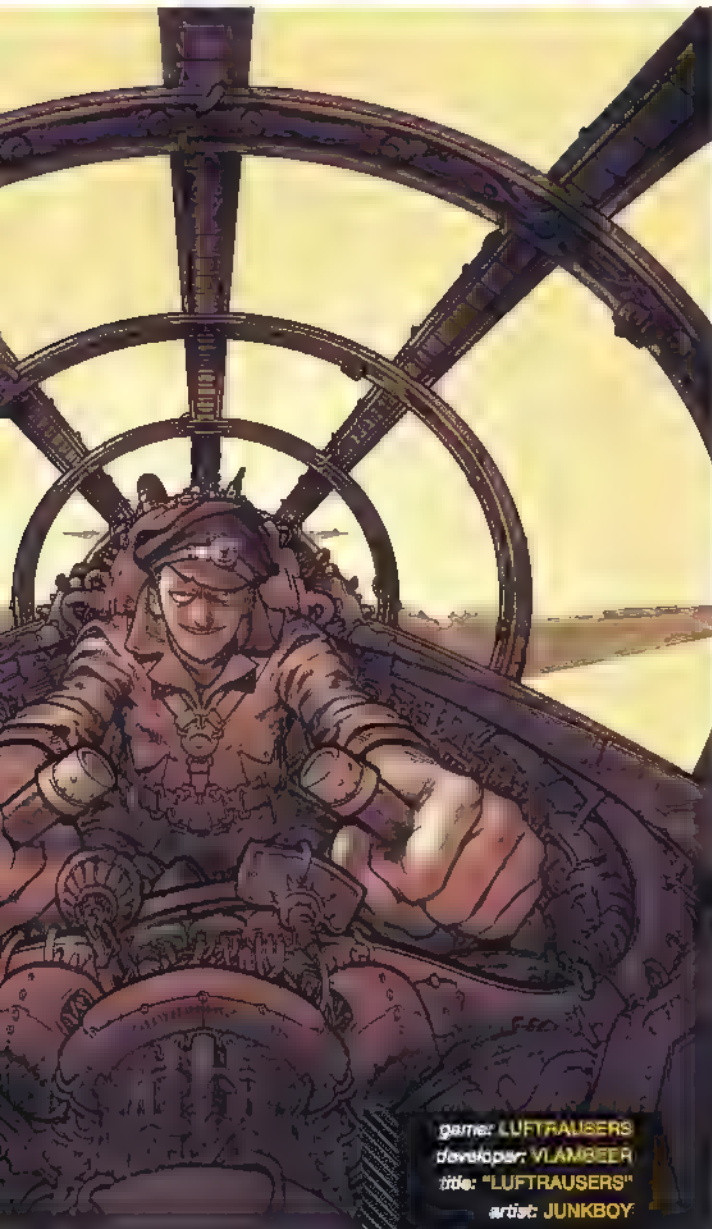
title: "DEDSEC STREET ART"

artists: PATRICK DESBREWERS, SIDONIE WEBER, MATHIEU LEDUC



game: THE BANNER SAGA
developer: STOIC
title: "BANNER POSTER"
artist: ARNIE JORGENSEN

game: GUILD WARS 2
developer: AFINANET
title: "REFUGEES"
artist: THAO PRINS



game: LUFTRAISERS
developer: VLAMBEER
title: "LUFTRAISERS"
artist: JUNKBOY



game: TENGAMI
developer: NYAMYAM
title: "WINTER SAKURA"
artist: RYO AGARIE



game: ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY
developer: UBISOFT MONTREAL
title: "EXECUTION"
artist: MOHAMED GAMBOUZ

BETTER WITHOUT KINECT

Since its unveiling on May 21, 2013, Microsoft has been on a campaign to improve public perception of the Xbox One. What should have been a leap forward became a major stumble for the front-runner. Microsoft's policies alienated long-time fans and priced the system at \$100 more than the competition. Now the Xbox One is available for \$399 (the same price as Sony's PlayStation 4) thanks to a new option to purchase the system without a Kinect camera. **by Michael Futter**

Just one year ago, Microsoft took the stage at E3 and left crowds disappointed. The company decided to move ahead with a set of principles for the Xbox One that directly contradicted every signal from consumers. The device required daily Internet check-ins, placed restrictions on used games, and required the bulky Kinect 2.0 camera to function.

The following week saw backlash and disapproval from consumers and pundits to a degree notable even in this age of social media furor. In the nine days that followed the company's lackluster E3 press conference, a decision was made to dismantle one of the two key hallmarks of Microsoft's next-gen push. The "always online" requirement died a quick death, restoring status quo to console usage and game ownership.

The Xbox One's other unique feature hung on much longer, likely due to Microsoft's dedication to making the device a living-room hub. "Microsoft was pretty ambitious with Kinect, and hoped to integrate voice and video into its control mechanism for the device," says Wedbush Securities analyst Michael Pachter. "My

view is that all of this was geared toward making the Xbox One the entertainment hub in the living room, allowing users to access movies, TV, games, etc. with voice or motion commands. The camera built into Kinect was probably intended to be used for Skype or Twitch more than for games, but they wanted to build a Trojan Horse into Kinect by leading with games, since the other applications weren't sufficiently well-developed."

Microsoft has had some trouble getting voice commands working in all of the countries in which the console is currently available. Three of the thirteen territories still do not have any Kinect voice commands. Only five of the remaining ten have access to what Microsoft calls "premium/natural voice." The company would not confirm how many of the 26 countries receiving the Xbox One in September 2014 will have access to the full suite of Kinect features at launch.

Sony decided early on to pull its camera out of the box, enabling a price advantage on retail shelves. Microsoft was more stubborn about Kinect, commenting multiple times that the camera isn't a

peripheral, but rather an integrated and vital part of the system (see sidebar). That appendage has now been severed. To hear Microsoft tell it, the first flick of the knife was made in August 2013.

We spoke with Xbox boss Phil Spencer when the decision was made to sell a new, lower priced Xbox One. That version of the system is on store shelves now and brings price parity to the console war. "When we made the decision last summer that you could run with Kinect unplugged, that was a fundamental decision for the program," he says. "There was a different leadership team in place, but that discussion led us to think about a console where Kinect was not required to be plugged in at all times."

The decision to become competitive on price and drastically alter the relationship between the Kinect and the Xbox One will have ramifications for some developers. Harmonix has been at the center of support for the original Kinect with three Dance Central games, and the studio is currently working on motion-based title Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved for both Xbox 360 and Xbox One,

as well as a new entry in the Dance Central franchise (see p. 83).

The move to separate Kinect from Xbox One deals a heavy blow to the studio, effectively reducing the install base for Disney Fantasia and other Kinect-only titles (of which there have only been five since the console's launch). "As game makers, this platform change doesn't affect our strategy – it reinforces that we must continue to focus on building innovative, compelling and well-designed motion experiences to motivate consumers to buy our games," a Harmonix spokesperson told us.

Paul Mottram, head of Zumba World Fitness studio Zoë Mode was less optimistic. "From a developer point of view it's a shame, as it all but kills the chances of making an original Kinect title unless it is a

major licensed fitness or dance product – and even those will suffer as it's unlikely we'll see Kinect 2 units even come close to the installed base of the original now," he told *Develop*.

Microsoft has proven itself willing to listen to the market over the past year, but started doing so far too late. Early stumbles have left the Xbox One in the underdog position with about 5 million units shipped worldwide against over 7 million PlayStation 4 units sold.

Now, the two are on an equal playing field. "I think it's all about price parity," Pachter says. "The decision to bundle Kinect was a no brainer for them, but the decision to charge \$100 more was the fatal mistake, and price parity matters more to them than advancing the connected living-room initiative. I think they

realize that they can offer Kinect as a standalone peripheral, and when gamers with Xbox One consoles decide they are ready to use Skype or Twitch, they can add the camera."

Pachter sees the race becoming much closer now. "Making their console the same price as the PS4 should be the great equalizer, and just like last cycle, the two consoles should now be expected to sell around the same number of units going forward," he says.

Whether Microsoft's latest steps to undo the self-inflicted damage are enough to give itself a boost won't be fully clear until after this coming holiday season. One thing seems clear though; Microsoft is learning from its mistakes and is ready to put up a fight. ◀

A Hole In The Xbox Live Paywall

Alongside its decision to offer an Xbox without Kinect, Microsoft made a fundamental change to Xbox Live. Up until now, a Gold membership (\$60 per year) was required to access Netflix, Hulu, and other streaming applications.

Xbox 360 was one of the first devices to offer Netflix as a streaming option, and Microsoft invested much to make that possible. Requiring Xbox Live Gold Membership to access a Netflix streaming account made sense for a long time, but the landscape has changed.

Microsoft is now moving those apps in front of the paywall, making

them accessible to all Xbox 360 and Xbox One console owners.

"I didn't want Xbox 360 or Xbox One to be seen as prohibitive to those customers who want to watch Netflix or YouTube or browse the web," Spencer says. "This, to me, was a little bit about becoming current with the state of the industry on those apps."

As of now, free-to-play and subscription-based games remain behind the paywall. With competitors taking a different approach and making those titles available to all, this could be the next policy Microsoft decides to revise.

Kinect: From Integral To Negligible

Microsoft has changed the way it talks about Kinect over the past year, as the device has transitioned from integral component to secondary peripheral.

May 2013 • "The all-new Kinect is an essential and integrated part of the platform."
– Xbox One Official FAQ

May 2013 • "Kinect does require to be connected to Xbox One in all cases, yes."
– Microsoft UK's Harvey Eagle to IGN

August 2013 • "The console will still function if Kinect isn't plugged in, although you won't be able to use any features or experience that explicitly uses the sensor."
– Former Xbox chief product officer Marc Whitten in an IGN Q&A

August 2013 • "Xbox One is Kinect. They are not separate systems. An Xbox One has chips, it has memory, it has Blu-ray, it has Kinect, it has a controller. These are all part of the platform ecosystem."
– Microsoft corporate vice president Phil Harrison to CVG

February 2014 • "We're in it for the long haul. Kinect is absolutely integral to Xbox One."
– Harvey Eagle, Microsoft UK to BBC

May 2014 • "This decision for me and for us as the leadership team was about giving consumers choice at retail."
– Head of Xbox Phil Spencer

The Good

ROCKSTAR GAMES is releasing a game for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One before the end of the current fiscal year (March 2015) according to Strause Zelnick, CEO of Rockstar's parent company, Take-Two. No other specifics were given, but we'd sure love to see the return of *Bully* or *Red Dead*!



The Bad

NEVERSOFT,

the Activision studio behind the *Tony Hawk* franchise and steward of *Guitar Hero*, has been absorbed into Call of Duty developer Infinity Ward. Neversoft already helped Infinity Ward with *Call of Duty: Ghosts*, and the pair's work was seen as duplicate. Because of the merger, Neversoft head Joel Jewett and studio director Scott Pease will retire from the industry after helping the transition.

Quotable

"[Darksiders] is not dead!!! The new owner, Nordic seems very committed to continuing the series."



Darksiders creative director **Joe Madureira** holds out hope for a *Darksiders 3* via a post on his Facebook page



The Ugly

DELAYS HAVE HIT *Batman: Arkham Knight* (pictured), *The Order: 1886*, *Mad Max*, *The Elder Scrolls Online* (for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One), *Dying Light*, and *The Division*. *The Elder Scrolls Online* hopes to still hit this year, and *Arkham Knight*, *The Order*, and *Dying Light* early next year. *Mad Max* and *The Division* have set a blanket 2015 target.

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AND YOU COULD SAVE A BUNDLE.
I THINK THAT'S A HAIKU.**



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PROGRESS



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Home and Auto Bundle is a great way to save money on your home and auto insurance. It's a bundle of two policies that you can get for less than if you bought them separately. And it's a great way to make sure you're covered for both your home and your car. So if you're looking for a way to save money on your insurance, Home and Auto Bundle is a great option.

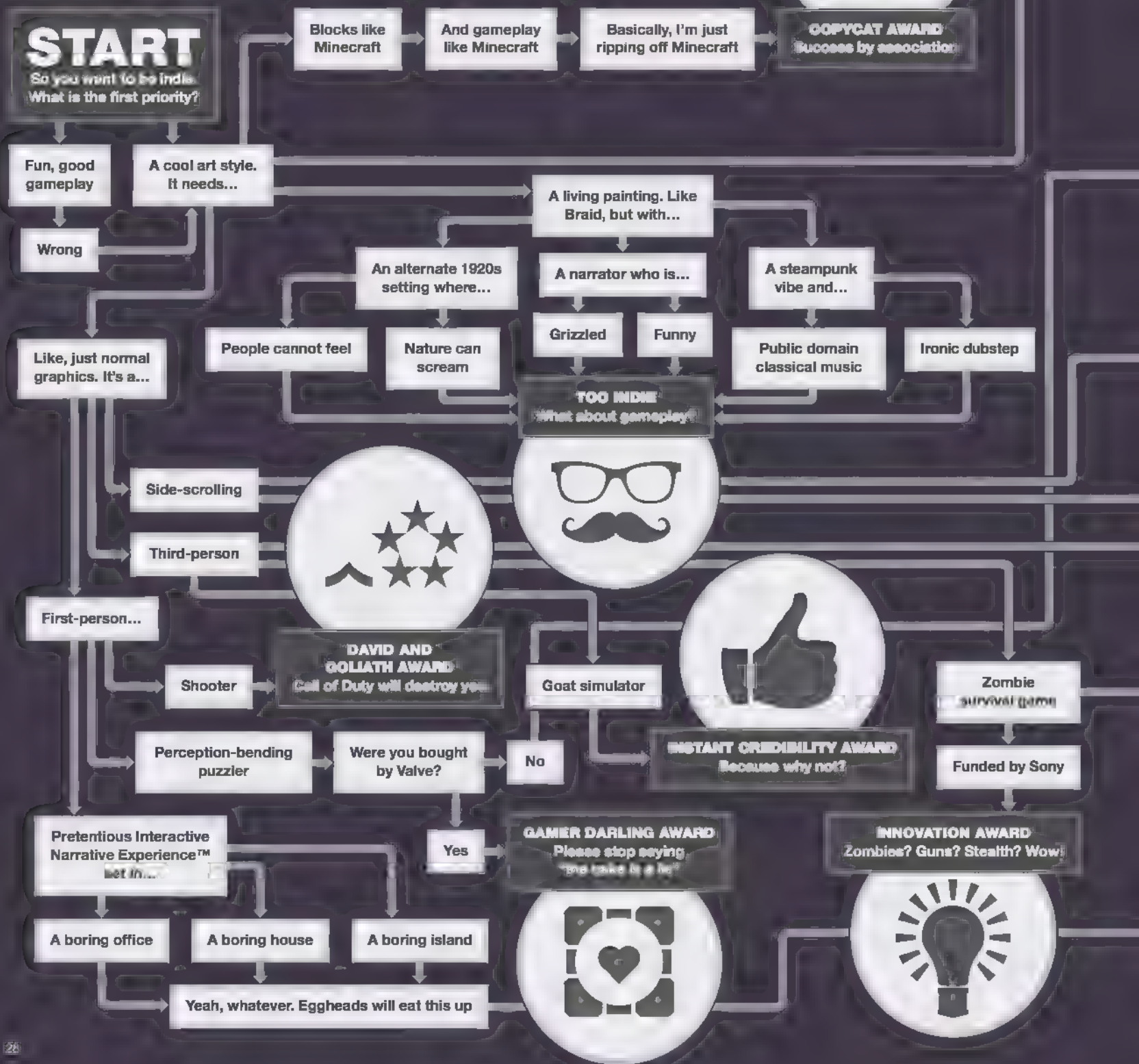
Home and Auto Bundle

Home and Auto Bundle

The Indie Game Flowchart

by Joe Juba

If you want to make an indie game, you need to be driven by passion. Maybe you want to tell a personal story, or experiment with a never-before-seen genre. Realizing this dream might require years of work and your life savings, but it could be worth the struggle. What is your reward at the end of the journey? Follow our flowchart to find out. You might earn instant credibility, vast wealth, or cheap statuettes from an industry awards show.





NINTENDONT AWARD
Filling an inexplicable void

Retro sprites.
It's a(n)...

Ouya exclusive

Just kidding!
It's really a(n)...

Old-school RPG
inspired by...

Chrono Trigger and every
other RPG you've ever loved

Ruthless and
punishing platformer

Because I love precise
challenges aimed at...

A few dozen
masochists

Border Control
Simulator

Some N64 RPGs

Because I run a controller
repair business

A mainstream
audience

Whoa...that may be
the indieest idea ever

INDIE POUL!
That's not how
this works



Years later...

Perfect! Your project
has the green light!
When will it release?

One year

Delay, show
at PAX

Two years

Delay, show
at PAX

Four years

Your game is finished!
The only thing left is
the name. You need...

Point-and-click adventure

No

Then keep at it!

Something both slimy
and geometric, like
"Gooptahedron"

A weird sentence
fragment, like "And Thus
Our Teeth Were Broken"

Shoot 'em up

Yes

Wait a minute...
are you already a
famous developer?



NICE TRY AWARD
Decades of experience
Isn't indie

That's free-to-play,
isn't it?

A single, vague word,
like "Palanquin"

Yes

Hell yes

Your game releases. It is a huge
success! What do you do now?

**ZERO CREDIBILITY
AWARD**
Money ≠ quality



F--- it, I quit

Beg for money on
Kickstarter and try again

**GO BACK
TO START**



Roguelike

With crop farming

And collectible creatures

With spaceships

And carefully
crafted dungeons

And dogfighting

But no
permadeath

Look, I don't know what
"roguelike" means

Funded by
independent
modders

Who get massive
community support

Who have a
well-organized
business plan

**SOMETHING
FIGHTY AWARD**
Don't forget to
cancel the sequel



Size Matters

A step-by-step guide to replacing your PlayStation 4's hard drive

Between the mandatory disc installs, increasing popularity of downloadable games and content, and title

updates that can balloon into the gigabytes, the stock PlayStation 4 hard drive can fill up fast. Instead of deleting your old games and recorded gameplay videos, you may want to consider a hardware upgrade instead. Not only is swapping in a bigger hard drive a cinch, it can also provide your system with a modest speed boost as well.

by Jeff Marchiafava

What You Need:

Sony made replacing your PlayStation 4 hard drive as easy as possible, but make sure you've got the following items on-hand before tinkering with your system:

1. A small Phillips-head screwdriver
2. A USB flash drive* with at least 1GB of free space
3. A compatible replacement hard drive (see sidebar)
4. A computer with Internet access
5. A micro-USB cord to re-sync your DualShock 4 controller

**The recessed USB ports on the front of the PlayStation 4 are a tight fit for most flash drives. Save yourself a headache and make sure your USB drive is skinny enough to plug in before you swap out your hard disk.*



THE COMPATIBILITY QUESTION

Sony designed the PlayStation 4 to be compatible with most internal hard drives, so finding a suitable replacement shouldn't be a problem. Here are the main requirements you need to be aware of:

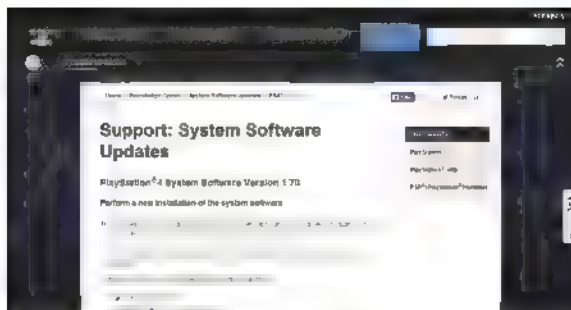
1. It must be a 2.5-inch internal hard drive, and no taller than 9.5 millimeters
2. It must have a capacity of at least 160GB
3. It must be a Serial ATA drive

Some users have run into problems getting their PS4s to recognize hard drives that are bigger than 1TB. Before you buy a replacement drive, search online for user reviews of the make and model you're looking at — chances are someone has already tried installing it in a PS4 and reported on its compatibility (or lack thereof).

**Own an Xbox One instead? Replacing your console's internal hard drive is a much trickier process and voids your warranty. However, a June system update gives players the ability to use an external hard drive via Xbox One's USB ports.*

Step By Step

Once you have the listed items, you're ready to replace your hard drive. We've outlined the process in five simple steps. If your PlayStation 4 is brand new (or you don't care about your old game saves), you can skip steps two and five.



Step 1: Download The System Software

The first thing you should do is download the system software to your USB drive. You will use this to initialize your new hard drive once you install it in your PS4. Plug your USB into your computer and create a folder called PS4 in the root drive, then create another folder inside of it called UPDATE. Make sure both folder names are written in all uppercase letters, or else your PS4 won't recognize them.

Next, head to Sony's website and download the system software (you can also find the page by searching "PlayStation 4 system software" on Google). Clicking the link on Sony's site will download a file called PS4UPDATE.PUP. Stick that file in the UPDATE folder on your USB drive.

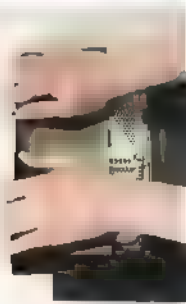


Step 2: Back Up Your Game Saves

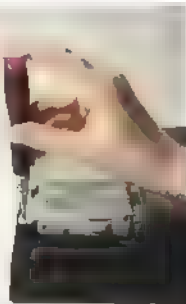
If you plan on keeping any game saves located on your old PS4 hard drive, you should back them up before swapping the drive out. To do so, turn on your system and head to Settings>Application Saved Data Management>Saved Data in System Storage. Here, you have two options: You can upload your data to the cloud (if you are a PlayStation Plus member) or upload it to a USB drive. Free to use the same drive you installed the system software on—if it's at least a 1GB drive, you should have plenty of space. Once you've chosen your back-up method, simply click on each game file you wish to save and press Copy.

Step 3: Replace The Hard Drive

It's finally time to open your PlayStation 4. First, turn off the system. Make sure it's actually shut down and not just in standby mode—the light on the top of the system should be completely off. Next, unplug all of the cords from the back of the system.



A. The shiny left-hand side of the PlayStation 4 provides easy access to the hard drive. Simply press down slightly with the palms of both hands and slide the cover away from the system.



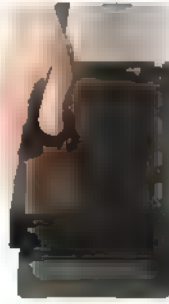
B. In the bottom left-hand corner is a screw with the four PlayStation button symbols. Unscrew it, then slide out the hard drive tray using the finger hold.



C. The sides of the tray have four more screws. Unscrew them and the hard drive will slide out.



D. Replace it with your new drive, making sure that the connectors are facing the same way as the original drive. Some drives may have to be flipped upside down—and screw it into place.

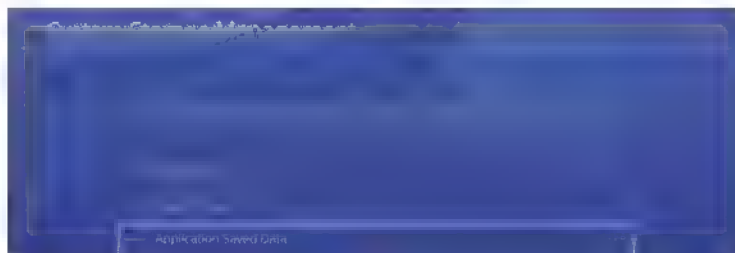


E. Slide the drive tray back into the PS4, then replace the screw with the PlayStation symbols. Slide the cover back on and snap it into place—that wasn't so hard, was it?

Step 4: Install The PlayStation 4 Software

Plug the cords back into your system and insert the USB drive into one of the front USB slots. When you press the power button, the PlayStation 4 should automatically boot into Safe Mode and start the installation process. If it doesn't, press and hold the power button for seven seconds when turning it on—you should hear a second beep as the system enters Safe Mode. Re-sync your PS4 controller with your micro-USB cord, then select "Initialize PS4 (Reinstall System Software)" from the menu.

A "Please Wait" message will appear on screen as the system prepares the installation. Don't panic—while it may seem like the system isn't responding, it will eventually prompt you with a message to confirm the initialization process. Select "Yes" and you're home free!



Step 5: Restore Your Game Saves

If you backed up your game saves during Step 2, it's time to copy them back over to your new hard drive. Go back to Settings>Application Saved Data Management, then select either "Saved Data on Online Storage" or "Saved Data on USB Storage," depending on which method you used. Next, select "Copy to System Storage," then select the data you want to retrieve. Once completed, head back to Settings, then choose "System Storage Management" to reveal in the size of your new drive.

THE RIGHT DRIVE FOR THE JOB

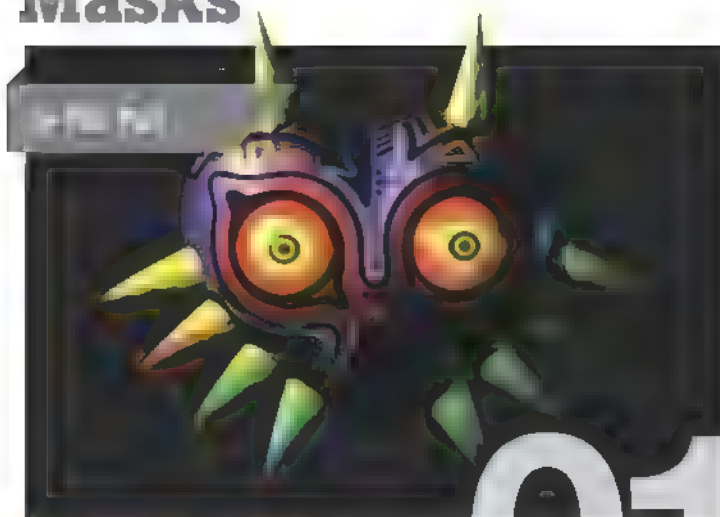
Not all hard drives are created equal. Here's a breakdown of the three basic types of hard drives that are compatible with the PlayStation 4.

Regular Hard Drive: A run-of-the-mill internal laptop hard drive is your cheapest option, and can provide plenty of extra space as well as a modest speed boost. The PlayStation 4 comes with a 5,400RPM HGST hard drive that features a 3.0 Gb/s transfer rate and 500GB of space. We replaced it with a slightly speedier 7,200RPM HGST drive that transfers data at 6.0 Gb/s and offers 1TB of space. The new drive shaved a few seconds off the loading times for most of the games we tested, while doubling our available hard drive space. It also only costs around \$75, making it a great option for most gamers.

Solid State Drive: Solid state drives are basically like massive flash drives; they don't contain a moving disk like normal drives, and are much faster because of it. We tested one of Seagate's 600 Series SSDs, which offered 480GB of space. It was the fastest of the drives we tested, but that speed comes at a price; the model costs anywhere between \$200 and \$400 depending on the retailer you buy it from—and that's for less space than the stock drive. Ultimately, you're still only saving a few extra seconds compared to other upgrade options, which makes it hard to justify the cost and space restraints of SSDs.

Solid State Hybrid Drive: As the name suggests, SSHDs are a mix of the two hard drive technologies. The bulk of an SSHD's memory is stored on a traditional hard drive. However, the drive also features a small amount of flash NAND memory, which automatically stores frequently used data. We tested Seagate's 1TB hybrid drive, which features 8GB of NAND memory. The results were mixed—the initial load times for the games we tested were slower than the stock PS4 drive, but subsequent loads offered improved speeds, as did the boot sequence for the system. Hybrid drives cost only slightly more than traditional drives, so if you're the type of gamer who only plays a few titles repeatedly, you may want to consider one.

Masks



Majora's Mask

The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask

This powerful artifact from a long-forgotten tribe falls into the hands of a mischievous forest child. Link taps into his own collection of mystical masks to save the land of Termina from Majora's influence. In dramatic fashion, Link and the evil mask have their final showdown in a psychedelic chamber.



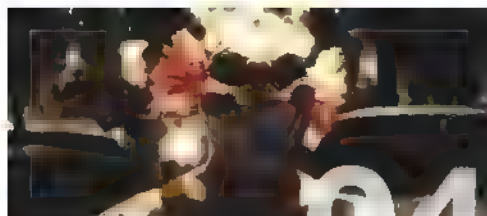
Phanto - *Super Mario Bros. 2*

Before the sun came to life and terrorized players in *Super Mario Bros. 3*, Phanto harassed those foolish enough to enter the world's magical vases. This demonic visage's fast, sweeping attacks were permanently burned into our young minds.



Vega - *Street Fighter II*

Vega is equal parts fighting expert and narcissist. He maims his opponents with his Wolverine-like claw while protecting his flawless face with an eerie placid mask. Vega's cocky demeanor makes shattering his mask all the more satisfying.



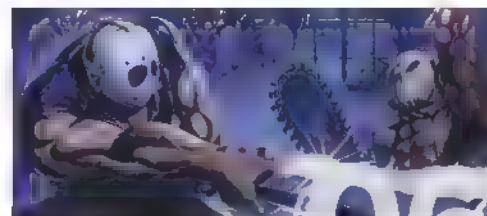
Sweet Tooth - *Twisted Metal: Black*

This homicidal, ice cream truck-driving clown started his vehicular killing spree on the PlayStation. The clown updated the look of his mask to something more sinister in *Twisted Metal: Black* on the PS2, but his flaming head really helps sell the look.



Corvo - *Dishonored*

Corvo's mechanized mask conceals the assassin's identity and strikes fear into the citizens of Dunwall. Its integrated telescopic lens lets Corvo spy on targets from a safe distance and even amplifies far-off sounds.



Terror Mask - *Splatterhouse*

Rick is beaten and left for dead when the evil Dr. West kidnaps his girlfriend. The Terror Mask, possessed by an inter-dimensional being, mends Rick's wounds and grants him supernatural strength. Together, Rick and the Jason Voorhees-inspired headgear embark on their rescue mission.



