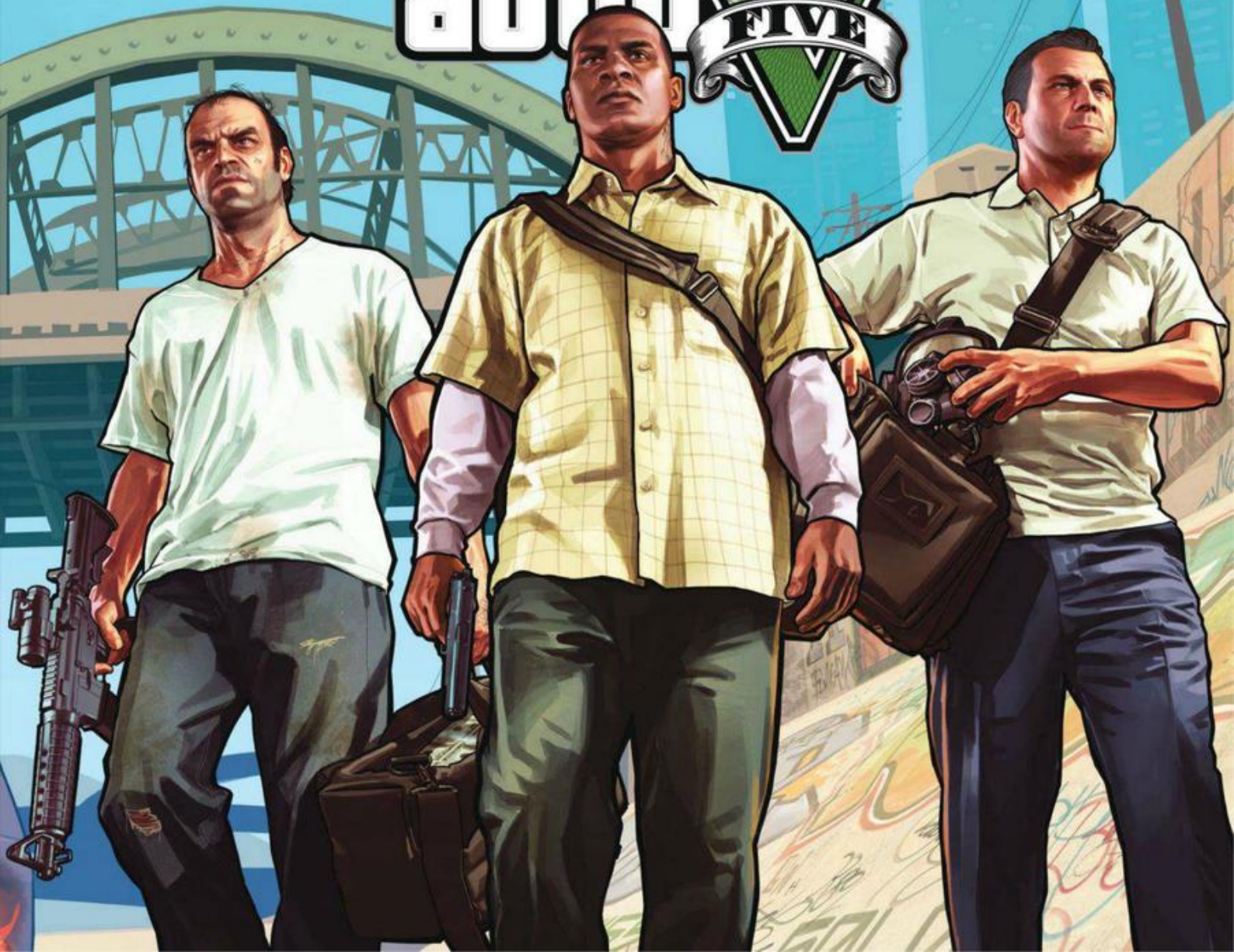


gameinformer

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

grand theft auto V





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BEST PS VITA GAME
BEST OF SHOW - GAME INFORMER
BEST OF SHOW - YA, 100! GAMES
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BEST ACTION TITLE
BEST ACTION GAME - IGN
BEST ACTION GAME - IGN

OVER 60 E3 NOMINATIONS

BEST OF SHOW - GAME TRAILERS
BEST OF SHOW - NEWSARAMA
BEST OF SHOW - X-PLAY
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BLOOD
INTENSE VIOLENCE
SEXUAL THEMES
STRONG LANGUAGE

AVAILABLE ON ALL CONSOLES

ASSASSIN'S —CREED— III

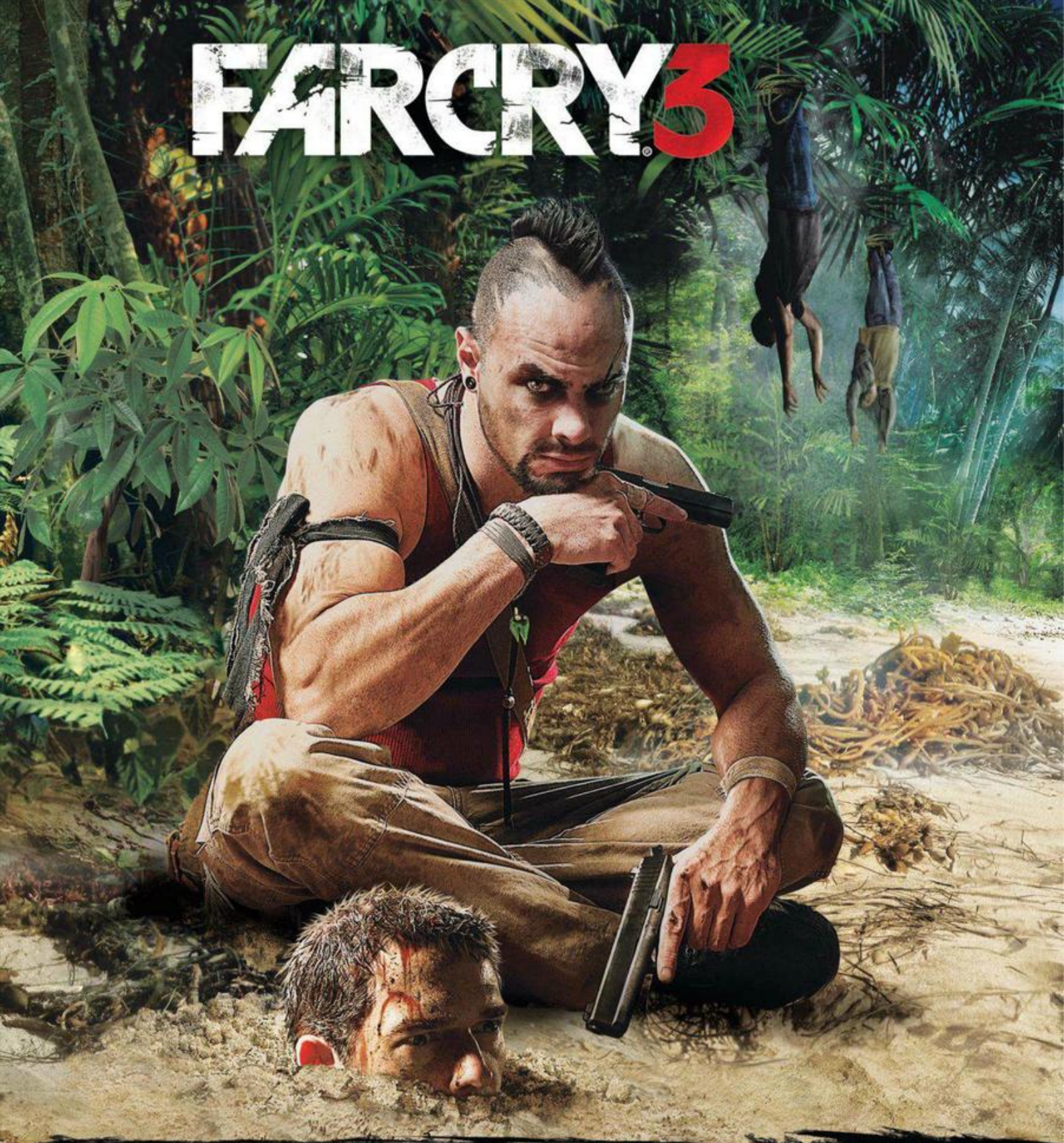
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"Far Cry 3 is like Skyrim with guns"
-Machinima

"An echo of Red Dead Redemption"
-Kotaku

"Hell of a lot of fun"
-IGN

"Gorgeous"
-CNET.com

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BEST OF E3
Awards
& Nominations

JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF INSANITY

Far off the charts lies an island unlike any other. A place where heavily armed warlords traffic in slaves. Where outsiders are hunted for ransom. And as you embark on a desperate quest to rescue your friends, you realize that the only way to escape this darkness... is to embrace it.



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

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comment on this letter at
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The Year Ahead

Every year, our holiday issue is a little bit-sweet for me. I love that we completed another 12 fantastic issues of Game Informer and finally got Game Informer Digital up and running on iPad and 10-inch Android devices this year. It's always exciting to create new products, as I enjoy the trials and triumphs that we encounter as we try to conquer this new digital domain.

With victories come new challenges. Our readers are demanding that we deliver Game Informer Digital to seven-inch devices and mobile phones, as well as improve our current products and deliver them to all the corners of the world. I'm confident we are up to the task. I am thrilled with the work the team has done with our tablet edition, and our plans for 2013 are to create better experiences in more places for Game Informer Digital while expanding and enhancing gameinformer.com along the way.

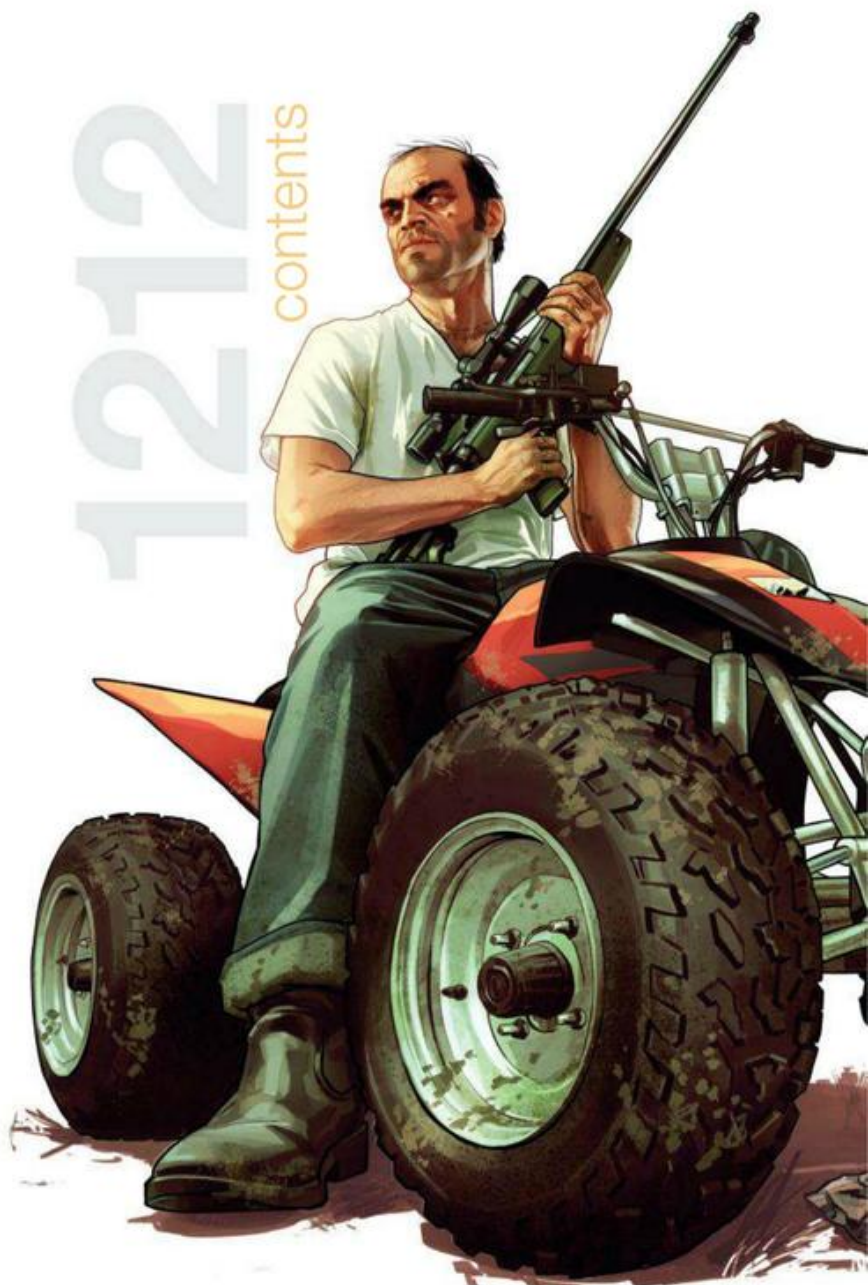
The year 2013 will be a very exciting and busy year for Game Informer. I can't share all our plans with you quite yet, but I promise you that we won't take our growth for granted. We value your readership and contribution to Game Informer in print, digital, and on gameinformer.com, and will do everything in our power to make sure that we bring you only the best.

We are not alone in that endeavor. The new year starts with a number of fantastic games that slipped into the first half of 2013, a spring that will bring Grand Theft Auto V, a Nintendo Wii U system just starting to show off its capabilities, and hopefully new systems from Microsoft and Sony. With so much exciting news to look forward to, you can bet we'll have another year chock full of world-exclusive game reveals.

Yes, 2012 was great, and I'm sad to see it come to an end, but I'm excited for the thrills that lie ahead. We have lots of exciting games and news to unveil in the year ahead that we will bring to you in new and innovative ways. Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

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Grand Theft Auto V

Rockstar is changing everything for Grand Theft Auto V. Check out our cover story to read about the game's three protagonists, the largest Grand Theft Auto world ever created, and tons of additional details and new screens.



regulars

» 8 Feedback

Readers take a break from gaming to reminisce about Nintendo's iconic plumber, speak about the need for accessibility in video games, and marvel at our ability to see into the future.

» 14 Connect

We celebrate the 25th anniversary of Maxis with a huge feature recounting the Sim City creator's impressive history. Also, check out our holiday buying guide and top 10 favorite video game holiday homages.

» 76 Previews

This month we put our hands on Raiden's sword in Metal Gear Rising Revengeance, design our own metropolis in SimCity, and change our perception of the past with Capcom's Remember Me.

» 90 Reviews

Many of the 2012's biggest games are reviewed this month. How did Halo 4 turn out in 343 Industries' hands? Does Assassin's Creed continue to excel in a new time period? Head to our reviews section to find out.

» 112 Game Over

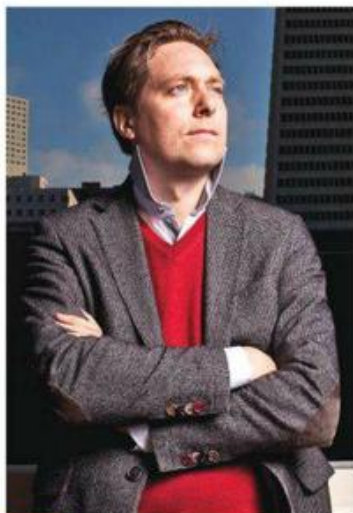
We ask the producer and director of Pokémon Black and White 2 important, long-standing questions about the series like, "What's it really like inside of a Pokéball?"



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Interview: David Helgason



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NBA 2K13



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Zero's Escape: The Last Virtue



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This month in Feedback, readers reminisce about Mario, marvel at our all-seeing omnipotence, advocate game accessibility, and shower us in motherly love.

Mario Mania

I want to thank you for your cover story on the new Mario. Never has a magazine cover given me so much happiness. It's definitely going in my scrapbook.

Katie Williams
via email

I was shocked to see Mario on the cover of issue 234. I am so used to having FPS games or fighting games on the cover, I didn't realize it was Game Informer. I am such a Mario fan that I skipped everything else and read and enjoyed every word of the cover story. But one thing bothers me. Why do the goombas always look mad while the koopas look like they're smiling?

Alex Hancock
via email

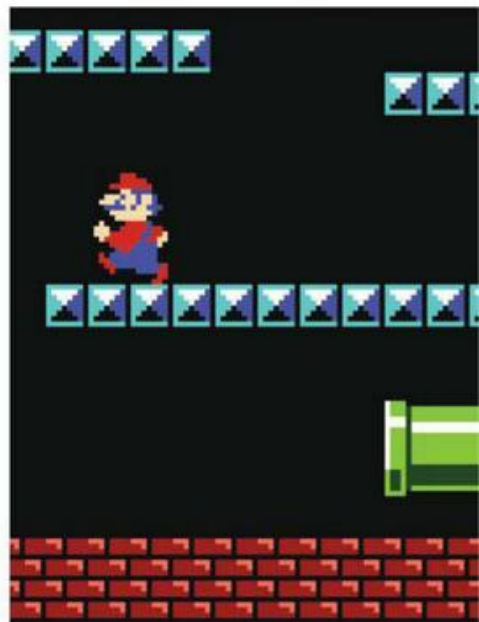
Without a doubt, our New Super Mario Bros. U issue features one of the happiest covers we've ever had – a fitting honor for Nintendo's legendary mascot. As for the disposition of goombas: If your only purpose in life was to fall off ledges and get stepped on, wouldn't you be mad too?

Before They Were Super

I'm curious, why does the original Mario Bros. game always get overlooked? I'm talking about the non-scrolling platformer in which Mario and Luigi had to jump up to knock turtles, crabs, and fireflies onto their backs, and then kick them off the screen. You did a whole feature on Mario Bros. games, but didn't mention the original. I asked some friends if they remembered the game, and they said I was mistaken. According to them, the Mario Bros. series started with Super Mario Bros. Has everyone just wiped this game from their minds? Does no one else get the urge to kick a turtle when they hear the opening notes of "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik"?

David T.
via email

Fear not, David: While our Mario timeline only covered the "Super" installments of the series (and not the "New" series and other spin-offs, as other readers inquired about), you're not mistaken. The 1983 arcade hit Mario Bros. introduced a variety of elements that would become staples in the Super Mario Bros. series, including Luigi, prototype koopas, POW blocks, and Mario's questionable plumbing skills.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Access For All

In issue 234, the article "Game Accessibility: What It Is And Why It Matters" by Josh Straub was an unexpected and very welcome find. My brother loves video games almost as much as I do, but his choices for games are quite limited. He was born with cerebral palsy, which severely limits his hand-eye coordination. We have, time and time again, discussed this very topic. We would love to see more games that are within his range of play, while still remaining challenging. Fortunately, he is very good at the Madden series, which he purchases annually. I truly hope some of the ideas that Josh brought to light are addressed in the near future, as my brother and I are always on the lookout for more games that we can both enjoy. In the meantime, I'll just settle for watching my brother make people ragequit on Madden.

Kyloe Flesner
via email

We received an overwhelming amount of positive responses to Josh's editorial, sharing in his desire for developers to consider accessibility when creating their games. To follow more of Josh's writing on game accessibility, head to daggersystem.com.



Another Perspective

I agree with every part of Josh Straub's article on game accessibility, but while he touches on how motion-control games are alienating a portion of the disabled community, at the same time they are bringing others in. Many hospitals and nursing homes (including the one I work at) frequently use these consoles. I myself used the Wii to work on my balance/walking abilities after I lost them to a brain tumor. The Wii made it more fun to relearn these skills, and I felt much less embarrassed to fall over playing a game than while performing a certain motor skill. These consoles are also safer for certain forms of physical therapy, as you are interacting with the digital rather than the physical world – so the consequences of, say, missing a catch, won't result in getting hit with a ball. I still agree with Josh about alienating some disabled gamers; I just want to point out how they are helping others as well.

Krista Lundberg
via email

You bring up an excellent point, Krista. It's easy to overlook both the negative and positive aspects certain gaming trends have on different populations of the gaming community. Recognizing that diversity is part of Josh's goal; we're sure he appreciates your input.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions:

"Isaac Clarke of Dead Space needs a hug. Is there any way to manage this?"

Not without getting sliced in half with a plasma cutter.

"My wife won't let me buy Mass Effect 3 because 'it's the most boring game ever,' and she hates it. Any advice for her?"

Tell her to get some better opinions.

"Have you guys ever thought of advertising your magazines with a bunch of cats and explosions?"

Obviously!

Worst News Tip of the Month:

"I need make good luck"

Worst Opening Line to a Feedback Letter:

"First of all, this is an enraged letter."

Reader Gibberish:

"Hello, I wanted to talk to someone also A writing an article about the tournaments that for the outfit game."

Question of the Month:

What classic video game genre would you revive and why?



gi spy



(Left) After joining Reiner, Tim, and Dan for an episode of *Replay*, comedian Frank Caliendo became the fourth member of *GI*'s official boy band, "Raging Joysticks." Watch the *Replay* episode online. **(Right)** Matt Helgeson and Prodigy of Mobb Deep keep an eye out for shook ones at Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed III* art exhibit in Manhattan.

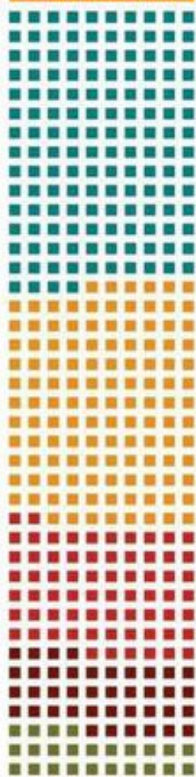
CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY

continued on page 10

feedback 9

On Your Mind



- Support For Game Accessibility **36%**
- Villain Roleplay Responses **31%**
- Mario Cover Story Happiness **17%**
- Madden 13 Gripes **10%**
- Tabletop Gaming Love **6%**



Post-Apocalyptic Pokémon?

I'm trying to get the word out on a big idea: Pokémon meets Fallout. If Nintendo and Bethesda could join up and fuse their styles together, the impact would be gigantic. Picture this: You start by creating your own character, choosing what he/she looks like and what clothes they wear. Then you pick one of the three starting Pokémon and begin your RPG adventure. But instead of the normal 2D Pokémon we're all used to, it's in the form of Bethesda's 3D RPGs that are quickly taking the world by storm. Later in your journey, you can choose to be good and fight evil with your Pokémon, or end up joining Team Rocket. It's a pretty decent idea.

Tanner W.
British Columbia, Canada

We're willing to overlook the ridiculousness of this idea if it means we can one day decapitate Meowth in a slow-motion V.A.T.S. sequence. Consider us on board.

Kid Detested, Mother Approved

Thank you for printing the Feedback letter from the boy who started his own Minecraft server and was being disciplined for disobeying his dad (Privileges Revoked, issue 234). My 12-year-old son had just spent time on Minecraft instead of getting ready to go to a soccer game, which made leaving really hectic. He was getting an attitude about it when I had him read the letter and response. Parenting in the gaming age is a serious challenge; supporting drive and creativity while keeping kids grounded in the things of this world is tricky. Any advice you all can give kids about balance in life and responsibility is greatly appreciated!

Lara Lewis
via email

I wanted to thank you for your response to "Privileges Revoked." I am a gamer as well as a mom, and I appreciate you and your magazine always siding with the parents. It's very difficult to be a responsible parent in the age of digital media and video games. There's so much to filter and monitor, and I am always grateful to see your responses to kids that complain their parents won't let them play Call of Duty or other M-rated games. Thanks for helping us parents!

Adina Johnson
via email

Sarcastic Soothsayers

Did you know you guys are psychic? In your Game Infarcer parody in Issue 204, you (or should I say Darth Clark) wrote about the Nintendo WiiDS, and it was described as "a hybrid of handheld and console gaming." Well, the Wii U is a combination of handheld and console gaming. Just wanted to give you credit for your remarkable talent!

Kenny Martin
Pacifica, CA

Darth Clark may be arrogant, but there's a reason we keep him on the payroll. Specifically, he can see the future. We're still waiting for his prediction of Red Dead Refrigerator to come true, but he assures us the game is in the works.

The Gaming Apocalypse?

A lot of gamers online seem worried about the game industry and many are predicting its downfall. Whether it's the annual release schedule of triple-A franchises, the oversaturation of FPS games on the market, or the damage that the used game market is doing to development studios, everything seems to be leading up to a huge gaming apocalypse. However, as much as I read or hear about these issues, I never get the impression that the quality of video games has decreased, nor do I feel like there is not enough variety in genres and settings. What is your take on this dark prophecy that tells of the demise of all gaming?

Elbin Cenisev
via email

We don't have to be oracles to figure this one out. Every time a new trend emerges

in gaming, someone declares it the death of industry – and they've been wrong every time. While nostalgia will continue skewing some peoples' memories of how great past generations were, this year's holiday lineup proves that the industry is still alive and well.

Bad Is Better

In issue 234, we asked readers what video game villain they would like to play as. We received an abundance of enthusiastic replies, making us question the morality of our readership. Here are some responses:

I would be Bowser from the Super Mario Bros. series. Apart from being Mario's main antagonist, he's an amazing tennis player, golfer, and kart racer. He obviously has the security figured out in princess Peach's castle: Sam Fisher and Snake could learn a thing or two from him.

Michael Garner

I would like to play as Lex Luthor. Seriously, can you imagine a game where you plan crimes and manage multimillion dollar corporate decisions, all while slowly working on a plan to destroy Superman? That would be way cool.

Robert Perry

Pyramid Head from Silent Hill. I don't think there even needs to be a reason to back this up.

Judi Corvinnelli

I'd be Mike Tyson from Punch Out!! Then I would mercilessly crush the dreams of young gamers with just a couple of punches to the face. I hate you, Mike Tyson!

Carlos Carmona



(Left) WWE '13's creative director Cory Ladesma was seriously impressed by Dan's wrestling shrine, and a little creeped out by how lovingly he cradles his Sheamus dolly. (Right) Ben "International Incident" Reeves hung out with this hotdog statue in Tokyo for an hour before he realized it wasn't alive. It's too bad, as they were quickly becoming BFFs.



GI SPY

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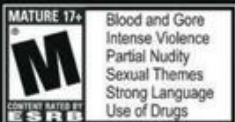
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SQUARE ENIX.



1



2



3



4

WINNER

1 Tessa Boronski
Link poses for the next cover of *GQ*

2 Carlos Pulido
Having leaves for hands must make a lot of things difficult for Petey Piranha

3 Jessica Allen
Spyro has wings, which is probably a safer method of flight than surfing on a missile

4 M. Moaiad
Outabachi Activision finally responds to complaints about Call of Duty never changing things up

Corrections:
In issue 235's Dead Island: Riptide feature, we mistakenly stated that our online roundtable discussion would include members of Techland. In actuality, we were joined by members of Deep Silver.

Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest | 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor | Mpls, MN 55401

GI SPY

continued from page 10

(Left) Ubisoft's Stone Chin, Raha Bouda, and Richard Farrese pose with Miller in front of a familiar cover after playing Assassin's Creed III: Liberation.

(Right) Reader Aidan Cavanaugh is such a huge fan of Replay that he has an entire wardrobe devoted to the show. Thanks for watching, Aidan!







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NOTABLES

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Cliff Bleszinski Leaves Epic Games

*What does the Gears of War creator's departure
mean for the industry?*

"This just happened." Those three words, tweeted by Epic Games' design director Cliff Bleszinski on October 3, sent shockwaves through the game industry and the Gears of War fan community. The tweet was accompanied by a link to a page on Epic's website, which broke the news: Bleszinski, widely known as "CliffyB" and the public face of the company for two decades, was leaving.

by Matt Helgeson



On Epic's official site, CEO Tim Sweeney and President Mike Capps expressed their admiration for Bleszinski and wished him a fond farewell. Sweeney said, "In 20 wonderful years with Epic, Cliff Bleszinski has grown into a true design luminary, and his contributions to the Unreal and Gears series have helped shape the game industry into what it is today. Cliff leaves with our gratitude for his many contributions, and our wishes for continued success in the next chapter in his life."

Capps' statement read, "Cliff has been a business associate for the past 20 years and, while it is sad to see him move on from Epic, I know that everyone here has benefitted from his passion for gaming and the depth of his expertise and experiences."

They also released an excerpt from Bleszinski's note to his Epic colleagues, which expressed gratitude for the talent and friendship of his workmates past and present and also hinted at some of his reasons for leaving: "I've been doing this since I was a teenager, and outside of my sabbatical last year, I have been going non-stop. I literally grew up in this business, as Mike [Capps] likes to say. And now that I'm grown up, it's time for me to take a much-needed break."

While the break appears to be amicable, Bleszinski was the latest in a string of high-profile staff members who have departed Epic Games in recent months. In August, Rod Fergusson, a Microsoft veteran who had served as Epic's production director for more than eight years, suddenly

left for a position at Irrational Games in Boston, where he is working on the long-awaited BioShock Infinite. A few days later, Adrién Chmielarz of Epic's People Can Fly studio, also announced that he was leaving the company. Chmielarz was the creative director at People Can Fly, and played a major role in the development of Bulletstorm and Gears of War: Judgment. In recent weeks, Chmielarz announced that he had formed a new independent studio called The Astronauts, which recently signed a deal to use Epic's ubiquitous Unreal Engine 3 development tools. Back in July, Lee Perry, the senior lead gameplay designer for the Gears of War series, exited Epic to form Bitmonster, a new company focused on mobile development.

This exodus of top talent from the company has led to speculation that there is trouble behind the scenes at Epic. Though there is little hard evidence, it's odd to see such highly placed (and, we assume, highly paid) employees leaving a company that appears from the outside to be a developer's dream: independent, flush with cash, and equipped with a world-class technology base. It is worth noting that these departures came in the months following the announcement that the Chinese technology investment company Tencent (which also owns a share of League of Legends developer Riot Games) had purchased a minority share of Epic Games. Though Tencent and Epic did not disclose the terms of the purchase, the announcement said that Epic would continue to operate independently. It's unclear whether Tencent's investment in Epic has anything to do with the departures of any of the previously mentioned staff.

It's also anyone's guess how Bleszinski's exit will affect Epic's future. Bleszinski was not one of the founders of the company, but over the course of his 20-year tenure there, his outsized personality made him Epic's public spokesman. Bleszinski, always quick with a joke and a pithy soundbite, is a popular interview in the gaming press, and has legions of both admirers and detractors in the online gaming community. While many game developers struggle with the spotlight, Bleszinski embraced it, and was sure to be spotted onstage during Microsoft's E3 press conference, demonstrating the latest edition of Gears of War to the crowd and millions watching worldwide. With his flashy cars and spiked hair, he is, in many ways, the dream of the average gamer come true: a guy who made his fortune doing what he loved, and had fun doing it.

With Bleszinski gone, Epic has lost a great personality, but more importantly, it's lost a tremendously talented game designer. At times, Bleszinski's gregarious temperament and everydude persona overshadowed his significant accomplishments. A teen prodigy, Bleszinski made his first game while still in high school, and created Jazz Jackrabbit for Epic at the age of 19. As the years went on, he played a major design role in Epic's Unreal franchise and was the driving creative force behind Gears of War, which helped establish Epic as a major console player and gave Microsoft a much-needed blockbuster franchise to complement Halo. His work on Unreal Tournament, which was one of the first to push the idea of FPS-as-sport (even in its name), still echoes in the professional gaming scene today.

Though a company as talented and successful as Epic will hardly wither and die, there is always a risk that a studio's vision can become compromised when some of its figureheads depart. However, there's also the chance that, as was the case when Naughty Dog's founders Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin left the company in 2004, the absence of Bleszinski, Fergusson, Chmielarz, and Perry will give other talented developers the chance to shine in new leadership roles.

As to what's next for Bleszinski, it's anyone's guess. Now out from under the thumb of Epic public relations, he seems to be doing exactly what he said in his statement: taking a break. Judging by his Twitter, he's spending it exactly how most of us would: playing games, seeing new movies like *Looper* with his wife, and generally enjoying the good life. Still, one wonders what happens when the itch to make games again returns?

The concerns for Epic are obvious, but Bleszinski's departure, coupled with the recent announcement from BioWare's Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk that they were leaving the game industry altogether, should be cause for dismay for the game industry as a whole. If Bleszinski, at the ripe old age of 37, can't hack the grind of triple-A console development anymore, what does that say about the industry? If it can't get a handle on making the production of large-scale games more manageable, it's likely that more high-profile developers will wake up one morning, check their bank balance, and decide that Sims creator Will Wright had the right idea when he tromped off from the industry to go play with robots. ♦

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Spike TV's

VGAs Turn 10

Turn 10



by Jeff Cork

This year marks a milestone for Spike TV's Video Game Awards: The VGAs are now 10. To put that into perspective, *Call of Duty* picked up the award for best first-person action game in the first broadcast – that's "Call of Duty" without any numerals or additional subtitles. Since the initial event, the show has consistently served as a platform for worldwide game reveals and celebrity appearances.

This year looks like it won't break that streak, either. Our friend Geoff Keighley, the show's executive producer, gave us a glimpse of two of the games you can expect to see on this year's show. Tune in to Spike TV's VGA 10 live on Friday, December 7 on Spike TV and at spiketv.com at 9 p.m. ET to see these games and many more.



Viewers can look forward to a new look at Gears of War: Judgment, including some never-before-seen environments. Here are a few concept illustrations that provide a sneak peek at what's on the way.



It looks as though Joel and Ellie are joined by this mysterious woman in The Last of Us. Who is she? Can she be trusted? Stay tuned.



Samuel L. Jackson is back!

Actor Samuel L. Jackson returns to the show after taking a few years off. We spoke to the veteran host to get his thoughts on the show, gaming, and more.

You've hosted before, in 2005, 2006, 2007, and now 2012. Are you the Billy Crystal of Spike TV Awards? A not-so-secret weapon?
You saying I'm getting predictable after all these years? Maybe I'll switch things up this time.

What is it about these awards that keeps you coming back?

They're one hell of a party. It's just a blast to host them. I like the bands, the game character costumes, and the crazy gamers.

You hosted the BET awards back in July. Any danger of being hosted out?

Ha! I think I've still got something left in the tank.

Philosophical question: What do you consider the role of a host? Are you basically the hype man?

Really, I think a host is there to, one, keep the show moving, two, keep the show fun, and, three, make everybody on stage look good. That makes for a dope show.

Should Spike TV's censors hover their fingers over the bleep button?

Naw, a three-second delay ought to do the trick! But it is a Spike show, so I can at least make the show a hard PG-13 if not a full-blown R-rated one.

You've appeared in a number of games over the years. Would you call yourself a gamer?

Yeah, of course! I'm not super hardcore, but I like blowing things up, shooting bad guys, and running around in fantasy worlds. I do it on screen all the time.

You've also voiced several memorable animated characters in movies, including *The Boondocks*, *The Incredibles*, *Afro Samurai*, and *Astro Boy*. Is the recording process basically the same as working in video games?

Yep. Voice acting is voice acting is voice acting to a large degree.

I've read that you like to see your movies in the theater at least once. Do you try to play games that you're in, too?

For sure. It's great to have a little pixel version of me running around with crazy weapons and crazy powers.

Living the Simulated Dream



25

Years of Maxis





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he year 1987 is a pivotal one in gaming history, introducing iconic series like Mega Man, Metal Gear, and Final Fantasy. Though shooting robots and fighting wizards were the most prominent gameplay moments from that year, a new type of experience was taking shape at the newly formed Maxis Software – a small studio in Moraga, California formed by Will Wright and Jeff Braun to publish SimCity. In the

gaming landscape of 1987, a simulation about urban planning was risky, but Braun and Wright hoped that it would find an audience.

After 25 years, Maxis is a different organization in many ways. It has grown into a multi-studio developer, survived a corporate buyout, released a high-profile disappointment, and built the best-selling PC series of all time. Despite these changes, the core of Maxis has remained intact over time; its focus on fun, accessible, and creative content lets players' imaginations run wild. The studio's ability to retain this identity over time is due in large part to the passion of its dedicated staff, many of whom have been at Maxis long enough to witness a wide array of its stumbles and triumphs.

These are the stories from those people about the ups, downs, and quirks that come with building and maintaining one of the most respected studios in the industry – and the games that make Maxis famous. **by Joe Juba**

Contributors

Current Maxis Staff

- **Ben Bell** (1) executive producer, The Sims Studio
- **Lucy Bradshaw** (2) senior vice president, Maxis
- **Kip Katsarelis** (3) lead producer, SimCity
- **Charles London** (4) creative director, The Sims Studio
- **Ocean Quigley** (5) creative director, SimCity
- **Robi Kauker** (6) audio director, The Sims Studio
- **Lyndsay Pearson** (7) producer, The Sims Studio
- **Christian Stratton** (8) UX director, SimCity

Former Maxis Staff

- **Will Wright** (9) CEO, Stupid Fun Club
- **Chris Hecker** (not pictured) developer, SpyParty
- **Rod Humble** (not pictured) CEO, Linden Labs
- **Alex Hutchinson** (not pictured) creative director, Assassin's Creed III





talking about their approaches to SimCity. It was wonderfully written, maybe a 10- or 12-year-old kid. It was one of the most brilliant things I've ever seen.

Bradshaw: We get the purists. They will point out if we've missed a number. We strive for integrity, and we strive for consistency in our integrity. It is a game. It needs to be playable and it needs to be understandable. So we strive for that, and yet, we also strive to make it behave consistently within that construct.

Quigley: The actual urban planners, I think, like it a lot because it takes the thing they have to stress about and turns it into a game. People who aren't city planners know it's a game, and people who are city planners are just tickled that somebody's making anything that relates to their profession.

The broad range of fans helped turn SimCity into an enduring franchise, but the team felt the pressure with each iteration to provide something new.

Kip Katsarelis: There's definitely a challenge in not just repeating what's been done, but capturing the essence of - for SimCity - that puzzle solving and that challenge and that pushback you get from the simulation.

Christian Stratton: We've explored ideas that bridge between The Sims and SimCity. We explored the idea of games that brought the camera in closer. It was a natural thing, and people had been asking for it. We did explore it, and often what happened is we came away thinking, "Well, we just don't really have the right game here." So we'd just drop it once we felt confident in that assessment.

Bradshaw: I came on board to lead SimCity 3000. It had moved to being 3D, but it wasn't at a time when computer processing could ultimately tackle such a thing.

Quigley: My favorite game that we've done so far is SimCity 4. Because of that hobby, model

Maxis has its roots in a pizza party, where co-founders Jeff Braun and Will Wright first met. At that point, the "game industry" was hardly an industry at all; computers were not widespread, and creating games was largely a hobbyist pursuit.

Will Wright: I met Jeff at that pizza party and I had shown him an early version of SimCity. Jeff at the time had a small company making font software for the media. But he was really into games. He didn't give a s--- about fonts, but he loved games. He saw SimCity and he just got really excited about it and said, "Let's do a game company together." We started talking about it more, and he ended up selling his font company. He had some money from that, and I had some money from royalties on a previous game, and it just kind of went from there.

Lucy Bradshaw: I don't think Will, of his own impetus, would have formed Maxis the way that

it was. There are those people in life that, together, they can take something further than otherwise would be possible alone. I think Jeff has that ability to make other people even better than they are. Both of them together were a fascinating combination.

Ocean Quigley: My first impression of Jeff was, first and foremost, he's a businessman. He was the guy who was setting the top-level objectives for the company.

Wright: I think I was more in the creative space, Jeff was in the business space, which worked out well. Jeff has a passion for growing a company and running a business, and I had more of a passion for creating a product. I think my perspective was more, "How far we could take this stuff on the computer? What can we do that's cool?"

Building SimCity

When it officially released in 1989, SimCity won acclaim and awards. Though it sold well, the extent of the game's success didn't completely sink in at Maxis.

Wright: I think the first time I really kind of realized that was when Time or Newsweek did a full-page review of SimCity, and it was the first time they had ever reviewed a computer game.... At the time, all of the games were kind of fantasy-based or combat. There weren't any quality games in the strategy realm. There were a few turn-based games like Dissonance or the old Avalon Hill stuff. But none of it felt like it was contemporary, real-time, and accessible to a lot of people.

The SimCity series earned many fans with this approach - some of whom got surprisingly invested.

Wright: We got letters from all sorts of people. It was funny, we got one from the mayor of Portland saying, "Oh god I wish Portland was this easy to run. I have so much power in this game, but I don't have that power in Portland." There was also this kid in New Hampshire who lived in this small town and there was this mayoral race happening. And the kid invited each of the five candidates over to his house to play SimCity and he wrote an article for the local paper

railroad quality to it. When I was a kid, I'd build cities out of blocks and go down the stream and carve out a landscape for houses. Of the games we've shipped so far, *SimCity 4* is the game that scratches that itch for me the best.

Maxis released other well-received simulations like SimAnt and SimTower, but the mid-'90s produced a glut of other Sim-something games that weren't met with the same enthusiasm.

Alex Hutchinson: I think that studios are always growing and changing, and that they have natural life cycles with peaks and valleys. People forget that before *The Sims* went large, the studio wasn't in the best space.

Quigley: Maxis had decided that they wanted to become like Electronic Arts and be a publisher, and bring in lots of stuff. Will, at that point, had gone off to work on *The Sims* - his little skunk-works project. The sharp, core efforts of the studio had gotten diffused across a bunch of projects that Will wasn't paying much attention to.

