

gameinformer

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



JUST CAUSE 3

**A NEW PLAYGROUND OF CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION
ROCKETS TO PLAYSTATION 4, XBOX ONE, AND PC**

THE WITCHER® WILD HUNT

FEBRUARY 24TH, 2015



PRE-ORDER NOW! BUY.THEWITCHER.COM

RATING PENDING

RP
ESRB

May contain
content inappropriate
for children.

Visit esrb.org for
rating information.

The Witcher® is a trademark of CD PROJEKT S. A. The Witcher game© CD PROJEKT S. A. All rights reserved. The Witcher game is based on a novel by Andrzej Sapkowski. All other copyrights and trademarks are the property of their respective owners.



WB GAMES LOGO, WB SHIELD:™ & © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. (s14)

XBOX ONE


PC DVD-ROM

XBOX ONE

A Must See Next Generation RPG

GAMEINFORMER



 /THEWITCHER

 /WITCHERGAME

 /WITCHERGAME





GO PRO GET MORE


MORE **POINTS** | MORE **SAVINGS** | MORE **EXCLUSIVES**

As a **PowerUp Rewards Pro** member, you'll receive a monthly issue of *Game Informer* magazine delivered directly to you, a minimum of \$50 in exclusive offers and have the power to **GAME THE WAY YOU WANT!** Stop by your local GameStop location to become a **PowerUp Rewards Pro** member today.

Get all these great benefits and more as a **PowerUp Rewards Pro** member.

All for just \$14.99 a year!

- 🔌 \$50 in exclusive offers every month
- 🔌 10% more points on nearly every dollar spent
- 🔌 10% extra credit on games and accessories
- 🔌 10% off pre-owned games and accessories
- 🔌 Buy 2 Get 1 Free offer on pre-owned games (worth up to \$55)
- 🔌 Get 12 issues of *Game Informer* magazine!

Check out November's Exclusive Offers. 

NOVEMBER'S **PRO MEMBER** EXCLUSIVE OFFERS

PowerUp Rewards Pro members can access these coupons in the all new **GameStop App** or by logging into **PowerUpRewards.com**.

\$50 EXTRA CREDIT

when you sell us your PS4 or Xbox One



Offer valid 11/1/2014 through 11/30/2014.

Not valid toward cash trades. Trades must be in full working condition to receive full value. See store associates for details. No dealers. Offer valid in the United States, Puerto Rico and Guam only. Void where prohibited. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

\$25 OFF

any pre-owned tablet



Offer valid 11/10/2014 through 11/23/2014.

Cannot be combined with any other offer. Color and selection of all items subject to availability by location. Coupon must be surrendered at time of purchase. Coupon valid in-store only. Offer good in the United States, Puerto Rico and Guam only. Not valid on previous purchases. Void where prohibited. GameStop, Inc. reserves the right to cancel, terminate, modify or suspend the offer for any reason without notice.

GameStop
POWERUP
REWARDS™



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

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

I'm A Gamer

Some people argue that the term "gamer" should go away.

They say you don't call yourself a reader or a watcher if you read a book or watch a film, so why would you need to call yourself a gamer if you play games? They argue that as the art form has moved into the mainstream, the gamer label limits the scope of what gaming can be, or even is, as it stands today. For these critics many people overzealously use the term as a badge of honor, which also acts as a gate that wards off those who don't play games or don't dedicate as much of their time or mindshare playing games.

Gaming most certainly is part of the culture, and I understand that some people simply don't want to self-identify as gamers. I come across people all the time who tell me how they aren't really gamers, then share stories of a game they are playing. The disassociation is so important for some that they are literally playing a game on their phone as they inform me of this distinction.

I respect the fact that for some, the term doesn't represent who they are, yet they still love gaming. I can even understand the need for these people to distance themselves from the negative representation the term brings to some people's minds.

I just find it odd that so many of these same people who want to take the term away from the lexicon altogether also want those who call themselves gamers to find another way to celebrate their love of the medium.

I like food, but I certainly wouldn't call myself a foodie. I like movies, but I would never call myself a film nut. I call myself a cyclist because I love bikes, but most people who ride a bike wouldn't even consider it, as they "just like riding bikes." All forms of enjoyment to which people indulge themselves have levels of interest that differ from person to person.

People have different ways of identifying themselves. The young kid who beats randomly on a pot and calls himself a drummer has just as much right to the term as the late-great John Bonham (of Led Zeppelin fame).

I'm a gamer, and I will always be one. It is who I am. I define myself this way and use it to show people that games are not only great, but that the people who play games are not the stereotype, because I am not the stereotype. I'm just a person who just happens to love games.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

1214 contents



» 42

Just Cause 3

Rico the Scorpion returns, and this time he's wearing a wingsuit, which means you spend even less time with your feet on the ground. Avalanche Studios gave us the first peek and hands-on with its new, huge open-world experience. **by Bryan Vore**



10

The Indie Game Development Primer



76



30



83

Assassin's Creed Rogue



16



80



54

Axiom Verge

regulars

» 6 Feedback

This month readers share some of their scariest video game experiences, complain about our *Destiny* review score before they even saw what it was, and tell us what games we left out of our top 25 horror games list. Also, one reader laments Sony's abandonment of PlayStation Home.

» 10 Connect

We spoke to some of the industry's most successful indie game developers to gather advice for readers who want to make their own games. We also take a look at *Monster Hunter*'s 10-year anniversary with series producer Ryozyo Tsujimoto.

» 58 Previews

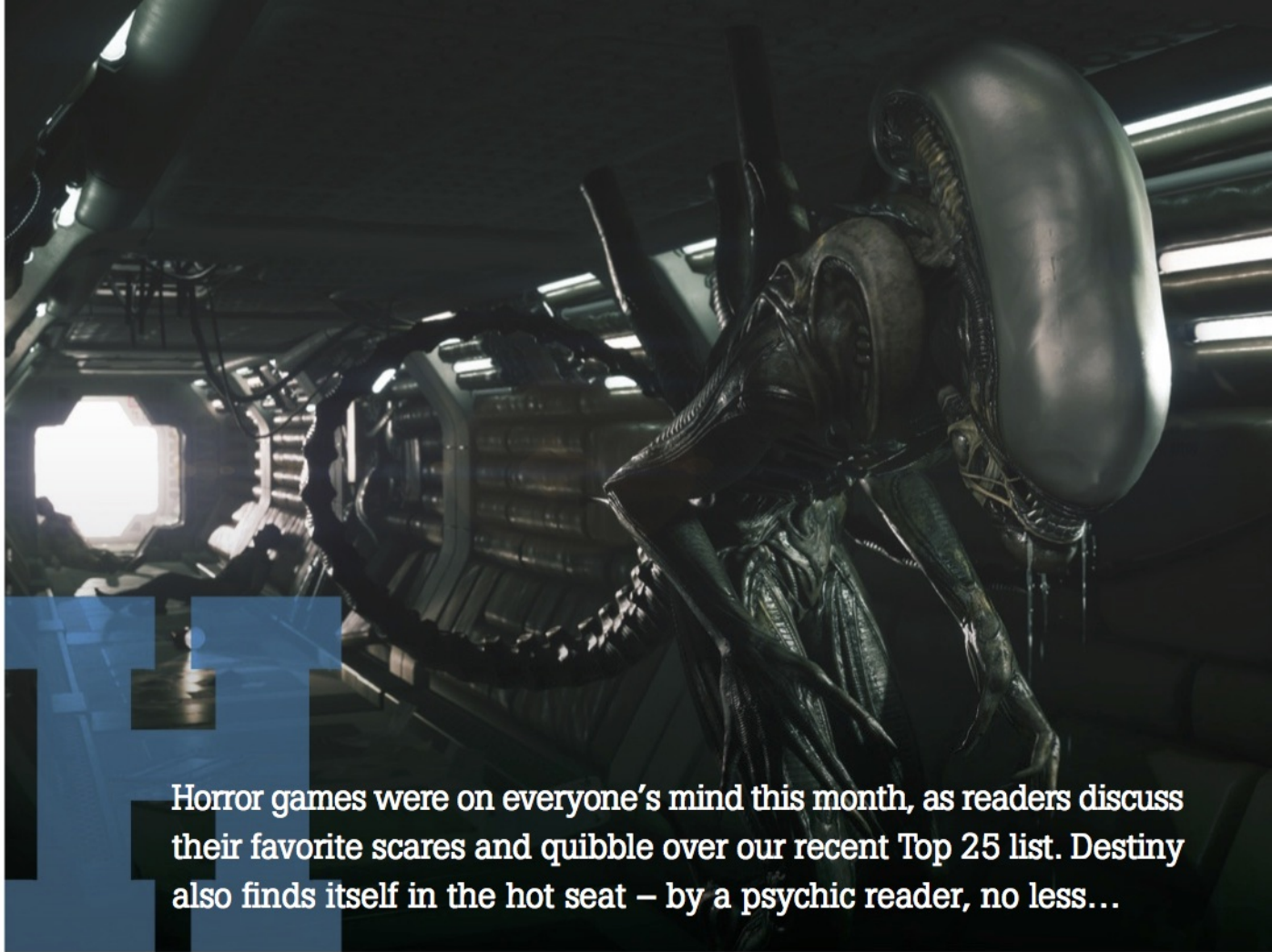
We give *Far Cry 4* an extended spin, take one final look at *Assassin's Creed Unity* before we share our review, see if *Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker* is worthy of its own dedicated release, and discover what's new with the *Resident Evil HD* remaster.

» 78 Reviews

We're finally offering our reviews on many of the games we've been looking forward to all year. Does *Dragon Age: Inquisition* redeem *Dragon Age II*? Does *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* finally mix up the formula? Also, what exactly is *Fantasia: Music Evolved*?

games index

A City Sleeps	94
Alienation	21
ArchAge	22
Assassin's Creed Rogue	83
Assassin's Creed Unity	64
Axiom Verge	54
Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel	85
Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare	81
Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker	62
Civilization: Beyond Earth	92
Close Castles	20
Costume Quest 2	94
Disgaea 5	73
Dragon Age: Inquisition	80
DriveClub	88
Evil Within, The	84
Fantasia: Music Evolved	91
Fantasy Life	93
Far Cry 4	60
Gauntlet	94
Geometry Wars 3	71
Grand Theft Auto V	58
Hearthstone: Goblins vs. Gnomes	72
Heroes of the Storm	74
Hyper Light Drifter	70
Just Cause 3	42
Kingdom Hearts HD 2.5 Remixed	69
Long Dark, The	75
Murasaki Baby	94
Natural Doctrine	94
NBA 2K15	82
Neverending Nightmares	94
Persona 4 Arena Ultimax	94
Pier Solar HD	94
Pillar	21
Pokémon Omega Ruby & Alpha Sapphire	76
Pong	96
Project Spark	90
Resident Evil HD Remaster	68
Return of the <i>Obra Dinn</i>	20
Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishments	87
Skylanders: Trap Team	86
StarCraft II: Legacy of the Void	66
Sunset Overdrive	89
Ultimate NES Remix	77
Vanishing of Ethan Carter, The	93



Horror games were on everyone's mind this month, as readers discuss their favorite scares and quibble over our recent Top 25 list. Destiny also finds itself in the hot seat – by a psychic reader, no less...

The Horror

As a diehard fan of the genre (and little else) for 25 years, I know survival horror. Your recent horror issue was very impressive, and I greatly enjoyed your Top 25 Horror Games Of All Time list. The most amazing part was the top-five ranked games, which match mine pick for pick. I really appreciate G.I. doing justice to this incredible but greatly under-appreciated genre of gaming. You got it right.

Brady Hixson
via email

We received a ton of feedback for our horror-themed October issue, and like Brady, everyone who responded completely agreed with our list of the top 25 horror games of all time. Who are we kidding – everyone else called us idiots for not including their favorite game. For more of our celebration of all things horror, check out our bonus coverage at gameinformer.com/horrorissue. Now, on to the griping!

Let's Get Critical

I think Harvester (the 1996 adventure game from DigiFX Interactive) would have made a fine addition to your top 25 horror games list. Think of it as *Dr. Strangelove* meets *Blue Velvet*, with a thin veneer of *King's Quest*. Sure, the mechanics were clunky, but I recall being genuinely drawn into the warped little town of Harvest, only to be repulsed by what lay behind the curtain. Harvester's themes psychotic violence, xenophobia, and reincarnation seem straight out of a David Lynch film.

Christian Poole
via email

You guys left out one of the horror genre's most terrifying entries: Quake 4. As a teen who discovered the series late and had creepfests such as *Dead Space* and *Resident Evil* already under my belt, Quake 4 never failed to make me...well, quake with undiluted dread whenever I entered a dimly

lit hallway or saw an ammo drop in a too-good-to-be-true location. Remember the nice little scene of Stroggification, where most of your body was mutilated and replaced with machine parts? Or your commanding officer coming back as a large robot and trying to put a lot of holes in you? While certainly not comparable to the higher-ranking games, I believe Quake 4 deserves its place on the list somewhere.

Matt Stern
via email

Even though it came out not too long ago, I really feel that *Five Nights At Freddy's* deserved to be on your horror list. It's like a Chuck E. Cheese nightmare with killer animatronics! It makes *Slender* look like child's play in my opinion. I've seen tons of YouTube reaction videos of people playing this game and crapping themselves because of the jump scares and the fact that you have no periods of respite in the game (you are constantly on alert for the evil robots). So that's why I think *Five Nights at Freddy's* should've been on the list.

John
via email

Normally, we'd say everyone has their own opinions for a list like this and you can't please everyone, but "Chuck E. Cheese nightmare" does sound universally terrifying. We're going to blame our automatonophobia for blinding us to the omission.

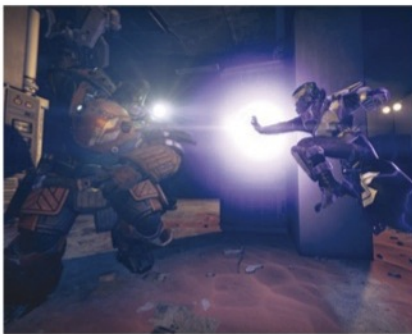


Destined For Controversy

I'm writing this in response to what I'm assuming will be your 9/10 Destiny review score. What exactly does the game do to get such a score? The environments can be beautiful at times, but they're all kind of the same and there is no reason to explore. The class system could be interesting, but they are all so similar it's nearly pointless. You rarely ever meet people out in the world and when you do you cannot communicate easily to party up, so it's pointless. Destiny plays like Halo mixed with Borderlands Lite. Less than stellar gameplay could be made up for with an interesting story, but Destiny also lacks that. None of the characters are interesting or memorable. It's not terrible, just painfully average; it's a 6 or 7 at most. Games like this that are built solely upon hype to sell as many pre-orders as possible to try and cover their bloated budgets represent everything wrong with the industry today.

Kevin Poole
via email

We received a couple of cranky emails about Destiny this month, but this is the first time someone has preemptively complained about one of our reviews before it was even written. While Kevin has clearly made up his mind about Destiny (as further evidenced by the fact that we received his letter on launch day), those who read Miller's review know that he scored the game an 8.75 because – despite its flaws – he has continued to thoroughly enjoy the minute-to-minute gameplay. Naturally, we've reprimanded Miller and told him not to have so much fun playing Destiny in the future.



Story Time

I just wanted to talk about one of the common complaints I've heard about Destiny so far – the lack of story in the game. Many believe there isn't much story to Destiny, that it doesn't provide much background or reason for what we're doing in the game – not to mention that the ending leaves you with more questions than answers. My problem with this critique is you cannot compare Destiny to other FPS games. Destiny is more like an MMO (whether Bungie wants to admit it or not), and expansions will expand on the story and grow the lore. Remember, Bungie has stated that Destiny is a 10-year game, if not longer; they will continue to constantly grow the game. So before you think that you've beaten the game and you're frustrated with it, remember that the game is going to continue to grow.

Brett Rushing
via email

Sorry Brett, but those who are disappointed with Destiny's narrative offerings have every right to be upset. A game doesn't need to be an FPS to feature a good plot (a notion which defies conventional wisdom anyway), and being an MMO isn't an excuse for poor storytelling. Assuming Bungie will flesh out a master story over the next 10 years is giving the developer a lot of credit, and you can't blame players for not wanting to wait a decade to get a more cohesive and engaging story in the game they already paid for.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Is couch co-op dead?"

No. Unless you don't have a couch. Then you're screwed.

"When will Windows get on board and actually make their phones useful?"

We're pretty sure you mean Microsoft not Windows, but either way, probably never.

"Do any of you guys LARP?"

Does dressing up on Halloween count? Because we don't do that, either.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"What is your tip email?"

You're Welcome?

"As an avid gamer dating back to the NES era, I would like to thank your establishment for never labeling me as psychopathic, racist, sexist, a man-baby, or a terrorist."

Question Of The Month:

What's been your biggest gaming disappointment of the year and why?

gi spy



(Left) We don't think voice actor Dee Bradley Baker is quite as evil as his Lego Batman 3 counterpart, Brainiac, but he definitely has the evil laugh down (Right) Dan Tack poses with Twitch's Chase and ESL's Anna Rozwandowicz, proving definitively that there's no shortage of thumbs between the three of them

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



- **26%** Horror Issue Happiness
- **24%** Favorite Scary Games
- **20%** Top 25 Omission Gripes
- **16%** Letters Mentioning Fear-Induced Incontinence
- **12%** Dilemmas With Destiny
- **02%** Letters That Literally Use "Literally" Wrong

Equal Opportunity?

Since *Nintendo Power* is now a thing of the past, I subscribed to *Game Informer* thinking that I would be able to get my Nintendo fix with y'all (sorry, my Texan spilled out there). Each month, I literally get to read a handful of articles relating to Nintendo or their games. The whole magazine is so crammed with PlayStation and Xbox games that Nintendo has no room to breathe. This magazine seems to have no love for Nintendo! My wish is that you would equalize your magazine space with articles about each of the major gaming consoles instead. Show us some love!

Roy Rodriguez
College Station, TX

We'd love to cover more Nintendo games in the magazine, but for that to happen there would first have to be more Nintendo games – as it stands, a lot more games are in development for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One than for the Wii U. We cover every promising Nintendo game that we have the opportunity to see and play, but we can't devote the same number of pages to each system in order to foster a false sense of fairness.

No Place Like Home

I gotta say, I'm sad to hear Sony is shutting down Home. Many have responded with quotes like "It's about time" and "Did anyone really use this?!" Yes, we did. I consider myself a hardcore gamer; I have a double-digit trophy level, numerous platinums, and thousands of hours logged into games, yet I still visited Sony's virtual world. I met thousands of cool people over the six years, many of whom are now PSN friends. When we weren't shooting aliens or causing chaos, many others like myself enjoyed just shooting the breeze, playing virtual pool, and visiting the theater to watch trailers and other free extras. Yes, PSHome is dying, but instead of dancing on its grave and insulting those who will mourn it, how about we give it a respectful death, and remember the social platform for what it was: a casually fun time for hardcore and casual gamers alike.

Kirk Austin
Huntsville, AL

Hmm...we guess we'd be okay with giving PlayStation Home a respectful death – but only if it's one of those Viking ceremonies where you light it on fire and float it down a river.



Terror Time

In issue 258, we asked our readers what's the scariest game they've ever played, and they responded with no shortage of traumatizing experiences. Here are a few of the best responses:

The scariest game I have ever played is *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*. After trying to smack bugs off my screen, watching my save file "delete" itself, and the infamous bathtub scene, I literally slept in my mom's bed that night. I was 15 years old.

Parisa Monazahian

The scariest game I've ever played was *Amnesia*. Why? Because at one point, I actually couldn't play it. I had to watch a YouTube play-through because it physically took too much out of me. So, I guess the scariest game I ever played was the game I couldn't play.

Adriana Alvarez

The recent *Silent Hills* playable teaser. It builds suspense so well that you never know what's next, and the sound design is incredible. I know it's short, but I put down the controller several times just because I didn't want to move forward. I had to stream it and have a friend watch it with me and help me proceed – and I'm a 32-year-old man. My wife loves horror movies and she didn't make it more than 10 minutes before she stopped.

Justin Holman

(Left) Harmonix's Nick Chester and Annette Gonzalez also have thumbs

(Right) Tim joins IGN's Mitch Dyer and Greg Miller in blissful ignorance of the creeper standing right behind them. Watch out guys, those things explode!





1

WINNER

1 Casey F. Meehan
Tali has never looked better

2 Rebecca Marrietta

No, you aren't looking at art from a new Tales game. This is what a chibi-version of South Park: The Stick of Truth would look like

3 Terra Shrewsbury

Everyone sees Commander Shepard differently

4 Adriel Oviedo

Little Mac after learning his character sucks in Smash Bros.

5 Rebel Stars

Why did Michael Bay have to give Megatron a new look? He was perfect



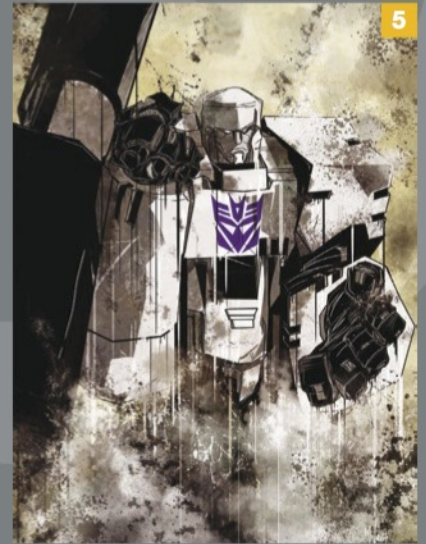
2



3



4



5

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



(Left) Capcom producers Michiteru Okabe and Yoshiaki Hirabayashi had no shortage of Resident Evil info to share with us during our recent trip to the studio. Learn more at gameinformer.com/rev2
(Right) While in Japan, Tim and Ben Hanson also caught up with 17-Bit's Jake Kazdal and 8-4's John Ricciardi, Mark MacDonald, and Hiroko Minamoto



THE

ADVICE FROM

INDIE GAME

THE PROS ON JUMPSTARTING

DEVELOPMENT

YOUR CAREER

PRIMER

NOTABLES

- 14 top ten hells
- 20 impulse:
early looks at tomorrow's
indie innovations
- 22 massive: archeage
- 30 game informer's
holiday buying guide
2014 edition
- 40 super smash bros. diaries
by masahiro sakurai

W

With an ever-expanding selection of inexpensive development tools, crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter, and a host of accessible digital distribution channels, it's never been easier to enter the world of independent game development. In this brave new world, indie studios are creating experiences that rival the output of major game companies in both sales and quality. However, like any discipline, making a game requires a tremendous amount of skill and hard work.

Game Informer is frequently asked for advice on how to start out in game development. We reached out to some respected independent game creators and asked them what advice they'd give to the next generation of development.

BY MATT HELGESON

Aside from enrolling in a game development or programming education program, what do you think is the best way to get started as an aspiring indie game developer?

Robert Boyd: Just start making and finishing games. They don't have to be amazing games at first – in fact, they probably won't be – but you learn so much from actually working on a game that you can't learn any other way.

Jason Rohrer: I would actually caution people against enrolling in most game development programs. Many of them are focused on skills that will help you secure an industry job. There's a strong focus on 3D modeling and animation, for example, which is mostly useless for practical independent game design – if you want to ship a game in your lifetime. The best way to get started is to start making games in your free time. If technical know-how

seems like a stumbling block, start out by making a board game. Just make something so that you can start thinking about game systems. Make sure you finish your first project, whatever it is. Learning how to finish stuff is really important. Lots of people start making a game.

Ryan Payton: Schools like DigiPen have really excellent programs that give students an opportunity to function like a real, professional game development team. I was really impressed when I visited them recently. However, formal education isn't for everybody, which is why I think aspiring game developers are so lucky to have tools and resources like YouTube, Unity, and the Unity forums. That's really all you need to answer all the questions you're going to have from the start. From there, it's really about self-discipline, perseverance, involving yourself in the

community, and deciding how bad you want this.

Nathan Vella: The best way to get started is simply to get started, preferably with other people. Cappy began as a collection of people that came together through the Toronto IGDA (International Game Developers Association) chapter, and I would definitely recommend looking around to see if there's a chapter in your city. I would also suggest looking at what other game development groups are around you – whether they are formal or casual, meeting other people interested in game development is a key part of getting started making games. These people may become teammates, support, or even good friends. If you live outside of a major city with this infrastructure, or you can't easily travel to these areas, there are lots of online communities around game development you can access as well.



ROBERT BOYD
ZEBOYD GAMES
(Breath of Death VII,
Cthulhu Saves The World)



GREG KASAVIN
SUPERGIANT GAMES
(Bastion, Transistor)



RYAN PAYTON
CAMOUFLAJ
(République)



JASON ROHRER
INDEPENDENT
GAME DEVELOPER
(Passage, Gravitation,
The Castle Doctrine)



TIM SCHAFER
DOUBLE FINE
(Grim Fandango, Costume
Quest, Broken Age)



NATHAN VELLA
CAPYBARA GAMES
(Super Time Force, Below,
Indie Fund board member)

What technology would you advise starting with?

Robert Boyd: Depends on your goal and your current level of expertise. With the game we're currently working on, we wanted to be able to target multiple platforms easily – since we already had some experience with C#, one of the supported languages, Unity was an easy choice.

Jason Rohrer: The first step should be deciding to make a 2D game. Drop your dreams of making a triple-A clone. Realize that a 3D game involves at least six times more work for the same amount of content. GameMaker is very well designed and has a strong pedigree, and it's free to try. You can get something interactive up on the screen in an hour or so with absolutely no coding. As you go deeper with GameMaker, coding is there when you need it, and you can actually work your way into programming while actively making real games. Some GameMaker games have gone on to earn millions of dollars, so there really are no limits.

“

EVERY ASPECT OF
MAKING A GAME
IS DIFFICULT, SO
IT'S IMPORTANT
TO KEEP ONE'S
AMBITIONS IN
CHECK. BY ALL
MEANS DO BE
AMBITIOUS, BUT
BE REAL.”

—
GREG KASAVIN

Ryan Payton: We're obviously big fans of Unity, so I would start there. The engine is incredibly easy to use, and the plug-ins available on the Asset Store will save you a lot of time and effort. Unity has done an excellent job allowing the community to help co-develop the technology, meaning there are an infinite amount of resources available online. I truly believe that Unity has sparked a global democratization of game development.

Nathan Vella: I genuinely don't believe it's the tools that matter. Tools can be learned, no matter how easy or difficult they are. In my opinion, everyone should start with something they want to do, and something that is actually doable, and use that desire to decide what tool will suit them best.

Greg Kasavin: It's impossible to give blanket advice about which technology to start with since it really depends on an individual's goals, interests, and circumstances. For those who have a sense that they want to make games but don't have any real

experience doing so, or maybe they just want to explore to find their talent, I think a good place to start is GameMaker: Studio. Another favorite of mine is Twine, a tool designed for interactive fiction. While Twine can't be used to make traditional games, those who have a special interest in writing and game narrative can use Twine to focus exclusively on those aspects. Twine is powerful and very easy to use for what it is.

What are some of the skills necessary to create games that aspiring developers often overlook?

Jason Rohrer: Learning how to keep working on something, many months later, when you are no longer excited about it. Even the simplest games take a long time to make. Toward the end, newer, more enticing ideas will beckon. You have to push them out of your mind and see your first project through before starting another one.

Ryan Payton: While tools like Unity make it easier for non-technical people to produce

content, it's still heavily reliant on C# coding. You don't need a masters in computer science, but I'd recommend that even aspiring game designers invest a significant amount of time in learning C# programming – many of the best designers out there have enough coding knowledge to be dangerous.

Tim Schafer: People think it's all about programming or art, but there are so many other elements of design that come from your imagination. Feed your imagination by reading lots of books and learning about things outside of games or programming that interest you, and that will all come back out in your game design.

Nathan Vella: Time management is critical. Most people beginning to make games will have another thing in their lives that dominates their time – work, school, family, volunteering, etc. Being able to manage your time to give you some focused, uninterrupted hours to start learning and start making is crucial. Another crucial skill is being self-critical. Making “something” is an important first step, but making “something good” requires a developer to critique their own work, to be honest about how interesting, fun, and playable their work is.

Greg Kasavin: Very few people are cut out to make games entirely on their own, so working well with others is a critical skill for a game developer. Being good at what you do means nothing if you can't collaborate. Working well with others requires a host of skills and heaps of common sense and empathy. Some aspects of it can be taught, but really I think it comes from experience, self-awareness, and humility. It is about putting the needs of those around you ahead of your own needs.

What's important in terms of pre-production before you start making your game?

Robert Boyd: Two things that are crucial to figure out before starting active production on your game are: One, what's unique about your game? There are so many indie games coming out every day that “merely” good games will usually get ignored. There has to be at least one unique selling point for your game if you want to stand out from the crowd. Two, what scope are you looking at? Determining a rough outline of the game's length and complexity is key to keeping



TRANSISTOR BY SUPERGIANT GAMES



BROKEN AGE BY DOUBLE FINE

the project under control when the temptation comes – and it always comes – to keep making the game bigger and better. This usually results in the game never actually getting finished.

Jason Rohrer: I start by writing extensive notes down on paper. Think through your design. Find potential problems and then design solutions to those problems. Get everything worked out in your head, and then document in words and diagrams on paper so you have a clear idea of what you're making before you start making it. Games are complex artifacts, and all the moving parts need to work in unison. It's very much like building a car. You can't just jump right in to the building part without some kind of plan.

Tim Schafer: Get in touch with the core idea about what's fun about your game. Is it a new mechanic? If so, make lots of prototypes to prove that it's fun. Is it some new, crazy world you're exploring? If so, develop that world on paper with maps and concept art. Know what your game is really about at its core.

Nathan Vella: I personally believe that the sooner you can get your idea into something playable – even as grey boxes or red circles on a black background – the sooner you can see if your idea is holding water. I think pre-production should involve distilling your idea down to what critical

pieces need to be tried, and finding out how to try them as quickly as possible. This enables iteration, and iteration is at the heart of most great games.

Greg Kasavin: Pre-production is the time to figure out what game you're making. You may not know what game you're making for much, much longer than you'd like. Even if you go into the project with a crystal-clear vision for the game you think you want to make, the reality of building it is likely to cause you to change course, change your mind, or otherwise discover that the reality is different from the idea. So, I think it's best not to overthink or over-plan pre-production. If you have the luxury of time, which almost none of us do, then take all the time you need to figure out exactly what you want to build and what it takes to build it. Or if your time is limited, then recognize that your ambitions may also have to scale down to reality, and be honest. It is way better to ship a small, modest, well-thought-out little game than to get mired down trying to make an over-ambitious mess.

What are some of the biggest mistakes you've made or seen other indie developers make?

Robert Boyd: Underestimating how long it'll take to make something is a mistake that I – and just about everyone else – has made. I remember thinking that we'd finish our second RPG in less time than it took to make

our first RPG since “we already had the engine done” even though we were planning on making numerous improvements to the game's quality and length. In actuality, it ended up taking almost three times as long.

Another common mistake I've seen is bland or derivative game titles. In many ways, your game's title is the most important bit of marketing you can do. Ideally, a game name should be catchy, unique, easy to search for online, easy to say and spell, indicate the game's tone, and indicate the kind of gameplay the player can expect. I think we did a good job with our first game's name, *Breath of Death VII: The Beginning*. Just from looking at that name, you can quickly deduce several things: it's an RPG (the roman numeral sequel, the subtitle, the reference to existing RPG series), it's a comedy (subtitle “the beginning” despite being the “7th” game in the series), and it has to do with death (in our case, the game takes place in a world full of undead). For the most part, our second game (*Cthulhu Saves the World*) did well in this regard also, although the inclusion of Cthulhu has caused us some issues in terms of spelling, pronunciation, and search engine results.

Ryan Payton: In general, I lament the “flavor of the year” syndrome when it comes to indie games. Looking around the [PAX] Indie Megabooth, it seemed like this year's flavor is the roguelike

genre. A few years back, it was stick shooters and 8-bit platformers. There's nothing wrong with making games in those genres, but my advice would be to explore something new. I think indie developers need to remind themselves that they have a larger capacity to be innovative compared to [bigger] studios, which really have to play it safe.

Nathan Vella: I am pretty weary of answering this question, simply because making mistakes is an integral part of the process. There are some core mistakes that everyone should avoid, like signing contracts without having a lawyer who has worked in games review it, or setting up a corporation but not hiring an accountant to deal with the implications of having a company...but those are the easy ones to resolve.

Greg Kasavin: I think chasing after a “dream game” idea tends to be ruinous. A lot of us grow up thinking about our perfect game, but there's a reason that game never gets made. Every aspect of making a game is difficult, so it's important to keep one's ambitions in check. By all means do be ambitious, but be real.

Another classic oversight is to only start thinking about how to promote one's game after it's finished. Being a game developer means having several jobs at once, and one of those jobs is promoting what you're working on. Even if the game is a free,

not-for-profit side project, if no one ever plays it then it failed in its fundamental purpose as a game. Finding ways to get the word out, finding ways to talk about one's game that's honest and enthusiastic, that all takes time and practice too – and it's an important factor in a game's chances for success.

What's one thing you wish you would have known before you got into game development?

Robert Boyd: This is probably something that most everyone knows now, but I really wish I had known that anyone could make games and that you didn't have to wait until you got hired by a big company. Although I had a desire to make games from a very young age and I did a little tinkering as a teenager, I didn't really get serious about game development or programming until I was almost 30 years old. I can only imagine how much better I would be at my job and how many more neat games I could have made by now if I had started earlier.

Ryan Payton: I didn't anticipate how much administrative work comes with running a studio, so I wish I had paid more attention in my finance class. I also can't emphasize enough the importance of leadership and social dynamics, and how important it is to learn about what motivates people – this not only applies to your own team, but also how you work with outside partners. ♦

Hells

by Tim Turi



Diablo

Once upon a time, an archbishop unleashed the soul of a powerful demon in the bowels of an abandoned cathedral. An adventurer traveled to the town of Tristram and fought his way through leagues of demons, deep beneath the unholy building. The ancient architecture gradually gave way to more demonic trappings, culminating in a showdown with Diablo himself.



Earthworm Jim

Most games save a trip south of Heaven for the later levels, but Earthworm Jim travels to "Heck" in the second level. The devilish Evil the Cat rules this underworld, complete with belching flames, toothy demons, and a 16-bit version of "A Night on Bald Mountain" playing. The only thing worse is the intermittent elevator muzak accompanied by a chorus of tortured screams.



Doom

The zombies and demons overrunning the UAC's moon base are just the tip of the iceberg. The ill-fated space marine eventually travels to Hell via a goat head-shaped portal to wipe out evil one shotgun shell at a time. Satan's forces have even spilled forth onto earth when the sequel rolls around, forcing "Doomguy" to plant a volley of rockets into The Dark One's forehead to end it all.



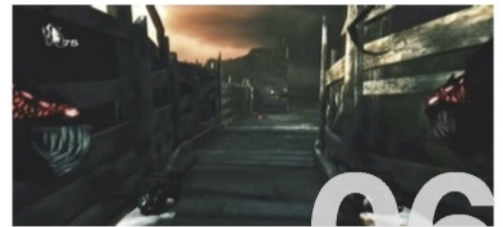
Dante's Inferno

Visceral chose the ultimate source material for their vision of Hell: Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante travels through the Nine Circles of Hell, using Death's scythe to conquer evils based on greed, gluttony, violence, and more. The infernal land is filled with sick creatures like giant worms with human teeth and a towering, monstrous Cleopatra who spawns demon babies from her nipples.



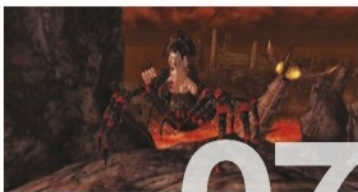
Minecraft

Some things just need to stay buried. In the case of Minecraft, teleporting beneath the world's surface brings you to a dark, cavernous realm called The Nether with deadly lava waterfalls and zombie pigmen. In this insane place water immediately turns to steam, compasses don't perform correctly, and even beds explode if you attempt to nap it all away.



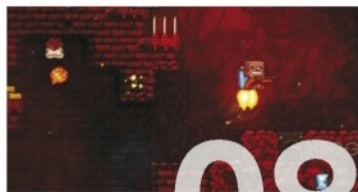
The Darkness

The Darkness' Jackie Estacado aptly describes Hell as "a f---ed up place." Jackie follows his dead girlfriend into Hell with a self-inflicted headshot, despite the warnings of the heart-munching, tentacled demon riding shotgun in his body. He awakens to find himself in a warped version of World War I, complete with crusty bunkers and evil, spike-helmeted German soldiers.



The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

While it isn't the realm of eternal punishment found in religious scriptures, Oblivion is as close as you get in Tamriel. The Planes of Oblivion are accessed through gates the Daedric use to attack the land. It's a blasted land outlined by a burning sky, filled with flowing lava, spider creatures, and towering spiked fortresses containing the means to seal the Oblivion gates.



Spelunky

Just getting to Hell in Spelunky is a perilous trial. Intrepid spelunkers must hunt down an ancient artifact, the key of Anubis, and the Necronomicon itself. They even have to kill themselves in the right spot and perform a daredevil maneuver with the final boss. To what end? They get to navigate the vampires and lava pools of this punishing game's true final area.



Painkiller

Daniel and his wife become separated in the afterlife after they're killed in a traffic accident. Daniel must battle against Lucifer's four generals before he can meet his dearly departed in Heaven. He blasts through limbo to Hell itself: a tapestry of wars stuck in time from medieval sieges to a nuke forever stuck in mid-detonation.



Shadows of the Damned

Joined by his skull-faced, wise-cracking gun/torch/motorcycle/partner Johnson, demon hunter Garcia Hotspur ventures through a wacky version of Hell only as Suda51 could imagine it. The journey includes everything from a storybook-style sidescrolling shooter to a demon battle along a glitzy strip that makes Las Vegas look like Chuck E. Cheese's.

TURN CRAZY IDEAS INTO CRAZY REALITIES.

It's one thing to have creative ideas. It's another thing to see them come to life. Learn to get games into the production pipeline. And get yourself into this competitive industry.

Explore our degree programs in the area of Game Design & Programming. And learn to do what you love, for life.

 **The Art Institutes®**
CREATIVITY *for* LIFE

GAMER.ARTINSTITUTES.EDU

1.800.592.0700

Artwork: Andrew Ronda, Bachelor of Science, The Art Institute of California—Orange County, a campus of Argosy University, Game Art & Design, 2012. Since The Art Institutes is comprised of several institutions, see aiprgrams.info for program duration, tuition, fees, other costs, median debt, federal salary data, alumni success, and other important info. The Art Institutes is a system of over 50 schools throughout North America. Programs, credential levels, technology, and scheduling options vary by school and are subject to change. Several institutions included in The Art Institutes system are campuses of South University or Argosy University. Administrative office: 210 Sixth Avenue, 33rd Floor, Pittsburgh, PA 15222 ©2014 The Art Institutes International LLC. Our email address is csprogramadmin@edmc.edu 090514



10 Years Hunting Monsters

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Monster Hunter series – a franchise that has found huge success in Japan and has built a small but devoted fan base in America. To commemorate the series' decade of killing monsters and using their remains to create armors and weapons, we spoke with Ryozo Tsujimoto, who has been with the series since its original release. He started by working on the network operations, and is now a producer on the series. **interview by Kyle Hilliard**

How did the original idea for Monster Hunter come about?

Back when I belonged to the team in the old days, we were trying to establish three new online titles for home consoles; these were Auto Modellista, Resident Evil Outbreak, and Monster Hunter. I was one of the game designers on Auto Modellista. Monster Hunter was designed based on the concept of a "multi-action online game that anyone can join and play," and we made full use of Capcom's best action game talent.

Did you ever imagine it would become such a popular franchise?

Those of us on the team often said things like, "We'd like to aim for a million sales," amongst ourselves, but I honestly didn't expect it to become such a hit. There were a lot of factors involved, but I think the co-op functionality played a major role for the series to have achieved such success.

Monster Hunter doesn't portray a savage world, as we wanted anyone to feel welcome to jump in and play. If the game were too over the top and savage in atmosphere, we thought that even the co-op experience could come across as rather bleak. For instance, monsters are not defined as an "absolute enemy" in the game. Both monsters and hunters

are together in this world just trying to survive; in this world, you either hunt or become prey. But Monster Hunter is also a world that's designed in a fair way. It doesn't matter who shows off the most during a quest. The rewards are distributed equally regardless who played the flashiest. We wanted to make sure that all players cooperate and help each other, and making sure everyone feels rewarded was a big part of that.

How do you feel about its popularity? Does pushing the franchise forward each entry cause undue stress?

I don't feel much pressure. I only focus on further evolving the game where we need to and making sure that I protect the essence of the Monster Hunter franchise.

While it has found an audience in North America, Monster Hunter hasn't reached the same heights in popularity as Japan. Why do you think this is?

Japan is a country made up of small islands, and this gives us an environment wherein people tend to gather rather closely together thanks to the well-developed public transportation system we have with our train and bus lines. Therefore, it's easy for word of mouth to spread while people are playing together

via an ad-hoc connection on their portable gaming devices. I think the environment was really well suited for building the fan base we now enjoy and for encouraging people to play with one another.

In the U.S., the environment and culture may not be as well suited to this type of play, and that has led to it not being quite as popular yet. That said, we are aware of a growing multitude of really strong and tight-knit communities that have sprung up in the States, and we know that they hold their own events on the local level. We treasure these dedicated communities, and I sincerely hope that these veterans will usher in a new group of fans to enjoy Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate.

