

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM REVIEWED INSIDE PG.82

GAMEFORMER

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



THE BEATLES ROCKBAND

COVER 2 OF 2

ISSUE 197


SEPTEMBER 2009

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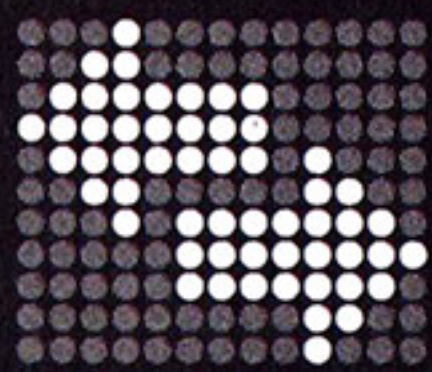
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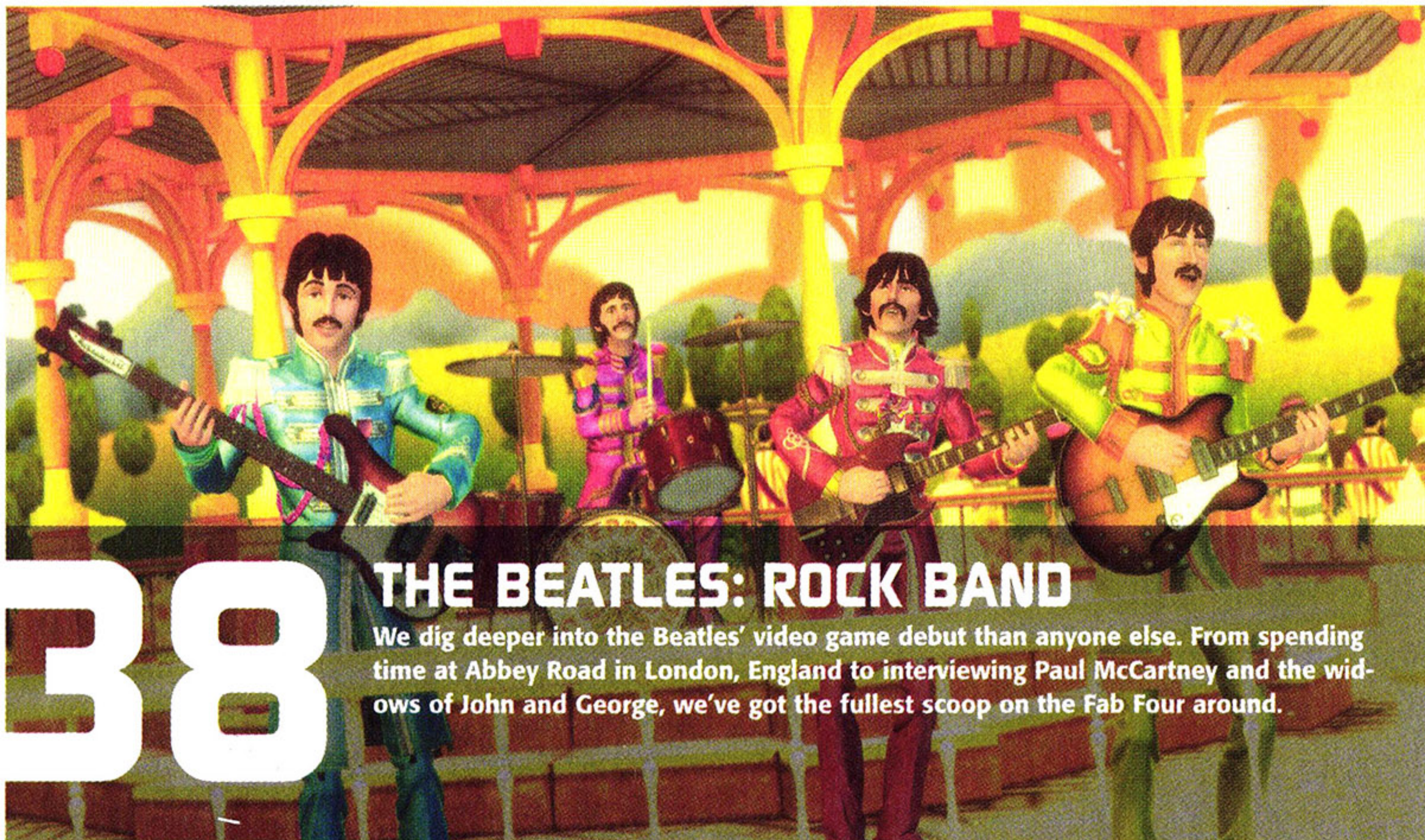
WiiTM



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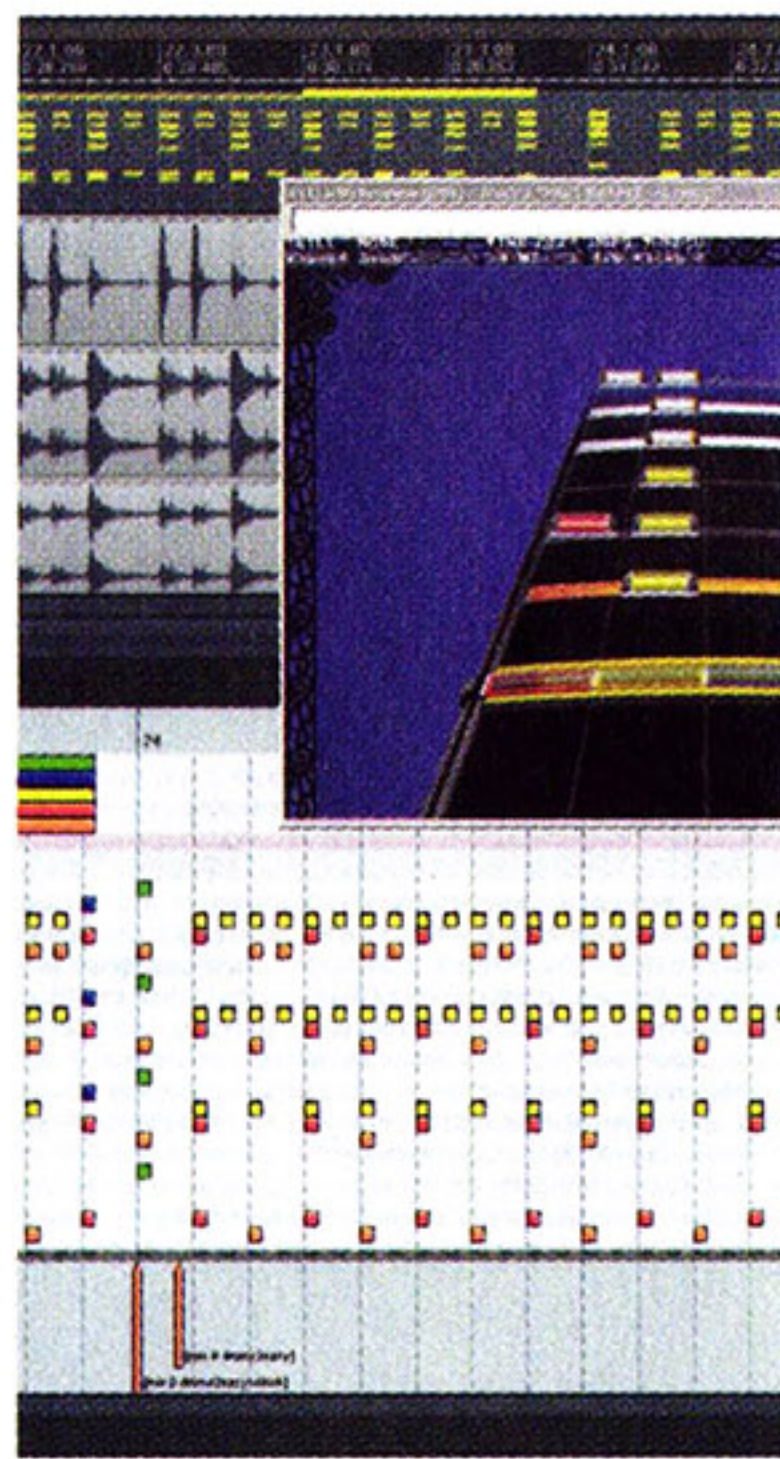
We dig deeper into the Beatles' video game debut than anyone else. From spending time at Abbey Road in London, England to interviewing Paul McCartney and the widows of John and George, we've got the fullest scoop on the Fab Four around.

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



LOOKING FOR RUG: MUST TIE ROOM TOGETHER

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Take my word on this one, the scariest thing you can do as a magazine editor is make changes, or try something new. You simply can't please everyone. Ever. Maybe there is a life lesson in there somewhere, but I'll leave that to commencement speeches and Hallmark cards.

To quote The Dude, "I'll tell you what I'm blathering about... I've got information, man!" While, like The Dude, I would rather be bowling, I am here to regale you with a storm of Game Informer news.

First off, I want to thank all the readers that responded to my previous request for feedback to help with the upcoming redesign. I'm pleased to announce our new look will be revealed in our November issue (just in time for our 200th issue that follows in December). The redesign not only serves to fix the small fonts in our sidebars (perhaps the number one request from readers), it also serves as the springboard for one of the biggest Game Informer projects I have ever worked on in my almost two decades with the magazine: a massive re-launch of gameinformer.com.

As a side note, every time I talk about this, I can't help but feel like Ryan from *The Office* when he hysterically delivered his pitch for Dunder Mifflin Infinity 2.0 (with his fists punctuating the 2.0 for dramatic effect). So let's skip the laughing out loud and finger pointing, and keep the mockery to mere snickering at my expense as I realize how silly I sound when I talk about the Internet like it is some new contraption, or a series of tubes.

That said, I'm not going to spoil the surprise. Let's just say the redesign and the new website will bury you in a deluge of Game Informer content. From our sense of humor to our hard-hitting reporting, it is all going to culminate in what I hope will give you, the reader, the best information you can get anywhere at any time about the world of video games.

So let the countdown begin. The new and improved world of Game Informer becomes a reality this October.

Andy >> andy@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Working Like A Madman To Get The Relaunch And GI 2.0 Up And Running (So Many Cool Things In The Works - I Can't Wait To Tell You More) **Dislikes:** That All The Work Isn't Done And Out As We Speak, That My Capcom Coffee Mug Broke, That There Isn't More Time In The Day **Current Favorite Games:** Infamous, World Of Warcraft, Chrono Trigger, Dead Space, The Beatles: Rock Band, Batman: Arkham Asylum



Reiner >> reiner@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** Konami Creating A Game Based On *Metalocalypse*, Ryan Reynolds As Green Lantern (He'll Make A Great Hal), My Twitter @Andrew_Reiner **Dislikes:** George R.R. Martin (Stop Blogging And Finish *A Dance With Dragons!*), George R. R. Martin AGAIN! (Seriously, Man. Get To It!), Xbox Live's *The Guild* (A Gaming Snooze-Fest) **Current Favorite Games:** Batman: Arkham Asylum, Demon's Souls, The Secret Of Monkey Island: Special Edition, Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2



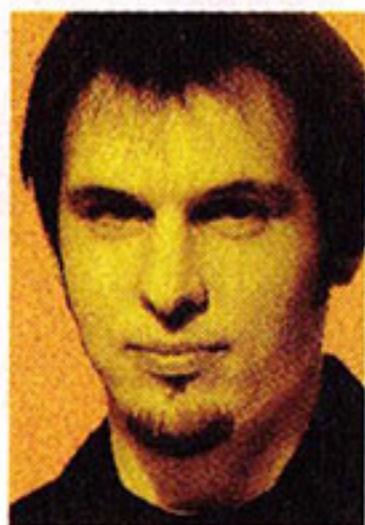
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Adam >> adam@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** Building A Better WoW UI, *The Lies Of Locke Lamora* By Scott Lynch, Cool Summer Weather (60 And Cloudy Is Perfect! All You Lizard People Can Move Back To Southern California), The Continued Dominance Of The American League **Dislikes:** The Twins' Inescapable Average-ness, Ants, Potholes, Unending MN Road Construction **Current Favorite Games:** Left 4 Dead, World Of Warcraft, Mass Effect, Demon's Souls, Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri



Joe >> joe@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** *Never Let Me Go* By Kazuo Ishiguro, *Let The Right One In* (Best Vampire Movie I've Seen), Tom Siddell's *Gunnerkrigg Court*, Pulled Pork Sandwiches **Dislikes:** Early 2010 Becoming The New Late 2009, Waiting For *The Wise Man's Fear* By Patrick Rothfuss, Delayed Fallout 3 DLC For PS3, The New Xbox Experience (Not Really New Anymore, But I Still Hate It) **Current Favorite Games:** Dragon Quest IX, The Secret Of Monkey Island: Special Edition, Professor Layton And The Diabolical Box, Scribblenauts, Valkyria Chronicles



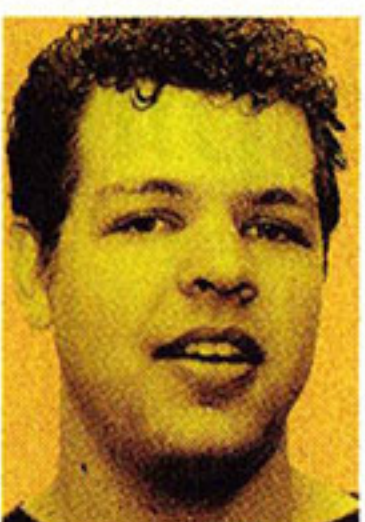
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Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters, Music, Puzzle **Interests:** The Bloody And Fascinating History Of The Tower Of London, *Eberron Campaign Guide*, Playing Rock Band In The Place Where The Music Was Originally Recorded, Receiving Back Stolen Wallets In The Mail From Mysteriously Beneficent Criminals **Dislikes:** Stolen Wallets, The Exchange Rate For British Currency, *Marvel Divas* (This Should Never Have Been Allowed To Happen) **Current Favorite Games:** The Beatles: Rock Band, Shadow Complex, The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition, The Sims 3



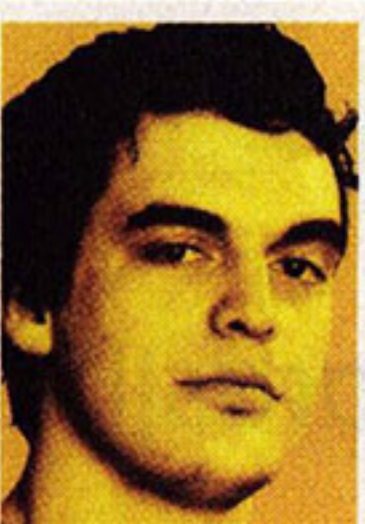
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Handle: Lord Gamington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** Beck Interviewing Tom Waits, Future Of The Left - *Travels With Myself And Another*, Starting An Online Franchise In Madden, Matt Taibbi's Writing In *Rolling Stone*, *Caught Stealing* By Charlie Huston **Dislikes:** Laggy Xbox 360 Dashboard (When Did It Become Windows 95?), iPhone International Data Fees, People Who Twitter DLC Codes With One Missing Letter or Number **Current Favorite Games:** Madden NFL 10, Battlefield 1943, Batman: Arkham Asylum, Shadow Complex, NHL 10



Ben >> ben@gameinformer.com

Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer-Man **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Racing, Stealth **Interests:** *Blink* By Malcolm Gladwell (Go Read Everything He's Ever Written), *100 Bullets*, *Bone* By Jeff Smith, *The Name Of The Wind* By Patrick Rothfuss, Maru The Stunt Cat (YouTube It) **Dislikes:** Having Too Many Interests To Hate On Anything... Except *Transformers: Revenge Of The Fallen* **Current Favorite Games:** The Sims 3, Shadow Complex, Batman: Arkham Asylum, Metroid Prime



Bryan >> bryan@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Rhythm **Interests:** Touring The New Minnesota Golden Gophers Stadium, *Black Hole* By Charles Burns, *Dredg - The Pariah*, *The Parrot*, *The Delusion*, Learning More About The Behemoth's "Game 3" **Dislikes:** Water In The Basement, Drinking Way Too Much Diet Pepsi For The Rock Band Caps **Current Favorite Games:** The Beatles: Rock Band, Batman: Arkham Asylum, Scribblenauts, X-Men Origins: Wolverine, Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days

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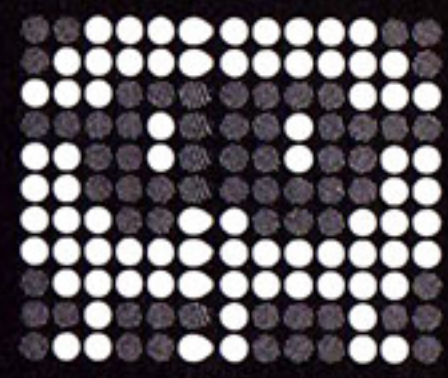
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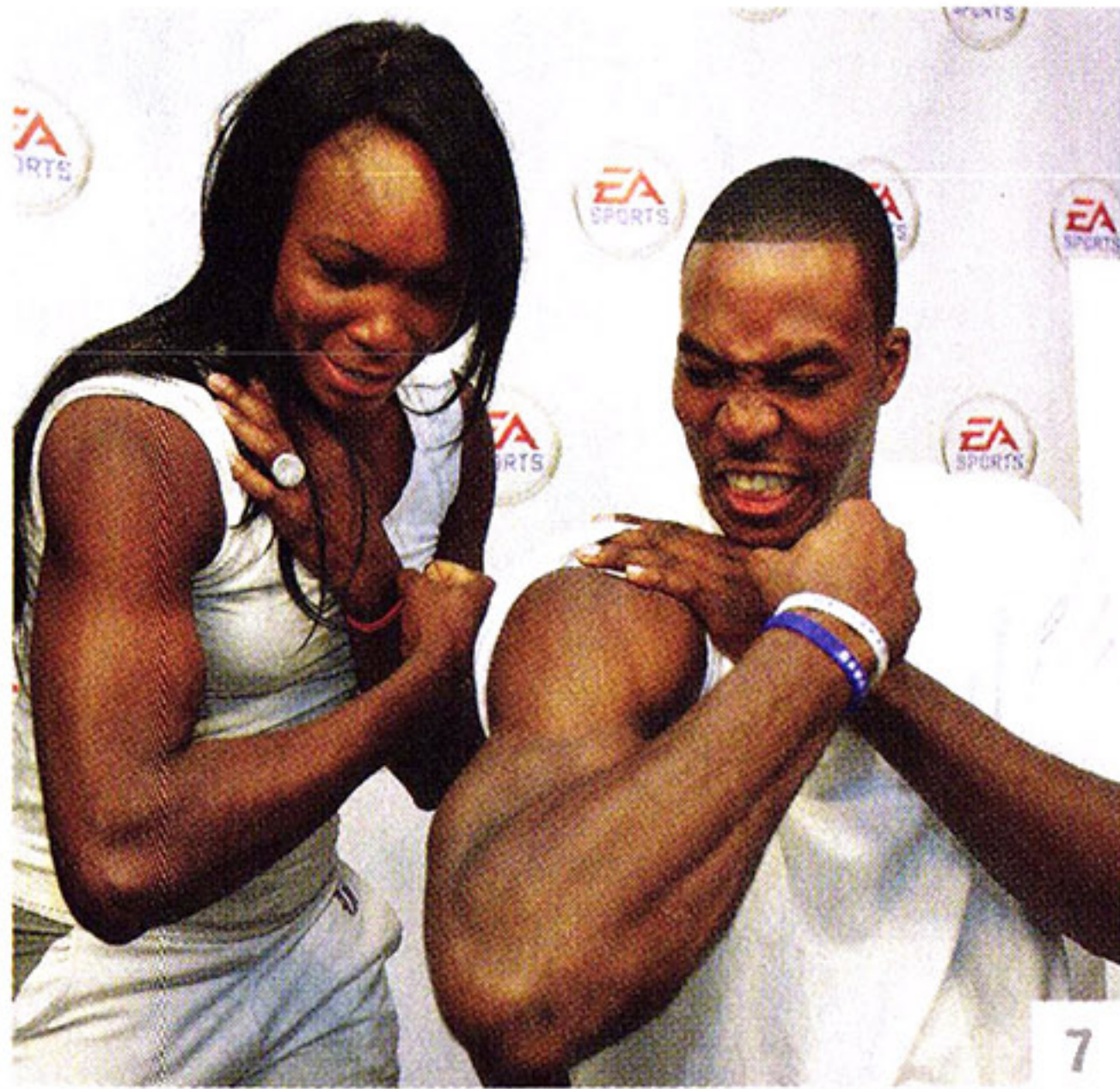


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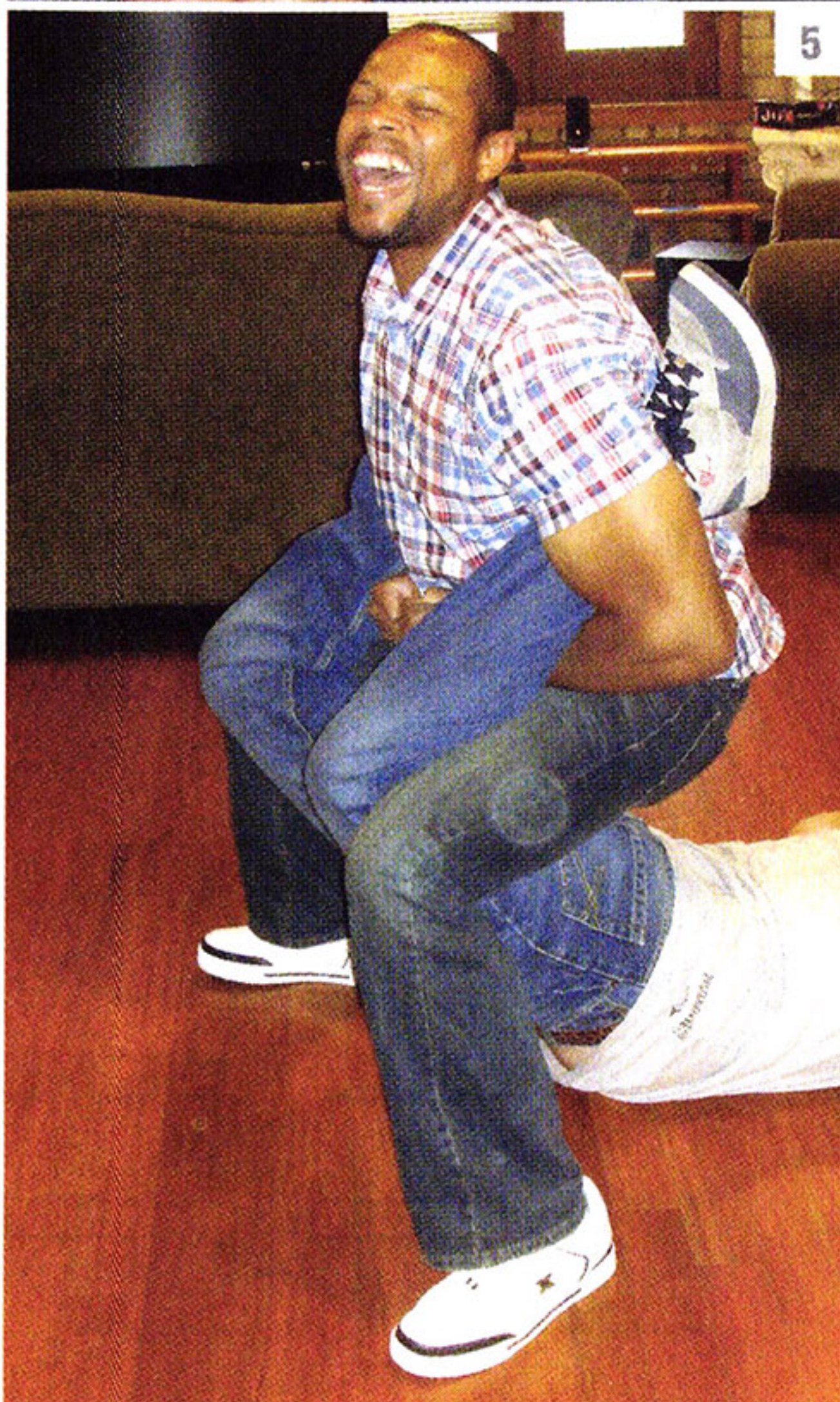
Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry



7



6



5

1 Sandbox Strat's Jay Fitzloff and Activision's Tim May test their manhood by consuming the "Frog" and "Alien" shots at Origami in Minneapolis. Basically, it's sake and a bunch of stuff that used to be alive. Judging by their reactions, they were delicious! 2 Jay Fitzloff, Bryan, Jeff, and Aspyr's Eric Duncan are all hopped up on Sunny D and can't stop jumping! That's what this is a picture of - either that or a woefully miscast teen comedy 3 Socc...er... football star Sacha Kljestan shows us his skill on the pitch at EA's Vancouver studio 4 Bryan looks bemused as he and Tomy's Mike Jones and Bender/Helper's Parnaz Taheri try on some of the assortment of hats from the GI wardrobe department! Yes, we do have a wardrobe department! (98% of the budget goes towards t-shirts and adult diapers) 5 We can't really say what Ben and THQ's Bryan Williams are doing in this picture, but we're pretty sure it violates a few of our parent company's HR rules. Rest assured, we've sent this photo to the proper authorities 6 Activision's Ryh-Ming Poon debates some killer mixes with hip hop legend DJ Shadow 7 Sports superstars Venus Williams and Dwight Howard compare pipes at an EA Sports event in Vancouver. Sad thing is that either of them could beat up the entire staff of GI



4

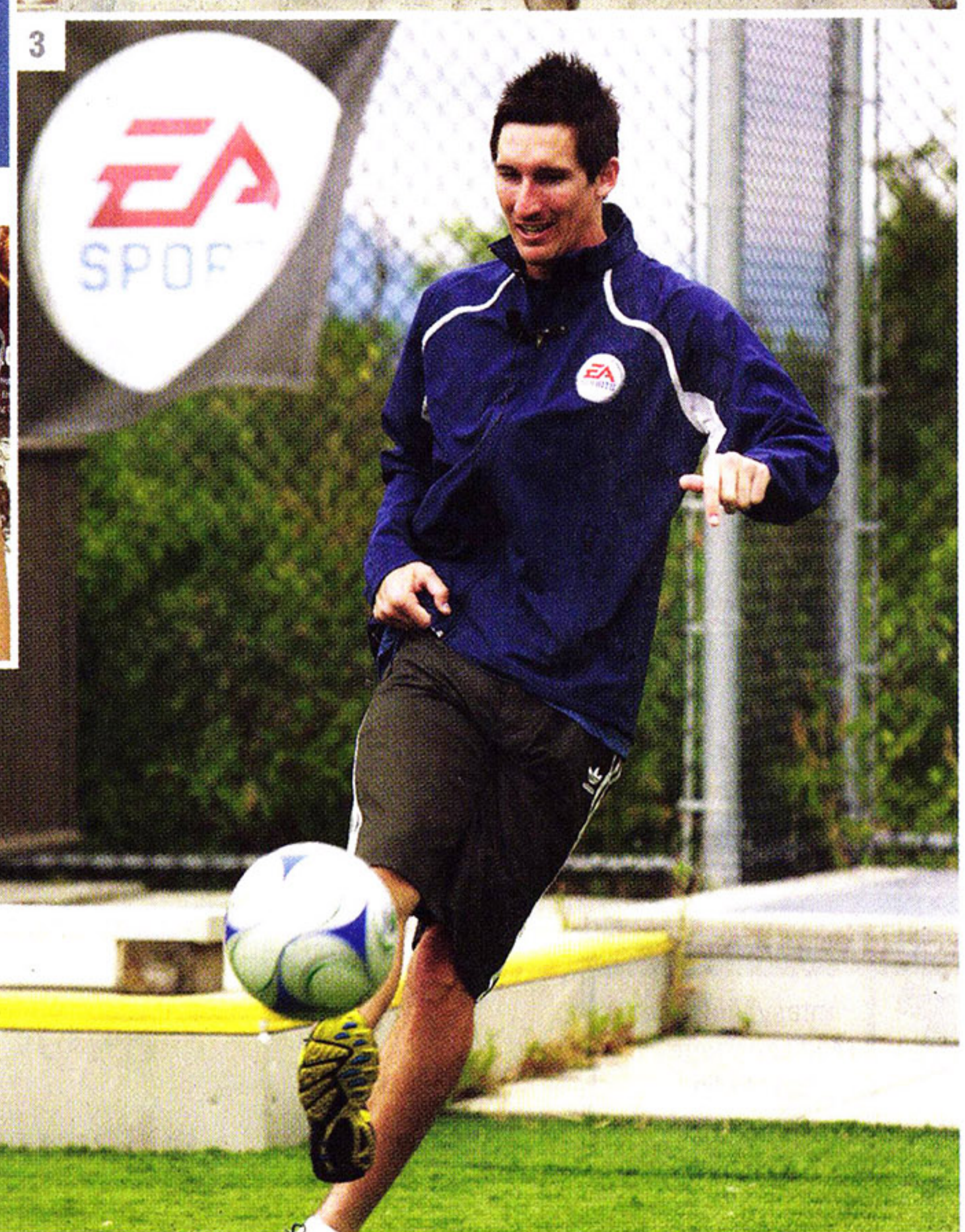


1A



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2



3

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Odd Appreciation

Thanks for the great Q&A with Oddworld Inhabitants' Lorne Lanning about Fangus Klot! I've been wondering why that game was cancelled for years now, and I finally got the story. I hope that big publishers (like Activision and EA) got a look at the article and realized just what kinds of awesome ideas are getting killed by the market they're creating. I know that profit is most important, but sometimes it feels like publishers don't even play games,

and are unnecessarily razing the creative landscape because they're afraid it won't make a buck.

Adam Condra
via email

We would have liked to play Fangus Klot, too. Don't be too quick to lament the current creative landscape in gaming, though; we're still seeing tons of great games come out every year, replete with clever and unique moments. Additionally,

many unconventional games that would not have otherwise been released are finding an audience thanks to XBLA, PSN, and WiiWare. Yes, some potentially great games (like Fangus Klot) may die on the vine, but the argument that creativity in the gaming industry is on the decline does a disservice to the people working hard to make the games we play and love.

Dead To Rights

Thank you for telling Cody Hersman, who wrote the "Dead Wrong" letter in issue 196 about the Left 4 Dead 2 boycott, to stop whining. I loved the first game, and the second one looks even better – incendiary rounds, new locations, new characters, and more! If people are dumb enough to not play what is sure to be one of the better games of this year, then that's their mistake.

Grant Doefler
via email

I am so tired of hearing all of these people complain about Left 4 Dead 2. Valve has publicly stated that they will continue to back the original Left 4 Dead, yet for some reason that is still not enough. I find it amazing that so many people lack trust in Valve's decision-making. This is not a company that is known for just cranking out games to make a buck.

Ben Lemon
via email

Cody Hersman didn't disrespect you in any way, and yet you tore him apart. What the hell is wrong with you? You didn't need to print his letter in the magazine if you have a bone to pick – do it in private.

Sudip Dalta
via email

Last month, we printed a letter from Cody Hersman in support of a Left 4 Dead 2 boycott, along with a response voicing our support for Valve's decision. Many readers assumed we were tearing down Cody specifically, but our harsh words were actually directed at the boycott movement as a whole. That may not seem much better if you happen to support the boycott (we did call you whiny, entitled brats), though the distinction is important. We have no problem sounding off about issues in the industry, but we never want to single out readers and make them regret writing in to voice their opinions. If it came off otherwise, sorry Cody!

One or the Other

I don't understand something. Sega made all the kid-friendly Sonic games, so why would the company publish bloody games like Bayonetta? Konami makes the card game Yu-Gi-Oh, yet it also makes the war-filled Metal Gear series? Why can't companies make up their minds about what types of games they want to be known for?

Patrick Messenger
via email

Let's say you own a toy store, and you're trying to decide what type of toy you should sell. Some customers like action figures, while others prefer stuffed ani-

mals – would it be smart to limit yourself to only one of those two? Wouldn't you sell more toys if you had both stuffed animals and action figures on your shelves? That's one of the reasons video game publishers release many titles in different genres. If Sega sells both Sonic the Hedgehog and Bayonetta, it can reach a wider audience than if it only focused on one or the other. Game companies don't necessarily want to become known for one type of game; usually, they just want to sell as many games as possible. That's business.

Lambasting The Lombax

Alright...in issue 195, a caption in your Ratchet and Clank feature said: "The mysterious Lombax named Azimuth is the first character of that race players have met, other than Ratchet." This is a very false statement. This will be the second Lombax other than Ratchet; Angela, a Lombax, can be found in Going Commando on PSP, and she has a huge role in the story. Just thought that I'd inform Game "Informer" about this.

Curtis Bragg
via email

Actually, according to Insomniac, Angela is not technically a Lombax. She is certainly presented as a possible member of Ratchet's race in Going Commando –

which adds a layer of mystery to the character – but it turns out that she belongs to a similar, as-yet-unidentified species. Hold on...did we just spend time discussing whether a fictional character in a fictional universe was a member of a fictional species? Ugh. We're going outside for a while to get some fresh air.



Hardcore Holla Back

In issue 196, a reader called out Wii gamers by bringing up a few good games and asking why people weren't buying them. Here's my best answer: Just because you are a hardcore gamer doesn't mean that everyone likes the same type of hardcore games. I still enjoy my Wii and pick up a new game for it when it appeals to me, but for the types of games that I enjoy, being a multi-console gamer is the only way to go.

Jessica Mascola
via email

Send your comments to Game Informer. Snail Mail: Game Informer Magazine • Attn: Dear GI • 724 North First St., 4th Floor • Minneapolis, MN 55401 Email: deargi@gameinformer.com

GI COMMUNITY

Game Informer has a thriving online community, and this is where they can sound off about issues facing the gaming industry today

THE QUESTION:

Are you excited for Microsoft and Sony's upcoming motion-based control systems?



Fallout 3

It seems like a gimmick to attract casual gamers away from the Wii. I can't see how motion controls could be used for "real" games like Fallout, GTA, or Call of Duty.

not_a_bumblebee

I fear that the gaming industry has become too fixated on motion controls being "the next big thing." Personally, I'd rather see efforts put forth to figure out true 3D graphics or just a few genuinely good new IPs that stop the sequel parade for a while.

aubradley84

The possibilities with Natal are endless. Various ideas like using it to glide through menus or

turn on my 360 via voice make me giddy like a schoolgirl. As long as I get to use my regular controller too, I'm hooked.

SmackeyTheFrog

It comes down to software. Sure, Natal will make the dashboard easier and possibly add a few fun features, but I'll stick to a regular controller for games like Halo and Call of Duty.

Treestump

I can't say that I am. The prospect of standing in front of my TV and flailing my arms around like I'm mentally ill doesn't do anything for me. Besides, I love my good old-fashioned controller.

Hiroshige

As long as Sony and Microsoft stay away from mandatory motion controls and just have it as a nice little alternative, everything will be fine and dandy. I'm going to check them both out, but my outlook isn't positive.

Metallica69

I only own a PS3, and from what I've seen, the Sixaxis controls don't work as well as they should. If this new remote is the same deal, you won't see me wasting money on it.

Wii_hater3360



Lair

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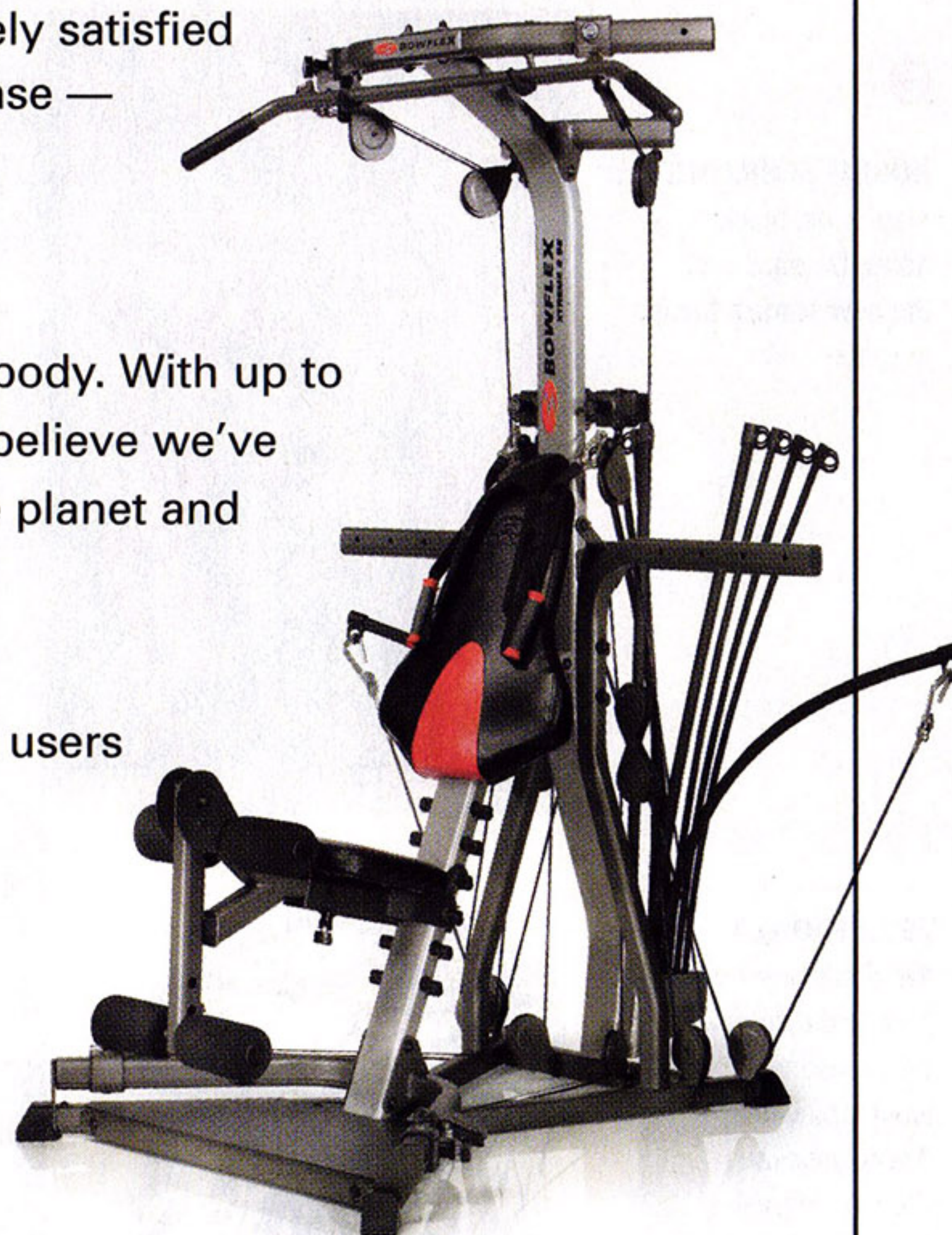
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Wii owners are not required to buy a hardcore game if it comes out, regardless of their personal preferences. MadWorld, despite its artistic flair, was not the world-shattering title I had hoped for. Likewise, if you're not into rail shooters, House of the Dead (and the upcoming Dead Space: Extraction) won't make it into your shopping cart. Just because a system has a limited number of hardcore titles doesn't mean that people are required to buy them.

Thomas Bedient
via email

Hardcore negligence? Let me tell you about negligence. How about Nintendo's failure to respond to the desire for more third-party titles sooner? How about piles of stupid peripherals, including one (WiiMotion Plus) that adds functionality that should have been there years ago? How about the lack of any advertising muscle on anything but first-party titles? I've bought my so-called "hardcore" games - I have not failed Nintendo, but Nintendo has failed me.

JD DeMoro
via email

One thing we learned from challenging hardcore Wii owners: Gamers resent the idea that they are somehow obligated to buy games out of blind devotion to their console. Games specifically targeted to hardcore gamers on Wii have not sold particularly well, but that isn't necessarily the consumer's fault. You can't expect to keep everyone satisfied with just a handful of niche third-party titles.

Easier Than Easy Mode

I realize that sarcasm doesn't carry over real well into print, so I'll be direct - demo play is a *bad* idea. Reiner's opinion piece in issue 196 about the benefits of demo play couldn't be further off base; a game playing itself for you is pathetic. It takes the challenge out of the game, as well as any feeling of accomplishment. Developers are mollicodding us too much already just to sell more games to the casual crowd. Meanwhile, the more dedicated gamers are forced to endure the indignity of playing far beneath their abilities. I know demo play is only optional right now, but how long before it becomes as common as regenerating health?

Kieran McKeighen
via email

If you don't like the idea of demo play, then don't use it. You'll still experience the game's full challenge, and the sense of accomplishment from overcoming that challenge without assistance. However, that aspect of gaming may not be as important to some people - and you can't presume to tell anyone how they can or cannot enjoy a game they have purchased. If widely adopted, demo mode could even prove to be a great thing for hardcore gamers; developers might be less inclined to adjust the gameplay for a more casual audience, assuming that those gamers can just skip past sections that are too difficult. Think of demo play as a tool for those who choose to use it, not as an evil shadow encroaching on your right to die 15 times on a single boss fight.



DANA KOERLIN

In the future, engineers get to wear sweet armor. Unfortunately, in the present, they are nerds

reader art

Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best damn art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault. All entries become the property of Game Informer and can't be returned.

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ROBBIE SCHILLING

Step aside, black holes. Demons are the new scariest thing in space



ERIKA STANWOOD

Just back away slowly and everything will be fine



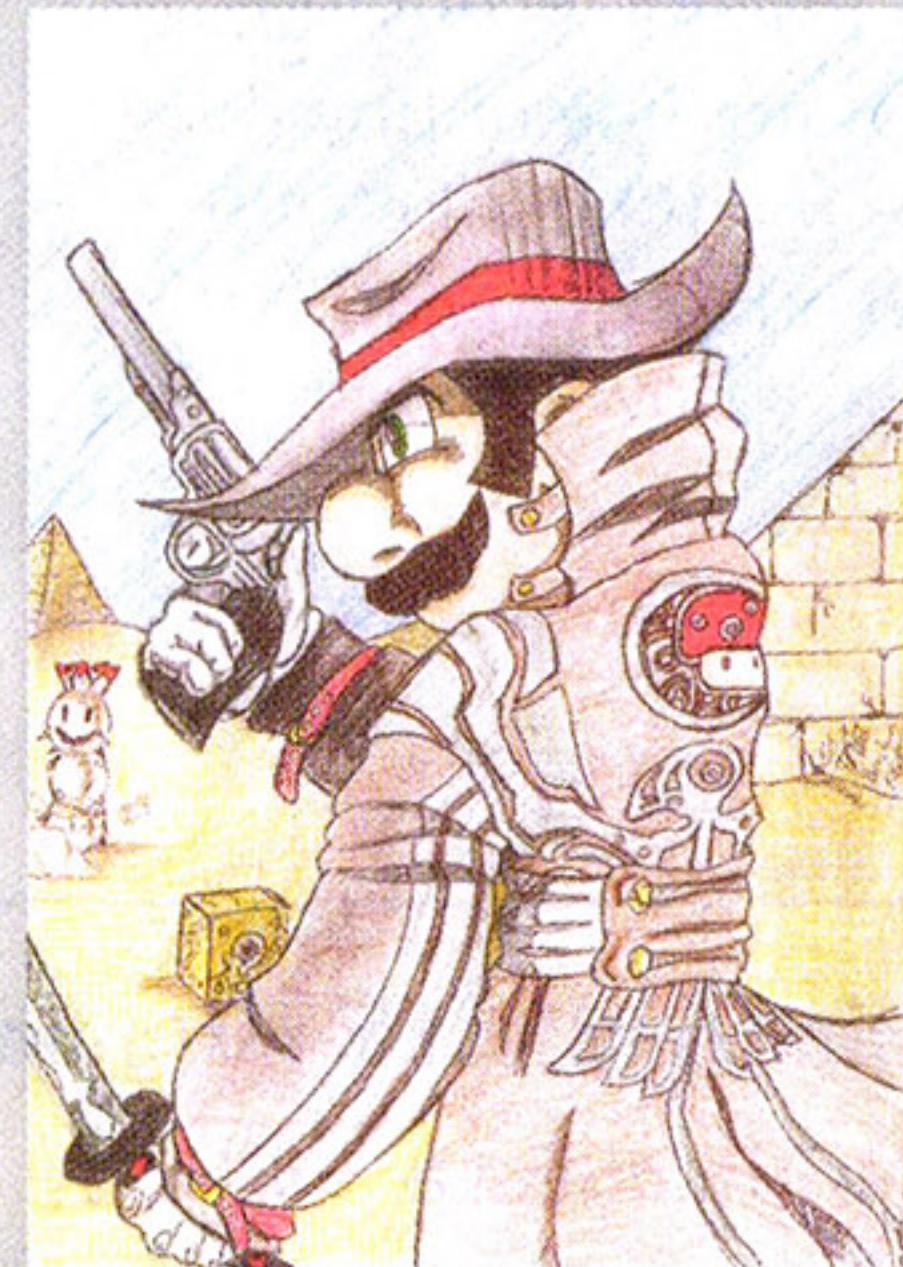
FELIX PADILLA

We don't care how bad he'd throw off balancing - we want a playable Apocalypse in the next Marvel Ultimate Alliance



BRANDON PARFAIT

Every good cowboy needs a spectacular moustache. Mario and Sam Elliott are tied for the "Best Cowboy" award



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DARKEST OF DAYS

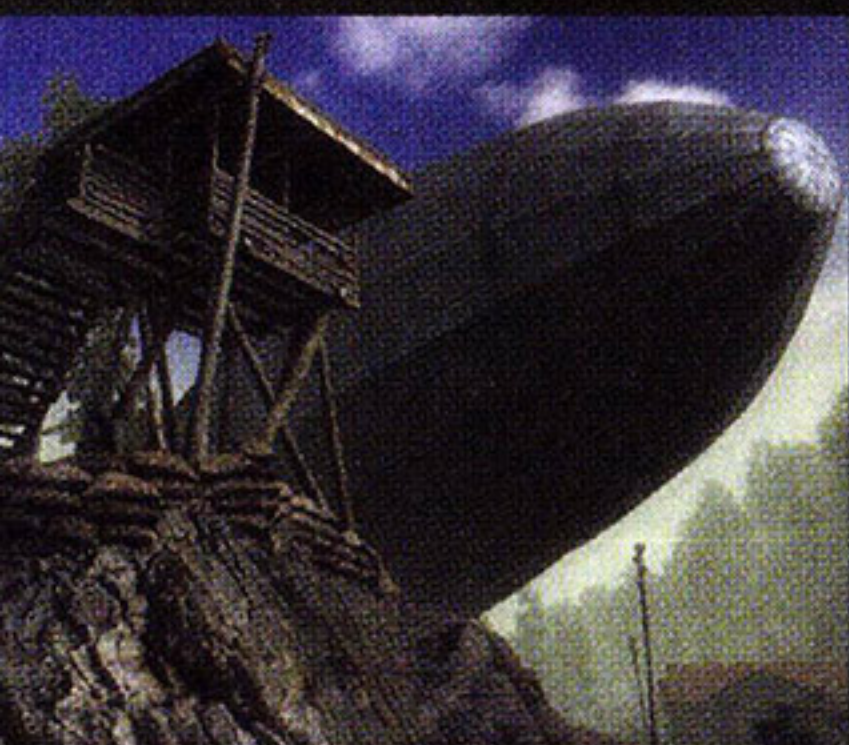


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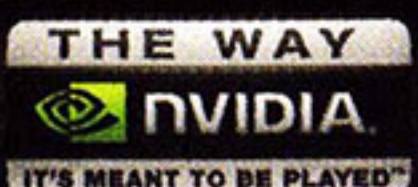
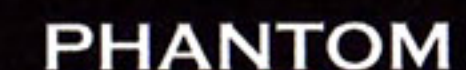
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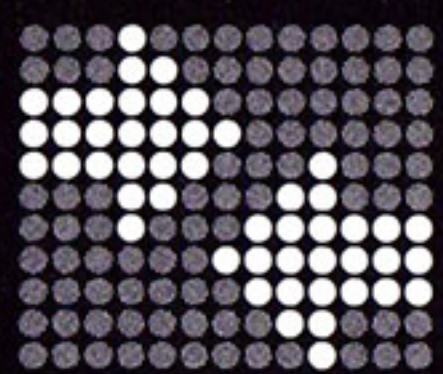
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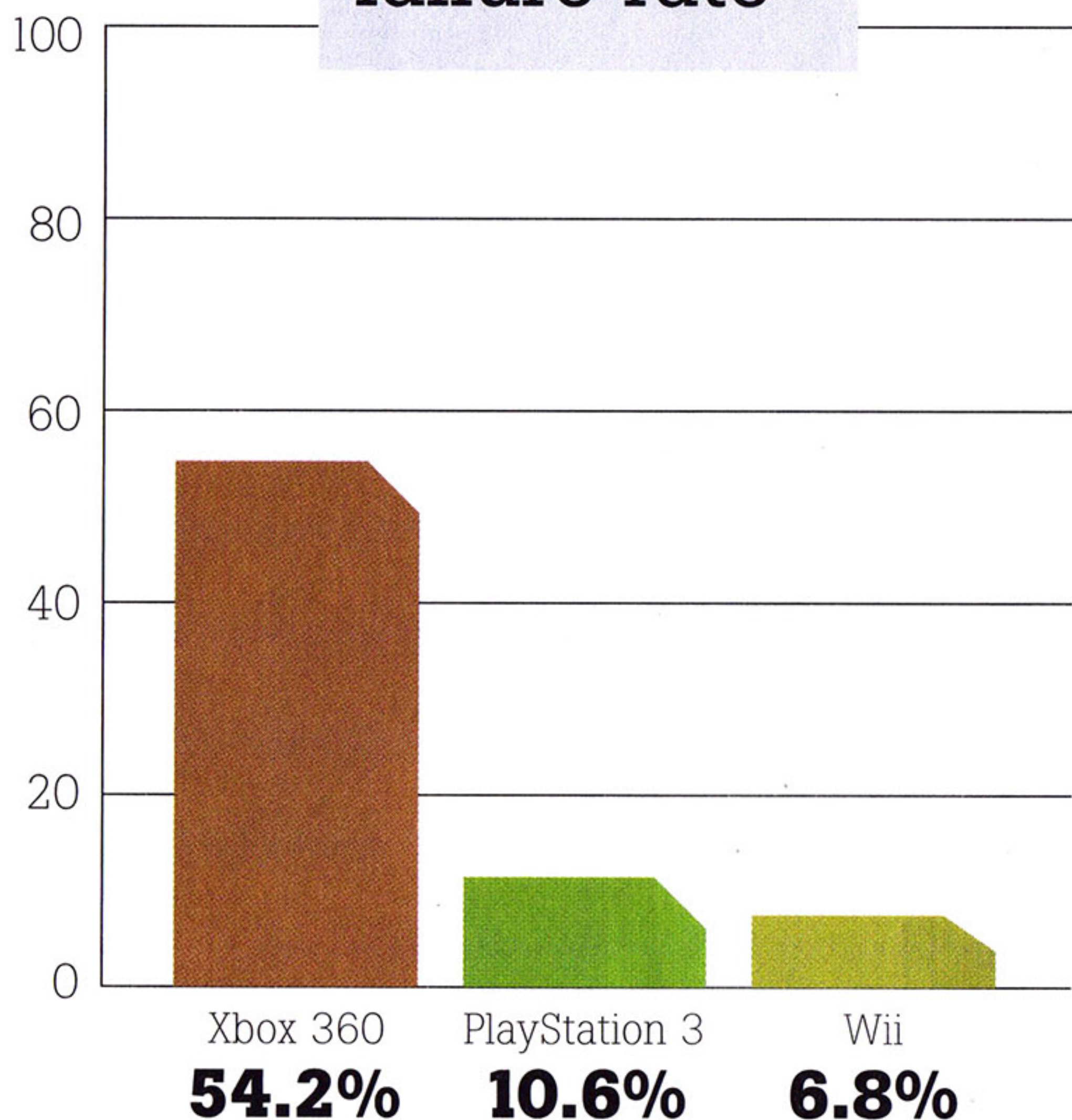


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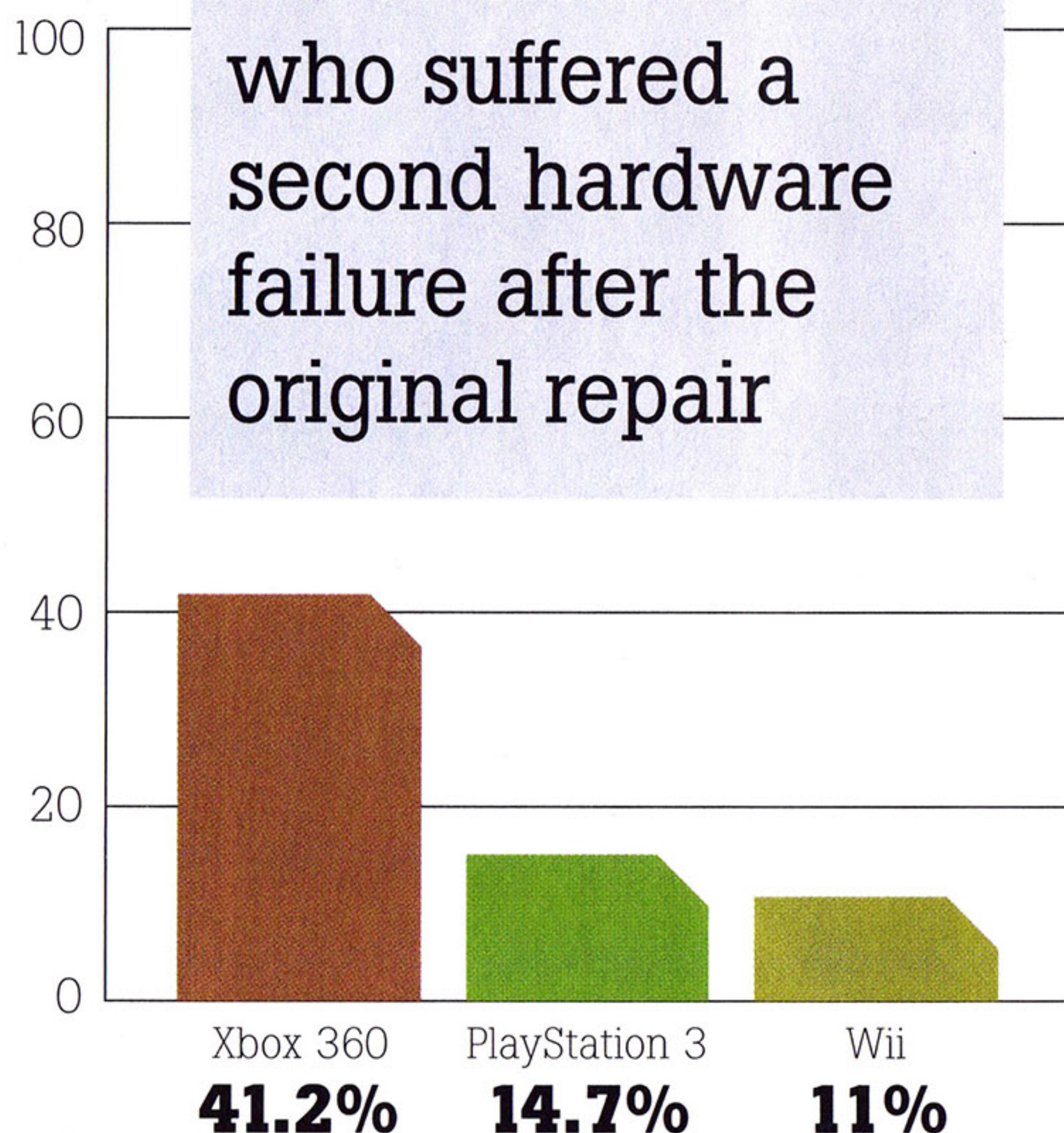
EPIC FAIL

No gaming moment is more demoralizing than the time you sit down to play a game and your system doesn't work. With hundreds of dollars invested into the console and visions of customer service hell, you start to freak out. You hope the problem will fix itself, but it never does. Unfortunately, most of us have been there. How pervasive is the Xbox 360's Red Ring of Death? What about Sony and Nintendo? We surveyed close to 5,000 readers and document their tales of woe.

» Console failure rate



» Percentage of console owners who suffered a second hardware failure after the original repair



Note: Percentages taken from the total number of owners of each respective system

Random Facts

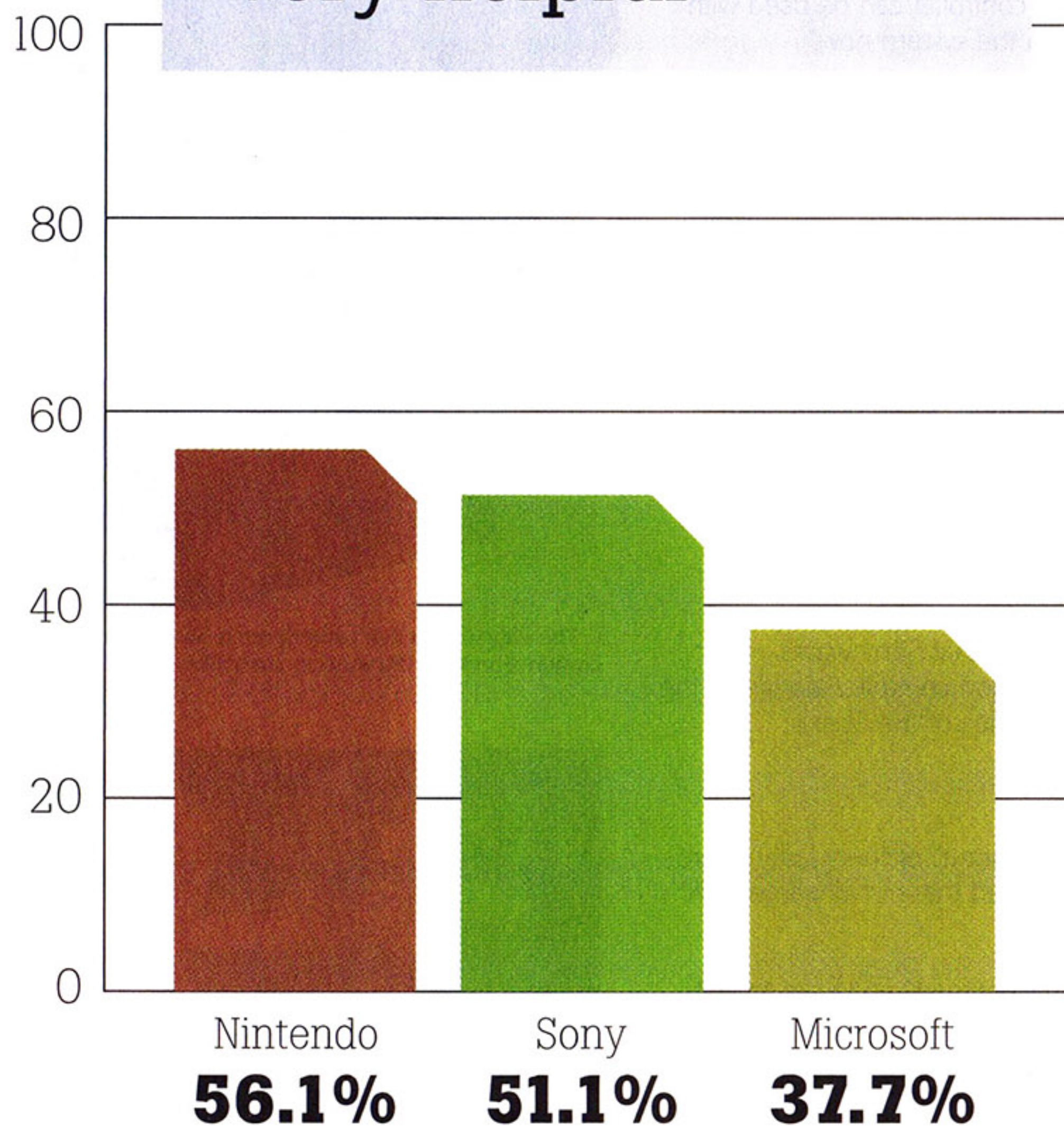
» Percentage of respondents who said they'd never buy an Xbox system again because of their system failure: 3.8%

» The majority of repairs for each console took two to three weeks, but Microsoft's drifted upwards toward a month. Nintendo and Sony, meanwhile, trended sooner at one week.

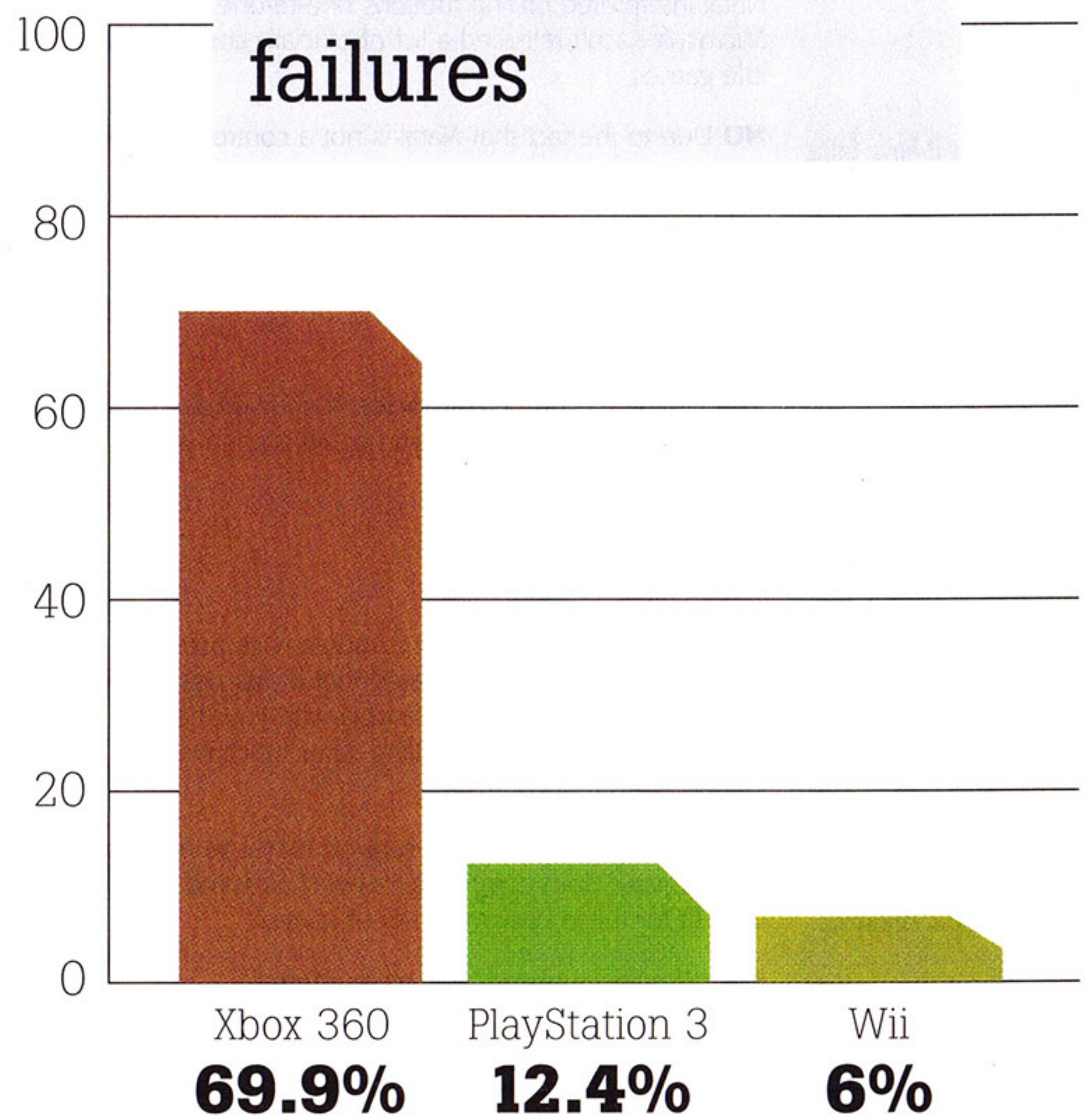
» Perhaps the Wii has suffered fewer hardware failures among our readers due to the fact that it isn't played as often. The majority of Wii owners (41.4%) said they play their Wii less than an hour a day on average, as compared with the Xbox 360 (three to five hours: 40.3%) and PS3 owners (three to five hours: 37%).

» The unreliable Xbox 360 isn't stopping its fans from buying new ones. The percentage of owners of failed 360s who've bought more than one: 36.4%. This is compared to Sony's 13.4% and Nintendo's 8.4%. Makes you wonder how legit the 360's sales numbers are.

» Percentage of people who rate their customer service experience "very helpful"



» Percentage of respondents whose friends have had console hardware failures



Moving Into The FUTURE >>>

In June, both Microsoft and Sony revealed their answers to Wii's motion controller with new peripherals. Here's a quick comparison of the two.



■ Apart from normal motion control functions, Sony's E3 demo showcased the wand being used for level creation, drawing, and writing. Here it is being transformed onscreen for a virtual morning star



MICROSOFT

» What is it?

Project Natal is a motion-based application that does not require gamers to hold anything in their hands. Your body's movements control what happens onscreen.

» What do you need?

Since Natal isn't a controller, all gamers will need to buy is a camera that sits upon your TV or entertainment center.

» Will it work with games I now own?

YES Although it was just a demo, at E3 Microsoft showed Natal working perfectly with EA's Burnout Paradise. Players held up their arms in the steering wheel motion and moved their feet for gas/brake. Natal interpreted driving motions one-to-one. Microsoft hasn't released a list of officially compatible games.

» Does it have force feedback rumble?

NO Due to the fact that Natal is not a controller.

» Does it have voice recognition?

YES

» Can you scan in ordinary objects?

YES During the E3 demo, Microsoft showed a skateboarding game where you could scan in your own skateboard deck.

» Can you use it with a normal controller simultaneously?

POSSIBLY Former Microsoft corporate vice president John Schappert speculated that it was possible to control the game's camera with your head using Natal while still controlling other functions with your normal controller.

» Will this replace my normal controller?

NO Not all games will have support for these new controllers, or if they do, not all of them will require it exclusively. Both companies, as well as some developers, have already stated that not all games will be a fit for these new methods of control.

» Who's onboard?

Epic, Bungie, Lionhead, and other internal Microsoft studios are already working with Natal.

» How much does it cost and when can I get it?

Microsoft hasn't said anything about Natal's official release date, but we've heard that the company is targeting a holiday 2010 debut. No price has been announced.

SONY

Sony's wireless motion controller contains a sensor ball at the top, and has buttons and a trigger along the wand's side. With the help of a PlayStation camera, some games can project your image into the virtual world. The wand can represent a virtual object (like a sword), which you can then swing to control the on-screen action. Up to four controllers can be used at once.

The controller requires the PS3 PlayStation Eye camera. We assume both will be sold in a starter kit, but Sony has offered no official word yet.

POSSIBLY We've gotten slightly mixed answers on this. An official spokesperson told us that the company is looking into it, while Jack Tretton, Sony America's president and CEO, told CNBC, "I think our [motion] controller can be used with every game that's on the system now."

YES

YES The controller itself can't, but the requisite PlayStation Eye camera does.

POSSIBLY A patent found by Siliconera has recently surfaced for Sony tech (using the PlayStation Eye) that would allow you to scan in everyday objects for use in a game. Whether this is integrated into the motion controller is unknown.

POSSIBLY Early word is that Sony wants you to be able to use the motion controller alongside the motion control capabilities of the Sixaxis.

Development kits have already gone out to first- and third-party partners, but no specific games have been announced. Sony says it wants the peripheral's launch to be filled with familiar franchises and new IP.

Sony says that the controller will be out in spring of next year. A price has not been announced.



■ This demo tasked you with kicking oncoming balls. Project Natal can also be used to navigate menus on your 360 dashboard



■ The PlayStation Eye camera must be used in conjunction with the motion controller



■ Lionhead's Milo demo showcased Natal's facial and voice recognition functions, as well as its ability to integrate the user's image into the onscreen experience.

Wii

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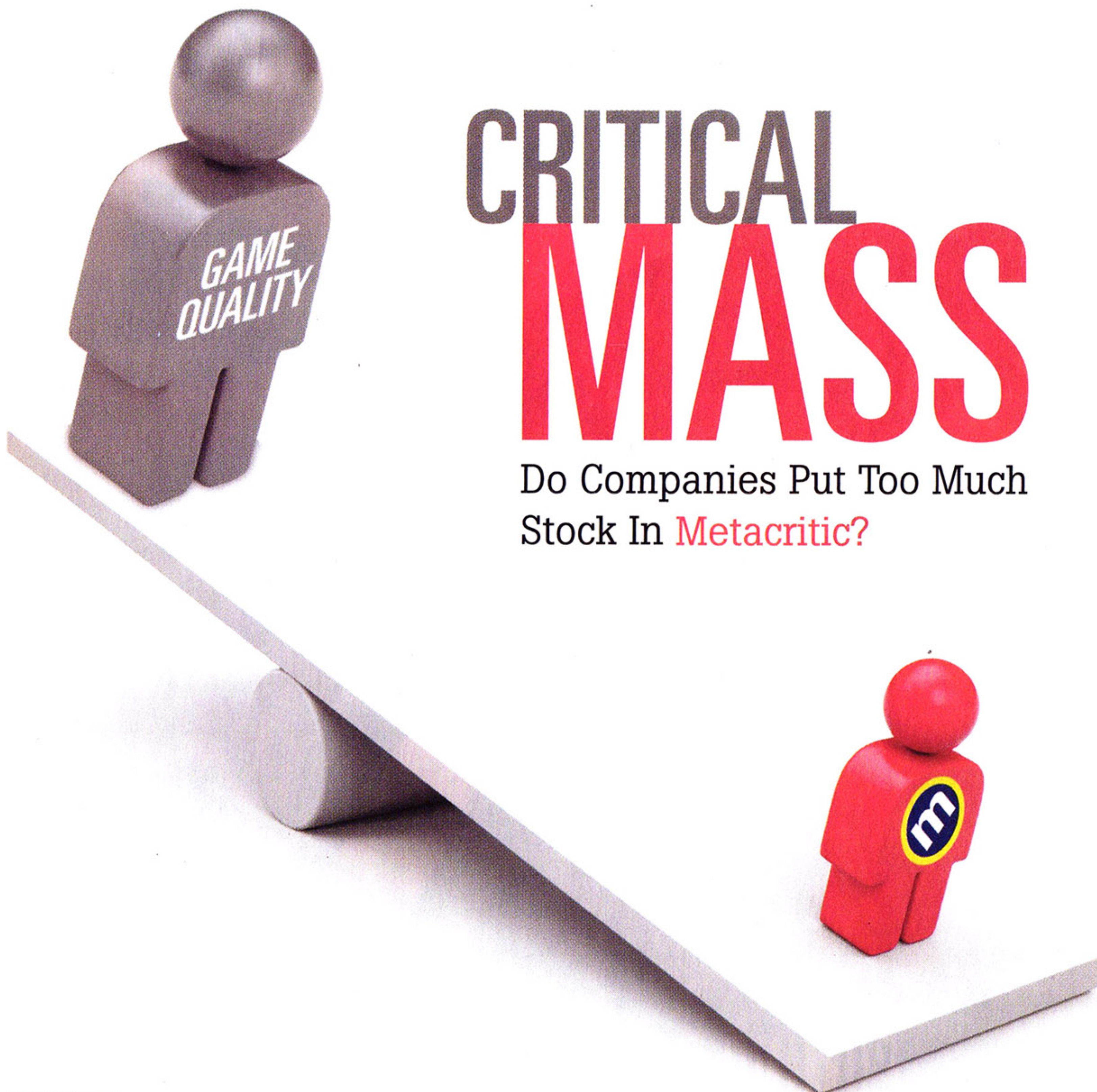
Submit A Comment

COMING SOON

Video games may be our favorite hobby, but it's a business. It's big business for the people that make the games, and it's also a business for the media who review and rate video games. Whether or not you write for a magazine or website, we all have opinions about how good or bad a title is. But to some it's more than an opinion; it could be life or death. The competition is tougher than ever today, and not only making, but selling a successful video game makes and breaks the fates of developers large and small.



■ **Dead Space** executive producer Glen Schofield says that the game's missing a 90 Metacritic rating was no small matter at publisher EA



CRITICAL MASS

Do Companies Put Too Much Stock In **Metacritic**?

How do you gauge if a game is successful? Overall quality? Sales? Reviews? For a publicly owned publisher, for instance, you'd think sales are the one and only figure that matters. Sales are undoubtedly important. However, another factor is arguably just as valuable to the marketing departments, accountants, executives, shareholders, and development teams behind these multi-million dollar projects: public opinion. More specifically, the scores calculated by aggregate review score sites such as Metacritic and Game Rankings.

What does a site like Metacritic, which takes a swath of review scores for a game, interprets the different scoring systems, and squeezes out a single unified score, really tell anyone? Is it fair to judge a game based on such a system? How does it affect the attitudes and practices of companies and the teams that make the games? Regardless of your answers to these questions, companies like Electronic Arts are paying close attention to what Metacritic says about its products.

"It's definitely something that pushes us, motivates us, and makes us work harder," says Glen Schofield, former Visceral Games general manager and *Dead Space* executive producer.

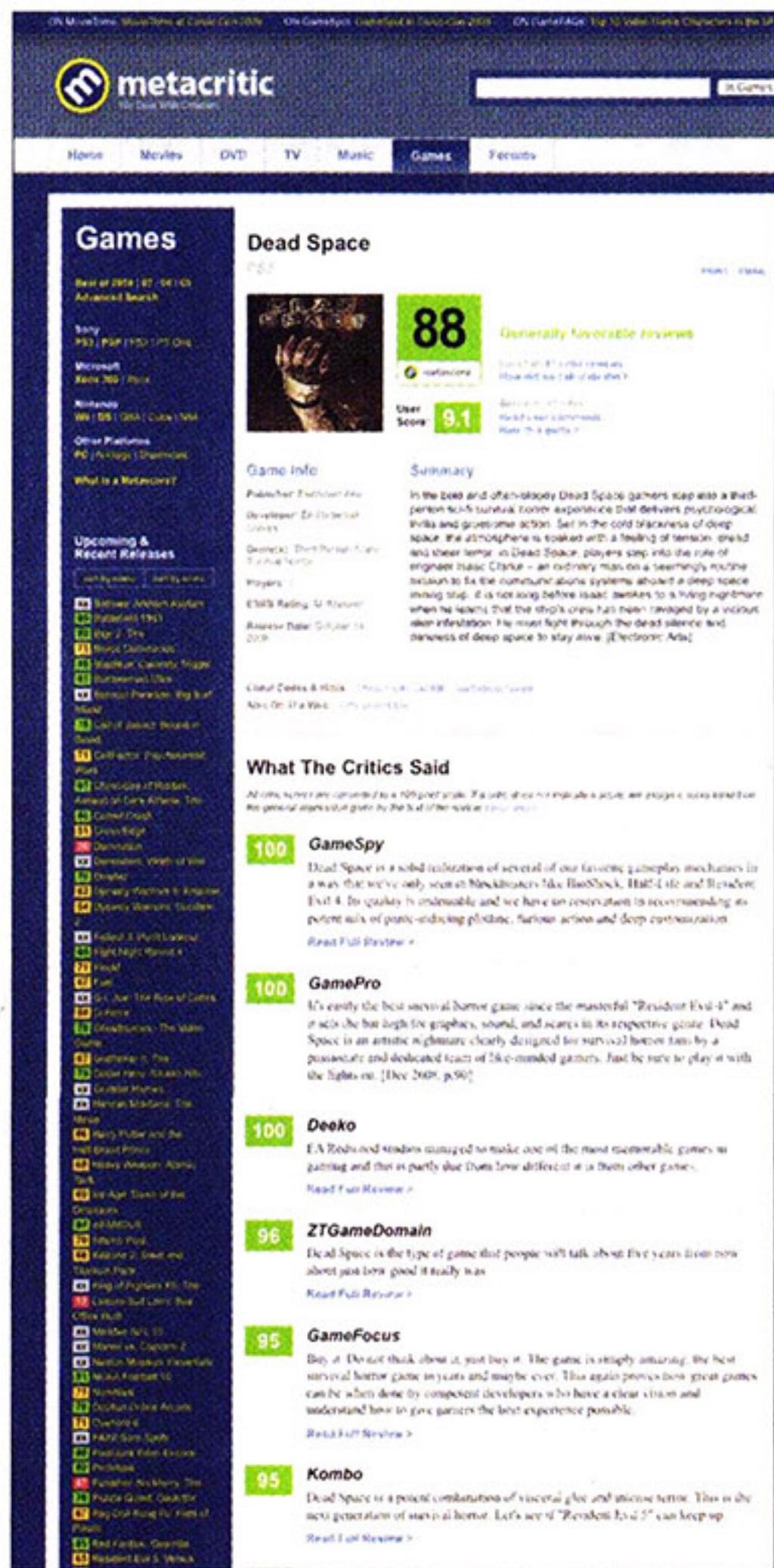
UNDER THE HOOD

Metacritic gives games a Metascore based on a 100-point scale, with titles scoring 75 or above receiving a green banner to indicate to consumers it's a good game. Outlets that don't grade on a 100-point scale have their scores converted by Metacritic, including those that don't assign a review score of any kind. Metacritic draws from a host of close to 140 different outlets to determine which will be utilized for a Metascore. Which ones it chooses is something that co-founder and games editor Mark Doyle says he decides himself. In fact, Doyle told us that half his time is devoted solely to trying to keep up with who's good enough to contribute to a Metascore. "You can't automate this process," he says. "You really have to pay attention, because there's a lot of really weird stuff that goes on."

