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A NEW BREED OF MULTIPLAYER

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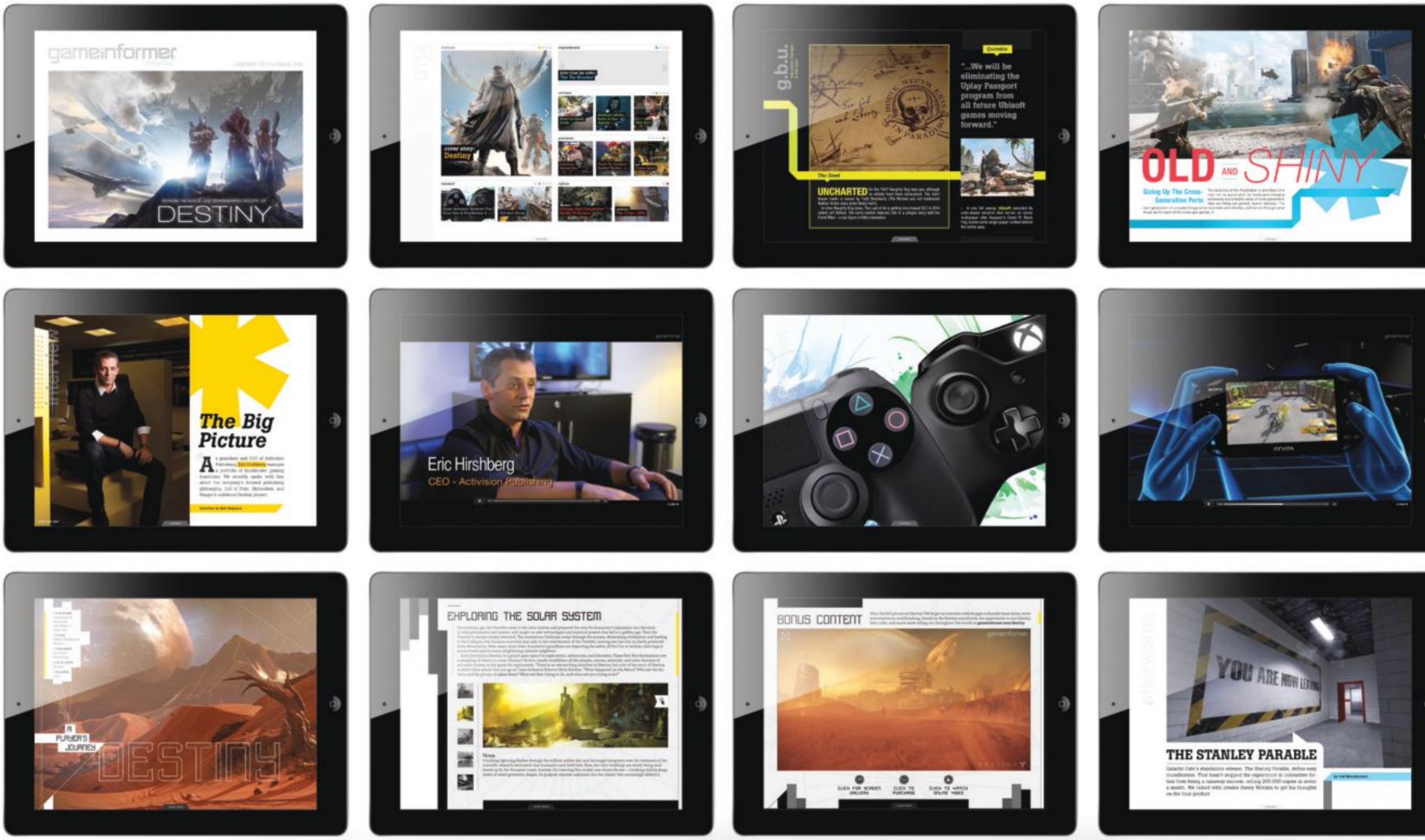
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cover story: Destiny
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"...We will be eliminating the Uplay Passport program from all future Ubisoft games moving forward."
UNCHARTED
OLD AND SHINY
Sizing Up The Cross-Generation Ports
interview
The Big Picture
Eric Hirshberg
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GameStop POWER UP REWARDS PRO

The Top 50

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

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

Ten years ago, Game Informer first introduced its Top 50 Games format for our year-end awards. Our previous formats had worked for over a decade, but we wanted to shake things up. To this day I feel it's one of the best decisions we ever made, and is far and away my favorite annualized feature that we do.

The concept is simple, but I wanted to explain the method behind the madness. Whenever we looked at the top tens or other award formats from around the games industry, it seemed like all the usual suspects were a part of everyone's list (including our own at the time). In essence, with some slight variation, most video game awards from around the globe endorsed the same 10 or 12 games.

This still holds true today (for the most part), be it in games or movies. For one, it's easy to market to gamers. Companies, journalists, and gamers like the simplicity of nominations and a clear-cut winner.

We do too. This is why we give individual awards for genres, platform exclusives, reader awards and the like, but I still feel the most important part of our issue is the Top 50. It's not just about knighting games that we already know are great; it's about expanding your gaming experiences and finding those gems that you may have missed.

The Top 50 gives us the chance to be that friend who introduces you to something you may have never heard before, or missed when it released. It's part checklist, part recommendations, and of course, all celebration of the great year in gaming that was 2013.

Believe it or not, it was hard to get it down to 50 games, as it has been every year for the last 10 years (and yes, you are not alone in your anger that a game you love didn't make the list – that's how lists work). And if our cover story on Evolve this month is any sign of things to come in 2014, picking the Top 50 next year will be just as difficult.

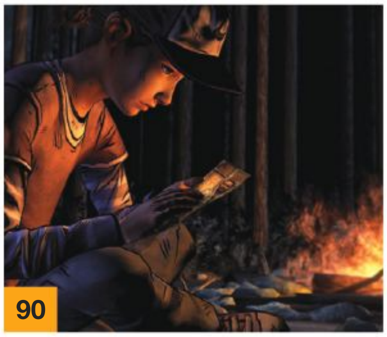
Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

»38

Evolve

The team behind Left 4 Dead is abandoning the undead, but continues to embrace its innovative multiplayer focus with a brand-new game pitting a team of humans against one imposing monster. ***by Jeff Marchiafava***


90

79

10 **Fall Of The Empire**

top
50
Games
of 2013
50

74

96 **Top 25 Wii Games**

GRAN TURISMO
MAZDASPEED
91

games index

Alien: Isolation 74
Banner Saga, The 83
Diablo III: Reaper Of Souls 86
Division, The. 78
Doki-Doki Universe 94
Evolve 38
Fighter Within 94
Gran Turismo 6 91
Icycle: On Thin Ice 94
Infinite Crisis 85
Legend of Zelda:
  A Link Between Worlds, The 20
Lego The Hobbit 82
Lightning Returns:
  Final Fantasy XIII 76
Max: The Curse of Brotherhood . . . 86
Mighty No. 9. 79
NASCAR '14 81
No Man's Sky 28
Novelist, The. 94
Peggle 2 94
Pokémon X & Y 26
Room Two, The. 94
Spacebase DF-9 28
SteamWorld Dig 92
Super Mario 3D World 25
Tiny Brains 94
UFC. 80
Walking Dead, The: Season Two –
  Episode 1: All That Remains 90
Wasteland 2 84
Ys: Memories of Celceta 93

regulars

» 4 **Feedback**
This month readers tell us we were spot on with our Zelda review, way off on our Sonic review, and thank us for calling out some cult games that they may have missed.

» 10 **Connect**
To the dismay of fans, LucasArts collapsed last year. We dive in to see what happened and what could have been changed. We also chat with a man who played Defender for 32 hours straight to try and set a world record.

» 74 **Previews**
The developers behind Total War are taking a break from its strategy series to take on the classic franchise with Alien: Isolation. We also check in on Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune's spiritual successor, Mighty No. 9.

» 90 **Reviews**
The Walking Dead makes a return as we review the first episode of the second season. We also take a look at Gran Turismo 6, one of the PlayStation 3's last hurrahs.

» 100 **Game Over**
2013 saw the end of a generation, and the release of many games that will be discussed and highly regarded for years to come. We've put together a series of charts and graphs visualizing the breakdown of the year's best.

CORRECTION: In issue 248's Holiday Buyer's Guide, we incorrectly displayed an image of the HTC One X when talking about the HTC One.

feedback

Now that the new consoles are out, we can get back to what's really important: arguing over review scores. Readers also discuss the limitations of cross-gen games and weigh in on the relevancy of fantasy games.

The Shadow Of Last-Gen

After reading about Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor in issue 248, I am conflicted. On one hand, I'm ecstatic because the game sounds amazing. At the same time, I'm worried that it won't live up to expectations. According to the article, the game is coming to Xbox 360 and PS3 as well as the new consoles. Will it still be the same game on the older generation of hardware? My 360 can hardly play Skyrim without five minutes of loading first, and I'm guessing Shadow of Mordor's groundbreaking AI will push it beyond its limits. Can the older consoles handle the games made for the new generation?

Xavier Kazi
via email

Cross-generation games have become a recent concern amongst gamers, since it seems that concessions are being made to accommodate the Xbox 360 and PS3. Exciting games like The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt and Evolve (featured on this month's cover) are exclusive to the new consoles and PC, but you shouldn't count out cross-gen games. Titles like Shadow of Mordor and Watch Dogs are still introducing new ideas and technical innovations while benefiting from a broader audience.

Failure To Launch

Your list of the top 10 launch games (issue 248) was great, but I'm afraid it only served to highlight how disappointing the launch lineups for the Xbox One and PS4 were overall. I'm beginning to think I'll never see the terms "system seller" or "killer app" again. You certainly won't hear those words describing anything that accompanied these two systems. Instead, we were treated to another round of sequel mania and re-hashed sports games. Each system also had an original property that received weak-to-mediocre reviews (Ryse and Knack, to name names). Obviously, a console's launch window is when it will have its fewest number of games, but it's a shame that between the two systems, we couldn't get even one original triple-A title that will find itself in the company of Soul Calibur or Halo someday.

Christopher Gast
via email

Microsoft and Sony may not have had much for original content, but that won't matter as this generation continues. Aside from the enjoyment that comes from comparing (and arguing over) launch lineups, releases have a habit of bleeding together over the years. Ultimately, both systems will end up with their share of new, generation-defining IPs. Building a quality library takes time.

Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com

Thanks For The Support

I understand that you receive a lot of biased feedback about your game reviews, and that you have undoubtedly already received many complaints about this holiday's reviews. I just want you to know that you have one gamer at your back who understands that your reviews are just opinions, and not sacred judgments of the quality of a game. Thank you for sharing your opinions; I always respect them, even though I may not always agree with them. Also, Call of Duty: Ghosts is better than Battlefield 4.

Coleman Patterson
via email

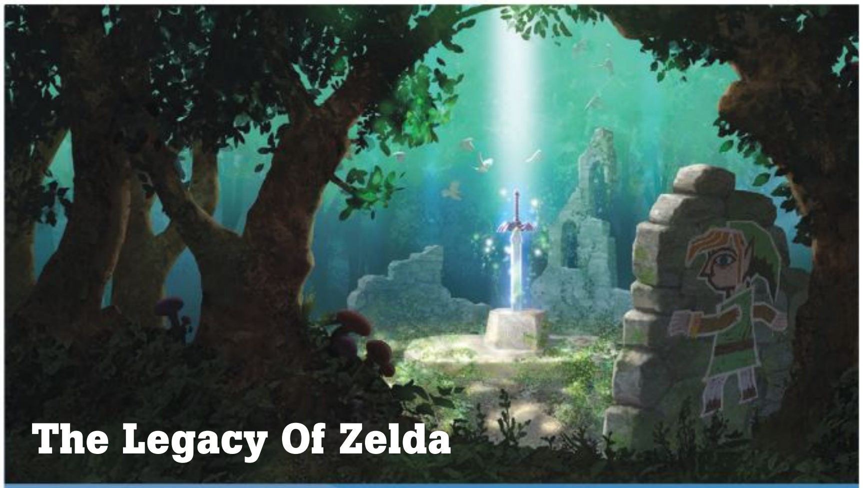
Your letter is so well-stated that we don't even mind your tongue-in-cheek trolling. The following reader, on the other hand…

Sonic Attack

I have had up to my neck with you guys before, but this is ridiculous. It was bad enough when you guys gave Sonic Colors a 7. But when I went on your website and saw that you gave Sonic Lost World a 5, I was enraged! Not only that, but Tim Turi dares to call himself a freaking Sonic fan when he gave these games really low scores. Good day to you!

Charlie Marble
via email

It's alright, Charlie. Someday you'll understand that being a fan of something doesn't mean you have to love it unconditionally. Ignoring a game's shortcomings won't fix them, and blindly supporting a series only gives its developer an excuse to continue making the same mistakes. Sonic fans in particular would be better off learning this lesson.



The Legacy Of Zelda

I commend Dan Ryckert for his review of The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds, because it was spot-on. Everything about this game earned its 10 rating. The graphics are well done, there are lots of new features, and overall, it is a wonderfully done title. I'm not sure what Nintendo's idea was in terms of having it be a remake of sorts, but whatever it was, I applaud them on doing such a great job.

James Pope
via email

The Legend of Zelda is one of the best franchises ever to exist. *Game Informer* has awarded a perfect 10 to a lot of them. I love the Zelda games, so I'm not disputing that; I'm just wondering if these games are being awarded their 10s simply for being Zelda. I know that not every Zelda game has earned a 10, but whenever I see a new one coming out, I feel it's safe to say that it will garner a perfect rating from you guys.

Hank
via email

Actually, while games in The Legend of Zelda series have generally received high scores, only four have been awarded 10s. No game we review skates by on the merits of its predecessors. The score that A Link Between Worlds received is a testament to the talent of Nintendo's development team, not the history of the series.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"I would like to know if there are any more Call of Duty games coming out sooner or later?"

Yes.

"I dated cheerleaders and played football in high school. Now I eagerly await your mag every month. Am I a nerd?"

You're definitely heading down that path.

"Saints Row IV or GTA V?"

That depends on how much you like fart jokes.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"i have a xbox u want me to review it 4 u?"

Question Of The Month:

Which new system has the better controller: The PlayStation 4 or Xbox One?

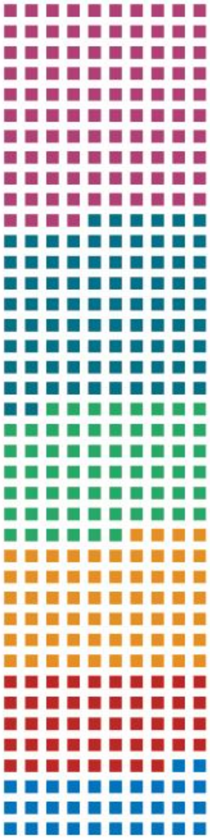
gi spy

(Left) Miller hangs out with Harebrained Schemes' Mitch Gitelman and Jordan Weisman, along with his son Zach Weisman and other tabletop gaming pros Mike Elliott and Patrick Day.
(Right) Dan and Bryan met up with wrestling legend Steve Austin at a WWE 2K14 event. Despite our pleading, Austin refused to perform a Stone Cold Stunner on Dan.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



🟪 **26%** Review Score Talk

🟦 **22%** Next-Gen Hype

🟩 **16%** Favorite Cult Classics

🟧 **16%** Fantasy Game Responses

🟥 **12%** Battlefield 4 Server Woes

🟦 **8%** Zelda Love

Generation Next

I thoroughly enjoyed your article on current-generation cult classics (issue 248). As a solo gamer who is slow on adopting new consoles, your list gave me new games to look for that will extend the life of my current-gen systems. I also have to say that Enslaved: Odyssey to the West is a fantastic game, and I was glad to see it included on the list. The voice acting and story really make it a game worth picking up on the cheap. I look forward to seeing more lists of classic games in the future.

Josh Radcliffe
via email

Our old systems certainly had some exceptional lineups, and we bet you're not the only reader who missed out on a few great games. The only problem is now that the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 are out, the next-gen systems are now current-gen systems, and the old current-gen systems are now last-gen systems. If you'll excuse us, we need to lie down for a minute.

Keep It Simple

There are plenty of players who read every tome, complete every quest, and uncover every secret in a game. I respect these gamers for their diligence, but offer this message to developers: Some of us just want to beat the damn thing. I'm not into the stories, quests, or histories of any game. I spam buttons like nobody's business during cut scenes, dialogue, or any sequence that interrupts gameplay. I buy games to play them, after all. If I wanted to watch something, I'd put on a movie; if I wanted to read something, I'd pick up a book. I want a video game to be so intuitive, real, and easy to play that I instantly become immersed in it. Developers, please keep the impatient gamers in mind. All we want to do is play.

Reed Erickson
via email

Fleshing out a game's lore with extra content is tricky. Developers want to expand their stories in a meaningful way without interrupting gameplay with lengthy exposition. Optional audio recordings and sidequests are one way developers try to give interested players more insight into their fictional worlds, but it's far from a perfect solution. Hopefully, we see some new approaches to marrying story and gameplay in 2014.

On To Something

I'm confused. As a lifelong Nintendo fan, I can't help notice how often you badmouth the Wii's library, but you also gave pretty high scores to most of the big games for the system. You fell head over heels in love with Skyward Sword and Donkey Kong Country Returns, and in issue 248, you praised Twilight Princess and No More Heroes. Your reviews don't reflect your supposed dislike for the company, and sometimes I suspect you only bash them because that's the trendy thing to do given how out of place they look in the modern gaming scene. Am I in the ballpark, or do you guys just have a love/hate relationship with the Big N?

David Otto
via email

So you're saying that, despite the preconceptions some diehard Nintendo fans have about our coverage, we actually have a history of fair review scores and acknowledging the company's triumphs? Nah, that can't be right. For more of our rampant Nintendo bashing, check out our hate-filled list of the top 25 Wii games on page 96.

TURTLE ROCK
STUDIOS

(Left) A few of the talented folks at Turtle Rock posed for a pleasant picture during our studio visit, right before annihilating us in Evolve. **(Right)** Studio heads Chris Ashton and Phil Robb also showed us their awesome trucks. Pictured here is Phil's ridiculously souped-up 1937 Ford.

Platform Prejudice

I have a rant that I'm quite sure you hear on a daily basis. Why do PC gamers continually berate console gamers for being behind the times? Does their given platform offer anything different than what a console offers? Graphically, yes, I understand the upgrade. Other than more horsepower under the hood, what exactly is their bragging point?

Dustin Heath
via email

Some gamers will always exhibit a sense of elitism over their platform of choice in a vain attempt to impress their peers. PC gaming does have its advantages, including a much greater selection of indie titles, as well as access to mods and user-created content. Fortunately, consoles have begun adopting these trends, largely in response to consumer interest. Rather than chastising others platforms, players should celebrate the growing array of options we have at our disposal.

Mad About MOBAs

I highly enjoyed the recent interview with the League of Legends World Championship winners (Gamer, issue 248). Even though I favor DotA 2, it was still cool to see a MOBA being recognized. I have been getting into eSports a lot these past few years and am loving them so much. One thing that disappoints me is there really isn't much coverage on eSports, so I was pleasantly surprised to see that piece in the magazine. I'd like to see more interviews with different eSports casters or teams in the future, and coverage of LoL's season cups and DotA's International.

Andrew
via email

The popularity of eSports is certainly on the rise, as evidenced by the massive turnout for the League of Legends' World Championship tournament, which sold out the Los Angeles Staples Center. You can definitely expect to see more coverage of MOBAs and eSports in the future, both in the magazine and on gameinformer.com.

Living In A Fantasy World

In issue 249, we asked readers if they still enjoy playing traditional fantasy games. The readers who replied are still in love with elves and orcs. Most of them, anyway.

I still love playing fantasy games and never get tired of them. There is just something about games with elves and magic and that sort of stuff that brings out one's imagination and draws us into a world that is otherwise unattainable. Games like Final Fantasy, Zelda, and Skyrim bring out the kid in many adults, and are enjoyable many years after they are released, unlike a lot of games.

Jimmy Avila

Some of the best games I have ever played have traditional elves and dragons. Skyrim is the most recent example of a game I really enjoyed. Although I have not played a Lord of the Rings game yet, I'm sure I will be playing Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor after reading about it in GI.

Adam Paredes

Yes, I do like fantasy games. When you take a look at western RPGs like Fable, Dragon Age, and The Witcher 2, you see immersive worlds that give you choices for how you react in combat. Whether it's strategy or cinematic fights, you can feel what it's like to be in a Tolkien or Game of Thrones experience where you choose your own path. These games never get old in my opinion.

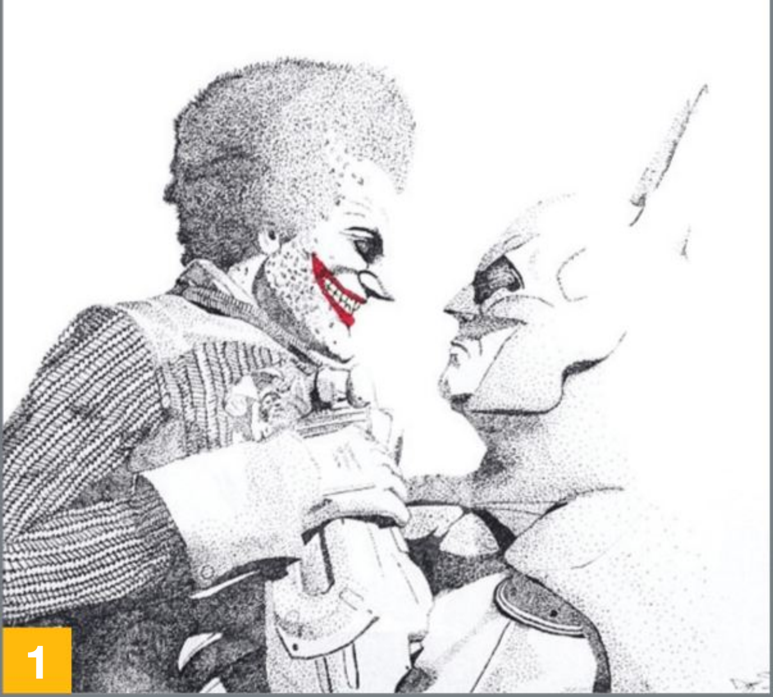
Daniel Guthrie

Actually, no. Those generic fantasy tropes have been overused by the gaming industry a lot. Come up with something new, people! How about Wagons? It's a hybrid between a werewolf and a dragon.

Mohammed Khan

(Left) Mike was blown away by Sam Lake's real-life bullet time abilities, which rely heavily on help from Remedy's Ozz Hakkinen and Kai Auvinen. **(Right)** After a long and productive term, GI interns Isaac Perry, Mike Trinh, and Katie Seville battled each other to the death. We wanted to stop them, but they seemed to be enjoying it.

gallery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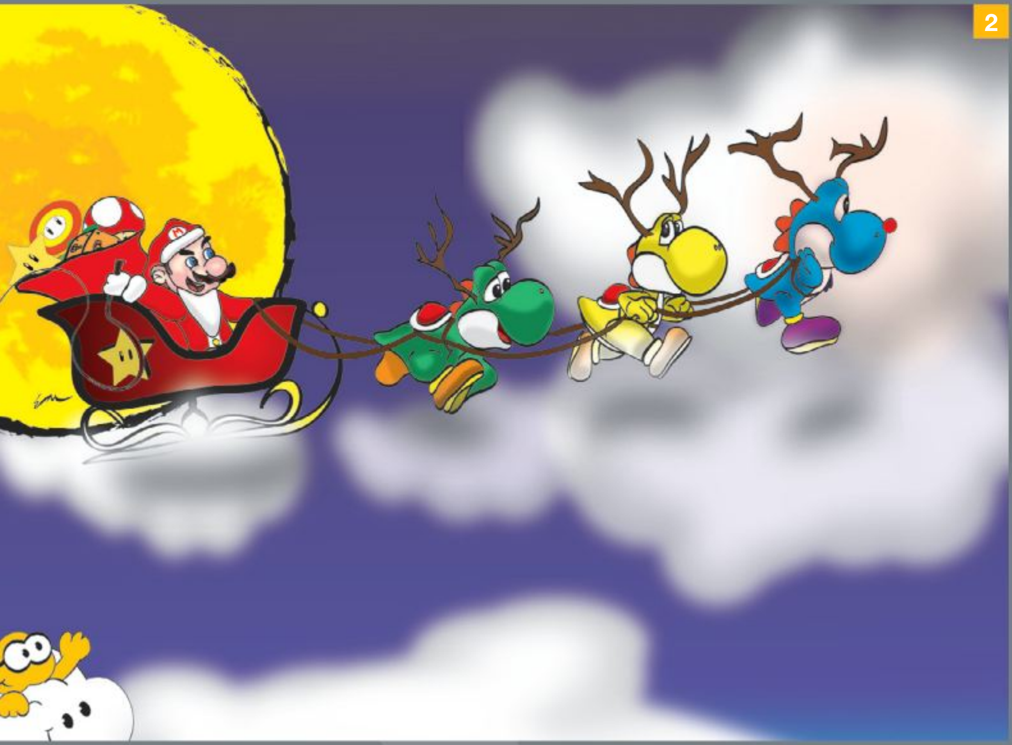
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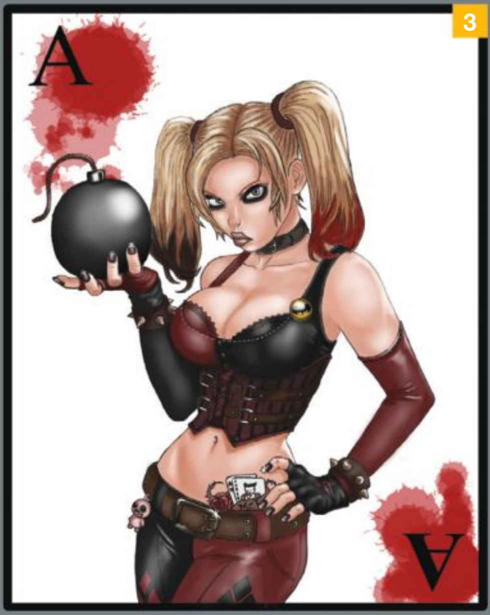

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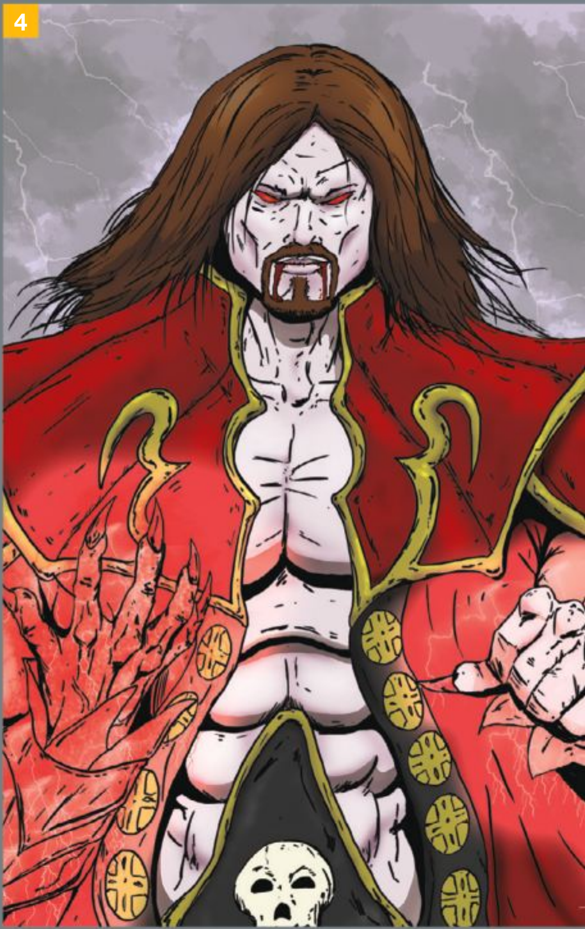
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WINNER

1 Dylan Sherman

You'd think Batman would reconsider his "no killing" rule after catching the same jerk 500 times in a row

2 Enrique Morales
Considering how long Yoshi's flutter jumps last, this should be a short sleigh ride

3 Jason Romano
One of The Joker's most useful cards

4 Tracarris Wince
Dracula may be a bit of a homebody, but he really oughta head to a walk-in clinic for that hand situation

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FALL OF THE EMPIRE

by Andrew Reiner

HOW INNER TURMOIL BROUGHT DOWN A LEGENDARY STUDIO

NOTABLES

20 afterwords: the legend of zelda: a link between worlds

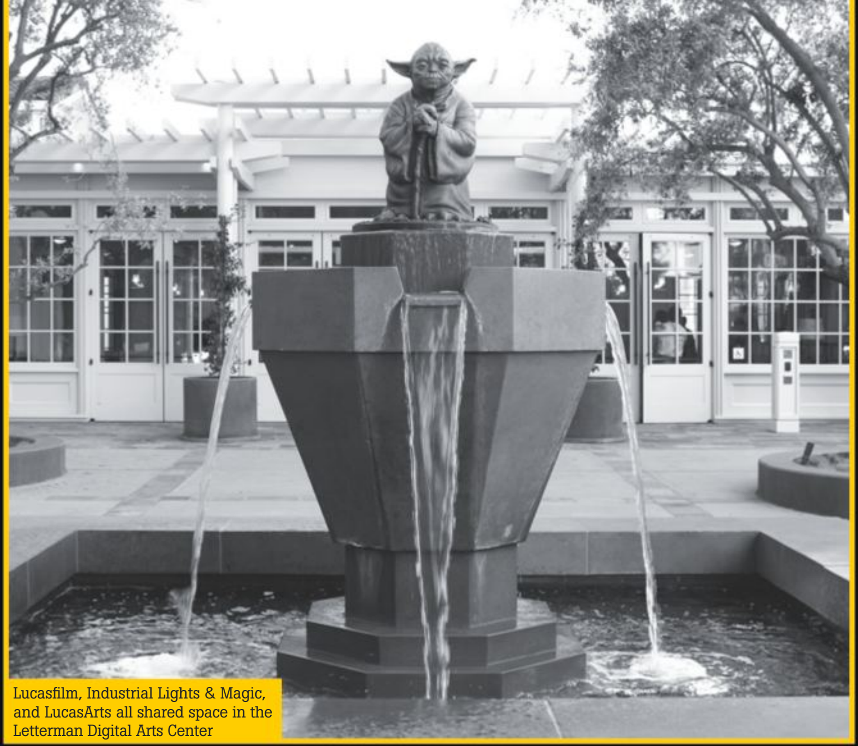
25 afterwords: super mario 3d world

26 afterwords: pokémon x & y

30 massive: the state of the mmo

32 interview: michael pachter

36 gamer: the returning defender champion


Lucasfilm, Industrial Lights & Magic, and LucasArts all shared space in the Letterman Digital Arts Center

Like a farm boy looking contemplatively upon two suns, in 2004 LucasArts was searching for answers and ways to right a video game business in disarray. Although Star Wars fans were pleased with several of the studio's latest endeavors with the license – namely BioWare's Knights of the Old Republic and Raven Software's Jedi Academy – George Lucas felt that his beloved galaxy created far too many mediocre games. Even the popular titles weren't generating the revenue needed to sustain a healthy business model.

Lucas entrusted the future of the company to newly appointed president Jim Ward, who previously held the position of Lucasfilm's senior vice president of marketing, global distributions, and online. During his tenure at Lucasfilm, Ward was a key player in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*'s media blitz, which raked in over $400 million in the box office despite its poor critical reception. He also helped guide *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* to a successful run on the silver screen.

Ward didn't waste much time altering LucasArts' battle plans. In a press release he stated, "To make LucasArts thrive and to position ourselves for the long-term future, we need to make some fundamental changes." The new focus led to the slimming of LucasArts' workforce from roughly 450 employees to 190*, and a shift in development for internal and external studios.

Months after taking his new position in gaming, Ward told Game Informer, "Five years from now, I want to have been able to put the 'Lucas' back in LucasArts. To have that same 'pixie dust' feeling when people see that logo that they maybe did in the '90s. For them to think, 'If I pick up this game, I know it's going to be kick ass; I know it's going to be of the highest quality and the most creative thing out there.'"

That sentiment was echoed by gamers and critics alike late in 2004 after they played Pandemic Studios' Star Wars: Battlefront, a multiplayer-focused shooter that capitalized on the immense scale of this universe's wars and vehicles. The game was backed by an impressive marketing campaign that coordinated its release on the same day as the reissue of Star Wars' original trilogy on DVD. This move, masterminded by Ward, created a huge Star Wars event at retail.

In 2005, LucasArts' portfolio of releases consisted of just five titles, yet, according to NPD data, the company's sales ranking rose to eighth, up from thirteenth in the previous year. Out of the top ten selling games that year, Star Wars: Battlefront II ranked sixth, and Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith held the eighth slot. The other titles – Mercenaries: Playground of Destruction, Lego Star Wars (published by Eidos), and Star Wars: Republic Commando – all sold well.

From a numbers standpoint, LucasArts seemed like it was well on its way to becoming a publishing powerhouse. Ward's hope was that LucasArts would be a top-five publisher by 2008.

Behind the scenes, however, all was not well. Numerous LucasArts employees, all who wish to remain anonymous, recall the company spiraling out of control during this prosperous time.

The LDAC houses a movie theater, gym, restaurant, and a coffee shop named "Javva the Hutt"

"Jim Ward's leadership style was not for everybody," one source says. "He was a challenging person to get to understand. He came from the film side. His objective was nothing less than changing the way the entire industry worked by the sheer force of his own will. He was quoted several times basically saying, 'I don't understand why video games can be late. When Industrial Light and Magic works on *Harry Potter*, they don't have a choice to be late. The movie's going to open. The effects have to be done. You don't get it. There's no choice. So I don't understand why we get in this situation where games can be late.' It turned out that he couldn't change the way the industry worked in the way he desired. But he was the type of guy who wouldn't take, 'That's just how it's done' for an answer."

Another LucasArts employee remembers a particularly divisive decision made by executives for Star Wars: Battlefront II, a game that was already in danger of quality issues due to LucasArts only giving it one year of development time. "It was originally being designed as a multiplayer-only game," this staffer recalls. "It remained that way for most of its development cycle. New people who came in after the game was in development basically said, 'No, we're not going to make money off of a multiplayer-only game, you have to put in a single-player campaign.' Pandemic screamed bloody murder and said it couldn't be done, but [LucasArts] said that they had to figure it out. Battlefront II's producer at LucasArts basically had a breakdown bringing the game in, but the team made their deadlines and the game sold like crazy. It was probably a bad lesson for Ward to learn, because LucasArts was successful at doing something that everyone thought was impossible."

---

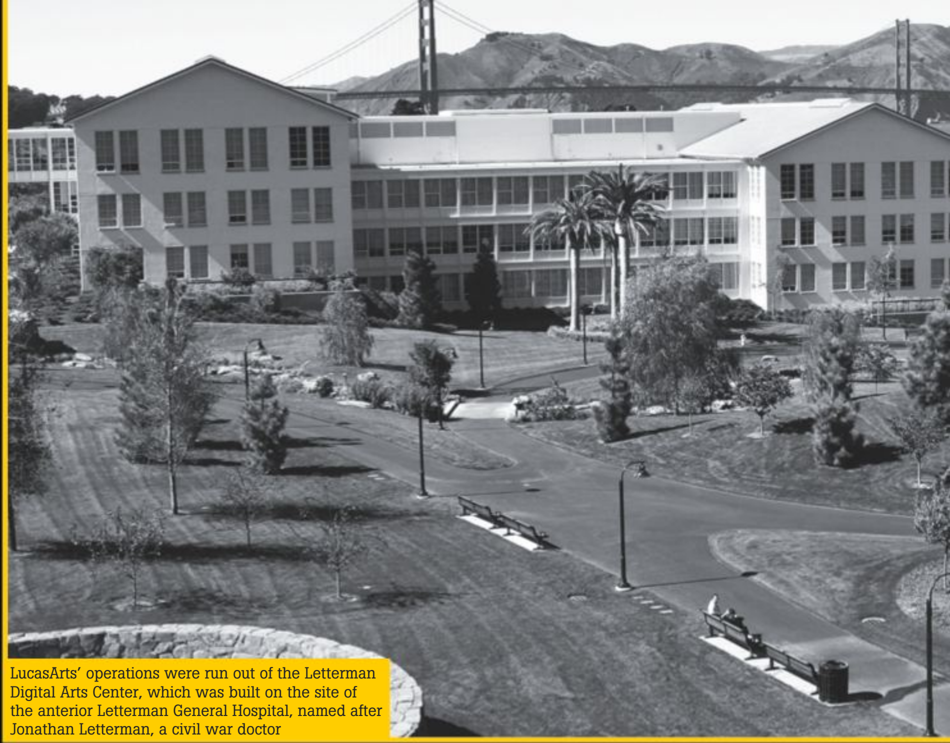
*from Rob Smith's book, *Rogue Leaders: A History of LucasArts*

**Jim Ward, Lucasfilm, and executives from both teams could not be reached for comment

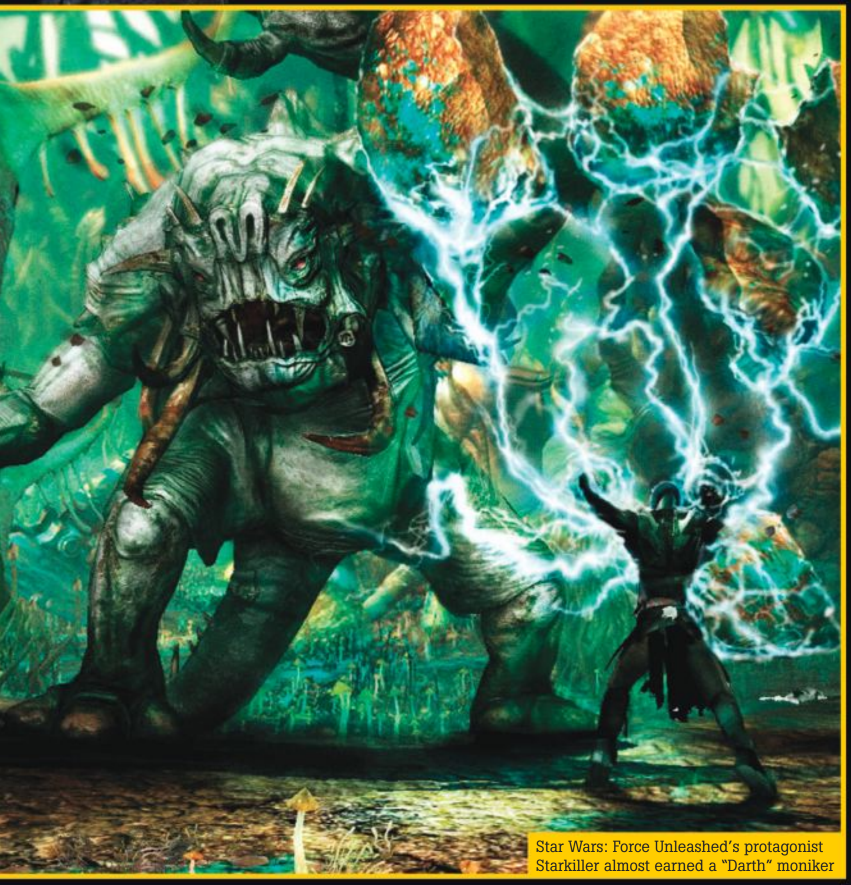
When a development team would reach a milestone, a "core meeting" would be assembled on LucasArts' campus, consisting of roughly 40 to 50 people spread across development, marketing, management, public relations, quality assurance, business development, among others. Ward and LucasArts' top brass conducted these meetings, which played out like show-and-tells where developers would detail the progress made to their projects.

"Those are the infamous 'Jim Ward losing his s---' meetings," a former employee remembers. "If you were sitting at the table, it meant you were in the firing line for any number of crazy business questions. People would arrive at the meeting early and sit around the perimeter of the room. If you got there a couple minutes before the meeting started, and only table seats were left, you were like, 'F---!'

"It would be the type of thing where a team would show a build and [Ward] would say something like, 'Alright, [Quality Assurance], based on the playthroughs what are we rating this right now?' And it would be a 22-year-old QA person who showed up late and was sitting at the table that answered. He would say something like, '84,' and Jim would say, 'That's not good enough. What gets this game to a 90?' QA would nervously say, 'Oh, adding online co-op,' which is not at all in the schedule or budget, and Jim would say, 'Let's look into that.' The dev team wouldn't know how to respond to that. That addition wasn't in the books. We became this forum for democratization, but nobody really had any idea of what was going on. At the same time, nobody wanted to tell the truth, because they didn't want Jim to lose it and fire a water bottle across the room."



LucasArts' operations were run out of the Letterman Digital Arts Center, which was built on the site of the anterior Letterman General Hospital, named after Jonathan Letterman, a civil war doctor



Star Wars: Force Unleashed's protagonist Starkiller almost earned a "Darth" moniker

CREATIVE DIFFERENCES

In 2006, LucasArts teamed with Day 1 Studios to bring a new intellectual property to market. The vision for this new title was a first-person shooter that allowed the player to shape a battlefield's terrain by using various science-fiction weapons. That ambitious design became Fracture, a game that was announced on May 3, 2007.

"The plan [for Fracture] was turned completely upside down in a meeting," a LucasArts dev who worked on the title says. Although the team was far into development, a decision was made by LucasArts' executives to turn it into a third-person shooter. "We were told to 'pull the camera out.' We had to make a character model, create animations, plot the levels differently, stream it differently. It was a nightmare for everyone involved."

When Fracture was revealed to the public, its protagonist was a character named Mason Briggs. By the time the game launched, his name was changed to Jet Brody. A person who helped give this gun-toting rebel his original name recalls going through weeks of naming conventions. "Literally, whole teams sitting together, brainstorming what looks good – the first name, the last name, etc. Done, good to go."

But then a phantom menace struck. George Lucas would periodically check in on the status of the games his company was making, lending creative input and advice. The developer I talked to sighs, and agitatedly says, "In one viewing of Fracture, [Lucas] said it looked really good, but he didn't like [Mason Briggs'] name. We're like, 'What do you mean, George?' He responded to the effect of, 'It doesn't really fit. When he jumps on stuff, he moves pretty fast. I like B.J. Dart.'

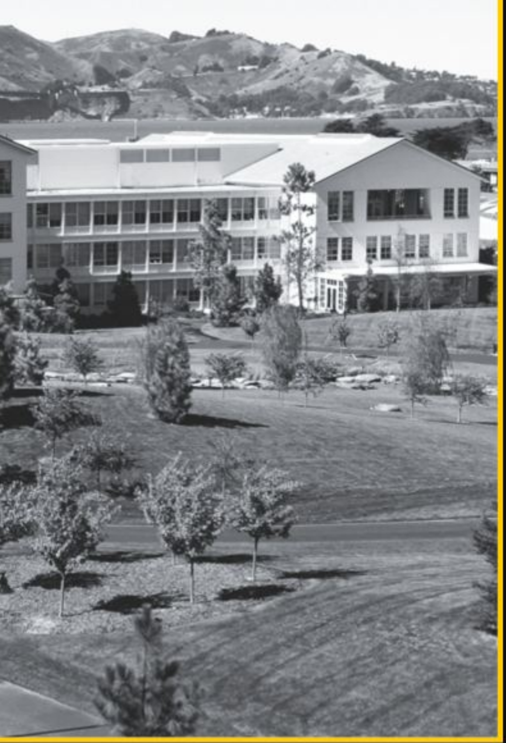
"So everybody's like, 'No, he's gotta be f---ing with us.' He's absolutely not. So when something like that happened – in the middle of the campaign, mind you – we have to go back through that entire naming convention again… from scratch." From that second session, Jet Brody was born. Coincidentally. Jett is the name of Lucas' son.

A similar situation arose with Star Wars: The Force Unleashed's protagonist, Starkiller. "[That name] was only supposed to be a nickname or call sign, not a proper name from the beginning," a former LucasArts employee says. The development team hoped that Lucas would give Vader's apprentice a Darth moniker, which at the time, was something that didn't happen often.

"The team threw a Hail Mary to George, saying the game would have more credibility if the apprentice had a 'Darth' title," a Force Unleashed team member says. Lucas agreed that this situation made sense for Sith royalty, and offered up two Darth titles for the team to choose from. "He threw out 'Darth Icky' and 'Darth Insanius.' There was a pregnant pause in the room after that. People waiting for George to say 'just kidding,' but it never comes, and he just moved on to another point."

Team members involved in the decision to *not* use these ridiculous Darth titles could not be reached for comment, but three LucasArts employees believe an excuse was made to push the Darth title to the sequel. By the time development on that title commenced, the names were long forgotten by Lucas and weren't muttered by the development team again. Starkiller remained Starkiller in the games, but was also named Galen Marek in the greater Expanded Universe fiction.

"These name problems may sound like funny stories, but the quality of these games suffered from these curveballs thrown by people not directly tied to the development process," another employee angrily adds. "It got to a point that it became difficult to hire new talent because these stories got out there. People thought we were running a madhouse."



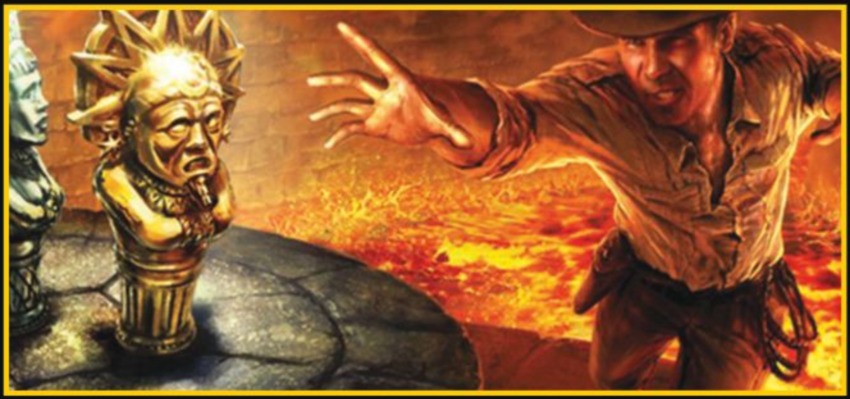
WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

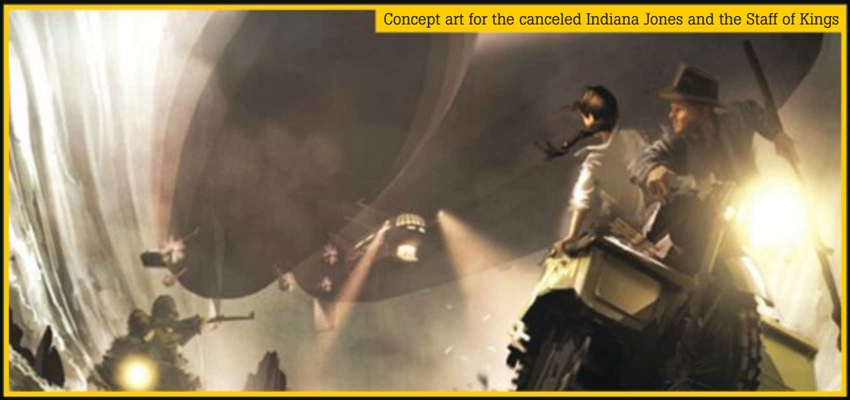
In 2006, LucasArts' internal development structure consisted of three teams, one working on Force Unleashed, another on Indiana Jones, and a third called "Team Three."

A LucasArts employee remembers the third studio being in a state of constant flux. "They had this interesting, tortured history where there was an effort for them to create a full-fledged game, but they could never get anything greenlit for various reasons. Ideas went all the way up to Lucas, and he didn't approve them, or ideas never made it to him. The team was recast to become the handheld division. They came up with quite a few concepts, five or six different ideas that could be DS games, but none of them got off the ground, either."

Numerous LucasArts personnel provided details for some of these projects. One was a platformer starring a furry woodland creature scampering around and going on adventures. Another pitch was for a crime-solving game in which the player was a detective with the ability to examine photographs from within their proofs. One concept that gained traction and entered development before being scrapped was a downloadable shooter titled Caveland.

LucasArts' push for more internally developed Star Wars titles left behind a tantalizing trail of unreleased projects. Star Wars: Imperial Commando, a sequel to Republic Commando, would have put the player in control of an Imperial assault team, but never made it out of the conceptual phase of development. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic III was almost greenlit, but none of the people I talked to involved in the project knew why it was canceled. "Most of the conceptual and story groundwork for the title was there," a LucasArts employee says. Star Wars: Jedi Knight III – Brink of Darkness and Jedi Master were two different directions LucasArts hoped to take its Jedi Knight series, but neither made it to proper development. Other scrapped Star Wars titles included Smuggler, a linear action game that focused on a Han Solo-like character; Rebel Warrior, a violent action game with a Wookiee protagonist fighting the Empire; a title that put players into the role of Darth Maul called Star Wars: Darth Maul; an internally developed Star Wars MMORPG codenamed Proteus; a Call of Duty-like shooter named Star Wars: First Assault; and most surprisingly, Star Wars: Episode VII – Shadows of the Sith, which was believed to be a spin-off to the upcoming motion picture now helmed by J. J. Abrams.





Concept art for the canceled Indiana Jones and the Staff of Kings

A TROUBLED PARTNERSHIP

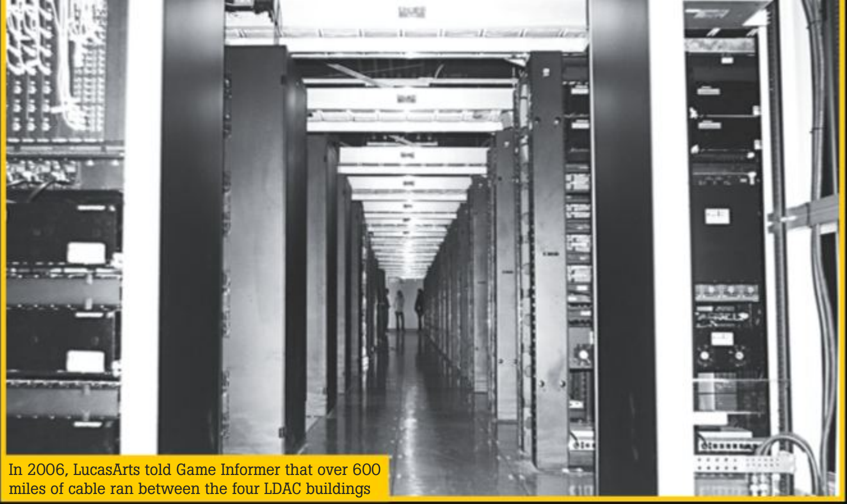
Then there was Star Wars: Battlefront III, a project LucasArts entrusted to developer Free Radical, of TimeSplitters fame. Industry veteran and Free Radical founder David Doak remembers the excitement that was in the air when LucasArts pitched his team. "We were looked at like reliable hands for making shooters," he says. "We had never done the work-for-hire thing before, and we always wanted to make our own thing. However, we could see that there was a lot of uncertainty in the industry. It's like, 'Well okay, that sounds like a good opportunity.'"

Free Radical pitched an ambitious design to LucasArts, in which the game would seamlessly transition from running and gunning on the ground to flying a vessel into space, where another war was being waged. "Within that, the seeds for disaster were sewn," Doak says. "I think that core design pillar of the game was slightly untenable because of the scale."

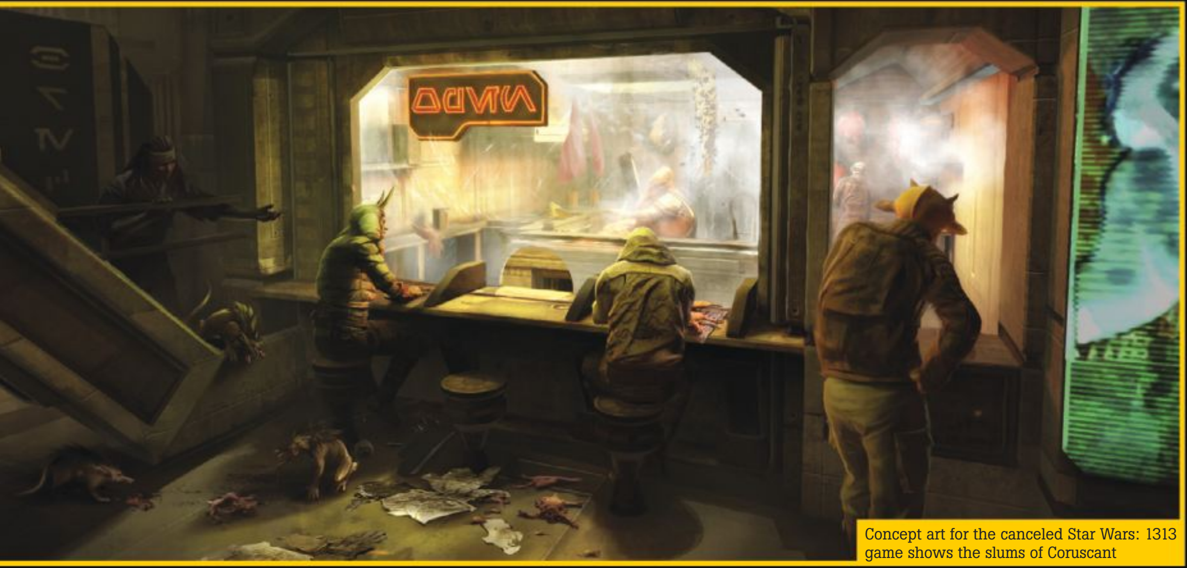
Free Radical worked on the Battlefront franchise for over two years, trying to get its vision to work. The art team moved on to designing assets for Battlefront IV even while Battlefront III was struggling to reach its intended vision.

Red flags were waved internally at Free Radical, but on LucasArts' end, the game was looking like a smash hit. Development on Battlefront III seemed to be going well. "We kept getting these code drops that were amazing," an ex-LucasArts employee remembers. "The big hook of going from ground to air to space seamlessly totally worked. Piloting a capital ship, getting out and running around in the ship's interior, and jumping into an escape pod and rocketing down to land again – holy s---! We thought [Battlefront III] was going to turn the industry on its head. Free Radical was meeting all of their milestones. Even Jim Ward would sit in those core team meetings and would say things like, 'So this is shipping next month, right?' And this was 2007. This is a joke because it was looking so good, especially compared to Fracture and Force Unleashed at the time, which were just troubled the whole way. And we would all laugh, thinking, 'Wow. If it looks this good now for a game that's shipping in 2008, there's not going to be any problem.'"

Difficulties arose early in 2008. Free Radical started missing milestones, and the new builds of the game that were coming in featured major stability issues. The design called for 100-player multiplayer matches. "We'd get 20 players in a match and it would just bog down," a source close to the project says. "Then Free Radical started cutting content. They're like, 'Ok, we're going to go from 100 to 50 players online. That's still really good; it's still more than anyone else. That's fine. We're going to cut this single-player campaign down in scope.' So then the cuts started coming, which is all fairly standard stuff. But we just couldn't get an estimate. It was starting to become apparent that they weren't going to make the [release] date that they said they were going to make, and they weren't being very clear about why or what the new dates would be. Internally, because this was right when Haze was shipping, we were all certain that they had pulled tons of resources off Battlefront to finish up Haze, and they wouldn't tell us what was going on. We tried to get our producers over there and they wouldn't let us into the building. The relationship just started fraying."



In 2006, LucasArts told Game Informer that over 600 miles of cable ran between the four LDAC buildings



Concept art for the canceled Star Wars: 1313 game shows the slums of Coruscant

At that time, Jim Ward stepped down as LucasArts' president and was replaced by Darrell Rodriguez, a new overseer who a former associate sized up as "not f---ing around." Rodriguez pushed Free Radical hard, creating a tense working relationship between the two companies.

Doak recalls this time, his words quiet and melancholy. "I wouldn't even talk about it personally because it completely did my head in," he says. "I think, particularly, because of the role that I was creative director and also the front man for the company, I got to do all of the putting on a brave face and smiling, then going behind doors and having the arguments, and then going back telling my guys we have to work harder this time. And after that thinking, 'You're going to miss the next milestone because I know they [LucasArts] don't want you to pass it.' I really hated that. It just completely stopped me from functioning. You don't believe it's actually a real thing until it happens to you, but I was in the midst of a nervous breakdown. Tears all over the place. It was just a really horrible time. I wasn't there for the very end."

In an interview with *Eurogamer*, Free Radical audio director Graeme Norgate revealed that LucasArts stopped funding the project around this time.

"LucasArts hadn't paid us for six months, and were refusing to pass a milestone so we would limp along until the money finally ran out," he said. "They knew what they were doing."

In early 2009, Free Radical released a company video that made fun of LucasArts and Star Wars. In it, a representative of LucasArts tells a Free Radical employee, "We have to pull the game. It has become too good. You need to make it worse, or we are pulling the game. We need to make products with the Star Wars name, but with little content. It's about making a f---ing bucket full of money, don't you understand?" After an exchange of words, the Free Radical employee responds, "You guys are a--holes."

"We sent Free Radical an email asking for them to remove [the video], and they refused to take it down," a former LucasArts employee says. "That was one of the last straws for Darrell."