All of the monsters that appear in the game are visually and mechanically distinct. What goes into designing a new monster?

It's no exaggeration to say that the monsters are the most important element of Monster Hunter. We put the most emphasis on designing unique attributes of each monster's action while keeping in mind the user's game experience.

The team also often uses reference materials such as National Geographic to bring a certain sense of biological plausibility to the monsters. Monsters are



a fictional creation, but we develop them with the idea that they could very well exist in our world; in our reality. The more we learn about natural life forms and reflect that in the game, the more realistic and plausible that world becomes.

At first, we brainstorm ideas for game mechanics of each monster based on all sorts of elements such as when it appears in the game, what kind of actions we'd like hunters to learn from the gameplay, whether the mechanics are too similar to those of other monsters, etc. At the same time, we begin coming up with rough designs for the look of the monsters and make sure the design and game mechanics make sense as a whole. Sometimes we're inspired by the monster's art design, and that can lead to some interesting ideas for game mechanics.

After tossing around ideas and ensuring the uniqueness of the monsters' design and mechanics, we start creating the animations and programming necessary to implement them into the game world.

What's the strangest bug you've ever encountered while developing a Monster Hunter title?

This wasn't really a bug, but one day some of the developers in the team asked me to test the game with a very cute looking monster, but they had actually set the parameters to be incredibly strong without telling me. I was seriously beaten up by that monster and they were having so much fun. Perhaps they needed to square accounts with me from our working days [laughs]. Of course this monster was appropriately balanced before it made it to store shelves, so you don't have to be humiliated like me.

Do you have a favorite monster?

I suppose it won't come as a shock to hear that I really like the Gore Magala in Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate. I find the dark and mysterious feel to be unique and compelling. ♦

Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate, the next entry in the Monster Hunter series to come to North America, releases on 3DS early next year



Quotable

"We didn't find the fun. We didn't find the passion. We talked about how we put it through a reevaluation period, and actually, what we reevaluated is whether that's the game we really wanted to be making. The answer is no."



— Blizzard CEO **Mike Morhaime** tells *Polygon* why the company canceled the Titan MMO after seven years of development.

The Good

HALO: SPARTAN STRIKE, a top-down, twin-stick shooter, has been announced for release this December by developer Vanguard Games and 343 Industries. The game comes out for Windows 8 devices and on Steam for \$5.99 on December 12. It takes place during Halo 2, and achievements earned unlock an exclusive emblem, nameplate, and avatar in Halo: The Master Chief Collection on Xbox One. Halo: Spartan Strike has not been announced for the Xbox One, but hopefully it will come to a home console in the future just like its predecessor, Spartan Assault.

The Bad

DRIVECLUB AND NBA 2K15 experienced crippling online problems at launch. DriveClub had to drop online features at times and delay the release of its free version to PlayStation Plus members while it worked on its servers, while online problems have been a persistent issue for NBA2K. The basketball title's online MyPark play was naturally affected, but so was the offline MyCareer mode. For more on the games, check out our reviews on page 82 (NBA 2K15) and 88 (DriveClub).

THE HARASSMENT

of Anita Sarkeesian continues. Sarkeesian canceled her lecture at the Utah State University after the school received an email threat of "the deadliest school shooting in American history" should she give her speech. The school offered additional security measures, but Sarkeesian, creator of the website Feminist Frequency and the Tropes vs. Women video series, canceled the talk due to the fact that any person with a valid concealed firearm permit would be allowed to carry their weapon into the venue. The police said they would not screen for guns. For more on Sarkeesian's work, check out our interview with her from Issue #259. 💎

The Ugly

**THE NAME YOUR PRICE TOOL CAN
HELP YOU SEIZE CONTROL OF YOUR
BUDGET AND MAYBE EVEN...
THE WORLD!**

Mwahahaha



**IF YOU ASK ME, YOU SHOULD GET
A SAY IN WHAT YOU PAY.**

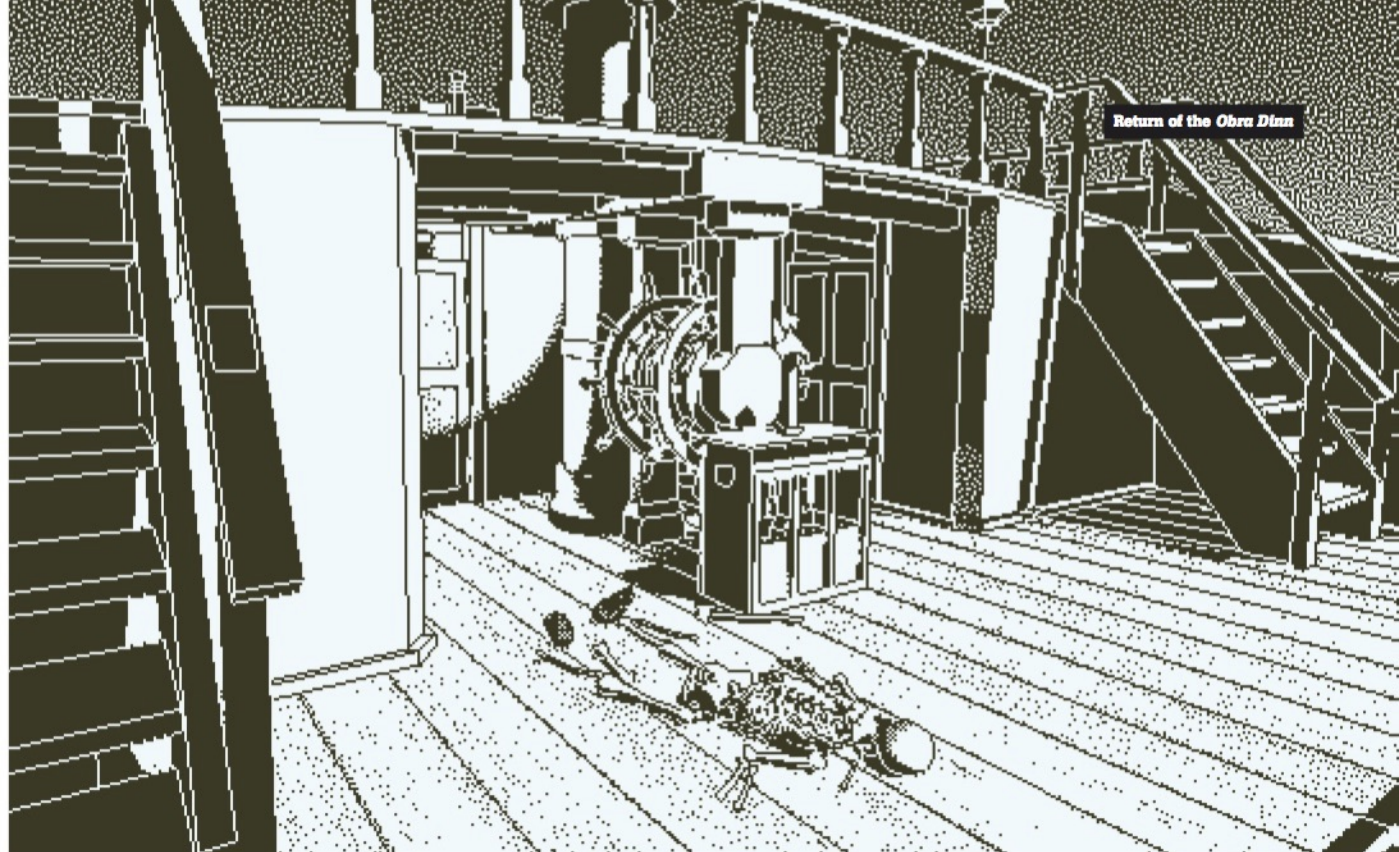
That's why we created the Name Your Price[®] Tool. We show you a range of options, and you pick the coverage that fits your budget. Putting you in control. Now that's Progressive.



LEARN MORE. SCAN HERE.

1.800.PROGRESSIVE | PROGRESSIVE.COM

©2014 Progressive Casualty Ins. Co. & affiliates. Price and coverage match limited by state law.



Return of the Obra Dinn

Early Looks At Tomorrow's Indie Innovations

by Matt Miller

One of the most exciting parts of covering games is hearing how developers twist and shape existing technology, design, and gameplay mechanics to create something new. That drive to innovate is a particularly potent force for independent developers, as evidenced by the four games we're highlighting this month.

Lucas Pope garnered acclaim in 2013 for his experimental game called *Papers, Please* – undoubtedly the first game about being a border patrol agent to be spoken about as a game of the year candidate. Now Pope is ready to share some info about his next project, *Return of the Obra Dinn*. The game casts the player as an insurance adjuster for the British East India Company in the year 1808. A merchant ship called the *Obra Dinn* makes its way into London's port, but its crew is mysteriously absent.

"Your ultimate goal is to determine the specific fate of every single crew member on board – if they're alive or dead," Pope says. "If they're alive, where are they? And if they died, how? There's a larger mystery of what happened on board, but the immediate gameplay is based around searching the ship and trying to identify individual crew members with limited information." *Return of the Obra Dinn* mixes magical elements into the seemingly mundane task, and Pope says

it explores unusual approaches to relaying information about the mystery, rather than forcing players to endlessly read old notes to reveal the answers.

The game is crafted using a 1-bit visual style, so everything is rendered in black and white. The limitation creates challenges for Pope, but also lets him create a game himself that would otherwise require many more artists to render in full-color 3D. The primitive visual style is supported by high-definition environment and gameplay audio, including full voiceover work. I'm compelled by Pope's unusual basis for his next game, and I'll be watching its development closely as he prepares for a release on PC, Mac, and Linux this coming summer.

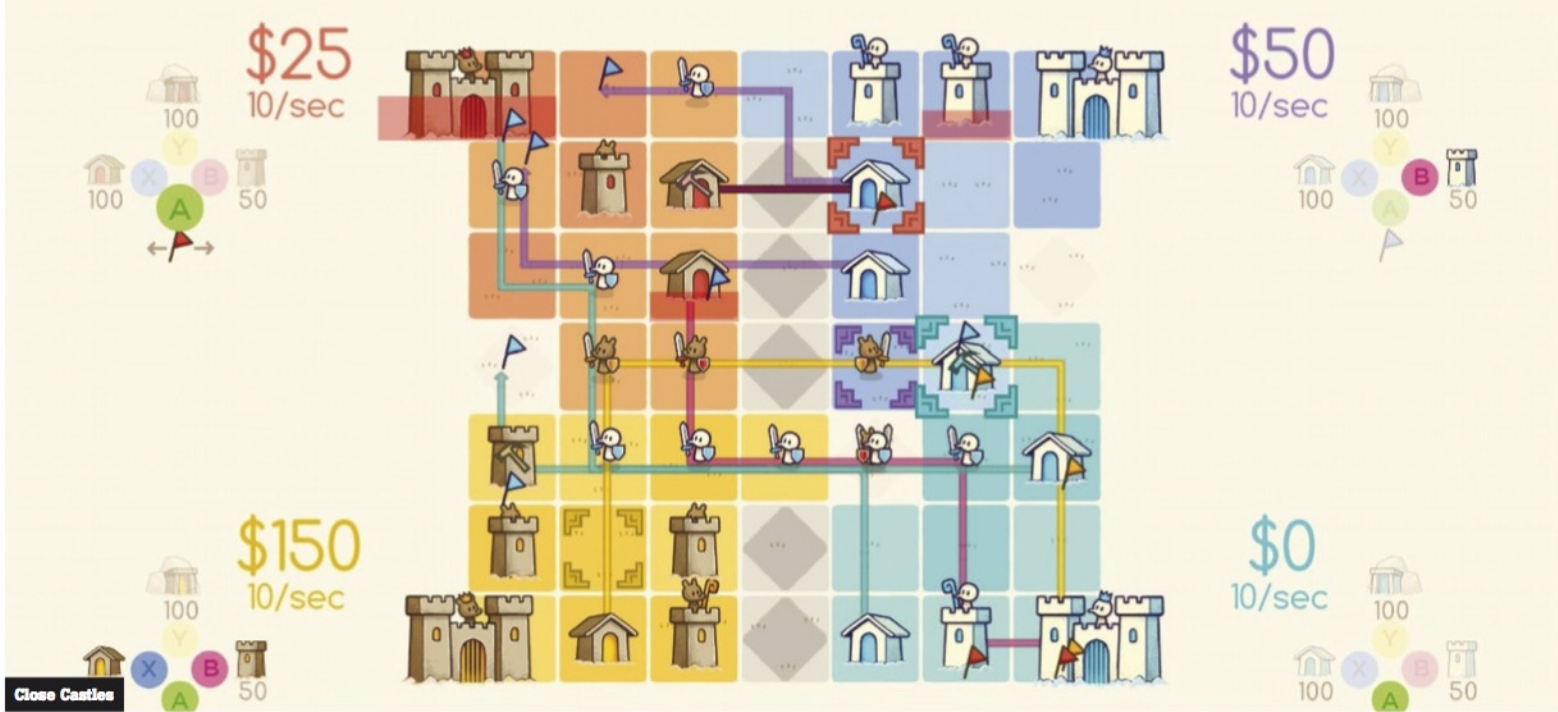
It's no exaggeration to say that *Threes!* became a phenomenon with its simple but rewarding loop of sliding and combining numbers on a grid. Developer Sirvo has shifted focus to a new game headed to consoles and PC in 2015. *Close Castles* is about two

kingdoms that build their castles too close to one another. The game stays on the square grid of Sirvo's last game, but replaces friendly numbers with wizard towers to defend the realm, money-producing mines, and houses that pour out an endless flow of attacking citizenry. The games that ensue strip away the micromanagement layers of real-time strategy and tower defense, instead focusing on an intense head-to-head confrontation.

"Real-time strategy is one of my favorite game types, but I find it horribly inaccessible and miserable for players who don't want to spend a thousand hours mastering the genre," says designer Asher Vollmer. "In *Close Castles*, I focused on all my favorite components of RTS – base building, high-level strategies – and plucked out all the things I hate – 40-minute play sessions, unit micromanagement, clumsy interfaces. The resulting game is a super tight five-minute competitive kingdom builder that almost feels more like a fighting game than a strategy game."

Sirvo is still iterating on the concept, and the focus so far has been on nailing the two- to four-person experience, but Vollmer says he won't ship the game until it also includes a single-player component. *Threes!* established the developer's ability to make a deceptively simple concept compelling, so here's hoping this stripped-down version of strategic warfare taps the same addictive vibe.

Looking for more independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, previews, and reviews. Read our feature on *Axiom Verge* (p. 58), *Hyper Light Drifter* (p. 70), *Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions* (p. 71), and *The Long Dark* (p. 75). You can also check out our review of *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* on p. 93.



One of my favorite games of 2013 was Housemarque's *Resogun*, so I now follow the studio's work with close attention. Its most recently announced title is **Alienation**, a new twin-stick shooter that capitalizes on the studio's reputation for insane enemy numbers and flashy-but-precise combat.

Players control squad members of an elite fighting force as they battle a swarming alien threat. The UNX soldiers you control each have their own class and special abilities, and teamwork is essential for success. One class Housemarque described to me is a classic tank, with defensive shields to hold off the worst of the attackers, but without the speed or agility that characterize some of the other fighters.

Levels are crafted by hand rather than through procedural generation, and Housemarque is iterating off its previous work by putting the focus on collaborative multiplayer and environment destructibility. In addition to a robust cooperative experience, the team is exploring an invasion mechanic similar to *Dark Souls*, in which players can crash other players' games for glory and rewards. This promises to add a competitive twist to the otherwise collaborative battles. As the screens attest, fights in *Alienation* are overflowing with enemies and explosions; I can't wait to see how this ground game plays given the amount of fun I've had in Housemarque's vision of outer space.



Anyone who made their way through an intro to psychology course is likely familiar with the Myers-Briggs personality types. Gonçalo Antunes and Michael Hicks' **Pillar** taps the well-known analysis tool for inspiration, crafting an interactive experience that explores the differing ways we each view and interact with the world. Through a collection of interconnected minigames, Pillar aims to offer insight into the human condition.

"Every major psychological preference in that test [the MBTI] is represented in the game somehow," Hicks says. "Sometimes it's through a metaphor, other times it's more literal." In one minigame, you control introverted characters, and they lose energy by being too close to NPCs in the game world. In another,

the game draws the distinction between intuition and sensing based individuals. "People who prefer intuition see the forest not the trees, and those who prefer sensing see the trees not the forest – the camera for the characters are different to represent this," Hicks says. "The INFJ's camera is zoomed out and the details of the scene are distorted. The ISTJ's camera is zoomed in, and she has the ability to pan it around to focus on different areas of the level."

I'm fascinated by Pillar's attempts to explore the arenas of personality and perception within an interactive framework, and I'm hopeful the minigames reach beyond the inspiration and can be genuinely compelling in their own right. Pillar is targeting release on PS4, Xbox 360, and PC later this winter. ♦

massive

ArcheAge

Sailing in the sandbox

T rion Worlds' free-to-play ArcheAge gives players the chance to engage in traditional MMORPG activities, but it does so with some aspects that differentiate it substantially from the rest of the pack. ArcheAge features open-ended gameplay with a heavy focus on crafting, a player-driven economy, building up and working on your own housing and land, and perhaps the most interesting, seafaring exploration, piracy, and combat.

by Daniel Tack

Players build a class by selecting three of ten different skillsets to create one identity. These skillset combinations lead to your class designation. For example, selecting Witchcraft, Occultism, and Sorcery leaves you with the magic-oriented Demonologist, while Battlerage, Defense, and Archery gives you a physically focused Liberator. By combining different skills available in each archetype,

players unlock combo attacks that are the core of the combat system. For instance, casting one spell first on an enemy, then another, will lead to various bonus effects like fear or increased vulnerability. It's not the most unique system, but it keeps you active as you move from encounter to encounter waiting for various chains and effects to trigger. You aren't just mindlessly mashing buttons.

While the combat is mostly standard MMO fare with a focus on combinations, open-world questing and grinding, and dungeons, ArcheAge ropes many of the desired drops and other materials you can gather around the world into an extensive crafting system that goes beyond merely gear, to home improvements and decorations. The majority of the best gear doesn't come from slaughtering raid bosses, but instead from player-created gear. Crafting is a huge chunk of gameplay, and although you're not required to participate, it's extremely beneficial to have friends or guildmates that are proficient crafters if you're after the best in slot "wow" equipment.

Seafaring, water exploration, and naval combat take ArcheAge into mostly uncharted MMORPG waters. From your humble beginnings managing small rowboats to your own larger ships with customizable flags and banners, a lot happens on the big blue. This includes resource collection of coral and other special water resources to treasure hunting, fishing, looking out for pirate players, and even running into other sailors and coming together



to take on the king of the ocean, the Kraken, in what amounts to a sea raid for one of the coolest gliders in the game.

The naval aspects of ArcheAge are not to be missed. Life on the high seas is one of the major draws, and nothing is quite as cool as sailing around with your imported image flying high on your sails, fending off pirates, and exploring with friends. Of all the things to experience in ArcheAge – and there are plenty of options – I had the most fun on the water.

Another major part of the game is the housing system. Grab a plot of land, build a farm, or get your castle ready for sieging in guild-vs-guild combat. This system is a neat aspect to explore for players looking for customizable housing space or those focused on the player-vs-player endgame, but as with many of ArcheAge's features, you are free to engage with these aspects as you wish.

Some players may never bother with land or group housing, and may prefer to stay out of PVE combat and work on crafting and building, working trade routes, or engage in fully sanctioned PVP or player-killing, where they

may be put on trial and jailed. That's really where ArcheAge shines: player choice. While I wouldn't call it a full-on sandbox MMORPG because there are plenty of theme park structures in place to form the backbone, it offers players open-ended choices on how they'd like to interact with the world and the players in it. The standard quest and level structure remains for traditional fans, complete with exclamation points over heads and killing 10 goblins or scorpions. However, for those who want to engage differently with the game, there are plenty of cool options alongside the tried-and-true monster-mashing dungeon

crawling backdrop, such as planting illegal crops, taking to the high seas as a pirate, spending some time in jail for your crimes against the server population, becoming a master crafter, or rounding up some friends to go take on the Kraken.

If a semi-sandbox MMORPG with the option of substantial non-combat activities sounds like something you'd enjoy, ArcheAge might be a seaworthy selection. As it's free-to-play, hoist the sails and give it a shot. It doesn't break the MMORPG mold, but it contains a wide variety of ways to play for those looking for something other than the traditional themepark design. ♦

interview

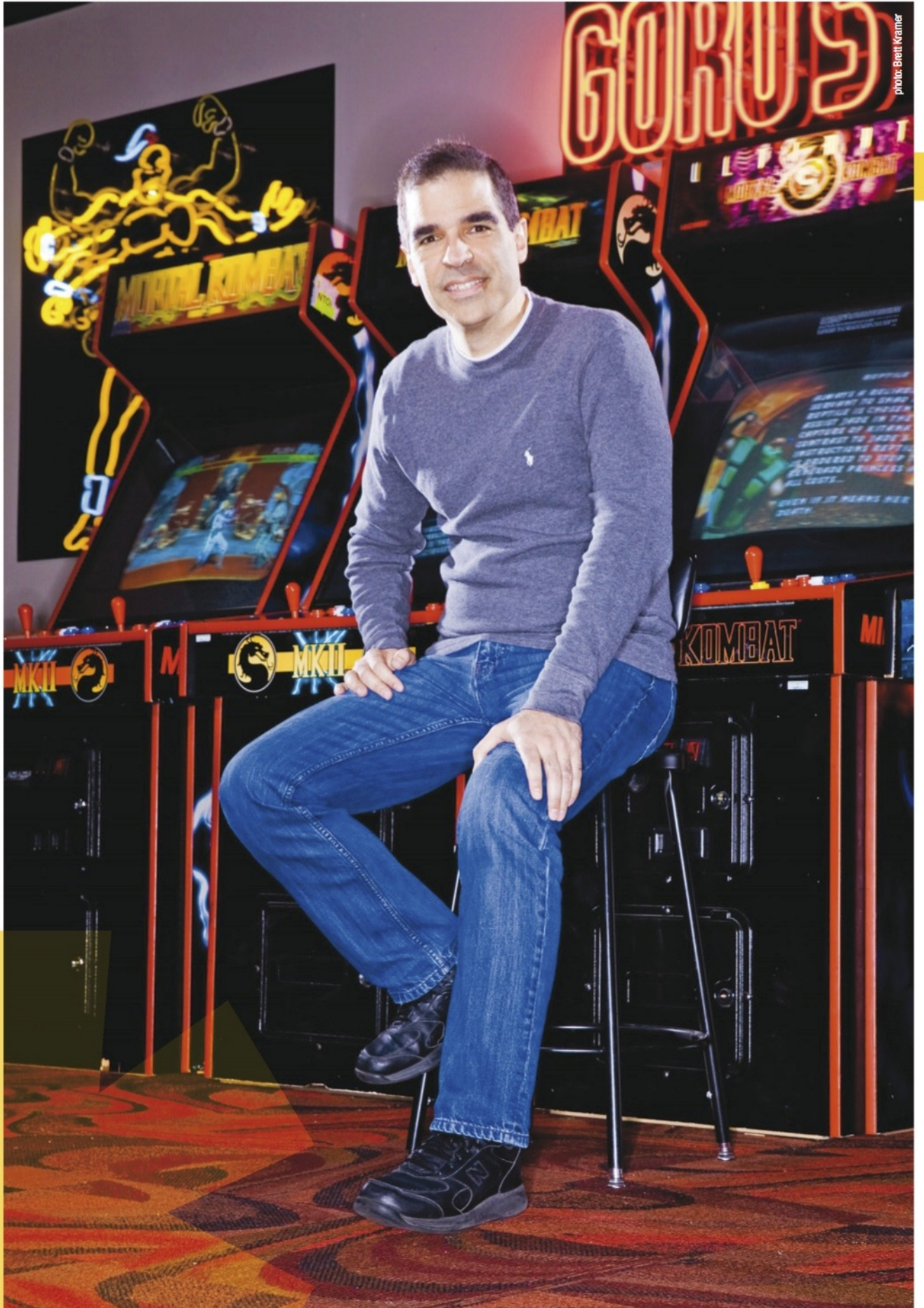


photo: Brett Kramer

The Master Of Kombat

The creator of the Mortal Kombat franchise, **Ed Boon**, is one of the living legends of fighting games. We recently spoke to him about the past, present, and future of the series.

interview by Andrew Reiner

What is it about the *Mortal Kombat* franchise that keeps you coming back?

I suppose it's a combination of a number of things. When a game does well, the first thing everyone involved thinks of is "sequel." Ironically, when we did the first *Mortal Kombat*, we were thinking, "Cool, we're done with that. We're going to start on a *Star Wars* game." The general manager at Midway at the time came to us and said, "No, you're not. You're doing another *Mortal Kombat* game." It was weird because it didn't cross our minds immediately. "We have this franchise, and we're going to do multiple installments." It was this quick project to help fill the assembly line of arcade machines. We did it in eight months. All of a sudden, it was a thing, and then they continued to sell well.

You said, "Star Wars game." Was that something you wanted to get the license for?

At the time, [around] 1993 or something, we were thinking that it would be cool to do an arcade *Star Wars* game. I was a big fan of the three they had released – the vector one and the sprite-based ones. We thought, "Let's do something with our digitized hardware." That dream didn't last very long.

The *Mortal Kombat* series has seen a lot of success, but it's had some low points as well. Was there ever a time when you thought, "Maybe this will be it"?

Mostly when Midway was going through its financial struggles. I thought there might be a scenario where Midway is broken up and the intellectual property is sold off. Who knows if the buyer is interested in working with the team? Some of the games, like *Mortal Kombat: Special Forces* and whatnot – which is, in my opinion, the series' low – I wasn't involved in it. It was really difficult to watch it not getting any traction in terms of having a fun mechanic. Seeing the response – the expected response – was a tough thing to witness.

You've been working on this franchise for years. How hard is it to continue coming up with new ideas?

It's as difficult as any game is. It's probably a little bit harder deciding what we're going to do this time with Scorpion as opposed to a brand-new character. It's certainly a challenge, but at the same time, it's part of why we've managed to endure as long as we have. We aren't afraid to make dramatic changes to the whole mechanic. We've gone from a 2D fighting game to a 3D fighting game back to a 2D fighting game. Along with the console transitions, the presentation of the game has varied all over the place. We've tried different things with different diversions – *Puzzle Kombat* and all of these crazy spin-off things. Every time

there's a new *Mortal Kombat* game, there's something about it that has never been done before or isn't expected.

Have you ever experimented with making something that isn't a fighting game?

We always want to, obviously. We did *Injustice*, and that did well for us, too. Hopefully, we can make a sequel to that. But I personally would love to do something outside of a fighting game. We're always talking about it. [But with] doing *Mortal Kombat* and possibly doing an *Injustice* sequel, the challenge is finding the time to get something else off the ground.

How do you see *Mortal Kombat X* evolving or adding to this console generation?

I think the biggest thing it's going to add is this new definition of what a character is – three variations of each character. I think it's going to have a lasting impact as far as character matchups. This online mode that we haven't defined, this sort of online metagame, is going to be a potential game-changer as well. The dynamic, long-term game that's being played is going to be a great addition to the fighting genre.

Does knowing that the game could be picked up for eSports affect how you design the game?

It does. *Mortal Kombat* games have always been casual-friendly games. We never wanted to have a game where someone's got to sit and practice for an hour before they can get one move down. I've never understood why some fighting games make these really complex inputs, immediately eliminating 80 percent of the audience. At the same time, the tournament scene and eSports have this much higher class and sophistication and player level as far as how much time they're willing to devote to it. You've really got to provide them something deep and multi-layered. I think our variations are going to provide that, redefining a matchup between two characters.

Do you seek feedback from the eSports community?

With the last few games – *MK9*, *Injustice*, and *X* – we've flown in people, really great players from various fighting game communities, and get them hammering on the game early enough that we can make changes to address some of the issues they find. That's always on our agenda.

How successful was *NetherRealm's Injustice* companion app on iOS? Are you looking to do something similar for *Mortal Kombat*?

It was successful in an order of magnitude more than any of us had ever dreamed. It was nothing short of staggering. While I have nothing to announce, I think we'd be pretty foolish to ignore that.

The arcade market has a very faint pulse.

Do you think there's any way it could work again for the fighting games that are coming out?

It's funny, because we have been approached as recently as *MK 9* by other companies asking for our code to make it work for an arcade. While I think you could physically do it, I don't know if there are enough people to support the nature of the game. In arcades, there are people trying to challenge you. It's a very social experience. That's been replaced with online now. You're in a virtual room and the people around you are challenging each other. I suppose if there's some arcade that still has a large number of players, you could place it there and make money. But as far as having enough places in the world that can support something that needs players around it, I don't see the economics of that working.

When making games, do you think about modes that fit Twitch viewing habits?

One hundred percent. That's the world we live in. Playthroughs and people giving lessons on games – that whole thing is here to stay. There are decisions we make that will make something easier for Twitch streamers to do. In fighting game EVO tournaments, they skip intros, they don't watch fatalities. They get to the core of the fighting. They also tend to be in a big rush to get their matches done. I've toyed with the idea of having a mode specifically for game tournaments or Twitch, where you strip out everything except for the core mechanics of the game.

Were you involved in the *Mortal Kombat* film that got dropped a few years ago? Is there a chance it's still stewing or is it dead?

It's still stewing. The director, Kevin Tancharoen, loves *Mortal Kombat*. When I met him, he showed me a picture of him at five years old in a *Sub-Zero* costume, which kind of makes me feel old. [Laughs] He did *Mortal Kombat: Rebirth*, and it got all this attention – 10 million views or something like that – and then Warner Bros. hired him to do the *Mortal Kombat: Legacy* series. It was my understanding that he was on board to do the third movie, but then he moved on. Recently, he directed last week's *Marvel: Agents of Shield*. But as far as I know, the movie is not dead.

At E3 a lot of the *Mortal Kombat X* characters were silhouettes, but one was clearly the silhouette of Abraham Lincoln. Can we expect a great president in *Mortal Kombat X*?

No, that was me just being a d---. [Laughs] Over the years, *Mortal Kombat* has always had secrets in it, rumors that weren't true. Clearly, we're not going to put Abraham Lincoln in *Mortal Kombat*. In *Mortal Kombat: Armageddon*, we had a create-a-fighter feature. One time, we were playing the game online, and some guy had made Abraham Lincoln. We just thought it was the funniest thing in the world. So I said, "We have to put that as one of the boxes." ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1986

ARCADE ROOTS
Boon graduates with a computer science degree from the University of Champaign-Urbana. He eventually gets work designing pinball machines at Williams

1990

DEEP IMPACT
Now with Williams subsidiary Midway, Boon begins creating games. His first release is the arcade hit *High Impact Football*

1992

THE REVOLUTION
Along with his partner John Tobias, Boon releases the 2D arcade fighter *Mortal Kombat*. Its digitized fighters and brutal "fatalities" make it a huge hit

1993

A FRANCHISE
Mortal Kombat II is released to great success among fighting game fans

1993

CONTROVERSY
Concerns about *Mortal Kombat*'s gruesome violence cause a controversy that leads to the game being one of the main targets of Senator Joseph Lieberman's Congressional hearings on game violence

1997

CHANGES
Mortal Kombat 4, the first 3D game in the series, is released to mixed reaction from fans

2002

THE COMEBACK
After some subpar releases that attempted to take *MK* out of the fighting genre, Boon and the series make a major comeback with *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance*

2011

LASTING SUCCESS
After a string of successful releases, *Mortal Kombat* (a.k.a. *Mortal Kombat 9*), becomes the best-selling game in franchise history



EVERYONE 10+
E
10+
ESRB
Cartoon Violence
Comic Mischief
Mild Suggestive Themes

IS BIGGER THAN EVER!



DOUBLE THE SMASH WITH UP TO 8 PLAYERS

If you thought smashing with 4 players was fun, battle locally with five, six, seven or even eight players. Then challenge players worldwide in four player battles online.*



FACE OFF AGAINST A GIGANTIC ROSTER OF ALL-STAR CHARACTERS

Get ready to SMASH like never before with more than 40 new and classic characters to choose from.



THE ULTIMATE SMASH BROS. GAME HAS ARRIVED

Create your own stages, compete in special challenges crafted by Master Hand, outwit your opponents in the new Smash Tour board game mode and more!



SETTLE IT IN
Smash!

AVAILABLE
11.21

ONLY ON **Wii U**

ALSO AVAILABLE ON
Nintendo eShop

*Additional accessories required for multiplayer mode. 8 Player mode can only be played locally with selected stages. Online does not accommodate 8 players. Game, system and some accessories sold separately. Broadband Internet access required for online game play. For more info, go to support.nintendo.com. © 2014 Nintendo. Original Game: © Nintendo/HAL Laboratory, Inc. Characters: © Nintendo/HAL Laboratory, Inc./Pokémon/Creatures Inc./GAME FREAK Inc./SHIGESATO ITO/APE Inc./INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS/SEGA/CAPCOM CO., LTD./BANDAI NAMCO Games Inc./MONOLITHSOFT. Nintendo properties are trademarks of Nintendo.



Your favorite characters come to life as amiibo fighters!

Customize



Customize your amiibo by adjusting their offensive and defensive stats.

Level Up



Train your amiibo by battling alongside or against them to level up and expand their abilities.

Supercharge Your Gameplay



Put them into battle and see whose amiibo comes out on top.



Discover the **POWER** inside

Mario™, Link™ and other favorites are ready to battle by your side. Just tap amiibo to the Wii U™ GamePad controller and train them to become the ultimate sidekicks in Super Smash Bros. for Wii U. And see how amiibo change your game in Mario Kart 8, Hyrule Warriors and many more titles coming soon.



COMPATIBLE
WITH

amiibo

Super Smash Bros. for Wii U is rated Everyone 10+ with Comic Mischief, Cartoon Violence and Mild Suggestive Themes by the ESRB. Figure shown not actual size. Compatibility and functionality of amiibo may vary per game. Software updates may be required. Visit amiibo.com for specific details on how each amiibo works. Games, system and amiibo figures sold separately.



Game Informer's

Holiday

Buying Guide

2014

Picking gifts for your loved ones is no easy task. People can get offended, or even hurt, if they receive something subpar. You could throw darts at a Sears catalog as usual, or you could peruse our annual buyers guide to get an abbreviated overview of the best entertainment, technology, and games 2014 had to offer. When your friends and family see what you got them this year, they're likely to put you on their shoulders and parade you through the streets. You can thank us later; right now you have some killer toys to buy.

\$25 and Under

Something that says, "I acknowledge your existence."

1. LEGO STAR WARS MICROFIGHTERS

What could be cuter than stumpy Lego versions of our favorite pop culture icons? How about even smaller Lego versions of our favorite pop culture icons? Lego's line of microfighters recreates iconic Star Wars spacecrafts such as the Millennium Falcon, the TIE Interceptor, and the X-Wing using the fewest number of pieces possible. Here's hoping they make Batman babies next.

\$9.99

lego.com/starwars

2. ASSASSIN'S CREED NECKLACE

If you've got a friend who wants to join an elite brotherhood of fans, give them the chance to show their enthusiasm for the Assassin's Creed series by wearing its most cherished symbol around their neck. As a member of this brotherhood, they can sneak up on people by crawling through the bushes and pretend to parkour off buildings by taking stairs three at a time.

\$25.00

etsy.com/shop/YaminCespedes

3. WHO ARE YA SOCCER T-SHIRTS

Help your friends showcase their pride for the world's most popular sport by giving them one of Who Are Ya Design's stylish soccer tees featuring designs for clubs and countries around the world. Whether they're fans of the Premiership, Bundesliga, or La Liga, this site has great options.

\$24.95

whoareyadesigns.com

4. POWER-UP MUG

Waking up in the morning sometimes feels like hitting your head against a block. Instead of watching your friends force their way through it, have them pour their favorite wake-up juice into this charming Super Mario-themed coin block mug.

\$11.99

thinkgeek.com



1

3



2



4

\$25-50

Something that says, "I like you."

1. VANS DARTH STORM SNAPBACK HAT

Next year is going to be a big one for Star Wars fans, with J. J. Abram's highly anticipated Episode VII scheduled to hit theaters. Make sure your friend has the proper headwear while standing in line for a midnight showing. Give them this five-panel snapback hat that features custom Darth Vader embroidery in the front.

\$35.00

vans.com/starwars

2. D&D ATTACK WING

Dragons take to the skies for deadly mid-air duels in this dedicated miniatures game based on D&D's iconic monsters. Based on the stellar Flight-Path system originated in the X-Wing minis game, the dogfighting starter pack includes three beautifully painted dragon figures to get your game started, Angels, giants, and more are on the way in expansion packs that add to the chaos of battle.

\$49.99

whizkidgames.com

3. TRAVELBOY BACKPACK

Much like Nintendo's original handheld, Think Geek's GameBoy-inspired backpack is a faithful travel companion. At 20 inches long, it has enough room to carry your school/work supplies or gaming consoles. It's the perfect present for the retro gamer in your life.

\$39.99

thinkgeek.com

4. POWER UP SMARTPHONE CONTROLLED PAPER AIRPLANE KIT

Paper plane technology hasn't evolved much since the Wright brothers used it to pass notes in high school. Thankfully, Power Up has made some significant paper aviation advancements. Using a Smart Module propeller and a mobile app, your loved one can turn any paper glider into an unstoppable flying airship.

\$49.99

poweruptoys.com



5. VINTAGE SCI-FI COMICS THROW PILLOW

Astronauts from the '40s and '50s lived a perilous life fighting giant lizards and space aliens, which is why we honor their achievements with these historically accurate throw pillows. Zazzle's selection of home decor comes in a variety of sizes, can be made from polyester or cotton, and are embossed with retro science fiction comics from the golden age.

Starting at \$39.95

zazzle.com/zazzle_home



5

Games



CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE ATLAS PRO EDITION

Hit the virtual battlefield in fashion with this definitive edition of Advanced Warfare featuring a season pass, two bonus weapons, and exo-skeleton perks for both single- and multiplayer.

\$119



ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY COLLECTOR'S EDITION

Enlist a friend to join the French revolution alongside you and two other compatriots in the first new-gen exclusive for the long-running Ubisoft series. This edition includes a 16-inch tall statue of Arno, a wooden music box, and bonus missions.

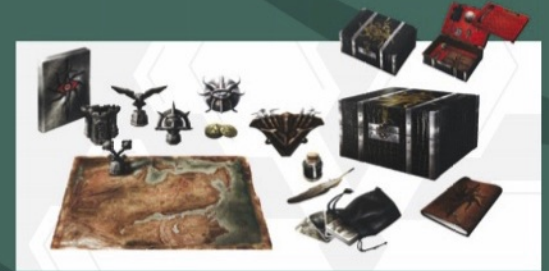
\$129



DARK SOULS II COLLECTOR'S EDITION

It's never too late to join the slaughter of this challenging dark fantasy RPG. This edition boasts a 12-inch tall warrior knight figure, cloth game map, and a collection of weapons to stave off your deadly opponents.

\$74.99



DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION INQUISITOR'S EDITION

Keep this treasure of an RPG in a limited edition case worthy of showcasing. Swag includes a cloth map of Thedas, inquisitor's badge, a 40-page journal, and a tarot card deck featuring Dragon Age art.

\$169



FAR CRY 4 KYRAT EDITION

Kyrat is not a real country, which is why this statue of dictator Pagan Min is excusable. This edition also includes a harpoon gun, three bonus missions, and a Min propaganda poster.

\$129



TITANFALL COLLECTOR'S EDITION

The best collector's edition of the year, this giant box includes an 18-inch tall recreation of a Titan, a hardcover art book, and a schematic poster of the hulking Atlas.

\$249



FIFA 15 ULTIMATE TEAM EDITION

Get your friend on an even playing field with this edition of FIFA 15, which comes with 40 Ultimate Team gold packs and the ability to have Lionel Messi join their squad on loan.

\$69.99



SKYLANDERS TRAP TEAM DARK EDITION

The best Skylanders game yet is best experienced with this starter pack, which includes the new portal, three figures, three traps, and a collector's poster.

\$99.99

\$50-100

Something that says, "I think we should be best friends."

1. DESTINY BICYCLE JERSEY

Bungie has teamed up with athletic wear company SUGOi to create a Destiny bicycle jersey that's both streamlined and stylish. Made from comfortable FinoTech material, this jersey's raglan sleeves allow unrestricted arm movement while three elastic back pockets easily expand for storing biking essentials...such as candy.

\$59.99

bungiestore.com



2. AUDIO-TECHNICA AT-LP60 STEREO TURNTABLE

Audio-Technica makes old technology relevant again with this modern turntable. Thanks to a built-in phono preamp, the AT-LP60 can connect directly to a computer, home stereo, or any external speaker with an audio jack. The system's professional-grade aluminum platter plays records at two different speeds (33-1/3 and 45 RPM), so your friend can finally put that classic record collection to good use.

\$99.99

audio-technica.com



3. VIDDY DIY PINHOLE CAMERA

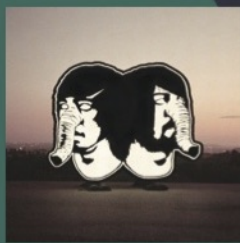
Most modern phones have cameras that make it easy to record the precious moments in our lives, but that's the problem; few people appreciate the art of photography anymore. The Pop-up Pinhole Co.'s latest screen-printed do-it-yourself camera is like an art project that captures other works of art. The device only takes about half-an-hour to put together, and it uses both medium format and 35mm film. Best of all, it instills a deeper ownership over every photo, and that's a feeling even the iPhone can't replicate.

