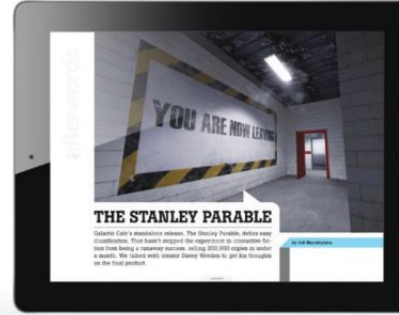
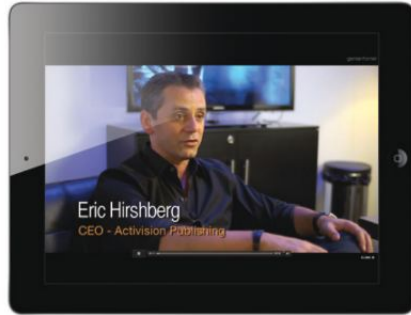
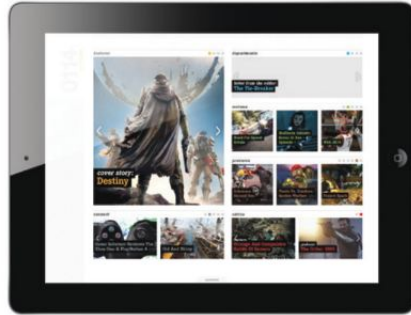


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The Death Of Handheld Consoles?



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

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

Since the early days of mobile, the theory that mobile phones (and now tablets) would replace handheld game devices from Nintendo and Sony has been repeated a million times.

I've felt from the early days of the smartphone that handheld consoles would face a real "pocket space" challenge, in that people would only carry so many devices with them at one time. During the early gold rush in the mobile gaming space, I was pretty certain that the 3DS and the PlayStation Vita were doomed.

Just look at the numbers. Tablet prices are extremely competitive or below the cost of a handheld console, and offer other valuable features like web browsing, email, texting, and app stores. A sea of free games (with pay as you play elements) is already available, and the marketplace is growing at an insane pace.

It just seems so logical. Console handhelds are doomed.

And then...you play one. Tearaway, The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds, Pokémon X & Y, Guacamelee, Steamworld Dig – the list goes on and on of the amazing experiences that are possible on handheld consoles.

A device designed specifically to play games can be magical. Not only do the action games they support play better, they don't interrupt my play with meeting invitations, emails, or "OMG" Facebook posts. Instead, the experience purely is about playing the game.

This isn't to say mobile and tablet experiences are horrible. I play tons of games on my devices, and the experiences tailored to those platforms are amazing. But the same holds true for handheld consoles, and I am a big believer in their power.

While the stock market analysts might tell you that handhelds are dead, I believe just the opposite. There is no better way to game on the go, and there will always be a market for those willing to go the extra mile or pay the extra dollar to experience the best the industry has to offer. In my mind, nothing does mobile gaming better than the handheld devices I have loved since the days of the Game Boy.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

contents



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Metal Gear Solid V

Metal Gear Solid creator Hideo Kojima is a man who likes to keep secrets. The series is always full of huge surprises, but we got as much as we could out of him for our coverage of both the Metal Gear Solid V prologue, Ground Zeroes, and the follow-up, The Phantom Pain. *by Tim Turi*



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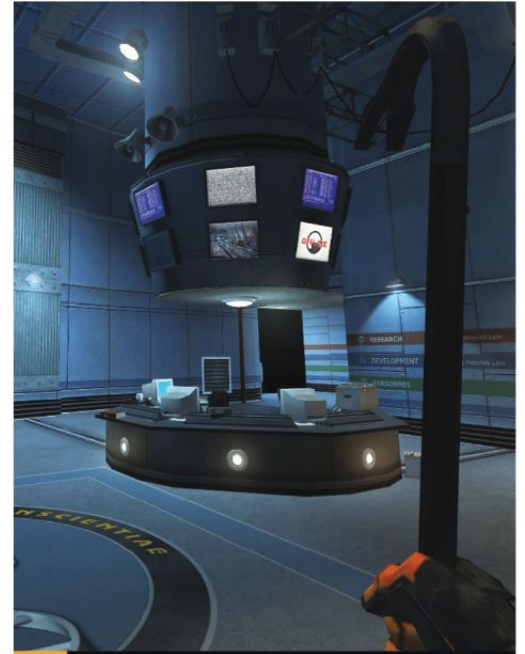
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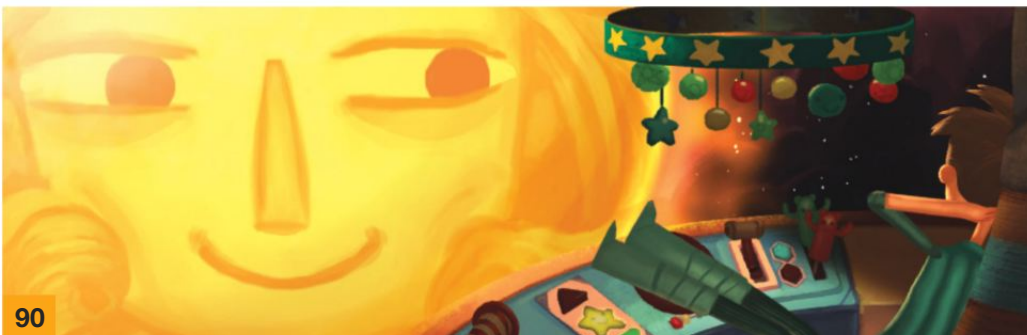
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Readers respond to our next-gen console reviews, discuss whether or not lives are necessary in video games anymore, and celebrate gaming's recent space race. Also, one reader explains how GTA Online is literally a life saver.

» 12 Connect

We delve into the burgeoning Let's Play space on YouTube, discuss why you'll likely be seeing big publishers double down on big blockbusters instead of creating new IP, and share some thoughts on Sony's PlayStation Now streaming service and Valve's Steam Machine.

» 70 Previews

This month we take a look at Japanese imports The Witch and the Hundred Knight, Drakengard 3, and others. We also check in on The Elder Scrolls Online and Super Smash Bros., spend some time with Transistor from the developers of Bastion, and discuss the zombie parkour hybrid, Dying Light.

» 84 Reviews

We finally spent time with Act I of Broken Age, Double Fine's Kickstarter-funded adventure game. We also review Final Fantasy XIII's third entry with Lightning Returns, see how Tropical Freeze stacks up against the previous Donkey Kong Countries, and share our thoughts on Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2.

» 100 Game Over

The Metal Gear series is responsible for many of gaming's most memorable baddies. Find out just how well you remember the past bosses.



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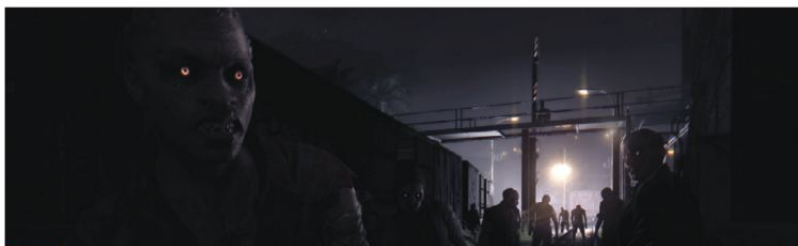
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Destiny was the popular topic this month, and fans couldn't be happier. Readers also lament the waning support of some gaming fads, celebrate the industry's recent space race, and claim GTA Online saved their unborn baby. You read that right.

Delighted For Destiny

Thank you for your article on Destiny in issue 249. I haven't been this excited for a game since Skyrim, and Fallout: New Vegas before that. I'm not much of an online player; I suck at most competitive games, and have yet to prestige in Call of Duty or even do fairly well in Halo. But the online components of Destiny sound truly incredible, and any worries I had about them have been drowned out by all the other details you gave us. The only thing I'm upset about is the fact that I have to wait nine months to get my hands on the game!

Caleb Dean
via email

I can't tell you how many years I've waited to see Destiny on the cover of Game Informer. This issue is definitely getting framed once I finish reading it. I've been itching for Destiny information for such a long time, and it appears my patience has paid off at last. I'm just perturbed there won't be any dragons within Destiny's universe. That was a bit of a buzzkill.

Preston Gibbs
via email

We're not sure why you were expecting dragons in Destiny, but we can understand your disappointment. Destiny's September 9 release date is still a long ways out, but this summer's beta should make the wait more bearable. In the meantime, you can check out all of our bonus Destiny content at gameinformer.com/destiny. Sadly, it's also dragon-free.

Making The Grade

I would just like to compliment your console reviews of the Xbox One and PS4 (The Next Generation Is Now, issue 249). As an Xbox fan, I expected a PlayStation-leaning comparison, but was surprised by the balance of the reviews. From the pros and cons to the spec reviews, this was a great article. Congrats and two thumbs up for getting an Xbox fan to appreciate something PlayStation related.

Brad Cahill
Martinsville, VA

I wanted to thank both Matt Helgeson and Matthew Kato for their incredible coverage of the new consoles. I was very impressed by the extent of both articles and how they remained focused and fair. This is one of the first times I've heard from both sides and truly felt like I could make a decision without feeling hesitant and cheated of some information. Here's to hoping there's less of a console war and more of a peaceful preference – and that I'll soon have the money to afford a new console.

Jordan Scribner
Lincoln, NE

While some readers were predictably irate that we gave the same review grade to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, others shared our general conclusion: Both systems offer players a great platform for a new generation of gaming. No matter which camp you end up in, you can expect plenty of fun in the years ahead – so why waste your time arguing on the Internet about which system you think is better?

Baby On Board

I was driving my pregnant wife to the hospital to give birth to our first son when I decided to take the freeway to get there faster. As we were going over the bridge, a woman who had just gotten off the freeway ran through the yield sign, right into our lane. She was mere inches away from hitting us when I jerked the wheel and drove around her, narrowly avoiding her car and certain disaster. As we got on the freeway, I turned to my wife and said, "I'm not going to lie; my quick reflexes and maneuverability are all due to playing endless hours of GTA Online." I suggested naming our son Trevor in honor of it, but my wife wasn't too keen on that. Thank you, Rockstar!

Devin and Tandra Griffiths
via email

It seems GTA is always getting blamed for having a bad influence on gamers – this might be the first time we've ever heard someone give the series credit for something positive. We just hope you suppressed the innate urge to perform any drive-bys on the way to the hospital.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Space Is The Place

Is it just me or does 2014 seem like the “Space Age” of video games? With the recent releases of early-access games like Starbound and Planetary Annihilation, and upcoming games like No Man’s Sky and Star Citizen, there are a lot of space-themed games coming out in the near future. Are there any that Game Informer is looking forward to? For me it’s Star Citizen, with No Man’s Sky a close second.

Andrew
via email

The final frontier is certainly becoming a popular setting in video games, especially for indie developers. You may want to add games like Galak-Z, Routine, Spacebase DF-9, Kerbal Space Program, Wildstar, and Lifeless Planet (previewed on page 82) to your watch list, along with Stardock’s reboot of the acclaimed Star Control action/adventure series.

Controlling The Kong

I just got done reading your Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze preview in issue 249. It made me stoked to play more of the game (I was lucky enough to try it at an event this summer). However, I have a question that the Nintendo representative couldn’t answer and it wasn’t addressed in the article: Can I use the Wii U Pro controller to play this game? I think the Pro controller is great and the nostalgia factor of playing a Donkey Kong Country game with an actual controller would make it a lot better. To be honest, I don’t care for the Wii remote and nunchuck, and I was disappointed that Super Mario 3D Land forced you to use the Gamepad for certain levels. I have tons of fun on my Wii U when I can just use my Pro controllers. The lack of Pro controller support is turning into a deal breaker for some games for me and my friends.

Curtiss Wells
Carteret, NJ

No need to summon your inner Cranky Kong, Curtiss; Nintendo tells us that Tropical Freeze does indeed support Pro controllers for both players, in addition to Gamepad and Wii remote/nunchuk options. Old-school DK platforming fans rejoice!



Moving On

Do you know what the heck happened to the PlayStation Move? I mean I know it was just a competitor with the Wii and Kinect, but still. I have one just lying around the house doing nothing. I maybe have one or two games that include Move support. The Wii may be dying out, but Microsoft is still supporting Kinect. I just want to know why there aren’t more Move games.

Justin Jensen
via email

I’m really disappointed in the 3D gaming department. I bought a sexy 3D TV last year to play games in 3D and I haven’t heard any news about the next-gen consoles supporting 3D gaming. On that same point, the current-gen consoles haven’t announced or released many titles with 3D capabilities. I own a few 3D games (Batman series, GT 5, God of War Collection, Ico/Shadow, etc.), but I want more!

Raul Arauz
via email

There’s a fine line between “the future of the industry” and “forgotten fad,” and most new technologies end up in the latter category. The good news is that both the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One support stereoscopic 3D, and Sony’s Move peripheral is also compatible with its new system. That bad news is that whether or not developers use these technologies still depends on consumer interest. So...who’s interested in running out to buy a new 4K television?

Short Answers To Readers’ Burning Questions:

“What’s with the spawning in the new Call of Duty?”

You die, and then a few seconds later you come back and die again.

“In Destiny, are the spells science-based, or are they actual supernatural magic?”

We’re pretty sure there’s no such thing as science-based spells. There’s also no “actual supernatural magic,” either.

“Is it my destiny to play Destiny?”

What do we look like, a Magic 8 Ball?

Worst Opening Line To A Feedback Letter:

“I’m not one to complain, but after two years, I’m about to (and could use an open forum).”

Reader Gibberish

“I would like to see in the MLB ___ the show is bench brawls to live up to the baseball game?”

Question Of The Month:

What setting or time period would you like to see used more in games and why?

gi spy



(Left) This month rapper Riff Raff joined Reiner, Tim, and Dan for a surreal episode of Replay. Watch it on Gameinformer.com

(Right) Ben made a bunch of new friends at this year’s CES, including Valve product designer Greg Coomer

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



- **28%** Destiny Ecstasy
- **22%** Console War Casualties
- **18%** Lives In Games Responses
- **14%** Online Server Rage
- **12%** The Art Of Endings Love
- **06%** Monochrome Cover Complaints



Get A Life

In issue 249, we asked readers whether lives are still relevant in video games. While most respondents stated checkpoints and save states have taken their place, a few pointed to classic genres where their importance lives on.

I don't think lives are obsolete. Having a limited numbers of tries adds a sense of urgency and risk to the game. Getting "killed" in games with unlimited tries doesn't have the same emotional impact. When I play games like Defender and I'm down to my last life, it becomes an epic struggle to earn an extra life. I have plenty of favorite games that don't have limited lives, but in the games that do, I find they add a lot to the experience.

John Enfield

Looking at the seven games I own for my PlayStation 4, five of them have characters that can die. When they do, there is no number indicating their remaining lives; all that happens is you start over. Games are now based on checkpoints, not lives. No matter how many times I die in Knack or Lego Marvel, I will

still start at the same checkpoint. The only games that use lives anymore are arcade games that are based entirely on top scores.

Christopher Smith

As we get older, find jobs, and start families, we have less time for games – especially those that require days of practice due to having too few lives and too high difficulty. Games like Rayman Origins prove that unlimited lives don't take away from the game. In fact, it can be a motivation to complete the most difficult stages knowing you won't lose hours of work because you couldn't complete a stage in a couple of tries.

Erik Dresner

I wish I could say they were. Life outside of gaming is something most gamers would find fulfilling – more so than the lives of their virtual doppelgängers – if only they took the opportunity to really enjoy it. Oh, wait; you meant that kind of lives. Never mind then....

Philip Ehlke

(Left) Later, Ben also posed with Razer CEO Min-Liang Tan in front of some kind of glowing and presumably sentient super computer

(Right) Ben also got himself a new entourage: WWE's Mark Henry, graphic designer Ashley Hey (second to right), and WWE Funkadactyl stars Naomi Knight (center) and Cameron Lynn (far right)



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WINNER

1 Charles Arrington

2 Peach 2 Toadstool.

2 Corinne Butcher

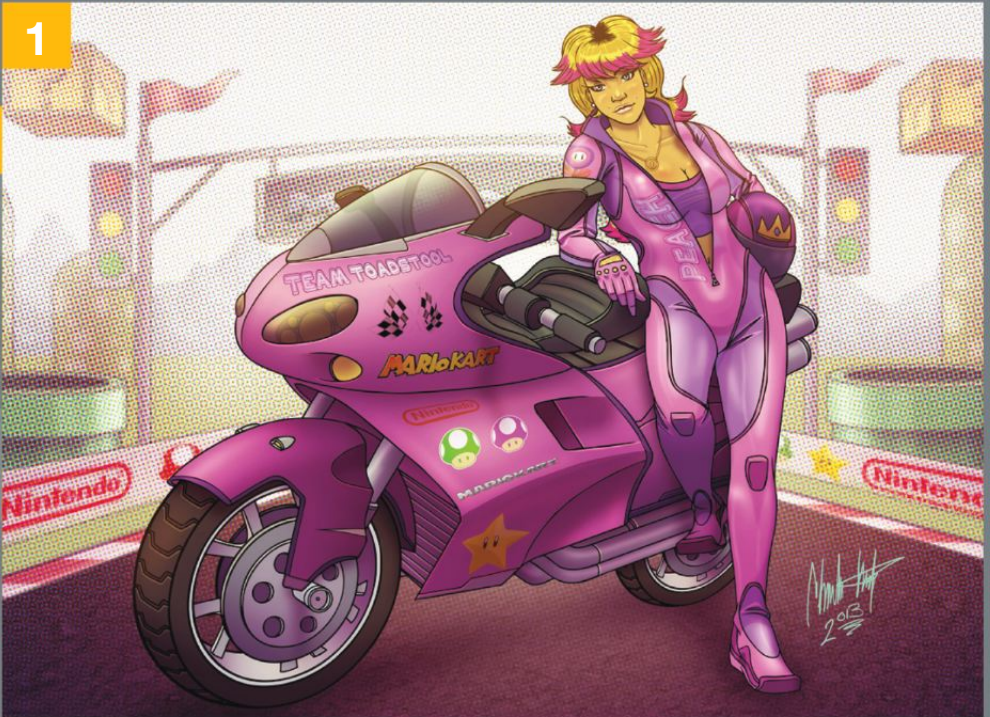
Link and Tetra flagrantly disobey the Splash Mountain rules.

3 Joseph Feliciano

We're pretty sure that Team Blue could take on Team Purple, which is just Spyro and Waluigi.

4 Zach Whitehorn

Not pictured: the toilet Batman's sitting on.



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(Left) Sure, Sandbox Strategies' Shaun Norton and Press Play's Mikkel Thorsted and Mikkel Martin Pedersen were here to show us Max: The Curse of Brotherhood – but who can resist taking a picture with Dracula? **(Right)** PC gamers rejoice: This issue is loaded with articles from Game Informer's new PC editor, Daniel Tack. Hop online and welcome him to the crew!





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Opening The PlayStation Archives

by Matthew Kato

Since the debut of the PlayStation 4, Sony has teased a cloud-based service powered by Gaikai that will allow owners to play older games from previous PlayStation systems. At this year's CES, Sony officially unveiled that initiative for PS4 and other devices – PlayStation Now.

PlayStation Now offers games (including their multiplayer, trophies, and text messaging apps) via streaming to your PS4 and PS3 – as well as other devices such as the Vita, most 2014 Bravia TVs, tablets, and smartphones. On stage at CES, Andrew House, president and group CEO at Sony Computer Entertainment, said the service covers games from the original PlayStation through the PS3, but the PlayStation Now official press release from the company so far only mentions PS3 titles. When PS2 and original PlayStation games will be added remains to be seen.

The service is currently in closed beta, with a full rollout tabbed for the summer. PlayStation 4 and PS3 get PlayStation Now first, followed by the Vita. A press release from Sony also mentions that PlayStation Now will work on non-Sony devices at some undefined point in the future. Since the service uses the cloud for your saves and is accessible by multiple devices (logging in via a Sony Entertainment Network account), you can save and continue playing a game on another supported platform. However, games played over PlayStation Now have no connection to the games you already own on your system.

Gamers can access PlayStation Now titles via a subscription that allows you to play multiple games or via a per-title rental. Prices for either approach weren't given, and it's unknown at this time if there is any relationship between a PlayStation Now subscription and PlayStation Plus.

In our hands-on time with the technology at CES on a Vita and a Bravia TV paired with a PS4 controller, we played *The Last of Us* and *God of War: Ascension* and experienced minimal lag between our control inputs and actions onscreen. There was, however, a little artifacting. The key caveat with this experience is that the servers were down the hall. How well the service performs once fully implemented across the nation could be a whole different matter. Sony vice president of marketing John Koller would not go into any specifics about how many servers Sony has set up, but he says the company has been

testing the latency across the nation since it acquired Gaikai in 2012. "I think we're in a pretty good place," he says.

Latency is just one of many questions up in the air about PlayStation Now, and even if things run smoothly, there are other concerns worth considering. Michael Pachter, research analyst at Wedbush Securities, thinks the fundamental concept of the service is a non-starter. "PlayStation Now is a joke," he says. "There is no publisher that is going to license content that's less than two-years old because they would be concerned that they can't sell as many copies if they make it available for subscription or rental. This has no prayer of working. None."

Pachter points to the lack of quality, relevant software for streaming services like OnLive and GameTap as historical examples of his theory, and he says that even if Sony puts its first-party games on PlayStation Now, that's still not a lot of titles. During the CES announcement, the fact that Sony did not tout any third-party partners was noticeable. At the time of this article, none have been officially announced, although Koller says, "I can tell you that the publishers are exceedingly bullish about this."

We reached out to third-party companies Ubisoft and Electronic Arts to gauge their interest in PlayStation Now, and neither were officially committed at the time of this writing. "We've long been advocates for the cloud's potential to change the way video games are made and played, and have previously partnered with companies like Cloudscaling, G-Scale, Orange, and Square Enix on cloud-related projects," reads a statement from Ubisoft. "We're excited to see Sony taking this big step to make gaming experiences accessible to an even bigger audience with a service like PlayStation Now."

Speaking to the economics necessary to make PlayStation Now attractive to third parties, Janney Capital Markets analyst Tony Wible estimates that in the digital ecosystem – including a service such as PlayStation Now – a publisher would have to rack up 11.1 million digital rentals, sell 900,000 digital

“There is no publisher that is going to license content that's less than two-years old because they would be concerned that they can't sell as many copies if they make it available for subscription or rental. This has no prayer of working. None.”

– Michael Pachter, research analyst at Wedbush Securities

copies, or garner 5.5 million subscriptions to make “comparable profit” to the current retail system. Although digital sales of full games requires the lowest sales threshold, Janney notes soberingly: “Full game downloads on consoles have not been popular to date.”

Another factor that may limit the games available for PlayStation Now is the state of any licenses previously utilized by the classic titles. Would a company like 2K, for example, be able to make *NFL 2K5* available since the company no longer holds the rights to the NFL license? The same could apply to a game's soundtrack or other once-held licenses that have since expired.

The questions of price, title selection, and performance make PlayStation Network too much of an unknown quantity at this point to gauge its usefulness to gamers and Sony's larger digital strategy. It could sate gamers' appetite for older games since the PS4 isn't backwards compatible, or it could simply be another online dead end. ❖



Sony's Bid For All-In-One Living Room Dominance

At CES, Sony also revealed a cloud-based TV subscription service to debut in the U.S. later this year. Alluded to by a previously announced deal between Sony and Viacom (which owns MTV and Comedy Central, among other popular networks), this as-yet-unnamed service will allow users to watch live TV and on-demand content, as well as use the cloud as a DVR. Similar to PlayStation Now, content can be accessed over various devices, including your PS4 and tablet. How, or if, this cuts out the cable and satellite companies altogether remains to be seen. Other details, such as pricing and further partnerships, have not been announced.

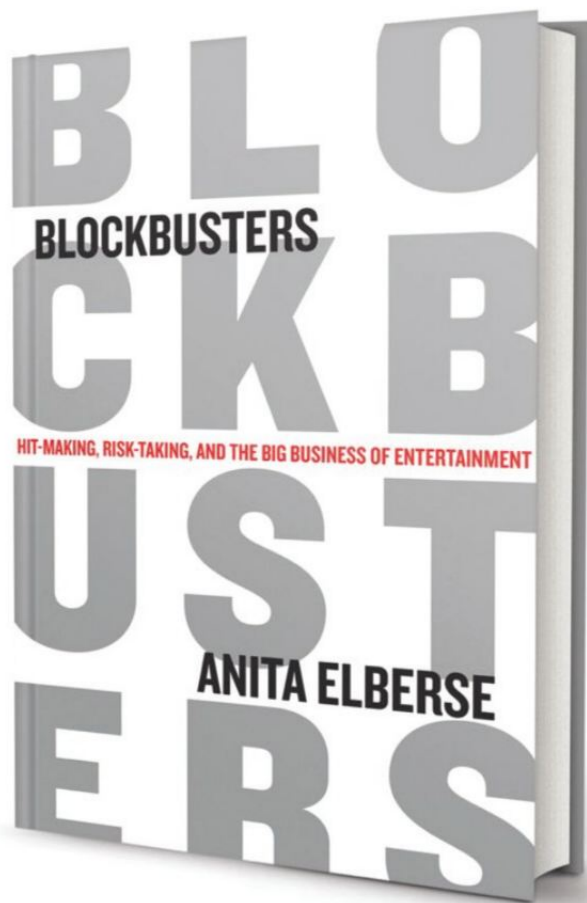
THE BLOCKBUSTER RULE:

Why one Harvard professor believes the future will be ruled by mega-franchises



interview by Matt Helgeson

In Anita Elberse's new book, *Blockbusters: Hit-Making, Risk-Taking, and The Big Business of Entertainment*, the veteran professor at the prestigious Harvard Business School argues that, despite claims that digital distribution models would democratize content, the future of games, movies, and television lies more than ever in a small handful of huge blockbuster franchises like Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto. We spoke with Elberse about this thesis.



What's the basic thesis of your book in relation to the entertainment and game industries?

I think of the book as having three parts. The part that has gotten the most attention, maybe because I start with it, is this idea that, in order to be successful, it is probably best for content producers to make blockbuster bets. They should spend a disproportionate part of their budget on what they see as a handful of the most likely winners. That seems pretty intuitive. But, the alternative strategy also feels intuitive to many people – a strategy in which content producers say, “It’s so incredibly hard to predict what’s going to work in the marketplace, we’re going to make a larger number of smaller bets and spend our resources equally. Then, we’ll see what sticks in the marketplace.” But my research shows that this blockbuster strategy, which seems very risky – making these big bets – leads to the higher chance of success. That, to me, is the first part.

The second part is about bets made on talent and how you should think about those bets. You see a similar notion there of how much it pays for leading content producers to have a talent strategy that revolves around A-list talent.

The third part, and the second half of the book, is how digital technology is affecting all this and whether it makes blockbuster bets

more or less relevant and whether it makes superstar talent more or less relevant. I conclude that we’ll see bigger bets on blockbusters and bigger bets on superstars because of digital technology.

What type of research is your book based on? Do you go through the economic data of a lot of different companies and properties, or is it based on anecdotal evidence?

It’s a combination of number crunching big data sets and in-depth interviews with people that work in the entertainment space and asking them how they look at the developments that are going on around them. Interviews are important, but it’s not enough. It’s also about looking at patterns that exist in the marketplace. Then you see, for instance, that companies that make these blockbuster bets have better returns. That’s something you can only get from analyzing lots of data.

Can you give an example of a company that embraced the blockbuster theory and had success?

The one that I actually start the book with is Warner Brothers. In the past decade or so, it’s been more focused on the blockbuster strategy than any other studio. As a result, they have been really successful. They are known for Harry Potter, the Dark Knight franchise.... If you look across all the gambles they’ve made, particularly under Alan Horn,

who pioneered the strategy, you see that they spend about a third of their budget on the top 10 percent of their movies and those movies account for more than half of their total profits. Those are the kind of patterns you see quite a bit.

In the game industry, you see similar dynamics there. If you look at Activision and how they spend their money and how they approach the marketplace, it’s very much a blockbuster strategy. Take-Two Interactive might be the most skewed. They really depend on their Grand Theft Auto franchise.

I wonder about the risk. What if all your big bets fail? Isn’t that risky? There are always big projects that don’t pan out.

You’re not wrong. It is incredibly risky to live by this strategy. But it’s incredibly risky to make entertainment products to begin with. There’s no way around it. The alternative is to say, “We don’t want to make these big bets, so let’s make a larger number of smaller bets.” Or, to make the same number of bets but make them less expensive. Both of those strategies, which seem safer, are actually riskier, because the chances of failure are much higher. That’s something a lot of people have trouble wrapping their head around, but that’s what emerged from the data. Instead of making a \$250 million movie, yes, you could make ten \$25 million movies, but you’re

actually making it harder for yourself to succeed by doing so. The collective profits you’d get from those 10 movies are not likely to exceed what you’d get from that \$250 million bet. That is a phenomenon that translates across all entertainment industries.

In many ways, this is the opposite of what we thought would happen with the digital revolution in entertainment. There was going to be a death of what we called the “monoculture” – a world where everyone grew up watching one TV show like *Leave it to Beaver* and huge icons like Elvis and the Beatles. Digital was going to segment the audience into a multitude of niche markets for products that would eventually be profitable over long periods of time – the “long tail” theory. Did that prove not to be true?

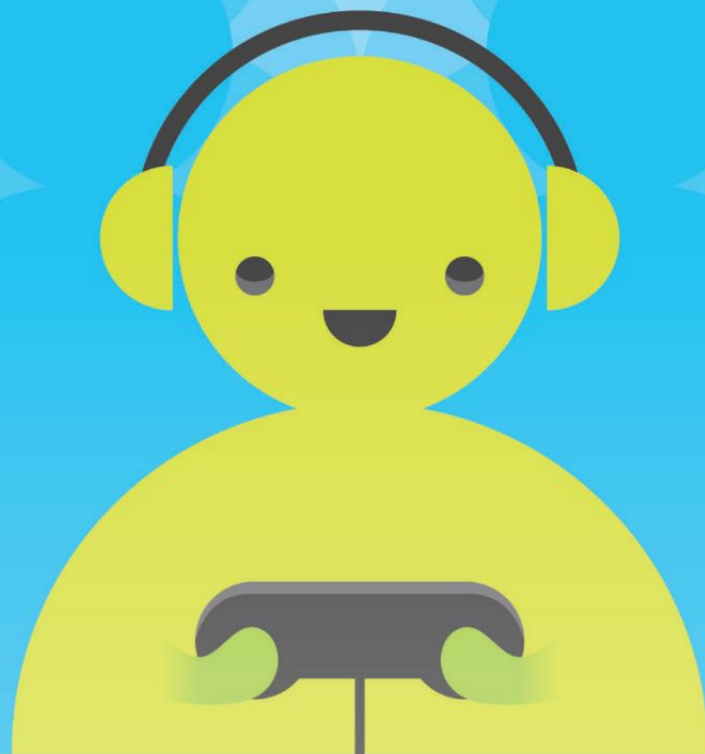
That’s largely the case. It was a compelling idea, and there certainly have been changes in the marketplace. There’s more variety in the marketplace. But, what most people forgot when thinking about the market is that the hits are benefiting from this increased access as well. If it becomes cheaper to offer goods, which is what digital technology does, you lower the cost of offering and consuming. It is the most popular products that benefit from that in a disproportionate way. But it’s not a monoculture in the sense that there’s no room for other voices; it’s just incredibly hard for those other voices to break through.

I get a lot of feedback from our readers that they feel as though this focus on blockbusters is having a negative effect on quality – that too many resources are being devoted to a few huge, formulaic projects at the expense of variety. Can the blockbuster theory have a negative effect on the overall health of an art form?

This is a common concern. I’ve heard this from many people in different sectors. I understand the concern. For example, if movie studios only made tentpole films or if video game publishers would only make those really big, blockbuster games, that would have a negative impact on the future of those industries. But that’s really not what’s happening. If you look at the portfolios of these top content producers, they’re not just making these big bets. In fact, a good blockbuster strategy means spending a disproportionate amount on these big bets, but not necessarily cutting out the smaller bets. That’s where innovation happens. That’s where employees can tinker with new ideas.

I’d like to turn it around, actually, and say maybe consumers should be happy that these strategies are happening because it leads to better products with higher production values. If we had a situation, for some reason, consumers would love crappy products, we would be faced with more and more cheap, crappy products. But people love high-production value products. This is a marketplace where Take-Two can spend years and years developing what is by all accounts a phenomenal game in Grand Theft Auto V that requires tremendous resources. The market supports those kind of endeavors, which I am actually quite pleased about. It’s a good thing that consumers respond favorably to higher production values and bigger brands. ♦

Watching People





PLAY

A look at the exploding Let's Play movement and why viewers love it

by Mike Trinh

In 2010, Brad Colburn was in his junior year, studying information systems at Kennesaw State University near Atlanta, Georgia. He was also a fan of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 and enjoyed watching players on YouTube who uploaded videos breaking down their multiplayer matches. That April, Colburn decided to start making his own videos. He already had the Modern Warfare 2 skills, and the equipment was relatively cheap. He bought an Elgato capturing device and a copy of Sony Vegas Pro 12 and began posting his matches to YouTube under the name TheRadBrad.

Colburn's first videos garnered several thousand views, but they weren't exactly huge hits. Still, he kept making them. Then in September, he found another way to use his capturing device – recording footage of himself playing an entire single-player campaign while providing live commentary. He was going to make a Let's Play video.

Colburn tested the waters with Dead Rising 2: Case Zero. The first episode drew in more views than any of his Call of Duty videos, so when he finished the game he moved on to the full Dead Rising 2 game. That video got even more hits. With each new game, Colburn's audience grew. He even caught the attention of developer Visceral Games, which posted his Dead Space 2 Let's Play on its website.

"I didn't get any kind of money – this was all a hobby," Colburn says.

By February 2011, nearly a year after he started making videos, Colburn finally received some earnings from his videos. However, he didn't plan on turning Let's Plays into a career. After graduating that year, he took a desk job at a corporate office, but found that it wasn't what he wanted. So he quit and tried to make a living doing what he loved – playing games.

"That's when it took off for me," Colburn says. "The more time I put into it, the more it showed."

He began pumping out scores of videos that covered a wide range of games. In 2012, Colburn played and uploaded complete single-player stories for 36 games. Today, TheRadBrad channel has nearly 2 million YouTube subscribers, gaining more than 500,000 within the last three months. Colburn says when he made his first video, he never expected his channel and the Let's Play movement to grow so large.

"I never thought it would be what it is," he says. "I just happen to be at the right place at the right time."



Brad "TheRadBrad" Colburn

Birth Of A Phenomenon

Let's Plays are typically videos that show gameplay accompanied by commentary from a person called the Let's Player. The first video done in this format, using the phrase "Let's Play," was created in 2007 (see Let's Play Origins sidebar), but the phenomenon has grown rapidly. The movement has now taken over YouTube.

Of the top 100 subscribed channels on the site, 11 are dedicated to uploading gameplay videos in the Let's Play style. The most subscribed channel on YouTube, with more than 17 million subscriptions, is PewDiePie, run by Swedish Let's Player Felix Kjelberg. For comparison, there are more people subscribed to Kjelberg than to popular mainstream musicians like Rihanna, One Direction, and Taylor Swift. His videos receive about 7 million views every day.

Other Let's Play channels, such as Yogscast Lewis & Simon, SkyDoesMinecraft, TheSyndicateProject, and CaptainSparklez have more than 6 million subscribers each.

To many, the rise of Let's Plays seemingly came out of nowhere. While the phenomenon didn't appear overnight, it did grow at an extremely fast pace. In July 2012 PewDiePie had 1 million subscribers, which is a significant number but hardly enough to be a top channel. Thirteen months later, it became the most subscribed channel on YouTube.

Rodrigo Velloso, head of gaming content at YouTube, says the website started to closely follow the rising popularity of Let's Plays and community videos only a year and a half ago.

"It had been really accelerating and that's when we really took notice," he says.

According to a 2013 study by YouTube, 95 percent of gamers watch game-related videos on YouTube, and the growth of time spent watching these videos has eclipsed YouTube's overall growth. Velloso says community videos have contributed greatly to this growth.

"It's been amazing to see what's happening in this gaming space," he says. "I think gameplay or Let's Play videos are



Jordan "CaptainSparklez" Maron

one of the segments that are really driving the trend."

In 2011, community-created content such as walkthroughs, tutorials, and gameplay videos accounted for nearly half of console game views. Recording and uploading these videos can be simple, which has led to their prevalence. Players only need a device that captures video on their computer or console and video editing software. After making the video, they upload it to a video site. YouTube allows users to check a box in the video's monetization tab, which allows advertisements to play before the video.

The money that the uploader makes off of these ads is determined by the CPM (cost per mille). Simply put, for every 1,000 ad views, the uploader receives a set amount of money. CPM rates can range from less than \$1 to more than \$10, depending on the channel. The top Let's Players do not officially reveal their income. But those who get hundreds of millions of views per year, like PewDiePie and SkyDoesMinecraft, can potentially earn more than \$1 million in that time.



Felix "PewDiePie" Kjelberg

Why Do People Watch?

On the surface, Let's Plays seem to have little appeal. It doesn't make much sense that people would choose to take time away from playing games in order to watch someone else play. Jack Patillo, who contributes to Let's Plays for Rooster Teeth, admits that he never would have expected these types of videos to become so popular.

"Ten years ago, I would have been like, 'Why would you want someone else play? Why don't you just want to play?'" he says.

Rooster Teeth, creators of the popular web series Red vs. Blue, first began experimenting with Let's Plays at the end of 2011 when two employees from the Achievement Hunter branch, Geoff Ramsey and Michael Jones, uploaded a video of them playing Saints Row The Third. Achievement Hunter had previously done video guides for getting achievements and trophies, but it had never done longer-form Let's Play videos before. The Saints Row video was so popular that

Ramsey and Jones kept making more, eventually venturing into other games and bringing in other employees like Patillo.