Wright: There was actually a thing that was going on, not just with us, but with a lot of the medium-sized

studios. Just the way business worked back then, we had our own sales force, and we were trying to sell to international markets. Before EA bought us, we were about 40 to 50 people at Maxis. A surprising number of those people were just on the marketing side, which is almost like this monster you had to feed. They need a number of products from you. So we were driven to actually produce more and more titles, and we were talking to a lot of outside developers [about] doing other *Sim* titles.

Even with the success of SimCity 4, Maxis went with an outside developer, Tilted Mill Entertainment, for the next entry, SimCity Societies, released in 2007, got a harsh reception from critics and fans.

Bradshaw: Part of the reason it went the direction that it did, in terms of how it was received by *SimCity* players, is that it didn't have the kind of interaction and simulation level... It was a fine game in and of itself, but for that *SimCity* player, it didn't meet the expectations for that level of it.

Wright: I didn't have anything to do with that decision. Honestly, I didn't even play *Societies*. I read some of the reviews of it, though.



Maxis employees taking a break at the studio in Emeryville, CA



Meeting Will Wright

Will Wright may be a legendary figure in game development, but to the people at Maxis who worked alongside him for years, he earned a variety of other titles. Whether he was a mentor, prankster, or just a smoker, the people at the studio had different stories to share.

Lucy Bradshaw: Will is one of the most jaw-droppingly brilliant people I've ever worked with, largely because of the way he looks at things. And he will look at things in such a unique fashion and be articulate about that. It's not just about how he goes about making games. It's how he views the world.

Chris Hecker: Will's rhetorical tai chi is unmatched. Someone would come in and be like, "Hey, Will, I think this part of the game needs to be changed," and he's like, "Mm! Come in." And then you'd leave the office five minutes later thinking something completely different. The problem with it, actually, is that he's overpowered. That might have been a good idea, but it's kind of a game for him. He's like "wooo-chaa," and you've completely changed your mind. And you come out smiling, saying "Wow, great meeting!" ... I think he's a little OP on that front.

Robi Kauker: Will struck me as one of those great people that - in the music world, where I had come from - you meet and you go, "This is going to be fun."

Kip Katsarelis: My very first impression was, "Who's this guy smoking all the time!?" (laughs)... A few months after being at Maxis, they had a "bring your kid to work" day, where Will taught game design. I'll never forget that experience - it was on a Saturday, so it was his own time, and he

sat there and played. They had toys and Legos and paper. He's just like a big kid; he was down on the floor with them, playing and teaching them how to build games. I still have a picture of my son sitting there with him.


Charles London: He's also a total prankster. He loves silliness. And he tells the world's worst jokes, which is a form of his sadistic humor. There's a donut joke that he tells. Everyone knows the donut joke, and we just love the way he tells it. It is not funny. It's not, in any way, a funny joke. But the fact that that's the joke he likes to tell makes it hilarious.

The Donut Joke

A man walks into a hardware store (or some store that clearly has nothing to do with baked goods) and says, "One donut, please." The shopkeeper, confused, replies, "I'm sorry, sir, we don't sell donuts." "Oh," the customer says, "Okay," and he leaves.

The next day, the man returns and says, "One donut, please." The shopkeeper, a little irritated now, replies, "I'm sorry, sir, but I told you yesterday that we don't sell donuts." "Oh," the customer says, "Okay," and he leaves.

The next day, the man returns and says, "One donut, please." The shopkeeper, fully irate, replies, "Sir! I've told you we do not sell donuts. There are no donuts for sale here!" "Oh," the customer says, "Okay, then I'd like one hundred donuts."



The pressure to create multiple simulation products led to financial trouble for Maxis, causing Wright and Braun to seek a buyer for the company. In 1997, Electronic Arts completed its acquisition of Maxis.

Wright: There were three prospective buyers that we were having negotiations with: Activision, Infogrames, and EA. Each had its pros and cons and we met with the leaders of each. There was something about the vibe from the EA people, though, that just felt much more comfortable. In retrospect, looking at all of the factors, I think we definitely made the right choice. Infogrames really wanted to have a U.S. presence and we would become, basically, their U.S. publisher. That would have been a totally different direction for us. Activision, I won't even go into that.

Chris Hecker: Everyone was like, "Oh, EA! I'm sure they're going to ruin Maxis!" To Will's credit – and EA's credit – Will always defended them and said, "No, actually. We were going to kill the Sims and EA came in and was like, 'No, this is great!'" The people who came

from EA, Will said, were always incredibly supportive, and saved the Sims in some sense. It's basically the exact opposite of the conventional wisdom of what EA did to companies.

Wright: I think we were bought by EA at a good time in EA's history. EA had done a couple of acquisitions before that, Origin and Bullfrog, that hadn't gone so well. But they learned a lot from those mistakes.

Stratton: Maxis was probably EA's biggest acquisition. It was something that they did very delicately. EA wanted to make sure it was a really clean, good transition when it acquired Maxis. I was just hired, but from my perspective, I felt like it was a great move that really energized Maxis as a studio.

Introducing the Sims

The Sims is the best-selling PC series ever, but the project's origins show that the idea of a playable dollhouse wasn't a sure thing.

Wright: I was having a hard time getting any support within Maxis – before EA bought it – for The Sims.

Almost everybody that saw it within Maxis thought it was a stupid idea... I was actually kind of running it as a black project within Maxis.

Robi Kauker: I can see how Will could see part of the group as not being excited, whereas those of us on the other side were like, "Yaaaaay!" We had come off of doing SimCity 3000 and SimSafari, and had a lot of change in the studio, and to have this big idea to deal with was awesome.

Hecker: The Sims wasn't about the people at the beginning. It was about the house and having them come in and judge. Then they realized that the people were the interesting part, and they switched it. A big part of The Sims is making your dream house, or locking [sims] in the closet. But the fact that they're there screaming when the stove catches on fire is the magic thing.

After zeroing in on the magic of The Sims, development efforts were focused on the title after the EA acquisition. However, prior to release, how it would fit into the gaming landscape was still a mystery.

Kauker: It was too cool of a project and too much of a toy to know what an audience was going to think about it. You kind of understood that everybody was relating to it in different ways, but you didn't know what that meant.

Wright: I don't think EA had any idea, at least on a marketing forecast level.

Quigley: We thought it would do okay, probably not as well as SimCity.

Wright: I would probably say The Sims [is my best game]. If for no other reason than the unpredictable nature and approachability of it. I think it's the game that almost anybody can walk up to it and have some sense of what they might or should be doing in it... When you hear a hundred different stories about what happened to somebody playing The Sims is, to me, an indication of a good, wide experience.

Ben Bell: There are so few games where people can find themselves in it. The reason why The Sims appeals to so many people is that you will find yourself in the game, no matter who you are. If you put time into it, you're going to fall into a play pattern that reflects you as a human being. It's like a Rorschach test.

Lyndsay Pearson: The very first time I played the Sims, I had a character try to make breakfast and set himself on fire immediately.

Charles London: We're always looking for opportunities to set sims on fire. There's always a new opportunity for a mishap.

Pearson: The Sims' philosophy is fundamentally optimistic. We create a world that fundamentally gravitates towards positive things. Now, if you as a player want to consciously go out of your way to do those other types of activities, we're not going to stop you.

The Sims became a phenomenon. Following up on that surprising success presented an interesting challenge for sequels, including the ill-fated The Sims Online.



Wright: I think we had these aspirations for *The Sims Online* – primarily custom content that never got in. I think we underestimated the engineering to even get the thing up and running with the amount of time and resources we put behind it. We were hoping to get this thing online and get custom content following up very shortly thereafter. Instead, we had all these other issues that came up and kept pushing back the idea of custom content further and further back to where it never made it in the game... If it would have been more of a freemium model like we have nowadays, I think it would have been a totally different story.

London: Under *Sims 1*, all of the effort was trying to get EA to understand why this game was a game.... But with *Sims 2*, the success was so phenomenal that it was an entirely different challenge. EA was like, "Now you've got to take it 10X." And "10X" was actually the phrase that kept getting used – "10X this" and "10X that." In retrospect, I'm grateful for the ambitious target, because it really made us realize that our biggest competition was ourselves. Which, by the way, is a condition that has never changed. It remains true.

Another result of The Sims' success is the stream of expansion packs for each new entry. Adding elements like new pets, seasons, and even magic, these expansions enhance the experience for fans – though some cynical gamers assert that the steady release is more exploitive than creative.

Rod Humble: We did try to combat it, but we also needed to make our customers happy. It's kind of like a band, you know? "Play Freebird!"

Bell: We work so hard on these games. It's hard to express that. There's tons of craftsmanship in every one of them. Every day we come to work and ask how we can make a beautiful game. How we can push the limits.

London: It is natural and understandable for our audience to say things like, "the new base game

should have everything all the expansion packs used to have." There's a reason why we don't do that beyond just the facile answer of, "Well, that's impossible." The reason is that it takes a lot of thinking and a lot of nuance and careful design to bring the best out of those subjects.

Pearson: There's always people who will say, "It's just more stuff," but it's actually a very different experience, and that's why the players keep coming back... The way we can best combat that perception is to offer something new that is really a substantially different experience. Players always want to tell a new story with their sims. They always want somewhere new to take them, something new to do with them.

One of the most distinctive features of The Sims series is the fact that the characters don't speak a recognizable language. Instead, they speak "Simlish."

Kauker: It has a small collection of words that mean something. "Nubu" translates to baby, "Sule sule" and "dag dag" are kind of "aloha" – hello/goodbye-type things. There's probably, right now, about 20 of those working. And then there are about another 100 or so that have contextual value – you're sad, happy, things like that.

Humble: When we put little characters on the screen, the fact that they don't talk really enables us to fill in the gaps. When we were developing *The Sims 3*, we would



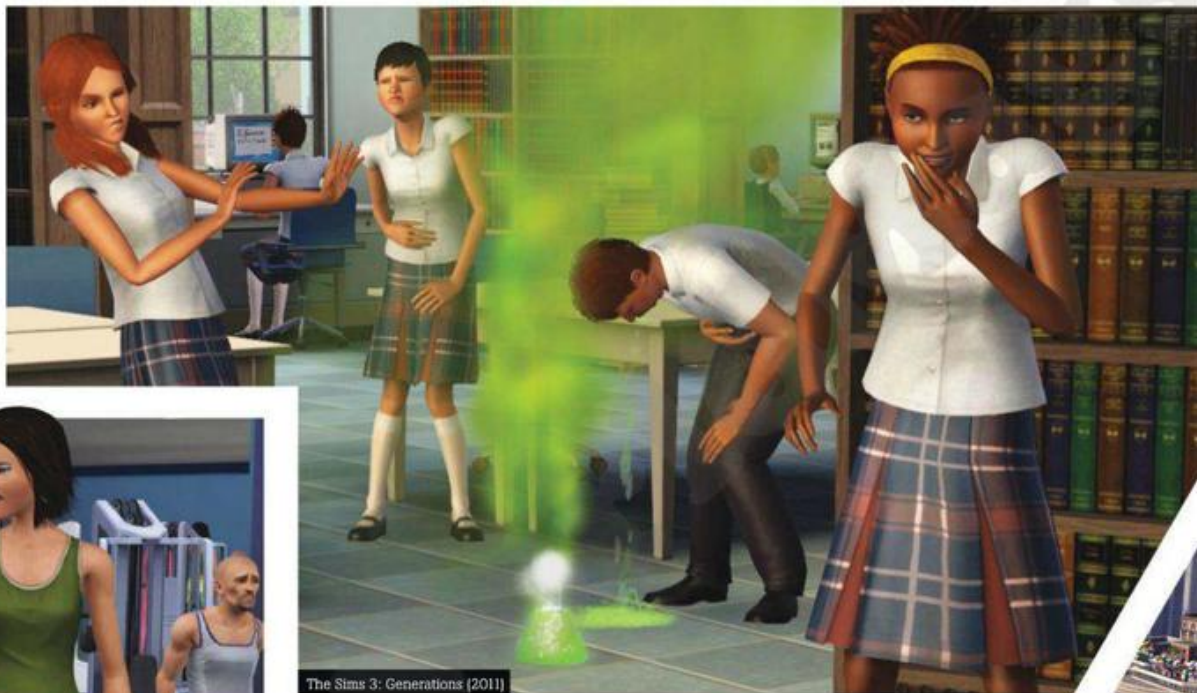
The Sims: Unleashed (2002)

call them "hamsters with jobs." They're little pet people, and we're kind of looking at them like animals, but we can also relate to them.

Bell: You know when you read a book, and you've got this image in your mind of what it means? There's this thing that happens between you and the fiction – you add a lot to it. The same thing is true with a physical toy, like when a kid is playing with Legos. They see a world that's in there, but it isn't really there. If the sims spoke, you couldn't imagine all the kinds of things that happen. It

frees you up as a player to go anywhere you want with the fiction.

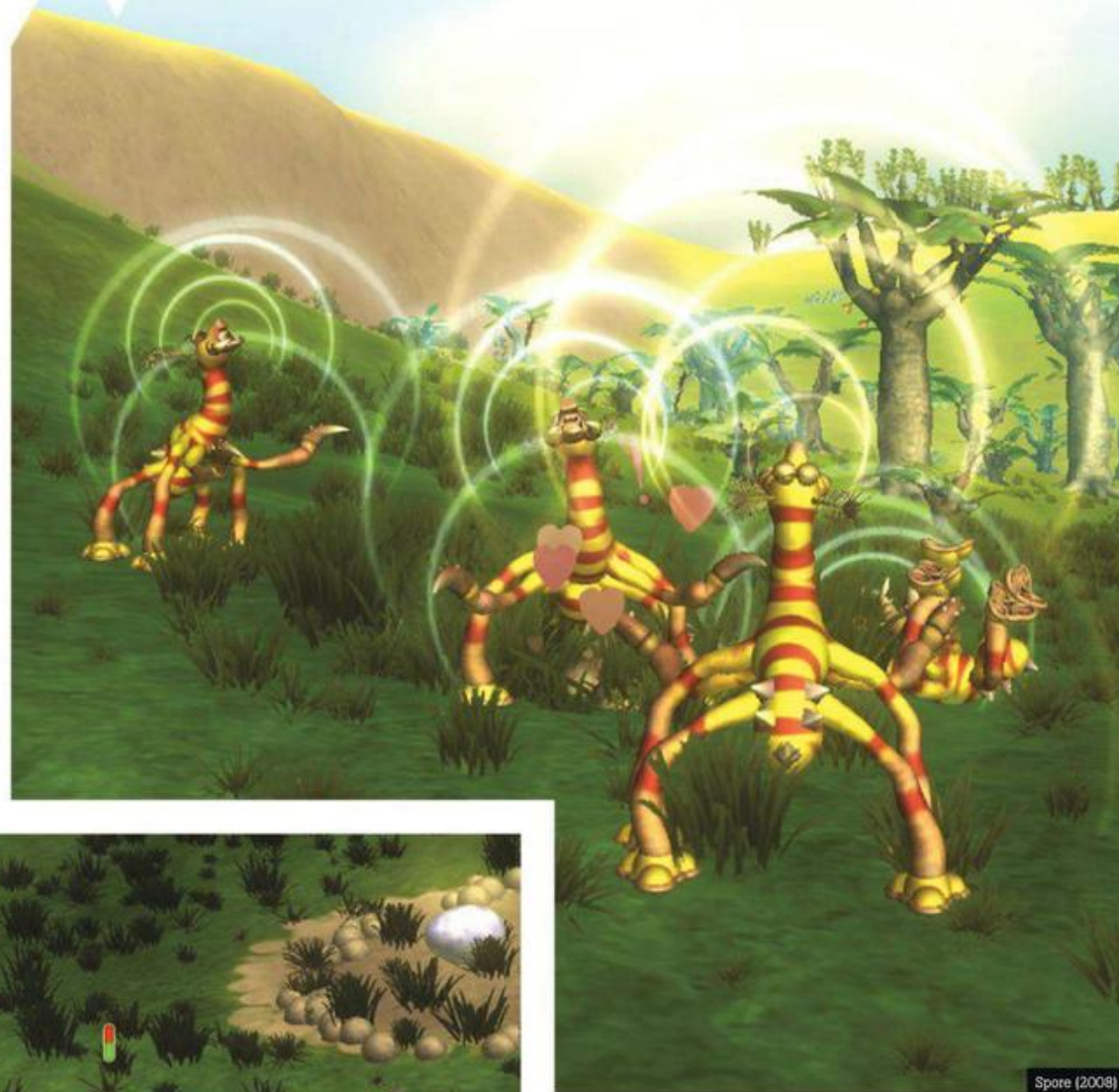
Pearson: One of the practical reasons [behind Simlish] is that we've shipped the game in so many different languages that that amount of support for all of the different translations would be huge. Astronomical. But the more important philosophical reason for it is that they are their own little culture. They live in their own little world. If we had made them speak English, it brings them closer to being in our world.



The Sims 3: Generations (2011)

A Selected Gameography

- 1988: SkyChase
- 1989: SimCity
- 1990: SimEarth
- 1991: SimAnt
- 1991: RoboSport
- 1992: SimLife
- 1993: SimCity 2000
- 1993: SimFarm
- 1994: SimTower
- 1995: SimSle
- 1995: SimTown
- 1996: SimCopter
- 1996: SimPark
- 1996: SimTunes
- 1997: Streets of SimCity
- 1997: SimGolf
- 1998: SimSafari
- 1998: SimCity 3000
- 2000: The Sims
- 2002: The Sims Online
- 2003: SimCity 4
- 2004: The Sims 2
- 2004: Urbz: Sims in the City
- 2008: Spore
- 2009: The Sims 3
- 2011: Darkspore
- 2013: SimCity



Spore (2008)

Evolving Spore

Spore (titled SimEverything originally) was unveiled at the 2005 Game Developers Conference, though it had already been in development for years. While it initially dazzled audiences, development challenges led to a longer wait than expected.

Katsarelis: I saw Will give his talk – he did it down in Redwood Shores – and I just got goosebumps. I’m like, “I want to work on that game.”

Hecker: There were these three axes we were trying to innovate on: tech, UI – how do you make these things accessible? – and game design... I think we hit it out of the park on the first two, and I think we failed on the game design.

Wright: I think we probably should have waited longer to reveal it...it turned out to be an almost unprecedented amount of engineering with the procedural animation and creative aspects, but almost an unprecedented amount of design

that we had to attack with at the same time.

Hecker: When you’re making creative art, you should innovate on one axis. Do one thing no one’s ever done before, and do it amazingly well. We were doing, like, 40 things no one had ever done before. It took so much time.

Hutchinson: I think that at the end of Spore, we were all exhausted and just ready for it to ship. People had been wrestling with the problems in that game for so many years, and really at that point you can’t make radical changes, you just need to finish... Usually, beginnings are full of hope and you don’t need to be very realistic, and the end of a project is full of cold reality, so they often require different types of people.

Wright: I think we expected it to be three times harder than a regular game on the design side whereas it turned out to be ten times harder. In my mind it was almost an analogy between the Apollo program and space shuttle. NASA was roughly expecting the space shuttle, which had about three times more parts than the Apollo, to be about three times more engineering than the Apollo. They figured out the space shuttle was about 10 times more because it was really exponential.

Bradshaw: [Spore] didn’t achieve the kind of success that we would have liked to have seen, that we have with both SimCity and with The Sims. I think it’s still something that I’m immensely proud of. When you look at the immensity of that – and it’s a lesson in scope – I think what we did do was deliver something that those who played it engaged with it very deeply.

Because Spore fell short of expectations and never grew into a massive franchise, some people are quick to call the project a failure. Not everyone agrees.

Hecker: There was a lot of cooks in the kitchen on that game, design-wise, which is another one of the problems. But from a technology standpoint, oh man, Spore was the best. I have a page up on my website about all the cool stuff I got to do...from a programmer’s standpoint, it was the best job ever.

Quigley: I think the stuff that worked for us and the stuff I’m most personally proud of is all of the procedural world creation and creature creation and vehicle creation. That was kind of the heart and soul of Spore, as a creative toolkit for people to build creatures

and planets and buildings and stuff like that. We broke a lot of a ground with that.

Bradshaw: You'll see in how we've evolved our creativity tools that Spore encouraged us to think about the intuitive nature of these. You'll see vestiges of it in how we've evolved our creativity sets. As we go forward, even with SimCity, we're allowing you to kind of construct buildings, and they have snap points, and it's really fun and malleable. Mostly I think you'll see Spore in the way we've learned from it.

Creativity Culture

Will Wright left Maxis in 2009, but the atmosphere of the studio has remained true to the pillars on which it was founded. An emphasis on creativity, community, and accessibility still seems to drive Maxis employees.

Wright: Maxis has had its up and downs in terms of quality and focus, but for most people I think Maxis represents something that's more focused on reality in a playful way.

Hutchinson: People would hang out, play boardgames after work, hit a local bar, but perhaps unsurprisingly it was much more family-friendly and relaxed than many video game environments I've worked in. But a lot of us are still friends even though we work in different studios and sometimes in different countries. The culture was very loyal and very caring.

Bell: Work is like family. It's a real bonding experience. For me,

the more that people can relate to each other and count on each other at work, the more familial it is, and the better the product is going to be. One thing we talk about at Maxis is, because we make games about life, they're games about people.

Hecker: Maxis was incredibly gender-diverse compared to most. And age-diverse. Age matters, too. I'm 42 now, and I've killed enough orcs. I'm done. I don't need to kill any more orcs. I beat the orcs. I want to make games about different stuff now. So the fact that there are "old" people at Maxis now, I think, matters a lot.

London: The culture is close. It's familial. It's funny. It's a little neurotic sometimes, which I think is a very particular quality to Maxis. We're very introspective... There are some studios that have a real sense of their stardom, and that's particularly absent where we are. We're really conscious of the fact that we earn the right to make every subsequent expansion pack. So it's a pretty humble place, which I like.

Before "casual gaming" was even a term, Maxis has been creating titles that appeal to a wide audience. The company has invented avenues for people who don't consider themselves gamers.

Stratton: We've always been a studio about sim. We have explored things that were lighter on simulation, some that came to market. But, basically, we know our strengths, and our strengths are in simulation.

Wright: From my point of view, I was always making the kind of games that I would want to play, and the kind of games that Jeff would want to play, too. We were just asking ourselves what kind of games would we want to play? We were twenty-something years old, and a lot of these games felt like they were targeted towards fifteen year-olds. There weren't that many games targeted towards adults with different sensibilities.

Quigley: These are the kinds of games I want to make, and really, no one else is making these kind of games with this level of quality and this level of ambition... I want to make games where you create a world, and that world comes to life, and you edit it and transform it, and it pushes back at you, and it convinces you it's reality... There's no other company that's doing the kinds of games that I want to make, so I'm stuck here as a consequence, right?

Humble: Nothing is stickier than your own creativity. If you've got a toy that becomes a mirror for your creativity and helps you be creative, I think that is incredibly powerful.

Bradshaw: It was funny, at one of our town halls, I read a catalog from 1992 or 1994, and there's a blurb that really does talk about the heritage of Maxis and why that was meaningful to who we are today. It talked a little bit about creating software toys, which I thought is such a brilliant way of thinking about the games that Maxis makes. It's something that, as a label, we've embraced.

Full Circle

Now, after the departure of Wright, Maxis is turning back to the franchise that put it on the map. In 2013, the studio is set to release the first new SimCity in years. The classic property's revival is just one of several projects – some unannounced – in the works.

Quigley: It was only after we finished Spore that we had the bandwidth. That we could look up and say, "What I really want to work on next is SimCity." You think of a company like EA as a giant corporate assemblage, but it's really made out of people who want to do different things.

Humble: The legacy of Maxis is attached to the genius of Will Wright. He is able to think in such an unusual way. And the fact that he did it twice! Two genre-breaking megahits that opened the door for a whole new way of thinking... When Maxis does something new,



people get really excited and they want to know what it is.

Bradshaw: We have two really well-known IP, which are Sims and SimCity. We have an opportunity to look at new platforms to reinterpret those... We're looking at those super powers for where the Maxis label is investing in terms of new games. I can't speak to any of them, but our Sims brands and our creativity tools and a lot of these elements become our playground to continue to reinvent. 🌟





Borderlands 2

Borderlands 2 is a critical and commercial success, with Gearbox succeeding in making it bigger and better than its predecessor. Now that it's been in gamers' hands for a couple of months, we spoke to Gearbox CEO **Randy Pitchford** about the sequel's development and future.

We know that you did the voice for Crazy Earl and creative director Mikey Neumann is Scooter, but are any other characters voiced by members of the team?

The biggest role from a Gearbox team member is David Eddings, Gearbox VP of licensing and business development, playing the role of Clap Trap. He also does the voice for TK Baha. Several other people on the team do parts here and there. The audio guys, Raison Varner and Mark Petty, have done a bunch of bandit voices and other content. Most of the key roles have been cast with professional voice actors, but occasionally we have the perfect voice amongst us already.

Did you ever consider making the original vault hunters playable, or did the plan from the beginning focus on new characters?

From the beginning of Borderlands 2's development, we knew we were going to bring a whole new cast of heroes. It was really important to us to make sure that Borderlands 2 was a full-on 2.0 experience, and developing new characters and skills is a key part of that. However, we love the heroes of Borderlands and I'm really glad that we worked them into the narrative in such an important way.

Is there any one class that the dev team tends to prefer over the others, or is it pretty spread out?

It's pretty evenly spread out, which is one of the indicators that we're doing it right. Everyone seems to have different favorites and various people on the team keep telling me about how they change it up and go with something new. About a week after launch I got some data from the live team about what customers are choosing. Their favorite seems to be Zero, with over 30 percent of the customers picking that character. Least played is Salvador, which is interesting because, well built and with the right gear, Salvador easily has the highest damage potential of any character in the game. I played a lot of Salvador during development because he was the first character we really had going. I switched to Zero when the Bloodshed tree got sufficiently fleshed out and had a blast. About two months before launch, I started playing with Maya and really liked her. With the retail version of the game, I finished my first play through with Axton. I'm looking forward to building a level 50 Gunzerker with my retail copy of the game, and I think I'm going to do a playthrough with a Mechromancer.

The various skill trees allow for some crazy class customizations. What's the most

ridiculously overpowered character that you've seen?

A Rampage-built Gunzerker with a bee shield and a pair of Conference Call shotguns seems to be the most overpowered configuration at the moment. There's a mild nerf coming to the bee – just fixing the downside, but not hurting the upside. We're pretty cautious about nerfs – we'll balance with new gear instead. It's going to be hard to beat the bee shield, though, so we may have to do more to it...

Secrets like the Minecraft and Dark Souls areas are all over the internet. Are there any big Easter eggs or secrets that are still relatively undiscovered?

There are a ton of secrets in the game, likely uncountable. A lot of good stuff has been discovered, but there are a lot of esoteric things and convoluted references that are mostly just us entertaining ourselves that I'm not sure will ever end up on an Easter egg list. One super minor Easter egg is a picture of Wastelander Panda, which is a cool/interesting indie film project out of Australia that caught my eye. Some folks have found the hidden panda image and have asked if it's a reference to an animated film or an MMO expansion. That's funny.

The Minecraft area isn't just an homage, as it features actual creepers and what

looks like Minecraft assets. What kind of communication did you have with Mojang to make this happen?

We reached out to Notch and he was down with it, so it happened. We had a Minecraft server at Gearbox and a lot of us have had a lot of fun in Mojang's game. Some of the experiences in Minecraft create revelations that go back into our own work. It felt right to not just do a reference but a more built-out homage and gameplay space.

Tell us a little about the creation of Bonerfarts. Were there any other incredible names floating around for them?

The mind of Anthony Burch is a wonderful thing. There are just so many goofball words and names that come up during development. If you think Bonerfarts is strange, you should've seen some of the stuff on the whiteboards that never made it into the game. Way too early for it to stick, Michael Neumann tossed out a genius character name: Quazimofa. We're going to have to bring that one into play someday. Maybe Quazimofa can ride around on Butt Stallion.

With the success of both Borderlands games, can we look forward to the franchise continuing?

No. That's it. We're pulling the plug. Kidding. We're having fun and we seem to have a huge number of fans that want more. So we're doing a lot of stuff to add on to Borderlands 2 and will think about where it goes from there when we have a moment to breathe.



replay



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@Coldplay - 8,332,909
@muse - 1,132,313
@waynecoyne - 107,892

@videogames_live - 5,555*
@GuitarHero - 46,788
@rockband - 76,140
@Johnthancoulton - 89,159

The Twitter

We've been proclaiming video games are a part of mainstream culture for years, and in many ways, franchises like Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto have become touchstones for a generation. Gamers are also supposed to be among the most connected and social media savvy consumers. So why do games seem to have trouble keeping up with other forms of media on Twitter? We took a look at some of the most popular gaming-oriented people, franchises, and companies on Twitter, then compared them to their counterparts in other forms of entertainment. The results were surprising.

Gap

by Matt Helgeson

@CallofDuty - 582,875
@AngryBirds - 506,290
@ElderScrolls - 135,070
@AssassinsCreed - 134,944

@HarryPotterFilm - 724,495
@BigBang_CBS - 902,078
@Twilight - 1,042,144
@WWE - 1,767,676

The Walking Dead

- @walkingdeadTTG - 1,061*
- @telltalegames - 52,463
- @RobertKirkman - 152,872
- @WalkingDead_AMC - 585,058

Top Personalities

- @ladygaga - 30,031,503
- @Oprah (Oprah Winfrey) - 14,015,536
- @DalaiLama - 5,266,109
- @JenniWoww - 3,588,471
- @mrdannylover - 1,501,985
- @Bbaumgartner (Brian Baumgartner) - 130,621
- @GeoffKeighley - 70,900
- @HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN - 142,931
- @therealcliffyb (Cliff Bleszinski) - 164,173
- @fourzerotwo (Robert Bowling) - 356,069
- @majornelson (Larry Hyrb) - 437,312
- @notch (Marcus "Notch" Persson) - 922,430
- @fragdolls (Frag Dolls, Professional Gamers) - 1,317,190

Big Franchises

- @gameinformer - 119,065
- @kotaku - 160,250
- @gamespot - 412,345
- @ign - 539,009

- @nytimes - 6,245,140
- @cnn - 6,163,942
- @espn - 5,297,450
- @peoplemag - 4,172,631

Media

*visual representation not visible to the naked eye



Starbreeze Studios' Surprising New Project

by Matt Miller

Swedish filmmaker Josef Fares (known for the films *Jalla! Jalla!* and *Zozo*) may not be a household name in the United States, but he's an award-winning movie director back home. That's why it's surprising he's taking a step back from film to explore his great passion for the interactive medium, partnering with The Darkness and Syndicate game creators at Starbreeze on a new game project. Fares is leading the team behind **Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons**, and I recently sat down with the director to play the innovative new title.

Brothers tells the story of two siblings in a fantasy world who hunt down a cure for their ailing father. Playing largely from a top-down perspective, a single player controls both brothers simultaneously, one on each analog stick. In addition, each brother is afforded a context-sensitive shoulder button that lets him interact with the world. No HUD or interface appears on screen, so players are left to learn and experience the world on their own.

As I play an early part of the game, Brothers shows few fantasy trappings. Wandering through a village, each brother exhibits his personality through the way he interacts with the world. The older brother is responsible and serious. Press his button in front of a townsfolk, and he pulls out a map to ask for directions. Meanwhile, the younger brother is playful, creative, and mischievous. He runs up to an elderly woman and pushes her back and forth on her rocking chair, eliciting excited laughter from the old gal.

Brothers distinguishes itself with the variety of actions available to the brothers. Without exception, every context-sensitive action is different from previous ones. Steal a ball from a little girl and throw it back and forth between the two characters. Strum the strings of a harp belonging to a local musician. It's fun to interact with the world just to see how each brother will approach the situation.

The gameplay is simple and experimental, reminding me of thatgamecompany's *Journey*, with its focus on discovery and exploration. At times, simple puzzles bar my progression through the brothers' adventure. In one instance, our path through a field is blocked by a snarling guard dog. I have one brother whistle to get the dog's attention while the other brother hops down and runs for a nearby hay bale, out of the dog's reach. They trade off in this fashion until they reach the far side. Later, a drawbridge must be lowered by running on a hamster wheel-style device. One brother activates the bridge, and the other runs across to grab a sheep and carry it back over to run the wheel instead, allowing both brothers to cross.

By the end of the demo, I've seen beautiful nature panoramas, scrambled along cliff walls, talked with plenty of townsfolk, but seen little evidence of the deep fantasy setting I'd been promised. That changes in the final scene, as the brothers climb up to the mountain abode of a hulking troll. Despite his monstrous appearance, the creature seems friendly. He helps point the kids in the right direction to continue their quest, and flings them across a chasm to a distant outcropping. Fares promises that *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* is built to slowly

unfold its most unusual and fantastical settings and creatures. By the end, the brothers will find themselves in situations that are anything but familiar.

I'm intrigued by Brothers' leisurely pace and unusual controls, and I've been a fan of Starbreeze since its first *Chronicles of Riddick* game. It's exciting to see the established developer experimenting with new game ideas in the downloadable space, and Josef Fares' cinematic influence only makes it more intriguing. I'm eager to see if the simple gameplay and puzzles hold up throughout the experience, but the brief section I played certainly felt distinct from anything else on the gaming horizon. Publisher 505 Games is aiming for a spring release, and gamers will be able to experience the brothers' journey on PS3, Xbox 360, and PC. ♦

Looking for more information about downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates on the best in PSN, XBLA, WiiWare, PC, and mobile downloads. For more in this issue, read our reviews of *The Walking Dead: Episode 4* (p. 99), *Karateka* (p. 99), *Retro City Rampage* (p. 100), *The Unfinished Swan* (p. 103), *Torchlight 2* (p. 104), and *FTL* (p. 105), and our scores for *Realms of Ancient War*, *Hell Yeah: Wrath of the Dead Rabbit*, *Angry Birds Trilogy*, *Pid*, and *La-Mulana* on p. 108-109.





WORLD OF WARCRAFT: Mists of Pandaria

No longer the undisputed champion

It was bound to happen eventually. After more than seven years of supremacy as the MMO of choice for genre players, World of Warcraft's new expansion is the first to feel like it's not the definitive king of the MMO pack, even if its player count still dwarfs everything else. Star Wars: The Old Republic's storytelling, Rift's dynamic events, The Secret World's innovative progression system, and especially Guild Wars 2 and its across-the-board evolution of genre conventions each borrowed heavily from Blizzard's juggernaut while moving in new directions of their own. At times, World of Warcraft feels dated in comparison. Even so, Mists of Pandaria makes an excellent case that the game still has plenty to offer longtime players. If it's not the undisputed champion, WoW is still certainly a serious contender.

Much has been made of the streamlined gameplay and user-friendly features that permeate Mists of Pandaria, but I found my journey beyond level 85 to be a smooth transition. Most of the changes to progression feel natural. The newly revamped talent system is simpler and has less number-juggling, but the core of my class remains familiar. The pet battle option (think Pokémon) is a fun diversion with a clever turn-based battle experience, but after several hours running my little animal friends through early zones, it's hard to imagine spending endless hours perfecting the system. I feel similarly about the new farming and cooking options; these are major diversions for those willing to invest, but peripheral to the rest of the player base. For those most hardcore players, Pandaria delivers some painfully slow reputation grinds that, for better or worse, will keep you busy for a long time.

The real meat of the expansion is right where it should be, with a large new continent to explore, several strong dungeons, and a new chapter of storytelling for Azeroth and its greatest heroes. Pandaria taps its Asian influence from its opening zone and keeps the focus there throughout the subsequent ride across the massive island. The storytelling feels more structured than in previous expansions, with a core group of non-player characters that pop up throughout the tale, helping to ground your playtime in familiar faces and narrative threads. While the pandaren race might have started out as something of an obscure joke, Blizzard has done a fine job of fleshing out the culture, architecture, and personality of these big bears, and I enjoyed exploring their homeland. While Pandaria may not always feel as epic as a fight against the Lich King or a giant dragon, this expansion features Blizzard's most cohesive storytelling to date.

Questing across Pandaria rarely offers any big challenges, but the quest hubs are well organized and smartly usher you forward to the next hotspot when you're done. More thoughtful use of phasing than we saw in Cataclysm assures you'll see some big changes to the game world as you experience events, but being phased away from fellow players along the way is less frequent. Blizzard includes a number of highly scripted quests that feel especially easy, but they do offer a break from routine. My favorites are the ones that put you in control of one of your heroic allies and you get to walk a mile in their shoes, albeit with a simplified set of powers.

The new dungeons are uniformly strong, from the goofiness of fighting aelementals in Stormstout Brewery to the mystical vibe of the Temple of the Jade Serpent. The focus is on big, challenging bosses over constant mobs, and those fights are rewarding and entertaining. Heroic versions of those dungeons (and one more only available as a heroic) are just one of many features meant to flesh out the endgame. A more varied approach to daily quests, new instanced scenarios, two new battlegrounds, and leaderboard-supported challenge modes for the dungeons all prove that Blizzard is still the best in the business at supporting level-capped play. In particular, Mists of Pandaria deserves credit for offering meaningful post-leveling content for all playstyles, whether you're a lore enthusiast, a PvPer, or focused on competitive PvE.

Dedicated players will want to check out the new pandaren playable race and accompanying monk class. The pandaren starting zone is the equal of the excellent worgen and goblin starters from Cataclysm, with an immersive mini-story that sets the stage for the rest of the game. Monks can fulfill any of the healer, tank, or damage roles, and I enjoyed getting a handle on the class and its

chi building and chi spending abilities. Moreover, the unarmed martial arts vibe has a style all its own that feels like an overdue addition to the class list. All that aside, players are looking at a long and potentially lonely trip from 1 to 90 if they want to take their monk the whole way up.

Visually, Pandaria is a stunning and vibrant land to explore, but there's no avoiding the fact that the game is beginning to show its age. That's equally true with combat, which feels less tactical and mobile than recent competing MMOs. Blizzard has made strides in including more characters and voiced dialogue this time around, but it's a far cry from what many players will be used to after the last two years of evolution in that regard. Despite these concerns, Mists of Pandaria's ample content offers plenty of reasons to return, especially for longtime players with established characters. For those looking for a new MMO, it may finally be time to look elsewhere. ♦

by Matt Miller



HOLIDAY HOMAGES
by Dan Ryckert



01

Animal Crossing

Nintendo's charming series gets into the spirit of the season more than any other. When the console's internal clock nears December 25, a reindeer named Jingle wanders the festively decorated town to celebrate "Toy Day." Both he and Mayor Tortimer offer you gifts if you talk to them, many of which are Christmas themed.



02

Bully

Jimmy Hopkins is a cool kid, but fashion sense doesn't run in the family. His mother sends him a reindeer-adorned sweater for Christmas, causing his classmates to viciously mock him when he wears it around campus.



03

Daze Before Christmas

In this rare SNES/Mega Drive title, you play as Santa Claus as he attempts to save Christmas from an evil snowman. You use magic to turn rats and living toys into presents, and coffee power-ups make Santa turn into his evil alter ego "Anti-Claus."



04

Banjo Kazooie

On the snowy mountaintop of Freezeezy Peak, Banjo and his bird buddy deliver presents to baby polar bears, jump into a giant snowman's pipe, and light up a Christmas tree. You also turn into a tiny walrus for some reason.



05

Toy Commander: Christmas Surprise

If you subscribed to *Official Sega Dreamcast Magazine* around Christmas of 2000, you received a disc that contained this holiday-themed level. It was just a modified stage from the original game, but you got to play as Santa Claus with a jetpack. And he could fly into a toilet.



06

Christmas Nights

The Sega cult classic *Nights Into Dreams* received the holiday treatment in this bonus disc that came with select Saturn games and some magazines. It tasked the protagonists with retrieving the Christmas Star from Nightopia, which was littered with holiday cheer thanks to the dreams of hopeful children.



07

Jazz Jackrabbit: Holiday Hare

Former Epic Games design director Cliff Bleszinski cut his teeth on this PC platforming series, and designed several Christmas-themed episodes. Everyone's favorite green rabbit collects candy canes throughout *Holidayus* in his quest to get a kiss from Eva Earlong.



08

We Love Katamari

In a series that revolves around pushing things around in an effort to make a ball bigger, it's only natural to feature a snowman level. When the King of All Cosmos hears an accusation that Katamari is a copycat of the snowman, he sends the Prince out to collect penguins, skiers, Santa, and igloos to make his own.



09

Holiday Lemmings

Like *Jazz Jackrabbit*, this '90s PC title released several short episodes. *Holiday Lemmings* featured the adorable creatures in little Santa hats that you had to prevent from mindlessly committing suicide by walking off a cliff.



10

Overblood 2

A lot of things don't make sense in this awful PSone sequel, such as fighting a cybernetic tyrannosaurus rex with a light-saber. Fitting right in with this randomness is the Santa Claus statue that stands outside *Temjin Burgar*, which offers \$50 horse-meat burgers and \$500 bananas.