Metacritic has drawn criticism because of how it converts review scores into its own Metascore, including grade-based reviews from sites such as 1up.com. Editorial director Sam Kennedy believes that it's potentially dangerous to take a review out of a magazine or site's overall context, and that their move to a letter grade system was done because they thought it would be better understood. "The unfortunate thing," he says, "was that the only people who didn't understand that were some of the aggregators." Kennedy says that they're working with Metacritic to come to a better understanding, but that right now a 1up.com B- translates into what Metacritic considers a mixed review, while Kennedy says that they think a B- is still in the good range.

Metacritic's Doyle disagrees that letter grades are necessarily universally understood. "I find it the complete opposite. If you give something an F it's totally worthless, so why put it up against everyone else's 50 or 58 like it is in school?"

While there is no absolute way to infallibly convert grading scales or come to total agreement, to developers like Glen Schofield, the effects are very real. "Dead Space on the Xbox 360 had 78 reviews. 51 of them were 90 or above, but we got an 89 as our final score. We only had one 65 so...how do you get 51 that are above 90 and end up with 89? That brought us down one point. The difference between an 89 and a 90 is a big ass deal."



IT'S NOT JUST A GAME

How big of a deal? It can put a lot of pressure on the entire organization, from development teams to marketing and public relations. Some publishers tie a game's Metacritic score into the dev team's bonus money, and high-level decisions can be made before a game's release depending on what that company anticipates the Metacritic score to be. Maybe a company plays it safe with a game so as not to risk a lower score at the expense of taking a chance on a possibly cool, but risky, direction. Some teams are forced to gauge the time and money needed to implement a feature against what it may or may not gain them in Metacritic points.

Sales would surely seem to be more important than an aggregate review score. Some believe there is a tight relationship between the two, but that isn't always the case. Some rumors have circulated stating that some industry analysts have used a Metacritic score, for example, to change their outlook of a publicly held company's stock before the real sales data rolled in. A bad score on an otherwise fine game could scare off potential buyers, thereby lowering sales numbers.

Finally, there is the argument that sales, scores, and other outside artificial benchmarks can pollute the artistic vision of the creators, and therefore the games themselves. This question of subjectivity occurs from the nature of reviews, opinions, and scores such as in this magazine.

"I made a game quite a few years ago," Schofield tells us, "and it was about six months later and a reporter was asking me, 'Well, why didn't you ever make a sequel? I loved that game!' I said, 'Dude, you gave it a 70, so based on those reviews, we didn't do another one.' And he was like, 'Oh yeah, that's right, I did.'"

Schofield says Electronic Arts doesn't have a defined policy regarding Metacritic scores, and he would not talk about whether the company ties employee bonuses to such scores, but he fully admits the effect it has on a development team.

"It is a big deal. Everything's set to one-click to go the Metacritic page for the game you're working on, and people are constantly F5-ing and updating. You do a game that's rated in the 70s and you feel pretty bad. It's not a great feeling. I know when scores were coming in for Dead Space, people were yelling, 'It just went up a point. We're up to 16th!' They were looking to where we are overall, and it's a huge deal. The first few weeks are really, really exciting when it comes out."

DISCERNING VOICES

Schofield has his own idea of how to tweak the system to make it better: Throw out the highest and lowest score used to create an aggregate review score. This would help eliminate any extreme bias for or against a game and possibly create a more realistic average. Publishers could just do this themselves, but such internal judgments don't seem to be occurring. Companies could also be more

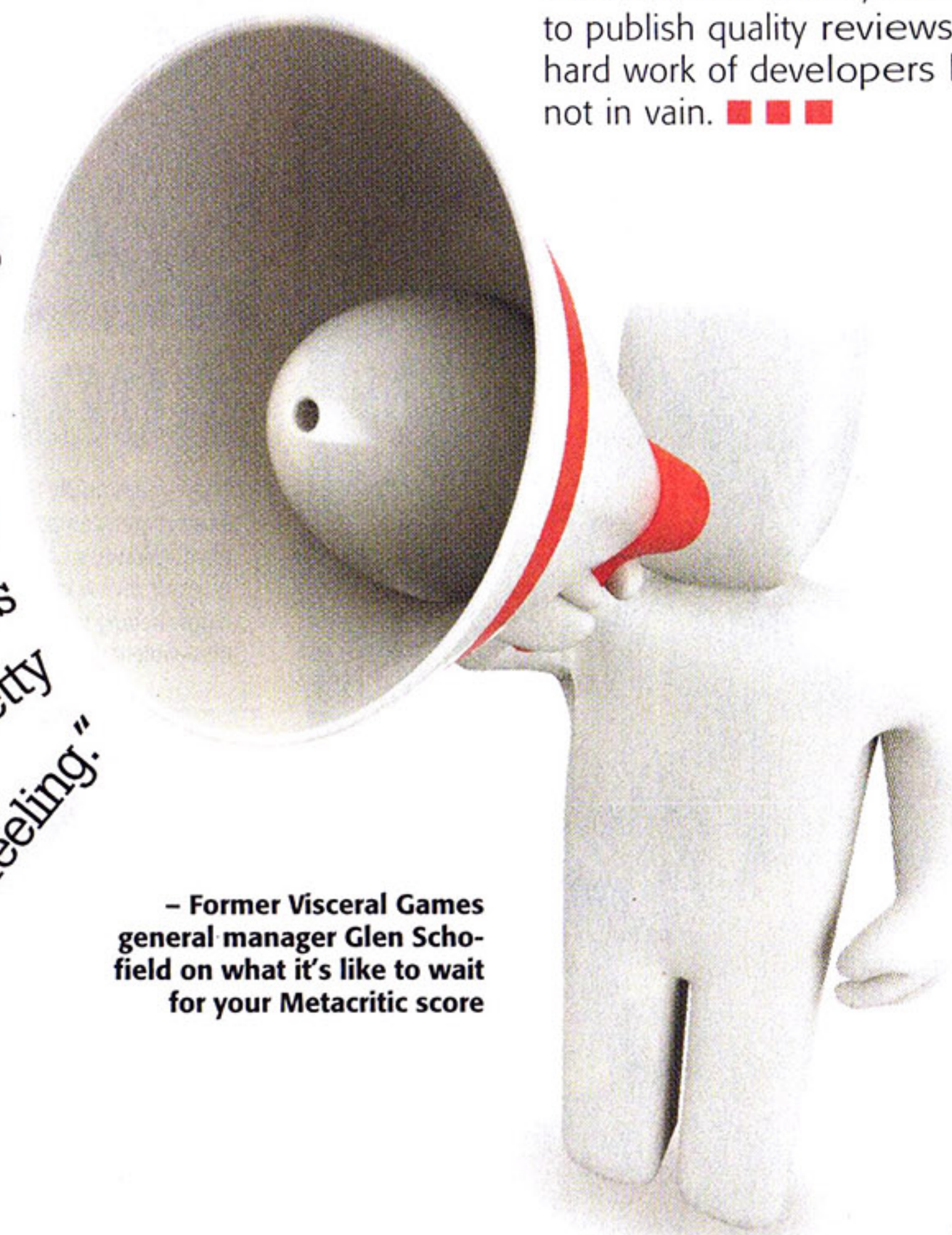
self-selective about what opinions they decided should matter in an attempt to tune out some of the static. Schofield says that in the case of Dead Space's near-miss of a 90 Metacritic rating, it turned out that the game's lowest score was from a freelancer that a particular magazine had hired. This made him question the score. "They just picked up a freelance person and he or she did a review on it, and so, you know, I wonder, why would we give so much weight to that? Maybe that person's favorite games were sports, and maybe shouldn't be doing this kind of game."

Choosing context and what opinions to heed and ignore can be a dangerous way to drink your own kool-aid, but companies are starting to get smarter about aggregate scores. EA Sports' Peter Moore says that factors such as a game's genre and platform need to be taken into account, citing the extenuating circumstances regarding traditionally lower scores for Wii games and the fact that these don't always match up to those titles' higher sales. Moreover, EA CEO John Riccitiello believes that factors such as a game being a sequel or polarizing because it has already established fans and non-fans (like the Sims) must be weighed.

In the end, Schofield believes that the importance of Metacritic will remain. "We need a judge to tell us how good we are, and I believe that the consumer needs something that says whether a game is good or not. I'm always going to be looking for a way to judge myself and judge our games against our peers and competitors, and we always want that Holy Grail: good scores, DICE awards, and all that good stuff. It validates your hard work. You've been working two years or whatever on the game, and you want someone to tell you that you did a good job. And if not, it pushes you really [emphasis his] hard for the next one."

With the importance of aggregate scoring a constant for the foreseeable future, perhaps all that can be done is for companies to get smarter about reading the Metacritic tea leaves, and media outlets to publish quality reviews so that the hard work of developers like Schofield is not in vain. ■■■

"It is a big deal. Everything's set to one-click to go the Metacritic page for the game you're working on, and people are constantly F5-ing and updating. You do a game that's rated in the 70s and you feel pretty bad. It's not a great feeling."

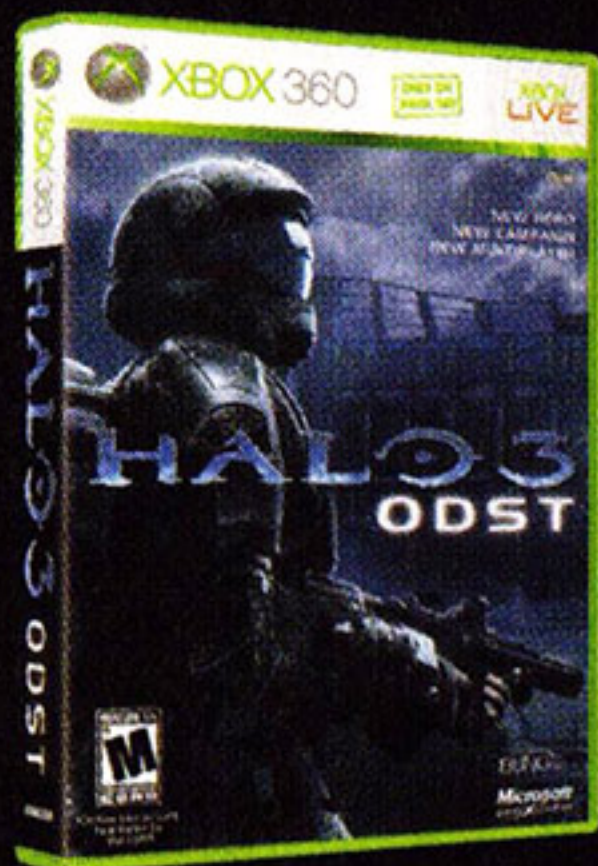


— Former Visceral Games general manager Glen Schofield on what it's like to wait for your Metacritic score



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THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

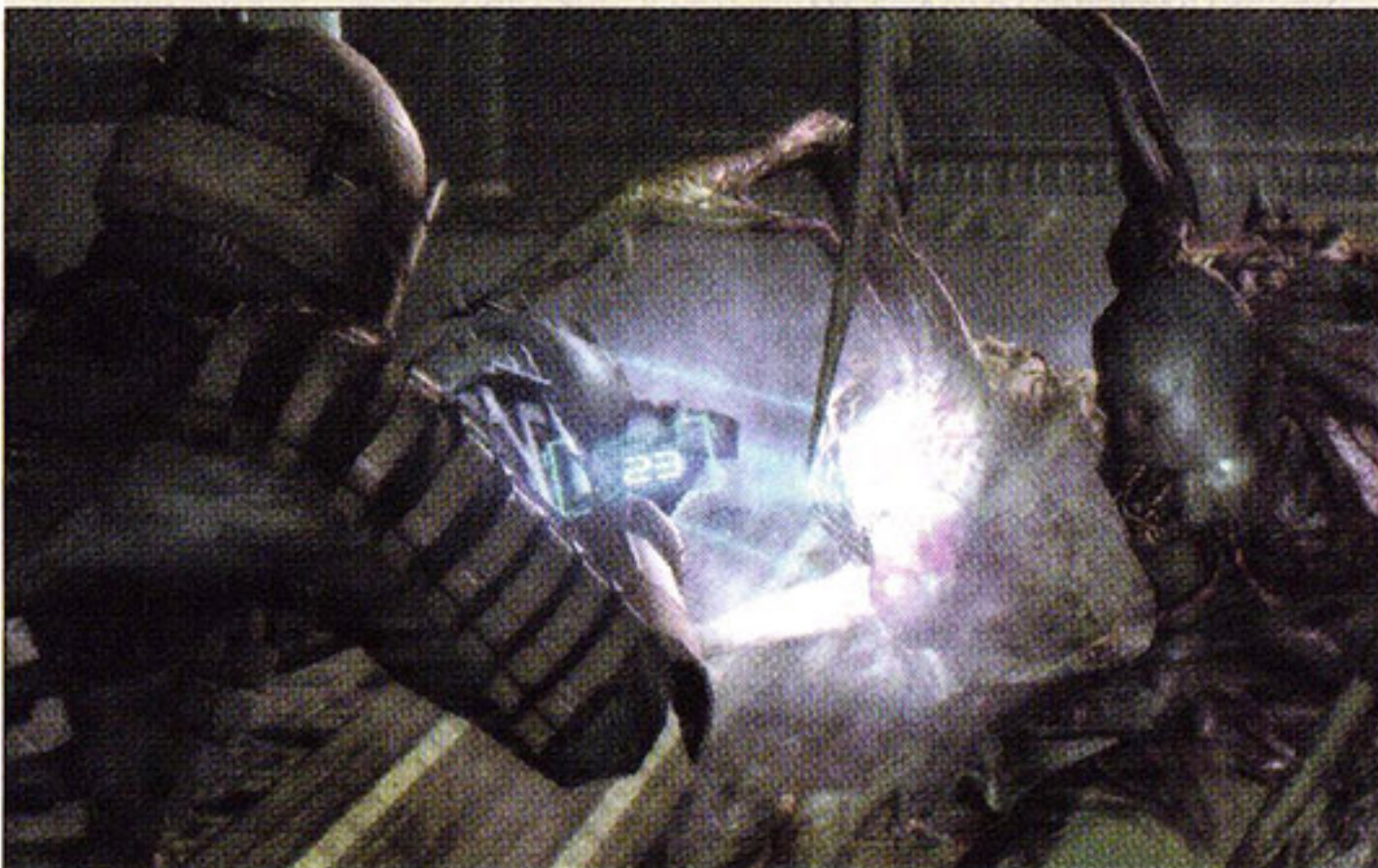
When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin



QUOTE

They wouldn't even take a meeting because mixed martial arts disgusted them. This wasn't a real sport. Boy, they got over that real quick, didn't they?

— UFC president Dana White throws down the gauntlet at EA and its new MMA game to website MMA Junkie. White also said that he'd ban any non-UFC fighter from the league if they signed to be in EA's title



BAD

EA loses two key former Dead Space team members to rival Activision. The newly minted Visceral Games (formerly EA Redwood Shores) general manager Glen Schofield and COO Michael Condrey jumped ship to start a new San Francisco-based Activision studio.



GOOD

Activision's delay of Singularity until the first quarter of 2010 may not seem like good news, but we agree with the reasoning. The publisher wants to make sure the game finds an audience, and not having it go up against label-mate/juggernaut Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 helps.



GOOD

Midway has finally been put out of its misery as the Warner Bros. acquisition of the beleaguered company became finalized. Unfortunately, this has prompted the closing of Midway's Chicago offices and the Newcastle, U.K. studio behind Wheelman (see our review in the May 2009 issue). Mortal Kombat and the developer behind it now belong to Warner Bros., and creator Ed Boon says the team is working on an ultra-violent iteration of the franchise for its new masters.



■ Splinter Cell 2 is going on a six month bathroom break

UGLY

Ubisoft has delayed Splinter Cell again. The E3 standout was supposed to come out this fall, but now it's not slated until the first three months of next year. Also getting pushed back are Red Steel 2, I Am Alive, and the new Ghost Recon game. As long as Sam Fisher doesn't go back to his earlier hobo look, we'll survive this delay like all the others.



BAD

Earlier this year, rumors spread that the Aliens RPG title being created by Alpha Protocol developer Obsidian Entertainment was cancelled. At the time, publisher Sega wouldn't comment, but the demise of the Aliens RPG is now official.

GOOD

Swedish metal band Opeth announced that its song "The Lotus Eater" will be included in the as-yet-unannounced Saints Row title for the PSP. Publisher THQ had no comment on the franchise possibly spreading to the handheld.

XBOX LIVE

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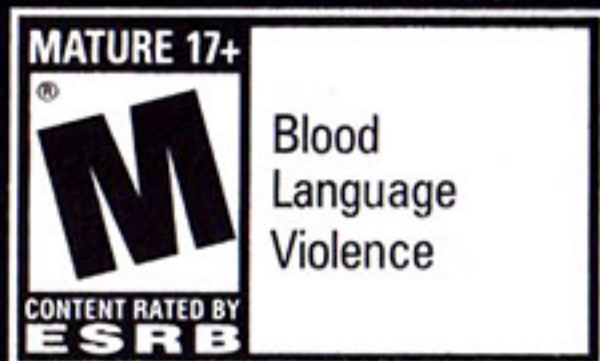
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Jump in.



LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip



AGENT TOTALLY INCOGNITO

The official announcement of Sony's Rockstar North-developed exclusive PS3 title *Agent* was a highlight of Sony's E3 press conference this year. Sony and Rockstar shared no details at the time, and from what Loose Talk is hearing, that's because...there aren't any. We've heard the game has been kicking around as an unrealized idea at Rockstar for years. A few years ago the studio signed a deal for an exclusive title with Sony, but it wasn't until recently that Rockstar decided upon *Agent* after officials from Sony poked their heads in to check to see what the studio had been up to since the deal was signed. Despite the game's impromptu origins as a PS3 title, this is the first non-GTA title Rockstar North has worked on since *Manhunt* in 2003, and we expect the studio to give it the full treatment for which it is known.



PURE 2 BAILS?

Sleuthy website Superannuation has the resume of a former artist from Disney's Black Rock Studios, and in it the artist lists *Pure 2* - which he says has now been cancelled. The studio is currently working on *Split Second* (see our preview on page 56), and the first *Pure* title unfortunately didn't set any sales records.



PRICE CUTS VER. 23.0

Sony's refusal to announce a PS3 price drop at E3 has only intensified the belief that the company will lower the system's price before the holidays. Website *Ars Technica* recently reported a rumor that Sony will introduce a slim PS3 in the fall along with a price cut for the 160GB PS3.

The site also says that the Xbox 360 Pro will be phased out and a cheaper version of the 120GB Elite will become the new standard console for Microsoft.

Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Based in the *Ghosts 'n Goblins* universe, this month's game was originally planned for the N64 by Capcom before it eventually released on the PlayStation 2 in early 2002 in America. The game's hack 'n' slash action is in full 3D but contains a nod to *Ghosts 'n Goblins*: The hero's armor falls off in successive pieces as he is hit, eventually leaving him only wearing his boxers. This title spawned a sequel in 2003.

(Answer on page 29)



games

BIG SISTER WAITS

BIOSHOCK 2 NOT THE ONLY ONE DELAYED

BioShock 2 kept things fairly low-key at E3, but that's nothing compared to the treatment it's getting now. Publisher 2K Games recently announced that the title is being delayed into its next fiscal year. *BioShock 2* was originally slated to release this November, but now it won't hit store shelves until some unspecified time before the end of October 2010. The company says that the game is being delayed in order to "provide additional development time."

In other *BioShock 2* news, French developer Arkane Studios (*Dark Messiah: Might and Magic*) has signed on to help with "design, animation, and art." *BioShock 2* developer 2K Marin has already enlisted the aid of 2K Australia and Digital Extremes for other aspects of the title, bringing the number of studios working on the game up to four.

THE WAITING GAME(S)

BioShock 2 isn't the only 2K Games delayed title. Sequels *Max Payne 3*, *Mafia II*, and *Red Dead Redemption* have also been pushed into next year.

10

the top best fighting game characters

Awesome is a term with many meanings. Sometimes it's defined by shooting fireballs from your hands. Other times, it's exemplified by fighting on after death. In fighting games, it's always accompanied by being a badass among badasses. Here are our picks for the 10 most awesome fighters in gaming history.

1 Akuma – Street Fighter

Ryu is undoubtedly iconic and awesome. When you improve Ryu and Ken's moveset and put it on the psychotic younger brother of their sensei, you're in business. Akuma may have been watered down into a balanced character for later Street Fighter games, but his ultimate attack still translates roughly to "Instant Hell Murder."



2 Nightmare – Soul Calibur

Idealistic knights errant are one of Western culture's most beloved romantic myths. Full of good intentions, these young men become twisted into unrecognizable nightmarish horrors by the very evil they seek to destroy. The gaze of the lidless eyes embedded in their gruesome, fleshy swords strip sanity away from any mortal foolish enough to engage their warped forms. Well, that's what happens in Soul Calibur, anyway.



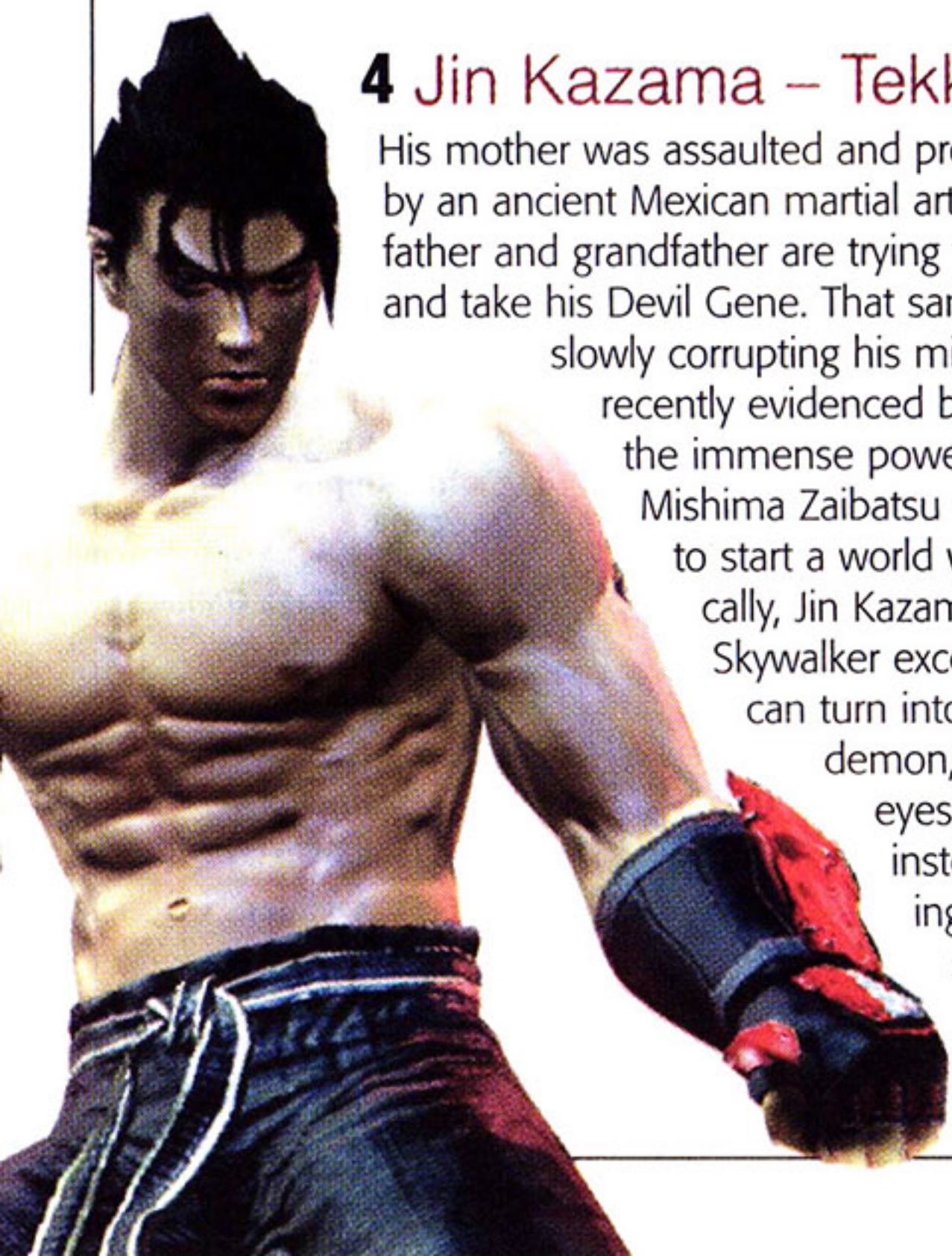
3 Scorpion – Mortal Kombat

"Get over here!" Scorpion made us believe the first time our tinny TV speakers busted out his poorly digitized catchphrase. It wasn't until weeks later, after we received our strategy guide in the mail, that he burned his way into our hearts forever by ripping off his mask and immolating his foes by shooting flames out of his bare skull.



4 Jin Kazama – Tekken

His mother was assaulted and probably killed by an ancient Mexican martial arts god. His father and grandfather are trying to kill him and take his Devil Gene. That same gene is slowly corrupting his mind, most recently evidenced by Jin using the immense power of the Mishima Zaibatsu corporation to start a world war. So basically, Jin Kazama is Luke Skywalker except that he can turn into a flying demon, and his eyes shoot lasers instead of gazing soulfully at sunsets.



5 Sentinel – Marvel Vs. Capcom 2

It's good to see evil robots get their dues after years of being chump video game enemies. Being a huge robot with laser beam eyes and rocket hands is only the beginning. As arguably the most powerful character in Marvel Vs. Capcom 2 – one of the least evenly balanced games in the genre to start with – Sentinel's got a counter for nearly any situation and infinite combos to seal the deal.



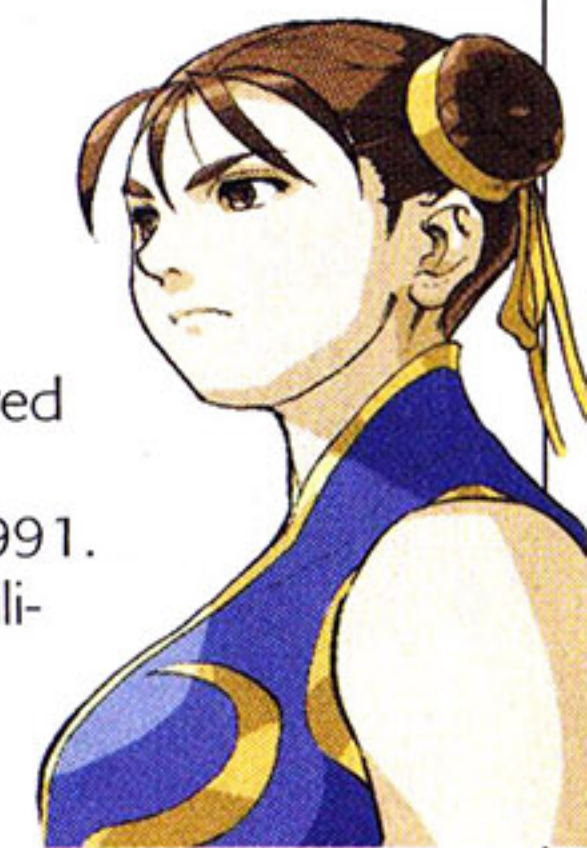
6 Sol Badguy – Guilty Gear

Decades in the future, the fusion of magic and biotechnology has resulted in the creation of immensely powerful living weapons called Gears. Naturally, they turn on the humans and a war of extinction ensues. The original prototype Gear, however, suppresses his corrupting power with a headband, calls himself Sol Badguy, and defends humanity by generally kicking ass and occasionally turning into a dragon. He is also a fan of the band Queen.



7 Chun Li – Street Fighter

She's one of the original nerd fantasies, but that's not why Chun Li is on this list. We've been corner trapping with her Hundred Rending Kicks and confounding opponents with her unmatched aerial mobility since 1991. Getting beaten up by a girl is far from humiliating when facing Chun Li – it's an honor. Besides, it's not like you have a chance against those mighty thighs.



8 Genan Shiranui – Samurai Shodown

Is being killed, resurrected, and plotting to overthrow the demon lord who brought him back really an excuse to murder dozens of foes with extendable claws and lick them clean between rounds? Apparently it is, since his wife stays with him and eventually prevails on Genan to retire the claws and live the good life. Truly, Genan's is a touching redemption story.



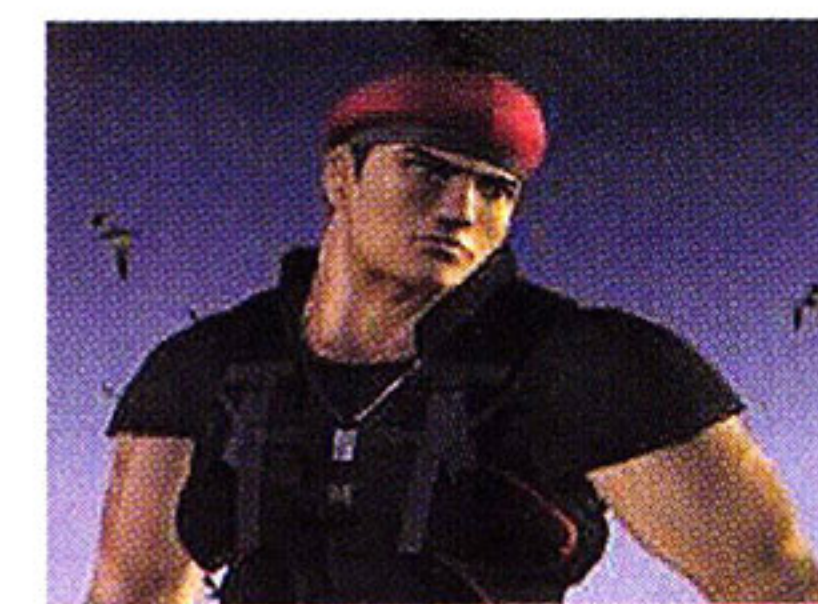
9 Fulgore – Killer Instinct

The entire point of the Killer Instinct tournament put on by the sinister Ultratech corporation was to test the capabilities of custom-developed warriors like this cyborg. His martial arts are strong, but removing his own head to reveal an enormous gun is what pushes Fulgore over the top.



10 Bayman – Dead or Alive

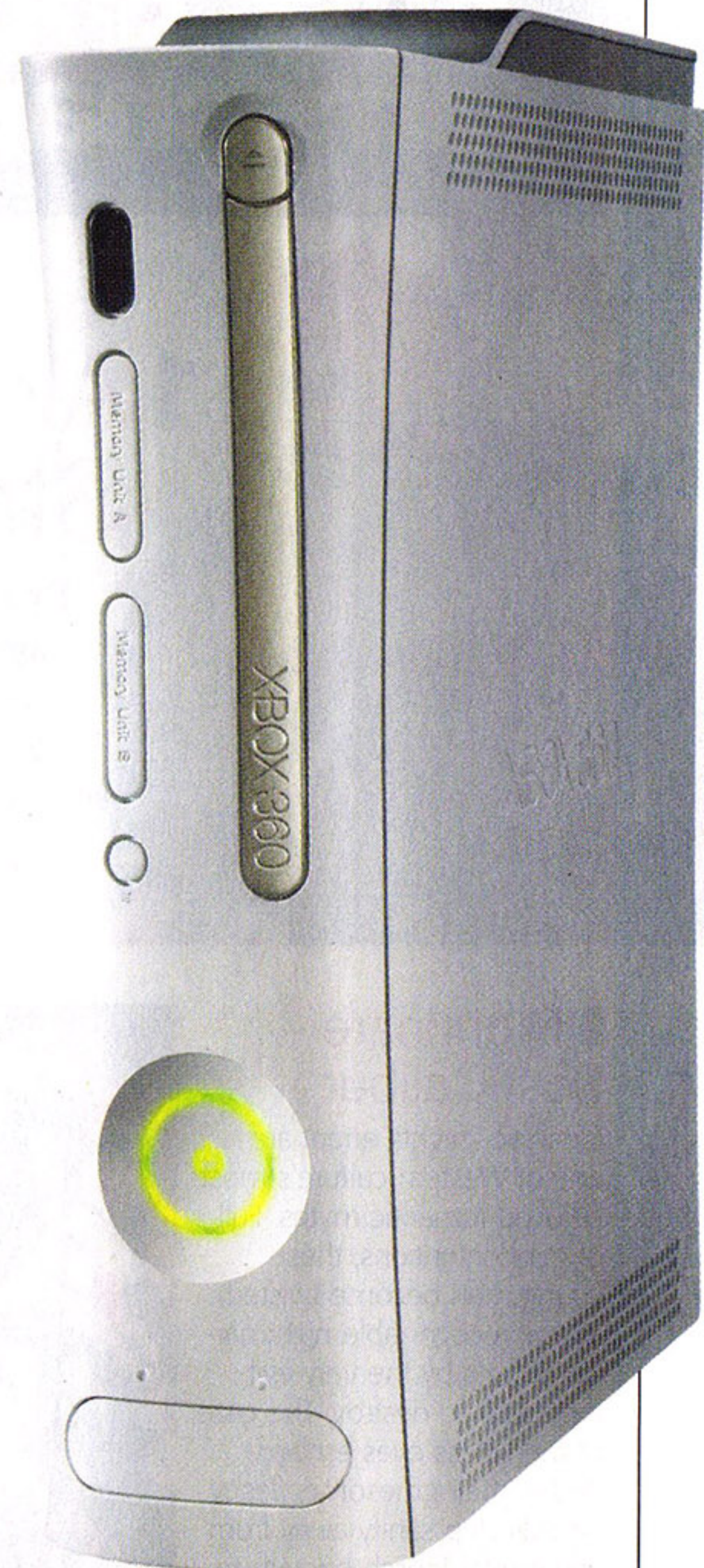
Bayman defies expectations in a series known more for jiggles than juggles. This massive Russian ex-commando can snap every limb in alphabetical order. Even in the context of counter-heavy DOA fighting, Bayman is a defensive player's dream fighter. Plus, he once stabbed himself in the hand while his interrogators were distracted – ostensibly to slow down a poison, but we like to think that it was to make sure everyone knows who the most hardcore guy in the room is.



MMOreport

BY ADAM BIESSENER

WHY ARE CONSOLE MMOS STILL M.I.A.?



Free-to-play is a vulgar phrase in many circles. Longtime MMO gamers scoff at those "casual" or "kids" games. Big-name Western publishers still haven't wrapped their collective heads around the phenomenon. And yet, dozens of smaller companies are raking in profits with microtransaction-based, free-to-play PC MMOs. So why aren't the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, each armed with built-in digital distribution and microtransaction frameworks, in the mix? Why haven't Microsoft and Sony – companies never accused of being averse to making a buck – charged into this burgeoning marketplace?

Like any other aspect of video games, it's just business. Min Kim, vice president of Maple Story developer/publisher Nexon's USA branch, points to consoles' network infrastructure as one hurdle. "I don't think these systems have been built for a service. I think they've been built for digital downloads," Kim states. Any title with an ongoing revenue stream, whether it's free-to-play or subscription-based, needs to deliver new content on a regular basis. Without fresh gameplay, players quickly move on to other games.

Limited hard drive space and a centralized framework for delivering patches and updates make the 360 and PS3 much more challenging platforms for Nexon's products. "We try to get as many people as possible into the game, and then we make money off a tiny fraction," Kim says. Who is going to foot the bandwidth bill for millions of multi-gigabyte downloads, many of which will never generate a dollar of revenue?

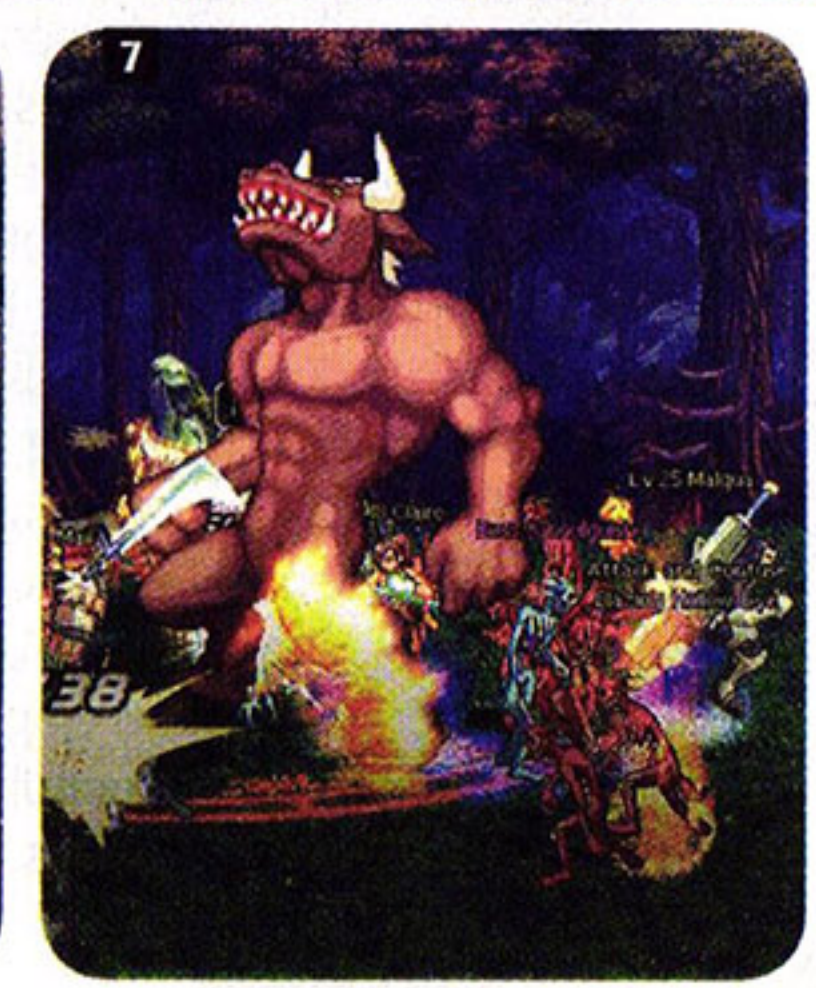
Jon Bellis, product manager at Chinese publisher Perfect World International, puts the

blame squarely on revenue division: "Microsoft and Sony want a cut. They want a sizeable cut." The lower-profile companies that make up the bulk of free-to-play development existing on thin profit margins. The 50 to 60 percent cut that Bellis estimates would come off the top of any transactions via XBLA or PSN effectively chokes those games out of the market.

Several additional minor issues also stand between PS3 and 360 and a free-to-play MMO future. Teaching PC-centric eastern developers to work on consoles, adapting designs to American PvE-focused player behaviors, and creating better communication systems each have their own share of problems. These are easily solved with clever design and smart developers, though. Compared to the money and infrastructure questions, they're practically nonexistent.

XBLA and PSN have driven a resurgence of independent and low-budget development, and the innovation and risk-taking that come along with them have been great boons to gamers. The PC space – particularly in Asia – was on that train years prior. It's a travesty that the business end of the industry has denied console players access to this rich segment of gaming. Given the financial success of free-to-play titles on both sides of the Pacific, though, it would seem to be only a matter of time.

"Microsoft and Sony are constantly going head to head, battling each other every year at E3, always trying to one-up each other," Bellis says. "If one of them just opens the door to free-to-play games, can you imagine if only one system gets a wide variety of free-to-play MMORPGs?" ■■■■



Pictured here is a small taste of the variety in the free-to-play MMO scene

1. Ether Saga Online
2. FreeRealms
3. Maple Story
4. Perfect World International
5. Jade Dynasty
6. Parabellum
7. Dungeon Fighter Online

TAKE YOUR PHONE TO THE NEXT LEVEL!

Wallpapers



WALLPAPERS

logo2217 logo2218 logo2219 logo2220

RINGTONE

Peter Laughing song5563

ANIMATED SCREENSAVERS

ani1534 ani1535

BEWARE OF DOGS!

FAMILY GUY

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Animated Screensavers



Themes



Realtones

BLACK EYED PEAS - BOOM BOOM POW	song5552
BLACK EYED PEAS - I GOTTA FEELING	song5553
FABOLOUS FEAT JEREMIH - MY TIME	song5554
JAMIE FOXX - BLAME IT (FT T-PAIN)	song5555
JEREMIH - BIRTHDAY SEX	song5556
KID CUDI - DAY 'N' NITE	song5557
SEAN KINGSTON - FIRE BURNING (SOMEBODY CALL 911)	song5558
SOULJA BOY TELL'EM - TURN MY SWAG ON	song5559
SOULJA BOY TELL'EM - KISS ME THRU THE PHONE	song5560
TWISTA - WETTER	song5561
YOUNG MONEY - EVERY GIRL	song5562

Games



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While many Harmonix employees focused their energies on presenting the Beatles in game form, another group was assigned a project that might prove to be even more important in the long run. This initiative isn't focused on mythologizing rock 'n' roll's past, but rather looking toward the future of the music.

Rock Band Network, set to launch this fall, is the most ambitious community-based toolset in the history of games. Soon, any band will be able to create, upload, and sell its own Rock Band tracks through Xbox Live (though songs will be available for sale on PS3, the console cannot be used in the creative process). If Harmonix has its way, Rock Band will go from being a mere music game to the iTunes of video games, a hub for a cornucopia of interactive music from the world over.

The Beatles: Rock Band proves that video games can deliver an appropriate tribute to legendary rock figures, but Harmonix's VP of product development, Greg LoPiccolo, is more concerned with finding the next Beatles. As the traditional music business continues to implode under the weight of illegal downloading and the death of the compact disc, artists and labels have increasingly looked towards video games as a source of exposure and revenue. With Rock Band Network, Harmonix is putting the tools for creating Rock Band tracks in the hands of musicians. Suddenly, the top down world of creating and selling video game music is going open source, and the possibilities for bands are endless.

"The most exciting thing for us is that a lot of what unfolds is going to be in the power of the people who step up," LoPiccolo observes. "We're excited to see who does what. [Can] songs or bands break through this medium?"

YOU
SAY
YOU
WANT
FI

ROCK
BAND



Harmonix's Caleb Epps demonstrates the Rock Band Network software



UNIQUE?

ROCK BAND NETWORK OFFERS OPPORTUNITY FOR A NEW GENERATION OF ROCKERS
BY MATT HELGESON

THE SPARK

Unlike most game developers, Harmonix sees itself primarily as a music company. The company was not even founded to create games, but rather as founders Alex Rigopulos and Eran Ergozy's effort to create new and accessible interfaces for music creation.

Walking around its Boston office, it's clear that Harmonix is made up of people that live and breathe music every day. The front of the lunchroom features a gong that would make Led Zeppelin's late John Bonham proud. Stephanie Myers, who is helping coordinate my visit, is wearing a Devo t-shirt. Communications manager John Drake is feeling a little wired, the result of his band just having arrived back in Boston from a short tour at 5 a.m. that morning. It seems as though nearly everyone at Harmonix, from the front desk to the corporate offices, either is or used to be in a band.

While Rock Band Network has evolved into a fairly complex system, its inspiration was born out of necessity. With such a passion for music of all kinds, the team has long been striving to overcome the limitations inherent in the process of creating downloadable tracks for the game.

"One of the things that's been a little frustrating to us is that it's a lot of work to actually author songs and put them into the game," LoPiccolo says. "We put a lot of work into our pipeline and we put out a lot of songs – we're up to like ten songs a week at this point – which has been great and really well received, but it's a bottleneck. We get approached all the time by bands of every size and shape that say, 'We'd love to have our music in your game.' They have to get in line."

THERE ARE LOTS AND LOTS OF PEOPLE WHO LEARN ABOUT MUSIC THROUGH ROCK BAND

THE IDEA

Starting with this basic problem – too much great music and too little time to convert it into Rock Band tracks – the rough outlines of Rock Band Network came together fairly quickly.

"We really saw Rock Band as a powerful new way for people to experience music. That has sort of come to pass, as we hoped it would. There are lots and lots of people who learn about music through Rock Band. It's turned into this kind of creative dialogue between us and our audience about the music, which is what we always wanted to have happen," LoPiccolo says.

The solution was simple in concept, but complex in execution. Why not provide all the tools required to create playable Rock Band tracks to gamers and bands everywhere? It's certainly an elegant idea: with Harmonix exceeding its bandwidth for creating tracks, why not turn over the keys to the artists themselves?

It's important to note that Rock Band Network isn't an in-game studio mode as we've seen in Guitar Hero: World Tour. The Network tools are just that: a group of programs that allow musicians to take the music they've written and recorded with real instruments and convert them into playable Rock Band tracks.

If things go as planned, soon everyone from bedroom laptop recording buffs to major label bands will – if they are willing to do the work – start creating and selling their own Rock Band tracks on the Rock Band Network store. This new online retail channel will be added to Rock Band 2 via a patch slated for later in the year.

"We hope that it will be a broad spectrum [of artists]. We've reached out and we've gotten back

super enthusiastic responses across the board," LoPiccolo reveals. "We think that tons of indie bands, unsigned bands, will think this is their shot and we expect them to roll their own stuff and put it up there. Then there are bands, like baby bands signed to major labels, which we don't have the bandwidth to put in the game even if we'd like to. What we anticipate is that some numbers of labels, majors or significant indies, will develop their own authoring capability, and start pushing back catalogue into Rock Band."

To ensure they are properly supporting this new community of content creators, Harmonix is ramping up its community team and tech support. In addition to online tech support for artists, Harmonix is also in the process of creating instructional videos and will even conduct classes and seminars on Rock Band Network in some areas.

This support is necessary because the effort required from a band to author its own tracks is, in LoPiccolo's words, "not trivial." Harmonix estimates that the amount of effort artists will have to spend on creating Rock Band tracks is similar to a home recording project; many of the tools are adapted from popular shareware home recording software. Still, with the promise of reaching millions of new listeners, as well as the generous 30 percent royalty rate being offered on Rock Band Network sales across the board (bands can also set their prices, but cannot give away tracks for free), it seems likely that thousands of bands will jump in with both feet.

The only question that remains is: Will the tools Harmonix provides be easy enough for musicians to use? That's the question I intended to answer with my trip to Harmonix.

– Greg LoPiccolo

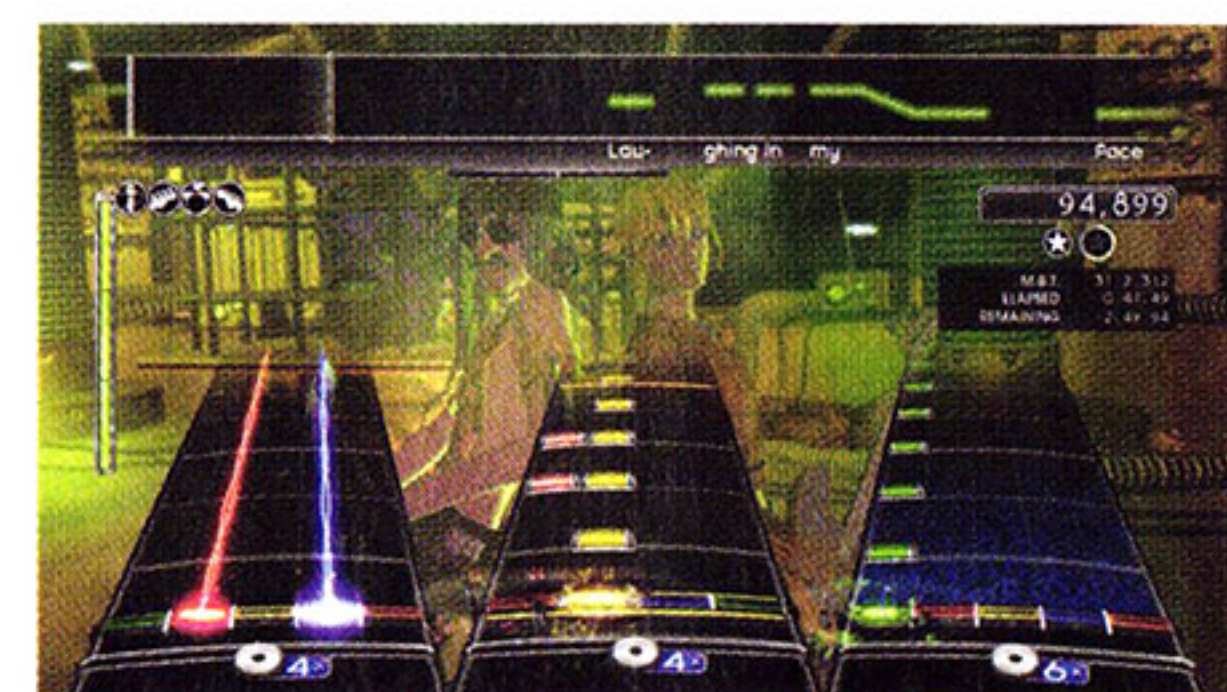
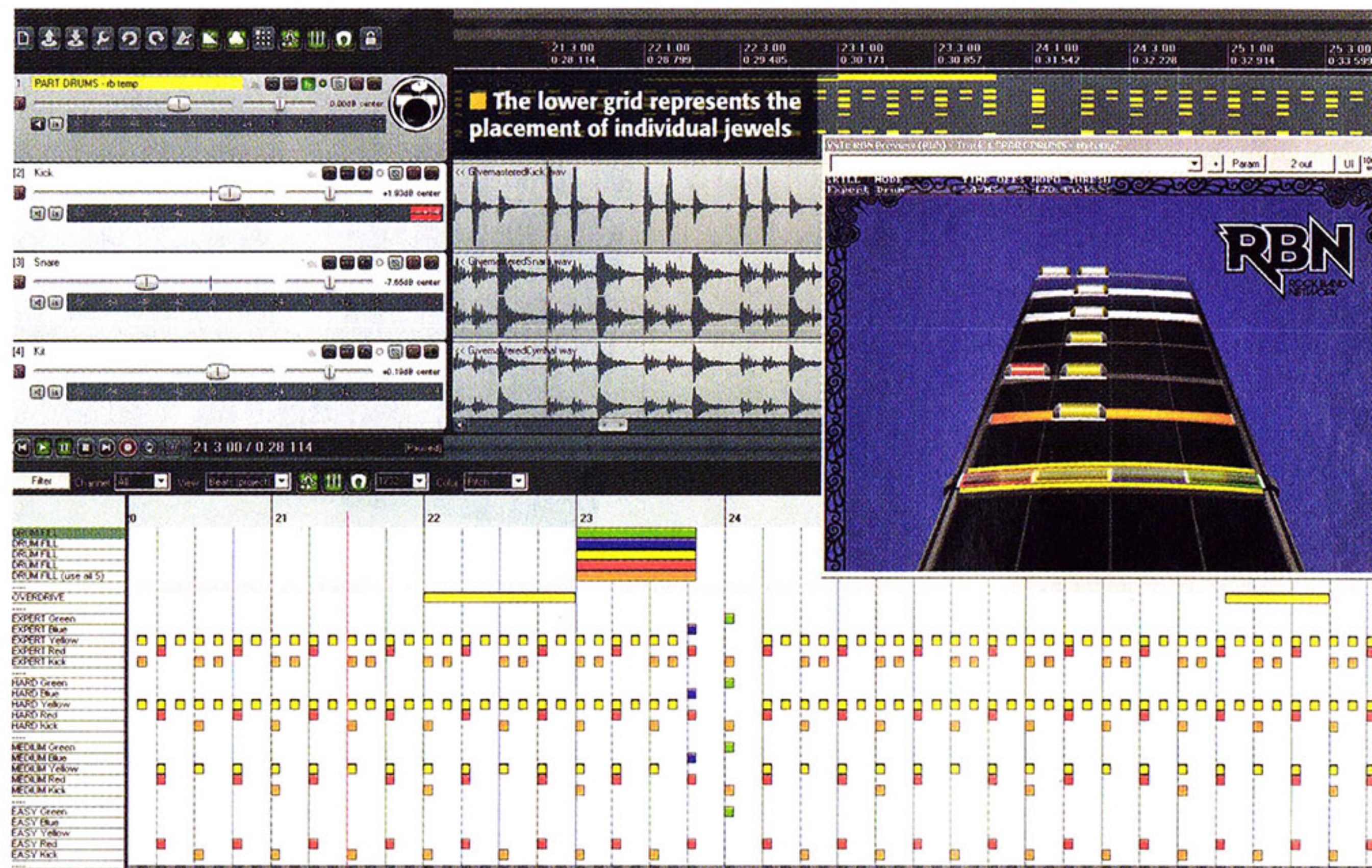
CAREERS IN ROCK

You may not know this, but in addition to being a video game journalist, I'm also a semi-unsuccessful musician. In the more than 10 years I've played in indie rock bands in Minneapolis, I've sold tens of records, a few t-shirts, and killed more than a few of my brain cells with free drink tickets. In fact, I first met our editor in chief Andy McNamara when I auditioned for (and won) the position of bass player in his band, Unbelievable Jolly Machine (if you're curious about Andy's shady rock past, learn more at worldofstuff.com/ujm).

For the last five years, I played bass in Maps of Norway (myspace.com/mapsofnorway), which had a modicum of local success playing UK-style post-punk inspired by bands like Wire and Joy Division. Though Maps of Norway broke up this past April, when Harmonix and MTV told us we could be the first in the world to see Rock Band Network in action, Andy decided that I should give the band one last shot at stardom – this time in the virtual realm.

The first step in the process won't be necessary for most. I decided to use our song "The Runout" off our 2008 album *Die Off Songbird*. We recorded both our albums on old-fashioned analog tape, so I needed to get digital transfers off the masters. Thankfully, Mike Wisti, the local producer who recorded our two albums, took care of it for a minimal cost. When he was done, I had a CD with each of the 24 multi-tracks as individual CD audio quality files. Harmonix refers to these individual tracks as "stems," which make it easier to create specific jewel charts for the various bass, drum, guitar and vocal tracks. After I picked up the disc from Mike, all I had to do was convert them into .wav files in iTunes and send them down to Harmonix. I should note that if you (as most do) record using ProTools, Logic, or another digital recording program, you can skip this step in favor of exporting the individual stems directly from ProTools. After that, it was just a plane flight down to Boston.

...PLAYING MY
SONG IN A
VIDEO GAME
MADE ME
FEEL MORE
LIKE A REAL
MUSICIAN—
THAN I EVER
HAVE.



CHARTING THE HITS

When we finally sat down in the Harmonix's offices, staffers Caleb Epps and Matthew Nordhaus walked me through the process of making a track. One thing quickly became clear: Rock Band Network is not a gimmick; it's a package of very powerful, professional software that requires a fair amount of work for most musicians to master. That said, I'm the type of person that can kill an afternoon working on some drum machine demos in my practice space, so I suspect that many like myself won't mind, or even consider this "work" at all. Throughout the process, I was impressed by the software's intelligent design, and how easily the pieces worked together.

The most important part of the process goes on in Reaper (www.reaper.fm), a shareware recording program created by the company Cockos, Inc. Harmonix and Cockos have worked together to tailor a version of the program that works with the specific needs of Rock Band Network. Basically, if you've used any recording software in the past, you should be able to get comfortable with Reaper.

After loading in the individual instrument tracks, you need to create what's known as a "tempo map." Most bands have slight variations in tempo – harder parts tend to speed up, quieter parts tend to drag, etc. A tempo map goes through the song measure by measure, calculating an accurate BPM (beats per minute) for each one. That way, no matter how fast or slow things get, the game can perfectly synch the falling gems to the music. Also, it's worth noting that complex, math rock bands have nothing to fear: The software can also instantly calculate odd meters like 5/8 on the fly. Looking at the tempo map, which shows dots above and below the BPM line to depict variations in tempo, I was pleased to see that we'd actually done a pretty good job tracking the song in the first place.

Once the track is loaded into the system and leveled correctly (Harmonix will provide detailed FAQs and technical info to users via its website), it's time to start charting the notes. We started with the bass drum. Usually, it's going to be one of the easiest tracks to create a jewel map for, as they are very distinct waveforms and require little thought in terms of creating track layouts (as compared to, say, a guitar solo).

We laid out the jewels using Reaper's MIDI sequencer. While that sounds like a complicated bit of tech, it's very intuitive in action. Essentially, it's a grid system where you map note jewels by filling in cells on the grid. It worked best to place the raw music file directly under the MIDI file we were working on, so we could use the corresponding waveform peaks that represent notes as a guide. This part of the process is the most labor intensive; each note must be placed individually, and Harmonix requires that you do separate charts for each difficulty level. Thankfully, if certain parts of the song, like verses or choruses, are identical, you can cut and paste whole sections of the charts. The program also has a preview window you can open, which shows you how the section you're working on looks in the game. All in all, the process feels pretty natural. It takes a significant amount of time to get a useable track done, but the tools seem well designed, allowing you to optimize your time.

In addition to the notes themselves, the MIDI system also allows you to create an extremely polished visual presentation. Again, by placing simple blocks on the grid, you can orchestrate cuts, close-ups, even lighting and special effects cues. Given our limited time, we didn't really delve into this, but the game already does a good job of choreographing the visuals with no assistance.

What was your reaction to Rock Band Network when you heard about it?

We were obviously pretty enthusiastic about it. Getting your music in Rock Band is a pretty big coup, so when we found out there would be an opportunity to get more music in faster, we were pretty excited about the idea. We've also been aware of what has happened with other artists that we've seen. When their music has gone up [on Rock Band] – whether it's a Sub Pop artist or not – you can see their individual download sales skyrocket week after week. It's an amazing phenomenon to witness.

What is Sub Pop's plan? Will you be setting up an in-house studio that could convert your songs in to game form?

Well, we only learned the basic outline of how the inputting in a system is going to work in the last week, so we haven't really gotten super into the mechanics of how this is going to work out for us. But I imagine that's how we'll begin, is in-house. You know, it's an excuse for us to have an Xbox 360 in the office finally. [Laughs]

Has Sub Pop been actively trying to get its music placed in games for a while now?

Yeah, we have a pretty aggressive licensing department. We've had some success with EA Sports games in the past, and a lot of Xbox driving games – our proximity to the Microsoft offices has I think helped us in that respect. It's been a little harder getting into games like Rock Band, because there's

such a demand because it's so effective. It's really night and day what happens for a band whose song is placed in Rock Band versus your average racecar game. I would venture to guess it's more than a hundred times greater, as far as the overall impact on sales across the board.

Have you guys been thinking about a strategy in terms of how many songs you're going to start pushing out and which artists?

We've had some very base, preliminary conversations about it. A lot of it is going to be determined by how long it takes us to input the songs. There's certainly some catalogue songs, things like Mudhoney's "Touch Me I'm Sick" that we'd want to get in there right away. There are things that

are timely that we'd probably want to move to the front of the queue. We're releasing all the first Sunny Day Real Estate records, and those are big guitar, bass, and drum songs for the most part that are pretty epic and I think would be fun to play. Also, [we have] things like the Shins and then more current things like Blitzen Trapper or Fleet Foxes. The other thing is, even though we probably have the right to proceed with everything contractually, we generally don't do anything without talking to our artists, so we just want to make sure everybody's into it. I can't imagine anybody won't be.

FOR THE WHOLE WORLD TO SEE

After we finished the basic charts, it was time to see how the "The Runout" played in Rock Band. A program called Magma handles the compiling and auditioning process. We'd been working on a PC, but Magma can quickly export a song to an Xbox 360 on your local network. I was surprised by how fast it worked; the track took less than a minute to fully upload to our 360. As soon as it finished, we played a full, four-player version of our song in Expert mode (we'd only finished the Expert charts). Thanks to Caleb and Matthew, it played perfectly – but if you need to make changes it's easy to go back and edit the jewel charts.

It's a very odd but very cool feeling to see your own song flowing down the onscreen runway as if it were some classic by the Beatles or Metallica. It sounds weird to say, but playing my song in a video game made me feel more like a "real musician" than I ever have. Even funnier was watching myself flub notes on a bass part that I'd performed live dozens of times with a real bass! Oh well, 97 percent isn't too bad.

A few other steps are involved beyond the note charting. You must enter in the required information and data the game needs to create a file that can run on the Xbox or PS3. In this step we entered pertinent band information and art files like promo photos and album artwork, in addition to the author (the person who actually created the note charts and MIDI files). Author is distinct from artist because Harmonix hopes that particularly skilled people will develop home businesses, creating Rock Band files for local music artists. Lyrics must be entered manually, syllable-by-syllable. It's advised to upload a "dry" vocal track (sans echo or reverb of any kind) to aid in getting accurate lip-synching on screen. You can also tweak things like scrolling speed and setting the onscreen singer avatar as being always female or always male. You must also set a price for your song – free is not an option. We skipped this step, as the service isn't up and running yet. The Rock Band Network will offer multiple price tiers, some perhaps as low as \$1 per song, although Harmonix had not finalized them at press time. Hopefully we'll know before Rock Band Network goes into open beta in August.

HARMONIX IS ALSO LOOKING AT WAYS TO PROMOTE AND FOSTER NEW BANDS...

THE FINAL CUT

The last step to getting your track up on the Rock Band Network store is the peer review. This is also the one step in path where bands or artist have to incur some costs – a \$99 membership to the Microsoft XNA Creator's Club (you can also opt for a \$49/four month membership), a community of aspiring developers that create games for Xbox Live Arcade. You upload your song to the service, where it can then be downloaded and playtested by the community of Rock Band content creators.

This step is crucial for a number of reasons. Most notably, it's a final bulwark against possible copyright infringement. Even though you're required to agree to documents that specify you as the copyright holder, there will likely be some that attempt to slide "Stairway to Heaven" past the system. Another thing that might get tagged could be potentially obscene lyrical content or songs that use samples of other artists' copyrighted work. [Note: while Harmonix hopes that the community will eventually be self-enforcing, the company will be keeping tabs on uploaded content in the early stages of the service]

More importantly, you get feedback on how the song actually plays and feels. Do all the difficulty levels seem correctly mapped? Is there a certain section of the song that needs to be polished? This feedback from other players should be invaluable in ensuring that Rock Band Network songs are every bit as high quality as DLC sold in the current Rock Band store.

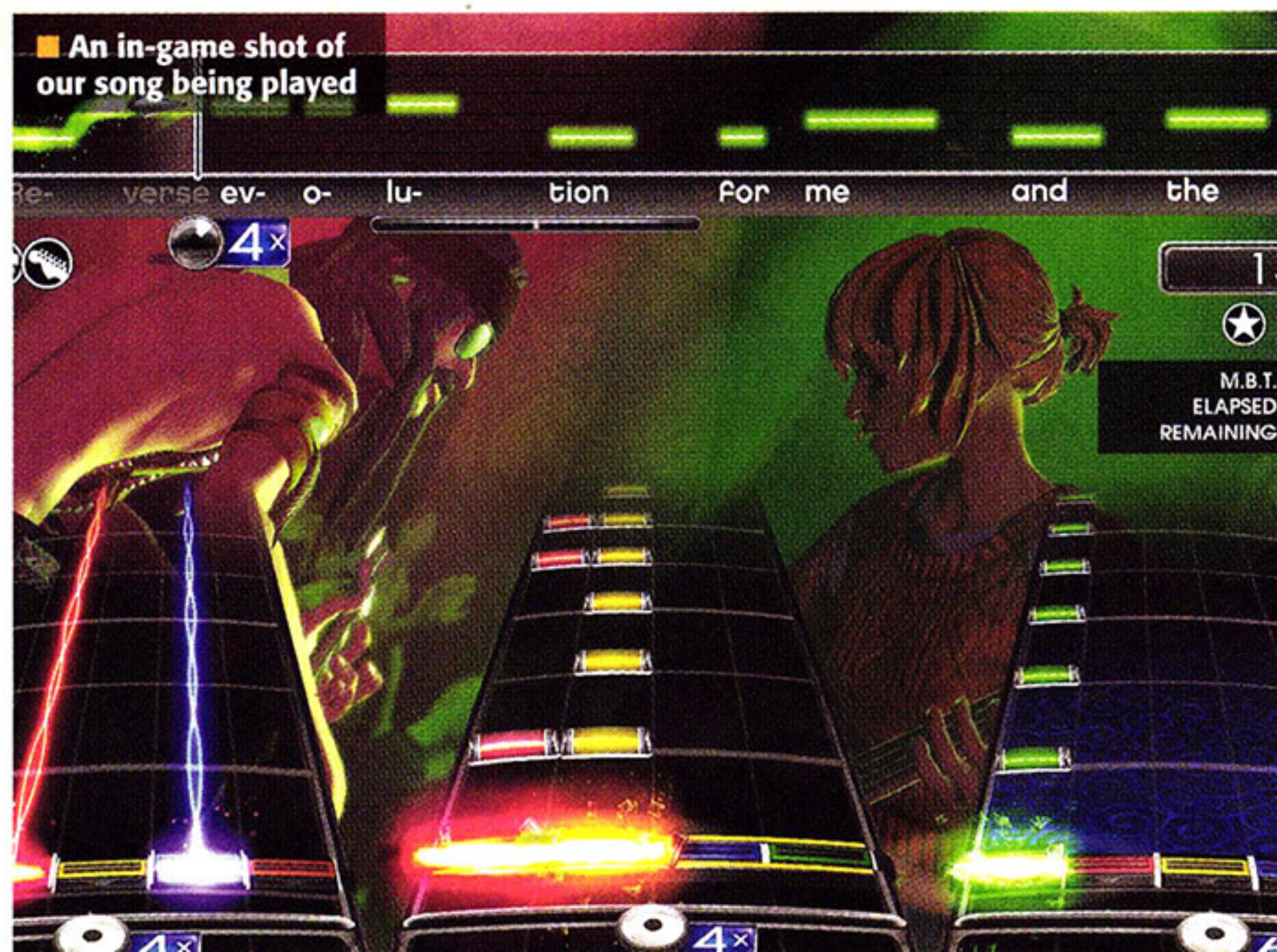
INTO THE FUTURE

So what's next? I don't think anyone at Harmonix or MTV Games really knows. Soon, the tools to make a song on Rock Band are going to be out there for anyone to download. Record labels, individuals, and bands of all sizes will be able to put up tracks that are for sale on Xbox Live just as if they were megastars on the level of a Green Day or U2. Within months, it's possible that the total number of songs available for download in Rock Band could skyrocket into the thousands.

"It's going to be a wild ride," LoPiccolo predicts. "We've done targeted outreach to some indie bands and potential authors, and some labels to get stuff into the closed beta, which is ongoing now. We're trying to get a certain amount of material mixed and authored and submitted just to test the pipeline. The response has been super enthusiastic. Our architecture can deal with a pretty big stream. I'd be pretty shocked if we saw anything we couldn't handle."

Harmonix is also looking at ways to promote and foster new bands looking to use games as a springboard to success. With radio and record sales breaking down at an alarming rate, it's no secret that musicians need all the help they can get. Still, new paradigms bring new opportunity, and it's clear that the people working hard on this bold new project see Rock Band Network as just that.

"And as painful as this time is for the music business and the old recorded music infrastructure, there's the promise for this true meritocracy, where people who have great music and are on the ball can express themselves and monetize that in a variety of ways," observes Paul DeGooyer, MTV Games' senior VP of electronic games and music. "Recorded music used to lead that, and it's [still] a part of it, but we're bringing a new element into play. So now there's the music, merchandise, touring, and maybe there's the interactive element. If we get that half right, I think that would be a pretty big game changer – certainly for us. It's very important for us. Other rhythm games may see themselves as a fad that's going to play out. We've been very clear from the beginning that this is a platform to allow creative expression, as opposed to commercial exploitation. We figure if you get the creative expression right, the commercial part will be just fine." ■ ■ ■



Live Arcade
dominates
the summer;
PSN holds
on to some
exclusive gems



Last month this column was filled with the many fine titles that were on display at this year's E3. This month, I was lucky enough to play near final versions of them. As it was last year, some impressive titles populate Live Arcade's summer slots, with one clear standout that may be one of the most talked about games this year.

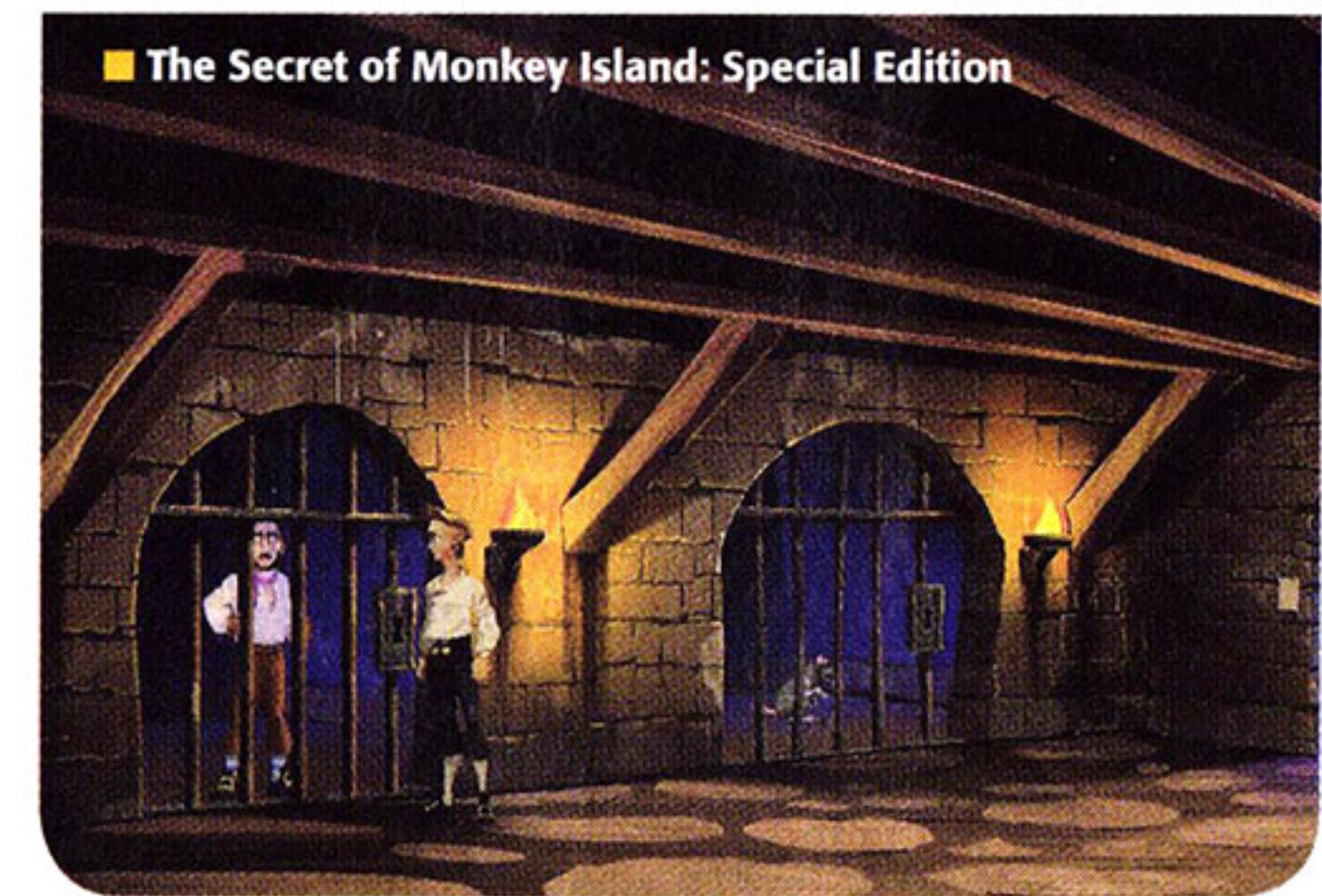
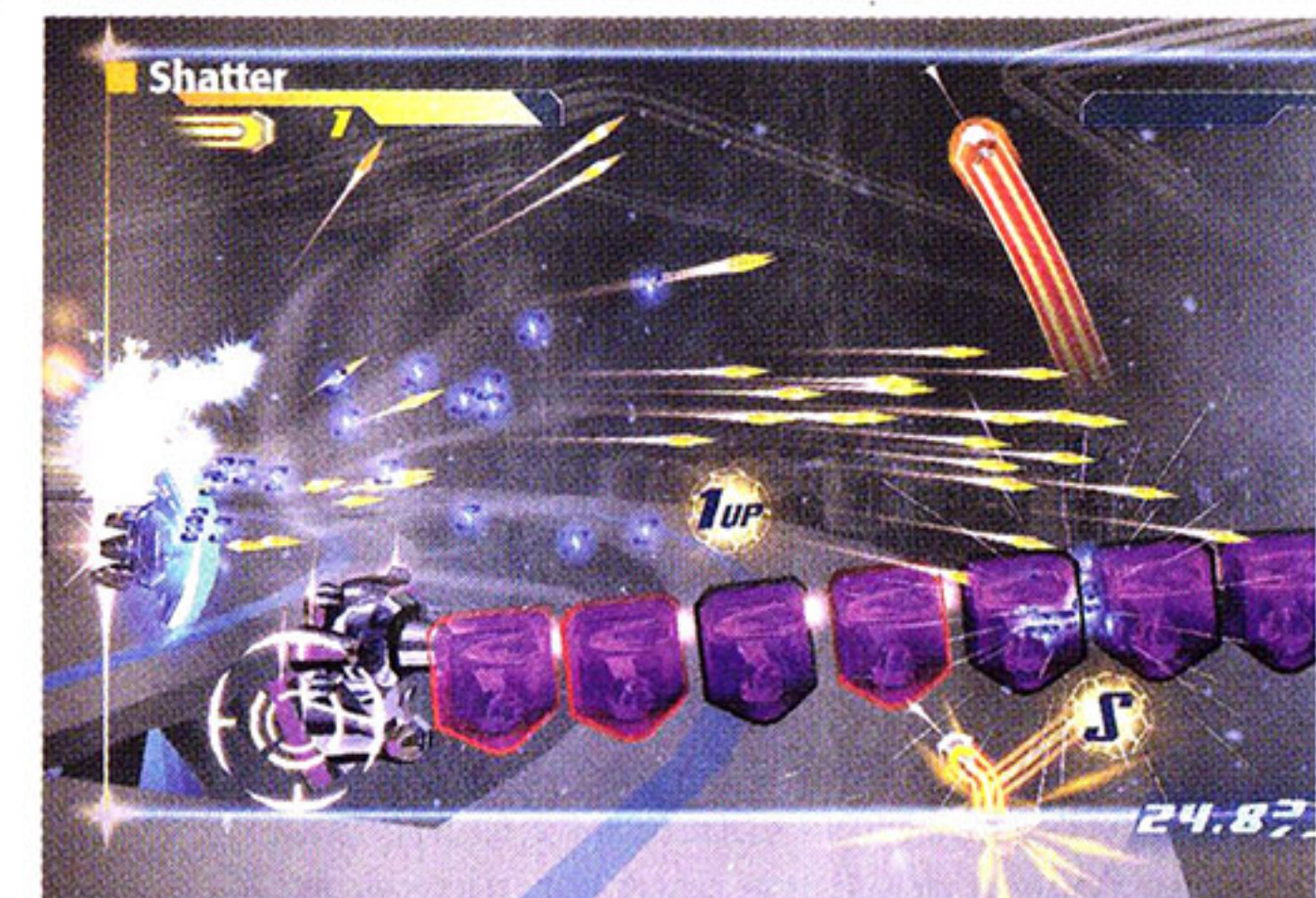
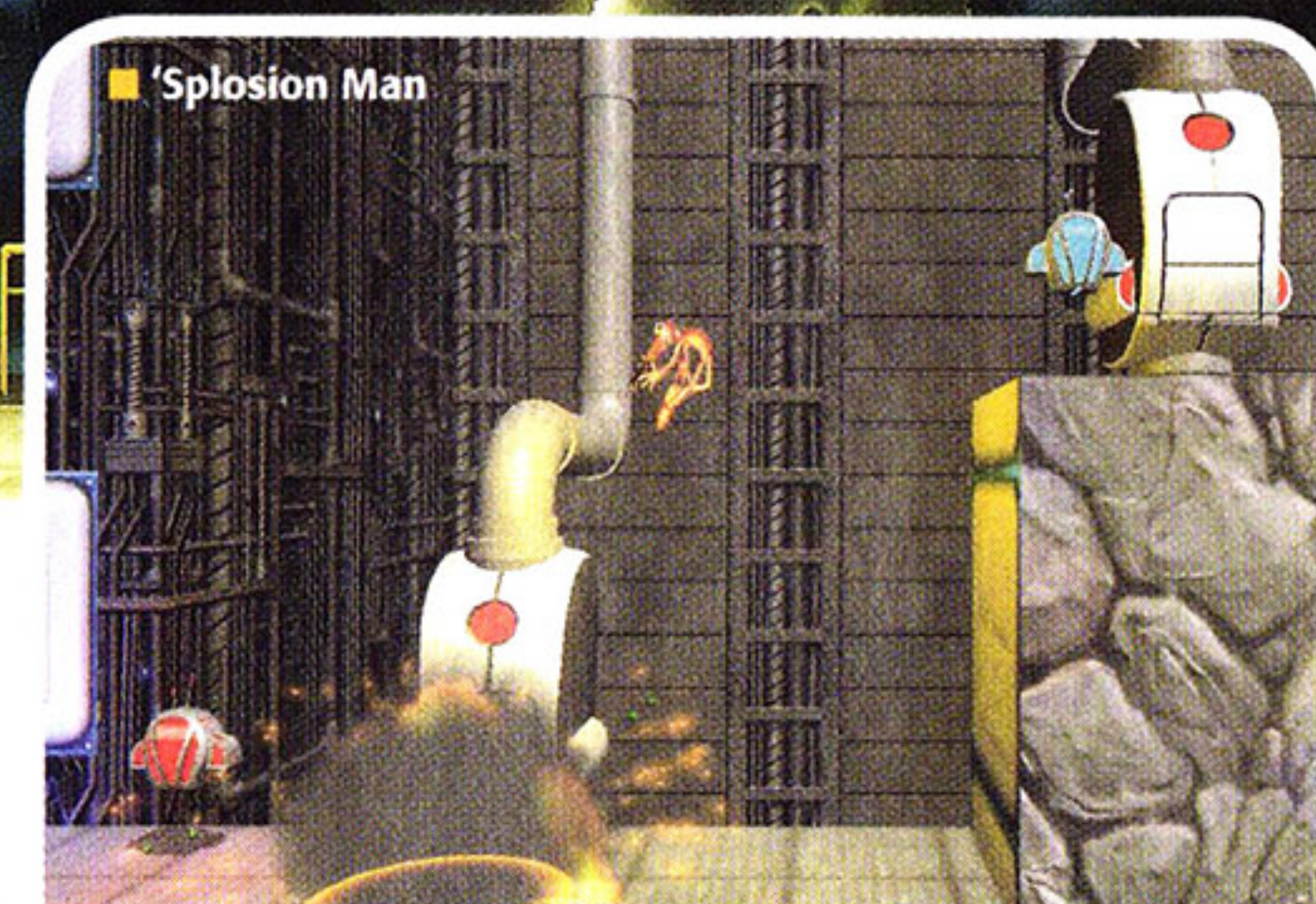
Having played it to completion, I'm confident **Shadow Complex** on XBLA is the downloadable game people will be talking about this summer, if not for all of 2009. It scratches an itch that almost every gamer has, mixing exploration, leveling, and collection mechanics together around a gorgeous setting, with fun combat mechanics thrown in for good measure. Comparisons to the best Castlevania games or Super Metroid certainly aren't far off the mark, though the boss fights in Shadow Complex don't quite live up to those lofty classics. Otherwise, this is a pitch perfect modern iteration of that familiar style, complete with a sprawling game world and scores of hidden secrets and passages. Some phenomenal animation, artwork, and music round out the experience, which takes six to eight hours to complete. I couldn't put the game down until the credits rolled. Go ahead and set aside a weekend this month to play it — I doubt you'll be disappointed.