"When Minecraft came out for the Xbox 360, we put together a five-person Let's Play of us just playing it, experiencing the world for the first time ever," Patillo says. "Sure enough, it just blew up."

The first Minecraft video pulled in a million views within two weeks, and now sits at more than 7 million views. This past April, Achievement Hunter created a separate channel, simply called LetsPlay, that currently has 2 million subscribers and receives nearly 1 million views per day. Patillo says viewers see Let's Plays as entertainment or distraction as opposed to a way to experience a game.

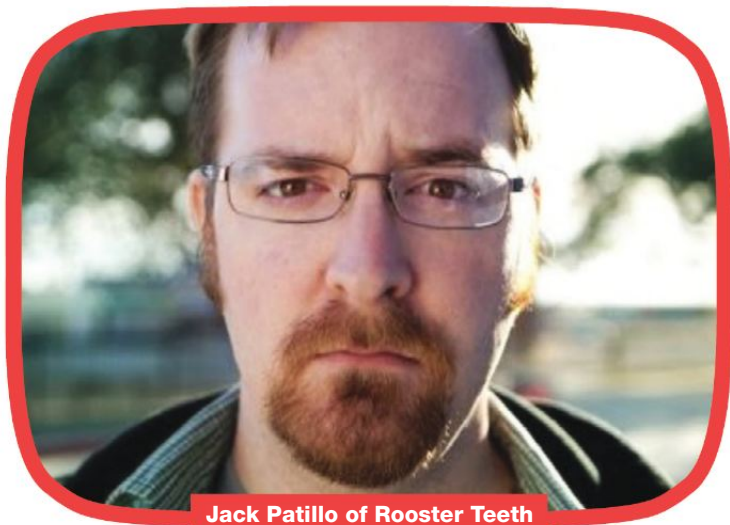
"We see more and more people streaming a game or watching someone play while at their job," he says. "You hear more and more about people that get home from work and they just put on a Let's Play."

Patillo thinks that Achievement Hunter Let's Play videos are popular not because their fans are simply interested in watching people play a game. Rather, fans want to see the chemistry and interaction between the Achievement Hunter players. The videos are similar to podcasts and radio talk shows.

"As you're playing the game you're not necessarily talking about what's going on in the game, but you're kind of goofing around with your friends," Patillo says. "I think that people relate to that."

He compares the viewer experience to sitting on the couch and watching a friend play a game. This feeling is shared by one Achievement Hunter fan, Kyle Zimmer.

"They have a constant energy that keeps you entertained throughout every video, even if the gameplay is uninteresting at the time," Zimmer says. "I'd say it's like hanging out with my friends and watching them play video games, but my friends are just not that funny."



Jack Patillo of Rooster Teeth

Let's Play Origins

It's tough to say when the first gamer started recording videos of him or herself playing a game while providing commentary. The invention of the video Let's Play is often credited to Michael Sawyer, who is known on the Something Awful forums as Slowbeef. According to Sawyer, game Let's Plays started on Something Awful, but not from him. The earliest use of the actual phrase "Let's Play" that he has found in the forum archives was created by users who did a screenshot Let's Play for the 1974 game Oregon Trail, but Sawyer gives credit to fellow forum user Vlapfor for setting the foundation of Let's Plays with his screenshot Let's Play for the 1995 point-and-click game I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.

In the very first Let's Plays, forum users would create threads where they posted screenshots of a game along with text describing their experience in the game. "I think it really defined what we wanted Let's Play to be and what people wanted to see back in the day, which was seeing a new video game and seeing someone's perspective on playing it," Sawyer says.

On June 5, 2007, Sawyer made a screenshot Let's

Play for The Immortal for the Sega Genesis. In the thread, he also posted a video of himself playing the game

while running a commentary in the background. This is the first example of the video Let's Plays that are so popular today. Several people liked the new format, so Sawyer later did a video Let's Play for Super Metroid, which became very popular.

Soon, another user named Kefkafloyd made a video series for the 1988 Bionic Commando. From there, the format exploded and the Something Awful forums were flooded with video Let's Plays.

"It got to a point where people were kind of annoyed because almost every other page had Let's Plays on it," Sawyer says. "So the moderators ended up making the Let's Play sub-forum on Something Awful."

The trend is still trying to define itself today as more people start making videos. However, the core purpose of any Let's Play should always be to inform viewers about a game, even if the viewers aren't gamers.

"I hope it bridges the gap between people who play games and people who don't," Sawyer says. "Let's Plays could be an opportunity for people who aren't interested to get them interested."



Our Favorite Let's Players

Are you new to the Let's Play genre? The field is full of great personalities, but with so many options it can be difficult to choose someone to watch. To make things a bit easier, here are some of the most entertaining channels we think you should keep an eye on.

The Yogscast Simon & Lewis

The Yogscast group was formed in 2008 by Simon Lane and Lewis Brindley, members of the World of Warcraft guild "Ye Olde Goone Squad." Their early videos on the BlueXephus channel were tutorials for WoW, but in 2010, they started making Minecraft videos, which instantly exploded. The Yogscast family has since grown to include over a dozen Let's Players, but Lewis and Simon are still the most popular. Most of their videos involve the use of a Minecraft mod like Tekkit or Galacticraft. In their notable series Yoglabs, every episode follows the two as they explore a mod for the first time.

Seananners

Like most YouTube channels, Adam Montoya's Seananners tends to offer bite-sized Let's Plays, many of which last less than five minutes. This preference likely formed due to Montoya's roots as a Call of Duty uploader, since multiplayer matches are generally less than 10 minutes long. Today, he does most of his Let's Plays for games created using Garry's Mod. In his fan-favorite The Hidden series, Montoya likes to play as an invisible monster hunting down his friends. It's hilarious hearing Montoya giggle uncontrollably as he psyches out his friends then executes them one by one.

TheRadBrad

The first Let's Plays were meant to introduce readers and viewers to a game that they might be interested in buying or that they have not heard about. Brad Colburn follows these early examples in his videos. He uploads entire single-player campaigns in multiple segments and covers a wide range of popular games. In 2013 alone, he captured and posted complete footage for nearly 40 games. Colburn's videos allow people to see as much of a game as they want to help decide whether or not they should purchase the game.

TheRPGMinx

Created by a British Let's Player who has only revealed her first name to be Michelle, TheRPGMinx is a smaller channel compared to the others on this list. However, the videos are top-notch, especially when she plays horror games. Her screams and anxiety seem more genuine than some of the other popular YouTube personalities. TheRPGMinx has plenty of Garry's Mod Let's Plays, but the channel also posts many videos highlighting indie games. Indie fans looking for something new should check out this channel.

Achievement Hunter

Achievement Hunter, an arm of Rooster Teeth, has a large cast of personalities in its Let's Plays and a constant stream of longer-form content. Since the release of Minecraft for the Xbox 360, the series (which is hosted on the LetsPlay channel) has done a weekly segment in the game. However, it isn't shy about exploring unconventional Let's Play games. In the past, it has done videos for Worms Revolution, Angry Birds, Ultra Minigolf Adventures, and Monopoly. When the gameplay doesn't provide them, the cast creates their own entertaining moments through commentary and interaction.



The Yogscast Simon & Lewis



Seananners



TheRadBrad



Achievement Hunters

No Sign Of Stopping

The Let's Play movement is still young and continues to expand. In the last three months, Achievement Hunter's LetsPlay channel received nearly 100,000 new subscribers, and Brad Colburn's TheRadBrad received more than 170,000.

YouTube's head of gaming content Rodrigo Velloso says he sees the rapid growth of Let's Plays continuing into the foreseeable future.

"I think it's just getting started," he says. "We've seen no real slow down, just an increasing number of creators, and increasing number of publishers embracing this and making it possible."

Just as many YouTube personalities have found success with Let's Plays, many game companies have also come to view the videos as being beneficial. Numerous large publishers, such as Ubisoft and Deep Silver, have publically announced that the community is free to make money off from videos featuring games from the companies. Some publishers even provide Let's Players advanced copies of games for their videos.

Brad Colburn says many publishers have seen his videos as a means of advertisement for their games. Rockstar gave him a copy of Grand Theft Auto V before the release date so he can prepare his Let's Plays early. In 2013, Ubisoft invited Colburn and other Let's Players to Toronto to do a video for Splinter Cell: Blacklist ahead of the game's release.

"They flew me out there and paid for everything, just so I can record gameplay and post it on my YouTube channel," he says.

Sony and Microsoft have also indicated that they believe community videos are now an important part of the new gaming generation. Both the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One have integrated streaming capabilities and have formed partnerships with Twitch. These features will likely spur the Let's Play growth even more.

Colburn is sure that as video capturing becomes more accessible, more and more people who watch Let's Plays will begin making and sharing their own videos. Because of this, the trend will continue to grow. But since it has really just begun, it's difficult to see how big this beast can get and how it will evolve.

"Every time I make a video, I'm trying to inspire somebody," Colburn says. "It's a phenomenon now and I honestly don't know where it will go." ♦

A Potential Threat?

Because copyright laws frequently lag behind the realities of media and society, Let's Play video currently exist in a legal gray zone. Until recently, publishers seemed to either support or simply tolerate the fact that Let's Players were using extensive footage of their copyrighted content to generate an income through YouTube. However, this past December many YouTubers found their game-related videos being pulled down through YouTube's ContentID system, which automatically removes copyrighted content that has been entered into ContentID.

Many popular YouTube personalities had videos taken down. Some companies, like Deep Silver and Blizzard, issued statements encouraging users to contest the bans proclaiming that they would take steps to approve the content. Others, like 2K and EA, refused to comment. Nintendo said it will be taking steps to monetize any and all video content relating to its copyrighted products, cutting YouTube personalities out of the money.

It can be argued that when people post movies and

television episodes onto the internet, studios lose a portion of their potential profits. People who can

watch something for free have less incentive to pay for it. However, unlike film and television, video games are interactive experiences. The same thinking can't be as easily applied when it comes to Let's Plays.

Jordan Maron, known on YouTube as CaptainSparklez, argues that few people decide not to purchase a game because they can watch it being played online.

"Obviously I can't speak for everyone, but I don't see many people thinking to themselves, 'Oh hey, there's this cool new game that came out, but I'd rather watch a video of someone playing it than play it myself,'" he says.

Maron's CaptainSparklez channel has over six million subscribers largely due to his popular parody music videos that combine famous songs with Minecraft themes. His video "Revenge" is a parody of "DJ's Got Us Falling In Love Again" by Usher. It has more views on YouTube than the original music video.

Maron also creates many Let's Play videos for Minecraft. One popular series called The Hunger Games pits him against other Minecraft players in a game of survival. Players have to battle the environment, hunger,

and each other to become the last person standing. Most of the videos have more than one million views.

Maron says Let's Plays do more to help a game's sales than hurt it.

"Nowadays when a YouTuber with a large following plays a new game, for every one person that elects not to purchase a copy because they've watched the video, there are many more who do purchase it who wouldn't have otherwise," he says.

Let's Plays can also help indie games get attention that they otherwise might not get. Games like Terraria, Happy Wheels, and Slender: Eight Pages have all benefitted when popular Let's Players made videos of them.

"Games like Minecraft have experienced huge increases in popularity due in a large part to videos posted on YouTube," Maron says.

While it appears that some publishers will continue to view Let's Play videos as free publicity, these legal issues could potentially stall this growing phenomenon as quickly as it started. Eventually, the courts may have to decide if Let's Play videos meet the criteria of "fair use," meaning that the added verbal commentary is "transformative" and makes the Let's Play video a work distinct from the original gameplay footage.

Video Games Within Video Games

by Kyle Hilliard



Geometry Wars Project Gotham Racing 2

Tucked away in the corner of the garage you can find an unassuming arcade cabinet useful for killing time between races. Geometry Wars was popular enough to eventually justify a standalone spin-off that became a platform-defining title for Xbox Live Arcade.



Guy Savage - Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

Metal Gear Solid games are always stuffed with bizarre bonuses, but none are as strange as this aside in Snake Eater. Starring Guy Savage and directed by Shuyo Murata, the violent hack-and-slash game is played during a dream Snake experiences while sleeping in a Groznyj Grad jail cell.



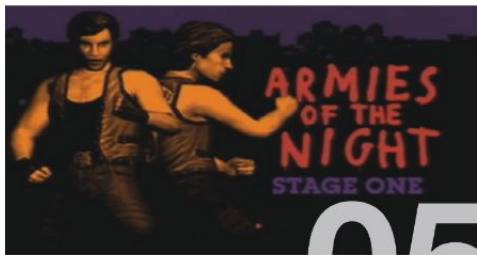
Dead Ops Arcade - Call of Duty: Black Ops

In Black Ops' opening start screen, in which the player is tied down to a chair, it is possible to escape and explore the room. If you type DOA on the computer in the corner, you are treated to a zombie-infested twin-stick shooter.



QUB3D - Grand Theft Auto IV

Grand Theft Auto is a series renowned for the many things you can do outside of the main storyline. In GTA IV, QUB3D arcade cabinets can be found all over the city. There's even a trophy/achievement for hitting a certain high score in the quality puzzler.



Armies of the Night - The Warriors

The Warriors is often fairly compared to the classic beat 'em up, Double Dragon. Rockstar obviously knew it would be, because after you beat the game, an Armies of the Night arcade cabinet appears in your base that allows you to play a near direct copy of Double Dragon starring Warriors characters.



Rune Man - Prey

Before the aliens ruin your night in Prey's opening moments, you can find a Rune Man arcade cabinet in the bar. This Pac-Man clone's title references Human Head Studio's previous game, Rune.



Lost Viking - StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty

You can find the Lost Viking arcade cabinet in the cantina you visit between missions. This scrolling shooter shares only its title with Blizzard's platformer The Lost Vikings, but it offers a fun change of pace from the real-time strategy.



ConSumo - Bully

If you want to use the basement of the Dragon's Wing Comic Store, you first have to play ConSumo, the arcade cabinet in the store. In it you assume the role of a sumo wrestler trying to eat everything he can while avoiding rotten foods and other wrestlers.



Mog House - Final Fantasy VII

In Final Fantasy VII's Gold Saucer, you find a number of carnival-type games, but it's also home to a video game named Mog House. In this game you feed a Mog until he learns how to fly to impress a female Mog.



The Turning - The Last of Us

The Turning isn't playable in The Last of Us, but Ellie knows much about the game and its star, Angel Knives, who will "punch a hole through your stomach before kicking your head off." It represents one of the many disappointments of The Last of Us' unenviable world: no video games.

The Good



SIMCITY offers an offline single-player mode via an update, which lets players load and save whenever they want since the save data is stored locally and not in the cloud. The update also adds the ability to integrate mods (with some stipulations). This change of course is interesting given that early on EA rebuffed the idea of offline play by saying it would be too technically difficult to execute.



g-b-u:

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

The Bad



THE WII U

continues to falter. Nintendo now expects to only sell 2.8 million units of the system worldwide in the 12-month period ending this March – that's down significantly from the nine million it had previously touted. It also expects to post a sales loss instead of a profit for the time period. The lower-than-expected sales of the Wii U have also naturally caused expectations for software sales to fall from 38 million units down to 19 million. The company even expects the 3DS to do worse than planned – 13.5 million units as opposed to 18.

Quotable

"Exciting times around the studio. Playable internal builds of the next Dragon Age, Mass Effect, and new IP."

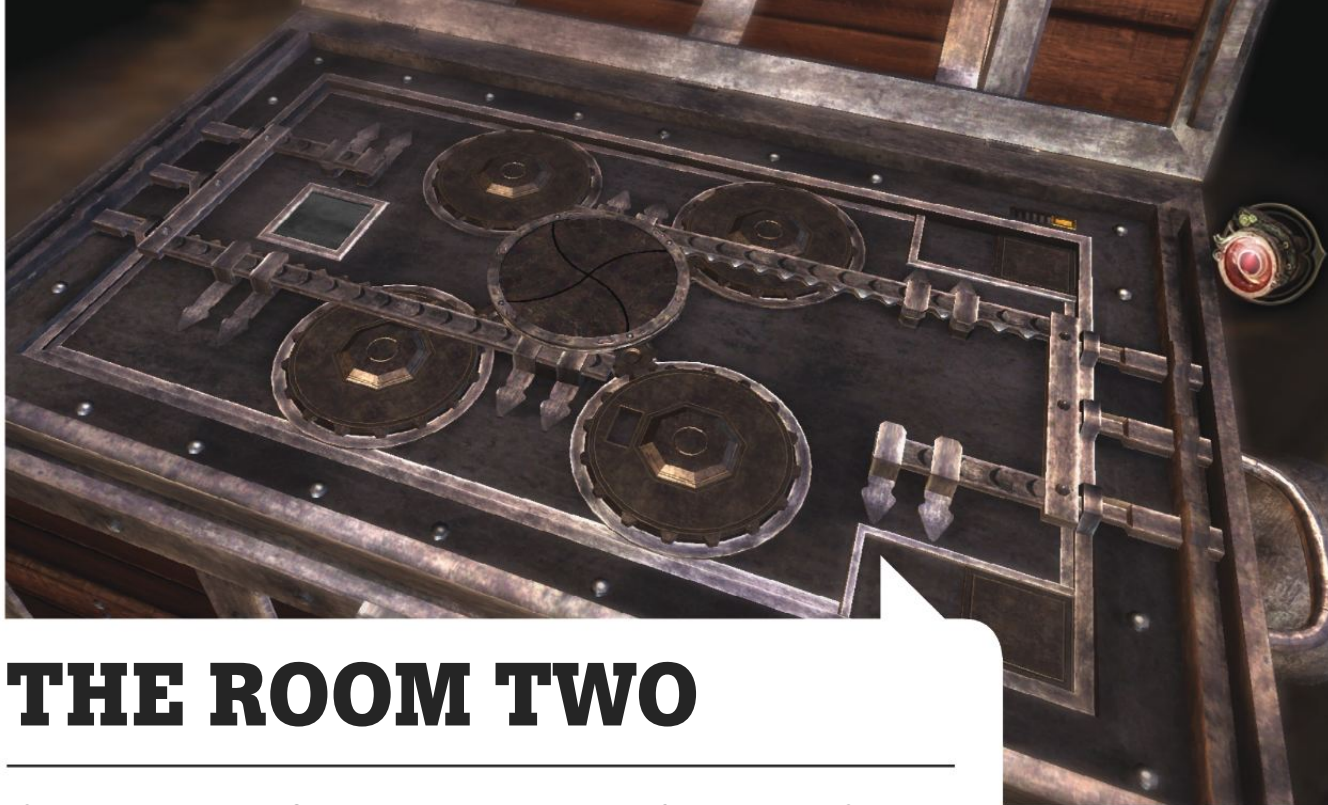


2K SPORTS did not renew its license with Major League Baseball, meaning that there will be no baseball title from the label moving forward. Not to be left standing at the plate, baseball fans can look forward to the return of R.B.I. Baseball. The game is being developed by the league itself, and hits current and next-gen systems (as well as smartphones and tablets) this spring. 🎮

The Ugly



– BioWare's **Casey Hudson**, executive producer of the Mass Effect series.



THE ROOM TWO

After working on *Burnout 3*, *Black*, and *Burnout Paradise* at Criterion, the six founders of Fireproof Games split off to form their own boutique freelance art studio, where they built digital worlds for other company's games. However, the team couldn't stay away from making their own titles, and in 2012 Fireproof released its first independent title, *The Room*. Within 48 hours, the game had risen to the top of the charts in the U.K., Germany, and the U.S., eventually winning Apple's iPad GOTY award. Fireproof recently released a follow up to this horror-themed puzzle adventure, and we sat down to speak about the project with commercial director Barry Meade. *by Ben Reeves*

The Room became popular very quickly. Were you surprised by the response?

You have no idea how much a surprise it was. *The Room* was an experiment for us – a way to test ourselves as a dev team – but secondly to test mobile, which was pretty alien to us as console kids. We knew when we finished that we had made a game we were proud of, but every mobile developer we knew was struggling to make money. We expected *The Room* to launch, scrape the bottom of the charts, and die a slow death. We expected to go back to freelance work for another year, raise a bit more cash, and do it all over again. Its success was a disaster to our carefully laid plans to fail.

Why was the original game called "The Room" and not "The Box" or something like that, because you spend a lot of time focused on the box in front of you?

Originally the working title of the project was *Puzzle Box*, but we had no idea what to call it for real. We played with a few abstract names but nothing really stuck. We have this ongoing belief at Fireproof that names

don't really matter until they're attached to something great, at which point a naff (stupid) name becomes a fabulous one – Bungie, anyone? So because we'd gone through the same contortions in trying to name the studio, we knew that we should just call the game something easy and relevant and stop worrying about it. We were nearing release and after weeks of agonizing over what to call it I idly said, "Why don't we just call it *The Room*?"

It seems like you guys were inspired by Cthulhu and 1800s clockwork designs. What else did you look at while working on the game?

We're hugely inspired by Lovecraft and Victoriana in general. [Design director Mark Hamilton] and the artists had studied up on period houses and furniture, too, but previously we had done a lot of research into the *Golden Dawn* and other very real Victorian occult groups. It's this unstated influence that really underpins the mood of the game. What appeals to us about that old occult concept of the supernatural is that it's unseen, and the forces are beyond knowing or

controlling. It's in great contrast to modern horror, which is all gore and explicit stupidity – no room for imagination.

The Room games have a very dark, moody atmosphere, which seems like an interesting choice for a mobile game; why go in this direction?

Lots of reasons, mostly to do with our inability to make that big-budget horror game on console we always planned to make. But we also wanted to set a wiser, and dare I say adult tone, to go the other way from what everybody else was making on mobile. We had heard that all mobile games had to be bright, breezy, un-immersive five minute click fests and we just wanted to prove that all wrong. We just turned some of our research and intentions for the horror game into this puzzle game, and it just really fit well.

There are a limited number of ways to interface with a touchscreen, so how you keep this series fresh and continually come up with new ways to interact with objects?

Fireproof came to mobile without any assumptions – the platform

was a blank slate to us – but coming from *Burnout* our natural default is "great games have great control systems." So looking at the tablet with our fresh eyes we just thought, "well, it's got a dang big touchscreen – guess we better make a proper touch interface then." We put a lot of testing into the system during development, but we knew what we wanted it to feel like so it wasn't a crazy chase to get there in the end. Once we had something that worked with *The Room*, for *The Room Two* it was less about finessing new controls as it is coming up with novel gizmos to interact with using those controls, and that's an ongoing happy challenge for us in the future.

Fireproof spent a little more time on the story this time around. Do you have a larger narrative that you're trying to tell across multiple games?

There's more going on than what we show, and all *The Room* games will inhabit the same universe, if not tell the same story. The backstory is forming all the time as we're making the game. Each part of *The Room* – the visuals, the atmosphere, the controls, the audio, the plot – is made up at the same time as we go along, so there's a natural affinity all these elements share. This means the story is always live in our heads and can change if we decide to change direction with the game. Horror works by firing the imagination not filling it, so we're in no rush to write a novella explaining it all. ♦

Two Puzzle Games With Something To Say

by Matt Miller

With a few notable exceptions, mobile games aren't known for providing thoughtful and contemplative experiences. Ustwo games' **Monument Valley** is aiming to be one of those exceptions. The surprisingly engrossing puzzle game draws strong inspiration from the art of M.C. Escher, challenging players to think outside of standard spatial reasoning while navigating an architecturally stark, yet stunning, series of levels.

You play as Ida, a silent princess wandering through a world of towers and walkways formed of fundamentally impossible geometry. The isometric view of the world immediately calls to mind the arcade classic *Crystal Castles*, though the focus here isn't a desperate dash to collect gems, but a stately walk to reach the stage's end point.

Each level is more mesmerizing than the last. The muted colors and strange architecture are beautiful in their own right, but gameplay demands that you manipulate each level to allow Ida's passage. By rotating individual platforms, or sometimes the entire building, platforms line up with each other in ways that don't seem

possible except in the world of your own visual perspective. In this way, *Monument Valley* shares more than a few similarities with 2008's *Echochrome*. However, *Monument Valley*'s touch-based interactions are more intuitive and level designs more varied by comparison.

The levels I played instantly hooked me. To proceed, I sometimes had Ida walking straight up walls, or rotating stairways to connect platforms that at first seem far too distant until viewed from the correct angle. *Monument Valley* is quiet, thoughtful, and challenging to one's perception, and its release on iOS is now one of my most anticipated mobile titles for 2014.

The creators of the popular *Triple Town* have a new puzzle game in the wings that looks fascinating. Spry Fox's **Road Not Taken** is identifiable for its visual similarity to *Triple Town*, but this new game is more nuanced in both gameplay and storytelling.

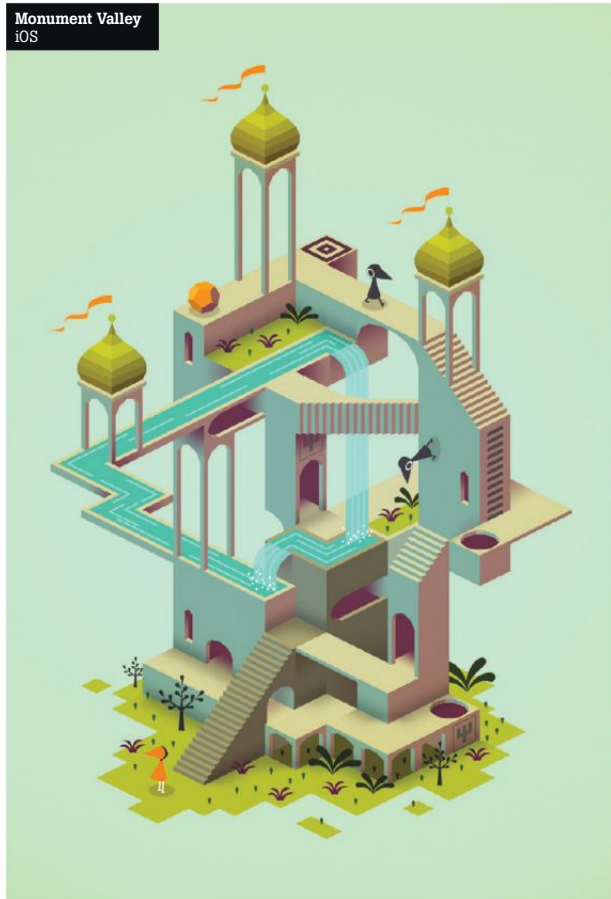
The title refers to the classic 1916 poem by Robert Frost, describing a traveler who takes the path less traveled through life. In the game, players control an individual who has eschewed the expected trappings of getting married and having kids to instead live alone on the outskirts of a village. The nearby forest is regularly beset by terrible storms, often leaving

the village's children trapped out in the cold. Thankfully, you have magic powers to save them and bring them home.

Road Not Taken is melding two surprising genres by presenting classic puzzle game mechanics within the procedurally generated permadeath structure of a roguelike. Each level is a square grid populated by heavy snow, tall trees, and dangerous creatures – each of which act and behave in unique ways that you must discover through trial and error. To save the children and move on, these objects must often be arranged in particular ways. Manipulating objects and moving them around the square grid of the stage costs energy, and if you run out then you die. Levels are different every time you play, but over multiple playthroughs, you can hopefully save all the children and fully discover the secrets of the forest.

Beyond the puzzle gameplay, a narrative unfolds about your character's life as he ages, his relationship to the townspeople, and how his life choices have set him apart from others, for better or worse. This ongoing story aims to lend a deeper emotional involvement than most puzzle games manage, while the procedural level generation should keep the sense of discovery fresh. I'm eager to further explore *Road Not Taken*'s enchanting world when it releases later this year on PS4, Vita, PC, and Mac. ✦

Monument Valley
iOS



Road Not Taken
PS4, Vita, PC, Mac



Looking for more info on the best independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, reviews, and previews. For more in this issue, read our Afterwords on *The Room Two* on the facing page, explore mod development with the team behind *Black Mesa* on p. 32, and check out our list of great mobile games from 2013 on p. 38. We also have previews of *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* (p. 78), *Hex: Shards Of Fate* (p. 80), *Starbound* (p. 81), *Lifeless Planet* (p. 82), *Trove* (p. 83), and *Grim Dawn* (p. 83), along with our reviews of *Broken Age: Act I* (p. 90), *The Banner Saga* (p. 91), and *OlliOlli* (p. 93).

Thinking Inside The Box

Taking Valve's Steam Machines for a test run

by Ben Reeves

The video game controller has evolved a lot over the last several decades, but the two analog sticks, four face button combo has remained a staple since Sony first unveiled the DualShock controller back in November of 1997. The basic controller design has become an instrument that every console gamer learns, but we forget how unintuitive it can be until we stick a modern controller into the hands of an uninitiated friend. Valve thinks there is a better way to control games in the living room, and later this year it hopes to prove it when the company releases the Steam Machine – a bundle of third party hardware (see sidebar), a Linux based operating system called Steam OS, and a controller unlike anything the industry has seen before.

When Valve first announced its initiative to bring Steam into the living room last September, many rejoiced at the idea of placing a Valve-branded console next to their TV, but when the beloved gaming developer first unveiled its new controller, even some diehard supporters questioned its awkward shape and nontraditional layout. After getting our hands on the device, however, we walked away surprised with its overall performance. Valve's odd controller isn't perfect, but it might just be crazy enough to work.

"We knew upfront that the Steam Machine's input would be a major piece," says Valve's product designer Greg Coomer. "We have somewhere around 3,000 games on the Steam platform, and most of them weren't programmed to be played with anything other than a keyboard and mouse. The main goal was to support the entire catalog with something that you hold in your hands, and I think we did that."

The way that Valve replicated the mouse input is probably the most unique aspect of the device. Instead of two analog sticks, Valve's controller uses two high-resolution trackpads. The left trackpad emulates the actions usually reserved for the WASD keys on a keyboard, while the right pad can be used to simulate a mouse's movements.

Hands-On Impressions

I played Portal 2 and Metro: Last Light using the new Steam Controller. At first the unit felt alien in my hands, but using a standard controller with two analog sticks felt a little strange the first time as well. After a while, I acclimated to the track pads and found that they actually make first-person shooters and other mouse-friendly games more accessible. Sliding your thumb across a pad better emulates the fine movements of a mouse than thumbing an analog stick one way or the other. The pads even offer satisfying haptic feedback as you cursor over objects or fire at enemies.

One of the Steam Controller's biggest strengths might be its programmability. While the left pad can emulate the WASD keys on a keyboard, it can also be programmed for eight-way movement, letting you bind additional keys to the diagonals. This was quick and easy to do. You can widen the dead zone in the middle of the pads, which will come in handy for gamers with big thumbs who continually brush the edges of the pads. Meanwhile, the inner and outer rims of each pad can be programmed with different actions. For example, you might want the precise aiming of a mouse while brushing the inside of a trackpad, but desire the continuous movements and quick turning speed of an analog stick when you

move to the outer rim of the pad.

After you've found the best button/hotkey layout for a given game, you can save it as a profile and upload it onto Steam's servers. The Steam community can vote on the profiles they like best, and if you don't want to bother with building your own layout from scratch, you can download some highly rated layouts and tweak them to match your style.

An Imperfect Machine

The version of the controller that we tested featured four shoulder buttons, two underside buttons (located where the tips of your middle fingers rest on the controller), and four face buttons located in the middle of the unit. Those middle buttons were in an awkward place, but apparently Valve thought so, too.

"We've been getting some good feedback from our partners and beta testers," Coomer told us at CES. "We're using that to make some changes to the controller, so the next version that we're going to test out will have a pretty different button layout from the one we've shown off so far. We think we're moving in the right direction."

During Valve's Steam Dev Day conference in the middle of January, the company announced a redesigned controller (pictured), which shifts the button layout significantly. The new layout removes the planned center touch-screen and groups four of the face buttons into a more familiar pattern below the right touchpad. A second set of four buttons (which could conceivably emulate a D-pad) has also been added below the right pad. This new design looks like a step in the right direction, but it might not be the final controller design, as Valve has stated that it will continue to





Original Steam Controller

Sketch of redesign

tweak the device throughout Steam Machine's beta period.

It's hard to imagine that Valve's new controller will completely replace traditional fare, but for some experiences like first-person shooters and other games that rely on subtle mouse movements the Steam Controller could be the easiest way to play PC games on your couch. Simulating the inputs of an entire mouse and keyboard in a handheld controller is no small feat; we'll find out if Valve is up to the task when the company officially releases its Steam Machines during the second half of the year.

Analyzing the Steam Machine's Market Value

Valve may have a unique new take on the controller, but does the concept of a Steam Machine appeal to a wide enough market? Valve's goal with Steam Machine is to penetrate the living room, which means competing with modern consoles for that coveted spot next to the television. Valve might discover that the living room market expects a different product than the PC enthusiast crowd that Valve is accustomed to.

By and large, consumers who buy a product for their living room are interested in simple plug-and-play devices that can boot up a game immediately without the need of checking system specifications first or undergoing complicated technical tweaking. Thus far, Valve has only revealed half of that formula.

Steam Machines are simple plug-and-play PCs, and the Steam OS is a streamlined service designed to work well with a controller, but Valve has partnered with at least 14 hardware manufactures that are constructing different set top boxes (see sidebar). This will undoubtedly fracture the market and could lead to brand confusion. Consumers who buy a \$500 Steam machine hoping to play some of the big-budget PC titles over the next five years might find that they'll have to upgrade their system sooner than expected. This is one of the traditional dilemmas of PC gaming, but Valve is entering a market not used to facing that problem.

Valve thinks that more choices are ultimately better for the consumer. "It would have been an unnatural decision for us to even consider limiting the scope of the hardware choice," Coomer says. "We think choices are great. More innovation happens if there are more choices. More customers are happy if they have some choice. The kinds of constraints that customers have put up with in the living room, up until now, don't really make sense to us."

Choices may be a good thing, but with so many Steam Machines on the market, customers may not know which model to

buy. Customers who are tech savvy enough to filter through 14 different spec sheets and determine which system is right for them are probably better off building their own PC and uploading Steam OS for free onto that machine. In fact, many of these consumers have already installed the Steam OS beta onto their current PCs.

The less technologically focused consumer has likely avoided PC gaming because they don't like having to worry about which video card is in their machine or if they have enough RAM to run the next game they're going to buy. Stifled with too many choices, these would-be Steam Machine owners may make the wrong choice and end up unhappy, or avoid Valve's systems altogether and settle on a traditional console.

Another problem that Valve will likely face is the OS itself. Steam OS is an elegant looking operating system, but it's based on the Linux open source software. Valve claims that it has optimized games to run faster on Linux, and the OS sounds like a solid platform for game development. Unfortunately, only a small fraction of Steam's library – roughly 250 games – actually run on Linux. By comparison, Valve has around 3,000 games listed on Steam for Windows users. Valve will have to convince developers to begin porting older games over to Linux, or at least start developing titles for the OS (in addition Windows and Mac). This will cost developers additional resources, and some

THE MOST BANG FOR YOUR BOX

During CES 2014, Valve announced that 14 different PC manufactures are producing an array of Steam Machine devices, which will begin re-releasing later this year. While many manufactures haven't announced the full specs for its systems, the entire range of Steam Machines looks to cater to every taste. Entry-level machines like Zotac, PC CyberPower, and iBuyPower come with a price tag of \$500 and include an Intel Core i5 processor, mid-level graphics cards, and 8GB of RAM. Meanwhile, the \$1,500 machines, such as Alternate and Webhallen, houses 16GB of RAM, 1TB of hard drives space, and Intel i7 processors. Finally, boutique PC manufactures like Digital Storm and Falcon Northwest will have gaming powerhouses that cost up to \$6,000. Check out the full list of Valve hardware partners below.

- Alienware
- Alternate
- CyberPowerPC
- Digital Storm – Bolt II
- Falcon Northwest – Tiki
- Gigabyte – Brix Pro
- iBuyPower
- Maingear Spark
- Material.net
- Next Spa
- Origin PC – Chrono
- Scan – NC10
- Webhallen
- Zotac

are likely to balk at the opportunity – at least while Linux only makes up one percent of the market.

If Valve can find a consumer market that lies somewhere between the extremes and foster a library of titles that people are excited to play in their living room, then the Steam Machine could be an unprecedented success. If not, it is bound to become a footnote in gaming history. ❖



Zotac

Webhallen

Digital Storm - Bolt II

WILDSTAR



5 FEATURES THAT SET WILDSTAR APART

One of the most anticipated MMOs on the horizon is Carbine's Wildstar, and the last several weeks of early beta access offered me the opportunity to explore the science fiction-themed title. Here are five features that caught my eye.

by Matt Miller

Setting and Aesthetics

Wildstar features a cartoon-inspired aesthetic, but stops short of feeling like it's kid-oriented. Instead, the exaggerated character models call to mind classic 3D character platformers like Ratchet & Clank and Jak and Daxter. The bouncy and colorful style is eye-catching, but made more interesting because it's juxtaposed against some dark storylines, like a gunslinger dealing with the death of his wife and daughter, or a border town whose marshal was publicly executed.

The setting offers a fun twist on the sci-fi standard. The two playable factions (the hegemonic Dominion and the rebellious Exiles) are fighting over the planet Nexus. The mysterious world holds the secrets of a long-lost civilization of aliens, and each group is competing to take control. Rather than a setting where the heroes have long-established settlements,

Nexus has a western frontier vibe. As you climb mountains and delve into lost caverns, it feels like you are part of the vanguard of explorers uncovering the world.

Ability Selection

Wildstar presents Newcomers with a standard class selection. The engineer, medic, and spellslinger each have their own roles and specialties, as well as a signature weapon, like the stalker's Wolverine-esque claws, that help to set them apart.

The customization of class abilities once you get into the game is intriguing. Wildstar offers a limited set of abilities that can be slotted into your hotbar at any time, but a broader array of abilities can be swapped in on the fly. Rather than have access to a complex array of abilities you may or may not be able to competently use with one another, the game demands that

you think ahead about the type of fights you're heading into and customize accordingly.

