

gameinformer®

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



THE ORDER 1886

A Supernatural Thriller
For PlayStation 4

We Love The Unknown



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

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comment on this letter at
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It sounds inconceivable when you say it, but there was a time when people didn't know that Grand Theft Auto or Call of Duty existed. Like any pop culture darling, they all start as smart ideas from (usually) struggling artists that resonate with the populace and explode into giant phenomena.

When people first saw Grand Theft Auto, the first words out of their mouths weren't, "Why doesn't this game have a female protagonist?"

When Call of Duty was unveiled no one screamed, "This game is a linear roller coaster ride with no choice!"

No, when people first laid eyes on these titles they looked at them with wonder and amazement. These games, like the many before them (Pac-Man, Super Mario, Zelda, Doom) and after them (The Last of Us, Mass Effect, BioShock, Minecraft) all were once unknowns before they were super franchises. Before these games could define what we expected gaming to be, they had to change it.

Our love of the unknown is what drives us here at *Game Informer* to take chances with what we put on the cover. With only 12 issues a year, we could easily put established blockbuster after established blockbuster on the cover and probably satisfy more readers and perhaps be more successful. But what is the point in telling people only what is known? The unknown is where the next game that changes the world lies.

New consoles bring innovation, and *Game Informer* will do its best to deliver the blockbuster cover reveals you desire along with new games we think have the potential to expand your gaming universe, whether they come from independent studios or big publishers. This month we do that with *The Order: 1886* from Ready At Dawn, a development house that isn't a household name yet, but will be in the future. I am certain of that.

Plus, the main character has a wicked mustache (best since Doctor Robotnik, in my humble opinion) that we get to proudly display on our cover.

Enjoy the issue.

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The Order: 1886

An ancient enclave of knights fights a deadly war against half-breed creatures on the streets of London. Ready at Dawn is best known for its work on the handheld versions of *God of War*, but the studio is striking out on its own and crafting an original story for the first time with *The Order: 1886*. We've got the first expansive look. **by Matt Miller**



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This month readers share their love for Persona, predict the ending of Call of Duty: Ghosts, and question the value of multi-gen titles. One reader also comes up with a novel solution to console exclusivity.

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We examine Valve's hope to change the world of PC gaming with SteamOS and a new unique controller. We also took a trip to Japan to check out this year's Tokyo Game Show, and break down the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, giving you all the facts you need to make an informed purchasing decision.

» 58 Previews

It's the final stretch before the holiday season of new games and new consoles, and we're taking one last look at the big games of 2013 before release like Batman: Arkham Origins. We also got a good look at Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes and Dark Souls II.

» 80 Reviews

Grand Theft Auto V is finally here, and so is our review. We also score the 2014 soccer games, see how Wind Waker stands up after 10 years, and let you know if Quantic Dream's Beyond: Two Souls is a worthy successor to Heavy Rain.

» 100 Game Over

It may surprise you to learn that most video game companies did not start out making games. Some were involved in waste management, others dealt in jukebox repairs and rentals. Test your knowledge, and maybe learn a little something, in our Before They Were Game Companies quiz.



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CORRECTION: In issue 246, we incorrectly stated that the Alienware 14 Gaming Laptop uses a Nvidia GeForce GT 750M video processor. Alienware's line of 14-inch gaming machines currently house a Nvidia GeForce GTX 765M.



Readers continue their next-gen contemplations this month with more opinions of Microsoft. Fans also praise an overlooked publisher and get off the couch to try activities inspired by video games. Who says games are bad for you?

Third Time's A Charm

I've been a gamer for 12 years now and have read more previews than I care to admit. Never had I actually squealed with surprise and excitement at an article until I saw Morrigan in your Dragon Age: Inquisition cover story. Morrigan has the most convincing, human-like personality of any video game character to date, and influenced the in-game choices I made with her bold character and outspoken beliefs. I am now fully excited for her appearance in Inquisition, and the game is going onto my list of "must-buys."

Kyle Kreuzer
via email

I was overjoyed by your article on Dragon Age: Inquisition. I loved the first Dragon Age, and was okay with the second. From the article, it seems like BioWare is spending the time and effort to do the third installment right. I like the idea of building the Inquisition's forces to combat the demon threat; it reminds me of the asset gathering/army building of Mass Effect 3, which I thoroughly enjoyed. If they combine that with the exploration of Dragon Age: Origins and the action and dialogue of Dragon Age II, BioWare will have a fantastic game to offer. As long as I'm not fighting through the same three styles of tunnels for all the side quests, it'll already be an improvement over Dragon Age II!

Jeremy Smit
via email

We received a number of cheery letters from Dragon Age fans this month, who also pointed to the return of multiple playable races and BioWare's adoption of the Frostbite 3 engine as reasons why they're excited for Inquisition. For more on the game, check out our month of exclusive coverage at gameinformer.com/dai.

Evaluating Xbox One

After all the arguing I've read on the Internet over Xbox One, I was not excited to see an opinion piece about someone disliking the new console ("Why I'm Still Not Sold On Xbox One," issue 245). I see enough of that junk on other gaming news sites; I would prefer it to be left out of my magazine. However, after reading the article I would like to say "well done" to Mr. Marchiafava. The article raises some valid points, and it does so without shamelessly comparing everything to Sony. While I plan on buying an Xbox One come November, I can understand why some would be skeptical about the console. It's refreshing to see that skepticism expressed logically.

Alex Greifenkamp
via email

I read your article discussing Microsoft's policy changes for the Xbox One ("60 Days Of Confusion And Counting," issue 245), and just wanted to thank you for clearing up the many doubts I had in my mind concerning the new

console. After hearing about all of its restrictions, many of my friends laughed and decided to buy a PS4 instead. But I still wanted to buy an Xbox One; I just refused to believe that Microsoft would give a big middle finger to its customers. Your article has eased my mind, and although the \$499 price tag is still high, I feel more confident in buying an Xbox One.

Christian Calso
via email

Readers have no shortage of opinions on the Xbox One, and react to every new announcement from Microsoft with both measured praise and vitriolic condemnation. Others continue to express confusion over the console's features and are unsure of which system to buy. If you fall into the latter category, check out our Decision 2013 comparison on page 18 for help choosing which next-gen console is right for you. That is, unless Sony and Microsoft decide to take the following reader's suggestion to heart...



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

One Console To Rule Them All

I have a question: Why don't Sony and Microsoft merge and form one big company? They could mix the technology from the Xbox One and PS4 and make one big console. This would be better for gamers and Microsoft/Sony, because gamers wouldn't have to choose between Xbox and PlayStation. The company would also make more money because instead of half of it going to PlayStation and half going to Xbox, all of it would go to Microsoft/Sony. They'd make more money and gamers would be happy too.

Eric Jones
via email

That's certainly a bold plan, Eric. There's only one problem: What would you call such a system? The Microsony XStation? The Sonysoft Playbox? Perhaps it's best if we just stick to the way things are – otherwise, what would gamers argue about?

All Dogs Go To Heaven

I have been reading a good number of previews for Call of Duty: Ghosts, and in some of those previews the game's creators have mentioned how heartbreaking it would be if you were to lose Riley. So I think at this point they have made it a little too obvious that the dog is going to die. All signs point to it. Infinity Ward is attempting to make a game with characters that you care about, and of course they will kill some of those characters; I have a big feeling the dog will be one of them. Just watch, you'll see.

Levi Lewis
via email

Could Infinity Ward really be heartless enough to kill off man's best friend? We won't bet against Levi's intuition, but if the developers do slay our loyal canine companion, they better bring him back as a badass robodog before the credits roll. We can't take another Turner & Hooch heartbreak.



Looks Aren't Everything

Your response to Nate Pfab's "Left Behind" letter about the differences between multi-gen games (Feedback, issue 245) has me wondering: Why would I want a next-gen system if the games only feature better graphics? I want the next-gen consoles to provide new features and gameplay too – better graphics are a given. Now you have me second-guessing my new console purchase at launch this fall. How many games at release date are being developed only for Xbox One/PlayStation 4?

Sean Walsh
via email

You shouldn't let the minimal differences between the first wave of multi-gen titles diminish your enthusiasm for the upcoming systems. While Xbox One and PlayStation 4 are both launching with only a handful of exclusives, many developers are already working on next-gen-only projects in addition to their multi-gen titles. Meanwhile, the number of current-gen exclusives is going to continue shrinking. You could always wait to upgrade if you want, but if you've already decided to purchase one of the new systems, you might as well play prettier versions of this holiday's games and pick up some next-gen exclusives to boot.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Do you have the capabilities to locate certain PS2 games?"

We're pretty sure everyone has that capability.

"What are the possibilities of Microsoft releasing an Xbox One with no Kinect and no Blu-ray?"

Outlook not so good.

"Why isn't there a Game Informer vs. Capcom yet?"

We ask ourselves that question every day.

Request Denied:

"I was wondering if you could put a picture of Axel from Kingdom Hearts on the cover of the January issue for my 16th birthday? It would be the coolest thing."

Axel Flameria

Sorry, Axel, but that's not going to happen. However, we will wish you a happy birthday!

Question Of The Month:

Did GTA V live up to your expectations? Why or why not?

gi spy



(Left) Infinity Ward's Steve Ackrich, Mark Rubin, and Tina Palacios posed for a picture with Ben Hanson and Dan during their recent studio visit. Ghost doesn't seem too sure about Dan... **(Right)** Ben and Dan also had some serious questions for Activision publishing CEO Eric Hirshberg, like "Where is the Call of Duty dog?" and "Can we pet him?"

GI SPY
continued on page 8

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- 42% Next-Gen Hoopla
- 24% IRL Video Game Activities
- 18% Dragon Age: Inquisition Excitement
- 15% Atlas Love
- 1% Requests For Shenmue 3 Info

Getting Persona

I was extremely intrigued by your “Perfecting Persona” article (issue 245). I have always been aware of how difficult localization for games created in other languages can be, but I completely overlooked the challenges of adapting references to events and culture that originated in whatever region the game is coming from. I never realized that a company would sometimes have to substitute a reference with another, more familiar reference for the audience they are localizing for. I now have a newfound respect for companies like Atlas USA. Thank you for opening my eyes and shining the spotlight on the hard work these people go through to bring us a product of the highest quality.

Anthony Cucchetti
Warren, MI

Persona 4 was the first JRPG I played and it became an instant favorite. I soon moved on to the previous Persona titles and loved each and every one of them. Several years later, I’m still beating Shadows to a pulp and trying to max out my social links. When I noticed the Persona 3 image in issue 245’s table of contents, I instantly flipped to the page and read the article. As a hardcore Persona fan, I was drawn in right away. I never knew Atlas USA took such a risk with Persona, but I’m sure glad that they did, and the article gave me even more respect for what the company does. I’m looking forward to Persona 5 and all the hard work that’s being invested into it. Hopefully the long wait means it’ll be even better than expected!

Benigno Naval
via email

Localizing content without stripping a game of what makes it unique is a tricky balancing act, but Atlas USA continues to please its devoted fans with quality translations. The Persona series in particular has managed to captivate critics and gamers alike even as JRPGs have become increasingly rare. Here’s hoping Atlas can keep its string of critically acclaimed hits going with Persona 5.



Is This Real Life?

In issue 245, we asked readers if a video game has ever spurred them to try a real-life activity. Tony Hawk was the most popular response, and has resulted in countless scraped knees and bruised shinbones. Here are some of the responses we received.

My little brother and I loved the original Tony Hawk’s Pro Skater so much that we were inspired to take up skateboarding. We went all in and designed our own boards at a skate shop with the decks, trucks, and wheels that we loved from the game. Our mom wasn’t super happy with the resulting doctor bills.

Kimball Jackson

After becoming obsessed with the Mass Effect games, I got interested in future technology and took a summer robotics and engineering class.

Madeline Vokovitch

Fighting games and epic battles in RPGs – specifically Street Fighter and Final Fantasy – are what led to me trying martial arts as a child. Soon I’ll be testing for my second-degree black belt in taekwondo. The form I’m developing even has some video game fighting moves, including one from Ken/Ryu. You’ll never guess what.

Patrick Jason Quintos-Almario

Yes. Amnesia: The Dark Descent convinced me to try never turning off my lights again. Thanks for asking; it’s nice talking to someone other than my therapist about it for once.

Mark Wasson

(Left) Mike sat down with Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot at Gamescom to discuss the publisher’s next-gen plans. Watch the video interview at gameinformer.com.

(Right) Later Mike was arrested by the cosplaying police for refusing to wear his homemade Ghillie suit. Come on, Mike, don’t be a spoilsport!



1

WINNER

1 William Jones

Link gets busted again for riding Epona after a Lon Lon Milk binge



2



2 Faith Chitwood

Sharing a tender moment is hard when there's always the risk of a giant, crazy robot bird thing ruining your afternoon

3 Mike Baer

The hills have eyes. Really creepy, tired-looking eyes.

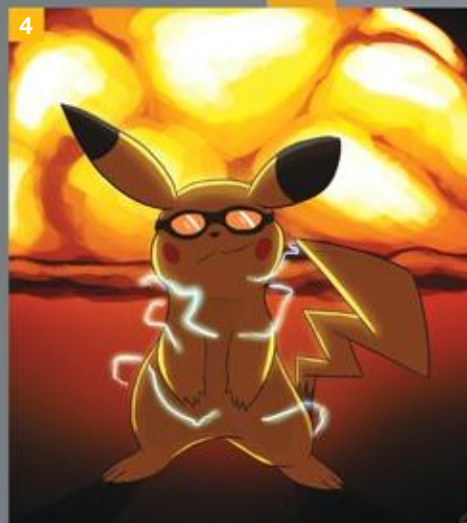
4 Chris Humphries

"I am become Pikachu, destroyer of worlds."

3



4



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(Left) Kids, let reader Keegan Anderson be a lesson to you: If you're going to play Pokémon in the bathroom, at least close the door so your mom can't take your picture and send it to a globally distributed magazine. **(Right)** Hanson and Reeves joined some industry friends to celebrate the end of Gamescom with a night on the town in Cologne, Germany. They were deported the next morning.



Full Steam Ahead Into The Living Room

by Mike Futter

Valve wants to bring Steam into your living room, and has recently laid out an initial plan to do so. The three pieces of the strategy cover a new Linux-based operating system called SteamOS, a line of preconfigured computers called Steam Machines, and a new input device called the Steam Controller. All of these will be available in beta later this year and more widely in 2014.

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S

teamOS is the brains. It natively plays Linux-compatible titles in the Steam library, and also streams games over home networks from any PC or Mac running the Steam client. You won't need to buy a new machine to try out Valve's new operating system, as it will be free to download and also fully configurable.

Valve claims that SteamOS provides "significant performance increases in graphics processing," and that audio and input lag improvements are currently being sought. "This is very intriguing to say the least," says Kevin Wasielewski, CEO of high-end gaming machine retailer Origin PC. "What I'm most interested in is the quote about performance increases."

The Steam Machines, which are headed into a very limited beta late this year, come in a variety of configurations from a number of different manufacturers. "I see these announcements as a direct attack on consoles."

Wasielewski says. "I think every PC gamer is intrigued right now, from the build-your-own crowd to system builders like Origin PC. Console gamers will also be very intrigued if PC gamers start saying this is the real deal." He declined to comment on whether Origin PC would be developing a Steam Machine.

You can build your own computer that runs SteamOS, but until Valve releases minimum specifications, we don't know what interested users should expect to spend on parts or prebuilt systems. We expect that costs will vary depending on whether the device plays games on its own or simply streams them from another PC or Mac.

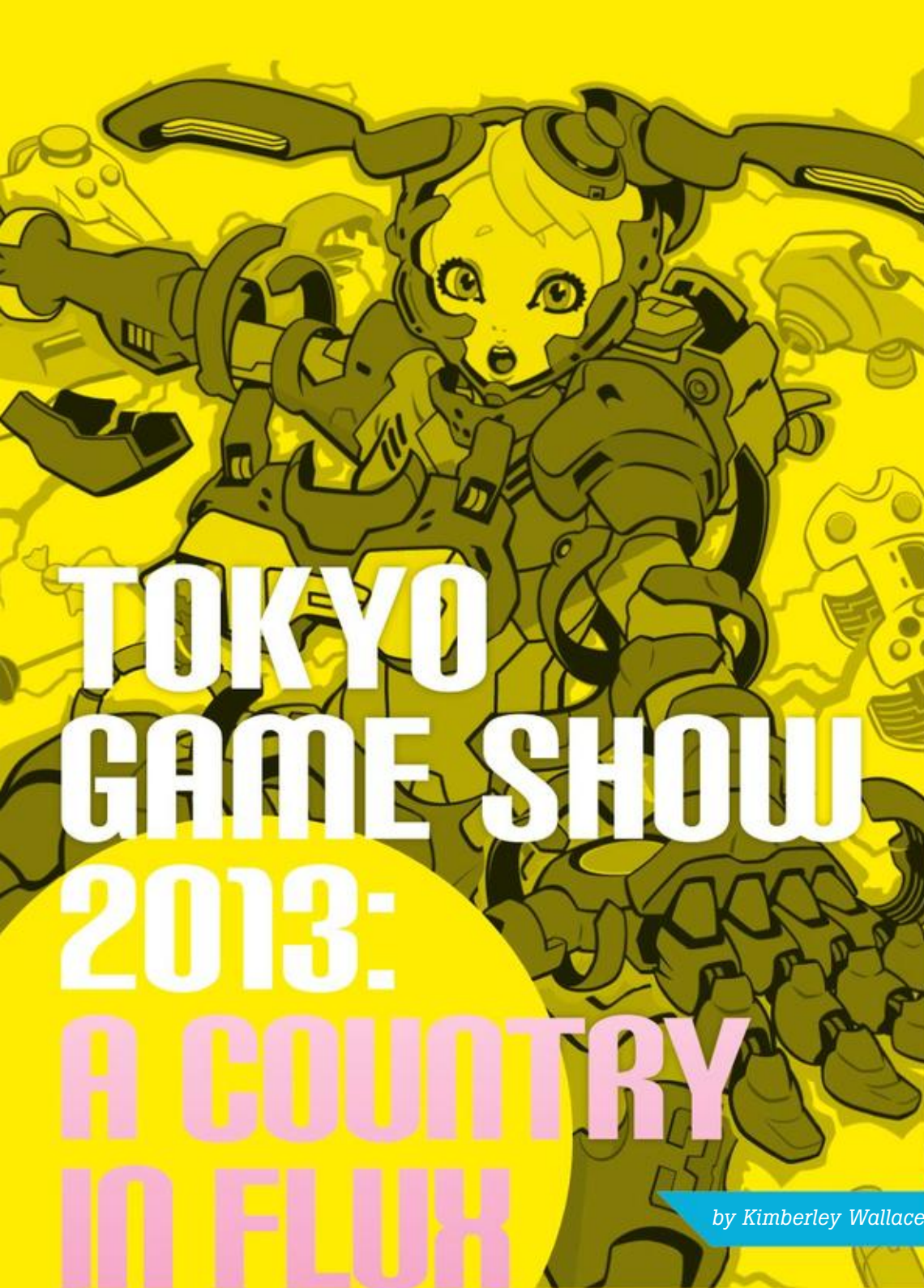
The final piece of the puzzle is the Steam Controller. Unlike standard console controllers that use dual thumbsticks and a diamond-shaped button configuration, the Steam Controller is tooled to mimic a mouse and keyboard.

Instead of thumbsticks, the controller has twin, concave touch pads. The standard four buttons are arrayed around a center, clickable touchscreen. There are two triggers on each shoulder and two rear buttons. Valve claims that first-person shooters and real-time strategy games are just two of the PC genres that will now be accessible with a controller. Whether Steam Controller users can stay competitive during online play against mouse-and-keyboard users remains to be seen.

We know that there are going to be a lot of choices of hardware from a number of different manufacturers. The cost range is still a mystery, and until we get a better understanding of the required investment, it's impossible to figure out who SteamOS and its companion hardware is really designed for. Is the Steam Machine just a secondary option for those PC gamers looking for a living-room option? Is it an entry point for console gamers that have been put off by PC gaming because of the cost? The only people who know the answers to those questions right now work in Valve's hallowed halls, and that makes it hard to know if we should be excited about what's coming in 2014. ♦



The Steam Controller



TOKYO GAME SHOW 2013: A COUNTRY IN FLUX

by Kimberley Wallace

Over the past decade, the Tokyo Game Show has continued to diminish in relevancy for all regions of the world. Japanese publishers have struggled to cater to Western markets, while Japanese gamers have turned their backs on consoles in favor of handheld and mobile platforms. With a new console generation in the wings, we thought this year's show had potential to return to the spotlight. While show numbers were up with a record high 270,197 visitors – 46,444 more than last year – the show remained underwhelming with its lack of news and game announcements.

Nintendo skips the show every year to hold its own event, but Sony and Microsoft were both on hand to display games and hardware. Sony took advantage of the show to announce Vita TV, a non-portable version of the handheld that links to a television to allow Vita games to be played with a DualShock controller. The unit can also stream PlayStation 4 games and other content via Wi-Fi.

When we spoke to Shuhei Yoshida, president of Sony's worldwide studios, he outlined the Vita TV's other potential uses. "There will be video services native on Vita TV," he said. "That's recommended, rather than streaming from the PS4 to Vita TV. For the Japanese market, we are bringing more services than we have on the PS3 in Japan because we see it's quite a unique proposition for a casual audience. It's quite a cheap, entry-level device [below \$100]." The Vita TV is launching only in Asia, but Sony said it is encouraged by the response from Western markets, and it may eventually come to Europe and the US.

Yoshida also showed off the PlayStation App, which allows you to accept friend requests, send messages, watch a friend's game stream, and browse the PlayStation store from iOS and Android devices. He used Playroom, which is preinstalled on every PS4, to demonstrate the device's interactivity. Yoshida drew different objects in the app and transferred them into Playroom. His drawings transformed into objects that computer-controlled robots could play with. The app also includes preset objects like a football, in case you're not a fan of drawing.

In addition to the Vita TV announcement, SCE president Andrew House outlined the company's expectations for PlayStation 4 sales, projecting five million units sold worldwide by the end of March. The company also confirmed its Gaikai streaming service will bring PlayStation 3 games to PlayStation 4 starting next year. Yoshida told *IGN* that Sony is planning on making these titles available on the Vita and Vita TV as well.

Sony also provided a long-awaited update on *The Last Guardian*. "The team is still there in SCE Japan Studio, [Fumito] Ueda-san is still there, but we are still waiting for the time to reintroduce it," Yoshida told us.

While Sony did its best to heighten the excitement for its new console with more details and hands-on demos of *Knack* (page 72), the free-to-play *Deep Down* (page 67), and a slew of indie titles, Microsoft banked on *Titanfall* and the *Evil Within* (named *Psycho Break* in Japan) to drum up Xbox One excitement. Microsoft's booth wasn't as hopping as Sony's, but the software lineup looked solid, giving showgoers looks at *Panzer Dragoon's* spiritual successor *Crimson Dragon* and *Deadly Premonition* creator Hidetaka "Swery 65" Suehiro's *D4*.

Getting new glimpses of these games was nice, but we were disappointed by the lack of new game announcements for Xbox One and PlayStation 4. On the heels of a new console generation, we expected at least a handful of new titles to pop up at the show from Japanese developers. Sony teased a Gravity Rush sequel, and Suda 51 announced the PS4 title Lily Bergamo a week prior to the conference, but that was it. Not even Square Enix, the titan of Japanese RPGs, revealed anything new for the upcoming generation. Instead it relied on Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII, Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn, Dragon Quest X, and Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call. The same went for Capcom,



Namco Bandai, Sega, and Tecmo Koei.

Konami was the only company to share new information on a big release, with Hideo Kojima out in full force promoting his upcoming Metal Gear Solid V projects. Kojima explored Ground Zeroes, a prequel project, letting the audience see 12 minutes of an extraction mission. The stealth gameplay invites nonlethal playthroughs, including stunning enemies with light. The bulk of Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

coverage highlighted how Kojima Productions is putting all the standby Metal Gear elements into a unique open world, but Kojima also discussed the differences from current-gen to next-gen versions. "For current gen, we are aiming for 30 frames-per-second, while with next gen we're aiming at 60 frames-per-second," Kojima said. "The next-generation textures, resolution, lighting, and shadows look much better, but gameplay-wise we are not making that many differences."

TGS didn't have much cooking for the next generation, but that hardly turned away gamers. The public days reached a record of more than 100,000 visitors each. Cosplayers took over the conference on the these days, and many gamers enjoyed the show's new areas focused on indie and cloud gaming, and romance simulation. Tokyo Game Show may not be the most news-focused conference, but the spirited gaming fans still bring an enthusiasm that gives it a unique pop. ❖



g.b.u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY



Quotable

“The PlayStation 4 game, which we’ll likely call Gran Turismo 7, will be done in about a year or two...”



— Gran Turismo series creator **Kazunori Yamauchi** (no relation to Hiroshi) promises big things in an article of Japanese magazine *Famitsu* as translated by *Polygon*.

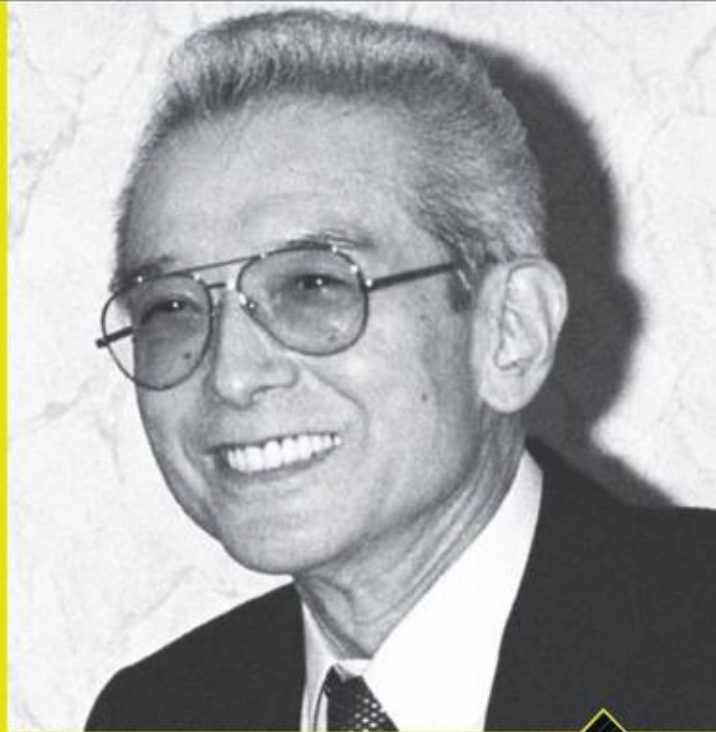
The Good

SEGA has taken over RPG publisher/developer Atlus via the acquisition of Atlus’ owners Index Corporation, which had filed for bankruptcy. Atlus is responsible for the Persona series — one of the properties that Sega says is the impetus behind the deal.

The Bad

HIROSHI YAMAUCHI,

former president of Nintendo, died at age 87. Yamauchi spearheaded Nintendo’s move into toys and then video games, and was also remarkable for his ability to hand pick which games Nintendo released. He created a structure at the company that allowed developers like Shigeru Miyamoto to showcase their talents. Our condolences go out to Yamauchi’s family and friends.



The Ugly



EA SPORTS has canceled college football for 2014 and the foreseeable future. The publisher/developer planned to put out a non-NCAA game after the association did not renew its licensing agreement with the video game company. EA Sports announced that it was going to use licenses from some schools, conferences, and bowl games through a different licensing agreement, but this would not have included the Big Ten, SEC, or Pac-12, among other entities. The NCAA is currently involved in a lawsuit from players who say their likenesses are being used in products like the NCAA Football video game series without compensation.



WORLD'S BEST

2013



After months of rumors, reveals, and reversals, the next generation of gaming is nearly here. While the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 feature many similarities, the differences that remain between the two consoles present gamers with a difficult purchasing decision. Determining which next-gen system is right for you largely comes down to personal preferences. If you still have doubts, or if you haven't been keeping up with the latest next-gen news, the following guide

provides all the facts you need to make an informed choice.

We start things off with a detailed breakdown of the similarities and differences between the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 across a variety of key categories, including price, exclusive games, and what peripherals are included in the box. After that, two Game Informer editors share their personal thoughts on each system, describing what convinced them to get in line for their day-one purchases. The rest is up to you. *by* **JEFF MARCHIAFAVA**

THE NEXT-GEN BRE

A lot of new details regarding Xbox One and PlayStation 4 have come to light over the past few months. While Microsoft has revised and reversed numerous aspects of the Xbox One to appease its consumer base, Sony has also provided a steady trickle of new information about the PS4's functionality.

PRICE

XBOX ONE: \$499

PLAYSTATION 4: \$399

RELEASE

XBOX ONE: Xbox One is set to debut in 13 countries on November 22, with more to be added in 2014.

PLAYSTATION 4: PlayStation 4 is set to debut in 32 countries, starting November 15 in the U.S. and Canada, followed by a November 29 launch in Europe, Latin America, and Australia. The system launches in Japan next year on February 22.

MEDIA SERVICES

XBOX ONE: One of the Xbox One's distinguishing features is an HDMI-in port, which allows users to plug in their cable box to navigate and watch television programs through their console. Streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu Plus are also available, but require an Xbox Live Gold subscription.

PLAYSTATION 4: Sony has confirmed that streaming apps such as Netflix and Hulu Plus won't require a PlayStation Plus subscription. At E3, the company announced that Sony Pictures is creating original programming for PlayStation 4 that's tailored to gamers, but has yet to expound on its plans.

PERIPHERALS

XBOX ONE: Although Microsoft has confirmed the Xbox One can function without Kinect 2.0 turned on, the motion camera is still being included with the console (resulting in the higher price tag). Despite its earlier assertion, Microsoft has also revealed that Xbox One is shipping with an included headset. Xbox 360 headsets are not natively compatible with the Xbox One, but Microsoft plans to release an adaptor.

PLAYSTATION 4: Sony's successor to the PlayStation Eye, now called the PlayStation Camera, is being sold separately from the console for \$59. Sony confirmed that PlayStation 4 comes bundled with a headset, and that select PlayStation 3 wireless headsets will be supported via a future PS4 system update.

EXCLUSIVES

XBOX ONE: Considered by many to be Xbox One's biggest advantage, Microsoft has landed some impressive triple-A third-party exclusives, including *Dead Rising 3* (a launch title) and *Titanfall* (to be released in 2014). These titles complement the company's first-party offerings, which include *Halo 5*, *Forza Motorsport 5*, and *Project Spark*. We suspect Microsoft will continue chasing down more third-party exclusives, though it may opt for less-expensive timed exclusivity agreements (which *Titanfall* may very well be).

PLAYSTATION 4: While Sony has lined up some triple-A third-party exclusives including *Deep Down* and *The Order: 1886* (read more about it on page 40), the company's main strength lies in its wealth of first-party talent. *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, *DriveClub*, and *Knack* will be available at launch, with *Infamous: Second Son* coming out in February. Naughty Dog and Media Molecule have yet to announce their next projects.

INDIE GAMES

XBOX ONE: Microsoft announced another applauded policy reversal at this year's Gamescom; the company has decided to allow independent developers to self-publish their games on Xbox One through a program called ID@Xbox. Reception to the program has been positive, but so far Microsoft hasn't announced many indie titles other than an Xbox One version of *Minecraft* and timed exclusivity for *Cyberpunk Games' Below*.

PLAYSTATION 4: Sony has been aggressively courting indie developers for the past few years, and shows no signs of slowing down. The company showed up at E3 with a total of 33 playable indie games for its systems, and announced over a dozen more titles coming to PS4 at Gamescom. While the race for being the go-to system for indie games is far from over, Sony has a major head start.

ONLINE SERVICE

XBOX ONE: Microsoft established itself the clear leader in online gaming this generation with Xbox Live. For Xbox One,



the company is revamping its matchmaking service to better track player behavior and is increasing the friend limit to 1,000. While initially announced as an online-only system, Xbox One can now be played offline. Microsoft has announced that the Xbox Live Gold Family Pack is being discontinued; instead, a single Xbox Live account grants online access to anyone on the system.

PLAYSTATION 4: Following Microsoft's lead, Sony has announced that playing PlayStation 4 games online requires a subscription to PlayStation Plus (only one account is required per system). Sony is also upgrading its online network to be more competitive with Xbox Live, offering cross-game chat, a 2,000 friend limit, and greater social integration. Sony has confirmed that free-to-play games won't require a PlayStation Plus membership.

POWER

XBOX ONE: While both systems feature similar processors and graphics chips, most analysts give a slight power advantage to PlayStation 4 (an assertion Microsoft disputes). One of the sticking points is Xbox One's 8GB of DDR3, 3GB of which is reserved by the OS to allow instant switching between games and apps. DDR3 RAM is also slower than GDDR5 RAM used by PlayStation 4, but Microsoft says it makes up for the difference with an additional 32MB of eSRAM. Xbox One ships with a 500GB hard drive.

PLAYSTATION 4: While the PlayStation 4's 8GB of GDDR5 RAM appears to give Sony's console an advantage, we still don't know how much memory is reserved for system functionality. A report by *Digital Foundry* in July contends that developers have access to 4.5GB of memory, plus another 1GB of flexible memory. Sony would not comment on the rumor, but clarified how the system's flexible memory works. Until we see some side-by-side comparisons, which system (if either) has the upper hand is unclear. PlayStation 4 also ships with a 500GB hard drive.

USED GAMES/SHARING

XBOX ONE: One of Microsoft's biggest reversals was its stance on used games and sharing. The company is no longer limiting the sale or playing of used games on Xbox One. As such, physical games must now be present in the disc drive in order to play them, and players can no longer share digital games with online friends. However, you can access your digital games remotely by signing into your Xbox Live account on other systems.

PLAYSTATION 4: As infamously demonstrated by Sony's Shuhei Yoshida and Adam Boyes in a video published on YouTube, sharing a PS4 game is as easy as passing the disc to a friend. PlayStation 4 users can also access their games remotely by logging into their PSN account from a friend's house.

AKDOWN



Project Spark

CONTROLLER

XBOX ONE: Microsoft is improving on the Xbox 360's beloved controller with a newly redesigned d-pad and more precise thumbsticks. The biggest difference, however, are the vibration motors that have been added to the controller's triggers, offering a new degree of haptic feedback. Like the Xbox 360 controller, the Xbox One controller uses AA batteries; a rechargeable battery kit is sold separately.

PLAYSTATION 4: The DualShock 4 sports some welcome improvements. The thumbsticks feature rubberized, concave tops, and the sticks have been tightened and placed farther apart for better comfort. The triggers are also now concave, functioning more like actual triggers. The DualShock 4 also features a touchpad in the center of the controller, and a light on the base that can be recognized by the PlayStation Camera, despite the peripheral being sold separately.



Infamous: Second Son



Halo



Dead Rising 3



Knack

CLOUD COMPUTING

XBOX ONE: Microsoft is a major advocate for cloud computing, investing \$700 million in a server farm it calls Azure. Developers can use Azure to offload additional computing processes, and Respawn has stated the service will allow Titanfall to feature better physics, enemy AI, and dedicated servers.

PLAYSTATION 4: Sony has also invested heavily in cloud computing, but to a different end. In 2012, the company purchased the cloud-based gaming service Gaikai for \$380 million. Sony says it plans to use Gaikai to allow PS4 owners to instantly try games on the PlayStation Store, and to play games from previous PlayStation generations, providing a form of backwards compatibility. Gaikai also fuels the system's Remote Play capabilities, allowing you to stream a PlayStation 4 game to your Vita, or allow a friend to take control of your game over the Internet.

