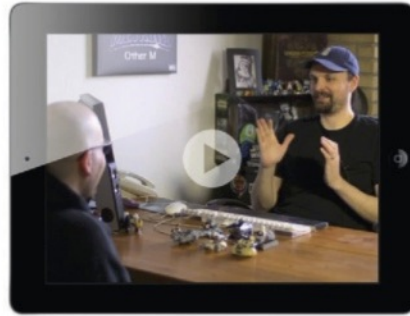
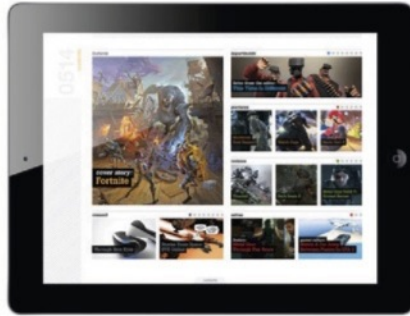


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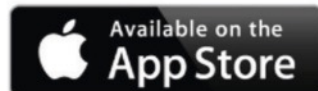


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Where Are The Games?



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

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

The Xbox One and PlayStation 4 have sold twice as many units through the first five months than their predecessors, the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, according to NPD data. Gamers were hungry for the new hardware, and now many of them are hungry for games to showcase the power of these platforms.

A dry spell of available software after a console launch is expected. The waiting period to new experiences is not extraordinarily unusual, but I know I have heard repeatedly from gamers that they feel their new shiny new devices are sitting underutilized outside of the few titles that have made it to market. That lack of software for the new hardware platforms is highlighted by the release of highly anticipated titles like *South Park: The Stick of Truth* and *Dark Souls II* on the previous generation, forcing gamers to go backward rather than forward to play these titles (at least for the time being).

Even the biggest console enthusiast never would have guessed the quick road to success these new consoles have found on a global scale. Many within the industry felt the proliferation of mobile and social games had lessened the desire for console experiences, but these first five months prove otherwise.

Thankfully with the digital marketplace, these new consoles have a number of experiences available to fill in the gaps between big "triple A" releases, and this fall we have a wide selection of new generation games to play, including *Evolve*, *Batman: Arkham Knight*, *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, and *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*. These are just the games we know about before we head into one of the most important software events of this generation. This first E3 after the launch of the new hardware is where we should finally get a solid roadmap of the future.

The software giants will roll out several predictable sequels, but there will be a few surprises as well, and we might even see new hardware if the rumors of a new Nintendo platform hold true. So while your investment in new hardware may not have paid off yet, we should soon be swimming in options both big and small.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



» 46

Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare

Sledgehammer Games is taking *Call of Duty* to the year 2052 to offer a realistic look at what the future of combat may look like.
by Dan Ryckert



22 **Demon Slayers**



16 **Creating Controllers For All Disabilities**



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30 **Warping Reality: Waterloo Labs**



29 **Dreaming Of Video Games**

regulars

» 6 Feedback

Readers use Game Infarcer to troll their friends, thank Darth Clark for his interesting views on video games, and yell at us about our fake MLB 14: The Show review. They also get excited about Batman being back on our cover, and weigh in on the future of second-screen gaming.

» 10 Connect

Space-combat simulations are making a huge return, and we break down what to expect from the revitalized genre. We also examine empathy in video games, try to figure out why video games are so good at entering our dreams, and explore the popular digital collectible-card-game genre.

» 64 Previews

After checking in on former cover titles, Destiny, Dragon Age: Inquisition, and Evolve, we take a look at Civilization's foray into space with Beyond Earth, die a few times in Lords of the Fallen, and then die some more in the ambitious Below.

» 84 Reviews

We offer our opinions on Lego The Hobbit, Ubisoft's gorgeous Child of Light, 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil, MLB 14: The Show, Mario Golf, and see what it's like to simulate the life of a goat. We also examine how the new Kinect stands up to scrutiny with our Kinect Sports Rivals review.

» 100 Game Over

Call of Duty has been going strong for a decade, and with annual releases a lot has happened across the franchise's large library of games. Head here to test your Call of Duty knowledge and see how much you know about one of the biggest franchises in the world.



64 **Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel**



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58



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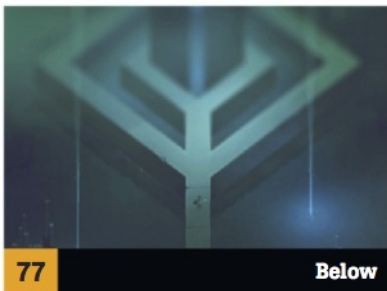
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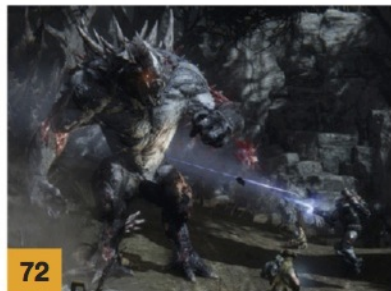
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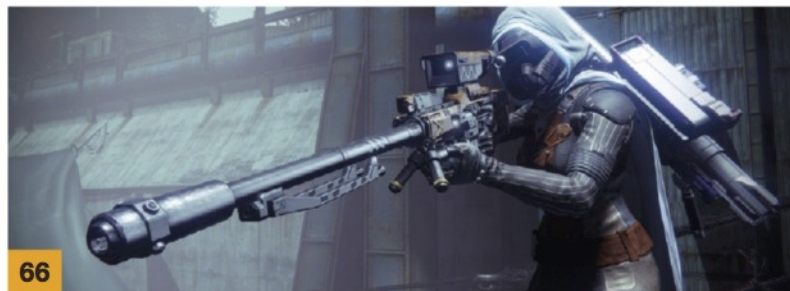
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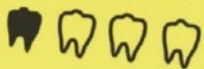
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CURRENT LEVEL

12/45



N

E

CANNON

120/300



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cigarettes, you're
harming your teeth.**

Smoking cigarettes can cause serious gum disease that makes you more likely to lose your teeth than someone who doesn't smoke.

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Darth Clark's annual return in April's Game Infarcer spurred the expected mix of celebratory and inflammatory responses from readers. Fans also discuss Rocksteady's latest Arkham game, second-screen technology, and what makes a great villain.

The Dark Knight Returns

You guys did an incredible cover story for Batman: Arkham Knight (issue 252). I have very much enjoyed all the previous Arkham games, especially the two by Rocksteady, and Arkham Knight sounds absolutely fantastic. The focus on new-gen systems is a huge plus for me, but the implementation of the Batmobile and the greater enemy counts and riots? Man, I'm super excited for October 14; I will be praying the release date doesn't get pushed back. I believe Rocksteady will give us a true first taste of what the new systems are capable of, as well as an excellent send-off for the Dark Knight.

Kyle Behling
via email

After a long day of work on my birthday, I finally got home and checked the mail, and what did I see? Only the best cover of Game Informer ever! Obviously that's just my opinion, but I absolutely love all things Batman, especially the Arkham games. Being able to sit down after a rough day and see that awesome cover and read the article totally made my month. Thanks so much for putting Batman on the cover of the April issue!

Vanessa Ortiz
via email

What better way to finish off the Arkham series than by having Rocksteady at the helm of one final adventure that takes full advantage of the power of Microsoft and Sony's new systems? For more on Batman's latest exploits, check out our month of bonus coverage at gameinformer.com/arkhamknight

Fooling Around

When I got issue 252 in the mail, I took it to school. I had the idea to try and punk my friends with this year's Game Infarcer. I told them that they were making a Mario and Sonic at the Hunger Games, and at first they didn't believe me – but when I showed them the actual picture, they flipped out! Of course, I got punched by all of them when I told them that they'd been trolled. Thanks, Darth Clark, for helping me fool my friends!

Travis Ames
via email

I have been reading your magazine for several years now, and I have to say Darth Clark is awesome. I almost fell out of my chair laughing at his Game Infarcer column and at the "Battlefield 5 Season Patch" article.

Matthew Prestage
via email

Based on the letters we received this month, the only thing our readers love more than a good joke is the readers who don't realize it's a joke in the first place. Let the laughing begin...



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Dazed And Confused

What the hell! I feel as a gamer that I've been taken to town by gaming companies – only I can't complain because I paid them to do it. First off, EA is now going to charge me more for Battlefield 5, which apparently needs my money to be fixed. I don't understand how they expect me to pay more money after the long season of mistakes that is BF4. I should be getting paid for having to deal with that. Now, I have to pay more for a "fixed" version of a game that should've been done right in the first place. Oh, and I heard that Microsoft was just going to throw out the Xbox One and the 360 2.0 is now their focus? Gee, thanks Microsoft – I sure am glad I'm stuck with your failed first try. Could I expect a free new system once you improve the old one?

Nathan L.
via email

The person that wrote the review for MLB 14: The Show clearly needs to be doing another job. Nobody gives two sh--s if he would rather be playing basketball. How about talking about signature swings or something like that? By the way, I don't play baseball to listen to the sports broadcasters talk about health care – I want to hear stats. Get someone that knows a little about sports the next time you're going to have an intern review a sports game, please. The next time he watches a game on television, I want him to count how many times he sees a woman on the field. C'mon guys, how about we do a better job on reviews?

Dennis M.
via email

We thought Darth Clark's review of MLB 14: The Show was too absurd for anyone to mistake it as a real review – then again, we thought that selling a season pass for game patches was obviously fake, too. At least Darth Clark's satirical letter from the editor didn't fool anyone...



Double Vision

Regarding your Connect feature on the future of second-screen experiences (Looking Toward The Horizon, issue 252), I think they can still have an impact even if they're not required. Just having the option to gain screen real estate by moving elements to a second screen would be great. Take Borderlands for example; I really like to play it split-screen with my wife, but the inventory menu is crowded and stops the game while you manage your loadout. Being able to do all that on my tablet would be a much better experience. I hope developers start taking advantage of second screens for all games, even if it's optional.

Sergio Castañeda
via email

A large portion of my gaming these days involves two screens. The problem for game developers is that I am using it to look up information on the game via the Internet. The tablet is there when I need hints for acquiring trophies, a guided walkthrough when tackling a difficult level, or a copy of the world map in a large RPG. Using a second screen for inventory? Probably a gimmick. But the new generation of consoles could improve second screens by putting the information we usually spend time hunting down on different sites all in one app that automatically loads the information when you start the game on your console. That would be pretty cool.

Karl T.
Chicago, IL

Creating a meaningful second-screen gameplay experience is difficult when it has to be optional by its very nature. However, as Karl says, a lot of players already use a second electronic device to look up information when playing a game. Allowing players to share that media and information in a dedicated space would be a great use for second-screen technology. Nintendo already offers a similar functionality through the Wii U's Miiiverse – we certainly wouldn't complain if Microsoft and Sony followed suit.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Are ninjas cool?"

Last time we checked, yes.

"Can you slap Darth Clark for me?"

No – not only is he our editor in chief, he's also imaginary.

"Does anyone at Valve even know how to count to 10?"

10? We'd be happy if someone at the studio could count to three...

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"my canoe is gone"

Worst Compliment Of The Month:

I was on the crapper, and I spent so much time admiring your Arkham Knight cover story that my legs went numb. Thanks for such a great article!

Jacob Mahaffey

Question Of The Month:

What improvement would you like to see from new-gen multiplayer games and why?

gi spy



(Left) No one poses for a prettier picture than the developers at Epic Games, who banded together last month to show us Fortnite.

(Right) Game Informer interns Shin Hieftje, Cameron Koch, and Isaac Federspiel assembled in the vault for an axe fight to the death. Unfortunately, Shin brought the wrong kind of axe.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



36% Virtues Of A Good Villain

22% Arkham Adoration

20% Darth Clark Haters

18% Game Infarcers

04% Virtual Reality Skepticism

Darth Clark Strikes Again

In response to the article "I Am Too Good For This," by Darth Clark – this guy is a grade-A douche. You ask, "Where would you be without my insight and guidance?" Easy: playing games and having fun like I have been since 1980 without even knowing who you are. If you are not happy getting paid to play games then quit and let someone else do your job. You're sick of this industry? I am sick of douchebags like you who whine about their current job but do nothing to pursue their passion. Your opinions and perspective suck, go away.

Neil H.
via email

The mentality Darth Clark has toward his target audience is not only offensive, it's extremely arrogant and alienates his readers. Do his articles get read before the magazine gets published? I mean seriously, I can respect his opinion on the industry, but he just automatically assumes every gamer is a moron. Darth sounds like every a--hole who says things over a gaming headset that they're afraid to say to someone in person; I would expect a punch in the face if I talked that crap. If he regards his audience as morons and has to command his morons to think, doesn't that make him "King of the Morons?" What a crowning achievement.

Max O.
via email

The bitter seeds Darth Clark sows every April always yield the most amusing responses. If you were one of our annual sacrifices to sarcasm, take comfort in the fact that you weren't alone. For more responses to the King of the Morons, head to gameinformer.com/mag.



The Art Of Villainy

In issue 252, we asked readers what's the most important characteristic a video game villain should have. While many readers prefer a villain they can relate to, others just want someone to hate. Here are some of the responses.

The most important characteristic for a video game villain is relatability. Sometimes the narrative calls for an archetypal evil character, but good and evil in real life rarely appears in such black-and-white terms. It's the villains that cause us to question our own motives as the "hero" that truly stand out from the rest.

Nicholas Lai

I believe the most important aspect of a villain is that they never think of themselves as "evil" or "the villain." They truly believe that whatever they are doing is justified and that their course of action is the right one.

David Toyofuku

You have to be able to hate the villain. I know that sounds like a bizarre characteristic: being hate-able. It's true though! If I don't feel a driving, passionate need to crush them, then I actually don't enjoy the game as much. Oh, and it always helps if they're bat-crap crazy, too.

Chelsea

A villain without an accent is like a doughnut without icing. It's still a doughnut, but it's kind of bland and uninteresting.

Jake Reed

(Left) Harmonix's Annette Gonzalez and Double Fine's Amarissee Sullivan bond at GDC.

(Right) Copybara Games' Nathan Vella and Double Fine's Greg Rice were on hand to inspect the wine barrels during GDC Napa.



WINNER

1 Jerry Varnado

This is the face of a turtle who's seen too many friends lose their shells



1

2 Alexander Richardson

All that Kickstarter money couldn't buy Mighty No. 9 an arm cannon



2

3 Julianne Metz

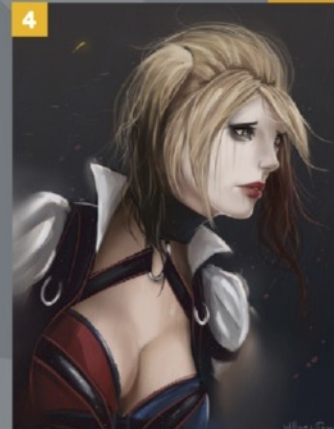
Sixteen Yoshis, and only one of them owns a pair of pants



3

4 William Jones

Harley's senior photo from Gotham High



4

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(Left) Consultant Tom Russo was in charge of keeping everyone on schedule. He took his job very seriously. **(Right)** And finally, Nike's Hayden Walling and FortySeven Communications CEO Sibel Sunar were in charge of hugs. What? That's a job.



NOTABLES

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After years of dormancy, the space-combat simulation genre is coming back in a major way.

by Matt Bertz

SPACE & BEYOND RAC



IN THE EARLY 1990s, while *Doom* was planting the seeds for first-person shooters and adventure games like *The 7th Guest* dominated sales charts, a rogue genre came out of nowhere to capture the imagination of gamers. Selling the fantasy of participating in space dogfights like Luke Skywalker's famed trench run in *Star Wars*, games like *X-Wing* and *Wing Commander* burst onto the scene to great fanfare. Suddenly PC players across the globe were investing in joysticks so they could have more authentic experiences trading fire with waves of enemy fighters. Both of these franchises became critical darlings and commercial successes. By 1995, the *Wing Commander* series had sold more than three million units and generated more than \$400 million in global revenue, eventually spinning off an animated television series, a movie, novels, and a collectible card game.

As the gaming industry evolved and mainstream players migrated toward consoles, the genre diminished as rapidly as it had arrived. LucasArts continued to release arcade-style space-combat games under the *Rogue Squadron* banner through the GameCube era (many of which incorporated on-foot third-person action missions as well), but simulations that challenged players to manage on-board flight systems while dogfighting, escorting ships, and ambushing supply lines had all but disappeared.

Publishers no longer saw the potential return on investment for this style of game, and the joysticks of sci-fi fans across the world were relegated to storage boxes and garbage bins. "To be honest with you, I'm not quite sure why it fell out of favor as much," says *Wing Commander* creator Chris Roberts, who eventually left the game industry when his preferred genre fell off the map.

M

More than a decade later, the birth of crowdfunding through services like Kickstarter has energized both creators and communities to re-engage with this once-dominant genre. In 2012, Roberts returned to the game industry with the dream of making a successor to his signature series, which he had been secretly working on for a year. Dubbed Star Citizen, the concept served as a beacon of hope to fans of this neglected genre, and they've thrown their support behind the project to the tune of \$41 million (and still growing) in development funds.

"When we made these games, the Wing Commanders and X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter were some of the biggest games out there," Roberts says. "They were like a big launch event – it wasn't just some small genre title. So I think a bunch of gamers from back in the day remember that and haven't had that experience for a while."

Soon after, others followed. David Braben, the creator of the original open-world space game, Elite, successfully funded the next chapter in that series via Kickstarter (concept art shown on p. 10-11). Eve Online creators CCP are also jumping into the fray with Eve: Valkyrie, a standalone dogfighting game.

Why the sudden space-combat simulator renaissance? Roberts thinks that's just the nature of the medium.

"I don't think it's any different than other forms of entertainment," he says. "There's times when a movie genre falls completely out of favor and there isn't one for a while, and then someone comes back and does one that works... everyone tends to grab onto the next thing they think is going to work. I think all of these things are cyclical."

Here are deeper looks at three games flying in the vanguard of this rebirth.



Star Citizen will have a fully realized economy driven by supply and demand. Disrupt a mining operation and you may drive the price of missiles into the stratosphere



The Hornet is one of the ships specializing in dogfighting. The ship can be retrofitted for stealth, tracking, or combat





STAR CITIZEN

PLATFORM: PC · MAC DEVELOPER: CLOUD IMPERIUM GAMES RELEASE: 2015

Chris Roberts' new studio, Cloud Imperium Games, is taking a multi-pronged approach to developing its foray into space-combat simulation. *Star Citizen* essentially breaks into two discrete modes. The first element is a narrative-driven campaign called *Squadron 42*, where players learn the ropes of space-combat à la *Wing Commander*. It's not just single-player, either. Your friends can drop into your game and take the role of your wingmen for missions.

The second element is a massively multiplayer persistent universe where players can join guilds of mercenaries, traders, explorers, and pirates to write their own destinies in space. Deep ship customization allows you to outfit your vessel to suit your playing style, whether you're hauling precious materials to faraway star systems or aggressively engaging in player vs. player combat.

Roberts began the project back in 2011, and quickly ramped up the scale and scope of the project after receiving the financial groundswell from crowdfunding. The studio is releasing

components of the game modularly, giving the community of backers a chance to check out elements of the game like the hanger and dogfighting early while the team continues to balance the game. The space-combat module, called *Arena Commander*, just released at the end of April.

This module acts as a virtual-reality training ground for pilots that they can access in their ship hangers. *Arena Commander* features three fighter craft that players can take into combat across three modes – eight-player deathmatch, four vs. four team deathmatch, and a Horde-style mode called *Armada* where players fight off waves of NPC craft. Cloud Imperium plans to add two more fighters to the mix in the near future, as well as a capture the flag mode. The studio is introducing some clever new elements to dogfighting; if you make too many aggressive maneuvers while evading enemy fire, your pilot starts to black out because of the G-force.

While it continues to hone the combat over the next 18 months, Cloud Imperium is also preparing the future

modules. Next on the list is integrating multiplayer ships (think the *Millennium Falcon*) where players manage different roles in real-time just like Han Solo, Chewbacca, and company in the *Star Wars* movies. After that, Roberts wants to introduce the first-person module that allows players to walk around an abandoned space station, the boarding mechanic for hijacking ships, and eventually planetside landings.

Using the *CryEngine 3*, *Star Citizen* pushes the boundaries of PC technology. The game boasts gorgeous ship rendering, breathtaking vistas of uncharted space, impressive lighting, and intricately detailed cockpits and hangers. All this graphical fidelity comes at a price, however. Only PCs built with 64-bit processing, quad-core processors, and 8GB RAM will be compatible with the game, so it may be time to upgrade if you have an older rig.

Cloud Imperium plans to launch the first episode of *Squadron 42* by March, and continue to roll out more episodes through 2015. By the end of next year, Roberts hopes to have players flying

around the persistent world, which will have 110 planets with about 450 locations delivered piecemeal as the game moves toward its commercial launch.

Star Citizen plans to support *Oculus Rift*. As for console plans, Roberts didn't dismiss them outright. "I don't see [new-gen consoles] as particularly different than the PCs we develop for," he says. "The big issue is it's important for us to be able to update the content frequently without getting stuck in the long-lead time and expensive processes we've had to do in the past with Xbox or PlayStation. We want to be open, and have everyone play in the same universe. If we were to do a console version, we would want the console manufacturer to be okay with everyone playing on the same servers that we could update with the frequency that we'd want to update. Basically, treat the console like we treat the PC. Right now none of the console guys are there yet, but I've always said if they are willing to change their practices and behave a bit more like PC, then we would consider it, because why wouldn't we want to have a bigger audience?"



Like X-Wing before it, in Elite: Dangerous pilots can redirect power to their shield, engines, or weaponry based on the circumstance they find themselves in

ELITE: DANGEROUS

PLATFORM: PC · MAC DEVELOPER: FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS RELEASE: 2014

How important was Elite to the history of open-world games? Former DMA Design developer Gary Penn described the early Grand Theft Auto games as “Elite set in a city.” Thirty years after its seminal release, creator David Braben is resurrecting the beloved space-combat sim and rebuilding it for the modern era thanks to a successful Kickstarter campaign.

Like Star Citizen, Elite: Dangerous promises an ambitious blend of space-combat, exploration, trading, piracy, and bounty hunting. Frontier Developments has commissioned a group of authors to pen novels and fiction bibles to paint the larger picture of the political systems and factions at play, but the setting of the game should be vaguely familiar to all.

“We’ve gone for as much scientific accuracy we can,” Braben says. “The entire galaxy is modeled, with 150,000 stars all in the right positions that you can visit.”

While the main star systems are colonized and policed, Elite: Dangerous offers a vast amount of uncharted space to explore. Players can discover and

name new worlds, stake claims on their resources, and even try to keep these locations secret (provided no one opens their mouth at the space station or gets followed).

Frontier’s dedication to realism extends to docking in space stations as well. These hubs rotate to create gravity inside, which can make landing a ship tricky. You first must establish communication with the station to request a landing bay. Once you’re given clearance, you then navigate your craft to align perfectly through the docking doors.

After you land in a space station, your ship moves below deck. This is where you can navigate menus to access the star port office, contractors, traders, merchants, and black market to sell your goods, resupply your ship, make repairs, purchase upgrades, and take on new jobs.

Frontier is giving players a lot of options for outfitting their ships. Raiders may want to invest in a scanner so they can get a reading on what type of cargo other ships are carrying. Combat specialists can choose between

fixed-position weaponry, which have more firepower but require skilled pilots, or gimbaled weapons, which don’t deal as much damage but provide slight auto-target functionality. Stealthy pilots can invest in heat sinks, which allow them to close their ship vents down to avoid heat signature detection. Every ship can do this, but it damages the ship over time unless you have these heat sinks to cool down the vessel.

Combat isn’t always all about destroying the enemy craft. If you’re more interested in the cargo than the bloodshed, you can target sub-modules on ships. For instance, you could target a cargo hatch, shoot it enough times to make it malfunction, and then collect the cargo floating in space without taking the life of the pilot.

The entirety of space is player vs. player, but Frontier is managing populations to make sure the majority of ships you encounter are NPCs. You can engage in PvP combat, but this is discouraged in most systems. If you attack other players in a heavily policed area, the authorities engage you. Take another player out

in a less patrolled region and you get a bounty placed on your head. If you have a bounty, then other players can target your ship with the endorsement of the system’s governing body. The only way to get rid of a bounty is to pay an exorbitant fee to the pilot federation.

Cooperation is the better route to pursue for most players. For instance, traders may need to enlist the aid of fighters to escort them through pirate blockades, offering these mercenaries a cut of the profits for their services.

Elite is currently in alpha, with a premium beta scheduled for the end of May. For \$250, you can participate in the limited alpha to experience space-combat, multiplayer, tweaking loadouts, and docking. Trading and exploration is planned for the next alpha stage. Eventually Frontier hopes to add landing and boarding missions, and possibly user-created content.

Like Star Citizen, Elite: Dangerous supports Oculus Rift and is currently only slated for a PC release. When asked about consoles, Braben replied, “We’d be stupid not to consider it.”

Gearing Up For Duty

Space-combat simulations work just fine with a keyboard/mouse combo or a gamepad, but nothing sells the experience quite like a flight stick. These gargantuan peripherals can be intimidating with all of their rotaries and toggles, but learning the nuances of the throttles and flight sticks is part of the fun. Here are two options we recommend for pilots eager to get back in the cockpit.



Saitek X55 Rhino

With seven three-way toggles, two rotaries, a throttle, and the flight stick, Saitek’s latest model gives you enough customizable controls to accommodate any star ship. You can increase or decrease the stiffness of the flight stick with four springs of various resistances, and the rubberized grip has a nice feel to it. The plastic bases of this HOTAS (hands on throttle and stick) setup are light, so we recommend outfitting it with some suction cups. If you want a slightly more affordable model that has aesthetics more in line with a spacecraft, pick up the X52 for \$30 cheaper.

\$199 | www.saitek.com

EVE: VALKYRIE

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 4 · PC DEVELOPER: CCP GAMES RELEASE: TBA

When CCP received the Oculus Rift development kit, a small team of developers at its Newcastle studio started tinkering with cockpit-based space-combat. They brought it to the annual Eve Fanfest, and the Eve: Valkyrie demo proved so popular the studio fast-tracked it for development. Now the game is scheduled to be a launch title for both the Oculus Rift and Sony's Morpheus VR headset for PlayStation 4.

Unlike *Elite: Dangerous* and *Star Citizen*, *Eve: Valkyrie* isn't about exploring vast galaxies with a starship – *Eve Online* already sells that fantasy. Following in the footsteps of the console first-person shooter *Dust: 514* before it, *Valkyrie* is a spin-off game that uses the *EVE* fiction as a backdrop for fast-paced arcade action.

"It's very much a multiplayer dog-fighting game," says executive producer Owen O'Brien. "It's always player vs. player. Our focus is on the intense, visceral experience of flying around, having fun, earning some experience and money, improving your craft and your pilot, and moving up the ladder."

These battles are different from the large-scale capital ship wars that grab headlines in *Eve Online*, but the story builds off factions that should be familiar to *Eve* players. The game tells the story of the Valkyrie, a splinter faction from the Guristas pirate clan started by Rán, an ex-Navy pilot whom many presumed to be dead. The Guristas created the Valkyrie by using illegal technology to download the consciousness of dying fighter pilots and upload them into clones. Rán (who is voiced by

Battlestar Galactica's Katee Sackhoff) was the first to be subjected to this devious experiment, and eventually broke away from the pirate clan. She now stands in opposition to them as well as the corporation she blames for her family's downfall.

Players assume the role of a new recruit to the Valkyrie. As you complete missions, you are given experience and money you can use to upgrade your ship, buy new ships, or invest in your abilities, much like the multiplayer modes in *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield*.

The pace of combat is more in line with arcade games than hardcore space sims, which CCP chose to make *Valkyrie* more accessible. "We've spent the last few months taking that tech demo and turning it into a game that is still easy to play and quick to learn,

but also takes a long time to master," O'Brien says. "There's more and more depth the more you look at it."

Ships fall into three roles – nimble fighters, slower ships with more firepower, and support craft that aid in map control. Each of these ship types has different primary and secondary weapons as well as unique special abilities. O'Brien mentioned two abilities as examples: Head-guided missiles (true VR headset integration) and a countermeasure system that allows you to target and destroy incoming missiles.

The current build of *Eve: Valkyrie* only features deathmatch, but CCP plans to introduce more game modes in the future. The release date is dependent on when *Oculus Rift* and *Sony Morpheus* come out. ♦

Valkyrie takes place within the *Eve* universe, but CCP is not making a direct link into *Eve Online* at launch like it did with *Dust*



Thrustmaster Warthog

► If you're very serious about getting back into space-combat sims, the Warthog HOTAS is the Maserati of flight sticks. Built to mimic the stick of the A-10 Thunderbolt II, everything about this Thrustmaster setup screams quality. The weight of the metal bases will keep you from sliding across your desk in the middle of a tense firefight, and the ball joint in the joystick provides a smooth, precise response. The rock-solid construction means this stick is built to last through repeated tours of duty.

\$450 | www.thrustmaster.com



If you don't want to spend this much money on a flight stick, you have other options. Saitek's parent company, Mad Catz, sells entry-level flight sticks for as cheap as \$50. You won't get the full HOTAS experience, but it will still feel more natural than using a gamepad.

The New Last Frontier

Star Citizen, *Elite: Dangerous*, and *Eve: Valkyrie* may be the most prominent, but they aren't the only games jumping back into this long-neglected genre. Several other titles are offering unique takes on the space-combat simulations. If you want to dig deeper, check out *Strike Suit Zero*, *No Man's Sky*, *Starpoint Gemini 2*, *Rodina*, and *Ascent: The Space Game*.



Creating Controllers For All Disabilities

Special Effect enables disabled gamers to enjoy video game experiences, customizing controllers for any and all needs

by Kyle Hilliard

Lee Knight was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy when he was four years old. This genetic disease causes muscle weakness over time due to the deterioration of nerve cells that connect the brain to the body's muscles. Mental abilities are unaffected by the disease, but over time muscle movement is progressively limited, which is what happened to Knight.

Knight was athletic and enjoyed playing soccer, but around age 11, he was no longer able to play. By 12, he was in a wheelchair full time, and his interests moved to a new outlet: video games. Over time, Knight's movement capabilities became more and more limited. Today, Knight has lost all use of his left arm, and can only use one finger and his thumb on his right hand. Thanks to the charity organization Special Effect, however, Knight is still able to play games, even completing complicated action games like *Grand Theft Auto V*.

Founded in 2007 and based in the United Kingdom, Special Effect is a charity organization bringing video games to the disabled. Approaching each disabled player on a case-by-case basis, Special Effect builds and customizes video game controllers for specific disabilities and loans them out to gamers in need, free of charge. "Everyone's physical abilities are slightly different – some people we see might have finger movement but no strength to grip a controller," says Mark Saville, who is in charge of Special Effect's general communications. "Others might have limited abilities to move their thumbs. And others may have no controllable movement of their bodies at all, apart from their eyes."

Special Effect doesn't build each controller from scratch. Rather, the organization has a collection of modified controllers, many of which are built by a company called Mondelez International. These controllers are unassuming, looking like a box with a series of input sockets. Each of those sockets corresponds to a button on a video game controller, and different types of inputs can be placed into those sockets to activate buttons.

The small staff of 11 has 2 specialist occupational therapists on hand to help identify the best usable body movements from the player and puts together controllers based on those specifications. Special Effect was able to build a special mount for Knight with a modified Xbox 360 controller, placing the buttons under his fingers on his lap. Using his chin, he is able to manipulate the control sticks, which have also been modified with special microlight switches. Knight also has a special mouse controller supplied by Special Effect that incorporates a headset to activate buttons using voice commands.

Setting up someone with a compatible controller often takes more than reconfiguring the standard equipment. "Sometimes we get the drill and soldering iron out to modify controllers, say, to make a trigger available as a button on the front of the unit, or to install a socket so that an external switch can be plugged in," Saville says. "If there's a need to physically modify a controller – for example, to include a secure fixing to mount it to a wheelchair – we'll take it to the workshop and get out the screwdriver."

Sometimes Special Effect continually modifies a controller as necessary over the course of many years as a player's disabilities continually limit their ability to use a controller.

For Knight, receiving help from Special Effect has changed his life. "All my life I have played games, and they have bridged the gap between what I can and can't do," he says. Before working with Special Effect,

Knight says he thought he had lost the ability to play video games, and it was devastating. "I just can't put into words how much I love games, and Special Effect has allowed me to experience some games that I never thought I would," he says.

Special Effect has already helped thousands as it continues to expand its work and help disabled gamers. In one scenario, Special Effect helped a gamer suffering from the later stages of muscular dystrophy. "We used a fairly elaborate system of switches and joysticks harnessing what tiny movements of his body he had left, and by the time we left that evening, he was playing *Call of Duty* with his mother," Saville says.

There is no selection process or specific medical needs precluding the assistance of Special Effect. The charity organization helps everyone, including accident victims, service personnel with combat injuries, people with congenital and progressive conditions, and stroke patients. If you're unable to play a video game because of a disability, Special Effect wants to help. "We believe that everyone should have access to video games," Saville says. ♦

To find out more or to donate, visit specialeffect.org.uk

"All my life I have played games and they have bridged the gap between what I can and can't do."

Simon (left) has muscular dystrophy. Special Effect has been working with him for years, updating his controller as his capabilities have changed. Arlo (right) has cerebral palsy, but is able to play complicated games like his favorite, *FIFA*, thanks to the assistance of Special Effect and a large customized controller and joystick





The Voice Of A Generation

Troy Baker has quickly become one of the most prolific voice actors in the gaming industry, voicing iconic characters such as Joel from *The Last of Us*, Booker From *BioShock Infinite*, Delsin Rowe from *Infamous: Second Son*, the main character from *Saints Row IV*, and the protagonist of this month's cover story, *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*. Baker took a few minutes out of his busy recording schedule to talk with us about how he got into voice acting and the challenge of taking over established characters from other actors. **interview by Ben Reeves**

How did you get into voice acting?

It was a complete stroke of dumb luck. I was a musician, and we were recording our album in a studio in Dallas. That studio also did a lot of commercial work, so one day while we were taking a break, I went across the hall and said, "Hey! I want to get into radio!" And they were like, "Hey! Get out." A few weeks later, a friend of mine who was an engineer said, "Get down here. They want to see you." I sped down there and the guy could not have been more disinterested. He was like, "Pick up the pieces of paper there and let's see what you can do." It was all car adverts. I found out later that the guy who had done their spots for the last 20 years had had a heart attack and died and left them high and dry, and that's how I got the job.