While this system is still evolving as development continues, the big advantage of the limited action set is the way that it allows players to develop multiple builds simultaneously, and switch between them at any time. Moreover, each of the abilities you acquire can be tiered up to become more powerful. It all adds up to an experience that lends itself well to experimentation and optimization.

Aiming In Combat

Several of the big MMOs of the last couple of years have flirted with action-focused combat experiences, but Wildstar is investing in a new system of free-form targeting that puts the focus squarely on player skill.

Most attacks in Wildstar from a player or an enemy show up as a telegraphed outline

on the field of battle. If a monster is about to hammer in with a powerful charge, you see a red outline on the ground that dictates where the attack will hit, encouraging you to dodge out of the way.

When you mouse over the hotbar, you also see similar outlines that dictate the range and shape of the ability you're considering. In effect, every ability must be aimed, so movement and positioning becomes essential. A smart use of crowd control might be to line up all the enemies in a straight line before triggering a stun that hits in that same straight line. Similarly, even healers must aim their recuperative skills, demanding you carefully observe your party members' locations and actions.

In practice, the system makes for a dynamic and challenging combat model. Push past the easy intro levels, and battles soon require careful deployment of actions, especially once you enter the sometimes brutally difficult dungeons and later 40-man raids.

Paths

Choosing a class in Wildstar determines your combat style, while a second choice of path (also made at character creation) determines some of the activities available to your character. Becoming a soldier opens up additional combat challenges. Explorers get additional missions about discovering and charting the hidden corners of Nexus. The scientist path is for the true lore enthusiasts, with a wealth of quests that help to fill in the story and setting of the game. Settlers are focused on

expanding and protecting player towns and offering supply support to fellow players.

Each path comes with its own progression path and collection of quests in any given zone, giving you a separate sequence of specific mission types to engage with when you're taking a break from more traditional questing.

Housing

Player housing isn't a new feature to MMOs, but Wildstar is investing big on the concept in an effort to help players develop a greater sense of investment and ownership.

Early in the game, players can purchase a floating plot of land upon which they can build their first house. As the game progresses, you get access to better houses to purchase. Housing is tied to all the other game systems; for instance, you might acquire a new decoration for your house as a treasure drop from a monster.

Beyond the fun of visually customizing your house, engaging the system is worthwhile because the cooler the items in your house, the more rest XP you get for logging out from that house. Plus, your plot of land includes more than just a spot for a home. You can also lay down other facilities, like a garden, mine, or training dummies, to help set apart your own corner of the Wildstar universe.


The housing system lends itself well to the Western frontier feel of Wildstar, and it's just one of several reasons we think Wildstar might draw in an enthusiastic community when it releases later this year. ♦



The unlikely story of how a group
of modders is bringing the original
Half-Life to a new generation

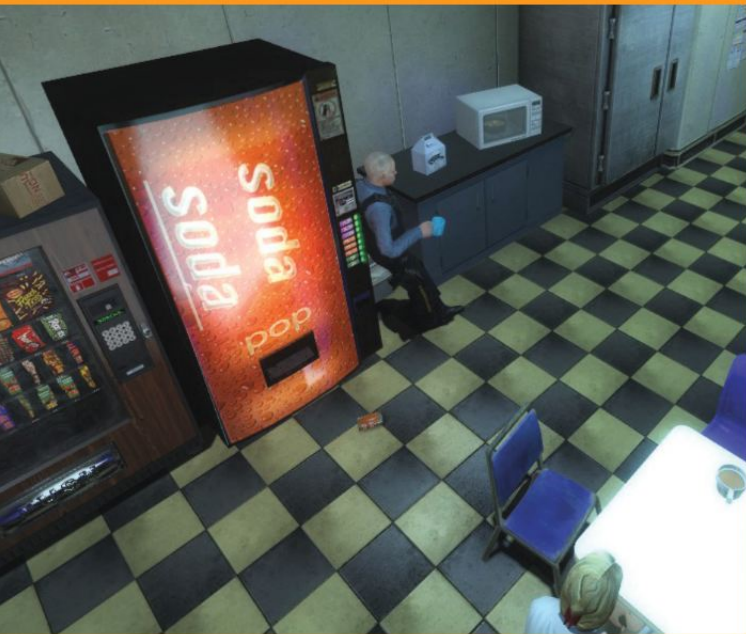
by Isaac Perry

BLACK MESA RETURN TO



FOR NEARLY A DECADE, the Black Mesa Modification Team has been working on a dream: a project to recreate Valve's iconic shooter Half-Life as a mod in the modern-day Source engine. If the idea of a loosely affiliated band of amateur developers remaking a Valve classic in their spare time seems unlikely, it is. Despite their best efforts, the Black Mesa project has been plagued by delays, development struggles, and dead ends. At times, even the most committed members of the team wondered if all their efforts had been in vain.

In 2013, the team's last-ditch efforts to renew some momentum were successful, and now the project has taken on a new life as something they wouldn't have dared imagine: a commercially released game distributed through Steam with the full blessings of their heroes at Valve. Not bad for a project that many members of the Half-Life community believed would never be finished.



ON A RAIL

When Half-Life 2 hit stores in November 2004, gamers were blown away. Set 20 years after the incident at the Black Mesa research facility, the sequel took the classic gameplay of the original and made it even better. Everything from the physics engine and graphics to the voice acting and character development made drastic improvements over the classic debut.

While the sequel worked its way toward release, Valve released a port of the original Half-Life made with its new Source engine. Half-Life Source took players back to the science research facility where it all started. Players expected many enhancements thanks to the new engine, but in reality it left much to be desired. Fans wanted the classic they loved brought up to Half-Life 2's newly set standard. Half-Life Source did little beyond adding a modicum of physics and visual effects.

If fans wanted to play the original Half-Life at the same level of quality they had seen in Half-Life 2, they would have to do it themselves.

Shortly after the Source engine's debut in 2004, two mod teams, unbeknownst to each other, set out with the same ambitious goal to rebuild a better version of Half-Life from the ground up. Eventually the two teams (led by Jon Dominski and Jimmy Headdon of the mod teams LeakFree and Half-Life Source Overhaul Project, respectively) would join forces. The group, aptly named Black Mesa Modification Team, announced their mod project, Black Mesa, on January 1, 2005.



DIY BY DESIGN

In the world of PC gaming, armchair programmers build mods to breathe new life into their video games. Some modders choose to enhance the preexisting game with improved graphics, user interfaces, or new levels. Others adopt the core engine to make something entirely new.

Not all games can be modified, but Valve has always been a staunch supporter of do-it-yourself game creators, offering its development tools to the community for free with the purchase of one of its games. This encouragement has yielded amazing results, with games like Counter-Strike, Team Fortress, and The Stanley Parable rising out of the mod community.

These ambitions often bring like-minded people together, which is what happened to

one group of friends who eventually assumed key positions on the Black Mesa project.

"I wore my Half-Life fandom on my sleeve when I got into college," says Black Mesa story lead Ben Truman. "I went to the Art Institute of Pittsburgh for video game art and design. [Half-Life] was my game. That was what I wanted to do. That was what I referenced. That was my life."

During Color Theory class, Truman sat down next to a scrawny young student named Chuck Wilson. They didn't know each other yet, but Wilson passed over a note that read, "What games do you play?" Truman quickly replied with a succinct answer – Half-Life. "I put the Lambda symbol in there – true-blue Half-Life fan," Truman recalls. "I gave it back to him and his eyes got wide."

"Me too!" the next note read. As it turned out, Truman had already seen some of Wilson's work. "He made maps for the fire-arms mod on the original Half-Life," Truman says, "I was sitting next to a kid whose maps I had already played." They instantly connected, forming the nucleus of a close group of die-hard Half-Life fans.

The friends got wind of the Black Mesa project soon after it was announced and heard that the mod team needed more level designers. Wilson leaped at the opportunity, applying for a position. For an avid fan who already had experience with Half-Life level designing, this was not something to pass up.

"[Wilson] was the first one in, and essentially ushered in a huge block of talent from the Art Institute," Truman says. Among them were Truman, lead modeler Adam Engels, and eventual project lead Carlos Montero. They would make up a small-but-critical, part of the international team.

Fans continued to trickle in over the months, bringing in talent from North Carolina to Australia to help with the project. Black Mesa gained momentum. Everyone was thrilled to make headway and recreate a game they loved, but no one could have foreseen the full extent of the challenges they would face in the coming years.

UNFORSEEN CONSEQUENCES

Black Mesa was an opportunity for this group of passionate-but-inexperienced amateurs to test their mettle at video game development. The team worked for free, finding time to develop whenever they could. They set a public deadline for themselves – a late 2009 mod release.

One of the first things they realized is that working with little to no insight on the Source engine is hard. With no guidance to help them understand it, Montero compares it to "building a puzzle where you're not allowed to look at the pieces. In sheer technical adversity, it's pretty incredible what we had to overcome. We very literally pushed the engine we had to its limits." The team spent many late nights dealing with the technical challenges of creating the gameplay and overall quality they wanted.

Programming was a process of trial and error. The team used a system that allowed them to make multiple revisions. "You'd make a change and it doesn't work, so it's game breaking," says designer Kevin Sisk. "You'd just revert it again and again until we could get it working again, then start over. Depending on how complex the problem, we could spend hundreds of hours working on one model or one scene."

Building the gameplay from scratch was the first pillar in development. The second was to faithfully adhere to the experience of the original Half-Life. The problem that story lead Truman encountered was that everyone had their own take on the game. "Getting the opportunity to recreate my own personal experience with Half-life was a huge challenge, because you are screwing with someone else's sense of nostalgia," Truman says. "That game was great to everybody, but its impact is subjective."

Truman's goal was to make Black Mesa an authentic representation of Half-Life, not a reboot. To achieve this, the team had to adapt every existing scripted sequence into the new engine in a way that wasn't possible in the original Half-Life. As Truman describes, in the original the scientists communicate by flapping their jaws. Their eyes carry no emotion, and their hands are always in fists. Truman contrasts the emotionless Half-Life characters with Disney's *Wall-E*, saying, "that little robot doesn't talk at all, but he emotes entirely through his eyes and his hands. When you take that kind of expression away from the original Half-life, you severely limit the range of what your characters can do. By adding that into Black Mesa, you've opened up this whole other possibility in making these characters seem real."



This screenshot comparison gives you a sense of the subtle changes introduced in Black Mesa since 2008 (inset)



The team had to respect the IP while making its narrative stronger. In Half-Life you often walk into a room and find characters who are just waiting for you, and only one person does the talking. These people wouldn't just be holding the walls up during an alien apocalypse. In Black Mesa, the team gave the characters things to do, adding conversations that heighten tension, while still keeping true to the Half-Life script nearly word for word.

However, as development continued, the team found it difficult to honor that intention. Some moments of Half-Life's video game logic didn't hold together. For example, to open up a new area to explore, the player essentially presses a big red button in a missile silo, sending a rocket careening into space. It's unclear why or what impact it has beyond opening a new area for you to explore. Black Mesa aims to fill in these types of narrative gaps and give player actions more context. By modifying interactions, the team can improve pacing and motivation during gameplay.

The greatest and longest-standing challenge for the team – and the reason the mod has

taken so long to develop – was that the people working on Black Mesa were doing it for free. Everyone was a volunteer, which meant that they were pursuing careers in other fields simultaneously. If their professional lives got in the way, progress on Black Mesa slowed. “That was discouraging,” Sisk says. “Because of how long it was taking, it could be emotionally draining.”

Some of the team had been working on Black Mesa since the beginning in 2005. With a volunteer project of this size, it isn't surprising that some talent was lost along the way. “Huge, huge, huge revolving door,” Truman says. People came and went. Roughly 80 people have worked on the project, though only about 40 positions have been occupied at any one time.

“It was natural chaos,” Truman says. “You'd have [someone] start working on a project and then that person disappears. Then you have all this lost work. That's a problem, but it was also great to have new people in the door. They'd bring the enthusiasm and energy we needed.” In short, the Black Mesa team was constantly in flux.

“WE'VE GOT HOSTILES”

As pieces of the project came together before the 2009 release window, the Black Mesa team realized the game wasn't ready. Everything from the character models to the pacing was off. The team could have simply pushed out the mod to the community – the quality bar for free mods is understandably much lower than the retail release gamers pay for – but the team knew it wouldn't satisfy the community in its current condition. After all, the team was a collection of fans. They wanted to be proud of Black Mesa, and in its current state, they weren't. They had to delay the release.

“Immediately after our 2009 delay was without a doubt the most difficult time for our team,” Montero says. “We had disappointed everyone and frustrated our fans.”

When Black Mesa followers heard that the mod release was postponed, they were angry. Some quickly dismissed the mod as a community dream that would never be realized. Wired Magazine even gave Black Mesa the vaporware award for one of “the tech industry's biggest, brashest and most baffling unfulfilled promises.”

“It was hard to hear the public outcry and know that we were only helping the project by not releasing it,” Montero says.

To reach the quality they themselves demanded, they had to change the scope of the project. “We weren't happy with where we were,” Montero says. “The level of detail, fidelity, player direction, and entertainment – that's what we realized we needed to focus on,” and it would mean a lot more work.

Dejected, the team had to push through the flak and establish what exactly it was they wanted to do with Black Mesa. How much of their personal lives could they put on hold in order to complete this mod? And would it be worth it?

APPREHENSION

Pushing themselves forward after their delay, the team jump-started development. The leads set new, higher standards that required a lot more work, which they believed they were capable of delivering.

“We wanted the best for Black Mesa, but we realized that if we didn't release something soon, we'd be doing this into our 40s,” Truman says. The team decided that it needed to re-define the scope of the project. It set a realistic goal – finishing the earthbound portion (everything but the last few chapters of Black Mesa) – and got to work.

With the new direction, mod development progressed. People devoted more time and energy to their specific parts of the mod. By 2012, three years after the delay, the team had a realistic end date in sight.

As the year wore on, the team heard of a new publishing program Valve was promoting. Steam Greenlight would allow independent developers to put their game concepts into the public arena. If fans up-voted a project enough, Valve would work with the developer to bring the game to their online distribution platform, Steam.

“Getting [Black Mesa] on Steam was never about selling it as a retail product,” Truman says. “We would just make the mod free for download from the Steam library. So when Greenlight popped up, we just thought, ‘Why not? Let's go for it.’”



A Team In Transition

The current team behind Black Mesa is vastly different than the original group, which is the nature of a community project of this size. Many people have lent their talent over the years, but not all have stayed.

“It's been difficult, to be honest,” Montero says. “Some members of the team have had to leave because their professional careers don't allow for them to be a part of a commercial project on the side.” Sisk agrees. “Before, it was very much a hobby,” he says. “Now we're going retail, and it's very much an investment.” Mark Abent and others have had to step down from lead roles, but a majority of the team remains.

Today, you can find some current and past members of the team scattered around the industry. Project lead Carlos Montero works at Cryptic Studios. Lead programmer Mark Abent just recently joined Cloud Imperium Games to work on Star Citizen. Game designer Chuck Wilson, the one who ferried in many of Black Mesa's talent in 2005, currently works on Respawn Entertainment's Titanfall.

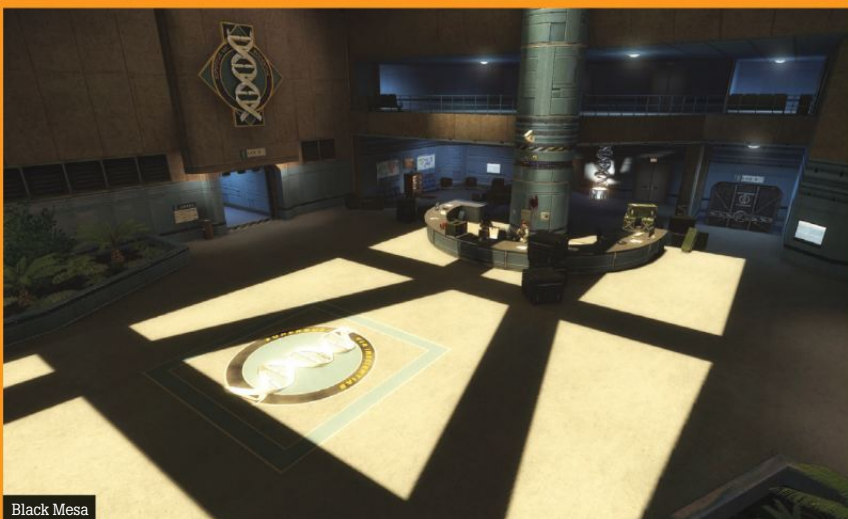
Others haven't been so lucky. Not all of them have found a career in the industry like they wanted. “I was dead sure that this project would open doors for me in the gaming industry,” says story lead Ben Truman. “Last year I had a very unsuccessful job hunt.”

Truman hopes that Black Mesa's retail release will be the foot in the door he's been looking for. “For now, all I can do is keep writing,” he says. Truman currently writes for a variety of comic publications, including *FUBAR*, a zombie alternate history to World War II.

The team is hopeful. After their retail release announcement, the Black Mesa Modification Team took on a new moniker, Crowbar Collective. The new studio will be the official developer behind Black Mesa when it releases via Steam. Some members in the studio are already playing with the idea of designing future independent games. Listening to the enthusiasm of recent announcements and of how work is continuing, it's hard not to be excited for the developers – both with their fan-made video game and their careers.



Original release



Black Mesa

The obvious roadblock between Black Mesa and its appearance on Steam Greenlight was Valve. Valve owned Half-Life. The Black Mesa team was recreating the original Half-Life and planned to submit the mod to a promotion on Valve's digital distribution service. This could pose a problem. As Truman put it, "When people tried to remake Duke Nukem 3D, Chrono Trigger, or Sonic the Hedgehog, those projects got squashed as soon as the lawyers heard about it."

With Black Mesa, Valve had always taken a hands-off approach. Still, the team knew that Valve had the legal power to wipe away all their work with the sweep of a pen. After spending eight years in development, on the verge of their release, the team could still have nothing to show for it. They held their breath and submitted the game to Steam Greenlight. "We watched Black Mesa rocket up there in votes," Truman says. "It kept climbing and climbing, and finally Valve cut the voting off and said, 'This is the first round of games to be Greenlit.'" Black Mesa was one of them.

September 2012 was a banner month for the team. On the fifth, the team submitted their mod to Greenlight. Six days later, it was successfully Greenlit. Three days after that, on September 14, the first part of Black Mesa was released to the public via a series of mirror sites. It has since been downloaded more than three million times, earning a rating of 86 on Metacritic and receiving the Mod of the Year award from ModDB.

Any lingering fear that Valve would interfere with their mod project evaporated following Black Mesa's release. For now, the publisher would remain quiet.

POWER UP

The team was overjoyed by the success of their project. "Black Mesa was such a huge part of my life," Truman says. "Seven or eight years working on this one project with the same group of people. It's not like we toiled for eight years and it was experienced by 20 people who thought it was mediocre and that was it. We actually got to make something that's arguably one of the biggest, highest profile mods in recent years."

After Black Mesa's release, Valve continued its hands-off approach. "The response from most [people at] Valve was, 'We'll play it when it's on Steam,'" Truman says. "They hadn't said anything good or bad about Black Mesa. It is the kind of relationship we've always had."

What Valve did next surprised everyone. During discussions with Valve regarding Black Mesa's free Steam release, Valve presented an offer. "After we got Greenlit [the proposal] just came across from them very casually as a

possibility," Montero says. It was staggering. Valve had just granted the team permission to sell Black Mesa as a retail game on Steam.

"In the back of our heads we had thought about [selling Black Mesa]," Sisk says, "but we didn't think it would ever happen." With Valve's new offer, members of the team could now be financially rewarded for their work. "Sometimes I don't think [Valve] realizes how cool they actually are," Montero says.

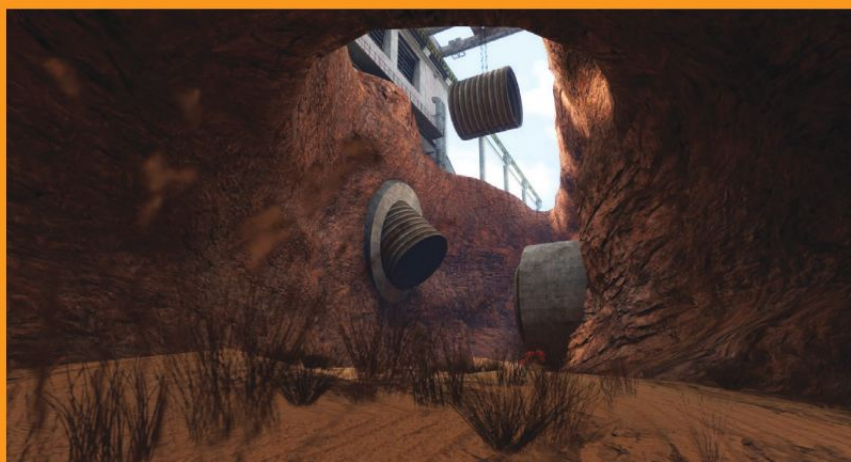
Because Black Mesa would be a full-fledged video game, the team had to raise the bar for the second time. Now they had an impressive to-do list: prepare Black Mesa for Steam – both for the retail product and the free Source mod – and continue development of future additions of Black Mesa.

Preparing a free Source mod alongside a retail product bears explanation. The team had already begun porting Black Mesa to the Source 2013 engine. This new build of the engine supports Valve's SteamPipe, which, among a variety of other benefits, allows for the developers to issue updates to Black Mesa themselves. But at the same time, they had started as mod developers and had a commitment to that community. Even though they had the chance to sell Black Mesa as a video game, they decided to see the Source mod through as well. Sisk puts it simply, "They're our brothers in arms. It would be silly not to do that."

So why would the team sell Black Mesa if they're going to release a free version? As Montero writes in his retail announcement, "Our decision to sell Black Mesa rests on two key points. One is we believe we can make the game even better by having full access to [a new and undisclosed version of the] Source engine. This lets us tackle and fix limitations instead of working around them. The second is because frankly, our team could really use the financial help."

The team is close-lipped about new content within the retail release of the game. However, Montero says the retail version "will include features that the free version simply cannot have." Xen, the last few chapters of the single-player campaign, and Black Mesa Deathmatch, the competitive multiplayer aspect of the game, are in the works.

Black Mesa has had a long and labored development. It's dizzying to look back over the past nine years and forward to the team's future plans. Legal issues, community fatigue, or technical roadblocks could have swallowed the project whole. Yet, the developers kept going, striving to make Black Mesa bigger than they could have initially imagined. One thing is clear. For the group of staunch believers, supporters, programmers, and designers, Black Mesa continues to be one hell of a ride. ♦



Timeline

June 1, 2004

Half-Life Source releases

November 16, 2004

Half-Life 2 releases

Jan 1, 2005

Black Mesa development officially begins

November 19, 2008

Mod team upgrades to 2007 build of the Source engine

December 6, 2009

The collective announces that Black Mesa is being delayed

September 2, 2012

After reworking the game, the team announces that Black Mesa will be released in two parts

September 5, 2012

The Black Mesa Modification Team submits its mod to Steam Greenlight

September 11, 2012

Valve accepts Black Mesa to the Greenlight program, which clears the way for the mod to be distributed via Steam

September 14, 2012

Black Mesa finally releases. Team begins porting to new Source build for Black Mesa's Steam release

November 19, 2013

Crowbar Collective reveals that Black Mesa will be sold as a retail product on Steam

The Best Mobile Games Of 2013

(continued)

Several months ago, we highlighted our picks for the best games in the mobile scene from the first several months of the year. If you're looking for a new batch of mobile titles to explore, we've gathered our picks from the later months of 2013, with an eye towards separating the wheat from the chaff. *by Matt Miller*



1

Device 6

Platform: iOS
Developer: Simogo

Simogo follows up its atmospheric title Year Walk by providing players with a brilliant evolution of interactive fiction called Device 6. Players navigate through a dynamic presentation of text and images that slowly unfolds the story of an amnesiac girl named Anna. By twisting and turning your device, carefully observing your surroundings, and solving puzzles, you advance her story. It's a fascinating new way to present narrative rooted in what works best about the mobile platform.



2

Kingdom Rush Frontiers

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** Ironhide Game Studio

Arriving a few days too late for us to squeeze it into the last list, Kingdom Rush Frontiers is nonetheless a must-play for anyone with at least a passing interest in tower defense. Like its predecessor, players deploy archers, artillery, and other towers along static paths while hordes of monsters charge past. This new installment offers more dynamic stages, more varied and compelling enemies and tower types, and immaculate balancing, all packed with charm.



3

Icycle: On Thin Ice

Platform: iOS
Developer: Damp Gnat

You are Dennis, a naked man on a too-small bicycle pedaling through the frigid snow on a quest for love. Icycle is chock full of organic storytelling and humor, accentuated by surreal imagery and chuckle-inducing sound design, but it's the strong platforming and level design that makes the game shine. Levels are constantly shifting around you as ice cracks apart and you tumble down through crystalline caverns. Artsy, clever, and thoughtfully designed, Icycle deserves a look.

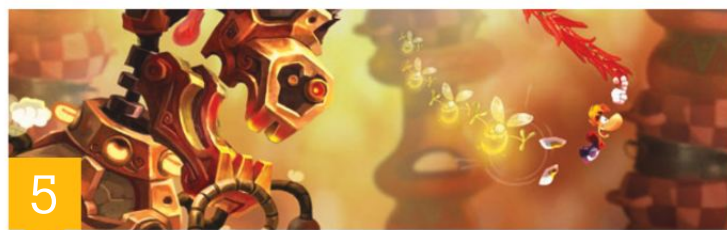
Infinity Blade III

Platform: iOS
Developer: Chair Entertainment

The final installment of Chair's epic dueling game wrapped up in style. A second playable character offered a second set of upgrades to acquire, while a dramatically expanded set of locations made this entry feel more like a world-spanning journey. Excellent combat controls, breathtaking environments, and a fully voiced story combine to form the reigning model for touch-enabled action games.



4

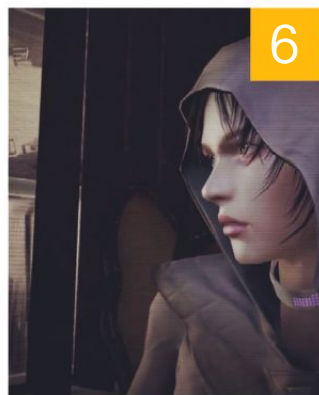


5

Rayman: Fiesta Run

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** PopCap

The excellent Rayman: Jungle Run borrowed assets from its console cousin, Rayman Origins, to create a fantastic one-touch platforming game. By doing the same with assets from Rayman Legends, Fiesta Run sticks with the successful formula. Beautiful art, whimsical music, and even more challenging levels this time around make this an easy pick.



6

Republic: Exordium

Platform: iOS
Developer: Camouflaj

The first installment of Camouflaj's Kickstarter-funded stealth game is one of the more ambitious projects in the mobile sphere. Decidedly more "console-like" than most mobile games, Republic stars a girl named Hope as she tries to escape from a totalitarian regime. Players navigate Hope past wary guards and electronic security systems, while garnering new glimpses into the characters and fiction of the world. This visually stunning title is a strong start to what we hope is a rich series.

Knightmare Tower

Platform: iOS, Android
Developer: Juicy Beast Studio

The instantly addictive Nightmare Tower casts you as a princess-saving knight hurtling higher and higher through a tower filled with monsters. Each time you slash down on a baddie, your speed increases, until either a wall of lava catches you or the monsters deplete your last heart of health. The simple formula is incredibly entertaining, and the flow of upgrades is steady and enjoyable throughout your efforts to climb ever higher. Nightmare Tower is simple, fun, and hard to put down.



7



8

The Room Two

Platform: iOS
Developer: Fireproof Games

The haunting puzzles of The Room Two make it easy to lose oneself in its world. Like in the first game, players turn dials, press buttons, open boxes, and otherwise manipulate objects to unwrap a story of supernatural mystery. Players actually travel to several strange rooms this time around, each of which has multiple points of interest to explore. For thoughtful, contemplative puzzling, The Room Two is hard to beat.



9

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Platform: iOS
Developer: Firaxis/2K China

The stellar strategy game makes a seamless transition to mobile in this highly polished port. You lead the world's clandestine military force to counter an alien invasion, upgrading your base and troops in-between tense and challenging strategic battles. Excellent touch controls make it seem like this mammoth game was designed from the ground up for mobile platforms. As one of the most technologically complex games on iOS, XCOM struggled with some stability issues in its early months, which have now been largely resolved, making this a great time to tackle it if you somehow missed the console/PC release.



10

Football Heroes

Platform: iOS
Developer: Run Games

Whether you like sports games or not, you might want to give Football Heroes a chance. Inspired by old-school titles like Tecmo Bowl, NBA Jam, and Arch Rivals, Football Heroes is a loose interpretation of football in which your players can punch, spin, and super-power their way to victory against cartoony opponents. Every action you take helps your players build XP, which in turn lets you level up position-specific abilities and perks.

Shadowrun Returns

Platform: iOS, Android
Developer: Harebrained Schemes

The long-awaited return of the Shadowrun universe to video games boasts a killer story and an atmospheric imagining of futuristic Seattle. Pickings for strong, story-focused RPGs on mobile are scarce, and Shadowrun Returns stands near the top of the pack. Well-implemented touch controls, detailed character customization, and strategic battles add up to big fun, whether you're a long time runner or this is your first time on the streets.



11



12

Plants vs. Zombies 2

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** PopCap

One of the most popular mobile games of all time finally reappeared with a sequel in 2013, but earned some gamers' ire with a free-to-play model and a controversial stage structure. However, there's no denying the pure joy of popping off zombie heads with a blast from your pea-shooters, and PvZ 2 provided plenty of new plants with which to strategize, new zombies to defeat, and a time-spanning series of levels to conquer. A post-release patch has improved player progression, and deserves a second look if you had problems the first time around.

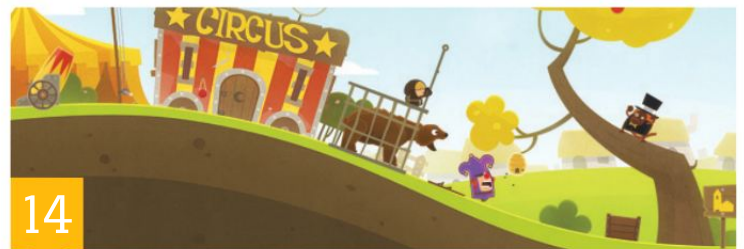


13

Lords of Waterdeep

Platform: iOS
Developer: Playdek

One of the best board games of recent years received a digital adaptation this year worthy of its tactical depth and artistic splendor. Lords of Waterdeep is playable solo against AI, but also features pass-and-play or online multiplayer in either real time or through asynchronous play. Players control one of the titular lords of the great city, placing workers around the city to acquire resources and deny those resources to other players. With Dungeons & Dragons fantasy themes and a fast-playing mechanic, this is a perfect choice for competitive strategy gamers.



14

Tiny Thief

Platform: iOS, Android (2014) **Developer:** 5 Ants

Tiny Thief takes classic point-and-click puzzle/adventures and jams them together with simple stealth mechanics, and the result is delightful. You navigate a hungry little thief through increasingly challenging stages, snatching up pies and treasures as you go. The scrappy little rascalion is an adorable protagonist, and nearly every level left us smiling with silly animations and a chipper soundtrack.



15

Oceanhorn

Platform: iOS
Developer: Cornfox & Bros.

Oceanhorn isn't just inspired by Zelda; it's trying to emulate the franchise wherever possible. While the game doesn't completely live up to its lofty source material, it's still a decent action/adventure in its own right. With music composed by Final Fantasy vets Nobuo Uematsu and Kenji Ito, the audio has a sweeping grandiosity, and the colorful visual style is charming. Add in some cleverly designed dungeons and rich world exploration, and Oceanhorn earns strong consideration.

interview



photo: Michelle Yee

The Independent Spirit

The career of Capybara Games' president **Nathan Vella** follows the iconic indie developer story arc: a chance meeting with some likeminded college students and a love of games parlayed into a successful and growing studio. We spoke with Vella about Capy's philosophy as well as his involvement with the Indie Fund.

interview by *Matt Helgeson*

Capybara is the classic "indie" story – a small group of people coming together to make small games. Now, the company is working on two ambitious console games at once: Below and Super Time Force. How do you manage that growth? Does it get to be too much at times?

It absolutely gets to be a lot for us. One of the things that is most challenging about our studio is running multiple projects. We came back from the Christmas holiday and that was the first thing that the owners met about – how do we continue to get better at managing multiple projects without sacrificing the quality level?

Sword & Sworcery EP was a huge success for you. Today, it seems that the iOS market is really crowded with a lot of cheaply made, derivative products – with exceptions like Device 6. What's your take on iOS today?

I think iOS is a very different place from when we were there. Looking back, we launched Sworcery at a very opportune time. It's a very challenging market. I think there is still space for great stuff, but the economics of it are completely different than they were when Sworcery came out. People on iOS have definitely been trained. They started being trained to want to pay 99 cents. Now, consumers are trained to not want to pay anything to download a game. That changes the way that independent developers look at the platform. The way you leverage iOS now is by doing what Simogo does, by doing smaller scale stuff where you don't need to sell 10 million copies to be profitable. Whereas on PC via Steam, you can feel that if you make something great, you'll have a great chance. The iOS market is a different beast altogether.

The free-to-play gold rush is on. Is this dangerous? Music fans have been trained not to pay for music now, and the industry can't unring that bell.

The risk in free-to-play – and I don't know if there is a risk – would be if that was the only business model. At a certain point, we'll reach the tipping point and everything is free and that's what consumers expect. On console, I don't see that happening. Consoles have been working in this pay-for-value model for so long that we've become in sync with our customers. There's not a real reason for me to figure out how to make Below a free-to-play game. I think there is a group of people that will be happy to pay for the game. I would much rather make the game for that group than try to hit 10 million people. It makes it much more clear who our audience is and easier to make decisions to serve our community and fan base.

Sony's self-publishing program was perceived as more friendly to independent developers than Microsoft. Capy is now bringing Below and Super Time Force exclusively to Xbox One. How has the experience of working with Microsoft been?

It's been great. Microsoft was kind enough to get us kits ridiculously early, so we've been working on it from an early phase. We've seen [the platform] develop and solidify. Being there at the beginning of a platform seems surreal. There's an interesting perception about how PS4 is for indies and Xbox One isn't. I think some of that has to do with Microsoft messaging it incorrectly, but it's also because Sony has done a great job of making it part of their message. With ID@Xbox, Microsoft has done something they didn't have to do. XBLA was a giant success on so many levels. So, when I looked at it, it was like "Why would they change what was working?"

But they still went out and said, "The industry has changed, and the industry wants self publishing. We're going to allow it, and get someone who knows their s--- and is trusted like Chris Charla to run it." It's something no one wants to discuss, because no one wants to say anything good about platform holders, but XBLA was a massive success and they still listened and reacted.

You're also involved in the Indie Fund. If I understand correctly, the fund gives out loans to independent developers, which are then repaid through sales of the game.

Yeah, you can go to indie-fund.com and actually see the contract. The way it works is that we give them the requested amount of money, they pay us back as quickly as they can, and after that we have a royalty percentage until we double our investment. So, if we give you \$100,000, we're going to take \$200,000. We're very specific about it – it's not charity. Developers need to understand that there are business components to making games that are required. But it's also about trying to make sure that it's about making terms that are fair and much better than going with a traditional publisher.

Have you been paid back by most of the projects?

All of them have paid back except for the one that got canceled, which was the very first one. If you can't finish the game or the game doesn't succeed, we're not going to take your house. If you can't pay it back in a period of time, the loan is basically forgiven. That means that we made a bad investment. The obligation shouldn't necessarily be placed on the developers themselves. The hope is that after we fund them once, they will never need to ask for funding again. If you look at games like Dear Esther or Antichamber, I believe we'll never hear those developers asking for money again.

Originally, "indie" referred to a business model but now often refers to a set of aesthetics. Media Molecule is owned by Sony, but they have indie aesthetics. Double Fine used to make triple-A games for big publishers but now they are operating like an indie. What's your definition of indie in 2014?

The question "what is indie?" used to really matter in terms of business, but now I agree it almost matters more in terms of aesthetics. For us personally, being independent is just the ability to make our own decisions and define the path for our studio. There are other people who are using independent games as a way to foster diversity in the industry or raise social issues or do crazy, ultra-artistic stuff. When you compare Cart Life to Bastion, they are vastly different games, but they are both capital-I "Indie." The biggest strength in indie is the diversity. The fact that it's an open, ethereal definition shows how far it's come. It shows how powerful the movement is.

How did you come up with the concepts for Below and Super Time Force?

You'd probably have trouble finding two more different games, yet we're making them at the same time in the same studio with the same people. The way they started is also very different. Super Time Force started at the Toronto Game Jam. We brought it back to the studio and decided that, in spite of the fact that those guys were also working on another game, they should also work on that. For months and months, they just worked on it once a week and added cool stuff each time. Below, on the other hand, was a game that Kris Piotrowski pitched a long time ago, before Demon's Souls. It was a really tightly crafted, strategic roguelike for consoles. That was four or five years ago, and none of us were really into that genre. But when Kris gets passionate about an idea it's probably a good idea. After we all got on board, we started messing around with the idea and prototyped it before it became a full project.

Super Time Force, like many games on the indie scene, draws a lot from the imagery and sounds of the 8- and 16-bit eras. Why is that aesthetic so popular?