Like Twisted Pixel's previous effort, *The Maw*, **'Splosion Man** tells an amusing little tale without the need for pesky dialogue. A manic experiment gone wrong, 'Splosion Man runs through the halls of the sprawling lab in which he was created, exploding himself to reach greater heights and gleefully destroying anything that gets in his way. The frantic action mixes platforming and puzzle sensibilities. While the single-player game is fun, the independent co-op campaign shines. With up to four 'Splosion Men along for the ride, you can use each other's blasts to reach higher points — an

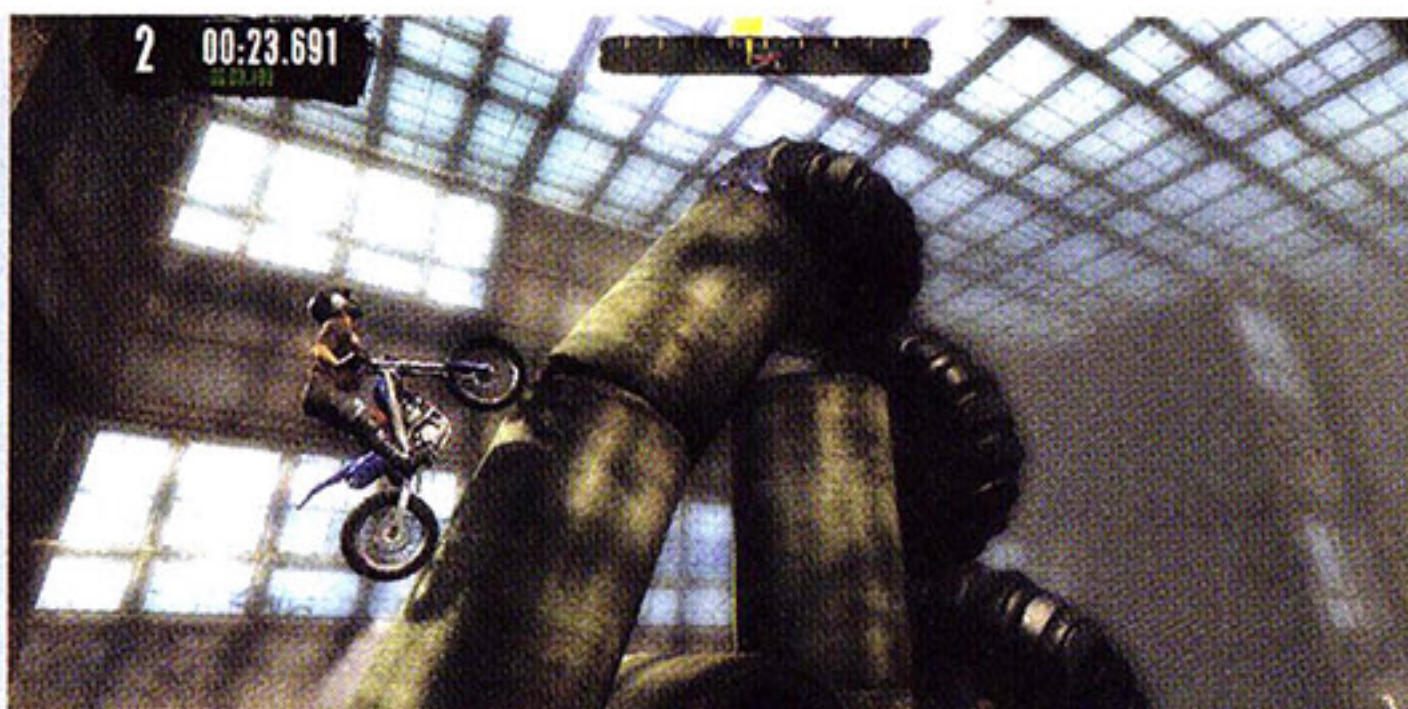
increasingly necessary tool as the challenging levels progress. Timing-based platforming in the later stages can get frustrating, but the co-op experience makes it worth the difficulty curve.

By the time you read this, **The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition** will have been out for awhile. However, it'd be a shame to miss out on this phenomenal remake of one of the great adventure games, so I'm mentioning it once again. I played through much of the game this month, marveling at the coolness of switching back and forth between the original game visuals and the snazzy updated graphics. The voiceover work is top notch, and most of the original jokes still work in that absurd way they did back in the '90s.

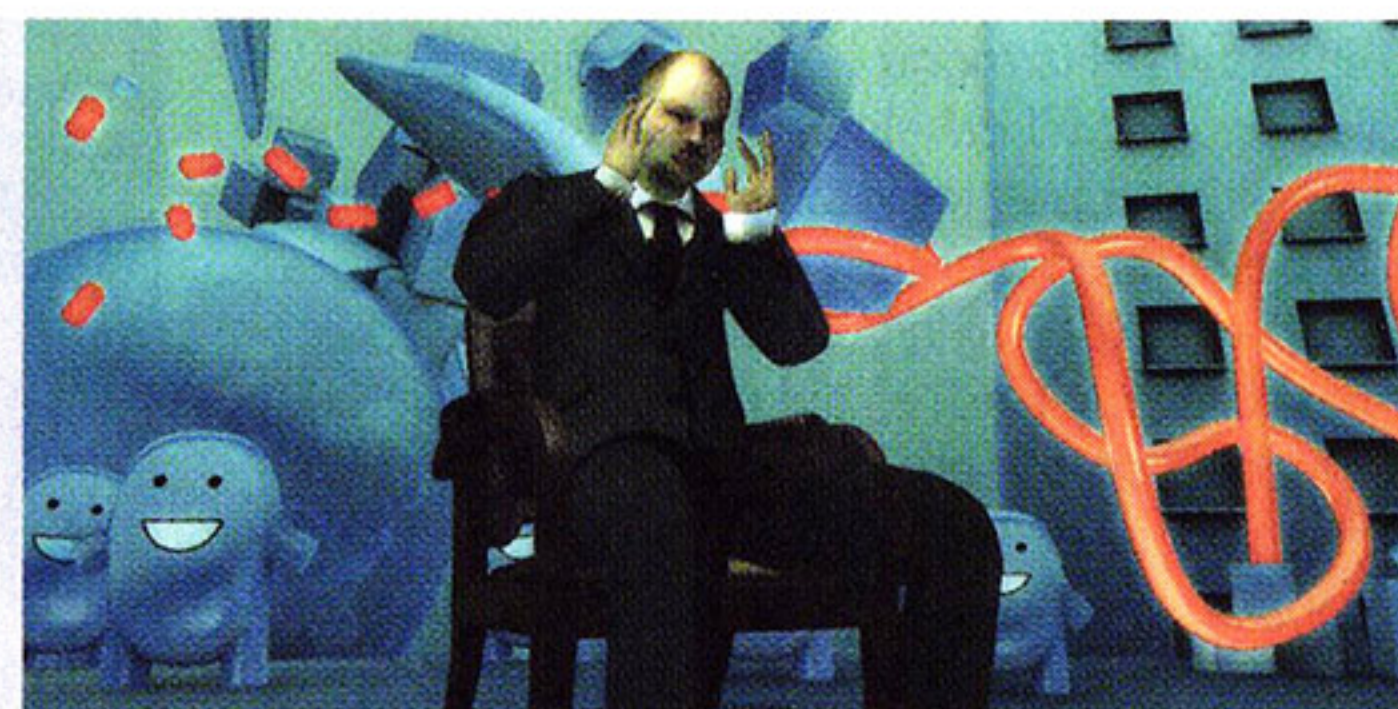
It's not part of Live Arcade's summer offering, but I'm surprised how much I enjoyed **Shatter**, the PSN brick-breaking title I first saw at E3. Unlike so many games in this style, *Shatter's* gameplay genuinely evolves over time. New challenges are constantly changing up the feel of the levels, and the dynamic nature of manipulating the ball mid-flight adds a more involved and dynamic vibe to the otherwise passive activity of brick destruction games. Boss encounters add another layer of complexity, often requiring careful use of the many power-ups and other tools the game sets up for you. Even the music is excellent; a driving electronica beat kept me engaged and excited. Give *Shatter* a try before you dismiss it as something you've seen a billion times before. ■ ■ ■



> Fez
This fascinating game is a long way off, but keep it on your radar. You play as Gomez, a 2D character making a journey into the third dimension. The game's creators at Polytron recently announced an early 2010 release on Live Arcade.



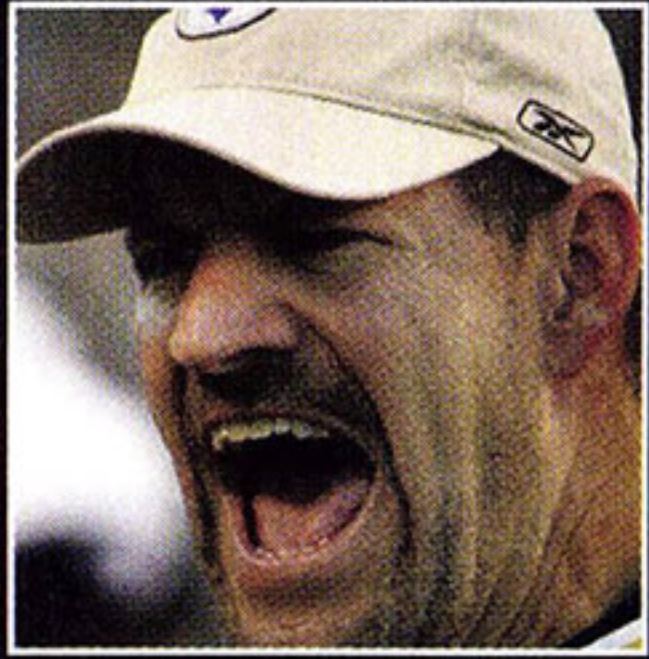
> Trials HD
The obstacle course motorbike game *Trials HD* is immediately addictive, forcing players to control bike tilt and speed while navigating impossibly crazy courses. The game hits it stride with big jumps and crazy tricks, but the later levels are incredibly challenging, and may halt the fun for some. This should hit Live Arcade around the time you read this.



> .detuned
Like *Linger In Shadows* before it, *.detuned* isn't really so much a game as it is an artistic experiment, letting you manipulate interactive scenes in concert with a musical backdrop. If you're searching for the frontiers of interactive art, track this down on PlayStation Network.

Listen To The Coach

Super Bowl-winning former Steelers coach Bill Cowher is lending his name to Quick Hit and providing color commentary and play calling assistance. Do what he says or face the wrath of the chin.



games

A NEW FOOTBALL EXPERIENCE

FREE, BROWSER-BASED FOOTBALL FROM 2K & MADDEN VETS

With All-Pro Football and Blitz on the shelf, all football fans have to choose between is EA Sports' NCAA Football and Madden. The former senior designer for Visual Concepts' famed NFL 2K series plans to change that with Quick Hit.

"What we're trying to do here at Quick Hit is to provide an alternative to folks that have played sports games year in and year out and are looking for something a little bit different," says director of design Brandon Justice.

Justice's newly formed development house is striking out in a new direction with a free browser-based football title. Justice wants to give every football fan with a computer a quick fix of football that hits both the casual and hardcore ends of the football and gaming spectrum.

Quick Hit puts you in the shoes of a coach/GM building a team and making decisions from calling plays, upgrading players RPG-style, making trades, and even playing earned tokens before

the ball is snapped to deploy special skills for your players. Under the hood, the game calculates the results of any given play, and takes into account penalties, fumbles, stats, and other variables.

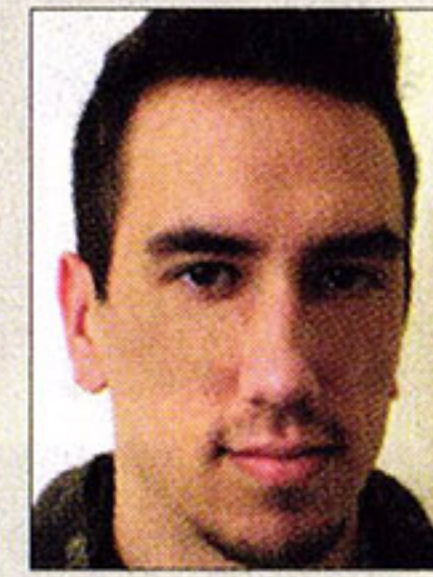
The game straddles the divide between garnering casual interest with its free-to-play structure, ease of play calling, and surface decisions that allow you to get in and play quickly, while at the same time adding more depth for hardcore players. Card packs of players built around different playbooks and players can be bought for a small fee.

"We're going to try to bring all of the expertise that we have working on products like 2K, All-Pro, and Madden, and really just infuse this thing with the type of football experience people want. But the main thing we're trying to do is make it simple." Quick Hit also offers full community features for players, different tournament types, leaderboards, and more.

Look for the Quick Hit public beta on September 9, and go to www.quickhit.com for more info.

TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers



DEVELOPER
JEREMIAH SLACZKA
Co-Founder & Creative Director,
5th Cell (Scribblenauts)

- 1 Metal Gear Solid – PSone
- 2 Final Fantasy VI – SNES
- 3 Counter-Strike – PC
- 4 Soul Calibur – DC
- 5 Super Mario 64 – N64



READER
EMILIO EVANS
Bronx, NY

- 1 Uncharted: Drake's Fortune – PS3
- 2 Grand Theft Auto series – Multi
- 3 Super Mario Bros. 3 – NES
- 4 Sonic the Hedgehog 2 – Genesis
- 5 God of War series – Multi

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

Game Informer Magazine/Top Five
724 N 1st St 4th Fl
Minneapolis, MN 55401-9022
email: topfive@gameinformer.com
(attach digital picture)

TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top 10 Ways To Tell The Difference Between The Beatles And The Monkees

- 10 Misspelled mammal? The Monkees
- 9 Misspelled insect? The Beatles
- 8 One British dude? The Monkees
- 7 Four British dudes? The Beatles
- 6 Ludicrous TV sitcom? The Monkees
- 5 Mr. Conductor from *Shining Time Station*? The Beatles
- 4 Those Two "Believer" Songs? The Monkees
- 3 Actually played instruments and wrote songs? The Beatles
- 2 Manufactured to copy the Beatles? The Monkees
- 1 Best band of all time? The Beatles

Name That Game Answer: Maximo: Ghosts to Glory

BRICK

UNLIMITED ENABLED

BY BRICK

HOW EA SPORTS CAPTURES STADIUMS



Thanks to University of Minnesota operations intern Marc Davis and all of the stadium staff for their assistance



◀ Tale of the Tape

A lot of measurements are taken: Inside the sideline to the field's perimeter wall, all the sideline widths, the end zone lines – many of these are not specified standard by the NCAA. The team uses a walking pedometer to take some measurements. Other important measurements include the width and height of the tunnels, the heights of the rails around them, the width of the steps, and the height of the field's edge walls. They even ask about the thickness of the end zone padding and take photos of the pads for color reference.



You know what it looks like to score in front of tens of thousands of screaming fans on a virtual college gameday in NCAA Football, but getting authentic stadiums into the games is no simple process. EA Tiburon has already begun work on NCAA Football 11, and one of the first steps is adding new or renovated stadiums for the game. Game Informer trailed team members from EA Tiburon as they took photos and videos of the Minnesota Golden Gophers' soon-to-be-opened TCF Bank Stadium.

When the developer started working on the next-gen game consoles, crews of photographers from the team – including a number of freelancers – started snapping pictures of dozens of stadiums across the country. Nowadays, not as much work is required to deliver authentic stadiums, with the leg work scaled back to about five visits per year. This year the team is adding new venues like TCF Bank Stadium and facility upgrades like Florida International University's renovations. The assets captured on site serve the team for future NCAA titles this generation, and possibly beyond.

For this particular visit, development director Ken Trunk and lead outsourcing artist Jason Alexander take shots of almost everything in the stadium, including minute details such as electrical outlets and emergency service panels. These photos are used to either model the actual object itself or to apply flat textures to the stadium models. Trunk and Alexander also take many establishing shots from all heights and angles around the stadium. At the end of the day Trunk has 16GB of photos on his camera.

"Anything you can see from the field is something we're going to have to shoot, even if it's the building in the background," explains Trunk. Neither of them know exactly how all of these production assets – such as the inside of a locker room or fan plazas in front of a stadium – will be utilized for a later NCAA game, so they take as many photos as possible. If the team decides

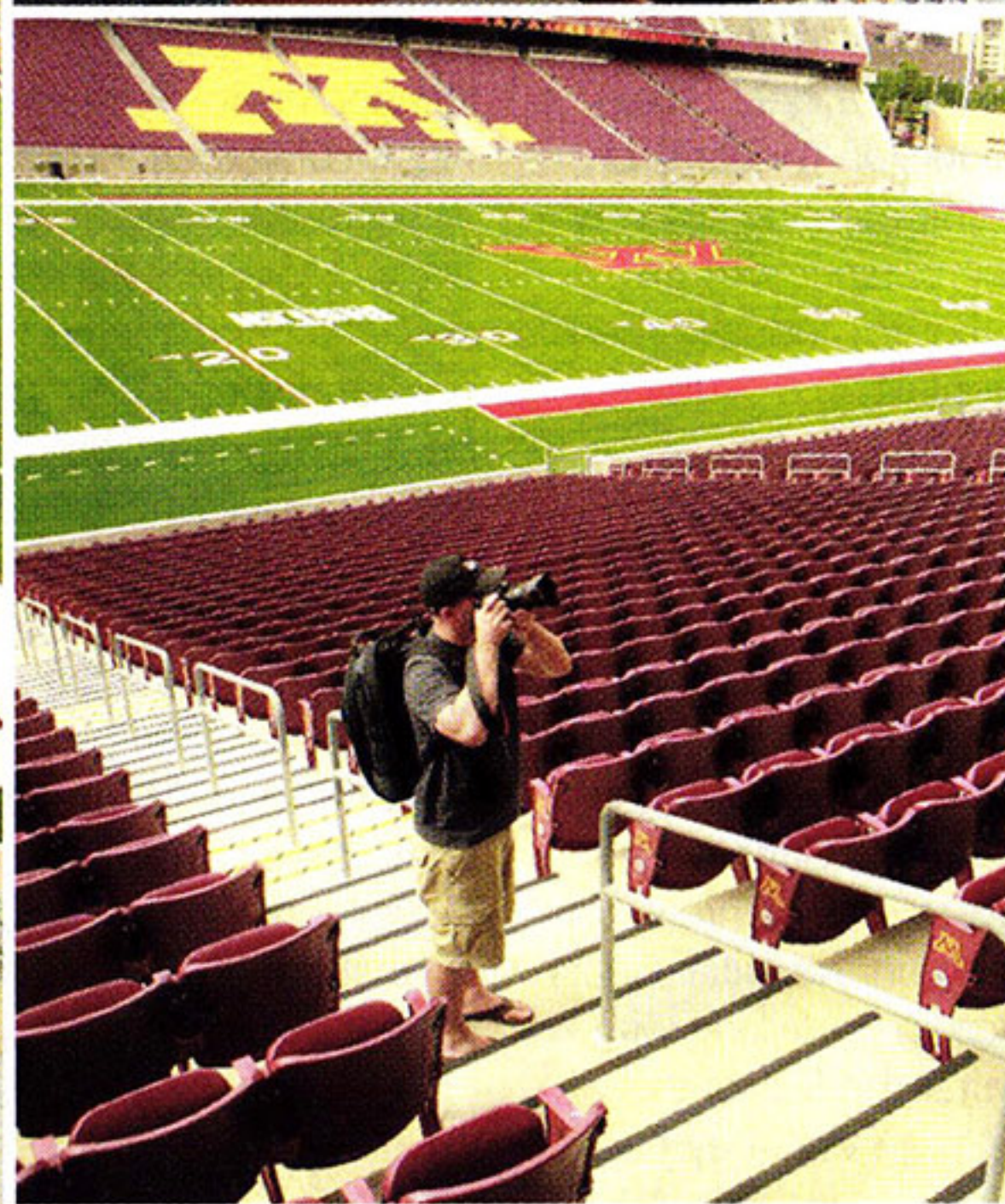
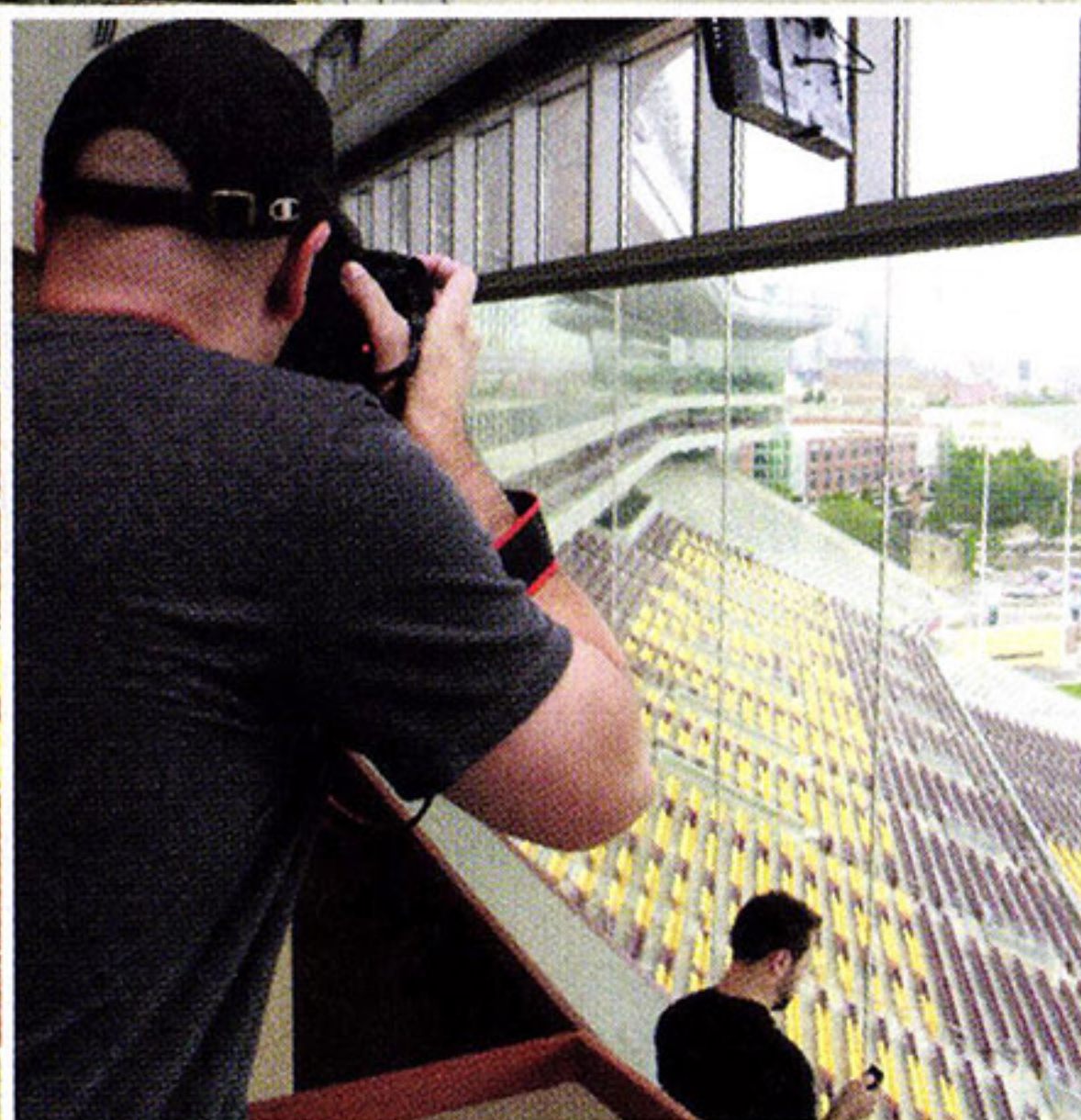
to show a cutscene from the coaches' booth in a future game, for example, they already have a real-life reference for it.

After sorting through all the photos, the development team takes a handful of shots and puts them into the 3D program Maya. For roughly three weeks Tiburon's artists and environmental specialists model the stadium into a wire frame, starting on the field level and building successive layers of the structure on top of that. Blueprints from the university are used to help layout certain areas, but the photos taken are very important because they are cross-referenced with the numerical data in the plans.

The nascent stadium is taken out of Maya and put into the game proper via a render pipeline, which converts the data into a readable feed. The team then spends another three weeks on texturing, tweaking shaders, and adding normal maps to create reflective and matte surfaces, which makes everything look realistic. A few days of lighting comes next, which includes stripping out any shadows from the reference photos so the game can produce its own appropriate shadows based on the time of day on the field.

Despite all the work put in so far (the artists say that most of their time with the stadium is spent in the modeling and texture phases), the stadium isn't complete. Even after seven or eight weeks in the production phase, and the fact that the stadium will more or less look like it will when it ships in the game, there is still a lot of work to be done. As the team places the crowds, mascots, and cheerleaders it is constantly being tweaked and bug checked. The original reference photos are still studied for color matching, for example. "Although stadium creation can be as little as eight to ten weeks, it's really a process that goes throughout development," says Trunk.

Want to see what the final product looks like? Stay tuned for future coverage as EA transforms its photos into virtual reality. ■ ■ ■



All photos by Greg Schaal



◀ The Money Shot

EA Tiburon development director Ken Trunk says this panoramic shot is the most important one he takes. The team will create its model on top of it to make sure the details match up. Trunk says it's like overlaying paper on top of a picture you want to trace.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1981 The Revolution



Phillips joins Nintendo of America. The company specializes in arcade titles like Donkey Kong, but soon revolutionizes the industry with its hugely successful Nintendo Entertainment System

1988 Drawn to Life



Phillips becomes a comic star in the first issue of in-house magazine *Nintendo Power*. In monthly comic Howard & Nester, Phillips encounters various game related shenanigans with bratty teen character Nester. Phillips' humor and trademark bowtie make him a legend among Nintendo fans of the day

1991 The Force

After leaving Nintendo, Phillips does a short stint at LucasFilm Games as creative director of its Games & Learning Products division

1991 On the Rise

Phillips leaves LucasFilm Games for up and coming publishing house THQ. While at THQ, he directs several development teams and establishes a satellite development office

1993 Big Developments

Phillips spends the next few years shepherding some new development houses: Absolute Entertainment (where he is director of west coast development) and Splash Studios (where he serves as VP of product development)

1997 Opening The Boxes

Phillips does a long stint at Microsoft, where he oversees many aspects of Xbox and Xbox 360 development, including Studio ZR, Microsoft Sports, and a Microsoft racing title

2009 The Big Chair



Phillips takes a job at Chair Entertainment, creators of the highly anticipated XBLA title *Shadow Complex*. The game is a favorite of critics and fans at the 2009 E3 convention

HOWARD PHILLIPS

STUDIO DIRECTOR, CHAIR ENTERTAINMENT GROUP

>> From the early days of Nintendo where he helped launch the NES to a recent stint at Microsoft, Howard Phillips has seen it all in the video game industry. This year, he took a position at Epic subsidiary Chair Entertainment, which recently released the highly anticipated *Shadow Complex*. <<

You were in on the very early days of Nintendo of America – obviously you guys launched the NES – what are your memories of that time period?

Well, 10 years is a lot of time, and from '81 to '91 – my tenure at Nintendo – certainly a lot transpired, both at Nintendo as well as in the industry as a whole. But when we got the Famicom system and they had Mario Bros. for it, it was a one-for-one match with the Mario Bros. game in the arcade. It was just an amazing thing. It's hard for people to imagine today, but back in those days, the only time you could have an extended high-quality video game play experience was if you stood in the arcade and just pumped in quarters. That was just a huge shift in the perception of what video gaming could mean. And so that was really exciting...at that time it was absolutely clear that all bets were off and it was a brave new world.

happening fast. One of the things that I learned is that he had the ability to hold off on making decisions until it was the right time; either the decision really needed to be made, or it was an opportune time to make the decision, or he finally got the right information he needed and wished to make the optimal decision. Because of that we were able to, I think, make better decisions and better plays in the marketplace.

You're unique in that you've worked at both Microsoft and Nintendo. What do you see as the differences with those and how they approach the video game business?

[Laughs] Wow, let me think. If I were to put it in a nutshell, I would say that, fundamentally, Nintendo is a toy company. Fundamentally, Microsoft is a utility software company. Nintendo, it ends up, is pretty darn good at making toy-ish products that

acquired a small studio down in Provo, Utah called Chair Entertainment. It certainly perked up my ears just because of the unusual nature of the name. But in talking further with Mike and doing some investigation on my own, it just seemed like it was a wonderful opportunity. It certainly turned out to be the case; it's a small, entrepreneurial atmosphere here, very talented guys – proven talent already – creating highly engaging game experiences. Combine that with the financial stability, business acumen, and technical expertise of Epic as their big brother company, and it's a no brainer.

Do you see Chair sticking to the Xbox Live Arcade style games they've had success with, or moving towards larger scale, boxed game type experiences?

Chair has done two XBLA games – we're just about to release our second one in *Shadow Complex*.

Fundamentally, Nintendo is a toy company [and] Microsoft is a utility software company.

You worked with some legends at Nintendo, like Mr. Miyamoto and Mr. Arakawa. What did you learn from them?

I started there at a pretty young age, and you do a lot of growing personally and professionally during those years. I had a lot of peer, as well as mentored, learning experiences from the folks there. I think what I learned from Mr. Miyamoto is kind of the methodical, calm, creative approach. It's not just a willy-nilly ad-hoc creative approach – just closing your eyes and swirling the paintbrush. He was very methodical in his approach to the process and highly iterative, and I think that was the secret to his success. Moving forward in the game industry, what has been the secret to the success of a lot of companies and a lot of individuals is their ability to take the creative space and to approach it with an engineering principle to come up with things that are both aesthetically pleasing, but at the same time technically amazing.


Mr. Arakawa is very calm, reasoned and rational. At the time in the game industry, at least in the North American version of the games industry, everybody was walking around, shouting and screaming, hair on fire, because there was money to be made – the world was changing, things were

appeal in that vein. Microsoft historically has been better at creating products that appeal more to the kind of the intellectual and nerdy, and maybe hardcore edge of the game space. That said, things are changing, and toy-like games are being played by hardcore gamers, and hardcore experiences are being shared by casual gamers these days. But on average it seems to me there is a clear difference; whether you're in a production meeting, or a design meeting, or a marketing meeting, it's very clear to me that the underlying perspectives are very, very much aligned with that toy industry mentality versus utility software mentality.

You recently joined Chair – how did that come to be, and what was attractive about the company?

First and foremost, they're a bunch of great guys. I've only been here a short time now, but it's just been fantastic. That said, my introduction to Chair was because I had worked with Epic Games when I was at Microsoft when we were doing Unreal Championship and also working on the initial Gears of War game. Later, I happened to be talking with [Epic president] Mike Capps after the first of this year, and he had mentioned to me that they had

We've got some expertise there. In addition to that the Unreal Engine 3 technology is a great development platform for Xbox Live – that's certainly one of the reasons that Chair and Epic partnered. Moving forward, it's a big open world for Chair and for Epic. Everything is looking extremely favorable for *Shadow Complex* on Xbox Live from a business standpoint, so we're very happy to be where we are. Moving forward, I think it would be a mistake to pigeonhole any development group into a particular genre or particular platform. It's going to be great, fun, and interesting times for us; we can't tip our hand specifically on what our next steps will be post-*Shadow Complex*, but I can tell you that the Xbox Live environment has been terrific for us, and is certainly very attractive to us in the future. The kind of classic retro gaming that is represented with *Shadow Complex*, being much more like a classic, fun, "gotta play it a lot" game like *Metroid*, *Castlevania*, or *Metal Gear Solid*; there's potentially some opportunity there in the future with other expressions of that. Whether we end up choosing to do that or not remains to be seen, but it certainly is a great place to be today.



FROM THE
NES
TO
XBOX
LIVE

■ Howard Phillips is taking his years of experience in the game industry to Chair Entertainment

Have Gear Will Travel

GI TESTS THE INDUSTRY'S SLICKEST NETBOOKS

Sacrificing a small amount of performance in favor of convenience and travel ease, netbooks are all the rage. It's easy to see why. While they won't let you play next year's hottest PC titles, they can handle a round or two of *Plants vs. Zombies*, are great for watching videos on the plane, and are so light you won't notice them in your travel bag. These books all feature a 10-inch screens, 160GB hard drives, 1 GB of DDR2 RAM, and come packed with Windows XP Home Edition. It's the little details that set these flyweights apart.

1 Acer Aspire One D150

VERY GOOD 

Pro: The cheapest book we tested also delivered the most well-rounded performance. We especially liked the five-hour battery life and its glossy, 1024 x 600 resolution, LED-backlit display.

Con: The Aspire's smaller keyboard makes typing a pain, but that's pretty standard for a netbook. The small and fussy trackpad, however, is subpar by any standard. The Aspire also lacks Bluetooth support.

\$329.99 • www.acer.com/aspireone

2 Asus Eee PC Seashell 1008HA

AVERAGE 

Pro: One inch thick and little over 2.2 pounds, the Eee PC is adorably tiny, but feels roomy despite the size of its keyboard. The Eee PC also boasts over five hours of battery life on average. The 10GB of free online storage isn't bad either.

Con: The Eee PC costs more than other netbooks with no noticeable performance boost. The single mouse button feels clumsy, and the integrated battery means you can't upgrade to a bigger charge or carry around an extra for long trips. The glossy finish also attracts fingerprints.

\$429.99 • eeepc.asus.com

3 Samsung NC10

VERY GOOD 

Pro: Sporting a nearly full-sized keyboard, the NC10 is the most comfortable netbook we found for typing. We also loved its crisp, clean 1024 x 600 screen, solid five-hour battery, and quick boot-up speed.

Con: While not necessarily slow, the NC10 lagged the most on the net, and the system could use a bigger touchpad and second mouse button.

\$419.99 • www.samsung.com/us

4 Toshiba Mini nb205

SUPERB 

Pro: The Toshiba boasted the best performance, battery life (up to 8 hours), and the trackpad of the bunch. If that isn't enough, it also comes with cool extras like hard drive impact sensors, which safeguard your data if dropped, and USB ports that charge devices even when the system is off.

Con: The Toshiba's wide load battery sticks out further than any of the others. If Toshiba fixed that and the screen's glassy glare, we might have the perfect netbook.

\$399.99 • www.laptops.toshiba.com

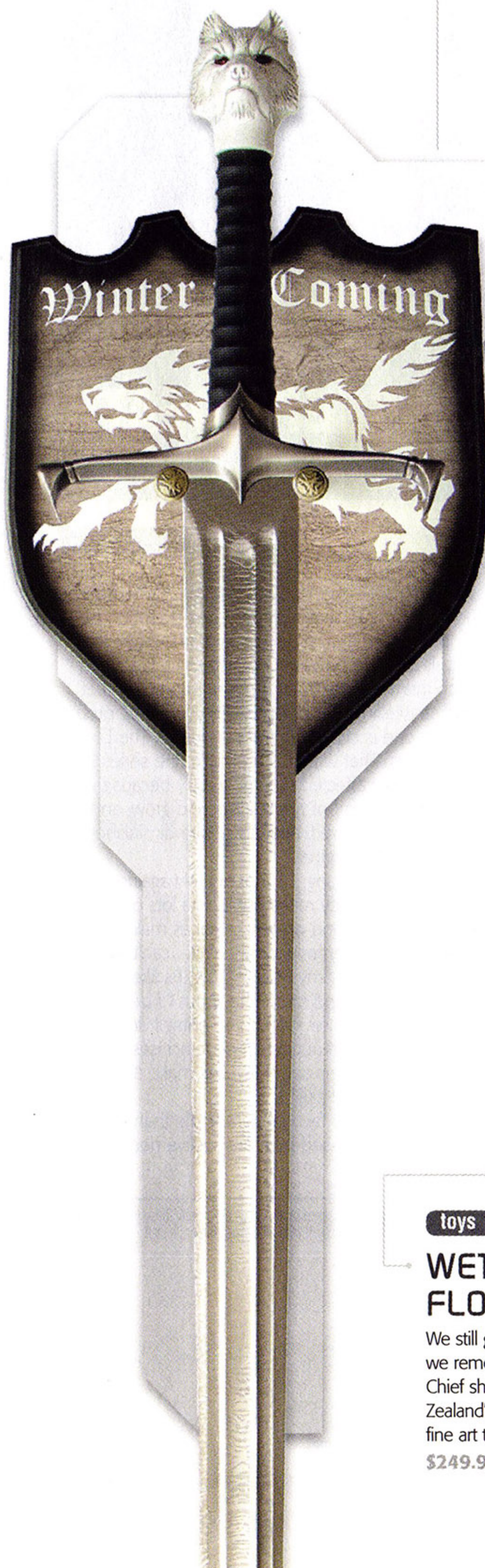


big dork

VALYRIAN STEEL LONGCLAW, SWORD OF JON SNOW

If you know who Jon Snow is, you likely felt a chill run up your spine just looking at this epic blade. George R.R. Martin's fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* has set a new standard for fantasy epics. This exclusive, officially licensed sword has a 39-inch etched stainless steel blade, a genuine leather wrap hilt, and a faux stone wolf head affixed to the end of the pommel. Buyers even receive a plaque for displaying the blade and a signed certificate from Martin himself.

\$240.00 • www.valyriansteel.com/shop



toys

FINAL FANTASY STATIC ARTS STATUES

If you're like us, you probably have a FF VII statue to go with every outfit. Seeing figures like this Cloud (pictured) and matching Sephiroth makes us want to expand our wardrobe. Both highly detailed figures stand approximately 14 inches tall and are made from PVC. Put them together and lock them in an epic struggle of good versus evil.

\$149.99 (each) • www.square-enix-shop.com/usa



toys

WETA HALO: MASTER CHIEF AND THE FLOOD STATUE

We still get a migraine every time we try to suss out Halo's overindulgent narrative, but then we remember Master Chief doing something like this and smile. No one makes Master Chief shooting a Floodling through the gut look more wicked cool than the sculptors at New Zealand's Weta Workshop. Standing over 16-inches high, you can add this amazing piece of fine art to your mantel this September.

\$249.99 • www.wetanz.com/halo

media shelf



1. *Battlestar Galactica: The Complete Series* on Blu-ray

Sci-Fi Channel's hit drama about humanity's last survivors trying to find their way to Earth is punctuated with enough explosive action to appease anyone.

\$349.99 • www.universalstudio-shomeentertainment.com

2. *Ender's Game & Ender's Shadow: Battle School* Hardcover

Marvel's comic adaptation of Orson Scott Card's masterwork follows the young Ender Wiggin as he prepares for the most challenging game of his life – a battle to save humanity.

\$24.99 • www.marvel.com/endersgame

3. *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!: Season 3*

If your gut feels tight from eating a lot of cheese, then it's time to bust it wide open with the newest season of Adult Swim's hit sketch comedy show.

\$29.98 • www.williamsstreet.com

4. *Torchwood: Children of Earth* on Blu-ray

All over the world children stop moving and announce with a single voice the coming of an alien race. It's up to the secret British organization Torchwood to save the day again in this critically-praised BBC original miniseries.

\$34.99 • www.bbcamerica.com

5. *Watchmen: The End is Nigh – The Complete Experience*

This set includes the Blu-ray director's cut of this year's epic comic flick, plus the PS3 version of both parts of the previously download-only game, which is more like a punishment than a robust extra.

\$49.99 • www.warnerbros.com

BEN REEVES
ASSOCIATE EDITOR, GAME INFORMER



WHY SOME FRANCHISES NEED TO ACCEPT DEATH

Here's the problem: It's hard to keep a property fresh and exciting over a long period of time.

Maybe Tony Hawk needs to die. Let me explain. In the summer of 1999, Pizza Hut ran a promotion where it gave away demos for upcoming games. That was my first introduction to Tony Hawk's Pro Skater. It was just a single level featuring two skaters and a handful of challenges, but the experience hit me like a rollercoaster thrill. I played that demo until the disc was bald. My friends and I got so into the series that we were still playing the original release by the time the sequel came out a year later. That enthusiasm didn't last. By the time Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 dropped on store shelves, I still hadn't finished playing through number three. The games lost my interest. By the eighth sequel, the series had lost most of its creativity, and all its originality.

I'm not the only one who tired of the experience. Tony Hawk went from a multi-million selling critical darling to a series that could barely crack the sales charts with its corralled fanbase. It took nearly a decade, two console generations, and an entirely different publisher to inject creative blood back into video game skateboarding when EA released Skate. Maybe they should have killed Tony Hawk years ago?

This isn't a warning about the perils of a yearly release schedule – if a series can stay fresh and creative every 12 months, more power to it. But Tony Hawk doesn't ride alone; plenty of series have fallen into that same downward spiral: Tomb Raider, Mortal Kombat, Sonic, Spyro the Dragon, Turok, Medal of Honor, and Silent Hill are just a few others.

Why can't we end a successful video game series

at its peak? Here's the problem: It's hard to keep a property fresh and exciting over a long period of time. Memorable gameplay elements are joyful the first time they happen, but their allure wanes each time they are implemented. Psychologists call this habituation. Economists call it declining marginal utility. Most of us just understand it this way: Variety is the spice of life.

Some franchises get it. Resident Evil went through a dramatic reinvention for its fourth entry. Every Final Fantasy is different. Metroid embraced a shift to first-person perspective when it went 3D. These decisions were needed to keep those franchises exciting. Fresh ideas have an expiration date; the old tricks don't always work the second or third time through, and if you do see an old idea in a game it's usually been reworked aggressively.

But why rework an old idea when a new idea is even better? In 1999, when Hideki Kamiya began work on Resident Evil 4, his team found itself coming up with a lot of great, creative ideas. The only problem was the concepts didn't fit within the confines of the Resident Evil universe, thus Devil May Cry was born. But can you imagine if Capcom ordered Kamiya to keep making RE4? All of the creativity and originality within that title would have been stymied. If Kamiya wasn't allowed to make Devil May Cry, we may never have witnessed the amazing atmosphere or stylish combat that made the series famous. Devil May Cry influenced the development of action games for nearly a decade afterwards.

The biggest issue with the sequel grind is the problem of story. Narrative, by its very nature, has a definitive arc. Once we've seen a character

travel the hero's journey – combating his demons and overcoming his challenges – his evolution is complete. After that character travels his path, the sequels lose the emotional punch since we just watch them do it again and again. I don't call that good storytelling; I call that the Dragon Ball Z problem. No one is clamoring for a sequel to The Lord of the Rings. That wouldn't feel right; the series is done. Its story affected us emotionally because we watched that band of heroes live, and grow, and die. It's almost sacred. Anything more diminishes the work of the original.

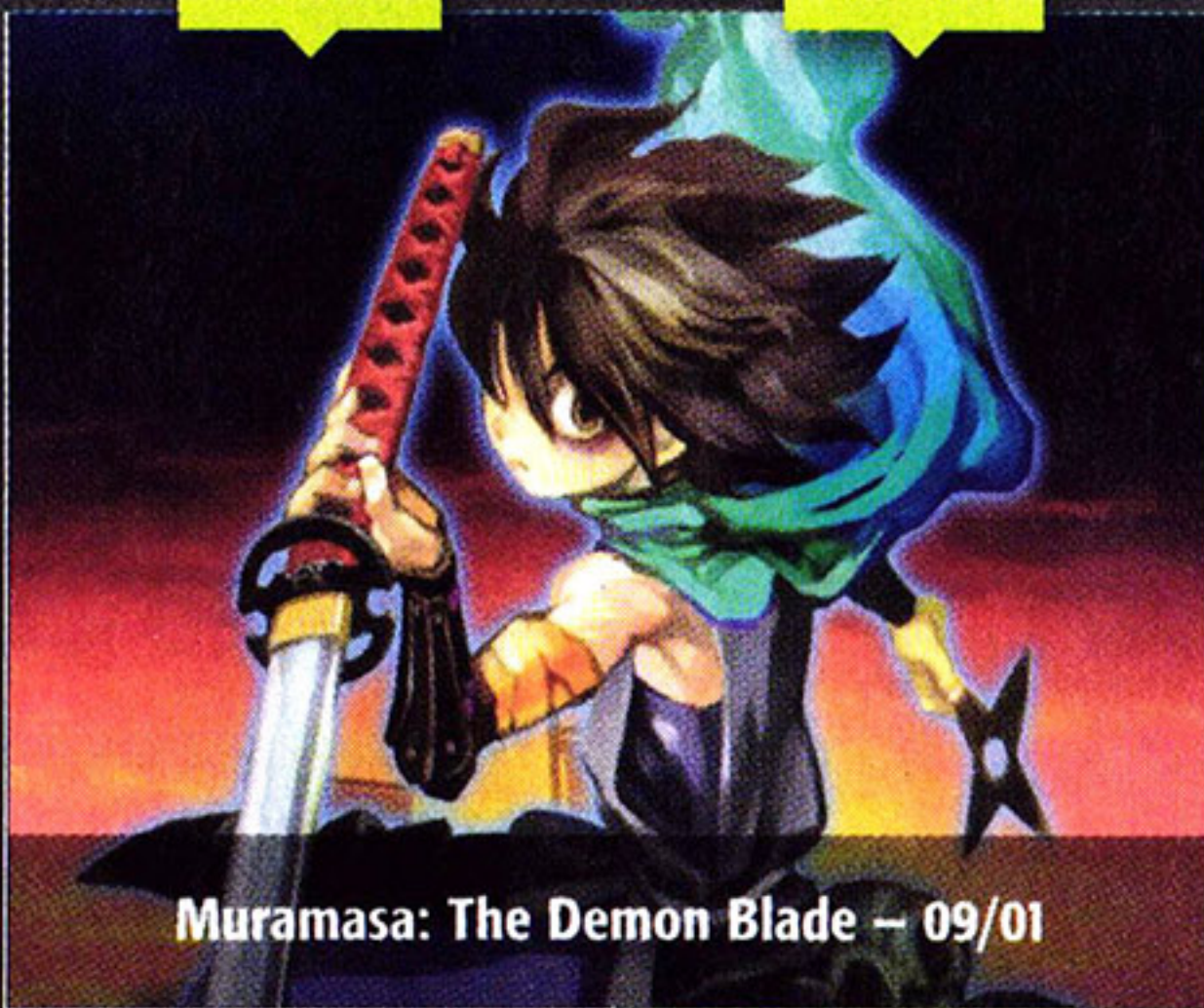
Don't get me wrong; I'm not entirely against sequels. I know they make publishers lots of money, and often the second game in a series makes some real improvements on the first. I can't wait for sequels to some of my favorite new IPs like Dead Space, BioShock, and Mass Effect, but I'll be sad if those series lose their spark three entries down the road and instead of putting those franchises on the shelf, their publishers say, "Hey, lets make another one, because it will sell."

I'd rather see my favorite games die than watch them get embarrassed by a destructive need for more. ■ ■ ■

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

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

SUN



Muramasa: The Demon Blade – 09/01

MON

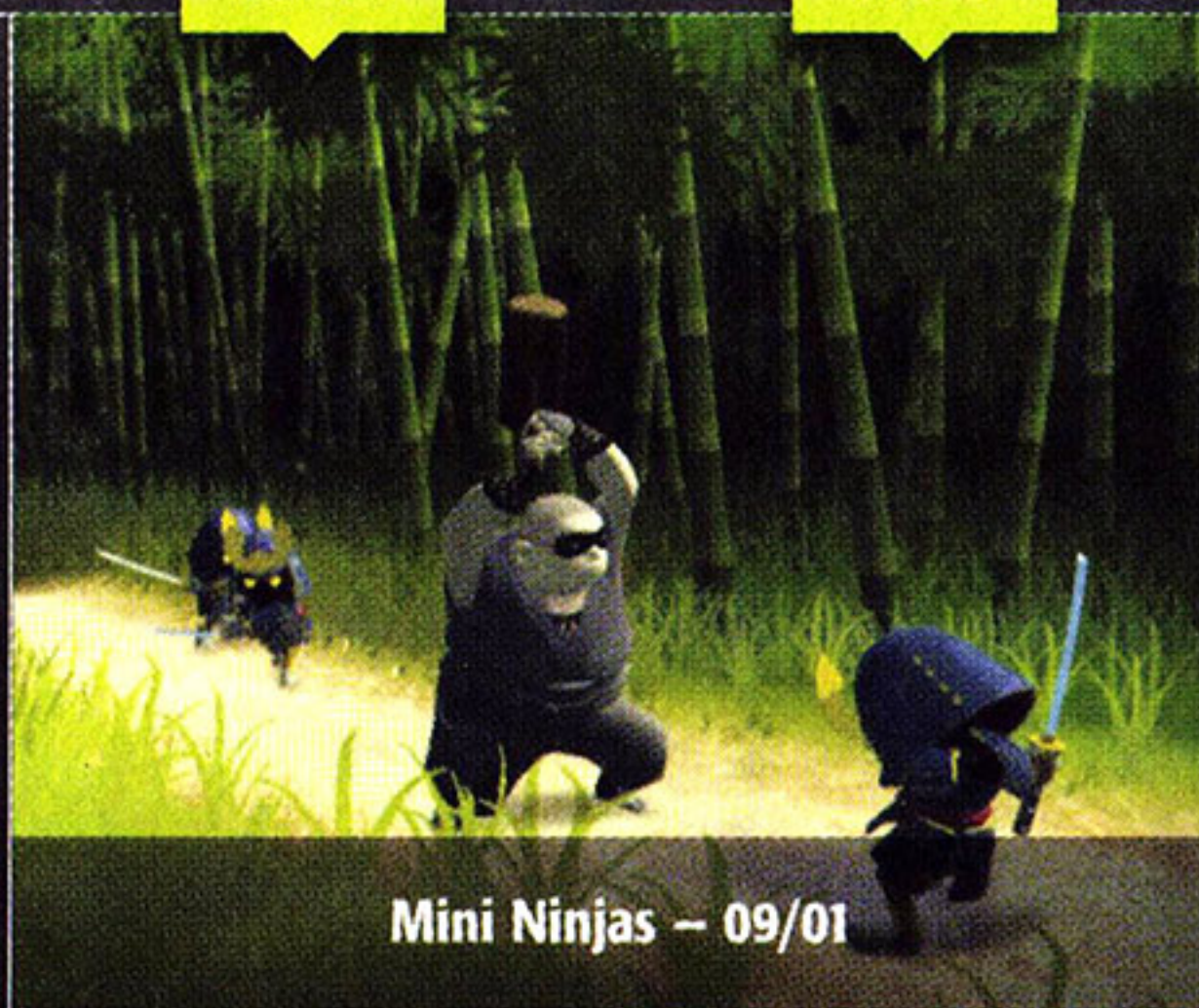
TUE

01

NEW RELEASES

- Academy of Champions: Soccer – Wii
- Champions Online – PC
- Duke Nukem: Critical Mass – PSP, DS
- Guitar Hero 5 – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2
- Hardy Boys: Treasure on the Tracks – DS
- Mini Ninjas – PS3, 360, Wii, DS, PC
- Muramasa: The Demon Blade – Wii
- Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny – PSP

WED



Mini Ninjas – 09/01

THUR

FRI

04

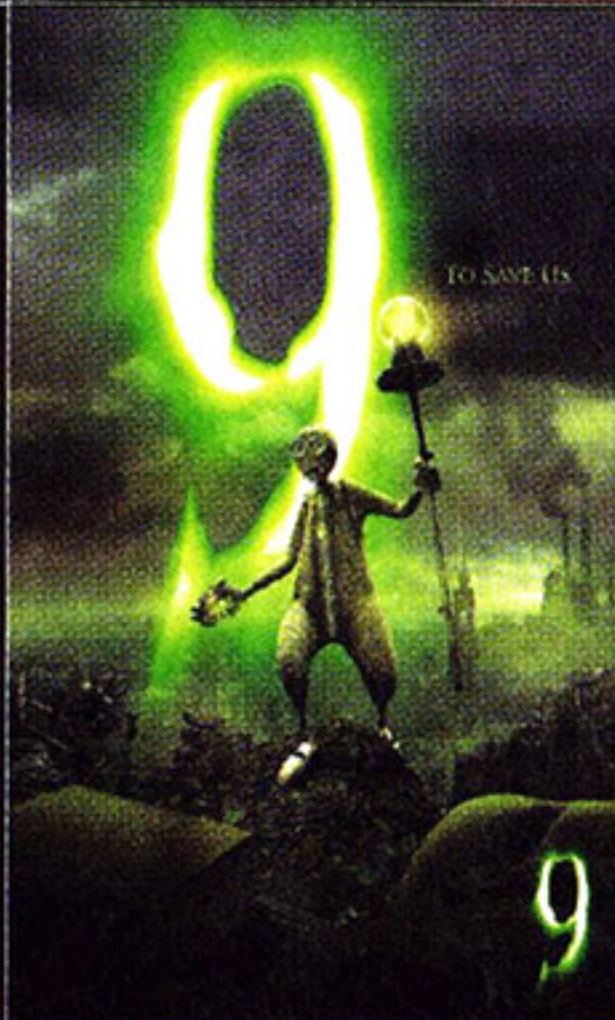
We love Michael C. Hall in *Dexter*, but his career ends today with the debut of the new film *Gamer*. He stars alongside that dude who shouted "This is Sparta" in this ludicrous interpretation of the future of video games. Think Call of Duty meets Project Natal meets *The Running Man*. That may sound like a winning formula, but John Leguizamo also has a role, so this movie is a guaranteed failure.

SAT



06

Remember back in the '80s when all of the best heroes had jean jackets and Oakley sunglasses? Apparently, all of the heroes of the future are made out of burlap. In Wednesday's theatrical release, 9, a fake-out Sackboy fights fake-out *Matrix* robots, and somehow, the fate of humanity hangs in the balance. Throw in a few racially insensitive gags and this could be a Michael Bay production!

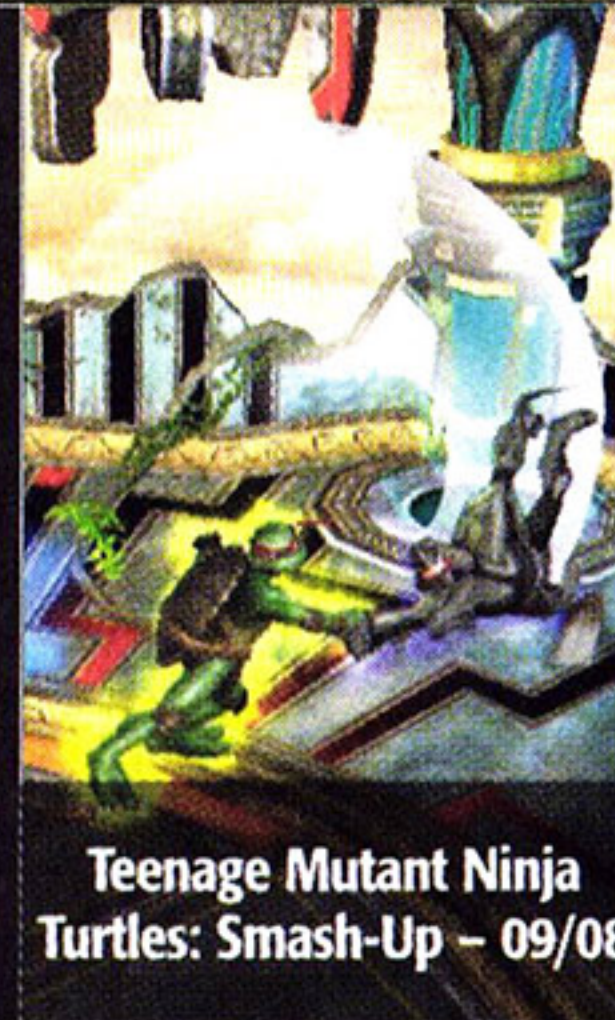


NEW RELEASES

- The Beatles: Rock Band – 360, PS3, Wii
- The Bigs 2 – DS
- Dirt 2 – PS3, 360, Wii, PSP, DS, PC
- Disgaea 2: Dark Hero Days – PSP
- Imagine: Detective – DS
- Majesty 2: The Fantasy Kingdom Sim – PC
- Obscure 2 – DS
- Petz Saddle Club – PSP

- Raiden IV – 360
- Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Smash-Up – Wii
- Valhalla Knights: Eldar Saga – Wii
- Wet – PS3, 360

08



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Smash-Up – 09/08

11

Brian Michael Bendis and Alex Maleev reunite to tackle Marvel's popular heroine, Spider-Woman. This comic series centers on Jessica Drew's indoctrination into S.W.O.R.D., an interplanetary monitoring agency. This should be the perfect accompaniment to Marvel's new online motion comic initiative, which you can check out today at marvel.com/motion_comics.



Toy Story Mania – 09/15

NEW RELEASES

- Age of Empires III: Complete Collection – PC
- Bleach: The 3rd Phantom – DS
- Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs – PS3, 360, Wii, PSP, DS
- Diner Dash: Flo on the Go – DS
- Dreamer: Top Model – DS
- Dream Salon – DS
- IL 2 Sturmovik: Birds of Prey – PS3, 360, PSP, DS

- Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story – DS
- Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2 – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, DS
- My Boyfriend – DS
- Mytran Wars – PSP
- NHL 10 – PS3, 360
- NHL 2K10 – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2
- Princess in Love – DS
- Scribblenauts – DS

15

- Star Wars: Clone Wars Republic Heroes – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS, PC
- Tornado Outbreak – 360, Wii
- Toy Story Mania – Wii
- Windchaser – PC

18

Megan Fox, whose real name is Young Angelina Jolie, stars in today's you'll-feel-guilty-for-going film, *Jennifer's Body*. If you go to this movie (penned by Diablo Cody) expecting snappy dialogue like *Juno*, you'll likely be disappointed. On the other hand, if you want to see Megan Fox half-naked...aw, who are we kidding? No one wants to see that.



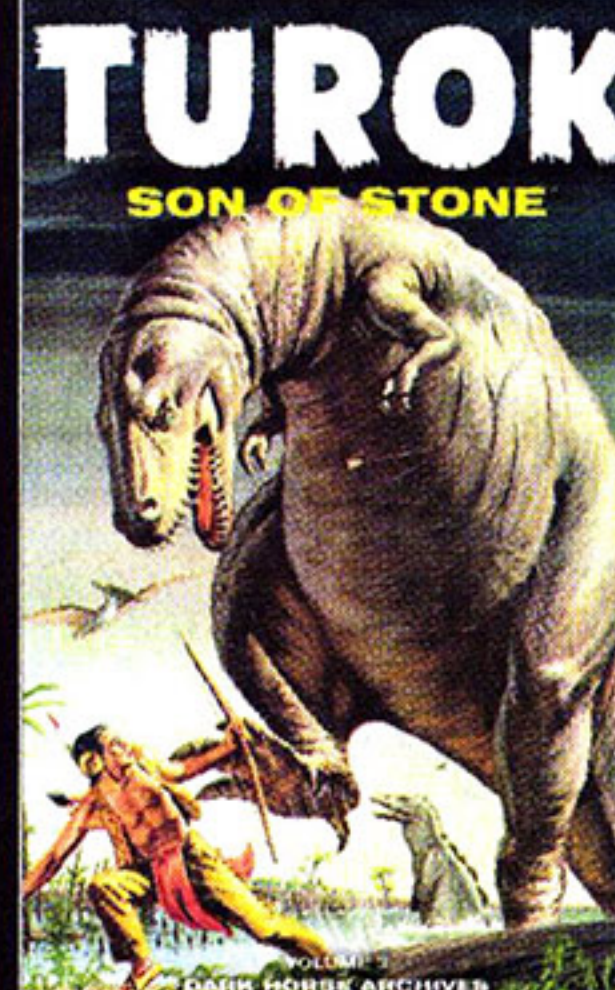
Halo 3: ODST – 09/22

NEW RELEASES

- Aion – PC
- Cabela's Outdoor Adventure – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PC
- Dark Void – PS3, 360, PC
- Fabulous Finds – DS
- Family Party 2 – Wii
- Halo 3: ODST – 360
- Just in Time Translation – DS
- Kataman Forever – PS3
- My Sims Agents – Wii, DS
- Need for Speed: Shift – PS3, 360, PSP, PC

- The Price is Right – Wii, DS, PS
- Scooby Doo: First Frights – Wii, DS
- Shin Megami Tensei: Persona – PSP
- Spore: Hero Arena – PS2, DS
- Wacky World of Sports – Wii

22



25

Did you know that humanity's over-reliance on technology might come at a terrible price? If you haven't seen *The Matrix*, *Minority Report*, or *I, Robot*, Bruce Willis will teach you this valuable lesson in today's big release, *The Surrogates*. Other obvious themes being considered include the power of love, the meaning of Christmas, and gun always beats robot.



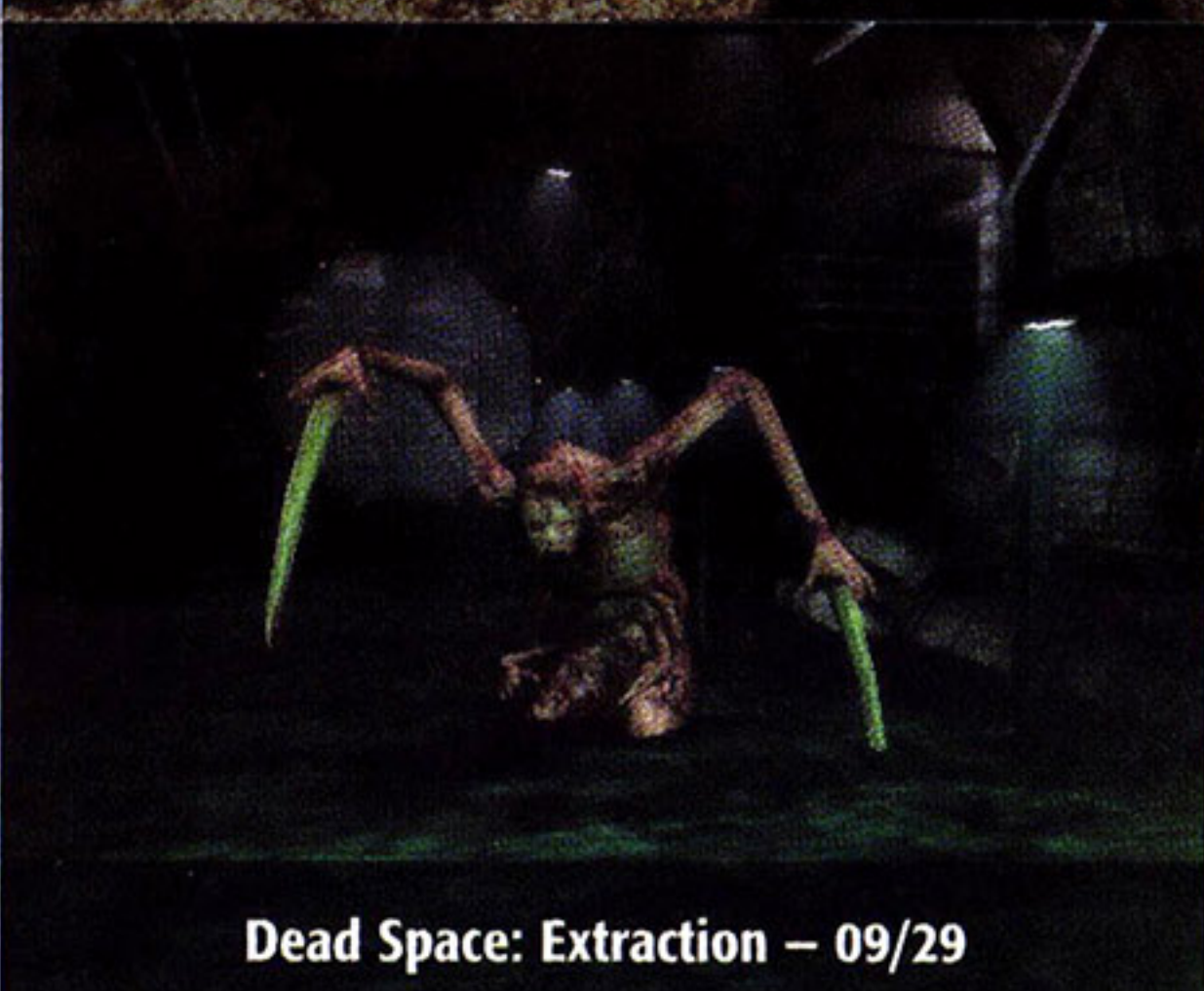
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NEW RELEASES

- Battle of Giants: Dragons – DS
- Club Penguin – DS
- Dead Space: Extraction – Wii
- Family Fued – Wii, DS, PC
- Imagine: Salon Stylist – DS
- Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days – DS
- Laevatein Tactics – DS
- Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 – PS3
- Order of War – PC
- Resident Evil 5 – PC
- Spyborgs – Wii

It remains to be seen if Turok, the slayer of fat dinosaurs, will return to video games. Dark Horse Comics is doing its part to keep this legendary hunter in people's minds with hardcover collections of his classic adventures. Each volume consists of over 200 pages, and most have a dinosaur or two on them. If you enjoy the games, these stories are worth a read.

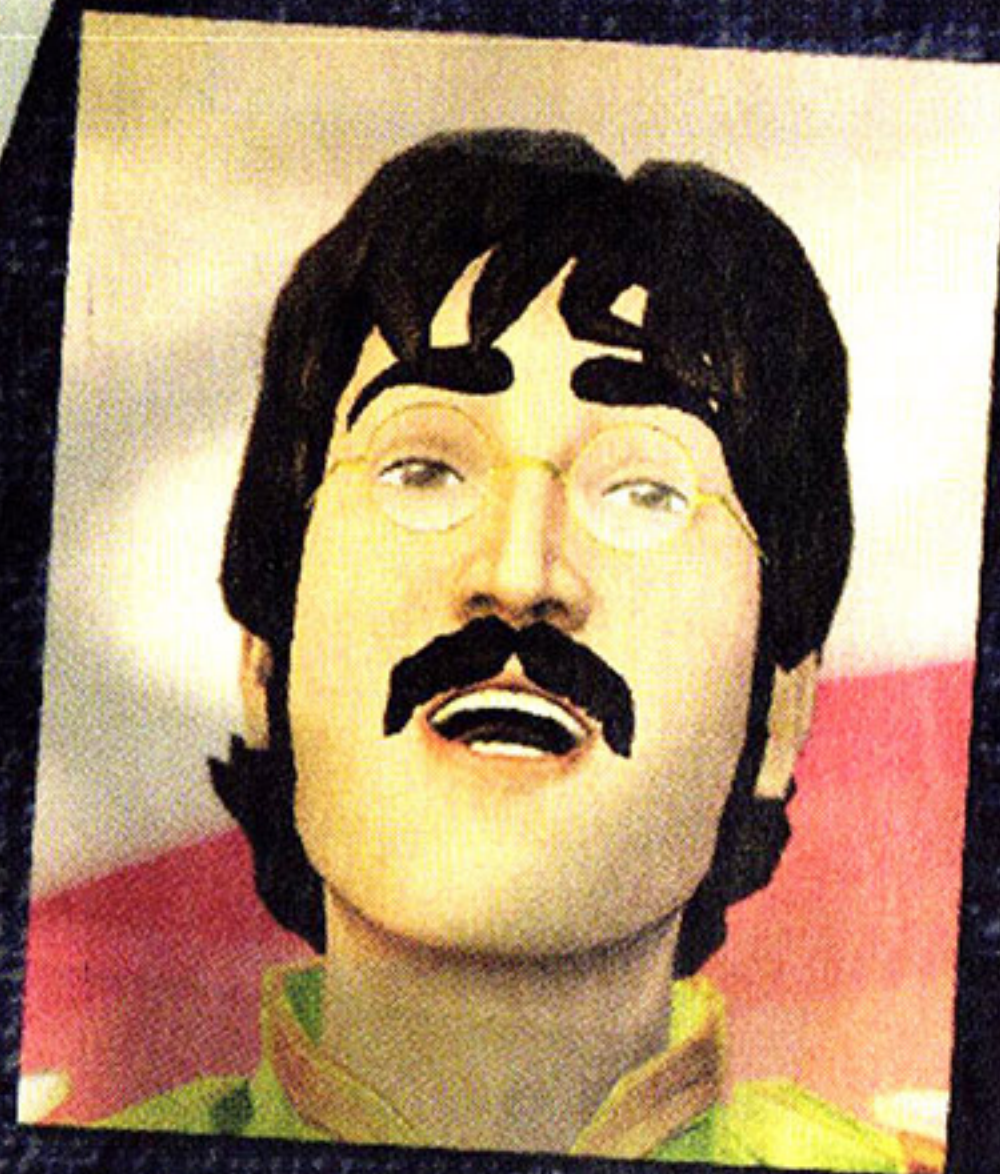
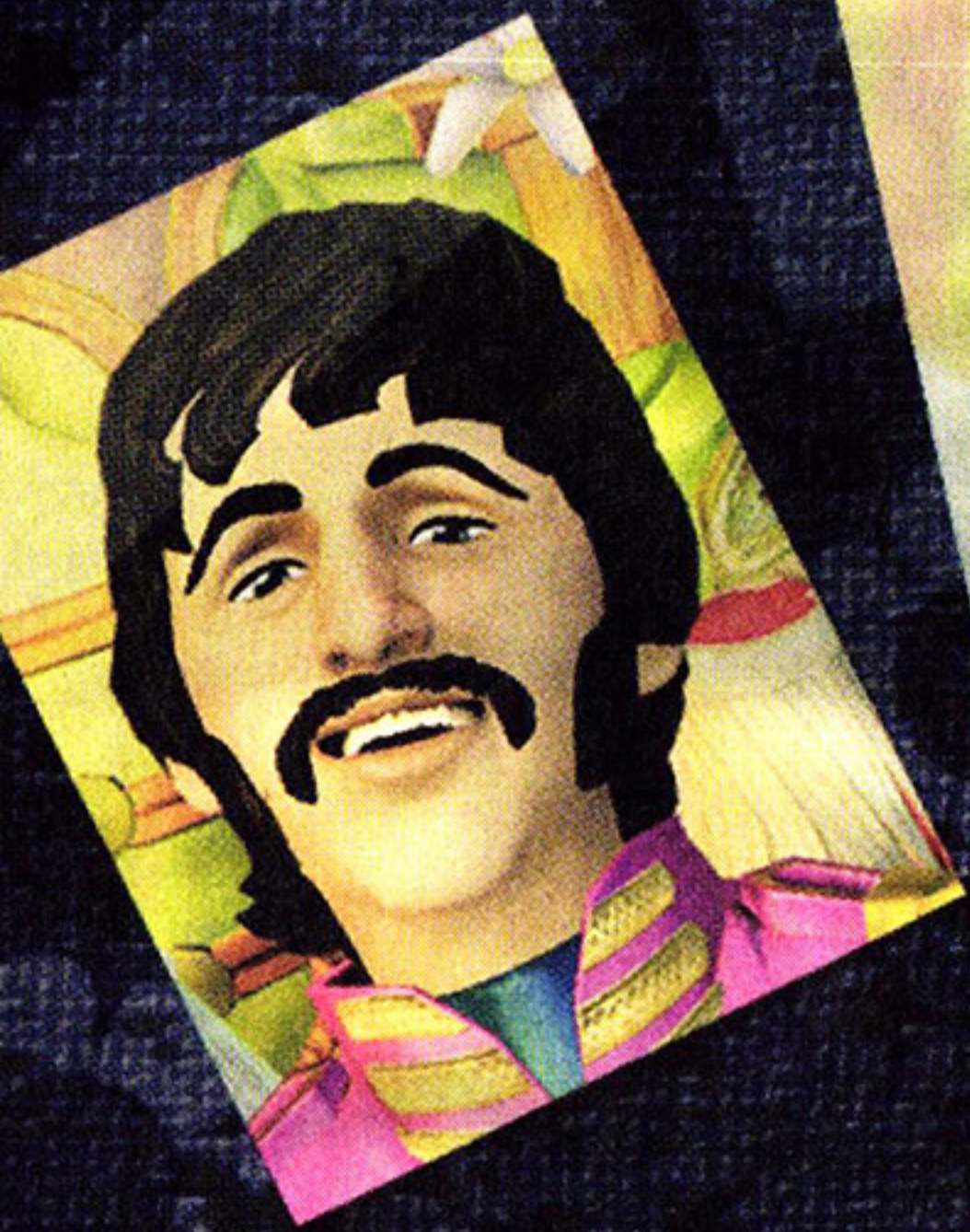
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Dead Space: Extraction – 09/29

september

For more information on these games and others go to www.gameinformer.com



I'm backstage at Microsoft's E3 Press Briefing, adrift in chaos. Contingents from USA Today, Entertainment Tonight, and The New York Times wander about my periphery. A sunglasses-clad Hollywood photographer with long, curly blond hair and immaculately clean cowboy boots is bustling about with lights and white backdrops. Serious men in black suits have their arms crossed behind their backs, staring off into the distance until I try to pass, when they halt me and meticulously check my press credentials. The bustle starts to die down as the cars begin to pull up. Without appearing to do so purposefully, individuals have angled their conversations towards the entry, trying to catch a glance. The Beatles are about to arrive.



THE BEATLES ROCKBAND

Around The World With The Fab Four

BY MATT MILLER



UNLIMITED ENABLED

- PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii
- > **STYLE** 1 TO 6-PLAYER MUSIC (6-PLAYER ONLINE)
- > **PUBLISHER** MTV GAMES/ELECTRONIC ARTS
- > **DEVELOPER** HARMONIX
- > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 9

From Los Angeles...

1

I'm not entirely sure how I came to this point, waiting to sit down and converse with the likes of Paul McCartney and Yoko Ono. It likely started with my dawning fascination with Harmonix almost a decade earlier, when I fell in love with *Frequency* and *Amplitude*, two of the first titles produced by the company. Several years later, the well-trod story of their meteoric rise to game phenoms began with *Guitar Hero*. By then, I was far from the only one fascinated with scrolling notes. Even after its departure from the *Guitar Hero* franchise, Harmonix found huge success with the *Rock Band* games, selling over 13 million copies since 2007, not to mention 50 million paid downloaded songs.

Among those many millions of gamers who fell in love with the new genre, one was in a unique position to bring Harmonix and the Beatles together. Dhani Harrison, son of Beatles guitarist George Harrison, was the first link in the chain that would result in the game's creation. Alex Rigopulos, co-founder of Harmonix, explains that *The Beatles: Rock Band* had its birth even before the original *Rock Band* had ever released.