Now that you're more well known, are you pretty selective with what jobs you take, or are you willing to do pretty much anything?

One of the first TV jobs I did, I worked with Lou Diamond Phillips, and he really took my under his wing. I remember asking him something on set where I said, "At what point do you—" and he said, "I want to stop you right there, because I hear you saying that at some point you will have arrived, but I want to tell you that that day will never come, so get out of that mindset. If there is something that you believe in, you do it from the onset."

Fans sometimes go up in arms when video game characters get new voice actors.

Gee, I wonder who you're talking about.

Well, actually you've had the opportunity to do this a couple of times, with Joker in *Batman: Arkham Origins* and now with Ocelot for *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. What do you think of these kinds of changing of the guard?

Specifically when it comes to Joker, Mark Hamill is and always will be my Joker. That's who I grew up with. When I first read [*Batman: The Killing Joke*], that was the voice in my head. I said no originally. I was terrified. I didn't know if I'd be able to do the voice.

Had you tried doing a Joker impersonation before?

No, it was kind of a weird thing, like you're not supposed to say the name of God or something. The first time I ever actually did it was for the audition. They brought me into the audition and told me I'd be auditioning for a character called Jack White. And I looked down and some of the paragraphs they had listed were from things like from *The Killing Joke* or from the animated series, and I said, "Uh, this is the Joker." And they were like, "Yep!" I wanted to run. They said, "What do you want to start with?" I looked down and saw *The Killing Joke* monologue, and just said, "F--- it, I got one shot at this."

Were you given some leeway on how to approach Ocelot, or did they have a very specific thing in mind for how to add to the role?

What was cool about that was that I was handed a sort of two-sided sword, because here's an established character, you know this character. There is a lore and a template for how he operates. But we're visiting this character at a different point in his life, so let's show someone a different side of the character, but we still have to believe it's this same person.

What do you think about Kiefer Sutherland as Snake?

I actually came in to record right after his first session and let me tell you something, the sheer mechanics of how we did that game would have been challenging for any actor, and the fact that Kiefer was able to come in, adjusted to that situation, do something he had never done before, and still swung for the fences, really speaks to his character. He gave it up; he left everything on the floor for that role. I think David Hayter is the classic Snake voice just like Hamill is the classic Joker voice, but there comes a time when it becomes appropriate for someone else to become the custodian of that character. There is nothing wrong with that, because we can never fully own a role, all we do is take care of it for a time.

A lot of people debated the ending of *The Last of Us*. Some people loved it and some people really hated Joel for what he did. Where do you land?

For me personally, I love what Joel did in the hospital, because it seems like a very selfish act, but it some ways it was the most selfless act he did, because if it's not worth saving one girl then what are we fighting for? Why would we save the world? To Joel, he started from a place where he didn't want anything to do with that girl and came full circle to a place where he would do anything for that girl. "I am saving the world, but this girl is my world." As a father, absolutely that's what I would have done.

What do you think of *The Last of Us* film? Who do you think should play Joel?

Over the course of the last three years I've come to trust [The Last of Us directors] Neil Druckmann and Bruce Staley implicitly. I think they've crafted a wonderful series and a wonderful game. If they feel that there is a story to be told in the movie space that will serve the same intentions of that game, who am I to doubt that? I love that Hollywood now looks to a game writer and says, "You're worthy enough to do the first two drafts of this movie." That's kind of unprecedented. As for who I think should do it. I'm kind of surprised, because Josh Brolin was always in my head, and certainly his character in *No Country for Old Men* informed Joel's personality template, so that's my first go to. ♦



DIGITAL CARD GAME ROUNDUP

— by Daniel Tack —

In 2014, the tabletop goes digital as myriad collectible card game titles big and small come to the PC and mobile. While there's something to be said for the permanence of a physical collection, many are intrigued about the possibilities of online-only card games. With no collection to occupy closet space, no spills to damage cards, the ability to pop into a tournament and find a game at any time of day, and the ability to quickly sort and construct decks from thousands of cards, the transition from the table to the screen is an exciting prospect. Here are some of the titles, in various stages of early access or release, you won't want to miss.

Might & Magic: Duel Of Champions

- » **Developer** Ubisoft
- » **Platform** PC • iOS

Might & Magic: Duel of Champions draws upon the classic fantasy role-playing series and creates an admirable free-to-play title that uses a creative resource system, tactical combat, and a format that allows players to stack up rewards each day. Players will recognize many popular themes and spell schools from the Might & Magic and Heroes of Might & Magic games. Duel of Champions has a thriving competitive scene and a considerable presence on Twitch.tv.



Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft

- » **Developer** Blizzard
- » **Platform** PC • Mac • iPad

Blizzard's free-to-play collectible card game taps into the flavor and lore of the Warcraft universe, and is one of the most accessible titles in the genre to date. In addition to a monthly ranked ladder and one of the most convenient takes on limited formats with Arena mode, the title will include a single-player adventure through the World of Warcraft raid Naxxramas, where players will take on familiar faces and unlock special cards.



Scrolls

- » **Developer** Mojang
- » **Platform** PC • Mac

Mojang's sophomore effort is a buy-to-play collectible card game with a heavy emphasis on tactics. The hex-based game board fills up quickly with creatures and structures as players attempt to break down opposing idols. While there are a few ways to spend additional real money in-game after purchase to play special game modes, most cards and packs are acquired by earning in-game currency by playing the game – there's no way to purchase packs directly with cash.

Magic: The Gathering

» **Developer** Wizards of the Coast/Stainless Games

» **Platform** PS3 • 360 • PC • iOS • Android

The king of the physical collectible card world, and likely inspiration for most of the games in this feature, has a digital presence as well. The Duels of the Planeswalkers series is the easiest way to learn how to play the game, and Magic: The Gathering Online serves as a digital mirror to the physical game. Players can trade in full sets acquired online for their physical counterparts.



SolForge

» **Developer** Stone Blade Entertainment

» **Platform** PC • iOS

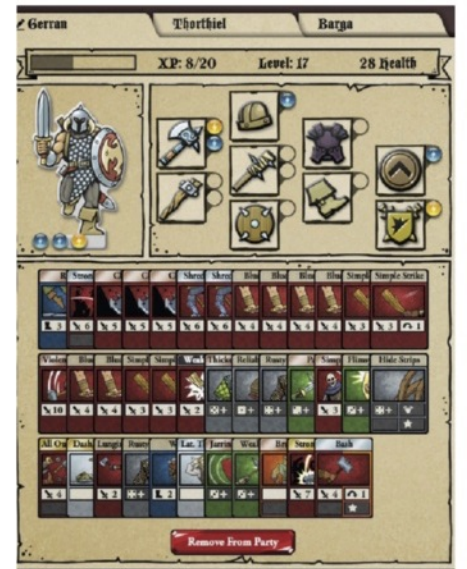
It's available on PC, but the gameplay and design of free-to-play SolForge make it an excellent mobile collectible card game. Players level up cards for stronger effects by playing them, and there's no real resource system beyond the limit of playing two cards a turn. This leads to some interesting strategy choices as the cards you choose to play early in the game will have impact on how things play out in the later stages.

Card Hunter

» **Developer** Blue Manchu Games

» **Platform** Web

Combining elements of Diablo, Dungeons & Dragons, and traditional collectible card games, Card Hunter is an interesting genre mash-up that really shines. Players assemble card sets and decks by equipping gear. A basic sword may come with several thrust, stab, or lunge cards, and more advanced items may come with ultra-powerful abilities – or possibly detrimental cards. A giant battle axe may come with some powerful area-of-effect cleave cards, but may also have a stumble or dull blow card the player will also have to include. The game features a robust single-player campaign and a competitive player-vs-player option.



Clash Of The Dragons

» **Developer** 5th Planet Games

» **Platform** Web

Fast-paced and available on Facebook, Kongregate, and many other web-based game destinations, free-to-play Clash of the Dragons features campaigns, crafting, drafting, tournaments, and many features that even standalone client games don't have. Play as classic fantasy archetypes like mages or warriors with their own style and feel through class-specific cards and abilities.



Hex: Shards Of Fate

» **Developer** Cryptozoic Entertainment

» **Platform** PC • Mac

Combining the collectible card game with the MMORPG, free-to-play RPG Hex is a single-player dungeon crawler with a complete player-vs-player competitive mode. All the things you'd expect from a MMORPG like leveling, guilds, an auction house, equipment, raids, and more are available. For competitive players not interested in PVE, Hex aims to provide tournaments and cards that unlock new artwork and other aesthetic perks by completing achievements.



Infinity Wars

» **Developer** Lightmare Studios

» **Platform** PC • Mac

This free-to-play, fast-paced title has some cool features that you won't find anywhere else, like a game mode where players use cards from both their own deck and the opponent's to create a blended experience. Featuring draft mode, a single-player campaign, ranked play, and lots of ways to unlock new cards, Infinity Wars is one of the best indie options out there on the digital card game scene. ♦



Faeria

» **Developer** Abrakam


» **Platform** Web

Abrakam is looking to do something different by taking concepts from board games and creating a tactical terrain, buy-to-play collectible card game. Players shape the game board by adding and destroying tiles over the course of a match, so no game plays out quite the same. The result of a successful Kickstarter, Faeria is an ambitious project being hammered together by a team of four.

DEMON SLAYERS

Forget ghosts and ghouls. A new breed of games is exploring real demons like depression, suicide, alcoholism, and cancer





***“Don’t judge a man
until you have walked
a mile in his shoes.”***

W

by Kimberley Wallace

We say it all the time. In life we all have unique struggles and situations to face. The most evocative movies, books, and music deal with the ups and downs of life. We’re drawn to what’s real and meaningful – something we can relate to or view in a new light. Mostly, we just want to feel understood.

For decades, games have primarily been a tool for escapism. Plenty of people sit down with a game for a reprieve, a fun diversion. But as the nascent industry evolves, so do the experiences that games can offer. Not every game has to be mindless or take you away from real-life issues. More and more developers are using games to convey their personal stories, tackling heavy issues like depression, alcoholism, and cancer to make players experience what it’s like to be put in an unsettling situation.

Last year, *Depression Quest*, *I Get This Call Every Day*, and *Papers, Please* took many people by surprise by casting you in a difficult role, earning this emerging genre the moniker “empathy games.” Developers might not love the label, but it says something about their games. They’re meaningful. They introduce an issue or experience players might not otherwise consider, and the trend is speeding up. *This War of Mine*, *Silent Enemy*, *Gods Will Be Watching*, and *That Dragon, Cancer* are just a few bold games of this ilk on the horizon.



CHALLENGING THE SYSTEM

Big publishers don't like to gamble. Armed with market research, they know what makes money, and anything that strays away from their proven formulas is a hard sell. Vander Caballero knows this firsthand. He worked at EA for eight years on franchises like Army of Two and Need for Speed before breaking off to form his own studio. He learned the skills necessary to create games, but he also learned to conform. "I just wasn't happy because all the different ideas, all the culture... everything has to fit around teenage power fantasies," Caballero says. "And the moment that you were stepping out of that you were 'acting weirdly.'"

Caballero desired fulfillment. He felt blessed to work on video games, but wanted to create something more meaningful and personal, something different, a scary word for any publisher. "Now I don't feel like I was actually weird, but at the same time, I felt like I was a weirdo," he says. "I [kept thinking] am I wrong? Is something wrong with me? And [then] I [realized] I'm not wrong. It's the system that's wrong."

Coming to this realization, Caballero left EA

and risked forming his own studio, Minority, in 2010. "I wanted to see if I could make it because I was ready to leave the game industry," he says. With a low budget and the desire to come out on console, Caballero had to think of what type of story to tell, so he looked back at his life as a gamer. "I went to my childhood and I remember playing Mario for hours and hours and that was my escape, but there was this frustration every time I came back to reality because it wasn't helping," he says. "I could defeat all the evil guys in Mario and Zelda, but then when I came back to my reality nothing that I learned or experienced helped me in my life. It was a sad return to life every time. Then I [thought], 'What if I do a game about how to defeat my alcoholic father, but in a meaningful way? For relief.' It took me many years to defeat my father and it was not through violence. It just clicked in my head that's what I'm going to do."

The idea didn't end Caballero's troubles though. As he started pitching the prototype, he felt the familiar resistance he did at EA. "Every game producer that I pitched the idea of *Papo & Yo*, who saw the prototype, was like, 'No. No. No. You cannot do that. You have to change this. You have to change that,'" Caballero says. "Again, I started feeling weird. Then I [thought] this is wrong. It should not be that way."

Caballero eventually got a call from Catherine Bainbridge, who had a background in documentary and fiction programming and was looking to get involved with video games. For the first time, Caballero felt comfortable talking about the game he was making. A partnership was born. Having a collaborator who had a background outside of games and had already tackled complex subjects was an asset for Caballero, who thinks the video game industry still has a lot to figure out. "In the big studios, no one knows how to [tackle difficult subjects]," he says. "We have all archaic processes of creation. No one knows whatsoever what an empathy game is and how to create empathy. [That's why] we see the empathy happening in the independent movement. We have to rethink all the processes we have of how we create video games."

Papo & Yo went on to be a success for Minority. It first launched on the PS3, and the interest level was high enough that Minority released it on Steam about a year later. The experience made Caballero realize he wanted to keep creating games that dealt with complex subject matter. His next game, *Silent Enemy*, due out next year, confronts bullying. The studio also recently announced a game called *Cali*, a tragic story about the experience of falling in love with an A.I. avatar.

Papo & Yo shows the difficulties of dealing with an alcoholic father





Lucas Pope travels a lot and started paying attention to border control workers. He decided it'd be an interesting topic to explore with *Papers, Please*.

TACKLING NEW SUBJECT MATTER

Minority isn't the only studio focused on bringing forth more meaningful digital experiences. With easier access to the tools and more opportunities to self-publish [see *Game Development for Everyone* sidebar], people are using games to open up about a variety of topics. If they don't see a game that speaks to them, they can craft it. That's what drove David Gallant to make *I Get This Call Every Day*, a game that showcased his struggles working customer service at Canada Revenue Agency.

"*I Get This Call Every Day* was the first project where I felt I had something that I really needed to express," he says. "The thing about the particular job that I had...the frustration was in the doing and the listening. You don't necessarily get that if you're just going through a linear narrative."

For Gallant, the video game medium allowed people to discover the choices he had whenever someone called, something he felt was key to make players understand his position. "Participating in the act of choosing what questions to ask the caller I felt was [important] because I wanted to show just how many options I had. Every time I got a call, I could get angry, I could break the rules, I could do any number of things that I felt might have been better than trying to do my job, but those also had consequences. You can't see those consequences without the actual ability to [make the choice]."

Will O'Neill took on even more complex subject matter in his autobiographical game, *Actual Sunlight*, where players confront suicidal feelings. "It's a game that I wrote about myself because I didn't think the story of me, if it was depicted in a more traditional entertainment space, would have been done accurately," he says. "It's something I wanted to do for the sake of saying, 'This is what it's like to be a person like this,' and hopefully make a mark and maybe connect with other people who felt the same way who wouldn't have seen themselves or that

experience represented either."

O'Neill used the game format to showcase his main character's deteriorating mind state. "The other reason to put it in that format opposed to putting it just in a book is that it really allowed me to experiment with that feeling of declining agency over the character," he says. While *Actual Sunlight* is highly linear, O'Neill steadily took control away from the player as the main character got more dejected. Finally at the end, complete control is taken away and you're forced to do what Evan wants. "That was a really interesting way of reflecting the myopia and the sort of narrowing perspective he has as time goes on," O'Neill says. "And you can do that in a game, you can take that agency away from a player in a way that you can't do in any other medium and that's what was so powerful about it."

On the other hand, giving the player a complete sense of agency is equally powerful. Lucas Pope created *Papers, Please* to show the difficulties of a job like border patrol, where he presented conundrums agents often face. "With a game you can really put someone in someone else's shoes... even in a first-person shooter, a person is put in the shoes of a marine, killing people," Pope says. "You can do it with mundane topics like this, too. For me, it ended up being the perfect situation to put somebody in to make them think about something they normally don't think about."

Pope's game resonated for the difficult choices you have to make, like whether or not to let in a fleeing refugee despite grave consequences such as being unable to feed your family. He thinks having it in the video game space really enhanced this struggle. "As far as games...I can make the player make decisions," Pope says. "I don't have to lay out a story where the main character makes a decision and it's what happens. I can make the player go through the emotional journey of making a decision or seeing the result of it, or in the case of *Papers, Please*, you don't see the result of a lot of your decisions, so it's almost like you have to imagine what happens to the people that you deny or approve."



GAME DEVELOPMENT FOR EVERYONE

These days it's easier than ever for creators to experiment thanks to low-cost tools like Unity, RPG Maker, and Twine. With digital distribution platforms like Steam, which don't require developers to partner with publishers, indie games can now reach more people as well. In fact, recently both *I Get This Call Every Day* and *Actual Sunlight* were brought to Steam via Steam Greenlight.

Video game researcher Kim Shashoua, who hosted a panel at this year's Game Developers Conference about narratives as therapy, agrees the easy access to these tools and blossoming independent developers have made more of these games catch on. "I actually see the emergence of these types of games not as something that's totally new, but a logical extension of the advances in technology," she says. "Before, to make a game you would need hundreds of people behind you at least and all of this corporate support, and because this was such a huge investment, you really wanted to play it safe. Just from that dynamic, you would get games that you were like, 'Okay, yes, this thing is popular, this is fun — I think a lot of people would buy it.' That kind of economic pressure would be really limiting. What we have now, like the games *Depression Quest* and *I Get This Call Every Day*, both of those were made by just one person. So I see this as the economic freedom, the big technological equalizer where now individuals can make these games that they weren't able to distribute as widely."

David Gallant, creator of *I Get This Call Every Day*, agrees. "I definitely think there's a combination of the democratization of game tools, like Twine and to a lesser extent RPG Maker and Unity, stuff like that becoming more accessible," he says. "Not just for hobby projects, but for creating actual commercial, sellable games. That's sort of allowing people to express more personal stories with their work."



Seeing Joel attend his chemo days gives you a glimpse into his fight

THROUGH THE PLAYER'S EYES

Games occasionally tackle complex topics, but *That Dragon, Cancer* brings a whole new experience to players. The unpredictability and harsh trials of cancer aren't exactly something you'd expect to see in a video game, but the Green family wanted to create the game as they faced their young son Joel's struggle with the illness. The Greens, along with a small group of developers, have been working on the game to convey the experience, not only as a way to cope, but also to share with others the experience of going through the harrowing process. "Cancer has consumed our life for more than four years," says Ryan Green, Joel's father. "I can't help but create out of that place. It's what I do. It's what Amy [my wife] does. We create. There wasn't really a decision on whether or not to share our struggles, but more how best to do it."

That Dragon, Cancer puts you in the midst of their lives, playing with Joel, learning about his journey, and seeing cancer up close. "We want the player to walk alongside The Greens and share in their journey," says *That Dragon, Cancer* co-creator Josh Larson. "One of the ways we're trying to accomplish this sense is through immersion. This video game is about sharing events that have already happened, so giving the player agency over those events would distract from what we're trying to accomplish. Instead, the agency we are enabling is related to how those events are explored, observed, interpreted, and received."

Unfortunately, during development, Joel passed away due to the illness at age five. "Our design direction has changed a few times throughout the process," Green says. "Early on, it was important to me that the players see just how much Joel had overcome in his sickness. Just how many times he'd received chemotherapy. Just how many times he'd undergone radiation therapy. Just how many tumors he'd beaten. We wanted people to understand all that he'd faced and yet was still here. Since his death, I've noticed that it doesn't ultimately matter. What I'm finding is that rather than retelling the story of his

cancer, I want to share what it was like to love Joel in the midst of his illness. More than retelling the story, I want to retell the emotion."

What's telling is that while the game hasn't been released yet, players have already felt a connection with Joel by merely hearing about the project, letting his memory live on. The response has been more than those working on the game expected. Larson recalls one lady who walked up to their South by Southwest booth who said, "[*That Dragon, Cancer*] looks like my world. Nothing else in this room looks like my world."

But was there doubt that this might be too much, that players wouldn't be willing to confront something so real and sad? Larson thinks the video game space makes players more willing to go on that journey. "Games can create a safe space for players, and that is exactly where we want our players to dwell," he says. "In the same way players have faith in other designers to challenge their reflexes or their strategic thinking, we hope players have faith in us as designers to challenge their emotional resolve, their ability to love, and their ability to be graceful to others."



TRENDING TOWARD EMPATHY

The games industry is evolving, and more people are experimenting with ways to tell their stories within its unique, interactive parameters. Most people making games now grew up with them and they're simply part of their self-expression. Caballero says this is only the beginning. "The next five years are going to be really fruitful because the dam has been broken and more people are going to want to create and create amazing journeys."

Games have evolved so much, but the medium is still in its infancy. In just 40 years we've gone from two ping-pong paddles to games with full-blown storytelling and vast worlds. Not only is what developers can do with games changing and expanding, but the



Ryan Green wanted to let people see what it was like to love Joel, making it important to spend time with him outside of the hospital



people who've been playing them all these years are maturing as well.

This is part of why Pope thinks we're ready for these deeper experiences and sees the shift towards these types of games as just a natural outgrowth of maturing games. He uses himself as an example of someone who played games his whole life, and thinks video games are such a large part of this generation. "It's a common way to experience things and naturally it's evolved past the idea that it has to be a game where you jump on heads and save the Mushroom Kingdom," he says. "I think we expect more and we're more open to different kinds of games, so it's just natural that we get games that...have deeper messages that people are using to express something about their life."

The big publishers will continue to deliver triple-A titles, but the evolving medium will continue to become more inclusive of different experiences and people. Games that are just about fun like Mario aren't going to be displaced by these types of games. When we sit down to play, we often want different things – which is why we have so many different options for not only games, but their respective genres. O'Neill agrees, and thinks games that tackle real subject matter have their own place in the industry. "We're going to have art-house stuff," he says. "We're going to have stuff that is not hugely possessed of a commercial potential, but which will have small groups of people that are passionately devoted to it. I think you're going to see more and more growth of that kind of scene...we're not going to ding into Grand Theft Auto V or Call of Duty. It's going to be two separate things. I don't think that the two are against each other."

QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The burgeoning scene of games that tackle real-world issues is a positive development, but can they actually teach empathy? After all, there has to be a reason so many people are referring to them as "empathy games." However, the research isn't there yet and empathy is difficult to gauge, so it's hard to know exactly what these games are causing. "It's great to set empathy as a goal, but we do have to be wary of claims for empathy," says Mary Flanagan, director of Tiltfactor Lab, a serious game research center at Dartmouth College. "Because a game that claims empathy, if it's not tested and evidence is not gathered, can easily be some kind of other relationship... We do have to be careful about what we're claiming our games do because most of the time we don't really know."

But feeling empathy from a game isn't completely off the table. Flanagan says some studies in other media might be applicable to games. "There's some great evidence about fiction and being able to lose yourself in fiction and possibly being able to really get into the mindset of someone else in terms of an empathetic situation," she says. Flanagan spoke about movies that let you take on first-person points of view in narratives that

"increases this idea of experience taking" and "can lead to notions of empathy." Unfortunately, this has yet to be evaluated with video games. "We don't have great studies about empathy in games," Flanagan says. "Part of it is that it's very difficult to measure, and we don't have a lot of experimental research in games in general."

Flanagan hopes that we see more research emerge on if these games are actually promoting pro-social behavior. "We know very little about what games are doing [or] how we can use them well," she says. "We know them as an art form. We know when people are moved. We know when people are horrified. But I don't think we know very much about what games are doing and what their potential is, and that's why it's an interesting field right now. It really is a frontier, and I hope we have rigorous researchers who can come along and let us know and some of this stuff may be stuff we don't want to hear."

Art often imitates life, and we often create what we know. Video games are no exception. Hopefully, these types of games will grow past the arbitrary title of "empathy game," and just be accepted as another type of genre like drama movies or autobiographical books. Time will tell where it leads, but it's hard to deny this is an interesting new direction that's only bound to build more momentum. ♦



THE TREND CONTINUES: WAR AS A SURVIVOR

For years, games have explored the topic of war, but *This War of Mine* is set to shake things up. You're placed in the role of a civilian as war breaks out and must survive by scavenging supplies, maintaining shelter, and finding food.

The studio knows this game is different than anything they've done before. "With this one we're creating something we really believe is art," says senior writer Pawel Miechowski. "It's something more than entertainment. A regular game is supposed to deliver entertainment and fun, but with this one we're delivering a message."

The message won't be spoon fed to you with heavy dialogue; instead, 11 Bit Studios wants to take advantage of a video game platform. "The experience itself is the message, because it's going to be your experience," Miechowski says. "So, you're going to look at yourself and how you behave when the war breaks out. It's going to be you making good or bad moral decisions."

Miechowski believes the format works by letting people experience the situation at hand. "Games are perfect to talk about important things because you're going to be in the middle of the experience... you're [not] a spectator," he says. "If someone stops and thinks after playing *This War of Mine*, that would be really great for us as creators of the message." For more info on *This War of Mine*, check out our preview on page 76.

Console Wars

interview by Matt Helgeson

A new book about the Sega Genesis vs. Super Nintendo battle is coming to the big screen

Blake J. Harris' new book *Console Wars* is an in-depth account of the people and events behind the legendary battle between the Genesis and SNES. It's also being made into a documentary and a movie adaptation with the help of comic star Seth Rogan.

Sega of America's Tom Kalinske is the hero of sorts in the book, how would you characterize him?

Speaking with Tom Kalinske is what crystallized the whole project for me. Personally, what really appealed to me about Tom was that he really made this much more of a relatable and human story. To hear from Tom and to hear him talk about trying to balance his family life with his corporate life and keep things in perspective made it much more relatable to me. It makes it a more universal story.

How did you go about the interviews and research?

After I spoke to Tom, and I knew this was something I wanted to do, I started contacting people. Most of the people I actually contacted through LinkedIn. Once Tom saw how I wanted to tell the story and that I was serious, he helped me get in touch with some of the other important figures at Sega.

I interviewed 250 to 300 people. Of that group, probably about a little over 200 were Sega and Nintendo employees directly. Another large portion of those were Electronic Arts employees, as Sega and EA had a very symbiotic relationship at that time.

Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi was a feared figure in games. What was the impression you got from people who worked with him?

One interesting thing was that when you hear of someone like him running the company, you imagine all sorts of interesting run-ins with him. But, as far as I can tell, he only visited Nintendo of America twice during the entire time. So, everything I heard about him was very much second hand, except for Howard Lincoln, who did have a close relationship with him. Howard had great things to say about him. That said, everyone who had great things to say about him definitely confirmed that dictatorial nature that we've heard about and that level of fear and intimidation that he seemed to travel with wherever he went.

What were the internal politics within Sega's American and Japanese branches like?

The really interesting battle to me, which I hadn't expected going in, was the battle between Sega of America and Sega of Japan. In terms of the advertising, the Americans were very brash and wanted to go directly at Nintendo. They were very interested in the style of how they advertised things as opposed to the substance of the gameplay. That's didn't necessarily sit well with Japan. Sonic was created by Yuji Naka and Sonic Team at Sega of Japan, [but] the Americans had a hand in altering his personality, which was more from the marketing side. He originally had a girlfriend named Madonna. At

one point he had fangs. Based on the eventual success of Sonic, you could say it was successful. But there was resentment from Sega of Japan.

We in America know that Sega rose up as a challenger and either defeated or at least tied Nintendo in the market. That never happened in Japan. Over here, Sega was able to get about 55 or 60 percent of the market. Over there, at the most it was about 25 percent. So, you have people that feel like they were responsible for creating this hardware and software and the ones who are benefitting are [Sega of America].

After going through the whole story, what do you see as the key things that Sega did to make the Genesis a success?

The number one reason that Sega was able to be successful was marketing. I mean that in a larger scope than just television advertising. The slogan was "Welcome to the next level." That attitude was evident in everything they did. "Sonic 2 Day" was the first ever global launch with a street date. They spent nine months planning that and put what little financial resources they had into that. That was, in my mind, the first time that a video game was released with the

same sort of marketing fanfare as a Hollywood blockbuster film.

Nintendo was always dictatorial with third-party publishers. How did Sega gain an advantage with third parties like EA and Midway?

Nintendo did not do themselves any favors in terms of how they treated retailers and third-party licensees. The licensees had very strict agreements with Nintendo. At first, they could only make five games a year and Nintendo had the right to approve all those games. If they wanted to take several months to review a game, they did. To put it bluntly, a lot of the third parties and retailers I spoke to all said a similar version of "Nintendo had you by the balls, and they knew it."

You sold the movie-option rights to Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg, who wrote the forward. How closely will you be working with them?

One of my first steps was to put together a [script] treatment, which I sent to Tom Kalinske, among others. Not long after that I suggested to my manager that we try to contact Seth Rogan, because he's a big gamer and I thought that this might be a project he might be interested in. He was very receptive. For a little over two years now, we've been working with them to develop this documentary and, in turn, this story they are going to adapt into a movie for Sony with [producer] Scott Rudin. We're now in post-production on the documentary. They've been very wonderful to me. ♦



Blake J. Harris



Tom Kalinske led Sega through its battle with Nintendo's SNES



Dreaming Of Video Games

Researchers investigate how playing video games affects the sleeping mind

by Kyle Hilliard

If you play video games, then there is a high probability you've dreamt about one of your interactive experiences. Maybe you've walked the grasslands of Hyrule, sprinted through a science-fiction battlefield, or seen Tetris blocks falling into place while you were asleep. Whatever the scenario, video games are particularly adept at appearing in dreams, which is a fascinating phenomenon for those who study the sleeping brain.

Bob Stickgold, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard University, has been studying dreams for years. His curiosity was sparked while on vacation, where he had vivid visions in his sleep of the mountain climbing and white-water rafting he had been doing earlier that day. Stickgold was fascinated by the idea of daily activities incorporating into dreams, and was eager to study it, but knew taking his students or other test subjects to go mountain climbing and white-water rafting to analyze their dreams was a difficult and expensive endeavor. While complaining about this complication to one of his classes, a student brought forward the idea of substituting Tetris.

Stickgold is a self-admitted "massive, addicted" Tetris player, but the idea of including it in a study about dream incorporation had never occurred to him. He began implementing it into his studies, having subjects play the game before going to sleep and then waking them up to report on their dreams just as they started to drift off. He found a staggering 75 percent of his subjects reported the appearance of Tetris in their dreams.

Researchers conducted similar experiments in the past, placing violent or pornographic videos in front of test subjects, but nearly none of these people incorporated imagery from those videos into their dreams.

Video games have a way of infecting our unconscious mind, and Stickgold thinks it's an area ripe for more study. "I gave a talk at about this at MIT once, and 90 percent of the hands went up when I asked, 'Have you ever had this experience playing Tetris?'"

Emotionally Invested

The reason video games are so prominent in dreams, and in a much broader sense the

purpose of dreaming to begin with, is a question scientists continue to study, but Stickgold and others have a few ideas. Stickgold hypothesizes dreams are a recap of emotions as opposed to specific visual memories, simulating preparedness for the future.

"Video games, first of all, have a lot of effects associated with them – a lot of emotion," he says. "An emotion is a real good indicator for your brain that this is important by definition." Your brain marks those elements of your waking life as important and plays with them during your dreams to try and spark recognition.

Stickgold says in the same way a well-designed video game starts off easy and ramps up difficulty to remain consistently interesting, your brain plays with ideas, creating strange imagery in such a way to keep you continually invested in what is happening. This is why your dreams sometimes include confusing experiences or elements you don't like. "Your dreaming brain is happy with a five-percent hit rate," Stickgold says in regard to your dreams inspiring emotion.

Jayne Gackenbach, a psychology professor at MacEwan University and co-author of the book *Play Reality: How Videogames Are Changing Everything*, has studied the effects of video games on dreaming for years and similarly hypothesizes about the emotional impact of dreaming.

Gackenbach says most media we appreciate is of a passive or push nature. We watch and become emotionally invested, but without interaction, or "pulling."

"That high interactivity is going to increase your immersion, your emotional commitment," Gackenbach says. This is why your unconscious mind often revisits it while sleeping.

Lucid Dreaming

Gackenbach's fascination with video games and their effects on the mind began when she started watching her young son play video games. "I was impressed at how devoted he was to it," Gackenbach says. She began to read up on the topic and found studies showed a strong correlation between gamers and spatial skills – the ability to mentally manipulate 2D and 3D objects – which fit into her own studies on lucid dreaming.

Lucid dreaming is a state where the dreamer is aware he or she is dreaming, and can sometimes lead to the ability to change and manipulate a dream while it is happening. Through surveying the activities of dreamers, Gackenbach found even infrequent gamers were much more capable of dream manipulation. It goes even further, as Gackenbach's studies have also shown gamers are much braver dreamers.

"Very often, I'll say in normal dreams – as much as one can say that – we're the victim," Gackenbach says. A lot of people experience being chased and can't defend themselves or hide during a dream. That's not always the case with gamers. "What happens with gamers is they're more empowered in the dream," she says.

Gackenbach also found gamers did not experience nearly as many nightmares as non-gamers, or at least they didn't perceive their dreams as being scary where a non-gamer might. They also have stranger dreams. When I asked Gackenbach to explain why, she laughed and replied, "How many aliens do you run across walking out of your building when you leave work?"

Stickgold and Gackenbach continue their studies on the unconscious mind and the effects of video games, aware the consumption of the interactive medium is becoming increasingly prevalent. "We're spending so much time in virtual worlds, how is it affecting our consciousness?" Gackenbach asks in regard to her continuing dream studies. "The whole nature of consciousness is being changed." ♦

Warping Reality

How a group of Texas engineers brings video games to life

interview by Ben Reeves

Some fans show their enthusiasm for video game franchises by collecting every toy in a series or by dressing up as their favorite character. The engineers at Waterloo Labs use complicated mechanical systems and ingenuity to recreate their favorite video games in the real world. Founded in 2008 by four engineers from National Instruments, Waterloo Labs has already recreated Mario Kart using real go-carts, used live firearms to play a first-person shooter, and designed an eye-tracking system to control an NES (see sidebar for more). We chatted with co-founder Hunter Smith about some of these projects and what Waterloo Labs is cooking up next.

Where do you guys come up with your ideas?

