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ASSASSIN'S CREED ROGUE

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Streaming Killed The Single-Player Star



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

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

Could the ability to watch an entire game from beginning to end online be the death of linear single-player experiences? It's an interesting question. Streaming has been around for a while, especially on PC, but now that streaming straight from your Xbox One or PlayStation 4 has lowered the barrier for entry and discovery, the question carries more weight.

Sure there are games, like *The Walking Dead* or *Mass Effect*, where the narrative can take numerous turns to create the illusion that "no game is the same." And there are open-world games, like *Assassin's Creed* or *Grand Theft Auto*, where the narrative runs alongside a playground that players need to experience to understand. But games in which the main story path is fairly limited and predetermined to a degree could be endangered.

Why play *The Last of Us Remastered* when the day it launches you can watch someone else play the entire experience right on your PS4? Did *South Park: The Stick of Truth* have fewer sales overall because world-renowned YouTuber Felix "PewDiePie" Kjellberg played through the entire experience online before the game was even available for purchase? The jokes were the same whether you watched it on YouTube or played it yourself.

To me, the answer to that question is easy; I want to play the game. I have no desire to watch someone else play through the experience, but there are plenty of people who do.

For many, perhaps it is just a question of budget. Why buy a game that you can watch when funds are limited? Yes, we love to support developers by buying their products, but few people out there can afford the thousands of games that come out across the spectrum of platforms in a given year.

I know I love well-crafted single-player experiences, and I would hate to see them fade from existence because developers can't sell enough units due to players watching them online. On the other hand, if developers can't create experiences compelling enough for you to need to play them and not simply watch them, can the consumer be blamed for simply watching the experience and walking away?

The experience on the gamepad becomes paramount to survival in this brave new streaming world. Developers need to innovate and hone the experiences, not add more scenes where mashing buttons opens a sealed door or stops a falling column. Player agency and ownership of the action will be what defines the games and gives weight to the stories that developers tell.

Enjoy the issue.

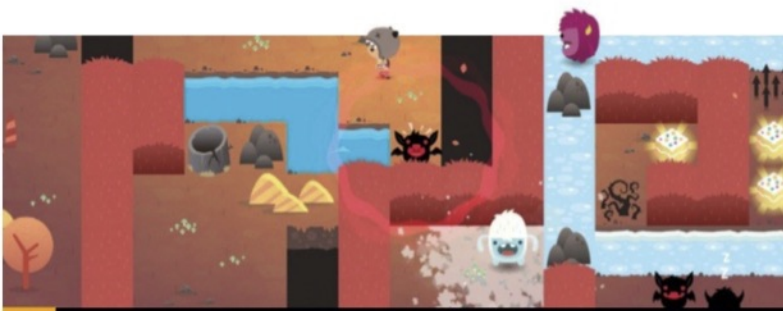
Cheers,

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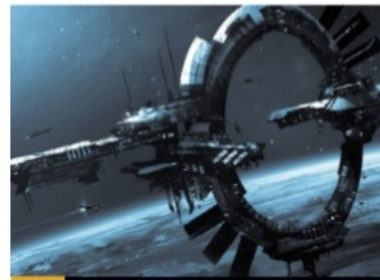


The Future Of Assassin's Creed

Assassin's Creed is back with two new games this fall, *Unity* and *Rogue*. *Unity* is a new-gen exclusive set to be Ubisoft's biggest venture yet, complete with cooperative gameplay and a love story between an Assassin and a Templar. *Rogue* lets you finally assume the role of a Templar, letting you explore New York City, and giving you your own ship to take on the frigid waters of the North Atlantic. **by Kimberley Wallace & Jeff Cork**



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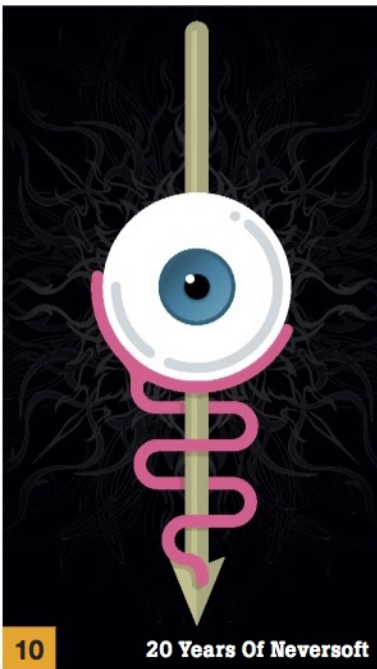
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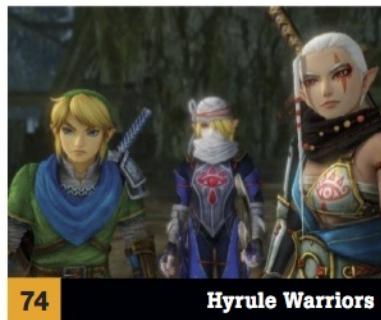
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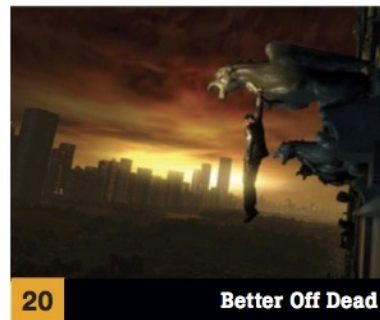
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regulars

» 4 Feedback

This month, readers react to our Far Cry 4 cover, which was much more colorful than any of our previous covers. They also share in our excitement over No Man's Sky, and tell us who wears the best outfit in video games (spoiler: It's Donkey Kong).

» 8 Connect

Neversoft, the studio behind Tony Hawk, was recently absorbed into Call of Duty developer Infinity Ward to create one super studio. We spoke with its founders to reminisce about its games and learn about its future. We also break down the net neutrality issue, and look at some of video games' most notable lawsuits.

» 68 Previews

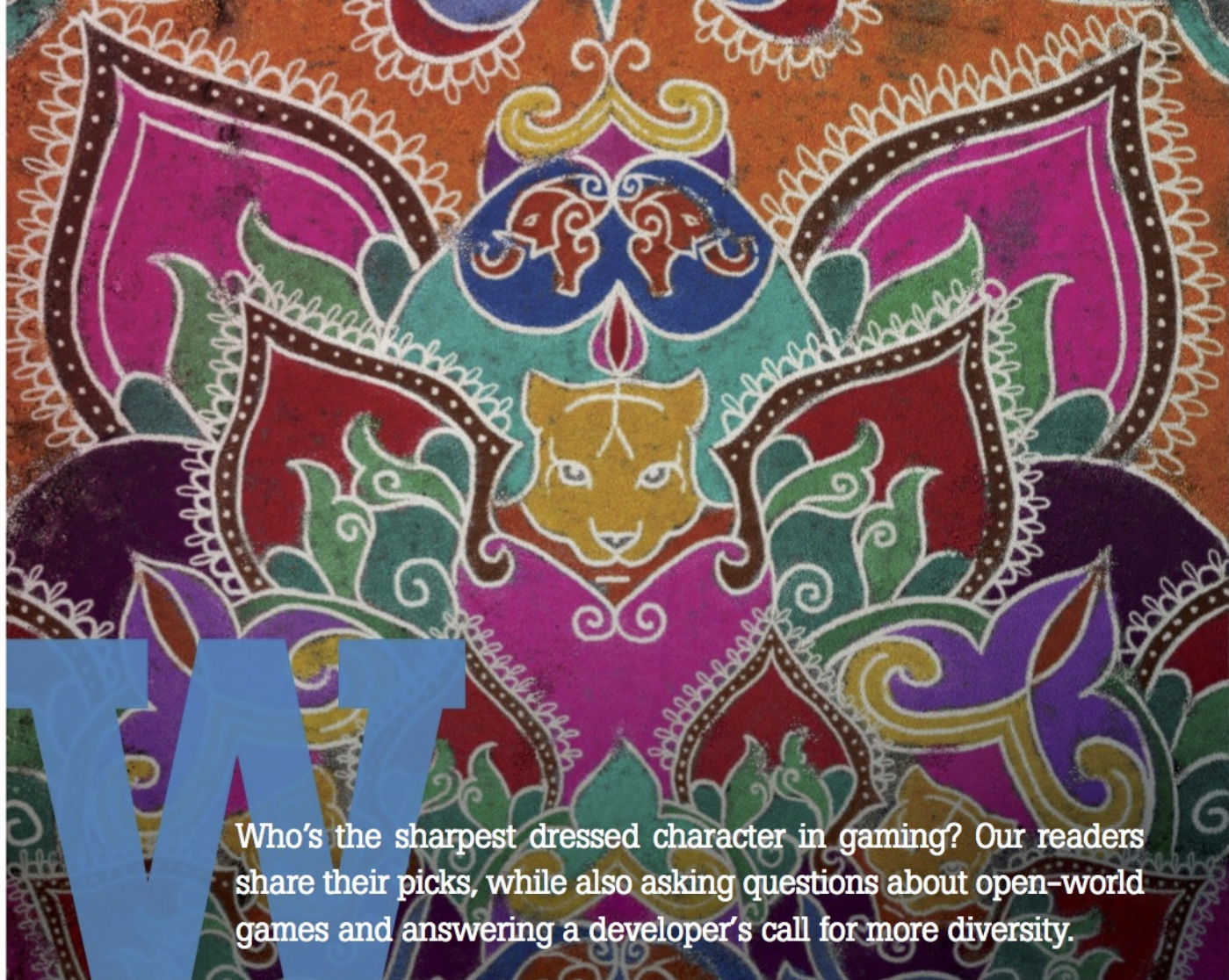
We take one final look at Destiny before hibernating for its release, put our hands on Dragon Age: Inquisition, and see what new characters are playable in Hyrule Warriors. We also find out what's in store for Madden NFL 15 and Pro Evolution Soccer 15, and revisit World of Warcraft to see what's happening in the Warlords of Draenor expansion.