"Van Toffler is the president of the MTV music group, and is a family friend of the Harrisons, Olivia and Dhani," he tells me. "Somehow or another they were on the same Caribbean island over the holidays two and a half years ago, during 2006. They were having dinner together and Dhani started talking to Van about *Guitar Hero*, and how much he loved it. Van was like, 'Oh, we just

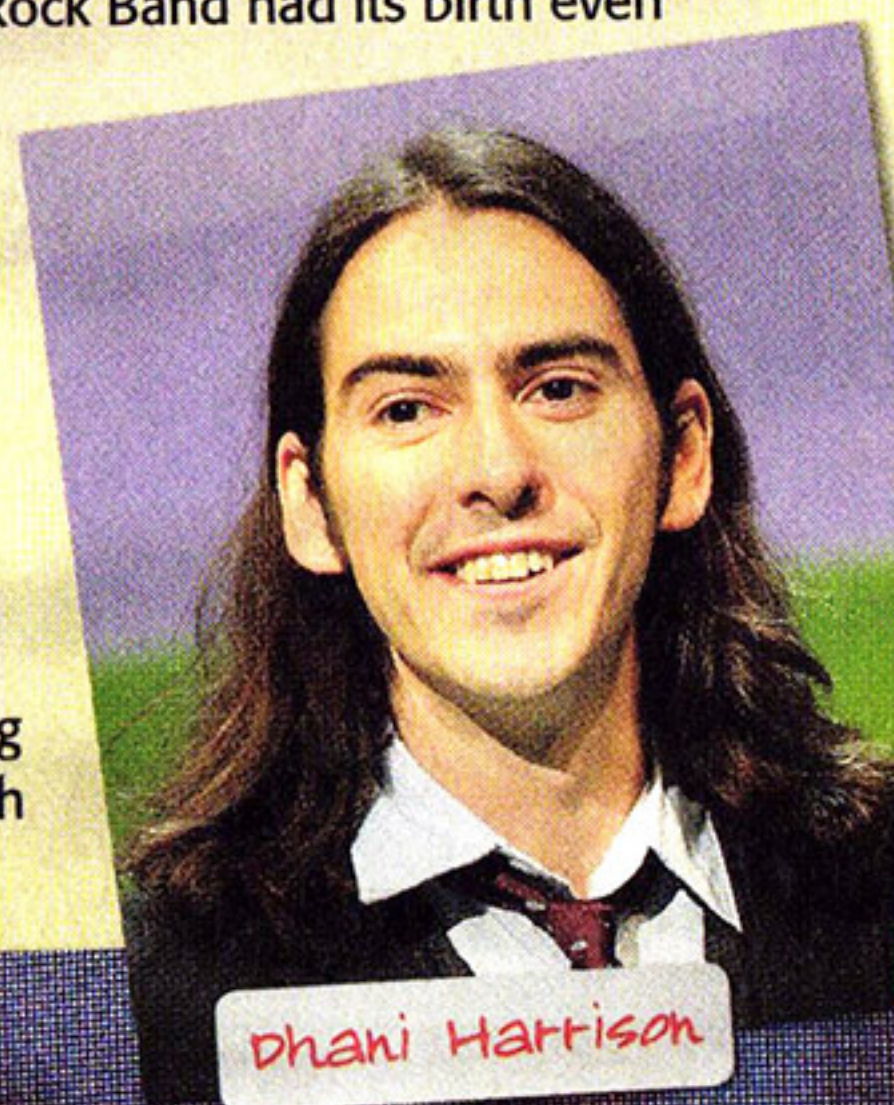
bought the company that made *Guitar Hero*,' and Dhani's response was 'Really? Well, the next thing they have to do is add all the instruments and they should call it *Rock Band*.'"

Rigopulos pauses to smile then continues. "We hadn't announced the game at that point, but of course we were building that game and so Van's response was, 'I think you should talk to Alex.' Van introduced Dhani and me, and we started getting to know each other as friends. After a little while we were doing some brainstorming and the idea bubbled up. Wouldn't it be unbelievable to do a game based on the Beatles' music?"

Unbeknownst to the countless fans clamoring for Harmonix to put the Beatles into its games, the idea quietly crept forward for years. "Business conversations didn't start until we had been talking about the creative concept for about a year, because if we couldn't come to a common creative vision that we all felt good about, the business conversations were pointless," Rigopulos explains. "The Beatles felt very strongly that, 'if we're going to do a

game at all, it has to be a game that covers the entire span of our catalogue, it can't just be about the later stuff.' The problem, of course, is that their early material predated multi-track techniques."

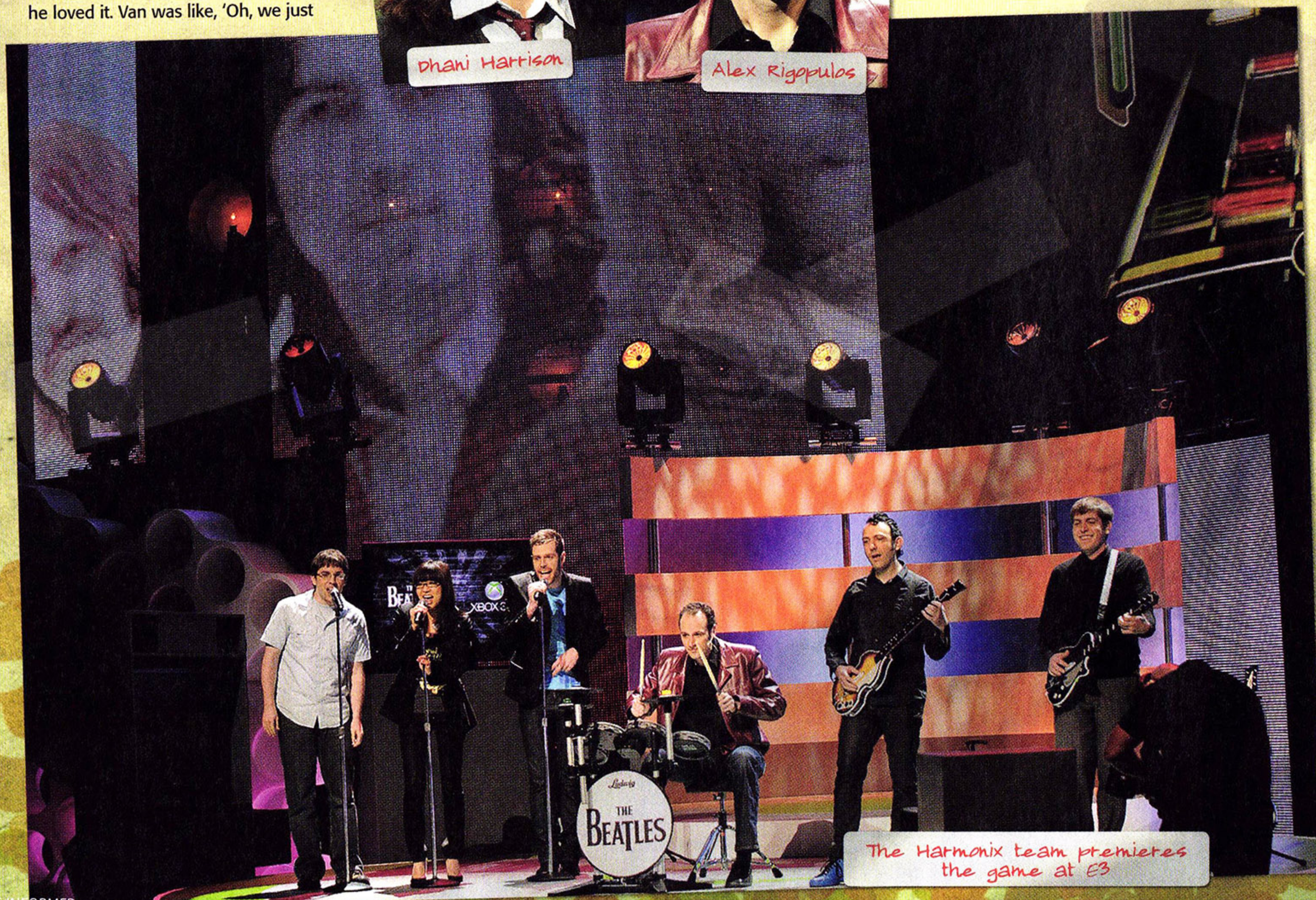
Unless a solution to the technical hurdle could be found, the meeting point between the Beatles' music and the gaming world would halt before it began.



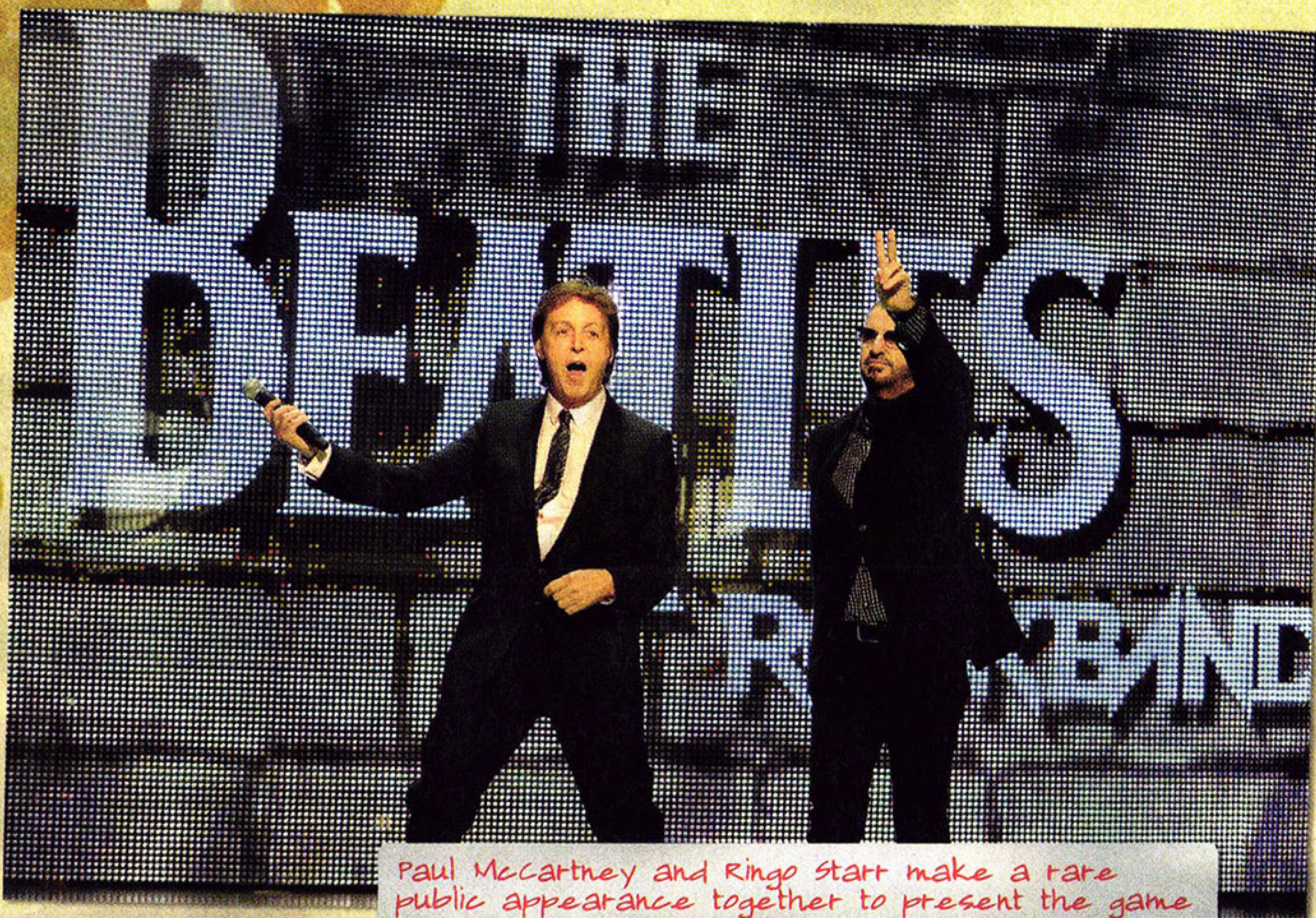
Dhani Harrison



Alex Rigopulos



The Harmonix team premieres the game at E3



Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr make a rare public appearance together to present the game



ive minutes before the Microsoft press conference begins, an absurdly expensive blue sports car pulls up to the backstage loading docks, and out steps Paul McCartney. From out of sight, on the street beyond, someone shouts: "We love you, Sir Paul!" He gives a practiced wave, acknowledging but nonchalant, and then strides in to prepare for his onstage appearance.

Twenty minutes later, I'm sitting in a gussied up trailer stocked with gourmet pastries and drinks. McCartney has finished playing his part in the game announcement on the big stage, and he's ushered up into the trailer to shake my hand and sit down on the sofa with me. He smiles and leans back on the cushions, disarmingly friendly and bursting with charisma. He may have done this sort of thing before.

"We're always kind of looking for ideas," McCartney tells me. "Post the actual Beatles career, what tends to happen is ideas just come in;

continued on next page

A HISTORY OF THE BEATLES (THROUGH THE GAME LENS)

The Beatles: Rock Band tells an accurate, if simplified, version of several major events in the band's history.

Players first join the Beatles at the Cavern Club, the small Liverpool venue that they played nearly 300 times in the early '60s. This also was the club where manager Brian Epstein first saw them and their soaring rise to popularity began.

The Ed Sullivan Show serves as the next major game location. In 1964, Sullivan introduced the Beatles to approximately 74 million American viewers, beginning their takeover of the U.S. music scene. In 1965, the Beatles played Shea Stadium, the first stadium rock show in history, hosting over 55,000 screaming fans, as depicted in the game complete with panicked teenage girls filling the stands.

The Beatles premiere in Japan is shown in the game through their controversial performances at the Budokan arena in central Tokyo; some Japanese protested that a Western band would defile the martial arts space. Those Budokan performances from the summer of 1966 are the last represented in the game before the band withdrew into their recordings at Abbey Road Studios.

The many songs recorded in the following years are exhibited through unusual dreamscapes in the world of the game, depicting the band on trippy journeys beneath the sea and through psychedelic fields of flowers and color. Finally, their last live performance together is documented in game, as they played on the rooftop of the Apple building in London. Within a year of that concert, the prolific career of the band effectively came to an end.



people say, 'Do you want to do a movie? Do you want to do a show in Vegas?' So we sift those ideas as they come to us. I believe this came to us via Dhani Harrison, who's a gamer and he's of the generation. So he came up and asked, 'Would you like to do a video game?' And I was like, 'Yeah, how would that work? Talk to me.' He's like, 'you can do this; we'll call people who can do it, Harmonix and the Rock Band people.'"

I know it's not that simple. The Beatles' music has never been just another license, given the complex interplay of rights holders that control its distribution. But, for McCartney's part in the process, he was impressed with Harmonix's initial ideas – at least enough to keep the project alive in those early stages.

"They [Harmonix] demonstrated the idea to us, and showed us some of their other stuff and said, 'this is what it's about.' I guess they sold us the idea and it just seemed so attractive," McCartney says. "They said, 'it'd be you guys, and what we want to do is go back to the Cavern and then there would be the psychedelic period, and the Shea Stadium period.' They told a good story."

From there, it was a matter of continuous feedback from the band. MTV and Harmonix scheduled regular sessions to share the game with the surviving band members and the wives of Harrison and Lennon and get their opinions. "I'd say things like, 'Ringo doesn't drum like that.' That was really all the input we could give, having been there, having made the original records," McCartney says. Those sessions evolved over the life of the game's creation, until McCartney and Starr were going to pains to correct long held misconceptions in the Beatles legend.

"If you get certain bonus points, you get information. You get interesting anecdotes. One of my roles, and Ringo's roles, was to check those. I was letting them



CONVERSATIONS WITH YOKO ONO AND OLIVIA HARRISON

Yoko Ono

What's your perspective on video games?

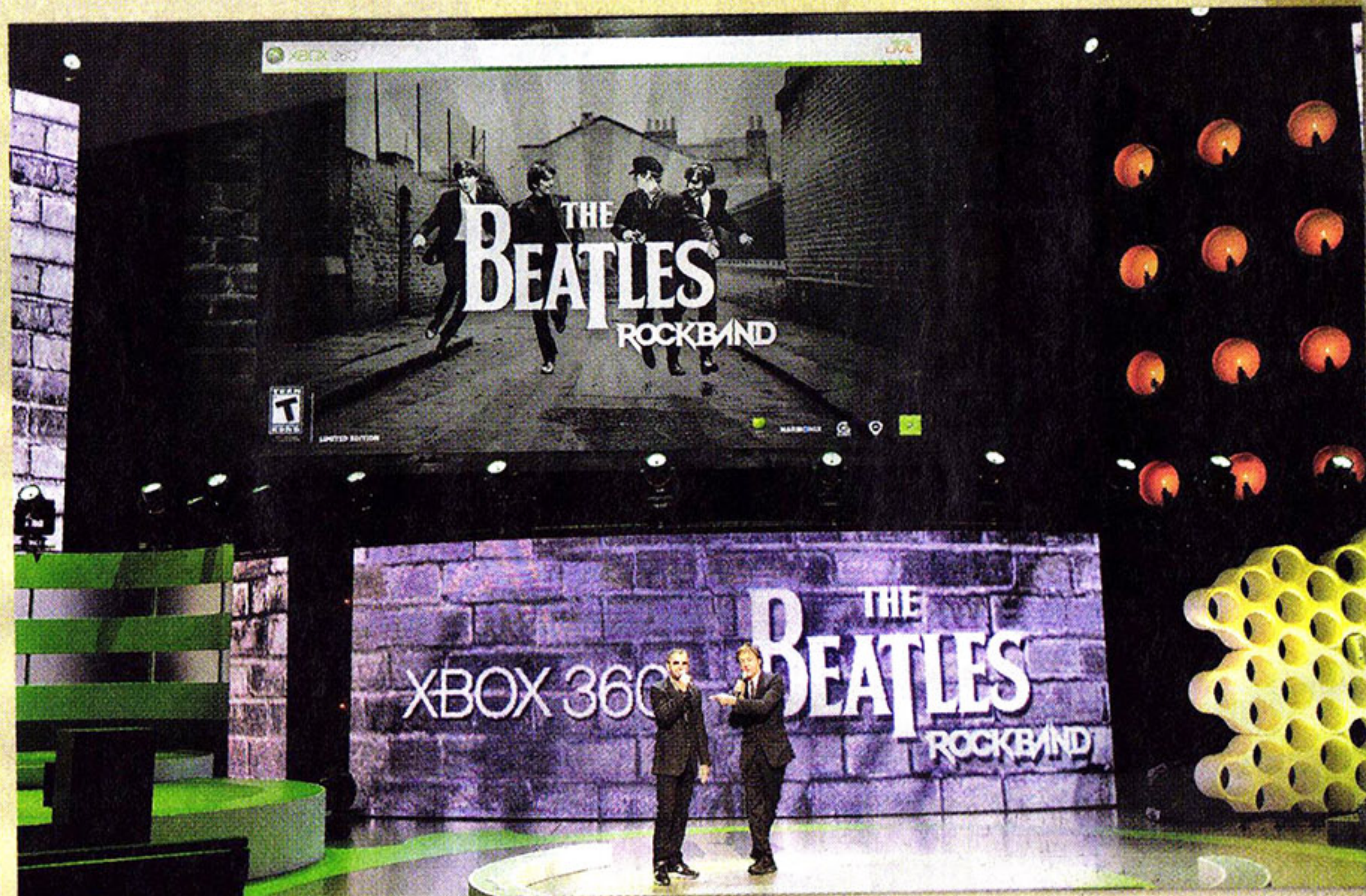
I am amazed that this is such an incredible revolution – I was going to say quiet revolution, but it's not that quiet, it's pretty noisy [laughs]. It's good, and I think it's going to change the world. I think, you know – especially for the young generation, and the generation who's still in the tummy, who hasn't come out yet – I think for them it's going to be just normal.

Within the gaming industry, there's been a lot of debate about whether video games can be considered an art form. Given your interest in the meeting point between artistic mediums, I thought you could bring an interesting perspective to that question.

Well, I think it is definitely an art form, but also – like all art forms now, it's going toward a very violent direction, you know? So this venture, doing it with the Beatles, is really beautiful, because it's not that direction at all; it's to just enjoy music, and to learn about music.

Given its connection with video games, what is your take is on the digital downloading of music?

[Laughs] Oh, okay; that's a delicate question, isn't it? So, eventually it's going to be like you can see films for free, you can read books for free, and then people who start thinking, "Well, I don't want to be in the entertainment business," or something. But the entertainment business is very important, and what they do – they don't do it just like a whip of a wind or



flash by in one demo, and I said, 'Whoa, wait a minute, if this is going out then it's like the new bible.' If these go out and we've endorsed it, these better be right. Certain little anecdotes that had become fan mythology, but in actuality aren't right. Those are bound in Beatles legends. So you've got to put a few of those right. We took the time and they [Harmonix] were very keen to do that."

With the help of Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Yoko Ono, and Olivia and Dhani Harrison, the project was well on track creatively and historically. But the technical hurdle remained. To represent the Beatles' history, a new method was required to split out and separate those tracks. To do that, Harmonix headed to Abbey Road Studios, where the Beatles first recorded their era-defining songs.

continued on page 44



Olivia Harrison

What guidelines do you use to make licensing decisions for your husband's work?

They're pretty well defined. George had them pretty well defined in his mind. He, like the others, never really wanted their music to be licensed for anything that was negative, or just gratuitous licensing.

Your son Dhani was involved in getting the game started in the first place. Has he continued working on the project throughout its creation?

Yeah, he did the motion capture for George, for instance. He tested every milestone, like every new build he would go through it. He would say, 'I was up until three o'clock in the morning playing Rock Band!' But not playing, really seeing how it worked.

What do you think of George's visual representation in the game?

I found it very difficult to see a sort of characterization of him. I think it's the right mix. You don't want to go over the line and make it like - what do you call it when they do like in *Polar Express*, or something like *Tomb Raider* - where it's almost like a human but it's an animated human. It's almost like, should it be

a person or should it be a complete cartoon? I think it's a really good balance in the way they're represented. Some of the songs to me are better than others in the way they look - I mean, not better, but some of them to me appear more like him than others.

What do you hope people would take from the experience of playing this game?

I just hope they would be uplifted by the music, enjoy the music, and that's it, really. Rather than sitting for an hour playing a game that's going into darkness. I think that's what I love about this game and that's why I know George would be okay with it, because it's nothing but uplifting. If there's some contribution to be made to the game world I'm glad that we could do that.



THE SONG LIST

The Beatles: Rock Band pulls musical content from throughout the band's 10 year career. Here is the full list of the on-disc selection of tracks, with the exception of one little surprise to save for your inevitable playthrough. Extensive DLC is expected for the title, beginning with the Xbox 360-exclusive "All You Need Is Love" on launch day (9/9/09), and the rest of the Abbey Road album in the weeks after release.

Singles

I Want To Hold Your Hand
I Feel Fine
Day Tripper
Paperback Writer
Revolution
Don't Let Me Down

Please Please Me, 1963

I Saw Her Standing There
Boys
Do You Want To Know A Secret
Twist and Shout

With the Beatles, 1963

I Wanna Be Your Man

A Hard Day's Night, 1964

A Hard Day's Night
Can't Buy Me Love

Beatles For Sale, 1964

Eight Days A Week

Help!, 1965

Ticket To Ride

Rubber Soul, 1965

Drive My Car
I'm Looking Through You
If I Needed Someone

Revolver, 1966

Taxman
Yellow Submarine
And Your Bird Can Sing

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, 1967

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band/With A Little Help From My Friends

Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds

Getting Better
Good Morning Good Morning

Magical Mystery Tour, 1967

I Am The Walrus
Hello Goodbye

The Beatles (White Album), 1968

Dear Prudence
Back In The U.S.S.R.
While My Guitar Gently Weeps

Birthday
Helter Skelter

Yellow Submarine, 1969

Hey Bulldog

Abbey Road, 1969

Come Together
Something
Octopus's Garden
I Want You (She's So Heavy)

Here Comes The Sun

Let It Be, 1970

Dig A Pony
I Me Mine
I've Got A Feeling
Get Back

Love, 2006

Within You Without You/Tomorrow Never Knows



Apple
Corps



...To London

Several weeks after my conversation with McCartney, many tedious hours of flying bring me to London, England. The oversized red cab pulls up to Abbey Road Studios as a gaggle of school-girls giggle their way through the famous crossing depicted in the Beatles album cover. I pay my driver, and ask him if he drops a lot of people here, even after all these years. He smirks and nods, then drives off. The front wall of the studio is plastered with graffiti – an indulgence the civic authorities seem to tolerate without complaint, so thousands of Beatles fans flock here to leave their messages and names. I step past the gate and head inside to meet the architects of the music in *The Beatles: Rock Band*.

Giles Martin is the son of George Martin, the producer behind nearly all the recorded tracks in the Beatles' massive library of studio sessions. When Harmonix looked for someone to handle the extensive work necessary for preparing the old Beatles tracks for use in its music game, Giles Martin was the obvious choice. A Grammy winner and music producer of great renown, the younger Martin was central in the production of Cirque de Soleil's *Love*, a recombination of Beatles music to go with the acclaimed theater troupe's Las Vegas show. *The Beatles: Rock Band* offered a new challenge to Martin based in the same familiar musical tapestry.

"I've always had personal history with the Beatles because my father signed them and recorded them. It's funny because they broke up when I was born. So everyone said I was the reason," Martin jokes. "I didn't really have that much to do with them at all. I grew up in a time in the seventies when my dad was desperately trying to get away from the Beatles. So I was kind of kept away from it. I liked them, but the funny thing is I didn't listen to the *White Album* until I was about 18. I wasn't really that aware; I was into other music. Then my dad started losing his hearing. I started getting involved in the studio scene because of that. I was becoming his ears to a certain extent."

Along with engineer Paul Hicks, Martin grew increasingly intertwined with the Beatles' music throughout the *Anthology* project in the '90s, the



The front stairs of the famous Abbey Road Studios

Cirque de Soleil show a few years ago, and on to *The Beatles: Rock Band*. Martin and Hicks became the chief liaisons between the Beatles and Abbey Road throughout their interactions with Harmonix, heading up the complex process of pulling songs off the old master track tapes.

"They gave me a copy of *Rock Band* so I started playing it and I loved it," Martin says. "But there are certain things in *Rock Band* that couldn't apply to this game – certain templates. Like you can't start off as a little band playing in little venues, and then get a van and start playing bigger and bigger venues and become the biggest band in the world. The Beatles did play little venues and they were in a van, but they became the biggest band in the world pretty quickly, and they played their biggest gig in 1965, and then stopped touring completely. As soon as you get to that point, you go, 'Wait a second, what are we going to do now?' You've stopped touring, that's the end of the game."

The solution lay in a change from the norm for Harmonix – a welcome transition to the talented artists who fill the development studio. The

latter half of the game would be populated with psychedelic dreamscapes – interpretive visions of the music and lyrics found in many of the Beatles' latter-era music. But that still left the core problem of separating the music into four distinct parts, when the original analog recordings were designed for nothing of the sort.

"The early stuff is two-track, so they were really just the vocals on one side, and drums, bass, and guitar on the other," Martin explains. "So a lot of filtering and a lot of work had to go into that. Each one would take about three days to do. But it was worth doing because it was important for us."

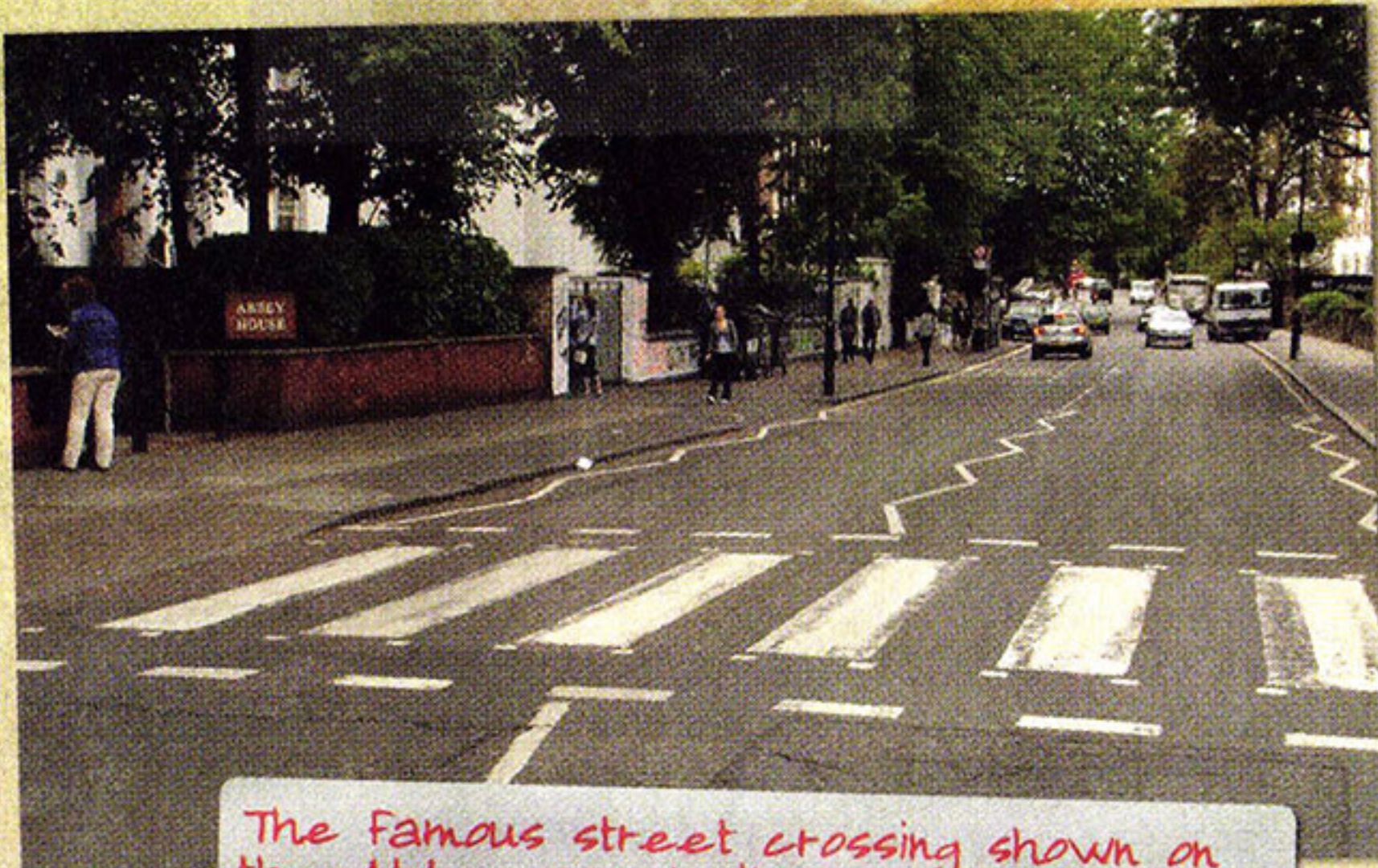
As it turns out, the technical hurdle of conquering those old master tracks wasn't overcome by some single fancy production trick. Rather, it was through meticulous work by engineers like Paul Hicks and the other Abbey Road professionals. Where bass and drums are on the same track, they've gone through and carefully pulled out the fundamental sounds of a particular instrument with complex waveform filters. Martin and Hicks play me an example – the rhythmic bass line from "Day



Paul Hicks and Giles Martin illustrate some of the tools used to prepare the Beatles music for use in the game



From left to right: Paul Hicks, Giles Martin, Josh Randall, Matt Miller



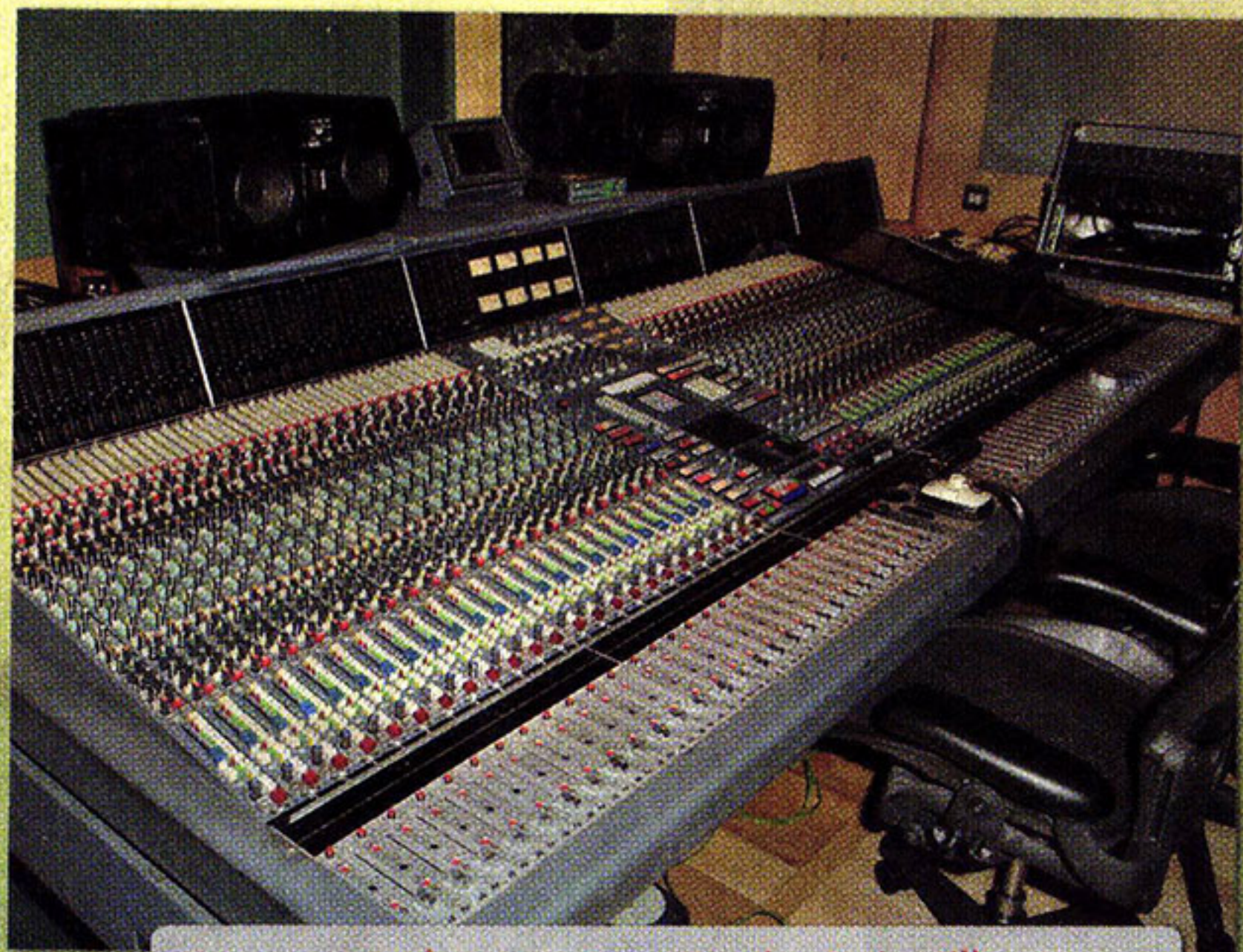
The famous street crossing shown on the Abbey Road album cover is still frequented by visitors on a daily basis

Tripper." The track sounds almost ghostlike – hardly the full-bodied sound from McCartney's original recording. But that ephemeral track is what makes you hear the bass in the wider recording. Add it to the whole, and the song sounds complete.

From there, it became a matter of doing new mixes of all the classic Beatles tunes. For the game, the starting point isn't the new remastered recordings that release this September. Instead, the game's tracks are pulled from the original master recordings. Once stripped to their separated components, Martin and Hicks worked one by one to build them back up to match closely with the quality and tone of the original mixes.

With the technical barrier crossed, Martin focused his attention on adding the touches that could only come with access to the original master tracks. Among the most compelling, especially for fans, are the new snippets of dialogue, instrument tunings, and studio chatter that Martin found in the spaces between takes. Menus and loading screens are now populated with those recordings, giving a glimpse into the Beatles' experiences as they recorded their music.

"I've been really lucky to have been exposed to these master tracks and to go and listen to these recordings," Martin says. "I want to have people have that same experience as I did. You realize it's not this historical thing – it's just four guys in their twenties making great music. It's as simple as that."



The control room for Studio 2 is filled with state-of-the-art recording tools, but much of the original equipment used to record the Beatles is also still utilized at Abbey Road Studios

CHANGING THE FORMULA

Fans, rest at ease – The Beatles: Rock Band keeps the falling highway of notes intact. The experience should feel familiar to anyone who has played a Rock Band or Guitar Hero game in the last four years.

That's not to say the game is simply a re-skinned version of Rock Band 2. The game's progression has been retooled, and several other major changes help the game stand alone. Creative director Josh Randall explains.

"The whole band world tour concept from Rock Band didn't really make sense for these guys, and we wanted to give players a journey through the career of The Beatles. Story Mode allows you to do that," Randall says. "You play in chronological order, from their humble beginnings all the way to their rooftop concert."

This story progression includes a brand new unlock mechanic; strong performances reveal photos and memorabilia from Beatles history, often of a variety rarely or never before seen by the public. "We sat in the archives of Apple Corps [the Beatles headquarters] for maybe three days, with just these huge stacks of books and these little magnifying glasses, just being like, 'Oh my god, this is amazing, check this out!'" Randall tells me.



Once you dive into the songs, the biggest addition is the new vocal harmonization. "We realized they just had these really beautiful, lush harmonies in a lot of their songs," Randall explains. "We would have these Rock Band parties on Friday nights – go down to the bar and then come back up and play – but there'd be like 12 people in the room – only four people playing, but then you'd look around and everyone else would be singing along. We were like, 'How do we get these other people involved? We have to figure out how to do vocal harmonies.' And so that became one of the bigger gameplay features that we worked on. That was really hard. We had a dedicated team that would meet every single morning, review the progress, play, and get feedback for months."

To nail the harmonies, players need to take advantage of the new vocal trainer feature. "You can basically hear a guide tone that teaches you which harmony pitch you should be singing," Randall says. "If you want to hear a high harmony, you can hold down a button and you'll hear a sort of flute sound that is following the same pitch. If you want to hear the low harmony, you can hit another button. You can go in and practice singing these harmonies, so you can actually train your ear to figure out how to do it, and then get back into the game and try to pull it off."

Many of the other changes adjust small elements of the interface and gameplay components. The freeform drum fill sections are gone, replaced by a single tap on the green pad to trigger "Beatlemania." The guitar whammy bar can still build energy on the long notes, but you won't hear it warble the song's audio, since that wasn't really an element of most Beatles music. Lefty flip and No Fail mode have been added to the front-end menu, making movement in and out of those features a much easier task.



T

Two days after my interview with Giles Martin, a spot opens up in the busy schedule at the still very active Studio 2 at Abbey Road – the recording space used for the majority of the Beatles' recordings. We've asked for something impossible in the vain hope it might happen, and the fates have smiled. I'm going to go play *The Beatles: Rock Band* in Studio 2.

As I arrive in the morning, the London Symphony Orchestra is filtering back into a film score recording session in Studio 1. Across the hall, I step into Studio 2, which looks remarkably unchanged from old photos of the famous acoustic space. Hot lights brighten the room, illuminating the smooth wooden floor and the strange white stairway, which climbs to the second story control room. Some of the fine folks from Harmonix and MTV Games join me, and we gather around a TV in the center of the studio and start to play – belting out the same songs that were put to tape in this very spot some forty years earlier.

Two hours pass as we enjoy our good fortune. We rock our way through "Helter Skelter," and try our best to nail the "Day Tripper" harmonies. I smile at the Harmonix team as we tackle the strange twisted dreamscape of "I Am the

Walrus." The most surreal moment emerges after we put down our instruments to take some extra photos, and leave the menu up onscreen. From the speakers, the background chatter of John Lennon and Paul McCartney trickles out – some forgotten and barely audible piece of audio captured in unrehearsed moments between recordings. It reminds me of something McCartney said in the final minutes of my interview weeks earlier, as he spoke about his perspective on new technology and its effect on the Beatles' music.

"A few years ago I went to a museum and saw Winston Churchill's papers from his Prime Minister-ship of England during the war, and they were getting older, and browner, and crinklier," McCartney had said. "Then I went pretty soon after to a Beatles session, and our songs were getting cleaner, shinier, and I was in the room with John; it felt like the session. Whereas we had always been in speakers on the wall, now it was like I was actually in the room again with John. Of course that was magical for me, because he'd passed years before. Whereas Winston's papers are crinkling, we're getting better and better. It's uncanny. We should be fading and getting crinkly. I love it." ■■■■



Team members from Harmonix and MTV Games join Miller to play the game in Abbey Road's world famous Studio 2



The unique structure of studio 2 has been maintained over the years; a long stairway climbs from the studio floor to the control room on the next level





Harmonix's Kat Burke, Josh Randall, and Eric Pope join MTV Games' Jeff Castaneda and Game Informer's Matt Miller on the front stoop at Abbey Road Studios

IT'S GETTING BETTER

ALL THE TIME

Haven't had enough? Our extensive and unedited interviews with the minds behind *The Beatles: Rock Band* are available for perusal in this month's online Unlimited section. Read more about Yoko Ono and Olivia Harrison's unique perspectives on their husbands' work. Get Paul McCartney's take on the new remastered CDs, and whether *The Beatles'* music will ever come to digital download. Learn more from Harmonix CEO Alex Rigopulos and MTV's Paul DeGooyer about how the game came to be. Also, dive into more details on the game itself, and check out our conversations with Abbey Road's Giles Martin and creative director Josh Randall. Curious about whether the game is for you? Turn to our exclusive review on page 80 of this issue.



The wall in front of Abbey Road Studios is filled with signatures and notes from Beatles fans that make pilgrimages from all over the world





BRUTAL LEGEND

*Double Fine cranks it up
as it races towards the finish line*

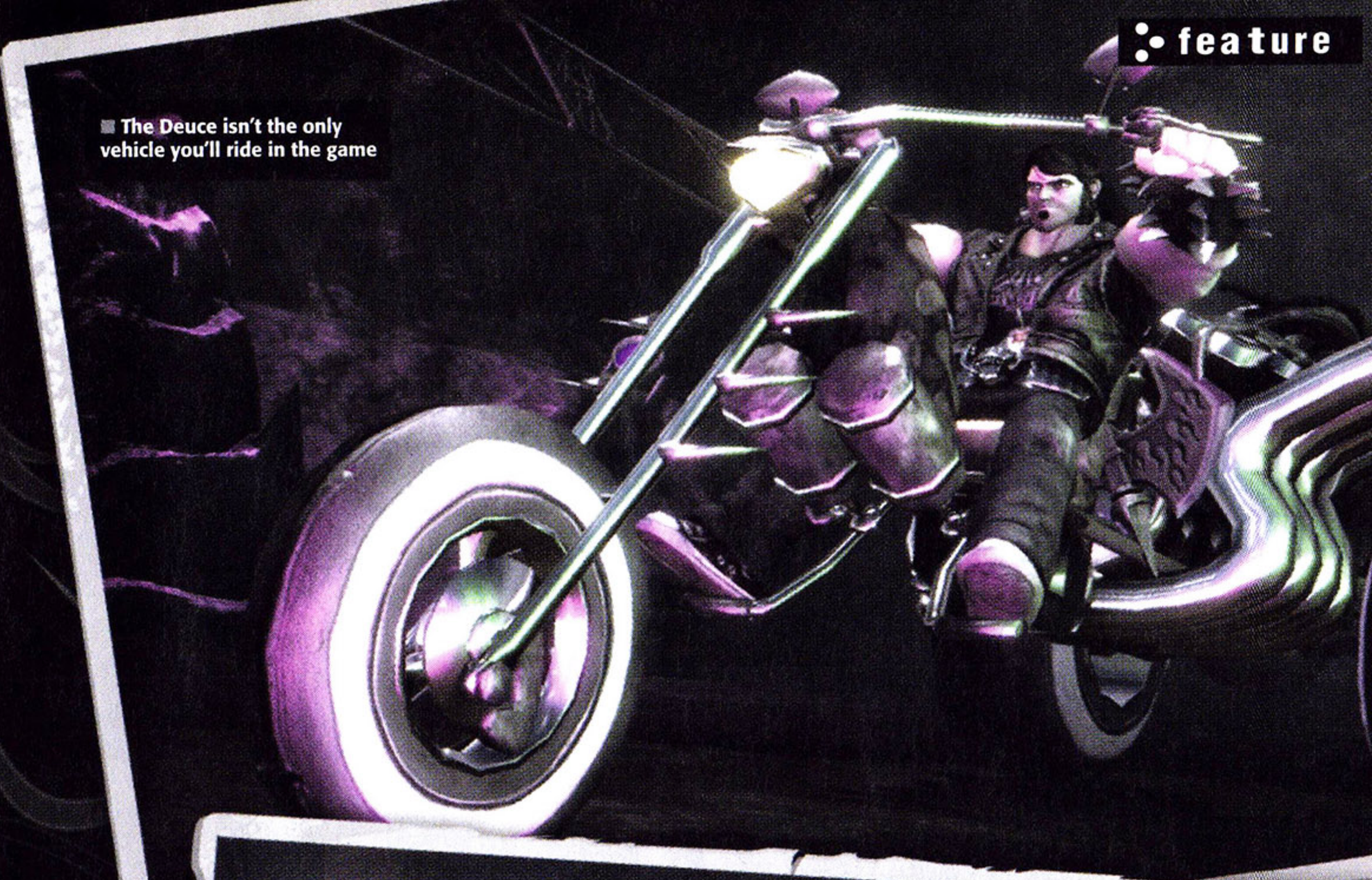
■ The Deuce isn't the only vehicle you'll ride in the game

Freewheel Burning

Brütal Legend has traveled a rocky road to rock stardom. The wheels briefly fell off creator Tim Schafer's tour bus when Vivendi unexpectedly merged with Activision, leaving the game in limbo. When the multibillion-dollar deal was confirmed, after much deliberation Activision dropped several Vivendi titles from the new company's roster, including Brütal Legend. Like any good crew of rock 'n' roll rebels, developer Double Fine dusted itself off and shopped the game to other publishers. Thankfully, it ended up in the capable hands of EA Partners, the division of the publishing giant that had already found world-beating musical success with MTV and Harmonix's Rock Band series. However, like a spurned baby mama, in June Activision reentered the picture with a lawsuit, contesting that the company "still has a valid contract to release the game," and were therefore owed payments from EA before the game could be published. Frankly, it's enough for a pretty kick-ass episode of VH1's *Behind the Music*.

So far none of the slings and arrows have been powerful enough to hold back the metal. At press time, EA assures us the game is on target to hit its announced "Rocktober" 13 release date. As proof, we recently sat down with the first "content complete" alpha build of the game for some exclusive hands-on gameplay.

>>



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
 > **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (8-PLAYER ONLINE)
 > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
 > **DEVELOPER** DOUBLE FINE
 > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 13



Into the Arena

We've already taken you through some of the early parts of the game [see issue 194], but here's a quick recap. You are Eddie Riggs, the world's greatest roadie who's stuck working for a crappy nü-metal band. In the midst of a stage setup, Riggs gets blood on his rad, Mötörhead-style belt buckle. As it happens, this belt buckle is actually the Earthly manifestation of the fire god Ormagöden and functions as a portal to another dimension. Got it? Well...yeah, honestly it doesn't really matter that much. What's important is that Eddie gets transported to this new world – one that draws much of its visual inspiration from the album artwork of such legendary metal artists as Dio and Iron Maiden – and begins a grand rock 'n' roll adventure.

The demon emperor Doviculus rules this realm, and controls the masses of enslaved headbangers by the hand of his hair metal puppet General Lionwhyte (voiced by Judas Priest's Rob Halford in a highly inspired turn). In the rock tradition of defiance, a small band of revolutionaries holds out hope, led by Lars and Lita Halford. As soon as he lands in this strange place, Eddie becomes embroiled in this conflict by a chance meeting with Ophelia, a member of the resistance who is also our hero's love interest.

While the initial premise is right out of a clichéd concept album, during our playthrough Schafer drops some hints that all is not as it seems. While the resistance sees Eddie as the "chosen one," the local lore is unclear as to whether that chosen one would come to save or destroy the world. Ophelia herself seems to have some inner doubts about Eddie as well, based on something she learned from her own mysterious parents.

As always, Schafer's dialogue shines. The game is filled with nods to metal history, as when The Killmaster (the game's healer, voiced and based off legendary Mötörhead bassist Lemmy Kilmister) shouts Mötörhead's slogan "Everything louder than everything else" during a battle. Jack Black hits the role of Eddie out of the park – although *Brütal Legend* is so deep in his wheelhouse that it may as well be a fat hanging curve ball for the Tenacious D star. We were especially happy to see a brief cameo by his partner in crime Kyle Gass of Tenacious D, hilariously cast as a neurotic giant cannon

operator. Gamers will meet a couple of other high-profile stars through the story as well, most notably Ozzy Osbourne, who runs the Motor Forge, a fiery lair that serves as the hub where you can upgrade your character's stats, moves, and add weapons and engines to your hot rod, The Deuce. We were surprised to find that the famously incoherent Osbourne was actually easier to understand than his fellow U.K. rock icon Lemmy.

Show No Mercy

Once Eddie realizes that the headbangers slaving away in Lionwhyte's mines need only to be freed by the power of metal, he leads the resistance from its headquarters of Bladehenge to take on the stifling hair metal aristocracy.

The basics of melee combat are standard. Eddie has two main implements of destruction – the Separator (his axe) and Clementine (his Flying V guitar). The Separator handles a range of melee attacks that can be unlocked in the Motor Forge by spending Lighter Tributes (*Brütal Legend*'s in-game currency). Clementine casts magical spells, and serves as Eddie's ranged attack (trust us, in the larger battles you'll rely on her a lot). Again, she can be upgraded with new combos, spells, and even improved stats.

Many casual observers might be surprised to know that *Brütal Legend* doesn't actually focus solely on hack 'n' slash combat. Rather, there are a good number of combat sequences called "Stage Battles," large-scale troop warfare that falls somewhere between RTS and *Ozzfest*.

The stage battles begin after your crew of misfit rebels goes on tour (as an army called "Ironheade") in a giant tour bus driven by your trusty (if a bit addled) friend Magus. By this point in the game, Eddie's gang is a fully functioning wrecking crew with a number of different unit types. The headbangers are your meat-and-potatoes fodder; these loyal lunks are always necessary for a good fracas. The Razor Girls resemble extras from *Dazed and Confused*, favoring feathered hair, three-quarter length concert t-shirts, and flares. These rock chicks focus on ranged attacks, shooting at enemies with guns ripped from the guts of some



■ Eddie's axe and guitar can create some explosive combos





■ In addition to the Deuce, you can also ride some of the animals in the world



■ General Lionwhite is hilariously voiced by Judas Priest's Rob Halford

strange metal boars that roam the countryside. In addition to aforementioned Killmaster (whose three-wheeled motorcycle allows you to heal your troops), the last new unit we saw is the Roadie. These journeymen of rock are the closest to Eddie's heart, and have some unique abilities. Since roadies stick to the shadows and never steal the spotlight, they are actually invisible to enemies, even as they creep along with giant amps on their backs. Even better, they have a very powerful co-op move when teamed with Eddie that emits an earsplitting sonic attack. Co-op attacks with any unit can be performed by running up to that unit and hitting the Y or triangle button.

The battles unfold much like setting up for a concert – give or take tons of blood and destruction. First, your crew builds a giant concert stage that serves as your base. From here you must gain control of nodes called “fan geysers.” These piles of rubble are being feasted on by giant worms that gain sustenance from the spirits of the fans contained within. By killing the worms, you can erect large merch booths on these sites, which feed fan spirit back to your stage. This is important because fans actually give you the ability to raise more units, thereby making defending your merch booths an important task.

The commands are fairly conventional, simple attack/defend/follow style inputs on the d-pad. You can also observe the battlefield from a much different perspective. You see, there's a little more to our hero Eddie. And by “a little more” we mean two gigantic demon wings that allow him to fly above the fray and issue commands to his rock soldiers on the ground. This also begs a few questions about Eddie's background and how he fits into the lore of the world, but sadly we did not get to see them answered.

Marching Out

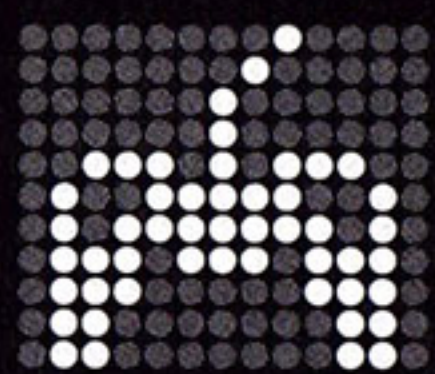
Based on our time with this latest build of *Brütal Legend*, a few things are clear. One, the game is very good at doing the things for which Tim Schafer is known. The characters are funny and sharply drawn. The dialogue is snappy and humorous – and all the more impactful for the exceptional facial animations in the cutscenes, which are created by ex-Pixar staffer Tasha Harris.

More importantly, it creates an inviting world. This place literally drips with rock iconography, from Mt. Rockmore (which you can customize with giant stone visages of Eddie and other characters from the game) to the Screaming Wall, a seaside cliff made entirely of amplifiers. As Eddie, Jack Black makes an ingratiating lead character, and Rob Halford surprises with a catty turn as the vain Lionwhyte. The setting, story, characters, and soundtrack all help to make a game that is uniquely single-minded in its devotion to all things metal.

However, this (admittedly early) alpha build was not without its problems. At times, the Stage Battles were chaotic and we often had trouble getting our units to do exactly what we wanted. It was frustrating, especially given how easy it was for Eddie to die if we engaged in hand-to-hand combat. For *Brütal Legend* to reach its considerably potential, there is some work to be done.

That said, EA has the resources, staff, and time to polish this game into a multi-platinum hit. If the kinks can be ironed out by October 13, we will receive a game that offers equal portions of charm and depth. And rock. Lots and lots of rock. ■ ■ ■





PREVIEWS

A Glimpse Into The Future Of Gaming



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Borderlands

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (4-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** GEARBOX SOFTWARE > **RELEASE** OCTOBER

SHOOT 'EM IN THE HEAD

■ Tougher enemy variants are designated 'Badass' and drop better loot

A lot's changed since we introduced Borderlands to the world nearly two years ago. After mutually deciding that the game needed more time, 2K Games and Gearbox Software postponed its release from 2008 to October 2009. That extra time enabled Gearbox to add more substantial changes than just a thicker layer of polish.

Comparisons between Borderlands and Fallout 3 are inevitable. Both feature post-apocalyptic worlds, roving gangs of raiders, and collectible bobbleheads. Aside from those surface elements, though, they clearly deliver unique experiences. Whereas Fallout 3 is an RPG with FPS elements, Borderlands is the mirror opposite. That becomes clear the moment you draw your weapon and blast your first enemy. "Everything is skill based as far as whether you hit or not," says Gearbox CEO and president Randy Pitchford.

"When you get a critical, that's because you shot someone in his head. How much damage you do and how much damage you take are based on the RPG system. Whether or not you hit is based on your skill as a shooter player."

We had the opportunity to test our skills in both the single and multiplayer modes. Combat was accurate and satisfying — when we missed it was because our aim was off, and not because we came up short on some hidden die roll. Those critical hits were key in most of the encounters, as we were frequently outnumbered by groups of bandits, mutants, and the dog-like Skags (those last guys would do the Umbrella Corp. proud; their heads occasionally split open, revealing their vulnerable squishy bits). In a nice touch, players who find themselves overwhelmed don't die instantly. Instead, prone players

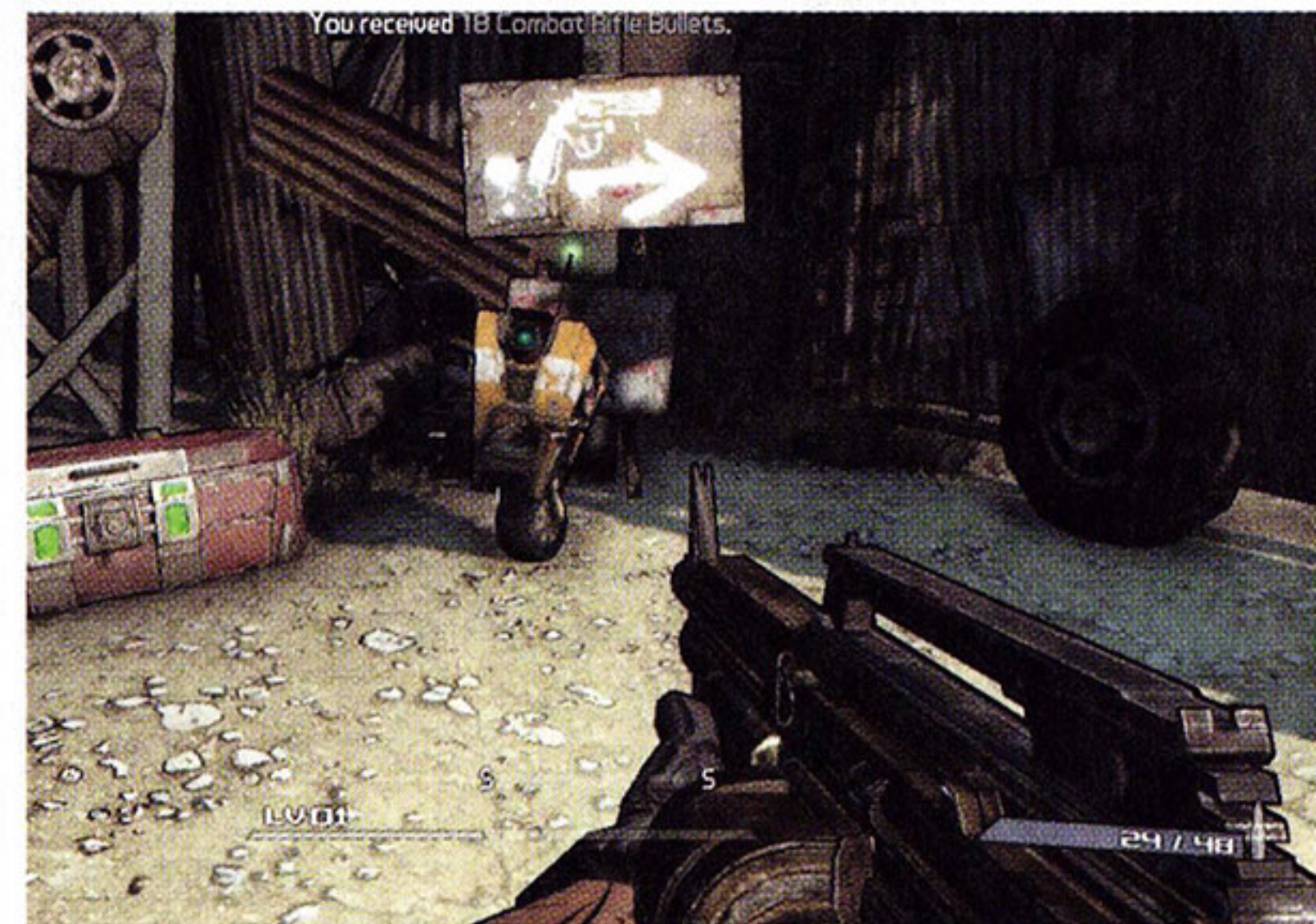
have a few precious seconds to take out enemies before expiring. Succeed, and the action continues with the character enjoying a second wind.

The four characters all fulfill standard MMO-style roles — mage, scout, tank, healer — though each can be customized by putting points into three unique skill trees. Players can tailor characters to fit their own unique playing style rather than getting crammed into a confined role. During one multiplayer session we chose Brick, and we played alongside another player's version of the character. Our Brick focused on dealing heavy melee damage while mitigating party damage. Our doppelgänger held back, dealing large amounts of damage from a safe distance.

Borderlands' weapons have also received a lot of coverage, and for good reason.

The randomly generated loot promises an unparalleled level of variety for the genre. We tested out loads of weapons, and the random nature of loot drops kept things exciting. Each drop potentially offers something amazing, from weapons that fire ridiculously fast to others that shoot unusual projectiles, such as darts in a shotgun spread. The game monitors the enemy levels in each area to ensure that dropped items are appropriate. Even if that means some dropped weapons are merely adequate, they're rarely underpowered.

It's great to see that Borderlands is shaping up to be worth the wait. The skill-based gameplay and co-op could attract players who love the setting, but have been holding out for more action. They'll have the chance to smoke some Skags themselves this October. ■ ■ ■





■ These guys are just begging to be sniped



■ Each of the game's four classes brings their own skills and abilities, through they all share a love for big guns



■ Whatever else has changed, C&C 4 still focuses on huge sci-fi armies blowing the hell out of each other

PC

Command & Conquer 4

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (10-PLAYER ONLINE) > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > DEVELOPER EALA > RELEASE 2010

PERSISTENCE IS THE NEW PINK

Watching good ideas spread across the industry is one of the joys of being a gamer. Electronic Arts is borrowing many of the better concepts that have surfaced over the last several years for this next installment of Command & Conquer. Chief among the changes is the overarching, Modern Warfare-like persistence across all areas of the game.

Everything you do in C&C 4 feeds into your experience pool. Every enemy you blow up, every mission goal you achieve, and every match you win gives you points to buy fancy new structures, upgrades, units, and powers. Given how well this works in Modern Warfare, its adaptation to real-time strategy is great news.

To support this system (and to keep the pirates at bay), EA is forcing all C&C 4 players to be connected to its servers via the Internet at all times. Even if you're playing single player, the game must phone home in order to run. Some gamers are understandably annoyed at EA over this decision. If Comcast does what Comcast always does and your DNS goes down, you can't play. If a storm knocks out your net access, you can't play. Some minor positives exist, such as the fact that your profile is stored server-side so that you can play from anywhere. Still, this has to be viewed as an inconvenience at best.

EA dodged the question when asked what happens in a few years when few people are playing C&C 4 any more, stating merely, "We plan to support C&C 4 for as long as there is a robust audience for it." With the publisher's history in this arena (see: Madden), that's scant comfort.

Copy protection questions aside, there is much to look forward to on the design side of C&C 4. All-in-one mobile bases called Crawlers replace traditional base construction, and

allow players to build or research whatever they like from one central location. EA touts this design as removing the focus on strict build orders at higher levels of play. Since Crawlers have combat capabilities as well, and different characteristics based on their owner's role, they can be used tactically. EA gave us an example of a Support player's aerial base flitting to wherever it was needed most on the fly, or an Offense player parking his Crawler outside an enemy base to pump out tanks directly to the frontline.

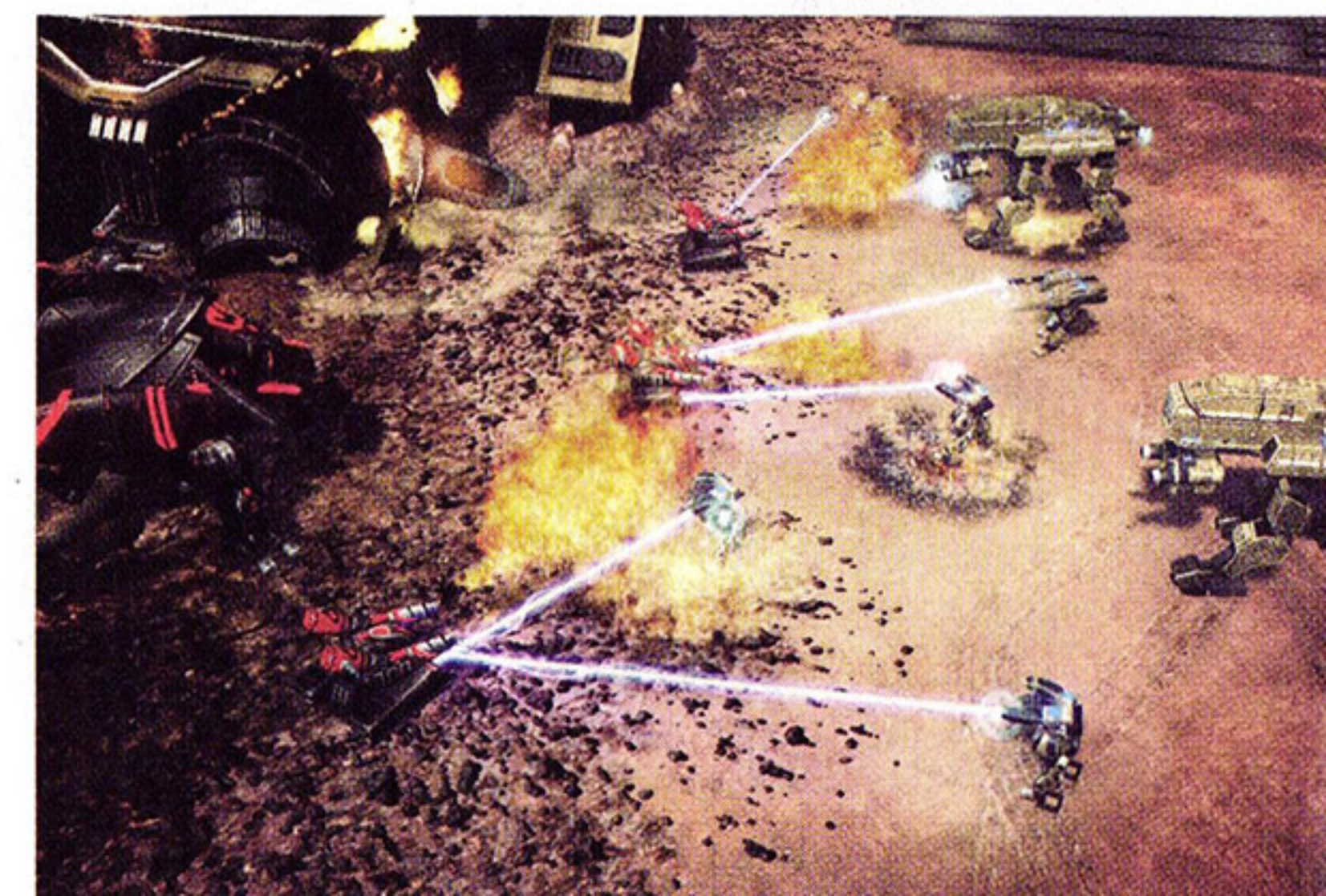
The Nod and GDI factions each have access to Offense, Defense, and Support roles. Each player chooses one at the beginning of a match, determining which units, upgrades, and powers he or she has access to. Don't think of it as a rock-paper-scissors arrangement, though. EA is moving away from Red Alert 2's hard counters and lightning-quick combat and focusing on soft counters in C&C 4. This ideally puts more emphasis on playing well overall, and less on spamming units that exploit your opponents' weaknesses.

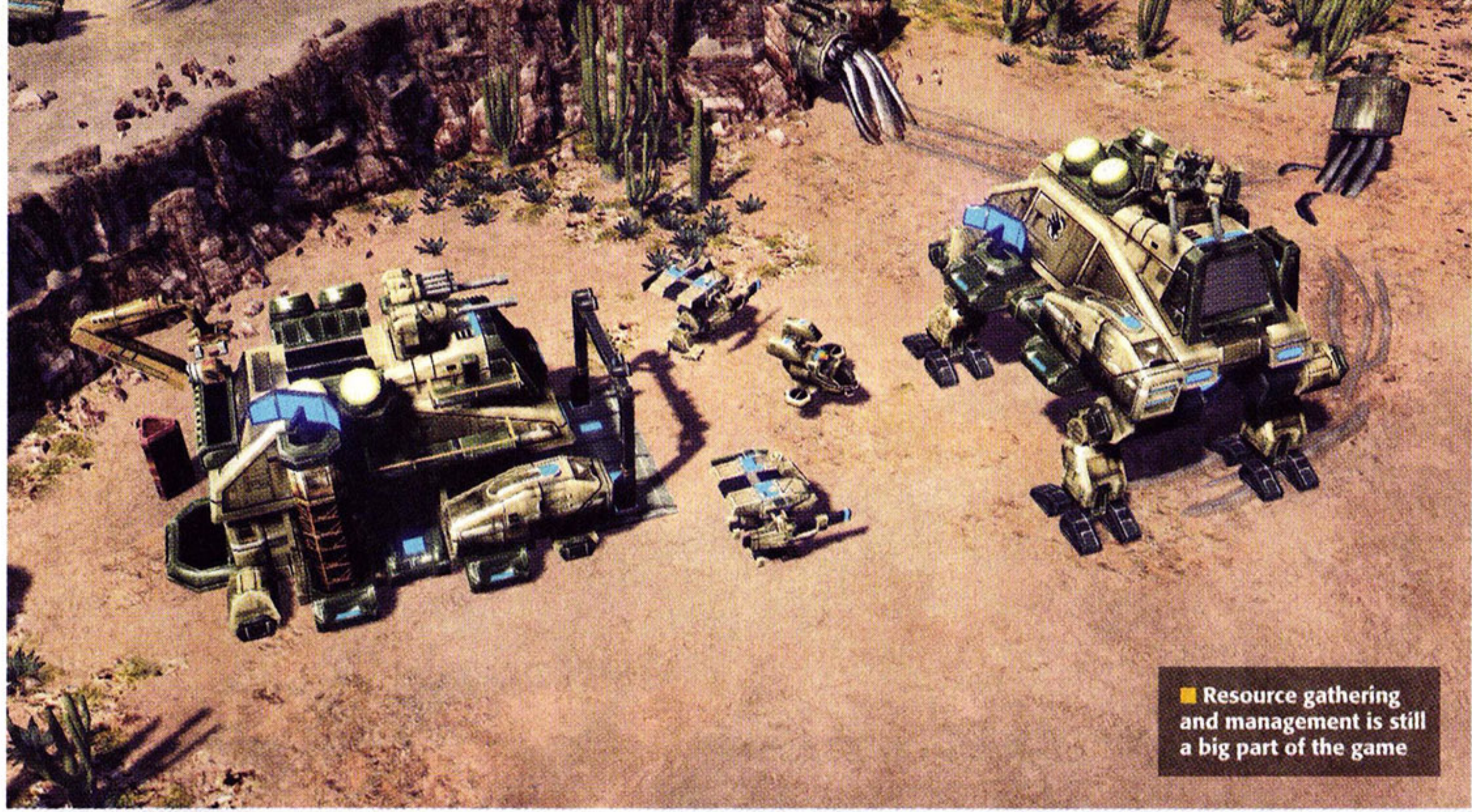
This role-oriented faction design supports C&C 4's ambitious 5-on-5 objective-based multiplayer. Details on this mode are scarce at the moment, but EA points toward several key concepts that surround it. Support and defense are more important since the maps are much larger and more diverse, giving newer, less tactically skilled, or more different-minded players a vital role. Additionally, players can respawn, since defeat is no longer a victory condition for the other side.

Currently, C&C 4 is only announced as in development for PC. A brief look at EA's recent history suggests that this is a temporary thing, though the company declined to comment on the possibility of other platforms for the title. Regardless, it's good to see EA moving the franchise forward and taking some chances on new designs. ■ ■ ■



■ Crawlers are a powerful force in their own rights





■ Resource gathering and management is still a big part of the game



■ In objective-based multiplayer, defeated players can respawn – even as a different role



■ Iconic units like Nod Scorpions and GDI Mammoths are returning

IS KANE ABLE?

EA is billing C&C 4 as “the conclusion to the Tiberium saga,” so players should finally see enigmatic Nod leader Kane’s endgame. Following the events of C&C 3, Earth’s Tiberium infestation has entered a new stage and has nearly consumed the planet. Thought dead (again), Kane resurfaces (again) with a strange new technology (again) that will control Tiberium and reclaim the Earth for humanity (new!). He needs the Global Defense Initiative’s help to deploy it in time, though, so an alliance is formed. Luckily for the human race, his crazy plan works, and the planet is poised on the edge of a new age of peace and prosperity. However, the fragile arrangement between Nod and the GDI begins to unravel as Kane reveals that he may not be a selfless savior after all...



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Split/Second

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (8-PLAYER ONLINE) > PUBLISHER DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS
> DEVELOPER BLACK ROCK STUDIOS > RELEASE 2010

FLAMING OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE FASTER THAN THEY APPEAR

By the time we arrived at E3 and got our hands on the first playable build of Black Rock Studio's reality game show-meets-death race Split Second, we already knew a few things about the game's airport level. We knew the other racers would try to blow us off the track and that the airport control tower could come crashing down and crush everything in its path at any moment. Still, we were happily unprepared for Split Second's frantic racing.

While we avoid the jumbo jet, competitors (who are doing their own beating and banging) trigger explosive traps. Trying to keep up with racers as the track changes from

a normal airport to a setting in a disaster movie sounds messy, but the game makes it easy to focus on the chaos at hand with a simple HUD that displays info on the back bumper of your car so your eyes don't have to wander around the TV.

The game also keeps you in the zen-like state because you're not constantly thinking about the skill points you can earn while racing. You must decide strategically about how to spend the points — whether it's to blow up a car ahead or trigger a massive, level-changing explosion — but the game smartly avoids a system that requires the racing game's equivalent to grinding for expe-

rience just to earn enough points to unleash the good stuff.

Even if you know what's coming, no two laps are the same. In one hairy moment a giant airplane starts to land in front of us. The competitors ahead scatter — some more successfully than others. In our subsequent races through this course, each go finds different debris and AI cars shooting our way. This freshness is important for each course's replay value; later in the game, old tracks even receive added content to encourage your return. Black Rock recently announced a dockyards level as well, complete with a race through a freighter that capsizes and starts

flooding with water.

For those times when you're doing the crashing rather than causing it, Split Second employs an advanced crash damage model, whereby it's possible to have the entire front of your car ripped off. A black and white crash cam also provides eye candy for the TV audience that is watching the explosive show. These may sound like minor details, but they're all a part of Black Rock's wall-to-wall package of thrills. This game comes at you at a high speed, whether you're ready for it or not. ■ ■ ■

■ Split Second also features two-player offline split-screen racing





■ This shot shows muscle and sports cars, but other vehicles will be available as you progress



■ Triggering this massive level-changing explosion is all the more satisfying if everyone else is under the rubble



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2 | NINTENDO DS | PSP

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (4-PLAYER ONLINE) > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER VICARIOUS VISIONS > RELEASE SEPTEMBER

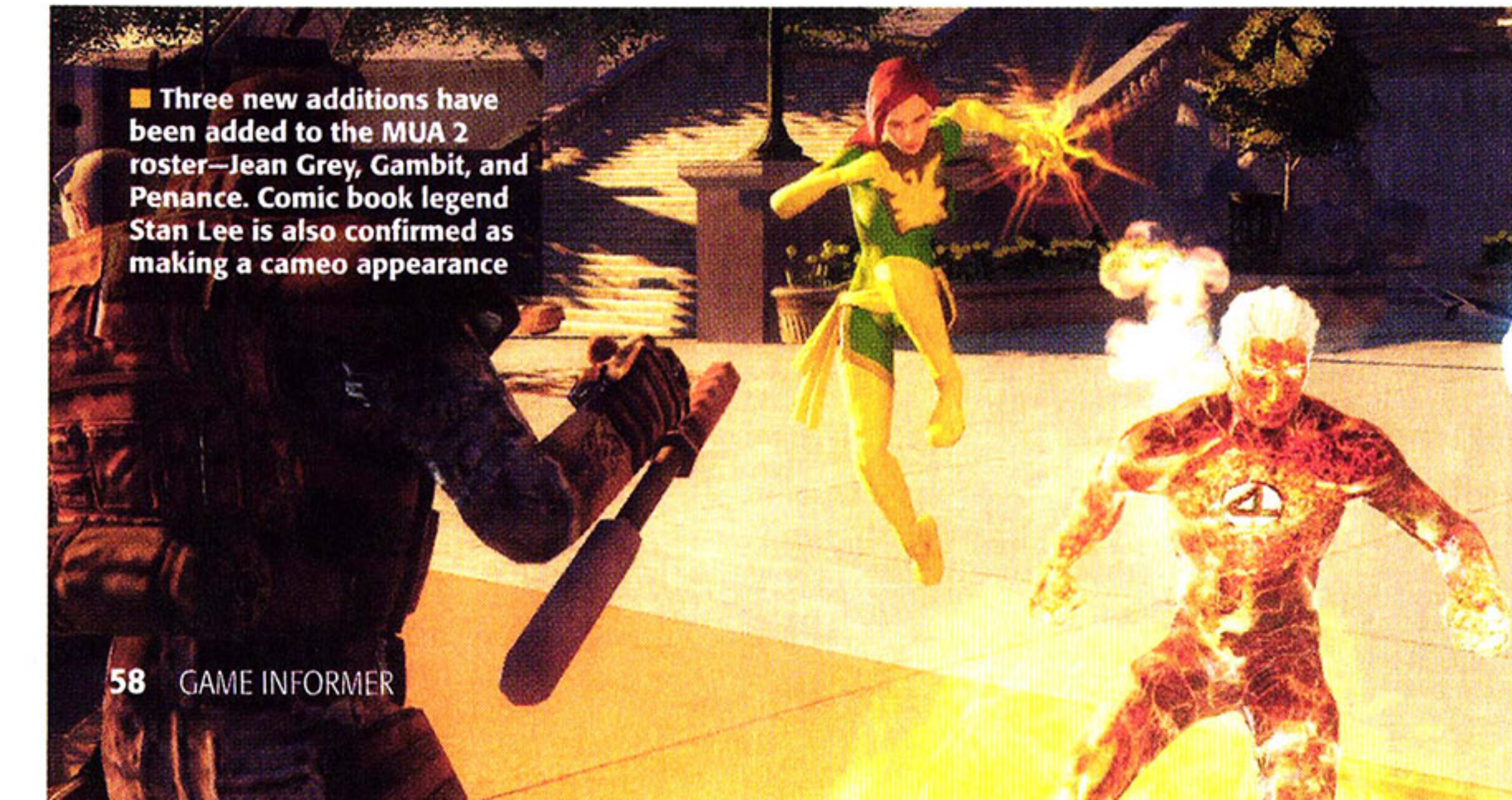
DECLARE YOUR ALLEGIANCE



■ A Quick Upgrade menu allows you to allocate points without interrupting co-op play. The menu is small enough not to obscure the screen, and your character automatically switches to AI in your absence



■ When part of the anti-registration faction you'll take on nameless S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives. If you choose the pro-registration path you will be pitted against the White Stars, a garden-variety guerilla group sided with Captain America



■ Three new additions have been added to the MUA 2 roster—Jean Grey, Gambit, and Penance. Comic book legend Stan Lee is also confirmed as making a cameo appearance



We've dished Marvel: Ultimate Alliance 2 info more than once in recent issues — meaning we expect you already know about the Civil War ties, diverging plot points, and the roster of revealed characters. But we wouldn't expect you to grasp how gameplay differs from the first iteration, because until this point, our coverage has been strictly hands-off. Now that we've had our spin in the driver's seat, we believe MUA 2 is on track to overshadow its forerunner.