The Good



CD PROJEKT RED, developer of The Witcher 2, announced that its previously teased upcoming sci-fi RPG Cyberpunk 2077 is based off of Mike Pondsmith's Cyberpunk pen-and-paper RPG. The company didn't announce specific platforms for the game, but promises a mature game that's faithful to the source material thanks to Pondsmith's involvement. The game features a non-linear story with divergent paths.



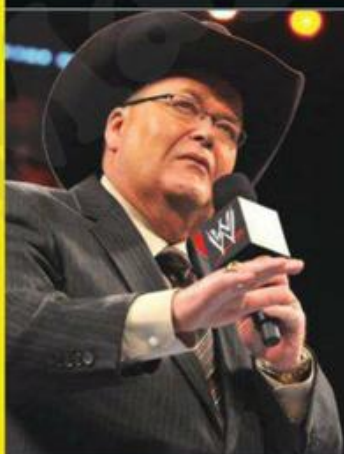
The Bad



SOME BORDERLANDS 2 players are afflicted by a bug that erases their Badass rank and prevents them from re-attaining it. As of the time of this writing, developer Gearbox has not found a solution for all three versions of the game (PS3, Xbox 360, and PC) even though the glitch has popped up two different times.

Quotable

"[WWE '13 will be] without question, the greatest video game in the history of technology."



— WWE commentator
Jim Ross

THE NO SHOW

that is NBA Live continues. EA Sports canceled NBA Live 13, meaning that the publisher's last sim NBA basketball is 2009's NBA Live 10. The game showed poorly at this year's E3, and the development team hadn't used the extra time since canceling the last title to its advantage.

The Ugly



interview



Photo credit: Jason Henry

Bringing Advanced Game Technology To The Masses

Unity Technologies and its Unity game engine have quietly sparked a revolution in game development. The engine and toolset has become ubiquitous among smaller developers, especially in the mobile space for its low cost (there is even a free version) and ease of use. We spoke with Unity CEO **David Helgason** about the company's philosophy, history, and expanding console plans.

interview by Jim Reilly and Matt Helgason

Can you talk about the origins of your company? What was your original vision when you got started, and how many of you were there when you started that?

You might say there are two stages. The original vision was to just have fun and make games. There were three founders, all programmers. We didn't have any experience from the industry. We were pretty good programmers, but we really didn't know much about games at all except, of course, we played them a lot. We did this thing that was sort of natural [to us], especially back then when Unity didn't exist, which was you start building the engine because eventually you have these tools and maybe you can make a game later.

In 2004, we actually realized that we were more passionate about the technology, and we felt that we had built something that would be able to enable other people to make games. We wrote the first business plan. We decided that we wanted to charge uniform prices and make it super-simple to use and, by doing that, we could have a lot of users. Everyone else in the game industry was either selling their stuff for millions of dollars or charging a big percentage of the revenue of the games. We said, "No, we're not going to be that business; we're just going to be like Photoshop for games, or Final Cut Pro for games." The thing about that is it has to have simplicity, it has to have directness, and the price point has to be accessible. But the belief was that, over time, the economics of having an approach like that would be so strong that eventually we could make it more advanced and better than anybody else.

What are some of your major platforms? I know you do mostly mobile and PC, but you're dabbling with consoles with Wii U as well.

We started on the Mac, so in the beginning you actually had to have a Mac to develop with Unity. Now it works on PC and Mac. We knew we wanted to go to the console eventually, and we felt that eventually mobile would be interesting. That all changed when the iPhone App Store opened up in July 2008. We knew this would be the perfect platform for us, because we felt like it was bound to be successful for small game studios. We had a Mac background, and we felt we could make this work really well. So we worked as hard as we could and launched support for the iPhone in October 2008. We actually felt we were a bit late to the

party. There were no other engines supported for the platform, [so we] felt that maybe the iPhone was not going to be that big. Of course that was extremely wrong, and it just kept ramping up.

What is it about Unity in particular that is such a draw for people? Is it the ease of use, the cost, or I guess the lack of cost? What have you gotten back from your developers about your engine?

People pick Unity for many different reasons. We kept the prices down because we really feel that the engine should not be a big burden, and we want everyone to be able to afford it. And it's the simplicity; it's really easy to get started with. Game development is never truly easy, but it's pretty straightforward.

Then there is the fact that we now support practically every interesting platform – we just launched support for Linux as well. The last piece is the big community, the fact that there are over 1.2 million registered developers using Unity, and something like a quarter of them used Unity in the last 30 days. It's pretty amazing, it's a huge community and there are [many] online resources. There are probably 20 books in many different languages, there are video tutorials, you can find answers to almost any question you need in the community.

What is your take on the industry as a whole right now? There is lots of talk about the death of consoles right now, and mobile is clearly taking off.

There are going to be many answers. First off, consoles are not [dying], and I think the rumors of their demise are slightly exaggerated. There is still more money generated in consoles than any other category – not more units sold, but more revenue generated. The next generation of consoles [hasn't been announced], but the Wii U has been announced and shown. We know it will sell in the millions, although the number of Wii Us that are going to sell [will] be a lot less than a mobile phone. The difference is that people who buy a game console, by buying it they kind of told people, "I am a gamer. I am going to buy games here. I made this investment and I want to have fun." So these people who buy the console will buy a lot of games. The console is not going away, but the growth is probably shrinking as a business. For smaller developers, it's a hassle [to get]

the approvals and even the development kits. So, the smaller developers are making mobile games, web games, and so on.

If you look at the iPhone, some of the top-selling games have not been done by big studios. Angry Birds was actually done by a pretty small company in Finland – now they're big, but they really weren't when they made that game. So you had this explosion of cool companies and cool games that would have had a hard time getting through. We think the next-gen consoles will be more open to that, which will be great for studios and gamers because I think people really enjoy these cheaper and often just as fun games.

What are some trends you're noticing in the industry now that you think are going to be big deals in the future?

One thing we're seeing now is many developers going cross-platform; building games that will work on many different devices. Before, you would have a PlayStation version of a game and a PSP spinoff, a completely different game in the same world. These games were typically built from the ground up. Now, it's not really porting in the same sense that you first make an Xbox game then you make a slightly worse PlayStation version. It's actually games that were born multiplatform and launched at the same exact time. Some of them, not as many of them as I would like, are being created so you can actually have the same character, the same score, and keep playing across these games. I'm hoping there is going to be more of that. It's really frustrating to start over on a different device.

Where do you hope to see Unity go down the road? Do you want more developers on board or are you hoping to explore areas of the industry in terms of hardware?

We have one fundamental tenet, which is that we want to make more people make better games. That's kind of what guides us; that's everything we do. From supporting a lot of platforms, because that's important for developers, to having really good tools and making it as cheap as we absolutely can, we're including a free version so more people can have access. We basically want to close the gap between what is theoretically possible, like the Frostbite engine that EA develops. It's one of the best engines in the world. It's only for EA, so you can't really get it if you're not EA, though. It's done by these tremendous engineers and we hired some of them. We want to close the gap so that everyone can have access to the same technology. ●

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1996 WITH THE PROGRAMS
Helgason becomes a programmer at Egeberg Interactive Communication for a couple years

1998 BIG DEVELOPMENTS
Starts developing at Netropolis, a technology consulting firm

2001 THE BUSINESS WORLD
Co-founds Panmedia ApS, a consulting company focused on business processes

2002 TECHNICAL WORK
Co-founds and serves as CTO of iCover, a music-related tech startup

2004 UNTITLED FRONT
Co-founds Unity Technologies with vision to democratize game development and develop technology for the next generation of the industry

2005 BIG LAUNCH
Unity 1 engine launches onstage at Apple's WWDC

2009 RUNNING FREE
A free version of Unity is announced and released. Unity triples in size and Sequoia Capital lends \$5.5 million series A investment round with David Gardner and Diane Greene

2010 HUGE SUCCESS
Unity surpasses the 250,000 developers milestone and both the Unity Asset Store and Union launch

2011 FUTURE INVESTMENTS
Unity Technologies lands \$12 million Series B funding, opens offices in Canada, Japan, Seoul, and Stockholm. The company surpasses 500,000 developers and 100 employees milestones

2012 THE LATESTS
Unity launches Unity 3.5, announces Unity 4, and surpasses the 1 million registered developers

2012 HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE

by Ben Reeves & Jeff Marchiafava

the end of the year is rolling around, which means it's time to start thinking about gifts. For the generous gamers, that means coming up with the perfect presents for your friends and family. For opportunistic gamers, that means scribbling out a list of gifts for others to buy you. We're not here to judge; we just want to highlight the hottest gadgets, newest gizmos, and best games that 2012 has to offer. What you do with that information is up to you.



UNDER \$30

Happy Holidays,
here's a thing



1 Smart Art, \$10.00-25.00 (monkeyminion.storenvy.com) • Monkey Minion Press is a one-stop-shop for decorating your home in geeky style. The husband and wife team from Portland offer everything from Star Wars-themed Empire propaganda posters to Ninja Turtle crochet dolls. With most items coming in under \$25.00, you're sure to find something for the nerds on your list. **2 Assassin's Creed Army of Troops T-shirt**, \$19.99 (store.ubiworkshop.com) • If you thought Ezio was a lothario, just wait until the ladies see this 16-bit rendition of Ubisoft's coldhearted assassin on your shirt. Actually, they're probably not going to care — but fellow gamers are sure to appreciate your retro sensibilities. **3 Mega Man Bobble Budds**, \$10.99 (bobblebudds.com) • Mega Man has never looked more adorable. These 3.5-inch recreations pay homage to the Blue Bomber and three of his nemesis: Proto Man, Guts Man, and Elec Man. These figurines contain detachable pieces that may be choking hazards to little kids, but let's be honest — we wouldn't let the little ones get their grubby hands on them anyway. **4 Cards Against Humanity**, \$25.00 (cardsagainsthumanity.com) • Not sure what to get that friend with a dirty sense of humor? We've got the perfect gift recommendation. Dubbed "A party game for horrible people," Cards Against Humanity challenges you and your friends to respond to questions with the most humorous and inappropriate answers possible. The base game won't break the bank, but if you're really cheap (or just don't like your friend that much), you can download it for free from the company's website and print it yourself. The best things in life really are free!

APPS



10000000
(iOS)
\$1.99
eightyeightgames.com



Bodyweight Training: You Are Your Own Gym
(iOS, Android)
\$1.99
hardcodedstudios.com



Khan Academy
(iOS, Android, Windows Phone)
Free
khanacademy.org



Kingdom Rush HD
(iOS)
\$2.99
armorgames.com



Middle Manager of Justice
(iOS)
Free
middlemanagerofjustice.com



Numberlys
(iOS)
\$5.99
numberlys.com



Organ Trail: Director's Cut
(iOS, Android)
\$2.99
hatsproductions.com



Rayman Jungle Run
(iOS, Android)
\$2.99
ubi.com



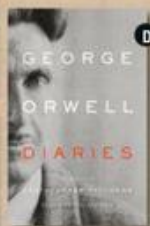
The Room
(iOS)
\$4.99
fireproofgames.com



Uber
(iOS, Android, Windows Phone)
Free
uber.com

\$30 to \$75

I hope you
like it, but I kept
the receipt
just in case



1 Rock-It 3.0, \$34.99 (origaudio.com) • Give your friends the gift of music – and we’re not talking about your stupid mix tape. With Rock-It 3.0, you can turn any surface into a speaker. The handy little gadget connects to your favorite music player via a standard headphone jack, and then pumps out vibrations that get transformed into sound waves by whatever object you stick it to. Just don’t stick a Rock-It to another Rock-It, or the universe will implode. **2 X-Wing Star Wars Miniatures Game**, \$39.99 (fantasyflightgames.com) • Forget X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter. Now you can pit Star Wars’ classic forces against one another in a two-player tabletop game from Fantasy Flight. The game includes painted X-Wing and TIE fighter miniatures, and allows players to pick their crews and plan their attacks to accomplish their missions. **3 Dungeon Command**, \$39.99 (wizards.com) • D&D fans looking for a quicker, more straightforward experience may be interested in Dungeon Command, a head-to-head miniatures game for 2 to 4 players. Each game takes roughly an hour, and tasks you with wiping your opponent’s warband from the battlefield. Each faction set comes with 12 painted miniatures, plus the cards, tiles, and rules needed to play the game. You can play against your opponent’s factions, or split up one set for a faster 2-player game. **4 Kingdom Hearts Heartless Inspired Apron/Pinafore**, \$70.00 (etsy.com/shop/darlingarmy) • This Kingdom Hearts-inspired gift from Darling Army doubles as both an apron and pinafore. That means you can wear it to protect

BOOKS

- A** *Absolute Green Lantern: The Sinestro Corps War*
\$99.99 | dccomics.com
- B** *Building Stories*
by Chris Ware
\$50.00 | randomhouse.com
- C** *Cloud Atlas: A Novel*
by David Mitchell
\$15.00 | randomhouse.com
- D** *Diaries*
by George Orwell
\$39.99 | books.wwnorton.com
- E** *The Fifty-Year Sword: Deluxe Edition*
by Mark Z. Danielewski
\$100.00 | randomhouse.com
- F** *Future Perfect: The Case for Progress in a Networked Age*
by Steven Johnson
\$26.95 | penguinroup.com
- G** *Luminous Chaos: A Novel*
by Jean-Christophe Valtat and Mahendra Singh
\$24.95 | mhpbooks.com
- H** *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*
by Sean Howe
\$29.99 | harpercollins.com
- I** *Saga Volume 1*
by Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples
\$9.99 | imagecomics.com
- J** *Scott Pilgrim Color Hardcover Volume 2: Vs. The World*
\$24.99 | onipress.com
- K** *Star Wars and History*
\$29.95 | wiley.com
- L** *Superman Earth One Volume 2*
\$22.99 | dccomics.com
- M** *Telegraph Avenue*
by Michael Chabon
\$27.99 | harpercollins.com
- N** *The Walking Dead Compendium Volume 2*
\$59.99 | imagecomics.com



your clothes while baking your video game-themed cupcakes, or pinafore your wardrobe whenever pinafaring is necessary. We'll be honest: we have no idea what the heck a pinafore is. **5 Retro Series Hard & Sugar-Free Cotton Candy Maker**, \$39.99 (nostalgiaelectrics.com) • Do you love cotton candy, but hate having to deal with creepy carnies just to get your hands on some? Maybe it's time to invest in your own cotton candy maker. This \$40 appliance from Nostalgia Electrics spins both sugar and hard candies into fluffy candy floss. You can even use sugar-free candy, though that kind of defeats the purpose. **6 Star Trek Door Chime**, \$29.99 (thinkgeek.com) • If you're like us, you've spent hundreds of hours wondering how you can class up your office door in a way that would make sci-fi fans jealous. What, you're not like us? Then you probably wouldn't be interested in this Star Trek Door Chime modeled after the wall communicator panels from the original series. Not only does it chirp out a variety of classic sound effects, but it's motion activated to ward off intruders. Don't blame us when Klingons steal all of your office supplies. **7 Gears of War Erector Construction Sets**, \$24.99-\$59.99 (erector.us) • Tired of the peaceful dioramas that Lego sets offer? Maybe it's time to upgrade to these Gears of War-themed Erector sets. Choose between the Armadillo APC, Centaur Tank, King Raven helicopter, and Locusts vs. Delta Squad Battle sets. Each pack comes with at least two figurines and 80-300 pieces. Erector jokes, however, are sold separately.

\$ 0 to \$200

I think
you're gonna
love this!



1 **Lego The Hobbit: The Goblin King Battle**, \$99.99 (thehobbit.lego.com) • The Lego video games provide plenty of fun for the whole family, but if you're old-school like us, you like to bust out the real blocks from time to time. The upcoming sets based on *The Hobbit* should appease Tolkien and Lego fans alike. The Goblin King Battle set is our favorite, and features figures of Dori, Nori, Ori, Gandalf, plus the Goblin King and his minions to help populate your new Goblin-town.

2 **Logitech Wireless Solar Keyboard**, \$79.99 (logitech.com) • Batteries and cords are so overrated. Like Superman, Logitech's new solar keyboard derives its power from the sun, letting you forget about the hassles of mortals still using traditional keyboards. Don't play your games in the sun? Fear not: Your indoor lights power the keyboard as well. It's like your mom's calculator, only useful.

3 **Kindle Paperwhite**, \$119 (amazon.com) • Thank goodness tablets finally made reading cool again; we were tired of getting all of our knowledge from strangers at the bus stop. The newest Kindle packs a higher resolution screen with 62 percent more pixels, a glare-reducing touchscreen, and a built-in light. Somehow the battery still lasts eight weeks. Maybe it's time to give this reading thing a try; all the kids are talking about it.

4 **NES & Super NES Hard Drives**, \$99 (500G), \$119 (750G), \$129 (1T) \$159 (1.5T) (8bitmemory.com) • This is one way to remember the classics. These custom built external drive enclosures are built using classic NES and SNES cartridges such as *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, *Super Mario World*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. If you don't like any of 8-Bit Memory's pre-made drives, you can suggest your own custom-built unit. All drives are assembled from Toshiba 2.5-inch hard drives. This might be the perfect solution to the Wii U's limited internal memory.

5 **LeapFrog LeapPad2**, \$99.99 (shop.leapfrog.com) • Trickery is the best way to teach children, and LeapPad 2 is one of the trickiest learning tools on the market. This kid-friendly tablet



VIDEO

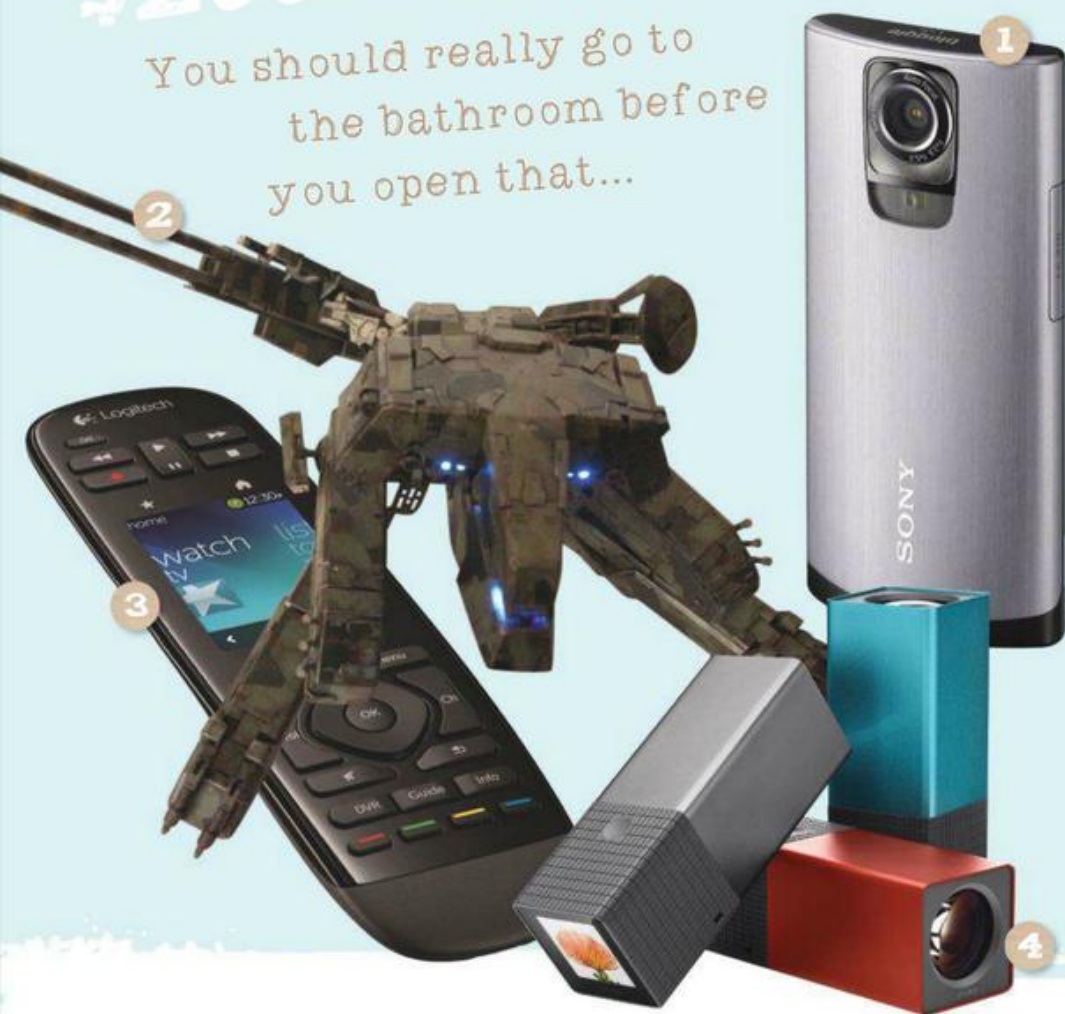
- A Alfred Hitchcock: The Masterpiece Collection**
\$299.99 | universalstudiosentertainment.com
- B The Avengers**
\$39.99 | marvel.com
- C Blade Runner 30th Anniversary Edition***
**additional gift set items not pictured*
\$64.99 | wbshop.com
- D Brave Three-Disc Collector's Edition**
\$39.99 | disney.go.com/brave
- E The Cabin in the Woods**
\$34.99 | discoverthecabininthewoods.com
- F Chernobyl Diaries**
\$29.99 | wbshop.com
- G The Dark Knight Rises**
\$35.99 | wbshop.com
- H E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial Anniversary Edition**
\$34.99 | etonbluray.com
- I Falling Skies: The Complete First Season**
\$49.99 | shop.tntdrama.com
- J Moonrise Kingdom**
\$34.98 | moonrisekingdom.com
- K Minecraft: The Story of Mojang**
\$15.00 | 2playerproductions.com
- L Pixar Short Films Collection 2**
\$39.99 | disney.com
- M Star Trek: The Next Generation – Season 2 HD**
\$129.99 | paramount.com
- N Tarantino XX 8-Film Collection**
\$119.99 | miramax.com
- O Transformers Prime Season 2**
\$29.99 | shoutfactory.com



features front-and-back cameras with video-recorder capabilities, 4GB of memory, a library of 325+ game cartridges and downloadable apps, and access to a wealth of eBooks, music, and games. If you nurture and love your LeapPad, it might someday grow into an iPad. **6 Nike Fuel+ Band**, \$149 (store.nike.com) • Athletes aren't fooling anyone – working out sucks. Might as well trick yourself into eating healthy by turning exercise into a game with Nike+. Challenge yourself to beat your high scores, unlock special achievements, and monitor your daily progress as Nike's FuelBand tracks your steps and caloric burn. Or throw it on your dog and drive through Taco Bell's takeout window. **7 Montie Gear Y-Shot Slingshot**, \$99.95 (montiegear.com) • Imagine you're camping one day, when suddenly you're attacked by a zombie deer. You whip out this high-tech slingshot, which features a .5-inch aluminum frame cut with a waterjet at 50,000 psi. You pull the slingshot back to its maximum draw of 28 inches and send a ball bearing through the zombie's head. Your friend yells, "Ew!" but as the beast falls under your boot, you're glad you brought your Montie. **Technomancer Digital Wizard Hoodie**, \$119 (thinkgeek.com) • Is this just a light-up hoodie? Ha! Is a Porsche 911 Carrera just a rolling cup holder? Dual accelerometers within the hoodie's sleeves sense your hand movements and then the system's internal LEDs and speakers produce a variety of effects, allowing you to cast up to 10 "spells." Even if you can't conjure a fireball, at least you'll look good while you gesture. **9 NuForce Cube**, \$119 (nuforce.com) • We know what you're thinking. "I've seen cubes before." This one is different, my friend. The NuForce Cube is designed to be your all-in-one mobile audio center. A quality headphone amplifier, high-performance speaker, and audiophile grade USB DAC are all crammed into a 2.3-inch cubed frame. The NuForce Cube keeps the party jamming for up to eight hours.

\$200 to \$500

You should really go to
the bathroom before
you open that...



1 Bloggie Live HD Camera, \$249 (store.sony.com) • We no longer just chronicle our lives, we broadcast them. Sony's Bloggie makes it easier than ever to live-stream your life. This 12.8-megapixel camera captures up to 8GB of full HD 1080p video and then wirelessly uploads it to Facebook, YouTube, or your home PC. With the Bloggie, any part of your life can become a live broadcast. You're probably more interesting than anyone from *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, so go for it.

2 MGS REX Collectible Figure, \$489 (sideshowtoy.com) • Here's a figure you won't need three key cards to enjoy. Sideshow Collectibles collaborated with Kojima Productions and Konami to create this authentic model of the Metal Gear Rex from Metal Gear Solid. This detailed figure features a 23-inch long laser cannon, houses a stunning light-up component, and measures 19 inches in height. It also killed our friend Gray Fox, and we may never be able to forgive it.

3 Logitech Harmony Touch, \$249 (logitech.com) • Quickly swipe and scroll through your favorite entertainment options with Logitech's Harmony Touch. This universal remote's ergonomic design, vibrant touchscreen, and 50 easy-to-customize channel icons make channel surfing a breeze. Screw that wizard hoodie; this is some real magic.

4 Lytro, \$399 (8GB) \$499 (16GB) (lytro.com) • The Lytro doesn't just take pictures; it records the entire light field. This means that instead of capturing a static 2D image, the Lytro gives you "living pictures," which you can endlessly refocus even after they've been taken. It's like capturing light's soul. Lytro's free desktop application also allows you to share your captures online, letting your friends experience the magic.



COLLECTOR'S EDITION GAMES

- A Assassin's Creed III Limited Edition** • \$119.99
- 9.44" Connor statue
 - 28" x 48" embroidered flag
 - 3" x 3.25" sturdy metal belt buckle
 - George Washington's Notebook
- B Borderlands 2 Deluxe Vault Hunter Collector's Edition** • \$99.99
- Four sticker set
 - Comic book download
 - Marcus bobblehead
 - Map of Pandora
 - Inside the Vault hardcover book
- C Call of Duty: Black Ops II Care Package** • \$179.99
- Remote-controlled Quadrotor Drone
 - Two collectible challenge coins
 - Official soundtrack
 - Additional in-game content*
- D Guild Wars 2 Collector's Edition** • \$149.99
- Collectible metal box
 - 10" Rytlock statue
 - Five art prints, custom frame and portfolio
 - Best of Guild Wars 2 soundtrack
 - Making of Guild Wars 2 hardcover book
- E Halo 4 Limited Edition** • \$99.99
- Additional in-game content and maps*
 - Bonus digital content and features*
 - UNSC Infinity briefing packet
- F Skylanders Giants Starter Kit** • \$74.99
- Portal of power
 - Three Skylanders figures, trading cards, and sticker sheets with secret codes
 - Collectible character poster

*visit gamestop.com for details

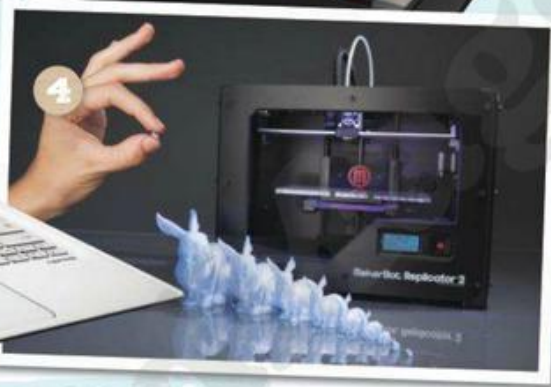
MUSIC

- A** Dethklok:
Metalocalypse Dethklok Dethalbum III
\$13.99 | adultswim.com/music
- B** Dinosaur Jr.
I Bet On Sky
\$13.00 | dinosaurjr.colortestmerch.com
- C** Health
Max Payne 3 Official Soundtrack
\$9.99 | rockstargames.com/maxpayne3
- D** Kendrick Lamar
Good Kid: M.A.A.D. City
\$9.99 | kendricklamar.com
- E** Flying Lotus
Until The Quiet Comes
\$9.99 | warp.net
- F** YeaSayer
Fragrant World
\$12.99 | secretlycanadian.com



\$500 & UP

Take it out of the box so we
can play with it already!



1 Sony Bravia 84-inch 4K TV, \$24,999 (store.sony.com) • 4K TVs look so good it's like getting a new set of eyes. The next generation of consumer televisions delivers movie-quality visuals to your living room. At a resolution of 3840x2160 pixels, Sony's new set has four times as many pixels as found in a standard 1080p HD set. This massive screen also features passive 3D, a 10-driver stereo speaker system, and a wealth of Internet streaming apps. Be one of the first people in the world to own the future. **2 New Razer Blade, \$2,499** (razerzone.com) • Like its name implies, Razer's new hardware cuts through even the most graphically intense titles in your gaming library. The Blade packs an Intel Core i7 Quad Core Processor with Hyper-Threading and an NVIDIA GeForce GTX 660M 2GB GDDR5 into a sleek, six-pound frame. But we're in love with the 10 dynamic adaptive tactile keys that change functionality depending on the program you're using, and the four-inch LCD display that functions as both a trackpad and a touchscreen, presenting you with specialized gaming information. Razer's new laptop is so sharp you might slice a finger. **3 Acer Aspire S7 Ultrabook, \$1,649** (us.acer.com) • Maybe you don't need a laptop that chews through games, but you might want a machine that's ultra-powerful and ultra-portable. Ultrabooks are the answer. Thankfully, Acer's new 13-inch laptop lives up to that title. Acer's top-of-the-line machine features a minimalist design, an Intel Core i7 CPU, and a 1920x1080 resolution touchscreen. This is also one of the first commercial laptops designed for Windows 8, so it makes great use of the new OS's touchscreen functions. **4 MakerBot Replicator 2, \$2,199** (store.makerbot.com) • You don't have to buy everything you want. You can make it! With a build envelope of roughly 410 cubic inches, MakerBot's fourth-generation Replicators let you construct replacement shower-curtain rings, custom gifts, video game item replicas, or virtually any other trinket and bauble your heart might desire. The first thing we're going to make is a cup of earl grey tea. Hot! ♦

Letting Go

by Adam Biessener, PC Editor, Game Informer

I used to never put a game down until I'd completely conquered it, even if things got so ridiculous that I found myself dodging 100 consecutive randomly timed lightning bolts. Nowadays I've stopped going for the full-clear in games from Final Fantasy to Arkham Asylum, and I'm enjoying my gaming hobby more than ever.

Credit (or blame) World of Warcraft for my change of heart. There was a time in 2009 when interpersonal drama blew up the group I was raiding with. Without a steady crew to conquer the game's toughest challenges with, but unwilling to quit and give up the game that had brought me closer than ever to out-of-town friends who had moved away after high school, I was left to my own devices. At first, completing challenge achievements in five-man dungeons kept me going. For a time after that, bringing my stable of alternate characters up to level cap occupied me. I checked one side goal after another off of my list – and World of Warcraft does nothing so well as providing a lengthy checklist – until I did the unthinkable. I began fishing.

Traipsing around the world and finding rare fish was fun for a time despite the brutal tedium of the fishing minigame itself. Grabbing a couple buddies and taking a shot at the ultra-competitive weekly contest in Booty Bay had its moments. Eventually, though, nothing was left but to earn my coin from the wishing well in the hub city of Dalaran.

Imagine rolling five dice every twenty seconds, trying to get all five matching for a Yahtzee – on each number, one through six. The first Yahtzee is a great moment. The thirty-third, when you get a set of threes when all you need is the sixes to finish your set, is maddening. Fishing up that damn coin broke me.

I saw too deeply into the Matrix; the process of checking off that final box was too transparent in its deliberate spacing out of rewards for performing trivial actions. I had always known it on an intellectual level, but internalizing the fact that I was a rat in a Skinner box, conditioned through a steady drip of inconsequential rewards to perform a task with no intrinsic

merit, triggered a deep revulsion in me.

Ignoring the voice in my head that urges me to engage in gaming activities I don't enjoy just for the achievement, trophy, or simple feeling of completion is now trivial. Sifting through the entirety of Arkham Asylum in detective vision, mining every planet in Mass Effect, skipping arbitrary chests to get the Zodiac Spear in Final Fantasy XII: no thanks. Those are games that I love all the more for my avoidance of aspects that have negative appeal to me.

At the same time, I happily die over and over in New Super Mario Bros. to get every last star coin and play Civilization V again and again to get the achievement for winning with each leader. The difference is that the pursuit of those goals is great fun for me, rather than being a monotonous chore endured in order to check an item off of a list someone slapped together to pass Microsoft certification.

You and I may love the same game for different reasons. My nephew adores playing Minecraft in creative mode on a server with his friends, an experience that quickly bores me even though I adore single-player survival mode. Why, then, should either of us force ourselves to slog through the parts we don't enjoy just to say we've "beaten" a particular game?

I nearly didn't complete Mass Effect – one of my absolute favorite games of this generation – because the sidequests were so awful. It took me three tries to beat Final Fantasy XII – likewise an all-star of the PS2 era – because I kept restarting after realizing I'd opened the wrong chest hours of playtime previously. Letting go of the completionism bug hasn't just freed up more time in my schedule for a wider selection of games, it has led me to some of the best experiences I've had with my hobby. ♦

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

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





04
Avengers: Battle for Earth



04
Far Cry 3



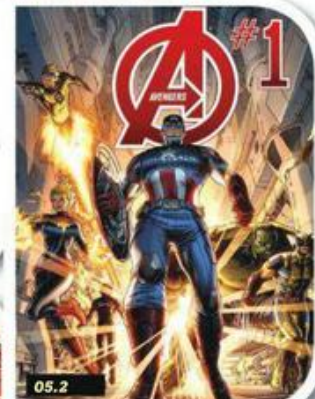
05.1



04
The Walking Dead



06



05.2



14



26



31

December

04 New Releases

- *Avengers: Battle for Earth* (Wii U)
- *Family Party* (Wii U)
- *Far Cry 3* (PS3, 360, PC)
- *The Walking Dead* (PS3, 360, PC)

05.1 New Shades of Green

Over the last few months, New 52's Green Lantern lore has undergone a dramatic shift. Hal Jordan and Sinestro are believed to be dead, the Corps is in disarray, and a new Green Lantern has been selected to protect Earth. In today's issue, the mysterious Third Army attacks, and Guy Gardner meets the new Lantern in town.

05.2 The New Avengers

Jonathan Hickman follows up his amazing run on *Fantastic Four* with a new take on Earth's mightiest heroes. *Avengers #1* reveals the beginnings of a new team formed by Captain America, facing threats that spin out of this year's *Avengers vs. X-Men* events. Some of the threats are even interplanetary.

06 NeoGeo Returns!

Tommo and SNK are celebrating NeoGeo's 20th anniversary with the release of NeoGeo X Gold, a portable console pre-loaded with 20 of NeoGeo's most beloved games. It can connect to TVs via an included docking station fashioned after the original NeoGeo system using HDMI or standard AV out. All of this plus an arcade stick retails for \$199.99.

07 Who Will Win at the Spike VGAs?

Spike TV's *Video Game Awards* show airs tonight, and if history repeats itself, the evening will be dedicated to game trailers and Felicia Day doing crazy things backstage. Samuel L. Jackson is hosting this year's festivities. You can check out the show live on Spike TV, MTV2, Tr3s, and streaming on Xbox Live and Gametrailers.

13 Learn About Social Games

Free-to-play and social games are two of the hot topics to be discussed at this year's Social Gaming Summit. Taking place on December 13 and 14 at Los Angeles' Marina del Rey Marriott, this conference offers a schedule packed with speakers and workshops.

14 A Weird Return to the Shire

Another Lord of the Rings trilogy begins today with *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. From what we hear, this film started as a reunion party for the original cast, but then Peter Jackson just started filming. Ian McKellen, Andy Serkis, Elijah Wood, Orlando Bloom, Christopher Lee, Hugo Weaving, and Cate Blanchett all reprise their roles — even if it doesn't make sense (many of their characters weren't in the book). Maybe the audience will be so star-struck that they won't notice. Lord of the Rings fans don't pay attention to details anyway.

18 New Releases

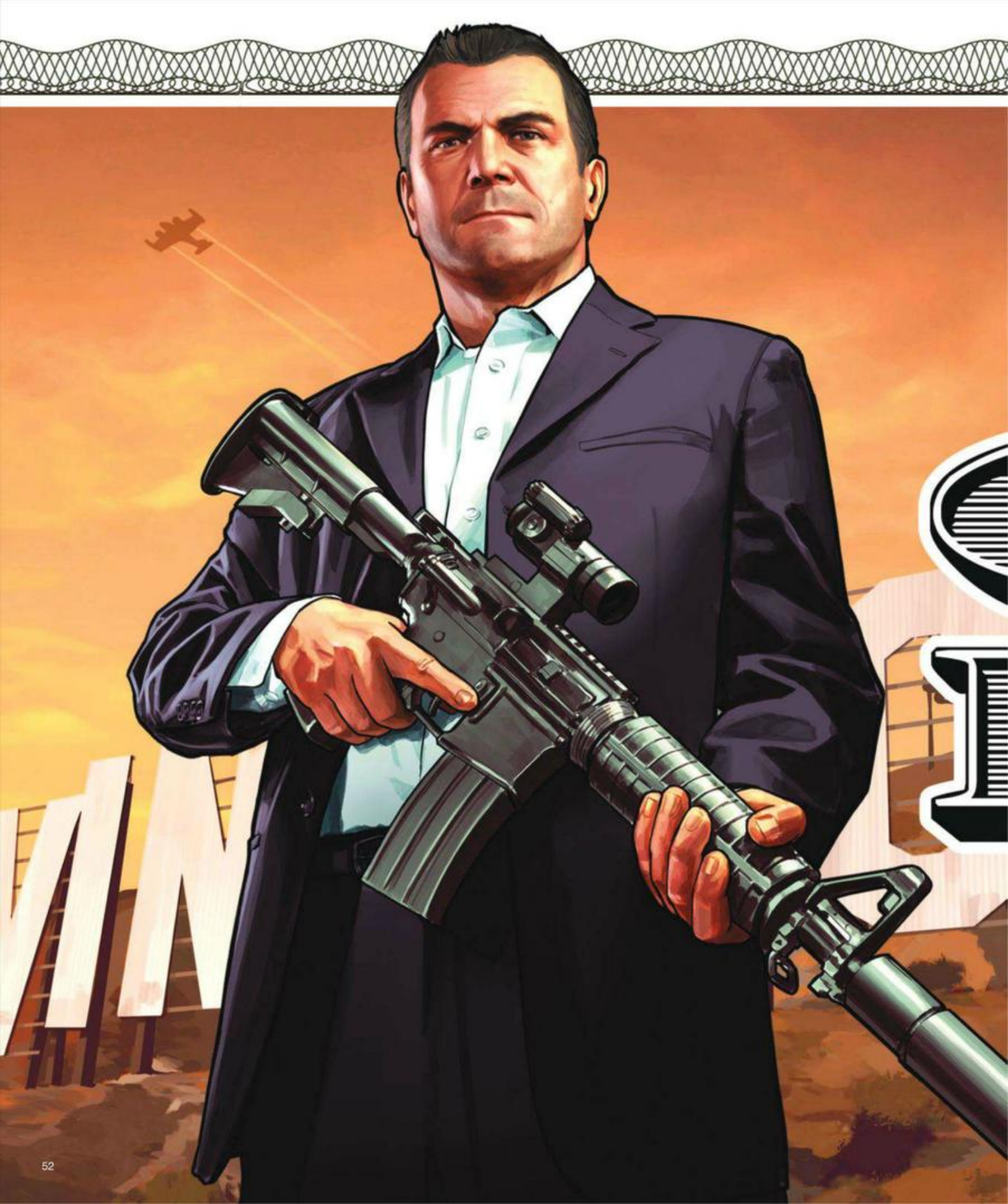
- *Futurama: Volume 7* (Blu-ray, DVD)

26 Spider-Man's Amazing Run Ends at 700

The 700th issue of Marvel's *Amazing Spider-Man* releases today. This is the final issue in the series. It will be replaced with *Superior Spider-Man* in the new year. The events in issue 700 bleed directly into the new series, and lead to a darker Spider-Man, as well as a new Sinister Six.

31 Ring In the New Year with Super Replay

Game Informer's *Super Replay* show, a series of hour-long episodes that chronicle an entire playthrough of a classic game, returns today! This time we're taking a look at Sega's *Blue Stinger*. This long-forgotten survival horror game was demanded by viewers, and should provide plenty of laughs.