» 88 Reviews

It's a relatively dry month for new releases, but we still have some good stuff to play. We offer our thoughts on the surprise RPG hit Divinity: Original Sin, find out how the Tales of Xillia sequel stands up to the original, and warn against Transformers: Rise of the Dark Spark.

» 100 Game Over

The Assassin's Creed franchise has a complicated, centuries-spanning story that calls into question the motivations of history's most iconic figures. It's hard to keep track of who is on what side of the Assassin/Templar battle, and we want to see how much you know.



W

Who's the sharpest dressed character in gaming? Our readers share their picks, while also asking questions about open-world games and answering a developer's call for more diversity.

Intelligent Design

I'm very impressed with the cover design for issue 255 (Far Cry 4). It's so pretty I thought my *Anthropologie* catalog had come. Naturally, I was much more excited to see it was the new issue of Game Informer. Kudos to the artist!

Leigh Borum
via email

My name is Janice Ingram and my 18-year-old son Parker has been receiving Game Informer for years. When your August issue arrived in the mail, I tore off the back cover before I gave it to him because I was so in love with the batik print that I wanted to keep it for myself. Bad idea. When I brought it to him, he flipped a switch; he has been saving every issue for four years and was very upset that I ruined this month's issue. Is it possible to get a replacement? It would be an act of restitution if I could give him a wholly perfect copy for his collection.

Janice Ingram
San Antonio, TX

Based on the responses we received this month, our classy Far Cry 4 cover was a pleasant surprise for more than a few readers – not to mention a few readers' moms. We're going to go ahead and chalk it up as a success. As for your dilemma, Janice – don't worry. We wouldn't leave a fellow batik lover hanging.

The Family That Slays Together...

I just wanted to say that your review for *Wolfenstein: The New Order* was not how I felt the game should have been rated. I agree with everything you said and also noticed how dopey the A.I. of the Nazis is, but I would have given the game at least a 9.5. The only reason I give it this high of a rating is not because of the quality of the game (which I know is how you usually rate games), but because of the personal experience that I shared with my dad while playing. It was something I looked forward to after he got home from work – something we could both enjoy together. Again,

I agree that the game by itself deserved about an 8, but sometimes what makes a game fun is how you play it with friends and family.

Drew Blakeley
via email

We're used to getting letters that complain about our review scores, but the reasoning behind your opinion of the game was surprisingly touching. We're glad you and your dad were able to bond over the age-old pastime of shooting video game Nazis together.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Give Me Some Space

I am so hyped after reading Bryan Vore's feature on No Man's Sky (Endless Possibility, issue 255). Everything from the art to the headline sucked me right in. After I finished reading, I felt a sense of wonder I haven't felt in a long time. Just the idea of being able to explore an entire galaxy and the fact that there will be other people doing it too makes me wish it was already out. No Man's Sky seems to fill a void that the industry has for true open-world exploration games. Sure, we have open-world sandbox games like Skyrim and Grand Theft Auto, but this game features a much greater scope, and seems more about how the player interacts with the world than telling the player what to do. It also seems to offer a much deeper feeling of exploration than Minecraft ever did, and I almost get a Journey-esque vibe from it (the game, not the band, just to clarify). I have high hopes for No Man's Sky and will be keeping a close eye on it from now on.

Kevin Conyers
via email

No Man's Sky continues to impress us as well, which is why at a show full of triple-A action titles with multimillion-dollar budgets, Hello Games' ambitious space-exploration game still made it to number five on our E3 Hot 50 list last issue. Read more about the game at gameinformer.com/mag.



"E" For Everyone

I was so thrilled to see the interview with BioWare Montreal's Manveer Heir (Pushing For Diversity, issue 256). I'm glad that Game Informer is a magazine that isn't afraid to focus on real issues in gaming, such as the lack of inclusion. As a woman who often feels alienated by the gaming community, I think this issue deserves a lot more attention. And besides that, Heir is brilliant and his argument for diversity in gaming contained a lot of good points.

Veronica Nelson
via email

I really enjoyed your interview with Manveer Heir about diversity. I agree with all of his answers and he provides a much-needed perspective. The Walking Dead is a perfect example of how well diverse games can do. The characters in the game represent many different races, and you can see how Telltale avoided stereotypes. People can say that games featuring diverse characters will not be well received, but we already have one example that shows diversity not only in race, but in age, culture, and the style of gameplay as well.

Tayci Stallings
via email

Despite a flood of positive feedback like the responses above, we received several predictable letters dismissing Heir's concerns as political correctness run amok. Since those readers can't stand niceties, we'll keep it real: If you complain about other gamers who would simply like to see more diversity and the same representation you already enjoy in games, you need to grow up.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Are you as excited as I am for the next Uncharted game?"

Probably.

"When is the game going to be released? Sonic and the Pac Man"

Huh?

"So since Sims 4 lets you grab body parts and stretch them, I'm going to ask the question we're all thinking: Can I give my sim a 20-inch ****?"

You're the only one thinking that question.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"I want to post post on some game niche so please give me chance to post few articles every month basis."

Reader Gibberish:

"where can I find a place why people can discuss with me about games."

Question Of The Month:

What city would you like to see featured in your favorite open-world series, and why?

gi spy



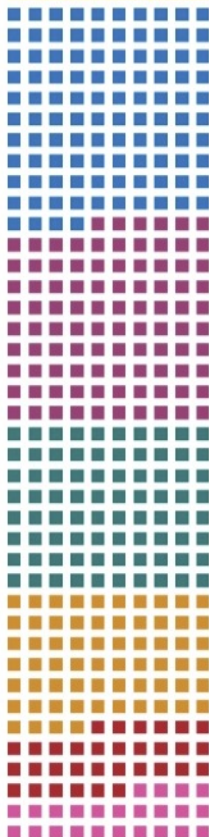
(Left) As you can see, Gearbox has some very serious folks working on Battleborn.

(Right) This month, actor and comedian Kumail Nanjiani stopped by to chat about games and joined us for an episode of Replay. Watch the video at gameinformer.com

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY
continued on page 6

On Your Mind



- **26%** Far Cry 4 Excitement
- **24%** Hot Video Game Getups
- **20%** No Man's Sky Angst
- **16%** Pro-Diversity Gamers
- **08%** Anti-Diversity Gamers (Really?)
- **06%** Moms Who Loved The Far Cry 4 Cover

Cutting Out The Cutscenes

I was reading your cover story on Far Cry 4, and while most of the details sound awesome, one thing bothers me. From Ubisoft Montreal's comments, it seems like they are designing the campaign and story with the intent of pleasing people who often skip cutscenes (i.e. people who don't really care about the story). As a big fan of story in games, I think that they might be missing the point. Story doesn't have to be sacrificed at the altar of the open world; can't they both live in harmony? However, since I loved the story and characters in Far Cry 3, I'll hold out judgment until I play the game.

Alex Porell
via email

You can rest easy, Alex. Ubisoft Montreal isn't trying to create a throwaway narrative, but simply one that doesn't rely on non-interactive cutscenes to convey plot points. The developer wants Far Cry 4's story to happen in the game world, and to be driven by choices the player makes during gameplay, which should hopefully deliver the harmony you're looking for. For more on Far Cry 4, check out our bonus coverage at gameinformer.com/farcry4.

Behind Closed Doors

In open-world games like Watch Dogs and Grand Theft Auto, why are there still closed doors and inaccessible buildings? Not being able to go in every door or explore every building and encounter random people in them seems "closed world" to me. I enjoy open-world games and hope the newer engines and hardware available to developers fix this. That kind of openness is what I'm looking for as we go into the future of open-world games.

Kirk Austin
Huntsville, AL

Even if developers relied on procedurally generated content, having interiors for every building in a sprawling city like those in the open-world games you mention would be a huge technological undertaking. That's not to say it wouldn't be totally awesome, and games like Assassin's Creed Unity are getting us closer to that vision, with one in four buildings featuring interior areas. Read more about it on page 48.