GAME STREAMING

XBOX ONE: Microsoft has announced that Xbox One allows players to broadcast their games or watch other broadcasters through the popular video-streaming service, Twitch. Additionally, Xbox One automatically records the last five minutes of gameplay as the user plays, which can then be edited and uploaded for other Xbox One users to view. Both

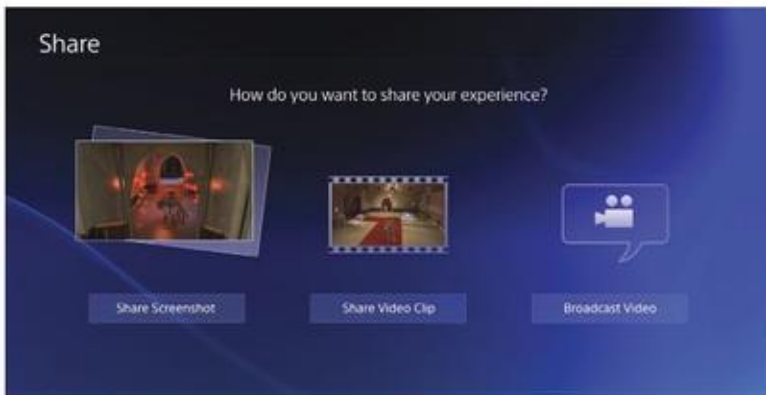
functionalities require an Xbox Live Gold account.

PLAYSTATION 4: During Gamescom, Sony also announced Twitch integration for PlayStation 4, accessible through the DualShock 4's share button along with Ustream. A separate Twitch app is available for watching Twitch streams. Sony also confirmed that PlayStation 4 records the last 15 minutes of gameplay, and that neither game recording nor streaming requires a PlayStation Plus account.

TRANSFERRING

XBOX ONE: Microsoft has confirmed that players' Gamertags and Achievement scores can transfer from Xbox 360 to Xbox One. While downloadable and retail Xbox 360 games are not compatible with Xbox One, other media purchases such as movies, television shows, and music can be transferred to the new system.

PLAYSTATION 4: Sony has also confirmed that PlayStation Plus accounts and non-gaming media can be transferred from PlayStation 3 to PlayStation 4. Digital game purchases, on the other hand, won't be transferred. Like broader backwards compatibility, Sony says it has the capability to support previous downloadable games via its game-streaming service, but hasn't stated whether it plans to honor previous purchases. Sony has not yet confirmed the transferring of trophies.



A MATTER OF OPINION

After months of deliberation, many of the editors at Game Informer have made their next-gen decisions. Here, senior editor Jeff Cork and senior associate editor Jeff Marchiafava explain the reasons they'll be adding the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 to their collections of home consoles.

This is the closest hardware race I've seen, with neither the PS4 nor the Xbox One poised to take an easy victory. Thankfully, for me it's not an either/or proposition – my decision to get a PlayStation 4 in no way diminishes my excitement to also purchase an Xbox One.

When you look at the hardware specs, its easy to notice is how similar the two systems ultimately are. Third-party developers have an abundance of power to play with thanks to the new hardware, and the Xbox One and PS4 versions of multiplatform games will probably be indistinguishable for a while. That's why I'm more interested in games and services than hardware specs, and Microsoft has a lot to offer.

Both Sony and Microsoft have their share of exclusives, but from what I've seen so far, I'm more interested in Microsoft's offerings. As an unabashed fan of the series, Microsoft's exclusivity for *Dead Rising 3* could be a system seller. I'm also looking forward to *Forza 5*, but the exclusive biggie is clearly Respawn's *Titanfall*. The shooter features on-foot and mechanized warfare in a grounded sci-fi setting. *Titanfall* looks rejuvenating, and when it launches in 2014, the only certain way to play it is on a Microsoft platform.

I'm also looking forward to how Microsoft is using its extensive history with Xbox Live to improve online experiences. Matchmaking is something I have a love/hate relationship with, and from everything I've seen, the next generation will fix some of my biggest complaints. Microsoft says it's working to ensure that player feedback really amounts to something, meaning that jerks will be pushed away from the rest of us. I'm particularly excited that matchmaking can happen in the background, so you don't have to sit idle at a screen as you wait. Instead, you can let the system know you want to play game X, move on to something else, and get an alert when the game is ready. This is going to be huge for fans of games that don't have the same reliably large fan base as a *Halo* or *Battlefield*, but who still want to play with other people. For all of Sony's prerelease bluster, I haven't heard it boast about anything comparable to this feature.

Microsoft had it right when they said we're a generation of multi-taskers. I rarely play games without a tablet or mobile device within reach. My wife and I also watch a lot of TV, either live or via the various apps on my 360. I'm looking forward to walking in front of my TV, having Kinect recognize me, and then pull up my profile – all automatically, without having to waste time messing around with a bunch of logon menus. Kinect voice commands on Netflix and other apps are great, and I'm looking forward to seeing how they're further implemented as time goes on.

The Xbox 360 has been dabbling with the cloud in the most superficial way possible, via remotely stored saves. With the Xbox One, Microsoft says true cloud computing will be available to developers, allowing them to remotely offload tasks such as AI, while everything else is handled locally. This has been controversial, and for good reason – the kind of reliable, high-speed connection that would be required isn't yet available to everyone. I do think it's a significant step toward future-proofing the console, at a point where broadband access would be even more commonplace.

Frankly, I don't envy anyone who has to pick between the two consoles, because it's not an easy decision. Looking at its mix of software, hardware, and services, though, I'm more than confident to be picking up an Xbox One on launch day. » Jeff Cork



Like many gamers, I've been watching Microsoft's evolving game plan for Xbox One with a keen eye.

Every new announcement and policy reversal has given its next-gen system greater parity with the PlayStation 4, and while I appreciate the arguments against hardware homogeneity, most of the changes have admittedly appealed to me. Microsoft has made up a lot of ground in my mind over the past few months, but come November I still plan on going with the company that got things right in the first place.

Perhaps I'm just a sucker for a good sales pitch, but Sony's declaration that the PlayStation 4 is a gaming console first and foremost has great appeal to me. I understand why Microsoft is courting a larger demographic with its all-in-one-entertainment-box approach – it's a great business strategy – but I'm buying a next-gen gaming console for one reason: gaming. As long as my new system can play Netflix (as pretty much anything with a microchip can at this point) and Blu-ray discs, my non-gaming entertainment needs are set. I'm not a cable subscriber and I have no interest in watching television on my console. I also still consider motion gaming an annoying (albeit persistent) fad, and Microsoft has yet to convince me otherwise. At least Sony's middling attempts with the format are being presented as an optional purchase.

As someone who's primarily interested in gaming, Microsoft's big exclusives like *Titanfall* and *Dead Rising 3* have certainly caused me to second-guess my decision. However, I have greater confidence in Sony's deep roster of first-party talent. Some of my favorite gaming experiences this generation have been Sony exclusives, running the gamut from highly polished triple-A blockbusters like *Infamous* and

The Last of Us, to creative ventures that focus on user-created content, like *LittleBigPlanet* and *ModNation Racers*. I'm also a big indie game fan, and the company's support of indie developers has been remarkable. Many of the ambitious indie projects I've been following and covering over the past six months have been signed to a Sony platform at this point, and the indie developers I've talked to have all been happy with their experience – another reassuring sign that Sony understands what gamers want.

A lot has been made about Sony's decision to charge money for online multiplayer on PS4, and while I felt it was inevitable, it's still a little disappointing. However, I'm already impressed with the value offered by PlayStation Plus. Between the free games and discounts, my annual subscription has already paid for itself, and provided a big enough incentive to sign up before the new console has even come out. I'm also not constantly being bombarded with annoying ads, which makes

PlayStation Plus feel more like a service that I don't mind paying for. PlayStation 4's new "share" functionality for recording and streaming games is also an intriguing feature, and hopefully another sign that Sony has prepared a better online experience for its next-generation system; at the very least, the first UI demonstrations have been promising.

There are a lot more factors that have weighed into my decision to buy a PlayStation 4 – the smart controller redesign and \$100 price difference are chief among them – but Sony's shrewd decision making has ultimately been the deal-maker. Consumer confidence is a powerful force. If I'm going to invest a considerable amount of money into a system, I want to feel like the company behind it understands what I want out of it, and has a plan to deliver that experience. For me, that's Sony.

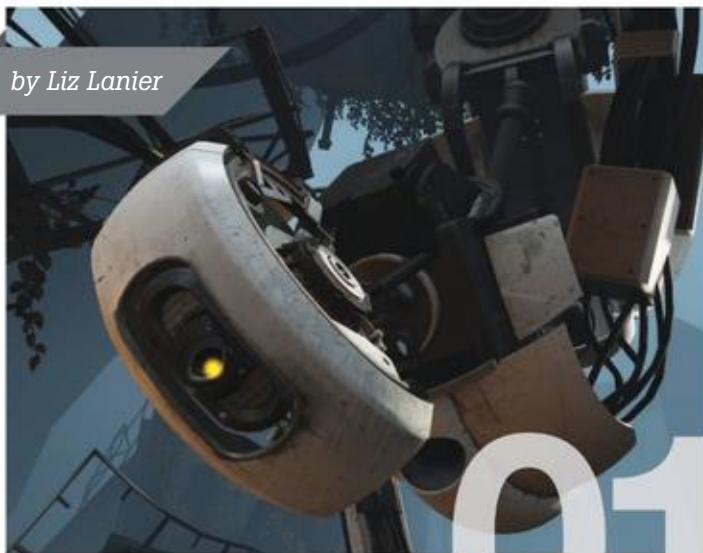
I'll continue watching Microsoft's experiments with cloud computing and online services with great interest, and look forward to seeing what other third-party exclusives the company manages to wrangle. When the Xbox One reaches a tipping point of great experiences I can't get anywhere else, I won't hesitate to buy one, however, I'll be starting the next generation with Sony. » Jeff Marchiafava



CONSUMER CONFIDENCE IS A POWERFUL FORCE. IF I'M GOING TO INVEST A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF MONEY INTO A SYSTEM, I WANT TO FEEL LIKE THE COMPANY BEHIND IT UNDERSTANDS WHAT I WANT OUT OF IT, AND HAS A PLAN TO DELIVER THAT EXPERIENCE.

Female Villains

by Liz Lanier



GLaDOS - Portal

No villain, male or female, has the charm of GLaDOS. If she's not trying to kill Chell, she's likely belittling her with passive-aggressive comments that would make a sorority girl proud. Even with her robotic voice, it's clear that "You look great by the way, very healthy" is no compliment.



Alma - F.E.A.R.

Each one of Alma's three forms has more disturbing implications than the last. Whether she looks like Sadako as a child or appears in her emaciated state as a woman, it doesn't bode well for the player. Even her more attractive form is terrifying considering she only uses it as a lure.



SHODAN - System Shock

SHODAN may not be a woman in the traditional sense considering she's an AI, but what she lacks in femininity and humanity she makes up for in creepiness. Her distorted voice is enough to send shivers up even the most seasoned gamer's spine.



Kerrigan - Starcraft

Kerrigan is as brutal as she is misunderstood. While she was once a skilled psychic terran, her capture by the zerg leads to her transformation into the Queen of Blades. With the rare ability to be both merciless and sympathetic, the leader of the swarm is an unforgettable villain.



Katherine Marlowe - Uncharted 3

Marlowe is the definition of a power lady. She runs the Hermetic Order, a secret organization that will do anything to find the Atlantis of the Sands. Marlowe will still take any opportunity to belittle Drake and others that get in her way on a personal level on top of taking violent action.



The Boss - Metal Gear Solid 3

The Boss is regarded as one of the greatest female video game characters of all time, in addition to being one of the most menacing enemies. The Boss doesn't have to resort to cheap tricks or feminine wiles to get her way or gain respect. That's why she's "The Boss."



Darth Traya - KOTOR II

Kreia is one of the few female Sith lords of the Star Wars universe, but she represents women of the dark side relatively ruthlessly. She's also one of the few villains who still wants to kill the player's character even after an olive branch is extended — though she admits, she appreciates the offer.



Sofia Lamb - BioShock 2

An extremist obsessed with the "greater good," Lamb will sacrifice anything and anyone for her own agenda. Whether that means brainwashing or murdering to create her utopia, she's down.



Catherine/Katherine - Catherine

Vincent can't catch a break between Catherine seducing him one minute and manipulating him the next. Catherine isn't much better with her passive-aggressive push toward marriage. Considering both appear as horrifying boss battles, they can easily be any man's worst nightmare.



Ada Wong - Resident Evil

As one of the most well-known femme fatales, Ada's loyalty can be hard to determine throughout her various appearances in the Resident Evil series. Whether you want to call her a bad guy or just an anti-hero, it's clear that her enemy is whoever gets in her way. If that happens to be a former ally, so be it.



A Street Fighter Gets An Inside Job

Peter “Combofiend” Rosas started playing Street Fighter after he first laid eyes on the game in 1992. Unlike a lot of people caught up in the fighting-game frenzy, he never stopped playing. Rosas entered a Street Fighter III 3rd Strike tournament in 1999 and continued competitive play until he was hired at Capcom as a senior community specialist in January. We spoke to Rosas about his past, his job, and more.



**Peter
“Combofiend”
Rosas**

Age
29

Location
San Mateo, Calif.

Background
Pro fighting-game player
now working at Capcom

interview by Jeff Cork

What’s a typical workday like for you?

As this question comes up quite frequently from my friends in the fighting game community, I’ve made a video detailing my day to day, that you can see here: <http://youtu.be/QkfefxPKNOM>. But in all seriousness, the only two things that are typical on a workday are emails and meetings; outside of that, my day to day can vary greatly. On Wednesdays and Fridays I stream Capcom fighting games and interact with the community directly with Neidel “Haunts” Crisan on Challenge Capcom. On other days, I might be out of the office, travelling to various events such as Evolution (the largest open-entry fighting game tournament in the world normally held in July) or to shows such as San Diego Comic-Con to inform Street Fighter fans directly about what new goodies (i.e. Ultra Street Fighter IV, Street Fighter Assassin’s Fist, new merchandise, etc.) we have in store for them. Other

days, I’m figuring out how to properly balance the characters in the upcoming Ultra Street Fighter IV, while ensuring the community is heard. All in all, never a dull moment.

Going way back, what was your introduction to fighting games?

It was Street Fighter II. I played it when I was about seven. I happened to be walking by a bowling alley on the way home from school, and I saw a big crowd playing. I thought, “Man, what’s going on there?” I saw the game that they were playing, and I saw Chun-Li grabbing Ryu. The graphics back then were mind-blowing, and I thought, “Oh my God, what’s going on here?” Everybody in there was cheering. It might as well have been a mini EVO or something, just seeing a bunch of people crowded around a machine. I didn’t know what it was, because I didn’t see the name, but I thought, “I have to play this game.” And then I found it a few days later at my local

donut shop, and that’s when the addiction began.

When you pick a character you want to learn, is it a cosmetic thing? Is it like, “That guy looks cool?”

Purely.

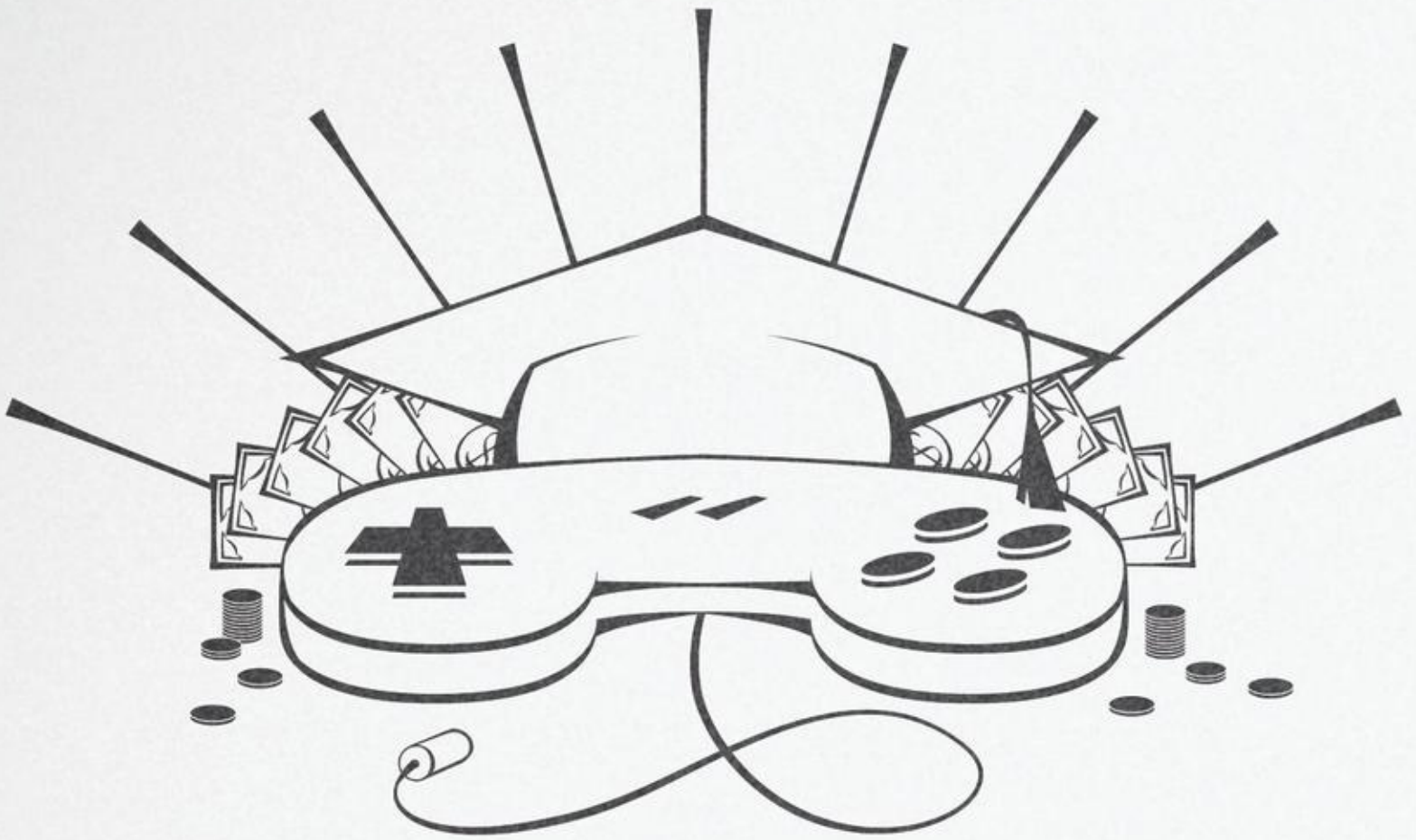
Really?

Yeah. In the first Marvel that came out – in Marvel vs. Capcom 3 – I wanted to play She-Hulk just because she was cool. The character turned out to be pretty good later on. It was just something I saw in the character that made me want to play the character. Same thing in Street Fighter IV – I saw Oni and I thought, “Man, this character is so obnoxious. I’m just going to play it. Win, lose, or draw, I’m just going to play this character.” And I feel like that is what a lot of players go through, actually. They see a character they relate to and they pick that up.

Do you have any advice for gamers looking to break into the industry?

First and foremost, I’d advise gamers that playing games is different from making games. It’s definitely fun, but definitely hard work as well. I would advise them that their best bet for breaking into the industry would be to get a job as a game tester. Ideally, this would be a springboard for getting into the department (marketing, production, licensing, community, etc.) that one would have the most interest in. For those who are still unsure, just getting into the company allows a chance to look around to see which department would be a best fit. Once that’s established, acquiring the skills necessary (if you don’t have them already) for that position is essential. Lastly, I’d advise those job seekers to be patient and not squander any opportunity presented. There are a lot of people who also have similar aspirations, so it may take a while to get hired. If you do get in, make sure you hit the ground running and take it very seriously if you want to make video games your career. ♦





How **Not** To Become A Game Developer

Advice and a cautionary tale for those looking to break into the game industry

In 2008, after a semester of engineering studies at the University of Iowa, I was uninterested in my program and searching for a change. I'd always loved video games and writing, and had long held the pipe dream of becoming a paid creative writer, particularly for video games. A good friend from high school had just moved out of state a few months before to attend Westwood College, a for-profit school with a campus in Illinois that offered a bachelor's degree in game art and design. Over winter break, I called the school and spoke with a recruiter. He was prompt, kind, and reassuring – always quick to address my concerns.

When I spoke with my parents about switching schools, they thought it was a bad idea. "Is it a real school?" they asked. "Is it accredited? How likely is it you'll actually get a job in that field?" I told them I'd learn industry-standard software, and in three years be proficient enough with it to land an entry-level game artist job. No problem. I told them the school was accredited. I parroted some of the recruiter's lines until they reluctantly agreed to co-sign my private student loans and send me on my way. I felt so triumphant. Now all I can think of is that awful Westwood commercial...*And my mom said I would never get anywhere with these games!*

by Brian Albert



A Rude Awakening

My program of choice, game art and design, doesn't actually exist in the same form anymore. Westwood's game-art program is now considered a subset of graphic design. When I was enrolled, students studied drawing, color theory, creative writing, mathematics, texturing, 3D modeling, unwrapping, art history, game history, and more. More specifically, I was supposed to learn industry-standard software, including programs from Autodesk, Adobe, and Pixologic. It's one thing for the school to lay out this smorgasbord of tantalizing classes before eager students. As I'd soon learn, teaching them is an entirely different game.

Over the next year, the picture of my future I had in my mind eroded under a constant flow of bad experiences. In the final weeks of a drawing class, I opted to draw a picture of Master Chief standing beneath a massive Covenant warship. When those of us who'd chosen more ambitious projects started to fall behind, the instructor cut back on help and often made comments like, "You bit off more than you could chew." I tried to, but never did, finish that drawing. I threw it in the dumpster outside of my apartment building. Another instructor repeatedly accepted papers that were plagiarized directly from Wikipedia, though during the first week of class he warned us not to do that. It's tough to see another student earn the same "A" you did after doing literally two minutes of work.

In classes where the point was to learn a program, some of my teachers taught using free online tutorials. My tuition was roughly \$25,000 per year. Some of the teachers walked around and answered questions; others sat at their desks playing Flash games. As time ticked by, students would routinely lose interest and click over to Newgrounds for some game time. Nobody cared. In any given class, it wasn't uncommon to see about one-fourth of the students playing Pandemic or trying out the new flavor of the week.

The Escape Plan

Somewhere around this time, I looked into transferring back to the University of Iowa. My parents, obviously pleased, said I should transfer the credits I'd earned at Westwood. When I tried, an Iowa admissions representative told me the school couldn't accept the credits – understandable for the game-specific classes, but not so much for general courses in math, writing, and art history. As it turns out, Westwood College, like many technical or "career-focused" colleges, is nationally instead of regionally accredited. If you look at Westwood's website, the list of schools your credits are guaranteed to transfer to features fewer than 20 names. Some are community colleges. Some are high schools. I'd be surprised if more than one or two of them are familiar to you. I made the mistake of not realizing this before it was too late.

After I learned my credits couldn't transfer, I tried to attend Westwood College Online and the University of Iowa simultaneously. I'd already spent around \$40,000 on my education, so I figured it would be best to just finish and move on. Westwood's online offerings, as I soon discovered, were equally inept. Technology issues were rampant. One instructor's requests for help went unanswered by the school's tech support, so she asked us students to send messages to the dean. I cut my very substantial losses and ran far, far away.

It's easy to write this experience off as something that happened long ago. But wherever I go in life, I'll have to consider the dead weight of debt I've accumulated. It affects what kind of payments I can make on a home or vehicle and serves as a constant source of stress for the foreseeable future. It can happen to you, too, if you're not careful.

The DIY Degree

Everyone I spoke to about breaking into the industry gave one universal bit of advice: Make things right now. If you have a few years left until you need to think about college, or if you don't have the option of seeking higher education, there's plenty you can do immediately to get started. Tutorials are readily available online that teach programming languages and industry-standard software. Though this approach may sound cheap or less prestigious, one game artist at a triple-A game studio who wished to remain anonymous says it can sometimes be more valuable than a degree.

"A lot of artists are self-taught these days," he says. "There are all kinds of resources online. There are 13-year-old kids who go online who just learn stuff and do work that's better than what I can do sometimes. I also have friends who've even gone to a community college, which costs significantly less [than my Westwood education], and they're also working in the industry."

Compared to the expense of a college education, the \$1,500 Unity Pro engine is a bargain. The engine has been used in a huge variety of game genres across different platforms, from *Deus Ex: The Fall* to *Kentucky Route Zero*. You could also download a free version of the Unreal Engine and start tinkering with Kismet, its visual scripting system. RPG Maker is inexpensive and was used to make the 2011 indie hit *To the Moon*.

A thriving mod scene has existed since video games' earliest days, and it's still around for you to dive into. *Defense of the Ancients*, *Counter-Strike*, and *DayZ* are mods of *Warcraft III*, *Half-Life*, and *Arma II*, respectively. But you don't need to invent a new genre or tackle an ambitious total conversion on your first project; it's good to just start and finish something.



What To Do Before You Apply

If you decide to move forward with a game-specific education, there are a number of things to research before you commit. But first, you need to understand that making games isn't as simple as playing games.

In a 2010 interview with *Game Informer*, Raymond Yan, the COO of DigiPen Institute of Technology, said educating students about the harsh realities of game design is an important task.

"What I don't like about some of these ads is that it makes it sound like [game design] is easy," Yan said. "'You're a good game player; therefore you are a good game maker.' That's not the case. We really try to share that with the students so they get that this is a business. You may think that playing games is fun, but when you sit and make that game and work on it for three years, it's not fun anymore. It's just work."

Once you're sure this is the career you want to pursue, you need to start the information-gathering process. Reputable resources like the Princeton Review rank game-design schools by curriculum quality, faculty quality, career opportunities, and other factors. In addition, I recommend doing some of your own legwork as you narrow down program options.

Double-Check Accreditation

Most traditional, four-year colleges and universities are regionally accredited. As I found out, career and focused technology schools tend to be nationally accredited. This can lead to difficulties when transferring credits. For example, Full Sail's website states that "Credits may transfer, but it is at the discretion of the receiving school which credits they choose to accept." Westwood's site is clearer about the issue: "Students need to understand that, except in limited circumstances, your Westwood credits will not be transferable to other schools."

Westwood College was a candidate for regional accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission in 2007, but after failing to meet the criteria in May 2009, the school voluntarily withdrew its candidacy. A Westwood representative says the school withdrew "to focus solely on national accreditation, which aligns more directly with Westwood's mission to provide career-focused education." When a school claims it's accredited, look up the accrediting body and find out what exactly that means. If you don't, you could find yourself with a pile of nearly worthless credits should you be looking to transfer.

Discuss Job Placement

When you're potentially spending thousands of dollars on an education, you hold the power. Ask all the questions you want to ask. If an admissions representative dodges the question or refuses to give you a definitive answer, take that as a red flag. Specifically, it's best to ask about job prospects for graduates; good schools are able to demonstrate strong placement in major development companies.

A helpful recruiter should have current placement statistics on hand, and preferably can cite specific, recent examples of students successfully moving into game-related careers. Many schools, like Full Sail, for example, dedicate a webpage to successful graduates' stories, but it's important to note that this featured top talent isn't necessarily indicative of what the average student is accomplishing.

If you're looking for the real nitty-gritty, you can locate highly detailed placement data on a school's website. The thing is, sometimes this information can be difficult to find unless you know exactly what you're searching for. Westwood, for example, tucks this information in its disclosures section, where it offers placement information with specific data on degrees, different campuses, average graduate salaries, degree-program retention, and more.

Research The Instructors

When comparing schools, be sure to check the qualifications one has to meet to teach at the school. After all, the instructors are the people you interact with most. Many schools prefer to have full-time instructors, while others opt for adjuncts.

Some programs, like the SMU Guildhall, boast notable professors who have worked directly in the industry in prominent positions. For instance, Guildhall director Gary Brubaker worked at LucasArts during the glory days on such projects as *Rebel Assault* and *The Curse of Monkey Island*. He later worked on the *Lord of the Rings: Two Towers* with Stormfront Studios. Other faculty members held senior positions while creating notable games like *Ultima Online*, *Brothers In Arms: Road to Hill 30*, and *Rainbow Six 3*.

Some for-profit schools also try to take this approach. Rob Catto, the program director of game studies at Full Sail, says the school does not hire any part-time or adjunct instructors in its game programs. Instructors at Full Sail "are required to have an educational background and several years of relevant work experience related to the courses they teach," Catto says.

When considering for-profit schools, I encourage you to research beyond the teaching parameters listed on the website. Westwood is very transparent, saying faculty must have at least a related bachelor's degree, or "a bachelor's degree not in the discipline and a minimum of 18 semester credits in the discipline to be taught."

Those aren't very high standards given the amount of money students are spending. "Many [professors] didn't seem very qualified, although they may have had master's degrees," says Tim Wiese, a Westwood graduate who now works as a technical artist at Music Mastermind. "One instructor I had for a 3DS Max class didn't teach us a thing. He would find tutorials online and print them out and have us follow them ourselves, while he sat at his desk and either played *Counter-Strike* or watched *Doctor Who*."

One ex-Westwood instructor, who wished to

remain anonymous, said it's not uncommon for Westwood to hire adjunct, part-time instructors for very low compensation – he himself earned around \$600 every two weeks. Westwood says 85 percent of its instructors across all programs are adjunct, and that compensation for the positions is "comparable to other schools offering similar programs."

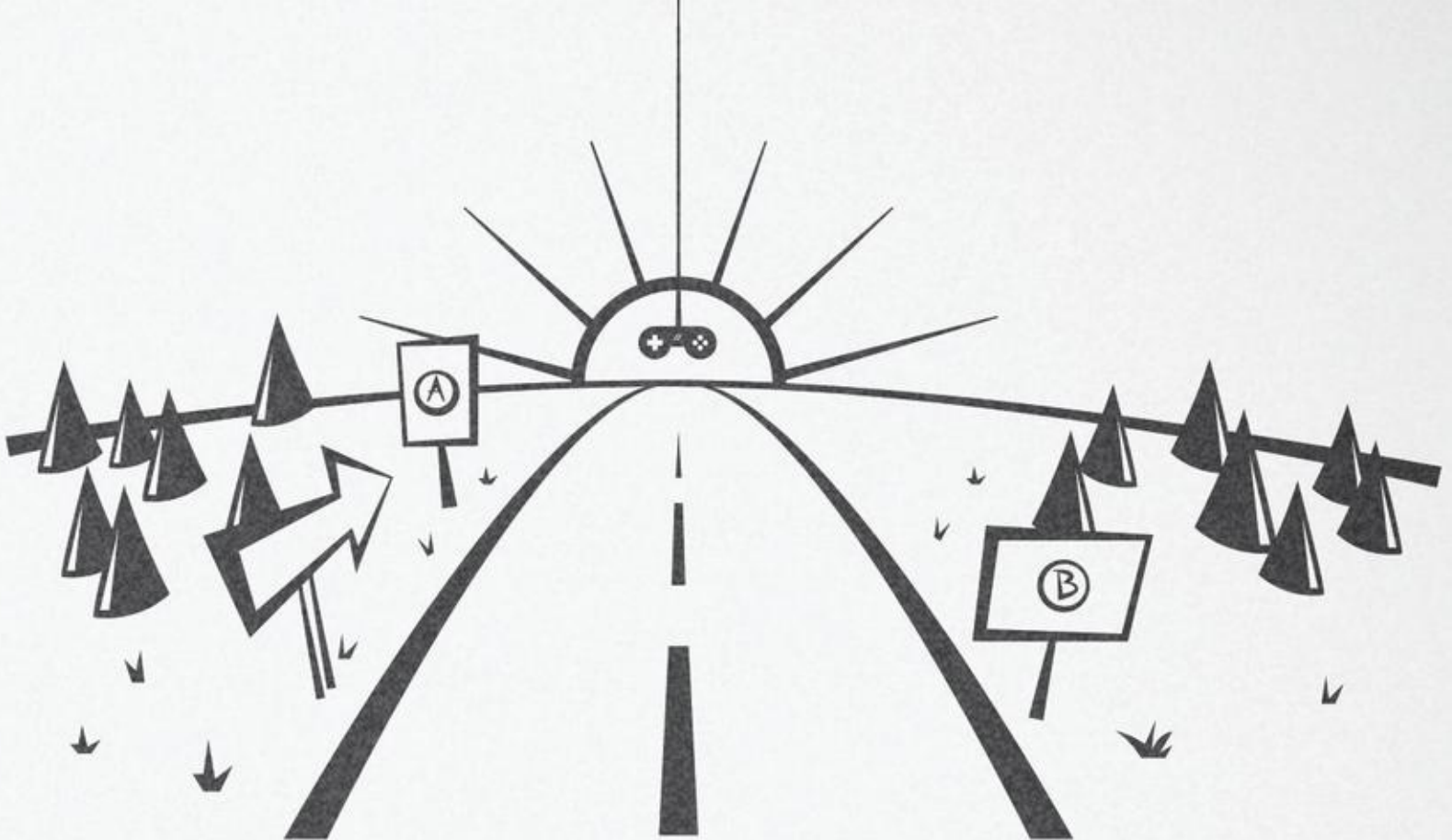
To learn more about a school's faculty, go directly to current students and ask them about their experiences with instructors. It's not uncommon for recruiters to suggest this anyway, but if you're inclined to do things your own way, it's easy to (respectfully) reach out to current students with online portfolios and public contact information. Official school Facebook pages are loaded with comments from students, so a quick initiation with social media isn't difficult either.

Choose The Right Program Length For You

Given the varying lengths of degrees available to potential game designers, you need to make sure the course is the right fit for your pocketbook and potential employment. For many students who don't want to spend four years in a regular school, accelerated programs can be an attractive alternative. Grant Shonkwiler, who graduated with a bachelor of science in game design and development from Full Sail University, was one of them.

"The [Full Sail] program was only 21 months long, which gave me the ability to get in and learn the skills I needed and exit quickly," says Shonkwiler, who is now a technical producer at id Software, the studio responsible for mega franchises like *Doom* and *Quake*. "Being ready to work within a short time frame was huge. I didn't want to spend my time with a normal university. I just wanted to make games."

He didn't just rely on his schooling, however. "The school encourages you to work on projects outside of school, which we all did to expand our knowledge even more," Shonkwiler says. "I worked on basic coding problems to creating mods to working on small games in my free time to expand my skills."



Finding The Right Program

Poorly ran for-profit schools can delay or destroy the dreams of young, impressionable people. The good news is that, with proper planning, landing a game development job isn't as unlikely as it often seems. If you dream of a career in games and plan to sharpen your skills with higher education, you owe it to yourself to do the research first.

If you want to make games, you need to develop the right skills that will make you an attractive candidate for a developer or publisher. Today, more valid options exist for acquiring those skills than ever before. Traditional universities often have art, programming, and business tracks, depending on what role you want to fill at a game company. Schools like the University of Southern California or Southern Methodist University have prestigious interactive media programs with courses taught by professors with years of development experience. People have also broken into the industry with degrees from community colleges or with self-taught skills learned from online tutorials and forum communities.

Marc Mencher, the CEO of Game Recruiter, is a 27-year veteran of the video game industry, 20 of which were spent in recruiting. He's found thousands of people positions with the smallest start-ups all the way up to industry giants like EA, Ubisoft, and Epic Games. According to Mencher, the best thing for high-school students to do when looking at colleges is to first gain an understanding of what skills are currently in demand with a variety of employers.

"Get onto Gamasutra or Monster," Mencher says. "Pull down five or twenty programmer job ads [for example] that hold your interest. You look at those jobs and the requirements of those ads, and it's pretty clear – alright, ninety percent of the ads say that I need to know Unity and Unreal, so it's pretty clear when I'm

picking a college, I better find a college that's teaching me Unreal and Unity."