» **Platform**
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
Rockstar Games

» **Developer**
Rockstar North

» **Release**
Spring

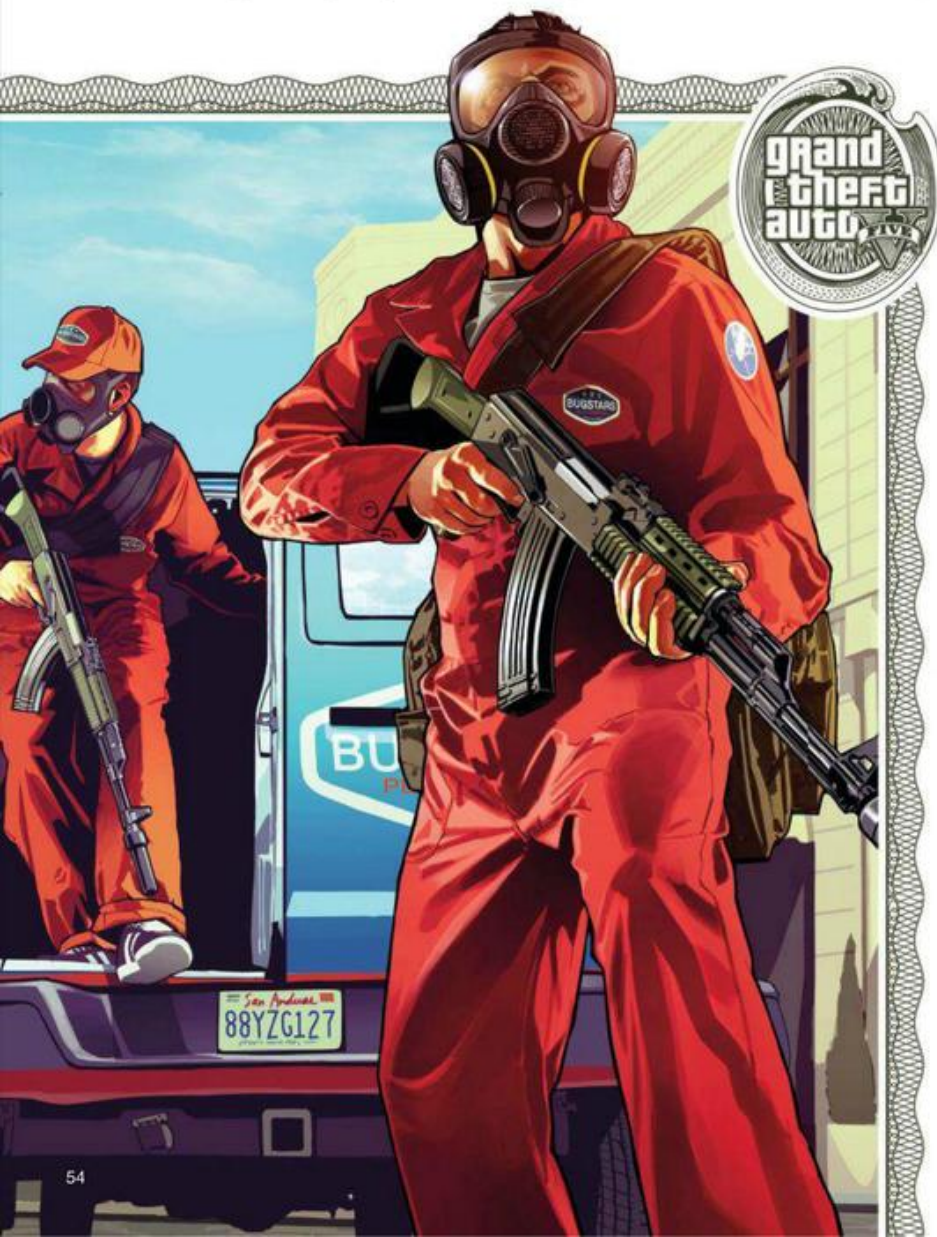
GRAND THEFT AUTO V OR GO HOME

*With Grand Theft Auto V, Rockstar Games
rewrites its entire playbook*

 by Matt Bertz 



It's not easy to stay at the top. When video games become multimillion dollar franchises, a publisher's natural inclination is to preserve its cash cow by continuing to offer the same kinds of game experiences that made it popular. As time moves on, the big changes the creative teams took to create the blockbuster are replaced by minor, calculated creative decisions backed with gigabytes of research data and focus-group analysis that proves people will keep paying the price of admission. The new additions become predictable. Add dual-wielding to Sequel 2. Introduce co-op for Sequel 3. Yeah, it's primarily a single-player game, but why not take a stab at multiplayer for Sequel 4?



Rockstar Games achieved blockbuster status in 2001 when Grand Theft Auto III introduced gamers to the addictive freedom of open-world gameplay. But rather than micromanage the studio and force its predictable business decisions into the creative process, parent company Take-Two Interactive has stayed on the sidelines, giving the team the ample time it needs to properly craft its vision (financial analysts be damned). This approach has paid off handsomely for Take-Two. The last game in Rockstar's flagship series, Grand Theft Auto IV, has sold more than 25 million copies to date, and currently holds the top perch of the Metacritic all-time list with a sterling 98 out of 100 rating that takes into account more than 80 independent reviews.

For the highly anticipated follow-up, Rockstar isn't playing it safe by collecting marketing research and watching focus groups. In a gamble to exceed player expectations, push its creative boundaries internally, and hopefully add something to the discussion of game design in general, the studio is taking the kind of chance most publishers would dismiss immediately for being too difficult, expensive, and time consuming.

Grand Theft Auto V evolves nearly every mechanic, features the biggest world in series history, and introduces a new technology that radically changes the way players experience the game. Why control one main protagonist when you could switch between three at nearly any time?

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

The evolution of open-world protagonists in Rockstar games eerily follows the trajectory of video game storytelling in general. The early top-down games advanced the plot through subtitles. When Rockstar embraced 3D with Grand Theft Auto III, the main character, Claude, was the strong and silent type even though the rest of the cast was fully voiced. With Vice City and San Andreas, the studio created protagonists Tommy Vercetti and CJ, whose cartoon-like appearances, voice actors, and larger-than-life personalities perfectly fit their respective historical time periods. At the dawn of the high-definition era, Rockstar gravitated away from caricatures in favor of morally grounded protagonists like Grand Theft Auto IV's Niko Bellic and Red Dead Redemption's John Marston.

But as the worlds got bigger and the amount of disparate activities increased with each subsequent game, Rockstar came across a narrative dilemma facing all open-world games. How many different lead characters can be all things to all people, all the time? If Niko is wrestling with the moral quandary of being unwillingly sucked into a life of crime in a cutscene, it creates a narrative dissonance when the player, assuming the role of Niko, fires rocket launchers at strangers in the middle of the street. When it came time to conceptualize Grand Theft Auto V, Rockstar chose to address this issue head on.

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Introducing the 9F, a convertible interpretation of the Audi R8



Michael cruising down the street in flip-flops on his bicycle

GAMEPLAY EVOLVED

For Grand Theft Auto V, Rockstar Games has rebuilt most of the gameplay mechanics from the ground up. Vice president of creative Dan Houser wouldn't speak to particulars, opting to let the teams that work on each system delve into finer details at a later date, but he did offer general impressions on the driving, shooting, and melee combat.

Driving

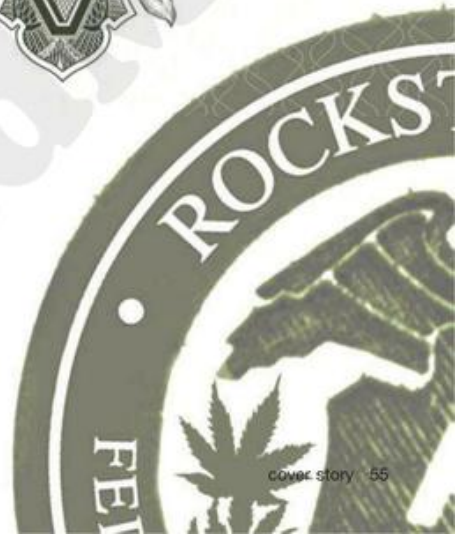
"The cars hold to the ground a bit better. We thought they were big and boatlike in GTA IV, and we feel like it has really leaped forward because we're able to run a little more physics on them. It feels more like a racing game. There are not a lot of high-level racing games out there at the moment, and that it's going to be scratched by this game in a way maybe it hasn't been in previous GTAs."

Shooting

"We feel like we've evolved it on from where we had it in any previous game a long way. And not just in terms of how it works, but also in terms of the core mechanics of how you play the game."

Melee Combat

"It's better than we've had in the past. How far we can push it - we will see depending on resources we allocate to it. It's never going to be as big a deal as shooting with the way that we make the game, but we do want it to feel really fun and strong."



"One of them is motivated by ambition, another is motivated by ego, and another one of them is motivated by id. What happens when you smash those together?"

- Dan Houser



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"We loved Niko and felt he was a very strong lead protagonist for a game, and we were starting to get into John Marston," remembers Rockstar Games vice president of creative Dan Houser. "We were still being told a western was going to be a disaster, but we thought we were going to make something interesting with a strong character that you started to fall in love with. We just felt that after those two games, just doing more of the same wouldn't be enough because we wouldn't be able to surpass them for a while. That was really where we came up with the concept of doing it like the episodes, with three characters."

As Episodes from Liberty City demonstrated, giving the player multiple perspectives has clear advantages. When you rode through Alderney on the back of a chopper as Johnny Klebitz, carrying all the emotional baggage of his motorcycle club, Liberty City felt drastically different than when you were partying with the one percenters as Luis Lopez or carving your American identity as immigrant Niko Bellic. The city, which one could argue is the true main character of any Grand Theft Auto game, felt more alive, as if these were just three of the thousands of stories that could be told within its boundaries.

Once Rockstar began discussing what having three playable main characters in Grand Theft Auto V would entail in terms of game design, the idea gradually evolved past the simplistic delineation between characters that seemed like the natural progression from the episodes. Instead of rotating between five missions as one character, five as the second character, and five as the third, what if you were constantly switching between them? It wouldn't be easy to pull off, but Rockstar deemed the opportunities for both narrative and gameplay flexibility worth the effort. On the plot side, it would allow them to create a more diverse style of lead protagonist and tie certain behaviors to particular characters. On the gameplay side, if the characters lived far apart then players could experience more of the world more quickly off-mission, and Rockstar could eliminate flat spots during missions by allowing players to switch between perspectives at the press of a button.

"It's been very challenging, because before you were trying to keep one story alive and now you're trying to keep three," Houser says. "It's definitely had complexities and things that have challenged us, but I think the advantage at a very simplistic and blunt level is it lets you tell a more complex story in a more naturalistic way. It is the same with game design as it is with story design, so you aren't forcing the lead character through every situation and every piece of information. At another level, it lets you play as both protagonist and antagonist. We hopefully have a strong and interesting cast of supporting characters, but maybe less wide-ranging than in previous games because a lot of the time, the people you're not necessarily fighting with, but bickering with, are your other lead characters."

OCEAN'S THREE

We first meet Grand Theft Auto V's three playable characters by jumping into their day-to-day lives during a hands-off game demo. Rockstar first introduces Michael, the character whose perspective we heard in the voiceover of the first Grand Theft Auto V trailer. Michael is a retired bank robber who is living a more lavish lifestyle than most people in the witness protection program thanks to an unconventional deal with the FIB. As the demo opens, he's resting comfortably in a pair of flip-flops alongside a pool in the affluent neighborhood of Rockford Hills (think Beverly Hills). In the near distance you can see his private tennis court, and if you look onto the smoggy horizon you can see the cityscape of downtown Los Santos.

Though he appears to be living the good life, Michael isn't content. His wife is burning through his cash reserves like she's auditioning for a role in *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, and he doesn't have the slightest idea how to communicate with his children. As he walks into his opulent mansion we meet Tracy, his teenage daughter, who is jamming out loudly to a Just Dance-style video game.

"It's called exercise – you should try it," she says flippantly to her father.

She clearly takes after Michael's wife, Amanda. We cross paths with her as she's heading out the front door for another



THE NEW FACES OF GRAND THEFT AUTO



Name: Michael

Occupation: Retired

Age: Early 40s

Location: Rockford Hills

History: A highly successful former bank robber, Michael retired in luxury after making a sweetheart deal with the FIB. Currently in the witness protection program, it may look like he has the idyllic life, but he hates his wife Amanda (who reciprocates the feeling and spends all his money) and doesn't understand his two teenage children (Tracy and Jimmy). With the money running out and his domestic life driving him crazy, Michael needs to get back into the game.

Appearance: He may be older, but with a clean-cut appearance, nice clothes, and a big house, Michael doesn't look out of place in high society.

Houser's Take: "When we started with Michael, the idea was an older guy who was very successful getting sucked back into the game. Of all the various stories we've told about bank robbers, thieves, and hit men over the years, this was a story – just as we thought with GTA IV and Niko as an immigrant – that's got a lot of freshness to it."



Name: Trevor

Occupation: Career criminal

Age: Early 40s

Location: Blaine County

History: A frequent drug user who is governed by his desires and prone to violent outbursts and destructive rampages, Trevor is the proverbial loose cannon. A former military pilot, he used to work a few bank jobs with Michael back in the day. You don't need to twist his arm to get him on board with a heist.

Appearance: Balding and disheveled, the years haven't been kind of Trevor. He frequently wears plain white t-shirts and has a tattoo that says "Cut Here" with a dotted line around his neck.

Houser's Take: "Trevor appeared to us pretty much out of nowhere as the embodiment of another side of criminality – of freedom, and of doing what you want. If Michael was meant to be the idea of some version of criminal control – or some sort of bourgeois criminal who tries to go straight and gets sucked back in – what about the guy who didn't do that? What about the opposite guy? What about the guy who just says, 'f--- off' every moment, is relentless, doesn't want to stop taking drugs, doesn't want to stop partying, doesn't want to be told 'no' by anyone, and just completely revels in chaos?"



Name: Franklin

Occupation: Repo Man

Age: Mid 20s

Location: South Los Santos

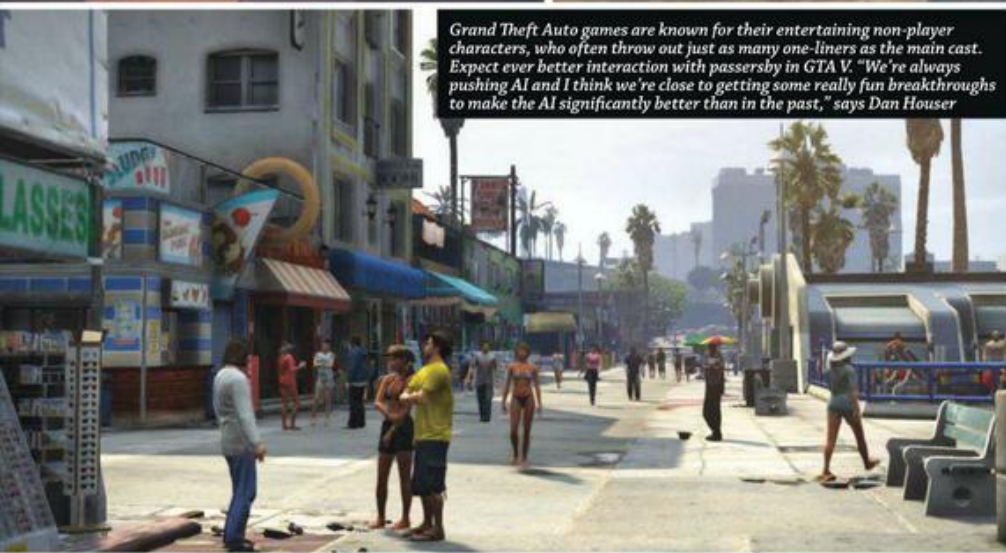
History: Franklin currently works for an Armenian luxury car dealership who who sell cars to people who can't afford them. When they default, Franklin plays the role of the grim repo man. Franklin stumbles into Michael when looking for a hustle.

Appearance: Fit and fashion conscious, Franklin is the young and capable one of the bunch.

Houser's take: "Franklin was the idea of this street hustler in the modern world where the glory days – if there ever were glory days of gang banging – had long since passed. When some of the illusions of this life have been shattered, what do you do now having been in that world? That seemed like an interesting character; a guy in his mid-to-late 20s who wants to move forward but doesn't really know how and is being held back by some of his more idiotic and dangerous friends."



Grand Theft Auto games are known for their entertaining non-player characters, who often throw out just as many one-liners as the main cast. Expect ever better interaction with passersby in GTA V. "We're always pushing AI and I think we're close to getting some really fun breakthroughs to make the AI significantly better than in the past," says Dan Houser



shopping spree. As she walks out of the house she shouts, "If you want to know where I am you can check your credit card statements."

She hops into her Sentinel XS sports car and Michael yells back, "Hey, I'm feeling lucky! I'll check the hospitals!" These two make Tony and Carmela Soprano seem like the Huxtables.

With the car gone, Michael grabs a bicycle out of the garage. As he rides down the street we get our first glimpse of the neighborhood. With manicured lawns, sprinkler systems, rolling hills, and enough high-end luxury cars on the street to make the Grotti dealership in Liberty City look like a used car lot, Rockstar has once again accurately captured the vibe of a region.

The contrast between Michael's world and that of his longtime friend Trevor is jarring. When the Rockstar playtester calls up a quick menu to switch characters, the camera pulls away from the affluent community and

zooms out to a Google Earth-style vantage before dropping us into a ramshackle trailer in a desert region of the map. As we greet Trevor, he's fighting a courageous battle with constipation on the toilet, yelling, "I need a f---ing midwife for this thing!"

We spend only a brief moment with Trevor, but his maniacal personality doesn't take long to make an impression. He hops into his Bodhi, a large truck that looks sort of like a convertible Jeep Wrangler JK, and heads down the road. Blaine County is a barren, rundown desert region filled with bikers, meth heads, and other walks of life more comfortable on the fringes of society (think the destitute area around the Salton Sea). Trevor rolls down the street, pulls into a parking lot and flicks off a group of people loitering in front of a building, something Rockstar recommends you do in varying circumstances to see the different reactions from people. People in rough-and-tumble neighborhoods will take it quite differently than the soccer

moms at the posh boutique store.

Time to wreak some senseless havoc. With Trevor, the demo playtester nonchalantly grabs a can of gasoline sitting along the wall of the building, douses all sides of a parked truck, and pours a trail away from the vehicle. He revels in the reflective qualities of the gasoline for a brief moment, drops his lit Zippo, and steps back to admire his handiwork. The flame travels violently toward the truck, first setting the tires on fire, then the chassis, and finally reaching the gas tank after a slow burn to cause a huge explosion. Just another day in the life of a drugged-out psychopath.

When we switch over to the third protagonist, Franklin, he's cruising Vespucci Beach (think Venice Beach) looking for a car he's supposed to repossess for his boss. The waterfront is filled with activities, including a muscle beach gym. A Jesus look-alike is conducting a sermon on a nearby street corner. Franklin eventually locates his target: a 9F, the GTA equivalent of the Audi R8. When he gets in the car, he drops the top down before taking off. Driving toward downtown Los Santos, we see several familiar businesses, including an Ammu-Nation. After a hiatus in Grand Theft Auto IV thanks to Liberty City's strict gun control laws, it's nice to see the return of everyone's favorite one-stop gun shop.

These brief introductions give us only a small sample of each character's personality, but it's easy to see the potential for this narrative approach. Michael, Trevor, and Franklin aren't interchangeable ciphers. Each one has his own personality, motivations, and skillset. When you're not controlling them, they're going about their daily business and you may be surprised by the situations they find themselves in should you switch back to check up on them. Just like the playtester did in this demo, the player is free to switch between these characters at any time when off-mission.

"That contrast between three different experiences, geographies, and vibes to everything should be really strong, and I think it's something that gives the game a unique feeling where you're visiting these people's lives and seeing what they do," Houser says. "Within the story, you're going to know information about a character before they know it because you're going to know what the other people know when you play as them."



WELCOME TO SUNNY LOS SANTOS



When the leadership group at Rockstar Games started conceptualizing *Grand Theft Auto V* shortly after wrapping up *IV*, many ideas were on the table. But rather than venture into a historical setting or new location, the team felt it still had work to do in San Andreas.

"Sam, my brother, more than anyone, but also the lead artist Aaron Garbut, were both really interested in the idea of doing a proper Los Angeles," says Rockstar Games vice president of creative Dan Houser. "We felt we hadn't done that with San Andreas – which was these very small, sketchlike cities. Los Angeles and the surrounding countryside would be very interesting, giving us good themes to play on and lots of good, different gameplay environments – something that could allude to aspects of *IV* and allude to aspects of San Andreas, but still feel very fresh and different from both of them."

Though Rockstar has focused on this region several times over the last few years with titles like *L.A. Noire*, *Midnight Club: Los Angeles*, and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, they

still felt they had only scratched the surface of the culture. If any culture is ripe for a GTA-style parody, it's the vanity capital of the modern world. With Hollywood, the porn industry, the decriminalization of marijuana, the immigration battle, gated communities, the pockets of luxury amidst the tent cities of homeless people, and the bankrupt government, there are more than enough topics ripe for parody in the signature Rockstar style.

"The geography you could get outside Los Angeles is spectacular," Houser says. "The contrast between desert/rural Southern California, inland from L.A. and just a bit north, compared to L.A., gives you a great microcosm of red state/blue state theme – different vibes culturally as much as geographically. I think that was something we really felt would be good about this location."

Grand Theft Auto IV featured a densely packed urban environment filled with activities around every corner, and *Red Dead Redemption* made large open expanses more gameplay-friendly with dynamic encounters that lure players into missions. *Grand Theft Auto V* combines

the best of both, giving players the largest open-world playground in Rockstar history with a huge and diverse city serving as the epicenter.

When I ask why they chose to make one large city instead of making two or three, Houser says it was a design decision primarily driven on making the best possible experience. "The bottom line was building one city and doing it properly. To do a proper version of L.A., which area-wise is the largest city in the world, the game has to give you a sense of that sprawl – if not completely replicate it. You have to spend a lot of your city budget time and money making L.A. To split that into two, you would lose what L.A. is."

Just how big is this new world? Art director Aaron Garbut crunched the math. When you include interior and exterior spaces together, Los Santos is bigger than the worlds of *Red Dead Redemption*, *San Andreas*, and *Grand Theft Auto IV* combined, with room to spare. This expansive environment includes beachfronts, wine country, a large wilderness area surrounding a fully explorable Mt. Chiliad, a Salton Sea region, a military base, and of course the sprawling suburban hills leading up to the bustling urban center of Los Santos. Bring your scuba equipment, too, because you can even explore the fully detailed ocean floor along the Los Santos coastline.

GETTING AROUND LOS SANTOS

To encourage players to explore this vast expanse, Rockstar is giving them more vehicles than any other Grand Theft Auto to date. Confirmed vehicles include a BMX bike, mountain bikes, road bikes, dirt bikes, a huge variety of cars and trucks, helicopters, planes, ATVs, and Jet Skis. You won't have to wait until the endgame to take to the skies, either. Since Trevor is a former war veteran with flight experience, you just need to find a plane to fly it.

LIVING THE HEIST LIFE

What brings these seemingly disparate characters together? The pursuit of the almighty dollar. Each character has a fully fleshed-out story arc, but instead of waiting for the finale to introduce complex missions, Grand Theft Auto V peppers several complicated, multitiered heists in the vein of Grand Theft Auto IV's popular "Three Leaf Clover" mission across the narrative.

"We really wanted to make heists a big theme in the game – and we'll demonstrate those later on – based on missions not just from GTA IV but from previous games that people really responded to," Houser says. "People are in love with doing the bank jobs, particularly when they feel like they have prepped the bank jobs. We've never felt we've done a great job with a bank job, so we decided, 'Let's properly invest the story and the mission design for some of the missions into making some of these built out series of heists.'" That was a huge part of the story missions – trying to set the game apart from games we've done in the past."

In addition to adding more big heists, Rockstar is also addressing mission diversity to leverage different pairings of the protagonists.

"We want to move from having one character in a mission to having two to having three," Houser says. "This makes the missions feel distinct in that they feel high action but they will have a very different tone depending on who's on them, how many people are on them, and how much we're using switches to make it feel different."

To demonstrate how this switch technology works mid-mission, Rockstar showcased a scenario where all three characters work together.

MAKING THE SWITCH

When we meet up with the crew, Trevor and Michael have already reunited, but not necessarily by choice. The FIB is on their case, and to get them off their backs, the trio needs to perform a snatch-and-grab mission for them.



They meet at a helipad to pick up the civilian chopper the FIB is supplying for the mission. As Michael pulls up, Trevor is berating the security agent guarding the chopper about standing around with his earpiece while everyone else is "out there making money and nailing chicks."

When Michael urges his lunatic friend to calm down, Trevor keeps on running his mouth like a deranged Dennis Hopper character. He has agreed to this mission on the premise that it will lead to the springing of his friend Brad. When he reiterates this, Michael replies, "We'll talk about Brad later." Sounds like there could be differing opinions on that.

This appears to be Franklin's first exposure to Trevor, because after seeing him taken aback by the psychopath's hot-headed rant, of which Michael's parenting skills eventually become the target, Michael tells him it's okay if he sits this one out. Franklin reconfirms his commitment, so

the mission proceeds as planned. Michael changes into an outfit suitable for rappelling down the side of a skyscraper, and he and Trevor hop in the chopper.

When they arrive at the towering IAA headquarters (the GTA equivalent to the CIA), Franklin is already perched with a sniper rifle in a nearby building, ready to react if things get violent. As Trevor hovers overhead, the player assumes the role of Michael as he rappels down the side of the skyscraper to locate the correct office. The rappelling mechanic is reminiscent of Rainbow Six Vegas; the player has full control over the camera and controls the speed of the descent. As Michael descends along the side of the building, we can see into the offices where people are going about their day-to-day business. We also notice the musical score ramping up the tension – a first for the GTA series.

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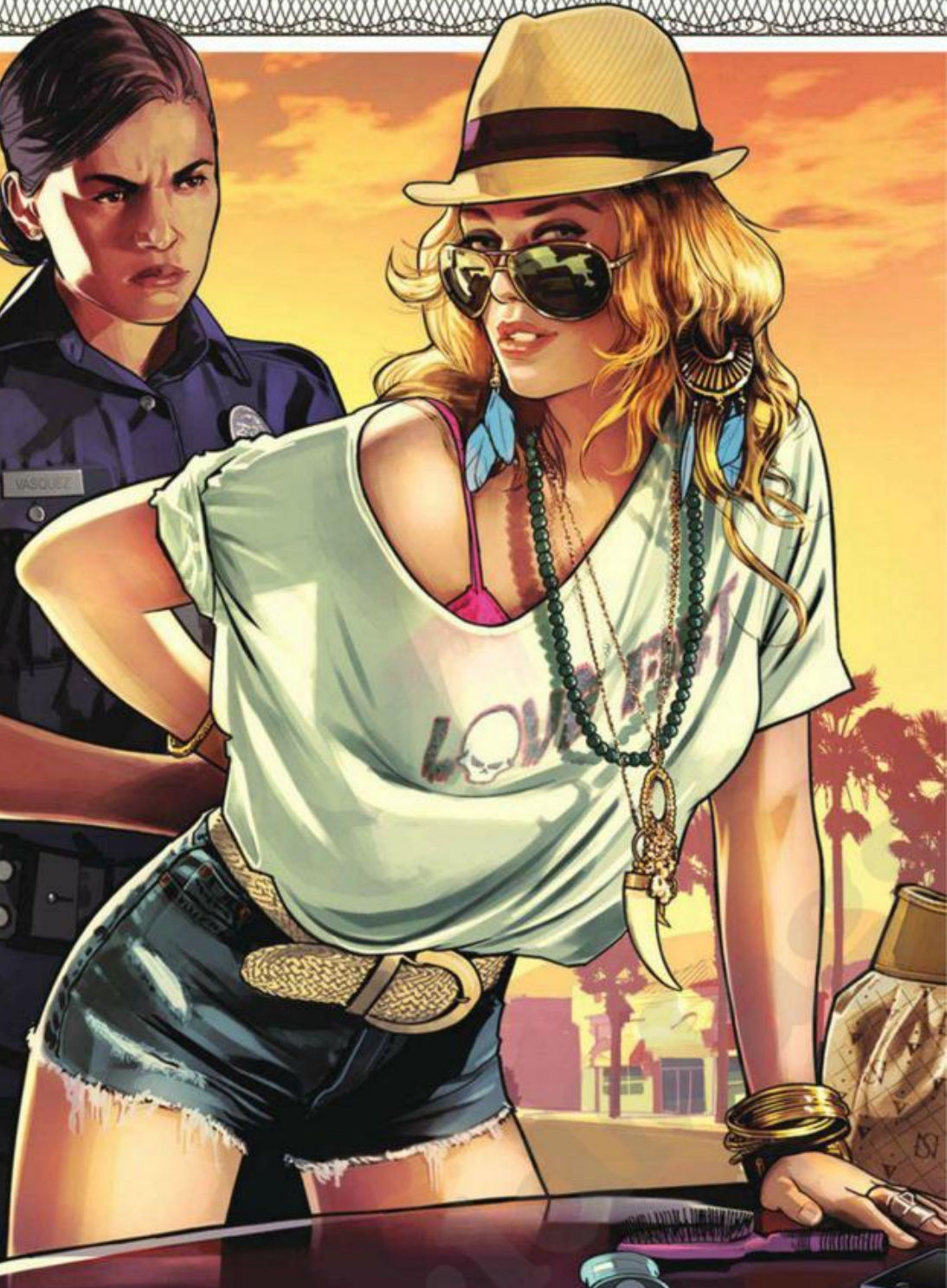


New protagonists Franklin, Trevor, and Michael (left to right) meet up for their first mission together



Vinewood is one of several Los Santos locations returning from San Andreas





KILLING TIME IN LOS SANTOS

With welcome diversions like bowling, strip clubs, live stand-up comedy, internet cafes, and a great selection of television shows to watch at home, players rarely found themselves twiddling their fingers in Grand Theft Auto IV. For the sequel, Rockstar Games plans to blow out off-mission activities to an even greater degree with a variety of different side missions and more sophisticated minigames in the vein of Red Dead Redemption's poker.

"What we really wanted to focus on in mission design is a huge amount of diversity," says Rockstar Games vice president of creative Dan Houser. "We want to use the characters and use the rest of their lives – be it Michael's family, Franklin's crazy friends, or Trevor out in the desert with access to planes very early on – to quickly get you into a lot of action and a lot of different kinds of things. You can go from being in as heavy a shootout as you've ever seen in a GTA game to doing yoga within a matter of missions. Hopefully it feels very nice, consistent, and held together, but you're being pulled around into a lot of different activities by the story in a really fun and interesting way." Here is what we know so far:

GET IN CHARACTER

Many of the side activities are available to each of the three protagonists, but to drive home the differences in their personalities and develop their characters further, Rockstar plans to give Michael, Trevor, and Franklin unique hobbies that only they can participate in. "We're still ironing out all the details, but we want one or two key minigame activities

per character to really help the characters get separated from each other," Houser says. "We just want the world to feel different for whomever you're playing. If you're Trevor, you're more likely to find the world antagonistic than if you're not."

CUSTOMIZE YOUR LOOK

Because Michael, Trevor, and Franklin are fully fleshed-out characters with specific skill

traits, Grand Theft Auto V does not have the RPG-style player customization so many people loved in San Andreas. Allowing players to gain and lose weight had a unique set of technical challenges. "The main thing is at a technical level to get the changing scale of the character – to get them bigger and smaller – is hard, and in San Andreas the standard definition graphics were

more forgiving," Houser says. "Doing that with three different characters – we definitely thought about it but decided it was impossible. We just weren't going to get the results we want with the way the rest of the animation system works. It was just not worth making compromises elsewhere." Though you can't go on a NutraSlim diet, you can still customize the look of your characters with different clothing.

ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT

Even if Niko stayed in his crappy tenement, he had plenty of entertainment at his disposal with a collection of hilarious television parodies. Our favorites included the ram-bunctious cartoon *Republican Space Rangers*, a scathing parody of George W. Bush's foreign policy, and the hilarious Ken Burns sendup documentary *A History Of Liberty City*. Rockstar confirmed that the "entertainment inside the entertainment" is returning in Grand Theft Auto V, but chose to keep specifics under wraps outside of saying it has "funny new stuff that's pretty odd to do in a game."

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Grand Theft Auto V expands on extracurricular activities in a major way with options like yoga, triathlons, Jet Skiing,





base jumping, tennis, and even a full-fledged golf game. "We've actually got a full golf course, which we're very pleased with because it's pretty fun," Houser says. "What we'd learned on the best aspects of GTA IV and Red Dead was that it's better to have one really good minigame built by a really good design team than five half-assed ones that aren't that fun. People will try everything, but if it's fun they'll invest more time into it."

NO ROMANCE IN THE AIR
Niko Bellic had several women available on speed dial to take on dates, but the cast of Grand Theft Auto V won't be spending its free time chasing tail. When asked if romance would return in GTA V, Houser says, "I don't think so, simply because of the nature of the characters. We weren't sure it would work, and we're doing lots of other new stuff. We definitely would bring it back in the future, but not in this game. It just felt like it was going to be overly complex [with three protagonists]."

MAKING FRIENDS
Players won't be spending free time wining and dining women in Los Santos, but each protagonist has his own cast of friends to interact with when they aren't performing heists or hanging out together. We asked Dan Houser to highlight a few Rockstar favorites:

Lamar: "I really like Lamar, who is Franklin's crazy friend. He's just a good sort of crazy—the guy who does the acting is brilliant. Franklin's kind of serious and ambitious, and Lamar's a more lunatic version from that world and he's just very funny."

Jimmy: "I love Jimmy, Michael's son. The actor captures the story of a whiny, lazy, pot smoking-20-year-old kid so brilliantly. They've got this awful and confused father-son relationship. You've never seen a relationship like that in a GTA game or in games before. You never see a lot of family stuff. So you have a full family thing that we are excited by, because it seems sort of fresh and weird."

Ron: "Ron is Trevor's best buddy—as much as Trevor can have a buddy. He's a paranoid conspiracy theorist living in a neighboring trailer. If Trevor is like the shark, he's like the remora. He's completely paranoid but terrified of this maniac he's got to spend time with."

Amanda: "Michael's wife Amanda is great. The actress is brilliant and the vibe of them is just so funny because he's been awful to her and she's a really strong personality as well. We've never had a woman like that in one of these games before. They've always been the gun-toting type or damsels in distress. Here's something completely different where she's bound to him by their past lives and they can't stand each other anymore. It's something that feels very fresh, feels like GTA, and it's just sort of amusing."

FAMILIAR FACES
Though he wouldn't name specifics, Houser confirmed that some familiar faces from Grand Theft Auto IV and Episodes From Liberty City may resurface in Los Santos. Just don't expect major characters like Niko Bellic or anyone from the PlayStation 2-era GTA games.

"The five PS2 games are one universe, and this is the high definition universe, so they don't co-exist," Houser says. "You wouldn't ever see CJ or Tommy Vercetti. They would be like mythical characters in this world who never existed."

THE LOS SANTOS ECONOMY

Past Grand Theft Auto games featured the ability to purchase real estate to expand your criminal empire or collect homes. For GTA V, Rockstar is taking a different approach to creating an economy. "A valid criticism of GTA IV is that there wasn't enough to do with money at the end of the game," Houser says. "We are definitely going to have a very vibrant and fun economy, from earlier in the game to after you've completed everything. There won't be property, but there will be loads of other stuff."

YOU BETTER CALL SOMEBODY

Since Vice City, Rockstar has used a cell phone to drive gameplay and give players new activities to pursue. GTA V preserves the mobile-phone concept, but you won't be getting calls from friends all the time. For all intents and purposes, you are your best friends. Rockstar plans to streamline the phone to surface some of the activities. "One criticism people felt about GTA IV was there wasn't enough to do when you weren't doing story missions," Houser says. "A lot of it was hidden on the phone, so we've taken a lot of that and moved it onto the map." Though it may be losing some functionality, Houser says it's gaining

new features as well. "It will be a more contemporary phone, so I think you'll use it for things like accessing the Internet," he says.

CASUAL ENCOUNTERS

Walking through the streets of Liberty City in Grand Theft Auto IV, you would occasionally run across a pedestrian you could interact with. These random encounters are coming back in a bigger way for GTA V. When Franklin drove around Vespucci Beach briefly in the demo, we noticed a Jesus-looking preacher dressed in white robes speaking to his flock. He is just one of many pedestrians who have more to offer than a witty one-liner. "This time they are fully mopped, they've got a lot more to say, and you can interact with them a little more," Houser says. "There's a far greater array of them along with just huge numbers of other pedestrians and other systems, so it should feel like it's a lot easier to meet people and stumble into interaction as well if you want to."

DYNAMIC MISSIONS

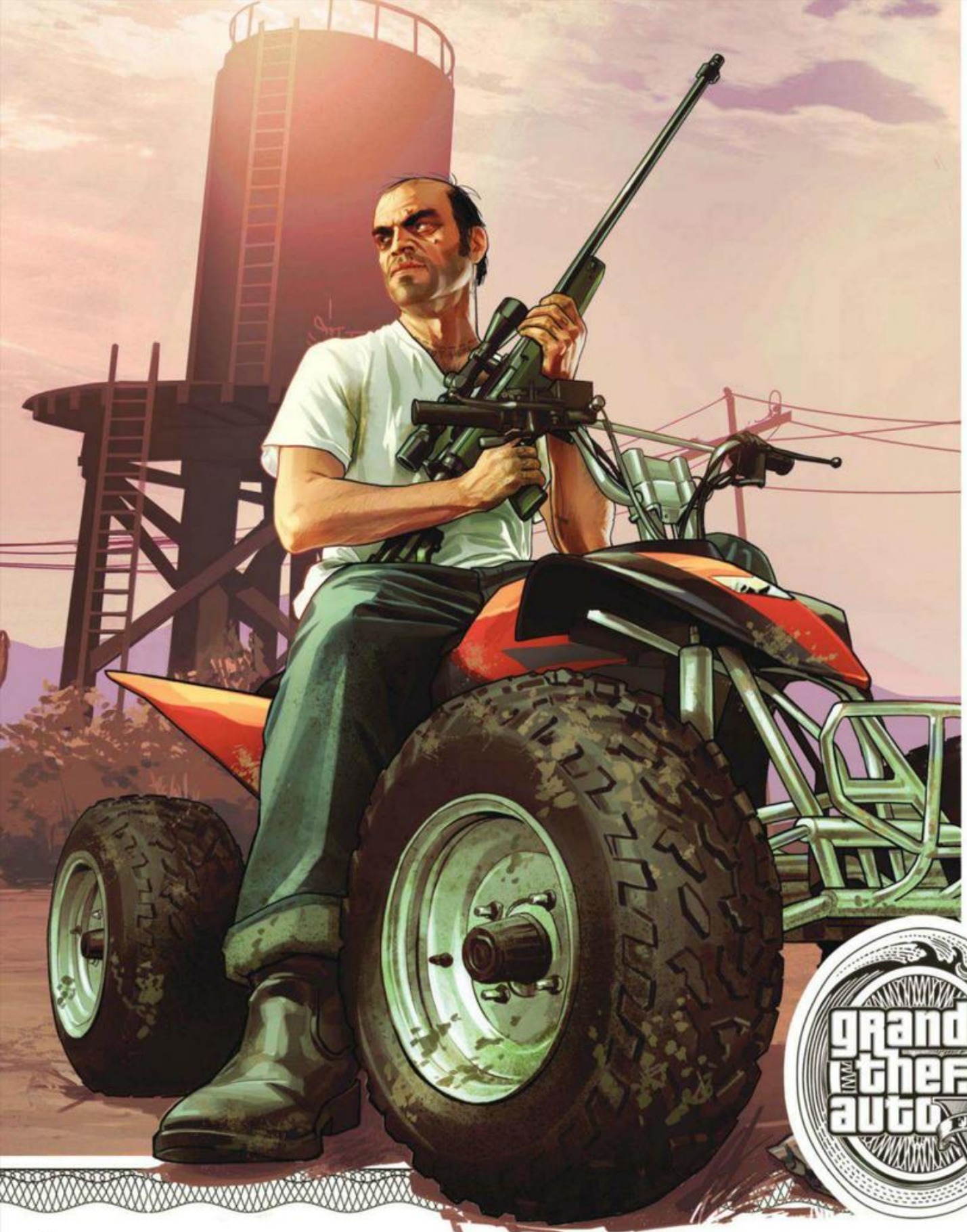
Because the expansive frontier in Red Dead Redemption was so wide open, Rockstar Games devised a dynamic mission system that would present players with scenarios they could either ignore or engage rather than making them wander aimlessly between missions. This structure proved so successful that Rockstar is migrating it over to Grand Theft Auto V. When you're driving around in the country, you may see a

broken-down car or hitchhiker on the side of the road. If you're the curious type, pull over and see what happens. Going off-road in the desert, you may come across two parked cars and a sea of dead bodies around them. Did a *Breaking Bad*-style drug deal go bad? Investigate if you want. Dynamic missions extend into the heart of Los Santos as well. If you see a cash van, you can attack it to make a quick score, or if you're looking to do a good deed you could catch the mugger who grabbed a granny's purse.

MULTIPLAYER

Rockstar is saving the multiplayer reveal for another time, with Houser only offering, "We're very pleased with the direction it's heading. We're ever closer to nailing the fun and excitement of open-world multiplayer." Though we have to wait for hard details, we already know some of the basics. During the Max Payne 3 press blitz, Dan Houser confirmed to IGN that the Crew infrastructure introduced in that title will carry over into Grand Theft Auto V via the Social Club. Though Rockstar says much of the HUD elements we saw during the demo were placeholder, we did notice that the multiplayer menu was located directly underneath the switch icons, which means players will probably enter the competitive modes through the single-player experience again. Given the single-player campaign's focus on heists, we hope Rockstar creates a dedicated cooperative/competitive mode based around this concept as well.