Looking Sharp

In issue 255, we asked readers which video game character has the best outfit and why. The leading men from the Assassin's Creed series were popular picks, as was a certain ape in a tie. Here are some of the responses:

I am going to say Altaïr from the first Assassin's Creed. He has the original iconic assassin outfit, and the white-and-red color scheme is still around to this day, as well as the beaked hood that I personally love so much. It's a fairly simple outfit, but with a lasting and visually attractive appearance.

Finn Smith

I think Donkey Kong has the best outfit because his tie represents his name and it's cool that an ape who lives in the jungle and punches and hops on animals can get formal wear.

Nizar Mohammad

I think the video game character that has the best outfit is Ellie from The Last of Us, because she's one of the only female characters whose outfit isn't ridiculous or over-sexualized.

Angie Bernard

Link has the best outfit, because his getup somehow manages to make a Wee Willie Winkie hat look badass.

Leo Morales-Egizi

(Left) Square Enix's Tai Yasue gave Bryan and Kim the key to Kingdom Hearts, but he still wouldn't share any Kingdom Hearts 3 secrets with us. Come on, Tai!

(Right) Reiner caught up with Bethesda's Erin Losi and actor Scott Porter at this year's E3



GI SPY
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SAVINGS THAT STAND OUT

EVEN IN A WIZARD'S BEARD.

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WINNER

1 Devyn Adams

We're hoping Shigeru Miyamoto considers this new look for Fox McCloud in the next Star Fox game. Doge for the win!

2 Dustin Holland

Are you really looking for lost artifacts when you bring a grenade and guns into a cave?

3 Emalee Cacciola

Always match your hair color to your weapons

4 Tyrell Duskin

Coollest stained glass window ever? We think so



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

(Left) What happens when you bring together Hello Games' Sean Murray and Insomniac's Ted Price to talk about game design? You get a really interesting conversation, which you can watch at gameinformer.com

(Right) Recently, Game Informer's editor in chief Andy McNamara went insane and reverted to his 12-year-old self. We're hoping he'll grow out of it...again



#1 Best Selling Bold Color

Splat
Rebellious Colors

MODIFY HAIR

CUSTOMIZE BOLD HAIR COLOR

•SPLAT COLOR GEL SELECTED:



HAIR STYLE SELECTED

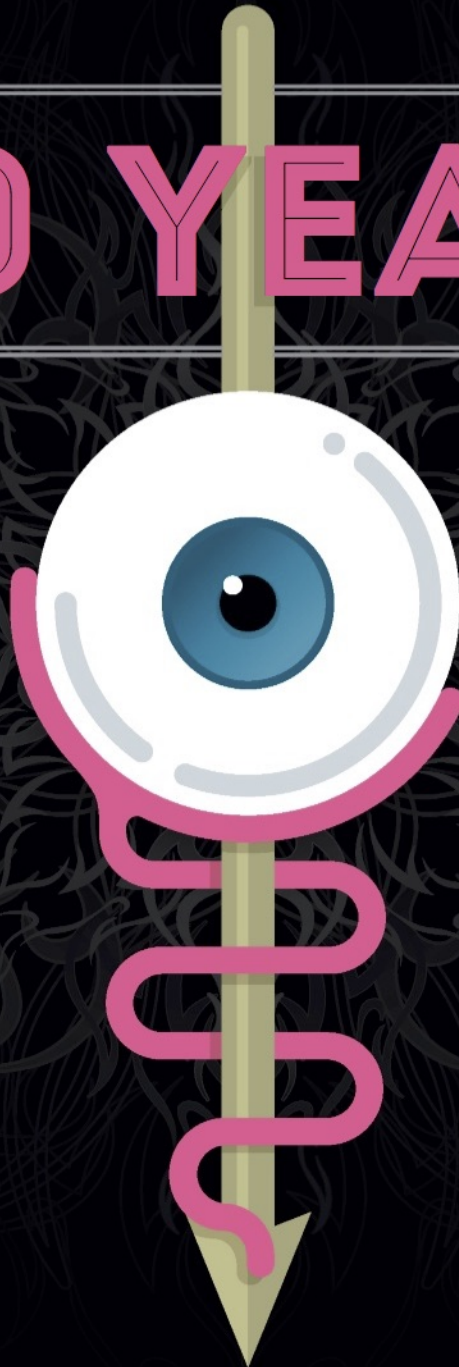
- MOHAWK
- FOWAWK
- EXTREME HOLD
- MULLET



EXIT INTERVIEW:

Departing president Joel Jewett & director
Scott Pease reflect on

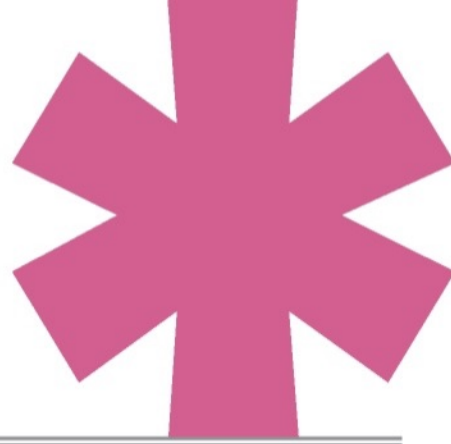
20 YEARS OF



1994 - 2014

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NEVERSOFT

This past May, news broke that Activision planned to dissolve Neversoft, one of its most notable internal development studios. The remaining team members would be absorbed by Call of Duty developer Infinity Ward, creating a new “super studio.”

The closure was done with the blessing of founder and president Joel Jewett and studio director Scott Pease, both of whom are stepping away from the game industry. We recently chatted with the pair, who reflected on the company’s humble beginnings, colorful history, and classic games in franchises like Tony Hawk, Spider-Man, and Guitar Hero.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Now that Neversoft is at the end, let's talk about the early days. Did you ever think it would last this long when you started?

Joel Jewett: We did not think it would last as long as it did. At the beginning, it was just a few people that quit another company and got together to make Skeleton Warriors. The idea was there was going to be an awesome cartoon, this was going to hit the airwaves, and we were going to make a game to go along with it. The game actually came out on the PlayStation and the Sega Saturn. The beauty of it was that the show came and went almost before the video game was done. We were like “Oh s---.” I think our claim to fame was that we got the game done and it shipped. It got the publisher’s money back, and we were allowed to continue being a developer [Laughs].

The game Apocalypse, which featured Bruce Willis, isn't well remembered, but ended up being pretty pivotal for Neversoft and served as the foundation for a lot of things to come.

JJ: The early years before Apocalypse were basically “keep the company alive” until we hooked up with Activision. We were pretty much broke before we did that. We did all these game demos over Christmas time; everybody else was on vacation. We were doing anything we

could to impress Activision. The cool thing we brought along was some tech that we had used in trying to make these previous games. Activision said, “Wow, can you do this Apocalypse game for us, and get it done within a year?” In the back in my mind I’m thinking, “Well, I’m f---ing broke, so I’m sure as s--- going to try.” We shook hands and we started to make Apocalypse.

The funny part was we weren’t even around for the beginning where they gave Bruce Willis a bunch of Activision stock to be in a video game, and they hyped the daylights out of it in the press. We just came in at the end and made this game. But, once again, it got the company’s money back, and sold enough units that we got some bonus money out of it. That was the game that proved to Activision that what we could do was make a game and get it done on time. Back in those days, in the development community – I don’t know that it’s even changed that much – no one could ship a video game on time. They just didn’t ever do it. I think a lot of people didn’t even think necessarily it was a big deal. One of the things we had in our minds was that, if you’re working for these big public companies and you meet the deadline, that sets you apart from all the other developers. We got Apocalypse done on time, and they said, “Hey, do you want to do something else for us?”



Joel Jewett shot the Neversoft eyeball with flaming arrows

That next thing was Tony Hawk, right?

JJ: Activision came to us with the idea. They said, "Hey, there are a ton of people running around with skateboards these days. We did some tests on it. Do you think you guys could make a skateboarding game?" That suited the attitude and vibe of Neversoft. We got to work on the Tony Hawk game, and at the same time, we also started working on Spider-Man.

Did you have a hunch when you were working on Tony Hawk's Pro Skater that you were onto something that had the potential to be big?

Scott Pease: I was over at Activision at this time, trying to get this skateboarding game to go, trying to get Tony Hawk on board, and working with Neversoft. I jumped over to produce the game over at Neversoft. It's funny, I look back at the letters I sent, the emails I sent. We were just making a game that we were passionate about. We hoped we would make a cool game and it would sell 250,000 units and make its money back. Then, the game started to come together. I remember taking it around the Activision offices. I [took] it to the sound booth to have the guys play it, and they wouldn't put it down. I couldn't get it out of there. They just wanted "one more run, one more run." That was the first indication that there was something special going on there. Then, that kind of steamrolled into that first demo we did.