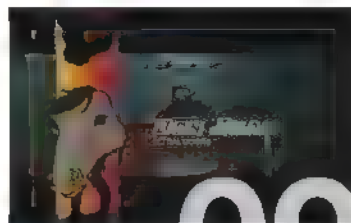
Aku Aku - *Crash Bandicoot*

This floating witchdoctor mask is possessed by an ancient spirit that guides Crash through his wild adventures. When freed from a crate, Aku Aku shouts a tribal phrase and follows Crash to protect him from enemy damage.



Dragon Priest Konahlik - *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

The ancient Dragon Priests awaken in *Skyrim* around the same time the flying beasts re-enter the world. Defeating these powerful mages and collecting their masks scores you the coveted Konahlik mask, which summons a Dragon Priest's ghost to fight by your side.



Don Juan - *Hotline Miami*

Masks are important for hired killers. The serial killer menace of *Hotline Miami* has a plethora of skill-augmenting animal masks to choose from, but the horse rules them all. Donning the Don Juan enables you to brutally murder goons by slamming doors into them.



Cthulhu - *Payday 2*

What better way to strike fear in the hearts of those you intend to rob than with the visage of an ancient, world-consuming god? This ancient Lovecraftian god is one of the game's rarest masks, and makes for a creepy status symbol on any heist.



Halo 5: Guardians Coming To Xbox One In 2015

Fans get the Master Chief Collection instead this year

by Matthew Kato

Last E3, 343 Industries general manager Bonnie Ross took the stage at Microsoft's press conference and declared, "In 2014, Halo combat will truly evolve, and your journey with Halo on Xbox One begins." Gamers – ourselves included – took that to mean that we'd be playing a new Halo title on our new Xbox Ones. Weeks before this year's E3, Microsoft and 343 Industries did indeed announce Halo 5: Guardians. However, the game won't be out until the fall of 2015.

Does this constitute a delay? Not according to 343 Industries. Franchise development director Frank O'Connor sidestepped the question with a veil of semantics at the recent Halo 5 unveiling. "I don't want to speak for Bonnie, but she was very careful in the way that she worded her E3 stage speech last year, because we knew that Halo 5 was going to take three years to make it the right game," he says.

O'Connor cites the move to a new console and engine (which will power the rest of the Halo titles on the system) as big factors in the development timeline. "It's a really big project," he says. "It's a big project in terms of

moving over to the Xbox One. It's also bigger in terms of scope and scale in the size of the already quite big Halo universe. With Halo 4 we talked about how we had gone back to the drawing board on a couple of features of that engine, but it was really an iteration of the existing Halo engine. This is a new platform with much more capacity and much more power, and on a different architecture."

Halo 5 may be further off than we originally hoped, but fans won't leave 2014 without a Halo title to play on their Xbox Ones. "I spoke about a journey rather than a destination," Ross says while recalling her stage speech from last E3. "That journey definitely begins in

2014 with a giant leap, rather than one small step." That "giant" leap Ross is referring to is 343's release of the Halo: Master Chief Collection – a single-disc Xbox One compilation of all the numbered Halo titles: Halo: Combat Evolved, Halo 2, Halo 3, and Halo 4 (see sidebar for more).

Regardless of whether 343 was targeting 2015 all along, releasing a new Halo this year would have helped the Xbox One. As of mid-April, the Xbox One has shipped five million units to stores worldwide compared to Sony selling seven million to consumers worldwide for the PS4. Halo 5 could have boosted these numbers – especially given that the system effectively received a \$100 price cut when Microsoft revealed a Kinect-free version (see page 10). The absence of a new Halo game casts a conspicuous first- and second-party hole in the system's roster, with Sunset Overdrive, Project Spark, and Quantum Break being the only titles likely to come out this year from Microsoft Games – none of which are the system sellers like Halo. Even when Microsoft announces new titles at E3, it's unlikely that these projects will see the light of day as soon as this year.

If there's a bright spot, it's that Sony's first-party software lineup is in a similar boat for 2014 with the delay of The Order: 1886 into next year. ♦

THE HALO: MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

This new Xbox One collection is not only a compendium of the main Halo games, it's also a celebration of the 10-year anniversary of Halo 2 and a teasing segue into Halo 5.

For this collection, Microsoft is updating Halo: Combat Evolved, Halo 2, Halo 3, and Halo 4 with 1080p resolution and 60 frames-per-second gameplay. This version also includes each of the games' DLC offerings. Unlike Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary, the Master Chief Collection retains each title's multiplayer features as they existed upon release.

Thanks to a handy menu system, you can play through any of the campaign missions in any order you want across all of the titles. Similarly, you can access all the multiplayer maps and even group them by match type.

For the 10-year anniversary of Halo 2, Microsoft is remaking six of its multiplayer maps, and the cinematics are receiving a big upgrade. Just like the Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary edition, you can switch between the revamped Halo 2 and the original graphics with a press of a button, only this time it's instantaneous without the wipe effect.

Finally, the Master Chief Collection leads into Halo 5 with some new cinematics that tie it to the 2015 game as well as a digital feature entitled Halo: Nightfall that explores the events leading up to Halo 5. Buying the collection earns you an invite to the Halo 5 multiplayer beta starting in December.

The Indie Game Scene Continues Its Surge

As we head into E3 2014, it's fascinating to note the ever-changing interaction between the indie scene and mainstream development. Even as large publishers focus their efforts on a few triple-A titles, each month brings details of new indie projects that are pushing gameplay boundaries with riskier ideas. The emerging ecosystem is great for gamers willing to step out of their comfort zone to try something different.

Most of the independent studios behind the games we feature are founded with indie development in mind from the beginning. Double Fine stands out from the pack as a former mid-tier, publisher-driven developer that's found renewed success with an indie overhaul. The company's huge moneymaking Kickstarter in 2012, which would eventually fund the adventure game throwback *Broken Age*, opened up a new avenue for development. Double Fine is still hard at work on the second half of *Broken Age*, but at the same time a different internal team is creating another Kickstarter-funded project called *Massive Chalice*.

This turn-based strategy game combines elements of tactical favorites like *XCOM* and *Final Fantasy Tactics* with a strategy layer inspired by the royal bloodline mixing of *Game of Thrones*. The inhabitants of *Massive Chalice*'s multiple kingdoms face a great threat – a mounting force of invading demons is spreading its corrupting influence across the land. This gradual invasion can't be settled in one climactic battle, though. The demonic invasion is prophesized to span hundreds of



years, requiring the realm's lordly houses to maintain and merge their families to create heroic bloodlines that can protect the lands well into the future.

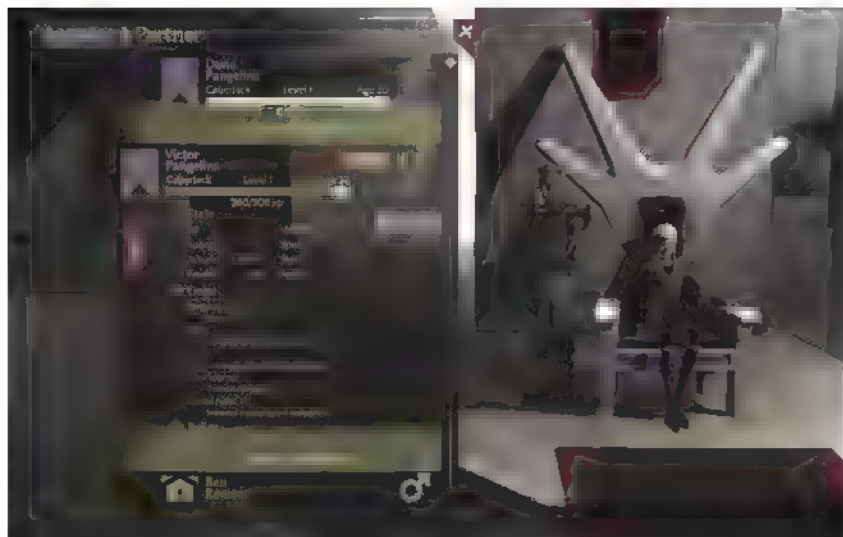
Beyond the basic story set-up, Double Fine doesn't want to nail down too much of a narrative that might detract from the emergent drama of games like *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. The developer hopes elements like permadeath and random starting character generation help players create their own memorable stories while managing the realm's families.

Your champions gain experience and new skills as they lay waste to demons on the battlefield. These acquired abilities not only make individual characters into better fighters, but also make them desirable mates for other proven warriors. Unfortunately,

propagating a heroic bloodline means that warrior is pulled from the battlefield. The offspring of matched heroes will inherit the abilities of their parents and carry the potential to be even stronger. The ever-ticking hands of time and death by old age encourages players to marry off warriors rather than run them into the dirt. Powerful characters that die prematurely in battle will leave behind potent Bloodline Relics that boost the abilities of their descendants when equipped.

Strategic procreation and realm ruling is only half of the fun. Much like the *XCOM* series, tactical battles feature a top-down perspective with fog of war, line of sight, and unknown enemy locations. Character classes feature three distinct types, which can be hybridized by marrying specific heroes together. The Caberjack deals heavy melee damage which knocks back enemies, the Hunter delivers powerful long-distance attacks, and the Alchemist pulls enemies close with a hook weapon and tosses mystical concoctions. These warriors fight demons that embody different negative effects of time such as decay, corrosion, and memory loss. A demon that affects characters' memories may cause them to forget their name and family, and destroy their chance of finding a mate. Another demon may scramble your heroes' genetic code, shuffling around their desired skills, or cause them to age faster. Double Fine wants the demons to be threats not only on the battlefield, but in the realm-managing strategy layer as well.

Double Fine is tapping into a promising concept with *Massive Chalice*, and *Broken Age* reinforces the developer's ability to deliver a quality Kickstarter product (the first half, anyway). We'll find out if *Massive Chalice* lives up to its awesome, generation-spanning potential later this year.



Looking for more independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, previews, and reviews. For more indie love in this issue, read our in-depth look at *No Man's Sky* (p. 60), our reviews of *Transistor* (p. 87), and *Super Time Force* (p. 92), and our scores for *République: Episode 2*, and *The Walking Dead Season Two – Episode 3* (p. 96).

This year on PlayStation 4, Metanet brings the N platformer series to a close with **N++**. Metanet constructed the levels and the game's design, but this time around the vector graphics and programming are done by Dyad's Shawn McGrath and are honed for pixel perfection – important when there are so many ways for your ninja to die. The game features over 1,000 levels, a level editor (including the ability to share them), and a range of multi-player options, from four-player races, a death-match mode, and two- to four-player co-op.

Beyond the vibrant new color palette, the momentum-based platforming remains as challenging and alluring as ever. New enemies ratchet up the tension, including a shadow ninja that is invisible until you hit the exit switch in the level, at which time he/she de-cloaks and chases you around the level. More passive obstacles also exist. Toggle Mines are activated when you first touch them, and thus make it harder to traverse through the level when you backtrack. Boost Pads speed you along if you land on them – dangerous in a game where managing your jumps and momentum is the key to survival. Developer Metanet hopes to have **N++** out this year for the PS4, and if things go well, other platforms are a possibility.

Vita owners are not going to want to miss **Metrico** when it comes out this summer for the handheld. The game, developed by the Netherlands' Digital Dreams, may look like a simple, stylish side-scrolling platformer, but it's a puzzler specially tuned to your every move and action.

When starting one of the six levels, you don't know where you are or what you're supposed to do, but **Metrico** is a game of experimentation about control input and what comes from those inputs. Movement may trigger a corresponding raising and lowering of a platform you need to reach, while jumping may manipulate the level in a different way. Managing these actions – and layered elements like a weapon and checkpoint switches – is how you change the environment and progress. Thus, **Metrico**'s infographic theme and percentage signs are about giving you an extra layer of feedback on how what you're doing is influencing that level. Don't know what to do in a level? The simplest thing to do is just start jumping in place to see what happens. Video



games are all about players' onscreen actions, and few games put the focus so squarely on those actions as **Metrico**.

Also coming this summer is **Nidhogg** by Messhof. The award-winning PC title is coming to the PlayStation 4, and pits two fencers against each other in a sidescrolling duel – not to the death (because that will happen many times over) – but to the finish line.

Besting your opponent is only the first step to victory since the ultimate goal is to be the first to travel across five scrolling screens in the same direction to reach the end of the world where the winner is eaten by the titular Norse serpent. When either player dies they respawn ahead of the advancing player to try and stop their nemesis again. It's a potentially

eternal battle across four worlds – Castle, Wilds, Clouds, and Mines.

The controls are simple, but there are a range of actions you can perform. Thrusts, parries, throwing your sword, melee attacks, wall jumps, rolls and more take place over levels with variations across each screen like rising terrain and choke points to discourage leaps. Die and you may respawn in an area and position that gives you the upper hand. Local and online multiplayer, as well as local tournament play provide ample opponents, and you can also play it by yourself against A.I. bots. **Nidhogg** a great fit for the burgeoning PS4 indie library, where it can hopefully find an even wider audience than it has already attracted on PC. ♦



interview



photo: Riccardo Calera

Pushing For Diversity

At the most recent Game Developers Conference, BioWare Montreal's **Manveer Heir** delivered an impassioned keynote about inclusivity and the lack of representation in games. We spoke to Heir about his opinions on diversity in games and how he would advocate change in the industry.

interview by **Matt Helgeson**

Your talk at GDC about representations of race, gender, and sexual orientation in games made a big impact. What feedback have you received since then?

Overwhelmingly, I've gotten positive feedback on the content of the talk, the delivery, the timing, the research I put into it, and things like that. When you go on Twitter, there's this world of anonymous people who can snipe back. I've only received a handful, which is actually kind of surprising.

You didn't talk about the larger culture surrounding games in your speech, but it seems like it's hard to separate the issues of representation in games from the larger culture of games.

Absolutely not. These are all interrelated. We have a workforce problem. We have a workforce that's predominantly white males. I think you see some of the output of that workforce as a result. I'm a firm believer that more diverse workforces would lead to more diverse game stories, characters, and interesting things you haven't played yet that's not a guy saving the world or saving a girl from a monster.

Data suggests games that feature white male characters tend to sell better. If you look at some of the huge franchises, that seems to be true. Do you agree with that observation?

It's not proven. Anytime something is not proven, it becomes more risky. What we have is an industry that is used to making something. They have data points on how to make those things and how to make the big blockbuster shooter, the big masculine, testosterone-driven game. It works for the most part, in terms of sales, which is the ultimate goal of a company or business. But my argument is that, one, there are some diminish returns there. I'd love to see more people trying interesting things.

For whatever reasons, people tend to like stories about war and violent crime. You could say, that, if you're talking about who's committing violent crimes, it's men. That's realistic in a way.

But why do we get attracted to stories of war and violent crimes? Is it because we've been conditioned since the day we were born to watch stories of war and violent crime? I would argue that's what's happening. I also think – from a video game perspective – we understand how to model violence systematically. Shooting a gun – we understand how that works. It's a lot harder for love. How do I systematically create a relationship on-screen? Frankly, most of us can't explain how love

works in the real world, let alone how to simulate it in a game. Games don't have to just be about war and love – those are extremes. There are violent contexts that we're not actually pursuing. No one is making a game that effectively makes you make hard, difficult choices during a time of war. We need to find better ways of telling interesting [stories].

For you personally, as a non-white person, have you ever felt alienated by the game industry as a professional or a player?

Absolutely. More regularly than I'd like to. When you walk into a room and you're the only non-white person in that room, you notice – even if no one is saying or doing anything racist. I grew up in an area of Maryland where I got picked on because of my race at a young age. Therefore, I am trained to think about it. At one job I had in the past, I got called the other Indian guy's name many times by accident. When there are two Indian guys at work and we don't look alike, and you confuse our names when we've both worked with you for three or four years... when the director of product development does that, you take offense. You can blow up or make a joke out of it to diffuse it and not get angry, but you feel weird.

Then, in our games, especially games that don't have strong characters, [why] don't have a choice to have someone who even resembles me? Half the time I'll just settle for a black character, because as a brown man, I don't see me. The U.S. thinks black and white in terms of race. Women, a lot of the time, don't have that choice to choose a female character. So when people say, "I just want to enjoy games and not politicize games," my point is I'm just trying to enjoy games too, but I can't enjoy the games the way you can enjoy games, because literally the entire culture has taught me to think about these things. You can even look at the Nintendo game *Tomodachi Life*, that's a great example. They don't think they are doing anything wrong by [not having same-sex relationships], but what they're doing is telling a group of people that they aren't represented here.

I think the response to that is to say, "We're in the business of making money and our job is to deliver what the largest audience wants and make the most money for our company." Do they have a responsibility to try to push more inclusivity?

Responsibility aside, why do we think that we can't make more money by appealing to what is a growing number of people who could be buying games but aren't buying games? Why did *Dora The Explorer* blow up on TV? Part of that is due to the fact that a large group of Latinos in America saw, for the first time, a character who looked like them and gave them something to grasp onto. Then – surprise! – it turns out that lots of people who

are not part of that race love the show.

When it comes to responsibility, I do think we have a responsibility to the culture. Not everyone is going to agree with that statement. People will say, "They're just games; they're just for fun." But I think that, at the end of the day, they affect the culture and who we are as people. If we're not trying to improve who we are as people, then what are we doing here on this Earth?

How do you bring some of your beliefs into your own work and your development philosophy?

You have conversations at work and find like-minded people. You build a sense of language of discussion that's civil and open, and you push each other's ideas. Then, you start changing your preconceived notions – does it need to be that way? Am I designing this character this way because the character needs to be that way or because I just fell back on a default of what I think a character should be? Is there something easy and not that expensive that I could be doing that would broaden the scope? You can see games doing this in simple ways like character creators. If you have a character creator you can customize things like skin color and hair and choose what your character looks like.

What are some of the base-level things you would like to see happening in the industry to start changing these issues of representation?

I would like to see more diverse casts in games and in primary roles. Let's just take the U.S. census statistics – half of our game characters should be women. And women shouldn't just be side characters that are annoying and shrewish, they should be main characters. I'm just using that as a guideline – I'm not saying the population of African Americans in the U.S. needs to be exactly represented exactly in games. But that's a good start, because then people would start seeing themselves. I would love to see that as a start.

Do you think these are issues that the people in the positions of decision-making in the industry care about?

I think this is stuff that a lot of developers care about. But they are meeting resistance at the top. So I don't think we've convinced everyone along the way. If you have a team that has an idea for a game that has a woman protagonist and they go to the top and the executives or marketing say, "No, you can't do that" – which is something that has happened and I've heard of – then, there is a major problem. It's about convincing those people that this is good, not only for the business, but for the game and the outcome. It's about standing up for yourself and the people around you. You have to do that with numbers. ☺

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

2004 YOUNG, FAST, AND SCIENTIFIC

An aspiring game developer, Heir graduates from Virginia Tech with a degree in computer science.

2005 INTERNING

After applying for numerous positions in the game industry, Heir nabs an internship at Big Huge Games working on the real-time strategy game *Rise of Legend*.

2005 SURPRISE OFFER

Just one month into his internship at Big Huge Games, Heir gets an offer at another company he'd applied to – a paid, full-time position at Raven Software.

2005 MOVING ON

Heir moves to Wisconsin to work at Raven, and joins the team making the next *Wolfenstein*.

2006 POSSIBILITIES

Taking a break from *Wolfenstein*, Heir works on a prototype for a new game that would eventually evolve into Raven's *Singularity*.

2009 SHIPPING NEWS

Wolfenstein is released to moderate sales and acclaim.

2010 UP NORTH TRIP

After an unannounced movie tie-in he was working on at Raven is canceled, Heir takes a position at BioWare Montreal working on *Mass Effect 3*.

2012 FINISHING THE SAGA

Mass Effect 3 is released. Heir is also credited with work on the game's day-one *From Ashes* DLC, as well as a later *Omega* DLC pack.

2013 NEW BEGINNINGS

BioWare confirms that it is developing a new *Mass Effect* game. Heir is currently working on this project.

gear

by Matt Bertz & Ben Reeves



MSI GS60 Ghost

Gaming notebooks have existed for years, but too many of them are hulking beasts that weigh enough to pull your shoulder out of socket while hauling them in a messenger bag. MSI's new line of thin and light notebooks looks to correct this age-old problem. By packing its power into a trimmer chassis and trading the typical 17-inch screen for a more economical 15.6-inch, 1920x1080 HD display, the Ghost drops its weight to a svelte 4.2 pounds.

The sleek frame resembles the Razer Blade, but the black aluminum finish loves to collect fingerprints, which takes away the wow factor of the otherwise impressive design. Once you pop the hood, the full-sized, backlit, SteelSeries keyboard becomes the focal point, which features software for changing the color scheme and setting up macros. Dynaudio technology powers the speakers, which deliver decent sound but lack the bass to give your games that extra oomph.

Gaming notebooks ultimately come down to horsepower, and the MSI Ghost is no slouch. The 2.4GHz Intel Core i7-4700HQ processor, Nvidia GTX 860M graphics chip, and 16GB DDR3 RAM give this system more than enough power to breeze through sessions of World of Warcraft. With more demanding games like Metro: Last Light, expect to drop

your settings. During benchmarking for this game, the Ghost only mustered 12 frames per second with the settings turned to high. Dropping the settings to low mustered a healthy 44 frames per second. This performance comes with a price – namely the battery life. Don't expect to get more than 90 minutes out of a game away from a power source.

Thin and light gaming notebooks like the MSI GS60 Ghost come with a steep price. But if you want a capable machine that won't make you sweat

while carrying it across town, this is one of the best options available.

VERY GOOD 
Starting at \$1,699 | msi.com



From Banker To Blood Knight

Jeffrey Shih, a.k.a. "Trump," has become a streaming phenomenon with the rise of Blizzard's Hearthstone. While Trump has been streaming for a while, the rising popularity of digital card games has allowed him to showcase his skills and talents in a genre that feels natural. Building free-to-play decks that make it to the highest levels of play and commanding one of the hottest Hearthstone channels on Twitch.tv, gaming isn't just a hobby for Trump – it's his job.



**Jeffrey
"Trump" Shih**

Occupation
Professional streamer

Twitch
<http://www.twitch.tv/trumpsc>

Location
San Francisco, CA

interview by Daniel Tack

How did you get into gaming?

I guess it was in elementary school, I played Oregon Trail and it was really fun. I've always loved gaming. When I was a kid I liked playing strategy or economic simulation, turn based strategy games. I got into Age of Empires II, which led me to Warcraft II. I started liking all the Blizzard stuff... I got into World of Warcraft, StarCraft II and Warcraft III, and finally to Hearthstone. I used to play a lot of Magic: The Gathering.

When did you decide to turn gaming into a career?

I'm not entirely sure when the professional began and the hobby ended, but I'd say I made a serious go at it during StarCraft II when I named my Twitch channel TrumpSC. I got into StarCraft II beta pretty early, started streaming, and began to grow a following.

So is this your full time job now?

Yes, it's going great. I get to do what I love doing and right now things are smooth. I've managed to get a lot of people who enjoy watching what I like to do. I've always been streaming a lot, but it used to be an after work sort of thing. I've always kept it up. Some point last year I made the decision to quit my job to pursue

full time streaming. I graduated with a degree in management and finance, started in banking, and I also did some SAT/AP style tutoring, that's the career path I left.

Walk us through your typical day.

I get up pretty late and generally stream from 11-6 p.m., usually a solid seven-hour period with some fun games added on near the end of the session, some Child of Light, FTL: Faster Than Light, whatever. After dinner I sometimes come back to do some more casual games, but it depends on the day. I go out for board game nights on Mondays; the Bay Area has a great scene for that. There are a lot of awesome board games out there that aren't Risk or Monopoly – I'm big into strategic German board games. I also frequently play the social game Mafia online in a Zoom meeting setting with about 16 players with cams and official rules. Sometimes I play Dungeons & Dragons; I DM.

What made you decide to leave StarCraft II for Hearthstone?

It was sort of a long transition. I didn't really have the hand eye coordination and reflexes to be one of the best. I was pretty good, but there's a difference between

pretty good and top level. After that I had a brief stint with League of Legends and Diablo III, and finally I landed on Hearthstone. My Magic: The Gathering background and my love of Blizzard stuff made it a natural fit.

Do you think Hearthstone is going to be a long-term game for you or do you see yourself jumping to another title?

I've been with Hearthstone for almost a year already. It's what my audience loves watching and I love playing it, so I anticipate staying with it for quite some time. It's hard to imagine what game could topple it right now. During the evenings I like to play casual-ish games, recently I've been doing some You Don't Know Jack, which is fun for everyone.

Do you think Hearthstone is pay-to-win?

I've taken three different classes from a new (free) account to legend in approximately a week of play each time – mage, shaman, and warlock. It wasn't out of rage or to prove people wrong about Hearthstone being pay-to-win, but I wanted to see what I could do.

What do you think about game balance?

The other day I was looking

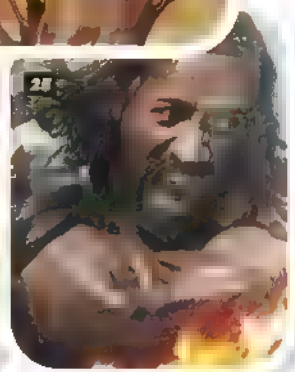
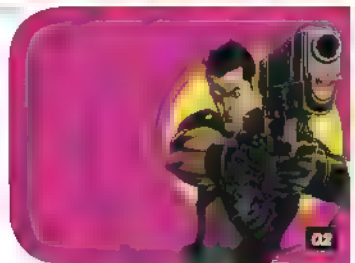
at my list of viable decks – it's something like 23 different decks. Some are more popular than others, but there's a lot of experimentation going on right now. I don't think things have settled down yet, and a lot of top players will say that this is the most diverse the metagame has ever been. Coming from Magic: The Gathering, where you see three or so top decks across nine or so viable ideas, I think Hearthstone is in a great place.

Tell us a little more about your experience with Magic. Did you compete at any major events?

I played mostly online. I don't want to call it work but I was a winning player. I exited with more than I entered with. I think I understood the game pretty well but didn't really feel the urge to travel much.

What do you think about the eSports potential of Hearthstone?

It's tough to say if anything will be able to compete with League of Legends/Dota type stuff. In terms of tournaments, Hearthstone tournaments are getting a pretty good following. I know Deck Wars had a good following and Dreamhack has some events coming up. It's growing with a bright outlook. ♦



Destiny Public Beta Begins

At some point this month Bungie is launching the public beta for Destiny PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 3 owners will be the first to get a crack at this beta, with the Xbox One and Xbox 360 versions trailing shortly thereafter. Destiny officially releases on September 9, but players who want an early taste should keep their eyes peeled for more beta news in the coming weeks.

01 New Releases

- › Child of Light (Vita)
- › One Piece Unlimited World Red (PS3, 3DS, Vita)
- › Sniper Elite 3 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)

02 Life After The Bat

Dick Grayson's days of wearing a mask and buddying around with Batman are over. He's now an agent of Spyral, an international spy agency. This new ongoing series, which DC calls a "super-spy thriller" is just one major change hitting DC's New 52 this month. The new direction kicks off in the first issue of *Grayson*, streaming today.

07 Game/A.I. Conference

The Game/A.I. Conference claims to be the "largest worldwide gathering dedicated to gameplay, character

animation, and artificial intelligence in game development." This three-day event, taking place in Vienna Austria, is open to game creators, students, and enthusiasts. Talks dissect games like *Crysis 3*, *EverQuest Next*, and *Ryse: Son of Rome*.

08.1 Rocket Raccoon Steps Into The Spotlight

The stars of the upcoming *Guardians of the Galaxy* movie are getting their own comic books this month. Starlord's series launches earlier in the month, and today welcomes the first issue of *Rocket Raccoon*, a new take penned and drawn by Skottie Young (*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*) that takes Marvel's tinest bazooka-wielding animal on a quest through the cosmos for answers as to why he's the last of his kind.

08.2 Develop In Brighton 2014

Over 1,600 game developers are expected to attend this year's Develop conference held in Brighton, U.K. Along with an indie showcase, competition and game jam sessions, this conference offers a wide variety of panels and speakers, including talks about using psychology in an applied way in game development, and designing virtual reality in games. Develop starts today and runs through July 10.

11.1 Gaymer X2

Held at the InterContinental San Francisco, Gaymer X2 is a three-day convention that focuses on LGBTQ culture in gaming. Special guests include BioWare's David Gaider, Dreamsky's Gordon Bellamy, WWE's Darren Young, and more. This event offers panels, game rooms, concerts, and a wedding.

11.2 Ape-ocalypse

The first rule of creating genetically modified apes: Do not name them Caesar, Sultan, King, or any other moniker that guarantees they will overthrow civilization. Case in point, *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, which swings into theaters today. The ape Caesar lives up to his namesake by crushing mankind and taking control of the planet. Humanity's best hope? Commissioner Gordon (once again played by Gary Oldman).

12 Midwest Game Developers Summit 2014

This conference began as a Kickstarter-achieved full funding, and is kicking off today in Oconomowoc, WI's Olympia Resort.

The two-day summit is open to everyone interested in game development. Numerous Midwest-based developers will be on hand for talks and panels.

23 The Wachowski's Next Film

After *Speed Racer* and *Cloud Atlas*, the Wachowskis could use a box office hit. It looks like they are going back to their roots with *Jupiter Ascending*. The film appears to blend every element of science fiction imaginable, from *Dune* and *Chronicles of Riddick* to *Zone of the Enders* and *The Fifth Element*. We're fine with that; we just hope they don't tap those crappy *Matrix* sequels for ideas.

24 Casual Connect USA 2014

If you're looking to learn more about mobile, social free-to-play, browser, and social casino game development, Casual Connect USA 2014 is the place to be. This three-day conference is loaded with events (such as the idea showcase) and encourages networking amongst developers.