I think a lot of it has to do with the way that independent developers look at pixel art is different than a lot of other people look at it. We love the art form, we look at it as a style just like 3D is a style and hand-drawn 2D is a style. Within that we see so many different opportunities for different styles. Super Time Force and Mercenary Kings are great examples of different-looking but similarly formatted games. It's the same way that Gears of War and Halo look nothing alike but are both done in 3D. It's a style that hasn't been co-opted by anyone else. It feels like one of those things that we, being the independent game community in general, has said "this is ours." ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

**1997
BIG SCREEN DREAMS**
Vella begins his studies at Toronto's Ryerson University as a film major

**1998
CHANCE MEETING**
Vella meets two fellow students, Kris Piotrowski and Anthony Chan. The three bond over a love of games

**1999
GAME ON**
The trio spend many nights in college playing Sega's new Dreamcast console, competing in games like Virtua Tennis and Power Stone

**2003
BREAKING OUT**
After graduation, Vella becomes fed up with his job as an editor at a Canadian television station. He rents a car and drives 54 hours to the Game Developer's Conference with Piotrowski and Chan

**2003
FELLOWSHIP**
Growing out of a thread on the Toronto IDGA forums, Vella starts meeting with a group of aspiring developers, the Toronto Game Initiative

**2005
IT'S OFFICIAL**
Vella, Piotrowski, Chan, and fellow group members Sean Lohrisch and Matt Repetski officially form Capybara Games. The crew moves into an office space to begin work on a host of licensed mobile games for franchises like Cars and Pirates of the Caribbean

**2009
MAGIC TIME**
Capybara creates the DS title Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes for Ubisoft. It's later ported to home consoles and PC

**2011
BREAKTHROUGH**
Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP is released for iOS and becomes a huge hit

**2014
JUGGLING ACT**
The company works on two high-profile new titles, the retro-inspired Super Time Force and the enigmatic roguelike Below



1

5 GAMING TECH TRENDS

TO WATCH IN 2014

Two of the major console manufacturers just released new hardware, but that doesn't mean that gaming innovation will stagnate over the next couple years. Technology continues to barrel forward, and gamers will reap some of the benefits. During the annual Consumer Electronics Show, we got our first glimpse at some of the hottest new consumer products that will soon be hitting the market. Here are five of the most exciting gaming tech trends to keep your eye on.

by Ben Reeves

1 Virtual Reality Is Virtually Real

Virtual reality has been a sci-fi dream for decades, and while some companies have tested the waters throughout the years, few have achieved the same level of buzz as Oculus' upcoming Rift headset. We tested Oculus' newest prototype at CES, and were impressed with the improvements in head tracking and display fidelity. Other companies like Sony and GameFace were showing off prototype VR headsets, and a handful of startups have begun making peripherals that track body movements while wearing such devices. Later in the month Valve revealed its own VR headset as well. We're still waiting for final product and pricing announcements, but expect to hear these practical details soon. By the end of 2014, you might actually be jacking into the Matrix.

2 4K Displays Become Affordable

Netflix is set to start streaming 4K content directly into our homes, and other entertainment services are sure to follow – delivering movies, TV, and games to consumers at a pixel density four times sharper than current HD displays. Unfortunately, you need a 4K display to enjoy this level of crystal clear entertainment. Thankfully, the prices of 4K displays has dropped dramatically over the last couple years and will continue to drop throughout 2014. Companies like Sony, LG, and Samsung all showed off new lines of product that will capture the attention of many consumers' wallets. Samsung's \$4,499 curved 65-inch UHD display (pictured) turned a lot of heads at the show, but other companies, such as Vizio, announced 4K sets for less than \$1,000. Upgrading to a new set or monitor will become more tempting as the year wears on.



3



3 Thinner, Lighter Gaming Laptops

There used to be two main camps of laptops: paper-thin machines built for checking email and surfing the Internet, and bricks that played games. The push to shrink gaming laptops without draining them of all their power has been going on for years, and this year's show proved that we keep getting closer. The most exciting gaming laptop at the show was the 17.3-inch Gigabyte Aorus, which crams a quad-core 2.4GHz Intel Core i7-4700HQ and two Nvidia GeForce GTX 765M in to an aluminum clamshell that is less than an inch thick. It looks like high-powered gaming rigs are finally getting small enough that we can carry them around without deforming our spine.

4 Falling To Pieces Over Modular Computers

Upgrading a PC requires a small amount of computer know-how and a willingness to screw apart a complex, expensive machine, but a few companies are trying to simplify that procedure. At CES, Razer unveiled a modular PC concept. The system's backbone tower houses ports for all kinds of modular components that could range from graphics cards to hard drives to Blu-ray players. A system like this would be easy to upgrade, but we'll have to wait and see if Razer actually brings such a device to market. Similarly, Origin showed off its new Genesis PC case, a custom-designed desktop housing that allows consumers to move the windowed side panel on either side of their tower. Inside, the motherboard and graphic chips can be arranged in a variety of orientations. A secondary housing add-on even allows owners to add additional storage or processing power to the system. We hope this trend continues and companies continue to make it easier for us to play with the design of our PCs.



5



5 Next-Gen Gaming Headsets

A lot of premium audio manufacturers – including Audio Technica, Klipsch, and Sennheiser – unveiled some interesting new PC gaming headsets, but we were more interested in seeing some high-tech headsets for our brand new consoles. Turtle Beach's Ear Force XO Seven wireless headset for Xbox One featured inline chat/voice controls and swappable speaker plates to help you design the most comfortable headset possible. Meanwhile, the company's Ear Force PX4 for PlayStation 4 features Bluetooth functionality, which allows you to answer mobile phone calls without pausing your game. If you're still happy with your last-gen headset and you don't want to spend a paycheck buying a new pair, companies like Turtle Beach and Astro confirmed that they are currently working on headset adapters, which should be on the market later this year. Much of the market seems to be waiting for more consumers to adopt the new consoles before they spring their hardware onto the market, but considering how well the new systems are selling, you can expect to see more third-party headsets to filtering onto the market soon.



AMERICAN HUSTLE

A star-studded cast led by Christian Bale and Amy Adams tells a story loosely based on the FBI ABSCAM operation of the late 1970s and early 1980s, where two con artists work with federal investigators to flush out a group of corrupt politicians.

\$28.99
americanhustle-movie.com

FROZEN

Based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen*, Disney's charming new animated film tells the story of a powerful witch who traps her kingdom in an eternal winter, and the fearless princess who braves blizzards and the foibles of an anthropomorphic snowman to defrost the realm.

\$29.99
disney.com/frozen

SONIC CD TEMPORAL DUALITY

Sonic CD was one of the earliest games to make use of the optical format, and OverClocked ReMix has taken 38 tracks from both the Japanese and American releases and let 39 different artists remix the tracks, creating a zippy new synth album.

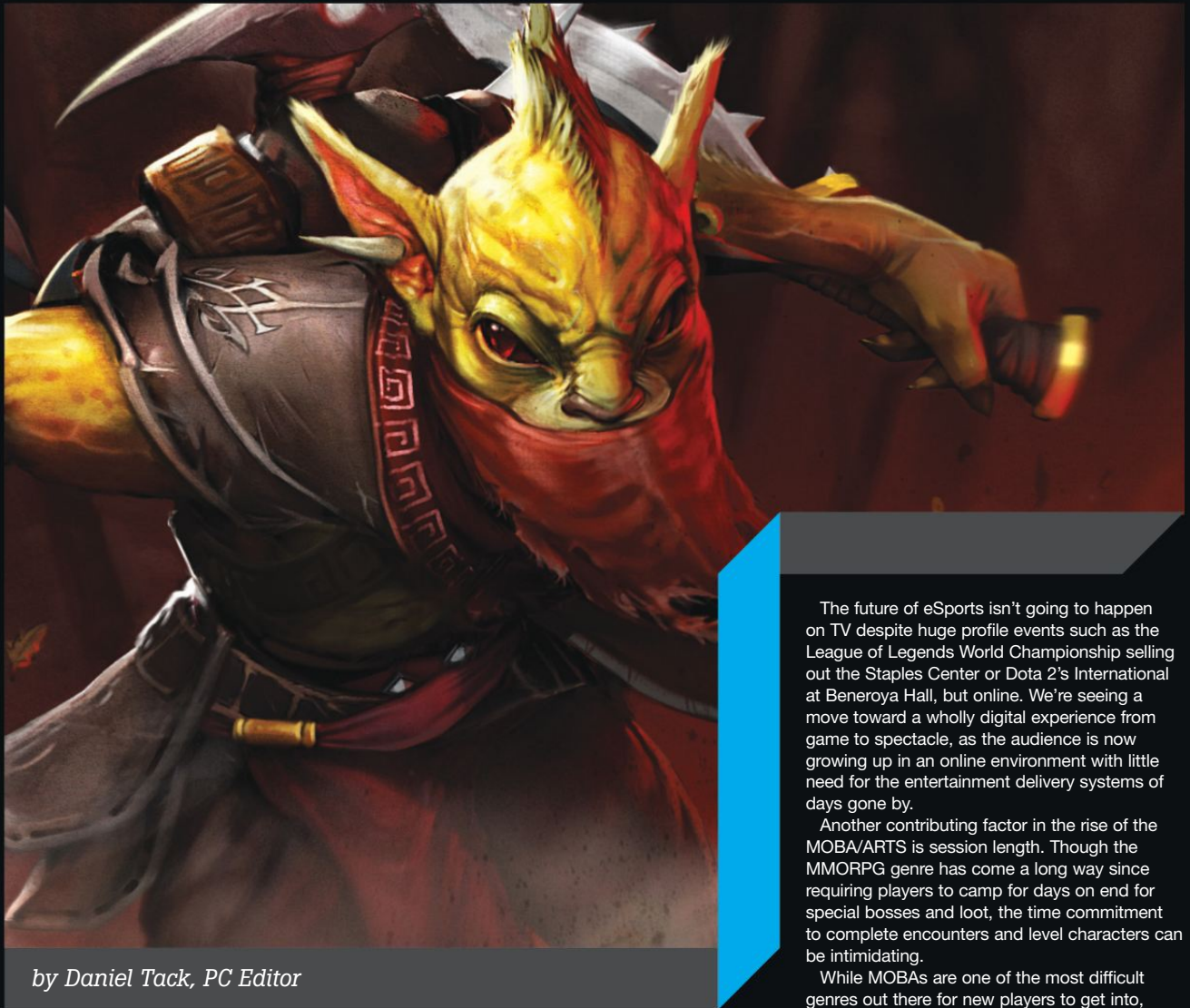
Free
soniccd.ocremix.org

WORDS OF RADIANCE BY BRANDON SANDERSON

Continuing the epic fantasy sequel to *The Way of Kings*, Sanderson lets readers visit the world of Roshar, where gigantic hurricane-like storms scrub the planet's surface and the tension between humans and Parshendi reaches new heights as a mysterious assassin slays the world's rulers.

\$28.99
brandonsanderson.com

Why MOBAs Rule The World



by Daniel Tack, PC Editor

The PC market is no stranger to trends. Developers and publishers have shifted gears rapidly as players have become willing to embrace digital distribution, new genres, and monetization models.

The massively multiplayer online role-playing game, once the realm of the hardcore and the hobbyist, exploded into the mainstream with World of Warcraft. Since then, the genre has become a sought after destination for huge IPs, gargantuan games, and enormous budgets.

But the cost to produce a MMORPG has risen almost exponentially as newcomers must compete with titles that already have years of content. New titles that seek to differentiate themselves from the rest of the pack often see their hooks and innovations quickly implemented into long-

standing titles, making it a difficult market to enter under the best of circumstances.

Then something happened. What if you could take the leveling, character progression, loot, classes and roles of a MMORPG and put them into a fast-paced, player vs. player arena setting? These single synchronous session titles pit role-playing team compositions against other thinking opponents, making for a unique game experience every time. Because of the possibilities, it makes for a far more dynamic group experience than one will find in a traditional scripted MMORPG encounter – and a far more watchable one.

Spurred by a custom map creation, the multiplayer online battle arena or action real-time strategy (MOBA/ARTS) genre has taken PC gaming and eSports by storm over the last few years, picking up the torch of the once grand real-time strategy game.

The popularity of these competitive team-based titles can partially be attributed to several other things happening at around the same time, including improved less aggressive free-to-play models, improved streaming services that allow players and professionals alike to watch or broadcast 24 hours a day, and implementation of progression models that reward players for each and every game played.

The future of eSports isn't going to happen on TV despite huge profile events such as the League of Legends World Championship selling out the Staples Center or Dota 2's International at Beneroya Hall, but online. We're seeing a move toward a wholly digital experience from game to spectacle, as the audience is now growing up in an online environment with little need for the entertainment delivery systems of days gone by.

Another contributing factor in the rise of the MOBA/ARTS is session length. Though the MMORPG genre has come a long way since requiring players to camp for days on end for special bosses and loot, the time commitment to complete encounters and level characters can be intimidating.

While MOBAs are one of the most difficult genres out there for new players to get into, there is almost no friction involved from a monetary or time perspective. Players may end up playing many more hours in a MOBA than a MMO, but it's chunked in a fashion that allows for more freedom.

The monetization models that drive the MOBA are varied, but the genre is mostly accessible as free-to-play. While free-to-play has continued to gain ground over the last few years, it's understandable that consumers approach it with some degree of trepidation. As free-to-play fumbles around to find mainstream acceptability, MOBAs are a significant driver of "correct" implementation of the model, largely focused on customization options that sometimes dip into the convenience basket.

The online gaming environment is changing rapidly, but MOBAs are better positioned than any other game type to take advantage of the trends shifting toward shorter session length, free-to-play frictionless entry, competitive modes, enhanced watchability, and progression-based incentivized logins and gameplay. ♦

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

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



04 Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z



04 South Park: The Stick of Truth



07 SXSW Gaming Expo



07.2



11 Titanfall



14



18 Final Fantasy XIII-2 HD

March

02 The 86th Academy Awards

Some people watch the Academy Awards to see which films are recognized as the year's best. Other people tune in to see what the stars are wearing. Another group of people watch this award show solely to laugh at people whose acceptance speeches go on too long. Our picks: Best Picture: *12 Years a Slave*; Best Actor: Matthew McConaughey (*Dallas Buyers Club*); Best Actress: Amy Adams (*American Hustle*); Speech That Goes Too Long: Best Visual Effects.

04 New Releases

- › Doctor Who: The Time of the Doctor (*Blu-ray, DVD*)
- › South Park: The Stick of Truth (*PS3, 360, PC*)
- › Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z (*PS3, 360*)

07 SXSW Gaming Expo

Free and open to the public, SXSW Gaming Expo houses upcoming games, panels, and "rocking parties." The game show starts today, runs through Sunday, and is just a small slice of things to do at this year's SXSW, which is once again packed with musical acts and movies.

07.2 This is Still Sparta

The ending of Frank Miller and Zack Snyder's *300* didn't invite much sequel potential. That's not stopping movie studios from bringing more shirtless men moving in slow-motion to the big screen in *300: Rise of an Empire*. Fun fact: If all of the slow motion sequences were played at regular speed, the entire film would be 97 seconds long.

11 New Releases

- › Dark Souls II (*PS3, 360*)
- › Titanfall (*Xbox One, 360, PC*)
- › Transformers: Armada: The Complete Series (*DVD*)

14 Another Game Movie

Movies based on games almost always end up disappointing fans. Remember *Hitman*, *Max Payne*, and *Prince of Persia*? Well, *Need for Speed*, in theaters today, is about to join their ranks. There's no way a mere movie could capture the high-octane drama and nuanced characters of EA's refined racing series. Cars and explosions? You're out of your league, Hollywood.

17 Game Developers Conference

Starting today and running through March 21, the Game Developer

Conference is packed with panels, lectures, bootcamps, and numerous other activities related to video games. Highlights include Bungie detailing *Destiny*'s customizable character design, and Yu Suzuki revisiting *Shenmue* in a classic game postmortem. This show is capped off with the 14th annual Choice Awards.

18 New Releases

- › Final Fantasy XIII-2 HD (*PS3*)
- › Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes (*PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360*)

21 New Releases

- › Infamous: Second Son (*PS4*)

25 New Releases

- › BlazBlue Chrono Phantasma (*PS3*)
- › Diablo III: Reaper of Souls (*PC*)
- › The Witch and the Hundred Knight (*PS3*)

28 Raid Harder

In terms of pure action, it's hard to beat *The Raid: Redemption*, a movie that follows in the tradition of *Die Hard*. The sequel, *The Raid 2*, doesn't change the formula drastically; one guy (Rama) systematically dispatches the members of a criminal organization with wicked kung fu. Brutal violence and stylish fight choreography are the series' hallmarks, but don't expect anyone to say "yippie ki-yay."

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METAL GEAR SOLID COMES FULL CIRCLE

Metal Gear Solid is one of the longest running and most influential series in the game industry. Boasting a development history and storyline that stretches back for decades, it's important to explore the franchise's roots in preparation for the upcoming Metal Gear Solid V. Game Informer visited Kojima Productions' headquarters in Tokyo for an extensive conversation with creator Hideo Kojima about his career, the Metal Gear franchise, and his future aspirations. We also got world exclusive hands-on with the prologue chapter, Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes. Finally, we divulge new information on Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain straight from the mind of its creator.

/// by Tim Turi

HIDZO KOJIMA SPOZNAKS





LIVING IN THE SHADOWS OF A LEGACY

Video game franchises change. Creative directors leave projects. Publishers hit the reboot button on series with sagging sales. Many of the industry's most beloved and successful series, from Castlevania to Tomb Raider, hardly resemble their original forms. And then there's Metal Gear Solid.

Since Metal Gear hit the Japanese MSX home computer in 1987, the long-running stealth series has stuck under the Konami banner, received warm critical reception, and been carefully handled by creator Hideo Kojima. Over 31 million Metal Gear games have been sold, with main entries in the series averaging a 90 rating on Metacritic. Since Solid Snake's debut, the stealth genre has risen and fallen. Franchise fatigue has cooled the enthusiasm of the most rabid fan bases. But like its battle-hardened protagonists, Metal Gear Solid soldiers on. Much can be speculated about the series' Rasputin-like staying power, but Kojima's constant guiding hand plays a tremendous role.

Kojima Productions opened a branch in Los Angeles late last year specializing in mo-cap and voice overs, but our visit brings us to Kojima's mother base. The studio is nestled within a large cluster of towers in Tokyo's Roppongi district, an area bustling with stoic salarymen by day and laughing club hoppers by night. We spent our time on a pristine office floor filled with white chairs, tables, and breakout rooms built for company meetings. A Konami representative tells us the company strictly prohibits press visits to the development floor, but adds that it's an aesthetically uninteresting cubical farm anyway. It's amazing such vivid, immersive worlds are born in such sterile, professional environments.

After an extended play session with the next-gen versions of Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes, we eagerly await Kojima to discuss the game and his time with the franchise. The anticipation in the conference room is palpable. Game Informer has sat down with the industry icon on multiple occasions, but the Konami and Kojima Productions staff carefully prepare for his entrance. Empty snack containers are tossed. Promotional posters are strategically placed in view of our cameras. Kojima's chair is even swapped out last minute with something more comfortable. Everyone greets the Konami vice president/director warmly when he arrives. An attendant touches him up with some camera makeup and carefully adjusts his styled wisps of jet black hair. The reserved Kojima sitting before us is a far cry from what fans may expect from the man who tried to fool the public into thinking MGS V was being developed by a fake studio. With a subtle smile and calm eyes, he folds his hands together and awaits my first question.



Nine years pass between Ground Zeroes and The Phantom Pain, with the latter game set in 1984. We begin by discussing what Kojima's life was like that year, before he started working in games.

"I was probably around 20 years old," he says with a touch of laughter. "I was in college back then, in my second semester I believe. I think that's when I started playing the Famicom. I was at rock bottom in my life. It was a bad time. The thing is, I originally wanted to make movies and I wasn't in an environment that I was able to do that, so I had kind of given up hope. I was going to regular college. I had a lot of mixed feelings inside me."

Kojima's intense passion for film dates back to his youth. His family watched a movie every night and encouraged him to frequent the theater. Not fans of passive consumption, his parents regularly engaged him in critical thinking about movies' themes. He and his friends enjoyed shooting zombie films, but his drive quickly overshadowed that of his pals. Without a school nearby that catered to his dream of filmmaking, Kojima felt lost. The downtrodden 20-something discovered video games at the perfect time.

"I think that year I was playing Urban Champion," he says. "I'm not sure if it was that exact year, but it was around that time. I didn't have too much contact with arcade centers at the place I was living. All there was were a couple arcade cabinets at the tops of shopping malls, but not too much. During this span of time, about 1982 to 1984, I eventually started going to more arcade centers. Before that I hadn't had too much contact with video games. I didn't have a PC but I did go to a friend's place to play PC games."

Kojima's imagination was ignited by Super Mario Bros. He quickly saw the medium's potential for telling interactive stories, something that would allow him to fulfill his dream. The first video game publisher Kojima applied to would also be his last. He joined Konami in 1986 to the chagrin of his friends and family. At the time, video game development came with a social stigma.

According to those in his life, Kojima wasn't living up to his true potential.

The going was rough for Kojima at Konami initially. The rookie developer's first title was canceled, and his follow-up pitch was met with skepticism. His superiors doubted his ideas for a game about avoiding combat rather than initiating it, but he began Metal Gear anyway. The radical new game design was a success both on the MSX PC and its eventual western release on the NES. The series received a proper sequel with Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake for the MSX2 in 1990 (Snake's Revenge, which released in North America on NES, is not an official part of the series). The story of Solid Snake's infiltration of Big Boss' Zanzibar Land base set the foundation for the revolutionary PlayStation follow-up in 1998.

MGS 4 marks the latest chronological entry in Solid Snake and Big Boss' stories



Metal Gear Solid's detailed 3D visuals, mature themes of nuclear war and genetics, and satisfying stealth gameplay rocketed it to blockbuster status. Hideo Kojima became one of the biggest names in the industry, rivaling visionaries like Shigeru Miyamoto and Will Wright. Three more successful sequels appeared across the PS2 and PS3, along with multiple spinoffs and rumors of a feature film. During his career, Kojima would create other series, like *Snatcher* and *Zone of the Enders*, but Metal Gear Solid became his legacy.

While each Metal Gear Solid entry has been met with near-universal acclaim and impressive sales, criticism has arisen over Kojima's storytelling methods. Gamers who once devoured each extensive cutscene and radio conversation have begun to question Kojima's approach. Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriot's half hour-plus mini-movies tipped the scales for some. These lengthy vignettes may be a symptom of the series' winding plot. The story of Solid Snake and his cloned predecessor, Big Boss, has become increasingly complicated over the series' 27 years.

"Having a complex story is not my intention at all," Kojima says. "It's nothing I ever shoot for or try to do. Ideally what I want to do is, for example, make a story that seems very simple. It's very easy to understand on the surface, and once you zoom in there's a lot of details and a lot of things that you can see there. But overall, ideally I try to stay within a story that, once you zoom out the main story, is rather simple."

Ironically, straightforward stories seem to be among his favorites. When asked about his favorite recent films, Kojima cites Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*, a visually stunning film that focuses on the simple but compelling story of astronauts stranded in Earth's orbit. But where Cuarón set out to tell one self-contained tale, Kojima has taken the formidable task of telling a multi-entry saga that spans whole eras.

"After each game I begin to think of the story for the next," Kojima says. "I didn't have the whole story put together at once when I created the first game. When you do that sometimes the veins [of stories] get lost, change, or get stuck. From there I need to create new bloodlines so the story can keep going. One thing that I try not to do is sacrifice certain things just so I can keep the original story intact. Sometimes I need to accept these inconsistencies in order to be able to achieve what I want for the story."

Some companies rely on wikis or a lore bible to keep their stories in check, but Kojima prefers his studio stick to a looser oral history.

"There are core members that have been here for a long time," he says. "Core members that know how things work. We don't have anything as a text, but the core members that have been here for awhile know how we try to create things in our studio. What we need to keep consistent for the users and what things we always want to try to offer. I've been creating games in a way that I try to keep staff that knows the things that we're trying to create. I've been trying to hand that down from person to person. In the past we've tried to create a bible like the one you mentioned, but no one reads it. So I decided it was better to just pass it on from person to person."

In the early days, Kojima mainly wrote the Metal Gear games himself. Considering storytelling is a fundamental pillar of the franchise, we asked Kojima about his modern writing process.

"In principle, I think in parallel between the gameplay elements I put in a game along with what kind of story will be there," he says. "I put those together in parallel. Once that is done I try to think of the setting, put together the plot of the story, and what kind of environment the game world will have. From there I start discussing with the team. Back then I used to write the story myself. Right now it's kind of impossible for me to do that. For example, the codec conversations, I think of the topics the codecs will have and I hand that to the team of writers that we have. They write it and then I check it after. Ordinarily I try to write as much as possible myself."



Ocelot makes his first storyline appearance in MGS 3

INTERLUPTING THE OROBOROS

Story writing isn't the only responsibility that Kojima has started to share over the years. Years ago the Metal Gear creator attempted to pass the torch for directing MGS 4, but following death threats and general fan disapproval, Kojima returned. He once again has a lead role for MGS V. While his leadership has helped guide the franchise to success, we asked if he thinks handing the series over to a fresh director could come as a benefit. We used the *Alien* films as an example, with James Cameron directing the sequel instead of the original's Ridley Scott. Speaking in terms of classic horror and action films is clearly Kojima's language, who lights up at the comparison and offers a chuckle. "Well, then after James Cameron the series kind of went..." he says with a laugh, hinting at the sci-fi series' steadily decaying quality.

"I understand what you're saying," he says. "At Kojima Productions, if our studio were a kitchen and the head chef changes then it changes the flavor. The franchise usually becomes more open, as in *Alien*. To be honest, I've actually wanted to do something similar just to change it. I don't know if the Metal Gear brand sometimes is a bit heavy to carry. The franchise is difficult to handle. But so far I've had no success [passing the torch]. Metal Gear Rising [Revengeance], fortunately that was a spin-off so that went well. Ideally I would like to step out from the Metal Gear franchise as a producer and dedicate myself to other games. So far that has proven to be a bit difficult.

"*Aliens* is a very successful example [of a new director coming in]. Unfortunately, in our case, it's more like *The Terminator*, that once Cameron steps out of it there was kind of a mess."



Kojima says *The Phantom Pain* has fewer cutscenes



Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake sets the narrative groundwork for Metal Gear Solid

As Kojima says, Metal Gear Solid is a heavy series to carry for a lifetime. The franchise isn't only important for Konami, but it also represents one of Japan's most consistently successful series. Industry analysts agree on the series' importance.

"Metal Gear Solid is a staple brand in video games," says Jesse Divnich, vice president of EEDAR (Electronic Entertainment Design and Research). "It's a brand that has continuously reshaped its genre with every release and has been a key pillar in driving technological and storytelling innovation on each new generation of platforms. Some would argue that a new generation of platforms doesn't truly start until it has seen a Metal Gear Solid release."

Over the years other highly regarded, financially stable Japanese game series like Final Fantasy and Ninja Gaiden have failed to live up to expectations. These specific disappointments, and other Japanese series like them, feed into the discussion of Japanese developers' waning relevance in the current industry. The western indie marketplace is booming and triple-A games from developers like Naughty Dog and Rockstar rule sales charts and Games of the Year lists.

In Japan, crossover success to western countries is becoming increasingly rare. Nintendo is the major exception, but unlike the Metal Gear Solid series, which strives to continually evolve and modernize its gameplay and storytelling, Nintendo makes minor adjustments to established formulas like The Legend of Zelda and Pokémon. Kojima is in a unique spot. Not only does he have one of the longest streaks of leading a single franchise, Metal Gear Solid also represents one of the most broadly appealing Japanese series in the industry.

"I try not to think like I'm a Japanese game developer," Kojima says. "Because, in Japan, Metal Gear only has so much success, in terms that people don't like that much Metal Gear here. The kind of things you mention as carrying the torch and all that passion, that's not something you hear often in Japan, so I try not to think of myself as doing that. It's a similar case for Japanese movies. If you make a Japanese movie that is only intended for a Japanese market, then it has a very specific size, so you will have a very limited budget. Also, if you write a novel intended for a Japanese audience, then you can only expect so much reach and distribution. But if you write a novel in English for other markets, then you can focus on one novel."

Kojima cites cultural differences between the West and Japan as holding back certain series from international success.

"Writers in Japan usually write four or five novels in parallel and release sequentially by chapter in magazines and whatnot," Kojima says. "Oftentimes they can't think of the ending. That's a huge problem we face in the Japanese market. Back in the day games didn't have spoken dialogue. Nowadays there's a lot of talking and a lot of expression. So within that we have to think of how to impact the whole international market, how to make a game towards that market. For example, let's say in a Japanese movie you use a very famous Japanese character for this movie. You cannot expect to relate to a global market, so we're trying to think day by day how to address this. How to make something that relates to the whole world."

He goes on to compare the early years of video games to silent films. These mute protagonists and simple graphics make games relatable to a vast audience. As technology has progressed, developers have been able to add more detail like language, slang, skin color, and more. Kojima believes that developers who focus on very specific cultural and racial elements risk alienating a wider international market.



Zone of the Enders, a flying mech game for PS2, came packaged with a MGS 2 demo

"If you want to have a successful game only in Japan, then you have Japan as the only place the story takes place," he says. "Then Japan will be the only place that gets it. Or there is another option that it could go somewhat like what Hollywood does, with aliens attacking the world which is something that relates to the world."

Solid Snake and Big Boss' adventures span the entire globe, weaving in real historical events that have impacted the entire world. Kojima's story not only speaks to a broad audience, but the gameplay is now evolving into one of today's most popular styles: open world.

Konami is positioned to slide MGS V into a genre filled with blockbuster franchises like GTA and Assassin's Creed. Similar to Japan's lack of first-person shooters – another extremely popular genre in the West – few Japanese developers embrace the open-world format. Microsoft published the open-world title Dead Rising 3, but it was developed by the Canada-based Capcom Vancouver. Kojima's point is clear: Japan's international success is dependent on the company's willingness to embrace modern trends. While traditional JRPGs and hack n' slash action games have their niche audiences, these fan bases are limited.

Kojima doesn't think of himself as a Japanese developer. However, there was a time when he worked closely with others in the industry, like developers at Capcom and No More Heroes creator Goichi "Suda51" Suda. Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker included creatures from Capcom's popular Monster Hunter series, and Kojima worked with Suda on a new radio drama chapter in the Snatcher series called Sdatcher. Over time, Kojima's circle of friends in Japanese game development changed.

"Just recently many of the Japanese developers are looking toward different directions from where I'm looking, so I'm not close to anyone," Kojima says. "I haven't really been close to anyone in Japanese game development. It's kind of hard to talk about our dreams together because they're different. Honestly, within the Japanese game industry it would be Platinum Games, I'm close with them. I have good friends there. Other than that, I guess people that make indie games. Actually for these days, it's easier for me to talk about my dreams with movie directors. I feel a little bit more comfortable talking about my dreams and personal goals with them."

Suda suggests Kojima's lack of interaction with other Japanese developers could be due to his high status in the industry. "He's not treated just as a game developer, but as a cultural guru, almost," he says. Suda also points to the broadening global development community and introversion as reasons some creators may socialize less with their peers.



Peace Walker introduces Zadoronov, who involuntarily leaves Snake behind a mechanical red hand



Metal Gear Solid wowed PlayStation owners with its detailed graphics and cinematic presentation



Adventure game Snatcher features a small robot called the Metal Gear Mk-II

EXPANDING THE KOJIMA GENOME

At the same time that Kojima feels a growing distance between himself and others in the Japanese game industry, he's also previously stated that he'd like to slightly detach from his symbiotic relationship with the Metal Gear Solid series. He doesn't want to go down in history as the "Metal Gear guy," so tackling new projects lies somewhere on the horizon. On the topic of moving on from the Metal Gear Solid series following the fifth main entry, we ask Kojima if he has aspirations beyond the game industry.

"First of all, I want to create games," he says. "Within the game industry, I would like to make more games that have that indie game taste or some completely different type of game with a big budget – something in a completely different direction. If I wasn't doing games, well of course I'd like to get involved in movies or write novels. I'm almost 50 years old, so I don't have that much time left. If I was to write a list of things that I want to do before I die, it would be a very stuffed list. Because of my age, I'm starting to think of the other things I have to do before I die."

If Kojima plans to write an original book or direct a film, Konami doesn't necessarily have to be involved. However, Kojima reveals a subtle, underlying dissatisfaction in having to create games within Konami's guidelines. The publisher has funded an entirely new game engine and an elaborate marketing campaign involving false leads for MGS V. Kojima Productions even described its team as "Development Without Borders" in recruitment literature at GDC 2012. Despite this, Kojima still butts up against creative and manpower-based barriers.

A couple months before the release of Grand Theft Auto V, Kojima tempered MGS fans' expectations with a sullen series of tweets saying "GTA V new trailer was awesome! This free control is future of the game, way higher than anywhere, makes me depress as matter fact. I don't think our 'V' can reach that level. Rockstar's team are the best. W/o question they will pull up the possibility of game." [sic]

We asked Kojima to elaborate on the restraints he feels working at Konami.

"One thing is that within Kojima Productions I'd love to put all my efforts and time into creating a Metal Gear Solid that's kind of what [Rockstar] does with GTA," he says. "Unfortunately that's not the case. It's still a business. In parallel we have to work on other projects and make things balanced towards Konami as a whole. Finding that balance with how to work on all our projects proves to be a little difficult."

Kojima also references creative boundaries in game development at Konami. Similar to the initial resistance his risky new stealth game received in the '80s, Kojima's eyes turn green when considering the works of other successful creators.

"I'm coming into *Breaking Bad* a bit late," he says. "I just got done with season two of *Breaking Bad* and that was pretty depressing. I got depressed for like a week."

Talk with anyone about the story of Walter White's downward spiral into the drug trade and they'll likely mention feeling like the series consistently punched them in the gut. While the sad story of a chemistry teacher turned meth kingpin saddened Kojima, his melancholy ran deeper than director Vince Gilligan's storyline.

"I was very pissed off, because I wasn't the one to think of that story," he says. "That depressed me. The kind of topics they're handling in *Breaking Bad*, the way they express them and put them on screen, let's say I tried to create a game with similar topics and similar expressions, it would be hard to get approval in the company. The way

these guys are planning this project and making it a commercial success, that's somewhere I feel very jealous as a creator."

Kojima also elaborates further on the genius of *Gravity's* succinct premise. "It's a movie about space," he says. "There's no sound, there's no light.

There are only two actors. They have

full-face helmets for a big part of the movie. The other part of the movie is they just get lost. That's something that would be really, really tough to pass here in our company. I'm sure it was a similar situation in Hollywood. Despite that, Alfonso Cuarón got into that project, convinced everyone to move along with it, wrote the story with his son [Jonás Cuarón], and made a huge commercial success out of it. That's something as a creator that really impacted me. Making something out of the ordinary, that you wouldn't think of or be able to do, and making that happen while making it a success. That's something that I can empathize with and I'm also very jealous of it as a creator. It stirred something in me."

Cuarón isn't the only filmmaker that has captured Kojima's attention and admiration. He has one clear answer when asked who he's grown close to recently.

"The guy I feel really comfortable talking to, and which was very exciting, is Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*, *Pacific Rim*)," Kojima says with a smile. "I had a fantastic time talking with him. Last time I was with Guillermo we went to karaoke, and next time I'm looking forward to doing karaoke again."

A Konami PR representative cuts in to mention that Kojima has an awesome singing voice. Kojima humbly responds by praising del Toro's chops, who can allegedly belt out Sinatra with the best of them. The two men, each with penchants for gigantic bipedal robots, also tag-teamed Japanese anime songs late into the night. According to Kojima, del Toro is a hardcore anime nut, which shouldn't come as a surprise to those who've witnessed *Pacific Rim's* gonzo "robots vs. Godzilla monsters" premise.

When asked if he'd like to collaborate with del Toro on any projects in the future, Kojima says "Yeah, that would be great."

Reflecting on Kojima's beginnings as an aspiring filmmaker, the fast bond with an accomplished director such as del Toro makes sense. Kojima turned to video games as an outlet for the types of films he wanted to make, and his cinematic flair has continued to captivate gamers for years. But just as del Toro has created many successful films, it's clear that Kojima wants his legacy to extend beyond a single series, no matter how important and beloved it is. Whether Kojima marks other dream projects off his to-do list is dependent on whether he's finally able to pass Metal Gear along to another leader. Until then, we can only wait and hope he and his team continue to meet the series' high bar of quality. ♦



Raiden replaced Solid Snake as the main protagonist in MGS 2

METAL SLAYER SOLID V: GROUND ZEROES





REDEFINING BIG BOSS' LEGACY MISSION

While visiting its headquarters, Kojima Productions gave us four hours to play through Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes and offered us a glimpse into the world of The Phantom Pain. Before we get into the gameplay changes and new details, it's important to know where the road began for these MGS V titles. Hideo Kojima loves breaking the fourth wall and playing tricks on his audience. The creator fooled players into thinking their PlayStation's A/V connection failed in the first Metal Gear Solid. With MGS 2, he led fans

to believe they'd be playing Solid Snake the entire game, then swapped in an entirely new protagonist. His antics were in full swing leading up to the reveal of Metal Gear Solid V.

- » PLATFORM
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
- » STYLE
1-Player Action
- » PUBLISHER
Konami
- » DEVELOPER
Kojima Productions
- » RELEASE
March 18



Originally teased with only its subtitle as the game's name, *The Phantom Pain* was revealed at Spike TV's 2012 Video Game Awards. Kojima wanted the world to believe the title, which looked suspiciously like *Metal Gear Solid*, was in development under a fake Scandinavian developer named Moby Dick Studios. Diligent fans quickly sniffed out the farce. Some noticed Konami employees wearing Moby Dick Studios shirts. Others realized the bandaged head of Moby Dick Studios' first name, Joakim, was an anagram for Kojima. The hired model playing "Joakim" claimed to be recovering from an accident. Kojima took the stage at a GDC 2013 event wearing a head-banded mask, removed it, and confirmed what everyone suspected: *The Phantom Pain* is *Metal Gear Solid V*.