JJ: Sony had this program where they would release this little demo disc quarterly. They were called Jampacks. That's when it hit me – the Jampack shipped with a demo for the first Tony Hawk game on it. We knew people at other developers like Naughty Dog, Paradox, and some other guys in the community. We started hearing our friends at other developers were not working on their own stuff because they were all in the back room playing this Tony Hawk demo, seeing who could score the highest.

Did Tony Hawk's Pro Skater break out immediately, or was it a slow build through word of mouth?

SP: It was word of mouth.

JJ: Yeah, we had one more cool event that happened before it shipped. We're cleaning our offices out right now and I pulled out this newspaper article. I looked at the date – it was July 21, 1999 – and that was the date of the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper article that showed Tony Hawk had just done the 900 during the X Games that year. So the Jampack demo was out there and now our guy that we had signed to be in the game f---ing goes off and throws down the 900. We actually had to scramble and put the 900 trick into the game.

In hindsight, do you think the

annualized sequels hurt Tony Hawk as a brand?

JJ: I disagree with that. It's hard to catch lightning in a bottle, and if you do, you just wanna run. The world's going to change. Like right now, is skateboarding itself as popular as it was at that time? No. I just think you wanna have fun, work hard, and capitalize on it if you have something like that. When we quit making the Tony Hawk games, you essentially hit a point in time where our games split the market with Skate, and the market had actually shrunk by then. People had been there, done that – they're looking for something new. If you were trying to make something last forever, the world changes. We could've tried to make it last forever and we would've made, like, four games, and it would have had the same lifespan.

The game Gun is an interesting one in hindsight, given the success of Red Dead Redemption. The industry didn't think that westerns were a good genre for games, but you guys seemed to sense the potential. You had the right idea, but maybe it wasn't the right time. Rockstar obviously took the concept and made it a blockbuster.

JJ: Where to begin? Gun was awesome – that was another one where Scott and I both were totally into the material and we spent a ton of time researching. That game was a passion project between the two of us. We tried to figure out what was the right thing, and we thought we identified a niche where we could make a game that the public would be receptive to. We thought there was going to be this big demand out there. Quite frankly, I think we were right and I thank the guys at Rockstar for, in my opinion, proving us right.

But what went wrong? We could've probably made a better game. That's one that we maybe should've worked on it a bit longer, and really refined what we had. But that was part of the Neversoft way – we weren't going to miss the deadline. So we went in and got it done. We probably bit off a little bit more than we could chew. We made Gun in 18 months from the ground up, even hiring the team. Then, at the end it was like, "Oh yeah, by the way, it's a console transition year, so...s---." We have that to deal with [the Xbox 360 version] too? But all in all, it was a wicked experience, even for how hard it was. I very fondly remember it at this point.

SP: It was a pretty tall task, and we got most of it. At the end of that project we actually had an early open-world engine



Gun

that was pretty awesome. But other things came up and that [series] wasn't meant to be continued. But I love that game. It's somewhat of a shame that it ultimately proved to be a test and a prototype for the guys at Rockstar to kind of take it further. But they did a fantastic job.

JJ: We had a bunch of guys that fought really hard over on the Activision side and we got the sequel approved, and then we more or less had to make the call over here that we couldn't do it for business reasons. We just didn't have the manpower to make [Gun 2] and another skateboarding game. We had to take our engine to the next level, because we were [moving to] the Xbox 360. We had to put everybody back on the Hawk franchises.



Scott Pease and Joel Jewett

TIMELINE

1994
Joel Jewett, Mick West, and Chris Ward found Neversoft

1995
Skeleton Warriors

1997
MDK (PlayStation Port)





1998
Apocalypse



1999
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater



1999
Activision acquires
Neversoft

2000
Spider-Man



2000
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2



2001
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3



2002
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4



2003
Tony Hawk's Underground



2004
Tony Hawk's Underground 2





How did the transition to Guitar Hero happen? It was a big phenomenon by the time Activision split with Harmonix. Was Guitar Hero something you lobbied for, or was it something that Activision kind of pitched you?

JJ: If you wanna go out there and write the definition of what Neversoft means, it means Neversoft should be doing Guitar Hero. Born and raised rock and roll, it's in our freakin' hearts, you know? We had a bunch of guys here who felt the same way. When Activision lost Harmonix I was on it like, "We just have to make this game." I called Activision and said that. At first they're like, "What? You guys are busy." And I said, "No. We just have to make it." They might've even had some other studios thinking about doing it, starting to do some stuff on it. We just started hiring people. Once again, it was another hard project to get done – [we had] less than a year by the time we had our s--- together.

SP: Joel told the story earlier about how other developers were playing the Tony Hawk demo. Here at Neversoft we're the same way – we were having Guitar Hero parties and playing Guitar Hero in the back of our office for fun while we were making our other games. The passion was already in place here.

What were just some of your memories from that era?

JJ: All the bands. I'm not kidding you when I say I graduated high school in 1981 – Great Falls, Montana. I was listening to Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath, and Motörhead. I [would] drive around Great Falls with my windows down, cranking Motörhead. I was one of like eight guys doing that. So we got to meet all those guys. It was awesome. I got to go hang out with Lemmy. He came to our studio and we judged the Guitar Hero contest together. That was a total kick. Ozzy came to our studio; all of Van Halen came into our studio. We packed our mo-cap gear up and flew it up the coast and went to Metallica's studio and set all our stuff up there. They basically air guitared to their own music and we mo-capped them and we pretended we were their audience. You grow up listening to these bands – do you think that's ever going to happen to you in your lifetime? That's awesome.

Most studios tend to be focused on a single genre. Infinity Ward makes shooters or Harmonix makes music games. Over the years, Neversoft has been all over the map, going from Apocalypse to Spider-Man to

Tony Hawk, to something totally different where you're working with peripherals and notes, like Guitar Hero. At the end, you were working on Call of Duty. How was the studio able to switch gears so rapidly?

JJ: Well, first of all, thanks for noticing. That's part of the longevity of the studio, right? We would work to a deadline and make the best possible thing we could make. At the same time, we had a lot of really intelligent, passionate people here. We never ever thought we couldn't do something. If something looked fun, the world is changing around you, and suddenly everyone is into this Guitar Hero fad it's like, "That looks awesome, let's make one – we can do it." We would never think that we couldn't do it. And why would you ever think that? At the end of the day, making a video game is really fun problem solving.

SP: Over the years we have developed almost like a five-year rule, too, where if you work on something for five years, you're ready for something new. You need a new challenge; you need to step into a new genre and try to figure out what makes it tick. Everyone here is so creative. Incremental improvements only take you so far at some point. You've kind

of filled the dirt enough. Jumping into a new genre was just like, "Boom!" Doors are opened – all new problems to solve. When we got the Guitar Hero franchise, we got zero help from Harmonix.

The last thing Neversoft did was the Extinction Mode for Call of Duty: Ghosts. That franchise is about as big of a scale as you can possibly get. How was that different for you guys?

Did you enjoy working on that game?
SP: It's interesting. It was really cool being able to work on Call of Duty and it was a new challenge. But games have gotten to this crazy point where it requires so many people to make one. You have two choices. You can have a company with 300-some people under one roof, which is going to come with its own management issues. Or you can divide and conquer and split it up between multiple studios, which once again comes with its own management issues. It's a lot of work, and sometimes a lot of that work isn't actually having your hands on the video game. It's just kind of the state of the industry, so to speak, at this point. It is what it is.

You've both been in the console development business for a long time. What are some of the biggest positive and negative changes that you've sort of seen in the business over time?

JJ: I guess positives are...just sit down in front of one of these new Xbox One or PS4 games on a big high-res television set with a killer sound system and go back and look at what Tony Hawk 1 looked like. It's just amazing. If you're in video games of course you must have at some point watched some Star Trek. When are we going to get to the holodeck? If you compared Tony Hawk 1 to the game we just finished – we've gone a long way toward the holodeck in the last few years. It's just crazy. I considered myself fortunate to have lived through that. Making our first video game, there was no Internet so to speak. There was no network in our office. You would save out to a three-inch floppy and take the data over to the other guy's room and plug it into his drive. That's how you transferred data.

SC: The scale now is unprecedented. The amount of people that a Call of Duty game reaches is just staggering. It's literally like three games put into one – and they're three big games too, when you look at single-player, multiplayer, and Extinction mode. It's great that games now kind of ascended to the point where they're considered entertainment options

2005
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland



2005
Gun



2006
Tony Hawk's Project 8



2006
Neversoft is given the Guitar Hero franchise



2007
Tony Hawk's Proving Ground



2007
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock



2008
Guitar Hero: Aerosmith



alongside movies and books. My only regret is that there are definitely some costs that come with that scale. When you have these massive projects and these massive teams, it's just very different. Back when you could have a smaller team working on something, it didn't cost you so much to make changes. Today, with taking so much work and so much thought, you can't make those kinds of seat-of-the-pants decisions as easily as you could in the past.