We start every project with "Wouldn't it be cool if..." It's always interesting to see on YouTube that something like Mario does much better in Japan or countries where Mario is very popular, where things with cars and guns do a little better in America, Brazil, or Israel, which like action a little more. One of our most proud moments is shortly after the iPhone-controlled car video, Apple released an addendum to their apps store that said an app may not operate a motor vehicle.

What have been some of the more challenging problems to solve during your projects?

I'd say our most technically challenging

project so far has been the eye-controlled Mario. A lot of the projects we do are fairly easy to pull off because we're just connecting existing devices in a new way, but for the EyeMario project we actually had to develop a whole new system from scratch. We built our own biomedical signal-processing game, so we had to use some really hardcore engineering to do the math and the filtering and the circuit design. There was also a safety issue, because anytime you're hooking up electrodes to your face you want to take great lengths to make sure you don't electrocute your brain.

You also built a first-person shooter using real guns. How did that work?

In principle, all we did was detect impacts.

We projected a game onto a target board at a firing range. When the bullets impacted the board, we detected the delay in how long it took to get to the four corners, where we had mounted vibration sensors. Using a little bit of algebra, we mathematically determined where the impact was, and once we figured that out, we translated that into screen coordinates and auto-generated a mouse click at that location. Essentially all we really made was a big touchscreen that you slowly destroy as you use it. We figured out how to build a version of the same system using nothing but rubber bands, so we made it a lot safer and we actually brought it out to some local high schools.

One of your most impressive projects was a playable, life-sized version of Mario Kart. How did you guys build that one?

We found a go-cart track in town that was willing to let us have unlimited access to their carts. There are basically three systems that we had to control: the gas, the brakes, and the steering. For the gas and the brakes, we had a pneumatic piston that could pull or push on the pedal, so we could slam on the brakes to stop the cart at any point. Rather than engage directly with the pedal, we actually used a little servomotor to connect directly with the throttle on the engine itself. Normally we limit you to about 85 percent of total speed, but when you get the mushroom we open it up all the way to 100 percent. For steering, we attached a set of pneumatic pistons that could push the steering column back and forth.



Custom Made

None of Waterloo labs projects have been developed for commercial purposes, but the group gives away their source code and schematics online at Waterloolabs.com, so would-be engineers can pick up where the group left off and make their own projects. Here's a quick recap of some of Waterloo Labs' more impressive engineering feats.

EyeMario – With sticky sensors and some custom circuitry, the team built a system to track eye movement and allow players to play Super Mario Bros. using only their eyes.

Driving A Car With An iPhone – After buying a \$300 Oldsmobile off Craigslist, the team used robotic parts from a high-school science competition to control the vehicle while riding on its roof.

FPS With Real Guns – Using vibration sensors to measure points of impact, the team projected a Flash version of Half-Life at a firing range and used a loaded pistol to take down virtual Headcrabs.

Kinect-A-Sketch – Using Microsoft's first-generation Kinect and an Arduino microcontroller, the team was able to draw on an off-the-shelf Etch A Sketch using body movements.

Real-Life Mario Kart – The team hooked up an elaborate series of servos, pneumatics, and RFID tags to a wireless communication system, which allowed them to play Mario kart on a real go-cart track.

But how did you guys replicate Mario Kart's combative items?

We took RFID tags – basically the same thing you have in your security badge at work – and put one in each of the plush items we had. We had cRIO controllers on the carts that would look for these tags, and depending on which item they hit, the cart would act differently. For instance, with something like the mushroom or the lightning bolt, as soon as you took it out of the box, it's active and all of a sudden your throttle opens up or everyone else's brakes slam down.

Where'd the idea for that one come from?

A lot of my ideas come from boredom. I carry a notebook with me most places, and I just doodle these ideas down as they come. We have no shortage of ideas. I keep a spreadsheet, which probably has about a hundred ideas on it right now.

I think what we're doing is part of a growing trend of trying to bridge the physical and virtual worlds. But really we just want to have fun while connecting some dots for people. For example, the EyeMario system isn't super practical, but after we did that project, we had a number of people approach us and say, "Hey, my son suffers from a degenerative eye condition where he has to do exercises to work out his eyes and look left and right a hundred times." As you can imagine, getting a kid to diligently look right and left a hundred times can be a bit of a challenge, but if you could turn that into a kind of Dance Dance Revolution-type game, it now becomes a lot easier to convince a kid to do his eye exercises. That kind of implementation was not our intent with the EyeMario project, but the technology exists to take video game concepts and incorporate them into our lives in some really profound ways. ♦



Austin's Park n' Pizza allowed Waterloo Labs to modify its go-carts to create a real-life Mario Kart



Hunter Smith explains Waterloo's EyeMario technology to an audience at the Gadget Show Live expo in Birmingham, UK

A lot of what you are doing seems to be working to augment reality to make it more like our entertainment, so what do you think of new technology, such as virtual-reality headsets, which aim to augment our entertainment in a way that makes it feel more like the real world?



g.b.u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

Quotable

"My goal, first and foremost, is to make sure that everybody understands that Xbox is a gaming brand and it's going to be gaming first."

— **Phil Spencer**, the new head of Xbox



The Good

AFTER A FEW LEAKS,

Ubisoft confirmed the next game in the Assassin's Creed franchise. Assassin's Creed Unity takes place during the French Revolution and is coming to PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC at an undisclosed time. Last-gen fans of the series can also look forward to more from the franchise on their systems. Ubisoft says it's committed to the older consoles, but did not go into specifics.



The Bad

DESTINY composer and long-time Bungie music man Martin O'Donnell is no longer with the developer. According to O'Donnell, he was terminated "without cause" by Bungie's board of directors, but further details about the situation are unknown at this time. The composer worked on all of the Halo titles, and was with the company since 2000.



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A FIVE-YEAR-OLD KID figured out a way to bypass the Xbox One's password security. Kristoffer Von Hassel from San Diego wasn't deterred by the fact that he didn't know the password to his father's Live account. Von Hassel bypassed the system's second verification screen simply by entering blank spaces. Microsoft has since patched the exploit and given Von Hassel four free games, a year of Xbox Live Gold, and \$50 for his "work."

The Ugly

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Shooter Campaign Levels

by Dan Ryckert



All Ghillied Up *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

This sniper-centric mission is one of John Price's greatest moments. It tasks players with navigating the dangerous outskirts of Pripyat while silently taking out enemies and guard dogs. Stealth missions are usually dreaded in the world of first-person shooters, but it was a highlight of the original Modern Warfare.



The Silent Cartographer - *Halo: Combat Evolved*

The fourth level in the original Halo contains several elements of what fans loved about the Xbox launch game. Flying into the level via Pelican offers beautiful sights, the Covenant forces on the beach put up a great fight, and Master Chief cruises across the sand in his trusty Warthog. Combined with interior sections, The Silent Cartographer one of the most well-rounded missions in the game.



Facility - *GoldenEye 007*

Bond's second mission in GoldenEye isn't particularly long, but it fits in numerous memorable moments. Players can silently shoot off an enemy's hat while he's doing his business in the bathroom, hold hilariously nervous scientists at gunpoint, and eventually make an explosive escape after using several remote mines.



Ravenholm - *Half-Life 2*

Valve's masterpiece offers science fiction throughout most of the experience, but Ravenholm almost feels like Gordon Freeman was fighting his way through a zombie movie. One of the great joys of that game is using the already-awesome gravity gun to pick up buzz saws and send them flying through the heads of the undead.



Omaha Beach - *Medal Of Honor: Allied Assault*

Long before Infinity Ward became known for its set-piece moments in Call of Duty, it gave us a stellar video game version of the Invasion of Normandy. Like *Saving Private Ryan*, the intense action begins the second you step off the boat and work your way toward the shore.



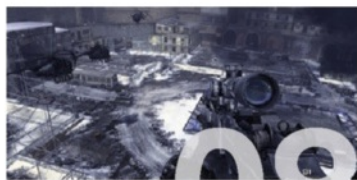
Fort Frolic - *BioShock*

The entirety of Rapture is a sight to behold in the original BioShock, but Sander Cohen's indulgent Fort Frolic is the stand-out area. Filled with slot machines, booze, and shopping, it was probably a fun place for splicers to kick up their heels before everything went to hell.



Hollywood Holocaust *Duke Nukem 3D*

From the first level of Duke Nukem 3D, you knew what the big guy was all about. Duke ejects from his crashing vehicle in the opening moments, and before you know it he's blasting pig cops with rocket launchers, spewing one-liners, and hanging out at an adult theater.



The Gulag *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*

Playing as "Soap" MacTavish, you're ordered to storm an old Russian prison in an effort to save a man known only as "Prisoner #627." After a shower room shootout straight out of *The Rock*, Soap discovers that the target is his old buddy Captain Price. In a thrilling end to the mission, the soldiers escape when a friendly helicopter extracts them through the gulag's roof.



Wade Elementary School *F.E.A.R. 2*

Evil kids are a surefire recipe for creepy vibes, and F.E.A.R. 2 offered up an area that basically serves as a factory for their production. A large chunk of the game takes place here, and the bloody elementary school/research facility is filled with disturbing drawings, unreliable lighting, and jarring Alma sightings.



Why We Fight - *Homefront*

THQ had high hopes for this new shooter back in 2011, but it ultimately failed to deliver. Things started off in impressive fashion, however, with a level that perfectly set the stage for its alternate reality. This fictional modern setting saw North Korea occupying an American town in its opening moments, but the intriguing setup never gave way to an interesting game.



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Three Early Access Games Already Worth Your Time

by Matt Miller



People have strong opinions about the value and wisdom of the early access model for PC games. The practice has been on the rise since the astonishing success of Minecraft, and now a large percentage of PC projects, especially indies, are offering players the option to purchase the game early and get a copy of the unfinished game. Many find the proposition appealing, but not every game is well served by the practice. If core mechanics, or that indefinable fun factor, remain elusive in an early version, some players may dismiss the game before the more polished version is finally done. I have mixed feelings about the practice, but I can't deny that in some cases, it's thrilling to play a promising title months before release. This is the case with the three early access titles I played this month.

Broforce is an action-movie fan's dream come true. In this side-scrolling action extravaganza, one to four players work together to blow up everything in their path, ostensibly on an ongoing mission to rescue hostages, but in practice for the joy of onscreen mayhem. The pixelated art depicts stage after stage of masked terrorists, flammable barrels, and constant explosions. Weapon fire and detonations can dramatically morph a level in front of you, alternately offering a path to a hard-to-reach hostage, or blowing up a platform that makes it much harder to continue moving forward.

Developer Free Lives has no compunction about tapping familiar source material, up to a point that I hope the team can get away with it without any legal action levied against them. While the names are moderately altered, players control characters clearly inspired by action stars like Judge Dredd, *Alien* hero Ellen Ripley, Walker Texas Ranger, Rambo, the *A-Team*'s B.A. Baracus, vampire-hunting Blade, and even RoboCop. Free Lives is shooting for 30 distinct playable characters by launch this summer, but the roster is already hilarious. These characters

make for a dramatically different play style from Rambo's blazing machine gun.

While I had fun playing solo, the game is clearly built with cooperative multiplayer in mind. Players race from left to right, bringing down bad guys as they go. When four players are present, the onscreen chaos is hard to avoid, and it's easy to accidentally bring down a friendly with an accidental explosive that gets out of hand. Other game modes are already present in the early access build, many of which show a willingness to let the action go off the rails in the name of fun, like one mode where all the players must race to escape the entire stage blowing up behind them.

Broforce is a machismo-laden dose of tongue-in-cheek patriotism, filled with American flags and callbacks to bombastic Hollywood action clichés. But its shooting is solid, and the high-speed platforming reminds me of quality releases like *Super Meat Boy*. It should be a good fit for players who like some laughter mixed in with their high-octane action.

unlock for play as you rescue hostages in any given level, at which point you instantly switch to the new character, complete with their distinct weapon and special ability, along with one additional life to try to complete the stage. This rapid-fire character swap fuels a lot of the fun, demanding everyone learn all the characters and how best to use them. Blade's high-flying melee sword slashes

For more on independent games throughout the month, check out gameinformer.com/impulse.

For more in this issue, don't miss our previews of *Orcs Must Die Unchained* (p. 75), *This War of Mine* (p. 76), *Below* (p. 77), *Darkest Dungeon* (p. 78), *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (p. 79), *Invisible, Inc.* (p. 80), *Defense Grid 2* (p. 81), *Hack 'N' Slash* (p. 82), and *Soma* (p. 83), and our reviews of *Child of Light* (p. 86), *Moebius: Empire Rising* (p. 91), *Goat Simulator* (p. 91), and *Monument Valley* (p. 92).



Broforce
PC, Consoles TBA



After the success of *Ridiculous Fishing* and *Luftrausers*, there's good reason to be excited about Vlambeer's next project. I dug into several playthroughs of the team's new roguelike, **Nuclear Throne**, and came away eager to see the final version. *Nuclear Throne* is set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland filled with giant scorpions, tattered brigands, and quick deaths. Players fight from one stage to the next in a top-down view of the battle, shooting off in one direction while frantically dodging enemy bullets in another. Finish off all the enemies and you're whisked away to another procedurally generated landscape of bad guys.

As the game begins, you choose between one of 11 playable mutants out to conquer the wasteland and claim the nuclear throne. Each of the playable characters has its own starting bonus and special ability. One character might begin the game with more ammo, another can slow down time, and another might have the ability to call in an ally in the midst of a fight. These starting features are only the beginning of your character build. As levels progress, you pick up various weapons, from simple shotguns and sledgehammers to plasma rifles and ion cannons. Your kills help to rack up XP, and if you level up, between stages you choose a new mutation that can alter your fighting style, like extra feet to increase movement speed, or rhino skin for added hit points.

Like most traditional roguelikes, defeat in *Nuclear Throne* is permanent. If you meet your demise it's time to pick a new mutant and start again from scratch. However, even in my brief time with the game, I quickly established skill with the different weapons and in confronting particular enemy types, and almost every playthrough brought me deeper into the seven playable worlds, which range from irradiated deserts to long-lost underground labs. *Nuclear Throne* is currently available on PC, Mac, and Linux, with plans for versions on PS4, Xbox One, and Vita. Vlambeer recently revealed plans to add two-player cooperative play to *Nuclear Throne*, which may make this a good game to try with a friend.

Even though **Dungeon of the Endless** is also a roguelike, it couldn't play any more differently than Vlambeer's action game. Set in the same fictional universe as developer Amplitude Studios' 2012 4X game, *Endless Space*, this new project explores some major twists on the roguelike formula. The player controls a team that has crashed their space ship into a dangerous facility of twisting corridors and rooms on a forgotten planet.

A number of features set *Dungeon of the Endless* apart. You control not one, but multiple party members who each have distinct abilities and strengths, from a sword-wielding female bounty hunter to a repair-oriented medical robot. Each of your team members must move around the dungeon, opening doors and confronting the dangerous alien life-forms that lie beyond. Meanwhile, the crystal generator that powers their crashed ship must be protected, and once an exit is discovered, escorted by one of the party members to

progress to the next level.

Complexity comes through exploration. As new doors are opened, players gain access to resources that help to keep the team alive. These collected resources allow players to build on nodes they discover in rooms, establishing turrets, missile launchers, and other installations to hold the line against the ravenous monsters. Strategy is all about determining which defenses to establish, where to build facilities that can increase your resources, and when and how to safely transport the crystal to the exit. Amid the roguelike procedural levels and permadeath, there's a touch of tower defense that makes for an intriguing mix. The game also has a robust inventory and leveling system for your characters, and new heroes get unlocked as you encounter them throughout the facility. The combination of strategy, exploration, and RPG flavors is rewarding, and even this early access build has a lot of meat on the bone to keep you busy until release later this year. ♦





The Elder Scrolls Online

The Elder Scrolls Online starts off slow, but as players move through the early game and into the world of Tamriel, the experience becomes interesting and rewarding. Players may feel like they don't have a lot of abilities or things to do during the first few hours, but behind the seemingly simplistic skill system is a multi-tiered web of customization. With inventory space, skills, and exploration limited for new players, it takes a good five to ten hours to really get into the game. Those who push through the early wall will find that things open up quickly, with a wealth of public dungeons, group encounters, crafting, unlockable skill lines, morphing abilities, a new hotbar available at level 15, and a solid player-vs-player alliance war environment. There's a lot to love, but it's a slow burn.

by Daniel Tack

ESO deserves massive credit for its graphics and sound. The game is beautiful, possibly the best-looking MMO on the market, and the voice-acting talents of Malcolm McDowell, John Cleese, Kate Beckinsale and more bring out the best in some of the storytelling. The narrative has a considerable range, from a deep single-player questline to surface-level fare that you'd find in most MMORPGs.

You only have four main classes to choose from, but don't be fooled: Class selection merely provides three skill trees, and you have dozens of skill lines to pick from. If you'd like to build an iron-clad, two-handed-claymore-wielding caster who summons pets, you can. If you want to create a cloth-wearing ranger who attacks from afar, you can. How about a support tank? Lots of options are available, and they're all surprisingly viable. If you feel like you want to change things up

later down the line, a respec option makes that possible.

The skill system in ESO is much deeper than it appears at first. Skills can be morphed over time to become customized versions suited to specific playstyles. While a run-of-the-mill, damage-over-time spell may not seem interesting, new options for it become available as players progress, like adding area-of-effect damage or reducing the time it takes to deal damage. Players also gradually gain access to a variety of abilities that are initially locked, such as the skills provided by the dungeondelving Undaunted or bestowed by becoming a werewolf.

Combat is fluid and interesting. Players manage health, magicka, and stamina during battle. Early in the game it feels a bit stagnant, but that improves significantly as skills and abilities are unlocked. Players have access to ultimate

abilities that are charged up through combat and can be dished out at opportune moments. These abilities are especially useful in group settings, as they often include ways for other characters to interact. As the tank, perhaps you have a shielding ability as your ultimate; other players can tap into that shield and gain benefits by pressing X at the right time.

While players have a variety of methods to level and progress through the world, traditional MMORPG questing is one of the main ways to level up and acquire new gear. A main storyline chain provides significant rewards, and some of the quests throughout the world have fairly deep stories and lore behind them. However, you still encounter a wealth of quests that amount to simply moving around from location to location while killing various monsters.

You should check out the public dungeons scattered throughout Tamriel's landscape. These contain skyshards, which give bonus skill points, and usually consist of a few rooms and a boss. Some of these contain questlines and additional group bosses. At the end of these small treks is generally a mini-boss that can be farmed repeatedly for loot.

Exploration and discovery play a significant role, but since it is a MMORPG, it can feel you're exploring carefully crafted theme park areas. Some cool things are waiting to be discovered off the beaten path, like treasure maps and other goodies, but traditional zone-to-zone progression is at work here.

Players who elect to get involved in the crafting system of ESO will find a simple-but-deep system that allows for considerable customization. Crafting allows players to upgrade gear, break down items for raw materials, conduct



research that allows creation of customized gear, and seek out and create special highly prized set items.

The group dungeon experience is frenetic and fun. The traditional MMORPG archetypes (tank, healer, DPS) are all still here in some fashion, but the roles are less rigidly defined. Players have to be aware of what's going on at all times, and every role has several responsibilities during combat. Your dual-wielding, heavy-armor



DPS slot may rush in to disrupt healers, your tank may be dishing out shield buffs to the group, and your cloth-ranger may drop a healing font that the group can tap into. The creature packs in dungeons are huge compared to other games, often including pulls with five to ten monsters. Bosses often have telegraphed abilities that need to be dodged, avoided, or dealt with. The grouping experience is made easy with a group-finding system and teleport, but at the time of this writing, the experience rewards for dungeons need a boost to make them on par with other forms of content.

Upon reaching level 10, players have access to Cyrodill, a massive PvP alliance war battleground. It's reminiscent of the sort of keep wars that players may remember from Dark Age of Camelot, and is a fleshed-out

experience that's a lot of fun. If you're looking for a MMORPG PvP experience, Cyrodill has plenty to keep you interested.

As with any MMORPG, it's all about the end-game. Players can choose to engage in veteran versions of dungeons to obtain skill points and special gear, PvP, and travel the world to complete quests from the other factions. While it did not roll out with launch, the new Craglorn adventure zone (not released at the time of this writing) includes content designed for four to twelve players, and supposedly functions as a major source of endgame content.

ESO has a lot of content to explore, and it has options for all classic MMORPG archetypes. Whether you want to dungeon crawl, PvP, or start a crafting business, Tamriel has something to suit your playstyle. ♦



interview



All For The Team

As owner of OpTic Gaming, Hector "Optic H3CZ" Rodriguez is an eSports jack-of-all-trades, guiding his team's efforts both as game casters and high-stakes Call of Duty tournament players. We recently spoke with him about his work and overall vision for OpTic.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Talk about your day-to-day duties as owner of OpTic Gaming.

I wear many hats here at OpTic Gaming, but my main one is to make sure that everything that needs to be done for the players is taken care of, making sure the team's house bills are paid for, because these guys' main focus is gaming. I've lived a life where I worked 40 hours a week at a corporate office in a cubicle. These guys, all they know is video games. Because I was older and had at least some experience in corporate America, I had a small business sense as to what would work. When I started managing the team and became owner of the team, I decided I was going to be the team manager, the salesperson, [and] the director of operations. I was going to do it all because I had this vision for what this thing was going to become.

The entire team lives in one house in the Chicago area?

In June of 2013, the team and I agreed that if I got them a team house to live in, it would benefit the overall business, from the competition side to the entertainment side of video games. With having somebody who is experienced like NaDeSHoT [in the house], I knew the other three guys were going to be able to learn from him – and at the same time attract some of the fans that have already been attached to NaDeSHoT and OpTic. We started out in a house that had almost no furniture – all it had was the desks the guys play on and the office chairs. They all have air mattresses. They haven't even bothered to go buy regular beds, because all they do every day is work on their craft.

Are players under contract with you? Do they get a salary, or just endorsements?

Our organization was built on entertainment. By the time that I acquired the professional team I had already built a steady business where entertainment was going to pay the bills. It's more lucrative for players to come play for us because we've been around for so long that we have a firm grasp on how players can grow themselves into a personal brand. So for me to pay somebody a salary doesn't necessarily make sense. What I'm offering is a chance for them to gain popularity.... I [teach] them how to be their own personality on YouTube. Online media is a bigger payout because you're not relying on a paycheck from an organization at that point. We help with [endorsement] deals, and they do get a [portion] of the partnerships that we have as an organization.

What about competition prize winnings?

OpTic does not take any percentage of their winnings. We're very lucky to be in a position

to say, "We have our own business where we're making our own money." So there's no need for us to take money from the players. They're the ones competing. Not all organizations do that. It's a model that is necessary in eSports because you need to be able to make money. If you're dumping thousands of dollars to fly these guys across the country and overseas to compete and win, it makes sense for them to make a percentage of that. But we don't take a percentage; all the winnings are split evenly between the players.

When you're selecting people to be on the team how do you balance the need for guys that can win at a competitive level at tournaments with the need to have personalities that can connect with an audience?

I hit the lottery when I partnered up with my current teammates. I was lucky enough to partner with people who just happen to be really good at being funny and know how to be themselves on camera. My guys just happen to be really personable and really funny. It was a grand slam from the get-go.

You have a bunch of young guys who are playing an insane amount of Call of Duty living in one house. How do you manage the different personalities on the team or conflicts that might arise?

Part of the job is making sure that everybody in the house gets along. Competitive players are driven by competition and that has a lot to do with their personality and, at times, their ego. Everybody wants to be the best. That's what makes a good competitive person. When you're in a house with four competitive players everything is a competition. We just invited a former professional Halo player to move into the house because he's really knowledgeable about fitness and nutrition. Everything to him is a competition – who drinks their nutrition shake or their food shakes quicker, etc. There's always going to be a clash [about] who's the best or who's more popular or who does what the best. I've always been a very respectful person, so I've done a very good job at respecting the way people are.

How do you value raw individual skill in each player versus the chemistry a team that can play together?

Anybody can have good chemistry when they're winning. The chemistry that somebody needs to be to be successful is the chemistry that works when times are at their worst. If these guys get along outside the game, the in-game stuff is going to work itself out. [Maybe] it's one player using one gun, and the team saying "Hey you need to use a different one." Because they're so close and friendship is there, it will be a lot easier for him to agree with his friends as opposed to just his teammates.

How important is placing and winning the big tournaments to OpTic?

Now that we're in this position and now that we don't really need to compete in order to make a living off of our passion and our love of video games, it has become something that we want more than anything. Winning is the only thing that is not going right for us now. Winning to us is much more than prize money – we can live with or without that – but it's winning, it's that championship, it's that number one spot that really drives these guys.

You placed third in the recent Call of Duty championships. Were you pleased with that result?

We won first place on the first-ever Call of Duty championships. In 2013, we placed third, and this year again we placed third. It was the second time my team played together on LAN, and that always changes people. Playing online is one thing, but once you get to LAN it is a completely different game. There are no connectivity issues. You're in a live setting with your opponent literally feet away from you. I have to be honest, I thought we were going to be top eight at best, so for them to run through teams that were constantly beating us in previous tournaments and online tournaments – it was a great accomplishment. I'm very proud of them.

Has the new popularity of MOBAs like League of Legends negatively affected the popularity of Call of Duty or other shooters?

I think eSports as a whole is growing. Obviously, the MOBAs and PC gaming as a whole is leading the charge on that, but that doesn't necessarily mean that Call of Duty or shooters as a whole are suffering. We're still in our infancy stages. It's big, but it not as big as it could be. If we focus on doing everything right, from the developer all the way down to the professional player, as long as everyone does their job the way that they should be doing their job, I think that it will continue to grow. As an example, NaDeSHoT, the most popular eSports player in the world in December of 2012, he had, I believe, 15,000 followers on twitter. He sits at 520,000 followers on Twitter today. In [two] years, he has grown tremendously.

What are your goals for OpTic in the next few years?

Expanding is always in front of us. I know, at one point or another, I'm going to have to grow with eSports and pick up a League of Legends team. As it stands, it's something that is in the future. As big as we are right now, there is so much more room for improvement. We need to hire to help me with the things that I need help with. As a company we've reached a plateau where we need to hire a salesperson to represent the 48-52 million monthly impressions that we get across our network. We need to start getting other brands involved. We need to make them aware that this is a thing, this is happening and it's growing. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

**1993
COMING TO AMERICA**
At age 13, Rodriguez and his family move to the U.S. from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

**2007
BIG BUSINESS**
After a few years working in the mortgage industry, Rodriguez gets a job as an analyst at insurance giant AIG

**2009
MAKING A BREAK**
After uploading his first Call of Duty videos to YouTube, Rodriguez decides to make gaming a profession, forming OpTic Gaming, focusing on gameplay-video content

**2010
A NEW FACE**
Rodriguez meets Matt "NaDeSHoT" Haag, who joins OpTic's new competitive Call of Duty team. NaDeSHoT will become one of pro gaming's most popular players

**2011
THE PRIZE**
At Activision's Call of Duty XP convention, which features \$1 million in cash prizes, OpTic takes first place, winning \$400,000

**2011
BIG SPLASH**
OpTic makes waves on the professional gaming circuit with by winning the Call of Duty: Black Ops Championships at the 2011 MLG Providence tournament

**2014
MAJOR LEAGUES**
Already popular on YouTube, OpTic Gaming signs a deal with MLG to provide original video content for the MLG website

**2014
IN COMPETITION**
The OpTic Gaming team places third in the Call of Duty Championship, winning \$120,000. The company also announces that it will now have two competitive teams

THE **NEW** GENERATION OF **HEADSETS**



1 Sony Gold Wireless Headset

PS4 • Xbox One (chat adapter required) • PS3 • Vita

Sony's new Gold Wireless headset rides somewhere in between its lackluster Pulse and the exceptional Pulse Elite brands. The ill-fitting over-the-ear cups don't fully seal against your head and let in a bit of outside sound, but they are nicely padded and comfortable. The garish blue band on the inside is another minor quirk, but aesthetics aside, the Gold scores points where it counts: performance and versatility. Being wireless, the Gold doesn't share the same stereo-only limitation of the other headsets on this list. Granted, Sony's cheating with simulated surround sound, but the difference is a noticeable improvement and helps set it apart from other, similarly priced headsets. The hidden microphone is ideal for those who don't want a boom mic in front of their face and does an impressive job gating out ambient noise. Wireless connectivity is done via a dongle on the PS3 and PS4, but there is also an auxiliary

3.5mm jack for use with the Vita, mobile devices, or even the Xbox One (if you have the chat adapter).

VERY GOOD 

\$99.99 | sony.com

1

by Jason Oestreicher



2

BEST VALUE

2 Tritton Kama

PS4 • PS3

Admittedly, our expectations were low after noting the Kama's price point and cheap build quality. However, performance-wise, this Tritton wired headset is an overachiever that delivers impressive sound and microphone quality for its price. The ear cups are on the small side and the band feels as though it's one adjustment from snapping in half, but budget-minded gamers with a gentle hand (and small head) will be hard pressed to find a better value.

AVERAGE

\$29.99 | tritonaudio.com

3 Microsoft Official Xbox One Headphones

Xbox One

Microsoft's official wired headset serves as a significant upgrade to the Xbox One's pack-in headset, but it doesn't stand out when compared to the other headsets on this list. Construction, game audio, and chat quality are solid across the board, but not exceptional. Perhaps the most notable feature is the oversized, cushy ear cups. The headset is comfortable and breathes well, which makes it great for extended gaming sessions.

AVERAGE

\$79.99 | xbox.com

4 Polk Audio 4Shot

Xbox One • Mobile

With its steel headband and stitched leatherette padding, Polk Audio's 4Shot looks and feels like a luxury wired headset. Audio quality is impressive for stereo sound, but the near-field microphone is abysmal for voice chat. Polk has owned up to this oversight and is now offering a free boom mic attachment to customers, but this upgrade is only a marginal improvement.

LIMITED APPEAL

\$159 | polkaudio.com

5 Turtle Beach Ear Force XO Seven

Xbox One

Turtle Beach's Ear Force XO Sevens may not be the most comfortable of the bunch – the stiff construction and all-too-tight ear cups put a lot of pressure on the head – but it makes up for this with exceptional sound and voice chat. The 50mm speaker drivers cleanly separate sound and pump out loud bass. The bass is a bit muddy, which doesn't make them ideal for music, but it's just fine for gaming. If you only have an Xbox One and play a lot of multiplayer games, this wired headset might be a clear choice for you.

VERY GOOD

\$159 | turtlebeach.com



3



4



5

Will These Headsets Work With Other Consoles?

The short answer is yes, but getting each headset to work with an unlisted console isn't always simple. The Tritton Kama and Sony Gold Wireless Headset will work with the Xbox One, but you'll have to buy an Xbox One Stereo Headset Adapter, which is sold separately for \$24.00. Similarly, the Turtle Beach, Polk, and Microsoft branded headsets will work with PlayStation 4 systems, but first you'll need to go into your PS4's system settings, select Devices and then Audio Devices to enable them. You also won't be able to adjust these headsets' mic or speaker volume unless you are in this menu, which isn't convenient during the middle of a match. Unfortunately, that is the price for cross compatibility.

Media Shelf



COSMOS: A SPACETIME ODYSSEY

Three decades later, celebrity astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson resurrects Carl Sagan's beloved science series with 13 new episodes exploring the mysteries of the universe.

\$59.98
cosmosontv.com

THE DEVIL'S WORKSHOP BY ALEX GRECIAN

After four vicious murderers escape from a London prison in 1890, they seek retribution against the men who sent them to jail in this next entry of Alex Grecian's historical thriller series Scotland Yard's Murder Squad.

\$26.95
us.penguingroup.com

EASTBOUND & DOWN: SEASON 4

Loudmouthed former major-league pitcher Kenny Powers settles down as an assistant manager at a car-rental outlet. But his vices prove difficult to escape, and Kenny's arrogance eventually drives him to pursue fame once again in the final season of HBO's hit comedy series.

\$29.98
hbo.com

LUFTRAUSERS THE OFFICIAL SOUNDTRACK

Vlambeer's heart-pounding indie shooter has a soundtrack to match its intense action. Luftrausers' soundtrack evolves as you customize your aircraft, but the original soundtrack features all the base tracks from the game as well as five original songs used elsewhere.

\$8.29
kozilek.com

Esports Evolved

To continue the growth of competitive gaming, companies need to focus on the right things



by Josh Olin, Turtle Rock Studios

A

s great as it is to see so many organizations rallying behind eSports, I can't emphasize enough how important it is that we're all speaking the same language here. The reality is, eSports is still in its infancy. This means that, if we as an industry of gamers are going to propel competitive eSports into a truly sustainable business model, we're better off working together than against each other.

For some people in the biz, this is intuitive. For others, this mindset may take some getting used to. Some companies are stuck in the mindset of fiscal quarters and investor relations, and they evaluate and present their eSports footprint accordingly. This, to me, is a major threat to the evolution of eSports in this early stage.

I'll begin with an example. After a major eSport event, Company X issues a press release: "Game X Pulls In Over 8 Million Unique Viewers To World Championship." They go on about setting viewership records, and then pop champagne, pat each other on the back, and celebrate their success.

Then comes the postmortem. Any smart organization will concede that there's always room for improvement. They'll begin identifying those areas for the next year.

The danger arises in this stage. The problem is Company X in this example truly believed their success was adequately measured. Satisfied with how many viewers they pulled, Company X begins evaluating their areas of improvement for the following year focused around the wrong metrics entirely. The improvements that are made aren't necessarily helping eSports to evolve, so much as they are helping the PR hype machine set new records – records that ultimately don't matter.

Let's use Game X's World Championships as the example again – "Pulling in over 8 million unique viewers worldwide!" If you think about that metric, why would it be a surprise to anyone? When Company X has Twitter accounts with over two million followers, a Facebook account with 15 million fans, an email newsletter with over 20 million subscribers, and a bunch of partners pushing the same event to their millions of customers, why is convincing 8 million of them to click on a URL viewed as an accomplishment at all? To me, that's a given. Anybody could have pulled that kind of viewership when they had that kind of marketing and communications reach. If I had a reach that large, I could send out links to the World Championships of Jenga and pull in those kinds of unique viewers.

Measuring unique viewers is a marketing boast, not an eSports accomplishment. When evaluating your eSports organization, and the people involved in putting on your events, it's critical you know the right ways to measure their success and to hold them accountable for their performance. Otherwise, eSports will suffer.

Average view time is a metric I can get behind. If Game X pushed 8 million unique viewers to a stream, but the average view time of that stream was merely 3 1/2 minutes, that tells me their eSports programming was not engaging. That means people were loading the stream, and getting bored in just a few minutes time. With that in mind, do you still believe Company X should be popping champagne?