24 San Diego Comic Con 2014

Big game news, usually pertaining to comic book or motion picture-based video games, often happens at San Diego Comic Con. This expo is for the fans of all forms of entertainment, offering a first look at movies, games, action figures, and comic books. It's also the best place to go for people watching, as cosplayers are out in full force.

25 Disappointed!

Go ahead and lock down your Oscar pool choices, people. *Hercules* opens today, and it is a sure thing for best picture. It stars Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson in the title role and co-stars a giant CG bear, a giant CG lion, and a giant CG snake-thing. Finally, someone in Hollywood gets Greek mythology – it should be like a wrestling match, but with monsters instead of people. The bigger and more CG the better.

26 New Releases

- › Lego Ninjago Nindroids (3DS, Vita)



FAR CRY 4

■ **PLATFORM**

PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

■ **STYLE**

1-Player Shooter
2-Player Online Co-op,
Competitive Multiplayer TBA

■ **PUBLISHER**

Ubisoft

■ **DEVELOPER**

Ubisoft Montreal

■ **RELEASE**

November 18

A HIGH-ALTITUDE HOMECOMING

*Ubisoft Montreal
is taking the Far
Cry franchise
to new heights
by adding co-op
and building on
to what made
it a surprise
powerhouse*

by Jeff Cork

FREEDOM CAN BE LIBERATING, BUT IT CAN ALSO PARALYZE.



The Far Cry franchise is fascinating, because the connections between each installment are loose to the point of being nonexistent. The first game, developed by Crytek a decade ago, pit former spec-ops member Jack Carver against genetically mutated primates in a South Pacific island.

Ubisoft Montreal took over development from there, releasing several iterative sequels that added feral abilities and traps, before releasing Far Cry 2 in 2008. That game introduced several player characters in an African setting with a morbid meditation on violence, but its insistence on realism – guns jammed, and your character had to regularly take anti-malarial medication – and a rough checkpoint system divided players. Far Cry 3 yet again took an independent approach, with a new setting and cast.

"The really tough thing about working on Far Cry is that everybody is like, 'Well, Far Cry is a whole bunch of different games, and it's got a whole bunch of different themes, and you can pretty much do anything,'" says Far Cry 4 executive producer Dan Hay. "Is that hard? The danger of trying to make something anything is that it can become nothing. The truth is, for a while, we've been searching for an identity," Hay says. "You think about what Far Cry 2 was, and when we came to Far Cry 3, for me, the brand experienced not a reboot but a full resurgence. We simply said that we wanted it to be about discovery. We wanted to make it plausible that if we give you a passport, a little bit of cash, and a gun and we go, 'Okay, go over and experience something,' what's it going to be like?"

People responded to the game, in which Jason Brody experienced a Micronesian vacation gone horribly wrong. Far Cry 3 was a surprise hit, with aggregate review scores hovering at 90 and selling more than nine million copies worldwide. Despite that success, in many ways it remained the anti-franchise: A downloadable offshoot, Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon, simultaneously skewered '80s action movies like *Cobra* and *Terminator*, while leaving players further confused about what the Far Cry name meant.

"In my memory, we kind of tripped across the finish line and turned around and we won the race," says Mark Thompson, who served as

level design director for Far Cry 3 and has since moved on to become the Far Cry 4 narrative director. "It all kind of worked out. At the end, there was a lot of learning, and there were a few things that we felt like we missed."

Based on its overwhelming popularity, it was no surprise that a fourth entry was in the cards. "The idea behind the brand is that it's surprising, so when we started talking about where we were going to take it, what are we going to do, it's like, 'We'll put it on the same island, we'll make it about Jason, we'll have a whole thing,'" Hay says. "Wait a second. Wait a second. This is exactly what people expect. Let's get a fresh perspective."

Hay turned to Alex Hutchinson, who served as creative director on *Assassin's Creed III*. The two knew each other from touring their respective games and had grown to like one another. Hay brought Hutchinson on board, in part because of Hutchinson's thoughts on how player choice should drive the story.

"When you come on to a new project, you have a window I like to think of being untainted," Hutchinson says. "You're not victim to Stockholm syndrome at this point. You can come in and go, 'Why are you doing this? Why is this a decision that works? What are your goals? What's happening?'" The window closes super fast, because in the end you end up all aligned and making the same game, and you all believe in the same vision, but you have a super tiny ability to say, "Wait, stop. This is great, but not that bit."



The elephant gun packs a wallop

Far Cry 4 brings players to a new location; the fictional nation of Kyrat nestled in the Himalayas. This is a place full of natural beauty, ravaged by human cruelty. Its heights present exciting ways for players to explore, including mountaineering and piloting autogyros, and its lowlands can be enjoyed from the backs of elephants. Though the setting is all new, Ubisoft Montreal is working to expand the thrill of Far Cry 3's unscripted moments, and incorporate those elements into the campaign in some surprising ways.

WELCOMING PARTY

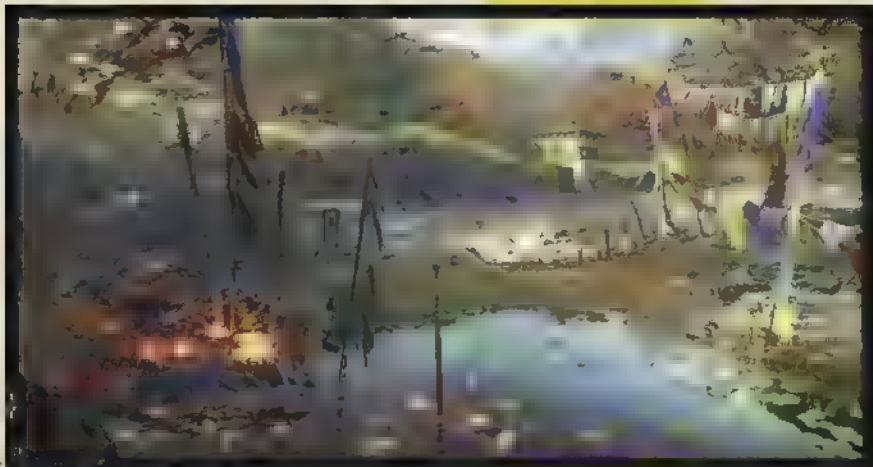
Our demo begins with a breathtaking view of Kyrat's snow-covered mountains. An eagle glides by, and our attention focuses on Tibetan-style prayer flags whipping in the thin air. They're meant to bring good luck to travelers, and we'll take it. This is Far Cry, after all, and one of the few constants in the series is that things can go wrong quickly.

The camera pans and pulls through a cracked and dingy window. We look around and realize we're enjoying the vista from the well-worn seat of a bus. A furry macaque is on the seat beside us, and the little primate shows little interest in us. The vehicle is filled with other travelers, including a man with a braided beard sitting opposite us.

He asks to see our passport and we hand over the document. It's dark blue, and marked with the seal of the United States of America. "Breathe," says the man, a fixer named Dharpan. "I'll do the talking." The bus squeaks to a stop at the checkpoint, and armed guards approach the vehicle.

Borders are porous in this part of the world, provided you can pay. Passengers—including our character—stuff their passports with cash and pass the fatter than usual documents forward, where they're collected by the bus driver. He steps out and hands them to the guard in charge. The whole scenario seems like it's played out hundreds of times before. This time, however, something's different.

The guard shakes his head, and his men scatter around the bus. One looks underneath the bus' frame with a pole-mounted mirror. Passengers are tense. The back and forth between the driver and the guard seems to be going on too long. The macaque begins to screech, giving voice to the discomfort we're feeling. There's a commotion behind, and we turn to see the rear emergency door swing open as two people flee the checkpoint. A guard levels a rifle and fires, killing them both. Pandemonium follows, with the guards firing at everyone on the bus. We dive out the back with Dharpan, landing in the dirt near several bodies. A guard walks to us, but pauses. The gunfire stops as the sound of a helicopter approaches.





NAIIVE SON

Don't let the protagonist's passport fool you. Unlike *Far Cry 3*'s hero, players aren't going to be playing as a stereotypical sightseer. One of the criticisms people leveled at that game was that it played too easily with clichés about noble savages and enlightened westerners (see *Eye Of The Beholder*, p. 16). That was something the development team wanted to address head on with the sequel. "The outsiders who come in and try to have their escapist white-savior fantasy are actually the bad guys, and you're on the other side of that," Thompson says.

Ubisoft Montreal wanted to introduce a character who was both foreign and familiar, who belonged to Kyrat, but wouldn't alienate players, who wouldn't immediately be familiar with the world. The solution was Ajay Ghale.

"The first thing we said was this guy is from Kyrat," Thompson says. "No matter what happens, the most important thing is he is part of this world, he belongs here, that's where his parents are from, his family are from. So when you go back there, it's a place you belong to."

Ghale's father, Mohan, started a revolution against the nation's oppressive regime, inciting a civil war that is still being waged when Ghale attempts to cross into the country. "His mother ends up fleeing the country, and she seeks asylum in the U.S.A.," Thompson says. "He essentially grows up from the age of four in the U.S. So he goes through the U.S. education system to the point where he eventually has a U.S. passport - that's the passport that you see on the bus when you go in. But when he arrives back, everybody knows him, everybody knows his mother and her acrimonious exit, everybody knows his father, because his father was the founder of the revolution that's still happening today, that's still fighting the civil war. So just his name, Ajay Ghale - particularly the Ghale part - gets him in trouble. Even to the point where his whole

life he's called himself Ajay Ghale, but his name is actually pronounced 'Ah-jhay Gah-lay.' Even his name is pronounced differently, and it's the thing that gets him into trouble."

Ajay doesn't come back to Kyrat to become involved in any of that nation's politics. His interest is much more personal. His mother has died, and in the will reading he's told that she wants her ashes scattered in Kyrat. This is all foreign to Ajay, because his mother never spoke about their homeland. The only way into Kyrat is by bribery at border checkpoints, which is how Ajay began his journey, before it all fell apart.



BUILDING KYRAT

One of the things the Far Cry 4 team strives for is delivering fantasy balanced with authenticity. They've created a fictional place – Kyrat – but are working to ensure it is believable, and just as important, surprising.

“Oh, the world’s so boring now, everybody knows everything,” says Far Cry 4 narrative director Mark Thompson. “So you have this kind of escapist fantasy where we can create a place that looks and smells and feels real, but it isn’t known about. We get to make its own history and its own backstory, which is a lot of fun for the writers who get to create their own world. It’s exciting for people, because it’s like finding a new species of animal that doesn’t exist. I’m crossing into a frontier that’s all new and undiscovered.”

For Far Cry 3, executive producer Dan Hay says the team relied on art and video references and personal stories from its team to create the fictional Rook Islands. That worked, but he wanted to improve authenticity with the sequel. “The first thing we wanted to do with Far Cry 4 was to send some of these guys out and have a very real, credible experience,” he says.

Thompson and other members of the team visited Nepal for several weeks early in the development process to see it first-hand. Their experiences shaped the direction of the game in surprising ways.

“When we came back, the first thing that struck me was that the game kind of looked like a caricature,” Thompson says. “I came back and looked at our early prototype, and it kind of looked like a Disneyland version of Nepal. The biggest thing was how much reach the western world had over there. I came back and looked and thought, ‘s---, we made a 17th century version of Nepal.’ When you go over there, they have billboards everywhere of LG Electronics and Tuborg Lager And Angry Birds. Holy s--- There was a western influence that we’d omitted because we hadn’t been there.”

When he returned, Thompson sat down with the art director and they looked at video and thousands of pictures from the trip. They fixed things they’d gotten wrong, like, for instance, the way tuk-tuks looked. “Everything was super beautiful and bright, and we just had red car and blue car,” Thompson says. “Just tiny details like that all the way up to narrative characters and how they looked and who they were. Even the focus of the narrative. Or tiny details like, ‘Oh, they don’t even have chairs like that, they have the ones like this.’”

“That’s been one of the most impressive things to me about these guys,” says creative director Alex Hutchinson. “Sometimes, success is as dangerous as failure. Once you finally hit one and you’re like, ‘that’s great, people really liked it and it sold really well,’ there’s a tendency to change nothing. Just repaint it, keep it the same. We’re not sure what it is, we’re not sure why it worked, and I think that’s by far the most dangerous route to take. Even if you get away with it once, you won’t get away with it twice, and you fail to learn, so you set bad practices in place. People will start replicating things instead of creating things, so the effort to do more research, to go back and say these elements of the game work, these elements of the game didn’t work has been a lot of fun.”

PAGAN MIN

The helicopter lands, and a man steps out. He has a shock of bleach-blond hair, and he's wearing an equally shocking pink suit. He strolls among the carnage, looking distracted, but calm. He's unmistakably in charge, and he isn't pleased. He walks up to the guard who, only moments earlier, seemed ready to vent late our skulls.

"I distinctly remember saying stop the bus," the man in the pink suit says, with a voice like poisoned honey. "Yes, stop the bus. Not shoot the bus. I'm very particular with my words. Stop. Shoot. Stop. Shoot. Do those words sound the same?"

The guard mumbles that the situation went out of control. At that, Pagan Min makes a fist around the pen in his hand. "It got out of control?" he yells, his voice breaking. "I hate when things get out of control!" Min repeatedly stabs the guard in the face and neck, and they both collapse to the ground, one exhausted and the other dead.

"At least there's a silver lining," Min says, finally looking at us. "You didn't completely f--- it up. Here, boy. I'd recognize those eyes anywhere. I'm so sorry about this. This was supposed to be... well, not this. We have a party waiting for you, but I don't think I know your name," he says, looking at Dharman. "Who is this? Hmm? Is this your plus one? Strong silent type. I'm heavily embarrassed about this. This was supposed to be very simple."

Min helps us up – we still don't know where exactly we stand with this psychopath or who he even is – before taking a selfie of us both as we face the smoldering bus. "This will soon be behind us," he says, cheerfully. "I have cleared my calendar for you. You and I are going to tear s--- up!"

"If Vaas was evil, Pagan Min is the devil," Hay says, referring to one of Far Cry 3's most notorious characters. It's an impression that Min has carefully cultivated as he rose to control Kyrat and installed himself as king. Pagan's father was a Hong Kong gangster who disapproved of his son.

"He's always been a bit of a peacock, slightly more flamboyant than his father was comfortable with, and he was kind of an embarrassment to his father," Thompson says. "So he's always had that rebellious streak to him, like a f--- you punk-rock attitude, and he didn't really fit well in that organization. At a certain point he felt like he was hitting his limits because he didn't do things the way they were supposed to be done. Then his father was mysteriously killed... he didn't die of natural causes, let's say. That's when Pagan Min took on the moniker of Pagan Min. He was originally called Gang Min, and he changed his name to Pagan Min after an old Burmese king who murdered his father so he could take control. That was Pagan's message; he didn't ever say that he killed his father, but he named himself after a Burmese king who did."

Pagan has a complicated relationship with Ajay's family. He fell in love with Ajay's mother, Ishwari, which softened Pagan's outlook on life – even fathering a daughter with the woman, a girl they named Lakshmana. Pagan was guided by the local woman to rebuild Kyrat and become a better man himself. Then Pagan learned that Ishwari was sent as a spy by Mohan Ghale, Ajay's father,



and that she was Mohan's wife. That led to a chain reaction of violence, ending with the death of Lakshmana. Devastated, Pagan retreated to his palace, leaving control of the nation's day-to-day activities to his lieutenants. Years later he receives word that Ajay is attempting to return to Kyrat – to scatter Ishwari's ashes near her daughter's. Here, their complicated relationship begins. Pagan Min is voiced by the prolific Troy Baker, who's portrayed characters as diverse as The Joker in Batman: Arkham Origins and Joel in The Last of Us. Ubisoft Montreal says they went with Baker because he seemed to be having fun with the role during his audition, taking the character in unexpected directions. They say he's easy to work with, funny, creative, and professional, so casting him was a no-brainer.

One lesson the team took from Far Cry 3 was how to better





This new hunter enemy type shows that players aren't the only ones who can use stealth and cover to their advantage.

incorporate strong antagonists. Hoyt was an interesting character, but he was overshadowed by others, including Vaas, because he was so isolated from the action. "That is where we failed with Hoyt; we kept him away from you way, way too long," Thompson says. "Hoyt didn't have an effect on the world. You didn't hear people talk about Hoyt. Pagan Min is on the f---ing money, there are posters of Pagan Min everywhere. He has his official department of communications blasting propaganda about how Pagan Min is the father, is the king, and should be trusted because he's the right way to live. In all of the villages you go to you can see what life is like under Pagan Min's watchful eye. You meet his governors, which are like fractured reflections of his personality, and they reinforce who he is. The whole game is saturated. You really feel like this is a world Pagan Min came into and exploded."




THE NEW-GEN DIFFERENCE

The team is committed to ensuring that players have the same gameplay experience in spite of their preferred platform, but PlayStation 4 and Xbox One owners will finally experience PC-like performance.

"Generally when you're on console, you're developing for the lowest common denominator, and then you up-res or do some stuff for next gen or for more powerful systems or PC," says Alex Hutchinson, Far Cry 4's creative director. "Far Cry is a PC-developed game at heart, we develop on the PC, and the console versions have never seen ultra-high PC. This time, you're going to get on next-gen consoles ultra-high PC, plus all the new tech. So I think, personally, it's going to look next-gen on console but it's still going to look gorgeous on current gen."

The game is built using Ubisoft's proprietary Dunia engine.



This auto crossbow is one of the game's new weapons. It fires several arrows pneumatically before it needs reloading.

STORY MEETS EXPLORATION

Open-world games often make the necessary trade of freedom for plausibility. Developers want to give players the option of taking breaks away from the campaign so they can explore the world on their own. It can create problems, such as a hitman who walks away from a ticking time-bomb scenario so he can deliver pizzas or buy new clothes. In Far Cry 3, Ubisoft Montreal dealt with this narrative dissonance by telling players that Jason (and by extension, themselves) were too weak to deal with the threats that held their friends and the island hostage. By exploring the world and accepting side missions, they were getting stronger and were more capable of progressing in the story. It worked, but Hay and the rest of the team felt unsatisfied with that approach overall. Additionally, players seemed to be more enthusiastic about the emergent gameplay over the missions the team had agonized over creating.

"If you look at the online chatter and you talk to people about the game, almost everyone just talks about the open world," Hutchison says. "And then you do the math and you go, 'Wait a

simmering, and players help decide the fate of the organization, The Golden Path. The group is facing internal turmoil, too, as two leaders within it are vying for power. Sabal is a traditionalist with a cynical outlook on rebuilding the nation. Other countries watched idly as Pagan Min terrorized Kyrat, so he doesn't want any outside help in restoring it. Sabal sees westernization as an inevitability, and that many of Kyrat's religious traditions are paternalistic and sexist. Hutchison says an easy way to think about it is that players will be working with a faction that despises Pagan Min's rule, but has its own ideological differences, like the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States.

"They know each other, they've been working together for years, they kind of have a love/hate relationship with each other, but you're the ingredient that will tip the balance one way or the other," Hutchison

INTRODUCING THE ELEPHANT

Animals have had a special place in the franchise since Far Cry 3 encouraged players to team up with – and battle – a variety of deadly predators. Coming up with a menagerie of creatures that supported interesting gameplay was critically important when Ubisoft Montreal initially started working on the setting for the fourth game.

"For me, the elephant was the number one animal," says Patrik Méthé, Far Cry 4's game director. "But in Far Cry 2, it was in Africa, so we were like, 'Where could we go to not only have access to the elephant but a place where there's also a wide array of animals?' That's why we ended up in Nepal."

The elephant presents its own challenges. The animal is revered in many cultures, and it's also considered one of the most intelligent species in the animal kingdom. At the same time, the powerful beasts have been used in war since ancient times. This contradiction isn't lost on Ubisoft.

"There's a special connection with the elephant," Méthé says. "It's the only animal we won't reward the player for killing. It allows you to go on the land and also on water and seamlessly transition. You can also call other nearby elephants. If you see a big outpost and think, 'Oh, this is going to be very difficult, very challenging to go there,' not only can you call your friend to go help you, but if you're in a spot near an elephant you can ride one of them and call the other one so that you are going to charge the outpost with two or three elephants, which will be total chaos and a nightmare for the NPCs."

Narrative director Mark Thompson says that they're still working on how to deal with players who kill the creatures. Now, players get a green targeting reticle when they hover over the creature. The team is considering the idea of treating them like allies, so if friendly NPCs see you killing an elephant, they'll react by attacking you.

says. "So you do a lot of similar missions, but you have these key inflection points, where you can make a decision and say, 'No no no, his vision for the country is crazy, I'm going with her,' or vice versa, and then you have to deal with the consequences in sub-objectives and things in subsequent missions."

"Lots of games provide choices where the narrative changes and you get a different cutscene, but if you're the kind of guy who says, 'Oh, this is boring I'm going to skip the cutscenes,' you skip the stuff that's different anyway," Thompson adds. "We wanted to make sure that it was actually the gameplay that was different."

For example, you might have a mission focused on seizing control of a tea factory that's been converted to process heroin. One leader wants you to destroy it, because the illicit drug trade is ruining the nation. On the other hand, players can choose to align with the opposing leader and take out Pagan Min's men – and then shift the profits over to The Golden Path.

Hutchinson says too many games offer players a factional choice that's on one extreme or the other near the beginning of a game, and they typically stick with that choice throughout. In *Far Cry 4*, the team wants players to realign their positions as they learn more about these leaders. "We'd like people to flip-flop, basically," he says.

These choices change the story and cutscenes, but players also get to experience completely different missions depending on the decisions they make. "The goal was to bring the anecdote factory from the open world into the missions, so that people could get just as excited about the different stories they did in the missions as they do in the open world," Thompson says, referring to the studio's pet name for the mayhem that occurs in the open world.

We get to see how that plays out in a single-player mission that starts with Ajay walking along a mountain pass. It's a treacherous drop, but the path is wide enough for yaks and goats to roam. He looks to his side and admires a massive statue of a Buddha-like figure (The team has created its own religions for Kyrat, so any similarities are superficial). He's not the only one who's distracted – an eagle swoops down and grabs an unsuspecting goat with its razor talons, taking it skyward. It's probably best Ajay doesn't linger.

He moves on, walking across a log bridge. He's surprised by another eagle attack, though he's able to swat it away before it takes him for a ride. Ahead, Ajay comes upon a cache of mountaineering gear. He's in the mountains, after all, so this gear will come in handy. Sure enough,

he finds a grapping spot a short while later, and uses the hook to pull himself up. Ahead, he comes across another spot where he attaches it and swings across a gap.

He moves down the slope and sees enemy soldiers milling around a shabby encampment. The mission objective is to destroy an enemy convoy. A guard climbs a ladder – something A.I. characters couldn't do in *Far Cry 3* – and Ajay follows, taking him out with a stealth takedown. Several guards are below the platform, but Ajay is undetected. There's a nearby fuel barrel, and he plants C4 on it, kicks it down on the guards, and detonates it.

The remaining guards sound the alarm and open fire on his position. He ducks into a nearby tuk-tuk – a small, motorized rickshaw – and heads after the fleeing convoy, which has taken off amid the chaos. Ajay follows, taking advantage of his ability to drive while shooting (another new feature) to take out a jeep's driver in the back of the procession. It drives over the edge of a flimsy retaining fence to what must be a thousand-yard drop. Pulling alongside a cargo truck, he leaps from his car, stabs the passenger, yanks him out, and kills the driver. In a flash, the truck is Ajay's. It isn't for long, as he looks and sees an approaching truck swerve to avoid a herd of goats, which places it directly in his path. He cuts his losses and drives off the cliff. Unlike the driver of that ill-fated jeep, Ajay is prepared. He activates his wingsuit and glides through a densely wooded ravine, frantically dodging trees. It opens into a clearing, and he activates his parachute, sailing calmly through the sky.



Elephants are the only animal in the game that won't earn players rewards for killing.

THIS GUN'S FOR HIRE

Everything's better with a friend, and Far Cry 4 is no exception. Far Cry 3 featured a standalone co-op campaign, but it didn't allow players to explore the islands freely on their own terms, which is what players enjoy doing best. When Hutchinson joined the team, addressing co-op was high on his list of priorities.

"Originally, the idea was to have co-op as a mode, to have a co-op adventure," Hutchinson recalls. "My belief on modes is that once you make them, you segment your audience. So you have this on the side and hopefully everyone comes across, but realistically like multiplayer and other things, a percentage comes across."

The solution isn't as simple as smashing single-player and co-op together, either. Missions that are designed to be tense and surprising can lose their power if a friend can move into an unexpected position and snipe the bad guys before they're ordinarily spotted. "For a while, we were in a challenging spot where we thought, 'Do we take away all the realization and immersion? That sounds like a terrible decision.'" Hutchinson says. "Then you're like, 'But I really want my buddy.' How do we make these things live together?"

The solution they arrived at, which they call Guns for Hire, plays to Far Cry's strengths. "When you invite a friend, it's only for the open world," Hutchinson says. "All those single-player missions will turn off, and then all the co-op stuff will turn on."

Like many players, Hutchinson was particularly fond of Far Cry 3's open world activities, like scaling radio towers, finding collectibles, and taking over outposts. When a friend comes online and you get an alert, you can choose to invite your friend into your game as a Gun for Hire. Your friend can help you take out enemy fortresses, explore the world, and essentially mess around — just about everything that exists in single player, aside from campaign missions. When your friend leaves, they keep their earned XP, crafting materials, and collectibles, but don't take any outpost or radio-tower unlocks with them. The game will also feature competitive multiplayer, but Ubisoft isn't talking about that at this time.

Players who don't have friends online can still call in A.I. companions for extra assistance. Their strength depends on how high of a karma reputation the player has from helping civilians in trouble and performing other noble deeds. Ignore them, and you're likely to wind up with a random guy with a pistol and a knife, Hutchinson says.

When you do join up with a buddy, they play as Hurk, the monkey-obsessed maniac from Far Cry 3. "If you imagine, the co-op player is someone who in the fiction of the world has agreed just to turn up and shoot things with you, contextless," Hutchinson says. "You need me to shoot? I'll shoot it!" So we thought, this person is a little eccentric, so it seemed to fit with Hurk.

I played co-op during my first hands-on time with the game. Unlike the mountainous areas from the earlier demo, I was at a much lower altitude. While you wouldn't likely confuse it with other tropical environments in previous Far Cry games, our starting point was filled with trees and other plant life. Of course, we weren't here to play armchair botanists.

Looking ahead, I spot a radio tower high in the



These buzzed helicopters are a great shortcut for reaching the tops of radio towers or taking enemies by surprise.



Pagan Min's forces have desecrated Kyra's holy sites, like this bell tower. Players can scale it and destroy the radio equipment near its top.

distance. My partner and I head there our own ways. He grabs a nearby truck, and I continue on foot. While there is an invisible tether between players, it's generously long, and it doesn't interfere with exploration. By the time I arrive, Ajay has cleared out the guards, leaving the climbing to me. As in *Far Cry 3*, these sections are little traversal puzzles. I work my way to the top, finding the transmitter and destroying it. With that out of the way, Pagan Min's broadcasts stop in that region, and I could see points of interest appear on the map. As an added bonus, the radio stations in vehicles now play music instead of propaganda.

I take the zip line down, and spot a few tapir clustered in a group. My hunting instincts kick in, and I pursue one. My shot is wild, and the spooked creature runs into the forest. I pursue and eventually sprint up to it and slice it apart with my knife. *Far Cry 4* introduces the concept of clean kills into hunting. Players who take the time to harvest animals using bows or headshots are rewarded with additional crafting supplies, while people who rely on grenades don't fare as well. I get a skin

truck, and I take the mounted machine gun in the back. An icon appears, indicating a nearby convoy. Convoys occasionally appear in the world, ferrying freight between fortresses. Players have a choice if they want to interact with them. They can destroy the trucks, or take out their escorts and drive the trucks to a friendly fortress. If they choose the latter, they're rewarded with resources. Of course, first you have to capture those fortresses, which is easier said than done.

Far Cry 4 introduces fortresses to the game. These four locations are essentially beefed-up outposts, each of which is controlled by one of Pagan Min's lieutenants. Unless those leaders are taken out first through the campaign, Ubisoft says they're virtually impossible to recapture. Run-of-the-mill outposts are also more difficult.

"The first thing we wanted to do with the outposts was the idea that you walk up to an outpost and you understand the gameplay from *Far Cry 3*," Hay says. "You're like, 'I get this, I'm comfortable.' Then you shoot at it or you go to move close to it, and all of a sudden the alarm goes off and you're like, 'Whoa whoa whoa.' Then mortars start being launched at you, and they're launching very specifically at where you are."

Animals remain a big part of outposts, though the soldiers aren't as infatuated with keeping tigers and bears in cages as their Rook Island counterparts. "At a certain point you had the question,

"Why would these enemies still be dumb enough to keep an animal in a cage despite hearing the stones," Thompson says. "Do you guys not talk to each other on the north island? You haven't heard about this guy who's gone into 15 of the 30 outposts and unleashed the wild animals that we keep? Maybe there would be a memo? 'Hey guys, FYI someone has been releasing the tigers.'" Players can still use animals to their benefit, but they'll have to be crafty with bait.

Now that my partner and I are sufficiently warned up, we try to take a fortress. We start off outside the walls of the encampment, and Ajay hops onto a nearby elephant. He uses the beast to smash through the gates, firing at guards from his perch. The sight is amusing, but I move to find another entrance rather than watch the festivities. I find a way in on the side, and Ajay continues to attract attention. I use stealth takedowns and throwing knives to dispatch several enemies who are too distracted by the marauding pachyderm to pay me any mind. A cluster of guards hides behind cover, firing at my partner who's now on foot. I fire an RPG at them, since they're exposed from my position. I see that Ajay fell during the exchange, and I rush over to revive him. I'm nearly killed in the process by a helicopter. I aim wildly with my RPG, and it's a lucky hit—the vehicle spins out of control and crashes outside the fortress' walls.