In many cases, Mencher says experience and finished projects trump a degree. However, because some schools have a reputation within the industry for turning out talented, passionate graduates, the name attached to your degree can still be important – especially before accumulating relevant experience. For example, Mencher says students who study game programming at Full Sail leave the school with 900 hours of hands-on programming experience, which is around double the number of hours required by most other colleges. This known standard, he says, makes the degree more valuable.

For some companies, the portfolio may trump the degree. "The degree itself, for us, is not necessarily beneficial," says Epic Games' director of talent acquisition, Tim Johnson. "What we tend to look at more is the work product... We would much rather see somebody with an awesome portfolio than we would any degree at all." Johnson also says Epic has seen a lower success rate from people with a degree from for-profit schools as opposed to a traditional, four-year university.

Programmers at Epic Games work on the Unreal Engine, one of the most popular and powerful video game engines available for licensing. Because Epic isn't just making games, but also the technology others use to make games, the type of hire they look for sometimes requires a more theoretical knowledge base.

"I think that somebody coming from a four-year university with a computer-science

degree really understands the fundamentals of computer science, and they've got a little bit broader and deeper knowledge base of programming," Johnson says. "So for us, building cutting-edge technology, we're really looking for people who have that deeper level of knowledge."

Both Johnson and Mencher often give advice to prospective employees. Some publishers, including EA, have student-specific sections on their job sites, often with internship or scholarship information. When doing your due diligence, you can look up a school's price and program curriculum and speak with an admissions representative to see whether the program aligns with your goals.

The Winding Road To Employment

If you want to break into the industry by teaching yourself, there's certainly a precedent for that. If a traditional university seems more your style, that's great too. You can get what you're looking for from a for-profit education, but only if you know exactly what the program offers and you're okay with the generally high cost of tuition – about \$80,000 at both Westwood College and Full Sail University, for example, with many other options at similar prices. Don't be intimidated by high-pressure admissions workers who bombard you with nebulous placement rates and unending statistics. Ask clear, focused questions and only be satisfied with clear, focused answers.

I was lucky enough to have a strong support network to help me get back on track with a traditional school; some people won't be so fortunate. ♦

The Opening Salvo Of PlayStation 4 Indies

by Matt Miller

I recently visited Sony's Santa Monica Studio to tackle the upcoming slate of indie games for PS4. A host of awesome titles are on the way, but instead of trying to squeeze in every cool-looking project, here are five titles we haven't talked about very much.



Helldivers

Developer: Arrowhead

The new cooperative game from the creators of *Magicka* doesn't hide its inspirations. *Starship Troopers* offers the template, but Arrowhead has found a way to nail the gameplay concept. One to four players hurtle down onto an alien planet to complete a short series of objectives in this top-down shooter. And then you start dying. Everything kills you in *Helldivers*. Those monstrous bug aliens? Eviscerated. The turret you built and then stood in front of? Perforated. Standing where the orbital supply drop has been called in? Obliterated.

Helldivers is a smorgasbord of constant danger, but the easy revives from teammates, quick missions, and skill-based shooting keep frustration at bay. Teamwork is key to survival, as you load each other's missile launchers, or hold off a swarm of aliens as your buddy arms the bomb. My playtime reminded me more than once of the screaming panic (and fun) that comes out of a good game of *Left 4 Dead*.

Drop-in and out co-op is in place, as are cross-play options on PS4, PS3, and Vita. More interesting is the unfolding galactic war; the entire community of players affects the course of the campaign against the aliens on hundreds of worlds, and the full war concludes after many weeks of missions. If we win, the next campaign will be even harder. Lose, and the reboot war might go a little easier on the community, like adaptive difficulty on a massive scale.

Looking for more downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates. For more in this issue, check out our preview of *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* (p. 66), and our reviews of *Rain* (p. 89) and *Card Hunter* (p. 92).

Rime

Developer: Tequila Works

Rime captured a lot of attention at Gamescom. The surreal landscapes, quiet setting, and natural colors call to mind games like *Flower* and *Ico*. That's something of a surprise, since Tequila Works' last project was the zombie-themed *Deadlight*. I put some questions to the Spain-based developer about what we can expect from the mysterious project.

The developer acknowledges and embraces the comparisons, but tells me that Rime's gameplay is quite different from those well-known projects. As a boy stranded on an island, you explore the odd relationship he develops with the island itself, as if it were a character in its own right. Gameplay focuses on free exploration, open-world traversal, and some as-yet-undisclosed gameplay built around light and sound.

The developer isn't ready to talk release dates, and the tenuous details on gameplay seem to imply that there's a long road ahead before final release. Nonetheless, Rime is intriguing, and I'll be following its development closely.



Resogun

Developer: Housemarque

The team that brought us *Outland*, *Super Stardust HD*, and *Dead Nation* is bringing its expertise to the classic space shoot 'em up. Players control a ship as it moves back and forth through the circular arena of a city under assault by aliens. The last surviving humans are down on the surface, and you need to hold off the increasingly devastating waves of enemy ships until you can pick them up and evacuate them.

The world and ships of *Resogun* are formed completely of tiny voxels, the three-dimensional pixels seen in games like *Minecraft* or *3D Dot Game Heroes*. In *Resogun*, seemingly millions of these voxels are present at any one time; ships explode in showers of color, and at the end of the level the entire city shatters into innumerable tiny cubes as you warp away to the next city.

With its discrete levels, twitch shooting, and mesmerizing visuals, *Resogun* should hit a sweet spot for gamers who enjoyed titles like *Geometry Wars*. Look for this PS4 release before the end of this year.



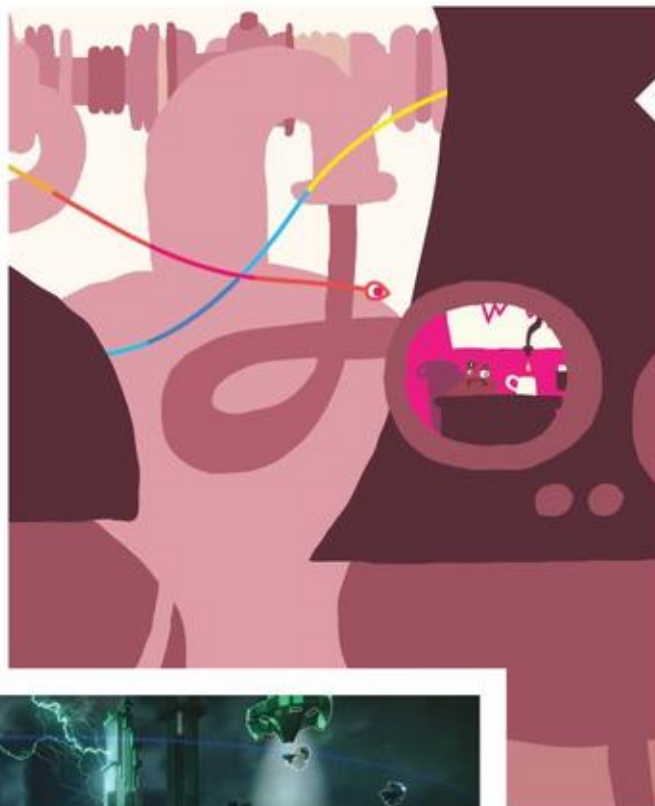
Hohokum

Developer: Honeyslug

Hohokum's unusual charm comes across immediately, but describing its appeal is a whole other matter. Players control the "long mover," a strange flying creature that moves through one environment after the next, trailing its long snake-like tail, which changes color depending on which direction you're facing. Every level is a process of discovery, uncovering the actions, secrets, and Easter eggs that progress events in the vicinity.

Each of these worlds has its own characters, style, and mellow electronic score. One level has the long mover making individuals emerge out of trees and homes so that it can carry them to the top of a level, where they begin to fly kites. Another stage, called the guano factory, is all about manipulating machinery and traveling through pipes to slowly fill up a vat with a suspicious brown substance.

In some ways, Hohokum plays more like a toy than a game, and the challenge of progression is more about observation and time investment than true puzzles. Ultimately, looking for traditional game systems is beside the point here; Hohokum is fascinating because it's so simple and engaging, and I'm excited to see the full scope of levels when the game releases on PS4, PS3, and Vita in 2014.



1001 Spikes

Developer: Nicalis

Gamers hungry for the next big platforming challenge need look no further than *1001 Spikes*. The brutally punishing game has the player running through an 8-bit inspired game world on a quest to find the main character's missing father, and you've only got 1,001 lives to do it.

That sounds like a significant number until you start playing. Every level is a cleverly designed machine built to manufacture your demise. Spikes, falling rocks, hidden darts, enemy creatures, and complicated jump patterns rob those lives from you with alarming frequency.

A separate cooperative set of levels lets you bring in up to four players at once, but your pool of lives is shared. You can also play the single-player levels cooperatively, or tackle a designated versus mode. Over 100 total levels offer plenty to explore. The full cast of characters includes around a dozen individuals, each with their own special powers, like being able to hang on ledges, wall jump, or float briefly in mid-air.

Finally completing one of *1001 Spikes*' levels offers an incredible sense of accomplishment, but the trial-and-error work required to succeed makes this a game targeting a very specific kind of gamer. Nicalis plans to release the game before the end of the year on PS4, Wii U, Vita, and 3DS. ♦

TAMING THE TONGUE

WE'VE YELLED AT GAMES FOR YEARS; **BOT COLONY** ACTUALLY UNDERSTANDS



by Ben Reeves



CONVERSATION STARTER

In the mid '80s, Eugene Joseph founded a company called Virtual Prototypes, where he helped develop graphical design tools for the aerospace industry. In 1999, Joseph was inducted into the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum's Laureate Hall of Fame for his innovations in aerospace prototyping. But after spending nearly a decade and a half developing flight simulators and war-gaming products for corporations like Lockheed Martin and Northrop, Joseph pursued his passion for designing robotic systems of a different sort.

In 2001, Joseph founded North Side Inc., and the company immediately began designing systems that they hoped would some day be able to flawlessly read and speak human language. Around the same time, Joseph caught the writing bug and coughed up the first draft of an industrial espionage thriller set on a pacific island full of advanced, human-like robots. Joseph knew that his book wasn't just a novel, it was the first stage of what would become *Bot Colony* – an episodic video game series that would use the advanced natural language comprehension software that his team at North Side was developing to ultimately allow players to converse freely with video game characters like they were real people.

A GAME OF WORDS

By 2021, the world's overpopulation and rising poverty line have contributed to a global shortage of natural resources and produce. As global markets fall into disarray, Japan's Nakagawa Corp. emerges with a series of technological breakthroughs and starts supplying governments and corporations with advanced, multi-purpose worker robots.

Nakagawa sets up an advanced complex of urban and industrial buildings on the uninhabited Mariana Island of Agrihan. Dubbed Bot Colony, this facility is designed to further the corporation's research on advanced A.I. and robotics. The plant is completely isolated from the outside world. Unexpectedly, three of Nakagawa's most advanced robotics sensors go missing. Is the disappearance of these three sensors just another case of white-collar crime, or is it an ominous sign of a greater threat?

Taking on the role of a specialist in robot cognition, players are tasked with discovering the truth behind Bot Colony's missing sensors. In traditional adventure game style, players traverse across the island of Bot Colony as they converse with NPC worker robots and solve simple puzzles. But that's just the rough outline of the experience; North Side has spent over a decade on the technology at the heart of Bot Colony in hopes that players spend less time playing its game and more time talking to it.

TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD

When conversing with these bots, players aren't picking prescribed sentences from a list of stock questions. A central aspect of Bot Colony's gameplay is that players can think of their own questions and freely converse with the island's robotic inhabitants however they wish. North Side's major innovation is its series of algorithms that read and understand natural human language. This means that players have to acquire the information they need for their investigation without a script.

"Voice recognition is only part of the problem," Joseph says. "There are plenty of voice recognition tools that listen to a voice and output text. But actually understanding that text is huge, because it means you understand language. That's why we've been working on this for 12 years, and why we've spent \$15 million on this. To understand language you need



North Side is using Nuance Communication's Dragon NaturallySpeaking software to help ensure that players' words are properly transcribed into the proper text

to understand the world."


In the past, programmers have encountered a daunting challenge when designing computers that converse in human-like ways. Machines have trouble parsing human language. When a player says the word "light" are they talking about the weight of an object in their inventory, or are they talking about the luminosity of the environment around them? If a word has multiple uses, people are able to understand its meaning based on the context of its sentence, but linear thinking machines struggle to accomplish the same feat.

Using some advanced server-side computations, North Side believes it has finally cracked the code for machine parsing. Using North Side's massive language database, Bot Colony's NPCs can break a sentence into its constituent parts, separate the nouns from the pronouns, and decipher its subject, verb, and predicate. Even if a player says a sentence in Yoda speak, such as, "Any robotic sensors around here, have you seen?" Bot Colony's robots can understand the basic idea behind the question.



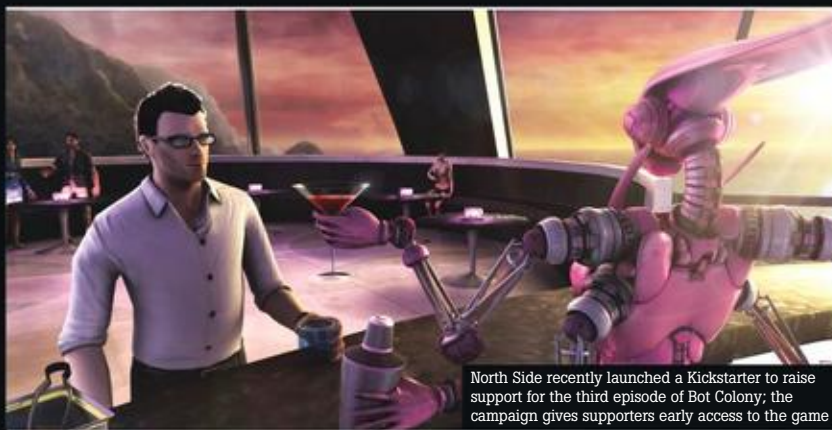
SPEAKING OUT

Bot Colony isn't a traditional video game, but North Side isn't a traditional video game studio. That leaves us with a number of unanswered questions. Does a technology company with a focus on linguistics know how to design an entertaining video game? Will an episodic experience largely designed around naturally conversing with NPCs quickly grow mundane? Or will the novelty of freely conversing with robots like a junior P.I. prove compelling enough to keep gamers coming back?

North Side is banking on the idea that consumers will find its natural language system so captivating that they'll return to Bot Colony every other month to see how the narrative unravels. The company recently announced a monthly subscription plan starting at \$2.95, and it hopes to release the first two episodes of Bot Colony this fall (the open beta may release shortly after this magazine), and recently launched a Kickstarter campaign to continue development of episode three. North Side's technology certainly sounds compelling, but we'll have to wait to get our hands on the game to discover if North Side has convinced us to trade in our conversation wheels for microphones. 

COULD THIS GAME TEACH PEOPLE TO TALK?

North Side's natural language comprehension software has a number of real-world applications. First and foremost, North Side believes that Bot Colony can be used as a learning tool. "This is also a fun way to practice language if English isn't your native tongue," says North Side founder and CEO Eugene Joseph. "We have over 7,000 people from 176 countries in our database who have all signed up for the beta just to practice their English. We're hopeful that this won't be just a game, but a fun way for them to improve their lives."



North Side recently launched a Kickstarter to raise support for the third episode of Bot Colony; the campaign gives supporters early access to the game

interview



photo: Richard Brown

Robot Love

After Capcom suspended the Mega Man franchise in 2012, fans told series creator Keiji Inafune that they wanted a new game in that classic style. Inafune granted that wish with a Kickstarter campaign for *Mighty No. 9*, a spiritual successor to the Mega Man series. Within 72 hours, the project met its funding goal.

interview by Matt Bertz

Kickstarter has been a phenomenon in the U.S. for close to two years. Why do you think that it's taken this long for the Japanese to test the funding platform?

With Kickstarter, the issue for Japanese creators is that it seems so far away. What I mean by that is that there is not a lot of investment in Japanese creators and developers. The Japanese are traditionally a very risk-averse people, so for an investor to go around throwing around money on games, that's a very risky proposition. Lots of times you fail and lose lots of money; sometimes you hit it big. But, because of that, there's not a lot of investment opportunities for developers in Japan. So, even if they see news blips about some new crowdfunding site that's gaining popularity in America, it just seems too far out of their wheelhouse.

Additionally, the projects funded through Kickstarter have traditionally been PC games. PC never really took off in Japan. So there are a lot of reasons why Kickstarter hasn't caught on in Japan.

I'm hoping that this project is a success, not only so we can own our own IP and connect directly with the users and make something great, but I hope that it is something that gains enough news and eyeballs on it in Japan so other independent developers in Japan look at this as a potential way for them to own their own IP and create something they otherwise couldn't have.

Mighty No. 9 obviously seeks to fill the void created when Capcom discontinued the Mega Man franchise. Would you be making this if Capcom were still making Mega Man games?

I have lots of ideas and games in my head that I could make. But some ideas I feel would not resonate with the fans and they wouldn't want to play those sorts of games. If, as a creator, you make a game the fans won't want to play, you have a game that won't sell. That would be that.

So knowing that you have something that the fans want is very important for deciding which ideas you are going to pursue. In the last few years, lots of people have come up to me and said, "I want a Mega Man-style game and it's not available to me." That led me to think that there needs to be a game that speaks to these fans' desires and interests. What makes Kickstarter so great is that it's a great way to dip your toe in the water and find out if the idea is really what the fans want.

The North American and European independent game scenes have been flourishing in the past few years. There have always been independent Japanese developers, but there are fewer new and ambitious projects

coming out of Japan. Do you sense that it's changing with programs like Bit Summit, which encourages that growth?

No, it really hasn't changed. Just because you do a PR event like Bit Summit doesn't mean that there are all these opportunities that exist in Japan that didn't before. In the end, independent developers are largely viewed as the labor houses for the core concept that the publisher develops. They are really looked down upon, like, "I'm going to tell you what to do, and you're going to do it." If an independent developer develops a pitch and shops it around to publishers, most of the time they look at it and say, "No. You're going to do this IP and I'm going to tell you how to do it and you're just going to go make the art and models and be done with it." A lot of times, that's how it works out.

As long as that core mindset exists in Japan, the number of opportunities that exist for independent developers there will forever be limited. Additionally, Japan has never been a strong PC market, so being able to have two or three people making a game for PC isn't attractive for the consumer base there. No one is going to buy it. That leaves you one option, which is maybe to do a social game with a two- or three-person game for iPhone or Android. But there is a ton of competition there, and you're not going to have the marketing dollars or support to get that up and running either. That's why the best solution is to come up with new, innovative ways that an independent developer can raise money. One of those solutions is going to be Kickstarter.

The console manufacturers have gone to great lengths to bring indies into the fold, with Sony allowing studios to determine their own release dates and price structure. Microsoft announced its ID@Xbox program at Gamescom. Do you think those programs provide a way forward for the Japanese independent developers?

Just because there are these new opportunities doesn't mean that there are funds. It's nice that first parties are allowing developers to borrow dev kits, set their own price points, and be flexible, but until they start giving money to these developers – everybody's got to eat. Trying to build a game for a year, even with three or four people, with no income is a really tall order. Until the day comes when there are more options for funding, it will be the same as it ever was.

A lot of the younger American indie developers don't have funding. They work a second job and develop games in their spare time. Is anyone in the Japanese community taking that approach?

One of the things that is great about America is that you've got the American Dream. It empowers you to say that, "I work really hard and I have no idea how this is going to work out, I'm just going to do it – I believe in it and

I'm going to get it done. We're going to make a game and it's going to hit it big and we'll be millionaires." It's believing in yourself and believing in something you can't see in the future and being willing to put in the time and energy. Japan is a very risk-averse society, so not seeing what is in your future and sacrificing all this for something that might not happen – versus a stable job at a big company where you know you have a paycheck – that's something that doesn't fit with the culture so well. The idea of scrapping it out with two or three jobs and at night making a game, you're not going to see that in young Japanese developers. At least not a lot, that's for sure. Most of them dream about making games, but even more than that, they dream about working for a big company with a nice brand name on it. That's what makes them feel very comfortable.

On the Kickstarter page, you said you're not necessarily seeking a publishing partner, but you would be open to one. What would you do if Capcom came calling?

I would hear their terms. If they had the best terms, I would go with Capcom. There is no reason not to publish with Capcom, and I certainly don't feel like there's a reason that I have to publish with Capcom. Literally, it would be a very cut-and-dried business negotiation. If they had the best terms, the logical businessman in me would say, "Yes, let's go with them."

If that were to happen, would you then re-skin it as a Mega Man game or would it remain Mighty No. 9?

If Capcom came up with really great terms to make it a Mega Man game, then of course I would listen and that would be an option. But the base of this game is that we wanted to create something original. If they gave us an offer we couldn't refuse, that would mean having to change the main character into Mega Man and all the key gameplay into Mega Man. On top of that, it would still have to be our IP, which is what we want. I can't foresee that happening. We really want this to be our thing.

Being a spiritual successor, do you feel liberated since you don't have to adhere to the Mega Man traditions in regards to gameplay?

Obviously, when you're working with a brand there are expectations of what has to be in it – staples of that series, so to speak. Mega Man has a lot of those that you have to adhere to. It's refreshing not to have to adhere to that, to be able to be more flexible and creative with what your goalposts are in the game. For example, in Mega Man you have to have one boss per stage, but in *Mighty No. 9* we could potentially have three bosses in one stage and after you beat all three then you get all three of their powers. So there's a lot of flexibility we have by doing something original and new. ✨

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1987
JOINING THE FIGHT
At age 22, Keiji Inafune joins Capcom as an illustrator. His first job is to design the character Adon in the original *Street Fighter*

1987
A LEGEND IS BORN
In his first year of work, Inafune also teams with Akira Kitamura to create Rockman for the new Nintendo Entertainment System. The game was later renamed *Mega Man* in the U.S.

1988
SOLIDIFYING THE FRANCHISE
Though *Mega Man* only garnered modest sales, Inafune and his compatriots successfully lobby Capcom to make *Mega Man 2*. The game goes on to be a huge success, and spawns four more entries on NES

1993
A NEW DIRECTION
For the first franchise release on the Super Nintendo, Inafune redesigns the blue bomber for *Mega Man X*. The series is a hit, with 11 total entries

2005
THE BIG PROMOTION
Inafune is promoted to senior corporate officer, which allows him to oversee the creation of new Capcom franchises like *Onimusha*, *Dead Rising*, and *Lost Planet*

2009
FADING ENTHUSIASM
Dismayed by the Japanese development atmosphere, Inafune ruffles feathers at a *Dead Rising 2* event by saying "Japan is over. We're done. Our game industry is finished" after touring the Tokyo Game Show floor

2010
DEPARTURES
Inafune announces he is leaving Capcom to start his life over. A few months later he launches a new game development company, Comcept

2013
A ROBOT REBORN
With *Mega Man* on the shelf, Inafune decides to fill the void by announcing a Kickstarter campaign for *Mighty No. 9*, a spiritual successor

Shut Up And Have Fun

Thoughts on gaming's culture of negativity



by Dan Ryckert, Senior Associate Editor

F

or eight years, I've looked forward to attending E3 each summer. With its extravagant booths and surprising reveals, the annual conference is a fitting celebration of an industry that so many of us love. Between getting a first taste of next-gen consoles, great games, and exciting new experiences with technology such as the Oculus Rift, 2013 was my favorite E3 I've attended. Unfortunately, my excitement over the industry's future was mixed with disappointment in the behavior of many gamers.

As Game Informer covered the press conferences, my job was to moderate the chat room in our Twitch-hosted live stream. Before Microsoft even took the stage, an avalanche of hate-filled comments sped past my eyes at a pace almost too fast to read.

Angry gamers were ready to pounce on Microsoft, and they spewed their hatred toward every piece of news coming out of the conference. "Micro\$oft" (or the even less-clever "FailureSoft") was a "piece of s--- with no games," and *Dead Rising 3* "must have been running at 10 frames per second." When publishers showcased shooters, the chatters quickly decried them as "more s---ty Call of Duty clones." When Microsoft unveiled Project Spark and *Sunset Overdrive*, the participants complained about "all this kiddie s---" (despite the latter looking decidedly violent).

At first, I thought this overwhelming display of anger was a product of Microsoft's unpopular and now-changed Xbox One policies. As the day went on and I moderated the chat for Ubisoft and EA's pressers, I realized that this sentiment wasn't confined to a single publisher or console. These gamers hated everything they saw.

I ended that day looking forward to gaming's near future, but I couldn't shake the negative chat-room behavior from my mind. This industry revolves around games, which largely exist as a source of entertainment. Debate may rage over whether or not games are art, but I doubt many would question that fun is the driving factor behind many people's love of the medium.

If we play games to have fun, where does all the vitriol come from? I'm asking this not as a naive defender of the industry; I understand that not everything is perfect. Every console has major and minor issues that frustrate me. I don't like the 360's d-pad and Microsoft's focus on Kinect. I don't like the Wii U's lack of games and Nintendo's archaic online offerings. I don't like the constant need to update Sony platforms or the long trophy sync times. I don't like having to worry about whether my PC can handle a certain game, or the high cost of upgrading.

Despite these annoyances, I don't always think about them when I'm asked about a certain console. I think about how much I enjoy playing online with friends on Xbox 360, how much *Uncharted 2* impresses me on PlayStation 3, and how perfect the platforming is in the *Mario Galaxy* games.

We saw some of this as early as SNES vs. Genesis, but these sentiments have been ratcheted up to ridiculous levels as console generations have progressed. A debate class in my junior high featured a heated PlayStation vs. Nintendo 64 argument. I saw someone in college in the 2000s wearing a "Friends don't let friends play Xbox" shirt, and rolled my eyes at the fact that he felt strongly enough to have a shirt made. During a live stream of *Metro: Last Light* just a few months ago, our chat was overrun with PC fans viciously mocking the Xbox 360 version we were playing. I understand that not everyone can afford every system, so there's a hope you're making the right choice when it's time to pull the wallet out. That said, I don't understand why that translates into the vilification of the rival platforms.

This escalation of hatred is aided in no small part by the Internet. With the proliferation of comments sections and the advent of YouTube, we can all become our own version of the infamous pro-PS3 troll Chad Warden. Requiring no more than an iPhone, anyone is free to make a song about how much the PS3 sucks or record a webcam rant about how much they hate the Xbox 360. There's a time and place for subjective criticism, but it seems silly to go out of your way purely in an effort to spew venom.

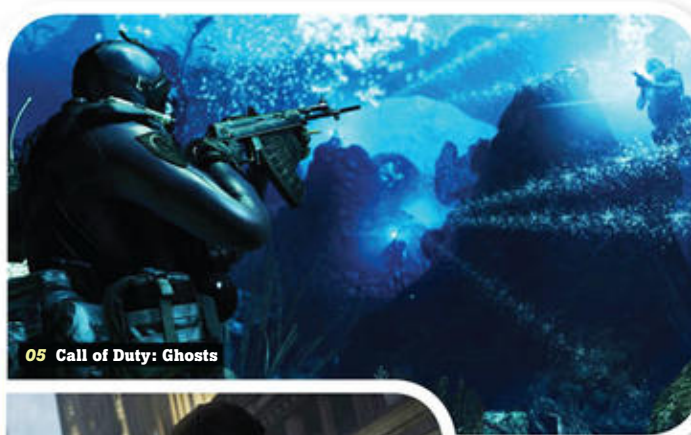
If you follow gaming news and industry events like E3, why go in with knives out? Every year brings us new game experiences and advances in technology. The industry is also reaching out to new gamers with accessible entry points like mobile and social gaming. Sure, your mom's time with *Words With Friends* or *Just Dance* may differ wildly from your tense playthrough of *The Last Of Us*, but do we really need to mock any form of gaming different than your personal preferences?

In 25 years of playing games, I believe that the industry has never offered so much to so many. Senior citizen homes have Wii bowling tournaments. Young kids are flexing their creative muscles in *Minecraft*. Retro fans have seen great revivals of classic genres as downloadable offerings on consoles. Competitive gamers have a vast array of options for following and participating in e-sports. Legitimate virtual reality gaming appears to be on the horizon. Mobile gaming is constantly improving as developers experiment further with the touchscreen input.

It's an amazing time to be a gamer. If the only reason you follow the industry is to complain about everything it has to offer, maybe you should reconsider why you play games. I'll be over here having a blast. ♦

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



November

01 The Next Science Fiction Epic?
Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* is regarded as one of the greatest science fiction novels to date. Today, theatergoers see how his story fares with dozens of child actors starring alongside a grumpy, old Harrison Ford. Don't worry, Jake Lloyd is all grown up now and isn't in the film. Also, George Lucas wasn't allowed on set.

02 New Releases
 > Ben 10: Omniverse 2 (Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS)
 > Call of Duty: Ghosts (Wii U, PS3, 360, PC)
 > The Guided Fate Paradox (PS3)
 > *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey Extended Edition* (Blu-Ray)
 > Moshi Monsters Katsuma Unleashed (3DS)
 > Power Rangers: Megaforce (3DS)
 > Ys: Memories of Celceta (Vita)
 > Zumba Fitness: World Party (Wii U, 360, Wii)

06 Galactus Hungers Again
Marvel Comics' Age of Ultron series concluded with an event that affected all of Marvel's ongoing continuities. The Ultimate universe looks like it was dealt the worst hand. Galactus is on his way to earth. Starting today, all of Marvel's Ultimate books tie into the *Cataclysm: The Ultimates Last Stand* story, penned by Brian Michael Bendis. Marvel hasn't pulled punches with this continuity in the past. Could this be the end?

08 Another Day, Another Marvel Film
Marvel's movie onslaught continues today with *Thor: The Dark World*. If you haven't watched any of Marvel's movies yet, here's what you need to know: An invincible guy beats up aliens with a magic hammer, and...uh...well...that's pretty much it. Hopefully the hammer is used enough to tide us over to the next *Avengers* movie.

12 New Releases
 > Barbie: Dreamhouse Party (Wii U, Wii, 3DS, DS)
 > Cabela's African Adventures (PS3, 360, Wii)
 > XCOM: Enemy Within (PS3, 360, PC)

13 Lewis And Clark's Monstrous Adventure
Skybound's newest comic series, *Manifest Destiny*, is set in 1804 and follows William Clark and Meriwether Lewis' exploration of the uncharted American frontier. What they find isn't in detailed in history books, and has long been covered up. Skybound doesn't want to spoil the mystery, but we're told the discovery is of the monster variety.

15 PlayStation 4 Launch
The next generation of gaming begins today with the launch of PlayStation 4 in North America. The system hits Europe and Australia two weeks later on November 29. Sony is skipping Japan this year, and will release PlayStation 4 in its home territory on February 22. The

PlayStation 4 retails for \$399 (US), \$549 (AUS), €399 (EUR), £349 (UK), and ¥38,980 (JPN).

15 PlayStation 4 Launch Lineup
 > Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
 > Battlefield 4
 > Call of Duty: Ghosts
 > Driveclub
 > FIFA 14
 > Just Dance 2014
 > Killzone: Shadow Fall
 > Knack
 > Lego Marvel Superheroes
 > Madden NFL 25
 > NBA 2K14
 > NBA Live 14
 > Need for Speed: Rivals
 > Skylanders: Swap Force
 > Watch Dogs

19 New Releases
 > Adventure Time: Explore the Dungeon Because I Don't Know! (Wii U, PS3, 360, 3DS)
 > AquaPazza (PS3)
 > Need for Speed: Rivals (PS3, 360, PC)
 > *Star Trek: The Next Generation Season 5* (Blu-Ray)
 > Watch Dogs (Wii U, PS3, 360, PC)
 > Young Justice: Legacy (PS3, 360, Wii U, Wii, 3DS)
 > Zumba Kids (360, Wii)

22 New Releases
 > The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds (3DS)
 > Mario Party: Island Tour (3DS)
 > Super Mario 3D World (Wii U)
 > Tearaway (Vita)

22 Microsoft Ushers In Xbox One
Just a week after Sony's PlayStation 4 launch, Microsoft is releasing its next generation console, Xbox One, in 13 major worldwide markets. The system comes packaged with Kinect and retails for \$499 (US), \$599 (AUS), €499 (EUR), and £429 (UK).

22 Xbox One Launch Lineup
 > Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
 > Battlefield 4
 > Call of Duty: Ghosts
 > Crimson Dragon
 > Dead Rising 3
 > FIFA 14
 > Fighter Within
 > Forza Motorsport 5
 > Just Dance 2014
 > Killer Instinct
 > Lego Marvel Superheroes
 > Lococycle
 > Madden NFL 25
 > NBA 2K14
 > NBA Live 14
 > Need for Speed: Rivals
 > Peggle 2
 > Powerstar Golf
 > Ryse: Son of Rome
 > Skylanders: Swap Force
 > Watch Dogs
 > Zoo Tycoon
 > Zumba Fitness: World Party

22 Bow & Arrow: The Sequel
Katniss Everdeen returns to theaters today in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, which means there will be fewer people to fight in line

for Xbox One. This sequel picks up right where the first chapter left off, with Donald Sutherland making evil eyebrows at everyone, and Katniss politely ignoring Peeta's advances.

26 New Releases
 > *Breaking Bad: The Final Season* (Blu-Ray, DVD)
 > Disney Infinity: Frozen Play Set Series 2
 > Disney Infinity: Power Disc Pack Series 2
 > Lego Friends (3DS)

27 Disney's Cold Front
The creators of *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Tangled* are back today with *Frozen*, a new animated movie that tells the story of a kingdom trapped in eternal winter. It's basically like *Sunshine*, only with more wacky Disney side-kicks and fewer depressed people in space.