How about returning visitors? Over a three-day eSport spectacle, how many people who viewed on day one came back on days two and three? What kinds of conclusions should you be drawing based on those percentages? To me, that's much more valuable data than the big marketing number in a press release.

Let's take a deeper look at the data. When I put on an eSports event, this is what I look at: When do people leave the stream? Do they leave during a match? Do they leave after a match? Do they leave during long shoutcaster segments? Do they leave during sizzle videos/interviews? Which

specific parts of my eSports broadcast are causing what kinds of user behaviors, and how can I improve my live programming to provide the most engaging viewing experience possible?

It's this thought process that I fear some of the current forces in the games and eSports biz are missing. I want to get this sound bite out there in the hopes that more people start thinking in this way and collaborating. Not all companies behind eSports are doing it the way Company X is in this example, which is a good thing. But through some of my consulting gigs I've encountered my fair share of game companies that are starting to look at eSports as a buzzword they must hit – that checkmark they need to make sure to include in their organization – and aren't necessarily thinking about the discipline in a way that will actually benefit eSports and all of its supporters as a whole.

The numbers aren't everything, mind you. A critical discipline in software development and live services (including game development) is user experience. eSports is no different. There it's important to consider the experience of the viewer at home when putting on a live broadcast, which often have entirely different and unique sets of considerations than that of the core game you designed. For example: switching sides after every round helps create balance for the game, but is a confusing user experience from the spectator's perspective. Not showing the team names in-game on every screen is also very confusing for new viewers unfamiliar with the individual players on each pro team's roster. It's important to fully understand such spectator UX implications, and program your content accordingly.

Let's work together to share what we've learned, and move forward with a mutual understanding of what it takes to find entertainment in watching professional players compete. I promise it's what's best for all of us; game developers, journalists, publishers, sponsors, and gamers. ♦

Olin's credits include working on both *Call of Duty* and *League of Legends*. To engage him in conversation about this topic you can reach him on Twitter: @JD_2020



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



03 Murdered: Soul Suspect



03 WildStar



06.1



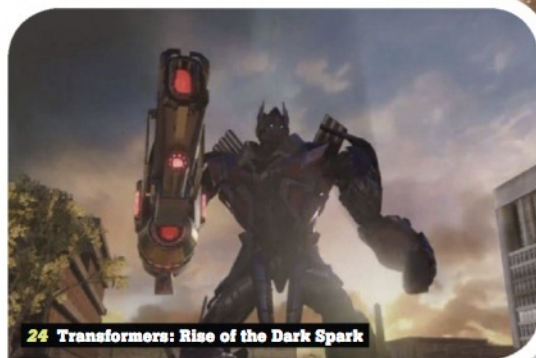
10.1 Enemy Front



10.1



13



24 Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark



25



27.1

June

03 New Releases

- › *Falling Skies* – Season 3 (Blu-Ray, DVD)
- › *Hyperdimension Neptunia PP* (PS3)
- › *Murdered: Soul Suspect* (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- › *Star Trek: The Next Generation – Season 6* (Blu-Ray, DVD)
- › *WildStar* (PC)

06.1 Channeling Bill Murray

With his experience in *Minority Report*, *War of the Worlds*, and a crazy space religion, Tom Cruise is one of the biggest names in science fiction. He returns to the future in today's theatrical juggernaut, *Edge of Tomorrow*. The story looks to be a cross between *Groundhog Day* and *Starship Troopers*, with Cruise's character caught in a cycle of death and rebirth amid an alien war. We're hoping for a Bill Murray cameo... or at least Chris Elliott (not Andie MacDowell, though).

06.2 TV Premiere

Orange Is the New Black returns for a second season on Netflix today.

10.1 New Releases

- › *300: Rise of an Empire* (Blu-Ray, DVD)
- › *Enemy Front* (PS3, 360)

10.2 E3 2014

All signs point to virtual reality being the buzz of this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, which starts today in Los Angeles' Convention Center. As always, gameinformer.com is reporting on E3's minute-to-minute developments, and live streaming and blogging the Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo press conferences.

13 Jonah Hill Day

Today marks the release of two big movies at the box office: *How to Train Your Dragon 2* and *22 Jump Street*. One is a movie for kids, and the other is a movie for idiots, so you might not think they have much in common. You're wrong. Hollywood superstar Jonah Hill is in both of them! We hereby proclaim today "Jonah Hill Day." To celebrate, you should get a perm like Mr. Hill, then go watch *Superbad* again.

18 Games For Health

Games for Health is a three-day expo held in Boston, where game developers and health-care specialists discuss how video games can be used to improve people's lives. This show offers discussions and demos related to exercise, therapy, education, and more.

22 TV Premieres

The first episode of *True Blood*'s final season hits HBO today, and *Falling Skies* kicks off another season on TNT.

24 New Releases

- › *Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark* (PS3, Xbox One, PS3, 360, Wii U, 3DS)
- › *Tropico V* (PC)
- › *Xblaze: Code Embryo* (PS3, Vita)

25 Saga Turns 20

If you haven't been reading Brian K. Vaughan's excellent *Saga* series yet, you're missing out on one of the best comic books in years. In *Saga* issue 20, Image Comics' solicitation simply states, "something terrible happens." Catch up on the series, and then hit your comic shop today to grab this issue.

27.1 Too Many Games 2014

Held in the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center, Too Many Games is a show filled with classic-game vendors, panels, concerts, and an indie-game showcase. Concerts include Powerglove and Mega Ran.

27.2 Age Of Michael Bay

Today's theatrical release, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, is the fourth installment in this series. It has the job of winning back fans after the lackluster second and third entries, which sucked. Maybe Michael Bay's robots and explosions shtick is getting old, but at least this series can still bank on the star power of Shia LaBeouf and Megan Fox. From what we hear, both of their careers are taking off!

2014

CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE



FACING FORWARD

SLEDGEHAMMER PREPS CALL OF DUTY FOR THE FUTURE

Publishers and developers have always struggled to stay on top of the ever-changing gaming industry. In the gamer's everlasting pursuit of the next great thing, nothing is sacred. Former blockbuster franchises like Final Fantasy, Doom, and Medal of Honor, which were once considered untouchables, have fallen from the forefront of gamers' minds. Mainstream phenomena like Rock Band and the Wii's motion control seemed to disappear as quickly as they arrived on the scene.

With Call of Duty, thus far Activision has managed to survive franchise fatigue, legal battles, and overwhelming backlash from a vocal community. Even with its proven longevity, no series can survive without adapting and preparing for the future. One of the biggest steps the publisher is making in this dedicated new-generation effort is to shift to a three-year development cycle that replaces the two-year system Infinity Ward and Treyarch have worked with in the past. Staffed by several key members of the original Dead Space team, Sledgehammer Games is the first studio to reap the benefits of the added development time. As the first Call of Duty built for the new generation of consoles, the first to receive added time for innovation and iteration, and the first entry in years to be tackled solely by a new studio, Activision hopes Advanced Warfare is poised to stand as the torch-bearer for the future of the franchise.

» **RELEASE**
November

» **DEVELOPER**
Sledgehammer
Games

» **PUBLISHER**
Activision

» **STYLE**
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

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

by Dan Ryckert





AFTER 10 ENTRIES IN THE MAIN
SERIES, IT'S BECOME CLEAR
THAT ACTIVISION IS AWARE
CALL OF DUTY MUST EVOLVE TO
STAY RELEVANT.

What began as a World War II series evolved into a gritty take on modern warfare with its fourth installment. Two studios with different visions have swapped control over the franchise in alternating years, offering gamers more variety and developers more time between entries. Over the last decade, the modern warfare trend slowly became the new World War II. Call of Duty, Battlefield, Spec Ops, Rainbow Six, and the failed Medal of Honor reboot have contributed to a flood of shooters set in (or near) the current day.

Moving to the near future isn't a new idea, as it's been done plenty by franchises like Ghost Recon, Crysis, and even Call of Duty itself with the mostly futuristic setting of Black Ops II. With Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare, the future is more than just a setting for Sledgehammer Games. The team is aiming to make their debut solo outing with the world's biggest gaming franchise represent the biggest step forward for Call of Duty since the launch of Modern Warfare in 2007.





Mitchell's EXO suit is the backbone behind Advanced Warfare's changes to gameplay

A FRESH START

Advanced Warfare's origin started with the uncertain future of its two leads, Glen Schofield and Michael Condrey. Fresh off the success of the original *Dead Space*, the duo departed EA with dreams of building a studio from the ground up. "We went from running all of Visceral — 400 developers on the main campus at EA, to two guys [walking out]," Condrey says. "We're sitting in a car going, 'Wow, all right. What do we do? Who's gonna come with us? What's the name of the place? How are we gonna get a facility?'"

They (along with many other key members of the Visceral team) found a new home at Activision. Under the moniker Sledgehammer Games, the team's first order of business was to develop a third-person offshoot of the *Call of Duty* series. With concerns that franchise fatigue could be a problem, a third-person entry that used the talents of the *Dead Space* team seemed like a satisfying remedy.

"Our perspective on this was that we were given a great opportunity to bring *Call of Duty* to a new genre," Schofield says. "We had a lot of experience and a team built to deliver quality like we did with previous games."

Roughly 15 minutes of the game were fully playable over half a year into the project, when Sledgehammer was approached with an alternative proposal. Infinity Ward co-founders Jason West and Vince Zampella were fired shortly after the release of *Modern Warfare 2*, and Activision needed a reliable studio to step in and ensure that *Modern Warfare 3* came out on time. "One day, a bunch of the execs come up and they say, 'Hey, great job on this. How would you like to work on *Modern Warfare 3*?'" Schofield says. "For the first game to come out of this studio, it's like 'Oh my god...'"

Scrapping the third-person project wasn't an easy offer to accept. "From day one, we started Sledgehammer Games to deliver our game," Condrey says. "Not to deliver somebody else's game or co-develop. We had set a vision for what we wanted Sledgehammer Games to become, and neither Glen nor I were going to make that decision on our own. We wanted it to be an all-in studio decision. The first reaction was, 'Wow...we have our game here. We have this game. Are we willing to give up our pursuit of that to join with another studio?'"

"It took a few days for the whole studio to come together and be ready to commit. Once that happened, we were off like race horses. It was part of our culture that we were all gonna make that decision together. We would have loved to make that [third-person] game. It was in a space that we enjoyed, but how does anything compare to the first-person blockbuster release of 2011?"

Along with the remaining members of Infinity Ward, Sledgehammer averted a potentially terrible situation and succeeded in delivering *Modern Warfare 3* in the same early November timeframe that the series has seen release in for years. Activision took notice of the studio's impressive work, and pegged it to be the third studio to join the series' rotation, and first to have three years to make their own game.

"Moving to a three-year cycle allows the teams a couple of things," says Activision Publishing CEO Eric Hirshberg. "First of all, it gives them the freedom to fail in the creative process. It allows there to be things that don't make it onto the disc. In a two-year process, every single line of code is like a race to the submission. We want to be able to try new things, try new core mechanics, and try new approaches within the game."

A near-future setting doesn't exactly qualify as a new approach in the genre, but the veteran developers at Sledgehammer are bringing an entirely new background to the franchise. Whereas *Dead Space* was tense and atmospheric, *Call of Duty* games are typically more akin to a Michael Bay summer blockbuster. Leveraging Sledgehammer's history, the studio had an opportunity to bring a new narrative experience to the standard *Call of Duty* campaign.

"As a gamer, *Dead Space* is one of my favorite narrative games ever," Hirshberg says. "It was a triumph of atmosphere and style and graphics for the time. I'm a huge fan of these guys' pedigree, and they've built a triple-A team around them."



AN UNANSWERED CALL

Before Sledgehammer was approached to help finish *Modern Warfare 3*, their third-person project was deep in development. "We had spent six or eight months on it, and were really getting into the story," studio co-founder Glen Schofield says. "We had some really cool mechanics. We had a big moment that I would love to get into a game someday, but it's not something we could do in first-person."

Rather than being a globe-trotting affair like many other entries in the series, this early Sledgehammer project was set in one specific area during the Vietnam War. "Everyone thought that war was in Vietnam, right?" Schofield says. "It was in Cambodia and Laos, too. We did a lot of research on that war, a hidden war, and there were thousands of miles of underground tunnels. We had the tunnels, and we were definitely going for some *Dead Space* moments. It was gonna be a fresh take on war, that's for sure."



TRIPLE-A FRANCHISE, TRIPLE-A TALENT

Previous entries in the Call of Duty series have reached out to the broader entertainment world, from Ed Harris and Gary Oldman voicing characters in Black Ops to promotional campaigns featuring Eminem and Robert Downey Jr. None of these contributions reach the level of involvement of Kevin Spacey in *Advanced Warfare*, however. The two-time Academy Award winner provides not only the voice of Atlas CEO Jonathan Irons, but also his likeness via a full motion capture that was performed at the same studio James Cameron is using for *Avatar 2*.

"My producing partner first told me about the project, and I was very interested," Spacey says. "Participating would be a first, and would introduce me to a whole new audience, which is always an interesting aspect to doing something new. I can tell you after doing it that the technology is just remarkable."

Spacey sees some similarities between Irons and his *House of Cards* character Francis Underwood. "I think they both enjoy making s--- happen and not playing by the rules," Spacey says. "Which in a game is the ultimate disruptive act."

AN AUTHENTIC VISION

With the team secured as the developers of the next Call of Duty title, Sledgehammer began developing its own game from the ground up. Its vision? Take the series to the year 2052 and span the story several years beyond that. Obsessed with authenticity, Schofield, Condrey, and the rest of the team researched military technology that's currently in conceptual stages.

Many of us have seen YouTube videos of projects like Google/Boston Dynamics' "Big Dog," a quadrupedal robot designed to traverse rough terrain. Sledgehammer spent considerable time and research developing its own vision of how similar technology would function four decades from now. The team consulted with experts like SEAL Team

Six's Mitchell Hall and collaborated with *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* producer/screenwriter Mark Boal. Sledgehammer clearly wants to create a realistic depiction of the future rather than throwing in some lasers and robots and calling it a day.

Authenticity is the key to making Sledgehammer's vision of the future more compelling than others in the genre, and that stretches into the narrative. Many games have featured generic private military companies as the primary antagonist, but the corporation at the core of *Advanced Warfare* is more nuanced than we're used to seeing.

Unlike a harbinger of bad PR like Blackwater, *Advanced Warfare*'s Atlas Corporation is often seen as a philanthropic group. Founded by its CEO Jonathan Irons (played by Kevin Spacey, see sidebar), the group is often the first to swoop in after catastrophic events and set things right. In this fiction, it went into Baghdad after the second Gulf War and did more in three years to repair the city than the government could do in 50. The company is free to act without waiting for governmental or congressional approval, and it has immense funds that create fast results. Irons built Atlas from the ground up into the world's largest private military, and it became the first corporation to be admitted into the United Nations Security Council.

Atlas may set up sandbags for hurricanes and drop food packages in warzones, but this wouldn't be Call of Duty if they weren't also armed to the teeth. That's where the player comes in as Private Mitchell (voiced by Troy Baker), a character with an intentionally generic backstory. Sledgehammer wants the player to inhabit Mitchell as much as possible, so it isn't taking a deep dive into his background. He also only speaks during cutscenes, never during actual gameplay.

"There was a cost to making that decision," says creative director Bret Robbins. "I can't necessarily have players be a submarine pilot and also a jet pilot - it stretches the imagination to make Mitchell be able to do all those things. The cost for me is absolutely worth it. Now I get to tell a single soldier's story throughout an entire campaign."

Technology like hover vehicles is already being researched in the Transformer program from Lockheed Martin Skunk Works





A COHERENT WAR

Previous games in the series have featured convoluted stories and plot twists that can seem impossible to follow. As creative director Bret Robbins says, the old form of storytelling used to be “disembodied voices talking over maps.” *Advanced Warfare* is taking a different approach, helped by the single protagonist system and fully rendered CG cutscenes that use performance capture. Most importantly, the team wants to ensure that objectives and missions are clear and coherent. Early in development, Robbins says, “I charged on the hill with my sword saying, ‘The player has to know what he’s doing during every mission.’”

Mitchell begins the game as a United States Marine, repelling an invasion on foreign soil alongside his friend Will Irons, who is the son of the Atlas CEO. After the battle, Mitchell is approached by the elder Irons with an intriguing offer: leave the U.S. military and join Atlas, gaining access to the world’s greatest equipment and weaponry. He accepts and is outfitted with the EXO suit, a piece of technology that has more of an impact on *Advanced Warfare*’s gameplay than any other.

In the modern world, functional exoskeletons have moved away from Terminator-esque science fiction and are inching toward reality. The Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) funded the Berkeley Lower Extremity Exoskeleton (BLEEX) project, which allows soldiers, relief workers, and medical personnel to carry heavy loads that a standard human would be incapable of hauling. Ekso Bionics, a private company based out of Richmond, California, currently develops powered exoskeletons that aid paraplegics and injured soldiers in walking again. Today’s technology requires many exoskeletons to be connected to hoses, wires, or bulky batteries, but several decades of iteration could very well make the EXO suit that Mitchell receives from Atlas a common sight on the battlefield.

“The machines now are fairly large,” says Michael Belfiore, futurist and author of *The Department of Mad Scientists: How DARPA is Remaking Our World*. “It’s mostly given over to the power supply and motors. That weighs a few hundred pounds, and it’s not yet at the point where it would be feasible for a person to carry all that weight. That’s one of the things we’re waiting for right now. If they can crack that nut



with a combination of better, lighter batteries and capacitors, then exoskeletons could definitely be useful for field work.”

Mitchell’s EXO is undeniably useful for gameplay, and players earn points during each mission that can be used to upgrade the suit with new features. In the middle of shootouts, players can boost-dodge toward cover, perform super jumps that propel them into elevated positions, cover ground via a zip line, climb buildings with magnetic gloves, cloak themselves with optic camouflage, and hover in mid-air. Many of these abilities seem far-fetched at first, but they may not be impossible.

“Cloaking [by 2052] is feasible,” Belfiore says. “I’ve seen experiments





Exoskeletons in the future will likely be much more mobile than the bulky contraptions of today



KEEPING COMPETITION ALIVE

Sledgehammer kept the focus of our visit squarely on the single-player experience, but it did offer some hints for what to expect from *Advanced Warfare's* online offerings. "We've had two and a half years to dedicate this team to a full, next-gen experience of *Call of Duty* multiplayer," says Sledgehammer co-founder Michael Condrey. "You can probably imagine the possibilities of a lot of the stuff you saw in single-player and how it would apply online."

The obvious implication here would seem to point toward EXO abilities contributing to the multiplayer experience. In a series that has featured sliding and diving as two of the only major navigational additions, the ability to boost-dodge around the map, jump significantly higher, and apply optical camouflage could make a major difference on the online battlefield. These features will likely be included in *Advanced Warfare's* version of the now-traditional co-op mode. Condrey confirmed that this style of mode would be included, but declined to elaborate on its gameplay.

Previous entries in the series have included eSports-friendly features, and that will be no different for *Advanced Warfare*. "The guys obviously think that eSports is very important, as do all the studios," says *Call of Duty's* global PR manager Kyle Walker. "As a franchise, we have a very specific focus on eSports. That's a very rabid audience and it's a growing category and we take it really seriously. We can't say much on that, but the studio is absolutely committed. We're gonna make that a major pillar of the experience."

where they are actually able to bend light around a substance. Advances in materials, some kind of meta material they call it, can actually shape itself according to different input, combined with a processor that's taking in the surrounding environment."

The EXO isn't the only advancement that Mitchell can make use of, as his entire arsenal is appropriately futuristic. Variable grenades can be switched from concussive to threat detection as they cook, with the latter revealing enemy locations via augmented reality in your visor. A grenade that reveals enemy locations may sound like something from a sci-fi movie, but the basis for the technology is already being researched.

"The Army and other organizations are working on very small drones, so you could potentially throw them into a building," Belfiore says. "It might be undetectable because it's so small, but it's sending back data. You can easily put that kind of sensor and processing power and transmitter inside a grenade-shaped device. In fact, there have also been experiments using existing Wi-Fi within a building. If you're going to a place that has Wi-Fi in it, you can actually process the signals bouncing

around from that to resolve who or what is in that room."

Sledgehammer's level of detail when it came to researching the future was even noticed by a group that could conceivably be using similar technology at some point. "There's a Navy research division out of Dartmouth, and they came to us," Condrey says. "They said 'What you guys are showing through *Call of Duty* are the same things we want to be building.' It was kind of nice to see the conversation flip around, from us being inspired by military research to the military being inspired by what the games are trying to deliver."

"We brought in experts from production design in movies to experts in the military to scientists and futurists," Schofield says. "People who make predictions and work for the Department of Defense and the Pentagon, and their job is to say, 'What if another [Hurricane] Katrina happened?' They have all these plans, and we'd ask them, 'What if?'"

This strong dedication to research is all being done to make sure Sledgehammer's vision of the future of war is as authentic as possible. We saw two distinctly different missions that demonstrate what we can expect.





The Atlas Corporation has access to the best technology in the world



ADVANCED HARDWARE

According to Sledgehammer co-founder Michael Condrey, *Advanced Warfare* is being built on a new engine. The stages that Sledgehammer demonstrated to us showcased an impressive amount of onscreen activity, particularly during the Golden Gate Bridge sequence. Realistic details were also shown on the smaller scale, such as character models with pupils that actually dilate.

Since last year's entry was built across platforms simultaneously, the end result on PS4 and Xbox One looked good but didn't blow away any new console owners that hoped for a more dramatic upgrade. With *Advanced Warfare* being built for new-gen first, fans of the series can prepare for a bigger visual impact.

TERROR GOES WORLDWIDE

Early in the game, a catastrophic attack occurs that Michael Condrey refers to as being "like a global 9/11." Details of this attack weren't revealed to us, but it was implied that major cities on numerous continents have been devastated by simultaneous acts of terrorism of some sort. The perpetrator is the KVA, a well-funded network of international terrorists.

One of the areas that remained untouched was San Francisco, but chatter over official government channels suggests possible terrorist activity during Fleet Week in the mission we saw. Mitchell begins in a Pitbull, which is a military transport vehicle that Sledgehammer says is its version of a futuristic Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle (MRAP). A suspected terrorist is spotted thanks to Mitchell's augmented-reality visor, and a pursuit begins on the highways of San Francisco.

Weaving through traffic, the player fires energy blasts (technology that's currently being worked on in the Navy, and doesn't require any tangible projectiles) at the suspect's van while avoiding civilian vehicles. The chase ends dramatically and abruptly at the Golden Gate Bridge, as the player's Pitbull flips over onto its roof. Mitchell uses the enhanced leg strength that the EXO grants him to forcefully kick the Pitbull's door off the vehicle's frame entirely.

Enhanced striking strength such as this should be possible in the near future, according to Belfiore. "These current kinds of forklift-style systems are able to do that," he says. "They allow a person to lift much more than the weight they could on their own. It's easy to imagine instead of lifting something, you could punch or kick something. I think one of the concerns is injuring the person using it. If too much force is applied inexpertly, it could perhaps break the bone of the person wearing it."

Coming to his feet, Mitchell spots civilians rushing off the bridge in a panic as traffic comes to a standstill. Tossing a threat-detection grenade behind a group of buses, numerous members of the KVA are

revealed to be fully armed on the bridge. Using EXO suits of their own, they boost up onto the roof of a bus and fire at Mitchell, flanked by armed aerial drones. By approaching an open car door, the player has the option to rip it off and use it as a shield against the KVA forces.

An intense shootout commences, and Mitchell and his Atlas squad successfully take down all of the enemy forces outside of the initial van. The player approaches the van as two KVA troops exit with their hands up in surrender. One reaches for his gun and is promptly shot. With the other being taken into custody, the player approaches the back of the van and opens it up. Without warning, a mechanical tray full of drones bursts out through the rear of the vehicle. These flying devices immediately attach themselves to various support cables of the bridge and detonate.

Attaching offensive capabilities to drones in such a manner is already in use, and this kind of attack isn't out of the question in the future. "Predator drones are already starting to be used like that," Belfiore says. "They started out as surveillance systems, and then all they had to do was mount missiles on them and now they can do a strike. Everything is on the table, now. If you can build a machine that is robust enough to carry explosives, there is no reason to think that such an attack couldn't be carried out."

In one of the series' trademark set-piece moments, the Golden Gate Bridge collapses. A one-two punch is then revealed, as a large portion of the bridge falls directly onto a massive aircraft carrier below that was celebrating Fleet Week. Buses, military vehicles, and Mitchell himself slide down the destroyed bridge and wind up on the deck along with plenty of debris.

The KVA is attempting to take over the carrier for its own use, so Mitchell has to act quickly and plant jammers on its turrets to ensure that the enemy can't access them. He keeps the carrier's final turret active, and uses it to fire energy blasts at invading KVA container ships as the chaotic demonstration ends.



The audio team behind Dead Space contributes greatly to the intensity of battles





UPPING THE AUDIO GAME

One of the highlights of *Dead Space* was its stellar sound design, and *Advanced Warfare* should be no different thanks to the fact that audio director Don Veca is one of the many ex-Visceral employees on the team. Despite the acclaim that his work on that game received, he's more than ready to move forward. "Dead Space was *Dead Space*," he says. "That was a long time ago. That's like bragging about being on the football team in high school."

With *Advanced Warfare*, Veca is looking forward to the advancements that the new generation of consoles affords. "We've had two and a half years to create brand-new tech to control and support this game," he says. "It's something like 10 times the memory since this is next-gen. With all this extra memory and new mixing technology, we don't have to compress everything. We can make things longer and let them breathe."

Call of Duty's primary competitor, *Battlefield*, is typically the go-to example of great audio, and that's something Veca is well aware of. "We have competition in this industry, absolutely," he says. "We're constantly monitoring everything they do, playing their games, trying to figure out what they're doing that sounds great and also saying, 'Okay, well that's not so great. Let's not do that, and keep doing what we do really well and retain what's useful.' Then we suck in as much as we can that's really cool from not just one competitor, but multiple."

In addition to Veca's expert audio design, the game's soundtrack features contributions from veteran *Metal Gear Solid* composer Harry Gregson-Williams. Can *Call of Duty* take the audio crown this year? Veca seems confident. "I think *Advanced Warfare* is going to be the best-sounding and certainly the best-mixed game ever," he says.

TURNING THE VOLUME DOWN

While impressive, our look at the San Francisco level fits in with what we'd expect from the bombastic *Call of Duty* series. It wasn't until we saw the Detroit level (titled "Aftermath") that the unique abilities of the team at Sledgehammer took center stage. A large portion of the beginning of the mission is focused on narrative, featuring Mitchell moving through a massive refugee camp outside of Detroit.

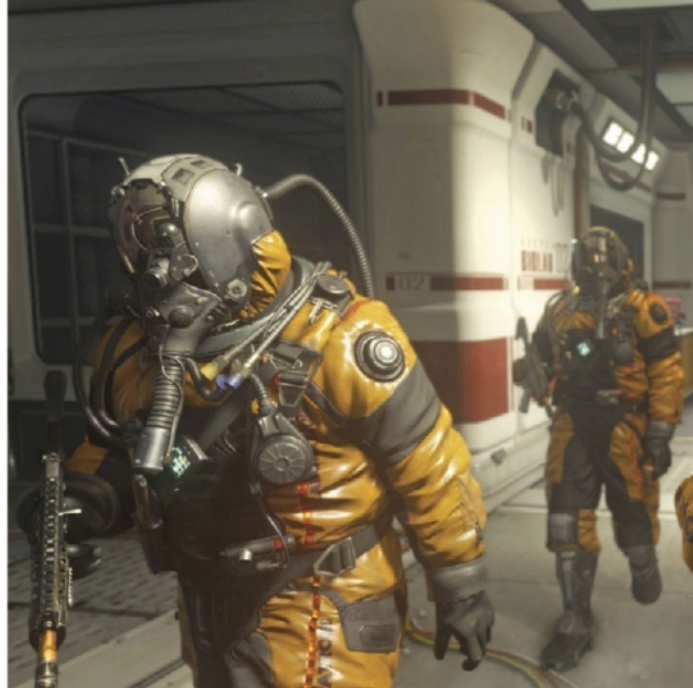
The Michigan city's current-day troubles pale in comparison to the state it's in here; it was one of the cities targeted by the initial KVA terror attack. Mitchell arrives at the camp via helicopter, while the impressive sounds of a thunderstorm boom above and around him. Atlas has set up this refugee camp, and their contractors are everywhere. One guard chases off a graffiti tagger, while another tells citizens from a stage that DNA chips are required for everyone. Nearby, a crowd of refugees begs for rations near a supply van.

After waiting in a scanner, Mitchell meets up with his Atlas squad mate Gideon and they both mount hover bikes. By syncing the bikes together wirelessly, the player is essentially on autopilot for the ensuing look at Detroit. Large Armored Security Troop (AST) guards in mechanical suits check the duo's ID before opening the ominous metal doors leading into the city.

With the thunderstorm still pouring down rain, Mitchell and Gideon get a firsthand look at the flooded streets of Detroit. Their bikes hover a foot above the standing water as the player can look around at various buildings that have been reclaimed by nature, vines stretching across their walls. Arriving at an old school, the two dismount their bikes and the player regains control of Mitchell.

Mitchell turns on the light of his suppressed SMG and begins to move into the dark, foreboding school. With the sounds of dripping water and wind coming through the broken windows serving as the only soundtrack, it's far more tense and atmospheric than the whiz-bang action that fans of the franchise have grown accustomed to. Even the sound of a light bulb suddenly shattering was enough to produce a brief scare.

Mitchell and Gideon walk over the shattered glass into a scene that seems like it's straight out of the USG *Ishimura*. A pile of bloodied bodies is illuminated by Mitchell's light, and they appear to be murdered members of a hazmat cleanup crew. Their suits are missing,



which leads Gideon to believe that the KVA terrorists are disguised within the city.

Continuing across the second story of the school, Mitchell is forced to shimmy across uncertain footing as most of the floor has long since collapsed. Suddenly, the narrow strip of wood that he's standing on gives way, and Mitchell plummets through another story to a cellar area below. Not long after he returns to his feet, a KVA operative disguised in a hazmat suit comes in to investigate. A quick-time event leads to Mitchell stomping on the enemy's foot and then stabbing him to death on the ground. When a lone backup operative enters the room, Mitchell fills him with suppressed SMG rounds.







SKYLANDERS
Trap Team

The EVIL SIDE

Of

VIDEO GAME ACTION FIGURES

W

ith over 175 million toys sold and \$2 billion in franchise revenue, Skylanders is the video game juggernaut that no one saw coming – except the kids and adults alike who rushed to stores to secure the rare figure variants. Just how popular is it? It outsold all of the top action figure lines in 2013, including Star Wars, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Marvel Comics.

Despite these impressive numbers, Skylanders was not the top selling action figure-based video game in 2013. That honor went to Disney Infinity, the new competitor in town that has almost 100 years of fiction and characters to pull from. This year, Disney is adding Marvel Comics' characters to the next Infinity title, a move that should catch the eye of an even wider audience. How does Skylanders compete? Through innovation.

Developer Toys for Bob hopes Trap Team brings a “wow factor” back to the Skylanders series. More specifically, the team wants to recapture that moment of fascination and uncertainty people experienced when watching an action figure come to life in a video game for the first time.

“I honestly think Trap Team is the boldest innovation since the very beginning,” says Toys for Bob founder, CEO, and creative director Paul Reiche III. “We think this game is going to fire up people’s imaginations.”

» **PLATFORM**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One · Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 · Wii · 3DS

» **STYLE**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **PUBLISHER**
Activision

» **DEVELOPER**
Toys for Bob

» **RELEASE**
October 5

By Andrew Reiner

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That spark of innovation Toys for Bob is banking on isn't immediately apparent. From the outset of play, Trap Team looks and functions like a prototypical sequel. All of the series' defining characteristics immediately jump into frame: the Portal of Power, the action figures that stand on it, the isometric gameplay they unleash, and Kaos' bid to destroy them all. The sum of these parts smacks of version four more than something new.

The only slight oddities that catch the eye are the redesigned Portal of Power and the unified design for all of the Trap Team Skylanders (called Trap Masters), who wield gigantic weapons that are translucent, yet colored appropriately to their element types. They look like they were ripped out of a Green Lantern comic book. On average, they seem to be just a few centimeters taller than Swap Force characters – the bulk of their weapons make them look bigger than they really are.

The portal is once again new. Yes, this means all of the previous portals tied to Spyro's Adventure, Giants, and Swap Force are not compatible with Trap Team. Lou Studdert of Activision's production team says this particular model is called the Traptanium Portal. While retaining the circular shape of the previous versions, this one is sleeker in design, with a thin, translucent surface for figures to stand on. The portal is not freestanding, and is instead attached to a rock structure. A tiny hole is visible on the structure's surface.

When I question the hole's purpose, Studdert points a finger at three crystalline objects sitting on the table in front of him. I see a gold hammer, a green eagle, and a blue totem. "These are traps," he says. "You insert them into the rock."

The oddly named "traps," while looking like unremarkable random objects, hold this game's most innovative feature. "They bring a game character to life in your living room," Studdert adds with a smile.

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A look at this installment's hub world

BOSS TRAPS

Before I'm shown what function the traps perform, Studdert places a new Skylander on the Traptanium Portal. This particular monster is named Snap Shot. He's a blue, bipedal crocodile who is a part of the new Trap Masters line of figures. He wields a crystalline blue bow loaded with a similarly colored object that appears to be a cross between an arrow and a sword. Studdert quickly shows me that it serves as both. Snap Shot can fire the arrow, which breaks apart into crystal shards mid-flight, and also use it as a melee weapon to fend off foes at close range. In addition to these attacks, Snap Shot unleashes violent waterspouts that are manually controlled. When you control the spouts, Snap Shot cannot move.

The first foe that I see Snap Shot square off against is a boss. "This is the Chompy Mage," Studdert says. "He's one of over 40 villains in the game." The battle plays out just like any boss battle seen in the previous Skylanders titles. Chompy Mage is an old wizard who sometimes speaks through a chompy puppet.

He also wears adorable chompy slippers. His attacks range from fire shockwaves that Snap Shot must jump to the ability to transform into a gigantic chompy that bounces around the arena, gnashing its teeth. Not much effort is required to fell this foe, who collapses to the ground, and is quickly covered in a force field.