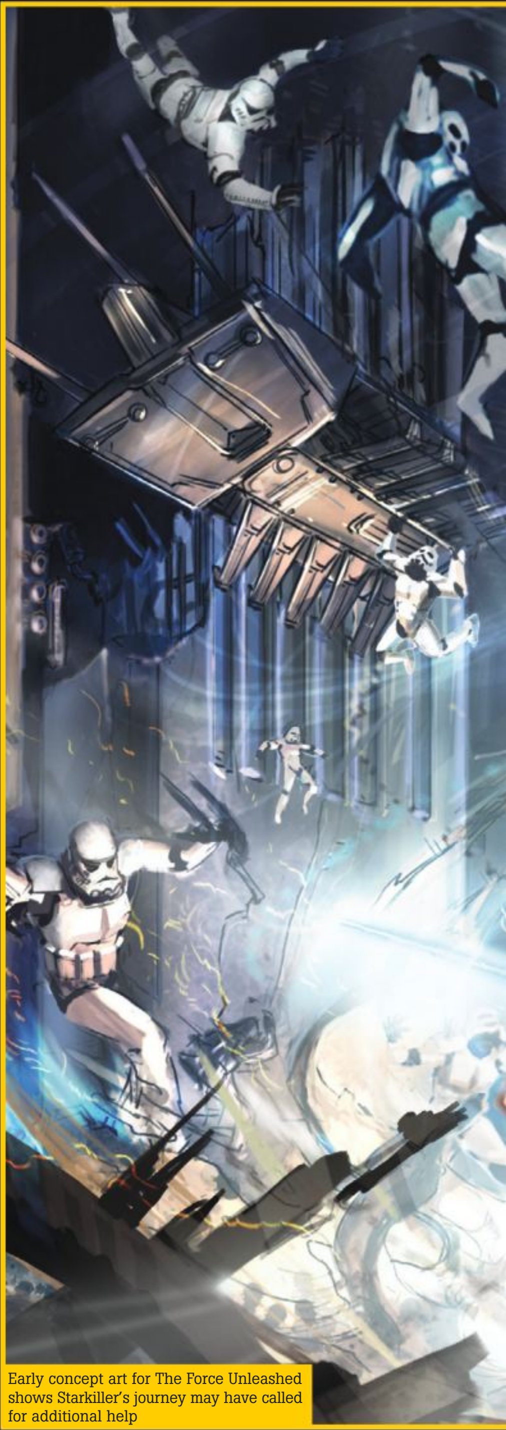
Ties with Free Radical were severed, but the fate of Battlefront didn't remain in limbo for long. LucasArts' creative lead/creative director Adam Orth teamed with former SOCOM developer Slant Six to create a new vision for a Battlefront sequel.

The disastrous Free Radical relationship had a profound effect on LucasArts' business moving forward, an ex-LucasArts staffer remembers. "At that time, the idea was to make [Slant Six's] Battlefront III downloadable-only. You could not push through a new major console project at LucasArts at that time. There was no appetite for it. Even as early as 2009, the powers that be at Lucasfilm would not agree with that kind of expenditure. I think the board at Lucas had just lost their stomach for the risk there." Slant Six's Battlefront eventually met the same fate as Free Radical's.

A NEW ERA DAWNING?

While many of LucasArts' projects derailed in the development stages, the company did release its most successful title during this time. The Force Unleashed flew off store shelves, becoming the fastest-selling Star Wars game to date, with over seven million copies in circulation.

LucasArts' goal was to release both Indiana Jones and Force Unleashed in 2007, but setbacks in development for both titles altered these plans dramatically. "[It] was an impossible goal," a former LucasArts developer remembers. "We saw there was no way that was going to happen, but the company was very energized. They were hiring like crazy." The goal was to staff up both teams to over



Early concept art for The Force Unleashed shows Starkiller's journey may have called for additional help

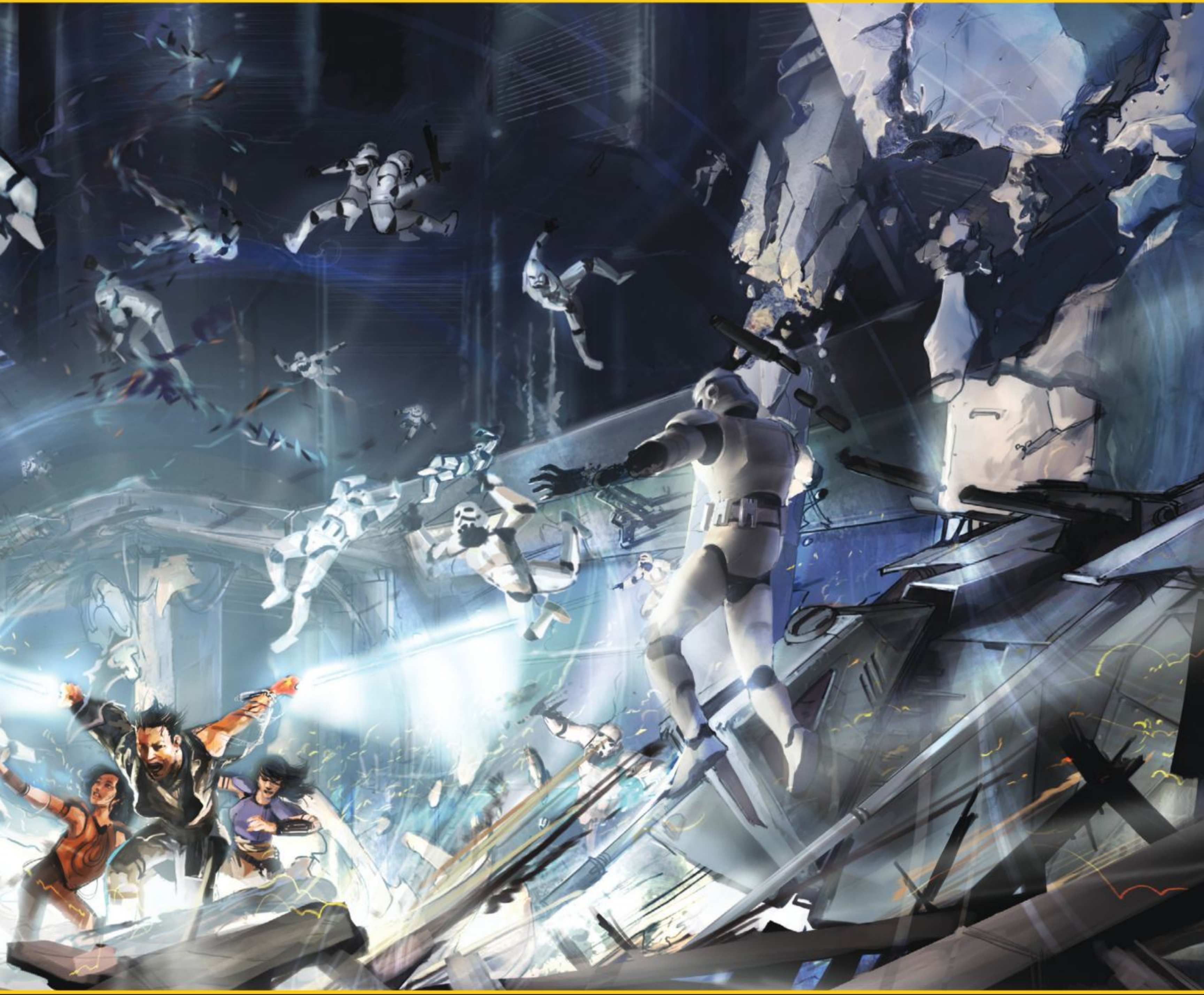
100 each, but the company couldn't bring in quality talent fast enough, especially engineers with PS3 experience.

If a LucasArts employee brought in a new hire, they were rewarded with an Xbox 360, and if that new recruit stayed with the company for over six months, a substantial monetary bonus.

Half of the Indiana Jones team moved over to Force Unleashed, prioritizing this title for a 2007 release and pushing Indiana Jones into 2008. Even with a fully staffed team, development ran into problems, pushing it well outside of the 2007 release window. At that time, most new employees were added to the Force Unleashed team. Indiana Jones' development continued on, but with a skeletal team not large enough to make legitimate progress on the title. The scale of the Indiana Jones game was ambitious, showcasing impressive technology and what one developer remembers as "ambitious water physics."

A big blow to Dr. Jones' video game return came from an outside source. That year, Naughty Dog and Sony Computer Entertainment released a game called Uncharted. One LucasArts employee remembers that day well, as a large group of Indiana Jones' developers gathered in a demo room to check out Naughty Dog's work. "I have never seen a more f---ing forlorn group of guys, because that is exactly the game they were trying to make," this staffer says. "Indiana Jones had a cistern level – same as in Uncharted – it had similar jungle environments, too, but one of the big things that they were attempting were those run-for-your-life moments, where something happens, the camera turns, you have a different perspective that shows the danger behind you, and then you have to control the character out of it – which is exactly what Uncharted did. They had effectively out-Indy'ed Indy."

When Rodriguez joined the company, he looked at the progress (or lack thereof) made to Indy's adventure, and decided to shelve the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 versions indefinitely. Only the subpar Wii version, which was named Indiana Jones and the Staff of Kings, saw the light of day.



SLOWING TO A CRAWL

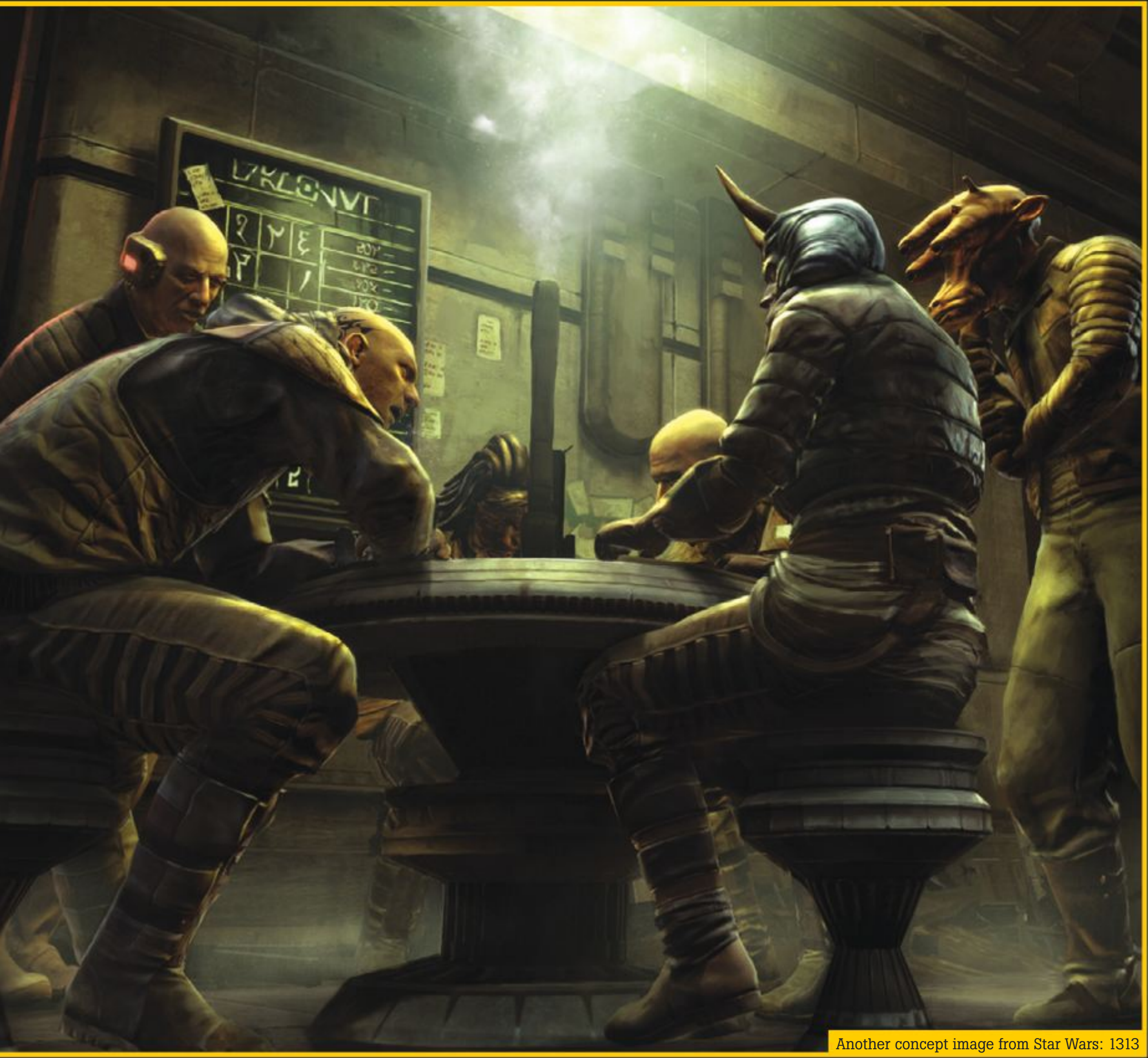
Although Force Unleashed was a huge hit for the company, the sequel wasn't greenlit right away. The development team worked on concepts for a sequel for close to a year, and created various demos showcasing new ideas – one of which was Starkiller using two lightsabers. In one meeting in 2009, Lucasfilm asked that the sequel be made in a year, despite the development team saying they would need two. "The team's response was, 'If that's all we get, it's going to be six hours long and will probably score a 60,'" an employee remembers. The Metacritic review score average for The Force Unleashed II was 61. The game didn't flop at retail, but it also wasn't a mega-hit like its predecessor.

Force Unleashed II was the only game released by LucasArts in 2010. Layoffs rippled throughout the company. Rodriquez stepped down as LucasArts' president, and was replaced by Paul Meegan.

Far removed from LucasArts' intimate game development procedures, BioWare was quietly working on a new Star Wars MMO. Even today, rumors continue to swirl throughout the video game industry that BioWare and Electronic Arts' Star Wars: The Old Republic is one of the most expensive games ever created. In a 2011 story, the *New York Times* reported that it might have cost between $125 and $200 million to make.

LucasArts' expenses for this project were reportedly minimal. An employee who worked on the game says this is one of the smartest partnerships the company ever made. "For all the dumb things they did, they also did some super smart things," he says. "The deal [LucasArts] made was that BioWare was going to fund every dime for The Old Republic. Lucas ended up funding the voice work, but BioWare and EA fronted most of the bill. LucasArts just made money off of the backend. [The Old Republic] wasn't as successful as anyone wanted, but that team at BioWare was amazing. They made a really big, risky game. And the whole way, were totally dedicated to it." LucasArts' executives presented a video of the deal being signed to the entire company. The deal itself was held within a thick binder.

BioWare's work on The Old Republic reportedly started way back in 2006 (the game didn't release until December 20, 2011). In an internal greenlit document that Game Informer secured, the initial plan for The Old Republic was for the gold master to be completed on September 30, 2009. The first high-level milestone was due on April 30, 2007. Numerous LucasArts employees wished that more deals similar to BioWare's would have been made, free of their company's tinkering.



Another concept image from Star Wars: 1313

END OF AN ERA

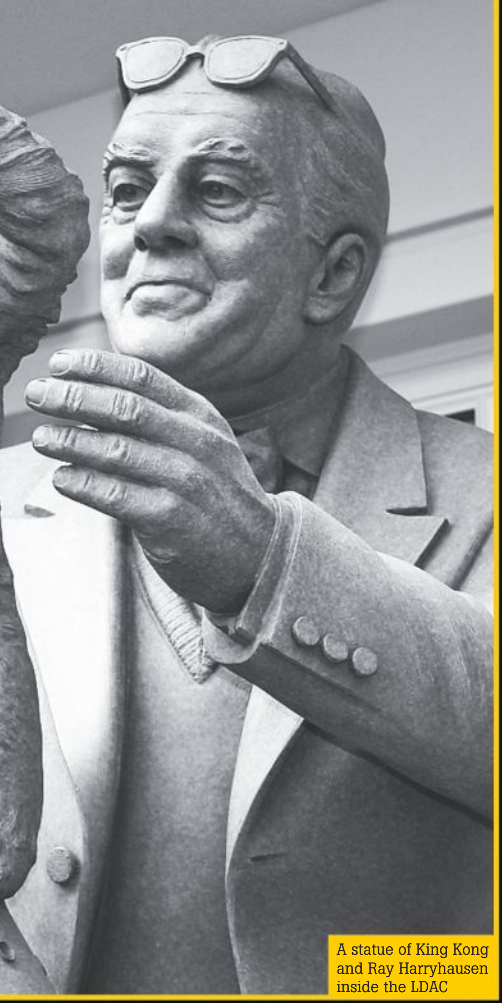
From 2011 to early 2013, LucasArts' catalogue of games remained slim, consisting of just Lego Star Wars III: The Clone Wars, Angry Birds Star Wars, Kinect Star Wars, and The Old Republic. LucasArts' internal development push couldn't find stable footing.

While Lucasfilm pushed LucasArts to support the Clone Wars animated series with numerous products, a big shift came with a surprising internal announcement.

Plans were in motion for Lucasfilm to create a live-action TV series called *Star Wars: Underworld*, a source says. LucasArts was tasked to build a tie-in video game. Excitement rippled throughout the studio, and a game design came together quickly, calling for an open world that favored vast exploration and RPG elements. "Those plans didn't last long," the source adds. "LucasArts' executives decided to change direction to a vanilla shooter – because that's what was selling then. Shortly after that, we thought the project was destined for cancellation because the TV show hit development hell."

The project moved on slowly until George Lucas became heavily involved with its direction, much to the initial delight and eventual ire of the team. They embraced his idea to make the protagonist a new bounty hunter, but often had their work derailed by Lucas suddenly changing his mind or demanding significant alterations to the script and the game's tone.

One of Lucas' most crushing curveballs came weeks before the game was announced. He didn't want the protagonist to be a fresh face; he wanted it to be Boba Fett. Without any working Boba Fett assets ready for the



A statue of King Kong and Ray Harryhausen inside the LDAC

announcement, the team members who unveiled the project to the press during 2012's Electronic Entertainment Expo, had to play dumb. They lied when asked directly about it, unable to mention anything about the iconic bounty hunter being the lead.

The new direction for the game brought the title change of Star Wars: 1313, a name which Star Wars fans immediately connected to Boba Fett since he used the alias CT-1313 in the novel *Boba Fett: Maze of Deception*. The game was well received at E3, drawing many comparisons to the Uncharted series, the same franchise that essentially landed the killing blow on Indiana Jones.

The atmosphere at LucasArts was completely different after that reveal, a source remembers: "We were all really happy and driven to make Star Wars: 1313 the best Star Wars game yet. It was fun seeing fans gush about it. It was also fun showing the world their first next-gen game. We got in a lot of trouble for that."

Although LucasArts wouldn't confirm what platforms Star Wars: 1313 was destined to release on, the graphical fidelity in the demo showed it was obviously being designed for PC, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One. Work on the project continued as planned.

In August 2012, Meegan stepped down as president, and Kevin Parker and Gio Corsi were brought in to co-lead the studio. Another assessment of the company's business brought hiring freezes and internal strife. 1313's development was crippled from the lack of new staff needed to hit milestones. LucasArts fell into silence.

Then, everything changed.

A NEW BEGINNING

On October 30, 2012, Disney announced it purchased Lucasfilm and LucasArts. Bob Iger, chairman and CEO of Disney, added to the excitement when he revealed that Disney was, "planning to release *Star Wars: Episode VII* – the first feature film under the 'Disney-Lucasfilm' brand. That will be followed by Episodes VIII and IX – and our long term plan is to release a new Star Wars feature film every two to three years."

From this unexpected partnership with Disney, a new hope was restored to LucasArts. With an entirely new Star Wars era to explore and Disney lording over the company's operations, many video game pundits – Game Informer included – believed LucasArts would be stronger after this merger. At the time, Iger said Disney wanted to focus on social and mobile experiences over console titles, but we didn't anticipate what happened next.

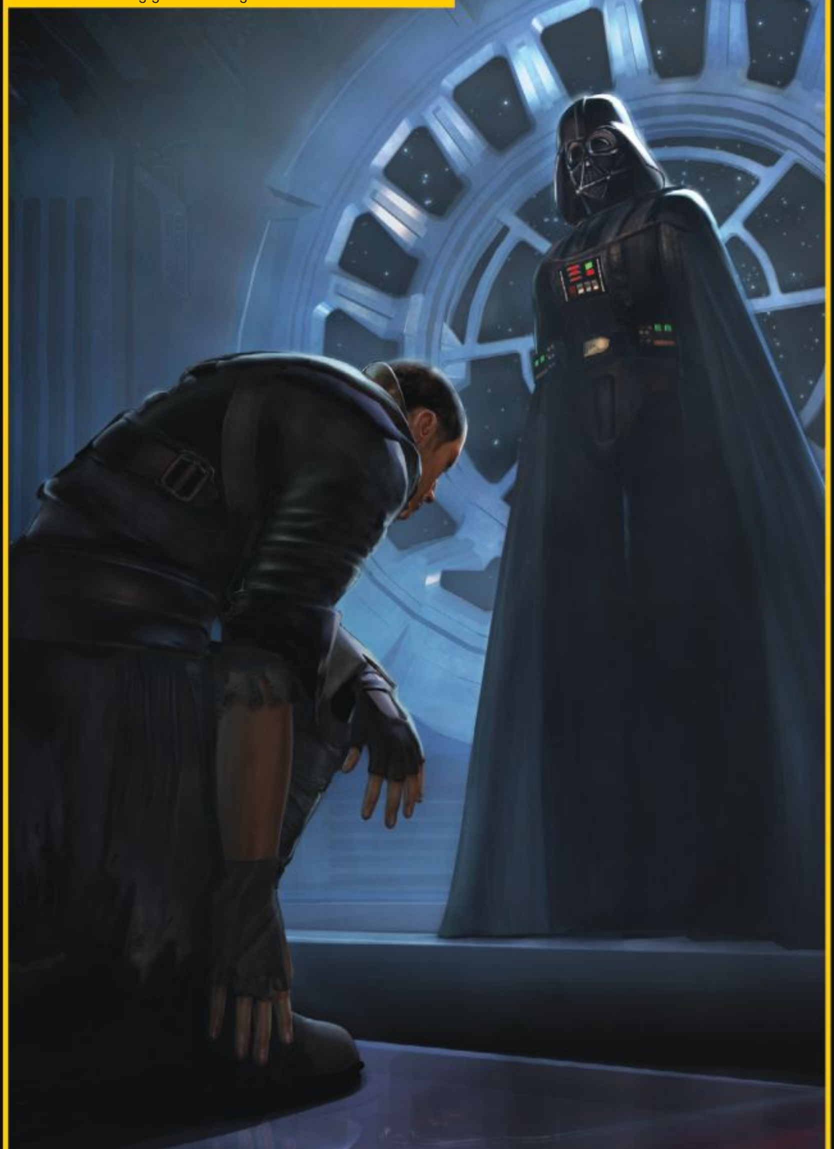
On April 3, 2013, Disney announced it was closing LucasArts. An official statement released by Disney read: "After evaluating our position in the games market, we've decided to shift LucasArts from an internal development to a licensing model, minimizing the company's risk while achieving a broader portfolio of quality Star Wars games. As a result of this change, we've had layoffs across the organization. We are incredibly appreciative and proud of the talented teams who have been developing our new titles."

Work on 1313 and all other internal projects (Star Wars: First Assault included) were put on indefinite hold. The last game published by LucasArts was Kinect Star Wars.

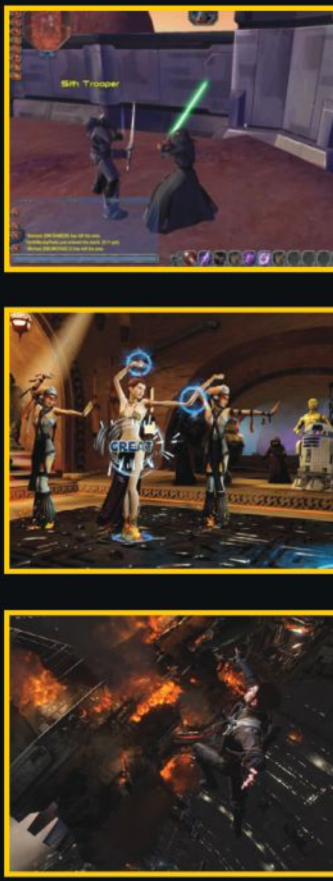
While the LucasArts we knew is gone, the company's name will live on under Disney's guidance as a publishing division. The first fruits of this new deal are already being seen in mobile games like Star Wars: Tiny Death Star. Disney also partnered with Electronic Arts to exclusively bring Star Wars games to PC and console.

At this past E3, Electronic Arts revealed that a new Star Wars: Battlefront title was in development at DICE. Visceral and BioWare are also working on Star Wars projects.

LucasArts left behind a rich history of games. From Ron Gilbert and Tim Schafer's excellent adventure titles to an impressive portfolio bearing the Star Wars name, this studio had no shortage of hits in its 31-year history. Though the company was struck down by its own failings and the pitfalls of the modern game industry, the legacy of its work will live on in the memories of gamers.



Before Force Unleashed was realized, LucasArts threw around the ideas of making games staring Darth Maul and Darth Vader



(Top) The first screenshot of Star Wars: The Old Republic from LucasArts' internal greenlit documentation (Middle) Star Wars' iconic characters dance up a storm in Kinect Star Wars (Bottom) Star Wars: 1313's protagonist before he was replaced by Boba Fett

THE WITCHER

The Witcher Adventure Game

The next chapter in Geralt's saga

by Matt Miller

As role-playing gamers eagerly anticipate the arrival of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt on their new consoles and PCs, we learned this month about another secret project starring Geralt of Rivia. CD Projekt Red is teaming up with the tabletop experts at Fantasy Flight Games to release The Witcher Adventure Game, a richly imagined board game of character development, exploration, and monster hunting. We sat down for an afternoon of playing the upcoming game with developers from both studios.

Acclaimed Polish tabletop designer Ignacy Trzewiczek came up with the concept of The Witcher Adventure Game, approaching CD Projekt Red with a theme-driven game built around narrative depth that doesn't sacrifice choice-driven gameplay. CD Projekt Red embraced the game and its continued development, shaping the project in-house at the studio. Eventually, the established video game developer sought a partner that knew the ins and outs of the tabletop scene. "From the start, we instantly knew we wanted to go with FFG," says CD Projekt Red project manager Rafal Jaki. "Those guys have such an amazing lineup. They've had a substantial contribution to the game, just because of their expertise in the market."

"It's a fantasy world that's so different and unique," says Fantasy Flight producer Steven Kimball. "As we played through the game, the characters all felt different and unique – they have a niche." The presence of these distinct characters is exactly what sets The Witcher Adventure Game apart, and also gives it an unmistakable flavor of The Witcher world. The four-player competitive game puts each player in charge of one of the central characters in the fiction. Geralt is the titular Witcher, a monster hunter of unparalleled skill. His erstwhile lover, the sorceress Triss Merigold, wields magic of all sorts. The womanizing fop, Dandelion, is more skilled with talking his way out of situations than confronting danger. The dwarf, Yarpen Zigrin, brings with him a cadre of fellow dwarven followers to aid him in his journeys.

Your choice of character determines not only your abilities and opportunities for upgrades, but also dictates your playstyle. Gameplay is built around the completion of quests tailored to your character, from monster hunting missions for Geralt to magical conflicts for Triss. Characters have their own custom sets of dice that match their unique abilities, and are used to resolve encounters. For instance, Dandelion has a greatly increased chance of rolling an evade result in battle, letting him slip away unharmed.

The game length is easily tailored by choosing the number of quests any player must complete before the game concludes. In an interesting twist, just like in the video games, every mission comes with optional side quests for extra victory points. In addition, players can negotiate with each other to get support in a quest from fellow players, giving both characters a small boost of victory points upon completion. Strategy emerges as you juggle a rush to the final quest completion against the desire to more fully complete each individual mission. As the game continues, players are combating the monsters, traps, and other threats on the board while simultaneously competing with each other for the highest victory point total.

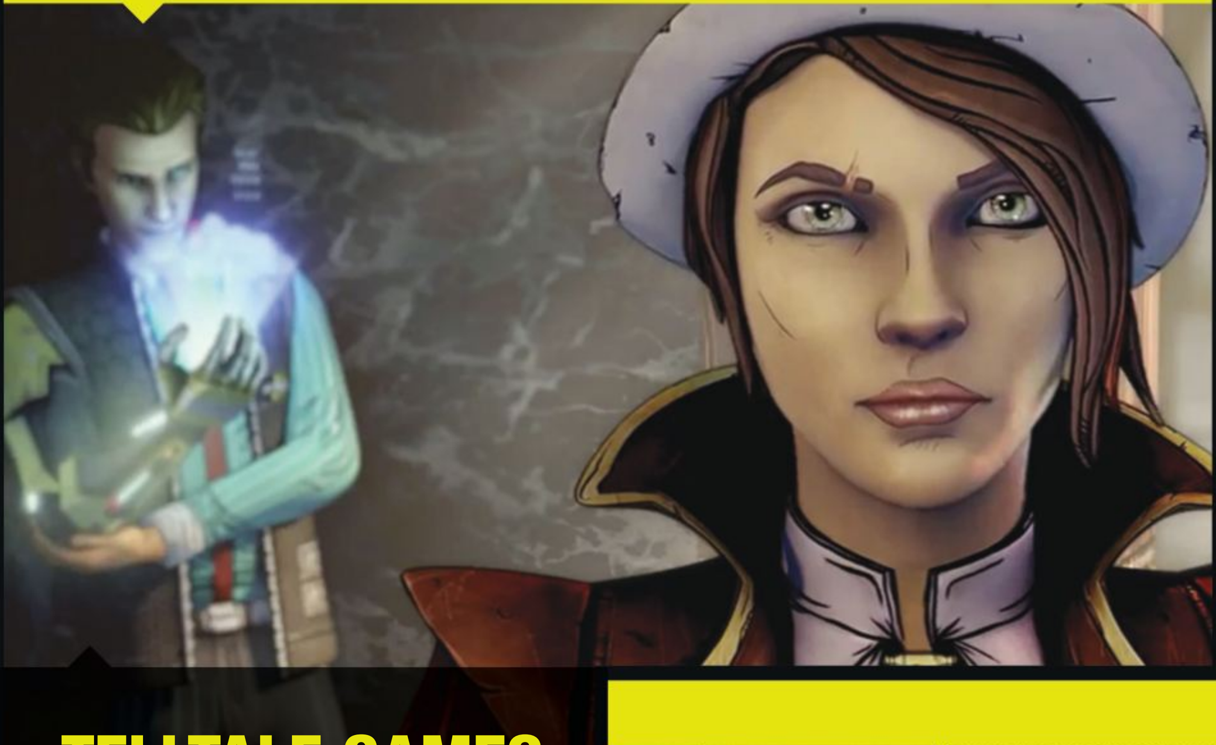
Along the way, the board game carries the series' trademark punishing difficulty and harsh choices. Heroes regularly become wounded or poisoned, and players are forced to place a token on their character that prevents one of the game's basic actions, like moving to a new destination, or investigating in any given area. Rush cross-country at high speed to reach a distant location, and you're forced to draw cards representing terrible mishaps that occur along the way. Each adventure card you draw and quest you complete comes with a piece of narrative flavor text, and your own personal adventure story begins to emerge. It's an intuitive, quick-playing mechanic that had me hooked in minutes.

The near-final version of the game we played left me eager to come back again when the final release hits later in 2014. It's an easy pick for one of the thematic tabletop games to watch this year. "The Witcher 3 is not a multiplayer game, but this is a game you can play with your friends," Jaki says. "I think that the experience of tabletop gaming will bring people together and they can share in the fun and their love for The Witcher universe." ◆

g.b.u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

The Good



TELLTALE GAMES

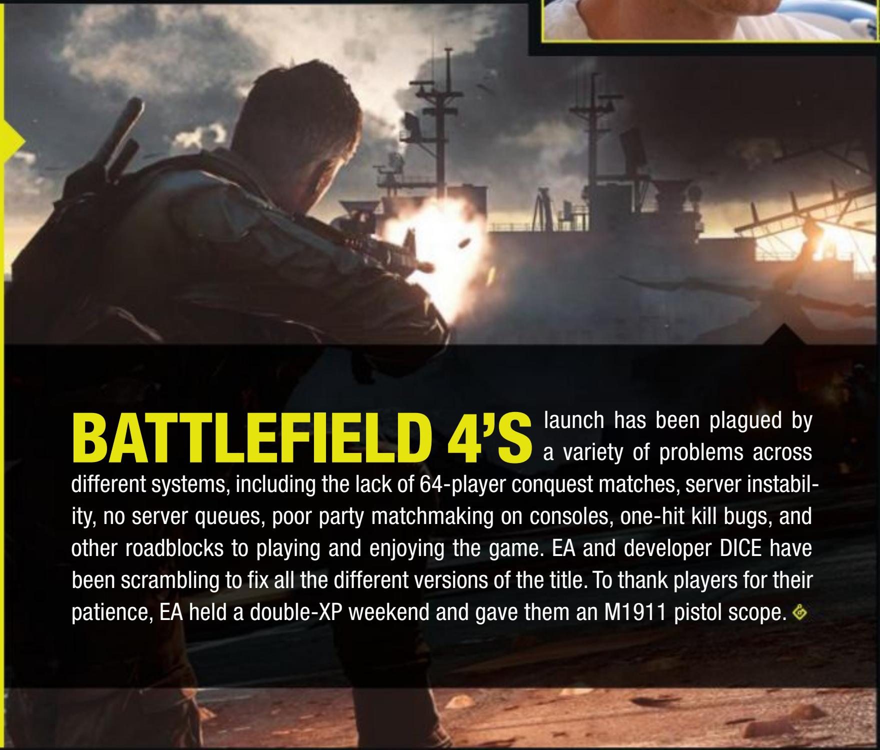
announced two projects featuring big-time franchises: HBO's *Game of Thrones* and Gearbox's Borderlands (entitled Tales from the Borderlands). Both are currently scheduled to release sometime in 2014.

The Bad

JOHN CARMACK,

legendary id Software co-founder, left the company to become chief tech officer at Oculus VR full time. Carmack built the tech behind id's games, and hopefully his legacy in video games continues to grow in his new position.

The Ugly

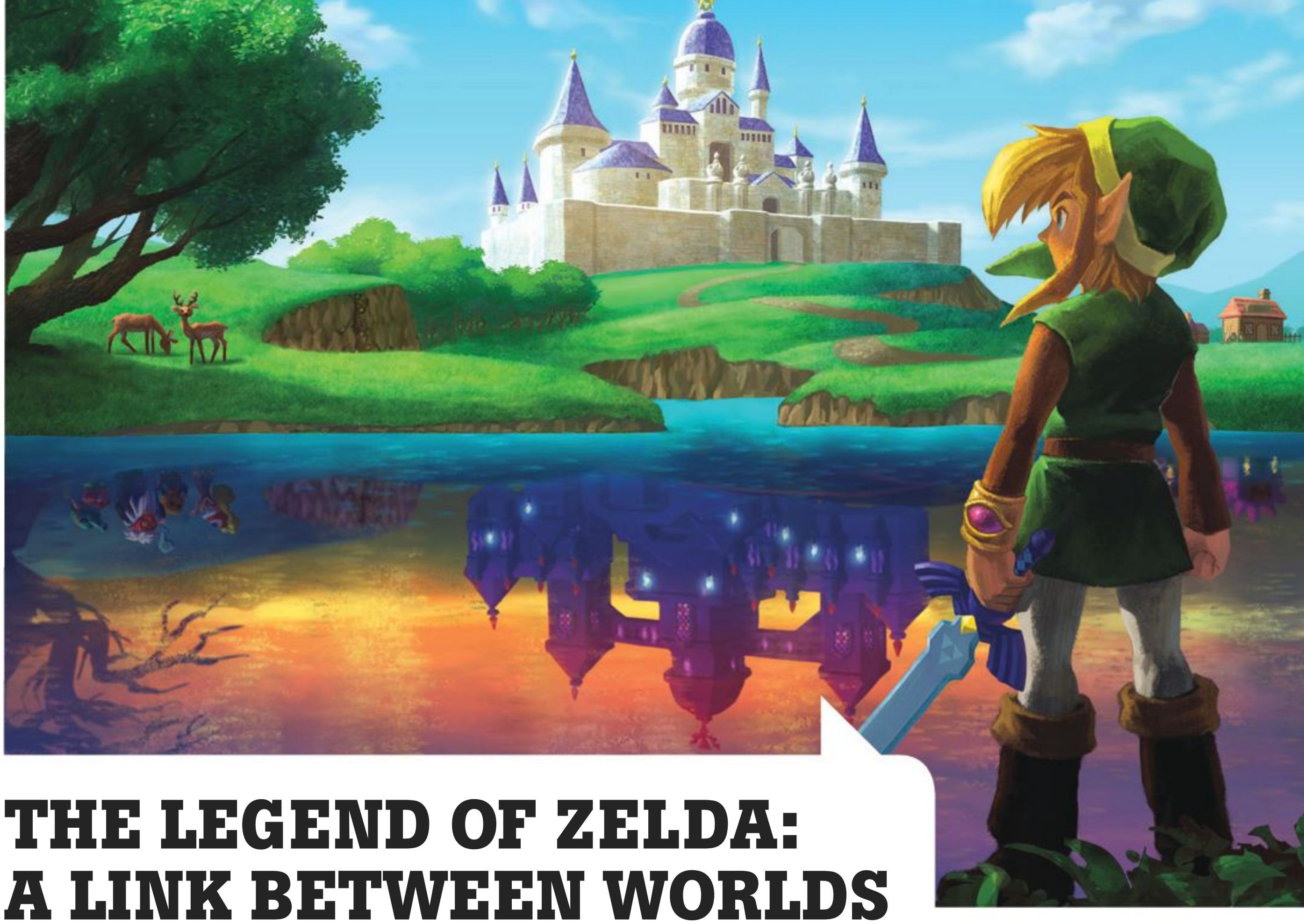


BATTLEFIELD 4'S launch has been plagued by a variety of problems across different systems, including the lack of 64-player conquest matches, server instability, no server queues, poor party matchmaking on consoles, one-hit kill bugs, and other roadblocks to playing and enjoying the game. EA and developer DICE have been scrambling to fix all the different versions of the title. To thank players for their patience, EA held a double-XP weekend and gave them an M1911 pistol scope. ◆

Quotable

> "Congratulations on your launch, Sony."

– **Microsoft's** well wishes to Sony on the PS4 launch leads Shuehi Yoshida, Sony president of worldwide studios, to later respond at the debut of the Xbox One, "Congratulations on the global launch of Xbox One."



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS

Link's newest adventure has been hailed as one of his best by fans and critics, and introduces new elements to the series while retaining its classic feel. We spoke with game director Hiromasa Shikata about its development. *by Dan Ryckert and Ben Hanson*

The Iwata Asks interview for The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds mentioned that the idea to revisit Link to the Past came from Miyamoto. Was Miyamoto persuaded by fan requests or a personal desire to return to the top-down Zelda structure?
We know that Mr. Miyamoto received requests from fans to make a Zelda game like Link to the Past, but that's not actually what inspired this project. Link to the Past had pixel graphics and allowed you to move up and down in perspective. We found out that we could use the 3D functionality to make sure those things that are above you and things that are below you look that way. We also think there are a lot of users who have never played a 3D game that takes advantage of the top-down, multi-tiered perspective so well.

Was there ever talk of featuring a new overworld while retaining the feel of Link to the Past, or was the plan always to revisit the (mostly) same map?
We kept the size of the levels, locations, and number of dungeons the same with respect to Link to the Past. However, with this game, because you can go into walls and the fact that we designed it around the 3D functionality, we want you to think of the content and mechanics as being entirely new. We didn't take content from Link to the Past for the sake of doing so; we did it because we could take advantage of the walls and items in this title. For instance, we thought that pushing the red and blue moving blocks into the walls in the Tower of Hera would make things a lot more fun.

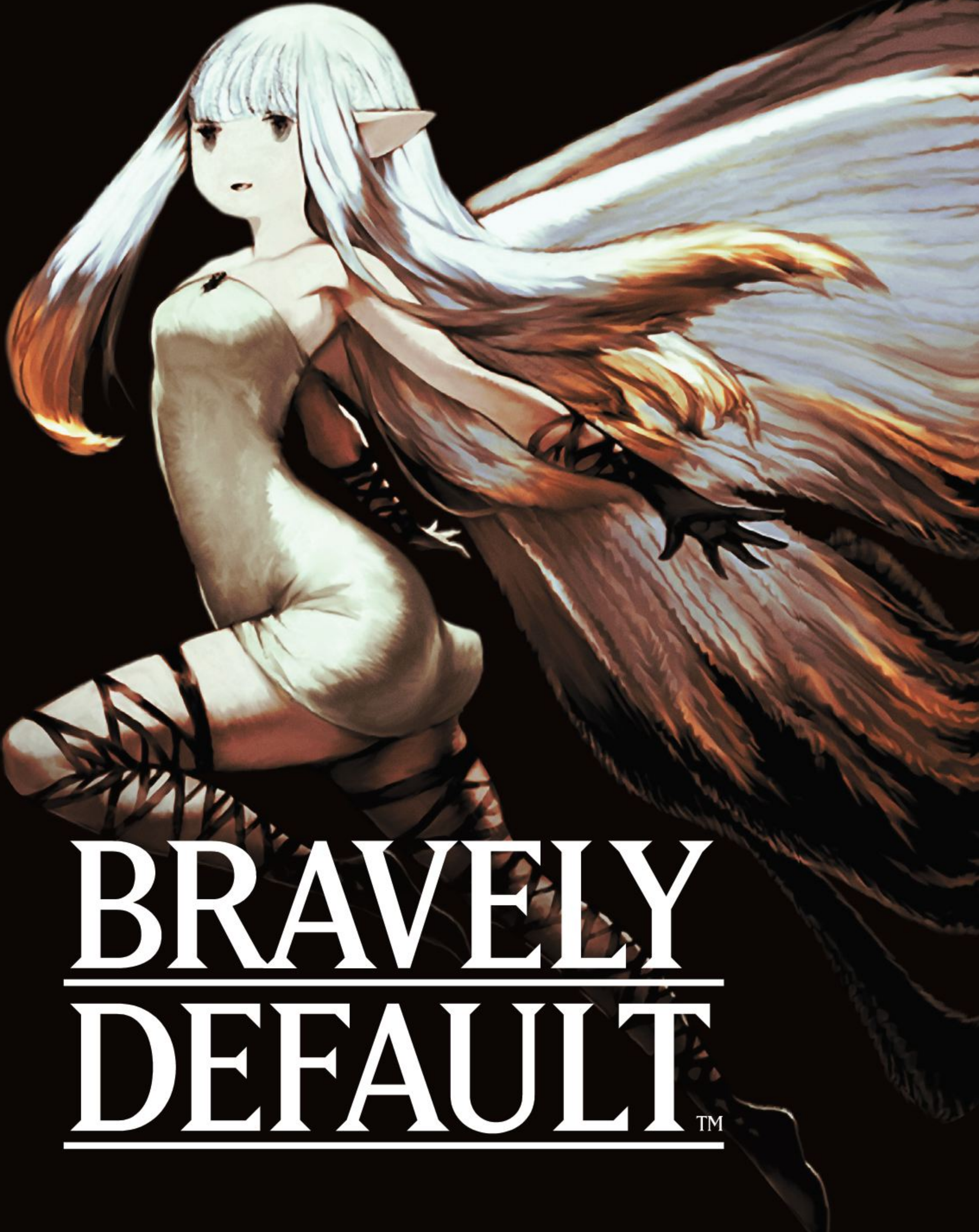
The game looks beautiful running at 60 frames per second. Do you see this as a new standard for the Zelda series moving forward?
It's really the concept of the game that changes whether you want to keep the volume of information in the game low and running at 60 frames per second or high and running at 30 frames per second. We kept it at 60 to make the 3D look smooth, allow the players to clearly see enemy movements, and keep everything moving crisply as with previous games. This doesn't mean that all future Zelda titles will run at 60 frames per second.

Fans have embraced the item-rental system and the freedom it allows in the non-linear approach to the dungeons. What has the team learned from experimenting with this system that they can apply in future Zelda titles?
It was a challenge to shift the traditional Zelda formula, and we're happy to have the fans' approval. It would be great to have them on board with even newer changes we're hoping to make in future titles.

What was the process of modernizing the classic soundtrack like?
The Link to the Past soundtrack is incredibly popular, and we didn't want to break that. However, since all the models in the game were being beautifully made we didn't just want to put the music in there as-is and have it take a backseat. We decided to change the tone, to make it contemporary and orchestrated.

We found Majora's Mask and another subtle reference to Link's Nintendo 64 adventure in Ravio's journal. Are there any other Majora's Mask references that we missed?
[Having Majora's Mask in Link's house] was a special request from Aonuma's production team. Now why would they ask us to do that?

Since this game was such a success, do you think Nintendo is now more interested in revisiting the structure/perspective of classic SNES games like, for example, Super Metroid or Star Fox?
It's an honor that people consider the game to be a success. When we make a game we often start by thinking of the basic system and letting that in turn determine a suitable setting. If there's something fitting for the basic Star Fox and Metroid formula then I think we'll be able to develop something. On this title, if we hadn't come up with the idea of going into the walls at the beginning and instead thought of something new which had the player curling up into a ball, we might have ended up with Metroid, not Zelda.



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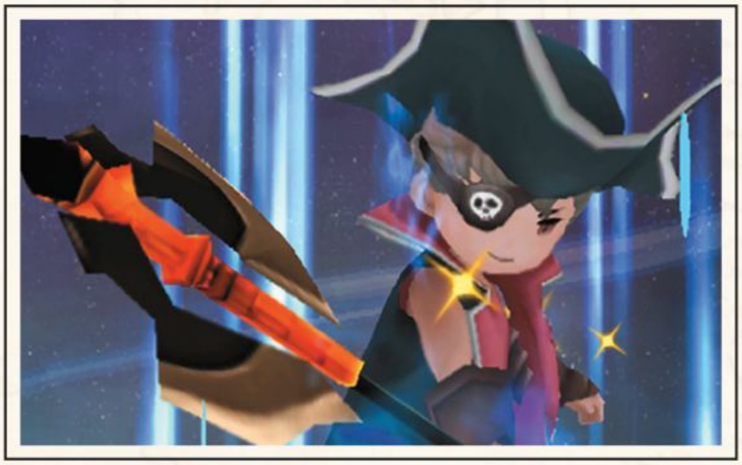

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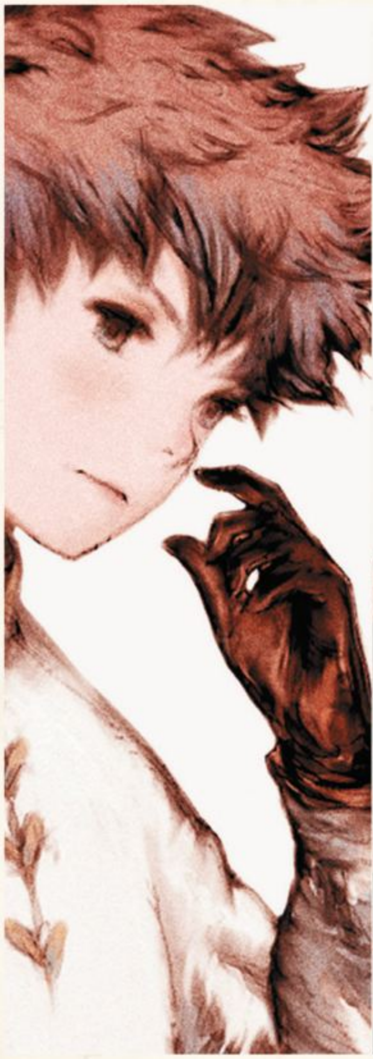
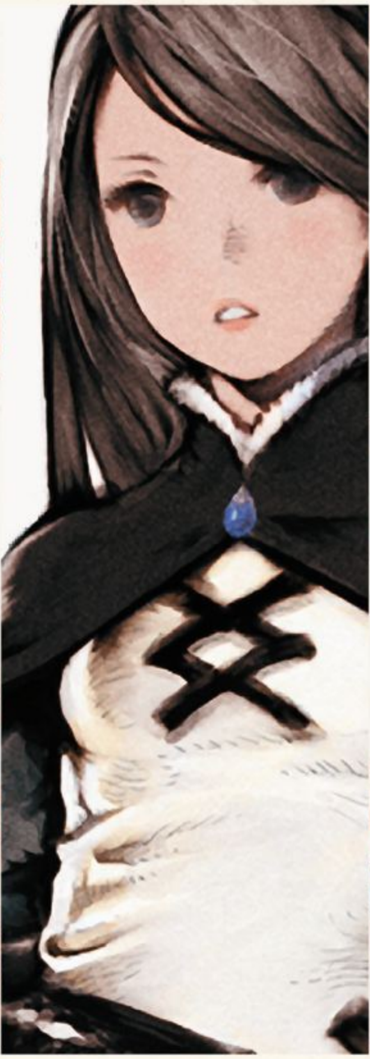


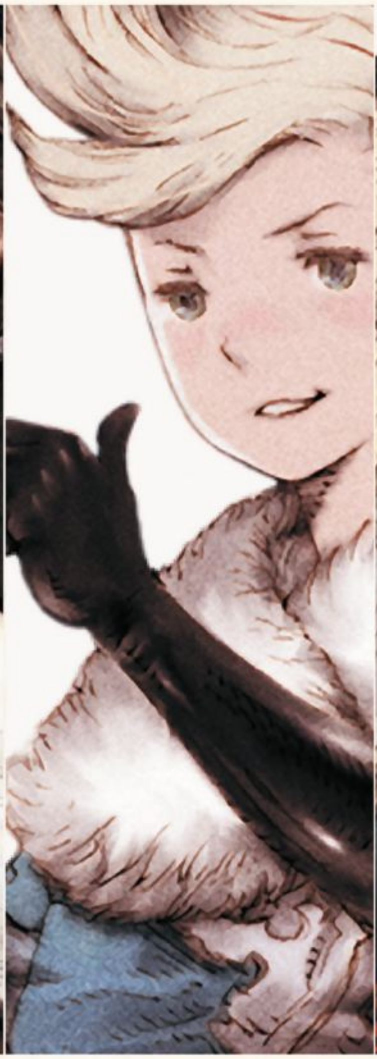
Tiz

After the Great Chasm destroys the village of Norende, Tiz is left as the sole survivor. He is still deeply haunted by his failure to save his only family — his younger brother.



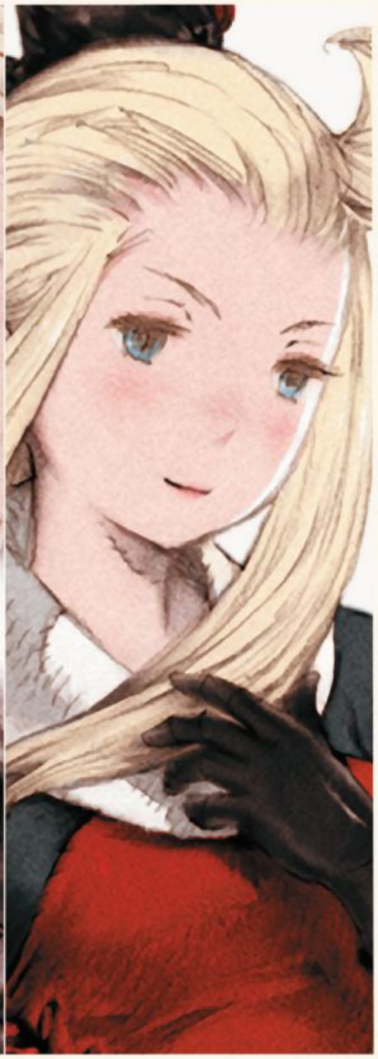
Agnès

Agnès watches over the Wind Crystal, one of the four crystals worshiped by the faithful of Crystal Orthodoxy. When a dark power overruns her temple and the world, she sets off on a quest to awaken the crystals.



Ringabel

A ladies' man who remembers nothing of his past, but is on a quest for his "fated woman." Charming and self-assured, he carries a mysterious journal that holds hints of future events.



Edea

Though she possesses a strong sense of justice, Edea is considered a traitor to her native homeland, the Duchy of Eternia, a realm that defies the Crystal Orthodoxy.

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SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

Best platformer. Best cooperative multiplayer. Best Wii U exclusive. Super Mario 3D World took home all three of these accoladess in our year-end awards (starting on pg. 50). We talked to director Koichi Hayashida, director Kenta Motokura, and producer Yoshiaki Koizumi to learn about the winning formula. *by Bryan Vore*

Has there been any consideration to getting rid of the conventional lives system?
Hayashida: Making the lives system that 3D introduced in Mario 64 into the progressively more difficult one for the 2D Mario titles was a real challenge. I think that collecting coins and 1-Up mushrooms is an integral part of the Mario series. In the most recent games it's not quite as important, but we still end up chasing after them anyway [laughs]. I wonder if your readers do the same thing?

Cat Mario's animations are adorable. Why did you decide to incorporate these details when other classic animal power ups like Tanooki Mario don't necessarily mimic raccoons, for example?
Motokura: Running the player performance checks over and over, we found ourselves having quite a lot of fun running around the map on four legs and climbing walls. In order to get that ability to the point where it was easy to understand, we had to grasp the finer details of how a cat moves. It didn't hurt that both Mr. Miyamoto and the design supervisor are pretty big cat people!

Who came up with the victory "meow" at the end of the stage?
Motokura: We just asked the sound designers to put that in there and they expanded on various ideas. The idea to put the meow at the end of the E3 promo video was Mr. Miyamoto's, by the way.

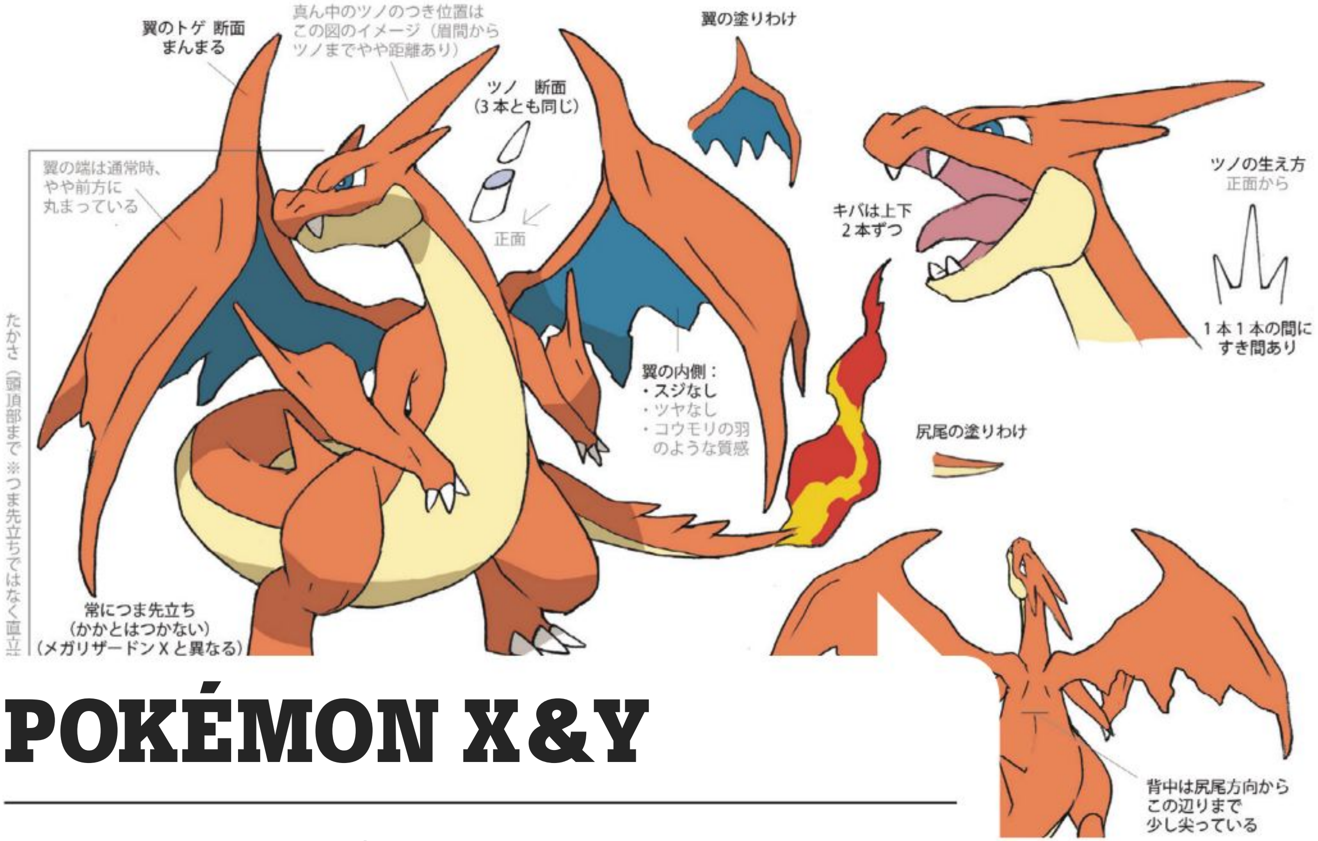
Why wasn't online multiplayer included (outside of Miiverse functionality)? Will we ever see online play in a Mario game?
Koizumi: We've been testing online multiplayer since the days of Super Mario Galaxy, but with this title we really wanted to deliver an experience that you can share with family, friends, or your boyfriend or girlfriend in the same place like you did with the original NES. We really want players to have fun in front of the TV, talking while they help each other out or get in each other's way.