2013

TWISTED

III

» PLATFORM
PlayStation 4


» STYLE
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBD)

» PUBLISHER
Sony Computer
Entertainment

» DEVELOPER
Ready At Dawn

» RELEASE
2014

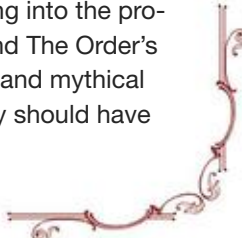
The Order: 1886



For a decade, Ready At Dawn has been a quiet but steady partner to Sony's portable efforts. With games like *Daxter* and *God of War: Chains of Olympus*, the studio was one of a handful of development houses devoted to the PSP; those releases proved to be some of the most highly praised titles on the system. With the advent of next-gen console technology, Ready At Dawn is prepared to tackle a new system – the PlayStation 4 – and once again prove how powerful and flexible a

new Sony platform can be. If launch-window games like *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *Infamous: Second Son* aim to showcase the PS4's potential to transform existing franchises, *The Order: 1886* is one of our first glimpses of a game series built to harness the system's power. Ready At Dawn is stepping into the pro-

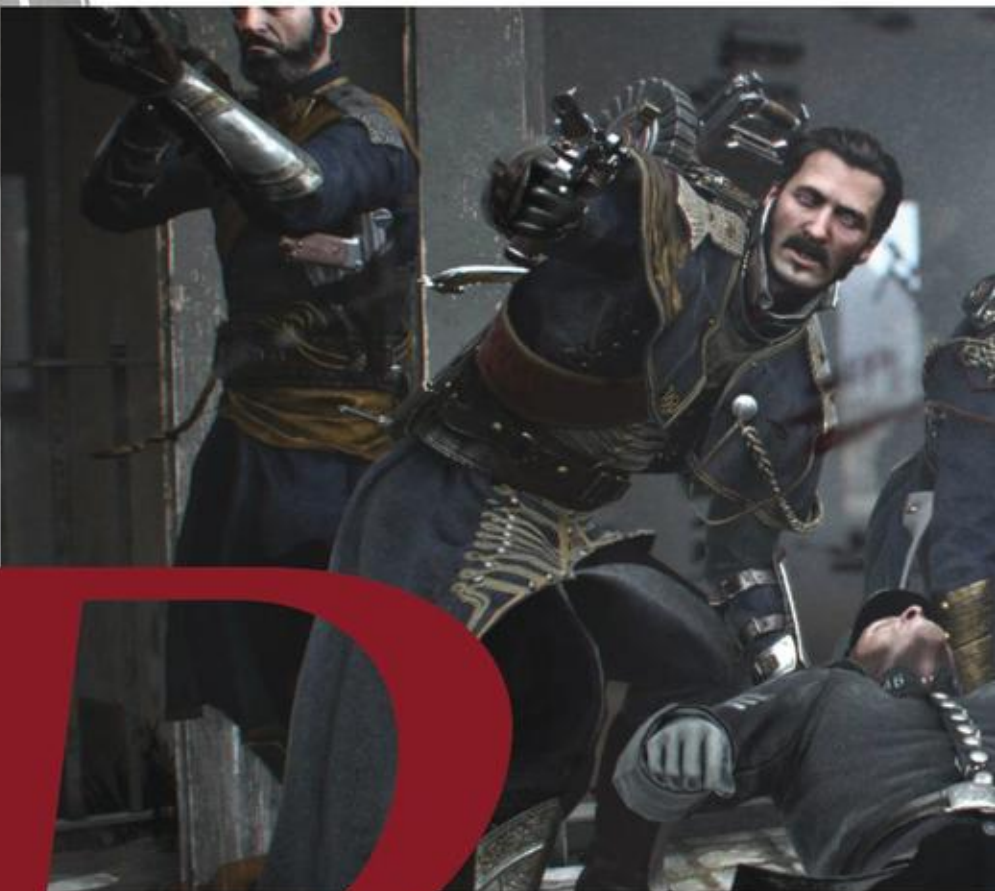
verbial big league, and *The Order's* stunning technology and mythical reimagining of history should have everyone's attention.



by Matt Miller



STORY



R

eady At Dawn formed in 2003 when three veteran game developers departed acclaimed studios Blizzard and Naughty Dog to create their own independent studio. Ready At Dawn's name was drawn from the first letters of the founders' first names – Ru Weerasuriya, Andrea Pessino, and Didier Malenfant. While RAD has primarily worked with Sony over the years, the studio remains independent and continues to craft one game after another to strong critical praise.

The Order: 1886 represents the studio's most ambitious project by a wide margin. The concept has been in the works since 2005, slowly brewing until the team could harness the scope of the project with powerful new hardware. In 2009, RAD began work on its own game engine, taking the dangerous step to not rely on outside technology to fuel its

game creation. The resulting engine takes full advantage of the new capabilities of the PlayStation 4. "The PS4 was the perfect platform," says creative director Ru Weerasuriya. "We have this mentality of being a single-platform team. That's what we do best. That's who we are. And I almost feel like it's who we're going to be."

The result of this long-in-gestation technical project is, frankly, remarkable. Even counting the increasingly impressive collection of next-gen titles announced in recent months, The Order: 1886 boasts the most stunning in-game visuals we've seen. A trailer at this year's E3 drew attention, depicting a mysterious group of warriors riding a carriage through an anachronistic version of 19th century London. A fight ensues between the warriors and a pack of bestial attackers, and strange fantasy weapons fire off to halt the threat. While exciting, the video spawned plenty of critics who called it out as convenient CG fakery.

On the contrary, all of the visuals on display in that trailer represent The Order's in-game graphical quality. Most games use high-resolution renders of their main characters in trailers and other marketing. Instead, the characters you see in that announcement trailer are the actual in-game models. The weapon effects in the action sequence of the trailer are the same visual effects on display in the



game. While the cinematic style and panning camera offer a more dramatic presentation, it's the only part of the video that steps away from what players can expect from the graphics. To back up its claims, Ready At Dawn showed us the trailer scene again, dynamically altering light sources on the fly and rotating the camera to new angles on the 3D models.

While the trailer offers only a brief glimpse of Ready At Dawn's vision, it speaks to a central tenet of the project, something the team calls filmic presentation. This ideal is on display in several demos we witnessed while visiting the studio. The player's view is always that of a follow camera, a familiar technique in many third-person shooters meant to emulate a second person following behind the lead.

However, The Order's follow camera is more reminiscent of effects you'd find in a big-budget movie, tapping

into subconscious expectations we all have about viewing a scene after decades of watching television and film. "We thought about how we're used to seeing in film or TV, that everything is shot through a lens, and we realized that the lens is not something that everybody is modeling," says game director Dana Jan. "The idea of simulating what it is that goes on optically as light enters a camera through a lens, the image has a quality and texture that doesn't feel sterile or digital – it starts to feel a little more organic. And dealing in a game that's a period piece, one of the first things we wanted to do was to have it look visually more comfortable to the eye."

Stand with a tall pillar at the far right or left of the screen, and you'll see a barely perceptible bending of the straight vertical shape, echoing the bowing at the outside of a camera lens. Lens flares catch the light as you rotate through an environment, flashing bright circles

Even hard objects like crates and chairs are modeled with soft-body physics, so that they exhibit authentic behaviors when bending, breaking, or moving





This early concept illustration shows off a version of London that was more fantastical and vertical; newer iterations feel closer to the historical London, albeit with small touches that establish that this world is slightly different from our own

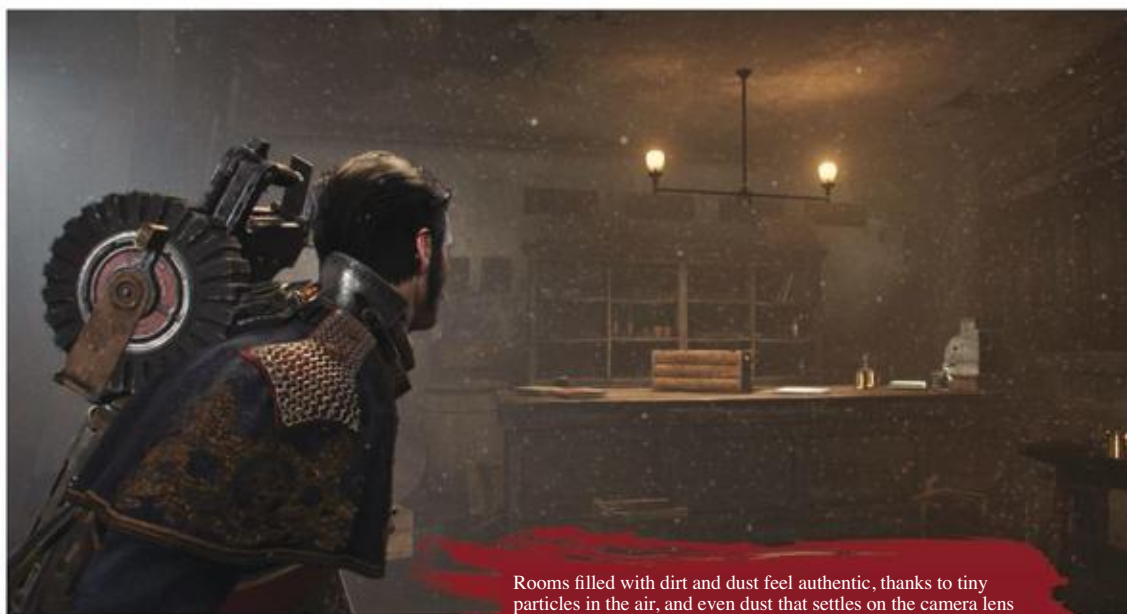
into your eye. Dozens of oil lamps flicker independently in one underground scene, and each light bounces off objects with uncanny realism thanks to the impressive material modeling for everything from leather and cloth to wood and metal. Clouds of particles and dust are so small they are barely perceptible, but they swim around the flames and slowly settle to the ground and onto the camera lens itself. Rotate the camera from the view of a distant doorway to a nearby human face, and the door shifts slightly out of focus, centering your attention on the object with which you're interacting.

Rather than fall back on rigid-body physics to represent objects and people in the world, everything in *The Order: 1886* is modeled with soft-body physics, so that it reacts authentically to interaction, whether from a cascade of bullets or a falling body. "Rigid bodies are hard, and they have no flexibility," Jan says. "Soft bodies are things that have some type of give or flex. That can be as soft as a pillow, or as subtle as a crate that is dropped from a second story – it's going to compress because it's made of wood and water, and so on a molecular level it has some give. You don't notice that unless someone points it out to you, but the way that it hits and bounces and rolls is different if it's a soft body rather than totally rigid."

As a result, fascinating effects are possible, like dynamically bending and morphing a metal beam in reaction to a powerful magnetic force, or making the boards of a ramshackle wall buckle before splintering apart when pressure is applied.

Each technical achievement comes together to support the filmic vision of the game. It's an essential ingredient, as *The Order: 1886* is rooted in storytelling. The script (written by Weerasuriya and *John Adams* script writer Kirk Ellis) is filled with surprising reveals fueled by an unusual amalgam of history, fantasy, mythology, and science fiction. For players who love games powered by a rich and deeply imagined world, *Ready At Dawn* has you in mind.

The story begins hundreds of years ago with a foundational event that makes this alternate world different from our own. "Somewhere around the seventh or eighth century, humanity starts splitting," Weerasuriya says. "A small group becomes genetically different." While the majority of people remain recognizably human, some take on bestial traits, and are dubbed half-breeds. The scared populace labels these creatures with names out of mythology and folk tales, but they are in truth a new species of sentient creatures on Earth. That difference



Rooms filled with dirt and dust feel authentic, thanks to tiny particles in the air, and even dust that settles on the camera lens



breeds conflict, and a terrible war ensues that changes the course of history. The humans are many, but the half-breeds are stronger and far more resilient.

Humanity's hope comes centuries later, when a man named Arthur gathers a group of like-minded individuals to form this world's version of the Knights of the Round Table – the Order. The real-world Arthurian legends tell us of the knights' religious quest for salvation through the Holy Grail. In the world of *The Order*, the knights seek a more literal salvation by fighting the half-breeds. "Arthur sees that humanity is in need of protecting, so he assembles the best of them in order to protect the rest of humanity and take the war to the half-breeds," Weerasuriya says. "He realizes very soon that it's a losing battle." Through a mysterious turn of events, the knights discover a substance called black water. By imbibing the strange liquid, the knights gain incredibly longer lives and equally impressive abilities to recover from injury. The knights continue to age, but at a dramatically slower rate, letting them wage war across centuries. These knights have sworn to protect mankind at all costs, but they suffer an increasing distance from their own mortality as they watch all around them fade and die. "The salvation comes as a curse," Weerasuriya says. "They will protect humanity, but at the cost of their own humanity."

Cut to the end of the 19th century, and the world holds both familiar touchstones and fantastical changes. The war still persists, but after centuries during which the half-breeds continued to win victory after victory, even against the long-lived knights, the industrial revolution turns the tide. Humanity develops incredible technologies that alter its fate once again. Airships float through the skies of London, docking at towering mooring stations that loom over the city. Ingenious inventors are years ahead of their time, crafting wireless-communication systems and thermal-imaging technology. Dangerous new weapons spit out clouds of termite that ignite with a flash, or belch shafts of lightning to pierce a foe. "By the time our game begins, the balance has shifted, and the humans almost have martial law," Weerasuriya says. "The half-breeds are now trying to find a different way to survive."

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The Squad

The storyline for *The Order: 1886* is focused on Galahad's adventure, but that doesn't mean he'll be working alone. Three other members of The Order are part of his team, and these characters figure prominently both in gameplay and in the unfolding story. The original names of these warriors are passed down to new individuals when a previous knight dies, so each of the knights carries two names: their given name, and the name bestowed to them upon knighthood.

Sir Galahad/Grayson

Grayson is the third man to bear the moniker of Sir Galahad, but he has survived and triumphed over the Round Table's enemies for centuries. Though he is the main character of the story, we know little about his background or personality. As the game begins, he's something of a blank slate. He is close to all the members of his squad in different ways; Malory as a mentor, Lafayette as a friend, and Isabeau as something more.

Lady Igraine/Isabeau D'Argyll

The original Igraine was mother to Arthur, but the first bearer of that name has long since passed away. As the new Lady Igraine, Isabeau is one of the younger knights inducted into The Order. Visually, she's in her late twenties, but she's actually much older. She enters the Order as a disciple to Galahad. When she is inducted into the knighthood, the two become close friends. In more recent years, a deeper affection grew between the two. "It's a relationship they will never consummate, because the knighthood doesn't allow it," Weerasuriya continues. "So they have this connection, this closeness to each other that pulls them together and apart, but you know that in any other world they'd go off to a deserted island together."

Marquis de Lafayette

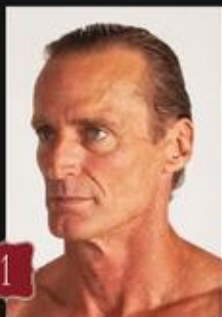
The youngest member of the squad of knights should be familiar to those who remember their high school history classes. Marquis de Lafayette was a French military officer who served in both the American and French Revolutions. In the world of *The Order*, Lafayette still fought in those conflicts, but his wisdom and tactical genius brought him to The Order's attention. "Sebastian Malory comes to him after the French Revolution and says, 'I know this is the world that you've seen, but there's another world out there that you need to see. You're fighting the wrong fight,'" Weerasuriya says. Though younger than the others, Lafayette has seen much of the world, and he has a whimsical attitude toward life that brings levity to the group. As an apprentice, he doesn't yet have the name or title of a knight.

Sir Percival/Sebastian Malory

Fans of the King Arthur mythology likely recognize the name Malory; the 15th century writer Sir Thomas Malory wrote the definitive Arthurian text, *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In the fiction of *The Order*, Sebastian Malory is an ancestor to Thomas Malory, and by the time this game begins, he is the oldest and most experienced member of the squad. "He's second in the lineage of Percival," Weerasuriya says. "The original Percival dies, and his place is taken over by Malory. He becomes one of the best knights the Order has ever seen. He's exactly the reason why Galahad trusts the Order. He's the big brother. He's the guy who is always going to be there. They are the two closest friends. Malory is the one guy you know is always going to do the right thing."

Creating A Next-Gen Character

A single character in *The Order: 1886* is the result of hundreds of hours of work split between many Ready At Dawn team members.



1 The artists start with an actor or model to set an initial baseline facial structure for the character.



2 Scanning the face data gives the character modelers a three-dimensional head for manipulation.



3 Concept art serves as a guidepost for modelers as they make adjustments to the initial scan.



4 A final character sculpt evolves the initial scan to bring it closer to the character concept.



5 Extreme pose sculptures show off blendshapes and wrinkle animations.



6 A member of the Ready At Dawn team has his hair and beard professionally styled to match the in-game character. These photos then serve as reference, and as texturing assets.



7 Hair and beard are added, and texture work is completed by hand to add aging, coloration, and blemishes. The final character facial model appears in-game as you see him here. Character models are not down-rezzed in-game.



8 Meanwhile, concept artists work to design a uniform.



An untextured uniform model is created from the concept.



This final character model is just one of dozens of characters in the final game.



The arc gun charges up and releases a burst of lightning against distant or well-armored foes

<< continued from page 45

Wielding these powerful new weapons, the Order persists, but they are much changed. Many knights have fallen in battle over the centuries. Each time, a new apprentice takes up his or her predecessor's name, and continues the fight. To the wider populace, the knights are nearly legendary figures – elite warriors whose skill and experience set them apart. Politically, the Round Table itself sits at the center of Britain's House of Lords; they protect the realm under orders of the Lord's Chancellor.

You play the third knight who has gone by the name of Sir Galahad. Born with the name Grayson, he took up the mantle of Sir Galahad hundreds of years ago, and is now one of the most renowned knights at the Table. Like the Galahad of the real-world Arthurian legends, he is truly the best among his fellows, and his deeds are legendary. Even so, his long life weighs heavily on him, and in the demos we witnessed, he comes across as a mighty but somber warrior, devoted to the knight's mission even as he questions his role. "In so many ways, he's the hero that you don't know," Weerasuriya says. "He's the blank canvas that you start painting on. Everything that is going to happen in this game is going to define who he is. And it's going to bring back who he was – who he has repressed."

London in 1886 is rife with conflict. While the threat of the half-breeds still lingers, their power in recent years has waned. Now the knights and their allies face a new threat. A human rebellion is slowly gaining steam, fueled by angry individuals unhappy with the inequity between layers of society. The knights and their aristocracy support the rich and noble, but leave the poor struggling to survive. "The rebels understand that there is a greater war going on between the humans and half-breeds, but

they are unwilling to be oppressed by the government," Weerasuriya says.

Galahad's struggle against the rebels is on full display in our gameplay demo, showing off an extended sequence in the Whitechapel area of London. In this time period, Whitechapel is a seedy and gritty district, far from the airship towers and opulent palaces elsewhere in the city. Galahad's team has split up to investigate a disturbance in the area, but the knights rarely visit this part of town. Igraine and Percival have taken a separate route, while Lafayette and Galahad observe the scene from an elevated rooftop.

As soon as the demo begins, we get a glimpse of some of the gadgets that set this alternate timeline apart from our own. Galahad reaches up to his shoulder to speak through a bulky but functional communicator, letting him talk to the rest of his team or the airship that floats overhead. Lafayette tosses him a device to get a better look at the area, and Galahad uses it to spy his destination, the royal hospital, as well as confirm locations with the airship.

As Lafayette and Galahad descend into the tight alleyways of Whitechapel, they come across a cadre of constables holding the line against rebels. Our first glimpse of combat follows tried but true conventions for third-person gunplay. Galahad leaps from one cover point to the next, peering out to fire rounds from his semi-automatic pistol, the standard sidearm for knights in the field. Enemy rebels are canny and aggressive, and between the many combatants on both sides of the conflict, the battle scenes are chaotic and exciting.

Running down an alleyway, laundry sheets hung out to dry offer a glimpse at the immaculately modeled physics; gun blasts send them fluttering wildly, and characters

that push past make the cloth move naturally. We also see some simple melee in action, as Galahad charges forth to dispatch his last enemies. A single button press pistol-whips a rebel to the ground.

A more formidable rebel opponent surprises Galahad out of nowhere, and offers a look at a more involved form of melee. "How do we do a different take on quicktime events, where the player has windows of opportunity to make a choice and change the direction of some of these more cinematic fight moments?" Jan asks. "Thematically, it's interesting that Galahad is this honed warrior that has so much experience and so much knowledge about how to handle himself in situations like this that he can almost see what is coming next." As the two wrestling combatants crash through a wooden barrier, Galahad's centuries of combat experience give him a preternatural ability to predict how different actions play out. During these sequences players are treated to a unique variation on the familiar quicktime event formula. Players can rotate the camera to different objects and opportunities that each indicate a related button press. These split-decision moments let you choose how



Concept art shows off the Mayfair area of London



Galahad handles the ensuing melee, perhaps dodging a punch or attacking with an improvised weapon.

The scuffle ends as the venerable knight Percival appears on the scene, combo gun in hand, and blasts the rebel. Weapons in the *The Order* are often unusual and surprising, like the multi-purpose combo gun, or the lightning-spewing arc gun we see later in the demo. This mid- to long-range gun requires players to hold down the fire button for a few brief seconds to charge, and then release to unleash a crackling bolt of electricity. While the arc gun can reach distant snipers, it is especially valuable because of its ease of aiming. True to its name, the bolt of lightning it shoots moves in a curving arc, but always circles back down to nail the intended target. "It almost seems like it's going to explode in your hand," Jan says. "That's part of the fun of our game. Some of these prototype weapons seem wild and dangerous in their own right. I can wield it, but I'm kind of uncomfortable using it."

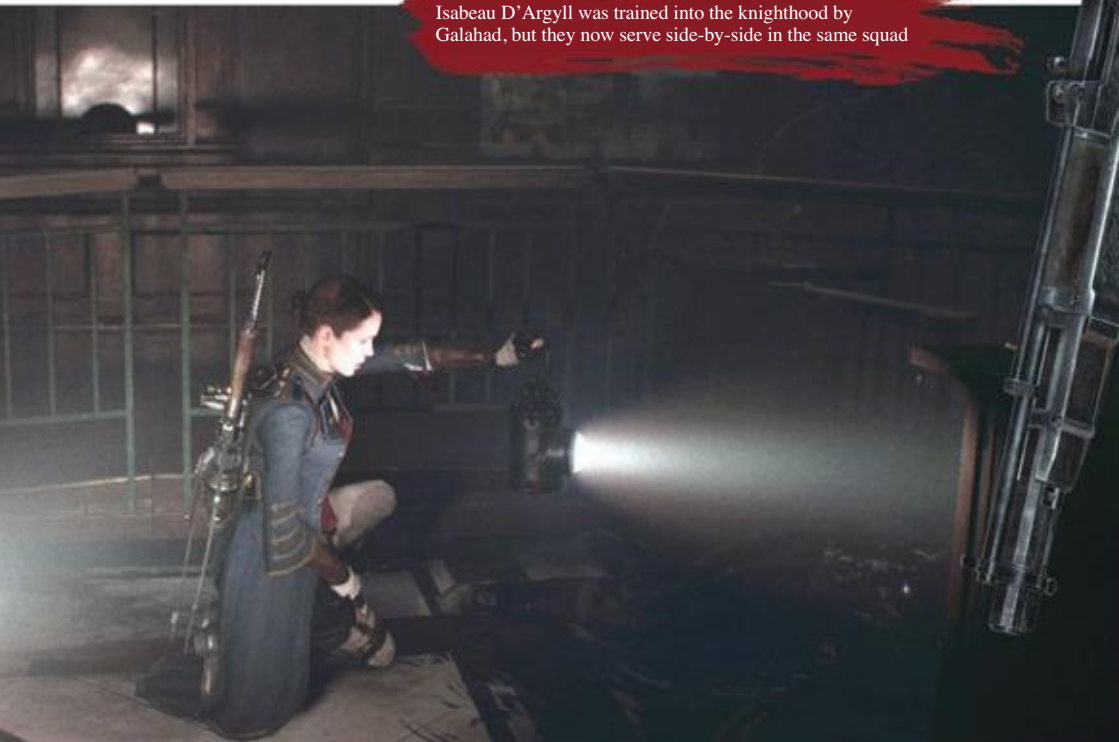
Percival leads the team to a startling discovery. The rebels' fervent defense of the area was for a good reason; a nearby basement reveals a cache of contraband weaponry. The rebels have crates filled with guns that should

be reserved for the knights, but the lack of serial numbers indicates they've somehow been hijacked. The mystery will have to wait for another time, as Igraine waits on the far side of the building, holding off the rebels as they try to retake their ill-gotten armaments.

Galahad grabs up a thermite rifle and runs out to aid his fellow knight. Like the arc gun, the thermite rifle offers a clever twist on a familiar function. As Galahad emerges onto the street, he fires off a shot of condensed aluminum iron oxide. When the pellet strikes a surface, it scatters into a cloud of glittering shards. The tiny particulates are small enough to make the rebels cough and wheeze, but that's not the weapon's true purpose. After several clouds of thermite are in place, Galahad fires off a super-hot flare that surges into the clouds, instantly igniting them into a flash of molten fire. Even if enemy combatants survive the assault, they're still not safe. The thermite acts naturally within the physics model; that is, the now super-heated metal rains down out of the sky onto anything and everything below. "We didn't want it to be a precision weapon," Jan explains. "It's one of our spray and pray weapons. It's really meant for crowd control. You want to fire it and take out a bunch of targets."



Isabeau D'Argyll was trained into the knighthood by Galahad, but they now serve side-by-side in the same squad





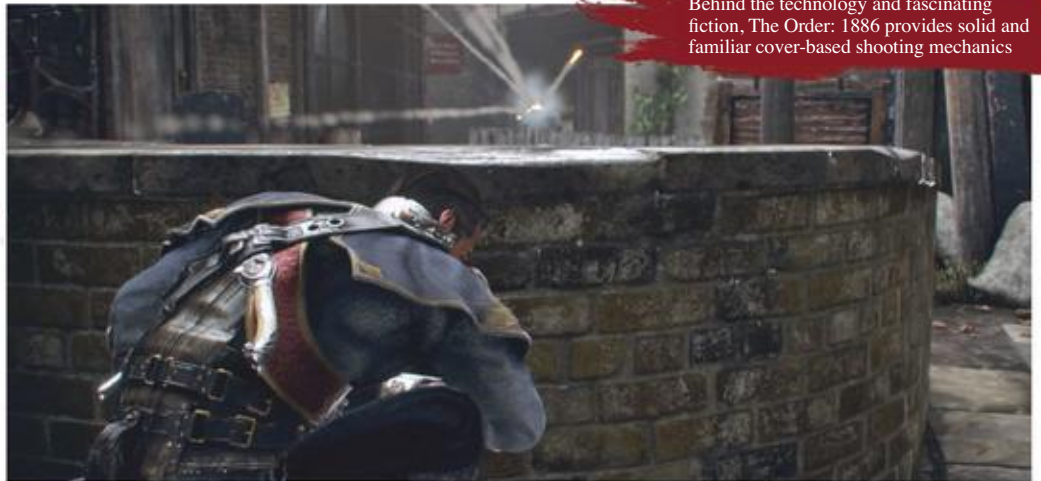
The knights' advanced weaponry goes a long way to turn the tide against the rebels, but it's hard to compete with numbers. When an allied constable runs out of cover into the street, he's quickly shot down. Unwilling to leave an ally to die, the knights rush into the street, and Percival and Galahad drag the injured man into a nearby building. This brief exchange leads to what the team calls an interactive cinematic moment, where the camera zooms in close and the player continues to fend off attacking rebels from the balcony above, even as the sequence of saving the ailing man plays out.

Sadly, it's too late for the unfortunate constable, and the knights continue on, now united as a formidable team of four. It's clear during the subsequent battles how much effort is being put into establishing distinct relationships and repartee between each member of the team. Galahad clearly respects Percival, and Igraine is often sparring verbally with the jocular Lafayette. "You're playing the game, and you're aware of what's going on in Galahad's head," Jan says. "I know what Lafayette needs. As a squad, I know what it is they're going through when they try to push through an area, or when they're lost, or pinned down. Even during down time, which is even more critical. It's giving the player a chance to take a breather from something hectic and understand how those characters are coping with what

they just went through."

As the fights continue, the knights frequently rely on the mysterious black water to confront the heavy odds thrown against them. "The knights aren't immortal, and we wanted a way to communicate that," Jan says. "When you play a game with certain superheroes that are basically impervious to everything, it starts to be dull, and you lose the meaning of the action. So we made sure that anything that would mortally wound and kill a person would also kill our knights. There are going to be times when you need to tap into this resource of the black water to regenerate your health."

After a harrowing series of skirmishes, the knights finally reach their destination. What they find confuses them. A large squad of constables has routed the last of the rebels, and has them trussed up. Ahead, the royal hospital stands seemingly abandoned, but the constables are terrified to proceed further. Warily, the four knights move closer to the outer wall of the hospital, and it becomes clear why everyone is so scared; a crowd of half-breeds pours onto the rooftops. Their hunched and feral forms howl and scratch as they stare down at you. Why are the half-breeds here? How have so many gone unnoticed? Galahad looks up as the airship floats into view. Just as he calls in air support, the demo comes to a close.



Behind the technology and fascinating fiction, *The Order: 1886* provides solid and familiar cover-based shooting mechanics



The Whitechapel demo offers a thorough glimpse of what we can expect out of the action in *The Order: 1886*, but it also leaves many questions unanswered. The true nature and threat of the half-breeds is tantalizing, as it's clear that their animalistic nature makes for a different kind of enemy than gun-wielding humans. While we know the beginnings of the complex storyline of the Knights, our initial glimpse into this world leaves us wondering about the secrets behind their origins, the fate of King Arthur, and how the values of the Order might have changed over the years.

What about multiplayer? Ready At Dawn is reticent to speak definitively about anything beyond the possibility of a single-player campaign. "We love multiplayer games, and when we took on this project, it's definitely something we kept in mind," Jan says. "From the ground up, it's been in our minds; there's been conscious decisions made that wouldn't prohibit that from being possible."

"At the end of the day, we want to do right by the IP first; build this right," Weerasuriya adds. "We felt that our focus would be better spent just doing this – just doing this story-driven game." Nonetheless, evidence like *The Last of Us* and *God of War: Ascension* indicate Sony's strong desire to have their top-level projects boast multiplayer, and the presence of a four-person squad is hard to ignore.

No matter the answers to these mysteries, *The Order: 1886* makes a powerful first impression. The graphical fidelity and realism on display is astonishing. The depth of story and world building clearly indicate that Ready At Dawn hopes to grow *The Order* into a franchise that reaches beyond one game. After all, there has to be a reason that this installment is subtitled "1886." Amid a sea of sequels and prequels that have dominated release charts in recent years, it's refreshing to see an up and coming team eager to test a complex and unusual new vision. Our early look has us cheering for their success. ♦

Looking for more details on *The Order: 1886*? We've got a full month of interviews, in-depth features, and assets at gameinformer.com/theorder



The thermite rifle sends out a cloud of metallic shards that can be set alight with a flare

A Knight's Arsenal

Ready At Dawn is putting a big focus on crafting compelling weap-

onry to share the spotlight with the larger-than-life characters. The alternate history setting allows for guns that are both visually exciting and functionally unusual. "We want the guns to be like characters in the game," says game director Dana Jan. "There aren't enough games that I play right now where the guns are really the stars of the gunplay. So it was really fun coming up with guns that were grounded in understandable science, but at the same time have behaviors and outcomes that players have never seen before." Here are a few of the coolest weapons we saw during our visit to Ready At Dawn.



The **Arc Gun** is an ideal long-range weapon, and its powerful blast also works well against heavily armored opponents. The gunner holds down the trigger until the weapon is fully charged, and then releases to unleash a crackling spark of electricity.

The **Combo Gun** has two distinct functions. A non-lethal shaped charge can burst out from one barrel, flinging nearby enemies back against the wall to make some space.

Afterward, a standard rifle barrel can finish foes off one by one.



The **Thermite Rifle** sends out pellets of aluminum iron oxide that burst on contact with any surface. A secondary fire then sends out a superheated flare that sets the thermite alight, raining down fiery death on anyone in the cloud's vicinity.

Frag grenades fulfill their expected purpose, but like many of *The Order's* weapons, there's a twist. A small spike can be deployed to make the grenade useable as a proximity mine, which can be jammed into a wall or floor to leave behind a nasty surprise for foes.



PIECES OF EIGHT

We've spent hours sailing the seas and exploring Black Flag's world – here's what every sea dog needs to know

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
October 29
(PlayStation 3,
Xbox 360, Wii U)
November 15
(PlayStation 4)
November 22
(Xbox One)
Winter (PC)

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag lets players live out their own pirate fantasies by giving them a ship, a crew, a vast open sea, and the power to explore it all on their own terms. It's an ambitious project, even for a series known for excess. I played the PlayStation 4 version of the game for several hours, and I was ready to fly the black flag myself when my time was up. Here are eight pieces o' the most interesting things I experienced during those hours.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag



By Jeff Cork

Pirate's Life

I put some serious mileage on Connor's moc-casins, but Assassin's Creed III's version of the American wilderness left me cold. It was beautiful to look at, but there wasn't much to do once you filled your pockets with beaver fat. In contrast, Black Flag's ocean offers a constant bounty of opportunity. I played through several story missions, and wasn't able to sail from one point to another without finding an interesting distraction. Sometimes it was something simple like seeing uncharted islands on the horizon, which often led to impromptu treasure hunts. Other times, I sailed past naval battles in progress. Opportunistic captains can take advantage of these situations, waiting until ships are incapacitated before boarding them and plundering their goods. You may also find random cargo bobbing in the sea, which you can retrieve with the press of a button.

At the center of it all is Edward Kenway's ship, the *Jackdaw*. She may not be the largest vessel in the water, but she gets the job done. The ship feels more agile than AC III's *Aquila*, which is critical for navigating around the Caribbean's various isles, coves, and shoals. Make no mistake, it's still modeled to behave like a boat – don't expect to disregard the wind or back it into reverse if you overshoot a dock – but I enjoyed the simple act of getting around in the vast open world. You're going to spend a lot of time at the wheel, so that's important. To help pass the time, you can also command your crew to sing sea shanties. These rousing ditties are a great accompaniment to the action, and Kenway can add to his pirate playlist by finding musical scores floating on rooftops a la Assassin's Creed III's pages from the *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

Life doesn't end when you head ashore. The Assassin's Creed series is known for featuring worlds bustling with activity, and Black Flag is no different. Islands and towns are teeming with life, from tiny crabs skittering on the beaches to drunks retching up their grog. Towns feature a variety of activities to keep you busy, like era-appropriate board games. There are more rough-and-tumble things to do befitting a pirate, as well. In one area I explored, the local tavern was closed until I took care of a few ruffians. I soundly defeated the foursome and then stepped over their still-squirming bodies to buy a drink. I slipped the barkeep some coin and was given some info with my drink: the coordinates to a fat naval vessel ripe for the taking.



Kenway divides his time between the sea and the shore. He's as deadly regardless of what's under his feet

Naval Combat

Stumbling upon the smoking carcass of a ship is an easy way to get the goods, but it's not why people continue to romanticize pirates. Sea battles are a fundamental part of the game, and they're quite satisfying. Some waters are hostile, and you have to navigate carefully; cross another ship's field of vision, and you're likely to take on cannon fire. Other times, you want to light the fuse first. Either way, the *Jackdaw* is as capable a fighter as she is at surviving a rolling storm.

Your crew attacks with the appropriate weapon

depending on your position. If you're heading straight toward a ship, for example, pressing the attack button unleashes several chain rounds at your victim. From the side, you attack with cannons, and enemies who tail you have to contend with the explosive barrels you drop behind you. As with navigation, ship-to-ship combat felt more immediate to me than AC III's, which felt sluggish and lacked punch. Black Flag's battles felt more participatory; I wasn't waiting for the reload meter to refill between shots, I was jockeying for better placement and planning my next move. The wonderfully realized waves come into play, too. If you don't pay attention, you're likely to waste shots (and time) blasting iron into a watery wall instead of your quarry.

The smallest ships disintegrate after taking on enough damage. Larger ones can be boarded and looted. You can board by hopping from your mast or climbing onto the ship from sea level, but that's not theatrical enough. Once I discovered a handy rope on the *Jackdaw*, I was set. As my crew pulled our ships closer together, I'd use it to swing over to the enemy vessel's deck like a demented Errol Flynn and take on the surviving crew in a little hand-to-hand combat. Once they inevitably surrendered, the holds were emptied before sending it on down to Davy Jones' Locker.

Current Gen?

Ubisoft is understandably excited about how the game looks on PC and next-gen consoles, but it's being released on the PS3, Xbox 360, and Wii U as well. How does the game hold up compared to its big brothers? Will there be any gameplay missing or loading screens while exploring the seas? Game director Ashraf Ismail says current-gen players won't be left out.

"On next-gen there are more features that we get to play with, but the pure core experience is the same on all platforms," he says. "The story, the seamlessness, the number of locations in this world – all of this is generally the same."



Remember chasing after Ben Franklin's papers in *AC III*? There's a similar element in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*, though you're rewarded with new sea shanties



Blackbeard

It wouldn't be an *Assassin's Creed* game without some historical figures, and *Black Flag* is rife with infamous pirates. "When we talked with historians and did the research, we saw that people in this time period were really incredible people," says game director Ashraf Ismail. Edward Thatch, created his Blackbeard persona because he actually abhorred killing. He was going out of his way to scare people and to make himself look like a monster just for the sake of having them give up without a fight."