This straightforward prank was slightly complicated by a previous announcement Kojima made at the 2012 Penny Arcade Expo for *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes*. The game would be a prologue to *Metal Gear Solid V*, which had not yet been revealed. The confusion was cleared up in the months following the *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* reveal at GDC. Due to *The Phantom Pain*'s long development time, the much smaller *Ground Zeroes* is arriving early so players have a chance to try out the new gameplay, get a taste for the open-world flavor, and return to the story of Big Boss.

WHO'S THE BOSS?

It's been six years since an old and gray Solid Snake saved the day in the last numbered entry in the *Metal Gear Solid* series. The revamped, cybernetic Raiden has shown off his ninja moves in Platinum Games' spin-off, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, but that story has no direct impact on the saga of Big Boss and his cloned children. Since *MGS 4* hit the PlayStation 3, important developments have occurred in Big Boss's story on the PSP home front.

If you passed up *MGS: Portable Ops* and *MGS: Peace Walker* for the PSP, you may even be wondering who Big Boss is. In *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, players control a stealth soldier who goes by Naked Snake. At the end of *Snake Eater*, Snake is forced to kill his former mentor, The Boss, to clear America's name amidst a nuclear crisis. This legendary soldier leaves behind a dying wish for a unified world. Her passing bestows Snake with the title Big Boss, though he still prefers to go by Snake. The Boss' dying will is perceived differently by Snake and his commander, Major Zero. Snake believes The Boss wants soldiers to stop being used as government pawns, and Zero thinks she called for the world to be controlled by one all-powerful group. Snake and Zero attempt to work together to form The Patriots, but quickly have a falling out. A disillusioned Snake goes on to form a mercenary group called *Militaires Sans Frontières* (Military Without Borders), while Zero continues developing the Patriots.

During the events of *Portable Ops* and *Peace Walker*, Snake meets series icons like Roy Campbell, Gray Fox (a.k.a. Cyborg Ninja), and Kazuhira Miller. Miller becomes Snake's second in command in MSF. Miller makes a quasi-reappearance in the first *Metal Gear Solid* when Liquid Snake impersonates him. Snake and Miller work together to recruit new soldiers and build out their offshore headquarters, Mother Base. In 1974 MSF is contacted by a pair of undercover enemy agents posing as peace-loving Central Americans who want Snake's forces to liberate their people. Their cover is eventually blown, revealing one as a KGB operative named Vladimir Zadoronov and the other, Paz, a young female agent

working for CIPHER (aka Zero). Zadoronov is killed, leaving behind his red, robotic hand. Paz hijacks MSF's *Metal Gear Zeke*, which was developed with the help of Huey Emmerich (Hal "Otacon" Emmerich's father). Paz offers Snake an ultimatum: MSF becomes the Patriots' army or it will be wiped out. Snake eventually disables the *Metal Gear*, Paz falls into the ocean, and *Peace Walker* ends.

/// The Metal Gear Timeline

1964 - Naked Snake kills his mentor, The Boss, at the end of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* and becomes Big Boss. Ocelot, a CIA operative, escapes Russia.

1970 - Zero, Big Boss' former ally and eventual rival, joins Ocelot to form the Patriots. The organization aims to fulfill The Boss' dream of a unified world.

1972 - Big Boss (a.k.a. Naked Snake) briefly joins the Patriots. Dissatisfied with Zero's direction, he disbands and forms *Militaires Sans Frontières*.

1977 - The Les Enfants Terribles cloning program begins. Big Boss' DNA is used to create two clones, Solid and Liquid Snake. A third clone, Solidus, is also created.

1974 - On behalf of Zero, Paz betrays Big Boss in *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*.

1975 - Zero's forces destroy Mother Base during the events of *Ground Zeroes*, and Snake enters a coma.

1984 - Snake awakens from his coma in a hospital at the beginning of *The Phantom Pain* and seeks vengeance on Zero.

Flash forward to 1975, the year Ground Zeroes takes place. Snake and Miller receive an anonymous tip that Paz and a MSF child soldier named Chico are being held at a U.S. black site called Camp Omega located in Cuba. The MGS V prologue opens with a mysterious unit named XOF approaching Chico's prison cell on a dark, rainy night. The supposed commander of XOF, a disfigured man called Skull Face, gives Chico a Sony Walkman with his favorite song and tells him to "Give my regards to your Boss when you get home." Afterwards, a conversation between Miller and Snake reveals that MSF wants to convince Paz to join them, hopefully to get information about an upcoming UN inspection of Mother Base that may expose the compound's true power and nuclear capabilities. They believe Zero is behind the inspection. As this conversation ends Skull Face approaches an XOF chopper, uses a special light to wipe off the logo, and his men discard their uniform's XOF patches once in the air.

Kojima offers some insight on the relationship between the XOF unit and the U.S. Marines of Camp Omega. "There are marines in the base, and they're not necessarily working together with XOF," he says. "They're just there because their superiors commanded them. Skull Face comes there with XOF, and him and his guys are doing these tortures and whatnot. The guys who are originally in the base are regular marines



just doing marine duties. Ideally, Snake would only go there and wouldn't shoot the marines; he would just put them to sleep because the bad guys are only the XOF guys. But that will be up to the player." It's not certain, but affiliation between XOF and Zero seems likely.

How Snake infiltrates Camp Omega is entirely up to players. The Metal Gear Solid series has always been about accommodating different play styles, and all are welcome here. Konami has shown off a vast majority of Ground Zeroes' content in extended videos, but fans of the series know that no two playthroughs will unravel the same way. Snake can clear out half the base from a watchtower and blast the rest of the searchlights with an RPG. He could try to sneak by completely unnoticed like a ghost. Or he could try a mix of lethal and nonlethal tactics while trying to remain hidden.

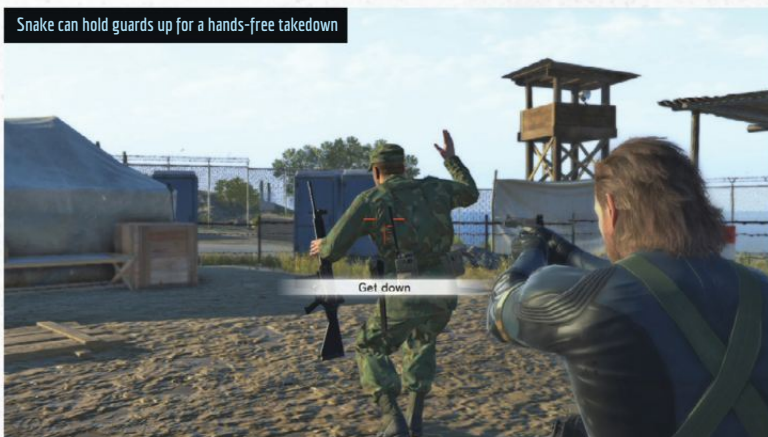
Our hands-on time with Ground Zeroes is a first for non-Kojima Productions staff, and we get a good feel for the new controls and gameplay mechanics during our four hours. We walked away with a clear understanding of MGS V's gunplay, melee takedowns, targeting system, map features, and more.

Snowe's binoculars are now more useful now thanks to a new system that allows players to tag targets just by looking at them. Zooming in on enemy soldiers permanently marks them, allowing players to track their position on the map and sense their location through walls when they're near. This feature is enabled by default, but can be switched off in options for the truly hardcore. Guards' patrol routes are much wider and unpredictable compared to earlier Metal Gear titles, and this tracking ability is a boon for the new formula. Marked guards show up on Snake's iDroid map device, which can be used with second-screen devices.

Sometimes pure evasion isn't an option, and thankfully Snake has a suite of gunplay options available. MGS V defaults to a third-person aiming view, similar to MGS 4. Players can still aim in first-person to dial in shots, but aiming over the shoulder feels smooth and reliable. Lower-caliber weapons like the tranquilizer pistol suffer from bullet drop, so players must use distance notches on the reticle when outside optimal firing range. Line of sight is especially impressive, allowing us to pull off tricky shots through chain link fences and narrow jail cell bars without issue. The series' long-running shoulder button-based inventory management has been replaced with more a convenient d-pad system. Tapping in a given direction will select your pistol, rifle, or thrown weapon. Holding down that direction opens up your complete suite of class-specific weapons. This fast and efficient new method removes pauses in the action and preserves the tense, hectic nature of firefights. Additionally, any weapon found on the battlefield can be used on the spot.

If a firefight goes south and Snake needs to hide, shaking your pursuers is a straightforward process. In past Metal Gear games, an onscreen percentage indicates how hidden Snake is from the enemy. Hard numbers are replaced with common sense in MGS V. Laying down in tall grass works well, with guards only spotting you very nearby. Crawling across a flat helipad makes it difficult for the

Snowe can hold guards up for a hands-free takedown



198? - Big Boss and his MSF comrades (now called Diamond Dogs) establish the Outer Heaven mercenary base in Africa.

1995 - Solid Snake infiltrates Big Boss' base, Outer Heaven. Snake destroys Big Boss' Metal Gear and defeats his former commander in combat.

1999 - Solid Snake sneaks into the Zanzibar Land base and seemingly kills Big Boss in Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake. The Patriots retrieve Big Boss' body.

2005 - Liquid Snake, Solid Snake's brother, seizes the nuclear warheads of Shadow Moses and demands Big Boss' remains during Metal Gear Solid. Liquid is defeated and Ocelot escapes.

2007 - Solid Snake and his partner Otacon infiltrate a tanker rumored to be transporting a new Metal Gear. Ocelot steals the amphibious Metal Gear Ray and sinks the ship.

2009 - Solid Snake helps Raiden, a puppet of The Patriots, defeat Solidus (another clone of Big Boss) in Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty.

2014 - Ocelot is finally defeated by Solid Snake in Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots. The Patriots' malicious AI programs are retooled. A rejuvenated Big Boss kills Zero and dies before Solid Snake's eyes.

/// Metal Gear Solid V Gets Second-Screen Support

Longtime Metal Gear Solid players are used to eyeing a mini-map to spot patrolling guards. This feature is gone in MGS V, but Kojima Productions is supporting second-screen functionality for Android and iOS mobile devices. Both Ground Zeroes and The Phantom Pain allow players to keep the map running without having to interrupt gameplay. The app can also be used to listen to audio files and view mission information.

We tested out the second-screen app on a tablet during our hands-on time with Ground Zeroes. Having the tablet propped up and within peripheral view was a tactical advantage. The game doesn't pause when Snake brings up his iDroid in-game, so being able to set waypoints or glance at guard positions without pressing a button helps. Kojima also teases that once The Phantom Pain releases, this app will allow players to progress elements of their game while away from their console.



guard in the distance to spot you. Break into a sprint and that guard you missed might immediately look your way and call in his buddies. New to the series is a 360-degree detection meter that feels similar to Far Cry 3's. If the enemy notices you, an opaque indicator points out which direction they're located and slowly fills in with color as they become more suspicious. It's a great cue to hit the deck, dive into the brush, or choose your next target.

Guards rush towards Snake's last known position, so quickly leaving the scene is imperative. It's entertaining using semi X-ray vision to watch previously marked guards sweep through the area on the hunt while hiding in a safe spot. Every Metal Gear title up until MGS V features a countdown that indicates the enemy's level of alertness. Ground Zeroes forces players to rely on intercepted radio chatter and keen observation to discern when the coast is clear.

If a guard discovers Snake, the soldier has a new ability to help him narrowly avoid raising full alert. The action slows to a crawl, offering players the opportunity to hold down the left trigger and lock onto the alerted guard. Barring any obstructions and assuming your gun is loaded, Snake can pop the enemy for a skin-of-his-teeth save. He's not called The Legendary Soldier for nothing. Like marking targets, this mode can be deactivated in options, but given the unpredictability of MGS V's new open-world formula, this life saver should come as a boon even for longtime fans. This last-ditch effort feels more like a nice bonus when it works rather than an easy crutch. Players can also close the gap during slow-motion sequences for a melee takedown.

On the top of Snake's heightened reflexes, the eye-patched hero's effective close quarters combat returns in MGS V. A button prompt appears when Snake nears an enemy. He pulls the guard into a chokehold and you're free to drag him out of sight from the other guards. Three simple icons appear onscreen that allow Snake to interrogate, knock out, or kill the guard. Interrogating the victim makes Snake pull his knife, which may get the soldier to reply with useful information like ammo or secret passage locations (which are then automatically marked on your map). Snake automatically pockets the enemy's ammo when he grabs them. He can also pull enemies into a chokehold from behind low cover and chain together takedowns around multiple targets. Taking down a target from the front automatically strips their weapon and allows you to quickly turn it against them.

Turning enemies' weapons against them is great, but stealing their transportation can prove even more useful. Driving is new to the series, and takes some getting used to. The large, lumbering trucks of Camp Omega have pitiful turn radiuses, and crashing into an obstacle will immediately alert nearby sentries. Vehicles can be used to cruise past light enemy checkpoints or make a hasty escape. Stealing a tank and manning the .50 caliber gun or cruising to safety in a speedy jeep is a blast.

Vehicles are a great choice when it comes to extracting Chico and Paz from the prison facility to finish up the mission. Both characters must be loaded onto MSF helicopters that players direct towards specific landing zones. Other prisoners on the compound can be rescued as well, which Kojima says will pay off when The Phantom Pain arrives.

Once on the helicopter, Snake and a medic get to work inspecting Paz's injury. A huge "V" has been cut into her stomach and stitched shut. The men get to work on inspecting the unconscious girl without anesthetics. After removing the stitches the doctor plunges his hands into her stomach, commanding Chico and Snake to "keep her guts in." The graphic, incredibly realistic scene is enough to make the most stoic players wince. The team finds and removes a ticking package, no doubt a bomb placed in Paz by the Patriots predicting Snake's rescue attempt.

The group attempts to contact Mother Base on the radio but the line is dead. MSF's headquarters is in flames by the time the chopper returns. The UN inspection was a Trojan Horse. The chopper lands on the stilted strut with just enough time to rescue Miller before it begins to crash into the sea. Paz has come to by this point, and Miller immediately begins cursing out the former agent of the Patriots. We learn that Snake's enemies counted on him discovering the bomb, but had a contingency plan in place. The resulting attack is presumably the incident that leads to Snake waking from a coma in a hospital nine years later, missing an arm.



/// Adjusting To Sutherland's Take On Snake

Fans went into an uproar when Hideo Kojima announced that 24 actor Kiefer Sutherland would be replacing Snake's longtime voice actor, David Hayter. While Hayter's gravelly tones will always remain Snake's true voice in our minds, Sutherland does a wonderful job conveying MGS V's hero. Sutherland's performance, while still gruff, adds a layer of emotion absent in Hayter's one-note growling. Big Boss goes through the wringer throughout the course of MGS V, and Sutherland has the chops to convey the soldier's shaky grip on his dramatic life. Like adjusting to a new James Bond actor, the new voice feels natural after some time.



main mission. Collecting these patches unlocks a different special mission depending on whether you play on PS3/PS4 or 360/Xbox One. Sony users unlock Déjà Vu, a mission that turns Camp Omega into a tribute to the original Metal Gear Solid's Shadow Moses base. Music and lighting change to harken back to the PlayStation title, complete with Miller doing nostalgic impersonations over the codec. Snake is tasked with arranging a handful of scenes reminiscent of Metal Gear Solid, like Shadow Moses' heliport or hanger. Beating the mission unlocks a polygonal Solid Snake skin. Microsoft users play as Raiden in

a mission titled Jamais Vu, in which the cyber ninja must destroy enemies from Kojima's adventure game, Snatcher. The speedy ninja doesn't pack his sword, but his increased speed helps drive the action-focused mode. Both modes are fun, simple fan service.

While Ground Zeroes has its fair share of fan service, it may be those same fans that take issue with MGS V's unique distribution strategy and pricing system. Ground Zeroes will be available on March 18 for download (last-gen: \$20, current-gen: \$30) and at retail (last-gen: \$30, current-gen: \$40). That steep of a price tag for a game that rolls credits in under two hours could be a tough sell for Konami.

"It's an interesting strategy and one with few historical examples," says EEDAR's Jesse Divnich. "Dead Rising 2 launched a prequel to the full release with Dead Rising: Case Zero and achieved moderate success. Arguably, Case Zero was ahead of its time."

"The Metal Gear Solid fan base is deeply loyal to the franchise," Divnich says. "There certainly lies risk that consumers feel shortchanged. That Konami took one full game and divided it between two releases with the sole reason of driving more revenue. This won't be the case with Metal Gear Solid V. Instead, I believe this is Konami's attempt to prolong engagement of the next iteration in the series. How consumers interact with games has evolved over the years. Post-launch DLC, multiplayer map packs, expansions, etc. have all become the standard models in prolonging consumer engagement while simultaneously driving topline revenue. Konami and Kojima are trying to operate within this evolving business model, but at the same time retain the Metal Gear Solid identity. That identity, among others, is the story, and it makes sense that if Kojima is going to be telling us a story that spans nine years within the Metal Gear Solid universe that there should be an intermission."

We didn't play the final version of Ground Zeroes, but based purely on our hands-on time, fans have a lot to look forward to. Ground Zeroes is a tantalizing taste of the beloved stealth franchise's next evolution. The open-world gameplay, impressive visuals, and darker story tones are on full display should players choose to whet their appetites. Much of how Ground Zeroes is received will depend on the quality and variety of the extra missions. Considering each operation takes place in Camp Omega, some fans may be tougher sells than other, especially given the price. ♦

Kojima Productions is releasing Ground Zeroes as a prologue appetizer while fans wait for the core experience of The Phantom Pain to release later down the road. Think of it like a paid, standalone version of the Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty demo that was included with Zone of the Enders on the PlayStation 2. PS2 owners poured hours into the demo, infiltrating the huge tanker with a variety of play styles, getting used to the new controls, and tinkering with the new game systems. Unlike that MGS 2 demo, Ground Zeroes comes with a handful of extra missions, exclusive modes for Sony and Microsoft users, and leaderboards for competition with friends.

Judged just by the core story mission, Ground Zeroes is short. We completed it in just less than two hours. Konami says internal testers can speed run the main mission in around five minutes. How quickly it takes to complete the main mission and explore the camp is up to the player, but the extra missions give the game a little more replayability.

One such mission takes place during the day. Snake can be spotted more easily with the increased visibility, forcing players to think more critically about tactics. These daytime missions also show off how impressive the Fox Engine looks when fully lit. The sun reflects off the rubber of Snake's dark sneaking suit, dust realistically plumes off the ground with raking gunfire, and watchtowers crumble to hundreds of pieces with an RPG shot. Kojima Productions' hard work under the hood pays off in the graphics department. Kojima notes that MGS V looks slightly better on the PS4 compared to the Xbox One, something we also noted before he mentioned it.

Players interested in seeing everything Ground Zeroes has to offer also have to hunt down and collect the XOF patches Skull Face throws away at the beginning of the

BREAKING IN THE STEALTH PLAYGROUND



METAL SLEAZER SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN





THE SNAKE SHOWS HIS SKIN

Round Zeroes is an impressive display of Kojima Production's development capabilities with open-world gameplay, but Kojima claims The Phantom Pain is hundreds of times larger. This chapter in the Metal Gear Solid universe is meant to show how Snake's punishing life hammers him into the hardened mercenary we know as Big Boss. Few concrete details have been revealed, so we pressed Kojima for whatever we

could learn. We discovered more about the open-world structure, building up Big Boss's base, and some intriguing hints regarding story development.

- » PLATFORM
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
- » STYLE
1-Player Action
- » PUBLISHER
Konami
- » DEVELOPER
Kojima Productions
- » RELEASE
TBA



A variety of wildlife wanders across the dry land of Afghanistan



The Phantom Pain takes place in 1984, nine years after the end of Ground Zeroes. As we've seen in trailers for MGS V, Snake awakens in a hospital without his arm and is led out by a mysterious aid as an enemy force called Those Who Don't Exist assaults the building. Haunting figures appear, resembling characters from the series' past – a flaming version of MGS 3's villain, Volgin, and Metal Gear Solid's gas-masked telepath, Psycho Mantis. We also see known Patriot operative and future series villain, Ocelot, rescuing Snake from the flaming hospital on horseback. The trailers shown thus far have been visual splendors to behold and treasure troves filled with clues to ignite fan theories.

MGS players who've paid attention to the complicated plot over the years have noticed inconsistencies in the number of times Big Boss enters a coma. In the original Metal Gear Solid, Liquid Snake reveals that the cloning program that created both he and Solid Snake, Les Enfants Terribles, began when Big Boss was in a coma. However, previous information suggests that the cloning program began years before Ground Zeroes. We asked Kojima to clear the air about exactly how many deep sleeps Big Boss slips into.

"There's only once he's in a coma, and to explain that you need to play toward the end of The Phantom Pain," Kojima says. "There it will come together. You'll be like, 'Oh, that's what happened!'"

The Big Boss we see in The Phantom Pain becomes a much different man somewhere on the other side of his coma. A horn-like piece of debris protrudes from his forehead, and he sports a mechanical red arm. This false limb looks exactly like the one used by the KGB agent Zadoronov in Peace Walker. The Russian operative even loses the prosthetic during an encounter with Snake on Mother Base, affirming the

MSF had it in their possession when it was last seen. Between the eye patch, horn, and red hand (with a built in lighter), Snake's transformation into Big Boss is an aesthetically obvious one.

"As you can tell from the title, The Phantom Pain, I want to kind of depict how you come back from war, and even if you make it back you won't be able to make it back unscratched," Kojima says. "You might be injured, you might lose a limb, you might lose a friend, a superior. Even if you come back, there's some pain with you. I tried to depict this in my games. One way to do this is by my characters losing limbs."



Big Boss' horse looks similar to The Boss' steed from MGS 3

/// Replacing Metal Gear's Engine

Since the original Metal Gear Solid wowed gamers with its detailed 3D visuals, the series has set a benchmark for graphical power. Kojima Productions's latest development technology is called the Fox Engine. The new toolset enables the studio to create more photorealistic in-game models, better lighting, and realistic behaviors.

After cutting his teeth at Square Enix and Crystal Dynamics, Julien Merceron joined Konami as its worldwide technology director. He works closely with Kojima productions to make sure Metal Gear Solid V gets the most out of the Fox Engine, reinforcing how important it is for creating the open world.

"Metal Gear is moving in a direction where the team is trying to do something different, and so that's why this technology is starting to be different from what you traditionally find," Merceron says. "A lot of games in Japan are still about pre-computed cinematics, they are still about putting more in graphics rather than motion quality, etc. Technology is enabling what you're trying to do, what you're trying to achieve. Fox Engine is different than a lot of the technologies you'll see in Japan, because Kojima-san is trying to do something different."

Merceron says the work Kojima Productions has put into the Fox Engine should help streamline the development process as the studio shifts its full focus to The Phantom Pain.

HUNTING PHANTOMS

Big Boss' new look is even more impressive when shown off on a high-end Fox Engine development PC, which demonstrates what The Phantom Pain's open world looks like on the PS4 and Xbox One. Kojima Productions boots up MGS V's Afghanistan area to show off the impressive visuals in action. Tan rock and dry ground stretches in every direction with incredible draw distance. Expansive landscapes of shrubs and wandering animals brings to mind a more visually stunning version of Red Dead Redemption's pasture. Big Boss riding on horseback across the dusty expanse only makes the comparison stronger. Sheep, goats, and other indigenous creatures roam along the roadside, each rendered with incredible fidelity. Ramshackle buildings litter portions of the map, complete with armed guards on patrol. The high cliff faces mark the edge of the playable area, but they're so far off it's difficult to judge how long it might take to travel there.

Kojima Productions confirms that The Phantom Pain is not one massive world, but a collection of open sandboxes in different parts of the world. The development team is hesitant to reveal what the other locales are, but given MGS 4's globetrotting nature we're guessing fans are in for plenty of variety. Previews shown of the game suggest Africa could be one such location.

Based on our glimpse into MGS V's Afghanistan and previous statements from Kojima, we know The Phantom Pain is larger than Ground Zeroes. We asked the creator what other differences players can expect between the two titles.

"The basic controls won't change," Kojima says. "There will be more things that you will be able to do, but how the game feels might change a little bit. Ground Zeroes takes place on a small island, and when you think of it, you're in an

enemy base. Every step you take, you face the risk of finding an enemy. The Phantom Pain is roughly 200 times bigger than Ground Zeroes. You will have bases, forests, paths between them, fortresses – all of these things. There are a lot of places that don't have that many enemies. The player won't have that constant stress. He will be able to control

when he goes into stressful situations and places, and when not to."

Kojima also offers some insight into how the expansive environments of The Phantom Pain will affect players' sneaking strategies.

"In Ground Zeroes you're in an enemy base and the design of the game doesn't let you go outside of the base," he says. "You can't just run away from the base. For The Phantom Pain, you can go to an enemy base, they will chase you, but you can choose to go outside the base. The user will have this choice of whether to constantly have all this stress or walk away from it."



Vehicles can be driven for the first time in the series

One such method of open-world evasion Kojima Productions has shown off is Big Boss hiding on his horse by leaning off to one side.

Big Boss spends plenty of time in *The Phantom Pain* completing the main story and side missions, but he can also build up his base by rescuing characters like the prisoners in *Ground Zeroes*. This mechanic is the next evolution of the Mother Base building from *Peace Walker*. Given that Mother Base is destroyed at the end of *Ground Zeroes*, Big Boss and the MSF must be working on a new headquarters. The organization may be constructing the infamous Africa-based Outer Heaven featured in the original *MSX Metal Gear*. A timeline bullet point at the end of *Ground Zeroes* lends even more evidence, mentioning an underground nuclear testing facility that was abandoned by the South African government in 1977.

As in *Peace Walker*, Kojima confirms that players rescue characters using the Fulton Recovery System. The Fulton System rigs targets up to a balloon mechanism that hitches to passing rescue planes and quickly transports them off the battlefield. It's an addictive, satisfying way to grow Big Boss's forces.

"We couldn't put [the Fulton Recovery System] in *Ground Zeroes* because of the setting," Kojima says. "It wouldn't make sense for you to use Fulton in an enemy base. For *The Phantom Pain*, depending on equipment you'll be able to use Fulton and carry different things. Snake will have the option to go on missions without going back to his base, or return every once in a while in a helicopter."

Kojima also reveals that players' bases are more interactive than previous games, complete with new online functionality.

"You will be able to go into the base, walk around your own base that you created, and will be able to do different things," Kojima says. "It will be an evolution. You will also be able to walk into your friends' bases, go to the base of people that you know online or whatnot and see their facilities."

Players' save data from *Ground Zeroes* plays directly into the base building operations of *The Phantom Pain*, according to Kojima.

"If you rescue more hostages in *Ground Zeroes*, that will be reflected in *The Phantom Pain*," he says. "I cannot dive into too much detail, but there will be several advantages and bonuses that people who are playing *Ground Zeroes* will be able to get in *The Phantom Pain*. For an extreme example, your game records and your scores will be inherited. People will start from the same place, but despite the fact that you're starting from scratch altogether, people that have played *Ground Zeroes* will have clear advantages over people that didn't."

Staffing Mother Base with personnel retrieved from the field is among *Peace Walker*'s highlights, and fans should be excited to see them return in *The Phantom Pain*. As for when the core MGS V title will arrive on new systems, and whether it will hit last-gen consoles, is still a mystery.

When searching for a character in the Metal Gear Universe that most closely resembles Hideo Kojima, the anime-loving genius Otacon may come to mind. While the two may both wear glasses and fondly remember Policenauts (a Kojima-made game and Otacon's desktop wallpaper), at this point in his career Kojima more closely resembles Big Boss. Both have led legendary careers and recruited countless loyal followers. When Kojima finally decides to move on from the lead role on the series, he'll have to hand the mantle off to a new boss. Similarly, the end of *The Phantom Pain*'s story could mark the storyline's official transition from the story of Big Boss to Solid Snake.

When asked whether *The Phantom Pain* might fill the gap between these Snakes' storylines, the developer coyly dodges eye contact and jokingly asks me to look away for fear of revealing something with a glance. "I'm so tempted to tell you and I shouldn't," he says. "What I should say is that there is a specific way for the games to put things together."

Kojima's passion for the story he's telling is obvious. The iconic developer is creating *The Phantom Pain* nearly 30 years after the creation of the first Metal Gear, and he's just now closing in on completing the saga's deep cycle. Should he decide to close the loop and step away from the series, Kojima will have singlehandedly guided one of the most complex tales and successful series in the history of

video games. Now, if Konami could only find a way to clone him. ❖

Keep up with our month of exclusive Metal Gear Solid V content, video interviews with Kojima Productions, and more by heading to gameinformer.com/mgsv





/// The Artist Behind Metal Gear's Breathtaking Style

Yoji Shinkawa has been designing Metal Gear Solid characters and bringing series creator Hideo Kojima's world to life since the PlayStation original. Now the art director for Metal Gear Solid V, the man behind the series' beautiful, painterly concept art style discusses his craft.

"I need to be honest here, management is definitely not one of my strengths," Shinkawa says when asked about his team's organization and his artistic growth. "I can't even manage myself. So it's very difficult to manage a team. Still to this day I enjoy spending a lot of my time drawing by myself. All the time I feel I need to learn more new things. I need to keep improving. One thing that is different though is awhile back I used to create everything by myself, including the character art. Compared to right now we are working as a concept art team. Everyone is working hand-in-hand together. I don't know if I would call that management, but my perspective has changed from drawing everything myself to everyone creating a piece of something together. There are many things that we learn from each other as a team."

The Metal Gear Solid series' titular bipedal tanks have their roots in Japanese anime and manga. From these robotic nuclear weapons to the samurai sword-wielding Cyborg Ninja, Shinkawa's anime inspiration is obvious. But over time, the artist's goals have changed.

"For Metal Gear Solid V, those [anime] elements shouldn't be there on a conscious level because one thing that is absolute when we're creating this game is we want to create designs that can be accepted worldwide, that can be rather easily assimilated by anyone in the world," he says. "But then again, there will be some Japanese elements there. Maybe me myself being Japanese and a lot of our team members being Japanese, there might be some remnants of this manga/anime culture that we have within us. Also, that's not something that I want to completely remove, because if there are no Japanese elements then what we create [loses its flavor]. I always focus on creating some sort of design that can be accepted and assimilated by anyone in the world."



Crawling across the dirt is a great way to remain undetected



A
JOURNAL OF
DEATH

*Five hours of defeat in Namco Bandai's
upcoming sequel*



DARK SOULS II



tumbling through a heavy downpour, you fall to your knees, gravity unceremoniously pulling you down face first into the mud as thunder booms above the forest's canopy. You

hear an elderly woman's voice holding a calm, cautionary tone. "You will lose everything. Once branded. The symbol of the curse. An augur of darkness. Your past. Your future. Your very light. None will have meaning, and you won't even care. By then you will be something other than human. A thing that feeds on souls. A Hollow."

Hazy memories of a life soon forgotten flash before your eyes. You see a loving mother holding an infant close to her chest. She's in a moment of motherly tranquility, yet her black robes and sullen expression tell another story. In a flash, splinters of wood dislodge from the ceiling, falling slowly like light snowfall. The wood rains down on the woman and child, but they are oblivious to it, unmoving. You enter the room. Your back is diseased, a shadowy blur of grotesquerie. You raise your hand toward the family, inching closer ever so slowly. And then the unexpected happens. The woman and child melt rapidly, looking like wax figurines held to a blaze.

You blink out of this moment and into another reality. Your hand is still outstretched, only now it's reaching for a door. A familiar voice grabs your attention again. It's that of the old woman, who is seated at a loom directly behind you. She tells you of Drangleic, a land to the north. You see it for a brief second: a kingdom built into mountaintops, spiked castle spires piercing a beautiful sunset filled with dozens of airborne dragons.

The old woman warns, "One day you will stand before its decrepit gate without knowing why." A smile creeps across her face, a flicker of life almost appearing in her pearly white eyes.

You journey across land and sea to find it, passing across realms in ruin and littered with the dead.

Your expedition ends at a pool, so calm not a ripple can be seen on it. On the far side of the pool rests Drangleic's gate. It registers your presence and opens, releasing a harsh breeze. Your skin cracks and dies, and your pupils become black voids. Winds send a swarm of specters across the pool. They roar over it, their skeletal features

screaming out in anguish, turning the waters into a violent vortex.

You study the swirling waters for a brief second, and then calmly leap into it. "For that is your fate," the old woman says. "The fate of the cursed."

This is Dark Souls II's dramatic introductory sequence. When you take control of your character, all that guides you are a hint of a past life and a vision of a kingdom overrun with beasts. Your skin is green, dead. From this point forward, what happens next and who you become is in your hands.

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

» **STYLE**
1-Player Action/Role-Playing
(2-Player Online)

» **PUBLISHER**
Namco Bandai

» **DEVELOPER**
From Software

» **RELEASE**
March 11
(PC TBA)

BY ANDREW REINER

My first moments in *Dark Souls II* are best told through a journal of death. I explored Drangleic for over five hours on PlayStation 3, and in that time, I kept the Grim Reaper busy. Over the next four pages, I chronicle the events that lead up to 20 painful defeats. Although I was beaten and bloodied in the early stages of my journey, I learned from my mistakes, adapted to my surroundings, and made significant progress through this challenging world. Read on to find out what transpired during my quest, and to see how *Dark Souls II* differs from its predecessor. **WARNING: LIGHT SPOILERS ABOUND**

DEATH 1: ONE SMALL STEP

The first stop for every player is to enter the cabin, which is home to a coven of witches known as the Fire Keepers. They speak cryptically of who you are, but give you a gift to help you remember. This item, called the Human Effigy, is a new addition to *Dark Souls II* that reverses Hollowing and also weakens links between your world and those of other players.

In this instance, however, the Effigy is used as means to create your character. You gaze upon it and recall what your physical being looked like. The character-creation process is as bare-bones and disappointing as it was in the first *Dark Souls*. Little effort was put forth to enhance the character model details or give players the tools necessary to truly create unique identities. The most dramatic character differences are once again wild hair colors. Next up is selecting a class. The choices are not as robust, offering just Warrior, Knight, Swordsman (a new addition), Bandit, Cleric, Sorcerer, Explorer, and Deprived (who is now hiking the loincloth as high as possible in the front, but is fully covered in the back). Noticeably absent are the Wanderer, Thief, Hunter, and Pyromancer classes from *Dark Souls*.

After selecting Sorcerer (my go-to class in the first *Dark Souls*), I'm given the option to select a gift from a list of seven options. While I debate grabbing the Homeward Bone, which can send me back to a bonfire, I select a Life Ring that gives my character a slight bump in HP. The oddest choices are Petrified Something (an oddly shaped lump that suggests it will have a use at some point in the game), and the Bonfire Ascetic, an



item that, once thrown in a bonfire, raises the strength of nearby enemies.

The witches inform me that I've come to this land to break the curse that has befallen me. After conversing with each chatty witch, I depart their abode and run into my first bonfire. I take a seat in front of it and I'm presented with a list of options. I can use bonfires to travel, attune spells, burn items, and access my item box. The "level up" option is not present at this point.

A brief jaunt brings me into a darkly lit woodland. I'm not on the forest floor, and instead find myself elevated a good 30 feet above it on narrow passage-ways (I'm sure I'm a goner if I make one wrong step). This zone is infested with slow moving adversaries, appearing to be knights who have gone Hollow. They wield either sword or bow, and are easy to fell, as they lack significant motor skills and act like zombies. When I take their lives, they explode into dust. In these early moments I'm already in a groove with the controls, which are identical to *Dark Souls*.

After exploring many different paths that lead through hollowed out trees, I come upon an overlook with an expansive swamp below. Lurking on its shore is a creature that can best be described as an obese bipedal rat. One of my favorite aspects in *Dark Souls* is that oft chance of stumbling upon a high-level adversary. I'm already hit with that sensation, and I sit motionless for a few seconds to determine if I should continue along the path or leap into the swamp to try to take down this beast. I roll off of the cliff and plunge into the water with a splash. My character doesn't resurface. My first death comes from drowning.

DEATH 2: AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

I awaken at the bonfire outside of the witches' home. I retrace my steps as best I can. Enemies are all in the same locations. When I reach the clearing this time around, I stay on the cliff, touching the bloodstain where I died previously to regain the souls I've collected from slaying enemies, and I also burn my only Human Effigy to restore my humanity. Whenever you die in *Dark Souls II*, you start off with less health. Restoring humanity brings the character's health back to full. Are Human Effigies going to be in great abundance? I'm willing to bet they won't be. This realization makes me think I should have saved the one I had.

At the end of the forest, I find a path that leads up to a small crack in a canyon wall. I enter it and the visual aesthetic changes completely. I run toward a blinding light and emerge onto a sprawling golden terrain filled with rocks and dead trees. The game alerts me that I've entered a zone called Majula. The hilly terrain creates bad sight-lines, and though I can't get my bearing in this area I do see numerous destinations, such as a black tower in the distance, what appears to be the remnants of a city in a nearby valley, and a sprawling ocean.

I cling to the hillside to my left and stumble upon another cave entrance that I likely wouldn't have noticed had I not hugged this side of the terrain. This path is not a place for claustrophobic people, offering little room to do anything more than maneuver forward or back. In this dark passage, I find ruins of an ancient civilization that must have perished from the cave collapsing. I emerge from this dark area onto a path and immediately



Soul Arrows function just like they did in the first Dark Souls game, but hit their mark most of the time. I rarely witnessed shots sail over an enemy



Clinging to the oceanfront, I spy another cave. Before entering, I light my torch with a lantern. I use it to explore this darkened area – a new feature in Dark Souls II. This dreary place takes me into a well-preserved brick catacomb that eventually gives way to an underground river and the ominously named “Forest of Fallen Giants.”