It's not the only chopper at the base, however. My antics have drawn the attention of the mortar, and I have to weave through the courtyard between buildings to avoid its blast. Ajay finds its operator and ends his run before he can tally any kills. And with that, the fortress is ours.

I look around the place and survey the damage. Then I spot a two-man helicopter, the buzzard, and take flight. From above, I can see how the forests thin out near the edge of the mountains, becoming desolate and rocky. Closer to the base, there are terraced rice paddies and roads. I suspect that future convoys will be taken here and plundered by The Golden Path. The buzzard isn't a fortified military chopper. It's essentially an open cage with a rotor, which makes my next move especially easy.

I jump, gliding away with my wingsuit, away from the fortress, away from the devastation, and toward my next adventure. ♦

Head to gameinformer.com/farcry4 for a month of bonus coverage, including developer interviews, a full profile of Pagan Min, the rise of *Far Cry*, and more.



BUILD YOUR OWN OUTPOST

Players who enjoy flexing their creative muscles will be glad to know that a revamped version of the popular map-creation tools are included with *Far Cry 4*. We saw a demo in which a user created an outpost mission from scratch—placing buildings, sculpting terrain, and adding A.I. patrols and enemies—in 10 minutes. Ubisoft says it's looking at streaming services like Netflix and Apple's App Store as inspiration for how to best surface the best user-generated content.



BUILDING

A HEROIC SEQUEL

MARVEL JOINS FORCES WITH DISNEY
TO CREATE AN EVEN BIGGER INFINITY



Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes

Five years ago, Disney purchased Marvel Entertainment for more than \$4.5 billion. The deal created a pop-culture powerhouse, putting characters like Mickey Mouse and Spider-Man under the same corporate letterhead. Aside from seeing merchandising crossovers like Iron Man-themed mouse ears at its theme parks, however, those two worlds have stayed largely separate.

Disney Infinity smashed the barriers between Disney's own licenses, allowing characters like Lightning McQueen to race Pirates of the Caribbean's Jack Sparrow around Cinderella's Castle. The sequel to that game, Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes, adds fan favorites like Spider-Man and Thor to the mix, through their own all-new adventures and in the user-created mayhem that is the Toy Box.

BY JEFF CORK

PLATFORM

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

STYLE

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

PUBLISHER

Disney Interactive

DEVELOPER

Avalanche Software

RELEASE

Fall



In the first iteration, the characters in Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes are hitting shelves in several ways. Players who buy the starter pack at retail get the game disc, Infinity base, a pair of Toy Box Adventures (more on those later), and the Iron Man, Thor, and Black Widow figurines. Another playset, based on Spider-Man, will also be available, along with individual figurines of characters like Captain America and Hawkeye. Comic fans might notice that the bundled characters are members of The Avengers. That's no coincidence. Unlike the first game, which packaged figures in playsets based on *The Incredibles*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and *Monsters Inc.*, *Marvel Super Heroes* includes a single, Avengers-themed adventure.

"With Infinity 1.0, our fans said it was nice that you had Jack Sparrow, Sully, and Mr. Incredible, but you couldn't play with those characters right out of the gate in a multiplayer experience," says John Vignocchi, executive producer of Disney Infinity. "Fans said, 'We'd rather have characters that right out of the box you can play multiplayer in, because that's where the game's most fun.'"

During our demo of the game we got to see The Avengers set in action, as well as an exclusive look at Spider-Man. Based on what we played it's clear that Disney and Avalanche aren't just molding a few new figurines and calling it a day. Instead, they've taken a critical look at what worked and what didn't, and are addressing some of those issues head on.



HERO UP

With a great roster comes great responsibility. While Disney Infinity featured dozens of iconic characters, many of them weren't well known for their gaming adventures. While that didn't make Avalanche's job a cakewalk, players didn't enter Infinity with preconceived notions of what Rapunzel or Jack Skellington could and couldn't do. That's a big difference from the Marvel characters, which have been regularly featured in games since the days of the Atari 2600 — for better or worse.

"Different publishers do one game around a character, and even then sometimes people struggle to get it right," Vignocchi says. "So we knew that it was a daunting task to integrate all these guys, but in a way that players

wanted to feel like Iron Man. It had to be best of breed Iron Man, it had to be best of breed Spider-Man, it had to be best of breed Thor."

Our demo begins in a tutorial mission set in Avengers Tower. Frost giants have broken into the high-tech building (the game now includes interior areas), and Captain America runs through its hallways, cleaning house along the way. Battles are functionally similar to what we saw with the first Infinity, with Cap alternating between melee attacks and long-range shield smashes through simple button presses. The giants attack in waves, but they're small (for giants) and don't provide much challenge. Mostly, the level serves as a way for players to become acclimated to concepts like combat, block-breaking,

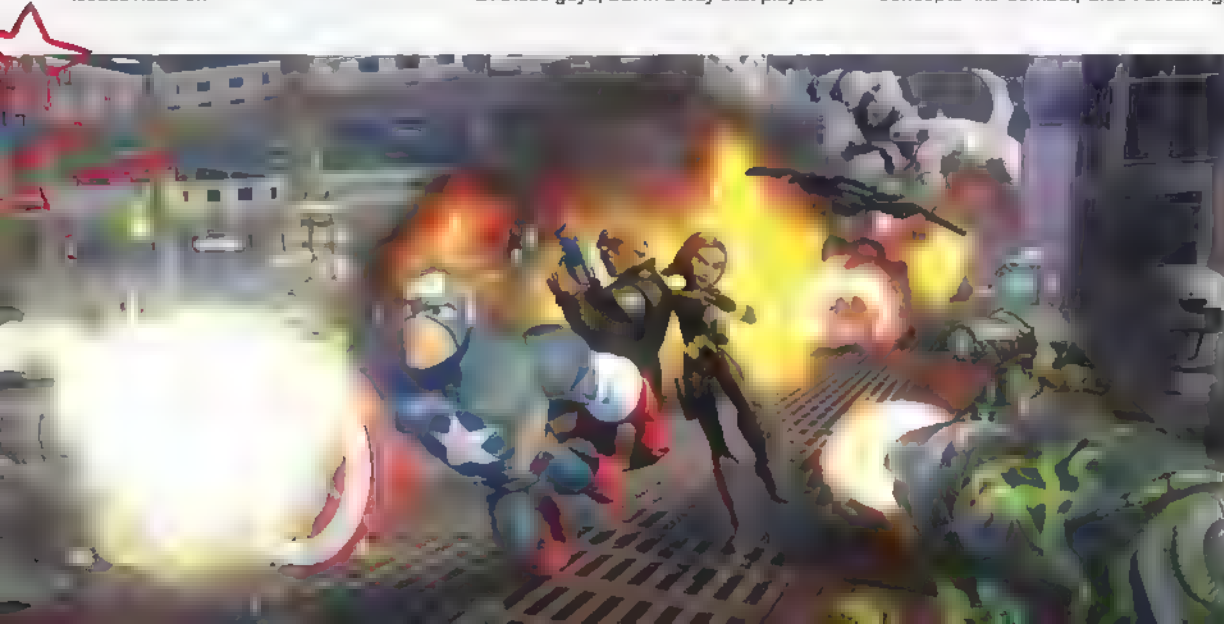
and ground-pounding attacks.

As Jarvis' automated voice guides Captain America toward the building's power core, we encounter a laser barrier. We're still in the tutorial, so finding a way to disable it isn't going to make anyone sweat, but it does show a new element that the team is incorporating into level designs.

"We added a little more pace-breaking gameplay into the game this time around," says John Blackburn, game director and Avalanche vice president. These light puzzle elements, such as breaking control panels to disable gates, are designed to give players a break from nonstop action, and give them time to appreciate the environments.

Once past the barrier, we work our way to the core. The room is teeming with enemies, and Blackburn decides to demonstrate just how powerful our heroes can be. He enters a cheat, which maxes out Cap's level to 20. His shield whirrs around, and his fists knock the giants down without much trouble. In *Marvel Super Heroes*, leveling up is about more than just increasing an arbitrary number. He presses a button, to show what he means.

"The engine went through a massive change, in that everything became stat based," Blackburn says. "Before, it was kind of like most enemies in the game had the same amount of hit points. Some were stronger than others and some required different move sets than others to defeat them, but now it's much more like, 'This character has 100 hit points, Captain America is doing this much damage, and you can actually upgrade the amount of damage he





If you're not a big Marvel fan, Disney is releasing new characters including the wicked Maleficent

does and the amount of health he has." Each character's skill tree has 40 different skills that can be upgraded, which include health pools, armor, and special abilities. When players hit the level cap of 20, they can upgrade about 30 of them. That means that players must make some decisions about how they want to play. In our demo, Captain America's shield abilities have been greatly enhanced, to the point where he's able to launch two enemies into the air and juggle them momentarily as the shield careens between the two targets. Leveling up becomes more important as players progress through the story, thanks to a new knockout system. In the first Disney Infinity, there wasn't any consequence when your character ran out of health. They'd fall apart (they're toys in the game, too), and then

reassemble themselves. Now, as with the Skylanders games, characters that are defeated during a mission are temporarily out of play. Players have to either put a new character on the base to continue or risk failing the mission. After defeating the frost-giant threat—or at least putting it on ice for a while—Blackburn moves the action outside to Manhattan. He replaces Captain America with Iron Man, and zips into the skies above the city. Just like in the movies, Tony Stark can use his suit's repulsor blasts to enter a hover (perfect for sniping enemies) or to fire off like a rocket. Characters who can't fly have other options available to them, such as a slick-looking S.H.I.E.L.D. car that enters a hover mode with the press of a button. We had a lot of fun taking the car onto rooftops and driving off buildings,

avoiding crashes at the last second by engaging the hover pads. Seeing the area from above the streets puts the city's scope into perspective. "Our largest playset in Infinity 1, from an overall footprint size, was Metroville from *The Incredibles*," Vignocchi offers for direct comparison. "Marvel Manhattan, which is what you see right here, is four times the size of that." Spider-Man's adventures take place in Manhattan, too, but in a different version of the city. For instance, Avengers Tower isn't a prominent feature of Peter Parker's world, but his employer, The Daily Bugle is. Spidey and his friends also face a different threat. Instead of marauding frost giants, he faces old foes Misterio and Green Goblin, as they work out a plot to wipe out the forces of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Two Toy Box and playsets offer different experiences, giving players the opportunity to play without rules or to enjoy more directed play. Some players wanted something that provided a little bit of both, and Avalanche is responding. "Basically, our fans and the community were saying, 'It's really fun that you guys are releasing Anna and Elsa figures, and you guys are releasing Wreck-It and Vanellope. But we really want some structured content on these characters, not just to have them play inside the Toy Box mode,'" says Disney Infinity executive producer John Vignocchi. "To make a playset is a significant investment from a time and a resource perspective, so we began brainstorming what can we make that still fulfills that promise for the fan but isn't necessarily a 30-50 man team hunkering down to create 8-10 hours' worth of content. What we decided to do was introduce structured play inside the Toy Box." The solution comes in the form of the new Toy Box Adventures, two of which are included with the Marvel Super Heroes starter pack. They both feature storylines that are tied to specific Marvel heroes, but once the game is broken any figure can join in on the action. The first is a tower-defense game, in which waves of enemies flood an arena and attempt to destroy vials containing Asgardian artifacts. If they manage to crack through their containers, it's game over. Up to four players can work to prevent this from happening. In true tower-defense style, players can use the currency they earn from defeating enemies to purchase items like turrets, spring traps, and contraptions that slow the foes down to a manageable crawl. The dungeon crawler makes use of Disney Infinity's little NPC figures. "They become a sidekick that you can imbue with powers," Vignocchi says. "My favorite is taking Anna from *Frozen* and imbuing her with fire powers, which is the antithesis of Elsa. You can choose to level them up so they have freezing abilities, they have lasers, they can shoot fire, they can also heal your character, so there are lots of different ways to do that." These two games are just the starting point for Disney Infinity. "We like the idea that, over time, we can expand Infinity to include more Toy Box games based on some of your favorite games," Vignocchi says.

WHAT IS CHANGING?

Fans of Disney Infinity will notice a few major changes in Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes. Here are some of the big ones.



POWER DISCS

"Last year, people were getting dupes after three or four packages, and that's because there were only 20 per wave," says John Blackburn, game director and VP of Avalanche Software. "We're making the waves much larger now, and there are two of them. We're also making it so you get sparks for your character when you get dupes, so you do get something for unlocking that."

NO MORE SPINS

"The spin system was not very fun," says Blackburn of the first game's randomized item-unlocking system. "You didn't get the toy that you wanted, so we revised it in 2.0. We unlock about 250 toys right out of the gate. If we detect a save file, we go and unlock another 200 or 300. The other toys you unlock based on your progression." Placing down a playset piece automatically unlocks all in-game toys associated with that playset. "We want you to feel like that playset has some value to you," Blackburn says. Additional toys are unlocked with sparks by visiting the in-game store.

SO LONG, WII

Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes is coming to Wii U, but it won't be arriving on the system's little brother. "We're dropping the Wii," says the game's executive producer, John Vignocchi. "The reason why we're doing that is because what we're trying to do with the software, the Wii is just not capable of doing."

GOODBYE, GOO

All the toys and props from Infinity 1.0 are returning to the Toy Box, except for one: the goo that shrank and expanded characters and objects. "That was a huge deal and a big budget of effort for us, but the amount of effort required to do that was astronomical and the response from fans wasn't what we were hoping for it to be, so we decided to remove that to allow us to do bigger and better things with more pieces," Vignocchi says.

The Spider-Man playset comes with three figures – Spider-Man, Nick Fury, and Nova – and a playset piece shaped like Spidey's logo being swallowed by Venom. In another new feature, some characters make the leap from one playset to another; they're not all tethered by their license.

"It didn't make sense in Disney, because Buzz Lightyear would never go to Pirates of the Caribbean, but in Marvel they can and often do crossover stories," Vignocchi says. "We didn't just want to slam that in; what we wanted to do was create specific content for those characters that made sense thematically to the story we're trying to do. So Nova was part of Ultimate Spider-Man and will cross over into The Avengers and have exclusive missions for that character, and exclusive content reasons why you're going to play as that character inside of that playset."

In addition to Nova moonlighting in The Avengers set, Hulk takes on a few missions in Spider-Man's world. Spidey can use the help, judging from what we saw. Venom and the symbiote have taken over in a big way, with slug-like creatures popping from beneath the asphalt and infecting townspeople. The infected might not be as powerful as Venom himself, but they give Spidey a decent challenge. He fights back by encasing foes with webs, smacking them around, and attaching a chunk of concrete to a web and whipping it like a hammer.

While his combat prowess is on par with the rest of the heroes we saw, what sets Spider-Man apart from the rest is how he moves through the world. His web-slinging abilities have been a big part of past Spider-Man games, and it seems like each one has taken a different tack. Avalanche had

several goals with their interpretation of the hero.

"There's features that we all wanted to capture," Blackburn says. "Number one, the feeling of freedom and what that feels like. Since we're a family game, we spent a lot of time thinking of what we want to do the left and right thing or whatever else. We really came back to, as a kid, you want to be able to do this easily."

They landed on something that's simple, but effective. Once airborne, webs appear over Spidey, even if there aren't technically any anchors above him; like Blackburn says, working in the Toy Box was a priority, and sometimes players are tooling around in giant, empty areas. Our hands-on with the hero was proof that they nailed the sense of being able to just swing, gain momentum, and experience the exhilarating sense of zipping through the sky.



Merida is joining the cast, too. She'll give Hawthorne a run for his money.



THE TOY BOX

Avalanche had big hopes for Disney Infinity's Toy Box, and it looks like that enthusiasm paid off. According to Avalanche's metrics, players spend about 60 percent of their time in the creative sandbox, building their own adventures, downloading and playing through other people's creations, and just messing around. The next iteration of the Toy Box looks like it's going to give players even more reasons to open it up.

One of the biggest things (and something that should give parents a reason to exhale) is that character and power disc that you purchased in the first game is compatible with Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes. So, when your friend decides to start menacing the townspeople in your Toy Box, you can pop down your Rapunzel and whack his slimy head with a frying pan. Those older figures now can level up to 20, and players can upgrade them in the higher levels as well.

All of the things you unlocked in the first game carry over, too (with one exception, see "What Is Changing?" sidebar), so you won't have to go through the rigmarole of unlocking everything all over again. The goal here is to give people the tools they need to create stuff as quickly as possible. That means making the opening a little less daunting for beginners.

"I loved our intro last year, but once we then set you into the Toy Box, there was this response from people like, 'I don't know what to do,'" Blackburn says. "We just wanted you to dink around. Here's a gun, here are some collectibles and stuff, here's a car, go do what you want to do. With this year, we've put a bunch of the little townspeople in there that give you missions, and they're a help system, too. It's not a story, but it's structured play. It's not 'accept a mission or not,' it's 'What do you want to know about?'"



The S.H.I.E.L.D. car has a slight hover mode, that lets it reach the tops of buildings.

One of the coolest things in the new game comes in the form of some powerful new auto-generation tools. Say you want to build a woodland area, with a giant tree. Place a special trunk piece into your world, and a gigantic tree forms before your eyes – with branches, leafy canopies, platforms, and rickety bridges connecting it all together. It's built from smaller components that you already have access to. The tool simply builds something for you in seconds. From there, players can tweak the creation or use it as is. Avalanche calls these tools brushes, and they have them for building cities, castles, and more. After defining a starting and ending point, Blackburn conjured up something you'd see in a platforming game, with conveyor belts, swinging hammers, and other obstacles. An entire Toy Box world can be generated based on themes, and the toolset will

build a world and populate it with enemies and collectibles.

Some new tools make game creation easier for both experts and novices. Avalanche has built in some premade game archetypes, such as an item-collection minigame and a pinball table. Creators can also add win parameters and results screens to their own games.

More sophisticated creators have access to tools that allow them to build RPGs, which is something the previous game didn't support. "You can download a Toy Box now, and the creator can say when you come into this Toy Box, 'Here are the five weapons that I want you to have, or that are dropped,'" Vignocchi says. "You can create a game that has an economy, and then you can go in and buy things and price things."

They can also use new doors to connect up to 10 Toy Boxes. "You could create a dungeon from Zelda," Vignocchi

says. "You put doors in the edges of your Toy Box, and when you walk through there you go on to the next Toy Box, which is a whole other room with a whole bunch of enemy types and that kind of thing."

"Most people aren't going to use these things," Blackburn adds, "but the people who do are going to have so much more control over the games they create."

Blackburn says he looks to Minecraft and wants to make sure that his team is giving fans and creators what they want. "That modding community is what keeps that game fresh and vibrant," he says.

Vignocchi says that fan-first mentality spills beyond the Toy Box's borders, into Infinity itself. "It's like we finally found our way at Disney Interactive with Infinity, and now it's about keeping our fans as happy as we can." ♦



Venom has the same basic skills as Spider-Man, but he's not quite as civilized. Go figure.



ENDLESS POS



SIBILITY

NO MAN'S SKY

Last December, No Man's Sky made waves throughout the gaming community following its debut on Spike's VGX award show. The teaser promised a completely procedurally generated galaxy down to the atom, all waiting to be explored. In-game footage showcased a taste of the environments, including an underwater area brimming with sea creatures and plant life, a beach with red grass and trees, mysterious futuristic pillars jutting out of rock formations, a massive derelict freighter wreck atop snow-covered mountains, and huge sandworms slithering across a dusty desert. Quick flashes of pilotable ships showed inspiration from Star Wars' X-Wing to triangular stealth bombers. The most striking footage took place within the cockpit as the ship took off and soared up into the clouds and straight into outer space with no visible loading. The black expanse is full of dogfights, perilous asteroid fields, space station commerce, and large-scale fleet battles.

It's hard to come away from the ambitious trailer and concept and not be brimming with excitement. But then the practical considerations come. How is this from the same developer as the arcadey, motorcycle stunt-racing Joe Danger series? How can a team of four people (since expanded to a whopping seven) handle creating a living, breathing, explorable galaxy? We spoke extensively with Hello Games' managing director Sean Murray about the team's atypical approach to designing No Man's Sky, and dug out details on how the game will play — all on the eve of what will be the company's most important E3 showing yet.

by Bryan Vore

► PLATFORM
TBA

► STYLE
Player Action/
Adventure

► PUBLISHER
Hello Games

► DEVELOPER
Hello Games

► RELEASE
TBA

CONCEPTION


The concept for No Man's Sky has been kicking around in Sean Murray's mind for years. However, when he formed Hello Games alongside three fellow industry veterans, an inconceivably large, sci-fi, roguelike, space exploration game was not a realistic first project. Instead the team would put everything they had into a more manageable game: stunt biker Joe Danger. Murray even sold his house to pay for development costs. The first game debuted on PlayStation Network in 2010 with little promotion. Several 9-plus reviews (including *Game Informer's* 9.0) and plenty of positive word of mouth propelled it to success and paved the way for several sequels, spin-offs, and special edition ports on consoles, PC, and iOS.

In early 2013, Murray decided it was finally time to get things rolling on his dream project. He and three others started development on No Man's Sky while other team members focused on Joe Danger Infinity for iOS. By the end of the year, they found themselves releasing a trailer on a worldwide stage at VGX.

"We've had a weird experience where, I guess in our minds, we were working on some sort of niche game

that would only appeal to us, and then we showed it at the VGXs and had this really amazing reaction," Murray says. "Don't get me wrong, you work really hard and you hope the people are going to like it, but we're an indie studio. We just thought we'd be on some sort of montage of indie games at the end. The trailer went down really well, and people were super excited about it. It's brilliant. It's amazing. But it's really scary as well. It's a huge amount of pressure on this really small studio."

With all the excitement came skepticism. Looking through the reactions, Murray saw that every tenth comment or so would be to the effect of "I don't think these guys can pull it off. Their team's too small." Even at VGX, Murray watched former Epic design director Cliff Bleszinski answer a question about his ideal team size when he starts a new studio, if it could be something extremely small like on No Man's Sky. "He was like, 'Those four people are going to be dead by the time that game comes out. They're going to be bleeding out of their eyeballs,'" Murray remembers. "And I was just waiting to do my interview and thought, 'Oh, Cliff B thinks we're going to be dead.'"



Resources are clearly represented as glowing cubes. Players will track them down with scanners, shoot to collect them, and spend them on upgrades back at the ship.

CREATION

While No Man's Sky is an incredible undertaking, Hello Games doesn't plan on dying anytime soon. Through a unique marriage of art and programming, the team is able to populate a galaxy with intriguing worlds that don't require a time-intensive hand-created touch. Instead of programming rocks, trees, and water for a single area, the code is always built with the entire universe in mind. The artists create loads of concept art inspired primarily by classic sci-fi novel covers (seen on the opening spread), and the programmers comb through it looking for details like flowers at the base of trees and waves dissipating on the shore of a lake. When they decide on a new detail to include, they can enter it into the code and it'll show up in the appropriate spots throughout the whole galaxy.

"Initially it takes way longer, but then the results are really good," Murray says. "There's this massive payoff where the lakes look better everywhere in the universe. Or if you manage to program in the ability to have waterfalls then suddenly there are waterfalls dotted throughout the universe where they should be. Once you get into it, it's this really different way of making a game." The team is then able to explore the game world and discover a specific location, like a colorful jungle with a nearby planet looming in the sky that happens to nearly match the original concept art.

This specific search is by no means easy. One of the core elements of No Man's Sky is providing a perspective on the vastness of space. "If you take our planet and there's like seven billion of us on it we still haven't seen everything on our planet," Murray says. "A planet is way bigger than what you think. A solar system is way bigger than what most people comprehend and then a galaxy and a universe is just so much bigger than [that]. And that's what we want to give people a feeling for." Even if the game sells beyond the team's wildest dreams to millions of players, he estimates that everyone combined will only discover a small fraction of the immense galaxy.

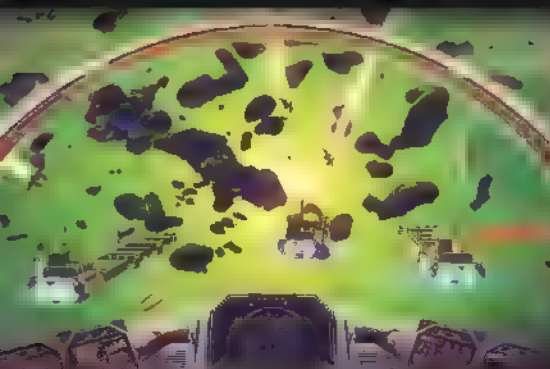
THE MISSION

Every player starts at a different point on the outside edge of the galaxy. The story details are still a secret, but we know this unmapped frontier was made to be explored, and adventurers are encouraged to journey toward the center where a mysterious black hole awaits. An

Internet-connected galactic map compiles every known celestial body that any player has discovered and chosen to upload the data for all to see (your personal tag will forever be credited for the find). Unexplored stars and planets appear with no name or details, inviting risky exploration.

Players venture out for improved weapons, scanners, space suits, and ships. While there are no specific classes, adventurers can tailor their skills to a specific playstyle or blend in a bit of everything. If you're mostly interested in combat, you can shoot down pirates and other known villain factions to earn money and invest in fighter ships with more defense and firepower. Players who want to branch out and discover new worlds should buy science craft with longer hyperdrive range and speed, and suits that allow exploration in toxic atmospheres or longer underwater time. Space truckers should invest in bulky cargo ships so they can haul tons of planetside resources to trading posts and spaceports.

All ships are procedurally built as well, but you can't customize them currently. The idea is that you seek out ships with your preferred look and stats at space stations. Murray adds players can scan the game's patterns and find that every Tuesday a really rare ship is on sale at this particular station, for example. People could start up ship trading websites to map out the complex web of what's on sale where. "Some of them are super rare. Some of them are really common," Murray says. "And that makes the whole thing more interesting and more real. When you see an interesting ship and you think, 'I must have that. I didn't know that existed,' there's real value to that."



TELLING YOUR OWN STORY

Even though the main thrust of the game is to progress toward the center of the galaxy, players are never forced to do anything on this track. They can follow whims from system to system or even spend the whole game fully exploring their starting planet.

The closest gameplay comparison of this journey is a roguelike. Traditionally, these involve venturing through a dungeon that randomly generates each room on the fly. You gather loot, power yourself up, and inevitably die and get sent back to the beginning and the dungeon changes again.

"We're turning that on its head a bit and generating all of the dungeons that could ever exist and then stitching them all together," Murray explains. "Each planet is almost like a room. It's like a stepping stone along that journey."

Due to the sheer number and variety of these planets, Murray admits that there will be a significant amount of content that even the developer won't see before release. How exactly will you interact with all of the content before you?

"What we want to do is make a game that when I describe what I've just been doing, for it to sound like I'm reading the plot of a science fiction novel," Murray says. "In the same way for DayZ when people talk about what just happened to them in the game it sounds like the plot of *The Walking Dead*. To me, that classic sci-fi is about entering a solar system, scanning the planet, seeing which ones are habitable, what class of planet it is, maybe checking the galactic map, seeing what information is already out there about them, going down, discovering that planet, sharing that information, then finding that there are certain life forms that are really dangerous that you didn't expect, which is that classic Star Trek thing."

Dying in these dangerous situations won't send you back to the edge of the galaxy, but it does have its consequences. If you're out on foot looting and slaying deadly creatures and end up going down, you'll regenerate at your ship, but lose everything you've collected since the last check-in. In a similar fashion, if your ship is blown up you'll lose it along with everything it was carrying.

"That's the feeling we want throughout, that you're making decisions and that those decisions have consequences," Murray says. "And that is the thing that I think that games like DayZ give really well, which is that feeling of, 'I just made a stupid mistake there, but this feels quite real and I'm never going to do that again.' It has meaning. And I think a lot of games that you play now, they handhold the player to such an extent that everyone who plays the game has the exact same experience. Like, literally, we all look at the exact same thing at the same moment. We have the same cutscene. We basically die exactly where they want us to die and survive exactly how long they want us to survive. It's very similar for everyone, and I love some of those games, but we want to have something that feels a lot more real in terms of the experience."

Risk of death heightens the closer players get to the center of the galaxy, but even once they accomplish this goal the game doesn't end. Murray says there's more content beyond that, but a lot of people will be happy to achieve this and be able to say they've done it.

TO THE HORIZON

By the time you read this, No Man's Sky will have debuted an all-new trailer and a realtime gameplay demo at E3. We got a look at the video and, even in its rough early state, it's full of intriguing new locations and creatures that we can't wait to see fully formed. Hello Games is hoping this next big showing of the game will convert some of the online naysayers doubting the studio's capabilities.

"We actually play the game all the time and so you think 'No, it is real, and it's here, and we're playing it. That's a silly comment,'" Murray says. "But there is another element where it just makes you want to make it—to just get it out there. I want to get it finished so I don't have to answer any more questions. If people are excited about it, that's kind of it for us. That's the naive indie developer talking. I just want to go make the game and do nothing else." ♦



Hello Games hopes No Man's Sky's procedurally generated planets will appeal to YouTubers looking for unique content that viewers would likely never see in their own game





Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor

Beast-riding into new lands

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

► Style
1-Player Action

► Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive
Entertainment

► Developer
Monolith Productions
(PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC)/
Behaviour Interactive
(PlayStation 3, Xbox 360)

► Release
October 7

In the run-up to E3, few games have seen the groundswell of enthusiasm Shadow of Mordor is enjoying. The enthusiasm comes as many in the gaming press have gotten hands-on with the project, valuing that both the rhythm-based combat and ambitious nemesis system that governs enemy behavior are both heading in good directions. On top of that, the chance to ride powerful creatures into battle can't help but engender some excitement.