Princess Peach is finally playable again in a core Mario game for the first time in over two decades. Why did you decide to bring her back?
Koizumi: We always want players to have fun with our games, but as much as possible we'd like female players to enjoy themselves, too. Toad is pretty cute, but we thought that Princess Peach might be someone they'd want to pick. With Rosalina in the game, we hope that two women will play with characters that will mix things up a little.

Was there a lot of discussion around granting Rosalina a special attack and a jump boost, since these powers have traditionally required a power-up?
Motokura: It wasn't just Rosalina – we had quite a few discussions on what sort of abilities we should give to the players. When we thought about Rosalina being introduced in this game, the personality of the character and what sort of things would be fun to play with and fun for the player, we took all that into consideration in deciding that the spin attack would be best. We hope players try Rosalina out and see what she can do that other characters can't.

Super Mario 3D World has flat credits, lacking specific titles or roles for everybody involved. Why did you choose to structure it that way?
Motokura: This game wasn't created by people doing specific jobs, but by the contribution of many ideas, cooperation, and people having fun together. It's proof that it's not just the work of the higher ups in the company, but of the team coming together as a whole. While there are any number of ways to express this, this is what we came up with.

We loved the strange subliminal 8-bit Luigi appearances throughout the game. What are some of the weirdest places you've placed Luigi that not many players have found?
Hayashida: Luigi's hidden in so many ways you'd never expect. Maybe you already found him on the golden train cars in the hidden level? Take a close look at the smoke coming out of the cars and you'll see one Luigi after another in the pixels. He's hidden like that in all kinds of places, so we'd love it if the players out there in the world can work together and to find all the pixel Luigis for us. ◆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・コウモリの羽
のような質感
尻尾の塗りわけ
常につま先立ち
（かかとはつかない）
（メガリザードンXと異なる）
背中は尻尾方向から
この辺りまで
少し尖っている

POKÉMON X&Y

The latest core entry in the Pokémon franchise is the biggest step forward the series has taken in many years. It's a huge game with a newly realized 3D world and 3D Pokémon, and it's full of mystery in both its plot and its development. We spoke with series producer Junichi Masuda about the difficulties of taking Pokémon in this new direction, as well as questions about the plot, general Pokémon lore, and what's going on with Klefki and Espurr. *by Ben Hanson & Kyle Hilliard*

How long were Pokémon X&Y in development? Had work already begun on the game while Black & White 2 were in development?
Yes, the conceptual planning for Pokémon X and Pokémon Y began before Pokémon Black Version and Pokémon White Version were released. The idea for the game first arose around June of 2010. Then we spent three years developing the game, and, when you include the localization work, it ended up being a big project on which around 500 people were involved.

The pacing of Pokémon X&Y is dramatically sped up compared to previous games. You have your first badge before you meet the professor. Can you talk about why that decision was made? Was there a fear that rookie players would be left behind?
One thing that I can say is that people these days don't have a lot of time. Kids today are overwhelmed with information and busy on social networks, blogs, etc. When considering the reality of the era, we wanted to make the games easy for new players to get into and also fun for players of previous games. The fact that you get your Pokémon from a group of friends you just met also has a modern feel to it. Also, the professor being younger this time and the fact that he trusts the player and his or her friends kind of reflects modern times (in Japan these days, the relationship between teachers and students is more like a friendship than it was in the past).

The giant man named AZ was a surprising addition to the story of the game. Was everybody from 3,000 years ago on the Pokémon planet as big as him? What story was the team trying to express by including this character?
AZ used a machine to bring his beloved Pokémon back to life. By doing so, he gave his Pokémon eternal life, and he was also affected by this. Part of that was him turning into a giant and still living even after 3,000 years have passed. However, unlike his Pokémon, he still grew old. Was living so long a good thing for AZ? Was using the machine to give his Pokémon eternal life a good thing? I wanted to express these things as well as the differences between the encounters and losses that we experience in our lives compared to what AZ feels about the encounters and losses he has experienced over 3,000 years. However, what I most wanted to express with this character was the bonds between people and Pokémon.

What was the inspiration for Team Flare's evil objective and the character of Lysandre?
The idea for Lysandre came up when I was working on AZ's character settings. He's a person who thought AZ's ultimate weapon was brilliant and became obsessed with it. However, he's more obsessed with what he could do with the weapon than what the reason for its creation was originally. I wanted to express how terrifying obsession can be with this character.

In Pokémon Black Version and Pokémon White Version, Team Plasma's philosophy had a bit more of a serious tone to it. With Team Flare, I wanted to separate them from some kind of philosophy and make them a bit more goofy and funny.

The legacy of this gigantic war that raged 3,000 years ago is important to the story of the game. Was this inspired by the impact of World War II on France today?
It was not inspired by those events. It came from my desire for war and terrorism to vanish from the world. By showing the war that transpired in ages long past, I wanted the player to think about war. The fact that the same events may occur all over again – I wanted to leave that decision in the player's hands. What I wanted to tell them was: "Don't leave it up to others to change things – you have to be the one to enact change."

The exact details of the war and its impact on the world of Pokémon are ambiguous. Will we ever learn more about what transpired during that war?
The war was a clash between two different countries. People treated Pokémon with special powers as mere tools in their conflict. They gathered lots of Pokémon and Pokémon with unique powers. This long conflict was drawn out and many lives were lost. In order to emerge victorious, the soldiers believed that they needed even more powerful Pokémon. AZ loved his Pokémon, which he had received

from his late mother, but it was forcefully taken from him by the soldiers. His Pokémon ended up becoming just another sacrifice in the war. Distraught with grief, AZ began work on his machine. Little did he know that his creation would bring great sorrow to the world.

The camera's perspective occasionally shifts to rest behind the character's head. Is the team interested in trying to keep this closer perspective throughout an entire game in the future or do you see the overhead cameras as a key component of the Pokémon experience?
The overhead view makes it easier for players to be able to understand where they should go based off where their character is in the world in relation to where the grass is positioned. It makes it easier to know, for example, where you need to stand to get seen by another Trainer, or what the shortest route through a patch of grass would be. We implemented the overhead camera more for gameplay reasons rather than for any visual reason.

Which Pokémon proved to be the most difficult to take from a 2D sprite to a 3D model? Were any Pokémon removed because it didn't seem like they would work as 3D models?
We've never decided not to create a Pokémon because it was difficult to make it work as a 3D model. However, some Pokémon that do special things, like the Mega Evolved Gengar, were very difficult to make – not just the 3D modeling, but also the programming involved to make them work in battles.

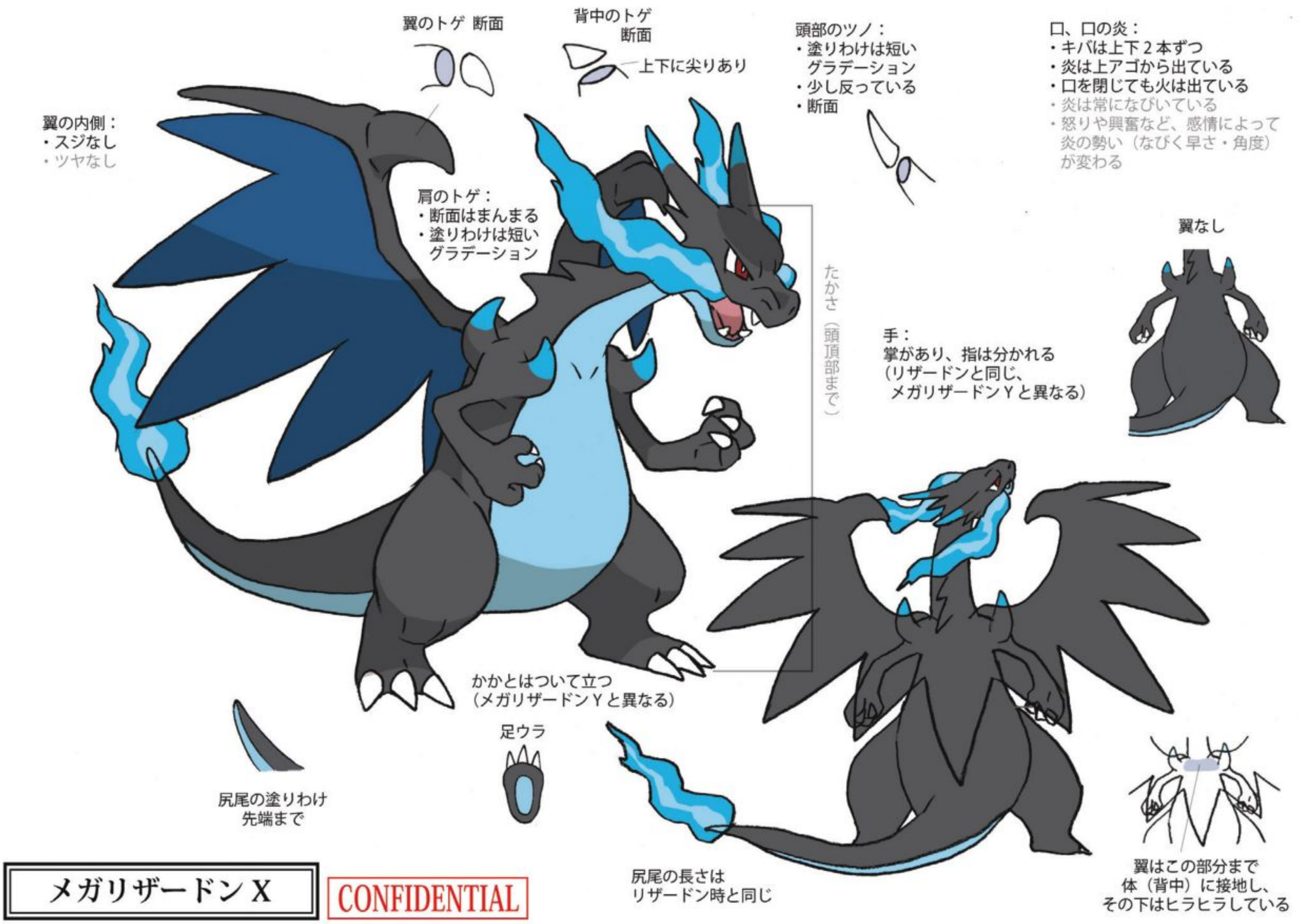
What were the discussions like behind the new approach to sharing experience? Some have argued that this item makes the game too easy. Were you hoping to balance the game for both players that used it and those that didn't?
There are so many Pokémon living in the Kalos region, you can encounter a different Pokémon just about every time you go into the tall grass. We wanted players to try raising lots of Pokémon, which is why we changed how the Exp. Share item worked. Of course, we also made it so players could turn off the Exp. Share and still enjoy the game if they wanted to.

What is the story behind the new Pokemon Klefki? Who's idea was it and why did it make the cut?
The base idea came from Ms. Ibe – one of our graphic designers. Since the Kalos region has a lot of history, we felt we could attach some story elements to a key design. The idea for Klefki came from thinking of old mansions and secret keys and such.

Historically, your trainer's father has been absent, but in Pokémon X&Y your father apparently purchased the computer that's in your room for you. What is your father up to? And where are the fathers of the previous games?
Wherever could they be? They're probably off working somewhere, or maybe just having Pokémon battles? [laughs] It's apparent that they are at least making enough money to buy the player's character a computer! [laughs]

The Pokémon Espurr has become a popular Internet meme with fans citing his vacant expression representing a troubled past. What happened to Espurr, or what did he see that made him so vacant?
I wonder what happened, too! [laughs] I'd like everyone to think about it. I'm not sure Espurr would be willing to talk about it even if we asked, though. [laughs]

Who do you like to pick as your starters?
Fennekin, of course! I love playing with Fennekin in Pokémon-Amie! ◆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・少し反っている
・断面
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・キバは上下２本ずつ
・炎は上アゴから出ている
・口を閉じても火は出ている
・炎は常になびいている
・怒りや興奮など、感情によって
炎の勢い（なびく早さ・角度）
が変わる
翼の内側：
・スジなし
・ツヤなし
肩のトゲ：
・断面はまんまる
・塗りわけは短い
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（メガリザードンＹと異なる）
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尻尾の塗りわけ
先端まで
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翼はこの部分まで
体（背中）に接地し、
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メガリザードンＸ
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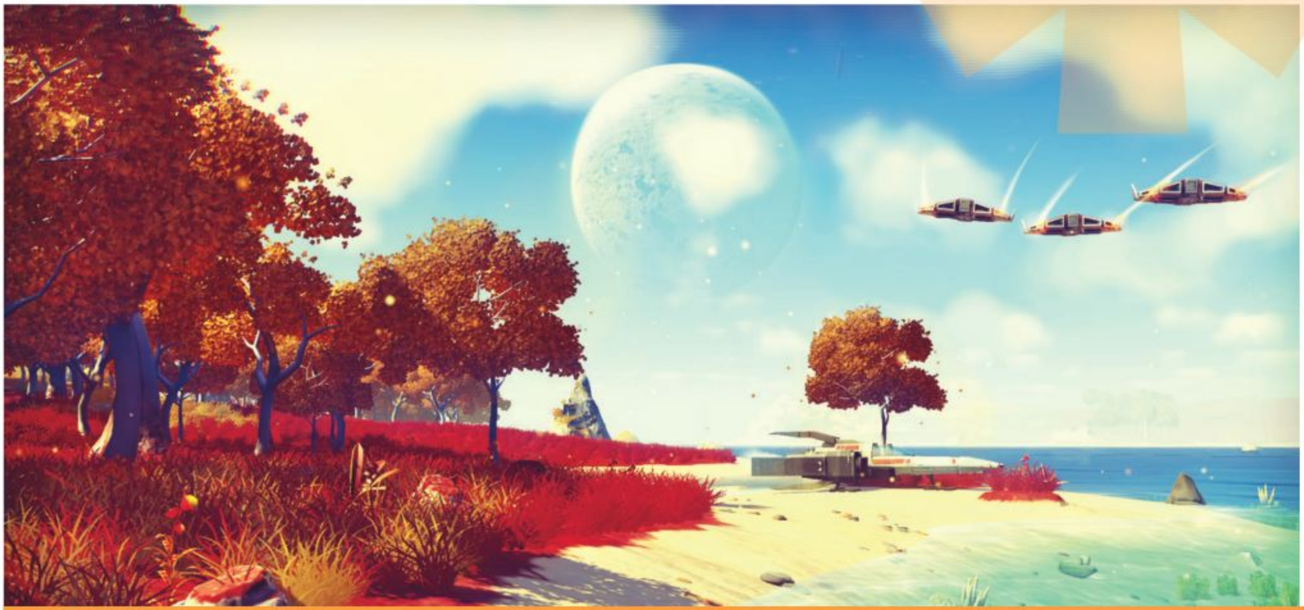
Two Indie Sci-Fi Games Shoot For The Stars



by Matt Miller

Great science fiction often fosters a sense of wonder and discovery, and these two indie games explore diametrically different approaches to tap those sensations. I'm thrilled to see such ambitious and surprising titles on the horizon in one of my favorite genres.

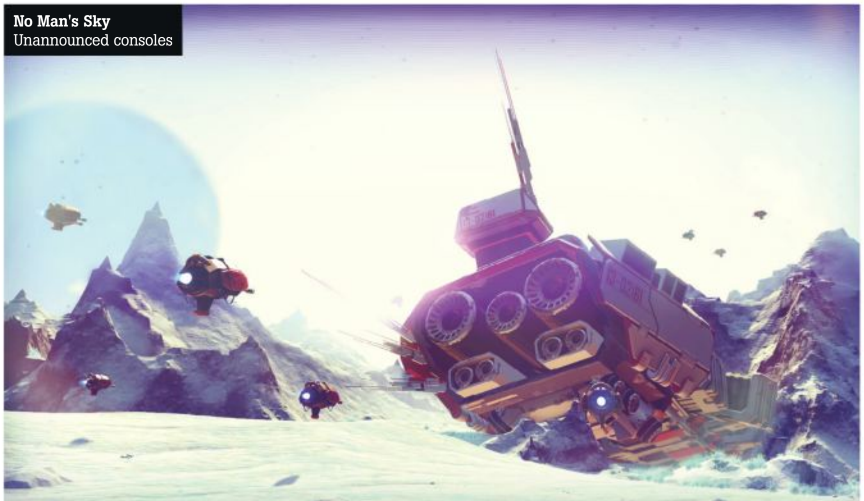
Hello Games has spent years working on its zany Joe Danger series, which stars a stuntman who navigates an inexplicable array of obstacles to impress his fans. **No Man's Sky** is a dramatic departure for the studio. The game looks to classic '60s and '70s sci-fi books, movies, and television, from *Dune* to *Star Trek*, and seeks to provide the same sense of danger and mystery that dominated those properties.

No Man's Sky puts you in control of an outer space explorer who ventures from his home near the edge of the universe inward toward the center where the Big Bang began. From a perpetual first-person perspective, the action unfolds in both outer space combat aboard your ship, as well as walking around on the ground of the many planets and moons that you discover along the way. As you explore, you acquire wealth and materials to improve your weapon, suit, and ship. Those upgrades make it more feasible to venture into the more dangerous galaxies and solar systems that lie closer to the universe's center.

Handcrafting an entire universe of stars and planets is a tall order, so Hello Games is using a procedural model to create the many locations you visit, dictating features like the ecology of a planet surface or the amount of oxygen in any given atmosphere. The game in turn generates appropriate flora and fauna, and alters the way light diffuses through the air. Everything you see in the game is a location ready to be explored. Spy a mountain on the horizon, and you can go there. Two moons hang in the sky overhead? You can visit them. Even the constellations in the sky represent actual stars, each of which has its own system to explore. Players engage in combat both on the ground and in space, and Hello Games states that you can seamlessly transition from one to another without loading times – you simply ascend through the clouds (presuming that planet has water) and exit into space.

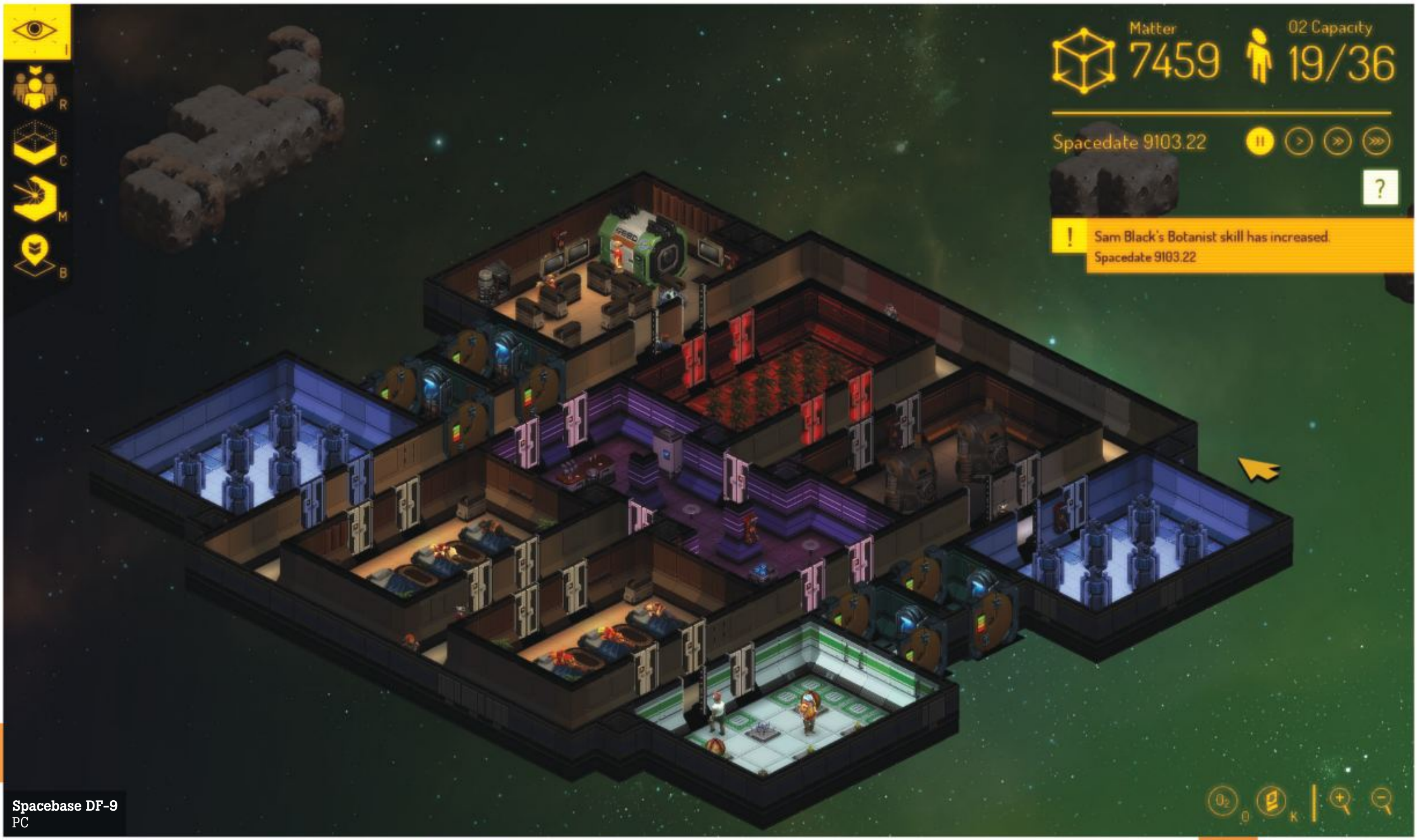
While the universe is procedurally generated, that doesn't mean it's random for each player. Instead, everyone playing the game is in the same giant universe, and you can interact with other players as you explore. Map an uncharted planet, and you can upload those details to the universe map that all players can access. In this way, the entire player population will slowly discover the universe. Along the way, everyone is pursuing the nebulous goal of reaching the universe's center, but what you do along the way is player guided. One player might become a pirate of the space lanes. Another could be a dedicated mapper who meticulously explores each planet before moving on to the next. No Man's Sky also aims to craft a continuous story once you enter the game, but one where your decisions and choices have consequences. Get shot down over a lonely planetoid, and you might not die, but you may be stranded and scrounging for resources for a while.

I'm fascinated by the sheer audacity of No Man's Sky, as it strives to present a massive playground for players. Here's hoping it all comes together. The game is still in early development, but Hello Games hopes to have a release on unannounced next-gen consoles before the end of 2014.



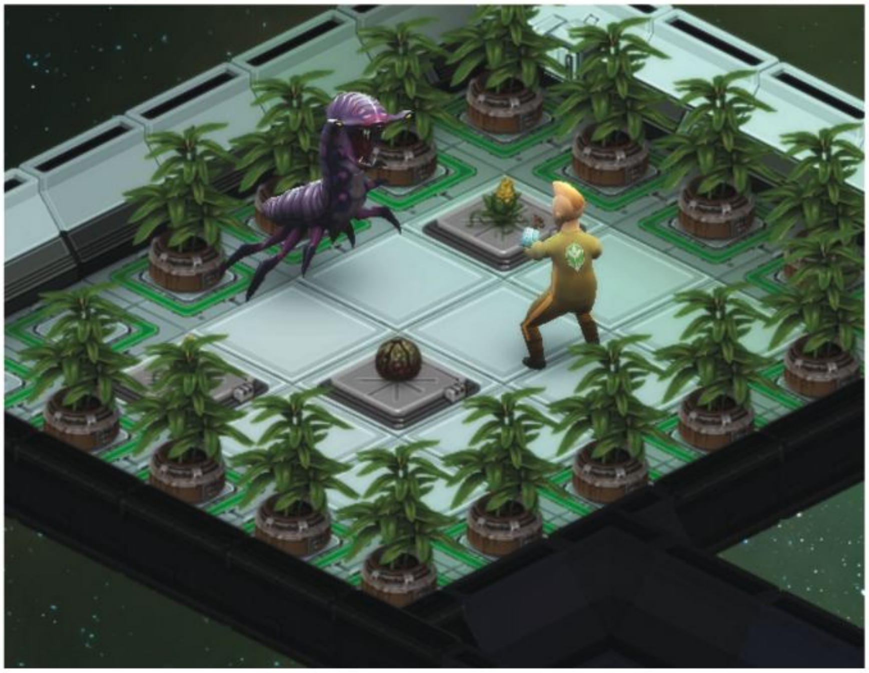
No Man's Sky
Unannounced consoles

Looking for more on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, news, previews, and reviews. For more downloadable games in this issue, check out our previews of Mighty No. 9 (p. 79), The Banner Saga (p. 83), Wasteland 2 (p. 84), and Max: The Curse of Brotherhood (p. 86), and our reviews of the first episode of The Walking Dead: Season Two (p. 90), and SteamWorld Dig (p. 92).



Sam Black's Botanist skill has increased.
Spacedate 9103.22

Spacebase DF-9
PC



Where No Man's Sky sends players careening across the universe, Double Fine's **Spacebase DF-9** takes players to one tiny corner of the sky and lets them build a life there. The indie studio behind The Cave and the upcoming Broken Age, Double Fine conceived of Spacebase DF-9 during one of its Amnesia Fortnite prototyping events. The resulting game is a sci-fi building and social simulation in which the player slowly builds a space station in the depths of space, adding residents and new structures while fending off dangers.

The game begins at a glittering map of the Milky Way; your mouse pointer hovers over a seemingly infinite number of space sectors. Each location has different properties that affect the viability of your subsequent base, such as stellar density, which determines how much mining you can do, or warpgate proximity, affecting the likelihood of passing ships. Select your spot, and a colony pod is launched into the unknown with a few brave souls aboard.

The primary view of the action is an isometric, zoomable camera that allows you to see your spacesuit-wearing colonists emerge from their tiny pod. As the game begins, the astronauts have only a few minutes of oxygen in their suits before asphyxiation, so you need to work quickly to set up a barebones station with life support and an airlock.

Each of your colonists can be assigned a job, including necessary roles like builder, miner, botanist, or the all-important bartender. Once you survive those first few minutes, your residents go about their lives, each with their own wants and needs. One colonist might need more social opportunities aboard the stations, while another is looking for better entertainment. Like an outer space version of The Sims, you have to juggle fulfilling these individual needs while simultaneously handling the requirements of your growing outpost in deep space. Unlike The Sims, alien parasites regularly threaten, ancient derelict ships occasionally arrive, and your whole crew might die if you don't get that airlock door repaired in time.

Spacebase DF-9 is still in alpha, and Double Fine is regularly adding new content. The build I played offered a great foundation for the sim and building aspects of the game, but left me hungry for more guided objectives and conflicts, which I'm confident are on the way in later updates. The work-in-progress title is already available for purchase and play on Steam, so you can check it out as it continues to develop into a fully fleshed-out game in the coming months. ◆

The State Of The MMO

by Matt Miller

As we steer into a new year of gaming, most of the best options for MMO players don't lie in the future, but in the richly fleshed out worlds already filled with content and players. A number of big MMOs have changed dramatically over the course of the months and years since release, making improvements and additions that enrich player experience. Whether you're deciding to return to an old favorite, or thinking about trying one of these for the first time, here is what you can expect from a selection of titles that have seen major changes since launch.

AGE OF CONAN

While it's been around for many years, Age of Conan has continued to receive new polish and content, and it remains a solid choice for players looking for a low-fantasy sword-and-sorcery title, albeit one with some mature themes and visuals. In the years since launch, performance improvements have resolved the sometimes-buggy nature of the original release, and new content has improved on the lack of endgame content. In addition to standard expansion content, the Age of Conan team has continued to rework game systems, such as the recent revamp of crafting and tradeskills. For a game from 2008, Age of Conan has seen some big changes, and its transition to free-to-play lets you hop in with little risk.

GUILD WARS 2

has run from the beginning without a monthly subscription model, and it's helped the game garner some impressive concurrent player counts. ArenaNet has focused on providing small but constant updates (over 20 in the first year) to its players, many of which arrived less than three weeks apart from one another. This agile development model has allowed the team to respond quickly to player demand, and even shape new content in response to player votes. The new content runs the gamut, from PvE maps, PvP maps, and open-world bosses. This living world concept makes Guild Wars 2 a great fit for players looking to have an active and ongoing relationship with their game and the developers behind it.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

Since its launch in 2007, Tolkien's online world has seen five full expansions and a host of new features, including two new character classes, mounted combat, and eight brand new regions to discover. One of the coolest features came online in late 2013, with the introduction of the Epic Battle system. This new mode puts players on the wall at Helm's Deep as thousands of attackers storm the walls. Players work together to hold off the attack, splitting up tasks to succeed – vanguards charge into battle, officers command troop groups, and engineers place and fire siege weaponry. If you're curious, the epic battle system opens up early at level 10; enter the battle and you're automatically boosted to a level-capped 95 for the length of the battle.

MARVEL HEROES

Gazillion and Secret Identity's free-to-play superhero title felt like it still needed some polish when it launched earlier this year, and the team has been hard at work to live up to that potential. The lack-luster PvP has seen significant advances, with new game modes such as the MOBA-like Fire and Ice scenario. Several new heroes add to the already impressive roster, including Human Torch, Nova, Luke Cage, and Loki. Players complained about the blind drops to acquire new heroes, so a couple of new in-game currencies allow players to get the character they want. Finally, the core game itself has continued to expand, with new zones in Queens and Midtown in New York, as well as a sprawling new Asgard location.

RIFT

Trion Worlds openly touts having tripled the size of its game world since launch, and a look at the wealth of content produced since launch in 2011 bears that out. New customizable player housing through the dimensions system lets you carve out your own place in the world, while additional dungeons and raids offer plenty of content to dig into as you work toward the new level cap of 60. Several new souls (classes) let you further customize your character in Rift's highly flexible system of mixing and matching abilities. Rift distinguishes itself through its approach to its free-to-play model, which has all of the game open for exploration whether you have a paid subscription or not, and most of the best items must be found in-game, rather than purchased. For a rich and beautiful MMO with lots of dynamic content to connect you with other players, Rift is a good fit.

THE SECRET WORLD

The modern fantasy of Funcom's The Secret World has been consistent in providing regular new content for its players to explore. Like issues of a comic, each small expansion brings with it missions, monsters, and locations. For instance, issue six, The Last Train to Cairo, sends players back in time to flee rolling boulders and acquire the new whip weapon in a clear homage to everyone's favorite fedora-wearing adventurer. Funcom has also worked hard to give its devoted players options to further customize their already maxed-out characters, including new auxiliary weapons and an augment system that provides new twists and upgrades on already learned powers. Perhaps most importantly, a subscription is no longer required to play the game – each expansion issue can be purchased separately if you fall in love with the game, while the continued subscription option brings with it enough points to buy all the expansions as they release.

STAR TREK ONLINE

has seen some dramatic shake-ups since launch, and players who haven't played since 2010 will find an almost completely new game in place. Eight "seasons" of updates have brought with them new ships to pilot, revamps of both outer space and ground combat, and the full-featured Foundry system that allows players to craft their own missions to share with others. For Star Trek fans, these new seasons have also continued the Star Trek fiction into the future that lies beyond the Next Generation movies, with major changes occurring within the balance of power between all the familiar species of the galaxy. The latest expansion lets you play as a Romulan or Reman captain, and allows new players to hop in from the beginning on the side of the Federation, Klingon Empire, or Romulan Republic.

STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC

Since its launch in 2011, the narrative-focused MMO has continued to add content, and a free-to-play option reinvigorated its player base in 2012. A new group-finding feature and a more flexible approach to gear customization lets you shape the character you want to play, while the Legacy system allows for a connected "family" of characters across your account, and rewards for developing each of them. Last year brought a full expansion called Rise of the Hutt Cartel, with a new fully voiced planet to explore and a new level 55 cap. The Galactic Starfighter expansion went live in December, finally allowing 12v12 outer space PvP combat, including a host of playable ships and customization options.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

The reigning king of the genre may be down a few million players, but it still towers over the competition in sheer numbers. After four full expansions including a refit of all the original zones, the game is now a completely different experience from its original incarnation. Most recently, Blizzard has updated raids to run with flexible groups of between 10 and 25 players, with the difficulty adjusting dynamically based on player count. Recent updates have also added new zones and challenges for level-capped players. Looking to get back in to Azeroth after a long absence? You may want to wait for the upcoming Warlords of Draenor expansion, which lets you jump one character instantly to level 90 to experience the new content. ◆

interview

photo: Ed Carreon

Analyzing The Game

Wedbush Securities' Michael Pachter is a stock analyst who watches the video game industry. Unlike most analysts, he maintains a high profile in the press and is one of the most quoted people in games. We recently spoke with him about his job and his outlook on the game industry.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Could you give our readers an explanation of what you do as an analyst, how you approach your job, what you base your opinions on?
I think the most important thing for them to understand is being a consumer is largely irrelevant. These guys who spout off [say], "He doesn't know anything about games. I finished Halo in six hours." I'm like, "F--- you. Who cares if you can play games?" I'm just saying 26 million people can play Call of Duty. What's the big f------ deal? What's the prerequisite to playing Call of Duty? $60. There are no barriers of entry to play games. So, you're a gamer. Who cares? Nobody listens to me because I'm better at Call of Duty or Battlefield than the other analysts. That's irrelevant. I don't think it matters if you play them at all. What matters is that I understand the business so I help investors – and by investors I mean institutions, professional money managers, not individual investors – to make better informed decisions about 21 stocks. Of the 21 stocks I cover, four or five remaining are game companies. I help them understand how these companies are going to perform, what they're going to earn, and why.

Are review scores a relevant metric for you?
Well, they're a good indicator of relative sales if the two games are the same. If Take-Two's NBA game had gotten a 46 and EA's had gotten a 90, I would have bet that Take-Two's sales would be down a lot. And it didn't happen. But if they're both sports sim games and if one of them gets terrible reviews, the other's going to get all the sales.

What other metrics and data are you using? I'm assuming this is financial reports and quarterly reports?
Yeah, but I get all that stuff. That's my bread and butter. That's my job. I can look at financials and I know what they mean. And I know stuff that isn't in the financial report. I can come up with a very reasonable estimate for the royalty pay for the Rockstar guys. I know what Microsoft charges to stamp out a disc on the Xbox One. I understand what the marketing budget should be on a particular game. So the guys who play games who say, "I could do his job because I'm really good at Halo." Yeah. Tell me what the console royalty is, please. I'm just saying they have no clue. They have no idea. What's a game development budget? They have no idea. "But Nintendo's great because I like their games." That's just the dumbest reason in the world to buy a stock.

We just had two console launches. What are your general impressions of the PlayStation 4 and the Xbox One?
I think that unlike any other launch, both manufacturers generated far more interest in their consoles than they were able to satisfy with supply. So you had those first big numbers. I mean, two million consoles sold in 24 hours. They were two weeks apart, but that's pretty impressive. Compared to I think five or six hundred thousand Xboxes in the first few weeks and probably one and a half million PS3s in the first two months. I think that's great, especially since neither console is all that dramatically better than the existing consoles. They look better and they do more stuff, but the games aren't any different right now. Pretty impressive. We'll see how long this keeps up.

Do you think this console cycle could be as successful as the past couple, in terms of units out there on a global basis, or do you think we're going to see some attrition?
I think that Xbox and PlayStation will be bigger, because they're going to grow demographically – both people getting older and continuing to play, and reaching into countries that didn't embrace consoles before like Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America that have not really embraced console technology in big numbers. Ten percent of households have it, but not the Western norm of 40 or 50 percent of households. So I think that there's room for those guys.

Nintendo's clearly losing share. Microsoft and Sony should capture a chunk of that. Not all of it, because Nintendo did something that the other guys have never done, which is broaden the market to women who really don't play games, but figured Guitar Hero looks fun or Wii Fit looks fun, so I'll buy a console. Most of those women are gone. They're either not playing games or they're playing Angry Birds, Candy Crush, or Farmville. I think the Wii audience, about half of them were more casual and they've moved on. So, yes, similar size, because I think the Wii attrition is about 50 million. I think the Xbox and PlayStation gain is about 50 million, and I think you're going to see about the same size console base.

Is there any reasonable scenario where there's a positive way forward for Wii U at this point?
They'd have to really surprise us. The Wii did something that the Wii U isn't doing – it captured our imagination, because the way the Wiimote worked, it was so easy and intuitive and fun that people were willing to give it a try. The price point, which I believe was $249 at launch, was so cheap relative to a $399 Xbox 360 and a $599 PS3 that a lot more people were willing to try it. And then there was Nintendo's reputation as having much more family-friendly games.

I don't think the Wii U does any of those things. My mom came over to my house – she was 83 when I got a Wii – and she was playing and laughing so hard that tears were running down her face. She picked up the Wiimote, and she knew exactly what she was doing to play Wii tennis. It was just obvious. She came over last year, and we had the Wii U. She wanted to know if we had any new consoles. We handed her the GamePad and she was completely baffled – no idea what to do with it. If you play, you know that it's not that intuitive. I think that they are so interested in innovating, that they tried something that was a little too innovative, and it wasn't intuitive. So, no, I don't think they recover. I think they screwed that up royally. They're going to have to scrap it. There's a reason why we have game controllers, and if you remember back in the day, Nintendo invented the game controller. The NES came with a game controller. They were the first guys who did it, and they came up with something because it made sense.

Of all the game companies that you follow, which are you most optimistic about and which are you most pessimistic about?
Over the long-term, you can pretty much mail in that Activision and EA are going to be around and thrive. Activision has done something kind of remarkable: they just manage to come up with something new every few years. The knock on them is they have too much concentration in a handful of franchises that are all getting old. The positive you can say about them is they're a resourceful management team who figures out what people want and gives it to them.

The other one I love is EA just because I [love] the core sports business – which they seem to be screwing up with NBA. FIFA is never going away, and Madden is never going away. I think they've done a good enough job with Battlefield to give consumers choice, so I think that thrives. They have a handful of other good franchises, so I like those guys. I think they're going to do really, really well.

The guys I'm concerned about – again this isn't a negative stock-market pick – Take-Two needs to be more transparent and let us know what they have in the pipeline. We can observe that Rockstar puts a game out every single year for nine years. One game. But we don't know what the next one is. Investors really have trouble buying a stock in a company when they don't know what's going to happen next, and I just don't know why it's a secret.

Ubisoft worries me a bit because they have not been particularly consistent about getting games out on time. They've delayed a lot. They just got to be more disciplined about getting stuff out on time. I thought they were getting there because of what they did with Assassin's Creed until they slipped Watch Dogs. Then you wonder.

My bias on all four companies is positive. Nintendo's the one who's the biggest to avoid right now because they not only don't seem to have mastered what to do with hardware, but they're kind of blissfully ignorant that they're not doing well. It's almost like they're the only ones who don't know it. ◆

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1981
A LEGAL MATTER
Pachter graduates from Pepperdine with a law degree

1982
HOOKED
While at the University of Florida getting his Masters of Law degree, Pachter spends his mornings in local arcades playing Galaga and Galaxian

1982
TAXMAN
Pachter joins the firm Atlantic Richfield, working as a tax lawyer. He later moves to mergers & acquisitions

1989
BACK TO SCHOOL
Eager to expand his horizons, Pachter earns his Masters of Business Administration at UCLA

1999
NEW RESEARCH
Pachter moves to Wedbush to head up the firm's research division

2001
GAME ON
After two game industry stock analysts leave his research division, Pachter decides to take on the job himself

2006
NEW MEDIA
Pachter appears on the first episode Geoff Keighley's *Bonus Round* interview show on *GameTrailers* and quickly becomes a regular guest

2010
ON THE ATTACK
Pachter's popularity on Bonus Round leads to his own *GameTrailers* show, the Q&A program *Pach Attack*

MACPRO

by Ben Reeves

Measuring 9.9 inches tall and 6.6 inches in diameter, Apple's new Mac Pro looks more like an extra-wide thermos than a personal computer. Designed around a unified thermal core, the base model Mac Pro houses a quad-core 3.7GHz Intel Xeon E5 processor, 12GB RAM, a 256GB solid state drive, and dual AMD FirePro D300 graphics cards. Apple's sleek new machine also sports more ports than the city of Seattle – letting it output to up to three 4K displays and up to six HD displays via six Thunderbolt 2 ports. The system's back panel even glows, making it easier to connect devices to its Gigabit Ethernet, HDMI, and USB 3.0 ports. Apple claims the system can deliver up to seven teraflops of computing power, making it ideal for graphic designers, music and movie editors, and 3D modelers.

Starting at $2,999 | *apple.com/mac-pro*

1

1 Anki Drive Starter Kit

These miniature hot rods speed across a giant vinyl mat while an iOS app lets you control your car and shoot at other vehicles with invisible lasers. Up to four players can have a car on the track, but if you're home alone you can still race against AI-controlled vehicles. Anki promotes this system as a real life video game, but it could be the slot cars of the future.

$199 | *anki.com*

2

2 Aardman DC Nation Action Figure Set

Batman is just about the coolest comic book hero there is, but in the hilarious animated shorts from the Academy Award-winning team behind Wallace and Gromit, he's a lovable dope. DC Collectibles has created a series of figures based on these Cartoon Network shorts, so bat-fans of any age can cheerfully display their reverence for Batman's goofy side.

$74.95 (5-pack set) | *wbshop.com*

3

3 PeerAir Wireless HD Multimedia System

You have a problem: You have more rooms in your house to play games than you do systems to play them on. In an ideal world, PeerAir's wireless signal streaming system would solve this problem, but this isn't an ideal device. The system claims to hijack any HD signal (be it gaming or video) and transmit it clearly up to 100 feet away. In practice, our video stream continually dropped down to 480p when we tried to broadcast it from a computer in the bedroom to the living room. PeerAir also claims that this device works well with gaming consoles, but our Xbox One and PlayStation 4 controllers started to lose signal strength after about 25 feet. So unless you only want to move your Call of Duty match into the room next-door, you're probably better off just streaming video with a device like Google Chromecast.

LIMITED APPEAL 🟩🟩🟩🟩🟩🟩⬜⬜⬜⬜

$249 | *peerair.peerless-av.com*

Media Shelf

A THEORY OF FUN FOR GAME DESIGN

This 10th anniversary edition is just as relevant today as ever. Ultima Online designer Raph Koster discusses how games play off our innate ability to seek patterns, and how they often still teach primitive survival skills.

$34.99
raphkoster.com

DESPICABLE ME 2

Gru gave up his life as a super villain to settle down as a dad, but the world isn't ready to let him hang up his black hat. The Anti-Villain League recruits him to track down a new criminal mastermind in Universal's hilarious animated sequel.

$34.98
despicableme.com

MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000: 25TH ANNIVERSARY

Mystery Science Theater 3000 is nearly as old as some of the films it used to lambast. This special anniversary set includes six hilariously bad films, a three-part documentary retrospective, and 660 minutes of laughs.

$54.99
shoutfactory.com

TRANSFORMERS: THE COVENANT OF PRIMUS BY JULIA ROBSON

Explore the history of the Transformers fiction in this hardcover volume that features 60 never-before-seen illustrations from Hasbro's archives. The book comes encased in a wall mountable, interlocking Autobot emblem.

$59.99
apub.com

Billy Joe Cain

The Returning Defender Champion

TEXAS VIDEO
CHAMPIONSHIPS
ZEKTOR
FOOD STORES
First Annual Texas Video Game Championships

Billy Joe Cain holds the record for the highest recorded, refereed, and Record Setters verified Defender score. Cain's score may not be the best score in the history of Defender, but it's the highest to be fully streamed and recorded online. He played the game for more than 32 straight hours, recording a score of 32.6 million on November 16. This endeavor required a substantial amount of preparation, and Cain even sustained some minor injuries preventing him from making another attempt for a few months. But according to Cain, it was worth it.

by Kyle Hilliard

A Champion Is Born

Cain discovered Defender as a child in his hometown 7-Eleven. It was the first game he saw that had a battery backup to store high scores. "I just fell in love with it, and the game was so damn hard that it was kind of this giant mountain you had to climb so that you could get further," he says.

In 1982 7-Eleven sponsored a statewide championship in Texas for a handful of arcade games including Defender, and Cain won. His prize was his own arcade cabinet version of the game's sequel, Stargate. "It came to the house in a giant box," he said. "I opened it up right there, and it was absolutely the most insane thing ever to have a brand new arcade game in your house."

Cain started to consider a comeback after a chance meeting with Twin Galaxies' Walter Day of *King of Kong* fame. Unbeknownst to Cain, Day knew who he was and had even written about his Texas Defender title in one of his books. Cain set up a Facebook group and invited world record holders to give him advice, and began preparing to tackle Defender's high score.

The Marathon Comeback

As suggested by his mentors, Cain bought three different chairs for his marathon attempt – a hard stool, a soft stool, and a chair with a back. He switched back and forth between the chairs and standing on a soft pad.

Since Defender doesn't have a pause button and you lose a life every seven seconds if you aren't touching the controls, food and bathroom breaks required careful preparation. For food he went with smoothies and vegetables. He also drank lukewarm water, because consuming cold water burns energy. He made sure to put the cabinet near a bathroom, and faced it away from sunlight in order to avoid glare but still in a position where he could see the sun and track the passing days.

At about 17 hours, Cain realized he was struggling to keep track of his numbers and had to get help from friends hanging out for his stream. During the second afternoon of playtime, Cain realized his focus was drifting and he nearly got booted off the game, but he recovered. At around hour 30, he started hallucinating, as his mentors warned would happen. He began to visualize his son sitting next to him on a nearby stool, and it took him a while to realize what was happening.

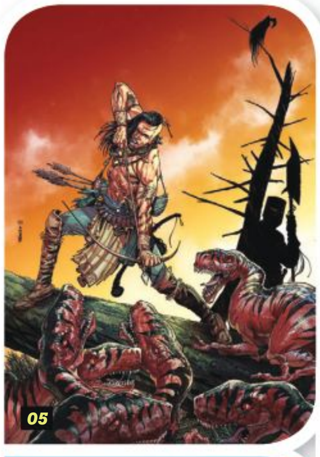
Around this time, the pain starting setting in. Friends applied IcyHot patches and ice to his back and forearms, and he put on a wrist brace. At the 33,644,725 point mark, Cain finally succumbed to a game over screen. "It was brutal, and I had never been kicked off that game before but I just – I couldn't do it," Cain says, "Everybody was really freaked out and sad because I didn't give up – my body gave up. I gave up because the game kicked my ass." His wrist tendons were brutalized, and he still was struggling with pain even when we spoke to him a month later.

Despite the injury, Cain loved the experience and even seems disappointed by the three-month wait his mentors recommend between attempts. Defender's highest score still belongs to a man named Dale Reeves, who has a long-standing score of 40 million. "You can say that [mine] is a world record or you can say that it's a world record on Record Setter," Cain says. "But it is the highest verifiable score ever. Is that weird? I don't want to piss anybody off. I don't want to seem like that crazy *King of Kong* insanity where everybody's mad at it. It's ridiculous. This whole thing is supposed to be fun." ◆

Making the Games

Billy Joe Cain does more than just play video games for 30-hour marathons. He's been in the game development industry since 1992, doing everything from QA to running studios. He was lead designer on Wing Commander: Prophecy, an integral part of bringing EA Sports Rugby to fruition, has started Facebook game companies, and is currently an expert doing hardware and software testing for VMC Game Labs.

04 **Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze**


05

11 **Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII**

12

18 **Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare**

19

21

25 **Thief**

25 **Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2**

25 **Tales Of Symphonia Chronicles**

February

2014

02 Super Bowl XLVIII

Your TV will likely be on today, either watching Super Bowl football or the commercials and trailers that play during the breaks. Game Informer's Super Bowl prediction: The Broncos edge out the Seahawks in a low-scoring game with blizzard conditions.

04 New Releases

- Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze *(Wii U)*
- The Lego Movie Video Game *(PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, 360, PC, Vita)*

04 D.I.C.E. Summit 2014

Held at the Hard Rock Casino in Las Vegas, NV, this year's D.I.C.E. Summit offers a wide variety of speakers from Major League Gaming's Sundance DiGiovanni to video game legends Ed Fries and Trip Hawkins. This three-day event kicks off today and concludes with the 17th Annual D.I.C.E. Awards.

05 Turok Returns

Dynamite Entertainment is giving the Son of Stone another shot in today's comic book release, *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter.* This unexpected revival is helmed by the all-star team of writer Greg Pak *(Batman/Superman, World War Hulk)* and artist Mirko Colak *(Conan)*.

07 New Releases

- Bravely Default: Flying Fairy *(3DS)*

07 Another Great Use For Legos

Some of the best parts of the Lego video games are the funny cut-scenes. *The Lego Movie*, opening today, delivers this humor in feature-length form – and you don't have to solve a bunch of puzzles to see it. With numerous Lego properties like Batman and TMNT along with the voice talents of Will Ferrell and Morgan Freeman, this looks like a must see.

11 New Releases

- Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc *(Vita)*
- Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII *(PS3, 360)*
- One Piece: Romance Dawn *(3DS)*

12 I'd Buy That For A Dollar

Robocop is one of the greatest films to come out of the '80s, and despite two questionable sequels, it still holds up. Today, *Robocop* returns in a reboot geared for a new generation. He looks sleeker, and the action is ramped up to modern standards, but he's still part man, part machine, all cop. Joel Kinnaman and Samuel L. Jackson star alongside Michael Keaton – another relic from the '80s.

18 New Releases

- Earth Defense Force 2025 *(PS3, 360)*
- Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare *(Xbox One, 360)*
- Ragnarok Odyssey: ACE *(PS3, Vita)*

19 The Final Fate Of Nightwing

The world knows Dick Grayson is Nightwing. The Crime Syndicate's need for Grayson as a hostage is over. DC Comics is billing *Forever Evil #6*, releasing today, as the "final fate of Nightwing." Sounds like the Bat-family is shrinking again.

21 The End Of An Animated Era

Hayao Miyazaki is the writer and director of *Howl's Moving Castle, Princess Mononoke, Spirited Away, Ponyo,* and several other amazing films from Studio Ghibli. Today marks the release of his final film, *The Wind Rises*. It tells the fictionalized story of Jiro Horikoshi, a Japanese engineer who designed fighter planes during World War II. You don't need to know any more about this film; just go see it.

25 New Releases

- Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2 *(PS3, 360)*
- Tales of Symphonia Chronicles *(PS3)*
- Thief *(PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)*

28 GottaCon 2014

A video game-themed burlesque show, Dota 2 tournaments, and an alternate reality game are all a part of this year's GottaCon. Held in Victoria, British Columbia starting today and running through March 4, this con focuses on video games, board games, trading card games, and various workshops.

EVOLVE

A NEW BREED OF MULTIPLAYER

Turtle Rock Studios isn't a household name amongst most gamers, but that may change in the coming year. The independent developer has spent more than a decade creating highly refined and replayable multiplayer experiences, taking players from the competitive killing fields of Counter-Strike to the team-focused zombie apocalypse of Left 4 Dead. Its newest project pits a four-player squad of space-colonizing hunters in a continuous boss battle against an evolving, 30-foot monster – only instead of featuring glowing weak points and scripted attack patterns, the beast you're up against is controlled by another human. Evolve is Turtle Rock's newest attempt to redefine multiplayer, and its ambitious mixture of cooperative and competitive gameplay doesn't just look good on paper. After spending a few hours playing the game, Evolve is on our short list of titles to watch in 2014.

» PLATFORM
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

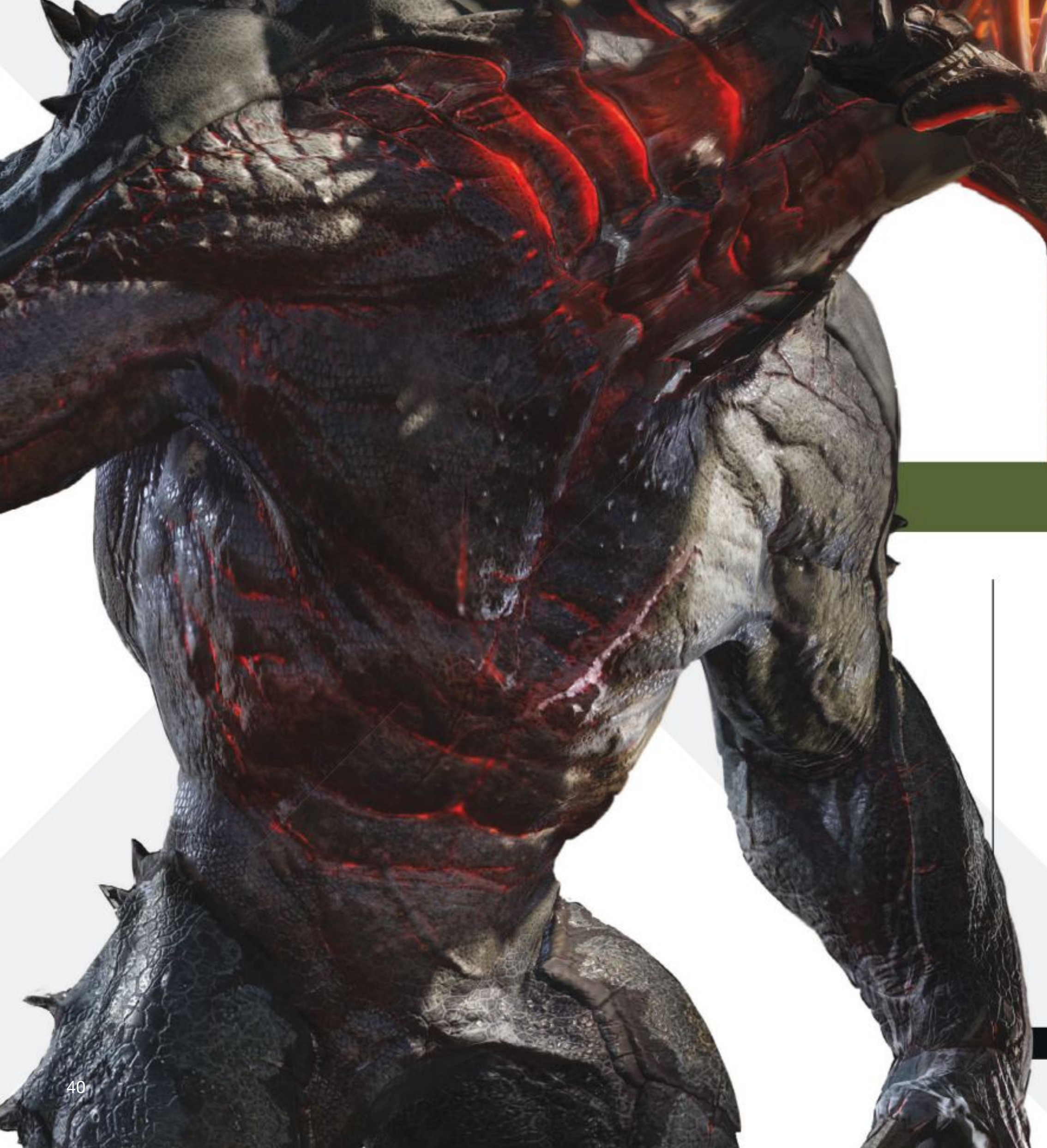
» STYLE
1-Player Shooter (5-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
2K Games

» DEVELOPER
Turtle Rock Studios

» RELEASE
Fall

by Jeff Marchiafava



ORIGIN STORY

Based in an unassuming office building in Lake Forest, California, Turtle Rock has been quietly working on Evolve for nearly three years. During that time the developer has grown to approximately 75 employees, and is overseen by studio heads Chris Ashton and Phil Robb. Both are quick to stress the team's flat hierarchy, deflecting personal credit for where the company is today. In an age where independent developers face great difficulties keeping their doors open, Turtle Rock is in a good place as a studio, but has suffered through its share of hardships and uncertainty to get there.

Turtle Rock was originally formed in 2002 by Mike Booth, an AI programmer who was contracted by Valve to make an official bot for Counter-Strike. Valve was so impressed with Booth's work that the company urged him to put together a team to finish up Counter-Strike: Condition Zero, which had suffered numerous

SALVERON
RMP-41K

delays. Booth turned to some old colleagues he met while working at Westwood in the late ‘90s. This group included Robb, who at the time was doing freelance work after leaving EA, and Ashton, who was already working for Valve in Seattle and eager to move back to sunny California.

After establishing the company, Turtle Rock completed Condition Zero in 2004, which solidified a fruitful partnership with Valve. “Valve was pretty happy with the work we had done, so they gave us Counter-Strike: Source to finish up,” Robb says. “Then we sort of just became the custodians of Counter-Strike for about three years. But the cool thing about Valve was they were always like, ‘You guys should come up with your own thing. Just try something out.’”

Turtle Rock began working on a variety of prototypes, when it noticed that a lot of Counter-Strike players were using the AI bots it had designed to play against a flood of knife-wielding enemies. After trying it out in the office, they realized the variation had instant appeal. “You had all these guys charging at you,” Ashton says. “You’ve got a gun, but there’s so many of them, and they’re all trying to stab you. It was pretty freaky, but it was really fun.”