There's one thing that I wanted to clear up because I've seen it reported different ways. After Guitar Hero: Warriors of Rock and before you guys worked on Call of Duty: Ghosts, did you guys have your own original IP in development?

JJ: How to tactfully and appropriately answer that...we worked on a first-person shooter during that period of time. You're just going to have to ask Activision what you can say about this. I would love to set the record straight on that, frankly.

It's something I've seen reported.

JJ: Let me put it this way, and I think I can say it: We worked on a first-person shooter during that period of time, and hindsight being 20/20, I think it was freaking awesome and we did some killer work. There are other people out there that would corroborate that. I think it would be cool if people knew more about it...that's all.

Why did you make the decision to step away from Neversoft now?

JJ: As I told all my guys, this was the hardest decision of my career. For me, it was a timing thing. I ran super hard for 20 years. Doing another giant console game was what was on the table. I'm 51 and I was just like, "Do you want to do that now, be basically 54 or 55, and then come up for some air? Or do you want to come up for some air now?" For me, it was time to come up for some air, clear my head, and take a rest. I want to ride my horses into the backcountry and camp out for two weeks. Go hunting. Do

all kinds of stuff – I have an awesome laundry list of things I want to do. I had to do it now.

At the end of it all, I just would say thanks to all these people I had the pleasure of working with all this time. They've afforded me the opportunity to be able to do this, and I'm really fortunate to be in that position.

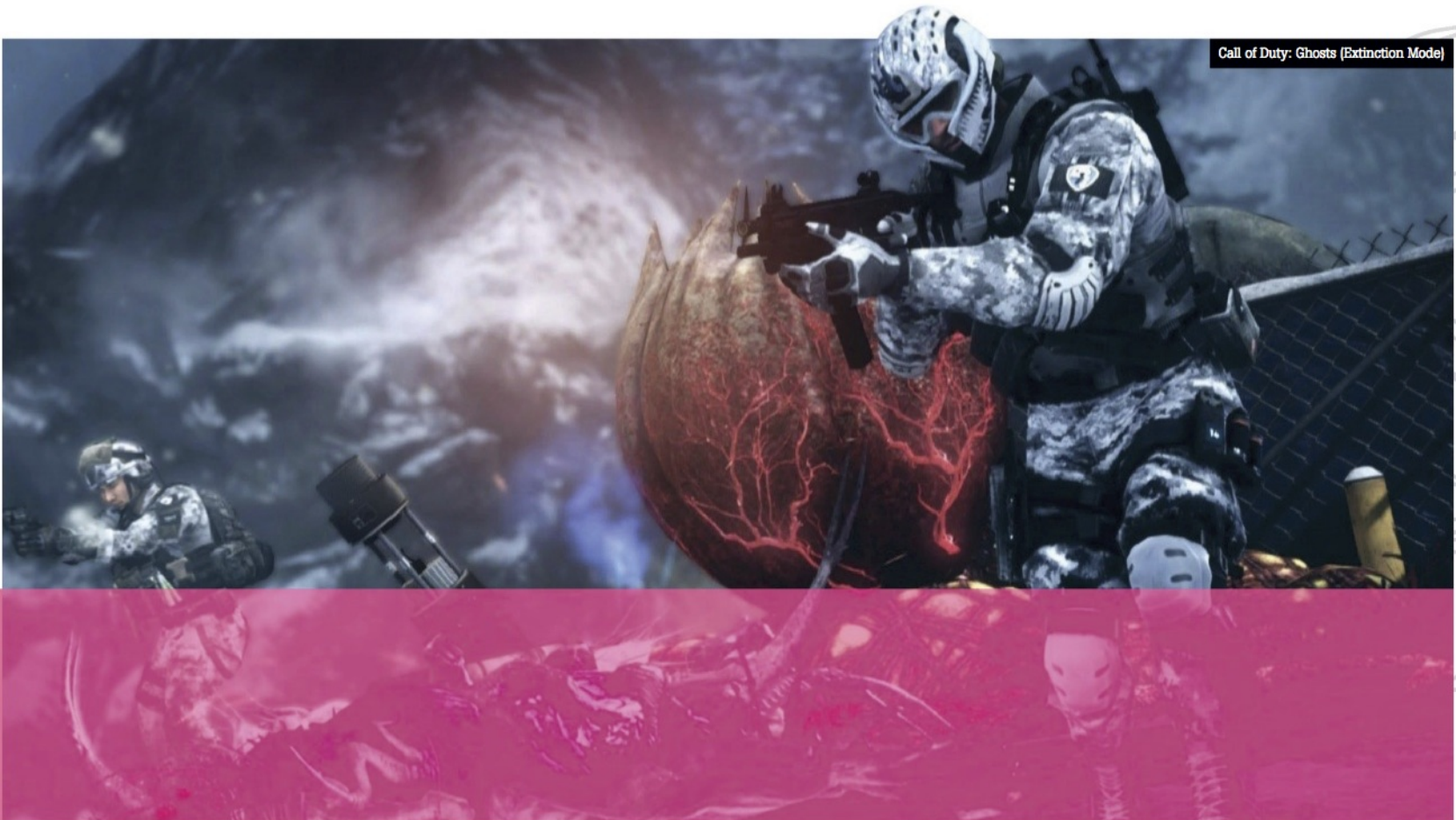
Scott, do you plan on staying in the industry?

SC: I'm going to take a break as well, recharge the batteries. It's been, I think, 18 games in 15 years here at Neversoft. We've been charging hard for a long time. But like Joel said, the next game on the horizon – now you're looking at three-year development cycles plus a year of DLC. It's a big commitment. You kind of gotta be all in on something that big. For me, it was just time to take a break. On the flipside, between what we worked on before Ghosts and then going through Ghosts here at Neversoft, we've developed a crack squad. The guys here are

very into the franchise and the genre, and I think they did some fantastic work on Ghosts. For them, the right decision is to continue working on this franchise and, in that respect, I think a merger makes perfect sense.

How would you like people to remember Neversoft?

JJ: Now and then, I compare units shipped to some of the big rock and roll bands, and we've shipped over 100 million units of our video games. That's starting to get up there, chasing after the AC/DCs and Black Sabbaths. More importantly, the legacy has always been about the people. Literally just hanging out with cool dudes trying to make something that's awesome. That's what really drove me. Every morning I got up, I started thinking about making video games in the shower and drove to work, and my job was awesome. We tried to share all the benefits that came from that with everybody. I hope everybody else had as good a time as I did. ♦



Call of Duty: Ghosts (Extinction Mode)

2008
Guitar Hero:
World Tour



2009
Guitar Hero:
Metallica



2009
Guitar Hero 5



2009
Band Hero



2009
Guitar Hero:
Van Halen



2010
Guitar Hero:
Warriors of Rock



2013
Call of Duty: Ghosts
(Extinction Mode)



2014
Neversoft is dissolved
and merged into Infinity Ward





Big Plays, Bigger Payouts

Back in 2004, a professional gamer considered \$20,000 to be a good haul for winning a tournament. In 2014, winning one event can turn you into an instant millionaire. From MLG prize pools of \$5,000–\$10,000 10 years ago to this year's Dota 2 The International 4 commanding a \$10 million-plus purse, eSports are becoming incredibly competitive even compared to some sporting events. With last year's League of Legends Season 3 World Championship selling out the Staples Center and The International's finals being broadcast on ESPN, visibility is at an all-time high. *by Daniel Tack*

Along with the unparalleled competition provided by relatively new players on the eSports scene in the MOBA/ARTS genre, the prize pools are increasing at what seems like an exponential rate. With a prize pool of over \$10.9 million, Dota 2's The International 4 tournament made every member of the winning team, Newbee, into an instant millionaire, with 46 percent of the total going their way. This victory turns players on Newbee into the top five overall prize earners in eSports history.

Why did MOBAs suddenly become the destination genre for competitive gaming? League of Legends creators Riot Games thinks it has to do with the core game experience.

"League of Legends had the DNA of a successful spectator sport from day one: It relies on team play, strategy, and clear goals," says

Riot Games vice president of eSports Dustin Beck. "The core element to League is competitive action, but it's also a team game that rewards collaboration. There's a consistent rhythm to it – the map and the players may change, but the goal always stays the same. These are just a few of the things that makes League such a natural fit as a spectator sport, and one of the reasons why we chose to invest in an ecosystem that made it easier to take part in and enjoy live tournaments."

The team play aspect is also what drives interest in Dota 2. "I think that these 5v5 team games are really popular because you can play with your friends," says Peter Dager, who plays on the Evil Geniuses Dota 2 team. "Games in the past have been more focused on the individual."

The money involved with these events has come a long way since Quake III: Arena, StarCraft II, Counter-Strike, and Halo tournaments ruled the scene. Even in comparison to last year's biggest events, the growth of eSports purses in recent months is staggering. The International 3 had a \$2.8 million purse, compared to \$10.9 million this year.