The new demo sees hero Talion venturing into a new area of Mordor – the Sea of Númen. Where the previous locale of Udun closely matched most Tolkien fans' visions of Mordor, this new area presents a different vision of Sauron's land. "Udun is a little bit more what fans might project for Mordor," says art director Philip Straub. "It's desolate, dark, and gritty. Númen feels like another portion of Middle-earth. It's got green grass, and trees, and it's got this nice coastline element to it. It feels much more like a wilder natural environment."

With its fishing village and more lush vegetation, it's a glimpse into a part of Mordor that plays an important role in the war effort. "This

area is where Sauron's forces are feeding the war machine," Straub says. "The land is being farmed, and the land is being used up." Talion encounters the humans who once controlled this land, who have since been driven from power by Sauron's forces. The queen of the coast, Marwen (see sidebar), tasks Talion with confronting and defeating the warchief behind the usurpation, and our dark hero is set loose to freely wander and accomplish the task.

The demo makes good on the promise of open exploration and freedom. No set order dictates the way that Talion brings down his targets, and increased research before a kill gives him expanded options for defeating a high-ranking Uruk. Each enemy soldier has his own personality, visual style, and tasks in the world. These differentiations are widely described as flairs, and help to assure that Uruk orcs you encounter feel distinct. "Flair is an accentuation of the personality," Straub explains. "It is relative to your interactions with the uruks in the game, and relative to their roles and personalities, and how they evolve. One of our personalities is a scholar, which is kind of humorous, because he's an Uruk. As he's evolving in the game, and based

on your interactions, he gets these visuals where he has this purse full of parchment." The beastmaster flair includes costuming pieces built of caragor pets, and is often encountered with creatures nearby to aid in combat. The dung collector is a filthy but necessary part of the Mordor war effort, and his demeanor and visual style matches his unfortunate profession. The bloodlicker flair speaks to the horrifying and dark nature of the uruks; covered in blood, he taunts Talion about the terrible things he plans to do to him.

Talion's combat abilities remain a rhythmic but lethal variation on the Batman Arkham games. The newest feature on display involves his ability to dominate the less intelligent beasts that live in Mordor. "Not only can you dominate the uruks, you can dominate the caragors, and ride them," Straub says. "Like a horse, but a way faster horse that can climb up on anything. It can climb up cliffs, architecture – anything. It offers an incredibly diverse set of gameplay that is going to be really exciting." The ranger can ride a caragor into the midst of an enemy force and dish out destruction in multiple directions; as the caragor slashes one foe, Talion



Shifting Shadow

The team at Monolith is expending great effort to make Mordor come alive, both as a place and as a manifestation of Sauron's will as the great evil awakens to the world. "The levels that we have evolve over time as far as weather, and day and night affect how you engage with the world," says art director Philip Straub. Each mission offers crafted experiences meant to evoke an emotional response. "When the story was created, I went through, relative to the tone and beats of the story, and called out particular times of day and weather events to reinforce notions of horror, fear, happiness, or reveals of something new," Straub says. As the game continues, Sauron's influence is often strongly felt through the way weather manifests around Talon.

hacks another with his sword. Monolith has also revealed plans to let Talon dominate the gaugs — massive trolls that tower over most enemies. As a gaug lumbers into combat with Talon riding upon his back, the creature can devastate entire packs of Uruks, even as its rider lets loose one arrow after another at more distant foes.

Even with the introduction of Marwen, many questions remain unanswered about the storyline and other characters that are a part of Talon's trek through the land of shadow. However, it's heartening to find that the core game systems that Monolith has been promising feel as good to play as originally presented. With Peter Jackson's third Hobbit movie hitting just a few months after *Shadow of Mordor*, it's going to be a big year for Tolkien fiction fans. Our early time with the game has us hopeful this new direction for the video game arm of the franchise will be worthy of the series' legacy. » Matt Miller



Queen Of The Shore

Very little is known about the other characters that play a major role in *Shadow of Mordor*, so the reveal of Marwen is significant. Marwen is a human character who once reigned as the queen of the shore by the Sea of Numen. "Her tribe was originally pretty well off," says art director Philip Straub. "Most of their influence was derived from the farming of the land and the money associated with that. That tribe has been displaced because of the return of Sauron. They're now a small group that is migrating and moving around to survive." Marwen is an apothecary and alchemist, rooted in ancient traditions of superstition. While she's a human character, just one glance at her art is reminiscent of images of Talon when possessed, and the gameplay demo with Marwen implies the same. It seems likely that Talon isn't the only figure in Mordor who holds an ancient wrath within.



Sunset Overdrive

Insomniac splashes into the open-world genre



Platform
Xbox One

Style
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

Developer
Insomniac Games

Release Date
Fall

From snarky flying dragons to gritty alien invasions, Insomniac Games has explored a lot of different ground over the past two decades. The studio's fast-paced open-world title, *Sunset Overdrive*, is yet another foray into a new space for Insomniac, yet it feels like something the developer has been building toward since the beginning.

Sunset Overdrive sticks out from the open-world pack with bright colors, a weapon wheel filled with creative tools of destruction, and a plethora of traversal options. Conveniently placed power lines, railings, cars, awnings, and more let you swing, grind, wall-run, and bounce across the sprawling city. Linking together grinds and accurate jumps evokes memories of the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* glory days. Weaving together a chain of flashy moves across the cityscape is not only fun, but it builds up a metering system dubbed the Style Level that unlocks additional powers and weapon ability. New amps are crafted or earned by completing main quests and side missions.

The weapon variety in *Sunset Overdrive* lives up to the Insomniac pedigree of goofy guns. The TNTedy launches a stuffed

bear strapped to a stick of dynamite, which destroys packs of enemies. A fireworks gun fires a salvo of bottle rockets, which are great for taking out crowds of weak threats. One set-and-forget weapon pops out balloons with handguns attached, which automatically blast nearby enemies. All these weapons are selectable via a big weapon wheel, and aiming feels reminiscent of *Ratchet & Clank's* from-the-hip gunplay. The reduced emphasis on precision and accuracy frees up players to focus on traversal and attacking groups rather than individuals.

The enemies you fight in *Sunset Overdrive* are the product of an energy drink launch party gone wrong. *Overcharge Delirium XT* has turned the citizens of *Sunset City* into violent, soda-infused mutants. You are working cleanup detail during the launch party, but the recent apocalyptic scenario turns your dead-end janitorial duties into free-roaming fun. The overdosed mutant nuisances attack in packs, exploding into pools of orange liquid. More powerful bad guys have merged with hardware like leaf blowers and construction equipment. Smaller mutants even ride one large enemy type, who hurls his underlings at the player.

Groups of enemies roaming the streets are a consistent threat, but some story missions

lead to larger boss encounters. For example FizzCo, the company behind the outbreak, is transmitting advertisements and misinformation via an antenna array high above the city. In one mission, players must climb up one of these metallic towers to disable it, grinding along rails and bouncing on satellites along the way. This section culminates in a face-off with a huge balloon version of the FizzCo mascot, Fizzy. Bouncing across a series of satellites sends out a shockwave that stuns Fizzy, leaving him susceptible to fire. The mascot gradually erupts in flames as he takes jabs at the player like, "Get ready to die, a--hole!"

Speaking of curse words, don't let *Sunset Overdrive's* colorful, fun aesthetic fool you. This is no kid's game. Insomniac's irreverent story makes fun of big businesses' influence on our culture, and lets the cursing and sexual innuendo fly. The crass humor that's been lurking behind the *Ratchet & Clank* series for years has finally been unleashed, and the developer is pulling no punches.

Sunset Overdrive's unique traversal, colorful open world, and host of awesome weapons make it an enticing offering for Xbox One owners. Insomniac isn't revealing specifics about multiplayer, but confirms that playing with friends is part of the fun. **—Tim Turi**



The Sims 4

Creating more realistic lives with plenty of refinement

Platform
PC
Style
1-Player Simulation
Developer
Maxis
Release
Fall

After five years since The Sims 3's release and several expansions later, the franchise is ready for new lifeblood. In my recent hands-on session, I discovered that while The Sims 4 is maintaining the series' comfortable gameplay, it's also providing the most accessible and realistic interactions to date.

Creating sims is easier than ever. Gone are sliders to make minor modifications to appearances. Now with a click of the button, you can grab any feature on your sim and adjust it, akin to sculpting them like clay. The change allows players to add in specific

touches, like having a smaller upper lip, adjusting pupil size, or changing their posture. You can even select the way they walk, giving them swagger. The selections for appearance and clothing have been improved greatly. "We're going to be shipping The Sims 4 base game with the most content ever when it comes to objects and clothing for your sims to wear," says producer Ryan Vaughan.

Besides crafting more realistic looking sims, Maxis also strove to make them feel more natural; if a conversation is going poorly, expect their body language and facial expressions to reflect it. "Hundreds of new facial

expressions are tied to your sims' emotional states," Vaughan says. "You're going to know how they're feeling just by looking at them and the idios that's also represented in the UI."

Moods even extend to the gameplay. Depending on how your sim is feeling, extra interactions become available. For example, if your sim is in a flirty mood, they might be bold enough to strike a seductive pose. "Your sim's emotional state allows you to do other interactions that you couldn't do in the other emotional state," Vaughan says.

You have some control over emotional states; socializations, object interactions,





The Gallery: A Better Way To Share Your Creations

Maxis realized not enough people used their online sharing system due to it being outside of the game via their website, so for the Sims 4 it is introducing The Gallery – a way for players to share their creations straight from the game. “We know that there were over 500 million downloads on The Sims 3, and that’s actually done by a real small percentage of our players,” says producer Ryan Vaughan. Vaughan thinks the easier process will invite more players to share and download. “We’re hoping that having this gallery experience integrated directly into the game is going to open up the creativity and open up the ability for our players to share with each other in a really easy way,” he says. Just imagine all the celebrity look-a-likes and famous landmarks just waiting to be created and shared.

and environment can influence mood. Some fans expressed worry this might be a frustrating obstacle, and Maxis is working to make it a fun and balanced part of the gameplay. “This is meant to expand your game and not give you another chore to do,” Vaughan says. “We’re making sure your sims aren’t bouncing around from emotion states too quickly. Depending on how you play, you only see one, two, or three throughout the day.”

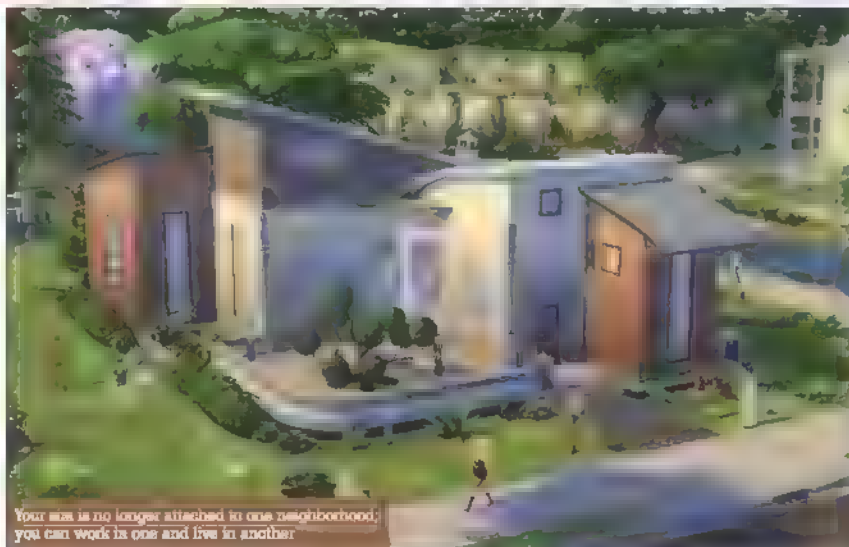
The mood shifts felt natural. I was alerted whether discussions were pleasant, awkward, or sour. The game also had options to try to change the course of conversation if it’s going downhill. Sims also converse freely in groups. You no longer need to select an option to get a group together, as they automatically engage in group conversations and activities when in proximity.

Two new relationship bars now exist; one indicating your friendship state and another showcasing your romance level. Unlike past games, you can now be enemies with someone, but also be romantically involved. Conversations are also much more focused on a sim’s personality. If your sim likes writing, expect to have the option to discuss favorite writers.

New careers have also been added with more branching paths, unlocking items as you advance. “If you’re an astronaut, you’re going to play through that career and be able to unlock a really hi-tech desk or broken satellites and use them in your house,” Vaughan says. “You can decorate and interact with them. It’s all about really surfacing that sim’s personality and making who they are really real to you as a player.”

Every sim has his or her own main aspiration, like becoming a master painter. A system called whims generates short-term goals, which function similarly to The Sims 3’s wish system. “Some are easy and some are more difficult,” Vaughan says. “[They’re] really dependent on your sim’s personality and characteristics based on your emotional state.”

Maxis is also working on improving its A.I. in several ways. Not only do sims walk in natural paths and can go up the stairs more



Your sim is no longer attached to one neighborhood; you can work in one and live in another.

than one at a time, but they also remember interactions. When I played, I chatted someone up at the bar. The next day he stopped by my house to continue what we started. “[We] finally got our sims to a place where they’re feeling natural and you’re not having to babysit them and they feel more fluid,” Vaughan says.

Additionally, Build Mode has been refined, making building smoother overall. For The Sims 4, Maxis has a motto “the builder always wins.” If you want to expand a room, the game automatically adjusts the furniture in the other rooms to accommodate the change. If you choose to add windows, the game shows you the best placement for them. You can even move entire rooms with a click of a button, keeping all the furniture. You don’t have to build every room from scratch either. Not only can you choose different room shapes, but you have an option to use stylized rooms already built with furniture in place. Previously, I never got into building because it was so time-consuming, but I found myself more willing to experiment due to the accessible tools.

The Sims 4 definitely plays more smoothly,

fixing a lot of the series’ needless obstacles and flaws. “It just feels like The Sims should have always been [this] way,” Vaughan says. Time will tell how the more complex emotion system fares, but right now it looks like it’s adding a splash more personality than we’ve seen in previous iterations.

» Kimberley Wallace



Maxis listened to fan feedback and provided more options than ever for sim creation.



Evolve

New hunters join the chase

» Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» Genre
1-Player Shooter
(5-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
Turtle Rock Studios

» Release
October 21

Evolve has redefined the thrill of its hunt with four new characters that must coordinate their attacks to bring down a player-controlled morphing monster. Like developer Turtle Rock's previous *Left 4 Dead*, teamwork and communication are key. But unlike that game, the characters and their loadouts and special abilities are what set each session apart. We recently spent time with the newly unveiled characters in a new map — The Dam — and found each of the hunters were distinct and enjoyable in their own right.

The new map is notable for its mix of tricky desert canyon terrain and the dam's industrial plant, whose generators are a tasty objective for whomever takes the role of the monster. Finding the monster is made more difficult by the cliffs and cave passages of the location. All the hunters have jet packs to ascend the sheer rock faces, but these work on rechargeable fuel that can run out while you're in mid-burn. Thus, it's very important that hunters not get separated in their haste to track the monster.

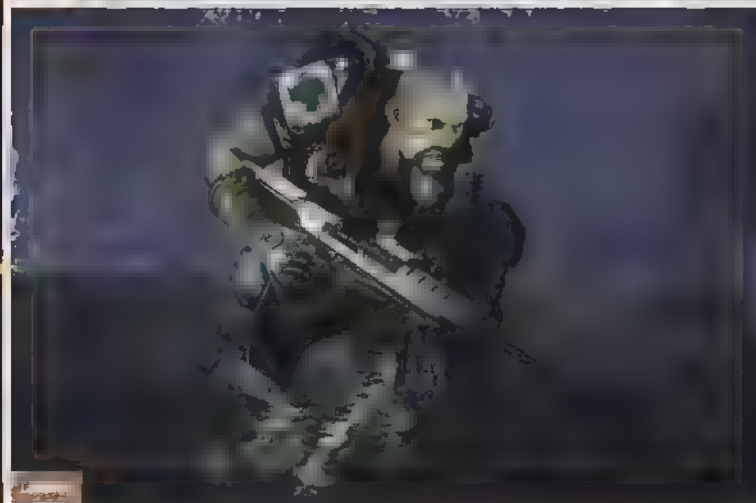
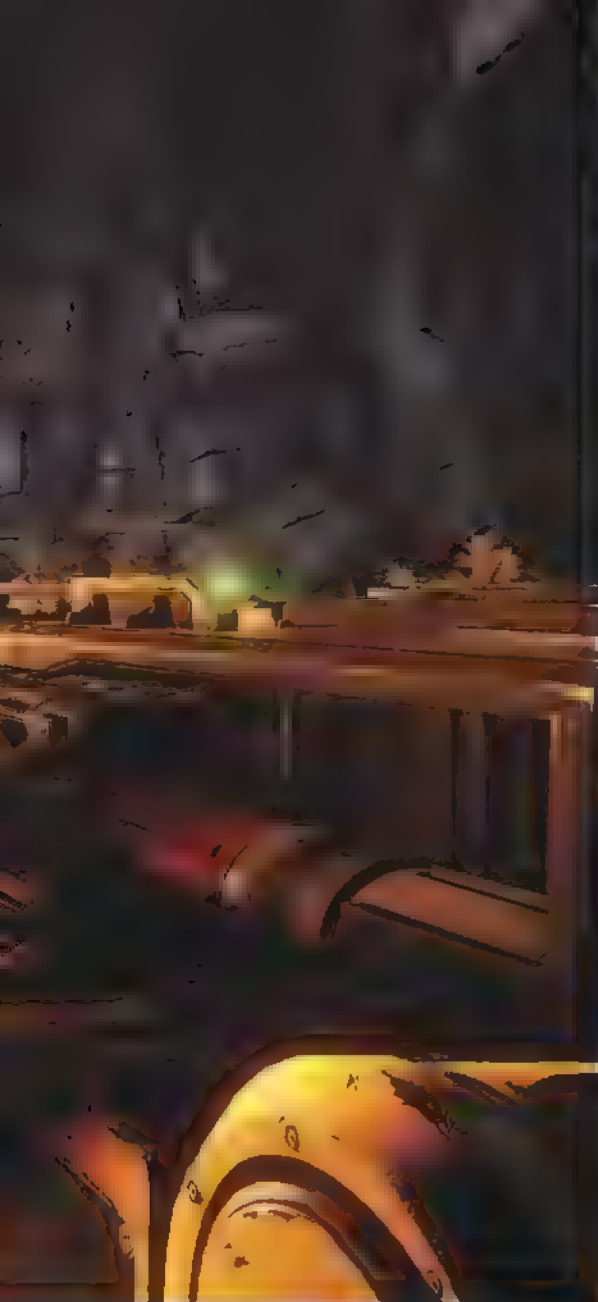
The monster isn't the only dangerous lifeform in *Evolve*. Numerous times I had to fight off Dune Beetles or worse, like the

Megamouths, deadly stationary plants that feast on careless hunters who get too close. The map's wildlife doesn't just impact hunters. Whomever plays that monster competes with animals like the Dune Beetles for food in the map.

After tracking the monster's footprints and engaging the beast, some members of our party are easily killed before we all get a handle on how best to play our hunters (see sidebar). Only with some measure of party coordination — attacking the monster so it can't focus on any one hunter or objective — do we stand a chance against it. Overall, the ebb and flow of the battle is tense but fair. Several times the party is reduced to a single member who frantically tries to stay alive until the dropship respawns the others.

This latest set of new hunters is only the beginning. The game has over a dozen maps, more hunters with their own weapons and abilities, more monsters, and different modes (only Hunt mode has been discussed so far) to bolster the experience. "We were really trying to fulfill that goal of at least close to an infinitely replayable game," says Turtle Rock co-studio head Phil Robb. » Matthew Kato





The Fall Army

Maggie (Trapper class)

► This Trapper comes with an extremely useful pet – Daisy. Daisy tracks the monster, so whenever you're unsure of where it is, follow Daisy. She can also revive teammates, since she counts as one of the party when she's alive, the monster hasn't met its kill objective. Maggie herself can use Harpoon Traps. These can be planted in the ground to pin the monster in place for a short period of time.

Lazarus (Medic class)

► Unlike Val, the previously announced Medic, Lazarus isn't as good at healing hurt hunters as he is at reviving them from the dead. Thus, if you are killed, don't instantly hit the respawn button if there's a chance Lazarus can get to you in time. Lazarus also has a personal invisibility cloak that aids his support abilities.

Hyde (Assault class)

► Hyde's flamethrower deals the most damage of any weapon in the game but it also has the shortest range. Not just about firepower, Hyde also has a personal shield that makes him invulnerable for a short time.

Bucket (Support class)

► A robot, Bucket can remove his head and use it as an aerial drone that can be replaced if destroyed. He also packs a punch with a guided missile launcher and stationary sentry guns. Finally, he can cloak the entire party if they are close enough.



Batman: Arkham Knight

The Batmobile is a true Utility vehicle

» Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive
Entertainment

» Developer
Rocksteady Studios

2015

As we revealed in our Arkham Knight cover story (issue 252), the game introduces the Batmobile – a game changer that forced developer Rocksteady Games to alter the entire world of Gotham and how the player interacts with it. In our first feature we told you how its mere existence transformed the city's layout (even necessitating further adaptation like Batman's chain grapples), and spoke to the open-world format. Now the Batmobile itself is changing, and the game and its world with it.

The Batmobile can be transformed between two modes at any time with the press of a button. Its normal car form, pursuit mode (complete with afterburners) can be switched into battle mode – a transformation that turns it into a highly mobile tank. We played a section of the second chapter, introducing us to the Batmobile's new form and all its uses.

Scarecrow has taken control of Ace Chemicals and is using it in his plans to detonate his Fear neurotoxin bomb. Five workers are trapped inside – workers who might know where Scarecrow and the bomb are. Batman meets Commissioner Gordon at the gates outside the plant, but before they can enter, Arkham Knight shows up with a small army, blowing up the bridge leading into the complex.

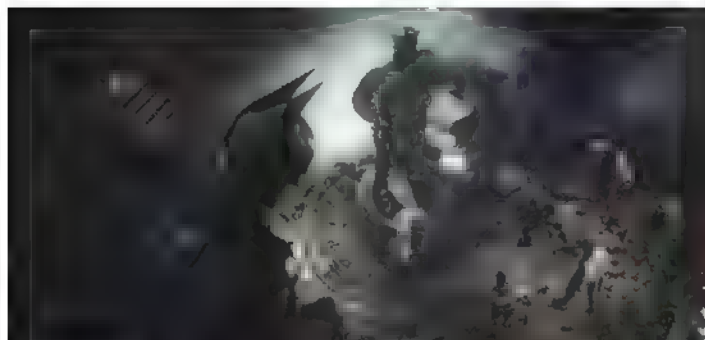
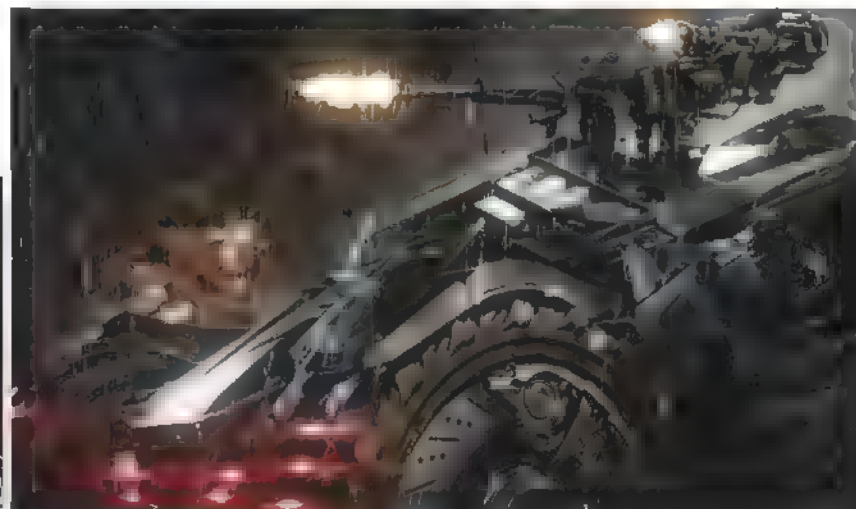
After the Knight takes off, Batman asks Oracle to ID the villain, but all she can find is his name and that his forces were seen training in Venezuela. Batman doesn't know a lot about the Arkham Knight, but the Knight already has an axe to grind with Batman. "Your vengeance will come," Scarecrow promises his lieutenant.

In the course of rescuing the workers, Batman makes full use of both Batmobile modes. Battle mode comes with a powerful machine gun and two types of cannon fire – a regular mortar shot and a charged barrage shot for armored targets. Unlike a tank, however, the battle mode also has a quick evade that shuffles the vehicle from side to side.

Even when Batman is on foot and away from the Batmobile, it's useful. It can be controlled remotely, allowing Batman to solve puzzles. In one sequence, we use the vehicle's grapple winch to pull up an inactive elevator car. It can also be used to transport people in its containment unit – allies and villains.

After finding a tied-up worker, Batman is cornered by the Arkham Knight and a few of his soldiers. The Arkham Knight knows some of Batman's secrets, telling his unit to avoid shooting the hero in his chest insignia – the strongest part of his suit. The Arkham Knight clearly relishes his anonymity, promising revenge and hinting at some as-yet-unstated motivation. While he goes, Batman remotely controls the Batmobile to a nearby location and shoots out its riot suppressor, stunning his enemies and allowing Batman to escape. When the vehicle is nearby it can also be used as part of melee finishes.

Talking to the rescued worker, Batman finds out Scarecrow has enough supplies to create a Fear toxin bomb big enough to cover the entire Eastern seaboard. We didn't get to stop Scarecrow before the demo ended, but with the powerful Batmobile at our side, we're ready to take on whatever he and his cronies throw at us. » **Matthew Kato**





Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham

Taking superheroes into space

Lego Batman 3 picks up right where the last one left off, but that doesn't mean it's exactly the same. Lego vets TT Games are making some effective changes to broaden the experience.

Instead of building a suit changing station like in previous Batman titles, you can switch to any suits you've unlocked via the radial gadget wheel. The game offers plenty of new suits as well. Robin's illumination suit and Batman's sensor suit expose otherwise hidden areas of the environment, and Batman is also getting a space suit for flight in the vacuum of space. During a demo on the Justice League's Watchtower, Cyborg used the gadget wheel to quickly transform into everything from a washing machine to a giant mech.

The demo picks up in the third level of the game, where the Justice League mobilizes

to stop the Legion of Doom from taking over the Watchtower. However, TT Games wants gamers to explore the vast array of DC characters (over 150 playable), so you get control of the Legion of Doom members (and their suits), including the Joker. You can even team them up with the Justice League. Players eventually take to space in a journey that leads them to Oa, one of the homes of the Guardians of the Universe.

Getting into orbit to reach the Watchtower requires inputting the code for the Bat-Rocket, which introduces another new twist from previous titles. Beyond Gotham features a slew of VR mini-missions. In this case, it is a simple series of three platforming sequences you must navigate to retrieve a code from the Batcomputer. These are sprinkled throughout the title in approximately 15 forms, breaking up the experience with

activities like racing and puzzle solving.

Once Batman and Robin reach the Watchtower, they need to stave off its defenses, which Lex and Joker have initiated from within. Rocket salvos, mines, and Joker's chattering teeth come after Batman and Robin (who breaks off from the Bat-Rocket in his own ship). Here players enter into a Defender-esque shooter sequence, flying left and right around the Watchtower from a third-person camera. Another sequence with new gameplay situations involves one player in low orbit in a planet while the other is on the ground in a vehicle. Throughout the game you jump into vehicles like The Javelin and the Invisible Jet, all of which are upgradeable.

Beyond Gotham has a cast of familiar DC characters, but new situations make them feel anything but old. — Matthew Kato

» **Platform**

PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Vita
3DS • PC • Mac

» **Style**

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

» **Publisher**

Warner Bros. Interactive
Entertainment

» **Developer**

TT Games

» **Release**

Fall

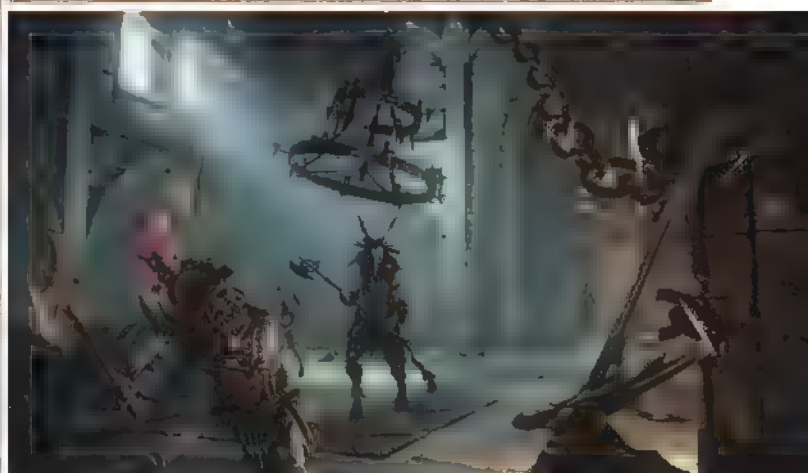


Hellraid

Stepping out of the jungle and into hell



Alongside the campaign mode, which will have a story, Techland is not prepared to detail just yet, arena and mission modes allow up to four players to fight the demonic hordes together online.



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

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

» **Release**
TBD

» **Developer**
Techland

» **Release Date**
2015

Hellraid was first announced by Dead Island developer Techland in 2013 with the intention of releasing that year for previous-gen consoles. Unfortunately, that release window slipped all the way into 2015, and as it did, it left behind the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and Wii U in favor of new-gen exclusivity. "You can tell when a game is cross-platform," says producer and game designer Marcin Traczyk, which is why the studio made the choice to embrace the power of PlayStation 4 and Xbox One at the cost of extending development. "The decision was hanging in the air for several months, and we're glad we made it."

