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UBISOFT



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

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The Leap

I once jumped out of a plane. Not by myself, and not without a parachute, but I did it.

I never thought I would be brave enough to do it, though once the deed was done I wondered how the feat was ever in question. The nervous lead-up was the worst of it, as a sea of questions and concerns thundered in my head. Then my feet left the safety of the plane and the negative thoughts fell away in a wash of noise and pure adrenaline rush.

Players around the globe now sit with that same nervous energy I associate with that fateful jump (with less fear of death) as we await the arrival of PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. Which system do I get? Do I pre-order? Do I go at midnight? Do I get them both? Do I care about Kinect? Do I bide my time, sit back, and enjoy my current system until the battle between console manufacturers becomes more clear?

I have been wrestling with these questions myself, as each passing day brings more news and controversy around the new systems. With *Batman: Arkham City Origins* and *Grand Theft Auto V* available only on the current platforms, and most of the launch titles for the next-generation systems created with both new and old platforms in mind (and thus not taking full advantage of all the new bells and whistles new consoles have to offer), there is no easy answer.

Much like the moments leading up to stepping out of a moving airplane, as anxiety sets in I ask myself, "Would I really be willing to play the 'lesser' versions of certain games knowing there are superior versions available (even if only by graphic quality)?"

Panic.

I have made plenty of bad decisions in the panic of the moment, and on that plane I certainly thought I was making one, but with the next generation of consoles I've decided the leap is worth it. Now there is no looking back.

Not everyone will go with next-generation consoles this holiday, and the good news is there are so many amazing games you may not even notice. But if you are like me and have to make the leap, then embrace the change and enjoy the rush. There really is nothing quite like new consoles, and from what I've seen of the games on the horizon (coming soon to Game Informer covers) we have a lot to be excited about.

So which system comes with a chute? Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



contents

» 40

Call Of Duty: Ghosts

One of the biggest video game franchises of all time is getting ready to release its next iteration, and we've taken an all-encompassing look. We spent lots of time with Ghosts' multiplayer and single-player, and we're bringing you our in-depth report of what you can expect to see and play in the next Call of Duty.

by Dan Ryckert



18

Mutant Football League



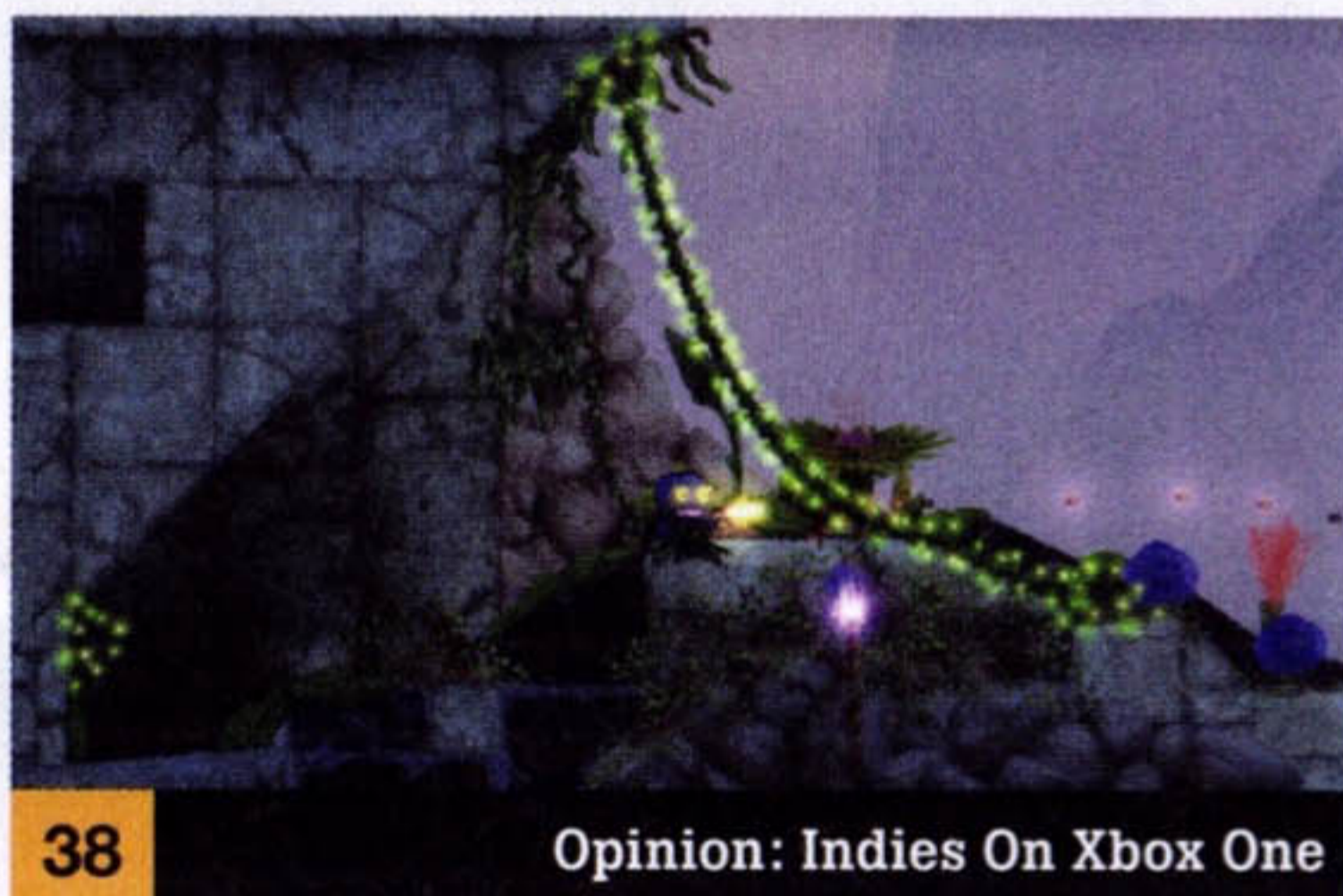
20

A Conversation With Robert Carlyle



50

Grand Theft Auto Online



38

Opinion: Indies On Xbox One



56

Dead Rising 3



81

regulars

» 6 Feedback

Readers respond to our E3 Hot 50 picks with compliments and rage, see the zombie apocalypse as an exercise opportunity, and give an elementary school classroom a GI makeover.

» 12 Connect

Gamescom, the annual video game trade show in Germany, rivals the scope of E3, and we report directly from the jam-packed convention halls. We also find out about the return of Mutant League Football, and chat with actor Robert Carlyle about his role in Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2.

» 62 Previews

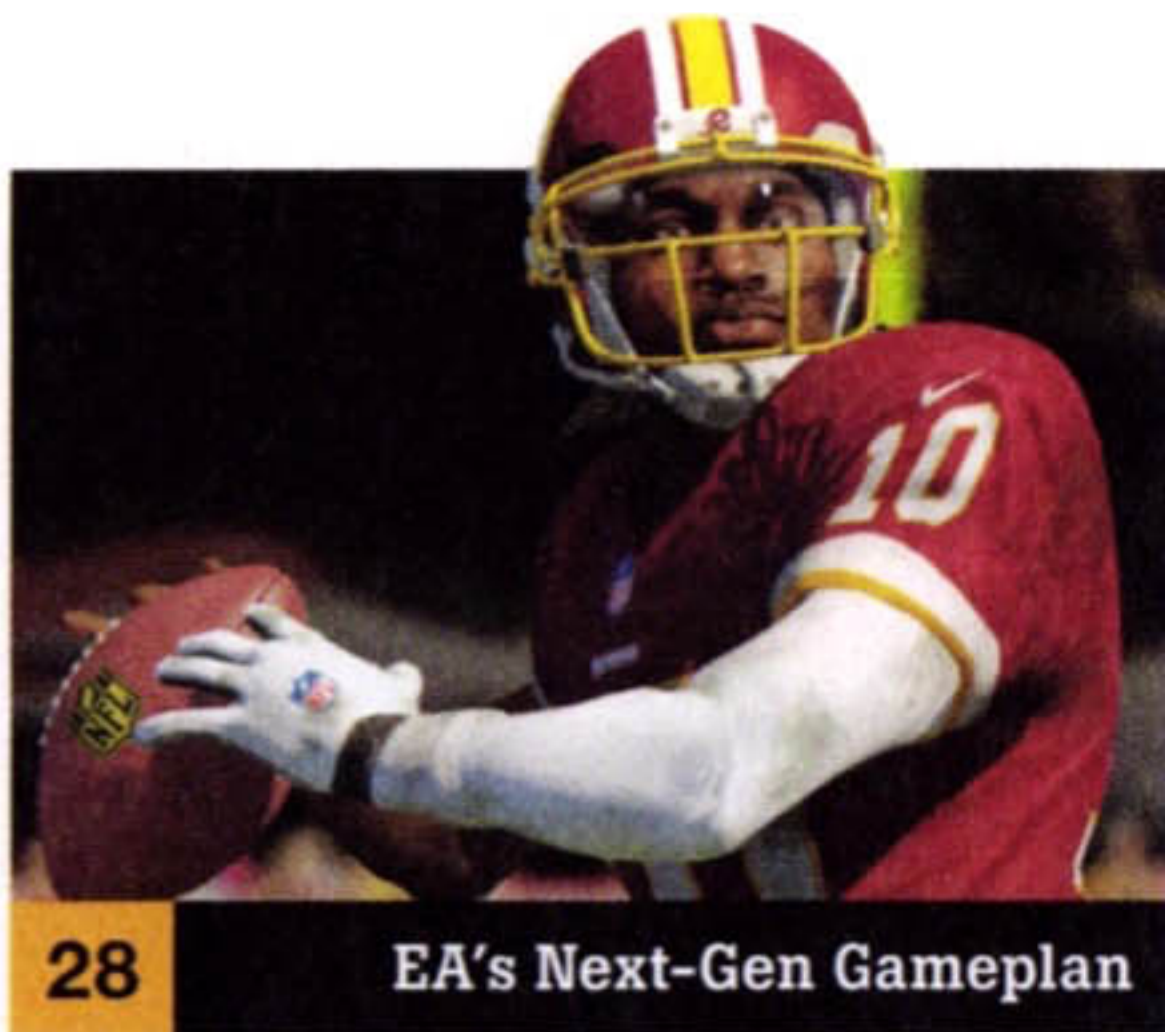
We get our first look at Mad Max, take to the ocean in Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, and find out what's new in the Fable universe. We also take a look at Telltale Games' The Wolf Among Us, and try out our hacking abilities in Watch Dogs.

» 80 Reviews

The biggest games of the holiday season are starting to trickle out. We have reviews for the new Splinter Cell, Rayman Legends, the console version of Diablo III, Saints Row IV, and Lost Planet 3. We also look at some heartfelt indie games with Brothers and Gone Home.

» 100 Game Over

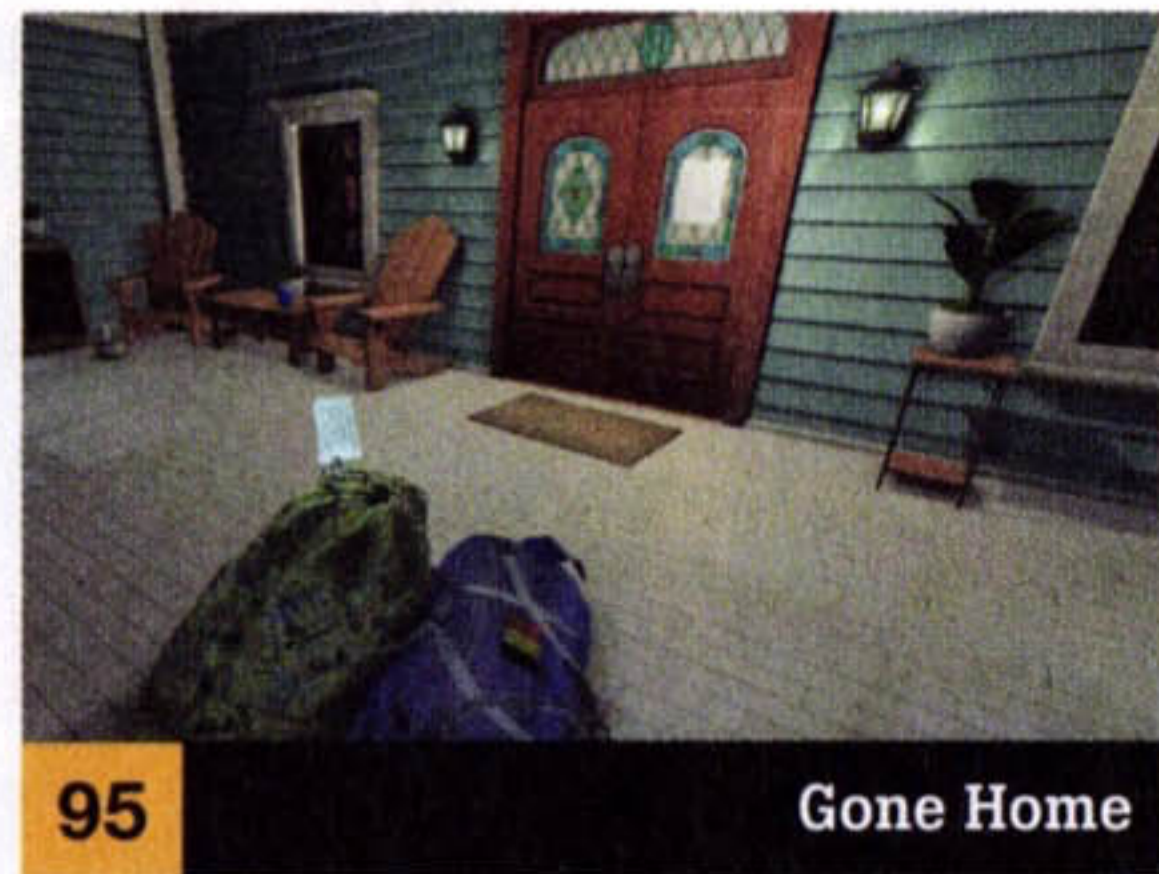
As long as there have been video games where you could die, there have been screens reminding you that the game is over. This month we test your knowledge to see if you can distinguish between these death screens.



28 EA's Next-Gen Gameplan



82



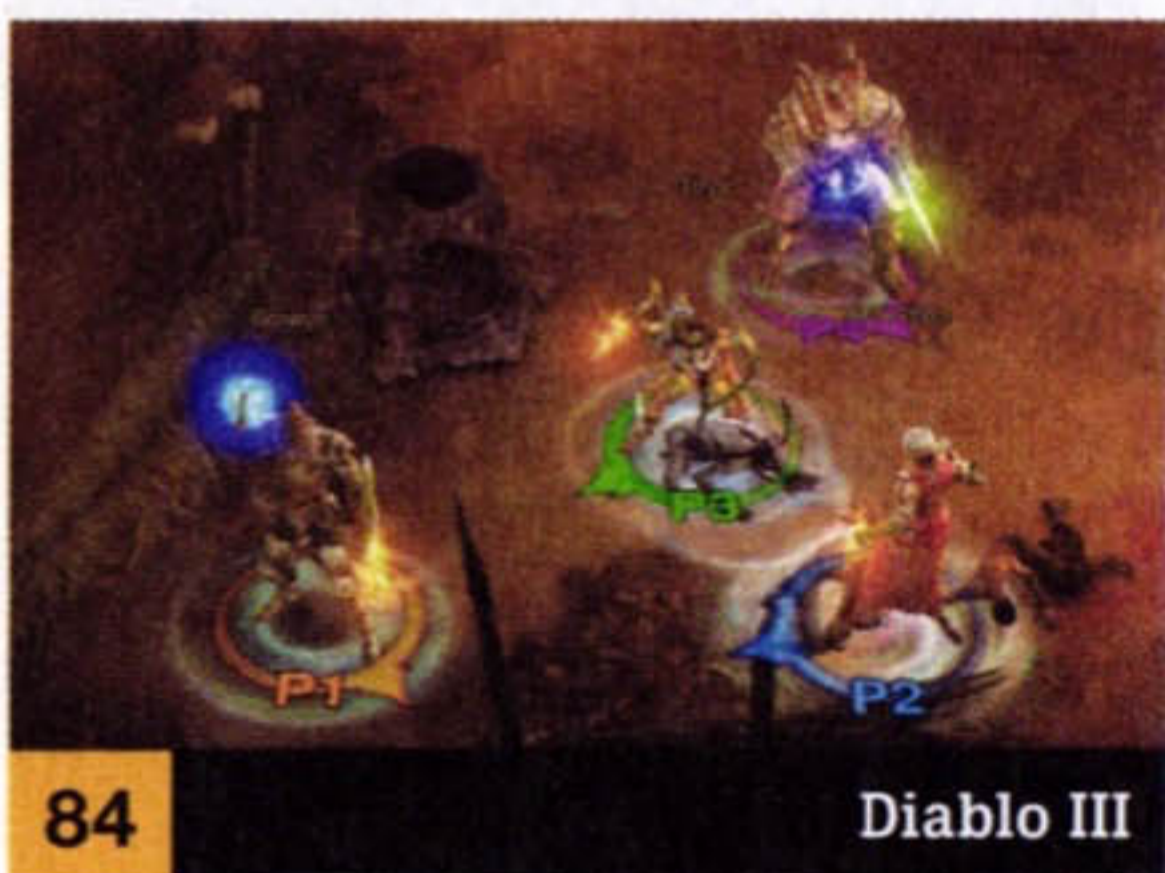
95 Gone Home



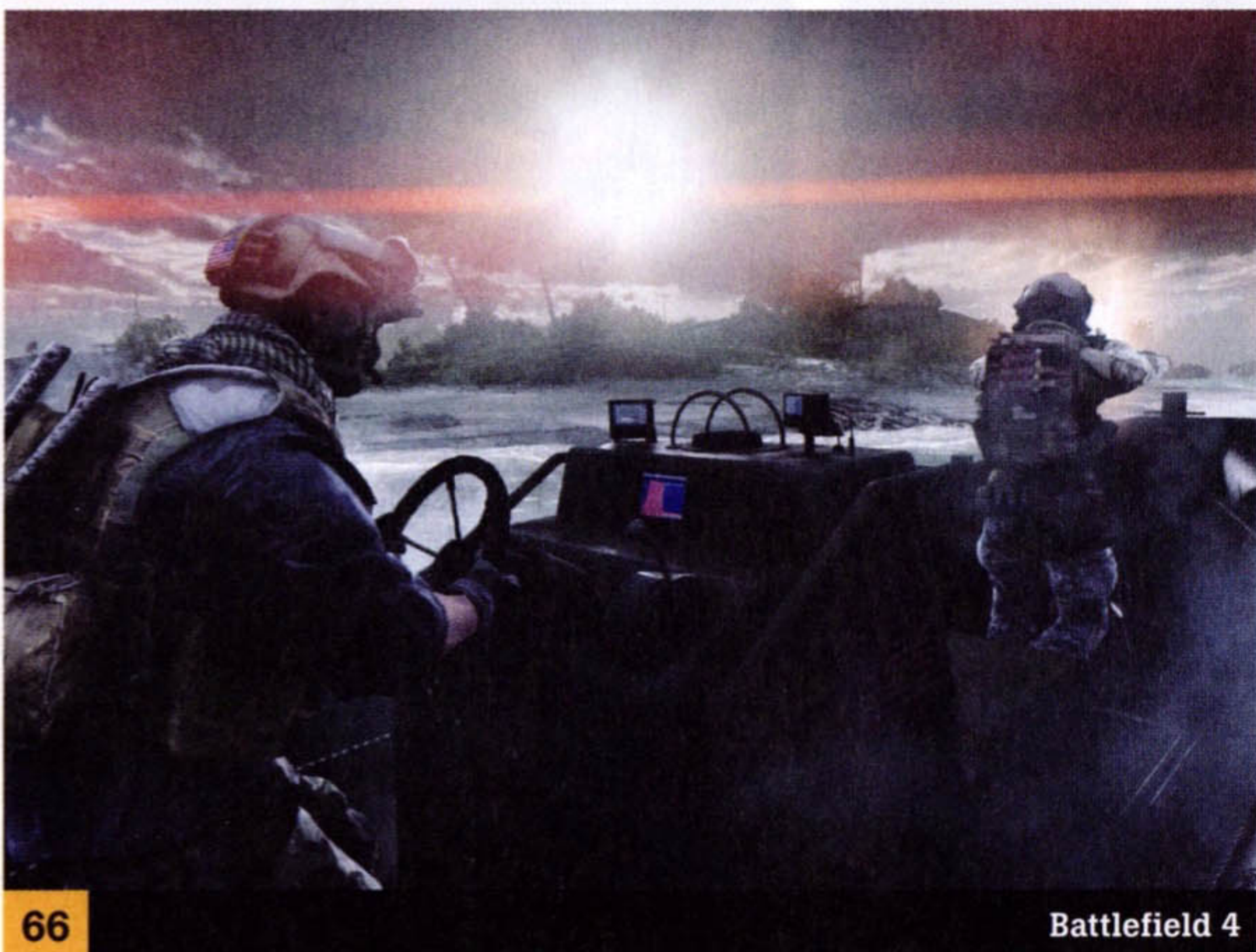
76



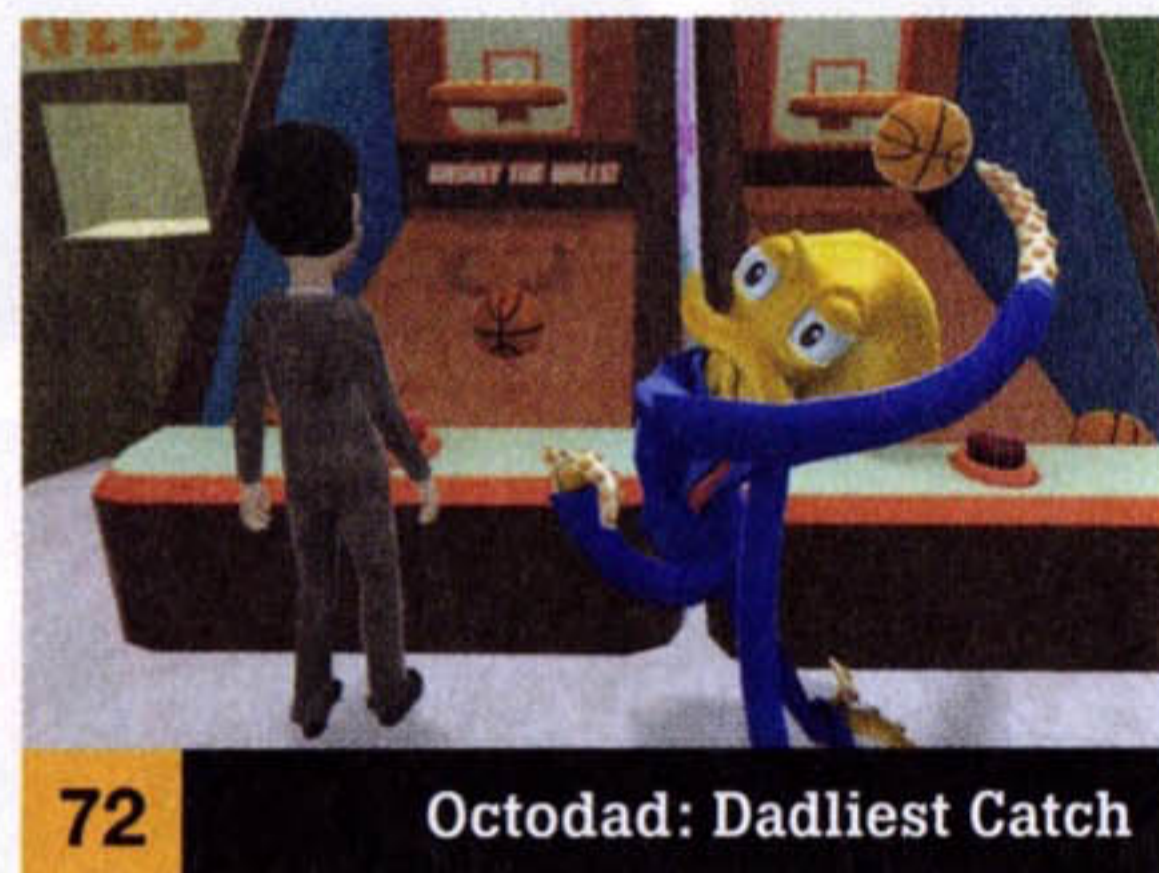
69



84 Diablo III



66 Battlefield 4



72 Octodad: Dadliest Catch



87



70



34

games index

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag . . .	62
Battlefield 4	66
Bloodmasque	96
Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons	94
Bureau: XCOM Declassified, The	85
Call Of Duty: Ghosts	40
Castle Of Illusion.	91
Charlie Murder	96
Dead Rising 3	56
Diablo III	84
Disney Infinity	81
Disney Infinity: Toy Story In Space	73
Do Not Fall	96
Dragon Commander.	94
Dropchord	96
DuckTales: Remastered.	96
EverQuest Next	64
Fable: Legends	71
FIFA 14	79
Firefall.	24
Gone Home	95
Grand Theft Auto Online	50
Halo: Spartan Assault.	96
Ibb & Obb	92
Incognita	22
Killer Is Dead.	90
Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix	92
Lost Planet 3.	90
Mad Max.	69
Madden NFL 25.	88
Mutant Football League.	18
NBA 2K14	78
NHL 14	89
Octodad: Dadliest Catch	72
Payday 2	86
Pro Evolution Soccer 2014	79
Rayman Legends.	83
Ryse: Son Of Rome	70
Saints Row IV	87
Sims 4, The.	75
Splinter Cell: Blacklist	82
Velocity Ultra.	96
Watch Dogs.	76
Wolf Among Us, The	77
Wonderful 101, The.	93
WWE 2K14	74
XCOM: Enemy Within.	68

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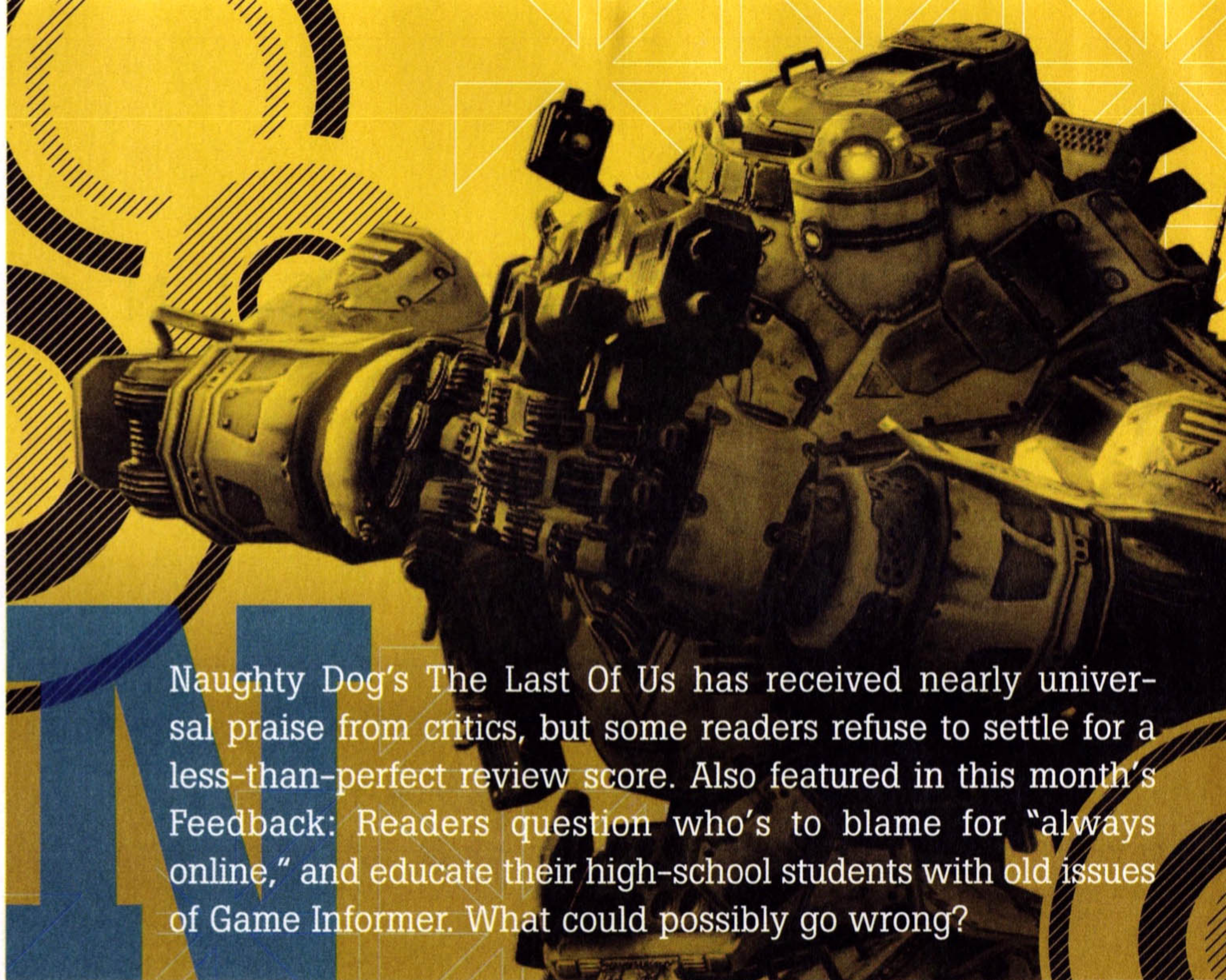


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Naughty Dog's *The Last Of Us* has received nearly universal praise from critics, but some readers refuse to settle for a less-than-perfect review score. Also featured in this month's Feedback: Readers question who's to blame for "always online," and educate their high-school students with old issues of *Game Informer*. What could possibly go wrong?

Hot Or Not

After reading the E3 Hot 50 issue, I just want to say that I am set for the next couple of years when it comes to Christmas, my birthday, and the money I make mowing lawns. I already preordered *Batman: Arkham Origins* and am working on *Call of Duty: Ghosts* and *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2*. I have very high hopes for this year.

Will Michaeli
via email

When I received your E3 issue, I was so excited to read more about the best game of show, but it wasn't even included in the Hot 50. I cannot believe you were blind to the potential. *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* is definitely Game of the Year, possibly even Game of the Decade. I have already pre-ordered eight copies. You and your readers are truly missing out.

Anna Eddy
via email

Alas, it wouldn't be an E3 Hot 50 list if we didn't receive a healthy mix of compliments and complaints about our selections – usually more of the latter. But look on the bright side: While some fan favorites like Anna's beloved cephalopod didn't make the list, it's only because there were so many excellent games at the show this year. Surely we can all be happy about that, right? Yeah...we didn't think so.

The Future Is Now?

While reading your E3 Hot 50, something occurred to me. Your top two games, *Titanfall* and *Destiny*, are both multiplayer-only. Why isn't anyone complaining? Microsoft caught all kinds of flak for its always-online policy, but with no single-player campaigns, you have to be online to play these games. I believe Microsoft was trying to prepare people for these types of games. To me, Microsoft isn't forcing everyone into being always online – the developers making the games are. I believe eventually the majority of games will be multiplayer-only with no campaign, and if you're not online, you won't be able to play. I just hope people realize that this "always-online" trend isn't all Microsoft's fault; I think they just had the guts to tell everyone what was coming and they got blasted for it.

John Chestnut
via email

We'll certainly be seeing more multiplayer-only games in the next console generation, especially considering the broader support for MMOs that the new systems offer. However, there's a difference between giving players the option to buy a multiplayer-only game, and demanding an online connection even for single-player games that don't require one. Whether Microsoft was simply preparing for the future or not, the company wasn't giving developers or gamers a choice in the present, which people clearly took issue with.

The Nintendo Enigma

E3 has come and gone once again and, to be honest, I found Nintendo's presence at the show to be rather underwhelming. This is mainly due to the lack of attention they gave to their various first-party IPs; while I am looking forward to new titles such as *The Wonderful 101*, I feel that Nintendo is neglecting some of its older series. For example, there hasn't been a new *Star Fox* game since 2006 (not counting the *Star Fox 64 3D* remake), *F-Zero* saw its latest title in 2004, and the most recent entry in the *EarthBound/Mother* series was in 2006 with *Mother 3* – which hasn't even been released outside of Japan, much to the chagrin of Western fans. It seems to me that Nintendo has been neglecting these high-potential franchises for what was essentially the entire life cycle of the Nintendo Wii.

Parker M.
Arlington, TX

Nintendo has always relied on its core stable of franchises for success, but even among its hits, some of the company's decisions remain a mystery. In addition to *F-Zero*, *Star Fox*, and *EarthBound*, players have been begging for another old-school 2D *Metroid* and a full-fledged *Pokémon* console game for years. Hopefully the Wii U provides more long-awaited favorites than its predecessor, but if that's Nintendo's plan, the company doesn't appear ready to tip its hand.

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com



Getting Schooled

Even at the age of 43, I get a little giddy when I find the newest issue of Game Informer in the mailbox. Once finished, I can't seem to let go of my back issues, and I've been known to take them to school and let my fifth graders read them after big tests. With the new year, I decided to adopt a gamified approach to teaching with a matching video game theme in my classroom. After searching for video game decorations on the Internet in vain, your beloved magazine saved the day. Gaming icons remind students of class rules, covers pass on invaluable hints for a variety of math topics, and several pages sacrificed themselves as a crucial bulletin-board border. Sure, I hacked a few magazines with a pair of scissors, but I think you'll agree it was for the kids. The students will see everything for the first time in a few weeks. I'm sure that they'll appreciate your contribution to the classroom.

Todd Miller
via email

Your classroom decorations sure beat the most common alternative use for the magazine that readers tell us about. Just be careful: With a classroom that cool, your students might be looking for excuses to get detention.

Getting Fit For The Apocalypse

Recently, I have been playing an iOS game called *Zombies, Run!*, which requires you to run in real life to collect virtual supplies for your in-game base and community. Every quarter mile or so, the game tells you what supplies you've gathered. After playing it for a month, *State of Decay* came out, and I got interested once I heard that you are basically a runner gathering supplies, like the iOS game. Now, with all this talk of second-screen integration, a game like *Zombies, Run!* could encourage gamers to exercise in real life by incorporating your progress into a full-fledged console game. Soon enough, being healthy could become essential for survival-horror games!

Noe Monsivais
Texas

We're guessing most players wouldn't be too pleased if survival horror games started incorporating real-life exercise into their gameplay, but then again, a zombie Armageddon would favor the survival of the fittest. In any case, it sure as heck would beat our stupid old Pokéwalkers.

You Will Be Assimilated

I am honestly shocked with your review of *The Last of Us*. I admit the review was very positive and the reviewer did a very good job, but I feel there was no explanation as to why it warranted a 9.5 when it was so positively reviewed. The reason I'm angry is I can't help but feel that this score was deliberately given to differentiate your magazine from all the numerous perfect scores given by other publications in order to incite readers like myself. I know at the end of the day you will write me off by saying that you gave it a positive review and that I don't understand reviews are opinions, and then chastise me with a witty rebuke. I also know it's an empty threat if I tell you I'm canceling my subscription, but that's exactly what I'm doing.

Chris Stewart
via email

I have read your review for *The Last of Us* – in fact, I have read it maybe 20 times and I don't understand the reason for the 9.5 instead of a 10. Matt praises the game in all aspects but doesn't score it a 10? The only "negative"

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Why did you decide to exclude *GTA V* from your E3 Hot 50 list?"

Because it wasn't at the show.

"Wanna see me eat a waffle?"

No.

"With Microsoft Points gone, what are we calling their new money system? Microsoft Money?"

Money. Just money.

Gangsta Love:

"I just wanted to thank you for your Warren G. reference in issue 244's Feedback. It made my day."

Drew Malkin

Question Of The Month:

Do you play sports games? If so, what next-gen innovation do you want to see in your game of choice and why?



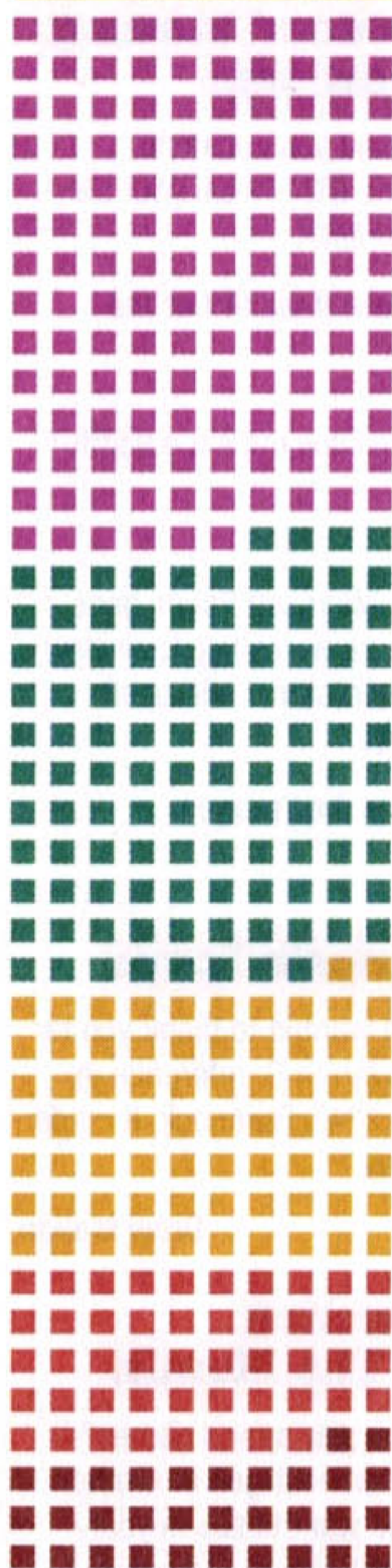
(Left) Ben Reeves and Jeff Cork held an impromptu GI reunion party with Harmonix's Annette Gonzalez and Crystal Dynamics' Meagan Marie at this year's Comic-Con.

(Right) Ben also met with actor Robert Carlyle and Konami's Dave Cox to check out *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2*. Sadly, they refused Ben's request to recreate the final scene of *The Full Monty*.

GI SPY
continued on page 8

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- **34%** Next-gen Purchasing Decisions
- **28%** Xbox One vs. PS4
- **18%** "Why Wasn't [Insert Game Here] On Your E3 Hot 50 List?!"
- **12%** Lingering Always-Online Concerns
- **8%** Review Score Rage

thing he mentioned was how brutal the game is and something about the AI. Yes, this game is very brutal; that was the maker's intent. Since when is a score based on the brutal nature of a game? In the future, please let him review iOS or DS games and let the hardcore reviewers give games like *The Last of Us* the correct score. Maybe Matt could review *Angry Birds* and tell us how brutal the game is to birds.

Jack Fenter
via email

A few disgruntled readers wrote in this month to complain about Matt's "offensively low" score for *The Last of Us*, presumably after mastering the art of selective reading. Matt's review praised many aspects of the game, but also pointed out its AI lapses (which Naughty Dog copped to in issue 245's *Afterwords*) and some trial-and-error frustration he experienced with the stealth-heavy gameplay. As for the violence, Matt stated that the grim tone won't appeal to everyone, and that the brutality occasionally overwhelms the storytelling – a valid critique that doesn't exactly make him a fainthearted hemophobe. We suppose we could offer a witty rebuke about how reviews are opinions, but more than anything, we just don't understand the Borg-like need for all of them to be the same.

Cats And Dogs

I was reading the E3 issue and got to the preview about *Elder Scrolls Online*. I have two big questions. First, is it going to be easy to pick up for people who aren't used to MMOs? Secondly, my favorite part of *Skyrim* was getting the option to be a werewolf (my character was a Khajiit, and I was amused by my new cat-dog condition). Will I be able to become a werewolf in ESO?

Josh Neumann
via email

Fear not, Josh: Zenimax Online Studios is indeed making ESO more approachable for non-MMO players, so Skyrim players shouldn't have too much trouble fitting in. Additionally, the developer has confirmed that lycanthropy and vampirism will both be returning and have their own skill trees, so even though your cat-dog hybrid is an abomination to nature, it still should be an option.



Decisions, Decisions

In issue 244, we asked readers what the deciding factor is when buying a next-gen system. While some pointed to feature sets and price, most players were interested in a sole, unsurprising concern: the games.

There is a saying that I always refer to when I am choosing a gaming system: Nobody wants to buy a drill; they want a hole in the wall. No matter what bells and whistles a system has, the only reason to buy a system is the games it offers. Everything else is just gravy.

Ervin Hughes

Feature set is the biggest factor for me. I'm choosing PS4 for its remote play, background downloads, and Gaikai game streaming capabilities.

Pete Perez

It all has to do with friends. Finding out what console all my friends are going to get is the key to buying a system. Since all my friends want to play *Titanfall*, it looks like Xbox One is for me.

Joe Finelli

(Left) Tim introduced Sega's Omar Woodley, Thu Nguyen, Aaron Webber, and Jasmine Ramos to his childhood Sonic and Tails dolls. It was a touching moment, until Tim started impersonating their voices. **(Right)** 17-Bit Studios CEO Jake Kazdal stopped by the office to show Jeff Marchiafava and Matt Miller *Galak-Z: The Dimensional*, and didn't even mock them for going down in flames. What a guy!





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WINNER

1 Venancia Zuniga

Spyro looks cocky now, but we'll see how he holds up with Mickey Mouse and the rest of Disney gunning for him

2 Audra Crebs

Ghost has been waiting by the phone ever since he heard the title of this year's Call of Duty

3 Caliph Greene

Mega Man wonders if he made a mistake when he signed up for Smash Bros.

4 Hannah Williams

Stop it, Link. You're better than this



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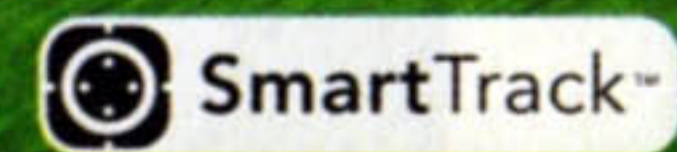
(Left) Kim poses with actor Scott Porter at this year's E3
(Right) Joe and Kim took a paragon/renegade approach when they interviewed BioWare's Aaryn Flynn, Casey Hudson, and Mark Darrah during their studio visit for Dragon Age: Inquisition. Ben Hanson naturally played the role of the jester.



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NOTABLES

- 19 the mutants return to the gridiron
- 22 impulse: mark of the ninja dev tackles turn-based strategy
- 24 massive: firefall
- 28 ea sports' next-gen gameplan
- 35 interview: remedy's sam lake
- 38 opinion: making xbox one a destination for indie game developers





GAMESCOM 2013

Sony announces PlayStation 4 release date,
Microsoft gets indie friendly

A hybrid of consumer and trade shows, Gamescom is different than any other video game conference. The Koelnmesse convention center in Cologne, Germany, has 14 huge halls. Many of those are public spaces, but tucked away behind a screen are two halls reserved for press, retailers, developers, and publishers.

We spent most of our time in the walled garden, but touring the show floor is a good litmus test for seeing what games excite the public the most. EA and Respawn told us that they had to stop people from queuing up for Titanfall once the line reached four hours long. Ubisoft had to cap lines for Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag at five hours. A cursory look at the spaces open to fans revealed that many publishers were forced into making the same difficult decisions.

This year's sold-out crowd totaled over 340,000 (up from 275,000 in 2012). With Microsoft and Nintendo returning to Cologne after skipping last year, even more activity occurred throughout the space.

by *Mike Futter*

MICROSOFT AND SONY: THE RACE TO THE FINISH

Last month, we detailed Microsoft's meandering path following E3. Much has changed since June (including a headset coming with every Xbox One, a fact that was altered after we went to print last month). We're entering the final phase of the console launch ramp-up, and more details are coming into focus. Microsoft and Sony are still tackling the new hardware in very different fashion, and this fall is shaping up to be one of the most interesting in years.

Like at E3, Microsoft once again found itself leading off a day of press conferences. But this time, it didn't play its entire hand. Instead of announcing a release date, the American company instead focused on other major announcements.

Microsoft revealed two new Xbox One games: Ubisoft's Kinect-powered *Fighter Within* and Lionhead Studios' first next-gen endeavor, *Fable Legends*. The former is an Xbox One launch title; the latter is still so early in development that Microsoft wouldn't even confirm that

it's targeted for 2014. The biggest news for European fans is that *FIFA 14* will be bundled with every pre-ordered console. "We have nothing to announce at this time," corporate vice president Phil Harrison told us in regard to a similar offer in North America.

In response to the company's increasingly poor reputation among indie game developers, Microsoft revealed details about how it plans to woo these developers with its new ID@Xbox program, which offers free devkits and a support structure that enables fast certification (see page 38 for more info). However, Microsoft still retains control of setting the retail price for each game.

Sony's press conference was a starkly different affair.

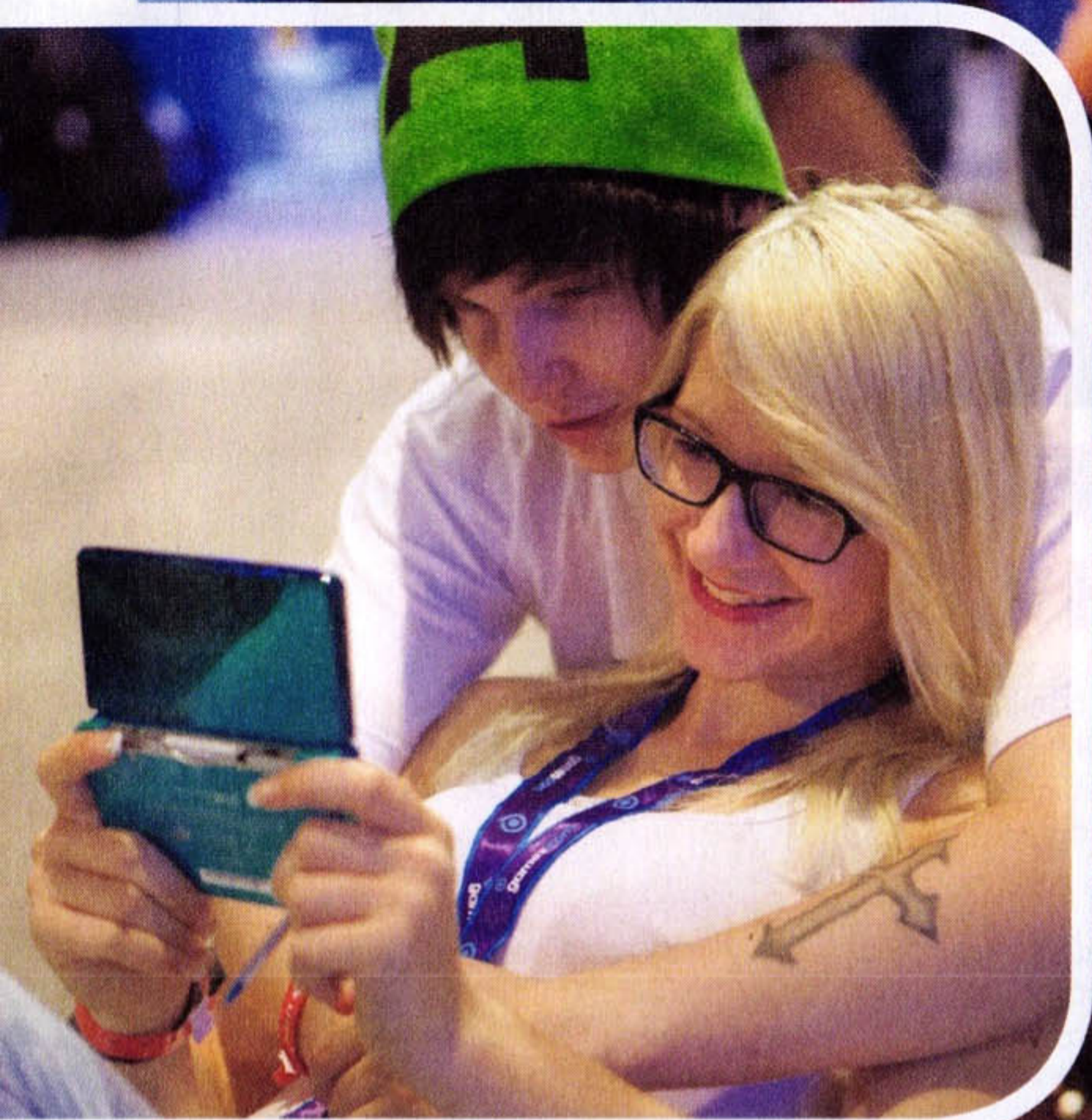
We were surprised with the volume of game announcements, specifically from independent developers. While Microsoft has only just started taking applications for its ID@Xbox program, Sony has already signed a deep slate of

titles that will be available in the launch window and beyond. Dennaton's *Hotline Miami 2*, the Ico-esque *Rime* from Deadlight developer Tequila Works, and Housemarque's *Resogun* are all coming to the PlayStation 4 and Vita.

The release date for the PlayStation 4 is November 15 in North America and November 29 in Europe. Sony also revealed that the console is launching in 32 countries, and that *Resogun* joins *DriveClub* PlayStation Plus edition as a free PlayStation Plus title on day one.

This fight isn't finished, as final software lineups aren't finalized. Microsoft still has room to get the jump on Sony (by up to two weeks based on the E3 promise of a November release). A free game for North American audiences would go a long way to cementing a fan base that has wavered in recent months. The next generation will be here before we know it, and this last leg of the race is likely to be the most exciting.





TRENDING TOPICS

WHERE'S THE WII U SUPPORT?

Ask Nintendo, and it will still tell you that the Wii U is the first of the next-gen consoles. Ask just about anyone else, and they'll tell you that it simply isn't. Worse, the install base continues to limp along such that most major publishers are steering clear.

EA, Take Two, and Deep Silver have all but abandoned the platform. Grand Theft Auto V, Madden NFL 25, Need For Speed: Rivals, Battlefield 4, NBA 2K14, XCOM: Enemy Within, and Saints Row IV are all skipping the Wii U.

Activision and Warner Bros. are wavering. Call of Duty: Ghosts, Skylanders, Batman: Arkham Origins, and LEGO Marvel Super Heroes are coming to Wii U. Diablo III, Destiny, Mad Max, and Dying Light are all taking a pass.

Ubisoft remains a firm ally, but the publisher has been vocal about a desire for Nintendo to take action and improve sales. A recent \$50 Wii U price drop might fit the bill. Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, Watch Dogs, and Just Dance are still coming to Nintendo's latest living room console. No plans have been announced for The Division or The Crew, and it's hard to believe that Ubisoft will invest in online-focused titles for the Wii U.

OPEN WORLDS ARE HERE TO STAY

Ubisoft recently shared its plans to dive even deeper into titles with open worlds. Watch Dogs is the publisher's latest franchise to fit that bill, with The Crew and The Division firmly landing in that camp as well.

Warner Bros.' Mad Max features vast landscapes to drive, prowl, and shoot

through. The publisher is also working with Techland on Dying Light, a title strikingly similar to the Dead Island games it made for Deep Silver.

Bungie's Destiny is massive in scope, with players able to roam the land together or solo. Even CD Projekt is tweaking its Witcher formula to make Geralt's third adventure more compatible with free-roaming.

As hardware becomes more powerful, open worlds become less strenuous and easier to build. The flood of these types of titles could result in some developers swimming against the tide with throw-back games that tout "linear structure" as a selling feature.

SECOND SCREEN EXPERIENCES: AN EXHAUSTING FAD

Last generation, Microsoft and Sony followed Nintendo into the world of motion-controlled gaming. This time out, the two are eagerly touting "second screen" experiences that mimic the Wii U GamePad. There's one difference, though. Balancing an iPad while using a controller isn't easy.

Some developers have figured out ways to smartly offer complementary experiences on tablets. Watch Dogs' CtOS Mobile app provides real-time cooperative and competitive experiences that don't require users to split their attention. Use of the companion app is free and does not require ownership of the retail Watch Dogs game. More importantly, messing with your friends (or helping them) from across the couch or around the world is a lot of fun.

Other developers haven't thought through the ergonomics of their second screen experiences. Crytek is integrating basic menu and leaderboard features into its SmartGlass functions for Ryse: Son of Rome. This cumbersome implementation offers no benefit to the game.

Dead Rising 3 offers content that is only accessible when using SmartGlass. It's clever to think that players might want to use their own phone as a mirror for the one in-game, but it's a pain to juggle another device. These interesting ideas are largely impractical for how most people would prefer to interact with the game.

MMOS BUCK THE FREE-TO-PLAY TREND

MMOs have gravitated towards the free-to-play space, but two publishers are swimming against the tide with subscription models.

Banking on the popularity of The Elder

Scrolls series, Bethesda decided on a traditional model for The Elder Scrolls Online. The publisher stands a better chance of a long run as a subscription service thanks to its ties to the beloved franchise. This is a risky move, though. Should Bethesda fail to keep The Elder Scrolls Online popular for more than a year, the almost inevitable shift to free-to-play (taken by so many other titles) could be seen as a sign of weakness.

NCSOFT announced that Carbine Studios' Wildstar also uses a subscription model. The publisher has opted to follow CCP's EVE Online, allowing players to convert an in-game currency to play time. Wildstar is shaping up nicely, but it needs a strong and loyal player base early to stay in the black.

Both titles carry a \$15 per month fee, with discounts available for bulk time purchases.



NEXT-GEN LAUNCH LINEUPS

Both Sony and Microsoft confirmed their complete list of titles currently slated for the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One launches, respectively. Here are the lists of games scheduled to hit shelves and/or digital stores between the November debuts and the end of the launch window in March.

XBOX ONE:

- Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag (Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft)
- Battlefield 4 (DICE, Electronic Arts)
- Call of Duty: Ghosts (Infinity Ward, Activision)
- Crimson Dragon (Grounding/Land Ho!, Microsoft Studios)
- Dead Rising 3 (Capcom Vancouver, Microsoft)
- FIFA 14 (EA Canada, EA Sports)
- Fighter Within (AMA Ltd., Ubisoft)
- Forza Motorsport 5 (Turn 10 Studios, Microsoft Studios)
- Just Dance 2014 (Ubisoft Paris, Ubisoft)
- Killer Instinct (Double Helix, Microsoft Studios)
- LEGO Marvel Super Heroes (TT Games, Warner Bros. Interactive)
- Lococycle (Twisted Pixel, Microsoft Studios)
- Madden NFL 25 (EA Tiburon, EA Sports)
- NBA 2K14 (Visual Concepts, 2K Sports)
- NBA Live 14 (EA Tiburon, EA Sports)
- Need for Speed: Rivals (Ghost Games, Electronic Arts)
- Peggle 2 (Popcap, Electronic Arts)
- Powerstar Golf (Zoë Mode, Microsoft Studios)
- Ryse: Son of Rome (Crytek, Microsoft Studios)
- Skylanders: Swap Force (Vicarious Visions, Activision)
- Watch Dogs (Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft)
- Zoo Tycoon (Frontier Developments Ltd., Microsoft Studios)
- Zumba Fitness: World Party (Zoë Mode, Majesco)

PLAYSTATION 4:

- Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag (Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft)
- Basement Crawl (Blobber Team)
- Battlefield 4 (DICE, Electronic Arts)
- Blacklight: Retribution (Zombie Studios, Perfect World Entertainment)
- Call of Duty: Ghosts (Infinity Ward, Activision)
- Contrast (Compulsion Games, Focus Home Interactive)
- CounterSpy (Dynamighty, Sony Computer Entertainment)
- DC Universe Online (SOE Austin, Sony Online Entertainment)
- Doki-Doki Universe (HumaNature Studios)
- Driveclub (Evolution Studios, Sony Computer Entertainment)
- FIFA 14 (EA Canada, EA Sports)
- Flower (thatgamecompany, Sony Computer Entertainment)
- Hohokum (Honeyslug, Sony Computer Entertainment)
- Just Dance 2014 (Ubisoft Paris, Ubisoft)
- Killzone: Shadow Fall (Guerrilla Games, Sony Computer Entertainment)
- Knack (SCE Japan Studio, Sony Computer Entertainment)
- LEGO Marvel Super Heroes (TT Games, Warner Bros. Interactive)
- Madden NFL 25 (EA Tiburon, EA Sports)
- Minecraft (Mojang)
- N++ (Metanet Software)
- NBA 2K14 (Visual Concepts, 2K Sports)
- NBA Live 14 (EA Tiburon, EA Sports)
- Need for Speed: Rivals (Ghost Games, Electronic Arts)
- Pinball Arcade (FarSight Studios)
- PlanetSide 2 (Sony Online Entertainment)
- Pool Nation FX (Cherry Pop Games)
- Resogun (Housemarque, Sony Computer Entertainment)
- Skylanders: Swap Force (Vicarious Visions, Activision)
- Super Motherload (XGen Studios)
- Tiny Brains (Spearhead Games)
- War Thunder (Gaijin Entertainment)
- Warframe (Digital Extremes)
- Watch Dogs (Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft) ♦

VITA RECEIVES \$100 PRICE DROP

With a sparse game library and sluggish sales, many have already put the final nail in the coffin for the Vita. Sony gave its handheld system a much-needed boost by dropping the retail price of its 3GB Wi-Fi model to \$199 effective immediately. Combined with Sony's concentrated effort to make the handheld an attractive platform for indie developers, this aggressive price cut could give the struggling system a new lease on life. Sony also announced that nearly all PlayStation 4 games will run on the Vita via Remote Play, which may encourage early PS4 adopters to add the handheld to their shopping list this holiday season.



Be sure to check out the biggest previews from Gamescom 2013 in this issue, including Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, Battlefield 4, Dead Rising 3, Mad Max, Ryse: Son of Rome, The Sims 4, Watch Dogs, and XCOM: Enemy Within. A new Titanfall hands-on preview is available exclusively for our digital subscribers

The Good



REAPER OF SOULS, the first Diablo III expansion, has finally been announced. It features a new Crusader class, an increased level cap (to 70), randomized end-game content, three new regions, improved loot drops, and more. Blizzard has not announced a release date or committed to a console version of the expansion.

a-b-u-
THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY



The Bad

XBOX ONE'S KINECT

is becoming superfluous. Microsoft announced that the improved motion-peripheral does not have to be connected to the Xbox One. Previously the camera's always-on settings could be turned off, but it still had to be hooked up to the system. While this seemingly opens the door for a Kinect-less Xbox One that could cost less money than the platform's current \$499 price tag, the company is (currently) saying that the system will not be sold separately from the Kinect. In other Microsoft news, CEO Steve Ballmer, who engineered the company's recent organizational restructuring and took over for Bill Gates, announced his retirement.



FEZ II CREATOR Phil Fish canceled the game and quit the video game industry after receiving an avalanche of criticism. "This is as much as I can stomach," he said on developer Polytron's website. "This isn't the result of any one thing, but the end of a long, bloody campaign. You win."

The Ugly

Quotable

"If you enjoy your games, have a little respect for the people who make them and stop threatening them with bodily harm every time they do their job."



— **Dan Amrich**, Activision community manager, sticks up for Call of Duty: Black Ops II developer David Vonderhaar. Internet tough guys threatened Vonderhaar with violence after Treyarch released a patch that changed fire and sprint times by tenths of a second.

The Mutants Return To The Gridiron

With a new Kickstarter, Mutant Football League aims to bring back a classic



by Matt Helgeson

Sega Genesis fans no doubt remember EA's cult classic Mutant League Football, a title that blends a well-crafted football game with macabre monsters, booby-trapped fields, a satirical sense of humor, and comic violence. Released in 1993, the game offered an oddball take on the sport that drew in both fans of Madden and gamers who generally didn't play sports titles.

The wacky football game frequently graces online wish lists of franchises that need to be revived. Now, thanks to Kickstarter, series creator Michael Mendheim hopes to bring it back, in a carefully titled new game called Mutant Football League.

"I thought the timing was right to do something like this because it's the 20th anniversary of Mutant League Football," says Mendheim. "Over the years, the fans and

press have always asked me the same question: 'Is there ever going to be another Mutant League game?'"

Mendheim shares this fondness for the game. "Of all the projects I've worked on – and I've worked on a lot of games – Mutant League is the project that keeps calling me back," he says.

However, in a console industry that's often focused on the latest triple-A shooters,

Mendheim found little interest on the part of Electronic Arts. "Over the years, I've tried really hard to get something going and it just hasn't been possible," Mendheim says. "I have nothing but respect for Electronic Arts and the guys that work there. But, for whatever reason, they don't want to do it. That's fine."

EA's interest in the property was so low, in fact, that the company let its Mutant League Football trademark lapse (it's been listed as a "dead" trademark on the U.S. Patent Trademark and Patent Office since April, 2001). Along with this legal opening, the advent of Kickstarter gave Mendheim, like many creators of classic game franchises, an opportunity he never thought he'd get.

Mendheim hopes to raise a little less than one million dollars on Kickstarter, and he's assembled a team around him to ensure that the game hits both a high level of production value and succeeds as comedy. This includes





Dave Devries (author/artist of the popular children's art book *The Monster Engine*), comic-book creator Dave Elliot (*A1*, *Weirding Willows*), comic artist Simon Bisley (*ABC Warriors*, *Lobo*), and writer/director Jay Lender (*SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Phineas & Ferb*).

In particular, Mendheim sees Lender's involvement as crucial. "It's a game that needs to make people laugh, and Jay is my insurance on humor," he says. Mendheim sees the modern football world as ripe for parody, and is pushing the game in a more satirical direction, with *Mad Magazine*/Garbage Pail Kids style characters that emulate modern NFL icons like broadcaster John Gruden (a Chuckie

doll lookalike, natch) and Troy Polamalu (a.k.a. Troll Polamalapuke of the Blitzburgh Stealers).