A Hollow knight and some archers are no match for my Soul Arrow strikes, but one hidden foe lands an unexpected blow, injuring me severely. Rather than using a lifegem to heal, my curiosity gets the best of me. I ascend a ladder and touch foot in a beautiful, enclosed grass-land with a giant tree in the center. This area is filled with enemies, including a

new foe: a white knight, who is resting against the tree’s trunk. All of the adversaries hone in on me, and out of the corner of my eye, I can see the knight getting to his feet. I frantically try to take down as many foes as I can, hoping against hope to battle the white knight without any other interference. The white knight sprints into the fray, pushing past the other foes to crowd me. He’s at least eight feet tall. I circle strafe to avoid his sword strikes successfully for roughly a minute. I sprint behind the tree and try to use it as cover, peeping out for a second to launch an arrow at the knight. This works well until I run out of Soul Arrows. At this point, I switch to my dagger. It’s a weak blade, but it can stun enemies temporarily with its quick strikes. Unfortunately, I can’t pick away at the pack fast enough. Numerous enemies land the final blow on me at the same time. I die horribly.

I foolishly try the same tactics five more times, thinking I actually stand a chance, but I don’t. My last foolhardy attempt depletes all of my health and magic resources. Not only do I have less health to work with after each death, my soul reserve is stuck in what appears to be a no-win situation.

The only ray of hope that exists for me is a small opening in a mossy wall to the right of the tree. On my next attempt, I sprint directly through this gap, and several enemies give chase. I climb a ladder, thinking I’m safe, but I immediately run into two more foes, which stop me dead in my tracks.

After an awkward pause, I kill them with dagger and turn my attention back to the ladder. My attackers are climbing, and I realize that I’m only alive because

seize up. Leaning against a nearby rock is a knight taking an afternoon nap. He’s armed with a sword the size of Cloud’s Buster Sword from Final Fantasy VII and the glow of a Jedi’s lightsaber. I inch forward slowly. When I reach his location, he doesn’t move. A prompt to communicate with the knight appears. He needs help; he wants me to remove a statue from a tower. Traveling a little further down the path, I come across said tower, and the statue, which is more disturbing than I thought: It’s a woman who looks to have been trying to flee, but was turned into stone just as she was trying to open a door. She’s petrified in front of the door’s lever. Can I remove her? Heal her? I have no answers, and I see no solutions.

On my way out of this area, I see two gates that escaped my vision on my way in. I open one, and a creature leaps out, giving me a jump scare. I inch backward slowly, and am taken further off guard by the creature’s body. He looks a little bit like Lord of the Rings’ Gollum – skinny to the bone, but with an enormous stomach that drags on the ground. One quick claw strike from this foul monster ends my life. I’m not opening that gate again until I level up. I check the bonfire to see if that option is available yet, and it’s still absent. Odd.

DEATHS 3-9: THE CAT AND THE WHITE KNIGHT

After retrieving my souls from the tower, I retreat through the cave and progress deeper into Majula. That village I spied in the valley is my next stop. It consists of three houses. One shop offers armor, but I can’t afford anything yet. Another is occupied by a talking cat named Shalquoir, who compliments me on my fragrance and tries to sell me rings and items. I’m not interested in what she’s peddling. At the center of this town is a giant concrete pit. Peering over the side of it, I can’t see how far down it goes, but I do spot ledges holding flashing items roughly 50 feet down. I already died once from taking an ill-advised leap. I won’t do it again...yet.

On my way out of this settlement, I find a bonfire on a hill overlooking the ocean, a foreboding sight consisting of black waves passing through jagged rocks. Upon exploring the area thoroughly, I learn how to level up my character, but it wouldn’t be fair of me to reveal it here, as it seems like another element From Software wants people to figure out on their own. I turn in what souls I have to reach level 12. I focus mostly on improving my stamina (which is tied to spell casting).



An enemy’s firebomb blows out a wall to reveal a helpful shortcut

they move at a snail's pace. I take them down one by one, and continue exploring this elevated terrain, which runs around the tree area. My Soul Arrow won't reach the white knight, but I've done a nice job of removing the threat from this troublesome zone. Only the knight and two other foes remain. I replenish my Soul Arrows.

My heart racing, I retrace my steps and confront the white knight. I won't let him or his friends get close. I have the room to maneuver, and I've managed to bunch them together, making for an easy battle. The knight is a Soul Arrow sponge, taking nine shots to drop.

With the threat cleared, I study my surroundings and find another path in this area that leads me through a dilapidated castle interior to a bonfire. A saleswoman who has five effigies in supply (900 souls

each) warms herself by the fire. I purchase two, and all of the other items I need to get back to fighting shape.

A ladder near the fire takes me into a dungeon that looks eerily like Sen's Fortress from Dark Souls. I move with caution, fearing I'll trigger a trap. Spear-wielding knights are roaming the walkways, and many of the corpses I pass reanimate. I'm on edge. I won't ruin some of the surprises that this area holds, but I advise that great caution be taken in exploring this zone. The level designers at From Software clearly had a good time putting this deadly fortress together.

Although I'm inching through it slowly, I'm dealt an unexpected death by a firebomb thrown by an unseen adversary, who is holed up in a second story window.

DEATHS 10-20: FEE-FI-FO-FUM

Retracing my steps to retrieve my souls takes roughly five minutes. This area is fairly large and nicely designed, offering plenty of locked doors and openings that I haven't explored yet. My next death comes quickly. A slow-moving turtle wielding a sizable mace lands a "lucky" blow against me when I try to take advantage of his slow movements, hoping I can take him out with my dagger. One hit is all it takes to smash me into the ground.

Although I try to follow in my same footsteps again to get my souls back, I see a ladder that eluded me before and decide to explore it. What happens next is both awesome and surprising to the point that I won't spoil it here. Whatever I encountered killed me - I didn't stand a chance. I ascend the ladder again, hoping to grab my souls and run, but the mysterious threat is no longer here. Very strange.

With a fair number of souls in tow, I use a Homeward Bone item to return to the last bonfire I used. From there, I fast travel to Majula's bonfire so that I can level up and hopefully stand a better chance in this challenging dungeon.

Upon returning to my previous point, I make great progress over my next few lives. Numerous shortcuts are opened, allowing for quick travel to new areas. I even stumble upon a new helm that gives my defense a much-needed boost.

I also learn why this world is called the

ON CO-OP AND COVENANTS

Dark Souls II director Yui Tanimura provides insight into how the game's difficulty is balanced, and what players can expect from covenants and co-op this time around.



How do you determine if an aspect of the game is too easy or difficult?

Throughout the development period, we carry out constant trial and error by playing the areas of the game over and over in order to balance and tune the game to meet the standards we aim to achieve. When

tuning the game for its challenge and difficulty, one thing we constantly keep in mind is to make sure that the difficulty is not a result of player skill and reflex, but make sure that players will have the ability to learn from the mistakes they make and attempt different strategies to overcome the difficulties in their own ways.

The difficulty level is tuned so that players constantly feel a high sense of achievement when they are able to overcome tasks, but also make sure that the game is fair in the sense that all tasks and hurdles can be overcome by paying close attention to what occurs in the game, and trying different strategies. The game is too easy when achievement cannot be felt, and perhaps never too difficult!

Is part of the process gauging player behaviors?

We try not to gauge based on player behavior. A concept of Dark Souls II is to allow different play tactics and strategies carried out by players. Again, the goal is not to create an impossible game, but to make sure that the difficulty and challenge is high, and at the same time, make sure the challenges can be conquered and generate excitement for taking that additional step or push in the game. We hope that players constantly derive their own strategies to explore and immerse themselves deep into the Dark Souls II world.

With this said, we are tuning the game as we speak based on our network beta tests as well as in-depth internal testing.

What is the average number of deaths that players experienced playing the original Dark Souls? What is the highest death count you've seen for an individual player?

We have never really counted this before, and so I don't have an exact idea of the death counts, but I would anticipate that even for a skilled action game player, players will face 15-20 deaths within the first hour of gameplay.

For Dark Souls II, we are utilizing a dedicated game server, and so these statistics can be tracked. It may be interesting to reveal such data if possible or requested by the community.

How are you handling covenants this time around?

Covenants will be a stronger part of Dark Souls II in expanding the online gameplay styles. Further, a lot of the covenants implemented are aimed for players to take on their own specific roles in the world. In having players immerse themselves in the world, we hope that the covenant system will add to the player's experience as an element for decision making in playing their part within the loose connection felt between other players experiencing the same challenges. We hope that players will explore the world and choose a covenant that fits the style of the players.

What are some of the changes made to the co-op experience?

One of the major changes we have made to the co-op system in the game is that we have added voice chat between the players during the co-op sessions. Players will be able to verbally chat with each other when they are summoned as allies during the game. This will add another layer of strategy possible to defeat foes.

As another addition, players will be invaded even when they are undead, and so it is no longer safe to remain undead against invaders. This seems cruel, but we have added elements/features to also help players against invasions, and covenants will be one of the elements to help this.





Slain enemies that don't explode into dust no longer feature ragdoll physics, meaning you can't comically drag their bodies across the terrain

The Last Giant is the first boss I encountered. As you can see, he removed one of his arms and is using it as a weapon



"Forest of Fallen Giants." In the lower section of this maze-like fortress, I pass through a mist portal, triggering a cinematic sequence that reveals my first legitimate boss encounter, a ghostly being called The Last Giant. He stands around 30 feet tall, and seeing that he has a giant tree trunk impaled through his torso and other various objects jetting out from his mud-like skin, I doubt my Soul Arrows are going to phase him much. My assumption is correct. Each shot only takes off a sliver of his health. Thankfully, his attack patterns are easy to read, granting me plenty of time to roll out of the way. When I deplete roughly half of his health,

he wises up and changes his tactics – removing one of his arms to use as a club. This painful choice makes him more aggressive and gives him a new set of attacks. One wild arm swipe is all it takes to end my life.

When I return to his lair, I can't help but smile, as I know he's going to die this time around. The reason for this is a glowing mark that has materialized in front of the mist gate. Interacting with this mark gives me the option to summon an NPC-controlled Phantom into my game. I waste no time doing this, and a ghostly knight appears at my side, following me through the gate.

My newfound friend charges the Last Giant and hacks away at his leg. He keeps it busy, dealing a fair amount of damage as I fire off Soul Arrows from a safe distance. Our combined effort overwhelms the beast, and he collapses without even engaging me. This victory rewards me with a bounty of souls and a key, which will presumably opens up one of the numerous doors I passed earlier.

The key does just that. Although I'm technically still running through the ruins of the same fortress, the sun finds this new area, casting it into different, more vibrant light. Horrors still lurk around most of corners, but this area eases my stress-level. After spending a few minutes in this wing of the fortress, I run into another mist gate that leads to a second boss. He goes by the name of The Pursuer. This heavysset humanoid figure stands roughly nine feet in height. All of his features are hidden behind thick silver armor. His sword and shield are comically large.

His appearance isn't as menacing as the Last Giant. He floats slowly toward me. I unload Soul Arrows as fast as I can, but they do little damage. I learn quickly that he has a long reach with his sword. Rolling to evade is incredibly challenging, and as his name implies, he always seems to be in pursuit. I pick away at his health, taking off roughly 20 percent, before one of my evasive maneuvers falters. This life was my best attempt. All of the others that follow are absolutely pathetic.

That's where my journey ends. Not with victory, but with a death that lives up to the legacy of this series, making me question whether or not I have the skills to take down this foe. Even as I write this, I want to jump back in and give The Pursuer another shot.

My extensive time with Dark Souls II taught me that this entry carries the series' torch of throwing players into gameplay rapids rolling with crushing defeats, great triumphs, and plenty of unexpected twists. I walked away feeling like I played more of the first game. From Software and new director Yui Tanimura are clearly trying to replicate the experience that came before, and I think that's a great decision. ♦





Dying Light

Trapped amongst the undead

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

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

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
Techland

» **Release**
2014

In most contemporary zombie fiction like “The Walking Dead” and “World War Z,” the survivors can always escape to the countryside to get a breather from the dense urban locations where the majority of undead are gathered. Players won’t have that luxury in Dying Light, as the city is under quarantine and nobody can escape its confines. That means respites from danger are few and far between.

“I think the whole idea of that quarantined city is pretty unique,” says producer Tymon Smektala. “If you start feeling like those survivalists trapped in that city, you start to wonder what’s happening outside and what the people outside of the quarantine think of the people trapped inside. Do they really want to help them, or maybe they would just like to nuke the

whole place and forget about it?”

The survivors trapped within the Harren’s city limits must make do with the scarce resources left in the city, receiving only the occasional supply drops from the outside world. Scavenging for these supplies in the multi-region open world is imperative to eek out an existence among the virals. Most of your quests come courtesy of a small band of survivors you team up with, but Smektala says as you explore the city you also experience dynamic encounters with other survivors. Not everyone you meet has your best interests at heart. Some may simply try to use you, but others may lure you into a trap so they can steal your supplies.

Moving amongst the virals and more menacing creatures that come out at night, you need

to choose your tactics wisely. Smektala says the best analogy to the skill tree in Dying Light is Deus Ex (sans the augmentation). Some skills focus on melee combat, giving you the ability to perform 360-degree whirlwind attacks or takedowns from elevated positions. Others accentuate your parkour skills or awareness to help you avoid confrontation altogether. These skills are especially helpful when night falls and the zombies grow more dangerous.

Combat is primarily melee based, but you can set traps and stumble upon the occasional firearm as well. You should save guns as a last resort, because the loud noise attracts more virals to your location. Not all noise is bad, however; making a booming sound can also be used to bail a friend out of a tough situation when playing cooperatively.



Scavenging for supplies during the day can yield new pieces that will help you construct more powerful weapons



“We have a noise system in our game,” Smektala says. “It incorporates noises made in game, and also if you want to, noises made by you in your living room. This gives way to some clever co-op mechanics, like for example you run through the city and you see your friend being surrounded by zombies. The zombies are really getting onto him and he’s about to die. You see or he tells you that he doesn’t have any weapon, so basically he’s screwed. If he’s too far from you to reach him, you can try to make some noise like bang with your weapon on the wall or just scream through your headset to draw the zombies attention.”

Smektala says the noise system is smart enough to tell the difference between regular chatter with friends and the instances where you want to draw the attention of virals. Players can calibrate the noise levels that cue the zombies or opt out altogether.

With games like Left 4 Dead, State of Decay, Day Z, Dead Rising, The Walking Dead, The Last of Us, and Techland’s own Dead Island competing for attention, Dying Light needs any subtle edge it can get to stand out in the crowded market. We’ll find out later this year if its quarantine setting, parkour and melee combat driven gameplay, and small innovations like the noise mechanic will be enough for Dying Light to rise to the head of the undead pack. » **Matt Bertz**

The next-gen versions of Dying Light feature 1080p resolution and 60 frames-per-second performance



The Next-Gen Difference

When we asked Techland about the major differences between the Xbox One and PlayStation 3 era games, producer Tymon Smektala says the content within the games is identical. The only real advantages to choosing the next-gen version is the 1080p resolution and 60 frames-per-second performance.



They Only Come Out At Night

Gamers who pre-order Dying Light get the chance to walk in the shoes of a Night Hunter. Should players choose to accept the challenge before launching a game, at nightfall these player-controlled monstrosities will join the hunt for survivors, which should offer a nice change of pace from dealing with A.I.-controlled enemies. Blessed with superior speed, agility, and jumping ability, players who adopt the role of the Night Hunter still have a fighting chance even if they’re outnumbered by a cooperative group of opposing players.

Each side of the showdown has rewards at stake. Should the Night Hunter protect the spawn points for virals and successfully hunt down survivors, that player is rewarded with experience points to spend on ability upgrades. When the survivors respawn after defeat, they will face a slightly larger population of virals as well. Killing the Night Hunter won’t be easy, but should they do so, the survivors will also earn experience, as well as unique rewards for weapon or gadget crafting.



The Elder Scrolls Online

A new approach to group mechanics

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

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

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
ZeniMax Online Studios

» **Release**
April 4 (PC/Mac)
June (PS4/Xbox One)

The Elder Scrolls Online (ESO) is examining new ways to bring players together to complete dungeon crawls and boss battles. The ideas that drive the four-person group composition are rooted in promoting teamplay and individual player action with as little friction as possible. In a discussion with creative director Paul Sage, we learned about the different grouping and party options that players will have in the world of Tamriel.

Players in ESO won't have to worry at all about "tagging" or gaining rights to monster loot and experience – everyone involved in vanquishing a monster receives credit. This is especially important for some of the world bosses and other overworld encounters that require multiple players to take on. Players who don't want to party up in the traditional sense can simply interact with each other in the completion of a few goals or mini-bosses and move on.

To help promote this sort of inherent teamplay and cooperation ESO is introducing a version of the "public quest," experiences and events that everyone in an area can contribute toward without necessarily being in a group. This infrastructure should give solo players plenty of opportunities to engage in this type of content without having to form groups or join a guild.

What about those who decide to take things to the next level and group up for a dungeon or two? ESO features a looking for group (LFG) system that allows members of a team to teleport quickly to dungeons and other points of interest. This means the team lead needs to have previously visited the dungeon entrance to obtain a viable port point. ESO's LFG system also allows players to search and sort for various encounters outside of dungeons within specified level ranges.

The decision to go with a four-person

group size places emphasis on player actions. Larger group sizes can downplay individual contributions in an action-oriented MMORPG, and the smaller team size ensures that all players engage in a variety of roles during combat.

While some players will probably still take on traditional group roles such as healer or tank, the tank won't just be tanking and the healer won't just be healing – they must be involved in multiple aspects of an engagement. Group dynamics are not set in stone, so don't expect one tank, one healer, two damage dealers to be the cookie-cutter content-clearing machine.

ESO's group content also goes beyond the standard four-person team. Details have not been announced, but ZeniMax Online plans to integrate larger team raid style encounters for players looking for those kind of experiences.

» **Daniel Tack**



A Dark Anchor spotted in Reaper's March



The town of Mistral



Skull Kid is in the game...but only as an Assist Trophy



Super Smash Bros.

A tale of two games

- » **Platform**
Wii U • 3DS
- » **Style**
1 to 4-Player Fighting
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Namco Bandai/
Sora Ltd/Nintendo
- » **Release**
2014

One of the last things any gamer wants to hear is, “you have to buy two versions of the same game if you want to see everything it has to offer.” The latest Super Smash Bros. information released by Nintendo points at two decidedly different experiences tied to the Wii U and 3DS versions.

The development team at Sora Ltd. is creating content for each version that caters to the handheld and console markets. In the 3DS version, some of the stages players fight on are based on The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks, Kid Icarus: Uprising, Nintendogs, Mario Kart 7, Animal Crossing: New Leaf, and Find Mii. From what we’ve been told, these stages are exclusive to the 3DS version. Wii U has its own selection of exclusive levels based on Super Mario Galaxy, Wii Fit, Pikmin, Animal Crossing: City Folk, The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword, and Metroid: Other M.

Many of these stages are decked out with fan service and little touches that tie into the games represented. The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks’ environment places

warring characters on the train. On this stage, platforms whiz by overhead, and the caboose detaches and disappears off screen, and is then replaced by an entirely different car. Players won’t find much stable footing in the level inspired by Super Mario Galaxy, either. Parts of the galaxy are explored, and the smaller spherical worlds that form this challenging battleground look to deliver different gravities.

Animal Crossing: New Leaf’s stage is graced by the presence of Kapp’n. We don’t know if he’ll serenade players with a song, but we can’t imagine this boisterous turtle staying quiet in any scenario. Find Mii’s stage looks to be one of the most terrifying with the Dark Emperor boss descending to the battlefield for a visit.

Trophy collecting is returning in this iteration. Again, the collections players can amass are tied directly to the platform they are playing on. Wii U trophies are largely inspired by console games, and 3DS trophies by handheld games.

As of now, it is believed that the announced roster of characters applies to both versions, but Nintendo has said that there are alternate costumes for some characters, which again opens the door for unique offerings on handheld and console. The newest additions to the roster are Rosalina (of Super Mario Galaxy fame), and returning characters Marth, King Dedede, and Princess Zelda. Long-time Smash Bros. series staples like Yoshi, Jigglypuff, and Ness are still noticeably absent from the character lineup, but we’d be shocked if they aren’t announced by the time this title ships. Solid Snake’s inclusion is a bigger question mark. We’ll have to see if Nintendo inks another deal with Konami to include this popular character, or if Capcom’s Mega Man is taking his spot as a third-party inclusion.

Nintendo still hasn’t announced an official release date for this highly anticipated title, other than saying it hits store shelves sometime in 2014. » **Andrew Riener**

Sound And Light Show

Nintendo still isn't done revealing new combatants for both the 3DS and Wii U versions. Here's the confirmed list so far...



Bowser



Captain Olimar



Donkey Kong



Fox McCloud



King Dedede



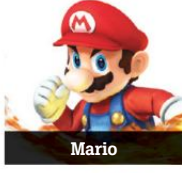
Kirby



Link



Luigi



Mario



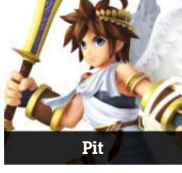
Marth



Mega Man



Pikachu



Pit



Princess Peach



Princess Zelda



Rosalina & Luma



Samus



Sonic



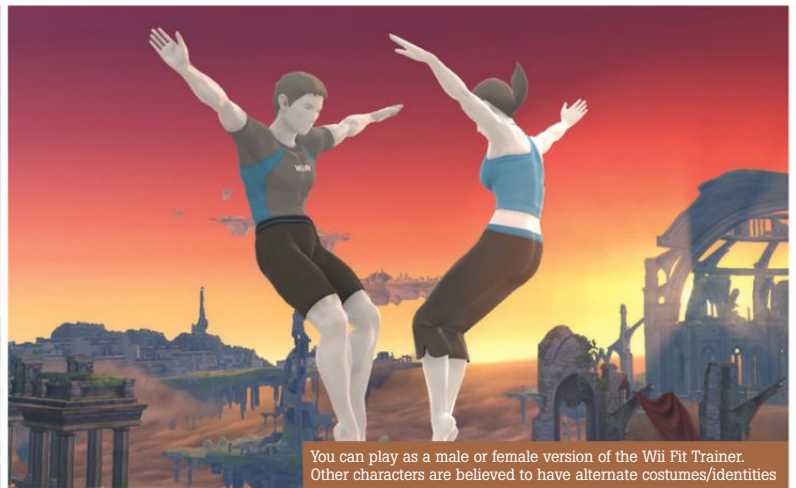
Toon Link



Villager



Wii Fit Trainer



You can play as a male or female version of the Wii Fit Trainer. Other characters are believed to have alternate costumes/identities

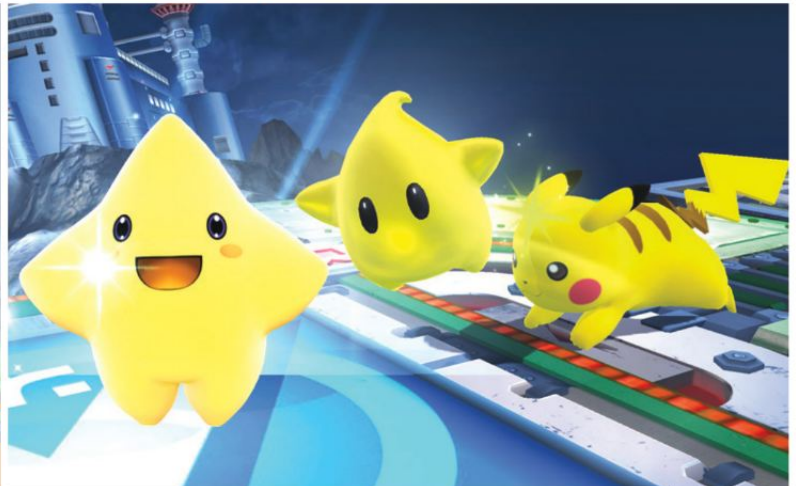
The 3DS and Wii U versions will likely feature unique stages, such as this Find Mii-inspired level in the 3DS version



The 3DS and Wii U versions will feature unique sets of collectible trophies. Wii U's trophies are inspired by console games, and the 3DS' by handheld games



Pit and Animal Crossing's Villager set their sights on Dr. Wily's castle (one of the game's new stages)





Strider

Hands-on with Capcom's resurrected ninja assassin

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Double Helix

» **Release**
February

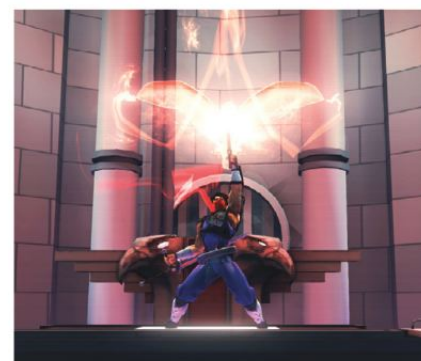
Old-school arcade fans don't have to wait much longer to get their fix from Capcom's long-lost ninja. The original Strider arcade game released in 1989, with a PlayStation follow-up in 2000. This Double Helix effort, the first new entry in more than a decade, is a reverent mash-up of the classic titles that injects plenty of new elements to the mix.

Once again, Grandmaster Meio rules over the world with an iron fist. Hiryu has graduated from the Strider program with the prestigious Special A-Class rank, and his first order of business is to infiltrate Kazakh City and kill the oppressive warlord. He arrives in style on a futuristic hang glider and immediately gets to work. Right out of the gate you feel like a badass ninja dashing, flipping, climbing, and slashing your way through the *Blade Runner*-meets-Soviet-Russia landscape.

Double Helix replaced the linear stages of

the past with open, Super Metroid-style maps. Clear objective markers point to the next spot you need to visit, but it's smart to venture off the beaten path to clear out the fog of war and snag health and energy upgrades, plus pickups like concept art and enemy profiles. Found capsules unlock attacks like a ground slide and a downward slash that allow Hiryu to bust through various grates to find hidden routes and items. He can also track down new abilities for his Cypher plasma blade like bullet reflecting and enemy freezing that also grant access to various color-coded doors.

As you dive deeper into the game, a plasma eagle can transport Strider between two separate 2D planes on a map, adding a unique separation to the map zones. This eagle can also be used in battle, summoning it to blaze a powerful slash across the screen. A peek at the zoomed-out world map and some of the trophies indicates that players may visit a

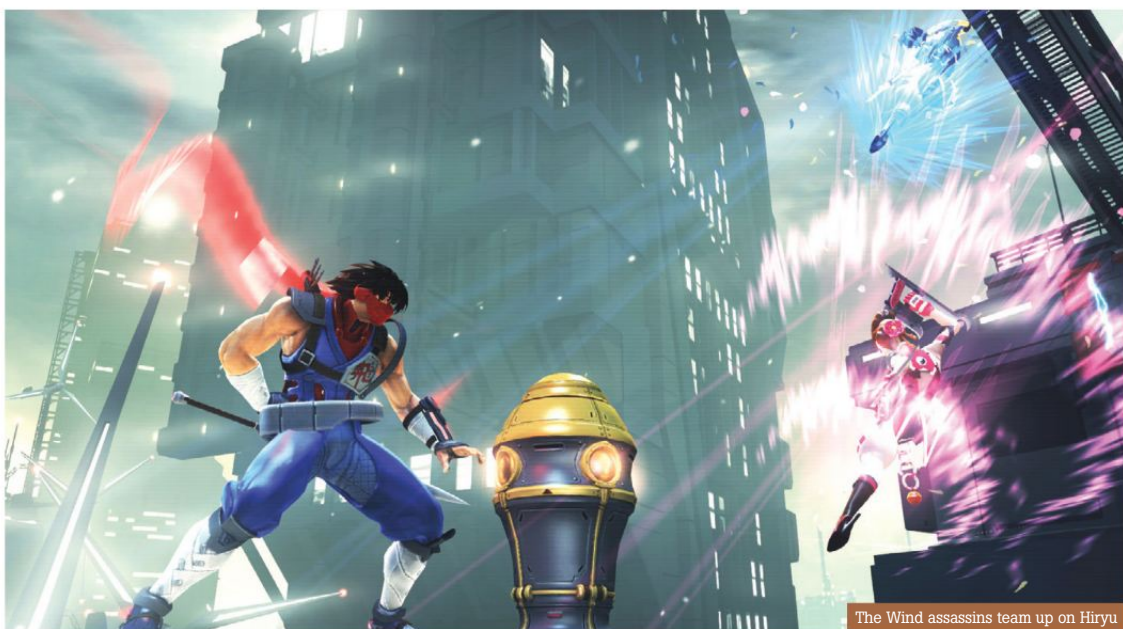


certain airship and a lunar celestial body.

Fans should remember several of the bosses from the early section of the game. We discussed the flying serpent Ouroboros Mk III in our previous coverage, but this time around we took on the assassin sisters known as The Wind. Pei Pooh, The North Wind, attacks with hook swords fused with sub-machine guns. Later on, you battle Nang Pooh, The South Wind, and her energy-powered spear. Once she's weakened, they team up on you in a frenzied battle. We wouldn't be surprised if the third sister joins the fray at some point down the line.

Another classic foe, the bounty hunter Solo, makes an appearance near the end of our demo. This armored, flying assassin has a creepy angelic appearance reminiscent of the enemies in Bayonetta. Between taunts, he blasts out complex laser grids and floating energy boxes you must dodge, leaving a few openings for you to jump up and tag him with a charged slash.

Our time with Strider cut off at about the 20-percent mark, and left us wanting more. It's packed with references for fans, while moving the gameplay forward to appeal to a modern audience. If you're concerned about difficulty, normal is completely reasonable for the average player so far. Players looking for the punishing, old-school experience should go straight to hard. » **Bryan Vore**



The Wind assassins team up on Hiryu

Drakengard 3

Zero isn't your typical RPG heroine



Drakengard never hit it big in North America, but developed a dedicated fanbase that supported a sequel and a spin-off, *Nier*. *Nier* was also bittersweet, as it would be the last game developed by Cavia, which was dissolved into AQ Interactive. However, director Yoko Taro and producer Takamasa Shiba didn't give up on keeping the franchise alive. They teamed up with publisher Square Enix and brought back some of the minds they worked with at Cavia to create a new entry: *Drakengard 3*, a prequel to the original.

While the new iteration is in the same universe, it's not exactly coloring in the lines. "The end of *Drakengard 3* won't necessarily connect directly to *Drakengard 1*," says producer Takamasa Shiba. While Shiba wants to keep the majority of the new game a surprise, he does confirm that *Drakengard* standbys are in place, like a dark world, mature story, and bloody action combat.

Shiba calls *Drakengard 3* "very edgy," right down to its anti-hero protagonist, Zero, who

is out to kill her sisters. These aren't your ordinary sisters, though; they're Intoners, whose songs unleash powers to keep the peace. The sisters have governed and kept the world safe, but Zero, also an Intoner, doesn't think they're needed anymore. While Shiba refuses to reveal why Zero wants to kill her sisters, he does let on that Zero will stop at nothing to reach her goal, putting it above all else. You're in control of Zero as she encounters her sisters, each with her own distinct quirk, from a bastion of justice to one enveloped in complete paranoia.

Zero is fierce as she hunts for blood. She slices enemies, leaving crimson splattered across her face and dripping from her blade. Combat is a high-action affair and Shiba promises even speedier battles in this new installment, complete with standbys like cutting through mobs of enemies and riding your very own fire-breathing dragon, Mikhail, for high-speed aerial battles. Additionally, because Zero is an Intoner, songs determine her skill flow in battle.

While Zero has her trusty dragon at her side,



Zero isn't afraid to get her hands dirty or kill her sisters...

she can also recruit four different allies to help in her fight. However, she can only bring two to the battlefield with her at a time. Character interactions still occur during battle. The exploration, however, is minimal; only new weapons and items are uncovered. Expansive towns with nooks and crannies to explore aren't part of *Drakengard 3*.

The prospects for *Drakengard 3* looked bleak after Cavia's demise, but seeing Square Enix and Access Games work together to preserve the franchise is exciting. One of the most intriguing aspects according to Shiba is "experiencing the story through the eyes of the main character." Now it's time to find out why Zero has such an appetite to kill.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Access Games

» **Release**
2014



Mikhail not only breathes fire at enemies, he also provides companionship





The Fans want to get the same phone calls for hits from the Janitors that Jacket did, so they're taking it upon themselves to attract their attention

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • Vita
PC • Mac • Linux

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Devolver Digital

» **Developer**
Dennaton Games

» **Release**
2014

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number began as DLC for the original game, but it grew larger and larger until creators Jonatan Söderström and Dennis Wedin realized they had a full-blown sequel on their hands. Söderström and Wedin say Wrong Number concludes the Hotline Miami story.

Wrong Number follows a few narrative threads, some taking place before the events of Hotline Miami and some after through the eyes of multiple playable characters. One thread follows the Pig Butcher, an actor in a

slasher movie inspired by the events of the first game. The others follow the exploits of a group of five wannabe vigilantes known as the Fans, who are inspired by the original Hotline Miami protagonist, Jacket.

In the first game, Jacket received mysterious calls from a secretive group called the Janitors tasking him with brutally murdering assigned targets. Many saw Jacket as a psychopath, but The Fans worship him as a hero and seek to emulate what he did. Each of the six playable characters has his or her own abilities,

and Devolver told us even more characters will be in the final game.

Hotline Miami 2 retains the pixelated hyper-violence of the first game. Players still view the action from above, taking out anyone who gets in their way. The first game is renowned for its difficulty, and Wrong Number holds nothing back. In fact, a new, harder difficulty is available for players skilled enough to unlock it.

We're curious to see how this murderous tale wraps up later this year. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Atelier Escha & Logy: Alchemists Of The Dusk Sky

Revitalizing a series with two new alchemists

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Tecmo Koei

» **Developer**
Gust

» **Release**
March 11

The Atelier series found its niche by centering on female protagonists coming of age while learning the ropes of alchemy. However, with yearly iterative releases since 2006, developer Gust decided the time is ripe for a change. For its latest entry, not only are there two different selectable protagonists, but players have the option to play as either a woman, Escha, or a man, Logy. I've been wondering about the variations between the two characters, so I played an hour of each alchemist's story to see their differences.

Escha's personality and backstory are akin to past protagonists. She grew up learning alchemy, but has yet to master the skill. Now she's embarking on her first big job as a government official, hoping her talents can help the town. She's been living in a small outpost

city her entire life and is eager to explore outside its walls. Logy is also an alchemist and new government official, but he hasn't received the same traditional teachings as Escha. He's a newcomer to town, and he often picks up on odd circumstances and provides insight into situations that Escha might take for granted. He's extremely diligent and serious, a foil to Escha's enthusiasm and carefree nature.

Both characters' journeys start with an assignment to fix the town's windmill. While both stay on the same path, subtle changes are noticeable. Escha starts out trying to locate a townspeople to get more information about the quest; Logy's path skips this altogether and lets you directly interact with the same villager, revealing different information

than Escha receives from her. In the end, both characters end up traversing the world map together to search different locations for materials and fight off baddies who get in the way. The turn-based battles play out similarly to past games, where you build up a gauge to chain attacks, often giving you two extra hits in a turn.

So far the differences are minor between the two paths, but I did notice that Logy has more internal monologues, constantly reacting to what's going on around him. Logy's path also seems to have a bigger story arc regarding the world and its history, while Escha's appears more focused on character interactions. Who you pick determines your ending; will you go the lighthearted route with Escha or the serious one with Logy? » **Kimberley Wallace**



The Witch And The Hundred Knight

The minds behind Disgaea try action

The Witch and The Hundred Knight's development schedule has been full of ups and downs. The game was announced in 2010, with release slated for 18 months later. It immediately piqued interest, being from the minds behind Disgaea and borrowing heavily from its art style, but diverging with action-focused gameplay. Unfortunately, Nippon Ichi pushed back the release date many times due to changing visions and a lack of polish. Now in 2014, it looks like the developer is finally ready to send its baby out into the world.

As the titular Hundred Knight, you form an alliance with the Swamp Witch, meaning her every wish is your command. Her goal? To spread her swamp throughout the land. It's up to you to break down any barrier preventing her from doing so. Along the way, you begin to second guess if you're working for the right cause. After all, there must be a reason nobody has worked with her before...and can you ever really know the true motives of a witch? Something tells us this is a classic story about choosing between good and evil.

Set in a dark fantasy world, the top-down, action combat has the creativity the Disgaea team is well known for. You can equip up to five different weapons, used in succession to build different combos. You also have some special skills up your sleeve, like the ability

to slow down time to dodge attacks at the last second. In addition, you can change your "facet" on the fly to make yourself quicker, tankier, or built like a glass cannon. You can even chow down on enemies, restoring Gcals, which allow you to explore areas longer. All of this combat plays out fast and fluid across vibrant, fantastical lands.

While it's still too early to tell if The Witch and The Hundred Knight will capture gamers the way Disgaea did, it's great to see Nippon Ichi stepping into new territory. While the similarities to Disgaea are present in the art style and the fight between good versus evil, being under the influence of a witch could be engaging in its own right. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
NIS America

» **Developer**
Nippon Ichi Software

» **Release**
March 25



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Hex: Shards of Fate

When trading cards and MMOs collide



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer
Online Strategy

» **Publisher**
Cryptozoic
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Cryptozoic
Entertainment

» **Release**
2014

Hex: Shards of Fate is board game veteran Cryptozoic Entertainment's first foray into the digital market. This ambitious free-to-play genre mashup combines the trading card game with the massively multiplayer online game.

Players can compete with each other in tournaments and duels like traditional collectible card games, but they can also partake in dungeon crawls and raids with multiple players. Along the way they collect treasure, battle monsters, and craft decks to take on challenges like the epic Kraken (which spawns tentacle cards).

Magic: The Gathering or Duels of the Planeswalkers veterans should find Hex easy to pick up and play. For those that haven't had experience with TCGs, a tutorial will likely be included in the final product once player vs. environment elements are introduced.

In addition to PvE elements, Hex is being designed with a number of other features that separate it from other digital trading card games. Hex will eventually feature an auction house; items that can be collected to alter the properties of cards, guilds, races, and classes; and all the trappings of an MMORPG. The cards also feature a "double-back" that keeps track of play statistics and achievements.