Rockstar says it has no plans to introduce Kinect or Move functionality to the game, but if a particular game system works as intended, the studio would consider releasing an iOS companion app to perform an as-yet-unannounced task

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Michael locates their extraction target just in time, as the lady conducting the interrogation is threatening to sodomize him with an 18-inch Maglite – sans lube. As they verbally berate him and smash his fingers with the heavy-duty flashlight, he sticks to his position that he “installs camera equipment, not surveillance!”

Before things get too out of hand, Michael smashes through the glass and grabs the target, holding him hostage with one arm while pointing a gun at the various interrogators reaching for their pistols in front of him. Suddenly, an icon on the screen presents the player with the first switch option.

From here out, you could stay in the role of Michael, trying to pick off agents while waiting for Franklin to snipe the rest of them from afar, but instead the player pulls up the radial quick menu and selects Franklin. Upon pressing the button, the player perspective switches instantaneously,

putting you behind the trigger of a sniper rifle in the building across the way. The transition is executed smoothly, with a camera angle that helps you adjust to your new role instantaneously. As Franklin, the player makes short work of the remaining agents.

After Trevor picks up Michael and the target, a helicopter chase ensues in the sky above downtown Los Santos. During the chase, the player has three switch options available: you can pilot the getaway as Trevor, try to snipe other pilots as Franklin, or fire an assault rifle out the back of the chopper as Michael. After taking down a few birds, the crew returns the copter to the FIB helipad and the mission concludes.

After seeing this one short demo, the gameplay possibilities that open up with three varying perspectives are immediately evident. Switching to another character at the right time can eliminate the flat spots during missions and keep the player at the heart of the action. Letting you

swap between characters handling various tasks should also make the multifaceted heists much more intriguing – imagine cracking a safe with one character and then immediately switching to the man guarding the door who is just about to open fire on the arriving police.

“We have a design issue that all games have – that games are at some level about doing stuff, you being the person in charge of the mechanic,” Houser says. “When you are only one character, it means they always have to be driving when the driving is fun, shooting when the shooting is fun, flying when the flying is fun, and parachuting when the parachuting is fun. It can lead to things being a little ridiculous – having a lot of time spent climbing ladders, or a lot of segues from moment to moment that can end up being slightly contrived. With [multiple simultaneous protagonists] we can get past that and also cut out a lot of the transitional moments to just always put you in the action.”

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THE ART OF GRAND THEFT AUTO

To gain insight into the process of creating the intricate worlds of Grand Theft Auto, we spoke to Rockstar North art director Aaron Garbut.

When you finally settled on returning to Los Santos for Grand Theft Auto V, what elements of the San Andreas version of the city did you want to preserve, and which parts were you comfortable leaving behind?

We wanted the world to feel fresh, so, like Liberty City in Grand Theft Auto IV, our reference for the world wasn't the city from the earlier games. Instead, we went back to the real place, the real locations. Some elements found their

way back in, but more through nods to the past than trying to recreate the original. This is an entirely fresh game world waiting to be explored and experienced.

Liberty City captured the spirit of New York City better than most books and films. What elements of Southern Californian culture did you want to include in Los Santos that perhaps you didn't get the chance to include in San Andreas?

Our processes and the fidelity of the world have evolved so much since San Andreas that it's hard to think about San Andreas in those terms anymore. We didn't have the power to do this properly in the past, but it's an area we're always trying to push forward. To get beyond the city as just a backdrop or a game level with pedestrians randomly milling about and instead make it feel like part of a real world, with distinct areas and individuals going about their lives, a real place that you can visit and exist within.

The primary focus of San Andreas was gang culture. This time we are trying to capture the contemporary culture of L.A. as a whole, the entire cross section and the variety that brings a city, surrounding towns and settlements to life. So in some senses the difference between San Andreas and V is that V is so much broader. Conversely, everything about it is so much more detailed and thought through.

So it comes down to increased scope with massively increased fidelity – not a bad goal. We're trying to capture the nuances that make a place feel real, but doing that in the context of a city that also has such extreme contrasts.

That's the interesting thing about L.A. – it's just so diverse. That's how the city feels to me: diverse, sprawling, larger

than life, and more than a little bit mental. We've toned down its sprawling nature in Los Santos – we compressed the city somewhat so that it never felt dull, but everything is there, including those special mental characters and moments you just wouldn't experience anywhere else; the oddness that's as much a part of L.A. as the palm trees and the traffic jams. We're filling the world with unique characters you can come across and random events you can witness or become involved in that really can bring this world and your experience of it to life in a way we've never done on this scale before, and certainly in a way we really couldn't achieve in San Andreas. We're trying to move beyond the city as just a backdrop or a game level with pedestrians randomly milling about and instead make it feel like part of a real world, with distinct areas and individuals going about their lives, a real place that you can visit and exist within.

What are some of your favorite details about Los Angeles you've incorporated into Los Santos?

One of the biggest achievements we've made with this game is the detail we have created over such a massive and varied world. I love the contrasts L.A. provides as a city – there's so much variety, so many extremes and we've done our best to capture all we can. When we're building the world we tend to fly about and check things out using a freely moveable "debug" camera. It's pretty incredible to start out nearly a mile up looking over the vast city, rivers, coastline, countryside, hills, mountains, canyons, deserts, wetlands, forests, and all the little towns, farms, buildings, and settlements and then zoom in to an area. Starting high enough up that you can watch the shadows of the clouds in the sky roll over the world far below, seeing the helicopters, birds, and planes flying about and then zooming in until you first see the cars and pedestrians driving and hanging out, then closer still, and you can make out the unique architecture

of the area, the graffiti on the walls and the areas that have been painted over, the countless fake brands on shop fronts and the TV shows, films, and ads on billboards – then closer again until you can see the way the sprinklers turn on in the evening to keep the grass wet or the way puddles have gathered around the hoses in a carwash or the dog jumping against a fence as someone walks too close, while the neighbor lies on a sun lounger by the pool soaking in the last of the day's sun. The way some dodgy looking guys hang around outside the store, ready to hassle anyone getting too close, then zoom farther into a 24-7 store, where everything from the food on the shelves to the cigarettes and magazines behind the counter are individually modeled and textured with specific designed branding. Where the floor has been worn by foot traffic and the tiles have lifted a little in places and curled up a little around the edges. Then zoom from there back out through the door, past the canopy flapping gently in the wind, back out, and out, and out a mile up again, that 24-7 way too small even to see anymore. Knowing the same detail is everywhere you want to look. Whatever you can see, and you can see a lot, is fully realized, fully resolved, filled with unique characters, vehicles, missions, and experiences and waiting for you to explore. It's intense.

Talk about the level of research Rockstar puts into capturing the culture and vibe of a city and its various neighborhoods. How deeply do you dive into census information, etc?

We go to quite extreme lengths to make sure we capture the right flavor of each area. We've always done a good amount of research, bringing a large chunk of the team over to photograph the locations, but since IV this has really moved up a gear. We took over a quarter-million photos this time and filmed many hours of video. We pored over the various online mapping and street-view tools. Our research team created dozens of DVDs filled with information,



documentaries, news stories, video clips, etc. Census information informed the population control in the game for each area. We looked at information on car sales and ownership in California to guide our vehicle list. Basically, any information we could get our hands on has been used in some way. All this stuff just works as a guide; we aren't just trying to copy or emulate the real place. We're using it as a basis to push and pull into something vibrant and distinct. That's easier to do when it's based on the solidity of reality though, when you're building on something rather than freestyling.

When scouting locations during the research phase, Rockstar often relies on locals to introduce them to the different cultural pockets of the cities that tourists don't often come across. Who showed you around Southern California?

The research trips were huge. We covered such a huge area. Just covering a massive sprawling city like L.A. is hard enough without also including the desert, hills, forests, towns, and farms with that. Our research team did a fantastic job organizing this all and hooking us up with the right people to show us around. From architectural historians and location scouts, to off-duty cops and DJ Pooh. We were taken to the perfect places, educated, and kept safe!

Pedestrians have always made GTA cities feel bustling, but as anyone who has visited L.A. can attest, Californians would rather drive their car halfway down a block and leave it with another valet than walk. How are you making this city feel vibrant with a diminished number of pedestrians in some areas? What we find is that although the number of pedestrians wandering around the streets is reduced, there are always people actually doing things or hanging out. We have written a system to handle this. Creating people and cars doing specific things around the map scheduled throughout the day. You can see the gardeners and cleaners waiting at bus stops in East Los Santos in the mornings then find them tending



the gardens and houses in our Beverly Hills during the day. This system does a lot to bring the world to life and it's the key to giving each area the proper flavor.

Los Santos is bigger than GTA IV, Red Dead Redemption, and GTA: San Andreas combined. From the art design perspective, what are the biggest challenges of creating a game world of this scale?

The main challenge is keeping it all in your head and keeping it all moving forward consistently. A lot of us now know Los Santos better than Edinburgh, but getting to that point has been a struggle. It's a massive task in terms of production in all sorts of ways. There are so many diverse areas and filling them with unique features and getting it all to just feel right has been a massive undertaking that has seen the combined efforts of a lot of very talented people across many of the Rockstar studios. This effort though has given us a world that should keep people interested for quite a while and one we can continue to expand on.

With GTA V, you're not only allowing players to explore Los Santos and the surrounding wilderness - they can explore the ocean floor as well. How did you approach designing these regions? What kind of surprises can gamers look forward to encountering? We get the world roughly

blocked in as quickly as we can then constantly play and evolve. We add new features, areas, and detail pretty much right up to release. Detail and features are added in layers and passes. This helps us keep a level of consistency, but the fact we continuously play and feedback that experience into pushing and pulling the map and evolving it means that areas almost grow into their final forms, sometimes driven by gameplay, sometimes by visual needs. We are always looking for ways we can give the player a different experience or new toy-set to use; allowing the player to go underwater is a function of that. Like any area, the underwater has had the same attention as above land with rocky canyons, deep ravines, and coral beds, with the same goal of distinctive features, areas, and fun.

What comes first - the creation of the game world or a list of missions the designers hope to include with location requirements? Walk us through the close partnership that needs to exist between these two disciplines on a project of this scale.

We build the world first. A relatively small team builds an untextured version of the world before anything else happens. This lets us get a sense of scale, see the skyline, and get a sense of each area. Once we're happy with this we build up the team and start to turn the untextured world into a finished item. Once the untextured world is built, it can be

driven about on so missions start to progress, too. Some ideas come from playing about in the world, others are just built out on paper. The missions evolve in a similar way to the world, starting as rough playable sketches and evolving. As the missions develop the map can be built up around their needs. There's a lot of back and forth and adjustments to suit the needs of the missions, and sometimes missions get adjusted when we need to change the world for visual reasons.

As technological capabilities have advanced over the years, GTA has gravitated toward photorealism on consoles but stopped short of fully embracing it. What is the philosophy behind this approach?

I think photorealism is a bit of a boring goal, actually. It's not really a goal at all, more an inevitable technical achievement. Pushing Grand Theft Auto a bit towards photorealism has suited its grittier approach, but it's vitally important to give the world and the characters in it their own personality. It's just more fun, more interesting, and - to me at least - a lot more appealing.

At what point in the process do you start conceptualizing the look of the protagonists?

Mike Kane, one of our associate art directors, works with the guys in New York, who cast and then scan our characters. Mike and his team then work to

give them the right flavor and push them to where we need them to look - like everything else, that evolves all the way through development.

As the level of detail has increased over the years, Rockstar's cutscenes have gotten increasingly more cinematic. What, if anything, did you want to do differently or improve upon for Grand Theft Auto V?

The main thing we've tried to do is integrate them into the game experience more, flowing in and out of cutscenes as seamlessly as possible so everything ties together into a single experience.

What are the new technical tools provided by the RAGE engine that the art team was most excited to exploit for GTA V?

There have been some very nice advances in the lighting and shader model that gives us much more control and subtlety. The ramp up in scale has been exciting, new features that have meant essentially we draw everything into the distance. We used to "only" render 1.5 km at most in IV, now we render the most distant mountains at the other end of the world many, many miles away. You can even see the little lights on the street or on buildings draw right into the distance. It all gives the world a lot more solidity. Really though, on a project this size there's a million things, small and big, that have given us the ability to push the experience.



Grand Theft Auto V includes the biggest list of vehicles to date for the franchise



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A RISK WORTH TAKING

As the biggest structural change to how Rockstar designs games since *Grand Theft Auto III*, implementing this switch technology isn't easy. Being able to jump into another player instantly is onerous on the game engine, so Rockstar is still optimizing the performance. In doing so, they've also found spots in big missions where they can make the switches feel more cinematic and spectacular, leveraging all of the new techniques they learned in making tailored shooting experiences in *Max Payne 3*.

Coupled with the narrative flexibility that multiple protagonists provide, Rockstar believes they've created a foundation for its most innovative game yet.

"We're all starting to feel that it's our strongest plotted game because the characters are so intertwined," Houser says. "When you're advancing Michael's story, you're also advancing Trevor's story in a different way, and the meeting

points are very exciting. I think making that work has certainly been challenging given our inexperience and lack of skill, but we've done our best to come up with something we think is giving this much more densely plotted experience that we couldn't have pulled off when you always need the lead character in every moment."

For a series as successful as *Grand Theft Auto*, any major change is a risk. Fans expecting a bigger version of *GTA IV* set in *San Andreas* are going to get a whole lot more. Time will tell whether Rockstar's fans embrace this new three-protagonist structure, but based on what we've seen, this has the potential to take the franchise – and open world games – to new heights. Change isn't easy, but if Rockstar's creative gamble pulls this off, the rewards for *Take-Two* and *GTA* fans could be great indeed.

To watch a new trailer of *Grand Theft Auto V* and read more information about the game, head to gameinformer.com/gtav

SHELVING THE CELEBRITIES

Past *Grand Theft Auto* games are remembered for their colorful casts of celebrity voice actors. The impressive roster of big name talent includes Ray Liotta, Samuel L. Jackson, Peter Fonda, and the late Dennis Hopper. But when Rockstar moved into the high-definition era, they eschewed celebrity talent for major roles. This philosophy extends to *Grand Theft Auto V* as well, which has no major names cast as the main protagonists. We asked Rockstar Games vice president of creative Dan Houser about the reasoning behind this decision.

"We've done two or three movie shoots for this game spread out through various three-week shoots," he says. "I don't think there would be many celebrities that would be available even if we wanted to spend the money on them for the amount that we've used them for."

"The good thing about most famous actors is they can actually act very well or they can do their shtick really well. Sometimes it's one, sometimes it's the other. I think it was really useful on the PS2-era games for bringing these somewhat simplistic characters to life."

"But when we went to PS3 and 360 I think it would become a distraction if you were like, 'Well, that's a famous person.' Suddenly these characters start to feel like they were alive a lot more and you need that to sell them. As long as you have good actors, not knowing them actually is an advantage in terms of bringing the game to life. I can't see us moving past that for major parts in the game."



FEDERAL RE

» *Platform*
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» *Style*
1-Player Action
(16-Player Online)

» *Publisher*
Ubisoft

» *Developer*
Ubisoft Montreal

» *Release*
December 4

Greetings from

FEAR

The word 'FEAR' is rendered in large, 3D block letters with a red and white border. Each letter contains a different scene from the game: 'F' shows a tropical jungle; 'E' shows a character in a dark, fiery environment; 'A' shows a character in a dark, industrial setting; 'R' shows a character in a dark, industrial setting. The letters are set against a background of a tropical landscape with a large, stylized skull in the upper left and a torn paper effect at the bottom right.

The title 'CRY 3' is rendered in large, 3D block letters. Each letter is filled with a different scene from the game: 'C' shows a tropical landscape, 'R' shows a character in a red shirt, 'Y' shows a wooden bridge over a river, and '3' shows a character in a bamboo cage. The background is a textured, brownish-yellow surface with a white torn-paper edge separating it from the lower section.

CRY 3

Paradise Lost

Far Cry 3 opens with a group of fresh-faced buddies enjoying a vacation together. We see them laughing, snorkeling, and skydiving in what appears to be an ordinary montage-style introduction. Then the footage becomes pixelated and we realize that it's all taking place on a phone's screen. A phone held by Vaas Montenegro.

Looking around, Jason Brody absorbs his situation, and it's not a pretty one. The blue skies and waters are gone, replaced by a bamboo cage, a dirt floor, and a seriously unhinged, mohawked jailor. Jason's brother Grant is tied up and gagged across the cage and, judging from his bloody face, this vacation is officially over.

by Jeff Cork



"What is it?" taunts Vaas with a sneer. "Why aren't you laughing now like you did up there? Is this not fun anymore? ... You see, the thing is, up there, you thought you had a chance. Waaaaay up in the f---ing sky." His rant ends with a chilling "But down here, you hit the ground."

A man-in-a suit pulls Vaas away, chiding him for messing with the captives. "Stop scaring the hostages. I need you to take care of the rejects." Vaas looks back at his caged prey and stalks off. That other character is named Hoyt and, as you soon learn, he's a major player in the story. For now, all you need to know is that Vaas has good reason to defer to Hoyt's orders.

A Sandbox With a Purpose

Open-world games offer unparalleled freedom by design. The best sandbox games supplement their stories with loads of side missions and activities, so players can alternate between propelling the story along and, say, delivering pizzas. One of the problems caused by that freedom is that storytelling is often diluted, particularly when gamemakers are relying on a sense of urgency. Taking an in-game bomb threat seriously is hard when you can spend hours driving cars off cliffs and pushing characters down stairs.

Ubisoft Montreal is not only aware of this challenge, but has taken some interesting steps to address it head on. "In FC 3 we were very focused on making sure the open world and the story worked together, and what I mean by that is that we are self-aware of our own genre," says producer Dan Hay. "Characters in the game will tell you 'Go out; use the open world, it's okay.' But then some of the people you had to rescue would

see that you changed because of it. 'Where have you been? What have you been doing out there?' It confirms the idea that you are out there in the world, using it like your own supermarket, [and] that the game and characters are actually aware of it. You are out there playing with the toy, not feeling guilty that your friends are in trouble, but you're actually harvesting the skills you need to go and save your friends."

Hay and designer Jamie Keen came by the Game Informer offices, and we spent two full days playing in the sandbox while getting an exclusive look at several of the game's missions, characters, and location.

A Great Escape

Once Vaas has moved out of sight, Grant slips out of his bonds and unties Jason. He tells Jason to follow his lead and moves back into



This isn't a typical ride at the summer cottage

THE ISLANDS

Far Cry 3's island chain is scarred by the ruins of crashed planes, moored ships, and past civilizations. What's going on with this place? Is it somehow pulling people to its shores? Does it have some kind of power over people's mental states? Or is it just a completely normal island that coincidentally has played host to generations of suffering? Hay answers these questions with a few of his own.

"Is it like *The Shining*, like the Overlook Hotel, where it's so remote, where it's a place where you can get away with it?" asks Hay cryptically. "The reality is, we specifically didn't answer that question, because we want to be able to do more with it. For us, it's beautiful, it's lush, but it's also convenient for people who are a little bit bent. They can go in and take advantage of the fact that there's no sheriff."

his former position. Grant lures a guard over and repeatedly bashes his face into the cage. It's a sudden moment of intense violence, and Jason is clearly shaken by the man's death. Grant doesn't seem quite as bothered, muttering, "And that is what they teach you in the army," before sliding the cage open. The two are free, and now it's time to rescue their younger brother and missing friends.

As you'd expect, the initial moments serve as a basic tutorial, but the stakes seem significantly higher than being told to look up and down or ping targets down in a military shooting gallery. Grant and Jason realize the scope of the situation while sneaking through the camp. We see the rejects that the man in the suit referred to earlier and watch in horror as the other captives – who apparently didn't bring enough of a ransom – are systematically executed.

Without venturing too deeply into spoiler territory, the duo's plan doesn't succeed. Jason and Grant are separated by Vaas and his men, and we begin to see just how cruel the camp leader truly is. He recaptures Jason, but he's not going back to the cage. Instead, Vaas pushes him into the forest and shouts at Jason to run. It's a head start for a chase that he's not meant to win, the frenzied panting of

his breath punctuated by his pursuers' gunfire.

Hay says the goal of the setup was simple: establish Jason as a relatable everyman before setting him loose in the world. Jason's transition from scared little brother to terrifying force of vengeance isn't something that happens over the course of an afternoon, and Hay says the team agonized over that evolution. Jason's first kill fills him with revulsion, but he begins to learn that he is innately able to go to extremes to survive. That transition isn't something that he or his friends and family easily adjust to, either.

The next time we see Jason, he's getting a tattoo chiseled on his forearm by a man in an olive-green army jacket. He introduces himself as Dennis, and he becomes Jason's guide to the island. Dennis sees great potential in the young man, and he encourages Jason to go out into the wilds of Rook Island to gain the strength needed to rescue his friends. Jason protests at first, saying he doesn't know how to do any of these things. "Trust your instincts," Dennis says. "Society has taught you how to fail, not nature."

The first few parts of the game are designed



That glider is a great way to coast down to the beach. If you're skilled enough, you can drop into a vehicle and kill the driver



Jason can sneak up on unsuspecting enemies, which is critical when he's outgunned

REALITY CHECK

Dr. Earnhardt is another one of Rook Island's inhabitants, and he's the closest thing to salvation that we've seen. The doctor lives in a white house just off the shore, seemingly above the island's fighting and internal strife. The criminals have struck a bargain with the doctor: provide them with drug recipes in exchange for safety. There's a hidden grotto below his home, and the doctor is allowing Jason and other freed survivors to use the location as a temporary shelter.

In addition to providing sanctuary and a hub for the player, the grotto is a place where they're called to task for their actions. "When you are getting seduced by the island, you're getting drawn into it. You're getting more and more powerful, and you're beginning to master your environment," says designer Jamie Keen. "Every once in a while, you run back into your friends again, and they're like, 'Dude, what's happening to you?'" Jason understands the changes he's experiencing as his survival skills improve, and they aren't necessarily benign.

As Keen says, you've been out running around shooting people in their faces and taking over outposts, all the while racking up a body count in the hundreds. It's not necessarily an in-your-face morality lesson, but other characters are aware of Jason's murderous actions – and they're not going to pretend that they aren't bothered by it all.



FRIENDLY FACES

Jason Brody's friends and family members were also kidnapped before the game begins, and rescuing them is central to the story. Here are some quick bios for the characters who keep Jason motivated on his island journey.



LIZA SNOW

Jason's girlfriend is an aspiring actress on the cusp of stardom. She was set to begin filming a major role in a Hollywood blockbuster before the ill-fated vacation. Liza appreciates how care-free Jason makes her feel, though she has been hard on him for not living up to his potential.



GRANT BRODY

Grant is Jason and Riley's older brother (and father figure), and he's as close to a golden boy as it gets. He's smart and athletic, having served as team captain on his high-school and college basketball teams. After graduating, he joined the Army reserves.



DAISY LEE

Daisy is a swimmer with an intense drive for competition. She's independent and courageous. She and Grant have plans to get married; she feels as though his nurturing personality is a great counter to the calculated drive that her father exhibited while she was growing up.



RILEY BRODY

Jason's younger brother took their father's death particularly hard. Seven-year-old Riley went mute for several months until Grant took on a larger role in raising him. Riley is a pilot who tries to tap into his fearless nature, though that doesn't always come easily.



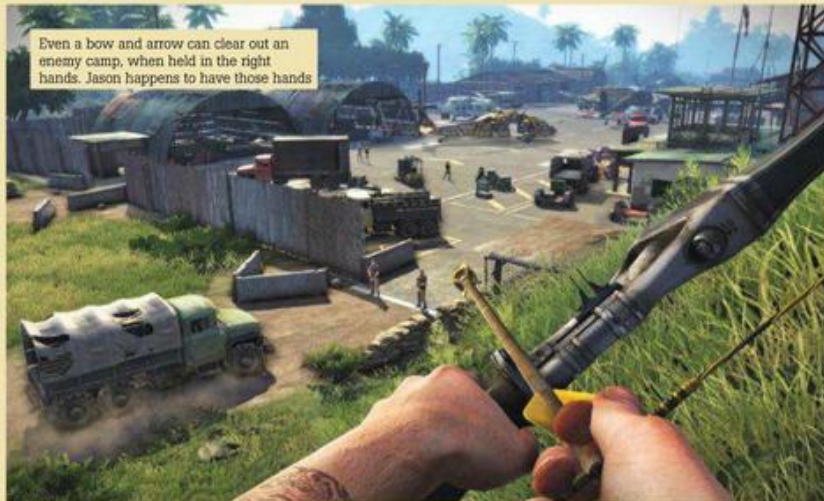
KEITH RAMSEY

Keith has parlayed his intelligence into a successful career as a Wall Street banker. It's come at a high price, however, with friends saying that he doesn't seem to have much free time or energy. This vacation is a chance for him to experience his friends' freedom, which he secretly envies.



OLIVER CARSWELL

If you're looking for a stereotypical trustafarian, look no further. Oliver's parents are wealthy and disinterested in their son's life, which he's spent smoking weed, DJing, and snowboarding. He looks to extreme sports as a way to fill a void deep within his personality.



Even a bow and arrow can clear out an enemy camp, when held in the right hands. Jason happens to have those hands.

to acclimate Jason (and, by extension, the player) to his new island home. Even though Dennis is providing guidance on how to hunt, use plants as remedies, and take out enemy installations, it's tough to shake feelings of isolation and helplessness. "We wanted you to feel alone in the woods, like a little kid," Hay says. Even if Jason were to stumble into Hoyt's base camp, he'd be annihilated. For now, he needs to hone his skills and formulate a plan.

Deep Cover

Family is a key theme of the game, whether it's the family you choose or the one you're born with. We jump ahead, where Dennis introduces Jason to Citra, a key figure among the native Rakyat islanders who are choosing to fight Hoyt and his thugs. Her relationship to the enemy is complicated; Vaas is her brother, and she's working to kill him. Citra's first meeting with Jason takes place at night in a stone temple. There, bathed in torchlight, Citra taunts Jason for his tattoo and then asks what he's seeking. His response is simple and to the point: the power to get revenge and defeat all who stand in his way. Citra smiles ominously and asks if he's sure. Nothing is that simple.

Jason is given a mysterious cocktail, which leads to one of the game's many hallucinatory

scenes. Far Cry 3 is playing with the concept of sanity, and how easily it can break. Sometimes that's an effect of drinking potions from strangers. Ubisoft isn't ruling out that there could be something more fundamental at play, too, and the island's denizens could serve as a warning to Jason. "With every single character, we went for character," Hay says. "We wanted to make sure they were memorable, they were unique, they were different, and they were a reflection of what might happen to you if you stay on the island too long."

In the dreamlike sequence, Jason walks along a path flanked by vignettes from the past. We see his friends skydiving and people playing cards, along with the distressing sight of his captive friends in peril. Suddenly, we see a man dressed in white walking ahead. Jason follows the man in the vision before eventually tailing him in reality. His journey leads to a small structure. Jason walks in and the doors lock tight. A voice on a speaker orders Jason to identify himself within the next 10 seconds or the package of C4 underneath a table will detonate. Sure enough, there's an ominous package tucked under the furniture. Jason stammers out his name, which is good enough for the voice on the other end. Descending down a hatch, Jason meets another one of Rook Island's off-kilter



Jason hones his skills throughout his journey. He may not know how to throw an ax when he starts out, but he'll get there before the credits roll.



Again, stealth kills are often the way to go

inhabitants, a self-described CIA agent in deep cover.

Willis Huntley is clearly paranoid, though it's hard to tell if it's well founded or a result of the island's isolating presence. Jason's new guide explains that he has an entire team in the field, and he's just waiting to hear back from them. A cursory glance around the little shack doesn't show signs that anyone else lives there, casting a sliver of doubt on Willis' story. Regardless, Willis is the key to the archipelagoes' previously unseen south island.

A Whale New World

Until now, all of our Far Cry 3 adventures have been limited to Rook Island. The island is lush and rugged, providing a detailed (if stereotypical) tropical environment. Most of the structures we've seen look ramshackle and temporary, and its enemy forces don't seem especially disciplined or well equipped.

Rook Island's southern counterpart is another thing altogether. "It's much more urban, comparatively," Hay says. "It has a force of privateers working for Hoyt. He's running a huge trade, basically running people like meat. They are trained, and they are tough." We've seen hints of Hoyt's organization before – while Jason and Grant were escaping, they walked through a room stacked to the ceiling with narcotics and hostages' luggage – but its scale didn't sink in until Willis flew us over the South Island compound in a small plane. A runway landing is out of the question, so we see Jason donning a wingsuit for the first time. Think of it like a wearable hang glider, only one with a far steeper (and exhilarating) descent.

Once we're on the ground, it's time to meet our contact, Sam. The bulked-up German is one of Hoyt's privateers (and a friend of Willis), and he says that Jason's exploits on Rook Island haven't gone unnoticed. The Rakyat are becoming more brazen in their attacks on Vaas' pirates, and word is that they're being rallied by a guy named Brody. Sam is working both sides of the Hoyt/rebel conflict, and he points out a critical weakness in Hoyt's defenses: Hoyt has no idea what Jason looks like. From this point in the game on, players are going to have to change their play style from hiding in the foliage to the challenging task of hiding in plain sight.

"All of the skills you've learned? Hide them carefully," Hay says.

Killing boars and sharks certainly requires a special set of tools, but taking on heavily outfitted privateers is quite different. Once he

gets his hands on a privateer's uniform (R.I.P., unnamed rookie near the docks), Jason can wander around nearly everywhere he needs to go. That's after the orientation meeting, of course.

When we finally see Hoyt up close for the first time, it's during a welcoming ceremony of sorts for the new recruits. Hoyt stands on stage, greeting the new hires and explaining the three simple rules for his operation. The first rule is to protect the product, including people. Secondly, kill any natives you see on sight. Finally, all profits go to Hoyt. To reinforce his points, Hoyt gestures to a cage with a terrified man inside. If you fail, he says, this is what happens. With that, he sets the cage alight and the sounds of his prisoner's screams fill the tropical air as he frantically shakes the bars in vain.

Would You Kindly?

Our demo ends with one of the more gut-wrenching things we've seen in a game. Again, we won't spoil anything, but Jason has to earn Hoyt's trust in a scene that's bound to stick with a lot of players. Hay says his team purposefully set out to create what he calls "Would you kindly?" moments, referencing BioShock's memorable climax. We saw another one of these moments earlier in the demo, and it resonated emotionally, in large part because players are forced to participate.

"There was a very specific effort in making sure that the player is not just a voyeur in the game; that they can actually step in and be the common denominator inside very emotional moments," Hay says. "The idea we embraced is of making the player and the character one, so we built a number of moments through the game where the player needs to do, to act. In that acting, the player is the one moving the story forward, and it's not necessarily with a gun or a weapon."

Those shocking moments, as well as even the most mundane character interactions, are reinforced by the superb voice acting and motion capture technology. Facial animations effectively convey subtle emotions such as doubt, or disturbing moments of pure rage. This kind of attention to detail is critical when you're trying to sell the serious kind of story that Ubisoft is telling. When fantastic dialogue isn't accompanied by convincing animations, games can look like amateurish puppet shows.

Far Cry 3's open world, missions, and overall storytelling gel in a way that's difficult to ignore. The "3" shouldn't turn off players who haven't played earlier games in the



DINGOS, AND TIGERS, AND BEARS

Far Cry 3's island archipelago is home to a variety of wildlife. Some pay Jason no mind, while others charge at him like toothy missiles. Just about all of them can be harvested for their parts, which can then be crafted into holsters, rucksacks, and more. Here's the complete critter roster.

- Asian black bear
- Bird of paradise
- Black eagle
- Black panther
- Buffalo
- Cassowary
- Crocodile
- Deer
- Dingo
- Galapagos tortoise
- Goat
- Great white shark
- Komodo dragon
- Macaque
- Manta ray
- Moray eel
- Red-headed vulture
- Sea turtle
- Tiger



series, either. This game's story and setting is completely separate from those installments, though Hay says they do share a spiritual core.

"[W]hat I like about Far Cry is that it's a moment in time," he says. "You take a regular character and you put them into a situation that is abnormal and you tell that slice of their life. It's not much different to the Viewfinder toy that you had as a kid, where you press a button and it rotates revealing a brand-new image. Where we really found a home was in finding that people responded well to insanity and to a vast open world that is dynamic and alive."

Jason and his friends may be doing their best to get off these islands, but everything we've seen so far makes us want to stick around for a good long while. And that's not just island insanity speaking, either.

Want more Far Cry 3 info? Visit gameinformer.com/mag for an extended cut of our interview with Dan Hay, and Willis' slightly skewed animal dossiers

previews





The action in *Revengeance* is just as stylish as Platinum's previous action game, *Bayonetta*.



You can sneak through some of *Revengeance*'s levels, but it's more fun to get caught.

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

You can sneak through this Metal Gear, but why would you?

Metal Gear Rising: *Revengeance* has had a rollercoaster development. The game started out as a side story chronicling Raiden's adventures leading up to *Metal Gear Solid 4*. However, the project struggled to find focus, and development shifted to Platinum Games. The *Bayonetta* developer brings its signature focus on action to the forefront. Fans can still sneak through enemy encampments, but after putting *Revengeance*'s combat through its paces in a recent demo, we're not sure why anyone would want to hide in the shadows.

Revengeance is set four years after *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots*. Raiden now works for a private military contractor called Maverick Security, where he protects VIPs and trains new recruits to combat terrorist attacks. The demo picks up in the middle of the action, as Raiden storms the beach of an

Eastern European-looking island only to come up against a squad of soldiers from a rival PMC group called Desperado Enterprises.

Platinum Games' strength is designing visually stunning yet polished combat, and *Revengeance* is no exception. Raiden glides across a battlefield, slicing through platoons of enemies with electrified combos. Players can slow down the action with a mechanic called Blade Time, which allows them to use the right analog stick to direct sword swings with lethal precision.

After I turn a couple of enemy soldiers into shark chum, a bipedal Gekko joins the fray. These Gekkos provide a greater challenge, but after several well-timed combos, one of the Gekko's legs begins to glow blue and I initiate a Blade Time attack that turns Raiden's sword into a giant blender.

The demo also showcased *Revengeance*'s

stealth mechanics. Raiden can sneak up behind enemies and eviscerate them with the tap of the button or perform strikes from above, but it's easy to get caught by various patrolling enemies. When spotted, local enemies go on alert and Raiden can hide until the classic Metal Gear caution timer ticks down to zero. However, unlike previous Metal Gear games, the action is so intense that it's more fun to make your presence known and take on all comers.

Before long, a robotic canine with a chainsaw tail bursts through a nearby wall and halts my advance. I dodge a few throwing knives and dismember a couple waves of minions before launching into a full-on assault that ends with Raiden lopping off the cyborg's tail.

With its refreshing take on stealth and stylish action, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* should provide a little of something for everyone when it releases on February 19. » **Ben Reeves**

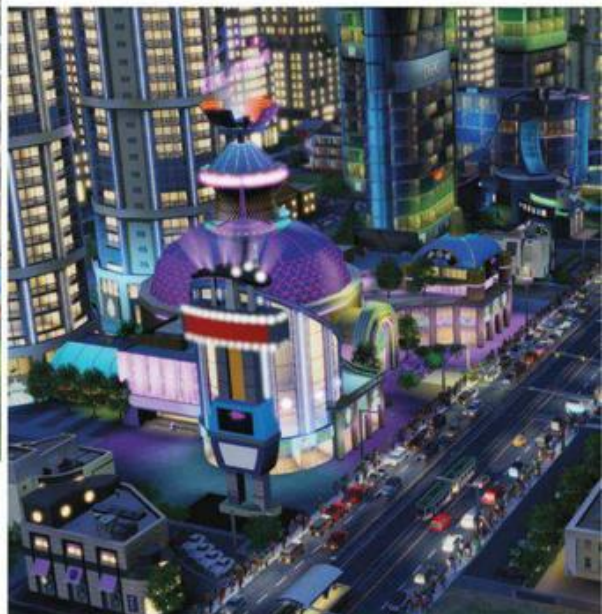
» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Platinum Games

» **Release**
February 19



SimCity

Reinvention and renovation

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Simulation
(Online TBA)
- » **Publisher**
Electronic Arts
- » **Developer**
Maxis
- » **Release**
March 5

The SimCity name inspires fond memories for many gamers, regardless of which of the four main installments they have played the most. Wherever your SimLoyalty lies (personally, I'm a fan of SimCity 2000), the latest SimCity combines elements of your favorite entry with new features to ensure your urban planning experience feels both familiar and modern.

With a few months to go before the game's February release, I played two hours of an early SimCity build at Maxis. The first lesson I learned is that smart city planning begins with building a road that connects your patch of land to the regional highway. This is how you open the lines of communications and trade with other cities in your region. These cities might be controlled by your friends playing simultaneously, or they

could be your own carefully constructed communities running automatically. Your interaction with these nearby towns plays a central role in your own planning – but more on that later.

Connecting to the regional highway is crucial because it allows you to start building your own roads. Almost all of the infrastructure revolves around them now. Roads automatically carry electricity and water to adjacent structures (no more manually building pipes and power lines), and you are unable to build structures or zones without an accompanying road. SimCity is much more flexible with road-building than previous titles, letting players sculpt winding paths instead of straight lines.

After laying down a basic grid, I started one of the most beloved activities in the franchise: zoning. Fans are familiar with the basic industrial,

commercial, and residential zones, but these options seem less dependent on each other now. This is where the regional structure and depending on your neighboring cities comes into play again. One city can make up for deficiencies in another; if you build a bedroom community full of residential zones, your citizens can drive to other towns for work. If you run a manufacturing powerhouse, you are better off focusing on industrial zones instead of convincing sims to move into your pollution-clogged neighborhoods. Maintaining a balance within your region is necessary to make sure that every city has its needs met.

How you build your city is guided by which specialization you choose. Selecting education (like I did) means that you need to focus on building schools, bus stops, universities, etc.



Disasters are a fan-favorite feature of SimCity titles, and players can still unleash them on unsuspecting citizens



Instead of looking at the city from afar, the visuals are more reminiscent of model train sets

Placing these structures isn't just a question of having the money; you need to reach certain milestones before they are available. For example, the community college isn't an option until your town hall is upgraded to a city hall – a separate feat that hinges on meeting a population requirement. Specializations help you keep your eyes on an immediate goal, adding direction to the larger process of building a thriving city.

My only major complaint from what I played is the emphasis on interconnectedness. Allowing players to trade and interact with other cities is one thing, but requiring it is another. City specializations are a cool way to focus players' efforts, but they discourage building a diverse city that covers all of the bases. This increases reliance on your neighbors; you may have to turn to other cities for certain necessities,

including power, housing, or jobs, instead of providing it for yourself. As a player who likes to build a single sprawling metropolis, I didn't get the sense that my favorite way to play is encouraged. You're supposed to build multiple specialized cities in the same region to work together to achieve the same goal.

Civilizations can only succeed through cooperation in real life, so seeing it manifested in SimCity isn't a surprise. The regional structure drives home the importance of working with your friends, and is aimed at providing a different kind of simulation than the series' classic entries. The SimCity fans have grown to love isn't gone, though. The humor, customization, and pure fun involved in building a bustling city is intact, and I can't wait to see how these aspects evolve beyond the introductory hours. » Joe Juba



You can't zone areas without roads nearby, so it's best to start building close to the highway



Some buildings, like universities, have new modular structures to add as you progress

Remember Me

Build your own combo system

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Dontnod Entertainment

» **Release**
May

By 2084, mankind has unlocked many of the mind's mysteries. Giant corporations control the political elite by shuffling their memories like decks of cards. Remember Me's protagonist Nilin used to be one of these memory hunters until someone bleached her brain. Now she haunts the streets of Neo-Paris, collecting fragments of lost memories as she tries to sort out why her employer gave her a digital lobotomy. To get to the heart of this corporate conspiracy, Nilin must keep her wits and use every tool available. Thankfully, her combat toolbox is both vast and versatile.

Capcom impressed us with Remember Me's Gamescom reveal, so we jumped at the chance to go deeper with the title's unique new combo system at this year's Tokyo Game Show. Using Remember Me's combo lab, players can create their own strings. Every combo is constructed out of single-button attacks that Dontnod calls Pressens. Different Pressens have different properties. For example, you can string together found Regen

Pressens to regenerate Nilin's health while attacking, while coupling Power Pressens builds more powerful combos that set up enemies for finishing attacks. Players can also mix together different attacks to create combos that both heal or set up enemies for finishers. Chain Pressens even amplify whatever kind of attack they are attached to. Dontnod says the combo lab is capable of producing over 50,000 unique combos.

When our demo starts, a series of visual glitches and distortions clutter the screen, signifying that Nilin is low on health. To solve this problem, we go into the combo lab and create a regen combo. Now Nilin's curative attacks quickly fill up her health. Remember Me's combat opens up when Nilin uses created combos in conjunction with her powerful special moves, which Dontnod is calling S-Pressens. The terminology gets a little confusing, but S-Pressens are basically powerful, single-move attacks that can turn the tide of battle – kind of like technological magic.