"We're parodying the owners, the coaches, the sponsors, the players, and all the lunacy that goes along with that," Mendheim says. We'll have to see if these antics run afoul of the No Fun League, but to avoid confusion with EA, none of the original Mutant League Football teams or character designs will be in the game.

Since Mendheim will have to wait to see whether the MFL Kickstarter is successful, the game is largely in the pre-production phase, but the vision is to create gameplay that keeps many of the familiar elements of the original

(like the on-field hazards and the ability to kill off the opposing team's players) while employing state-of-the-art design and graphics. "I don't think Mutant League Football held up that well over the years," Mendheim says. "We want to pay homage to the original, but let there be no mistake that we are creating a new franchise and a new game."

To do that, the team will use the popular (and affordable) Unity engine, which Mendheim praises for its ability to easily port between systems. Right now, the game is planned for Xbox Live and tablets. Mendheim is also intent on giving the Kickstarter backers input in the development process, and says he'll allow them to submit ideas and give feedback on the game's crazy plays and over-the-top characters. Mendheim says, "The fans have kept this property alive and they are definitely going to get some payback."

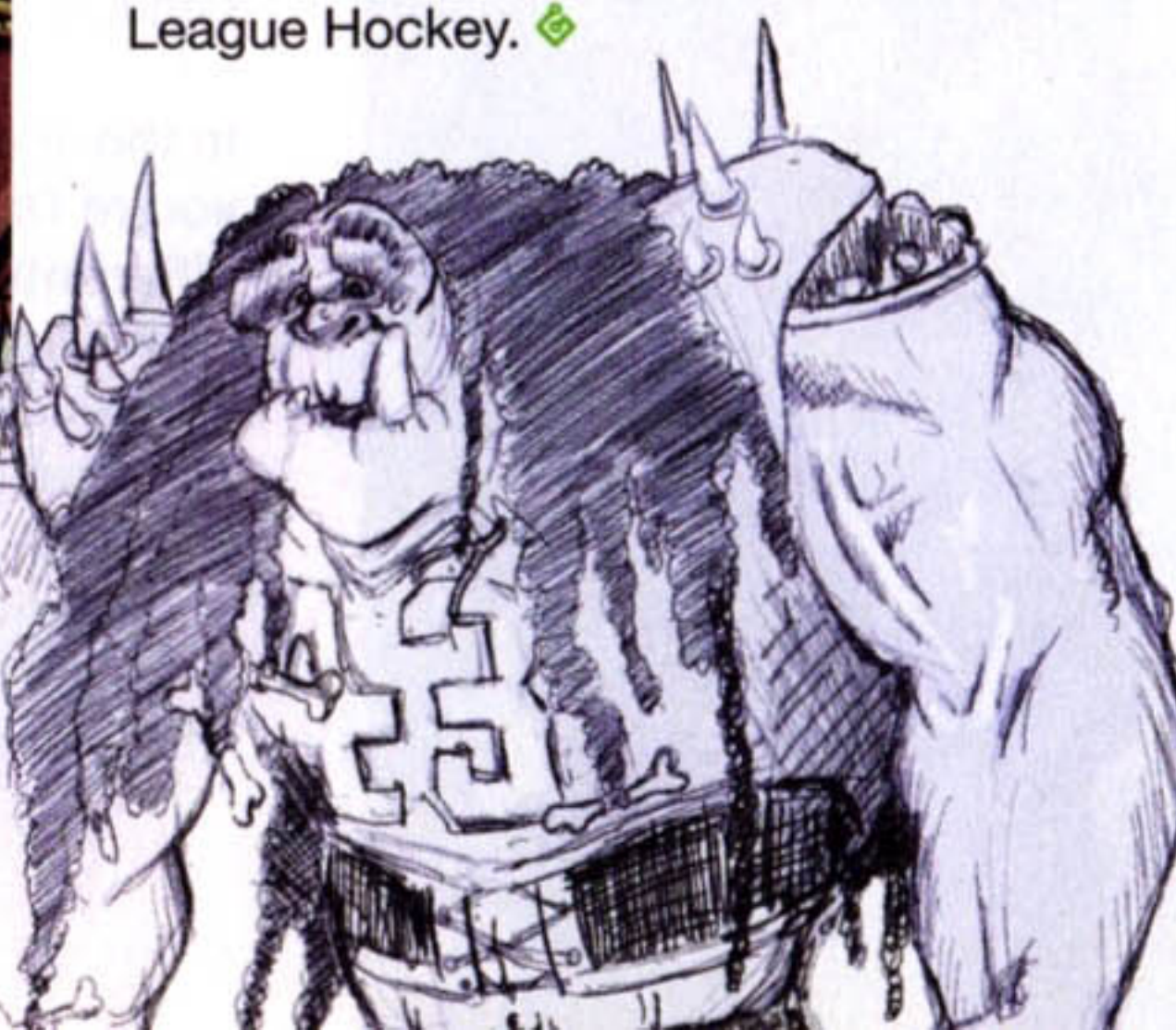
Mendheim is hopeful that Kickstarter will give him the ability to perfect the franchise he created 20 years ago. "I've been working on this for a little while, because I'm not rushing it," Mendheim says. "I wanted to put together a competent creative team who have proven themselves with successful products. We're ready and we're going to launch it."

While he's not looking too far past Mutant Football League, he also says that, if it's successful, there's a chance he will consider reviving the equally beloved Mutant League Hockey. ♦



A Saturday Morning Oddity

The Mutant League Football franchise has endured over the years thanks to its faithful fanbase. However, back in the '90s the game had enough juice to spawn some licensed spin-offs, including action figures and (strangely) a Saturday morning cartoon show produced by Western Animation. The series featured the character Bones Justice (a play on the game's Bones Jackson) who battled the forces of sports evil after having been turned into a mutant by a toxic waste spill at a football game. The series only lasted two seasons, and was mostly notable for the high level of violence it featured, which was extreme for a children's show.





A Conversation With The Dark Lord

Castlevania actor Robert Carlyle talks about his role as Dracula

by Ben Reeves

When MercurySteam started work on *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow*, it envisioned that Gabriel Belmont would be a muscle-bound Conan the Barbarian type. Once actor Robert Carlyle (*Trainspotting*, *28 Weeks Later*) came on board, however, the team decided to shape the protagonist into a more grounded, thoughtful character. During recording sessions for the first game, Carlyle wasn't given a lot of work with – the team didn't even have concept art to show him. In *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2*, Belmont has taken on the role of Dracula, so we sat down with Carlyle to talk how the actor has changed his approach to the character and how he prepared for voicing one of the most iconic villains in history.

Did you read *Dracula*, or anything else, to prepare for this role?

No. I always think that it's a wee bit dangerous to do that kind of stuff – to go back and look at Bela Lugosi or whoever and how they played Dracula – because that would say that there is only one way to play Dracula. There is no point in putting yourself in a box. You can get yourself stuck in a particular version or particular story. I just wanted to be kind of loose with it.

I know with film or TV work there's a little bit more play in just how you arrange a scene, but with video games, the developers lay out the environments and the animation. Did you find that to be a more rigid experience?

There's more freedom than you would imagine. The team was very open to interpretation. I've worked with actors who I call bedroom actors – people who sit in front of a mirror and they play something to that glass, and no matter what they do that glass will never answer back. I see that and think, "You have planned this down to the absolute nth degree and no matter what I say, no matter if I start jumping up and down naked, it's not going to change." I'm always open to suggestion; I think that's a more genuine process.

In the sequel, it's pretty evident that you're Dracula. Do you play the role a bit differently now?

I don't think it was necessarily that different. I was touched by the emotion in the character. This Dracula is not walking around biting people willy-nilly. He's trying to get back to some kind of earlier version of himself – a place where he was when he was happy. At the end of the first game, he made a deal with Zobek to try to

get rid of this eternal life curse. He doesn't want it. He's been alive for a thousand years. It was really helpful to tap into that emotionally, because you're going to follow along with this character all the way through your gameplay experience. You've got to, in some way, like this character. You've got to have some kind of feelings toward him.

That's interesting, because Dracula is traditionally an entity of evil. How do you go about associating with a character like that?

I'm always looking for shades of gray whenever I approach any piece of drama. I identify with most of the characters I've played, even Dracula. I can't see that any single person living on this planet is 100-percent bad. I don't think anybody is born 100-percent bad. Throughout my career, I've played a lot of crazies, but I always try to look at the other side of the coin. What's it going to look like if I actually play this nice? What's this going to look like if I play this with a laugh on my face?

We heard that there were moments during the recording process where you broke down crying because the scene was so emotional. Did you find that video game acting was more challenging than you expected?

Yeah, because what's not being said in a scene is always more interesting to me than what's being said – it's the stuff between the lines. [Video games] are a different kind of discipline, because you can't really play the stuff between the lines; there isn't anything in the eyes to show what the actor is thinking. What I'm trying to say is that you can say two different things with your eyes and your voice. But this is different, because the actor doesn't control the character's eyes, so it was a challenge for me to try to find that piece of the character vocally. I guess I've been challenged more vocally in this than anything I've ever done before.

Was there anything in the script that got you excited to go through it or see it visualized?

The prospect of playing Dracula was enough to light my candle because that's something I've always fancied doing, but I'm maybe not quite Dracula material in terms of film or TV. To be able to do it vocally was fantastic. That was really an easy yes. Within minutes I was like, "Yeah, of course I'm going to do that again." And I think I'd do it again. ♦

This is the legend you've heard
whispered through the ages



THE LEGEND OF
ZELDA
the Windwaker
HD



Early prototype build

Mark Of The Ninja Dev Tackles Turn-Based Espionage

by Matt Miller

One of my favorite games of last year was *Mark of the Ninja*. Klei Entertainment performed the difficult trick of taking the familiar mechanics of action/stealth and seamlessly adapting them to a 2D platforming space. Early signs indicate that the studio's newest game is equally surprising. **Incognita** bends genres, combining the turn-based tactics of *XCOM* with the rogue-like procedural levels of *FTL*, placing the whole thing in a '60s spy movie milieu.

"The game is set on an alternate Earth, where mega-corporations control the world," says co-designer Jason Dreger. "With the help of a mysterious entity who calls herself Incognita, players head an elite group of super agents to liberate the world."

Rather than only control an individual agent, the player takes the role of the operator or commander back at base, guiding his or her team through a corporate infiltration. Even as you dictate the actions of each of your characters, you also switch over to a blueprint-style mainframe view, where you control laser grids and observe rooms through remote camera feeds.

Unlike most espionage games, *Incognita* is turn-based, so you can think carefully about how to deploy agents throughout the rooms ahead. However, as turns pass, tension is introduced through an alarm system. "The building is always scanning for the player's

team and will inevitably find them if they linger too long," Dreger says. "Once discovered, brutal shock troops arrive, making the level significantly less friendly. Being spotted by security cameras or letting guards' heart meters signal the alarm accelerates the scanning process."

Before entering a level, players choose a team structure. "Trench coat shrouded stealth-agents

build on information gathering abilities," Dreger says. "Cyborg engineers deploy traps and excel at computer control. Dead-eye sharpshooters become excellent at long-range takedowns." These first three classes are just a sampling of the final roster Klei has planned.

Once your team is formed, they head for the mega-corp's elevator and proceed to climb through its many floors to the pinnacle. As you explore the procedurally generated map, there are plenty of objectives to pursue; most are about balancing a drive to find and reach the exit against the need to uncover corporate secrets and upgrade your agents. Ammo is limited, so you need to keep an eye out for more. Safes hide data discs that may be used to improve an agent's abilities. Hacking computers offers a better look at the rooms ahead, at the cost of the time it takes to complete the procedure. All the time, the alarm ticks higher, and your agents won't be strong enough to



survive the assault if the heavy security arrives.

Klei is known for its distinctive art styles, and *Incognita* continues the trend. The exaggerated, elongated character models and cartoon facial models call to mind classic spy cinema with a touch of futuristic charm. The isometric view assures a strong ability to assess the expanding tactical options as a given floor of the building is uncovered, and allows for fun sneaky maneuvers, like baiting guards into a trap, or tracking enemy movement until you can stealth past. In many ways, the control and view recalls *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, but with less of a focus on head-to-head combat.

Aping a feature from *Mark of the Ninja*, enemy and ally characters exhibit a sound circle that indicates how much noise they're making. "In *Incognita*, sounds have many different ranges," says co-designer James Lantz. "Under the control of careful players, observant agents will be able to hear guards before the player can see them. If the player acts loudly, nearby guards might hear the noises and come to investigate. Clever players can use the sound ranges to distract guards or draw them to specific locations."


Incognita is far from complete, with release planned for some time in early 2014 on unspecified platforms beyond PC. However, Klei plans for a beta before the end of 2013. From what I've seen so far, the intriguing mix of roguelike exploration and turn-based stealth should make this worth getting in on the ground floor. ♦

Hungry for more info on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates on the best new projects. For news on the spiritual successor to *Mutant League Football*, check out p. 18. Don't miss our previews of *Octodad* (p. 72), and *The Wolf Among Us* (p. 77), and our reviews of *Payday 2* (p. 86), *Castle of Illusion* (p. 91), *Ibb & Obb* (p. 92), *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (p. 94), and *Gone Home* (p. 95).

Early prototype build





 legend as sweeping as the sea





FIREFALL

Shooter first, MMO second

by Adam Biessener

During the desperate combat, battling tides of aliens in your jetpack power armor, Firefall seems to offer everything a hybrid MMO/shooter possibly could. After the dust settles, it's a different story. When much of your cash has been eaten by repair costs and you've shaved off a bare sliver from your next XP milestone, it seems like developer Red 5 studios hasn't learned any lessons from the evolution of MMO design since the masochistic early days of EverQuest.

Playing Firefall is a constant oscillation between these poles of elation and ennui. The combat itself is wonderful. The game's aliens threaten humanity with unearthly powers and hellishly altered fauna, but even newly created characters have the power to fight back by raining incandescent sci-fi death from above like the avenging gods.

Any player, from a seasoned vet to a less twitch-oriented MMO fan looking to support their allies, should find something to love in the five classes. I was originally drawn to the Bastion engineer suit and its wide array of turrets and deployables, and had a great time supporting my allies by turning any patch of ground into an instant fortress. Some hours of experimentation later, though, I fell permanently in love with the Firecat assault's all-out offense that turns me into an explosive wrecking ball as I bounce in and out of the hairiest parts of every battle.

Even though every class is a fully capable battle platform in its own right – even the medics' guns pack a hell of a punch – the feats a well-organized and diverse group is capable of are surprising. Firefall's gameplay is pure shooter, and no battle could be characterized as the "tank-and-spank" combat many MMO combat systems are limited to. The action also has a tactical depth not often found in fast-paced shooters. Sturdy juggernauts draw fire while offensive assault players launch heavy area-damage effects at the clustered enemies. Recon snipers assassinate threats to the biotech medics who are standing in the thick of it all, spreading clouds of nanobots that heal allies and poison foes. Every role captures one or more of the pure thrills of shooter combat, and finding the fun is never difficult.

As entertaining as Firefall is when the plasma

bolts are flying, the joy drains in the aftermath of battle. Everything becomes depressingly similar after pushing back invasions, defending resource-mining thumpers, and assaulting dangerous Melding tornadoes for a few dozen hours. I love the concept of spawning constant bits of dynamic content, but the breadth of activities is severely lacking. Retake one watchtower from an alien strike team, and you've seen how that same battle will play out every time. Every tornado battle follows the same pattern. Even the one-off missions that appear in the wilderness fall into a bare few categories that become rote after not much time with the game. The major invasions that sweep across broad swathes of the landscape are still exciting after dozens of hours spent in Firefall, but I've gone days of extensive playtime without seeing one happen.

Progression comes in two forms, both of which are awful. Experience gained from completing objectives is spent on upgrading the mass, power, and CPU of your suit, but the geometric growth of the XP requirements quickly moves from earning an upgrade every hour of playtime to every day, then every week. Crafting is a tedious process that involves gathering huge piles of different resources, and then navigating the terrible interface for making sub-components with marginally different stats. After dealing with this sadistic interface and waiting the 10 to 120 minutes it takes for the final item to actually complete, you might come out the other side with a clip one round larger and ten percent more damage on your primary weapon.

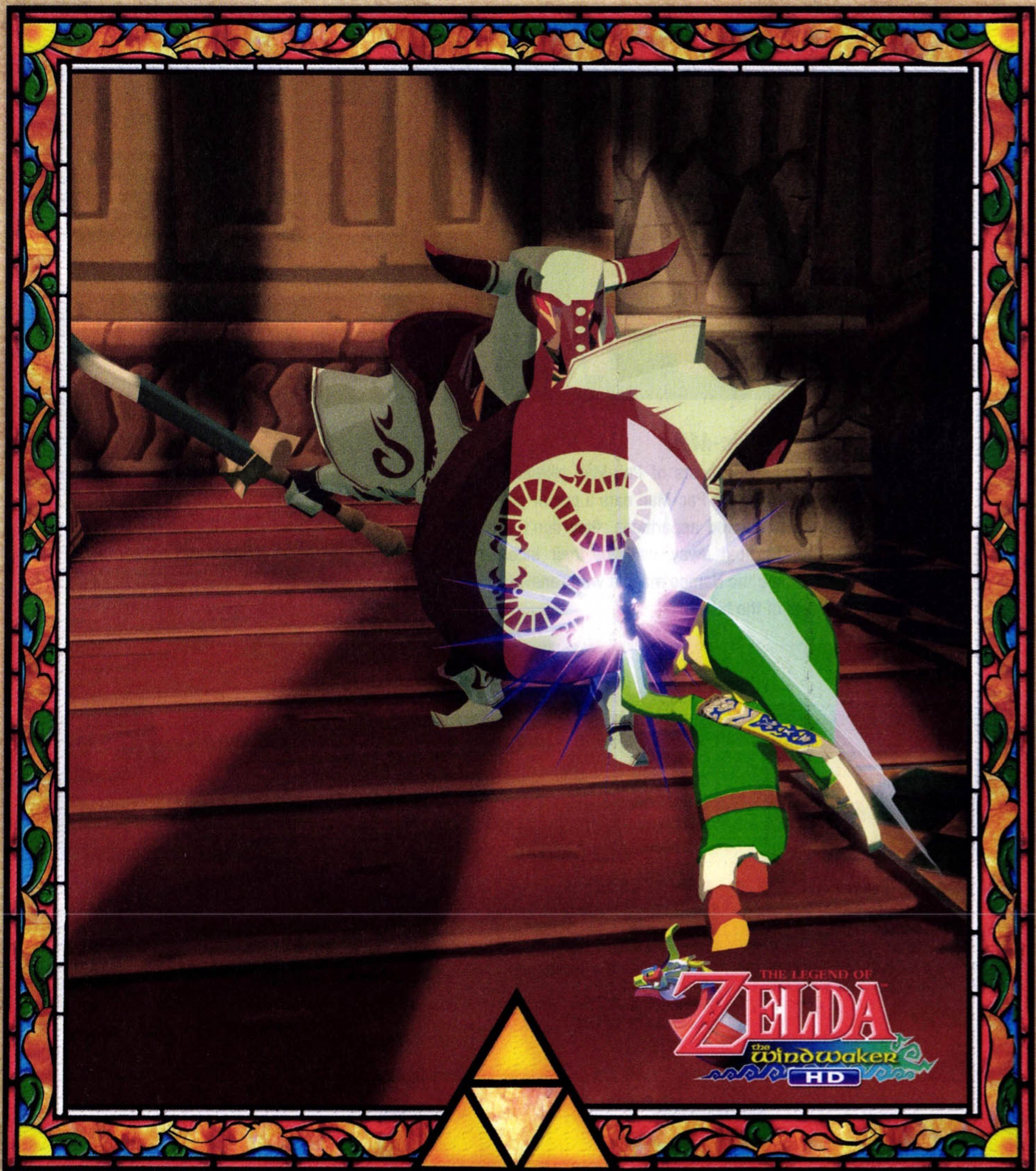
You put up with the painful crafting because that extra round and bonus damage make a noticeable difference in battle – especially in aggregate across a dozen pieces of equipment. Besides, what else are you fighting

for? The invasions never stop, and the story doesn't progress. The higher-end content you're theoretically working toward currently consists of a single series of group encounters that, while cool, are limited in scope.

As it is with so many shooters, player-versus-player combat could be the saving grace of Firefall, but I can't recommend it over many better-executed offerings in the genre. There is no open-world PvP; all competitive players are shunted off into small-scale instances with even teams. Red 5 has made a significant investment in e-sports with a good spectator mode and prize pools for tournament play, but the weak foundation of questionably balanced classes and often-shaky netcode that results in lagging and rubber-banding unacceptable for any PvP game have kept a healthy PvP community from forming so far. These are solvable problems, but Firefall has not started off on the right foot if it is intended to be a top-shelf PvP shooter.

Firefall's free-to-play model sits in the middle of the pack in terms of respect for players and the integrity of the game. The 10 advanced armors (which are better than the basic versions by virtue of having access to the basic abilities as well as a set of advanced powers) can be purchased for roughly \$8 apiece, or unlocked with about eight hours of XP grinding each. Convenience items – notably rechargeable glider pads and motorcycles – are hardly necessary, but I would recommend anyone who plans on spending more than a handful of hours with the game shell out the few bucks they cost. Cosmetic stuff is, as always, for vanity purposes only. There is no box price or subscription fee involved, and no energy mechanic or item degradation to enforce constant reinvestment in the game.

The co-op side of Firefall has great gameplay but not enough content. The game's PvP side has interesting maps and a high-quality observer mode, but too much lag and unconvincing balancing. Both halves of the game benefit from the gorgeous presentation and suffer from the terrible progression systems. While playing Firefall, my enjoyment outweighed my frustration, but its current incarnation lacks the staying power of the best MMOs. ♦

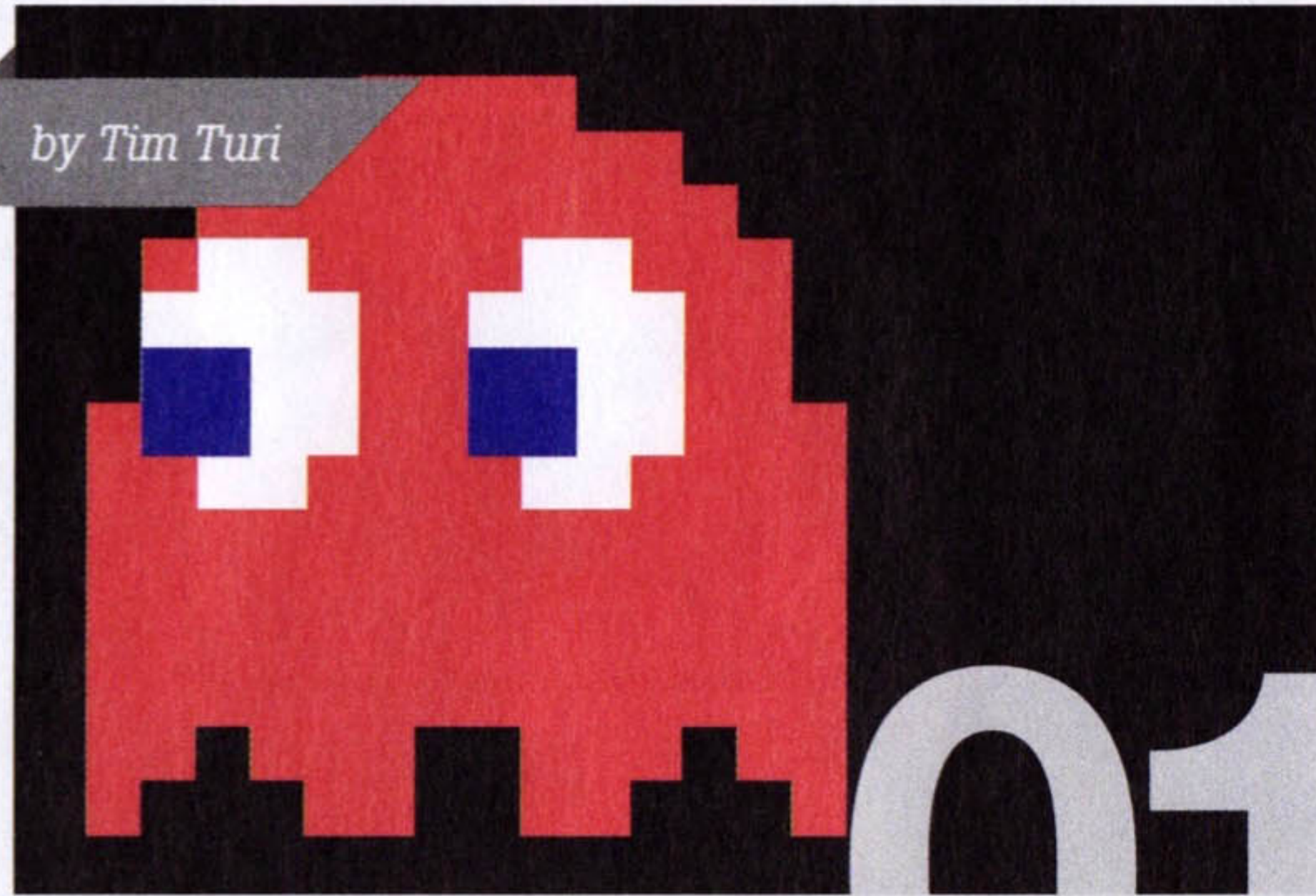


Q legend born from battle



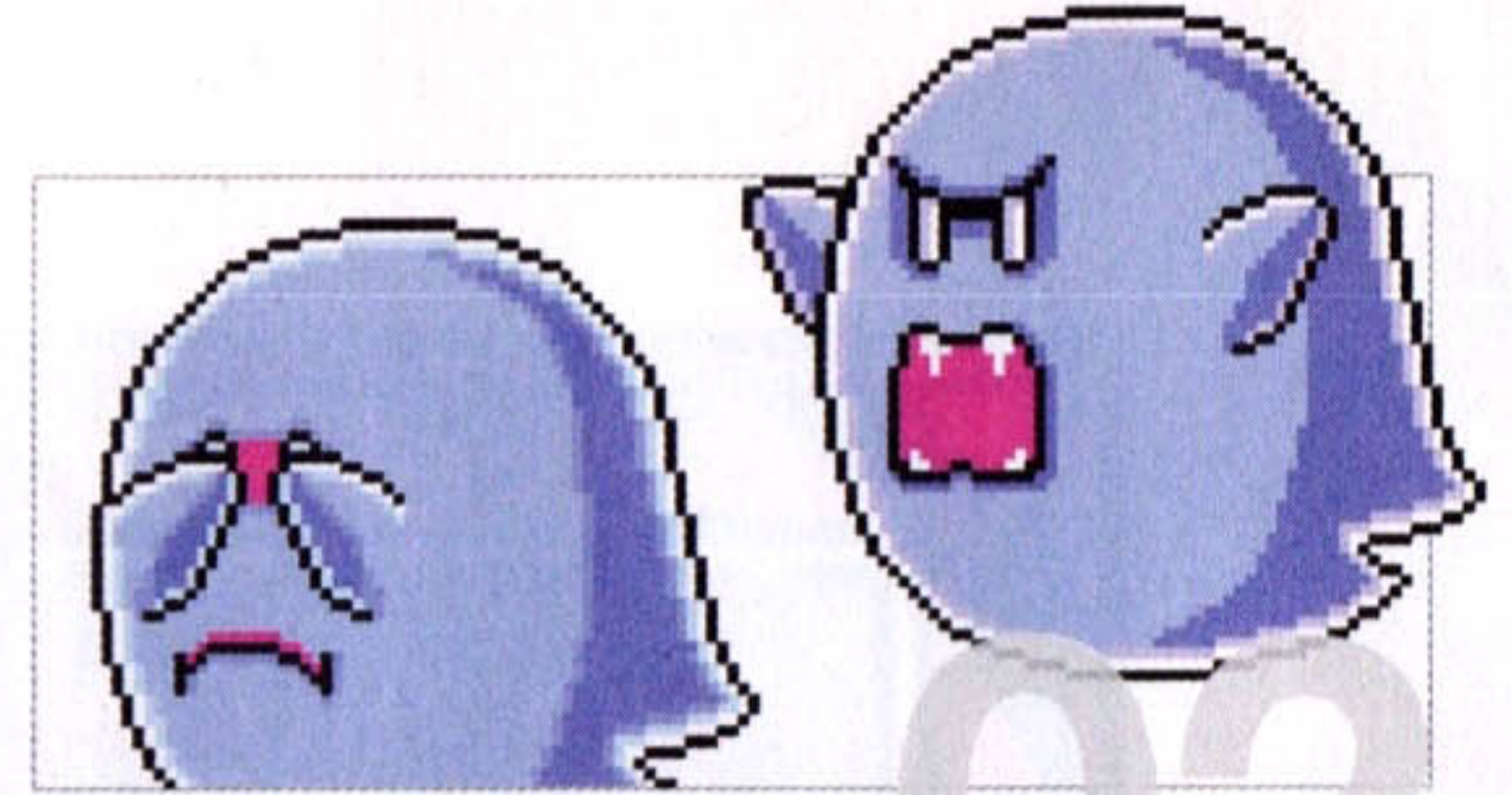
Ghosts

by Tim Turi



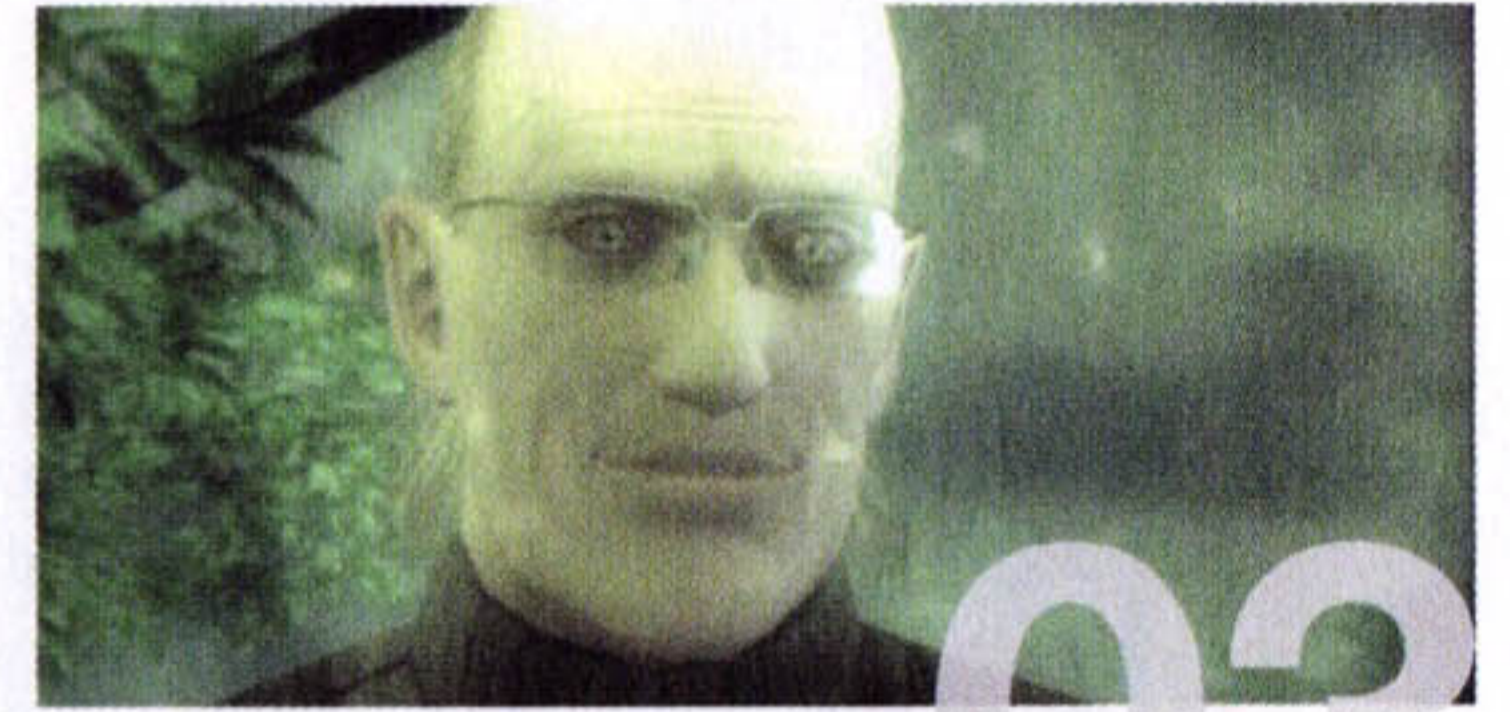
Blinky - Pac-Man

True evil never dies. The ghosts of Pac-Man relentlessly pursue the little yellow hero. Even when Pac-Man eats a power pellet and gobbles up the roaming, multicolored apparitions, they don't stay down. Their disembodied eyeballs float away, wait for their incorporeal form to regenerate, and pursue the Namco mascot with renewed vigor. Blinky is the most persistent of the bunch.



Big Boo - Super Mario World

These timid, mostly invulnerable nuisances have been pestering players since Super Mario Bros. 3. A huge, screen-filling version of the Boo lurks in the Ghost Houses of Super Mario World. This foe is so big that Mario often needs to use a trampoline to vault over it.



The Sorrow - Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

The Sorrow forces Snake to confront the spirit of every man he's ever killed while trudging down a stream. This all occurs in Snake's mind. Lethal players have to evade swaths of soldiers filled with bullet holes or sporting slit throats. Pacifists can stroll through the water unharmed.



LeChuck - The Secret of Monkey Island

After being rejected by his crush, LeChuck set off to look for the secret of Monkey Island to prove himself worthy. The burly captain was killed and came back as an evil scorned spirit. Despite LeChuck's machismo and revenge plotting, the unassuming Guybrush Threepwood dispatches the lovesick soul with a spray of root beer.



Haunter - Pokémon

Some Pokémon resemble flora or fauna, and other times the catchable critters are straight out of left field. This vaporous Pokémon hails from both the ghost- and poison-type categories, making it a spooky, toxic mess. Haunter's tongue is made out of gas, and it likes to attack its victims by licking them. Once licked, the subject convulses until it dies - pretty brutal for such a cute little guy.



Alma - F.E.A.R.

Alma is the vengeful spirit of an innocent child with potent psychic abilities seeking revenge on the Armacham Technology Corporation for experimenting on her. Throughout the FPS series, Alma crawls along ceilings, possesses soldiers to do her bidding, and generally creeps players out. Think Carrie meets Drew Barrymore from *Firestarter* with a liberal dose of Samara from *The Ring*.



Polterguy - Haunting Starring Polterguy

The wonderfully named Polterguy looks like the mischievous ghost of James Dean with a rad flat top. Polterguy possesses household objects to terrorize a family. Haunting a table saw causes a bloody, dismembered hand to roll across it, and leaping into the couch turns it into a ravenous piece of furniture.



Poes - The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

These cloaked phantoms first appeared in A Link to the Past, but we most fondly remember their 3D incarnations in Link's N64 adventure. Perhaps taking a cue from their Nintendo cousins, Boos, these ghosts disappear when players target them, save for their floating lanterns.



Sissel - Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

The star of this Nintendo DS adventure starts things off by getting killed. In most games this is followed by a Game Over screen, but in Ghost Trick it's just the beginning. Sissel's death pulls him into a web of crime filled with murder and intrigue. This leading entity has the ability to rewind time and inhabit objects.



Kerrigan - StarCraft

StarCraft: Ghost is still MIA, but we got to play as a stealthy ghost unit in the RTS series' first entry. Back before she had space dreadlocks, Kerrigan could detonate EMPs, use cloaking technology, and paint bases for nuclear strikes.

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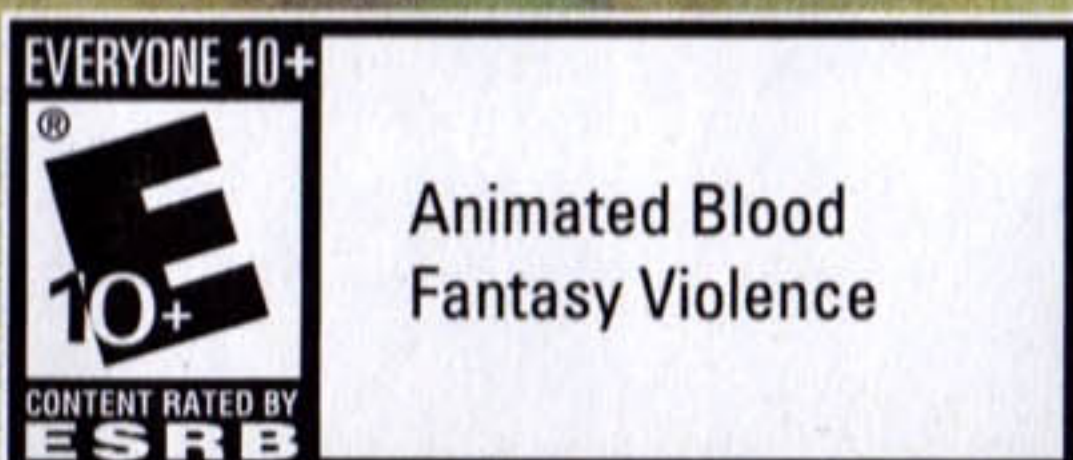
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THE FRANCHISE IN TRANSITION

by Matt Bertz



As EA Sports closes a turbulent era, its newfound commitment to teamwork and shared technology has the sports label in a better position for next-gen consoles

If you had to tag a genre as the Rodney Dangerfield of the video game industry, sports games would make a convincing argument. The developers of these annual releases thanklessly operate as spec ops teams, responsible for executing at a high level on an aggressive timetable with no support net to catch them if something goes awry. Unlike an Irrational Games or Rockstar, they aren't afforded the luxury of delays. The FIFA, NBA, NFL, and NHL games must ship before the starting date of their respective sports' seasons, and a failure to do so becomes a high-profile news story.

Even when they do their job, they often get no respect. Few congratulate these teams for operating in such a hostile environment, and their releases are often met with derision from the hardcore fan bases who expect each game to ship with the same degree of innovation as other genre sequels; time constraints be damned.

Making one game that must ship in eight months regardless of how polished the experience is a daunting enough task. So how do the Madden and FIFA teams make two in the same timeframe, with one of them shipping day one on two new platforms that are constantly evolving as the development team readies it for the bright lights?

The question bears answering for EA Sports, especially in the light of it bungling the last console transition. This time the sports label believes it has a winning gameplan.

A BUNGLED TRANSITION

Calling the transition from the PlayStation 2-era consoles to current-generation consoles a disaster is putting it mildly. The hyper-threaded processors found in the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 gave engineers several technical hurdles to overcome. While 2K Sports figured out a way to port its entire game infrastructure over to the new consoles for its NHL and NBA games, EA chose to start from scratch.

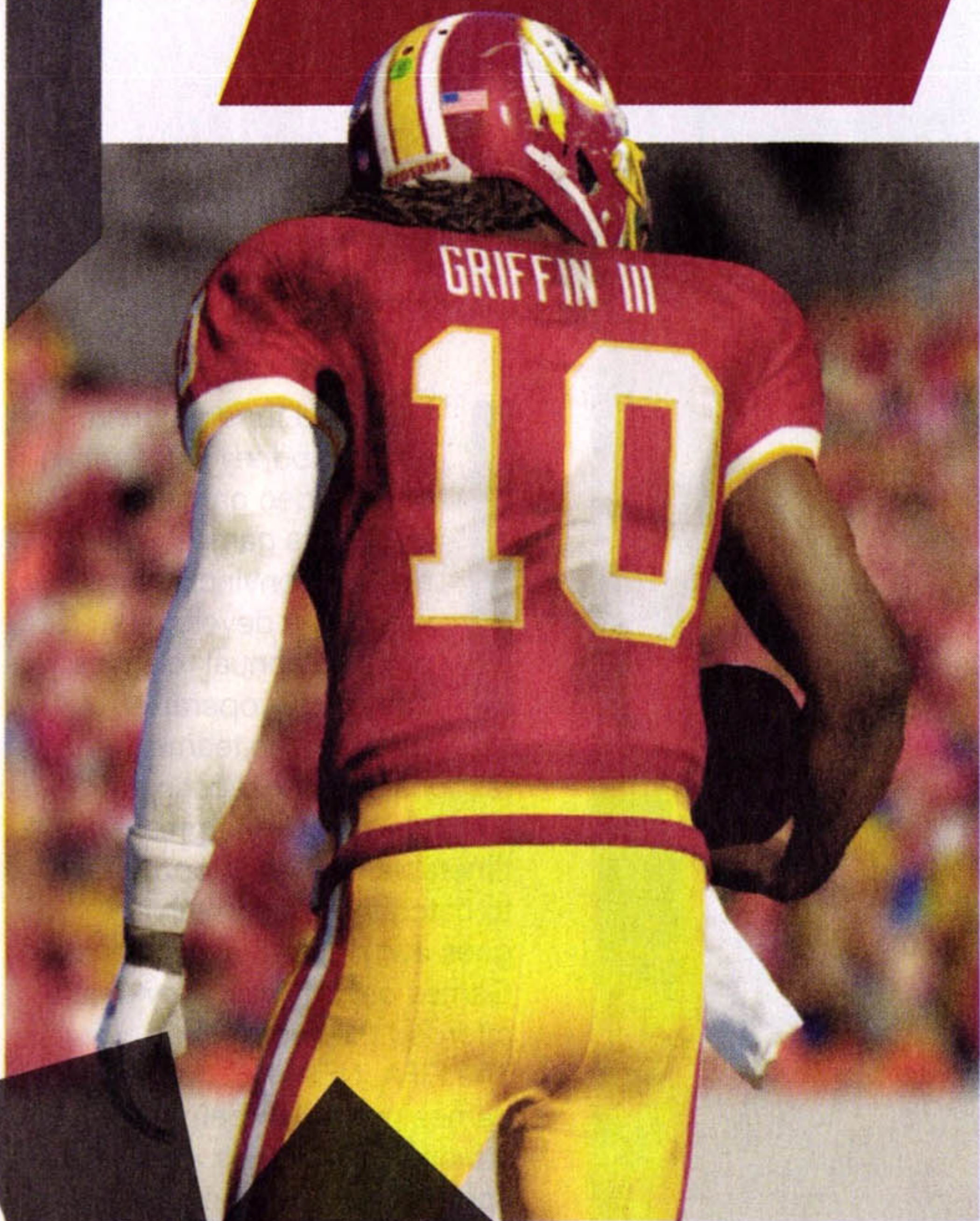
As a result, the early releases were devoid of game modes fans not only expected, but demanded. You could still have a full-featured experience on the PlayStation 2 and Xbox versions of Madden 06, but the 360 edition lacked broadcast commentary, had a barren franchise mode, suffered from buggy gameplay, and left out the superstar, practice, and minicamp modes altogether. It even got

some of the sport's basics wrong, like failing to include the ability to challenge a ruling on the field.

The Xbox 360 version debuted with weak reviews, garnering a 74 Metacritic rating (compared to an 88 rating on the PS2). For some hardcore sports fans, the lackluster game signified a betrayal – especially given the NFL exclusivity agreement EA had just signed the previous year to kill off the critically acclaimed NFL 2K series.

Madden wasn't the only botched launch game for EA Sports. NBA Live and FIFA fared even worse, with Metacritic ratings of 64 and 62, respectively. FIFA and NHL prospered as the generation went on, but the NCAA and Madden franchises went through a series of ups and downs. EA's NBA series never found its footing, suffering through multiple cancellations and a three-year absence.

"That transition was a difficult one...but we lived through that and learned those lessons to apply for the gen four transition," says EA Tiburon vice president and general manager of basketball and golf Daryl Holt.



IF IT'S ON THE FACE, IT'S ON THE FACE

It doesn't take an art director to point out that the most evident difference between current- and next-gen versions of the EA Sports catalog is the graphics. Because of the new rendering engine, EA claims that the leap in fidelity is akin to the jump televisions made from standard to high definition, with four times the texture resolution.

The player models were authentic last generation, but too many faces looked more like mannequins than their real-life counterparts. The Ignite engine includes a new head scan technology that allows developers to capture every nuance of a player's face, right up to the depth of the pores and birthmarks. In games where

players don't wear helmets, like NBA Live and FIFA, you can see new technology like subsurface scattering makes a subtle but important difference. The light penetrates through ears just like it does in real life.

"We use passive stereophotogrammetry to collect and build 3D player models," says FIFA 14 executive producer David Rutter. "The talent sits in a diffusion dome with 10 stereoscopic camera pairs (20 cameras) positioned to get a 360-degree capture of a person in a split second. These high-quality images are used to build a 3D point head and resurfaced player model. The images are digitally molded together to texture the face. The post-production process involves an

artist refining details for 'true-to-life' likeness, such as changing a hairstyle if required. The benefits of this technology is that it is portable and enables us to gather high-resolution head scans of individual players, guaranteeing a consistent, high-quality digital player model that is authentic to each individual player."

The faster hardware has also allowed the developers to uncompress animations, which makes them look much more natural. Other graphical enhancements include a new global illumination system for outdoor games, 30 to 40 new shading techniques that help make the shadows look more crisp and clear, and grittier jersey degradation.

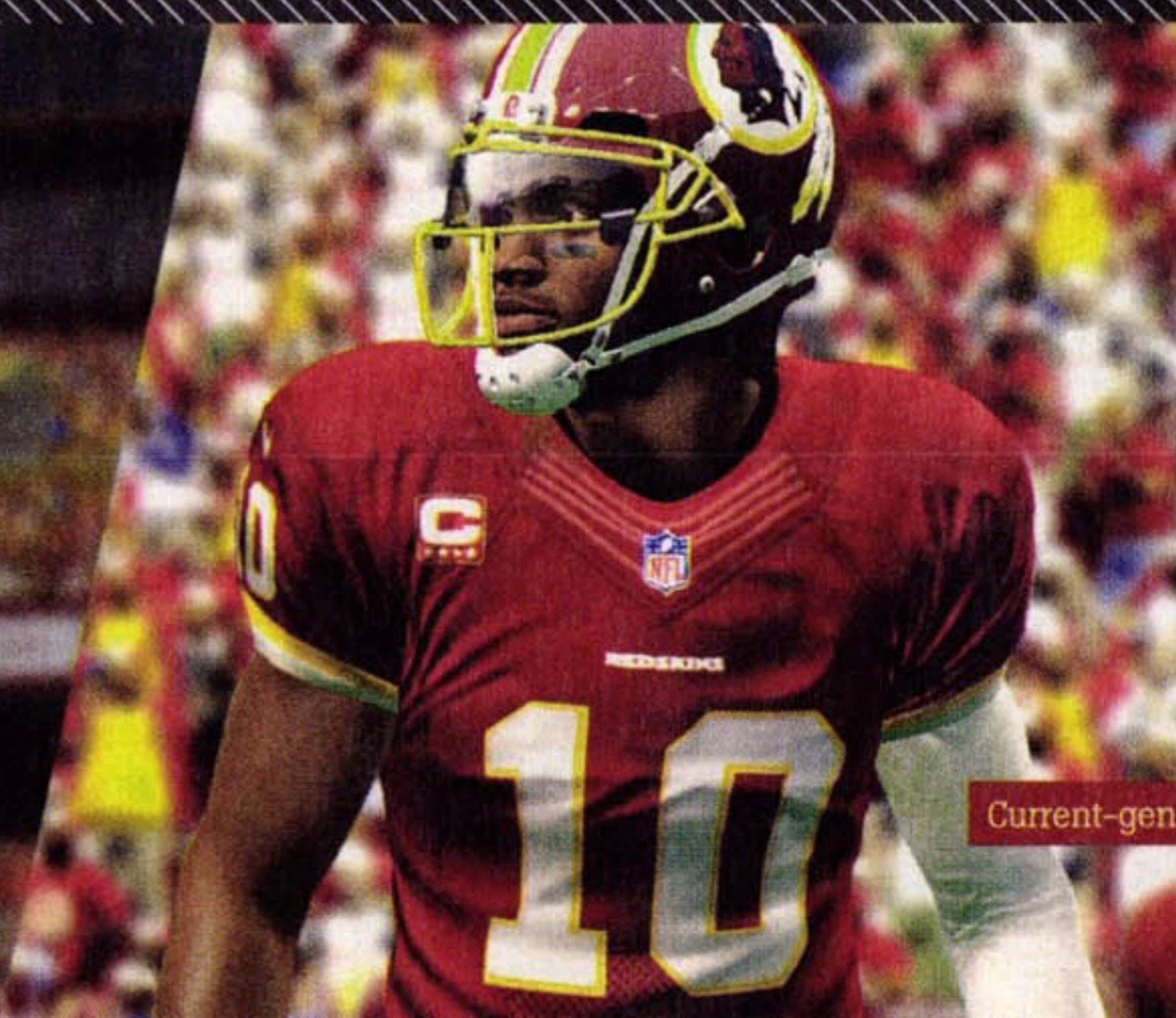
THE ROAR OF THE CROWD

Since every major sporting event takes place in an arena or stadium, building a shared technology to drive crowd logic was a no-brainer for EA Sports.

Last generation's stadium-goers were basically cardboard cutouts that hardly understood the nuances of what was happening on the field. Their next-gen replacements are much savvier, knowing when they are attending a rivalry match, championship game, or preseason game and bringing the appropriate enthusiasm level. FIFA 14 and NBA Live 14 crowd logic is even split between home, away, and neutral fans, each of which reacts differently depending on the circumstances. If Lionel Messi bags a goal on the road in front of the FC Barcelona supporters, they will respond with a fervor. If he does it again on the other end of the pitch, the response from home fans is much more muted.

The crowds are also better at noticing momentum swings. If an NBA team goes on a run and nails three consecutive three pointers at home to pull even with the visitors, the crowd appropriately goes nuts. When a star comes out of the game after putting up big numbers, the home fans give him a standing ovation.

The shared technology also extends to the sidelines, though the various sports teams are taking different approaches. Madden has the most complicated task of all the games, as EA Tiburon must render the more than 40 players, coaches, photographers, and trainers on each sideline at any given moment. These aren't just unintelligent bystanders; they react to players stepping out of bounds. Home teams may catch the ball carrier and give him a pat on the back as he heads back to the huddle. Away benches move out of the way as a runner careens toward them.



Next-gen

Current-gen



JUMP-STARTING NEXT-GEN

Knowing it couldn't put its brand through the ringer for another console transition, EA Sports started planning for the future well before Sony and Microsoft shared their next-generation road maps.

"We learned our lesson the last time," Holt says. "It was a drastic change from the PS2 to PS3 or Xbox 360 – multithreading and a whole host of tech issues, so those teams really ballooned and went really large. But as we worked through that transition we saw where the industry was probably going even before the Sonys and Microsofts of the world shared their specs."

When analyzing what went wrong in the past and how to better address these challenges in the future, the senior leadership realized it needed to stop thinking year to year and embrace a more stable long-term vision. Instead of resetting series' trajectories annually based on the whims of the marketing teams, fan requests, and development team wish lists, the label needed to chart a course that could develop solutions to complicated challenges over the course of several years.

The more successful current-generation teams like FIFA and NHL used this forward thinking to drive innovation, but only recently did Madden and NCAA adopt the same approach. Evolving features like the Player Impact Engine in FIFA, which EA Canada continued to refine in the subsequent years after its introduction, are signposts for how the entire EA Sports label plans to innovate moving forward.

To carry over this vision to a console

transition, the teams first had to embrace a development platform that allowed them to test on more advanced hardware. Though EA has largely abandoned the PC over the course of the last generation, roughly 18 months ago the teams starting porting their games to the platform so they could experiment with better hardware.

"We were mindful and respectful of the major trends, like Moore's Law – memory and computing power doubling every 18 months at a fixed cost – and also the digital trends," says Madden NFL 25 executive producer Roy Harvey. "As we looked across these things we said regardless of when new consoles come or what format they take – whether it be something that's expressed in the cloud, web, mobile, or what's going to come to consoles – we wanted to make sure all the technologies were built with that in mind."

Another major problem facing the sports label was the lack of communication between its teams. Outside of a few shared tools like the ANT animation system, the Madden, FIFA, NBA, and FIFA teams largely tackled technical issues independently.

"We solved the same problem three or four times in three or four different ways," Holt says. "Just take sports as a microcosm, and you look at in Vancouver you have EA Canada and you have EA Tiburon here [in Orlando]. There was not a lot of sharing going on. Even something like Ultimate Team was built for FIFA and then built for Madden – it feels like it was built on two different platforms, so to speak."

THE RATINGS GAME

For more than 20 years, EA Sports has used player ratings to drive behavior on the gridiron, rink, pitch, and hardwood. But as new resources become available to the developers, some mavericks within EA Sports are starting to wonder if now's the time to do away with ratings altogether.

For NBA Live 14, EA Tiburon partnered with Synergy Sports, a statistical firm that compiles information on every basketball player in the NBA. The spreadsheets are densely packed with information like how quickly a player can run from three-point line to three-point line, which direction a player prefers to drive the line, and whether or not a player is more comfortable catching and shooting or creating shots off the dribble. The information is so comprehensive that every NBA team uses it to aid their player evaluations. Now the NBA Live teams want to do the same.

"The stuff we get from Synergy Sports, it's an enormous amount of data, and no other sports game has anything even close to it," says NBA Live 14 executive producer Sean O'Brien. "Given the fact they work with every single NBA team – it's very good data, it's credible data. It hits home the idea that we want to be as authentic as possible."

"Where it breaks down is we still use ratings that a guy comes up with to drive the way the players play and the way teams play, and I want us to get away from that completely. I want the data that comes from the real world to drive how the players play and how the teams play together entirely. That's a big step to take and we're in the process of taking a really large step in that direction this year."

If you pair this data with the human intelligence initiative

EA Sports has made an edict across its games, you see how alluring the idea could be.

"Russell Westbrook has a field goal rating of 84," O'Brien says. "What does that mean? Where does that come from? Does that mean off the dribble, does that mean when he's being guarded, is it at full speed, at spot up? The left side or right side? When you look at Russell Westbrook and you break down his jump shot, there are so many different factors that go into whether he makes or misses. Our game can do the same thing based on the data we have."

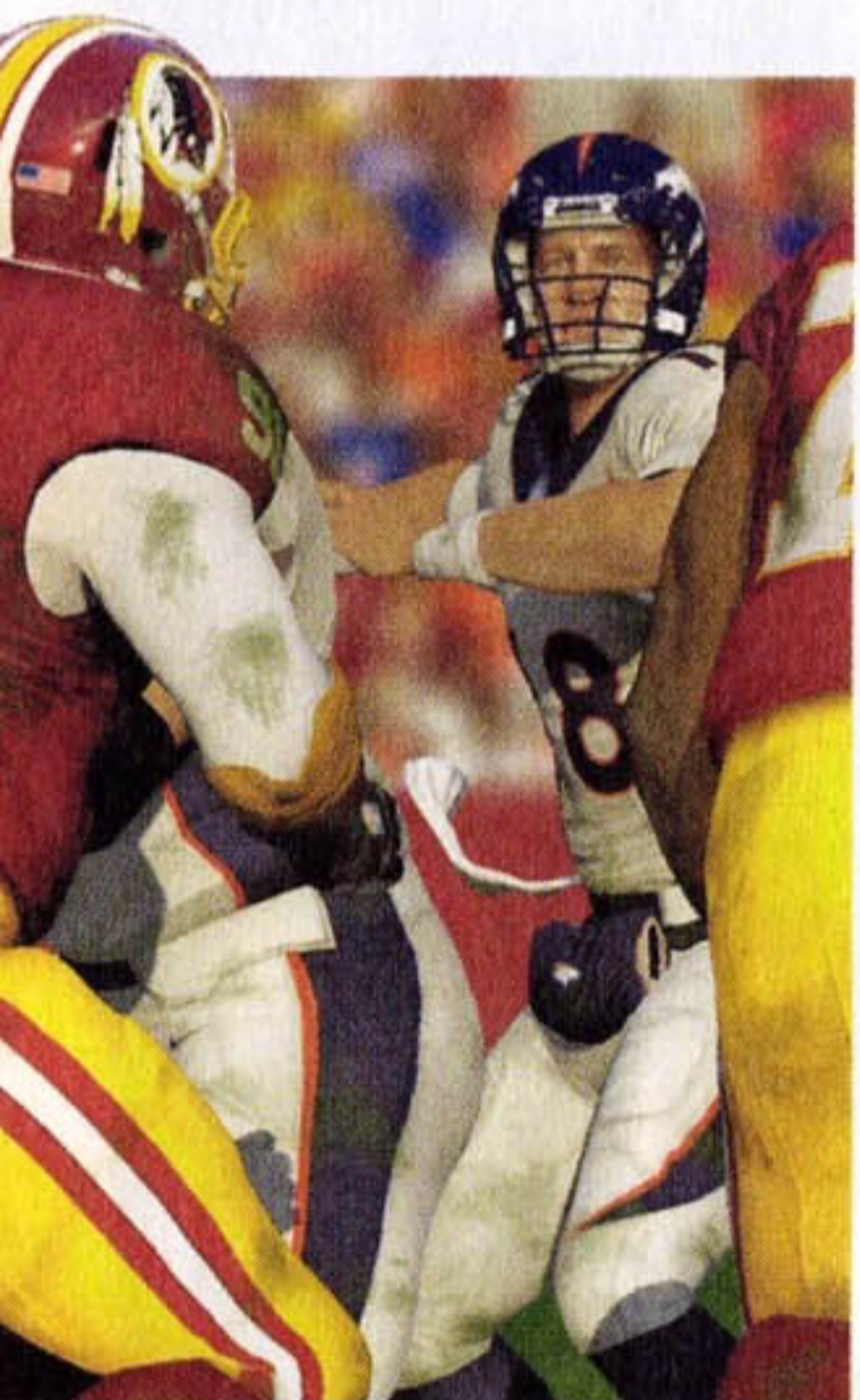
This approach could also make the offseason game of building a contending team more compelling and teach players how real GMs think. If an NBA franchise is lacking three-point production, they don't just look at the free agency and trade markets for a guy with a high three-point average.

Instead of trading for a guy with a three-point rating over 80, you need to ask what sets you should run to get a three-point shot. Should you get a point guard who can penetrate and draw people off your spot up three-point shooter? Do you get a guy who can shoot off the screen?

The idea of forsaking man-made player rankings in favor of analysis is being discussed across the label, but not everyone is ready for such a drastic shift.

"There are a couple of companies recently who have pinged me about that," admits Madden NFL 25 executive producer Roy Harvey. "We still hand-craft that stuff, and I think in football it's a little bit unique because it's got that turn-based strategy element, where it's very strategic so the tuning is very important to making sure teams play the way you expect them to play from a playcalling standpoint."





IGNITING THE FUTURE

Around the same time the Madden, FIFA, and NBA teams were experimenting in the PC test environment, EA Sports executive vice president Andrew Wilson called a summit with all the general managers at the sports label. Inspired by EA's decision to make DICE's Frostbite engine the core technology driving next-generation development at the EA Games label, Wilson's division received the blessing of then-CEO John Riccitiello to develop a similar shared toolset for the sports games.

With studios growing larger and development expenses threatening to go up again with this console leap, EA Sports needed to find ways to increase collaboration and drive down cost. Why develop three or four different physics engines or audio-authoring tools when the entire label could use one solution built from the ground up with all of the sports games in mind? Hockey, football, and soccer seem vastly different at first glance, but in reality they have several commonalities.

"We talked about true player motion, human intelligence, living worlds – those are our pillars," Holt says. "Those things set the

stage for different areas. When you look at the movement of a hockey player versus a football player there is authentic responses of how they are going to plant, the locomotion involved, the animation involved, and the processes behind that is all very similar. Then you start looking at those arenas and those venues and you say, 'Alright, I've got a basketball court, a hockey rink, a football field, and a soccer pitch – they're still flat planes in stadiums and their environments share a lot of similarities.' So from an environment standpoint you can build things that are shared like crowd tech."

To build this shared toolset, EA formed a loose council led by chief technical officer Rajat Taneja. Last summer a team of high-level engineers from EA Tiburon and EA Canada started collaborating on the new locomotion technology driving the next-gen versions of Madden NFL 25 and FIFA 14. After spending a few weeks together at the EA Canada campus, the teams broke off to implement the new technology in their respective games, continuing to collaborate and compare notes as their

development plans took divergent paths.

"The tone and attitude is kind of 'Think globally, act locally,'" Harvey says.

Christened the Ignite engine, this shared technology platform includes the ANT animation suite, rendering, physics, lighting, audio, and presentation technology, which is essentially a broadcast scripting switchboard that drives the camera system, commentary, and postgame flow. All of this technology is scalable, and the development teams are free to take whatever bits and parts they want for their game.

Now that Ignite is up and running, a dedicated team of engineers is working on the engine full time. While this team hones core features that will benefit the majority of the franchises using the technology, the individual teams can build new features on top of the engine to solve problems unique to their sport. These supplemental features are then made available for other teams should they choose to use them in future iterations of their game.

Some of this collaboration is already happening. The FranTk (pronounced "frantic") franchise toolkit developed by the Madden team to create Connected Careers may migrate into other sports games as well.

"Every sports title has reached out to us and said they want to understand how that system works," says Madden NFL 25 line producer Seann Graddy. "It runs on a PC without a console, so you can put players in, sim, tune, and do it over again. I see most of the sports titles moving to that and that becoming a part of the Ignite engine as well."

Handing over this powerful new technology has given the sports teams the ammunition needed to hit the next-generation consoles running.

"To make a concerted collaborative effort to unite on a single set of tools and technologies has allowed us to accelerate on this console generation much further than we were expecting," says FIFA 14 executive producer David Rutter.