When I meet him, Thatch is approaching 50 and has become disillusioned with the life of an outlaw. He worked for years to establish a pirate's paradise of sorts in Nassau, but the inhabitants have become sick and it's far from the utopia he'd dreamed of. He realizes that the best way to get what he wants isn't through reason, but through finding what men are terrified of and preying upon that fear. He dons a black hat festooned with lit cannon fuses, and the legend is born.

I played through several story missions alongside the man, and he seems to be one of the most interesting characters (if the not *the* most interesting) I've encountered throughout the series. He's a role model and mentor for Kenway, so players spend plenty of time with the legend.

4 Under The Sea

As Nassau turned nauseous, I began a series of missions designed to bring medicine to the ailing town. Sailing to the nearest drugstore was obviously out of the question, but we were in luck. Word came that a ship carrying medicine had been sunk, which meant it was ours for the taking. With the wreckage in deep waters, I had to equip the *Jackdaw* with a diving bell.

One mercantile trip (and several hundred doubloons) later, I dropped anchor above the wreckage. The bell followed shortly after, with Kenway plunging down with it. Now I had to find the medicine among the various chests strewn across the ocean floor. My first few attempts were fruitless, though it gave me time to appreciate the beautiful coral and undersea life. I stopped by the bell to refill my lungs with

air before working my way into the actual shipwreck. I found what I was looking for, though the rotten wood collapsed around me after I grabbed only one measly bottle.

From there, it only got worse. I had to find a new escape route, and a current banged me through an underwater cave system – leaving me seconds away from drowning. I returned to the bell, but by then sharks surrounded it. I switched between swim-sprinting and hiding amongst the seaweed as best I could, in an attempt to not be spotted. A shark discovered me nonetheless, and I had to bat it away with a series of frantic quick-time events. Finally, I returned to the bell and signaled for my crew to yank me back aboard.

The medicine? It was expired. Wonderful.

5 Treasure Island

Kenway's adventures take him all over the Caribbean, and his holds overflow with plundered treasure and other prizes as he progresses. His biggest haul, perhaps, could be his very own pirate hideaway, Inagua Island.

"It's reminiscent of the villa or the homestead," Ismail says, referring to the home bases featured in *Assassin's Creed II* and *III*. There's one key difference, however. "In the past, you use [those] as mechanisms to make money. Here's it's really about services. It's a place where all

the amenities you need in the game are available."

The island has its secrets, too, which you can uncover through exploration and by completing missions. I explored a bit of it, and was surprised to see how large it was – it's not just a dock with a margarita stand set up nearby. The jungle hides ruins of the isle's previous inhabitants, and I'm excited to see what they were up to and to perhaps learn why they aren't there any longer.

6 Crafting

Kenway's arsenal isn't entirely made from off-the-shelf items. You have to be resourceful to survive harsh conditions on the open seas. With *Black Flag*, Ubisoft Montreal takes a page from *Far Cry 3*'s crafting system. Players can track down various island life and use their pelts and other assorted parts to create new items. By way of introduction, I hunted a pair of ocelots and a few iguanas – a cinch using Kenway's handy eagle vision. Once I acquired the appropriate materials, I created a new holster for my pistol and a health upgrade.

Crafting is yet another reason to keep your spyglass eye open while traveling. If you use the tool on islands, you may spot an icon indicating what animals make it their home. Depending on what you're looking for, that could be an invitation to drop anchor and go for a hunt.



These sleeping darts are a handy way to take out patrols



Kenway adds to his pirate crew by recruiting them – or rescuing them from the gallows in this instance



Violence isn't the first resort for Kenway – he's fond of negotiating his way through trouble

Modern Times

Desmond's story wrapped up at the end of *Assassin's Creed III*, but Abstergo is still going strong. What's the company up to now? Ubisoft is making sure that *Black Flag* is accessible to players who haven't played the previous games. One way they're doing that is through the present-day content.

Desmond sequences are nowhere to be found. You assume the role of a low-level data analyst who realizes that Abstergo Entertainment is researching Edward Kenway for a specific reason, not just because he happens to be one of many pirates. I saw a little bit of the present-day content, including a quick look at the employee's cubicle – complete with figurines and other decorations.

Ismail says most of this content is optional, and that it serves as both fan service for AC veterans as well as a way for neophytes to catch up on the ancient feud between Templar and Assassin. This section includes hours of content, including video and audio files, and transcripts. Ismail teased that players will see what happened to Desmond after *AC III*, as well.

Smooth Sailing

I played the PlayStation 4 version of the game, and it was absolutely gorgeous. The level of detail on display astounds at times, especially during heavy storms at sea. As the *Jackdaw* pitched and fell in the waves, water spilled across the deck. The crew braced against the surf, with some members slipping on the slick wooden surface. The sails strained against the winds, further selling the illusion.

In spite of everything *Assassin's Creed III* may have done right, it was full of glitches. I spent about five hours with *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, and I'm relieved to say that I didn't see anything sketchy. Characters didn't fall through the world, ships didn't teleport, and livestock didn't stroll around in the sky. I only mention this because I was so disappointed with the myriad issues I ran into with the last game. ♦



Batman: Arkham Origins

A fight to the finish with Deathstroke

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
Warner Bros. Montreal

» **Release**
October 25

The Black Mask is in hiding after placing a bounty on Batman's head. The Penguin knows where he is, but he's holed up on The Final Offer, a nuclear-powered cruise ship turned mobile fortress where he makes his arms deals. Batman needs to get in, interrogate the bird, and find the crime boss before things get worse on the streets of Gotham.

This incursion takes place approximately two hours into *Batman: Arkham Origins*. Once aboard, I see some familiar gameplay and some of the new dynamics that Warner Bros. Montreal is introducing into the Arkham series.

The predator moments that fans love have received some noticeable upgrades. At the conclusion of each scene, players receive a grade based on their performance. In addition to the raw experience points that translate into WayneTech upgrades, higher grades offer multipliers that can rocket the best Dark Knights into new abilities faster.

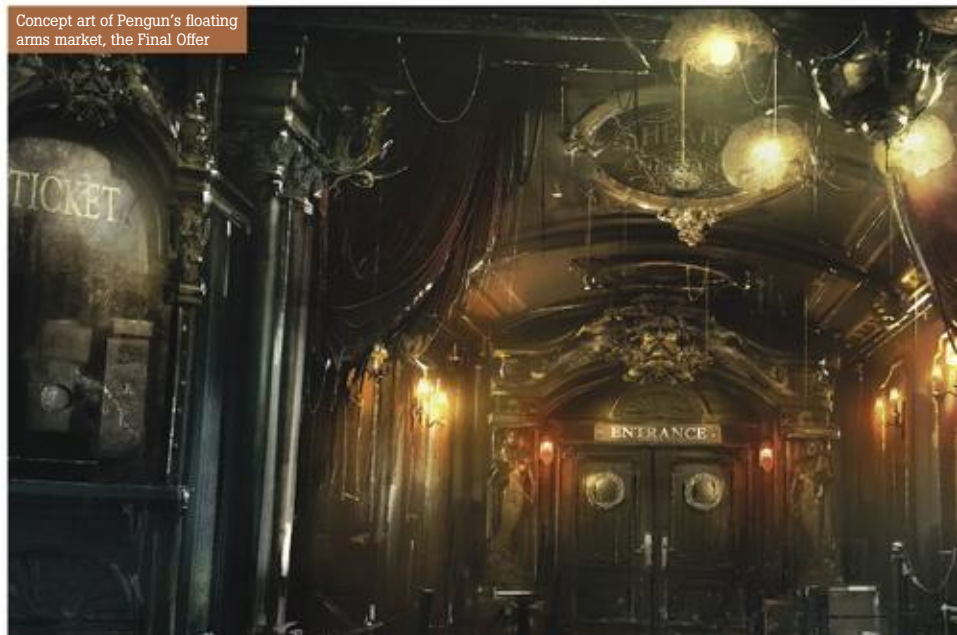
The WayneTech system also receives an upgrade in this installment. Instead of a largely flat list of options, Batman's skills and gadget enhancements appear as a more traditional tech tree. These are grouped into close combat, invisible predator, and auxiliary tracks.

Additionally, Dark Knight Challenges unlock access to some new abilities. Players earn

these by performing well in combat and predator moments. They also provide a health boost, which can make all the difference in a tough fight. "We want to train players to be black belts at being Batman," says gameplay director Michael McIntyre.

As I sneak through the Final Offer, I realize that the Penguin's thugs aren't alone; enforcers for the Falcone crime family are also present. After engaging the armed guards from the shadows, one of Penguin's men takes a mobster hostage.

Concept art of Penguin's floating arms market, the Final Offer



This sets up a tricky situation for Batman. If he's seen, the captive will be executed. Should that happen, it's game over. This is similar to the Victor Zsasz mini-fight in the beginning of Arkham Asylum.

After subduing both captor and captive, it's time to fight. The free-flow combat system has some new tricks up its sleeve, as Batman uses more of the environment to his advantage. One thug wields a sledgehammer. Wrestling that from him, the Dark Knight takes the criminal out of the fight by twisting the foe's leg around the handle of the hammer and snapping the bone.

After reaching Penguin's cabin, I discover him torturing Alberto Falcone, son of crime boss Carmine Falcone. Penguin wants Falcone's territory, but Batman is more interested in getting the information he needs.

He grabs Penguin and forcefully encourages the bird to spill Black Mask's location. Things go south quickly, as Batman goes from predator to prey when Deathstroke enters the fray. He's seen the bounty on Batman's life, and he aims to collect the reward.

What ensues is a fight unlike any other in the Arkham series. Deathstroke wields gadgets and martial arts skills that rival Batman's. "The assassin fights are final exams," McIntyre says. "We want to test the player's core skills."

The Deathstroke fight is a one-on-one free-flow combat bout. At the start, he wields his metal bo staff, and uses it to trip Batman and poke him from afar. I counter, but when I get too aggressive Deathstroke blocks the assault.

This sets up a chain of hits and counterblows, the latter of which must be timed precisely. After dealing enough damage, Deathstroke retreats under cover of a flash bomb. At this point he either leaps, forcing a series of rapid counters, or uses a remote hook latched onto Batman that reels in an exploding barrel.

This can be countered, sending the canister at Deathstroke. If you fail, the villain takes the opportunity to use guns from afar. A combination of smoke pellets and grapnel hooks brings the combat back to close quarters.

Halfway through the fight, Deathstroke loses his bo and switches to a sword. The mechanics are largely the same, but the counters and timing vary. Batman eventually incapacitates Deathstroke and walks away with a new gadget, the remote grapnel that caused him so much trouble during the fight. » **Michael Futter**



Deathstroke welcomes his fight with Batman



Penguin hides in his office





Forza Motorsport 5

The Xbox One delivers more fuel for the franchise

- » **Platform**
Xbox One
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Racing
(16-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Turn 10 Studios
- » **Developer**
Microsoft Studios
- » **Release**
November 22

The Xbox One's feature set may have changed since the system was unveiled in the spring, but Forza Motorsport 5 developer Turn 10 is not pumping the brakes on trying to deliver a true next-gen experience.

Forza 4 had Drivatars, but Forza 5 uses the cloud power of the Xbox One to expand the concept and make them a more integral part of the entire game. The feature tracks how players drive their cars (brake points, corner entry, etc.) and creates an AI profile based on that data, which then populates other drivers' single-player races according to the difficulty they want to race at. If you have an online connection, new Drivatars are automatically uploaded, and all of them evolve. If you don't connect online, the game still ships with normal, developer-created AI cars. Since your Drivatar is being used in other gamers' races, you get a report on what your Drivatar has been up to since you last played.

The game also uses cloud computing to provide better matchmaking (including pairing

you with opponents who speak the same language), and to surface different kinds of races and online challenges the console thinks you may be interested in based on your favorite car, for example. Livery designs from your favorite artists or those of a certain style are suggested. The more you use the recommendation system, the better it works.

Forza 5's graphics surely benefit from the extra horsepower of the Xbox One, but it's not just about a new coat of paint. The power of the system is being used to rework the series' tire physics, aerodynamics, suspension, and more. While this tweaking would be welcome in any year, it's more important for this Xbox One debut not only given the added umph under the hood, but due to the fact that Forza 5 is including open-wheel cars for the first time. These include classic Formula 1 cars and IndyCars – vehicles that are sure to test the limits of your tires and the laws of the universe.

If you can't wait to strap into a Formula 1 car and hit the track, Forza 5 is making it easier

than previous entries. The game is organized into eight leagues: Sport Compact, Sport, Grand Touring, Exotic, Vintage, Specialized, Racing, and Class Competition. Within these leagues, you race through various championship series (there are 40 total in the game). To gain entrance to any of the other leagues at any time you must simply own a car in that category. If you take a different car through a category you've already raced in, the game presents you with different events.

Forza 4 was a high point for the franchise on the Xbox 360 because of its user-friendly options and the natural evolution of the series. It went from being a by-the-numbers sim racer to augmenting that core by finding better ways to let players access its content – including fun multiplayer modes, the sharing of user-created content, and merging its online and offline worlds. The Xbox One is the next step in this continued progress, and hopefully Turn 10 can use the new system to do what all racers are born to do – to push their machines to the absolute limits. » **Matthew Kato**



Iconic track Laguna Seca will be in the game, along with Spa-Francorchamps in Belgium, a circuit in the city of Prague, and more



The Open-Wheel Experience

Forza 5 now includes classic Formula 1 cars, IndyCar, and other open-wheel vehicles. Teams from the IZOD IndyCar series include Andretti Autosport, Team Penske, Target Chip Ganassi Racing, and Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing. Classic F1 cars include James Hunt's 1976 McLaren M23 and Niki Lauda's 1976 Ferrari 312-2.

How racing games handle car damage is always a hot topic among gamers, and it will be interesting to see how it's represented in Forza 5



Forza Vista

If that name sounds familiar, it's because it's a take on Forza 4's Autovista – the showroom-like, Kinect-enabled mode that let you inspect certain cars and learn about them via commentary from *Top Gear*'s Jeremy Clarkson. Forza Vista expands the mode by offering it on all the cars in the game. Turn 10 isn't saying specifically how many cars are in the game, other than to say it's in the hundreds. The entire cast of *Top Gear* returns for Forza 5, but it's unknown if this will be for Forza Vista mode or in some other capacity.



Dark Souls II

No easy way out

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

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

» **Publisher**
Namco Bandai

» **Developer**
From Software

» **Release**
March 11
(PlayStation 3,
Xbox 360)
2014 (PC)

Just when you thought the Dark Souls formula couldn't get any more punishing, developer From Software reveals a suite of malicious design changes. The original Dark Souls gained a cult following of masochists who appreciate its challenging third-person swordplay, lethality, and high-risk leveling system. While the original is anything but a cake walk, players could exploit a few tricks to make the game slightly less hellish. From Software is putting an end to that with the sequel.

One of the series' nastiest features is that enemy players can appear in your game to kill you. This could be avoided in the previous game by remaining an undead, or "hollowed," character. Only players who restored their

humanity with a consumable item could be invaded by bullies or summon allies to take on big challenges. In Dark Souls II, even the undead can be invaded, wiping away what little respite the series offered. Even worse, when you're undead, each death that follows shaves off a portion of your maximum health, bottoming out at around 50 percent. Only using a Human Effigy to restore your humanity replenishes your life. From Software is designing it so that players want to be human.

Another new slap in the face is a limit on how long summoned co-op allies can assist you. A time gauge ticks down as a buddy or two helps you out with a tough section or boss encounter. The gauge depletes faster as your teammates kill enemies. From Software

hasn't decided whether summoned allies can disappear mid boss battle or not.

Dark Souls II is shaping up to be much tougher than its predecessor but there is some respite in sight. Dark Souls II also introduces a new covenant for players to align themselves with. The Way of the Blue are do-gooders who help out other players when they're invaded. These glowing blue defenders are automatically summoned to your aid when



Blood messages can be written anywhere, anytime





Bonfire checkpoints are still few and far between

you encounter enemy black phantoms, who are powerful foes spawned by other players. Successfully helping out other players earns you White Sign Soapstones, which can be used to call in backup later on.

From Software also streamlines the series' indirect method of helping other players. The previous game required a consumable item to leave blood messages – notes that warn players about enemy ambushes, clue them

in on secrets, or deviously trick them into a deathtrap. Blood messages can now be left anywhere without requiring an item. If your blood message is ranked highly by others, you recover a little HP. It may not be much, but the survivors of Dark Souls' vicious world must take what they can get.

Speaking of the world of Dark Souls II, we explored a new area called the Huntsman's Copse during a hands-on session with the public beta (starting on PlayStation 3 in October). The location is filled with dreary woods, cave networks, and stone ruins. I battled gaunt fiends with flaming torches and lumbering brutes carrying sickles in each hand. Basic movement and combat feels identical to Dark Souls, but the previous game's occasionally jittery animations are smoothed out. I died multiple times at the local minions' hands, and while navigating pitch black caverns with deadly cliffs. Players still have to run back to the point where they died to recover their souls (Dark Souls II's experience and currency), or it's lost forever following another death. Despite being rusty and receiving a beating, I dragged myself to a bonfire where I was able to checkpoint my progress and level up.

From Software could've designed a by-the-numbers sequel with new enemies and locations. To give players something they could expect wouldn't be the Dark Souls way, however. Instead of rewarding its fans for enduring the original Dark Souls, From Software is taking the opportunity to punish players brave (or stupid) enough to come back for more.

» **Tim Turi**



Members of the blue covenant can enter your game to help you battle invading red players



Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes

New tactics for a new mission



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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
Kojima Productions

» **Release**
TBA

The latest live demo for Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes seems suspiciously familiar at first. It begins with a story sequence at a prison camp – the same sequence we saw when the project was first unveiled last year. However, a few things have changed.

First, English voice actors have now assumed their roles, including Kiefer Sutherland as Snake (a.k.a. Big Boss). Second, among the badges that the grotesque villain throws out of a helicopter is a single black and red FOX badge. As a member of the Kojima Productions staff starts playing, Snake's objective is to hunt down the anomalous badge somewhere in the camp – and to show off several new features of this next installment in the process.

As the search begins, Snake pulls out his binoculars and begins marking the guards that patrol the base. These enemies remain marked, allowing players to track their movements and maneuver around them. The system is more intuitive than watching vision cones, and allows you to stay focused on the action rather than staring at a mini-map. Though marking is handy, it doesn't protect you completely; not all guards are standing on watchtowers or walking patrol routes just waiting to be marked. Sometimes enemies are hidden, and can still get the drop on Snake.

This happens as Snake descends into the camp. Hopping off a roof, he lands directly in front of a guard. In previous Metal Gear titles, that's when the alarm would sound – but not this time. When detection is imminent, you have an opportunity to avoid raising the full alarm thanks to a few seconds of slow-motion. If you can neutralize the enemies that have seen you in that short window, you are in the clear. Fortunately, this is what happens during the demo. Snake kills the guard, hides the body, and resumes his search.

Snake quietly approaches a few enemies and overhears them talking about where to find a cool red-and-black badge. Springing into action, he kills one of the guards and uses CQC to disarm and interrogate the other. The guard reveals that the badge is hidden in the back of a truck. Despite the fact that it's only 1975, Snake has a smartphone-like device that provides holographic satellite imagery of the camp, which he uses to mark the location of the truck and follows the objective indicator.

Once Snake knows the location, obtaining the badge is simple. However, escaping with the prize is more difficult; Snake is spotted by several guards, and is unable to take them out in time to prevent the alarm. Enemies swarm him from all directions and start firing. He's taking damage, but he no longer has a visible

health bar. Instead, the game takes a cue from the first-person shooter genre and uses the “decolorize and blood-splatter” method to indicate the severity of Snake's wounds. Taking a break while out of harm's way appears to regenerate some health.

To escape the gauntlet, Snake steals one of several jeeps scattered throughout the base, driving it out the gates. Though the guards pursue, they can't stop him before he calls in air support. His helicopter extracts him from the hot zone, thanks in part to the fact that Snake threw some grenades at anti-aircraft guns during the preceding firefight. As he flies off, he triumphantly attaches his new badge to his sneaking suit.

In the actual game, Snake's objective in the camp is to rescue Chico – a young man first introduced in Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker. The badge hunt was created solely to demonstrate some of the mechanics without spoiling any of the real objectives or story moments. We already know some of the broad strokes (things don't go well for Snake during the events of Ground Zeroes, and he falls into a coma for nine years), but Kojima Productions is notoriously good at protecting the twists and turns in any new Metal Gear title. For now, we have to be content knowing more about how the game plays, and accept the fact that all of the story details will have to wait. » **Joe Juba**



September marked the 15th anniversary of the release of Metal Gear Solid on PlayStation



The world of Ground Zeroes is not as open or freeform as what comes later in The Phantom Pain



In The Boss' Words

At a recent event at Kojima Productions' new Los Angeles studio, director Hideo Kojima answered questions ranging from his design philosophy to specific mechanics of Metal Gear Solid V (which encompasses both Ground Zeroes and The Phantom Pain). Here are some of the highlights from Kojima's comments.

On open-world stealth

"If you CQC someone and leave the body, and a vehicle comes by and spots it, the alert stage is going to go on. So you have to be careful about what you perform and how you take care of it afterwards... Since this is an open world, if we bring in the old Metal Gear – where you can get spotted from anywhere – maybe that's a little tough. So we added a little bit of a step so players would have an opportunity to not be found."

On interface

"It was intentional that we minimized the amount of UI. We wanted to give players that photorealistic feeling, and we wanted to minimize the sense that you're playing a game. We do have to add a little bit so it will be intuitive. Right now, I'm still not satisfied with the amount."

On the next-gen version

"First of all, it's going to be 60 frames per second. The resolution, the texture, there's going to be a great improvement there. Also, we're going to have a lot more lights, a lot more shadows, so it's going to look a lot more realistic. The gameplay itself won't see a great difference. We're not going to throw in a bunch of NPCs and we're not going to have a bunch of new enemies."

On splitting MGS V into two parts

"The Ground Zeroes part is only the prologue, so I really wanted to separate that. Another reason is that Ground Zeroes takes place in 1975. The main story, The Phantom Pain, takes place nine years after that. There's a pretty wide time difference there, so I wanted to separate that. Another reason is that Metal Gear, the series, hasn't done open-world. Transitioning from the former Metal Gear right into an open-world – we didn't really want to do that. Ground Zeroes is open, but it's a little closed. We wanted to give the player an opportunity to get used to the open world field and the traversal and all the different vehicles, and then move on to the main story."

On Big Boss

"Solid Snake isn't a real human, but Big Boss is. You really see that emotion from him. He can be sad. He can be angry. Story-wise, it's easier to create a story with that true emotion from the character."

On cinematics

"It's an open world, so we're not really planning to add many cinematics. We're trying to get the player perspective, so we're not really going to cut the camera, even in the cutscenes. We're going to try to follow the same camera, and have a smooth transition between cinematics and gameplay... In open world, it's a little bit of a distraction to add the cutscenes. The structure itself is kind of like a TV series, where you complete all these little missions, and by completing the missions, it would actually tie together and tell a bigger story."



The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter

Former People Can Fly developers reveal mysterious new thriller

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
The Astronauts
- » **Developer**
The Astronauts
- » **Release**
2013

In 2011, People Can Fly released the combo-centric first-person shooter *Bulletstorm*, then transitioned to *Gears of War: Judgment*. Not long afterward, the studio's founders left the company, only to emerge months later with a new independent game studio, The Astronauts. Their first project is a unique new horror game called *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*.

Inspired by macabre tales from the early 20th century, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* centers on a man named Paul Prospero, an occult detective with the supernatural ability to visualize events leading up to a crime scene. The game begins after Prospero receives a coffee-stained letter from a kid named Ethan Carter, who claims to be one of his biggest fans. However, it quickly becomes apparent that Ethan is in grave danger, and Paul sets off to help him. The kid's trail leads Paul into the mountains, where the detective discovers the mutilated body of one of Ethan's kidnappers. If Paul hopes to save the kid before it's too late, he has to get to the bottom of the paranormal activities that have plagued the area for decades.

"It's a different kind of horror to what's expected in video games," says lead designer Adrian Chmielarz. "Whenever someone says horror, they usually mean a survival horror: a game that involves some evil entities that are bent on killing the hero. But while the primal fear is great, we've decided to go for a different kind of experience, one where there's gameplay, but no combat, and the story focuses on people, not the claws in the dark



The game is inspired by macabre tales from the early 20th century

and a malfunctioning flashlight."

The Vanishing of Ethan Carter sounds like other indie horror hits like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. Players explore a series of disturbing environments looking for clues to progress through the story. However, Paul's "gifts" give him a supernatural edge, allowing him to visualize the final moments of anyone who's been murdered. These flashbacks become more detailed as players pick up clues surrounding the murder.

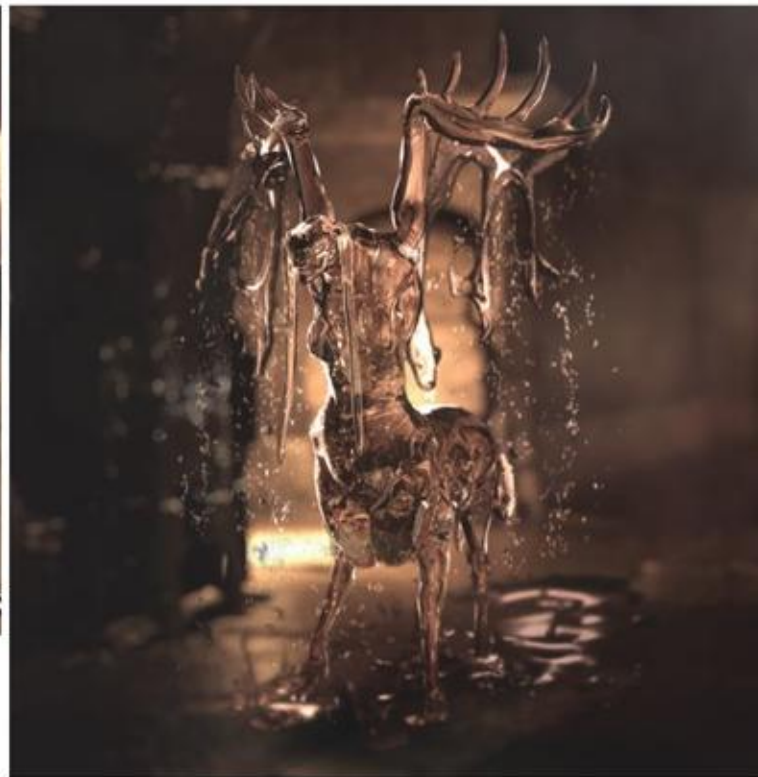
"We're trying to steer away from gamey things like having the player pick up items just because they are available," Chmielarz says.

"Ooh, a pink shoe, I'd better pick it up, it may come in handy later!" That's like bad acting or plastic CGI in a movie – they make you realize it's just a game. The only time we want you to say, 'It's just a game' is when you get too emotionally attached to the characters and need to convince yourself it's not real."

The Astronauts have only started to tease *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, but the company has already tickled our curiosity. The studio may be brand new, but we respect the pedigree of its founders, and are glad that we won't have to wait long to see this game in action. » **Ben Reeves**

Deep Down

Exploring the depths of Capcom's free-to-play PS4 title



Future Xbox One owners have *Dead Rising 3* to look forward to, but PlayStation 4 users may also have a Capcom exclusive with *Deep Down*. Sony showed off the free-to-play downloadable title on stage at a PS4 event last February, though Capcom and Sony still aren't confirming the title for release outside Japan. The third-person action title channels the spirit of *Dark Souls* with weighty combat and dark, ominous corridors populated by angry creatures. We strapped on our armor and took to the depths during a hands-on preview.

Deep Down takes place in New York during the year 2094. While we haven't seen what Capcom's futuristic vision of The Big Apple looks like, we know players are zapped back through time by touching magical artifacts. The demo begins at the entrance of a huge stone temple, with tall pillars flanking the entrance. The metal-clad knight plods toward the entrance, kneels on a rune etched into the floor, and is teleported inside. The vibrant glow of the portal and wispy, brightly colored particle effects show off the PS4's graphical capabilities.

The dungeons of *Deep Down* are procedurally generated, promising a unique experience for each player. During one playthrough the ground crumbles after a few steps down the first dim corridor, sending me into a pit filled with huge, pale-fleshed ogres wielding clubs. The trap is absent during another playthrough, and the initial hallway instead leads me to a room filled with arrow-shooting statues. These spherical stone sentries track your movement, but are vulnerable to a quick spear jab from behind.

Combat has a slow, deliberate feel similar to *Dark Souls*, but offers more precision. The hulking brutes in the dungeon can be taken down using a series of standard and heavy attacks. These strikes have animations of varying length, requiring strategic timing before your enemy counters. Without a shield to deflect attacks I have to leap backward to evade strikes. Holding down a shoulder button brings up a reticle, which lets me jab with accuracy at the ogres' legs. When the wounded beasts take a knee they're left open to a volley of spear stabs. For larger crowds you can lob magical bombs like grenades or activate a special ability for a wide slash or charging lunge. Special attacks seem to

deplete a resource that can be recovered from killing foes and breaking pottery.

I stumble upon a collection of other secrets and tricks before the demo ends. Touching a glowing glyph on a wall teleports me to a room filled with treasure chests. One winding passage leads to a dead end. More false floors give out and trap me in a tight space filled with bloodthirsty monsters. What lies around each corner is uncertain due to the shifting layout of each dungeon.

Deep Down also supports four-player online co-op. A demonstration from Capcom shows four knights teaming up to take down a huge dragon. The legendary creature drenches the allies with flame and summons whirling, fiery tornadoes in the arena. One player activates an ability to stop time. Even the flow of fire coming from the dragon's mouth is frozen, creating a cool John Woo-style effect as the knight circles around and tosses magical bombs at the beast.

Many questions still surround *Deep Down*. We still don't know how many randomly arranged dungeons are in the game, how important a role story plays, what type of progression system is in place, or what the consequences for death are (invincibility seemed to be activated for demo purposes). Another curiosity is how the free-to-play model will be monetized.

The biggest question of all is if and when *Deep Down* will arrive stateside. Since most of the debut trailer's dialogue was spoken in English and spending the millions to make a game solely for the relatively small market of Japan would be foolish, we have a strong feeling we'll get our hands on it again. » **Tim Turi**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

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

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom Online Games,
SCE Studio Japan

» **Release**
TBA

Dragon's breath looks convincing on the PS4





The Crew

Cruisin' across the USA

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ivory Tower/
Ubisoft Reflections

» **Release**
Spring

Players looking to hit the track this fall have no shortage of options, with nearly every major publisher bringing its own take on racing. Ubisoft's *The Crew* sets itself apart from the pack with its exhilarating cross-country races and insane-looking arcade action. We spoke with creative director Julian Gerighty to learn more.

The open-world game takes place in a seamless, condensed version of the U.S., featuring a wide variety of terrain such as deserts, forests, and cities. You might decide to take on a mission that challenges you to follow a line coursing through a hilly stretch of coal country, and then minutes later try your hand at a gonzo

race where roads are mere suggestions.

"In this idealized version of the USA, everything, and I do mean everything, you can see you can drive to, drive over, scramble to the top of, race the length of, or jump off," Gerighty says. "Everywhere you go, other players are there too."

Drivehub is the core of *The Crew*'s social component, and it boasts a variety of functions. "Our friends list lets you know who's currently online and available, but another way to see what they're up to is to navigate throughout our map, zoom in, zoom out to satellite view to explore our world and watch your friends live as if you were hovering above them

in a helicopter," he says. "This also serves as a transportation mechanism as you can choose to fast travel next to your friends at a glance if you wish to join them whether it is to bond or to compete."

Even when you choose to play cooperatively with friends, there's a component of friendly competition at play. If you perform better than your buddies, you'll net more cash and XP rewards than they do – there's not a whole lot of room for dead weight in *The Crew*. Those rewards are funneled back into your garage, where you can tune and tweak your cars as you prepare for your next wild American adventure. » **Jeff Cork**



Players are rewarded for performance even in co-op, so don't think you can slide by under your friends' work



Ubisoft says this game would only be possible on next-generation hardware



LEGO Marvel Super Heroes

Marvel's best (and worst) save New York

LEGO Marvel Super Heroes is a natural evolution of the concepts introduced in *LEGO Batman 2* and honed in *LEGO City Undercover*. *Traveler's Tales*' take on New York is an open world that features real landmarks like Central Park, as well as those that only exist in Marvel's version of the Big Apple. You can visit Stark Tower, Dr. Strange's Sanctum Sanctorum, and the Fantastic Four's Baxter Building – the setting of the demo *Traveler's Tales* showed off.

The sequence begins high above the Empire State Building, upon the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicopter. There, Captain America and Mr. Fantastic explore the deck of the massive airborne battle cruiser before leaping off the side. As they plummet to the ground, Cap pulls the ripcord on his parachute. Mr. Fantastic requires no such aid, flattening and extending his body to catch the air on his way down.

Once on the ground, the two make their way to the Baxter Building, which Doctor Octopus (under orders from Doctor Doom) has commandeered. In order to reach the front of the building, Mr. Fantastic and Captain America must get through a gate. By constructing a grate in typical LEGO style, Mr. Fantastic is able to slip to the other side and remove the lock. From there, Captain America takes over to disable the defenses, and the two head inside.

After making their way to the top, the duo confronts Doctor Octopus. The doctor has dismantled one of Mr. Fantastic's devices to retrieve a cosmic block from Silver Surfer's

broken surfboard. Before the heroes can take out the antagonist, he escapes to the rooftops with Captain America and Mr. Fantastic in pursuit. We'll have to wait to find out if he escapes or is apprehended.

Many of the 150 characters are still a secret, as *Traveler's Tales* doesn't want to spoil the surprises that LEGO has in store for new sets. We do know that the cast includes some characters that are likely going to be more popular in the coming year thanks to *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Thor: The Dark World*, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*.

The main tale involves the world-eating Galactus, but many villains, including Doctor Doom, Sandman, and Sabretooth, are featured.

The cast also includes a number of lesser known characters, including Howard the Duck, H.E.R.B.I.E., The Leader, and Captain Britain.

Figures that are typically more violent have been made to fit the LEGO universe so as not to be left out. For instance, Punisher is an eco-enforcer rather than an ultra-violent vigilante. Deadpool is included, and while he's not nearly as vulgar, he still amusingly breaks the fourth wall.

If those aren't enough, a character creator allows players to mix and match pieces. Not only does this allow for unique creations, but each included piece imbues the new hero (or villain) with the powers of its owner.

» **Michael Futter**

» **Platform**

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

» **Style**

1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**

Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**

Traveler's Tales

» **Release**

October 22
(Wii U, PS3, 360, PC)
November 15 (PS4)
November 22 (Xbox One)

A closer look at the S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier





Strider

An old-school hero retains his grip

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Double Helix

» **Release**
2014

Twenty-five years have passed since Capcom introduced Strider Hiryu to the world, but time hasn't slowed the futuristic ninja down one iota. He's appearing in a new downloadable game next year, and as we recently saw, he's still able to scurry, slash, and slide with the best of them.

Our demo starts in a futuristic military facility, filled with the heavy artillery and high-tech computers you'd expect in an evil lair. Robotic soldiers patrol the metal hallways from the ground and on catwalks, but they're no match for Strider's quickness. He's able to get the drop on his enemies by running toward them at full speed, sliding through them when close, and then turning back around and carving the soldiers to pieces from behind. It happens so quickly that the mechanized threats aren't even able to face their opponent before they're destroyed.

Strider's abilities are upgraded as he progresses, imbuing his plasma sword with a fiery charge upgrade, and powering up his slide attack even further. The latter upgrade is particularly handy, allowing him to destroy air vents and tunnel underneath sections of the facility. The game's 2.5D presentation and exploration aspects bring to mind games like *Shadow Complex*, albeit with more of an emphasis on nimble combat. Strider's focus on melee attacks make him a unique character—he's forced to use his agility and ability to cling on practically every available surface to avoid projectiles as he methodically gets within striking distance of his foes. It's a refreshing change of pace.