\$51.00

thepoppinpinholecompany.com



Music



DEATH FROM ABOVE 1979

The Physical World

The cult favorite Canadian rock duo reunites for another tight album that you can bang your head or dance to in equal measures.

\$12.99 | deathfromabove1979.com



DESTINY ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK

We're not sure why composer Marty O'Donnell fell out with Bungie, but we're glad it didn't prevent the world from hearing this amazing game score.

\$14.99 | destinythegame.com



FLYING LOTUS

You're Dead

Longtime producer Flying Lotus returns with a kaleidoscopic album that effortlessly blends jazz loops with ambient beats and the hip-hop stylings of Kendrick Lamar and Snoop Dogg.

\$9.99 | flying-lotus.com



FOO FIGHTERS

Sonic Highways

Tireless ambassador of rock Dave Grohl returns with a new album featuring eight songs recorded in eight different cities. You can watch its creation on the new HBO series of the same name.

\$11.99 | foofighters.com

4. COMBAT CREATURES ATTACKNIDS

If your friend is constantly outmanned during your neighborhood turf wars, it's time to unleash the drones. Combat Creature's Stryder and Doom Razor Drones can fire Nerf disc or darts up to 30 feet, and can be remotely controlled from a distance of over 200 feet. If our robot masters are eventually going to take over, we might as well arm them with foam bullets.

\$79.95
combatcreatures.com



5. PLAYSTATION TV

Not every TV is lucky enough to have a console companion. If you know of a lonely TV owner in your life then you can play matchmaker by pairing them with a PlayStation TV. Sony's scrappy little streaming device play hundreds of Vita, PSP, and PSone classics such as Final Fantasy X, Metal Gear Solid, and Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time, and it also streams PS4 games from other rooms onto the PlayStation TV. Currently, PS TV has a few entertainment offerings, like Crackle, but Sony says the system's Netflix app will be enabled soon.

\$99.99
playstation.com/playstationtv



6. LEAPFROG LEAPPAD3 LEARNING TABLET

Tablets are so fun that kids of all ages want them, but the younger set needs a machine that's a little more colorful – and a lot more droppable – than a \$500 iPad. LeapFrog's premier brand of kid-friendly tablets gives kids access to more than 1,000 educational games, eBooks, and videos as well as personalized learning tools that automatically scale to each child's level. LeapSearch web software even offers kids a portal to a nearly limitless stream of age-appropriate videos curated by learning experts.

\$99.99
leapfrog.com

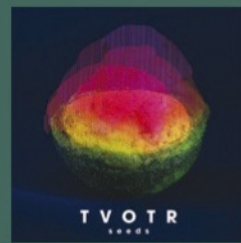
7. STAR WARS IMPERIAL ASSAULT

This massive strategy board game challenges up to four players to control members of the Rebel Alliance in the wake of the first Death Star's destruction, as another player controls the forces of the Empire. A modular tile-based board offer a full campaign of story-based Star Wars combat, while a second mode of play offers head-to-head skirmish play in that galaxy far, far away.

\$99.95
fantasyflightgames.com



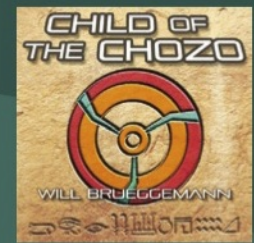
NICKI MINAJ
The Pinkprint
 Coming off her fifth straight BET award for best artist, the reigning queen of hip-hop returns with her highly-anticipated third album that explores her musical roots.
\$15.98 | mypinkfriday.com



TV ON THE RADIO
Seeds
 The darling Brooklyn indie rockers return with their fifth studio album, the first to release after the band lost bassist Gerard Smith to a battle with lung cancer.
\$11.98 | tvontheradioband.com



TY SEGALL
Manipulator
 Prolific garage rock icon Segall may have just released his best album yet. Manipulator feels like an album out of time, combining his signature fuzz with melodic underpinnings and glam rock accents.
\$12.00 | ty-segall.com



WILL BRUEGGEMANN
Child of the Chozo
 Nintendo and chiptune fans shouldn't miss this Metroid tribute album, which delivers a sonic burst of nostalgia while riffing off the themes of the classic games across multiple generations.
\$5.00 | supermarcatobros.com

1. APPLE IPHONE 6 OR 6 PLUS

A small startup called Apple recently unveiled this cool little gadget that might actually appeal to a few consumers. The lightest and thinnest iPhone to date also features the company's biggest HD screen (4.7 for the 6 and 5.5 for the 6 Plus). A 64-bit desktop-class chipset allows the phone to play the most visually intense games and apps, while a more detailed camera offers up 1080p video at 60 fps. It also features Apple Pay's contactless payment system. Seriously, this device is so sophisticated it even makes mobile phone calls.

Starting at \$199 (with contract)
apple.com/iphone-6

2. JORDAN CP3.VIII

The eighth iteration of Chris Paul's signature shoe brings a sleek, minimalist aesthetic to the classic design without sacrificing performance. A unique 5/8-height, coupled with an inner sleeve, delivers a sock-like fit that allows ballers to make quick changes on the court. Nike's newest Jordans are guaranteed* to make that special someone in your life a better basketball player. **Not Guaranteed.*

\$130
nike.com

3. NINTENDO 3DS XL NES EDITION

While this looks like a wireless remote for a classic NES console, it's really the newest design for Nintendo's 3DS system. The handheld has a glasses-free 3D screen that's 90 percent bigger than the original 3DS, can access online services like Netflix, and has a library of games that includes New Super Mario Bros. 2, The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds, and Super Smash Bros.

\$199
gamestop.com/nintendo-3ds



1



2



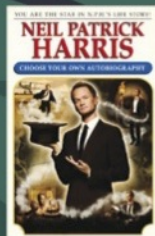
3

Books



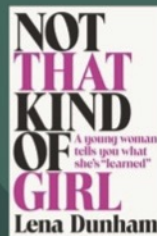
BLACK SCIENCE VOLUME 1 by Rick Remender

The writer behind the pulp sci-fi shooter Bulletstorm crafts a story about an anarchist scientist who punches a hole in the universe, opening up a wormhole to any possible dimension, before sending his team on a series of adventures that could take them anywhere — it would seem — but home. **\$9.99** imagecomics.com



NEIL PATRICK HARRIS: CHOOSE YOUR OWN AUTOBIOGRAPHY by Neil Patrick Harris

While most autobiographies tell you the story of how a celebrity rose to fame, actor, producer, and director Neil Patrick Harris allows readers to choose how to live his life for him. **\$26.00** nphbook.com



NOT THAT KIND OF GIRL by Lena Dunham

The acclaimed creator, producer, and star of HBO's *Girls*, Lena Dunham, explores the concepts of falling in love, feeling alone, and struggling with being overweight in this collection of candid personal essays. **\$28.00** randomhouse.com



SAGA VOLUME 4 by Brian K. Vaughan and Fiona Staples

Y: The Last Man and *Lost* writer Brian K. Vaughan continues his Eisner, Harvey, and Hugo Award-winning space epic about a couple who abandon their stations in a never-ending galactic war to raise a young girl. **\$14.99** imagecomics.com

4. DESTINY PLAYSTATION 4 BUNDLE

Nothing would make the gamer in your life happier than a shiny new PlayStation 4. Sony's new Destiny package includes a glacial white PS4 and DualShock 4 controller, a copy of Destiny, and a 30-Day PlayStation Plus Trial. PS4 owners can also look forward to a list of exciting upcoming titles such as The Order: 1886, Bloodborne, No Man's Sky, and Uncharted 4: A Thief's End.

\$449

playstation.com



5. GOPRO HERO4 BLACK

Upgrade your friend's video life with a compact camera that has jumped out of planes, surfed with killer whales, and flown into volcanos. Now, the world's most extreme camera is ready for a whole new set of adventures. The Hero4 Black's frame rates are twice as fast – capturing 4K photos at 30 frames a second and 1080p video at 120 frames per second. The system's built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth makes it easier to share and upload videos.

\$499

shop.gopro.com



6. CALL OF DUTY: ADVANCED WARFARE XBOX ONE BUNDLE

If your beloved is an Xbox fan, there's another great bundle option available this holiday season. Microsoft's Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare bundle includes an Advanced Warfare-themed console and controller, a copy of Sledgehammer's futuristic shooter, and – perhaps most importantly – a one terabyte hard drive. Xbox One owners can also anticipate a slate of exciting console exclusives such as Halo 5: Guardians, Ori and the Blind Forest, Sunset Overdrive, and Quantum Break.

\$499

xbox.com



7. MEDICOM BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS FIGURE

Based off Frank Miller's iconic The Dark Knight Returns comic, this highly-articulated figure stands nearly 12 inches tall, comes with multiple hand sculpts, and is so detailed that you can see the tread patterns on his boots. Medicom's figures are so lifelike and articulate that for all we know this really is a tiny person in a Batman suit.

\$169

medicomtoystore.com

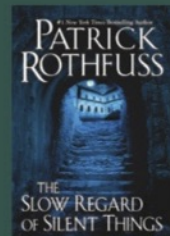


THE PERIPHERAL

by *William Gibson*

Flynn is desperate for work, so when her brother offers her a job beta testing a new game, she jumps at the opportunity. However, while the testing seems simple at first, Flynn begins to suspect it's actually a cover up for murder.

\$28.95 williamgibsonbooks.com

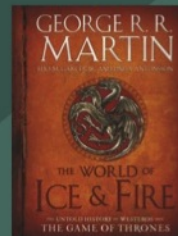


THE SLOW REGARD OF SILENT THINGS

by *Patrick Rothfuss*

After living a life underneath the university, Kvothe's friend Auri has uncovered a world of secrets. In this side story to the award-winning The Kingkiller Chronicle series, Patrick Rothfuss' explores the history of one of his most intriguing characters.

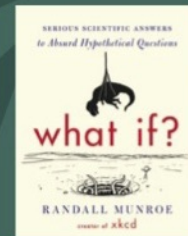
\$18.95 penguin.com



THE WORLD OF ICE & FIRE: THE UNTOLD HISTORY OF WESTEROS AND THE GAME OF THRONES

George R. R. Martin's Song of Ice & Fire series is such a massive fantasy universe that its entire history can't be contained to the original books. This illustrated tome aims to tell a comprehensive history of George R. R. Martin's Seven Kingdoms.

\$50.00 georgerrmartin.com



WHAT IF? SERIOUS SCIENTIFIC ANSWERS TO ABSURD HYPOTHETICAL QUESTIONS

by *Randall Munroe*

Webcomic creator Randall Munroe (xkcd.com) delivers hilarious answers to questions such as, "What if I took a swim in a spent-nuclear-fuel pool?" and "Could you build a jetpack using downward-firing machine guns?"

\$24.00 xkcd.com

\$500-1000

Something that shamefully says, "I'll be eating ramen noodles for a while."

1. ASUS ROG SWIFT

Asus is the first company to produce a monitor using Nvidia's G-Sync technology – a system that taps your graphics card when updating the display, resulting in buttery smooth frame rates that make your friend's games look better without upgrading their hardware. This 27-inch LCD panel has a resolution of 2560x1440 and comes packed with some added motion-blurring tech.

\$799

asus.com



2. SIDESHOW COLLECTIBLES GODZILLA MAQUETTE

If you've got a friend with a taste for monster movies, this huge figurine will make their Christmas special. Based on Legendary Pictures' updated design from earlier this year, Sideshow collectibles' Godzilla maquette is over two feet tall and was designed using original digital assets from the film. He may be a monster, but he's hard not to love.

\$799

sideshowtoy.com



3. LENOVO ERAZER X315

You don't have to mortgage your house to give that special someone in your life a PC that will run games like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, *Star Citizen*, or *Starcraft 2: Legacy of the Void*. Lenovo's newest desktop looks like a futuristic tank, and with an AMD Radeon R9 graphics chip and 12GB of DDR3 memory under the hood, it's ready to take you to war.

\$699

shop.lenovo.com



4. SMOKIN' AWESYMETRICAL SNOWBOARD

Mountains exist so that we can slide down their peaks at the speed of an F1 racer. Smokin' Awesymetrical Snowboard is an asymmetrical design that features a deeper side cut on the heel side than the toes. This bleeding edge snowboard technology gives boarders more control while turning and provides a smoother ride on the toe edge. The Awesymetrical is also made from renewable resources such as hemp stringers that give the board some extra pop off jumps.

\$559

smokinsnowboards.com



Video



SONS OF ANARCHY: THE COLLECTOR'S SET

This collector's set includes the first six seasons of FX's hit show about a Northern Californian motorcycle gang. The Samcro Reaper clubhouse table packaging even has an empty spot reserved for the unfinished seventh season.

\$169.98 | shop.fxnetworks.com



ALIEN QUADRLOGY

The *Alien* series has gone through several releases on DVD and Blu-ray already, but this latest 4-disc compilation offers just the movies you love and none of the fancy bonus features for a rock bottom price.

\$25.99 | foxconnect.com



BATMAN THE COMPLETE TV SERIES

Many regard Batman as a gritty detective, but the hero functions equally as well in the world of '60s camp. This 18-disc set includes all 120 original television episodes and over three hours of all-new extras that include interviews with the cast and crew.

\$269 | warnerbros.com



FARGO: SEASON ONE

The 1996 dark comedy thriller, *Fargo*, was an instant classic in theaters, but the concept remains strong even for prime time. In this drama, loosely based on true crime stories, a manipulative master criminal arrives in the frozen midwestern town only to be hunted by an eccentric police force.

\$49.99 | foxconnect.com

\$1000 and Over *Something that says, "Love can be bought."*

1. VPCABS TRADITIONAL LE-X PINBALL MACHINE

If you've got a friend who appreciates the roots of pinball but wants a modern take on a classic pastime, VPCabs' digital pinball table might be the perfect gift. The LE-X may have the look a feel of an old-school pinball table, but inside are several high definition monitors, a solid-state hard drive, and a high performance audio/video system. This digital marvel comes preloaded with Pinball FX2 and its ever-expanding collection of pinball simulations.

\$9,995

virtualpinballmachinesrus.com

2. TESLA MODEL S

You can win the holidays forever by giving someone the car that Tony Stark dreams about. While most electric vehicles are small, slow, and about as sleek as a honey-baked ham, Tesla Motor's Model S looks like a German luxury sedan, jumps from 0-to-60 mph in a little over four seconds, and can cover more than 250 miles on a single charge. The only thing it doesn't have is a tank full of highly combustible liquid.

Starting at \$71,070

teslamotors.com

3. ALIENWARE AREA 51

Alienware's newest desktop doesn't look like a gaming PC; it looks like an alien artifact. The system's unusual triad-design actually has a purpose – it optimizes heat dispersal. Capable of holding up to 8-core Intel Core i7-5960X processors, triple Nvidia GeForce GTX 980 graphics cards, and up to 12GB of GDDR5 RAM, the new Area 51 can display games at a mind-melting 11520 x 2160 resolution across three 4K monitors. Whichever lucky gamer receives this gift could probably help NASA shoot rockets at Mars.

Starting at \$1699

alienware.com/landings/area-51

4. LG 55EC9300 OLED DISPLAY

This 55-inch curved OLED display offers a more natural and immersive viewing experience and manages to remain only 0.17-inches thick. LG's infinite Contrast system offers a deep range from white to black while it's Four-Color Pixel technology gives viewers a fireworks display of color.

\$6999

lg.com



GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

A group of Marvel Comics' characters you never knew existed and never thought you'd care about band together to save the universe in a movie that you never expected to be one of the funniest and most electrifying films of the year.

\$39.99 | marvel.com/guardians



SNOWPIERCER

After a post-apocalyptic ice age pushes humanity onto a futuristic super train that circles the globe, the survivors are separated into an oppressive social structure. But one man spearheads a revolt that could send the train careening off its tracks and doom the last seeds of humanity.

\$29.99 | anchorbayentertainment.com



RICK & MORTY: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

When a mentally unbalanced scientific genius reconnects with his estranged family, he ends up spending most of his time taking his young grandson, Morty, on a series of whimsical (and highly dangerous) adventures throughout the cosmos.

\$29.99 | adultswim.com



THE WIND RISES

Award-winning Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki (*Princess Mononoke*, *Howl's Moving Castle*) delivers one final tale. A young boy dreams of flying, but he is nearsighted and unable to become a pilot, so he instead pursues his dream by becoming one of the most accomplished airplane designers in the world.

\$36.99 | thewindrises.com

Super Smash Bros. Diaries



Director Masahiro Sakurai shares his thoughts on the development of the game as they transition from the 3DS version to the upcoming Wii U release



by Masahiro Sakurai

Welcome back, everyone. A lot has happened since the last time we talked here. Most obvious, of course, was the launch of Smash Bros. for Nintendo 3DS. I just want to say thanks, because the reception you've given it really makes me feel like all the hard work was worth it. Next up is the launch of Smash Bros. for Wii U. With one game out and one to go, the questions keep coming, so let's get to them...

Last month you touched on character creation. Could you share more insight into how you go about selecting characters?

The process is pretty well set. We survey character popularity and such, both in Japan and worldwide. And there's research into games currently in development that might provide new characters. But in the end, the decisions are made by me alone, because I need to consider things like development time and so forth.

Selections are made using a wide number of factors. I consider whether a character has unique characteristics, and whether these characteristics inspire ideas that can be used to make Super Smash Bros. more fun. I also look at the prominence of the character, and if there's a chance that character overlaps with another. I also look ahead to see if there are promising-looking characters from other games that are still in the early stages of development.

With all of that in mind, characters with no future – in other words, ones from series with little chance of a new release going forward – are difficult to justify unless there's some special aim

I have in mind. This doesn't apply for alternate costumes or models for existing characters, though.

To put it simply, if I firmly believe a character can work, then I'm open to anything. But even if a character can stand by itself, if it overlaps with another character or doesn't create any new uniqueness as a fighter, I can't implement that.

You've talked about how you select characters, but why does the roster continue to expand with each release?

For every Smash project, as I'm working on it, I always think to myself, "This is it – the last Smash Bros.!" Of course, after the original game and Super Smash Bros. Melee, the Wii and Nintendo 3DS entries came out anyway, which makes it a bit difficult to deny the possibility of future games. The point I'm trying to make here is that I throw my body and soul into every project with the mindset that this is the last one. As a result, there have been a lot of new characters and features added. It's to the point where it's almost an impossible quantity to work with – this lineup of polished characters, each with such a litany of things to implement.

The characters get remade every game since we keep switching development studios. And since it takes work to give characters a wide dynamic range while still sticking to their backstories, this leads to more development cost per character. I think, for most games, just having a few new characters would be all one could expect.

In a word, it's relentless. Right now, I have no way to picture whether things will go as well next time.

Why are my 3DS matches running really slowly?

This issue is one I can't comment about specifically, since network speeds and stability can vary so widely from place to place. We tested out the game in assorted environments, places where you'd expect to play comfortably using some outside connection.

During a match, the game simply connects both players and sends small amounts of data between them, so if it's running slowly, that's a problem with network speeds. If you start a match on a slow network, it'll be just as slow

for your opponent as well, so I'd advise playing on as clear a network as possible for both of your sakes.

The 3DS relies on Wi-Fi, so even if your home has a great net connection, it won't work as well if the signal is weak from the 3DS to the Wi-Fi router or something is interfering with it. I'd also advise against playing while streaming something else off the net or using a tethered connection. Free hotspots might not be very well suited for gameplay, either.

Matching, of course, is nicely set up so that you can connect to other players physically near you.

What features can we expect in the Wii U version?

The Wii U version of Smash will have new stages and additional game modes. There also may be a few things you weren't expecting. There's a video on the official site called "Super Smash Bros. for Wii U: 50-Fact Extravaganza." Give it a view and you'll get to see how awesome it is for yourself.

That's all for now. See you next month. ♦





02 The Crew



05.1 Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker



05.2



09 Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris



12.2



17.2



09 Star Wars: The Old Republic - Shadow of Revan



13



30 Red vs. Blue: Season 12

December

02 New Releases

- Angry Birds Toons: Season 1/Vol 1 (DVD)
- The Crew (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)
- Kingdom Hearts HD 2.5 Remix (PS3)
- Star Trek: The Next Generation - Season 7 (Blu-ray)
- Terraria (PS4, Xbox One)

05.1 New Releases

- Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker (Wii U)
- Ultimate NES Remix (Wii U, 3DS)

05.2 Leave The Dead Alone

If there's one thing movies have taught us, you don't mess with ancient Egyptian tombs. In today's theatrical release, *The Pyramid*, a stupid group of archeologists unearth a long-lost pyramid, and go inside with handycams to document their findings. By "findings," we mean "gruesome deaths," because of course there are insidious traps, angry ghosts, and a labyrinth inside. Even so, it could be worse - they could be making another Mummy movie.

09 New Releases

- Halo 5: Guardians - Multiplayer Beta (Xbox One)
- Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Star Wars: The Old Republic - Shadow of Revan (PC)

12.1 Batman Vs. The Pharaoh

Christian Bale reprises his role as Batman in *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, opening in theaters today. Given the ancient Egyptian setting, we assume this story is based on Grant Morrison's *Return of Bruce Wayne* comic book series, which sees the Caped Crusader traveling through time. In this era, he fights the pharaoh Ramesses II, and deals with various plagues. Is it just us, or does this bear some similarities to the biblical story of Moses?

12.2 Marco! Polo!

Netflix's newest series, *Marco Polo*, debuts today, and chronicles the merchant traveller's journey into China and Asia. The first season consists of 10 episodes. Italian actor Lorenzo Richelmy stars as Marco.

12.3 Phoenix Comicon Fan Fest 14

Held in the University of Phoenix Glendale Stadium, Phoenix Comicon Fan Fest is a show dedicated to all things pop culture. In addition to a "geek prom," this show offers autograph opportunities with actors and comic writers and artists, concerts, raves, and plenty of events centered on video games. This first ever Fan Fest runs for three days.

13 From Television To Comic Book

Marvel's newest comic series,

S.H.I.E.L.D., follows Special Agent Phil Coulson and his team from the hit television series in new stories that center on some of the biggest superheroes around. The first issue hits today, featuring Spider-Man, Thor, Captain America, and Fantastic Four's Thing on the cover.

17.1 Sigh

Here we are again, announcing the arrival of another Middle-earth movie, *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies*. You know what to expect by now: hairy feet, singing dwarves, a dragon, and CG everywhere. But

because it's the third entry in the trilogy, Peter Jackson will get an Oscar for it.

17.2 The X-Files X-Mas Special

All of the *X-Files* agents come together for the first time to celebrate the holidays at Walter Skinner's house. The festivities are short lived when something unexplainable descends the chimney and enters the house. This stand-alone story hits store shelves today.

30 New Releases

- Red vs. Blue: Season 12 (DVD)





EXPLOSIONS IN THE SKY

HOURS OF EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON TIME WITH **JUST CAUSE 3's**
ACTION-PACKED MEDITERRANEAN PARADISE

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

◆ **STYLE**
1-Player Action

◆ **PUBLISHER**
Square Enix

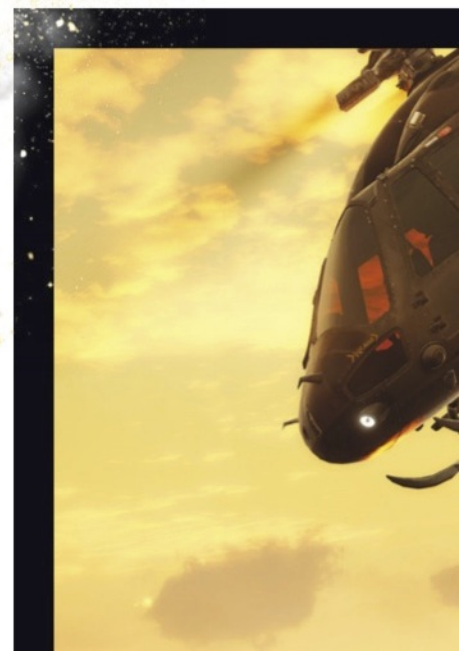
◆ **DEVELOPER**
Avalanche
Studios

◆ **RELEASE**
2015

BY **BRYAN VORE**



RICO CAN NOW WALK AROUND FREELY ON TOP OF ANY VEHICLE WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT FALLING OFF





IN 2003, CHRISTOFER SUNDBERG DREAMED OF A GAME WHERE YOU COULD PARACHUTE ONTO THE ROOF OF A SPEEDING CAR.

He was reeling from closing modest development house Rock Solid Studios with partner Linus Blomberg, and they needed a project that could score them a deal. Based off this kernel of an idea, the duo conceived a game that was all about over-the-top stunts and action. For their fateful meeting with publisher Eidos, Sundberg used a friend's empty studio space and set up several computers that weren't even plugged in. The four-page pitch document still had another company's letterhead on the back. Despite the ragtag presentation, Eidos (now owned by Square Enix) saw something in the duo and signed Avalanche Studios to its first deal.

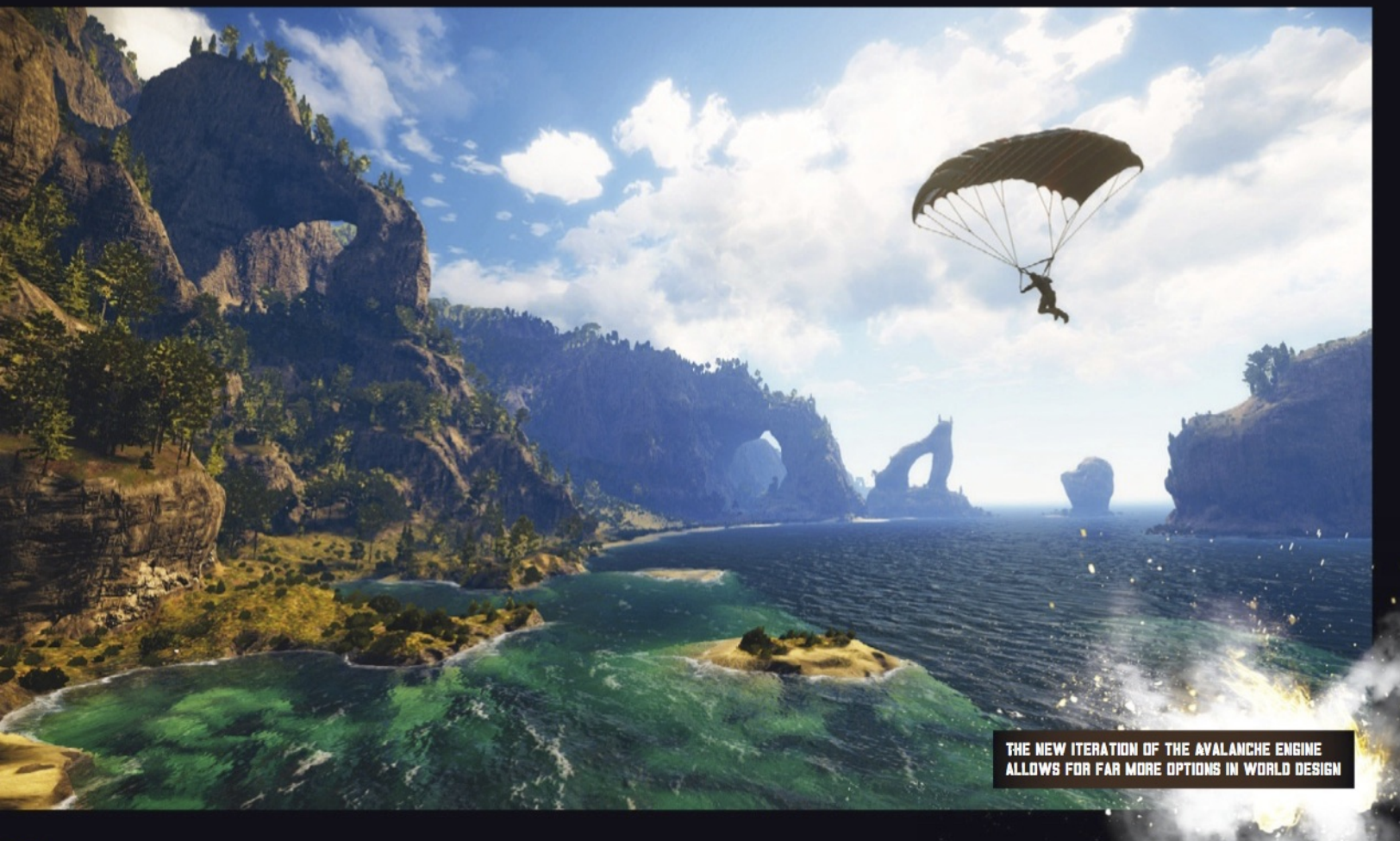
Just Cause released three years later and went on to sell over a million copies, which was impressive for a new franchise at the time. It might not have been the most polished title, but it wooed players with its wild parachute stunts, massive open world, and freeform gameplay.

Just Cause 2 exploded onto the scene in 2010 and raised the profile of the franchise, eventually selling six million copies. It amplified the action and refined the gameplay, adding the new ability to tether two objects together and encouraging players to devise creative and silly enemy takedowns. Modders and YouTube users took to the game with a passion, unlocking multiple simultaneous tethers and even adding online multiplayer. Avalanche and Square Enix were so impressed that they released multiplayer as an official mod late last year, giving the game a second wind. Still, even the most ardent fans acknowledge the sequel's many rough edges despite investing 80 to 100 hours into the inviting playground.

After four long years of waiting, Avalanche is finally ready to reveal its next chapter of open-world insanity. A team of veteran developers has gathered at the Swedish developer's new Manhattan studio, merging talent from top series like Ratchet & Clank, Assassin's Creed, Far Cry, Burnout, Infamous, and more. This fresh perspective on the franchise, along with open communication with the branch in Stockholm, promises to push Just Cause to new heights while retaining what makes it special. More tools, tethers, guns, and vehicles join vastly improved mechanics, visuals, destruction, and A.I. for the series' new-gen debut.

The dream of parachuting onto a car has long been granted to millions of players, but after playing Just Cause 3 for hours we can confirm that it's never felt this good.





THE BIRTH OF A STUDIO

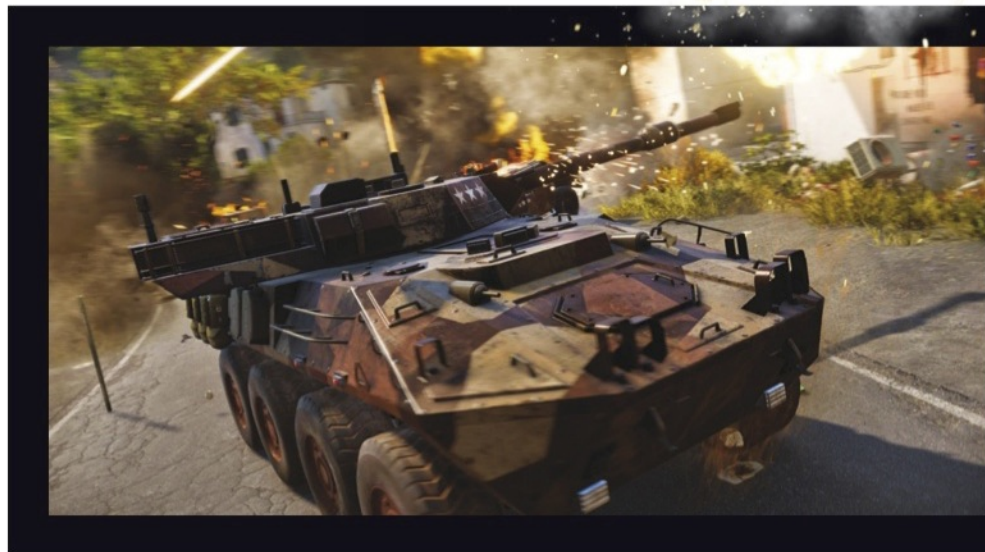
The story of Just Cause 3 begins with the expansion of Avalanche Studios from Stockholm to New York. Not long after the release of Just Cause 2 in 2010, Avalanche co-founder and chief creative officer Christofer Sundberg started talking about possibly building a new studio with longtime friend David Grijns at the helm.

"Christofer kept coming to New York very frequently and eventually I said, 'I don't get it. Why do you keep coming to New York? There's really no business to be conducted here. Nothing was really happening with Atari except bad things,'" Grijns says. "And he said 'Well, do I really need a reason to come to New York?'" Grijns decided to give him one.

Once he left his executive position at Atari, he brought up the idea of building a studio in the city. "It's something that I've been dreaming about doing for the better part of the last 20 years," Grijns says. "Since I was born and raised here it was sort of a natural inclination that I had after being in this industry for a long time doing my time on the west coast, being very unhappy about it, and wondering why this city never had a legitimate presence in the games development business. One thing led to another and eventually Christofer said, 'Show me what it's going to cost.'"

By November 2011, Avalanche announced the new studio with Grijns as general manager. The initial 10,000 square foot studio has now doubled its space by bursting through the walls into the adjacent buildings instead of splitting the now 90-person team up into multiple floors. After around a year of hiring and conceptualizing, the team decided what its first project would be.

"I've been thinking of doing Just Cause 3 since even Just Cause 2 was done," Sundberg says. "When you work on a game you have all these ideas that never end up in the game. In this day and age you can save it for DLC probably, but in this case I really wanted to do this in the third game. It was always in my head."



RICO COMES HOME

The structure for Just Cause 3 should be familiar to fans of the series. After games set in Latin America and Southeast Asia, series hero Rico Rodriguez is headed to the fictional Mediterranean republic of Medici. He grew up here but was forced to flee at a young age due to a violent military coup. The head of this occupying force, General Di Ravello, remained in power all these years since. Rico returns at the behest of friends, only to see the near complete destruction of the rebel forces in



the area. Di Ravello touts this victory as an example of his power and threatens the rest of the world in the process. Rico decides to employ his unique set of dictator-crushing skills to rally the freedom fighters, take back territory, and liberate his homeland.

Just Cause 3 takes place in some vague time after the first two games. "We don't delve too deeply into the last game," says game director Roland Lesterlin. "If you're really into the story from the last two games you will find lots of references, but we want to make sure you don't need to have played Just Cause 1 or 2 to enjoy Just Cause 3." He hints that a few familiar faces from the old games might appear alongside plenty of new characters, but what about the powerful Agency that Rico works for?

"They are involved," Lesterlin says. "The way the Agency has worked in the last two games is they tend to have their fingers on lots of sides of stuff. They're not taking any particular side in the battle. They're taking the most influential side. There are some fun twists in there that will come out." He notes that the Agency wasn't too pleased when Rico decided to nuke the oil fields off of Panau to halt the interest from aggressive world powers.

Even though the setup sounds grim, Sundberg assures the game still has Just Cause's signature light tone. "It's a fine balance between being just outright stupid and fun, and I think Just Cause is always balancing on that very fine line," he says. "We never tip over to being too serious or being just stupid. We're focusing more on Rico in this game than we've done before so players can get to know him a little bit more. With that said, it's not a story-driven game. The sandbox always comes first."

ENTER SANDBOX

Medici is around the same size as Just Cause 2's massive 400 square mile map, and it's built around the team's central goal. "From the very beginning we set a vision for the game: We want to push the verticality in combat, in gameplay, in navigation, in world design; that is the center of the bull's-eye for us," Lesterlin says. "Just Cause shines when you

get the player to be comfortable being in the air. We spent a lot of time talking about what is it that encourages a player to be vertical, to be creative."

Medici is inspired by the southern coast of Italy, Sicily, Corsica, Malta, and Greece. The beautiful scenery and stunning seaside cliffs provide the ideal playground for Rico's air-friendly navigation.

We begin the playable demo in the town of Surpicco. The sunny coastal village is surrounded by colorful fields of lavender and sunflowers. It would be a quaint vacation spot if not for the occupying military forces. My mission is to liberate the town, but first I experiment with the new controls. However fondly you may remember the Just Cause 2 mechanics, if you go back to them today they haven't aged well. Just Cause 3 seeks to smooth everything out so that players can start pulling off wild stunts as soon as possible.

A NEW WORLD

After our hands-on gameplay demo, Avalanche took the controls and accessed a developer-only free flying camera to provide a look at the greater scope of the world. We soared over a sparkling blue ocean, huge land masses containing cities, small islands, towering mountains (one had a skull on the side of it), a nuclear cooling tower, and more.

One base on a small island is defended heavily up top, but then we flew down the cliff to the water and found a secret cave you can enter by boat. Another area featured two islands connected by a tall white bridge. After a barrage of rockets from a helicopter, the structure crumbles into the water below. This seems like it would be the ideal way to take down an entire convoy or lose a group of pursuers.

Avalanche cites this versatile terrain system as the biggest improvement to their internal engine for new-gen systems. The previous heightmap system only allowed a top layer of terrain to be represented. This is like playing around on the bumps and valleys of a giant blanket. The new volumetric terrain adds more realistic, 3D formations. "What that allows us to do is really enhance the verticality of the game," says technical director Andrew Yount. "It gives us the ability to do caves, tunnels, overhangs, vertical cliffs, and layer different aspects of terrain so that you can have bases that descend down into the earth, or spires that we can put up and over interesting areas of the world."

Aiming the grapple no longer has to be pixel perfect. The grapple cursor sticks to the closest building edge even if you're aiming your primary reticle at the sky slightly above. Now you can run toward a building, grapple, and keep holding the left stick to pop up on the roof in one smooth motion. I grapple and tap the A button on the Xbox One controller to launch the parachute and immediately sense the difference. It feels far more stable and easy to steer. You can move faster and remain aloft by grappling to the ground or other structures and slinging yourself forward.

After a little warm up, I initiate combat. I target an enemy policeman and tap the grapple button. In the past, you would always reel in except when targeting enemies. In that case you'd yank them to you. This created inconsistency in the controls, and if a guy moved at the last second you'd pull yourself right into the middle of a dangerous situation. Rico now reels himself and kicks the guy in the chest. You can always count on what's going to happen and even shoot at enemies mid-reel before landing the kick.

Occupied towns are covered in Di Ravello's propaganda. Billboards, loudspeakers, and video projectors join fuel tanks and SAM sites as Chaos objects you must destroy to claim the territory and progress in the game. I follow the sound of the speakers and plant C4 on it. These sticky explosives can't be thrown anymore, but you now have an infinite supply of them and can plant up to five at once. No more emptying wimpy pistol rounds into fuel tanks when you run out.

As enemies pour in, I blast them with a submachine gun. The gunplay feels strong right out of the gate instead of the peashooters you started with before. Aiming is much tighter and bullets feel like they have more of an impact. This combined with the improved parachute mean that I was flying and shooting at enemies in no time.

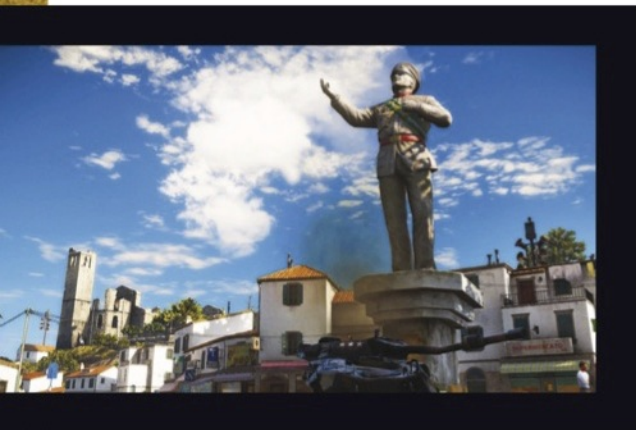
When Rico takes damage, the outer edges of the screen turns red and the colors desaturate (except for the enemies). This ensures that the closer you are to death the more visible the threats become. Health regenerates completely over time, so there is no need to search out those irritating health packs. The evade roll was one way to escape danger in the past, but it's not in the build I played. Not that I'm complaining. It was a pain to continuously mash the right bumper as a hail of bullets tracked your every move. "[The evade roll] wasn't quite what we were looking for, but it may come back," says senior system designer Joe Ishikura. "But things like crouch, why was there a crouch in Just Cause 2? It wasn't that fun. It was a mechanic where you stood still. One thing we don't want players to do in Just Cause is stand still."

BEATING THE HEAT

After raising a ruckus for a bit, reinforcements show up and the Heat level keeps rising. As in most games, you can get the hell out of there and lie low until things die down. But Avalanche has a more offensive option as well. "Rico's not really a run away sort of guy, so we put in another system that lets you beat Heat," Lesterlin says. A countdown icon appears onscreen showing one of the enemies calling reinforcements. If you take out that soldier, it will halt further aggression, allowing you to take out all remaining forces and end the Heat cycle.

A militia-controlled police station sits atop a nearby hill. Special stripes on the wall surrounding it indicate that it's destructible. I toss a grenade and it creates a nice new doorway for me to enter. Red fuel tanks grab my attention and I blast them with my SMG. Instead of using a health bar for an inanimate object like last time, the tank shows damage as you shoot it. Bullet holes with small flames bursting out appear exactly where I shoot. When I've traced a few flaming dotted lines across the shell it explodes, sending flaming debris flying everywhere.

I shoot some guys hanging out by the main entrance and run over to a call station on the wall. I hit the button to open the gate for a group of rebels. These guys don't kill everyone for you, but they will take some of the focus off you so you're free to try out creative attacks like raining a bunch of rooftop red barrels onto the SWAT team below.