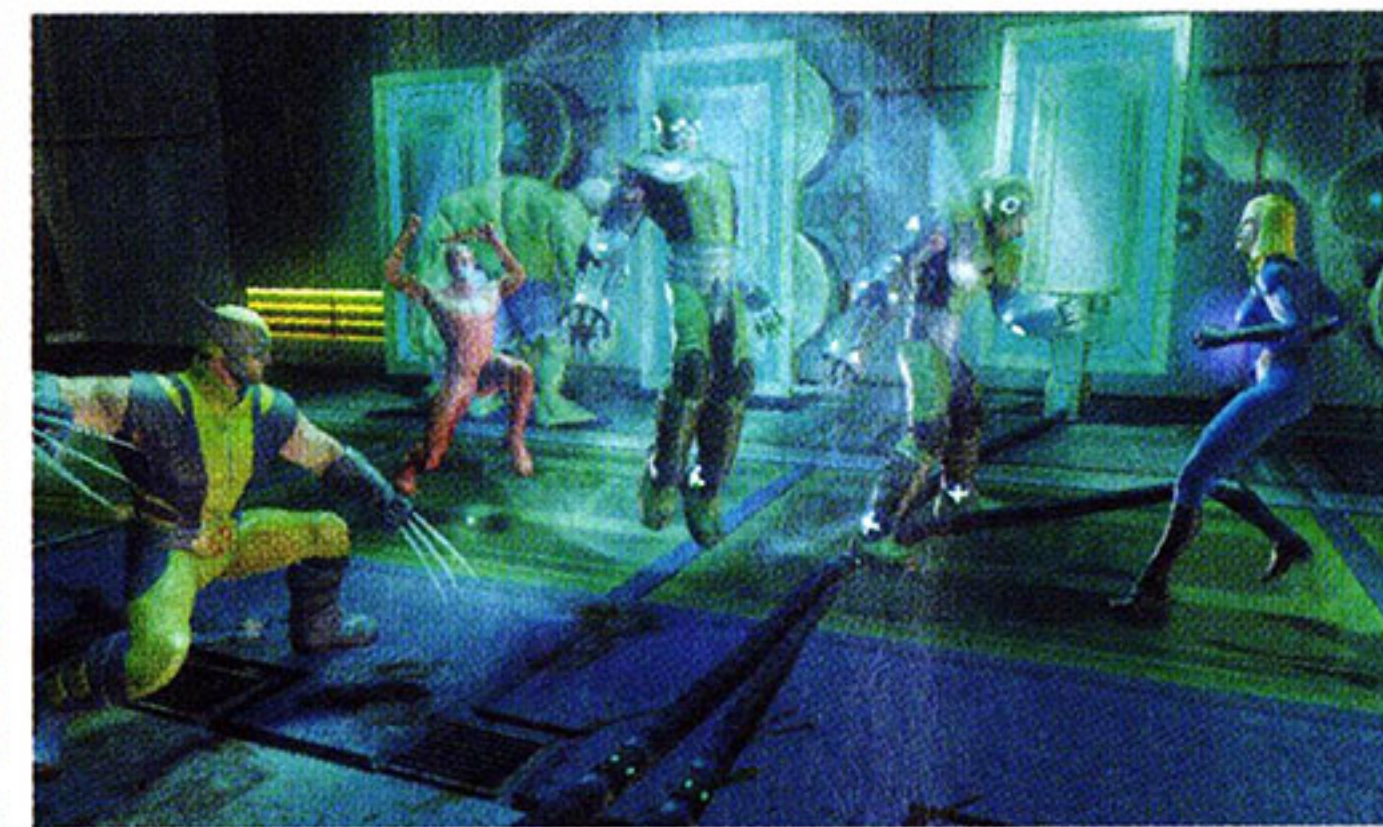
First, we confirmed the obvious: Depending on your alliance, some characters are rendered unplayable. Vicarious Visions wasn't explicit about how many characters are off limits once you take your stand, but it's safe to assume that you're not going to be playing as Iron Man if you align with the anti-registration faction, and vice versa with Captain America. Reed Richards, a.k.a. Mr. Fantastic, is confirmed as exclusive to the pro-registration side. The anti-registration spectrum features Iron Fist and Luke Cage.

As with the first game, interactions with NPCs play out differently depending on their relationship with your lead character. You can communicate with NPCs via one of three response styles — aggressive, diplomatic, or defensive. Your conversation style subsequently affects the attributes of your character. Aggressive answers augment strength, diplomatic responses fortify teamwork, and defensive rebuttals boost your defensive skills.

We tested our chops in Washington D.C. against hostile soldiers brandishing rocket launchers. Gameplay felt familiar, balancing heavy and light attacks with grapple moves and more advanced, character-specific powers. The environment is much more destructible this time around, giving us the option to toss benches, cars, and other large objects at bad-dies. The ability to heal and revive your teammates by collecting revival tokens — eliminating the need to find annoying S.H.I.E.L.D. access points — is another new feature that keeps action from lulling.

The second part of the demo unfolded with us firmly rooted as members of the anti-registration camp. Our mission? Navigate the rooftops and take out S.A.M. hubs to keep aerial reinforcements at bay. If we had instead adopted the pro-registration cause, the level would play much the same, with us defending the rooftops instead of infiltration them. Even though the differences are small, the variation in mission structure helps a second play through sound more appealing.

Sadly, we didn't get enough time with the game to fully explore the most attractive feature — fusions. But the few we tested out were flashy and powerful, making short work of a room full of fodder or taking a major hit off a boss's health. With a September release just around the corner, we'll be wielding these superpowers again in no time. ■ ■ ■



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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Bayonetta

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** PLATINUM GAMES > **RELEASE** JANUARY

DEAD SEXY



■ No move in Bayonetta is without a graphical flourish



Sega is no stranger to over-the-top games based on absurd premises, as proven by titles like *MadWorld*, *The House of the Dead: Overkill*, and *Daisy Fuentes Pilates*. *Bayonetta*, developed by Platinum Games (makers of *MadWorld*) and directed by Hideki Kamiya (*Devil May Cry*, *Viewtiful Joe*), looks to raise the bar for modern action games into the heavens – where the titular character can slaughter any angels she comes across.

Bayonetta is a witch who hunts and kills angels. Evil angels. But that's just the beginning of her insanity; she shoots the aforementioned angels with guns attached to her feet. Her skintight outfit just happens to be made out of her own hair, which is also used to summon and create supernatural monsters. The bodies of these demons are also made up of Bayonetta's hair, as are various torture attacks, including one where a giant high-heeled foot comes down from the sky and crushes her foes. Naturally, the more hair demons she summons, the more naked Bayonetta gets. What can you expect when Kamiya states the game's central theme is "sexiness"?

Kamiya also dubs *Bayonetta* an "infinity climax action" game. While we're aware of the perverted undertones, this means the unrelenting, breakneck gameplay is the beating heart underneath Bayonetta's bawdy exterior. Gameplay comparisons to *Devil May Cry* are entirely appropriate, though Dante may have a hard time keeping up thanks to the additions of a free camera system and Witch Time, which slows down the action when you narrowly dodge an enemy's attack, allowing you to set up brutal counters. The non-stop action that ensues, drenched in too many graphical flourishes to count, leaves us with racing pulses – not to mention a mild case of Attention Deficit Disorder.

While the developers strive to reach their goal of "infinity climax action," the length of the story is anything but. Kamiya says *Bayonetta* will take 10 to 12 hours to complete – but he also says the team views a player's first run through of the game as a warm-up lap. The real fun comes from mastering moves, striving for the Platinum rank (the game features a rating system similar to *Viewtiful Joe*), and breaking high scores. We have to wait until early next year to find out if *Bayonetta* achieves gameplay perfection, or if she ends up as just another witch with a bad hair day. But from what we've played so far, *Bayonetta* is looking mighty fine. ■ ■ ■



■ Even while getting his hand cut off, this giant boss can't help drooling over Bayonetta



■ Gunfights make other shooters look about as exciting as *Antiques Roadshow*



■ A high heel "Torture Attack" made out of a naked woman's hair – welcome to brand new levels of absurdity

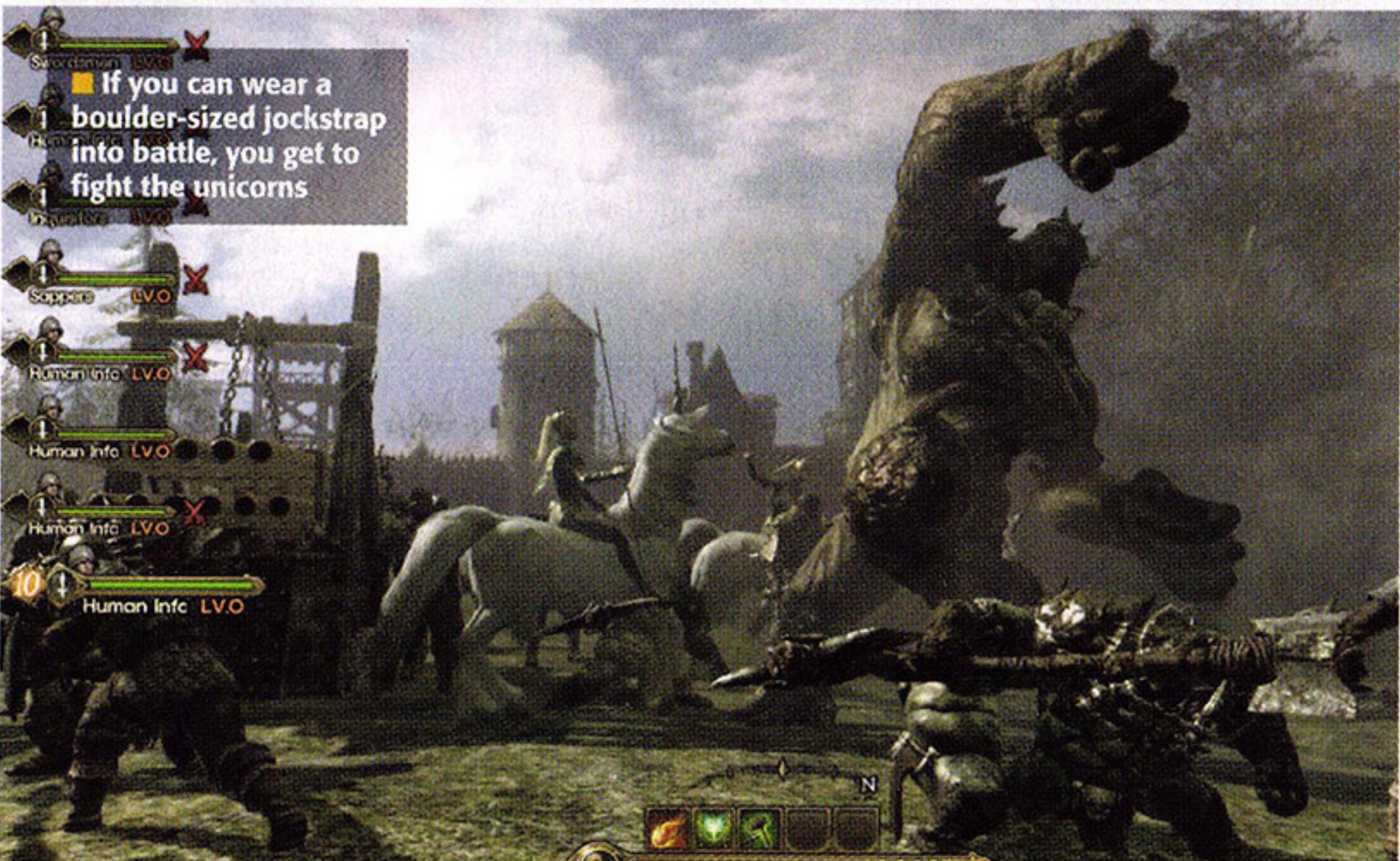




■ "To my left are some of the biggest guns in the kingdom. To her left is our siege cannon."



■ Blueside has already promised a variety of downloadable content once the game is released



■ If you can wear a boulder-sized jockstrap into battle, you get to fight the unicorns

XBOX 360

Kingdom Under Fire II

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/STRATEGY (ONLINE TBA) > **PUBLISHER** TBA
 > **DEVELOPER** BLUESIDE/PHANTAGRAPH > **RELEASE** 2010

NEEDED: HUGE BUCKET OF WATER

With four Kingdom Under Fire titles released thus far, it seems like there should have been a sequel in there somewhere. But according to developer Blueside, it's taken this long to develop a strategy title worthy of the title.

The original Kingdom Under Fire told a tale of medieval war between the races of men and an alliance of vampires and dark elves. This sequel jumps 150 years into the future to explore a new war and adds a new race of mutants called the Encablossians, who are waging war across the fantasy land of Bersia.

The original console KUF titles stand out due to their epic battles. As a sequel should, KUF II features bigger and flashier conflicts, displaying thousands of warring soldiers on screen at any one time. While players control the wings of their armies as they spread across the battlefield, most of the action is funneled through one of several overpowered generals whose special attacks are capable of devastating entire legions.

Forget about the action/RPG route taken by last year's Circle of Doom. Kingdom Under Fire II is a return to the series' strategy roots. Once a battle starts, players won't

have much time to think, so most of the game's strategy takes place just before two armies collide. Players command up to 100 different units types, including fantastical high-flying mounts, enormous carnivorous beasts, and gigantic siege machines. With so many troops at their disposal, players must carefully arrange and manage their flanks via a new electronic game card system.

Blueside has ambitious plans for its online multiplayer, going so far as to call it a strategy MMO. Players can join guilds and factions while exploring Bersia in giant motherships. Experience and items are earned through one-on-one, two-on-two, and fifteen-on-fifteen player matches where each player controls troops in a variety of match types, including all-new castle siege battles. We're excited to see exactly how expansive the world exploration is, but Blueside has remained vague on how the battle and exploration integrates. The game already looks visually amazing, and the promise of epic online battles makes us all the more eager to get some hands-on time. ■ ■ ■



Wii

Spore Hero

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** MAXIS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER

THE CREATURE PHASE

For all the space exploration and civilization building in Spore, one cannot deny that the creature creation process is the game's star. Players love using their imaginations to craft impressive (and often horrifying) beasts able to exist in harmony with the environment, charming or destroying foes at will. The only downside is that the creature phase is just a small segment of the larger Spore experience. With Spore Hero on the Wii, gamers have the opportunity to spend much more time with their unique creations; the creature-focused play is being expanded across the entire game.

Players take control of a recently hatched creature that is little more than a pair of legs with eyes. Moving around in third-person using the nunchuk and remote, players roam around the world, completing quests and collecting blue meteor fragments. Completing quests progresses you through the story, and the meteor fragments act as your currency for evolution, allowing you to add new parts and abilities.

We spent some hands-on time with the game's creature creator, and while it lacks some of the amenities of its PC counterpart, it feels like a decent adaptation. It contains over 250 parts (most of which you unlock by tackling objectives), and allows you to change the shape and color of your creation's body. The only major issue we encountered was precision; trying to adjust individual joints or place parts felt finicky. Since we weren't playing a final version of the game, that problem could be ironed out before release.

Though you'll frequently go back to the creature creator to tweak your specimen, most of the structured gameplay unfolds like a simplified MMO. You encounter other creatures who want your help, so you accept their quests and set off to collect, fight, or talk to whatever or whoever the quest requires. The storyline isn't exactly deep, but it gives players an excuse to explore the colorful Spore universe, play around with the creation tools, and spend time with the species they so carefully craft. For anyone who thought Spore's creature phase was too short, Spore Hero is worth keeping an eye on. ■ ■ ■

ENTERING THE ARENA

Spore Hero isn't the only new direction for the franchise – it is also branching out in the form of Spore Hero Arena for DS. This title utilizes a condensed version of the creature creator, allowing you to make an intergalactic gladiator to take on corrupted opponents on other planets. While fighting champions in the arena is the main attraction, you can earn the parts and powers you need to take them on by completing odd jobs and puzzles. After you've created a suitable warrior, you can take on up to three friends locally in multiplayer. It may be smaller in scope than the original Spore, but at least Spore Hero Arena looks to be a step up from Spore Creatures, its DS predecessor.



Wii

Ju-on: The Grudge

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** XSEED GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** AQ INTERACTIVE/FEELPLUS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER

NIGHT MOVES

Publisher Xseed Games bills this take on the Japanese horror film series as a “haunted house simulator.” After playing the first couple of chapters, we think that’s a surprisingly accurate description. The game has no story setup with people jabbering about how strange things are getting around here lately. You’re just out walking your dog one day when she runs off into an abandoned factory and it’s on.

It’s pitch black in this place. We turn on a flashlight and aim it around by pointing the Wii remote at the screen. To creep forward, we hold the B trigger down (no nunchuks allowed here). You can’t strafe or sprint, but the slow pace and limited peripheral vision contribute to the atmosphere that something could get the jump on you at any time.

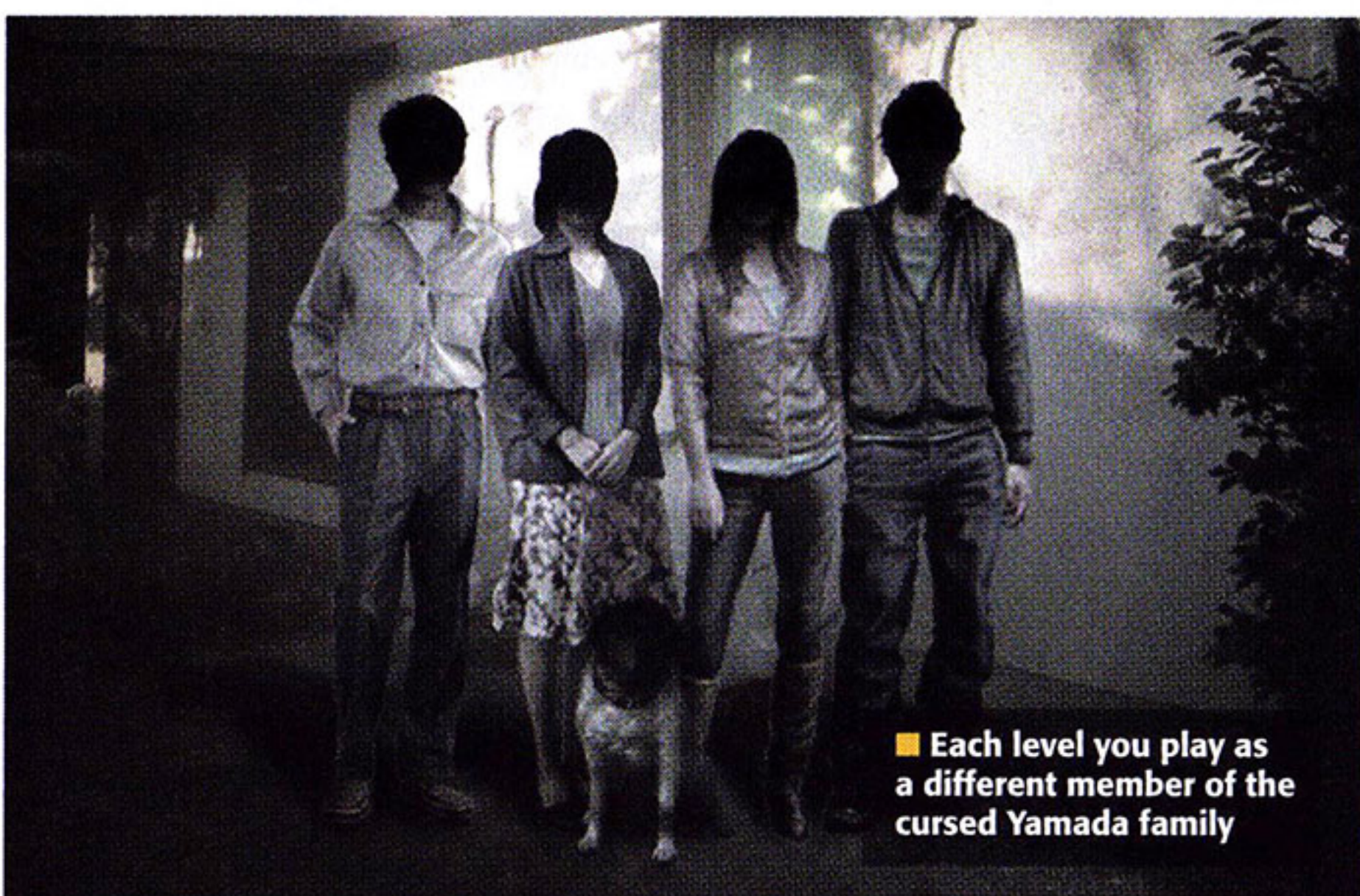
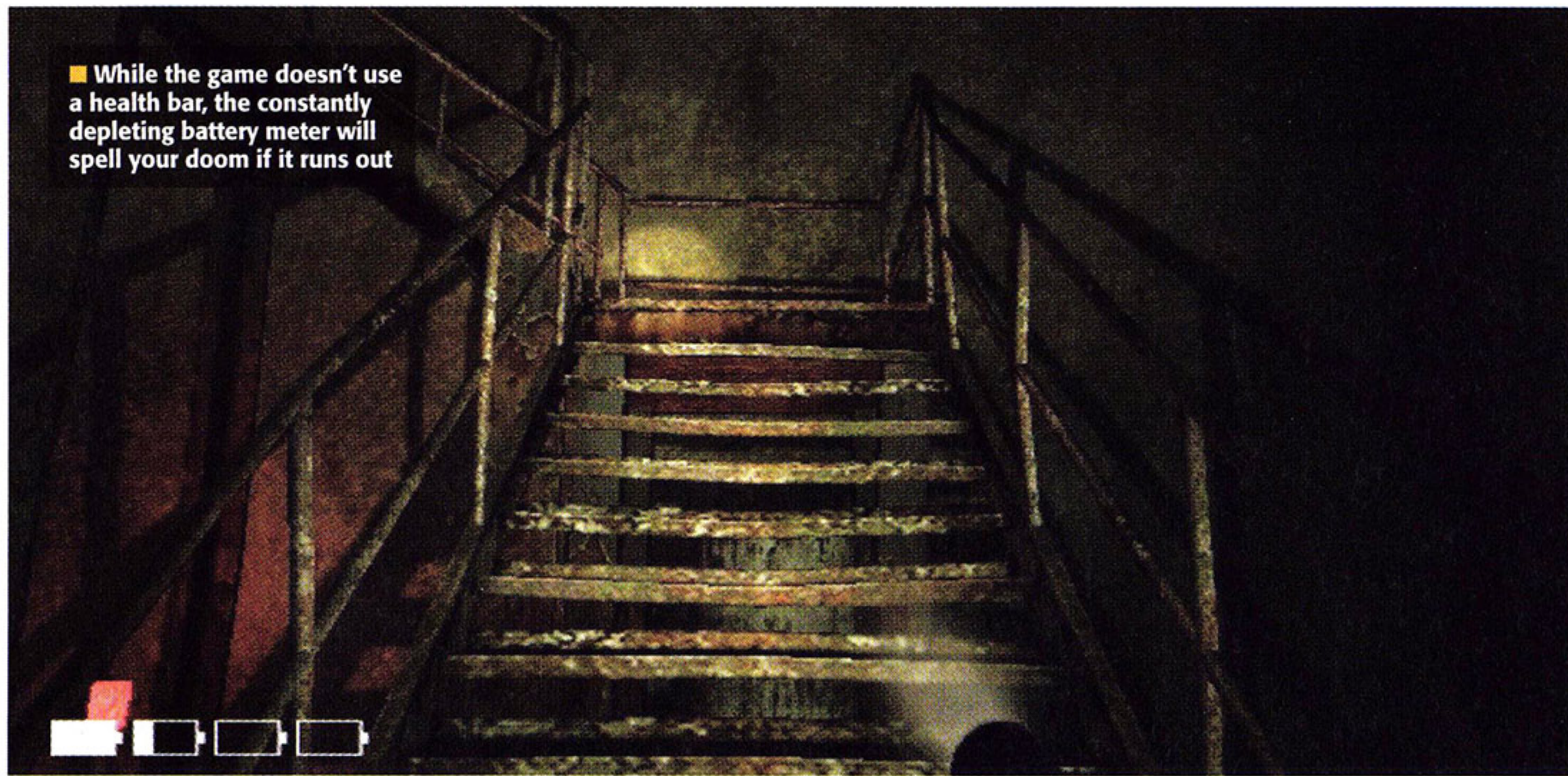
We walk toward a slightly ajar door with the clicking of our shoes and some random scary clatter echoing off the walls, only to have it slam shut as soon as we get there. Through the glass we can see our dog barking at something on the other side. We search the immediate area and find some batteries for the flashlight and a key for the door. As we approach the door, that creepy boy from the movies skitters past our flashlight. We press on through the door, but the dog is gone so we press on to the next door. As we open it, the freaky black-haired girl grabs us on the wrist, and we frantically swing the remote along with an onscreen prompt to escape. Fail and the screen splatters with blood for an instant game over. We won’t spoil the rest of the level, but the creepy atmosphere made us literally jump in our chairs several times – quite surprising for a lower powered console that doesn’t support 5.1 surround sound.

At the end of the stage, we get a full rundown of our performance. Since you enter your gender and zodiac sign before you play, the game uses that information to taunt you afterward. We entered Aries, and receive this evaluation: “Aren’t you supposed to be a sheep and not a chicken? Jumping at sounds and freezing in panic... Well, maybe you’re a sheep after all.” You’re also judged on a scare meter and sissy meter that tracks whether you jiggled the remote when something jumps out at you.

Ju-on only has five stages, spanning a hospital, fashion design school, and, of course, the actual house from the movie. To help with replay value, players can search the stages for special items to unlock the final level or mess with their friends in courage test. Here one player can hit buttons on a second remote to make scary stuff pop out onscreen while the other person’s playing.

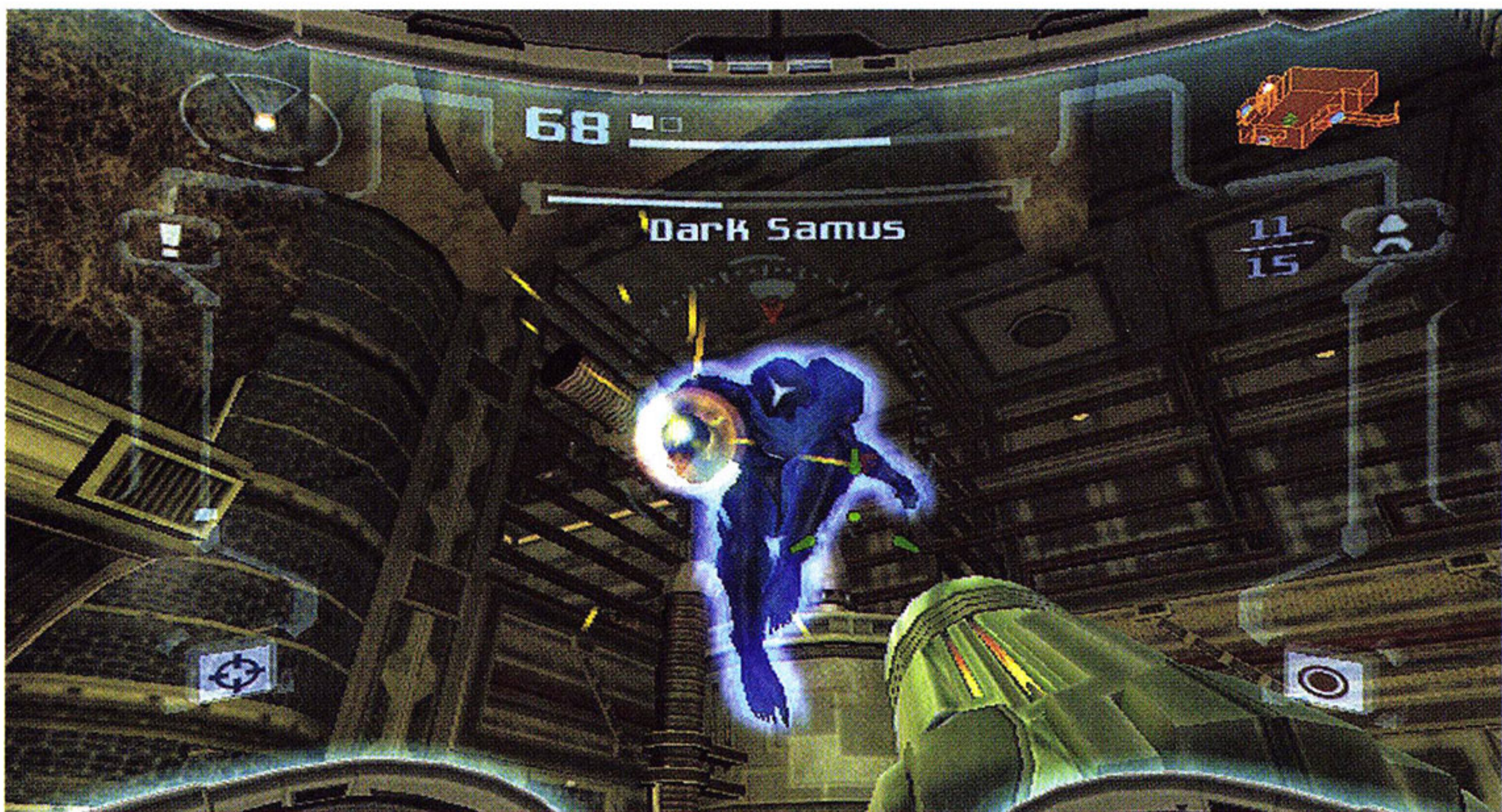
Ju-on is expected to hit just in time for Halloween at a lower price point than the average Wii game. It may be just the ticket for fans of the films or someone simply looking to get spooked. ■ ■ ■

■ While the game doesn’t use a health bar, the constantly depleting battery meter will spell your doom if it runs out



■ Each level you play as a different member of the cursed Yamada family





Wii

Metroid Prime Trilogy

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** RETRO STUDIOS > **RELEASE** AUGUST 24

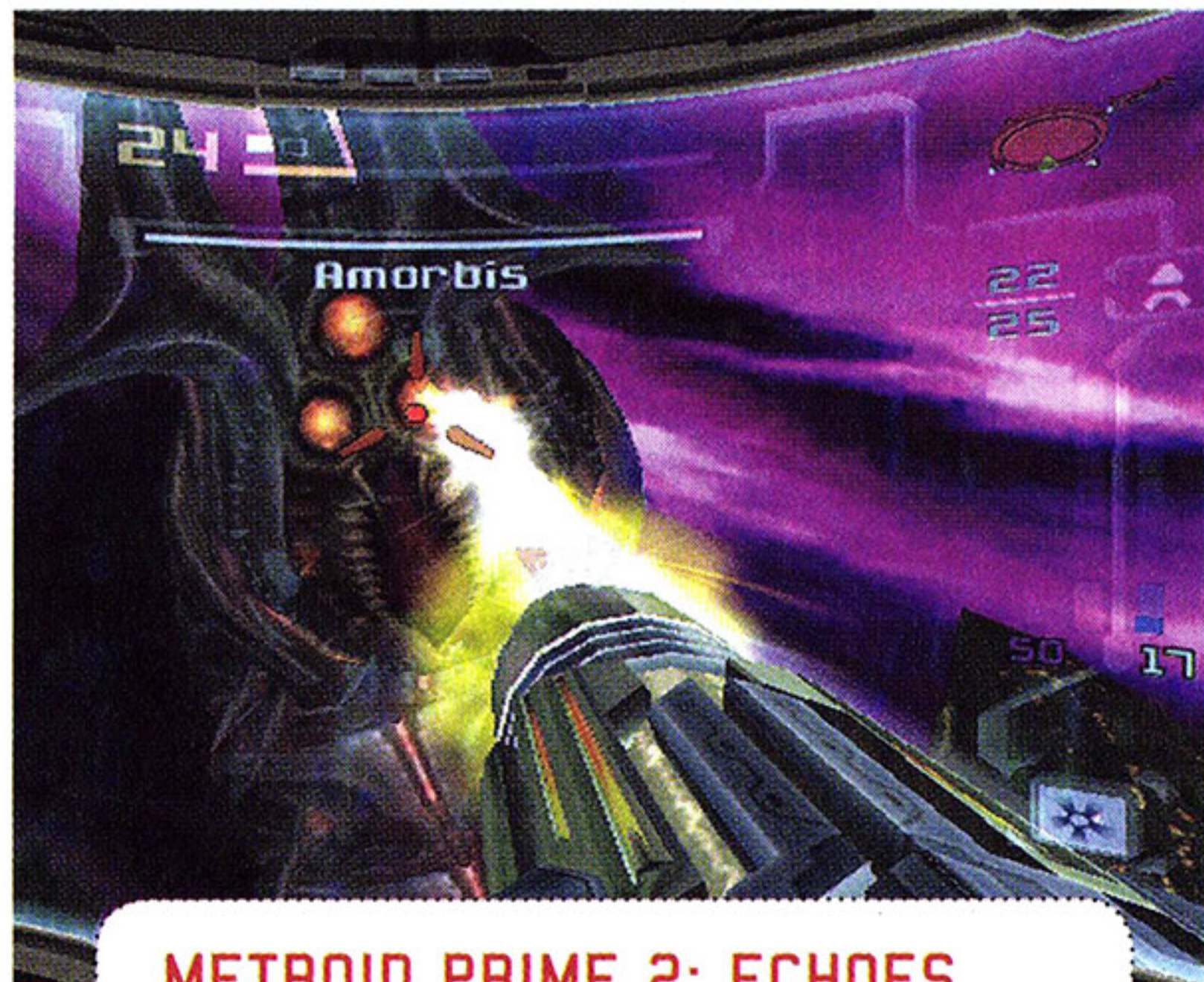
STILL PRIMED

While it received criticism for its B-movie story and less-elegant-than-usual level design, many agreed that the motion-based control scheme for Metroid Prime 3: Corruption was an improvement. With Metroid Prime Trilogy, Nintendo takes that notable improvement and retrofits it into the first two GameCube titles. Motion controls aren't the only improvement, as all three games are available in widescreen format and come with a host of unlockable art galleries. This meaty bundle might be just the excuse to re-experience one of the finest space odysseys video games have ever produced. ■ ■ ■



METROID PRIME

Developed by the Texas-based Retro Studios, Metroid Prime wasn't just the first Metroid to go first-person, it was the first Metroid in 3D. After an eight-year hiatus, Nintendo graciously delivered one of its finest sci-fi adventures. The story of Prime takes place right after the events of the original NES game, as bounty hunter Samus Aran battles a nefarious race of Space Pirates and discovers the secrets behind their biological experiments on the planet Tallon IV. Even seven years later, the game holds up. With its eerie atmosphere, mind-bending environmental puzzles, and a story that knows to stay out of the way, it's easy to see why the first Prime made such a splash.



METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES

Criticized for being too hard, Echoes gave fans more of what they loved while introducing a few new mechanics, including a parallel dark dimension that Samus must travel through to solve puzzles and a multiplayer deathmatch mode. After the events of the first Prime, Samus is sent to rescue Galactic Federation Marines from a ship near the planet Aether, but after crash landing on the planet, she begins to unravel the mysteries left by an ancient race called the Luminoth. Echoes was also the first game to feature her mysterious doppelgänger, Dark Samus.



METROID PRIME 3: CORRUPTION

The only Prime title made for the Wii, Corruption's artistic detail squeezes so much juice out of the little system, we are surprised there is room on the disc for those other two games. Set six months after Echoes, Corruption's largely unimportant narrative finds Samus continuing her battle with her Dark rival while trying to stop a mutagenic material called Phazon from spreading through the galaxy. In addition to the improved controls, Corruption gave Samus's ship a more central role, as it helped her travel between areas and blasted apart obstructions within the environment.





■ Bosses are as impressive as they are difficult



■ The world's rich backstory is fascinating

PLAYSTATION 3

Demon's Souls

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (4-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** ATLUS
 > **DEVELOPER** FROM SOFTWARE/SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT JAPAN STUDIO > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 6

THE HARDEST OF CORES

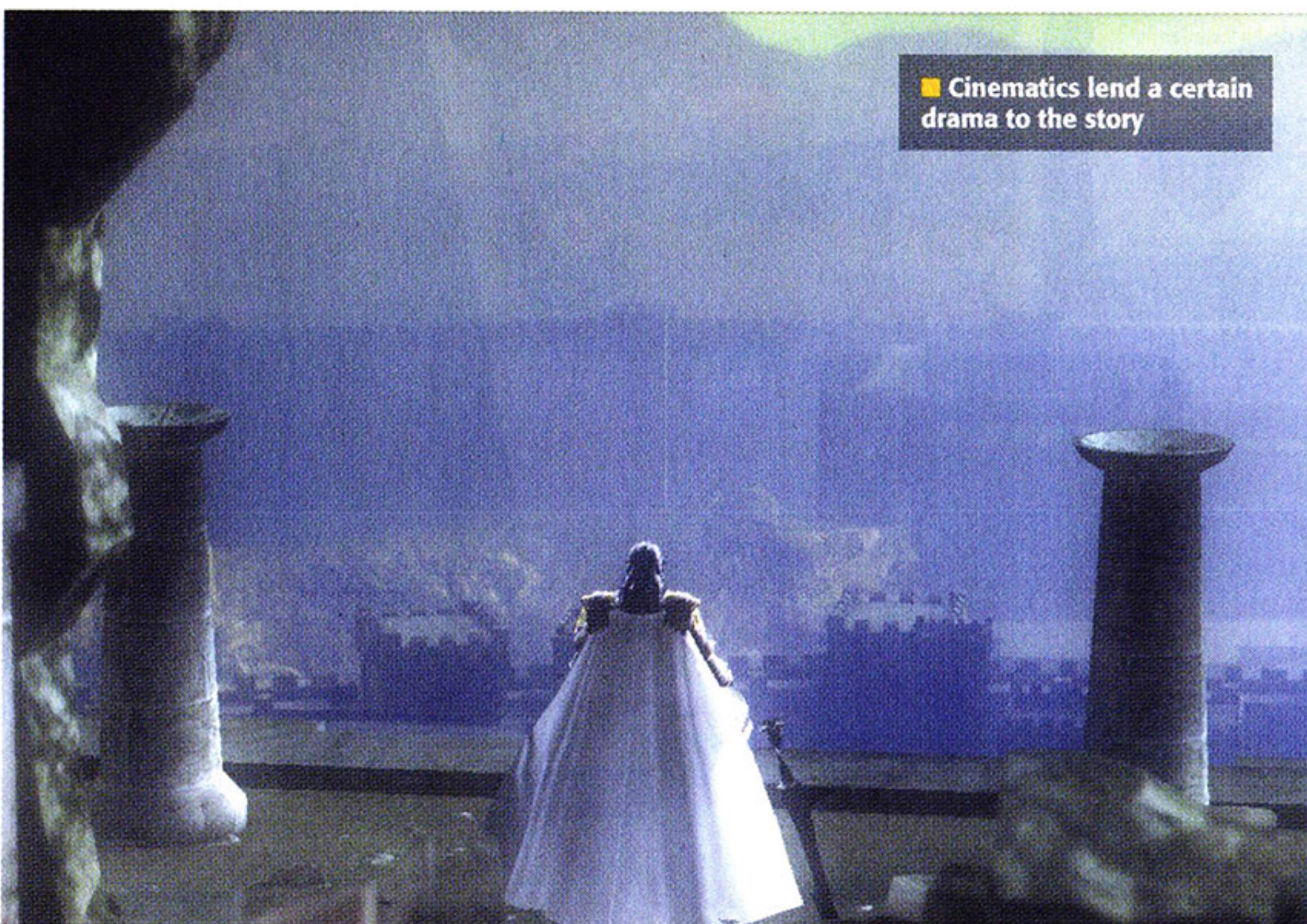
This Japanese import has a bounty of treasures. Its deep brawler-like combat varies radically depending on what type of weapon you use, whom you're fighting, and how you've built your character. The rich atmosphere created by its stunning visuals and outstanding audio is often creepy, sometimes breathtaking, and always engrossing. Its impressive breadth of content supports dozens of hours of play on a single run-through. Innovative use of the Internet to facilitate player interactions including, but not limited to, co-op and competitive play greatly improves the experience.

Almost none of it is accessible in the least. You'll die in *Demon's Souls*. A lot. Two or three hits from an enemy is often enough to kill you, and it's not uncommon to be ganged up on. Every time you perish, you lose all of your souls (which function as both experience points and money) and are sent back to the beginning of the level — which might be 45 minutes or more of fighting

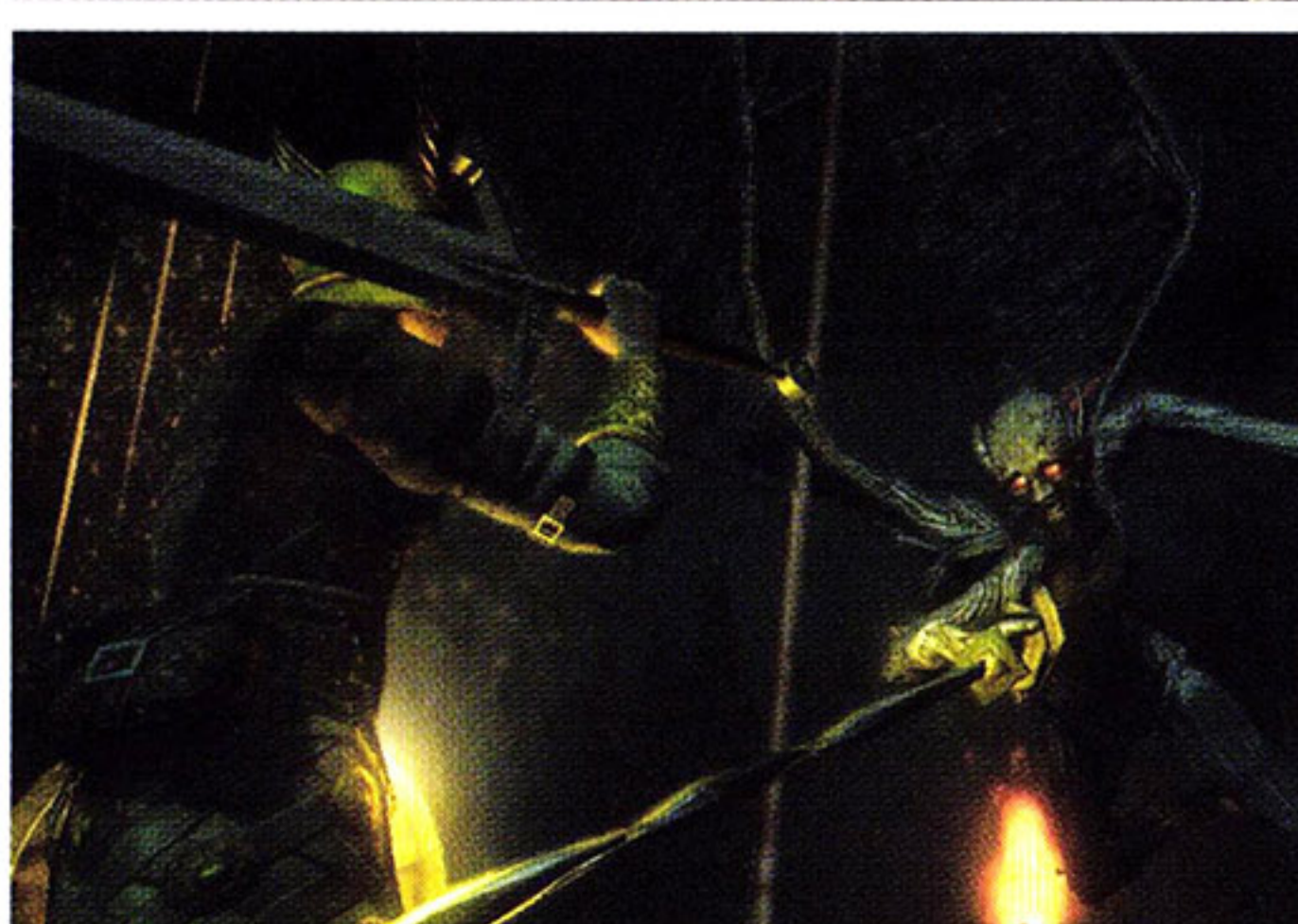
behind you. If you can make it back to where you died, you can retrieve what you lost. However, all of the enemies have respawned and your equipment has lost durability.

Beating the first level — even with one of the easier character classes — might take a dozen deaths for a reasonably skilled player. For someone having a hard time wrapping their head around the controls, or less experienced with 3D brawler melee combat, it might take more like 30.

The flip side of all this is the fantastic sense of accomplishment you get when you finally kill that boss (who, incidentally, is probably effectively immune to your weapons. Hope you brought some special items!). None of the superlative compliments to the game above are exaggeration. *Demon's Souls* is one of the hardest and most rewarding experiences RPG fans will have this year — if they're up to the challenge. ■ ■ ■



■ Cinematics lend a certain drama to the story



DEMON'S SOULS: A FIRST PLAY-THROUGH

Start tutorial. Begin to wrap head around unusual control scheme. Enter hub world. Wander around, exploring huge area. Accidentally attack vendor, die for hubris. Respawn, explore some more. Find locked gates to other worlds. Fall to death while climbing non-OSHA-compliant crumbling staircase. Respawn. Find the single unlocked gate. Enter.

Stare in awe at gorgeous vista. Begin moving forward. Trade blows with first enemy, kill him while being reduced to half health. Pile of nearby rubble explodes, revealing two more enemies. Fumble with controls in surprise, get stuck and killed. Respawn at beginning of level.

You think we're kidding. We're not. You'll quite possibly die on the second encounter. Moving on: Dispatch first few enemies with lessons learned in previous life. Move forward. Cautiously peek around next corner. Get shot in face by enemy with crossbow. Two more sword-wielders charge in from blind side around corner. Get stuck and die. Respawn at beginning of level.

Let's fast-forward: Skills slowly improving, steadily work deeper into the level. Kill dozens of enemies, taking little damage. Dodge arrows, parry and one-shot-counterattack melee-using foes, build up stocks of recovery items. See NPC ally under attack by six of same enemy type. Apply turpentine to mace, light on fire, charge in. Lay waste to all. Collect loot.

Player skill makes up for the brutal odds in *Demon's Souls*. You'll pay your dues, but the thrill of victory is unparalleled.

NINTENDO DS

Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (4-PLAYER LOCAL) > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
> **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX/H.A.N.D. > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 29

WOO HOO, NO CARD BATTLES!

A new Kingdom Hearts game hasn't come to the States for over three years, and the series' status is one of the most consistent queries we get from readers. Square Enix is finally giving our letters department a break in just over a month as Kingdom Hearts fans can stop writing and start playing 358/2 Days.

The story starts just after Roxas' initial creation as Sora's Nobody when he is brought into Organization XIII as member 13. This time span runs parallel to Sora's memory repair cryosleep in Namine's chamber all the way to the beginning of Kingdom Hearts II. Still following us? Roxas isn't the only new recruit; a black-haired girl named Xion joined around the same time as the 14th member. This mysterious character doesn't say much at first, but eventually starts a friendship with Roxas.

Roxas is kind of spacey for the first couple of weeks, but it's not long before his new black-robed friends put him to work since he is the only member that can wield a keyblade. Each mission counts as a day, and players will see them tick by one by one. But that doesn't mean you'll just go straight from 1 to 358. In our hands-on time with the game we

jumped from day 255 to days 7 through 17. We hovered in the 20s for a bit, then jumped up to the 50s, and so on. It seems you'll always be skipping around as little story nuggets are doled out in traditional cryptic Kingdom Hearts fashion.

The Castle That Never Was serves as your hub where you start each day. You can walk around and chat with Organization members or buy items from the moogle shop. You talk to the leader, Saix, to enter the mission select screen and browse a mix of required and optional quests throughout areas like Twilight Town, Agrabah, and Beast's Castle. Once you select a mission, you can go it alone or with one of the Organization members.

Combat controls feel nearly identical to the PlayStation 2 games in the series, with the notable exception of camera manipulation being tied to the shoulder buttons instead of the second analog stick. Attack, magic, and items are all accessible through the traditional Kingdom Hearts real time battle menu, and you can eventually learn things like blocking and roll moves.

All of the maps that we played are essentially identical to their PS2 counterparts in layout, so veterans should already

know their way around. Sections of every map are blocked off to keep you on the right track and focused on your objective. Mission types include investigating new areas, eliminating specific enemy types, surviving for one minute against waves of enemies, fighting bosses, and so on. At the end of a mission players receive experience, munny, heart points, and other helpful items.

Replay value looks to be a big part of the game as well. All missions can be replayed at any time (or played for the first time if you happened to skip it initially). Finding a hidden ordeal badge in a mission will unlock a challenge to complete the next time through, like finish the level in a certain time limit, or refrain from using recovery items. Mission mode allows you to play stages alone or with up to three friends locally. Here you can play as any member of Organization XIII, all with different weapons and stats. Players work together to complete the objective, but also compete to earn the most points and earn exclusive rewards available only through mission mode.

So far 358/2 Days is looking promising, with lots to do. Stay tuned for our full review in next month's issue. ■ ■ ■



Roxas



Xion

PANELS

One of the unique features of 358/2 Days is the leveling system. All currently equipped special moves, items, keyblades, spells, accessories, and even level-ups must be arranged on a rectangular grid. Special modifier pieces take up several slots at once and look similar to Tetris blocks. This creates an interesting puzzle dynamic for ability management.



NINTENDO DS

Scribblenauts

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
 > **DEVELOPER** 5TH CELL > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 15

WRITING IS FUN?

Most "press start" screens in console games are left over from the arcade days. In Scribblenauts, this screen is so fun that you'll blow half an hour playing around in it before you remember that there is a game to be played. Here you write or type almost any noun you can think of and they appear in this open sandbox. Any number of objects, vehicles, animals, and people – 10,000 different things in total – can be interacted with by main character Maxwell, and each reacts to one other. The only thing you're limited by is forbidden categories (dirty words, copyrighted material, proper nouns) and a budget meter that prevents the game from crashing under the weight of too many onscreen items.

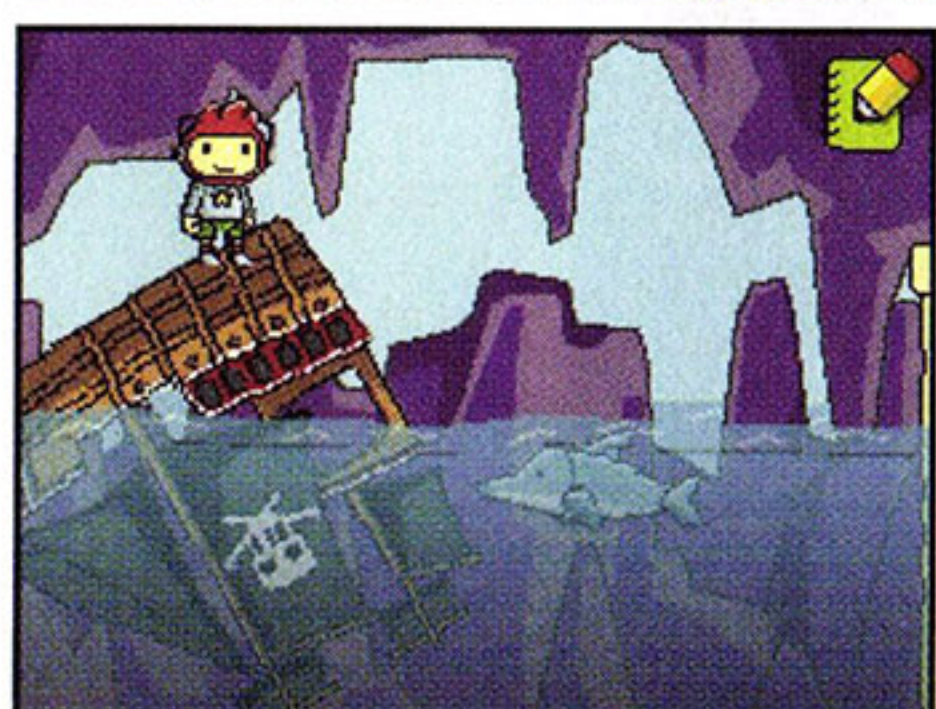
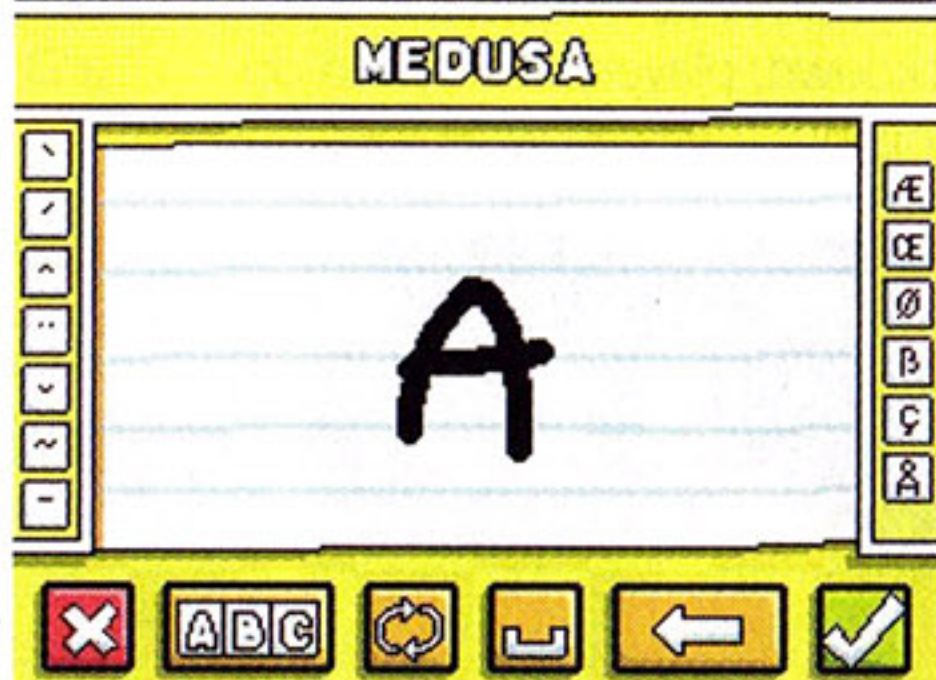
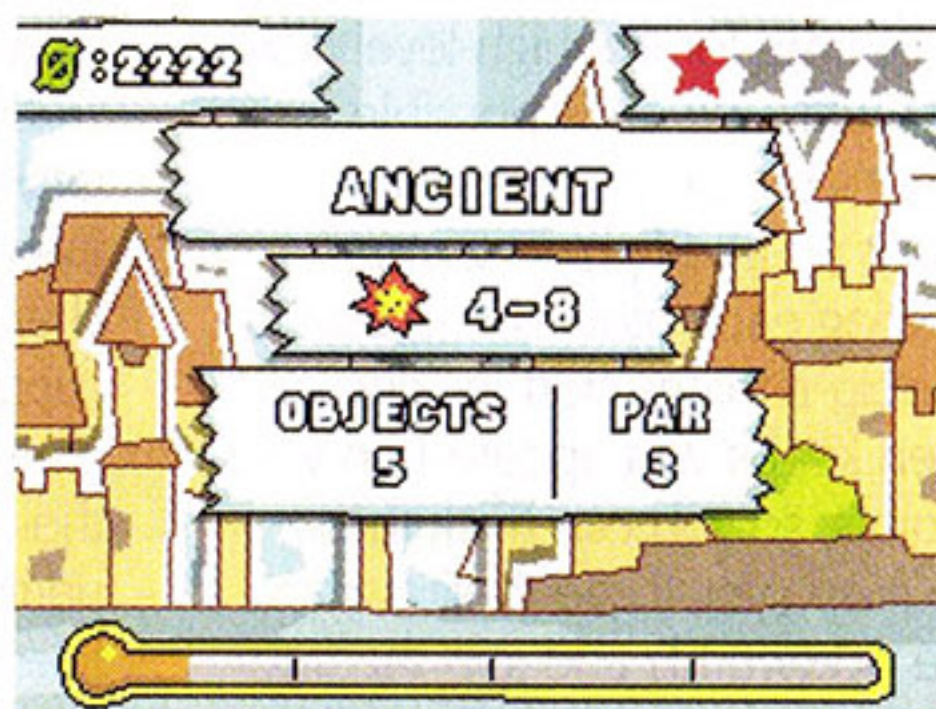
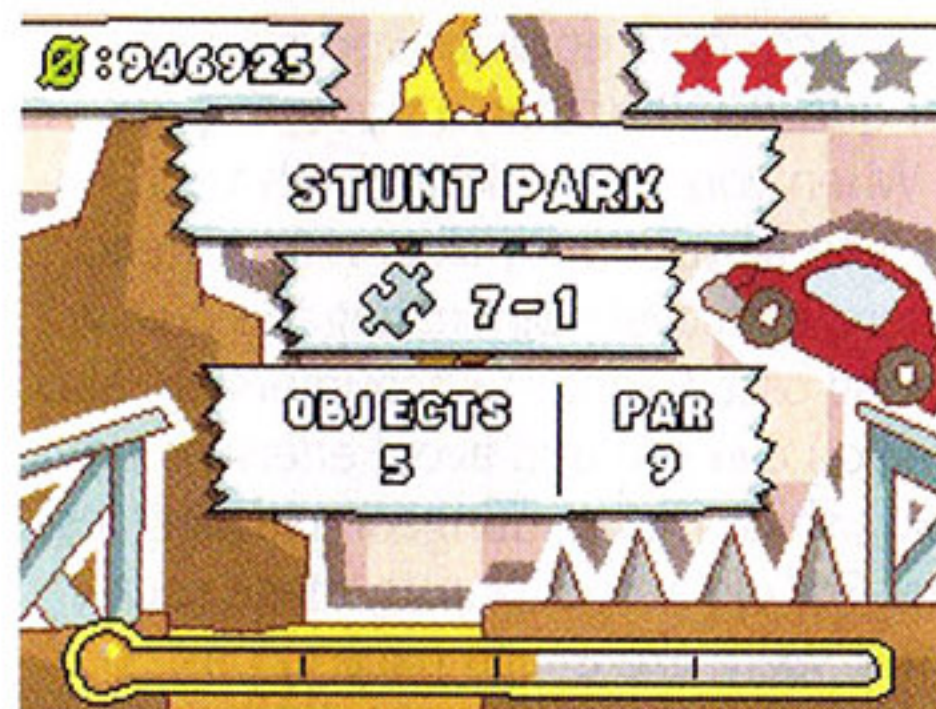
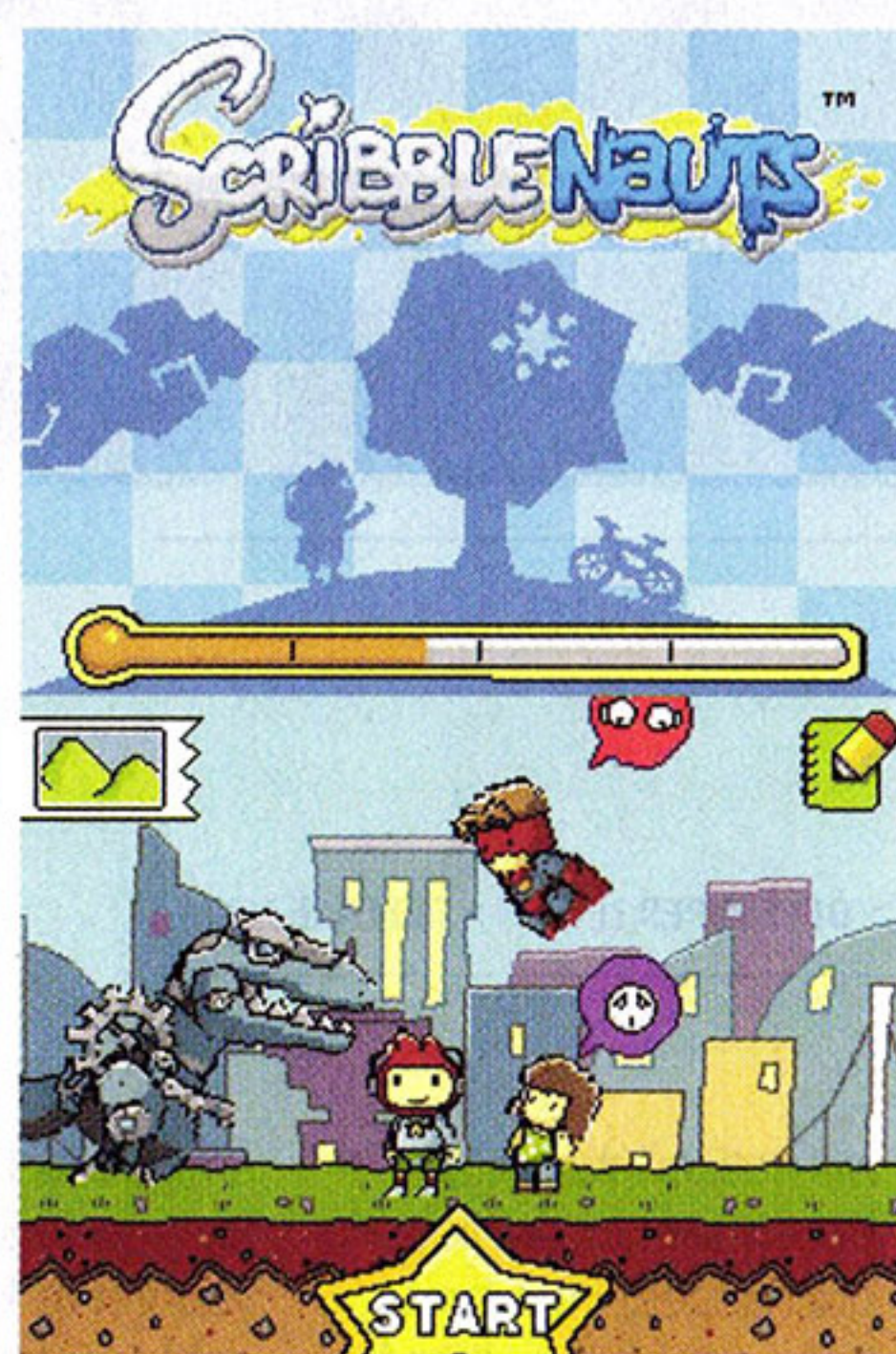
As we passed the game around, different editors wrote the

first things that came to their heads. Joe scribbled a stream of expletives and inappropriate items to no avail. Reiner wrote out every mythical beast he could think of, and when he ran out he searched out more on the Internet. Maxwell was turned to stone more than once (thanks, Basilisk and Medusa). Inspired by the Net, Bryan got both Keyboard Cat and Rickroll to work (no "Chocolate Rain," though).

Once we finally pressed start, over 200 levels appeared, ranging from creepy forests to outer space themes. Early stages have relatively simple challenges. A girl wanted to get her kitten out of a tree, so we dropped a fireman up there and he retrieved it like a champ. A stack of glass bottles was set up carnival style for us to knock down. Instead of throwing a baseball at it, we just dropped an airplane on the whole

thing and it all worked out. At the end of each stage, players are judged by how many items they used, how much time it took, and a more abstract "style" evaluation. In the final game, players can spend points or "ollars" won in levels to unlock new areas, but we got to jump around to get a sense of the variety. You can also purchase new avatars like a pirate, zombie, or ninja, and buy songs for the sound test.

While the fine details are still under wraps, the ability to create and share levels online has us excited. It's unclear whether players can upload and rate created stages on a central server or if they'll have to trade friend codes and only swap levels with people they know. We're hoping for the former...and for the final version of the game to arrive at the office ASAP! ■■■



LEVEL SAMPLING

The sheer variety of objectives in Scribblenauts surprised us. Here we've listed a few puzzles and our unique solutions.

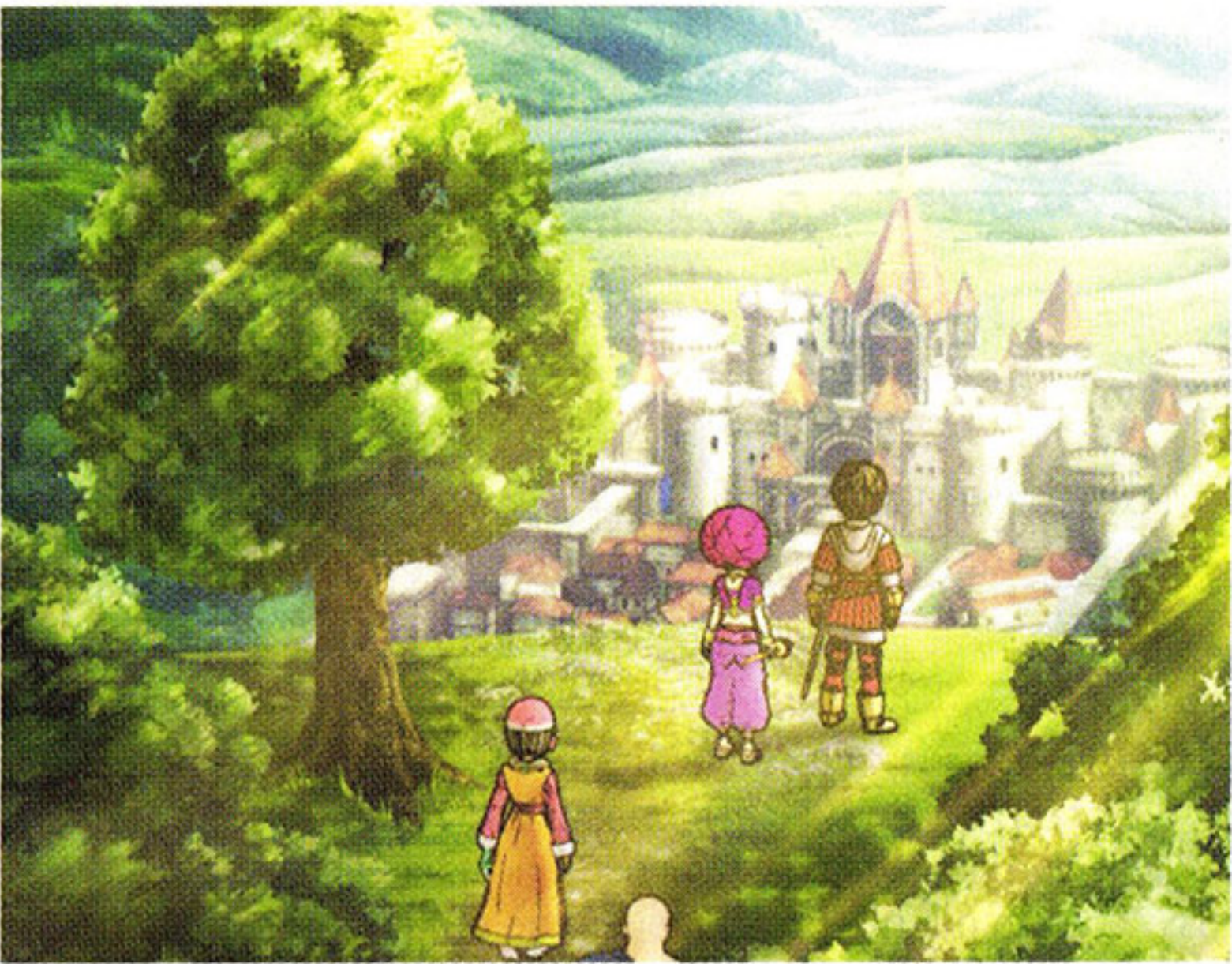
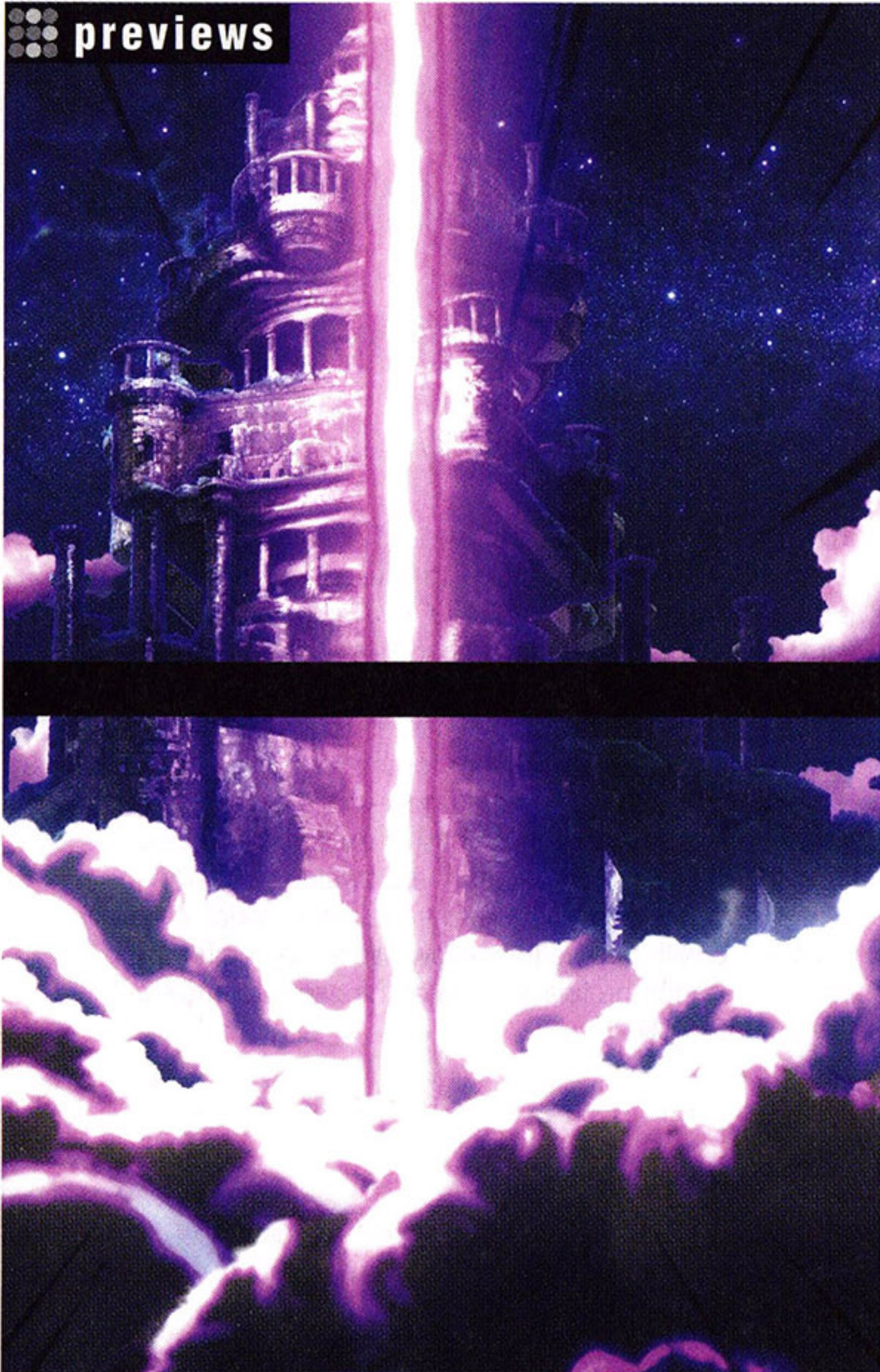
P: Stop a boat in the arctic from running into an iceberg
S: Put a kraken in the water to scare the captain away

P: Get past two flame sword wielding "Scribblenauts" to pick up the X-ray goggles
S: Give one flowers and the other a newspaper to render them harmless

P: Make it past a tornado
S: Place a lake below it and swim under

P: Stop ants from ruining a picnic by eating the food, but don't upset the nearby hippie by killing them
S: Place a dam and a wall on either side of the picnic to block out the ants. If that doesn't work, just grab the food and run





NINTENDO DS

Dragon Quest IX

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (4-PLAYER LOCAL) > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** LEVEL-5 > **RELEASE** 2010

A CHANGED BEAST

Major role-playing franchises have experimented with new ideas over the years, but Dragon Quest has remained faithfully predictable. When its peers veered away from random encounters and turn-based combat in the PS2 era, DQ stuck to its successful old-school style. While this may be endearing for longtime fans, re-using the same gameplay formula isn't a great way to win over a new audience. Perhaps that's what inspired Level-5 to give this RPG juggernaut an overhaul; the days of knowing exactly what to expect from Dragon Quest are over.

The series' transformation is not immediately apparent. After spending a few hours with the recently released Japanese version

of Dragon Quest IX, we noticed the colorful art style and combat system of previous iterations are largely unchanged. However, the move to the DS has opened the door for a new mechanic that shapes the landscape of the entire game: multiplayer.

In the past, multiplayer in an RPG usually consisted of letting a second player enter battle commands for select characters; Dragon Quest IX allows you to team up locally with up to three of your friends to explore the whole world. One player acts as the host, and the others enter the host's world as guests. While adventuring as a guest, you won't make any story progress for yourself, but you can help the host advance by completing quests together. For instance,

a high-level character can jump in to assist a low-level friend with a tough dungeon. Since you get to keep any experience, items, and gold you find, providing this kind of help isn't a total waste of time for the high-level player.

Just because teaming up is possible doesn't mean it's the only way to play. Players can split up and fight monsters individually, giving each other the option to jump in and help if things start looking bad. A status screen keeps you updated on your friends' hit points, so you can track them down on the map (you'll see their avatars fighting in the overworld) and join the fray. The structure reminds us a little bit of the co-op in Crackdown; players are free to do their own thing, but they can work together

as the situation warrants.

In order to better accommodate the multiplayer features, some of the classic elements of Dragon Quest are missing. The story is much more episodic, focusing on smaller quests rather than a sweeping narrative. When you aren't playing with your friends, you fill your party slots with generic characters, effectively eliminating the quirky supporting cast. Random encounters are also gone — you can see and avoid enemies on the field, which makes dungeon crawling less perilous. For old-school purists, these sacrifices may seem like a high price to pay. For us, this was the most fun we've had playing a Dragon Quest game in years. ■ ■ ■



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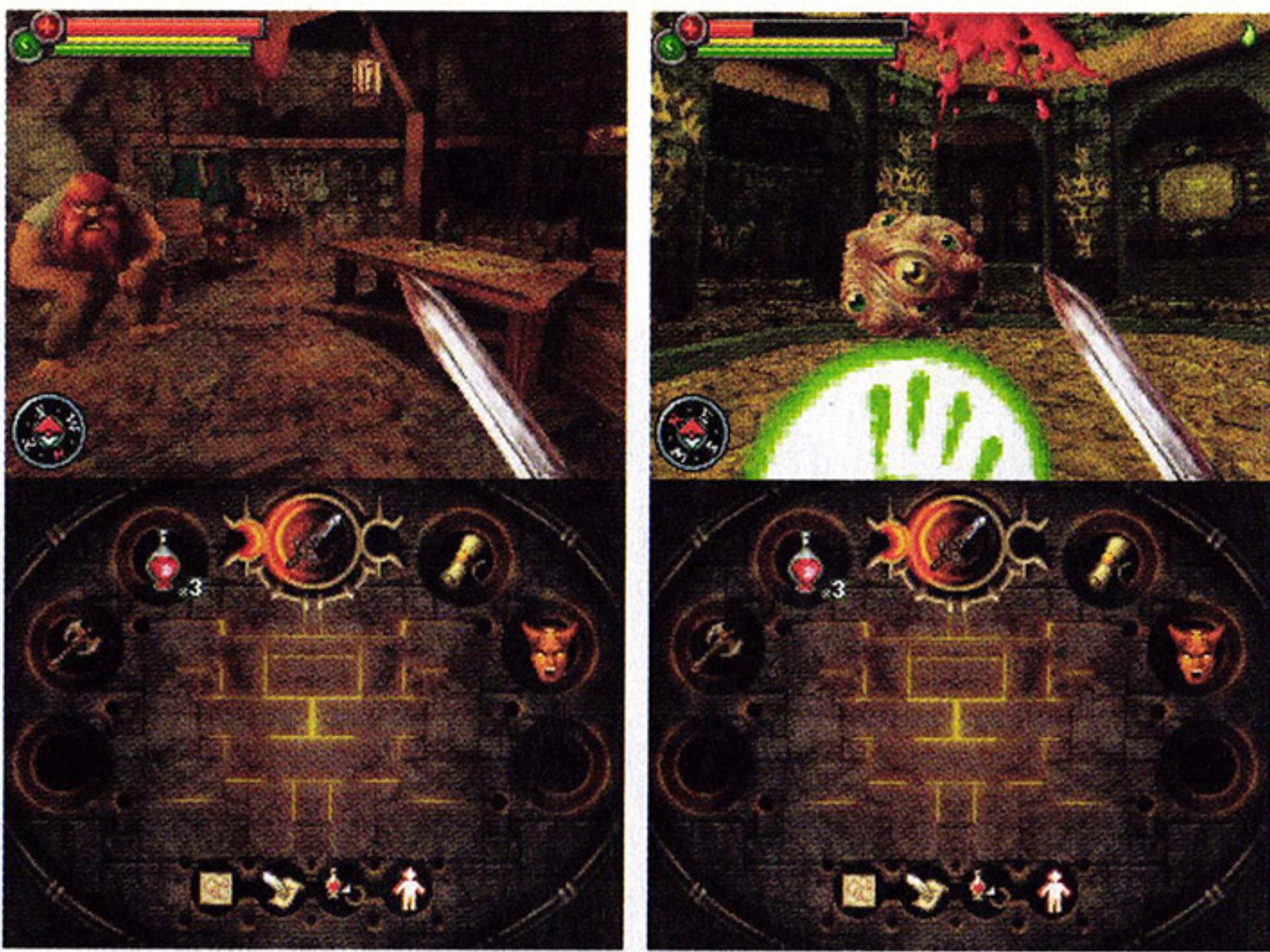


4



6

- 1: When you aren't playing co-op, your party is made up of generic characters
- 2: A job system influences your stats and abilities
- 3: The hero begins as an angel, but is cast down to Earth after a disaster
- 4: You create a hero when you start, and armor and weapons change your appearance
- 5: Instead of random encounters, you'll see your enemies on the field
- 6: The story takes a backseat to self-contained quests and multiplayer



NINTENDO DS

Infinite Space

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** PLATINUM GAMES/NUDE MAKER > **RELEASE** SPRING 2010

LITTLE PLATFORM, BIG GAME

We're intrigued by the sheer ambition of Infinite Space. The makers of the incredibly complex Steel Battalion are behind this new DS role-playing adventure, which already released in Japan to enthusiastic sales and reviews. The outer space epic sprawls across two galaxies, includes dozens of ship types, and a huge array of planets and solar systems to explore.