We beat a teleporting miniboss (an excuse to further hone our slide-and-slash attacking combo), and progress deeper into the complex. We're taken by surprise when what we think was an ordinary platform turns out to be the back of a large robotic foe—the Ouroboros Mk III.

The segmented dragon is a nod to the Ouroboros boss from the end of the first stage in the original *Strider* and the Chinese dragon boss from *Strider 2*. Strider doesn't have time

to reflect on those memories, as the creature uses electrified spikes to defend itself. Strider has to destroy three sedative capsules located on the Ouroboros' back, which he does in a thrilling multi-part battle. The dragon-like armored beast isn't having any of it, firing missiles and summoning other enemies to help in its defense. As each capsule is destroyed, the creature becomes more enraged, increasing both the speed and ferocity of its attack, in classic old-school arcade game style. It's all in vain, as Strider methodically destroys the vessels and reveals the horror beneath the armor: a disgusting biological monstrosity, trapped in the armor by Strider's nemesis, Grandmaster Meio.

Capcom is a strong steward of its back catalog, delivering great downloadable reboots of classic games like *Bionic Commando* and the *Mega Man* series. *Strider* is set to continue that streak, which is good news for people who have been waiting for the hero to step out of *Marvel vs. Capcom's* shadow. In the meantime, we'll have to wait until 2014 to see exactly what else Meio has in the works. Don't be surprised if it involves a giant ape in a metal suit. » **Jeff Cork**

Strider fans will get the Ouroboros reference



The plasma sword is an invaluable weapon



D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die

Quirky characters and time travel



The adventure genre went through a rough decade, but it has picked up steam recently with hits like *The Walking Dead*. Their intriguing stories have immersed players, but what if you were actually a part of the adventure, speaking the dialogue and performing the actions? That's what Hidetaka "Swery 65" Suehiro of *Deadly Premonition* fame is attempting to do in *D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die*. He compares the experience to being in the middle of a TV episode. At Tokyo Game Show, Swery demonstrated how it leverages Kinect to reach its goal.

You won't be flailing your arms with the Kinect interface. Swery and his team designed the commands to be played with leisurely gestures like raising your arms or pushing them forward. While Swery prefers you play *D4* with the Kinect, he's also included an option to use a controller.

As the demo begins, David Young arrives on an airplane set to change the past. His wife was murdered and this flight is the key to finding out why. All David knows is that a drug boss by the name of "D" has something to do with the crime. Warping into the past comes with its own hazards – David must make sure nobody figures out that he's not really supposed to be there.

Soon enough, David has his first encounter with a flight attendant. He's instantly attracted to her, as she reminds him of his beloved Peggy. As he converses with her, different dialogue options pop up, and you respond using the Kinect's voice recognition. The catch? To get more points, you must role-play as David and pick the command he's most likely to say. Soon the flirtatious chat turns into a stern warning. The flight attendant tells David the airline doesn't appreciate "uninvited guests." David wonders if she knows he's from the future, but he has no time to worry, as he must figure out the mystery behind "D."

Scanning the room, two men catch his eye. The one with the shaved head wearing dark sunglasses looks like a take-no-lip man. The other, sporting a vibrant purple suit, has a



Making the right Kinect gestures brings intensity to high-action fights

sleeping mask with silly eyes covering his face. After an unpleasant conversation, the dark sunglasses man named Derek obviously knows David's game and tells him that this case will take him to places he doesn't want to go.

David continues on, searching the cabin for more clues. As David, you use the Kinect to reach and examine objects. You can also take a special action to illuminate clues you haven't searched, and a seat cover catches his eye.

Before David finds any other clues, an exuberant, green-haired fashion designer bumps into him. The designer walks around with his muse, a mannequin named Sukey, whom he treats like a real human being. The exchange is bizarre, but hilarious. The lively conversation soon takes a backseat to a fight that erupts between the two suspicious men from earlier, making it clear one has something to hide. This is where things heat up, as you're now part of the fight.

The culprit throws everything at David he can, from suitcases to carts to boxes. Your goal with the Kinect commands is to push items out of the way and dodge innocents with simple hand swipes in the oncoming direction. One command requires an arm raise, which leads to David holding on to the luggage bin and kicking the opponent to the floor. Suddenly, turbulence causes some unexpected trouble, making both characters fly forward and shattering the mannequin. David picks up Sukey's leg as a weapon and the enemy takes an object, winding it up like a pitch. Swinging the leg like a baseball bat, David socks his opponent right in the eye, his glass eye falling to the ground.

Mannequin lovers and glass eyes are only just a sample of what's to come. *D4* is looking to bring adventure games to a different place, and I'm curious to see how it all shakes out.

» **Kimberly Wallace**

- » **Platform**
Xbox One
- » **Style**
1-Player Adventure
- » **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios
- » **Developer**
Access Games
- » **Release**
TBA

Knack

Piecing together Sony's family-friendly launch game



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
SCE Japan Studio

» **Release**
November 15

Colorful platforming games are a staple of new console launches, and Knack is the PlayStation 4's inaugural entry in the genre. Developed by Sony's Japan Studio (Ape Escape, Gravity Rush) and PlayStation 4 system architect Mark Cerny, Knack harkens back to the days of Crash Bandicoot with a touch of accessible, God of War-style combat. We bashed through a fortress of goblins and tanks in a recent look at the PS4 exclusive.

Knack is a golem composed of hundreds and eventually thousands of tiny floating relics. Over the course of the game Knack collects

relics to grow larger and stronger, and loses them as he takes damage. Thanks to the PS4's increased processing power, each individual relic can be seen adhering to Knack's body or flying off with each hit. At one point he bashes ice crystals instead of relics to produce blue, spikey, hedgehog-like ice armor.

Speaking of blue hedgehogs, Cerny's early platforming experiences involved working on the Sega Genesis' Sonic the Hedgehog 2. His experience on that game and Sony's Crash Bandicoot shines through in the combat, music, and overall feel of the game. The camera is fixed, freeing players up to focus on running past rotating spike totems or dodging hammer-wielding goblins. Knack punches enemies or double jumps into the air to deliver a Sonic Adventure-esque homing attack. Similar to how Knack gathers relic particles, chunks of armor shed off enemies as Knack beats them down. Combat is simple enough for anyone to pick up and understand, but provides a healthy challenge. Infinite lives help curb frustration from repeated failures.

Sunstone pickups also save Knack during hairy situations. Knack bashes crystal formations into tiny pieces and collects them to restore his health and gather Sunstone energy. Gathering enough Sunstone crystals lets him deliver devastating special attacks including a wide ground pound and ranged blast. My favorite is a tornado attack that sends all Knack's relics swirling in a deadly vortex. The

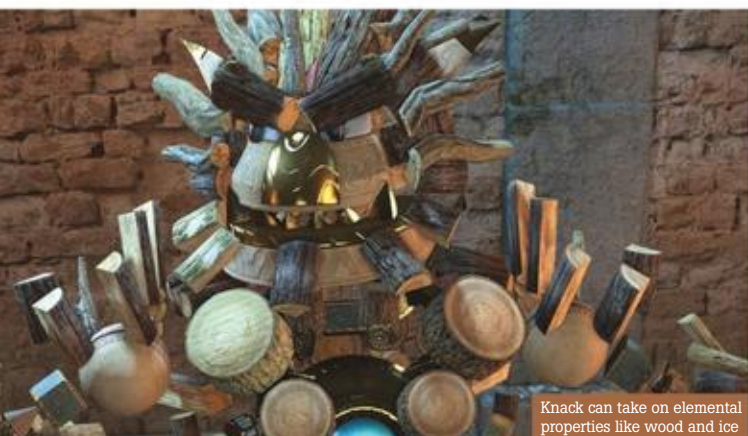
larger Knack is, the wider and stronger the attack radius of this coup de grace.

Eventually Knack absorbs thousands of relics and becomes a hulking beast. Beefy goblins that once gave him trouble are now easily squashed, and heavy tanks can be bashed and tossed into one another. Scaffolding, barriers, and the entire sides of the fortress can be punched into oblivion. Shattering the world into pieces and absorbing hundreds of relics is satisfying, similar to collecting bricks in Lego games or bolts in Ratchet & Clank.

Knack's assault on the goblin base concludes with a boss battle against the big head honcho. During this multi-tiered fight, the foe leaps between courtyards, standing at the opposite end while blasting Knack with a variety of attacks. The grenades, rockets, firewalls, and devastating cannonball flying towards Knack require quick dodges. The showdown concludes shortly after Knack tosses the goblin's bombs back at him.

The wealth of particles, lighting, and colorful environments of Knack do well to show off the PlayStation 4's capabilities. Despite the impressive visuals, the even mix of traditional platforming and basic combat (complete with local co-op) doesn't look poised to bring anything particularly fresh to the genre. That may not be a bad thing, however, as Sony is looking to appeal to the PS4's broad potential audience with this new, multifaceted hero.

» **Tim Turi**



Knack can take on elemental properties like wood and ice

Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call

Tapping again to infectious Final Fantasy beats



Square Enix hasn't announced that Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call is coming stateside yet, but we hope the success of last year's Theatrhythm gives the company plenty of confidence to localize this follow-up. Curtain Call doesn't drastically change the previous game's formula except by adding a versus mode, and that's fine by me. This encore packs in 200 songs with 60 classic characters. The best part, though, is that tunes from newer games like A Realm Reborn and Lightning Returns are included.

During Tokyo Game Show, I got hands-on time with Curtain Call and chose to play two songs from the underappreciated Final Fantasy V. The first song had me tapping to its battle theme while nasty enemies hit the screen one by one. Depending on my success of tapping the stylus, I would deal damage. If I missed notes, I'd be the one losing health. The activity that appears on screen while you're making the music is mesmerizing; there's something about how the music intensifies as you're about to unleash a more powerful attack. The display is constantly changing, so you're not merely gazing at the same background as you symphonize the classic Final Fantasy music.

Next, I tried my hand at the field music from V. The format is completely different from when I was battling enemies. This time around, I tap along to fly my airship through the obstacle-cluttered sky. While this might seem like a more relaxing stage, it's anything but. You have to tap and hold with the stylus, moving it up and down with the beat. If you release too soon, you'll potentially miss several notes. I breathe a sigh of relief as I get through the ever-changing level.

After my demo, the themes continued to play through my head, sparking nostalgia for the games. Curtain Call hits Japan in spring of 2014. I sure hope a North American release follows. » **Kimberley Wallace**

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Rhythm/Music
- » **Publisher**
Square Enix
- » **Developer**
Square Enix
- » **Release**
TBD



Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc

A twisted adventure to kill

The popularity of Aksys Games' 999 and Virtue's Last Reward proved that an out-of-the-ordinary narrative can get you far. NIS America is hoping the same is true for its upcoming adventure Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc, which is developed by the same company, but a different team than 999. From what's been shared of the premise, they might have something twisted enough to turn heads.

Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc is set in a Japanese school for gifted students, but the students aren't the only atypical element in the building. The school president is a sadistic bear named Monokumo, and the students' mission is to stay alive. To do that, they must kill their peers. The producer is worried the premise won't be received well in America, but NIS America has such faith in the project that it convinced him it will work. After all, the concept is in the vein of *The Hunger Games* or *Battle Royale*, right down to the survival of the fittest.

You play as Makoto Naegi and your competition is fierce, since your school features some of the most skilled students in the region, full of programmers and athletes. We have a feeling plenty of mind games are at the root of the fun, and the demented bear isn't going to let students get out of the school easily. As students die, you must make sure the killers don't get away with it. In between your own bouts you must try to figure out which of your fellow students are behind the deaths.

Danganronpa is already a popular series in Japan, with a few titles under its belt and a recent anime release. But don't worry about a lack of knowledge, as Trigger Happy Havoc is a self-contained title. This version is actually a Vita remake of the original Japanese PSP title. If it's received well, NIS could have a new franchise on its hands. » **Kimberley Wallace**

- » **Platform**
Vita
- » **Style**
1-Player Adventure
- » **Publisher**
NIS America
- » **Developer**
Spike Chunsoft
- » **Release**
Winter



Don't let your classmates get away with murder! Talking and investigating are important for trials



Crimson Dragon

Controlling dragons isn't easy

» **Platform**
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Grounding Inc.

» **Release**
November 22

Panzer Dragoon fans have been waiting a long time to get their hands on another rail shooter. A spiritual successor, *Crimson Dragon* was first unveiled at 2011's Tokyo Game Show, sparking excitement, as many of the people who previously worked on Panzer Dragoon iterations, like director Yukio Futatsugi, were back in the mix. However, last June's expected Xbox 360 release date was mysteriously delayed. This year at E3, it was confirmed to be still alive and kicking, but now making its debut exclusively on Xbox One. While at Tokyo Game Show, we saw the game in action for Xbox One – be prepared to give your dragons a workout.

The 3D shooter has a liveliness that's hard to ignore. You can tell a lot of effort went into the backdrops. One level was filled with stony structures to evade, while another was a vibrant sea world. Stages completely changed scenery midway through – in one level the lush forest turned into an underground cave – and the frenzied pandemonium of controlling a dragon is comparable to the beloved games of yore.

Obstacles abound as you dodge and shoot your way through enemies. But this is about more than just mashing the shoot button – you need to pick the best skills and attacks to earn top scores. Two types of attacks are at your



disposal: a lock-on laser skill to blast chains of enemies and a powerful, but difficult to aim direct-fire attack.

The levels are split into several sub-missions featuring extra objectives. For instance, your goal might just be to beat a boss, or you might need to destroy a mechanism. While you're

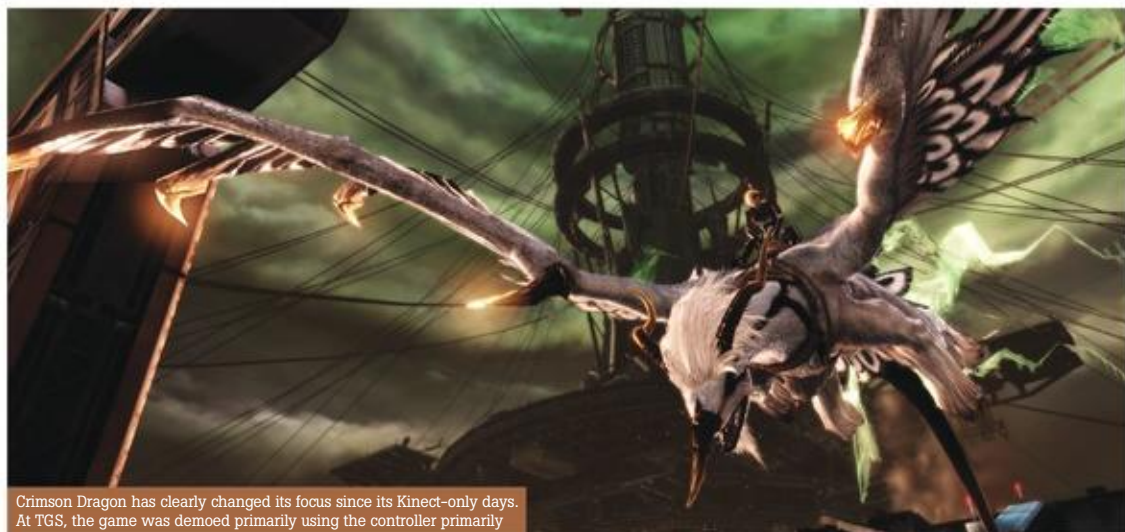
meeting basic conditions, optional objectives provide opportunities to strengthen your dragon. These can be as simple as meeting a certain time limit, or as difficult as avoiding damage during the entire level. At the end of every level, you're given a rank that assesses your skills. Depending on your final score and extra objectives completed, you're rewarded with food to feed your dragon for stat boosts. Between the extra objectives and different ranks, players have a reason to keep coming back.

A smart dragon knows what to fire and when; making the best decisions is vital to your score and health. During boss fights, a notification system gives you a heads up if you're making a good choice or not; red or green flashes before your attack inform you if you're choosing the right strategy. During battles, you also get support from characters who give advice about what needs to be done, should you have trouble finding where to target.

Boss battles are hardly tame; in the last level of the demo, a huge sea creature with octopus-like arms provides a struggle. Preventing his tentacles from knocking away the dragon is an obstacle in itself. After locating a weak point and attacking it with fervor, the boss becomes enraged and even more frantic. The best course of action is to swoop back and create some distance from the enemy. Once the dragon launches a ranged skill, the beast finally meets his demise.

Movement during the boss battles is different, too. Unlike Panzer Dragoon, not every level in *Crimson Dragon* is on rails. Some shift from rails to open flight when certain objectives are met, like destroying a portion of a boss. The transition may surprise fans, but it adds more variety to keep you on your toes.

Crimson Dragon doesn't drastically sway from the basic Panzer Dragoon formula, except with the improved visuals and free flying sequences. This isn't a bad thing, as series fans may find something to love in this spiritual successor. » **Kimberly Wallace**



Crimson Dragon has clearly changed its focus since its Kinect-only days. At TGS, the game was demoed primarily using the controller primarily





Killer Instinct

Combo-breaking a 17-year hiatus

The last time we pulled off an ultra combo or stopped one in its tracks with a combo breaker was 17 years ago with the Nintendo 64's *Killer Instinct Gold*. Ever since Microsoft acquired the *Killer Instinct* license by buying Rare, fans of the series have wondered when to expect a return. The franchise missed two generations, but it's coming back on launch day for the Xbox One.

What took the franchise so long to return? "It's kind of hard to say," says *Killer Instinct* producer Torin Rettig. "Fighting games went out of style for a period of time. It would have been hard to get one greenlit." The genre has experienced a resurgence in recent years, with the renewed popularity of classic franchises like *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*. For Microsoft, the timing seemed right.

Microsoft and developer Double Helix decided to abandon the numerical subtitle on what is technically the third entry in the series. Rettig didn't refer to the game as a reboot, but it serves as a new starting point for the series. "We didn't want to necessarily be beholden to all the lore and mythos," Rettig says. "Although we are leveraging it more than we thought we would."

For Rettig and the team, an important part of *Killer Instinct* is retaining the classic feel of all the fighters, while injecting them each with something new. Classic characters like Jago and Sabrewulf feel familiar, but steps are being taken to make sure fighters feel more distinct than they did in the past.

Double Helix looked to current fighting-game class archetypes, like the rush-down character, the grappling character, and the zoning character, and tried to apply them to the *Killer Instinct* cast. Chief Thunder, for example, focuses on getting in close and grappling. Gladius, another familiar face, uses his powers to push characters away and attack from afar.

Double Helix offered a tease briefly showing returning fighter B. Orchid petting her cat, but so far the only brand-new fighter to be revealed has been Sadira. She has a double jump, and uses spider webs to pull characters to where she wants them to be. Think of her as the air-superiority archetype.

Six of *Killer Instinct*'s eight characters have been revealed, and Rettig plays coy about the two who have yet to be revealed. When pressed about classic characters like Cinder, Spinal, and Fulgore, Rettig cautiously avoided the topic.

More characters will come later in the form of downloadable content, and title updates will ensure the online arena stays competitive. Patching games on the Xbox 360 has been notoriously time-consuming and expensive for developers, but the Xbox One's cloud processing allows Double Helix to make changes easily without going through the complicated approval process. Large changes or content additions require downloadable patches, but Double Helix can implement balance changes quickly. That doesn't mean they plan to over-analyze or continually tinker. "Even though we will have the ability to patch something immediately, we're going to be very careful about actually doing that," Rettig says. Taking into consideration the feedback of the community will play an important role in why or how often the game gets balance patches.

Rettig takes a never-say-never approach to *Killer Instinct* receiving a retail disc release, but for now the game is exclusively available as a download on the Xbox One. Anyone can download the game for free and play as Jago on launch day online and locally. If players want more characters, however, they have to buy bundles or separate new faces. In addition, Double Helix plans on switching Jago out as the free character with the rest of the fighters to give players who don't spend extra money on the game a chance to try out different characters and keep things fresh. Time will tell if this is a successful strategy for fighting fans. » **Kyle Hilliard**

- » **Platform**
Xbox One
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
- » **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios
- » **Developer**
Double Helix
- » **Release**
November 22

A Familiar Voice Returns

Killer Instinct's memorable announcer, Chris Sutherland, returns in *Killer Instinct*, and he isn't alone. Before making the decision to bring back Sutherland, one of *Killer Instinct*'s producers, Michael Willette, provided the combo commentary. He did such a good job that Double Helix decided to keep it. The final game features a mix of the two commentators yelling the type of combo you're performing.



Sadira is the only character (so far) who can double jump, making her an excellent in-the-air fighter

Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft

Blizzard engulfs another genre

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

A wave of high-potential digital card games is about to break onto your PC. Kickstarted titles like SolForge and Hex look to bring radically different mechanics and modes of play to the genre, while Blizzard is doing what the developer so often does: sticking close to established norms while bringing best-in-class polish and a few excellent new ideas.

Hearthstone doesn't fall far from the Magic: the Gathering tree. Players draw one card per turn, summon creatures defined by simple attack and health values onto the board, and cast powerful spells that deal damage, draw cards, and grant unique abilities to creatures and players. Unlike the faceless, abstract avatar of Magic, Hearthstone players take on the role of a hero belonging to one of nine World of Warcraft classes.

The differentiation between the nine classes is a fantastic addition to the card-based

dueling structure. Each hero has access to a large set of cards unique to its class, in addition to the wide base of common cards available to all. In my playtime in the beta, I shapeshifted my druid into a ferocious bear that mauled my enemy's entire army, led a band of recruits to victory as a paladin, and had a priest one-shot me the turn before I would have killed him with a super-buffed knight minion. Though you have full control over the deck you build and play, the themes that run through each class' cards naturally result in duels that share much of World of Warcraft's distinctive flavor.

In addition to the unique cards for each class, every hero has a basic power at their command. These abilities can be fired off once per turn for a moderate effect, like a hunter's steady shot or a shaman summoning a random totem ally. These hero powers cost mana but no cards, and balancing their use against playing

the limited resource of cards in your hands is a key element of Hearthstone's strategy.

Heroes can also equip limited-use weapons if they put those cards in their deck. This lets the heroes themselves attack on their turns, and can be a powerful effect even though your health total drops from engaging in combat. Melee-based classes like warriors and rogues can often combo their weapon with other abilities, like boosting their weapon's damage or getting free attacks against every enemy on the board.

Cards in Hearthstone are always spells, creatures, or weapons. The sole resource, mana, is generated every turn automatically. Your pool grows by one every round, up to a maximum of 10 mana per turn. This departure from Magic's land mechanic retains some of the flavor of ramping action without the constant danger of being resource-poor or flooded thanks to bad luck on the draw. The overall result makes expensive cards somewhat more valuable in general, though Hearthstone keeps lower-cost cards valuable by having far more card-drawing effects available to every deck.

Blizzard's famed polish oozes from every corner of Hearthstone. Even simple things like the End Turn button having a weighty feel because of its dramatic animation adds to the physicality of the game. While chrome like the visually interactive game boards fades after hours of play, subtle touches like the smart way turn timers are handled are always relevant. The ability to see what your opponent is mousing over gives Hearthstone matches a sense of sitting across the table from a human foe that digital games have always lacked.

Hearthstone's Arena mode is a fantastic adaptation of the concept of limited or draft play to the digital space. Building a deck is done by picking one card out of a set of three until you have a 30-card deck, at which point you can enter the queue and play other Arena decks until you've lost three matches. The more wins you accrue before washing out, the better your prize is at the end of your run. Arena mode's playing field is much more even than regular constructed matches, since everyone is building a deck from a heavily randomized, limited set of cards – a good thing if you're not sinking money into the ostensibly free-to-play game, because epic and legendary cards that come in for-sale packs are far stronger than the basic cards every account has access to. You can slowly grind new cards for your collection through play, but dropping real money is a huge leg up in constructed play.

I'm not yet convinced about Hearthstone's balancing – the extreme power of some high-cost cards, particularly rare spells and legendary allies, can push the game toward a battle between hard counters. Too often, the player who happens to draw an assassinate or polymorph to neutralize the huge monster their opponent just dropped wins, while pulling the same card against a swarm deck is nearly useless. That's true of many card-based dueling games, though, and Hearthstone has much to recommend it. For my money, the outstanding Arena mode makes Hearthstone worth my time all on its own. » **Adam Biessener**



The starting life totals are well tuned at 30, with rushing being viable but not overpowering





Might & Magic X – Legacy

A high-def trip down memory lane

The latest Might & Magic title from Ubisoft is a high-pressure blast of nostalgia for anyone who grew up in the silver age of Western PC RPGs like me. I spent a significant portion of my childhood exploring huge worlds full of mysteries and monsters, and Might & Magic X – Legacy is a modern callback to the grid-based designs of yore.

My playtime with an alpha version of the first act recalls several fond memories; NPCs calling out the original games get a smile from

me every time. Equipping my custom-made heroes with every crappy item I find in barrels in dirty alleyways is, weirdly enough, profoundly enjoyable. Smashing spiders into goo in a stately march through the cavern under the starting city is a delightful combination of archery, spellcasting, and my barbarian's ax.

The presentation is pleasantly modern. The colorful, high-def environments are inviting and the monsters are suitably intimidating. Combat animations lend a hefty weight to

swordplay and spell-slinging, but badly need to be shortened as the game insists on playing out every lengthy sequence before accepting the next piece of input. Though maps are built on square grids that you move through with discrete steps, you can freely move the camera to explore or search for secrets. The view conveniently zooms in on obviously interactive objects like treasure chests.

My brief taste of Might & Magic X didn't answer the question of whether it contains the level of exploration and world-spanning puzzles that made the early games such classics, but I'm impressed by the presentation and the obvious potential of combat and the largely free-form character progression that gives players tons of room to build the party they want. » **Adam Biessener**

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Ubisoft
- » **Developer**
Limbic Entertainment
- » **Release**
Early 2014





Diablo III: Reaper Of Souls

New quests, a new villain, and more end-game content come to Sanctuary

» **Platform**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
2014

When Diablo III released in 2012, some hardcore fans were disappointed by a few of the new directions the series was headed. Since then, Blizzard rebalanced and tweaked the game to meet player expectations. The upcoming Reaper of Souls introduces even more content and features that improve loot drops and provide a richer endgame experience.

Reaper of Souls introduces a new player class, the Crusader, who combines brutal melee skills with mid-range combat. Unlike other classes, Crusaders use their shield as a weapon, bashing foes and blinding them with an ability called “shield glare.” These warriors can turn themselves into holy missiles, rocketing down from the sky with Fist of the Heavens. Crusaders also have healing abilities that encourage the rest of the party

to group up for maximum effect. This class’ abilities thrive on wrath, which is regenerated over time.

Along with the new class comes a villain unlike any other to grace the series. Malthael is the fallen angel of wisdom, who has become Death itself. The once-benevolent creature has come to Westmarch, bringing with him his maidens, who turn residents of the town into revenants.

Players travel through the plagued city, the Blood March, and the Pandemonium Fortress in their quest to free Westmarch from Death’s icy grasp. Blizzard has improved the environmental flow, and players move from outdoor landscapes to indoor catacombs seamlessly.

In addition to the new quests and enemy types, Blizzard is significantly bolstering the endgame content. Long considered one of

Diablo III’s weakest aspects, two new systems change the way players approach the game after finishing the main quest.

The new Paragon system applies to all characters on a profile. As long as one avatar has reached the new max level of 70, players can earn points that boost attack, defense, movement, gold pickup radius, and other stats for all of their characters.

The Loot Run system also gives high-level players brief raid-like experiences. These 15-to-20 minute encounters are randomly generated collections of maps, monsters, and bosses. They are going to be tough, but victory means epic loot. Because everything is random, players won’t know what they’ll be facing at the conclusion of the dungeon.

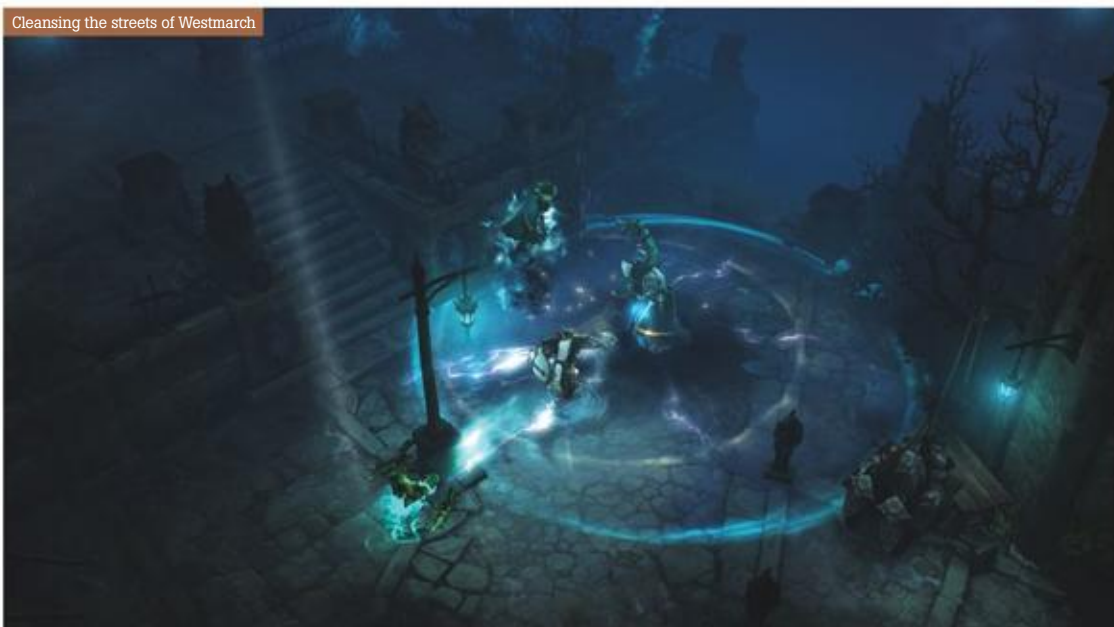
Everything in Reaper of Souls is bolstered by the retooled Loot 2.0 system that includes a smart drop system. This new approach to gear skews the loot table to give players a better chance of finding something that is more applicable to their class, build, and level.

Additionally, Blizzard is implementing a new vendor, the mystic. Now, as players collect items, they also add their appearance to a library. The mystic can make any piece of gear look like another you’ve collected. This is a neat customization feature, but the mystic’s real value is in his ability to enchant gear.

For the right price, the vendor can re-roll a bonus stat on a piece of gear. For instance, you’ve reached max level and no longer need bonus experience, but everything else about the item that bestows it makes it worth equipping, the mystic can randomly change that stat to make the item more useful.

Loot 2.0 and the Loot Runs are all about making the end game more appealing and creating more interesting and useful pickups for players. We’ll have our chance to check out the improvements for ourselves in 2014 when Reaper of Souls is released for PC and Mac. Console versions of the expansion haven’t been announced, but Blizzard hinted that they might be coming. » **Michael Futter**

Cleansing the streets of Westmarch



NBA Live 14

Climbing back into contention one shot at a time



EA Sports' NBA series has gone through an unprecedented run of failure, which is normally enough to sink a series forever. After canceling NBA Elite 11, taking a year to recalibrate, and then scrapping NBA Live 13 as well, the publisher knows it has a rough road ahead of it to regain consumer confidence and restore the franchise to its glory years. This task is even more daunting in the face of competition, as 2K Sports' NBA 2K franchise has continued its run of critical acclaim and blockbuster sales. So where do you start this rebuilding project?

"We have great respect for 2K and the 2K basketball franchise, and they've helped grow the market," says EA Tiburon vice president and general manager of basketball Daryl Holt. "I think we've looked at it in a couple of different ways. We looked at the market and said, 'That's a market we can go after,' and it's a good battle to have a competitor in from that perspective. We've done it before with FIFA and NHL, so we know the playbook. But as we look at the game itself and understand, it's not about having something they have and saying, 'Gosh, I wish that was something we had' or 'I think we can do that better,' it's about understanding and bringing people on the team that understand basketball and what our fans want. How do we build an overall experience that's a good experience? If you build a great game, it doesn't matter what they are doing. You put a great game against a great game and let people choose. We focus more on, 'How do we make the best basketball game that can possibly be made starting with the core fundamentals and core gameplay?'"

The centerpiece of that new core is next-generation visuals and the new Bouncetek technology driving the dribbling. Rather than have the ball bounce up to a player's hand like a yo-yo, EA has applied true physics to the basketball, which EA thinks will pay off with more organic controls.

Whereas NBA 2K dribbling controls operate much like the attacks in a fighting game, EA is opting for a less complicated control scheme that focuses on responsiveness – when you press a button or direction on an analog stick, the action should unfold immediately and be contextually appropriate. Much of that fidelity relies upon having the right animations for every possible scenario, and EA has spent a considerable amount of time building that library and adding signature animations for several of the league's top players.

Since EA is spending so much time honing the fundamentals, don't expect any revolutionary features to be present in the game modes. NBA Live 14 producer Sean O'Brien says the game features Dynasty, Rising Star (Read: Be A Pro), and Ultimate Team modes, with all the bells and whistles you would expect. Fans of online dynasty and the competitive EASBL online league will have to wait at least another year for EA to reinsert them into the experience.

Much of the development outside of pure gameplay is being spent integrating the Synergy Sports data that governs player behavior on the court using real-world analytics. To highlight this technology, EA is introducing a Live Seasons mode that lets you choose a team and play along with them throughout



the season, following the same ups and downs that hit the team along the way. In addition, after every real-world game EA Tiburon is analyzing the data to create unique gameplay challenges. If Rockets guard James Harden drops 20 in a quarter, for instance, the game will recreate the same scenario to see if you can match or beat him.

"You watched the game and you read about it on ESPN.com afterwards, and now we're giving you something that's relevant to what just happened as well in a bite-sized way," O'Brien says.

NBA Live 14 doesn't need to beat its rival feature for feature right out of the gate. Like a player coming back from injury, the team at EA Tiburon needs to rediscover its scoring touch, and build from there. Nailing the core fundamentals would be a great place to start.

» **Matt Bertz**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

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

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
November 19

reviews



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH
82 Grand Theft Auto V

Five years since Rockstar debuted Grand Theft Auto IV, we finally have a proper follow-up. With three playable characters, a massive world exponentially larger than any previous Rockstar open world to date, and improved mechanics, Grand Theft Auto V is the latest must-play game in the series.

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	Wii U sales.

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



Grand Theft Auto V

Visit the seedy side of a sunny state

9.75

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
PLATINUM

Style 1-Player Action (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Rockstar Games
Developer Rockstar North **Release** September 17 **Rating** M

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Take the lessons learned making *Midnight Club: LA*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *Max Payne 3* to craft the most well-rounded Grand Theft Auto game to date

» Graphics

From sun-drenched beaches to breathtaking mountain ranges, Rockstar meticulously captures the essence of Southern California

» Sound

Competent voice acting is buttressed by a mood-setting score and another fantastic array of radio stations to entertain you while driving

» Playability

The action stays frantic during missions thanks to the character-switching technology, and the gunplay and driving are the best in a Grand Theft Auto game yet

» Entertainment

With a huge open world to explore, three playable characters, and a wealth of side activities, Grand Theft Auto V is the gift that keeps on giving

» Replay Value

High

Seen through the lens of Rockstar Games' sardonic wit, Southern California is a kaleidoscope of American culture. Populated with self-important hedonists and self-improvement gurus, the luxuriously wealthy and startlingly poor, vanity-plate liberals and border-patrolling conservatives, the region captures an impressive number of American idiosyncrasies. Californian essayist Joan Didion perhaps described it best as "a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension." That suspension serves as the perfect backdrop for the three anti-heroes of Grand Theft Auto V.