TOP SHELF TEAM

The New York studio is comprised of Just Cause fans from a diverse range of backgrounds. "I really wanted the game to be developed by a new team to get that fresh take on the IP," explains Avalanche Studios co-founder and chief creative officer Christopher Sundberg. "Everyone in Stockholm that worked on Just Cause 2 is being very supportive and always shares the success of the Just Cause 3 team. We tend to circulate teams quite a lot. It was a necessary step for the franchise as well." Here are some of the varied resumes.



ROLAND LESTERLIN, GAME DIRECTOR

This is Lesterlin's first directing job. He developed game-like simulations for the military and most recently worked on the publishing side at Atari for games like *Champions Online* and *Star Trek Online* with New York office general manager David Grijs.



ANDREW YOUNT, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

Yount worked at Insomniac Games for eight years as a lead gameplay programmer on six *Ratchet & Clank* games and the *Resistance* trilogy.



ZACH SCHLAPPI, ART DIRECTOR

Schlappi got his start as a lighting technician on the 2002 movie *Ice Age*. He since followed it up with work on the *Medal of Honor* series and *Far Cry 2* and *3*.



FRANCESCO ANTOLINI, PRINCIPAL DESIGNER

Antolini made a name for himself designing gameplay and missions for *Assassin's Creed III* and *Brotherhood*.



JOE ISHIKURA, SENIOR SYSTEM DESIGNER

Ishikura comes from *Sucker Punch*, where he worked on *Infamous 1* and *2*.



HAMISH YOUNG, SENIOR VEHICLE DESIGNER

Young started as a programmer on the first *Burnout* game and worked his way up to technical director on *Burnout Revenge*. He moved to producing for *Burnout Paradise* and *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit*. His final project at the company was director for *NFS: Most Wanted* (2012). Criterion programming colleague Richard Parr also joined Avalanche.



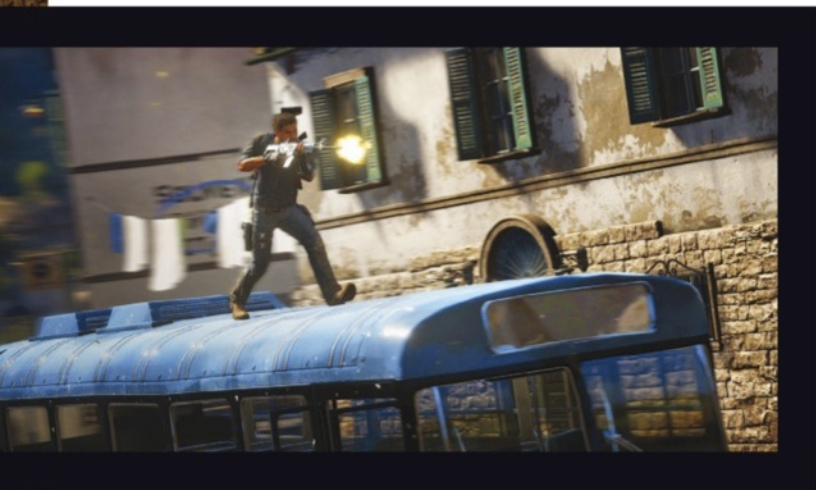
ALEX CROWHURST, PRINCIPAL ANIMATOR

Crowhurst worked as an animator on *Heavenly Sword* and the *TimeSplitters* series.



PER HUGOSON, PRINCIPAL PROGRAMMER

Hugoson worked on both previous *Just Cause* games and provided DICE some programming help on *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*.

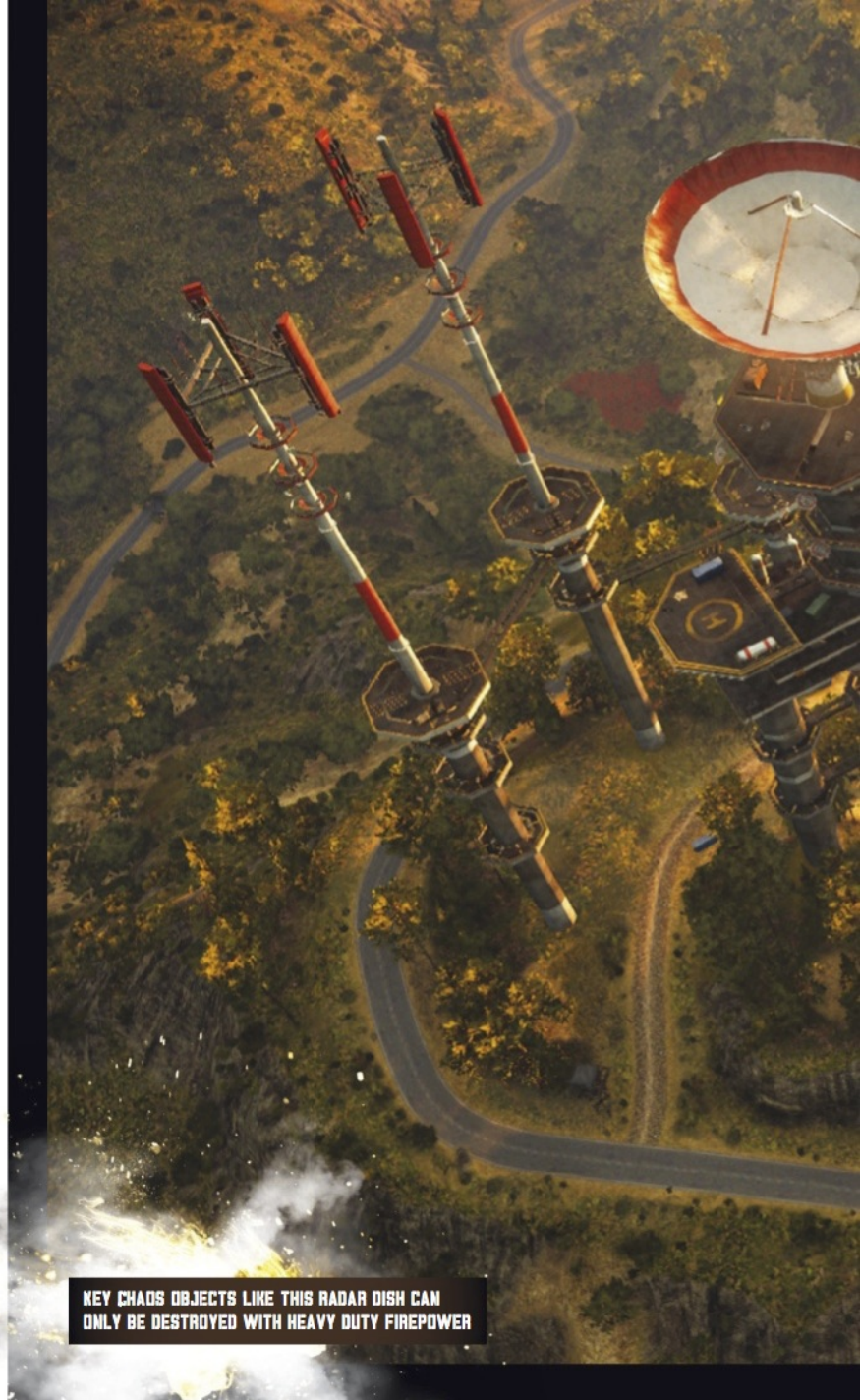


A helicopter swoops in to back up the base and I grapple up to it. You have the option of immediately entering the cockpit and booting the pilot without dealing with an outdated quicktime button press sequence. If you do nothing, Rico hangs from under the chopper and can choose to plant C4, fall away, and detonate it in mid-air. I couldn't pass up the chance to fly it around so I left it intact. I fired the machine guns at remaining enemies, fuel tanks, and propaganda. A handy checklist on the left edge of the screen keeps track of all the Chaos objects you've destroyed and what remains. It's far more informative than the previous bland percentage counter. It appears I'm still missing one big item: a towering statue of Di Ravello.

I could have simply shot it up, but as fans know there's something more satisfying about ripping these dictator statues down with a tether. I land and hook one end of the tether to his face and shoot the other at the ground. When I hit the left trigger, the line tightens up and tears the statue down. Advanced destruction technology and physics ensure it crumbles in different ways every time, though Avalanche purposely makes the head indestructible so players can hang it from helicopters and use it as a wrecking ball.

This new remote tether-retracting mechanic opens up all kinds of possibilities. Now you don't always have to tether heavy objects to trucks to move them around. You could attach a guy on the ground to the top of a building, retract the tether, and hit 'A' to cut the line at just the right time to slingshot him hundreds of feet away. It gets the mind spinning even more when you consider that you can now unlock multiple tethers to use at the same time. I played around with three at once, but there's a chance the final game could have more. Upgrades boost tether strength and retract power to the point that you can eventually attach a bus to gates or explosive objects and quickly pull it into the structures like a massive makeshift battering ram.

Once the final Chaos item is destroyed rebels come to claim Surpicco as their own. These liberated towns now have several benefits to Rico. He can retreat to them to help dissipate heat, or he can bring any civilian vehicle to a chop shop and save it for the new rebel drop system. Instead of having to pay for the black market drops every time like in *Just Cause 2*, rebels will drop whatever vehicle you want from your collection at no cost (cooldown times apply so you can't drop 100 cars in a row). Any garage upgrades you unlock can be applied to essentially any vehicle. It's even possible to deck out a puttering old tractor with nitrous boosts. If you conquer the more imposing military bases, the rebels earn better military vehicles when you call them in.



KEY CHAOS OBJECTS LIKE THIS RADAR DISH CAN ONLY BE DESTROYED WITH HEAVY DUTY FIREPOWER

They start with junky pickup trucks and eventually get armored jeeps, tanks, helicopters, and more.

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

I start up a street race to see how the challenges work and get a sense of vehicle handling. A sports car sits at the starting line for convenience, but players can call in any vehicle from their rebel drop if they'd like for the race. The timer starts as soon as you cross the first gate. The car demonstrates quick acceleration and tight handling as I weave through the green rolling hills. The smooth, arcadey driving comes as no surprise when you find out that Avalanche recruited two longtime veterans of Criterion's *Burnout* series.

"It's not a hardcore sim by any stretch of the imagination, but everything behaves in a realistically believable way," senior vehicle designer Hamish Young says. "We're trying to make it so that everything feels right for what it is. You get a sense of weight. You get a sense of speed. But still make it like every vehicle has a purpose and can really be fun to play. Just because you're in an old flatbed truck doesn't mean you can't have fun playing it even if it's not as fast as the racing car."

Before each race you can see your friends' times to beat and in the



final game you can see their ghosts driving alongside you. Avalanche declined to elaborate, but a one-to-five gear rating appears to contribute to vehicle upgrades.

In a similar vein, Rico can also compete wingsuit challenges. In the spirit of *Pilotwings*, I jump out of a helicopter at a mountain peak through a series of rings. Smaller red circles within offer a score bonus for taking higher risks like buzzing pine trees or slipping through a narrow opening between some rocks. If you wipe out, it's easy to restart with much faster loads than in previous games. If you decide you'd rather go do something else instead of perfecting the run you still get gear credits in proportion to how far you made it.

The wingsuit isn't only for special challenges. This speedy new way to get around can be used just as easily as the parachute at any point in the game with a tap of the Y button during a reel in. It works best when you're travelling from a high elevation to a lower one, but you can still engage it on flat ground by first using the parachute to gain some lift off of buildings first. The trick to effective wingsuit piloting is to not crank too far back and risk stalling out or push too far down and wind up face down in the dirt. As with the parachute, you can slingshot grapple along the ground to gain even more speed.



Lesterlin wanted to introduce a wingsuit from the very beginning of development, but it was tricky to get the right feel. "The first version of the wingsuit sounded really good on paper, but it really didn't fit what our game was about," Ishikura says. "You hit a button and it was kind of like being a Transformer. You felt like you were playing a different game. All of a sudden you were in flying mode and you couldn't do anything else." He says it originally controlled more like a jetfighter than the glider feel it has now. "Now it feels like it's much more a part of the process, almost one of those 'I can't believe Just Cause 2 didn't already have a wingsuit.'"

TEAR IT ALL DOWN

I put all of Rico's new skills to the test at Vigilator Nord, a military base on the coast with a massive radar array. I scan the gate with my sniper rifle and see one of the enemies posted at a turret. I take him out, grapple to his location, and detach the minigun from its base. This infinite ammo special weapon is just as overpowered as before, now with the added ability to walk and shoot at the same time, albeit slowly. Once the outer checkpoint is clear, I drop the minigun and head toward the radar dishes.

A helicopter opens fire from above so I grapple up and take it over. I don't get to enjoy the view for long as multiple SAM sites send tracking missiles my way. I bail out and parachute to the nearest offender. I could simply blow the SAM site up with C4, but with several helicopters still on the attack it's a better play to use the new reprogramming feature. After holding a button and filling an onscreen meter, the SAMs start targeting unfriendly fliers that are after you instead. With all the mayhem around the core of the base, I can't pull it off and it eventually blows up. No problem. I spot another hundreds of feet down on the docks below.

I jump over the railing and engage the wingsuit, gliding quickly over clear blue ocean and nail the landing on the docks. I take out the lone guard and reprogram the SAM site. As if on cue, a helicopter flies in and immediately takes a pounding. Soon it's just a heap of flaming wreckage sinking into the sea.

I take a seat in a nearby flak cannon and target the radar spires surrounding the main dish. This attracts a little too much attention and I get overwhelmed. Fortunately, when you die trying to take over a military base now you respawn right outside of it instead of getting sent all the way back to a liberated base and having to hoof it back.

This time around I grapple up into a parachute and rain down bullets and grenades on the enemies up near the main radar array. Once the coast is clear, I look up at the dish. It's absolutely huge up close and is covered in a strange hex pattern. This indicates that the Chaos object in question cannot be destroyed with normal guns; explosives or heavy-duty firepower is required. I look around and find a flak cannon that should do the trick, but it's hidden in an odd spot without a good angle on the dish. Fortunately, it's not bolted down so I tether it to a spot on the ground and retract to drag it to a more ideal area. My mind runs wild thinking of all the places I could transport the cannon with it tethered to a helicopter, but first I must complete the job at hand.

I aim at the dish and start to knock chunks off the outer edge.

MODS & MULTIPLAYER

Just Cause 2's huge world and stunt-based mechanics struck a chord with modders, YouTubers, and machinima creators. Now these creative users are inspiring the creators of their favorite game. Seeing players use multiple tethers in interesting and fun ways proved to Avalanche that it was worth the investment to officially include this feature in Just Cause 3.

"It's kind of silly to not pay attention to all the amazing things that this community's doing," says senior system designer Joe Ishikura. "I don't know as much nowadays, but some of the [early] missions we were looking at were inspired by some of those situations that people created because those situations were cooler than anything that we could have thought of. It was really eye-opening."

The most famous mod of all added multiplayer to the game. Avalanche and Square Enix released the mod officially late last year. "The mod is absolutely fantastic. We owe those guys a lot," says Avalanche co-founder and chief creative officer Christofer Sundberg. "They've actually supported the game and helped it stay alive for so many years after the game was released. It's so fun watching the game being played when you have hundreds of players."

Despite the popularity of multiplayer, Just Cause 3 is single player only. "We'll continue to support the multiplayer mod, but for us the single-player experience is what we're focusing on right now," Sundberg says. "Maybe sometime down the line we'll take Rico into the world of multiplayer, but right now it's the sandbox experience."

After enough damage, the game awards Chaos for fully destroying it and I'm feeling quite satisfied. Then I notice that all of the debris is crumbling right toward me. I get out of the cannon and grapple to safety just in time. I look back and my precious cannon is completely buried under a huge pile of wreckage. It's been a great day.

INTO THE WILD

Just Cause 3 still has plenty of unknown factors. We haven't seen any cutscenes to show the tone of the characters, and we never played an actual story mission. But some unknowns can be a good thing. From what we've played, the mechanics provide an excellent foundation while leaving the rest open for players to come up with their own creative solutions and experiments in the world. Rigorous playtesting has provided only a small preview of what the public will do once it's out in the wild.

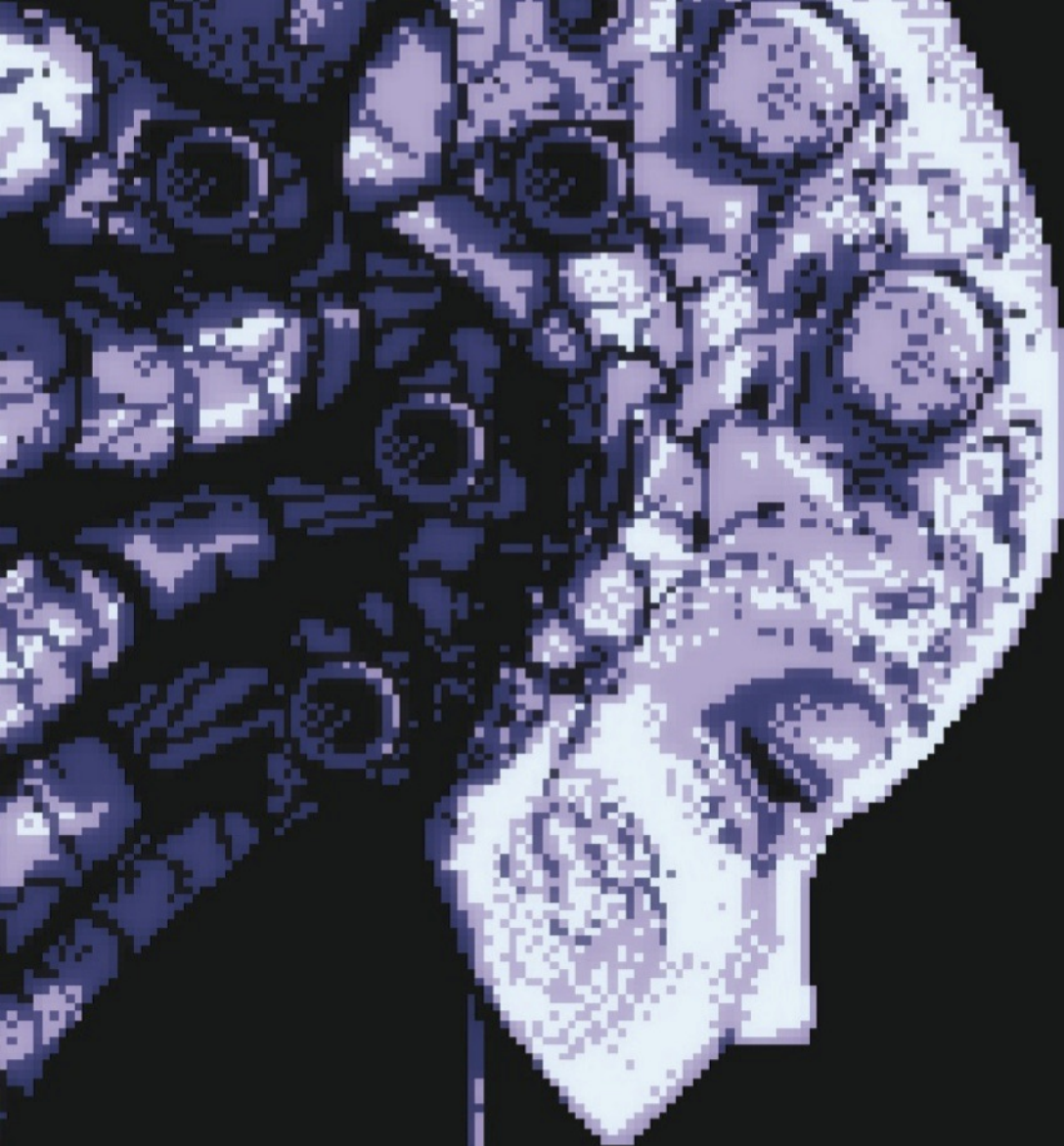
"They come up with cool solutions to things and cool ideas about how to use stuff, and that's the great thing about emergent gameplay," Young says. "We don't actually know what our players are necessarily going to do with all of this. That's always a surprise to us." ♦

Check out an entire month's worth of Just Cause 3 coverage including video interviews, further details on the world and systems, and more at gameinformer.com/justcause3





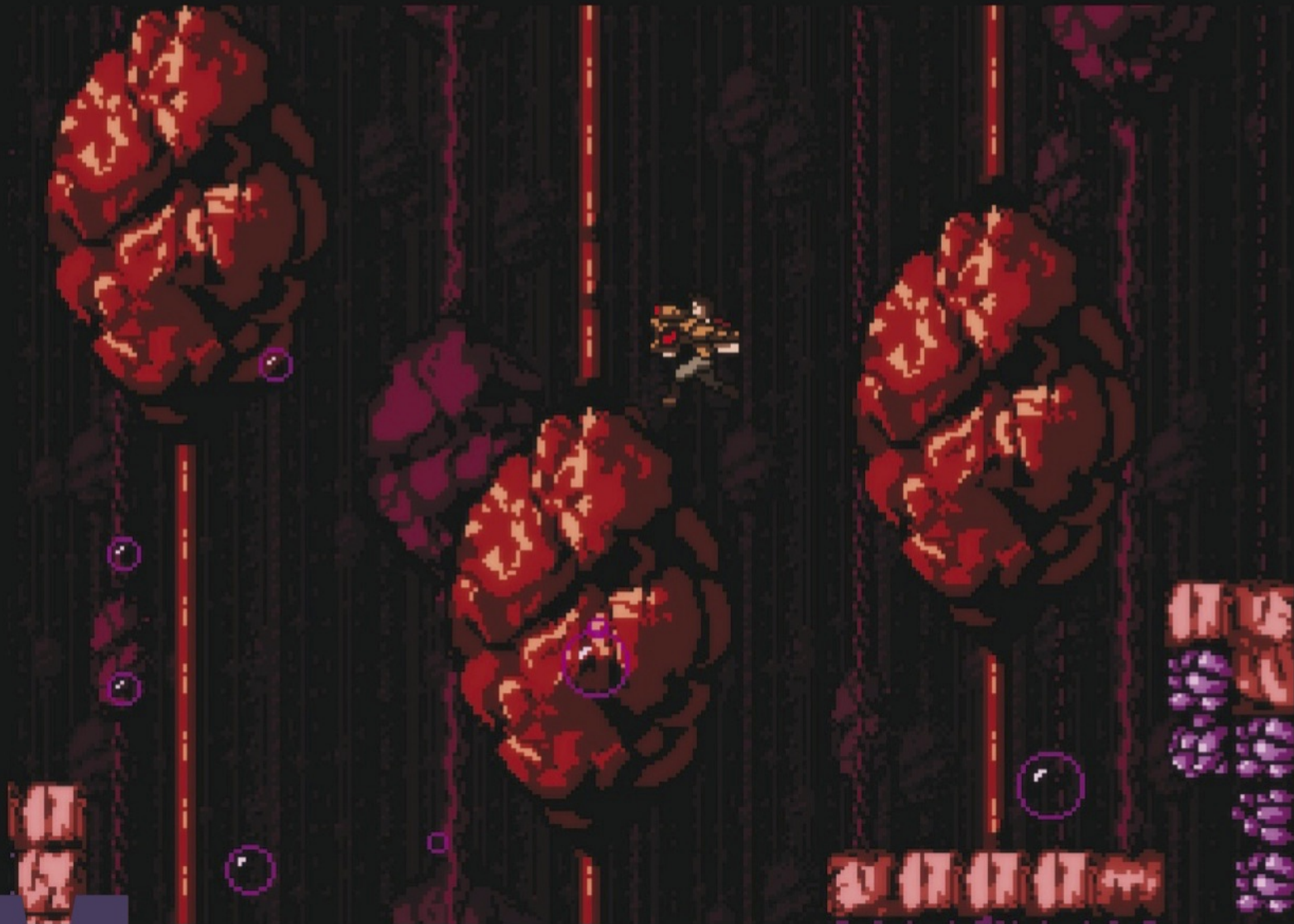
**MULTIPLE TETHERS OPEN UP ALL SORTS
OF NEW RIDICULOUS POSSIBILITIES**



SOLITARY JOURNEY

**AXIOM VERGE IS ONE OF THE HOTTEST INDIE GAMES ON THE HORIZON, AND IT'S ONLY
TAKEN DESIGNER TOM HAPP FIVE YEARS TO CREATE**

▀ PLATFORM PS4, Vita, PC ▀ STYLE 1-Player Action ▀ PUBLISHER Sony Computer Entertainment ▀ DEVELOPER Tom Happ ▀ RELEASE 2015



Many artists find comfort in collaboration. Where one designer is weak, another is strong. Even the leanest indie studios often seek help, having a friend assist with programming, outsourcing the art to a third party, or hiring a professional musician for the soundtrack. Few designers are talented enough – or crazy enough – to attempt to create a full game from scratch entirely on their own.

Tom Happ is that kind of crazy. Inspired by some of the best 8- and 16-bit games from his childhood, this designer has toiled tirelessly for nearly half a decade, creating the code, the sound, the art, and the story for *Axiom Verge*. Sacrificing sleep, personal relationships, and career security, Happ has laid it all on the line to prove that he has what it takes to make a complete game.

by Ben Reeves

THE ACCIDENTAL DESIGNER

Happ originally tried to major in physics, but realized he wanted to make games after he was inadvertently enrolled in a computer science course in college. The budding designer switched his major to computer programming, but after graduation Happ had little luck finding a game programming position, so he joined a graduate program for computer animation. Ironically, after spending all this time learning to animate, Happ's first industry job came as a programmer for Red Eye Studios.

The added schooling had the unintended benefit of giving Happ a more holistic understanding of the game development process. As both a programmer and an animator, Happ understood how the assorted elements of a game came together during development. After nearly 10 years in the industry, working on titles like *Crash Nitro Kart*, *NFL Street 3*, and *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 09*, Happ felt a growing itch to create a game entirely on his own. He knew he had the talent; all he needed was the dedication and the time.

Happ started collecting his thoughts on paper in 2010 – not in words as much as

in form. "I actually created 90 percent of the art assets for *Axiom Verge* before I'd ever written a line of code," Happ says. "I knew I'd get distracted later on if, while coding, I had to switch context and start drawing again."

A child of the '80s, Happ wanted to create a game that paid homage to many of his favorite games from the 8- and 16-bit era classics. He dreamed of a game that would mash the combat of *Contra*, the grapple mechanic from *Bionic Commando*, the vehicle sequences from *Blaster Master*, and the iconic discarmor weapon from *Rygar* into one super game.

As development continued and ideas coalesced into code, the game started to take on its own personality. "As I drew the maps it started to look more like the original *Metroid*," Happ says. "I really liked the idea of tiled environments that actually looked like tiles. I decided the main weapon would be more versatile as a firearm rather than melee, and I started to incorporate a variety of weapons like what you have in shoot 'em ups." Then there were the meta elements, which Happ kept coming back to, such as the idea of letting players intentionally glitch their game.

BOSSING AROUND

Axiom Verge has nine total bosses scattered across its labyrinthine world. Developer Tom Happ has worked to ensure that these battles are capstones to all the work players have done upgrading their character up to that point. Each boss offers up a unique challenge. Using the game's second boss, Telal, we go through the basic steps Happ takes to bring each of these monstrous villains to life.

STEP ONE – SKETCH: In almost all cases, Happ starts with a sketch. "A lot of my best – or at least, most interesting – work seems to happen when I'm absent-mindedly doodling, rather than sitting down with high-quality paper and pencil trying to pressure myself into making an amazing image," he says. "Whenever I have spare time, I just doodle and the best ones become monsters or bosses in the game."

STEP TWO – SCAN: After doing some breakout studies and settling on a final design, Happ takes his sketches and scans them into his computer then starts to pixelate them. Smaller enemies don't scale down well, so Happ often has to re-draw them digitally after the scan.

STEP THREE – PALLETIZE: Axiom Verge's color palette is somewhere between 8- and 16-bit. To help give the game a classic look and feel, Happ limits each individual body part to three colors (in addition to black and transparent). Sometimes, Happ uses Photoshop to smooth out the gradients between pixels, but he's careful not to make everything too smooth.

STEP FOUR – CLEANUP, TILING: After first breaking a scanned image into pixels, there are usually a lot of jagged edges, so Happ has to work by hand to manually clean up each scan. "Many classic games used tiled sprites to get around memory limitations," Happ says. "In order to obtain the look of an 8- or 16-bit era game, I made generous use of tiles. Any section of a creature that looks similar are repeated using 8x8 tile patterns."

STEP FIVE – SEPARATING LAYERS: Smaller bosses, such as Axiom Verge's first boss Xedur, are tiny enough that they can be single animated sprites. However, enemies like Telal are so big that they need to be drawn piecemeal. Happ separates these larger creatures into sections, which helps give Axiom Verge the "cutout" aesthetic of bosses like those in *Contra 3*, a game that contains many of Happ's favorite SNES boss battles. Initially, at this point Happ decided to recolor and design Telal and sent him back to step three.

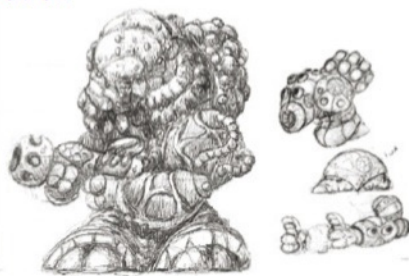
STEP SIX – ANIMATING THE PARTS: A lot of Axiom Verge's bosses have pulsating, writhing body parts that are continually moving regardless of the creature's overall pose. Happ breaks these into separate animations using an animation graphics editor called GraphicsGale.

STEP SEVEN – ANIMATING THE BODY: Once all the parts are ready, Happ brings them into a different animation program, called Anime Studio, to make the creature move. Happ likes this program because it outputs scripts in a way that his game engine can understand, so there is rarely need for further animation work once the boss is in the game. Collision boxes and muzzles (which designate where the boss can fire from) are also added at this point.

STEP EIGHT – CODING THE BOSS: "This is the most complex step in the whole process," Happ says. "Because now I have to put together the creature's A.I., some metadata with the boss's combat statistics, animation, and sound effects into a coherent whole. Bosses are typically so unique and specialized that I can't reuse a lot of code from other parts of the game."

STEP NINE – TESTING: Finally, Happ has to make sure that his creatures are as fun to fight as he hoped they would be when he designed them. Often a boss needs to be reconfigured when it gets to this point. For example, Gir-tab is a giant scorpion who is very agile, but partway through testing the creature, Happ realized that it would need to be able to jump, and he had to reprogram the boss's animation and A.I.

STEP ONE



STEP TWO



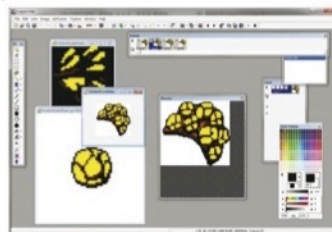
STEP THREE



STEP FIVE



STEP SIX



STEP SEVEN



STEP NINE



BUGGING OUT

Happ has always loved glitches. They seemed like windows into a secret world; ways for a player to skip past the fenced-off confines of a designer's world and step into an unexplored country of computer code. What if he could make a game that allowed users to glitch their game at will?

Working meticulously, Happ has designed *Axiom Verge* to "glitch" on purpose. As players wander through his world they slowly begin to notice areas that look "wrong" – pieces of the environment that flicker – mangled or corrupted tiles that look like garbage code. These are an important element of the game. About a fifth of the way through *Axiom Verge*, players recover a tool called the Address Disruptor, which allows them to either clean up these areas or make them worse.

The Address Disruptor also affects enemies. For example, the Address Disruptor turns one enemy into a platform, allowing players to reach new areas. Other glitches might cause the code within a wall to breakdown, letting a player phase through into another room. Happ has even added a Game Genie-like passcode system that lets players experiment with different passwords that might create oddball effects or even break the game.

Happ wouldn't explain the ultimate cause of all this glitching, but it likely plays into *Axiom Verge*'s plot in some significant ways. "When I started dreaming about the project, I had been thinking about the nature of reality; how all physical laws are basically a set of rules for operating on data, and how the general consensus is that our universe is comprised of a lattice of discrete connected points and operates like a cellular automata," Happ says. "I wanted to make a game with that as a backdrop."

The opening of *Axiom Verge* follows a

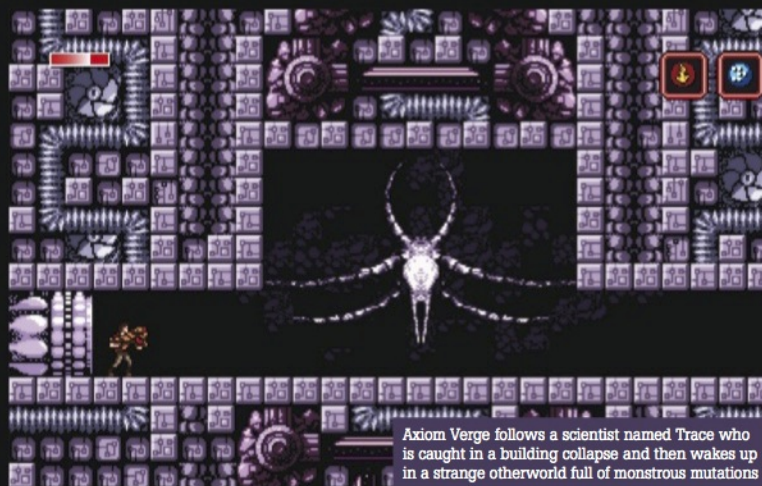
scientist named Trace who is caught in a building collapse before "waking up" in a strange otherworld. The environment around him looks futuristic yet old. Trace can see remnants of a human civilization, but no one is currently alive to inhabit them. The only other characters he encounters are monstrous mutations that may have once been people, but now only seem interested in tearing into Trace's face. If Trace wants to figure out the nature of this alien landscape – as well as how he got there – he will need some impressive firepower.

Fortunately, the world of *Axiom Verge* has firepower in spades. As players explore Axiom's Metroid-like maps, they can collect over 20 weapons and 60 other items and power ups, giving Trace a range of destructive tools. For example, the Multi-Disruptor is a spread-shot gun that annihilates enemies at close range, the Kilver chain-lightning gun is useful for clearing the screen of smaller enemies, and another weapon hugs terrain and can wrap around corners to whack enemies before they have a chance to get a bead on Trace.

"My favorite is the Ion Beam," Happ says. "It's basically a laser, but it's a hell of a lot of fun to point at destructible tiles and blow up a whole bunch at once."

The power nodes scattered through the world increase a weapon's damage, while range nodes increase how much ground a projectile covers. Size nodes increase the projectile size, and in turn offer up greater damage coverage.

Weapons are really only programs that run on Trace's main gun – an arthropod-like firearm – so the upgrades extend to every weapon Trace collects, meaning all weapons level up at the same time. As players explore Axiom's haunting environments, they'll also want to explore their arsenal – switching back and forth between weapon programs throughout the game depending on the situation.



Axiom Verge follows a scientist named Trace who is caught in a building collapse and then wakes up in a strange otherworld full of monstrous mutations

THE HOME STRETCH

For over four years, *Axiom Verge* has been Tom Happ's labor of love – an evening and weekend hobby that has slowly taken shape into a game. By late 2013, Happ's hobby project had started to attract some of the biggest publishers in the industry. Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft all met with Happ to get a better look at the game, he ultimately shook hands with Sony, who awarded *Axiom Verge* an indie pub fund scholarship in early 2014. This scholarship guarantees Happ Sony's marketing support, as well as an advance on royalties once the title ships to PS4, Vita, and PC later next year.

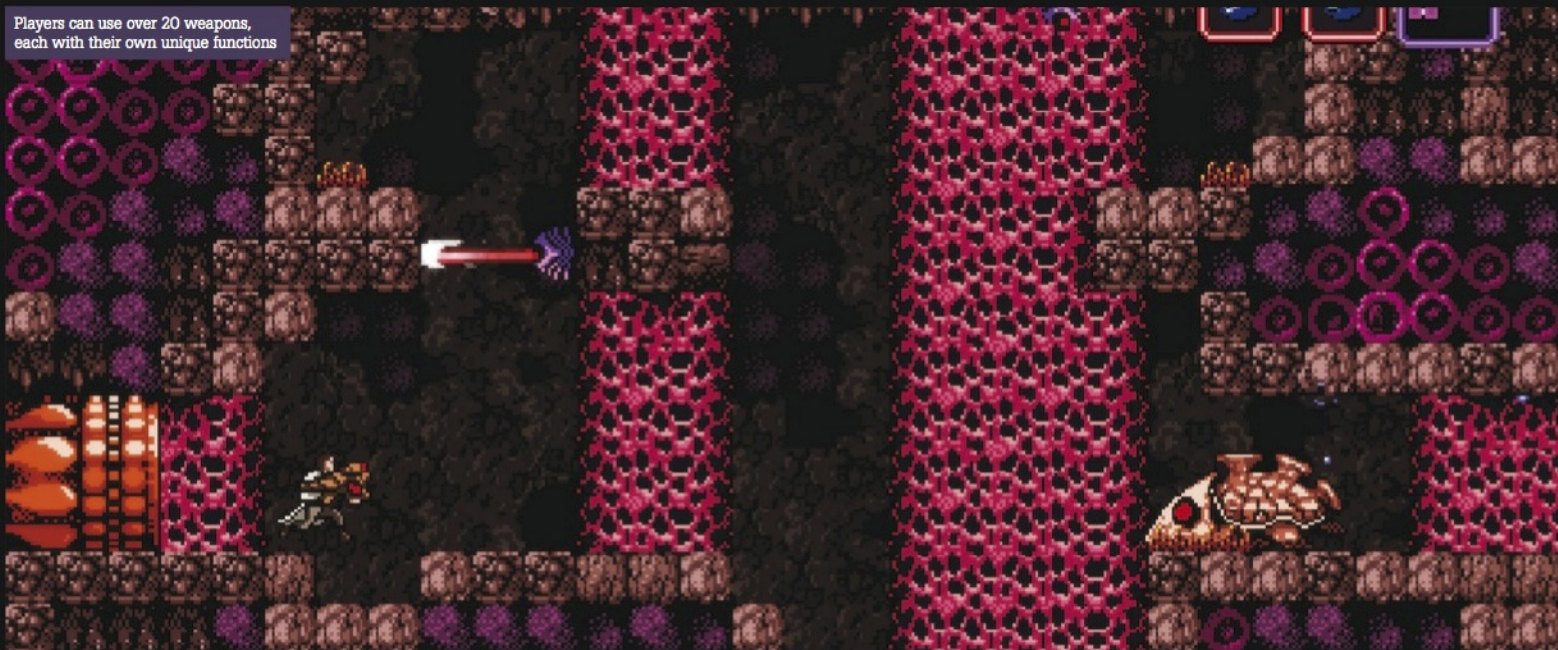
"I'd intended to get a business loan and just go for it full time from there, but it turns out the interest rates on this kind of thing are huge, and as I talked with other indies, I found out that the loan application process would take months, which I didn't have," Happ says. "So I switched to working two days a week at my former job to help cover insurance and some bills. Then the other five days

I work on *Axiom Verge*. Unfortunately that adds up to seven days a week with no rest."

The added toil has taken its toll on Happ's mental and emotional health, but the extra focus on *Axiom Verge* has been valuable. Over the course of the last eight months, Happ has made more progress on the game than he did during the first four years of development. Which is saying a lot, because when Sony awarded Happ its indie pub fund scholarship, the game already looked like one of the most promising titles on the horizon.

Not only does *Axiom Verge* play like many of the classics it seeks to emulate, but its fast and furious action, array of creative weapons, and imaginative use of glitching create a genuinely new experience. Fans of 8- and 16-bit classics should hope that nothing unfortunate happens to *Axiom Verge*'s polymath designer before its 2015 release, because if Tom Happ gets sick, goes on vacation, or becomes obsessed with some passing fancy, then all work on *Axiom Verge* grinds to a halt. ♦

Players can use over 20 weapons, each with their own unique functions



Grand Theft Auto V

New-gen GTA V is much more than just a port

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

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

» **Publisher**
Rockstar Games

» **Developer**
Rockstar North

» **Release**
November 18
(PS4, Xbox One),
January 27 (PC)

Rockstar caused a stir at this year's E3 with the announcement that its blockbuster open-world game, Grand Theft Auto V, would be coming to PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC. As the release of the console versions draws near, the company has revealed some new – and surprising – information about the game.

The company has never been known for doing quick and easy ports; this reimagining of GTA V is no different. This version has all the technical improvements you'd expect: 1080p resolution, improved draw distances, high-res textures, greater pedestrian density, new animals and fur textures, improved particle effects, 100 more songs and new talk radio segments, plus thousands of new animations. The game

even features some console-specific control options like using the DualShock 4's touchpad for weapon switching or haptic feedback on the Xbox One's triggers.

To put it simply, this is the best-looking Grand Theft Auto ever made. However, Rockstar North also has a new feature up its sleeve that lets you play GTA in a brand new way.

For the first time, you can play GTA with a first-person perspective for the entire game. Looking for something that would distinguish this version from previous iterations, Rockstar North has crafted a new first-person view that works for running, shooting, climbing, driving, parachuting, and anything else you might want to do.

Taking a game from third-person to first-person

isn't as easy as switching the camera. This is a painstaking process; Rockstar North has added 3,000 new animations for weapon interactions alone. Even the basic character movement had to be tweaked to make it feel better in first-person and allow for better strafing.