Players adopt the role of Yuri, a young space crewman, as he pursues his ambition of becoming a ship captain. In service to that goal, the game puts a big focus on spaceship building and customization. Somewhere around 150 blueprints offer a huge variety of ships to build, and you can recruit dozens of different crewmen that impact the functionality and effectiveness

of your vessel in battle.

While the story plays out in traditional anime-style scenes, the ship-to-ship battles appear to be in real-time 3D. A command gauge builds up based on the abilities of your crew, and when full, enables an attack against enemy ships. From the glimpses we've seen of the game in action, it appears that there are also character battles once you board enemy ships.

Early feedback on the game has included the conspicuous mention of an extremely high difficulty curve, but learning the ropes may be worth it if the story and scope are as deep as they appear to be. Unless the localization process goes off track, we expect to plug this in to our DS units sometime next spring. ■ ■ ■

NINTENDO DS

Fighting Fantasy: The Warlock of Firetop Mountain

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** ASPYR > **DEVELOPER** BIG BLUE BUBBLE > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 27

CHOOSE YOUR OWN RPG

In the early '80s, a book series called Fighting Fantasy came along that was part D&D adventure and part novel. These books became wildly popular among adolescents, allowing readers to create personalized characters and ultimately choose their own path through the story. Its popularity in the U.K. makes us wonder why the U.S. got stuck with the seemingly inferior Choose Your Own Adventure series. Developer Big Blue Bubble must have wondered the same thing, because it's bringing the first book in the series to our shores in RPG form for the Nintendo DS.

Based off the book *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone (also famous for co-founding the miniatures company Games Workshop), the game follows adventurers as they navigate a giant maze and battle an evil dragon to find the secret treasure hidden by a dark warlock. The game fol-

lows the book's rough outline, but takes certain liberties to lengthen the narrative and insert side quests.

Fighting Fantasy plays like a simplified, portable Elder Scrolls. Players use a compass to travel around the hub town of Anvil accepting quests from locals, fighting monsters in first person real-time battles, and finding keys that unlock the warlock's hidden chests. Like the book, choices players make throughout the game will have consequences down the road. Monty Python fans should note that the game is also filled with plenty of tongue-in-cheek European humor. For example, the first dwarf we ran into was named Offar Goodnessake.

Hopefully Fighting Fantasy's few twists to the RPG formula are enough to make the game worth playing, because we'd love to see such an exciting franchise finally find a foothold here in the States. ■ ■ ■





PSP

Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER KONAMI > DEVELOPER KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS > RELEASE 2010

RELIVING THE PAST

■ Peace Walker is set 10 years after Metal Gear Solid 3. A guy can grow a lot of facial hair in 10 years

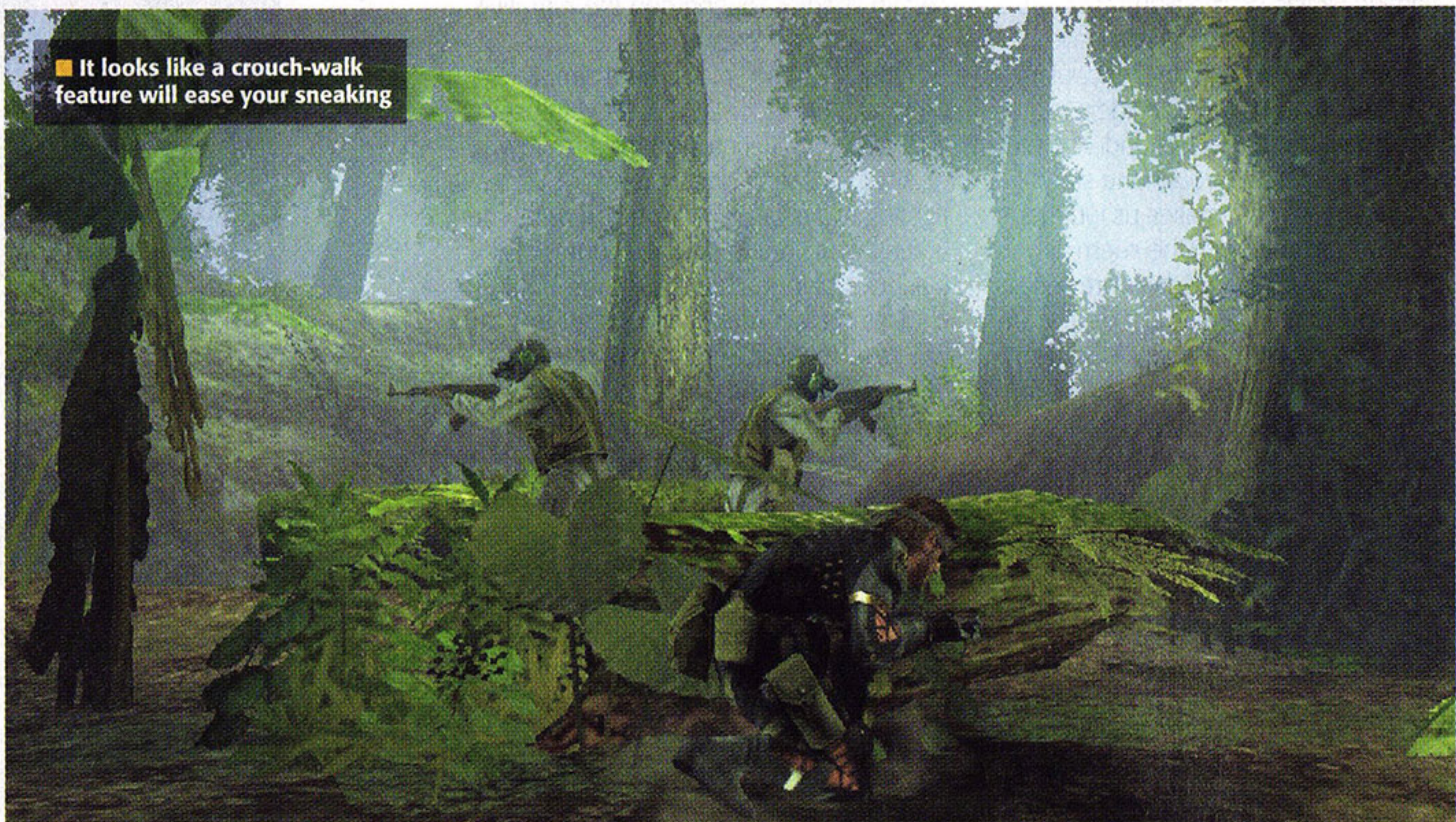
Hideo Kojima can't escape Metal Gear. Despite the legendary designer's assertions to the contrary, did anyone really believe that Metal Gear Solid 4 would be the end of Kojima's involvement in the flagship stealth franchise? The skeptics have once again been proven correct; Kojima is returning for Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker, a new entry coming exclusively to the PSP.

"This game is an MGS 5-class game. I am supervising, designing, producing, directing, and editing this title together with the MGS 4 team," Kojima explains. "I actually had the plan for this project in mind while working on [Portable Ops]. Back then, I intended to place the project in the hands of the next generation of creators at Kojima Productions. However, in the end, I felt that it was still a little too early to leave it completely in their hands, so I decided to take the reins."

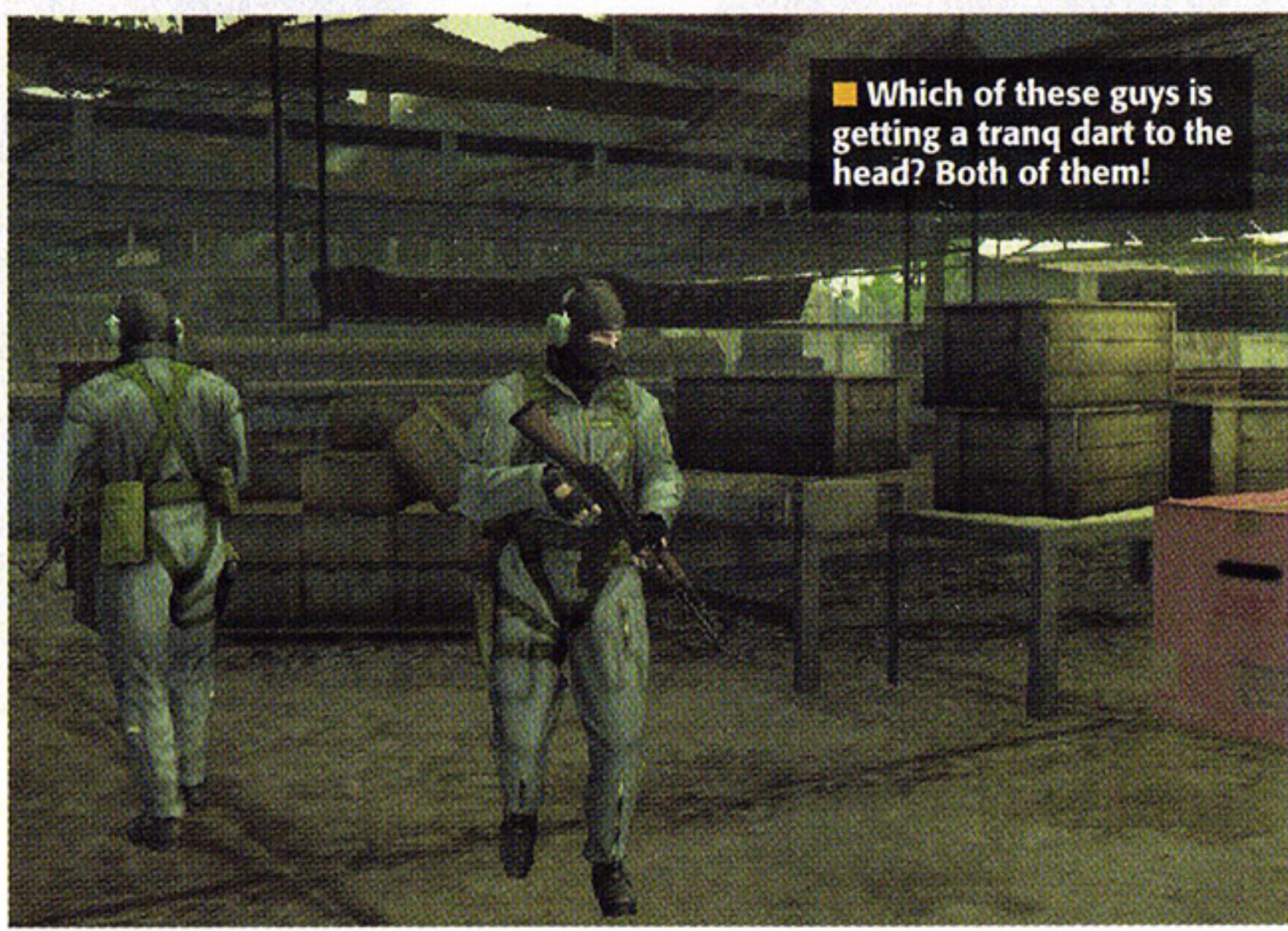
Peace Walker takes a step back in time, focusing the spotlight back on Big Boss as he and his mercenary army fight off a military invasion in Costa Rica. The tale is set during a mysterious era in the Metal Gear timeline: after Big Boss establishes the Foxhound unit (in Portable Ops), but before he orchestrates the rebellion at Outer Heaven (in the original Metal Gear). Peace Walker bridges the gap between these events using a mixture of new and familiar gameplay mechanics.

"The game will be stealth-action based. I can't reveal too many details yet, but we are implementing features that can only be realized on the PSP," Kojima clarifies. "The game will be a little different from the Metal Gear that players have come to know." These hints, along with the game's E3 trailer (which depicted four versions of Big Boss sneaking side by side), indicate that co-op is a strong possibility – potentially with a mission-based structure similar to Portable Ops.

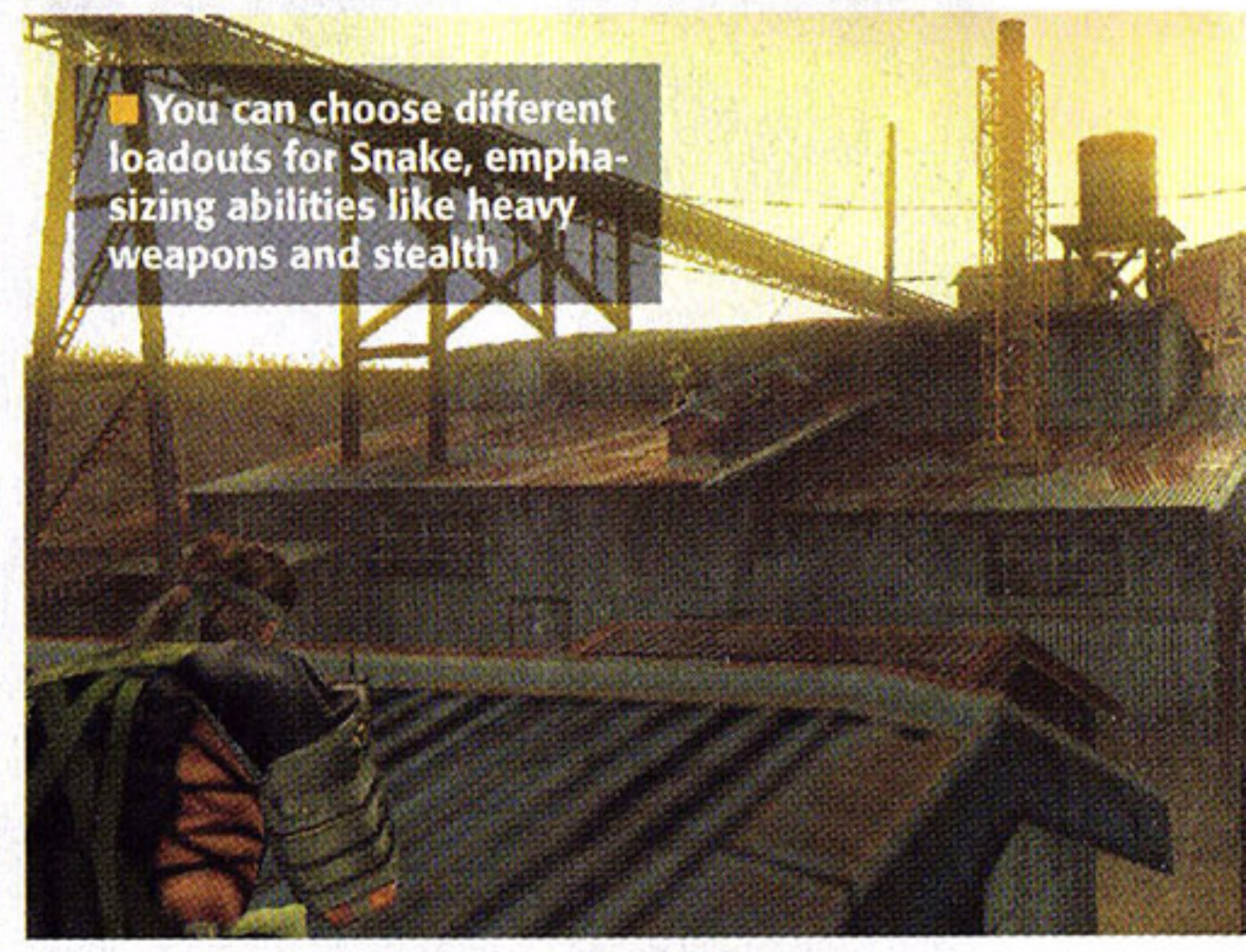
Though Metal Gear Solid 4 closed the book on Solid Snake, the series still has plenty of life thanks to its other characters. Big Boss is a tragic and charismatic figure, and fans have long been anxious to learn how he established himself as a great military leader. Portable Ops gave gamers a glimpse of that history, and we expect Peace Walker to reveal even more about the great soldier's mysterious past. ■ ■ ■



■ It looks like a crouch-walk feature will ease your sneaking



■ Which of these guys is getting a tranq dart to the head? Both of them!



■ You can choose different loadouts for Snake, emphasizing abilities like heavy weapons and stealth



PC

Aion

> STYLE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME
 > PUBLISHER NCSOFT > DEVELOPER NCSOFT > RELEASE SEPTEMBER 22

INTO THE ABYSS

It's been a while since a game has put World of Warcraft's audience directly in its sights. Aion makes no bones about it: Everything from the interface to the combat and quest design makes WoW players feel right at home. Why reinvent the wheel, though? We spent some quality hands-on time with the closed beta and came away impressed with the game's sky-high production values and promising endgame design.

The newbie experience takes great pains to avoid the "grindy" label that many gamers reflexively apply to Korean-developed titles. Like WoW or any other successful Western game, players are funneled from quest hub to quest hub, being gradually introduced to the game's many concepts along the way. It's a familiar but fun trip through beautiful, Asian folklore-inspired settings and tales.

Beginning at level 25, players can start taking in Aion's real meat-and-potatoes gameplay: the Abyss. Here, the two player factions clash with the neutral Balaur and each other over control of prime locations. Dozens of minor objectives exist and serve various purposes, but the true prizes are the Fortresses. These sprawling edifices grant powerful faction-wide buffs to their owners, from stat boosts to access to unique vendors and dungeons. They can only be assaulted at certain times, which should help concentrate player activity to critical mass for entertaining battles. Nothing is worse than a so-called PvP objective that turns into a routine NPC stomp because nobody is there to fight over it.

NCsoft recently gave us a guided tour of the Abyss, as well as a high-level PvE dungeon. Being put in control of a max-level character cold is nothing like playing to level cap on your own, of course, but we

were pleased with our Templar regardless. The class makes extensive use of chain attacks (as do many of Aion's heroes), and the UI supports the playstyle well. The button for any chain starter changes to the next main line attack in the sequence, which removes the need to dance across dozens of hotkeys to maintain the assault. Alternative moves, like stat-buffing shouts, branch off of certain attack paths as well.

Assaulting an Abyss objective is much like being in a public PvP dungeon. We worked our way through trash mobs before engaging the boss, much like you would in any setting. The point we were fighting over was minor, easily conquered by a single unopposed group. Major objectives like Fortresses require many more players to conquer, and have correspondingly larger layouts and tougher NPC guardians.

If you're too much of a carebear for the Abyss, you can stick around safe zones all the way to level cap and even find some dungeons and raids to keep you occupied there. The rewards will be less enticing, though, and the world much less dynamic.

The PvE dungeon we went through was more mundane. Just like in any other game, we crowd-controlled as best we could and focused damage on the most dangerous mob standing. Bosses threw a few curveballs at us, but nothing terribly difficult to adjust to on the fly. It's only a single dungeon in a game with dozens, but it did little to impress.

Aion is a beautiful, rich game that has as a good chance of succeeding. The gameplay is very familiar – in a good way – and the Abyss-focused endgame is promising. NCsoft isn't revolutionizing the MMORPG, but there's a lot to look forward to in this amalgamation of many of the genre's best ideas from the last decade. ■ ■ ■





PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

NHL 10

> **STYLE** 1 TO 6-PLAYER SPORTS (PS3), 1 TO 4-PLAYER (XBOX 360) (12-PLAYER ONLINE)
 > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 20

BUILDING A LASTING FRANCHISE

NHL 09 won over gamers with its fantastic gameplay, addictive Be a Pro mode, and deep online hockey league, but its franchise mode lagged woefully behind contemporary sports titles. Like any competitor on a quest for greatness, the team at EA Canada used the offseason to shore up its weaknesses.

This totally revamped Be a GM mode gives players the keys to a franchise, but if you want to become the next Brian Burke, your off-ice decisions must be as savvy and tactful as your unstoppable power play on the ice. First and foremost, EA Canada addressed the broken aspects that kept the players from making the kinds of drastic changes needed to build a winner. NHL 10 no longer requires a minimum number of players on your roster during the offseason, and the AI won't automatically resign players you planned to let go. This gives players more flexibility to make big changes, but the other GMs and agents aren't the brain-dead chumps from years past. Try to swindle the Boston Bruins by offering a 30-year old minor leaguer and a low draft pick for Zdeno Chara, and your standing with the team will take a hit, making the team more unlikely to deal with you in the future. Lowball enough free agents and your team

will develop a negative reputation among the players, making those star free agents less likely to sign with you. Much like the Be a Pro mode, as you make smart moves and complete tasks requested by the owner, you earn points which can be used to improve your player training, scouting, medical staff, and knowledge of behind-the-scenes league activity.

The most exciting new features are the draft day trades and retooled trading block. The trade block allows you to dangle three players at a time and fine-tune the parameters of what you expect to get in return; teams won't bother offering over-the-hill veterans when you're more interested in draft picks or prospects. When you're pitching trades, GMs no longer simply accept or decline the offer — they will indicate just how close or far away from making a deal your proposal is and even go as far to tell you what they are looking for in return. Gamers can also buy out unwanted contracts, fine-tune the training for each player, and make trades during the NHL draft.

Add these impressive new features to the board play and revamped presentation during the playoffs, and NHL 10 is looking like an early favorite for sports game of the year once again. ■ ■ ■



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

FIFA 10

> **STYLE** 1 TO 7-PLAYER SPORTS (PS3), 1 TO 4-PLAYER (360) (20-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
 > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 20

THE GRASS IS GREENER

The FIFA series has clawed its way to respectability, culminating in the franchise's best effort last year. Getting over the ghosts of past iterations and overcoming the long-standing competition wasn't easy, requiring a combination of gameplay tweaks and the maturation of features like Be a Pro mode. Perhaps EA knows that all eyes are on it to see how it handles its newfound respect and success, because the majority of additions to this year's game are aimed at refining the experience to solidify the title and shield it from reproach.

In our short time with an early build of the title, the one thing we came away with is how comfortable playing the game feels. The dribbling options conveyed by the triggers, bumpers, and analog sticks provide a wide range of moves that are nicely represented by the game's animations — something that could not always be said about the franchise. This reflects the more subtle work that typifies EA's approach this year.

This kind of smooth ball control possible makes it less necessary for FIFA 10 to make a splash with all sorts of new features. Fear not, however, as the game does offer new surprises with customizable set pieces.

As impressed as we were with how the game felt out on the pitch, there's a lot about this title that is too early to quantify. The developers at EA Canada are working on making AI players and keepers act smarter. This ranges from how they play defense, their positioning, their reactions to your play, how they tackle, and even how realistically the computer sims transfers and results in the GM mode. The quality of the game could rest on how these factors are executed. Poor player AI, from ditzky keepers to bad play along the touch lines, has been an unfortunate legacy of the series. Making good on promises to make players smarter would be a long overdue improvement. ■ ■ ■





■ Even without calling a play, your teammates try to create offense by posting up and running screens

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

NBA Live 10

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (10-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 6

TRADING PLACES

The old American proverb "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" holds no weight at Electronic Arts. Despite getting posterized by NBA 2K for the past nine years, the feisty NBA Live dev team at EA Canada shows no sign of tossing in the towel. Instead, the studio pulled out its pocketbook to land NBA 2K lead designer Mike Wang. Can Wang's considerable talents deliver EA to the Promised Land?

The seeds of change are readily apparent as the players step on the court. Gone are the two buttons for shooting and dunking, left trigger low post controls, right analog dribbling, and the complicated pick and roll introduced last year. In its place is a gameplay system that unsurprisingly shares much more in common with NBA 2K. The impact of the new left analog-based dribbling is immediately noticeable — skilled players like Brandon Roy seamlessly string together jukes and crossovers while attacking the basket. If the opposing guard is too staunch a defender to blow by, Roy can call for the pick by holding the B button. Without hesitation Greg Oden makes his way to the top of the key to block out the

guard. Roy explodes past his defender, and by holding the shoot button rather than tapping it, he elevates for a dunk. In the paint, big men will automatically post up their defender in the proper context.

The new mentality extends to off the ball movement as well. Guards and forwards no longer stand in place waiting to be directed via a playcall. Armed with over 150 new off-ball animations and new AI, teammates show the awareness to run screens and get open without goading. Working in concert with the DNA feature introduced last year, teams should react to situations just as their real world counterparts. More hands-on gamers can also take control of a second player to create big plays like alley-oops.

NBA Live 10 also boasts major changes to its presentation, including new broadcasting storylines that develop over the course of a season and redesigned arenas that reflect true stadium sounds and lighting. Many of the other new features, such as the revamped online team play, will be revealed as we move closer to the October 6 release date. ■ ■ ■

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii | PS2 | NINTENDO DS

Bakugan: Battle Brawlers

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION/BOARD > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> **DEVELOPER** NOW PRODUCTION > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 23

MARBLE MONSTERS

Pikachu? He's old news. Yu-Gi-Oh? Please, what a chump. Ask any kid today and they'll tell you that the new hotness is Bakugan. Take the classic backyard game marbles, add a few card game elements, and replace all the marbles with tiny transformers that do gladiatorial battle, and you'll begin to understand the newest Japanese cartoon/toy/card game craze that's even now invading the U.S. market.

Bakugan tells the story of an otherworldly group of creatures called, well, Bakugan. When the core energies of their dimension become unbalanced, these tiny creatures are cast to Earth, where they team up with a group of school kids. Humanity turns many of its wars into games, but for the Bakugan war is a game. Players use mysterious metallic cards that fall from the sky; only by battling the forces of an evil Bakugan named Naga and restoring the dimensional energies can the other Bakugan save Earth and return to their

home dimension.

Activision's new game follows the rules laid out in the TV show and card game. Players vie for gate cards by rolling their Bakugan onto a battlefield and going toe-to-toe with their opponent's monsters. In the video game, however, before a Bakugan lands on a card and stakes claim to it, players can briefly explore the game board and pick up power-ups that will give them a leg up in combat.

Battles play out in a variety of random minigames. Sometimes these are as simple as seeing how many icons a player can match onscreen under a time limit, while at other times they are Guitar Hero-like rhythm challenges.

Battle Brawlers looks like a faithful digital interpretation of the series, so fans of the franchise should be pleased. Since Bakugan is currently exploding like Cabbage Patch Kids, we doubt this game will have any trouble finding that audience. ■ ■ ■





PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Darksiders

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION

> **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** VIGIL GAMES > **RELEASE** JANUARY 1

THE TRIALS OF WAR

A single Horseman of the Apocalypse fights against angels and demons as he amasses enough power to take on the Destroyer, a beast who left the world in ruin. With a storyline rooted in a conflict of biblical proportions, it is no wonder that most talk about Darksiders has been centered on battle; the stylish combat system is easy to pick up and understand. This tends to overshadow the game's other major element, exploration, which takes shape more slowly over an extended time – something we had a chance to experience firsthand as we spent a few hours playing the latest version of this post-apocalyptic adventure.

As the game begins, the horseman War is cast down to Earth, stripped of his powers as punishment for prematurely instigating the end of the world. Much of the overworld is closed off to him in this weakened state, but we saw hints of the potential paths scattered across the hub area. After obtaining the right gear, War can use blue circles on the ground for a jump boost, glide over gaps too wide to

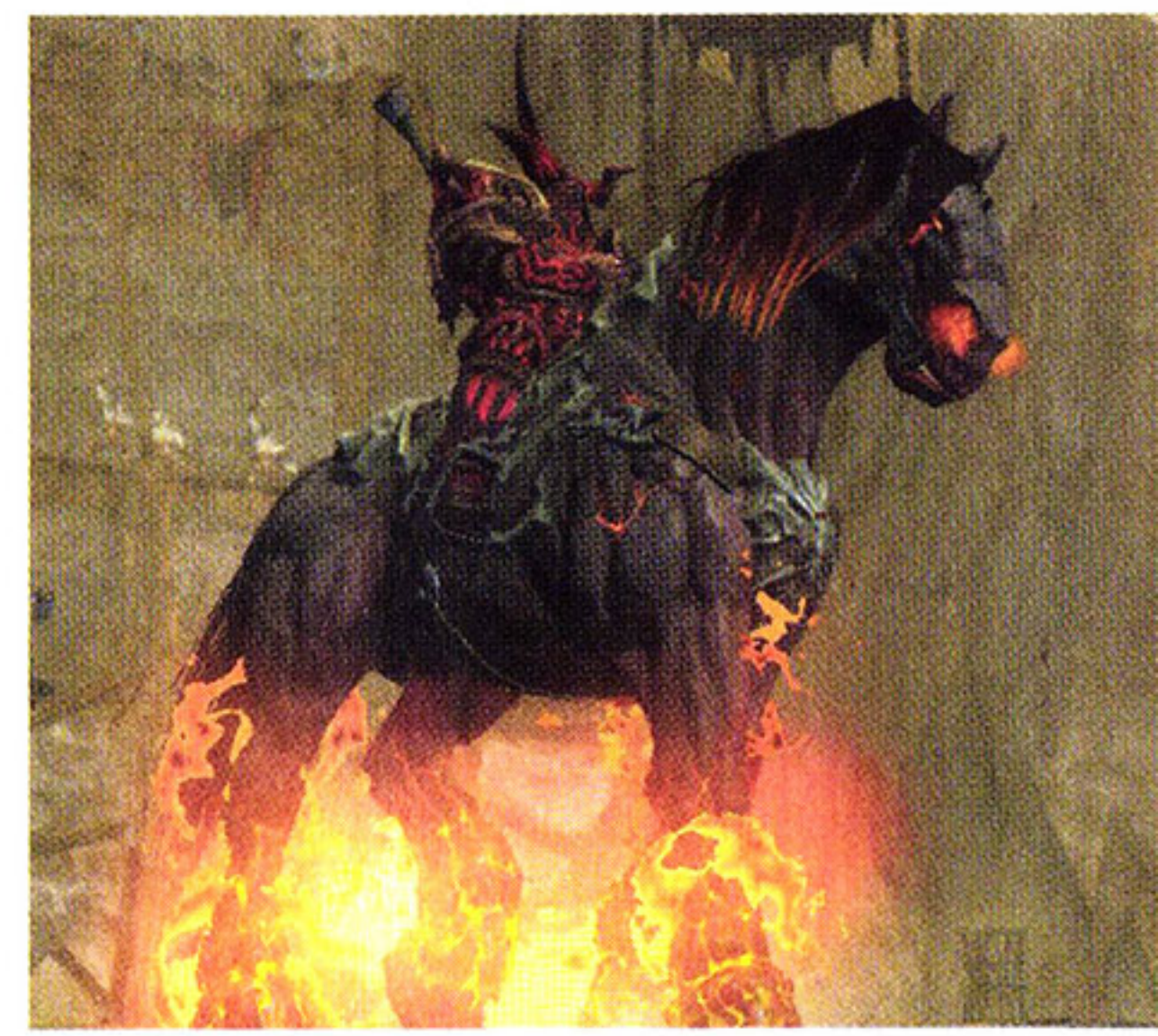
jump, and break through crystals obstructing a door. Encountering these obstacles for the first time gives a similar sensation to seeing a red door in *Metroid* or a cracked wall in *Zelda*; you know that getting somewhere new is just a matter of finding the right tool.

Once you reach these areas, you can also access new "dungeons," self-contained areas branching out from the main overworld. They may not be dungeons in the classic underground temple sense, but they are similar in concept; they present War with a series of trials and combat encounters before pitting him against a boss. We played through a series of submerged subway tunnels, turning cranks and pushing train cars to progress. We had to fight back plenty of bloodthirsty monsters along the way, but the ratio of combat to exploration felt well balanced.

Even the boss fights integrate a degree of puzzle solving. For instance, we fought a huge dragon-like aberration called Tiamat at the end of the first dungeon. War battles the she-beast from the roof of a cathedral,

where the creature circles above and shoots goutts of flame. To bring her down into melee range, we grabbed a dormant sticky bomb off the ground and whipped it at her, then used our boomerang blade's chain-targeting to hit a burning torch before arcing toward the bomb and igniting it. The resulting explosion took Tiamat out of the sky, leaving her open to War's sword combos. The process may not sound too complex, but Tiamat is the first major fight; developer Vigil Games promises subsequent boss battles ratchet up the scale and complexity.

Darksiders was first announced over two years ago, but it seems like the increased development time has been well spent. Vigil has created an impressively large world, a dynamic combat system, and imbued each character and creature with a distinct comic book vibe. If all of these elements continue to come together during the next few months, living through the apocalypse could be an excellent way to ring in the new year. ■ ■ ■



■ Demons look unsurprisingly evil, but angels have a tech-heavy design



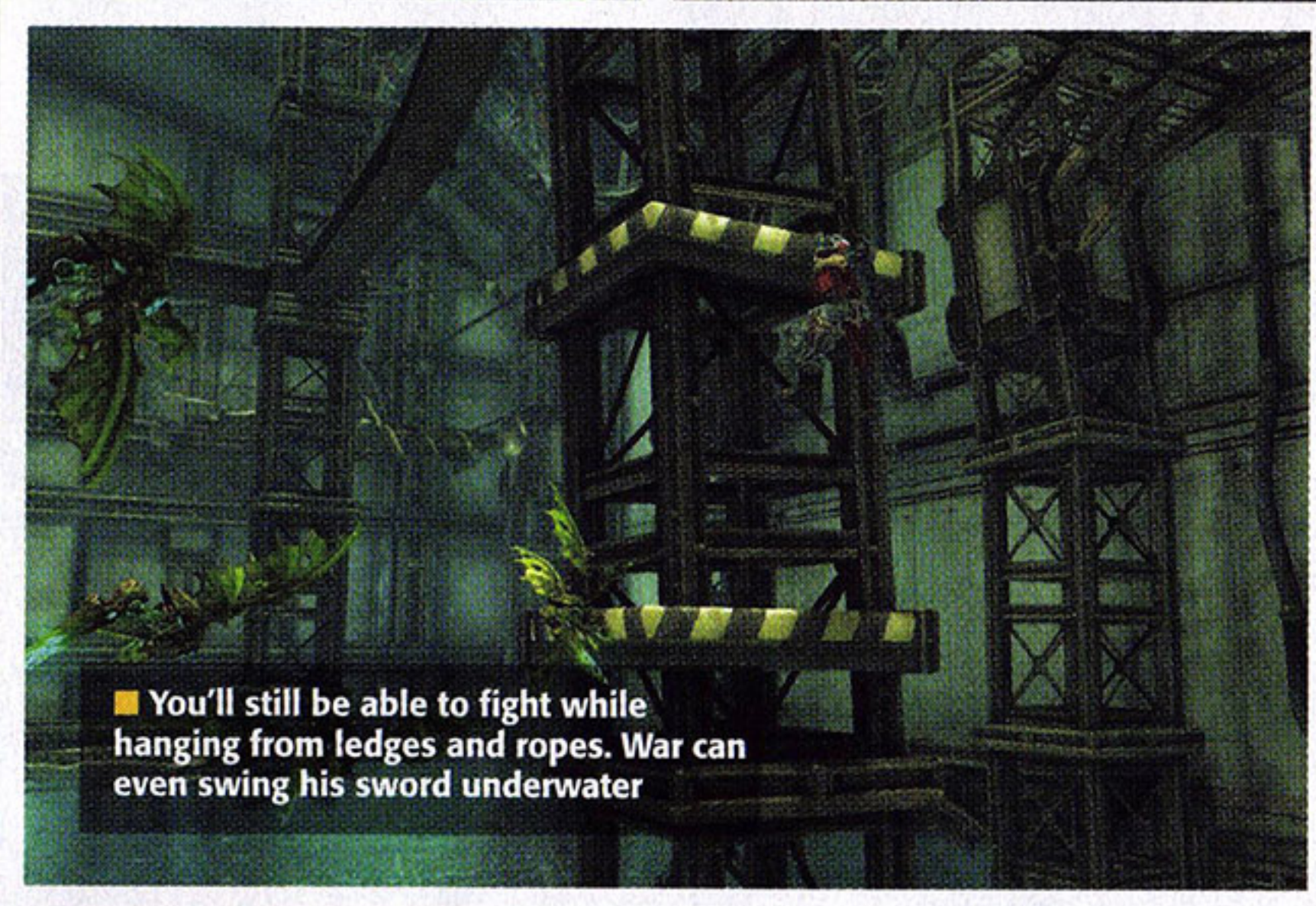
■ Tiamat is just the first of many bosses



■ Vulgrim will sell War new moves in exchange for souls

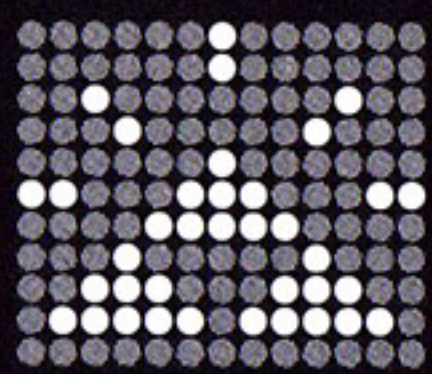


■ You'll still be able to fight while hanging from ledges and ropes. War can even swing his sword underwater



■ It may be a dagger instead of a key, and an eye instead of a lock, but you get the idea





PHOTOPHILE

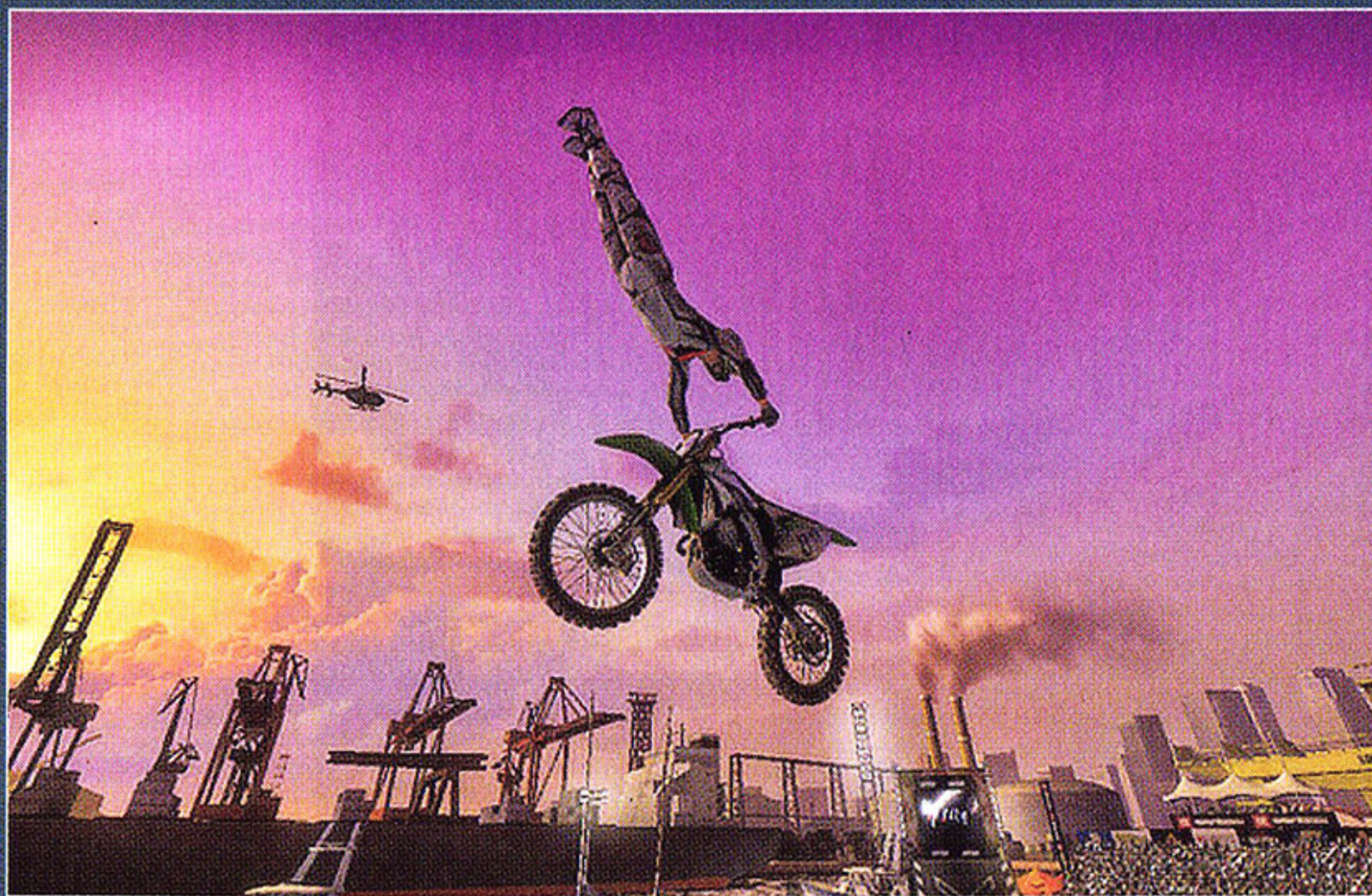
Mini Previews With Big Pictures



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii

NHL 2K10

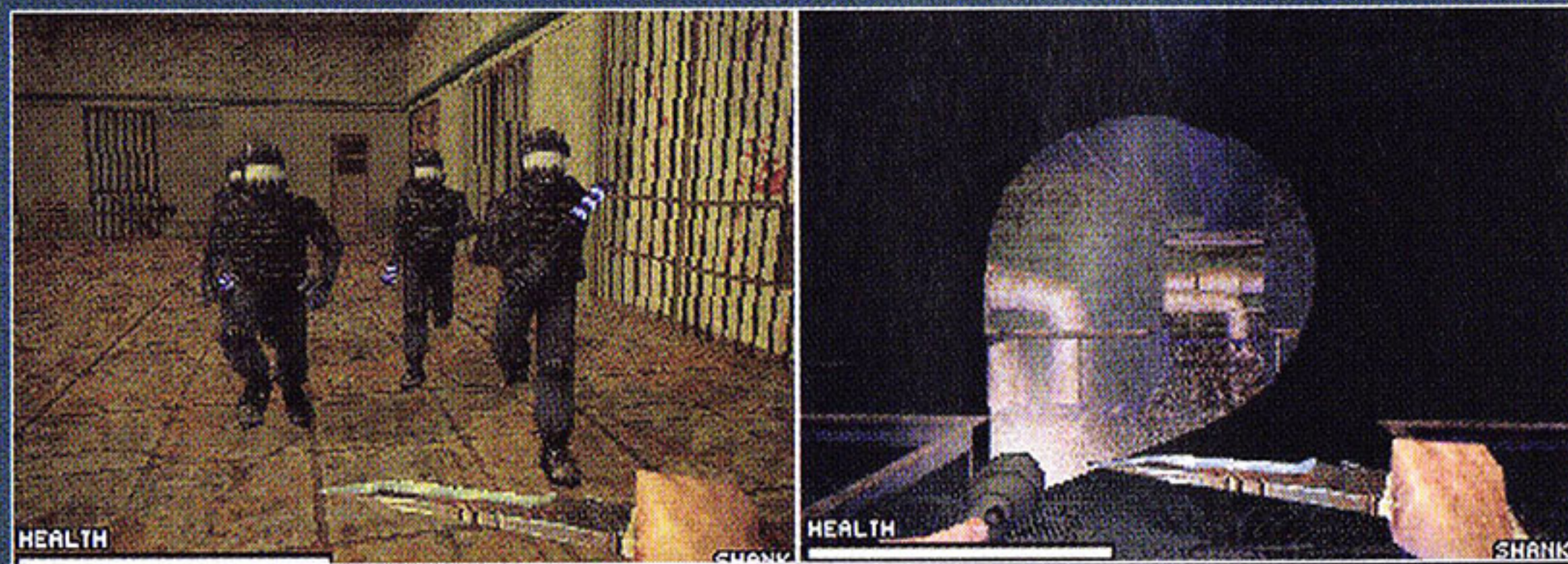
Last year's NHL 2K returned developer Visual Concepts to the helm, and now it's back to the drawing board... again. Featuring a new skating engine and reworked AI in order to keep its players in basic hockey positioning, NHL 2K10 hopes to get called up from its stint in the minors. The fine-tuning extends to Franchise mode, where each NHL team starts with a franchise state, such as being in rebuilding mode or on the cusp of the cup. This influences how the GM makes trades and builds his team. The Wii version of NHL 2K10 is getting its own improvements with online play (including leagues, tournaments, and created teams), WiiMotion Plus compatibility (great for slap and snap shots), and five exclusive Mii super skills minigames based around the NHL All-Star skills competitions. The game comes out in mid-September, and it shouldn't take us long to find out if this year's title will finally stay up in the NHL.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PSP | NINTENDO DS

MX vs. ATV Reflex

The racing in THQ's MX series has always been fast, but now you'll really be hanging on for dear life. The Rainbow Studios-developed MX vs. ATV Reflex introduces a new gameplay mechanic that changes the way you take every turn and pull every trick. The right analog stick now controls your rider independently of your bike. Thus, you use it to lean into turns, perform tricks as you fly through the air, and even to try and regain control of your bike in dangerous situations. Combined with persistent track deformation that makes races hairier than ever before, Reflex should offer a unique feel to the moment-to-moment racing as you try and keep control over the courses' constantly changing terrain. The gate drops this holiday.



NINTENDO DS

Dementium II

The first Dementium suffered from plenty of problems, but it filled the underserved FPS horror niche on the DS and showed promise in many areas. Developer Renegade Kid has heard your complaints. In this sequel, you can crouch and jump, hold the flashlight and a weapon at the same time, and carry healing and status items to use at will. The save system is more liberal (it also refills health), and enemies now emerge from hell portals rather than closets. In the first half hour we played, we also noticed the environment and enemy variety had improved considerably. Fans can see the changes firsthand when SouthPeak publishes the game in early 2010.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2 | PSP | NINTENDO DS

Cars: Race-O-Rama

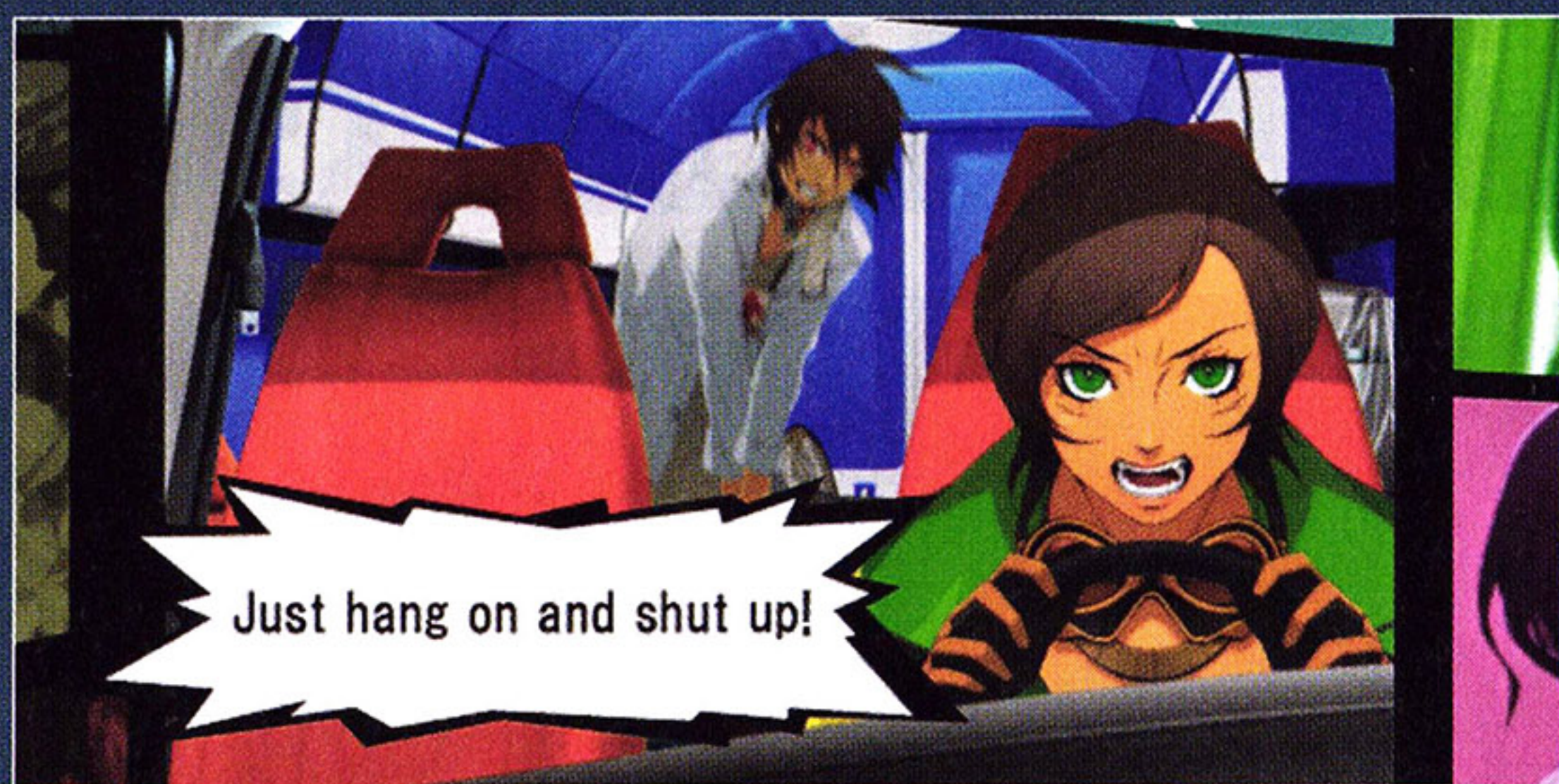
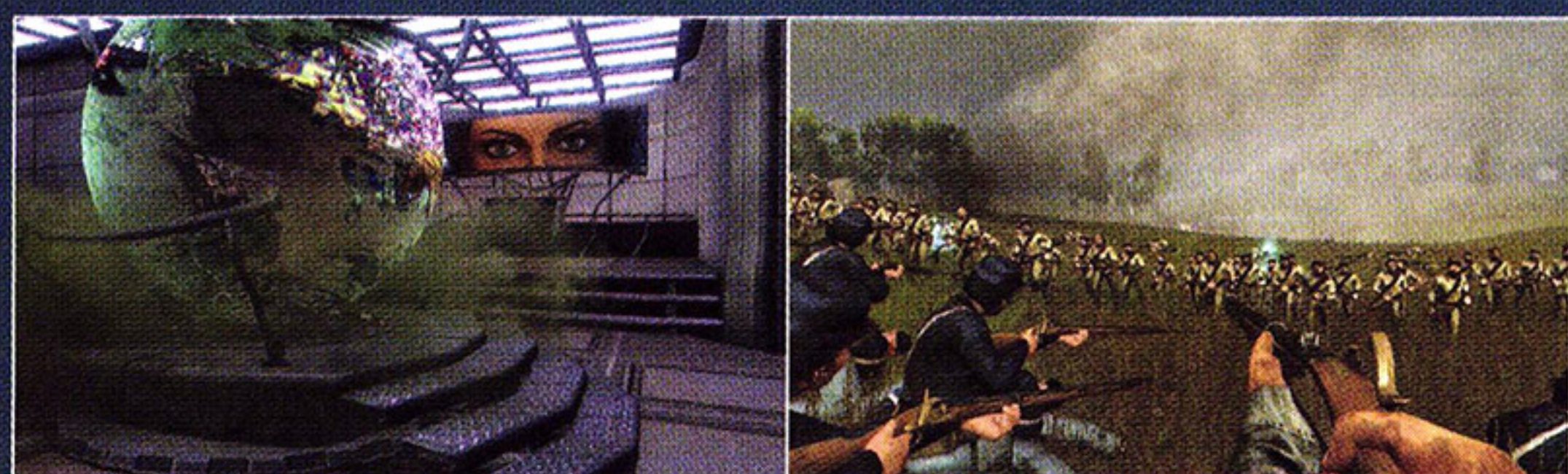
Lightning McQueen is the king of anthropomorphic cars. He's fast, he's sporty, and he sounds just like Owen Wilson. What's not to love?! If you're not a McQueen fan, THQ's new racing game, based off Pixar's *Cars* license, lets you customize and race one of up to 30 playable vehicles through Santa Carburera and Motoropolis City in the national Race-O-Rama exhibition. The competition is fierce, as antagonist Chick Hicks will do anything to win and has placed traps across many of the courses. Players interested in racing clean can also join a friend in one of the 10 minigame challenges based on Pixar's *Cars* shorts when the game comes out this October.



XBOX 360 | PC

Darkest of Days

Time travel junkies should find a lot to like in the clever storyline behind *Darkest of Days*. In some indeterminate future, humanity discovers time travel. To avoid the dilemma of screwing up the timeline, they pull their agents from dark days in history, usually from the files of soldiers who were reported missing in action during major conflicts. You play a soldier recruited from Custer's last stand who travels back and forth between World War II POW camps, the Civil War, and even the soon-to-be devastated city of Pompeii in the hours before the fateful volcano eruption. Along the way, you're tasked with utilizing both period weaponry and wildly overpowered futuristic guns. The game's biggest bragging point is the huge number of onscreen characters, which makes for some impressive war scenes. Phantom EFX plans to publish the game this September.



Wii

Trauma Team

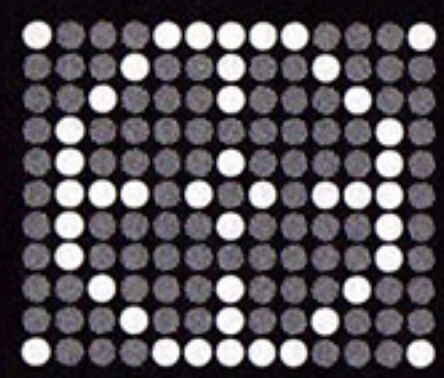
The first *Trauma Center* was one of the most tactile games in the early days of the DS. But as the series continued, the same old surgeries got stale. Atlus' latest entry delivers six new playable characters and specialties: EMT, endoscopic technician, orthopedic surgeon, forensics, diagnostics, or general surgery. Storytelling has also advanced, ditching static talking heads in favor of a more action-heavy moving comic book style. Get ready to snap on the gloves next spring.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

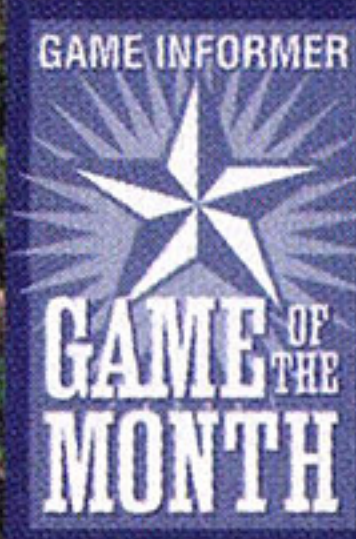
Fairytale Fights

This cute-on-the-surface brawler doesn't take long to show its true colors. Embracing cartoon violence in its most extreme state, *Fairytale Fights* is a four-player hack 'n' slasher from Playlogic. Characters like Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, and other bulwarks of classic children's literature are playable both on and offline. Realizing that fairy tales are becoming increasingly obsolete, these characters start a brutal rampage through the colorful backdrops of everyone's favorite stories. The game includes light platforming elements, but the major focus is on dismemberment and vengeful slaying using weapons that lay scattered about the levels. Expect your grandma to mistakenly buy this for your youngest sibling sometime this holiday.



REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To



Batman: Arkham Asylum

Batman has been beaten, battered, bloodied, and left for dead in video games. But like any true hero, he has found a way to come out on top. Batman: Arkham Asylum is not only the best Batman game to come out on consoles, it's a contender for Game of the Year. Little-known developer Rocksteady Studios has crafted an atmospheric and action packed homage to one of DC Comics' most beloved characters.

Our crack (or crackhead, we can never decide which) review team rates games in a number of categories to help you sort out the great from the stuff you'll hate. Most games are reviewed by two staff members, and you will find both their opinions on each review. To make things a little easier we have put together some definitions of what the numbers mean, what we look for in a game, and also a cheat sheet so the newbies can understand our advanced video game jargon. It is important to note that the Game of the Month is determined only by the main review score, not an average of the two opinions.

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.
- 9** Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
- 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.
- 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.
- 6** Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
- 5** Passable. 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.
- 4** Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
- 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.
- 2** Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
- 1** Advertars. Just when we thought Avatars couldn't get any worse.

- > **Concept:** What new ideas the game brings to the table and how well old ideas are presented.
- > **Graphics:** How good a game looks, taking into account any flaws such as bad collision or pop-up.
- > **Sound:** Does the game's music and sound effects get you involved or do they make you resolve to always play with the volume down?
- > **Playability:** Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.
- > **Entertainment:** Flat out, just how fun the game is to play. The most important factor in rating a game.
- > **Replay Value**

- High** – You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.
- Moderately High** – Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.
- Moderate** – Good for a few months or a few times through.
- Moderately Low** – After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.
- Low** – You'll quit playing before you complete the game.

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82



the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older.		Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older.
	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older.		Content suitable only for adults.
	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.		Product is awaiting final rating.
	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older.		

For our newer readers, here is a glossary of terms and acronyms that commonly appear in the magazine. Video game veterans should move along (these aren't the droids you are looking for).

1080i – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The “i” means that the video is being interlaced

1080p – Currently the best resolution for gaming on an HDTV. In widescreen, 1080p generates an image at resolution of 1920x1080 in progressive format

480p – Progressive scanning, this option (“p”= progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture, 480i (“i” = interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting

720p – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 720p stands for resolution of 1280x720 pixels. The “p” means that the video is in progressive format

4X – A term we use for games like Civilization and Total War. The abbreviation means “explore, expand, exploit, exterminate”

action – A term we use for games like God of War and Devil May Cry

ad hoc – A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity

AI – Artificial Intelligence. Usually refers to how well the computer reacts to human opponents or works with human allies

adventure – A term we use for games like Myst and Escape From Monkey Island

bloom – An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces

board – A term we use for games like Scene It? and Mario Party

cel shading – A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels

CG – Computer Generated. Usually refers to cutscenes that don't use in-game graphics

DLC – Downloadable content. Usually takes the form of inexpensive or free add-ons to existing games

E3 – Electronic Entertainment Expo. A gaming convention held every year since 1995. It is one of the largest events in the gaming industry

first-party – A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system

fighting – A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive

FPS – First-Person Shooter. Describes games like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty. Also used to denote the phrase “frames per second,” or how many animation frames happen in one second

framerate – The frames of animation used to generate the appearance of movement

frontend – A game's menus and options

HDTV – High Definition Television

HP – Hit Points. A numerical representation of a character's remaining life. Common in RPGs

HUD – Heads Up Display. The various status indicators overlaid on the screen, like mini-maps and health bars

infrastructure – A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances

IP – Intellectual Property. A single game or franchise encompassing the ideas and characters contained within

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like Warcraft 3 or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

jaggies – Graphical lines that look jagged when they should be straight

LAN – Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft

motion blur – Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed

music – A term we use for games like Guitar Hero and Rock Band

NPC – Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans

particle effects – Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time

platform – A term we use for games like Super Mario and Ratchet & Clank

pop-up – When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance

Pottery – When a popular book spawns a mediocre movie, which in turn becomes a crappy game

PS2 – Sony's PlayStation 2

PS3 – Sony's PlayStation 3 console

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Picross

racing – A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart

RPG – Role-Playing Game. A term for games like Final Fantasy and The Elder Scrolls

RTS – Real-Time Strategy. A subgenre of strategy games including titles like StarCraft and Command & Conquer

shooter – A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL and Top Spin

strategy – A term we use for games like Disgaea and Fire Emblem

third-party – Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

The Beatles: Rock Band

> **STYLE** 1 TO 6-PLAYER MUSIC (6-PLAYER ONLINE)
 > **PUBLISHER** MTV GAMES/ELECTRONIC ARTS
 > **DEVELOPER** HARMONIX > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 9 > **ESRB** T

LEND ME YOUR EARS AND I'LL SING YOU A SONG

It's hard to fathom the number of stars that needed to align for this game to come to light, but align they did, and the game community can now reap the benefit. Harmonix has done a remarkable job of bringing the Beatles' music to life in an interactive setting, devoting enormous attention to the details of history and authenticity that Beatles fans demand. The developers also added their own visual flair to the game, making this the most aesthetically beautiful music game to yet release.

The game ships with fewer songs than we've come to expect on a disc, they're all from one band, and some of them aren't as challenging as expert players might wish. Those three things are the only reasons one should marshal concerns at the game, and those issues must be stacked against a preponderance of quality and excellence in every other facet of the game experience.

While much of the core Rock Band experience remains intact, the presence of The Beatles warranted a full remodeling of the menus and visual style. Small adjustments to the front end make No Fail mode and Lefty Switch easily accessible.



In addition, the World Tour structure is scrapped for a simpler progression tracing the history of the band. Strong performances unlock old photos and other extras from the band's weighty career. Even loading screens have some added spice, with never-before-heard snippets of dialogue, tunings, and other audio clips gathered from The Beatles old between-takes recordings.

The biggest addition to the formula is harmony vocals. Up to three microphones can be plugged in beside

the instruments, enabling either busy six-player parties, or the more challenging option of three or four person bands, where each instrumentalist tackles a vocal part simultaneously. An excellent vocal trainer helps players learn their parts, and nailing those tough harmonies can bring new life to classic tunes.

The progression through venues is a great lesson in the breadth of music produced by The Beatles, but the highlights of the experience are the Abbey Road recordings in the latter half of the game. Rather than show repeated scenes of the historic recording space, Harmonix conjures imaginative dreamscapes to represent the lyrics and tone of the music being played. Combined with pitch-perfect recreations of historic venues like the Ed Sullivan Show and Shea Stadium, the visual component shines.

I've left the most central aspect of the game for last, because it's hard to speak about music whose merits and quality have been debated for over 40 years. Suffice to say, the songs on display here helped shape entire branches of popular music that came in later years. The game does an admirable job of showcasing that music, delivering a brand new way for fans to appreciate it, and undoubtedly drawing new fans into the fold. —MILLER

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** Arguably the greatest band of all time gets its own music game

> **Graphics:** Harmonix meticulously represents the band members and their career, while adding a great interpretive aesthetic unique to the game

> **Sound:** While there are fewer songs than recent music games, nearly every one is a definitive classic

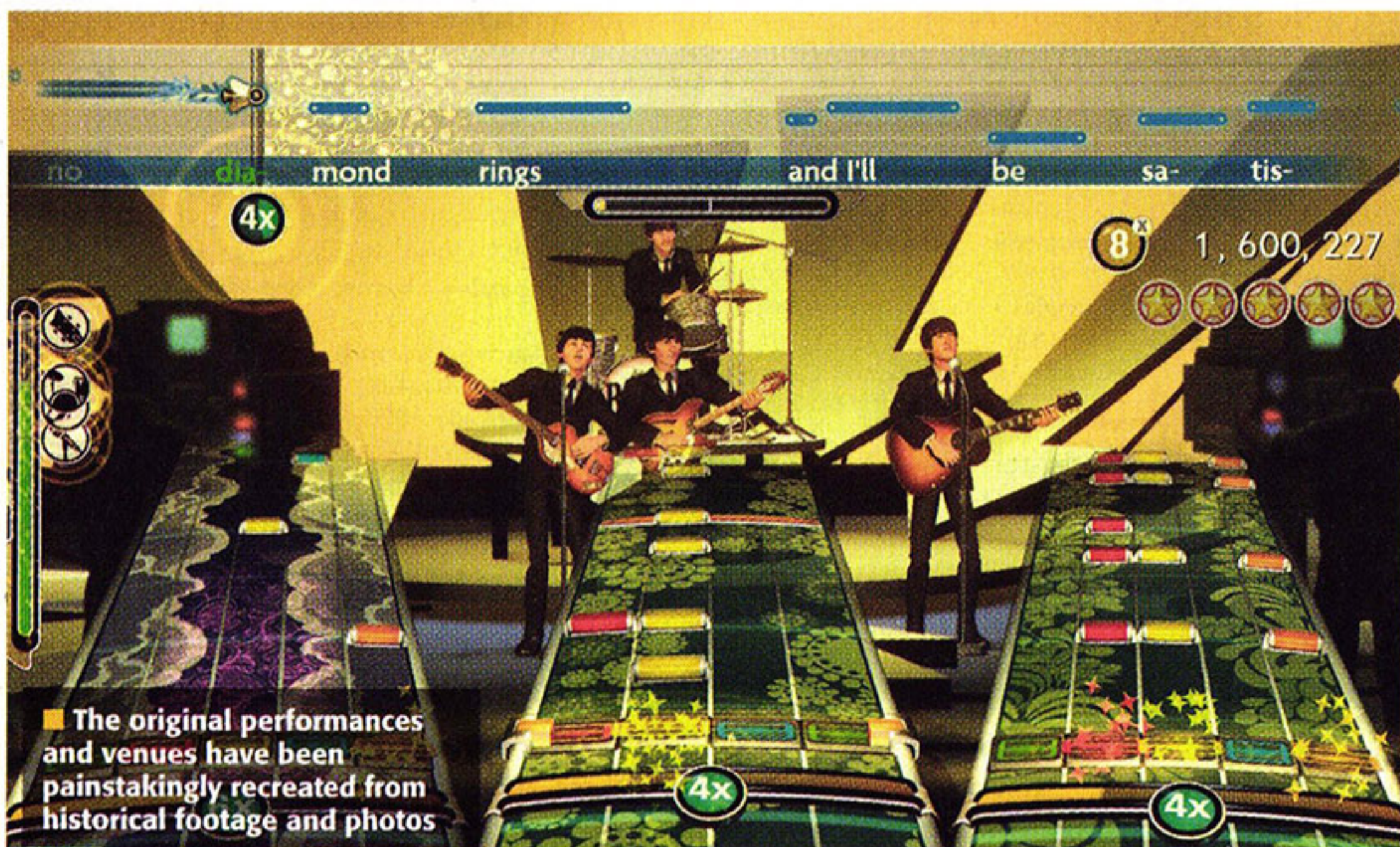
> **Playability:** Subtle tweaks to the menu deliver a better play experience than earlier Rock Band games

> **Entertainment:** A phenomenal and loving tribute to the band, the game has the power to make fans of those who never really got what the big deal was before

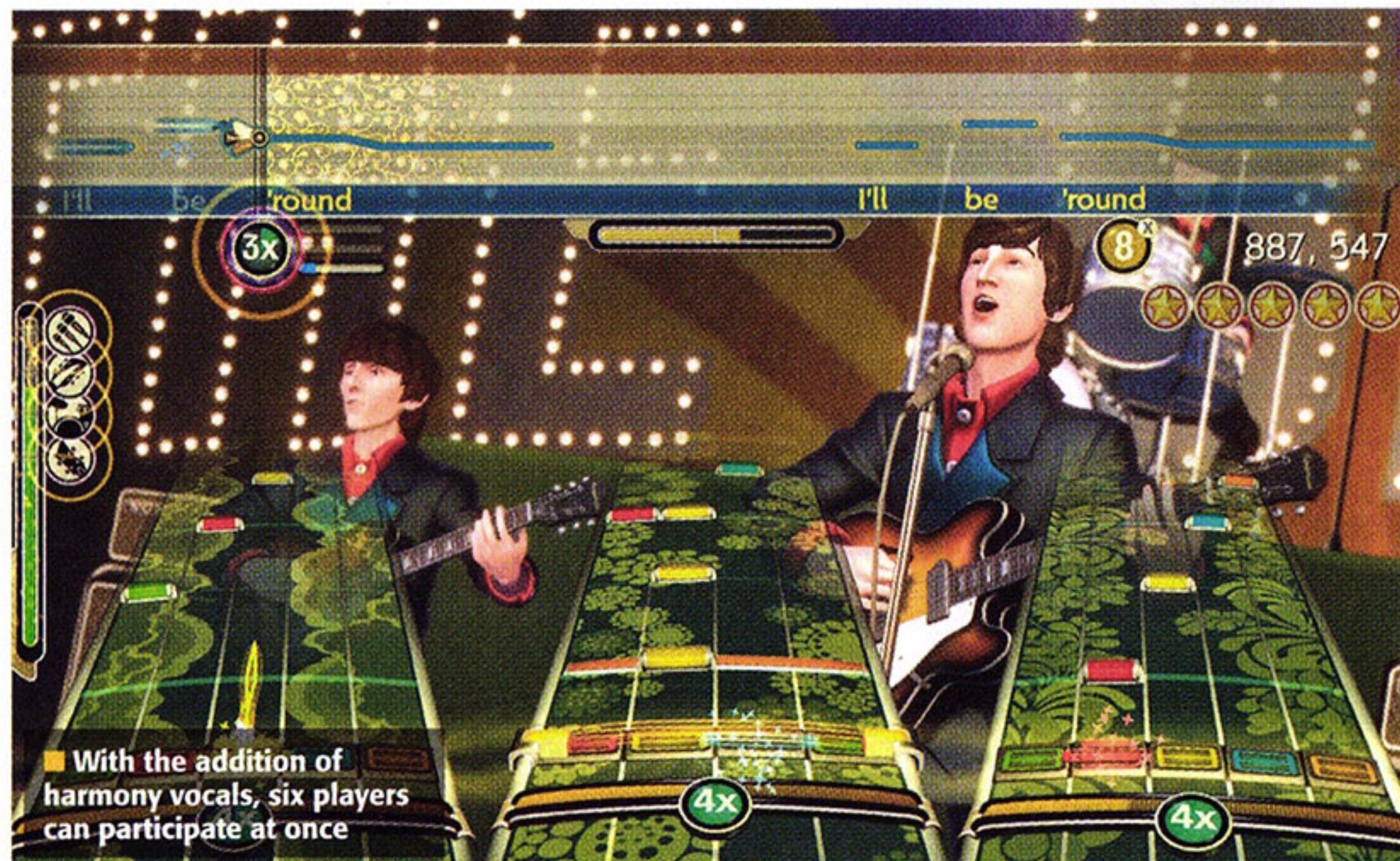
> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.75

The Beatles mean so much to so many people, and I consider them the best band of all time. It is no small feat that this game captures the essence of their music and brings them closer to the hearts of fans and anyone with ears. The setlist is a mixture of hits, some deep cuts ("I Want You"), too many Ringo songs, not enough of George's, and the criminal absence of "Rain," among others. While this game captures the Beatles' musical magic, it isn't as good at exposing the power of their story. The game's cutscene montages — while beautiful to look at — are only snapshots of The Beatles' legacy, invariably prompting questions that the game's trivia nuggets (which are buried in the menus and not woven in the Story mode) can't answer. To that end, this game can be the first step in falling in love with The Beatles either for the first time or all over again. —KATO



The original performances and venues have been painstakingly recreated from historical footage and photos



With the addition of harmony vocals, six players can participate at once

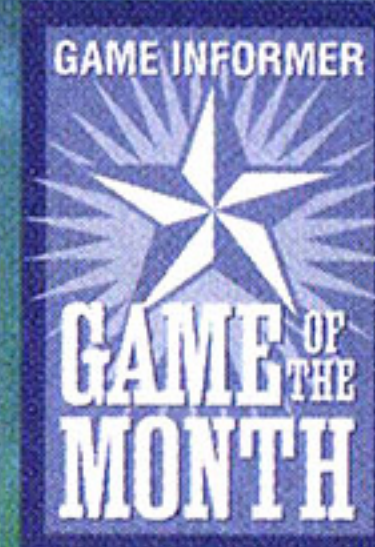
"HE HACKED INTO OUR NETWORK, STOLE OUR PLANS, AND KILLED NEARLY ALL OF MY MEN."



ALPHA PROTOCOL™

THE ESPIONAGE RPG

BOTTOM LINE **9.5**



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Batman: Arkham Asylum

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS —
> **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS > **RELEASE** AUGUST 25 > **ESRB** T

THE BEST BATMAN GAME EVER MADE

Gloomily lit corridors spattered with various molds and blood types snake treacherously toward the heart of Arkham Asylum, each whispering secrets of lunacy and death. The sound of maniacal laughter echoes faintly through these halls, damning all who can hear it, as all are dead men walking regardless of whether they wear pinstripes or badges. The atmosphere established in these confines is taut, yet strangely mesmerizing.

Like BioShock's underwater dystopia, Arkham Asylum is a place of wonder and inexplicable horror. The demonized Victorian architecture blends seamlessly with a lifetime of comic book history to create a tourist attraction that steals your attention away, and makes you wish you had a camera to preserve the unbelievable imagery. The Asylum isn't just a backdrop for this twisted tale, it is its tone-setter and driving force. The Asylum pumps just as much excitement into this adventure as the pointy-eared vigilante, Batman, does.

With the Joker seizing control of this establishment, it doesn't take long for its inmates to be freed from their cells. Impressively, none of these goons feel like standard video game fodder. Developer Rocksteady Studios has gone to great lengths to make all of the inhabitants, be it the inmates or the now-hunted guards, feel like they are living, breathing characters. They converse with one another, interact with Arkham's geometry, and ultimately create their own self-contained stories. Their scripted behaviors translate to brilliantly devised gameplay cues that dictate how Batman approaches a sce-

nario. Almost all of the encounters bring different twists and challenges that play off the personality traits of the caped crusader.

Some situations allow you to play up your "demon of the night" legacy, by striking from the dark and instilling such a degree of fear into your opponents that they shoot at the shadows and fall right into your traps. Batman's detective skills are also used in a variety of entertaining ways, such as using his high-tech gadgetry to follow a DNA trail, or employing his perceptive skills (which in turn are yours) to solve the Riddler's many riddles. Through a beautifully designed melee system, Bruce Wayne's years of martial arts training are highlighted with brutal efficiency. Even when the odds are stacked against you ten to one, you are empowered with the feeling that you will wipe the floor with them all. The ease with which Batman can counter an attack and retaliate with a teeth-showing blow almost makes him seem like he is at peace on the battlefield.

His "wonderful toys" bring great depth to the navigation of Arkham. Like the Metroid or Zelda games, areas of this fortress are locked off until new gadgets are obtained. Most hold valuable secrets, like experience points for adding new combat abilities to your arsenal and awesome audio recordings delivering the backstory of the Asylum and its inmates. There's always a good reason to backtrack through this dark place, even if you spend far too much time navigating its ventilation shafts.

The story behind this amazing Batman experience



■ **Batman's gadgets are seamlessly tied to the combat, allowing for effortless batarang tosses and grapple strikes**

doesn't evolve much from Joker taking over the Asylum, but it dishes out water cooler moments like they are going out of style. Some play off Batman's insensitive side, others highlight the rogues' ability to manipulate him, and a few are sprinkled in as tips of the hat to long-time comic readers.

As clever as many of these moments are (some are in the reality-warping vein of *Eternal Darkness*), the final confrontation is a major letdown; a good idea gone to waste. In this scene, an outrageous concept is squashed by Batman's morality. The fight that follows is easily this game's worst.

Regardless, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* is this year's BioShock, not just from the connection established with the world, but from its ability to innovate where new ideas are needed, and moreover, deliver an adventure unlike any other. —REINER

Second Opinion **9.5**

For years, all I ever wanted was a decent Batman game. With its superb blend of action, stealth, survival horror, and Metroid-like exploration, *Arkham Asylum* finally delivers video games' equivalent to *Batman Begins*. Arkham's greatest success is making you feel the power of the Caped Crusader. Any comic reader can tell you about those awesome moments when it looks like the bad guys are about to do something dastardly then — from out of nowhere — batarangs knock their guns away and Batman single-handedly takes down 20 men. *Arkham Asylum* is filled with these moments, but now you're the one kicking guys in the head as you ninja drop from the ceiling, silently picking off criminals one at a time as the rest of the group slowly goes insane with terror. I never got sick of playing with Bruce's million-dollar gadgets, or fighting armies of Joker's goons with a battle system that looks so badass. Rocksteady wisely threw in a series of challenge rooms just to show it off. —BEN

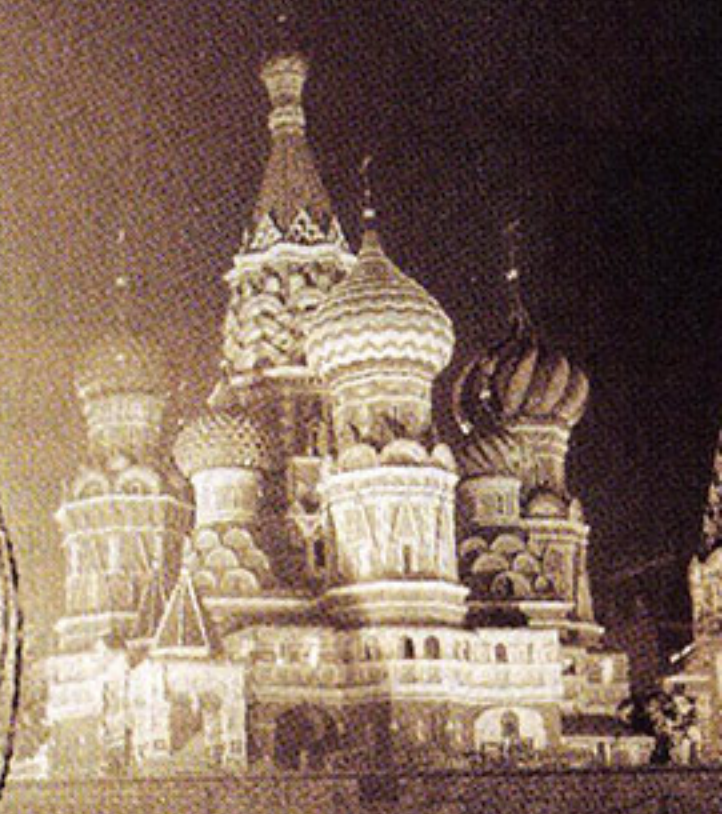
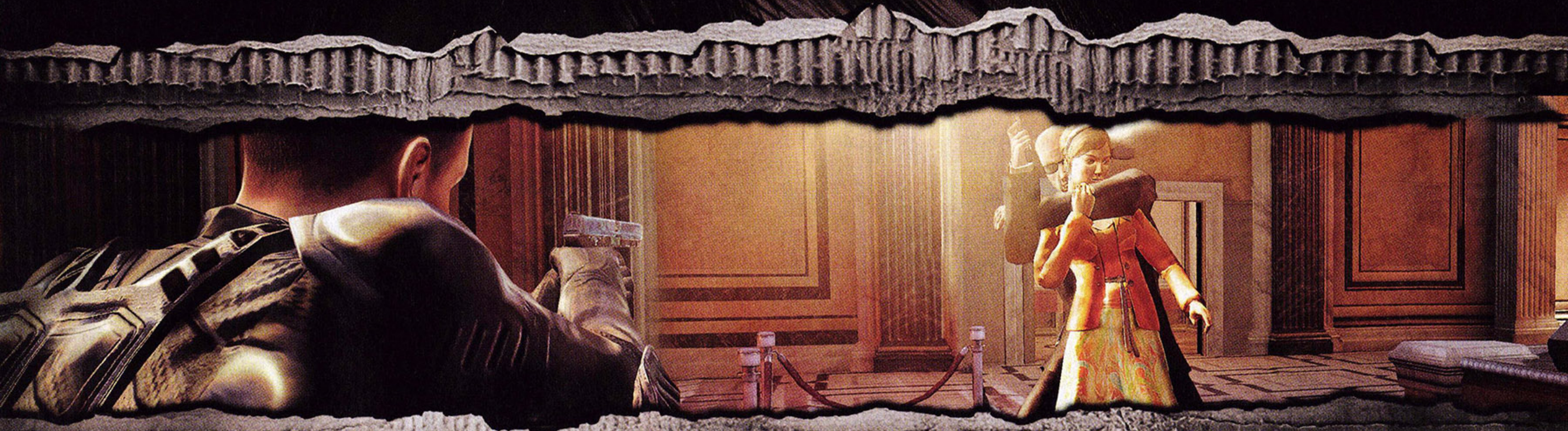


the edge
When All Games Aren't Created Equal
The PlayStation 3 version comes with an added bonus, a free download featuring the Joker as a playable character in new challenge maps. Playing as this clown prince is a blast and reason to veer toward the PS3 version



■ **When henchmen are no longer at their posts, Joker's men start to panic**

"HE WENT INSIDE UNDETECTED, RESCUED ME, AND THEN HE WAS GONE."