Cryptozoic is taking advantage of the digital space in a few critical ways. Hex features

cards that have multiple transformation stages, something difficult to achieve with physical games. Some cards "remember" being played, shoot back into the deck, and have different abilities when they come around again. Hex also has cards that "escalate," rotating back into the deck when played and adding additional strength to each copy of the card that is played subsequently.

Hex also features a gemming system for cards. A basic creature could be 3/3 with no abilities and a gem slot. Players have access to all gems and can tailor the creature to meet

the needs of a given deck or encounter, giving the creature flight, additional power, and a wide variety of other abilities. The gem system adds some interesting decision-making and customization options for both PvE and PvP play.

Hex is currently in an alpha/early access state after a successful Kickstarter campaign. Prospective players can buy-in to gain access immediately; the game will be free-to-play on release. The current build supports player vs. player only and allows players to build freely with all released cards. » **Daniel Tack**





Starbound

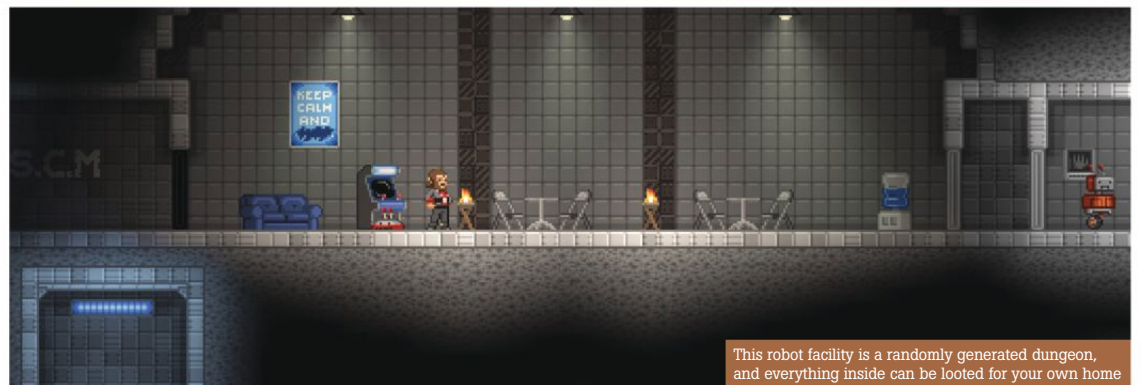
Spelunking in outer space

Minecraft's unparalleled popularity has led to an explosion of indie games that incorporate mining and crafting mechanics into their gameplay. One of the more successful and entertaining of these titles was Re-Logic's *Terraria*, which featured a 2D pixel-based approach and introduced platforming and *Metroid*-like exploration into the mix.

Since then, *Terraria*'s former graphic designer Finn "Tiy" Brice created his own studio, which is currently working on *Starbound*. The sci-fi sandbox action game expands on *Terraria*'s formula by offering players an endless map of unique planets to explore, populated with procedurally generated flora, creatures, and items. After spending nearly 20 hours with the early access beta, it's clear that the ambitious project is off to a good start.

Starbound features six playable races, which run the gamut from the bird-like Avians to the amphibious Hylotl. Boring players can always choose to be a human, but as soon as I see the simian Apex, I'm set; how could I not play as a space monkey? After customizing my appearance and accepting the randomly suggested moniker "Littleface," it's time to begin.

The Apex's backstory is indicative of



This robot facility is a randomly generated dungeon, and everything inside can be looted for your own home

Starbound's tongue-in-cheek tone. A failed rebellion against the Ministry of Scientific Progression (also known as the Miniknog) has left me stranded in a far-off corner of the galaxy, orbiting an unknown planet in a hijacked enemy ship. It's up to me to topple the Miniknog's despotic ruler, Big Ape, but first I have to find fuel for my ship.

Teleporting down to the surface of *Vaastolaan Minoris II* provides a first glimpse at *Starbound*'s planet generator. The rolling landscape is adorned with purple grass, and twisting green root trees with bubbly leaves tower overhead. Various holes in the surface lead to underground caverns ripe for exploring, but some are filled with poisonous pools of green acid. I come across several hostile creatures, including yellow snail men and orange, fire-spewing birds. An abundance of small black creatures with big teeth and leafy

skirts also roam the area, but they don't seem interested in picking a fight.

After scouting my surroundings, I settle into a gameplay loop familiar to *Terraria* fans: gathering resources and crafting new items. I fell trees to build a workbench and rudimentary tools. Mining iron and silver from deep underground results in better armor and weapons, and vines can be converted into lifesaving bandages. Hunting creatures with a bow provides plenty of food, plus leather for crafting warmer clothes – which come in handy later on when I visit the planet's icy moon. I also stumble upon a village full of peaceful mushroom men and a research facility run by hostile robots, which break up the monotony of mining.

Eventually, I gather enough resources to build a distress beacon, but activating it has unintended consequences. Instead of summoning my ape allies, a massive UFO full of angry and well-armed penguins appears and chases me across the landscape. I cheese my way through the boss fight by hiding in a hole and taking potshots at it with my bow, and the exploding ship drops a component vital for unlocking more advanced crafting items. After warping back to my ship and converting some coal into fuel, it's time to head to a new planet.

Starbound still has a long developmental road ahead, but our first look at the game is encouraging. The enemy AI is rudimentary, and many of the most enticing features (including customizable ships and space combat) are still M.I.A., but the variety of the procedurally generated planets and deep crafting system have us excited to see what Chucklefish adds next. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

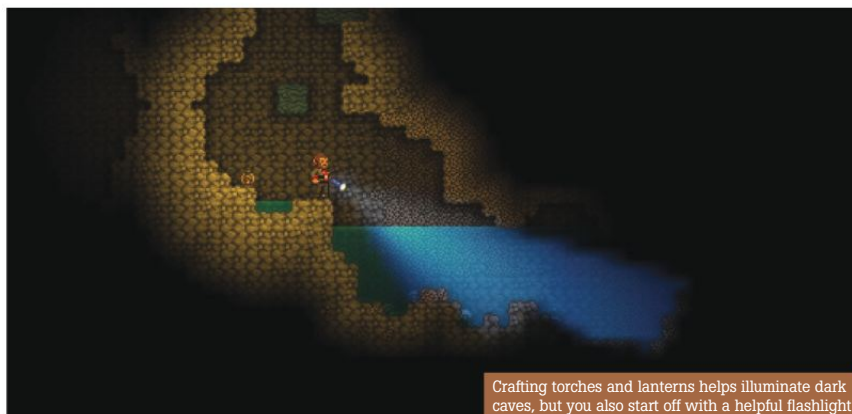
» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC

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

» **Publisher**
Chucklefish Games

» **Developer**
Chucklefish Games

» **Release**
TBA



Crafting torches and lanterns helps illuminate dark caves, but you also start off with a helpful flashlight



Lifeless Planet

A lost love and a mysterious planet

» **Platform**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Stage 2 Studios

» **Developer**
David Board

» **Release**
Spring

Lifeless Planet is an appropriate name for David Board's independent, Kickstarted puzzle/platforming game. Seemingly alone on an Earth-like planet, the world feels stark and without life, but something far in the distance begs you to move forward and explore.

When NASA discovers a planet light-years away that appears to support life, it sends a team of astronauts on a one-way mission to explore it. This mysterious world is Mars-like in its appearance, with yellow skies and red sand. When the space shuttle crash-lands, you awake alone. As you explore the world looking for other surviving astronauts, you start to realize this world may not be uninhabited after all. Power-lines are your first clue of civilization, and early trailers showcase abandoned Soviet ghost towns.

As I explore the environment with my spacesuit and jetpack, I think I see a woman in the distance. She travels the landscape without the aid of a spacesuit, but appears to be

human. I mutter to myself, "I don't know if she can be trusted," but her footprints carefully avoid danger, so I follow them.

In my attempts to follow her, I come across an empty home with a crane nearby. An electronic note reveals the crane was working thanks to a nearby power source, and whoever wrote the note is hopeful a cure can be found soon. Confused and now worried about my health, I find the power source by following the power lines nearby. I find a strange alien formation at the end of the path and use a special arm attached to my spacesuit to place a glowing green rock inside the power source, opening the path to a special fuel canister. The fuel allows me to travel much farther, which is helpful as I make my way back to the house and crane.

With the crane powered on, I use it to create a platform to reach the woman I have been following. As I near her, a voiceover narration from my past reveals my character had a wife who suddenly disappeared without a trace

years prior, but he still believes she is out there somewhere. The music begins to swell, the woman leaps from the cliff I have climbed to reach her, and the demo ends.

Lifeless Planet's visuals and animation are clearly born of a small budget and a small team. What it lacks in visual polish, however, it makes up for with its mysterious setting and puzzle mechanics. Creator David Board has been designing the game on his own for a long time, calling it "the culmination of years of learning, experimentation, and ambition." It recalls the 1995 anime short film *Magnetic Rose* with its secretive, science-fiction setting, but Board is looking back further for inspiration. "It's sort of an old-school sci-fi story, inspired by TV and movies I enjoyed growing up like *The Twilight Zone*," Board says.

I want to see where this astronaut's journey takes him, and I am excited to find out if Board achieve his singular, focused vision.

» **Kyle Hilliard**



Lifeless Planet is a puzzle game with platforming, but it can be creepy, sometimes feeling closer to a survival horror game

Trove

Craft, build, and dungeon dive



Trion's free-to-play title, Trove, draws upon the voxel-based building and crafting that Minecraft brought into the spotlight and adds a hefty dose of action role-playing and MMO elements. Players hunt monsters in various biomes and environments, level up, learn new abilities, and create castles, towers, and more. By exploring and fighting, players gain the components required to craft new items and structures.

Procedurally generated dungeons and world bosses give adventurers something to look forward to. Expansive destructible and harvestable terrain provides the crafting/building player an unlimited brush to paint with. Players will likely engage in both types of play, gathering new weapons and armor that allow them to progress to new zones and handle harder encounters.

Level ups and progression aspects persist throughout the world. Players can collect and craft equippable badges – a sort of collectible talent system that provides players upgrades like increased running speed, bomb or potion boosts, and more.

The game also features a “cornerstone” system that allows players to bring a personalized home base from world to world. These homesteads can be moved anywhere at the player's discretion. Trion has plans to add group building as well so that friends can create communal cornerstones of epic proportions.

Trove is currently in an alpha/early access phase and is available to play through random key acquisition via sign-up or buy-in. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Massively Multiplayer
Online Action/
Simulation

» **Publisher**
Trion Worlds

» **Developer**
Trion Worlds

» **Release**
2014



Grim Dawn

Familiar but flavorful role-playing fare

Crate Entertainment's Grim Dawn draws upon the talents of Titan Quest veterans to bring a dark fantasy world to life. Grim Dawn has many similarities to the Titan Quest and Diablo franchises, but tries to add its own flavor to the tried-and-true hack and slash genre.

A stark contrast to the heroes and myth backdrop of Titan Quest, Grim Dawn's landscapes are the stuff of nightmares, a world of war-torn wreckage and despair.

The product of a successful Kickstarter campaign, Grim Dawn is currently available as an early access title on Steam. This alpha build features one act of gameplay and no multiplayer functionality, though Crate says the game will support cooperative play at launch.

Fans of loot and scoot action/RPGs will find familiar trappings as they upgrade skills, search for better gear, and move from boss to boss, level to level.

The formula is familiar, but Grim Dawn acknowledges where it's drawing from to paint a respectful homage rather than a derivative mess. Players can mix and match skill trees to create templates specializing in various aspects such as melee, magic, summons, and ranged attacks.

Grim Dawn's loot system has been designed to drop less “trash,” so players won't have to spend significant time rummaging through worthless items. An extensive crafting system allows players to create items that complement builds and specializations. Those items can then be re-crafted and upgraded as the player levels, through multiple evolutions and tiers.

As multiplayer content is introduced, we'll get a better feel as to how Grim Dawn stacks up to the latest crop of hack and slash titles. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Crate Entertainment

» **Developer**
Crate Entertainment

» **Release**
2014



Reviews



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

89 Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze

Donkey Kong Country Returns nailed it back in 2010 on Wii and Retro Studios has returned to do it again on Wii U. Some of the most innovative platforming stages yet blend with the hardcore challenge that fans crave. New Kong partners Dixie and Cranky add variety to DK's moveset to help players navigate another knockout platformer from Nintendo.

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	Half of two.

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



Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2

Dracula, dead and loathing it

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Konami **Developer** MercurySteam **Release** February 25 **Rating** M

6

PS3 • 360

Castlevania: Lords of Shadow was one of my favorite games of 2010. I loved the boldness of the reboot, recasting familiar bosses and reinterpreting characters and settings in imaginative ways. It ended on a killer double cliffhanger, where we learn that not only has Gabriel Belmont embraced his inner Dracula, but that he's stayed alive through the modern day. The scenario held a tantalizing amount of promise, and I was excited to see how MercurySteam would build off an excellent foundation. Unfortunately, this sequel is as fresh as a whiff of garlic breath.

It starts off with promise. Gabriel is tired of immortality, and an old acquaintance offers a deal: help defeat Satan's acolytes, and Gabe will get the eternal slumber he desperately craves. With the promise of death

in his sights, he's off. Instead of his combat cross chain-whip contraption, now he attacks bad guys with a flail-like blood whip. He also has an icy sword and flaming claws, which allow him to leech life from his victims or burn through their defenses. Each weapon has its own skill tree, upgrades, and unlocks, which encourages you to try new things in battle rather than rely on a few tried-and-true combos. It's a decent-enough God of War clone, when enemies aren't stun-locking you out of combos from across the street while you simultaneously battle the camera.

Satan's head honchos have embedded themselves in modern business, heading up industries including pharmaceutical and weapons manufacturing (har har). That gives Gabriel a reason to infiltrate a few generic factory levels, where he leaves his combat

abilities at the door in exchange for tedious stealth – opening doors by turning into piles of rats and possessing generic guards. After surviving these sections, as well as a later stealth area that is truly a worst-in-class experience, I understand why Gabriel craves death's sweet embrace.

The modern-day setting is conceptually interesting, but fails in execution. Gabriel ends up spending the bulk of his time in abandoned alleys and the occasional ruined plaza. Satan's minions and other beasts warp in regularly, providing Gabe with the chance to use his revamped arsenal. It's up to him to beat up the world's armies of poorly realized demons, paladins, and robots.

Gabe does get to visit more classic Castlevania-style locations through some narrative gymnastics, and they're more interesting to look at and explore than barren aisles of flaming cars. Aside from one startlingly good section involving a toy theater, however, it's all ground previously covered in the first Lords of Shadow.

That's ultimately the problem with Lords of Shadow 2. This shambling monstrosity is composed of chunks from other, better games. Rather than blend them together into something new like its predecessor attempted, this one just feels like a patchwork mess. » **Jeff Cork**

» Concept

Take Gabriel Belmont – now in full-on Dracula mode – on a modern-day mission to defeat Satan, and ultimately end his own immortality

» Graphics

The main cast and some bosses look great, but lesser enemies and environments are often uninspired or poorly realized

» Sound

Robert Carlyle and Patrick Stewart give it a good shot, but even they can't salvage the hokey dialogue

» Playability

Nearly every attempt that Lords of Shadow 2 makes to stray from its fundamental kill-room formula ends in failure

» Entertainment

This is a disappointment for fans of the first game, and for people who were looking forward to playing Castlevania from the perspective of Dracula

» Replay Value

Moderate

The contemporary setting is mostly a letdown compared to the fantastic places Gabriel explored in the first Lords of Shadow





Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

Ending the world with a whimper

7

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix **Release** February 11 **Rating** T

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

The clock is ticking as Lightning tries to accomplish as much as possible before doomsday

» **Graphics**

Impressive overall art direction creates some striking scenes, and the main cast looks pretty good. However, generic characters look terrible, and many of the environmental textures are awful

» **Sound**

Some catchy new tracks mixed in with recycled music from the two previous games

» **Playability**

The new battle system is fast and fun, and the on-screen clock makes it easy to manage your time

» **Entertainment**

An unbelievably bad story and phoned-in side quests make it difficult to appreciate the innovations present elsewhere

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

As the savior from a prophecy, Lightning has awoken to save the souls of the remaining humans before the world is destroyed. However, that isn't the only redemption that rests on her shoulders. As the third and final installment in the Final Fantasy XIII saga, Lightning Returns tries to distance itself from its predecessors and get back into gamers' good graces. This results in some bold and unconventional decisions, but they don't save this entry from being the bottom of Final Fantasy XIII's downward spiral.

Though I was ultimately disappointed, Lightning Returns is not a bad game. It takes more risks than Final Fantasy XIII-2, particularly with its cool twist on combat. You control Lightning exclusively, executing abilities and guarding against enemy attacks in real time. This change to the formula means that timing and positioning are important, making battles feel less automated and more skill-focused.

You're trying to exploit weaknesses and stagger your foes, all while switching between three customizable weapon/ability sets called schemata. Depending on its latent properties, a schema can be tailored to a specific purpose – like physical attacks or debuffing – or have a mix of powers from different categories. I like this flexibility, since it gives players the freedom to stray outside of the traditional roles (commando, ravager, etc) and develop new combat styles. Swapping from one schema to the next and unloading

with a series of carefully plotted attacks creates a fast-paced, high-tension system that makes fights exciting.

The battlefield may be different, but the most significant change in Lightning Returns comes from the passage of time. The impending apocalypse is happening in 13 days, and an on-screen countdown clock ticks through the minutes as Lightning goes about her business. Though it pauses for combat and cutscenes, the danger of wasting time adds constant pressure, which has upsides and downsides. The sense of urgency can lead to some entertaining time management; I liked planning out my days and optimizing travel to accomplish as much as possible. On the other hand, with the hours slipping through your fingers, you are effectively discouraged from any extensive exploration. I finished the five main storyline quests by day seven, but I had no idea what kind of surplus or deficit I would have along the way. I would do things

differently on a subsequent playthrough, but when faced with the prospect of failing and having to restart, I was reluctant to burn an entire day scouring the Wildlands for tucked-away treasure spheres.

My biggest problem with the timer is that it severely limits your ability to fully dive into some of the systems. For instance, after you kill enough of a species of monster, the "last one" appears – the final specimen of its kind. If you win these encounters, you exterminate the species completely and get some good loot. The whole concept is cool, but you need to spend hours of in-game time grinding through beasts (many of which don't have consistent spawning patterns) to take advantage of it. The same goes for ability synthesis and upgrading; enemies drop the items you need to make these systems work, but you don't have the freedom to grind without worrying about how your limited time could be better spent.

An Easier Start

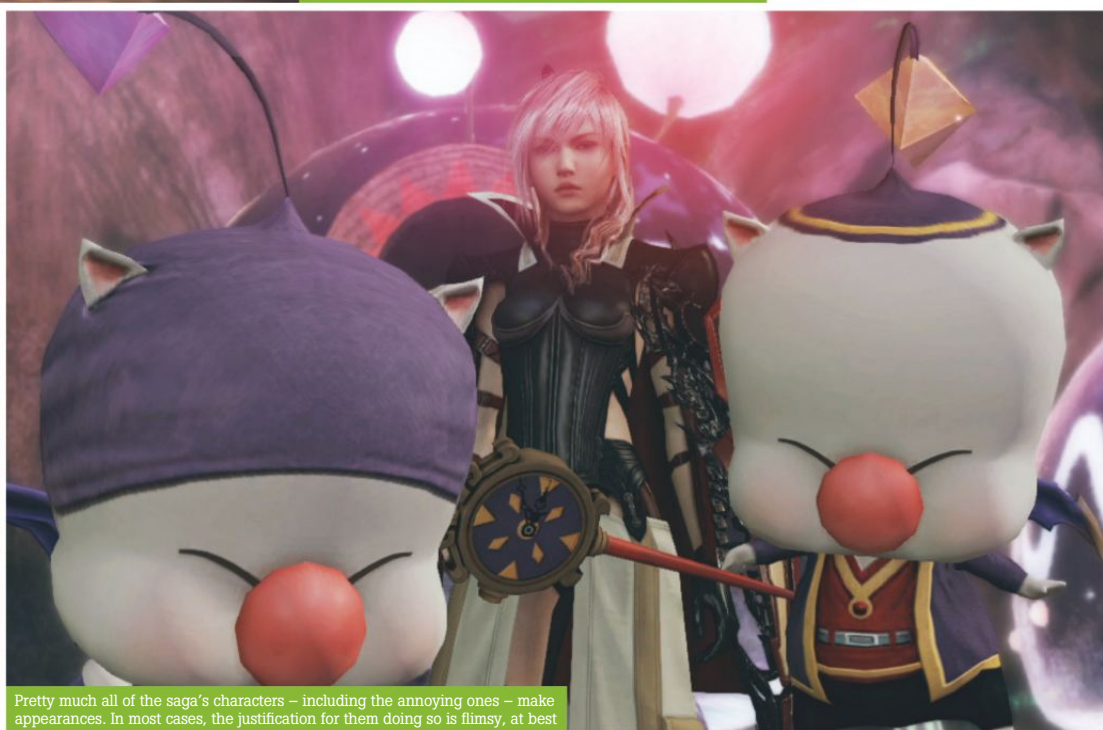
When you begin Lightning Returns, you choose between two difficulty settings: easy and normal. Unlike previous installments, normal can get quite difficult; don't let your pride keep you from starting on easy. You don't miss out on any significant content, and the game doesn't have any difficulty-specific achievements. On the other hand, the challenge of playing on normal mode is thrilling, and it forces you to learn the intricacies of the battle system. Whichever one you choose, be warned: You can't change the setting once the game starts.



The abilities on each schema are set manually (though some are innately locked in), meaning you can develop your own playstyle

What If I Blow It?

If the worst happens and you run out of time, all is not lost. *Lightning Returns* is designed to allow multiple playthroughs thanks to a new game+ feature. If you run out the clock and the world ends, you are able to start a new game while retaining all of the stats and items that you obtained previously. However, you get even more bonuses (like access to weapon upgrades) if you start a new game+ after completing the main storyline.



Pretty much all of the saga's characters – including the annoying ones – make appearances. In most cases, the justification for them doing so is flimsy, at best

Apart from the main quests, most of Lightning's attention is on completing side quests. These are usually started by talking to someone at a specific time of day, followed by you fetching something – or a series of things – for them. The tasks are dull, have badly written dialogue, and are made needlessly complicated by events or items only being accessible at certain times. So why do them at all? Because they're your primary form of progression.

You don't earn experience points or gain levels in *Lightning Returns*. Instead, you get passive stat upgrades by doing quests. Though I like the idea of rewarding players' actions instead of their tolerance for grinding, the side quests aren't interesting or fun enough to justify the time you need to spend with them to increase Lightning's power. Engaging in battle isn't rendered completely

useless, since it still gives you money and EP – a limited resource with many applications ranging from healing to freezing time. Even so, I wasn't nearly as enthralled with Lightning's development because I had no influence over which stats grow or by how much. Each side quest just dishes out static boosts.

Tying everything together is the story, which is a joke. It feels like a non-canon spinoff that would normally be relegated to a comic book or mobile-exclusive puzzle game. Lightning's heavy-handed inner monologue demonstrates a "tell, don't show" approach to her character, and she doesn't exhibit any growth. The main quests are all transparent efforts to shoehorn recognizable characters into the events, despite the leaps in logic the game attempts to explain why people like Sazh and Snow

are still around and relevant 1,000 years after *Final Fantasy XIII*. Though *Lightning Returns* definitively ends the tale that began with that game, the climactic events are so convoluted and poorly explained that it killed whatever lingering investment I had in the universe.

Final Fantasy XIII and *XIII-2* trained me to look past a bad plot and appreciate good gameplay, but the positives are more buried and harder to see in *Lightning Returns*. It makes the same mistakes with its narrative, and swaps out systems that worked (like monster collection and the crysterium) for half-baked concepts that don't hit the same high notes. The conclusion of a trilogy presents the opportunity for an emotional farewell to a beloved cast and world, but *Lightning Returns* only left me relieved to see this adventure end. » **Joe Juba**



Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition

Lara's never looked better

9.25



Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Crystal Dynamics **Release** January 28 **Rating** M

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept

Bring 2013's excellent Tomb Raider reboot to the next-gen systems with a high-res facelift and DLC extras

» Graphics

The original version was gorgeous; this version is one of the best-looking console games I've ever seen

» Sound

The game features a great score and voice acting on par with a Hollywood film. The new voice commands work, but aren't essential

» Playability

Lara's running movements feel jumpy, but overall it has the best control in the history of the series

» Entertainment

If you've already played Tomb Raider, it's not worth \$60. If you haven't, this is the best game currently available on Xbox One or PS4

» Replay Value

Moderate

Crystal Dynamics has held the reins of the Tomb Raider franchise since 2006, when publisher Eidos decided that Core Design had run the series into the ground. After two solid new titles and an updated remake of the original games, the studio finally hit a home run with 2013's Tomb Raider, a reboot of the series that many – myself included – felt was the best game in franchise history.

In many ways, Tomb Raider recalls the trio of recent James Bond films starring Daniel Craig; both reimagine a British entertainment icon in a harder, less playful fashion. Don't expect this Lara Croft to engage in quippy banter; the violent, often grim tale pushes her to the limit as she turns from a girl to a battle-hardened woman.

Aside from the subpar multiplayer and a few suspect plot twists, the game is nearly flawless. The big questions are: What's new in this "Definitive Edition," and should I buy it? The answer is...it depends.

The grandiose subtitle might fool some into thinking this re-release is more significant than it really is. In essence, this is a next-gen port of Tomb Raider packaged with all of the post-release DLC content. There are a few Xbox One- and PlayStation 4-specific added features like voice commands and touchpad controls. You can say "stealth" to switch to a silent weapon (which isn't as fast as doing it with the d-pad) or use the PS4's touchpad to light a torch. The PlayStation 4 controller glows red when you have a torch. The Xbox allows you to tilt your head during platforming sequences to shift the camera angle. As you'd expect, it's all clever but inessential.

A good selection of bonus content is also included: multiplayer maps, characters, and weapons previously released as DLC and the Dark Horse digital comic book "Tomb Raider: The Beginning," an art book, and a making-of documentary. Six new outfits

allow you the unprecedented ability to dress Lara in clothing that's actually appropriate for the weather conditions. The most notable new addition for fans is the only new single-player content, the Tomb of the Lost Adventurer, an all-new Tomb found off to the right in the area before Lara and Whitman enter the large tomb doors in the first hour. Like the others, it's short and mediocre.

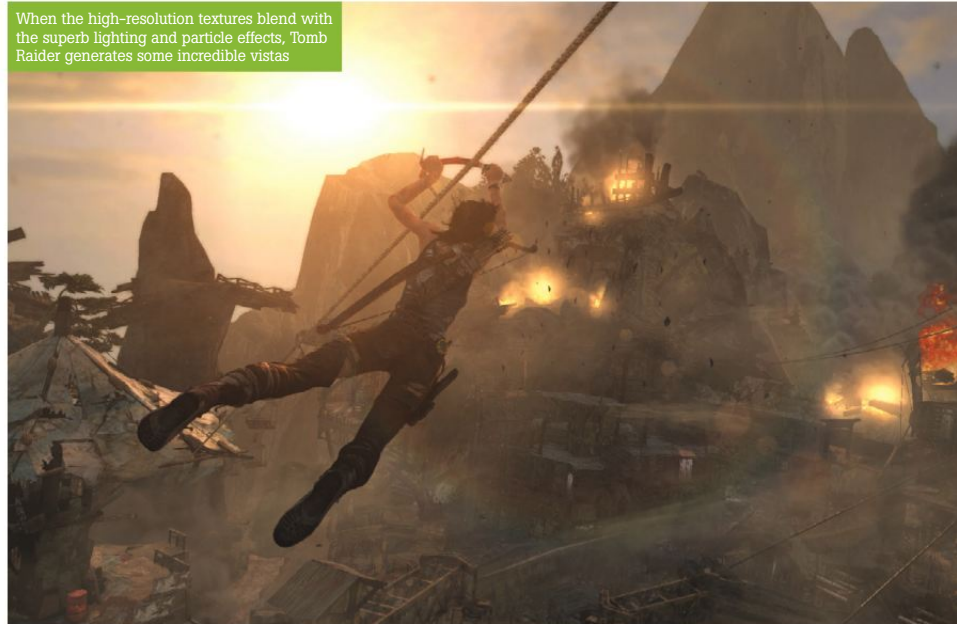
The biggest draw of Tomb Raider: The Definitive Edition is the improved graphics. They're simply stunning in perhaps the best-looking console game I've ever seen. Running smooth 1080p resolution, this new version adds an incredible level of detail to the newly modelled characters and lush environments. From Lara's uncannily realistic

hair to the shimmer of water reflections on a cave wall, every inch of this game is visually striking. It's a tantalizing glimpse at the wonders that these new consoles have in store for us.

Are these improvements worth \$60 if you've already played the game? Without knowing your bank balance, I can't definitively answer that question. For me, it's simply a great port of a great game. The added content is a welcome addition, but didn't markedly affect my enjoyment of Tomb Raider. That said, it's undeniably the best version of Tomb Raider yet – and the best game currently available for Xbox One and PlayStation 4. If you haven't played it, I don't know what you're waiting for.

» Matt Helgeson

When the high-resolution textures blend with the superb lighting and particle effects, Tomb Raider generates some incredible vistas



The Edge

The PS4 version appears to have a better framerate at times. However, Tomb Raider looks good on both consoles and the discrepancy didn't affect my enjoyment of either version.

Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze

This icy sequel brings plenty of fire



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo
Developer Retro Studios/Monster Games **Release** February 21 **Rating** E

Just when the Kong crew sits down for a nice banana feast, a fleet of Viking animals sails up to their island and freezes everything in sight. After getting evicted, Donkey Kong and friends journey through a series of themed islands to rebuke the invaders and return to their homeland in an adventure chock full of inventive and challenging levels.

On the surface, worlds divided into categories like jungle, beach, and ice seem like they could drift into well-worn territory, but the variety is amazing. You platform across giant leaves (kept aloft by gusts of wind from Alpine Horns timed to the background music), ride mine carts through a sawmill as obstacles are carved out just ahead of you, dash through a raging forest fire with slick lighting effects, and navigate ice chunks that quickly melt in the lava below. Just like in the previous game, I yelled alternating

cries of agony and relief working through particularly challenging areas. Almost everything is fair and doable with enough focus and patience; the bonus stages are a little ridiculous, but that's to be expected.

Underwater levels return from the original DKC trilogy and remain compelling despite video game swimming's spotty reputation. I played most of the game with the d-pad, but these areas work best with the analog stick. For some reason you have to pick one or the other instead of both being active at the same time, and it's annoying to have to dig into the menus every time I get in and out of the water.

Diddy Kong returns to ride along on DK, providing extra health and a hover jump. New partners include Dixie Kong and Cranky Kong, who offer a small jump boost and a high-flying cane stomp, respectively. Dixie and Diddy work well in tricky platforming

areas, while Cranky is great for nabbing out-of-reach collectibles and traversing spikes. For an underwater stage, you may want Dixie's speedy ponytail propeller or Cranky's slashing cane attack. They each have a unique screen-clearing Kong Pow attack that changes enemies into helpful extra lives, bonus hearts, or banana coins. Rotating barrels allow you to choose the best Kong for the job, giving you the flexibility to compensate for whatever weakness you may have and provide the best advantage for the situation at hand.

Local co-op play is as much of a mixed bag as it was in the last installment. That extra player can be great for harvesting collectibles or taking on tough bosses, but on a tricky platforming area or rocket barrel ride, your shared stock of lives melt away much faster. Despite the addition of the new Kong characters, the first player is still stuck controlling Donkey Kong, who has no special jumping powers. The team-up abilities wouldn't be possible without DK, but I'd be willing to make the sacrifice if given the option.

Players accustomed to the eight core worlds of DKC Returns might be surprised that there are only six in Tropical Freeze. Even though there are fewer total levels this time around, the individual stages are longer than an average level from the previous game. In the end, I'd rather have a slightly smaller collection of Retro Studios' best levels than one bloated up with lesser-quality stages in order to hit an arbitrary number. That finely cultivated assortment is exactly what you get with Tropical Freeze.

» **Bryan Vore**

9.25

Wii U

» **Concept**

Create more of the most imaginative, thrilling, and challenging platforming levels out there

» **Graphics**

The vivid backgrounds look fantastic and DK's hi-def fur is a nice upgrade

» **Sound**

Original Donkey Kong Country trilogy composer David Wise returns to contribute some catchy tunes

» **Playability**

Unlike the Wii original, plenty of options allow you to avoid shaking the controller to ground slam or roll, though that clunky option is still available

» **Entertainment**

A smooth, finely-tuned blend of wonder and punishment

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High



Most levels feature at least one unique element you won't see anywhere else

Online Functionality

We couldn't test Tropical Freeze's online features for this review, but the game includes online time attack leaderboards and replays of players' best runs. This could be a great way to learn speed run routes from the best of the best.

Broken Age: Act I

A tale of two kiddies

8.5

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Double Fine Productions Developer Double Fine Productions Release January 28 Rating N/A

PC

» **Concept**

Find your own place in the world in a pair of imaginative, tandem adventures

» **Graphics**

Like pastel drawings come to life, the game is a visual wonder

» **Sound**

Recognizable talents like Jack Black and Elijah Wood provide their voices, fleshing out the memorable characters

» **Playability**

The UI is streamlined, even for a point-and-click adventure game

» **Entertainment**

With imaginative puzzles and wondrous settings, Broken Age is a delightful game for fans of adventure

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

The story behind Broken Age's creation is filled with triumphs and twists that rival many game narratives. First launched as a Kickstarter, Double Fine aimed to shed light on game development while also delivering a new title designed in the spirit of classic LucasArts adventures. It was a runaway success, eventually earning more than \$3.3 million, which far exceeded the original goal of \$400,000. The project's scope expanded and the studio reevaluated its scale – eventually deciding to raise additional money and split the game, now known as Broken Age, into two acts.

It was all chronicled in a series of documentaries that showed how the sausage was made. People who didn't breathlessly follow each minute and design decision should know that Broken Age stands alone as an excellent game that you don't have to be a club member to appreciate.

Broken Age tells the story of a pair of characters living in two completely different worlds. Velloria's village lives in fear of an entity known as Mog Chothra, and they sacrifice maidens every 14 years to keep the beast from destroying them all. Shay lives an isolated life on a spaceship, where he passes time engaged in pathetically phony "missions" for an overprotective AI mother. How their stories intertwine is a mystery that's saved for the final moments of this first installment.

Double Fine's games have traditionally played at the intersection of the familiar



and strange, but Broken Age pushes the boundaries even further. The writing is sharp, with dialogue that adds dimension to even the smallest of bit players. Puzzles are well thought out and are appropriately weird, too. If you've never gossiped out a talking tree to the point of vomiting, you will.

The characters and their worlds are clever and interesting. In Vella's story, each town in her world is known for a particular trade, and hers is baking. To appease the loathsome beast, maidens wear elaborate "gowns" that

are actually enormous cakes. If you've seen those odd doll/confection hybrids while grocery shopping, you know what I'm talking about. Only she seems to realize the absurdity of the situation, and she alone decides to rebel against the sacrifice. That bold move puts her adventure into motion.

Shay is similarly stuck, though his life is safe to an extreme. He's coddled by an AI mother, who coos at his every tiny triumph. Seated in his toddler-toy captain's chair, Shay is put through various missions, like hug attacks and ice-cream avalanches, where failure is impossible (a sly commentary on puzzles and games?). The robotic NPCs marvel at his cleverness, though Shay feels unfulfilled. After sabotaging a mission, I got to experience some of the danger that he's been craving all along.

You choose between Vella and Shay's stories at the beginning, but you can swap between them at will. You don't trade items or flip switches between worlds, but the option provides a chance to take a break from one story if you get stuck on a puzzle or are just looking for a change of pace. It took a bit longer for Vella's story to get its hooks into me. Hers is the more traditional of the two, with extended dialogue sequences and plenty of characters to speak with (and fetch things for). Shay's comparative isolation naturally creates more action- and object-oriented puzzles. When I got a little tired of clicking through dialogue in Vella's world – and I did – I appreciated being able to switch to Shay and explore the off-limits areas of his ship.

Broken Age is the best venue I've seen for Double Fine's twisted sensibilities in a long time. They've crafted two unique worlds, filling them both with just enough silliness to be fun without overwhelming the characters and their ultimately touching journeys. I'm eager to see what Act II has in store for us.

» **Jeff Cork**





The Banner Saga

Of massacres and mead



Style 1-Player Strategy Publisher Stoic Games Developer Stoic Games Release January 14 Rating N/A

8.5

Stoic's *The Banner Saga* is a turn-based tactical role-playing game rooted in choice and consequence. The Kickstarter title from ex-BioWare developers blends beautiful graphics and a haunting score by Austin Wintory. Players are thrust into an unforgiving Viking world and forced to make decisions that determine characters and gear availability, as well as group morale. As a grim tactical journey through frozen wastes and fields of foes, *Banner Saga* succeeds.

Combat is a tactical tightrope. Brute forcing encounters isn't a viable option, and players may find themselves losing a battle or two even early in the game. With dozens of decisions to make during every encounter outside of positioning, tactics fiends will revel in the fact that simply eliminating an opponent may not always be the right choice. Due to the back-and-forth turn system that *Banner Saga* employs, foes may be more useful as a crippled turn-waster than a corpse on the field.

As characters level up via promotion, balancing raw stats and other options such as the expendable willpower resource becomes crucial. You manage quite a few resources in combat, from the basics like armor and strength to special abilities and armor break potential. Players call upon a large range of heroes, such as giant Varl that occupy multiple tiles, close-range fighters, ranged archers, and even special caster units.

The act of promoting characters carries with it some degree of risk, as the character could be lost forever during storyline development. Game-altering choices like this can be looked at a few different ways. On one hand, it certainly drives home the theme that choices matter and have serious repercussions. On the other hand, losing a character that you've invested considerable currency in can be a difficult pill to swallow. Currency used to level up characters is also used for

purchasing items and supplies to keep the caravan healthy and full, further reinforcing the "decisions matter" theme running underneath the game.