At this point, Studdert turns away from the TV, grabs the green eagle crystal, which he calls a "life trap," and places it into the portal's rock. Within seconds, a green vortex appears in the sky over Chompy Mage. He screams and howls not to do this to him. The vortex rotates violently, and Chompy Mage is sucked up into it. He screams as he's lifted off the ground. His voices taper off as he enters the vortex, and carries outside of the TV down into the crystal that Studdert inserted into the rock. Chompy Mage is not a happy camper. He doesn't want to be trapped in the crystal. Whenever he speaks, the crystal lights up, flashing to simulate lip-syncing. The villain's personality comes through loud and clear through the portal-based speaker.

Skylanders: Trap Team's gameplay holds true to most of the established series conventions



THE POWER OF VILLAINS

If players wish to capture all of the villains, they won't have to purchase over 40 plastic crystals to contain them; they need just one crystal representing each of the eight elemental types. When a foe like Chompy Mage is defeated, you have the choice to either trap him in a crystal (if you have the corresponding element type – he falls into the Life class), or send him to a vault in the hub world, where he can be retrieved whenever you want to play as him. If you already have a Chompy Mage contained in a trap and you come across another boss requiring a Life crystal, you can remove Chompy Mage, who is sent to the vault with all of his attributes and stats intact, and add the new foe to the crystal.

When an occupied trap is placed into the portal, you see his or her statistics to the right of the Skylanders' vitals. Taking control of the villain, those two sets of stats switch so you can keep better tabs on the active character. If you are playing a two-player game (which is once again limited to just local play), the second player can also switch to a villain who isn't already in use.

Not only do the villains up the number of new playable characters in the game, they open up new combo opportunities. To illustrate this, Studdert swaps out the green crystal for a blue one to summon another villain named Chill Bill. This goofy looking troll uses a freeze ray to immobilize two foes called the Eggsecutioners. In a flash, he switches back to Snap Shot to smash them to bits with a swipe of his arrow.

The new Traptanium Portal features lights and sound for the captured villains that are contained in removable colored crystals



I-Wei Huang, Toys for Bob's character and toy director, says the team explored a wide variety of trap ideas before landing on the crystal. "We were thinking it must need an LCD or LED display, or picture, or projection," he says. "We even explored the idea of a physical cage containing the character. In the end, our audio team mocked up something and we cut a hole into a portal and prototyped things out. On paper it doesn't sound that cool, but when you see it, you totally believe that villain just got sucked in. We are really excited about that."

Studdert continues controlling Snap Shot. He's moving deeper into a level called Phoenix Perch, which is littered with birdcages and colorful fauna. He's tasked to locate acorns that, once planted into the ground, create vine bridges to different regions. As he plays, Chompy Mage continues his banter. Studdert points out that he's programmed to react to certain situations and regions. "If you keep him in the trap, you'll hear him say all sorts of funny things as you play through the game," Studdert adds. "But we don't need to keep him in there."

With one quick tap of the Xbox One controller's left trigger, Chompy Mage is summoned into the game, replacing Snap Shot. "We can now use him as a playable character, just like any Skylander," Studdert says. All of Chompy Mage's attacks used in the boss battle can now be unleashed to progress through the level.

All of the 40-plus villains players track down can be trapped and added to the ever-expanding collection of Skylanders' controllable characters.

Catching Up With The Story

Kaos' latest bid for power is commanding an army of feared villains. He attempts a prison break at Cloud Cracker Prison, but botches it and ends up blowing up the prison in the process, which just happens to be constructed out of a material called Traptanium. The explosion launches the Traptanium shards and villains to Skylands. The Skylanders are enlisted to round up both the shards and the enemies on the loose.

The third villain I am shown is Shrednaught. This Tech-based foe isn't a character; it's a tank piloted by two dimwitted trolls. "[Shrednaught] is a character that one of the designers put together just to experiment with," Huang says. "In the first game, or maybe it was Giants, we had these mechs, troll mechs – they were the inspiration. And then there was a big chainsaw from Giants. We put those together and prototyped a character that could walk around and do a crazy chainsaw move. We saw that and loved it so much we made it into its own character, its own thing. That's how that one evolved; it was purely, 'Wow, this is the coolest thing ever.'"

Shrednaught is slow moving, one of the slowest I've seen in a Skylanders game, but its gigantic chainsaw attack has a good reach, and absolutely decimates the competition.

When asked if players can expect to see more villains of this variety, Huang didn't want to give away too much, but said there's a different approach to designing these characters. "Villains are difficult because it needs to be clear that these are the bad guys," he says. "But at the same time, there has to be something compelling enough for them to be on your team. It's a hard balance."

One of the villains players will gain control over – which we're guessing will be an end-game reward – is Kaos, the big bad from all of the Skylanders games. "One of the things that motivated us to do the bad guys as playable characters is people's affection for them was, in many cases, as strong as it was the good guys," Reiche says. "If you think of who the signature character in Skylanders is, I think a lot of our fans would say Kaos. So he was our number one. As a joke, we made a little Kaos character statue [internally]. Everybody started asking for it, and our 3D printer was going hot and heavy generating those for people. It was sort of like, 'Hmm... Maybe people want to play as Kaos.'"



Torch is a new standard assortment Skylander figure



Food Fight uses vegetables to slay his foes

DON'T FORGET ABOUT THE GOOD GUYS

At its core, Trap Team is still a Skylanders game, and the good guys are still very much the stars. Tessa and Flynn (voiced again by Kari Wahlgren and Patrick Warburton, respectively) return to aid Spyro, Trigger Happy, and over 50 new Skylanders characters on their journey to stop Kaos and his new army.

In terms of what people can purchase, these characters fall into two camps: a new assortment of standard-sized figures, and the larger Trap Masters variety. All of the previously released figures from all three Skylanders titles are compatible with this game.

Toys for Bob isn't loading up each level with zones that require Giants or Swap Force characters. Their unique abilities will come into play in some capacity, but Toys for Bob wants to keep the focus on the Trap Masters hook. While Activision and Toys for Bob wouldn't show us the unique Trap Masters abilities in play, I'm told the Trap Team characters are the only Skylanders that can dig up Traptanium shards scattered across levels. These shards unlock new areas and collectibles. Some of these areas contain hidden, trappable villains. When a Trap Masters character faces off against any villain, they receive a damage boost thanks to their Traptanium weapons.

Will Action Figures Be Retired?

Skylanders: Trap Team introduces a host of new playable characters. On top of this, all previously released Skylanders figures are compatible with it. That begs the question: How long can Toys for Bob go before characters have to be retired?

Toys for Bob founder, CEO, and creative director Paul Reiche III pauses momentarily before answering the question. "Every year we ask ourselves that question, and every year we've said to ourselves, for the benefit that we would get for retiring some characters, there's such a loss in our relationship with the consumer," he says. "It's a very simple message right now: It all works. I hear stories of the bucket or the box of toys that many kids have, maybe some adults, too. They're walking into the game with a collection of toys that they know and love and that are strong.

"What we have to offer each year is a reason to buy new toys, and to spend time with them. And so, you know, each year we're trying to find a way to make the characters appealing in a different way, and how to connect them with the hardware innovation that year. So it's an increasing burden of work. Those past characters are occupying a significant percentage of the disc, and we are not selling as many of those old characters anymore. Some of them haven't been on sale for years. So, at this point, I can't speak to the future. At a certain point, we'll need more discs. But at least the decision this year was, 'Yeah, we could save a little work, but man, it's just not worth changing the commitment to the consumer.' We really love the fact that our fans have made the game successful and we don't want to do anything wrong by them at this point."



In addition to Snap Shot, I was briefly shown two other Trap Team characters: Wildfire, a lion decked out in gold armor who wields a gigantic red shield, and Wallop, an Earth beast who specializes in hammers. Both of these characters appear to be close-quarters experts. Wildfire's primary attacks are a shield bash and fire breath, and Wallop smashes foes with rapid hammer strikes.

One of new faces falling into the standard assortment is a character that Toys for Bob and Activision feel will become an instant fan favorite. His name is Chopper, a baby Tyrannosaurus Rex outfitted with an exoskeleton suit complete with gyrocopter maneuverability and rocket attacks. This feisty little guy can throw a tantrum to power-up a roar attack. He can also angle his gyrocopter blades toward the ground to slice up attackers.

"Who doesn't love a T-Rex?" Haung says. "I actually tried to make him into a giant at some point but I couldn't find a good balance. This time around I was able to do it, but his design changed a lot. It's a T-Rex with a mech suit, with a helicopter, with rockets. It's a bit of a handful to say, but the design team figured out cool gameplay with it. I usually don't go talk to the design team and say 'Hey, here's this character. He does A, B, and C.' I just hand the art over to them, and let them have as much creativity as possible."

Another wild character is the appropriately named Food Fight. This squat combatant wields a tomato cannon with a zucchini shield fastened on his underbelly. If he doesn't peg an enemy with a shot, the tomato takes root and grows in size. If Food Fight picks up that tomato, he can fire it again, this time dealing more damage. Food Fight can also plant exploding artichokes into the ground.

The last character I see is Torch. With hair made of flames, and fire being her ally, she falls more in line with the elemental-based characters of old. She's a classic fire character. When she's in play, the battlefield is ablaze. Her hair can be whipped back-and-forth for close-range assaults, should enemies somehow get past her mighty flamethrower blasts. She can also toy with her opponents by stunning them with smoldering horseshoes.

In the short time I had with Trap Team, I was impressed with its character variety, and the ability to quickly swap between heroes and villains for combo purposes. The gimmick of a game character coming to life in your living room is a bit oversold and isn't as cool as having a nicely detailed action figure to play with, but it is handled remarkably well, and, above all else, is an upgrade that rewards players with twice as many Skylanders characters to control. ♦



The Traptanium crystals will be sold separately. Activision has no plans to release them in blind packs





Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel

Grab your moon boots and prepare for low gravity

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

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

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
2K Australia/
Gearbox Software

» **Release**
Fall

At the end of *Borderlands 2*, Gearbox strongly hinted that the next entry would take players off Pandora and into space. It should come as no surprise then that the third *Borderlands* title takes place entirely on the planet's moon, including the Hyperion base. What might be confusing though, is that this game doesn't take place after the villain's death.

In fact, Handsome Jack features prominently in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*...as a hero. The latest title in the *Borderlands* series takes place before the events of *Borderlands 2* (pre) and after the original vault hunters completed their quest in the first title (sequel). See? It's a "pre-sequel."

OK. That's not really a word. Gearbox president Randy Pitchford wanted to call the game *Borderlands 1.5*, but he was overruled in part by new developer 2K Australia, which is teaming up with the series creators for this entry.

2K Australia partnered with 2K Marin (since shuttered by publisher Take-Two) in the earliest days of the title that became *The Bureau: XCOM Declassified*. Following its split with Marin, the Canberra-based studio worked with Irrational Games on *BioShock Infinite*.

Gearbox set up 2K Australia with the most basic framework for its first *Borderlands* game. "It started off with a conversation between the key players at Gearbox," 2K Australia general manager Tony Lawrence says. "We've got this fantastic new thing – the moon – to play with. What can we do with that? The designers and writers asked, 'well how far can we push it?' The feedback they got from me, and was reinforced by Gearbox, was 'push as hard as you can.'" Other than the moon setting and the edit that *The Pre-Sequel* needed to be a full-length game, 2K Australia has a great deal of flexibility.

From here 2K Australia began crafting new gameplay features and, in conjunction with *Borderlands 2* writer Anthony Burch, a narrative that has cross-cultural influences. "We have a lot of Australian culture to definitely tap," says 2K Australia general manager Tony Lawrence. "Some of the characters in there kind of had Australian accents. We were recording voiceovers in the studio and sending those milestones off to Gearbox and they said, 'that sounds cool. Keep that!'"

Because of the division of writing labor, the surface of the moon is based on Australian

culture, while the Hyperion base is closer to "classic" *Borderlands*. "My hope is that the game is going to come out with more comedic variance than *Borderlands 2* had," says writer Anthony Burch.

Another major narrative change comes from the four new characters. Instead of two-dimensional templates, each of them will be familiar to series fans. Athena, the gladiator, was first introduced in the *Secret Army of General Knoxx* DLC. Wilhelm, the enforcer, is one of the first bosses in *Borderlands 2* (though he appears as a human instead of a cyborg in *The Pre-Sequel*). Nisha, the law-bringer, is the sheriff of Lynchwood in the second game, and Claptrap (playable for the first time) is the first robot we met at the start of *Borderlands*. All of them have their own crafted narrative arcs, making them more fleshed out than series characters have been in past installments.

During our demo, we got the best look at Athena. Her active ability (kinetic aspis) brings up a shield that works similar to *Titanfall*'s vortex shield. It absorbs incoming fire, and Athena throws it back when time runs out. The shield's collections can be thrown early,



of course, and one of the abilities at the bottom of her Phalanx skill tree allows the returned fire to ricochet and hit multiple foes.

We also saw Wilhelm in action as the co-op player. As he levels up, he slowly transforms from human to something more akin to the half-man/half power loader we met in *Borderlands 2*.

2K Australia is also putting its own stamp on gameplay. Players need to monitor their oxygen levels (conveniently displayed in the lower left of the HUD) in order to survive in the vacuum of space. New items, called oz kits, are used to manage the amount of breathable air you can store. They also enhance the other benefits of working in a low gravity environment.

As you might expect, you can jump higher and float to the ground slowly while out-doors. Oz kits allow you to double jump and further hover, all at the cost of your oxygen reserves. These can be replenished by entering shielded indoor environments or standing over oxygen vents on the moon's surface.

2K Australia has cleverly dealt with the problem of floating to the surface. Instead of making characters practically immobile targets off the ground, a new "butt stomp" ability



can be triggered by holding the crouch button when floating. Enemies too close will find themselves stunned (and easy pickings).

This is still *Borderlands*, which means even more weapon types for laying waste to your foes. In the many loot chests littered about the moon, you can find some guns that have the new "cryo" element. These weapons shoot ice bullets that slow and, with sustained fire, freeze enemies. Once encased in ice, you can shatter them.

2K Australia is also adding the quintessential space weapon: lasers. These come

in a number of varieties, including Star Wars-inspired single-shot blasters and beam weapons. One of the latter we saw looked very much like a *Ghostbusters* proton beam. If you happen to use a laser in an oxygen-rich environment, you'll inflict burn damage on top of the base weapon power.

Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel might be a step back in the narrative timeline, but it promises to advance the gameplay. You might have been expecting a next-gen entry, but 2K Australia hopes you're just as happy to fly to the moon on last-gen consoles. » **Michael Futter**

Why Not New-Gen?

Gearbox president Randy Pitchford was up front about the decision to develop *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* for PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC. "One-hundred percent of the investment, resources, and talent have been spent to create content, to iterate the technology from the *Borderlands 2* engine," he says.

Gearbox and 2K Australia are funneling all of the resources into content creation. "The advantage is that we know that all of the people who have played any of the *Borderlands* games before has these platforms," Pitchford says. "There are currently fewer PlayStation 4 and Xbox Ones than we sold copies of *Borderlands 2*. It was a really natural decision to prioritize the platforms that our customers are on."

Given this is 2K Australia's first sip at the *Borderlands* trough, allowing the studio to focus on content instead of technical challenges is a smart decision. Gearbox isn't handing off the series entirely (at least not yet), but Pitchford also sees this as a potential first entry from the Canberra studio, instead of a one-off.

Destiny

Hands on with cooperative play



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

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer
Shooter

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Bungie

» **Release**
September 9

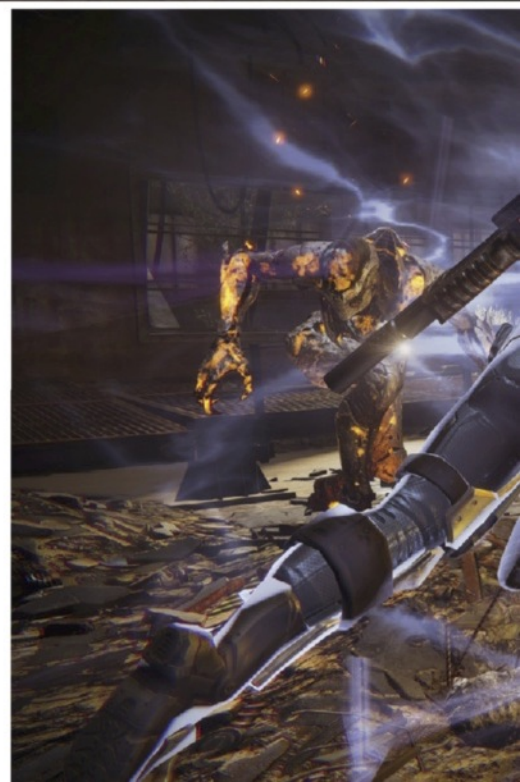
Destiny is a massive game, so it can be hard to perceive its potential for long term investment while examining just one element – a classic case of missing the forest for the trees. After our in-depth cover story in January on the many working parts of Destiny, I returned to Bungie headquarters for some focused hands-on time with a newly revealed cooperative strike. The game has made major strides in the intervening months, especially in visual and technical polish. After several playthroughs of this cooperative event, it was hard to step away knowing about the many unclaimed vistas and experiences that I have yet to explore around the solar system.

The top-level user experience of engaging with Destiny is a system called the director. While the feature hasn't been fully detailed, my early glimpse indicates that the director offers players a view of all the content with which they can engage, from competitive matches to single-player patrols through the wilderness of a distant planet – and the choice to hop to any event immediately. In practice, this is a map with a selection of multiple objectives you can tackle no matter where they are in the solar system. The director is an alternative to free wandering, which

serves as another path to the same content.

My hands-on time begins one step past the director, in the pre-mission setup screen in orbit around Earth. The chosen mission is a cooperative strike – a short 30-minute excursion designed for a small fire team of three players that always ends in a boss encounter. In this case, our mission is to infiltrate the Den of Devils – a lair of Fallen aliens hiding out in the ruins of Old Russia's Cosmodrome. If we defeat the Exalted Servitor that resides there, we'll bring down its Fallen house as well and win a triumph for humanity's efforts to push back the Darkness.

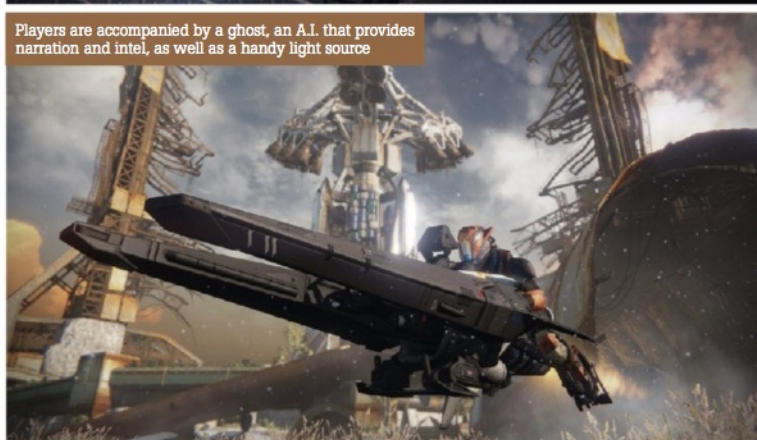
Before we get into the action, I have a few minutes to explore my character's equipment screen. My armored titan class has two available focuses to choose from. These subclasses help determine how the character plays – I choose the offensive-oriented striker codex (built around close-combat deployments of arc energy) over the well-protected defender codex. Three distinct weapon choices give me an array of firepower, including a machine gun-like auto rifle, a shotgun, and a missile launcher. Each of my armor slots allows for additional customization, both in the cosmetic appearance of my warrior and her attributes.



As Destiny's answer to the mount, these speedy hoverbikes allow guardians to traverse long distances at high speed



Players are accompanied by a ghost, an A.I. that provides narration and intel, as well as a handy light source



My equipment pieces include upgrade trees of their own – spend glimmer (money) along with discovered resources, and I can construct a helmet that offers increased grenade radius or other effects.

With my armored knight ready for combat, the view switches back to my ship in orbit beside those of my two companions. Each ship banks down toward the planet as the mission begins. Right off the bat, I'm treated to some voiceover exposition from my ghost – Destiny's A.I. companion, not unlike Halo's Cortana. The A.I. ghost has some gravitas thanks to the voice talents of Peter Dinklage (*Game of Thrones*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*). My team heads forward, and begins to encounter both Fallen and Hive enemies that

block our way.

Combat in *Destiny* feels responsive, and the action is similar to *Halo*. What's different now is the broad array of abilities and weaponry that each member of my team brings to the fight. As the warlock flings out blasts of energy, the hunter pulls his devastating ghost gun, and my titan goes rocketing into the midst of enemy groups to deploy a shockwave of lightning. In between these deployed super abilities, we each engage groups as we see fit, with close-up shotgun blasts, or hanging back with a sniper rifle to pick off stragglers.

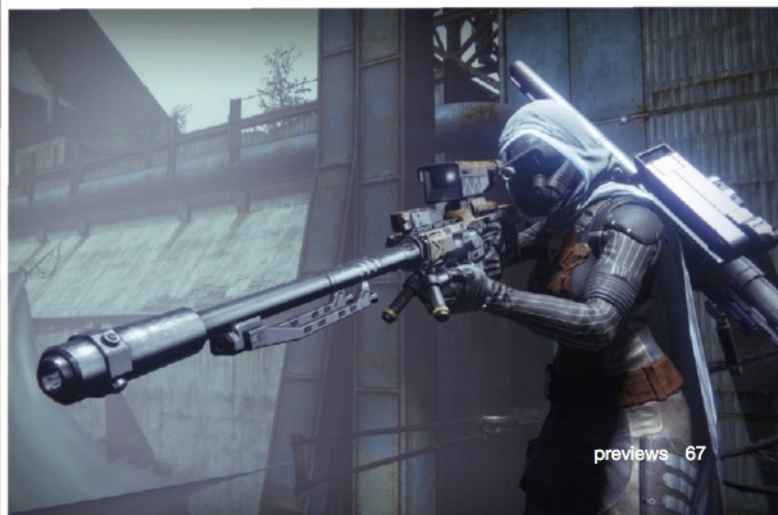
In between fights, I scour the area for ammo pick-ups (keyed by color to each of my three weapons) as well as hidden

caches of glimmer. If faced with a stretch of ground to cross without enemies, a tap of the touchpad (on PS4) brings up my ghost, and I can use it to summon my Sparrow. The floating vehicle zips me along the ground at high speed, and even sounds a lot like a *Star Wars* speeder bike.

The Devils' Lair strike takes us into twisting interior corridors and out into open courtyards, each built to encourage quick but engaging fights against the enemy. Halfway through the dungeon, we have an extended battle in which we must hold and defend a point while the ghost hacks into a nearby computer system. Waves of enemy soldiers pour in from all directions, and more than once one of us is defeated, only to be revived by a helpful teammate. We manage to avoid a wipe.

The strike culminates as we pass through a macabre display of mounted human skulls and out into an enormous chamber. The exalted servitor, named Sepicks Prime, shows up to the fight – a glowing purple sphere that blasts out beams of dark energy. Before we can test our skill against this boss, Bungie teleports us back to orbit – Sepicks Prime will face his fate another day. » **Matt Miller**

Every focus comes with a set of upgrade choices, including a super ability that can be deployed after a long recharge





Lords Of The Fallen

Bandai Namco's Dark Souls understudy

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

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

» **Publisher**
Bandai Namco

» **Developer**
CI Games/Deck 13
Interactive

» **Release**
Fall

It's difficult to not immediately recall From Software's critically acclaimed Dark Souls series after seeing Lords of the Fallen in action. A tagline on a recent teaser trailer for the game reads, "Every victory is born from defeat," as we see an armored knight attack a boss enemy and die over and over again. When talking to the executive producer Tomasz Gop, who also worked on The Witcher series, he cuts me off before I can even finish saying the word inspiration excitedly exclaiming, "Dark Souls!" Despite the comparison, Gop is confident the game will

ultimately stand on its own for a number of reasons, but right now he's happy to embrace the comparison. "On a certain day I said, 'Hey, what are you going to do? If people are going to compare us to Dark Souls, let's focus on trying to make that not be a bad thing,'" Gop says. "Since that day, I sleep way more soundly."

The fallen in the game's title refers to an evil god and its demons defeated and buried by humanity 1,000 years ago. This victory leads humanity to pursue a belief that evil can be entirely eliminated. As a result, a religion

of purity is born that harshly defines sin, banishes those who partake in evil activities, and marks them with tattoos for their transgressions. Lords of the Fallen's story begins when the demons begin to re-emerge. Humanity looks to Harkin, a person who has been tattooed more than any other. They believe he has the ability to defeat evil again based on his history of sin.

Players can't change Harkin's appearance, but they do select his class at the start of the game – rogue, cleric, or warrior – to dictate the path of his spell trees. His gear, weapons,



Lords of the Fallen's world is made up of large connected areas. It's not open world, but there is lots of land to explore



Extra rewards are in store for players who can take out bosses without causing them to enter their deadly rage mode

and stats are class-independent, so it's easy to mold him to the way you want to play, as opposed to making the decision up front.

As Gop walks us through a catacomb level, he jokes that every fantasy action game needs catacombs. Harkin enters holding a large spear and a flaming shield. His flowing robes stand out in particular, taking full advantage of the power of the new-gen consoles. The game looks great overall, but Gop says the particle and cloth effects are where the new-gen elements shine.

Walking through the shadowed halls, Harkin takes on enemies one at a time. Harkin kicks one enemy, forcing it to open itself up to attack. After defeating this enemy, he sees another holding up a shield far down a long hallway. He gives chase as the enemy slowly backs out of the hall into an open room. Harkin, focused on the enemy, enters the room, only to be blindsided by a foe on the right who was hiding. Harkin dispatches the two using a variety of rolls, fire spells, spear attacks, and carefully timed blocks.

Before moving on, Harkin finds a locked door with a symbol next to it. He backtracks into the previous room to a switch on the floor with the same symbol on it. Stepping on it opens the locked door, but Harkin has to sprint to make it to the door before it locks again. Inside he finds some new gear and a large spider. Limited puzzle solving and exploration appear throughout Lords of the Fallen, but Gop is quick to qualify these are not the main points of the game. "It's a really nice cherry on a pie, but we want to make sure the pillar of the game is combat and character development," Gop says.

The demo of the game ends with the boss we saw earlier in the game's teaser. Gop equips Harkin with a pair of claws, making him look like a high-fantasy Wolverine. The boss' main attack is a charge that Harkin dodges with a roll, firing off a fireball spell and moving in for attacks during the infrequent openings. After defeating the boss, Gop is



Lords of the Fallen will test your skills. You will die, and you will die often

pleased with himself, remarking he is thankful he's starting to get better at the game.

Lords of the Fallen is meant to be difficult. "It is a game that requires you to do your homework," Gop says. "Especially for most of the boss fights, you will probably die once or twice, or five times – I don't know." It won't be a breezy action game, but Gop doesn't want to push against new players. Things like frustrating environmental deaths are promised to be limited, and the game can be paused. The

entry curve, compared to Dark Souls, is overall meant to be more accommodating.

Tomasz Gop cut his teeth producing The Witcher series, but has been working on Lords of the Fallen as a co-developed project between CI Games and Deck 13 Interactive for the last two years. It's the first new-gen game from publisher Bandai Namco and has crossed the alpha checkpoint, meaning development is going smoothly for a 2014 release. » **Kyle Hilliard**



The Evil Within

A surprising shift in direction

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
Tango Gameworks

» **Release**
August 28

Shinji Mikami has teased his latest survival horror title with a dark vision of gruesome nightmares, haunting imagery, and sheer terror, but since its announcement we had only seen one moody, deliberately paced demo that called to mind classic survival-horror games with its emphasis on scares and escape over action. Tango Gameworks used PAX East 2014 to showcase more of the game, including our first real dive into combat. This demo wasn't what we, or the audience, were expecting.

In *The Evil Within*, players take on the role of detective Sebastian Castellanos. After being sent to investigate a murder at a mental hospital, his world spirals into a series of surreal encounters with bizarre, unsettling creatures. Sebastian can use traps and traditional weaponry to take on some foes, but others don't seem to be phased by damage. It all comes together through the use of the id Tech 5 engine, also being used in *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and *Doom 4*.

In the first of the two new gameplay demos we watched, Sebastian moves through a shifting cityscape, with cars, pavement, traffic lights, and the entire environment reshaping at will as he maneuvers through a dynamic urban maze. Eventually he encounters a pack of slow-moving zombies that he deftly destroys with an extensive arsenal, including a shotgun, a crossbow that fires explosive bolts, and a powerful pistol. The zombies don't put up too much of a fight, but he must also light the downed corpses on fire to ensure they stay dead. Sebastian moves through the area and comes to a more interesting encounter – a water-filled area with a vague figure shifting under the surface. He attempts to distract the unknown entity by tossing an object into the murky

depths but fails, and is destroyed in rather dramatic fashion by the creature as he runs through the area. This scene lasted only a few seconds, but was vastly more exciting than all the travel and zombies that preceded it.

The second gameplay demo features Sebastian using a crafting mechanic to make ammunition, and working through an underground series of tunnels, turning valves and opening doors while running away from the "Boxhead" creature. This sequence is clearly intended to place pressure on the player and ramp up tension, but the player's arsenal tore through Boxhead each time he

appeared and attempted to clumsily swing at our hero. In the end this sequence felt repetitive and did not do much to inspire fear or excitement.

We hope these brief sequences are not indicative of the entire *Evil Within* experience. We don't have reservations about the importance placed on combat as much as the lack of weight or impact during the battles. Sebastian seemed to almost casually dispatch his supernatural foes without caring much about their presence, which drained the experience of its tension. Hopefully more of an effort is placed on keeping the suspense intact in the final game. » **Daniel Tack**



EA Sports UFC

Craft your game plan and dominate in the octagon



Most of us don't have the physical and mental stamina required to become a professional fighter, but that doesn't mean we lack the overall desire to feel powerful and capable. This is why games like EA Sports UFC allow fighting fans to live out their dream of rising to the top of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. Previously, we've talked about the nuts and bolts of how EA's new UFC fighter functions in the ring, but EA has finally released details about its career mode meta game, which allows players to shape their own championship story.

Players begin their career auditioning for *The Ultimate Fighter* television show. EA acquired the rights to this reality show, which follows a group of would-be fighters as they train and compete with one another for a chance to win a contract with the UFC. Players participate in many of the shows challenges and fight fellow contestants before advancing into the UFC proper.

A player's time on the *The Ultimate Fighter* is only a fraction of their fighter's career, however. With enough success, players can climb up the fight card to earn a shot at the championship belt, participate in super fights against fighters at different weight classes, and eventually earn a spot in the UFC Hall of Fame.

Throughout this journey, players must manage their fighter's career-longevity-meter. EA compares this meter to a health bar for a fighter's career. Every fight a player participates in slowly chips away at their career's longevity. Grueling fights eat away more of this meter than easy fights, which simulates a fighter's overall fitness and the years of wear and tear dealt to his or her body. On the other hand, the more exciting a fight, the more fans a player earns afterward, and as fighters become more popular they will have more opportunities to extend their career meter.

Most professional fighters don't go through

their career without some kind of attack plan, and EA's virtual combatants are no different. EA has implemented a system called Game Plan, which allows players to assign a special ability to their fighters before entering the ring. These abilities are passive boosts that might help your fighter improve his stand-up striking attacks, his ground game, or his overall endurance. As players earn new abilities they can mix them into their Game Plan. When a player is facing a fighter with tremendous knockout power, such as Johny Hendricks, it would be smart to prepare a game plan that makes him or her more resistant to punches.

EA Sports UFC releases this June, so we have to wait and see if the developer's own game plan for a career mode is actually fun or if it feels like as much of a chore as a 5 a.m. workout. We're hoping for the former, because we're ready to take our fighter to the top. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

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

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Canada

» **Release**
June 17



The iconic action star and martial arts

master Bruce Lee is in the game as an unlockable fighter. Pre-order bonus

Enter the Dragon

EA recently announced it has been working with Bruce Lee Enterprises to put the iconic action star and martial-arts master into the game as an unlockable fighter.

"We had a brainstorming meeting about who we could have in the game as a cool Easter egg, and I don't think there was anyone in the room who didn't have Bruce Lee at the top of their list," says creative director Brian Hayes. "Maybe there was one weird guy on our team who said 'Jean-Claude Van Damme.'"

How will Lee match up against the other MMA staples in the game? "Although he's achieved almost mythical stature in our culture, he's still a human being," Hayes says. "We didn't put him in the game with a 100 skill in everything. We didn't want people to go online and see only Bruce Lee vs. Bruce Lee. He was a tremendous athlete with amazing striking, but he only really started adopting grappling skills later on. He also lived in a world that sort of predated Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, so we wanted to be evenhanded with the idea of who he was and what he was capable of."

Consumers who pre-order EA Sports UFC before June 17 will get a code to unlock Lee on day one, but the father of Jeet Kune Do can also be unlocked after completing the game's career mode on pro or higher difficulty.



Evolve

The monster has evolved

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

» **Style**
5-Player Online
Shooter

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Turtle Rock Studios

» **Release**
Fall

Since we introduced Turtle Rock's *Evolve* in our February 2014 issue, the studio has made some significant changes to how the monster earns its powers in the four vs. one action game. The new format adds more depth and player choice to controlling Goliath and the other yet to be revealed monsters.

When we played the game for our cover story, Goliath began with two of his four abilities. It wasn't until feasting on the wildlife and staying clear of the hunters long enough to "stage up" that it could grow into the remaining skills. At stage two, one more was unlocked, and then the final ability became available after fully evolving to stage three.

Turtle Rock is now offering a more robust system that borrows a bit from MOBAs. At the start of the game, the monster player has three points to assign however they choose. Some players may opt for a devastating single skill and max out one ability. Others may spread the points around to allow for more options should they get pinned early in the match.

When I played, I put two points into fire breath (to quickly kill prey with area of effect) and one point into dash in case I needed to make an escape early. I managed to feed most of my way to stage two before the hunters found me. The fire breath came in handy, and I took my chance to dash away (after swatting at a trapper who had used a harpoon gun on me).