THE EVOLUTION OF PRESENTATION

One of the most underrated aspects of bringing sports games to life is the presentation. Over the course of the last generation, the NBA 2K series drove much of the innovation by integrating more context into its broadcasts, something that EA Sports did marginally. The NBA 2K games are aware of a team's recent performance, discuss the evolution of your player in the My Career mode, and are even savvy enough to start a more involved conversation, break off to comment on a big basket that just happened, and then return to the topic at hand. With the drastic increase to 8GB of RAM in the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, expect EA Sports broadcasts to move swiftly in that same direction. FIFA 14 executive producer David Rutter provides an example of EA's vision for next-gen commentary.

"If you look at something that's going on right this minute – Gareth Bale, who plays for Tottenham Hotspurs – Real Madrid are trying to sign him for 100 million Euros," he says. "Spurs have said that they'll sell him for 100 million pounds plus an exchange on another player. Imagine a world in which that deal actually goes through. Our game has no concept of Bale's relationship to the players at Real Madrid or to his ex-colleagues at Spurs. The fact that the last season he became a deity at Spurs – the fans adore him and will be extremely upset if he leaves.

"Imagine a world where Real Madrid in a Champions League final of the future meets Spurs... Our vision of our game needs to tell this story of Gareth Bale playing for Real Madrid against his old club and his old club's reaction to his

new club, his old teammates reaction to him, his reaction to them in not just the presentation of it but also the attitude on the pitch. Beyond that, how does the crowd react to him when he comes out of the tunnel and onto the pitch for the first time at his previous home? Do they cheer him, or do they boo him? How can we frame the crowd to help show the emotion and what's been going on in the history of the player, the team, the club history, and the seasons and areas that they are playing in? That, for me, is what this generation of consoles allows us to do, which is tell those stories. Most of the sports games kind of do an okay job of it, but it's sort of fake. What we're about to embark on in this new world where the game itself has the equivalent of a soul and can track the history, the behaviors,

and the relationships between those players and those clubs."

This depth of storytelling isn't an easy goal to achieve, and it will take the games a couple of years to implement its vision.

The Madden team has similar goals with in-game storytelling. The new narrative engine is aware of what has happened previously in your franchise mode, so when the graphical overlays showcase starting lineups the commentators will discuss player streaks and slumps.

The audio team is also taking unprecedented steps toward capturing the essence of a Sunday broadcast featuring Jim Nantz and Phil Simms. CBS allowed EA Tiburon to capture commentary directly from the booth for 12 games last year, including the Super Bowl. Though many of these quotes are too idiosyncratic to stitch

into the game, EA extracted between 100-200 samples from each game. EA used the other clips as reference so Simms could reproduce the same feeling and sound as a live call for instances like fumbles. Other improvements coming to Madden include Simms' commentary aligning correctly with replays and the integration of sideline reporter Danielle Bellini to discuss injuries and get pre-game coaches comments.

The presentation adheres to the tenants of broadcast media, but EA Tiburon is keenly aware of the leverage it has in the virtual space to try new things. Innovations like the first down line and three-dimensional replay cameras were born out of video games and eventually co-opted by broadcasters, so EA wants to continue to push the boundaries.



EMBRACING POSSIBILITIES

The Ignite engine is just one of the philosophical shifts EA is adopting while heading into uncharted territory. The studio is also changing its approach to the mobile and social space. Formerly, the teams developing Madden and FIFA apps were divorced from the console game creators. Bringing the social and mobile development under the same umbrella as the console games should allow those teams to collaborate much more with both companion apps and standalone games.

"You take something like golf," Holt says. "I should be able to take a shot on my console in the morning, take the next shot at lunch on my PC, maybe I'm on a subway in New York and I take the next shot on my mobile phone, and when I get home I sink the putt. All that stuff builds this always on, always connected 'I can experience something about my game,' especially for sports, no matter where I am in the world. That may be trades, buy some Ultimate Team [packs], or I want to manage my team, or I want to literally play the game. It's creating this world that extends beyond the couch to wherever you are, however you want to play."

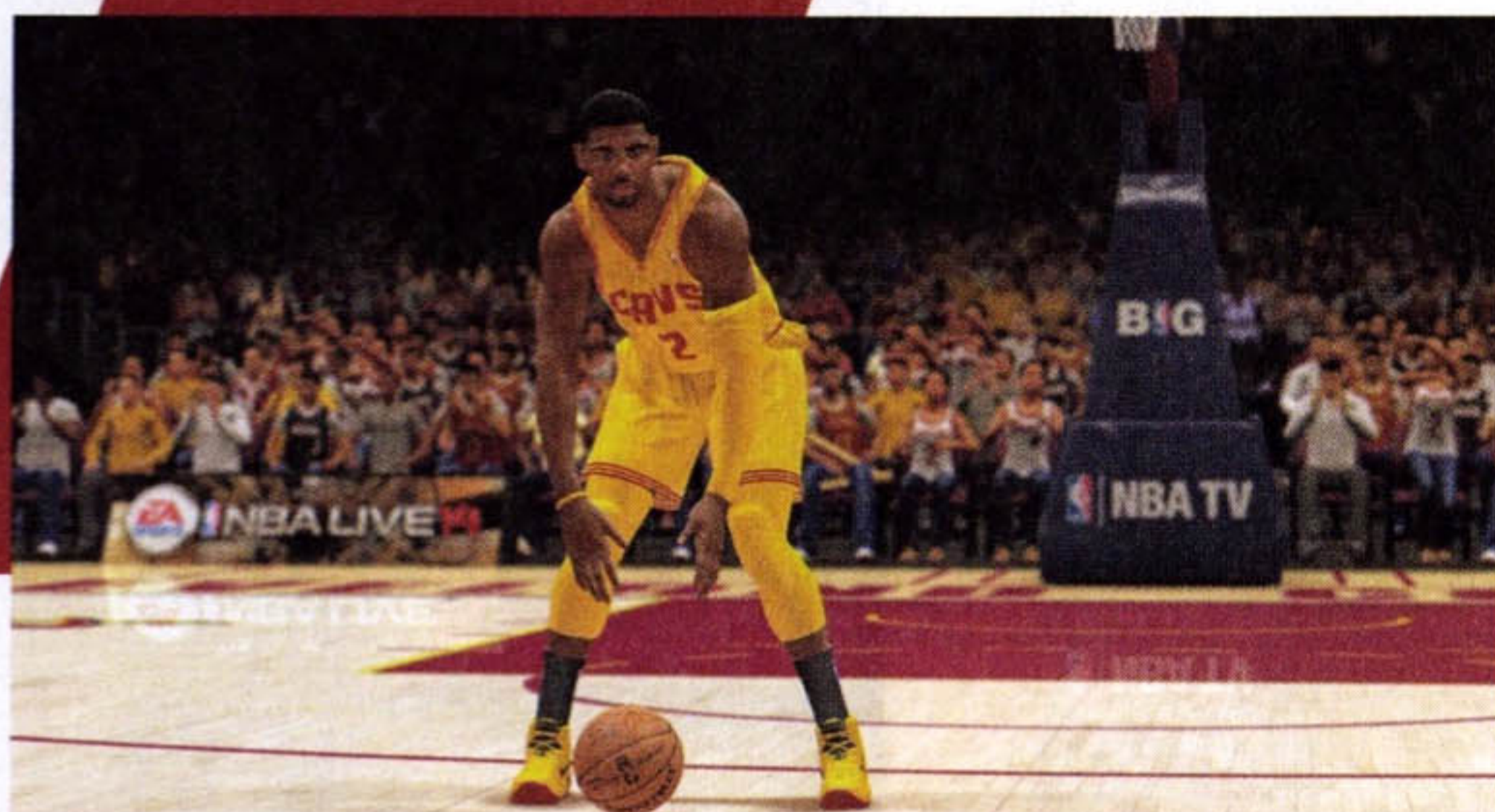
EA Sports is also excited about the new social sharing technologies being implemented by Sony and Microsoft. The sports label has always been a frontrunner in this

space, allowing users to share video replays in several of its sports games over the last generation and introducing live streaming in its MMA game. Now that the Xbox One and PlayStation 4 provide these services, EA is excited to see how gamers embrace the functionality. Imagine tuning in to watch a live-stream of your Connected Franchise Super Bowl with the 30 other league members not participating in the championship.

But the most exciting new feature of the next generation consoles is a predictable one – the increased horsepower.

"The transition is liberating because you're blowing through the ceiling and you have this whole new level of innovation you can access with fidelity in the quality of animations and physics," says NBA Live 14 producer Ryan Ferwerda.

With the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One slated to release before the end of the year, it won't take long to find out whether or not this new approach bares fruit. If the next-gen versions of Madden NFL 25 and FIFA 14 wow, and the NBA Live reboot makes an impressive enough debut to provide a foundation for challenging the massively successful NBA 2K franchise, perhaps the sports label will finally earn some of that ever-elusive respect. ♦



GETTING SMART

Many championship teams were built with a collection of smart athletes who made up for their physical deficiencies by playing efficiently. EA Sports hopes to take a similar approach with its revamped player intelligence. The advanced hardware of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One allows the developers to make 50 times the calculations on the field that they could do in the Xbox 360 era. Much of this horsepower is going directly into how players read and react on the field.

For the next-gen version of Madden NFL 25, EA brought in former NFL offensive lineman Clint Oldenberg to completely rewrite the line play. In the past generation, the offensive line essentially knew what the defense was going to do before the snap of the ball. The new system has the line read the defensive formation to devise its blocking scheme. Once the ball is snapped, the blockers survey the

field for blitzes and stunts, coming off double teams to pick up pass rushers. The result is more natural line play where players follow the same thought process as their real-world counterparts.

"We were talking to coach Madden, and he was all smiles because he's always asked for this," says Madden NFL 25 executive producer Roy Harvey.

The players in NBA 14 have also undergone an education to react more realistically on the hardwood. Basketball defenders now better understand how to defend against ball screens, reading the skill set of a ball handler to determine how to guard it. If Dirk Nowitzki is coming off the screen, the AI-controlled player knows he has to deny the shot because Nowitzki is deadly from that range. Computer-controlled players know the time and score at every moment as well, so they know when to be in desperation mode on defense and offense.

interview

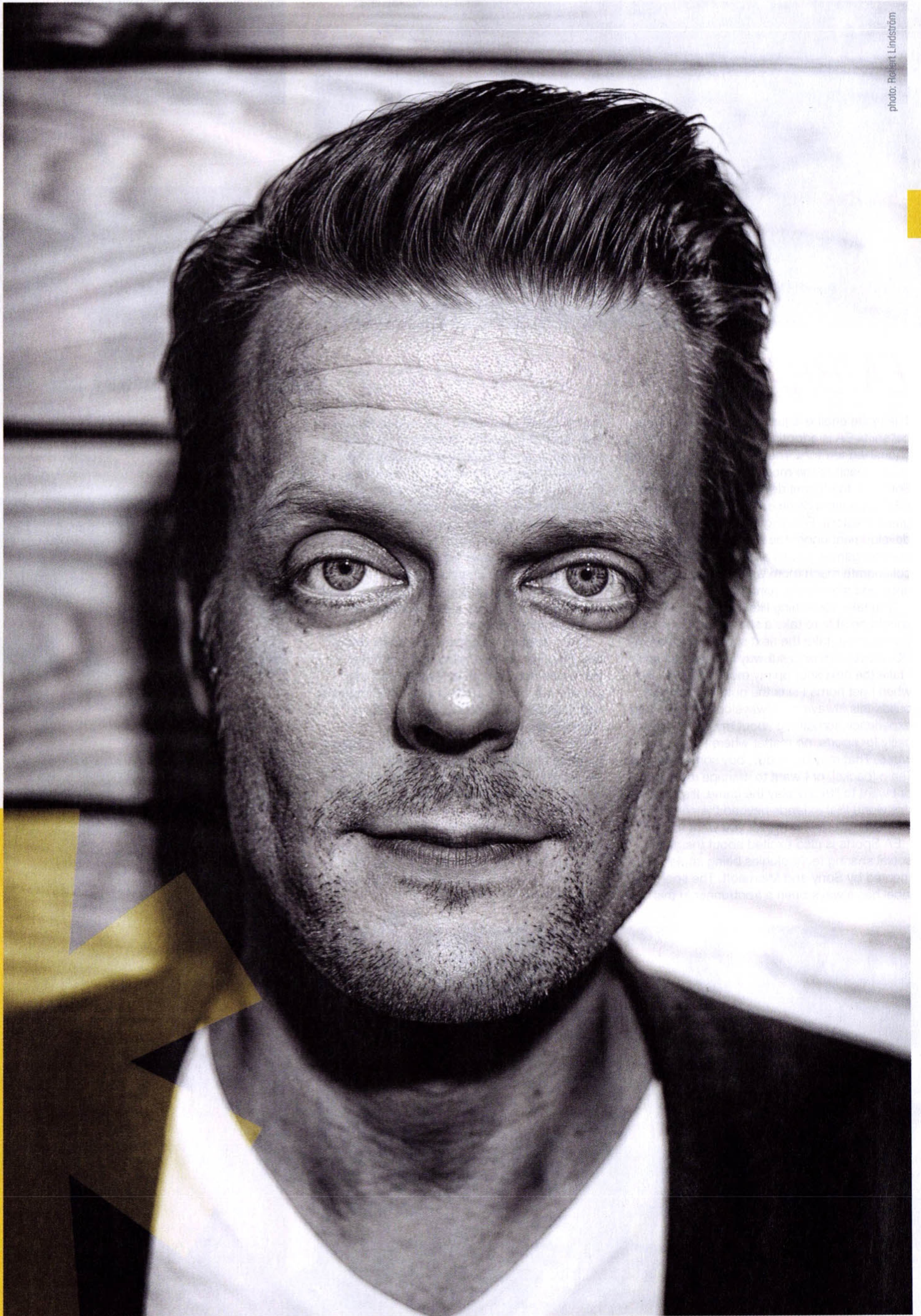


photo: Robert Lindström

The Storyteller

From Max Payne to Alan Wake, **Sam Lake** and Remedy have always created gripping tales. Now, he's seeking to merge gaming and live-action TV with Quantum Break.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Talk about your roots as a writer and the path you took to where you are today.

If we go all the way back to childhood – a little bit of psychoanalysis here – I've always been really, really interested about stories as far as I can remember. Some of the most vivid childhood memories come from things like bedtime stories being read to me. In my mind, the connecting trend is that whenever there was something that was slightly too scary or too challenging, that was always something that sparked my imagination and left a lasting mark. I remember my older cousin babysitting me and she had been watching *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and she told me what the movie was about and I was totally captured and totally scared out of my wits but still enjoying it.

In school, I might have [been around] 13 years old, I almost by accident discovered *The Lord of the Rings* in the local library. I read it something like four or five times; For a period of time I was really into fantasy in general and read a huge amount fantasy books. That in turn led me to tabletop role-playing games, which in my teen years was a big part of my life. That's also kind of the first thing that got me to writing in many ways. That's true for many role players that just thought writing things related to the adventures and characters and things like that. I wanted to do more on writing and it felt like my thing, really. I studied the English language and literature at Helsinki University. While I was studying, Remedy was founded, and one of the founding members was a long-time friend of mine who also was part of the same tabletop role-playing group. He obviously had read a lot of the stuff that I had been writing. So, when those guys were working on Remedy's first game, *Death Rally*, they needed someone to write the text for the game. [They] asked me if I wanted to do it and I said, "Hell yeah, I want to do that." [It was an] awesome, fun opportunity.

You've obviously been associated with game storytelling throughout your career. Looking back, what do you think are some of the big key changes or advancements you've seen in game storytelling?

One obvious thing has always been the technology – how do you show the human emotion and human touch when it comes to the characters? That traditionally has been a big challenge. For a long time, it's been bugging me. Movies and television, budget-wise, have been able to do human characters very cheaply – the small things like emotions and interaction. That has been impossible or really, really expensive in games. Whereas the things that have traditionally been expensive

in movies – like destruction and explosions and things like that – have been really cheap to do in games. That's a big challenge. In the Max Payne games, we went for graphic novel storytelling for the very reason that the cutscenes back then were really clumsy and expensive.

What we are now doing with Quantum Break is putting a big effort into developing our new storytelling technology, Northlight. We really have digital doubles of the actors onscreen. We are able to do surface capture and mo-cap. It's actually the actor doing the whole role from beginning to end, capturing all the nuances of the actor's performance and putting that on screen. The huge leap is that we can actually now do that in real-time and in-game instead of CG. That is really a revolutionary step forward.

How did the idea for Quantum Break come about?

In many ways, how we do things here at Remedy – which, compared to some other developers, is a slightly different method – we usually do start the whole process from the story idea and character ideas. Obviously a gameplay concept comes along really fast to join that, and there is a lot of back and forth between the design of the game and the story. We had a concept that [is] now Quantum Break. It involved time travel and alternate parallel timelines and things like that. And then we started talking about things on a more concrete level, and wanted to create something that would be bigger than a triple-A game, an experience that contained a kind of dynamic interactive TV show on the side. Then, we started talking about the possibilities of doing a more interactive narrative and dynamic story – the concept of making choices along the way.

Quantum Break has been conceived as partially a live-action show, partially a game. Could you explain how players' actions affect the live-action portion?

We've been looking at live-action for a while now in various ways. Ever since Max Payne, it just felt natural to include many different levels into the experience, be it in-game television, radios, and creating custom music. Obviously in Alan Wake, [there were] fragments of a novel and in-game television bits with live-action material. It has more and more felt like a natural extension and a part of this experience. We always try to think of ideas that could be translated to other mediums. So, in many ways, it feels like a natural step forward with Quantum Break to bring that [live action] element and make it even more closely [related] to the overall experience.

In the game, which deals with time travel and alternate timelines, our characters have time-manipulation powers. We have a concept

called "junctions in time," which are dramatic moments where we have multiple potential futures at hand. It's actually the main bad guy in the game, Paul Serene, that you get to play during the junction moments. He has the most powerful time-manipulation power. Serene has the power, at certain points, to see visions of different potential futures and you get to choose which future becomes the past. We will actually have alternate content and scenes that depend on your junction choice. In a way, you are creating your own personalized director's cut of the show.

That sounds incredibly challenging from a writer's perspective — to keep track of junction points in every episode there's sort of exponentially growing different permutations. How do you begin to keep track of those story threads?

Yeah, that's definitely a challenge. It is worth mentioning that, even while all this is going on, Quantum Break is not *Choose Your Own Adventure*. What often happens with that format is that one initially strong story gets watered down to many weaker ones, because coming up with different options and consequences is tricky. Our philosophy with the junction points is much more [about] one strong story told many ways based on your actions in the game. So there is a certain kind of spine that we have. And then, around that, the player gets to choose based on your preferences of what you want to happen and want to see happen.

So you might see different events in that story but not alter the outcome?

Yes, the skeleton of the story is the same. There are certain key points along the way that will have fundamental impact. But the philosophy is more that it's one story told many ways.

Are you working with Microsoft's new studio in Los Angeles that's centered around television and movie-style content?

Yes, definitely. We have a lot of experienced talent from the television side – some of them through Microsoft and some of them working here in our team. We want to make sure that what we are creating is high quality, and obviously it means that experienced people within that industry should be involved.

Do you see the possibility that the game could have that television format where there is a "second season" of Quantum Break?

Obviously, everything depends on the success of the first game. But we have already sketched out further seasons and those ideas. The first one is a standalone installment – it has a conclusion and resolution that's satisfactory. At the same time, we are opening doors that can lead to further seasons if enough gamers enjoy the first one. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1995

LIFE AND DEATH

Sam Lake is asked by an old role-playing game friend to write some script materials for new developer Remedy Entertainment's game, *Death Rally*

1996

DARK HERO

Lake and Remedy begin talking about a new third-person action game that would involve a hard-boiled private eye, under the working title *Dark Justice*

1998

TO THE MAX

Now called Max Payne, a trailer for the game is shown at the 1998 E3 convention and garners a lot of hype

2001

A LONG ROAD

After many delays, Max Payne is finally released and wins accolades – although its "Bullet Time" mechanic had already been used by *The Matrix*

2003

ANOTHER NOIR

Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne, penned by Lake features a more emotional, gripping story and great gameplay. Still, it did not sell up to expectations

2005

AWAKE, ARISE

Remedy announces a new IP, Alan Wake, about a writer who falls into a web of strange forces in a small Pacific Northwest town. Lake is the main writer on the project

2010

THE LONG RUN

After another extremely long development cycle, Remedy releases Alan Wake as an Xbox 360 exclusive

2012

FINAL CHAPTER

Remedy releases Alan Wake: American Nightmare, a standalone spinoff game. Lake later says that the Alan Wake franchise is on indefinite hold

2013

BREAKING TRADITION

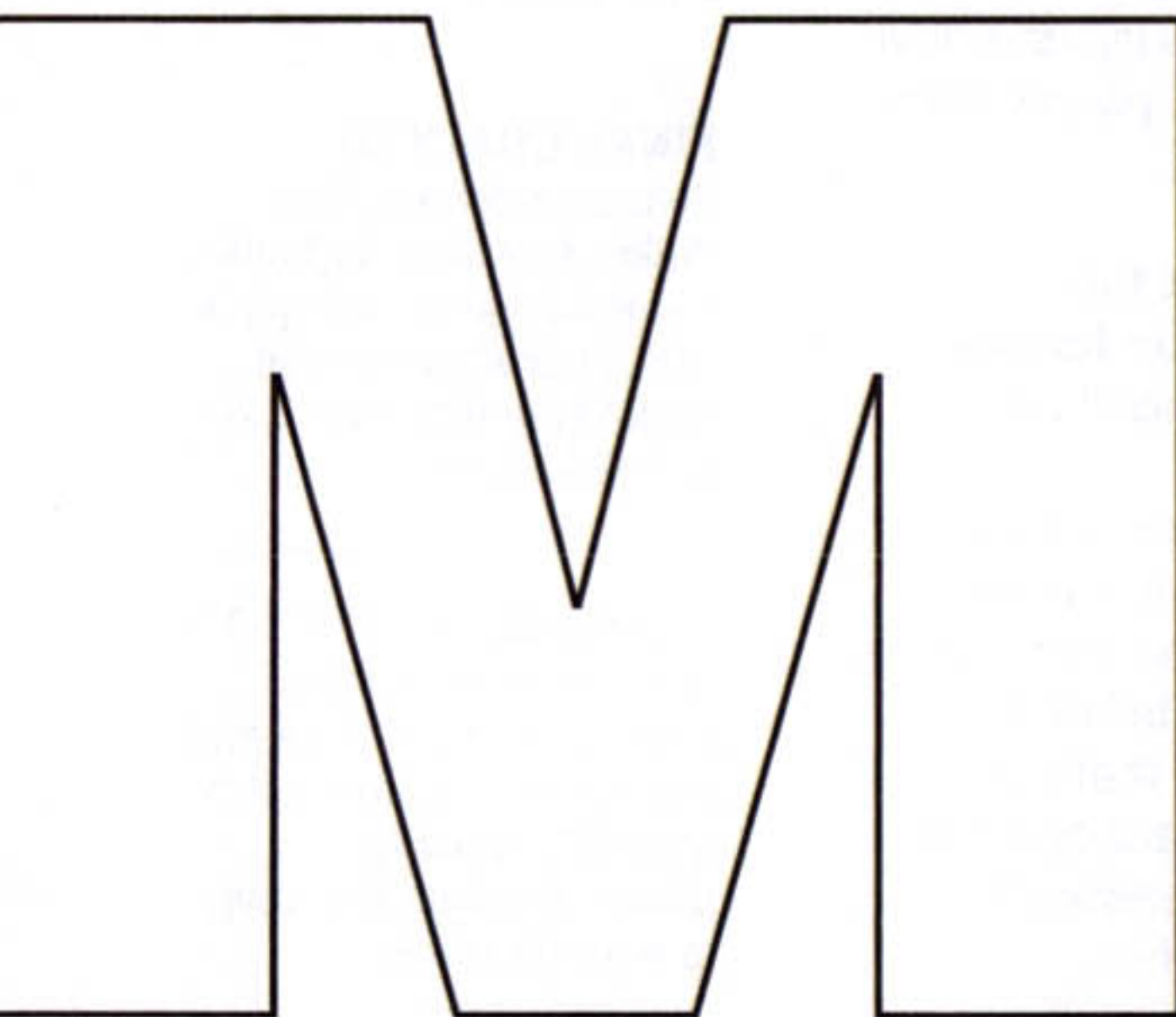
At the worldwide Xbox One debut event, Remedy's next project, an interactive game/TV show hybrid Quantum Break, is shown in a teaser trailer

gear



ALIENWARE 14 GAMING LAPTOP

by Ben Reeves and Matt Miller



Measuring 1.6 inches thick and weighing almost six pounds, Alienware's new 14-inch laptop bucks the trend toward thinner and lighter portable computers. The Alienware 14 doesn't sit comfortably in the same class as other 14-inch machines, but this welterweight packs a heavyweight punch.

The reinforced magnesium alloy frame helps it stand out, and its programmable backlit keys and trackpad give the system an eerie glow. The system looks like it's possessed by some extraterrestrial power, and thankfully its performance lives up to its looks.

Housing a 4th Generation 2.4GHz Intel Core i7-4700MQ processor, Nvidia GeForce GT 750M graphics, and 8GB of memory, the Alienware 14 powerlifted any game we threw at it. *Crysis 3* and *Metro: Last Light* both ran without a chug.

Unfortunately, the base model we tested featured a low-res 1,366 x 768 screen, so we recommended you upgrade to a higher resolution panel. Still, the screen's matte finish helps reduce glare and makes both games and movies, like *The Avengers* and *Skyfall*, look stellar. We also loved the gentle feel of the system's soft-touch rubber keys and the wealth of ports: three USB 3.0 sockets, three 3.5mm audio jacks, an HDMI out, and an SD card slot.

The Alienware 14's biggest fault is its battery, which only kicks out about two hours of playtime. While this laptop may not be built for distance running, if you need a small gaming laptop that can deadlift next year's crop of big-budget titles, the Alienware 14 won't disappoint.

VERY GOOD

Starting at \$1199 | alienware.com



Media Shelf

FOCUS TWIST

This inventive app takes several images at different focus settings and creates an interactive photo that you can refocus after you've snapped the shot.

\$1.99
focustwist.com

ONCE UPON A TIME: THE COMPLETE SECOND SEASON

The residents of Storybrooke, Maine, are actually some of the most celebrated fairy-tale characters of all time, but now they're living in the modern world. In the second season of ABC's hit drama, new threats emerge to threaten their reality.

\$79.99
abc.com

SHADOWRUN FIFTH EDITION

Shadowrun is one of the most intriguing tabletop settings on the market, and the new version does justice to the pen-and-paper RPG's powerful legacy with smart updates to the long-running ruleset, faster character creation, and nearly 500 full-color pages.

\$19.99 (digital), \$59.99 (print)
shadowruntabletop.com

TEMPLAR BY JORDAN MECHNER AND LEUYEN PHAM

Prince of Persia creator Jordan Mechner's newest graphic novel plays out like an action-packed heist film. When a handful of Templar Knights escape the King of France's conspiracy to destroy their order, they hatch a plan to escape the country with a legendary treasure.

\$39.99
macmillan.com

1



ewok mini-figures not shown to scale



1 Lego Star Wars Ewok Village

This Lego recreation of the Ewoks' treetop home on Endor's forest moon features rope walkways, a kitchen and food storage area, a bedroom, and a planning room. Hide your special treasures in the secret Lightsaber stash, avoid the dangerous spider web and net traps, and show respect to your droid masters with its elevating throne. The set also contains a replica Speeder and 16 mini-figures (including Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and Chewbacca) for you to sacrifice over a fire.

\$249 | shop.lego.com



2

2 Pathfinder Adventure Card Game

The new cooperative card game from Paizo offers the fun of a traditional role-playing adventure, but without the need for a game master or time-intensive preparation. Nearly 500 cards come in the base Rise of the Runelords set; players can tackle entire campaigns as they level up and improve their character. Gorgeous art, flexible cooperative options for one to four players, and an innovative gameplay loop set the Pathfinder card game apart as one of the most intriguing tabletop releases of the year.

\$59.99 | paizo.com

3 Leap Motion Controller

Forget Kinect, Leap Motion is ready to inaugurate the next generation of high-definition motion controls. This PC peripheral allows you to point, wave, reach, and grab digital objects using natural motions. Leap Motion's 3-inch box has a 150-degree field of view, allowing it to register the position and placement of all 10 fingers, while maintaining a pinpoint accuracy that can literally track the tip of a pen. We wish its suite of digital apps were a little more diverse, but that growing list already allows you to paint cityscapes, dissect frogs, and explore the Milky Way.

AVERAGE [Progress bar]

\$79.99 | leapmotion.com

3



Making Xbox One A Destination For Indie Game Developers



by Chris Charla, Director of Independent Developers, Xbox

I'm writing this in the midst of Gamescom in Cologne, Germany, which I was told this year has nearly 300,000 attendees, making it the biggest trade fair on the planet. It's an amazing show. There's so much energy among the crowd and the exhibitors. Everything related to games is represented here – from publishers like Konami and Electronic Arts to PC case fan and power supply makers. There's even a massive and amazing retro game section. And of course, the original Kit car from *Knight Rider* has a place of honor down in Hall 10!

Microsoft is here, showing off games on Xbox One, Xbox 360, and Windows. Like most exhibitors, we also have a booth in the business center, a trade hall where companies show off demos behind closed doors and meet with press and business partners.

I love to come to this show just to play games and experience the fantastic gaming culture, but this year I'm camped out in a little room in the business center. While I'll miss playing *Arkanoid* on a Mac SE in the Retro section, or checking out the latest work from Team ChaosModder in the 24-hour live case mod challenge, I couldn't be happier.

At the Xbox press briefing before the show, we announced the launch of ID@Xbox, our independent developer publishing program. I'm lucky enough to get to help run it, and I've been spending the show meeting with developers about the program.

The program is pretty simple. Developers can register at www.xbox.com/id, and afterwards we send them two Xbox One dev kits at no cost. They then get access to all the developer information they need to put their games on Xbox One. When they're ready to ship, we help them get the game through certification and release it into the Xbox One Game store. There are no fees to participate, and the games have access to everything every other game on Xbox One has – Gamerscore, Achievements, Kinect, Game DVR, multiplayer, cloud services, and more. On Xbox One games are games: there's no artificial segmentation between "indie" and "AAA" – all games are sold in the same digital store.

In the launch phase of the program we are focused on studios with some previous experience shipping games on console, PC, mobile, and tablet, to help us test out the internal systems we've built, but we're planning on opening things more broadly as soon as possible.

Most of the meetings have been surprisingly short, in a good way. "You mean there are really no fees to participate?" Nope. "So, when I finish my game, where is it sold?" In the same store as every other game on Xbox One. "Is the program only open to larger studios?" No, we're open to everything from one-person studios on up. "Can I...?" Yes! Bottom line: If it can be done in or by an Xbox One game, it can be done by games that come in through the ID@Xbox program. Reaction from developers has been pretty positive, and it's been gratifying. We've also already seen some unbelievably cool games that people showed us when we were meeting. Seriously, multiple meetings in a row, we saw innovative games that were being created by small teams with big visions. We can't wait to help get those games on Xbox One.

Those kinds of games are why we're excited to offer this new way onto console for independent developers, which we think is really going to complement the traditional methods of working with a

third-party publisher or Microsoft Studios. For a lot of developers, of course, working with a publisher is still a great choice: Publishers provide marketing and promotion, handle details (like getting ESRB ratings), and can provide funding. If a developer just wants to focus on their game only, a publisher is usually a smart bet.

But for those who want the freedom (and responsibility) that comes from doing it yourself, ID@Xbox now offers a great choice too. It's something developers told us they wanted, and something we've been planning a long time. We met with more than 50 developers to help shape the initial phase of the program, and we'll continue listening to make sure the program works as well as possible for developers.

The program is really keeping in line with our vision on Xbox One, which is that it should not only be the best platform on Earth for enjoying great content, but that everyone who has an Xbox One can also use it to create content themselves. Marc Whitten, Xbox chief product officer, has laid out our plan that eventually any retail Xbox One can be used as a dev kit to create games. It will be a great on ramp to console development for students, hobbyists and anyone wanting to create. In the meantime, Project Spark, from Microsoft Studios will enable anyone, even people who can't program, to create their own game experiences. The guy who leads Project Spark is Saxe Persson, himself a graduate of the '80s European Amiga demo scene; he's right at home at Gamescom.

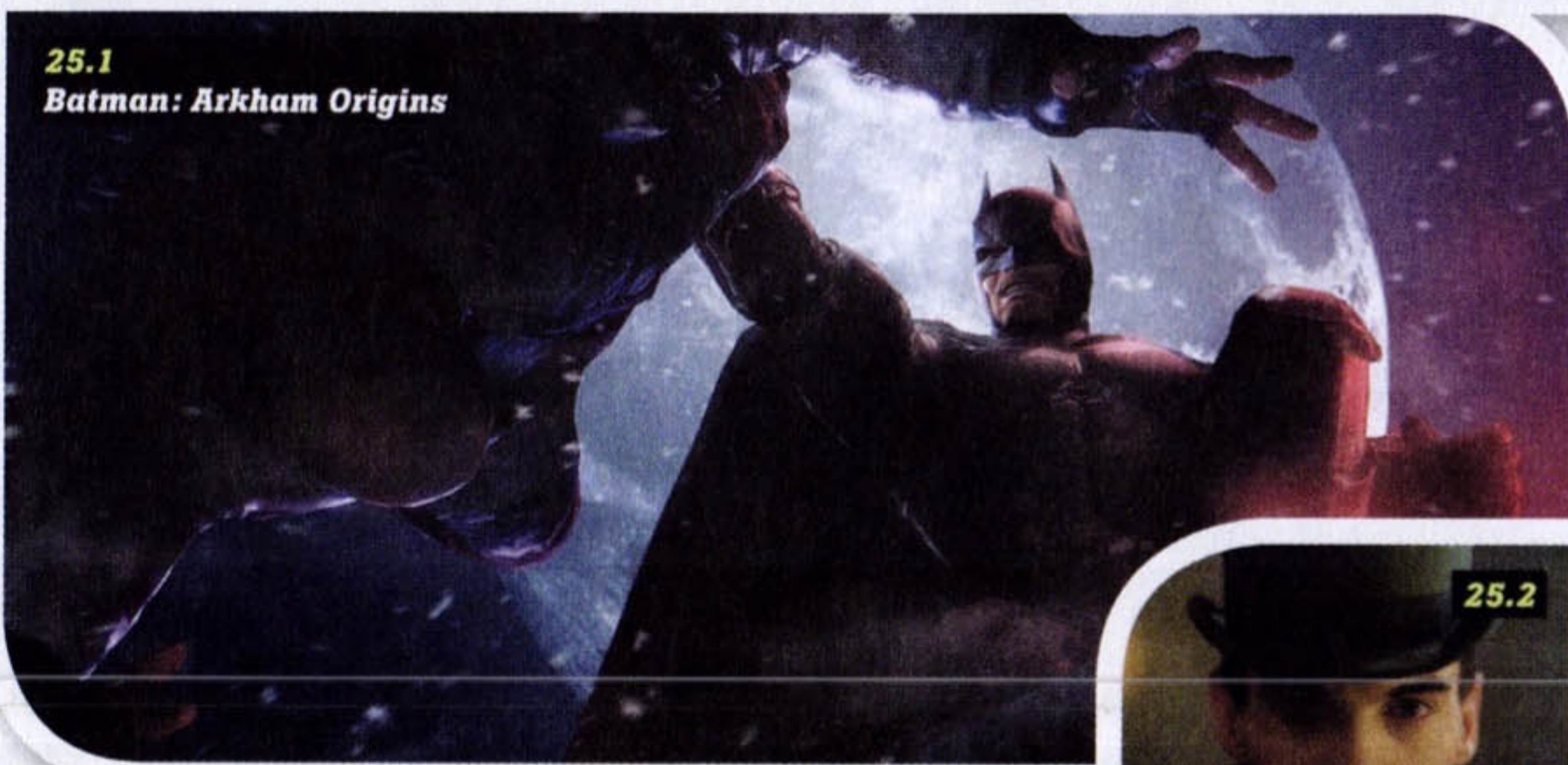
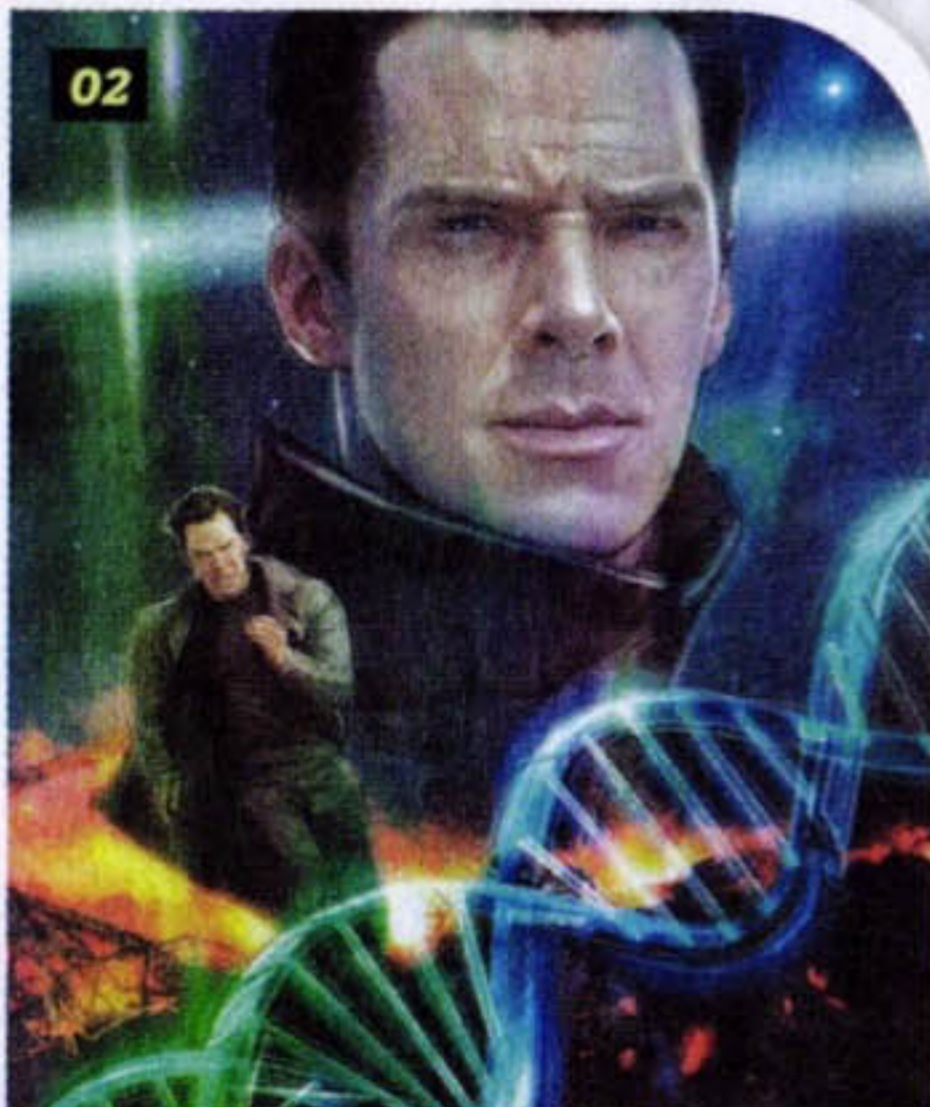
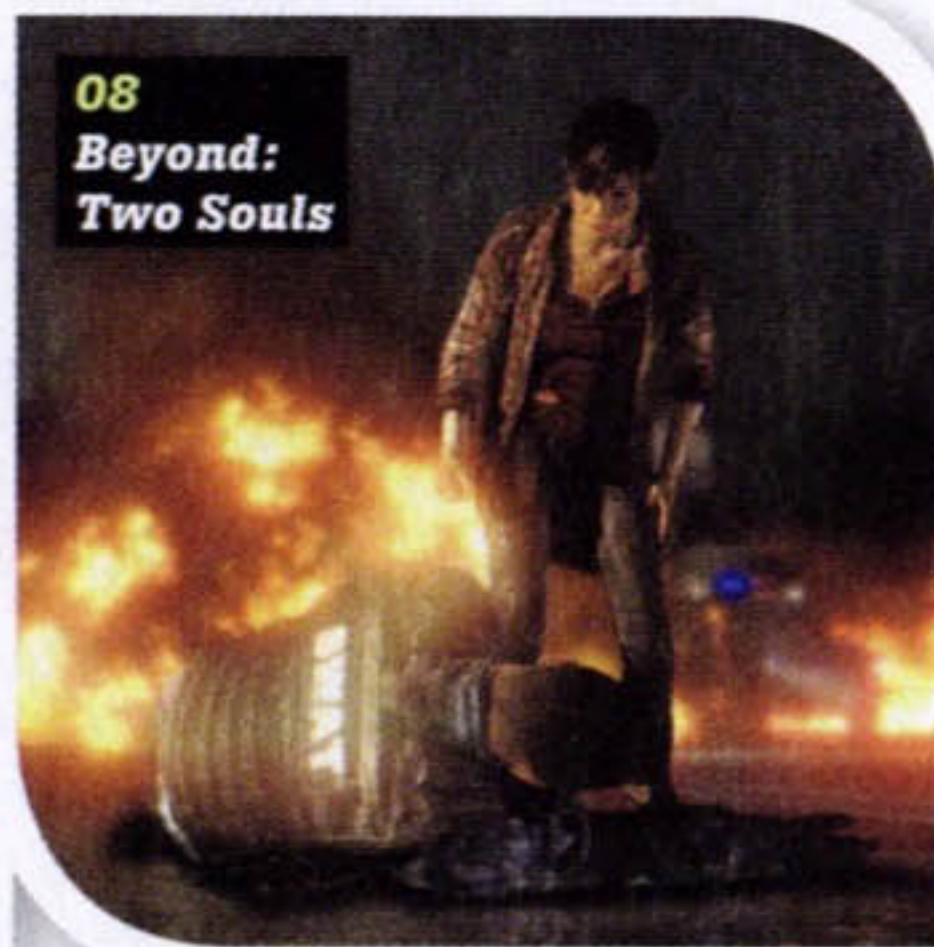
Of course, the ultimate goal of making, creating, and publishing friction-free for developers on Xbox One is to make sure we have the broadest and most diverse content available for players when they check out their Xbox One. We've made some big improvements to discoverability on Xbox One, which we think is going to really help players find games that are meaningful to them – whether it's trending, which shows you what's popular among your friends, or Game DVR, which we think is going to turn into a great discovery tool.

Independent developers are making some of the most interesting games in the medium today. That's been true since the dawn of the game industry. Xbox helped pioneer digital distribution for independent developers on console with Xbox Live Arcade for Xbox 360, and we're excited to be doing this new program to help continue to offer options that enable independent developers to get their games out to the widest possible audience.

The list of amazing independent games that debuted on Xbox is long – *Limbo*, *Castle Crashers*, *Dishwasher: Vampire Smile*, *State of Decay*, and many more. We can't wait to see what independently created games join that hall of fame on Xbox One. ♦

Chris Charla is one of the original founders of IGN, former editor-in-chief of Next Generation magazine, and previously worked in game development at Foundation 9

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



October

01.1 New Releases

› NBA 2K14 (PS3, 360, PC)

01.2 Marvel Movies On The Small Screen

Marvel announced the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s September 24 premiere date shortly after we went to print last month, but we wanted to make sure this show is on your radar. The second episode airs today. If you enjoy Marvel's films, make sure you check this series out, as the story is a continuation of *The Avengers*.

02 Khan's Origin Detailed

IDW Publishing's new *Star Trek* miniseries is a prequel story to J.J. Abrams' film, *Star Trek Into Darkness*. This story dives into Khan Noonien's history, focusing heavily on his involvement in the Eugenics Wars. *Into Darkness*' writer Roberto Orci is overseeing this project.

05 Portland Retro Gaming Con

Over 200 arcade and pinball machines (all set to free play) are on display at this year's Retro Gaming Con, held at Portland's Convention Center. Gaming legends

David Crane and Joe DeCuir are just a few of the speakers attending this two-day show.

08 New Releases

› Batman: The Dark Knight Returns Deluxe Edition (Blu-ray)
› Beyond: Two Souls (PS3)
› Disgaea D2: A Brighter Darkness (PS3)
› Just Dance 2014 (Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii)

09 The Walking Dead Turns 10

To celebrate *The Walking Dead*'s 10th anniversary, Robert Kirkman and his team at Skybound are launching "All Out War," a 12-part story that kicks off today in *The Walking Dead* issue 115. This story is being teased as the biggest event yet for this apocalyptic tale. This issue launches with 12 different covers — 10 of which connect together to create a mural representing each of this series' 10 years.

12 New Releases

› Pokémon X/Y (3DS)

13 New Releases

› Skylanders: Swap Force (Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii, 3DS)

15 New Releases

› Defiance: Season 1 (Blu-ray, DVD)
› Hometown Story (3DS)
› Zumba Fitness: World Party (Wii U, 360, Wii)

18 Grumpy Old Men In Prison

Today's theatrical release, *Escape Plan*, follows Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone as they try to break out of the most secure prison ever built. That's pretty much it. Much like the *Grumpy Old Men* movies, these two codgers probably exchange sarcastic barbs and make fun of each others' sexual prowess. The only difference? Gatling guns.

22 New Releases

› Lego: Marvel Super Heroes (Wii U, PS3, 360, Vita, 3DS, DS)
› Rocksmith 2014 (PS3, 360, PC)
› Sonic: Lost World (Wii U, 3DS)
› Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (360, Wii, 3DS)

25.1 New Releases

› Batman: Arkham Origins (Wii U, PS3, 360, Vita, 3DS, PC)



25.2 Dracula Weekly

NBC's new hour-long drama, *Dracula*, is one of this fall's promising new shows. Set in the late 19th century, Dracula (played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers) seeks revenge on the people who cursed him. He isn't hiding in the shadows with his fangs at the ready. He's hiding among them as an American entrepreneur who fancies modern science and wishes to bring new technology to a Victorian society.

26 Queerness And Games Conference

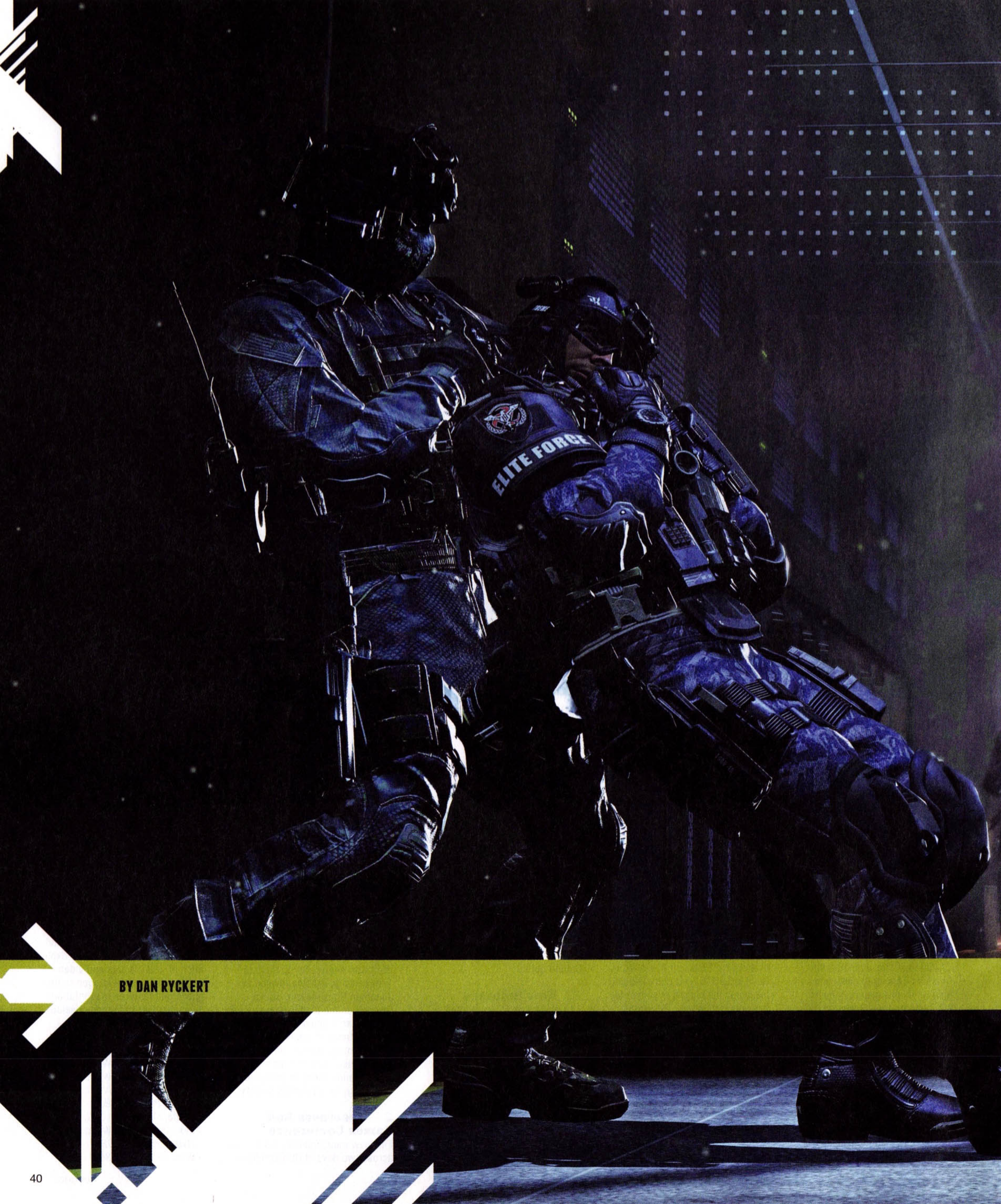
This new game industry event runs across two days at UC Berkeley's

Center for New Media, and seeks to "bring together developers and academics for an interactive exploration of LGBT issues and video games." This event is open to the public and features presentations by academics and game development professionals.

29 New Releases

› Angry Birds: Star Wars (Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii, Vita, 3DS)
› Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag (Wii U, PS3, 360, PC)
› Battlefield 4 (PS3, 360, PC)
› Monster High: 13 Wishes (Wii U, Wii, 3DS, DS)
› WWE 2K14 (PS3, 360)

2013



BY DAN RYCKERT

SPECTERS OF WAR

Infinity Ward introduces
a new universe to the
world's biggest series



Call of Duty: Ghosts

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

» STYLE
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» PUBLISHER
Activision

» DEVELOPER
Infinity Ward

» RELEASE
November 5 (Wii U,
PS3, 360),
November 15 (PS4),
November (Xbox One)



During the current console generation, one franchise has stood on top of the multiplayer mountain. Year after year, Call of Duty tops sales lists and digs its hooks into millions of fans. With its robust online offerings and steady stream of DLC, many fans don't even bother with other shooter franchises.

Many have tried to usurp the online shooter throne, with attempts like Medal of Honor failing critically and commercially. Battlefield is a formidable competitor, but it sells millions less than Activision's series. Despite Call of Duty's long reign, the approach of next-gen consoles brings some serious competition. Respawn (a team largely formed from Infinity Ward refugees) swept E3 awards with Titanfall, and Battlefield 4 is harnessing next-gen power for 64-player matches on consoles. With big names aiming at the king, Infinity Ward hopes to keep the action fresh with Call of Duty: Ghosts to ensure continued success for the annual blockbuster.



Dogs play a role in both single-player and multiplayer



TWEAKING THE ONLINE BATTLEFIELD

One of the most important areas to keep fresh is multiplayer, which has been the series' calling card from the beginning. With this year's tweaks and additions, executive producer Mark Rubin claims, "This is the biggest overhaul of multiplayer we've done since the original Modern Warfare."

The two studios responsible for making Call of Duty games every other year, Infinity Ward and Treyarch, typically don't borrow ideas from each other, but there have been instances of popular systems making crossover appearances. Black Ops II's multiplayer introduced the Pick 10 system that allowed for a large amount of loadout customization, and Infinity Ward is making its own version for Ghosts.

Everything on Black Ops II's loadout screen costs you a flat point, but Ghosts doesn't dock you a point for attachments and killstreaks. Twelve points can be distributed among your primary weapon, secondary weapon, tactical grenade, lethal grenade, and perks. If you are gutsy enough to step on the battlefield with no guns and only a knife, then you could spend all 12 points on perks. If you'd rather arrive with the standard selection of guns and grenades, that leaves you with eight points for perks.

Instead of the series' previous three slots for perks, they're now divided into seven categories: stealth, awareness, speed, handling, resistance, equipment, and elite. Each perk has its own cost, so players can choose between several low-powered perks or a couple of game changers. One of the most expensive (at five points) is Deadeye, which increases the chances of a critical hit with each consecutive kill. An interesting lower-cost perk is Gambler, which bestows a random perk on you each time you spawn. It could be a one-pointer that you don't have any interest in using, or it could grant you a powerful perk without messing with your point budget.

Eyes On The Enemy

Instead of the "one and done" nature of UAVs, SAT COMs operate on a tiered system. If one station is active, enemies show up on the radar if they're in any of your teammates' fields of vision. Two active stations grant a standard UAV signal, while three activates a faster ping. If your team has four active SAT COMs on the battlefield, you can see which direction any enemy on the map is facing.

The killstreak strike packages introduced in Modern Warfare 3 return for Ghosts. Some fans complained about the abundance of air-based killstreak rewards in the past, and the team hopes to rectify that this time around with more grounded rewards. One of the biggest changes is the elimination of flying UAVs in favor of the new SAT COM reward. This radar still reveals enemy locations and is awarded at three points, but it's a stationary satellite station deployed by the character. Because it sits on the ground, players won't have to worry about equipping special launchers if they want to shut down the enemy's radar.

Juggernauts are among the most feared foes in Call of Duty, and a new version of the armored soldier is sure to terrorize multiplayer matches in Ghosts. Upon achieving

a nine-point streak in the assault strike package, players can transform into the melee-based killer. Sacrificing guns in favor of speed, Juggernaut Maniacs sprint around the battlefield with only a knife. Their life doesn't regenerate, but lots of body armor ensures that their enemies need to unload several clips to take them down.

If a user of the assault strike package reaches five points, he or she can call in the assistance of a guard dog. Unlike the packs of dogs that attack indiscriminately in previous Call of Duty games, this canine companion follows the player around and attacks nearby enemies. The support package focuses more on defensive measures, so its five-point reward is the protective Night Owl. This flying, orb-like contraption

is essentially a mobile trophy system, swatting enemy grenades out of the air. The specialist package returns in Ghosts, but none of its killstreaks have been revealed as of this writing.

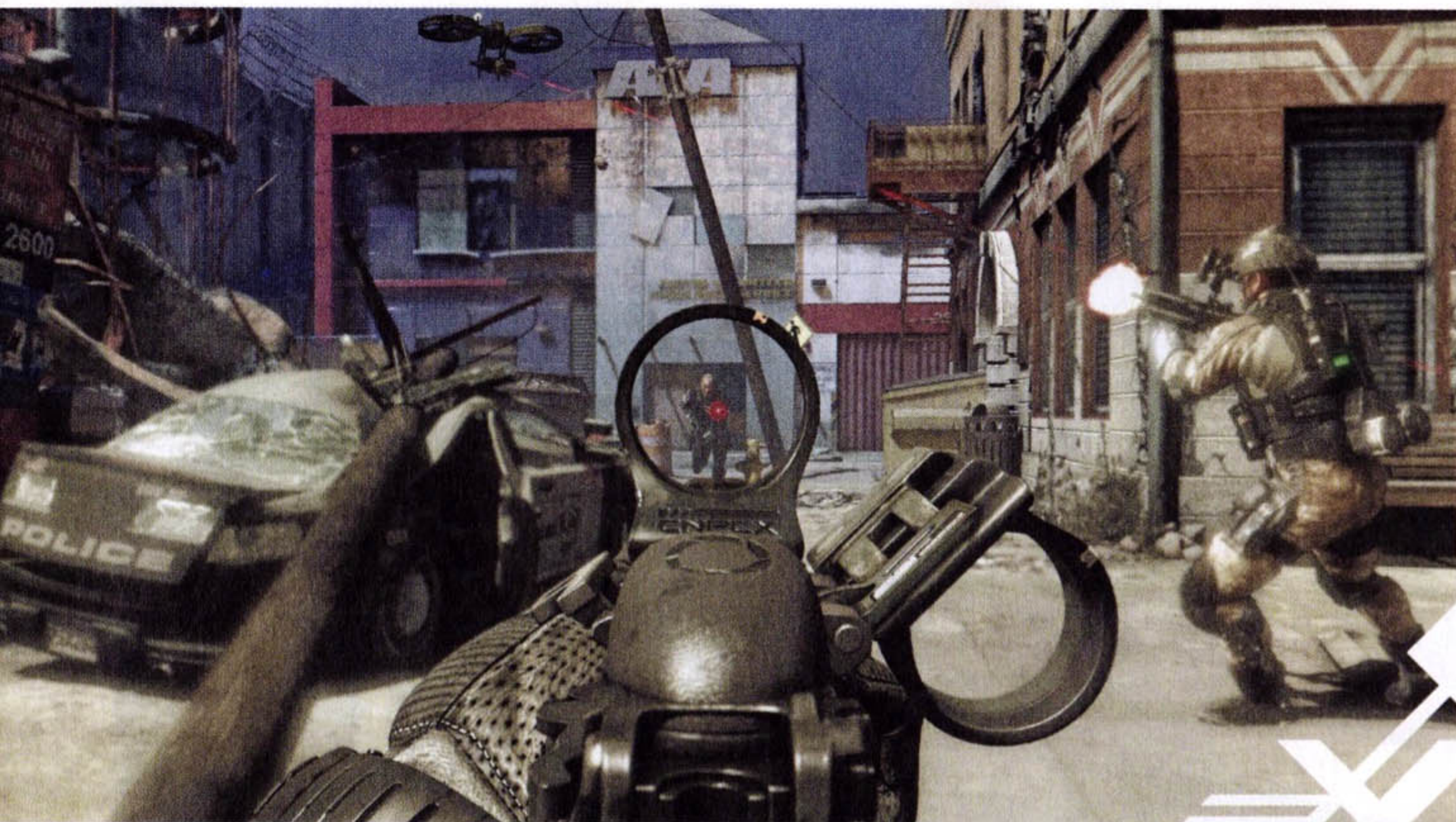
I played three new modes during our visit to Infinity Ward: Cranked, Search & Rescue, and Blitz. Cranked is the most frantic of the bunch, and it certainly doesn't make any attempt at realism. As soon as you kill an enemy, you're granted a speed-based perk (faster reloading, ADS, sprinting speed, etc.) and a countdown begins. If the timer hits zero before you get another kill, you explode. If you're able to score a kill, the timer resets and you're granted another speedy perk. Players that get on a roll zip around the field like hummingbirds, but they also have the added pressure of an impending combustion.

Search & Rescue is Search & Destroy with a twist. Instead of being permanently out of the round when killed, you can be resurrected if a member of your team can pick up the dog tags that you dropped. If an enemy gets to them first, you're out of the round.

In Blitz, the only way to score is to run directly into a small zone in enemy territory. A point is awarded if you successfully enter it, and you then spawn back on your side of the map. It's simple, but this mode gives a rush when you're making a mad dash to the scoring zone.

Running into scoring portals and spontaneously combusting aren't typically parts of actual warfare, but Infinity Ward isn't concerned. "In multiplayer, we get to have a little more fun," Rubin says. "We do try to be a little more serious than we might be once we get to DLC, but it's still a place where we can have fun. For a while, on a lot of the Call of Duty games, we were a little too serious on multiplayer and concentrating too much on making sure everything was super competitive. On Modern Warfare 3, we introduced this idea of community playlists and community modes. That's where the idea of Infected mode came from. We have a place for the non-serious, non-competitive modes. Infected is not a competitive mode, but it's fun. Let's not worry about whether this game is fair competitively, let's just make sure it's fun. It turned out to be extremely popular."





No matter which mode you're playing, you can witness and activate numerous dynamic map events. These interactive, destructible portions of levels are sometimes as simple as a chunk of wall that falls apart or a door that opens. Others are larger in scale, causing gas stations to collapse or entire baseball stadiums to be destroyed. While the destructible elements in maps are very specific and inflexible, having some impact on the battleground is still nice.

For the first time in the series, players have free reign over the cosmetic aspect of their characters. Over 20,000 combinations of helmets, heads, and uniforms can be made, and the option to play as a female character is finally available. You won't be stuck with one character throughout your multiplayer experience, however, as the new squad system allows you to have an entire stable of soldiers.

As you rank up in multiplayer, you are awarded squad points in addition to the standard XP. These points can be used to unlock weapons and attachments, but they can also be spent to add squad members. Teammates feature their own appearance and loadout, so you can assemble a dream team of dedicated snipers, close-quarter experts, dual-wielding maniacs, or whatever combination you can imagine. Once your team is built, there are several ways to put them to work for you.

Squad vs. Squad is a new mode that pits you and your AI-controlled squad against other players and their teams. Infinity Ward wanted to advance its AI to more closely resemble human players, so your teammates (and your opponents) corner camp, side strafe, and take jump shots. If you give your teammates a sniper rifle, they behave

like a sniper. Give them a shotgun, and they sprint in and try to take enemies out from close range.

Your AI teammates help you even when you're not playing, as other players can be randomly matched up with your squad (or specifically picked if you're on their friends list) in Squad Assault mode. When other players take on your team, you are rewarded with XP the next time you hop online.

The introduction of squads also radically changes the long-running prestige system. Instead of allowing for 10 prestige levels that each reset your unlocks, each member of your squad can prestige one time. No unlocks are taken away, so there's no downside to confirming the prestige selection. Since 10 characters can be in each player's squad and each of them can prestige once, technically Ghosts still has 10 total prestige levels.