Traveling through the wilderness from town to town represents a significant portion of the gameplay, full of stops that require input from the player to move on. These range from "Should we eat these suspicious berries we found?" to "We're starving and out of supplies, should we threaten these poor farmers for their food?" Players also make more significant story choices that can add or remove characters from the party for good. Before you choose to send out Skafnard to examine those rustling bushes or invite a rather shady looking fighter to your entourage, make certain that your choices will protect the core team members that you're developing.

Even if you are the type of player who doesn't enjoy moving through dialogue menus, you should pay attention to these interactions or face potentially brutal consequences from a stray selection or misclick.

During caravan journeys, players also meet with enemies. Outside of the storyline battles, these encounters are an opportunity to pick up additional items and currency. While these battles are technically optional, skipping too many of them results in an underpowered team

that may run into serious problems completing mandatory encounters, so the choice to retreat and lose some of the caravan's retinue should never be taken lightly.

In addition to managing all of the above, characters that fall or take serious damage during an encounter become injured, requiring rest to function at full capacity. Days of rest cost supplies, so this adds yet another element that must be weighed carefully in order to succeed. A playthrough can be damaged to the point where the game must be restarted, though that danger is mitigated by the ability to change the difficulty setting.

If *Banner Saga* could use more of anything, it's variety. The legions of Vikings and Dredge that players encounter have only a few different unit types and templates, and some variance would break up the tedious optional battles. Players gain access to a handful of interesting units and abilities over the course of the game, but the enemies feel like they could use some variation.

Depending on a number of factors, *The Banner Saga* should take around 6-20 hours to complete on first playthrough. Despite a few minor issues with enemy variety and the tedium of recurring encounters, *Banner Saga* stands out as an excellent tactical RPG with considerable depth. » **Daniel Tack**

PC

» **Concept**

A tactical journey through a dark Viking world

» **Graphics**

Beautiful presentation and unique visual style

» **Sound**

On-point score from Austin Wintory (of *Journey* fame), along with expository voiceovers and perfect war howls and hacks

» **Playability**

Moving and controlling units is easy enough, and the first few missions serve as a sufficient tutorial

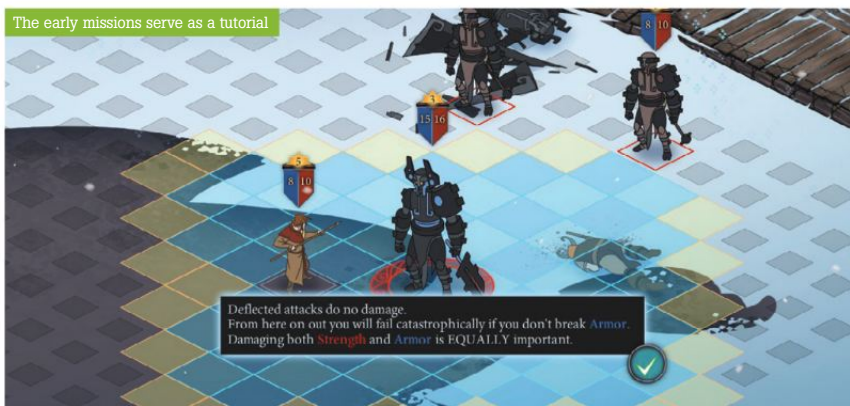
» **Entertainment**

Fans of tactical RPGs can find a lot to enjoy here

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

The early missions serve as a tutorial





Bravely Default

New ideas, old problems

8

3DS

» **Concept**

Liven up the turn-based JRPG genre with a few clever combat mechanics

» **Graphics**

The hand-drawn backgrounds are beautiful and look great in 3D (for as long as you can stand the effect)

» **Sound**

The music is appropriately lively, but eventually gets repetitive. The voice acting is hit or miss

» **Playability**

Silicon Studio could have made more use of the touchscreen for menu navigation, but the control scheme works fine

» **Entertainment**

Bravely Default's depth and variety largely make up for a slow pace and repetitive mission structure

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Silicon Studio **Release** February 7 **Rating** T

Western JRPG fans have been waiting to get their hands on Bravely Default ever since it released in Japan in 2012. That wait has brought with it a few extra perks, as Silicon Studio used the past year to smooth out some of the original shortcomings.

Despite these helpful tweaks and an engaging combat system, enjoying all Bravely Default has to offer still requires a great deal of patience.

Bravely Default gets off to a slow start. The story revolves around a war between the Crystal Orthodoxy, a religious group that worships Luxendarc's four massive crystals, and the Duchy of Eternia, a collection of secular forces that want to use the crystals for scientific purposes. Players control a four-some of heroes fighting on the side of the orthodoxy, and must activate the crystals before the world is shrouded in darkness.

The opening hours of the story and characters are rife with clichés, and the dialogue is excessively wordy, often bombarding players with a dozen lines of dialogue where a few would suffice. The text-only party chat scenes are the worst offenders, offering pointless banter among your group that repeatedly hits the same tired notes. The protagonists are particularly fond of discussing Luxendarc's cuisine, to the point where even George R.R. Martin would roll his eyes.

Luckily, the combat is good right out of the gate and only gets better. The titular Brave and Default system, which allows players to borrow actions from subsequent turns or save them up in advance, adds a clever wrinkle to the turn-based battles and makes steamrolling weaker foes a quick and easy affair. The job system has all the depth you could want; players unlock 24 different roles, assign a secondary role that gives access to an additional job's moves, and equip a number of support abilities as well. All of this mixing and matching just begs players to experiment with different strategies, and because characters level up independently from their jobs, you

don't have to sacrifice your overall stats to try something new. Some early balancing issues eventually even out, and you don't need to grind unless you want to max out additional jobs in the final hours of the game.

The combat holds up for the long run, which is good because like the dialogue, Bravely Default's structure is in desperate need of a shrewd editor. A hefty amount of pointless backtracking is required, with some missions forcing you to run back and forth between faraway areas just to talk to characters – they don't even qualify as fetch quests. These instances could easily be handled by short cutscenes, and feel like mere padding in an already lengthy game. The experience you acquire from defeating monsters on the overworld map is inconsequential compared to that awarded in dungeons and boss fights, so the endless running around adds nothing of value. You can turn off random encounters at any time (and eventually unlock fast travel) to speed things up, but I was still left scratching my head at the pointlessness of some of my objectives.

The story finally starts to get interesting around the 30-hour mark, thanks to a game-changing plot twist. The protagonists display some real growth as well, breaking out of

their clichéd molds. The underlying mystery is intriguing, but comes at a cost, requiring you to replay massive portions of the game multiple times. The monsters and bosses you re-encounter are more powerful, and different dialogue keeps things interesting, but that doesn't excuse the fact that you're caught in a continual loop of visiting the same locations and repeating the same actions. If you want to see the true ending, you must go through the same cycle of main dungeons five times.

Bravely Default also contains a number of interesting social features, allowing friends to share job abilities, summon customized special moves, and build up their own town which periodically gifts the player useful items (A.I. players will fill in for lonely gamers). Aside from the inclusion of some unwanted but inconsequential microtransactions, these novel features are rewarding additions to the experience.

Despite being plagued by a slow pace and late-game repetition, Bravely Default's core mechanics kept me engaged until the credits. If you consider game length an indisputable indicator of quality, Bravely Default's repetition may not bother you. However, I hope that Silicon Studio learns how to trim the fat for the sequel. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Bravely Default's hand-drawn environments look great



OlliOlli

Mastering the latest trick

Style 1-Player Sports Publisher Roll7
Developer Roll7 Release January 21 Rating E

8

Skating video games have waxed and waned through the years, with the Skate and Tony Hawk franchises the most recent casualties of gamers' fickle love affair with handrails and kick-flips. Despite the infrequent success of the sport in video games, when done right it contains a hook that satisfies many of our base gaming urges. The Vita may seem like an odd choice to house your latest session with the sport, but OlliOlli contains all the twitch gameplay, trick combos, and high score addictiveness to make it the latest resident pro.

The heart of any skating game is its trick system, and OlliOlli's delivers both a breadth of tricks and a fluid control scheme to pull them off. The fact that you can execute them without using the X button to ollie like in other titles streamlines tricks, and although the Vita's small left analog stick occasionally obscures the process (including using the shoulder buttons for spins and modifiers), the handheld is more than adequate for the task.

Marrying the trick system with a runner-like 2D scrolling where you are constantly moving forward at various speeds and must avoid obstacles that are certain death gives the game the rhythm of a platformer. Catching big air and busting big tricks while you're trying to hit the right rails pulls you into that focused state of mind (and elevated heart rate) where your hands move without thought and the gooey fun center of your brain lights up just as automatically. I also like how the game requires you to nail landings (with the X button), adding another layer to your hands' flurry.

OlliOlli's addictiveness is meted out over multiple stages in six different locations, and challenge is added with two difficulty tiers. Complete all the objectives in the amateur level and you unlock the pro one. You can also take a crack at a daily grind challenge, where you get only one chance to post your score alongside the world's best. Similarly, Spots mode tasks you to string together your best combo.

Street skating is all about adapting to your surroundings and making a skate spot out of anything that crosses your path. Don't pass this game up or you're going to miss a killer session. » **Matthew Kato**

Vita

» Concept

A 2D scrolling skating title using elements of the runner sub-genre

» Graphics

Sharp pixel graphics are at home on the Vita. The backdrops stand out but don't distract, and the foreground objects are discernible even at high speeds

» Sound

Low-key but not bland. Includes tracks from Qemists, Dorian Concept, and Flako

» Playability

The tight radius and grip top of the Vita's left analog stick can obscure tricks, but it also helps

» Entertainment

OlliOlli captures the key qualities of a skate game: a deep trick system, bite-sized gameplay as well as longer runs, and an addictive nature

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc

A psychological whirlwind: kill or be killed

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher NIS America
Developer Spike Chunsoft Release February 11 Rating M

8.5

Vita

» Concept

Survive in a school where your only way out is to kill

» Graphics

Some imaginative and funny character models stand out, but everything else is standard visual novel fare

» Sound

Great music for every occasion, but much of it gets overused. Voice acting is top-notch, matching the characters perfectly

» Playability

Danganronpa is easy to grasp and play. Some minigames require such precision that it can be a turnoff

» Entertainment

Plenty of intrigue, unpredictable moments, and psychological dilemmas make it hard down to put down

» Replay Value

Moderate

You never really know anyone completely. We hear that phrase all the time. Violent crimes occur, and people say the offenders never gave the slightest indication that they were capable of such brutality. You can't know what somebody else is thinking, and that fact is what makes Danganronpa: Trigger Happy Havoc so engaging. You aren't certain what other characters are planning, making you powerless to prevent the next move and leaving you blindsided when it occurs.

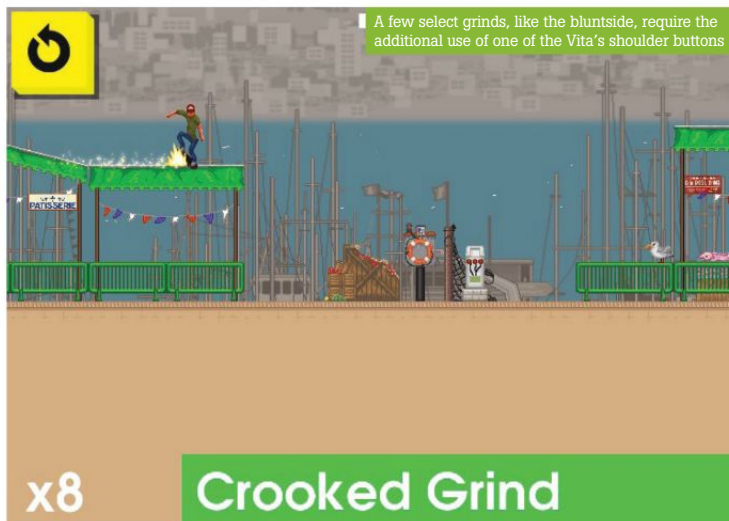
Though lives are eventually at stake, Danganronpa begins upbeat by introducing an all-star roster of the best students in Japan. They're equipped with exceptional talents, including the top martial artist, programmer, and baseball player. Everything looks like a typical first day of school, until a sadistic bear takes over and announces he's locked everyone in the school and the only way out is murder. If you kill another student and can get away with your crime, you escape.

The premise is intriguing and harkens back to the concepts explored in *Battle Royale* and *The Hunger Games*. This dilemma combines with unpredictable plot twists to create great psychological tension. Essentially, you're waiting for death, passing time by forming connections with eccentric classmates that include a fan fiction writer, a goth lolita, and a manic depressive writing prodigy. Then you stumble on a dead body and wrestle with the fact that a character you know was willing to take a life and forsake friends in exchange for freedom. You're always wondering who's going to break next, knowing you can't prevent it – and the how, who, and why is always shocking.

Once a killer strikes, you have to face it immediately, investigating the murder scene and dead body using point-and-click controls. A trial then begins to correctly select the culprit. The stakes are high, because everyone else dies if you incorrectly pick the murder. If you identify the killer, you must watch the elaborate and harsh execution. Even when you win, it feels like a loss.

Although the trials create the tone the game is going for, they also hold some of the weakest parts. During these trials, minigames, like a rhythm game to break down someone's defenses and shooting letters out of the air to fill out a phrase, progress the trial. Providing evidence, Phoenix Wright-style, is also necessary for advancement and far superior to the minigames.

Danganronpa's murder mysteries are just that – mysterious. I found myself constantly second-guessing what the solution to each investigation was until the verdict was passed. Few games keep the wool over your eyes as effectively as this dark tale. Making a story so gripping is tough in a video game, but it's Danganronpa's best attribute. I was surprised, captivated, and challenged by the culprit in every case. » **Kimberley Wallace**



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the score

8 | Dr. Luigi

Platform **Wii U** Release **December 31, 2013** Rating **E**

While the new "Operation L" mode is the least enjoyable part of this farewell to the Year of Luigi, Dr. Luigi offers other competent updates to classic Dr. Mario gameplay. — **Mike Futter**

7 | Dragon Ball Z: Battle Of Z

Platform **PS3 • 360** Release **January 28** Rating **T**

Battle of Z values style over substance, but for an anime about super humans fighting super aliens while flying through the air, maybe it is the appropriate direction. — **Kyle Hilliard**

8 | Fable Anniversary

Platform **Xbox 360** Release **February 4** Rating **M**

Fable is still a great game, and Albion definitely looks better in this edition. As long as you don't expect anything more from Fable Anniversary, you won't be disappointed. — **Joe Juba**

7.5 | République: Exordium

Platform **iOS** Release **December 19, 2013** Rating **12+**

République is an ambitious title that plays better on a tablet than a phone, but you're bound to run into a few hiccups regardless of the device. If you can forgive some frustrating control and A.I. issues, République's first episode is an intriguing start to this ambitious episodic title. — **Dan Ryckert**

7.5 | Nidhogg

Platform **PC** Release **January 13** Rating **N/A**

Nidhogg is well-honed, mechanical gameplay stripped down to its core. The combat is fun, but I wish Messhof applied the same striving for perfection to the presentation and game modes as it did to the swordplay. — **Kyle Hilliard**

8 | Joe Danger Infinity

Platform **iOS** Release **January 9** Rating **9+**

Despite some issues, Joe Danger Infinity remains in the auto-running elite with quirky characters and backgrounds, responsive touch controls, and enticing progression rewards. — **Bryan Vore**



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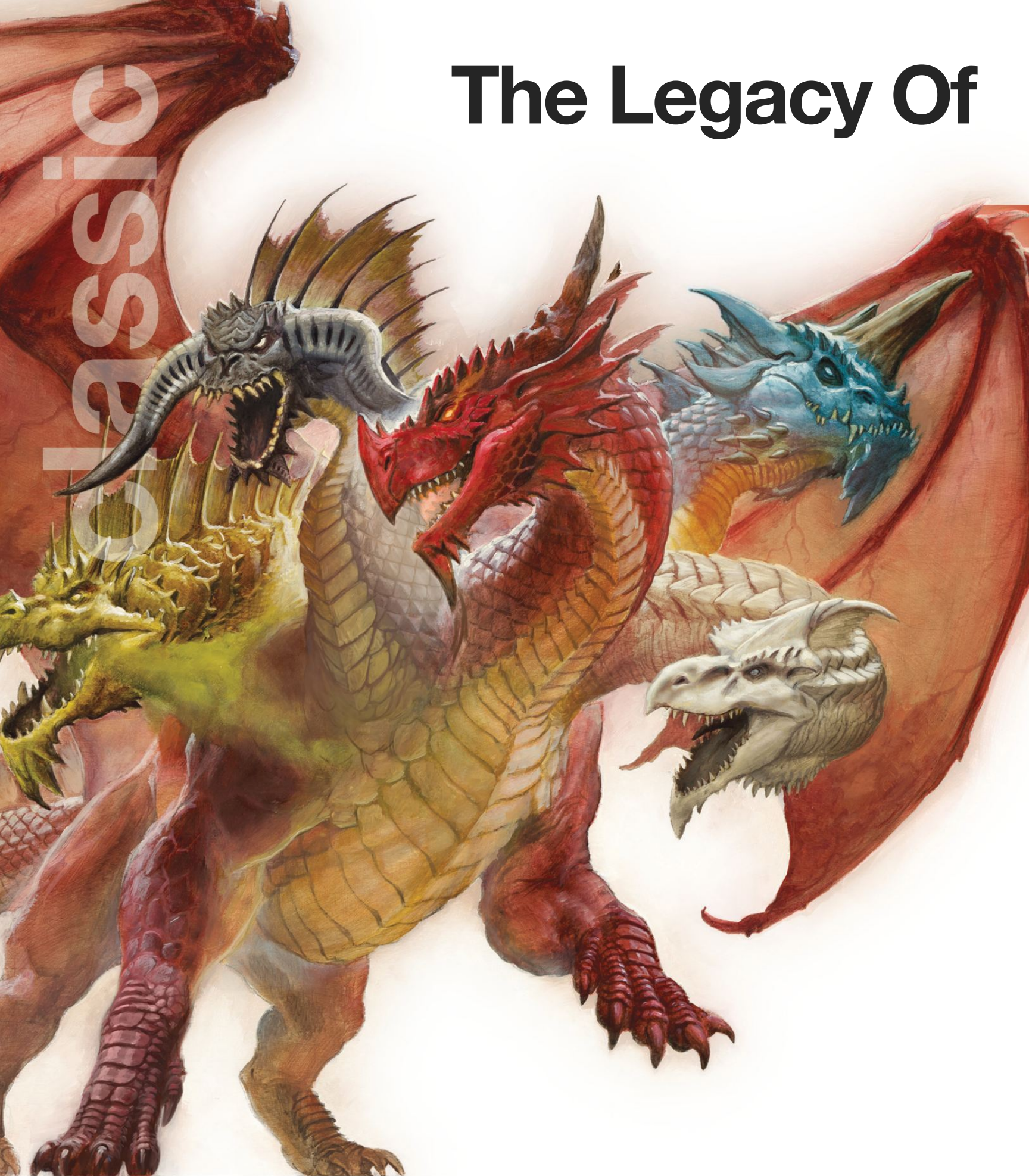
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The Legacy Of



Dungeons & Dragons

In the words of those it inspired

by Matt Miller

Back in 1974, a small hand-stapled set of game rules released that was all about fantasy heroes battling monsters. On its 40th anniversary, it's hard to overstate the profound effect Dungeons & Dragons has had on the broader gaming landscape. Whether you've ever engaged with the tabletop game or not, D&D has inspired countless video game developers over the years, and the mechanics of the game, like leveling and hit points, are mainstays of modern game design. That original role-playing game helped define the hobby we all love.

In the early '70s, no one had heard of experience points or dungeon masters. D&D was born from the cooperation of two enthusiastic miniature gamers named Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax. Earlier games, including Gygax's Chainmail, aimed to create a medieval miniature ruleset to govern combat between armies. Arneson embraced the Chainmail rules, but implemented them in a new way – taking players into an underground dungeon he called Blackmoor. Together, the two imaginative creators collaborated to craft a formalized ruleset for fantasy gaming, in which one player controlled the setting and monsters, while the other players cooperated to confront threats, controlling individual characters that improved over time. Dungeons & Dragons was born.

That first release of Dungeons & Dragons is a fascinating glimpse into the birth pangs of the role-playing genre, filled with sometimes-contradictory rules and loose descriptions of how to handle particular situations that wouldn't be codified until years later. It's also filled with dry humor and constant nods to the fantasy and science fiction books and movies that inspired it. "What's interesting is how much of the content is inspired by other people's

work," says Jonathan Chey, designer of Card Hunter – a recent game that is itself an homage to old-school D&D. "For example, recently we were talking about mind flayers and the controversy about how they were inspired by some sci-fi book cover that Gary Gygax was presumably reading at the time. All this culture poured into D&D, but then it got turned into something new, and from there it's exploded out again. D&D is kind of a classic example of how borrowing and originality are an integral part of the creative act."

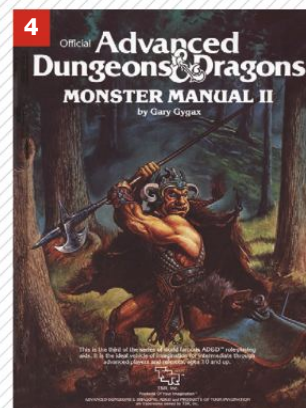
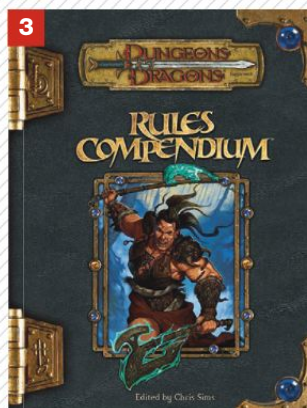
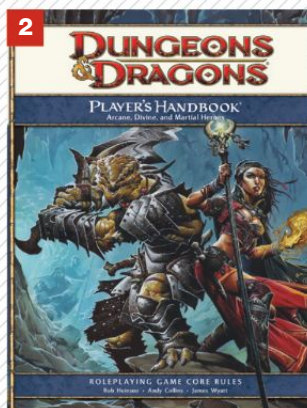
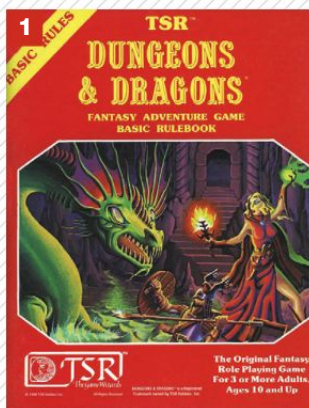
While gamers today accept the concept of the personified avatar as a given in virtually every game we play, the concept was drawn from the innovations of Dungeons & Dragons. Moreover, the idea that such an avatar should develop and level up over time was revolutionary to the understanding of keeping players invested over time. "The incredible idea that you could use a game to simulate a setting in which you were a hero was introduced to the world in Dungeons & Dragons," says Dustin Browder, game director at Blizzard on StarCraft II and Heroes of the Storm. "Every game that lets you pretend to be someone else owes its core idea to Dungeons & Dragons. The day

I first played Dungeons and Dragons was the single most important day in my professional life. I was 10. It changed everything for me."

Beyond offering the chance to craft and control one's own character, D&D also pioneered the idea of working together with your fellow players toward a communal narrative goal. "D&D created the concept of multiplayer cooperative gaming, and is responsible for so many features that are ubiquitous in gaming now, such as dungeon delving, experience points, leveling up, loot as a main goal, power ups, and health potions," says Wizards of the Coast D&D brand director Nathan Stewart. "These features are at the core of games across every genre."

Blizzard's senior art director Samwise Didier agrees. "I would venture that without Dungeons & Dragons; there would have never been a WarCraft," Didier proclaims.

D&D fanned the creativity of hundreds of creators in movies, television, novels, comics, and video games. Journalist David Ewalt recently authored *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and the People Who Play It*, and his investigations clarified the broad reach of the game. "I spent a lot of time talking to designers, executives, artists and programmers, and when I met them, I asked everyone the same question: 'What made you want to make games for a living?'" Ewalt says. "Over and over, I heard variations on the same answer: 'Well, I played a lot of D&D when I was a kid.' D&D was the hottest game on the planet during the formative years of the video game industry, and it left a permanent impression on the people who went on to create the games we love today. It inspired some to learn to program, so they could play on their own with a computerized Dungeon Master. Others developed an appreciation for fantasy adventure, and a desire to make games so they could share their own stories with the world. D&D gave all of them a shared language and frame of reference – a common way to think about characters in a game, to measure their strength and successes, and develop over time."



1 The basic edition of the game in the late '70s and early '80s offered an introductory experience for potential players. 2 The 4th edition represented a dramatic shift in gameplay, and the fanbase split over playing the new set or sticking with the popular previous edition. 3 Many gaming groups pick and choose which rules to include in their own games. 4 Every edition has included statistics for hundreds of monsters, often spread across multiple books.

Insights From Jordan Weisman

While we spoke with a variety of game developers about the powerful effect Dungeons & Dragons has had on the gaming world, Jordan

Weisman's written response is particularly relevant. Weisman is currently one of the masterminds behind the recent *Shadowrun Returns* and upcoming *Golem Arcana* at Harebrained Schemes. As an early adopter of the original D&D, the creator of the original *Shadowrun* role-playing game, and later a colleague to Arneson and Gygax, he had this to share.

D&D changed everything.

As a species we love games. We apparently have been playing them since we stopped clubbing woolly mammoths over the head for dinner, as archeologists are yet to find a human civilization that did not play games. But even in the context of thousands of years of game playing, D&D changed everything.

Dungeons & Dragons was an outgrowth of a historical miniatures game called *Chainmail*. Miniature wargames were popularized in the previous century by H.G. Wells, who published a set of miniature game rules called *Little Wars* in 1913, but the game format goes all the way back to the ancient Romans and maybe even further – so *Chainmail* didn't break much new ground.

There were two important ways in which the changes from *Chainmail* to D&D changed games forever. First, it turned the whole goal of playing a game on its head. Until D&D, the one element that every game shared was that at the end of the game there would be a winner, a victor to whom the spoils would go. In D&D there is no winner, and even more importantly, no loser. The goal of the game is not to win, but to have a great time, to tell stories, and to enjoy each other's company and creativity. To take arguably the oldest known form of entertainment (not including sex) and change its fundamental structure from "Only one can win" to "We all win all the time" was certainly a turning point in history. This shift is so profound that it's almost impossible to trace the impact it has had not just on games, but on how we view entertainment and even socialization altogether.

Secondly, D&D changed the player's relationship with the game. For thousands of years, players were either not represented in the game at all (*Mancala*, *backgammon*, etc.), in the role of a commander of the units on the board (*chess*, *Monopoly*, *war games*, etc.), or took on the "role" of an existing token (*Snakes & Ladders*, *Clue*, etc.). D&D offered a radical new relationship by having the player create a persona, a fictional character that was their avatar in the world of the game, and directly interact with the fictional world of the game through that character. This concept of immersion existed in many places, but not in games up until this point, and D&D's relationship between player and game world was so impactful that it became, and remains, the obsession of game creators – especially video game creators. I don't believe that it is an overstatement to say that all first-person and third-person games are descended in one way or another from D&D.

At its best, D&D is not a game, it is an interactive story told in unison by the players and the game master. I have never sung in a choir, but I think the experience would be one of contributing your voice to something that in aggregate becomes its own entity – a creation of such power and majesty that you cannot believe it came from you and those around you. Playing a great session of D&D is like that. My friends and I remember sessions that were so intense we were pacing and sweating, sessions that were so heartbreaking that tears were shed, and of course sessions that were so funny we pissed ourselves. But the key thing is that we remember – the experiences we created as a group around the kitchen table were so powerful that they live with us forever.

Me and D&D

In 1974, I was a 14-year-old junior councilor at an eight-week summer camp in Wisconsin. One of the councilors who was attending college in Wisconsin brought a copy of a freaky new game called *Dungeon & Dragons* to play with the other councilors at night when the kids are asleep.

I was instantly enthralled – one game session changed my life forever. Why did D&D change my life so dramatically and permanently? First, I loved stories, games, and people – D&D brought these things together in a wonderful interactive soup.

Second, I have a vivid imagination, and my first game master was good enough to fire that imagination through his descriptions, so I was experiencing places and events at a richness that exceeded any movie or TV show I had ever seen.

Third, I am a severe dyslexic, and at age 14 I could barely read. Not reading hadn't been much of an issue for me because, like many dyslexics, I had become very good at cheating and charming my way through life. But for the first time there was something that I *wanted* to read. I needed to not only know the rules, but also the world. Peter Jackson's movies were decades in the future, so if I wanted to understand all the references in D&D I needed to read Tolkien. By the time I finished *Lord of the Rings*, I knew how to read.

After the summer, I returned to Chicago, rounded up my friends and a parent to drive, and returned to Wisconsin – this time to Lake Geneva to buy copies of the game. We arrived at Gary Gygax's house – the first floor of which was servicing as TSR's office and store, and about the only place in the country to buy D&D at the time. Dave Arneson was manning the store that day, and our little group represented a pretty big sale, so Dave offered to *Dungeon Master* a game for us.

The kitchen of the house had been arranged for running D&D. Dave sat in the kitchen proper and we sat in the breakfast nook. A table spanned the two little spaces but it was divided by a sheet of plywood, which was perforated with holes like a bank teller's window. This meant we could not see Dave, only hear him. As his disembodied voice led us through our adventure in *Blackmoor*, occasionally a hand would appear through the slot at table height and deposit dice in front of us. "ROLL THESE," the voice of god demanded; we complied and our fates were decided. In the end we were killed off by a combination of acid and rats and sent back to Chicago.

My life spoiled for anything else, I now knew that I was going to make games, and I started FASA Corporation only six years later. In the decades that followed I had the privilege to collaborate with Gary and Dave on different games and projects, but more importantly I got to know Gary well and become good friends with Dave.

I know what the two of them created – they created me.

Gearbox president Randy Pitchford confirms the power of D&D as a formative experience. "When I started programming, one of the first programs I wrote was intended to basically be a computerized version of D&D," Pitchford says. "I spent so much time and memory on the character generation part of the program that I didn't really have any memory left for the game itself! All of my early text adventures that I wrote were inspired by D&D experiences. What is interesting is that as I looked around the landscape of this generation of self-taught game developers that I was a part of, it was very clear that not only was my experience and influences not unique, but nearly universal."

While recent years have seen RPG systems invade virtually every genre, from action to sports, many early computer and console games were direct attempts to recreate the D&D experience in a digital format, just like Pitchford's fledgling experimentations. Early classics like *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, and *Rogue* gave birth to the western RPG, but the influence was no less powerful overseas. Early Japanese role-playing games also drew heavily from D&D. The original *Final Fantasy* included monsters like *Tiamat* and *Bahamut* – drawn directly from the 1977 *Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual* – not to mention a wealth of D&D game systems, like equipped weapons and armor, classes, and resting at an inn to recover health.

Those early attempts to digitize the D&D experience hewed close to the mechanics of the tabletop experience. "I was regularly playing D&D and other pen and paper RPGs between the ages of 11 and 23," says Arkane president and co-creative director Raphael Colantonio. "I also started to play computer game RPGs when I was 11, so I could definitely see the parallel between the two, and how video game RPG systems started very close to pen and paper RPGs. Every player action was abstracted like in a pen and paper game back then: movement, attacks, lockpicking, conversations. All these actions were a character stats-based dice roll. Computer games were trying to emulate pen and paper games."

As the years passed, the direct correlation between the tabletop game mechanics and their video game cousins shifted, though the line of inspiration remained true. "Video games slowly evolved into experiences where player actions are driven by actual gamer skill modified by character stats," Colantonio says. "For example, in *Skyrim*, lockpicking is not the result of a dice roll like in the '80s – it's a gamer skill based action moment. Same for combat and player movement. I love the way computer game RPGs have become their own thing."

Even as D&D's influence seeped into the many corners of game design, the D&D brand itself expanded onto computer screens. A long and successful line of "gold box" games from Strategic Simulations Inc. are fondly remembered by fans. The original D&D-branded *Neverwinter Nights* was the first online multiplayer game that displayed graphics, helping engender the MMO genre. In 1998, a little known developer called BioWare released *Baldur's Gate* to instant acclaim.



tabletop and video games that offer twists on the formula. Even with that wealth of options, many still embrace the experience of sitting down for an actual pencil-and-paper session. “The thing about D&D that really inspired me is that, despite the game’s stigma as an antisocial, overly nerdy affair, it’s actually an incredibly positive and communal experience,” says *Borderlands 2* writer Anthony Burch. “There’s something deeply interesting and beautiful about a group of people sitting around a table, socializing with one another and using their imaginations. In many ways, D&D is a much more positive, much more social (not “Social”) game than many modern multiplayer videogames.”

Wizards of the Coast is hard at work on the latest iteration of *Dungeons & Dragons*, scheduled for release this summer. The new rules aim to appeal to a broad range of previous and new players by presenting a modular experience that can be customized by each gaming group that plays it. But at its core, the new game is rooted in the same fun and experiences that has inspired generations of creative minds.

“There is no denying the profound effect *Dungeons & Dragons* has had on videogame design as well as serving as

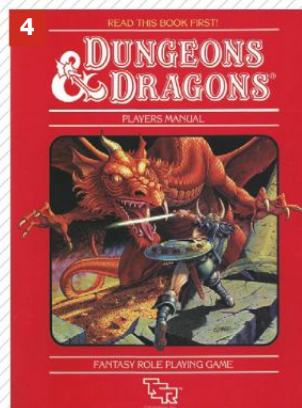
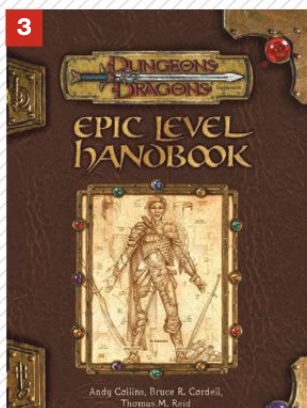
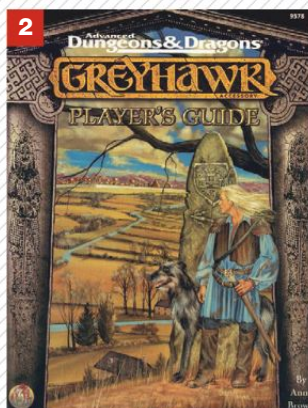
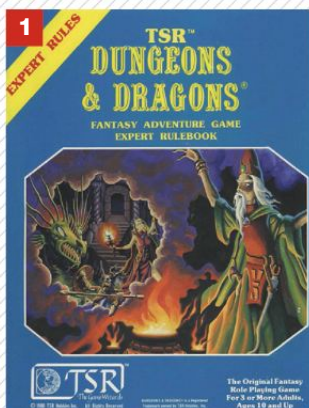
the inspiration for scores of screenwriters, film directors, musicians and artists who have brought fantasy and geek culture to the foreground,” says Wizards of the Coast’s Nathan Stewart. “D&D’s true legacy, though, has got to be the bonds of friendship that playing the game has forged for so many. D&D is social; it’s collaborative and inclusive, and when someone new wants to join the party, they are welcome in no matter who they are or where they come from.” ♦

“BioWare’s first RPG was a 2nd edition D&D game, so you can definitely say that this had a huge impact on us,” says BioWare’s Mark Darrah, the executive producer of the *Dragon Age* series. “I programmed most of the combat system, so my familiarity was a big help.”

For many developers working now, the cycle of inspiration from D&D to games and back to tabletop is apparent. “I grew up on pen and paper RPGs that combined

player-driven narrative and crunchy game systems,” says Colantonio’s development partner and Arkane co-creative director Harvey Smith. “Originally, it was D&D, of course, but the form continues to evolve. Over the holidays I got to play *Ghost Lines*, an innovative pen and paper RPG that lists *Dishonored* as an influence. For me, it was a kind of full-circle experience.”

Today, the descendants of *Dungeons & Dragons* are everywhere, with hundreds of



1 TSR remained the publisher of D&D for over two decades, until it was purchased by Wizards of the Coast in 1997. **2** Over the years, D&D has fostered dozens of campaign settings, like the early Greyhawk world. **3** The 3rd edition *Epic Level Handbook* let players build godlike characters and confront world-ending threats. **4** The iconic art of Larry Elmore was the gateway into D&D for millions of gamers in the 1980s.



A Villainous Match-Up

No series can match Metal Gear when it comes to memorable, insane bad guys. Can you match the bosses below with their descriptions on the right?

1. Screaming Mantis ____
2. Dirty Duck ____
3. Vulcan Raven ____
4. Pacifica Ocean ____
5. The Running Man ____
6. Solidus Snake ____
7. The Fury ____
8. Fat Man ____
9. Fortune ____
10. The Pain ____



- A. This roller-skating madman plants bombs and gets distracted by pigeons.
- B. A telekinetic, floating villain who dangles puppets from its synthetic arms.
- C. A former President of the United States who wears a Dr. Octopus-like suit and swordfights the player on a New York City rooftop.
- D. A hulking, heavily tattooed, shirtless man who wields a minigun and stalks the player around a freezer.
- E. A villain who can seemingly deflect bullets and wields a portable railgun.
- F. A double agent who pilots a flooded Metal Gear in their underwear.
- G. The leader of the Egg Plant terrorist group, also known for using boomerangs in battle.
- H. This grotesque villain carries a queen bee in his utility bag and shoots "bullet bees" out of his mouth.
- I. This Olympian's athletic career was ended by a steroid scandal, and he became one of the leaders of a French terrorist group.
- J. A cosmonaut who returned from space with severe burns covering his body, and is now incapable of feeling pain.

1-B, 2-G, 3-D, 4-F, 5-I, 6-C, 7-J, 8-A, 9-E, 10-H



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