After feeding a bit more and staging up, I was awarded more points, which I used to unlock the other two abilities: rock throw and leap smash. The fight heated up quickly after

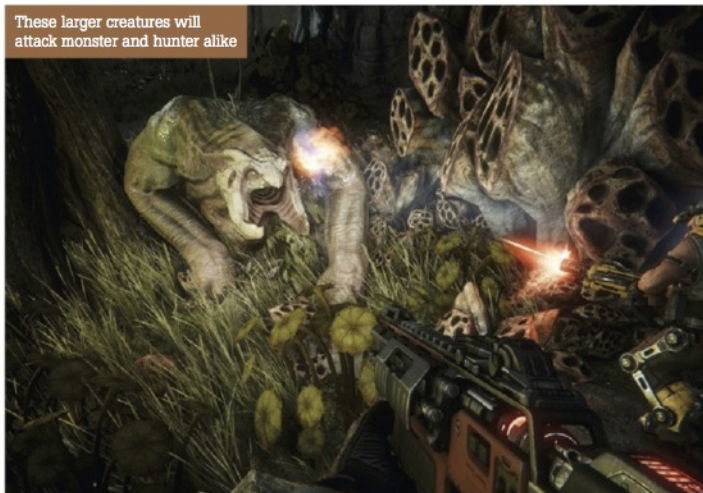
that, and I got to put my new skills to the test.

Throwing rocks knocked my opponents off my feet, setting them up for a leap smash. The trapper continued to stall me with harpoons and a cage, keeping me confined. The medic was undoing the damage I had dealt, so the two of them became priority targets, even as the assault and support were cutting into me.

I came very close to complete domination, but the hunters managed to best me after reinforcements dropped in. It was intense and frantic, and I can't wait to play more.

» **Michael Futter**

These larger creatures will attack monster and hunter alike



A harpoon tether prevents the monster from getting too far



Dragon Age: Inquisition

You and what army?

The third entry in BioWare's Dragon Age series puts players in control of the Inquisitor, an individual charged with rooting out corruption and uncovering the person responsible for the turmoil that has spread across the land of Thedas. The role of Inquisitor is a sacred duty, but what are your qualifications? What makes your character so special that you are entrusted with the fate of civilization? BioWare recently gave more details about the state of the world and your central role.

As the game begins, top-ranking agents from the Circle of Mages and the Chantry get together for peace talks – an attempt to end the ongoing war stemming from Dragon Age II's conclusion. That's when a portal to the Fade (the realm where magic and demons reside) opens in the sky. The blast and ensuing chaos kills everyone – except you. "You survived this blast, but you actually walked out of the Fade when the soldiers found you," says producer Cam Lee. "So, you get pushed into the Fade, and as a consequence, you are marked."

The mark on your hand allows you to interact with breaches like the giant one in the sky, as well as smaller disruptions. This unique ability is part of what makes your character special in the world, and a key factor in your ascension to the head of the Inquisition. Some characters want to aid your cause, thinking that you are a holy chosen one. However, the mark also makes you a target for those who see you as a threat. "Whoever caused this massive explosion – whoever is behind all this chaos in the world – is now hunting you for your mark," Lee says.

Who is this pursuer? Getting to the bottom of the mystery is part of your goal, but you won't need to wait until the end of the game before the identity is revealed. "At some point during the game, the central antagonist will come and kick you in the head, basically," Lee says. "You form this Inquisition to face the threat and uncover the truth, and the enemy starts to see you as a serious threat, so they literally show up at your doorstep."

You attract this attention by building up the Inquisition, which provides a parallel form

of progression alongside advancing your Inquisitor's abilities. "The inquisition has three major facets, and each of those facets is led by a particular character," Lee says. "Each one of those facets essentially has its own talent tree, and through them, you can unlock various benefits for you and the inquisition. Some may be to bring in more gold, strengthen your soldiers, or give you a personal boost in gathering crafting materials." Players can also get a sense of progression through the agents they recruit and how they customize Skyhold, the inquisition's home base.

Having a center of operations is good, because the Inquisitor travels to the far corners of Thedas rallying allies and eliminating evil. One area you visit late in your journey is Emprise Du Lion, in the highlands of Dale. After receiving a call for help from the inhabitants of a town in the region, you arrive to discover an army of corrupted Templars (powered by Red Lyrium) have enslaved

the locals. You have the option of invading Emprise Du Lion with the Inquisition army, and the Inquisitor takes up position at the head of the war front to defeat the Templars and liberate the area.

After the offensive, you can rebuild and help return to region to prosperity, which has several benefits; gamers eager for a challenge will be most interested in the dragons nesting nearby in an ancient elven coliseum.

The encounters in Emprise Du Lion are so difficult that most players probably won't see everything it has to offer until the post-game, but that's okay. It's just one of many areas with quests to complete, loot to obtain, and mysteries to uncover. Even a powerful character like the Inquisitor, backed by the might of the Inquisition, might have to save some adventures for later. "We don't expect players to explore all the world by the time they finish the campaign," Lee says. "The world's too big for that." » **Joe Juba**

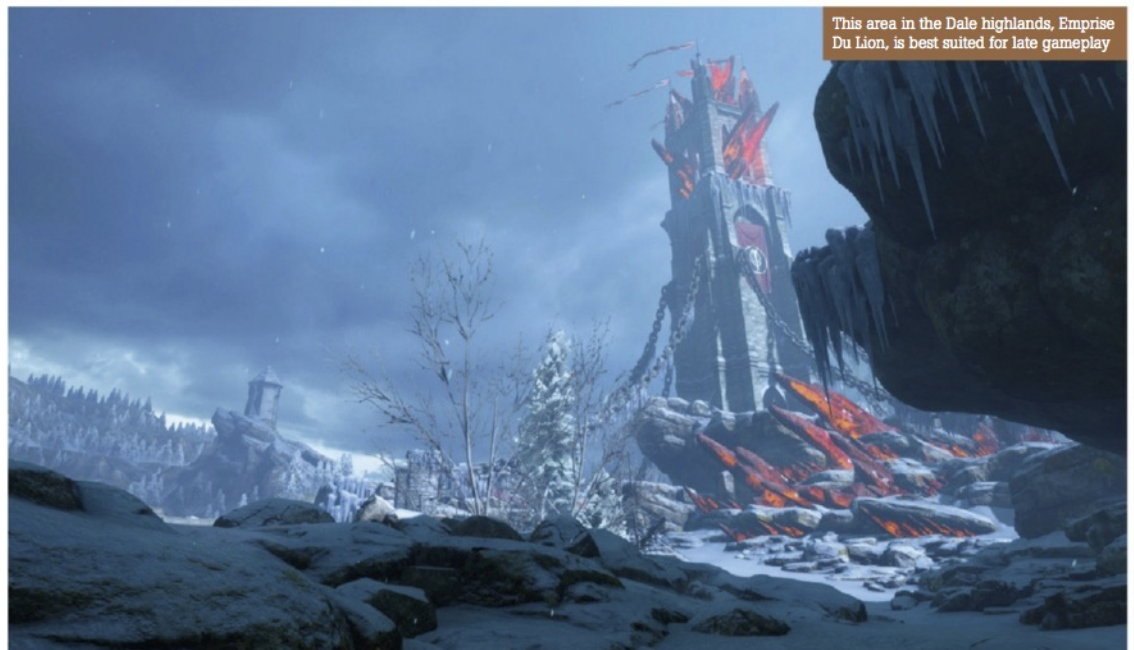
» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
October 7



This area in the Dale highlands, Emprise Du Lion, is best suited for late gameplay



Sid Meier's Civilization: Beyond Earth

Alpha Centauri finally gets its spiritual successor

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(Multiplayer TBA)
- » **Publisher**
2K Games
- » **Developer**
Firaxis
- » **Release**
Fall

Not since 1999's Alpha Centauri has Sid Meier taken our imperial desires into space and the future. This fall's Civilization: Beyond Earth returns us to the stars to explore the next chapter of humanity's story.

We spoke with lead designer Dave McDonough and producer Lena Brenk about Firaxis' next Civilization game and how it honors the series' tradition while creating something entirely new. For longtime fans of Firaxis' work, it's impossible to ignore the influence of Alpha Centauri.

"There is a lot of inspiration from Alpha Centauri in this game," McDonough says. "We even have a couple of people who worked on that game still on the team and helping us make the game. It's not Alpha Centauri 2. It's not a sequel. It's a whole new imagining of what civilization in the future, civilization in space could be. There are many homages and nods and winks to Alpha Centauri, and there's a huge creative and spiritual debt we owe to the groundwork that

game laid, but this is a whole new idea."

Each game of Civilization: Beyond Earth starts players in orbit around their new home. Leaders are no longer coupled with factions. Instead, players have the opportunity to choose a leader, assemble a party of colonists, and equip them for the journey to the surface. "You equip your expedition and choose things like which spacecraft to take, which might, for instance, be able to see the outline of the continents you'll be landing on," Brenk says. "You'll also choose which colonists to take, and there are scientists, production-oriented colonists, so you'll get boosts depending on how you equip your expedition."

One of the key differences in Beyond Earth is how flexible technology progression has become. The linear tree that takes players from the Stone Age to the Space Age is gone, replaced by a web. Nearest to the starting point at the center are near-future technologies that aren't likely to seem too foreign to players.

As they go deeper into the tech web, players

find options that fit into one of three affinities: purity, harmony, and supremacy. These each represent one of the five victory conditions. Purity reflects a culture's desire to remain human, and the related "promised land" victory involves terraforming land in order to bring humans from Earth through a warp gate.

Harmony involves genetic manipulation in order to become more symbiotic with the new world. The "transcendence" victory sees a culture awakening a long-dormant superorganism living in the planet.

Supremacy sees the human race shedding its mortal nature in favor of a robotics and artificial intelligence. The "emancipation" victory also involves building a warp gate, but instead of bringing humans through, players send emissaries back to Earth to liberate humanity from its fleshy existence.

In addition to the affinity-based win conditions, players can pursue a traditional military victory or make first contact with a long-departed alien species. "There's no modern-age arrival point at which time you can crown a winner, so we could decide what it means to win," McDonough says. "We decided to make it the next great leap, the next great turning point in the story of the human race. You get to decide what that is."

Units and leaders reflect your technology choices, and different affinities inevitably put you into conflict with other colonists. Purist and harmony cultures are going to clash because of their opposing goals. One wants to change the land while the other wants to preserve it.

In addition to these significant changes, quests help create a stronger narrative than past Civilization games, and the added strategy of an orbital layer impacts terrain and troops. Civilization: Beyond Earth is no small step for the series once grounded on Mother Earth. We're looking forward to see how the giant leap to the stars plays off. » **Michael Futter**



Orcs Must Die Unchained

Orcs must jump into the MOBA pool



Robot Entertainment's *Orcs Must Die* and *Orcs Must Die 2* live at the nexus of the tower defense and action genres. The games task players with laying traps to defeat oncoming hordes while actively engaging in battle. Between the first two games, the series moved from a solo affair to a cooperative endeavor. For the third entry, *Orcs Must Die Unchained*, it evolves from player-vs-enemy to player-vs-player action.

Unchained adds a distinct MOBA influence to the mix, pitting two teams of five players each against one another. Teams lay traps, summon minions from gates, and directly engage the enemy with loadouts represented by cards. *Unchained* is free-to-play, and is monetized by booster packs that can be used to tailor gameplay.

The game currently offers 10 characters to choose from, with more planned before launch. Robot Entertainment tells us that the characters have unique skills, but there is more flexibility for players to build them into different roles. Unlike most MOBAs, which put much of the build customization in the game, *Orcs Must Die Unchained* uses a deck system constructed outside of combat.

Players choose their items, abilities, and minion types from available cards. The latter are accessed via gates placed on the maps. To start your creeps marching toward the enemy portal, you'll need to pay some of your leadership with the in-match currency. You can also

level up the gate to enable stronger minions.

Players must work together to choose complementary troops and level up gates at the right time. Signaling to other players that it's time to get bigger and badder forces into the field seems critical for victory.

Instead of victory by base destruction, a team is defeated if 15 minions enter their nexus. This is distinctly different from most MOBAs, as even letting the smallest individual minion through costs a team one of its nexus points. During our play session, this caused exciting swings between offense and defense.

In MOBAs, knowing when to push a lane (and when to retreat) is one of the most important skills. In *Orcs Must Die Unchained*, that's compounded by knowing how to budget leadership and spend on traps, troops, and gate upgrades at the right time.

Despite the complexity, the game is accessible. More importantly, the design may mitigate the snowball effect that plagues most games in the genre. Stumbling in the early match won't leave you at as significant a disadvantage as it might in *League of Legends*.

Robot Entertainment is targeting the competitive community with the third entry in the *Orcs Must Die* series. The developer is turning its thoughts toward a season format, which will introduce new cards and pull some out of rotation to keep things fresh (similar to *Magic: The Gathering's* constructed format).

The title is in early access now (you can join for \$150 if you're enthusiastic). When it releases, the game will feature a variety of different maps to experiment with. *Unchained* approaches the MOBA community from a different angle, making it one for competitive gaming fans to keep an eye on. » **Michael Futter**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
10-Player Online
Action/Strategy

» **Publisher**
Robot Entertainment

» **Developer**
Robot Entertainment

» **Release**
2014





This War Of Mine

Surviving war's harsh realities as a powerless civilian

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Survival
- » **Publisher**
11 Bit Studios
- » **Developer**
11 Bit Studios
- » **Release**
2014

War has always been a common topic in games. From early titles like *Wolfenstein 3D* to powerhouse franchises like *Call of Duty*, the boots of a soldier are never far away. But what if you don't have access to powerful weapons and machinery? Civilians get thrust into war, too, but we rarely see their struggles up close. 11 Bit Studios changes that with its upcoming title *This War of Mine*. As the game's trailer states, "In war not everyone is a soldier." Here, you're a refugee, merely trying to survive by finding food and resources.

This War of Mine is 11 Bit Studios' biggest challenge to date. The studio is best known for its *Anomaly* series, but doing justice to such a difficult topic is a whole new ballgame.

"We have a different approach this time, because with all respect for our previous games, they were typical, plain fun games," says senior writer Pawel Miechowski. "We feel like this is the most important game of our lives."

The team decided to make a game from the perspective of a wartime civilian after coming across a web article entitled "One Year in Hell" about a man who survived the Bosnian war in the 1990s. "It was like a spark that really got us on fire so to speak," Miechowski says. From then on, the team hunted for more survival stories and researched what it really meant to be a refugee.

The stories all featured a common survival trend, and 11 Bit Studios' felt putting players

in the middle of that would make a statement. As Miechowski explains, people are just trying to get by, searching for the basics like water, medicine, and shelter. "When the war breaks out you're short on everything," he says. "That's how war looks. Imagine all those kind of situations. Imagine being forced to rob someone to [eat]. [The dilemma is], are you starving or are you hurting someone?"

We saw the demo play out across a war-torn 2D world, and managed three survivors by ordering them to do tasks like cooking or gathering supplies in an attempt to survive for 30 days. During the day, you can't leave your shelter because it's too easy to be spotted, so this time is spent using your supplies to feed survivors and improve your camp in ways like making a bed or a water filter.

The night is a different battle. This is your time to scavenge and explore. The risk intensifies, as you must make it home before dawn or you risk exposing your party. Death isn't something 11 Bit Studios shied away from; if you make a bad choice or don't provide for survivors, they perish. You also have tough decisions; do you break into a house to find new material and risk potentially running into another survivor who will respond with force?

Often you must decide if you should take on another survivor to increase productivity or turn them away so you don't have another mouth to feed. "[We wanted] to show during the war that there are times when you're tempted to hurt someone to survive," Miechowski says. "On the other hand, there are also many situations for doing heroic deeds to save someone. We try to get some small stories out of what we've read about and put them inside the game and give the player true evidence in the war."

Right now, 11 Bit Studios is crafting a game that brings a tension to war that we rarely experience. It has the potential to be a powerful experience, as it's grounded in our deepest fears: War can break at any time, and lives can be turned upside down. This is a side to war that we hope we never experience, but I'm glad 11 Bit Studios is trying to portray it. » **Kimberley Wallace**





Below

What lies beneath? A sense of wonder

If Dark Souls and The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker had offspring, the result would look something like Below. Capybara Games' latest title mixes powerful visual elements and striking sound to create a vast dungeon world with a focus on exploration, secrets, and death.

In Below, the environment is at best indifferent to the player's presence; your character is a mere speck on the screen. Surroundings feel overwhelming and mysterious, as every object, creature, and sound that you encounter is meaningful. Below's areas are procedurally generated, but there's a twist – landmarks and other patterns that the player stumbles upon lead to certain areas that will always be accessible the same way, once the secret is known. Players could wander endlessly through the dungeon, but once they learn

how to identify constants they can make their way to special areas that delve into the story. The North Beach is one such area, containing a wrecked ship and some treasures within. These secrets drive the gameplay of Below as players hunt for clues that may lead to the next great discovery.

Combat is simple but elegant. Players begin with a sword and shield, and have a wide range of abilities that can be executed to handle different situations and ranges. A variety of additional two-handed weapons can be added to your arsenal as they are found during gameplay, including a bow and spear. These weapons are generally slower than the swipe of the sword, but dish out more damage and can be "charged up" to land powerful attacks at range.

It's a good thing that the player has a wide

variety of weapons to draw from, because any attack from an enemy can be lethal. From a stray dog bite or being grazed by one of the many traps lurking in the dungeon, the player's "heart" begins to bleed out after damage occurs. The easiest way to stop the blood loss is to use a cure potion, but these are limited in supply. Players need to be creative and find new ways to stop the bleeding, such as perhaps cauterizing the wound in fire. Death is permanent, but all is not lost. Players can journey back to recover items from the last adventurer's corpse, and they keep the knowledge of the dungeon they've already acquired.

Many areas of the dungeon are dark. Since it contains hostile creatures, traps, and indifferent life such as dogs and other animals, it's nice to be able to see where you're going. The player has an oil lantern that can be used to shine light on the unknown, but resources to fuel the lantern are limited and valuable. The player should pay close attention to the environment, as many items can be picked up can be crafted into useful tools. If managing health from battle wounds wasn't enough, players must also address hunger, as exploring the depths gives your adventurer a healthy appetite.

If this all seems a bit overwhelming, it's not. The dungeon isn't all evil, and there's a sense of enchantment and wonder as you discover and explore. Yes, you're going to die. You're going to learn how to battle creatures, unlock secret areas, find new ways to treat wounds, craft items, and reveal breathtaking areas. Below is at the core a journey of discovery, one that should keep you coming back for more after each adventurer falls. Death acts as inspiration, not frustration. I cannot wait to sit down with Below in a dark room, headphones on, and lose myself in the magic.

» Daniel Tack

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

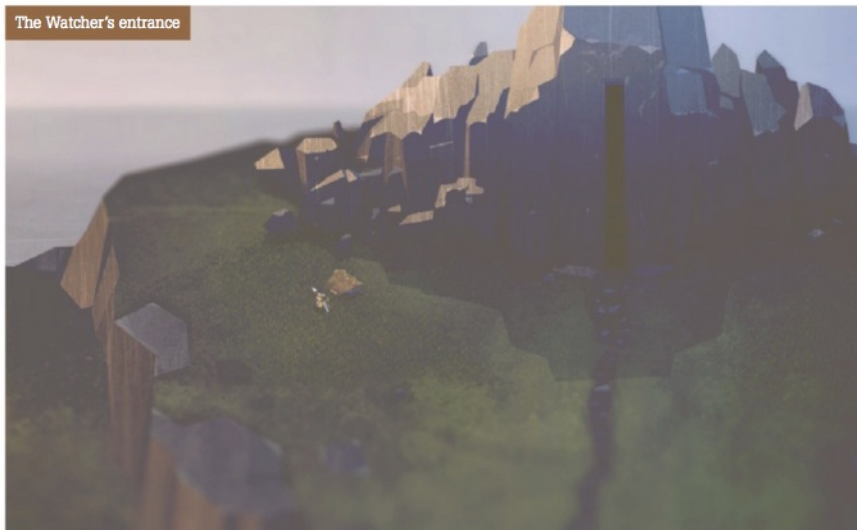
» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Adventure

» **Publisher**
Capybara Games

» **Developer**
Capybara Games

» **Release**
TBA

The Watcher's entrance





Darkest Dungeon

Adventuring takes its toll

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Red Hook

» **Developer**
Red Hook

» **Release**
2015

"You lot are going to get me killed," my highwayman says. This is terrible timing. I'm in the middle of a fight with grizzled and angry skeletons, and everyone is already stressed out.

Little white numbers pop up above my adventurers' heads. Their stress level rises, and the white bars underneath their woodcut-style figures are getting terribly close to full. The highwayman's is already maxed out. He is now "afflicted" with a mental malady. He's depressed, and it's starting to have an effect on the rest of the party. Worse, I've lost his turn. He's refusing to fight.

Darkest Dungeon is a role-playing game that explores the mental toll the horrors of caverns and monsters can have on heroes. You have returned home after finding out that your family has done something terribly wrong, unleashing evil upon the land. Your job is to venture into the eponymous darkest dungeon and seal off the threat from spilling into your world.

To do that, you must assemble a party of adventurers, all with unique quirks. Some are positive, but others have drawbacks that will set members of your company apart from one another.

You take a party of four with you on each expedition, mixing and matching heroes and personalities. At first glance, combat looks like standard turn-based fare. However, party position matters, as your skills and attacks can only be triggered from specific places in the line. They can also only impact certain positions in the enemy row, so juggling your team to access the proper skills becomes a rewarding part of the strategy.

Early on in a quest, this isn't an issue. You have full control over your formation.

However, some enemy attacks can mess with your order, forcing you to burn a character's turn in order to make things right.

When your characters become fully stressed out and afflicted, they might also randomly attack (enemies or other heroes), spout off and impact the mental status of other characters, or move around in the line. Knowing when to camp in a dungeon is crucial, but it also requires you to think.

When you rest for the night, you have the opportunity for characters to use their skills on one another to improve morale or heal. However, personalities might clash, and one hero cracking a joke might offend another and

do more harm. You learn quickly not to pair those two again – if they both survive.

Red Hook borrows thematically from the works of H.P. Lovecraft, a turn of the century horror writer whose work often explored the fragility of the human mind. Gameplay is inspired in part by XCOM: Enemy Unknown, with its roster management, tactical bent, and permadeath.

Darkest Dungeon is a blend of familiar elements that promises to be something entirely new. We enjoyed our time with it and look forward to finding out what other horrors will break our will as the title progresses.

» **Michael Futter**



Valiant Hearts: The Great War

Telling the tales of the forgotten war



Ubisoft Montpellier's artful new adventure *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* is out of step with most modern military-themed games. In fact, Ubisoft's Guillaume Cerda told us that the team thinks of *Valiant Hearts* not as a war game but a "game about war" – an important distinction. As such, a large part of the experience isn't about battlefield heroics, but the human beings who were swept up in the cataclysmic events of World War I, the first "war to end all wars."

World War I remains largely uncovered by the game industry, which has already stripped World War II. *Valiant Hearts* tells the tale of four main characters whose paths intersect in surprising and touching ways in the war during the years of 1914 to 1918: Emile (an older French farmer), Karl (Emile's blond German son-in-law), Freddie (a brawny American fighter), and Anna (a plucky young woman turned battlefield nurse). At points, players are also accompanied by a dog named Walt, who you can command and plays a role in solving many of the puzzles.

The game walks a razor's edge, balancing surprisingly light-hearted comedy with a story

that deals with the heavy moral and emotional cost of war. Its storybook visual style is gorgeous, rendering everything from the rooftops of Paris to the trench warfare of the Marne in a style that recalls the detailed, hand-drawn animations of the French classic *The Triplets of Belleville*. Sometimes it runs the risk of trivializing the subject matter; I'm not sure chlorine-gas warfare is something that lends itself to the adventure-game treatment. However, it seems successful at generating real emotion from the plight of the characters.

Valiant Hearts's gameplay is a mix of adventure elements and light action, with an emphasis on puzzle solving. Most of the puzzles I experienced weren't particularly difficult – distract a guard with a thrown brick, use pulleys and switches to navigate up to a high walkway, etc. Anyone who is a fan of 2D adventure games like *Broken Age* should feel right at home. The interface is very simple, usually based around single button commands. Some set-piece action moments break up the flow of the game, like an exciting sequence when you must steer your car clear of bombs that fall in time with the orchestral soundtrack. Ubisoft



The game's puzzles seem fairly straightforward

says that the game is peppered with unique moments like this.

Valiant Hearts has the potential to be a special experience. While not technically an "indie" developer, Ubisoft Montpellier clearly has the go-ahead to follow its muse, and it shows. The game is unique in both subject matter and tone. I have questions about whether the gameplay can sustain a longer play experience. However, there's something about *Valiant Hearts* that sticks with you; it doesn't feel like anything else currently on the market, and its rooting in real World War I history gives it a sense of importance that other games of this ilk can't match. It's clearly a labor of love. One of the producers' great grandfathers fought in the war, and his letters home have served as the team's inspiration for the project. If successful, *Valiant Hearts* could serve as both an introduction to an important part of world history and a tribute to those who experienced the events themselves.

» **Matt Helgeson**

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

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montpellier

» **Release**
June 24

The puzzles seem fairly straightforward





Invisible, Inc.

Don't get caught in this tactical espionage game

- » **Platform**
PC • Mac • Linux
- » **Style**
1-Player Strategy
- » **Publisher**
Klei Entertainment
- » **Developer**
Klei Entertainment
- » **Release**
2014

Klei Entertainment is known for delivering stylish games across a variety of genres. Shank delivered an over-the-top arcade side-scroller, Mark of the Ninja put stealth on a 2D plane, and the roguelike Don't Starve challenged players to do exactly that. The studio's latest title, Invisible, Inc. (formerly known as Incognita), is a tactical espionage game where every move counts.

In Invisible, Inc.'s fiction, high-tech corporations rule the world. Players control of spy agency that sends field agents into potentially deadly missions across the globe. I played an alpha version of the game to see how good I could lead a team in this turn-based strategy game.

I picked the starting duo of Deckard, a trenchcoat-wearing spy, and the robotic Dr. Pedler. Each has a unique special ability, which significantly changes how they're used in the field. Deckard is stealthy and quick, and his larger pool of movement points makes him a natural scout. He's significantly weaker than his android buddy, however, who can take a direct hit or two from the guards. Pedler can hack into computers from a distance. This is a major plus since his clanky robot feet have a tendency to draw unwanted attention unless he enters a slower stealth mode.

The basic structure should be familiar to players who have spent time with tactical games like XCOM, though there's one exciting difference here. No matter how clever you are, your presence is slowly revealed to the enemy thanks to a steadily increasing alert system. Even if you do a good job of checking every door before opening it and

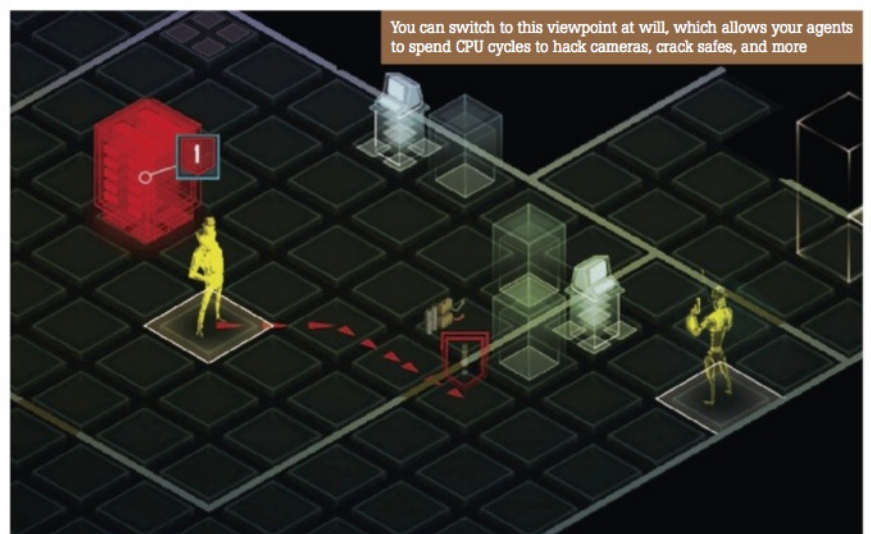
using your technical know-how to disable surveillance cams, your mere presence will eventually trigger an alarm. It provides a nice incentive to take chances while also remaining cautious – play it too safe, and additional patrols might permanently prevent you from making it to the elevator. Play it rough by killing guards, and their now-silenced heart-rate monitors will accelerate the alarms.

Invisible, Inc.'s levels are procedurally generated, which cuts both ways. I enjoyed the unnerving feeling of never knowing exactly what was behind the next doorway or around the corner since it forced me to be methodical. But it also created some situations that

felt patently unfair, such as starting out with my agents on either side of a deadly robot. The developers say they're aware of these frustrations, however, and that balanced level generation will continue to be a focus in development moving forward.

I enjoyed my time with Invisible, Inc., even when my missions ended in failure. I felt as though I was learning something that I could apply to my next attempt – better use of gadgets, paying closer attention to patrols – which is something that's important for retaining interest in the long-term. I'm looking forward to more spying later this year.

» **Jeff Cork**





Nosgoth

Legacy of Kain returns...sort of

People have clamored for a new Legacy of Kain game since its last title in 2003, but few expected this. Nosgoth is Square Enix's vampire-vs-human, free-to-play third-person action game that takes place in the Kain universe.

The gameplay is fast-paced and refreshing, with small 4v4 teams keeping the combat intimate. Whether you are playing as a vampire or human, you can select from a variety of loadouts to suit your play style. Teams take turns controlling each faction during the course of one game.

The vampires specialize in close-range combat and disables, able to pounce down on humans from the shadows or the sky and

climb walls effortlessly. The vampires can also feast on downed humans to recover their hit points. This process leaves the bloodsucker vulnerable, so they also have the ability to drag human corpses around so that they can attempt to drink in a safe environment. Right now, playing as the vampires is probably the most fun you'll have in Nosgoth.

The humans come with a wide array of ranged abilities and can recover their ammo and health at shrines around the map. They have attacks and weapons that can dish out incredible damage, and working as a team they can protect each other from the vampires that are more focused on picking off

single, vulnerable targets.

Loadouts and classes are heavily customizable; players will quickly find that although the basic abilities are quite potent, they may want to accentuate things to suit their personal preferences. New options can be purchased by using in-game currency; the real-money cash shop is generally reserved for skins and cosmetics.

Nosgoth combines fast matches and team-play, with a dark theme running throughout. While we'd love to see the Legacy of Kain universe return to a single-player, story-based title, what Psyonix is doing here is working surprisingly well. » **Daniel Tack**

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
Online Multiplayer Action
- » **Publisher**
Square Enix
- » **Developer**
Psyonix
- » **Release**
TBA



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Defense Grid 2

Fend off a new alien flood

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

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

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Hidden Path

» **Release**
Fall

The tide has receded a bit for the tower-defense genre. For a while, it seemed like every other game released involved marching baddies and gun encampments. It becomes harder to appreciate the good games when you have to wade through so many copycats.

One that rose to the surface was Hidden Path's *Defense Grid*. Instead of enemies exiting a level when reaching the base, aliens stole cores and brought them back to the start point. The sequel adds new towers, more aliens, and a number of improvements that promise to make it a contender for best in the genre.

Defense Grid 2 makes tweaks for usability, including controls to rotate the map view and a new grid-based tower-placement system. In the first title, towers could be placed anywhere. With the new system, players won't need to guess about how their choices will impact the enemy path. This is also aided by a pathing line that dynamically changes as you plan to place a tower. You can see how each new emplacement affects the flow toward your base. A new heatmap feature shows where your defenses will inflict the most damage.

Hidden Path hopes its other new additions spice up the tired genre. Some maps now have dynamic features that add new paths mid-match, changing the flow toward the base. *Defense Grid 2* also supports user-generated content that community creators can monetize via Steam Workshop.

Cooperative and competitive modes give players a way to challenge their friends, including one that's an homage to *Puzzle Fighter*, with aliens bouncing back and forth between the two players, getting stronger with each kill.

Hidden Path pushed the tower-defense genre ahead with the first *Defense Grid*. The sequel is shaping up as a reminder of why it became so popular in the first place.

» **Michael Futter**



Hack 'N' Slash

A hackable adventure that bends to your will



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Double Fine

» **Developer**
Double Fine

» **Release**
Summer

Old hacking hardware like the Game Genie and Game Shark allowed folks to modify their favorite games to earn extra lives, increased damage, and more without earning it. Double Fine's unique *Hack 'n' Slash* builds this concept into the game, tasking players with manipulating lines of code to pass tricky enemies or puzzles.

Players are dropped into a dungeon prison near the start. The hero finds a sword, which he attempts to use on the jail cell door. It shatters immediately, revealing a USB input beneath the broken steel. This thumb-drive hilt becomes the player's main means for interacting with the world. The hero can now plug himself into the door and interact with the programming code linked to it. A quick change to the binary values of the door causes it to swing open, and the adventure begins.

This code-hacking sorcery extends to enemies, treasure chests, block-pushing puzzles, and more. Reduce an enemy's health to zero via code. Alter an impassable block so that pushing on it causes it move backwards, opening a passage. Slow down the speed of moving platforms to make crossing a chasm easier. The possibilities are vast and demand players to tap into uncommon puzzle-solving techniques.

Hack 'n' Slash has come a long way since its original introduction in Double Fine's *Amnesia* Fortnight 2012 game jam. The colorful, polished aesthetic and novel puzzle design make this one that would-be hackers should check out. » **Tim Turi**



Soma

The horror of sentience

Following its underground survival horror hit *Amnesia: Dark Decent*, Frictional Games chose to abandon its Edgar Allan Poe-like macabre fantasy vibe in favor of a horror tale set in a more believable world. *Soma* trades in the medieval castle setting for the cold industrial embrace of a story that explores what it means to be a sentient being.

Our first demo of the game dropped us in the middle of events, so it was hard to make sense of what exactly was going on. We do know that the protagonist, Simon, wakes up in a strange place with no idea how he got there. Unlike *Amnesia's* memory-challenged protagonist, Simon knows who he is, but he doesn't understand why he awoke in a long-abandoned industrial building.

Exploring the environment, Frictional Games clearly wants to lure players in with atmosphere, and then suffocate them. With no user interface telling you where to go, your intuition guides you. The minimalistic lighting, sense of abandonment, and uncomfortable musical score all contribute to a sense of foreboding.

Gameplay largely consists of puzzle solving and searching for clues that shed light on what happened to this place. Audio logs scattered around the area act as black boxes, chronicling the final moments of people's lives. Most of these casualties seem to have been the victim of a rogue computer system known as WUA. Simon can trigger



extrasensory experiences when interacting with certain objects, giving him additional insight. Simon isn't alone in these abandoned facilities. A woman named Catherine Chun occasionally appears on the intercom, offering advice and asking for the odd favor.