Hellraid began its life as an experiment within Dead Island, so some comparisons can be drawn between them. "It was just some kind of an internal joke: 'Maybe we should try to put in some medieval weaponry instead of just a katana and a machete,'" Marcin says.

After those early experiments, the game took on a life of its own separate from Dead Island. The technical quality of graphics are in line with Dead Island and Techland's other upcoming zombie game, Dying Light, but Hellraid has a demonic aesthetic and visual direction all its own. Looking towards Renaissance era European art as inspiration, your enemies consist of gargoyles, demons,

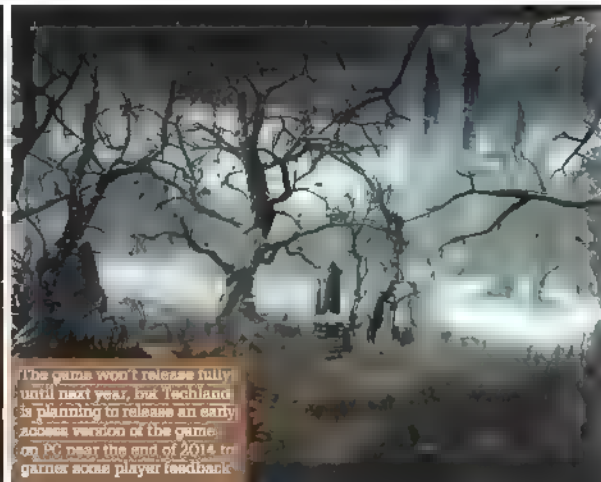
Minotaur creatures, and (of course) undead—all straight from hell.

As for the visuals, Hellraid features another big departure from Dead Island: It's not an open world. Exploration is a part of Hellraid, but the focus is on the weapons and using them to combat the forces of hell. The campaign is linear, making sure your main concern is the action. The team wanted to create grounded melee and sword combat, and even took fencing classes to learn the art of swordplay. This gave the team a good grasp on sword technique, but Marcin and the rest of the team made sure not to sacrifice the fun of swinging a weapon entirely in favor of realism. "We still want to keep the emotions we had while swinging the sword," he says.

Alongside the medieval weaponry, you also have access to magic and a crafting system (which allows you to imbue your weapons with elemental powers). Hellraid was initially going to have classes following predetermined leveling paths, but with its delay to 2015 comes the abandonment of that idea in favor of a system where players have a choice in their progression. You can still take the melee or magic paths, but you are no longer committed to it from the outset.

Techland has had great success with zombies, releasing two Dead Island titles and excitement surrounding the upcoming Dying Light. The studio is not ready to completely abandon the undead, but zombies are just one of many types of foes in Hellraid, marking a step away from the studio's comfort zone.

» Kyle Hilliard



The game won't release fully until next year, but Techland is planning to release an early access version of the game on PC near the end of 2014 to garner some player feedback.

H1Z1

Open-world zombie survival

SOE's upcoming free-to-play post-apocalyptic zombie survival title has players crafting and battling their way against impossible odds and hordes of undead. Unlike many other games taking this same open-world survival approach, H1Z1 is expected to weigh heavy on PvE action rather than PvP, though PvP will still be a significant factor, especially as groups establish footholds in the world. Both first person and third-person views are available.

"You're going to be working with other people, stealing from other people, basically just trying to survive the apocalypse. There's no experience or leveling in the game — you start with nothing, and you'll progress until death," says senior designer Jimmy Whisenhunt. "It's more about surviving as long as you can and getting housing and long-term survival methods going. Your gear is dropped and lootable on death. Your home can be looted or destroyed."

Players can hunt deer or scavenge for cans of discarded food, repair and drive vehicles, team up with other players to create shelter and fortresses, and craft everything from guns and tomahawks to Molotov cocktails and a variety of explosives. Along with a heavy emphasis on crafting, players can trade. There's no coin or dollar currency, so players must form their own value and exchange for goods — is a bullet worth a large quantity of wood?

"It's not sort of the large-scale deathmatch that a lot of other survival games are doing right now. We wanted people to be able to

work together and incentivize that," says Whisenhunt. "We haven't decided if we're looking for small-scale group support or to do the whole larger deal with clan tags and such."

There will be multiple SOE servers designed to support thousands of players with varying rule sets. While the game is inherently "hardcore" with a drop-on-death loot system and destructible housing (even when you're offline!), some servers may feature rule sets to lessen the blow or make things even harder. One server option being discussed is a server where players lose their housing on death along with their items or perhaps a game mode with finite resources that declares the last person standing the winner.

As the "endgame" places some emphasis on grouping and player interaction, there will

be grouping, group voice chat, proximity-based voice chat, and the ability to meet up and deploy from allied housing. While there is a focus on group- and team-oriented play, there are options for lone wolves to strike out on their own as survival assassins or peaceful farmers. What exactly is going to be available for purchase via micro-transactions isn't completely known at this time, but you can expect cosmetic appearance options.

"What's next? We want to grow the world out," explains Whisenhunt. "We want to get crafting close to the realistic side of things in this sort of 'Anywhere America' setting, and then expand out with new items and new challenges."

An early version of H1Z1 is expected to be available now via Early Access. » Daniel Tack

- » PlayStation 4 • PC
- » Massively Multiplayer Online Action
- » Sony Online Entertainment
- » Developer: Sony Online Entertainment
- » TBA

DriveClub

A delayed start could give this racer a photo finish

PlayStation 4

Style
1-Player Racing
(12-Player Online)

Sony Computer Entertainment

Developer
Evolution Studios

October 7

Scrolling around the DriveClub menu, it's not evident why the game was delayed from the PlayStation 4 launch. But had it been released during its original window, it wouldn't have been the game it is today. "We've been able to meet our ambitions," says game director Paul Rustchynsky.

Delaying a game because the menu interface wasn't ready is hardly glamorous stuff, but in a game like DriveClub, whose stated aim is to easily serve up plenty of races from a variety of sources, it's better to avoid a

jumbled mess. Coming out of a race, you see a screen of existing challenges you can dive into next, including those recommended to you from your fellow club members. Face-offs present challenges related to particular sections of the track, such as taking the best line or the longest drift through a corner. You can set the parameters for new challenges when you finish a race (including from your race archive) and they can be pushed to anyone. The activity feed and social hub both surface content for players.

Skipping from challenge to challenge or racing anywhere in the game builds up the status of your six-person club, and drivers of all abilities and stripes contribute to the club's success – whether it's by laying down the fastest times or racing with a certain car. As the club levels up, everyone earns cars and other rewards. If you're looking to become the biggest and best club, you can check your global ranking and track your position in club challenges.

Whether you're interested in being the best club or not, the driving straddles the line between being casual and sim. Instead of including driving assists, developer Evolution Studios has tuned each car so some are more challenging to drive than others, but you can draw more out of them as well. The game tests you but feels fast and fun enough that it dares you to take some risks.

Even though DriveClub didn't make its launch, it's definitely a good advertisement for the PlayStation 4. The time lapse of the day-to-night lighting cycle looks great, and playing the game and seeing how the challenges and clubs work proves that Evolution made the right decision. — Matthew Kato

The Power Of PlayStation Plus

PlayStation Plus members can try a feature-complete version of DriveClub for free. The only difference between this edition and the full-fledged one you can buy via download or at the store is that it's whittled down to one location (India), 10 cars, and 11 tracks. The full version includes 5 locations, 50 cars, and 55 tracks. Otherwise, all the other features and modes are there. You can upgrade from the PlayStation Plus version to the full edition for \$49.99 (a savings of \$10 from the normal price) and keep your progress. From then on, the full game is yours to keep – even if you drop your PlayStation Plus membership.



The game features multiple tracks in India, Norway, Canada, Scotland, and Chile.





Battlefield: Hardline

Partners in crime expand the Battlefield franchise to a new warfront

Dead Space developer Visceral and Battlefield studio DICE are two studios under the same umbrella at Electronic Arts, but there's something more that unites them: a mutual appreciation. About two years ago, Visceral general manager and executive producer Steve Papoutsis and DICE CEO Karl Magnus Troedsson met and bonded over a love of each others' games. Out of that meeting came a desire to do something together.

First, however, Visceral had to get some seasoning with DICE's Frostbite engine and game design philosophies, so Visceral worked on Battlefield 3's End Game DLC to add motorcycles to the game and help on the different modes. Despite this acclimation to the military multiplayer bent of the Battlefield series, the studios' collaboration would be something a little different — a cops and robbers Battlefield title.

With DICE providing feedback, Visceral took the reins on the new project, delivering the concept, art, code, and engineering. Creative director Ian Milham (formerly the art director on the Dead Space franchise) wanted to do something more relatable than the serious, hard-military titles that have ruled the roost. "It felt like there was a real opportunity to do something that was juicier and more fun," he says.

Our first look at the game featured two multiplayer game modes pitting cops vs. criminals: Heist and Blood Money. In Heist, the criminals must break into an armored location (like two armored cars) and bring the two sets of loot to two different locations. In the map we played, which was basically downtown Los Angeles, one drop-off location was on top of a skyscraper, while the other was on a road by a freeway. In Blood Money, both the cops and the criminals withdraw money from a single

cache in the center of the map and bring it back to their vault — which can be raided at any time.

Despite Milham's insistence that he didn't want the game to mirror the high-tech soldier world of most shooters, there is plenty of firepower on both sides. Tazers, flash bangs, shields, zip lines, grapping hooks, boats, armored vehicles, helicopters, and much more are brought to the firefights. Both modes play out frantically, with neither side relishing a clear advantage.

Taking the class-based system from traditional Battlefield games, players choose between the professional, enforcer, mechanic, and operator classes. Each of them brings unique gadgets to the table that accentuate team play. As in traditional Battlefield, you rank up with experience, but in a new twist you can purchase new equipment with your earnings from heists.

Hardline's single-player is being kept under wraps for now, but the game puts equal emphasis on its single- and multiplayer modes, with the former being a crime/vengeance story that Milham is confident will satiate those looking for a significant experience. "We're Visceral," he says. "We've done a lot of single-player stuff. I think people kind of get that we're going to come up with something there."

Visceral's expertise on single-player campaigns should help shore up what's been widely regarded to be a shortcoming for many previous Battlefield games. Combine that with a new take on DICE's signature multiplayer, and the sum of Hardline's parts could overcome the negativity many may associate with the franchise becoming an annual series just like its chief rival Call of Duty. — Matthew Kato

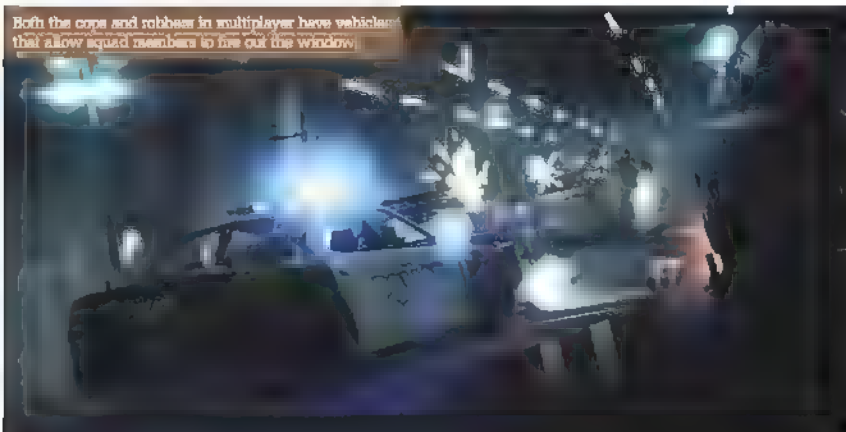
Platforms
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Shooter
64-Player Online
[PS4, Xbox One, PC],
24-Player [PS3, 360]

Publisher
Electronic Arts

Developer
Visceral Games/DICE

Release
Fall





Battlecry

Brawling gone multiplayer

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
32-Player Online Action

» **Developer**
Battlecry Studios

2015

Amid a number of announced games from established franchises, the weeks leading up to E3 also included a few surprises. One of those is the reveal of a new game and fiction from Bethesda. Created by newly founded and aptly named Battlecry Studios, *Battlecry* – the game – is a new take on the free-to-play online multiplayer experience focused on third-person brawling, imaginative visuals, and large-scale battles.

Battlecry reimagines history by supposing that a devastating war at the beginning of the 20th century resulted in a treaty that banned gunpowder. After a brief period of peace and technological advancement, the threat of war looms once again, and the world's powers settle their conflicts using competitions between small battles of elite warriors in sanctioned zones.

These world-shaking conflicts play out as 32 player competitive battles between the rival factions. Without traditional guns, the action is focused on a mix of melee brawling and limited ranged weapons, like bows and arrows. Basic attacks map to the mouse buttons, and each character also has three additional special powers to deploy. Once the action gets going, battles turn into combo-laden melee and shooting affairs. As you fight, your character builds up an adrenaline bar that can be deployed to have a brief surge of power in the midst of a particularly dangerous exchange.

Players choose between several distinct classes that each bring different skill sets to the fight. The enforcer is a melee-focused powerhouse whose massive sword transforms into a shield. The tech archer focuses on precision arrow shots. A duelist class feels like a traditional rogue, built for stealth and speed. Two additional undetailed classes, the



brawler and gadgeteer, offer additional variations on the standard combat roles. No matter your class selection, you're fighting for one of three factions – variations of historical groups like the royal marines or the Cossacks, and the progression sees you earning iron and increasing in rank within your faction.

Maps are built with mobility and verticality in mind. Grapple points are scattered throughout most stages, allowing players to zip quickly between points to get into position for an attack. Taking a cue from sci-fi shooters, the maps also include launch pads that send your character hurtling through the air to a new location on the map.

The comic-book-inspired art style is colorful and engaging, but tinged with elements of reality that help it feel grounded. That shouldn't come as a surprise – the team at Battlecry Studios includes Viktor Antonov, who previously helped bring the artistic

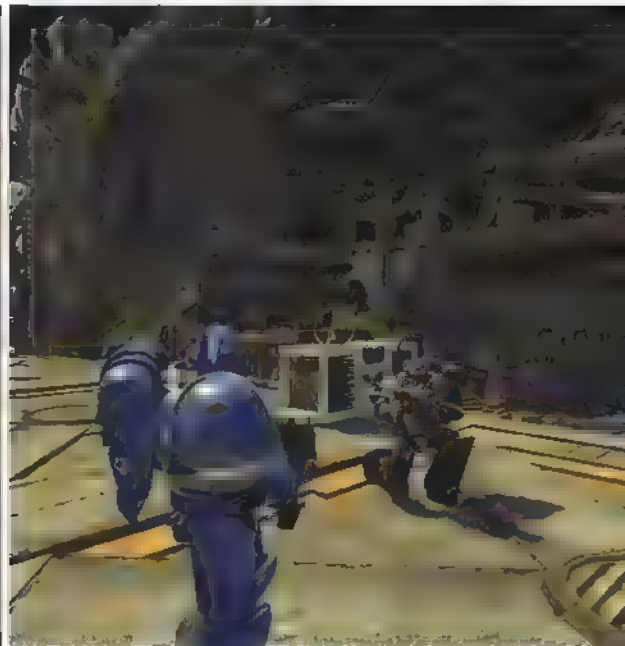
worlds of *Half Life 2* and *Dishonored* to life. One of the art team's central initiatives for *Battlecry* is to have the environments change around you depending on whether your team is winning or losing.

Many gamers have a justified hesitance about the free-to-play space, and it's too early to tell if those concerns are valid for this project. Bethesda says *Battlecry* allows players to purchase new weapons, character skins, helmets, and gender options, but further monetization details remain scarce.

Battlecry is still a long ways off, and much of the gameplay we witnessed was clearly very early in development. Nonetheless, Battlecry Studios is trying something different in the multiplayer arena with its debut game that could give it a fighting chance to compete with the shooters and MOBAs that currently dominate the competitive PC gaming scene. » Matt Miller

Warhammer 40K: Eternal Crusade

The Boyz are back in town



Games Workshop's beloved band of Orks, Eldar, and Space Marines are coming to PC and new-gen consoles in a third-person single-server battle royale with a heavy focus on competitive multi-player and territorial control. While there will be player vs. environment elements, the game's core is rooted in a massive player vs. player war.

The game will be available as a buy-to-play title with additional microtransactions for cosmetic enhancements, and there's another twist – players can play for free as well. Free-to-play players only have access to one of the four factions, the Orks. Those of you familiar with the Warhammer universe should find that the crass, hooligan-esque swarm of Boyz makes thematic sense to house the title's free-to-play faction.

We played an early alpha build with a few players, and the action was exciting and fun even on the small scale. I played as a heavy class with an incredibly powerful chaingun but low maneuverability, and a more agile class that allowed me to use a jetpack to maneuver quickly around the battlefield and dish out a

flurry of melee chain attacks after landing with a near-lethal skystrike.

Along with grenades, a cover system, and a block/parry system for close combat encounters, the combat system appears to be skill-based. While satisfying in small-scale encounters, I can't wait to explore the combat in a more robust battle environment with Orks flaring around everywhere and legions of players competing to take objectives and territory. Large-scale combat is expected to support hundreds or even a thousand players in the same battle.

Players fight for control of various points on one enormous world. As factions extend their boundaries into enemy territory, their own borders will feel pressure from the game's NPC faction, the Tyranid. Leaders would be wise to divide their forces somewhat as they push into opposing lands, ensuring that there are patrols and defenses in place to handle Tyranid assaults that threaten to cut off supply lines.

Leadership and command work in a powerful but not overbearing way. Players can opt to run solo, but most should at least join a basic

squad – a group of ten players under the command of one leader. The leader can issue buffs and commands over the radio. Players are free to ignore the whims of leadership, but there are bonus rewards for completing objectives that the commander dictates, and leaders may also use their resources to outfit their troops with vehicles and other perks in order to realize the goals of the faction war. Even if you're just an unruly member of the free-to-play Orks, you're going to want to visit your squad commander on occasion to get a significant buff before heading back out into the chaos.

Squad commanders take their direction from yet another group of leaders above them, and those leaders get their orders from the elected faction kingpins, the War Council. You can expect plenty of diplomacy, backroom dealing and betrayal from the political structure in the game, which should make for some interesting stories that end up shaping the world.

I'm looking forward to getting into the thick of combat as a Chaos Marine – early access for Warhammer 40K: Eternal Crusade is expected to go live in June. – Daniel Tack

» PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC
» Style
Massively Multiplayer
Online Action
» Publisher
Square Enix
» Developer
Behavior Interactive
» Release Date
TBA



Tales From The Borderlands

Meaningful storytelling in Pandora

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC • iOS

Style
1-Player Adventure

Developer
Telltale Games

Release
Summer

After success with *The Walking Dead* and *Fables* licenses, Telltale is stepping into the world of Pandora with *Tales from the Borderlands*, a dark comedy tied to Gearbox's beloved loot-hunting franchise.

After fan favorite *Claptrap* appeared in Telltale's *Poker Night 2*, Gearbox and Telltale took things a step further after crossing paths again at the 2012 VGAs, surprising many. Most *Borderlands* aren't playing for the narrative, but that's what's so interesting to Telltale. "The thing that *Borderlands* does so well is that [Gearbox] set up this amazing universe and world and they have all these great tools," says director Nick Herman. "They allowed us to add to that lore and take some of their characters and create some of our own and really dig deep on who these people really are."

Tales from the Borderlands occurs right after the events of *Borderlands 2* and will be canon for the franchise. "Whatever future *Borderlands* titles come along, the events that happen in our games will be reflected as well," says producer Adam Sarason.

Telltale wants to give players an intriguing new role, so instead of a vault hunter, you're

controlling two different protagonists, Rhys and Fiona, shifting between their perspectives. Rhys works as a data-miner for Hyperion, spending his days in a cubicle as a peon. Fiona is a con artist and a wanted woman. These characters are polar opposites, but they find a worthy reason to team up: a powerful prize that could fix their problems.

Tales plays out with Rhys and Fiona retelling their journey to a mysterious man, and you choose how they disclose the adventure. Beware, though; the two often interrupt one another to paint themselves in a better light and call you out if you go too over-the-top. "We have these two different characters who have this incredible journey they go on together, but they also aren't best friends at all, so their stories conflict," Herman says. For instance, Rhys might say he turned events around by giving a moving speech, but Fiona might chime in with a different version where he's a bumbling mess.

Expect Telltale's specialty—relationship-building and consequence-laden gameplay. Choosing between the two leads is just one of the dilemmas on your plate. "I'm sure

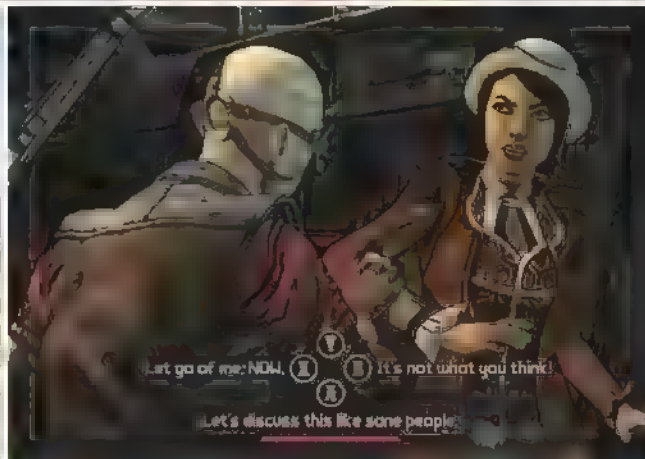
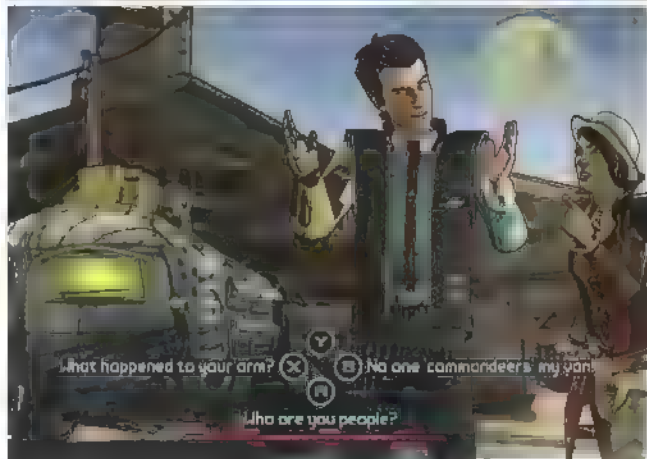
people are going to have their favorites," Herman says. "Some people are going to think, 'Fiona's the best, so I'm going to do everything in her interest, so when I'm playing as Rhys I don't want to screw her over or do things that affect her in a negative way.' But that's going to have repercussions on Rhys' relationships."

Telltale still isn't revealing how the action sequences play out, but confirms this title will have more action than past Telltale games. "There's definitely going to be some new and exciting stuff that feels really *Borderlands-y*," Herman says. A great portion of the gameplay also revolves around the characters' skills. Since Rhys is a hacker, expect to use technology to get ahead in the world. With Fiona, you must fast-talk and con people.

Borderlands provides Telltale another crack at comedic storytelling and also a chance to create something more lighthearted. "It's a break for those who are interested in our games and maybe want to put the [tissues] down for a month," Herman says. Hopefully, it turns out as engrossing as Telltale's recent work. — Kimberley Wallace

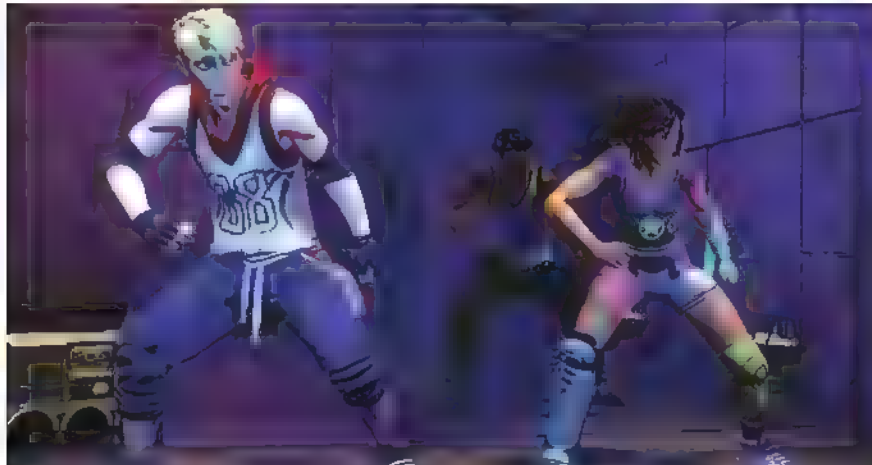
Loot Crossing Over To Other Borderlands Games

Right now, Telltale is still working out the kinks, but is striving to do something similar to *Poker Night 2*, which had unlocks in *Borderlands 2*. Telltale plans to include loot in *Tales from the Borderlands* that will then appear in Gearbox's future *Borderlands* games. This time around, though, they want the extra content to be more meaningful. "Our dream has always been that if you saw that item in a *Borderlands* game and you've played *Tales from the Borderlands*, you'd know what that player did to get that item, what choice they made, so that's the ultimate goal," says producer Adam Sarason.



Dance Central: Spotlight

Kinect throws one last dance party



The timing couldn't be worse for Harmonix given Microsoft's decision to remove Kinect from the Xbox One bundle, but another Dance Central is ready to hit the dance floor.

If there's a catch to this download-only game, it's that this is not a full-fledged effort. Spotlight contains new 10 songs, and Harmonix promises to make more than 50 songs available at launch as downloads (price not determined). The studio plans to release a steady stream of DLC content afterward, and it can now release

content in a more timely fashion to catch the zeitgeist of the hit parade. Xbox 360 owners can rest easy knowing that they will not have to pay for a DLC song if they've already bought it for a previous Dance Central title.

Each song on Spotlight (including ones already released for the franchise) contains eight dance routines – four of various difficulties, two fitness routines, and two dubbed Choreographer's Choice. A dedicated fitness mode lets you compile up to 90 minutes of custom routines, complete with a calorie counter.

If you're not so sure of your dance moves, you can dip out of a song, practice a loop of moves, and then jump back into the action where you left off.

Spotlight may feel like the kind of addendum that made a dinosaur of the music genre in the first place, but Harmonix promises that the initial 10-song download and any subsequent DLC will be cheaply priced. Besides, early adopters already paid for a Kinect, so they might as well get a game that makes good use of it. » Matthew Kato

Platform
Xbox One

Style
1 or 2-Player Rhythm/Music

Developer
Microsoft Studios

Developer
Harmonix

Release Date
2014

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FIFA 15

Trying to make the second impression count

Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1 to 7-Player Sports (PS4, PC)
1 to 4-Player (Xbox One)
(22-Player Online)

Publisher
EA Sports

Developer
EA Canada

Release
Fall

FIFA has already debuted on the new-generation consoles, and while the development team at EA Canada noticeably upgraded areas of the game beyond graphics, the team is just now starting to really dig into the systems. The developer isn't talking yet about any improvements to FIFA 15's game modes, but strides in the presentation and gameplay have yielded immediate results in the new-gen versions that we played.

One of the highlights so far is player interaction; encounters are more varied and physical. Shoulder charges knock players off the ball and aggressive body shielding prevents being dispossessed. Tackling has also been improved to make it easier for tacklers to gain possession of the ball after a tackle. Furthermore, the developer says the ball won't always roll back to the other team after a standing tackle. The ball itself carries more momentum, which means more accurate deflections (important for shots on goal) and fluid one-touch passing.

The players look better, and refined movement is also noticeable. Defenders plant their feet and react better to keep up with dribblers, who themselves address the ball with the inside and outside of the foot and take smaller steps at times to accommodate the ball and prepare for shots. The game makes use of this to even highlight how certain players like to favor carrying the ball on a certain foot or have a particular dribbling style.

Details like this sound small but are important in synching up what you do with the controller and it transferring to the screen. In terms of pure visuals, FIFA 15 can't be ignored. The lighting makes an afternoon match pop with player details, and there are footprints and marks all over the pitch. Crowds make their mark, with Bayern Munich fans recreating The Yellow Wall, Arsenal supporters singing "You'll Never Walk Alone," and Manchester City fans doing The Poznan. Half- and full-time replay packages have been improved to include more relevant selections, and expect to see more mob celebrations like everyone

piling on near the corner flag.

You should also notice how a team reacts thanks to a new team emotion system. This isn't tied to the skill ratings of your players like form, nor their overall mental state like morale, but is intended to make the players seem more alive. Matching the ebb and flow of emotions during a match, like the excitement of an early goal, anger over a questionable tackle, or frustration of a blown chance, should be evident. In terms of A.I. that affects your gameplay, forwards make better runs and teams react to situations like parking the bus to protect a lead. Previously, EA Canada talked about how the power of the new systems could be used for commentators discussing more ongoing storylines, but the developer hasn't announced that for the game.

It remains to be seen how FIFA 15's gameplay and modes all come together in a full package, but the progress with the new-gen systems since the last FIFA half a year ago is already evident. » Matthew Kato





Madden NFL 15

Another year of polishing fundamentals

The Madden franchise's 25th anniversary last year wasn't a celebratory affair. Fans on the new systems got to play a game that kept its features intact in the console transition, but there were missed opportunities to improve a franchise. Madden 15 has its work cut out for it this year, starting with the gameplay on the field.