With squads, character customization, and a modified loadout system, Ghosts brings plenty new to the table. These big bullet points

On The Go

Over 20 million gamers already have a Call of Duty account, and the Elite stat tracking service has been well-received by hardcore fans. Ghosts supports second-screen experiences, allowing players to track stats and modify loadouts on their phones, tablets, or computers on the fly. Ghosts also introduces the ability to manage clans and use a touchscreen interface to create your multiplayer emblem.

aren't all that's changed, as Infinity Ward has made many smaller tweaks. Basic stats are always shown in the top right of the screen, and can be toggled between basic kill/death numbers and the full leaderboard. The area around your scope isn't blacked out any more, so you won't lose your peripheral vision while aiming. A new mantling system allows you to hop over small walls without losing momentum. If you want to naturally transition from sprinting to

crouching, the new knee slide move works perfectly. A contextual lean system allows you to peek around corners without adding any complicated controls.

Infinity Ward made enhancements to the audio presentation, as well. Like Battlefield, reverb effects are different based on where you're standing, so shots fired in a large, metal room sound different than those fired in a small, carpeted one. Contextual battle chatter improves upon the basic "Reloading!" or "Enemy sighted!" AI snippets from the past. Now, they say specific lines like "Enemies near the gas station!" or "Coming through the back entrance!" It makes battles feel more realistic, and provides information that you can act on.

Following Orders

When you kill an enemy in Ghosts, you sometimes see a briefcase rise out of the corpse. This is a field order, and only one is active at any point in a multiplayer round. It may task you with stabbing an enemy in the back, killing an enemy while prone, or any number of other objectives. Complete it, and your team is granted a care package drop. Get killed, and the orders are dropped once again.



Customizing your character's appearance is finally an option





New Name, New Universe

Call of Duty: Ghosts doesn't differ from Infinity Ward's Modern Warfare series in name alone. "We're doing a whole new engine, we're playing on a whole new platform, and we've got a whole new world," says executive producer Mark Rubin. "We wanted to really go with that theme and do a new Call of Duty. It's still in the modern world, but it's not in the same universe as Modern Warfare." One of the only nods we've seen to the existence of the other series is in the naming of the dog, Riley. Despite being named after Modern Warfare's Simon "Ghost" Riley, neither that character or any of the previous games' events exist in the Ghosts canon.

Tech improvements like this are coming to both current-gen and next-gen consoles, and the game runs at 60 frames per second regardless of what you play it on. Infinity Ward also wants to make the transition to next-gen simple if you choose to upgrade after the game comes out, so season passes transfer from Xbox 360 to Xbox One and PS3 to PS4. Your character and squad are tied to your Call of Duty account, so you won't have to start unlocking guns and ranking up from scratch if you choose to upgrade or play at a friend's house.

Making a triple-A game across generations didn't come without added development stress, however. "With this game, we're looking at five platforms," Rubin says. "We created a different pipeline for art assets, so it's not a shared set of assets across all platforms. Art assets became 'let's do all of the art at cinema quality, and create the PC version. Then from that we'll make the next-gen version. Then from that we'll make the current-gen version.' We actually have to create another asset from our master assets, and it's a long process. Everything that we're doing in this game took way longer than we expected, so this is the hardest game I've ever worked on."

BECOMING THE UNDERDOG

For over a decade, Americans have been trained to fear homemade bombs made by religious extremists more than any nuclear threat from an enemy nation. The "duck and cover" instructional videos for Cold War-era schoolchildren have been replaced by "If you see something, say something" posters aimed at thwarting small terrorist operations. In Call of Duty: Ghosts, Infinity Ward replaces small-scale paranoia with a new nationwide threat.

In this alternate reality demonstrated in Ghosts' prologue, the United States deployed a massive space station and cluster of satellites known as ODIN (Orbital Defense Initiative). Rather than serving as a base for experimentation and research, it exists as a nuclear deterrent for any nation that would dare threaten America's power. Armed with unfathomably heavy tungsten rods, the station is designed to drop them earthbound if called upon. Their meteor-like impact mimics the devastation caused by a nuclear bomb, but without the fallout that would harm innocent neighboring nations.

Call of Duty: Ghosts introduces this world from the perspective of two teenage brothers, Logan and David "Hesh" Walker. In the prologue, we witness the devastation of America firsthand through the eyes of these future soldiers. An enemy has taken control

of ODIN and used it to strike its creators. Tungsten rods rain down upon the United States, immediately transforming the leader of the free world into an underdog. From Ghosts' opening moments, the threat to America isn't relegated to one skyscraper, marketplace, or sporting event. The country has been attacked on a massive scale, immediately downgrading its status as a political and military superpower.

"In Modern Warfare, you're fighting in a world you know, but you don't feel like the characters are shaped by that world," Rubin says. "For Ghosts, we wanted Hesh and Logan to be shaped by this changed world."

The game fast-forwards as players assume the control of a now-adult Logan. After witnessing the horrific events of his adolescence, he's inspired to follow his older brother into the weakened U.S. military to fight back against those who attempted to put the country under.

With America in shambles, the country's previous ability to churn out tanks, jets, and other instruments of war isn't an option. In this new world, its only hope lies in small groups of highly trained soldiers known as Ghosts. Only the most elite soldiers are admitted entry into the Ghosts, a program designed to combat a massive force with a much smaller one.

In the aftermath of the ODIN incident, a new global superpower rises when a collection of South American countries join forces to create the Federation. With vast amounts of oil from Venezuela and the participation of numerous nations, the Federation is the most resource-heavy government body in the world.



The single-player campaign follows one squad, and Infinity Ward declined to say how many total squads are in the Ghosts program



Two Of The Best



David "Hesh" Walker
Age: 28

The older brother of Logan, Hesh was taught how to hunt at a young age by their father, Elias. His skills as a marksman grew as he aged, and he eventually joined the Ghosts he always idolized. Ten years after the ODIN incident, he's tasked with patrolling California's coast and defending it from Federation forces.



Merrick
Age: 41

The consummate professional, Merrick is the field commander of the Ghosts. Highly decorated and respected, he was the youngest person to complete SEAL training at 17 years old. His demeanor often seems cold and harsh, but his track record shows a history of getting the job done.



STEALING HOME

During our trip to Infinity Ward, the team showed us a good chunk of the Struck Down mission. Those who have watched footage of Ghosts' multiplayer have likely seen the Strikezone map, which takes place in and around a San Diego baseball stadium. The ODIN strike has reduced Greenway Park to rubble, and Federation forces have turned the stadium into a forward operating base.

Players assume control of Logan at the outset of the mission, which begins with the Ghosts on the perimeter of the stadium area. Intel suggests that their partner, Ajax, is being held by Federation forces somewhere within the park, and it's up to the elite squad to rescue him.

After setting up a remote-controlled .50 caliber sniper rifle, the player peers through the scope to get a better sense of the happenings within Greenway Park. Security checkpoints block vehicular entry to the field and heavily armed soldiers patrol the bleachers, but there are no signs of the captive Ghost until the press boxes appear in the scope. There, several Federation soldiers are beating Ajax, who defiantly gives them the finger.

Suddenly, the sounds of a convoy can be heard from the Ghosts' position on the perimeter. One of the AI partners instructs the player to grab a special grenade launcher that can tag targets for detonation later. As each vehicle in the convoy drives by, the player silently tags as many of them as possible with explosives.

Once enough of the convoy is marked for destruction, the Ghosts move to a nearby parking garage. Hopping into a vehicle, they head down the same road that the Federation convoy took just moments earlier. In a tense moment, the Ghosts pull up behind the line of vehicles moving through Greenway Park's checkpoint. With the press of a button, the player simultaneously detonates all of the explosives that had been

A Silent Hero

Rather than the character switching, globetrotting affairs of previous games, players assume control of Logan for the duration of Ghosts. To help gamers experience the story from their own perspective, Logan is never given a voice or shown onscreen.



In multiplayer, the Strikezone map changes drastically after Greenway Park is hit with an ODIN strike

placed on the vehicles.

Chaos erupts at the checkpoint, and it's just the opening the Ghosts need to speed through. Gunning the gas, the vehicle busts through the commotion and enters the park area. A shootout commences as the player exits the vehicle and sprints through the stadium's hallways. Enemies fill concession and merchandise stands as the Ghosts and Federation trade fire. The player isn't confined to guns and grenades at this point, as the simple press of a button orders your faithful dog, Riley, to attack enemy combatants.

With this initial hallway clear, the Ghosts move toward the press box. Breaching rooms filled with enemies is nothing new to the Call of Duty series, but this particular moment presents the action from a different perspective. Other Ghosts line up against the door in traditional fashion, but the player can view the breach from the remote sniper's scope. As the others bust in and begin taking out Federation soldiers, the player can pick off as many as possible from a mounted gun stationed hundreds of yards away.

Bodies lie across the floor, but there's no sign of Ajax. Afraid that the Federation

Help From Hollywood

Black Ops II enlisted *The Dark Knight's* David Goyer for its story, and Infinity Ward is also taking the Hollywood route via Stephen Gaghan (writer of *Traffic* and *Syriana*). "We had just started in pre-production for the game, and someone at Activision went to a baby shower," says executive producer Mark Rubin. "Stephen Gaghan happened to be there as well with some mutual friends. They talked, and he wound up being a huge fan of not only the game, but the idea of writing for a game. So yeah, it all started at a baby shower. All the important stuff happens at baby showers."



Terror In The Deep

In addition to our look at the Struck Down mission, I played a version of the Into the Deep mission that went slightly beyond the E3 demo. One terrifying section tasked Logan with slowly and deliberately ascending through a chamber filled with circling great white sharks. I was spotted several times, and the resulting attack sequence was one of the few times in a Call of Duty game I've been genuinely scared.

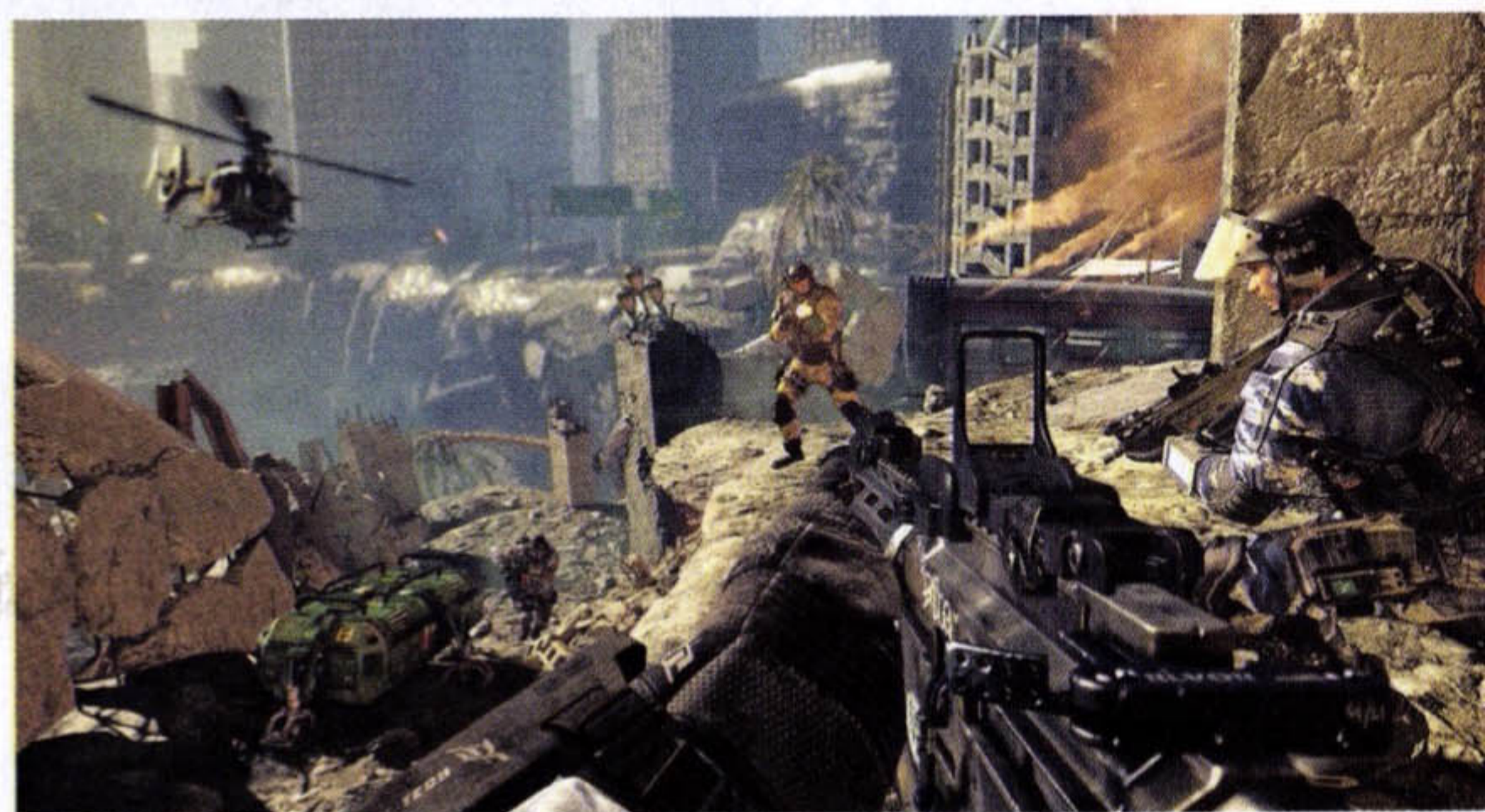
may be moving him to a new location, the Ghosts quickly press forward. Through the bottom of a half-closed cargo door, the player can hear several foot soldiers on the other side. Donning gas masks, the Ghosts toss canisters of tear gas underneath and move in. Helpless enemies cough and wheeze as they're taken down by a quick barrage of gunfire.

Moving downstairs to the area reserved for the baseball players, Riley gets the scent of Ajax and takes off near some batting cages. He leads the Ghosts to the darkened clubhouse of the San Diego Tsunami. Flares illuminate the hallways and locker room as Logan and the Ghosts tread carefully towards Ajax's possible location. Sounds are heard from the next room, and the team prepares for another breach by putting their gas masks back on. They kick through the door and scream for Ajax, and that's where the Struck Down mission ends. Infinity Ward has been careful not to reveal many plot points of the single-player campaign, so players have to wait until November to see exactly how the war between the Ghosts and the Federation plays out.

THE ANNUAL JUGGERNAUT MARCHES FORWARD

Each year, armchair analysts love to predict that the Call of Duty series has peaked from a creative and commercial perspective. Despite their theories, Activision has marched forward with the franchise year in and year out, introducing new elements and continuing to set sales records. It's too early to know if Ghosts will continue the upward trend of sales, but what we've played proves that Infinity Ward has plenty of new ideas to improve and expand upon the already-gigantic Call of Duty experience.

Want to make the wait easier with even more Ghosts info? We'll be posting video interviews with Infinity Ward all month at gameinformer.com/codghosts



GRAND THEFT



AUTO ONLINE

When Rockstar announced that Grand Theft Auto V featured three main protagonists in our December 2012 cover reveal, it took mere nanoseconds for readers to connect

HANDS ON WITH ROCKSTAR'S AMBITIOUS NEW TAKE ON ONLINE PLAY

the dots and ask if this meant the game would feature co-op. When we explained the switch technology that allows a lone player to move between the perspectives of Michael, Trevor, and Franklin at will, fans understood why cooperative play wouldn't work in this context, but that did little to dampen their enthusiasm for sharing a Grand Theft Auto experience with friends. Rockstar shared the same vision all along; it just wasn't ready to take the veil off its ambitious concept for making this fantasy a reality.

the dots and ask if this meant the game would feature co-op. When we explained the switch technology that allows a lone player to move between the perspectives of Michael, Trevor, and Franklin at will, fans understood why cooperative play wouldn't work in this context, but that

» PLATFORM

PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» STYLE

1 to 16-Player
Online Action

» PUBLISHER

Rockstar Games

» DEVELOPER

Rockstar North

» RELEASE

October 1



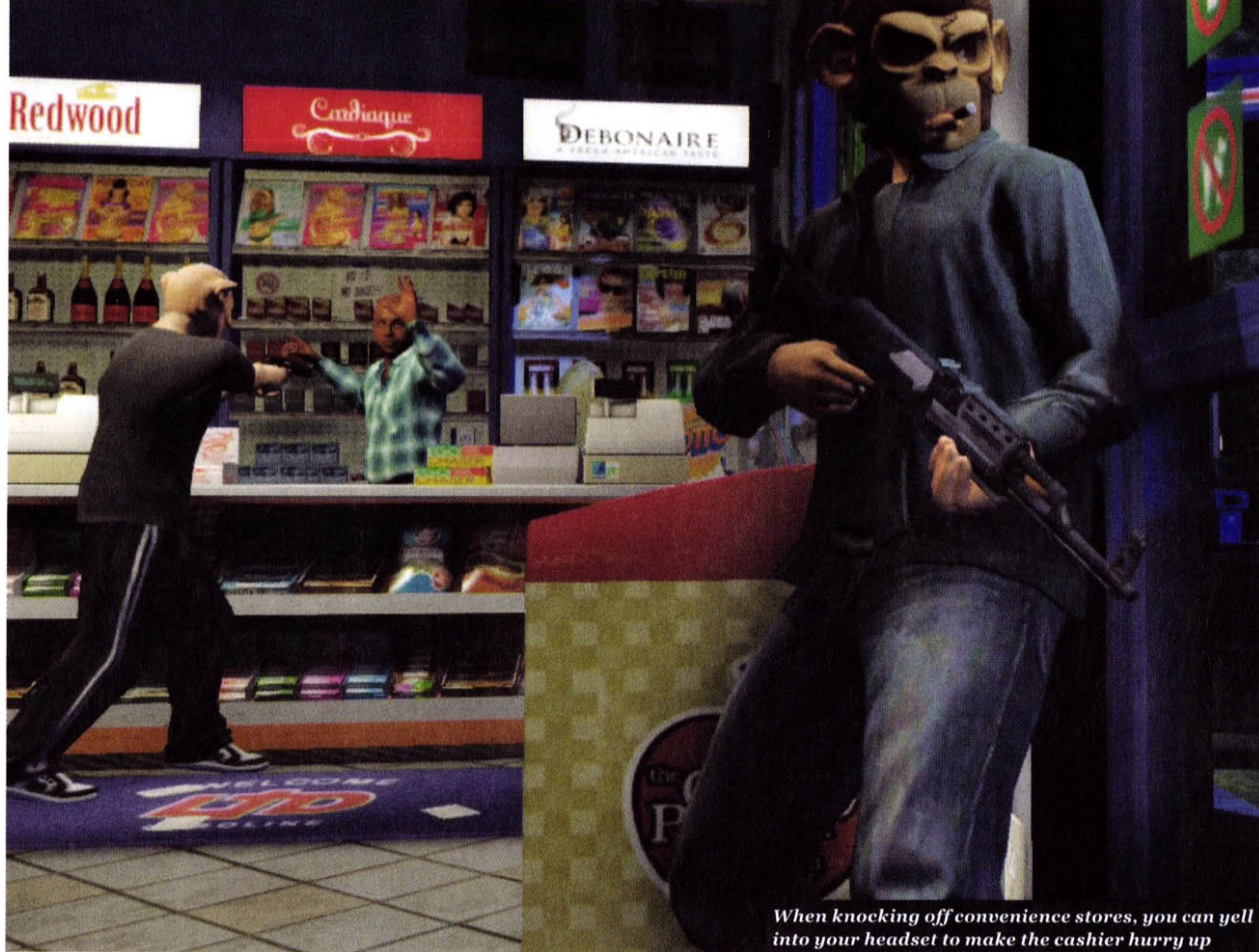
Since it first debuted an open-world online experience with Grand Theft Auto IV back in 2008, Rockstar Games has had a reasonable degree of success with its multi-player endeavors. GTA IV is still one of the most-played games on Xbox Live five years after its launch, and Red Dead Redemption also has a dedicated fan base. Despite these achievements, Rockstar has never felt it delivered an online experience on par with its single-player games.

For Grand Theft Auto V, Rockstar North decided to go for broke with a kitchen sink-approach to online. Instead of building a world that shares only some characteristics of the single-player experience, this persistent world would operate independently of the single-player campaign but have the same degree of ambiance, mission variety, and activities as the base game. Once the lofty goals were set, the team started the onerous task of building technology to bring its bold vision to life.

Most persistent worlds sacrifice ambiance and fidelity for the sake of hosting larger player populations. Rockstar decided to take the opposite approach. Only after the world was up and running did the studio determine how many players could inhabit this living, breathing world at once without crippling the experience. The result is Grand Theft Auto Online, a dynamic world that can entertain up to 16 players concurrently.

"Grand Theft Auto Online has been in our minds for a long time – since we started on Grand Theft Auto III," says Rockstar North president Leslie Benzies. "We've always wanted to create a world with the complexity of a single-player Grand Theft Auto game with the addition of real players. We wanted a world where people could spend years without getting bored of playing the same content over and over. I think we've managed to achieve something very close to our dream."

/ by **MATT BERTZ**



When knocking off convenience stores, you can yell into your headset to make the cashier hurry up



A NEW FACE IN LOS SANTOS

GTA V and GTA Online share the same geography, mission types, and mechanics, but Rockstar is treating them as separate entities. By purchasing Grand Theft Auto V, you gain access to this new product, which ships a couple weeks after the launch of the single-player game. After that, they take divergent paths.

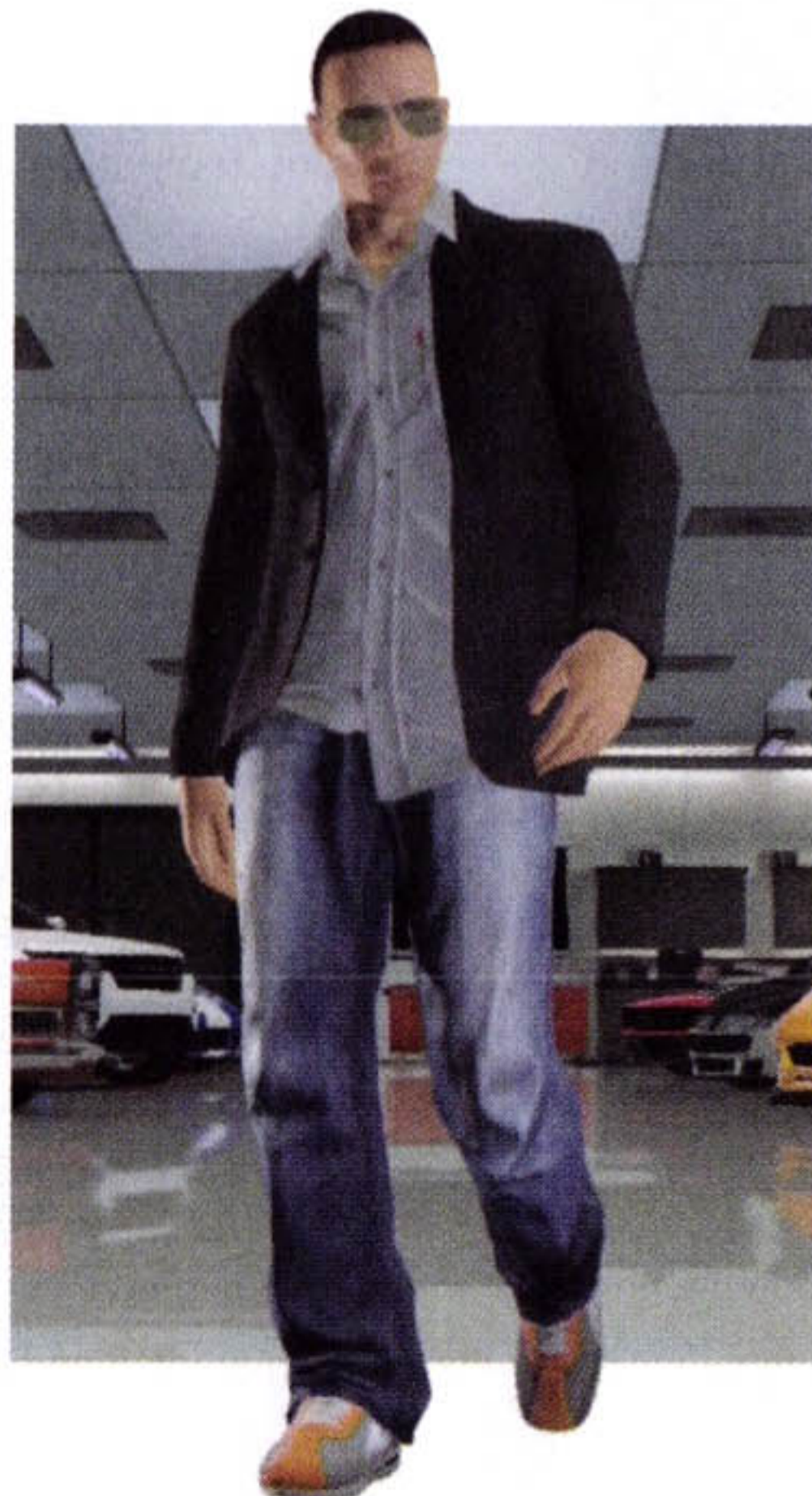
Once GTA Online goes live, players are given access to a fourth player on their in-game character wheel. You can access this character at any time while playing the game, and receive invites from your friends for multiplayer events whether you are exploring the open online world yourself or engaging in criminal hijinks with one of the single-player characters.

Your character growth has a flow, but don't expect an overarching narrative that culminates in a definitive conclusion. Like any hyper-capitalist, your goal is to grow your bank account by any available means, which allows you to expand your personal brand by purchasing better vehicles, weapons, clothes, and real estate. Your character appears in cutscenes just like a regular protagonist when interacting with the various characters around the world, but like Grand Theft Auto III's Claude, he or she doesn't speak. (Yes, I said she – you can create a female character if you prefer.)

Nearly anything you can do in GTA V is available in GTA Online, including heists, missions, robberies, assaulting gang hideouts, hijacking armored vehicles, races, and the litany of extracurricular activities like tennis, golf, and base jumping. In all, Benzies says the game features more than 500 missions. You can perform

many of these on your own, team up with friends for more complicated missions, or challenge all comers to a friendly race or deathmatch.

GTA Online takes place shortly before the events of Grand Theft Auto V, so expect to run into many familiar faces. As you do favors and build a rapport with a character, in traditional Grand Theft Auto fashion he or she may eventually introduce you to another shady associate who has several missions waiting to be completed. For instance, Franklin's friend Lamar may introduce you to car dealer Simeon Yetarian, who is always looking for new vehicles for his showroom. Get in tight with a biker gang, and they may tag along if you need backup for a job.



If you have enough pull with a tech-savvy character, he can hide your blip on the radar during a multiplayer match. Develop strong ties with private security company Merryweather, and you can even phone in an airstrike to remove that pesky car in the front of the pack during a heated race.

So how do you find your friends in this world? Rockstar uses a dynamic system that populates the world around you, first with your friends and fellow crew members, and then matches you with similarly skilled players in the same part of the world.

"We've set up Grand Theft Auto Online to be as customizable as possible," Benzies says. "You can lock down your

games to only let the players you want in there. There are options to let the game decide who to play with – tell it to auto-fill the game and it will search the world for friends, your crew, or suitably skilled players. Or you can hand pick every player in a game. We've pushed to make sure play keeps rolling so you waste as little time in lobbies as possible – maximizing the playing time has been key to us."

As you spend more time in the world the game will analyze your playing style to surface missions that appeal to your sensibilities. If you always do jobs with your crew, for instance, it will know this and

THE FOURTH PROTAGONIST / In GTA Online, you don't play as GTA V protagonists Franklin, Michael, or Trevor. Instead, you create your own unique male or female. This noob steps off a plane into Los Santos, and from there you create a unique story with your own actions. But before you write your future, you need to sculpt your past in the character creator.

"I've always felt character creators in games to be a bit wacky – pulling the ears and noses to change the way they look seems wrong," says Rockstar North president Leslie Benzies. "That's not how humans are made in the real world. Normally it involves a man, a woman, and some sexy time."

"This is the basis of how we do it in Grand Theft Auto Online: Choose your mum, dad, and grandparents, then out pops your character. You then spend time choosing your lifestyle, making choices about the kinds of things your character spends time doing, whether they spend more time partying or sitting on the couch or doing criminal activities than sleeping and being athletic – and your character is complete."

The skills you start with are based on the lifestyle you have chosen for your character, but just like the three GTA V protagonists, you can upgrade your various skills, buy new property, and customize your look by spending money on haircuts, tattoos, and clothing.



Crew leaders can create impromptu races right from their phones



tailor content in that direction – something Rockstar strongly encourages.

“We hope everyone will join a crew as it adds another layer of gameplay to the experience,” Benzies says. “There is a crew ranking system as well as a personal rank which will give rewards that you can only get from crew membership. Matchmaking will keep crews together, and you’ll be working towards making your crew the number one in the world. You can challenge crews to a head-to-head battle using a custom playlist that you have created or you can set challenges for other crews/players to beat.”

HANDS ON WITH GTA ONLINE

To show me the breadth of the GTA Online experience, I’m handed a DualShock to assume control of a previously created character. My first indoctrination into the criminal underworld of Los Santos is a standard stick-up job.

My partner in crime rolls up in a sports car, and I hop into the passenger seat. While riding shotgun, I can control the radio station, set waypoints on the map, marvel at the scenery using the cinematic camera, or take potshots at unsuspecting pedestrians on the sidewalk with my SMG.

We arrive at the liquor store, and my partner volunteers to stay outside while I do the dirty work. Before heading into the shop, I hold the select button down to pull up the player interaction menu. Here, I can change my outfit, alter the gesture I can perform at will (I settle on flipping dual birds), access my inventory, and equip a mask for situations such as these that require anonymity. I throw on the devil mask, take a quick selfie with my phone to chronicle my exploits, and head into the store.

I barge in with my gun pointed at the cashier, who immediately starts emptying the register – he’s clearly done this before. The transfer is taking too long, so I shout at him to hurry up through my headset, which he acknowledges. To drive my sense of urgency home I shoot a few of the booze bottles behind him.

With the \$1,500 score in my hands, I head toward the door. Before I exit, I hear a gunshot – this clerk was packing heat! Rather than return fire, I hightail it to the getaway car considering we already have a two-star wanted level. The cops have already been alerted to my position, so I hop behind the wheel to begin the traditional song and dance between cops and robbers. To avoid getting busted I must keep the car out of the vision cones of the several cop cars circling the neighborhood. I focus on driving while my partner keeps an eye on their location on the radar and shouts out directions. We stay out of sight long enough to lose the wanted level, which means it’s time to split up the dough.

After each successful mission in GTA Online, players receive the cash reward and Reputation Points (RP). The crew leader decides who gets to keep the loot. If they want to hog all the money, they can, but their partners may not take kindly to the act of selfishness and exact revenge by offing them and taking the dirty money. Our crew leader takes the sensible approach and doles out the cash fairly.

While we’re lingering outside my character’s apartment, another player invites us to participate in an impromptu race. I receive the message on my phone, and by accepting the invitation I seamlessly warp to the starting line – no waiting in a boring lobby. While we speed toward the finish line, a detour is in order. Another group of players is engaged in an intense firefight with police in the middle of the street.

I start the race on a high-end motorcycle, which can reach screaming high speeds but has very touchy handling. After a crash into a light post I abandon the bike for an equally speedy Cheetah. This expensive ride is also finicky, but players can customize car handling to their liking at the Los Santos Customs shops around the city. Putting a racing

transmission into a sedan makes it switch gears more quickly, while buying high-end replacement brakes and tires on a luxury sports car gives it better handling more in line with the mid-tier cars I drove during missions. Having gotten behind the wheel of a racecar, SUV, and sedan, each felt very distinct and much more in line with a traditional racing game than any previous GTA title.

With the race coming to a close (I lost), we then attempt a more structured mission. A shipment of Maibatsu bikes is due to arrive at a warehouse, and for a healthy price our contact wants us to divert that shipment to him.

Four of us agree to take on the mission, which opens up a lobby window on the screen. Here, each player gets to choose his or her role. I volunteer to be the sniper, while the other guys accept the roles of lookout and transporter. The crew leader can also tweak mission settings like the time of day, weather, degree of difficulty, and the number of lives we have to complete the mission.

With everything set, we ride together to the industrial area. The game issues everyone different mission priorities just like it would in a single-player mission.

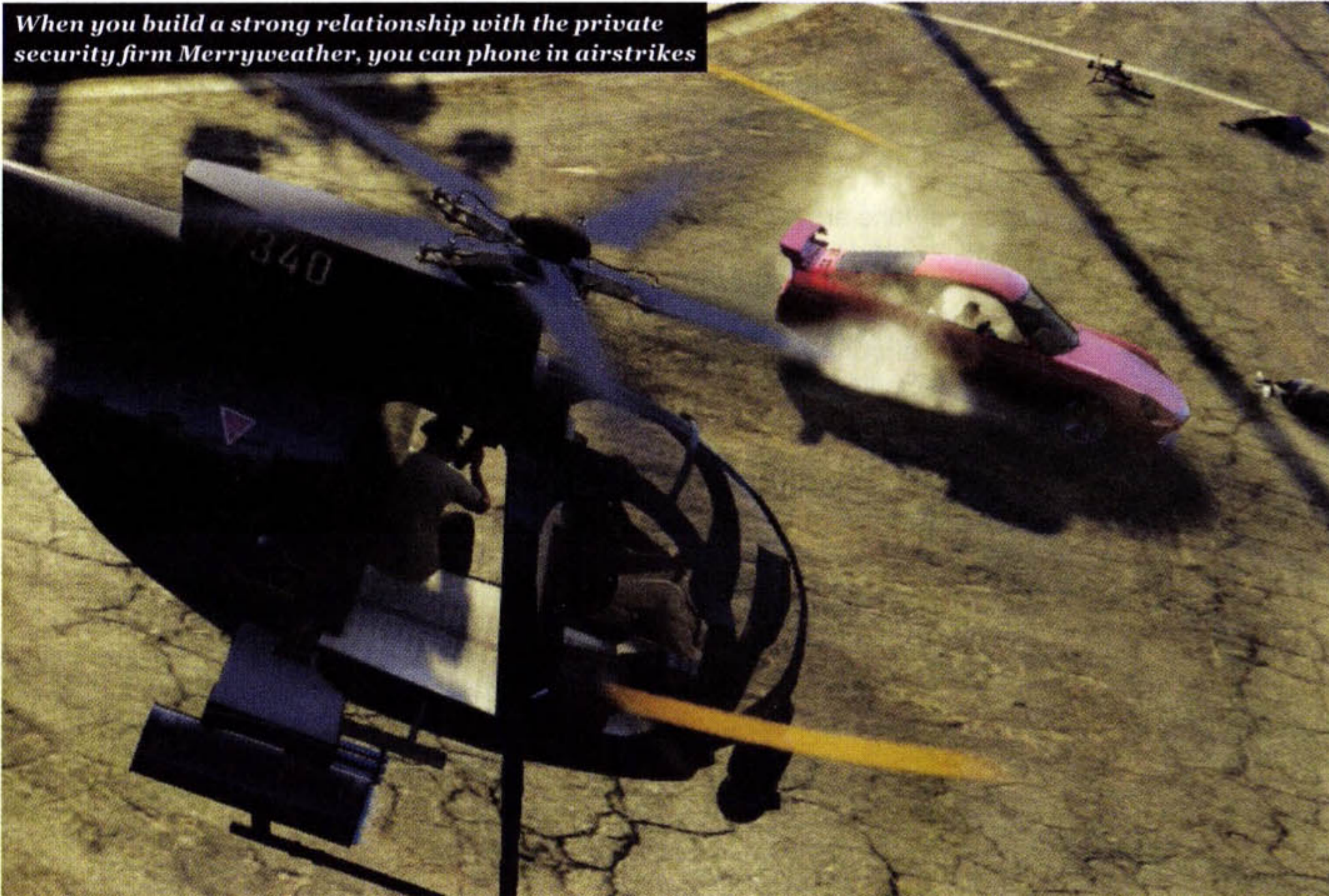
MONEY: IT’S WHAT YOU WANT /

As a new arrival to Los Santos, you don’t start with much. But as you knock off convenience stores and complete missions for the various characters you meet along the way, you can spend your ill-gotten gains on living the lifestyle of the rich and infamous.

Each home comes with a garage for storing your vehicles. Modest apartments only have room for two vehicles, but if you splurge on a high-end luxury condominium, your garage can accommodate 10. You can treat this space like a showroom, walking amongst your high-speed darlings to admire the customization you put into each one. Keeping these cars in mint condition isn’t easy, so you can hire a mechanic to watch over them and buy insurance to avoid paying huge repair bills when you inevitably send a car careening off a bridge and into oncoming traffic.

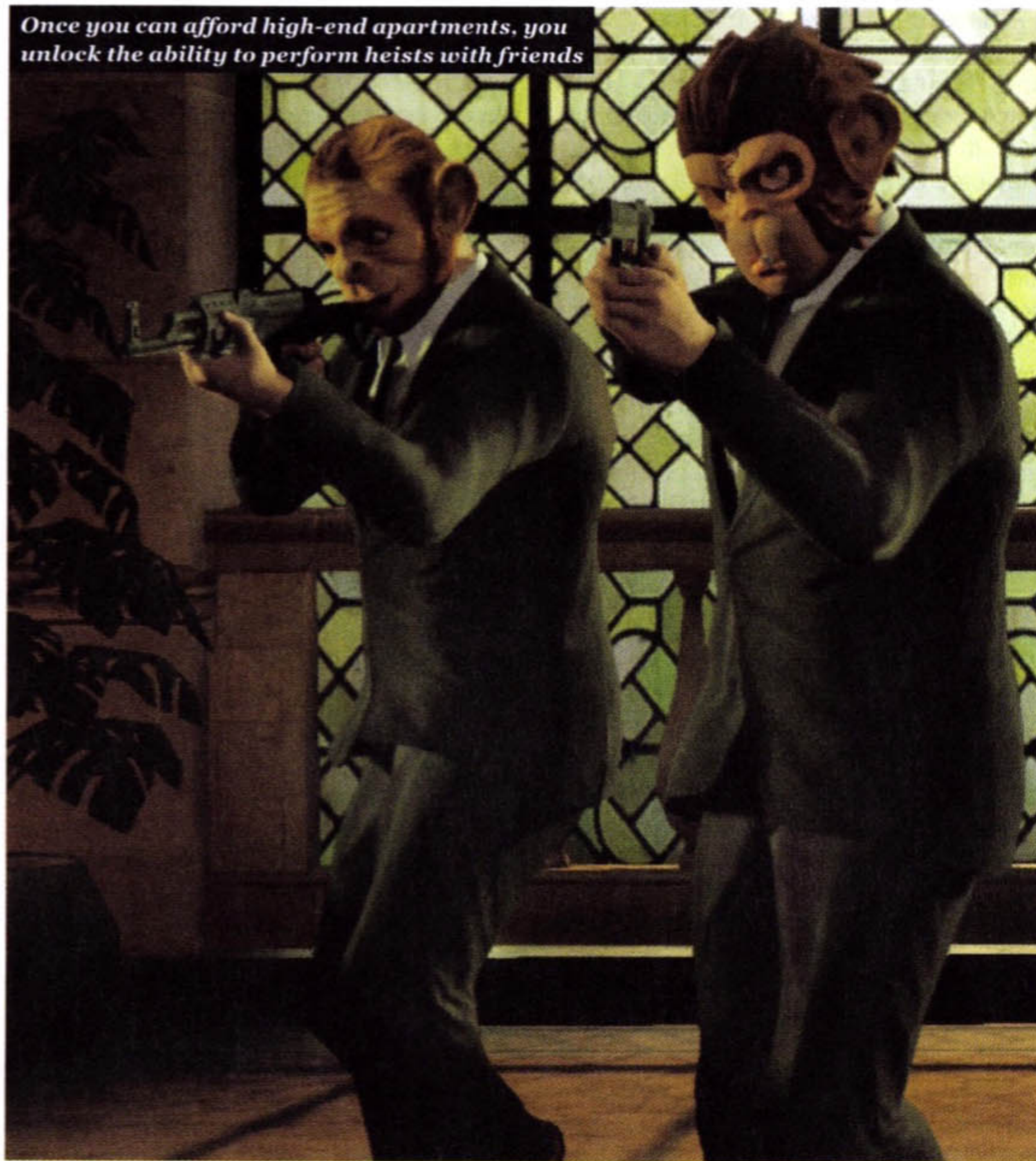
After a rough job, head to your place and take a shower to clean off the blood and scars. You can also invite friends over. Many activities are available, including calling strippers, having a drink, looking through the telescope to enjoy the view, or watching one of the several Rockstar-created parody shows on TV. If other players in your world are in a high-speed chase with police, you can watch the action unfold on Weazel News. When the pursuit is happening in your neighborhood, you may even see the whirl of police lights out your window.

When you build a strong relationship with the private security firm Merryweather, you can phone in airstrikes



Imagine the level of chaos you can achieve with 16 players wreaking havoc at once

Once you can afford high-end apartments, you unlock the ability to perform heists with friends



I am instructed to climb the ladder of a nearby building to gain a vantage point. Moving up, I stealthily take down a guy perched on the roof and slide into cover.

From this position I can see several armed men standing around the big-rig. Once everyone is in their places I open fire with the sniper rifle, clearing the way for the transporters to reach the truck. With gunfire hailing all around, I spend too much time out of cover and get clipped by a bullet. Every death uses one of the lives the team has to complete the mission. I respawn nearby, and by the time I reach the scene of the crime we already have control of the semi-truck. I hop in another car and provide escort for the vehicle.

Several cars give chase to the rig, and our job is to run them off the road before they can cause it to crash. After an intense battle on the interstate we exit, lose the pursuit by turning onto a dirt road, and safely reach the hideout.

THE BIG SCORE

Not all of the missions in GTA Online are small-time jobs. Once you have enough money to purchase a high-end residency, you unlock the ability to set up involved heists like those that serve as the centerpiece to the single-player game. Not everyone needs to own luxury real estate to participate – as long as one of the participants has a planning room, he or she can invite anyone to round out the heist team.

Rockstar shows us an example of these types of missions with a job called Titan Steal. The private security corporation Merryweather is holding a valuable cargo plane in its heavily guarded hanger. This team's mission, if they choose to accept it, involves procuring said plane from the base.

To prep for the job, they split up. Two guys head to the Ammu-Nation to buy an arsenal fit for the job. The store stock



is impressive, with everything from flak jackets, parachutes, dozens of gun varieties, and attachments for customizing each weapon. While these guys stock up on gear, the other two procure a helicopter.

Once everyone arrives at the chopper, the mission starts in earnest. The guy with the best piloting skills takes control of the chopper, guiding the team over the coastal airport to get the lay of the land. After circling the area twice they determine the plane is housed in the middle hanger.

With the target identified, the chopper circles once more to allow the passengers to skydive into position. Each player heads a different direction. The sniper lands on the runway some ways away from the hanger and takes cover. The other two pinch from the sides. As the firefight ensues, the chopper pilot lands nearby.

Once the hanger is cleared of targets, one more obstacle stands between the crew and their payday. A truck is parked in the way of the cargo plane, which the crew obliterates with a rocket. One man jumps into the cockpit and guides the giant plane onto the runway while the others fend off another wave of attackers.

A truck loaded with armed guards tries to drive in front of the plane, and is wiped out by a well-placed rocket. Once the plane is in the air, the others rush to the chopper and rejoin it in the sky.

Throughout the demo, Grand Theft Auto Online never feels divorced from the traditional GTA experience. The diversity of missions, large open world with a wealth of areas to explore, and vast array of side activities feel like they are pulled straight out of the base game. The only difference is we can now share this type of experience with friends.

KEEPING TO YOURSELF / *If you don't want to be bothered by other players while going shopping or driving to see the sights, you can enable a passive mode that protects you from stray (or intended) bullets. This is deactivated the moment you start shooting your own gun, however.*

When you aren't in passive mode, try not to move through the world carrying too much cash. At any given time another player could kill you and take all the money on your person, and there is no recourse for recouping the lost money outside of exacting your own revenge. The smarter play is depositing your cash at one of the many ATMs located around Los Santos. When you put the money in the bank, nobody else can touch it and it's still available for making purchases much like a debit card.

If you get robbed by another player and demand satisfaction, you can put a bounty on his or her head.

CALLING ALL CREATORS / As GTA Online evolves, Rockstar will continue to issue new content to its community. In addition, it also plans to give players the keys to a creation system. Rockstar North president Leslie Benzies sheds some light on how this works.

Talk about the approach Rockstar North is taking with user-created content.

We want to give players the opportunity to create anything that we can create within the team and for it to be as easy as sending a text message. I think we've managed that with the editors. Now anyone can have their own races or deathmatches spread amongst the world of Grand Theft Auto Online players within minutes. The race and deathmatch creators are the simplest and will be available first. We'll then release more variations to allow any type of mission to be made.

Do you have to reach a certain rank before you are allowed to start creating your own content?

Yes. We want people to understand the game before they go off and create. You only have to be a few ranks to be able to start, so you should be there within an hour of play.

Can you give an example of the kind of ownership the user has over a race or deathmatch? How intricate can these designs get?

Races are fairly simple and allow the player to select the vehicle type, the race type – Normal race, GTA Race, or a new mode that is great fun called Rally. You choose the weather, the radio station, whether police can interfere, and then whether you want ambient cars. After that, you place the checkpoints, test the race, and publish it. A deathmatch has more options and allows you to set the type, default kills, as well as the time. You then place the spawn points, weapons, and any extra props and vehicles you'll want on the map. Players will want to test their missions over and over to perfect them, as others who download and play their missions will be ranking them.

How is user-created content being surfaced for other players? Will Rockstar curate its favorite fan-created material?

Yes. We'll be continually playing the content and stamping the quality missions with 'Rockstar Verified.' The people creating the missions will be ranked, and eventually you'll get to know who is creating the best content and you can start to follow them and grab their works.

How do you eventually see content creation evolving?

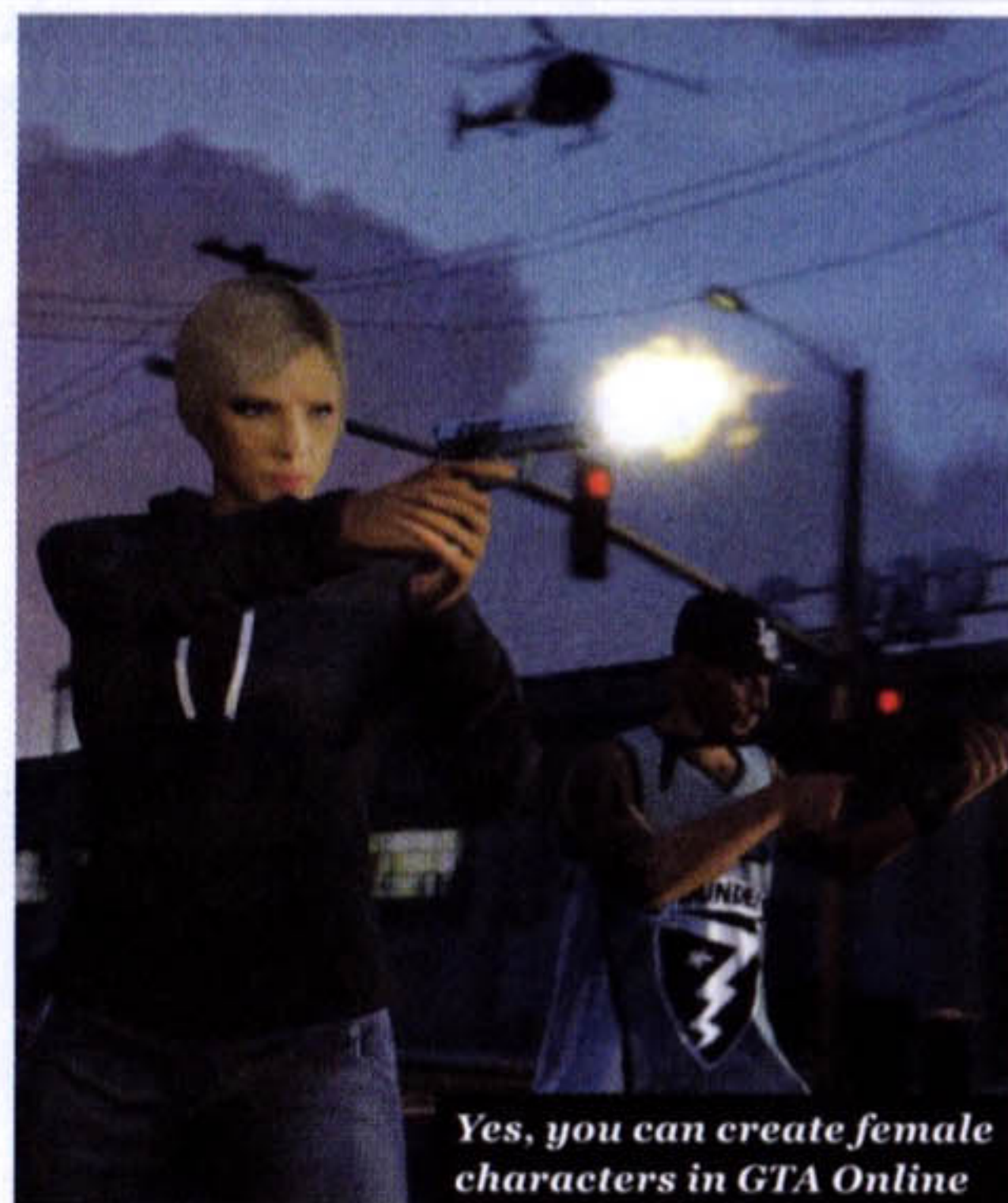
We eventually want players to be able to create missions as complex as the ones found in our single-player games. We want to give the player the power to make anything their brains can come up with. At some point in the future, we'd like people to be able to make their stories with all the tools we have available to make ours.

How does Rockstar plan to roll out new studio-created content in the future?

There will be a mix of everything. There will be a continuous flow of content and we'll be creating new missions faster than people can play them. We have over 500 missions in there at the moment, which will take a long time to get through. It's also worth taking into account that even a simple deathmatch can be completely changed by calling up one of your contacts and asking for some help or even having a contact hide you from the radar. The possibilities are endless.

Is the geography for Grand Theft Auto Online locked, or could you eventually decide to expand with new regions?

Every part of Grand Theft Auto Online has been designed with expansion in mind. A dream of ours is to create an entire Grand Theft Auto world that consists of everything we've done or are going to do then let the player freely move between them. The launch of Grand Theft Auto Online is a beginning for us; it gets us a little closer to being able to make that happen.



Yes, you can create female characters in GTA Online

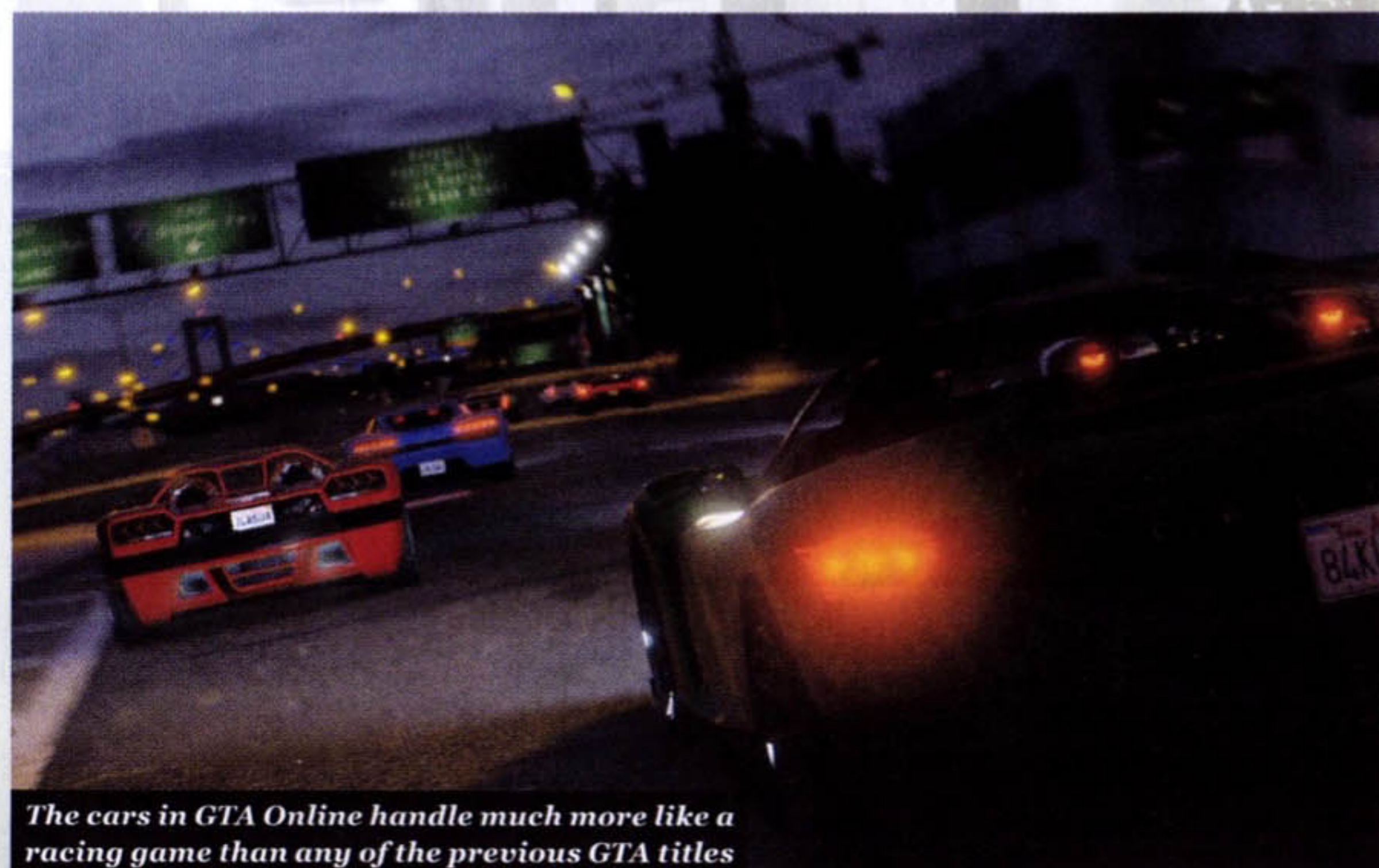
AN UNCHARTED FUTURE

When Grand Theft Auto Online launches on October 1, this is just the start of a new journey for Rockstar. Though it's not being billed as a beta, since this is new territory for the studio, it wants to use the first few weeks as a stress test. Rockstar is keeping a dedicated team on the job, which will evaluate how players are engaging the content, adjust the experience as needed, and create new missions so the world constantly evolves.

Since most of the missions are controlled via the Social Club, Rockstar has a lot of power to tweak missions on the back end day by day. For instance,

if they want to create Rocket Launcher Sunday, it can be done with a few slight adjustments.

How Grand Theft Auto Online will evolve in the future is still up in the air. Rockstar hasn't determined whether the majority of content will come via free title updates, paid expansions, or even smaller microtransactions. One thing is certain: Rockstar is confident enough in this product to treat it as a separate product launch, and we expect them to continue to service it years beyond its release date provided people are still playing it. Based on my experience, that sounds like a pretty safe bet. ♦



The cars in GTA Online handle much more like a racing game than any of the previous GTA titles



**THICK
WITH
BLOOD**
AND LIGHT
OF HEART

DEAD RISING 3

by **TIM TURI**

» **Platform**
Xbox One

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

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom Vancouver

» **Release**
November

TM

icrosoft first unveiled Capcom's *Dead Rising 3* as an exclusive Xbox One launch title at E3 2013. Notable exclusives for the next generation of consoles are rare right now, which makes Microsoft's deal with Capcom even more valuable. Many are excited for the larger open world and huge hordes of zombies, but a vocal minority have reservations about the tone. *Dead Rising 3's*

premiere gave the impression of a more serious, grim game. Having mowed through dense hordes of zombies in a clown-decorated hovercraft that turns them into meat balloons, I can confidently confirm *Dead Rising* is still goofy as hell.

The *Dead Rising* series is built on a solid formula: Destroy an inordinate amount of zombies with creative weapons while trying to beat the clock. All those core elements are still in place, except that Capcom Vancouver has made the series' infamous timer optional (see sidebar). *Dead Rising 2* added in the ability to combine items (like gems and a flashlight) at work benches to create powerful new weapons that net you extra experience (like a light saber-style sword). *Dead Rising 3* further improves these DIY combinations by letting players craft weapons on the fly, access all combo weapons at their safe houses, and even cobble together vehicles to form macabre zombie-slaying machines.



Protagonist Nick and his co-op trucker budd, Dick

ESCAPE FROM LOS PERDIDOS

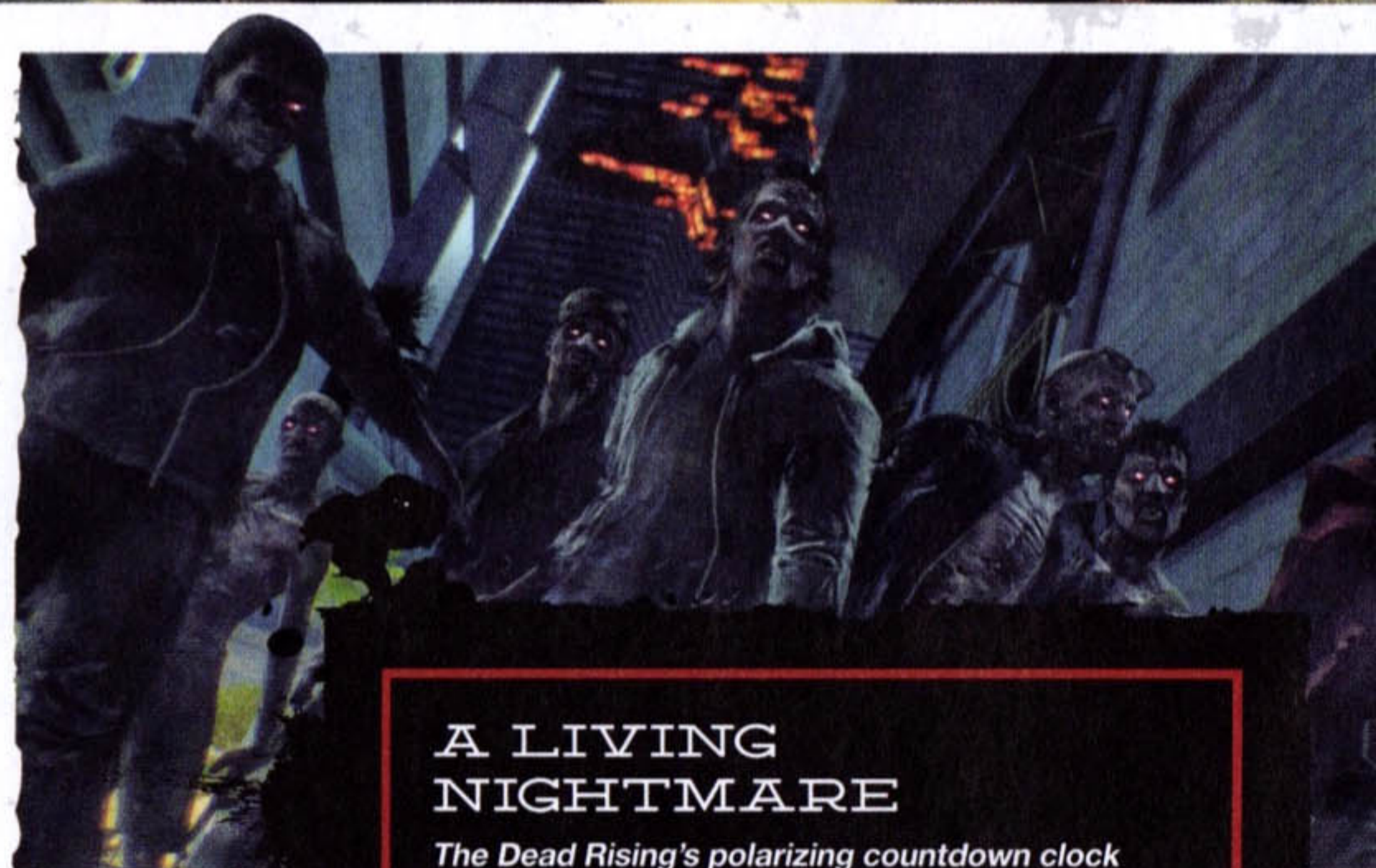
The first one of these modified vehicles is driven by a homicidal maniac named Hunter who the protagonist meets under dire conditions. Early on in *Dead Rising 3*, former mechanic Nick Ramos is fleeing to a quarantine checkpoint with his boss Rhonda following the zombie outbreak. The government is planning to level the infected Los Perdidos, California with heavy ordinance. Instead of a way out, the two find a killing ground. A pack of *Mad Max*-style anarchists appear from nowhere on their motorcycles. These lowlifes are capitalizing on the fall of the government by having their way with other survivors. A few of the *Road Warrior*-wannabes drag Rhonda off while Nick is left to face the rest.

A Capcom Vancouver developer handles the controller for this portion of the demo, guiding Nick to the nearest car. High quarantine walls and big trucks block in the area, creating a post-apocalyptic destruction derby. The evil bikers toss Molotov cocktails at Nick while he attempts to ram them with his car. Similar to the *Grand Theft Auto* series, cars begin to smoke, flame, and eventually explode if they take too much damage. Nick hops from car to car as he whittles away the raving biker gang to nothing.