The team wants to ensure that players can play the game the way they want, and have added a slew of new settings related to first-person views. You can play the game entirely in first-person, or set it so certain parts of the game are in first-person and others in third-person. For example, Rockstar expects that many might want to set the options so the driving segments are in first-person while on-foot action is in third-person. You can also select whether or not you want to remain in



first-person during the ragdoll animations or combat rolls.

However, if you desire, the entire game can be played via first-person. There's even a first-person cover system and new phone animations that use an in-world phone instead of a 2D overlay. You can also calibrate aim sensitivity and take advantage of some new, more subtle auto-aim settings.

Rockstar North has also implemented improvements for GTA Online. As previously revealed, you can save your progress in the online game across platforms and generations (this is not available in the single-player campaign). The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions of GTA Online support 30 players and two spectators, and a more detailed online

version of Los Santos and Blaine County.

The game has other extras, including new events, rewards, vehicles (like a monster truck and the classic Dodo seaplane), new rail gun and hatchet weapons, challenges like stock car races and wildlife photography, and a murder mystery to solve that unlocks stylish "noir" visual filters.

All the new content is certainly impressive, but it's important to remember that these are only additions to what is one of the largest, most detailed games ever made. If you've never played GTA V, this will be the definitive way to play the game, while veterans of Los Santos will want to experience the new first-person mode and all the new extras.

» **Matt Helgeson**





Guns for hire are smart enough to stay quiet if you want to attack with the element of surprise



Far Cry 4

Five things to expect from your visit to Kyrat

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
November 18

With Far Cry 4 about to drop on November 18, I took one last spin through the game to see how it's shaping up, what new ideas it's bringing to the table, and how it fits into the franchise lineage. Read on to learn about what awaits you when crossing the border into the war-torn fictional region of Kyrat.

A Game Quite Similar To Far Cry 3

When a Far Cry sequel gets announced, you never entirely know what to expect. The first game featured a remote island that served as the secret location for dastardly genetic experiments that produced mutant soldiers. The punishing second act abandoned the sci-fi theme for a dark look at the mercenary culture in Africa. The most well rounded of the entries,

Far Cry 3, once again shifted gears to tell the story of a group of one percenters who mistakenly end up on a South Pacific island and ultimately free the natives from the control of the deadly pirates that took up residency in the area. Of all the varied approaches Ubisoft has taken with the series, Far Cry 4 adheres most closely to its direct predecessor.

If you were to replace the Himalayan setting with another Southern Pacific island, you could be forgiven for mistaking this game for Far Cry 3 – that's how closely it sticks to the gameplay loop. The majority of your time is spent taking command of radio towers, liberating outposts, hunting animals to craft improved gear, and recovering loot from the many crates littered across the land. The major distinguishing factors between the games are the new

online co-op, which lets a friend jump into the open world to help with non-story missions, the ability to ride elephants into combat, and the new fortresses, which operate as outposts on steroids to provide a more serious challenge. Given how much *Game Informer* loved the last game, sticking this closely to Far Cry 3 template isn't necessarily a bad thing.

A Struggle For The Soul Of A Revolution

As a newcomer to his home country, protagonist Ajay Ghale is thrust into the center of a struggle for the soul of a revolution that intends to dethrone the current despot, Pagan Min. The two contenders, Amita and Sabal, recommend taking drastically different steps to elevate the Golden Path to power. Ultimately, it's often up to Ajay to choose the course of action.

The first such mission I encounter involves a Catch-22. A rebel outpost recently overrun by the Royal Army may still contain vital intelligence on Pagan Min's plans, but if we go retrieve the data then another rebel stronghold is in jeopardy of being overrun. Amita and Sabal leave the choice to the player, and I opt for the intelligence. Upon returning with the information, Sabal informs me the outpost was overrun, costing nine soldiers their lives. The intelligence proves to be invaluable, however, as we discover Min plans to attack an ancient monastery carved into the side of a mountain. We arrive in time to save several innocent lives and protect the ancient statues.

The next move for the Golden Path is equally contentious. Amita wants to seize the heroin operation being run by Pagan Min and use its spoils for the rebel cause. Sabal vehemently disagrees, saying that Ajay's late father (who started the revolution) would never have supported getting into the drug trade. I side with Sabal and happily torch the poppy fields with a flamethrower. Upon returning, Amita scolds me for throwing away a precious "medical" resource. She also warns me against taking everything Sabal says at face value.

Only time will tell if these choices impact the plot in any meaningful way, but expect to play a pivotal role in this rivalry throughout your time in Kyrat.

Colorful Characters

With the ruthless Vaas, seductive Citra, and depraved Buck Hughes, Rook Island had no shortage of intriguing characters in *Far Cry 3*. Though we've only spent a brief time in Kyrat, this small country tucked into a mountain valley looks to have just as many quirky personalities living within its borders.

The early candidates for biggest buffoons are Reggie and Yogi, two backpackers who Ajay finds squatting in his parents' abandoned home. Prone to ingesting copious amounts of mind-altering drugs, the two are never bashful about offering a hit of their "Oculus Spliff" or sharing stories of their misadventures around the world.

Another character of questionable repute is Longinus, a former African warlord who now runs guns and other contraband for the rebels in an act of spiritual cleansing for his past transgressions. In reality, he seems more like an opportunist capitalizing on an emerging market for his wares.

A World Of Wonders

Bordered by the looming Himalayas, you could be forgiven for thinking the majority of Kyrat is inhospitable. After journeying across the mountain valley country, I'm happy to report it holds more variety than I expected. Featuring gorgeous waterfalls, steep mountainsides displaying ancient carvings, and a serene riverfront, Kyrat is just as beautiful as Rook Island. It's about the same size as well, but feels more populated than its oceanside counterpart.

The roads are often crowded with activity, and the territory has enough wandering wildlife to serve as a National Geographic Channel set year round (if they could afford the insurance costs of repeatedly putting its talent in harm's way). With more animals inhabiting any given corner of Kyrat, the chances of you aggravating a predator are greater than ever. In one sequence, I was attacked by a pit viper, black eagle, and rhino in a matter of minutes. If you need to get somewhere quickly I suggest you



The flamethrower returns for some great hijinks



Jumping into the random encounters around Kyrat can up your karma level, which rewards you with shop discounts and better guns for hire

stick to the roads.

When you do veer off the beaten path, you have more options for traversal. To alleviate the tedium of having to circumnavigate the many mountainsides in the region (something that *Skyrim* players should be intimately familiar with), *Far Cry 4* equips players with a grappling hook that can be used to scale cliff faces at certain places on the mountain. This can drastically cut down your travel time.

You also have the opportunity to visit the Himalayas with the help of a Sherpa on some missions. This harsh climate isn't very accommodating to Ajay, who must wear an oxygen mask while in exploring the high elevation.

Side Activities Galore

It wouldn't be an open-world game without a host of optional activities to perform. *Far Cry 4* includes all the basics found in the last game (the aforementioned towers, outposts, hunting challenges, and collectibles) plus some new random encounters and psychedelic trips to Shangri-La.

Occasionally while moving through Kyrat, you may encounter a hostile situation between two factions. If you intervene you can gain more karma points. These points are also accumulated by spinning the many Mani

wheels found throughout the country. When you level up karma, you are rewarded with do-gooder discounts at trading posts and the ability to upgrade your A.I.-controlled guns for hire.

Taking a page from *Assassin's Creed*, you can also spend money on upgrading your homestead by improving its condition or adding new features like a mini-copter, trading post, or garden. » **Matt Bertz**



Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker

The Mario platformer with no jumping

- » **Platform**
Wii U
- » **Style**
1-Player Puzzle
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Nintendo
- » **Release**
December 5

A game that began its life as an enjoyable collection of alternate levels not starring Mario and his friends in Super Mario 3D World is branching off into its own full experience, and it draws a surprising amount from the game it found its footing in.

In Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker, players control the loot-chasing duo Toad and Toadette – a pair Nintendo is quick to point out are not romantically involved, as they are too in love with finding treasure to find each

other. Upon unearthing a glowing star, the evil bird Wingo appears to steal it before the two can claim it for themselves. Toadette grabs the star clutched in Wingo's claw as he flies off into oblivion, leaving Toad to track her (and his stolen treasure) down.

What follows is a series of puzzle levels, some starring Toad, some starring Toadette, which must be solved without the aid of jumping. Playing a game that looks like a Mario game without the ability to jump is strange

at first, but I didn't miss it after the first level. Beating a level is about figuring out the path to your destination as opposed to partaking in a series of jumping challenges.

Nintendo has often said Super Mario Galaxy 2 began as a collection of ideas and levels that didn't fit into the original game. Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker plays radically different from Super Mario 3D World, but thanks to the similar art style and some of the same mechanics, it wouldn't be a stretch to call Toad's game a companion to Super Mario 3D World in the same way Galaxy 2 was a companion to the original.

If you played the Captain Toad levels in Super Mario 3D World, you likely recall them being welcome respites in Mario's often challenging adventure. Those puzzle-styled levels that offer the opportunity to pause and examine a stage exist in Treasure Tracker, but the game also features some very challenging, fast-paced levels.

One level stretches far into the distance and contains a series of boost pads that force Toad to sprint at full speed without stopping until making it to the star at the end. This level is less of a puzzle and more of a frantic speed run reminiscent of some of Super Mario 3D World's most fun and challenging levels. A level featuring the disappearing and reappearing platform blocks set to a specific rhythm (another design that should be familiar to Mario 3D World players) also mixes up the play.

Another level takes place in an intimidating swamp as Toad rides a raft over a deadly purple gas with Hammer Bro enemies throwing hammers at him. All Toad has to defend himself is his weapon of choice: radishes. Much like Super Mario Bros. 2, leaves embedded in the ground can be picked to reveal



Toad may not be able to jump, but he can fall on enemies to defeat them





vegetables (that can be used as weapons), coins, collectibles, or even a pickaxe that can be used to defeat enemies or to break through bricks to find hidden areas.

Other levels include one made of two gigantic pieces that can be tapped on the GamePad in order to move and relocate the sections to navigate to new areas. Another contains hidden pathways that reveal themselves when you tap the screen, while yet another takes place on a minecart as you use the GamePad to fire radishes at enemies from the first-person perspective. Much like the Galaxy titles and Mario 3D World and Land, every level is

distinct and seems to offer something new.

Toad and Toadette also encounter the occasional boss. The boss in our demo is a dragon resting in lava constantly spouting out fireballs as Toad rushes to find cover behind spaced out barriers. Defeating the dragon is a matter of climbing to the top of a tower that is quickly filling with lava and dropping a shaky platform on his head.

Based on what we've played, and with more than 70 levels promised, we're convinced Toad's first standalone game could be worthy of standing alongside the Mario titles.

» **Kyle Hilliard**



Full camera control lets players zoom in and see each level from every angle





Assassin's Creed Unity

A last look at some big changes

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft

» **Release**
November 11

Assassin's Creed Unity should be available by the time you read this, but a review copy wasn't available in time for us to include our evaluation in this month's issue. However, I spent several hours with a pre-release version of the game, and came away with some clear impressions. Some of what I played may have changed in intervening weeks, but many of the fundamental features are unlikely to shift.

Unity is striking for the way it goes back to the drawing board on most of its central systems, from navigation and combat to progression and mission structure. It's clear that Ubisoft hopes to set a fresh groundwork for the franchise to move into this new generation, and it's willing to risk some disgruntled fans who aren't interested in such sweeping changes.

Character growth and development has always been a big part of the series, but Unity's hero, Arno, has more customization options than ever before. Various currencies (including the option of real money shortcuts) allow the purchase of dozens of weapons, from one-handed swords to bulky polearms. Costume pieces can be purchased separately and color schemes can be applied to any given combination of gear, ensuring a hero that is distinct from your friends. Basic abilities are

also purchased one by one, meaning that early in the game players are deprived of some of the basic skills all previous assassins have taken for granted, such as hiding on benches or lockpicking.

Stealth is a bigger focus than ever before. Unity borrows from its sister franchise, Splinter Cell, to create a framework for sneaking. Arno regularly crouches and hides behind tables and boxes to stay out of sight, and if spotted, a transparent "last known location" outline indicates where guards will look next. During my

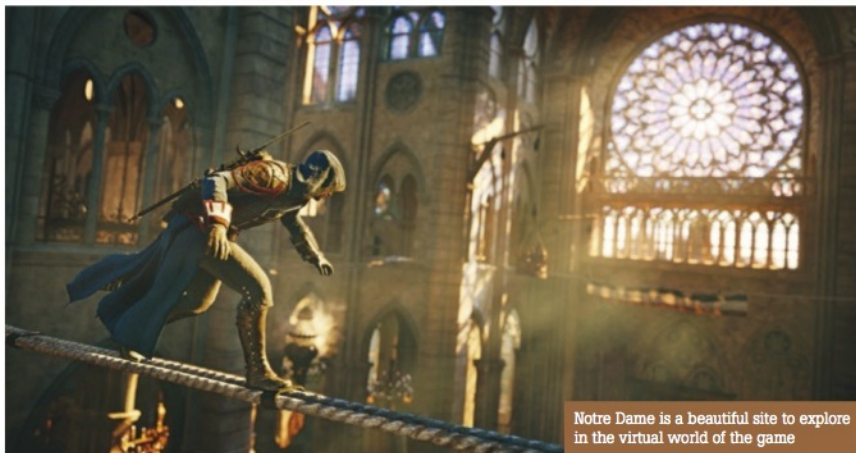
time playing, guards were better at spotting me and coordinating their searches than in previous installments, and I found myself getting cornered and challenged regularly.

In the more recent Assassin's Creed games, these kinds of confrontations could be met with brute force, but that strategy rarely did me any favors. Instead, combat difficulty has been ratcheted up; just three or four enemy soldiers could easily bring me down. Part of that may be because I'm still adjusting to the new fight controls. Attacks, parries, and a





The poison bomb offers one of many ways to get out of danger quickly



Notre Dame is a beautiful site to explore in the virtual world of the game

rolling dodge are all options, but nailing the timing takes practice, especially because off-camera enemies don't provide clear warnings before their attacks come hurtling in. If you fail at stealth, and a number of guards show up, discretion is often the better part of valor, and retreat is your best choice. Even then, the deadly power of enemy bullets may still end your run.

With fewer skills available early in the game, and generally more challenging encounters in store, players shouldn't go in expecting a lot of hand holding. The same is true for mission design, which seems inspired by the roots of the franchise. Like in the first *Assassin's Creed* game, assassination missions often indicate a target's location, and then set the player loose to find a creative path to completion. Side tasks, like stealing a building's keys or causing

a distraction, change the mission parameters on the fly, providing a sense of creative freedom. On the down side, a faulty approach can go wrong in a hurry, so occasional frustration is unavoidable.

Outside of the solo campaign, another big change is in the implementation of multiplayer. The cat-and-mouse competitive modes are gone, replaced by two or four-player cooperative missions set around Paris. The duo Brotherhood missions offer additional story content, while the four-player heists provide a quick way to gather some cash, but with randomized guard locations, building entrances, and objective sites, all in the name of increased replayability. I enjoyed what I played of these mission types, but given the focus on stealth, it's clear that a team is only going to be as strong as its weakest link.

In charting the big changes coming to *Unity*, the mobile companion app has to make the list. Ubisoft has doubled down on the importance of this second-screen experience. Even if the mobile app is not mandatory, it is now the exclusive place to engage with some content that might previously have been integrated into the main game. Glyph puzzles allow players to explore landmarks around Paris, uncovering hidden symbols on the city's historical structures. Discover all the glyphs, and you unlock a new nomad mission within the app – *Unity*'s replacement for the fleet building or Mediterranean conquest experience. Nomad missions allow you to send out individual allied assassins on missions, and each task requires a different combination of health, attack, defense, and stealth, which are upgradeable stats on each of your team members. Complete one of these 63 nomad missions, and you unlock something extra in the main game, like a special chest that includes an exclusive outfit for Arno.

Along with the shift back to a primarily urban setting in French Revolution-era Paris, players are undoubtedly in for a change of pace from recent adventures through the seas of the Caribbean and the open wilderness of the American colonies. I'm eager to dive into game from the beginning to craft my own version of Arno, and see how the new features feel after experiencing the full game. If you're equally excited to get going, be prepared for some big shifts in gameplay from what you've come to expect from the series. Also, keep an eye on gameinformer.com, where we'll offer our full review as soon as we've experienced the entire game. » **Matt Miller**

The streets of Paris have far more people and crowds than any previous *Assassin's Creed* game



StarCraft II: Legacy Of The Void

Blizzard reveals the final chapter of StarCraft II



» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

The StarCraft II trilogy is finally reaching its culmination with the long-awaited third entry, *Legacy of the Void*. The real-time strategy juggernaut brings with it a number of exciting new features. Along with new units, a robust story-driven campaign, and details on the future of all your favorite StarCraft heroes and villains, *Legacy of the Void* features two new multiplayer modes.

The first two games centered on the Terrans and Zerg, respectively. For *Legacy of the Void*, the Protoss take center stage. "This is a distinctly Protoss experience," says senior story developer James Waugh. "So we asked ourselves, what does that mean? What defines the Protoss and how does that affect gameplay? We've got these sort of space samurai, space paladins, that are few in number, fighting an impossible foe. It's all very anchored in say, the *Seven Samurai* style. Few warriors standing up against a legion, that's Protoss philosophy. In the final act here,

we see the Protoss attempting to retake their homeworld and remake their culture."

After Kerrigan and Raynor's overthrowing of the vicious Arcturus Mengsk in *Heart of the Swarm*, an evil entity (which we are assuming is Amon, the fallen Xel'Naga that was ultimately responsible for the Zerg) has arisen from the Void threatening all life in the galaxy. With Kerrigan and the Swarm missing in action and Jim Raynor focused on rebuilding the wreckage of the Terran civilization, the task of dealing with this ancient terror lies with the Protoss and their current heroes, Artanis and Zeratul. Under Artanis's command, the Protoss will attempt to take back their homeworld, Aiur, across 20 campaign missions.

Players have access to Artanis's amazingly powerful ship as they move from mission to mission, and while the story won't be "choose your own adventure" style like *Wings of Liberty*, there will still be a sense of player agency as they make decisions that are reflected in

dialogue and other minor story points. "We'll find out what the deal is with the Xel'Naga," Waugh says. "We'll sort of see all of Zeratul's prophecies come to bear, with Arcanis as sort of the uniter and Zeratul as this kind of Obi-Wan character."

While it will be nice to see what happens to our cast of characters, the new multiplayer modes should be the highlight for the long game. The first, called *Allied Commanders*, allows new players to jump in easily alongside more seasoned friends. Each player takes on the role of a commander from their chosen race to take on an A.I.-controlled army. Players unlock new units and abilities as the game goes on with an open-ended progression system.

The second new mode, *Archon*, is a competitive match where two players share control over a single base and square off against another pair – an excellent way to learn the ropes from a veteran player. Players learning



the game can pair up with friends and learn the nuances of resource gathering, micro-management in battle, and forming unit groups by experiencing it themselves. Sure, one player could technically just sit around and watch the other play, but in practice having two minds controlling an army is going to make for interesting play.

This mode could also be attractive to seasoned veterans. You could have one player completely dedicated to scouting while the other focuses on resource collection. The ability to work in tandem on different tasks and then come together to micromange units during a team clash is going to make for some cool situations.

Legacy of the Void isn't coming for a while, but the final chapter of StarCraft II looks like it could be the most exciting of the lot with the focus on new modes, a finale to the story, and some incredible new units.

» **Daniel Tack**



Reinforcements Arrive

What's an expansion without new units? Here are the new units in Legacy of the Void:



HERC » These new Terran units can be used to counter the popular zerging and baneling army composition. They're effective at tanking damage from most Protoss ground units while other allied infantry ground units deal heavy damage.



Cyclone » Cyclones debut a new way to open a fight for Terran players. They pit the movement skills of both players against each other since Cyclones need to stay within a certain distance to deal damage with their lock-on ability.



Ravager » These new Zerg artillery units can break force fields using their corrosive bile. Since this ability has a small delay before it lands, player skill has a large influence on the outcome of who will emerge victorious when these two abilities collide.



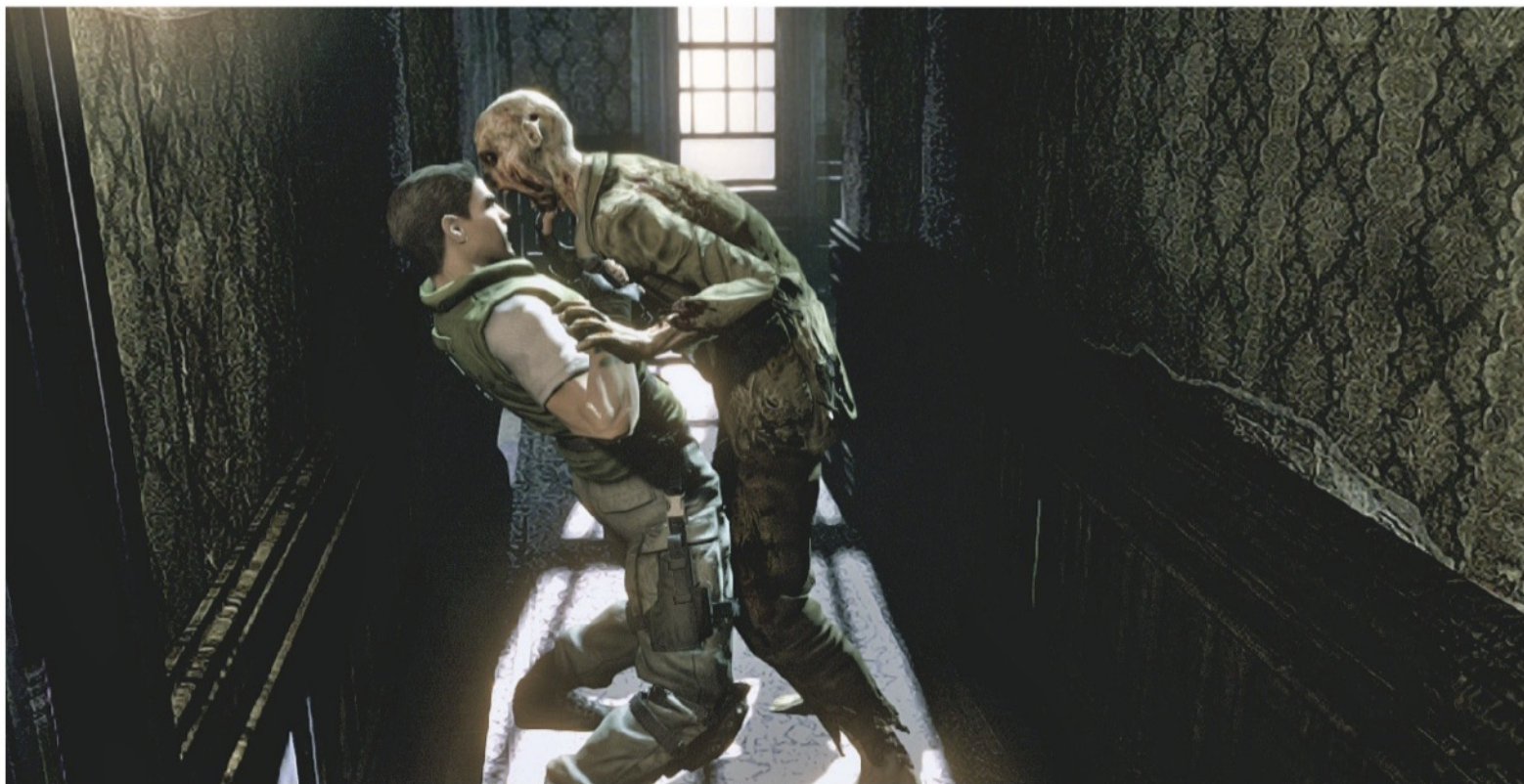
Lurker » Lurkers provide the Zerg with a new siege option, harassment option, and can be used to defend key locations. Additionally, they can be used as part of a Zerg player's core army causing splash damage to large numbers of smaller units.



Disruptor » Disruptors introduce a new splash damage option to the Protoss. Unlike the Colossus, the Disruptor's effectiveness depends on the movement skill of the player. It's possible to get a larger number of kills with the Disruptor depending on your positioning prowess.

Resident Evil HD Remaster

Stepping foot into the renovated Spencer mansion



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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
Early 2015

One glance at the screenshots and trailers for Capcom's remastered, high-definition version of the legendary 2002 GameCube Resident Evil remake is all it takes to tell the already gorgeous game is looking even better. However, what horror fans can't appreciate yet is the impact the updated control scheme and widescreen view have on the game. We went hands-on with these optional alternate features to see how they affect the classic horror game's tense gameplay.

Early Resident Evil games are infamous for their stiff tank controls – players turn the character by pressing left and right, then press forward and backward to move in the direction they're aimed. Capcom is including a control

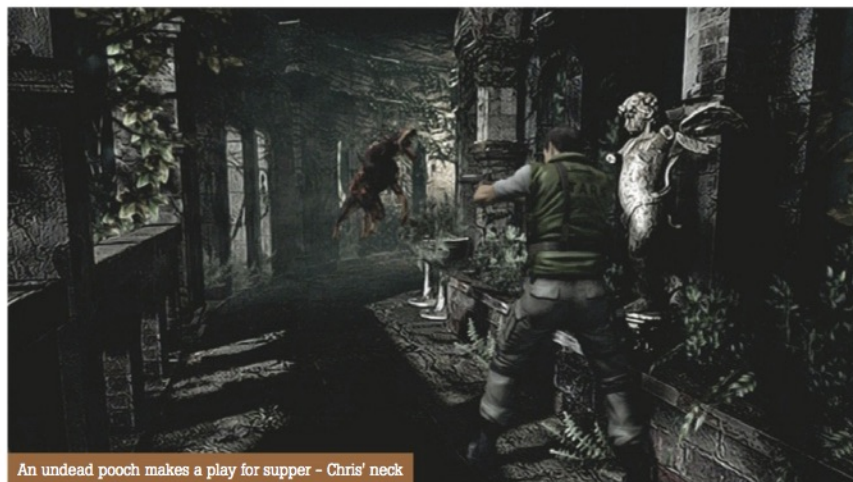
scheme with a novel vision: characters move in the direction you point the analog stick. While I was playing the game with this method, I noticed Chris and Jill now default to running and can pivot on a dime. No need to press the run button. The enhanced agility makes the 180-degree quickturn defunct. I tested out Chris' newfound spryness on one of the first zombies I encountered. Armed with only a knife, I easily ran circles around the ghoul while slashing him into submission.

The new controls offer a great introductory concession for newcomers who might dislike the tank controls, but they come at some cost. While it's empowering to outmaneuver the enemy's A.I., it reduces the tension of some

encounters. Additionally, the game changes camera angles as you explore, which creates some issues with the modern control scheme, similar to early Devil May Cry games where you might suddenly start running in an unintended direction. Finally, the S.T.A.R.S. team members' NFL running back-like dexterity sucks some of the grounded sense of weightiness. I enjoyed experimenting with this early version's new controls, but I'm undecided whether I'll end up preferring it to the original style.

Another big change involves the resolution. The 2002 GameCube Resident Evil was developed with standard definition TVs in mind, so its native resolution is 4:3. Playing with this original view means there are letterboxes on either side of the screen. Capcom can't widen each of the mansion's room to fit widescreen, so instead the optional 16:9 widescreen view zooms in on the environments. This means trimming off a bit of the original 4:3 view, so to compensate the camera tracks the character as they move through the game. This subtle panning is a great solution for folks playing in widescreen, and I hardly noticed the difference in the early sections I played. Purists are welcome to toggle back and forth between the aspect ratio on the fly, same as the control scheme.

Game Informer named Resident Evil the best horror game of all time in our Horror issue. We consider this enduringly creepy title worth checking out whether you're traditionally a fan of horror or not, and RE HD Remaster's optional features might make this one of the best jumping-on points for the series since Resident Evil 4. » **Tim Turi**



An undead pooch makes a play for supper - Chris' neck



Kingdom Hearts HD 2.5 Remix

Unlocking another exciting collection

Last year's Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix took us back to the beginning of the series. Kingdom Hearts 1, Chain of Memories, and the cutscenes of 358/2 Days all returned with an HD visual upgrade in a single package. At long last, we finally got the fully loaded Japan-exclusive Final Mix edition of the first game in the West. Frankly, this was the primary reason to buy the collection, as the other two inclusions were significantly weaker.

The new HD 2.5 Remix collection has a leg up on the first simply by having a better lineup. I spent several hours sampling Kingdom Hearts II Final Mix, Birth By Sleep Final Mix, and the cutscenes of Re:coded, and it's already clear there's more quality per hour in this collection. Here's a breakdown of each component.

Kingdom Heart II Final Mix

Nearly nine years have passed since Kingdom Hearts II released in North America on the PlayStation 2. Square Enix has done its best to upgrade the visuals for the modern eye. Most of the lead characters have higher resolution models along with more detailed and lifelike faces. Several of the environments also got an HD pass. However, like HD 1.5, plenty of low resolution textures went untouched. Certain parts of a character's clothing are blurrier than the rest. The skybox, some background buildings, and objects like the wall ivy are jarringly inconsistent with the otherwise beautiful,

cartoony visuals. The worst offender is by far the cutscenes. In the same scene characters will go back and forth between sophisticated, fully lip-synched facial animations to crude, vacant faces that look like they're a ventriloquist-controlled puppet. That said, world exploration and battles (which is 90 percent of the game) all look great, with vibrant colors and effects permeating the experience with no framerate problems as far as I encountered from the first several hours of gameplay.

If you're not a hardcore importer, you're probably wondering what's different in the Final Mix edition. The answer is a lot. An extra-hard "Critical Mode" difficulty is available in addition to a new puzzle piece collecting meta game. Several heartless receive updated looks. New cutscenes, boss battles, weapons, and gear abound.

Kingdom Hearts Birth By Sleep Final Mix

Birth By Sleep released on PSP back in 2010 and is considered by many fans to be the best Kingdom Hearts entry outside of the two primary PlayStation 2 games. It takes place 10 years before the first game, setting up the events that would lead to Sora's adventures. Players control three keyblade wielders – Terra, Ventus, and Aqua – in any order they please. This leads to a flexible story, but also a sense of déjà vu as you revisit worlds (albeit different sections and story threads) three times over.

Birth By Sleep translates naturally to the big

screen from its previous portable home. It still has the same sprinkling of bad textures and weird cutscene animation quirks as KH II, but again the battles and characters look great. Compared to the intricately decorated worlds of KH II, these environments are plain and empty. Playing these two back to back doesn't help. But the use of a full controller compared to PSP's lack of second analog stick and full set of trigger buttons feels much better. It brings to mind the control advances made on KH 1 when it made the jump to HD 1.5 last year. The Final Mix edition adds in more special boss battles, challenges, and a new playable section at the end of the game.

Kingdom Hearts Re:coded

This part of the collection is a cutscene-only remake of a 2011 DS game which was a remake of a Japan-only episodic mobile game. For some reason this black sheep of the family keeps showing up. I watched the first 20 minutes of the movie and it isn't bad compared to the 358/2 Days movie from the previous collection. Mickey and company comb through a corrupted journal and work with a digital Sora inside it to solve a mystery. It flows from one place to the next without a bunch of repetitive clocktower lounging and ice cream eating. Square Enix even added custom battle scenes so you see representations of the fights players had in the DS game instead of the awkwardly edited 358/2 Days movie. » **Bryan Vore**

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
- » **Style**
1-Player Action/Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Square Enix
- » **Developer**
Square Enix
- » **Release**
December 2



Hyper Light Drifter

Two hours in a lonely world



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
Vita • PC
Mac • Linux

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Heart Machine

» **Developer**
Heart Machine

» **Release**
2015

After a successful Kickstarter in 2013, Heart Machine's action/adventure has been among the most anticipated indie projects on the horizon. A recent hands-on demo showed off a two-hour segment of the game, and based on my time exploring, *Hyper Light Drifter* is well worth the excitement it has garnered.

With its top-down view of the action, *Hyper Light Drifter* draws immediate comparisons to titles like *Zelda* and *Diablo* – ingredients from both are sprinkled in. But with its stark post-apocalyptic setting and smartly designed combat system, Heart Machine's project remains a fresh experience, distinct from its roots.

You play the Drifter as he explores a world of abandoned ruins and mutated monstrosities. The world is engrossing and mysterious.

Massive cyclopean blocks bear strange runes and symbols, with little explanation of what once built the structures. Even the Drifter's inventory is something of a mystery – new items must be tried out before you understand their uses, and objective items are collected with little idea of what they might do or how they function. A deep sense of analysis and discovery pervades the gameplay.

Players have access to several basic moves, but each gets more complex as you develop your skills. A sword slash is the easiest way to bring down enemies that get too close, and holding down the button provides a charged power attack. Ranged weapons map to another button, but it seems you can only carry one weapon at a time. These distance attacks are safer, but each drains some energy that refills on a cooldown or with a pick-up found within the world. The Drifter's most compelling ability is his teleporting dash, which lets him zip in and out of danger, as well as flit between the precarious platforms hidden in the ruins. Careful timing allows the player to chain together dashes in long streaks to move across the screen in moments.

Enemies are abundant and unusual. Green mutants sprout tendrils from their back as they leap at you. Computer monitors scuttle about on spider legs. Hulking ogres leap across the room to smash into the ground. Like the *Zelda* games that seem to have inspired the project, each enemy has a distinct attack pattern to track. Even simple enemies can do damage if you don't pay attention to how they move.

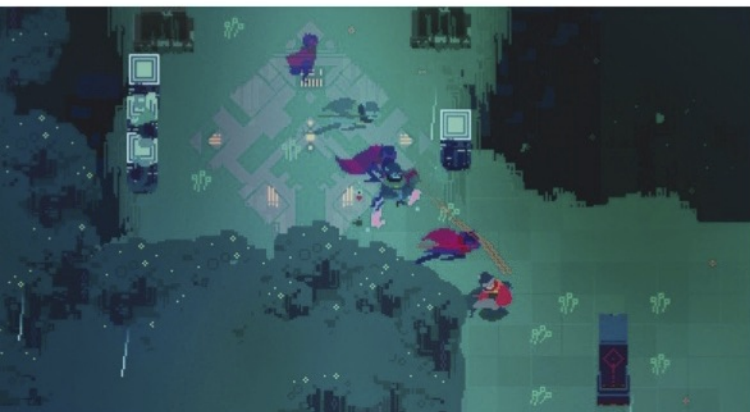
The ranged weapons you carry are as

varied as the monsters they can kill. A powerful laser must be held down and charged for maximum damage. A rifle fires a blast halfway between a shotgun spread and a rocket barrage. A tiny grenade drone can be released, and then reacts to the movements of your analog stick to track down targets. Every tool changes the flow of combat, and how you approach encounters.

The world is split up into distinct sections or rooms, and getting to a door at the far end lets you breathe easier, since that means a checkpoint as well. Between one door and another, creatures converge on you from unexpected directions, massive blocks attempt to crush you, and the floor falls out from beneath your feet. Managing your limited health and weapon energy is vital to success. Hidden secrets beckon out of reach behind walls, enticing you to go back through the dangerous, laser-strewn paths you've already tread to find the secret passage you missed.

Throughout your explorations, an ethereal score sounds like it's been ripped out of the synth-smooth science fiction movies of the 1970s. As battles commence, and the intensity heats up, heavier beats are layered onto the sweeping synth background harmonies, and then fade away as the fight concludes.

My brief hours with the game reassure me that Heart Machine is crafting a game worth paying close attention to in the coming months. The pixel-art visuals, challenging combat and platforming, and opportunity for discovery all left me eager to learn more about the strange and melancholy adventures of the Drifter. » **Matt Miller**





Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions

The chaos returns

When Activision announced the return of the long-defunct Sierra publishing brand, the Internet was abuzz with speculation pertaining to the games that may fall under this label. Although King's Quest, a gem from Sierra's past, is coming back, Sierra's net appears to be wide, as Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions will be the first game published under its name. Sierra is taking on the role of Activision's indie label.

As the name implies, this Geometry Wars experience isn't contained on just one plane. The series' frantic shooting action now unfolds across three-dimensional constructs, such as cubes and spheres. A layer of challenge is added by not knowing what's around the corner

or over the horizon. The grid moves and warps in some of the stages, creating even more chaos for the player to keep tabs on.

Dimensions' adventure mode consists of over 50 levels, complete with the series' first boss battles. These encounters play out as their own levels, and push the player to deploy different tactics (offensive and defensive) to take these bullet sponges down. Players have more firepower to handle these situations, such as deployable turrets, detonators, and mines.

A new multiplayer component pushes players to conquer grids or accumulate the most points. This new avenue of play supports up to four-players both online and off. » **Andrew Reiner**

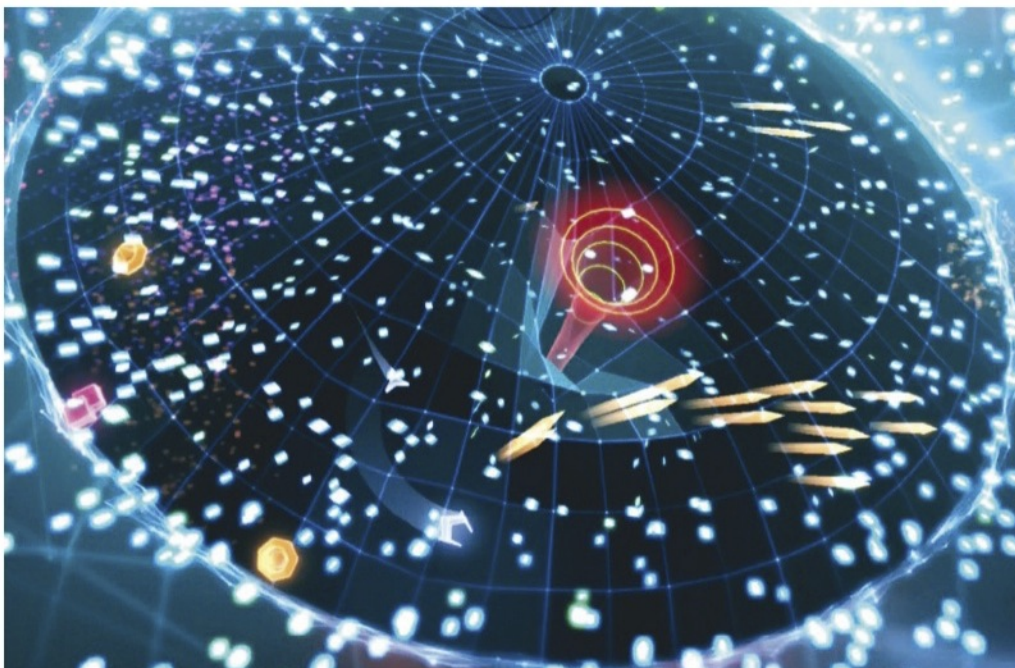
» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

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

» **Publisher**
Sierra

» **Developer**
Lucid Games

» **Release**
November 25
(PS4, PS3, PC),
November 26
(Xbox One, Xbox 360)

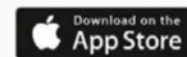


Everything You Want At Your Fingertips.

The All New GameStop App



Available for iPhone and Android.



The Power Of Trade
With Trade Center, you can find out what GameStop is paying for your games, electronics, and more right on your mobile device.

PowerUp On The Go
Score points, browse the PowerUp Rewards Catalog, and redeem points for coupons and merchandise without ever leaving the app.

Want A Product Fast?
Locate store inventory, request a hold and even get driving directions to guide you there. The app makes it easier than ever to get the latest products from your favorite GameStop store.



gamestop.com/app

GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS™



Hearthstone: Goblins Vs. Gnomes

Controlling chaos in Blizzard's first Hearthstone expansion

» **Platform**
PC • iPad

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

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
December

Blizzard's foray into the digital collectible card game market was originally created by a small team with a laser focus. Today, *Hearthstone* has blown up as a leading option for the burgeoning genre on PC and iPad and is one of the top games at any given time on Twitch.tv. The first expansion, *Goblins vs. Gnomes*, shakes up the formula with gnomes, goblins, piloted mechs, and more than 120 new cards.

Players will get to experiment with new mechanics like spare parts – cards created from some of the new tinker toys that add small boosts – but you won't know what they do until you get them. These small boosts may only impart one damage or one health buff to a minion, but using the right spare part at the right time can make the difference between a game loss and a win.

Mechs are the major new minion type, with many cards boosting, buffing, or altering the rules when they're part of the mix. If you recall the *World of Warcraft* raid boss Mimiron, his head makes an appearance here. If you have three mechs out with the head, they combine and form V-O7-TR-ON, a massive 4/8 construct that comes with charge and mega windfury for four attacks a turn.

Mekgineer Thermaplugg makes an appearance as a massive new legendary mech minion that spits out a swarm of Leper Gnomes. The Blingtron 3000 gives both players a random weapon. These weapons are always the gold versions, naturally. Is your opponent hiding behind a fistful of cards in hand? Roll out the Clockwork Giant and get beastly 8/8 on the board for a reduced price. Need some health? The Antique Healbot confers a massive eight health to the caster when it lumbers onto the table.

Goblins vs. Gnomes introduces the concept of piloted mechs, minions that pop out

random units when they die. Being able to use the random minions that may jump out from the wreckage is going to introduce a whole new kind of skill-on-the-fly gameplay. What will be inside that Piloted Shredder – a Doomsayer, a Mad Scientist, Nat Pagle, or something else completely? If you want to get really crazy, check out one of the expansion's high-profile piloted machines – Sneed's Old Shredder. Who knows what legendary minion will be hidden inside?