Madden 15 is different before you even snap the ball. Influenced by the Madden companion app, playcalling now offers strategic information. The right side of the screen shows three play windows: strategy, community, and favorite. Strategy offers up plays based specifically on the down and distance and what play your opponent traditionally runs. Community pulls popular plays from the cloud, and favorites shows what you've liked to run in the past. On the left side of the screen is the result of the play you just ran, including what play your opponent called. All of the plays include stats such as how many yards were gained on average. GameFlow play-calling is still present but has been modified to give you more info. While this new info is helpful, if you prefer to call plays the old way, using formations or play

type, rest assured you can still do that too.

Another new element of the pre-snap process is the ability to toggle among the cameras to get a better view of the entire field. You can do this, along with revamped play art, to get the lay of the land before a play. On defense you can lock the camera (like NCAA) on a single player and swivel the camera around.

Defense was a big focus of the early demo. Pass rushers get a boost with better disengagement from blockers. The right analog stick is no longer used while rushing the passer. X on the PS4 (or A on the Xbox One) is your power move and Square (X on Xbox One) is your finesse move. The left stick lets you steer blockers down the line of scrimmage, and pressing X as the running back approaches disengages you from the blocker to make the tackle. As in NCAA, pressing the right trigger as the ball is snapped gives you an anticipatory jump.

In the secondary, EA overhauled man and zone cover schemes so players are where they are supposed to be and the plays function like they should. The expected result: fewer passing yards. Aiding this goal are corners

who break on the ball more, (provided their heads are turned and they are following the play) and more differentiation in passes — whether it's between good and bad quarterbacks or because a defender got a hand on the quarterback's throwing arm. More passes are off target, leading to more catch animations.

Tackling in the open field is easier this year thanks to improved A.I. and a new, optional icon system. A radius icon at the base of your player helps orientate them before contact and make the tackle. "This feature on its own, internally, has increased the effectiveness of open field tackling as much as 75 to 80 percent with our [quality assurance] testers," says Rex Dixon, creative director for gameplay. "You shouldn't feel at such a disadvantage on defense this year."

Developer EA Tiburon is promising a lot of improvements for the new-gen versions of the game (shown), although we're not sure yet what will make it into the old-gen entries. At a minimum, it has isolated some of the areas that have needed work for years, and hopefully this lifts the franchise out of its lull.

» **Matthew Kold**

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

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

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
Fall



NHL 15

New announcers headline a year of renovations for EA's hockey franchise



Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

Publisher
EA Sports

Developer
EA Canada

Release
Fall

NHL arenas, just like everything else, have a shelf life. After a few decades of hosting games, the concourses seem small, the scoreboards look dated, and the audio systems sound downright quaint compared to the newer buildings. Inevitably, cities decide to upgrade their team's digs. The same goes for EA Sports' NHL series.

Developer EA Canada is seizing the opportunity provided by the new-gen consoles to update the franchise's appearance with NHL 15. Everything is on the table, including authentic arenas, more than 9,000 new crowd models, improved player likenesses for up to 300 of the sport's biggest stars, and NBC Sports-style presentation.

With the NBC packing comes a brand new broadcasting team. Mike "Doc" Emrick and Eddie Olczyk replace longtime commentators Bill Clement and Gary Thorne, who started to sound stale after several years of service.

Alongside new analyst Ray Ferraro, the team recorded up to 35,000 lines of new dialogue. EA also changed its approach to how it records commentary, which should result in more natural conversations.

"No longer do we put a script in front of talent and say 'Okay, read,'" says producer Sean Ramjagsingh. "What you see with that is you try to turn the commentators into actors, and they don't sound like themselves. What we've done with all the content you're going to hear in the game this year, aside from some very specific things with player names, we just give them a situation. We did 30,000 lines of giving the situation: 'Daniel Sedn scores a goal top shelf in the last two minutes of the game. Give me 10 samples of that.' They pause for two seconds, think about what they would say, and they rattle it off. Doc and Eddie have worked together so long they just know how to play off each other, and the stories that

they can tell that we've incorporated into the game are fantastic."

On the ice, NHL 15 continues to invest heavily in physics, adding 12-player collisions that should result in more realistic scrums, plus a completely rebuilt puck physics model. "What we're seeing now is bounces in the game that we've never seen before," Ramjagsingh says. "We're seeing goals squeak through the goal between the inside of his arm and his chest."

Other changes coming to the gameplay include a renovated ski stick that provides more fidelity of movement, some new toe drags, and an emphasis on puck support thanks to the improved player A.I.

"With the power of the new consoles, it allows us to access more of what was going on," Ramjagsingh says. "We have all 10 players on the ice trying to look one, two, three seconds ahead, understanding how the play is developing, and then moving realistically to the way the play is coming together." One example Ramjagsingh shared is when a puck is loose in the corner. "The A.I. player will take note when there's not much pressure coming in so he knows that he can go pick the puck up, keep his speed in stride, initiate the breakout himself, and then start looking for a pass. Whereas in gen-three, the guy would go get the puck, know that when he gets the puck he wants to make a pass, and then assess the pass he wants to make immediately."

These improvements should provide a great foundation for NHL 15 to build from, but just as much attention needs to be given to the game modes, which currently lag woefully behind the competition in the sports genre. Hopefully EA Canada has some announcements in store on that front as well. • Matt Bertz



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MARIO KART 8



gameinformer
★ GAME OF THE MONTH
95 Mario Kart 8

More than two decades after its initial release, the Mario Kart series is showing no signs of declining quality. Rather, this most recent entry could be the best one yet. If you own a Wii U and have been looking for something to play, it's time to dig out that GamePad. Mario Kart 8 is easily one of the best games on the console, and it's our Game of the Month.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game involved is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Mixed. While some things work as planned, the majority of the title either malfunctions or it is as dull (and the game falls apart) as a whole.
8	Very Good. Inexpensive, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Pitiful. 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	Worst's future prospects.

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



Transistor

Weird and wonderful discovery

by gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing Publisher Supergiant Games Developer Supergiant Games Release May 20 Rating T

Not everything needs an explanation. I imagine some variation of that idea was in the heads of the team at Supergiant Games as *Transistor* took shape. From its surreal setting and enigmatic characters, to its surprising upgrade system and combat, *Transistor* is a game that is happy to let you discover its charms over time. For players willing to accept a slightly more opaque experience than many games, *Transistor* offers an escape into a strange and enchanting world.

We're introduced to heroine Red at the end of a rough night. The famous singer has appeared at the edge of town after an attempt on her life, and her only companion is the vestige of a man who saved her life by sacrificing his own – his essence now trapped within the sword-like weapon that killed him. Red's journey to confront her would-be killers uncovers a plot that threatens the entire city of Cloudbank, and only the *Transistor* weapon she now carries has a hope of stopping it.

From these early moments and on through the rest of the game, the story and setting are different from the expected. Cloudbank is not a normal world, and neither are its citizens. Scattered terminals and occasional encounters with other sentient beings offer insight into the city and its inhabitants, gradually laying out a whole culture and jargon that's richly imagined. As you explore, your guide is the ever-present voice of the man inside the *Transistor*, offering a running commentary that sheds light on the threats at hand, the places you visit, and the character you control.

Beyond moving from one part of the city to the next, *Transistor*'s gameplay is all about combat, which unfolds through a clever mix of real-time action and a strategic action-paused planning mode. Different powers are mapped to each of the controller's face buttons, and each can be deployed across the battlefield to juggle the many enemies that attack at

one time. When in planning mode, Red can queue several powers to be fired off in quick succession, and as the action unpases, she zips about the screen as her foes stand frozen in time. The more powers that are deployed, the longer the recharge before attacks can begin again, creating a rewarding balancing act between bursts of destruction and frantic movement to avoid damage.

An impressive selection of enemies maintains a steady challenge curve throughout Red's journey. The insidious Process take many forms, and each attacks and defends in its own way. One might fling out grenade-like area attacks, while another hides in a corner projecting an energy shield onto an ally. Even as one enemy charges headlong toward you, another hangs back and remains phased out and impervious to damage until you come within line of sight. Each battle becomes a puzzle, and the solution lies in which enemies to hit first, and what powers will best do the job.

My favorite part of *Transistor* is the constant mixing and matching of functions that leads to those battle powers. Throughout the adventure, Red gathers more traces of individuals being consumed by the Process, and absorbs them into her weapon. These functions can be slotted as one of her four primary skills, or used to upgrade a different function already in one of those slots. Alternately, additional passive slots are available that won't add to any one skill, but instead affect Red's overall abilities. As more and more functions become available, the possibilities for experimentation blossom. Create a stealth build about backstabbing and speed or a devastating distance striker who never lets enemies close.

Lest you be tempted to stick with a tried-and-true skill loadout, excessive damage in battle temporarily overloads your functions, so before the next fight you need to reshuffle. What might have been frustrating is instead an exciting

opportunity, because playing with these combinations is so engaging. As you hone in on a few skillsets that work well for you, perhaps you're brave enough to scale up the challenge by applying modifiers to combat; by boosting enemy power and limiting your own, you receive experience boosts as well as an ever-present way to tweak difficulty.

In between fights, there's plenty of time to enjoy the gorgeous surroundings. Lush color brings life to the computerized cityscape of Cloudbank, while brief still-life cutscenes help push the story forward. A striking soundtrack combines jazz and electronica to great effect. The music is presented like Red's own backing tracks, a feeling accentuated by the player's ability to stop and have her hum along by pressing L1, which I found myself doing more than I care to admit.

Players who want to dig deeper should find the backdoor combat tests to be a great way to extend the experience – not only are these additional battles to confront, but they often communicate helpful clues into smart ways to use your powers. In addition, a robust new game plus feature opens up after game completion; your second playthrough includes entirely new enemy configurations, along with the ability to continue to level up and expand your upgrade options.

Transistor's focus on combat lets it shine, but one battle after the next results in a strictly linear path to game completion that can feel repetitive. And while it plays into the game's story, I found myself wishing I had the chance to visit Cloudbank before it was abandoned; as it is, it's a very isolating adventure. Players looking to find all the answers by the time the credits roll are likely to be disappointed. *Transistor* is as much about what is left unsaid as what is explained. I suspect I won't be the only one.

— Matt Miller

9

PS4 • PC

Concept

Explore a world being overtaken by conformity while wielding a weapon of growing power

Impression

Warm, watercolor-esque environments bring a soft edge to a high-tech setting

Sound

A creative and original soundtrack melds jazz, electronica, and voice to great emotional effect

Playability

Grasping the complexity of the upgrade system takes a lot of time, but thankfully the game difficulty gives you the leeway to master the complexity

Entertainment

From story to gameplay, a sense of wonder and discovery pervades *Transistor*, but demands the player accept moments of confusion and unanswered questions

Display Value

Moderately High



Watch Dogs

A solid debut for a promising new series

8.5

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Montreal Release May 27 Rating M

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Create a tech-laden open world that provides players with new ways to interact with their environment

» **Impressions**

The final visuals don't match the luster of early videos, but the game still looks good

» **Sound**

The licensed track list is second rate, but the original music nicely complements the action during select missions

» **Playability**

The driving controls take some getting used to, but the on-foot controls and shooting mechanics are top-notch for the genre

» **Entertainment**

The hacking abilities are a legitimate game changer and give Watch Dogs its own identity

» **Play Value**

High

Ubisoft introduced players to Watch Dogs with an exciting gameplay demo that stole the show at E3 in 2012. Since then, a six-month delay and rumors of a visual downgrade have caused fans' faith in the promising new IP to waver. The final game lies somewhere between the early next-gen hysteria and subsequent skepticism; like most antiheroes, Watch Dogs gives players what they need, but not necessarily everything they want.

Watch Dogs follows the exploits of Aiden Pearce, a tech-savvy hacker hell-bent on discovering who was responsible for the death of his niece and making them pay. The story offers up a number of conspiratorial twists as Pearce discovers the far-reaching powers of the Blume Corporation. The company's CtOS is the interconnected operating system that Chicago runs on, and through his own hacking prowess, allows Pearce to run Chicago.

The first thing players will notice about Watch Dogs are its visuals, which are indeed less impressive than the (literally) explosive announcement demo. Ubisoft only provided PS4, Xbox One, and PC versions of the game for our review, but the graphics betray Watch Dogs' cross-gen status, and players should adjust their expectations accordingly. Sometimes the game looks great; other times, bland textures, sparse crowds, and the occasional pop-in of cars and objects when traveling at speed fail to meet the new standard

Grand Theft Auto V set on last-gen hardware. The more important plus side is that Watch Dogs provides a massive open world filled with plenty of interaction and few load times aside from the initial startup.

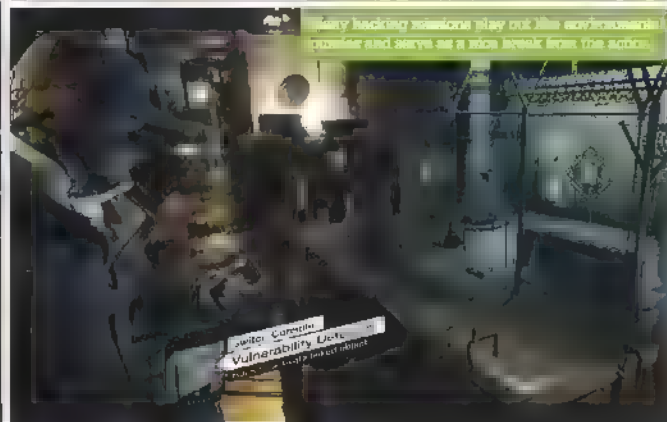
Like many open-world games, the activities in Watch Dogs split your time evenly between spin on foot and in a car (or motorcycle or boat). The driving controls are looser than I'd like, and are more reminiscent of the early 3D GTA games than the turn-on-a-dime handling many modern games offer. Most objects have a distinct feeling of weightlessness in the world; fences crumple like tissue paper, light posts snap off and shatter on the ground, and cars spin out of your way with minimal contact. Smashing through bus shelters and sidewalk cafes without losing speed creates some Hollywood-worthy action moments, but they come at a cost; ramming a pursuing enemy vehicle into oncoming traffic only to have them blow through cars and be back on your tail a second later is frustrating—especially considering you can't use weapons when driving.

Instead, technology is your weapon (spoiler!), and you unlock a variety of hacks to eliminate your foes. Activating guard posts, overloading steam pipes, and tripping traffic lights can take down vehicles with a single hit, and the game signals when it's best to activate them. They work well, but are fundamentally limited—you have to find them in the environment in order to

use them. This leads to a lot of circling around blocks and alleyways hoping to come across a hackable item you've already unlocked to use on foes. Rather than eliminating all of your pursuers via environmental takedowns, driving in Watch Dogs is really about evasion—losing your tails just long enough to pull into a secluded side street or parking lot and hide in your car (via an actual hiding mechanic) until the heat dies down. Once I realized that, the cat-and-mouse driving segments became more fun.

On the other hand, the on-foot action is entertaining from the get-go and only becomes more engaging as you unlock new abilities. Hacking items adds a meaningful dimension to combat, allowing you to effortlessly hop between camera feeds to get the layout of the environment, tag foes, and activate traps. The solid shooting mechanics make full-scale firefights enjoyable, but Watch Dogs' combat really shines with a stealth-minded approach. A focus power lets you temporarily slow down time to line up headshots and take down enemies before they alert their buddies; using the environment to my advantage and picking off enemies one by one while remaining undetected never got old for me.

That said, Watch Dogs' gameplay still has its problems. All too often, Ubisoft Montreal forces you into the scenario it wants you experience; most missions are bound to end with a



protracted car chase, and sometimes backup guards spawn no matter how careful you are. Additionally, the developer still hasn't learned that tailing missions are boring and over-armed enemies that require multiple magazines worth of ammo to take down are cheap and frustrating.

On the whole, however, the campaign missions are entertaining, and provide the right mix of interesting environments and gameplay variety. Guiding a non-player character through a gang-controlled apartment building via security cameras and crashing the secret auction of a human trafficking ring are just two of the memorable scenarios that complement Watch Dogs' more conventional action missions – which still feel fresh thanks to Pearce's hacking powers. A wealth of unlockables and some interesting side content should keep completionists happy for a long time. The Dark Souls-style multiplayer elements are also engaging; having random players invade your game to hack your data or observe you from the shadows adds a sense of urgency that goes up against non-player characters can't match. As boring as tailing an AI character is, chasing after and observing another unsuspecting human player while trying to remain unnoticed is exciting and amusing in a voyeuristic kind of way.

Unfortunately, Watch Dogs' story doesn't live up to the gameplay, in large part due to Ubisoft Montreal's inability to pick a tone and stick with it. Some characters, like Lucky Quinn and Jordi Chin, are (relative) understated and interesting. Others, like Anthony "Iraq" Wade and Clara, are so overdesigned that it's hard to take them seriously. Aiden Pearce is a mix of the two approaches; a lone-wolf vigilante with a comically gruff Batman voice who can't let go of his guilt for the death of a family member. Ultimately, Pearce is Max Payne without an

These line blockers are effective for training purposes – you can find them while driving around the city.



affinity for cheesy poetry, and while he offers up a few compelling moments during the story, he's usually just a mope who can't stop staring at his cellphone.

The few thought-provoking and poignant moments of Watch Dogs' story are undermined at every turn by the general idiocy of the rest of the writing. Random civilian chatter, enemy conversations, and the video feeds you frequently hack are filled with crass, immature, and oftentimes offensive content, such as one random NPC's diatribe about why he was justified for beating his girlfriend. The GTA series manages to skewer American culture with a sardonic wit and a tone that matches the style and stones of the series. In contrast, Watch Dogs' more sensationalistic writing simply panders to every annoying stereotype of a pubescent, mouth-breathing gamer; vulgar sex jokes, lazy insults, and obscenity-laden outbursts are repeatedly served up without

context or class. Ubisoft's attempts to make you think about the random people you're hacking are so heavy-handed that they come off as patronizing, and are undermined by the same sophomoric humor. This NPC has brain cancer. That NPC was recently prescribed diarrhea medication.

At the end of the day, Watch Dogs' story works as a basic revenge tale, and the final few missions provide some gravity to the characters. Ultimately, however, the main draw of any open-world game is the gameplay, and while not perfect, Watch Dogs' hacking abilities add an engaging and unique twist to the third-person action. Ubisoft has another deserved hit on its hands, and I look forward to seeing where the new series goes next.

» [Watch Dogs](#)

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC versions of Watch Dogs. It is also available on PS3 and Xbox 360.

Wolfenstein: The New Order

A new order following the old rules

Style 1-Player Shooter Publisher Bethesda Softworks Developer Machine Games Release May 20 Rating M



PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

After Nazis take over the world, B.J. Blazkowicz takes it back with the help of a tight-knit band of resistance fighters

» Graphics

Textures vary from muddy to sharp depending on the environment

» Sound

The chugging, unimaginative guitar riffs get old quickly but eventually turned off the music

» Playability

The satisfying kickback of the guns is offset by the lobotomized A.I. How did this army take over the world, exactly?

» Entertainment

A more well-rounded outing than the last Wolfenstein game, but its more comfortable employing tried-and-true gameplay conventions than striving for innovation

» Replay Value

Moderate



Twenty-two years after its smashing debut, and the godfather of first-person shooters is still piling up Nazi corpses.

Over this impressive span, the Wolfenstein franchise has experienced highs – namely *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* and *Enemy Territory* – and a few lows, like the hollow 2009 re-imagining. To reinvigorate the brand, Bethesda tapped Machine Games, a new studio led by former members of Starbreeze Studios – the developer best known for its criminally under-celebrated *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*.

Wolfenstein: The New Order is an amalgamated reimagining featuring a few familiar characters and a new central premise. After a failed attempt to assassinate General Deathshead in 1946, B.J. Blazkowicz suffers a head trauma and spends the next 14 years as a vegetable. During his absence, the Nazi Wehrmacht conquers the world. Only after his caretakers are shot and killed does Blazkowicz snap out of his vegetative state and start a new rampage against the totalitarian regime.

Along the 20-hour campaign he joins a colorful resistance group hiding within Berlin, infiltrates a prison to save some old friends, steals some valuable vehicles, and even journeys to the moon to retrieve the nuclear launch codes necessary to wipe the Nazi regime off the map. The varied environments do an effective job of keeping things fresh, and the varied cast is much more memorable than most first-person shooter campaigns.

In building its own vision for the brand, Machine Games is hardly forgetting the series' past. Many homages exist to *The New Order*'s precursors, including the muscular character

model for Blazkowicz, using Nazi helmets as icons for armor pickups, secret rooms hidden in each level, and even a "nightmare" dream sequence that lets you play the first level of *Wolfenstein 3D*.

Traces of Machine Games' pedigree are also evident throughout the game. From the surprisingly varied and satisfyingly brutal close-quarters melee takedowns to the quiet moments interspersed between action sequences, *The New Order* shares many similarities with the *Riddick* title. The studio also endows Blazkowicz with an internal dialogue to give the character more depth, but these monotone philosophical ponderings feel at odds with the wanton brutality he projects through the rest of the game.

The combat is a mash-up of both lineages. You can dual-wield and decapitate enemies with headshots, or take a more measured approach to combat. Most levels have Nazi commanders stationed throughout. Sneaking up and performing a stealth takedown prevents them from pulling the alarm once the bullets inevitably start flying, giving cautious players a tactical option. You can also fire from cover, but the cumbersome mechanic makes this the least valuable tool in your arsenal.

The RPG-lite perks system offers some incentive for experimenting with your approach. Meeting certain requirements, like completing a certain amount of stealth takedowns or racking up a set body count from cover, unlocks useful upgrades that give you an edge in combat that isn't necessarily needed thanks to the stunted A.I.

The New Order offers a wide array of enemies, from traditional soldiers and panzer

hounds to monstrous mechs and heavily armored super troops. None of them are very smart. Their casual approach to patrols makes it easy to run through levels carelessly making stealth takedowns (including on the hounds, which seems highly implausible), and they have the unfortunate habit of running for the furthest cover away from them in the middle of live fire, giving you ample time to line up kill shots. The final boss fight is the only exceptional challenge, but this battle essentially boils down to classic trial-and-error. If you're looking for a challenge, I strongly suggest you up the difficulty.

With no multiplayer modes on offer, Machine Games adds replayability by littering levels with collectibles and introducing an early choice that changes the trajectory of the narrative. Deciding which of two fellow soldiers lives changes who participates in the resistance, and gives you different alternate navigation routes in levels, but otherwise the game is essentially the same. Scavenging for enigma codes and cracking them also unlocks new challenges to give seasoned players a run for their money.

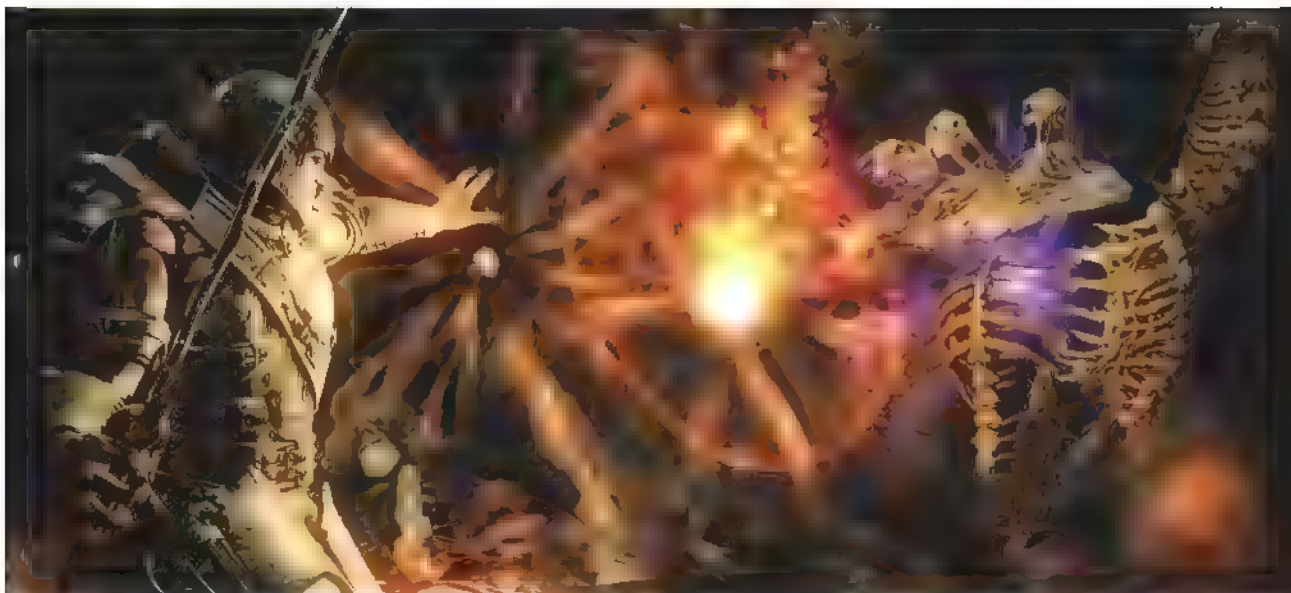
Wolfenstein: The New Order is a positive step forward for the series after the last dud. Machine Games presents a competent shooter with more polish and a better array of characters, but ultimately the game feels more comfortable recommitting established conventions than it does striving for innovation.

— Matt Bertz

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions of Wolfenstein: The New Order. The game is also available on PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC.

Bound By Flame

A solid RPG snack



Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Focus Home Interactive **Developer** Spiders **Release** May 9 **Rating** M

Fantasy action/RPGs are plentiful, so any entry in the genre needs to be more than just competent to stand out among titans like *Dark Souls II* and *Diablo III*. Though *Bound by Flame* does not reach those heights, it should not be overlooked. Precise combat and plenty of customization make it more fun—and more challenging—than it first appears. Combat is grounded in the style that the *Souls* series has popularized, but the character development and relationship-building are more along the lines of *Dragon Age*.

Parrying and blocking are essential no matter which of the three main class trees (warrior, ranger, and pyromancer) you explore. The abilities are fun and allow players to develop a set of skills that suit their playstyle, but they are somewhat limited in variety. Each tree has only a few signature skills, with most abilities just adding on to existing ability functionality. The limitations don't feel like they hurt things too much, but the desire to have a few more moves gets stronger as the battles get harder. Combat is equal parts twitch and tactical; players hoping to win by button-mashing will find themselves dead in a hurry.

Battles leave little room for error, especially against bosses. These encounters do a solid job at breaking up the standard enemy clusters that the game throws at you. Bosses tend to have more interesting movesets and skills, along with more satisfying death sequences. Regular enemy packs can easily kill players if they blink at the wrong time, but bosses require an even greater degree of extended precision. The final boss fight took me around 10 minutes of constantly shifting action, where a single mistake could send me back to loading a save. The game's chapter bosses and final boss provide satisfying challenges.

The customization system allows players to take standard weapons such as hammers, swords, and axes and tailor them to specific playstyles. A sword pommel and blade may be

enhanced for additional damage, fire attacks, stagger chance, and more. Players can also craft a handful of consumables on the fly like healing potions and traps. If you get stuck in a fight that seems impossible and you've exhausted other options, don't forget your traps—they can deal considerable damage to batted foes. These options ensure players have flexibility. Feel like smashing foes down so they can't fight back or use their abilities? Grab a two-handed hammer and load up on stacking interrupt boosts and pummel your foes into the ground. Just going for damage? An outfitted two-handed sword may be what you're looking for.

Players can select a sidekick for quests and free-adventuring that complements their playstyle. You have a number of options that are all traditional RPG roles—an archer, a few types of mages, knights, etc. You can further define their assistance role by changing their settings. The A.I. can be frustrating and foolish at times, so making sure that you've locked in their combat style in the options menu is a must. I recommend choosing a mage assistant with a focus on crowd control, which was highly effective for me and made tough battles much easier. You're able to generally switch out and play around with your helpers at will, and even build relationships with them outside of combat through dialogue and quests. Each companion has a clearly defined personality: the sarcastic and bubbly skeleton, the outcast witch, and the knight who constantly refers to himself in the third person flesh out a fun cast of supporting characters.

Unfortunately, the foes you face aren't as interesting as the allies by your side. Enemy variation leaves much to be desired; for the latter half of the game, you're fighting the same handful of enemy types for hours. While this gives you the opportunity to become incredibly familiar with their attacks and how to beat them, it is also tedious. The combat is crisp,

but the ability selection outside of your main swipes and swings is small, and the action starts to feel stale.

Game-changing decisions help to keep the journey interesting, as you either fight off or embrace the demon inside you. If you choose to go evil, you gain interesting abilities with some trade-offs. Your demon horns are cool and all, but you're not going to be able to wear helmets. Opting to go good will change the direction of your adventures, and you get other perks to make up for not letting the demon out. I went evil early on and regretted it by the end—not because of the abilities, but because I began to feel like an absolutely loathsome human being. When they say evil, they mean it; you do some absolutely appalling things that you don't have a vote on once you're corrupted. Your choices and your interactions with companions factor heavily into how events play out along the way. While the plot itself is akin to a B-movie or worse and the dialogue laughable at times, decisions like choosing to slaughter your commander or leaving elves to die have repercussions. Your elf companion, for instance, doesn't like to see his kin abandoned and will come at you later—and only one of you survives.

A skilled player doing no sidequests and blowing through dialogue can complete the game in about 10–12 hours, but this is sacrificing a ton of content both in the quest, exploration, and relationship-building categories. When you invest the time to master the challenging combat and explore the world, *Bound by Flame* is a solid romp with rewarding tactical action supported by rewarding boss battles and plenty of ways to see your choices reflected in the world around you.

—Daniel Tack

This review pertains to the PC version of Bound by Flame. The game is also available on PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360.



PS4 • PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Embrace or defy the demon within as you weave through a traditional fantasy RPG world.

» Graphics

Looks great, though some weird quirks (like the running animation) are off-putting.

» Sound

Dialogue is fully-voiced and the soundtrack is powerful, especially during boss fights.