Rhonda and her abductors appear from her temporary prison, the two bad guys nursing recent injuries to their groins. A garage door opens in the distance revealing Hunter, a raw-looking killer with a menacing tattoo across his face. He sits atop the Roller Hawg, the intimidating, ugly hybrid of a steamroller and a motorcycle. The ensuing boss battle involves Nick dodging Hunter's charges, staying clear of the Roller Hawg's vicious flamethrower, and tossing Molotov cocktails in retaliation. Weakening Hunter with Molotovs lets Nick initiate close-quarters melee, smashing the enemy's face into the steering wheel. The fiery faceoff

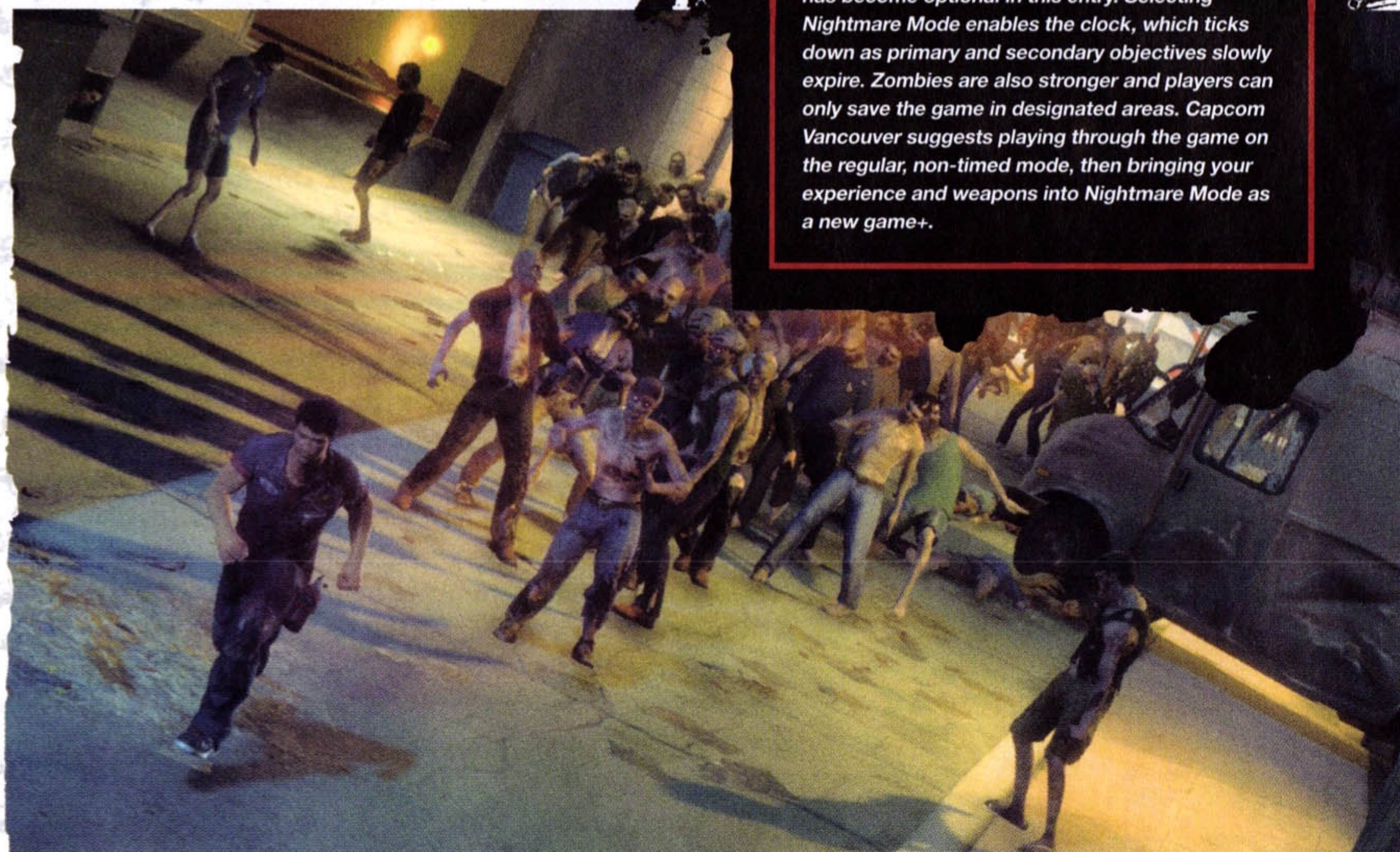
ends with Hunter ramming into a gas tanker, creating a tremendous explosion.

The onscreen mayhem is ridiculous, but Nick and Rhonda respond to the disaster with humorous sincerity. These bloodthirsty bikers were the first human lives Nick has ever taken, and Rhonda reassures him there was no choice. Fans of *Dead Rising* can rest assured that the only ones truly taking the story seriously are the characters, and the juxtaposition between their dire reactions and the in-game hilarity is priceless. Things get even more ludicrous if you're the type who likes to wear a mariachi outfit or another custom get-up during zombie outbreaks.



A LIVING NIGHTMARE

The *Dead Rising*'s polarizing countdown clock has become optional in this entry. Selecting *Nightmare Mode* enables the clock, which ticks down as primary and secondary objectives slowly expire. Zombies are also stronger and players can only save the game in designated areas. Capcom Vancouver suggests playing through the game on the regular, non-timed mode, then bringing your experience and weapons into *Nightmare Mode* as a new game+.





The bull outfit is from the butcher's shop

NICK AND DICK FIGHT EVIL

Nick and Rhonda aren't the only poor souls trying to make it out of Los Perdidos. Two-player co-op returns in Dead Rising 3, except this time the second character is more than a carbon copy of the protagonist. Dick is an unlucky trucker who was passing through town when the zombie outbreak hit. He wants out, too, so he partners up with Nick for a silly, bloody quest through town. He even appears in cutscenes, making him more than another anonymous survivor. Capcom Vancouver demonstrated what two-player shenanigans in Dead Rising 3 can look like.

Nick and Dick stand on a bus parked in the middle of downtown at night. Similar to Dead Rising 2, your friend can hop in and out of the game no matter where you are in the story. The duo leaps off the bus and begins raising hell. Armed only with his wrench, Nick bats a few zombies out of the way, but focuses on evasion until he gets better gear. Zombies are more aggressive at night, and are quick to swarm and follow them on their paths of destruction. The two jump kick through the plate glass windows of a formalwear shop, then toss debris at a glass showcase with two tuxedos behind it. After donning the formal attire, they begin

looking for beefier weaponry.

Dick uses some basic melee weapons to hold off zombies as Nick gathers a combo blueprint for something called the "Heavy Metal." He finds a 2x4 and lead pipe nearby, taping them together to form a brutal bludgeon. The hefty weapon sends zombies flying through the air with big globs of blood in their wake. The Heavy Metal weapon nets Nick extra experience (called Prestige Points) that lets players customize his attributes (see Raising The Bar sidebar).

They approach an abandoned police car. Former police officers stagger around, randomly firing their sidearms. Dick and Nick hop in a squad car and pop on the cherries. The siren draws in more enemies. Running down throngs of undead is fun, but if you collide with too many they slow down your vehicle. After a brief joyride of destruction, they crash into a butcher shop. With the entrance conveniently blocked by the crashed vehicle, Nick starts juicing together various health items in a blender, a series trademark. He takes a hunk of meat and a bottle of liquor, pouring it into the blender and producing a volatile cocktail. The duo pops on a pair of oversized mascot suits and drinks the

dubious beverage. In addition to recovering their health, they can now breathe fire on incoming zombies.

Nick and Dick eventually make their way to a safe house. In Dead Rising 3, every item, combo weapon, and piece of clothing you find ends up in your safe house. There, you're free to share with a co-op buddy. Showing your friend a combo weapon or vehicle unlocks the invention in their game for use after you part ways. The outfit Nick decides on is a football jersey, shorts, rain boots, and a scuba mask. He also rummages out combo weapons with names like Jazz Hands, Blambow, and Dragon Punch. The Jazz Hands are gloves with pistols for fingers that let players dispatch zombies with flashy Broadway musical poses. The Dragon Punch is a nod to Capcom's Street Fighter series – boxing gloves combined with engines that allow for powerful jumping uppercuts (complete with a "Shoryuken!" cry). The Blambow is a compound bow mixed with fireworks, which blow zombies to bits from impressive range.

When they're not heedlessly wrecking zombies, Nick and Dick can grow their posse by rescuing survivors. A country girl with a cowboy hat and shorts is also hanging out in the safe house. As you progress you are able to bring more of these characters with you. In past games, these NPCs were burdens that constantly needed to be rushed to safety. In Dead Rising 3, they are valuable partners. Players can direct them to hunt for food or weapons, go fight zombies, or provide support. These commands are given using the controller, Kinect voice recognition, or pointing at the screen using the Kinect camera. One example we saw had the NPC covering the entrance to a building while Nick and Dick scavenge for supplies.

THE STORY SO FAR

A decade has passed since the zombie outbreak in Dead Rising 2's Fortune City. Since then, the government has stepped in to control the infected population with regimented doses of Zombrex. GPS trackers keep tabs on tainted humans and a Big Brother-like security network keeps the population in line. Despite 10 years of regulated safety, yet another outbreak erupts, this time taking the crowded California city of Los Perdidos. The government plans to wipe the city off the map with an airstrike, leaving survivors to fend for themselves.

Players control Nick Ramos, a young mechanic sporting a mysterious tattoo. His boss Rhonda is the tough but lovable woman running the auto garage Nick works at. She's desperate to protect her family amidst the outbreak. Dick is a trucker who doubles as Nick's co-op partner. He's kind of a jerk, but he's a loyal soul that wants to do good in these dire times.

Annie is among Nick's most recently revealed allies. She's an "illegal" – an infected human that flew beneath the government's radar before the latest outbreak. She's capable, tough, and has romantic connections to the charismatic leader of the illegals.

In Dead Rising's past, plot has been more of an excuse for the mayhem rather than the driving motivation, but this new game already appears more intriguing than past entries. Capcom Vancouver teases that the story of Dead Rising 3 weaves itself into the viral outbreaks of the previous games to create a more comprehensive franchise narrative.





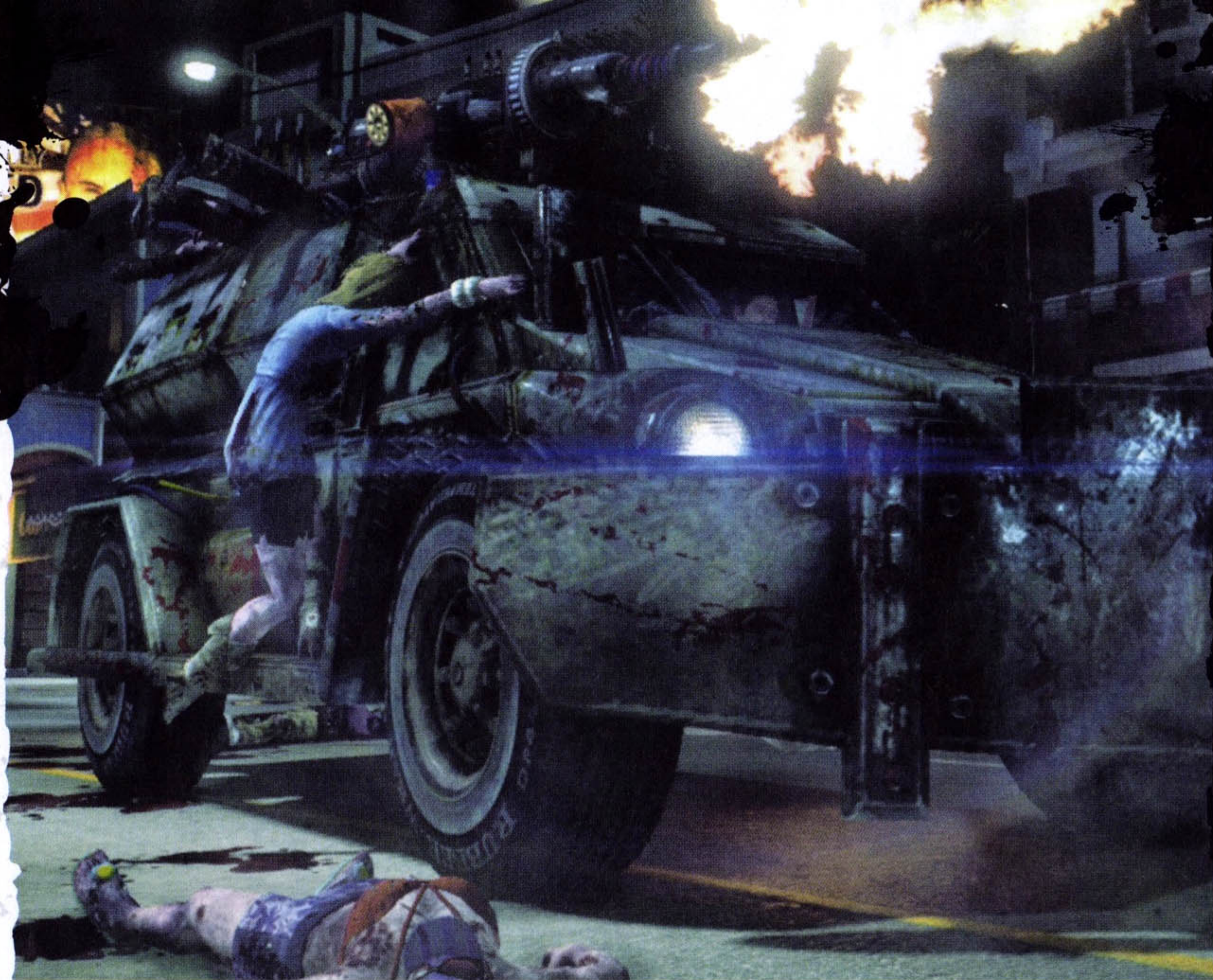
IT'S A MAD HOUSE

The *Dead Rising* series is famous for its psychopath battles. While the anti-establishment killer, Hunter, is definitely unstable, he's not as bad as other villains Capcom Vancouver is cooking up. Seven enemies based on the seven deadly sins are scattered throughout the game. One based on Greed weaves in and out of the main storyline. Greed is a former doctor turned maniac who harvests the organs of living people. These personified vices are in cahoots with one another, and we're excited to see how their backstories intertwine.

This is Greed, one of the psychopaths themed after the seven deadly sins

Hunter is the malicious leader of a biker gang





RAISING THE BAR HOWEVER YOU LIKE

Killing zombies earns you PP (Prestige Points). Using combo weapons and vehicles nets you increased PP, which makes you level up faster. In previous Dead Rising games, leveling up involved earning an extra inventory slot, extended life meter, or additional combat maneuver in a predetermined order. Players can customize their own skill progression in Dead Rising 3. You can upgrade your life, inventory, melee strength, ranged attacks, mechanical ability (combo durability and power), agility, and smarts. Separate combo categories can be enhanced, making it easier for you to build improvised weapons with less specific parts. For instance, if a combo weapon calls for a proper blade you can make do with scissors if your level is high enough. Capcom Vancouver wants players to eventually be able to make interesting and useful weapons out of most things they find.

A GEARHEAD IN HIS ELEMENT

Once Nick and Dick finish up at the safe house, they go for another ride. In addition to weapon combinations, vehicles can also be combined in Dead Rising 3. The first example Capcom Vancouver shows off is an armored vehicle with a turret. Nick's mechanic skills come in to play here, allowing him to merge an SUV and bulldozer together to create the new rig. The beastly transport allows one player to crush zombies while the other mows down stragglers. They also weave through buildings, as Capcom has designed many interiors to accommodate players who love to drive everywhere. If slaughtering zombies from the driver's seat is your thing, Dead Rising 3 has you covered.

The aforementioned armored turret rig is just a taste of the ridiculous vehicle combinations players can cobble together in Dead Rising 3. Nick Ramos is an impressive mechanic, but he needs inspiration to fuel his skill. For instance, after his showdown with Hunter, Nick can craft the Roller Hawg by parking a steamroller next to a motorcycle (or vice versa), and combining the two. This creation is one of the most ridiculous and satisfying tools I've ever used to destroy zombies in a video game.

The Roller Hawg boasts impressive speed and precision. When pushed full throttle into

a pack of zombies, the steamroller wheel turns the screen into a tidal wave of red as the former humans are turned into goop. If too many zombies swarm Nick's ride, you can fire up the frontal flamethrowers and pull donuts to immolate the surrounding fodder.

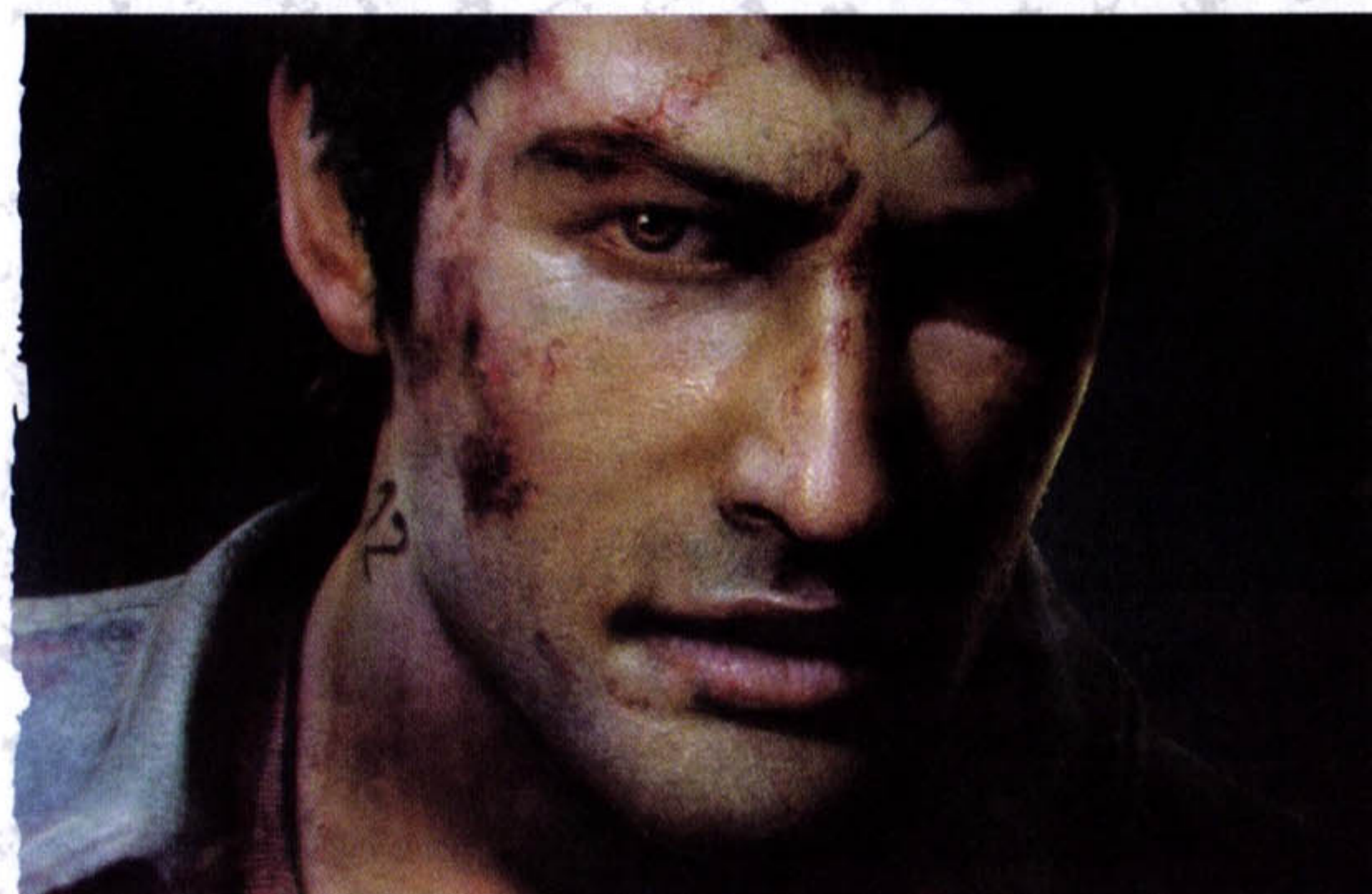
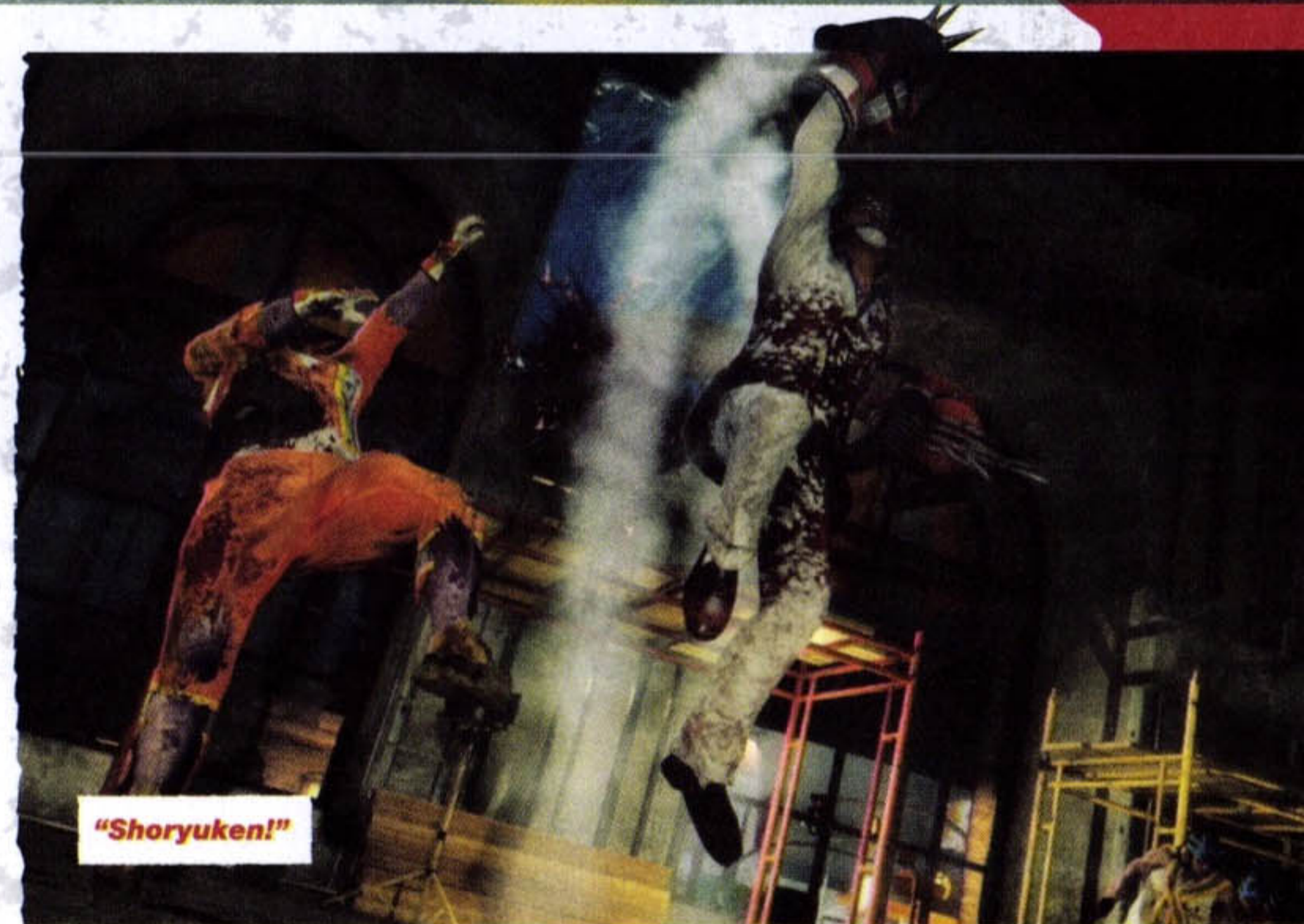
Just like Nick's accumulated wardrobe and combo weapons can be pulled from safehouse lockers, players can visit garages to spawn any combo vehicle on the fly. These rigged rides score players extra PP points and increased vehicle durability. One of the most basic combos I saw was a Junk Car, which is the combination of two beaters fused together. The nasty jalopy can take a beating and fires zombie-dissolving acid from the front.

The Fork Work combines a vehicle decked out in fireworks with a forklift. A handy boost lets players skewer zombies on the frontal forklift prongs, and fire them off into the distance using fireworks. The Party Slapper is the twisted combination of a party supply van and street sweeper. This improvised hover craft sucks up zombies, inflates them into comical balloons, and fires them off to damage foes. A co-op buddy can also fire explosive bouncy balls from an upper turret. These destructive transports are just a taste of Dead Rising 3's on-the-go zombie genocide.

A NEXT-GENERATION MASSACRE

Certain Capcom franchises, like Street Fighter and Resident Evil, have been criticized for their stagnation. However, Capcom Vancouver appears determined to impress existing Dead Rising fans by delivering a cathartic, violent, and rewarding

title that adds to the Xbox One's allure. The streamlined weapon combinations, drop-in drop-out co-op, increased world size, and hordes of undead unite into a game that's hard to ignore. ♦





Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

Sailing the seas and prowling rooftops

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

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

Few games fully explore what it's like to be a ruthless pirate. Games like *The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker* and *The Secret of Monkey Island* have given players a child-like vision of a buccaneer's life, but *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* is poised to deliver the full package. Edward Kenway is a roguish jack of all trades who enjoys sailing the high seas, harpooning sharks, exploring cave networks, and accepting assassination contracts in portside cities.

Black Flag's Gamescom demo begins by dropping Edward Kenway and his ship into the Atlantic Ocean. Kenway has a crew of loyal sailors at his disposal, freeing him to steer his ship. His men can be divided to drop and raise sails, man a variety of weapons, and board enemy ships. The ship is slow to turn when riding the winds at full sail, but lowering them allows you to turn quicker. Kenway can scan the horizon with his looking glass to spot points of interest like a wealthy ship, a hidden cave, or a flock of circling birds. The latter indicates an opportunity to harpoon some sea life.

Hunting sharks and other large sea creatures is simple. Kenway sets out with a few men on a row boat stocked with spears. These spears are tethered to the boat, preventing lanced animals from swimming away. I spot a shark swimming near the surface and take aim. The longer you aim, the more accurate your harpoon toss becomes. Hitting the shark angers it, causing it to attempt escape and ram the ship. Waiting for the deadly fish to resurface after hiding in the depths reminds me of the excellent lake boss fight from *Resident Evil 4*.

Bagging sharks and eventually whales is great fun, but the ocean hosts bigger prizes. I spot a royal frigate at one point and immediately set course to intercept it. I open up my assault with a precise mortar strike, dealing a chunk of damage and alerting nearby escort ships. I dispatch them by pitching explosive floating barrels off the stern, and firing chain shots from cannons on the bow. I turn one side of my ship towards the frigate, giving it my full attention with a volley of cannon fire. I'm careful to incapacitate the

ship without sinking it. I order my crew to board and they create tighropes between the ships with grappling hooks, allowing me to walk across. The switch from naval combat to the reliable *Assassin's Creed* gameplay is seamless. Within minutes, my crew and I slash our way through the remaining men, slay the captain, and harvest the ship to repair damage done to our own during the fight. Players can also choose to add captured ships to Kenway's fleet, which feeds into a flotilla-building metagame.

Edward's adventures aren't just limited to battles between ships. Players can set sail for hidden pirate coves or explore cities for an experience more in line with previous *Assassin's Creed* games. Havana, Kingston, and the pirate haven of Nassau aren't as big as the cities in previous *Assassin's Creed* games, but they deliver a familiar experience. While exploring Havana, I quickly settle back into the familiar parkour stunts and rooftop antics of previous games. I track down a pigeon coop and find a contract for the

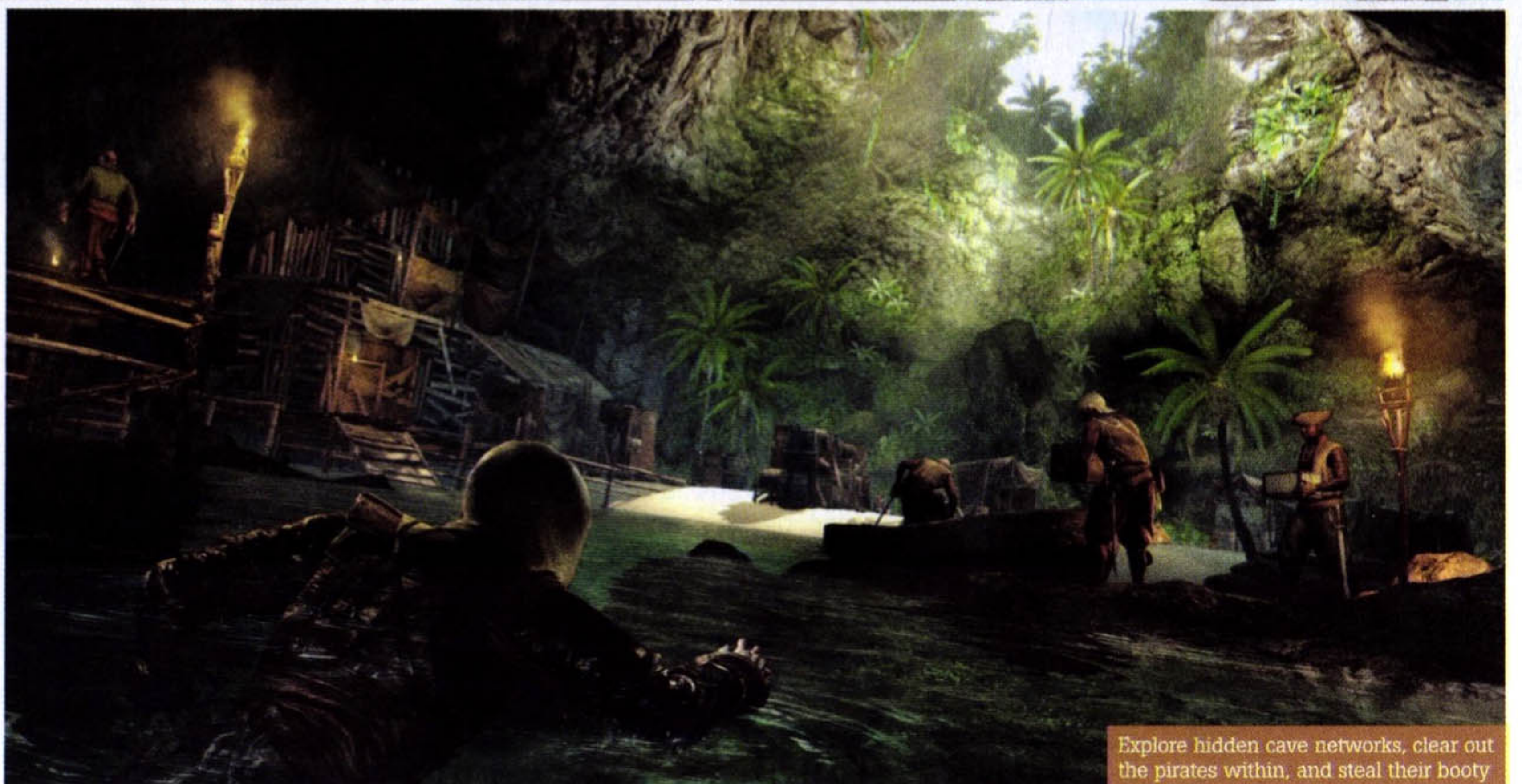


Edward Kenway isn't an Assassin right away, but he still moves like one



assassination of a drunkard privateer. Free running to the pirates' beachside camp is easy, but closing in on my target proves more difficult. I use Kenway's blowgun to shoot an elevated sentry with a sleeping dart. Replacing his position, I use the vantage point to fire berserk darts into the pirate thugs below, which sends them into an indiscriminate rage. The chaos gives me the opportunity to crawl along the catwalk above my mark and leap onto him with my hidden blade. Ubisoft says 60 percent of the game occurs on land, and the remainder is spent sailing the seas.

Last year, Assassin's Creed III forced players through a guided, lengthy prologue sequence before finally opening up the world. Naval combat also didn't surface until further into the campaign. Ubisoft Montreal aims to pick up the pace towards setting players loose to explore the Caribbean, so expect to be riding the waves early on. Judging by the fun and variety packed into my brief time with the game, players will be happy to get their sea legs sooner rather than later. » **Mike Futter**



Explore hidden cave networks, clear out the pirates within, and steal their booty

EverQuest Next

Rebuilding the MMO genre with help from the fans



» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Sony Online
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Sony Online
Entertainment

» **Release**
Landmark:
Late 2013,
EQ Next:
2014

When EverQuest Next director of development Dave Georgeson took the stage at Sony Online Entertainment's Live event in early August, he made it clear that "enough is enough." People are tired of playing the same game, and EverQuest Next is being designed to challenge the boredom and routine that has stagnated the genre.

Sony Online is in the unenviable position of having to create a third living, breathing world that feels both familiar and foreign. MMOs thrive on the sense of exploration, and striking a balance for the EverQuest fanbase that doesn't abandon what players love about the world of Norrath is no mean feat.

Georgeson's team decided to reboot many elements of the lore and nearly everything related to the gameplay. Familiar loca-

tions like Feerot and Lavastorm (and even lands like Oasis that haven't been seen since EverQuest 1) will be recognizable, but enriched by enhanced graphics and the Forgelight engine (first used in Planetside 2) to create stunning day/night cycles. They'll also fit into the new lore in ways that will keep veteran players guessing.

Character design has become more rough and tumble while also offering more fluid clothing and hair options that move more authentically. Facial features, particularly mouths and eyes, are exaggerated to enhance emotes. EverQuest Next supports SOEmote, a feature currently available in EverQuest II that uses a player's webcam to map facial expressions onto in-game avatars during play.

Sony Online has also re-imagined how

players will grow and evolve their characters. At the start, eight classes are available, each with two available weapon sets and the standard repertoire of active and passive skills. However, more than 40 classes are scattered around the world, and players can switch among them and even create their own. These include traversal skills, like the wizard's teleport and the Kerran warrior's leap.

All of EverQuest Next's Norrath is built with tiny blocks called voxels, which makes destructible environments possible. Shaping tools allow for bevels and smooth surfaces, making the small bits appear as cohesive structures. This design approach also allows for a Norrath that is layered, with subterranean catacombs honeycombing the land. A weak piece of terrain can be destroyed



during combat, revealing a cave beneath the surface. Players can also cleverly destroy bridges or block passages to cover an escape from danger.

The land heals itself over time, but the voxel approach to world building allows possibilities for player-versus-player, player-vs-enemy, and player-vs-environment gameplay that haven't been seen before. Defending a fort from an invading faction becomes more challenging when that structure can actually be destroyed.

The non-player character AI has also been completely re-envisioned. Instead of creating spawn points, each NPC is programmed with likes and dislikes. Georgeson used the example of Orcs that dislike guards, but prefer lonely roads where they can ambush travelers. Orcs wander the land looking for a place that is free from patrols to set up camp. They might also be incited to move if those roads become too well traversed or if they end up being driven out.

Georgeson made a point of clarifying that quests to clear a forest from danger or liberate a village can now actually be accomplished. Driving monsters out of an area for good is possible, but those actions could have unintended consequences. A horde of pesky goblins evacuating a wooded area could incite their king to send warbands to harass local villages, for instance.

On a larger scale, EverQuest Next offers rallying calls, which are worldwide quests that take months to accomplish. Players build new cities and tame the wilderness. These events play out differently across servers, and the trigger points to advance the rallying calls are hidden. Players often won't know what is necessary to advance the story, which creates more organic play rather than laser-focused, task-driven grinding.

EverQuest Next is a collection of bold promises fraught with immense risk. MMOs are typically heavily scripted affairs, and the emergent experience Sony Online is striving for does have the potential to breathe new life into the genre. "We want this to be just as much your game as it is ours," Georgeson told the crowd at SOE Live. Whether his team can steer the community vision as well as it seems to be guiding its own is something we're eager to find out in 2014. » **Michael Futter**



Norrath's terrain is layered with deeper caves hidden under adventurers' feet



Kerrans are bulkier and more leonine

Adventurers won't know what awaits as deeper catacombs become uncovered



Sony Invites Gamers To Build EverQuest Next's Norrath

Sony Online is taking the bold step of releasing EverQuest Next's mod tools as a standalone, free game called EverQuest Next Landmark. Players will stake their claims, build up their plots, and quest for more resources.

Fans of Mojang's Minecraft will see familiar elements in Landmark, with recipes to be used on crafting tables and other objects of significance the motivation for exploration. Landmark also supports Sony Online's Player Studio, which enables users to sell their creations for real money. A royalty system is also in place, so if a player packages and sells an item that includes another user's creation, a percentage of the proceeds trickle back.

On each world, the EverQuest Next team will pick a continent to enforce its art direction. Creations on those landmasses will be considered for inclusion in EverQuest Next when it launches in 2014. With guilds and the ability to earn new plots (or join yours with those of other players), Landmark is an MMO in and of itself.

MMO developers have touted before that players help shape the world. With Landmark, Sony Online is fulfilling that promise quite literally.



Battlefield 4

Surf, sand, and sabotage on Battlefield's Paracel Storm map

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

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(64-Player Online -
PS4, Xbox One, PC)
(24-Player Online -
PS3, 360)

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
DICE

» **Release**
October 29
(PlayStation 3,
Xbox 360)
November 15
(PlayStation 4)
November
(Xbox One)

Ask people where they can get the best Battlefield experience, and most will recommend the PC. Imagine our surprise when we sat down to play Battlefield 4 at Gamescom 2013 and found DualShock 4 controllers waiting at our stations.

EA and DICE took the opportunity to stress that the title is running at 60 frames per second on PlayStation 4. This supports the dynamic atmosphere of the Paracel Storm map, which brings more to the table than destructible environments.

At the outset of the match, the skies are sunny with no noticeable breeze moving through the trees. It doesn't take long for Mother Nature to turn on us. The skies darken as a stormfront moves in. As rain begins to fall, the wind picks up, whipping through the trees and causing large waves to crash on the shore.

None of this has a direct impact on the action. Bullet trajectories are not affected by wind speed, and explosions are not dampened. The atmosphere is used to create the feeling of the passage of time and the sense of

progression throughout the battle.

There isn't much time to stop and admire the scenery, as Paracel Storm is a claustrophobic map in Conquest mode. Moving among the tightly packed three flags yields enemy encounters at every turn. What it lacks in length and width, it makes up in height. The verticality of the buildings, lifeguard towers, and even the hills offers an opportunity to clear out a capture point from a distance before moving in. Keeping an eye on the corners is important, but remembering to glance up at the face of a building crumbled by nearby explosions can spell the difference between life and death.

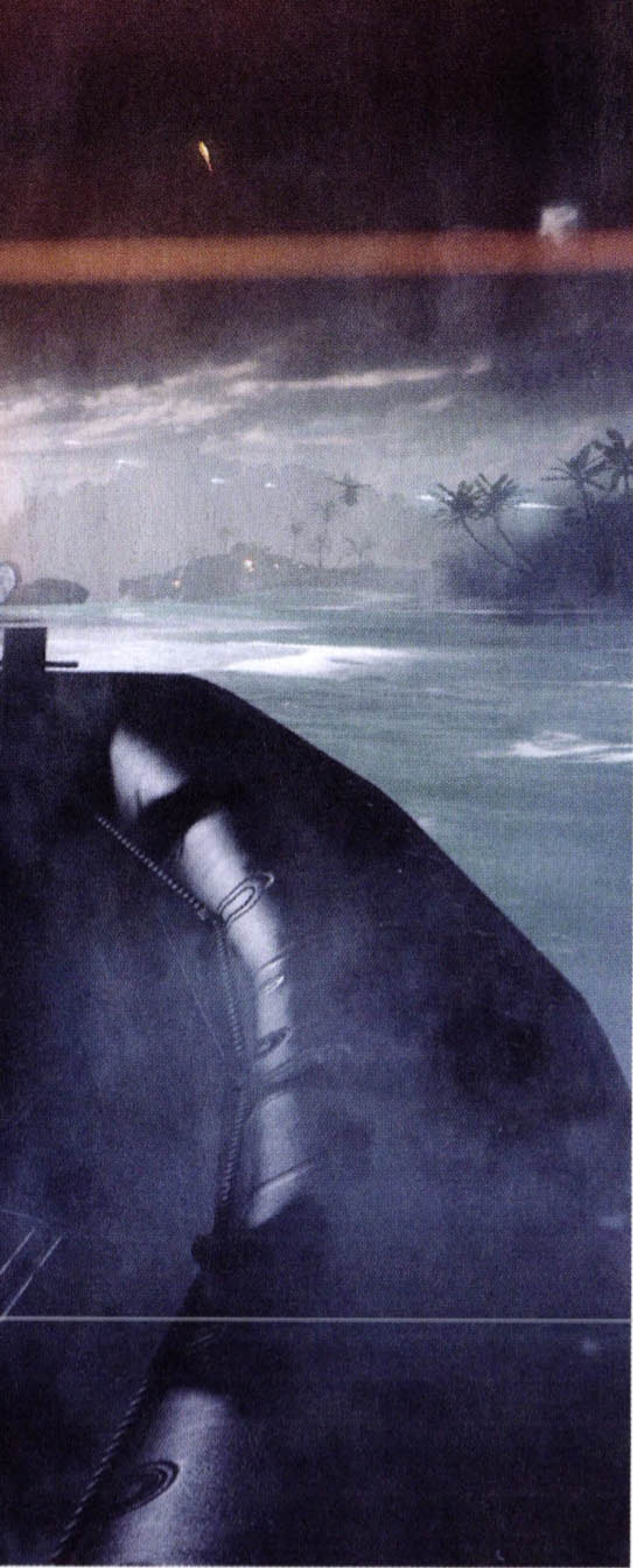
One of the better tweaks to multiplayer is the change made to melee kills. Longtime players are no doubt familiar with players that rely on rushing in to stab foes. Now, front-facing knife kills can be reversed. There is a brief window to turn the tables, which should force players to attempt melee kills from behind their enemy.

EA and DICE continue to tout their manufactured "levolution" concept, and we received

a better explanation at Gamescom. The idea is that players can manipulate and influence the environment. In our game, this is restricted to simple actions like opening and closing metal container doors. However, there is much more available on the map in modes that take advantage of the larger landscape.

DICE tells us that the growing waves have a significant impact on water craft, especially since they are processed and pushed out over the network for simultaneous effect. An enormous battleship can be commandeered and crashed into the island to change the map flow. "Levolution" is a fancy term for evolving maps, but regardless of what you call it, it makes a difference in how matches play out.

Finally, there is a console Battlefield that stacks up against the PC version. Sixty frames per second and 64-player battles brings the experience that mouse-and-keyboard jockeys have loved for years to the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One when those consoles launch this holiday. » **Michael Futter**



The next-gen versions of Battlefield 4 finally give console players a taste of 64-player combat



Chinese and Russian helicopters battle for air supremacy



The Frostbite 3 engine ensures that waves batter boats realistically. They also appear consistently for all players, yielding tactical options



XCOM: Enemy Within

To fight the aliens, XCOM soldiers must become more than human

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

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

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Firaxis

» **Release**
November 12

Fans of Firaxis' work know that when the studio expands one of its games, the entire experience is altered, balanced, and enhanced. That's exactly what *Enemy Within* will do for *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*'s tactical alien invasion experience.

The name evokes a sense of sabotage or infiltration, but the true meaning is more insidious. In order to combat the incursion, XCOM soldiers must augment themselves using captured technology. *Enemy Within* features a host of improvements; chief among them is the new Mech Soldier class.

Once a recruit reaches the rank of Squaddie and is slotted into a role (Assault, Heavy, Support, Sniper), they can be sent to the Cybernetics Lab, one of two new base

improvements. There, the operative becomes a Mech Soldier, retaining the previous rank, but with a new skill tree and unique attribute based on his or her previous class. If you augment a more senior officer, he or she immediately has access to more of the Mech Soldier perks.

Alternatively, commanders can send XCOM forces to the Genetics Lab to receive augmentation in five different slots: brain, eyes, chest, legs, and skin. These feed off autopsies, giving you more incentive to hold onto alien corpses rather than sell them on the gray market.

The *Enemy Within* content is woven throughout the experience, with brand-new maps, including urban UFO crashes and farmland. The original maps have been refreshed, as a new resource comes into play, fueling cybernetic enhancements.

Meld canisters dot every combat zone, and they have been rigged to self-destruct if players don't make it to them in time. Firaxis is hoping that the limited availability of these precious items disrupts the overly cautious move-and-overwatch play style that pervades the single-player experience.

There are also new enemy types to confound even the most veteran of XCOM commanders.

The Sectoids have been working on cybernetic augmentation, and the result is the formidable Mechtoid.

In addition to new units, there are new items, grenades, experimental warfare unlockables, and even a foundry project that enables a second inventory slot for utility items. *Enemy Within* is also packed with a number of quality of life enhancements.

Players can now free up inventory items with a single click, and customization options now extend to full language packs in French, Russian, German, Spanish, Italian, and Polish. Mechs also have their own voice options in each of those languages.

All of the new units on both sides of the war are available in multiplayer, and the number of maps has been doubled. All of this makes for a significant set of enhancements that affects the entire XCOM experience from early in the game.

On PC, *XCOM: Enemy Within* will be sold as a digital expansion. Currently, the plans for a console release only include a retail Commander Edition, which includes both the core *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* experience and the expanded *Enemy Within* content.

» **Michael Futter**



Sometimes getting up close and personal works



Even augmented soldiers need to tread carefully

Mad Max

Another journey into the unforgiving wasteland

The post-apocalyptic wasteland is a familiar setting in video games, but in Mad Max gamers get to experience one of the settings' original inspirations – the trilogy of movies starring Mel Gibson.

Settling in for a developer-driven demo, it's easy to pick out all the parts of other games that Avalanche Studios is incorporating into Mad Max's wasteland adventure. At the outset, Max is betrayed, left for dead, and separated from his iconic Interceptor car.

The entire game is a quest for revenge framed by Max's endeavor to build a new car,

the Magnum Opus, with the help of mechanical genius Chumbucket, who is often along for the ride. In the demo, Max must ally himself with the leader of a survivor settlement to retrieve valuable parts for the new vehicle.

Max sneaks into a bandit camp to steal "The Twelve," the only remaining 12-cylinder engine car. Upon approach, he slips into the back of his car to use an enormous sniper rifle. Through the scope, he tags enemy guards in a manner similar to Far Cry 3's spotting system.

To take out the second guard, Max rolls up slowly on the tower he is perched upon. For

some reason, the loud car is not heard or seen, and Chumbucket uses a harpoon to pull the tower down, killing the bandit.

Once on foot, Max sneaks in to survey the situation. Entering combat shifts the camera, and the gameplay reveals striking similarities to Batman: Arkham City's punch/block/parry style. Max is victorious, lowering The Twelve to the ground and using a fire stick to blow open the gate for his escape.

On the way back to the settlement, he's forced to tackle waves of angry bandits trying to ram him into submission. With the exception of Max's trusty shotgun, the vehicular combat appears very similar to Criterion's Burnout series.

The goal is to take down enemy vehicles, and while that can be accomplished by shooting out tires or gas tanks, ammo is scarce. Ramming vehicles until they are destroyed (with familiar cinematic angles) is an equally useful option.

Different parts for the Magnum Opus give players a chance to build the vehicle to suit their play styles. Heavy ramming bumpers and armor make for a slow, but powerful ride. Light bodies and powerful engines can make for better speed and evasion.

Much of this feels very familiar, as titles like Borderlands and Rage have already done the wasteland motif found in the Mad Max universe. Avalanche Studios and Warner Bros. have their work cut out in order to make the 2014 title stand apart from the games the movies inspired. » **Michael Futter**

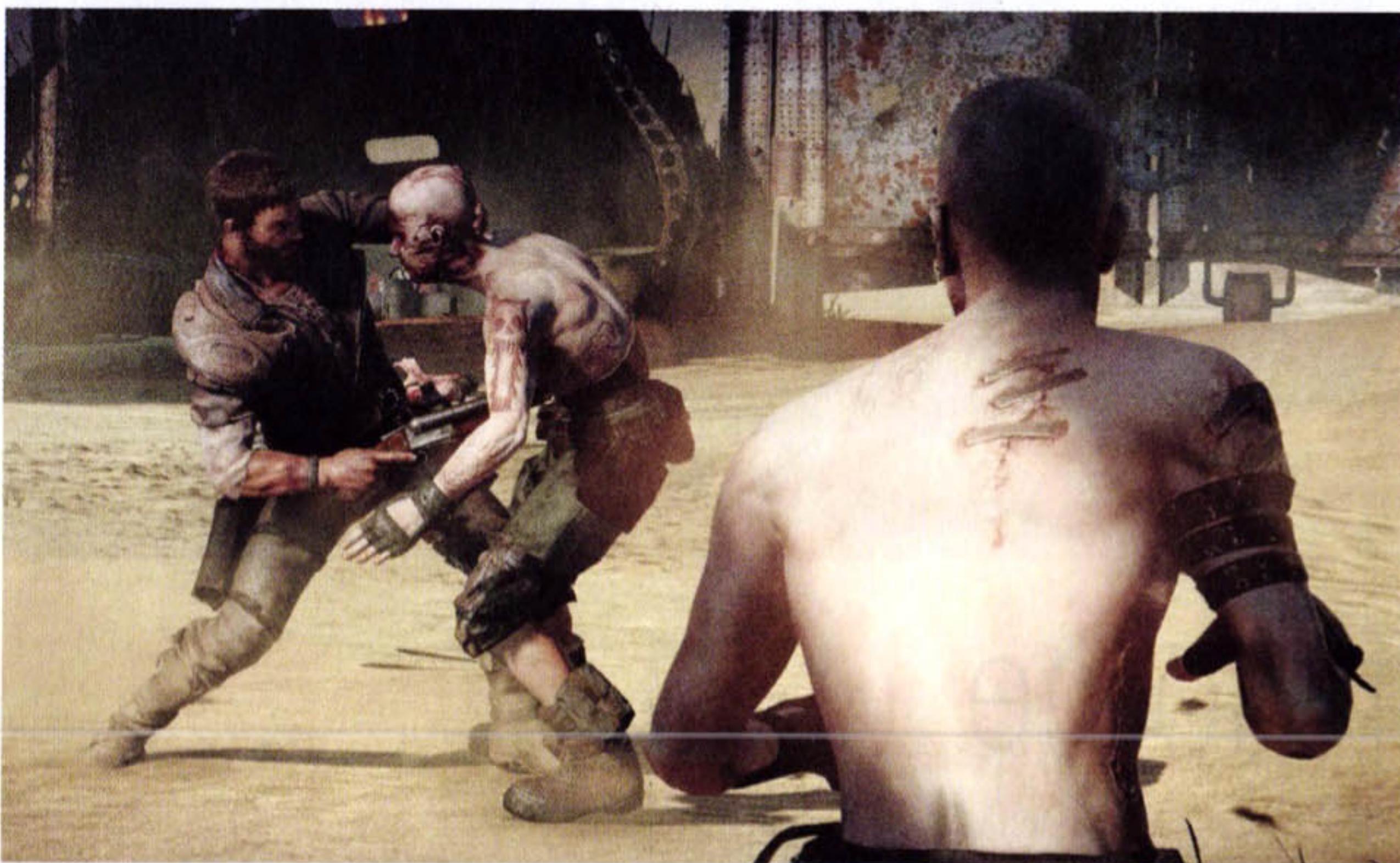
» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Avalanche Studios

» **Developer**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Release**
2014





Ryse: Son Of Rome

Crytek lends its sword to the Xbox One launch

» **Platform**
Xbox One

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

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Crytek

» **Release**
November

This Crytek title began life as a Kinect-enabled 360 adventure called Codename: Kingdoms, went dark, then resurfaced as an Xbox One exclusive called Ryse: Son of Rome, diminishing the motion control focus in the process. Ryse is a straightforward action game with the option to command troops using the Kinect's voice and gesture commands. I got a feel for slashing, blocking, and delivering brutal executions in Ryse during a hands-on preview.

Crytek set me loose against waves of enemies in a Stonehenge-like battlefield used for testing combat. A handful of barbarians rush me as the camera automatically focuses on the nearest foe. The zoomed-in third-person perspective is stylish, but the character model sometimes obscures enemies winding up for attacks. Reading your foes is crucial for blocking or parrying with your shield. A combination of slashes, shield bashes, and deadly executions are used to take down bad guys. Executions can be triggered when your enemy's life is low enough, initiating a quicktime event. The unlucky barbarian is outlined in the color of the corresponding button press, a more subtle cue system than the previously shown button icons.

Players are rewarded for performing precise, fast executions. Four perks can be selected to boost your health, damage output, a time-slowing focus ability, and XP gain. Leveling up unlocks new executions and grants access to new weapons. Players can swap between these four perks on the fly in the single-player campaign, but can choose only one in Gladiator Mode.

In Gladiator Mode, two players team up and enter a coliseum to eliminate waves of enemies or complete simple mission objectives. One goal tasked me with tipping over fiery cauldrons to set barbarian camps ablaze. Spike traps and spinning blades are scattered around the arena, adding an extra challenge to the routine swordplay. These environments morph between matches, similar to the terraforming seen in the Pokémon Stadium stage in Super Smash Bros. Melee. The cooperating players don't interact much aside from reviving each other when they fall.

Booster packs can be purchased using currency earned in game, but players can

exchange real money as well. A SmartGlass app is also in development to let players alter their loadouts using mobile phones and tablets.

Ryse is due out on the Xbox One when the system launches this November. At this point in development the execution-based combat is underwhelming and repetitive. The deciding factor is whether Ryse: Son of Rome can deliver a worthwhile campaign with large-scale spectacle and a set of genuinely unique executions. The controls are capable if not mediocre, but we'll have to wait until November to see whether it's a hit or a Trojan horse. » **Tim Turi**

The terrain of gladiatorial co-op matches varies from round to round



Fable Legends

Fable's next generation takes place in Albion's past



One of the biggest surprises out of Microsoft's Gamescom 2013 showcase was the announcement of Fable Legends from Lionhead Studios. The series has a rocky recent history, with the mixed reception to Fable III, the underwhelming Fable Heroes, and the Kinect-burdened Fable: The Journey. The first Xbox One entry for the series hopes to change those fortunes by taking the series back to its deepest roots, in a time far in Albion's past.

Fable Legends is unlike any other title the series has seen; it reminds us of a delightfully wicked dungeon crawl. Legends is designed for online multiplayer, though it is not an MMO. Players can tackle the adventure solo (with three AI partners) or join with friends against the beasts that roam the Albion wilderness.

In this untold era, humans are huddled behind the walls of cities, terrified of what exists beyond the gates. The fortress of Brightlodge serves as a stronghold against the darkness, and the four distinct characters its protectors. The cast is made up of the charming rogue with rapier and throwing daggers; the fearsome protector (voiced by Jennifer Hale), with sword and enormous shield; a hero of skill that uses ranged weapons, including a four-armed crossbow; and a hero of will, with her ability to use magic.

In the gameplay demo, the four heroes

banter, come to each other's aid, and combine their skills (similar to the X-Men Legends and Marvel Ultimate Alliance titles) to enhance effects. The title is running on Unreal Engine 4, and even in its early state, it is impressive.

More astounding is the way Lionhead is embracing the choices found in the Fable series. "In past games, even when you played the villain, there was another bad guy out there," says game director Dave Eckelberry. In Fable Legends, a fifth player can use a controller, Kinect voice commands, or Smart Glass to interfere with heroes' attempts to conquer the wild lands of Albion.

"Fable is often about sharing an experience," Eckelberry says. As the villain, that experience is markedly different. Players place enemies, lay ambushes, and target heroic players. The Smart Glass integration looks good so far, and reminded us of a simple RTS — perfect for a touchscreen interface.

Villains can also take control of boss characters and directly engage players, using their skills and, possibly, coming out victorious. We saw the battle play out in both ways, and a post-skirmish score tally was displayed for both (rather than a fail condition should the heroes lose).

Villains can practice their evil schemes, taking on four AI heroes. This reminded us a bit of Bullfrog's Dungeon Keeper, a title led

by former Lionhead boss Peter Molyneux. Whether players will be able to craft their own zones is yet unrevealed, and current Lionhead studio lead John Needham told us that many of the details (including the combat system) are still a work in progress.

Fable Legends does not yet have a release window, and Lionhead wouldn't even commit to a 2014 target. We're eager to learn more about it in the coming months as the studio refines the battle systems, customization options, and the clever villain mechanic.

» **Michael Futter**

» **Platform**
Xbox One

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

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Lionhead Studios

» **Release**
TBA



Octodad: Dadliest Catch

Sony's new indie hero blunders through life



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Young Horses, Inc.

» **Release**
Winter

Octodad is a game about a clumsy fellow who has a beautiful wife, two loving kids, and one ugly secret – he’s really an octopus. Octodad’s biggest fear is that if anyone discovers his secret, he’ll end up as sushi. While most people can recognize a man from a mollusk, Octodad has been able to keep his species camouflaged for most of his life. Unfortunately, this secret comes at a cost. For Octodad, even an average trip to the grocery store for milk is a harrowing adventure where, at any moment, a stranger could recognize his lumbering footfalls as the awkward movements of a disguised octopus.

Octodad began life as a student project from a group of programmers at DePaul University. The original freeware game was released in November of 2010, but Sony loved the project so much that it quickly asked the team to continue developing the game for its upcoming PlayStation 4. We sat down with lead artist Chris Stallman to talk about what it’s like being an octopus in disguise. » **Ben Reeves**

The concept sounds simple but bizarre. How do you turn that into a full game?

Octodad’s like a marionette. We started with the simple mechanics like walking and then using his arms to pick up and throw stuff. We found that the less precise the controls became, the more emergent humor popped up. Honestly, we weren’t sure if we’d be able to make a full game out of it, but we kept prototyping and having fun with new things, and then we’d decide to put them in the game. Mundane and usually boring things are made more fun with Octodad, because of the slipping and the falling and the not having bones.

Can you give some sample objectives Octodad will need to complete?

Most of our objectives are really simple at face value, but they’re a whole lot harder to accomplish as Octodad. For example, you go to the grocery store and you need to get the perfect apple. For a normal person this is an easy task, but for Octodad if he takes one wrong step, he slips on the floor and smashes into the fruit and it goes flying everywhere, then everyone is staring at him going, “That guy isn’t normal. Maybe he’s an octopus,” because if someone’s acting strange, clearly they’re an aquatic creature.

The game is hilarious in short bits, but how do you balance the awkward controls to ensure that people will still have fun several hours into the experience?

We introduce new things over time. For example, when you go visit the aquarium with your family there are marine biologists who, if they

just see you, they’ll be like, “That guy looks suspicious!” So you have to be a lot more careful around them. The game is a unique stealth experience.

The game’s awkward animations are a big part of what make the game fun. Can you talk about how you designed the animation system?

I am our animator, and I’m so glad that I don’t have to animate everything. Octodad is essentially a bunch of physics ropes tied together and held up in some very complex ways. Every time we updated our physics system, something would break and he’d either lift an arm and start flying, or he’d throw an object and it would take off like a bullet.

Octodad seems to have a little bit of facial animation too; at the end of the last trailer we noticed that he puts his hand up on the aquarium glass and looks pretty sad.

We actually put that in there because we wanted to give people an idea that there is a story to the game. Yes there is a bunch of floppy physics and a bunch of stuff that gets knocked over, but there is more to it than just silliness. There is a psychological phenomenon called impostor syndrome, which is about people who feel like they shouldn’t be where they are, but are just trying to keep up the façade that everything is fine. That’s kind of like a metaphor for the game. A lot of people on the team feel the same way because we just graduated, this is our first commercial game and it’s like, “How are we at the point where we’re publishing with Sony, and people seem to like our game?”





Disney Infinity: Toy Story In Space

To the far reaches of the galaxy



Jessie and Buzz are packaged with the play set. Woody is sold separately

Avalanche Software is no stranger to the Toy Story license. In 2010, the studio released a video game bearing the Toy Story 3 name, but the ambition behind it was greater than a mere film adaptation. Two radically different experiences were offered on the disc. The first was a linear action game based on the film's story – typical licensed video game fare. The second drew inspiration from the imaginative adventures Andy created for his toys. This mode was called the Toy Box, a concept that eventually led to the creation of Disney Infinity.

The Toy Box experience in Toy Story 3 took place in the Wild West, Woody's stomping ground and one of Andy's go-to areas for bank heists and Hamm's evil capers. Disney Infinity's upcoming Toy Story play set focuses on Woody's pal, Buzz Lightyear. Titled "Toy Story in Space," this set takes players through the cosmos to a distant world designated as the new home for the adorable three-eyed aliens most often found in vending machines.

Buzz, Jessie, and Woody (who's sold separately) are tasked with colonizing the planet with a base that will help their alien friends. When this base is fully operational, the services of a hospital, clothing store, hatchery, and research center become available.

Although you just arrived on the planet with the aliens in tow, they've managed to get in a

lot of trouble. Some of them eat things they shouldn't and become deathly ill, requiring a quick trip to the hospital. Others venture too far off of the beaten path and find themselves stranded on tiny platforms or surrounded by dangerous fluids. Star Command's crew must retrieve them and bring them back to safety.

Zurg's evil face does appear in the game, but from what I saw during my hands-on demo, only in training-simulator exercises against his robot legion. On that note, Toy Story's play set is mostly nonviolent, much like the Monsters University set that launched in Disney Infinity's box.