Not every location is as suffocating as the industrial plant. The demo later transitions to an open, underwater environment where Simon can explore the ocean floor. Eventually he stumbles onto a shipwreck – the *MS Curie*. Here Catherine tells him

to avoid the Jiangshi, who appear to be bloated, grotesque apparitions that Simon has no means of fending off. Like *Amnesia*, if you see one of these monsters, you had better run or hide.

While getting a true sense of the narrative is tough during a one-hour demo that jumps around the story, we could start to see the rough shape of the experience Frictional Games hopes to create. With a palpable tension and strong sense of mystery, *Soma* has our interest piqued. » **Matt Bertz**

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Adventure
- » **Publisher**
Frictional Games
- » **Developer**
Frictional Games
- » **Release**
2015

Lichdom: Battlemage

First-person fantasy magic

Take the difficulty of *Dark Souls*, the loot of *Diablo*, bake them into a first-person spell-slinging action-RPG, and you've got *Lichdom: Battlemage*. The first title from new developer Xaviant, the game uses some simple concepts in creative ways and aims to provide core gamers with a serious challenge.

At the beginning of the game, players choose from a male or female protagonist.

The female is a jeweler who built her business from the ground up, and the male is a blacksmith of some renown. Both draw the attention of the powerful aristocrat Count Shax by embarrassing him at one of his parties. His vengeance is swift – he kills their families, burns their homes, and leaves them to die. Enter Roth, an ageless entity that seeks out someone with nothing to lose and grants

them new powers and purpose. Empowered by this timeless shaper of nations, the player sets off on a journey of revenge.

Players use different schools of magic to defeat opponents, such as fire, ice, dementia, lightning, and more. Spells take the form of single target blasts, area-of-effect assaults, and shields that can be properly timed for devastating results. Spells and spell schools are customizable and upgradeable with all kinds of loot found by slaying enemies and tackling challenging optional events within the game.

Spell crafting allows players to make spells tailored to their play style. Different interactions between spell schools allow players to take advantage of mixing and matching spell blasts. For instance, throwing a cloud of voracious insects on one foe then lighting them up in a bugsplosion that spreads to other opponents is just one method to handle a tough situation.

Lichdom's bosses are huge, with multiple phases and a slew of ways to destroy players. If you're having a lot of trouble with an encounter, spending some extra time in a level working on spell upgrades is a viable method to get the edge during a tough boss fight. *Lichdom* looks like a great choice for gamers seeking some creative carnage and a serious challenge. » **Daniel Tack**

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-playing
- » **Publisher**
Xaviant
- » **Developer**
Xaviant
- » **Release**
August 26





gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH
93 Kirby: Triple Deluxe

Kirby's first adventure on the 3DS brings new abilities and a better balance of challenge compared to previous Kirby games. The new Hypernova sucking ability is a blast to use as you watch Kirby swallow gigantic weapons and huge bosses in a single gulp. Kirby has always offered an impressive level of adorable charm and crazy super powers, and Triple Deluxe is no exception.

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	Social media on Sunday nights.

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

Lego The Hobbit

The road goes ever on



Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** TT Games **Release** April 8 **Rating** E10+

Certain elements always carry over between Lego games, regardless of the attached franchise. The series has found a winning combination of action, exploration, and puzzle-solving, so getting familiar experiences doesn't kill the fun. Some might say that Lego The Hobbit goes too far; several characters, locations, and concepts are recycled from 2012's Lego Lord of the Rings. However, that title wasn't just my favorite Lego entry – it was also my favorite game adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's legendary universe. Instead of being outraged at the repurposed material, I am happy to have another reason to reread Middle-earth brick by brick.

The core elements of the Lego formula are all intact. Using a wide cast of Tolkien's characters, players smash and jump through stages based on the iconic settings from the films. I looked forward to seeing key moments represented in Lego form, and I wasn't disappointed. TT Games strikes the perfect balance between remaining faithful and injecting humor, whether you're watching two stone giants fight or sneaking around a dragon.

The action is not complex or challenging (apart from some occasionally spotty platforming), but it provides simple fun for solo players or co-op duos of all ages. Simple puzzles are scattered throughout, requiring you to use specific characters to overcome obstacles, like Gandalf blasting blue bricks with magic, or two hobbits using a buddy-up move to break barriers. Slightly more involved solutions are required if you're trying to collect every item and secret by replaying levels, but you can engage in that kind of post-game play as much or as little as you want.

Like Lego LOTR, I had the most fun after the credits rolled. With the story missions complete, you have an entire world to explore. Unlock your favorite characters, earn cheats to amass a fortune in studs, and perform quests for Middle-earth citizens in need. The variety of activities is improved over the last installment, but still not ideal. Expect to fetch or craft a lot of items for people, though most of these objects are useful in your adventures, too.

The biggest step down in Lego The Hobbit is the addition of a more complicated – but not better – crafting system. As you smash objects, you collect new resources like gems, metals, and food. These are used for performing special builds in designated places and in crafting Mithril items (which no longer depend solely on collecting Mithril bricks). The problem is, if you run out of an item you need, you either have to hunt more down (which is tedious and time-consuming) or buy them at high prices (which is a hassle). Neither option

is fun, and the whole process just puts up an unnecessary roadblock between you and the cool thing you want to do. I appreciate the desire to set Lego The Hobbit apart from its predecessor, but this "innovation" does more harm than good.

One of the strangest things regarding Lego The Hobbit isn't part of the game at all. Warner Bros. decided to release the game to coincide with the home video release of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, the second movie in the series. That means the story doesn't actually conclude – it stops right where the second movie does, then drops you in the world for free play. As jarring as that may be, the gameplay doesn't suffer. With all of the side quests and collectibles, Lego The Hobbit is a complete and entertaining game. If you were counting on the Lego version of a movie adaptation of a 70-year-old book to deliver an unsullied narrative experience, you were expecting too much anyway. » **Joe Juba**



8

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360

» Concept

Transform the two released Hobbit movies into a single adventure, closely following the blueprint established by Lego Lord of the Rings

» Graphics

Imagine Lego bricks and minifigs in Middle-earth. That's what this looks like

» Sound

Audio taken directly from the films is used for the major dialogue, which occasionally produces distracting incongruities

» Playability

Straightforward controls keep things simple. Precise jumps are still frustrating, but they aren't a regular requirement

» Entertainment

The more lighthearted tone of The Hobbit works great with the Lego style, with lots of fun moments

» Replay Value

High



Child Of Light

All fairytales have their villains

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Role-Playing Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Montreal Release April 30 Rating E10+

PS4 • Xbox One
Wii U • PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Fly through a storybook world and fight monsters in turn-based combat

» Graphics

A gorgeous visual style is the most striking and impressive part of the entire game

» Sound

The music accentuates the mood perfectly, whether it's during battle or exploration

» Playability

Entering commands during encounters works fine, but the best part is guiding Aurora's flight

» Entertainment

Even without the depth of a fully featured RPG, this streamlined experience still has fun systems to dig into

» Replay Value

Moderate

Names like Final Fantasy and Grandia carry a lot of weight with certain gamers, but they don't need to be important to you in order to enjoy Child of Light. Ubisoft's downloadable, side-scrolling RPG borrows concepts from those classics in the genre, but infuses them with new ideas and presents them alongside captivating visuals and music. The result is something both familiar and surprising, but Child of Light's charm isn't powerful enough to completely cover its mistakes.

The art style immediately demands your attention. Storybook environments and characters bring the tale to life, which has a flying princess named Aurora exploring a fairytale world in hopes of getting back home. From the fantastical 2D settings to Aurora's flowing hair, every step of the journey is a visual treat. An impressive soundtrack sells the aesthetic even more, with lots of mellow strings and piano music accompanying you on your journey.

Despite its pleasant presentation, Child of Light isn't all about taking in the scenery. The turn-based combat system doesn't pull punches, and it's where you find most of the depth. A single meter governs when you and your enemies are able to act, and aggressively manipulating that meter is your key to victory. Interrupting an enemy who is readying an attack cancels the move and kicks them back

in the timeline. Your characters are vulnerable to the same effect, which makes combat an exciting back-and-forth of trying to maximize your actions while minimizing your enemies'. The process gets even more interesting when you factor in elemental weaknesses, skill progression, and crafted augmentations, providing a fun and balanced challenge.

As much as I enjoy the basic combat, I am frustrated by the two-character battle format. It feels needlessly restrictive; after acquiring a whole party, forcing them to fight in pairs excludes a wide range of potentially cool strategies and configurations. Consequently, I barely used some of the utility characters, opting only to swap them in for quick one-offs before replacing them with more useful fighters. Juggling characters like this becomes a part of your strategy, but it isn't fun. The arbitrary limitation makes it difficult to experiment and use characters to their fullest.

Your two active party members have a little assistance from Igniculus, a luminous floating sprite who doesn't directly participate in battle. Instead, he zips around the screen and slows down enemies, collects orbs that restore health and magic, and heals you directly. Managing Igniculus during solo play is easy enough, but his support role makes him a good fit for a younger co-op partner. He's a great addition to the formula, since his contributions aren't critical in most

encounters, but he can be extremely helpful.

Combat may have RPG roots, but don't expect the same from the story. You won't find nuanced characters or complex plot developments here. Worst of all, the dialogue is written in rhyme, which is probably supposed to enhance the storybook vibe. The novelty is gone within minutes, but the pattern only gets more annoying during the 10-hour journey. Imagine if, when writing this review, I was more concerned with making my sentences rhyme than articulating my thoughts about the game. The points and intent would get muddy, and that's the sacrifice Child of Light makes. The overabundance of awkward phrasing and interjections maintains rhyme and rhythm, but at the expense of developing the world and characters.

Child of Light isn't all style with no substance. The writing and story suffer due to Ubisoft Montreal doubling down on the whimsy factor, but that doesn't stop the gameplay from being accessible and entertaining, and a new game plus option keeps the adventure alive for additional playthroughs. Child of Light isn't a top-tier RPG, but its solid mechanics and visual flair ensure that it also isn't a forgettable one. » **Joe Juba**

This review pertains to the Xbox One version of Child of Light. The game is also available on PlayStation 4, Wii U, PS3, 360, and PC



Daylight

Better left in the shadows

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Atlus
Developer Zombie Studios **Release** April 29 **Rating** M

6

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**

Walk around in the dark, pick stuff up, avoid ghosts, and try to care

» **Graphics**

Despite using Unreal Engine 4, Daylight's visuals don't highlight the engine's power.

» **Sound**

Ambient music and sound effects accompany the minimal voice work

» **Playability**

Navigating the environments isn't complicated, but sometimes you need lightning-quick reflexes to fend off a shadow before it kills you

» **Entertainment**

A few jump scares left my heart racing, but the overall adventure isn't exciting

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low

In the absence of more traditional action, first-person exploration games depend on their atmosphere and characters. Success stories like *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home* demonstrate how a compelling narrative can pull players in, even when the gameplay consists mainly of looking at stuff and reading. *Zombie Studios* makes a similar attempt using a horror setting with *Daylight*, but fails to create a world where you care about anything or anyone. Without a captivating hook or any real scares, *Daylight* leaves players lost in the dark.

You control Sarah, a woman who wakes up in a spooky hospital with nothing but a cell phone. Using its flashlight, Sarah illuminates creepy corridors and dodges specters while finding bits of information like newspaper clippings and journal entries. Unsurprisingly, these generic clues hint at sinister goings-on at the hospital-turned-prison, but they never coalesce into a real mystery. Not every game needs cutscenes and long-winded exposition; I'm fine with piecing a story together based on the clues I find. The problem with *Daylight* is that, even after collecting all the information, the story isn't interesting.

The bland settings don't help the situation. Apart from the predictable menace of places like sewers and abandoned prisons, the procedurally generated environments don't provide a crafted or deliberate journey. On one hand, this means that the maps are never exactly the same. On the other hand, lots of dead ends and corridors with nothing to find results in too much aimless exploration. You get plenty of unpredictable jump scares that are different for each playthrough, but *Daylight* doesn't get past that surface level to deliver anything truly frightening. The randomness deflates the sense of tension, because information must be recollected after you die, but it isn't found in the same places or in the same order.

I also ran into a series of technical problems, including crashes, falling through the ground, and audio glitches. These technical missteps are distracting, but they aren't the most serious problem. *Daylight's* inability to terrify you and present a world you want to explore is its ultimate undoing. » **Joe Juba**

This review pertains to the PC version of Daylight. The game is also available on PlayStation 4



Trials Fusion

Modest changes

Style 1 to 4-Player Platforming **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer RedLynx **Release** April 16 **Rating** E10+

8

PS4 • Xbox One
360 • PC

» **Concept**

Trials steps into the future, but the gameplay is rooted in a long-established structure

» **Graphics**

Slick presentation and great backgrounds make this the best-looking game in the series

» **Sound**

The addition of occasional voiceovers from a futuristic A.I. attempts to create a window-dressing story

» **Playability**

Though the basic controls couldn't be simpler, mastering the balance and jumps necessary for later levels is incredibly challenging

» **Entertainment**

Still a great series, but not much is changing with this new iteration

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

The *Trials* series has a reputation for fun and challenge, and *Fusion* offers no reason to change that expectation. Stages of escalating difficulty put players' motorbike platforming, jumping, and balance to the test. Retries are inevitable as each course is charted and memorized. While RedLynx has gone to great lengths to introduce a few new surface-level features, *Fusion* is firmly built on an established blueprint. For players simply eager for another batch of courses, that should be just fine.

From its slick front menu to the stage backdrops, *Fusion* catapults the setting of *Trials* into the future. Players are riding on solar panels and leaping off hover planes as often as dirt and asphalt. An odd meta-story about artificial intelligences who like obstacle courses adds to the lunacy of the tracks. Those stages escalate quickly from easy to ridiculously hard, and I'm disappointed that more courses don't reside in the fun space between the two extremes.

A simple progression system offers rewards for medals and other achievements, and you slowly earn mostly cosmetic adjustments to your bike and rider. I like the streamlined unlock system, but it doesn't have enough meaningful purchases to spend your currency on.

The flexible Track Central course builder returns, offering an excellent tool for enterprising creators, and a curated system to guide players to the best user-crafted tracks. Local multiplayer is another bonus, but a small one; only 10 courses are available at launch, and the four-rider competitive matches are good for little more than a party distraction.

The biggest addition in this installment is the new FMX system, which allows players to complete crazy high-flying antics in mid-air using the right stick. It's a fun and easily mastered diversion, but FMX events are separate from the normal obstacle levels. They generally don't affect the core gameplay, even if they do contribute to progression. You are also treated to your first chance to drive an ATV during a few courses, which is a nice change of pace.

Trials Fusion, like its predecessors, is a bundle of fun packaged in frustration, repetition, and memorization. If that kind of punishment is your cup of tea, *Fusion* offers more of what you've come to expect. The existing formula is good, but with few meaningful steps forward, it's easy to feel like we've crashed down this road before. » **Matt Miller**

2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil

The cure for World Cup fever?

8

Style 1 to 7-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (360) (2-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Canada Release April 15 Rating E

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Add some mid-season adjustments without being as good as FIFA 14

» **Graphics**

The manager models look a little bloated, but at least they are there

» **Sound**

The special podcasts are cool to hear even though the commentary itself is not very specific. It's talk for talk's sake, which is sports radio in a nutshell

» **Playability**

Gameplay additions to headers, corners, and general movement are noticeable

» **Entertainment**

Unless you haven't touched the series since the last World Cup, this game is not essential

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High



The World Cup is highly anticipated, not only for the chance to see the best soccer players in the world face off cloaked in national pride, but because the tournament happens only once every four years. This FIFA title lacks the World Cup's scarcity. Including FIFA 15 coming this fall, EA is giving fans three FIFA titles in one year. World Cup Brazil has its advantages, but it's stuck in an awkward position. It's not the best representation of all the tournament encompasses, and in some ways it's not even better than FIFA 14.

Then again, World Cup Brazil is not a dud. The game contains more features than any of the previous titles centered on the tournament, and even includes enhancements on FIFA 14's gameplay. Headers are improved

both by defenders' increased ability to win the ball in the air as well as new strategic options for corner kicks. Developer EA Canada also worked on streamlining player movements after receiving the ball in order to make acceleration more fluid.

These are tangible improvements, but they only tell half the story since those gameplay areas still need work. Headers may now have more possible outcomes, but it still seems like the outcome is determined before the ball is kicked into the air. Player movement is smoother, but there are still times when players inexplicably fail to detect the ball at their feet or lack any awareness regarding the ball or teammate location. The latter is particularly frustrating when you're trying to clear the ball

from in front of your goal and teammates are clustered too close.

If the gameplay is a zero-sum when compared to FIFA 14, the title's World Cup-related accoutrements are welcome, but not significant. Training between friendlies and matches in the Road to the World Cup mode gives you strategic options as a manager. Do you use the pre-tournament matches and training sessions to build up younger players so they can crack the World Cup roster later on, or do you simply maintain the form and morale of already-established players?

Despite elevating the importance of training, like previous World Cup titles, this game doesn't do enough to convey the entire experience. The skill games are hardly interesting, no drama exists in the roster selection process or with your players, and there's not much weight conveyed to the qualification process. FIFA 14's headline-driven career HUD does a better job of livening up the day-to-day experience, and while there are added presentation elements like a radio show and new cutscenes of fans, they are tidbits that are drops in the bucket. In terms of new World Cup capturing modes, Road to Rio de Janeiro takes on the series' popular Seasons format, but it's not a destination feature.

You've probably heard of World Cup Fever. What is it? You know it when you've got it, and this game doesn't raise the temperature much.

» **Matthew Kato**

Like the new training minigames, in Captain Your Country mode you'll go up against others to solidify your position on the team

RIVAL STANDINGS

Player	Rank	Final 23	Overall Rating	Attributes
Javier Hernández	7	Final 23	84 OVR	62 PAS, 82 SHO, 79 DRI, 41 DEF, 76 HEA, 75 PAC
Giovani dos Santos	21	Final 23	80 OVR	69 PAS, 83 SHO, 89 DRI, 39 DEF, 63 HEA, 73 PAC
Andrés Guardado	22	Final 23	81 OVR	80 PAS, 74 SHO, 86 DRI, 74 DEF, 60 HEA, 73 PAC
Rafael Márquez	23	Final 23	76 OVR	73 PAS, 59 SHO, 67 DRI, 74 DEF, 77 HEA, 60 PAC

EA Sports ADVANCE



MLB 14: The Show

Changing the rules of the game



Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (8-Player Online) Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Sony San Diego Release April 1 Rating E

8.5

In 2008, Major League Baseball recognized umpires weren't enforcing the 12-second time limit between pitches. All 30 teams were warned that this hard-and-fast rule would be in full effect for the upcoming season. The reason? Game times were running longer than normal, and fans and sports writers alike balked at the idea of spending more time at the ballpark. "Clubs and fans share the common objective of seeing a game that is played as sharply and crisply as possible," commissioner Bud Selig said at the time. "We have reminded our staff and our umpires to enforce the rules in order to achieve the progress we need in this area."

Flash forward six years: That desire to shave down the amount of time it takes to play a game of baseball almost seems comical. Pitchers and batters are not penalized for dillydallying, and the expanded use of instant replay – in which managers can challenge calls – has slowed the sport even more. Games are longer than ever.

In MLB 14: The Show, developer Sony San Diego is channeling Selig's 2008 mindset to reduce the amount of time needed to complete nine innings. Since this series already gives players the option to bypass the off-action moments – such as players adjusting their batting gloves, or managers yapping it up in the dugout – cuts had to come from the game itself. Sony's solution is essentially abridged baseball. For every second you save, you see less of the game.

I've had numerous debates with myself over what kind of baseball fan someone must be if they don't want to watch every pitch. Most of baseball's strategy and drama comes from the batter and pitcher match-ups. Players develop an understanding of how the pitcher attacks and changes speeds – every pitch matters. Conversely, MLB 14 makes a fairly good argument that you don't need to see every pitch to derive enjoyment and intensity from a game of baseball.

A new optional setting called Quick Counts simulates a count every time you step into the batter's box. These counts are generated using

two years' worth of statistical data from MLB.com, and also factor in the developments of the current game and situation in that at bat.

Playing a full game with Quick Counts activated results in a much faster experience – my shortest games were completed in just under 30 minutes, and the longer, higher scoring affairs were around 40. Full games in MLB 13 range from 60 to 75 minutes.

On the plus side, Quick Counts took the "hack-at-everything" out of my plate approach, and gave me opportunities to walk. On the mound, I paid closer attention to pitch counts, which can elevate quickly when a hurler is running into trouble. I called upon the bullpen more than I ever have in a baseball game.

On the downside, I never once saw a 0-0 count, meaning batters never put the first pitch in play. Again, the hardest pill to swallow is knowing that you aren't controlling your destiny for most of the game.

The second feature that speeds up play is called Player Lock. In its intended form, this option lets you role-play as one player throughout an entire game, taking all of his at bats and fielding opportunities, just like in Road to the Show mode. Player Lock can be turned off at any point during the simulation, or reassigned to different players. If you want to make sure your team wins a close game, you can enter the substitution menu and Player Lock the closer. This new option isn't without its problems. Interrupting the simulation when you want to can be difficult, and a fair amount of time is spent in menus selecting players.

Using Player Lock, my game times were around 10 to 15 minutes. Player Lock can be used in conjunction with Quick Counts to reduce a game's time to five to seven minutes.

You won't find new gameplay mechanics to tinker with in MLB 14, but Sony's iterative process continues to shine, giving this year's on-field performance another jolt of realism. Along with entirely new catcher and base-running animations (which look fantastic), the ball is the star of this year's in-game improvements. Actually, it's the indicator that follows the ball,

which is no longer stationary. When a ball is clobbered, or taken for a ride in the wind, the catch indicator moves accordingly. This little change creates a wealth of excitement, including balls drifting back, back, back, and gone. In most cases, you won't see that a ball is a home run until it drifts over the wall. Another small tweak that makes a world of difference is a new dynamic camera that tracks the ball out of the batter's box. This helps immensely for fielding or judging whether you should tag up or not. Pitching, batting, fielding, and base running are all handled remarkably well, delivering fun gameplay and an accurate representation of the little nuances of the sport.

I applaud Sony's decision to remove unnecessary advancement goals from Road to the Show, which allows for players to be sculpted any which way, but this mode still doesn't offer enough interaction and viewpoints outside of player building. The newly implemented Topps Amateur Showcase is a step in the right direction, but in an age where NBA 2K's My Career mode includes fiction, endorsements, and choices galore, MLB 14's attempt is antiquated by comparison.

I was hoping to spend a fair amount of time in MLB 14's new online franchise mode, which offers all of the standard bells and whistles sports gamers have come to expect, but all of my online games ran into significant performance issues related to lag and framerate. Here's hoping Sony can iron out these problems. Having the option to quickly contact people looking for leagues is a nice touch. The framework Sony has in place is impressive, giving the commissioner and players plenty of flexibility. The play just needs to be reliable.

MLB 14 is another pennant-winning effort for Sony San Diego that showcases improvements both on and off the field, and opens avenues of play to people looking to digest baseball in different ways. Best of all, the progress you make in this year's game won't be lost when spring training rolls around next year. Your Franchise and Road to the Show saves will carry over into MLB 15, allowing you to pick up right where you left off. » **Andrew Reiner**

PS3

» Concept

New features dramatically cut down the time it takes to complete a game, allowing players to get deeper into seasons

» Graphics

New fielding animations add authenticity to specific plays. The level of detail is nearly identical to last year's game

» Sound

Commentators Matt Vesgersian, Eric Karros, and Steve Lyons do a fine job covering the play-by-play, but they often repeat the same player-specific information

» Playability

New ball tracking creates more excitement on spinning liners and balls crushed to the fence. Quick Counts are a welcome addition that generates more realistic pitch counts and walk totals – all while cutting down time investment

» Entertainment

The same great baseball simulation now caters to a wider group of gamers with online franchises and shorter game times

» Replay Value

High

Age Of Wonders III

An uneven patchwork strategy



Style 1-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Triumph Studios **Developer** Triumph Studios **Release** March 31 **Rating** T

7.5

PC

» Concept

A strong turn-based fantasy strategy game mixed with a simplified 4X empire simulator that can feel like a chore

» Graphics

Features a nice diversity in unit types, but the simple environments won't push your GPU to the breaking point

» Sound

A peppy, drum-filled soundtrack will get you pumped for war, but the voice acting will make you happy to just read the subtitles

» Playability

Age of Wonders III's many systems feel complicated at first, but you will pick up the basics in a couple hours

» Entertainment

The turned-based battles will leave a lot of strategy fans happy, but I wish you could fast forward through the rest of the game

» Replay Value

Moderately High

If you worked out only half of your body, you wouldn't merely look ridiculous; you'd also only be as strong as your weakest half. This was my experience with Age of Wonders III, which is essentially two games in one. A series of turn-based wars have you managing a variety of units across the battlefield, and a 4X strategy layer lets you govern the cities within your kingdom, build your war machine, and manage your population's happiness. While the war strategy is strong and full of interesting tactical choices, the empire simulation is less interesting and more repetitive. Age of Wonders III's uneven strengths ultimately make it weaker in the long run.

In traditional fantasy style, you begin the game by choosing your warrior race from a selection of humans, orcs, dwarves, or the dragon-like draconians. The differences between races runs deeper than skin tone and ear shape; each race features a version of the basic combat classes such as ranged archers, knights, sorcerers, and battering rams, but they use these classes in unique ways. The high-elf longbowmen, for example, are well-armed archers with a balanced ranged attack. Goblin swarm darters, on the other hand, have a weaker overall attack but inflict poison damage

and have night vision that gives them added range in the dark. Even if you have holes in your army, you can conquer different racial cities and use their training grounds to add their unique unit types to your growing horde.

Hero customization and spells are especially good, letting you develop a leader who can wade into battle beside your warriors on horseback, send lightning from the sky down on your opponents, or summon wild animals to charge into the fray. The diversity of class types gives you a lot of options when approaching a battle, which is good because Age of Wonders III's randomly generated battlegrounds are sometimes a little simple. However, even a basic walled castle presents you with a plethora of strategic attack options. Do you pelt your opponents with volleys of arrows from outside and hope they come out and fight? Do you send your gryphon riders to fly over the wall? Or do you have your hero teleport through their fortifications and shake up the enemy's defenses while risking death? Each strategy has weaknesses and strengths, but finding the battle plan that works for you is rewarding. Even during exchanges where I was highly outmatched, I occasionally pulled out a win thanks to careful planning.

These skirmishes can be auto-resolved, which helps save time during battles where you heavily outnumber your opponent. I wish you could also auto-resolve many of Age of Wonders III's top-level strategy elements.

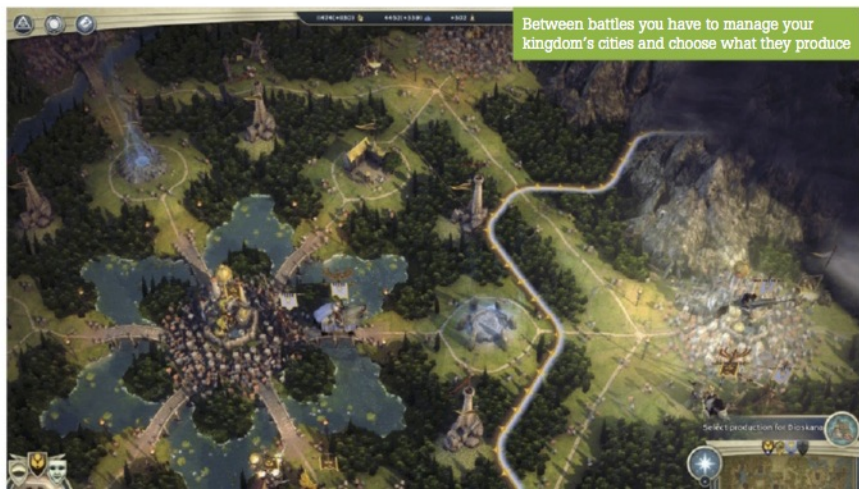
This section tasks you with managing your cities' population and production. Like other 4X titles, Age of Wonders III lets you explore a larger world map, establish new cities, and even explore dungeons filled with bandits. However, unlike its peers, military dominance is really the only way to win here. The only reason to build up your cities' economies is to funnel that money back into the war machine. Researching new technologies is only good for unlocking more powerful military units. I enjoy the feeling of progress, but when all roads ultimately lead to the same place, the top-level decisions feel less like real options and more like a slog of clicking through menus.

A story mode lets you follow a young elf woman on her quest to avenge her brother's death and prevent the massive empire known as the Commonwealth from overwhelming her race, but the tale isn't that compelling. Everything that's entertaining about Age of Wonders III can be distilled into smaller and more bite-sized scenarios, but it's nice to have some context for why your army is trying to defeat the other army.

This whole experience easily shifts over to the online arena, where you can participate in epic wars with up to seven other players. The mechanics don't change much online, but the diplomacy interactions become more interesting when you're bartering with real people.

Age of Wonders III's wealth of unit types and leader abilities leads to some engaging battles. I just wish as much thought was required for its strategic empire-building sections. If you can put up with the toil of running an empire, you are treated to some compelling and rewarding combat. Unfortunately, you have to do both, because you can't play only half a game.

» Ben Reeves



Moebius: Empire Rising

A campy adventure that falls flat

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Phoenix Online Publishing **Developer** Pinkerton Road
Release April 15 **Rating** Not Rated



As a big adventure fan, I was excited to see Jane Jensen, creator of the famed Gabriel Knight series, back with a new project. Moebius has an intriguing premise, with hero Malachi Rector piecing together a connection between history and present events. Unfortunately, the lackluster gameplay and disappointing story didn't pull me in.

Let's get the biggest issue out of the way first. Moebius is campy and everything plays out ham-handedly. The problem is it's positioned as a serious drama, while wooden animations and unrealistic scenarios – like luring a guard into a cell only to take him out with a karate chop – had me rolling my eyes at the absurdity.

A good adventure game has a gripping world and characters, but Moebius' cast and story are simply subpar. Malachi is an aloof antiques appraiser investigating a conspiracy. He tells it to people straight, which gets him in trouble. He's reminiscent of Temperance Brennan from *Bones* or Dr. House, only without the redeeming moments or likable traits. This doesn't help the story, which lacks momentum and has laughable plot twists.

I do enjoy Moebius' Carmen Sandiego vibe. You travel around locations like France, Italy, and Egypt examining relics, meeting people, and learning about history. The investigations, however, are basic match puzzles. A chest may have a symbol on it, and you just choose from a few images to find the one that resembles it.

Moebius has plenty of basic point-and-click puzzles, but most use weird adventure-game logic. Maybe you discover a clue at the bottom of a river – but you need to combine a pole with something sticky, and that item might be innocuous. I also didn't care for some of the backtracking required. I would often see an object and know it would be useful, but couldn't pick it up until its puzzle presented itself.

While some puzzles challenged me, others were tedious roadblocks. At one point, you're investigating a government figure with a knack for cryptography, but entering the solution is a time-consuming chore. Some sequences also go on too long, like finding a way out of an abandoned cave with various dead ends, then backtracking through it two more times. This isn't fun or challenging – it's busywork.

Moebius is missing a spark – something that makes you want to keep playing. It has a few shining moments with some standout humorous lines, but they're buried in bad dialogue, empty characters, and a dry mystery. Sadly, I don't think people will be talking about Malachi Rector with the esteem they do Gabriel Knight. » **Kimberley Wallace**

6

PC

» Concept

Take on the role of the antique appraiser Malachi Rector to discover why influential people have jarring similarities to historical figures

» Graphics

There's no hiding the low-budget graphics, especially when it comes to the awkward animations

» Sound

Despite using various accents, which pose extra challenges, the voice acting is still decent. Still, some dialog isn't as natural as it could be

» Playability

The point-and-click controls get the job done, but some puzzles are more tedious than fun

» Entertainment

Moebius is a great throwback to old-school, point-and-click adventure games, but it has plenty of unexciting puzzles and wasted potential

» Replay Value

Moderate



Goat Simulator

A goofy but rough sandbox bleat 'em up

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Coffee Stain Studios
Developer Coffee Stain Studios **Release** April 1
Rating Not Rated

5

PC

Coffee Stain Studio's webpage for Goat Simulator describes it as "a small, broken, and stupid game." These aren't the words I'd typically use to begin a review, but I found them appropriate. The developers' humorously dismissive statement accurately sums up the wacky, physics-based sandbox, but there's more to say about the title's shortcomings and emergent, goat-related chaos.

Players are dropped into a small sandbox world as a goat. This single stage is the only offering in the whole game, which leaves much to be desired. This mammal can jump, ram, bleat, lick things, ragdoll, and slow time to relish the more dramatic moments. Smashing through fences and launching innocent bystanders is initially amusing, especially if the unpredictable physics sends them hurtling farther than expected. I enjoyed licking a car doing donuts in a field with the goat's adhesive tongue and being dragged along for a zany ride. Finding a jetpack and blasting through the air like a drunk, bleating missile is also entertaining for a few minutes. These moments are amusing the first time around, but the chuckles diminish upon repetition.

After the experimental mayhem dies down, a paper-thin string of challenges is available. Most involve catching a certain amount of air time, finding collectibles, or scoring points. The confusing, seemingly random combo and multiplier system for ramming, licking, and exploding stuff in the environment doesn't offer a sense of true accomplishment.

Achieving your malicious or self-abusive goals is easy enough, but overall platforming and object collision is buggy beyond belief. Within the first hour of the game I was trapped behind buildings, stuck in fences, and falling through the game world. Developer Coffee Stain Studios understands its game is an unpolished practice in absurdity, and has included an achievement for making the game crash. The loose controls and numerous bugs aren't enough to cause intense frustration, but they're enough to dull the appeal over time.

I don't regret playing Goat Simulator, but I also don't recommend it to anyone looking for more than disposable, unpolished entertainment involving goats making people fall down and blowing up gas stations.

» **Tim Turi**

» Concept

An invincible goat brings doomsday to a small town via ridiculously buggy, physics-based gameplay

» Graphics

The design of the town and overall aesthetic is aggressively generic, but serves its purpose

» Sound

The single looping music track is cheesy and annoying, but I never get sick of hitting the bleat button

» Playability

The controls are loose and the action is imprecise, but I had little trouble ramming my intended targets after some effort

» Entertainment

Fun for an hour or so, and likely even more enjoyable with a group of onlookers reacting to the onscreen nonsense.