» Playability

The controls can be challenging at first, but I got comfortable after an hour or two. Difficulty can be changed as you play, but I recommend the easiest difficulty setting for beginners.

» Replay Value

Fun combat, customization, and decision making overpower the cliché plot and monotonous enemy lineup.

» Replay Value

Moderate

Super Time Force

Gonzo act on, innovative mechanics

8.5

Xbox One • 360

» **Concept**
Crash through one historical period after another as a time-altering team of soldiers

» **Graphics**
Pixelated, brightly colored characters and backgrounds get overwhelming and chaotic as each "time-out" layers in new actions

» **Sound**
The vibrant chipmune soundtrack is upbeat and engaging

» **Playability**
Shooting and movement controls are simple, but mastering the time-out and team-up systems takes a lot of practice

» **Replayability**
Wildly inventive time-warping mechanics make playing this game feel unlike any other

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Shooter Publisher Capy Games (Xbox One), Microsoft Studios (Xbox 360)
Developer Capy Games Release May 14 Rating T

Super Time Force isn't the game I thought it was. A quick glance at its insane onscreen action calls to mind classic bullet-hell shooters like *Contra* or *Metal Slug*, but spend more than five minutes playing it and a different picture emerges. While dodging bullets and taking out enemies is certainly part of the fun, the real appeal is all about playing with time, replays, character positioning, and an odd twist on speed running. Capy's latest game forces players to think in new ways, and the thrill comes through the inventive routes to success.

A nerdy scientist in the 1980s discovers time travel, and as soon as he does, his infinitely cooler self from the future shows up as proof of concept. The Super Time Force is formed, ostensibly to confront robots that begin to pop up throughout time. In practice, the Super Time Force stumbles through history, enacting the history-altering whims of its commander, like keeping the dinosaurs from going extinct or traveling to the future to get all the Internet updates. The story is unabashed nonsense, filled with amusing puns and preposterous scenarios, like a fighting on a rocket-powered turbodactyl, or visiting the Mad Max-esque "Funderdome."

At any time during gameplay, the action can be voluntarily paused using a time-out. It also happens automatically if your character dies. At that point, you can rewind a few seconds, or even all the way to the beginning of the

level, and expend one of 30 lives to replay the sequence with the same or a different team member, effectively teaming up with your earlier self. If you prevent the death of your past self, that shimmering character becomes a pick-up that gives you an extra hit point and the additional super ability of the team member you saved. This process can be repeated and compounded as many times as you have lives to spare. The delightful boss fights can easily have over 20 iterations of you running about at once, each adding to the battle in their own way.

You gather new members of your team along the way, from a machine gun-toting porpoise (Dolphin Lundgren) to a couch potato Jedi from the future. Each one has unique special abilities, and understanding the utility of these zany characters is key to defeating the many enemies. A laser blast that can shoot through walls might be ideal in one moment, while an explosive grenade with wide area damage could be just the ticket a few seconds later. Learning the advantages of each character is enjoyable, but combining their skills with the time-out system is where the depth kicks in.

Each level has a punishing time limit that is challenging to complete with a single character, especially if you're trying to pick up all the bonus items available along the way. But by layering in additional characters that blast enemies in your path and run down side corridors to pick up items, you open a path for a beeline

run to the finish. A special exhilaration can be found in weaving among so many bullets and enemies, even as previous iterations of your characters clear the way ahead.

The ability to replay an entire level dozens of times comes with some downsides. What at first seems like it should be almost impossible becomes easy once you have 10 allies onscreen firing off super powers. I only encountered a couple of levels that really taxed my full complement of 30 lives. The game also flirts with too much repetition, since you're effectively banging your head against any given short stage again and again to succeed; it's hard to miss a bullet pattern the tenth time it fires at you.

Even if Super Time Force isn't as challenging as it initially looks, the core mechanic is brilliant. At the end of each level, a full video replay rolls, letting you sit back and enjoy the wild antics of your heroes. For those hungry for a harder experience, a new game plus mode ups the ante by requiring that you rescue every previous self from death, or they disappear from your roster for the rest of the level.

Super Time Force is a fascinating design experiment, and deserves your attention if only for its innovative twist on the classic shooter experience. Goofy humor and nostalgic visuals might be what capture your attention, but the reimagining of how we perceive time in an action game is what makes it memorable.

— Matt Miller

The Edge

Given the retro graphical style of Super Time Force, you're not likely to notice any difference between the 360 and Xbox One versions. The Xbox One iteration includes a built-in way to take advantage of the console's clip recording function, which is a bonus if you're hoping to share your replays with friends.



The Amazing Spider-Man 2

Beenox weaves a tangled web of banality

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Activision
Developer Beenox **Release** April 29 **Rating** T

5.5

PS4 • Xbox One
Wii U • PS3 • 360 • PC

► Concept

An open world action game starring everyone's favorite wall crawler, but only loosely connected to the latest movie.

► Graphics

The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions look only marginally better than last generation, and I look more like Andrew Garfield than his in-game counterpart.

► Controls

The voice acting is fairly generic, but Spider-Man's repetitive one-liners will grind against you like a cheese grater.

► Playability

The controls are easy to pick up and combat is quick, but the action is highly repetitive and ultimately boring.

► Story/Characterization

Swing between the skyscrapers of New York, stop petty crimes, punch the Green Goblin in the face — you've already played this game.

► Replay Value

Moderately Low

The Edge

Unsurprisingly, the PS4 and Xbox One versions look better than their last-generation counterparts. However, aside from better lighting and some slightly higher resolution textures, the generation gap isn't striking. The gameplay and features list for all versions is identical, so apart from the visual bump, you have no reason to pick one version over another.

When 2004's *Spider-Man 2* hit theaters, the video game tie-in was an example of how licensed products could be done right. Ten years later, *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* is on the big screen, but this time the game is just an empty commercial cash-in. Like every *Spider-Man* game since Treyarch's title, this one features a shortlist of some of *Spider-Man*'s most dangerous enemies, a vast open-world version of New York to swing through, and a variety of petty crimes to stop. This formula was a blast back in 2004, but history has been repeating itself for a decade. Unfortunately, *Spider-Man*'s open-world shtick has been overplayed so many times that his puns look fresh by comparison.

After the serial killer Carnage starts terrorizing the city by killing thugs, the Kingpin puts together a vigilante task force that somehow ends up hunting down *Spider-Man*. Honestly, I don't need to tell you anything more about the plot, because it just doesn't matter, and the few RPG-like dialogue sequences do little to help you care about this series of tired plot devices.

Combat tries to emulate the attack/dodge rhythm made popular by *Batman's Arkham* titles, but the action in *Amazing Spider-Man 2* isn't balanced to be nearly as interesting or challenging as that series. For most of the game, you perform the same attack/dodge combo when Spidey's spider-sense goes off. You go through the same ritual for boss fights, except bosses have larger health bars and occasionally throw things at you or spawn minions — some of the later bosses do both.

In the usual fashion, side missions, scattered across the city, try to distract you from the main story. These range from stopping carjackings to saving civilians from fires to taking pictures of crime scenes. The game coerces you into completing more petty crime missions with a Hero/Menace meter. The more crimes you stop the higher your Hero meter climbs, but if you wait too long, some of these crimes time out and the meter dips towards Menace. This is a cool idea, but since most of these missions are repetitive, I didn't appreciate the pressure to complete them. In the end, I didn't see any meaningful consequences for my actions reflected in the gameplay or story, which made me feel like I wasted my time.

I'm sad to see that the *Spider-Man* games have fallen this far, because the formula once worked exceedingly well. Beenox's *Amazing Spider-Man 2* is trying to cash in on its film's popularity while emulating many of Treyarch's touchstones, and in nearly every area, this game is inferior to a title that came out nearly a decade ago. » Ben Reeves

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 3 versions of The Amazing Spider-Man 2. The game is also available on Xbox One, Wii U, 360, PC.



Drakengard 3

Soulless blood splatter

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix
Developer Access Games **Release** May 20 **Rating** M

6

PS3

► Concept

Play as Zero, a woman on a mission to kill all of her sisters protecting the world.

► Graphics

The visuals aren't impressive, with stock environments and generic character models. The cutscenes look better, but aren't exactly thrilling.

► Controls

Solid voice acting and a few standout tunes accompany the game, but some of the music gets repetitive.

► Playability

The basics are easy to grasp, but the finicky controls are frustrating.

► Story/Characterization

Outside of a few interesting scenes and battles, *Drakengard 3* is too routine and flawed to recommend.

► Replay Value

Moderate

The *Drakengard* series has always been divisive. Repetitive gameplay and frustrating controls have alienated some players, while the dark tone and furious action attracted a devoted (albeit small) base of dragon-loving fans. *Drakengard 3* doesn't correct the series' imperfections; instead, it adds to them with over-the-top controls, redundant levels, and homocidal characters.

Despite all its weaknesses, *Drakengard 3* has an interesting premise. In this prequel, you play as Zero, a heartless woman out to kill her five sisters. Unfortunately, the narrative and characters make a lot of missteps. First off, Zero's companions are unbearable. Her dragon tries to act as her conscience, but his "why must you kill?" shtick is overplayed. She also recruits an old man who is obsessed with his genitals, and another character who constantly tries to get into Zero's pants. Zero herself has some good one-liners, but the better efforts are buried in a lot of bad party banter.

Each sister has a set of levels to conquer before you can attack her, and these linear affairs are bland and uncreative. The setup is always the same: Slice your way through a sea of enemies with special powers and a variety of weapons, engage in a boss battle, and maybe use your dragon in an even larger fight. The combat-oriented action is smooth and has some depth, but it never comes together in a satisfying way. This is mainly due to boring level design and predictable enemy patterns, which turns Zero's impressive arsenal into a dull hack-and-slash affair involving little strategy or skill. Dragon fights, which should have been a highlight of *Drakengard 3*, are some of the worst battles due to the poor controls. The AI party members are morons, and the long load times, bad checkpoints, and an overall lack of polish make every encounter a slog.

As with past *Drakengard* games, the game has multiple endings. However, if playing through the game once is such a pain, I can't imagine who would willingly go through such lackluster content multiple times. *Drakengard 3* offers some bright spots at first, but those quickly flicker and fade. It simply doesn't have enough to redeem itself from its laundry list of flaws. » Kimberley Wallace



Tropico 5

Go bananas with El Presidente

8.5

PC

► **Concept**

Become an economic, military, and political power as you build up a city

► **Graphics**

Zooming in on city inhabitants participating in various activities is a nice touch, but the title hardly delivers a visual oomph

► **Sound**

A punchy soundtrack and almost slapstick sound effects keep things lively

► **Playability**

A tutorial provides a welcome entry point, and the campaign is structured to slowly teach players the ropes. Controls are simple and intuitive, and the complex aspects are rolled out slowly

► **Life-time events**

With disasters, elections, and new tasks to complete at every turn, Tropico 5 provides a structured and entertaining city building experience

► **Replay Value**

Moderate

gameinforma
SILVER

Style 1-Player Simulation (4-Player Online) Publisher Kalypso Developer Haemimont Games Release May 23 Rating T

Tropico is known for tongue-in-cheek dictator humor combined with solid sim gameplay, and this fifth title in the series keeps the legacy going, with some solid changes to core systems. If you've played the series before, you should feel right at home. If you haven't, it's a great place to start — this is the most fun and accessible installment yet.

The robust single-player campaign does an excellent job of teaching new players how to get the most out of plantations, mines, and other sources of revenue while striving to curry favor among the people and keep their

lands safe from invading armies and troops. The classic research, trading, and exploration systems from previous titles in the series are all streamlined to be easily understandable. If the campaign isn't enough, El Presidente for you, there's sandbox mode, missions, and multi-player available to keep the dynasty going. The only issue is most of the modes play roughly the same.

Players have to strike a delicate balance in order to achieve maximum efficiency, whether it's carefully planning roads and residential areas or selecting the perfect mix of upgraded

crops for massive yields. Plenty of complexity is here for players looking for it, but newcomers to the franchise and casual sim fans can enjoy the basic components without worrying about selecting the perfect manager and upgrade for every building.

The game takes place over the course of three different eras, which keeps the gameplay fresh. Each era includes new buildings, research, and ways to tackle the goal of becoming the richest dictator ever. Developing your perfect plot is satisfying and enjoyable, with many different routes players can take to achieve success while mitigating the effects of invasions and disasters. Many difficulty modes are available so players of all skill levels can select the perfect setting to provide a challenge (or lack thereof).

The new multiplayer mode, which supports up to four players, is the most exciting feature in Tropico 5. Players can work together or against one another, and often diplomacy dictates a bit of both as each player angles for his or her own success. You're still going through the motions of single-player gameplay, but it is nice to have the option to play with friends and occasionally quibble over a resource node, and it's always fun to watch a random tornado destroy your friend's entire city.

Tropico 5 is a polished sim game, the only downside being that city development begins to lose its luster because so many of the game modes feel so similar. But if you're looking for an accessible, fun, and fresh city builder, Tropico 5 is an excellent choice. — Daniel Tack



Mario Kart 8

Another great lap



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Racing (12-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release May 30 Rating E

It's no secret Wii U owners have had slim pickings in recent months, but one of Nintendo's most consistent franchises is back to give you a reason to dust off that GamePad. Mario Kart 8 is filled with the traditional

upgrades: new tracks, new weapons, and new characters. Mario and friends can also drive on walls and ceilings now. All of those elements are fantastic, but the overall polish, gorgeous visuals, and entertaining replay system make this a bigger step up than we're used to in the series.

Upon hitting the track for the first time, there's no way to ignore the visual leap Mario Kart 8 has made thanks to its HD visuals. The vivid colors and cartoon-like Mushroom Kingdom environments have never looked better, even surpassing the beautiful Super Mario 3D World. I had several co-workers watch the game over my shoulder, and "Wow, this looks great" was the most frequent comment by far.

Once you're done ogling the visuals, you quickly realize the polish isn't purely cosmetic. Courses are finely tuned, with tracks like Mount Wario, Shy Guy Falls, Twisted Mansion, and Cloudtop Cruise in the spotlight as standouts. Mario Kart 8 is also host to the best version of Bowser's Castle, featuring a gigantic stone version of the villain punching away at the track and causing ripples. Course design even shines in tracks that are over 15 years old; Toad's Turnpike was one of my least favorite tracks on Mario Kart 64, but its inclusion in Mario Kart 8's retro cups is fantastic thanks to the ability to drive onto walls and soar above traffic.

Defying the laws of gravity is simple. Many walls feature blue curves that shift your tires

sideways when crossed. Keeping your cart or bike in the hover position isn't limited in any way, so large portions of some tracks are spent in topsy-turvy conditions that remain somehow coherent. Gravity transitions are never jarring, and they don't feel overused.

Like Super Mario 3D World, Mario Kart 8 features several controller options. While the GamePad and Wii remote/nunchuk schemes get the job done just fine, I prefer the Wii U's Pro controller. Regardless of what you choose, the controls are pitch perfect and you can never blame them for your own poor performance. This being Mario Kart, you can blame the barrage of blue shells and lightning strikes for sending you from first to ninth at the last second.

That infamous blue shell isn't as unstoppable as it has traditionally been. A new boombox item comes in handy when you're in first and you hear the ominous sounds of the flying projectile approaching. Directly before it strikes, activating the boombox shatters the shell and renders it useless. Another great new item is the piranha plant, which serves a variety of purposes. When active, it chomps away at anything in front of it, including opposing racers, obstacles on the track, and coins. If there's nothing for it to eat, it snaps at the air and gives you occasional speed bursts. The new boomerang flower allows you several chances of hitting an enemy, as you're able to throw it up to three times and it has a chance to hit as it goes forward and backward.

Grabbing the gold in every cup should keep you busy for a while, but the franchise's classic multiplayer is what keeps you coming back. For the first time, up to four players can

participate in grand prix competitions. With four human players and eight CPU racers, seeing where you stand in the rankings at the end of each track proves to be a lot of fun. Playing single-player or with one friend runs at a silky smooth framerate, but adding more players makes a noticeable difference. It may run a little slower, but no other areas suffer. If you're looking to take the action online, setting up matches with friends or random players is a straightforward and simple process. The only thing that falls on the disappointing side is battle mode, which eschews the unique arenas from the past in favor of duking it out on standard courses.

The addition that surprised me the most is the new highlight reel system. At the end of each race, you're given the option to watch a customizable recap of its events. Replay length, featured characters, and highlighted moments (big hits, drifts, etc.) can all be adjusted, and it's easy to fast-forward, rewind, and go into slow motion. Watching the characters' facial expressions slowly change when they're passed or hit with an item is an unexpected joy of this new entry.

Every Mario Kart title has been at least "good," but there are some clear standouts. Mario Kart 64 hits the right nostalgic notes for fans of local multiplayer, and Double Dash shined with unique gameplay elements and great courses. Mario Kart 8 should certainly be added to the list of top-tier entries, and none of the previous titles can boast the rock-solid total package that this one offers. Say what you will about Nintendo sticking with the tried and true, but I have no problem with that as long as it stays this fun. — Dan Ryckert

9.25

REVIEW

► Concept

Drive the long-running series forward, sideways, and upside-down

► Graphics

The franchise's HD debut is visually stunning, and the Mushroom Kingdom never looked better

REVIEW

The audio presentation is on par with the visuals, with great orchestrated tracks that are among the best in the series

► Playability

Numerous control options are available, but the Wii U Pro controller is the way to go unless you desperately want to honk a horn with your GamePad

REVIEW

Mario Kart remains pure fun, and it's never been better

► Replay Value

High

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Theif	8	Apr-14
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Madden NFL 25	8.5	May-14
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BioShock Infinite		
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Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII	7	Mar-14
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Wolf Among Us: Episode One - Faith, The	9	Dec-13
Wolf Among Us: Episode 2 - Smoke & Mirrors, The	7.5	Apr-14
WWE 2K14	8	Dec-13

8.5 | The Walking Dead Season Two - Episode 3: In Harm's Way

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC • iOS Release May 13 (PS3, PC) May 14 (360) May 15 (iOS) Rating M

I felt emotionally drained and dejected after finishing this episode - but what's so fascinating is never once did I want to stop playing. I want to see Clementine win. - Kimberley Wallace

7 | République - Episode 2: Metamorphosis

Platform iOS Release April 30 Rating 12+

Over four months after the first episode's release, République returns. Episode 2 features a new area of the Metamorphosis base, and additional powers and enemies, but most of the core gameplay mechanics remain unchanged. - Bryan Vore

6.5 | War Of The Vikings

Platform PC Release April 15 Rating M

Battles in War of the Vikings can be quick and enjoyable, but those flashes of fun aren't enough to keep the experience interesting. The action is fun and fast-paced (when the latency issues aren't letting you down), but things get stale too quickly. - Daniel Tack

7 | Hitman Go

Platform iOS Release April 17 Rating 17+

The entertainment Hitman Go provides is a landscape of stunted peaks and shallow valleys. It's not Agent 47's best performance, but as always, he gets the job done. - Jeff Marchiava

7 | Borderlands 2

Platform Vita Release May 13 Rating M

As a standalone product, this version of Borderlands 2 has little value, living in the shadows of its superior iterations. It gives dedicated vault hunters even more ways to spend time on Pandora - but if you love the core gameplay that much, its implementation on Vita is bound to disappoint you. - Joe Juba

STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com
Editor-in-Chief
Andy McManara andy@gameinformer.com
Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com
Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Senior Features Editor
Matt Helgeson matt@gameinformer.com
Digital Editor
Bryan Vore bryan@gameinformer.com
Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com
Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com

News Editor
Michael Futter miked@gameinformer.com
PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com
Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com
Senior Associate Editors
Jeff Marchalava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Tim Turi tim@gameinformer.com
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Associate Editors
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
Creative Director
Jeff Akerink effake@gameinformer.com
Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com
Graphic Designers
Leah Azarhin Tobin leah@gameinformer.com
Jason Pfizer jasonpfizer@gameinformer.com
Samm Langer samm.langer@gameinformer.com
Web Designer/Programmer

Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com
Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanapa@gameinformer.com
Video Editor
Jason Oestreicher jason@gameinformer.com
Circulation Services
Ted Kutzung ted@gameinformer.com
Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com
Senior Product Manager
Lisa Wagner lisa@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Borm rb@gameinformer.com
West Coast Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com
East Coast Advertising Sales Director
Suzanne Lang Midaugh suzanne@gameinformer.com
East Coast Advertising Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com
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Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com
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ANDROID

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7 | NES Remix 2

Platform: Wii U Release: April 25 Rating: E

Nostalgia and challenge are all well and good, but this game doesn't bring anything to the table that makes it more than a novelty experience. A stellar selection of games makes it a better download than the original, but you're better off replaying these classics in their true forms rather than experiencing them in tiny snippets. — Dan Ryckert

9 | Ultra Street Fighter IV

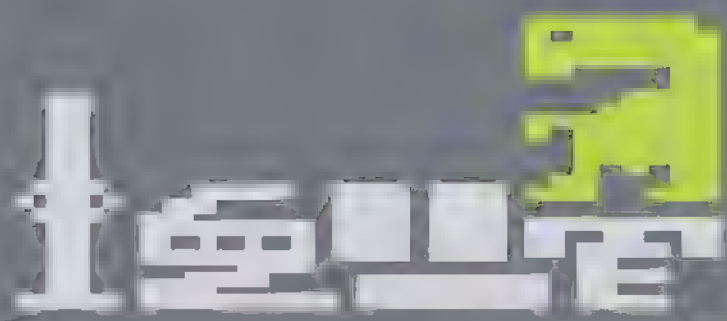
Platform: PS3 • 360 Release: June 3 Rating: T

Minimal effort has been put into making Ultra Street Fighter 4 a brand new title. The handful of new characters and modes won't entice newcomers, but considerable changes and balances have been made to the engine. It isn't groundbreaking, but it keeps the venerable Street Fighter IV on top of the fighting game hierarchy. — Jason Oestreicher

6.5 | The Wolf Among Us: Episode 4 - In Sneep's Clothing

Platform: PS3 • 360 • PC • iOS Release: May 27 (PS3, PC) May 28 (Xbox 360) May 29 (iOS) Rating: M

Other than seeing more about The Crooked Man and exactly who is involved with the crime ring, Episode 4 doesn't have much oomph. But you're already invested enough in the story that it shouldn't deter you from the finale. — Kimberley Wallace



Extraterrestrial Excavation

Seeking the fabled Atari cache in a pile of trash

by Kyle Hilliard

In the early eighties, Atari's once thriving video game business was collapsing. The company was struggling and it invested heavily in a video game adaptation of the wildly successful film *E.T. The Extra Terrestrial*. The game was terrible and is often, perhaps unfairly, labeled as the worst game of all time. E.T. is not the reason Atari fell apart, but it was a contributing factor. As a result of Atari's collapse, its inventory of cartridges, which consisted of E.T. and other Atari games, were dumped into a landfill in New Mexico.

Over the years, as trash piled on top of the abandoned cartridges, the cache began to take on the form of an urban legend. It was a

difficult-to-confirm symbolic legacy of Atari's failure. As the cache of cartridges became more and more mythical, so did its location. When I first heard the rumor, the cartridges were buried not in a landfill, but somewhere in the middle of the desert as though Atari had attempted to hide its shame.

On April 26, 2014, archeologists, garbologists, filmmakers, video game developers and publishers, a marketing firm, and a handful of excited fans all gathered around a landfill in Alamogordo, New Mexico to dig through decades' worth of trash in the hopes of unearthing video game history – and that's exactly what they did.

"Once I came onto the project and actually looked at the research, it seemed crazy to me that people didn't believe in it since there is a lot of evidence that it happened," filmmaker Zak Penn says. Penn teamed up with Microsoft's newly formed Xbox Entertainment Studios to craft a documentary film around the excavation excursion. Penn

has some experience pursuing urban legends on camera. In 2004 he directed *Incident at Loch Ness*, a documentary film about director Werner Herzog making a movie about the Loch Ness Monster. "Why is it so hard to believe that the company dumped their garbage in a garbage dump?" Penn asks.

By the time Penn got on board with the project, the wheels had already been turning for some time. Joe Lewandowski a.k.a. "the garbage guru of Alamogordo" had been researching the possible location of the cartridges with the intention of organizing the dig. Lightbox Interactive, the developer behind Starhawk on PlayStation 3, and Fuel Industries, a marketing

This Is Real Archaeology

The idea of digging up abandoned video game cartridges from a landfill may seem absurd, but it was a task the archaeologists and garbologists sifting through the rubble took very seriously. Archaeology, in general, is the study of trash. Archaeologists studying history are rarely afforded the opportunity to examine living quarters or treasured objects of forgotten civilizations. Instead, the best and most common way to discover secrets of a lost culture is to look through what has been thrown away. The archaeologists may have been digging through and archiving landfill trash on April 26, but from an archaeological perspective, it was important and worthwhile work.



Images: Microsoft

Zak Penn

Penn is known mostly as a screenwriter in Hollywood. He's been involved with films like *X-Men 2*, *The Avengers*, and *Last Action Hero*. He's also a lifelong gamer who began with Pong as a child and has kept up through today. "Video games are a big part of my life. I happen to love them," Penn says. Microsoft's Xbox Entertainment Studios invited Penn to make the film which will appear exclusively on Xbox Live later this year, and he quickly agreed to be involved. "I'm better at playing video games than I am at writing," Penn jokes, "I know a lot of fans online will say, 'I already know that.'" After finishing up this documentary, Penn will be working on writing a show for Showtime about a video game company.

firm, had also gotten involved to help fund the dig. There was more than enough evidence to prove the existence of the cache – the trouble was deciding where to dig. "You're basically looking for a haystack in a whole bunch of other haystacks, and then trying to find a needle in that haystack," Penn says.

Despite the difficulties related to sifting through garbage, archeologists working alongside Lewandowski, with Penn and his crew filming, found the fabled cache. "I went out there not knowing what to expect," Penn says regarding the actual dig, "You're basically inviting people to a landfill as you dig disgusting garbage out of the ground in hot,

windy, dusty weather. And hundreds of people showed up."

Howard Scott Warshaw, the designer for E.T.'s Atari adaptation, was among the group of onlookers and though he will reasonably argue that E.T. is probably not the worst game of all time, he happily embraces the legacy of the game. "I did something. A little program I wrote 32 years ago today is still generating social discourse!" Warshaw said at the dig site. "The fact that something I did this long ago is still creating this much interest – that just makes me feel good."

The number of cartridges buried was rumored to be around 750,000, but Penn is

not ready to reveal exactly how many were uncovered that day. He was excited to reveal the discovery and share some footage from the dig, but wants to leave some details for the documentary.

As for the future of the urban-legend-turned fact collection of cartridges, it's unclear exactly what is in store. The city of Alamogordo, New Mexico owns the landfill and in turn the cartridges. Some will be donated and distributed among museums, but the fate of the rest is undecided. "I urge that someone should steal them and bury them in another landfill, so we can do another movie about it," Penn jokes, "but I don't think they're going to do that."

CO-OP TRIVIA

Unite gaming's legendary teammates

Video games are home to some of the most iconic partners of all time. Pair up the characters portraits with the name of the correct partner on the right. Then tally up your score, and see what buddy cop duo embodies your co-op knowledge.

by Tim Turi



A
Arbiter



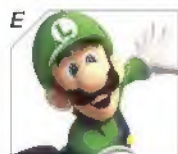
B
Elliot Salem



C
Earl



D
Paxton Fettel



E
Luigi



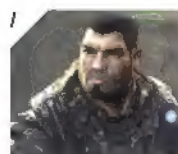
F
Rash



G
Atlas



H
Billy Lee



I
Dom Santiago



J
Bill Rizer



K
Sheva Alomar



L
Kung Lao



M
Mike Haggart



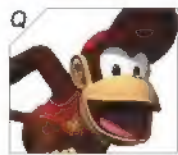
N
Rocky



O
Cream



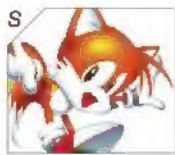
P
Bub



Q
Diddy



R
Francis



S
Tails



T
James Lynch

- _____ 1. Toejam
- _____ 2. Mario
- _____ 3. Lance Bean
- _____ 4. Pocky
- _____ 5. Jimmy Lee
- _____ 6. Tyson Rios
- _____ 7. Sonic
- _____ 8. Marcus Fenix
- _____ 9. Bob
- _____ 10. Liu Kang
- _____ 11. Cody Travers
- _____ 12. Zoey
- _____ 13. P-Body
- _____ 14. Point Man
- _____ 15. Chris Redfield
- _____ 16. Zitz
- _____ 17. Cookies
- _____ 18. Master Chief
- _____ 19. Adam "Kane" Marcus
- _____ 20. Donkey Kong

Key: 1-C, 2-E, 3-A, 4-N, 5-H, 6-B, 7-S, 8-F, 9-R, 10-L, 11-M, 12-R, 13-G, 14-D, 15-K, 16-F, 17-Q, 18-A, 19-T, 20-Q

How did you stack up? Each correct answer is worth one point



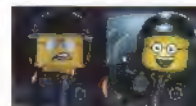
0-4
Turner and Hooch



5-8
Schmidt and Jenko



9-12
Robocop and Lewis



13-16
Bad Cop/Good Cop



17-20
Tango and Cash



GO PRO GET MORE



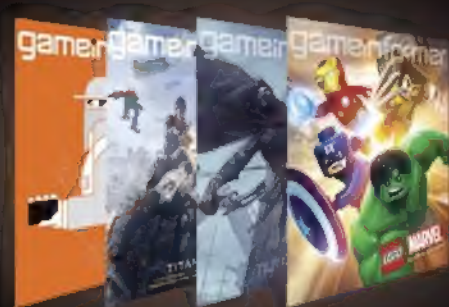
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