As the set title implies, plenty of mech-boosting gnomes and random blasting goblins are available alongside the ridiculous robotics. Goblin blastmages and bombers provide some new ways to use chaotic demolitions to

take out opposing troops.

While many of the cards we've seen are neutral and can be played in any deck, there will be an accompanying suite of class-specific cards as well. The Priest's Shrinkmaster is a potent two-drop that can zap an enemy down to size as he hits the table, and the Mage's Unstable Portal continues the theme of controlling chaos and making the most of randomness. You never know what's going to come through the portal, but you're likely getting a serious discount on the casting cost.

Blizzard's first expansion for *Hearthstone* looks like it's going to be incredibly fun, as bots and bombs come together in new and fascinating ways. » **Daniel Tack**



Disgaea 5

Taking the Netherworld to the next level



Are you ready to level your characters all the way to 9,999? Nippon Ichi's popular and comical strategy series is back with a new mainline entry, and it's poised to be the largest entry yet thanks to bigger battles and a grander story.

Nippon Ichi is pushing for Disgaea 5 to have a deeper and longer storyline than previous games. The trademark humor remains intact, but after hearing feedback from fans, the developer wants to have more complex characters and a story with a larger scope. Therefore, Disgaea 5 centers on the darker theme of revenge.

The new cast is comprised of three main characters: the revenge-hungry Killia, the bratty runaway Seraphene, and the curry-loving Usalia. While Usalia, a peace-loving demon, is considered to be the "mascot" character, don't expect her to just be the comic relief. She apparently has a dark past that gets uncovered throughout the storyline. Vengeance plays into all three characters' storylines

in different ways, and the narrative has 16 chapters – the most ever in the series.

The game still holds everything from past entries, like its grid-based strategy gameplay, but this time around the stage is much larger. You can deal absurd levels of damage to enemies in the high millions, and the PS4's extra power makes it so now 100 enemies can be on screen at once – a far cry from the 30 that were in past games. All enemies are also overlords, and a fitting revenge mode, which increases all of your stats, lets you form the ultimate payoff. You also have an ultimate demon skill that activates during this mode.

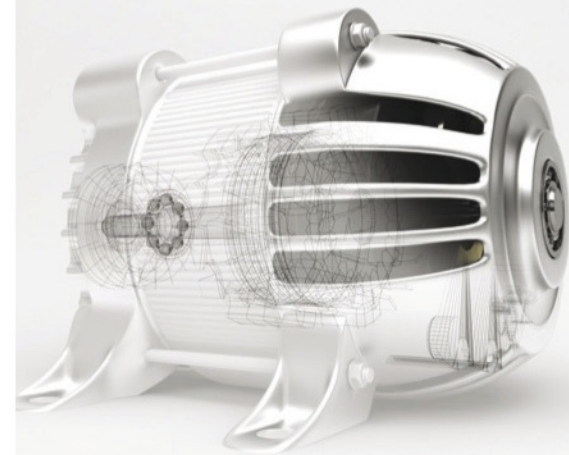
We'll have to wait for more details on other new combat mechanics, and Nippon Ichi confirmed it's still putting the finishing touches on its new conversation system. With the game coming out in March in Japan, though, we suspect it won't be too much longer before more is revealed and we have an official U.S. release date. » **Kimberley Wallace**

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
- » **Style**
1-Player Strategy
- » **Publisher**
NIS America
- » **Developer**
Nippon Ichi Software
- » **Release**
TBD



TECH
RESPECT

PATENT YOUR FUTURE



Earn tech respect with a Digital Maker and Fabrication Bachelor of Science degree

Digital fabrication is about to revolutionize how we invent and create. Learn to lead this revolution while developing your own inventions in an unprecedented university-wide, open lab environment. As part of their curriculum, graduates of this program will file for their own U.S. patent. This unprecedented degree is the first of its kind being offered from the elite private university that first focused at the dawn of the computer revolution on advancing computer technology.

Be the first to join a long line of trail blazing graduates that will lead the next transformation of technology and industry.



Patent your future. Invent something that changes everything!
Learn more today at www.uat.edu/DMF

Heroes Of The Storm

Big names and new maps for Blizzard's hero brawler



» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
TBA

Heroes of the Storm continues to grow as it prepares to leave alpha and enter a closed beta stage in early 2015. At BlizzCon, players were treated to some big reveals for the upcoming MOBA in the form of a batch of high-profile heroes, two new maps, and the introduction of ranked matches and draft play. With *The Lost Vikings*, Jaina, and Thrall entering the mix alongside what will become the backbone of competitive Heroes play, there's a lot of content to digest.

Jaina Proudmore is an archetypal Warcraft universe ice mage with abilities that are amplified on chilled targets. With stacking nukes, snares, and a water elemental, Jaina can put out more burst damage than almost any hero

in the game, but has a limited mana pool and standard glass cannon mage defenses. Jaina has to pick her moments, but can have massive game impact.

Thrall is a melee character that can summon fire wolves, blast chain lightning, and use windfury to power up his Doomhammer for potent attacks. He can also summon a huge earthquake.

The Lost Vikings play differently than any other hero in the game, and like Murky and Abathur, they break the traditional hero design mold. Players control each Viking independently; they all have separate death timers, and can be positioned all over the map. You could conceivably have one Viking taking on

a mercenary camp, one sitting in a lane, and one even jumping in the Dragon Knight – all at the same time. If you want to have some real fun, try the ultimate ability that puts all the Vikings into a single longboat for some devastating damage.

The new maps are *Sky Temple* and *Tomb of the Spider Queen*, which have an Egyptian feel. *Sky Temple* tasks players with capturing obelisks. While these obelisks are held, they lay siege to enemy defenses, but they also summon monsters to try to push players off the point.

In stark contrast to the *Sky Temple*, where players don't spend a lot of time in lane, *Tomb of the Spider Queen* incentivizes people to stay in lane to collect souls from killing enemy minions. Collected souls can be turned in to add various monsters to join in on lane pushing, so that's where the action focus lies on this smaller map with less travel time and constant combat.

Two modes of ranked play are coming to Heroes of the Storm. One mode lets you queue solo or with friends, and another requires you to have a prearranged team to participate. Draft mode is used in these competitive matches, so once one team picks a hero it will be unavailable to the other team.

Heroes of the Storm has already seen myriad changes during its extensive alpha phase, and when it moves into the beta stages next year it will be a powerful contender to watch in the congested and competitive MOBA space.

» **Daniel Tack**

Sky Temple





The Long Dark

The cold vein

Hinterland's *The Long Dark* raised over \$250,000 on Kickstarter with the promise of a "first-person post-disaster survival simulation set in the Northern wilderness." Right now, the game is in early access on Steam, granting players the chance to test drive an incomplete version for \$19.99. I played the current alpha, and found it to be an intriguing but uneven experience that has yet to realize Hinterland's final vision for the game.

A trailer for *The Long Dark* teases a plot about a bush pilot named Will Mackenzie in a desolate, post-apocalyptic winter. Over mournful piano, a narrator intones, "First there was a brilliant light, then a great and silent darkness...many suffered beyond reason, now most are gone. Who will bare witness to this long dark? I will."

The clip is highly effective, using a minimal approach to convey a deep sense of mystery. However, don't go into this alpha in hopes of the same experience. The main campaign mode, which promises a quest, other A.I. survivors to interact with, and more locations, is currently not available. Instead, you can explore the sandbox mode, a barebones experience with one objective: stay alive.

After entering the sandbox, you're placed in a seemingly random location in the large open world. You have a few items of winter clothing and supplies, but not enough to last you long. Now, it's your job to begin exploring, all the while monitoring your health, hunger, energy, and temperature.

The wilderness is harsh and unforgiving. Supplies are scarce, and must be scavenged from abandoned buildings and even dead bodies. Finding a simple device like a can opener in an old cabin could mean the difference between life and death, allowing you to open that precious can of pork and beans without having to smash it open and waste a

portion. Finding adequate clothing and shelter is equally important. If you get stuck outside at night when a wind comes through, you quickly freeze – if a wolf doesn't get you first. Walk, explore, eat, sleep – that's the life of a survivor. There are no puzzles to solve and no progression, just the endless struggle against the cold and your own failing body.

As such, this experience isn't for everyone. There's a certain power to sandbox mode's minimalism; there's nothing but the wind and the sound of your own footsteps to distract you. You'll never know how excited you will be to find a simple pair of boots or energy bar until you're on the verge of death. Still, it's only a matter of time. Death will come sooner or later.

After my initial fascination with the alpha abated, I began to grow restless with the game. It starts to feel as though there's no point to the experience; whether you delay it by a dozen hours or a few days, you're going to die in the cold. These frustrations are compounded by the fact that this game, which prides itself on realism, includes a few video game conceits that actually make

it more difficult. Items like pry bars and can openers degrade at an unusually fast rate.

For example, prying open a few lockers could reduce the lifespan of your bar by almost 50 percent. That's both annoying and unrealistic. Also, your character burns through calories at a tremendous rate. Inching towards death, I ate cans of food and multiple energy bars only to find myself back on the brink of starvation in minutes.

In its current state, *The Long Dark* is a tantalizing, but incomplete, glimpse into what could be a truly unique gaming experience. That's the nature of playing an early access game; it's a small taste of what's (hopefully) to come. If the core gameplay can be polished and wedded to a narrative structure that gives it some purpose, I believe Hinterland could create something great. As it stands, this is not that game. » **Matt Helgeson**

Note: We played a work-in-progress, Early Access version of The Long Dark. This preview is based on what we experienced. By the time this is printed, Hinterland will have added another area to the sandbox, new wildlife, and tweaks to the hunger/fatigue system, among other balancing adjustments.

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Hinterland

» **Developer**
Hinterland

» **Release**
TBD





Pokémon Omega Ruby & Alpha Sapphire

Soaring to familiar heights

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Nintendo,
The Pokémon Company

» **Developer**
Game Freak

» **Release**
November 21

After the release of Pokémon X and Y, fans expected an extension of those titles with something like a Pokémon Z. Despite a few minor hints and references found within Pokémon X and Y, Game Freak caught many off guard when it announced the remake of Ruby and Sapphire.

The game retains the new (for Pokémon, anyway) 3D art style of X and Y. For the foreseeable future, Pokémon is living in this new world of three-dimensional polygons. As a remake, however, Game Freak is using the new perspective to give players a broader view of a familiar world, which leads to new locations and heights.

Along with the ability to see and explore new elevations, players also unlock a new ability called soar, after they find the Mega Evolved versions Latios or Latias. Soar differs from the fly ability in that players retain full control over their movement in the sky and can land almost wherever they please. This unlocks new locations that couldn't be reached in the original Ruby and Sapphire, and lots of new Pokémon.

In Ruby and Sapphire, players listening closely could hear the cries of Pokémon hiding in the grass and in the world. According to Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire director Shigeru Ohmori, who was a game and map designer on the originals, this was done to give players the sense Hoenn was alive and teeming with Pokémon. Continuing that idea, players can see some Pokémon moving in the grass and in the world. In some cases, you can see which Pokémon you can catch before even

exploring the grass. The majority of your captures are still randomized, but if there is a particular Pokémon you are looking for, it should be a little easier to track them down.

Game Freak is also overhauling the music. Junichi Masuda, who composed the original soundtrack and is serving as producer on the remakes, left the arrangement completely up to the sound team without direct supervision. "I don't like revisiting old songs and re-arranging them," Masuda says. He requested that the music stay faithful to players' memories while modernizing the familiar, so you can expect the frequent use of trumpets to

continue forward.

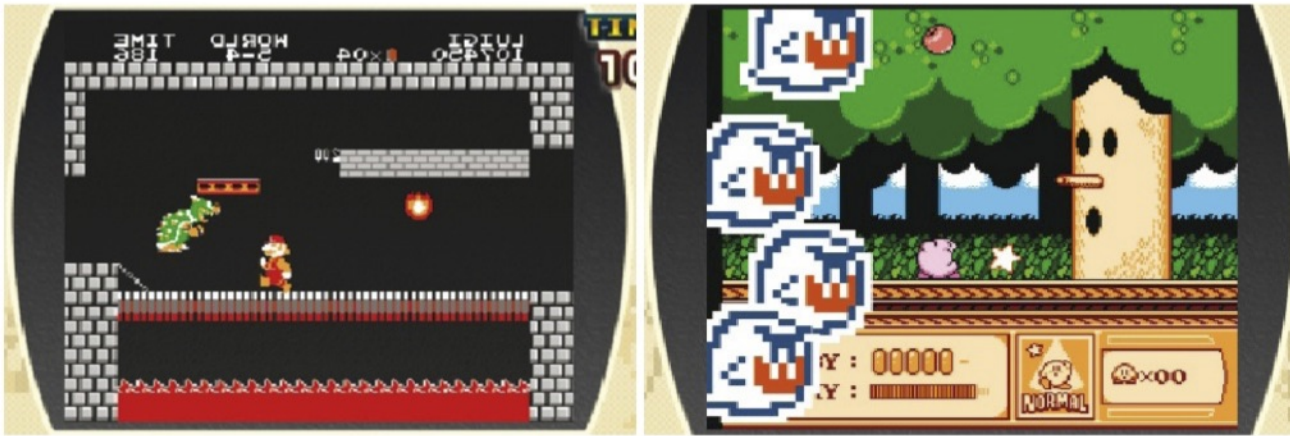
The visual goal for the Hoenn region, even in the original releases, was to showcase a Japanese summer with the theme of co-existence among humans and Pokémon. That theme, along with those of land and sea (for Ruby and Sapphire respectively) is being expanded for the remakes beyond just the visual upgrades. With the expanded online capabilities and trading options between X and Y, co-existence among players is receiving greater emphasis. And thanks to the new soar ability, a sky theme has also been added to the game. » **Kyle Hilliard**

The controversial Experience Share item returns for Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire



Players can now create QR codes of their bases, which will make them much easier to share with others





Ultimate NES Remix

Remixing a remix

NES Remix is quickly becoming a new franchise for Nintendo, seemingly picking up the gameplay mechanics that WarioWare left behind for Game & Wario. Nintendo NES games are grinded down to small challenges that must be completed as quickly as possible to move on to the next batch. The formula has been successful enough for two entries to be released on Wii U, and now it is moving over to 3DS. Borrowing from 16 different Nintendo

Entertainment System games like Super Mario, Metroid, Zelda, Kid Icarus, Kirby, and more, Ultimate NES Remix takes the best of the best from the two Wii U games and brings them over to the handheld.

A new feature for Ultimate NES Remix includes the difficult-to-unlock Famicom mode, which converts the entire game to the Japanese versions of the featured NES games. The gameplay is the same, but small audio and visual changes reflect the Japanese releases.

Another inclusion, Speed Mario Bros., drastically speeds up the gameplay of the entire original Super Mario Bros. in a jarring but fun way.

Playing the familiar games has a few advantages on 3DS. For one, your goal (which changes level to level) is displayed on the lower screen. It's nice to have a consistent reminder as your goal is constantly changing. With its quick gameplay chunks, the game is also well-suited for play on 3DS.

» **Kyle Hilliard**

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Platforming
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Nintendo
- » **Release**
December 5

 FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY.

THE POWER TO CREATE

DEGREE PROGRAMS IN:

Game Art

Game Development

Game Design

3300 University Boulevard • Winter Park, FL

Financial aid available for those who qualify • Career development assistance • Accredited University, ACCSC
To view detailed information regarding tuition, student outcomes, and related statistics, please visit fullsail.edu/outcomes-and-statistics.

800.226.7625

fullsail.edu



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

80 Dragon Age: Inquisition

BioWare's fantasy RPG series comes roaring back with an expansive world, a great cast, and an amazing vision for the future of Dragon Age. Players build the power of the Inquisition through an array of interesting quests and an entertaining combat system, and the enormous amount of content will keep role-playing fans busy for ages.

OF

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	Candy corn and peanut butter taffy, the only dumb Halloween candy you have left at this point.

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

Let's elevate the moment.



Toyota Corolla

toyota.com/corolla

Options shown. ©2014 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.



Let's
Go
Places

Dragon Age: Inquisition

The future of Thedas

9.5

gameformer
GOLD

gameformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) Publisher Electronic Arts
Developer BioWare Release November 18 Rating M

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Step out from under the shadow of previous Dragon Age installments with a massive, entertaining RPG

» Graphics

Character models look particularly good, and the detailed environments and flashy spell effects always give you something impressive to look at

» Sound

Excellent voice acting for all of the major characters, and a soundtrack that fits the epic fantasy setting

» Playability

Combat is fun and responsive, though some issues with the interface (like a fussy top-down camera and the lack of a storage chest) leave me scratching my head

» Entertainment

The most fun I've had with an RPG in years. Even a simple quest can turn into a multi-hour affair thanks to how well the missions, characters, and rewards tie into each other

» Replay Value

High

Multplayer Note

I played the multiplayer mode on pre-release servers at BioWare's studio. Under those conditions, everything worked as intended, though whether the live server performance is smooth at launch remains to be seen. Even in the event of network problems, Dragon Age: Inquisition's offline single-player campaign is still the main attraction.

Dragon Age: Inquisition's predecessors – Dragon Age: Origins and Dragon Age II – represent two separate visions of the franchise. The first is a sprawling tribute to old-school PC RPGs, while the second is a compact and action-oriented experience tailored to consoles. Though fans may wonder which of those entries Inquisition most resembles, the answer is ultimately irrelevant; Inquisition can't be reduced to a simple meeting point between two extremes. Instead of trying to reconcile every difference, BioWare strides into new territory for an expansive and unforgettable journey.

Inquisition doesn't completely forsake its roots; it still blends story, exploration, and combat to bring the adventure to life. While those ideas remain, their execution and seamless connection to each other are unlike anything the series has done before. The nexus of these elements is the Inquisition itself, as you rally the people of Thedas under its banner. As Inquisitor, you perform missions across Orlais and Ferelden, gaining allies and resources to fight a war against an ancient and powerful enemy.

The brilliant part of this concept is how it imbues every activity with purpose. The world of Inquisition is immense, and a freeform structure means everything you accomplish, no matter how small, feeds your larger aspirations. From simple fetch-quests to dragon-slaying expeditions, you are pulled in multiple directions, and each one leads to desirable rewards. I could hardly make it to a single objective marker without getting distracted; I'd stop to claim landmarks, close rifts, and collect crafting materials along the way.

The payoff for these distractions is the ability to unlock even more new areas, plus earn upgrades (like XP boosts and increased inventory space) for the Inquisition as a whole. This game-play loop makes distraction easy and lucrative; at the 10-hour mark, I was still exploring the Hinterlands, the first post-prologue area. I finished the game after about 70 hours, and even then, a few zones were left practically untouched.

While the world isn't one unbroken landscape (it spans two whole countries, after all), the zones dwarf anything Dragon Age has attempted before. The Hinterlands alone could probably host an entire game, and it is just the

first of several large areas packed with content. This grand scale, along with the quality of quests that fill it, is the biggest and best surprise Inquisition has to offer Dragon Age fans.

No matter where it goes, the Inquisition fights resistance from enemy factions. Combat is more in the vein of Dragon Age II than Origins, with instant-activation abilities mapped to the face buttons. The removal of traditional healing spells is a surprisingly good move, since it prevents you from playing tug-of-war with your health bar and forces you to keep the heat on your foes. The encounter design is more interesting due to the variety of enemies and their different roles, and your allies have fun ways to work together to manage the flow of battle.

Though you can technically activate an Origins-style top-down tactical camera, this view is unreliable at best, getting caught up on the environment and making it difficult to target enemies at different elevations. On normal difficulty, this option is only useful during tough encounters in flat, open areas. Inquisition's combat may not be as rewarding as the brutal pause-and-play fights of Origins, but it is still satisfying, and a great showcase for your Inquisitor's power.

Character progression is handled well, with a good mixture of passive and active abilities that always have you looking forward to spending your next skill point. I played as a mage, but being able to control any active party members means you get a feel for how all classes (and specializations that unlock later) play. The crafting system gives you the option to create, customize, and improve your gear, but making the truly powerful stuff requires some repetitive item farming. You also get a sense of your growing influence through the development of your main base, Skyhold, which is repaired and filled with your allies as they join the cause.

Everything Inquisition does right overshadows my smaller qualms with its design, like the lack of a storage chest, the inability to equip multiple weapon sets, and a handful of audio bugs and crashes. The only major disappointment in Inquisition is the central story arc. In concept, it sounds cool: The Inquisition is formed to close a demon-filled breach in the sky, unite the

paralyzed power groups of Thedas, and stop an Elder One from taking over the world. However, when you actually reach those beats in the story, many of the would-be defining events feel abrupt or poorly explained. This would normally be a death knell for an RPG, but in this case, the main narrative is just one of the many stories woven into the experience.

I loved getting to know this cast of characters (my favorite in the series to date), and their individual missions and conversations are more than enough to keep you invested and propel you forward. They present sides to various in-game issues that I had not considered, and I used my favorite characters as guides when wrestling with some of the morally ambiguous choices presented to the Inquisitor. A handful of these moments will have your mind racing at the possibilities that other outcomes might produce.

The world, characters, and side quests of the single-player campaign are bigger and better than ever, but Inquisition doesn't stop there. The multiplayer mode has you teaming up in four-player co-op for dungeon runs against one of three enemy factions. It captures a kind of excitement similar to Mass Effect 3's multiplayer, but instead of fighting off waves of encroaching enemies, you are coordinating more precise strategies against a smaller number of foes. These 20-30 minute runs provide a fun twist on a familiar style, and the post-match rewards are great for enticing you to play another round. The maps and classes at launch are plenty to get started, and BioWare has promised continuing support in the form of free DLC in the coming months.

After two disparate entries with different philosophies, Dragon Age's identity crisis is over. With a mixture of open-world exploration, entertaining combat, and top-tier characters, the team at BioWare has found a winning formula that isn't shackled to either Dragon Age: Origins or Dragon Age II. Inquisition is not defined by the traditions it returns to, but by the new directions it forges for this magnificent fantasy universe. » **Joe Juba**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version. The game is also available on Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC





Call Of Duty: Advanced Warfare

War changes after all



Style 1-Player Shooter (18-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision
Developer Sledgehammer Games/High Moon Studios **Release** November 4 **Rating** M

9

After years of modern warfare, the latest Call of Duty takes you to a terrifying future just a few years away. Drones fight wars, harmonic pulses identify targets behind walls, and death is casually doled out from afar on tablets. Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare feels like you're screening 10 summer blockbuster films at the same time as you maneuver through a fantastic set of backdrops that range from Seoul, Seattle, and a futuristic Abu Ghraib. With serious tweaks to some elements of core gameplay, Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare feels like its own special surge forward while maintaining the gunplay that makes the series fantastic.

The story sees your friend killed during a mission, and his father (played by Kevin Spacey) seeks to create a world where such reckless deaths will be avoided – a world shaped by his paramilitary corporation. Spacey's character is almost a cut-and-paste job from his *House of Cards* persona, and it's suited to the role, but the performances still end up feeling one-dimensional and hammy. Even so, the story tackles the issues of totalitarianism, fascism, and war on a slightly more cerebral level than prior iterations of the series; there's a lot more going on here than taking on "the terrorists" out of some forced patriotic narrative. Still, the campaign plods to a predictable conclusion after about seven hours.

You fly, drive, head underwater, and participate in a string of missions in a variety of distinct and interesting levels – always welcome in the shooter space where things blur together as you take out hordes of identical enemies. The action stays constant, interspersed with horrifying (or wonderful) lessons regarding the tech you use to complete your tasks, and you rarely rely on the same powers or technology twice. There's nothing quite like painting a room with a harmonics pulse and watching

all the targets drop, or using your grappling exo suit to snag unsuspecting guards during a stealth mission. Some of my favorite moments involved an extended sequence commanding a drone to back up my team's insertion, running from a new-age take on the traditional bell tower sniper, and crawling back from beyond death under the icy depths.

You gain new powers like extra health and grenades, but these upgrades don't feel meaningful or impactful. The gunplay feels a lot like the Call of Duty you've played before, despite having new additions like the catalyst/primer sniper rifle and energy shotgun. The most significant change (which I noticed a lot more in multiplayer) is to mobility. Having a double jump and boost dash adds a degree of agility that changes how Call of Duty is played, giving you an unprecedented amount of fast movement for ambushes, flag caps, and skirmishes in vertical space. It takes a few hours, but once you perfect dashing and jumping, it's a whole new kind of combat.

Advanced Warfare is at its best with multiplayer. "Pick 13" allows for a ridiculous amount of loadout customization. Similar to the Pick 10 system from Black Ops II, Pick 13 allows for even more extensive customization. You have 13 points to distribute in any areas you wish, from weapon attachments, perks, exo abilities like temporary cloaks, speed, or health boosts, exo launchers (grenades), and scorestreaks. If you want to make a cloaked knife commando or a grenade-lobbing demolitions expert, you can. Never getting scorestreaks because you're always dying? Don't bother with them; put your points in something else. It's a lot of fun mixing and matching your points to make wacky or effective combinations.

As per traditional Call of Duty progression, you rank up and unlock a host of new weapons, perks, and other toys. You can even customize

your score streak options, like a support UAV that costs substantially more points to use but retains points toward use through death.

The new supply drop system means you are constantly finding new variations on standard weapon types along with cosmetic, stylish options to outfit your character to perfection. I wasn't the best shot with the HBRa3, but once I found an elite version of the weapon in a supply drop I was tempted to learn it, and I enjoyed doing so while wearing some hot purple gloves and green shoes. If you find something you don't like or can't use for another 20 ranks, you can cash it in for XP. These supply drops are truly the secret sauce, as they provide a reward loop on top of the already pervasive progression system that lies at the core of Call of Duty multiplayer. Coming off of a bad round, there's nothing like busting open your supply drop and hearing "Elite!" when some new gear pops out.

All the classic multiplayer modes are available, like Team Deathmatch and Kill Confirmed, but you're also free to try some of the new modes, the best among them being Uplink. It's essentially capture the flag with one flag and two basketball nets, and watching someone go in for a dunk and get processed with a laser beam is great times. A co-op survival mode is perfect for players shy about going right into competition, or those looking to set records on how many waves they can handle.

Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare's single-player campaign is a ridiculous summer movie romp with sobering visions of the future of weaponry. Bring popcorn, because the real fun begins with the multiplayer, where the wealth of customization options should have players coming back for game after game. » **Daniel Tack**

This review pertains to the Xbox One version. The game is also available on PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

► Concept

Explore the exciting and terrifying applications of weaponry in the near future

► Graphics

Excellent visuals with backdrops that go way beyond the standard generic offices, warehouses, and weapon facilities

► Sound

All of the gunshots and grenade clatters as you expect, with some new sounds (or lack thereof) for new toys like the mute charge

► Playability

The campaign presents everything you need to know as you go. Multiplayer has so much customization that it can be daunting to jump into from scratch, but easy-to-use templates are available immediately

► Entertainment

A traditional, well-executed string of bombastic set pieces in single-player give way to excellent and varied multiplayer modes that capitalize on the tried-and-true franchise gameplay while adding significant changes in the form of mobility and enhanced customization

► Replay Value

High

NBA 2K15

A chronic injury plagues a star sports sim

7.75

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Hone the new-gen offerings in MyGM and MyCareer modes, but continue to turn the ball over when it comes to connectivity

» **Graphics**

Excellent player models and animations make this the best-looking sports game on the market

» **Sound**

The top commentary team in the virtual space returns, though having current Warriors head coach Steve Kerr in the booth is strange

» **Playability**

A refined experience buttressed by improved A.I.

» **Entertainment**

A good suite of game modes that could have been great had 2K fixed its server woes

» **Replay Value**

High

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) Publisher 2K Sports Developer Visual Concepts Release October 7 Rating E

Building a championship team is one of the most befuddling jobs in professional sports. You can get everything aligned – a collection of star players in their prime surrounded by hardworking secondary players and a motivating head coach – only to watch the season unravel when a critical player goes down to injury, an off-field matter becomes a distraction, or some of the players don't perform up to expectations. NBA 2K15 is like one of these on-the-cusp clubs.

If NBA 2K15 were firing on all cylinders, it would push FIFA as the best sports game on the market thanks to its best-in-class presentation, forward-looking franchise experience, and innovative MyCareer mode. But the decision to tie several game modes – some of which are experienced entirely offline, like MyCareer – to unstable servers that continue to have intermittent outages overshadows the great strides the game makes in other areas.

The revamped online versus experience, dubbed MyPark, should be avoided. In theory, the idea of having a virtual space where players commune to join pick-up games sounds great, but it's downright maddening in practice. I would rather join a match by simply selecting my preference in a menu and loading directly into a game rather than wandering around a basketball park waiting for others to jump into a queue at the same time as me. When you do finally get enough people to play a game, the delays, drops, laggy performance, and lost progress in the ranking system mar the experience.

On the hardwood, NBA 2K15's outlook brightens. The gameplay is largely improved thanks to a refined A.I. system. Players move with purpose across the court, setting up off-ball screens, spacing to open up isolation plays, and effectively defending pick and rolls.

To help newcomers better understand the shooting styles of the various NBA players, Visual Concepts added a new shot meter that visualizes the right time to release the ball. While some may find this helpful, I found it distracting and eventually turned it off because my eyes were locking on the meter instead of watching the court.

Defense may prove the biggest obstacle for newcomers. When tracking a player around the court, it's easy to get drawn into unintended animations, giving the attacker just the opening he needs to make a play. I also saw a player clip entirely through a defender's torso while going up for a shot, an immersion-shattering occurrence I thought this series had left in the rearview mirror long ago. Despite these annoyances, the moment-to-moment action is enjoyable whether you are controlling a full team or your MyPlayer.

The star mode of NBA 2K, MyCareer, once again puts you in the shoes of an up-and-coming player trying to make his mark on the Association. Instead of playing your way into being a lottery pick, this year you have a giant chip on your shoulder as an undrafted free agent. To crack an NBA roster, you need to perform well in a scrimmage for a team of your choosing and earn a 10-day contract. From there, your fate is in your hands.

NBA 2K15 tries to give you a glimpse at the life of a real NBA player by increasing your interactions with coaches and players. The idea of interacting with a real player on a regular basis is thrilling, but the experience can be interesting or horrible depending on the performance. Some players, like Al Horford, sound convincing. But others, like DeMarcus Cousins and Markieff Morris, sound like they were just going through the motions during the voiceover sessions.

MyCareer is much deeper this year, but it still has room for improvement. The new upgrade system, which has you upgrading sets of skills rather than tweaking individual skill ratings, is blind to the type of player you want to become. This is especially irksome early in the progression, when you see points get allocated to post defense and blocks when you're a point guard who would be better served with skills used during defending the perimeter. I also wish you had more control over your character's reactions. Even when you choose the humble option, the voice actor delivers his lines with an off-putting tone. The most noticeable shortcoming of all is the long load times in between games, cutscenes, and crossing over to MyPark.

If you prefer to run a team rather than control an individual player, MyGM is your best bet. This mode puts you in the shoes of a new executive responsible for overseeing everything from finance plans and scouting to training regiments and coaching strategy. You can't just sim full seasons at a time and expect good results; MyGM demands constant involvement from the user. You must manage personalities, tweak training regiments, keep promises you make to staff members and players, and try to avoid angering the press to the point where they start asking loaded questions.

The systems Visual Concepts has in place for MyGM make for a compelling experience, but some of the disparate elements need to coalesce before this becomes a destination mode. Too much of your time is spent dealing with players demanding different training regiments, and the mode isn't good at keeping track of what actions you've taken. In one instance I offered a contract extension to a player before I had a conversation about it with him, and was subsequently punished for breaking a promise even though he had the two-year deal in hand.

The other option for franchise fans is MyLeague, which strips the role-playing elements from the mode experience in favor of giving players total control of the settings. With fantasy drafts, the ability to control as many teams as you'd like, and tweakable sliders for everything from player morale to trade difficulty, MyLeague is a great option for control freaks. It's a shame this mode doesn't include the option to play with friends online.

When it works, NBA 2K15 offers a triple double worth of compelling content, from its accessible but deep gameplay to the deep MyGM and dramatic MyCareer modes. Unfortunately, the connectivity issues continue to box out players from its engaging experiences. Not every mode is affected, but tying the predominantly offline MyCareer to the servers was a poor decision, as was the choice to once again take the court with an underperforming online suite. » **Matt Bertz**

This review is based on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions. The game is also available on PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC





Assassin's Creed Rogue

Familiar territory from a new perspective

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Release November 11 Rating M

8.25

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Retread familiar gameplay with a new story of an assassin fallen from his perch

» Graphics

Only available on last-gen hardware, Rogue still manages to present some impressive environments

» Sound

Voice work and music are strong, but you've heard some of these tunes before

» Playability

The same controls that worked in the last two installments remain in place to good effect

» Entertainment

A large game with lots to explore, as long as you don't mind a sense of déjà vu

» Replay Value

Moderate

Assassin's Creed Rogue is a safe bet. Whether you're the developers who put it together, or the gamer who plays it, Rogue offers a tried-and-true experience with few gameplay surprises. By embracing established mechanics and gameplay systems, the closing chapter of the America saga regularly feels like a retread. Fortunately, with much of the groundwork already in place, the developers have been able to focus on content creation, and Rogue is one of the biggest and most varied titles in the franchise to date.

The story of Shay Cormac has overtones of Greek tragedy, focusing on an assassin's change of heart and the devastation to his previous brotherhood that ensues. The story is at times compelling, but caught in a strange gray space between an unexpected path into villainy (à la Anakin Skywalker) and a more sympathetic vision of the Templars as potential good guys – an interpretation that has never really worked for me. Regardless, there's no denying the fun of experiencing the other side of the conflict; I love the constant disquiet I felt at murdering the very figures I've spent seven years trying to aid to victory.

The metastory of Abstergo Entertainment and your unwitting part in its machinations continues to struggle to find footing. Wandering an office building and hacking computers lacks the tension and narrative drive of the series' earliest entries, and I'm hopeful that the overarching fiction can diverge into more provocative fare sometime soon.

The core gameplay draws heavily from many of the best features in Assassin's Creed III and Black Flag, and even earlier installments like Brotherhood. Sailing through the iceberg-laden ocean of the North Atlantic brings more open-sea ship combat, and the exploration of beached shipwrecks left behind by unfortunate explorers. The alpine forests of the Hudson River Valley are home to settlements to control

and wilderness to discover. And the urban streets of New York provide gang headquarters to conquer and buildings to renovate. The variety of activities is vast, even without many fundamentally new experiences.

The side activities are all tapped through the course of the central campaign, and by mixing things up, Rogue avoids some of the pitfalls of other franchise entries. I rarely felt like I was doing the same thing over and over again. If one mission offered a chase through the forest, the next might be a ship battle, and the one after that would be a fort infiltration.

These time-tested experiences are bolstered by a number of collectibles, including Viking sword fragments, Templar maps, and prosperity gems whose sole purpose is to boost the value of other rewards. Ubisoft also brings back the fleet combat minigame, which now plots Shay's involvement in the Seven Years' War. I was regularly pulled away from the core story missions into an engaging platforming challenge through the trees, or a quest to track down just a few more lost war letters. While the story setup differs, it's striking that many features are lifted wholesale from older games, from a bunch of the same sea shanties to a virtually identical fleet deployment map. Even so, these familiar and interconnected systems all perform well, and kept me busy for hours of upgrading and outfitting.

The melee combat also remains largely unchanged. Furious sword and pistol duels are still fun, but the system is beginning to show its age, especially in the light of other franchises that have begun to improve on the rhythm-based formula. After multiple games using the same moves and similar animations, the counters and strikes lack some of their previous punch.

The few new gameplay features don't show up until a few hours into the campaign, but they add some meaningful diversions. My favorite

additions involve turning the tables on the established conventions of Assassins hunting Templars. As fun as it is to hunt down an enemy of the Brotherhood, there's something equally engaging about thwarting those hidden foes before they take down an ally. Similarly, I like the sense of danger that comes once you become a target. Any bush or sloping rooftop might hide a hidden blade aimed at your heart, unless you remain wary for the telltale whispers of an approaching killer.

Rogue is vast with lots to explore, and while it lacks novelty, it offers a wealth of gameplay and lore to faithful fans. The absence of the dedicated multiplayer mode is a bummer, but you can't fault the game for lacking things to do.

For players trying to figure out which game to tackle first when two Assassin's Creed games release on the same day this year, the answer is to start here. Shay's story closes a number of story loops left behind on the American front of the Templar/Assassin conflict, and offers a crucial first step into the new European theater of war. Rogue proves why it's time for the franchise to chart some new territory, but leaves no doubt about why we fell in love in the first place. » **Matt Miller**



The Evil Within

A masterwork of absolute insanity

9

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Bethesda Softworks Developer Tango Gameworks Release October 14 Rating M

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Marry Resident Evil 4's gameplay with a much darker, unpredictable world that takes its scares seriously

» **Graphics**
A top-notch demonstration of this generation's visual potential, despite occasional texture pop-in. The attention to every gory detail helps sell the unsettling tone

» **Sound**
The sounds of an enemy's raspy breath or a butcher hacking his victim sends chills. The save room music is a masterful exercise in Pavlovian reactions

» **Playability**
The core third-person gunplay feels great, and the stealth mechanics are handled gracefully. But be warned, this game is hard as hell in the best way

» **Entertainment**
Is feeling completely unnerved for 15-plus hours your idea of a good time? Then you're in for a treat

» **Replay Value**
High

Nearly a decade ago, Shinji Mikami and Capcom unleashed Resident Evil 4. The game not only revamped the series, it set a new standard for viscerally satisfying third-person gunplay. Over the last nine years, players have mastered this gameplay style with the RE series and other franchises. Now Mikami is back to put our honed skills to the ultimate test. Tango Gameworks' premiere extracts the essence of RE 4's satisfying gameplay and progression loops while expertly ratcheting up the skin-of-your-teeth survival elements and suffocating atmosphere.

The Evil Within is what you get when you take the most iconic horror clichés, blend them into a bloody pulp, and spread them across the sturdy bones of Resident Evil 4. I can't overstate how firmly planted The Evil Within's roots are in RE 4, but that's a wonderful thing given the 2005 GameCube title's legacy. Everything from the core combat, A.I. behavior, and escalation of the enemy types feels like the incredible Capcom classic.

Mikami isn't resting on his laurels – where RE 4 and its successors were a step toward over-the-top action, The Evil Within is a return to terrifying form. This is one of the most tense, unpredictable, and demanding horror games I've ever played. One moment you're sneaking through a medieval village taking out zombies with the slick stealth system, and the next you're flung into a room with gigantic doll heads stacked to the ceiling. The Evil Within offers no respite. Even the act of saving your game is an unnerving affair, though I won't spoil how. Tango Gameworks draws obvious inspiration from horror movie classics like *Ju-On*



and *Saw*, but the way the team incorporates these themes into the gameplay makes you feel like you're surviving one of the craziest horror films you've ever seen. The multi-limbed, black-haired Laura is one of the most disturbing creatures I've encountered in a game, and she's only a fraction of the fright.

Jump scares and the gorgeous and ominous lighting set the tone, but the scarcity of resources and lethal enemies generate the most anxiety. Similar to early Resident Evils and more recently *The Last of Us*, feeling "safe" sometimes means tip-toeing into a trap-infested murder maze with a single bullet in your chamber – because at least you have something. I love playing a modern horror game where finding a couple loose shotgun shells feels like stumbling upon *El Dorado*.

You can drop matches on fallen enemies to light them on fire for a fast, ammo-saving kill. I love the satisfaction of waiting for an approaching enemy to walk near a prone corpse, and setting both monsters ablaze in a clutch two-for-one. On multiple occasions I threw every last bullet, shell, and crossbow bolt at the enemy, only to limp away with nothing but having survived. One emergent, memorable moment involved a standoff with an enemy wielding a single-action pistol, both of us circling each other before I narrowly downed it using my final bullet with only a sliver of health left. Tango Gameworks has mastered the ebb and flow of rationing out resources before dramatically stripping them away – something I found consistently intense and never frustrating.

The Evil Within is a wonderfully horrifying experience, but I have some minor gripes. Texture pop-in distracts from time to time, and a handful of archaic trial-and-error instant-death moments – like fleeing down a hallway from an invulnerable beast – become tedious instead of scary after a few repeated attempts. I died 64 times, and while I know the vast majority of those were my fault, the rest of my failures felt like remnants of the worst elements of the modern Resident Evil games. Speaking of which, the story and actors are as cheesy and heavy-handed as ever. The premise of detective Castellanos enduring a perpetually warping nightmare is great, but the driving narrative forces are at best enigmatic and at worst embarrassing.

Horror fans shouldn't let the disappointing story deter them one bit, however. Few *Paranormal Activity* fans care how these malevolent demons come back again and again – what truly matters is that the audience's nerves are frayed until they're raw. The Evil Within excels at keeping your palms sweaty while delivering a harrowingly rewarding gameplay trial. Watching the credits role with a sigh of relief doesn't feel like winning; it feels like surviving. » **Tim Turi**



This review is based on the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions. The game is also available on PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC

Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel

More Borderlands, for better and worse



Style 1 or 2-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Games **Developer** 2K Australia **Release** October 14 **Rating** M

Last generation, *Borderlands* became Gearbox's prized series, and the developer has been vocal about not tackling *Borderlands 3* until it has enough new ideas to do the game justice. In the meantime, 2K Australia stepped in to keep the money train rolling with *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, a humorous detour that takes players to Pandora's moon, *Elpis*. Despite featuring four new playable characters and a few new features, *The Pre-Sequel* feels like more of the same, which is both good and bad for fans of the series.