"It's not just the competitive events that are capturing massive attention of gamers – the size of the community itself is much larger than most FPS and old-school RTS games," says Valve vice president of marketing Doug Lombardi. "If you look back at TI1, held in our booth at Gamescom in 2011, it was really low-fi. Held in a loud trade-show environment, no between-game analysis, and the audience didn't really have a vested interest in the tournament. After each International, we come away with a list of things the community would like to see, things we feel we can do better, as well as suggestions from the players and teams."

Crowdfunding has provided new opportunities to push prize pools to new heights. Valve has long tapped into the community to create new content for Dota 2, such as cosmetic items, announcer packs, and loading screens. But with events like The International, the player Compendium has become an integral part of the event. Each time a player buys this digital item, money is added directly into the overall prize pool. Fans can also purchase team-branded merchandise to support their favorite competitors and support their favorite shoutcasters and personalities by adding a digital autograph to purchases.



"What Valve has done to make the crowd-funding aspects attractive to the community, they have kind of made The International into this glorious celebration of Dota," Dager says. "Whether you play the game or not, you're probably watching. I think crowdfunding is the right way to go about this, I think other companies will do similar things. I don't think eSports is leveling off, I think it will continue to grow until it is just as if not more popular than things like televised sports."

These huge events owe much of the rapid ramp to greatness to the pervasiveness of streaming growing up alongside modern eSports. With Twitch.tv and in-client spectating, the friction of watching your favorite players messing around day-to-day or participating in a major tournament is gone. Finding, watching, and even participating with eSports has never been easier. ♦

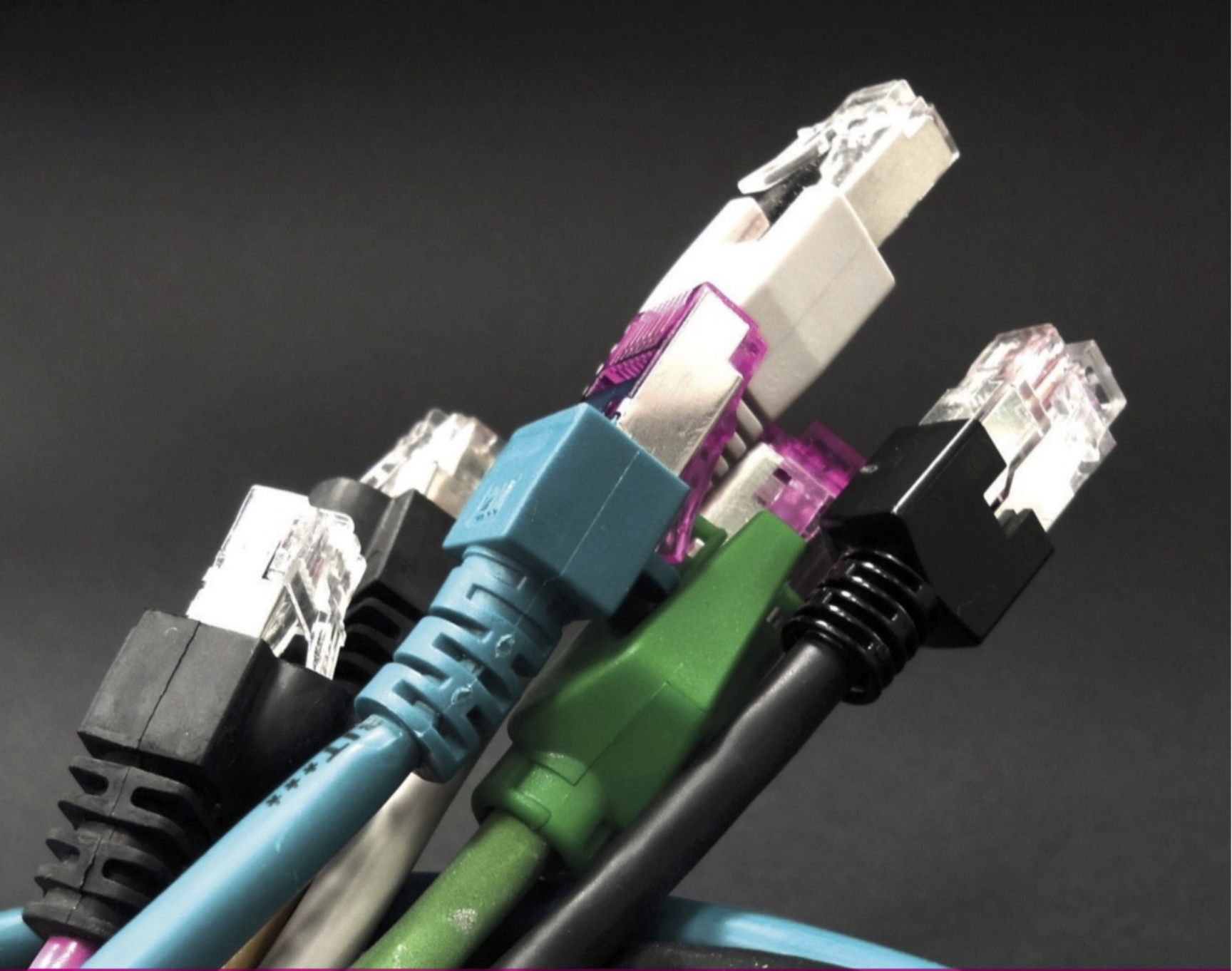


The Top 10 eSports Tournaments By Prize Pool

1. The International 4 \$10,900,000* (Dota 2)
2. The International 3 \$2,874,000 (Dota 2)
3. Season 3 World Championship \$2,050,000 (League of Legends)
4. Season 2 World Championship \$1,970,000 (League of Legends)

5. The International 2 \$1,600,000 (Dota 2)
6. The International 1 \$1,600,000 (Dota 2)
7. Call of Duty Championship 2014 \$1,000,000 (Call of Duty: Ghosts)
8. Call of Duty Championship 2013 \$1,000,000 (Call of Duty: Black Ops 2)
9. Call of Duty XP \$1,000,000 (Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3)
10. CPL World Tour finals 2005 \$510,000 (Painkiller)

*Prize pool not final



Changing The Rules Of The Game

* The end of net neutrality
could usher in a new and uncertain
landscape for gaming

The present and future of video games is online. For systems like the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, the quality of your Internet connection is becoming as crucial as any chipset in the box. But bringing your system online is only the beginning of the story.

Downloadable games, updates, patches, TV shows, movies, and any other content coming and going via your system's Internet connection all require quality service from your Internet Service Provider (ISP). Right now, a legal and ideological war is being waged between the ISPs, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), content creators, politicians, and consumers that will likely impact your gaming and console experience by affecting the quality and cost of your Internet. Here are the basics regarding what is at stake. **by Matthew Kato**

WHAT IS NET NEUTRALITY?

Net neutrality is basically the concept that ISPs should not discriminate the content they serve, giving all sites on the Internet the same speed whether it is owned by a big company like Netflix or a small website. Essentially, net neutrality ensures that all websites, big or small, are on a level playing field.

Net neutrality is being threatened by possible changes to the FCC rules that govern the Internet. In January of this year, the Washington D.C. Court of Appeals struck down the net neutrality regulations the FCC put in place in 2010. Currently, the FCC has submitted a proposal of new Internet rules, and the government agency, along with politicians, ISPs, consumer groups, and the public are trying to work out a new way forward.

What net neutrality means in practice, however, differs for all sides. Content companies like Netflix believe the principle should shield them from having to pay extra for a quality connection to consumers via ISPs. On the other side of the argument, ISPs say that companies like Netflix load up too much data onto its infrastructure, and thus Netflix causes an imbalance of one-way traffic. Under a concept called interconnection, or peering, ideally the flow of data would be equal and thus not subject to an additional fee. However, network services company Sandvine says Netflix alone is responsible for as much as 30 percent of residential Internet traffic at peak times. Netflix recently reluctantly agreed to pay Comcast and other ISPs to effectively get its data closer to the ISPs' networks – especially as it believes the ISPs intentionally throttled the speed of its data as a show of force.

Consumers want costs to remain low, and they want the ability to access all content on the Internet at the same speed. However, with companies like Netflix and Comcast having to pay their own infrastructure costs, consumers may ultimately have to pay to keep things running smoothly. For gamers, this could mean higher costs to sustain an acceptable Internet connection.

"We've already been told by telecommunications executives that they see all of that as simply the cost of doing business," says Hal Halpin, president and co-founder of the non-profit video

game membership organization the Entertainment Consumers Association (ECA), which has been involved in raising awareness on the issue. "Their perspective is that they're investing in updating and expanding their infrastructure and they want consumers to pay more as a result."

Anne Marie Squeo, the director of corporate communications at Netflix, says the company currently has no plans to raise its prices in response to its interconnection deals.