One of Nilin's S-Pressen abilities is called

Logic Bomb. This explosion of digital energy destroys enemy shields. After using Logic Bomb, Nilin begins to dismantle a group of soldiers. However, a Seraphim shows up to hamper her progress. Seraphim are flying robots that dart around the screen and shoot at Nilin, interrupting her combos. These hovering drones are nearly impossible to catch. Thankfully, Nilin has a S-Pressen move called Rust in Pieces that corrupts mechanical enemies and forces them to fight by her side.

S-Pressen attacks run on a cooldown, but regular combos can be programmed to decrease this cooldown. Players can create up to four different active combos. Some combos even cause enemies to drop PMP orbs, which can be used to buy new Pressens.

Remember Me mixes the story-driven action/exploration gameplay of titles like *Uncharted* with the science-fiction vibe of *Total Recall*. So far, this combination looks like a powerful cocktail, and we look forward to tinkering around in the game's combo lab a bit more before its May release. » **Ben Reeves**





Nina can create her own combos that do a variety of different things, such as heal herself and set enemies up for finishing moves



Cool visual distortions add style to the game's combat





Lost Planet 3

Capcom lost a planet, but may have found a solid shooter

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Spark Unlimited

» **Release**
2013

In an effort to mine the galaxy's riches, the Neo-Venus Construction company settles on the planet E.D.N. III. After constructing a series of thermal posts that make the ice planet hospitable for humans, the megacorporation begins digging for precious minerals. A contractor named Jim is merely one of the mining grunts working for NEVEC, but when disaster strikes his camp, he is forced to investigate the company's interworkings and begins to uncover some dark secrets.

When I jumped into a recent demo of the game at Tokyo Game Show, Jim was performing basic maintenance on mining equipment. However, daily checklists got sidelined when he got a call to check on a communications relay that had mysteriously shut down.

Jim is bundled under layers of parkas to protect him from E.D.N. III's icy windstorms, but his day quickly heats up as he battles dozens

of giant flying insects that inhabit the peak near the communications relay.

These pitbull-sized mosquitos don't pose much of a threat, but one gets close and prompts a quick-time event that has me dodging its stinger. Using Jim's shotgun as a fly swatter, I make my way to the top of the peak. A quick inspection of the relay reveals that someone has been tampering with the circuitry. The sabotage suggests that there may be a traitor in the camp. This vandal poses a significant threat to the mining community since the communications relay is our lifeline to the world, but I must repair it before I can hunt down the spy.

While I wait for my repair rig to make its way up the cargo lift, a giant scorpion attacks. In traditional Lost Planet style I must shoot the giant orange spot on the beast's tail while dodging its scorpion stinger and acidic spit

until my mech shows up.

When my rig arrives I retreat into the safety of its steel cockpit. However, the monster has found shelter of its own and burrowed into an ice sheath. I can't have this rabid monster spitting acid at me while I try to repair the relay, so I use my grapple hook to pull the creature out of its hovel and slice through its tail with my drill arm.

My demo ended just as I get the communications relay back up and running, so I'll have to wait until Lost Planet 3 hits stores in 2013 to continue my search for that double agent, which is something I'm actually looking forward to doing. I've had trouble embracing this series, but Lost Planet 3 looks like a polished experience. The story is intriguing, the controls feel tight, and the action is smooth. Lost Planet 3 is also a prequel, so it might be the perfect entry point into the series. » **Ben Reeves**



E.D.N. III is as beautiful as it is deadly



To get the full Lost Planet 3 experience, play it outside during the winter



Guardians of Middle-earth

An unexpected journey into console MOBAs

J.R.R. Tolkien is the grandfather of modern fantasy. His mystical world of Middle-earth, filled with elves and orcs, is the reason franchises like Warhammer and Warcraft exist. Subsequently, Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos sparked the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) phenomenon with the user-created mod Defense of the Ancients. Since then, games like League of Legends and Heroes of Newerth have emerged to bring fans more competitive multiplayer action. The cycle has come full circle, with developer Monolith bringing a polished, accessible Lord of the Rings-themed MOBA to consoles.

I went into my hands-on time with Guardians of Middle-earth with minimal MOBA experience. I've dabbled in the past, but the hardcore, competitive communities surrounding popular MOBAs are practically impenetrable for beginners. Guardians evens the playing field for console-focused gamers like me with its controller interface. Players use the PS3 and 360's dual analog sticks to move and aim their Guardian's attacks. Players can choose from more than 20 LOTR heroes like Gandalf, Legolas, and even obscure characters like

hobbit and adventurer Hildifons Took.

I started my first match as Hildifons, a newcomer-friendly character that's apt at demolishing the enemy Guardian's towers and minions. Hildifons can throw down fire traps, slow enemies with barbs, and incinerate groups of minions with an area-of-effect fire attack. His ultimate attack lets him set down and sprint away from a powerful powder keg that explodes for huge damage. You can throw down his fire trap to deal destruction to both minions and enemy towers. His easy-to-understand abilities made me feel like an expert. Hildifons isn't especially effective against enemy Guardians, however, but he can slow them down with his Brandywine barbs. Demolishing an enemy tower with a big exploding barrel is a satisfying feeling.

After playing a hobbit, I spent time as an elf, a dwarf, and an orc. Legolas is what you'd expect: a powerful ranged attacker that crumples when put up against strong melee guardians. My favorite tactic as the Mirkwood archer involves closing the gap for a devastating ultimate attack, stunning my enemies, and using a teleport ability to flee. Thráin is a sturdy

dwarven warrior that deals heavy damage to other Guardians. Combining his protective spell, a ranged hammer throw who knocks foes into the air, and an earth-shaking ultimate ability can trounce packs of Guardians. Finally, Gothmog is an orc lieutenant that specializes in running interference. He can draw fire from towers and minions with a taunting banner to allow other Guardians past defenses unhindered. He also plants catapults with generous range to support the frontlines. My favorite times as Gothmog involves using his charge ability to burst into packs of rival Guardians and activate his potent ultimate attack to finish off weakened enemies.

Guardians of Middle-earth is more than a big roster of Tolkien characters and a new control scheme. An overarching, level-based progression system encourages you to keep playing, you unlock stat-boosting gems and relics to place into your characters' slotted belts, and intuitive social systems make it easy to team up with friends. These features, along with the console-friendly tweaks to the MOBA genre and rich Lord of the Rings lore are shaping up to be a winning combination. » **Tim Turi**

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
- » **Style**
1 to 10-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive
- » **Developer**
Monolith
- » **Release**
December 4 (360 TBA)

MOBA Basics

While Guardians of Middle-earth includes a single-lane map, the core of the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena genre is played on maps with three lanes.

Two teams of five compete to destroy a shrine nestled within the other's base. The map is littered with armed towers that defend each side and AI creatures that can be destroyed to level up. Lines of minions spawn at each base and march toward the opponents' fortifications. Players level up and improve their skills by destroying towers and killing rival guardians and AI creatures. Guardians of Middle-earth differs from standard MOBAs by offering a timed, point-based mode in addition to the standard destroy-the-base scenario. Towers and minions can also be upgraded after reaching specific levels.



Grid 2

Codemasters gets the franchise back on the track



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

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Racing
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Codemasters

» **Developer**
Codemasters
Racing Studios

» **Release**
2013

Four years have passed since the release of the first Grid racing title, and that span could hit five by the time Grid 2 comes out sometime in 2013. The genre has seen different racers come and go during that time, from the hyper-arcade titles like *Blur* and *Split Second* to the ever-changing spectrum of the *Need for Speed* series. The first Grid made its mark with the content and look of its career mode, the quality of the racing, and the introduction of the Flashback rewind function now adopted by many other racing games. Despite the competition and the elapsing time, Codemasters didn't feel the need to rush out a successor. Now, however, the publisher/developer thinks the time is right for the franchise's return.

"We had to make sure that we could support all of those things to the level that we expected for Grid 2," says Iain Smith, the game's executive producer. Smith is referring to the technology Codemasters wanted to master before it started work on Grid 2. In particular, he mentions an extensive lighting system that takes into account reflected light from different sources and subtle shadowing that represents various colors other than just simple light or dark values.

Codemasters rightly prides itself on how it makes cars feel for players. This, too, needed to be up to snuff before the series could continue. Car handling senior designer Gehan

Pathiraja wants the cars to give drivers a rich, tactile feel, and promises this can be done without any assist settings. "We don't try to patronize the player," he says. Instead of artificially handcuffing cars, your progress through the game is divided into four car tiers. The early ones offer easy-to-drive front-wheel drive cars, while the later ones give you control of harder to tame – but more rewarding – mid- and rear-wheel automobiles.

As for the game's career mode itself, Codemasters isn't giving away much at this point. The first Grid had a bevy of rotating sponsorships and a teammate you could hire/fire, and I'm hopeful this returns. Smith would say, however, that the overall stylization of your career mode that helped make the first game famous is returning. As your fame grows, your garage operation increases in stature from a self-sustaining outfit to a large team-run organization with better tech. The races themselves increase in spectacle from small-time local affairs to the pomp and circumstance of the world stage.

During Grid's hibernation, open-world racing has come into vogue, but Smith isn't interested in taking Grid in this direction. "I think that is the difference between racing and driving," he says, explaining that Codemasters wants to focus on the racing experience, where coming in first is more important than exploration. Despite this philosophy, Grid 2 has its own form of flexibility.

Many of the modes in the game have what Codemasters calls a Live Route system along with standard circuit races. Live Route allows the game to select and populate tracks with different junction points in real time ahead of your current location. The randomness generated enables players to drive for 30 to 60 minutes before seeing a repeated section. It offers "an immediate challenge, something for you to react to," Smith says.

Codemasters' outlook on multiplayer also differs from contemporaries. Instead of merging offline and online play like other games, in Grid 2 they are distinctly different, with their own progress systems and ways to customize and upgrade the cars. "We feel the kind of experience that players want from each is quite different," Smith says. The online component also takes the company's cross-title RaceNet stat hub browser out of the beta phase and into its 1.0 unveiling – complete with new features we haven't seen before.

What about Flashback in Grid 2 – possibly the series' biggest legacy to almost a generation of racing games that have followed it? Smith promises that its next iteration won't disappoint. "Now it's come full circle and we want to do it justice and do something pretty unique with it this time around." If what he says is true, then this game might make a hard charge to the front of the pack. » **Matthew Kato**



New audio technology creates rich car sounds as multiple cars attack corners



Grid 2's Live Route system will mix and match tracks' intersections to create variety on the fly



Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs

The indie horror king gets a new machinist

In 2010, developer Frictional Games released indie downloadable Amnesia: The Dark Descent. The first-person horror game tasked players with exploring a dark, macabre castle with nothing but a lantern to keep their sanity. Disturbing hallucinations and grotesque monsters frayed gamers' nerves, making it one of the scariest games ever made. Now a new Amnesia game is on the way, and Frictional has entrusted Dear Esther co-creator Dan Pinchbeck and thechineseroom to lead development.

"The chance to make an Amnesia game is my fanboy dream come true," Pinchbeck says. The Amnesia creators approached Pinchbeck and thechineseroom to create A Machine for Pigs while Frictional works on a secret project. Pinchbeck and the rest of the team will check in with Frictional throughout development to ensure it lives up to the original's horrifying standards.

Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs retains the same oppressive, desperate atmosphere as The Dark

Descent, but takes place 60 years later at the turn of the 20th century. Protagonist Oswald Mandus is a wealthy Victorian industrialist tormented by visions of a huge, macabre machine. Players can expect to explore dark, mysterious environments filled with dangerous, rusted machinery and bloodthirsty creatures. Pinchbeck says enemy AI is being tweaked to ensure survivors of the original Amnesia won't know what to expect.

"For me the thing that's really interesting about that period in history is that there's this massive creative explosion," Pinchbeck says. "Inventions and innovations are happening left and right. Science is leaping forward. There's huge social upheaval. You've got this time of progress, but underpinning that is an incredibly dark social world. Massive deprivation, poverty, child slavery, trades in body parts of natives from developing countries, widespread bigotry, and it's just a really awful time as well. Smashing those two things together leaves us with a period in

history when the machine is king but people are being trodden under in order to make all this progress happen. It's a powder keg of ideas for a horror game."

We have faith that thechineseroom is capable of lighting the fuse on that powder keg with A Machine for Pigs. The developer proved with Dear Esther that it can deliver an atmospheric, narrative-driven game that focuses on environmental storytelling. Augmenting the studio's superb writing and world crafting with the paranoid, sweaty palmed survival horror of Amnesia could deliver an experience even more disturbing than the original. — **Tim Turi**

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Frictional Games
- » **Developer**
thechineseroom
- » **Release**
2013

Amnesia: The Dark Descent included puzzles with machines, which we expect more of here

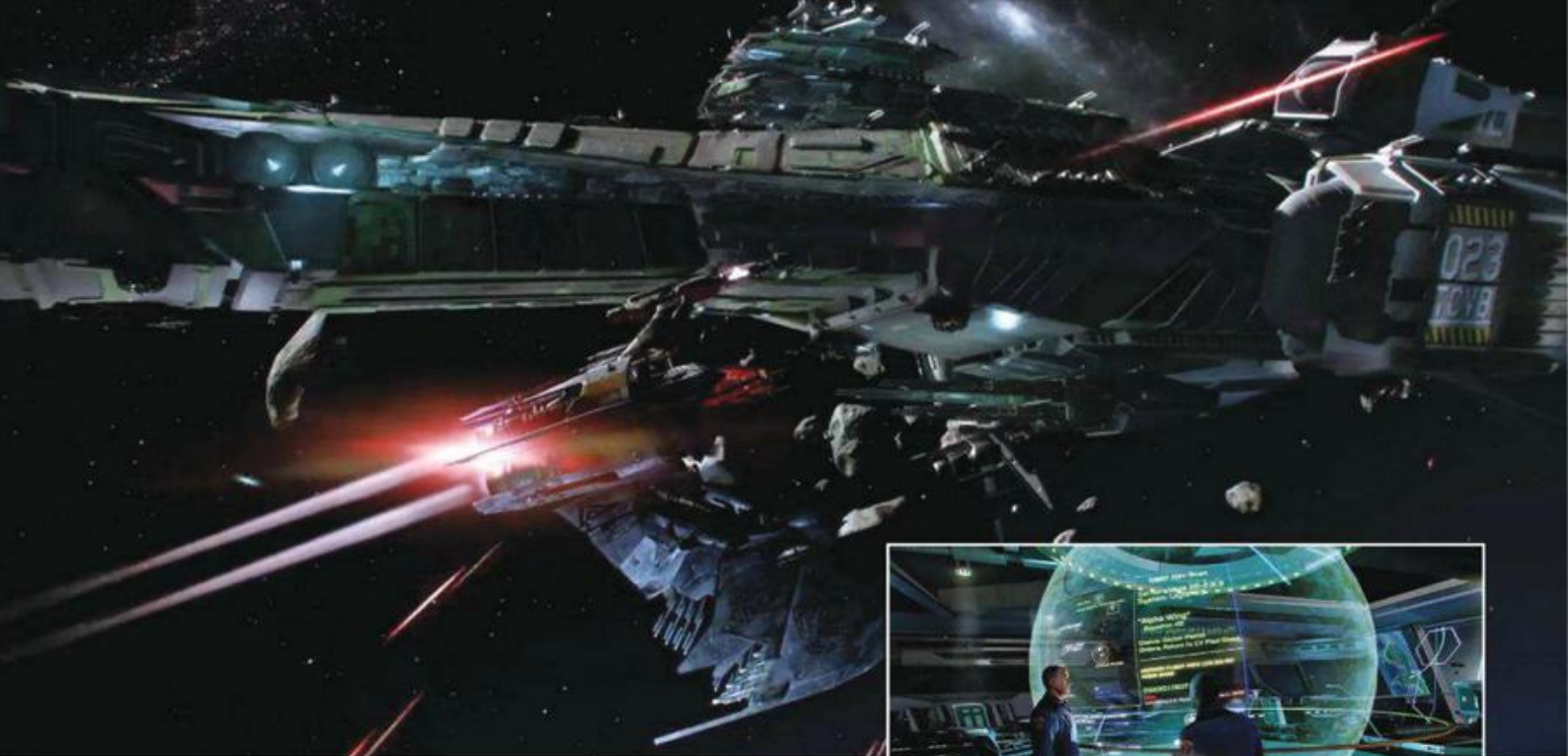


The booming Victorian era offers a more modern environment



Spreading Panic?

Right now thechineseroom is focusing on finishing the PC version of Amnesia: A Machine for Pigs, but hasn't ruled out future console iterations following the game's release.



Star Citizen

The long-lost godfather of space operas aims to retake his crown

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Massively Multiplayer Online)

» **Publisher**
Roberts Space Industries

» **Developer**
Roberts Space Industries

» **Release**
TBA

Chris Roberts is, in many ways, the patriarch of video game space dogfighting dramas thanks to his seminal *Wing Commander* and *Freelancer* series. Now he's back with a new company and a new game. *Star Citizen* aims to be everything the hardcore PC space combat fanbase has always professed to want out of their ideal game: real Newtonian physics, a dynamic interstellar economy, warring space empires, player-driven galactic events, and a seamless transition between the individual pilot level and kilometer-long supercarriers. Roberts is currently attempting to raise \$2 million through a private crowdfunding site and kickstarter, and private investment capital will make up the rest of *Star Citizen*'s budget.

Star Citizen is two games in one. The single-player/co-op *Wing Commander*-style campaign, with all the interpersonal drama and space

dogfighting action you can ask for, is playable on- or offline. The massively multiplayer part of the game is much more ambitious, with players taking on Imperial duties as a citizen of Earth's overbearing empire or a freelance pilot/trader/pirate trying to carve out a niche in lawless deep space. However you choose to play the game, you never have to pay a subscription to play online or check out the planned regular content updates. The developers are committed to a *Guild Wars 2*-style cash shop that sells cosmetic and convenience items (but nothing that grants direct in-game power).

Based on the videos Roberts Space Industries has released so far – which the company says are recorded from a moderately high-end PC running *Star Citizen* on a current Nvidia graphics card – the sense of scale is amazing. The camera soars through the bridge of a capital ship where commanders study a holographic globe and support personnel man their highly detailed stations. It then proceeds out the window to follow a one-man fighter as it launches from the carrier and engages incoming hostiles in a fast-paced dogfight while the kilometer-long capital ship's turrets fill the vacuum with streams of laser fire. As the viewpoint swings by on a close approach to the friendly fighter's cockpit, we get a nice view of the fully 3D-rendered pilot interacting with several control surfaces in his craft.

The physics simulation powering all of *Star Citizen*'s action is light years beyond what we've seen in similar games. A small fighter might have four small thrusters each on its top and bottom faces, as well as its main engine in the rear. Each of those thrusters acts on the craft's body realistically as it receives commands from the fly-by-wire system that translates the pilot's inputs into individual actions. Each can also be damaged,

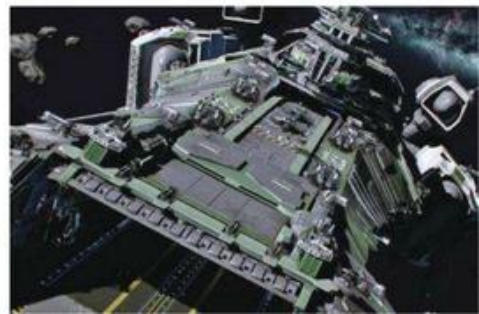
so losing a topside port attitude thruster isn't abstracted as a slower turning rate. It's modeled in the simulation, so you'll have a harder time pushing the nose of your ship down and left until it's fixed. Mass is also modeled, so dropping your cargo in a heated dogfight could give you the edge you need to survive long enough to make the FTL jump out of danger.

The relationship between this impressive-sounding combat and *Star Citizen*'s massively multiplayer universe is unclear. The action appears to be broken up into instanced combat zones that support a limited number of players, so we're not looking at a huge single universe like *Eve Online*. However, the developers have a plan for rich social interactions between players. For example, Intrepid explorers can scout out FTL routes to new systems and sell that info to the highest bidder – after stamping their own name on the system they discovered, of course.

Roberts Space Industries is making bold claims about its plans for *Star Citizen*, and the footage we've seen so far speaks volumes about the possibilities. The developers are undoubtedly reaching for the stars with this almost suicidally ambitious project, but it is a team led by one of the most experienced space game developers in the world. » **Adam Biessener**



The ships look incredible down to the smallest details



Neverwinter

Action combat takes center stage in Cryptic's free-to-play MMORPG



Cryptic Studios has developed a reputation for taking the MMO genre in interesting directions, from the superheroics of *City of Heroes* and *Champions Online* to starship combat in *Star Trek Online*. *Neverwinter* represents the studio's first full release with new publisher Perfect World at the helm. The game adapts the familiar *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy tabletop rules to a strong action-focused experience.

I played an early beta version of the game this month, and the focus on immediate feedback, fast combat, and instanced dungeons is clear from the start. *Dungeons & Dragons* players will feel at home with the basic terminology, from the six basic ability scores for your character to the presence of iconic spells like magic missile. You'll also see familiar D&D races, like humans, drow, and tieflings, taking on the standard class roles like wizards and rogues. Most abilities are adapted to run on cooldowns, but it's rare to wait long for a cool attack option to pop up. Get more than a few characters onscreen, and you start to see some impressive fireworks, as one explosive

power after the next fires off. Battles require you to keep your character highly mobile as you avoid sword strikes or spell effects, all the while maneuvering for the best position to inflict damage.

Neverwinter's story has players working to confront the evil forces converging on the titular city, and the many urban districts serve as both hub zones and adventure sites. Many early quests had me descending into dungeons and sewers beneath the city, where instanced game areas let me explore a defined quest zone set aside for myself and my party. I also had the chance to join some of the developers on a runthrough of one of the early five-person dungeons. I'm impressed by the length and breadth of these dungeons and the challenge of the boss fights, especially considering that the instance was designed for players only a few hours into the game.

One element I have yet to experience is the Foundry, and it's a feature that could set *Neverwinter* apart. Echoing the system that made *Neverwinter Nights* such a success several years ago, the Foundry allows players

to craft their own content and share it with the community. The toolset is built with user accessibility in mind, so you won't need a programming degree to make it work. The Foundry allows players to craft their own quests, zones, scripted dialogue, and monster encounters. A built-in rating system lets players rate the best content, allowing it to rise to the top. If the toolset works well, I'm excited to see how a dedicated player base can flesh out an MMO's questing content.

While *Neverwinter* is still very early, I enjoyed the chance to see a new take on the classic fantasy D&D experience. The fast pace of the combat was refreshing. *Neverwinter* is one of a handful of major MMO releases on the way in the next 12 months launching as free-to-play experiences, and aims to deliver a level of quality more frequently seen in retail releases. While the brief hours I spent with *Neverwinter* weren't enough to draw conclusions about the finished game, it was enough to make me curious to hop back in and play more as the beta evolves in the coming months. » **Matt Miller**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer
Online Role-Playing Game

» **Publisher**
Perfect World

» **Developer**
Cryptic Studios

» **Release**
Spring



Neverwinter is set within the larger fictional universe of the popular *Forgotten Realms* setting



Even in this early beta, visual effects on powers are looking great



A controlling wizard has tremendous ability to limit a foe's movement and attacks

Completely Free?

It costs nothing to acquire the *Neverwinter* client, and there is no subscription fee. Instead, the game is monetized through microtransactions that let you customize your character, acquire new items, and apply boosts to various character elements. The full game, all its zones and quests, and all character classes are entirely free.

Tales of Xillia

Celebrating and refining a well-loved series



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Namco Bandai

» **Developer**
Namco Bandai

» **Release**
2013

Few RPG franchises have stuck around this generation, but Tales hasn't lost its steam. The series entered this generation with *Tales of Vesperia*, and more recently saw *Tales of Graces f* for the PlayStation 3. Tales fans have long been frustrated with the entries that haven't come to our shores, but with Namco Bandai announcing *Tales of Xillia* for North America, the Tales fervor lives on for another game.

Xillia released in Japan to commemorate the series' 15th anniversary. But *Xillia* isn't all nostalgia; it's a game that takes risks while building off the series' strengths. For the first time, players choose one of two main characters. The storyline doesn't change much based on your pick, but your choice alters the perspective through which you see story events, particularly in the opening. You decide between a male medical student, Jude Mathis, and a female spirit summoner, Milla Maxwell. Their paths cross when a significant accident occurs, and they both investigate the location. In true RPG fashion, what they find is anything but ordinary. Events are complicated by the fact that their world, Rise Maxia, is in shambles and two nations are currently in conflict over the use of monsters and spirits that lurk in the world for protection.

Xillia also returns with the great action

gameplay that earned the series praise in the past. Though *Tales of Graces f* received kudos for its combat, *Xillia* shakes things up by meshing aspects from previous entries in the series into a new, more fluid battle system. Combat still operates in real time, but this time it combines aspects from two past games. From *Tales of Vesperia*, *Xillia* borrows the technical points (TP) system, in which artes cost points, but regular attacks refill the meter. Additionally, it includes *Tales of Graces'* Combo Chain system, where the total combo is limited by the number of CC points, except now it's called the Assault Counter. These two systems, while initially appearing contradictory, provide great balance and require careful planning for both attack and defense.

Since battles play out somewhat like a fighting game, it's understandable that characters are initially limited to a 2D plane. However, hold the L2 button and free run mode is enabled, allowing evasion of area-based magic spells and better positioning. You also have the ability to link your character to any of the other three party members. By doing this, the linked party member becomes best buds with your character, attacking the same target and assisting you if wounded.

Outside of battle, Milla, Jude, and company

progress like most RPG characters, earning experience that levels them up. What separates *Xillia* is its Lillal Orb system. Not unlike *Final Fantasy X's* sphere grid, each character has a spiderweb-shaped lattice with nodes on the corners. Fill up a rectangular segment, and that character acquires a passive ability on top of those unlocked by the individual nodes. This might include a static boost to HP or TP, or other similar perks. This system gives you a lot of control over how your characters evolve, which is refreshing for a genre that tends to have linear character progression.

Diehard fans are sure to notice that the design of *Xillia* is more mature; characters are now in more realistic proportion as well, so you feel the magnitude of the world. Also, each main character was designed by a different *Tales* team. This provides a great diversity of character design and meshes well with the gameplay elements.

Xillia has plenty of refinements to make the series feel fresh, but still taps into what fans love: burgeoning character bonds. The battle system modifications all feel significantly improved, and the new Lillal Orb system promises new depth for character growth. *Xillia* hits in 2013, and if you're hankering for a new console RPG, it's definitely worth keeping on your radar. » **Kimberley Wallace**





Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z

A rotting twist to a classic action series

A little over two years ago, famed Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune criticized the state of Japanese game development, going so far as to say Japanese gaming is dead. Maybe he meant to say that Japanese gaming is undead, because he recently took the stage at a Team Ninja event to announce *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z*, a zombified spinoff to Team Ninja's popular action series.

Yaiba's protagonist is a ninja named Kamikaze Yaiba, who was killed by *Ninja Gaiden* mainstay Ryu Hayabusa. Somehow Yaiba returns from the grave to hunt down his killer. Team Ninja's tease left us with a lot of questions. Is Yaiba some kind of zombie? What is the origin of the zombie outbreak? Why did Ryu kill Yaiba in the first place?

Team Ninja wouldn't address questions about the game's action either, but the announcement trailer showed brief glimpses of furious swordplay, geysers of blood, and a stunning cel-shaded art style.

Inafune's studio, Comcept, is teaming up with *Lost Planet 3* developer Spark Unlimited to complete the project. None of the development studios are talking about the release date or even which systems *Yaiba* is being developed for just yet. Team Ninja head Yosuke Hayashi cryptically said that the game would release on "consoles." Could *Yaiba* be another next-gen project announced before the new consoles from Sony and Microsoft? Hopefully many of *Yaiba*'s mysteries will be revealed soon, because we're dying to learn more. » Ben Reeves

» **Platform**
TBA

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Tecmo Koei

» **Developer**
Comcept/Spark Unlimited

» **Release**
2013

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previews 89



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

92 Assassin's Creed III

Several things could go wrong when introducing a new hero, new historical setting, and a new open-world frontier to explore, but Assassin's Creed III pulls it off as effortlessly as a hidden blade to the throat of an unsuspecting redcoat. Read about the bold new direction Ubisoft's flagship series takes on p. 92.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

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

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SHE SAYS  RIGHT.

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 **TOYOTA**
moving forward

Assassin's Creed III

Staggering scope and breadth

9.5

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Conclude a five-game storyline with a sojourn to the American Revolution

» Graphics

Beautiful wildernesses, excellent facial animation, and the best water ever seen in a video game

» Sound

The new atmospheric focus of the score is a departure from previous entries, but holds its own in the franchise legacy. Voice acting is top notch

» Playability

New controls take some time to adjust to for longtime players, but they're an improvement in every way

» Entertainment

The largest and best Assassin's Creed game yet

» Replay Value

Moderately High



gameformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Montreal **Release** October 30 **ESRB** M

Most players will likely spend the first six hours of *Assassin's Creed III* wrapping their heads around the profound size and ambition of the game. Ubisoft Montreal and its sister studios around the world have crafted a prodigious and complex game rich in theme-driven storytelling and diverse gameplay. From riding the towering waves of the Atlantic as they crash against your ship to witnessing the first shots of the American Revolution – and on to the conclusion of the present-day storyline introduced in the first franchise entry – *Assassin's Creed III* delivers everything the series has promised, and throws in a little more for good measure.

Assassin's Creed's greatest allure has always been melding real history with a conspiracy-laden fiction, and colonial America is rife with moments, personalities, and events worth exploring. Colonial-era Boston and New York are the liveliest and most authentic open cities I've encountered in a game, from the squealing pigs to the newsboys hawking papers.

The wilderness that separates the two is vast, and filled with plenty to do. Many missions are set in the frontier, and in between those missions you can hunt animals, bring down enemy forts, climb cliffs and trees, and explore hidden caves, just to name a few of many diversions. As an open wilderness zone, the frontier shines, though long runs to mission objectives can get tedious. Everywhere you go exhibits dynamic weather effects, and the world feels more varied and alive as you witness its passage from summer to winter and back again.

Along with providing a greater sense of place than its predecessors, *Assassin's Creed III* is more deeply rooted in historical time as well. If new hero Connor isn't involved in every memorable moment of the American Revolution, it's only because he can only be in one place at a time. Flinging boxes of tea into the Boston Harbor and running between cannon blasts at Bunker Hill, the game feels more cinematic and scripted than it has before. Many times, this approach results in thrilling intensity, but

some missions subtract from player agency by leading players along with a string of breadcrumb objectives. Other sequences recall the freeform assassination sequences of the first game in the series. An intriguing new approach to mission synchronization offers players more optional mission objectives, increasing replay value. Most of these objectives make the sequence play out in a cooler way, but a few seem contrary to the mission's goals, like the need to perform a special type of assassination kill during a mission that is otherwise about stealth.

It's a mistake to think about the game in terms of a critical path of core missions. Instead, *Assassin's Creed III* excels by providing meaningful story-based content everywhere you turn. One main thread may provide the tale of Connor's lifelong struggle against the Templars, but another line of missions describes his home life and the people who come to live beside him. A different story takes Connor out onto the seas of the Atlantic to

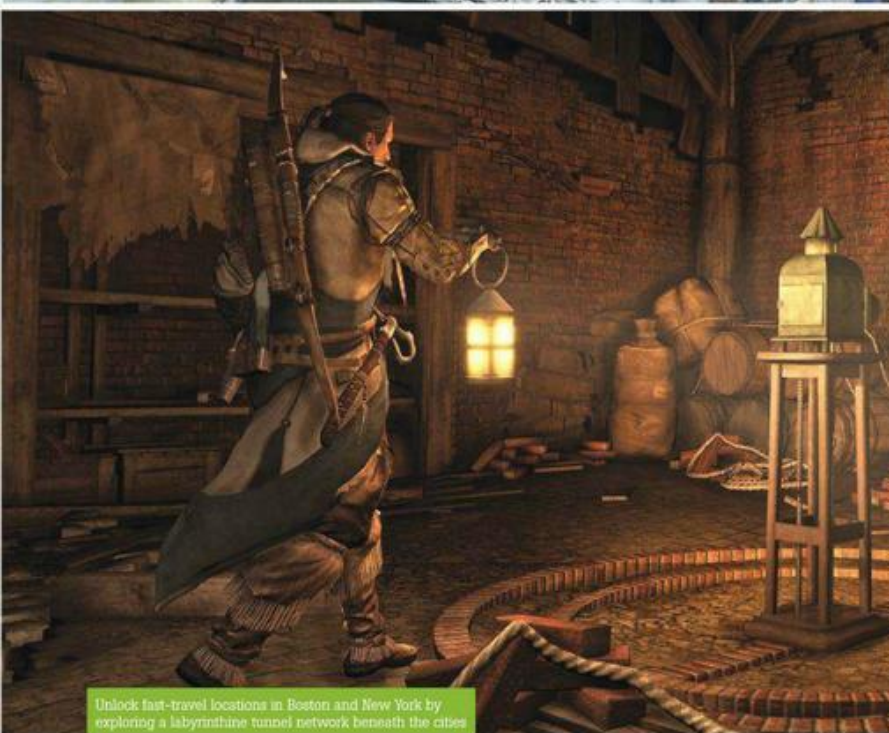
Stay for the Credits

Assassin's Creed III includes a painfully long credits sequence, but you'll want to stick around for some important story wrap-up post credits. The first cinematic appears a few minutes into the scrolling credits, and the second appears after they conclude many minutes later.



Weather changes over time, deepening the sense that time is passing





Unlock fast-travel locations in Boston and New York by exploring a labyrinthine tunnel network beneath the cities

confront a mysterious threat to the colonies. Yet another details how the men and women he gathers to join the Assassin order come to fight at his side.

The storytelling that weaves through these many threads is stellar. Rather than hiding from the complex themes of freedom versus control at the heart of the series, *Assassin's Creed III* confronts them head on, and tells a nuanced and adult story about the price of liberty, the dangers of extremism, and the connections that bind family. An impressive cast of voice actors supports the thoughtful writing by bringing the characters onscreen to life. The game also fleshes out the antagonists in a way that only the interactive medium could achieve, shaping them into characters that surpass stock villainy.

Combat and free-running remain gameplay staples, but both are improved. Platforming and traversal is streamlined through simpler controls, but I had more control over my character, not less. Climbing is more natural than ever, and the new tree navigation is a cool new trick in the arsenal. Meanwhile, combat takes major strides forward by giving more offensive tools to the player. Battle animations often result in incredibly cool takedown sequences, even if the new combat mechanics occasionally exhibit

jarring shifts between actions.

New features are scattered throughout the game, from hunting, exploration, and fighting clubs to a detailed but time-consuming crafting and trade mechanic. However, none of these additions comes close to the fun of the new naval experience. I love the brief but tense sea battles, and both the ships and the high seas look gorgeous. Naval fights offer the perfect break from the normal game flow; they're rousing and exciting, but simple and short enough to not keep you away from the rest of the gameplay.

Whether running along rooftops or calling for a broadside from your ship, the memory sequences of *Assassin's Creed III* once again are framed within a larger story set in present day. Desmond's previous sessions in the Animus completed his training, and we finally get some dedicated mission and exploration content with him, not to mention plenty of new revelations about what's going on in the world. Ubisoft doesn't cop out; as the end of 2012 approaches here in our real world, the looming 2012 catastrophe in the game world is finally addressed, and Ubisoft delivers the conclusion we've been anticipating. The questions you're left with are new ones, not the same batch you've carried for five years.

When you're done with the story, you owe it to yourself to engage with the exemplary multiplayer. Most of the excellent modes of previous entries return, but everything feels refined and the interface doesn't get in the way of the mental game of cat and mouse. I love the new competitive Domination mode and its constant give and take as teams capture territories and flip the tables on their opponents. I'm an even bigger fan of the new four-person cooperative Wolfpack mode, which encourages teams to race around the map eliminating targets, with giant bonuses for coordinating your strikes in one deadly moment. As you play any mode, you complete challenges, earn points for customization, and unlock a new multiplayer story. It's a rich and engaging multiplayer experience that is unlike any other online game.

Assassin's Creed III is the culmination of a story and gameplay model that's taken five years to polish. While not perfect, it makes a convincing case for the freedom and storytelling potential inherent to games over other mediums. An overwhelming experience in its own right, *Assassin's Creed III* is the crown jewel on an already excellent series, and it sets the mind reeling about the potential for where the story goes from here. » **Matt Miller**

Patching Recommended

Assassin's Creed III's unparalleled ambition comes at a price; the new game engine allows for some impressive feats, but technical bugs plague the retail release. I also played a version of the game that included the day-one patch, which resolves most of these issues. Players should prioritize downloading the patch before they dive into the action.

WWE '13

The champ is here

9

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1 to 6-Player Fighting (PlayStation 3), 1 to 4-Player (Xbox 360) (6-Player Online)
Publisher THQ Developer Yuke's Release October 30 ESRB T

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Relive the most memorable and exciting period in pro wrestling history

» **Graphics**
Matches and arenas look great, but several faces look odd

» **Sound**
Tons of classic entrance themes are great for nostalgia

» **Playability**
THQ allows you to do almost anything you'd see on Raw without resorting to an overly complex control scheme

» **Entertainment**
Wrestling fans couldn't ask for a more complete package

» **Replay Value**
High

Two years ago, NBA 2K11 released to critical and commercial success. A primary reason for the acclaim was a mode that meticulously recreated key moments of Michael Jordan's legendary NBA career. With WWE '13, THQ has produced a similar love letter to pro wrestling's greatest era. Millions were entertained by the antics of Stone Cold Steve Austin, The Rock, and D-Generation X in the late '90s, and this "attitude era" stands at center stage in this year's entry.

WWE '12 attempted to tell the stories of several wrestlers with its Road to Wrestlemania mode, but an annoying objective system and match structure brought the entire experience down. WWE '13's Attitude Era mode rectifies the mistakes of its predecessor by making specific objectives "historical bonuses" instead of required actions. If you want your matches to play out the way they did in real life, you're free to throw Mankind off of the Hell in a Cell or hit Kane with three tombstone piledrivers. If you'd rather progress through the campaign in your own fashion, you can move on just the same (albeit without the great bonuses the historical objectives unlock). While you're learning about the history of numerous wrestling legends, the mode gradually introduces you to new match types and gameplay mechanics. In every respect, Attitude Era is the best story mode I've ever played in a wrestling game.

THQ didn't skimp on the era's superstars, resulting in a dream roster of the wrestling greats covering everything from main eventers like Triple H and The Rock to mid-card talent like The Godfather and Billy Gunn. On its own, the Attitude Era mode and roster offer more than other titles with a historical focus like Legends of Wrestlemania and WWE All-Stars. They could have called it a day with their offerings from the late '90s, but THQ also offers a full current roster

and hugely customizable WWE Universe mode.

Like previous entries, WWE Universe gives you full control over match cards and television schedules, essentially combining a career mode and a general manager mode. Hundreds of scenes can pop up organically before, during, or after matches, and the development team had the help of WWE producer Paul Heyman, one of the best minds in the business, when putting them together. Creating feuds, guiding a created superstar's career path, and introducing your own TV show is great, and the mode is endless for all intents and purposes.

These big modes are fantastic in the broad sense, but plenty of little details and tweaks improve the experience significantly. If you're tiring of wrestling Eddie Guerrero for four straight weeks in Universe mode, you can change the "match experience" setting to Quick for a brief beatdown. If you'd rather have a Wrestlemania-caliber classic, you can change it to Epic. It's a subtle addition, but one I found myself using frequently.

Only longtime wrestling fans will notice some of the tiny details, but they're sure to appreciate the attention given to things like accurate cage color, Mick Foley's entrance stride, and appropriate logos and fonts for pay-per-views. Casual fans may not take notice of THQ's obvious love and knowledge of wrestling, but longtime viewers like me will be surprised and impressed throughout the game.

A detailed tribute to the industry's greatest era is great, but it wouldn't add up to much if the action between the ropes wasn't up to par. Thankfully, WWE '13 allows fans to recreate virtually anything you see on Raw without resorting to an overly complex control scheme. Standard actions like strikes, grapples, and reverses can be pulled off with basic button presses, but more elaborate maneuvers require some setup. With

a finisher stored, you can perform your finisher through a table, a superplex to the outside of the ring, or even a mid-air RKO or Sweet Chin Music if your foe makes an ill-timed leap. Multiplayer bouts are a blast, and several submission and iron man matches had me on the edge of my seat.

For everything it does right, WWE '13 still has some nagging issues. AI occasionally gets caught in odd loops. Physics for items like ring ropes and weapons are frequently wonky. A non-existent crowd started a chant during an empty arena match. Many of the wrestlers' faces look odd or don't resemble their real-life counterparts. Despite these complaints, very few of them interfere with the experience as a whole.

Wrestling fans may wonder where THQ goes from here with the series, because WWE '13 offers a staggering amount of content. Its roster is unmatched, its creation suite is bigger and better than the already massive past offerings, online play is lag-free and matches the options and functionality of the best fighting games, and it offers two fantastic and expansive modes in Attitude Era and WWE Universe.