The Pre-Sequel takes place before *Borderlands 2*, and details Handsome Jack's transformation from being a pretentious but well-meaning hero to one of gaming's most delightfully detestable villains. 2K Australia weaves an entertaining narrative around what players already know of the characters and timelines of the previous games. Even though the writing is still more sophomoric and annoying than it is clever, I enjoyed watching Handsome Jack's flaws bubble up and learning more about the manic and humorous universe.

Unfortunately, other aspects of the game don't fare as well. *Borderlands*' signature visual style has lost some of its luster over the years, which is exacerbated by *Elipsis*' bland and monotonous landscape. The texture pop-in is especially atrocious; the series always struggled to load in hi-res textures fast enough to keep up with the player, but waiting for blobby characters to slowly come into focus is a shortcoming I'll be happy to bury with my last-gen consoles.

On the gameplay side of things, 2K Australia hasn't made too many changes to *Borderlands*' familiar and addictive gameplay loop. You still level up your character with a variety of upgrades and skills while collecting, using, and selling an endless selection of guns and equipment. However, while other loot-focused action games have made great strides in streamlining

the collection process, *Borderlands* suffers from the same old inadequacies. You still spend too much time sifting through junk loot, selling off old and unwanted items, and opening countless crates to restore ammo and pick up paltry amounts of cash. Comparing item stats and managing your inventory hasn't gotten any easier, and the quick travel system still requires slogging through long stretches of the environment just to get to the appropriate kiosk. *The Pre-Sequel* offers up some new enemy types, but they rarely require different tactics aside from what elemental gun type to use.

The biggest gameplay changes revolve (or orbit, as the case may be) around *Elpis*' atmosphere. The low gravity makes bounding across environments and vertical exploration easy and fun. The O2 system, which requires players to periodically replenish their air supply, is rarely a hindrance, and adds a welcome layer of control while floating through the air. The best addition is the buttstomp, which rockets you down on top of foes and unleashes an area-of-effect explosion. However, these gameplay tweaks come at the cost of more mobile enemies (who share all your new moves), and targeting foes floating above you is as obnoxious as it's always been in first-person shooters. Other additions like laser and cryo weapons are nice, but hardly revolutionary.

It didn't take me long to get back into the swing of things, and despite the mostly old annoyances, *The Pre-Sequel* kept me entranced like the first two games. However, my enjoyment was repeatedly stymied by balancing issues. Sticking to the story missions will quickly leave you under-leveled, and most of the side missions don't dole out enough XP to make them worth your while. *The Pre-Sequel*'s boss battles are especially frustrating, and create a punitive loop for players struggling with the level curve; respawning after you die costs you money,

but because crates don't replenish – and the boss enemy's health and shields do – purchasing replacement ammo is often your only option to rearm before heading back into the fight. On more than one occasion, the solution for beating a difficult boss was to leave, grind out a few extra levels with side missions and killing random enemies, then come back and employ the same tactics. Like previous games, *The Pre-Sequel* isn't just better with friends, it's balanced for co-op, and playing solo feels like a chore.

Ultimately, those who just want more *Borderlands* are getting their wish. *The Pre-Sequel* offers plenty of missions, completely new environments and playable characters, and one of the more interesting story threads of the series. If you're looking for more *Borderlands*, however, *The Pre-Sequel* falls short, and it will take more than laser blasters and buttstomps to put the series back at the top of my must-play list. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

This review pertains to the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 versions of the game. It is also available on PC

The *Pre-Sequel* adds a new hover vehicle to the mix, though there's less incentive to spend your time wandering about outdoors



7.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Offer players another *Borderlands* adventure without making too many changes to the formula

» Graphics

The artistic visuals of the series aren't as dazzling anymore, and the limitations of last-gen hardware are more noticeable than ever

» Sound

Most new characters sport Australian accents this time around, and fit right in with the series' amusingly irreverent tone

» Playability

The gunplay is as tight as ever, but the added verticality means you'll spend more time trying to shoot enemies out of the sky

» Entertainment

A couple of co-op buddies and a strong desire for more *Borderlands* are vital for enjoying the game

» Replay Value

Moderate

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
PS3 • 360 • Wii

» Concept

Skylanders' heroes and villains unite for the first time to take on a new threat. In addition to buying action figures, players must now procure traps to play as the villains

» Graphics

The environments are more creative in design, taking players to the distant future and to worlds overflowing with food and clocks. The new Skylander and villain designs are excellent

» Sound

Kaos (Richard Horvitz) and Flynn (Patrick Warburton) get even more screen time and are as amusing as ever. The soundtrack is buried beneath the chaos and is hardly noticeable, but I do like that many of the villains have their own themes

» Playability

The dynamic between the heroes and villains is nicely designed, allowing for tough battles to be tackled in different ways. The villains solve the problem of low-level characters having to grind for experience before taking on harder stages

» Entertainment

The biggest and most enjoyable entry in the series. It's great for single player or co-op sessions

» Replay Value

High



Skylanders: Trap Team

Good to be bad



Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher Activision Developer Toys For Bob Release October 5 Rating E

Most bad guys stick to the script of bringing evil and chaos to the world, but we occasionally see them atone for their sins and perform good deeds. In *Return of the Jedi*, Darth Vader turns against the Emperor to save his son. DC Comics' recent *Forever Evil* story arc concludes with Lex Luthor joining the Justice League. In the Super Nintendo classic, Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars, Bowser teams up with his arch nemesis Mario to exact revenge on an evil king.

Skylanders' Kaos is latest character to join the forces of good, but not by choice. In his latest bid to seize control of all of Skylands, he frees every villain contained within Cloud Cracker Prison, assuming they would help him conquer the world out of gratitude. What he didn't bargain for was one of these evildoers being far more cunning and ruthless than he is. Dressed head to toe in vibrant gold and wielding the power of the Midas touch, the villain called the Golden Queen takes control of Kaos' army, knocking him out of the picture completely. His only hope of reclaiming his throne (and not being oppressed by the Golden Queen) lies with the Skylanders.

Adding this loud-mouthed antihero to the playable character pool is just one of many ways that developer Toys for Bob turns Trap Team into the best Skylanders game to date. While the gameplay core of this annualized series remains largely unchanged, the

functionality tied to Kaos (and the 40-plus other playable villains) adds an enjoyable layer of strategy to combat, inspiring collectors like me to scour the levels for hidden areas that could contain chance encounters with these baddies.

The villains are bona fide game changers, often empowering the player with the might and stature of a boss-like entity roaming the battlefield. The destruction they unleash is advantageous for several reasons. When used correctly, they can either be saviors who protect your Skylander from death, or the equivalent of high-leveled MMO players who power-level newcomers.

Since the villains are locked away in crystalline constructs, you determine when they are freed or imprisoned again. When let loose, they take the place of your Skylander, but only for a limited amount of time. When they sustain damage, the clock expires faster. Once depleted, they return to the trap. The villains cannot gain experience points or gold; all of these riches instead go to the Skylander they replace.

Low-level Skylanders are no longer sentenced to immediate death when thrown into a difficult combat encounter toward the tail end of the game. With the villain carrying them through, weak Skylanders could conceivably gain between two and five levels in these conflicts, without taking any action themselves. This is an efficient way of leveling up new additions to your roster.

The villains don't disrupt the gameplay flow at all. Most of them are immensely satisfying to play, offering unique abilities not seen in any of the Skylanders thus far. Kaos, who unfortunately is playable only after the game is completed, and Chef Pepper Jack are ridiculously powerful, almost to the point of breaking the balance. Kaos launches elemental blasts that decimate enemy forces, and Pepper Jack breathes fire, throws explosive red peppers, and grinds enemies to pieces with a comically oversized eggbeater.

Do the villains overshadow the Skylanders? To a degree, yes, but the two factions complement each other well. Other than unlocking new skins tied to unique quests that only they

can complete, the evildoers don't evolve over the course of the game; what you see from the outset is what you get from them. All of the Skylanders offer lengthy upgrade paths, and an exciting unknown element of not knowing what their third attack or special power will be.

Level design is another area where Toys for Bob makes big strides forward. Yes, you still run in to an annoying amount of fetch quests, turtle-pushing puzzles, and lock-picking minigames, but the levels themselves are beautifully imagined, rarely falling back on the elemental-based staples used in *Spyro's Adventure* and *Giants*. Players traverse a clockwork world filled with spinning gears and transforming terrain, and a world overflowing with food – and this adventure even shows off what technology 10,000 years into Skylanders' future looks like.

One downfall to the levels is the amount of dead time often tied to combat encounters. Waves of enemies don't immediately populate, and sometimes delay the action so much that it seems like the game may have crashed.

The same cannot be said for Kaos mode, a tower defense-like scenario that shows just how frenzied and enjoyable Skylanders' combat can be. Enemies crowd the screen and are unrelenting in their push to destroy a box that you and your towers are protecting. Kaos mode is a great avenue to power-level characters. The returning Arena mode also serves this purpose well, thanks to the villains.

Whether or not you have the Skylanders required to open bonus areas, this is the biggest entry in the series, consisting of 18 lengthy missions loaded with hidden secrets and collectibles. In addition to an array of new hats, all of the Skylanders and villains can wear trinkets, like pinwheels on their tails or teddy-bear backpacks. Yes, they look utterly ridiculous now.

Giving Toys for Bob an extra year to work on this sequel paid off, not just with the concept of villains partnering with heroes, but the world they inhabit feels more alive. Trap Team is an expensive proposition (see sidebar), but one that pounds out thrills and gives fans plenty of reason to visit Skylands for a fourth time. » **Andrew Reiner**

The Price To See It All

As is the case with all playable characters in the Skylanders games, playing as a villain comes with a real-world price. To add one of these characters to your roster, you first need to purchase a trap gem that must be plugged into the Traptanium Portal. There are nine different elemental types in this installment – one of which is reserved for endgame exploration and content. To truly appreciate the full game, you'll want all nine trap types. Keep that wallet open; the price associated with seeing all of the content doesn't end there. The only characters that can access bonus areas are the new Trap Masters, which are bigger than the standard variety of Skylanders and carry a higher price tag. You need all eight elemental types of the Trap Masters to be able to explore all of the levels in their entirety. The core set comes with a Water Trap Master and a Water and Life trap, which means you need to spend an additional \$250 to obtain everything you need to see it all.

Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishments

Of mind and murder



Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Focus Home Entertainment
Developer Frogwares **Release** September 30 **Rating** M

Sherlock Holmes often finds the proverbial smoking gun linked to a murder. In almost every case he takes on, he uncovers damning evidence that puts a killer behind bars. His proficiencies are all over the map, turning him into a super-sleuthing chameleon capable of becoming a shrewd interrogator, skilled scientist, master of disguise, untouchable combatant, undetectable thief, and any fantastical profession that leads to a miraculous case-breaking revelation.

In *Crimes & Punishments*, all of Holmes' aforementioned skills are effectively tapped to create dynamic gameplay sequences that gel with the investigations, and empower the player with the sensation of doing impressive exploratory work worthy of the Great Detective's name. Holmes solves six different murders, all offering interesting setups, outcomes, and plenty of sights for Anglophiles to soak up.

At every crime scene, Holmes must be astute and thorough, taking the time to uncover as many clues as possible to create different leads to dive deeper into. If evidence is overlooked, entire plot threads are left in the shadows, leaving Holmes with a smaller selection of suspects and motives to work with.

While I appreciate a game that pushes me to think like Holmes and be as complete as him, a little feedback would have been nice to understand where I went wrong and right. The game does a fantastic job of outlining possible leads and pulling the player along them, but lets the player free fall into the unknown in the final moments. Is it satisfying sending someone to jail?

Absolutely. I just wish I knew if I wore the deerstalker correctly. The choices that the player makes carry significant weight, not just in the thought that someone innocent could go to jail, but in that large chunks of an investigation can be missed if a case is sloppily handled and closed early.

Regardless of their outcomes, the cases all end up feeling like filler episodes from a television TV series. None of them are linked in narrative, and there's little to no character development to latch onto. Even so, sniffing out clues in *Crimes & Punishments* is enjoyable, and those startling "Eureka!" moments make the investigation worthwhile.

» **Andrew Reiner**



8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**

Sherlock Holmes' talents are on display in six standalone cases. The twist: All of his deductive reasoning is handled by the player

» **Graphics**

The character models are lush in detail, but awkwardly animated and lip synched. London is gorgeously brought to life, but the city's landmark sights are not featured. The focus is instead on areas you wouldn't expect to see in a Sherlock Holmes game

» **Sound**

Sherlock Holmes' voice rarely wavers from self-assured smugness, which can be annoying. Most of the voice work is decent, but the writing rarely calls for more than standard conversations

» **Playability**

A nice mix of exploration and minigames that fit the story and its events

» **Entertainment**

A great example of how player choice can shape a gameplay experience. Most cases offer a variety of conclusions

» **Replay Value**

Moderately low



St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

Thanks and Giving[®]

Show your support for the children at St. Jude and donate November 3 - December 24

GameStop is a proud supporter of
St. Jude Children's Research Hospital[®]

GameStop

POWER TO THE PLAYERS[®]

DriveClub

A new way to chase that familiar feeling

7.75

PS4

» **Concept**

Prove that a predominately online racing title doesn't just have to be about PvP racing to be fun

» **Graphics**

The lighting in particular makes DriveClub look great, and elements in the environment like smoke or confetti are great touches that prevent the world from being sterile

» **Sound**

I really enjoy the engine sounds from the cars, which is something that I don't usually care about

» **Playability**

The game is slightly more sim than arcade, and it feels really good

» **Entertainment**

DriveClub doesn't revolutionize online play, but offers solid driving and just enough features to keep it engaging

» **Replay Value**

Moderately high



Style 1-Player Racing (12-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Evolution Studios **Release** October 7 **Rating** E

You shouldn't need a lot of impetus in a racing game. The objective is to go as fast as you dare and come in first place. That being said, many racing games (DriveClub included) have found ways to make it so that even the not-so-great racers can get something for their effort.

Building out a good feature set and enticing players to keep doing essentially the same thing over and over again is the task of all racing games. DriveClub's answer to this problem is to rely heavily on online features designed to pump out user-created challenges and encourage you to join a car club in order to give further meaning to your race-in, race-out activities. This setup taps into the competitive spirit, but only sustains for so long.

The single-player activities contain a basic progression of races that unlocks as you earn

more stars based on your lap times, what place you come in, etc. There's nothing that distinguishes it other than how it's tied to online play; your lap times and other achievements in single-player can be used to create challenges for others via the event history log.

In fact, if you don't have an online connection, I would not recommend DriveClub at all. It is worth noting that many users have reported problems with the game's server, though I experienced no problem when playing the game for review.

All the races (including the 12-car multiplayer) feature face-offs. These require you to beat someone else's score in average speed, correct racing line, or drifting over a discrete portion of the track. Face-offs are DriveClub's distinguishing feature that keeps things fresh by offering a race-within-the-race. They change from lap to

lap and are populated via matchmaking. These keep you invested even when things aren't going well, since winning face-offs helps you increase your driver rank.

I like face-offs more than the challenge system – which isn't bad, but is pretty straightforward. Put down a good lap, race, or drift score and you can make it a challenge for everyone else, select friends, or other clubs. While completing challenges contributes to Driver Rank, I found them engaging only when I joined a club. Clubs are fairly passive, since they don't interfere with your activities. Joining one simply means that whatever you do is contributing to the overall club XP kitty. However, I developed a strange pride in trying to be the one who posted a good finish for the club on a challenge leaderboard.

Despite being a central feature of the game, clubs are surprisingly underutilized. There are no co-op challenges with club members, and no acknowledgment for the achievements of individual members. If I'm busting my hump advancing the club (there are five exclusive cars for clubs to unlock together), I'd like to get some recognition. Tabbing who has drifted the longest or put in the most hours would not only spur other club members and further the sense of accomplishment, but these and other club stats would also create more of an identity when stacked against other clubs.

In my time with the game, DriveClub worked as advertised, and despite the seamlessness of its single-player and online features, the game's not wildly more captivating than most other racers out there. It captures the spur of competitive racing, but this is due more to the fact that its racing fundamentals (which are more sim than arcade) give it a good foundation rather than some groundbreaking feature set. Drive it fast and drive it hard, but don't expect a miracle. » **Matthew Kato**



The real-time lighting changes help the game look great

9.25

Xbox One

» **Concept**

A joke-spewing protagonist grinds, flies, and blows the living hell out of mutants running amok in a gorgeously decorated open world. Strong in both humor and gameplay, this is Insomniac doing what it does best: fun, lighthearted action

» **Graphics**

The yellows and pinks give the city a unique pop that electrifies the screen. The protagonist's animations (and respawn sequences) look great. Watching a mutant's guts transform into onomatopoeia is strangely satisfying

» **Sound**

A blast of licensed and original punk and grunge songs gives the action a fitting punch of intensity

» **Playability**

Getting around the open world is a wonderful experience, and the excellent gunplay and abundance of collectibles heighten the fun

» **Entertainment**

Mission variety is lacking, but it didn't stop me from enjoying almost every second of play for 20-plus hours

» **Replay Value**

Moderately high



Sunset Overdrive

Insomniac Games is home from war



Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Insomniac Games **Release** October 28 **Rating** M

For the better part of a decade, Insomniac entrenched itself in war stories, taking players to the brink of extinction in Resistance, and to the race for resources in Fuse. Prior to creating these gritty experiences, Insomniac's fingerprint was colorful, lighthearted, and used to forge Spyro the Dragon, a coming-of-age tale set in a magical kingdom, and Ratchet & Clank, a journey into deep space that puts as much focus on the bond of friendship as it does blowing the living crap out of every evildoer in the galaxy.

Insomniac comes full circle with Sunset Overdrive. It's vibrant, fun, and though it occasionally waves a stern finger at corporations and pressing issues of the day, jokes always come first. I don't think one story moment is free of a punchline or sight gag.

The humor is entertaining, but the unconventional concoction of gameplay is the heart of Sunset Overdrive. On the one hand, it plays out like your typical super hero game, where city traversal is the backbone of most of the action. On the other hand, it's a shooter at heart, placing heavy emphasis on skillful running and gunning. And then on an unexpected third mutant hand, it's a sprawling collect-a-thon, pushing players to secure hundreds and hundreds of hidden goodies spread across Sunset City's colorful architecture.

The player-created character, a down-on-their-luck nobody, becomes the unlikely ray of hope that could bring humanity back from an apocalypse brought on by new energy drink Overcharge Delirium XT. Any person who sips one drop of this fluid mutates into a vile beast (called an OD). The ODs will do anything to get more Overcharge.

Much like Marvel's loudmouth mercenary, Deadpool, this character (who you create as a male or female) is a nonstop joke generator – and a pretty damn good one. The hero occasionally leans a little too heavily on profanity,

but is mostly successful in upping the humor and ridiculousness of a particular moment. Time and time again, Insomniac shows us that nothing is off limits for a joke. The death of a loved one, politics, focus testing – the fourth wall is even broken to poke fun at video game.

The humor and exploration coalesce in a workable way that makes cruising across Sunset City one of the most approachable and enjoyable experiences I've had in an open-world game.

City traversal delivers an addictive, Zen-like quality that harks back to the days of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, and the thrill of chaining together the biggest combos possible. The protagonist isn't super-powered, but just happens to be one of the most aggressively nimble characters to step foot in an open-world environment. Possessing the gift of a 10-foot vertical and the ability to free-run along any building exterior and grind on any rail, exploration is almost effortless for this oddball hero.

I rarely used fast travel to navigate the city's three boroughs. I immersed myself in creating massive chains linking together rail grinds, wall runs, pole swings, air dashes, and bounce maneuvers. Additionally, every action accumulates experience through use, eventually culminating in badges that enhance the hero's skills. The controls are simple in design, linking most of these actions with one or two button presses.

Sunset City itself is the key to making this functionality work, as almost every object – be it a bush, awning, power line, air vent, or car – can lead to a grind, bounce, or combo-extending maneuver. The city is teeming with beautiful details, but its most impressive quality is the strategic cluttering of interactive objects that feed into combo strings.

Chains aren't compromised solely of free-running techniques; combat is beautifully woven into them, making precision gunplay while zipping along a high wire easy to execute. From the silly weapon designs to melee

strikes cracking open boxes, the influence of Ratchet & Clank is undeniable in battle, and that's okay. Ratchet's gunplay has always worked well, and its inspiration feels right at home in Sunset Overdrive.

All of the weapons gain levels through use, and can be modified with a wide variety of amps (devastating modifiers that are unleashed when the combo meter rises). This is where you see Insomniac's gift for inventive death-dealing; you turn downed foes into explosive teddy bears, summon a reaper, and electrify nearby rails.

Amps are tied directly to the third activity: collecting. For whatever reason, the store-owners in Sunset City trade powerful Amps for stinky shoes, toilet paper, neon signs, surveillance cameras, and inflatable Fizzco balloons. Here's the kicker: There are 150 of each of these items, and all of them act as an independent form of currency. An amp that generates fire area effects costs 55 pieces of toilet paper.

Additionally, amps and collectibles are rewarded at the end of missions. Humor plays a large role in making the tasks fun, but Sunset Overdrive's biggest problem (which it even harps on) is its reliance on fetch quests. All too often, the assignment is to find three or five objects in a set location. While I like that I had to look high and low to find them, it starts to get tedious. The best missions veer away from this crutch and focus on one-off instances such as battling a Fizzco balloon, or helping a LARPing community seize control of a kingdom. The Night Defense missions, which incorporate deployable traps, are also notable.

Outside of the mission monotony, Sunset Overdrive is an immensely rewarding experience that has a look and style all its own and a great gameplay package to complement it. It's a colorful return to form for Insomniac games, and a hell of an exclusive for Xbox One.

» **Andrew Reiner**

A Side Of Co-op

Stepping into a photo-booth matches your character with seven others for Chaos Squad, a series of cooperative missions that culminate in a Night Defense battle. Teaming up to battle the OD can be a bit overwhelming given the insanity erupting onscreen, but it is satisfying to lock down the perimeter with a group. I enjoyed my time with Chaos Squad, but it doesn't have deep hooks or offer much outside the campaign.

Project Spark

Build an estimation of your dream game

7.5

Style 1 to 4-Player Simulation (4-Player Online) Publisher Microsoft Studios Developer Team Dakota Release October 7 Rating E10+

**Xbox One
360 • PC**

» Concept

Give players an impressive collection of tools, templates, and objects to create nearly any game they want

» Graphics

With an art-style reminiscent of Fable, creations look cool, even if you're not much of an artist

» Sound

The collection of loops and orchestrated music offers some surprisingly hummable tunes

» Playability

The game-building controls are complicated, and you will hit the wrong button by mistake often, but it's easy to fix errors.

The controller integration is well implemented

» Entertainment

Project Spark is whatever you want it to be, but realizing your dream project can be difficult to pull off

» Replay Value High

Despite a long-standing adoration for the medium of video games, I have never been interested in trying to make my own. Even with that mindset, however, Project Spark quickly got my creative juices flowing in an enjoyable way.

When creating a game and world of your own, the first thing Project Spark has you do is terraform the land. Building mountains and tearing holes in the ground quickly gives you a sense you are creating something worth exploring. That's the easy part. From there, you are dropped into the daunting task of coding (or "Koding" as it is referred to in Project Spark) your world and characters.

A short single-player game helps explain some of the properties of the coding, but it feels unfinished. Essentially, players must find coding tiles to complete logic sentences that manipulate the level to their will. This is a fun way to showcase how coding works, and could have been a great way to foster ideas for players to create their own games (something LittleBigPlanet's campaigns do expertly), but its lack of content makes this teaching opportunity fall short of its goals. The handful of episodes is completed in very little time, but Microsoft promises more episodes in the future.

The coding system in general offers a clean and fairly straightforward visual approximation of a typical programming language, but once you start moving outside of the starter templates, it can get confusing fast. Everything is arranged into "when" and "do" logic sentences. For example, you can manipulate the brain of your playable character so "when" the A button is pressed, the player will "do" the jump action. You can add modifiers from there, opening up an intimidating rabbit hole



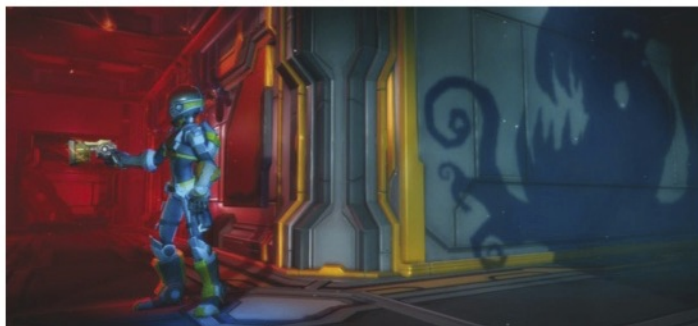
where seemingly simple actions become head-scratching puzzles. I was forced to access the Internet on many occasions to figure things out. Getting your coding to work and having the game do exactly what you want it to do, however, is rewarding.

Outside of the campaign, which disguises its educational value, there is only one tutorial for making a straightforward 3D action/platforming game. This is the type of game Project Spark favors, even though making many different types of games is possible. For a game so proud of its malleability, I was surprised it didn't make a stronger effort to teach you more of its options.

Project Spark may come up short in helping the player understand how best to take advantage of it, but there is a vibrant community of players making genuinely fun games (and non-games) that have been working hard with Spark since before the game officially

launched. I played first-person shooters, turn-based RPGs, music simulators, weird experiments, and more. It's easy to search and see if anybody has tried to make something specific, but Project Spark also surfaces the good stuff well. From nearly any menu, a list of recent suggestions appears, which means if you see something that looks interesting, trying it out or downloading it to look at the level's code and remix it is simple. This gives players a lot of incentive to keep checking in and see what people are making, so even if you don't want to try your hand at design, you may find some entertaining content.

Project Spark offers an impressive collection of tools for tinkerers, or even someone who might want to try prototyping an idea, but the experience is what you're willing to make of it. It won't make a designer out of everyone, but if you're eager to invest and study, it can be a versatile and enjoyable tool. » **Kyle Hilliard**





Fantasia: Music Evolved

Harmonix's concept album

Style 1 or 2-Player Music/Rhythm Publisher Disney Interactive Developer Harmonix Release October 21 Rating E10+

8.25

Xbox One • 360

» Concept

Conduct the magic of music in an interactive sequel to the classic Disney film

» Graphics

The colorful realms of Fantasia are whimsical and beautiful, while the in-song cues are clear and thoughtfully choreographed

» Sound

More than 30 songs run the gamut from pop to classical, but the multiple remixes for each make the game exciting

» Playability

Adjusting to the timing needed for the motion controls takes practice, but once you get that down, the Kinect integration is excellent

» Entertainment

Simple and unabashedly joyful, Fantasia is a game unafraid to explore new ways to interact with music

» Replay Value

Moderately high

Few studios have the clarity of purpose that Harmonix brings to each of its games.

Whether dancing to club hits or shredding on a plastic guitar, its games are built around extending the joy of music creation and involvement to any and all players, regardless of skill. Fantasia is the studio's most experimental and unusual project to date, sadly arriving several months after Kinect has been all but abandoned by Microsoft. But for the players who do own the motion tracking camera, Fantasia is the most surprising and creative project to harness its capabilities. If Harmonix's latest project at times fails to find footing as a traditional game, it makes up for it by invoking a novel experience of discovery, creation, and involvement with music.

Years ago, Mickey Mouse apprenticed himself to the sorcerer, Yensid, and his watery tribulations taught the value of learning to swim prior to entering the deep end of the pool. Years later, you are the sorcerer's newest pupil, ready to learn the magic of conducting the music of the cosmos. The simple story that unfolds is charming in the way of Disney animated fare, with a couple of likable characters, and a light but thoughtful theme about the way the noise of life pulls us away from our creative selves.

Adventures take the new apprentice into the realms of Fantasia, each a discordant and darkened environment waiting to be awakened with music and life. These artful realms recall the dancing hippos and frightening devils on the mountain of the original film, but expressed through imaginative new visions. Players visit the magical forest populated by a mischievous Yeti, a majestic solar system that transforms into an 8-bit wonderland with a gesture, and eight more equally amusing settings. Each realm is filled with little secrets to discover, each of which manipulates both the visuals and soundtrack of the scene.

Hidden niches in each realm offer musical minigames that further accentuate the realm's aural landscape, like preparing the routine of a dancing troupe of vegetables, or drawing the

music out of circuitry in an abandoned space station. Exploring these locales is fun, but it's a shame that the game has frequent and lengthy loads between content pieces, songs, and new areas. The long waits feel particularly tedious in a game about the immediacy of the creative drive.

Musical touchstones are tucked away in each of Fantasia's six realms. These entryways into a song offer the meat of the gameplay, as you swing your arms around like a cross between Harry Potter and a precocious child pretending to conduct a symphony. Prescribed motion cues flit across the screen, and you're soon punching, flicking, and sliding your hands in accompaniment to the wide-ranging soundtrack. The motion controls take getting used to (start the motion ahead of the cue), but the camera's responsiveness is excellent, and I found both musically literate and rhythmically challenged players got the hang of it within a song or two. Self-conscious players, on the other hand, may want to look elsewhere. Even more than many dancing games, Fantasia makes you look like a crazy person.

Fantasia plays in a large musical sandbox. On-disc selections skew toward recent popular hits, like Lorde's "Royals" and Nicki Minaj's "Super Bass." But sprinkled into the mix are old classics like Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" and Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." Harmonix didn't forget the roots of the Fantasia concept, either. Several of the tracks are gorgeous new classical recordings by the likes of Vivaldi, Mozart, and Tchaikovsky, as well as some stellar new pieces by game music mainstay Inon Zur.

While gesturing along to the music is fun in its own right, the real magic comes through opportunities to remix. Each song is packaged with two additional remixes that further stretch the musical sandbox into a playground. Pop tunes morph into big band arrangements. Classical melodies are layered with drum and bass. Mixing and matching these mixes at multiple switch cues throughout the song lead

to a version of the music that is all your own, and there's a mounting excitement as you get swept up into your creation. That's why it's a shame Harmonix has locked the mixes behind replays of the song – it's not until a third run at a piece that you can play with all mixes from the start. In addition to full remixes, composition spells offer additional ways to shape the music, adding a melody you built through your hand motions or a rhythmic flourish pasted together from samples. While these little musical sidetracks occasionally falter into cacophony, they often add a catchy new riff into the mix, contributing an even deeper sense of ownership. At times, the final mix as a song concludes feels synergistic and powerful. At other times, the mix is downright silly. Either way, I found myself smiling.

Multiplayer is as easy as a handshake in front of the camera, and I love the cooperative/competitive experience that results. Each player must complete their own color-coded gestures as they compete for high scores.

On that point, even on its most difficult songs, Fantasia rarely offers a true challenge, and the scoring system places too much weight on the value of multipliers established at each of the mix switch cues. Investment in progressions stutters halfway through; new song and realm unlocks carry you through the first half of the game, but too few rewards (beyond just a few bonus songs) await in the second half.

If Fantasia feels at times like it's been shoe-horned into being a game, it's because the concept doesn't necessarily lend itself well to gamification. At its best, a sense of playfulness and childlike glee pervades any given session. At the same time, it's easy to get impatient for the realms to open up, all the songs to be playable, and for the scores to go away in favor of pure musical expression. As it is, those hang-ups don't prevent me from embracing its weirdness and charm, and recommending it as a worthy (perhaps final?) dedicated project for Kinect. » **Matt Miller**

Civilization: Beyond Earth

How I learned to stop worrying and love the siege worm

9

PC

» Concept

As society on Earth collapses, lead your people to the new frontier of space to survive and thrive

» Graphics

The units and scenery make the hex-world come to life, but don't expect mindblowing visuals

» Sound

Applicable and interesting sound effects suited to the setting, from siege worms toppling workers on your zone borders to Suzanne Fielding making contact

» Playability

Anyone that has played Civilization V should feel right at home immediately.

A comprehensive advice guide/tutorial is available for newcomers that walks through many of the beginning decisions or helps identify all the new features and mechanics for veterans

» Entertainment

There's a ton to explore here within an inviting strategy shell, enticing those who have never delved into the 4X space and demanding the attention of genre fans

» Replay Value

Very high



Style 1 to 8-Player Strategy (8-Player Online) Publisher 2K Games Developer Firaxis Games Release October 24 Rating E

The Civilization series heads to the unexplored and uncharted realms of outer space with Beyond Earth. The game serves as a spiritual successor to the much-acclaimed Alpha Centauri, but along with alien life and covert operations in enemy bases, the title also draws from recent Civilization games to create its own distinct feel.

Civilization fans should have a fairly painless transition, as many of Civ V's features are intact, but there are plenty of new moving parts to keep things interesting. Aliens are the franchise's new take on the barbarians from the earthbound games. Unlike barbarians, these are not just some A.I. annoyance that needs to be occasionally purged from your borders. While there's no faction leader to negotiate with, these creatures are everywhere and they will remember your actions toward them.

As in Alpha Centauri, the aliens and the planet itself play a bigger role that must be dealt with over the course of a game; they are not factors you can ignore like the bumbling barbarians.

You can try and live in harmony with these creatures (which are everywhere, mind you) but often they'll be in the way of "progress." Busting up a few packs of baby green monsters may incur the wrath of siege worms or worse. Aliens must be handled in some fashion in every game, and these interactions with pervasive A.I. units add a new element to the mix. The aliens are a fun, thematic addition to the core gameplay, but they can take some getting used to, as your forces may be slaughtered during a war with another faction by a persnickety Kraken or swarm of other alien units.

Players gain minor perks from selecting a specific faction, but much of the customization in Civilization: Beyond Earth comes from a new affinity system. This represents your take on how to approach the alien life and the future of humanity on the new planet. Will you commit to preserve the old world, look to change things to a new existence, or integrate alien life and the new planet into your very DNA? The three affinities – Purity, Supremacy, and Harmony – all provide wildly different gameplay options, each with signature units, technologies, and victory conditions.

A Harmony player's buildings in the late game ripple with alien life. They may use actual alien units like the Xeno Swarm, tap into the normally toxic miasma for huge resource acquisition and unit healing, and even call up a siege worm assault to an opposing player's city via their willingness to embrace alien life. The Purity affinity embraces purging alien life from the planet, uses dirty bombs, and creates massive mechanical terrors. Supremacy sits between those two extremes, seeking to take advantage of new technological opportunities like superior orbital powers and maintenance-free roads.

These distinct paths, combined with the tech web, force players to make huge decisions during the first few turns that echo for the hundreds that follow. The mid-game and late game are especially interesting, as you see core units like marines and rovers completely transform based on players' affinity choices. Some incredibly specialized late game units actually require points in multiple affinities. The affinities add a ton of customized replayability that goes way beyond "I want to play Germany for the special tank units during this era" or a small culture bonus.

The new quest system serves as a sort of informational tutorial to guide a player's actions by providing significant rewards. You may get rewards from taking out alien bases, exploring, and many other essential activities. While you don't need to complete them to win, they provide an incentive and guide to move you in the right direction if you're not sure what you should be doing at any stage in the game.

You can win a standard game of Civilization: Beyond Earth in five ways. Beyond the classic ways to win via dominance or superior technology, Civilization: Beyond Earth features unique victory conditions associated with each affinity, generally advanced to by playing within the style that suits each ideology. This gives players opportunities to play in a wide variety of ways to win and does an excellent job of doing so.

Civilization: Beyond Earth doesn't take the series to the outer galaxies in terms of revolutionary new gameplay, but it provides fantastic modifications and mechanics that allow it to stand proud as a worthy bearer of the Civilization name. This is a must play for strategy fans, and if you've always been curious about the genre but never jumped in, your opportunity is here. » Daniel Tack



The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter

A hidden mystery worth uncovering

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** The Astronauts **Developer** The Astronauts **Release** September 26 **Rating** NR

Created by the three founders of People Can Fly, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* couldn't be more different from that studio's pedigree of relentlessly intense shooters. Thankfully, The Astronauts' first project is as refreshing as it is surprising.

Players dive into the role of a supernatural investigator named Paul Prospero who was summoned to the rural county of Red Creek Valley after reading a letter from a boy named Ethan Carter. When Ethan accidentally opens a door into a separate dimension, he unleashes a creature called the Sleeper, who possesses his family and turns them against each other. As Paul wanders through Red Creek Valley's twilight-lit hills, he stumbles across the aftermath of this event and pieces together a series of murders to discover Ethan's fate. The story is so compelling that I found it hard to put the game down until I'd pieced together the final mystery and discovered the delightful twist ending.

Unlike traditional adventure games, you don't run across a series of village inhabitants or acquire a laundry list of strange gadgets that let you unlock new areas. Instead, most of Red Creek Valley is open to explore from the outset, and while the tale generally funnels you in the right direction, it's still easy to overlook your next destination and get lost wandering in the forest until the suspense begins to dull.

If you're willing to put up with the loosely structured gameplay, *Ethan Carter* presents a series of captivating mysteries. All of Paul's investigations begin when he finds the body of one of Ethan's relatives. Cautious investigators will enjoy scouring each crime scene for clues that usually aren't too difficult to find thanks to Paul's psychic abilities. Once all of an investigation's clues have been found, Paul can commune with the dead and receive a series of snapshots from the event. For me, the most rewarding element was piecing these snapshots together into a logical sequence that ultimately rewards you with a full account of how each victim died – and a cryptic vision that points you one step closer to finding Ethan.

Outside of these investigations, a few odd tasks give you additional reasons to explore Red Creek Valley. During one moment of the game, I was chasing a mysterious figure through the forest. During another, I stepped through a series of portals that had me teleporting across a derelict mansion in order to find its hidden room. While these sequences are rarely challenging, they ensure that you never know what to expect next.

While sections of *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* might hang up players who aren't patient enough to scrub its environments, the experience rewards those who enjoy soaking in atmosphere and exploring every nook and cranny. *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* won't challenge your brain like it will challenge your daring, but it offers up plenty of thrills and tells a crafty story that fans of dark fantasy and pulp horror won't want to miss.

» Ben Reeves

8

PC

» **Concept**

Explore a rural countryside while looking for a lost child and piecing together the mysteries surrounding the death of his family

» **Graphics**

Environments look crisp, and the ghostly atmosphere engrosses you in the mystery

» **Sound**

A solid soundtrack and script help make up for the subpar voiceovers

» **Playability**

The two-button controls keep things simple, and most of the puzzles are simple but rewarding

» **Entertainment**

Freeform exploration can be tedious, but the tense moments will have your heart racing

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Fantasy Life

A beautiful world filled with chores

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (3-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Level-5, 1-UP Studio **Release** October 24 **Rating** E

6

3DS

What's the price of admission to a beautiful world? Is it enough to just explore a wondrous setting? *Fantasy Life* has charm, but it's more about its ambiance than what you actually do. The art style is striking and the music whimsical, but soon you're scrolling through mounds of boring text – or worse – completing fetch quests on repeat. I enjoyed *Fantasy Life* for the first few hours, but it showed its hand too early, never offering anything new or exciting.

Fantasy Life feels like an amalgamation of a grindy MMO and a simulation game like *Rune Factory*. You start a life in a new land and your first task is to choose from a widespread selection of classes, such as a mercenary, angler, or cook. The classes don't change the course of the main story, but they do determine the side activities available. All my challenges for the mercenary class revolved around slaying monsters or collecting bounties. Satisfaction comes from building up your stats, finding new gear to alter your avatar, and unlocking new features, such as pets and the ability to ride a tortoise. However, the progression loop is small and little skill is required to complete the monotonous tasks laid before you.

You can swap classes at all times and not lose progress, however, which is great because of the aforementioned lack of variety. Cooks will always have tasks regulated to making new dishes, so switching to combat is refreshing. Fetch quests are also littered throughout each land, which award cash to spend on gear, house items, plots of land, and pets. All of this is wrapped in a lousy story mode that lasts around 12 hours.

The narrative is run-of-the-mill: The shell of the world is crumbling and you must collect relics and wishes to save it. Every long, drawn-out conversation is stuffed in a horrendous story structure. To unlock the next sequence, you're often backtracking from one location to the next. Throw in characters that lack personality and every boring conversation is just going through the motions. To add insult to injury, after you polish off the story, you don't have much left to do aside from the class challenges, fetch quests, and a multiplayer mode that lets you play through the tedium with friends. Every action taken is rote, the bosses are pushovers, the dungeons are barren, and nothing is complex enough to evoke any sort of emotion.