That doesn't mean you're only helping

aliens get adjusted with their new habitats. Jetpack challenges, alien horse races, and platforming sequences tied to goo that makes your characters grow or shrink are in great abundance.

Completing specific missions rewards the player with a Star Command laser blaster, a jet pack, and a hover pack for use in the Toy Box. The jetpack is a slick means of travel and should be a huge aid in navigating the Toy Box.

Toy Story in Space is tentatively set to launch in October and is compatible with the Wii U, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and Wii versions of Disney Infinity. » **Andrew Reiner**

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

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

» **Publisher**
Disney Interactive

» **Developer**
Avalanche Software

» **Release**
October

Some of the races use Woody's trusty steed. Others require an alien horse



Even though you are in space, you can still dress up the aliens in adorable costumes



WWE 2K14

2K takes on the Showcase of the Immortals

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Fighting
(2 to 6-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Yuke's

» **Release**
October 29

T HQ touted WWE '12 as an overhaul for the former Smackdown vs. Raw series, but it was last year's WWE '13 that set a new standard for quality in the series. Its Attitude Era mode lovingly recreated iconic moments from pro wrestling's boom period in the late '90s, while Universe mode allowed players to go wild with modern superstars as well as their own creations. Now under the 2K banner, WWE 2K14 widens its historic lens to cover 30 years of the "Granddaddy of Them All," WrestleMania.

Like last year, the dev team goes out of its way to ensure that these legendary battles play out exactly as you remember them. Intro graphics, the colors of the ring ropes, and the specific attire of the wrestlers match their real-life counterparts that live forever on DVD and in fans' memories. Matches from the '80s and '90s even feature video filters that help replicate the video quality of their respective eras.

"After the Super Bowl is done, it's pretty much

done," WWE exec Triple H says. "After the World Series is done, it's pretty much done. The moments that define WrestleMania and the WWE live forever. They're much more akin to the big fight in a Rocky movie. You can watch that movie over and over again, and love it more every time."

Basing the marquee mode around WrestleMania wouldn't work at all without the appropriate talent, and 2K has assembled a dream roster that spans several decades of sports entertainment. At the top of the must-have list is Hulk Hogan, the larger-than-life figure that was featured more than any other during the first nine WrestleManias. Despite his current status as a figurehead in TNA, he'll be featured in the game regardless. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for other TNA talent such as Jeff Hardy, Kurt Angle, and the Dudley Boyz.

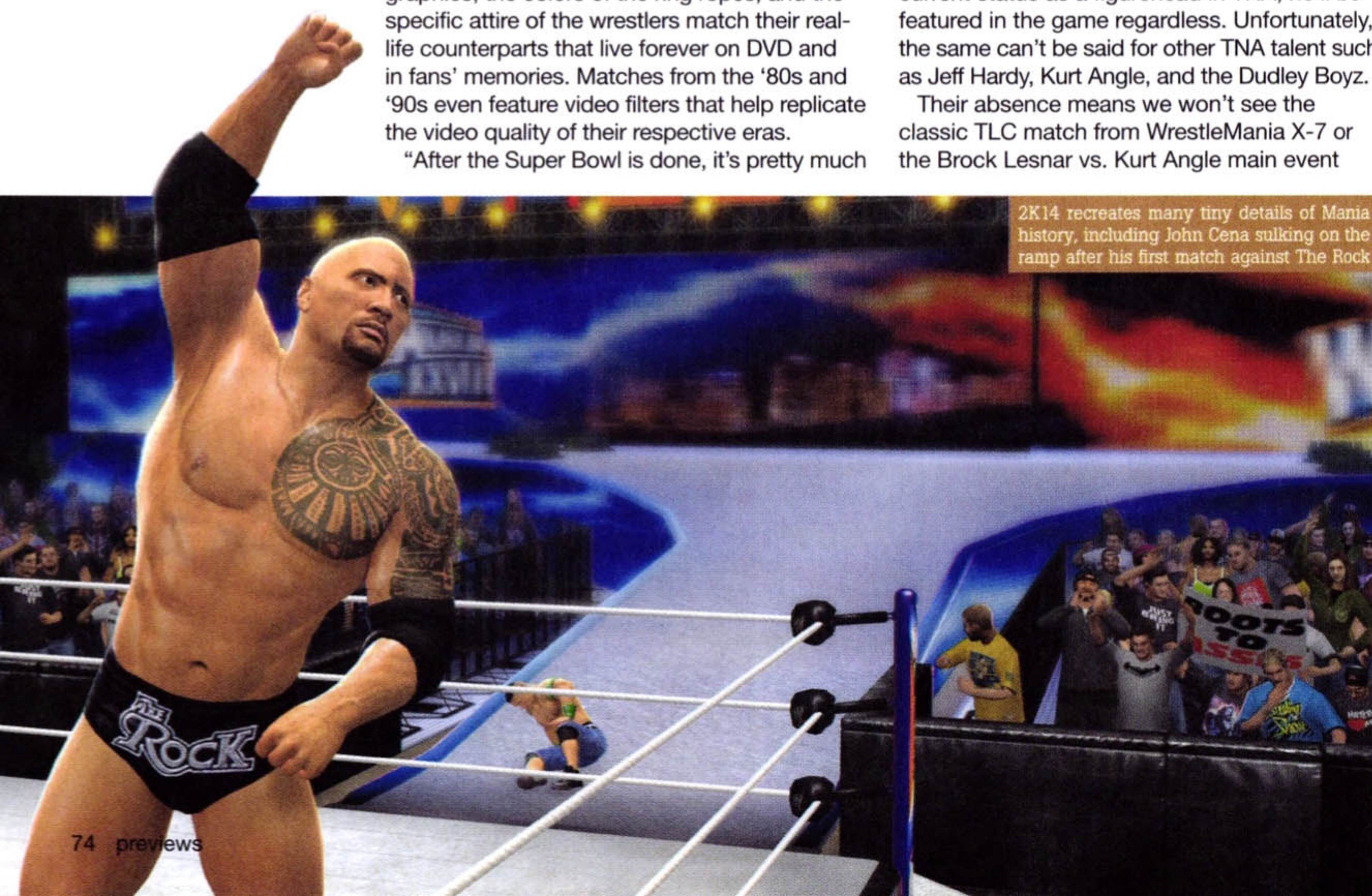
Their absence means we won't see the classic TLC match from WrestleMania X-7 or the Brock Lesnar vs. Kurt Angle main event

from XIX, but the roster ensures that dozens of unforgettable matches will be included. Eighties mainstays like Andre the Giant, Randy Savage, Big John Studd, and King Kong Bundy occupy space on the select screen alongside '90s stars like Diesel, Bret Hart, and Razor Ramon. With a large selection of current superstars also available, it's easy to play fantasy matches like Daniel Bryan vs. Bret Hart or CM Punk vs. Randy Savage. Few must-haves are absent, although the lack of Rowdy Roddy Piper (a Hall of Famer with over ten WrestleMania appearances) is confusing.

Fans will love all the nods to wrestling's past, but the development team is also introducing some tweaks to the action between the ropes. Reversals quickly turn into striking counterattacks, which limits the seemingly endless back-and-forth exchanges that tended to happen in previous titles. Running animations have been improved with more natural transitions, making the motions look less robotic. Strikes have been sped up without downgrading their power, which rectifies the weak-feeling punches and kicks from the past. Catch finishers allow you to launch running opponents into devastating finishers like Sweet Chin Music or the Shell Shock. Certain finishers (the Attitude Adjustment, chokeslams, etc.) can be performed on two opponents simultaneously, which makes it far easier to score pinfalls in triple-threat matches.

When I reviewed WWE '13 last year, I couldn't help but wonder where the series would go from there. By extensively mining a period that so many fans loved, I worried that they had shot themselves in the foot for future installments. Focusing on the Hogan era alone could alienate younger fans, and setting an entire campaign in other eras would yield less material than the Attitude Era. Yuke's and 2K have effectively rendered these worries unnecessary thanks to the ambitious 30 Years of WrestleMania mode that aims to satisfy wrestling fans of any age. » **Dan Ryckert**

2K14 recreates many tiny details of Mania history, including John Cena sulking on the ramp after his first match against The Rock



The Sims 4

Maxis molds Sims like clay

After a handful of sequels and a truckload of expansions, you might think that EA is running out of new ways for gamers to create and interact with their sims. However, The Sims 4 aims to reimagine the game's design interface. Maxis' streamlined creation tools and emotionally driven sim interactions should fundamentally change how gamers play out their wildest dreams and sickest fantasies with The Sims. Here are the most important new features of The Sims 4.

Simplifying Sim Creation

The previous Sims games were full of preset body parts and sliders, which made sim creation a little clunky. Now, players start with a basic sim and then tug on the sections of the body that they want to reshape. Pull on the top of the eyebrows to give your sim an arched brow or push on their snout to give them a button nose.

"The tactile feedback is something that we're still playing with right now," says producer Ryan Vaughan. "You grab onto your sim to do all your adjustments, but we want to make sure that it still feels easy and looks right when you're done."

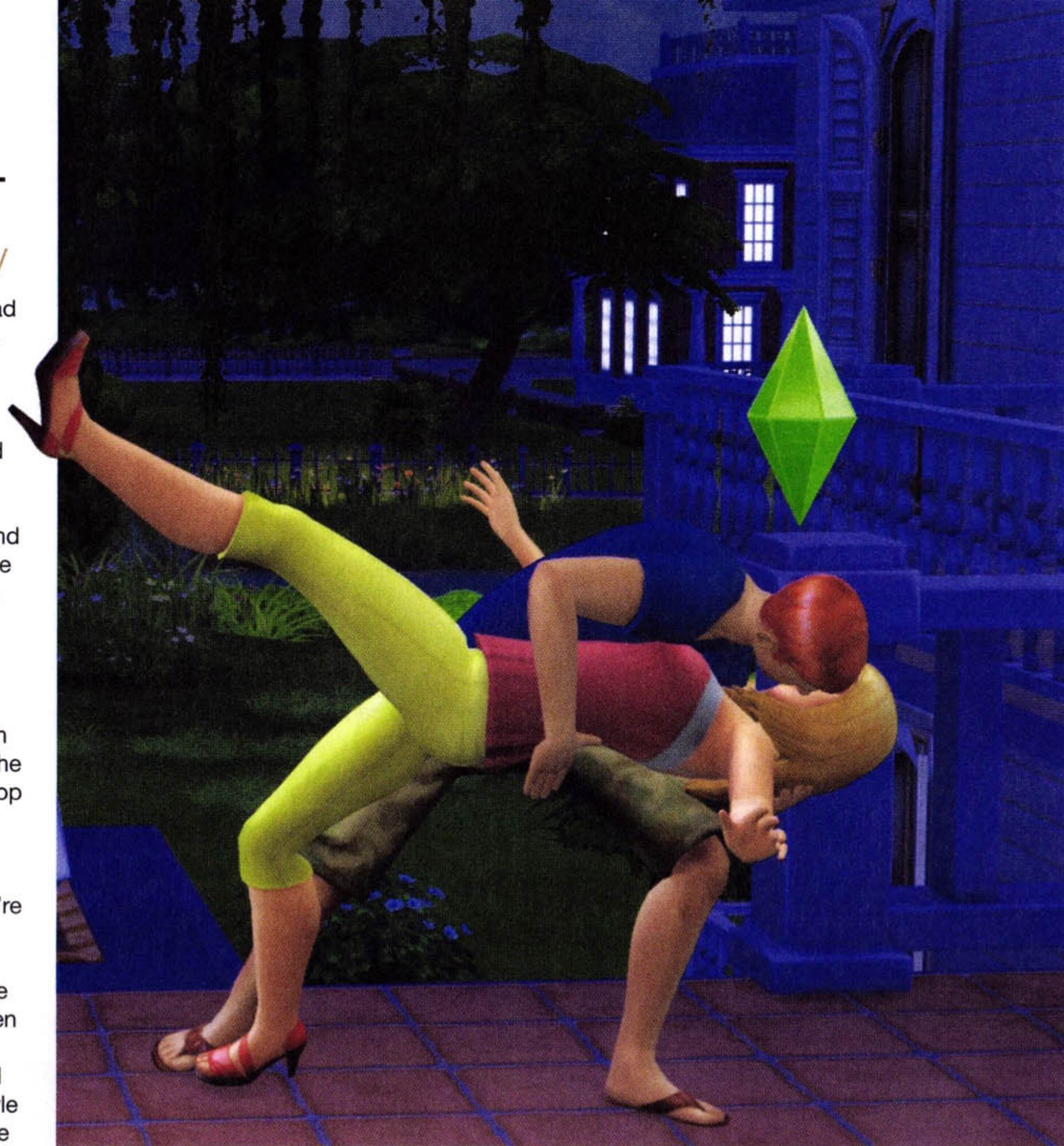
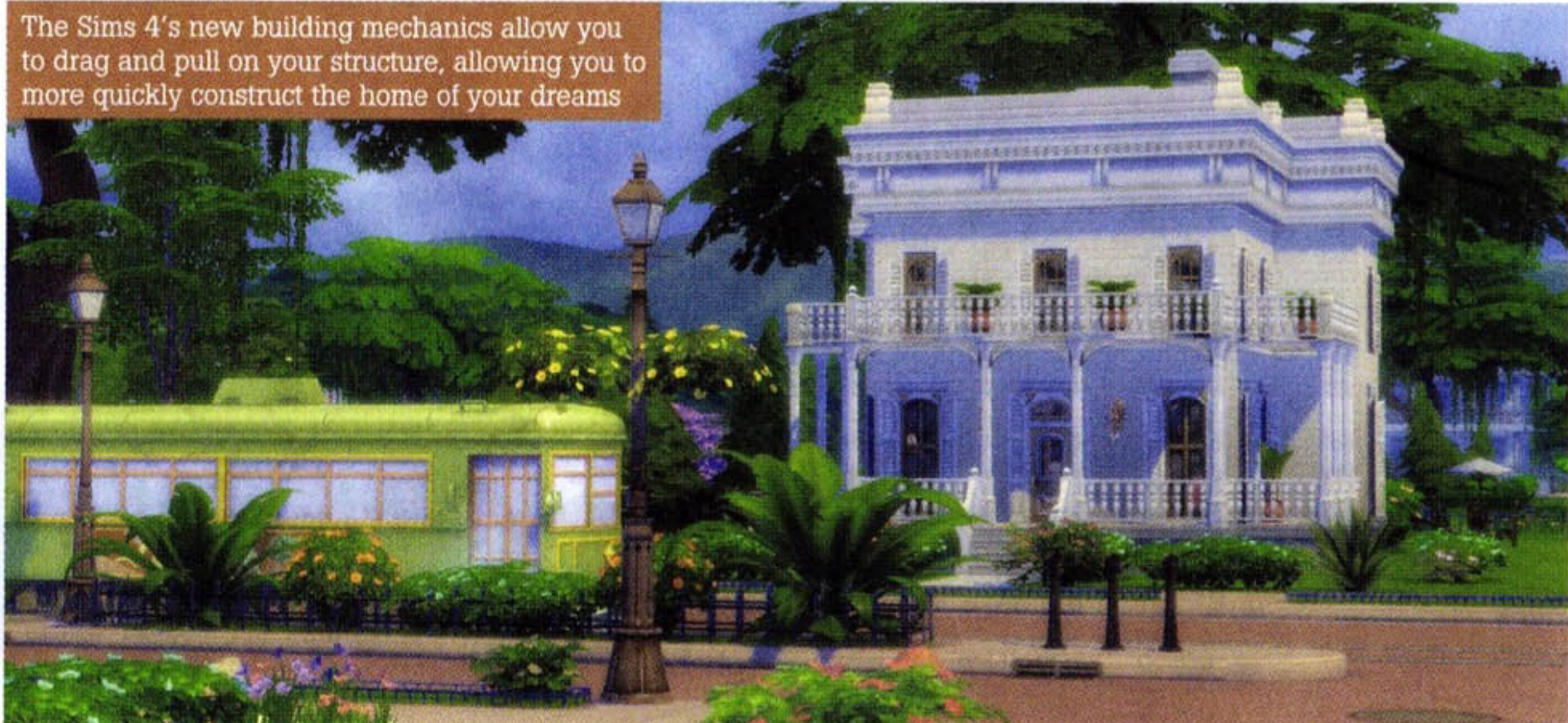
This level of customization extends beyond a sim's physique. Now you can select the style of voice your sim speaks with and change the hairstyle they keep while wearing a hat. You can even change your sim's gait, giving them the walk of a snooty heiress or the swagger of a cocky teen.

A Stronger Foundation

The game's building mode features many of the push-and-pull upgrades featured in the character creator. After placing a room on the ground, you can pull on the walls to expand them or even pick up whole rooms and set them on the other side of the building. These tools are smart enough to know what you're trying to accomplish. For example, take the porch tool and drag it across a corner of your house and it automatically wraps around the building creating a wraparound porch.

Moving into your new home is faster than ever. Furniture comes in preset collections which are displayed like magazine ads in your creation toolset. You can pick one of these sets and drop the whole thing into a room and the furniture will auto populate in the room. However, Maxis isn't restricting players' choice; if you want to mix and match sets or select specific item from a group, you're still able to do that.

The Sims 4's new building mechanics allow you to drag and pull on your structure, allowing you to more quickly construct the home of your dreams

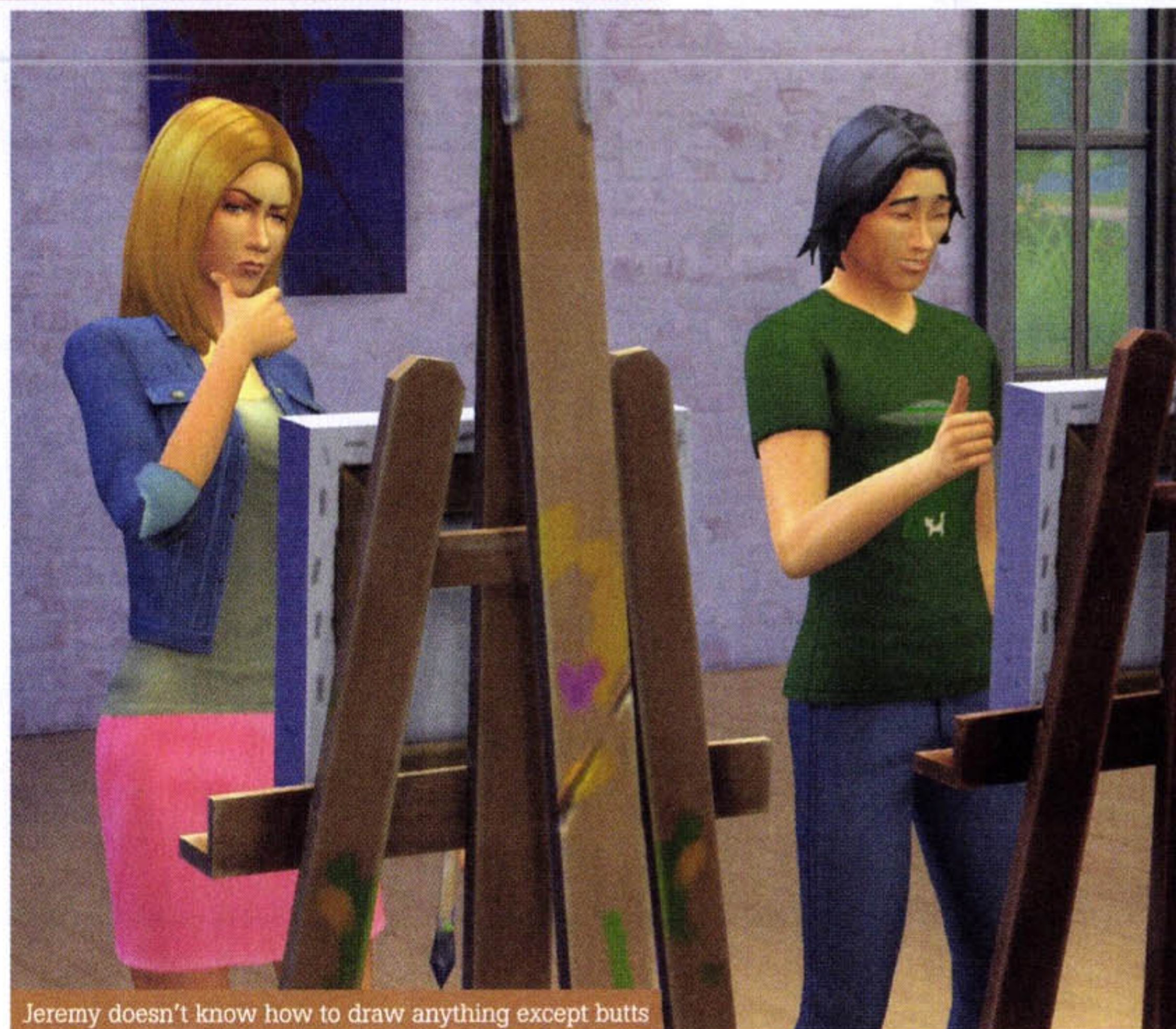


A Moody Bunch

Sims now have a variety of emotional states, and these states affect how they interact with the world around them. Confident sims will notice that they have more flirty options when conversing with a love interest, while an angry sim might only want to complain about their problems.

"There are a lot of different emotions in the game," says producer Ryan Vaughan. "And most of them go through intensities too. So you could go from flirty to passionate or go from angry to furious. You can even die by embarrassment, if your sim gets pushed too far down that hole."

Players can use these mood shifts to their advantage. In previous games, it was bad for your sim to be angry, because that caused poor performance at work and in social exchanges. Now, there might be times when you want to be angry. For example, angry sims who are burning off steam at the gym will work their way up the athletic track faster than normal, happy sims. Much like in real life, succeeding in The Sims 4 will require careful management of one's emotions in every situation. » **Ben Reeves**



Jeremy doesn't know how to draw anything except butts



» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Simulation

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Maxis

» **Release**
2014

Watch Dogs

Stepping into Watch Dogs' Chicago for the first time

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

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

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**
November 15
(PlayStation 4),
November 19
(Wii U, PS3, 360, PC),
TBA (Xbox One)

When Watch Dogs was first announced at E3 2012, its polished looks immediately captured the attention of showgoers. While it continues to look quite gorgeous, it's not just the graphics that mark this new franchise as one to watch; it's the gameplay.

At Gamescom 2013, I got my hands on the game for the first time. Watch Dog's virtual Chicago is made more efficient and safe by a central operating system (CtOS), but the hacking abilities of vigilante protagonist Aiden Pearce puts all of the city's automated features under his control. Chicago feels alive because of how players can interact with it, bending the city to their will.

At the start of my demo, I am tasked with installing a back door on a local node, giving us access to the entirety of that substation's service area. These are reminiscent of Assassin's Creed's viewpoints, which make parts of the map visible. Instead of climbing to the top of a tower, Aiden must sneak into a restricted area, find the guard with the access code, and get line-of-sight access to the node in order to install the malicious software.

Hacking is possible at all times in the immediate vicinity of a node, and manipulating the environment to distract guards is crucial in staying undetected. Using a combination of stealth and camera hacking to get a direct line to the node, I accomplish the task. Sneaking out of the restricted area isn't difficult, as I stay close to the gate, using only hacks to get progressively closer to the goal.

From there, I am given a nudge toward the Loop and the Willis Tower, a more likely location for stealing someone's credit card information. This is also where I have my first encounter with an interloper. Watch Dogs offers optional multiplayer that can open players' games to invading hackers.

This cat-and-mouse multiplayer is reminiscent of Assassin's Creed's multiplayer suite. Players see themselves as Aiden Pearce, but appear as a random NPC to others. These small minigames occur in a limited region of the map defined by where the players were when the hack was initiated. A progress bar ticks up to 100 percent, putting the defender on a time limit.

The successful hack rewards the intruder

with a small stream of cash, but the defending player won't be penalized. As the aggressor, there are three steps to the process: find a mark through the matchmaking screen, initiate the hack and remain hidden and alive until it reaches 100 percent, and then escape the zone.

The demo closes with an opportunity to stop an in-progress crime, leading to one of Ubisoft's promised emergent moments. After I intervene in a robbery, I orchestrate a shootout between the foiled thugs and responding police officers, giving me the perfect chance to escape. Normally, either the police or the thugs would give chase, but setting up a fight between them provides an unexpected sequence of events.

Speeding away from the scene of the crime marks the end of my first hands-on opportunity with Watch Dogs. This moment helped prove Ubisoft's bold claims about emergent gameplay and leaves me interested to play the final version in mid-November.

» **Mike Futter**



Competition Across Devices

Watch Dogs will have a mobile companion app, CtOS Mobile, when the console launches in November. The game is a free download that does not require ownership of Watch Dogs.

Players can challenge friends by adding their PlayStation ID, Xbox GamerTag, or uPlay account name. Once connected (whether in the same room or separated geographically), the chase is on. The mobile player takes on the role of a helicopter tracking Aiden Pearce.

That player can use the CtOS to direct police, trigger traffic blockers, detonate steam pipes and wreak havoc by suddenly changing traffic

signals. The console/PC player must rush to the finish line before time runs out, while the mobile player does whatever possible to stop that from happening.

The controls are intuitive, and the live nature of the connection creates a different atmosphere than many other mobile multiplayer games. Ubisoft is also planning on suspending the reputation system during these competitions to encourage fun and limit the negative impact on the single-player story experience.

CtOS Mobile will be released on both iOS and Android phones and tablets.



The Wolf Among Us

Playing the Big Bad Wolf is fun and twisted

The Big Bad Wolf, also known as Bigby, enters a cab as the city of New York illuminates the screen, a scene that could be straight out of Bill Willingham's *Fables* comics. Set in NYC's pre-Giuliani era, the streets are full of mystery and promise. The graffiti warns of its danger, the towering buildings make you feel small, and the darkness tenses your muscles. The smokaholic Bigby arrives at the Tenant Building in South Bronx to lecture Mr. Toad, who's "out of glamour," (not wearing his human form). Since this episode is set a decade and a half before the first *Fables* trade, all the references are explained for newcomers to get in on what's happening in Fabletown.

As you lecture Mr. Toad, you choose your responses via the controller's face buttons, just like in *The Walking Dead*. The infamous "Mr. Toad will remember that" prompt appears in the corner during the conversation, but soon it's interrupted by a loud noise. Bigby goes to investigate; as he does, he can observe items on the floor before reaching the door. When he walks in, a scene of violence and swearing unfolds as the Woodsman,

recognizable from *Little Red Riding Hood*, and a mysterious lady fight.

The drunken Woodsman is unhappy that Bigby has decided to pay him a visit, and the two soon engage in an intense QTE fight. During the tussle, Bigby can throw the Woodsman into different objects around the room, like dressers and desks, or grab objects like bottles to deal extra damage. The two soon fly out the window and crash onto a cab. Fables are hard to kill, so this battle is far from over. The Woodsman soon takes the edge, choking Bigby as you tap "A" to fight his strength. As things start to fade to black, the woman from before takes the Woodsman's ax and slices right through the back of his skull.

While the Woodsman lays bleeding, she takes out her rage by pushing the ax even further into his skull, and Bigby can stop her or let her carry out the punishment. Either way, it's not enough to kill him, as he mysteriously escapes. Bigby has an intimate chat with the girl, but never gets her name.

Bigby arranges to meet up to get more details, but runs into Beauty, who is obviously

keeping a big secret from Beast but won't say what.

However, that's the least of Bigby's troubles, as Snow White soon arrives to show Bigby the brutal murder of a Fable, a rare occurrence in Fabletown. Different clues at the scene of the crime can be investigated, and you decide how much digging you want to do. I examined everything from the body parts to blood leading to the alley. Snow asks Bigby's advice on telling the acting mayor Ichabod Crane, to which Bigby can choose to support her or not. She reacts depending on what you choose.

Arriving back with her at Crane's office, we're introduced to the vile man; he talks down to Snow, blames everyone else for the murder, and demands a massage. Part of the fun is role-playing as Bigby, so I quickly side with Snow and tell off the jerk. As he leaves, Bufkin appears drinking Crane's wine, and he's set to help Snow and Bigby figure out the dead Fable's identity. Bigby looks to the magic mirror, mocking the "mirror, mirror, on the wall" phrase trying to find out clues. The mirror visually reveals where people are, but won't provide the exact location. After looking through a book of Fables, we track down a name and the victim's origins.

Before leaving, the first big divergent path is presented. Mr. Toad, a worrywart, calls us frantically about a suspicious person in the building, but we also need to inform the victim's fiancé, who could also be a suspect, about the death. Consequences exist for both choices: Mr. Toad could very well be in danger, but we could miss out on a juicy lead. I stare at the screen, contemplating. Telltale has done it again; I'm a conflicted mess, and that ends my demo.

I want to play more; the characters have humorous lines, the choices make me think, and shaping Bigby is captivating. *The Wolf Among Us* is keeping up with Telltale's newfound reputation, and could even bolster it.

» Kimberley Wallace

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

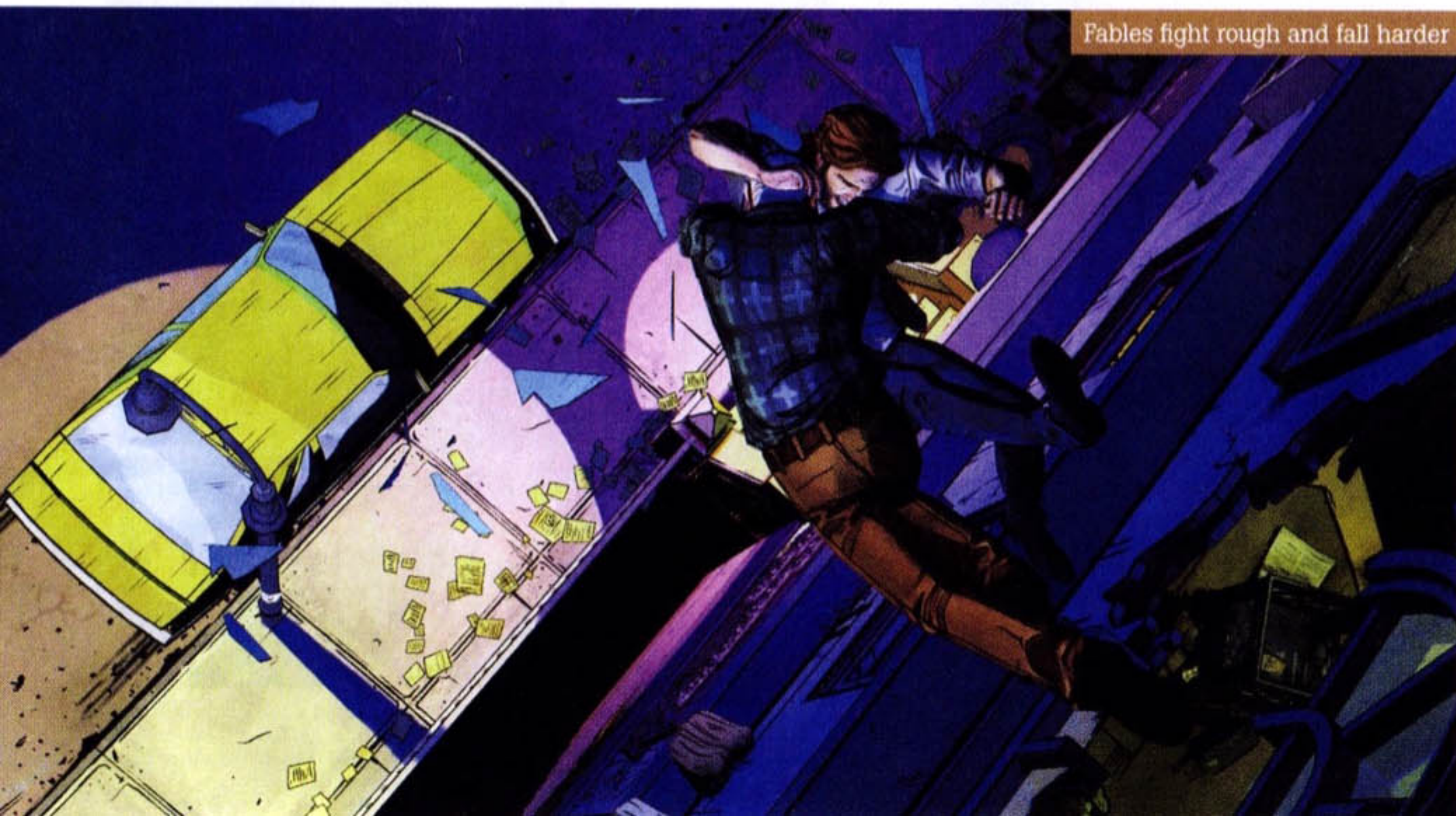
» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Telltale Games

» **Developer**
Telltale Games

» **Release**
Fall

Fables fight rough and fall harder



NBA 2K14

Visual Concepts posts up on current-gen consoles

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Visual Concepts

» **Release**
October 2

With the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One due out in a matter of months, you might expect Visual Concepts to phone in the current-generation version of NBA 2K14 in favor of devoting its resources toward the next-gen future of the franchise. But after four straight years of five million-plus sales, the NBA 2K fan base is larger than ever before. Visual Concepts aims to keep it that way by adding fresh content to both versions of the game.

Last year, the studio overhauled its right analog-stick control, migrating the dribbling moves to the stick and hiding the shot stick options behind a left trigger modifier. In the quest to make the controls as intuitive as possible, NBA 2K14 further tweaks these controls by removing the need of holding a modifier button to take a shot. How does this work? Basically, the dribbling controls respond just as they did last year, but if you hold the thumbstick in a particular direction it activates the shot stick. It takes a while to learn the boundaries between shooting and dribbling, and I'm curious to see if this leads to accidental shots in the heat of the moment. If this gamble works, the benefits are clear, the biggest of which is the new placement of the right analog-stick passing modifier.

Holding down the left trigger now activates a suite of flashy no-look and bounce passes for skilled point guards like Chris Paul and Ricky Rubio. Simply push the direction of the player you want to pass to while holding down the trigger and your skilled point guard delivers a stylish dish worthy of a highlight reel.

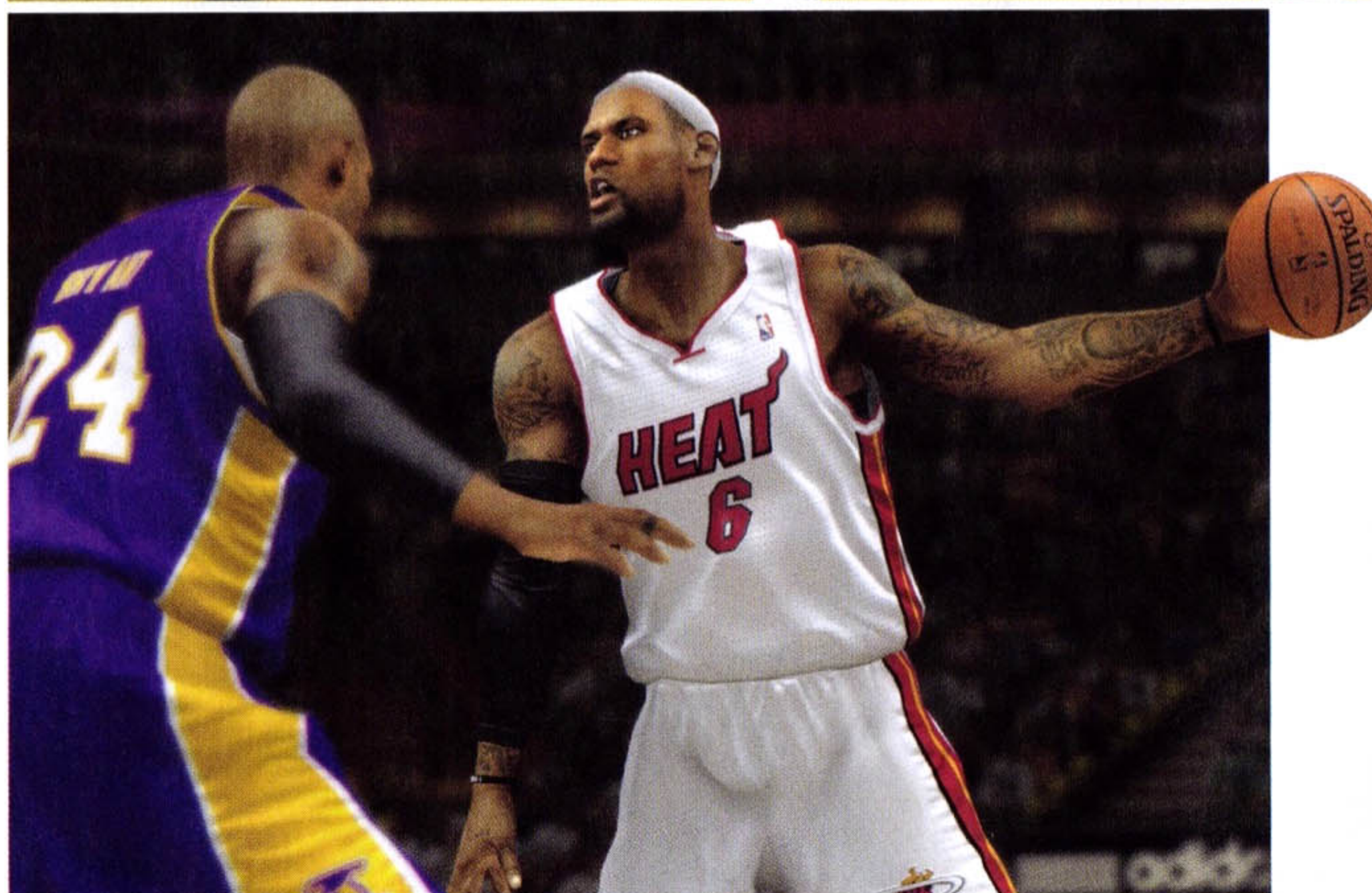
Offense isn't the only side of the game receiving attention. NBA 2K14 features a reworked blocking logic that allows defenders to choose where to swat the ball instead of just going for the first place his hand could attempt the block, which now allows big men to deny dunks. The defending animations also feature a renewed sense of urgency, and Visual Concepts reworked defensive rotations so they are better at picking up the roll man on pick-and-rolls.

The game modes are also receiving upgrades for 2K14. The development team reworked the AI logic in Association mode so players are more aware of the emerging markets and therefore more apt to opt for free agency if it looks favorable to their bottom line. AI-controlled teams also actively plan for free agency by attempting to clear cap space.

During the season, the lineup building has evolved to take into account recent player streaks. If a backup is putting up starter-worthy numbers, the team adjusts the rotation to give him more minutes, while slumps earn players bench time. If a player is coming off an injury, he is eased into the lineup while recovering his stamina and durability.

Will all of these improvements add up to a package worthy of splurging on a current-generation game when the next-gen version launches a mere month after? We'll find out when the game ships on October 2.

» **Matt Bertz**



The Crew Returns

Since it was removed from NBA 2K12, fans have lamented the absence of Crew mode. Visual Concepts heard the complaints, and is bringing it back for the current-generation version of NBA 2K14. You can create a team logo and take your created My Player online for five-on-five competitions once again, and competing earns you VC (virtual currency) just like the other modes.

FIFA 14

Hands-on with EA Sports' juggernaut



Football is the world's game, so it's only appropriate that FIFA 14 is using Germany's Gamescom event to reveal new details about what developer EA Canada says is its biggest mode – Ultimate Team. We also got some hands-on time with a new build for a feel of some subtle but important gameplay improvements.

FIFA 14 furthers the series' work in refining the feel and responsiveness of the gameplay. Variances in pass placement, players' first touch, and dribbling at speed are all impacted by the game treating the ball and player as separate entities. The big takeaway is that you have to be more careful when handling the ball, especially when an opponent is closing down your space. Addressing the ball is also important when shooting – something that the developer is trying to change this year; players' run up to a strike and the shots produced should be more diverse. I didn't notice much of a difference, but at a minimum I didn't feel that I had to alter my approach to the ball or see any awkward shots.

I haven't played the next-gen version of the game, but EA Sports says one of the things we can expect is more dynamic presentation, unscripted commentary/match storylines, and seamless transitions between dead ball situations and live play. This means everything from showing the anguished or delighted faces of the home and away fans (now modeled in 3D) to cameras and commentary focusing on the players' storylines – including the flexibility to switch to those who are relevant at any moment.

The Xbox 360 and Xbox One versions contain exclusive access to 42 legendary players (mainly from the '90s and 2000s) in FIFA 14's Ultimate Team mode via packs and/or auction. Regardless of which system you play on, the game expands the popular seasons format with co-op season play. Now you and a friend can work your way up the division ladder and stave off relegation on separate consoles.

With the final round of World Cup qualifying taking place, the start of European league play, new systems on the horizon, and FIFA 14 coming, it's a great time to be a football fan. » **Matthew Kato**

For more on Ultimate Team and career mode's new scouting method, head over to gameinformer.com/mag

» **Platform**

PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**

1 to 7-Player (PS3),
1 to 4-Player Sports (360)
(22-Player Online)

» **Publisher**

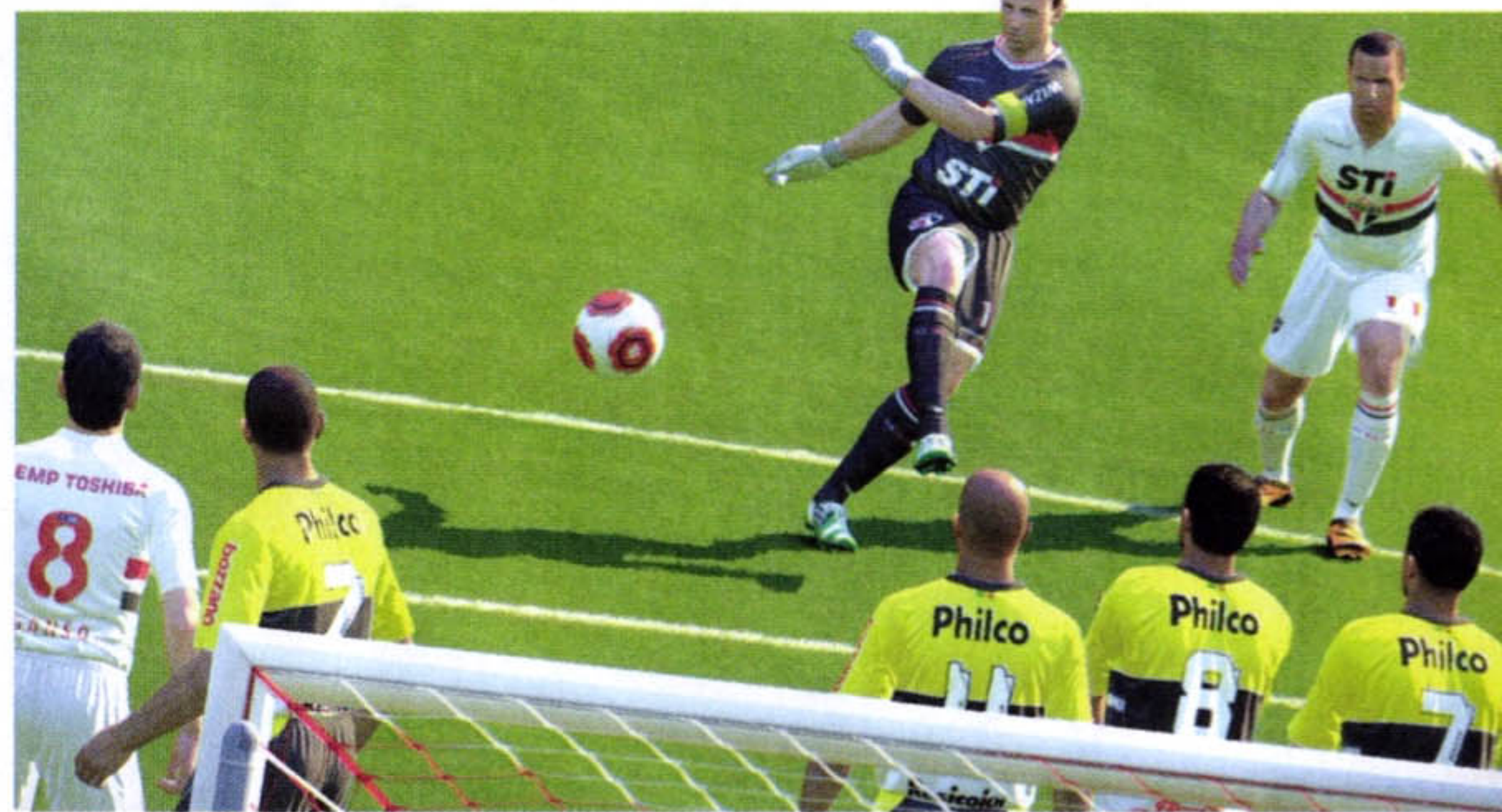
EA Canada

» **Developer**

EA Sports

» **Release**

September 24 (PS3, 360),
November (PS4, Xbox One)



Pro Evolution Soccer 2014

A new PES worthy of the old PES

Pro Evolution Soccer 2014 won't be on the next-generation consoles this year, but that doesn't mean that it's laying low. As part of a transition to the upcoming systems, PES 2014 is using Kojima Production's Fox Engine (also being used in Metal Gear Solid V) – a risky move this late in the console cycle, but one that could improve the gameplay of a series already known for its technical acumen.

The new engine affects the movement and feel of your players, and it feels more fluid than last year's game – including some extra bells and whistles. Managing footwork and body positioning using the analog sticks are important whether you're using your body to shrug off physical challenges (physicality is more prominent this year), producing deft touches to keep possession, or beat the opposition in one-on-one situations. The level of control took some getting used to, but I went from losing possession easily to creating space and making plays. The early build I played had a few animation and ball detection hiccups, but hopefully these get smoothed out.

PES 2014's Combination Play strategies are another useful tool to breaking down your opponent. These are pre-set, multiplayer plays that you can easily initiate once you reach predetermined areas on the pitch. Once there – and assuming your teammates are in their correct positions – you can execute dummy runs, overlaps, lay-offs, and much more with multiple players. It adds more complexity, variety, and context to your bag of tricks that used to just consist of through balls and give-and-gos.

The PES franchise has recently only changed along the margins, so it's great that developer PES Productions is trying to rejuvenate the series in preparation for the next-generation (including a promise that players will play with "heart"). If it can handle its engine transition deftly, we could see an improvement for the franchise that has nothing to do with the console it's on. » **Matthew Kato**

To see how to set up and execute a Combination Play, check out our exclusive video at gameinformer.com/mag



» **Platform**

PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**

1 to 7-Player (PS3),
1 to 4-Player Sports (360)
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**

PES Productions

» **Developer**

Konami

» **Release**

September 24

reviews



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

82 Splinter Cell: Blacklist

Sam Fisher returns at the head of a new special ops unit, employing his signature mixture of sneaking, action, and gadgetry. The previous Splinter Cell title, Conviction, gave the flagging franchise a rejuvenating jolt, and Ubisoft keeps its series heading in the right direction with Blacklist. Cool missions, varied stealth options, and the return of the acclaimed spies vs. mercs multiplayer mode make Blacklist another successful mission for Sam.

We had a close race for Game of the Month this issue (three games received a score of 9), but we decided that Splinter Cell edged out Disney Infinity and Rayman Legends. The console version of Diablo III scored even higher, but as a port of a previous Game of the Month, it was not eligible for the award again.

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	Hosenose and Booger. A game so bad it should never come out.

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



Disney Infinity

Fun with the Toy Box



Style 1 or 2-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Disney Interactive **Developer** Avalanche Software **Release** August 18 **Rating** E10+

Pixar's Toy Story movies give us a good look at two very different children and their playing habits. In one house, we see Andy. He's a good-hearted kid who takes great care of his toys and is heartbroken when his favorites break. In the house next door, we have Sid. This disturbed little monster conducts experiments on his toys. In Disney Infinity, the latest video game that can only be played if an action figure is placed on a portal, we are given the chance to channel our inner Andy or Sid.

We can create our own magical worlds for our action figures, or use them as cogs in violent Rube Goldberg machines. Both of these play styles generate big thrills, but only if we use our imaginations to enable them.

Captain Jack Sparrow, Buzz Lightyear, Lightning McQueen, and many of Disney's recognizable characters are a part of Disney Infinity, but they aren't the stars. The show stealer is a mode called Toy Box.

Toy Box is a construction set where worlds can be created, played within, and shared online. If Minecraft is the Lego of video games, Disney Infinity is the Duplo. Houses, castles, and most of the components are pre-built. The color and texture of many of these objects can be altered, but that granular level of sculpting

them to exact specifications is not available. Creativity is tied to how these pieces are used in the context of playing with them. Uncle Scrooge's vault may look cool on its own, but it takes on a whole new life when you try to jump cars over it, or construct a series of tricky spinning platforms leading up to its roof (where access to its fortunes awaits).

The creation tools are designed with simplicity in mind: Grab a desired object and place it in the world. An effective color-coding system shows when items are overlapping, touching flush, or floating freely. Generating dense forests or city blocks only takes a matter of minutes, but designing an enjoyable racetrack with a defined start, number of laps, and finish (complete with fireworks signaling a winner) requires a deeper understanding of how to make items interactive. Most of these actions are surprisingly easy to grasp, allowing for a wide variety of play within the world.

From the outset, the Toy Box doesn't offer all of the items you can use. This is where you feel the hand of Disney's marketing department, as it pushes the player to try other modes and – if you want to make your Toy Box as deep as possible – purchase more figures and play sets to unlock more stuff.

A bevy of hidden Toy Box items are scattered

throughout the Incredibles, Monsters University, and Pirates of the Caribbean play sets that are included in the base game. Each play set is a standalone adventure offering roughly three to seven hours of open-world missions. Monsters University is the weakest of the bunch, focusing on repetitive fetch quests and collecting widgets, but Pirates and the Incredibles do a nice job of mixing up the gameplay and throwing fun challenges at the player.

Outside of Cars' cast, all of Disney Infinity's characters share the same basic move set. Some characters offer additional actions. Dash, for instance, has super speed, making him more desirable than the Mike Wazowskis of Disney's kingdom.

When characters level up or their unique challenges are completed, they earn tokens that can be redeemed for spins to unlock a random toy box item. This is the element of the game where I found myself cringing as the thought "I need more figures" crossed my mind. Making the Toy Box as deep as possible is an expensive venture, but it's also a fun one that is backed by quality gameplay and a wealth of content for each of the launch sets.

Disney Infinity is off to a great start and will hopefully be supported for years to come. The thought of Avalanche Software potentially tapping Star Wars, Marvel Comics, and other properties in Disney's vault for upcoming sets makes this game's future just as exciting as spending an afternoon creating adventures with friends. » **Andrew Reiner**

Visit www.gameinformer.com for reviews and impressions of Disney Infinity's Lone Ranger and Cars play sets

In addition to the figures and sets, players can purchase packs of random power discs to unlock more Toy Box items, as well as attribute enhancements for their characters



9

Wii U • PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Disney Infinity is an action figure-based game that pushes players to use their imaginations to create unique adventures and worlds for their toys

» **Graphics**

The shared visual style helps tie all of Disney's universes together. The animation and texture work are top-notch

» **Sound**

The announcer in the Toy Box is grating, and characters repeat dialogue way too often. The soundtrack is often surprisingly absent and lacking that festive Disney vibe

» **Playability**

All of the toys are fun to play. Toy Box's building mechanics embrace simplicity, yet are deep enough to allow players to create their own interactive gaming experiences

» **Entertainment**

I enjoyed almost everything Disney Infinity threw at me. The Toy Box and play sets are both great co-op experiences

» **Replay Value**

High

Disney Infinity's action figures are beautifully made, and will look great on collectors' shelves





Splinter Cell: Blacklist

Ubisoft's stealth series lights the way for future installments

9

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Toronto Release August 20 Rating M

Wii U • PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Continue to refine the mark-and-execute system while reintroducing the series' popular Spies vs. Merc multiplayer mode

» **Graphics**

Blacklist continues the series' tradition of cutting-edge visuals by being one of the best-looking games on this generation of consoles

» **Sound**

Michael Ironside no longer voices Sam Fisher, but the new actor does a solid job

» **Playability**

Navigating a dark room while taking down half a dozen guards is easy to execute, and Ubisoft gives players a lot of ways to sneak through an environment

» **Entertainment**

Aside from a few trial-and-error moments, Blacklist is a nitro-fueled rush full of epic spy moments

» **Replay Value**

High

Unforgiving checkpoints and slow-placed trial-and-error gameplay kept many older stealth games from appealing to a wider audience. In 2010, Splinter Cell: Conviction broke away from the traditional stealth slog with an action-oriented stealth approach that encouraged players to constantly be on the move. Conviction's mark-and-execute system allowed gamers to easily take down their targets and quickly clean up their messes when they accidentally stepped out of the shadows. Blacklist continues Conviction's legacy, further refining many of those systems while crafting a white-knuckled espionage thriller that is hard to forget.

After a terrorist group known as The Engineers destroys an Air Force base on the island of Guam, the group demands that the U.S. withdraw all troops stationed inside foreign countries. If America fails to comply, the terrorists will perform a series of weekly attacks on United States interests. Enter Sam Fisher, who is given command of a new special operations and counter-terrorism unit called Fourth Echelon and tasked with hunting down The Engineers to put a stop to their activities. Blacklist might easily be one of the best stories in Splinter Cell history; the game is full of fun summer blockbuster-like plot twists and a few welcome character moments

actually make you care about the cast.

The missions have players skipping across the globe, sniping enemies as they parachute into Libya to extract a weapons smuggler, protecting a grounded plane as waves of terrorists zoom up the runway, and breaking into Guantanamo Bay to interrogate a prisoner. Blacklist's mission objectives are rarely repetitive and never boring. Whenever Blacklist started to get challenging, it was usually because I was failing to utilize Sam's sneaky skillset. Splinter Cell's mark-and-execute system is not only useful, but also extremely satisfying. Every time Sam performs a stealth takedown he earns an execute maneuver, which allows him to dispatch tagged enemies with the press of a button. I love the puzzle-like aspect of watching guards' behaviors, marking several targets, and then dropping down from a pipe to knock out one opponent before hitting the execute button to take out the remaining enemies in the room. My only major complaint is that this system is constrained by Sam's location; I was able to mark any enemy I saw, but sometimes I couldn't execute a marked target if he was on the other side of a large room – occasionally leaving me in sights of an active target.

Thankfully, Sam's wealth of stealth gear helps make up for his nearsightedness.

Smoke grenades, sticky shockers, and remote cameras are all useful for manipulating guard behavior and getting Sam out of dangerous situations, but my favorite new tool is the tri-rotor. It's a miniature aerial drone, which allows you to get a birds-eye view of a combat zone, mark targets, and shock enemies from three rooms away. I also loved the steady progression of new gear. After each mission, Sam gets a fresh infusion of cash from the U.S. government, which can be used to upgrade his equipment. For example, Sam's traditional night-vision goggles can be equipped with a sonar mode that allows him to watch enemies through walls and even track their footprints.

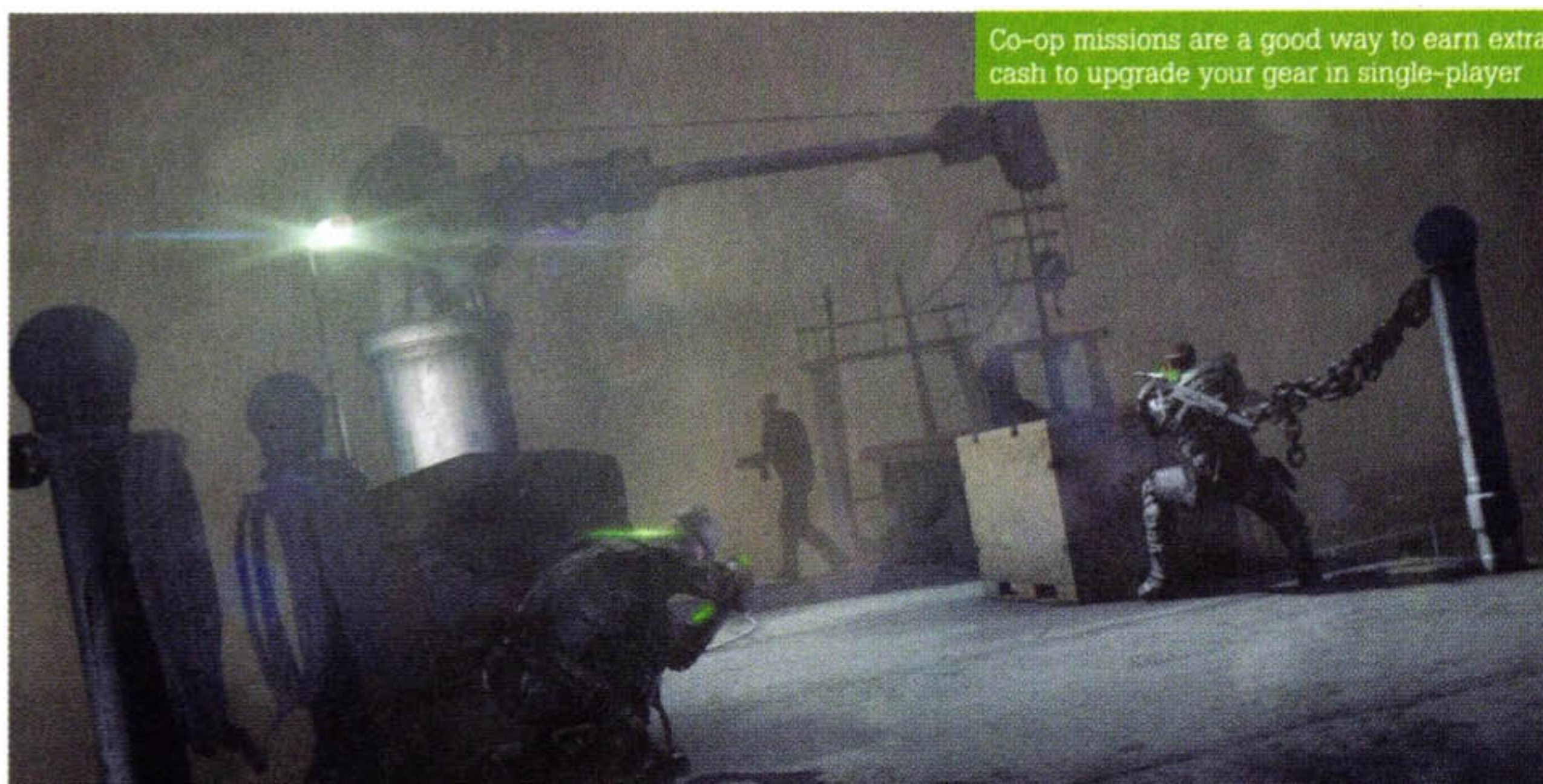
When you get tired of Sam's solo stealth, you can dive into the wealth of Blacklist's multiplayer missions. An abundance of optional co-op missions task you and a buddy (either online or through split-screen) with defending your position from waves of enemies, sneaking through terrorist encampments unseen, or trying to take down every hostile in an area without alerting their reinforcements.

Splinter Cell faithful will be most excited to see the return of the series' much-loved Spies vs. Mercs multiplayer mode. In this classic game type, a team of mercenaries must stop a group of spies from hacking a series of terminals. Mercs use traditional FPS gameplay while the spies have access to Fisher's arsenal of tricks that allow them to stick to the shadows and avoid open combat. Spies vs. Mercs has always been a refreshing break from traditional death match, and it remains so. Online matches are tense and bloody, and victory often requires careful coordination.

Splinter Cell: Blacklist is a beefy game, and it's well worth your time to explore all it offers. While a lot of stealth titles reward you for memorizing enemy patrols and choosing your movement carefully, Splinter Cell gives you the flexibility to be the kind of think-on-his-feet spy that Jason Bourne would idolize.

» **Ben Reeves**

Co-op missions are a good way to earn extra cash to upgrade your gear in single-player



Rayman Legends

Rayman hops from strength to strength



gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1 to 5-Player Platforming Wii U (1 to 4-Player PS3, 360) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft **Release** September 3 **Rating** E10+

Rayman Origins made me take notice of a franchise I had never given much thought to. After playing through its sequel, I have an even greater appreciation for the artistry that Ubisoft has brought to 2D platforming.

In an era in which game heroes carry virtual steamer trunks loaded with gear and power-ups, Rayman offers an elegant alternative. What you see is what you get. Aside from a rare boxing-glove upgrade, the characters' moves are the same from beginning to end. Their arsenal of jumps, glides, and melee attacks didn't leave me wanting more gimmickry, but instead made me feel all the more attuned to their precision and subtlety. Like Super Meat Boy, you learn exactly what characters are capable of, and how they can most efficiently maneuver around their worlds – a must, since the later levels are hard as nails.

Instead of simply treading water, Rayman Legends tackles new environmental themes and unexpected gameplay twists – including a stealth-based section and a level that plays a lot like a Metroid-style world. You won't see yet another ice level or desert zone; instead, you explore spy-themed underwater lairs, bizarre nightmares, and other imaginative venues. The game's new lighting engine adds another layer of visual flair to what was already a beautiful series. Ubisoft has even included remastered versions of levels from Origins that feature graphical updates and design tweaks.