I've always pointed to 2000's WWF No Mercy as the best wrestling game I've ever played, but nostalgia is certainly a factor in that. After playing WWE '13, I'm hard pressed to think of a more enjoyable and complete wrestling game in history. — Dan Ryckert

Mr. Socko moves in on the Texas Rattlesnake



Mike Tyson is available as a pre-order bonus



Need for Speed: Most Wanted

Criterion unleashes a tour de force



gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Criterion Games **Release** October 30 **ESRB** E10+

Forget that another studio already made a game called Need for Speed: Most Wanted this console generation. Police aside, this game isn't about any one franchise in particular. It's about developer Criterion's ruthless pursuit of its racing vision. With spectacular Burnout-style crashes, the police from 2011's Hot Pursuit, and the ease of getting new races via Autolog, Most Wanted is a well-sculpted, honed racing machine that delivers an exhilarating experience.

The open world of Fairhaven is a fertile ground for the Criterion racing concepts of accessibility, freedom, and motor mayhem. Freedom and structure delicately intersect in a loose career mode based around beating a list of 10 Most Wanted cars. Unlike most games out there, these races unfold in a subtle way. Jump in a car and do whatever you want, and the game tracks it and suggests objectives via Autolog (including the feats of your online friends). You're always free to hop to the next ride.

The career-building race events are actually tied to each car. You can race any of the 100-plus cars you find in the world, but to upgrade each one you have to complete an event that's tied to a specific car upgrade. Once your car is stacked and you earn enough Speed Points (which you accrue by doing things like near misses, drifts, etc.), you can take out the next Most Wanted car. I enjoyed the freedom this setup provides, since there was more than one way to pursue the same goal.

Cars are simultaneously coveted and disposable. It's great to find them in the world and pride yourself on beating/earning the high-prestige cars on the Most Wanted list, and yet tearing them up in high-speed wrecks and launching them off jumps (safe landing or not)

brought a smile to my face. This dichotomy can lead to doubt, since you're free to upgrade and use any car in the Most Wanted races, and not all upgrades are clearly advantageous in all situations. Sometimes it's better to have higher top speed than acceleration, so you want to make sure you have the right car to compete. The ubiquity of cars also cuts down on their eminence and your drive to upgrade all of them.

The cops rear their heads appropriately throughout the game, and are neither too powerful or pushovers. My favorite use of them is when they show up during a scripted moment in an upgrade or Most Wanted race and you have to continue to evade them after the event is over as the action spills out into the open world. For reasons I can't fathom, however, there are no police chases in multiplayer.

Regardless, Most Wanted has a hearty multiplayer spread, offering normal races and special challenges based around specific

locations on the map (such as everyone getting a certain amount of air off a jump). Like other aspects of the game, the online mode blends freedom with structure. Cooperation and competition can be intertwined. For instance, you gain Speed Points for crashing other cars – even during a team race – and some races let you negate competitors' scores by taking them out.

Sometimes while playing Most Wanted I was confused what to do next due to the sheer volume of opportunities. I was even frustrated at times when seemingly out of nowhere, a civilian car clogged up the last turn of a particularly high-tension race, causing me to eat metal instead of grabbing victory. But part of the beauty of this game is that there is no such thing as an unfair ending. Whether you're dominating your opponents or barrel rolling your way through a race, you're getting what you wanted – a game, that win or lose, goes all out getting there. » **Matthew Kato**

You're definitely going to want to replace this jerk's billboard high score picture with your own.



9

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Combine Criterion's Burnout Paradise with the traditional cops from the Most Wanted series

» **Graphics**
A lot is going on at any given moment, and things like medians can sometimes be hard to pick out. The damage, crashes, and overall vibe are great

» **Sound**
If you pay attention to the police chatter, you can tell what they're going to do

» **Playability**
The cars are fast and loose, and the rubber-banding is a necessary evil that helps make races intense

» **Entertainment**
This game makes everything you do fun and feels like the way racing games should be

» **Replay Value**
High

Skylanders Giants

A small step for giants

8

PS3 • 360 • Wii

» **Concept**

A direct sequel that adds larger characters but recycles most of the gameplay concepts

» **Graphics**

Outside of the creative character designs, not much catches the eye. In-game cutscene animations are once again lacking, and the worlds don't offer many noteworthy sights

» **Sound**

A catchy score accompanies the action. Most of the voice work is fantastic

» **Playability**

The gameplay is practically identical to the first game, but is nicely polished and balanced for the multitude of characters

» **Entertainment**

A repeat performance that is heightened by a strong story and fun new Giant characters

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High



Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher Activision Developer Toys for Bob Release October 21 ESRB E10+

When an Activision game is successful, a sequel is likely to follow in the next year. Activision transformed Call of Duty into a multimillion selling annual event, but exploited the Guitar Hero and Tony Hawk series until they reached bargain bin status. Skylanders appears to be the publisher's next perennial cash cow.

Hitting store shelves just a year after the release of Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure, Skylanders: Giants follows its predecessor's blueprint. As such, the Skylands are once again filled with block-moving puzzles, collectible hats, pushable turtles, breakable crates filled with gems, an annoying green creature that lives inside of locks, doors requiring multiple keys, character tokens that unlock videos of purchasable figurines, element-specific secret zones, and boss fights against shadow versions of many of the popular Skylanders characters. Since Spyro's Adventure covered the gamut of standard world types – be it fire, snow, or haunted village – most of Giants' level designs retrace these themes. It's the same song and dance.

And that's okay. If this were the fourth or fifth entry in the series, its charm may have worn off, but I had a blast playing this game even if it is painfully familiar most of the time.

The biggest difference between the two entries is the addition of new Giant characters. These lumbering titans stand in at roughly twice the height of standard Skylanders, and can be summoned to lift boulders, smash through weak floorboards, run through walls, and pull gigantic chains. On the battlefield, they punch harder and move a little

slower, but fit right in with the other Skylanders' assortment of short- and long-range attack strategies.

When it comes to world exploration, the Giants are a little too slow, and are tight squeezes on narrow paths. As I looked for secrets, I would switch these sloths out for the faster dragon characters, but used them as much as I could in large-scale conflicts or against approaching swarms. The Giants are particularly useful in the new Arena challenges, which pit one Skylander against numerous waves of foes.

Think of the Giants as a ninth class, joining the likes of Earth, Fire, and Undead. Although each Giant is aligned to one of those specific traits, only the fact that they are Giants matters in determining which areas they can enter. You won't need a Water Giant or a Tech Giant at any specific point; one Giant (like Tree Rex, who is packaged with the game) is enough to uncover all of the hidden areas.

All 32 previously released Skylanders figurines work with this sequel, and can attain five additional levels to reach the new cap of 15. These levels pass slowly, allowing players to keep their favorite characters in play for a majority of the time. New difficulty settings up the challenge for seasoned players, but even Hard is a little easy. You unlock the most difficult setting, Kaos, after completing the game.

Two unexpected joys

The Characters I Leaned on the Most

I used 26 different Skylanders figures throughout the course of this review, but found myself relying on six of them for most of the element-free challenges. These characters are: Tree Rex, Spyro, Trigger Happy, Chill, Bouncer, and Jet-Vac.

Collectors Beware

Giants are not the only new faces in Skylands. Toys for Bob has created eight new standard-sized characters – one for each element. That brings the total roster size to 48. Now here's the bad news for collectors: 24 of the original 32 characters are returning with new poses. On top of this, eight characters are upgraded with Lightcore technology and yet another pose.

came from Giants. One: The story. I didn't much care for the cinematics in Spyro's Adventure, but laughed frequently at the nicely penned humor in Giants. Most of the jokes are tied to Lord Kaos, his bid for power, and his loveable butler Glumshanks. My second unexpected joy was a new collectible card game. In most of the levels, you obtain new cards by purchasing them from vendors or beating rival card players in matches. I always like it when games put a collectible item like these cards to good use.

Although Skylanders characters are rarely asked to leave their feet, these games remind me of the great Insomniac Games and Naughty Dog platformers from the PlayStation 1 and 2 eras. I wouldn't necessarily categorize them as collect-a-thons, but the hunt for hidden loot is one of this series' strongest elements, not to mention the thrill of racing through levels to hit a par time. Although Skylanders' gameplay more closely matches the hack n' slash genre, the spirit of the long-lost platformer is alive and well here.

Pending a retail disaster this year, I suspect another Skylanders sequel is already in development and slated for release next holiday. Giants makes a good case for the fun and collectability of this series, but also raises the warning flag for franchise fatigue. » **Andrew Reiner**

Visit www.gameinformer.com/mag to see a video of the new Skylanders characters in action

NBA 2K13

Shooting out of an online slump



Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online) Publisher 2K Sports Developer Visual Concepts Release October 2 ESRB E

8.75

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Keep this high-flying basketball franchise at the top of its game and restore its shaky online reputation

» **Graphics**
From the accurate player tattoos to the authentic pre-game rituals, Visual Concepts captures the essence of the sport. I could take or leave the Jay-Z inspired presentation flourishes

» **Sound**
The best commentary team in sports games, and the crowd reactions accurately match the intensity of the situations on the hardwood

» **Playability**
Placing dribbling moves on the right analog stick along with shooting, post-game, and passing modifiers streamlines the experience

» **Entertainment**
The easier default difficulty makes NBA 2K13 much more accessible, but hardcore hoops fans still get a detailed simulation experience that rewards smart play

» **Replay Value**
High



the trade finder, and the NBA Today interface, lay the foundation for a good experience. Sim fans will appreciate the ability to determine their teams' first three scoring options with the new Total Sim Control feature, but other core pieces, like the NBA Draft and player free agency logic, need renovation.

My favorite way to play NBA 2K13 is My Career, the single-player mode that tasks you with writing your legacy on the hardwood. New changes like virtual Twitter followers, the ability to build your own custom Nike shoe once you become a superstar, and meetings with the general manager that allow you to air your grievances give it more depth than similar modes in other sports games. Becoming a game-changing player early in your career is also easier since you accrue VC outside of the mode.

On the court, this game performs like a perennial all-star. Taking a page out of EA's playbook, NBA 2K13 relocates dribbling moves to the right analog stick. Transitioning to this new control scheme takes practice – I commonly found myself tapping the right analog stick to enact a shot (which now requires a left trigger modifier) – but once you get used to it you'll be breaking the ankles of defenders and bursting to the basket with the skill of an elite shooting guard.

Other gameplay changes, like the dynamic shot generator that produces a rich array of context-sensitive shooting animations, make the action seem less scripted, but several legacy problems for the series resurface as well. Player animations clip through one another too frequently in the paint, too many passes and shots along the baseline clang off the side of the backboard or basket, and players lack basic boundary awareness – all illusion-shattering problems I hoped would have been addressed by now.

Niggling complaints aside, NBA 2K13 puts in another solid performance with its unrivaled broadcast-style presentation, improved online experience, and the best single-player mode in sports. None of its new features revolutionize sports simulations, and cutting out the historical mode was a poor decision, but it's still a polished experience NBA fans should enjoy. » **Matt Bertz**

Over the past few years, the NBA 2K franchise has solidified its reputation as one of the premier sports simulations. Packed with well-crafted game modes, best-in-class presentation, and entertaining-yet-deep gameplay, NBA 2K12 was the best sports game of last year. Instead of taking a post-release victory lap, developer Visual Concepts scrambled to address the rampant connectivity issues online. Broken matchmaking, frequent disconnections in the middle of games, and heavy lag ultimately damaged the reputation of the otherwise stellar game. Visual Concepts used the offseason to work on its weaknesses, but in doing so neglected some of its strengths.

This series has never been touted for its robust online offerings, but after an off year, the performance rebounds into the realm of acceptability. The Online Association improves by giving admins more options to run leagues with their preferred settings. In standard head-to-head match-ups, I occasionally experienced lag and dropped matches, but the performance improved for the most part outside of a fourth-quarter bug that causes the scoreboard to disappear.

NBA 2K13 lacks a dedicated player vs. player league like NHL's EASHL (a major missing piece for a sport that's perfect for this kind of mode), but at least you can play three-on-three pickup matches on the blacktop with your MyPlayer. Instead of building a fully featured multiplayer mode, Visual Concepts spent its time creating MyTeam, a mode that operates similarly to EA's Ultimate Team. Starting with a squad of scrubs, your goal is to build a team of NBA superstars by spending virtual currency (VC) or real money on

players or booster packs.

The VC also extends to modes beyond MyTeam. Whether you're playing Association mode, MyCareer, or taking on competitors online, you're racking up VC that can be used to upgrade your skill ratings for your MyPlayer or buy new signature skills, animations, and clothing. NBA 2K13 tallies VC totals online, so no matter what mode you are playing the game needs to interface with the servers. When the game launched, it suffered from connectivity issues that resulted in me losing VC and the results of the Association games I just played. Visual Concepts has since tweaked the servers to prevent this from happening.

Even when games are recorded appropriately, Association mode hasn't moved the needle much. Several of the core concepts, like coach-defined roles determining player happiness,

The new Dynamic Shot Generator results in more varied animations when taking the rock to the hole



Hitman: Absolution

Agent 47 returns at the peak of his game

8.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Improve on Hitman's core strengths and boost replayability with the new contracts mode

» Graphics

The environments are gorgeous and packed with NPCs with only the occasional, minor slowdown

» Sound

The voice acting is solid (if a little maniacal at times) and the soundtrack is top notch

» Playability

Agent 47 has never been deadlier thanks to a refined and simplified control scheme

» Entertainment

Hitman fans will be in heaven, though Absolution may still be too slow for more trigger-happy gamers

» Replay Value

Moderately High



gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Square Enix Developer IO Interactive Release November 20 ESRB M

After a six-year hiatus, IO Interactive's consummate hitman is back in business. Just like its titular assassin, the developer has honed its skills to a razor's edge, providing the best gameplay the series has seen to date.

Hitman's clone-filled narrative has always been the series' weakest link. I was left with mixed feelings about Absolution's story, which focuses on Agent 47 protecting a young girl from his shadowy agency at the behest of handler-turned-target Diana Burnwood. On one hand, the story ditches most of the sci-fi nonsense of past installments for a more personal narrative and features a solid voice cast. On the other hand, most of the characters are insufferable exaggerations, the dialogue is erratic, and many of the sensationalistic twists are just plain offensive. I get that unsavory henchmen might be prone to using homophobic slurs, but that doesn't make their usage any less detestable, especially when they're delivered in a joking manner. The ham-fisted narrative ultimately succeeded in making me dislike the characters I was meant to kill, but the constant attempts to court controversy are unnecessary and unwelcome distractions.

Thankfully, the rest of the game has been improved in virtually every way. Absolution features a lengthy campaign (it took me more than 20 hours to complete) that offers significant incentives for replaying missions. The levels are sprawling, gorgeous, multifaceted playgrounds to hunt down and kill your targets in, and feature some of the most impressive crowds seen this generation.

Better yet, the environments feature numerous kill options, including dropping a massive whale skeleton on an unsuspecting target,

impersonating an insane criminal to get thrown into a courthouse jail, and sabotaging an electrical box to zap an unsuspecting henchman as he takes a whiz – sometimes the best hit isn't the classiest. You also have an armory's worth of firearms and improvised weapons to take out targets with.

Absolution offers two divergent mission types. Most assassination missions are accompanied by one or more levels where your objective is to infiltrate or exfiltrate a target location. Unlike the original Hitman's mediocre action diversions, these escape sequences play to the series' core strengths: using distractions and disguises to traverse the environments sight unseen. These levels are shorter and more linear than the assassination missions, but are still fun.

Absolution adds even more deadly techniques to 47's repertoire while simultaneously simplifying the series' cumbersome control scheme. Your instinct power, which lets you spot objects of interest and enemies through walls, cuts down on much of the frustration and radar watching of past installments. Likewise, the new blend ability provides an invaluable security net for evading nosy guards. Even when a botched mission turned into a killing spree, I always felt in complete control of 47, who now performs like the unstoppable killing machine he's always supposed to have been.

The challenges, environmental kills, and Easter eggs built into each level provide a good deal of replayability, but the new Contracts mode is the real boon in this regard. Creating and uploading your own mission is as fun as playing other players' contracts, and the scoring system and global leaderboards should be compelling to hardcore fans. It's still a far cry from an actual

level/mission editor, but I can envision spending plenty of hours creating the perfect contract – and many more completing the missions of others.

Despite all of Absolution's improvements, Hitman still isn't for everyone. The pace remains slower and more methodical than most action games, and you'll find yourself reloading checkpoints countless times, in part because they are frustratingly tied to physical locations. If you take a different approach than what the developer had in mind, you may miss them completely. Attaining the rank of Silent Assassin still requires patience, skill, and more than a little trial and error. But while Hitman is still slower than most games, it's also smarter. Devising a strategy, using the environment and disguises to your advantage, and leaving before anyone knows you're there are the hallmarks of a perfect hit, and Absolution proves Agent 47 is still gaming's premier hitman. » Jeff Marchiafava



The Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner

Laying the foundation for the season finale

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Telltale Games Developer Telltale Games Release October 9 ESRB M

8.25

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
An emotional tale about being thrust into a zombie apocalypse and making difficult decisions along the way

» **Graphics**
The comic book art style is unique, and the realistic environments have the right amount of detail

» **Sound**
Effective sound design builds up high-pressure moments. Great voice acting enhances the emotional intensity

» **Playability**
Clicking objects and making decisions are the controls' main purpose, but a few action-packed scenes require quick responses

» **Entertainment**
Episode 4 offers deeper insight into the characters and our choices, and also appropriately builds up to Episode 5

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

The Walking Dead has been one hell of an emotional rollercoaster – tender moments, gruesome deaths, and agonizing choices are etched into my memory. With the impending conclusion, Telltale still emotionally tortures and spins heads with cliffhangers, making the wait for Episode 5 unbearable.

Episode 4 picks up right where the third left off: The group arrives in Savannah, searching desperately for a boat, the sea their best chance for survival. The pacing in Episode 4 is slower, but it feels intentional. Characters spend plenty of time reflecting on their baggage, and the loss and guilt are amplified. The realistic writing is at its finest, but it's not perfect. Some scenes force-feed emotions instead of letting them come naturally. For instance, a burial scene takes place, and with each shovel lift, there's a pause while the camera zooms in on the ground. The scene gets the point across with its initial pan, but then does it two more times for extra emphasis.

Death still permeates the tale and Telltale doesn't sugarcoat it. Everything The Walking Dead does well is still pumping through Episode 4, but it scales back Episode 3's constant stream of highly charged moments. That's not a bad change, since Episode 3 gave so much to digest.

Suspense is at the core of the action



sequences, and while Telltale increases anxiety with limited reaction time, the window passes quickly. Looking in the wrong direction for an object likely means game over. The shooting sequences are still awkward, with clumsy aiming and no auto-targeting. However, the exploration scenes are where Telltale best achieves suspense. Little touches, such as the uncertainty of opening lockers and doors,

provide scares.

Episode 4 builds to a promising finale, and the toll of every horrifying decision plagues your psyche. In that, it succeeds by laying down all the groundwork for Episode 5. The episode starts slowly, but climaxes with a worthy cliffhanger. I'm still thinking about it, and it doesn't get much better than that. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Karateka

Throwback arcade fun with a modern sheen

Style 1-Player Fighting Publisher D3 Publishing Developer Liquid Entertainment Release November 6 (PS3), November 7 (360) ESRB T

8

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Rescue the beautiful Mariko from an evil warlord using your martial arts mastery

» **Graphics**
Attractive Disney-style animation carries the game forward into the current generation

» **Sound**
The stunning score by Grammy Award-winning composer Christopher Tin nails the desired tone

» **Playability**
Simple reflex-based controls are easy to master

» **Entertainment**
Very brief when stacked against other downloadable games, but strong style and simple gameplay carry the day

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Simple and straightforward isn't bad. I imagine some variation of that principle governed Jordan Mechner and the team at Liquid Entertainment as they built the reimagined Karateka. The original Karateka released in 1984, and starred a heroic karate fighter on his way to save Princess Mariko from Akuma's mountaintop fortress. Players performed timing-based punches and kicks to fight their way to victory. This remake doesn't diverge from that formula, and the result is a game that feels more simplistic than most modern releases – though it remains relevant through high production values and a smart approach to replay.

Gameplay in the new Karateka couldn't be easier to understand. Watch the enemy combatants for signs of their attacks, and time a button press to counter their blow. Succeed,

and you can get in a few hits of your own. One opponent after another begins to layer on harder attacks, more blows at one time, and other tricks. The game never strays from the core mechanic, even when you come face to beak against the iconic hawk in battle. Despite the simple premise, I found myself engaged in the fights and eager to progress up the mountain to face more challenging foes.

One big innovation is the approach to fail states. Rather than plastering up "game over" when your martial arts master is finally defeated, Karateka introduces the idea of three suitors who are attempting to save the princess. The first and most challenging to succeed with is her true love; win the day with him, and you make Mariko's dreams come true. If he is flung from the mountain, the righteous monk will climb up to continue the

fight. If he falls, a lumbering brute can save the day, but Mariko won't be especially excited about her savior. The three characters offer a good reason to hop back to the beginning and play again, if only to give the princess her happy ending.

Karateka steps beyond its simplistic gameplay with exceptional production values. A vibrant art style recalls classic Disney animation, and the evocative music melds traditional orchestral scoring with more exotic themes to great effect. Karateka also offers something of a rarity in today's market; it's an accessible experience that can be played to completion in less than an hour. If that's an advantage rather than a detriment for your busy life, Karateka may be just the game you need to remind you what made those early arcade games so fun. » **Matt Miller**



Retro City Rampage

A frustratingly faithful tribute to the NES

7

Style 1-Player Action Publisher VBlank Entertainment Developer VBlank Entertainment Release October 9 ESRB T

PS3 • Vita

» Concept

Make a game with every '80s and '90s reference you can think of

» Graphics

The core game doesn't emulate any specific game, but it's distinctly 8-bit

» Sound

A fantastic soundtrack does a great job of mimicking the era's tunes

» Playability

Major balancing issues rear their head late in the game, but most of it controls admirably

» Entertainment

This look back is equal parts fun and infuriating

» Replay Value

Moderate

Nods to gaming's past are in no short supply these days. Designer Brian Provinciano began work on *Retro City Rampage* over a decade ago, with the vision of it being yet another love letter to the era. He has certainly succeeded in that regard, for better or worse.

Retro City Rampage bombards you with gaming and pop culture references. Obvious nods to properties like *The Dark Knight*, *Saved By The Bell*, and *Paperboy* occupy entire

missions, although many others are snuck in more subtly.

At a certain point, the novelty wears off. Once you're over the quirkiness and charm of its initial hours, *Retro City Rampage* can become a chore.

Its core gameplay is clearly inspired by the first two *Grand Theft Auto* games, featuring an open world littered with missions, sidequests, and pedestrians to plow through. Frequently, it mocks gaming in general with jokes about boring "tail this car" missions, invisible walls, and microtrans-

actions. Despite how self-aware the game humor is, the gameplay features some of the worst elements of NES-era gaming.

We like to remember the *Marios*, *Zeldas*, and *Mega Mans* of the period, but rarely are the downsides of less-prestigious titles discussed. Inconsistent checkpoints, wildly unbalanced difficulty, and cheap boss fights were par for the course. Rather than moving

away from the ugly side of the time period, *Retro City Rampage* embraces it.

Early objectives are relatively inoffensive, sending the player on a variety of fetch quests and wacky missions revolving around fixing a time machine. Many are unique but not exactly fun, and the final set of story missions turn into a gauntlet of cheap deaths and infuriating boss battles. One stretch involves a tribute to the awful *Ninja Turtles* underwater level from the NES game, a difficult *Dr. Robotnik*-inspired boss fight, and an extended section based on *Mach Rider*. If you're enough of a nostalgia fiend to get through these levels without becoming genuinely angry, you're a more patient gamer than most. Despite my frustrations, defeating the final boss gave me a feeling of triumph that's been difficult to duplicate in more recent generations of gaming.

I loved the initial hour of *Retro City Rampage*. It seemed like a fast-paced and funny reminder of one of my favorite eras of gaming. As I dove deeper, I realized that there are better alternatives for those looking for an experience like this. If you want a healthy dose of NES nostalgia, the free *Abobo's Big Adventure* is fantastic. If you want to re-experience *GTA's* introduction of the open world genre, play the first two games on PSone. » **Dan Ryckert**



Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward

Building upon a graphic adventure legacy

8.75

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Aksys Games Developer Spike Chunsoft Release October 24 ESRB M

Vita • 3DS

» Concept

Alternate between a choose-your-own-adventure, suspenseful narrative, and thought-intensive puzzles

» Graphics

Crisp and clear character models with unique designs outshine the drab, ordinary environments

» Sound

Music builds off the suspense, but the voice acting is inconsistent

» Playability

The puzzles are challenging, but not overwhelming. The touchscreen interface is a good fit for the visual novel style

» Entertainment

A thrilling, unpredictable story with fun-to-solve puzzles makes this one of the best graphic adventures around

» Replay Value

High

Most video games are predictable. They are programmed to follow rules, and characters are scripted to say specific things at predetermined times. Rarely can games make you feel like you are matching wits with another person — much less one with ulterior motives. This is the standout achievement in *Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward*; Every time you make a choice, the doubt, paranoia, and angst surging forth are real.

Abducted and trapped in a top-secret government facility, you are forced to be part of a sick game that consists of locking you in puzzle-filled rooms and pitting you against eight other characters. *VLR's* "prisoner's dilemma" forces you to ally with or betray characters, resulting in the gain (or loss) of points. These points are critical: nine points grant escape,

while zero points provide death.

The excitement builds as conspiracies show characters' true colors in the face of death. Can you trust the others to align with you, or will your multifaceted allies/opponents go from altruistic to heartless in the blink of an eye? Every possible outcome is covered, resulting in a branching tale full of tension and uncertainty. The fact that *VLR* can elicit such a reaction is a testament to the quality writing.

The other half of *VLR* focuses on demanding but creative puzzles. The riddles and logic challenges got my head spinning and adrenaline pumping just as much as the unpredictable story, leaving me with a sense of accomplishment unmatched by most games.

The 24 endings are a big part of how the story unfolds. Different paths bring new puzzles, decisions, and revelations, all of which are equally addicting. Not every ending is satisfying, but since the complete story only surfaces when you see them all, you have extra incentive to push forward and explore every option.

The Edge

While the Vita has the graphical superiority, the touchscreen controls don't function as well as the 3DS version. This is a big deal for a point-and-click adventure, making Nintendo's handheld the better option.

Virtue's Last Reward kept me playing and constantly guessing. As the sequel to *9 Hours, 9 Persons, 9 Doors*, it lives up to its legacy and invigorates the graphic adventure genre. Don't let this one pass you by; *VLR* is one of my favorite games this year. » **Kimberly Wallace**



Dishonored

Revenge is a dish best served bloody



gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Arkane Studios **Release** October 9 **ESRB** M

Revenge stories are an old and well-established form, but that doesn't make them any less gratifying. From *The Count of Monte Cristo* to *Sweeney Todd* to *RoboCop*, the thrill of watching a wronged hero deliver justice is one of my favorite kinds of entertainment. *Dishonored* falls in step with those notable examples as Corvo Attano hunts those who betrayed him, and the array of choices at players' fingertips makes it a pleasure to be the architect of his retribution.

Dishonored blends aspects of acclaimed games like *Deus Ex*, *Thief*, and *BioShock* to create a world where players are free to decide how to complete their objectives. Games have made this promise for years, but *Dishonored* comes closer to keeping it than anything else I've seen.

Navigating a guarded checkpoint might involve open combat, rewiring the security system, using Stop Time to sneak past, or a combination of those and other options. However, getting past the checkpoint is just one step toward your goal, so you also need to be mindful of where your choices lead. Killing six guards might seem like you blew it at the time, but when the streets they were patrolling are empty, it doesn't look so bad. Seeing this snowball effect as you work your way through your missions is one of *Dishonored*'s major payoffs.

The level design accommodates the various options well, and makes each new area feel like a puzzle to solve. Unfortunately, success is rarely as simple as devising your solution and executing it. Enemies' ability to detect you is wildly inconsistent, leading to fuzzy stealth mechanics that aren't predictable enough to be reliable (even with a cool power that shows enemy vision cones and silhouettes behind walls). The spotty

stealth is galling when trying to finish a level with no kills; being detected usually means a swarm of guards descend on you, so you just have to reload if things don't go your way. If you want to take a pure stealth approach, remember to save constantly.

If you don't care about racking up a body count, mixing aggression with deadly stealth is by far the most entertaining way to play *Dishonored*. Corvo's powers and equipment can be combined to great effect. Effective strategies include freezing time and placing a spring razor trap in the midst of a group of guards, rewiring an arc pylon (basically a weaponized Tesla coil) so it vaporizes nearby foes, and stabbing guards in the neck only to watch their bodies dissolve into ash before they hit the ground. If nothing else, you can just use your gun and sword to mow through foes in cool straight-up fights. Experimenting with your arsenal isn't always about finding your way around a problem; sometimes it's just pure fun to mess with bad guys and see what happens.

Murdering guards and assassinating targets raises the level of chaos in the plague-stricken city of Dunwall, while finding nonlethal solutions decreases chaos. Chaos only has two values – low and high – but managing it is never adequately explained. How many people can you kill before chaos rises? If you stab a wolfhound, does that count as a kill? What about deaths resulting from rewired traps? You have to wait until the post-mission stats to find out what effect your actions had, which makes it difficult to extract answers.

This mechanic is problematic because your cumulative chaos value determines which of the two endings you receive. For all of *Dishonored*'s attempts to avoid the traditional morality found

in choice-driven gameplay, you're still making a binary choice: Will you kill people, or not kill people? The latter option leads to the satisfying ending, while the former results in a punitive conclusion. This divide establishes a right and wrong way to play; high chaos makes the game harder, adding more plague rats, infected citizens, patrols, and even a more difficult alternate version of the final level. However, playing this "wrong way" is the mix of sneaking and assassination that makes *Dishonored* shine. If you want to see the good ending (and avoid being punished for playing the game at its best), you must forsake the multitude of cool death-dealing contraptions and upgrades in favor of the comparatively sparse offering of nonlethal alternatives – which doesn't help endorse low-chaos stealth as a valid style of play.

Maybe I wouldn't care so much about getting the bad ending if I didn't love Dunwall so much. Corvo may be the protagonist, but the city steals the show as a grimy, industrial backdrop for the action – and I didn't want to see it devastated at the end. The steampunk-inspired technology is fascinating, and the art direction superbly establishes a distinct visual style to accompany the dark and disturbing lore lurking behind the city. I hope this isn't the last time I play a game set in Dunwall.

Though I was frustrated by the chaos system and how it steers your actions, the heart of *Dishonored* is about being inventive, adaptable, and ruthless. The team at Arkane Studios has injected an array of possibilities into the simulated city of Dunwall, and discovering them all is a blast. When you come face-to-face with the people who wronged you, your only dilemma is deciding which poetic method of elimination will produce the coolest result. — Joe Juba

8.75

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Seek vengeance as a super-powered assassin in a rapidly decaying city

» Graphics

The city of Dunwall's artistic direction is great. The stylized approach suits the characters well, but the textures look more muddy than deliberate

» Sound

The cast includes some heavy hitters like Susan Sarandon and John Slattery, but the voices for many incidental characters are stilted and awful

» Playability

Everything feels natural for all of the different powers, weapons, and options. You even get a lean function!

» Entertainment

The rush of a well-planned strategy going off without a hitch is pure gold, but tighter stealth mechanics would help that happen more often

» Replay Value

Moderately High

The Edge

The console versions of *Dishonored* have more graphical hiccups like framerate issues and screen tearing (especially on PS3). The textures look a little muddy no matter how you play, but go for PC if you have the option.

Halo 4

343 Industries balances old and new

9.25

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) Publisher Microsoft Studios Developer 343 Industries Release November 6 ESRB M

360

» Concept

Master Chief's epic space opera steps in a new direction while maintaining the series' legacy

» Graphics

Phenomenal visual detail and lighting makes this a dazzling showcase of the Xbox 360's power

» Sound

A new benchmark in sound effect design, and an imaginative new score – but no manual control of the audio mix is a drag

» Playability

Tight, responsive controls are familiar and easy to learn

» Entertainment

A grand sci-fi adventure accompanied by fast, fun, and addictive multiplayer

» Replay Value

High

343 Industries had a series of challenges in front of it when it began to create Halo 4: Take a beloved series from the original developer Bungie, maintain the legacy established through a decade of development, and reignite enthusiasm by delivering something new. That is a daunting list, but 343 Industries was clearly up to the task. Halo 4 is a thrilling adventure, and takes the science fiction franchise headlong into the future. The magic formula is intact, but the new development team isn't afraid to put its own signature features into play, assuring that Halo is on a path to growth instead of stagnation.

Recent Halo entries felt ancillary to the core story. Halo 4 returns to the resonant drive of the series – Master Chief and his unrelenting defense of humanity. For the first time, the story has an emotional core that grounds the fiction: the connection between John and Cortana. As the two characters face a reemerging threat to the galaxy, we finally gain insight into the mysterious Forerunner race hinted at since *Combat Evolved*. Along the way, 343 Industries plays around with some heady science fiction concepts, from the nature of artificial intelligence to the planned shaping of a species' evolution. While these ideas might be bewildering to newcomers, the story is the most cohesive and well-structured in the series.

As I played through that story, I was struck by the extraordinary production values on display. Halo 4 is a visual marvel, with gorgeous environments accentuated by high dynamic range lighting and breathtaking particle effects. However, the experience is more than the graphics; I rarely feel the need to call out the sound effects of a game, but Halo 4 is an exception. The first time I fired a gun, I was startled by the forceful burst, and the impression only improves as the

flights progress. From the distorted static of a scrambled audio communication to the revving propulsion drive of a speeding Ghost, Halo 4's audio drags players into the game world by their ears. Several stirring new musical themes add to the effect, but those melodies are sometimes obscured within the sound mix. I wish Halo 4 allowed for manual adjustment of the audio mix like most high-end games on the market.

Enemies have defined the feel of Halo gameplay since the beginning, and Halo 4 balances familiarity and novelty. The Covenant returns (for reasons the in-game story fails to articulate), providing the classic experience Halo fans love – popping Grunts, zeroing in on distant Jackals, and furiously dueling Elites. Thankfully, new foes enter the picture before long. The Prometheans offer a robust tactical challenge, from the infuriating regenerative abilities of the floating Watchers to the savage Crawlers and teleporting Knights. Each battlefield becomes a tense puzzle as you decide which bad guy to engage first. That's why the widely spaced checkpoint placement is such a bummer; I love the searing difficulty the game exhibits on higher challenge levels, but Halo 4 often sends its players too far back as a punishment for failure.

Master Chief has new toys to bring into the fight, including several powerful new guns. Added to the array already introduced previously, the armament variety is impressive, and trying them all out is fun. The game encourages experimentation by severely limiting ammo on most pick-ups. At times, the strategy succeeds by making players use all the tools at their disposal. However, frequently running out of ammo slows the momentum of the action as you're forced to scavenge for an alternative.

Levels are thoughtfully structured and entertaining. One breathtaking environment is followed

by the next, and several alternative gameplay sequences offer variety, from the new walking mech Mantis battles to high speed flights in outer space. The ever-changing locations and set pieces give Master Chief's adventure a scope and grandiosity that's lacking in many other shooters.

For many, Halo 4's excellent campaign will be secondary to the endless battles of the newly introduced Infinity multiplayer. An integrated cooperative and competitive narrative tracks the progress of your Spartan as he or she trains aboard a UNSC ship and then heads out on missions, ranking up and improving on the way. Advancing your character is a joy, as you unlock armor pieces, customizable loadouts, and bonuses to boost performance in battle. The smooth and streamlined front-end interface is easy to navigate. Playing with friends is seamless; only time will tell if matchmaking can stand up to the rush that will hit after launch.

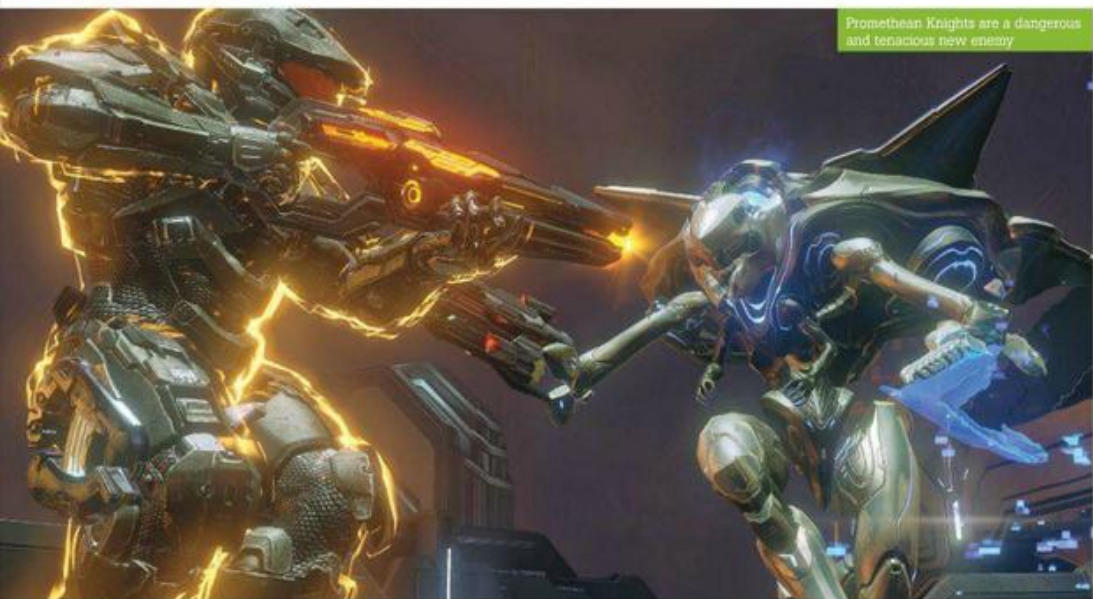
A few small changes to the flow of competitive multiplayer help Halo 4 feel more vibrant and replayable. Points have overtaken kills as the primary scoring mechanic. Random powerful weapon drops remove the chance for experienced players to camp equipment spawns. Support abilities and customized loadouts offer more flexibility. Combat is fast and intense, and hews close to what I've always loved in the series. New multiplayer modes like Regicide and Domination join perennial favorites like Slayer, Oddball, and Capture the Flag, and all the modes play out across an impressive set of over a dozen strong new maps.

Along with the returning option to play through the campaign cooperatively with friends, 343 Industries introduces an episodic cooperative experience with enormous potential to change the way post-release content is delivered in games. Spartan Ops brings a new cinematic episode every week, along with five connected missions. The large battles and objectives available in these missions are ideal for a group of friends, and at a little over an hour per episode, it's perfect for a weekly gaming meet-up. I'm disappointed that this new cooperative mode replaces Firefight, but I'm stoked about a continuing narrative that I can follow after the game is out.

Multiplayer is rounded out by the return of Forge and Theater options for the more creative. Each of the multiplayer maps plus several variants can be fleshed out into wholly new levels inside Forge. I especially appreciate the new tools to make iteration easier, from magnets that click pieces together, to simple button taps that replicate your last object placed. Along with broadened options for environmental effects, such as gravity shifting, I can't wait to see what the community comes up with.

Whether I am watching a grenade explode a Promethean into a shower of sparks or charging with friends at my side through a cooperative adventure, Halo 4 makes the series feel new again. 343 Industries' clear affection for the property shines through, leaving me thrilled to join Master Chief for another decade in defense of the galaxy. » **Matt Miller**

Promethean Knights are a dangerous and tenacious new enemy



Forza Horizon

Forza gets that new car smell again



Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Playground Games **Release** October 23 **ESRB** T

Although Forza Horizon is an offshoot of the sim racer, it captures a lot of what makes the base series notable. Car nuts, decal artists, and those looking for an intense racing experience will all feel at home in Horizon's frontiers. Despite this game's homage to the original Forza, it also strikes out on its own. The open world format allows Horizon to carve out a unique niche in the larger Forza franchise, but it's a title with its own boundaries.

In some ways, Forza Horizon gives racers the best of both worlds. A serious love of cars is married to a more accessible approach to the racing itself and game progression. While hardcore drivers will still find the upper-echelon cars a challenge with all the assists off, those less skilled can still dial back the car handling at the expense of winning fewer credits at race's end. Regardless of how you like to drive, Horizon makes finding a race easy.

Horizon Festival event tiers unlock by earning different colored wristbands and, while the game's light story and characters are cheesy, they also open up other kinds of races. Showcase events are races against other machines like planes, Street Race Hubs are easy places to grind for cash, and you can race against Rival ghost cars from online profiles.

I am most impressed by the competition and progression inherent in the fact that skill points are constantly earned for all kinds of racing feats. Driving on two wheels, different kinds of drifts, close calls with other cars, getting air, and more upped my ranking in those categories, raised my popularity, and earned more credits. It also fueled my desire to progress in the game and gave me a great sense of satisfaction.