In a more abstract sense, believers in net neutrality fear that, without proper guidance, the Internet could split between the haves and have-nots, favoring those with money and potentially stifling innovation. In July, a group of companies, including Google, Facebook, and Amazon, joined with lobby group the Internet Association to encourage the FCC to adhere to net neutrality principles and "light touch" regulation to preserve the Internet as we know it. Despite the association, there is a concern that large companies like Google actually have no stake in a single-lane Internet, since it could pay for better access as a way to distance itself from potential competition.

FCC chairman Tom Wheeler remains vaguely broad in his support for net neutrality, but has specifically said he doesn't think companies paying for access to an Internet fast lane, or paid prioritization, violates net neutrality principles. The agency's current proposal – or Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM), in bureaucratic-speak – is the start of the process of crafting the new net neutrality, and it states that the FCC seeks transparency, no blocking of legal content, and the vaguely stated principle that "ISPs may not act in a commercially unreasonable manner to harm the Internet."

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT GAMERS?

The primary area where gamers' interests and net neutrality intersect is they – and anyone else who uses the Internet – could pay more if ISPs start to segregate the Internet into different lanes of varying speeds and costs. Apart from the extra costs to your monthly bill, any content provider unable to pay for a better connection from an ISP risks being stuck in the slow lane.

For instance, PlayStation Now, Sony's upcoming game streaming service, requires a quality connection to run optimally. You currently may pay for a high-speed Internet tier from your ISP, but if a content provider like Sony has to pay an ISP to get into the fast lane for its services, that cost could eventually be passed on to the consumer, as well. Internet fast and slow lanes would also affect download times for games, patches, DLC, and other content. A large digital games provider like Valve, who owns and operates Steam, would clearly benefit from signing up for an Internet fast lane.

Neither Valve nor Sony would comment on the possible effects of revised net neutrality rules for their services, but Sony told us in a statement: "Consumers and Internet companies should be protected against restrictions, including blocking and paid-prioritization, to keep the market focused on the end-user experience."

Competition could also be affected if ISPs promote their own interests via better speeds than other content providers. In May, Reuters reported via multiple sources that Comcast and Electronic Arts were nearing a deal to stream EA games like Madden and FIFA via Comcast's X1 cable box. In the absence of strong net neutrality regulations, Comcast could conceivably favor its streaming service at the expense of PlayStation Now, for instance. While FCC chairman Tom Wheeler has stated he doesn't object to paid fast lanes, he is against ISPs "favoring the traffic from an affiliated entity."

HOW COULD DATA CAPS CHANGE THINGS?

The issue of data caps is not technically a net neutrality issue, but it is relevant to the discussion, as we could soon see ISPs charging high-data users more, just as they intend to charge high-bandwidth websites extra. It is another huge potential revenue stream for ISPs as gamers' appetite for downloads, updates, and other content increases, and would mean gamers get hit twice: once by content providers, and again by ISPs.

Considering that Call of Duty: Ghosts is just under 40GB to download on Xbox One, and Dead Rising 3 had its infamous 13GB title update, data caps could become another monthly gaming expense. Both the current and last-gen systems have expanded our digital reach, bringing in movie streaming functionality and encouraging some gamers to cut the cord from their cable or satellite company (with HD movie-streaming accounting for an estimated 2GB an hour), increasing the amount of data used. And consider the uploading size – also potentially subject to a cap – of the increasingly popular Twitch functionality of both the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, as well as the eventuality of 4K ultra high-def downloads, and gamers' data usage will only increase.

Comcast is testing a home data usage program in select cities with tiers from 5GB to 600GB a month, with 50GB automatically applied to your account

for an average fee of \$10. At the MoffettNathanson Media & Communications Summit in May, Comcast executive vice president David Cohen said he expects the ISP to have a "usage-based billing model" in five years. In 2012, Comcast had a flat 250GB cap.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

As the FCC and chairman Tom Wheeler determine what the next version of net neutrality looks like, replies to public comments on the NPRM can be posted until September 10 on its current proposal. Wheeler says he expects to have enforceable rules by the end of the year.

The NPRM – which will undoubtedly be revised – has drawn fire from all sides. It either goes too far or not far enough. Defenders of the 2010 version of net neutrality don't like Wheeler's capitulation to faster paid Internet lanes – although Wheeler interestingly states he's against a lane that is degraded to less than "normal" speeds. Others balk at the possibility of regulations from the FCC, even in "defense" of net neutrality. In particular, Wheeler has wielded the tactical possibility of classifying ISPs as common carriers like a utility, and thus open to strict regulation by the FCC. Title II reclassification, as it's known, is an option that some believe is the only way to ensure the Internet stays neutral, but one that ISPs have vocally railed against.

Despite the opportunity to resolve the issue for the foreseeable future, the FCC says it is predominantly interested in the "last mile" of the whole process – that which happens between the ISP and you. Thus, the bickering between content providers like Netflix and ISPs over interconnection fees – and what costs may trickle down to consumers – might not be addressed by the FCC.

Also potentially complicating matters is the pending merger of Comcast and Time Warner (which itself has an FCC comment period open until August 25). Apart from concerns about the lack of competition this may create, Comcast in particular could be subject to special terms by the FCC under the merger. This happened back in 2011 when Comcast merged with NBC Universal and the company was required to abide by the 2010 version of net neutrality until 2018.

The video games industry itself seems like it's still on the sideline. "The vast majority [of video game companies] don't have an official stance, as they are not gatekeepers," Halpin says. "First-parties would have the most to gain/lose, followed by second-parties. Third-party publishers and developers really only have things to lose in the fight, there's no upside for them, just like for consumers."

This is a crucial juncture for the Internet as we know it, and possibly our gaming experiences. To get involved, go to fcc.gov/comments or join the efforts of groups such as the Entertainment Consumers Association (ECA) at theeca.com/gamers_net_neutrality, savetheinternet.com, or publicknowledge.org. ♦

A man in a dark, possibly tactical or superhero-style suit is hanging from a large, dark bronze statue of a horse. The statue is positioned on the right side of the frame, with its head facing left. The man is positioned in the center, holding onto the horse's mane with his right hand. The background is a dramatic sunset or sunrise over a cityscape, with the sky transitioning from dark blue to bright orange and yellow. The city buildings are silhouetted against the bright light. The overall mood is intense and action-oriented.

**BETTER
OFF DEAD**

Game Series That Should Not Have Been Rebooted

The modern gaming landscape is littered with popular sequels, but for every Assassin's Creed and Call of Duty, there are dozens of once-popular video game series currently missing in action. Occasionally, a popular franchise from yesteryear gets a reboot, but sometimes these revivals do more to tarnish a series' good name than reignite fan fervor. We round up a selection of some of gaming's worst offenders. Here are five video game franchises that should have remained cherished memories.

by Ben Reeves

Alone in the Dark



► **The Legacy:** Widely considered the progenitor of the survival horror genre, Infogrames' *Alone in the Dark* was a twisted and almost masochistic experience. The game's programmer, Frederick Raynal, was tired of saving princesses and rescuing presidents' daughters, so he decided to make a different kind of game. A fan of George A. Romero's zombie films, Raynal thought it would be fun to create a game where the goal was simply to survive. In *Alone in the Dark*, players controlled a private investigator named Edward Carnby, who was hired to investigate a mansion and find an old piano for an antique dealer. Instead, Carnby discovers a house full of undead. The game was innovative for not only being one of the first survival horror titles, but also for being one of the first games to feature 3D generated characters instead of sprites. *Alone in the Dark* and its immediate sequels were praised for their cutting edge graphics, oppressive Lovecraftian atmosphere, and unique gameplay, which pioneered concepts such as limited resources.

► **The Death Blow:** After years of financial misdealing, *Alone in the Dark* publisher Infogrames rebranded itself Atari Inc. Under the new name, the company looked to reboot the *Alone in the Dark* franchise with a film and a PS2-era reboot. For fans, this turned out to be *Alone in the Dark*'s darkest hour. Critics universally panned the film, which starred Christian Slater and was directed by Uwe Boll. Sadly, the game didn't fare much better. Developer Eden Games had hoped to reinvigorate the series with a DVD-style episodic format allowing players to skip to any section of the game if they got stuck, but awkward dialogue, unpolished combat, and a series of technical hiccups caused more frustration than fun. Worst of all, the reboot was less scary than a trip to the dentist.

► **Likelihood we'll see another: 10%**

While hardcore horror fans once looked back fondly at *Alone in the Dark*, the 2008 release and the 2005 Uwe Boll film have soured the franchise considerably. More importantly, property owner Atari has continued to struggle financially and recently started focusing more on mobile and casino gaming.