Several auto-scrolling sections incorporate the game's stellar soundtrack, including a mariachi-inspired version of Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger." Players' jumps and attacks are timed to fit the music, and it plays like equal parts platformer and rhythm game. I only wish there were more of these – they're

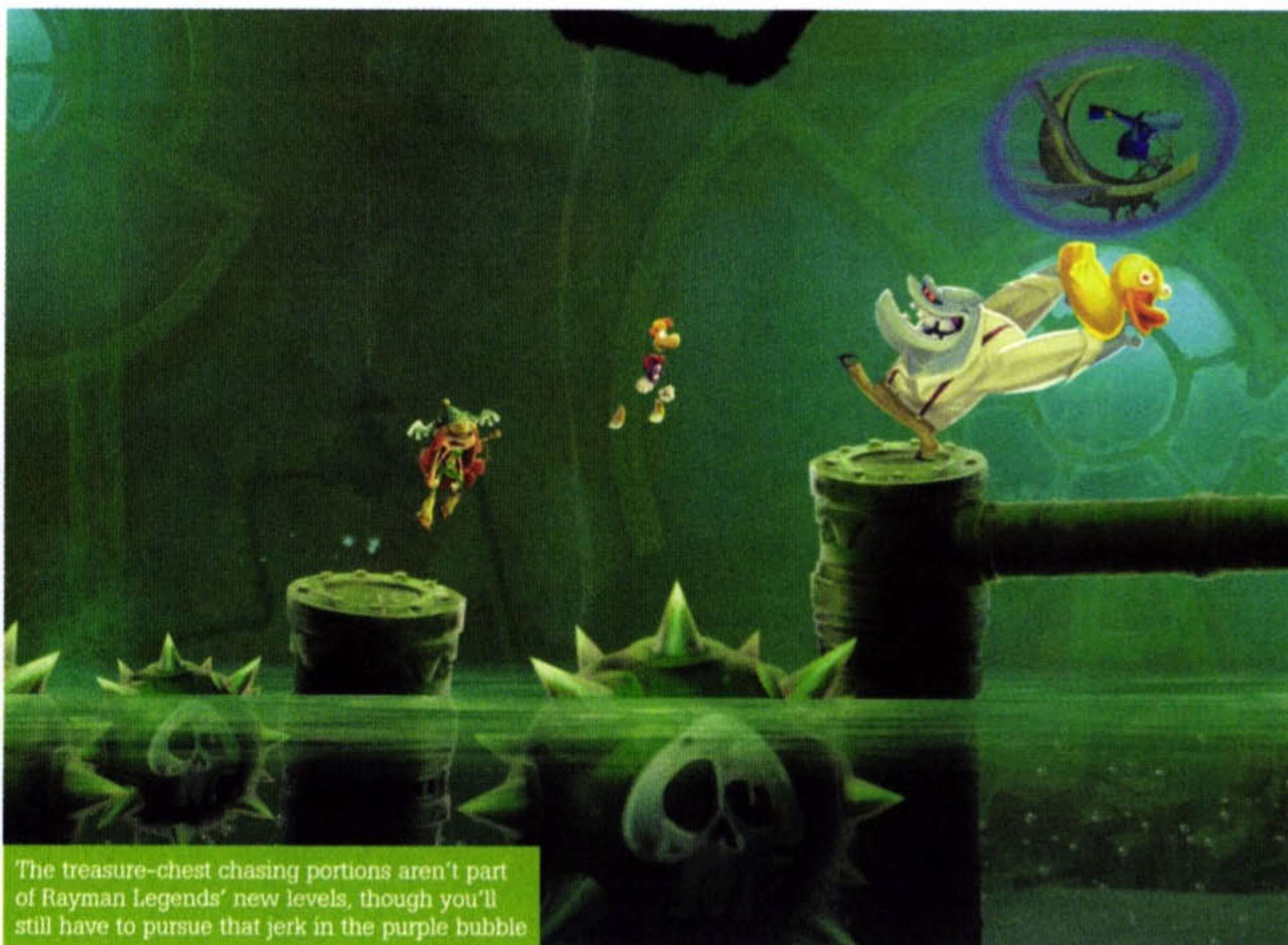
incredibly fun to play.

As much as I love Legends, it's certainly not a perfect game. Legends sticks with its predecessor in one unfortunate way, which is an overreliance on collecting items. You either squeak through levels perfectly the first time or have to revisit them later if you want to see everything the game has to offer. I'm all for gating off high-end rewards for that kind of dedication, but it was annoying to have to replay levels to free 9 or 10 of my hidden friends so that I could unlock the next set.

Fortunately, diversionary activities in the game make it feel like less of a grind. As you

progress, you unlock tweaked versions of completed levels, which offer high-pressure, time-based challenges. There's also a silly soccer minigame, as well as a variety of ranked online challenges that will be updated weekly.

All told, Rayman Legends provides top-notch gameplay with an expansive package of additional content. I'm glad to see the possibility of Rayman and his friends popping up at more regular intervals. If Ubisoft can maintain the series' current level of quality, by all means, keep 'em coming. I know I'll eagerly play each one. » **Jeff Cork**



The treasure-chest chasing portions aren't part of Rayman Legends' new levels, though you'll still have to pursue that jerk in the purple bubble

9

Wii U • PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Take Rayman and his crew out for another well-crafted platforming adventure

» **Graphics**

Pause the game, and Legends' exquisitely detailed world could be mistaken for concept art

» **Sound**

The soundtrack is absolutely great, and it's even incorporated into gameplay in a few clever levels

» **Playability**

Rayman and his crew stick to the run-and-jump basics, but they do so exceptionally well

» **Entertainment**

Ubisoft has inched the needle past the excellent Rayman Origins, delivering a great package with action, time-based challenges, chaotic multiplayer, and more

» **Replay Value**

High

The Edge

Rayman Legends was originally conceived as a Wii U game, and it shows in many ways. Murphy can be controlled on the GamePad's touchscreen, which lets players help friends by tickling enemies, making collectibles more valuable, and manipulating obstacles. That basic functionality remains on the Xbox 360 version, though Murphy is controlled by AI and players trigger his abilities with the press of a button. It's functional, but not as satisfying. When playing solo, however, some sections on Wii U require players to control Murphy while the AI bumbles its way through levels. It's easy to miss out on collectibles or lose lives through no real fault of your own. Playing solo isn't the best way to experience the game, but without online multiplayer, it might be hard for some folks to round up a group for couch co-op. Wii U players get exclusive Mario and Luigi character skins.



Diablo III

Blizzard's return to consoles is a smashing success

9.25

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Redesign the PC original for consoles while retaining all of the depth and replayability

» **Graphics**

Impressive physics and special effects make up for the lack of detail on the miniature character models

» **Sound**

Diablo III's soundtrack is largely forgettable, but the sound effects nicely complement the absurd action

» **Playability**

Having direct control over your character's movement is liberating. I can't imagine going back to the PC's point-and-click interface

» **Entertainment**

Everything you love about Diablo III is here, minus the PC version's more controversial components. What more could you ask for?

» **Replay Value**

High



Style 1 to 4-Player Role-Playing Publisher Blizzard Entertainment Developer Blizzard Entertainment Release September 3 Rating M

After more than a decade of creating titles exclusively for home computers, Blizzard is finally inviting console gamers back into the fold with a retooled version of its critically acclaimed dungeon crawler, Diablo III. After spending numerous hours pillaging Sanctuary's monster-laden realm, I'm ready to wish the PC version a fond farewell; all of the components the developer has added, tweaked, and removed for the console market make me vastly prefer this new-and-improved version for my endless demon-slaying adventures.

The biggest change awaiting console gamers is the new control scheme, which eschews the series' traditional point-and-click interface for direct control of your character's movement via the left stick and a new directional dodge move performed with the right stick. These changes don't transform Diablo III into God of War, but they do result in more responsive character movement and more engaging combat overall. Drawing in waves of beasts with a barbarian's ground stomp and dispatching them with a single, cleaving blow is empowering. Sniping foes from a distance with a Demon Hunter's exploding bola shots requires more finesse, but backflipping away from charging foes while laying down slowing traps can make you feel like a pro – even on the unapologetically easy normal difficulty. Despite the new console-friendly control scheme, all of the tactical depth and character build options are still here, along with an endless stream of randomly generated loot, enemies, and levels that beg for multiple playthroughs.

Unfortunately, the inventory redesign doesn't fare as well. The radial menu for viewing and selecting equipment is decent, but comparing item attributes is more time consuming than the PC version. Thankfully, Blizzard has included a junk function, allowing you to mark equipment for mass sale/salvage. All items now take up a single inventory slot

(the PC version's puzzle-like element of fitting different-sized items into your inventory is gone), which cuts down on trips back to town, but I still spent a lot of time managing my loot.

Equally important is what Blizzard has excluded from the console version. Console players don't need to create a Battle.net account, and can play the game offline to their heart's content. The gold and real-money auction houses have also been scrapped; gamers have mixed feelings on whether the auction houses helped or hindered the game and Blizzard's attempt to balance it. Either way, the developer is skipping the grand experiment on consoles and has tweaked loot drops to be more relevant to players. I have no complaints; I'm not interested in injecting real-world economics into my play sessions, and although I junk far more items than I use, I've replaced my characters' equipment by finding, buying (from the in-game merchants), and crafting items in equal measures.

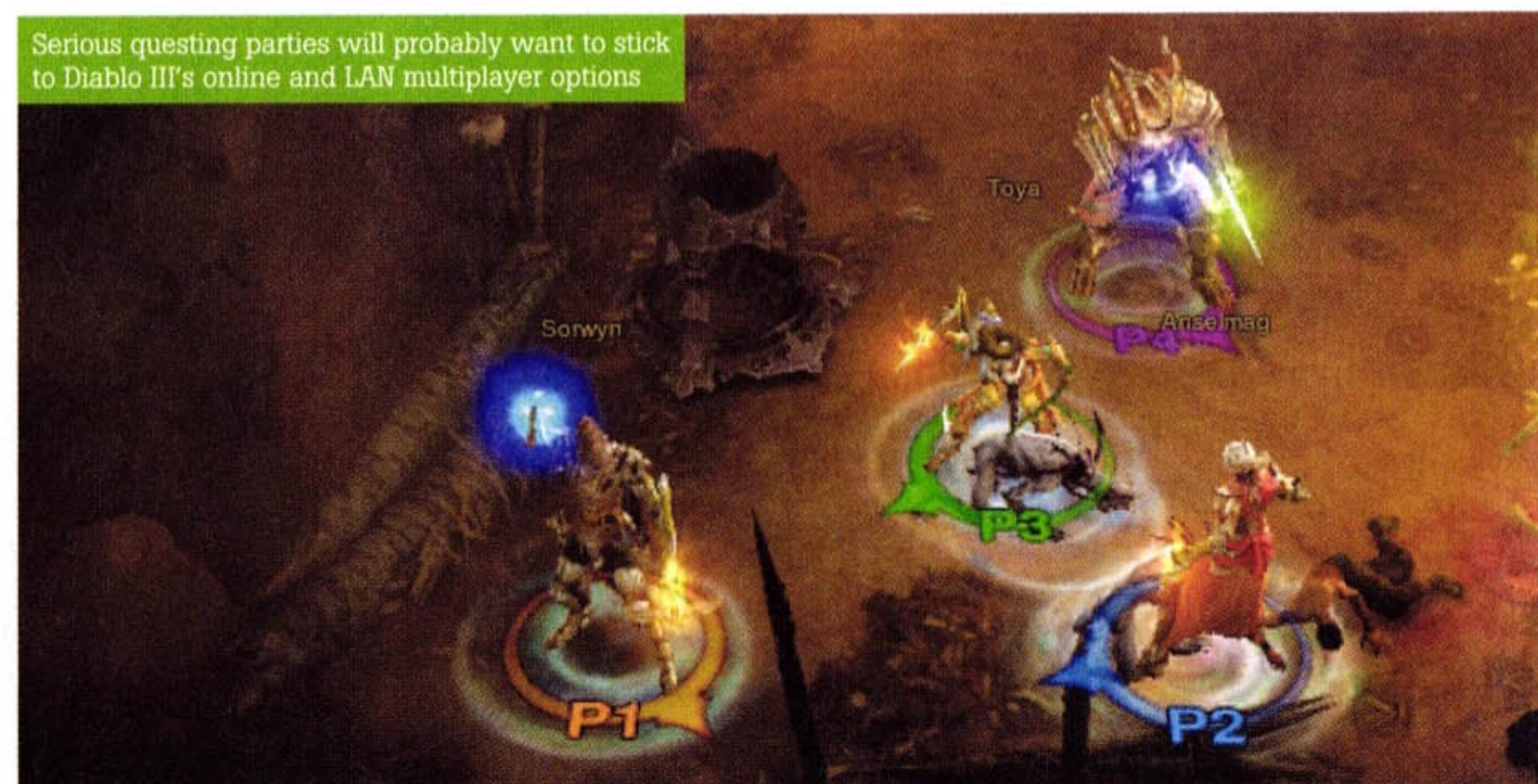
Diablo III is still more fun with a friend (or three), and provides the online and LAN

multiplayer options you'd expect, allowing you to team up with friends or random players while retaining your own loot. The new 4-player couch co-op is less appealing; hacking and slashing enemies with everyone on the same screen is certainly fun, but the game's complexity works against you. Players must share loot drops, and bringing up the inventory pauses the game for everyone. A quick equip option keeps players out of menus as much as possible, but it doesn't convey the magic attributes of items, and you need to take turns pausing the action to assign new skills. I can see the setup working for dedicated two-person teams, but larger parties are probably better off playing together online.

The console version of Diablo III is different from the PC version, and some diehard fans will denounce it for that reason alone. For me, however, it's different in all the right ways. With an engaging new control scheme, fewer online hurdles, and all the depth of the original, taking on Diablo's legion of demon lords has never been more enjoyable.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**

Serious questing parties will probably want to stick to Diablo III's online and LAN multiplayer options



The Bureau: XCOM Declassified

Rewriting history

Style 1-Player Action Publisher 2K Games Developer 2K Marin Release August 20 Rating M

7.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Repel an alien invasion during the height of the Cold War in a prequel to the sci-fi XCOM story

» **Graphics**

Early 1960s America is well presented. Colors are muted, calling to mind TV and movies of the period

» **Sound**

Tense and atmospheric music is muddled by too much repetition and occasional sound effect and voice bugs

» **Playability**

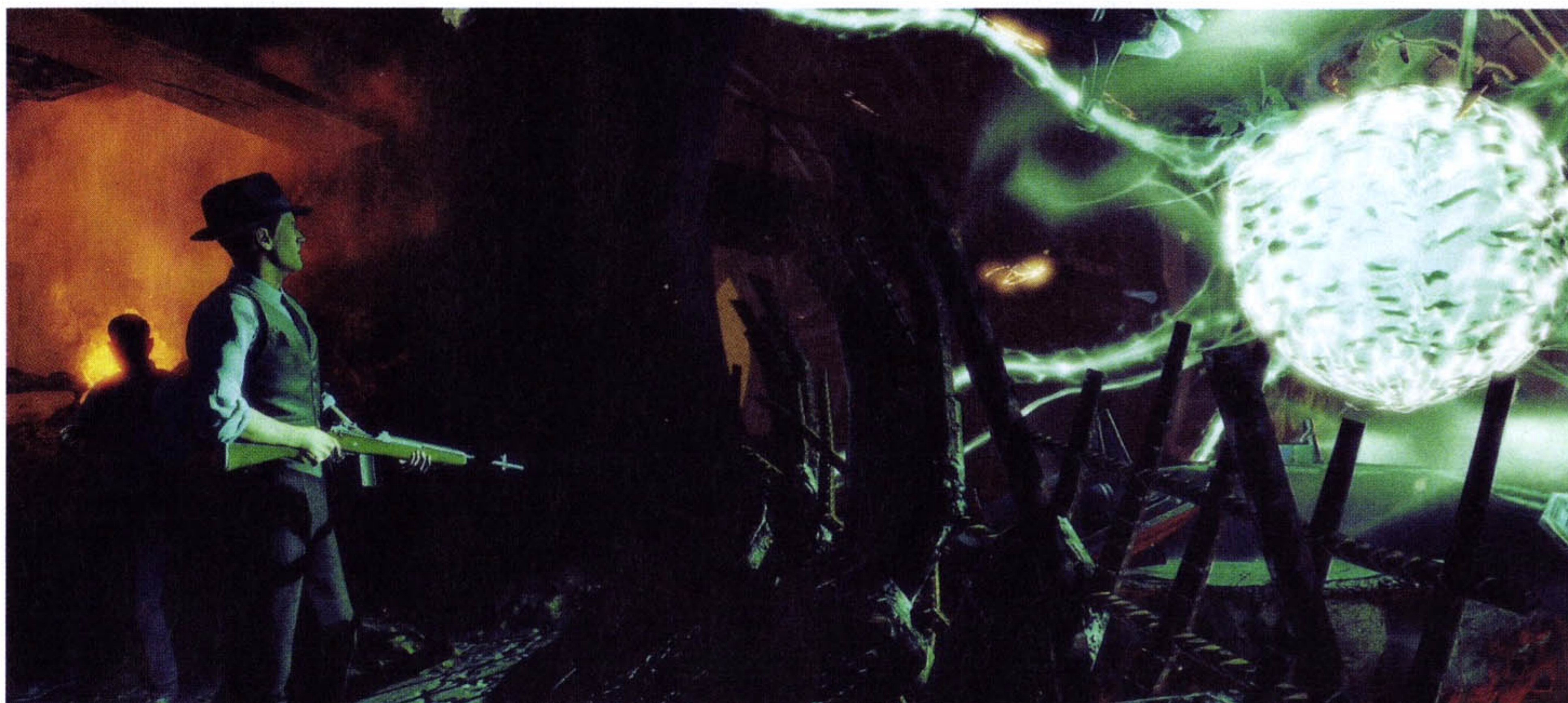
Success is contingent on learning and using the strategic options. Early battles can be frustrating since you have fewer options

» **Entertainment**

Even with a confusing plot and balance issues, The Bureau's mix of tactics and action is engaging

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low



Like its secret agents, The Bureau has gone through a number of identities over many years of development before settling into its current form. All that change has resulted in a game full of interesting ideas – but not all of them are successfully implemented. This prequel to the XCOM story promises action-packed battles, but also aims for the franchise's signature tactical sophistication. It borrows character conversations and upgrades from the world of RPGs, but doesn't embrace the full measure of choice that comes with that genre. It wants to tell a world-altering story of alien conquest and control of Earth, but won't do anything that would damage its continuity with the later game.

The Bureau puts you in control of William Carter, a government agent with a tragic past who is caught up in the events of an alien invasion. As the U.S. lives in fear of the Soviet Union, a far more dangerous foe arrives to threaten the American dream. Carter and the rest of the newly formed XCOM agency must hold the line against the aliens while trying to keep the public in the dark to prevent widespread panic. The nods to 1960s Americana throughout the story are great, from the anachronistic dialogue to the dated technology on display. The juxtaposition of the garish alien tech and otherworldly monsters against this backdrop makes for a compelling setting.

The circular conversation wheel, third-person cover-based action, and suite of powers at your disposal all show Mass Effect's strong influence on The Bureau. For better and worse, the fingerprints of BioWare's sci-fi trilogy are all over the gameplay and story. Unfortunately, Mass Effect's fascinating party dynamics, interesting character classes, and story choices don't transfer over. Instead, your companions are mostly generic secret

agents. Even with the ability to customize their appearance, they remain lifeless. Between missions, a few characters back at base offer lengthy conversations, but these exchanges are dull and bereft of any meaningful decisions.

The meat of The Bureau lies in the combat missions, during which Carter and his team infiltrate alien strongholds. Battles occasionally offer moments of brilliance as you fire off a slew of powers and flank the bad guys, but they are often frustrating. Enemies take too long to kill, and cheap deaths seem to come out of nowhere.

Unlike a traditional shooter, The Bureau demands that you regularly pull up a power wheel and set commands for your hero and his allies. Sadly, without regular babysitting, your teammates often make terrible decisions, becoming a detriment to the mission. As in XCOM: Enemy Unknown, defeated squad members can bleed out and permanently die without prompt attention. This isn't nearly as engaging in a fast-paced action game as it is in a turn-based strategy affair, and I usually reloaded a checkpoint

rather than face the prospect of building a new agent.

Early battles are frustrating as you get a handle on the stiff aiming and required tactical tools, but the game hits a sweet spot about halfway through. Armed with a number of interesting powers like lift, drone deployment, mind control, and turret placement, working through the well-designed battlefields and getting the drop on your foes is fun. Anyway you cut it, The Bureau is not designed to be easy, and higher difficulties present a potent challenge.

As it winds towards completion, the plot jumps the rails more than once. I lost touch with what was going on, but eventually I was charmed by the pure insanity on display. Even as the story wears out its welcome, gonzo story points and exciting choices reinvigorate the final act. I wish more of the game was characterized by the dramatic decisions found in the final hours. The Bureau tries to be many things, and succeeds only moderately at most of them. Even so, I'm happy this long-in-gestation project has finally seen the light of day. » **Matt Miller**



Payday 2

You can take this heist to the bank

8.25

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Become a player in the criminal underworld by knocking over jewelry stores, robbing banks, and running drugs

» Graphics

The 30 locations offer much more variety than the last game, but the environments still get repetitive

» Sound

Simon Viklund's electronic soundtrack perfectly captures the tension of attempting to pull off a heist and the anxiety when the job inevitably goes awry

» Playability

Like classic heist movies such as *Heat* and *Ocean's Eleven*, *Payday 2* trades on the thrill and danger of operating on the wrong side of the law

» Entertainment

Payday 2 is meant to be played cooperatively with three other people. If you're a person short expect a much tougher job thanks to the unintelligent teammate AI

» Replay Value

High



Style 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** Overkill Software **Release** August 13 (PC), August 16 (PS3, Xbox 360) **Rating** M

After studying the blueprints and reading the dossier, my crew knows the plan. Our job is to snatch four paintings using whatever means necessary. While the Mastermind and Ghost pick the side door lock and move into the museum, the Enforcer and I go up to the roof to get the lay of the land. A security detail patrols the galleries, while another guard sits behind the desk in the front entryway. We mark the targets so the other two know where they are. The getaway van is idling around the block, waiting for us to make our move.

It doesn't take long for the heist to head south. The entryways between galleries are guarded by laser detectors, and while doubling back, a security guard spots Ghost. He instinctively headshots the poor sap, and the gunshot echoes down the hallway. So much for stealth. Another guard trips the security alarm and the entire building goes into lockdown. With all the paintings now protected by metal bars, we need to drill into the security room. The cops will be here soon, and we haven't even grabbed our first painting.

Welcome to the haywire world of *Payday 2*, where almost nothing goes as planned and every job turns into a lengthy exchange of bullets with local law enforcement. This sequel reinforces the addictive gameplay experience of the 2011 original with 30 mission types, a deeper skill/upgrade system, and refined gunplay.

Upstart criminals can find work on Crime.net, a LinkedIn of sorts for those looking for a big score. At the beginning of your illegal career, you only have a few jobs to choose from, but as you prove your worth, you gain access to more intricate and difficult jobs with much higher payouts.

After knocking off jewelry stores and banks, I was soon involved in much more complex dirty work. During the three-day art job, we broke into the museum to steal the precious artwork, embedded small cameras into the frames to track the buyer (a prominent politician), then broke into his luxury apartment to download sensitive information from his server. Other freelance gigs included stealing an engine prototype from

an inventor, cooking a batch of meth during a drug raid, and laying waste to a mall to send a message to its owner. The mission diversity is a much-needed step forward for the franchise.

Completing a heist rewards you with the agreed upon fee (most of which goes into an offshore account you can't touch), a loot drop, and XP that feeds into your RPG-like level progression. Each time you rank up, you gain an ability point you can spend on one of the four skill trees.

Weapons are unlocked for purchase as you level up, but getting good attachments requires a bit of luck. You can only purchase barrels, stocks, or sights after you receive them from the randomized loot drop at the end of a successful heist. These upgrades aren't cheap, either – one weapon sight costs a shocking \$240,000. This convoluted reward structure stands in the way of creating your favored loadout; even after 20 hours I still didn't have anything close to my ideal gun modifications.

The best way to play *Payday 2* is with three other friends; the teammate AI isn't savvy enough to keep up on the job. The AI-controlled characters can handle a gun, but oftentimes wander out of a building into compromising situations. You can order them

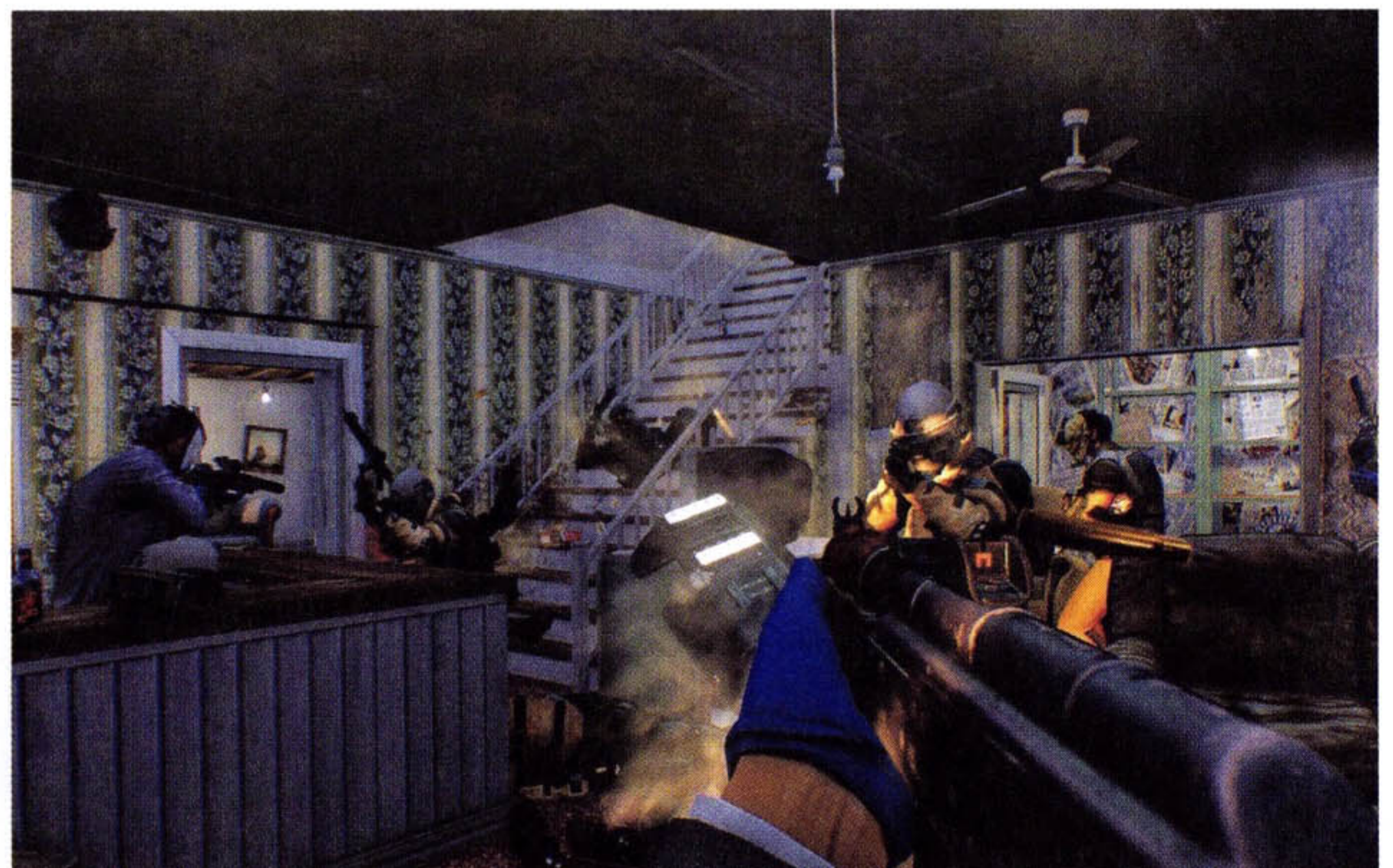
to follow you, but they won't help drag the loot back to the car. This can double or triple the time it takes to successfully pull off a job while under constant fire. The enemy AI can be similarly harebrained; I caught several SWAT members cluelessly staring into oblivion in the middle of a police assault.

Payday 2 gives players the tools to attempt stealthy heists (some of which aren't accessible until you're well into the game's 100 progression levels), but going the Mission Impossible route requires a refined balance of patience, coordination, cleverness, and luck beyond that of the normal player group. I'm curious if anyone can successfully rob a bank or museum without resorting to violence, because we rarely made it past two-minutes without having cops arrive on the scene.

Pulling off a frictionless heist is the exception to the rule in *Payday 2*, but the tension is still palpable as you try to orchestrate a robbery without getting caught, and the adrenaline flows steadily as you inevitably repel the barrage of police waves while trying to make your getaway. The overly expensive upgrade system and lackluster AI could use some work, but the minute-to-minute action is thrilling enough to overcome these complaints. » **Matt Bertz**

The Edge

If you have a choice between platforms, I strongly recommend playing *Payday 2* on PC. The PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 versions are competent ports, but the PC version features dramatically improved texture resolutions – provided your rig is up to the task. I encountered a crash that occurs immediately after a successful heist, which cost me the payout, loot, and XP rewards, but Overkill says this is a known issue being addressed in the day-one patch. Even better, the PC version is \$10 less than its console counterparts.





Saints Row IV

Superpowers can be a blessing and a curse

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) Publisher Deep Silver Developer Volition Release August 20 Rating M

When Volition was still under the THQ banner, then-president Jason Rubin took a look at the Enter the Dominatrix expansion for Saints Row: The Third and determined that its additions warranted a full-fledged sequel. Now that it's a stand-alone experience, this entry in the franchise attempts to go even further in its pursuit of no-holds-barred wackiness. It comes with some drawbacks, but Saints Row IV certainly accomplishes its goal.

The addition of superpowers is the one major addition that distinguishes this entry from its predecessor. Early on, the player character (who is now the President of the United States) is granted the ability to run at lightning speed and leap higher than many buildings. Collecting data clusters allows you to upgrade your abilities, and you can eventually become powerful enough to glide from one side of the map to the other in less than a minute. Previous games got crazy when you were mowing enemies down with high-powered weaponry, but levitating, shrinking, and mind-controlling your foes takes things to another level.

These powers are a blast, and scavenging for the 1,000-plus clusters is addictive in much the same way as Crackdown's orb system. That said, they virtually eliminate any need to use vehicles. When I looked at the statistics screen 17 hours in, I saw that I had only entered eight vehicles, and almost all of those were required for missions. While flying is objectively more useful than any car, part of me missed the thrill of getting a unique vehicle that I knew I'd be utilizing often. That crazy Tron-like motorcycle would have been awesome in previous games, but in Saints Row IV it's simply a less-efficient way to explore Steelport. Thankfully, you have plenty of other rewards including XP bonuses, new superpowers, and AI companions.

The bulk of Saints Row IV is spent in a computer simulation that's clearly a send-up of *The Matrix*. With its overt parodies of other properties such as *Metal Gear Solid*, *Mass Effect*, *They Live*, and many more, the humor often resembles a *Scary Movie*-like spoof-fest. Some of this scripted humor falls flat, but the absurdity of the gameplay is good for its share of laughs. I loved flying high above an

enemy stronghold, taking out numerous enemies with a thunderous stomp attack, sucking survivors into a black hole, and then sprinting up a skyscraper and flying away, all to the tune of Montell Jordan's "This Is How We Do It." Most of the weapons can be upgraded to be as powerful as they are ridiculous, so you can utilize the Inflate-O-Ray, Dubstep Gun, and a lightsaber as often for practicality as you do for humor.

Because of the computer simulation angle, the game often plays up glitches in the environment. Cars become pixelated and NPCs become hilariously buggy near unstable rifts, but not all of the hiccups are intentional. My save file played the same audio log at the beginning of every session, I suffered more than one hard freeze, and a necessary superpower was inexplicably locked during a late-game boss fight.

I was also irked by the fact that the entire open world always takes place at night, since the dark and gloomy color palette gets old quickly. A post-game unlock allows you to change the time of day at will, so I'm disappointed that Volition would choose to set the action in a perpetually dim environment.

Despite a few frustrations, glitches, and questionable design decisions, Saints Row IV is still a ton of fun to play through – whether solo or in the series' returning co-op mode. Vehicles may not be as exciting this time around, but the thrill of soaring through the skies and navigating with ease makes up for it. With tons of upgrades and weapon customization, making your President more and more powerful is an addictive and rewarding affair, and you can become virtually unstoppable by the end. Saving Steelport may not be quite as novel of an experience this time around, but an arsenal of new abilities and weapons ensures that you are doing it with more style and spectacle than ever before.

» Dan Ryckert

8.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Save the world from aliens in the increasingly bizarre Saints Row universe

» **Graphics**

The framerate holds steady and effects look good, but the always-dark environment is annoying

» **Sound**

If you want a soundtrack as silly as the game itself, keep yourself tuned into The Mix radio station

» **Playability**

It's impressive that superpowers have been integrated so smoothly in a game with an already-packed control scheme

» **Entertainment**

Doesn't quite reach the highs of the previous entry, but it's still a wacky good time

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Shaundi returns as a loyal friend





Madden NFL 25

An ambivalent anniversary

7.75

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

The game features the second iteration of the Infinity physics engine and the return of owners mode

» **Graphics**

There's not a lot new to see, and the faces and bodies of coaches and owners look odd and out of proportion

» **Sound**

Nantz and Sims are great to listen to, even if their comments and the context haven't improved greatly

» **Playability**

I never felt comfortable when tackling, even after fiddling with the tackling assist and/or heat seeker tackle settings

» **Entertainment**

Madden 25 shows flashes, but its features do not deliver consistent, significant results

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

Style 1 to 6-Player Sports (PS3), 1 to 4-Player (360) (6-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** August 27 **Rating** E

It's fitting that an iteration celebrating the 25th anniversary of Madden is littered with references to past games and hampered by the feeling that, no matter what has been done for this particular version of the game, the foundations it was built upon this console generation are not fully up to the task of delivering a highly polished product.

The uneven execution of ideas that have characterized Madden in this generation continue. You can see it in an owner's mode that changes little of how you run a franchise. It's also evident in the game's second stab at a physics model that produces tackles and hits that you would have never seen before, but which often inexplicably do not accurately take into account the mass of the players involved. These collisions are also at the whim of AI that has a hard time identifying targets to block, angles to take to a tackle, and sometimes even the awareness to trigger a tackle animation when the ball carrier is near.

Madden 25 does achieve a modicum of competency – and even excellence. Another year with the Infinity engine has paid noticeable dividends in the kinds of tackles seen, despite the work needed to produce consistent outcomes in player contact. Still, the inconsistency has me pining for an unambiguous step

forward such as last year's revamped passing game and the birth of Connected Careers.

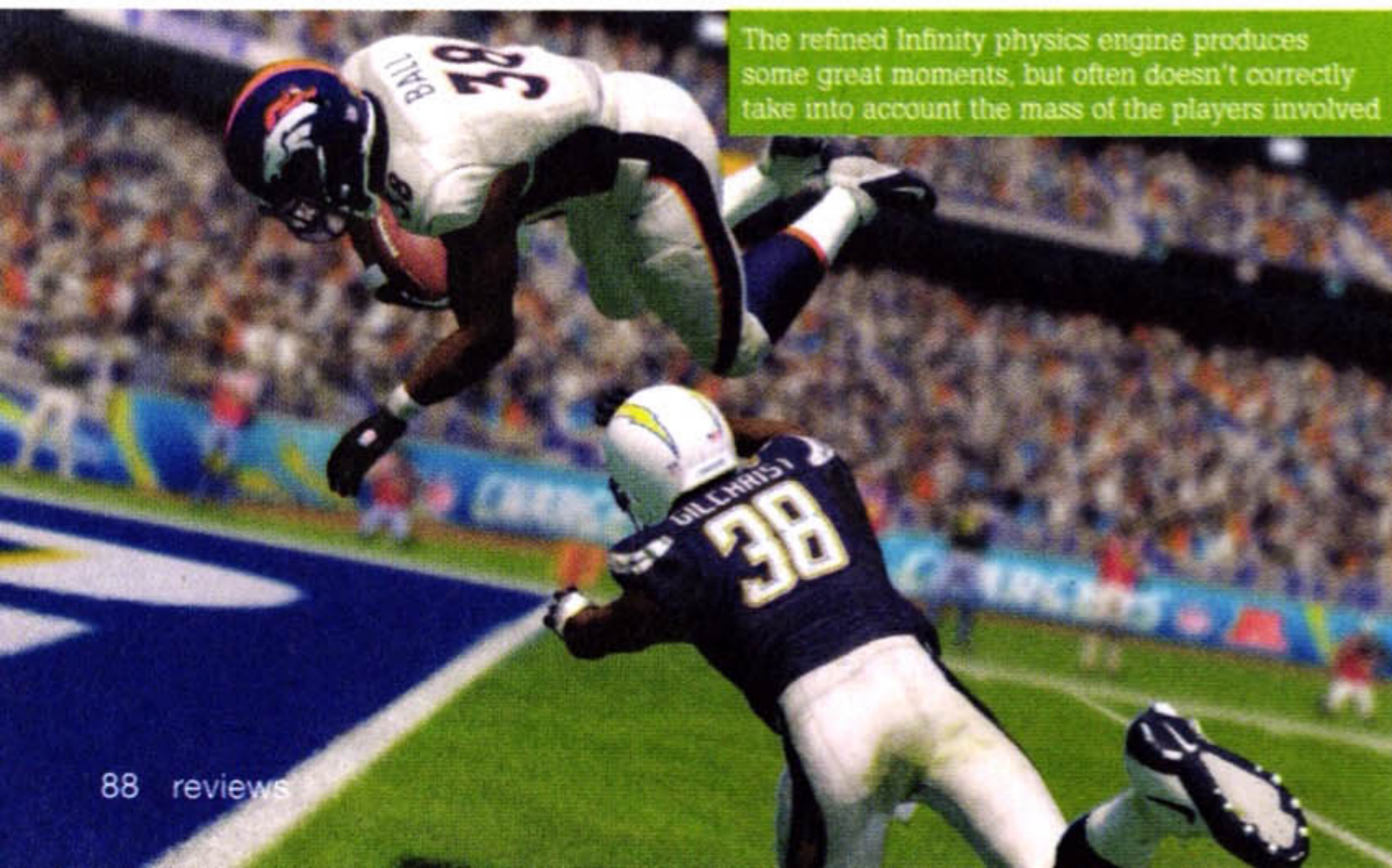
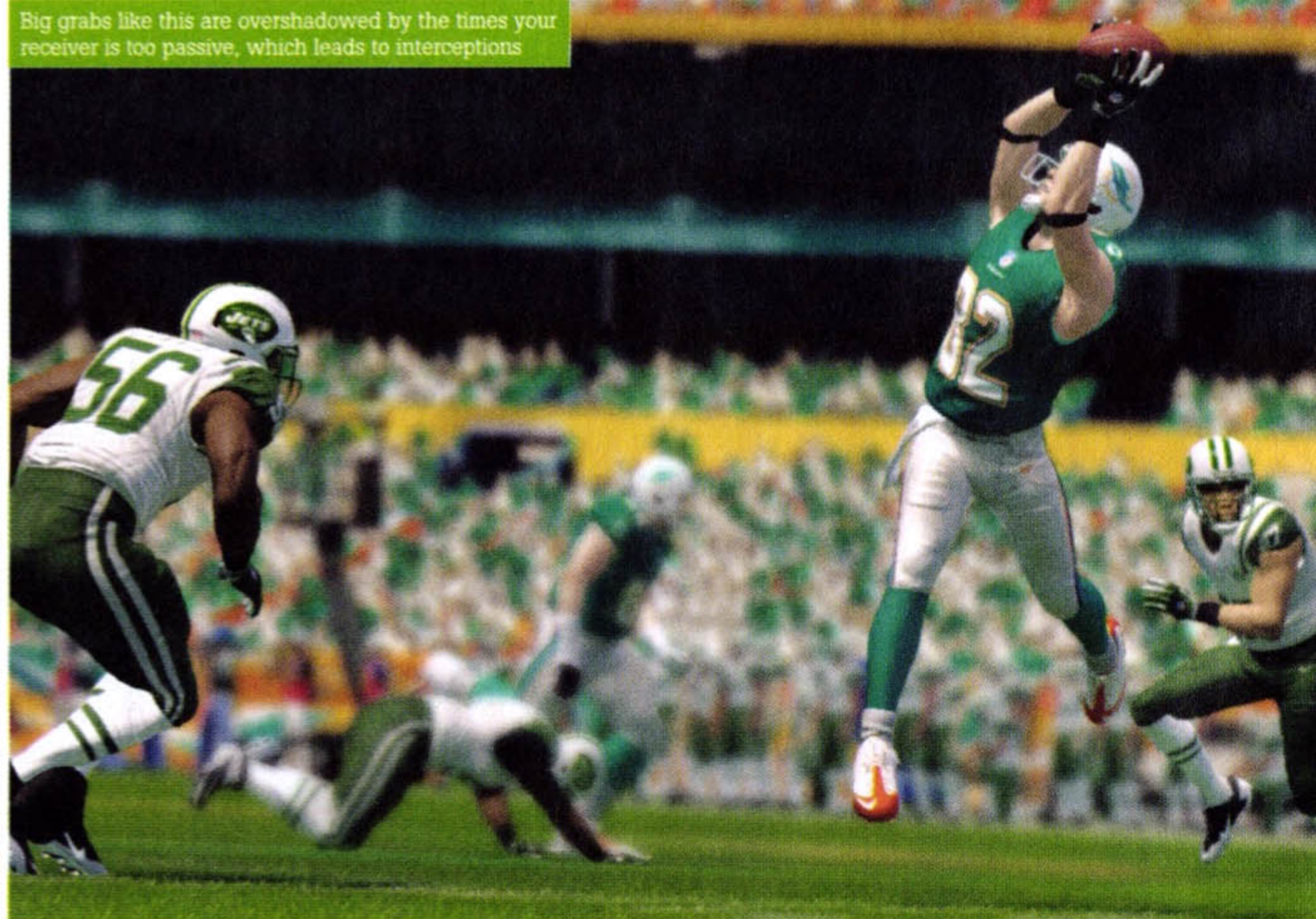
I hoped the return of owner functionality in Connected Franchises would be that advancement, but its revenue and fan happiness NFL ranking system is confusing (how could my Team Success rating get lower after going deep into the playoffs?) and, in the end, didn't matter. Even with a seemingly toxic combination of a bad stadium, a losing team, and high prices, I still could sign players and renovate my stadium. I like the fact that your team funds correlate directly to how much of a signing bonus you can offer players, the staff you hire, and the state of your stadium, but there are other franchise/money-related features that are still missing. These omissions include being able to offer different

contract options to players and restricted free agency.

These latter two points may be relatively insignificant, but the franchise mode still hasn't recovered all of the features that were previously purged, and presents limited choices such as not being able to negotiate rookie or in-season free agent contracts. Minute details like this are wrapped in larger-scale oddities such as a menu system that still buries or omits info.

Perhaps hoping for steps forward this late in a console generation is too much to hope for. But if the past is prologue, Madden 25's inability to separate features from fluff and meaningfully execute them has me worried for what we'll be asked to accept as progress in the next generation. » **Matthew Kato**

Big grabs like this are overshadowed by the times your receiver is too passive, which leads to interceptions



The refined Infinity physics engine produces some great moments, but often doesn't correctly take into account the mass of the players involved

NHL 14

The return of arcade hockey

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (10-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports Developer EA Canada Release September 10 Rating E

7.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept

Tune up the hitting and scoring to make the most accessible NHL game of the generation

» Graphics

Much better checking animations thanks to the Player Impact Engine, but the rest looks the same

» Sound

The commentary is in serious need of improvement. The duo of Gary Thorne and Bill Clement are still talking about things that happened years ago

» Playability

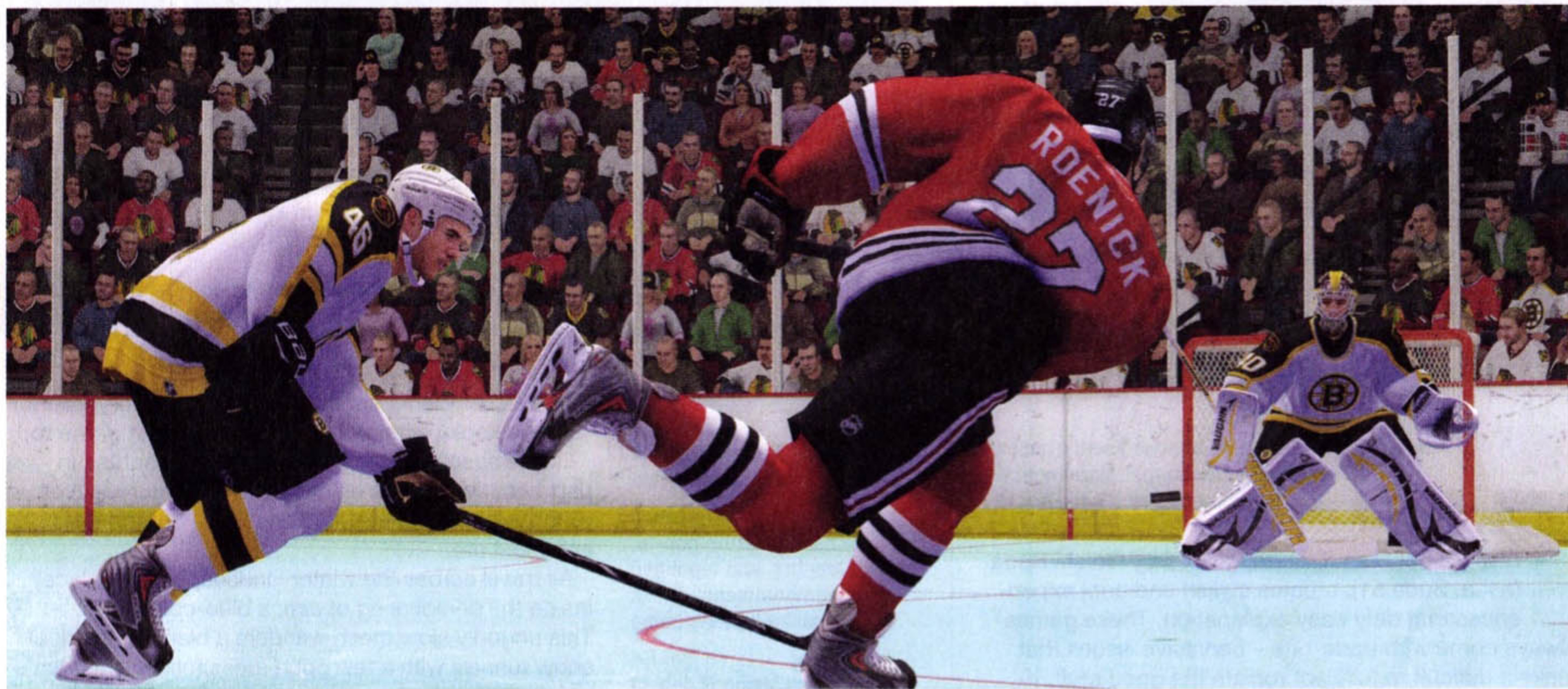
Much better hitting, scoring, and fighting, but the hardcore simulation mode plays too much like NHL 13

» Entertainment

The action on the ice is still fun, but the aging modes don't offer much draw

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Capturing the subtleties of a freewheeling sport like hockey isn't easy for game developers. Writing AI routines that know how to accompany a player-controlled skater during a breakout, provide ample forechecking support, maintain sound defensive positioning, and stickhandle through a sea of sticks and skates on the ice takes a lot of time and energy. As we come to the close of a console era, EA Canada left these issues for another day and instead took a high-percentage shot at the masses by making goals easier to come by, turning up the frequency of impactful checks, and revamping the fighting engine to make it fun again. On these points, NHL 14 succeeds – maybe to a fault.

Two of the three game styles introduced in NHL 14 cater to wide-open hockey. On both the casual and simulation settings, goals flow steadily, highlight reel checks abound, and everyone is spoiling for a fight to show off the much-improved fisticuffs. Even on the hardcore simulation setting, which is the online default, these arcade qualities shine through. The defense more aggressively prevents you from waltzing into the high slot – but when you get there, a well-placed wrister in the high corner frequently beats the goaltenders, which may be exploited online.

Every stop in play kicks off a potential scuffle between opposing teams, and players are too eager to drop the gloves whenever an important teammate gets upended. The result is an experience that feels more akin to *Slap Shot* than HBO's *24/7*; if you responded to every fight request the penalty box would be more populated than the team benches. Whether that is a good or a bad thing depends on your expectations. NHL '94 is considered a classic sports game, and it didn't skimp on these arcade qualities. Fans looking for a more realistic representation, however, need to spend time tweaking sliders

to get a more accurate experience.

Not all of NHL 14's gameplay changes skew toward the masses; a few smaller refinements are worth lauding. The poke checking is toned down compared to NHL 13, stick lifts are once again an effective defensive tactic, and skating feels more reactive than it did last year. I also like the more unpredictable puck physics. Gaining possession of a bouncing puck on the boards is slightly harder this year, which gives forecheckers a better chance at succeeding with the dump-and-chase strategy so pervasive in the NHL right now.

With a new collective bargaining agreement and lowered salary cap, NHL general managers had to acclimate themselves to a different style of management this year. I wish we could say the same about NHL 14's Be A GM mode, which is as old and outdated as the Blackberry you manage your club from. EA Canada made some slight tweaks, like allowing you to retain salaries in trades and surfacing more news in the message center, but even with these amendments it remains the least compelling franchise mode in sports games. Prospects take too long to develop, older players don't regress, free agency pools are too frequently devoid of blockbuster talent, and you still can't resign players during the season. Connected GM is largely hamstrung by the same issues, plus it has slow menus that suffer from a spartan design.

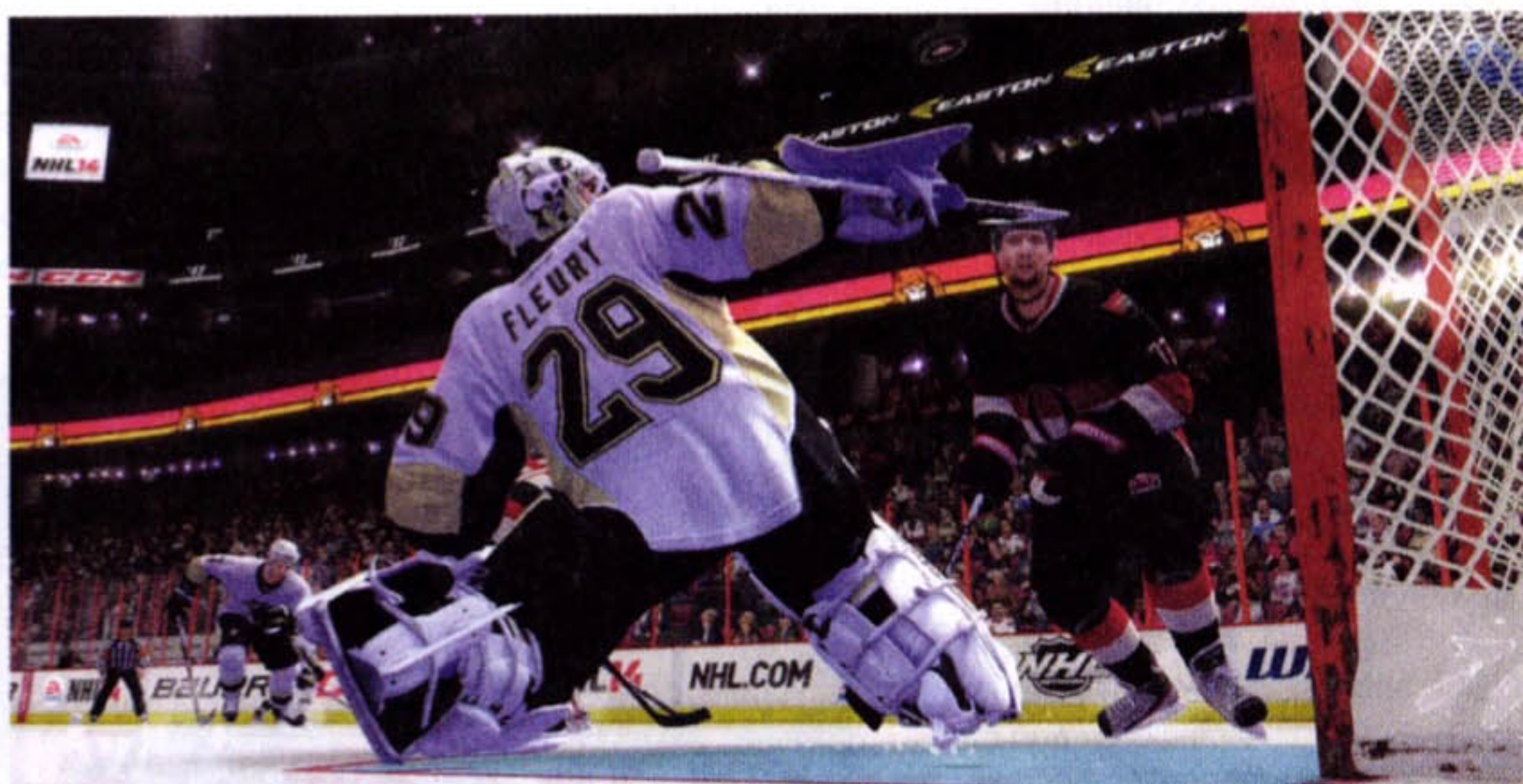
EA Canada spent more time revamping its Live the Life mode – the rebranding of Be A Pro. This year's version adds off-ice events like endorsements, media Q&As, pre-draft interviews, and likeability meters, but each feel half-baked in comparison to the superior My Player mode found in NBA 2K. Instead of showing your player during a press conference, you simply answer questions in a menu. A generic "hockey analyst" comments on your performances in the message center.

Given that the on-ice experience is largely unchanged, these new menus do little to make this a destination mode.

EA's other major selling point is the NHL '94 anniversary mode, which celebrates the classic game by bringing back the original controls, blue ice, and organ music. Just one thing is missing: the classic rosters that would make this feel like a true throwback mode. As is, I'd rather spend my time elsewhere.

The best experiences NHL 14 has to offer are online, with the EASHL and ultimate team modes. Neither has undergone drastic revisions, but the online seasons format migrates over from FIFA this year, so teams can move quickly from division to division and participate in monthly tournaments.

With its leaky goaltenders, heavy hitters, and eager fighters, NHL 14 may become the most popular hockey game of the generation for casual fans. However, the hardcore contingency looking for a deeper simulation experience may hang up their skates thanks to the arcade-leaning gameplay and dull game modes in desperate need of sharpening. » **Matt Bertz**





Killer Is Dead

An assassin who can't execute

6

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Xseed Games
Developer Grasshopper Manufacture
Release August 27 **Rating** M

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

The studio behind *Killer 7*, *No More Heroes*, and *Lollipop Chainsaw* brings you the story of an assassin and a bunch of crazy stuff from the moon

» **Graphics**

The stylized visuals would work great for a TV series, but the high contrast presents gameplay problems

» **Sound**

I like the music, but some of the characters (like your sidekick Mika) have awful and annoying voices

» **Playability**

Technical issues prevent combat from realizing its potential

» **Entertainment**

The focus on evasion and countering elevates the action above the average hack n' slash. Virtually everything else about the game drags it down

» **Replay Value**

Low

Gigolo Mode

Everyone has different thresholds for what they consider offensive, but *Killer Is Dead's* Gigolo mode is just embarrassing. In it, Mondo ogles women's legs and breasts while they aren't looking in order to unlock increasingly graphic sex scenes and new sub-weapons. The women aren't even characters – they're just awkward, wooden sexbots. While these missions are technically optional, why make players choose between having an optimized character and not being a pervert?

Grasshopper Manufacture, guided by Goichi Suda (a.k.a. Suda 51), creates stylish and cool experiences that defy easy explanation. These games always come with trade-offs – pervasive issues that make it difficult to fully appreciate the good stuff. If you were hoping that *Killer Is Dead* would break this trend, you should reevaluate your expectations.

I had the most fun with *Killer Is Dead* in the heat of battle. Players control Mondo, a hitman with a cybernetic arm who slashes his way through enemies from the moon. Dodging enemy attacks (while chaining your own) is the heart of combat, even though it may seem like a button-masher at first. Once you perfect the timing, you can perform flawless evades and rush in for a counterattack with ease. It makes you feel like the elite government assassin Mondo is supposed to be...when everything is working.

The high-contrast art style lends a cool flair to characters and environments, but works against you on the gameplay front. Telegraphed enemy attacks are easily lost in a black sea of environments and character models, making it difficult to read the action. Abundant screen tearing and the lack of a lock-on don't help, and the camera angles are uncooperative. All of these issues are especially frustrating during the boss battles that are supposed to feel climactic.

The ability to cycle through difficulties means that you can at least see the story through, but the plot doesn't make the gameplay any easier to bear. Just because I expect a story from Suda 51 to have a bunch of crazy nonsense doesn't make it any less disappointing when the basic pieces of the story never fall into place.

Killer Is Dead is intriguing – despite a mounting pile of evidence showing that it should be terrible. The characters and story are so outlandish and bizarre that they are fascinating – but the nonsense and clunky mechanics never coalesce into a satisfying experience. It lures you in with the promise of something unique, then botches the execution. » **Joe Juba**



Lost Planet 3

Banish this franchise to the outer reaches of space

6

Style 1-Player Action (10-Player Online)
Publisher Capcom **Developer** Spark Unlimited
Release August 27 **Rating** T

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Capcom upends the *Lost Planet* franchise once again

» **Graphics**

Constant texture pop-in, loading, and repetitive environments do not make a pretty game

» **Sound**

The voice acting is decent enough, but the script isn't interesting

» **Playability**

Poor rig controls and slow on-foot traversal wear on you throughout the campaign

» **Entertainment**

Keep your phone nearby to check email during frequent long loads and plodding mech travel

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

The PC Difference 6.5

If you're going to play *Lost Planet 3*, PC is the way to go. Texture pop-in is nonexistent, graphics and lighting are improved, and load times are reduced. Even though controllers are supported, mouse aiming adds accuracy and dramatically speeds up turns. Anything you can do to make this game feel faster is a huge bonus. Dodge rolls are awkward and key binding could be more flexible, but it's worth the trade off.

The *Lost Planet* series has a mixed history. From the kooky single-player tale of the first game to the absolutely bonkers co-op boss battles in part two, I've always enjoyed this adventurous (yet rough-around-the-edges) franchise – but the third entry lost me.

All travel across the winter landscape takes place inside the personal rig of Jim, a blue-collar hero. This ungodly slow mech wanders a bland network of snow tunnels with a few open areas for battling. Jim's bosses say no mech weapons are allowed, so all fights consist of a meager collection of melee swipes and grabs. Distance and reach are hard to gauge, resulting in a lot of flailing instead of connecting. Outside of the mech, you use weapons like pistols, shotguns, and assault rifles, but they are too weak unless you unlock (and stay stocked up on) alt ammo.

Boss fights – the focus of *Lost Planet 2* – are scaled back, involving sloppy mech combat or repetitive on-foot dodge-and-shoot tactics. Regular encounters are even duller; you fight the same handful of Akrids most of the time, though some inept human enemies try to shoot through their cover or leave their heads poking out for easy pickings.

Online multiplayer showcases grapple hook verticality, and includes the highly mobile Vital Suits from past games. Akrid Survival is the most notable mode, featuring two teams battling separate waves of AI creatures – then the doors open and the teams fight over a common zone. This mashup of two game types is jarring, and left me wishing for a standard Horde mode done well instead of two mediocre styles jammed into one mode. At least the ability to choose your own weapon and skill progression is a step up over the randomness of *Lost Planet 2*.