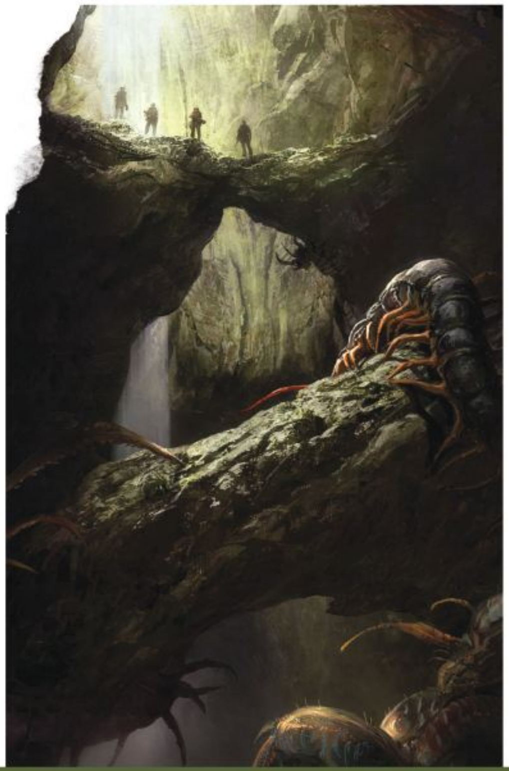
With Counter-Strike’s source code at its disposal, Turtle Rock began tweaking the game to give it a zombie theme, and presented it to Valve after a few months of prototyping under the working title of Terror-Strike. Valve was once again impressed by the studio’s work, and stepped in to fund the project. The game was introduced to the public in 2006 as Left 4 Dead. In the final year of development, Valve bought Turtle Rock with the intention of making it a satellite studio, renaming it Valve South. The companies released Left 4 Dead in 2008 after four years of development; Turtle Rock remained a team of about a dozen employees during the entirety of the project.

Left 4 Dead was a critical and commercial hit for Valve and Turtle Rock, but neither studio was prepared for how hard it was to work with a team in another state. Turtle Rock prides itself on collaboration; the studio has an open floor plan, and employees aren’t split up by departments. Like Valve, workstations are on wheels for easy movement, and Robb changes up the seating arrangement once a month to promote the free exchange of ideas. Co-developing games with a team in Seattle simply wasn’t working. “We used to work in a studio that had offices,” Ashton says. “And even if my office was next to Phil’s, that was a barrier; I had to get up out of my seat, walk out of my office, walk into his, and have a conversation. That’s too much. So the 800 miles [to Seattle] was a really big problem.”

After discussing the situation, Valve decided to relocate the majority of the staff to its Seattle offices while allowing those who wished to stay in California to reform Turtle Rock as an independent studio. Mike Booth, the original founder of Turtle Rock, continued working for Valve. Ashton and Robb chose to stay in California, taking up the mantle of their former company. “Turtle Rock had always been the best studio we had ever worked at,” Ashton says. “So for Phil and I, it came down to being able to preserve that more than anything else.”

Leaving Valve meant facing an uncertain future. “It was pretty f---ing scary,” Robb says. “The whole process of reforming Turtle Rock has kind of been one terrifying hurdle after the next. You start a company and you’ve got employees. Suddenly you’re not just worried about your own income; you’ve got all these people that are depending on the company for their own livelihood.”

The newly reborn Turtle Rock started out working on DLC for Left 4 Dead and Valve’s internally developed sequel, Left 4 Dead 2. After two years of making add-on content for the franchise it created, the team knew it was time to move on. “We decided that if Turtle Rock was going to be anything, and not just sort of disappear, we needed to do something big again,” Ashton says. The company went on an aggressive hiring spree for a new project. With Valve focusing its efforts on Steam, Ashton and Robb knew they would also have to find a new publisher to invest in them.



SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Turtle Rock had a number of game ideas to shop to publishers, but quickly landed on Evolve's core concept of four-versus-one multiplayer matches as the most promising. The team already had a convincing proof of concept: the panic-inducing battles against the powerful tank enemies in Left 4 Dead, which were a big hit with gamers. Turtle Rock had ideas for building out the simple concept years earlier, but its ambitious vision for what the game could be required more power than last-gen consoles offered. "The idea has been on our back burner for a very long time, but the tech needed to be there," Ashton says. "We have these very lush and large outdoor environments. We've also got a lot of AI wildlife in the world that are a critical player in the game."

As prototyping began, Turtle Rock incorporated hunting mechanics to facilitate head-to-head showdowns during matches. They gave the team of hunters the ability to follow the monster's tracks and inserted visual and aural clues in the environment to help locate their foe. For the monster, they incorporated a feeding mechanic that allows the player to grow larger and more powerful by eating wildlife. They quickly discovered that the gameplay accommodated two different play styles: those who like working cooperatively with their friends, and those who enjoy going up against other players without having to rely on anyone for help. Turtle Rock was on to something, and the publishers they showed it to agreed. "As we were going around to all these different publishers pitching Evolve, we got really good responses," Robb says. "We were taken aback by how enthusiastic people were. There were a couple publishers that really wanted it and were going back and forth over it."

Eventually, Turtle Rock chose THQ as its publishing partner, in large part due to its enthusiasm for the project. "[THQ] had their problems," Robb says, "but they were really nice to work with and they were huge supporters of Evolve. So we totally appreciated that."

With a publisher in place, Turtle Rock began fleshing out the gameplay with different equipment and abilities for players to use. Ideas poured in from everywhere, fueled by the studio's heavy focus on iteration and a willingness to try new ideas. "If you and I disagree on something, we can debate about it in this meeting room for an hour," Ashton says. "Or we can spend less than an hour and code it and try it. So usually if the idea sounds feasible and it's easy to try, it doesn't matter if I disagree; we'll try it and see if it pans out."

Company-wide play sessions also encourage collaboration amongst the team. "For almost three years, everybody who's been working here has played the game every single day," Ashton says. "You can't play the game every day and not want to change or affect the way that it plays. If it wasn't good, you'd go crazy."

Turtle Rock was making good strides, but Evolve soon faced another hurdle. After months of troubling financial reports, THQ imploded, filing for bankruptcy in December of 2012. An auction for the company's IPs was scheduled for the following month. Turtle Rock found itself showing Evolve to publishers again, this time as prospective bidders.

As the auction loomed closer, Turtle Rock found itself hoping for what it considered the two best-case scenarios. The first was that THQ would sort out its problems and business would continue as usual – a scenario that seemed less likely every day. The second was that Evolve would be bought by the publisher Turtle Rock felt the strongest connection with: 2K Games. "Every publisher was able to come down and sort of dig through our underwear drawer, so to speak," Robb says. "That's kind of how it felt, you know? But we had the best rapport with the 2K guys. They were really enthusiastic about the game."

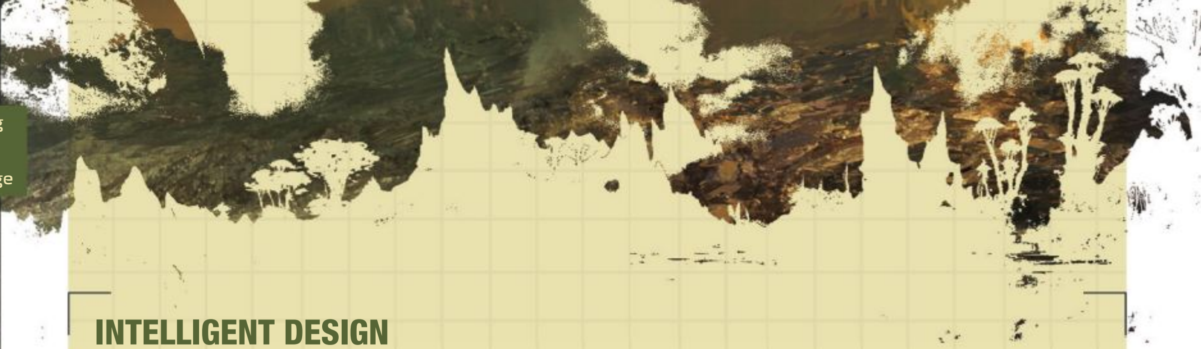
At the same time, Turtle Rock prepared for the worst-case scenario. The studio scraped together all of the money it could afford to make its own bid for the rights to Evolve. "Winning" the IP would leave the team in even worse shape than they were already in; they'd still have to find a new publisher to fund the game, but would've burned through their cash reserves just to gain back the rights. Turtle Rock placed a bid of $250,000 for Evolve, but it proved unnecessary. 2K had liked what it saw, and its parent company, Take-Two Interactive, stepped in to buy the IP with an offering of $10.8 million.

Once again Turtle Rock had lived to fight another day, in part because everyone who plays Evolve seems to walk away impressed. After giving us a brief presentation on the history of the project, Ashton and Robb are eager to let the game speak for itself, giving us hands-on time with a full team of hunters and Evolve's first monster: a hulking bipedal creature named Goliath.

A BOT AT YOUR SIDE

Evolve is designed for four-versus-one multiplayer, but that doesn't mean you need a full crew to play. Anywhere from 1-5 players can jump into the game, and the AI will fill in for the missing characters – including the monster. If your computer-controlled teammates aren't picking up on your desired tactics, you can switch between controlling them with the press of a button. Turtle Rock says Evolve also features a separate solo experience, but isn't ready to talk details yet.

Goliath's leap attack is great for crashing down on enemies from above. Hunters can defend high ground with Markov's proximity mines or Hank's orbital barrage



INTELLIGENT DESIGN

During our time with Evolve we noticed a ton of small touches that help balance the teams and keep players focused on the action. All weapons and equipment have unlimited ammo, and instead are balanced by magazine sizes and cooldowns. A three-strikes rule prevents hunters from endlessly reviving one another without the penalty of death, ensuring matches continue progressing towards an eventual conclusion. Running kicks in automatically when you're moving forward and not shooting, freeing up an extra button for calling out objects in the environment. If your jetpack runs out of fuel at the top of a cliff, your character automatically kicks up and grabs a hold of the ledge. Every item has its own timing and nuances to discover, which stem from Turtle Rock's daily, company-wide play sessions. The result is a highly polished multiplayer experience.

WELCOME TO PLANET SHEAR

Our look at Evolve focuses on the game's main Hunt mode, and Turtle Rock doesn't waste much time setting up the story. At an undetermined point in the future, humanity has begun exploring the galaxy and establishing colonies on distant planets. Unlike the smooth and sterile environments of many sci-fi games, these frontier worlds are dirty and dangerous places. Chief among them is Shear, a temperate planet filled with hostile alien creatures. To help keep colonists safe, teams of hunters watch over the land. "I like to think of them as planet tamers," Robb says. "They show up on planets and they help colonists make these places livable."

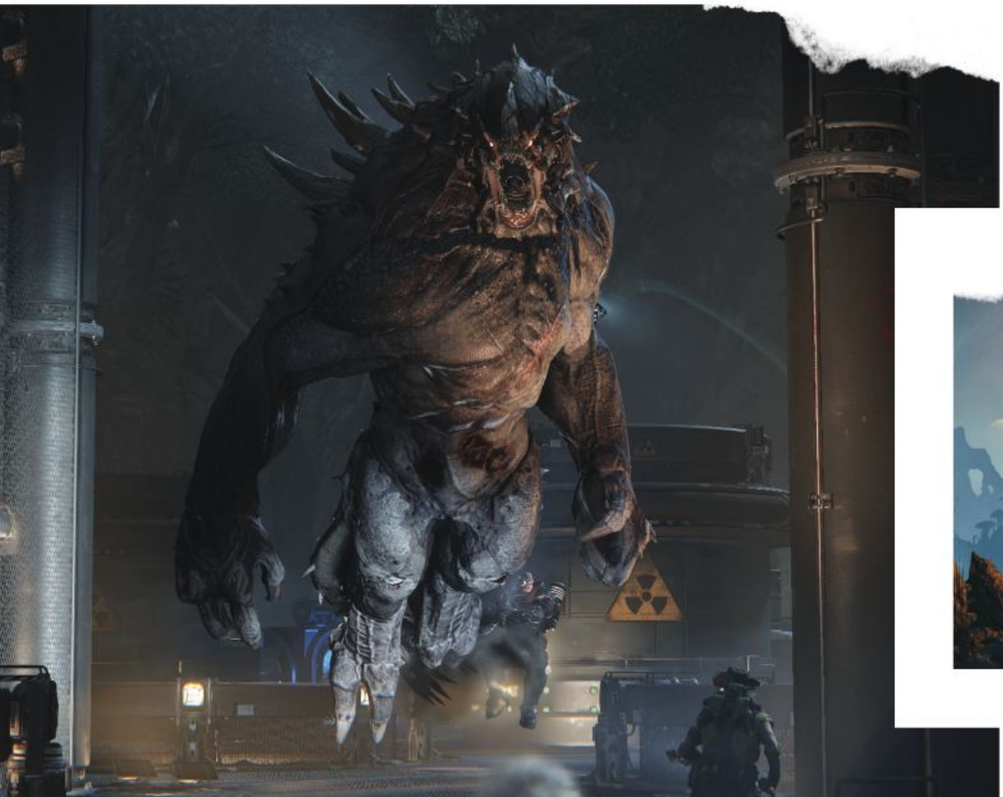
"That's the reason they have a harpoon gun, tranquilizer darts – they're here to handle the local wildlife," Ashton adds.

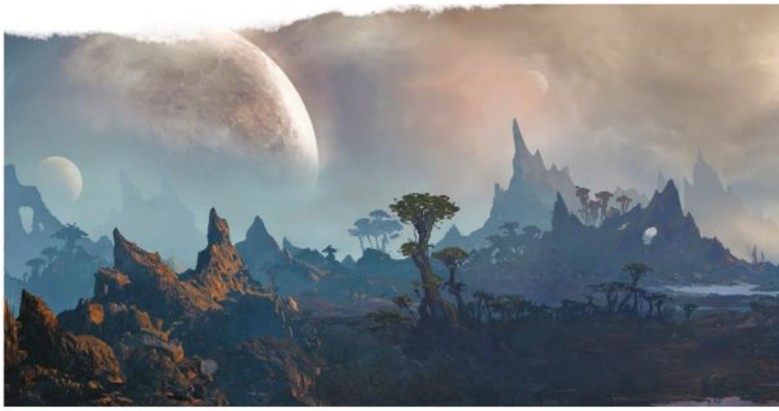
Roughly 50 years into Shear's colonization, however, new breeds of bigger and more powerful monsters begin appearing. As traveling to the distant planet takes years, the colonists are effectively stranded; their only hope is the hunters, who quickly find themselves in over their heads.

Turtle Rock wouldn't go into any more detail about why the monsters are there or where they came from, but like Left 4 Dead, the story isn't the point. "We're not a studio that focuses very heavily on a big, complicated story," Robb says. "We want the stories to be the sh-- you're talking about the next day after a long night of playing the game."

The rules of Hunt mode are straightforward. As the hunters, your job is to track down and kill the monster. The monster wins if it can incapacitate or kill all four hunters at the same time. Like in other multiplayer games, incapacitated players can be revived for a short time by their fellow teammates; dying initiates a dropship that returns the player to the game after two minutes. Any other players that die in the meantime are also returned on the same dropship, adding an element of strategy for when the monster makes an offensive stand.

Additionally, the monster can also win the game by completing a level-specific objective after reaching its third and final stage of evolution. On the forest level we played, the objective involves bringing down a shield generator on a mining facility and killing a number of civilians hiding on the premises.





ON THE HUNT

Our first foray into the game introduces us to the hunters. The four-player team is comprised of one member from each of the four classes. The classes are a mixture of new and traditional multiplayer archetypes, with each sporting a unique ability. Assault focuses on doing damage and comes with a personal shield that provides temporary invincibility. Medics are in charge of keeping their teammates alive, and feature an area-of-effect health burst. Support is designed to augment the abilities of the rest of the crew, and can temporarily cloak themselves and nearby allies. Finally, trappers help hunt down and contain the monster. They come with a mobile arena, which temporarily deploys a large spherical force field when placed on the ground.

Left 4 Dead did an excellent job of making players work together, but every character was functionally identical. Evolve's classes give each player a more defined role on the team, and accommodate different tactics. However, that's only the beginning of Evolve's strategic depth.

Each class in Evolve also has multiple characters to choose from, and while they all share the same basic class ability, the rest of their gear is unique. Turtle Rock shared the first tier of characters with us, which are designed to be familiar to fans of multiplayer games but still feature some clever twists.

Val is the first medic available in the game. In addition to the AoE health burst, Val comes equipped with a medgun gun that can slowly replenish a player's health from a distance and revive fallen players as well. Val also sports a tranquilizer gun, which highlights and slows the monster's movements when hit. On the offensive front, Val has an anti-materiel sniper rifle. Not only does this sniper rifle inflict damage, it paints a temporary bull's-eye on the point of impact; if another player hits the same spot, it causes twice the amount of damage. Usually medics take a backseat to other classes in first-person shooters, but Val's abilities make her a vital member of the team and are rewarding even if you're not dealing a ton of damage to the monster directly.

JUST SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

The unique abilities of Evolve's hunters and monsters provide incredible variety from one match to the next, but there's a larger picture to consider as well. Playing as different hunters unlocks upgradeable perks, one of which can be chosen at the beginning of a match. These perks are interchangeable between all of the hunters, and monsters have their own separate pool of perks as well. Additionally, special elite wildlife can be found during matches. Killing one of these animals and looting its carcass grants temporary and often game-changing bonuses to players, such as regenerating health and extra damage. Evolve also features a progression system for characters and items, but Turtle Rock wouldn't go into more detail at this time.

As the first assault member, Markov comes equipped with proximity mines and two high-powered weapons: An assault rifle for long-range attacks and a lightning rifle that deals out devastating damage in close-quarter encounters. Playing as Markov ensures you're always in the thick of the action, though his proximity mines are best used strategically for things like booby-trapping animal carcasses and keeping the monster out of easily defendable locations. We stuck close to Val when playing as Markov, and made liberal use of the assault class's invincibility shield whenever the cooldown timer reset.

The first support class character is a gruff-looking mechanic named Hank, who wields a repurposed laser cannon as his primary weapon and can call in an orbital barrage on a target location. The orbital barrage paints a red hologram on the ground a few seconds before it activates, which also makes it good for manipulating the monster's movement and scaring it away from incapacitated players. Hank also has a shield projector that provides a teammate with a brief few seconds of protection from a distance, similar to Val's healing gun. The support class's cloaking ability is indispensable when things go bad, allowing the player to slink away in silence and wait for the dropship to return their fallen teammates.

The last of the first-tier characters is Griffin, the trapper. Griffin has the most diverse gear of the group. In addition to the mobile arena, Griffin comes equipped with a harpoon gun that temporarily tethers him to the monster, impeding its forward movement. It also makes him a major target for an increasingly enraged foe, so sticking by Hank or Val is a good idea. Griffin packs a submachine gun as his primary weapon, and also has sound spikes that can be placed around the map to alert the squad to the monster's movement. The trapper is the most advanced class in Evolve, and takes a while to get the hang of. In the round we played as Griffin, our opponent quickly split up the team and wiped the floor with us.

Every hunter also comes equipped with a jetpack, which in addition to negating fall damage makes maneuvering around the massive environments a breeze. Double-tapping the jetpack button also performs a speedy dodge move.

Turtle Rock says that Evolve will ship with multiple tiers of hunters. Although we don't know the exact number of tiers or how they are accessed, players can mix and match characters as they see fit, as long as they have one member of each class. These additional hunters have their own character-specific gear as well. Turtle Rock shared an example of another trapper who has harpoon mines that activate when the monster approaches them. While not as immediate as Griffin's harpoon gun, these mines allow the trapper to stay a safe distance from the monster, and setting up multiple mines can further restrict its movement.

After getting used to the first group of hunters, it's hard to imagine what playing the game without some of their equipment would be like, which has us eager to see what abilities the other unrevealed characters have in store for players.

continued on page 46 >>

THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Each hunter in Evolve sports his or her own unique equipment and weapons. This gear has a huge impact on team strategy and the general flow of combat. The first tier of hunters features the following items, in addition to a third unique ability and a universal class ability.

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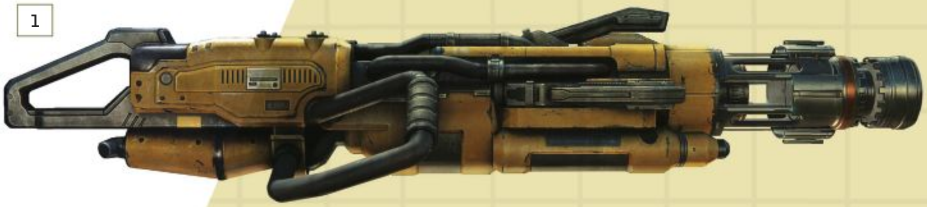

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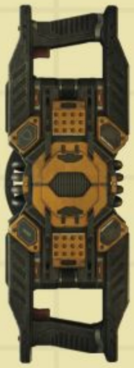

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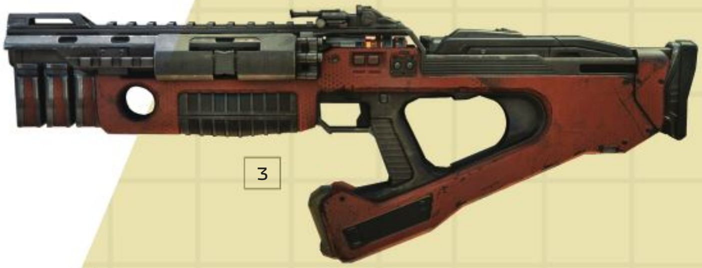

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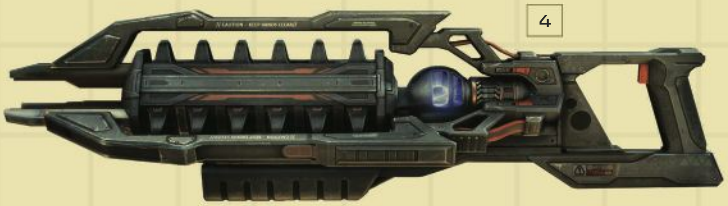

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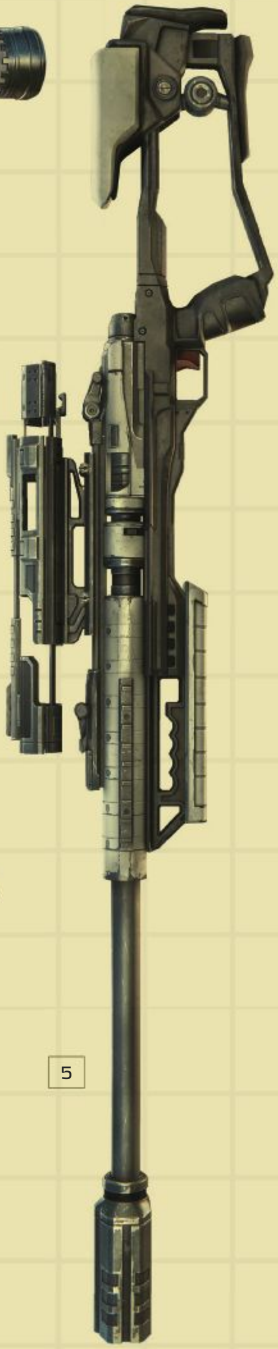

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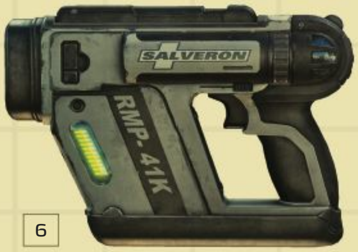

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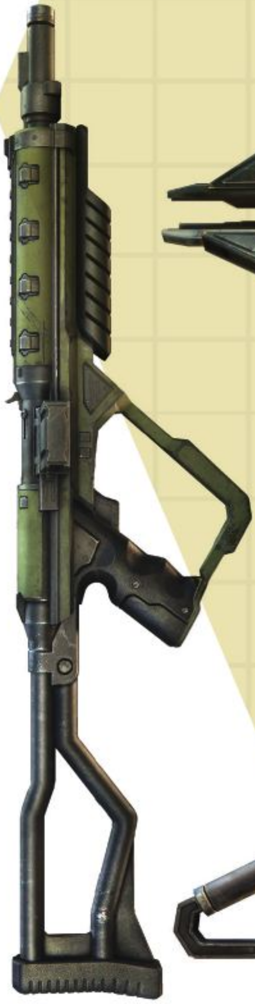

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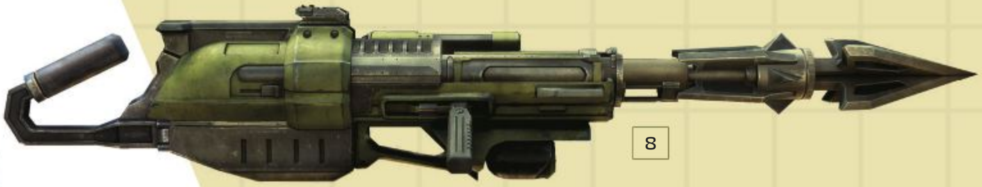


SUPPORT

1. LASER CANNON:
Despite being a support member, Hank's laser cannon packs a surprisingly powerful punch by emitting a constant beam of energy. Switching between offense and defense is a major component of the support class, making it an exciting class to play.

2. ELECTRONIC SHIELD:
The support class is designed to augment other squad members, and Hank's electronic shield does just that. Like Val's medgun, this item allows Hank to shield hunters from a distance. The charge only lasts a few seconds, so waiting for the precise moment of impact is essential.

ASSAULT

3. ASSAULT RIFLE:
As a member of the assault class, Markov comes with two high-powered weapons. The first is an assault rifle, which is good for doing damage from a distance.

4. LIGHTNING GUN:
Markov's second weapon is the lightning gun. This electricity-based firearm is capable of doing massive damage, but requires getting closer to your target.

MEDIC

5. ANTI-MATERIEL RIFLE:
Val's anti-materiel rifle provides a clever twist on the classic enemy weak spot seen in most boss battles. Hitting the monster dynamically paints a bull's-eye on the point of impact, awarding double damage for teammates who hit the same area for a short period of time.

6. MEDGUN:
As the medic, Val's medgun is capable of slowly replenishing a player's health from a distance. The medgun can also revive incapacitated hunters, making it a powerful tool when the monster is looming over a downed ally.

TRAPPER

7. SUBMACHINE GUN:
Like the other classes, being a trapper doesn't preclude a player from also dealing damage. Griffin's submachine gun is a good all-around weapon when it's time to switch to offense.

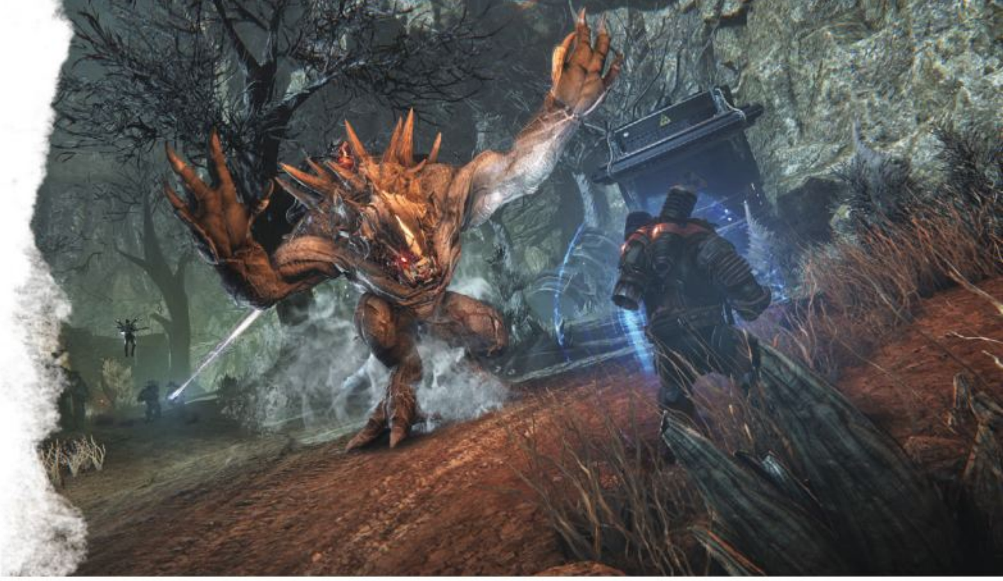
8. HARPOON GUN:
All trappers come equipped with a mobile arena to temporarily contain the monster in a confined location, but Griffin's harpoon gun takes things a step further. By shooting it in the back, Griffin can restrict the monster's forward movement, and prevent it from climbing up walls in the environment. You'll probably be the monster's next target, however, so make sure you have backup.

<< continued from page 44

THE MONSTER WITHIN

After trying out each of the four hunters, it was time to become the hunted. Unlike the humans, Goliath is controlled from a third-person perspective, giving players a better view of their environment. Even in his first stage of evolution, Goliath towers over his opponents and looks like a grotesque hybrid of ape, snake, and xenomorph. By the time Goliath reaches his third and final stage, he's over 30-feet tall and is covered in large spikes that protrude from his back. He's also a lot more powerful, so it's in the hunters' best interest to find and exterminate him as quickly as possible.

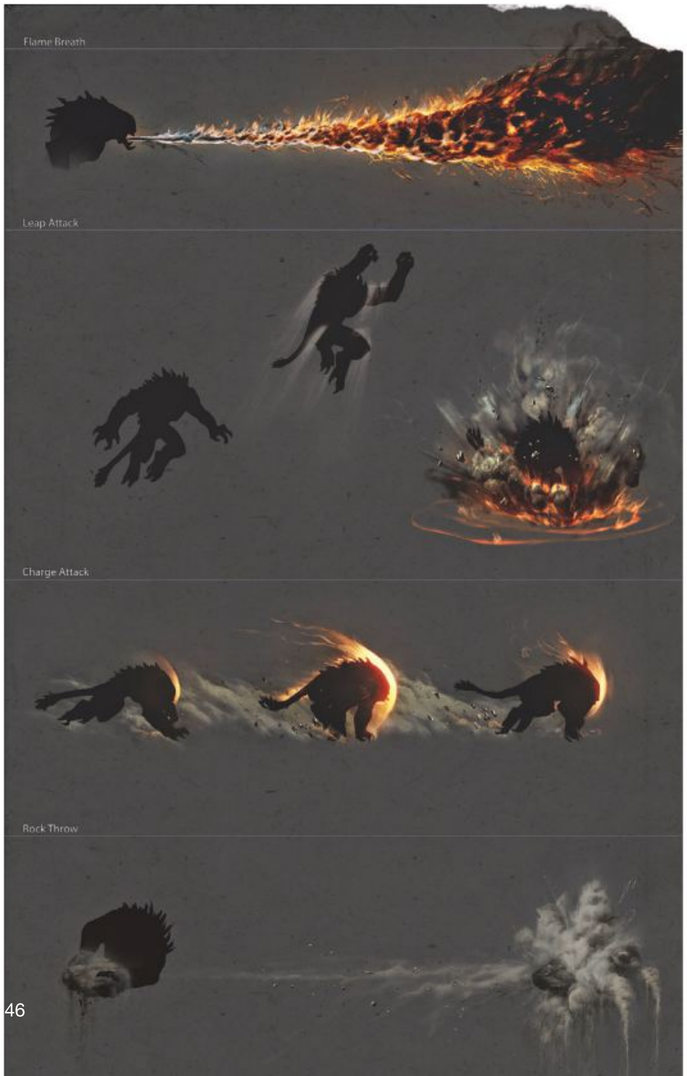
Goliath starts with a basic punch attack and can also leap long distances and climb up walls with ease. However, he also has four powerful special moves. These include the ability to hurl boulders at distant players similar to Left 4 Dead's tanks, a charge attack that knocks down and injures foes, a powerful leap attack that drops Goliath on a targeted area, and flame breath. Like the first tier of hunters, Goliath is designed to be relatable. "If you were going to be a monster in a game, what would you expect to do?" Ashton says. "Breathing fire sounds good, throwing rocks sounds good, jumping through the air and smashing stuff sounds good. So he's really the most straightforward – the brawler type of the group."

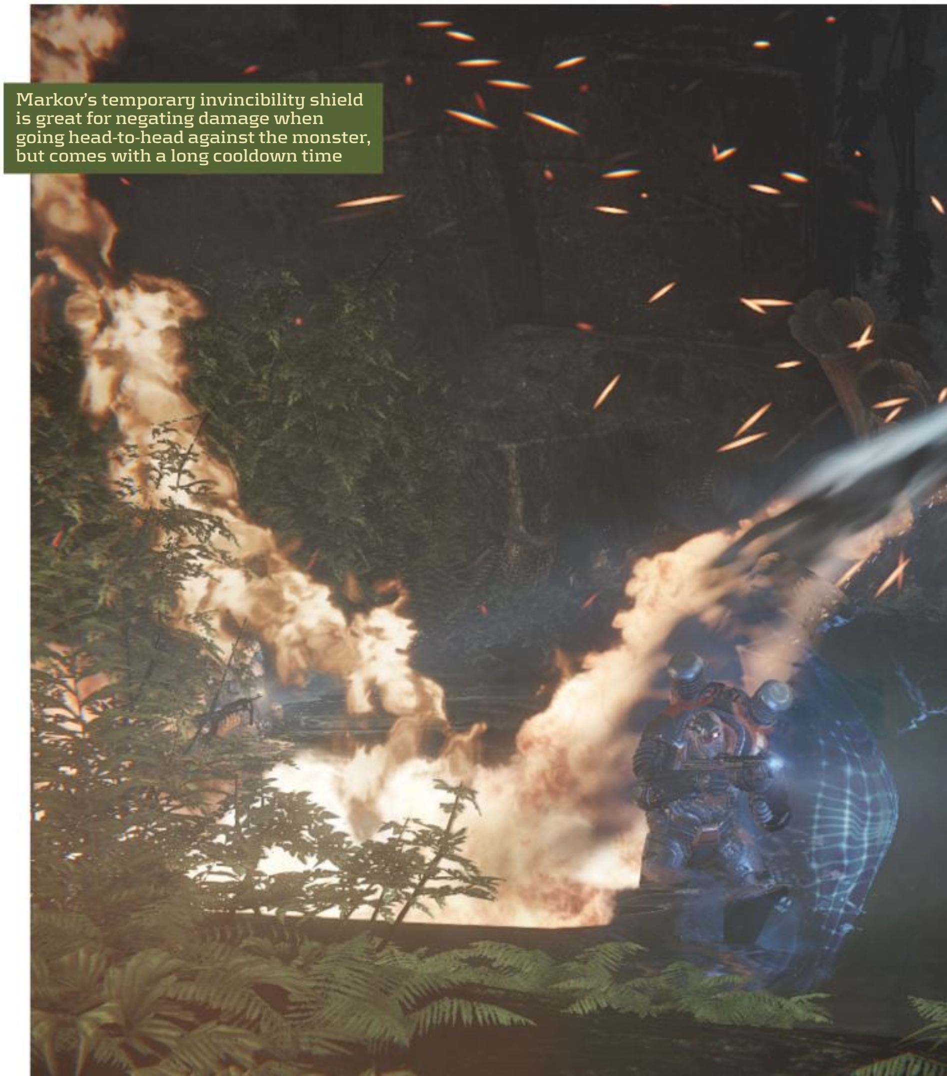


At the beginning of the match, the player controlling Goliath picks two of his special abilities, and can unlock the last two abilities at the second and third stages of evolution. The monster is always at its weakest at the beginning of the match, so the player is better off avoiding the hunters and trying to stage up.

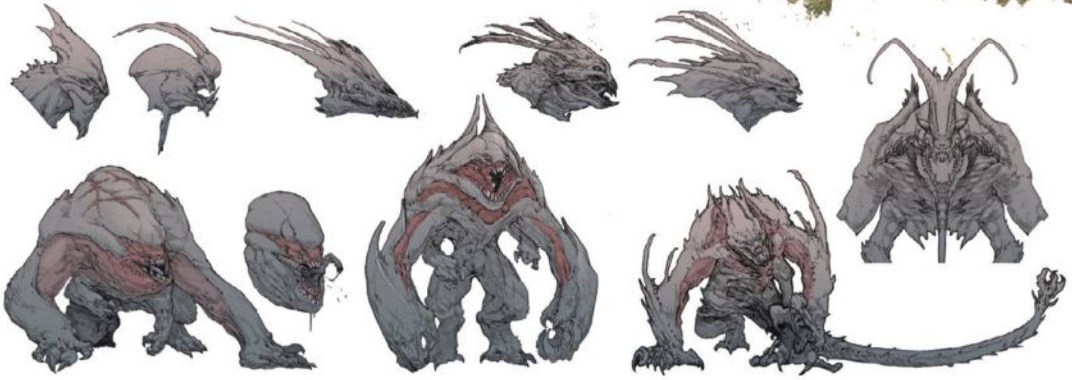
Luckily, the environment offers plenty of opportunities for a quick snack. A variety of animal species live in the wilderness, each exhibiting their own unique behavior (see "Into The Wild" sidebar). Some are even as large and aggressive as Goliath, but can be used to either team's advantage under the right circumstances. Each animal (or hunter, for that matter) that Goliath eats increases his armor and brings him closer to evolution. Initiating evolution causes the creature to enter a cocoon for a short period of time, during which he is particularly vulnerable to attacks. Once Goliath emerges, however, he is bigger, deals more damage, and has an increased health pool.

Starting a match as Goliath is nerve-wracking; despite being given a brief head start, many of your actions betray





Markov's temporary invincibility shield is great for negating damage when going head-to-head against the monster, but comes with a long cooldown time



your location. As you run through the environment, you leave behind glowing footprints that help the hunters track your location. Eating animals periodically causes buzzard-like Harpies to circle high overhead, and abilities like the leap attack make noise that can scare up flocks of Bat Rays or alert the hunters outright. A stealth mode negates these cues at the cost of greatly reduced speed, but it also enables new gameplay tactics, including a powerful sneak attack. "We had people that really wanted to stalk the hunters," Robb says. "Just like a tiger, you can sneak up and pounce on them when they're least expecting it." Like the leap attack of Left 4 Dead's hunters, pouncing on an enemy from sneak mode pins them to ground, requiring a teammate to free them.

When you're not lurking in the shadows, climbing up large structures in the environment and using Goliath's leap and charge abilities also helps keep you one step ahead of your pursuers. Survive long enough and the odds eventually shift in your favor. Reaching stage three is an invitation to stop running and make a final stand, and although victory is far from certain, the hunters will be facing an uphill battle. Having all four of Goliath's abilities at your disposal allows you to combo your attacks together to devastating effect, and finishing off the last remaining survivor is predictably satisfying. Conversely, getting caught by a foursome of hunters in stage one can be overwhelming, and often ends with you swatting at your attackers in a vain but entertaining frenzy.

Like the hunters, Goliath is just one of multiple monsters in Evolve, each of which has its own unique characteristics and set of special abilities.

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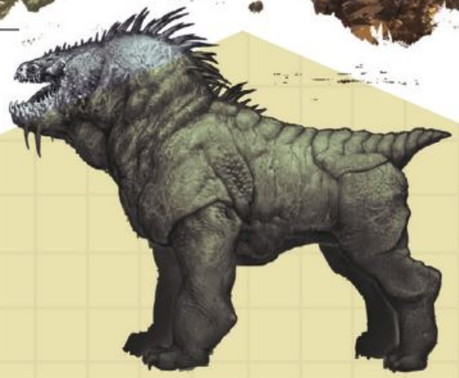


INTO THE WILD

Like Left 4 Dead, the environments of planet Shear do a good job of forcing hunters to stick together. However, Evolve's levels feature full-fledged wildlife simulations; each species of creature has its own distinct behavior, and interacts with other animals as well as players. Turtle Rock says that while there is some overlap, other environments feature their own unique wildlife. Here are just a few of the alien creatures we encountered in the forest environment.

SLOTHS:

Don't feel bad if you accidentally mistake your first Sloth for the player-controlled monster. These dinosaur-like creatures are larger than Goliath's stage-one form and are just as deadly. However, Sloths only attack players when they're provoked, making them a good ally if you can get the opposing team to accidentally hit them during the heat of battle.

TRAP JAWS:

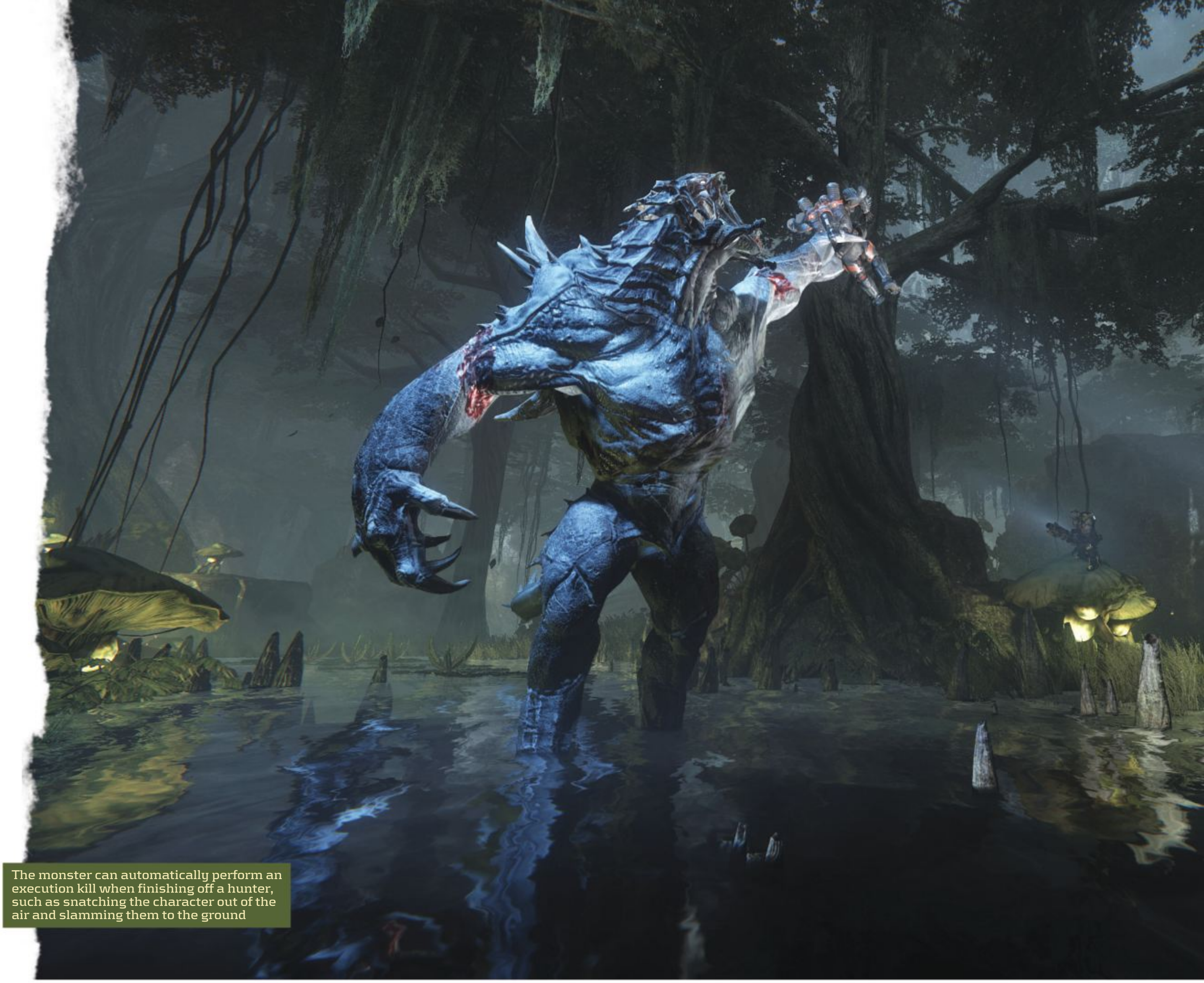
Pictured above, these massive dog-like creatures aren't too much of a threat solo, but run into a pack of them and you can quickly find yourself incapacitated. Trap Jaws are scavengers and will chase players and animals away from tasty carcasses. If you gun down a bunch of the local wildlife (or are feeding as the monster), be on the lookout for these aggressive beasts.

SPOTTERS:

Not every animal on planet Shear wants to eat you. Spotters are the extraterrestrial equivalent of a meerkat, and are constantly on the lookout for danger. This makes them particularly useful to hunters; when a spotter catches sight of the monster, the bladder on its neck expands and the creature emits a loud horn sound to alert its fellow brethren of the danger. These calls can also set off Griffin's sound spikes, making spotters a handy human ally even when they're out of earshot.

CARNIVOROUS PLANTS:

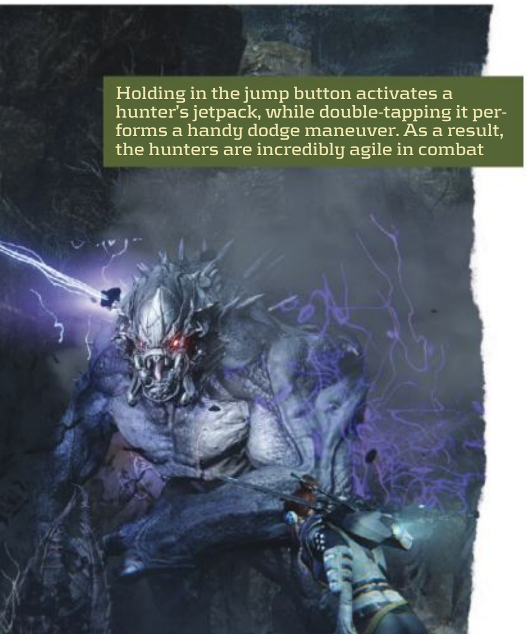
Like a massive Venus flytrap, these deadly plants devour anything foolish enough to step into their gaping maws. Once swallowed, ensnared hunters require a teammate to rescue them, or else they'll be slowly digested. These shame-inducing plants are easy enough to avoid once you know what they look like, which comes as little consolation when you accidentally stumble into their trap. Getting caught alone only adds to the embarrassment, so make sure to stick close to your fellow teammates.



The monster can automatically perform an execution kill when finishing off a hunter, such as snatching the character out of the air and slamming them to the ground

THE FINAL FRONTIER

While Turtle Rock wasn't ready to share its plans for post-launch DLC, the developer did confirm that it is supporting Evolve with additional content. Given the structure of the game and Turtle Rock's highly regarded DLC for the Left 4 Dead series, it's easy to get excited about the possibilities. Additional packs of hunters or monsters could easily expand the roster of playable characters, and offer more replayability without fracturing the online community. Considering Evolve is launching exclusively on next-gen systems and PCs, players could potentially be looking at a long road of support ahead of them.



Holding in the jump button activates a hunter's jetpack, while double-tapping it performs a handy dodge maneuver. As a result, the hunters are incredibly agile in combat

<< *continued from page 47*

THE MISSING LINK

What we played of Evolve makes up just a fraction of the experience that Turtle Rock aims to deliver. There are still more hunters and monsters to discover, each with their own unique items and abilities. New environments promise more wildlife species and alternate objectives. The other game modes also remain a complete mystery. In a game where all of the mechanics are interconnected, balancing everything will be a monumental task – to mention nothing of getting it up and running on Sony and Microsoft's new systems.

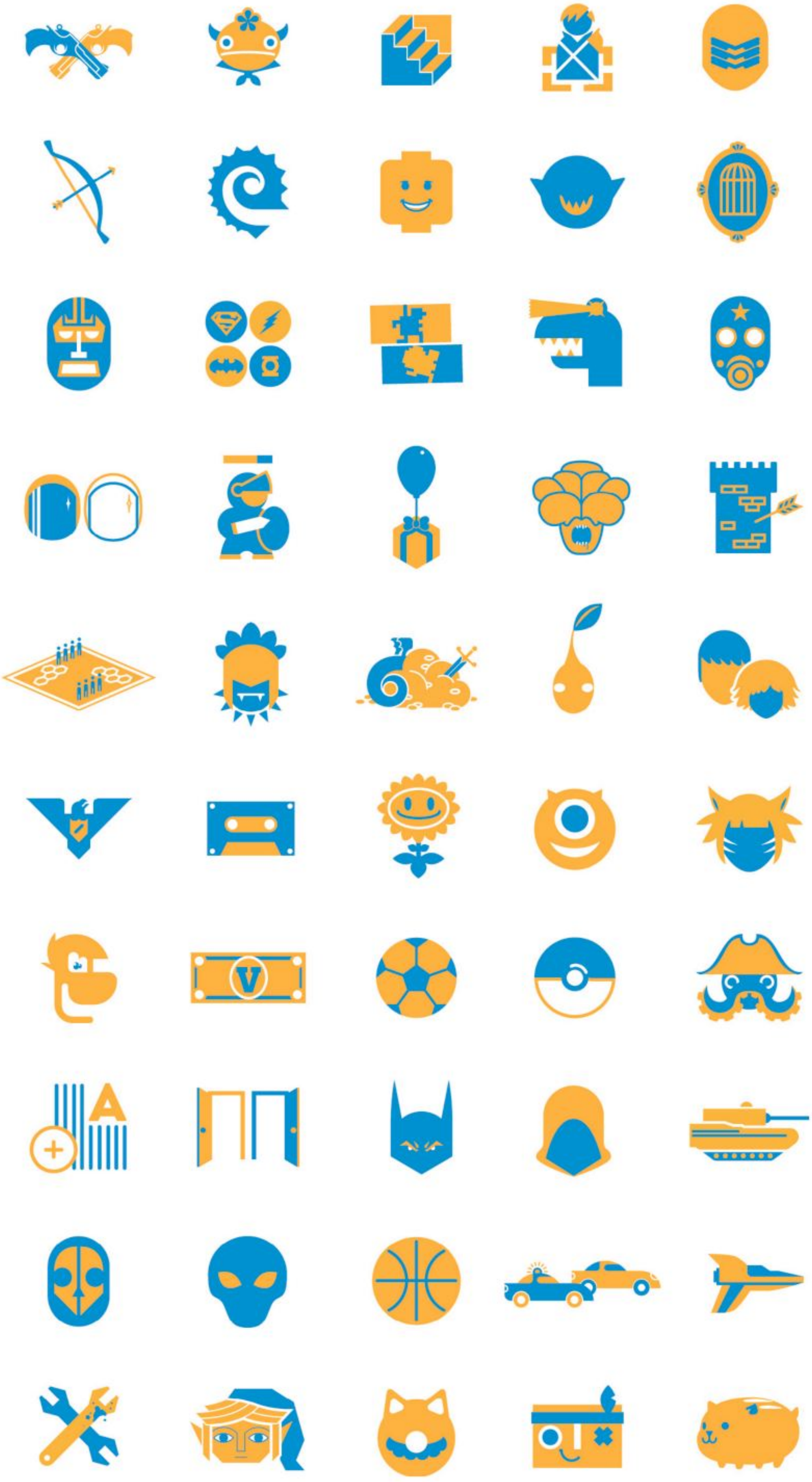
Given the obstacles the team at Turtle Rock has already overcome, however, we don't expect them to start failing now. If there's one thing the developer knows, it's how to make a compelling multiplayer experience. Based on our time with Evolve, that fact remains true.

Most of our match times hit a sweet spot of 10-15 minutes, and ran the gamut of possible outcomes. In one round, the player controlling Goliath managed to defeat the hunters while still in stage one, thanks to a little help from some aggressive wildlife. In another instance, our team of hunters barely squeaked out a victory against a stage-three Goliath that culminated in an intense final showdown. Most matches ended with the monster in stage two, when the two teams are most evenly balanced, and both sides won about 50 percent of the time during our hands-on time. Most importantly, we continued to discover new strategies and item combinations right up until it was time to give back the controller.

If Turtle Rock can continue iterating on the game's core formula in interesting ways, Evolve could deliver the kind of inventive and replayable multiplayer experience gamers have been hoping to see from next-gen titles. With a name like Evolve, what else would you expect? ◆

Head to gameinformer.com/evolve for a month of online bonus coverage, including developer interviews, a deeper look at the first four hunters, and extended hands-on impressions

top 50 Games of 2013



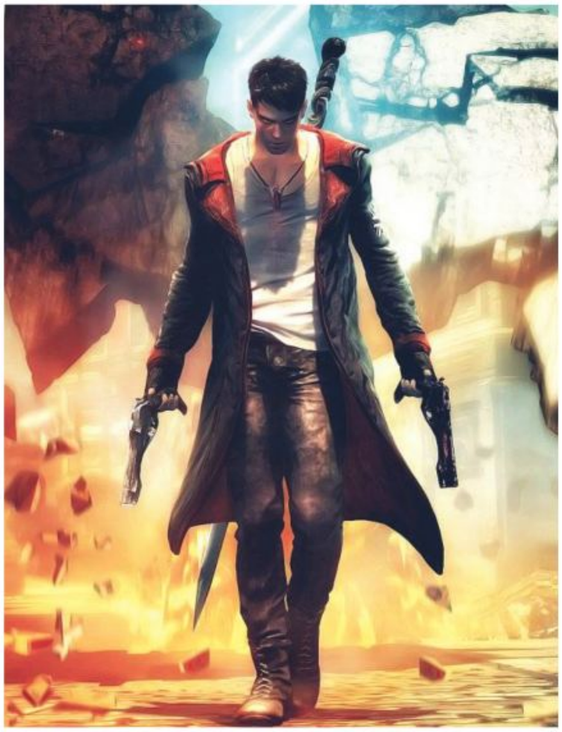
This was a transitional year in the world of video games. While change is a constant in the industry, this past fall saw the launch of two new consoles that ushered in a new generation of gaming.

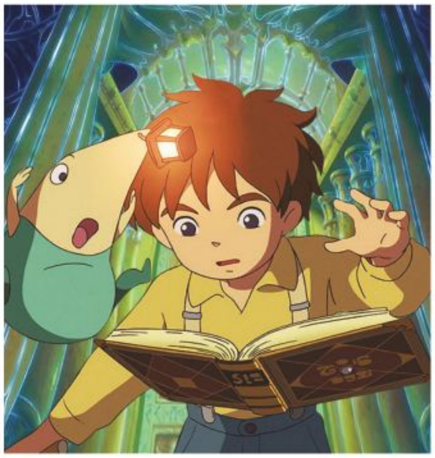
With so many of the big developers and publishers investing in next-gen technology and games that are either unannounced or far off on the horizon, 2013 was an interesting year. The triple-A scene was a mix of long-anticipated blockbusters like Grand Theft Auto V and BioShock Infinite and annual updates of some of this generation's big franchises. Amid these towering oaks, a host of interesting and experimental indie games bloomed, creating experiences unlike anything we've seen before. With five home consoles, the resurgent PC scene, two handhelds, and rapidly growing mobile platforms, one thing was certain: There were more good games this year than any one person could play. After much discussion, we distilled it all down to a list of the 50 games represent the best that 2013 had to offer.

Devil May Cry

JAN 15 **PS3, 360, PC**

Focusing on cool weapons, imaginative combos, and responsive controls, this reboot revitalizes Capcom's flagging franchise. Developer Ninja Theory stays true to the heart of the series, with stylish action as the centerpiece. Dante feels unstoppable with so many great moves in his repertoire, and the bending hellscape of Limbo gives you a variety of unique locations for slaying your demons.





Ni No Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch

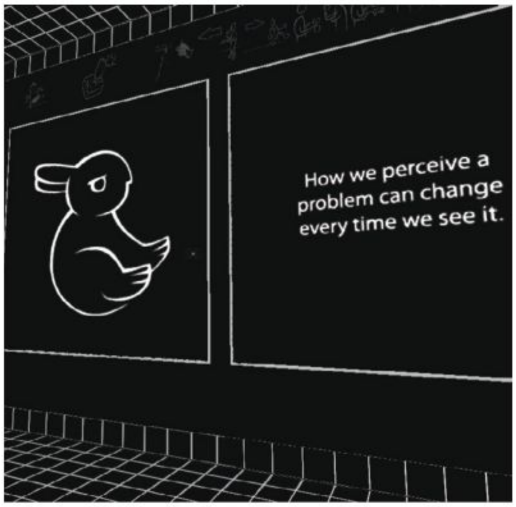
JAN 22 **PS3**

Both heartwarming and challenging, Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch plays off of the strengths of famed JRPG developer Level-5 and animation house Studio Ghibli. Channeling Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the story leaves it up to the player to determine if Oliver is really being transported to a fantasyland, or if he's using his imagination to block out the pain of losing his mother. Frantic battles and beautiful sights back this engaging tale.

Antichamber

JAN 31 **PC**

Indie games are known for taking creative risks, but Alexander Bruce's first-person puzzle game doesn't just defy standard gameplay conventions. It turns the laws of nature on their heads for a surreal and challenging journey that constantly defies your expectations. Antichamber deftly establishes a new set of rules for interacting with your surroundings one mind-bending puzzle at a time.



TOP 10 HEADLINES

1

THQ Bites The Dust

When THQ closed doors and sold off its most valuable franchises, it demonstrated the fragility of mid-tier game publishers. Make one or two bad decisions and you may not just set your company back a few years, you could kill it. At least some of the company's biggest properties, like WWE and Saints Row, were auctioned off to other publishers to find new life.