A tantalizing world can only do so much when what it holds isn't that exciting. *Fantasy Life* starts off enjoyable, but it nosedives quickly, leaving you with an experience disconnected from the potential of the world and its inhabitants. » Kimberley Wallace

» **Concept**

Build a life and save the land of Reveria by locating relics and defeating baddies

» **Graphics**

The world is vibrant and the animated cutscenes are so gorgeous that it's a shame there aren't more

» **Sound**

Another Final Fantasy icon, Nobuo Uematsu, takes the reins for the score. The result is delightful, but a few extra tracks would have gone a long way for variety

» **Playability**

The mechanics are easy to grasp, but the vast world can be difficult to navigate

» **Entertainment**

Fantasy Life is fun at first, but the boring quests and uninteresting characters exacerbate the repetition

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



PLAYSTATION 4

Alien: Isolation	7.75	Nov-14
Amazing Spider-Man 2, The	5.5	Jul-14
Bound By Flame	8	Jul-14
Child of Light	8	Jun-14
Crimsonland	7	Oct-14
Daylight	6	Jun-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Diablo III: Reaper of Souls – Ultimate Evil Edition	9.25	Oct-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
EA Sports UFC	8	Aug-14
Entwined	5.5	Aug-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Golf Club, The	8	Oct-14
Hohokum	6	Oct-14
Infamous First Light	8	Oct-14
Last of Us Remastered, The	10	Oct-14
Lego The Hobbit	8	Jun-14
Madden NFL 15	8	Oct-14
Metro Redux	8.5	Oct-14

Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor	8.25	Nov-14
Murdered: Soul Suspect	6.5	Aug-14
NHL 15	5.5	Nov-14
Sniper Elite III	6.5	Sep-14
Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark	5	Sep-14
Transistor	9	Jul-14
Trials Fusion	8	Jun-14
Valiant Hearts: The Great War	7	Aug-14
Watch Dogs	8.5	Jul-14
Wolfenstein: The New Order	8	Jul-14

XBOX ONE

Alien: Isolation	7.75	Nov-14
Amazing Spider-Man 2, The	5.5	Jul-14
Another World: 20th Anniversary Edition	8	Sep-14
Child of Light	8	Jun-14
D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die	7.5	Nov-14
Dance Central: Spotlight	6	Nov-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14

Diablo III: Reaper of Souls – Ultimate Evil Edition	9.25	Oct-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
EA Sports UFC	8	Aug-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Forza Horizon 2	8.25	Nov-14
Golf Club, The	8	Oct-14
Kinect Sports Rivals	6.5	Jun-14
Lego The Hobbit	8	Jun-14
Madden NFL 15	8	Oct-14
Magic 2015 – Duels of the Planeswalkers	8.75	Sep-14
Metro Redux	8.5	Oct-14
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor	8.25	Nov-14
Murdered: Soul Suspect	6.5	Aug-14
NHL 15	5.5	Nov-14
Super Time Force	8.5	Jul-14
Super Ultra Dead Rising 3 Arcade Remix Hyper Edition EX + α	7.5	Aug-14
Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark	5	Sep-14

Trials Fusion	8	Jun-14
Valiant Hearts: The Great War	7	Aug-14
Watch Dogs	8.5	Jul-14
Wolfenstein: The New Order	8	Jul-14

PLAYSTATION 3

2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil	8	Jun-14
Amazing Spider-Man 2, The	5.5	Jul-14
Bound By Flame	8	Jul-14
Child of Light	8	Jun-14
Dark Souls II: The Crown of the Sunken King	9	Sep-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Diablo III: Reaper of Souls – Ultimate Evil Edition	9.25	Oct-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Drakengard 3	6	Jul-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Grid Autosport	7.75	Aug-14
Hohokum	6	Oct-14
Lego The Hobbit	8	Jun-14

Madden NFL 15	7.5	Oct-14
MLB 14: The Show	8.5	Jun-14
Murdered: Soul Suspect	6.5	Aug-14
NHL 15	7	Nov-14
R.B.I. Baseball 14	2	Jun-14
Risen 3: Titan Lords	7	Oct-14
Sacred 3	7.5	Oct-14
Tales of Xillia 2	7.75	Sep-14
Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark	5	Sep-14
Valiant Hearts: The Great War	7	Aug-14
Walking Dead Season Two – Episode 5: No Going Back, The	6.5	Oct-14
Watch Dogs	7.5	Jul-14
Wolf Among Us: Episode 5 – Cry Wolf, The	7.5	Sep-14
Wolfenstein: The New Order	8	Jul-14

XBOX 360

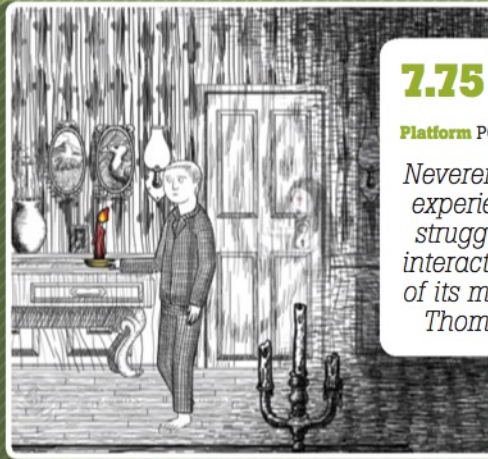
2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil	8	Jun-14
Amazing Spider-Man 2, The	5.5	Jul-14
Bound by Flame	8	Jul-14

7 | Pier Solar HD

Platform PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, PC
Release September 30 Rating T

I wanted to love Pier Solar HD. I grew up playing the titles it emulates, and seeing the look and feel so authentically captured gave me high hopes. However, I grew increasingly bored with Pier Solar once the initial wonder wore away.

– Joe Juba



7.75 | Neverending Nightmares

Platform PC Release September 26 Rating NR

Neverending Nightmares is an emotionally resonant experience. I felt fully empathetic towards Thomas' struggles, which is an impressive feat. The limited interactivity holds it back from taking full advantage of its medium, but I understood and was affected by Thomas' inescapable depression.

– Kyle Hilliard

8.5 | Persona 4 Arena Ultimax

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 Release September 30 Rating T

Atlus and Arc System Works both do what they do best and once again the result is a solid fighter that appeals to a variety of skill levels.

– Kimberley Wallace

8 | A City Sleeps

Platform PC Release October 16 Rating NR

A City Sleeps is an intriguing take on shoot 'em ups, but the limited content and out-of-reach powers keep it from reaching its potential.

– Bryan Vore

6.75 | Costume Quest 2

Platform PC Release September 30 Rating E10+

The changes to the game are a stride in the right direction, but it still has quite a ways to go if it wants to be seen as anything other than a series of funny skits divided by boring combat intermissions.

– Jeff Cork

6.5 | Natural Doctrine

Platform PlayStation 4, Vita Release September 30 Rating M

Natural Doctrine is a strategy game that tests your battle prowess and your tolerance for saccharin storytelling. If you feel like strategy games have grown stale, this curious take on the genre could be the change of pace you're looking for.

– Ben Reeves

7 | Gauntlet

Platform PC Release September 23 Rating M

Without anything beyond the constant monster mashing and levels that seem to blend together, you may find yourself needing excitement badly.

– Daniel Tack

6 | Murasaki Baby

Platform Vita Release September 16 Rating E

Murasaki Baby is a weird little game about a weird little girl lost in a weird-looking world. Once you get past its Hot Topic aesthetic, it's a breezy puzzle game that's challenging in all the wrong ways.

– Jeff Cork



Child of Light	8	Jun-14
Dark Souls II: The Crown of the Sunken King	9	Sep-14
Destiny	8.75	Nov-14
Diablo III: Reaper of Souls – Ultimate Evil Edition	9.25	Oct-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Grid Autosport	7.75	Aug-14
Lego The Hobbit	8	Jun-14
Madden NFL 15	7.5	Oct-14
Magic 2015 – Duels of the Planeswalkers	8.75	Sep-14
Murdered: Soul Suspect	6.5	Aug-14
NHL 15	7	Nov-14
R.B.I. Baseball 14	2	Jun-14
Risen 3: Titan Lords	7	Oct-14
Sacred 3	7.5	Oct-14
Super Time Force	8.5	Jul-14
Titanfall	9	Jun-14
Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark	5	Sep-14
Trials Fusion	8	Jun-14
Valliant Hearts: The Great War	7	Aug-14
Walking Dead Season Two – Episode 5: No Going Back, The	8.5	Oct-14
Watch Dogs	7.5	Jul-14
Wolf Among Us: Episode 5 – Cry Wolf, The	7.5	Sep-14
Wolfenstein: The New Order	8	Jul-14

WII U

Amazing Spider-Man 2, The	5.5	Jul-14
Bayonetta 2	9	Nov-14
Child of Light	8	Jun-14
Disney Infinity: Marvel Super Heroes	6.5	Nov-14
Hyrule Warriors	8	Nov-14
Pushmo World	7.75	Aug-14
Shovel Knight	8.75	Aug-14
Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark	5	Sep-14

PC

Age of Wonders III	7.5	Jun-14
Amazing Spider-Man 2, The	5.5	Jul-14
Among the Sleep	7.75	Aug-14
Bound by Flame	8	Jul-14
Child of Light	8	Jun-14
Dark Souls II: The Crown of the Sunken King	9	Sep-14
Daylight	6	Jun-14
Divinity: Original Sin	9	Sep-14
Fenix Rage	6.5	Nov-14
FIFA 15	9.25	Nov-14
Goat Simulator	5	Jun-14
Golf Club, The	8	Oct-14
Lichdom: Battlemage	8	Oct-14
Lifeless Planet	7.25	Sep-14
Magic 2015 – Duels of the Planeswalkers	8.75	Sep-14
Metro Redux	8.5	Oct-14
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor	8.25	Nov-14
Moebius: Empire Rising	6	Jun-14
Murdered: Soul Suspect	6.5	Aug-14
Only If	5	Oct-14
Risen 3: Titan Lords	7	Oct-14
Sacred 3	7.5	Oct-14
Shovel Knight	8.75	Aug-14
Sims 4, The	6.75	Nov-14
Sniper Elite III	6.5	Sep-14
Story About My Uncle, A	7.75	Aug-14
Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark	5	Sep-14
Transistor	9	Jul-14
Trials Fusion	8	Jun-14
Tropico 5	8.5	Jul-14
Valliant Hearts: The Great War	7	Aug-14
Walking Dead Season Two – Episode 5: No Going Back, The	8.5	Oct-14
War of the Vikings	6.5	Jul-14
Wasteland 2	8.75	Nov-14
Watch Dogs	8.5	Jul-14
Wayward Manor	5	Sep-14
Wolf Among Us: Episode 5 – Cry Wolf, The	7.5	Sep-14
Wolfenstein: The New Order	8	Jul-14

3DS

Azure Striker Gunvolt	8	Nov-14
Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars	6	Jun-14
Kirby: Triple Deluxe	8.5	Jun-14
Mario Golf: World Tour	8	Jun-14
Pokémon Battle Trozei	6	Jun-14
Professor Layton vs. Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney	8	Oct-14
Shovel Knight	8.75	Aug-14
Super Smash Bros.	9.25	Nov-14
Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call	8	Oct-14
Tomodachi Life	7	Aug-14

VITA

Borderlands 2	7	Jul-14
Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars	6	Jun-14
Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair	8	Oct-14
Hohokum	6	Oct-14
Tuffy the Corgi and the Tower of Bones	6	Sep-14
Walking Dead Season Two – Episode 5: No Going Back, The	8.5	Oct-14

IOS

Battleheart Legacy	7.75	Aug-14
Boom Beach	6	Jun-14
FTL	8.25	Jun-14
Hitman Go	7	Jul-14
Kero Blaster	8	Aug-14
Magic 2015 – Duels of the Planeswalkers	8.75	Sep-14
Monument Valley	8	Jun-14
République – Episode 2: Metamorphosis	7	Jul-14
Trials Frontier	7	Jun-14
Walking Dead Season Two – Episode 5: No Going Back, The	8.5	Oct-14

ANDROID

Magic 2015 – Duels of the Planeswalkers	8.75	Sep-14
---	------	--------



gameinformer

Volume XXIV • Number 12 • Issue 260

STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com

Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com

Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com

Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com

Senior Features Editor
Matt Helgeson matt@gameinformer.com

Digital Editor
Bryan Vore bryan@gameinformer.com

Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com

Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com

News Editor
Michael Futter mike@gameinformer.com

PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com

Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com

Senior Associate Editors
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com
Tim Turi tim@gameinformer.com

Associate Editors
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com

Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com

Graphic Designers
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Jason Pfitzer jasonpfitzer@gameinformer.com
Samm Langer sammlanger@gameinformer.com

Web Designer/Programmer
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com

Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com

Video Editor
Wade Wojcik wadewojcik@gameinformer.com

Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com

Headline Development Manager
Paul Hedgpeth paul@gameinformer.com

Senior Product Manager
Lisa Wagner lisa@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Born rob@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Sales Director
Suzanne Lang Middaugh suzanne@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Associate
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com

Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Castle rachel@gameinformer.com
Mark Burger mark@gameinformer.com

CUSTOMER SERVICE

For renewal, address change and Power Up Rewards Pro details:
Visit: www.gameinformer.com
Email: customerservice@gameinformer.com

or send correspondence to:
724 North First St., 3rd Floor
Minneapolis, MN 55401 • Attn: CIS Dept

For subscription inquiry ONLY:
1 (866) 844-GAME (4263)

Manufactured and printed in the United States of America. The Editor welcomes company product information for all video games. Such materials should be addressed to: Editor, Game Informer® Magazine, 724 North First St., 3rd Floor, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Copyright in all screenshots contained within this publication are owned by their respective companies. Products named in these pages are trade names, or trademarks, of their respective companies. All rights reserved; reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Game Informer® is a trademark of GameStop. PUBLISHER LIABILITY FOR ERROR The publisher shall not be liable for slight changes or typographical errors that do not lessen the value of an advertisement. The publisher's liability for other errors or omissions in connection with an advertisement is limited to republication of the advertisement in any subsequent issue or the refund of any monies paid for the advertisement. INDEMNIFICATION The advertiser and/or Advertising Agency agrees to defend and indemnify the publisher against any and all liability, loss, or expense arising from claims of libel, unfair competition, unfair trade practices, infringement of trademarks, copyrights, trade names, patents, or proprietary rights or violation of rights of privacy, resulting from the publication of the Advertiser's statement.



> www.uat.edu



Bachelors | Masters | Online | On-Campus

Please see www.uat.edu/fastfacts for the latest information about degree program performance, placement and costs.



PROTO PONG

An Atari industrial designer takes us on a tour through his drawings for a four-player Pong

by Jeff Cork

Barney Hueng was a recent college graduate from San Jose State University with a degree in industrial design and engineering when he got a job at Atari. In 1974, arcade games such as Pong were pulling in mountains of quarters at bars, and the company was trying to find the next big thing. Hueng says that Atari figured out their primitive games, fun as they were, had a lifespan of about three months. "The games were so simple that people would get it, put a bunch of quarters in there, love it, and then get bored with it," he says. "How do we reach a bigger market? Then they thought, 'Hey, let's get into the consumer market,' and that's how it started."

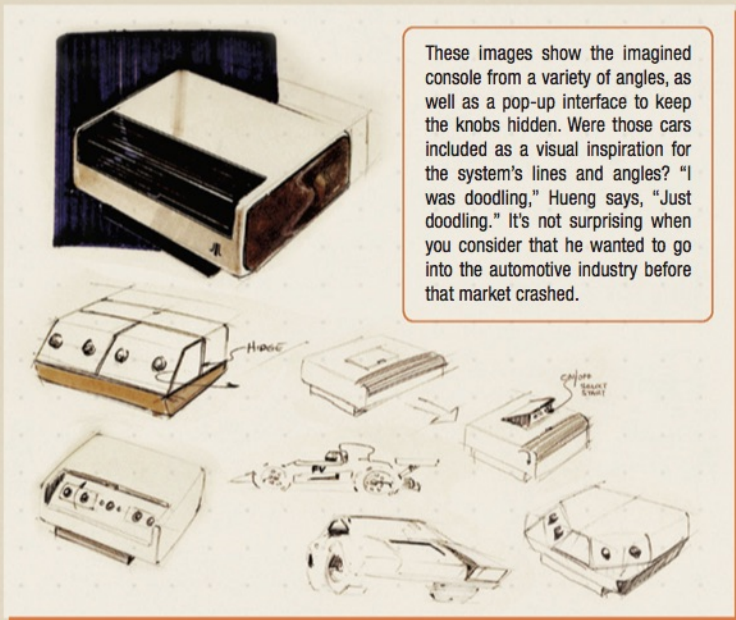
"It," in this case, was a consumer model of Pong, which would later be christened Home Pong and sold in Sears stores in the holiday season of 1975. That summer, Hueng and his fellow industrial designers began work on the successor to Home Pong, which would support four players.

The following sketches were discovered by Jeremy Saucier, assistant

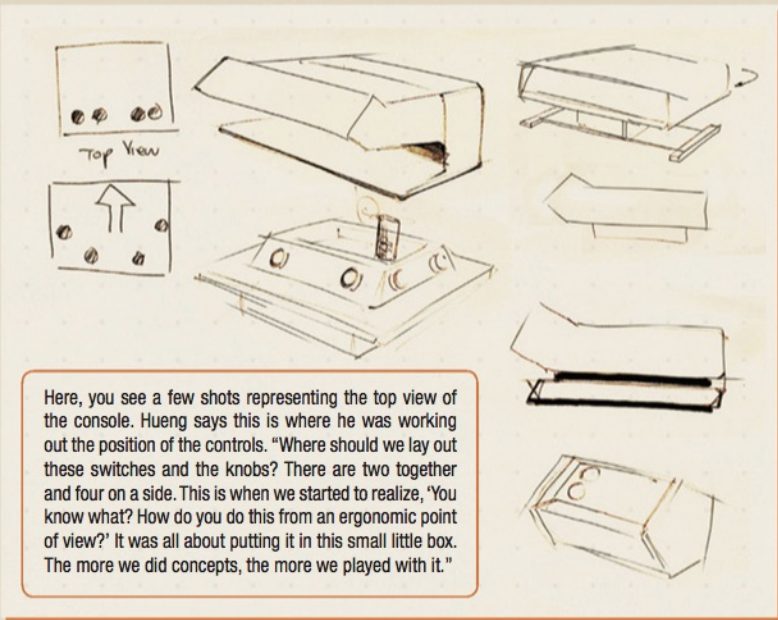
director of the International Center for the History of Electronic Games at New York's Strong museum. The museum acquired a massive 23-pallet collection of Atari memorabilia from a collector. While sifting through boxes in what Saucier jokingly calls the "Is it safe to have in the building?" phase of documentation, he found Hueng's concepts stapled together in a booklet and tucked away in a file. We reached out to Hueng to discuss these early designs, which never saw the light of day.

"This was the beginning," Hueng recalls. "Basically the assignment was, 'You've got four knobs. Do something with it.' We played the arcade game, so we knew it was very simple with the paddles, but nobody had any idea what it would look like. So we started playing with concepts."

Four-player Pong would eventually be released in a few forms, such as the Super Pong Ten, which included detachable paddle controls. The images you see here are from a time that predates those models.

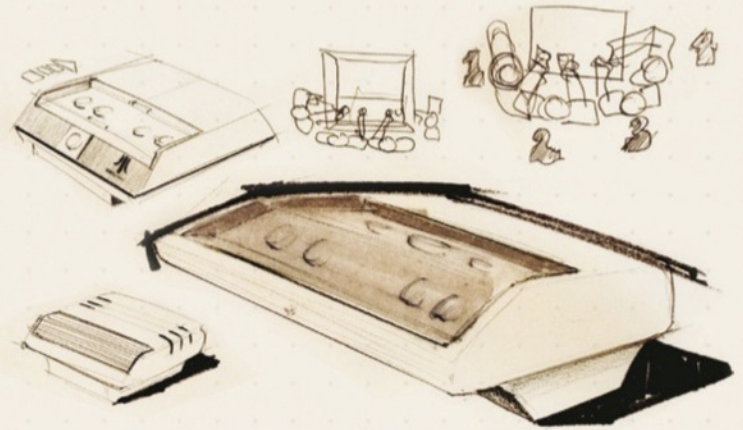
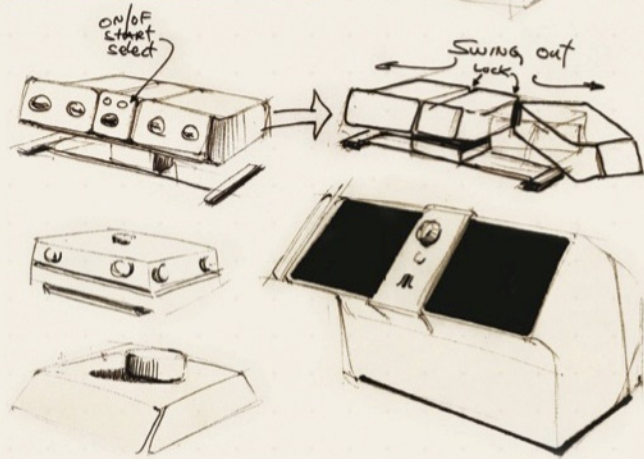


These images show the imagined console from a variety of angles, as well as a pop-up interface to keep the knobs hidden. Were those cars included as a visual inspiration for the system's lines and angles? "I was doodling," Hueng says, "Just doodling." It's not surprising when you consider that he wanted to go into the automotive industry before that market crashed.

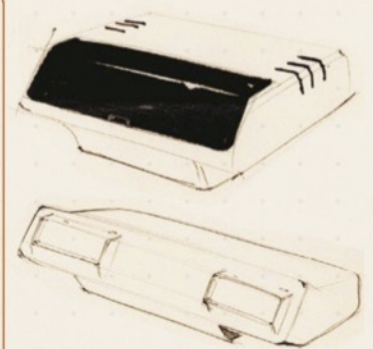


Here, you see a few shots representing the top view of the console. Hueng says this is where he was working out the position of the controls. "Where should we lay out these switches and the knobs? There are two together and four on a side. This is when we started to realize, 'You know what? How do you do this from an ergonomic point of view?' It was all about putting it in this small little box. The more we did concepts, the more we played with it."

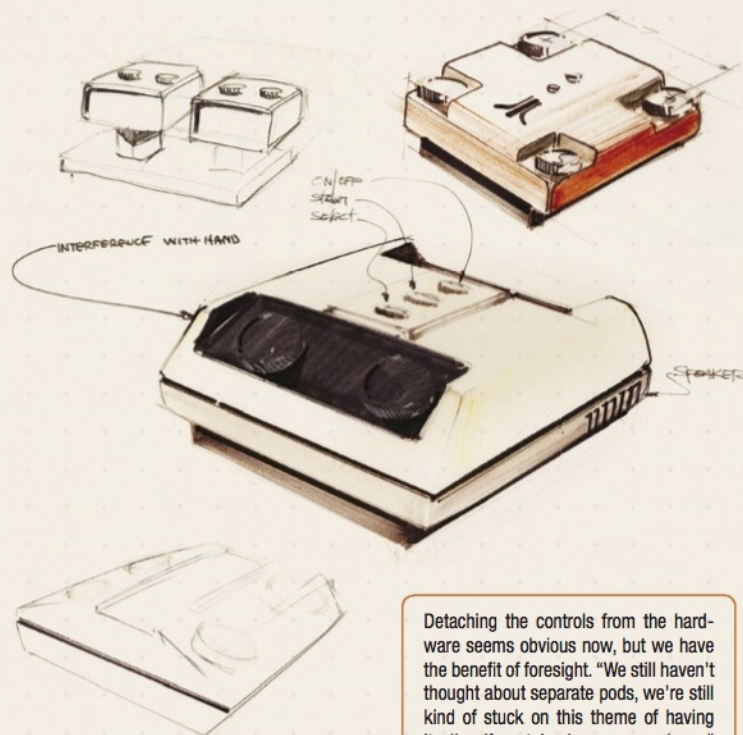
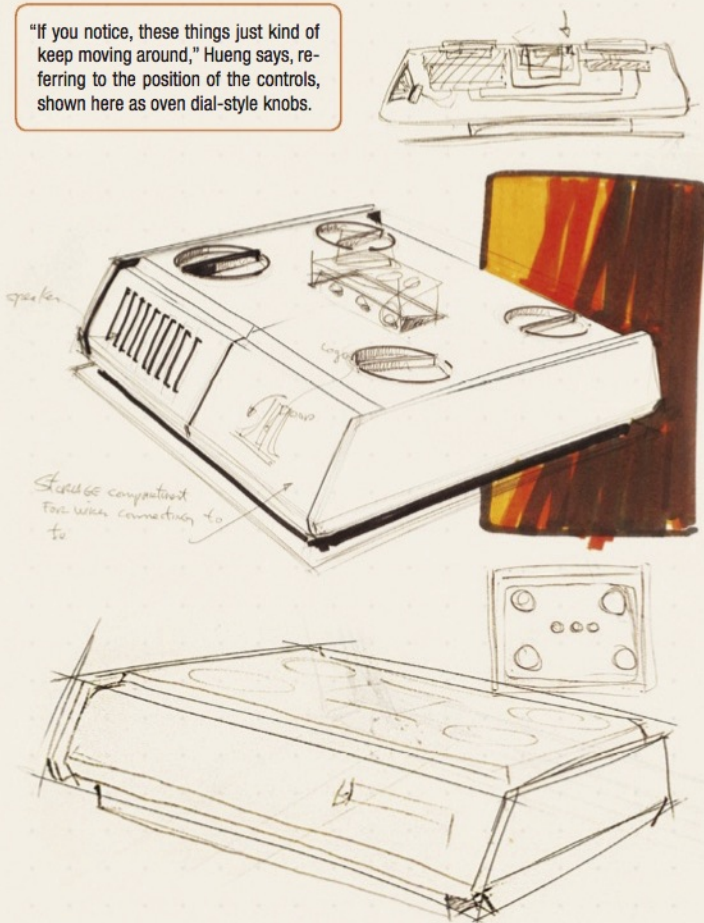
"This thing swings out," Hueng says, pointing out the hinged pod on the middle-right. "That was kind of my first idea of this thing helps separate you from the other person. You're in the same small space, but then you swing it out. Realistically, because this thing is so light, you start throwing it around and it doesn't work. From an ergonomic point of view, if it weighed about 90 pounds, no problem, it would work."



The problem of getting four players crowded around a relatively small system was the central issue Hueng tried to tackle. "You can see where I kind of drew four people there, look how big this sucker is. That ain't gonna cut it. You're not going to get four people sitting like that, that close." At this stage of the design phase, price wasn't a consideration. "There were no cost constraints, it was really how do you make this thing small and that four players could play... We start doing things like the shutters, where you can close it. Then it's like 'Why would you like to put that kind of expense in?' 'Because it looks cool!'"

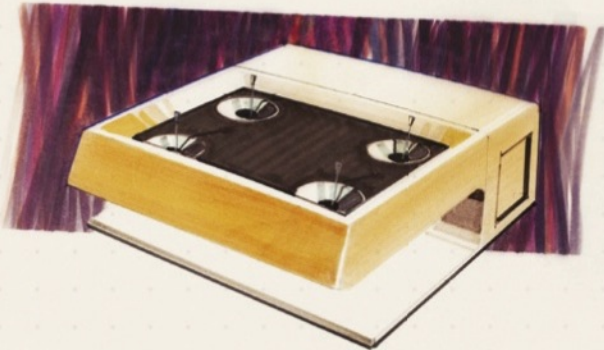


"If you notice, these things just kind of keep moving around," Hueng says, referring to the position of the controls, shown here as oven dial-style knobs.

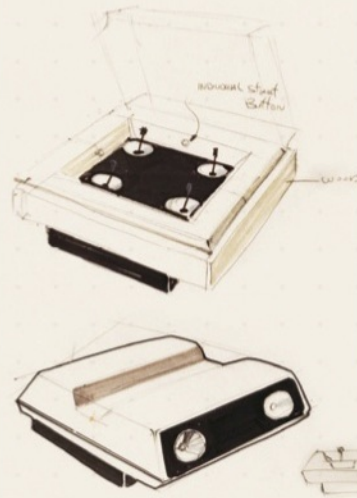


Detaching the controls from the hardware seems obvious now, but we have the benefit of foresight. "We still haven't thought about separate pods, we're still kind of stuck on this theme of having it all self-contained as one package," Hueng says. "You just plug it in and you're ready to go. ...It says seven inches. My goodness! It's really for one person, and I think we slowly started to realize that this wasn't going to work."

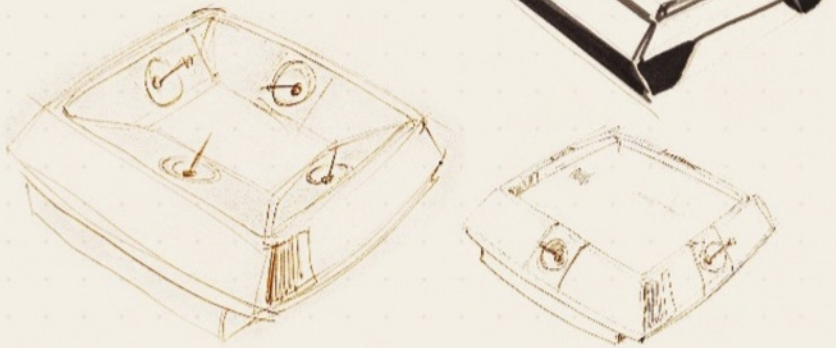
"What if we change it from a knob to a joystick? Then we start playing with this thing," Hueng says. "With a joystick, you could use one finger to do all this kind of stuff."



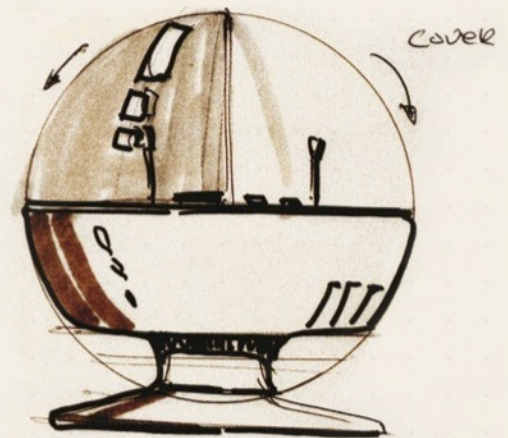
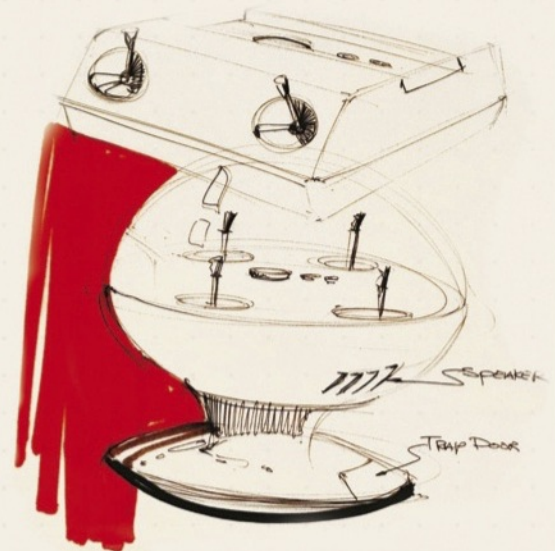
Another iteration. "We're still playing with the joystick and the shapes." Even though they had freedom when designing the console, make no mistake: This was an expensive endeavor. "Tooling for something like this, you're talking about back then about a half-a-million-dollar investment just for the tooling, and then you have to have the volume," Hueng says. "During that period also, everything was done in the United States, so it wasn't like you went overseas to get lower costs. It was all here."



"On the lower left, where it dips down, that was an idea of, 'What if you just rest your hand down there, then you could just move it.' But can you imagine four guys sitting around like that?" Hueng says. "The concept was more of you stick your hand down and that evolved."



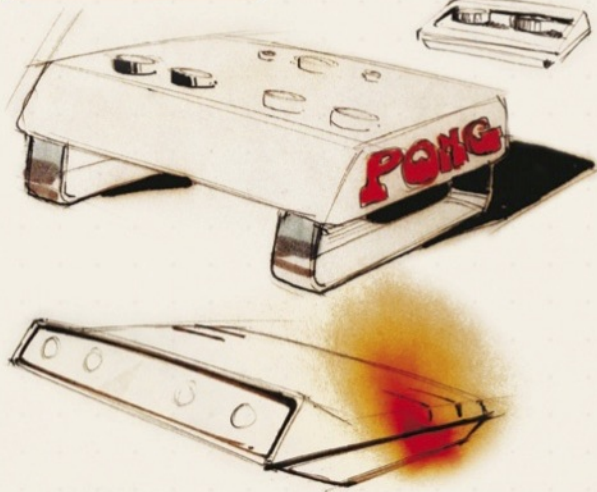
"I forgot all about that one," Hueng says, sounding surprised. "That's kind of cool. Wow, that looks contemporary!"



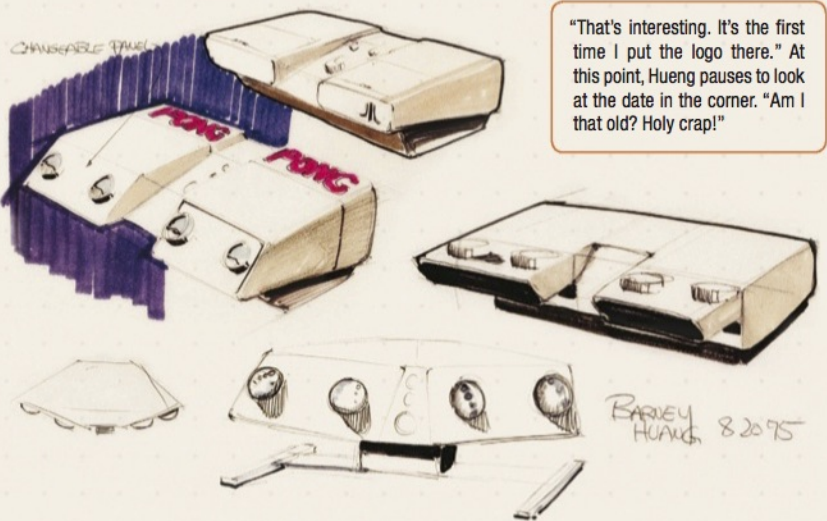
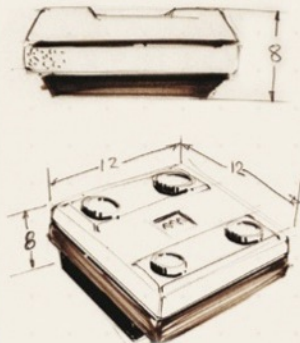
"If you look in the top-left, where it looks like it's on a pivot stand, that was an idea of from an ergonomic point of view you could point it up or point it down or whatever," Hueng says. "We knew right away that the thing was too light - I think it weighed a pound, if that. The thing on the left was an idea to get separation from people."



Here's a look at a design that offers a glimpse at an embryonic paddle controller. "Back to the knobs again," Hueng says. "Here's the beginning of having the separate unit with just two of the things. Then that evolved."

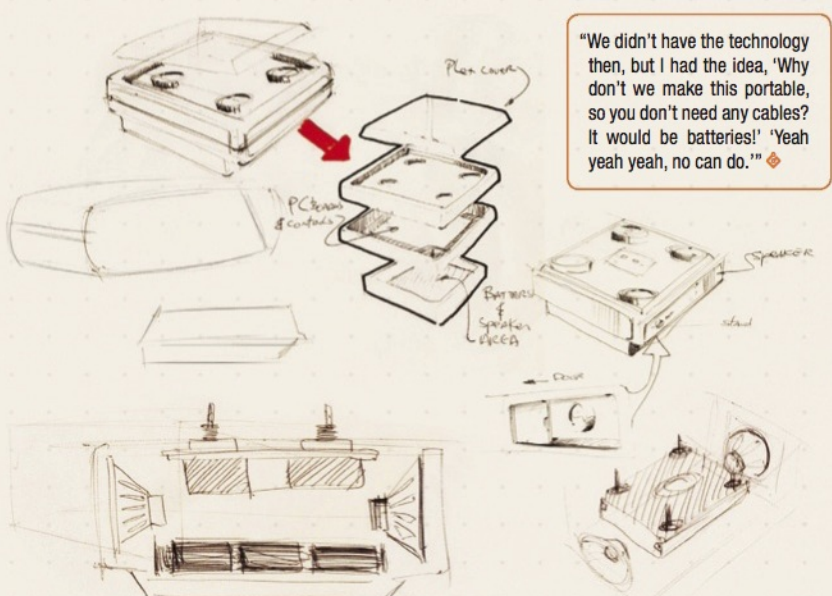
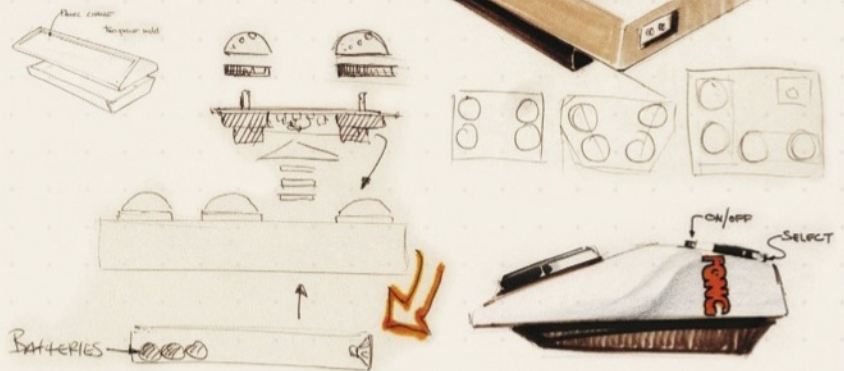


"The problem was this machine, if you made it bigger, there would be so much air space inside because it was really simple, so it would feel cheap. It didn't make any sense." And the Tiny Pong name? "I think that was something I just made up because we had the Pong arcade game," Hueng recalls. "We were playing with names – what do you call this thing, right? Not even realizing we had a brand: Pong! That was our brand; you didn't need to change it."



"That's interesting. It's the first time I put the logo there." At this point, Hueng pauses to look at the date in the corner. "Am I that old? Holy crap!"

"That was kind of the beginning of, 'Hey, we went from a knob to a joystick – what if we had something like a trackball?' Then nothing's moving, and it's just right there."



"We didn't have the technology then, but I had the idea, 'Why don't we make this portable, so you don't need any cables? It would be batteries!' 'Yeah yeah yeah, no can do.'" ♦



The Heavy Hitters

1-A, 2-E, 3-D, 4-D, 5-C, 6-B, 7-B, 8-D, 9-A, 10-Any Answer

This has been a prolific year for the gaming industry, with our new and old systems alike serving up plenty of great experiences. But how familiar are you with this year's biggest games? Take this quiz to see just how well you've been paying attention...you have been paying attention, right?!

by Jeff Marchiafava

1. Far Cry 4 takes place in Kyrat, which is totally not a real country located in the Himalayas.
a. True
b. False

2. Ubisoft seriously can't stop making Assassin's Creed games. Which of the following is not an upcoming game or expansion in the series?
a. Assassin's Creed Dead Kings
b. Assassin's Creed Rogue
c. Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China
d. Assassin's Creed Unity
e. Assassin's Creed Redemption

3. Sure, Nintendo is crazy, but not crazy enough to put the following character in Super Smash Bros.:
a. Wii Fit Trainer
b. Dr. Mario
c. R.O.B. The Robot
d. Waluigi
e. That dumb dog from Duck Hunt

4. Which of the following isn't a minion in Hearthstone?
a. Sludge Belcher
b. Sen'jin Shieldmasta
c. Laughing Sister
d. Elven Assassin
e. Leeroy Jenkins

5. The consumable items you come across in Dark Souls II are so nerdy that you can't make them up. Or maybe you can - which of the following isn't an item in the game?
a. Aromatic Ooze
b. Petrified Something
c. Sap of the Ancients
d. Fragrant Branch of Yore
e. Sublime Bone Dust

6. Alien: Isolation stars Amanda Ripley, daughter of the film series' ass-kicking Ellen Ripley. Amanda didn't exist in Alien lore before The Creative Assembly created her for the game.
a. True
b. False

7. Forget those dumb rings; in Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor, it's all about the Epic Runes. Which of the following runes doesn't exist in the game?
a. Flame of Anor
b. Gollum's Bane
c. Blade of Goldolin
d. The Wolf's Head
e. Evenstar

8. Which of the following is the name of the moon in Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel, and not an actual moon in our solar system?
a. Pandora
b. Hyperion
c. Atlas
d. Elpis
e. Trick question: They're all real moons in our solar system!

9. Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare features top-tier Hollywood talent, including Academy Award-winning actor Kevin Spacey. What's the name of Spacey's character?
a. Jonathan Irons
b. Sam Steel
c. Frank Underwood
d. Clarence Peckinpah
e. You mean he's not playing himself?

10. What's Destiny's plot?
a. Peter Dinklage undertakes an epic quest to scan and repair every last computer in the universe
b. Light Guardians must fight off the encroaching Darkness. Basically, light versus dark.
c. Whatever it is, it's got something to do with giant space turtles
d. Moon wizards?
e. It's all right there in the online Grimoire cards, idiot! ♦



SCORE & RANK

1
Wow. You really only got the Destiny question, huh?

2-3
Congratulations! You did slightly worse than if you had randomly guessed letters

4-5
You're right in that sweet spot of knowing more than nothing, but not enough to be accused of actually being smart

6-7
You got enough answers right to prove you don't just flip through the magazine and look at the pretty pictures

8-9
You're either considerably informed about video games, or you cheated. We're guessing it's the latter

10
You are a master of video game trivia. It's probably time to take up another hobby or two



FREE | **XBOX LIVE GOLD TRIAL**

WITH THE PURCHASE OF A ROCK CANDY XBOX ONE™ OR XBOX 360® CONTROLLER



AVAILABLE FOR
Xbox One™
NOW

rock  candy™



www.pdp.com

Designed for



XBOX ONE

   @PDPGaming

© 2014 Performance Designed Products, LLC. Performance Designed Products, PDP, Rock Candy, Pick Your Flavor, Color is Expression and their respective logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Performance Designed Products, LLC. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. All rights reserved.



ENTRE
ES
MS

US \$5.99 | EUR €5.99 | UK £3.99



Issue 260 • December 2014

www.gameinformer.com