Retired bank robber Michael drinks his days away secluded from his dysfunctional family, reminiscing about his glory days by watching old action flicks in his luxurious estate. On the other side of the tracks, young hustler Franklin scrapes by, repossessing cars while looking to escape his dead-end neighborhood. The third miscreant, Trevor, is most at home drinking and fighting in the trailer-park outskirts. With the loquaciousness of *Justified*'s Boyd Crowder and the volatility of *Trainspotting*'s Begbie, this maniac acts implicitly off impulse, often to hilarious and destructive results.

After events join these disparate personalities in an uneasy alliance, the three navigate the criminal underbelly of Los Santos, performing unsavory tasks for corrupt officials, Mexican cartel leaders, white-collar swindlers, and, most importantly, themselves. When they aren't bickering, the trio pulls off increasingly daring heists.

Open-world games are often weighed down by "errand boy syndrome," tasking players with menial jobs that seem beneath the ability of the protagonists or outside the cause of the narrative. While Grand Theft Auto V still has its share of blue-collar work (like towing cars

for Franklin's crackhead friend), the majority of the tasks feel more important because you can often see the direct benefit. For example, running weapons across Los Santos may increase the amount of money the airfield you purchased generates. This also applies to the heists serving as the game's centerpiece. Before you can rob the jewelry store, you must case the joint to identify vulnerabilities, hijack a pest-control van that provides your crew with cover, buy some masks to conceal your identities, steal a gas canister to deploy through the vents, and procure getaway vehicles. I didn't mind running these errands because I knew the payoff potential.

Before attempting the big-time heists, you are given the choice of two approaches. The first typically involves an *Oceans 11* degree of cunning, stealth, and deception, while the alternative frequently involves a dosage of lead normally reserved for world wars. Before you act, you also must pick your crew; hiring a cheap, young hacker may cost you valuable time to acquire the jewelry, but if you pick the experienced guy he demands a bigger cut.

Once the heists begin, the signature innovation driving Grand Theft Auto V takes center stage. During these missions you can instantly switch between each of the three characters. Rockstar often uses this mechanic to avoid the hassle of relocating to meet another wave of enemies, imploring you to switch via a blinking icon and noticeable sound effect to keep you in the thick of the action. The transitions occur smoothly, and the speed at which you swap characters is impressive.

The diversity of the heists and other missions is also worth praising. During my time in Los Santos, I scuba dived into a scientific research center to steal a chemical weapon, infiltrated a burning government agency building posing as a firefighter to steal a hard drive, and fought through a five-star wanted level with military-grade weapons. Should you falter during these high-octane scenarios, the forgiving checkpoint system (a much needed improvement over Grand Theft Auto IV) preserves your forward progress rather than forcing you to start missions from scratch.

The trio has distinct lives outside of these jobs, which includes separate friends,

We advise you to take flying lessons to improve the skills of each character



properties, bank accounts, and problems. Taking this approach allowed Rockstar to craft unique content for each, which keeps the side missions fresh. You can alternate between the perspectives of Michael, Franklin, or Trevor at will, and Rockstar uses this as an opportunity to surface unique gameplay opportunities. Jump to Trevor and you may find him passed out drunk on a hill nearby a hunting mission. Switch back to Michael later and he may be playing tennis with his wife or heading to an appointment with his psychiatrist.

Giving the player so much insight into the inner workings of the three protagonists provides great mission diversity, but it also creates the biggest crack in the story. Given what we have witnessed from one particular main character, his reaction to one of the major plot reveals seems extremely out of line with his personality. This happens early on and hangs like an albatross around the neck of the narrative for the majority of the game. The choose your own adventure ending (you have three options) also fails to deliver on the tension promised by this setup.

While the plot doesn't live up to the high standards set by Red Dead Redemption and GTA IV, the design surpasses every previous Rockstar game. Grand Theft Auto V melds together the expansive open world of its Western, the vehicle control and customization of Midnight Club: Los Angeles, the shooting mechanics of Max Payne 3, and Rockstar's signature sense of humor to create its most well-rounded game to date.

Those who complained about boat-like vehicle controls in previous games should be placated with the refinements Grand Theft Auto V delivers. Cars have a proper sense of weight, while retaining the agility necessary for navigating through traffic at high speeds. The damage models are also drastically improved, with more variance to the scrapes and dents you collect careening down the highways like a madman.

The targeting and cover systems also should win over holdouts who decried the gunplay of GTA IV. Rockstar offers three different aiming mechanics – the classic GTA snap-to shooting, aim assist, and free aim for those who prefer more autonomy. If you struggle with lining up shots with the default



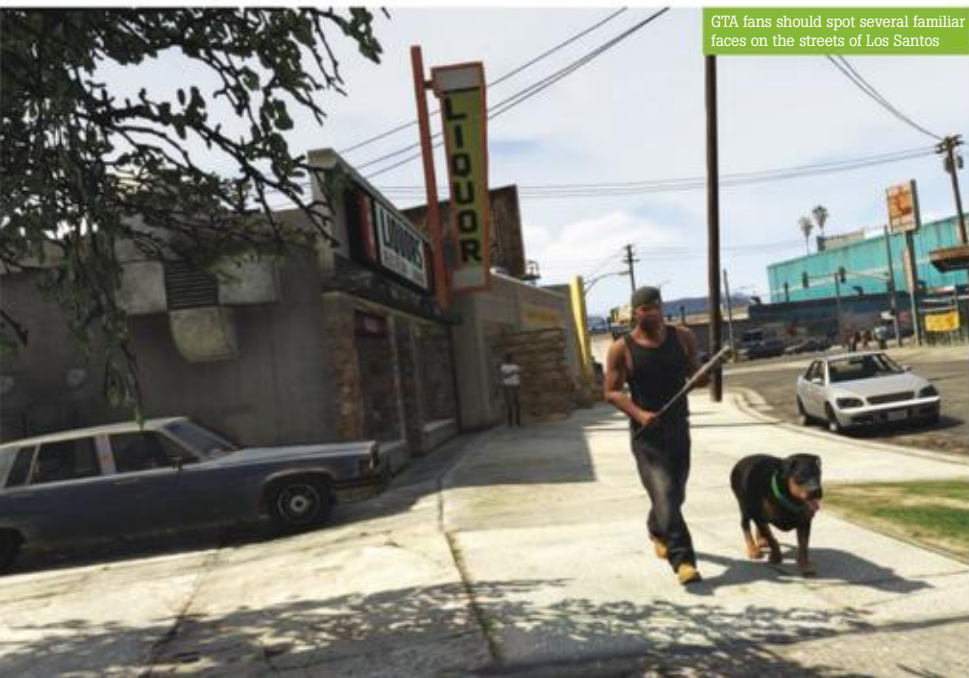
The most volatile playable character, Trevor, is the star of the game

micro reticle, you can choose a larger one in the settings. I found the shooting to be competent in medium-to-long range shootouts; the only time I got into trouble was when being flanked up close. Aiming with the left trigger slows down your reticle movement, which can make it tough to address enemies pinching from the sides.

The critical mission path offers roughly 25 hours of gameplay, but you can spend an even greater amount of time exploring the vast open world. Whether you are in downtown Los Santos or the sprawling San Andreas countryside, you always have a diverse array of activities at your disposal. While in town you can shop for new clothing, get a tattoo, catch a flick at the movie theater, or base jump off skyscrapers. Outside the city limits, you can search underwater shipwrecks for lost treasure off the coast of Los Santos, hunt animals in the wilderness, play darts in a dive bar, or participate in one of the many race varieties. I also spent a considerable amount of time betting on the stock market; paying attention to character chatter can land you a huge payday. That money won't spend long in your bank account; every time I had a significant amount of cash I went on a shopping spree, scooping

up businesses, buying new vehicles, and customizing cars.

Grand Theft Auto V has the lofty expectations of living up to the pedigree of its critically acclaimed predecessors. Rockstar Games deserves credit for pushing the boundaries of its flagship franchise yet again with improved controls, great mission variety, and the most jam-packed open world I've ever visited. The narrative fails to match the impact of John Marston or Niko Bellic's tales, but the colorful characters kept me interested in the story nonetheless. Like the golden state it parodies, Grand Theft Auto V is filled with beautiful scenery, a wealth of activities, and the promise of fortune. » **Matt Bertz**



GTA fans should spot several familiar faces on the streets of Los Santos





Scribblenauts Unmasked: A DC Comics Adventure

All of the heroes, none of their might

7

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** 5th Cell **Release** September 24 **Rating** E10+

Wii U

» **Concept**

A thorough exploration of DC Comics' long-running universe turns ugly when its heroes and villains lock in battle

» **Graphics**

Despite the simplistic art style, most of the characters look just like their comic book counterparts. Combat animations and effects are crude and hard to follow

» **Sound**

When battle ensues, the soundtrack doesn't change to follow the fray. Punches are thrown to peaceful city-specific melodies

» **Playability**

The Wii U GamePad handles word entry and location traveling beautifully. Controlling Maxwell isn't so easy. His basic actions are held too close to the chest

» **Entertainment**

Comic fans will get more out diving deep into DC Comics' history. The shoddy combat mechanics pollute most of this experience

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Scribblenauts Unmasked asks players to comfort a teary-eyed Bruce Wayne moments after he witnesses the death of his parents. He can't be conversed with, nor can he be pulled in for a hug; the only solution available is using a magic notebook, which transforms any word written on its pages into an object. What item could calm a grieving child? My first thought was to hand young Wayne a handkerchief. He took it from me, but his tears didn't slow. My second attempt was creating a car to drive him away from this grisly scene. He climbed into the passenger seat, but again his mood didn't change. Not knowing what the game wanted from me, I wrote "giant cheeseburger" into the notebook, and a tower of meat and buns almost the same height as Wayne appeared onscreen. I handed it to him, and his tears vanished. A word balloon from Batman appeared: "From that night forward I vowed to destroy crime."

Although this entry of the Scribblenauts series is set within DC Comics' universe, it hasn't lost its goofy charm, or its ability to turn a straightforward objective into a wildly imaginative exploration of ideas – even if the solutions are sometimes befuddling. The comic book tie gives players more word-based ammo to play with, and knowledge of DC's lore – though occasionally helpful – isn't required.

At any point during play, the Batcomputer can be accessed to bring up lists for all of the heroes, villains, vehicles, equipment, and teams featured in the game. As a comic fan, my first hour was spent scrolling through the database of characters to see who made the cut and who didn't. Oddballs like Blubber (the humanoid whale) are not included, but I was surprised to see many of New 52's characters like Talon present. Typing in "Batman" brings up 34 different versions of him, including most of Grant Morrison's variations that we

all want to forget about. Almost every character I summoned was equipped with his or her signature powers and weaknesses. Little touches like Batman refusing to use firearms are also present.

If heroes and villains share the same frame in a comic book, a punch is usually thrown. The same goes in Scribblenauts Unmasked, only you may not be able to pinpoint who threw the punch. Characters charge headlong into each other, melding into an indistinguishable pile of thrashing body parts, elemental blasts, and onomatopoeia.

Combat is Scribblenauts Unmasked'sryptonite, and Maxwell engages in it just as much as he uses his notebook. This is a change in direction for the series; the star-grabbing puzzles are still here, but they share the spotlight with combat. Unfortunately, this happy-go-lucky kid isn't exactly the most coordinated or skilled warrior. Maxwell's punches are slow and lack range, perhaps a little too true to his character. He can wield almost any weapon the player can dream up, but no firearm or prized trident makes the frays enjoyable. I cheesed the adjectives "super" and "giant," which raise Maxwell's offensive and defensive capabilities to the point of him being Hulk-like, and simply jammed on the attack button to swat away the enemy swarms.

A few of the combat scenarios push the player to come up with creative solutions to stop specific foes. I enjoyed most of these tests, as they feel more like extensions of Scribblenauts' traditional gameplay formula.

These moments are usually tied to story missions. Yes, Scribblenauts Unmasked places Maxwell and his sister Lily in a surprisingly wordy narrative that has the duo hunting down an evil Maxwell doppelganger sporting a magic book of his own. While this story is mostly a vehicle to shuttle the protagonists to iconic locations filled with DC characters, the conflict is fun to follow and delivers some

amusing moments for DC Comics fans.

Most of the content is aimed at this crowd. Bonus origin stories, Mxyzptk periodically showing up to propose challenges, and Maxwell taking a slight jab at the number of Flashes in the universe are just a few of the examples.

Outside of the narrative-driven critical path, side missions are randomly generated each time the player enters a new location. These missions don't often have ties to the particular locales, and are more in the vein of traditional Scribblenauts objectives. I was in Gotham City, yet my tasks were to play volleyball with a citizen, turn a Green Lantern's cow green, and find a way to cover up Krona's bald spot.

I enjoyed Scribblenauts Unmasked's encyclopedic exploration of DC's universe. Many of the puzzle challenges are also quite clever in their design and solutions. I just wish the heroes and villains would put aside their differences. Whenever they come to blows, the experience turns into a bothersome mess.

» **Andrew Reiner**

Players can create their own heroes and villains who can be summoned by typing in their names. Outfits, behavior, movement types, and scripting are fully customizable



FIFA 14

Leaving this generation on the ascent



Style 1 to 7-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (360) [22-Player Online]
Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Canada Release September 24 Rating E

8.75



There is a certain predictability about some of the club leagues around the world. Teams like Real Madrid, Juventus, and Manchester United drain drama from their respective leagues, where top honors are really only contested amongst a few rich clubs. While the FIFA franchise itself has turned into a predictable top-of-the-table juggernaut for EA Sports, that monotony masks some of the hard work that goes into the title and that which still needs to be done.

The changes in FIFA 14 can be felt throughout the game, and many of them add extra layers to the experience. Players' actions in relation to the ball feel more free and unpredictable, leading to less reliance on canned animations. The fact that you have to be more careful with your first touch – lest you lose control of the ball – is a good change, and led me to be more thoughtful with my actions. This also dovetails nicely into another added aspect of FIFA 14's gameplay – body shielding with the left trigger helped me keep possession, even if my careless first touches slowed down my attacks and got me into predicaments in the first place.

Some of the new features expand areas of the game, but don't always make it a deeper experience. Look under the surface of the gameplay and despite its improvements, it falls into the same ruts. Canned sequences mean that tackles still magically send the ball straight to the feet of an opponent, true battles for 50-50 balls are rare, and players still fall down after routine shots or insignificant contact.

Elsewhere, Ultimate Team adds new ways to build chemistry via Chemistry Styles. While it makes it harder (and possibly more expensive) to build that perfect team, I like the flexibility to change players' styles and attributes. If I want a certain player on my roster but my

play style isn't suited to his skills, now I have a way to make him more useful.

FIFA 14 also expands its breadth with the addition of co-op play to the Seasons format, and a new scouting mechanic for the Career mode. The latter tasks you with setting up scouting network (separate from the one for youth players) to do your due diligence for transfer signings. While it's just a more convoluted way to get you to the same end result as last year, good scouts cost you money and it adds drama to the transfer windows. In all, this year's additions aren't seismic shifts, but they're welcome.

Despite the new look and scouting system for the Career mode, the series still needs to address the player communication system. The game's execution of the concept of morale is inconsistent, particularly in relation to what the players tell you and what they do. For example, a low morale rating might make a player unhappy, but his form remains high and he doesn't ask for the transfer that he's been threatening all season.

Fatigue also isn't realized, as you can play the same lineup – even with a schedule filled

with domestic cups, international appearances, and other competitions – without the need for substitution. This undercuts the need for the lower end of your roster and therefore your youth system. These aren't game-killers, but realizing them is like pulling back the curtain and uncovering less depth than you initially had hoped was there.

Looking past such a calculating diagnosis, losing yourself in this game is still easy. The kinds of shots players get off are varied due to how they strike the ball (and with which foot), and the controls hit a sweet spot of being easy to pull off and capable of letting you engineer some incisive attacks. These aspects are not to be underestimated as they give you confidence going forward and the ability to score from some new areas. Combine this with all the different game modes, and you have a title that can satisfy in many ways.

They say that athletes excel when they're able to just execute on instinct. Regardless of its drawbacks, this game still lets you live in that moment and relish its qualities.

» **Matthew Kato**



PS3 • 360

» Concept

Tweaks in multiple areas give you new things to think about, even if they don't constitute large-scale change

» Graphics

No big visual improvements, though fewer weird fall-down animations help

» Sound

The commentary does a good job highlighting your team's recent form, and having different commentators for the international matches is a nice touch

» Playability

The modifier button for special moves now initiates the body-shielding mechanic

» Entertainment

FIFA 14 adds just enough to stay one step ahead of stagnation, and remains hard to put down

» Replay Value

High

Pro Evolution Soccer 2014

A break from the past

8.25

PS3 • 360

» Concept

The new engine resets some of the features of this installment, but it still feels like PES on the pitch

» Graphics

Noticeable stuttering sometimes occurs during play and cutscenes

» Sound

The commentary is fine, but nothing to write home about – like it always has

» Playability

Mechanics like the manual teammate controls have changed, and some are a little finicky. I really like the optional onscreen indicators for through balls and manual passes, however

» Entertainment

Developer PES Productions handles the engine change well, keeping the game feeling like Pro Evo

» Replay Value

Moderate



Style 1 to 7-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (360) (22-Player Online) **Publisher** Konami
Developer PES Productions **Release** September 24 **Rating** E

The PlayStation 2 heyday of the Pro Evolution series didn't transfer to this generation of consoles. Too many iterations were spent riding the coattails of earlier versions or dinking with control changes instead of upgrading the graphics, for instance. The increased competition from EA Sports' FIFA franchise has also put PES in a weakened state. A major overhaul of your gameplay engine for the last iteration of this console generation may seem odd, but it's better to take your lumps now and get your ducks in a row and not risk repeating history.

I was most concerned about how dribbling, shooting, ball physics, and player interaction would feel with the new engine, and for the most part I'm satisfied because it feels like I expect a Pro Evolution game to feel. The ball moves separate from the players, the weight of passes and shots is excellent, and for the most part the wealth of commands at my fingertips are responsive.

Perhaps most interesting is the blending of the optional auto-feints system with normal touches on the ball with the right analog stick. Combined with player movement via the left analog, it allows you to produce skilled touches that help you escape opponents and keep possession without having to memorize a command list of special moves (although those are still there). You can similarly protect yourself and the ball by flicking the right analog stick in anticipation of contact. Both of these are absolutely necessary to retain possession.

While controls like these are easy to pull off in the run of play, others are more

temperamental in their execution – such as sending teammates on runs. In the heat of the moment, you don't want to send the wrong guy on a run, and when they are sent it would be nice if they would make an attempt to stay inside. Is it necessary to have a low shot require two button presses?

While some of this complexity is nothing new for the series, returning fans may rue other aspects of this game, such as its reduced feature set. The day-in-day-out schedule of the Master League has been thankfully condensed, but the equipment feature from last year is missing, and you can't hire staff. At least you can coach a national team and/or switch club jobs from year to

year. As far as the online version of Master League goes (available in a day-one patch), you can now thankfully implement a salary cap, but overall PES's online features are pared down and less alluring than FIFA's.

A lot of things could have gone wrong in the series' introduction of a new engine, but PES 14 handles the change very well, sacrificing little of the feel while introducing some new concepts that I hope stick around. The bid to introduce emotion to players' performance remained inconclusive and I'd like the developer to settle on and refine its control scheme, but for the first time in a while, the future of the franchise is more exciting than its past. » **Matthew Kato**

A new free kick icon system shows you the ball's likely trajectory





Beyond: Two Souls

A flawed epic

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Quantic Dream **Release** October 8 **Rating** M

I think of David Cage as an auteur, a distinction that would no doubt please him. His studio, Quantic Dream, makes games unlike any other in the industry, doubling down on quicktime button-press events and advanced graphics technology to create digital stories that are at once startlingly lifelike and completely surreal. He's nothing if not distinctive.

Cage fancies that he's bringing true emotion into games, and – to an extent – he's right. His bizarre serial-killer noir *Heavy Rain* was weighted down with themes of parental love and loss. These carry over to *Beyond: Two Souls*, a game that tells the convoluted tale of Jodie, a girl linked to the afterworld through her connection to an omniscient dead soul named Aiden.

In a story told through out-of-sequence chapters, we see Jodie grow from a small child with mysterious powers to a lonely teen adopted and held captive by researcher Nathan Hawkins (played by Willem Dafoe). Later, she puts her abilities to use as a CIA operative.

Though I like his work, it's worth noting that Cage, for all his cinematic ambitions, isn't much of a writer. He just doesn't have a feel

for realistic dialogue; conversations often come off stilted and awkward. He also has a flair for melodrama that lends his games an artificial, overwrought quality. However, it's less of an issue in *Beyond*, due to excellent performances by Page, Dafoe, and former *A Different World* star Kadeem Hardison. They are seasoned actors, and it shows. Page isn't afraid to underplay a scene – a virtue in a game as overblown as *Beyond*.

The core gameplay mechanics will be familiar to fans of *Heavy Rain*. You experience the game through mashing buttons and quick directional presses on the analog stick. Quantic Dream has made the onscreen interface more minimal; instead of onscreen indicators, you have to observe the direction that Jodie's moving in a brief window of slow motion and move the stick accordingly. It makes the action both more challenging and more immersive.

You also play as Aiden, the soul who is tied to Jodie throughout her life. As Aiden, you float through walls and use your powers to throw chairs, possess or kill enemies, and help Jodie peer into the past of the people she

meets. It's thrilling but also limited; too many times you can't perform one of your powers simply because the game wants you to solve a puzzle in a different way. Still, the combination of characters makes this the deepest and most diverse gameplay experience that Quantic Dream has delivered to date.

It's a desire to emulate the huge action moments of more conventional games that leads *Beyond* astray. Cage's talent as a designer is finding gameplay in moments that most overlook: the excitement of cooking dinner for a first date or the tension of navigating the social interactions of a teenage party. Instead of leaning on that strength, *Beyond* often sets up plot points we've seen far too many times: third-world military maneuvers, CIA training, infiltrating an underwater base worthy of a Bond flick. Even worse, this focus on action sequences comes at the expense of Quantic Dream's trademark interactive conversations. There are fewer of them, and most of the choices you make don't seem to have much impact on the story.

All this jumping between different time periods and settings makes the story seem muddled; it doesn't help that there's a lengthy detour about halfway through the game that has little relation to the rest of the plot. That's too bad, because there are some moments of real power in *Beyond*. Page is stunning as Jodie, and learning of her troubled childhood and later relationship as Hawkins's ward is genuinely gripping.

I wish the story would have focused more on its emotional core than blockbuster theatrics, but I was still struck dumb by the impactful last hour. In the end, you make a truly profound choice, and see its consequences. There are multiple endings – none perfectly happy, each powerful. That's how I'll choose to remember *Beyond* – brilliant and flawed at once. » **Matt Helgeson**

7.75

PS3

» Concept

David Cage uses his story-driven design formula to tell the tale of a girl with strange occult powers

» Graphics

The facial animation is unparalleled. Star Ellen Page looks remarkably lifelike

» Sound

The voice cast, anchored by Page and Willem Dafoe, delivers a vast improvement over the awkward line readings of *Heavy Rain*

» Playability

I like the changes to the quicktime event mechanics, but *Beyond* struggles when it attempts to ape conventional action games

» Entertainment

Fascinating and frustrating, this game doesn't always play to Quantic Dream's strengths. Still, it holds many genuinely affecting moments

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Puppeteer

Sony's Japan Studio delivers a rousing stage performance

8.5

gamerformer
SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer SCE Japan Studio Release September 10 Rating E10+

PS3

» **Concept**

A creative platformer presented to players through the guise of a theatrical puppet show

» **Graphics**

With its cutesy art style, Puppeteer is a visually arresting game

» **Sound**

Top-notch voice acting and music sell the onstage action

» **Playability**

Controlling Kutaro and Pikarina at the same time can be challenging, but the snipping mechanic works like a charm

» **Entertainment**

Puppeteer delivers a lengthy adventure, plus a handful of meaningful bonus content

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

With all the talk of next-gen systems and the holiday's upcoming blockbusters, Puppeteer hasn't had a lot of time in the spotlight. Thankfully, this quirky platformer from Sony's Japan Studio doesn't need long to draw its audience in; Puppeteer's superb presentation and production values are enough to keep players engrossed until the final curtain call.

Puppeteer's theatrical motif permeates every aspect of the game, and is used to great effect. Entire levels slide and drop into place like stage scenery, a narrator moves the story along from scene to scene, and an unseen crowd gasps, laughs, and applauds throughout Kutaro's lengthy quest to thwart the evil Moon Bear King and save the stolen souls of his adolescent puppet brethren.

Ultimately, Puppeteer's goofy story is less important than its cast of oddball characters. Armed with the legendary Calibrus (read: magic scissors), Kutaro snips his way through a zoo's worth of memorable boss animals. Don't be fooled by the wooden-doll character models, either; Puppeteer is gorgeous thanks to the exceptional animation work and a diverse collection of environments packed with interactive objects. The boss fights are especially impressive, even if they rely on quicktime events too much.

As beautiful as the visuals are, Puppeteer would fall flat without quality voice acting. The voice cast is more than up to the task, offering up humorous soliloquies, character impressions, and even a surprise musical number without missing a beat. Stephen Greif steals the show as Puppeteer's off-screen narrator, providing a level of enthusiasm and gravitas rarely seen (or heard) in video games. Some characters can be a bit hammy and annoying at times, but their performances



Puppeteer features top-notch voice acting, which helps sell the onstage theatrics

mesh with the bombastic onstage theatrics.

In addition to its unique presentation, Puppeteer introduces a number of fresh gameplay ideas. After the Moon Bear King steals his wooden noggin, Kutaro must find and collect replacement puppet heads to stay alive. Kutaro can juggle up to three heads at a time and switch between them on the fly. Each head has a custom animation that can trigger helpful environmental changes, rewards, or bonus levels when performed in the right place. A few hero heads also imbue Kutaro with permanent abilities, such as a hook that can latch onto enemies and objects in the environment and a projectile-deflecting

shield. Kutaro's fairy companion, Pikarina, adds another layer of complexity; you control her with the right analog stick (or Move controller), and can use her to interact with certain objects and uncover secret gems. A second player can also take over Pikarina, which provides a simpler gaming experience for casual co-op partners.

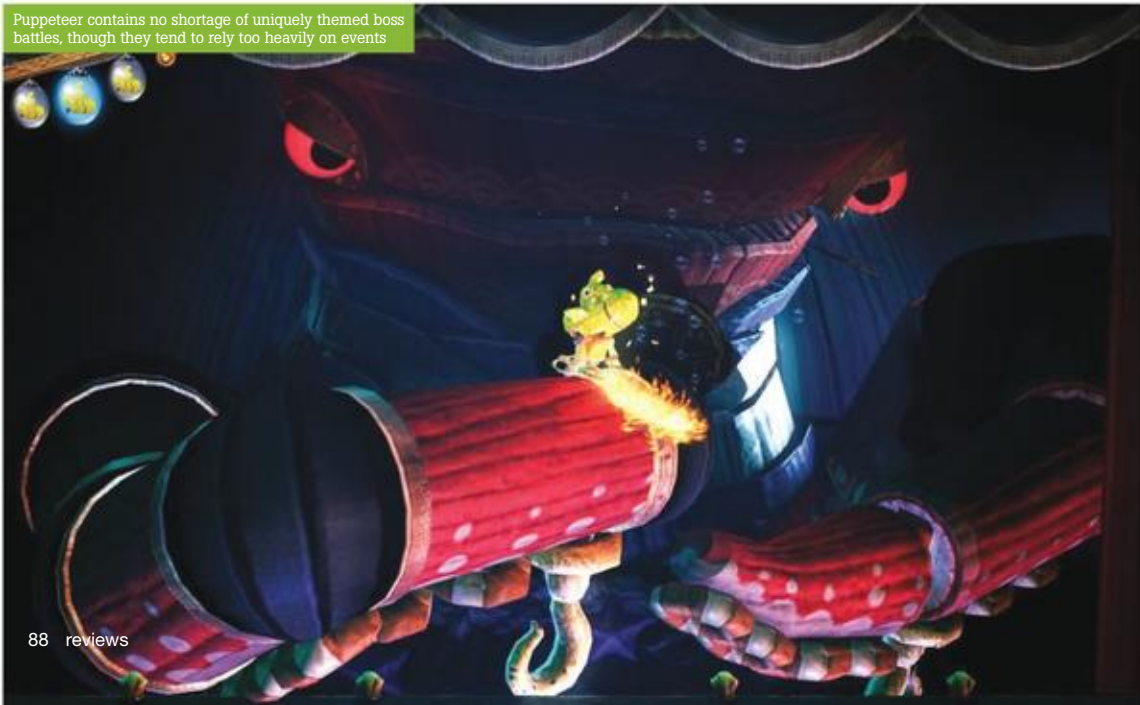
Kutaro's magic scissors fuel Puppeteer's most unique gameplay mechanics by allowing you to snip through all manner of fabric, webbing, foliage, and pretty much anything else gets in your way. You can control the direction of your scissors, and cutting an object mid-jump causes you to float for a second and propels you forward. This allows you to snip your way through the air with ease provided you have a trail of floating paper clouds, falling feathers, or other sliceable objects to sustain your momentum.

As neat as Puppeteer's snipping mechanics are, they do get repetitive. Japan Studio does a good job of introducing new abilities throughout most of the game, but you'll use each one a hundred times before the adventure ends. While the numerous boss fights each have their own unique twists, combat against the basic grub enemies is one-dimensional and dull. I also ran into a few unforgiving checkpoints, which made some already difficult sections of the game all the more frustrating. Even seasoned gamers will become intimately familiar with the continue screen.

Despite a few setbacks, Puppeteer features all the entertainment and creativity I've come to expect from Japan Studio. Sony has another exclusive title it can be proud of, and while Puppeteer may not take center stage in the company's holiday lineup, fans of family-friendly adventures won't want to miss it.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**

Puppeteer contains no shortage of uniquely themed boss battles, though they tend to rely too heavily on events





Rain

A unique vision swirls down the drain

6.5

PS3

» **Concept**

An invisible boy tries to help an invisible girl escape a town full of invisible monsters

» **Graphics**

Most of the game takes place in the same gray, dreary, unnamed European environment

» **Sound**

The music is wonderful, anchored by Claude Debussy's "Clair De Lune"

» **Playability**

Controlling a completely invisible character is tricky without any rain around

» **Entertainment**

Rain's intriguing concept is brought down by lackluster execution

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low

Style 1-Player Action/Puzzle **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Sony Japan Studio, PlayStation C.A.M.P., Acquire Corp. **Release** October 1 **ESRB** E10+

I don't know how Sony's united team of developers came up with the idea of a game full of invisible characters who can only be seen when they're in the rain, but it's certainly a creative starting point. Rain seems like it could be an art-house classic, but design decisions made along the way don't live up to the originality of the concept.

Rain's story begins with a boy waking in the middle of a rainy night. He dashes outside to help a ghostly girl in the street, and he soon becomes invisible himself and must help the mysterious girl while avoiding similarly invisible monsters. In the rain, all characters look like clear action figures. When out of it, they go completely invisible (except their

footprints). Most of the game is a linear path through the city where you hide under shelter, wait for an enemy to pass, and dash to the next hiding spot.

The mix of puzzle and stealth never evolves in a satisfying way. You make noise to distract monsters, then run the other way. Even when you start working together with the girl later on, you mostly push blocks around to clear her way or to stop an enemy. She can be slow at times, forcing you to wait around so you can team up to push something. Outside of a few unique locations, the world feels like one long slog through unremarkable gray alleys and streets.

Rain tries to tug at the heartstrings, but I never felt connected to the characters. These

two silent protagonists can't communicate outside of miming. You're told what's going on via text narration integrated into the environment. Sometimes it offers insight into the characters' thoughts, but many times it explains what you can already clearly see happening (e.g. "The girl pointed at a light in the distance"). The old adage "show, don't tell" could be put to great use here. The melancholy music sets the gloomy tone well, but it's tasked with nearly all of the emotional heavy lifting.

In the end, I still don't know who these kids are. They're just two people in a weird situation who stick together to try to escape. Just because they're invisible doesn't mean they have to be empty. » **Bryan Vore**

Disgaea D2: A Brighter Darkness

Reuniting with old favorites isn't the same

7.5

Style 1-Player Strategy/RPG **Publisher** NIS America **Developer** Nippon Ichi Software **Release** October 8 **ESRB** T

PS3

» **Concept**

Bring back the first game's beloved cast for another attempt at dominating the Netherworld's strategy gameplay

» **Graphics**

Sprites look better than before in HD, but the whole presentation still looks low-budget

» **Sound**

Voices match the characters well, and the music fits the world

» **Playability**

A Brighter Darkness caters to the hardcore; those unfamiliar may find themselves grinding and/or lost in the systems

» **Entertainment**

Creative and tricky maps fuel the desire to overcome, but the same can't be said about the extra grind

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

When Disgaea: Hour of Darkness debuted, I became attached to Laharl and company. After all, they introduced me to prinnies and taught me how to correctly spell "dood." Years later, Nippon Ichi has returned to this adored cast with D2: A Brighter Darkness, picking up right after Laharl finally becomes Overlord. Unfortunately, the developer didn't make Laharl, Etna, and Flonne as intriguing this time around.

A Brighter Darkness still features grind-based gameplay, but newcomers beware – this is a more punishing entry. As an experienced Disgaea player, I found myself leveling up my party in early stages, something I've never been forced to do before. However, the maps are some of the most creative yet, like an entire episode set at a rock concert.

A Brighter Darkness keeps your mind focused, whether you're maximizing damage or pairing compatible characters to increase the odds of a combo attack. You also weigh special abilities of your created characters, since you select a perk for each one. For instance, thieves can ensure that treasure chests always give a level three or higher item. Enemies also have perks, like increased poison odds, to take into consideration.

The addition of mounts is new to the entry, allowing for high-powered attacks and increased movement. I experimented with different mounts, but the risks outweigh the reward. Not only do characters share health, but it means one supercharged turn instead of two individual ones, so fewer combination attacks are available. As only a limited number of characters can be on the battlefield at once, this digs into your pool rather quickly.

Plenty has changed since the franchise's inception, but everything is pared down here. If you're expecting the ambition of Disgaea 4's superb online features, like user-generated

content, look elsewhere. The script is also weaker, from poor pacing to flat parodies. The comedy doesn't really kick in until the fourth chapter, and even a new character like Laharl's mysterious sister can't save it.

A Bright Darkness is more than passable, but it's not my favorite. Compared to Disgaea 4's ambition and heart, it is a letdown. Disgaea 4 took the series to new places, opening up multiplayer and community, but A Brighter Darkness doesn't do anything impressive. This is even more disappointing if you are a fan anticipating a reunion with beloved characters.

» **Kimberley Wallace**



Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs

Jumping at shadows

7.75

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure Publisher Frictional Games Developer The Chinese Room Release September 10 Rating M

PC

» Concept

Follow up Amnesia: The Dark Descent's castle-crawling horror with a macabre look into the industrial revolution's underbelly

» Graphics

Some rooms are impossibly dark without your lantern, a necessary tool that shows off Amnesia's impressive lighting system

» Sound

The groaning sounds of machinery and unsettling monster snarls keep you on edge

» Playability

Controller support makes the keyboard and mouse optional, and provides a much more comfortable experience

» Entertainment

More linear and story-driven than the original, but still a disturbing, cerebral trek

» Replay Value

Moderately High

Two years ago, Frictional Games delivered a first-person horror game called Amnesia: The Dark Descent. The moody corridor crawler tasked players with lighting the way via a lantern and scattered lamps while evading terrible creatures lurking in the shadows. The Dark Descent ignored combat altogether, instead asking players to run and hide when discovered by a monster. The tense and unforgettable game has given rise to a new wave of combat free, first-person horror games. The Chinese Room (Dear Esther) is up to bat for this sequel to the trend-setting original. The Dark Descent's flight-over-fight formula was effective, but A Machine for Pigs doesn't throw in enough threats to keep players on the edge of their seats.