ALPHATM
PROTOCOL
THE ESPIONAGE RPG



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Madden NFL 10

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER ONLINE) > PUBLISHER EA SPORTS
> DEVELOPER EA TIBURON > RELEASE AUGUST 14 > ESRB E

A STRONG TEAM EFFORT

I have no trouble telling you that this is the best Madden in this generation of consoles. It's not the most feature-rich title in the series, and not all of its previous problems have been fixed. But the game makes up for its deficiencies by offering a gameplay balance that delivers NFL-caliber football moments without sacrificing how the game plays or feels. Add in the debut of online franchises, and the development team's energy has gone in the right directions.

Madden 10's inclusion of online franchises is long overdue, and it mostly performs up to expectations. True free agency is missing, and the CPU drafting leaves a skewed player pool to pick from, but real-time drafting is a blast. Just don't let the timer run down on your pick, because you ain't getting it back. This mode needs improvements, no doubt about it, but it's a workable first step. As for the other new online feature: online co-op, don't get too excited. The camera is in tight like in Superstar mode, and only the player who is the online host can call plays.

Online franchises may be the big feature, but the gameplay has not been neglected. Sure, there still is some suction. You'll see it along sidelines and in some catches and tackles. At the same time, this Madden — without some of the more obnoxious hit stick moments — makes me feel more in control than in recent titles, whether that's throwing the ball as a QB with a defender draped on me, better handoff transitions, navigating traffic on a kick return, or the subtler juke moves.

A real standout is the game's gang tackles, which allow some control in moving the pile, but at the same time is not too powerful. I'm a big fan of the optional minigame to recover fumbles, as well as the controller rumble alerting QBs in the pocket and the effectiveness of cornerbacks' tight coverage — complete with hand fighting. I don't think the game hits on all the gameplay improvements that the developer touted in its pre-release blogs, but it feels good to be playing Madden again.

The time spent on the gameplay is not without its sacrifices, but if the dev team had to forfeit the player training feature to devote more time to give gamers presentation that is the best in the franchise and close to the revered NFL 2K5, then I'm glad. I'd rather see the referees discussing potential TDs, post-whistle pileups, injury carts, first-down

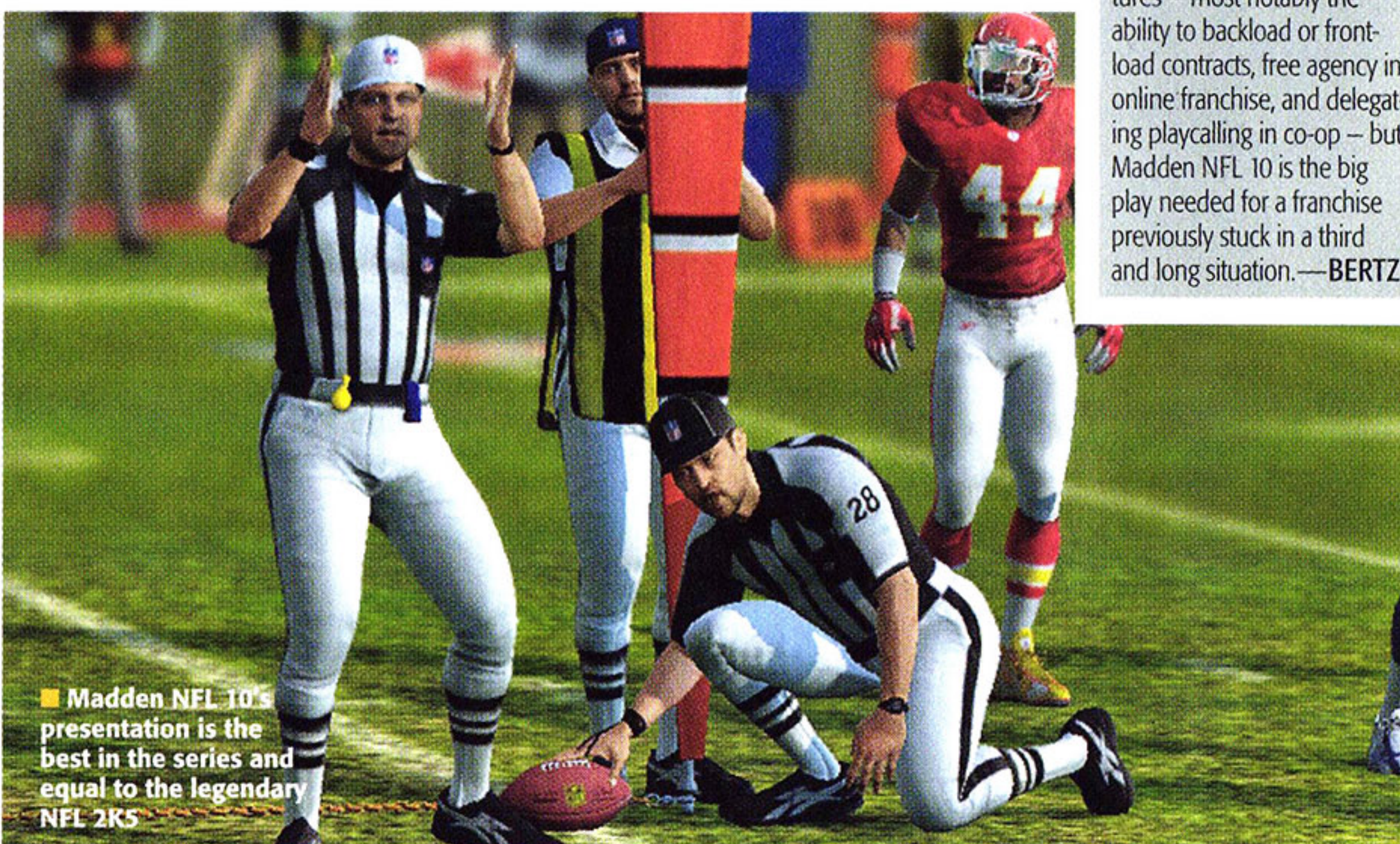


measurements, and coach meltdowns, thank you very much. I'm still looking for the whole enchilada of a rich feature set and perfect gameplay, but I don't think anyone wants Jostens rings just to say that they're in there. At this point, the series might as well drop the Superstar mode if it's going to continue to be as bare bones as it is in favor of time spent elsewhere.

That being said, it is absolutely necessary for the Franchise mode to be improved if this series is ever to take a bigger step forward. Practice squads, RFAs, and two free agency periods are just the start. Madden 10's salary negotiations still offer no flexibility, the coach contracts are broken, the draft scouting info is boring, and this game doesn't come close in this department to the advancements of EA Tiburon's own Head Coach 09. The only things I like of the

offseason options are the new player potential ratings and revamped player ratings and progressions. I expect much more progress for Franchise mode in the future.

It may only be August, but with Madden this good, football is back. Finally.—KATO



BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** EA Tiburon produces its most playable and exciting version of Madden in years

> **Graphics:** The animations are impressive and plentiful, but at times there are jerky transitions between them

> **Sound:** Player sounds from the field are just one part of a greatly improved presentation package

> **Playability:** The new optional fumble minigame is a lot of fun. And fair — or as fair as it can get when someone's gouging you in the eye to get the ball at the bottom of a pile

> **Entertainment:** Between the presentation, on-the-field gameplay, and online franchises, this is easily the best Madden of this generation

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.75

Finally, a Madden game I can see myself throwing hundreds of hours into just like the golden years. With the addition of online franchise (which supports 32 players), television style presentation (including weekly wrap-up shows), and a ton of fine-tuning to the gameplay, Madden finally feels worthy of the NFL license. From the formation of true passing pockets to the realistic sense of speed (if Adrian Peterson finds daylight, that corner across the field won't catch him), the gameplay changes are overwhelmingly positive. The revamped player ratings also make gridiron more realistic than in years past — attacking backup quarterbacks or rookies with constant blitzes often results in errant throws downfield. Even the franchise mode receives the attention it deserves, with a new scouting system and draft classes that feature gems and busts in each round. The game still lacks some obvious features — most notably the ability to backload or frontload contracts, free agency in online franchise, and delegating playcalling in co-op — but Madden NFL 10 is the big play needed for a franchise previously stuck in a third and long situation.—BERTZ

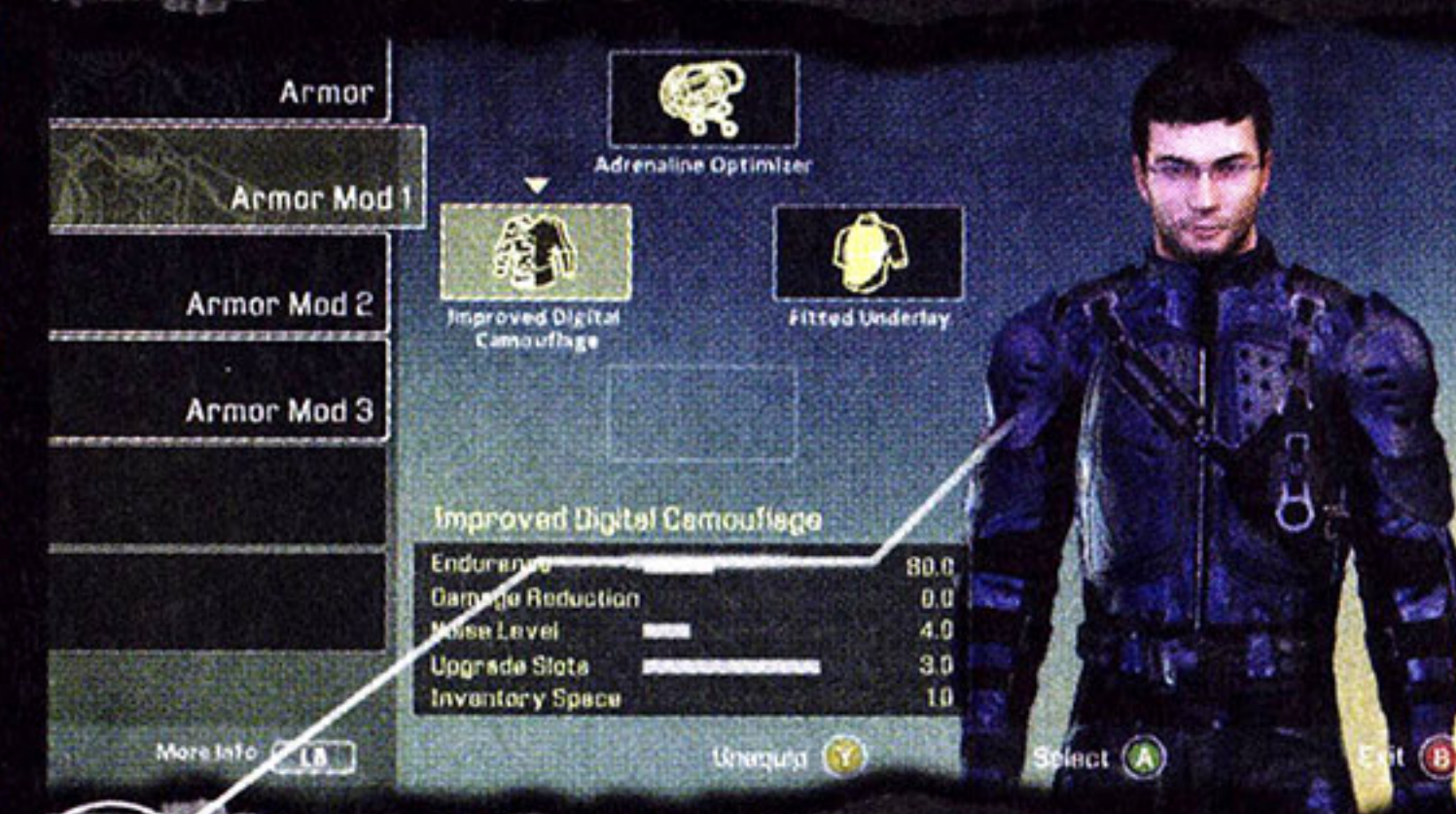
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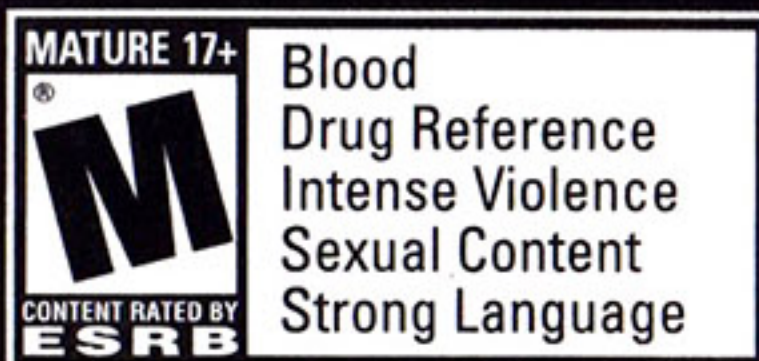
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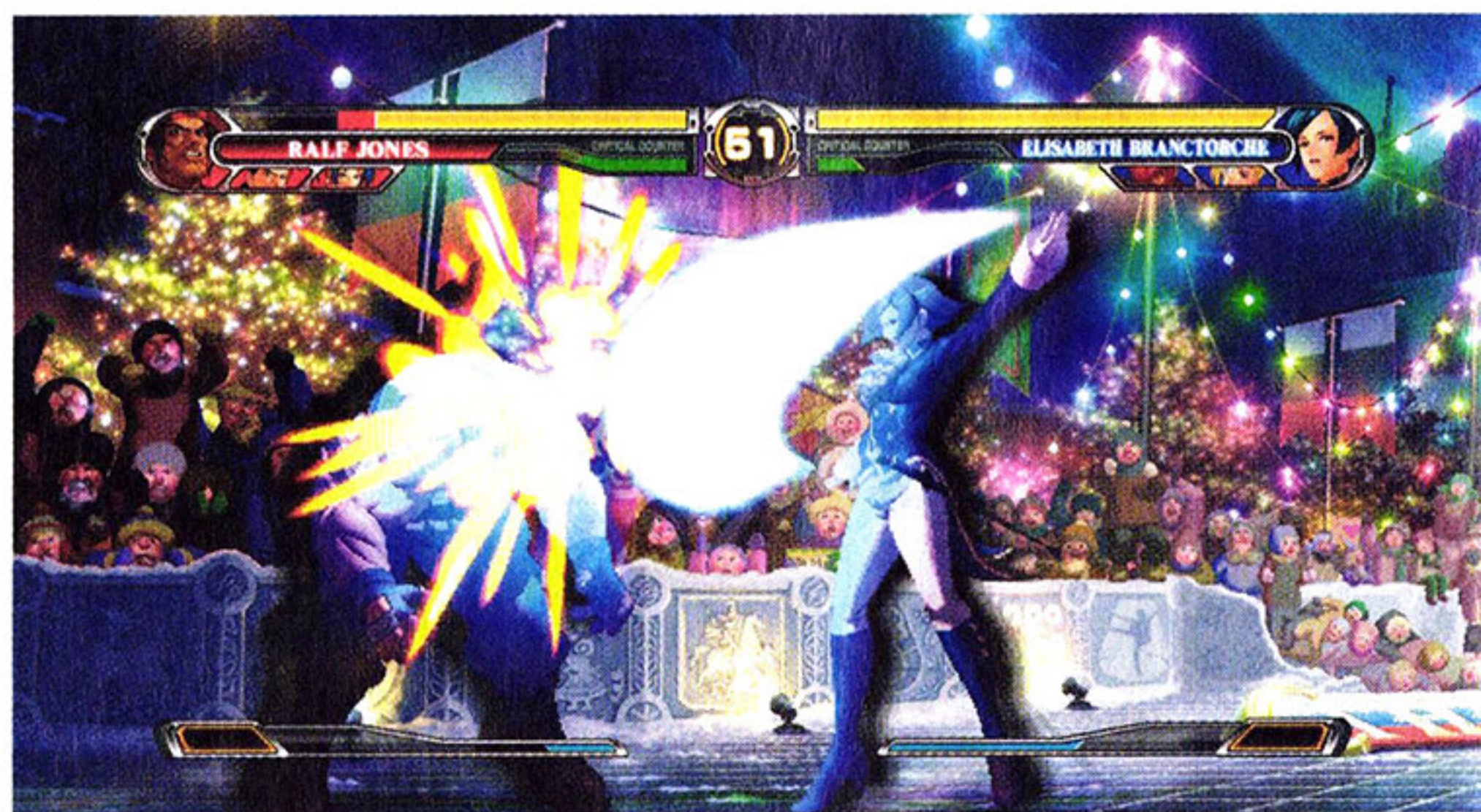
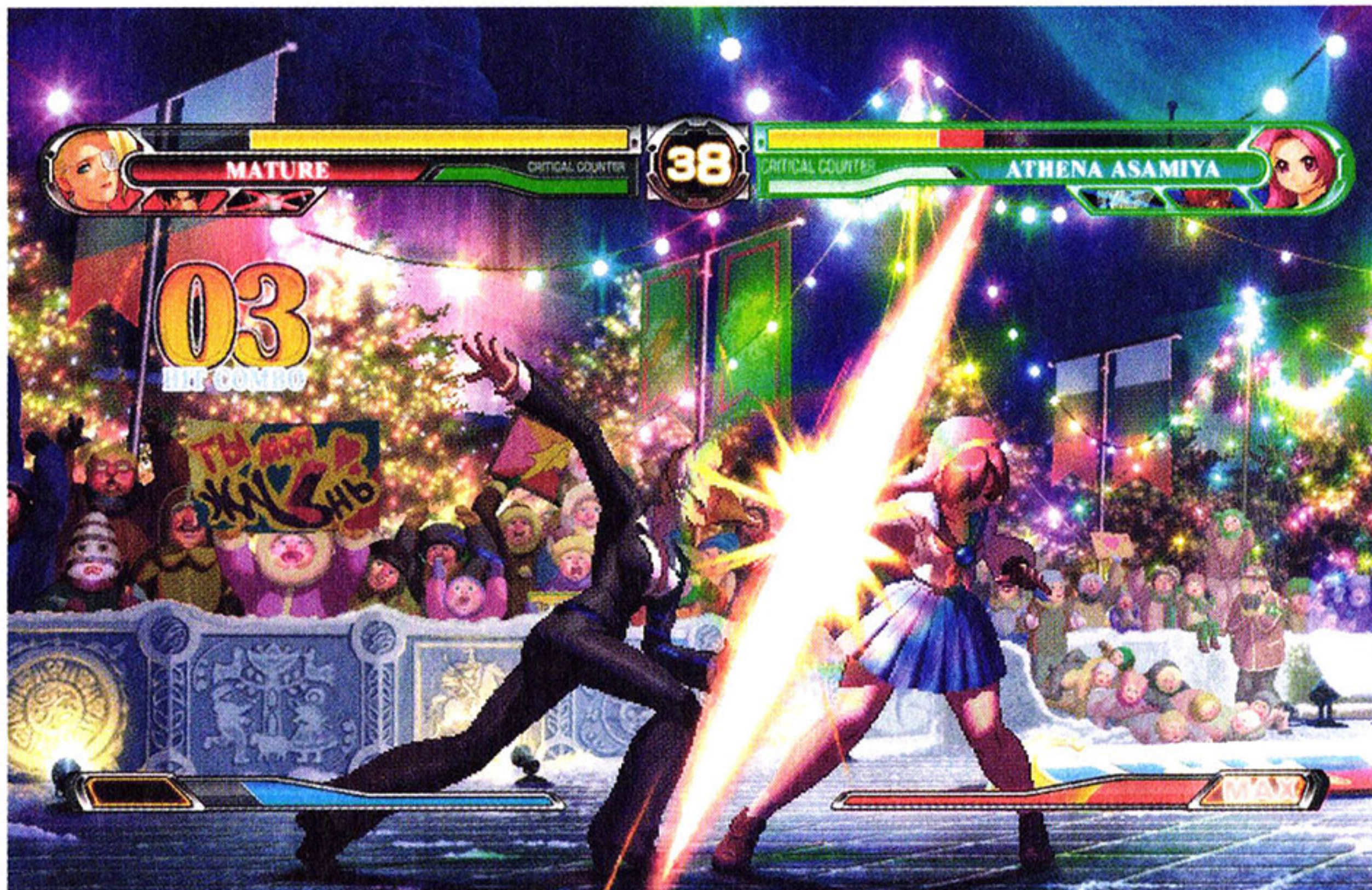


PlayStation Network

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BOTTOM LINE **7**

> **Concept:** Invest all resources in new hand drawn art and leave all the bells and whistles for XIII

> **Graphics:** While this is certainly a giant leap from previous KoF games, the blocky pixels don't look as good as BlazBlue's clean lines

> **Sound:** Switch to the Japanese language track. The English delivery sounds worse than Cooking Mama

> **Playability:** The "simple" control option allows for easy execution of special moves and helps level the playing field

> **Entertainment:** Straight up fighting and online play is all you get here

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

The King Of Fighters XII

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT
 > **DEVELOPER** SNK PLAYMORE > **RELEASE** JULY 28 > **ESRB** T

FIGHTING MEDIOCRITY

SNK made a smart move by halting its yearly King of Fighters release schedule and going with a straight numbering system starting with KoF XI. In the years since that release, the developer went back to the drawing board, scrapped all of the recycled art, and created all new character art and background stages. While XII looks better than ever, the strict focus on art has left the rest of the game feeling extremely bare bones.

King of Fighters XII has no story outside of some poorly voiced anime news reports. I'm not claiming that other fighting game stories are complete masterworks, but when even a ridiculous plot is missing it feels strange. You don't get a custom ending for each character, so there is no motivation for going back through the career multiple times – even

though the career rarely takes more than 10 minutes to complete.

Teams of three characters battle against each other until one side is completely beaten down, but you can't swap out fighters on the fly. The fight halts once you knock out one of your opponents; you get back a little health and then fight the next character on the team. Problem is, there's a slight yet noticeable load whenever a new fighter enters the ring, and it gets annoying fast. In XII's career you fight five of these teams of three, primarily because there are only five different backgrounds (and two of them are night and day versions of the same place).

Despite these complaints, KoF XII is a solid fighting game at its core. Even though it's a large drop from previous rosters, the 22 characters provide more than enough combat variety. Even with console exclusive characters Mature and Elisabeth added in, there aren't a whole lot of women in the cast. Nonetheless, all of the archetypes are there, from the strong and slow to the weak and agile, and ranged versus close quarters brawlers.

The new clash system blows both fighters back when they strike simultaneously with the same

move, which creates a tense rock, paper, scissors moment at the beginning of matches and can be used to push away an aggressive opponent. New critical counters allow players to execute a quick combo out of a hard punch or kick counter once the gauge is full.

You don't really realize it's there at first, but once you learn the technique, it can give you the upper hand. Super moves are powerful enough without feeling cheap since it's possible to dodge them once you know what to expect from certain combatants.

The fighters look nice in motion, and the special move effects dazzle, but I wish SNK ditched the pixelated look for more clean lines. You can tinker with a series of filters to attempt to smooth out the blocks, but it makes the characters feel out of focus more than offering much of an improvement. But maybe others will appreciate the more retro look.

Online multiplayer offers the most in this package. Up to eight-player lobbies create the atmosphere of arcades as two players battle and everyone else spectates, laying down smack talk the whole time over voice chat. Once the match is over, another player rotates in until everyone gets a chance. Sure, you can simply search for a random fight against another player and get right down to business, but I enjoyed the group dynamic. Team battles pit three players against three players on another team. The only possible downside is that if your first player is really awesome and takes down the three other players, you don't really get a turn. But your side won anyway, so who cares? We did experience some lag in our online tests, so be sure to keep away from shoddily connected players.

In the end, the sparse content maims KoF XII. Next time around there better be more stages, characters, modes – more everything. You can't just rip the five-minute-per-play arcade code straight to consoles and expect people to invest the full \$60 over a few coins. —**BRYAN**

Second Opinion **6**

With redrawn characters and backgrounds to match its pruned gameplay, KoF XII is something of a reboot for the series. Unlike Street Fighter IV's reimagining of classic sensibilities, though, this is little more than a straight-up love letter to 1995. Many of your favorite characters are all here – although there are "only" 22 fighters available – and the mano-a-mano fisticuffs are just like you remember them. A lot of the extraneous crap that seeped into the series over the years has been removed; there are no strikers, judgment bars, or any of that other nonsense. The new critical counters allow devastating follow-up strikes after strong counter moves, and the clash system breaks up the combatants when similar attacks match up their frames exactly, but these are tiny deviations from the series' classic 2D fighting. Movesets are tiny, the art pales in comparison to SF IV or Guilty Gear, and the team battle system is archaic. KoF XII is a fine high-resolution take on the venerable franchise, but there's nothing here for anyone who doesn't already have years invested into the series. —**ADAM**

the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

The PS3 and 360 versions of KOF XII are almost identical except for a few small online tweaks. The Xbox edition offers Trueskill ranking in addition to the more universal battle points system. PS3 users can utilize clans in team play to keep track of the best fighting groups. Take your pick.

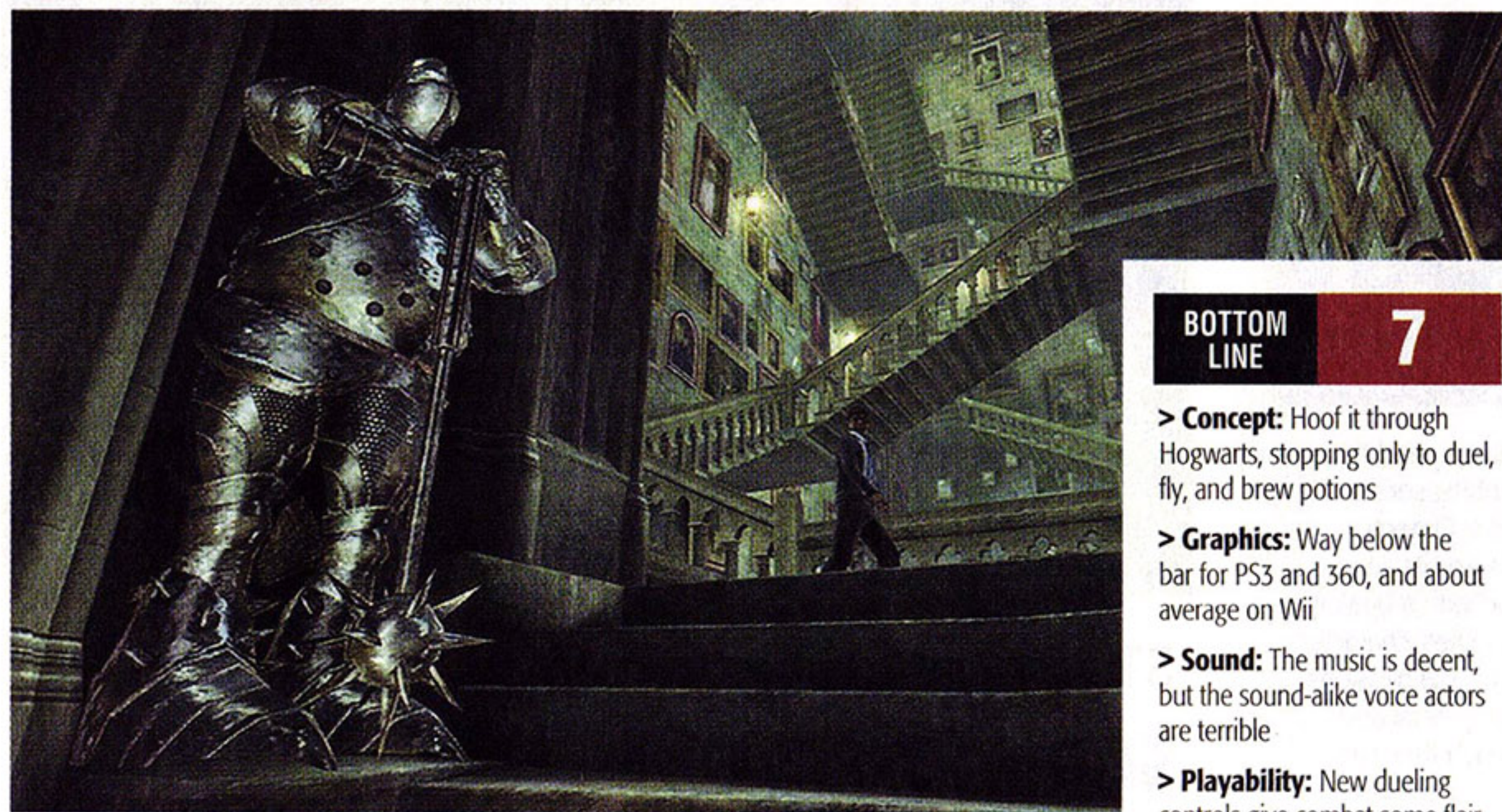


■ Aren't French ladies supposed to be thin and hot?

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA BRIGHT LIGHT > **RELEASE** JUNE 30 > **ESRB** E10+



BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Hoof it through Hogwarts, stopping only to duel, fly, and brew potions

> **Graphics:** Way below the bar for PS3 and 360, and about average on Wii

> **Sound:** The music is decent, but the sound-alike voice actors are terrible

> **Playability:** New dueling controls give combat some flair, and the flying sections work as intended. Potion-making is interesting in concept, but uneven in execution

> **Entertainment:** Fans will enjoy exploring Hogwarts, and the gameplay is fun in short bursts

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6.5

I now understand why Lord Voldemort never killed Harry Potter in his sleep. Watching this spoiled brat waste away at Hogwarts is a punishment far worse than death. In this game, Harry's schoolwork, relationships, love for Quidditch, and all activities related to being the so-called "chosen one" are pushed to the side. For what, you might ask? Collecting worthless trinkets! This game is the mother of all collect-a-thons, showering Harry with things to snatch up with almost every step he takes. This aspect is overblown, annoying, and far from entertaining, yet ends up being the primary thing to do. Wand dueling periodically arises, but for whatever reason, Harry's spells are overpowered to the point that most foes can be vanquished with one hit. Quidditch, which has devolved into ring flying, ends up being another unwanted distraction. The enjoyable potion mixing minigame is the only area where this game harnesses any of J.K. Rowling's magic. The remainder of the game, which is largely collecting, delivers an experience akin to getting whacked in the face with the stupefy spell.—**REINER**

HARRY EARNS A C-

He may be successful in literature and film, but Harry Potter has needed remedial video game education for years. Failing to grasp the concepts of pacing and entertainment, Harry's previous forays into gaming have more dark blemishes than a Death Eater convention. For Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, Electronic Arts hit the books and did some homework; this entry isn't making the honor roll, but it earns the franchise its first passing grade.

Instead of trying to encapsulate every facet of wizardry, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince narrows its focus to dueling, Quidditch, and potion-making. Along with exploring the Hogwarts grounds, these activities comprise the core of the game — with tons of optional collectibles to unearth. Though lacking in variety, these tasks feature some clever mechanics that function well — par-

ticularly dueling. The analog controls give spellcasting a tactile element, but the fights are far from fair; once you get the Levicorpus spell, all opponents (including the final boss) can be hilariously defeated by incapacitating them, then blasting them

with a fully charged stupefy to the groin. It's an entertaining and unstoppable path to victory.

Like the last game in the series, the opportunity for Harry Potter fans to walk the halls of Hogwarts is the major draw. Unfortunately, you aren't given any meaningful interactions with the school or its students — you're just shuffled from one

movie plot-point to the next, flying broomsticks and dueling along the way.

If Harry Potter took lessons from Rockstar's *Bully*, Hogwarts could become a great setting with vibrant characters and cool locations. Instead, Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince gives you

three activities to repeat constantly. Concocting potions and humiliating dark wizards is fun for a while, but once the novelty is gone, Hogwarts loses all of its magic.—**JOE**



the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

The content is the same across all three consoles, but the difficulty of certain tasks changes with the control scheme. Potion making is less complicated on the Wii, but dueling is clunky and imprecise. Conversely, the dueling on the PS3 and 360 works well, but potion making is more finicky. Whichever one you choose, you lose out on something.

MULTI QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

BOTTOM LINE 6.25

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (8-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** LUXOFLEX > **RELEASE** JUNE 23 > **ESRB** T

The video game adaptation of Michael Bay's money-grabbing train wreck doesn't include plot holes the size of the Milky Way, robots promenading as racial caricatures, or any form of leg humping. While avoiding the film's oil-soaked qualities, the game also lacks Bay's eye for jaw-dropping action. Whether you are playing through the Autobot or Decepticon campaign, the firefights are yawn-inducing affairs that have a chance to become comedic from malfunctioning AI (in a boss fight, Starscream flew directly into a pillar, where he sat motionless as I pulverized his inert form). Moreover, repetitive mission objectives do little to spur you forward. As lifeless as the single-player experience is, multiplayer pumps out satisfying robot mayhem. Each character plays like a different class, making for battles that demand teamwork and strategy. The game is more enjoyable than the movie, but only if you intend to put your skills to the test in the competitive arena.—**REINER**



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** EUROCOM > **RELEASE** JUNE 30 > **ESRB** E10+



Sharing the qualities of a child left unsupervised with a 10-pound bag of Skittles, *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* is a hyperactive adventure that bounces between gameplay types with reckless abandon, gleefully throwing mammals and reptiles into

harm's way before tuckering itself out and collapsing to the credits sequence after just a few short hours. Most levels serve as their own game type, and are rarely repeated. One level is reminiscent of *Gradius*. Another channels *Crash Bandicoot's* epic chase sequences, while others draw inspiration from *Marble Madness*, *Star Fox*, and *Ratchet & Clank*. All of the game types are backed by solid controls and level designs that play to the strengths of each presented genre. Most of the challenges are enjoyable (albeit lax on difficulty), but hardly any are in satisfying doses. I was left wanting more, and wondering why solid gameplay sections were only used once.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

BOTTOM LINE 5.5

Watchmen: The End Is Nigh

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE > **DEVELOPER** DEADLINE GAMES > **RELEASE** JULY 21 > **ESRB** M

Remember that terrible overpriced download-only *Watchmen* beat 'em up that came out around the time the movie hit theaters? Now it's packaged with new levels and released at retail in a box. The PS3 version is \$50 and includes the movie, and the 360 edition just has the crappy game for \$30. The previously released "Part 1" follows Rorschach and Nite Owl's pre-film timeline fight against waves of reskinned identical enemies in boring and repetitive locations. Combos are an option, but you can beat anyone by spamming throws and counters and kicking them while they're down. Part 2 is just as bad, only half as long, and takes place mainly in a strip joint and flophouse devoid of any nudity. If you enjoy making fun of bad movies with friends, the co-op mode might provide you a gaming equivalent, but that's all it's good for.—**BRYAN**





PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii

G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** DOUBLE HELIX > **RELEASE** AUGUST 9 > **ESRB** T

A REAL AMERICAN LOSER

Gamers constantly decry publishers for bunching too many game releases during the holidays and failing to spread big titles throughout the year. But maybe a lack of great games during summer isn't the problem; maybe the problem is the overwhelming deluge of crap games based off film franchises we're forced to suffer through, like G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra.

The idea is sound enough — two players pick from 12 classic G.I. Joe characters (and four famous Cobra members, like Storm Shadow and Destro) to stop the Cobra Commander from using the M.A.S.S. Device in an Ikari Warriors "hold your finger on shoot and spray away" meets Contra "shoot the turrets on the massive structure" style game. But the desecration of the goofy '80s children's cartoon begins with a camera so poor that sometimes neither character is on the screen during battles and just keeps getting worse. The broken targeting mechanic, which ties your aim to the same analog stick you use to move, is equally frustrating; even when you flick the right analog stick to aim at another target, more often than not your bullets go toward a power-up container rather than an enemy. The sticky cover system and finicky health system round out the broken gameplay.

Those patient enough to suffer through the initial gameplay inadequacies are rewarded with horrible, low-quality cutscenes, a "special" Accelerator Suit ability that often drains during said cutscenes, unreachable power-ups that hover just out of grasp, the worst vehicle controls I've used in years, and voice overacting that makes the guy who says "killing spree" in Unreal Tournament sound understated. With these working conditions, it's enough to make a Joe go AWOL. —**BERTZ**

BOTTOM LINE 3.5

> **Concept:** Massacre the G.I. Joe license with a crap movie tie-in game

> **Graphics:** PSone quality rendered cutscenes look atrocious on HDTVs

> **Sound:** A constant barrage of generic gunfire and explosions

> **Playability:** I'd rather have a dental appointment than play this game

> **Entertainment:** A terrible aiming mechanic, uncooperative camera, and the worst vehicle controls in years make this almost unplayable

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 4

My G.I. Joe collection includes a handful of losers — figures that I bought for a specific weapon, or who came free with a vehicle. Even the lamest of these cast-off chumps (like Tollbooth and Skidmark) are less of an insult to G.I. Joe's good name than this vaguely game-like disaster. Simplistic point-and-shoot mechanics are mangled beyond recognition due to an awful camera, and the barely operable targeting system ensures the gameplay never crosses into the realm of entertainment. Your absurd Accelerator Suit is more of a punchline than a power-up, which summarizes the entire experience perfectly; I laughed out loud several times playing G.I. Joe, but never because I was having a good time. —**JOE**

MULTI QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Dynasty Warriors 6 Empires

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** KOEI
> **DEVELOPER** OMEGA FORCE
> **RELEASE** JUNE 23 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE 6.25

In this iteration of the long-running series, developer Omega

Force opens its arms

to the role-playing crowd with a healthy injection of Risk-like strategies, character ability customization, and side missions devoted to leveling your general and army. While weapons reach their max level too quickly, the new strategies and RPG-inspired systems make this tired, old series interesting and fun again. That is until you step on the battlefield. Even with a wide array of enemies (ranging from archers to wolves) the wars are flavorless grindfests against foes who rarely do anything other than stare deep into your blood-covered soul. Mowing down wave after wave of comatose fodder kills any chance of this game's strategies having any meaning. An overhaul on the battlefield is sorely needed. —**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii

G-Force

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM
> **PUBLISHER** DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** EUROCOM
> **RELEASE** JULY 21 > **ESRB** E10+



BOTTOM LINE 7.75

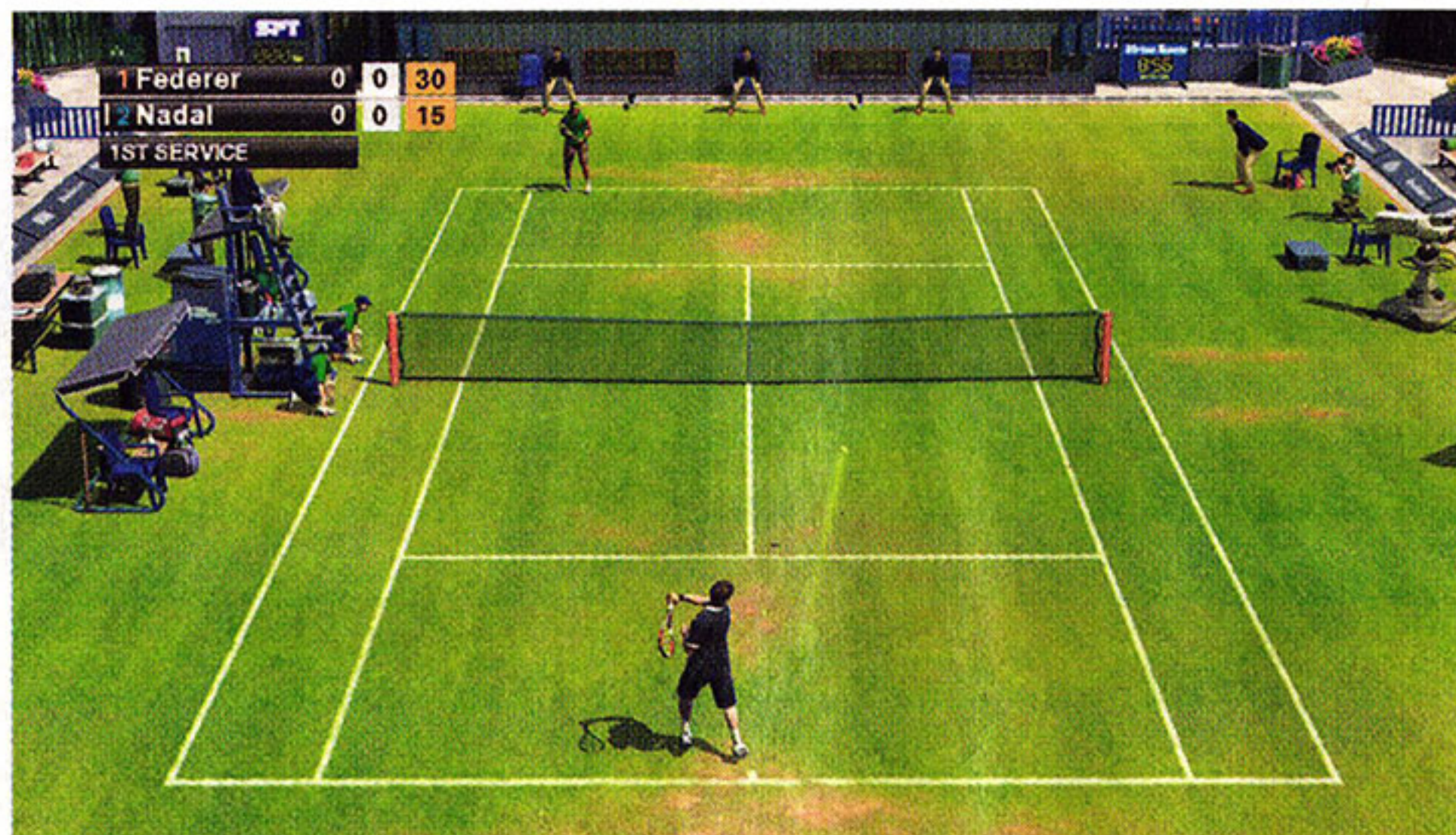
Surprisingly, G-Force actually uses the traditional action platforming blueprint to produce

something fun. The story is about an evil corporation that tries to take over the world by turning everyday appliances into robotic devils. Why does the FBI have a group of super secret guinea pigs prepared to fight off this kind of threat? Who cares? You're fighting a bunch of evil CD players and waffle irons. Go with it. The game stars Darwin, a furry weapons expert who uses his jetpack and mousy paws to scamper through human-sized environments and battle mechanical baddies with a plasma whip. Sections of the game let you play as his pet fly Mooch, who can sneak into areas and unlock doors the little rodent can't. Even the game's stereoscopic 3D setting is a fun novelty. Gamers who enjoyed the movie could do worse than this well-polished platformer. —**BEN**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii

Virtua Tennis 2009

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (4-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** SUMO DIGITAL > **RELEASE** JUNE 9 > **ESRB** E



STUCK IN DEUCE

"He not busy being born is busy dying." Bob Dylan said that. I'm sure Bob doesn't care about video game tennis, but this quote is neatly applicable to

Virtua Tennis 2009. Playing the game, I couldn't help but thinking the biggest change in this game was changing the number in the title from "3" to "2009." Is the gameplay solid? Absolutely, but it has been for years. A few new training minigames, some slight improvements to animations and the feel of control, and the addition of the Davis Cup is not going to be enough to make me recommend you upgrade from Virtua Tennis 3 — especially when the career mode is in such dire need of a total renovation. You could go back as far as the Dreamcast and find essentially the same experience. It's the same rotating globe interface, the same calendar... more of the same in every way. This tedium is not helped by the laborious career progression. It literally takes dozens of matches to move up even 20 spots in the amateur rankings (you start as the 100th rated player). And believe me — these are not challenging. The only time I even lost a point in my early career when I was talking on the phone while playing and forgot that my opponent was serving.

I want the full tennis experience — the ATP tour, all the Grand Slam events, endorsement deals, everything. Sadly, with all the competing interests that run the sport, I'll probably never see it. The players are independent contractors, as are the major tournaments, as are the major sponsors and equipment manufacturers. Negotiating all the contracts necessary to make a real tennis experience might be mission impossible. Still, there's got to be a better way than this. The Top Spin series, despite its gameplay issues, at least made an effort. Virtua Tennis needs to try much harder if it's going to regain its title as the preeminent tennis franchise. —**MATT**

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** The long-running series returns, looking very similar to its last incarnation

> **Graphics:** The animations are great, but the created players look extraordinarily ugly and the stadiums aren't particularly detailed

> **Sound:** Unremarkable music and no commentary

> **Playability:** As always, Virtua Tennis performs on the court, but sports fans new demand much more than this in terms of depth and career modes

> **Entertainment:** I have a soft spot for Virtua Tennis' fast and fluid play, but this series needs a major overhaul

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7

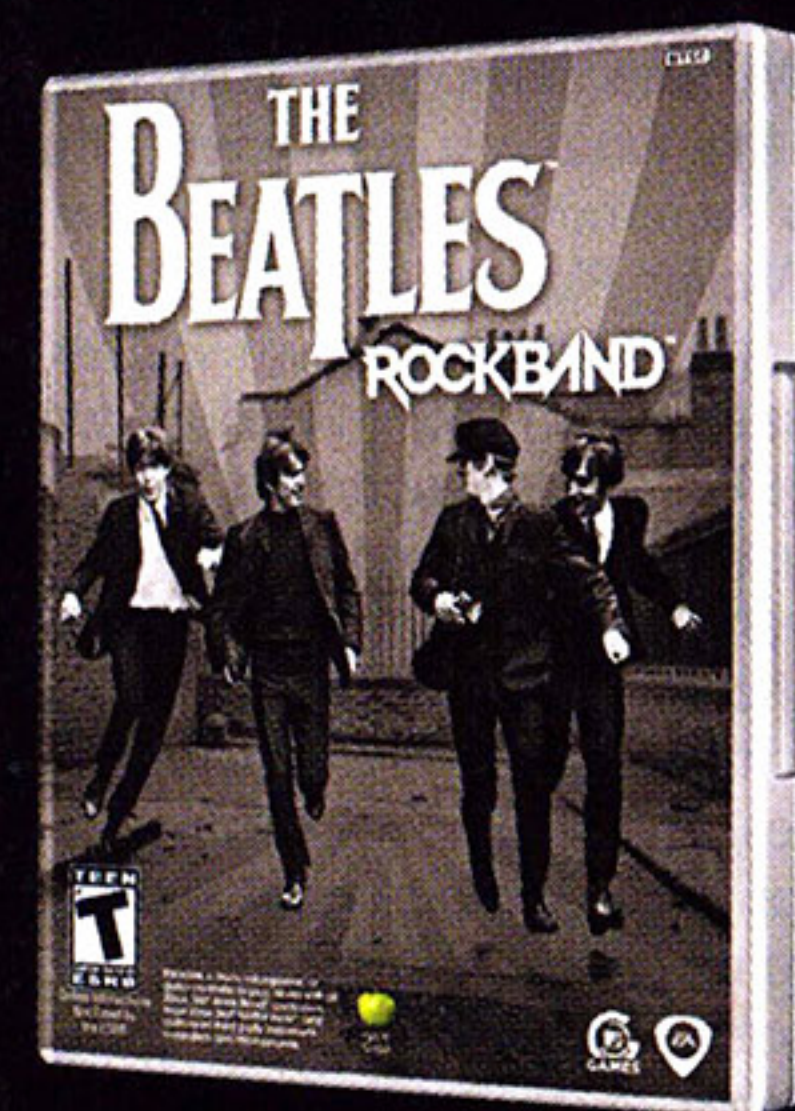
This series' repetitive nature is like watching a tennis ball go from side-to-side for eternity. The gameplay is good enough that you don't see a lot of funky animations, but the career mode's gulag of slow progress and repetitive minigames made me want to jump ship halfway to Dubai. It's a shame that despite playing well, the game is still almost no fun. —**KATO**

the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This game's big hook is its use of the new WiiMotion Plus add-on. Having played the game with the Motion Plus unit on and off, I think it's debatable how well it's being used here. While you can definitely use it to apply slice and top spin, the directional meter that governs where your shot goes means that this game still feels... well... like a game. All it's done is traded one contrived mechanic for another, less accurate one. While it's different, I'm not sure "different" equals "better" in this case. However, the animations look surprisingly fluid for a Wii title. While it's far from perfect, the Motion Plus play might add some interest to the otherwise stale formula for some casual gamers.

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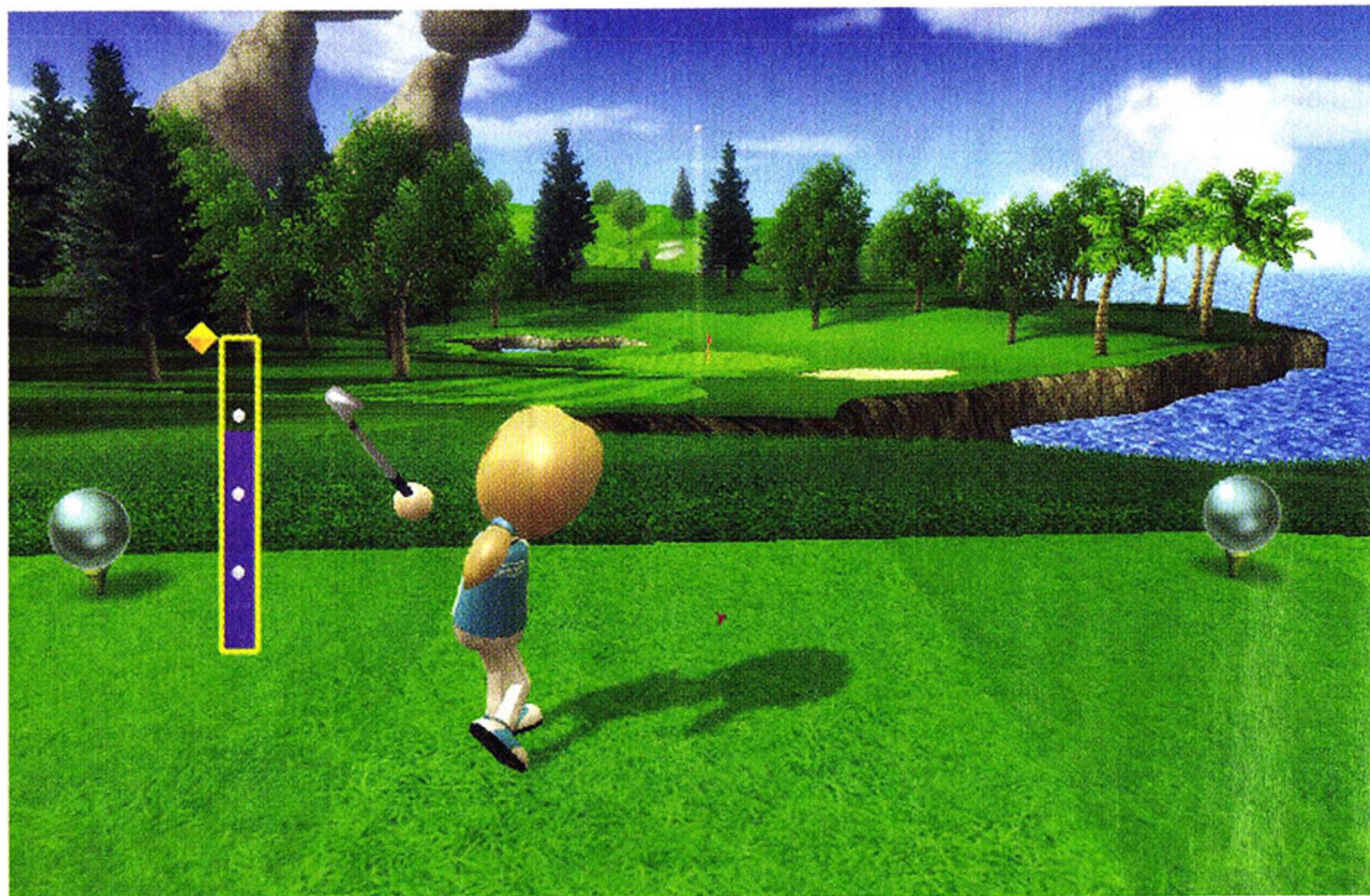


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BOTTOM LINE **7.5**

> Concept: Expand the ultra-successful Wii Sports with more games and the new WiiMotion Plus control

> Graphics: The same Miis you've come to know and love frolicking on a bright, cartoony island

> Sound: The pleasant music borders on generic, but Nintendo always finds a way to charm you with catchy melodies

> Playability: Is WiiMotion Plus a giant step forward in terms of accuracy? Yes. Does it solve all the problems associated with Wii control? No

> Entertainment: It's a much better package than the original, but hardcore gamers will find greater value in buying the Tiger Woods or Virtua Tennis pack-ins

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Wii

Wii Sports Resort

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS **> PUBLISHER** NINTENDO **> DEVELOPER** NINTENDO
> RELEASE JULY 26 **> ESRB** E

A MIIBURGER IN PARADISE

Given that it's the sequel to the game that defined the Wii experience for most people, and it's packed in with the WiiMotion Plus attachment, *Wii Sports Resort* could be the best-selling game of 2009. In many ways, this is more than just a game — it's intended to introduce the Wii audience to WiiMotion Plus in the same way the original taught us the basics of motion control.

The proceedings start off with cinematic flair, as your Mii parachutes down to the island from a passing plane. While you are skydiving, the game overlays a Wii remote over your character to show you how Motion Plus allows for fine adjustments of pitch and angle. On the way down you link up with other Miis in formation until your chute deploys, displaying a large *Wii Sports Resort* logo, taking you into the game. Later you can repeat the skydiving minigames and earn stamps for taking photos of yourself.

At the resort, you and your friends can jump into any of the 12 minigames at will. While there are difficulties, alternate modes, and performance-based stamps to collect (think Xbox 360 Achievements), this game pretty much defines the phrase "What you see is what you get."

So what do you get? In addition to the WiiMotion Plus unit, your \$50 nets you a collection of games

more numerous and of better quality than the original *Wii Sports*. Some of the contests are designed to show off the greater degree of control the Motion Plus brings to the Wii; the swordplay and archery contests display just how sensitive the add-on makes the remote in detecting fine movements. In particular, archery shines by keeping a focus on actual challenge (something the first lacked almost entirely). Hitting a bullseye on a moving target from a great distance is no easy feat, but the Motion Plus controls convince you that you can do it if you just get the right angle. While it's not as difficult, the swordplay admirably showcases the near one-to-one accuracy when holding a virtual blade.

Other contests don't fare nearly as well. I could not figure out how to get the jet skis in the power cruising minigames to stay on course — even after recalibrating the Motion Plus several times. Other games work, but are simply no fun (cycling and canoeing, I'm looking at you).

The remaining modes fall somewhere between compelling and merely pleasant. Golf is definitely improved, but not nearly as accomplished as the recent Motion Plus enhanced *Tiger Woods* game. Frisbee and table tennis are solid fun, as is the



Canoe? More like ca-barf!

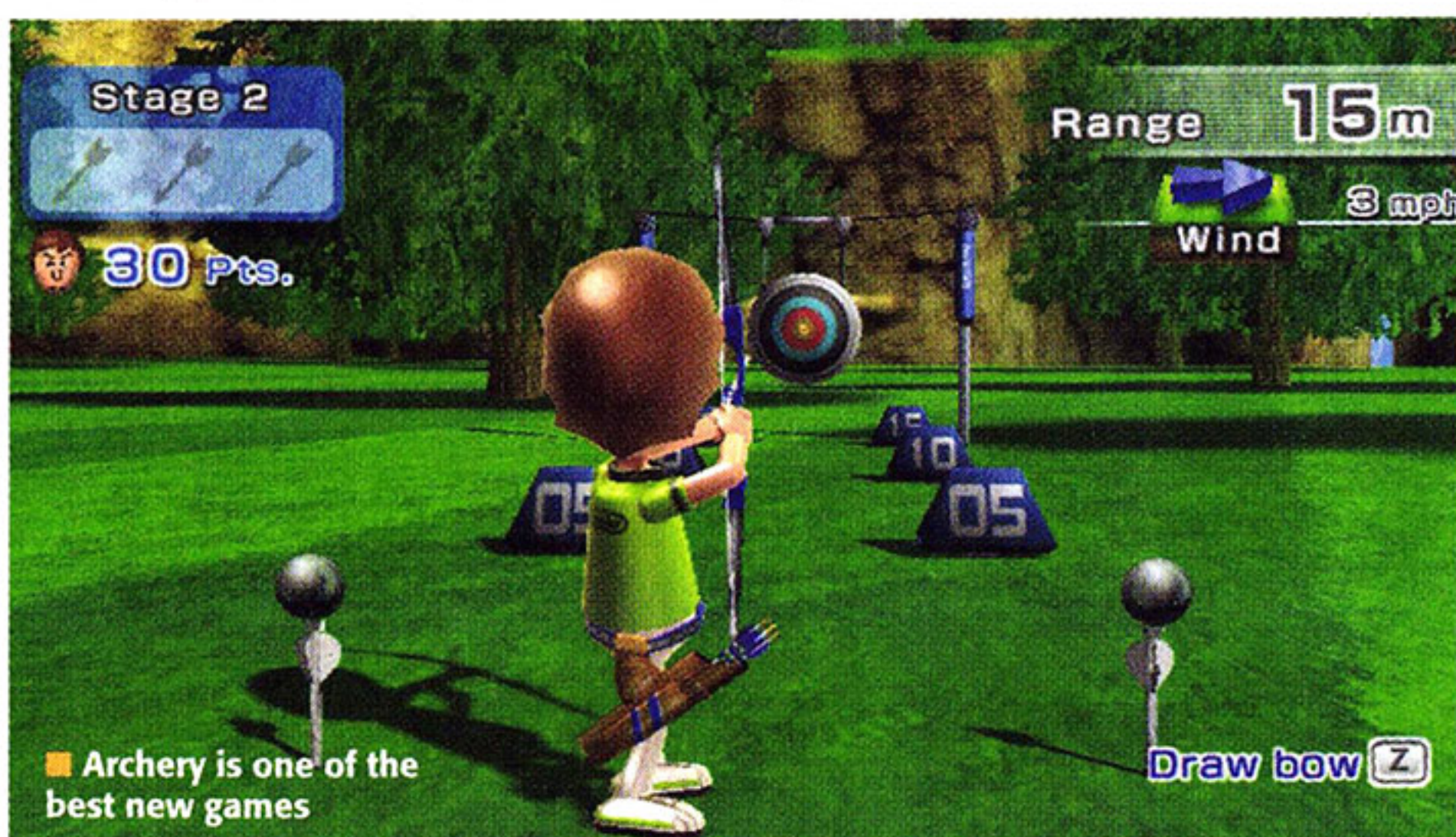
three-point contest in basketball — too bad the actual two-on-two play is terrible. One surprise was the oddly addictive air sports game, which lets you cruise around the island while holding your remote like a paper plane.

In the end, the best game in *Wii Sports Resort* is actually the best game in *Wii Sports*. Bowling was good before, but now features the ability to spin the ball and perform curved rolls. Later levels even force you to perform these techniques by introducing moving barriers in the lane. Add in a fun new 100-pin mode, and bowling once again takes the *Wii Sports* crown.

All in all, families that loved the first one would be well advised to pick up the sequel. It's a better game, and for the price of admission you get an accessory that will (hopefully) allow for improved gameplay for the future. —**MATT**

Second Opinion 8

If *Wuhu Island* were a real place, I wouldn't mind vacationing there; Nintendo's fictional vacation spot feels innately relaxing. The game's tropical *Magnum, P.I.* piano music entranced me while I participated in some of the most stress-free minigames I have ever played. As though I were vacationing with my therapist, the game kept reminding me to take a break and stretch my legs. But just because *Wii Sports Resort* makes you feel a little lazy doesn't mean there isn't anything to do. Of the 12 minigame categories, only a few are complete duds (go ahead and skip cycling). Many modes are not only fun, but provide you with plenty of options with which to waste your time. Air sports, for example, lets you skydive, tour the island on a plane, and participate in aerial dog-fights. I wish there was a little more meat to some of the games — most only require a few simple motions — but in a way, that's what makes *Wii Sports* so relaxing. Multiple difficulties, unlockable courses, and a variety of achievement-style goals give solo players something to work towards, but tackling these minigames with friends is the reason to keep revisiting this resort. —**BEN**



Archery is one of the best new games



The swordplay shows off the sensitive WiiMotion Plus controls



Wii

Madden NFL 10

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** AUGUST 14 > **ESRB** E

THIRD STRING

This game is a tale of two bastardizations. In trying to satisfy both casual fans and those who want more depth, Madden NFL 10 for Wii tries to serve two masters. In the end I don't think it achieves either goal.

At its most casual, Madden becomes unsatisfying when you can't get a play you want or if throwing only to the hot route receiver is the wrong read for your QB. The latter is dangerous as it basically treats you like a rookie QB locking on to a single receiver, ignoring the rest of the field. This can quickly become a pick six if you're not careful.

As you move up the difficulty ladder and add more layers to the game, you are basically jumping through more and more frustrating hoops to get access to gameplay features that are available to you more readily on the other versions of Madden. Wading through the advance

play and pre-snap menus can cost you a delay of game, and not only are those pre-play options skeletal, the interface doesn't accommodate for quick adjustments — particularly on defense. Add in the difficulty passing the ball the game presents in terms of both selecting a receiver and accuracy, and it's going to be a long afternoon.

De-emphasizing the Superstar and Franchise modes from last year (they are unlockable via code), this game's focus is on offering more multiplayer and co-op options. These include being able to play with invisibility, fast feet, lots of fumbles, and more. You can also wager showdown points before games and generate minigames during dramatic moments. I appreciate the spirit of these modes, but no matter how you shake things up, I just don't think the gameplay can support this title. —**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** Shift away from the traditional football game structure with more multiplayer modes

> **Graphics:** As someone in the office put it: It looks like Saturday morning football

> **Sound:** Collinsworth's otherwise fine commentary sounds out of place in this mockery of a football title

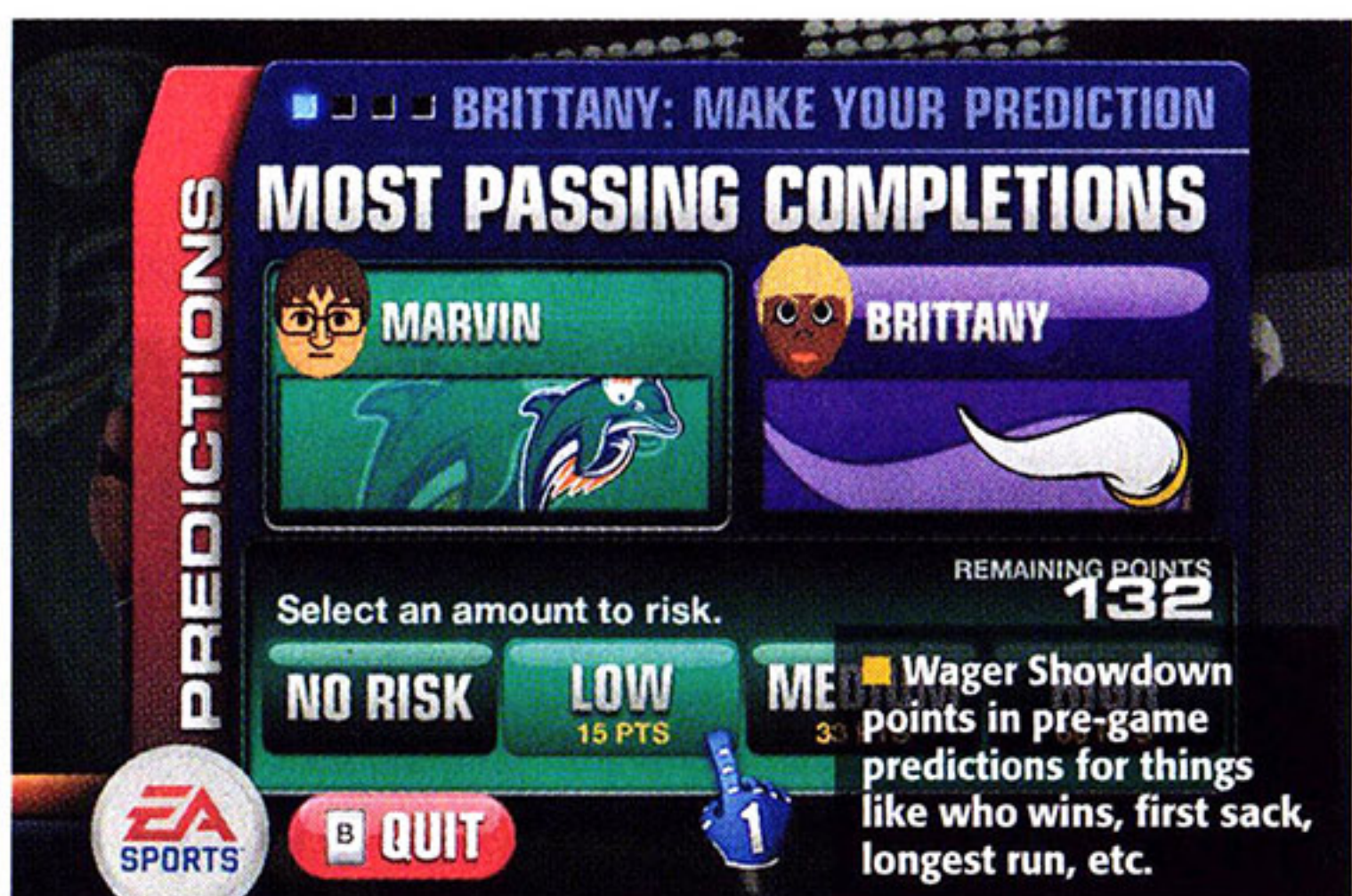
> **Playability:** Neither of the game's passing systems are without their flaws, and the lack of any QB precision passing makes both untenable

> **Entertainment:** EA has packed in a number of different modes, but the gameplay is a letdown

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

I don't envy the developers of Madden NFL Wii. While EA's NBA Live and NHL franchises get a pass from making inferior ports for Nintendo's eccentric console, EA Tiburon must figure out a way to fit a square peg into a round hole. Their solution? Dumb down the standard Madden gameplay to a pick-up-and-play level, bury pre-snap controls and playbooks under the guise of providing easily intimidated users a clean interface, and dress the game up in a misguided "I'm on a Wii!" cartoon art style that betrays the best qualities of the sport, much like the Saturday morning cartoon *ProStars* starring Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, and Bo Jackson did in the '90s. Hiding the franchise and superstar modes with codes in favor of highlighting minigames also feels like a step in the wrong direction. While younger gamers may be content with this kiddie approach, many die-hard football fans who own the Wii are clamoring for a legit football experience, not a condescending collection of punt, pass, and kick minigames. —**BERTZ**



Wii

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** KROME STUDIOS > **RELEASE** JUNE 23 > **ESRB** T



■ **Where's the beef?** Human actors like Shia LaBeouf are almost completely glossed over in the game's story

BOTTOM LINE 5

ROBUTTS IN DISGUISE

I have many childhood memories of playing with Transformers toys. They may not have had motion controls, professional voice work, or onscreen reticles, but in my imagination they fought colossal battles. Somehow this game has reached through time, stole all those memories, and poured a tank full of Bumblebee's bladder oil all over them. If this is what it's like to play with Transformers nowadays, I want no part of it.

If I hadn't already seen the film, I might assume that it consists of the Transformers spending two hours running past the same five set pieces while Bumblebee delivers line after line of terrible dialogue. Yeah, Bumblebee talks, and that's not the only inconsistency between the game and the film. But you won't really care, since you're too busy shaking your head at the waves of cookie cutter enemies and the game's tiring action. You might want to wear a wrist guard, because Transformers' motion combat is so unresponsive you end up shaking the remote hard enough to give you tendonitis.

For consistency's sake, the

rest of the game's mechanics don't work either. Your aiming reticle for long-range attacks is overlaid atop the screen like in an FPS rail shooter. The problem is that this is a third-person action game, so sometimes the Wii can't tell whether or not you want to shoot the enemy in front of you or behind you. However, the Transformers' worst sin is that you can't transform into vehicle form during the action. Isn't that the point of Transformers? They transform! Maybe this game should be called Giant Robot Forms.

Marginally entertaining rail sequences help change things up, but they are brief levels, and the game's two-player co-op does the minimal amount of effort meet the definition of the term — the second player is a sprite with limited attack options. In short, Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen is a gameplay disaster filled with one-dimensional characters that lacks many of the impressive ILM effects from the film. Yet somehow its story is still better than the movie's. —**BEN**

■ **Surprisingly, hearing Bumblebee talk is worse than if they'd followed the movie formula and had him play terrible Pointer Sisters songs**



> **Concept:** Nothing is more than meets the eye. Transformers is a bottom of the barrel action game with an amusing hacking minigame

> **Graphics:** The transformation animations look okay, but you'll wander through similar environments the whole game

> **Sound:** Optimus Prime sounds awesome, but what's with giving Bumblebee a burly voice?

> **Playability:** You have to shake the remote so hard during combat that Popeye could use this game for a workout

> **Entertainment:** The on-rails sequences are kind of fun, but it's sad when the best parts of a game are the sections in which you have limited control

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 6.5

While it is by no means a visual feast, the Wii version of Transformers manages some decent controls and straightforward arcade action. The game even features a good variety of characters, settings, and gameplay styles throughout the short levels through which you smash. Make no mistake, smashing is as high an ambition for which the title strives. Combat is shallow, the levels are linear, and the technology behind the whole affair looks like something from a generation ago, with the possible exception of the motion controls. Little additions like the limited co-op play and extensive unlockable extras are certainly welcome, but don't go in with any delusions; this is among the most simplistic of movie license games, albeit one that basically works the way it is supposed to. —**MILLER**



BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

- > **Concept:** Dominate the Age of Sail through shrewd trading, naval supremacy, and tough diplomacy
- > **Graphics:** The strategic view gets the job done. The naval battles look great, especially the water – finally, the ocean isn't flat!
- > **Sound:** Some strategy games use sound as another way to convey meaningful information to the player or to enrich the world's ambiance. This does neither well
- > **Playability:** Making players dig through as many menus as this does should be worth a stay in the brig
- > **Entertainment:** The economic sim sub-genre is so underserved that this might be worth a look for enthusiasts
- > **Replay Value:** Moderate

PC
East India Company

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (4-PLAYER ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** PARADOX INTERACTIVE
> **DEVELOPER** NITRO GAMES > **RELEASE** AUGUST 3 > **ESRB** T

STORMY SEAS



As a fan of economic sims of all kinds, I had high hopes for East India Company. The game has plenty going for it: good production values, a publisher that understands the strategy genre, and a setting largely untapped in recent gaming history. These advantages were apparently not enough, as some boneheaded design decisions sharply limit EIC's appeal.

Players take on the role of one of the great European trading companies of the age of imperialism. By shipping goods to and from their home port and the luxury-producing ports along the African and Indian coasts, anyone with a ship can make a fortune. With the industrial output of a European nation at your beck and call and a fleet of ships rivaled only by the world's greatest powers, the sums of money available reach the astronomical.

The vast wealth at stake attracts the worst kinds of attention. Pirates and rivals both are only too willing to empty your cargo holds at gunpoint. Players' responsibilities thus extend to the creation and maintenance of warships, commanding engagements with those ships, and the execution of diplomacy.

The structure of the strategic layer is brilliant. Both your sovereign ruler and your company's board of directors hand out missions, which guide players along the course of history and keep the game

moving along. You might be tasked with conquering a certain port, importing a quantity of luxury goods, or growing your treasury to a specific level. These are all activities you should be engaged in anyway, but the extra direction is a nice addition to the free-form gameplay.

All of this warfare and expansion is fueled by one thing: the efficacy of your trading empire. Unfortunately, managing your fleets of ships and the ports under your control is frustrated at every turn by a series of head-scratching design and interface decisions.

EIC features a complex price model that uses supply and demand to determine the buying and selling price of each of the dozens of tradeable goods at each individual port. Ideally, players maximize their profits by staying abreast of the world's many fluctuating markets, just like real-world trading companies. In practice, this is nearly impossible.

Automated fleets simply buy up the most expensive good at each end of their route and sell it at the other. Leaving this running is a good way to quickly end up on the wrong side of the supply/demand curve. However, managing cargoes manually is a horrible experience. To do so requires digging through multiple levels of menus and sitting through load screens for each port – there's no way to interact with cargoes or trading posts from

the strategic view. This absurd setup gives players two options. You can automate your trading routes, sacrificing large amounts of money-making efficiency for the sake of your sanity. Alternatively, you can manually manage your fleets, making lots of money but finishing one game per calendar year due to all the time-consuming micromanagement.

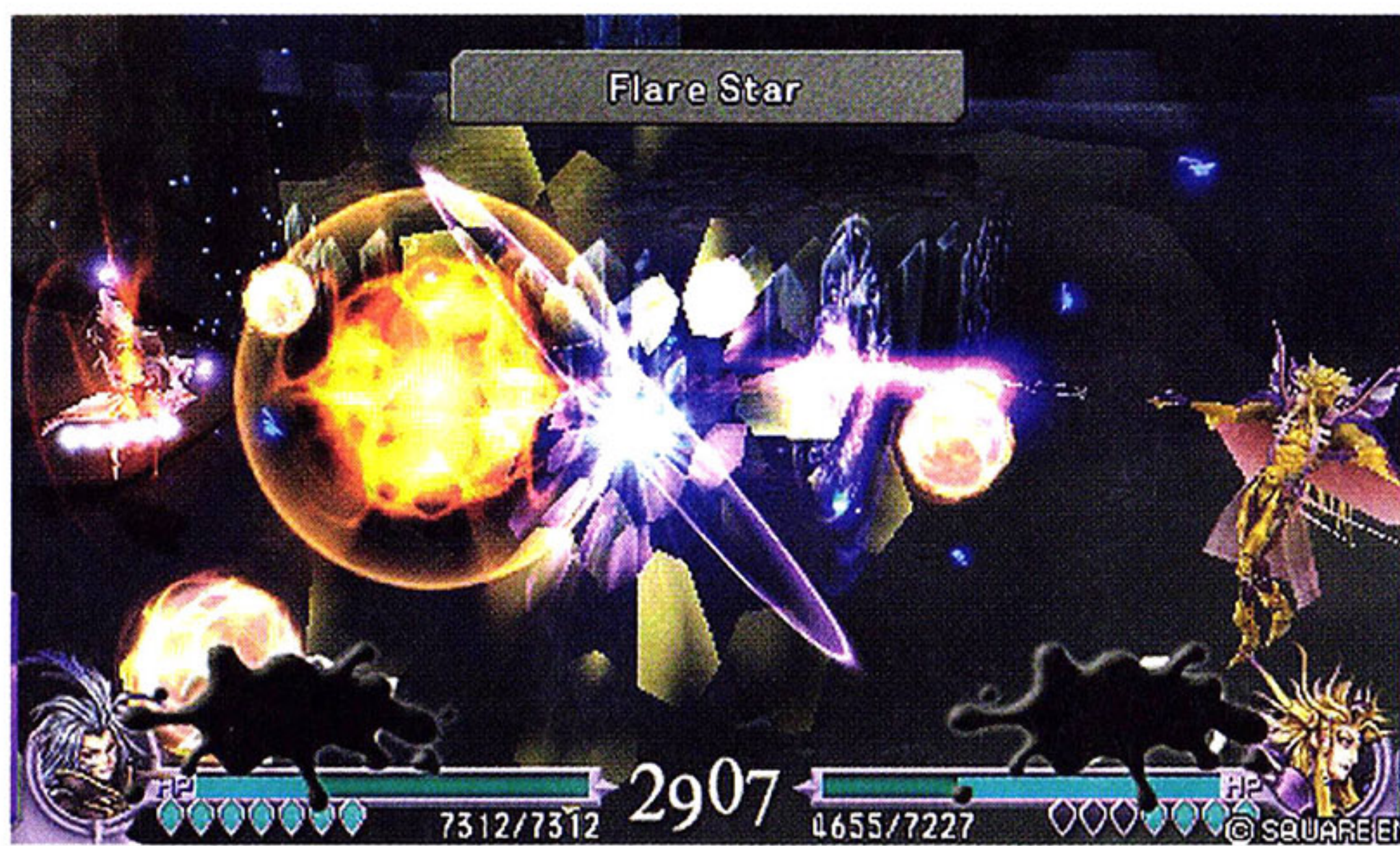
The game's ancillary aspects – tactical naval battles and global diplomacy – are executed well enough, but they're nothing we haven't seen before. Restricting fleets to five ships on a side limits the potential of the combat, but it's still amusing to watch the solid presentation as your navy blows the hell out of their enemies. Interactions with other companies take place via a give-and-take diplomacy screen that may as well have been ripped straight out of any other strategy game of the last decade. I'd suggest experiencing it in a better game.