The ease with which you earn skill points is matched by some convenient structural features. Horizon Outposts are locations you can

fast travel to if you've completed that Outpost's three objectives. If you don't have the requisite car or need to upgrade it so it's competitive, you can buy what you need without having to travel back to the garage. Credits are plentiful, and you become attached to your rides since even the most pedestrian cars can be upgraded to higher classes.

Despite Horizon's overall accessibility, the game isn't as accommodating as it could be. The open-world game has some notable flaws. The Colorado landscape is gorgeous, but you can't get to much of it due to the many roadside guardrails that hem you in. This shrinks the map and limits how it's used in the game. One of the effects of this is that Showcase races are pointless. Where's the fun in racing against a plane if you can't chart your own path to each checkpoint?

Being able to challenge other Horizon racers when you come across them in the world (only in point-to-point races) is fun, but beating them isn't tied to your progress in the Festival. Moreover, the game's single- and multiplayer portions are separate, so you can't meet up with and race your friends like in Test Drive: Unlimited 2. That said, Forza's online Playground games (including my favorite, Cat and Mouse) and the co-op challenges available in online Free Roam (like trying to get all eight players to cross a speed-trap camera at a requisite high speed) are really fun.

Forza Horizon is a well-crafted game that offers an enjoyable racing experience that accommodates different approaches. It's not a complete experience, but it's a take on the Forza franchise that does the series proud. — **Matthew Kato**

8.5

Xbox 360

» **Concept**
Bring the Forza series' love of cars to an open-world format

» **Graphics**
The game has some stunning vistas (including real-time day-to-night shifts), and the cars are fast and smooth, too

» **Sound**
There are three radio stations: Bass Arena (electronic), Pulse (alternative), and Rocks, as well as a fair amount of character voiceovers

» **Playability**
The difficulty assists let you tune the handling to Forza-like levels if you desire

» **Entertainment**
Horizon lets you explore the open world, but I don't think it will satiate your wanderlust

» **Replay Value**
High





The Unfinished Swan

A surprising, pleasant, and brief story

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Giant Sparrow **Release** October 16 **ESRB** E

8

PS3

» **Concept**
Explore a storybook world as Monroe, a boy seeking his mother's favorite painting

» **Graphics**
Sparse, but beautiful. Stark colors mix with minimalist backgrounds to create one gorgeous area after another

» **Sound**
An appropriately pleasant soundtrack accompanies you during Monroe's story

» **Playability**
Don't bother with the Move controls, as the Dual Shock 3 is the best way to explore

» **Entertainment**
It's brief and uncomplicated, but I enjoyed every second

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The Unfinished Swan's opening cutscene introduces us to Monroe, a child whose mother loved to paint. His favorite painting she made was the unfinished swan, and he wakes up one day to find it missing. The cutscene transitions into gameplay, although you'd be forgiven for not realizing it immediately; with only a reticle visible against a plain white background, it isn't immediately apparent that you're in control. Once you experiment a bit, you learn that Monroe can throw balls of black paint that reveal the surrounding environment. The concept is novel, but wouldn't make for much of a game by itself. Thankfully, The Unfinished Swan consistently switches up gameplay mechanics, ensuring that it stays interesting throughout.

A running theme is the feeling of disorientation, and you experience it early on as you wildly toss paint across a garden to discover the path forward. At one point, you reach an elevated platform that allows you to look back at the paint-splotted route you took to your current position. The artistic direction is stunning throughout The Unfinished Swan, and this is just one of the sights that stuck with me after my playthrough.

Soon after that moment is another striking visual, and you are treated to many more as you progress. I don't want to spoil these moments here, just as I don't want to spoil the surprise of later mechanics. The shift in aesthetic, tone, and gameplay between areas is the primary joy of The Unfinished Swan, and you deserve to discover for yourself if the concept of the early stages intrigues you.

Monroe's story of losing his mother and her favorite painting is a sad one, but it also touches on the more uplifting themes of discovery and childhood imagination. Some areas encourage you to take your time and experiment with the world around you, while you'll want to escape others as soon as possible. No matter which area you're in, the game is fantastic at making you feel like you're a wide-eyed child in a living storybook.

Regardless of the changing goals and mechanics, you throw balls from a first-person perspective throughout the game, but their function changes dramatically between areas. None of the levels drag on too long, as the world tends to shift just as you're beginning to settle into a style of gameplay. While a couple of chapters are true stand-outs, each of them is enjoyable in a different way.

Similar to Journey, The Unfinished Swan is brief, visually stunning, and more focused on the experience than with testing combat skills or platforming prowess. Some collectibles are available in the form of hidden balloons and storybook pages, which might bring completionists back for additional playthroughs. While I feel that the overall experience didn't affect me as much and won't stay with me as long as Journey, it still offers plenty of unique ideas. » **Dan Ryckert**



LittleBigPlanet Karting

More than just a mascot cash-in

Style 1 to 4-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** United Front Games **Release** November 6 **ESRB** E

8

PS3

» **Concept**
Take Sackboy out of his platforming world, and put him behind the wheel in a proper kart racer

» **Graphics**
The adorable aesthetic of the LittleBigPlanet world is a joy to look at, regardless of whether you are in a kart or on foot

» **Sound**
The licensed music pairs with the racing action perfectly. Every track invades your subconscious mind, and reverberates between your ears

» **Playability**
LittleBigPlanet's platforming is a little floaty, and its racing feels loose. It's rarely a problem, but it does take some getting used to

» **Entertainment**
Sackboy's transition from platformer to kart racer succeeds and offers a fun experience surprisingly similar to the previous games

» **Replay Value**
High

The most important thing to understand about LittleBigPlanet Karting is that it feels like a LittleBigPlanet game. Everything you know about the franchise is here: customization, excellent soundtrack, creative visuals, collectibles, Stephen Fry's dulcet tones, that adorable sackperson, and more creation tools than any reasonable person could ever figure out how to use (somebody will, though). This is more than just a LittleBigPlanet off-shoot. It's a full entry into the LittleBigPlanet franchise that just so happens to place Sackboy into a vehicle.

The racing is simple and doesn't offer a lot of opportunity for crafty tactics. With the exception of a few little tricks, much of your success comes down to luck and avoiding death. You can drift around corners, and if you are able to maintain your slide long enough, you can activate a boost. Outside of that lone tactic, your best bet is to think carefully about when to fire your weapons, avoid obstacles, and hit every boost you can.

Control feels loose, but not to the point of frustration. Much like Sackboy's platforming antics, it takes getting used to, but it feels right once you find your stride. Kart racing is a genre that aims to appeal to everyone, gamers and non-gamers alike, and the need to play a few tracks before fully grasping the controls may turn away impatient players.

All of the available weapons serve both offensive and defensive functions. A handy alert pops up whenever missiles and other explosives sneak up behind you, calling out the exact moment where you can fire your weapons backwards to avoid a crash. Expertly thwarting incoming attacks from behind feels great, and the alert helps new players from feeling like they are victims of explosive circumstance.

Track creation starts out simple, blending aspects of LittleBigPlanet's past and ModNation Racers. Laying out a track and test-racing on it is easy. After that, things can get as complicated as you want them to. Everything from what's going on in the background to how players interact with the road is under your control. It's intimidating, but LittleBigPlanet Karting offers you every tool you need to make the course you've always dreamed of with a little imagination and patience.

The existence of LittleBigPlanet Karting is a bit of a head-scratcher. It sort of already exists in the form of ModNation Racers, and to make matters more confusing, it was made by the same development team. Ignoring that weird overlap, however, LittleBigPlanet Karting is a fun racer that almost feels more like a LittleBigPlanet game than it does a kart racer. This is more than just a vehicle for Sackboy's mascot potential. It's a new LittleBigPlanet game. » **Kyle Hilliard**

PlayStation Move

Emblazoned on the front of LittleBigPlanet Karting's box is a sticker that proudly proclaims that this game is compatible with the PlayStation Move. Be warned, though: if you want to play with the Move, you need to purchase the PlayStation Move Racing Wheel, a new \$40 peripheral. The game won't work with the standalone Move wand.

Torchlight II

A competing vision of action/RPG greatness



9.25

PC

» Concept

Many of the original Diablo creators return to the glory days of Diablo II

» Graphics

The cartoonish look pops off the screen with its vibrant colors while exceptional animation brings the scenes to life

» Sound

I could swear I heard snatches of the steel-string Tristram theme in the otherwise unremarkable score

» Playability

The menus do a great job of avoiding information overload while telling you what you need to know. Odd z-axis behavior with targeting and movement around stairs and multi-level areas is infrequent enough to be a minor annoyance at worst

» Entertainment

Art style and branding aside, this is about as direct of a sequel to Diablo II as one could imagine

» Replay Value

High

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (6-Player Online) Publisher Perfect World Entertainment Developer Runic Games Release September 20 ESRB N/A

Nobody paying attention to PC gaming over the last year was concerned about whether Torchlight II was going to be good (it is). The question was whether it was going to compete with or even beat Diablo III at its own game. Beating Blizzard is an awfully high bar to be set before a game is even out, but the team at Runic Games can hang with the big boys. Torchlight II forgoes a robust online infrastructure, instead focusing on delivering amazing action in its loot-rich dungeon crawls and more freedom to build your character than any game in recent memory.

Torchlight II's isometric fantasy/steampunk combat is exactly as expected. The camera remains centered on your hero as you click around the field to move, attack, and fire off explosive powers that range from launching galleon-sized cannonballs to summoning packs of spectral wolves. Monsters explode in showers of loot and experience points, but not until they've demonstrated their own pyrotechnic tricks. Fifteen or so hours later, with the final boss dead at your feet, about 50 levels under your belt, and an inventory full of powerful magical

gear, you're ready to enter the Mapworks with its unique and randomly generated challenges or start over in new game plus mode.

No matter where you are or what skill and equipment loadout you build, Torchlight II is never boring. Monsters constantly throw new challenges at you: Beasts generate clones by eating corpses, steam-powered automatons spawn lightning-spewing gyrocopters, and mushroom mages create mana-draining void zones. The boss fights are similarly creative, many of which smartly push players out of their comfort zone by punishing or demanding certain strategies or engagement distances. A steady drip of new skill unlocks continually puts new tools in your belt, often enabling entirely new tactics. I flipped my approach to combat on its head more than once in my berserker playthrough, morphing wholesale from a dual-wielding melee machine to a sword-and-board battlemage midway through the third act.

In fairness, I used a developer-sanctioned cheat in that metamorphosis (see sidebar). Runic included the ability to re-do your last three skill points in the game, but I feel strongly that playing around with different builds is a huge positive in games like this, especially with the impressive diversity within each of Torchlight II's four classes. Not allowing players to rebuild their character at all would have been a significant downside, particularly when faced with one of the many ludicrous difficulty spikes.

The oddly inconsistent balancing is Torchlight II's biggest flaw. On several occasions, my experience toggled between an effortless waltz through waves of enemies to a potion-chugging slog through foes that halved my health bar with a single swing. The end of the game is the worst offender; the last three hours

are an unbelievable deathtrap for any melee hero. I switched from dual wielding to a shield, dumped 15 consecutive levels into the health/armor/block-boosting vitality stat, and emphasized armor and health to the exclusion of all other attributes on my gear. Even with all that, I could not engage in melee with most foes on Veteran difficulty. If it weren't for my discovery of the spellcasting build I beat the game with, the finale would have been rough going.

Through all that painful death and eventual triumph, the freedom Torchlight II allows in character builds kept my interest locked. Equipment comes with tons of interesting modifiers, from every passive stat boost you could imagine to fun triggered effects like raising steaming geysers from the earth when you hit something. The skill design is likewise excellent, with multiple point investments in an ability unlocking powerful bonuses like doubled range or additional projectiles on top of the expected boosts to its primary effect. Torchlight II makes me feel as creative in building an RPG hero as I ever have, and unleashing my ingenuity on the huge variety of enemies remains a pure joy after dozens of hours.

I would have loved persistent server-stored characters and a more robust social/trading system than the server browser that Torchlight II offers, but the minimal online implementation works just fine for hooking up with buddies for a little friendly co-op. The difficulty spikes and general balancing weirdness is unfortunate but solvable with a little persistence (and maybe a cheated-up respect potion or three). Torchlight II is an excellent game no matter how you slice it. As big of a Diablo III fan as I am, the margin between the two is razor-thin – and I have to give the nod to Torchlight II. » Adam Biessener



Recommended Cheating

Runic doesn't allow respect specialization in the base game aside from the last three skill points spent. However, the studio left in a simple way to spawn full respect potions with a cheat, and the developers went so far as to share how to do so in forum posts. Normally a cheat like this would have no impact on a review, but a developer-sanctioned method to sidestep what would otherwise be a significant knock on the game is worth pointing out – giving players more ways to enjoy the game they purchased should not be held against a studio, even if it requires manually editing a settings file.

Paper Mario: Sticker Star

Mario's latest RPG-lite adventure has dimension

8.75

3DS

» **Concept**
Add a sticky side to Paper Mario

» **Graphics**
Sticker Star is as visually charming as its predecessors, with bright, crisp characters and clever diorama-like environments

» **Sound**
The soundtrack is loaded with jazzy riffs on Mario tunes and compositions that would be at home in classic cartoons

» **Playability**
Tying Mario's abilities to finite resources is annoying at first, but the system works well once you get the hang of it

» **Entertainment**
The Paper Mario series has done a great job of reinventing itself with each release, and Sticker Star's 3D presentation and interesting combat keeps that streak going

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



gamerformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Nintendo Developer Intelligent Systems Release November 11 ESRB E

Believe it or not, Bowser's at it again. This time, he's smashed up the Sticker Comet, ruining Decalburg's Sticker Fest in the process. Mario's not about to let that kind of horrible deed go unpunished. In Paper Mario: Sticker Star, the gaming legend sets out to kick butt, take names, and stuff his sticker album to the seams.

I'm stumped to think of a better application for the 3DS' hardware capabilities. This is one of the few games where 3D adds to the experience instead of coming off like the gimmick it usually is. It's a little counterintuitive, considering that the series' visual conceit is that the world is composed of diorama-like environments built out of strikingly two-dimensional shapes. Sticker Star makes serious headway toward delivering the pop-up book experience the series has long strived to achieve. It's not only delightful to look at; there are plenty of times when crucial jumps are easier to line up with that added dimension.

Sticker Star takes an interesting approach to turn-based RPG combat, in that all of our hero's abilities are tied to the stickers in his album. They're a finite resource, too, so if you run out of stickers on the battlefield, you're out of luck. Fortunately, decals are haphazardly slapped nearly everywhere you go, though they're typically lame ones such as worn-out boots or plain old hammers. You can buy better stickers from stores, find them in hidden areas, or earn them by defeating enemies. Mario moves from level to level in an overworld map à la Super Mario Bros. 3.

Mario can also find 3D objects in the world, which he can then flatten and import into the stickerverse. They're usually tied to the best attacks in the game, though there are a handful of defensive ones, too. I was always eager to see what each one did in battle, particularly since so many of them don't seem to have any obvious purpose. Most people could predict

what scissors or a giant fan might do, but how about a violin or shaved ice?

Stickers are also used in the puzzles. A crown-shaped decal named Kersti accompanies Mario on his quest to retrieve chunks of the split-up comet and valuable Royal Stickers, and she has a remarkable ability: She can flatten the game's world even further, allowing Mario to hover above it and apply stickers. Most of these puzzles are easy to solve. For instance, placing a bridge over a bridge-shaped dotted line isn't exactly tricky. Others are more freeform, allowing you to dive into your inventory and apply the right decal – usually one from a 3D object. I was disappointed with how experimentation is discouraged with those sections. A perfectly logical solution might be deemed unacceptable, and you lose your sticker in the process. You can recover it, but that requires a winding trip back to a sticker shop.

Aside from padding Mario's album and pocketing heart containers, there's not much room for character progression in Sticker Star. There aren't any badges or Pixls to equip, and your tagalong friend Kersti sticks to the sidelines in battle. I was initially turned off by the game's middle ground – it's not action-focused like Super Paper Mario, and it's not as complex an RPG as The Thousand-Year Door – but I quickly grew fond of it. Mario can only use one sticker per turn, but a slot-machine minigame allows him to queue up to three consecutive items. You have to pay to play, however, creating a balance between making sure you have enough coins for the store while also ensuring you live long enough to get there.

In true Paper Mario fashion, you can add a little extra oomph to your attacks or mitigate damage from your foes by pressing the action button at the right time. There's a nice risk/reward element here; do you try to squeeze every last drop of strength from your hammer,

knowing if you wait too long the head will harmlessly fly off? Combat is ultimately engaging enough that I didn't avoid enemy encounters – though Sticker Star doesn't require or even reward anything close to grinding.

I was let down by the story, which frankly didn't capture my attention as past games have. Mario isn't exactly an engaging character (the dude never talks, for one thing), so the supporting cast has to carry his weight. Kersti's basically a crown-shaped Navi, and she guides players through what feels like a lengthy series of unrelated vignettes. No matter how hilarious some of those individual moments might be, they don't seem connected together in any real way. Past games have gotten around this problem by having Mario team up with talkative partners. Here, he's basically on his own. That works well in his action-oriented games, but his lack of personality doesn't do the story any favors.

Paper Mario: Sticker Star isn't a brain-bending RPG that requires a working knowledge of spreadsheets, and its story won't change the way you look at the world. That's not what the series is or has ever been about. However, it is one of my favorite Nintendo franchises, and Sticker Star is absolutely worthy of the Paper Mario name. » **Jeff Cork**





Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask

Improved presentation held back by a predictable story

Style 1-Player Puzzle/Adventure
Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Level 5
Release October 28 **ESRB** E10+

8

3DS

» **Concept**
 Bring Professor Layton into the 3D realm for the first time

» **Graphics**
 The series' distinct art style remains impressive even in the transition to 3D polygonal character models

» **Sound**
 As always, the music and voice acting are top notch

» **Playability**
 The puzzles feel more interactive, though you'll still have to picture plenty of puzzles in your mind

» **Entertainment**
 The puzzles are as good as ever, but the story falters slightly this time around

» **Replay Value**
 Moderately High

Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask debuted as a 3DS launch game in Japan way back in February 2011 (before North America even got The Last Specter). Despite being one of the earliest implementations of Nintendo's new technology, it's one of the best uses of 3D I've seen on the system. Instead of the flat, static backgrounds of previous games, Miracle Mask's surroundings brim with flowing fountains, fluttering flags, and bustling crowds. Turn the 3D slider up, and it looks like you're peering into a stunning paper diorama. While the 3D effect can still strain the eyes, I always made sure to look at each new screen in 3D at least once.

The traditional tap-to-search scan for hidden coins and puzzles has been replaced with a magnifying glass cursor that turns orange when you pass a point of interest. This also moves the camera around slightly, further selling the illusion of three dimensions. It's nice to feel like I'm not chiseling away at my poor screen as well.

Instead of using static 2D art for character interactions, Layton and company now emote and move their lips as 3D avatars. It was strange at first, but now I think it would be tough to go back to the old style. Hand-drawn animation purists can still enjoy the plentiful traditional cartoon cutscenes.

Miracle Mask is the second entry in the prequel trilogy and the fifth Layton game overall. After receiving a plea for help from an old friend, the good professor explores Monte d'Or, a city terrorized by the theatrical Masked Gentleman. Some chapters jump back to Layton's hatless youth when he was first pushed into puzzle solving.

While I always enjoy the character interactions, the overall story didn't do it for me this time. You'll be able to deduce the big mystery right away, so it feels like you're simply guiding the characters along to reach the conclusion you reached 20 hours ago. It helps that there are still plenty of smaller revelations along the way and that the post-credit video teases the next game brilliantly.

I find it harder to rate the puzzles with each successive game in the series. They all have challenges that make you feel like a genius or that you've been robbed. There are some that enthrall you, while others are such a pain that you make it rain hint coins just to move on. The only real shake up here is the top-down dungeon exploration section that appears later in the game. Here you control Layton in real time, rolling boulders, dodging mummies, and digging up treasure. I'm not sure I'd enjoy an entire game like this, but it is a pleasant diversion from the standard formula.

More new elements like this and a less predictable story would help push Miracle Mask up in the overall Layton ranks. » **Bryan Vore**

Puzzles, Puzzles, and More Puzzles!

If the 150 included puzzles aren't enough for you, Miracle Mask is offering a new puzzle to download every day for a whole year. That's 365, more than any single Layton game has ever had.



Code of Princess

Deep combat ignites frenzied battles

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
 (4-Player Local or Online) **Publisher** Atlus **Developer**
 Agatsuma Entertainment **Release** October 9 **ESRB** T

7.5

3DS

Code of Princess' combat embraces depth and simplicity in a way that few titles have. Usually one trait is sacrificed for the other, but Code of Princess functions aptly as a beat 'em up with some substance. However, it's not for everyone. If you thrive off a frenzied challenge where missing a single block reveals a "Game Over" screen, Code of Princess is in your wheelhouse.

As a 2D brawler, Code of Princess takes cues from Treasure's classic Guardian Heroes. The inspiration isn't hard to spot – switching between the three planes during battle is required – but annihilating waves of rapidly spawning enemies remains fun.

During the against-all-odds battles, you alternate between light and heavy attacks, specials, and combos. You customize your character by equipping items and distributing points into different attributes such as attack, speed, mind, and defense. All of these are integral to success. The early levels are mostly stocked with cannon fodder, but the missions steadily progress in difficulty. Surprisingly, the AI is competent; enemies work together to outsmart you. If I was struck by a freezing attack, another enemy would queue up a power while I was helpless. Later levels test your ability to read your enemy; neglect the block button and you will die.

Like most brawlers, Code of Princess doesn't have much of a story. The princess Solange is protecting a powerful sword after her kingdom has been overrun by an evil queen that is summoning monsters...and you've heard this all before. The cast grows on you, but they're still average at best and can't compensate for the poorly crafted story.

Code of Princess is surprisingly deep, offering a challenge for those with enough patience to persevere. The short missions and easy-to-remember controls suit the 3DS well. However, Code of Princess' difficulty is overwhelming if your tolerance doesn't extend to repeated content and frustrating bosses. » **Kimberley Wallace**



» **Concept**
 Hack and slash through waves of punishing enemies, all in the name of a sword

» **Graphics**
 Characters are unique and flamboyant, but the environments lack inspiration

» **Sound**
 Catchy tunes feed your excitement; unfortunately, the tracks are overused. The voice acting is hit or miss

» **Playability**
 Intuitive controls and simple missions make it a great pick-up-and-play game

» **Entertainment**
 Plenty of combat depth along with a thrilling challenge make it a worthy undertaking, especially if you can rope some friends into multiplayer

» **Replay Value**
 Moderately High

Multiplayer Appeal

Playing story missions with your friends online or locally is fun, though versus mode isn't quite as worthwhile. Additional playable characters in versus provide variety, but can be unfair to your opponent due to overwhelming power.

PLAYSTATION 3

Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12	Madden NFL 13	8.25	Oct-12
Armored Core V	6.5	May-12	Major League Baseball 2K12	6.75	May-12
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Borderlands 2	9.75	Oct-12	NHL 13	8	Nov-12
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	8	Nov-12	Ninja Gaiden 3	6	May-12
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Dead or Alive 5	6	Nov-12	Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12
Devil May Cry HD Collection	8	May-12	Pro Evolution Soccer 2013	8.75	Nov-12
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12	Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Double Dragon Neon	8.25	Nov-12	Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12	Rainbow Moon	7.75	Oct-12
Dyad	8.25	Sep-12	Ratchet & Clank Collection	9.25	Oct-12
F1 2012	7.75	Nov-12	Resident Evil 6	8.75	Nov-12
FIFA 13	8.75	Nov-12	Resident Evil: Operation		
FIFA Street	7.25	May-12	Raccoon City	6	May-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12	RetroGrade	8	Nov-12
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12	Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12
Gotham City Impostors	8	Apr-12	Risen 2: Dark Waters	5.5	Oct-12
Grand Slam Tennis 2	8	Apr-12	Rock Band Blitz	8	Oct-12
Inversion	6	Aug-12	Silent Hill HD Collection	8	Apr-12
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Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12	Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
			Starhawk	7.5	Jul-12

9.5 | XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC Release October 9 ESRB M Issue Nov-12

Both of XCOM's layers present life-or-death conundrums to which there is no right answer. No matter what you pick, something or someone is going to suffer for it. This kind of tension and terror rarely occurs within mainstream gaming, and almost never with this high degree of execution.



Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 13	8	May-12
Tokyo Jungle	8.25	Jul-12
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
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UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12

Walking Dead Episode One: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode Three: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Way of the Samurai 4	6	Oct-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12
Yakuza: Dead Souls	7.75	May-12

XBOX 360

Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12
Armored Core V	6.5	May-12
Asura's Wrath	8.5	Apr-12
Awesomenauts	8.5	Jul-12
Binary Domain	7.5	May-12
Blades of Time	4.5	May-12
Borderlands 2	9.75	Oct-12

7.25 | NASCAR The Game: Inside Line

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 6 ESRB E

Inside Line is a step up from its predecessor in every way, but it falls short of being a winner. However, this year's title is like points racing: Even if you can't win it all, you can still make up some ground.

— Matthew Kato

8.5 | Hell Yeah! Wrath of the Dead Rabbit

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC Release September 23 Rating T

Hell Yeah is an enjoyable 2D side-scroller that waxes nostalgic about classic games just as much as it establishes its own identity as a "how-to" guide to murdering monsters in ridiculous ways.

— Andrew Reiner

9 | Gateways

Platform 360 Release September 13 Rating N/A

Gateways aptly translates the spatial puzzles of Valve's hit Portal into a 2D environment, while providing a trio of other portal guns that transform the formula in more mind-blowing ways than Valve's own sequel. — Jeff Marchiava

4 | Realms of Ancient War

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC Release September 19 ESRB T

On its surface, Realms delivers the old school hack and slash experience it promises. However, a closer look reveals too many missing elements that come standard in comparable games. — Kyle Hilliard

5 | Mugen Souls

Platform PS3 Release October 17 Rating T

Mugen Souls has some ideas that might have worked well if the developers had honed in on a few systems to perfect. Instead, this RPG throws so many overwhelming systems at you that many get lost in the shuffle. — Kimberley Wallace

7 | Angry Birds Trilogy

Platform PS3 • 360 Release September 25 ESRB E

Angry Birds is a perfect mobile diversion game. It's quick and addictive, and before you realize how its fickle physics can be unfair, your game is interrupted by a phone call. It's not the sort of game that works well when you want to cozy up on the couch for a few hours. Angry Birds is a fun game, but the console is not where it belongs. — Kyle Hilliard

6 | Dokuro

Platform Vita Release October 16 ESRB E

Between its unforgiving nature, unbalanced difficulty, and humdrum puzzles, I wouldn't have pressed on through Dokuro if I wasn't reviewing it. Rarely did I feel that fun "a-ha" moment that makes puzzle games exciting; instead I found plenty of tedium and frustration. — Kimberley Wallace

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Nexuz	6	May-12
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PSP

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Kirby Mass Attack	8.5	Oct-11
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5 | Fable: The Journey

Platform 360 Release October 9 Rating T

Fable: The Journey is the story of a man named Gabriel, his horse Seren, and their unforgiving struggles against the villain Kinect. Without any form of visual feedback as to whether or not arm gestures are performed correctly, the action in this game can be extremely frustrating. – Andrew Reiner

8 | FTL: Faster Than Light

Platform PC Release September 14 Rating N/A

FTL expertly joins RPG progression mechanics, simple text-adventure dilemmas, multi-faceted one-on-one starship combat, and the ironman challenge of a roguelike. The ill-conceived final boss fight is a frustratingly unfair challenge, but the meat of the gameplay itself is excellent. – Adam Biessener

6.5 | Pid

Platform 360 Release October 31 ESRB E10+

This platformer is a beautiful homage to retro gaming, but it comes with that era's redundant gameplay and maddening boss battles. Game design has moved on, and unless you're ready for a frustrating experience (with a few key moments of promise), I suggest doing the same. – Jeff Cork

8.5 | La-Mulana

Platform Wii Release September 20 Rating E10+

This Indiana Jones-themed Metroidvania is the largest, hardest, and most detailed game in its class. Whenever the temple isn't crushing or impaling you, it's stumping you with mind-bending puzzles. Those who can stick with it will be greatly rewarded. – Bryan Vore

@!#?!@!

Celebrating Q*bert's 30th Anniversary *by Ben Reeves*

Chicago has long been a major hub for the printing, finance, and meat-processing industries. But the Windy City was also once the world's largest manufacturer of pinball machines. In the early '80s, Gottlieb, one of Chicago's premier pinball manufacturers, decided it wanted to dive into the burgeoning video game market. This initiative wouldn't change the world — it wouldn't even make Gottlieb a household name — but it would produce one of the most creative and lovable arcade characters of the decade.

FROM ACTOR TO GAME DEVELOPER

Warren Davis was a starving young actor who just needed to pay the bills. One day while searching through the newspaper classifieds, an ad for Gottlieb's Amusement Division caught his eye. He had no idea how to make games, but it sounded like something he might like to do. Davis had a little bit of engineering experience, so he figured he'd give game design a shot. Surprisingly, he was hired on the spot.

Gottlieb was based in the small town of Benson, Illinois. In an attempt to develop a think-tank environment, the company threw its hardware designer, artist, and all of its engineers into one large, unused manufacturing plant.

"There really was not a lot of supervision, especially in those early days," Davis says. "It was a very laid back atmosphere. Occasionally our supervisor would come through and say, 'All right everybody, you're working too hard, let's go and play some football,' and he'd take us into the plant and throw the football around."

Being a fairly green engineer, Davis decided to give himself a project that would challenge his programming skills. An idea came to him when he saw a fellow programmer messing around with a program that removed pieces of a static foreground to reveal a background full of cubes. It reminded Davis of an M.C. Escher painting, and that immediately inspired him to design a program where a ball bounced down a pyramid of cubes. What would happen if a ball hit a cube and then had the option to bounce either left or right? Which direction would it fall? Davis was fascinated by the underlying math problems associated with a program like this.

"I thought it would be a great opportunity for me to practice programming gravity and randomness. For me it was just a programming exercise," Davis says. "So I asked [Gottlieb's in-house artist] Jeff

Lee to draw a pyramid and a ball, and I started programming. People would walk by and say, 'Oh that's cool,' but it wasn't a game. It was just a programming exercise."

As Davis' project began to evolve, he realized that it had gamelike potential, so he went back to Lee and asked the artist if he had any character designs that he could use as the player-controlled character. Lee had dozens. Inspired by *Mad* magazine as a child, the artist continuously worked on a notebook of sketches, creating characters that he hoped would one day find life in a game. As Davis flipped through these designs, one character caught his eye: It was a frumpy little orange creature with a nose like a blunderbuss. Lee had imagined that this creature would end up in a shooter where his nose could fire projectiles. Davis had other ideas in mind for this goofy figure.



Q*bert mouths off

Some of Q*bert's most distinguishing features were the crazy sounds the cabinet made. Gottlieb had incorporated a sound chip into its system architecture, and many of the company's sound designers felt that since it was there they should use it. Sound designer David Thiel tried to program the chip to say things like "Bonus Points," but after days of frustrating trial and error, the closest he could get was a robotic "Bogus Points." In the end, Thiel decided to throw random numbers at the sound chip, which made it produce the gibberish Q*bert is known for.

Thiel was able to program two intelligible phrases into the game, however. One occurs when players enter their initials for a high score, Q*bert says, "Bye bye." The second happens when the machine is first powered up, when a chipper mechanical voice says, "Hello, I'm turned on."

The sound chip wasn't the only source of Q*bert's audible oddities. Near the end of the game's development, one of the company's engineers had the idea to attach a pinball knocker to the inside of the cabinet. When Q*bert fell off the pyramid, the knocker would fall back and bang against the side of the cabinet, creating the illusion that Q*bert had just fallen into the bottom of the cabinet.

"I liked the idea, but I thought that Q*bert hitting the ground shouldn't sound like someone knocking on the door," Davis says. "It should sound like a sack of potatoes hitting the ground. It should sound like a thud."

The team attached a little piece of foam to the inside of the machine, which altered the effect enough to create a proper thud. However, Gottlieb's management felt that they didn't have the manpower to attach pieces of foam inside every cabinet, so most cabinets were released without the foam insert and many more were produced without a knocker altogether.

A GAME TAKES SHAPE

People at Gottlieb began to refer to Davis' project as Cubes, but it wasn't really a game. There was no goal — no reason for the player to jump across this pyramid. Then one day, Gottlieb's vice president of engineering, Ron Waxman, wandered through the office. He sat and watched Davis' project for a while, and then suggested that the colors of the cubes should change as the character jumped on them. Suddenly, everything clicked into place. That was the key to opening up the game. The goal of Cubes would be to start at the top of the pyramid and change all of the cube's colors as you jumped around it.

The rest of the game's design developed rapidly after that. Davis' still-unnamed character needed something to chase after him, so he went back to Lee and asked for more characters. Lee supplied him with a snake and a puffy little green man with sunglasses. Cubes began to grab the attention of the whole office. It looked like the kind of project that could actually succeed and help Gottlieb break into the video arcade market.

However, not everyone agreed with all of Davis' design decisions. Since the character in Cubes always jumped diagonally, Davis felt it made sense to rotate the joystick 45 degrees in order to reflect the character's movements. Many arcade traditionalists within the company thought that an arcade joystick should line up horizontally and vertically, like a plus sign, because that's how arcade joysticks were always positioned. Davis won the battle, but when the cabinet went out to the test market, the rotated control scheme confused some players.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The name of Davis' game went through an almost greater evolution than the game itself. Many people within the company felt like the game should be named after its lead character, but no one knew what that should be. Gottlieb's vice president of marketing wanted to call the game "@!#!?@!", and a number of test cabinets actually left the factory with that title printed onto the side of the machine. However, @!#!?@! seemed like an unworkable title. What would people actually call it? How would people tell their friends about this game? Gottlieb had to find an official name for the game before retail cabinets were manufactured.

"I'm really bad at naming things," Davis admits. "So I went around the office with a notepad and asked for everyone's ideas."

Davis ended up with a list of about 60 names, including titles like Snots And Boogers and Arnie Aardvark, but none of the titles felt right. In a meeting with Gottlieb creative leads, Davis tried to hammer out a name for his game. Someone in the meeting suggested that the main character should be called Hubert. Someone else riffed off that idea, suggesting Cubert, which tied back to the original Cubes concept. Davis liked the sound of Cubert, but he wanted the name to stand out visually, so Gottlieb's art director changed the name to Q-ber, a name that retained the same phonetic pronunciation, but seemed more eye catching. In one final fit of whimsy, Lee changed the dash in the game's title into an asterisk, and the game was christened Q*bert.

"We were all like 'Yeah!' It was kind of a crazy moment, but we all just knew that was the perfect name," Davis says.

A LASTING LEGACY

Gottlieb debuted its new game in November 1982 at the Amusement & Music Operators Association trade show. The game tested well, but some thought it was a bit difficult. "I watched a lot of people put a quarter into the game and then fly right off the pyramid," Davis says. "People at Gottlieb were also terrible at it, so I started to tune the game [to be] easier as we approached release."

Davis eventually grew to regret making the game easier, and immediately started work on a follow-up title that he simply called *Faster, Harder, More Challenging Q*bert*. This version of the game featured moving blocks, faster enemies, and bonus levels. It didn't test well. Many people weren't familiar with the original Q*bert yet, since that game had just released. Gottlieb decided not to manufacture what Davis felt was the superior version of the game.

The version of Q*bert that did release went on to become one of the most popular arcade games developed by a western studio, selling around 25,000 cabinets. Q*bert became one of the most merchandised arcade characters of the decade, right behind Pac-Man and Donkey Kong. In the early to mid-'80s, there were Q*bert coloring books, sleeping bags, frisbees, board games, wind-up toys, and stuffed animals. In 1983, CBS adapted Q*bert to be part of its animated cartoon series *Saturday Supercade*. Q*bert's legacy even outlasted the decade. The character and many of his enemies are featured in Disney's new animated film *Wreck-It Ralph*.

"I've never made any money off of Q*bert, because we all did work for hire, but I'm incredibly glad that the character lives on," Davis says. "As a team, I think [Jeff Lee, David Thiel, and I] all share a pride in that legacy and it is rewarding to know that the game is still remembered this far along — even 30 years later."

If history is any indication, Q*bert won't be forgotten anytime soon. He's the kind of oddball character that is hard to forget. ♦

Designer Warren Davis poses in front of his creation



Pokémon's Burning Questions

Pokémon is a strange world. People are constantly solving their problems by making Pokémon fight one another, children are sent out to explore the world at a very young age, and evolution is more than just a theory. We wanted to know more about this bizarre world, so we asked Pokémon Black and White 2's director, Takao Unno, and producer, Junichi Masuda, all the questions we've always wanted answered.

+ What exactly happens inside of a Pokéball? Is there a home in there? Is there food in there? And can humans go in a Pokéball?

Masuda: It sure would be interesting if Pokéballs existed in real life, and we haven't imagined that. But, in terms of what's inside of the Pokéball, it's a space that's incredibly comfortable for Pokémon. So comfortable that they want to enter the Pokéball without any sort of outside encouragement. What's actually in there is something we would like for people to sort of imagine on their own. In terms of whether humans can enter the Pokéball or not, it's called a Pokéball, so probably not. I think it's just for Pokémon.

+ There is a rumor that in the original Pokémon games, versions Red and Blue, that the Pokémon Ditto was a failed attempt at cloning a Mew. I was wondering if you could speak to this, to whether or not it's true.

Masuda: That's the first time I have ever heard that rumor actually.

+ Is that your only answer?

Masuda: In terms of how Pokémon are designed, they are each their own unique living being. The unique thing about Ditto is that it's a Pokémon that can change forms, but each Pokémon we create with its own unique element, so we just make sure that they are all individual life forms of their own.

+ Is everyone in the world of Pokémon a vegetarian? Do people eat Pokémon? When they are eating steak are they eating a Tauros?

Masuda: There's a lot of fruits and vegetables in the world of Pokémon. There is also a variety of snacks and various candies and whatnot that come from the different regions. The Pokémon world is much more technologically advanced than the world of our own, so perhaps there is probably a lot of different food that we can't even think of.

One example of that is there is even a rare candy which is an actual snack or piece of candy that can make you stronger, raise your level. There are all kinds of strange foods that really don't exist in our universe.

+ It's funny you bring up rare candy, because my next question is if humans can eat rare candy, and what happens if they do?

Masuda: You probably could eat a rare candy as a human, but it might not taste very good. It might be kind of like, an example of our world, a human eating dog food. It's edible, but it probably doesn't taste

very good. You might hurt your stomach by doing so.

+ What happens when a gym leader runs out of badges to give away? Are they fired?

Unno: The gym leaders, they're primarily there because they have a strong desire to help trainers grow and really identify the good trainers. They only

give badges to trainers who they have recognized as being strong of heart and a strong battler as well. So they definitely don't quit when they run out of badges. The only time they would quit or stop being a gym leader is when perhaps their ideals change or they want to do something else in life.

And if a gym leader were able to actually give out so many badges to so many great trainers that they ran out of them, they would probably be overjoyed by that fact, that there were so many great trainers that came to challenge them.

+ We know the names of the regions in all the different games. We know the geography of the regions kind of mirror Japan and the United States. Our question is, does Pokémon take place on an alternate Earth, or is it in the future, or in the past, or is it an alternate present?

Masuda: We actually don't think of the world of Pokémon as Earth. If we were to do that, we would kind of be limited by what we could do. By thinking about how physical objects work on Earth and how various elements work on Earth, we would kind of be limited to that if we thought of it as Earth. We think of it as a place that is really similar to Earth, but is a different planet of its own with people on it who may be similar to people on Earth, but they have different values so they care about different things.

It's the type of place, the Pokémon world, where problems we face on Earth just wouldn't happen. There wouldn't be global warming, water shortages, or anything like that. It's

a world where the people in it really want to work together with each other. Their value system is such where they would prefer to work together and eliminate these problems rather than feud.

+ Are there worker Pokémon in the world of Pokémon? Are there swaths of Pichus powering a city?

Masuda: Pokémon as creatures, are much closer to – they're not like how our pets are on Earth – they're much closer to humans than they are to like a cat or a dog pet that we would keep on Earth. Because there is such a closer relationship between humans and Pokémon, most people in the Pokémon world probably wouldn't want to use Pokémon in such a manner as making them work to do something. But there are some people with bad ideals, or bad people in the Pokémon world who might try to do something like that.

+ In the same way humans in our world are a type of animal, are humans in the Pokémon world a form of Pokémon?

Masuda: Humans are definitely separate from Pokémon. The way you think about it is different than how we think about animals in relation to humans on Earth. For example, on Earth we have mammals and reptiles, all these different categories. In the world of Pokémon, they are all Pokémon. We don't really categorize them in exactly that way. It's kind of a different way of looking at it. So yeah, humans are definitely separate from Pokémon. For example, humans can't learn four different moves like a Pokémon can.

+ Don't trainers who start their adventure in a town far away from the player's home town have a difficult time starting because of the high level Pokémon and trainers in the area?

Masuda: If it were me, I would think about moving somewhere else, definitely. ♦

interview by Kyle Hilliard

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