Machine for Pigs' story is told as much through the environment as the scattered files and voiceover work. Set during the industrial revolution, players plod through the depths of a terrible factory that exploits humanity in disturbing ways. I enjoyed exploring the dim hallways of a mansion all the way down to the rattling, steaming bowels of the underground factory. Bold players are destined to discover the horrendous business practices afoot in this processing plant. I saw the main twist coming a mile away, but The Chinese Room unravels the story with its unique flair. Opaque, stylishly written journal entries add deeper meaning to the blood-splattered hallways and creaking processing lines. A disembodied voice frequently speaks to the amnesiac protagonist, peppering clues to his sordid past. I like the story Machine for Pigs tells, but it feels like The Chinese Room is more concerned with controlling the narrative than letting players get lost in the dark.

Horror is at its best when the audience's



minds fill in the gaps between scares. The original game was conservative with dispersing its monsters, but Machine for Pigs is too much so. The Chinese Room shows you plenty of monsters from behind the safety of artificial barriers, but legitimately dangerous encounters are scant. Amnesia: The Dark Descent shined brightest when throwing in an enemy that prompted players to flee into the shadows and hide behind a pile of boxes. Those moments are woefully rare in Machine for Pigs. A few open sections require players to evade stalking ghouls, but most of the encounters are too straightforward. For example, one enemy gives chase when walking down a linear path through city streets, which obviously provokes players to keep running forward. I felt like the scares were prodding me down the scripted path of the story rather than leaving the survival strategy up to me.

The predictable monster design is also a step back from the gruesome abominations of The Dark Descent. It's hard to remain frightened while exploring the factory when you feel like the game is pulling punches.

Using your lantern to navigate the darkness is necessary, and it escalates the tension. The original game required players to collect oil for the lantern and tinder boxes to light lamps along the way. These resources have been axed for a lantern with an infinite supply of oil. This more-reliable lantern enables players to explore the environments freely, but reduces motivation for exploring every nook and cranny. Lighting a breadcrumb trail of lamps was a key layer of tension in the original that is sorely missed in this sequel. Machine For Pigs attempts to compensate by causing the lantern to flicker unreliably when enemies are near, but this only further dampens the scares. I began using the light source like the radio from Silent Hill, removing the surprise from enemy ambushes.

Machine for Pigs feels like a trek through an understaffed haunted house crafted by artists with something to say about the ugly past of industrial progress. The winding, linear path is interrupted with simple crank-turning puzzles with the goal of repairing or sabotaging intimidating machinery. But these tasks just feel like distractions without the omnipresent threat of running out of light. One memorable moment interrupts a backtracking fetch quest with a sudden enemy appearance, but like many of the other frights this is just a false start.

The Chinese Room proves once again that it has wonderful, affecting stories to tell and can create environments that ooze atmosphere. However, Machine for Pigs guides players along the bloody processing line too strictly, removing the impact of interactivity. I had trouble giving into the scares when I knew each one was carefully prepared and mostly benign dressing or loud noises. It will still rattle of the faint of heart, but survivors of the original will feel like they've endured worse.

» Tim Turi





Total War: Rome II

Falling short of immortality

Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) Publisher Sega Developer Creative Assembly Release September 3 Rating T

8

PC

» **Concept**

Form the Roman Empire with blood and blade, or rewrite history by uniting the ancient world under a different banner

» **Graphics**

Total War has always boasted top-shelf presentation, and Rome II is the best yet – but your gaming rig had better be up to date

» **Sound**

Unremarkable audio throughout the campaign map gives way to blood-pumping clashes and cries in tactical combat

» **Playability**

The streamlined strategy layer is wonderful, but still can't keep the mid- to late-game doldrums at bay

» **Entertainment**

The sprawling map loses as much with its lack of focus as it gains in sheer scale and ambition. For all of Rome II's improvements, Total War: Shogun 2 remains the series' high point

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

This grand strategy title's scope is a historic achievement, asking players to lead ancient Rome or another of the era's powerful factions to hegemony through military force, diplomatic alliances, and the almighty power of money. As strong as Rome II's bid for strategy greatness is, its lack of focus and tendency toward monotony stain its gleaming banners.

Total War's core mission remains the same in Rome II: Conquer your way across a huge map one turn at a time, growing your economy and keeping public unrest low so your people don't rebel against your rule. When armies clash on the map, the action zooms into a real-time tactical simulation that puts the combatants in a geographically appropriate setting. Both sides of the game are impressive in scale and presentation.

Each culture of the era – from Greek city-states to Iberian tribesmen – is empowered with its own tech trees, military units, and buildings, giving every group a distinct flavor on and off the battlefield. Howling Hunnic hordes descend upon mobile Celtic skirmishers, while Roman legions clash with armored Greeks in deadly melees. This diversity is Rome II's greatest strength; every faction is unique not only because of its starting position but thanks to how it develops, builds, and fights differently.

Each province has one walled capital and one to three non-fortified settlements that can be captured independently. This has the dual bonus of simplifying empire management and decreasing the proportion of battles fought across city walls. Unifying unrest and economic development at the province level dramatically reduces the number of individual decisions you need to make, while allowing the map to retain its epic scale. Despite the enormous land area, Creative Assembly has done an excellent job creating chokepoints and other terrain configurations that encourage interesting maneuvering on the strategic map as well.

Making armies only exist under the leadership of a general and sharply limiting your number of leaders sound like problematic

changes for Total War on paper. In practice, the combination of easier mustering (all troop buildings are active across the entire province they're in, so no more going all the way back to your capital for reinforcements) and much larger garrison forces results in more huge, awesome battles and fewer tiny armies being shuffled around the map. The overall effect is a big win on every level.

Unfortunately, the metagame that propelled Total War: Shogun 2 to such great heights is severely dumbed down in Rome II. Diplomacy is a minor concern at best, since you have few options aside from "open warfare" and "brief armistice." The typical strategy loop is to pick your weakest neighbor, conquer them, put down rebellions, and repeat. No sense of navigating tricky webs of alliances or isolating a powerful foe from their friends is present.

The persisting legacy UI stupidities of Total War make every turn an exercise in flying back and forth across the map to make sure that you're not forgetting to move any armies, fleets, or agents – a far less entertaining activity than actively planning your conquests. Province development is a slog through picking which of three agricultural buildings is most efficient and choosing between the eight tiny bonuses that different temples offer. The good parts are still great – climactic sieges, desperate forest ambushes, finally getting the new units you've been building toward onto the field – but the boring parts are far too prevalent.

Battle is the same as it's ever been. When it

works properly it's great fun, and the presentation is second to none. Naval combat is still an unmitigated disaster, but sieges are better thanks to improved maps and multiple capture points. The cultural differences in units is wonderful, but the combination of legacy problems with the terrible naval implementation feels like a sidestep rather than a move forward for the series.

Tactical multiplayer is a step back from Shogun 2's system, with none of the persistent fluff around leveling your avatar. However, I continue to find Total War multiplayer battles less than engaging thanks to the poor UI and the fact that a single poor decision or mis-click still decides many combats. Multiplayer campaign support works fine in my experience, and it's a great boon if you have a buddy to play with, but slowing down the already glacial pace of the mid- to late-game is rough.

Rome II does many things exceptionally well. The bright spots, like epic sieges and come-from-behind victories, are some of the finest moments in the entire strategy genre. Even so, the game is a disappointment coming off of the brilliance of Shogun 2. The age-old problems that plagued Total War since its inception, which were mitigated with such great skill in the last game, return with a vengeance. As much fun as the battles often are, I never feel like I'm masterminding the rise of an empire against all odds – and that lack keeps any grand strategy game from realizing its full potential. » **Adam Biessener**



Each faction plays differently, giving Rome II plenty of diversity

Card Hunter

Much more than nostalgia

Style 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Blue Manchu
Developer Blue Manchu **Release** September 12 **Rating** NR



8.25

PC

» **Concept**

A rewarding grid-based tactical combat system wrapped in a blanket of '80s tabletop RPG nostalgia

» **Graphics**

The cardboard stand-up characters and colorful fantasy art perfectly match the theme

» **Sound**

Music and sound effects are overused

» **Playability**

A simple control scheme is easy to master, but the overwhelming difficulty curve might be tough to stomach

» **Entertainment**

A brilliant and difficult strategy game that's all the better because it's a free browser title

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

The roots of RPG gaming lie in the absurdly challenging dungeon crawls of '70s and '80s Dungeons & Dragons adventures. Small parties of adventurers were subjected to devious traps, surprise monster encounters, and regular party wipes in the name of the excitement that arose from constant risk. For better and worse, Blue Manchu's Card Hunter nails the aesthetic and challenge of those classic games, and along the way crafts a complex tactical rule system all its own.

Your friend Gary is game-mastering his fledgling sessions of Card Hunter in his mom's basement, and you're sitting on the other side of the table. Whether he's talking about polyhedral dice or not knowing how to flirt with the pretty pizza-delivery girl, Gary's endearing nerdery is a nostalgic and funny meta-story. The visuals support the concept, with a view of the table in front of you, complete with half-full soda cans, clipboard character sheets, and scattered cardboard miniatures. Inside the imaginary game, the story is appropriately cliché, as you lead a team of custom adventurers through one battle-oriented adventure after another.

Combat plays out as characters draw from a deck of cards based on their current equipment. New attacks, spells, and defenses pop up each turn-based round, and you make the best of the card selection available to defeat the bad guys or complete an objective. An astounding array of card effects rolls out over the course of the game, constantly offering new strategic options to explore. The increasingly demanding adventures offer a rich variety of monsters, environment designs, and tactical dilemmas.

That stiff balancing often suffers from the same problems those old classic D&D adventures are infamous for; battles can be unfairly brutal, and a few bad card draws can spell disaster. Knowing which equipment to bring into any given battle is often only accomplished through trial and error, while the process of prepping for a battle is further complicated due to little correlation between equipment's level and rarity to overall quality. Spending so much time managing a ballooning equipment list is a bore when the battles themselves are so much fun.

Even with its frustrations, Card Hunter is easy to recommend to tactics enthusiasts. The charming nods to old-school dungeon crawls are spot-on, but the depth of the incredibly flexible combat system gives Card Hunter its legs. There's even a well-designed multiplayer mode that lets you test your skills against fellow online players. The fact that Card Hunter is also a free browser-based game is icing on the cake, and a potent reminder that awesome games are cropping up in all sorts of unexpected venues these days. » **Matt Miller**



Outlast

Red Barrels delivers an endurance test in terror

7.5

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Red Barrels
Developer Red Barrels **Release** September 4 **Rating** M

PC

» **Concept**

Something has gone awry inside a Colorado mountain asylum, and you have to survive a tour through its halls without fighting back

» **Graphics**

Outlast features some haunting, true-to-life environments, but after a while all the game's characters begin to look the same

» **Sound**

Turn your speakers up while playing Outlast and you'll be treated to a cacophony of screams and creepy ambient effects

» **Playability**

Outlast's controls are simple; you spend most of the game running through halls and occasionally jumping over overturned desks

» **Entertainment**

If you love getting scared, Outlast provides you with an enjoyable weekend; if you don't, your time is better spent elsewhere

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low

Outlast doesn't worry about perk systems, weapon upgrades, or even inventory management. Instead, this game is hell-bent on one thing: horror. Fortunately, Outlast is very good at the one thing it does.

In 2009, Murkoff Advanced Research Systems reopened an old asylum that had been shut down after a government scandal, but many believe that Murkoff's interests aren't entirely honorable. When reporter Miles Upshur receives a tip from one of Mount Massive's contract workers he decides that the asylum could be the scoop of his career. After climbing headfirst into one of the asylum's second story windows, though, he soon discovers that he's descended into a hell he might never escape.

From the moment the game begins, Outlast's atmosphere is oppressive. Doors shut unexpectedly, bloody footprints trail down hallways, and the weeping of grown men echoes off the walls. After crawling through red-streaked sewage in a frosted sewer and being chased through a medical ward by a demented doctor with giant scissors, I realized I would never know what to expect next.

It's a good thing that Outlast's atmosphere is so arresting, because its gameplay is rather simple. Outlast doesn't let you face down its terrifying threats; your only option is to run like hell and hope to find a locker or bed to hide under until the danger passes. Outlast doesn't give you any tools to track enemies when they're out of sight. As such, you are constantly wandering into trouble and having to immediately backpedal to the nearest hiding spot and wait for your pursuers to forget you exist. Even then, you can't hear enemy movements over your character's own heavy breathing, so I would occasionally emerge from hiding to find that my foe was still in the room.

Outlast's biggest frustration is its lack of a map or some other form of navigation tool. It's easy to get lost in the game's maze-like environments, and this is especially tiring when the game sends you on a scavenger hunt. However, every time I started to grow tired of scavenging the environment for batteries to power my camcorder, the game threw a curve ball at me. Suddenly a contained explosion would blow me through a window and into a prison shower, or I'd end up dodging fire inside a cafeteria that some pyromaniac had turned into a blast furnace.

Outlast is a virtual tour through a hall of terrors. Even playing the game in full daylight makes me uneasy. However, the game's overall level design and gameplay were sacrificed at the altar of fear. If you're looking for an experience that will get your adrenaline pumping, Outlast is hard to beat, but if you're looking for a meatier horror experience, you might want to run past this one. » **Ben Reeves**

The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD

Even better than you remember



Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** September 20 (Digital), October 4 (Retail Disc) **Rating** E

Every game in the Legend of Zelda series is typically held in high regard, but 2003's *The Wind Waker* is one of the most polarizing. Some fans consider it the best in the series, while others claim it's the worst due to an overabundance of sailing and a tedious late-game fetch quest. With *The Wind Waker HD*, Nintendo has rendered those admittedly significant issues moot. Ten years after its initial release, this classic has been revived in a manner that's more than a simple HD upgrade. I've always liked *Wind Waker*, but Nintendo's changes helped me enjoy this new version even more than the original.

The gorgeous visuals wowed me, but I was more impressed with how well the gameplay holds up. This game is a decade old, and if it were released for the first time today, no one would bat an eye. Dungeons offer the franchise's clever puzzles, and the massive boss fights are among the best in the series. They may not be among the most difficult foes in series history, but they're certainly the best looking and make good use of each dungeon's item. Exploring random islands provides a great sense of discovery, and they offer more secrets than the simple floating rocks in *Skyward Sword*. Swordplay is arguably the best it's ever been in *Zelda*, with exciting dodge and parry moves available in most fights.

Two big changes are instrumental in making this a better experience than the original. Back then, players had to constantly change the direction of the wind if they wanted the slow-moving *King of Red Lions* boat to get anywhere. In *The Wind Waker HD*, the *Swift Sail* item can be purchased at the auction house after completing the first dungeon. This game-changing sail eliminates the need to alter the wind, and it makes your boat cut through the water at twice the original speed. Considering the amount of time you spend on the water, this drastically improves the overall experience.

The *Wind Waker* originally featured a giant

fetch quest. Near the end of the game, you had to find eight treasure charts throughout Hyrule, then pay Tingle 398 rupees each to decipher them. After that, you had to hunt down each of the eight Triforce shards. In *The Wind Waker HD*, five of the eight Triforce shards are directly found without the need of deciphering charts. This dramatically cuts down one of the most boring stretches in franchise history, and helps move the action along to the final climactic battle with Ganon.

Those changes are huge, but other tweaks improve the experience as well. Having the *Wind Waker* baton permanently mapped to a d-pad button removes the constant need to swap out items every time you need to make music. The notes for songs are displayed on the GamePad, so you don't have

to remember how to play a tune. Managing your inventory on the GamePad is simple and useful. Hero mode offers a tougher challenge for those that found the original too easy. The larger wallet at the start of the game prevents players from opening up treasure chests filled with rupees that they can't hold. These accommodations address almost all of the original's major flaws, giving players far more than basic visual improvements.

Every change Nintendo has made to this game is smart and serves a purpose, and I envy anyone that gets to experience *The Wind Waker* for the first time via this remake. It takes everything that made the original a classic and greatly improves on its visuals and quality of play. If you're a fan of classic remakes, you can't ask for much more. » **Dan Ryckert**



9.25

Wii U

» **Concept**

Improve upon Link's 2003 adventure

» **Graphics**

The visual upgrade is immediately apparent; the vivid colors and crashing waves of the flooded Hyrule looking fantastic

» **Sound**

Keeps with the tradition of memorable *Zelda* tunes

» **Playability**

While the pro controller is supported, you definitely want to play with the GamePad

» **Entertainment**

I couldn't keep the smile off my face as I revisited this classic

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Infinity Blade III

Chair takes one final swipe

8.75

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing Publisher Epic Games Developer Chair Entertainment/Epic Games Release September 18 Rating 9+

iOS

» Concept

Expand and improve every element of the Infinity Blade formula

» Graphics

Infinity Blade's visuals have always ranked at the top of mobile gaming space and this cranks the quality up even further

» Sound

A cinematic score, solid voice acting, and clashing battle noises all impress

» Playability

The classic control scheme is as tight as ever, with new weapons incorporated by the additional character, Isa

» Entertainment

I reveled in the dramatically larger and more varied world and expansive loot, combat, and customization options

» Replay Value

High



In 2010, Chair Entertainment released a new take on Punch-Out-style combat that showed off the graphical power of iOS devices and used controls expertly tuned to touch screens. When some complained about the brief completion time and repetitive nature, the developer bounced back in the sequel with a much larger castle to explore, new combat styles, and deeper customization. For the final entry in the series, Chair has done it again, offering a long list of satisfying improvements.

The most notable jump this time around is the addition of a second playable character. Siris' pal from the second game, Isa, is now a Deathless (meaning she can be killed and still come back for more). She stealthily creeps around and fires off crossbow shots into unknowing enemies before every fight. Isa's weapons fall into the same light, heavy, and dual-wield categories as Siris', but they're different classes. Rather than having a two-handed axe, for example, her heavy weapon is a spear. Her acrobatic battle style incorporates flurries of flying kicks and spinning neck snaps, and is a welcome alternative to Siris' straightforward warrior slashes. Though, in the end, you're still just swiping and tapping the screen all the same.

Isa has her own distinct armor, rings, and weapons (over 135 unique items for each character), but both share a bank account. Players are forced to use both characters equally via the back-and-forth level structure, so it takes some satisfying number crunching and resource management to make sure they're both well equipped. Skill upgrades are now included in the classic stat-boost system and encouraged me not to overload attack and health categories as usual. With enough points invested in certain categories you

can upgrade not only the current character, but universal mechanics as well. Rewards include more gold and experience when winning fights, discounts and more rare items in the shop, faster gem-fusion time, and even the ability to resurrect if you fall in battle. In pursuing these bonuses I felt like I used more magic and shields than in past games, and enjoyed a more well-rounded experience.

The new base of operations allows players to fuse gems, make potions, upgrade weapons and armor, and choose the next mission on the world map. Instead of returning again and again to a single labyrinthine castle like before, players visit all manner of finely realized locations like desert ruins, fancy palaces, and futuristic techno forts. I prefer these bite-sized and varied stages, but I hope that future updates allow for more alternate paths as they tend to be very linear.

In-app purchases return, but they're just as avoidable as they have been in past games. Chair has added battle chips as a separate form of currency from the standard cash. These are the only things that can buy potions, keys, and maps, while money is only for armor, weapons, and gems. At first I was disappointed at the currency split,

but it eventually makes more sense. Chips are much rarer; they can only be earned by completing goals (think achievements) and by winning random battle challenges (e.g. defeat an enemy without blocking). When you do finally get some, it's a bigger deal and you're forced to be much smarter with how you use them.

The story has always impressed me in the Infinity Blade series and I was hoping for a big finish. The previous games all had a twist to them that subverted expectations. Here the most interesting moment happens in the prologue. The rest is just a basic "Let's track this guy down and get him" structure. Attempts at more character development between stages don't quite get there, partially due to lower quality out-of-suit character models for Siris and Isa. The facial models aren't up to the high graphical bar set by the rest of the game, and their dorky future-sweaters are the polar opposite of the fantastic armor designs.

Despite these disappointments, I still enjoyed my wildly addicted time with the game, constantly tweaking my gear to gain every advantage. Even after the review I still find myself lured back for that second time through the campaign searching for gold and rare loot. » **Bryan Vore**

Online Play

Despite being built into the game, the ClashMob system was not released on launch day. When implemented, this system will invite all players to unite against a single monster with absurd hit points for big rewards. Solo trials are also planned so you can win rewards without relying on others. New Aegis Tournaments promise a competitive element, pitting players against each others' high scores. When these modes are playable, we will post our impressions online.

Players have to recruit this guy before they can fuse gems



Killzone: Mercenary

Rock-solid shooting on your Vita

Style 1-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Guerrilla Cambridge **Release** September 10 **ESRB** M

The lucrative FPS market has always struggled to find a suitable home on handheld devices. With a second analog stick available on the Vita, Guerrilla Cambridge has managed an impressive feat: deliver a rock-solid entry in the Killzone franchise that includes production values, controls, and action that stand comfortably beside (and in some cases, above) many console shooters.

The focus is right where it should be, on fast, challenging shooting scenes that come rapid fire one after the other. Smartly built battlefields offer ample cover points, lots of vertical space in which enemies might hide, and aggressive enemy AI that demands you stay mobile. Weapons mostly fall into familiar types, but I really enjoy the powerful Van-Guard devices, which deliver everything from orbital strikes to melee drones or electronics jamming. Many fights offer optional opportunities for stealth, which are a welcome change of pace from the constant shooting. Most of the ensuing fights are great fun, but some devolve into frustrating bouts against too many waves of enemies. I'm also not a big fan of the few boss fights, which mostly involve frustrating sprints between cover as you wait to trigger explosive barrels or weaponry.

While Mercenary is all about ushering you

from one skirmish to the next, Guerrilla has managed a deft bit of storytelling, systematically reintroducing many of the central plot events of previous games, now told from a new perspective. Protagonist Arran Danner is a nobody mercenary who gets shuffled from one conflict to the next, but it's hard to get behind the guy, since he's a jerk looking to shoot just about anyone for the right price. This mercenary attitude does offer the opportunity to finally play on both sides of the long-running conflict, a move that should please many fans, and leave others annoyed that they're having to side with the bad guys part of the time.

While it doesn't offer too many surprises, the multiplayer component is impressive and attractive. Players take each other out in some standard deathmatch and team deathmatch modes, along with a more objective-focused team mode that is the most entertaining of the three. Maps are thoughtfully designed and enjoyable to explore, but too many of the maps fall back on tired destroyed industrial architecture to stand apart from

one another. A dynamic valor system tracks your actions over time and rewards a numbered playing card that corresponds to your efforts, and in turn you can collect cards from fallen enemies, offering increased reason to come back for more matches every day.

Killzone: Mercenary sets a new bar of quality for FPS on handheld. While there's still room for improvement, the crisp visuals, aggressive action, and solid multiplayer make it an easy recommendation for players hungry for exclusive Vita content. » **Matt Miller**



8

Vita

» **Concept**

Return to the sci-fi war between Vekta and Helghan, this time as a soldier-for-hire

» **Graphics**

An adaptation of the Killzone 3 engine makes for some of the best visuals on Vita

» **Sound**

Voice work and sound design is high quality

» **Playability**

Guerrilla makes excellent use of the Vita's control inputs, with solid-but-standard FPS controls punctuated by occasional touch-screen options

» **Entertainment**

For shooting on a Sony handheld, nothing else comes close

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Angry Birds Star Wars II

A low midi-chlorian count

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Rovio **Developer** Rovio **Release** September 18 **ESRB** 4+



Angry Birds Star Wars II turns Jar Jar Binks into a more interesting and dynamic character than Darth Maul. While George Lucas can finally say that the true potential of his maligned character has finally been realized, this is the only area where Rovio makes an element from the prequel movies better. Like Anakin Skywalker's lackluster coming-of-age tale on the silver screen, this bird-hurling adventure is loaded with potential. It occasionally delivers fun and exciting moments, but too often it falls flat,

instead reminding us why the original game was great.

The careful difficulty balancing that we've seen in all of the other Angry Birds titles is missing in most of these stages. I completed all 80 in just over an hour, and was rarely forced to restart or alter my attack plans. Granted, I didn't three-star every level, or play long enough to unlock all of the special character missions, but

I did three-star a surprising number of levels in this short amount of time.

Of those 80 stages, I counted 13 that got the formula right and offered a decent challenge. The best stage focuses on *The Phantom Menace*'s pod racing sequence. Here, we see Anakin Skywalker taking on Sebulba, with a handful of piggy-piloted pods offering protection. This is also the first time that the player gets to control the evil piggies. Don't expect any variations to the play; they function exactly like the birds.

Players don't have to use the hand they are dealt. If you don't like using Yoda and his crazy (yet surprisingly weak) twirling lightsaber techniques, you can retreat to the menu to replace him with any Light Side character. This is another area where the level-design balance comes under fire; a stage carefully constructed for pinpoint targeting techniques can be torn down by bringing in a Jedi who can burrow through the structure.

Part of the reason Rovio implemented character switching is for Hasbro's Telepod action figures (sold separately). Following in Skylanders' and Disney Infinity's footsteps, Angry Birds Star Wars II allows players to place an action figure over the iPhone or iPad's camera to bring that character into the game. Don't worry — all characters can be called upon without having to buy a physical version, but only a limited number of times before a recharge. If you buy the toy version, however, you'll always have them available.

Even without much in terms of difficulty, Angry Birds Star Wars II is still moderately fun, but more in that "Wow, I didn't expect that shot to level the entire playing field" kind of way than the "How on Earth am I going to get all of those pigs with just three birds?" formula we've seen in past iterations. » **Andrew Reiner**

7.5

iOS • Android

» **Concept**

Based on the prequel trilogy, this entry offers more playable characters and an easier difficulty level

» **Graphics**

The destruction is fun to watch, especially when explosions are involved. The bird versions of the prequel characters are hilarious

» **Sound**

Familiar Star Wars melodies are present and periodically changed to add more playfulness to the action

» **Playability**

The need to reflect laser blasts or search for solutions are oddly absent. Most bird-tossing strategies work, and work well

» **Entertainment**

Offers a few great Angry Birds moments, but high levels of strategy aren't required to topple most stages

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

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Resident Evil 6	8.75	Nov-12
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
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Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
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Unfinished Swan, The	8	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
WRC 3 FIA World Rally Championship	7.75	Jun-13
WWE '13	9	Dec-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12

XBOX 360

Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Anarchy Reigns	7.5	Mar-13
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XCOM Declassified, The	7.5	Oct-13
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Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
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of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
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NBA 2K13	8.75	Dec-12
NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
Need For Speed: Most Wanted	9	Dec-12
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Omerta: City of Gangsters	6	Apr-13
Payday 2	8.25	Oct-13
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Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
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Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
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XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12

Wii U

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Chasing Aurora	6.5	Feb-13

Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
Game & Wario	8	Aug-13
Lego City Undercover	8.5	Apr-13
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New Super Mario Bros. U	9.25	Jan-13
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Wii

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Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12

PC

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Elemental: Fallen Enchantress	8.25	Jan-13
Fallen Enchantress: Legendary Heroes	8.5	Aug-13

2 | TMNT: Out of the Shadows

Platform 360 Release August 28 Rating T

Out of the Shadows is terrible, and offers nothing as a video game or even as a piece of nostalgia. The ugly turtle models didn't bring back any memories of the fun cartoon of my youth, and the gameplay is among the most unenjoyable experiences I've had during my time as a gamer. There is no circumstance under which anyone should play this train wreck of a game. — Dan Ryckert

6.5 | Divekick

Platform PS3 • Vita • PC Release August 20 Rating T

Just beneath the freewheeling, goofy exterior of Divekick is a layer of complexity that might scare off newcomers as fast as it brought them in. Once the concept of diving and kicking has set in, new questions arise. What are those meters for? Why is this guy teleporting? How come you can jump backwards? — Jason Oestreich

3 | Flashback

Platform 360 Release August 20 Rating T

The story and setting are fun, but after 10 minutes of wrestling with wonky controls, the nostalgia wore off. A little later, after Conrad's body somehow fused with a platform and forced me to restart, the contempt began. — Jeff Cork

Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
FTL: Faster Than Light	8	Dec-12
Gone Home	8.5	Oct-13
Gunpoint	8.75	Aug-13
Hotline Miami	7.75	Jan-13
Impire	5	May-13
King's Bounty: Warriors of the North	7.75	Jan-13
Leisure Suit Larry: Reloaded	6	Sep-13
Lost Planet 3	6.5	Oct-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13
Metro: Last Light	8.75	Jul-13
Monaco	8.75	Jun-13
Omerta: City of Gangsters	6	Apr-13
Payday 2	8.25	Oct-13
Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
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Valley Without Wind 2, A	6.75	May-13
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Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
XXOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12

3DS

Aero Porter	5	Mar-13
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Animal Crossing: New Leaf	8.5	Aug-13
Brain Age: Concentration Training	6	Apr-13
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate	8.5	Apr-13
Code of Princess	7.5	Dec-12
Crashmo	8.5	Feb-13
Crimson Shroud	7.5	Mar-13
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Epic Mickey: Power Of Illusion	5	Jan-13
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HarmoKnight	8.25	Jun-13
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Liberation Maiden	7	Jan-13
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Mario & Luigi: Dream Team	8.5	Sep-13
Mario and Donkey Kong: Minis on the Move	6.5	Jul-13
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Paper Mario: Sticker Star	8.75	Dec-12
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates to Infinity	6.75	May-13
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Project X Zone	7.75	Aug-13
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Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner – Soul Hackers	8.75	Jun-13
Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11
Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward	8.75	Dec-12

VITA

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Dokuro	6	Dec-12

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Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward	8.75	Dec-12

iOS

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Bloodmasque	6	Oct-13
Breach & Clear	6.5	Sep-13
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Deus Ex: The Fall	6.75	Sep-13
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Haunted Hollow	6.75	Jul-13
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Plants vs. Zombies 2	9.25	Sep-13
Scurvy Scallywags	7.75	Aug-13
Warhammer Quest	7.75	Aug-13
Year Walk	8.75	May-13

ANDROID

Cut the Rope: Time Travel	8.5	Jul-13
Iron Man 3	6.5	Jul-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13

geeked at birth



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STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com

Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com

Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com

Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com

Senior Features Editor
Matt Helgeson matt@gameinformer.com

Digital Editor
Bryan Vore bryan@gameinformer.com

Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com

Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com

PC Editor
Adam Biessener adam@gameinformer.com

News Editor
Michael Futter mike@gameinformer.com

Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com

Senior Associate Editors
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Tim Turi tim@gameinformer.com
Dan Ryckert dan@gameinformer.com

Associate Editors
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com

Contributors
Brian Albert
Liz Lanier

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com

Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com

Graphic Designers
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Jason Pfitzer jasonpfitzer@gameinformer.com
Samantha Langer sammlanger@gameinformer.com

Web Designer/Programmer
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com

Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com

Video Editor
Jason Oestreich jason@gameinformer.com

Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com

Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com

Senior Product Manager
Lisa Wagner lisa@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Born rob@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Sales Director
Suzanne Lang Middaugh suzanne@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Associate
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com

Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Nimerfroh rachel@gameinformer.com
Mark Burger mark@gameinformer.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE

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or send correspondence to:
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For subscription inquiry ONLY:
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THE LIES ON THE BACK OF THE BOX

by Ben Reeves

The games your console's packaging promised but never saw the light of day

C

onsole makers face a steep challenge every time they release a new system: How do they entice gamers to buy a product with a limited software selection? Even the best launch lineup can't compete with the library of an older system, which was built over the course of five years or more. Even so, console developers need to convince early adopters to buy their product. One solution is to advertise the promise of future software on the back of the console that customers buy today. Unfortunately, some of these games are never released. Here's a roundup of some of the most notable titles that were canceled even after they were featured on a console's packaging.



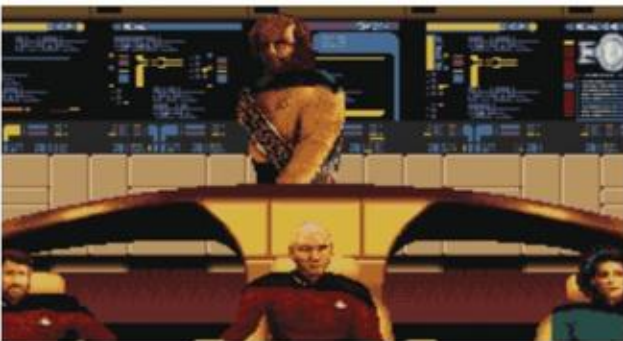
B-Bomb – Sega Genesis

Immature humor was fairly common in the 16-bit era, and B-Bomb was a product of its time. In this Sega-developed title, aliens from Pluto kidnap several Earth farm animals and force them to win their freedom by playing the national Plutonian sport, B-Bomb – an arena-combat game where contestants fly through low gravity fields and attack one another with their butts. Even though Sega placed B-Bomb on the Genesis' packaging, the game never made it to store shelves.



Special Tee Shot – SNES

A precursor to games like Super Monkey Ball, Special Tee Shot let players control a red sphere that bounced around various obstacle courses before landing safely inside a goal. The game never had a retail release, but was available via a satellite modem service in Japan. Fortunately, this story has a happy ending. Years later, Special Tee Shot was retooled to feature Kirby characters, numerous enemies were added to the courses to ramp up their challenge, and the game was given an official release as Kirby's Dream Course.



Star Trek The Next Generation: A World for All Seasons – 3DO

In 1994, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was a hot commodity, so Spectrum HoloByte licensed the rights to develop several games based on the series. SNES and Genesis versions made it to market, but the 3DO version never saw the light of day. Unlike the other *Star Trek* titles, *A World for All Seasons'* backgrounds were going to be pre-rendered in 3D, its story would feature a choose-your-own-adventure structure, and players would be able to participate in real-time space combat sequences similar to *Star Fox*. Unfortunately for *Trek* fans, the 3DO was a sinking ship, and *A World for All Seasons* didn't float.



Donkey Kong Racing – GameCube

Rare's *Diddy Kong Racing* for N64 was one of the few kart racers to keep pace with *Mario Kart*, so Rare was eager to follow it up with a GameCube sequel. In *Donkey Kong Racing*, players would ride various animals – such as Rambis – that they could upgrade as they collected food throughout a race. The planned GameCube title was announced at E3 in 2001 and featured on early GameCube boxes. However, in 2002, Microsoft bought Rare, preventing the developer from working on Nintendo properties. Rare took the game's code and reworked it into a game called *Sabreman Stampede* for Xbox, but like *Donkey Kong Racing*, this title never released.



Tiny Toon Adventures – Jaguar

In the late '80s and early '90s, Warner Bros. tried to reinvigorate its Looney Toons brand with a series called *Tiny Toon Adventures* – a cartoon that focused on the next generation of the Looney Toons characters who all attended a school named Acme Looniversity. The show was extremely popular, and spawned a series of video games for the NES, Genesis, Game Boy, and PlayStation. However, a planned *Tiny Toons* platformer for the Atari Jaguar went through two iterations before finally getting the ax.



StarCraft: Ghost – Xbox

One of the most infamously canceled games of all time, *StarCraft: Ghost* looked to give fans an up-close-and-personal view of Blizzard's *StarCraft* universe. This third-person, stealth-focused action title put players into the boots of a ghost operative named Nova, who worked to uncover a military conspiracy. The game was originally scheduled for release on PS2, Xbox, and GameCube, but never made it to any of these systems despite the fact that it was featured on the packaging for Microsoft's Green Halo Edition Xbox. In March 2006, Blizzard put the game on "indefinite hold," and fans have been holding their breath ever since. ❖



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