You can play East India Company as a trading/economic simulation, but the interface fights you every step of the way. You can play it as a 4X global domination game, but it's far more limited in that regard than the any by-the-numbers title dedicated to that sub-genre. I'd hoped it would be a compelling hybrid, but it unfortunately does not hold up in that arena either. —**ADAM**

Second Opinion **7**

Seedy modern corporations like Halliburton weren't the first businesses to meddle in foreign affairs. In the 1700s, the East India Company controlled the entirety of India both economically and militarily. The game gives you control of an overzealous branch tied loosely to a nationality. Your job is to set up trading routes, take over ports, upgrade facilities, and wage war with other factions in the name of the almighty dollar via a Total War-lite interface. The mechanics work on a simplistic level, but offer no real depth to manage meticulous trading routes or set up building queues. The naval battles fall completely flat, with difficult to control ships and no auto flee, which means you must manually go into each battle when you know your sparsely equipped schooner carrying valuable goods can simply outrun the sluggish attacking galleon – auto resolve guarantees the loss of cargo and ship. The ship commander character progression offers an interesting layer of depth, but the game's noninvolved diplomacy and lack of subterfuge feel like missed opportunities. If you enjoy Total War, this diet version of the game may serve in passing. Others should just stick with the master. —**BERTZ**





PSP

Dissidia: Final Fantasy

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER LOCAL) > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** AUGUST 25 > **ESRB** T

SUMMONING THE EFFORT

Discussions about which popular video game characters could beat others in a fight are widespread and stupid. These hypothetical match-ups serve only to rile up the most devoted nerds, leaving all other gamers to shake their heads in derision. For better or worse, Dissidia makes these long-imagined battles a reality, pitting heroes and villains from the entire Final Fantasy series against each other in fast-paced, addled combat.

Dissidia's main strength is its relentless pandering. If you love Final Fantasy characters, your jaw will go slack with amazement as you watch Cloud and Sephiroth cross swords, or witness Terra's transformation into her Esper form. Spells flying back and forth, mid-air combat, and ridiculous limit breaks come together to form an approximation of the high-octane battles that were previously relegated to the series' cutscenes. The speed of the action and the top-notch presentation is almost enough to make you forget the game isn't good.

For all of the emphasis on fighting, Dissidia's basic combat mechanics are remarkably unsatisfying. The erratic camera, shallow mechanics, and unreliable commands for performing specific attacks make implementing strategy difficult. Unlocking new moves, equipment, and costumes involves grinding through the repetitive story mode—a shoddy board game framework that moves you from fight to fight. Playing the story mode in a fighting game may sound pointless, but the restriction on two-player matches leaves you with few options; multiplayer only works locally, so you are limited to squaring off against friends in your immediate vicinity who also own the game.

In a similar vein as last year's Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII, Dissidia is only valuable to gamers who can look past massive flaws and appreciate being immersed in the lore of the series. The concept may delight hardcore fans, but the unrefined gameplay ensures that everyone else is left out in the cold.—**JOE**



BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** A Final Fantasy battle royale with lots of familiar characters and not much else

> **Graphics:** Great character models and flashy effects make Dissidia one of the most gorgeous games on the PSP

> **Sound:** Key voice actors reprise their roles for the likes of Cloud, Tidus, and Sephiroth

> **Playability:** While not exactly responsive, the controls are easy to understand

> **Entertainment:** If you like fighting more than Final Fantasy, look elsewhere for fun

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

You know your game stinks when even the computer-generated characters' faces are awash with shades of confusion and disinterest. Square's attempt at servicing fans by pitting Final Fantasy's greatest heroes and villains against one another only lasts as long as the action-packed introductory movie. The aerial combat that follows can best be described as a poor rendition of Armored Core, where most of your sword strikes fall short, the camera would rather frame nothing, and magic is as uneventful as a spell flying off of Neville Longbottom's wand. The most enjoyment this game delivers is found in its menus, where a wealth of equipment, summons, and attacks can be assigned and purchased. These thrills are fleeting, as they all lead back to the battlefield and the horrid plot, which I suspect might be random lines cut from previous Final Fantasy games jammed together. I'd pay top dollar to see Squall fight Sephiroth, but not when it seems they sold their souls to get a big check like they do in this game.—**REINER**

PSP

Pangya: Fantasy Golf

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SPORTS (8-PLAYER LOCAL) > **PUBLISHER** TOMY > **DEVELOPER** NTREEV SOFT > **RELEASE** JUNE 26 > **ESRB** E10+



GOLF, ANIME STYLE

Pangya: Fantasy Golf makes a name for itself in the world of video game golf by combining the familiar gameplay and item collection-based formula of Hot Shots Golf with a strange, anime-style story mode.

Anyone familiar with old school, pre-analog swing golf will be right at home with Pangya's gameplay. The swing works on the three-click mechanic, which feels accurate while still maintaining a degree of challenge for veteran players. The courses balance solid layouts with more fantastical elements like precarious islands and icebound bunkers. As you progress, you can learn new skills like power shots and top spin, which give you an added boost after your ball is done rolling. You can also buff your stats by buying new clubs, balls, and items with Pang, the game's internal cur-

rency (which is awarded for accurate shot making).

If all this sounds like a by-the-book golf game, you're absolutely right. Pangya isn't groundbreaking. The only unique element it offers is the lengthy cutscenes and myriad characters offered in the story mode. At times, it finds amusement, like when my golfer (a policeman that resembled a cross between the cop from the Village People and John Goodman's character from *The Big Lebowski*), developed a fervid desire for mass amounts of fried chicken. While it adds some much needed interest, the career structure is hugely flawed. Though there are four episodes, you can't advance past the first until you've beaten it with all eight characters! It's far too repetitive and laborious for a game with such a light, user-friendly tone.—**MATT**

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** A traditional Japanese style golf game that adds a unique, anime-style story mode to the Hot Shots template

> **Graphics:** Crisp visuals complement the oddball character models and courses

> **Sound:** Not memorable in any way

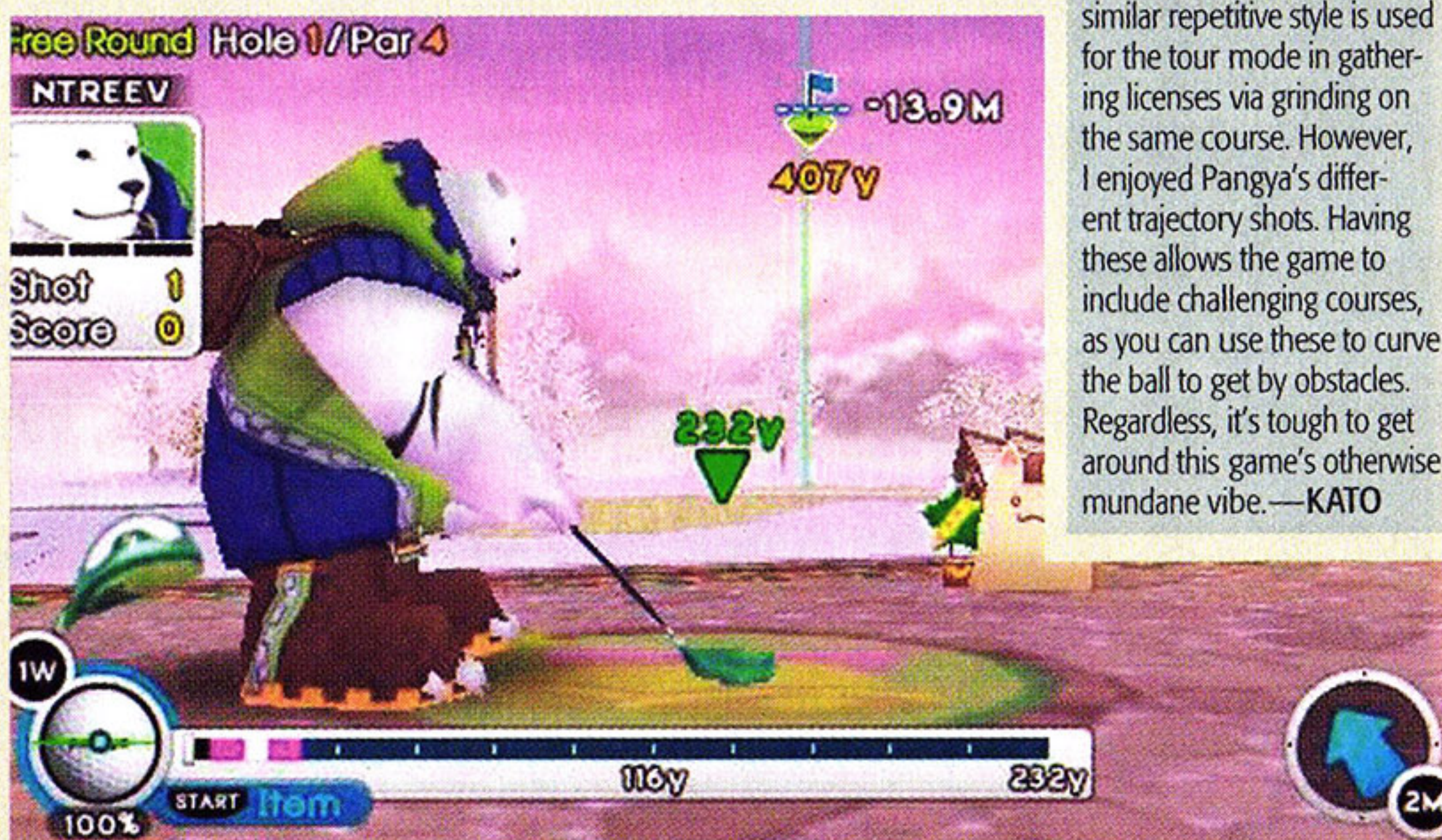
> **Playability:** While the classic three-click swing mechanics seems dated in comparison to Tiger Woods, everything works great and there is some depth to the experience

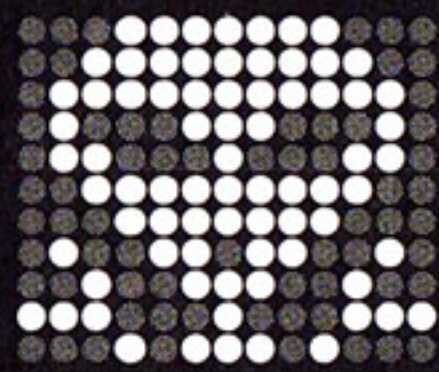
> **Entertainment:** If the wacky stories weren't enough of a hook for you, I'd stick with Hot Shots. But this is a (mostly) well-built and designed golf title

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 7

Pangya hits the PSP with little in the way of differentiation from previous versions. The new Story mode is more of a drag than a highlight, as you must repeat each episode with multiple characters before you can continue. A similar repetitive style is used for the tour mode in gathering licenses via grinding on the same course. However, I enjoyed Pangya's different trajectory shots. Having these allows the game to include challenging courses, as you can use these to curve the ball to get by obstacles. Regardless, it's tough to get around this game's otherwise mundane vibe.—**KATO**





The Conduit

UNLIMITED ENABLED

Wii

Mastering Multiplayer



By game designers Micah Skaritka, David Antognoli, Sam Elder, and Bob Chamot

The Scanner is Your Friend – Always keep an eye on your scanner. It has a 30-meter radius and shows players that are running or firing weapons. You can crouch or stand still to avoid detection or throw people off the scent by making them think you've been killed. Learn the maps and use elevation differences to your advantage, as the motion tracker doesn't account for height differences. Enemies that appear right on top of you may in fact be on a walkway or on the floor above you.

Lock-On – Locking on during melee can be the difference between life and death – and will help you avoid the spastic dances of death when close to an enemy. Locking on helps keep your camera oriented on the opposing player, allowing you to concentrate on aiming and placing melee strikes. When going to melee a player, it is more effective to sidestep them and circle to their left or right, rather than running straight at them. This keeps you out of their sight and range, but keeps them in front of you for an easier hit.

Pistol Envy – Many discount the pistol as a backup weapon, but it's one of the few that allows you to fire as fast as you can pull the trigger. If you're accurate with your headshots, the pistol is a very deadly weapon.

Boom – The starting weapons for the Explosive weapons set are the SMAW and the TPC Launcher. Switching weapons, especially with the SMAW, is faster than reloading, so be sure to use this to gain the upper hand if you don't get a kill with your rocket. Switching to the TPC while your opponent scrambles to reload is often an easy way to get a kill.

Frag Out – Grenades take skill to use, but are one of the most valuable combat tools in the game. Frags explode after

their second bounce, provided they don't hit a player. Use this to your advantage by aiming low and bouncing a frag into an opponent rather than trying to hit him directly. The blast radius will sometimes do the job if you miss. They're also great for ricocheting around corners.

Charge It Up – Guns offering charged shots, such as the Strike Rifle, are incredibly powerful when used in

combination with normal firing. Keep your weapon charged so that when you do see an enemy player, you can either kill them with a headshot instantly or do a large amount of damage with a body shot. This can be followed by several quick bursts of normal fire to finish them off before they can react.

Feel the Burn – Radiation grenades are great area of denial weapons, and you can hold a lot of them. Throwing three or more radiation grenades quickly into a doorway turns it into a death trap. This can be used to cover a getaway, or to stop an assault in its tracks.

Feeling Fit – While your health eventually replenishes over time, health packs instantly heal you. Memorize their locations and make them part of your routes through multiplayer levels. Nothing is sweeter than laughing death in the face after getting stuck with a radiation grenade by grabbing a well-timed health pack.

Flashdance – Some players have no use for flash grenades, but they're more effective than you might think. Throwing any grenade to the right spot is important. Remember, grenades are thrown to where the reticle is aimed, up to your maximum throwing distance. With practice, pretty soon your enemies will be stumbling into walls (or even better, standing still) due to a well-placed flash grenade, giving you a great opportunity to put them out of their misery.

Be Merciful – In objective-based games, it may not always be a good idea to kill every enemy you meet. If enemies are out of position away from their base, it's sometimes better to leave them there instead

of making the kill... only to have them respawn back by their ASE.

Atomic Bomb – While nothing is more satisfying than a well-placed bolo shot with a charged De-Atomizer, it's difficult to pull off consistently. It's sometimes smarter to fire at an opponent's feet, as the blast damage is significant and can be good for a quick kill.

Weapon of Choice – Upon dying, you drop your currently equipped weapon. Screw over the guy who killed you by switching weapons right before you breathe your last breath. "Yeah buddy, I know I had a rocket launcher. But here's an SMG instead."



Brick Not Hit Back – Range is a very important consideration when using the charged shot on the De-Atomizer, as the shots spread with distance. Remember that the farther away the enemy is, the longer the bolo shots have to circle before they explode, and the wider they will orbit the target. This can be the difference between a quick kill, a slower kill, and a failed bolo. Nobody likes a failed bolo.

Sacrificial Lamb – In team objective games with both a red and blue ASE, it's always a good idea to leave someone on guard at your base. While a mass charge into an enemy base usually means you will get theirs, you want someone around to try and prevent them from getting yours... or at least slow them down a bit.



Mod World

Half-Life 2
Neo Tokyo
www.neotokyohq.com

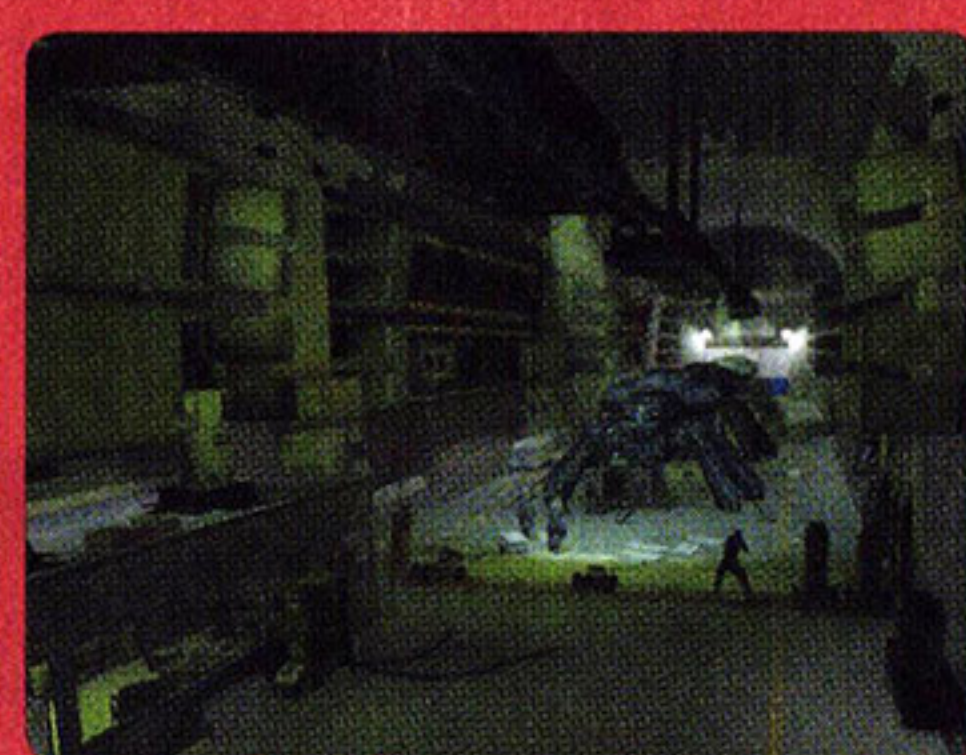


Remember the new-school Shadowrun FPS that Microsoft tried to use as a Trojan horse for DirectX 10? The game was mediocre (and hilariously didn't even use DX10 though it required it), so nobody cared enough to upgrade. Microsoft subsequently shuttered developer FASA, while DX10 and Windows Vista are still non-factors in PC gaming. Despite its inauspicious circumstances, the idea of a sci-fi/fantasy take on Counter-Strike was cool. Now we can play a version that doesn't suck.

The final version of Half-Life 2 multiplayer mod Neo Tokyo was recently released. This competitive, manga-styled first-person shooter hits all the notes that Shadowrun missed. The gunplay is tight. The classes work together and support each other. It's not insulting to a beloved memory. Also, it's actually fun.

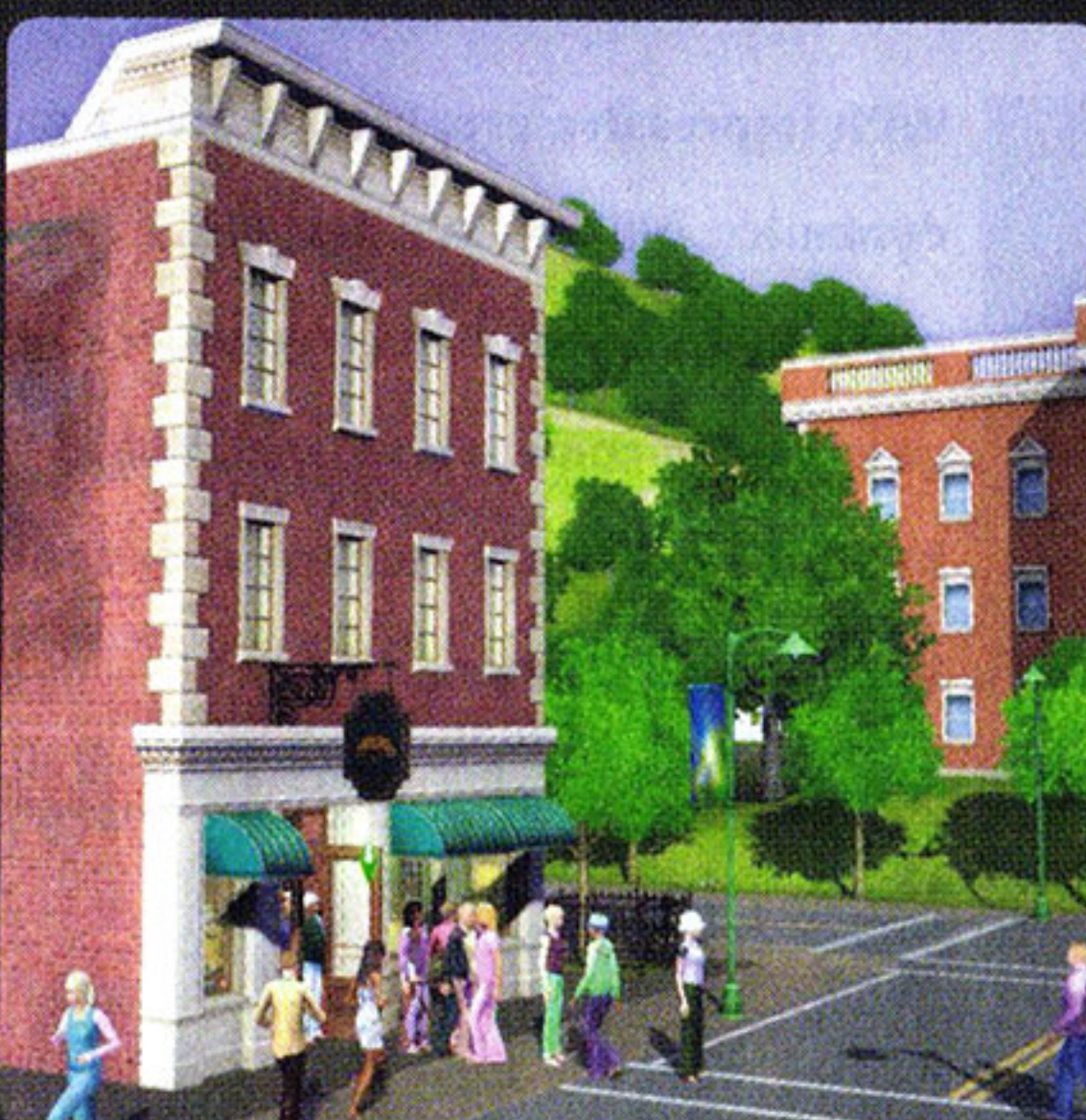
Players compete in a variant of one-flag CTF or a team deathmatch mode. Either way, there is no healing or respawning, and good performance rewards you with more unlocks for subsequent rounds. Told you it was like Counter-Strike.

Neo Tokyo has the usual assortment of firearms (complete with alt-fire modes), explosives, and class specialties like power-jumps. Its calling card, however, is thermoptic camouflage. Light and medium classes both have access to it, and it's as awesome as it sounds. It's limited by movement, duration, and injury, but any kind of invisibility in a game as lethal as Neo Tokyo is worth the tradeoff.



Code of the Month

The Sims 3



The Sims 3 does a great job at simulating life – but sometimes life is boring! Whether it's going to your job every day to scrape up some cash, or working tirelessly to make your spouse happy (or mad), sometimes a little break from reality goes a long way. To get these codes to work, first press CTRL+SHIFT+C (or

CTRL+SHIFT+WindowsKey+C for Vista) during gameplay to enter the Cheats console. Then input the following codes for the desired effect.

\$1,000 While on The Lot – kaching
\$50,000 While on The Lot – motherlode
Enables Llamas – enableLlamas

Toggles Hide All Meters and Effects – hideHeadlineEffects

Summon a Joke – jokePlease

Unlocks Outfits in Create a Sim Mode – unlockOutfits

Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So, unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a prize!

PS3 • XBOX 360



Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen

Whether you're a peace loving Autobot or a dastardly Decepticon, a little extra firepower can always be put to good use. Sure, cheating isn't something that's going to snag an Autobot the Matrix of Leadership, but when the fate of the world is at stake, we're willing to overlook a few gray area tactics. Select Cheat Codes on the main menu and enter the following codes to receive their benefits.

PS3

All Cairo Missions and Zones Unlocked – R3, △, X, △, L3, L1

All Deep Six Missions and Zones Unlocked – □, R1, △, ○, X, L1

All East Coast Missions and Zones Unlocked – R3, L3, R1, X, ○, □

All Shanghai Missions and Zones Unlocked – △, L3, R3, L1, △, X

All West Coast Missions and Zones Unlocked

– L1, R1, R3, △, R3, ○

All Upgrades – L1, △, L1, ○, □, □

Always in Overdrive Mode – L1, ○, L1, X, □, R3

Invincibility – R3, X, □, L3, □, □

Unlimited Turbo – ○, L3, □, R3, X, △

XBOX 360

All Cairo Missions and Zones Unlocked – R3, Y, A, Y, LS, LB

All Deep Six Missions and Zones Unlocked – X, RB, Y, B, A, LB

All East Coast Missions and Zones Unlocked – R3, LS, RB, A, B, X

All Shanghai Missions and Zones Unlocked – Y, LS, R3, LB, Y, A

All West Coast Missions and Zones Unlocked – LB, RB, R3, Y, RS, B

All Upgrades – LB, Y, LB, B, X, X

Always in Overdrive Mode – LB, B, LB, A, X, R3

Invincibility – R3, A, X, LS, X, X

Unlimited Turbo – B, LS, X, R3, A, Y

Wii



The Conduit

To unlock the following goodies, select Extras from the main menu, and input the following codes. Afterwards select the Cheats menu to activate the new abilities. All of the codes are case sensitive.

New Agent Character for Multiplayer Mode

– SuitMP13

New ASE Design for Single Player Mode

– NewASE11

Full Health – Left

Play as a Drone in Single Player Mode

– Drone4SP

XBOX 360



Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood

Here's a code that packs a Civil War-sized wallop! On the main menu, select Exclusive Content and enter the following code. You will receive all of the following items:

Extra Money for Equipment in Single player, Extra Money to Unlock Characters in Multiplayer, Silver Weapons in Multiplayer, and an Exclusive Weapon for the First Two Chapters – 735S653J

"GI Droid"

(location unknown – Last seen signing boycott petitions for games he still intends to buy)



[GEEKED AT BIRTH.]



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THEN

With impressive graphics, evolving gameplay dynamics, billions in sales, and a permanent place in American living rooms, it's obvious video gaming has come a long way. But as this scatter-brained walk down memory lane confirms, some things never change.

While gaming grows by leaps and bounds, some things stay the same.

& NOW



NOW
Wii remote

THEN
Power Glove



Bad Dudes



THEN
Bad Dudes



NOW
Army of Two

Moaning Through Bad Stories



THEN
Bionic Commando
NES



NOW
Bionic Commando
Xbox 360,
PS3

▲ Control Games Through Movement

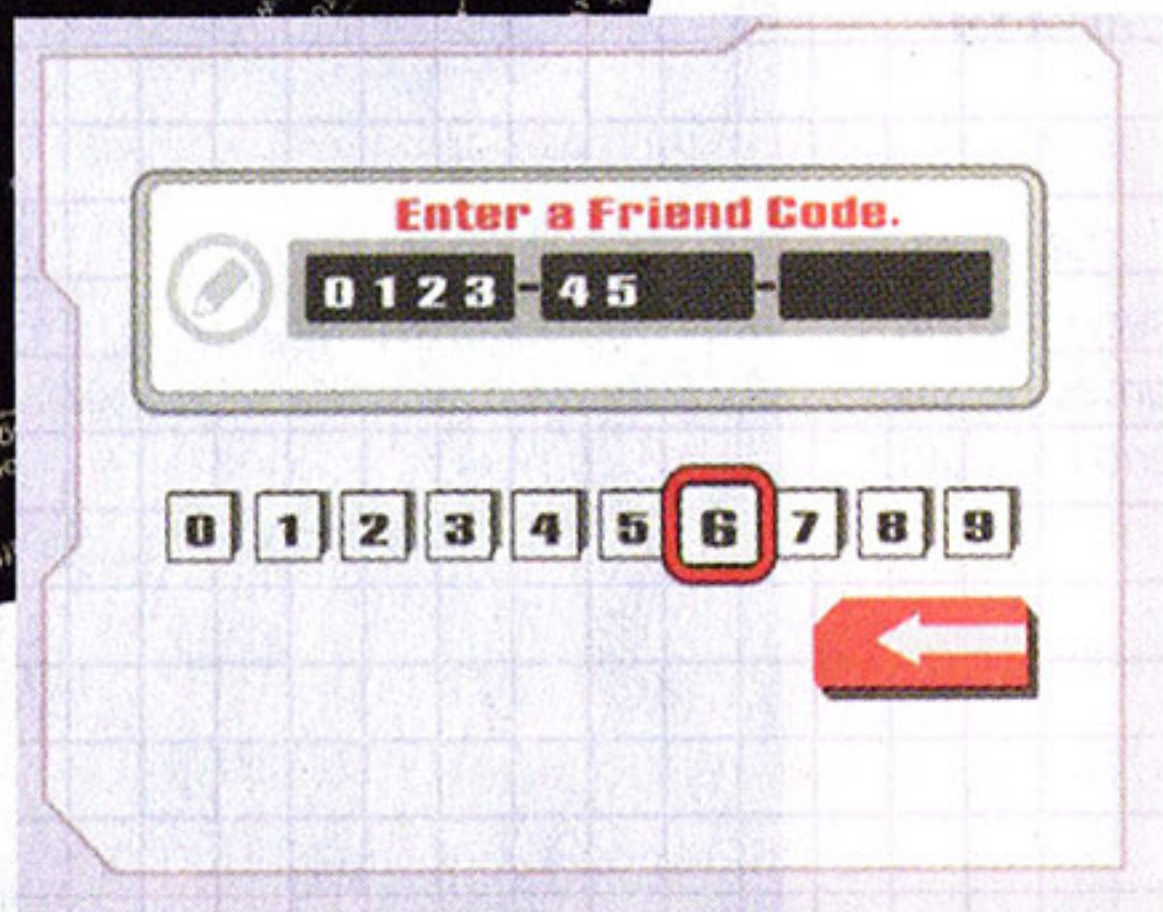
Technical Difficulties ▼

Consoles are such prima donnas. All you wanted to do was play Baseball Stars, but first you had to convince your NES it was a worthy cause. The courting process started with blowing hard into the game cartridge to clear any dust from the chip, and continued with aggressively massaging the cart with your index finger as it rested in the play position. Nowadays, finicky consoles require even more outlandish overtures, like covering the Xbox 360 with a warm towel to beckon an overheat and reset the chip just long enough to get you another few hours of gameplay before you send it in for repairs for the fourth time.



THEN
Code Wheel

NOW
Friend code screen

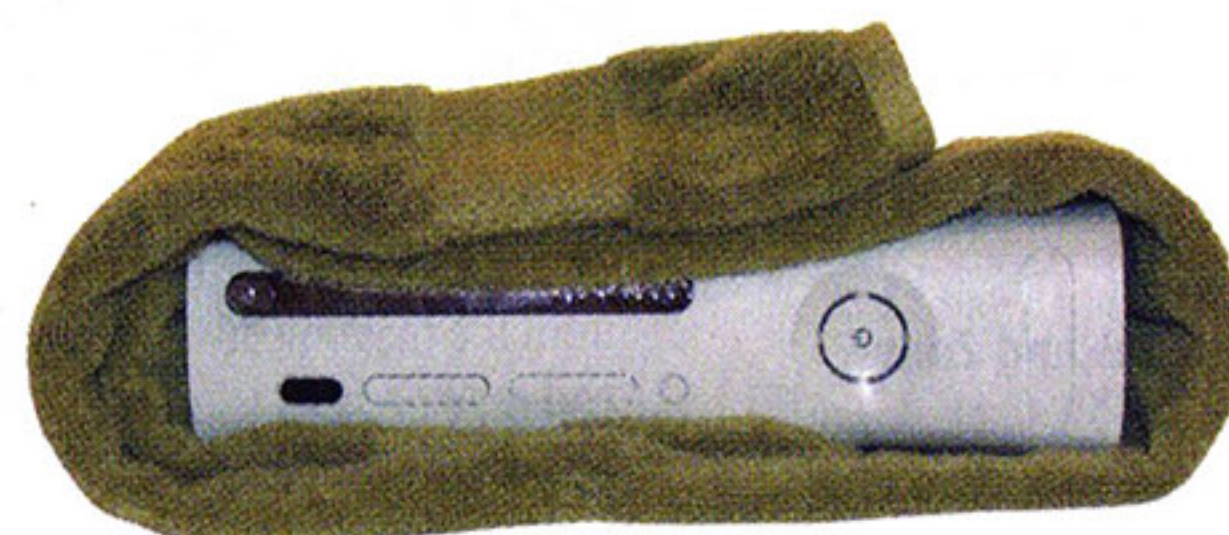


Code Breaking

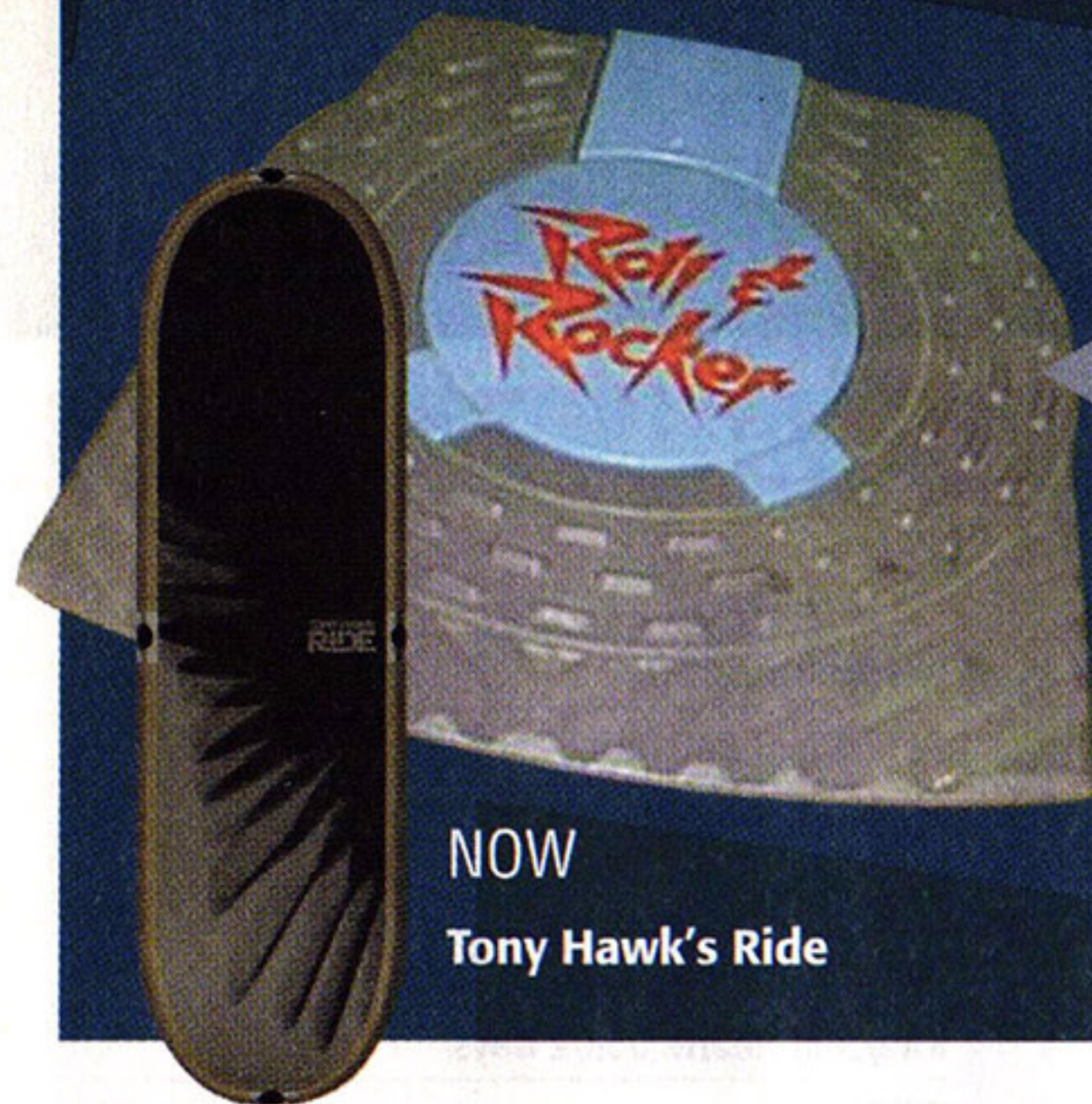
Maybe piracy wouldn't have severely maimed the PC industry if publishers had kept the frustrating code deciphering tools that shipped with early games. Maybe online play on the Wii would have taken off if Nintendo hadn't hidden your online buddies behind a wall of numbers and letters it conveniently calls "Friend Codes." Either way, gamers are still stuck entering strings of non-sensical data.



THEN
Blowing into the NES cartridge to get the game to play



NOW
Xbox 360 towel trick



THEN
Roll & Rocker

Ridiculous Peripherals

Not many remember the Roll & Rocker, a power pad-like device for the NES that allowed gamers who weighed less than 100 pounds to move their character by tilting their balance. Similarly, not many will remember Tony Hawk's Ride, a superfluous skateboard without wheels that gamers who hate themselves can stand on to move their character up half-pipes and rails.

NOW
Tony Hawk's Ride

The Konami Code

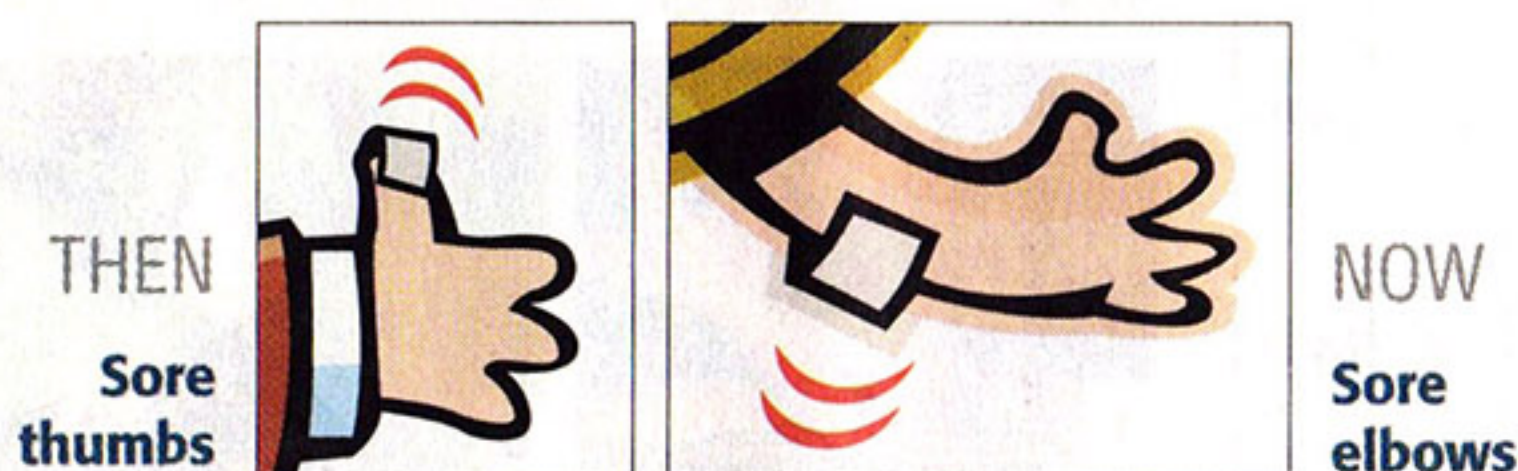


THEN
Entering Konami code on Contra to get free lives



NOW
Entering Konami code on ESPN.com to see unicorns

Nintendo Gives Gamers Arthritis



THEN
Sore thumbs

NOW
Sore elbows

Bad D-Pads

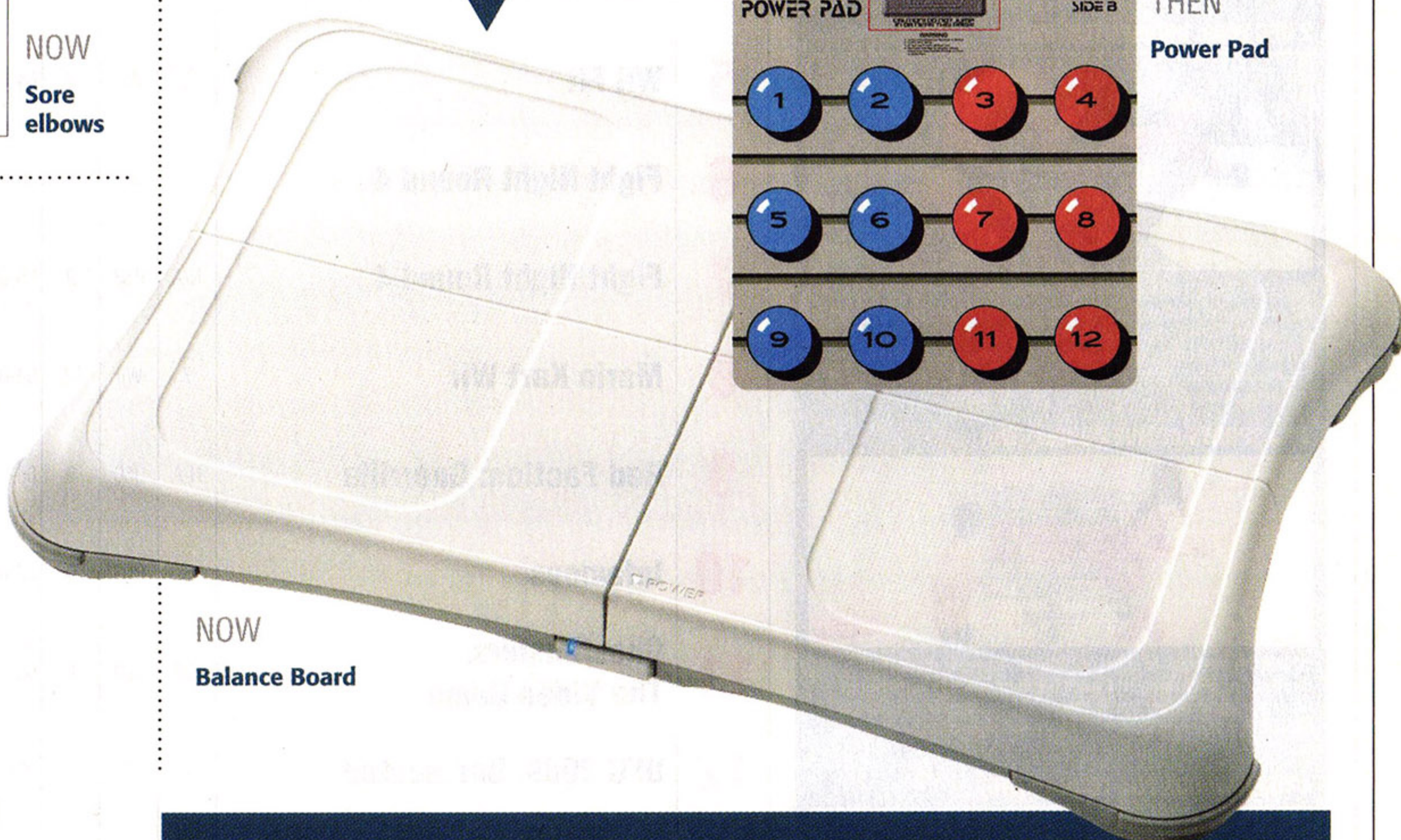


THEN

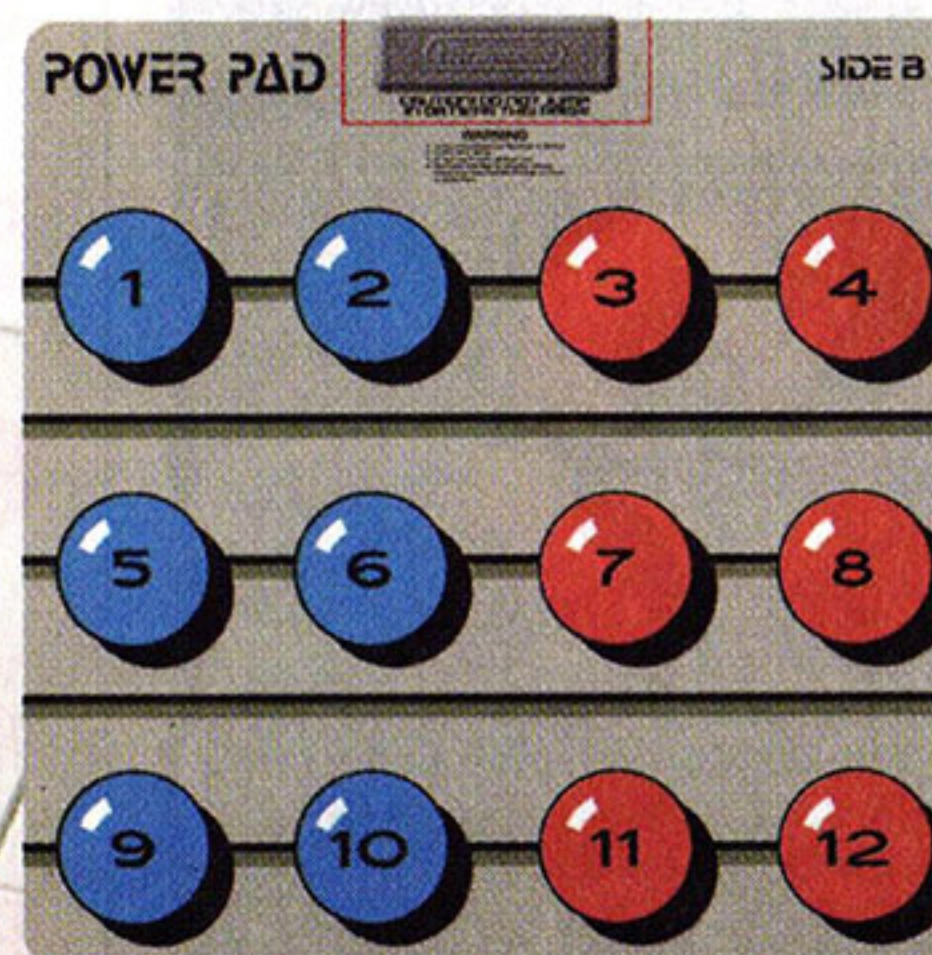


NOW

Nintendo Gets Active



NOW
Balance Board



THEN
Power Pad

Really Hard Games



THEN
Ninja Gaiden
NES



NOW
Ninja Gaiden
Xbox 360

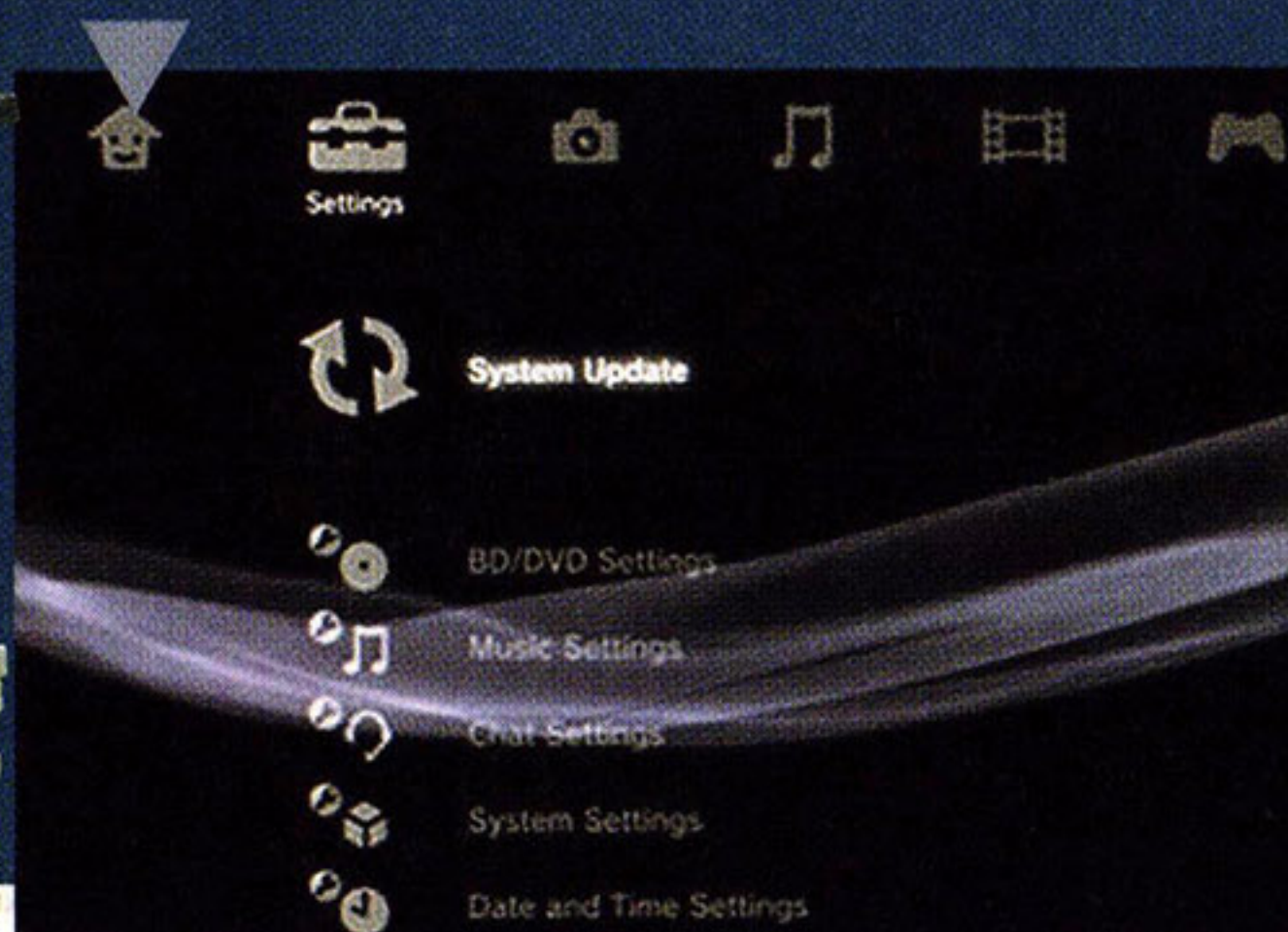
THEN

Waiting through tiresome PC floppy installs

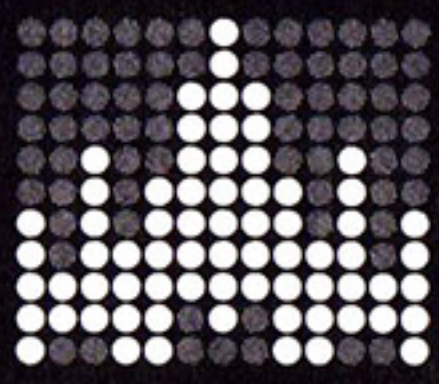


The Wait

Back in the day, waiting in line to buy that new PC game was only the beginning of a long trial in patience. Upon getting home, you were treated to a 14-disc game install that may or may not have required the creation of a boot disk. The problem is you wouldn't know until the game didn't start up after the laborious install! Now, gamers are treated with countless PS3 system update downloads and 15-minute hard disk installs. Just let us play!



NOW
PS3
System Update



CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

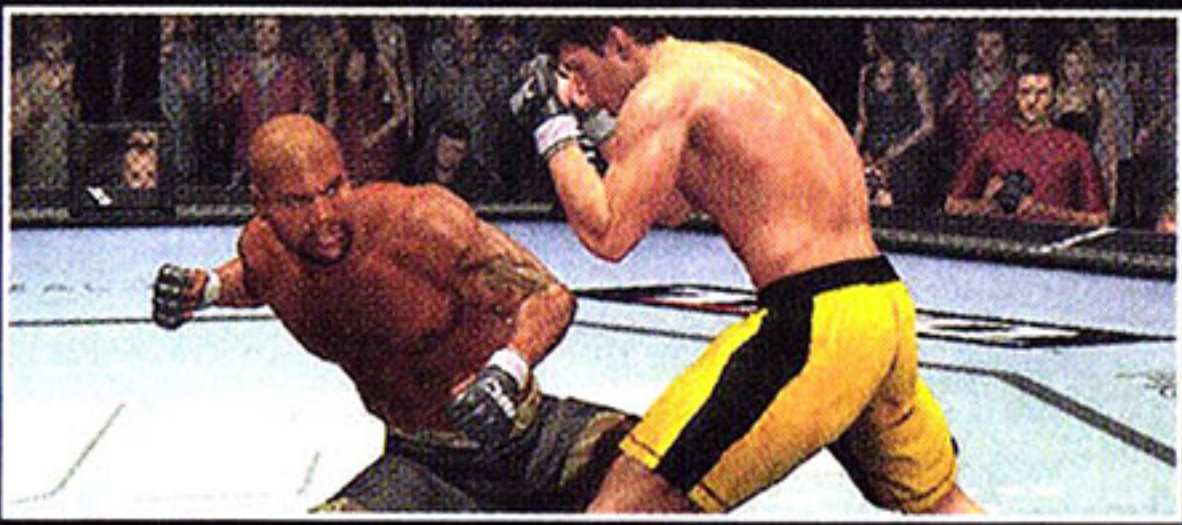
Listings Based Upon NPD Data For June 2009 Based On Units Sold

1 PROTOTYPE (360)



Welcome to Charts' Annual Spiceathon. Now with more spice! What's the best way to cook your Prototype? Start with a large frying pan, add two tablespoons of olive oil and a clove of garlic. Cover and forget until you smell burning. If the edges of your disk are a dark brown then you've succeeded in ruining a \$60 game. Garnish with a pickle.

2 UFC 2009: UNDISPUTED (360)



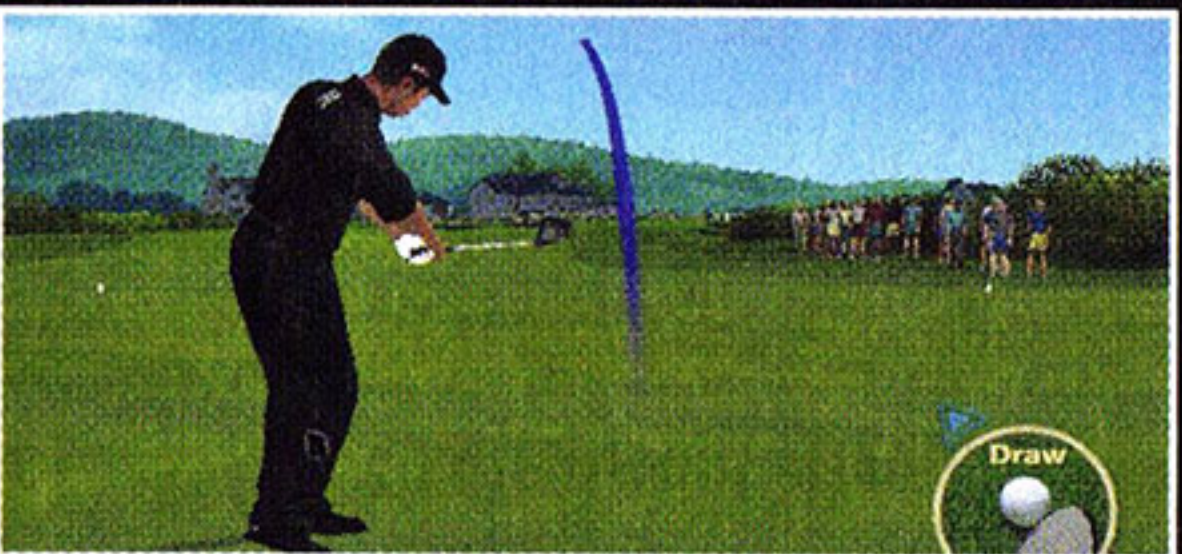
Why do crowded elevators always smell different to short people? No one knows. But we do know the best way to throw down an unstoppable UFC ground and pound. Keep a small packet of chili powder tucked under your tongue. When your opponent comes in with a left hook, blow that pixie fire into his eyes. He's all yours. Go for the groin.

3 EA SPORTS ACTIVE BUNDLE (Wii)



What's the best way to spice up your EA Active workout? Snort three grams of ginseng and you'll be lifting weights like a South African jungle monkey. You'll also need less sleep and risk going blind, but you're only five weeks from the perfect summer bikini body. Now that's spicy!

4 TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 10 (Wii)



Now let's check in with our eye-in-the-sky traffic reporter. Jan? Thanks, Bob. The 104 is looking pretty backed up right now, so if you're headed downtown be prepared for some slowdown. It also looks like a pack of wild geese are making their way across the green on hole eight but Tiger is going to play through. Back to you in the studio.

5 WII FIT (Wii)

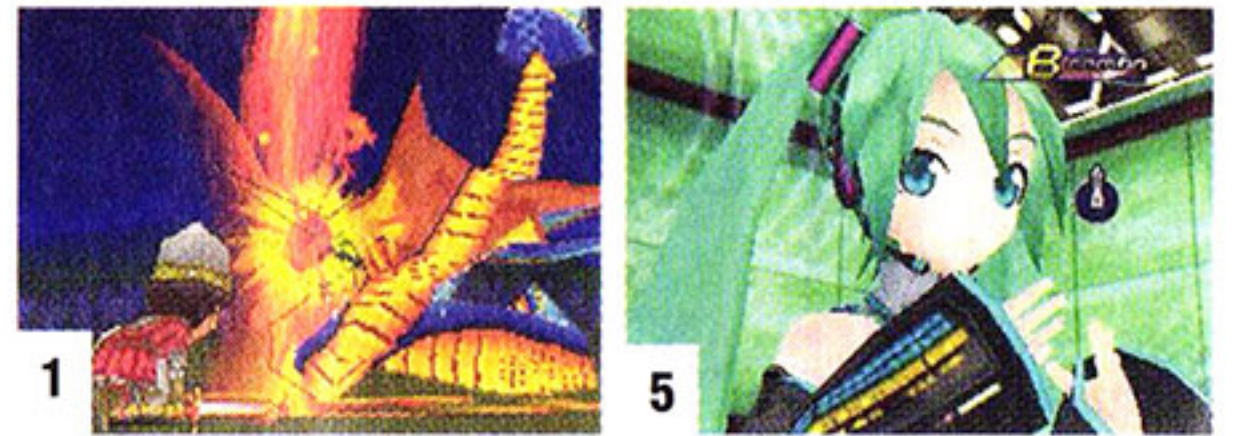


Thanks Jan. Well, you've heard of super foods, but what about super spices? That's right, being a healthy ingestible isn't just for blueberries and broccoli anymore. A new study from the Dew-knot Trustsus society says that ingesting five "fist-loads" of the spice sodium chloride could make you corpse-skinny in no time. Who needs Wii Fit now?

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release
1	Prototype	N/A	360	7.25	06-09
2	UFC 2009: Undisputed	1	360	8	05-09
3	EA Sports Active Bundle	3	Wii	N/A	05-09
4	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10	N/A	Wii	8.5	06-09
5	Wii Fit	2	Wii	8	04-08
6	Fight Night Round 4	N/A	360	9	06-09
7	Fight Night Round 4	N/A	PS3	9	06-09
8	Mario Kart Wii	7	Wii	8.5	04-08
9	Red Faction: Guerrilla	N/A	360	9	06-09
10	Infamous	5	PS3	9	05-09
11	Ghostbusters: The Video Game	N/A	360	8	06-09
12	UFC 2009: Undisputed	4	PS3	8	05-09
13	Prototype	N/A	PS3	7.25	06-09
14	Pokémon Platinum	6	DS	8.5	03-09
15	Punch-Out!!	8	Wii	9	05-09
16	Wii Play	10	Wii	7	02-07
17	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10	N/A	360	8.5	06-09
18	Mario Kart DS	12	DS	8.5	11-05
19	The Legendary Starfy	N/A	DS	7	06-09
20	New Super Mario Bros.	11	DS	9.25	05-06

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Dragon Quest IX	DS
2	Wii Sports Resort	Wii
3	Tomodachi Collection	DS
4	My Summer Vacation 4	PSP
5	Project Diva	PSP
6	Monster Hunter Portable 2nd G	PSP
7	Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days	DS
8	Wii Fit	Wii
9	Pokémon Platinum	DS
10	Sloan and McHale's Mysterious Story	DS



TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Batman: Arkham Asylum	N/A	multi
2	Shadow Complex	N/A	360
3	The Beatles: Rock Band	N/A	multi
4	Madden NFL 10	N/A	multi
5	Fight Night Round 4	1	multi
6	The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition	N/A	360
7	Battlefield 1943	2	multi
8	NCAA Football 10	3	multi
9	Wii Sports Resort	N/A	Wii
10	Sims 3	4	PC



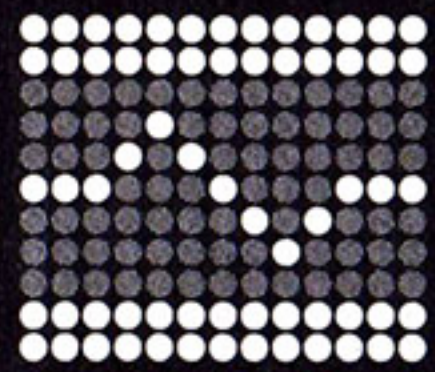
The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	The Sims 3	N/A	\$49
2	The Sims 3 Collector's Edition	N/A	\$69
3	The Sims 2 Double Deluxe	2	\$20
4	World Of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King	1	\$37
5	World Of Warcraft: Battle Chest	5	\$37
6	Spore Galactic Adventures	N/A	\$30
7	World Of Warcraft	4	\$20
8	Spore	7	\$40
9	Empire: Total War	6	\$50
10	StarCraft: Battle Chest	N/A	\$20



Based On Monthly Units Sold



ONLINE

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UNLIMITED LAUNCH: AUG. 17

Ladies And Gentlemen: The Beatles!

Dig deeper into Beatles lore with our extended interviews with Paul McCartney, Yoko Ono, and Olivia Harrison.



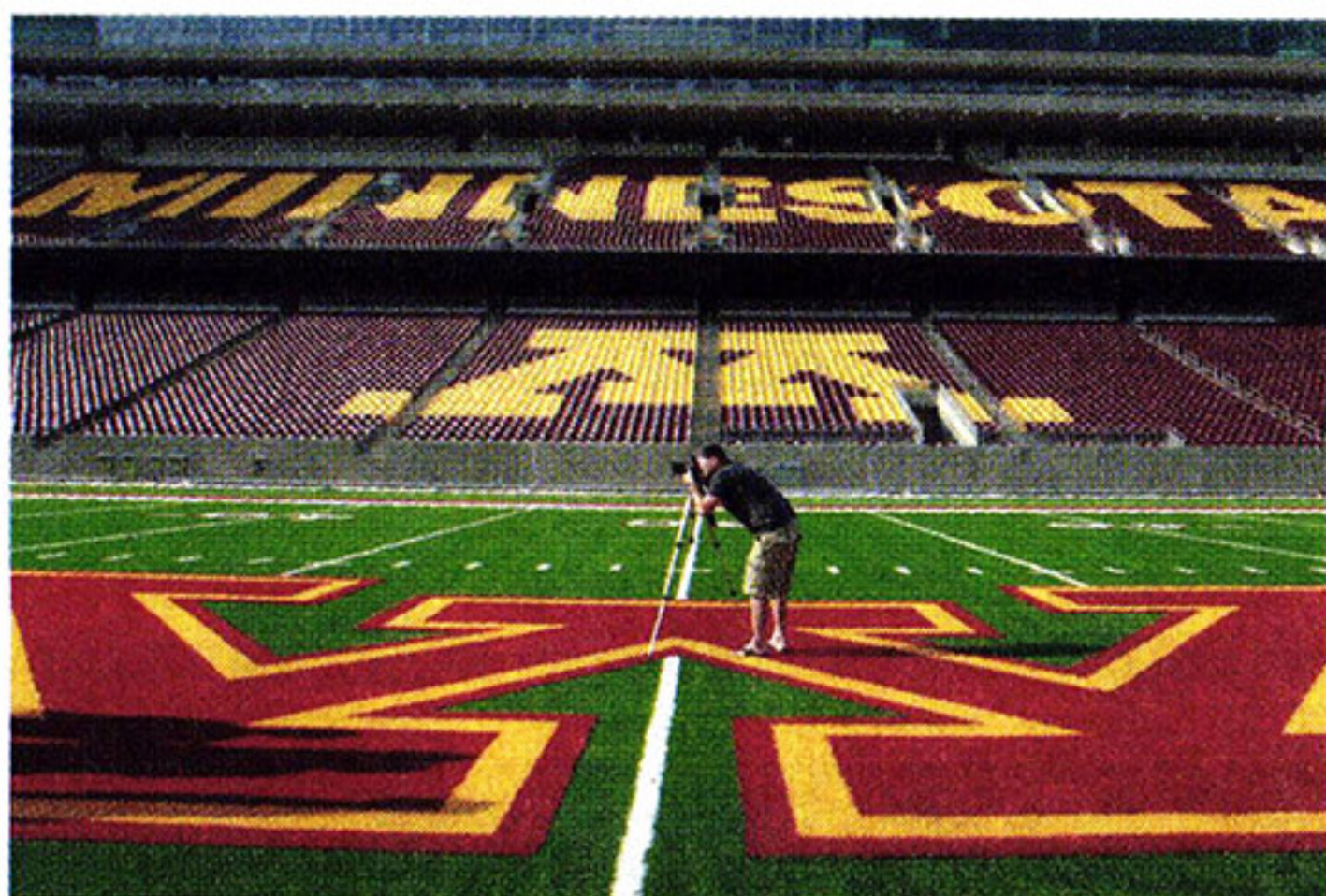
More Beatlemania

Putting together The Beatles: Rock Band didn't happen overnight. Learn more about how Harmonix and MTV Games beat the odds as we talk with studio head Alex Rigopulos, Abbey Road's Giles Martin, and others involved in the project.



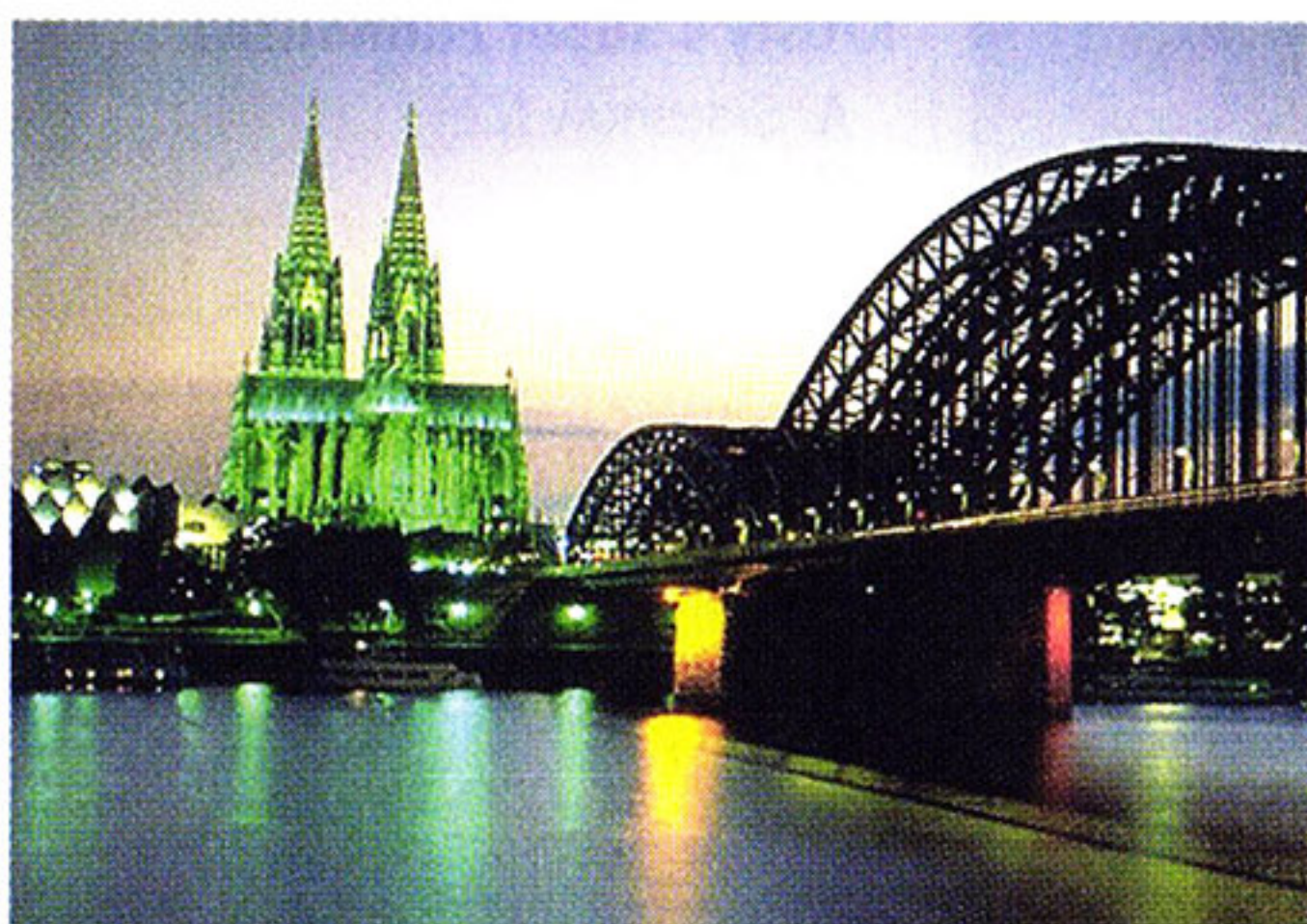
Conducting Destruction

Learn more ins and outs of how to own fools in The Conduit with our additional tips from the dev team at High Voltage.



Sim Stadium

View more photos of EA's visit to the University of Minnesota campus to capture footage of TCF Bank Stadium for NCAA Football 11.



Also Online This Month:

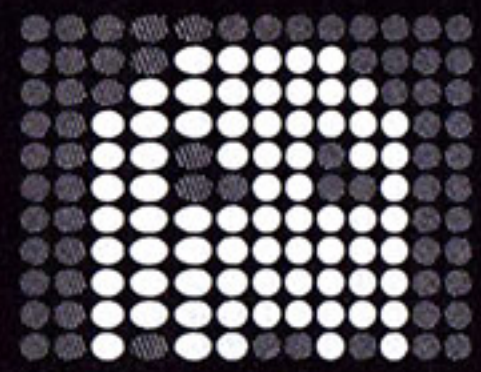
Game Informer Online heads to Germany to buy lederhosen, drink Bavarian beverages, and attend Gamescom 2009.

All New

All You

gameinformer.com

COMING SOON



GAMEOVER

You Have Ignited A Nuclear War.

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

In the past few years rhythm games have rocked the video game industry. It's easy to understand the appeal; they may just be little plastic instruments, but who hasn't dreamed of holding their own rooftop concert in front of thousands of adoring fans? With this month's Game Over quiz, you can live the fantasy! Check your score on the right to see what kind of rock star you'd make.

1 Which is the first album that will be available as DLC for The Beatles: Rock Band?

- A. Abbey Road
- B. Beatles for Sale
- C. The Beatles (a.k.a. "The White Album")
- D. Yellow Submarine

2 What color is the middle fret button on the dusty guitar peripheral underneath your couch?

- A. Red
- B. Orange
- C. Yellow
- D. Blue

3 Which one of these Game Informer bigwigs has never been in a band?

- A. Andy McNamara
- B. Andrew Reiner
- C. Matt Helgeson
- D. Jeff Cork

4 Which of the following ridiculous premises is a legitimate Alex Kidd game?

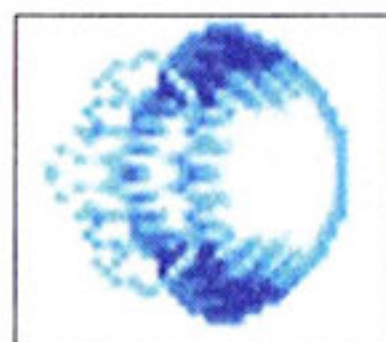
- A. Alex Kidd in Alien World
- B. Alex Kidd in Planet World
- C. Alex Kidd in Space Harrier World
- D. Alex Kidd in High Tech World



5 In Mega Man 2, what weapon is Dr. Wily's final form vulnerable to?

- A. Metal Blade
- B. Crash Bomb
- C. Bubble Lead
- D. Leaf Shield

6 What is this condensed sphere of deadly energy?



- A. Mega Man X's charged X-Buster shot
- B. Ryu's Hadouken
- C. Sonic the Hedgehog's Spin Dash
- D. Dark Knight Cecil's Dark Wave

7 Which migraine-inducing Virtual Boy game is pictured here?



- A. Virtua Boxing
- B. Cybox Bouts
- C. Virtual Punch-Out!!
- D. Telero Boxer

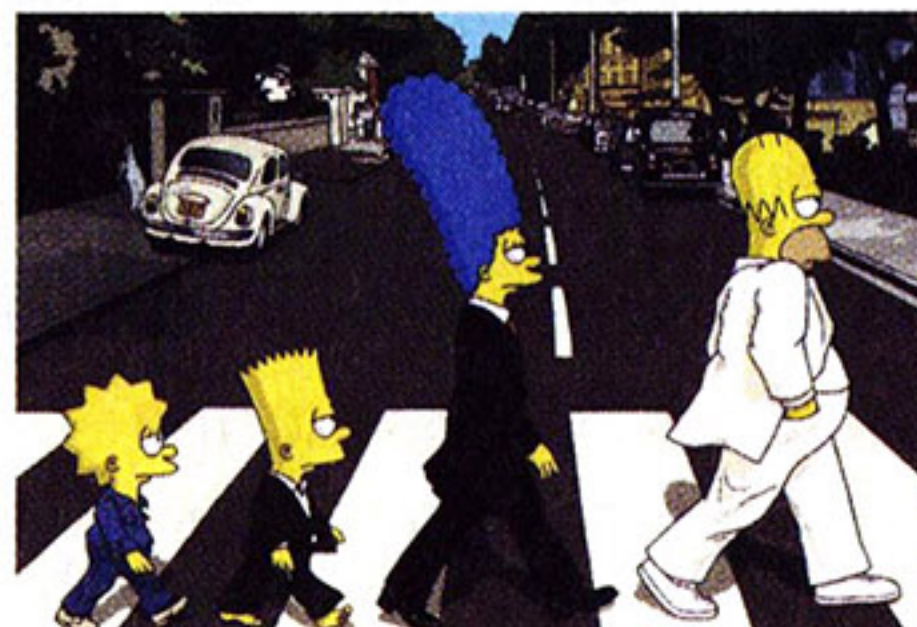
8 In Resident Evil 5, which of these classic enemies from the series makes a return?

- A. Hunter
- B. Licker
- C. Tyrant
- D. Steve Burnside



9 The Simpsons have made multiple allusions to The Beatles over the years. Which of the Beatles did Marge Simpson endlessly paint portraits of?

- A. John Lennon
- B. Paul McCartney
- C. George Harrison
- D. Ringo Starr



10 Speaking of the Simpsons, which character doesn't help you brutally murder mice in Krusty's Super Funhouse?

- A. Sideshow Mel
- B. Marge
- C. Homer
- D. Corporal Punishment



BREAKDOWN

49 million dollars was the final amount Warner Bros. paid for Midway, which includes the rights to the Mortal Kombat and Wheelman franchises, among others.

2.3 million units of Dragon Quest IX were sold in the first 48 hours of its release in Japan.

1 is the number of save slots Dragon Quest IX allows – looks like your brother has to buy his own copy!

5 days is all it took for Battlefield 1943 gamers to accrue 43 million kills over Xbox Live, unlocking a fourth playable map. Who says war never changes?

0 is the number of funny comments we have to end Breakdown with this month. Sorry.

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1 Your fame was based more on spectacle than talent, and now your fans have moved onto the next flavor of the month. The only way you can get back into the spotlight is to shave your head and stop wearing underwear.

2-3 You're a one hit wonder. It's not the worst thing in the world; you've tasted fame and have a decent following of fans, but it's going to take some new ideas to overcome being "the one who did that song."

4-5 Your second album was better than the first, and is receiving praise from even the toughest critics. You're the hottest star out there right now, but still plagued by the question of whether your music will stand the test of time or be forgotten.

6-7 Your impact on the music scene is unquestionable, but your fear of new technology and sue-happy tactics have turned off fans and made you the butt of industry jokes. Still, it's not going to stop anyone from picking up your next album – or downloading it, at least.

8-9 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? Check. Hit albums decade after decade? Check. Millions of fans and groupies? Check. Too much partying? Check – after all, why do you think you're always writing lists? A legendary career doesn't mean much when you can't remember it...

10 Your music isn't just a collection of songs, it's a vision; your work has created a movement and will never be forgotten. You have a "mania" named after you, for crying out loud. The world will never be the same.

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