2

EA Discontinues NCAA Football

When Sam Keller and other former college athletes sued the NCAA and EA Sports over the use of their likeness, they probably didn't envision the death of college football games altogether. Unfortunately, that's precisely what happened after the NCAA jumped, EA settled with the group out of court, and individual colleges started questioning their participation in the annual series.

3

Sony Drops The Mic At E3

With Microsoft placing the Xbox One in a precarious position with its DRM policies and high price, Sony saw weakness and pounced. First, Sony announced the PS4 was $100 cheaper than Xbox One. The thundering applause of the E3 crowd signaled a clear frontrunner in the court of public opinion. Then, a hilarious video showed how easy sharing games would be on the PS4 – simply hand it to a friend.

4

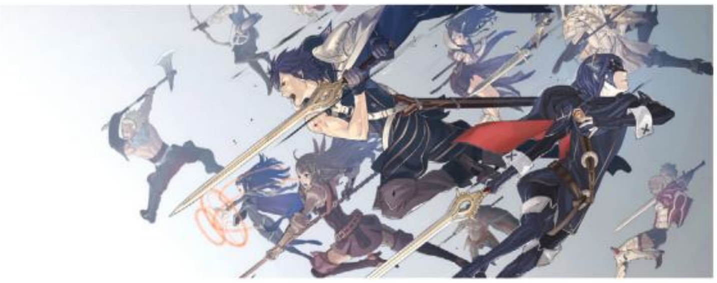
Microsoft Pulls An Xbox 180

Realizing its misguided policies could cost them the console war, Microsoft did the right thing and backed away from several questionable policies. It lifted the Xbox One ban on used games, no longer required players to keep Kinect plugged in, and abandoned the foolish idea of shipping the console without a headset.

5

LucasArts Passes On

After years of mismanagement and a decaying game lineup, LucasArts closed its development house in favor of pursuing licensing agreements with other publishers. One unfortunate victim in this move was the highly anticipated Star Wars 1313, which tantalized fans with the promise of being a bounty hunter in an open-world Coruscant.



Fire Emblem: Awakening

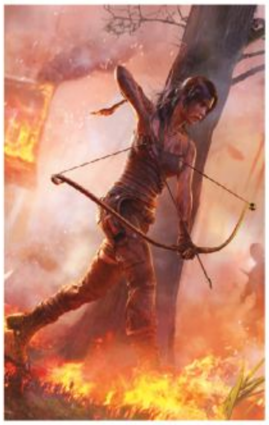
JAN 31 **3DS**

Fire Emblem: Awakening revitalizes the classic franchise by enhancing its steadfast formula. Still capturing the series' heart and soul with permadeath and hard-fought battles, Awakening also adds new lifeblood with a marriage system that provides bonuses and new combatants. With all the creativity, strategy, and tension packed into its grid-based gameplay, Awakening is a high point for handheld tactics.

Dead Space 3

FEB 5 **PS3, 360, PC**

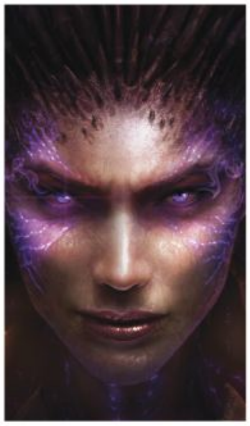
Every generation comes with its polarizing triple-A titles. Visceral's third Dead Space title caused waves among fans by shifting toward slightly faster paced combat and integrating an optional co-op mode. Some find scares in short supply, while others enjoy the intense fun of blasting through speedier necromorphs using custom weapons created with the deep crafting system.



Tomb Raider

MAR 5 **PS3, 360, PC**

The relaunch of Lara Croft's career took gamers by storm. By returning to the character's origin as the titular tomb raider, Crystal Dynamics adds a human element of survival and emotional growth to the established exploration vibe. Add solid shooting action and breathtaking animation and environment design, and this title becomes an example of what other franchise relaunches should aspire to.



StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm

MAR 12 **PC, MAC**

Wings of Liberty confirmed what many already knew: Blizzard remains the king of tightly balanced and thematically entertaining real-time strategy. The second installment, Heart of the Swarm, reaffirms that identity. The campaign adds a new RPG flair through increased focus on a single character and constant opportunities for unit customization. Meanwhile, the evolution of the multiplayer backend makes it easier than ever for players to make the transition into the world-class competitive scene.

6

EA In Disarray

Every big publisher has off years, but this one was especially bad for EA. John Riccitiello, its longstanding CEO, stepped down. Readers of *Consumerist* named it the worst company in America for the second year in a row. Two of its highest profile games, SimCity and Battlefield 4, both suffered from crippling server woes at launch. Amid those issues, EA is probably looking forward to a fresh start in 2014.

7

John Carmack Leaves id Software

The exceptionally brilliant John Carmack will always be thought of as the lynchpin to id Software. The mind behind the engines that gave birth to the first-person shooter pioneers Wolfenstein and Doom, Carmack is a video game legend. Here's hoping his legacy continues in his new position at the VR company Oculus.

8

Internet Mobs Teach Tough Lessons

Both Adam Orth and Phil Fish (shown) learned this year that the Internet is a cruel mistress. A Microsoft creative director, Orth kicked off the always-online controversy on Twitter by stating that people should just "deal with it." He later resigned. The always-controversial Fish canceled Fez II and walked away from game development to get away from the abuse he faced in the media and from gamers.

9

Square Blames Woes On Its Best Games

Rather than direct the blame for its meager profits at its grossly overpriced mobile games or the huge gaps in time between legitimate Final Fantasy sequels, Square chose to point the finger at its western studios for not meeting its ridiculous sales projections for Tomb Raider, Hitman, and Sleeping Dogs, all of which sold well. Stay classy, Square.

10

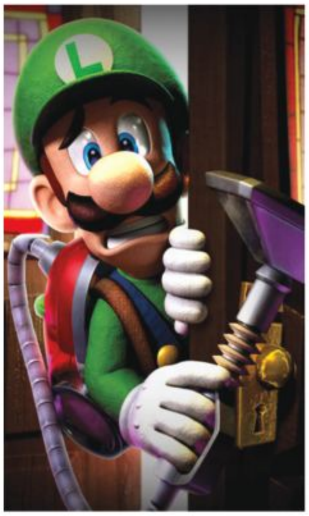
Valve Makes A Move For The Living Room

We have yet to see if Valve's vision of Steam Machines taking over living rooms comes to pass. However, the simple fact that this game industry juggernaut is getting ready to challenge Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo is a big deal. Valve's loyal fans and its innovation in the PC space have the potential to shake up the console market.

Lego City Undercover

MAR 18 **Wii U**

TT Fusion's Wii U exclusive trades co-op and a well-known license for a story-driven adventure set in the sprawling Lego City. Undercover adheres to the successful Lego game formula – smashing bricks and collecting studs – while delivering one of the funniest games of the year. Chase McCain may technically be the star, but his inept sidekick Frank Honey steals the show.



Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon

MAR 24 **3DS**

Luigi is often relegated to a supporting role, but 2013 was all about the Mario's green-clad brother. The Year of Luigi kicked off with a sequel to the GameCube launch title Luigi's Mansion. The 3DS installment improves the game in every way, featuring smart level design across a number of different mansions, clever puzzles, hidden Boos to bust, and Luigi in his most personable role ever. We love hearing the gangly ghostbuster saying, "I did it!"

TOP 10 CHARACTERS

1

Joel
The Last of Us

Joel is far from the morally squeaky-clean action hero we're used to, but his gruff demeanor covers up the wounded heart of a grieving father. Joel shouldn't be likeable, but his story is told with such care that – by the end – it's hard not to grieve with him.

2

Zachary Hale Comstock
BioShock Infinite

The leader of the ultranationalist party known as the Founders, Father Comstock helped create the floating city of Columbia. He spends most of the game antagonizing Booker and Elizabeth, but the revelation of his past makes you rethink your experience throughout the game.

3

Ellie
The Last of Us

Ellie is the counter to Joel: young, lively, and charming. Watching her wrestle with the world around her and the implications of her biologic immunity to a disease that nearly wiped out mankind makes you violently protective of her. And yet, Ellie is more than capable in her own right.

4

Trevor Philips
Grand Theft Auto V

Trevor isn't a hero; he's a sociopath. In a world as demented and exaggerated as GTA, Trevor still stands out as a lunatic. Still, he holds tightly to his own twisted code of conduct, and his rage issues and violent impulses make him a hilarious character to watch.

5

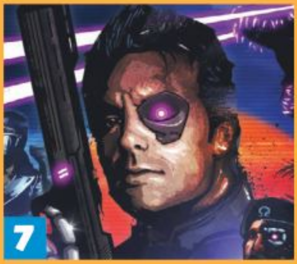
Elizabeth
BioShock Infinite

Elizabeth may be a young woman trapped in a tower, but she quickly breaks free from traditional storytelling tropes. Smart, animated, and insanely powerful, Elizabeth is an asset in combat, but it was her depth of character that really made us happy to have her by our side.

6

Lara Croft
Tomb Raider

Lara Croft has always been a sex symbol, but this year her journey was more interesting to look at than her form. At the beginning of the game, Lara apologizes for shooting a deer she needs to survive, but by the end of the game she becomes a grizzled warrior ready to take on the world.


7

Sgt. Rex "Power" Colt
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon

As a Mark IV Cyber-Commando, Rex Colt is part man and part machine, but he's nothing if not a complete hero. Modeled after the machismo-soaked '80s action heroes, Colt's constant sarcastic one-liners had us doubling over in laughter almost as often as he had his enemies doubling over in pain.

8

The Narrator
The Stanley Parable

The Narrator's proper British affectation makes him immediately likeable. Even though we never see this character's face, his explanation of Stanley's boring life proves to be a cleverly disguised commentary on the nature of game design and the relationship between game player and game maker.

9

Samantha Greenbriar
Gone Home

Players assume the role of Katie Greenbriar, but the real star of Gone Home is her sister, Sam. As you explore your family's empty home, you slowly piece together your sister's struggles with teenage angst and her heartbreaking journey of self-discovery.

10

Iota/Atoi
Tearaway

Sackboy is a hard act to follow, but Media Molecule's newest heroes are adorable in their own right. These papercraft messengers hold a special message within their envelope heads, and they need your help to deliver it.

BEST
Shooter

BioShock Infinite

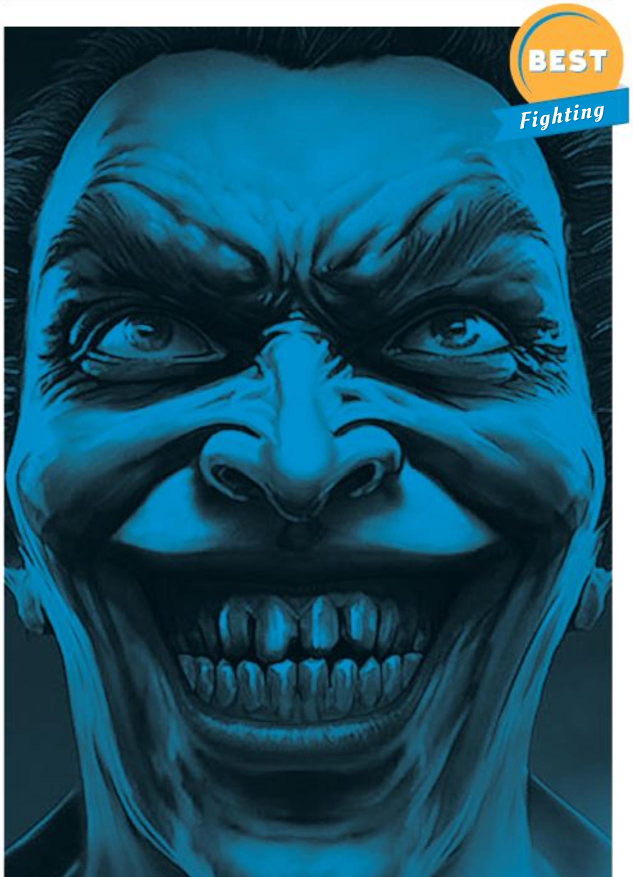
MAR 26 **PS3, 360, PC, MAC**

Leaving Rapture behind, BioShock Infinite ascends to the sky with the floating city of Columbia. Irrational Games' latest masterwork is more than just a new setting; interesting characters, complex themes, and entertaining combat work together to create an unforgettable experience. Just when you think you know what to expect, BioShock Infinite surprises you and keeps you guessing at every turn.

Guacamelee

APR 9 **PS3, VITA, PC**

Drinkbox Studios, makers of Mutant Blobs Attack, blends Mexican folklore with 2D Metroid-style exploration to create one of the most unique games around. The stunning cartoon art design blends with challenging-yet-fair platforming, satisfying and varied melee combos, and wacky, charismatic bosses. Plus, you can tackle it all with the help of a co-op buddy.



BEST
Fighting

Injustice: Gods Among Us

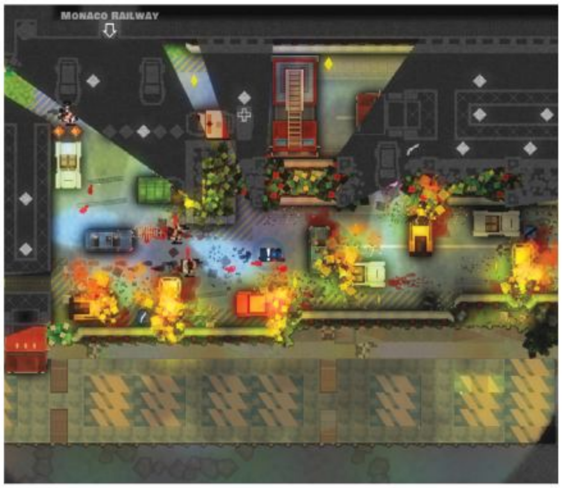
APR 16 **PS4, Wii U, PS3, 360, PC**

Superman knocks Batman into orbit. Doomsday sends Green Lantern into Earth's core. Injustice: Gods Among Us is a violent celebration of DC Comics' beloved heroes and villains. With Mortal Kombat's DNA powering this experience, controlling each character is a blast that speaks to both newcomers and fighting game vets. The game's greatest success: turning Aquaman into a cool/feared combatant.

Monaco: What's Yours is Mine

APR 24 **360, PC, MAC, LINUX**

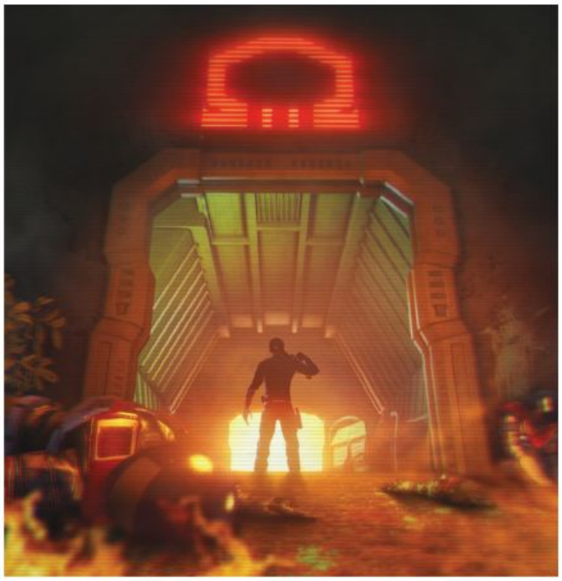
Hiding behind a veneer of blocky character art is one of the best stealth games in years. Monaco casts players as the classic team of thieves out for the big score, and keeps you along for the ride as events go south. Each of the many characters brings distinct abilities to the table, making every playthrough slightly different from the last. The way those characters work together in cooperative play makes Monaco a gem worth swiping.



Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon

MAY 1 **PS3, 360, PC**

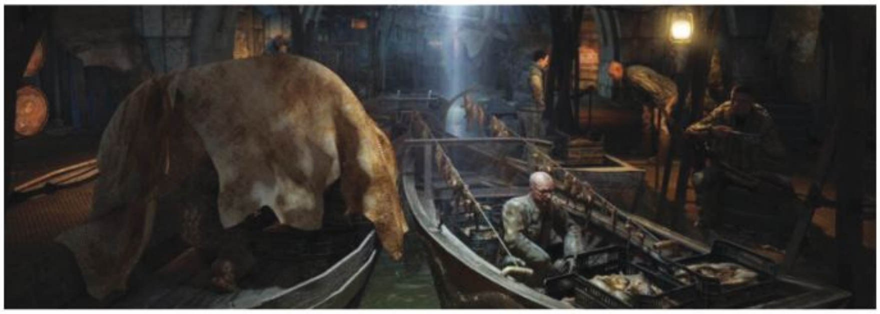
Ubisoft's standalone Far Cry 3 spin-off ditches the gritty story of the original in favor of a neon-drenched adventure inspired by 1980s sci-fi action flicks. Hero Rex "Power" Colt spits out corny one-liners that would make Schwarzenegger blush while blasting cyborgs with a quadruple-barreled flame shotgun. Blood Dragon's refreshing homage to the '80s is pure, goofy fun.



Metro: Last Light

MAY 14 **PS3, 360, PC, MAC, LINUX**

Metro: Last Light is a rarity in the modern-day shooter market; the game places the emphasis on single-player storytelling instead of multiplayer, and tightly wound, horror-influenced action and stealth over running and gunning. This survival tale in post-apocalyptic Russia builds on the strengths of Metro 2033 and fixes many of its interface and technical problems.



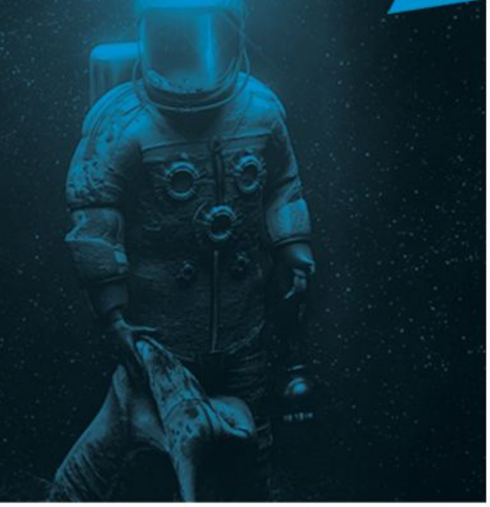
The Swapper

BEST Puzzle

MAY 30 **PC**

THE SWAPPER

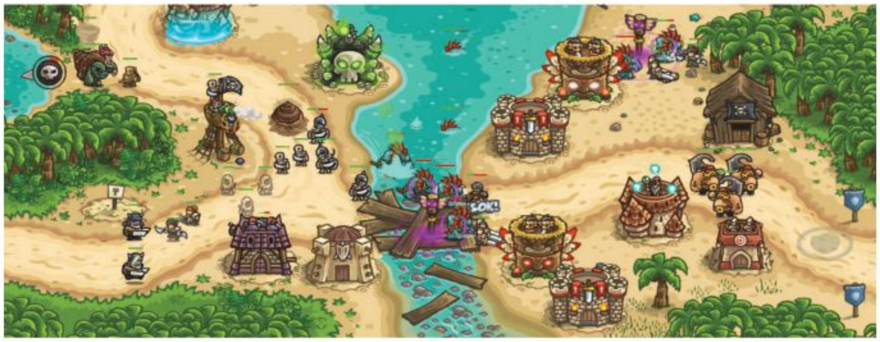
Some of this year's most devious challenges are found in Facepalm Games' indie puzzler. The concept is simple: Use a swapper gun to create four clones of yourself that can press switches and help you traverse a space station. This simple device opens the doors to dozens of difficult and rewarding puzzles that require plenty of brainpower to conquer.

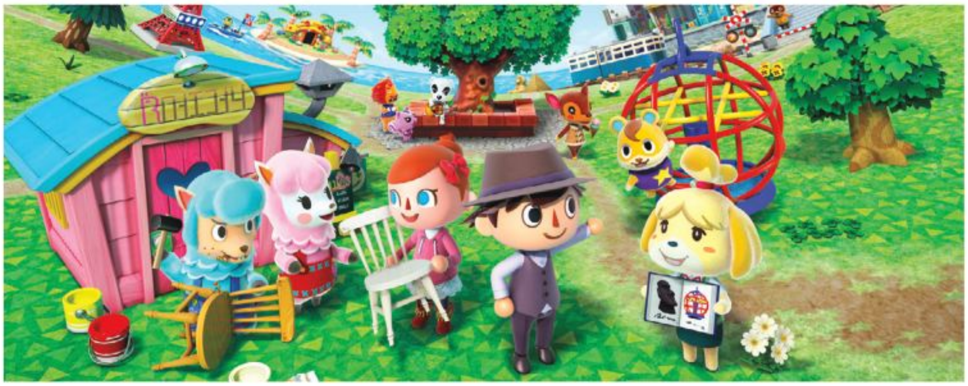


Kingdom Rush Frontiers

JUNE 6 **PC, MAC, iOS, ANDROID**

Tower defense fans have a lot to celebrate in this second installment of the Kingdom Rush series. Building on the excellent foundation of the original, Frontiers offers more interactive stages, strategically interesting unit types, and challenging enemies that force constant changes to your defensive tactics. If you wonder why some players love this genre so much, Frontiers makes a rock-solid case.



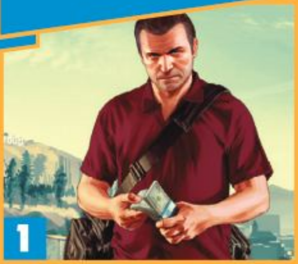


Animal Crossing: New Leaf

JUNE 9 **3DS**

We've inhabited Animal Crossing's peaceful world since the GameCube original, but we've never been more than residents. With New Leaf, Nintendo puts gamers behind the mayor's desk and gives them say over what their town becomes. Setting ordinances and choosing various public works projects is fun, and the game features plenty of the franchise's trademark charm.

TOP 10 SUCCESSES



1

Grand Theft Auto V Crushes Sales Records

Everyone knew GTA V would be a blockbuster. Not many expected it to generate $1 billion in sales in just three days. Rockstar Games proved its open-world franchise is still king of the consoles in the eyes of investors by outpacing the record-setting Call of Duty.

NINTENDO 3DS

2

The 3DS Proves Handhelds Aren't Dead

We lost count of how many times people have pontificated about the death of handhelds in the face of phone and tablet gaming. While it will never reach the eye-popping numbers of its predecessor, after a slow start the 3DS is steadily luring in gamers with the promise of playing alongside Mario, Link, and the Pokémon cast.

STAR WARS
BATTLEFRONT

3

EA Inks Star Wars Deals

Star Wars has a long legacy of critically acclaimed and best-selling video games. With the closure of LucasArts, that license was up for grabs, and EA smartly outbid the competition for the right to publish Star Wars games on PC, consoles, phones, and tablets. With a J.J. Abrams-driven film trilogy on the horizon, this could prove a shrewd move.

4

Video Game Toys Catch Fire

Video game publishers continued their invasion of toy store shelves with Skylanders Swap Force and Disney Infinity, both of which feature an action figure component that interacts with the video game. Given their intense popularity with kids, we don't expect them to leave store endcaps any time soon.

5

Next-Gen Starts Strong

Both Microsoft and Sony celebrated strong sales out of the gate with the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, respectively. Not only were gamers excited for the lineups at launch, but also for promising titles in the months to come. This is good news for an industry coming out of a previous console generation that lasted way too long.

6

Pro Gaming Keeps Growing

We've been hearing about the potential of professional gaming for years, but it's truly on the road to mainstream acceptance. The League of Legends world championship sold out the Staples Center (a.k.a. the home to the Los Angeles Lakers, Kings, and Clippers) in less than an hour, MLG set new attendance records, and former Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey joined the MLG board of directors.

7

Twitch Invades Consoles

Livestreaming has become a bigger and more popular facet of gaming culture. Thanks to Twitch, even more players can get in on the action. With its slick integration included at launch on the PS4 (and Xbox One functionality on the horizon), even someone with no livestreaming experience can get up and running in minutes. It was already popular, but Twitch is about to explode.

8

Gamers Give Back

Gamers continued to demonstrate their charity in 2013 with another record-breaking year. Extra Life raised a record $3.9 million (despite a DDOS attack), Child's Play pulled in $2.5 million, and the EA Origin Humble Bundle collected more than $10.5 million for good causes around the world. Lame sitcoms may depict gamers as awkward freeloaders who don't contribute to society, but that clearly doesn't hold true in reality.

9

Titanfall Wows Gamers

After being unceremoniously booted out of the Infinity Ward offices by Activision, the small band of developers who put Call of Duty on the map had to start over with no studio, no technology, and no direction. Respawn Entertainment rose out of the ashes with Titanfall, which won game of the show for both E3 and Gamescom and is arguably the hottest next-gen game on the horizon.

10

Oculus Rift Gains Steam

Virtual reality may not reach mainstream acceptance for several decades, but Oculus is doing its best to shorten that timeframe. The Rift HD prototype captured the imagination of gamers and developers alike, even turning famed id Software programmer John Carmack into an evangelist.

GAME OF THE YEAR
Editor's Pick 2013

BEST
PS3 Exclusive
Action

The Last of Us

JUNE 14 **PS3**

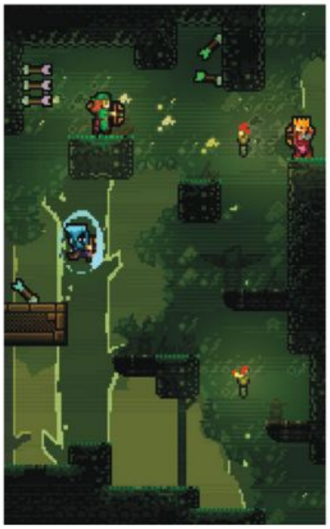
THE LAST OF US

No one can deliver a cinematic game experience like Naughty Dog. With The Last of Us, the studio turned away from the breezy adventures of Uncharted to create a harrowing story of love, survival, and betrayal set in a world devastated by plague and infested with twisted, mutated creatures that were once human. The tale of Joel, a grizzled smuggler, and Ellie, a young girl with a special gift, was the most emotional and resonant of 2013. The tense stealth and desperate combat was just as memorable. Topping it off is an ambivalent ending we're still debating, making The Last of Us our 2013 Game of the Year.

Towerfall

JUNE 25 **OUYA**

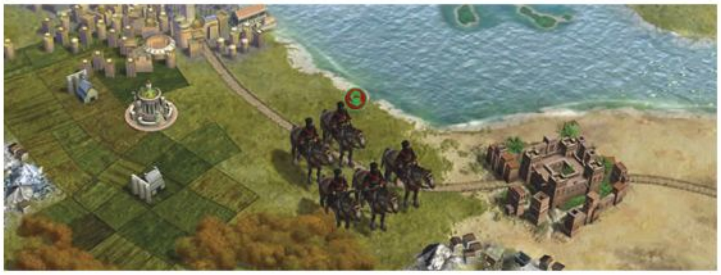
Ouya owners had slim pickings when the console launched this summer, but they gained access to an exclusive that happens to be one of the most riotous multiplayer experiences in years. Towerfall's one-shot kill competitive multiplayer plays like an even more chaotic and tense version of Super Smash Bros, and tons of variants allow for match customization. Few games can match the consistency of Towerfall's local multiplayer.



Civilization V: Brave New World

JULY 8 **PC, MAC**

The art of the expansion might be fading from memory, but Firaxis still remembers how to deliver transformative add-ons that overhaul the core experience. Brave New World, the second and most likely final major expansion for Civilization V, revamps one of the strategy gem's win conditions, overhauls tourism, and carries the sense of wonder through the late game with new archaeological features.



Dota 2

JULY 9 **PC, MAC, LINUX**

BEST

PC Exclusive

Competitive Multiplayer

Strategy

The MOBA space got crowded in 2013. A number of new genre entries were announced and released, making Dota 2's emergence from beta and continued rise to eSports dominance that much more impressive. The title isn't just fun to play; spectators have chipped in to increase the prize pool for major events. Those watching from home via Twitch or in the Dota 2 application have a chance to win loot drops, making viewership even more exciting.

Pikmin 3

AUG 4 **Wii U**

We didn't realize just how much we missed Nintendo's strategy-lite series until the third installment landed. The latest entry adds three pilots, which can be swapped between at the press of a button. That simple addition blows open the gates for sophisticated new puzzles and makes exploration even more satisfying. Don't be such a stranger, Pikmin!

TOP 10 DISAPPOINTMENTS

1

Nintendo Still Fails To State Case For Wii U

One year after release, Nintendo's new console is still stuck in neutral. You could cite waning third-party publisher support, a lack of consumer awareness, and inferior technology compared to other next-gen offerings – but the biggest hurdle facing the console is Nintendo's inability to make a convincing argument for why its GamePad controller is a game-changer.

2

Gearbox Blows Aliens: Colonial Marines

Given the pedigree of Gearbox, gamers had high expectations for Colonial Marines. We even put it on our cover back in 2008. Unfortunately for Aliens fans, the game was universally panned, with some disgruntled fans going so far to put up comparison videos that demonstrate the lack of visual fidelity in the final product compared to previous E3 demonstrations.

3

Disaster Strikes SimCity

EA essentially let down every SimCity fan on the planet with the series reboot. The crippling server issues at launch required that major features be removed for weeks just to make the game playable. Making matters worse, Maxis didn't include any way to play offline. For a game with a fanbase built through single-player simulation, this is a major failure.

4

Nintendo Still Can't Figure Out Online

Whether Nintendo likes it or not, a large contingency of gamers enjoy playing online with friends. Unfortunately, the confusing Wii U does little to service this constituency. With no universal friends list, no universal game chat, and annoying friend codes, Nintendo has dug a deep hole it may not be able to climb out of.

5

Android Systems Fail To Catch On

2013 would be remembered as the Year of Android except for one major problem: the Ouya, GameStick, Nvidia Shield, and Mad Catz M.O.J.O. all failed to translate open-platform hype into a solid consumer base. Shaking up the status quo is a noble pursuit, but you need to have ideas that can actually be executed...not just sound good in a Kickstarter pitch.

6

Server Problems Plague The Industry

Some server issues – like Rockstar dealing with an unprecedented level of demand when Grand Theft Auto Online launched – are understandable. Others, like DICE and Visual Concepts struggling to keep servers up and running when the Battlefield and NBA 2K series have had online components for decades, are less forgivable.

7

Broken Age, Broken Promise?

DoubleFine requested a mere $400,000 to develop Broken Age on Kickstarter, but received more than $3.34 million. But thanks to stretch goals and a widening scope of the project, in July DoubleFine revealed the project would be split into two parts, with the sales of the first helping fund the creation of the second. Delays happen, but this audible is a far cry from the original promise.

8

Still Worse With Kinect

Kinect is brilliant in concept, but even the second iteration of this device has a litany of problems. The camera mistook a plush giraffe stuffed animal for associate editor Kyle Hilliard, the voice commands rarely work on the first try, and third-party developers don't seem to be too keen on investing in a feature only available on one console.

YOU'RE FIRED

9

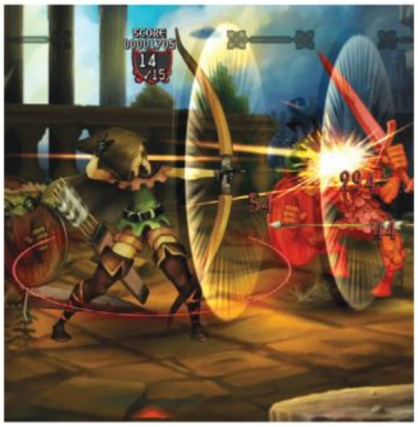
Another Year, Another Round Of Layoffs

EA cut 10 percent of its staff in 2013 to streamline its business, but it wasn't alone. Few companies were spared from the yearly bloodletting that plagues the video game industry, with 2K Marin, Irrational, Crystal Dynamics, Capcom, Square Enix, and several others all sending employees out the door with pink slips.

10

Overzealous Microtransactions

When it's implemented correctly, as in the Ultimate Team modes in EA Sports games, microtransactions are perfectly fine. The problem is too many companies use them unscrupulously, preventing the player from continuing in a game without spending a few extra dollars or allowing people to pay to win. This needs to stop.



Dragon's Crown

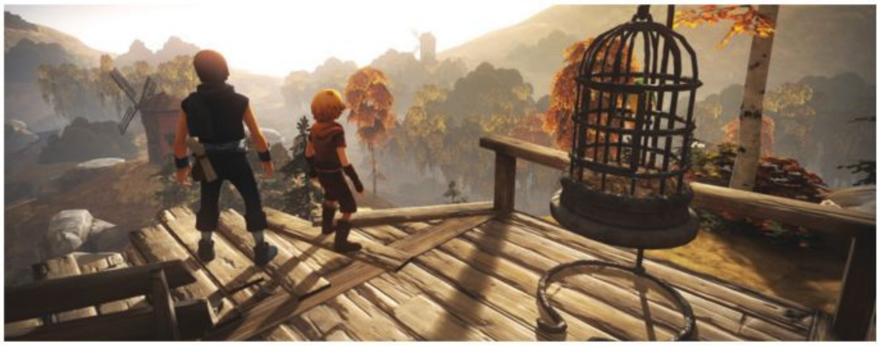
AUG 6 | **PS3, VITA**

The heyday of 2D brawlers may have come and gone, but Dragon's Crown proves the genre still has room to grow. With loot to grab, sidequests to complete, and alternate paths to explore, Dragon's Crown isn't simply about mashing on buttons to beat up bad guys. The game is accessible and addictive whether you're playing solo or in four-player co-op, and the gorgeous visuals fit the fantasy-themed action perfectly.

Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons

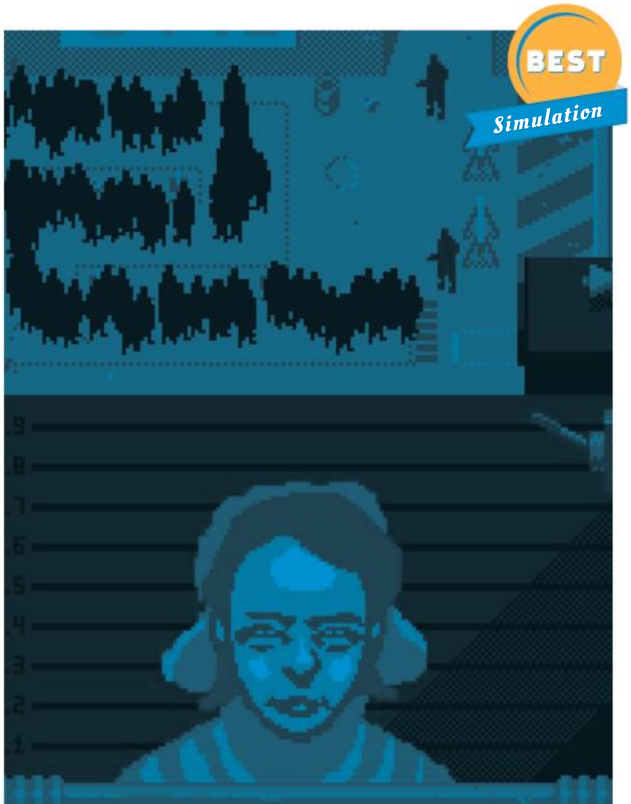
AUG 7 | **PS3, 360, PC**

Starbreeze Studios created Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons, but it couldn't be more different from the studio's violent Riddick series. This pastoral tale of brotherly love takes place in an eerie fantasy world you must guide the two brothers through, solving environmental puzzles and controlling both characters at the same time. Although the dialogue is delivered in a made-up language, the simple tale packs an emotional punch, making this one of the year's most memorable experiences.



BEST

Simulation



Papers, Please

AUG 8 | **PC, MAC**

Indie developer Lucas Pope's Papers, Please is an exercise in monotonous document inspection at a border checkpoint. It's not fun in the traditional sense, but becoming a better inspector, catching discrepancies in immigrants' paperwork, and stopping attempted terrorist attacks is oddly satisfying. It also offers a somber glimpse into the lives of customs officials and downtrodden travelers living and visiting a country suffering under a totalitarian regime.

TOP 10 MOMENTS

1

The Lighthouses

BioShock Infinite

Booker chases the mystery behind Elizabeth, Columbia, and Comstock for the majority of BioShock Infinite. The full explanation is complicated, but clearly and brilliantly conveyed using lighthouses as a visual aid. When you see them, the mind-blowing pieces all start falling into place.

2

The Final Exchange

The Last of Us

The problem with the zombie apocalypse is that it doesn't end neatly. No matter how much gamers want tidy conclusions, the closing scene of The Last of Us demonstrates that the world is a complex place with no easy answers – even if the questions are straightforward.

3

An Unexpected Encounter

The Last of Us

A far cry from the emotional intensity of the finale, Joel and Ellie share a much quieter moment in Salt Lake City. After spending most of their time interacting with zombies and psychopaths, the duo have a poignant encounter with an animal amid the desolation.

4

The Paleto Score

Grand Theft Auto V

Trevor, Michael, and Franklin are surrounded by cops after a bank heist…and things only get worse from there. Donning armored suits, the trio fights against a full military response to their robbery – dodging tanks and shooting down choppers – only to narrowly escape by train.

5

Hidden Strength

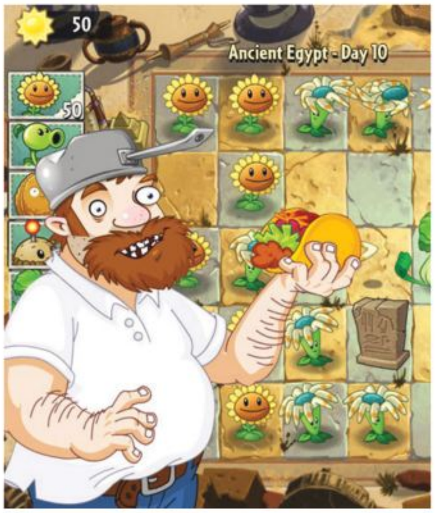
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons

The big brother does most of the heavy lifting in this game, with his younger sibling looking to him for protection. However, in an inspiring moment late in the game, the little brother discovers that he is capable of more than he (or players) ever suspected.

Gone Home

AUG 15 **PC, MAC, LINUX**

What do our possessions truly say about us? Gone Home answers that question as you explore a house searching for clues about a family's whereabouts. Few interactive experiences make you stop to take the story in, but that's Gone Home's modus operandi. The Fullbright Company's experimental project is one of the most unique experiences this year, taking interactive storytelling to a different level.



Plants vs. Zombies 2

AUG 15 **iOS, ANDROID**

Fans waited a long time for the sequel to PopCap's adorable tower defense-like strategy title, but it was worthwhile. A collection of new seedlings has you bopping off zombie heads as you travel through time, and PopCap varies the strategic challenge by altering the maps and zombie behaviors throughout your journey. If you own a mobile device, this is a must-play.

Disney Infinity

AUG 18 **Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii**

Disney Infinity succeeds by delivering new adventures for several of Disney's biggest franchises, and using the iconic characters and worlds as the building blocks for players to create their own adventures. Much like LittleBigPlanet and Minecraft before it, building detailed worlds and contraptions in Infinity is easy and fun. Within minutes, a player can forge a racetrack that sees Buzz Lightyear racing in Cinderella's carriage around Scrooge McDuck's vault.

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn

BEST mmo

AUG 17 **PS3, PC**

When the first incarnation of Final Fantasy XIV released, it was a disaster. Realm Reborn is the game birthed from the wreckage – redesigned and retooled to create an infinitely better MMO. With an addictive job system, lots of nods to the series' history, and plenty of cool rewards at regular intervals, Realm Reborn is the best way for Final Fantasy fans to get their fix.

6

Mariachi Madness

Rayman Legends

Rayman Legends' auto-scrolling musical levels combine classic platforming with elements of rhythm games. They're all fun, but this one is impossible to play without a giant grin…mainly due to the hilarious mariachi version of "Eye of the Tiger" that guides the action.

7

A Striking Finale

Tearaway

Platformers can offer some great gameplay, but they rarely deliver an emotional punch. Media Molecule's Tearaway breaks the rules in many ways – not least in its sweet, affecting conclusion. It puts your journey through the game in an inventive new context.

8

Battle Dragon

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon

The over-the-top '80s sensibilities in Blood Dragon are ridiculous, exemplified by the amazing ending sequence. That's when hero Rex Colt steals a robotic dragon from a platform that looks like a Styx concert stage, then goes on a laser-filled rampage.

9

Sailing and Shanties

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

Black Flag is full of action and intrigue, but the most memorable moments are those you spend between your destinations. Listening to your crew bellow sea shanties as the Jackdaw cuts across the waves is entertaining, and it cements the pirate atmosphere perfectly.

10

Returning to Earth

Lego City Undercover

Who says Lego games can't have great setpiece moments? Wearing the iconic Lego space suit (complete with jetpack), Chase McCain flys through space, dodges debris, and reenters Earth's atmosphere – all accompanied by a rousing and triumphant score.

Rayman Legends

SEP 3 **Wii U, PS3, 360, VITA**

Rayman's colorful cast has always had charm in spades, but Legends is the team's best platforming adventure to date. Stellar level design reaches past expectations, with everything from underwater stealth missions to mariachi-themed musical auto-scrolling stages. New online challenges keep the game fresh over time, and remastered levels from Rayman Origins add value. Few platformers are as infectiously fun and clever.

Grand Theft Auto V

SEP 17 **PS3, 360**

How do you possibly meet the ridiculous fan expectations for one of the biggest franchises in video games? For Rockstar Games, it chose to go big or go home. With three playable protagonists, dramatically revamped driving and shooting mechanics, involving heist missions, and the most fully realized open world we've ever experienced, Grand Theft Auto V answers the call and then some. Add an ambitious online mode that promises to evolve over time, and you have a title that earned serious consideration for game of the year.

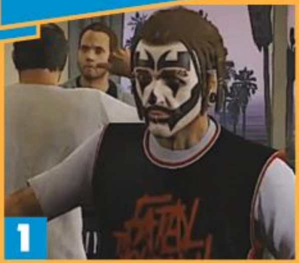
FIFA 14

BEST *Sports*

SEP 24 **PS4, XBOX ONE, PS3, 360, PC**

FIFA 14 creates a fervor the world over, and not just because the world loves soccer. FIFA 14 represents the best of the series so far with refined gameplay (especially for shots) and expanded career options like global transfer scouting that gets closer to the real-life game. Furthermore, the online suite is the best in sports games.

TOP 10 DORKS

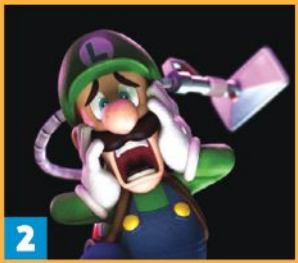


1

Wade

Grand Theft Auto V

Trevor's posse of spineless, wannabe gangsters is uniformly pathetic, but Wade takes the prize. He enters the game wearing Juggalo facepaint so you know something is wrong out of the gate. Making matters worse, the lackey sounds like he's struggling to speak with a botched back alley tongue piercing.



2

Luigi

Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon/ Mario & Luigi: Dream Team

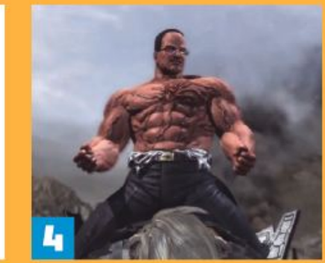
Nintendo declared 2013 the "Year of Luigi." This year was finally the green plumber's chance to step out of his brother's shadow. Despite Nintendo's official backing, Luigi spent the whole year quivering in haunted houses and sleeping through a 60-hour adventure. This was your shot Luigi, and you blew it.

3

Frank Honey

Lego City Undercover

No hard-as-nails detective is complete without his bumbling sidekick. Frank Honey is protagonist Chase McCain's oblivious buddy, constantly calling computers "compupers" and generally mucking up undercover work. Honey is the incompetent embodiment of TT Games' silly sense of humor.

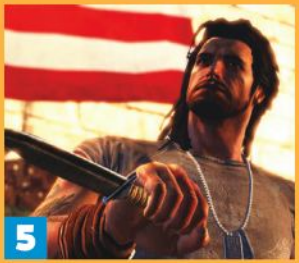


4

Senator Armstrong

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

Raiden's final rival in Metal Gear Rising is a 'roided up legislator. After delivering a rant equal parts pro wrestler promo and redneck soapbox proclamation, the suited presidential candidate tears off his shirt and hulks up with nanomachines. Armstrong then proceeds to battle the cyborg ninja wearing tight dress pants and nice shoes.



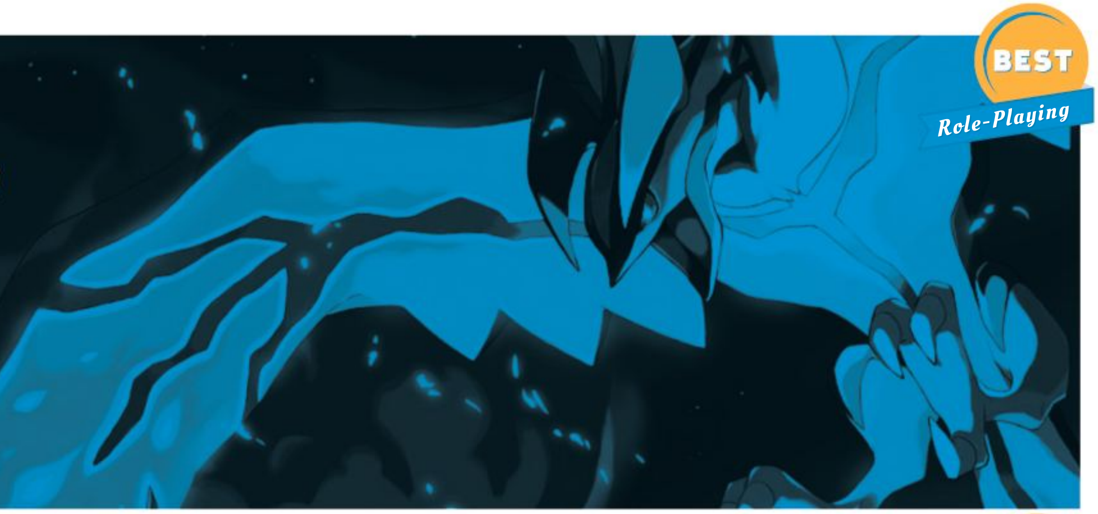
5

Jake Conway

Ride to Hell: Retribution

The dubious biker gang hero of Eutechnyx's awful action game looks like a deflated version of Brutal Legend's Eddie Riggs with giant hands. By some freak accident, Jake finds himself in the throes of passion with multiple interested ladies. Poor Jake must've skipped middle school health class, because he clearly doesn't understand disrobing is a key element of having sex.

BEST
Role-Playing



Pokémon X & Y

OCT 12 **3DS**

Pokémon has a rabid fanbase, but over time the series had become complacent with its successful model. Pokémon X & Y offers the most drastic and worthwhile changes in years. With a 3D world, fully modeled 3D monsters, a new type, and Nintendo's best use of online in its history, Pokémon X & Y provides an experience welcoming to long-term fans and newcomers alike.

Skylanders: Swap Force

OCT 13 **PS4, XBOX ONE, Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii**

Skylanders might be the stuff of nightmares for parents' wallets, but the series continues to deliver great gameplay for gamers young and old. This year's conceit is the ability to mix and match 16 of the 56 new figures (all previous toys work perfectly, though). Vicarious Visions added new features (new hidden areas, minigames, and the addition of a jump for every character) to a well-crafted story that ties together accessible action/RPG gameplay.

BEST
Mobile Exclusive

Device 6

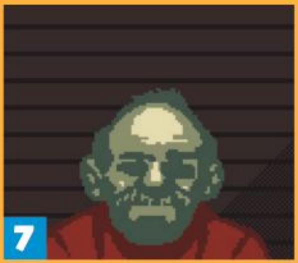
OCT 17 **iOS**

Distill a graphic adventure to its essence, and you have something that looks a lot like Device 6. As you unravel the mystery of how and why you ended up on a strange island, the text twists and turns along with the story. Simogo piles on impressively clever puzzles that require attentive reading of both the words and the stark environments.

You

Tearaway

Some mornings you just want to play a little Vita in bed before cleaning up and facing the world. That's when Tearaway activates the front-facing camera and pops your sorry mug on the game's sun. We understand the sentiment, Media Molecule, but at least give us a chance to shower before you zap us slobs into your beautiful games.



Jorji

Papers, Please

Checking official travel documents in Arstotzka is tedious work. Then a short, old man named Jorji walks in and tosses down a "pre-approved" passport that looks like it was cobbled together with crayon and construction paper. Good effort, Jorji. Keep trying.

Dr. James Whitman

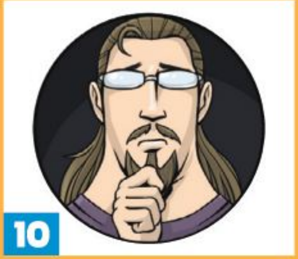
Tomb Raider

Whitman is an archeologist more concerned with making a name for himself and winning awards than doing actual science. He phenomenally blunders Lara's entire expedition by demonstrating his lacking skills in gunplay, loyalty, and basic Japanese.

Olivier Garneau

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

Abstergo Entertainment's chief creative officer doesn't make the best first impression. He curls his fingers like a hook and makes an awful pirate impression after learning the new hire is working on the Edward Kenway project. He's also one of those goobers that dismisses you by talking into his Bluetooth headset.

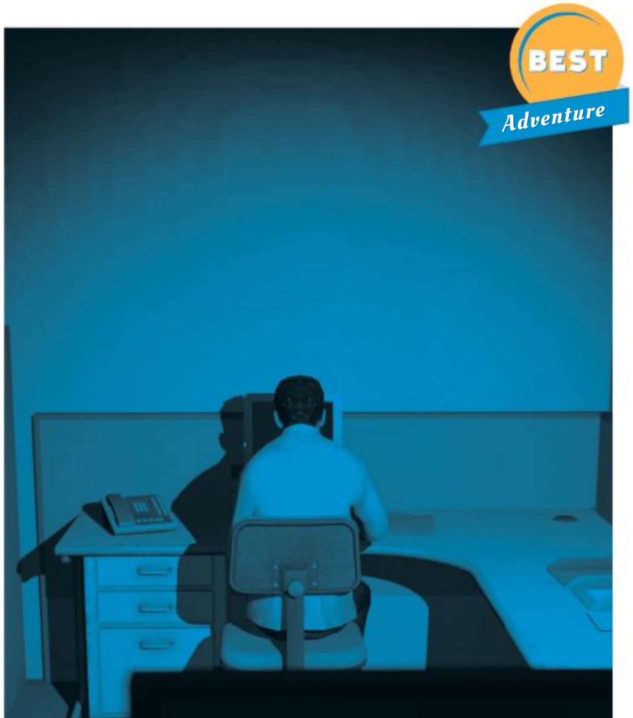


Melvin

Card Hunter

Pretentious nerds are the worst. Melvin, your friend's older brother, is quick to offer condescending jabs criticizing your Card Hunter campaign. The snarky alpha dork even molds an overpowered wizard named Melvelous the Magnificent into his own campaign.

BEST
Adventure



The Stanley Parable

OCT 17 | **PC, MAC**

If most of what you've read about this indie title is vague in nature, there's a reason for it. Trust what you read, as the less you know going into this fascinating experiment, the better off you are. Its unique narrative remains fascinating and humorous as it picks apart the most basic of game design decisions.

Batman: Arkham Origins

OCT 25 | **Wii U, PS3, 360**

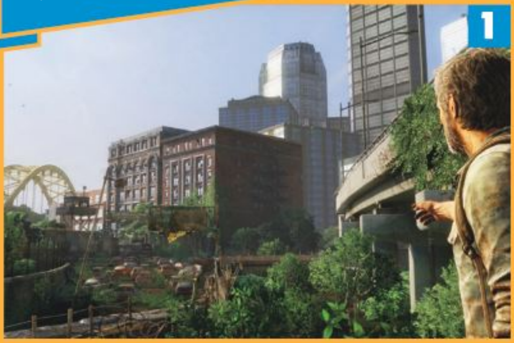
The Caped Crusader's first encounter with the Joker is the backbone of this entertaining prequel story. New developer Warner Bros. Montreal does a fantastic job of following Rocksteady's lead, offering the same great gameplay from Arkham City, while fleshing out the series' lore. Fan service is piled up high through the numerous villain encounters, and increased emphasis on crime solving brings you deeper into the mind of the Bat.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

OCT 29 | **PS4, XBOX ONE, Wii U, PS3, 360, PC**

The battle between the Assassins and Templar hits the high seas in this departure from series tradition. Edward Kenway (grandfather to Connor from AC III) is a pirate with more loyalty to gold than lofty ideals, and players pursue it in a vast open world. Whether you want to terrorize merchant ships, hunt treasure, or explore all corners of the map, your impulses are your guide in this freeform adventure.

TOP 10 DEVELOPERS



1 Naughty Dog

Not content to rest on its accomplishments with the Uncharted series, Naughty Dog delivered its most daring, emotional game to date. The Last of Us gripped nearly everyone who played it, and provided excellent gameplay along with an ending that felt like a punch to the gut.

2 Rockstar North

Facing perhaps more pressure than any game developer has ever faced, Rockstar North once again defied expectations with the latest in the Grand Theft Auto series. GTA V is an insanely large and deep experience, featuring more polished gameplay mechanics than any previous entry.

3 Nintendo

The Wii U might be struggling, but Nintendo once again proved its chops as a developer. Sticking to names and faces that have stood the test of time, Nintendo created a diverse slate of amazing games in its familiar franchises like Mario, Zelda, and Pikmin.

4 Irrational

Matching the original BioShock's Rapture was no easy task, but in the floating city of Columbia, Irrational did just that. The game expanded the BioShock universe to mind-bending effect, turning the saga of Booker and Elizabeth into something that shook the foundations of Irrational's universe.

5 Firaxis

Civilization V: Brave New World and XCOM: Enemy Within might be classified as "expansions," but these experiences offer more than most games on the market today. Both are examples of Firaxis' long-standing commitment to quality and craftsmanship.

6 Crystal Dynamics

Crystal Dynamics didn't just revitalize Tomb Raider; it created the best game in the series' long history. This tense tale of survival is different in tone than past games, offering deeper gameplay and a more nuanced take on the Lara Croft character.

7 TT Games

TT Games' Lego games are so ingratiating it's easy to forget how difficult it is to sustain the level of consistency the studio maintains. This year, it did everything right, creating one of its best licensed games Lego Marvel Super Heroes and flexing its creative chops with Lego City Undercover.

8 Starbreeze Studios

Known for the hyper-violent Riddick and Darkness games, Starbreeze made a brilliant left turn with the meditative action/puzzle game Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons. Play through to the end, and you'll see why it's an indelible experience. Starbreeze's Overkill Software division also made the frantic co-op shooter Payday 2.

9 Valve

Despite competition from Riot's massive League of Legends, Valve's long-awaited MOBA Dota 2 finally came out of beta this year, and proved to be worth the wait. It's been popular among millions of amateurs, and a new staple of the competitive eSports scene.

10 Media Molecule

Following up its LittleBigPlanet series, Media Molecule created the magical Tearaway, a Vita-exclusive platformer in which the player inhabits a world made entirely of paper. It's a beautiful game that uses the Vita to its fullest extent.

Battlefield 4

OCT 29 **PS4, XBOX ONE, PS3, 360, PC**

Were it not for extreme server difficulties that marred the gameplay experience for the many weeks following the launch of Battlefield 4, DICE would probably have been in contention for the best competitive multiplayer award. Bringing 64-player conquest battles to next-gen consoles, resurrecting commander mode, and continuing to push the envelope for multiplayer map design all make Battlefield 4 a solid multiplayer game…if you can get it to work.

Call of Duty: Ghosts

NOV 5 **PS4, XBOX ONE, PS3, 360, PC**

Activision's giant continues to roll forward, this time with a new universe and a new cast of characters. Featuring spacewalking shootouts, remote-controlled dogs, and fatal shark attacks, this is the most outlandish Call of Duty campaign to date, as well as one of the most entertaining. Ghosts' multiplayer doesn't shake up the series' standard formula, but its polished core is enough to keep fans content for another year.

XCOM: Enemy Within

NOV 12 **PS3, 360, PC, MAC**

Adding to a game as balanced as XCOM can't be easy, but Firaxis takes an already rich strategy title and gives it extra depth with this first expansion. Enemy Within's new Meld currency encourages you to rush deeper into a host of new maps, while soldier augments and a new Mech class give you the firepower you need to take on a handful of new foes. If you loved XCOM last year, there is even more to love now.

NBA 2K14

NOV 15 **PS4, XBOX ONE**

Visual Concepts wasn't content porting the PS3/360 version of NBA 2K14 to next-gen consoles. Instead, the studio rebuilt its two most popular modes from the ground up. MyCareer takes perhaps the most ambitious approach to a single-player career ever seen, integrating the management of relationships with teammates, coaches, and general management into the already stellar basketball experience.

Need for Speed: Rivals

NOV 15 **PS4, XBOX ONE, PS3, 360, PC**

BEST *Racing*

When Rivals is firing on all cylinders, single- and multiplayer experiences unite in a satisfying blur of speed and chaos. With six players all continuing campaigns in the same shared world, it's only a matter of time until two racers collide, sending cars roaring head on into one another at over 200 mph. Both a showcase of next-gen visuals and concepts, Rivals is an easy pick for this year's best racing game.