» Replay Value

Low

Kinect Sports Rivals

A .500 season

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Developer Rare **Release** April 8 **Rating** E



6.5

Xbox One

» Concept

Keep chasing Nintendo's last-gen success with a new Kinect-enabled sports minigame collection

» Graphics

It's not ambitious, but the Xbox One's power shows in the highly detailed environments and water physics

» Sound

I found the coach character's dialogue and attempts at humor to be grating. Otherwise, the audio is pleasantly forgettable

» Playability

The Kinect controls work fairly well – which is to say, not as well as they could and not as well as conventional controllers

» Entertainment

I admire the effort to build an online infrastructure and career story mode, but the selection of games feels slight

» Replay Value

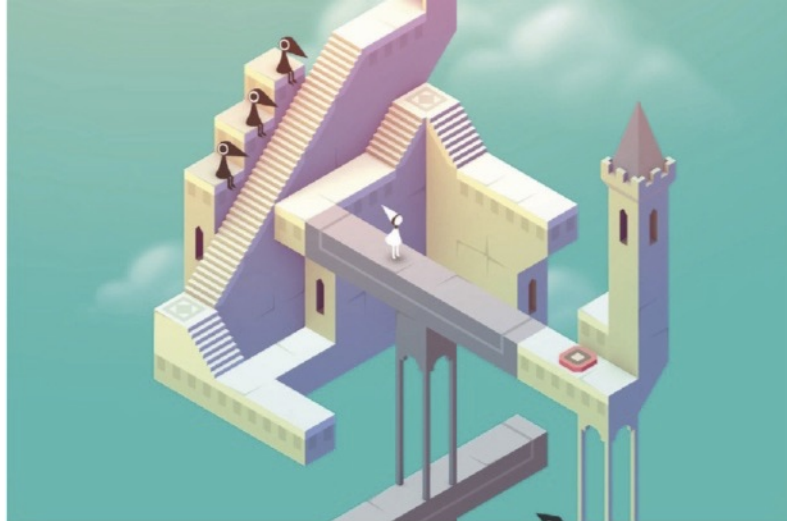
Moderately

Kinect Sports Rivals is the follow-up to Xbox 360's Kinect Sports, which tried and failed to do for Microsoft's motion control camera what Wii Sports did for Wii. While the game reportedly sold well, it didn't do much to establish Kinect as a must-buy peripheral. Now, developer Rare is back with Kinect Sports Rivals, a game that relies on the new camera that ships with every Xbox One.

Kinect Sports Rivals is a showcase for the technology first and foremost, letting users compete in six sporting events (wake racing, rock climbing, target shooting, soccer, bowling, and tennis) played entirely with motion controls. Each works to a varying degree of success, but the package is much better in terms of fine control than its predecessor.

Overall, it's a decent testimony to the accuracy of the Kinect 2.0. Sadly, I don't work for *A Decent Testimony To The Accuracy Of The Kinect 2.0 Informer Magazine*. As a game, it's never more than mediocre. Wake racing is well done, and reminded me how much I used to love Wave Race and Splashdown, but as my arms grew tired throughout a series of races, I wished that I could play the game with a controller. The tedious target shooting controls well, but is of little interest. Tennis, which should be a gimme for a game like this, seems to have the worst controls. Climbing won't be for everyone, but I was impressed by how the Kinect tracked my arm and hand motions while I reached for purchase on a series of handholds. Soccer is an oddly designed, foosball-like experience that requires awkward leg contortions to score goals. At least there's bowling – good old, reliable bowling.

Rare went the extra mile in creating the game's structure. There's a (somewhat cheesy) story, tons of items and clothing to buy with in-game cash, and an online hub for comparing yourself against others and uploading game footage. That's fine and good, but it feels like a lot of sizzle for such a small piece of steak. If this had been packed in with the Xbox One to demonstrate the new Kinect, it would seem like a nice extra. As a standalone game, it's just not compelling. » **Matt Helgeson**



Monument Valley

Savoring every moment

8

Style 1-Player Puzzle **Publisher** Ustwo Games
Developer Ustwo Games **Release** April 3 **Rating** 4+

iOS

» Concept

Lead players on an atmospheric adventure featuring puzzles comprised of clever optical illusions

» Graphics

Monument Valley's striking art style makes it a treat to wander each level

» Sound

The affective soundtrack complements the somber and mysterious narrative

» Playability

Point-and-click navigation and swipe gestures are all that's required

» Entertainment

It only offers enough content for a single sitting, but the journey is wonderful

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

Optical illusion-based puzzle games are quickly becoming a genre unto themselves, with indie titles like *Antichamber* and *The Bridge* challenging players to leave the basic conventions of reality at the start screen. Ustwo Games' *Monument Valley* is the latest to encourage its own line of thinking, as players help a mysterious princess navigate the visual tricks of her environment. While *Monument Valley* is definitely the most polished of this new breed of puzzle games, it is also the easiest.

Indie games often skate by on rudimentary visuals, but not *Monument Valley*. Each level sprawls out before the player like a minimalist movie poster, and features its own vibrant color palette and creative flourishes. *Monument Valley*'s surreal towers and castles are adorned in networks of interweaving paths and stairways, which players manipulate with switches and levers that transform the landscape in interesting ways. Towers rotate, staircases unfold, and passageways shift to reveal a path forward. In every level, I paused to admire how gorgeous *Monument Valley* is, demonstrating an indie game doesn't need a 16-bit art style to be aesthetically appealing.

While *Monument Valley*'s puzzles are visually clever, they don't take much brain power to figure out. Your path through the beautiful landscapes is often obvious, with only a few slides or rotations of environmental objects standing in the way of your goal. That said, Ustwo does a good job of constantly introducing new mechanics, so even though the puzzles are simple, they are rarely repetitive. Elements like path-blocking crows and a totem that can be slid around to reach new areas don't really make the puzzles more challenging, but they change things up just enough to keep players engaged.

The biggest head-scratcher is the obtuse narrative. *Monument Valley* seems like it's trying to tell a meaningful story, but the symbolism is so vague it's hard to tell what the developer trying to convey. Players control a princess who appears to be returning geometric shapes to some ancient monuments; beyond that the story is open to interpretation, and doesn't give the player much to go on.

I often commend developers for not padding out their games with filler content, but *Monument Valley* is one case where I was left wanting more. The game only features ten levels, with the first few serving to introduce the basic gameplay mechanics. Only the final levels hit a satisfying length and complexity, and then the game is over. That shouldn't detract indie fans from partaking in *Monument Valley*'s wondrous journey, however, which has already landed on my short list for mobile game of the year. » **Jeff Marchiava**



Kirby: Triple Deluxe

An upward slope of charm and challenge

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Platforming (4-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo
Developer HAL Laboratory Release May 2 Rating E

8.5



3DS

» **Concept**

Kirby gets pulled into another platforming adventure, but this time he can move between planes and his sucking powers have received a huge upgrade

» **Graphics**

Kirby is cute, his enemies are cute, and his world is cute. Plus, everything looks like delicious candy

» **Sound**

Remixes of classic Kirby music fill the game with nostalgic charm

» **Playability**

Slower than most modern platformers, but finding a rhythm doesn't take long. Motion-controlled elements are used sparingly, but work well

» **Entertainment**

The single-player campaign is the main attraction, offering a fun experience that plays with Kirby's typical mechanics in interesting ways

» **Replay Value**

High

Kirby has always moved at a slower pace compared to the platforming members of his extended Nintendo family like Donkey Kong and Mario. The difficulty level in Kirby's outings remains consistently low, creating a relaxed breed of enjoyable (but predictable) action. Triple Deluxe doesn't change the Kirby formula drastically, but it improves the difficulty curve and adds several fun mechanics.

The big draw of Triple Deluxe is the way it plays with action in the foreground and

background of each level. Kirby moves between the two planes, but the most interesting use of this mechanic is the way elements from one plane affect the other. Trees fall from the background into the foreground, threatening to crush Kirby. Walls tip forward, forcing Kirby to position himself in front of an opening – like Buster Keaton narrowly avoiding death from a collapsing house.

Triple Deluxe is a 2D platformer, but these elements force you to observe the level from all directions, as opposed to only the obstacles directly in front of you. This adds to the challenge, and results in some fun spectacles.

Triple Deluxe gives Kirby a handful of new powers, each changing the way you approach traversal and enemies. The most memorable of the bunch is the Hypernova plant. Gaining this power allows Kirby to leverage an incredible amount of sucking power to dismantle and consume trains, weapons, and groups of enemies all at once. Some levels are designed around the use of the Hypernova ability, and I was always excited to come across one. The Hypernova plant is used especially well during the final ramp-up, when Kirby must re-defeat the bosses he had to tackle earlier in the game.

Along with the single-player campaign comes two extra modes (hence the name Triple Deluxe) offering decent, but limited, distractions. One casts players as King Dedede in a rhythm platforming game. Only three levels are available, but perfecting them is a challenge. Kirby Fighters lets local 3DS players duke it out against one another, each playing as Kirby with their choice of power.

After playing a handful of rounds on each of the available stages, I didn't feel compelled to revisit it, but the familiar feel got me excited for the 3DS version of Super Smash Bros. Additional modes are also unlocked after beating the campaign, one of which lets you speed-run through the single-player campaign as King Dedede, who's alternate abilities make for a distinct and equally fun experience worth exploring.

Triple Deluxe does a better job than most Kirby games at retaining a consistent upward slope of challenge throughout. During the last few worlds and final boss, I was surprised to see my lives dwindle, and began to play much more carefully – something I've never done in previous Kirby titles. I was excited to embrace this challenge. The game isn't hard, but I needed to improve my abilities as I made my way to the end boss. This made for a Kirby experience that remained engaging up to the final boss and beyond.

» **Kyle Hilliard**



Mario Golf: World Tour

Back into the swing of things

8

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) Publisher Nintendo Developer Camelot Release May 2 Rating E

3DS

» **Concept**

The return of the franchise uses the conventions of previous handheld and console versions of the series, while also adding online play

» **Graphics**

Reading the lie of the green can sometimes be hard, but otherwise the graphics are sufficient

» **Sound**

Comments occasionally burst from the speaker, but they aren't actual commentary

» **Playability**

Using the touchscreen to direct where you want to strike the ball for fade, draw, etc. works well

» **Entertainment**

Yet another fun three-click golf discipline that offers a breadth of modes and experiences

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High



It's been almost 10 years since developer Camelot delivered the last Mario Golf title (Mario Golf: Advance Tour for GBA). That may seem like a long time – especially for a sports franchise – but three-click golf hasn't changed over the years. Mario Golf: World Tour doesn't reinvent any wheels on the venerable golf cart, but it does get with the times, offering plenty to shake your clubs at and making good use of the 3DS' touchscreen.

What's deceptive about World Tour is that even though it has a career hub called the Castle Club, it's not the be-all, end-all of the game. Instead of making this mode a destination, you must visit other parts of the game you otherwise might ignore (like the Play Now-esque Quick Round mode) in order to see everything on display. These detours earn you coins that buy better clubs and outfits (including Nintendo characters' costumes) for your Mii golfer. It won't take you long to beat the champions of the Castle's three 18-hole courses (yes, just three), but that's only the beginning of the journey.

Also on the castle grounds are six special nine-hole courses that you must earn Star Coins to unlock (more on that later). These fantastical courses based on Nintendo characters and locations are filled with item boxes, environmental hazards, and difficult layouts. Items, such as Bullet Bills that make you impervious to wind or Fire Flowers that burn their way through trees (these can be used on normal 18-hole courses in certain situations) can be used at various times to make things interesting.

All of the courses in the Quick Round mode host various challenges for Star Coins, such as golfing through in a set amount of time, beating a particular opponent, or making sure your ball passes through specific rings on the course. To see all the game has to offer, you're always switching between the two modes, snacking from an appetizer buffet rather than digging into a full meal.

I would have preferred a more unified structure with less menu hopping, but the larger inconvenience is that grinding for the Star Coins wears out its welcome. Given the lack of a larger progression structure other than buying new items (some of which don't improve your stats), I was less inclined to plow through the challenges. Netting an item I don't want isn't as exciting or deep as building up your attributes over time. Having more than three normal 18-hole courses (more are available via paid DLC), would also have helped keep the game feeling fresh.

Online tournaments are ready to go on day one as well as scheduled for the future. Similar to the rest of the game, tourneys are in both the Quick Round and Castle Club modes, and they earn you coins and items. You can also create your own around certain perimeters (handicap, number of holes, items you can use, characters you can use etc.). The online tourneys provide more content and fill out the feature set, but don't imbue the game with any higher sense of purpose. Missing is any summation of stats and achievements that defines and showcases your profile to the online community other than your leaderboard placings.

Despite some of the missteps, World Tour's bedrock gameplay remains a reason to check out the title. The 3DS' touchscreen is used to add draw, fade, loft, and drive to your shots, and it works well. Additions like this and online play show that the series hasn't remained stagnant in its long interval, but they aren't entirely unexpected, either. Mario Golf: World Tour is a welcome but not irrefutably triumphant return.

» **Matthew Kato**





Conception II: Children Of The Seven Stars

Making babies the weird and shallow way

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus
Developer Spike Chunsoft **Release** April 15 **Rating** M

6

Vita • 3DS

» **Concept**

Bond with women to create "star children" who explore labyrinths to stop a monster outbreak

» **Graphics**

Dungeons are drab and boring. Character models are generic and look like stock anime characters

» **Sound**

Some music is catchy and fun, but the tracks that play in dungeons are dull and uninspired. Voices are pretty spot-on for the character personalities

» **Playability**

The learning curve and lack of guidance mean that you often need to experiment and find your own success – which isn't necessarily a bad thing

» **Entertainment**

Despite some good ideas with its gameplay systems, it gets repetitive fast. The juvenile story and characters don't help

» **Replay Value**

Low

You can't deny that Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars is silly. The dungeon crawler/dating sim hybrid has players conceiving powerful children to fight evil. Silliness is okay, but Conception II doesn't have any endearing charm; it comes off as an otaku fantasy rather than a fun RPG. Ignoring the risqué visuals and in-your-face sex talk, the dungeons are boring, the combat is repetitive, and the story and characters are ho-hum.

Your character is kind of a big deal. He attends an academy with the mission of training young people to fight the monsters in the world, quickly earning the nickname "God's Gift," and is constantly encouraged to build relationships and "classmate" with women to create "star children." The game claims classmating is not real sex, but it is treated the same. The classmating scenes simulate an intimate encounter; your partners arch their backs, and the silhouettes outlining their body parts don't leave much to the imagination. This can be awkward, going a step further than necessary for the zany premise.

Growing your relationships produces high-potential kids with access to more job classes, but getting to know these women is awful. The story is poorly paced, and their problems are laughably superficial; I had to convince a girl that she was fine just the way she is – small bust and all. Self-esteem is a universal struggle, but when the scenario revolves solely around chest size, it loses poignancy.

When you're not trying to raise your relationship with one of the chosen women, you're dungeon crawling. You're paired with one of the romantic interests, and direct up to three groups of star children. I had one group that was more focused on healing and defense, while I set others to focus on magic and strength attacks. I enjoyed unlocking new classes and composing new battle groups, but the novelty wears off quickly due to the drab, randomly generated dungeons.

Some of the most exciting RPGs work with relationship building, like Persona and Fire Emblem, but this just takes it in a bizarre direction. Merely giving players a chance to pair up isn't enough; the actual relationship building needs substance, complemented by a compelling story and entertaining gameplay. Conception II just hits all the wrong notes. » **Kimberley Wallace**

The Edge

The game looks best on the Vita. The 3DS version is a visual step down, but it's not hindered in any other way.



Pokémon Battle Trozei

Form steps on function in this mediocre match-three

Style 1-Player Puzzle (4-Player Local)
Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Genius Sonority
Release March 20 **Rating** E

6

3DS

» **Concept**

Fill up your Pokédex by lining up collectible critters in this match-three puzzle game

» **Graphics**

Matching Pokémon heads is a cute idea, but their similarities can create problems

» **Sound**

The music speeds up when you're close to defeat, which is the only vaguely remarkable thing about it

» **Playability**

Dragging the icons around works well, though players with a 3DS XL will be at an advantage

» **Entertainment**

Strip away the license, and it's a mediocre puzzle game

» **Replay Value**

High

Pokémon trainers have something new to fill the time when they're not busy taming wild beasts in the series' main entries. However, players won't likely feel compelled to match 'em all in this puzzle spin-off thanks to Pokémon Battle Trozei's repetitive nature.

You drag icons around a grid, and matches of three or more are removed from the screen. If you can follow up a match of four or more with another valid match, you enter a special "trozei" mode. Matches of two or more count in this state, and the frenzy continues as long as you quickly keep your combo going or clear the screen. All of these successful matches weaken the wild Pokémon that appear, and the defeated critters are added to your Pokédex.

The game features hundreds of Pokémon, which can be problematic. There's a reason why match-three games use easy-to-identify iconography like gems, candy, and colorful blocks. Pokémon Battle Trozei's visual clutter needlessly obscures the playfield when you're looking for combos. That's where most of the difficulty comes from; once I settled into the rhythm of activating trozei, clearing the screen, and repeating, it became less of a challenge and more of a chore.

Players who know their Aurorus from their Emboars have a slight advantage. Pokémon have elemental weaknesses and alignments, and knowing what a ghost Pokémon is weak against is helpful. You can bring support Pokémon into matches, which adds a bit of strategy to the proceedings. Some have special abilities, like hitting with extra damage in matches of five or more, or healing the player's trozei box (wild Pokémon regularly attack, and when the box is destroyed, it's game over).

I'm a firm believer that a puzzle game needs to stand apart from whatever license or theme it has slapped on it. The game is the mechanic, after all. This is a case where characters are really the only appealing thing there is. Games like Puzzle & Dragons have successfully juggled a similar mechanic and character-collection elements, proving that it can be done – and done well. Pokémon Battle Trozei is too superficial to remain interesting in the long term. » **Jeff Cork**

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6 | Boom Beach

Platform iOS Release March 26 Rating 9+

Boom Beach gives you more strategic options than its predecessor Clash of Clans, but it is still designed to create lulls encouraging you to pay to speed up the clock. If you don't mind constant interruptions from timers you may enjoy this game, but despite its polish and a charming visual aesthetic, I couldn't wait to delete the app from my phone. – Kyle Hilliard

2 | R.B.I. Baseball 14

Platform PS3 • 360 Release April 9 Rating E

Major League Baseball's attempt to wax nostalgia is a Chicago Cubs-sized failure. The pitching and batting experience is the only aspect of the game that is even remotely entertaining. The remainder of the gameplay package is a frustrating blend of old school design and poor baseball logic. – Andrew Reiner

7 | Trials Frontier

Platform iOS Release April 10 Rating 9+

It's not enough that Trials Frontier has mastered the gameplay of the series on its new platform. The inflated structure that surrounds it – whether you pay or not – obscures what makes Frontier worth playing. – Matthew Kato

8.5 | The Wolf Among Us: Episode 3 – A Crooked Mile

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC Release April 8 (PS3, PC) April 9 (360) Rating M

A Crooked Mile is a much more balanced episode than its predecessor. The excellent pacing, the varied choices, and how the writers still make me guess their next move keeps this episode riveting. – Kimberley Wallace

9 | Titanfall

Platform 360 Release April 8 Rating M

Players who have not yet made the jump to a high-end PC or new-gen console have a competent way to play one of this year's most exciting games, and that's a chance that shouldn't be missed by quibbling over visual hang ups. – Matt Miller

8.25 | FTL

Platform iOS Release April 3 Rating 9+

This polished mobile version is a fantastic addition to the iOS library. It carries both the intense thrills and frustrating potential for loss that characterized the original – now with a smartly built touch interface. – Matt Miller



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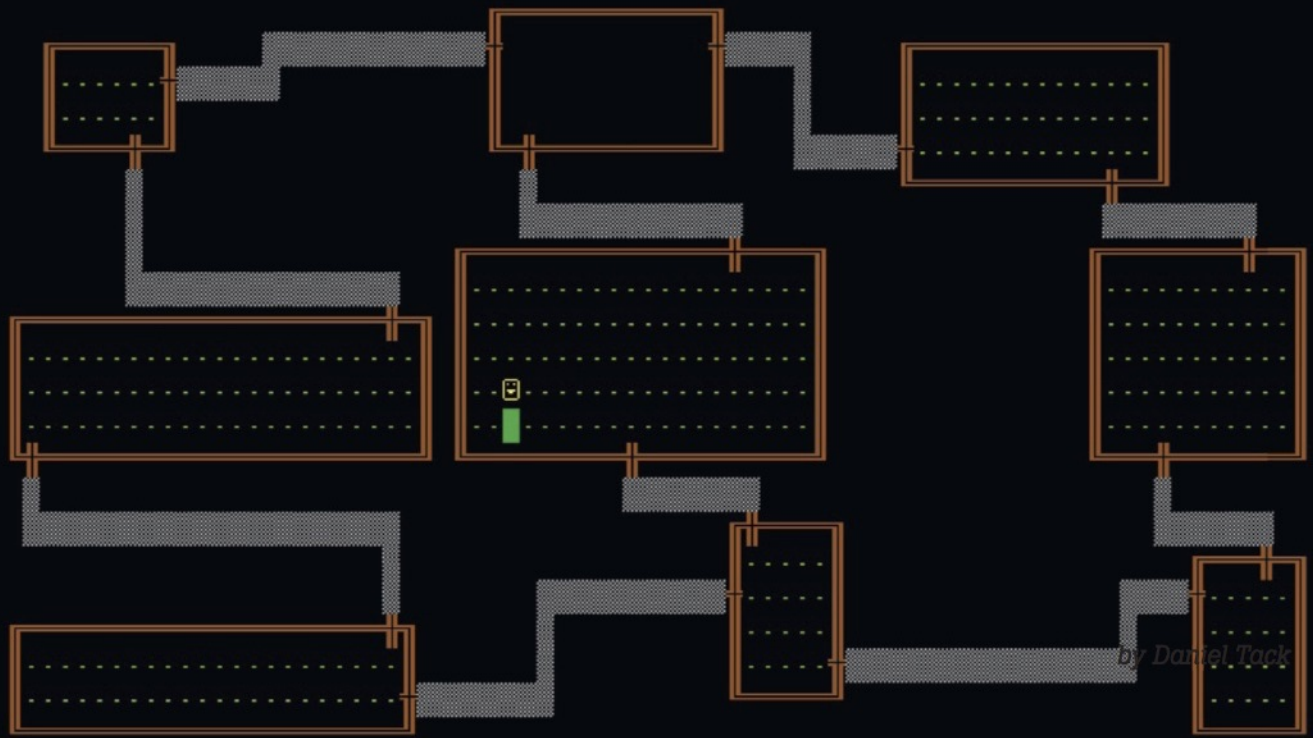
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GOING ROGUE

by Daniel Tack

How three geeks in a computer lab launched a genre

If you've read *Game Informer* in the past few years, you've no doubt seen games described as "roguelikes." This term is generally used to describe games like *Don't Starve*, *The Binding of Isaac*, and *Dungeons of Dredmor* that use particular design elements like permadeath and randomly generated dungeons. While roguelikes continue to grow in popularity, many gamers may not be aware of the genre's origins. The roguelike is an aptly named genre – the games in it are literally like *Rogue*, a PC game created in 1980 by Michael Toy, Glenn Wichman, and Ken Arnold.

When the trio started to make video games, they faced a very different set of circumstances than contemporary designers. *Pac-Man* had just hit arcades, the most popular computers at the time were the Apple II and Commodore 64, and students at colleges like UC Santa Cruz typically used terminals that connected to a

mainframe that had no graphical capabilities. PC gaming was hardly pervasive, but that didn't stop them from dreaming up ideas.

"Michael and I were both students at UC Santa Cruz... Michael had a home-built computer, which was rare in those days," Glenn Wichman says. "I designed card and board games as a hobby, and so when I discovered the computers at the lab and the games on those, I wanted to learn how to make games on the computer. We were both *Dungeons & Dragons* players from the early days and loved *Colossal Cave Adventure*, so we started working on text adventure games."

When it came to finding an idea to develop, the trio had a technical issue it wanted to address to make the experience less repetitive. Wichman and the team wanted a game that they could both design and play themselves without knowing what would happen every time. "We wanted to create one we could play ourselves and play more than once," he says. "You could never play your own game because you already knew all the answers to the puzzles and where to go, where to avoid. That was the spark behind making this happen.

That's why we needed those elements of permadeath and randomization."

In *Rogue*, players move around an incredibly old-school interface with the player, objects, treasures, and monsters represented by letters and symbols. Capital letters represent monsters, such as Z for zombie. Basic movement and other functions were completed using keystrokes to move around the three-by-three room dungeon grids to move from floor to floor, with the goal of reaching the final floor and recovering the Amulet of Yendor. After acquiring the object, players must return to the surface to win. If you die first, you have to start over. Every time you boot the game, however, you are greeted with a new computer-generated dungeon. The game feels barebones compared to the gameplay we're spoiled with today, but 30 years ago it was the impetus that laid the groundwork for many of our modern PC gaming experiences.

Rogue was originally created for Unix mainframe systems, but then the trio ported it to IBM PC and Macintosh. Over the course of the next decade, the game was released via various publishing deals on Amiga, Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC, and ZX Spectrum, among others. Reviewers from the relatively few magazines that existed at the time gave it moderately favorable reviews, but it never made much money.

"*Rogue* was never considered a commercial success," Wichman says. "It was initially sold by A.I. Design (PC version only), then later sold by Epyx for PC, Mac, Atari ST, Amiga, and CoCo. I'm pretty sure Epyx lost money on *Rogue*."



THE ROGUELIKE DEBATE

The definition of what exactly constitutes a roguelike is under constant debate, especially with newcomers to the genre defining themselves as “roguelites” that offer some form of progression from life to life, such as Cellar Door Games’ *Rogue Legacy*.

Rogue co-creator Glenn Wichman thinks it comes down to two crucial elements. “One is random level generation and the other is permadeath,” he says. “These two are key and they’re kind of tied together. The 2D overhead view, exploration, rooms, fantasy theme and turn-based systems are all typical, but they’re not key.”

Over the next few decades, *Rogue* faded from the spotlight, but never faded away entirely. Dedicated fans continued to port it to new platforms as they emerged, with versions of the game available on Windows, Mac OS X, and even iOS. In 2009 *PC World* awarded *Rogue* the sixth place ranking in its “Greatest PC Games Ever” feature.

The Roguelike Today

Now roguelikes are experiencing a modern-day resurgence thanks to independent developers being able to target the once-niche genre on digital distribution platforms. *Binding of Isaac*, *FTL: Faster Than Light*, *Risk of Rain*, and *Desktop Dungeons* are just a few of the modern roguelikes that have released in recent years. There’s a slew of new games on the way that incorporate roguelike elements, from *Below* to *Dragon Fin Soup*.

“Did we know we were starting a genre? I don’t know,” Wichman says. “We knew it was good, but around those times every game being made was sort of leading the charge for new genres.”

Wichman has gone on to a diverse career that includes work both in and outside of the games industry. He is currently working at Zynga as a designer and developer

for a number of projects, including *Words with Friends*. Toy’s career has taken him to Netscape and OnLive, and Arnold to places such as Sun Microsystems and Google.

These often-unforgiving titles give players an exercise in controlling the random variables with each playthrough. While some may criticize the random elements as making things feel too random or luck based, good players often learn the games well enough to minimize the elements of chance. Procedural generation of levels is becoming a popular tool used in all kinds of games, even those far-removed from the traditional concept of a roguelike.

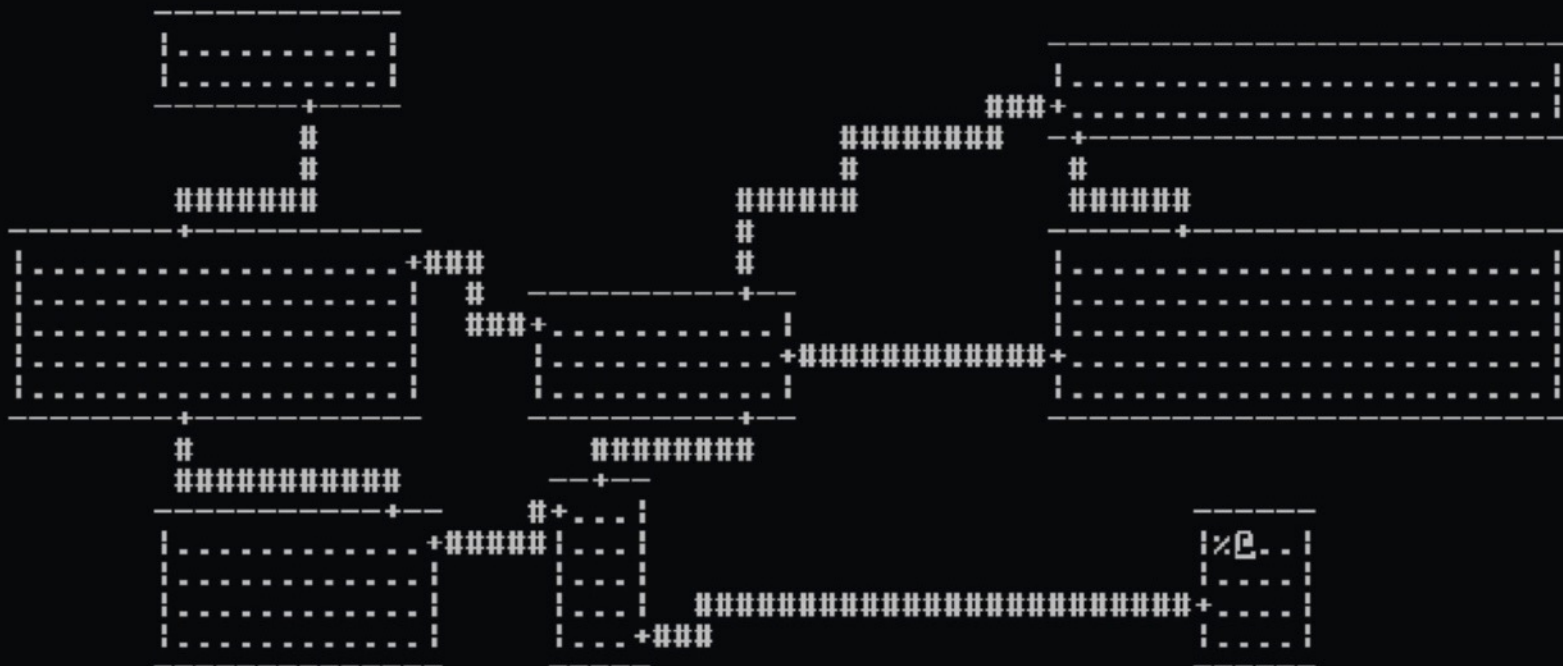
“*Dungeons of Dredmor* is a relatively standard roguelike game compared to what people are getting up to now, though at the time we were probably considered pretty crazy,” says David Baumgart, art director at Gaslamp Games. “It may drive the purists batty, but my personal approach to the design of *Dredmor* took a lot of influence from early not-exactly-roguelike CRPGs like *Fallout*, *Baldur’s Gate*, and especially *Diablo*’s user interface, loot system, and frankly brilliant core gameplay loop. We just gave it all a weird indie twist and went with a dollop of old-school roguelike out of low-budget necessity.”

As this resurgence continues, expect to

see plenty of roguelike features bleeding into other genres.

“When *Dredmor* was released it was not proven that roguelikes could be anything but free, minimalist hobbyist-developed games,” Baumgart says. “*Dredmor*, *Binding of Isaac*, and others like *FTL* proved that indies could find commercial success making roguelikes while totally rethinking the genre’s design traditions. I think the experimentation with roguelike features, particularly the procedural generation of content and radically player/mechanics driven narrative, is being mixed and remixed into other games with other genres which are themselves composites and this will only continue and get both weirder and more awesome.”

That’s quite the legacy for a game almost no one bought in the 1980s. ♦



CALL OF DUTY TRIVIA

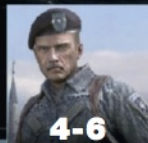
Advanced Warfare is the eleventh entry in the main Call of Duty series, which has seen a laundry list of characters, features, and plot twists in its history. Let's see how much you remember in this month's trivia challenge.

by Dan Ryckert

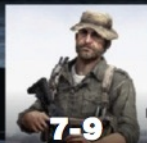
How did you stack up? Each correct answer is worth one point



1-3 Avenged Sevenfold



4-6 Shepherd



7-9 Price



10 Riley

Key: 1 - C, 2 - C, 3 - B, 4 - D, 5 - A, 6 - D, 7 - C, 8 - B, 9 - D, 10 - A

- 01 Which entry did not feature an appearance from Price?
 - A. Modern Warfare
 - B. Call of Duty 2
 - C. World at War
 - D. Modern Warfare 3
- 02 Including Advanced Warfare, how many different universes exist in the franchise?
 - A. 3
 - B. 4
 - C. 5
 - D. 6
- 03 What was the subtitle for the Wii version of Modern Warfare?
 - A. Mobilized
 - B. Reflex Edition
 - C. Declassified
 - D. Strike Team Edition
- 04 Which entry introduced Theater Mode?
 - A. Modern Warfare
 - B. World At War
 - C. Modern Warfare 2
 - D. Black Ops
- 05 Which celebrity has never appeared in any Call of Duty game or promotion?
 - A. The Rock
 - B. Megan Fox
 - C. Eminem
 - D. Jonah Hill
- 06 Who died via a knife to the head?
 - A. Vladimir Makarov
 - B. "Soap" MacTavish
 - C. Khaled Al-Asad
 - D. General Shepherd
- 07 Which feature was first introduced in Modern Warfare 3?
 - A. Killstreaks
 - B. Perks
 - C. Strike packages
 - D. A currency system
- 08 Who dies in the nuclear explosion in Modern Warfare's "Shock and Awe" mission?
 - A. Logan Walker
 - B. Paul Jackson
 - C. Alex Mason
 - D. James Doyle
- 09 Which Eminem song debuted in a trailer for Call of Duty: Ghosts?
 - A. "Rap God"
 - B. "Not Afraid"
 - C. "Till I Collapse"
 - D. "Survival"
- 10 Which veteran Hollywood actor voices Jason Hudson in Black Ops?
 - A. Ed Harris
 - B. Michael Douglas
 - C. Gary Oldman
 - D. Dustin Hoffman



SAVINGS THAT STAND OUT

EVEN IN A WIZARD'S BEARD.

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