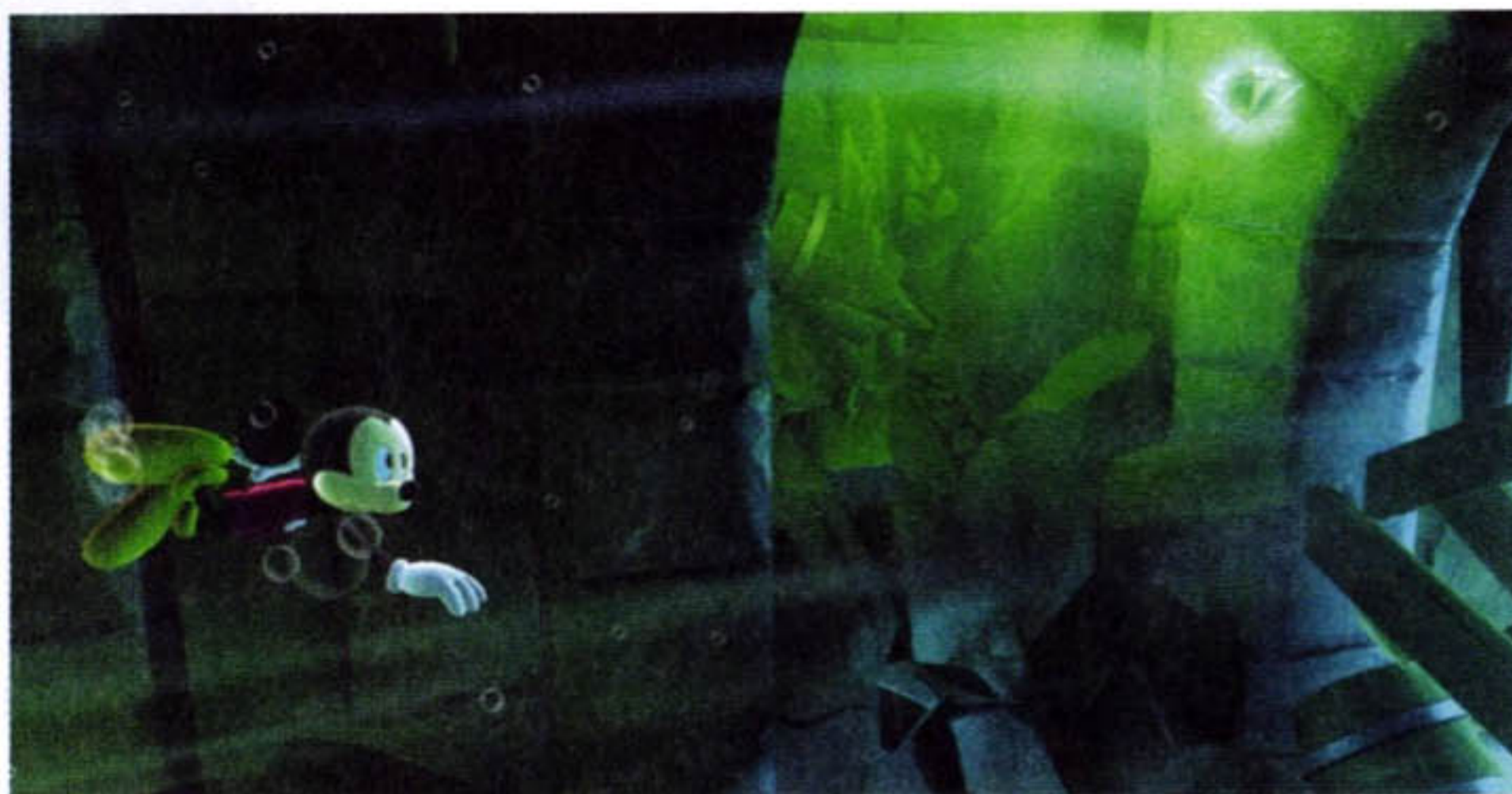
Popping orange Akrid weak points and mopping up goo in *Lost Planet 3* can still be satisfying. The first two games balanced out any unsavory elements with mega moments and straightforward fun, but this one doesn't have enough thermal energy to overcome its problems. » **Bryan Vore**



The pistol's alt ammo collects Akrid info for your bestiary

Castle Of Illusion

A charming but forgettable Disney platformer



7.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Explore whimsical side-scrolling worlds as Disney's timeless mascot

» **Graphics**
Colorful backdrops and detailed character animations bring the wonderful world to life

» **Sound**
Richard McGonagle, the voice of Uncharted's Sully, is a soothing narrator. Former Rare composer Grant Kirkhope expertly modernizes the catchy soundtrack

» **Playability**
The platforming is tight in both the two- and three-dimensional sections

» **Entertainment**
A cute but forgettable adventure. The experience ends just when things start to pick up

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Sega Studios Australia **Release** September 3 (PlayStation 3), September 4 (Xbox 360, PC) **Rating** E

Mickey Mouse has had a tough run in games recently. Junction Point's console Epic Mickey games disappointed Mouseketeers, as did DreamRift's spiritual successor to the 1990 Genesis classic Castle of Illusion on 3DS. Sega's new downloadable remake of the aforementioned Genesis platformer outperforms those titles, but it ends up feeling formulaic by modern standards.

Castle of Illusion isn't a one-to-one remake of the original, but it features familiar levels, bosses, and side-scrolling platforming sequences. It also incorporates checkpoints and generous retries, which curbs most of the original's challenge. The most drastic

difference is the inclusion of 3D boss fights and platforming sequences. Mickey leaps across macaroons in a milkshake river and flees a giant apple while running toward the camera Crash Bandicoot-style.

Whether bounding off the heads of toy soldiers in 2D or evading a huge jack-in-the-box in 3D, the platforming feels responsive and reliable. Despite the solid controls, the action in Castle of Illusion isn't exciting. The remixed levels and 3D sections show Sega's eagerness to rejuvenate the original's 23-year-old design, but those changes don't bring it up to today's platforming standards. Leaping over a boss's shockwave attack in a 3D battle

is clichéd enough that I can't pretend it's fresh and exciting just because it's new to this game. Players may have loved hopping across floating leaves in 1990, but the pretty new visuals can't rescue it from mediocrity.

Castle of Illusion's colorful worlds, good controls, and detailed character animations are charming (A giant, licorice dragon boss killed me several times because I was too busy admiring its craftsmanship). If you're a diehard Disney fan in the mood for a short, breezy platformer, this may hit the spot. However, the core gameplay beneath the endearing Disney aesthetic left me wanting more. » **Tim Turi**

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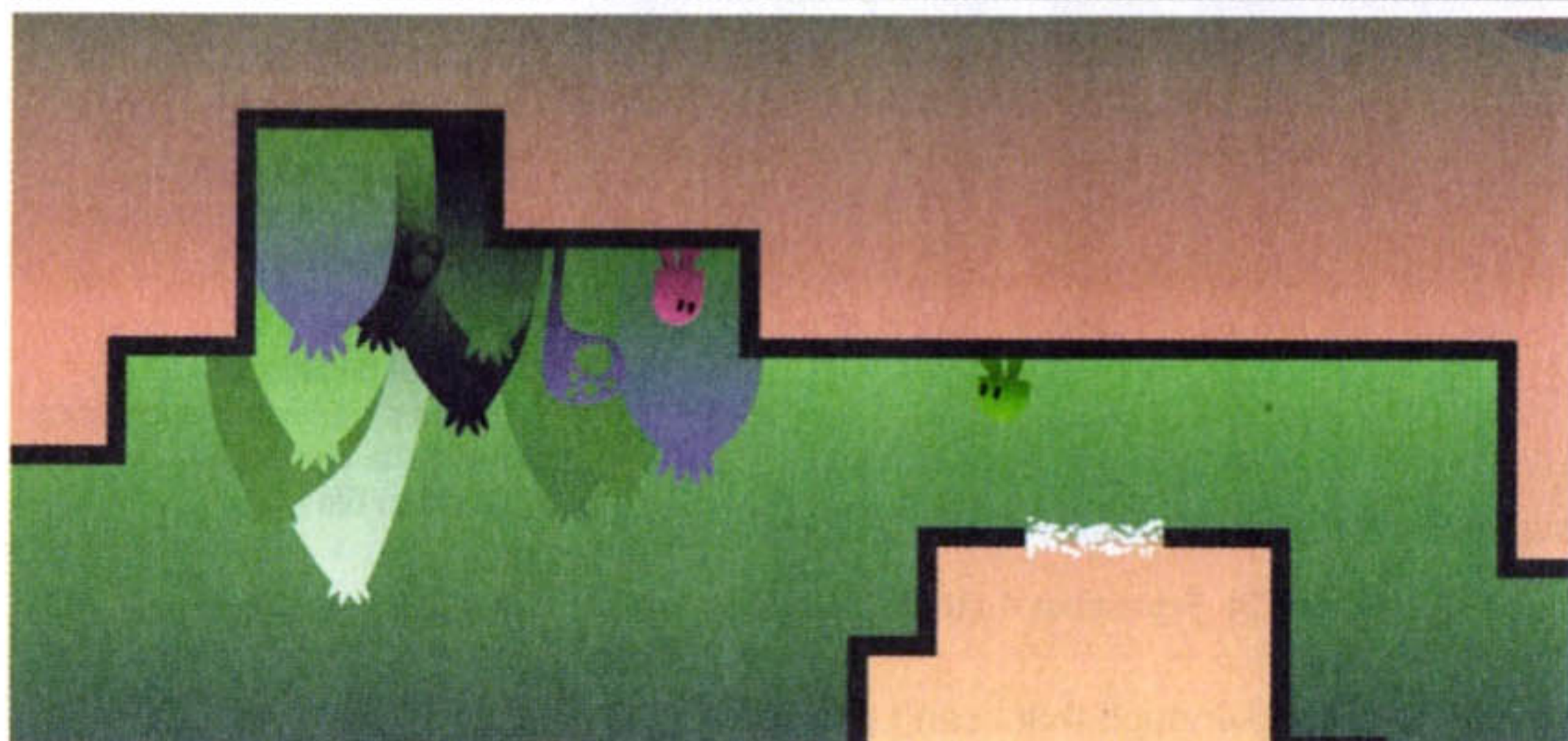
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Ibb & Obb

Falling short of its potential

Style 1 or 2-Player Puzzle (2-Players Online) **Publisher** Sparpweed
Developer Sparpweed **Release** August 6 **Rating** E



7

PS3

» Concept

Lead two colored blobs through a gravity-bending 2D world

» Graphics

Minimalist graphics aren't exactly original anymore, but it's still pleasing to look at

» Sound

A fitting soundtrack suits the game's charming and surreal tone

» Playability

With only moving and jumping to worry about, controls aren't an issue

» Entertainment

Its later stages can frustrate, but the opening hours are satisfying

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

This console generation has seen an explosion in the popularity of co-op play, and games like Portal 2 and Iloilo successfully introduced teamwork to the puzzle genre. Ibb & Obb attempts to join that club with a title that's worth your time, but also presents some annoying quirks.

The goal of Ibb & Obb is simple – get two characters together at the end of a stage. Most stages are split in two, and the titular, blob-like characters can travel on the upper path or the reversed-gravity lower half. Many puzzles involve momentum, and you find high places from which to fling yourself in an effort to reach platforms on the other plane of gravity. The premier games in this genre throw puzzles at you that seem wholly impossible at first glance, but give an immense feeling of satisfaction when completed. At its best, Ibb & Obb offers this feeling frequently, but things eventually take a turn for the uninspired.

Early levels regularly introduce new gameplay elements like bounce pads and new enemies, but the creativity peters out in later stages. Rather than introducing clever new puzzles, it presents basic platforming sections that task you with dodging enemies. Instead of feeling satisfied after conquering a brain-teasing gravity puzzle, I had to memorize tedious enemy patterns. What starts as a smart puzzle game that features platforming starts to feel like a ho-hum platformer by the end.

Playing by yourself is an option, but its implementation is downright awful. Platforming sections can be extremely difficult even with two players at the controls, and they're nearly impossible with one player handling both characters on one controller. This isn't "better with a friend," it's "only play with a friend."

My enthusiasm for Ibb & Obb waned, but there's no denying that its opening hours were a lot of fun. It may frustrate at times, and it's certainly not meant to be played alone, but Ibb & Obb is still worth checking out for those who enjoy solving puzzles with a friend.

» **Dan Ryckert**

Brief sections encourage Ibb & Obb to stick together to create light



Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix

One out of three ain't bad

8.25

PS3

» Concept

Bundle three-ish Kingdom Hearts games together and tighten up the graphics

» Graphics

The original Kingdom Hearts looks surprisingly good for being over a decade old

» Sound

Hear Haley Joel Osment go through puberty and experience enhanced Final Mix music

» Playability

The new right stick camera control (as opposed to using R1 and L1) adds a modern feel

» Entertainment

Whether you're looking for nostalgia or trying out Kingdom Hearts for the first time, this package delivers

» Replay Value

Moderately High

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
Publisher Square Enix **Developer** Square Enix
Release September 10 **Rating** E10+

Square Enix's unlikely combination of Final Fantasy and Disney characters became a mega-hit following its 2002 release. Eleven years later, Kingdom Hearts holds up surprisingly well in this HD remaster collection.

Kingdom Hearts looks as good as you recall in your mind's eye (which is far better than it does in reality when you drag out the PS2). The new-to-us Final Mix bonuses from the long-lost special release in Japan mean that you're not playing the exact same game again. Nasty new enemies with rare drop rewards await, the extra keyblades are welcome additions, and new abilities add exciting moves to Sora's arsenal (one of my favorites ends combos with an energy bubble that stuns surrounding foes). On top of these elements, several control tweaks make the gameplay smoother overall.

After all the years and Kingdom Hearts entries, the first game starts comparatively slow. Early levels like Wonderland have lots of backtracking and unclear objectives, and the combat and navigation controls take a while to blossom. Everything finally starts gelling about a quarter of the way through, when you amass a wide array of combos and magic and the story gains focus. This tale is refreshingly clear compared to later entries, and is full of moments both epic and bittersweet. I even learned to love the gummi ship segments after remastering the confounding building mechanics. My fears that Kingdom Hearts wouldn't be as good as I remember were fully dismissed: It easily retains its spot on my list of all-time favorites.

Chain of Memories picks up right where the first game ends, but the fun drops off sharply. It's deflating to lose all of the awesome powers you've earned only to sit through tons of tutorials teaching the pain-in-the-ass card battle system. Outside of Castle Oblivion, you play through the exact same places you visited in the original, and meet all of the characters over again since everyone's losing their damned memories. The sheer blandness and repetition is difficult to endure, and the only payoff is seeing the first appearance of Naminé and Organization XIII.

Even with its problems, at least Re:Chain of Memories is a game. 358/2 Days is merely a collection of remastered cutscenes from the 2009 DS title. Part of me was glad that I could refresh my memory without playing an entire RPG again, but sitting through nearly three hours of characters eating ice cream on a clock tower was torturous.

The core of this collection is the excellent original game, and that's where your attention should be. The other two lowly offerings are inessential bonus features. » **Bryan Vore**

The Wonderful 101

Superheroes don't always save the day



Style 1 to 5-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Platinum Games **Release** September 15 **Rating** T

Kids' television shows are not difficult to understand. When viewers tune in to *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, everything is exaggerated and accessible – from the villain's zero-subtlety plan to the heroes' wild gesticulations. The Wonderful 101 emulates the style and tone of these absurd adventures. While its plot is easy to grasp, the mechanics and design are far less inviting.

The Wonderful 101 is unique; it has stylistic traces of Bayonetta and Viewtiful Joe (both also directed by Platinum Games' Hideki Kamiya), as well as gameplay elements drawn from Pikmin and Street Fighter. Rather than control a single character, players direct a swarm of daring heroes, the Wonderful 100 (you're the +1), through an alien invasion. The storytelling captures the vibe of after-school television perfectly – from the paper-thin premise to the triumphant music – creating a funny and light-hearted backdrop for the whole affair. Even in its more frustrating moments, The Wonderful 101's presentation remains consistently amusing.

Cooperation is key for this super-team, and players use a combination of traditional buttons and drawn shapes on the Wii U GamePad to make the group function as a unit in combat. Drawing a circle summons a gauntlet composed of your allies, whereas drawing a straight line makes them combine to form a sword. The larger you draw the shapes, the more powerful the weapons.

This simple mechanic evolves as more people join your ranks and open up new options, allowing you to chain together impressive combos by activating several attacks in sequence and juggle enemies in the air. In addition to managing weapons, you're throwing members of your mob at aliens, evading enemy attacks, piloting ships, and boxing against giant robots. The whole package is innovative and exciting, but it doesn't always function properly.

While the idea behind the battle system is clever, the implementation often makes it more aggravating than entertaining. Both the touch screen and right stick can be used

to draw shapes, but neither works perfectly. When drawing with the right stick, the game frequently misinterprets shapes and your chances for error skyrocket. Precision isn't as much of an issue on the GamePad, but taking a hand off of the controls and looking down at the screen (to avoid inadvertently bringing up a menu) interrupts the flow in a different way. When you're in the middle of a hectic battle, both of these control flaws are hard to forgive.

I appreciate how The Wonderful 101 doesn't hold your hand, leaving many tactics and systems untaught so that you can discover them on your own. If you want a tutorial explaining the item-mixing system or laying out the optimal strategy for every new enemy introduced, you want a different game. However, such tutorials are unnecessary here due to the way the continue system works. Whenever you run out of health, you can usually pick up right where you left off. That doesn't mean you start at the nearest checkpoint; if you're in the middle of a boss fight, the boss' health stays right where you left it.

This approach means that even the most unskilled (yet persistent) players can finish the adventure, but it drains all of the tension from encounters. Where is the satisfaction in winning a tough fight if your success is guaranteed? A desire to improve your score needs to be your primary motivation, since the only penalty for death is a poor rank at the end of a mission. This lack of consequence lets Platinum Games lean on the teach-through-failure doctrine, giving the illusion of challenge but with none of the pride that comes from conquering it.

The Wonderful 101 experiments with inventive concepts and has plenty of charm. No matter how noble its intentions, it is brought down by the same thing that has ruined so many other superhero teams. The individual aspects are interesting alone, but they just have trouble working together. » **Joe Juba**



7.5

Wii U

» **Concept**

Perform feats of derring-do while controlling a mob of superheroes

» **Graphics**

Bright colors and a cartoony style make this an excellent homage to the Japanese heroes-and-aliens TV shows that inspired it

» **Sound**

Corny dialogue and heroic music accompany the action well

» **Playability**

It uses the GamePad in innovative ways, but drawing shapes with the touch screen or right analog stick doesn't always work

» **Entertainment**

The overblown characters and dialogue are great, though the over-generous continues sap away the sense of achievement

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

Co-op?

The Wonderful 101's campaign is single-player only, but it has a separate collection of "Wonderful Missions" that allow five players to team up. The catch is that four of the five are required to use Wii U pro controllers, with one on the GamePad. Considering that these missions are nothing special (with lots of "kill every enemy" objectives), buying a bunch of extra Wii U pro controllers just for this mode isn't worth it.

Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons

A brotherly puzzler impresses

8

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

An intriguing action/puzzle game that mines some obvious influences

» **Graphics**

Starbreeze uses the Unreal 3 engine to create a striking, diffuse visual style

» **Sound**

The soundtrack is minimal, bordering on non-existent at times

» **Playability**

Controlling two characters (each assigned to an analog stick) at once takes some getting used to, but you get better quickly

» **Entertainment**

Though it doesn't quite live up to its ambitions, this is an artful puzzle/platform hybrid

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low

Style 1-Player Platform/Puzzle **Publisher** 505 Games
Developer Starbreeze Studios **Release** August 7 (360),
August 28 (PC), September 3 (PS3) **Rating** T

Starbreeze Studios is best known for its first-person action games like *The Chronicles of Riddick* and *The Darkness*. Now, with the help of Swedish filmmaker Josef Fares, the company has created *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, a game that's more akin in spirit to arthouse games than Starbreeze's past work.

As the title suggests, the core is the familial bond between two siblings. The tale at hand is simple, and simply told; the story is revealed largely through the physical actions of the protagonists. Dialogue is used sparingly – and even when present, it is in an incomprehensible, made-up language inspired by Fares' native Lebanese. Thankfully, it's a story as pure as any folktale: the brothers' father has fallen sick and they must retrieve the "water of life" to save him. This minimalist approach has worked in the past for games like *Ico* and *Journey*, but here it has mixed results. While the game – largely through the excellent animation and art design – achieves a transporting atmosphere, the actual storytelling falls a bit flat. The arc is fairly predictable and the climactic moment of *Brothers* seems like a bit of unearned drama. However, quiet power comes from the beauty of the world that Starbreeze created, and many of the small moments shared between the brothers and the other characters left an impression on me.

The gameplay draws from an old favorite of mine, the *Adventures of Cookie & Cream*. Like that title, *Brothers* allows the player to control two characters at once – one assigned to each analog stick. Though each character only has one control input (the corresponding trigger, which serves as an all-purpose action button), the designers concocted a nice variety of environmental puzzles and platforming sequences. The solution is rarely obtuse – you just need to use the environment and the characters in the correct manner.

A lot of the puzzles are variations on things you've seen before, based around the dynamic of older brother being able to pull heavy switches and the younger being able to access certain areas. While it's hardly revolutionary stuff, the fact that you're controlling both characters at once adds a lot of challenge and fun to the experience. I particularly enjoyed a long sequence in which the brothers were tethered together with a rope, which led to some clever platforming puzzles.

In all, it's a good game that feels like a bit less than the sum of its parts. While I appreciate *Brothers'* languid storytelling and well-crafted puzzles, I can't help but feel as if the game had pretensions of being a much deeper experience than what has actually been delivered. » **Matt Helgeson**



Divinity: Dragon Commander

A beastly mix of strategy and action

Style 1-Player Strategy (4-Player Online)
Publisher Larian Studios **Developer** Larian Studios
Release August 6 **Rating** M

7.5

PC

» **Concept**

Take *Divinity's* generic fantasy landscape, strip away its RPG features, and lay down some basic RTS gameplay

» **Graphics**

Character models look great when you're walking around your ship talking to your crew, but *Dragon Commander* loses a lot of fidelity when you jump into battle

» **Sound**

Dragon Commander's voice work is generally pretty solid, and the sound effects help these otherwise routine battles come to life

» **Playability**

Bouncing between traditional RTS controls and dragon-piloting is fun, but I wish I cared more about my troops

» **Entertainment**

Divinity is a rich world with some worthwhile strategy, but much of it is bogged down with generic gameplay

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Larian Studios' previous *Divinity* titles are action/RPGs that allow players to switch between traditional third-person action and aerial dragon combat. *Dragon Commander*, on the other hand, takes the franchise in a different direction. Players still soar through the skies as a Dragon (equipped with a jetpack, no less), but many of the RPG elements have been replaced with top-down strategy. Series like *Halo* and *Warcraft* have proven that jumping genres can be successful, but *Divinity* needs more refinement before it soars as a strategy game.

Before you start making strategic decisions, you walk around your airship and speak with your generals, settle disputes among various dignitaries, and upgrade your troops and dragon skills. I enjoyed learning more about my crew, and the colorful cast of characters who all lend vibrancy to the otherwise clichéd fantasy tale.

Once you're ready to begin plotting your conquest of Rivellon, you're presented with a tactical battle map showing various territories that make up the continent. Within each territory you can build new structures and generate an army of troops to spread across the map. I mastered this system after a few hours, but I still got a kick out of trying to predict my enemy's movements and ensure that I had more troops on any given territory before the end of each turn.

Unfortunately, the RTS battles themselves are built around a bland rock-paper-scissors formula. Memorizing troop specialties and then using whichever unit is strong against your opponents' units gets tedious. Thankfully, *Dragon Commander's* wildcard is that it lets you jump into the action yourself as a high-flying dragon. Zooming around the battlefield using your dragon's jetpack is exhilarating, and your suite of dragon powers is useful for buffing your troops or setting your opponent's war factories on fire. Unfortunately, the dragon is a glass cannon; you are shot down in a matter of seconds if you're not watching your health carefully.

Divinity: Dragon Commander has a lot of layers. I enjoyed the *Risk*-like strategy of spreading my army across a world map as I sabotaged my opponent's units using different battle cards, but I dreaded the slog of each RTS battle. If Larian Studios can refine their battle system then it might have a strategy series that appeals to a wider audience, but right now only hardcore strategy fans can feel safe under this commander's wings. » **Ben Reeves**



Gone Home

A home can hold more than you think

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher The Fullbright Company Developer The Fullbright Company Release August 15 Rating NR

8.5



Have you ever walked into someone's house and got a sense of who they are? The objects we leave are remnants of the lives we lead, and they say more about us than we realize. Bedrooms are a portal into our personalities: old receipts reveal our interests, books showcase our passions, and the hidden things often mark our fears.

Gone Home is The Fullbright Company's ambitious attempt to let objects tell a story without action-packed gameplay or heavy-handed cutscenes. It tests whether curiosity surrounding real-life issues is enough to drive an entire game, and is a great example of what video games as a medium can do with storytelling.

You control Katie, a woman returning home from a year abroad only to find her family's house deserted and a note from Sam, her younger sister. Within, Sam begs Katie not to worry and says she doesn't want anyone trying to find out where she's gone. Obviously, Katie missed parts of her sister's life while she was away and the only way to find out what happened is to search the house for answers. That's the initial pull of

Gone Home, but as you delve into the house, you find much more than that.

The Fullbright Company clearly spent a lot of time crafting the setting; trophies are propped on a mantle, papers clutter tables, and family portraits hang in the halls. Set in the mid '90s, before cell phones and e-mail kept electronic records of lives, Gone Home has plenty of references to wax nostalgic over, like Street Fighter II, Kurt Cobain, and cassette tapes. What really drives the story are the notes, answering machine messages, ticket stubs, and other paper trails revealing what's happened to the family.

Unfortunately, the developers showed their hand far too soon. I figured out rather quickly what's going on with Sam. Usually this would destroy a game based around discovery, but the plot has more to offer than just that single point; the "how" matters so much more than the "what" in this mystery.

Looking at objects, even ones that offer no insight into Sam's whereabouts, becomes an addiction. I left no stone unturned throughout the process, even doing small things like opening the fridge to see what the family eats.

Upon finding an important object, Sam narrates what the item means to her. These moments have some of the best writing I've seen in a game. They're set up like she's reading her diary, completely confessional, with genuine emotions. Often she comes to such a true-to-life statement that it stuck with me long afterward. When talking about a field trip, "stick with the group" comes to mean something more than I expected.

While Gone Home is Sam's story, smaller threads weave their way in. Investigating the parents' careers and relationship is just as engrossing as discovering Sam's story. The father is a writer, and you get glimpses into his successes and failures. You read letters from editors, and posted on a bulletin board is a desperate phrase, "You can do better!" In the end, the resolutions to these side stories are just as satisfying as Sam's.

Gone Home's biggest strength is how it tackles more complex and realistic subject matter than most developers would dare touch. The raw and honest writing is refreshing, providing something so different than the standard narrative. It may not last more than a few hours, but I never put the controller down because I was so captivated. When it ended, I wished I could play it for the first time again. It may blur the lines defining what you consider a game to be, but sometimes evolution comes from radical change. Go in with an open mind and come away with a story that says something real about the way we bond with people and how relationships impact our lives. » **Kimberley Wallace**

PC

» Concept

Explore a house to discover what's going on with its missing inhabitants

» Graphics

The visuals are basic, but Gone Home stands out in the realistic detail it gives to everyday items

» Sound

Outside of a thunderstorm, sound is minimal, but accurate effects keep you in the moment. The voice acting of Sam is top-notch, making emotional moments thrive

» Playability

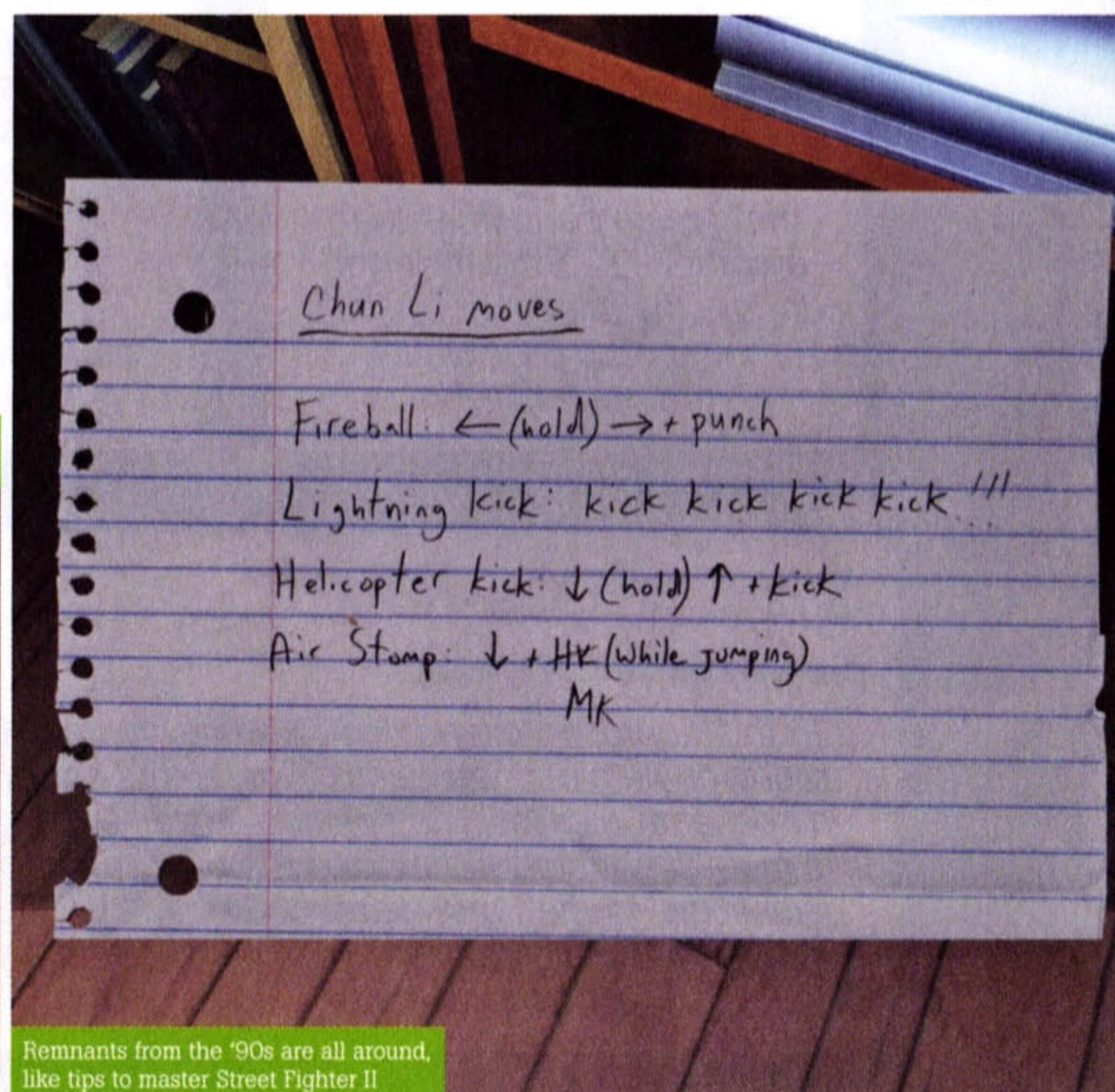
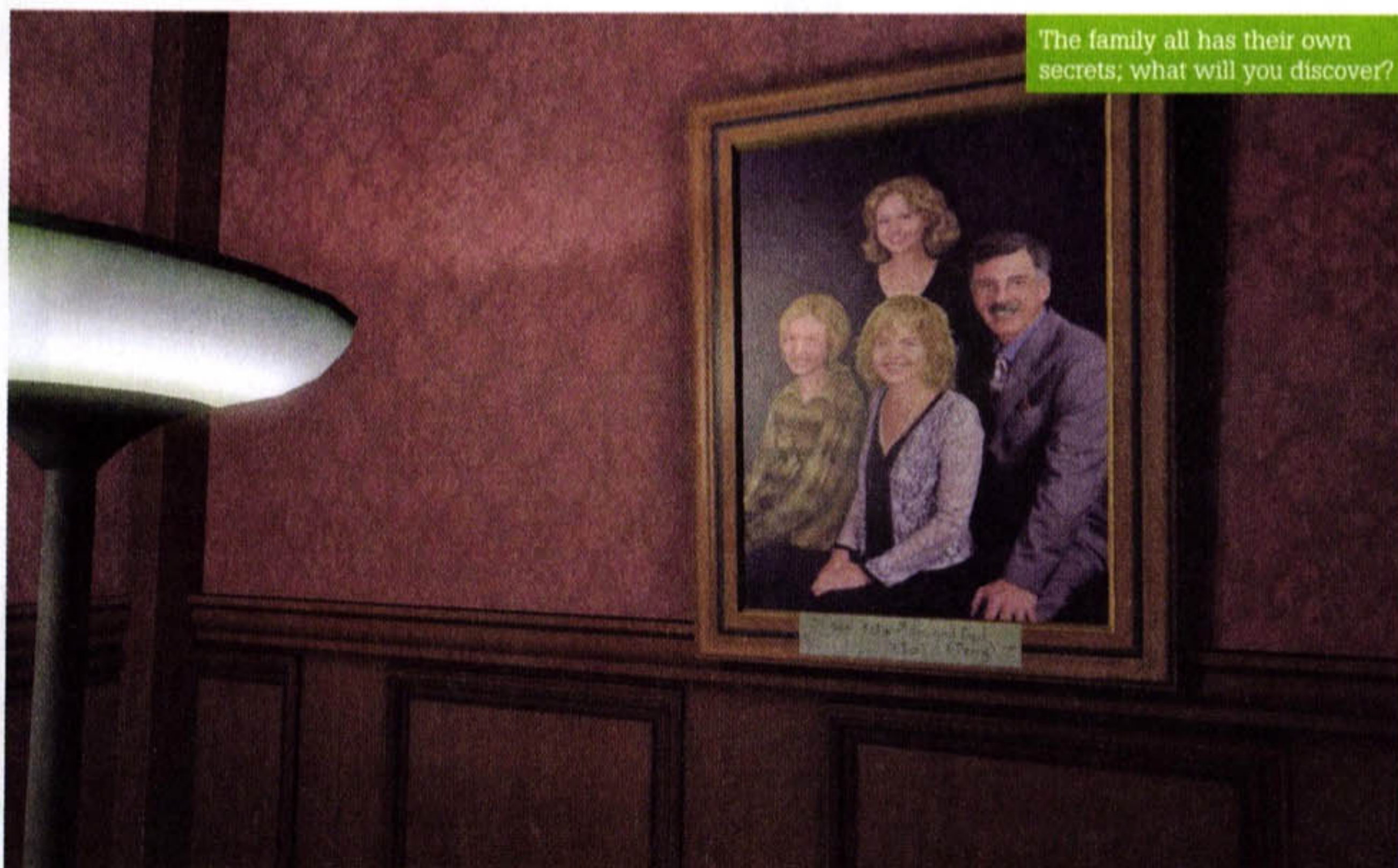
Gone Home is easy to play, since you're just moving around a house and examining objects. Nothing controls poorly, and visual cues lead you to important objects appropriately

» Entertainment

Few stories can drive an entire game, but Gone Home keeps you curious to uncover every little thread

» Replay Value

Moderate



Remnants from the '90s are all around, like tips to master Street Fighter II

PLAYSTATION 3

Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Anarchy Reigns	7.5	Mar-13
Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel	6.5	Jun-13
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Dead Space 3	9.75	Mar-13
Deadly Premonition: Director's Cut	7.75	Jun-13
Deadpool	6	Aug-13
Devil May Cry	9	Feb-13
Dragon's Crown	8	Sep-13
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen	8.5	Jun-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Dynasty Warriors 8	6	Sep-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13

God of War: Ascension	8	May-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
Guacamelee	9	Jun-13
Guardians of Middle-earth	7.5	Feb-13
Injustice: Gods Among Us	9	Jun-13
Knytt Underground	7.5	Mar-13
Last of Us, The	9.5	Aug-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance	7.75	Apr-13
Metro: Last Light	8.5	Jul-13
MLB 13: The Show	8.75	May-13
MLB 2K13	4	May-13
Mud – FIM Motocross World Championship	6	Apr-13
NCAA Football 14	7.75	Aug-13
Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
Ratchet & Clank: Full Frontal Assault	7.5	Feb-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13

Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time	9	Mar-13
Star Trek	5.75	Jul-13
Tales of Xillia	8.25	Sep-13
Terraria	8	Jun-13
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14	8.5	May-13
Tomb Raider	9.25	Apr-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
WRC 3 FIA World Rally Championship	7.75	Jun-13

XBOX 360

Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Anarchy Reigns	7.5	Mar-13
Army of Two: The Devil's Cartel	6.5	Jun-13
BattleBlock Theater	9	Jun-13
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
CastleStorm	8.25	Aug-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13

Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dark	2	Sep-13
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Dead Space 3	9.75	Mar-13
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Dollar Dash	6	May-13
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen	8.5	Jun-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Dynasty Warriors 8	6	Sep-13
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dragonborn, The	8.5	Feb-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
Fuse	7.75	Jul-13
Gears of War: Judgment	8.5	May-13
Grid 2	8.25	Jul-13
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Omerta: City of Gangsters	6	Apr-13
Phantom Breaker: Battle Grounds	8	May-13
Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
Poker Night 2	6	Jul-13
Remember Me	7.75	Jul-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Ride to Hell: Retribution	2	Sep-13
Sanctum 2	8.5	Jul-13
Skulls of the Shogun	8.5	Feb-13
Star Trek	5.75	Jul-13
State of Decay	7	Aug-13
Terraria	8	Jun-13

7.5 | Charlie Murder

Platform 360 Release August 14 Rating M

If you're playing with three friends that understand the game's systems, Charlie Murder can be a blast. If you're playing by yourself or with a revolving door of friends, the checkpoint problems and the need to explain everything can bring the experience down a bit. It may come with some frustrations, but Ska Studios has successfully introduced another fun co-op brawler to a service with no shortage of them. – Dan Ryckert

8 | Velocity Ultra

Platform Vita Release May 15 Rating E

Velocity Ultra looks, plays, and sometimes feels like a traditional vertical-scrolling shooter, but has a level of accessibility and innovation that separates it from comparable games. Its main hook is one I never felt fully comfortable with, but it didn't hinder the overall experience. The genre convergence on display here is exciting, and worth playing even if you typically avoid shoot 'em ups. – Kyle Hilliard

6 | Bloodmasque

Platform iOS Release July 25 Rating 17+

Its vampires-meet-Infinity Blade gameplay is completely derivative despite its competence, and the only thing more dangerous than a vampire sucking its victim dry are the microtransactions going after your wallet. – Kimberley Wallace

8.25 | Halo: Spartan Assault

Platform Windows 8 Release July 18 Rating T

The emotions Halo inspires, like panic from hearing your shield beep as enemies overcome you or the explosive joy you feel from throwing a well-placed grenade, are all on display here. Spartan Assault is a true Halo game, even if the series' signature scope and size are scaled down. – Kyle Hilliard

6.5 | Dropchord

Platform iOS Release August 1 Rating 4+

Dropchord starts with a simple mechanic – dragging a line across a playfield to destroy dots – and incrementally adds layers of complexity until the "game over" screen inevitably hits... The results are interesting for an hour or so, but it's not likely to retain a permanent spot on your iOS device. – Jeff Cork

6 | Do Not Fall

Platform PS3 Release July 23 Rating E

In this appropriately named PSN title, you control a rabbit as he platforms across islands that constantly fall beneath his feet. The nonstop movement required is more stressful than fun, and the pseudo top-down perspective is often awkward. Do Not Fall isn't broken on any fundamental level, but I never found myself having fun with it. – Dan Ryckert

8 | DuckTales: Remastered

Platform Wii U • PS3 • 360 • PC Release August 13 (Wii U, PlayStation 3, PC), September 11 (Xbox 360) Rating E10+

DuckTales: Remastered blends the cartoon and the NES game together beautifully. Fans of modern platformers can expect a simple lighthearted romp, but gamers who grew up in Duckburg are the ones who shouldn't miss out on this endearing homage. – Tim Turi



Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14	8.5	May-13
Tomb Raider	9.25	Apr-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13
Walking Dead: Survival Instincts, The	5	Jun-13

Wii U

Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Game & Wario	8	Aug-13
Lego City Undercover	8.5	Apr-13
Little Inferno	8.5	Feb-13
Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate	8.75	Jun-13
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	May-13
New Super Luigi U	8	Aug-13
Pikmin 3	9	Sep-13
Transformers: Prime	6.5	Feb-13

Wii

Pandora's Tower	6	Jun-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13

PC

Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Antichamber	9	Apr-13
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Civilization V: Brave New World	9.25	Sep-13
Company of Heroes 2	8	Aug-13
Crisis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Dollar Dash	6	May-13
Don't Starve	7	Jul-13
Dota 2	9	Sep-13
Dungeon Hearts	6	Jun-13
Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara	7.75	Aug-13
Eador: Masters of the Broken World	8.25	Jul-13
Fallen Enchantress: Legendary Heroes	8.5	Aug-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
Gunpoint	8.75	Aug-13
Impire	5	May-13
Leisure Suit Larry: Reloaded	6	Sep-13

Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
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Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Rogue Legacy	8	Sep-13
Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien	9	Apr-13
Sanctum 2	8.5	Jul-13
Shadowrun Returns	8.5	Sep-13
SimCity	6.5	May-13
Sniper Elite: Nazi Zombie Army	8	May-13
StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm	8.75	May-13
StarDrive	7.25	Jul-13
Swapper, The	9.25	Aug-13
Valley Without Wind 2, A	6.75	May-13
Walking Dead: 400 Days, The	8	Sep-13

3DS

Aero Porter	5	Mar-13
Animal Crossing: New Leaf	8.5	Aug-13
Brain Age: Concentration Training	6	Apr-13
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate	8.5	Apr-13
Crashmo	8.5	Feb-13
Crimson Shroud	7.5	Mar-13
Dillon's Rolling Western: The Last Ranger	7.75	Jun-13
Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D	8.5	Jun-13
Etrian Odyssey IV: Legends of the Titan	8	May-13
Fire Emblem: Awakening	9	Mar-13
HarmoKnight	8.25	Jun-13
Lego City Undercover: The Chase Begins	6	Jun-13
Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon	8.5	May-13
Mario & Luigi: Dream Team	8.5	Sep-13
Mario and Donkey Kong: Minis on the Move	6.5	Jul-13
Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate	8.75	Jun-13

Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates to Infinity	6.75	May-13
Project X Zone	7.75	Aug-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	9	Feb-11
Shin Megami Tensei	8.5	Sep-13
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner – Soul Hackers	8.75	Jun-13
Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11

VITA

Dragon's Crown	8	Sep-13
Guacamelee	9	Jun-13
Knytt Underground	7.5	Mar-13
Muramasa Rebirth	7	Aug-13
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time	9	Mar-13
Soul Sacrifice	7.25	Jul-13

iOS

Beastie Bay	7.5	Apr-13
Breach & Clear	6.5	Sep-13
Cut the Rope: Time Travel	8.5	Jul-13
Deus Ex: The Fall	6.75	Sep-13
Draw Something 2	7	Jul-13
Dungeon Hearts	6	Jun-13
Haunted Hollow	6.75	Jul-13
Hundreds	8	Mar-13
Iron Man 3	6.5	Jul-13
Joe Danger Touch	8.25	Mar-13
Kingdom Rush: Frontiers	9	Aug-13
Layton Brothers: Mystery Room	7	Sep-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13
Middle Manager of Justice	6	Mar-13
Plants vs. Zombies 2	9.25	Sep-13
Scurvy Scallywags	7.75	Aug-13
Warhammer Quest	7.75	Aug-13
Year Walk	8.75	May-13

ANDROID

Cut the Rope: Time Travel	8.5	Jul-13
Iron Man 3	6.5	Jul-13
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2014	7.5	Sep-13



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Activision Badges

The original gaming achievement

by Kyle Hilliard

Before the age of online stat-tracking and virtual bragging rights, you either had to hope that your friends didn't think (or find out) you were lying about your video game accolades, or iron a few Activision patches to your jacket. These video game merit badges are the original, tangible equivalent of today's digital Achievements and Trophies; physical items sent to players who achieved video game glory directly from the people who made the games.

From the very first games Activision published for the Atari 2600, and until around 1983, almost every Activision game gave players the option of taking a photograph of their high scores and sending them to the publisher to receive a patch commemorating their accomplishment. Every game had certain score requirements, with some games offering different patches for different tiers of scores. These patches were available for all of Activision's games, including those that released for Intellivision. Toy Bizarre, an Activision-published game available only on Commodore 64, also offered a patch. The only games that didn't provide patches were the obvious multiplayer exceptions that did not have high-score tracking, like Checkers or Bridge.

In order to get your hands on a patch, first

you had to achieve the requirement as outlined by Activision. Every game came with a listing of what scores were necessary to receive a patch and where to send your photographic evidence in the game's booklet. For example, you had to achieve 20,000 points in Pitfall!, snap a photo of your television as proof of your accomplishment, get the photo developed, and then mail it to Activision. After a few weeks, your Explorers' Club patch would arrive in the mail and you could live the rest of your life proud.

Some games granted multiple patches for different score tiers. Laser Blast offered one patch for obtaining 100,000 points, and a separate patch for 1,000,000 points. Strangely, achieving the highest score didn't necessarily merit all of the patches. Robot Tank, for example, had three patches for destroying 48, 60, and 72 tanks. Destroying 72 tanks did not automatically award you the lower tier patches, as many Achievements and Trophies do today. If you wanted all three patches, you had to send in three different photographs.

Every patch had a unique design and earned you a spot in an honorary club. If you gained 3,800 points in the first level of Starmaster, you became a member of the Order of the Supreme Starmaster. Receiving any patch was accompanied by a letter of congratulations and subscribed you to Activision's

newsletter. The newsletter had the expected advertisements for upcoming games, but also contained high-score tips for Activision titles, as well as profiles of the company's game developers.

Activision no longer offers patches to motivated players, but collectors are selling them on eBay and other online venues. Most patches go for anywhere from \$15 to \$40, but there are a few rare exceptions that fetch upwards of \$100. One of the most difficult patches to obtain was the gold medal patch in Decathlon, and there is also a hard-to-find Beamrider patch that is worth more than the average patch.

As we move further away from the era of tangible media, these patches are a reminder of a time when you could physically hold your games – as well as your high scores. These patches will exist as long as collectors hoard them or until the seams fall apart, but our Achievements and Trophies will last only as long as the online servers are maintained.

In the letter written to fans able to achieve Pitfall's patch-worthy score, Mr. Pitfall Harry himself wrote, "In permanent recognition of your special ability to find treasure despite snapping crocodiles and deadly scorpions, I've enclosed my official emblem." No digital Achievement or Trophy can offer the same "permanent" accolade. ♦

Permanent Recognition

This is only a small sampling of the patches available to players of Activision games. More than 40 were available to talented players across multiple gaming platforms.

Beamriders:



40,000 pts, Sector 14+

Toy Bizarre:



70,000 points

Starmaster:



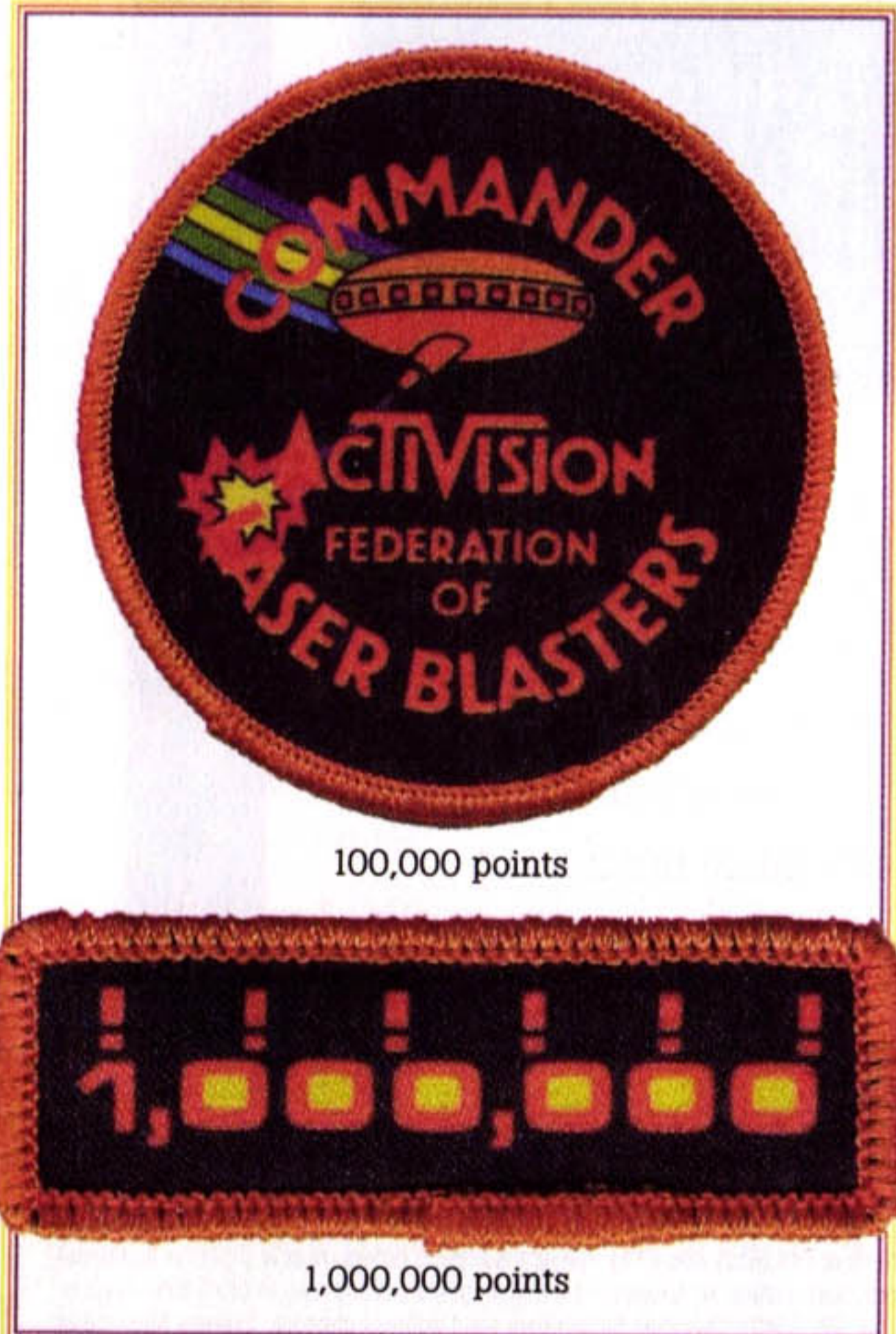
Robot Tank:



Decathlon:



Laser Blasters:



Letter Of Recognition

Along with the patch in the mail, players also received a letter from Jan Marsella, an Activision employee from the customer relations department whose job title changed depending on the letter you received. The only exception was the letter received if you obtained the appropriate score in Pitfall! In that situation, Pitfall Harry would send players a personalized letter congratulating them on their accomplishment. While still in character, Harry would also warn new patch owners to be cautious when ironing the patch, reminding them that sewing the patch is a valid alternative.

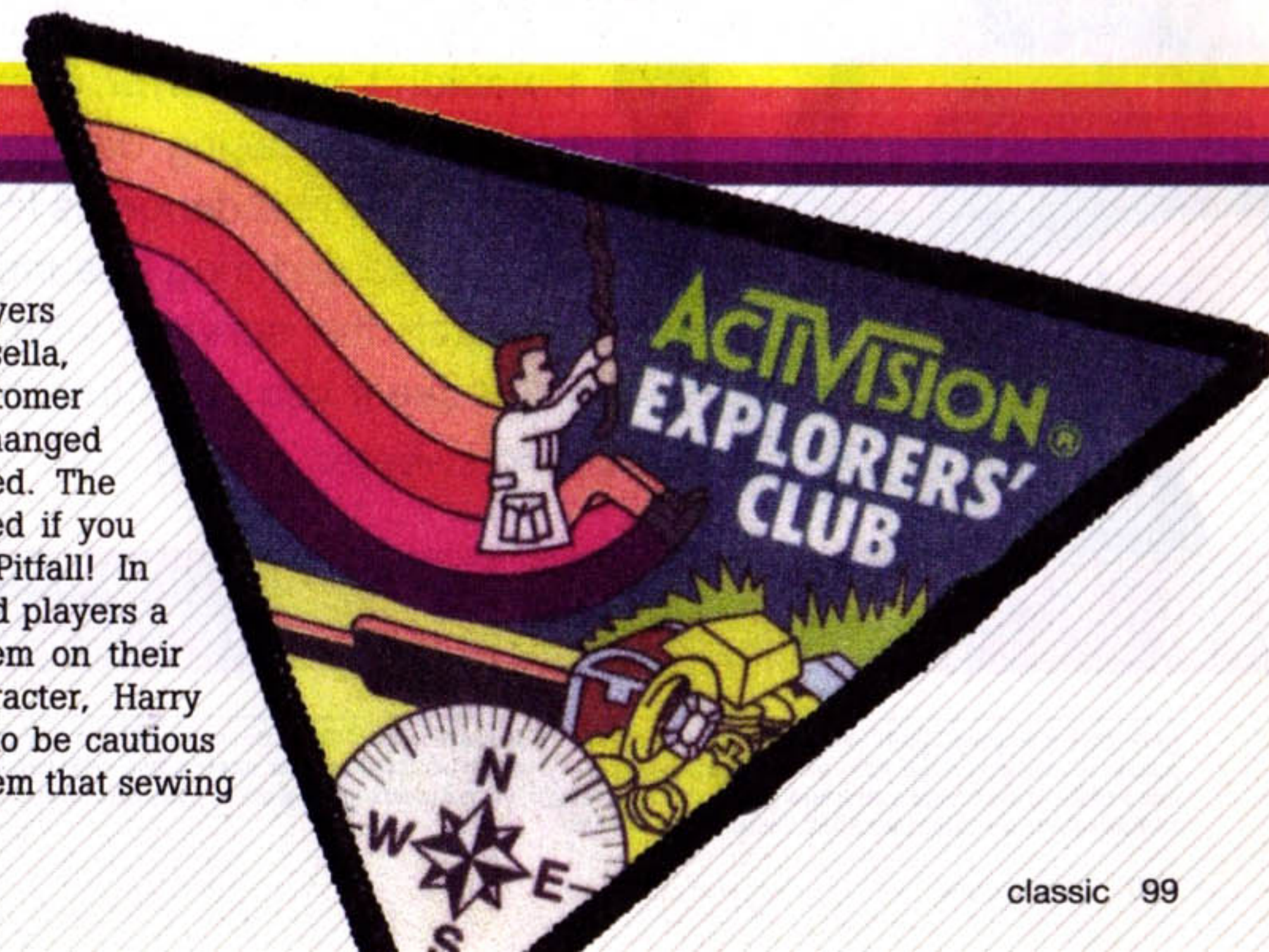
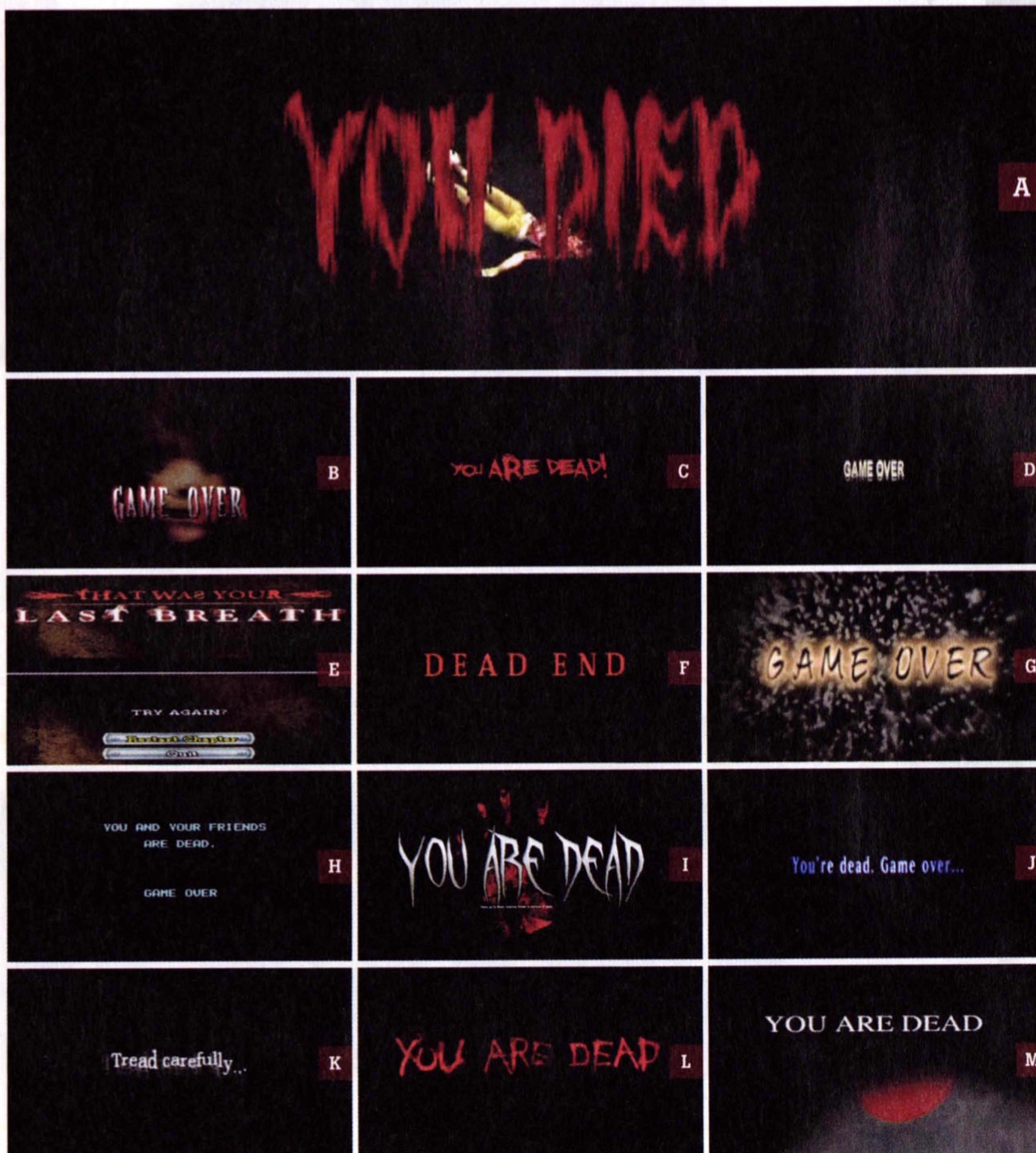


Image credit: Joe Santulli, Director of the Videogame History Museum, dpvideogames.com

Game Over, Indeed



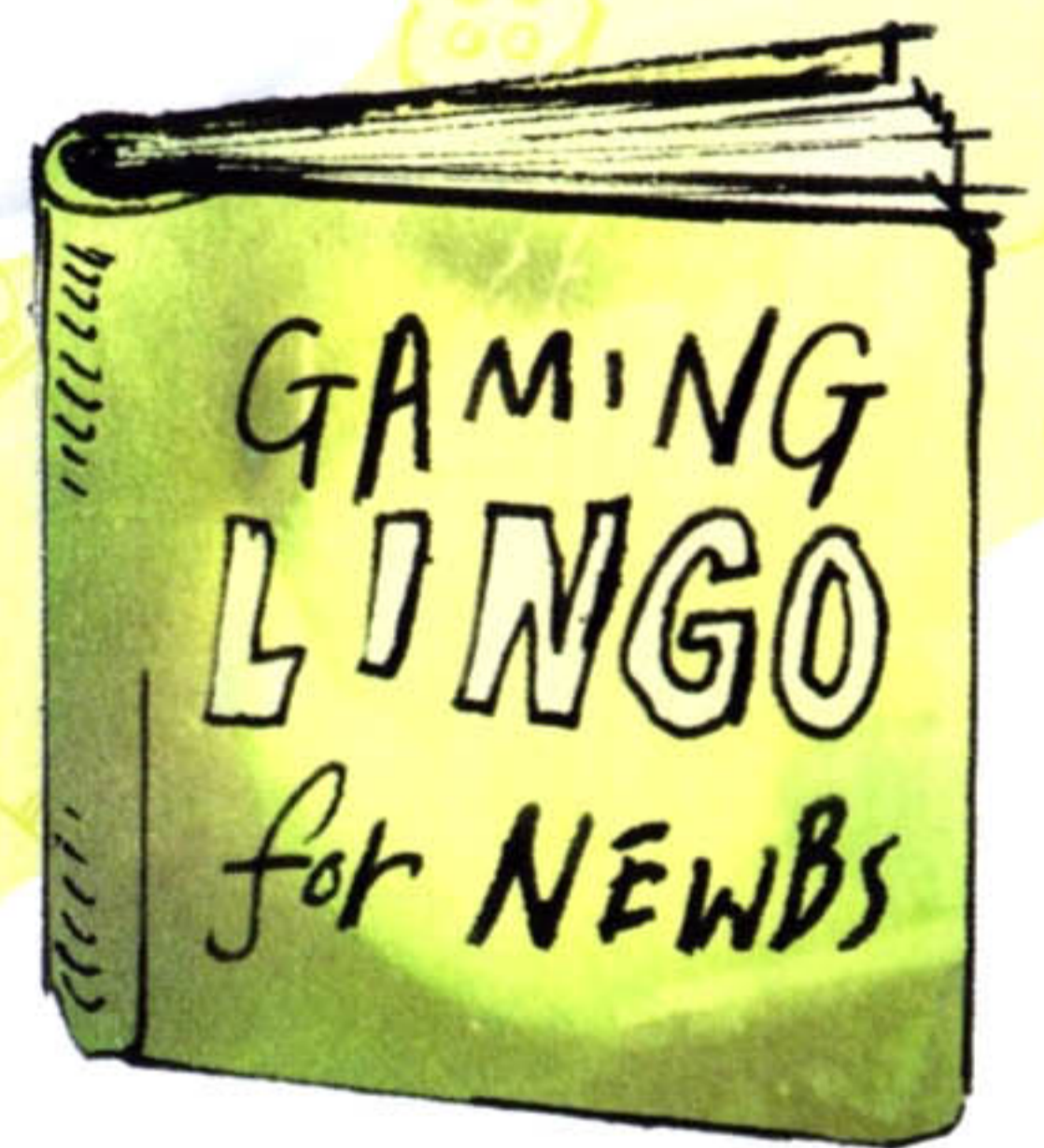
It wouldn't be a horror game if you weren't continuously facing danger. Fortunately for us, the only real danger is losing a little progress – and enduring a taunting “Game Over” screen. Match the screens with their respective games and see if you can't turn those failures into something sweeter. *by Jeff Cork*

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Amnesia ____ | 8. Galerians ____ |
| 2. Amy ____ | 9. Illbleed ____ |
| 3. Clock Tower ____ | 10. OverBlood ____ |
| 4. Day Z ____ | 11. Resident Evil ____ |
| 5. Dementium ____ | 12. Rise of Nightmares ____ |
| 6. Fatal Frame ____ | 13. Silent Hill 2 ____ |
| 7. Friday the 13th ____ | |

Answers: 1-K, 2-C, 3-F, 4-I, 5-E, 6-G, 7-H, 8-J, 9-B, 10-M, 11-A, 12-L, 13-D

IMHO, OUR MOBILE APP MAKES IT SO EASY TO PWN YOUR QUOTE, YOU COULD ALMOST BE AFK.

WHY YES, I DID TAKE A GAMING LINGO COURSE!



IF YOU ASK ME, GETTING A QUOTE SHOULD BE SO EASY A NEWB COULD DO IT.



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