BEST
PS4 Exclusive

Resogun

NOV 15 **PS4**

Launching alongside the PlayStation 4, Resogun gives players a heavy dose of arcade-style high-score battling nostalgia – which is appropriate considering its similarities to Defender. This small game is one of the titles PS4 players keep returning to, pushing their high score. With impressive voxel particle effects and tight controls, Resogun is a great reminder of video games' arcade roots.

BEST
Xbox One Exclusive

Dead Rising 3

NOV 22 **XBOX ONE**

Capcom Vancouver takes all the crazy weaponry and open-world madness we love about Dead Rising and improves the formula by removing strict time restrictions and limited resources. Despite its minor flaws, Dead Rising 3 impresses with an overwhelming number of on-screen zombies and devilish vehicles like the motorcycle/steamroller hybrid. This is a bloody good reason to own an Xbox One.

BEST
3DS Exclusive

The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds

NOV 22 **3DS**

Nintendo's successor to the 1991 classic A Link To The Past proves to be far more than a nostalgic nod to the legendary series' history. By shaking up long-running formulas for items, magic use, and dungeon order, A Link Between Worlds presents a new experience while retaining the classic feel of Link's greatest adventures.

TOP 10 PUBLISHERS

1 Take-Two
(Last Year: 1)

Game of the year candidates Grand Theft Auto V and BioShock Infinite helped Take-Two win back-to-back publisher of the year awards. NBA 2K14, XCOM: Enemy Within, and Civilization V: Brave New World were also stellar titles, proving that Take-Two rolls deep.

2 Nintendo
(Last Year: 4)

Nintendo pulled out all its big guns in 2013, unleashing successful new Mario, Luigi, Zelda, and Pikmin games. These successes proved that while many may rightly question Nintendo's decision making as a console manufacturer, no one should scoff at its publishing acumen.

3 Sony Computer Entertainment
(Last Year: 6)

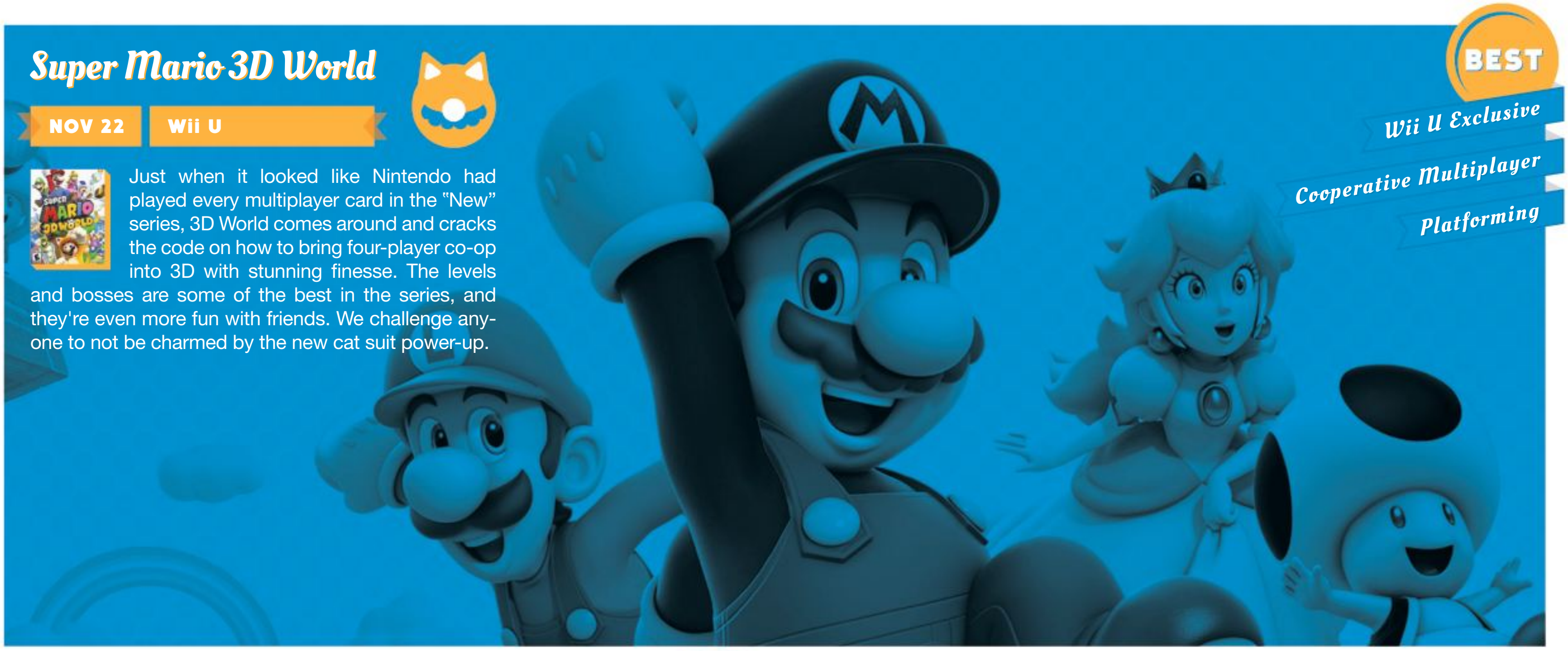
Sony's PlayStation 4 exclusives may not have lit the world afire, but with the Game Informer 2013 Game of the Year, The Last of Us, and the magical Tearaway on its roster, the publishing arm had a nice share of standout titles.

4 Ubisoft
(Last Year: 7)

Ubisoft has perhaps the most diverse lineup of games in its stable, with mainstays Assassin's Creed and Just Dance pulling in the cash so the publisher can afford to take brave chances with clever games like Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon, Call of Juarez: Gunslinger, and Rayman Legends.

Super Mario 3D World

NOV 22 | **Wii U**



BEST

Wii U Exclusive

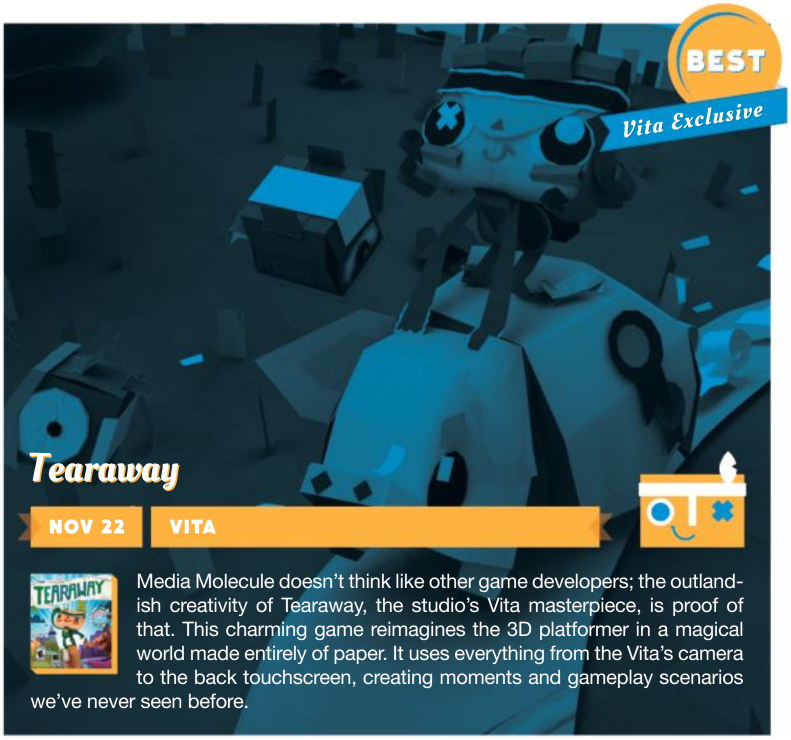
Cooperative Multiplayer

Platforming

Just when it looked like Nintendo had played every multiplayer card in the "New" series, 3D World comes around and cracks the code on how to bring four-player co-op into 3D with stunning finesse. The levels and bosses are some of the best in the series, and they're even more fun with friends. We challenge anyone to not be charmed by the new cat suit power-up.

Tearaway

NOV 22 | **VITA**



BEST

Vita Exclusive

Media Molecule doesn't think like other game developers; the outlandish creativity of Tearaway, the studio's Vita masterpiece, is proof of that. This charming game reimagines the 3D platformer in a magical world made entirely of paper. It uses everything from the Vita's camera to the back touchscreen, creating moments and gameplay scenarios we've never seen before.

Ys: Memories of Celceta

NOV 26 | **VITA**

Ys returns to the role-playing arena with Memories of Celceta, a strong entry that stays true to its roots without feeling archaic. With fluid and accessible real-time combat, a fun crafting system, and an expansive map to explore, Memories of Celceta captures plenty of what made role-playing fans fall in love with the genre in the first place, fostering experimentation and the thirst to adventure.

5 Activision

(Last Year: 3)

Nobody goes big better than Activision, which it proved yet again with a small but strong performing catalog of games featuring Call of Duty: Ghosts, Skylanders: Swap Force, StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm, and Diablo III's port to consoles.

6 Electronic Arts

(Last Year: 2)

EA had a rough year on the public perception front, getting voted the worst company in America for the second straight year and having both Battlefield 4 and SimCity suffer from server issues. That said, you can't overlook standouts like Need For Speed: Rivals and FIFA 14.

7 Warner Bros. Interactive

(Last Year: N/A)

Warner ruled the comic book roost, with Batman Arkham Origins, Injustice: Gods Among Us, and Lego Marvel Super Heroes all providing great cape-driven action in very different ways. If you want a superhero game, no one does it better.

8 Microsoft

(Last Year: 6)

The Xbox 360 puttered out with a weak lineup of exclusives, but Microsoft brought a lot of ammo to the Xbox One launch with games like Dead Rising 3, Forza Motorsport 5, and Killer Instinct all earning praise.

9 Square Enix

(Last Year: 8)

Square had a tough time getting its financial house in order, but if it releases more great titles like Tomb Raider and Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn, it shouldn't have a problem restoring its reputation as a serious player in game publishing.

10 Capcom

(Last Year: 10)

Capcom always seems to have an up and down year. Devil May Cry and Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate were showered with praise, but stinkers like Lost Planet 3 and Remember Me are best left in the dustbin of history.

TOP 10 EDITOR PICKS

Andy McNamara

1. The Last of Us
2. BioShock Infinite
3. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
4. Need For Speed: Rivals
5. Tomb Raider
6. Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
7. Tearaway
8. Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag
9. The Stanley Parable
10. The Room Two

Andrew Reiner

1. The Last of Us
2. Grand Theft Auto V
3. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
4. BioShock Infinite
5. Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
6. Tomb Raider
7. Devil May Cry
8. Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag
9. Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch
10. Gone Home

Matt Bertz

1. The Last of Us
2. Grand Theft Auto V
3. BioShock Infinite
4. Tomb Raider
5. Papers, Please
6. FIFA 14
7. Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon
8. The Stanley Parable
9. Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
10. Payday 2

Matt Helgeson

1. The Last of Us
2. BioShock Infinite
3. Grand Theft Auto V
4. Rayman Legends
5. Tomb Raider
6. Tearaway
7. Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time
8. Metro: Last Light
9. The Stanley Parable
10. Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons

Matthew Kato

1. The Last of Us
2. FIFA 14
3. Grand Theft Auto V
4. BioShock Infinite
5. Forza Motorsport 5
6. Papers, Please
7. Tomb Raider
8. Tearaway
9. The Stanley Parable
10. Gran Turismo 6

Jeff Cork

1. The Last of Us
2. Dead Rising 3
3. Grand Theft Auto V
4. Lego Marvel Super Heroes
5. State of Decay
6. Rayman Legends
7. Gone Home
8. Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag
9. Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
10. Marvel Puzzle Quest: Dark Reign

Joe Juba

1. BioShock Infinite
2. The Last of Us
3. Devil May Cry
4. The Stanley Parable
5. Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney - Dual Destinies
6. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
7. Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen
8. Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn
9. Dragon's Crown
10. Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

Jeff Marchiafava

1. The Last of Us
2. Grand Theft Auto V
3. Diablo III
4. Antichamber
5. Metro: Last Light
6. The Stanley Parable
7. Need For Speed: Rivals
8. Star Wars Pinball
9. BioShock Infinite
10. Battlefield 4

Matt Miller

1. The Last of Us
2. BioShock Infinite
3. Tomb Raider
4. Resogun
5. Rayman Legends
6. Kingdom Rush Frontiers
7. Dragon's Crown
8. Card Hunter
9. Monaco
10. BattleBlock Theater

Ben Reeves

1. The Last of Us
2. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
3. Tomb Raider
4. Grand Theft Auto V
5. Antichamber
6. BioShock Infinite
7. Rayman Legends
8. Pikmin 3
9. XCOM: Enemy Within
10. Gone Home

Dan Ryckert

1. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
2. The Last of Us
3. Super Mario 3D World
4. Grand Theft Auto V
5. BioShock Infinite
6. Devil May Cry
7. Animal Crossing: New Leaf
8. Fire Emblem: Awakening
9. The Swapper
10. Tomb Raider

Tim Turi

1. The Last of Us
2. Grand Theft Auto V
3. Dead Space 3
4. Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon
5. Tomb Raider
6. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
7. Super Mario 3D World
8. Dead Rising 3
9. Papers, Please
10. BioShock Infinite

Bryan Vore

1. The Last of Us
2. BioShock Infinite
3. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
4. Super Mario 3D World
5. Tomb Raider
6. Guacamelee
7. Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien
8. Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon
9. Batman: Arkham Origins
10. Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney - Dual Destinies

Ben Hanson

1. Rayman Legends
2. Super Mario 3D World
3. State of Decay
4. BioShock Infinite
5. Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
6. Pokémon X & Y
7. The Stanley Parable
8. StarCraft II: Heart of The Swarm
9. Devil May Cry
10. Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon

Kyle Hilliard

1. Tomb Raider
2. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
3. Grand Theft Auto V
4. The Last of Us
5. Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
6. Rayman Legends
7. Super Mario 3D World
8. Guacamelee
9. BioShock Infinite
10. Picross e2

Jason Oestreicher

1. The Last of Us
2. Devil May Cry
3. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
4. Tomb Raider
5. BioShock Infinite
6. Killer Instinct
7. Injustice: Gods Among Us
8. Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate
9. Batman: Arkham Origins
10. Charlie Murder

Kimberley Wallace

1. BioShock Infinite
2. The Last of Us
3. Fire Emblem: Awakening
4. The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds
5. NBA 2K14
6. Ys: Memories of Celceta
7. Super Mario 3D World
8. The Stanley Parable
9. Tearaway
10. Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney - Dual Destinies

Mike Futter

1. The Last of Us
2. BioShock Infinite
3. Tomb Raider
4. The Room Two
5. Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
6. Gone Home
7. Lego Marvel Super Heroes
8. Tearaway
9. The Swapper
10. Saints Row IV

THE 2013

Reader & Editor GAMES OF THE YEAR

R **READERS**

E **EDITORS**

R

E

THE LAST OF US

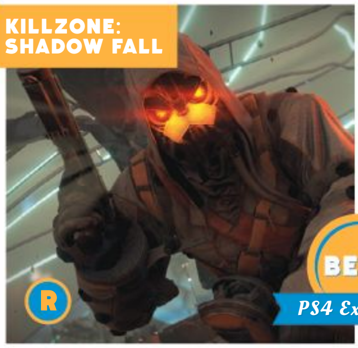
GAME OF THE YEAR

Editors' Pick 2013

BEST

PS3 Exclusive

Action



KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL

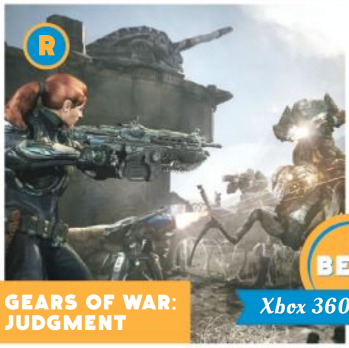
R

RESOGUN

E

BEST

PS4 Exclusive



R

GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT

E

BATTLEBLOCK THEATER

BEST

Xbox 360 Exclusive

R

E

BEST

Xbox One Exclusive

DEAD RISING 3

R

E

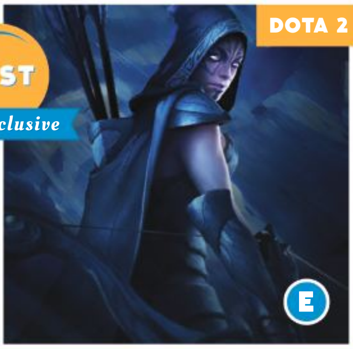
BEST

Wii U Exclusive

Platforming

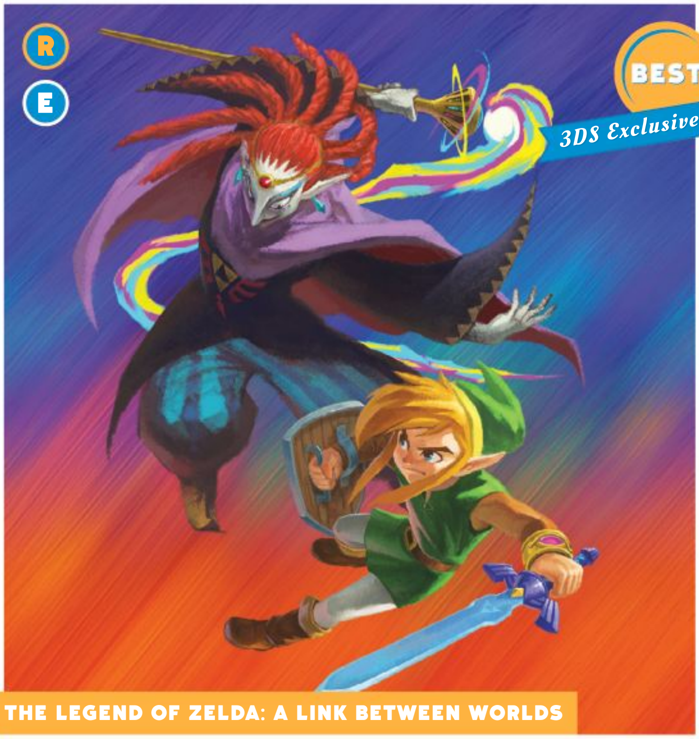
SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

CIVILIZATION V: BRAVE NEW WORLD



DOTA 2

BEST
PC Exclusive



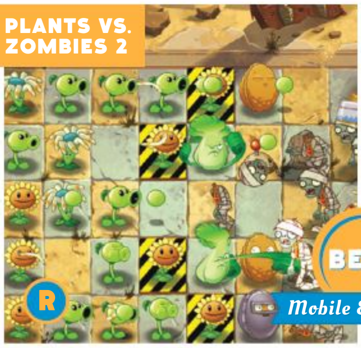
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS

BEST
3DS Exclusive

KILLZONE: MERCENARY

TEARAWAY

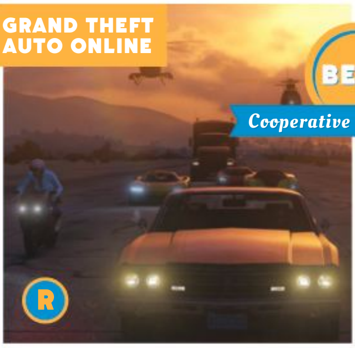
BEST
Vita Exclusive



PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES 2

DEVICE 6

BEST
Mobile Exclusive



GRAND THEFT AUTO ONLINE

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

BEST
Cooperative Multiplayer

THE WALKING DEAD: 400 DAYS

E
THE STANLEY PARABLE ADVENTURE LINE

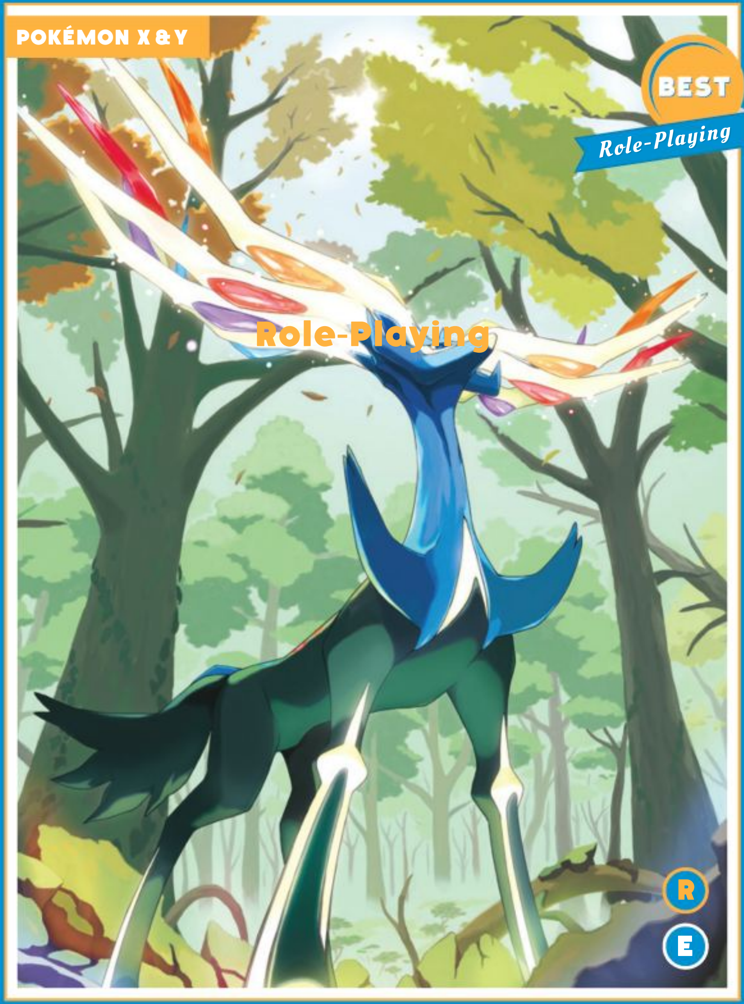
THE STANLEY PARABLE

BEST
Adventure

BATTLEFIELD 4

BEST *Competitive Multiplayer*

DOTA 2



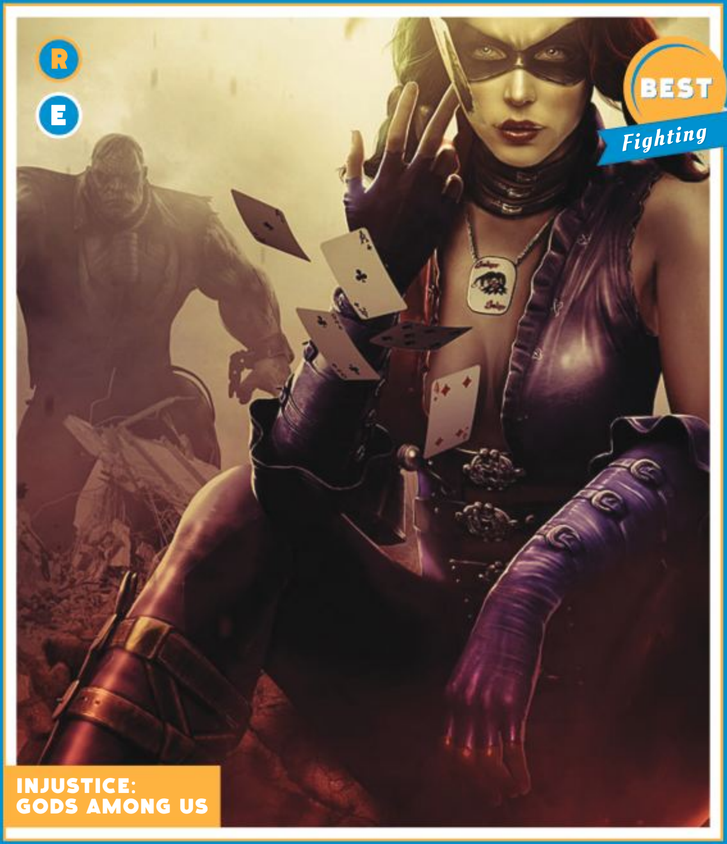
POKÉMON X & Y

BEST *Role-Playing*

FORZA MOTORSPORT 5

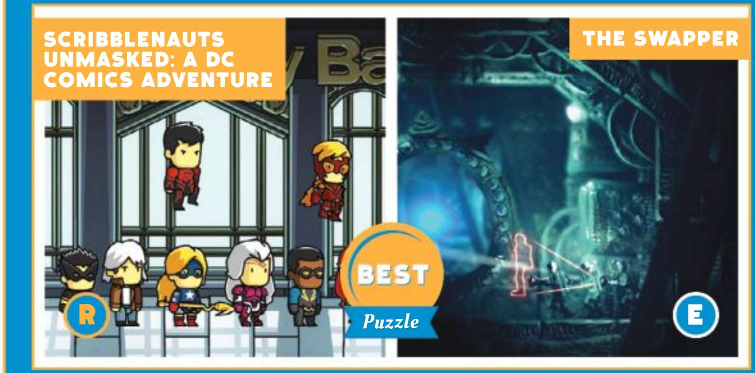
BEST *Racing*

NEED FOR SPEED: RIVALS



BEST *Fighting*

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US



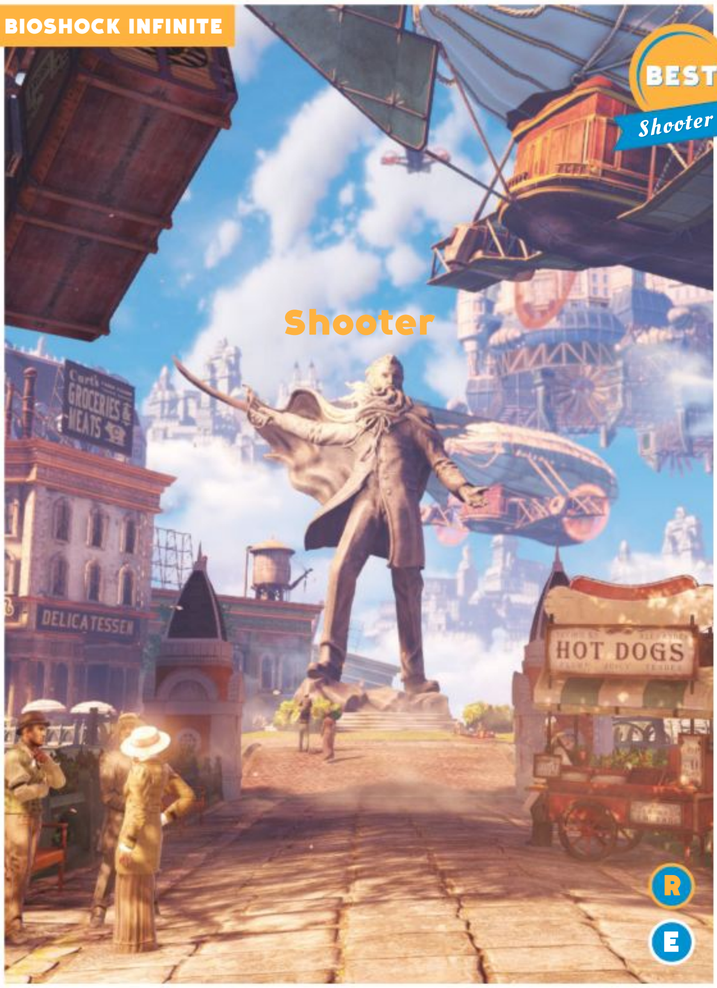
SCRIBBLENAUTS UNMASKED: A DC COMICS ADVENTURE

BEST *Puzzle*

THE SWAPPER

FINAL FANTASY XIV: A REALM REBORN

BEST *mmo*



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

BEST
Shooter
Shooter
GROCERIES & MEATS
DELICATESSEN
HOT DOGS
R
E

ROCKSMITH 2014

Fear of the dark
Fear of the dark
BEST
Rhythm/Music
R
E

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF

BEST
Simulation
R

PAPERS, PLEASE

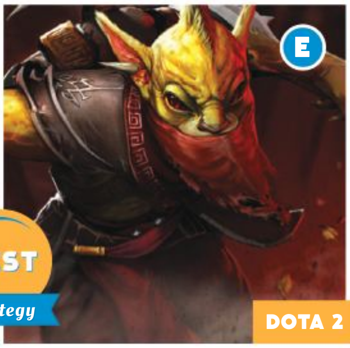
ENTRY
Safadi, Shaddy
E

FIFA 14

BEST
Sports
R
E

XCOM: ENEMY WITHIN

R
BEST
Strategy



DOTA 2

BIOSHOCK INFINITE: BURIAL AT SEA

R
BEST
Downloadable Content

MASS EFFECT 3: THE CITADEL

Alien: Isolation

Putting fear back into the Alien franchise

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

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Creative Assembly

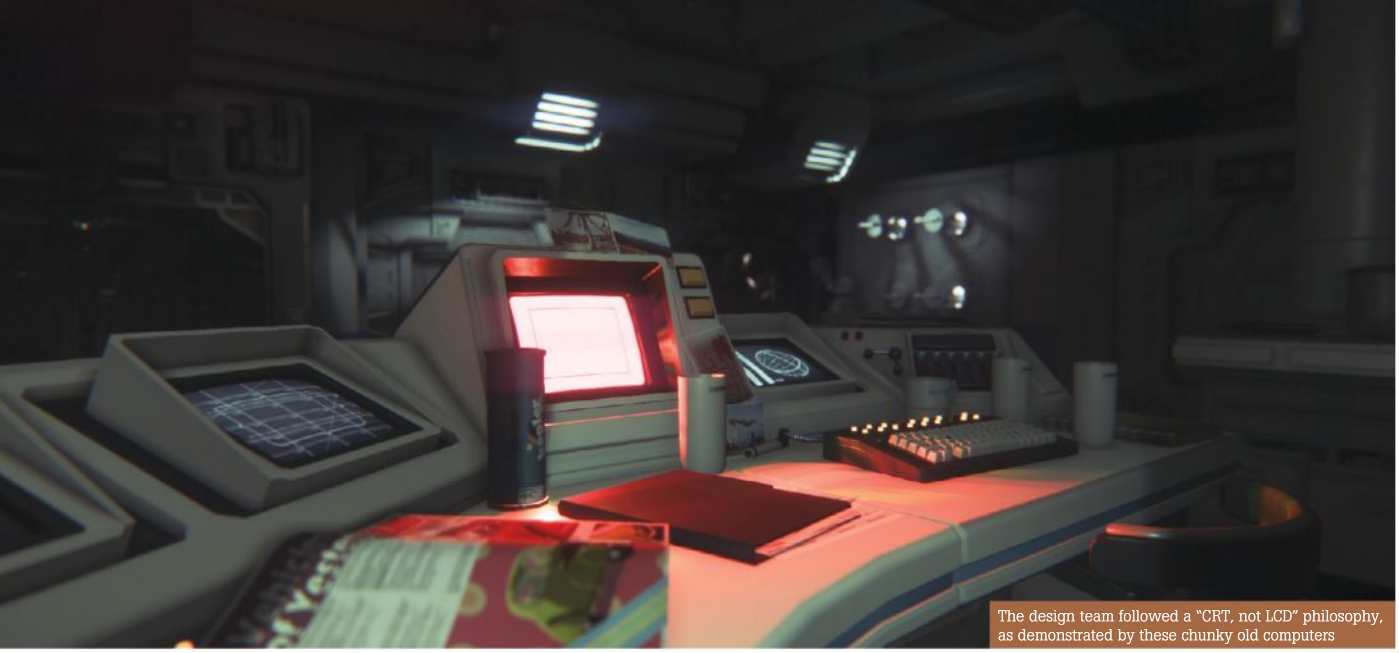
» Release
2014

I hack into an archaic computer, trying to gain entry to a door that's across the hall. I've already used a plasma torch to force my way into this section of Sevastapol Station, so I'm accustomed to improvisation. Sanctuary may only be a few hundred feet away, but in a few short seconds it seems impossibly far. A dark behemoth drops from the vents above, unfolding into a hulking nine-foot-tall form that's instantly recognizable. It's a xenomorph, and it's hunting. It skulks down the hall, leaving me with one question: "What now?"

"Games in the past have looked at James Cameron's 'Vietnam in space' angle, but people haven't really dived into the wealth of the original source of *Alien*," says Alien: Isolation's creative lead, Al Hope. Aliens has provided a reliable template for games – take a small squad of soldiers, put them in a sci-fi world, and watch things fall apart as alien hordes attack – but the original film has generally been overlooked. After playing Creative Assembly's survival-horror game, I'm astonished it took this long.

Isolation taps into the feelings of helplessness that made the first film so great. You play as Ellen Ripley's daughter, Amanda (see sidebar), and you have one mission: survive. Past Aliens games have diluted the power of the xenomorphs, downgrading them from fearsome hunters to cannon fodder. In Isolation, you're stalked by a single alien. The alien is driven by sense-based AI, meaning that he doesn't follow scripted patrols or exhibit predictable behavior. He reacts to your actions and decisions, which creates a terrifying cat-and-mouse dynamic.

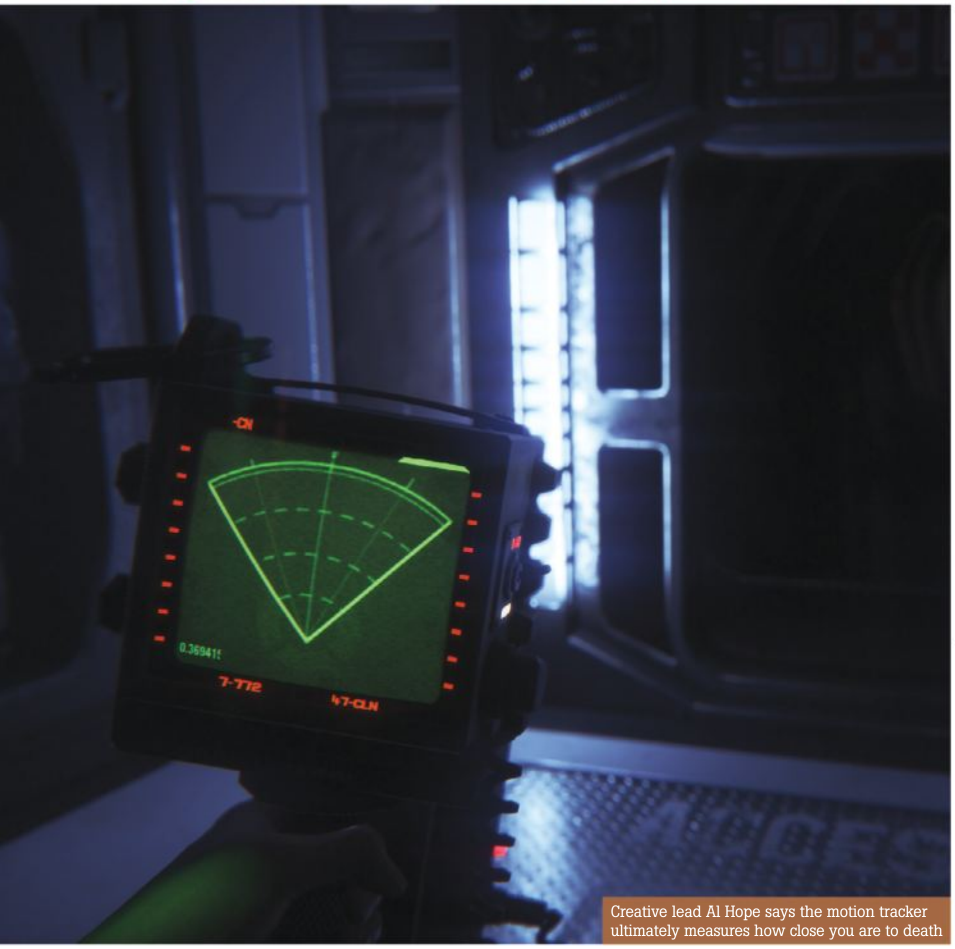
Unlike earlier Aliens games, the familiar motion tracker doesn't highlight the direction I need to point my weapon. The thumping pings simply reinforce the terrifying feeling that I'm not alone. You have to manually pull the device up to see telltale blips on its screen, and Creative Assembly has added another



The design team followed a "CRT, not LCD" philosophy, as demonstrated by these chunky old computers

Armed And Dangerous

Amanda was unarmed for the portion I played (which took place about halfway through the game), but players can scavenge parts to build weapons and defensive items. Creative Assembly wouldn't provide specifics, but considering some of those parts included gasoline and pipes, a flamethrower seems likely. Design lead Clive Lindop says that even though players are armed, the alien remains a threat from start to finish. It will learn from player actions, so don't be surprised if the AI begins to associate the telltale click of a reloading weapon with vulnerability.



Creative lead Al Hope says the motion tracker ultimately measures how close you are to death

interesting dynamic. When the tracker is out, Amanda's gaze is focused on its retro green display. Players can choose between focusing their eyes on the device or the environment, but not both simultaneously. Considering how adeptly the alien blends into the darker corners of the station, that decision can be vital.

As I crept through the station, I spent much of my time rooted in place. The alien was clearly stalking me, so I had to judiciously monitor its rough position on the motion tracker and through quick glances from behind cover. Some of the tensest moments came while hiding in lockers. Looking through the vents, I could see the creature warily approach the door and move its domed head around for clues. Amanda has to hold her breath to avoid detection, adding an additional layer of tension. The creature isn't dumb; if it sees the door close, it'll rush after you and yank you out.

From what I learned from my demo and talking to Creative Assembly, the team is dedicated to delivering an uncompromising vision for their game. They're intent on making a classic survival-horror game. It's not a shooter. There won't be any multiplayer. It's the Alien game they say they've always wanted to play. On that front, they definitely won't be alone. » **Jeff Cork**

Who Is Amanda Ripley?

Alien fans know that Ellen Ripley left a young daughter behind on Earth before the events of the first film. Alien: Isolation tackles several big questions, including what happened to Amanda Ripley and The Company's relationship with the ill-fated Nostromo in the time period between *Alien* and *Aliens.*

"Sixty years have passed [since the end of *Alien*], and nobody had ever gone looking for it? That doesn't make sense," says Alien: Isolation design lead Clive Lindop. "In the modern day, when an airplane disappears in the Atlantic or a ship disappears, we spend millions of dollars looking for it to recover the black box or whatever it is. Who went looking for it, and if they did find it or if they didn't find it, what happened to them, and why at the start of the second film does nobody know what happened?"

Amanda is an engineer, a career path that she drifted toward in the hope that she might eventually learn more about what happened to her mother. "When we meet her, which is in her mid-20s, her entire life has been driven by that question and all the different drama that's surrounded it, and she's been deeply affected by it," Lindop says. "Then out of the blue one day, somebody from The Company turns up and says, 'Look, the black box has been recovered, do you want to come and find the answers that you're looking for?'"

It's understandable why Amanda might leap at the opportunity to visit Sevastopol Station. "As for The Company," Lindop says, "it kind of makes sense for them to take her along, because it makes a nice PR story and there are motivations for them to take her. It's a simple collection drop; go and get it, bring it back. And then it all goes horribly wrong."

Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

The first two hours of the last 13 days

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Square Enix

» Release
February 11

The third and final installment in the Final Fantasy XIII universe is almost here, concluding the story of Lightning and her compatriots. By this point, Square Enix has released the major information about Lightning Returns. The tale takes place 500 years after XIII-2. The world is ending in 13 days. Lightning is "the savior," a figure from prophecy who guides souls to the next world. The real-time combat system is more action-focused, and revolves around changing outfits with different abilities. With so much revealed, the only thing left is to play the game – and that's exactly what I did. This is a breakdown of my experience playing the first two hours of Final Fantasy XIII: Lightning Returns.

0:00 – Before the game even starts, I have a choice to make: easy or normal mode. The two settings affect several areas. On easy, monsters are easier to stagger, HP recovers automatically in the field, and you are aren't penalized for running away. Even though the advantages are tempting, I opt for normal.

0:05 – After an impressive opening cutscene involving a battle between Lightning and Snow, the gameplay kicks off with a series of tutorials. I learn how to attack and how to switch schemata (Lightning's outfits that act as ability sets). Despite the conceptual changes, the flow feels very similar to the paradigm system from FF XIII and XIII-2. The big difference is that each schema's individual ATB bar doesn't recharge fast enough to support constant attacking, so you are essentially forced to switch after a brief offensive if you want to keep the pressure on.

0:20 – Lightning pursues Snow through his palace, clearing out monsters along the way. She eventually encounters a locked door that blocks her progress, but not before another tutorial. This time it's about the stagger system, which works like the previous entries except for the absence of a clear meter. Taking its place is the stagger wave, which appears behind the enemy's health bar and changes in intensity based on how close it is to being staggered.

0:30 – Thanks to the locked door, Lightning abandons her pursuit of Snow and returns to the Ark, a high-tech base where Hope watches over Lightning and offers guidance. Time does not flow in the Ark – an important point given the fact that an onscreen countdown clock is marking the time until doomsday. In the Ark, I talk to Hope and learn how to customize Lightning's schemata; I am able to equip a new outfit, shield, and sword, then assign combat abilities to the face buttons. The combination of these different elements is what constitutes a single schema.

0:40 – I dig into the menus and spend some time in the Datalog, reading up on the world, characters, and mythology. It does a good job outlining the ways the world has changed since the last installment.

0:55 – Hope transports Lighting to Luxerion, one of the four major areas in the world of Nova Chrysalia. Upon arriving, I see a group of investigators gathered around a dead body. The victim is a woman with rose-colored hair, just like Lightning's. The crime scene also has ominous writing nearby, declaring that someone called the Shadow Hunter will kill the savior. Lightning is being targeted, and the lead investigator asks her to look around for witnesses and gather clues. This becomes my first official quest.

The state of the world in Lightning Returns is a direct result of Caius' previous actions that allowed Chaos to seep into the world

As the savior, Lightning saves people's souls so they can continue existing after the end of the world

1:05 – I wander around Luxerion talking to bystanders. Everyone seems to think that the Children of Etro, a heretical religious group, is responsible for the murder. I report these findings to the investigator, but it isn't enough. Time to gather more evidence.

1:15 – After more snooping around, I learn that the Children of Etro gather at the train station when the in-game clock strikes 12:00 midnight. To kill time, I explore the city a bit, browse clothing and item vendors, and talk to (ugh) Chocolina. The minutes of the clock pass at an accelerated rate, so I don't have to wait long until the Children of Etro show.

1:30 – At midnight, I spot the white-robed heretics gathering in the square outside the train station. I follow them to their base, but they have a secret numerical code to gain entry, so I can't continue the chase. Over a communicator, Hope tells me that the numbers will appear on walls at 6:00 a.m., so I'll have to wait until then. That's a solid five hours of in-game time.

1:40 – I get the sense that there are side quests I'm supposed to undertake in Luxerion during this time period, but don't track them down. Instead, I continue exploring the city, and eventually encounter a monster in a cloud of chaos energy. These monsters are much tougher than normal beasts, and despite several attempts, I'm not able to beat the creature yet. I make a mental note to come back later and take revenge.

2:00 – At 6:00 a.m., Lightning is transported back to the Ark automatically to pay tribute to god, which can extend the amount of time left until the end of the world. Then, I transport back to Luxerion, tracking down those numbers and confronting the Shadow Hunter on my list of priorities. The segment of my time with Lightning Returns does not end climactically, but I'm excited for the hours that lay ahead. » **Joe Juba**

Three Questions With Yoshinori Kitase

After a decade in production, Lightning Returns closes off the three-game Final Fantasy XIII project. Producer Yoshinori Kitase answered three of our burning questions about what fans can expect from this final chapter.

Can you elaborate a little more on how the countdown clock affects the game?

Many players who have yet to play the game seem worried about the element of a countdown clock, but I assure you it is something you can easily understand as you play. It is not meant to be a stiff restriction or a time limit, but more about feeling the passage of time in this new realm, from morning to afternoon to the evening, just as it is in our world.

At first, players may feel a bit intimidated by the sense of time, but after spending several days in the world, I'm certain that they will get accustomed to the new environment, just like getting over jet-lag when traveling to a foreign country.

In this game, the world can end if left alone without doing anything, and so the countdown does serve as a starter that leads the player to be more proactive. At first, players may feel like time is against them, but before they know it, the allotted time will increase as quests are completed. They should be able to maneuver through the system as they please.

Final Fantasy XIII-2 had some excellent post-game content, from different endings to the string of extra boss fights. Does Lightning Returns have a similar array of challenges to tackle after beating the game?

There are plenty of challenges that the players can tackle, such as unlocking the Hard Mode, which can be done after beating the game once. Players can even get to places that are much harder to access in a normal method, engage in extremely tough boss fights, and so forth.

One example is that we've incorporated a sort of ecosystem of monsters. If a player continues to defeat the same species of monsters, he/she can make them go extinct after defeating a certain amount. Before the species become extinct, the final one appears, but some of these so-called "Last Ones" can be pretty tough. I would definitely recommend players to take this challenge.

After unlocking Hard Mode, players can raise the stats and parameters on Lightning's equipment significantly, to combat these strong opponents. There are also weapons and equipment only available in the Hard Mode. Through this, we hope that the players will be able to enjoy the high level of customization and depth offered in the game.

Without spoiling anything, how would you characterize the ending of Lightning Returns?

During Final Fantasy XIII-2, we worked under the concept of "expansion," and so we provided additional game content, including new episodic DLC. Because we created Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII under the concept of "completion," the story is all-inclusive in the package. Any questions about the world, or the fight against the fate of being controlled by the gods, or relationships between characters will be resolved with this installment.

The Division

A techno-thriller built on new technology

» Platform
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» Style
Online Multiplayer
Shooter

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Massive Entertainment

» Release
2014

The Division turned a lot of heads at this past E3 with its bleak post-apocalyptic setting and open-world structure that seamlessly transitions between cooperative campaign missions and competitive multiplayer matches. To create such an ambitious game, developer Massive Entertainment (World In Conflict) had to build a new technology base from the ground up.

Dubbed the Snowdrop engine, this tech must do a lot of heavy lifting to free the content creators of limitations when designing missions. We spoke to associate lead tech programmer Carl Johan Lejdfors about the challenges and opportunities Snowdrop presents. » **Matt Bertz**

What distinguishes the Snowdrop engine from other game creation engines?
Snowdrop is a game engine targeted specifically at next-gen consoles. It has been designed from the ground up to be intelligently structured, and to allow easy additions and changes.

The latter point is where I think we distinguish ourselves. We try to follow some of the following credos in development: The game should always be playable. This also implies that everyone works on the most up-to-date version of the game, at all times. The artists themselves can work directly in the engine, with their changes being pushed to the game in real time. Empowering the artists is a major improvement for the development workflow. Together, these factors provide extremely fast iteration times, allowing content creators to focus on the game and not be frustrated with waiting on baking time. In the end, those are very flexible systems for settings up assets, shaders, buildings, covers, destruction, particle systems, UI, dynamic behavior, and so on…

What features does the Snowdrop engine enable that wouldn't have been possible on the 360/PS3 generation of hardware?
Of course, most of the ideas in our development model take inspiration from the previous generation of consoles. One of the main innovations that the Xbox One and PS4 made possible for Snowdrop is the render pipeline (among others, tessellation and geometry shaders), simply because the GPUs of these next-gen consoles are extremely strong. Things such as accurate reflections, dynamic global illumination, and real-time destruction have now become a reality.

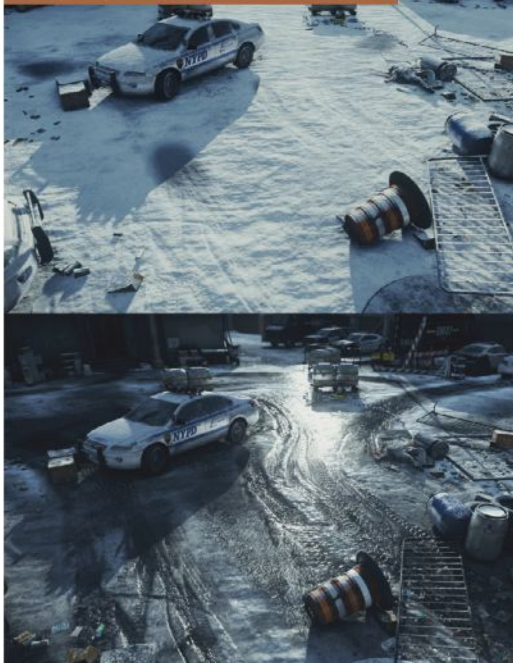
Snowdrop is the reason that The Division can be developed at its envisioned scope and detail, by a "small" team like us here at Massive.

What is the biggest technical challenge in creating The Division, and how are you aiming to solve it?
It's difficult to pinpoint at any one challenge specifically. For one thing, the world of The Division is huge, and we need to have a lot of data for crisp textures, perfect-looking models, and many other elements to create the best experience possible. So, it's a lot of work.

How does the technology support open-world exploration and discovery?
Our engine supports systems that intelligently render core elements of the game; objects, shaders, textures, etc. Because of these systems, the world that is rendered in Snowdrop has the maximum detail both in the immediate environment and at large viewing distances. This enables the content creators to focus on making the game come alive with a minimal amount of technical constraints.

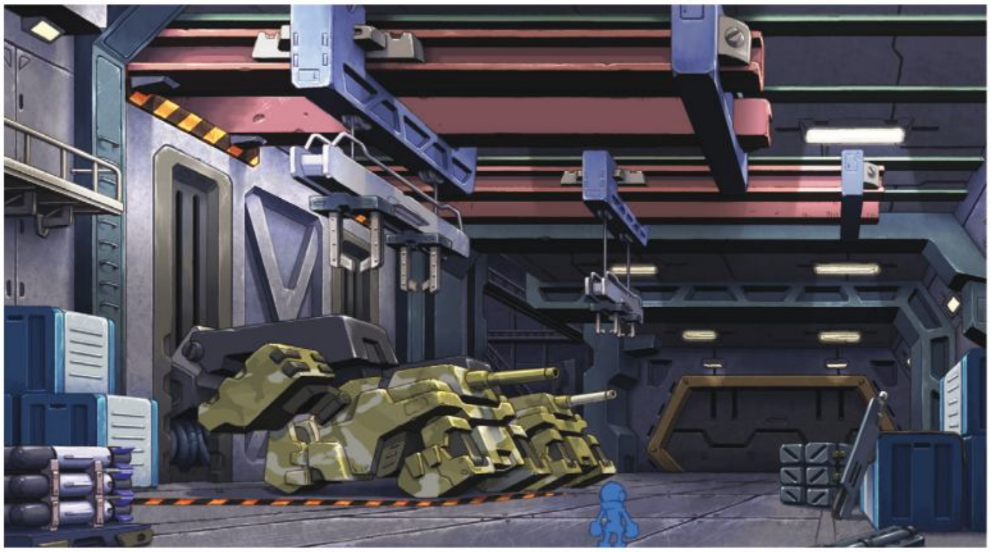
We created Snowdrop so there doesn't have to be a compromise between extreme attention to detail and the large scale of the open world. The same goes for gameplay; The Division will have a strong focus on both discovery and vast exploration.

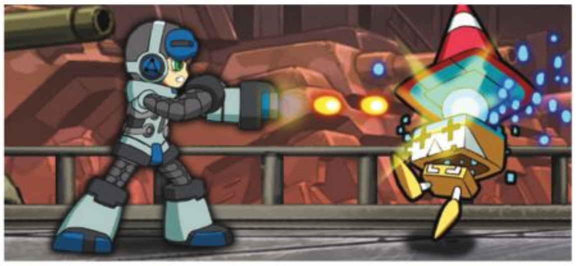
The dynamic material shader system allows the world to react to the constantly changing weather, transforming an icy parking lot into a snowy parking lot

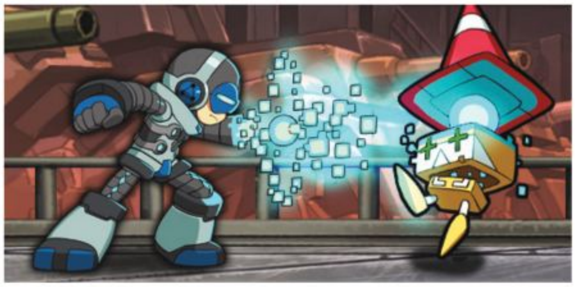


Mighty No. 9

Mega Man vets tap Kickstarter for new IP







Mega Man has been rusting away behind Capcom's walls ever since series co-creator Keiji Inafune left the company in 2010. Inafune's projects, including Mega Man Legends 3 and Mega Man Universe, were canceled after his departure, leaving fans distraught. The creator openly expressed sympathy for the dedicated Capcom fans that were left wanting, but parting ways with the company cut him off from making another Mega Man – until he pitched Mighty No. 9 on Kickstarter. The project raised over three million dollars and resembles the classic series in all the best ways.

The creators behind Mighty No. 9 are a veritable who's who of the Blue Bomber's past. Inafune's company, Comcept, is joining forces with seasoned Japanese developers, many of whom have years of experience working on Mega Man titles. A key partner is Inti Creates, the studio behind the challenging MegaMan Zero GBA games and retro throwbacks Mega Man 9 and 10. Even the composer of the original Mega Man score, Manami Matsune, is on board.

The developers openly state that Mighty No. 9 is directly inspired by Mega Man. Beck is the ninth Mighty Number robot to be created, and he's tasked with taking out his metallic brethren that've gone rogue. Dr. Blackwell created these machines for industrial purposes before they became violent warriors. Somewhere along the way, Blackwell becomes the main antagonist of the game, but Comcept says he has more in mind than world domination. Longtime Mega Man fans will recognize the plot as a spiritual retelling of the saga of the original series, except with the good Dr. Light and evil Dr. Wily apparently rolled into one.

The core gameplay features side-scrolling platforming and shooting. The Mighty Numbers essentially replace Mega Man's classic Robot Masters. These bosses include a helicopter-like robot that fires missiles and mysterious desperado-type with a sniper rifle arm. Beck absorbs the other Mighty Numbers' abilities after defeating them, and physically transforms when channeling their power. For instance, Beck can rearrange himself to gain tank treads that allow him to safely cross spikes. Beck also gathers a resource called xel ("cell") when he destroys regular enemies. Xel fuels his own Mighty Abilities, letting him temporarily double jump, run faster, hit harder, and more.

Mighty No. 9 stands as one of the boldest moves a developer has taken to reclaim an IP from its glory days. What makes this project even more special is Inafune and company's close communication with Mega Man's neglected fan base, which has understandably latched onto the project. If Capcom isn't going to step up to the plate and deliver the next evolution of the iconic series, we couldn't think of a better crew to pick up the spiritual mantle. » **Tim Turi**

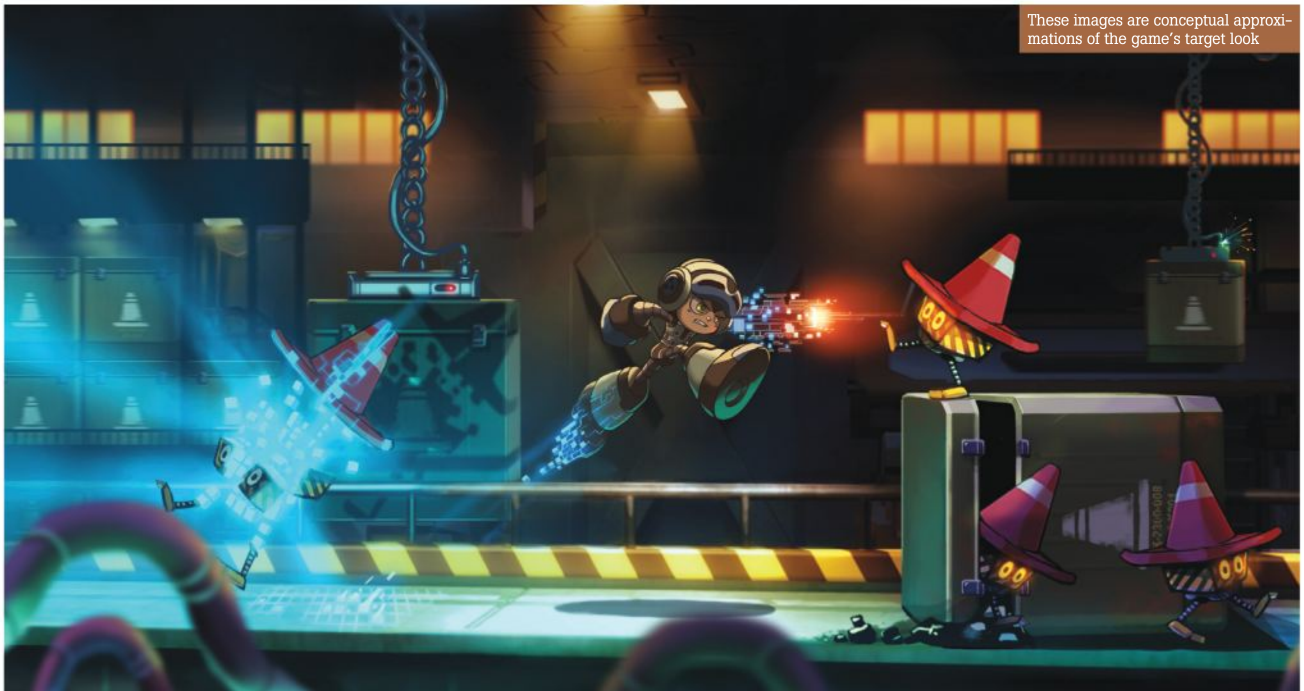
» Platform
PlayStation 4 • Xbox One
Wii U • PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Vita • 3DS • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Platforming

» Publisher
Comcept

» Developer
Comcept/Inti Creates/
Abstraction Games

» Release
2015

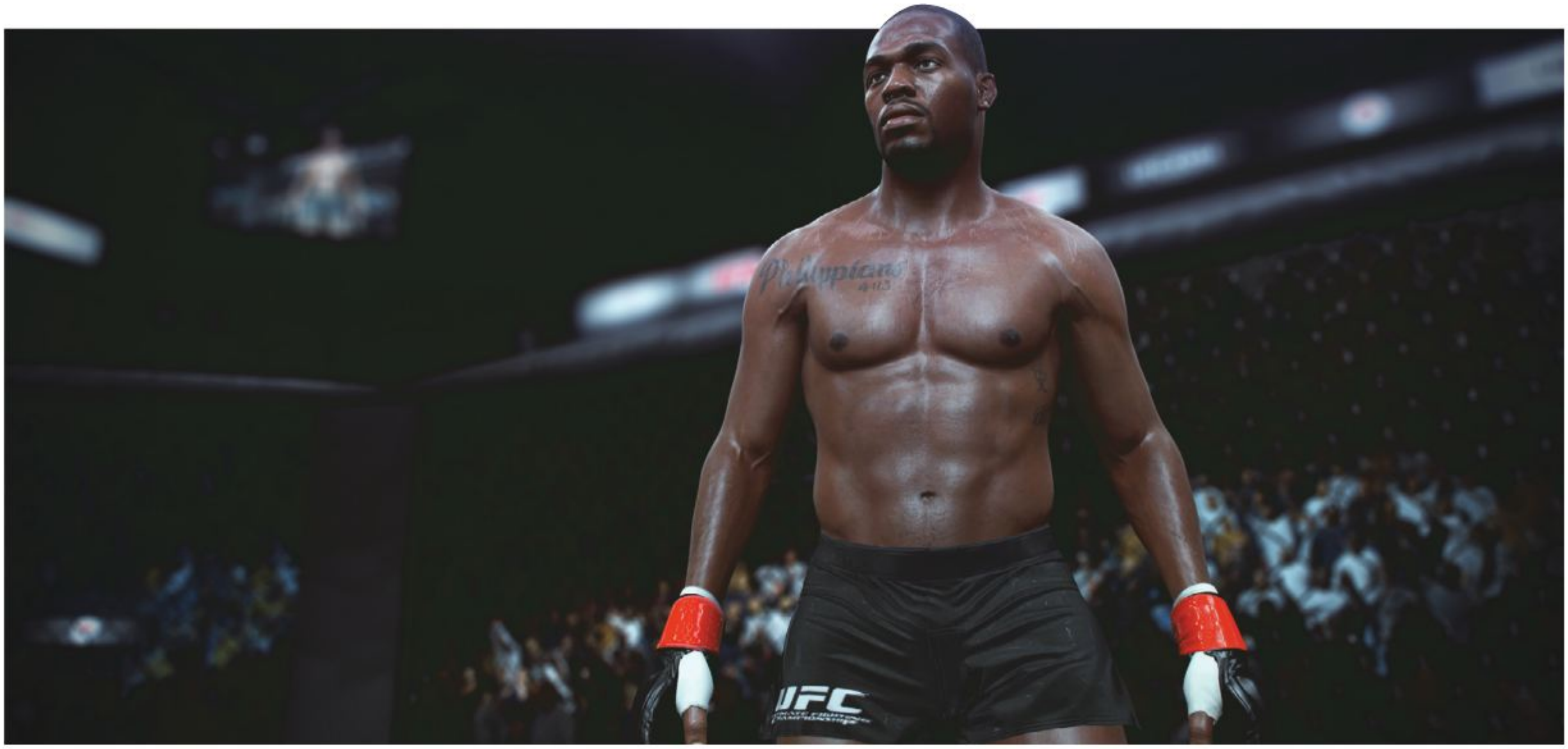


These images are conceptual approximations of the game's target look

Stretch Goal Gameplay Bonuses

These extra features are being added to Mighty No. 9 thanks to meeting the Kickstarter's stretch goals.

- Five additional stages
- Boss Rush mode
- Challenge mode
- New game-plus
- Support character
- Online Battle Race mode
- Optional chiptune soundtrack



UFC

EA Sports wants you to feel the fight

» Platform
PlayStation 4 • Xbox One

» Style
1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Canada

» Release
Spring

For years, THQ created earnest representations of mixed martial arts games with its UFC Undisputed series. After the publisher imploded, Electronic Arts snatched up the Ultimate Fighting Championship license. EA Sports released its own modestly successfully mixed martial arts title back in 2010, but now that the publisher is the only game in town, we're hoping it will step up its performance. We talked with creative director Brian Hayes to find out how the publisher has been training for its return to the octagon with UFC.

"Mike Tyson famously said, 'Everybody has a plan until they get hit in the face,'" Hayes says. "While I don't think your average UFC fighter gets discouraged easily, they do go into each fight with a gameplan. If that gameplan isn't working, decisions need to be made. It's no different for our fighter AI. If you are facing a fighter with tremendous submission abilities, you should expect them to try and get the fight to the ground and play to their strengths."

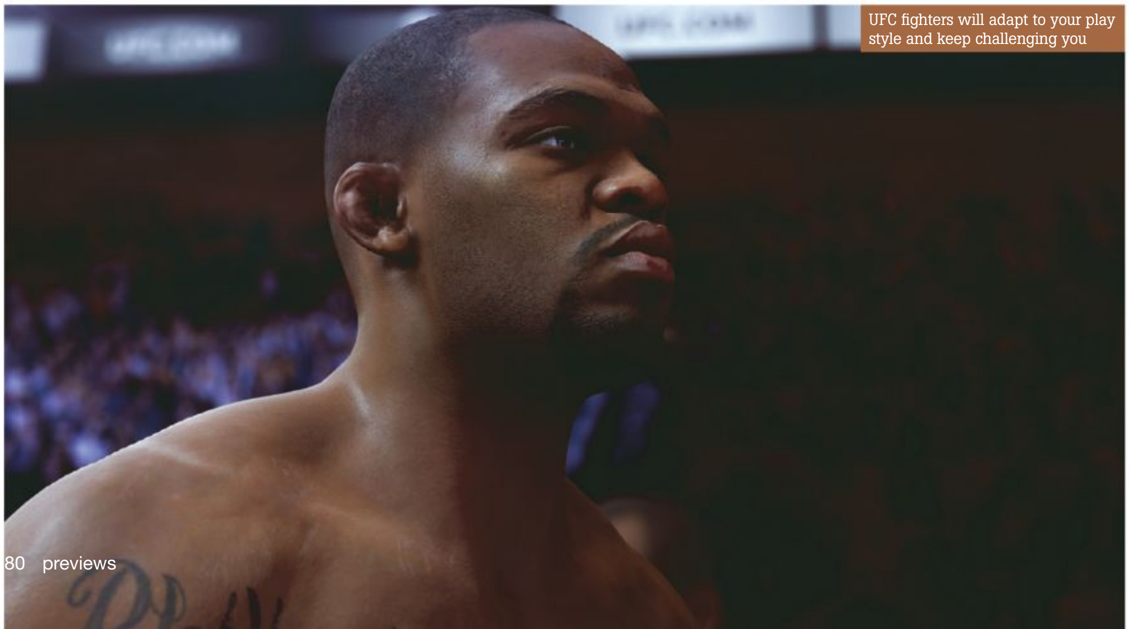
EA Sports' new AI system should give gamers a more challenging roster of opponents who learn and adapt to your fighting style. If you continually thwart a fighter's takedown attempts, they enact a backup plan. But not every fighter is created equal; a guy like Jon Jones can be very effective on the ground, in the clinch, and fighting from the outside, so he has a lot of options. A more one-dimensional ground fighter may struggle on his feet if he can't take you down. The key to winning these matches is reading your opponents and knowing their weaknesses.

If you're struggling against one of the organization's more well-rounded opponents, you can always try to use your surroundings to your advantage. In most combat sports, having your back to the ropes is a bad position because it limits your ability to avoid incoming attacks. That principle holds true in UFC. However, some elite fighters can use the edges of the octagon to their advantage, planting a foot on the fence and leaping off as they attack or using the fence for leverage to gain a better submission position. These kinds of attacks are unexpected, cause a lot of damage, and make a big impact with the judges. However, a fighter who predictably relies on the fence is susceptible to counter attacks.

EA isn't ready to unveil its new submission system, but Hayes knows it is critical to an MMA game's success. "It really can't be overstated how challenging it is to create a compelling ground game and submission system in a video game, and I want to tip my hat to everyone that's ever tried," he says. "We want our system to showcase more of the technique involved in setting up each submission and utilize the elements of directional movement, misdirection, and timing."

EA Sports is using the power of the new consoles and a lot of body reference capture in order to make the UFC's roster of fighters look as realistic as possible, but the developer's fighting systems also aim to make these combatants behave realistically as well. Hopefully, when UFC finally enters the octagon, it will live up to the league's legacy.

» **Ben Reeves**



UFC fighters will adapt to your play style and keep challenging you

NASCAR ‘14

A year of new beginnings

Home console NASCAR games have had a hard time releasing at the right time. Back when EA owned the association’s video game rights, it put the game out anywhere from summer to fall. Last year, publisher Activision released developer Eutechnyx’s NASCAR The Game: Inside Line in November – before the penultimate race of the season. Now that Deep Silver is working with Eutechnyx (a one-year deal with the hope for more), the game is finally being released at the beginning of the real-life NASCAR season.

This hadn’t happened before for good reason: At the beginning of the real-world NASCAR season, details are still up in the air such as what the car paint schemes will look like, which sponsorship deals are in place, and even what some of the races will be called. To facilitate the correct sponsors, paint schemes, etc. early in the season, Eutchnyx plans to offer downloadable updates that will not only let the title catch up to the nascent season, but to keep it current throughout. This includes any rule changes that NASCAR decides to make.

On top of this, the company is resuming its weekly DLC highlights mirroring that week’s real-world action on the track – right down to the correct speeds, positioning, and movements of the cars thanks to in-depth telemetry. The DLC has been so successful that Eutechnyx is putting it front and center, making it more of a focal point alongside the traditional career mode. Players are not only presented with the season’s most exciting racing moments as it progresses, but highlights from the 2013 season also come on the disc. As for the career mode, it returns with more real-world sponsors (including the ability to do with them what you will offline in the paint scheme creator), which are more logically presented to you as you progress.

Online also facilitates another improvement for the title – online leagues. Sixteen players can come together and race through seasons with schedules and options to their liking. NASCAR ‘14 is also getting with the times with better matchmaking, griefing penalties, and the ability for players to pick the server that’s best for their location. None of these are shocking additions, but considering the troubles that the developer had with its online component in its first NASCAR, it’s good to see the company continue to refine what was once a negative for the series. We asked about getting a full 43-car field for online leagues or play, but Eutechnyx explained that this was more a console-based restriction than a lack of desire on its part.

Activision helped Eutechnyx get its NASCAR operation off the ground, but new publisher Deep Silver hopes to take things to the next level and put it on par with the other big yearly sports titles. » **Matthew Kato**

» Platform
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» Style
1 to 16-Player Racing
(16-Player Online)

» Publisher
Deep Silver

» Developer
Eutechnyx

» Release
Early 2014

Garrett readies a strike with his blackjack

Online leagues can consist of up to 16 players

Lego The Hobbit

An expected journey

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

» Style
1 or 2-Player Action

» Publisher
Warner Bros.
Interactive
Entertainment

» Developer
TT Games

» Release
2014

Given the success of Lego The Lord of Rings back in 2012, no one should be surprised that the upcoming Hobbit films are also getting the Lego treatment. No one should complain, either; TT Games has demonstrated its ability to transform Middle-earth into a paradise for fans of Lego and Tolkien alike.

Some people winced when the film adaptation of *The Hobbit* took the compact novel and stretched it into a trilogy. That isn't the strangest bit of segmentation surrounding the tale; Lego The Hobbit game only covers the first two movies: *An Unexpected Journey* and *The Desolation of Smaug*. As bizarre as that division is, it may not matter as long as the game brings the same balance of humor and gameplay that made Lego The Lord of the Rings so great.

Players revisit iconic Middle-earth locations from the movies, like the Shire, Rivendell, and the Misty Mountains. Many of these areas were also present in the previous title, so we have to wait to see how they change, if at all. On one hand, creating a brand new layout for Rivendell may be unnecessary. On the other, a bunch of recycled levels would feel like a rip-off.

No matter where they travel, Bilbo and company have plenty of trinkets to collect. Gathering Mithril and forging special items from it returns, the mechanic responsible for some of the most memorable moments in Lego The Lord of the Rings (like the Disco Phial). You can also mine for gems, build Lego creations, and undertake treasure quests.

All of these activities can be done with a co-op partner at your side thanks to local multiplayer support. Don't expect drastic deviations from the gameplay formula; a mixture of combat and puzzle solving await, interspersed with amusing cutscenes. The characters have different abilities that you use to overcome obstacles. For instance, all of the dwarves have unique powers – one of which being a trampoline-like belly that allies can bounce on. A variety of other characters from the fiction – Gollum, Thorin, Gandalf – are all waiting to be unlocked.

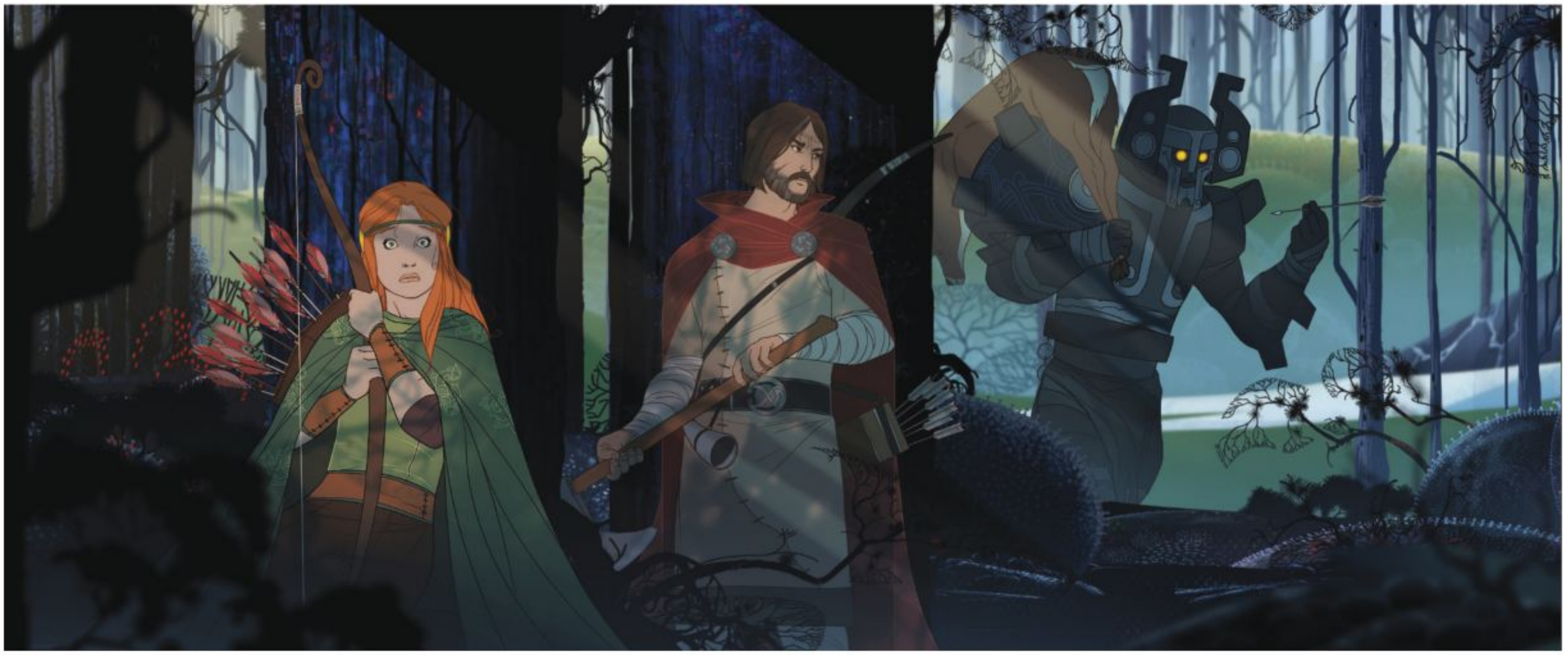
Lego The Hobbit sounds like more of what fans loved about Lego The Lord of the Rings. However, the fact that it won't tell the whole film trilogy's story might make for an oddly abbreviated experience. The third movie installment, *There and Back Again*, is slated to hit in late 2014; hopefully Warner Bros. and TT Games have plans to finish what they start with Lego The Hobbit. » **Joe Juba**

The game covers the events of the first two installments of *The Hobbit*

Each of the dwarves has a unique ability to help in combat or solve puzzles

The Banner Saga

Ex-BioWare devs explore a Viking wasteland



Sometimes even developers at big name studios find that they aren't working on their dream project. This was the case with the three founders of Stoic Games. After leaving BioWare, these entrepreneurs raised over $700,000 on Kickstarter to design a top-down strategy title inspired by Viking legends.

Within the Nordic kingdom of The Banner Saga, all of the gods have died. In their place arise long forgotten foes and a sweeping blackness that is slowly consuming the world. Mankind may have survived Ragnarok, but they now face a greater threat to their survival.

"There are tons of untapped ideas and weird mythology in the Viking setting that everybody tends to gloss over when they remake stories about the gods," says Stoic Games co-founder Alex Thomas. "We thought it would be interesting to have this heavy mythology background in a story that focused on humanity's struggles and backstabbing."

Players control a caravan as it travels across the world searching for safe haven. Along the journey, players must manage their supplies, which decrease with each day of travel. A larger caravan means more people have your back, but the group also burns through more supplies. Towns and cities have supplies for purchase, but this costs renown, which is The Banner Saga's singular currency used to purchase everything from supplies and character upgrades to items and weapons. However, if you run out of supplies the people in your caravan will start to die.

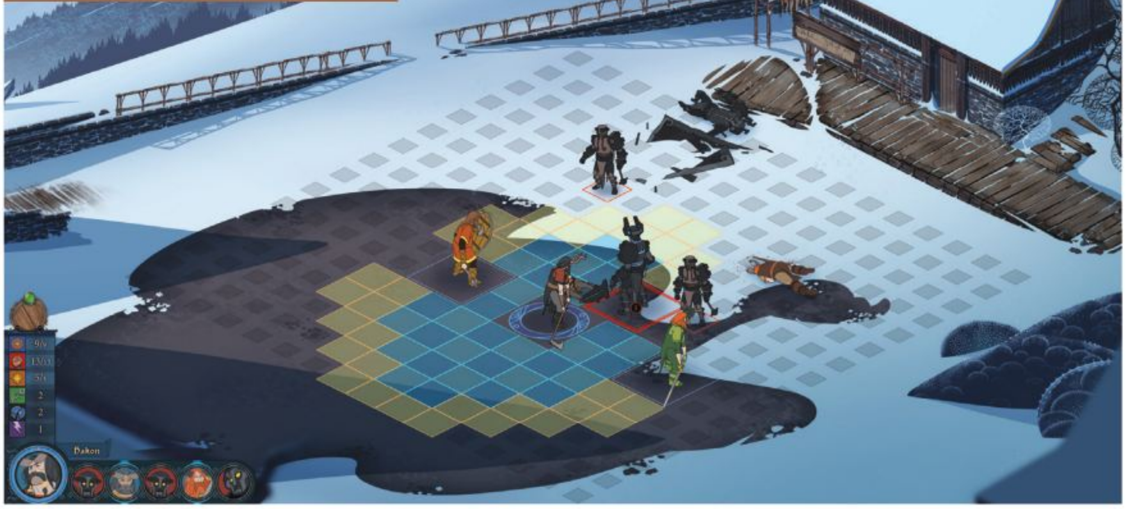
"Morale is the other factor to watch for in travel," Thomas says. "Your morale will drop if you go too long without rest or make some bad decisions during events. When morale gets low, certain events will trigger and you'll start with a stats penalty in combat. You'll also have more casualties in wars, which are large-scale battles where all of your warriors fight, not just the player's party. The number of your warriors in these battles will affect their difficulty."

Combat plays out like many traditional isometric strategy titles, with the exception that a character's performance deteriorates as he or she gets wounded – creating a more lifelike battle simulation. Stoic has mitigated character death spirals by giving each unit an armor stat. The higher a character's armor rating, the less damage he or she will take. Enemies have armor, too. This means a warrior might only do one point of damage to a heavily armored foe, but if a few other characters chip away at that enemy's armor first then your warrior might do up to eight points of damage or even wipe the target off the map. The end of any match can get fairly intense as the worn-down warriors in both parties struggle to achieve the final kill.

Every character in your party has a passive and active ability. Passive abilities are usually associated with a specific class. For example, raiders can make a shield wall, so any time they stand next to an ally both characters gain an armor bonus. Active abilities use a willpower resource and allow characters to perform knock-back attacks, set up traps, or attack a row of targets. Many active abilities work in tandem with other characters, setting up broader team strategies.

The Banner Saga is a gorgeous looking game, and its survival metagame combined with a dialogue-driven story and a unique combat system may please many strategy fans. The development team is small, but the game could make a big impression when it releases early next year. » **Ben Reeves**

Active abilities allow characters to perform knock-back attacks, set up traps, or attack groups of enemies



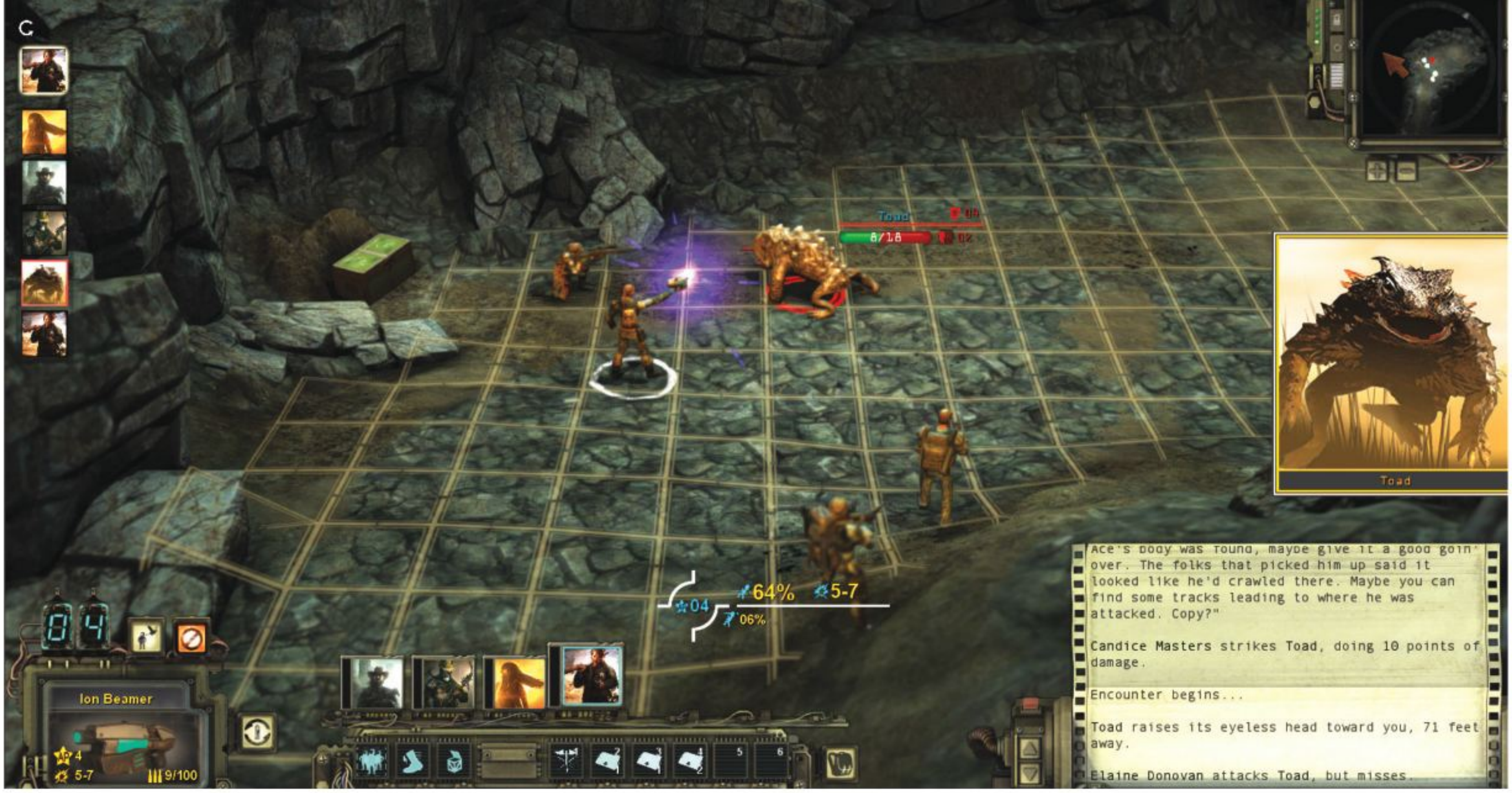
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy

» **Publisher**
Stoic Games

» **Developer**
Stoic Games

» **Release**
January



Ace's body was found, maybe give it a good goin' over. The folks that picked him up said it looked like he'd crawled there. Maybe you can find some tracks leading to where he was attacked. Copy?"

Candice Masters strikes Toad, doing 10 points of damage.

Encounter begins...

Toad raises its eyeless head toward you, 71 feet away.

Elaine Donovan attacks Toad, but misses.

Wasteland 2

Finding the will to live on

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
InXile/Deep Silver

» **Developer**
InXile

» **Release**
2014

Wasteland is a series modern gamers are more familiar with than they realize. In 1988, before post-apocalyptic worlds became a popular setting in video games, Wasteland presented a dark future where nuclear holocaust placed humanity on the brink of extinction. The game's creator, Brian Fargo, lost the rights to the Wasteland name, but wanted to continue to tell stories in such a world, so the Fallout series was born.

Wasteland 2 follows the exploits of a group of survivors as opposed to telling the story of a single person. Your initial group is made of four, but through the course of the game opportunities arise to expand your party up to seven. If you choose to make your own characters, you are given a pool of stat points to assign to various skills like combat, strength, bartering, and scavenging, among many others. Creating your own characters affords you atypical options like choosing what kind of cigarettes they smoke and their religious beliefs. You can also write full biographies if you really want the classic pen-and-paper role-playing experience.

For my playtime, I select pre-made characters – an emotionally distant former child-solider, a brawler better at punching than socializing, a scout outrunning a bounty, and Cold-Eye – a man who left his previous gang behind after they massacred a village of children.

My group of misfits starts in a small community seeking to help survivors. I am introduced to their leader with a literary description of his demeanor and clothing. He tasks us with finding repeaters – devices used to help boost radio signals – dropped by Ace, the guy who was killed while trying to install them.

I accept the job and don't think much of Ace until I meet Angela crying outside of the gate to the open world. I ask her what's wrong and she admits that despite all the loss she has experienced in this world, Ace's death has been particularly painful. She tells us about their history and how she told him not to take the mission. She blames herself for his death by not joining him, and asks if she can join our group to help find out who killed him. We accept.

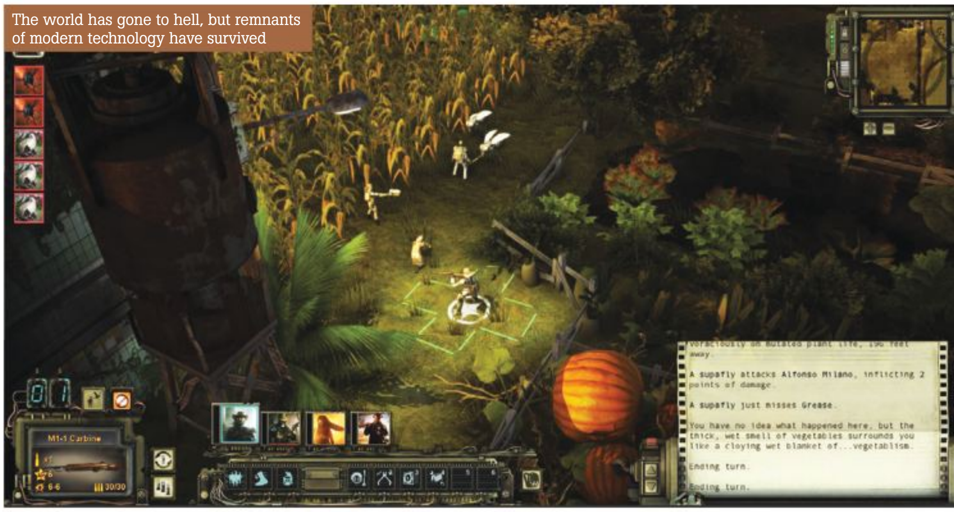
My new slightly larger group ventures into the wasteland, combating scavengers as we make our way to our destination. Combat is of the turn-based strategy variety. Each member of your party has different weapons and attacks. You take turns moving your party one-by-one on a grid and attacking based on each character's attack points. Gunners should move to fire from a safe distance, while close-combat brawlers need to move to the front lines to take attackers head on. You can take cover as necessary behind the environment's structures, or show your bravery (or stupidity) by firing and attacking from the open.

The original Wasteland included a novel-sized book detailing aspects of the world and characters that couldn't fit into the game's memory. In Wasteland 2, memory is no longer an issue and lengthy, interesting descriptions of everything from objects to people flesh out the world in meaningful ways.

Even though we've now explored the post-apocalypse in countless ways, Wasteland 2's universe feels more fleshed out and real than most – even after spending only a few hours in its world. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Doing It Fargo's Way

Wasteland 2 was part of the Kickstarter boom, raising nearly three times as much as its initial $900,000 funding goal. Fargo had always wanted to return to the series, and with Kickstarter, he accomplished this goal without any outside influence from publishers or investors. The only people affecting the creative decisions of the game are the fans who have wanted to return to Wasteland for the past two decades.


The world has gone to hell, but remnants of modern technology have survived

voraciously on mutated plant life, 196 feet away.

A supafly attacks Alfonso Milano, inflicting 2 points of damage.

A supafly just misses Grease.

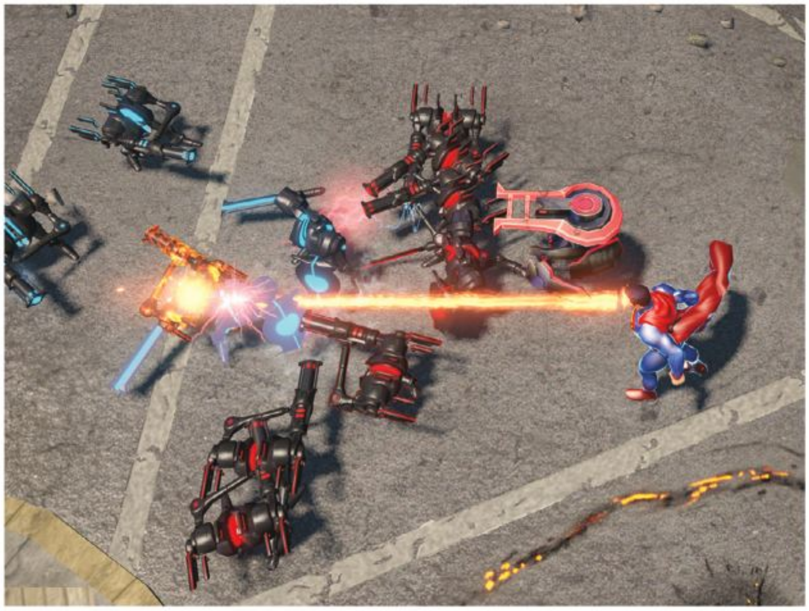
You have no idea what happened here, but the thick, wet smell of vegetables surrounds you like a cloying wet blanket of...vegetablism.

Ending turn.

Ending turn.

Infinite Crisis

The Man of Tomorrow joins Turbine's MOBA cast



The Man of Steel is a difficult character to incorporate into video games. Developers have struggled to represent the invincible, multi-powered alien in a way that stays true to his character without breaking the game. The Superman Turbine is introducing to its DC-themed MOBA touts the impressive speed and dramatic powers you'd expect without disrupting the delicate balance between characters. Turbine shared the first details about the iconic hero with us.

Turbine initially experimented with allowing Superman to use his flight ability to effectively teleport around the map. The developer has since focused on the Superman creedo of "More powerful than a locomotive, faster than a speeding bullet." His Heat Vision blasts enemies for damage and knocks them out of the fray. Triggering the move once more lets Superman close the gap. Kryptonian Might lets him charge up basic attacks to hit even harder. Frost Breath blasts enemies with a cone of frozen air, which deals damage and cuts down movement speed. Superman's ultimate ability, Speeding Bullet, lets him quickly fly towards an enemy and take a chunk out of their health. His ultimate can also be used to cut and run if things get hairy.

Every character in Infinite Crisis has a passive ability. Superman's Man of Steel passive grants a damage-muting shield each time he uses an ability. Turbine says he's great for dropping into skirmishes out of nowhere to deal a ton of hurt to the opposing team. His Achilles' Heel is ranged attackers that can deal quick damage while keeping a distance from the blue and red juggernaut.

Superman isn't playable in the closed beta yet, but I did play around with Harley Quinn on the newest map, Coast City Marina. Harley is a support character who shines brightest when helping teammates push lanes and capture new objectives. I appropriately followed and aided Joker as he dealt his more powerful ranged attacks. Harley swings her mallet to knock enemies back, offering respite to heal allies. She can also throw pies and shoot minion drones with her pistol. While Harley's emphasis is on support, her mallet-smashing ultimate packs a wallop. Our Harley/Joker duo proved useful while sticking to the bottom lane of Coast City Marina's streets. Teams can vie for control of a devastating Doomsday Device in the center of the map, which can be used to deal huge damage to enemies or their Power Core (destroying it scores a win).

Infinite Crisis is currently in closed beta, but it opens to the public this spring. Turbine is still tweaking the balance and changing things daily, but it's up, running, and ready to entertain MOBA fans with a taste for DC's universe. » **Tim Turi**

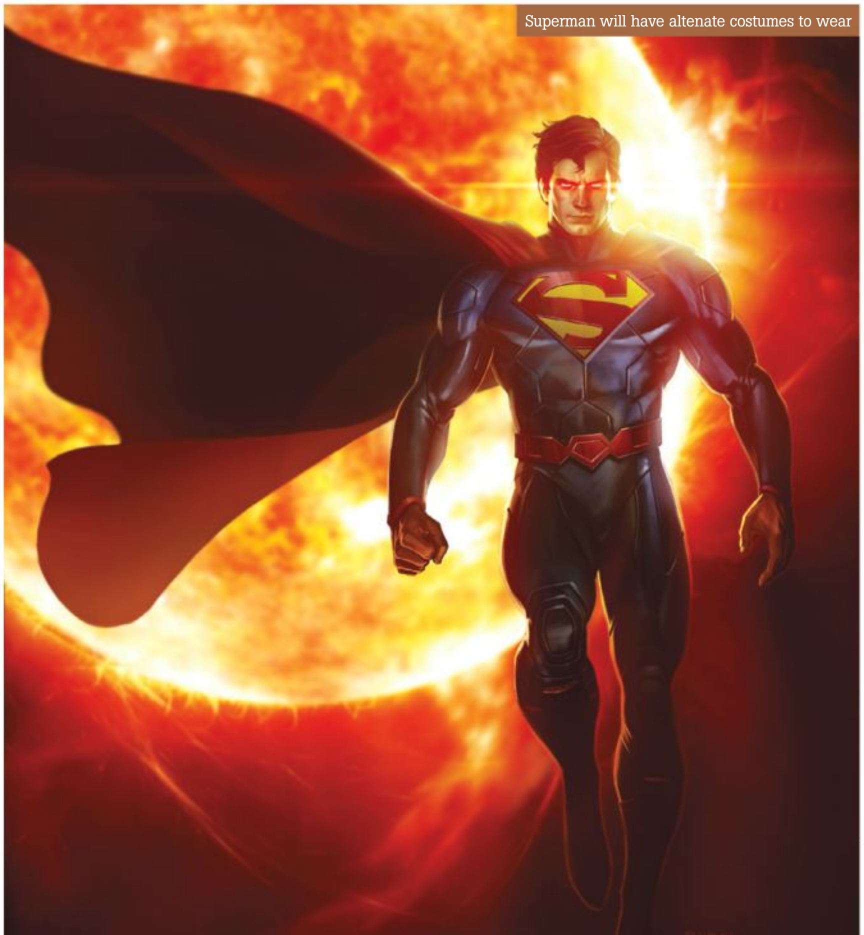
» **Platform**
PC

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

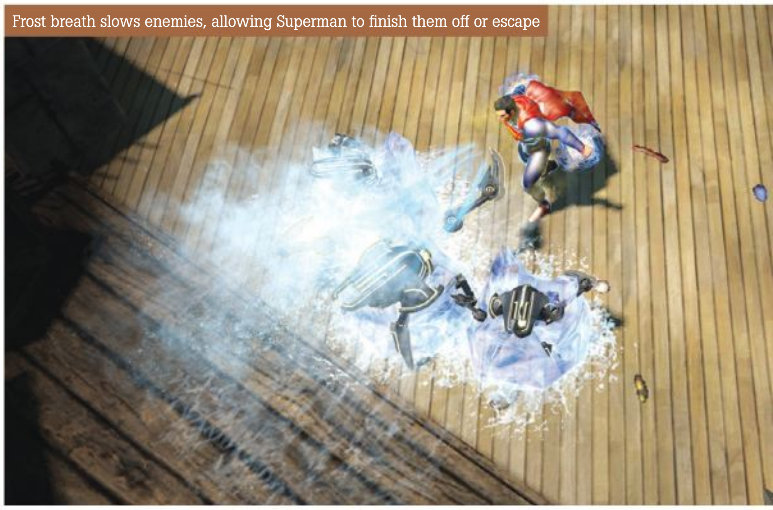
» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
Turbine

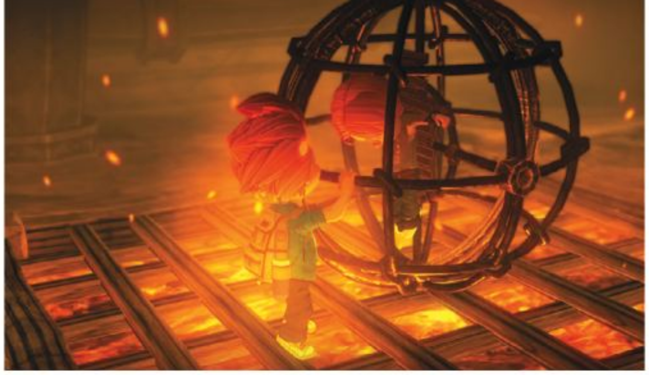
» **Release**
2014

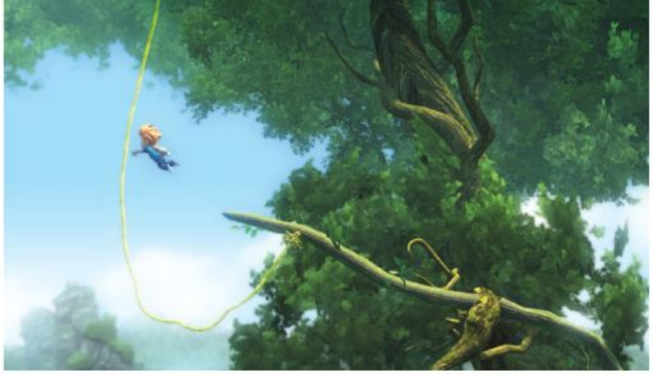


Superman will have altenate costumes to wear



Frost breath slows enemies, allowing Superman to finish them off or escape





Max: The Curse of Brotherhood

The power of imagination

» Platform
Xbox One
Xbox 360 • PC

» Style
1-Player Platform/Puzzle

» Publisher
Microsoft Studios

» Developer
Press Play

» Release
December 20, 2013
(Xbox One)
2014
(Xbox 360, PC)

In 2010, Danish developer Press Play released the charming 2D platformer Max & the Magic Marker. While it was generally well-received, the game didn't offer much variety for its central gameplay hook (the titular marker). With Max: The Curse of Brotherhood, the team has created a successor that appears worlds ahead of the original in every way.

In a brief opening cutscene, Max is bickering with his little brother Felix and searching the Internet for ways to make him disappear. He gets his wish when a large portal opens in his bedroom and a giant, hairy hand snags Felix and draws him in. Armed only with his magic marker, Max's brotherly instincts kick in and he dives into the portal to save Felix.

Max's marker was typically confined to creating bridges and platforms in the original, but he can unlock five unique powers in The Curse of Brotherhood. Early on, players can use the marker to create pillars out of flat ground. As Max progresses, the marker gains the ability to create tree branches, vines, waterspouts, and fireballs.

These elements interact with each other in clever ways, which players need to use to progress through the game. A large chasm can be crossed by drawing a vine to swing into a waterspout Max has created. A raging river is too dangerous for Max to swim in, but he can draw a tree branch, cut it off at the root, and use it as a raft.

I played through several levels that took place near the beginning, middle, and end of the game. Each of these three areas felt significantly different, which makes me feel like The Curse of Brotherhood shakes things up at a frequent pace. Early stages felt similar to the platforming in Limbo, with the added ability to create the pillars of earth. By mid-game, I was using vines and branches to tackle puzzles and avoid monsters. In one volcanic area near the end, I was tasked with using my magic marker to protect Max's brother Felix as well. At this point, he's imprisoned in a metal ball that can attach to vines and be launched with water spouts.

The variety of ways Max's marker can be used to manipulate the environment and solve puzzles is impressive, and the visuals are stunning. While the weight and movement of Max may feel similar to the popular Limbo, the look of the world and methods of progressing are far different. Max: The Curse of Brotherhood is looking very much on track to being another interesting downloadable puzzle platformer for Microsoft systems. **» Dan Ryckert**

Diablo III: Reaper of Souls

Waging a holy campaign across Blizzard's beta

» Platform
PlayStation 4 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/RPG
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Blizzard Entertainment

» Developer
Blizzard Entertainment

» Release
2014

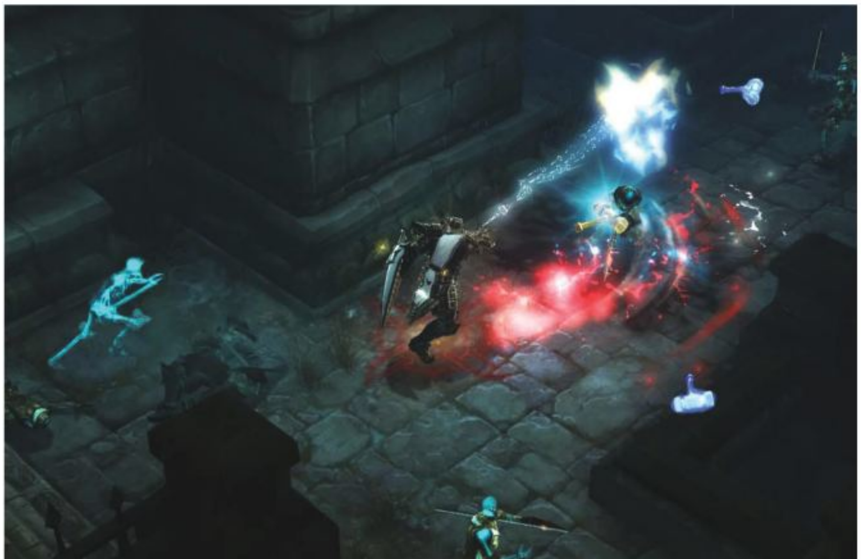
After sending Diablo screaming and clawing his way back into his cage, I didn't find many reasons to pull Diablo III back off my shelf last year. However, Diablo III's expansion, Reaper of Souls, looks to provide plenty of reasons to jump back into the fray. Malthael, the Angel of Death, has stolen the Black Soulstone and started to threaten humanity's existence. I jumped into the game's beta to cut down his army of reapers, but quickly fell in love with the expansion's new character class.

I spent a lot of time with the Mage and the Monk in Diablo III, but Reaper of Souls introduces a new class called the Crusader. I usually don't care for holy warriors, but this shield-bearing soldier isn't a holy water tossing wimp. Similar to the Paladin from Diablo II, these zealots are a blend of close combat and ranged attacks. Crusaders build "wrath" as they attack enemies, and this resource can be used for an array of screen-clearing attacks. Shield Bash is one of the character's early moves, which I relied on heavily. This attack is great for closing the distance between enemies and can be augmented early to create a shotgun-like burst when the Crusader's shield connects with an enemy's skull.

The Fist of the Heavens is another move I fell in love with. This area attack lets the Crusader call down a pillar of lightning from the sky that dissipates across the ground, shocking anyone that stands too close to the target.

The Crusader can handle himself in close quarters as well. His Heavenly Strength ability allows him to equip a two-handed weapon in one hand as long as he's using a shield in the other, depleting only a small portion of his overall speed. When situations got a little too dicey, I used the Steed Charge, which made the Crusader invincibile for a few seconds while a mystical horse helped him charge to a safe distance.

I didn't have time during the beta to reach the end-game content, such as the raid-like Nephalem Rifts, but if Reaper of Souls' post-credits content is as fun as its opening hours, then I suspect I'll have plenty of reasons to keep this expansion installed on my hard drive when it releases sometime later this year. **» Ben Reeves**

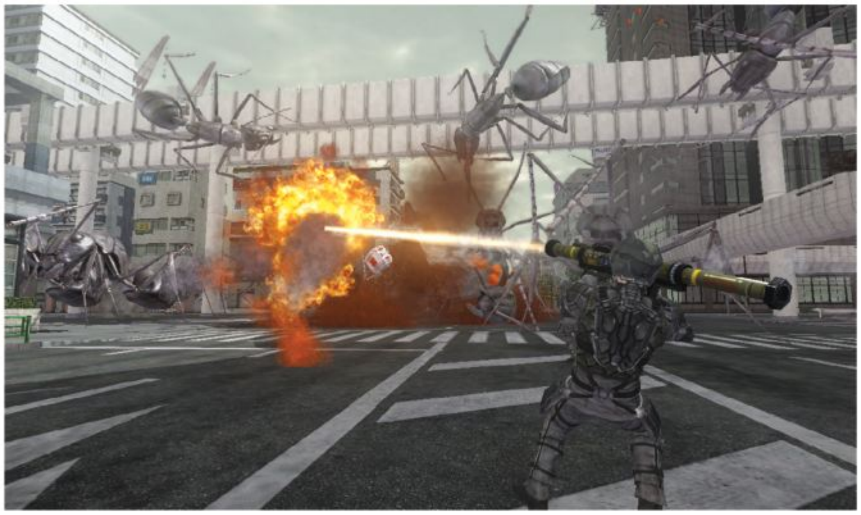


Earth Defense Force 2025

Awaiting the impending invasion

Several games planned for 2013 saw their released dates pushed to 2014. High-profile titles like Watch Dogs and DriveClub grabbed the biggest headlines, but the slip of Earth Defense Force 2025 was equally disappointing for a small-but-loyal group of fans. With its new February release date, the latest entry in this cult classic series is about to make fans of humanity, Earth, and ridiculous weapons very happy.

With the ability to fight the invading Ravagers as four different classes with unique abilities, players experiment to find their preferred methods for taking down giant bugs and robots. For instance, the Fencer class uses heavy weaponry like hammers, shields, and chain guns. The Ranger class offers a more traditional EDF experience, mixing agility with assault rifles and missile launchers. No matter how much you like a particular class, you won't use just one for the whole game. The dozens of missions demand different approaches, so players have a reason to switch it up.



The potential of each class expands the more players enter the fray. With up to four players taking down Ravagers online, you can explore how members of the Earth Defense Force work together. Damage-oriented classes can rely on the support-oriented Air Raider to get out of tough spots, and the Wing Diver can blast enemies from the air while the rest of the squad handles the situation on the ground.

While these elements add some depth to the experience, Earth Defense Force 2025 is an action-packed game about heroes killing alien invaders. It isn't focused on tactics; the series has arcade sensibilities that focus on shooting first and asking questions later. The class system and hundreds of unlockable weapons are entertaining wrinkles, but the main draw is massive destruction and exploding bad guys.

Earth Defense Force 2017 was a cult hit, and anyone who has ever chanted "EDF! EDF!" should be excited that this follow-up is almost upon us. Delays may sting at first, but if the extra time results in a better game, everyone wins in the end. » **Joe Juba**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
D3Publisher

» **Developer**
Sandlot

» **Release**
February

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reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

90 The Walking Dead: Season Two – Episode 1: All That Remains

We spent last season protecting Clementine, but now we're controlling her and making her biggest choices. Telltale doesn't hold back as you choose your alliances, meet up with old and new faces, and square off against more zombies. Clementine grows up in a coming-of-age story amidst a zombie apocalypse. You decide what type of person you want her to become, while wondering if you really know the best way to keep her alive.

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	EA's Code Wars.

AWARDS

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

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The Walking Dead: Season Two – Episode 1: All That Remains

Raising Clementine

8.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Assume the role of last season's darling Clementine and try to survive the zombie apocalypse

» **Graphics**
Little has changed, but well-placed camera angles deliver the action and emotions better

» **Sound**
Suspenseful music plays at the right times along with sound effects that heighten the tension

» **Playability**
Controls mimic the first season, but they are smoother in the fast-paced action sequences with better cues for your next move

» **Entertainment**
Clementine is captivating, and The Walking Dead's hellish world still presents tough choices that must be made to persevere

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

The Edge

The PC version rules the roost, especially in terms of graphics and loading times. Longer load times occur before action sequences in the PS3 and 360 versions, though the PS3 had some additional minor stuttering. On the other hand, the Xbox 360 looks less crisp and has inferior lighting.

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Telltale Games **Developer** Telltale Games **Release** December 17 **Rating** M

Growing up isn't easy, and doing it during a zombie apocalypse is an absolute nightmare. Exploring this hardship in the shoes of the most popular character from The Walking Dead's first season, the naive and adorable Clementine, is the highlight of season two's introductory episode. Putting the player behind a child in peril is a bold move, and so far Telltale is showing that it's up for the challenge by creating a worthy introduction to Clementine's newfound life.

Clementine is no longer the unworldly girl we met last season; she has accepted the diabolical world of The Walking Dead and fights to survive. She's smarter, bolder, and more intuitive, having learned from those who made their way into her life. All That Remains proves that she can be trusted to be in charge of her own destiny – and her own game.

This episode explores what Clementine's been up to since we last saw her, and where her journey has taken her. She runs into familiar faces and gripping new ones (like another child who is still naive to the horrors of the world), bringing new revelations and dilemmas to the table. They're multidimensional characters, providing intriguing new plot threads. You may hate some characters at first, but learning more about their backstory gives insight into their initial behavior. Still, some of the cast members are too reminiscent of last season's, which hinders an opening episode to a new season where players are looking for something fresh. I referred to one character as "Kenny Jr." thanks to a hothead demeanor and a similar trucker hat. Not all of the cast members are recycled archetypes – like the pregnant woman who is cruel to Clem – but I couldn't escape the parallels.

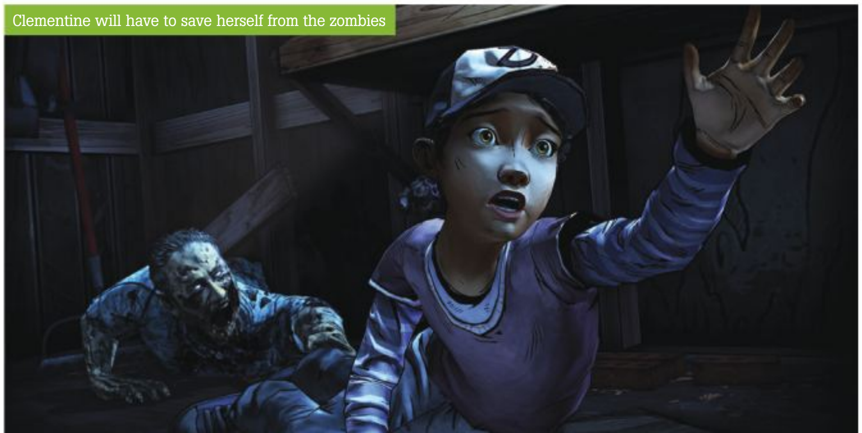
The action plays out similarly to what we've seen previously, as Clementine fends off zombies and other survivors, scavenges for food, sutures wounds, and tries to talk sense into adults who are clearly losing their minds. Telltale achieves this without making Clementine look like a super-powered little girl, and every experience feels realistic and authentic. Adults won't just take her word for things, and she often proves her usefulness rather than batting her eyelashes to appeal to their emotions (although, sometimes that does help).

Since you can play Clementine however you wish, the dialogue options are even more engaging than last season, as you determine the type of person she's growing up to be. Sometimes I made her sassy, other times I tried a kind approach, but no matter my response, characters always reacted reasonably and realistically to her age.

Telltale improved on its action sequences, taking a cue from the fluid action of The Wolf Among Us. As Clementine, brute force isn't usually successful. Instead, she dodges out of the way with a flick of the stick, and the constant need to escape creates great tension. Throw in a few kicks and press a button repeatedly as you fight to break free, and these fights make you feel right in the moment. Once again, Telltale refuses to pull any punches; the violence isn't softened just because Clementine is a child. I cringed more times than I was expecting during this episode due to some of the brutality, but that's exactly what an episode of The Walking Dead should make you do.

Those expecting to see a huge impact from their choices last season won't find much in the first episode to fulfill that desire. This is disappointing, but Telltale provides more than enough nods to the past, and gives enough reasoning for the present that it doesn't sting too hard.

All That Remains delivers by providing answers to lingering questions from season one and setting up new obstacles for Clementine to face. My biggest reservation is that it features many similarities to the first season; I have to wonder how many zombie fights and new camps of people I can find before they all blend together. While many portions evoked déjà vu, seeing events from Clementine's perspective keeps the narrative exciting. As long as the scenarios stay unique and unpredictable, this season has the potential to be more intense than the last. Time will tell how Tellale approaches a coming-of-age story in a zombie apocalypse, but if they continue not to hold back, Clementine is bound to be more than just a little girl in a hellish world. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Clementine will have to save herself from the zombies

Gran Turismo 6

Searching for Gran Turismo

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (16-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Polyphony Digital **Release** December 6 **Rating** E

A number of current staples in the racing genre are features Gran Turismo either pioneered or refined. As car and manufacturer licenses proliferated, sim-racing became an aim, and attention to detail increased, the series became scenery for the PlayStation brand and the poster child for the monotony of iteration. Gran Turismo 6 is the epitome of this series at its most base; it lacks any substantive new features, yet is more committed than ever to its original vision.

Similar to Gran Turismo 5, progression in the career mode is not hard to come by. Gone are the days of having to re-race early events just to progress. New races are gated by a star system, but it's not long until you've earned enough of them to open a side event like bouncing in a NASA buggy on the moon or renting a hot car for a special time trial. As relatively open as the game is, I still don't like having to hedge my bets and buy a car that allows me to enter the most races possible to maximize my purchase. Forza 4 (not the new Forza, ironically) was cool because it presented races based on whatever car you bought – a subtle but effective change from the norm.

In other restrictive moves, GT 6 doesn't gift nearly as many cars for winning racing series like in previous entries, there are no used cars, and you can't sell the vehicles in your garage that you don't want. Perhaps this was done because you can buy in-game credits with real money for the first time in the series. Regardless, the move is not intrusive, and apart from some high-end, desirable cars, there were enough rides at affordable prices that I didn't feel hemmed in. Races and cars in the career mode are defined by the PP rating from the online portion of GT 5. It may sound limiting, but it actually gives you latitude in the kinds of cars you can use and therefore options in your career. That being said, I did have fewer cars in my garage than usual.

The predictability of the career structure is mirrored by the spacing and routines of the AI cars in front of you, which makes the on-track racing more rote than dynamic. And yet, the game is certainly not without its challenges. The size of the field and the number of laps increase as you move up the ranks, and driving the cars requires more skill as their power grows. It's here where I really started to enjoy the game.

A number of the game's 1,000 plus vehicles are quite expensive, but it's not hard to find one that suits your needs

I fault Gran Turismo 6 for not having a more inviting career mode, its trifling damage system (repairing is included but hardly ever necessary), missing course creator (it will be added after launch via an update), and the overall feeling that so much has not changed with the series, but if there's a bright spot in that malaise, it's that I rediscovered the joy of being in awe and afraid of the cars.

It's easy to bolt on extra HP in the tuning shop, but knowing what to do with it, or with a finely tuned rear-wheel car, for instance, is a matter of skill that all these years later I am still trying to consistently muster. Making efficient turns and managing cars' acceleration, braking, and handling (the new suspension system feels really good) is a symmetry of gameplay that the franchise still excels at. When I was having to do everything in my limited power to keep up with the pack in some 20-minute endurance race or continually re-racing a side event at Nürburgring without going off the track or touching another car because I knew there was a gold-trophy performance within me somewhere (if only once), I enjoyed Gran Turismo 6. With no rewind mechanic to make my wrongs right, feeling this exposed was exhilarating.

The online offerings have made strides since GT 5, with race options like weather/time progression, qualifying, and the ability to save your favorite race settings. However, apart from the seasonal time trial events, it lacks leaderboards, any over-arching structure, or much of a connection to your single-player campaign (other than the money you win and the use of your garage). More content is on the way, like race clubs, but it isn't available at launch, so it falls outside the scope of this review.

It's fitting that GT 6 appears at the end of the PS3's arc. This 15-year anniversary is an unironic celebration of the yoke of its legacy, but it doesn't have to signal the end of the franchise itself. Thankfully, glimmers of Gran Turismo's racing spirit still live. » **Matthew Kato**

8

PS3

» **Concept**
Stay true to the legacy of the franchise even though it's in need of an update

» **Graphics**
Still looks nice, but objects and textures sometimes pop in as you approach. Driving at night is cool, and so is the time of day transition for the longer races

» **Sound**
Apart from the car sounds, I've never liked the background music for the series. The licensed songs get in the way of the audio experience

» **Playability**
I like the feel of using the right analog for both gas/brake (as opposed to the face buttons). This year introduces an optional onscreen indicator arrow when someone is in your vicinity

» **Entertainment**
There's nothing special about the series anymore. However, I still find a lot of enjoyment in the challenge

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

SteamWorld Dig

A 2D mining expedition that strikes gold

8

PC

» Concept
Channel the spirit of Minecraft's digging and mineral gathering into a Metroid-inspired side-scroller

» Graphics
Clean and simple. Expect to stare at dirt for a long time. The appearance of the ground changes dramatically by the end of the game

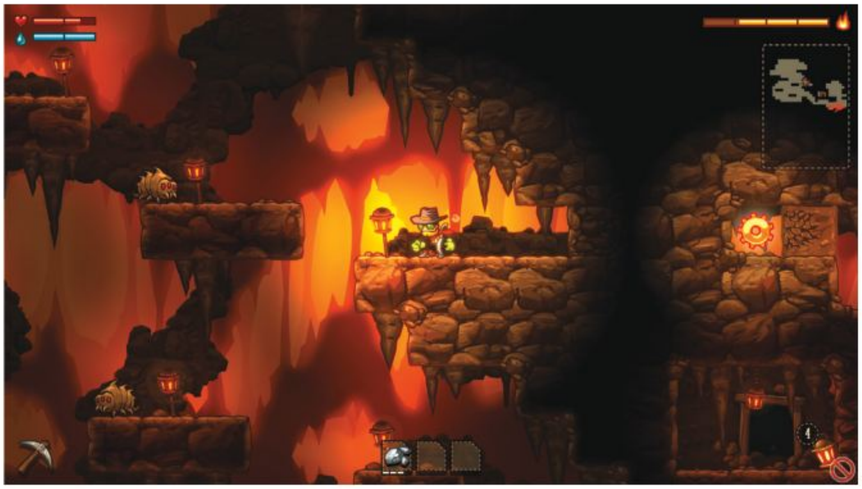
» Sound
The shopkeepers output cutesy robot gibberish. The sounds of a drill boring through a cluster of precious minerals is strangely satisfying

» Playability
Easy to pick up and learn, assuming you have a gamepad. Expect hand cramps playing with a keyboard

» Entertainment
Expertly paced skill progression and the simple joy of digging deep into the earth keeps you hooked from beginning to end

» Replay Value
Moderately High

Style 1-Player Action/Platforming **Publisher** Image & Form **Developer** Image & Form **Release** December 5 **Rating** E10+



Break ground in almost any digital video game marketplace and you find a huge vein of Minecraft-inspired games. These titles focus on digging deep into the earth, gathering resources, and finding enhancements that allow you to delve further down. The glut of digging games makes it difficult for one to stand out, but SteamWorld Dig is a gem among the junk. This side-scrolling adventure deftly balances repetitive mining with satisfying, Metroid-like progression.

Similar to games like Terraria and Super Motherload, SteamWorld Dig offers players a sliced, 2D perspective of the earth. The new PC version looks much better than its previously released 3DS counterpart, showing off nearly twice as much on-screen terrain. Shiny minerals and hidden enemies are easily spotted thanks to the cross-section view, assuming you have enough fuel in your lantern (which replenishes when returning topside). Run out and you're left guessing whether that next dirt block takes twelve swings of your pickaxe or two. Your bag can only hold so many valuable minerals as well. Fuel and limited inventory capacity force players to return to the surface where they can buy useful upgrades like larger bags, armor upgrades, or equipment that makes you dig faster and hit bad guys harder. This carefully designed gameplay loop kept me hooked. Cashing in a huge payload feels great, and digging deeper with your new gear is even better. Perfectly placed warp points and droppable teleporters take the sting out of climbing back out of your hole.

The art of digging tests your skills in platforming and puzzle solving. Planning your route out of the mine is as important as scrambling for pretty gems. Early on, this means digging a vertical shaft you can simply wall jump your way back up. Later on, dirt bricks that rematerialize and heavy, gravity-defying blocks make traversal more challenging.

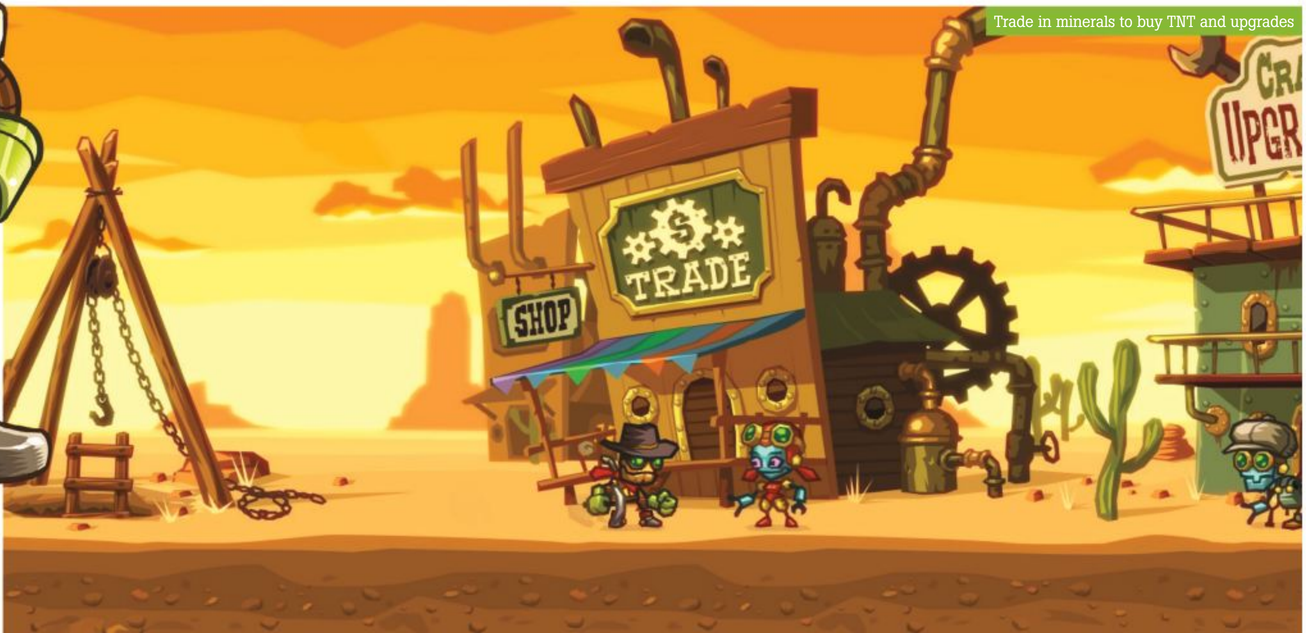
Scattered puzzles require players to think before they dig. For example, one situation presents players with a series of huge, impenetrable boulders atop vulnerable supports. You have to line up the big rocks into a path by correctly destroying the smaller structures. These fun little puzzles are tricky without ever feeling unfair. The payoff is usually a clutch of precious stones or a worthwhile new ability.

As SteamWorld Dig's robotic miner digs deeper into the ruins of a dead civilization, he's rewarded with powerful forgotten technology. A steam-powered drill cuts digging down to a fraction of the time. A rocket punch clobbers enemies from a distance and makes digging upward easier. These upgradeable abilities are powered by scattered water pools our hero soaks up. Drilling through the earth like a manic mole is when the game shines brightest. Typical platforming powers like a double jump and a fall damage dampener come later on, and are warmly welcome. The platforming feels loose and sloppy at first, but the added mobility makes up for those shortcomings by the end.

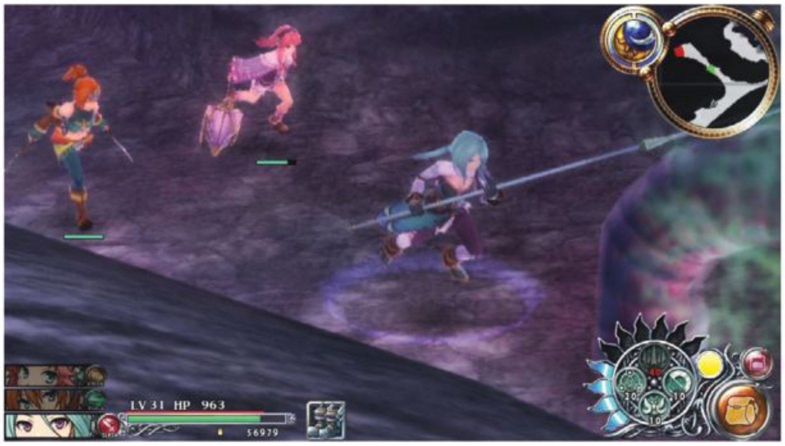
Unlike a lot of mining games, SteamWorld Dig ends. The story is practically nonexistent, but you know it's coming to an end when your best equipment clangs against the ground in futility. The final boss fight puts all your hard-earned gadgets and tricks to the test, but by then my hero was such a powerhouse that he easily steamrolled the foe. The final battle is unmemorable, but doesn't dilute the journey. I loved watching the strata gradually change from simple soil to the remnants of a lost society.

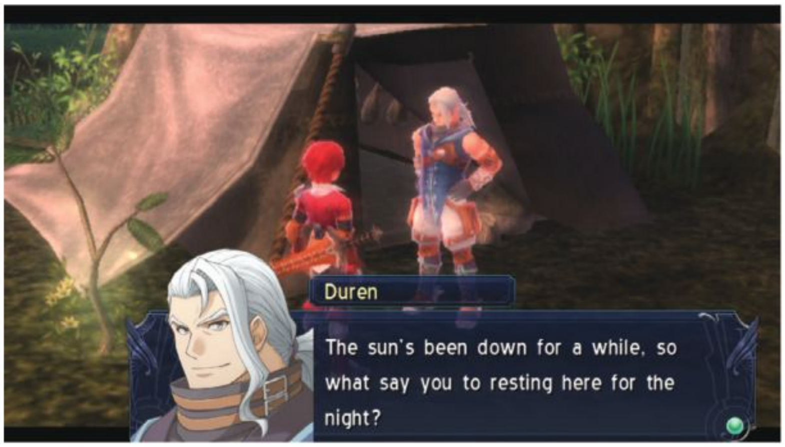
SteamWorld Dig does a wonderful job of combing the disparate gameplay elements of mining and classic platforming into one polished package. Digging in is worth it whether you're a Minecraft veteran, curious about the mining game frenzy, or just looking for some solid side-scrolling action and exploration.

» **Tim Turi**



Trade in minerals to buy TNT and upgrades





Duren

The sun's been down for a while, so what say you to resting here for the night?

Ys: Memories Of Celceta

The red-headed hero makes good again

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Xseed Games **Developer** Nihon Falcom **Release** November 25 **Rating** T

If Memories of Celceta proves anything, it's that the Ys series, which has been around for over two decades, is making a play to become a bigger name in the genre again. Memories of Celceta retains what makes the series what it is: twitch controls, stat-focused enhancements, and massive boss battles. It also updates enough of its elements to appeal to newcomers who didn't grow up playing the Ys games. Memories of Celceta feels classic without being archaic, and that's what makes it so endearing.

Exploration and action are front and center in every Ys game, and this entry is no different. Memories of Celceta's real-time action battle system isn't about button mashing; instead it forces a lot of thought on the battlefield. A lack of defense can be costly, testing your twitch skills at every moment. Thankfully, the controls are extremely easy to pick up and only require simple button presses to unleash advanced skills. You also receive bonuses for exploiting the system's intricacies. Blocking as an attack is about to hit lets you come back with a string of critical strikes. Finish off an enemy using a skill to regain SP and health. Strike down enemies with weapons they're weak against to receive more gold and rare items. The different bonuses encourage plenty of experimentation and may just make you try out strategies you've never considered. I usually feel safest defending over dodging, but when dodging at the right moment allowed my party to go invisible and slowed enemies, I happily started using it more.

Smart use of exploits is also your key to maximizing the crafting system, since certain attacks and party selection can increase your rare item drops. Not only does better weaponry drop, but you also earn better minerals for crafting. The crafting system is easy to grasp; all you need to do is refine minerals to get the best upgrades possible. For instance, you can add poison or extra strength to a weapon. Crafting became one of my favorite elements as I watched my decisions make battles play out quickly, especially the tough boss battles.

In Memories of Celceta, the Great Forest has plenty to offer and this extends to treasures, villages, bonus bosses, and dungeons. In dungeons, you solve small puzzles using your party members. Party members all have unique skills you can switch to on the fly, like lockpicking, destroying brittle walls, and shooting down out of reach obstacles to create paths. Swapping party members not only keeps things interesting in dungeons, but also in battles. For a good portion of the game I used the fast-attacker Adol, but then switched to heavy-attacker Duran for slower foes.

Memories of Celceta does have some blemishes. Dungeons require some backtracking and can be easy to get lost in. Difficulty spikes occur when entering new areas on the map, but can be overcome by upgrading your weaponry, which usually makes you feel overpowered until the next new area. While the characters have some funny dialogue, they never really grow on you. The story is a reimagining of Ys IV, but it's not enthralling. It merely provides Adol a reason to explore; he's trying to regain his memories of previous adventures through the Great Forest of Celceta. The majority of these memories are snoozefests, and most of the revelations are forgettable. While narrative has always been second-rate in the series, this isn't an excuse to give Ys a free pass for its clichéd, uninteresting plot.

That being said, all of Memories of Celceta's elements come together so well that I wanted to engage in everything. I haven't been compelled to be a completionist in a long time, but I returned to my roots with Memories of Celceta. Battles were so fun and fast and dungeons kept adding new elements often enough that I never once felt the grind. Crafting kept me engaged by making me find for the best stat or elemental boosts. This is some of the most fun I've had playing an RPG this year, proving that Ys has what it takes to keep afloat. » **Kimberley Wallace**

8.5

Vita

» Concept
Explore an expansive forest to discover its mysteries and retrace the memories of the amnesiac Adol

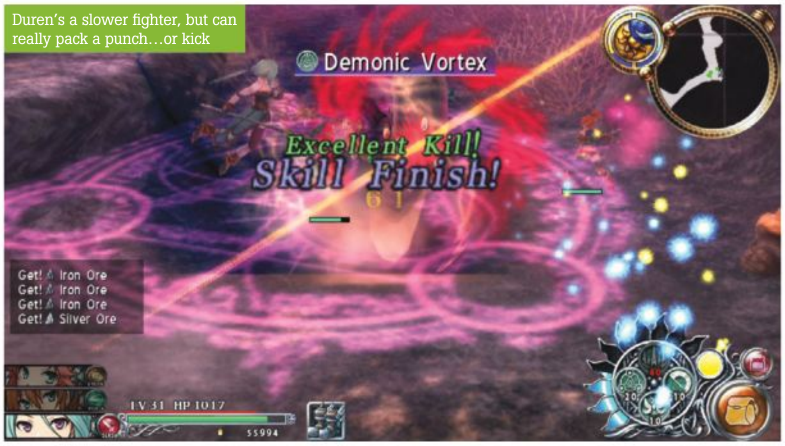
» Graphics
The vibrant world looks sharp, and the animated scenes are absolutely gorgeous

» Sound
From the soothing classical melodies to the tense synth-rock boss themes, this entry upholds the series' tradition of great music

» Playability
Easy-to-grasp concepts complemented by smooth controls make it a pleasure to play

» Entertainment
Memories of Celceta brings plenty for old-school and new RPG fans with its exciting action combat, sprawling world, tense boss battles, and calculated crafting system

» Replay Value
Moderately High


Duren's a slower fighter, but can really pack a punch…or kick

Adol has some flashy moves
LV 22 HP
1001

reviews archive

PLAYSTATION 4

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag	8.25	Dec-13
Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Contrast	7.5	Jan-14
Killzone: Shadow Fall	8	Jan-14
Knack	8.25	Jan-14
NBA 2K14	8.5	Jan-14
NBA Live 14	4	Jan-14
Need For Speed: Rivals	9	Jan-14
Resogun	8	Jan-14
Warframe	7.75	Jan-14

XBOX ONE

Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Crimson Dragon	6	Jan-14
Dead Rising 3	8.75	Jan-14
Forza Motorsport 5	8.75	Jan-14
Killer Instinct	8.75	Jan-14
Lococycle	7	Jan-14
NBA 2K14	8.5	Jan-14
NBA Live 14	4	Jan-14
Need For Speed: Rivals	9	Jan-14
Powerstar Golf	8	Jan-14
Ryse: Son of Rome	6	Jan-14
Super Motherload	6.25	Jan-14
Zoo Tycoon	7	Jan-14

PLAYSTATION 3

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag	8.25	Dec-13
Batman: Arkham Origins	8.5	Dec-13
Battlefield 4	8.75	Dec-13
Beyond: Two Souls	7.75	Nov-13
BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea – Episode 1	8	Jan-14
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons	8	Oct-13
Bureau: XCOM Declassified, The	7.5	Oct-13
Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Castle of Illusion	7.5	Oct-13
Contrast	7.5	Jan-14
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Diablo III	9.25	Oct-13
Disgaea D2: A Brighter Darkness	7.5	Nov-13
Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
Divekick	6.5	Nov-13
Do Not Fall	6	Oct-13
Dragon's Crown	8	Sep-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Dynasty Warriors 8	6	Sep-13
F1 2013	7.25	Dec-13
FIFA 14	8.75	Nov-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
Grand Theft Auto V	9.75	Nov-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Guacamelee	9	Jun-13
Ibb & Obb	7	Oct-13
Killer Is Dead	6	Oct-13
Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix	8.25	Oct-13
Last of Us, The	9.5	Aug-13
Lego Marvel Super Heroes	9	Dec-13
Lost Planet 3	6	Oct-13
Madden NFL 25	7.75	Oct-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Metro: Last Light	8.5	Jul-13
NBA 2K14	8.5	Dec-13
NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
NHL 14	7.75	Oct-13
Payday 2	8.25	Oct-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2014	8.25	Nov-13
Puppeteer	8.5	Nov-13
Rain	6.5	Nov-13
Ratchet & Clank: Into The Nexus	8	Jan-14
Rayman Legends	9	Oct-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
Saints Row IV	8.5	Oct-13
Skylanders: Swap Force	8.5	Dec-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Star Wars Pinball: Balance of the Force	8	Dec-13
Tales of Xillia	8.25	Sep-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
Wolf Among Us: Episode One – Faith, The	9	Dec-13
WWE 2K14	8	Dec-13
XCOM: Enemy Within	9.25	Dec-13

XBOX 360

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag	8.25	Dec-13
Batman: Arkham Origins	8.5	Dec-13
Battlefield 4	8.75	Dec-13
BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea – Episode 1	8	Jan-14
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons	8	Oct-13
Bureau: XCOM Declassified, The	7.5	Oct-13
Call of Duty: Ghosts	8	Dec-13
Castle of Illusion	7.5	Oct-13
CastleStorm	8.25	Aug-13
Charlie Murder	7.5	Oct-13
Contrast	7.5	Jan-14
Dark	2	Sep-13
Deadfall Adventures	4	Jan-14
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Diablo III	9.25	Oct-13
Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Dynasty Warriors 8	6	Sep-13
FIFA 14	8.75	Nov-13
Flashback	3	Nov-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
Grand Theft Auto V	9.75	Nov-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Killer Is Dead	6	Oct-13
Lego Marvel Super Heroes	9	Dec-13
Lost Planet 3	6	Oct-13
Madden NFL 25	7.75	Oct-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Metro: Last Light	8.5	Jul-13
NBA 2K14	8.5	Dec-13
NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
NHL 14	7.75	Oct-13
Payday 2	8.25	Oct-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2014	8.25	Nov-13
Rayman Legends	9	Oct-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
Saints Row IV	8.5	Oct-13

the score

7 | The Novelist

Platform PC **Release** December 10 **Rating** N/A

The lack of variety in your activities is unfortunate, but the cathartic moments of choice are exciting. Reading notes that reference your previous actions alternates between reassuring or depressing – but powerful in either case. I felt the weight of every option, and lamented my inability to keep his head above water on all fronts. **– Joe Juba**

5.75 | Tiny Brains

Platform PS4 **Release** December 3 **Rating** E10+

When all the powers combine to unlock a path through a level, especially when you've done it with the assistance of friends, the game comes together. Moments of interesting presentation appear here and there, but too many other aspects of Tiny Brains are sloppy and incomplete. **– Kyle Hilliard**

1 | Fighter Within

Platform Xbox One **Release** November 22 **Rating** T

From its unreliable (or non-functional) mechanics to its doofy character designs and hilariously bad writing, Fighter Within is garbage. It fails to operate on any level, and the content isn't deep enough to be fun even if everything worked. **– Dan Ryckert**

7.5 | Doki-Doki Universe

Platform PS4 **Release** December 10 **Rating** E10+

HumaNature Studios has created something genuinely good-natured and charming with Doki-Doki Universe. Even though elements get tedious, it was overall a welcome change of pace from the ordinary. **– Jeff Cork**

8.25 | The Room Two

Platform iOS **Release** December 12 **Rating** 9+

The App Store houses plenty of games designed for one- or two-minute bursts; The Room Two isn't one of them. Its powerful atmosphere and involved environmental puzzles deserve your undivided focus. **– Ben Reeves**

8 | Peggle 2

Platform Xbox One **Release** December 9 **Rating** E

It's one of those games that you can just pick up, play, and have immediate fun with. Yes, it plays out more like a level pack than a true sequel, but that's okay with me. As long as this formula remains entertaining, I don't mind more of it. **– Andrew Reiner**

8 | Icycle: On Thin Ice

Platform iOS **Release** November 22 **Rating** 4+

In many ways, Icycle: On Thin Ice feels like an art experiment as much as it does a video game. I missed having buttons, but not enough to make me abandon the game before getting to the end. Even without a defined narrative, I wanted to see everything Icycle: On Thin Ice had to offer. **– Kyle Hilliard**

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Sanctum 2	8.5	Jul-13
Skylanders: Swap Force	8.5	Dec-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Star Wars Pinball: Balance of the Force	8	Dec-13
State of Decay	7	Aug-13
TMNT: Out of the Shadows	2	Nov-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
Wolf Among Us: Episode One – Faith, The	9	Dec-13
WWE 2K14	8	Dec-13
XCOM: Enemy Within	9.25	Dec-13

Wii U

Disney Infinity	9	Oct-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Game & Wario	8	Aug-13
Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker, The	9.25	Nov-13
New Super Luigi U	8	Aug-13
Pikmin 3	9	Sep-13
Rayman Legends	9	Oct-13
Scribblenauts Unmasked: A DC Comics Adventure	7	Nov-13
Skylanders: Swap Force	8.5	Dec-13
Sonic Lost World	5	Dec-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Super Mario 3D World	9.25	Jan-14
Wii Party U	6	Dec-13
Wonderful 101, The	7.5	Oct-13

PC

Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs	7.75	Nov-13
Battlefield 4	8.75	Dec-13
BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea – Episode 1	8	Jan-14
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons	8	Oct-13
Card Hunter	8.25	Nov-13
Castle of Illusion	7.5	Oct-13
Civilization V: Brave New World	9.25	Sep-13
Company of Heroes 2	8	Aug-13
Contrast	7.5	Jan-14
Divekick	6.5	Nov-13
Divinity: Dragon Commander	7.5	Oct-13
Dota 2	9	Sep-13
DuckTales: Remastered	8	Oct-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Eador: Masters of the Broken World	8.25	Jul-13
Fallen Enchantress: Legendary Heroes	8.5	Aug-13
Gone Home	8.5	Oct-13
Gunpoint	8.75	Aug-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
Metro: Last Light	8.75	Jul-13
Outlast	7.5	Nov-13
Path of Exile	8	Jan-14
Payday 2	8.25	Oct-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Rogue Legacy	8	Sep-13
Saints Row IV	8.5	Oct-13
Sanctum 2	8.5	Jul-13
Shadowrun Returns	8.5	Sep-13
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	9	Oct-13
Stanley Parable, The	8.5	Dec-13
Swapper, The	9.25	Aug-13
Total War: Rome II	9	Nov-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
Wolf Among Us: Episode One – Faith, The	9	Dec-13
XCOM: Enemy Within	9.25	Dec-13

3DS

Animal Crossing: New Leaf	8.5	Aug-13
Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate	6	Dec-13
Etrian Odyssey Untold: The Millennium Girl	7.5	Dec-13
Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds, The	10	Dec-13
Mario & Luigi: Dream Team	8.5	Sep-13
Mario and Donkey Kong: Minis on the Move	6.5	Jul-13
Mario Party: Island Tour	4	Jan-14
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Dual Destinies	8	Dec-13
Pokémon X & Y	8.75	Dec-13
Project X Zone	7.75	Aug-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	9	Feb-11
Rune Factory 4	7	Dec-13
Shin Megami Tensei IV	8.5	Sep-13
Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11

VITA

Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate	6	Dec-13
Divekick	6.5	Nov-13
Dragon's Crown	8	Sep-13
Killzone: Mercenary	8	Nov-13
Muramasa Rebirth	7	Aug-13
Soul Sacrifice	7.25	Jul-13
Tearaway	9	Jan-14
Velocity Ultra	8	Oct-13

iOS

Angry Birds Star Wars II	7.5	Nov-13
Bloodmasque	6	Oct-13
Breach & Clear	6.5	Sep-13
Cut the Rope: Time Travel	8.5	Jul-13
Deus Ex: The Fall	6.75	Sep-13
Device 6	8.75	Dec-13
Draw Something 2	7	Jul-13
Dropchord	6.5	Oct-13
Haunted Hollow	6.75	Jul-13
Infinity Blade III	8.75	Nov-13
Iron Man 3	6.5	Jul-13
Kingdom Rush: Frontiers	9	Aug-13
Layton Brothers: Mystery Room	7	Sep-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Plants vs. Zombies 2	9.25	Sep-13
Scurvy Scallywags	7.75	Aug-13
Warhammer Quest	7.75	Aug-13

ANDROID

Angry Birds Star Wars II	7.5	Nov-13
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

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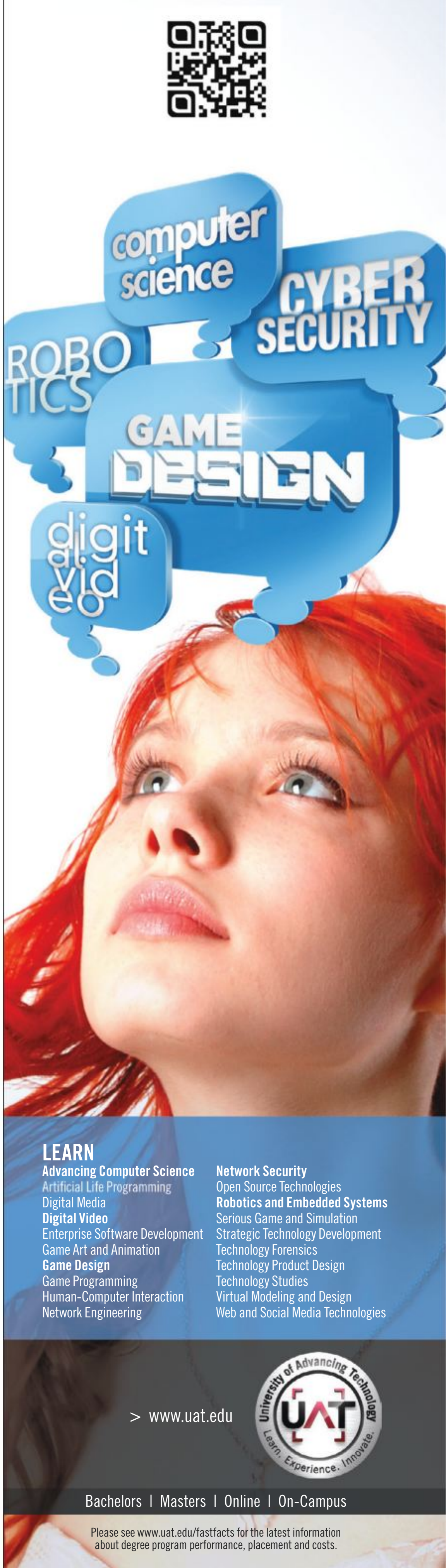

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TOP 25 Wii GAMES

As Nintendo ends its seven-year relationship with the Wii, and moves on to its new life with the Wii U, we reflect on the console's best games. With more than 100 million units sold, the Wii had a successful run. Here are the best games the Wii has to offer. **by Kyle Hilliard**

1 Super Mario Galaxy (2007)

Mario popularized platforming, and after elevating the genre with games like Super Mario World and Super Mario 64, we wondered if Nintendo could surprise us again. We were all excited to revisit Mario in a 3D setting after five years away from the genre, but nothing could have prepared us for jumping off a planet and letting gravity take over. Super Mario Galaxy rekindles some of the joys we experienced when we saw Princess Peach's castle in 3D for the first time in Super Mario 64, all with fantastic gameplay and the best graphics the Wii ever produced.

2 The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (2006)

Twilight Princess began its life as a GameCube game, and suffered a long delay when the decision was made to use it to launch the Wii, but it was worth the wait. The game brings a mature, dark tone to the Zelda franchise, and gave us our first chance to play out our pantomime dreams with the Master Sword.

3 Super Smash Bros. Brawl (2008)

Super Smash Bros. had one of the best E3 reveal trailers yet, surprising everyone with the inclusion of Sonic and Solid Snake as part of its fighting roster. When the game finally released, it did not disappoint. With the biggest cast in series history, a new story mode, the inclusion of the Smash Ball, and a sampling of online play, Brawl is one of the best ways to make (and lose) friends on the Wii.

4 Metroid Prime 3: Corruption (2007)

When the Wii was first shown to the press, Metroid Prime was retro-fitted to use the console's Wii Remote and Nunchuck to showcase how shooters could work with the new controller. Metroid Prime 3 released a few years later, ending developer Retro's trilogy with a flourish by offering a precise and immersive shooting experience.

5 Super Mario Galaxy 2 (2010)

Taking many of the ideas that couldn't fit on first Super Mario Galaxy's disc, Nintendo released a sequel three years later that added Yoshi and only a handful of repeated mechanics. This second 3D Mario platformer for the Wii easily stands with the best the console has to offer.

6 The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword (2011)

It took five years to bring a fully realized, exclusive Zelda game to the Wii. Skyward Sword gives fans a fuller picture of the relationship between Link and Zelda and features a level of control that improves upon the simplified swordplay of Twilight Princess.

7 Xenoblade Chronicles (2012)

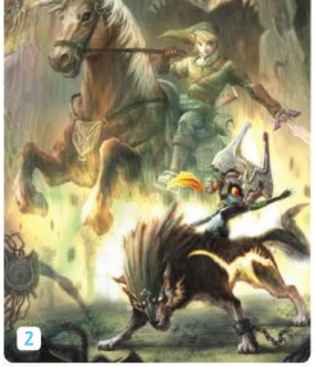
Xenoblade Chronicles arrived late to the Wii party, and very nearly didn't arrive at all, but RPG fans are glad it showed up. Taking place on the backs of two warring giants frozen in time, Xenoblade Chronicles' experience is surprisingly deep and stunningly beautiful, reminding players of a time when the genre was at the top of its game.

8 Donkey Kong Country Returns (2010)

Where Super Mario Galaxy delivers some of the best 3D platforming of any video game generation, Donkey Kong Country triumphantly offers some of the best side-scrolling platforming. Beautifully remixing the original soundtrack and posing an impressive level of challenge, Donkey Kong Country Returns should stand the test of time.

9 New Super Mario Bros. Wii (2009)

New Super Mario Bros. Wii offers the first chance for four players to play simultaneously in a non-sports Mario game. The ability to grief your friends as you precariously avoid lava and goombas in this 2D platformer makes the game all the more enjoyable and infuriating.



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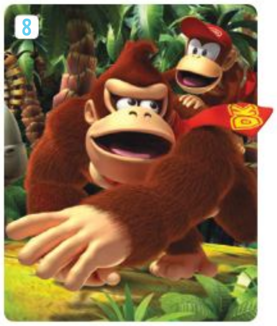

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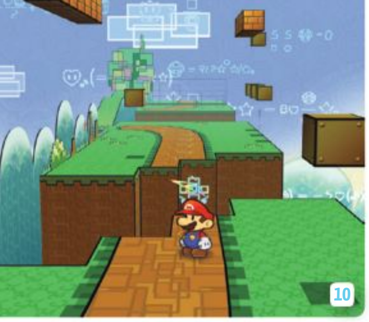
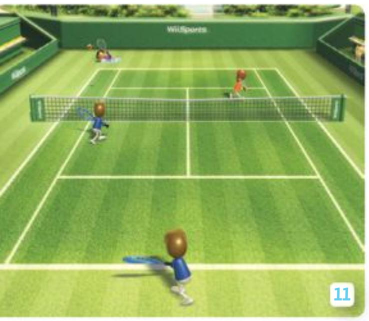
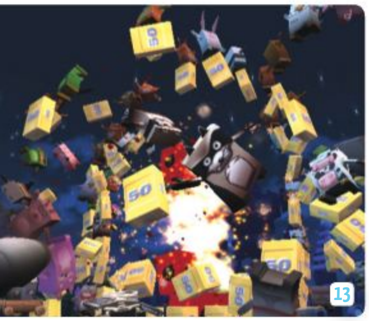






10 Super Paper Mario (2007)

Arriving early in the Wii's lifespan, Super Paper Mario is a crossover between Mario's typical platforming shenanigans and his turn-based RPG outings. With clever dialogue, a funny story, an attractive paper aesthetic, and atypical Mario gameplay, Super Paper Mario is one of the Wii's hidden gems.

11 Wii Sports (2006)

Wii Sports might not have offered the deepest gameplay, but it made everybody understand why the Wii was special. Bowling and tennis with a Wii Remote have come to define motion-controlled gaming. The simple gameplay helped a new demographic of players understand the appeal of video games for the first time.

12 Kirby's Epic Yarn (2010)

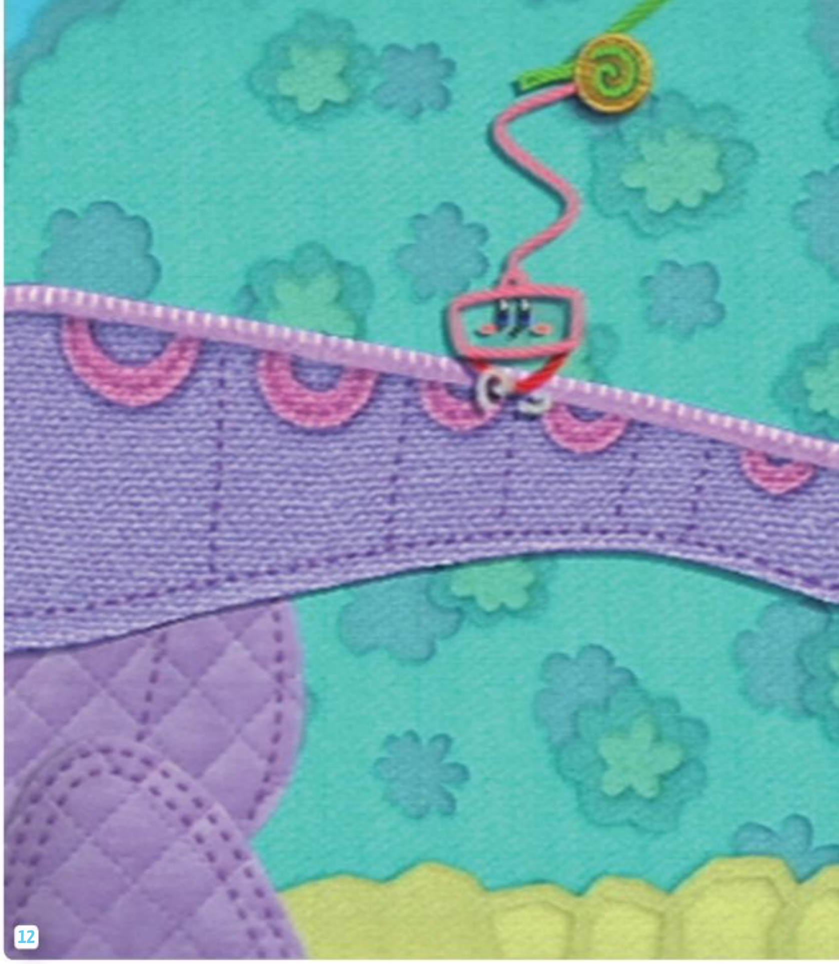
To play Kirby's Epic Yarn is to stare in the face of happiness. Kirby is already one of Nintendo's most charming characters, and seeing him converted into a yarn outline and placed into a world of fabric and buttons makes him even more adorable. It also helps that Kirby can turn into a gigantic yarn tank.

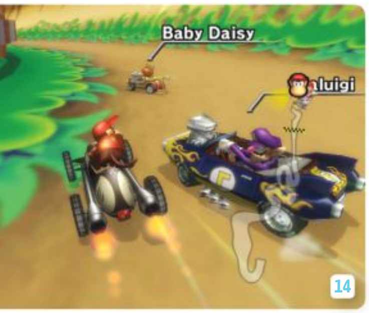
13 Boom Blox Bash Party (2009)

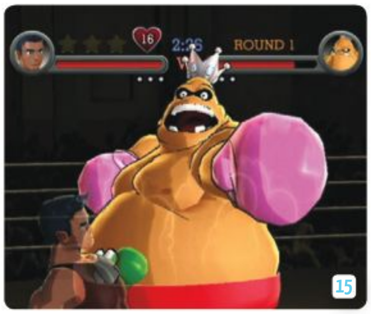
Before Angry Birds taught us the joy of knocking things over with assorted objects and animals, Steven Spielberg joined forces with Electronic Arts to create Boom Blox – a game where you knock over structures with assorted objects and animals. Bash Party is the much improved sequel, offering a polished multiplayer-focused version of one of life's simplest joys: breaking things.

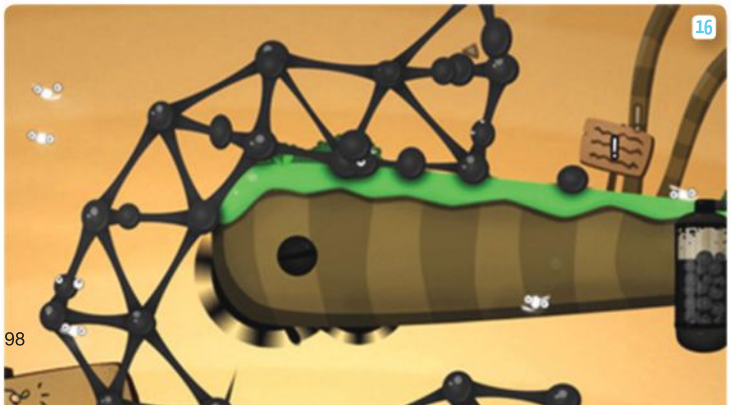
14 Mario Kart Wii (2008)

It wouldn't be a Nintendo console without Mario and pals driving around on go-karts, doing their best to make sure everyone else crashes before reaching the finish line. With the addition of motorcycles, motion controls, and online play, Mario Kart Wii is an infinitely replayable racer.









15 Punch-Out!! (2009)

The Punch-Out series was hugely popular on the NES and SNES, but disappeared during the Nintendo 64 and GameCube years, presumably to let the swelling go down. For its revival on the Wii, familiar boxers and the classic Punch-Out controls return to the ring courtesy of developer Next Level. The only thing missing is Mike Tyson himself.

16 World of Goo (2008)

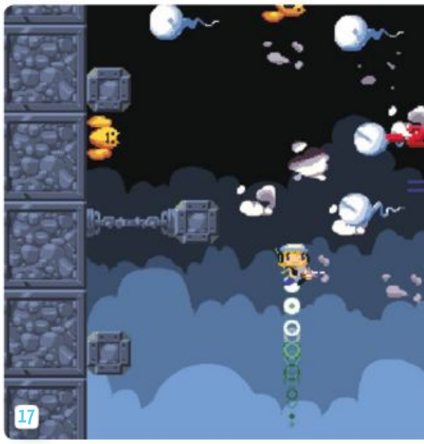
World of Goo released on PC and Wii on the same day, but not for competing consoles like the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 – and for good reason. Building bridges with the titular goo is better suited for play with a mouse or a Wii Remote than it is with control sticks. The unique premise made 2DBoy's game one of the first Nintendo eShop success stories.

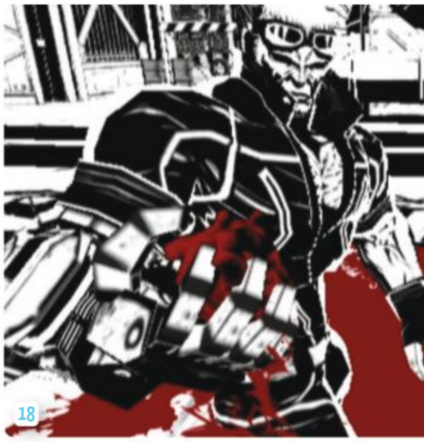
17 Cave Story (2010)

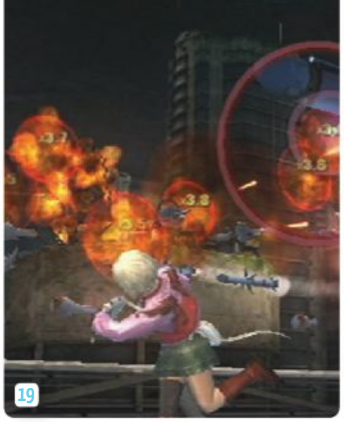
Similar to World of Goo, Cave Story existed outside of the Wii, but Nintendo's console is where many got their first taste of this great independent platformer. With inspiration from Metroid, and a healthy dose of platforming challenge, Cave Story offers all the nostalgia of old-school gaming, but with modern polish and conventions.

18 Madworld (2009)

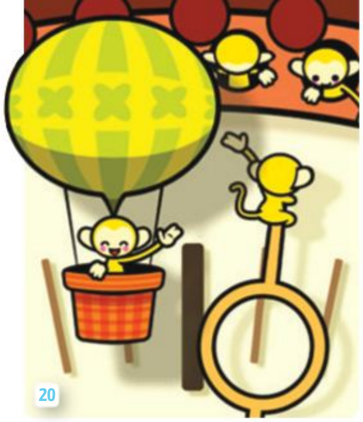
Madworld was one of the first games that unapologetically tried to prove M-rated games could find a home on the Wii. With its profane commentary, encyclopedic collection of killing methods, and a black-and-white aesthetic that constantly gets painted red by blood, Platinum Games' absurd game isn't for the easily offended or squeamish.







19



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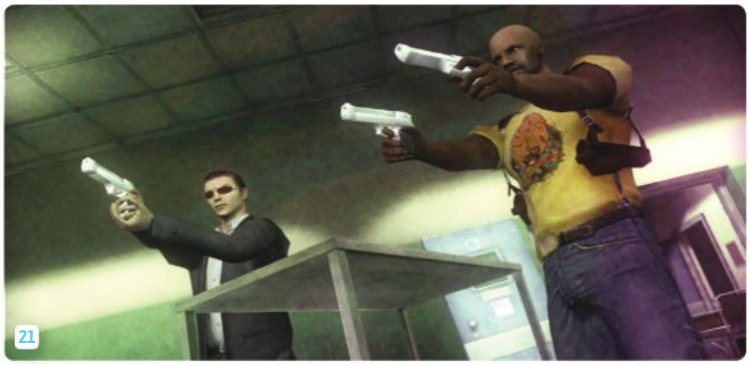
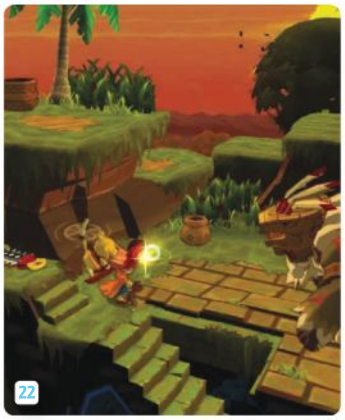
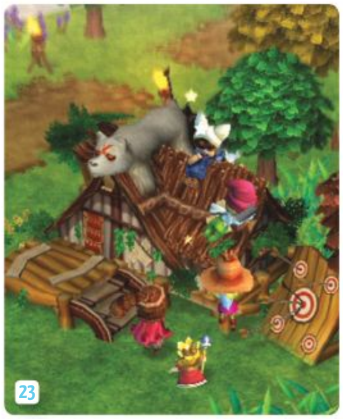


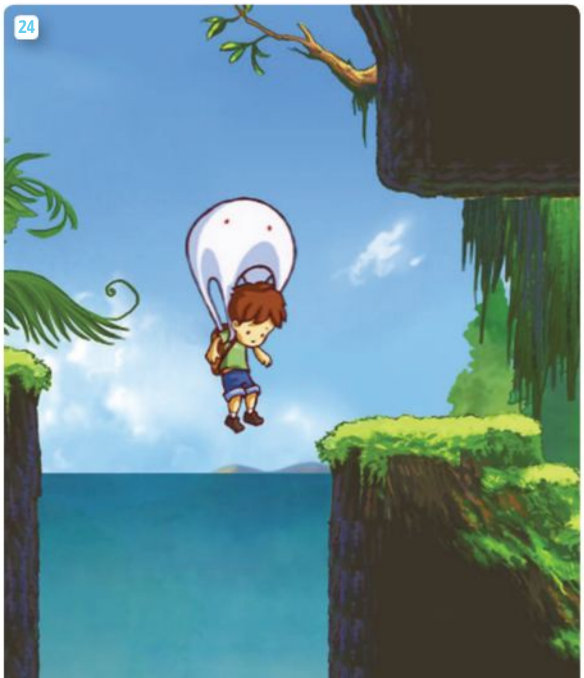
21



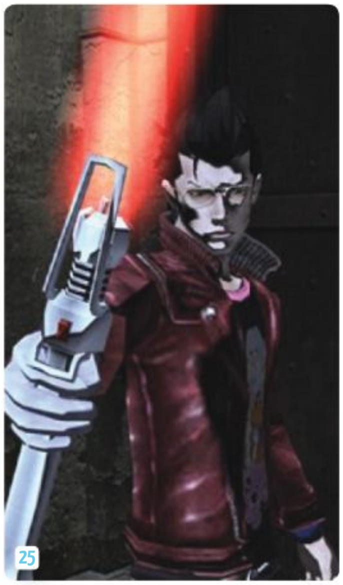
22



23



24



25

19 Sin & Punishment: Star Successor (2010)

Sin & Punishment was a well-regarded Nintendo 64 game that never made its way to the United States. After building a fanbase among importers, Nintendo decided to bring its sequel to North America via the Wii. The high-octane, on-rails shooter never stops to catch its breath as you ride dinosaurs and eventually travel into space, shooting everything on the way there.

20 Rhythm Heaven Fever (2012)

In a time where rhythm games seemed to have passed their prime, Nintendo released something wholly original, challenging, and hilarious that demands an excellent sense of musical timing. Rhythm Heaven Fever's quirky action all comes down to pressing either the A or B button in time with the assorted bizarre musical vignettes. One minute you are playing golf with a monkey, and only a few minutes later you are interviewing a wrestler, all in time to a great soundtrack.

21 House of the Dead: Overkill (2009)

Modeled after B-movie horror and released around the same time as the double feature film *Grindhouse*, House of the Dead: Overkill throws a curveball at the rail shooter genre with its profane, comedic dialogue and campy veneer. This is one game definitely intended for adult audiences only.

22 Zack & Wiki: Quest For Barbaros' Treasure (2007)

Point-and-click adventure games have made a comeback in recent years, but back in 2007 when Zack & Wiki released, they were still largely out of the public eye. Zack & Wiki is an excellent fit for the Wii Remote, as players interact with the environment to solve puzzles and uncover untold riches while experiencing the tale of a treasure-hunting pirate and his monkey pal.

23 Little King's Story (2009)

Taking a few cues from Harvest Moon, Animal Crossing, and Pikmin, Little King's Story tasks players with building a town from the ground up. Using a diverse set of mechanics, players achieve victory by exploring surroundings, maintaining their town, and building relationships with their townspeople.

24 A Boy and His Blob (2009)

A Boy and His Blob is a NES game highly regarded for its innovation – and its unnecessary challenge. As longtime fans, developer WayForward decided to reimagine the world with all-new content, impressive animation, and a more forgiving difficulty.

25 No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle (2010)

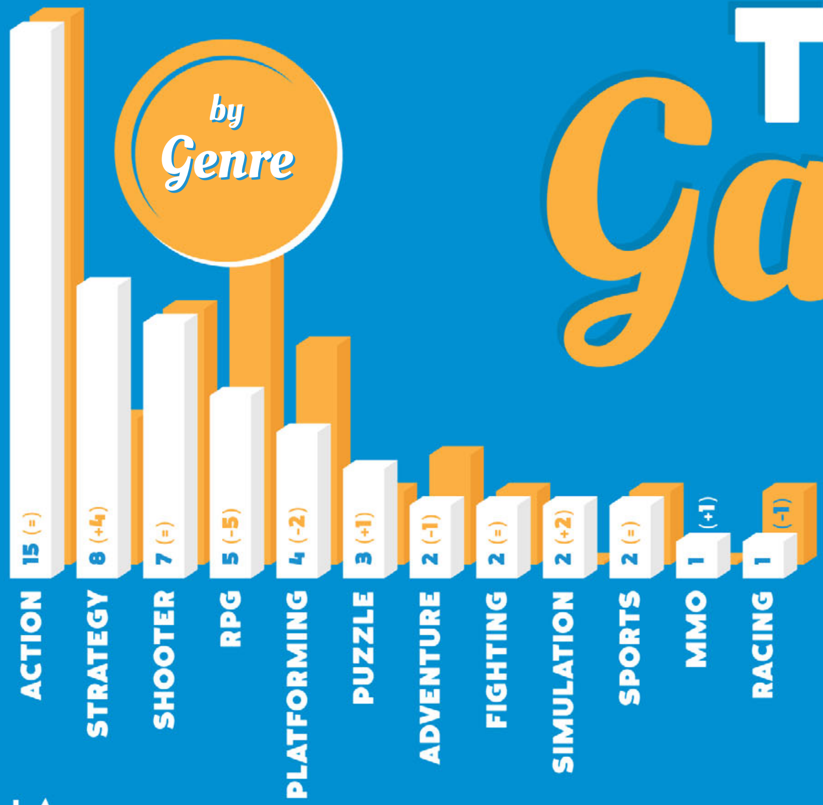
Grasshopper Manufacture and Suda 51 have always struggled to balance polish with its creativity and humor. The first tale of Travis Touchdown and his mail-order lightsaber is interesting, but full of undeniable problems. For the sequel, Grasshopper ironed out the wrinkles and polished the best bits to deliver its best title to date. ◆

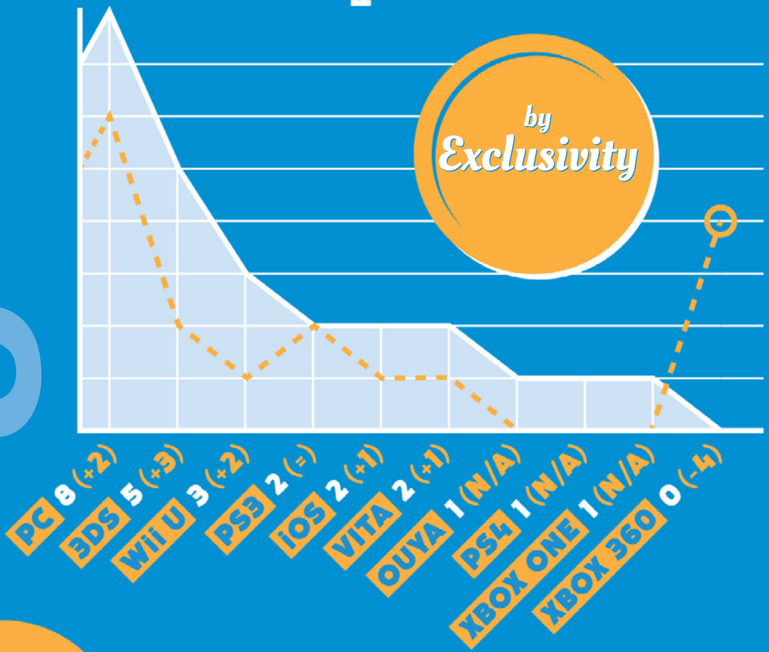
TOP 50 Games of 2013

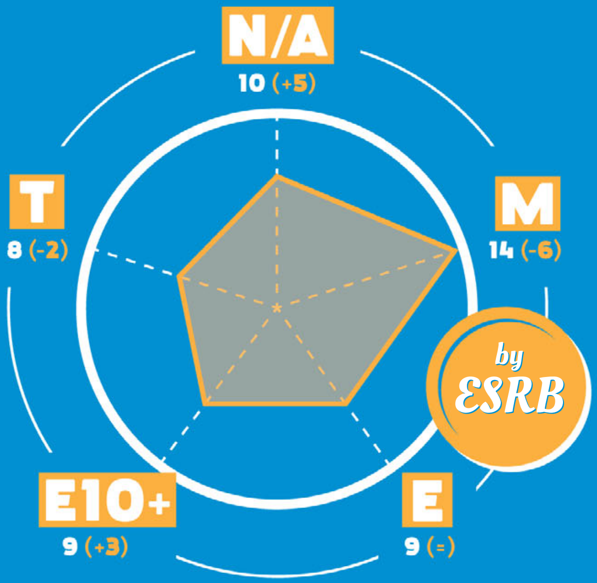
By The Numbers

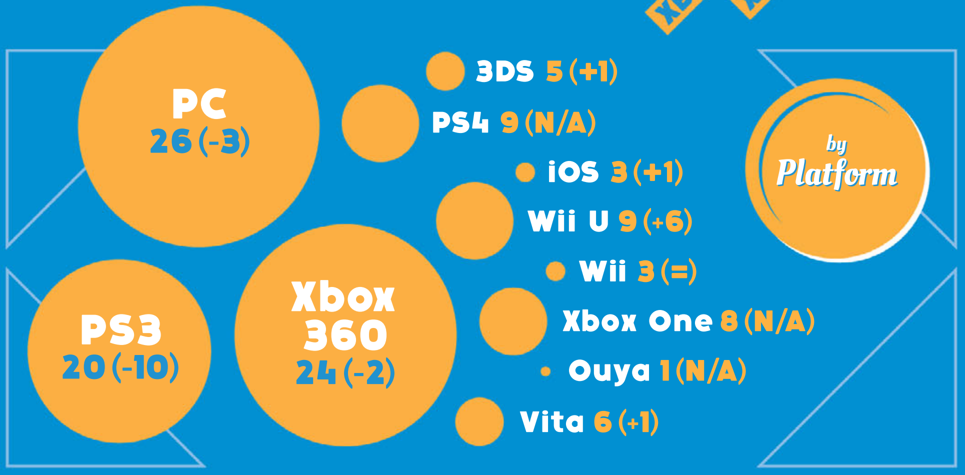
How does the Top 50 Games of 2013 break down in terms of genres, platforms, and publishers? We crunched the numbers to find out, and analyzed how the trends changed from last year.

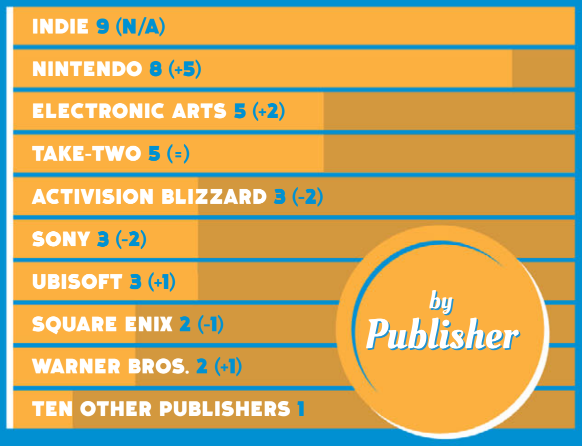
**The numbers in parenthises represents the change over last year*











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