Golden Axe



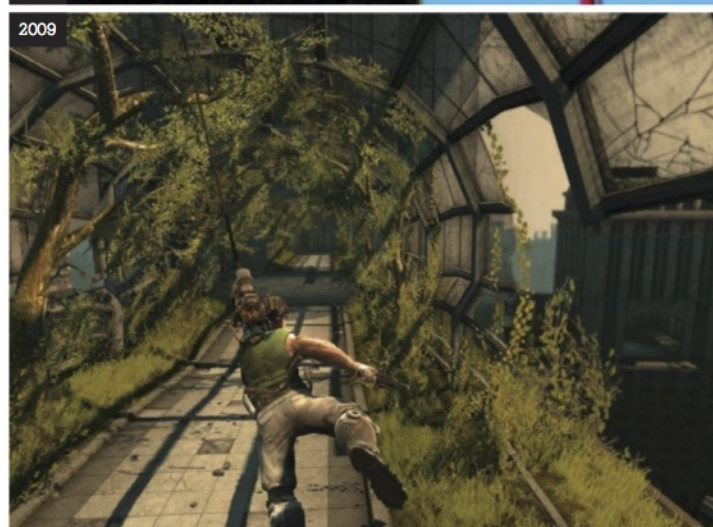
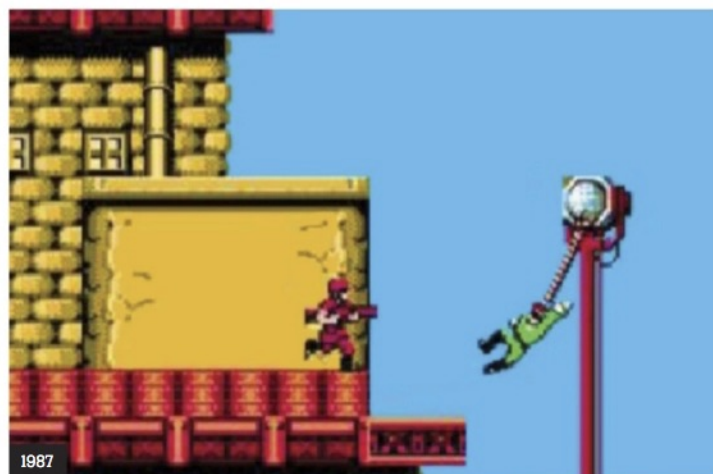
» **The Legacy:** Following the success of the arcade hit *Altered Beast*, Sega programmer Makoto Uchida was asked to create a new game in the same vein. Uchida took a concept for a fantasy RPG inspired by *Conan the Barbarian*, which he had already been working on, and redesigned it as a side-scrolling beat 'em up. The game starred three fantasy warriors who used magic and bestial mounts to combat the forces of a tyrannical giant named Death Adder. This new co-op, side-scrolling adventure swallowed so many quarters in the arcades that Sega quickly prepped a port for its upcoming Genesis console. Sega eventually brought three *Golden Axe* titles to the Genesis (the third was only available on the Sega Channel in the U.S.), and released one arcade-exclusive sequel. In spite of the fact that many fans looked back fondly on their time with the series, Sega hung up this axe for nearly 13 years.

» **The Death Blow:** At E3 in 2006, Sega announced plans to revive the *Golden Axe* series. Fans of classic beat 'em ups were initially excited, but enthusiasm waned as more details about Sega's reboot surfaced. Far from the co-op-friendly adventures from the decade before, *Beast Rider* was a single-player action game more in line with popular titles like *God of War*. Sony's Greek myth-infused series isn't necessarily a bad role model for *Golden Axe*, but developer Secret Level's take on the formula was disastrous. *Beast Rider*'s repetitive action was made more tedious thanks to a limited move set and a finicky parry system that often left players vulnerable. Enemy encounters were filled with continually spawning foes, which helped artificially inflate the game length, but did little to detract from the *Beast Rider*'s nonsensical storyline.

» **Likelihood we'll see another: 50%**

While Sega seems happy to continually farm its *Sonic* franchise, many of its other properties lay fallow. While we're not opposed to seeing another *Golden Axe* title that remains true to its roots, we hope Sega will return to series such as *Skies of Arcadia*, *Streets of Rage*, or *Panzer Dragoon* before tapping *Golden Axe* again.

Bionic Commando



» **The Legacy:** In 1987, Capcom released the original *Bionic Commando* in Japanese arcades under the name *Top Secret*. When the game was brought stateside, Capcom thought the title would sell better if marketed as a sequel to the top-down side-scrolling shooter *Commando*. The two games had very little in common, but *Bionic Commando*'s hero, Super Joe, was named after *Commando*'s protagonist. *Bionic Commando* was an action platformer, but unlike many heroes of the day, Super Joe couldn't jump. Instead, he grappled onto objects within the environment using his bionic arm and swung up to higher platforms. These swinging mechanics gave the game a unique tempo and helped it develop a strong cult following. *Bionic Commando* received a revamped NES port in 1988, a Game Boy Port in 1992, and a lesser-known sequel on Game Boy Color in 1999 before taking an 11-year hiatus.

» **The Death Blow:** In 2008, Swedish developer Grin released an enhanced remake of the 1988 NES game called *Bionic Commando: Rearmed*. The game was well received, but mainly served as a prelude to the bigger series reboot a year later. Grin's *Bionic Commando* was a mess of awkward storytelling, tedious combat, and repetitive gameplay challenges. Nathan "Rad" Spencer is an advanced military soldier who is betrayed by his government and then given a shot at redemption when terrorists invade the fictional metropolis of Ascension City and lay waste to its population. One of the game's most nonsensical moments comes late in the game when Spencer learns that his dead wife willingly sacrificed herself so government scientists could harvest her biology and integrate it into his bionic arm. Not long after the release of *Bionic Commando*, Grin closed. A sequel to *Bionic Commando: Rearmed* came out a few years later, but most of the enthusiasm for the series was depleted by then.

» **Likelihood we'll see another: 30%**

While *Bionic Commando* had a strong cult following, it never achieved mainstream popularity, and Capcom likely doesn't see much value in the brand at this point. Don't expect to see Super Joe in anything other than one of Capcom's VS fighting games for some time.

Dungeon Keeper



► **The Legacy:** Before creating the Fable series, industry veteran Peter Molyneux created a beloved PC strategy series called Dungeon Keeper. Set in the dark underbelly of a fantasy realm, players became the master of an empty dungeon and were tasked with filling its halls with ghouls, imps, and other unspeakably monstrous creatures that labored to increase their wealth and then protect that treasure from invading heroes. The game functioned a lot like a real-time strategy game in that players had to train, pay, and feed their workforce while mining out the depths of their dungeon for gold and building out new rooms and traps. However, players couldn't control which creatures would appear in their dungeon, and certain monsters wouldn't get along with other creatures, adding a level of sim management to the gameplay. PC strategists loved the cheeky tone and inventive gameplay. A sequel, released a year later, upgraded to 3D visuals and received similar praise. After that, Dungeon Keeper kept to itself for nearly 14 years.

► **The Death Blow:** Bullfrog Productions developed the early Dungeon Keeper games, but those titles were published by EA, which retained the rights to the series. In 2013, looking to expand its mobile offerings, EA resurrected the series for iOS and Android. Much like the older games, players slowly expand their labyrinthine dungeon by hiring new creatures and building new structures and traps, and players could even send some of their minions out into the world to steal resources from other dungeons. While these basic gameplay mechanics weren't broken, fans had a big issue with the games' freemium model, which required players to wait several hours for a task to complete, or spend a few dollars to buy gems and rush the job. Dungeon Keeper's pay model was so overbearing that the UK's Advertising Standards Authority ruled the game couldn't be called "free-to-play" and charged EA with "misleading advertising."

► **Likelihood we'll see another: 70%**

We'd love to see another Dungeon Keeper that followed Molyneux's original design scheme, but EA may not be eager to touch the brand until gamers have forgotten about its recent microtransaction-heavy release.

Bomberman



► **The Legacy:** Few franchises have seen as many iterations as Hudson Soft's Bomberman series. The original title was developed for PC in 1983 by Japanese designer Shinichi Nakamoto. Bomberman's top-down action pitted players against a series of enemies inside a brick maze. A variety of power-ups allowed players to slowly improve their arsenal of bombs, but a misplaced explosive could just as easily signal Bomberman's end as an enemy's. Later that year, Nakamoto ported the title to the NES in one 72-hour marathon programming session, and it was on consoles that the series really took off. Bomberman II for the NES introduced Battle mode, which allowed up to four players (almost unheard of in the early '80s) to duke it out in simple but strategic multiplayer matches. While the Bomberman series has often featured some form of a single-player campaign, it's always been the elegant mix of hectic but friendly multiplayer that has kept fans coming back for more.

► **The Death Blow:** In 2006, Hudson Soft decided it needed to update Bomberman's classic chibi look with an "edgier" space marine design. This boilerplate marketing move was just the beginning of Act Zero's problems. Instead of focusing on multiplayer, Hudson Soft put a lot of resources behind a new single-player mode that attempted to update Bomberman's classic maze gameplay with generic sci-fi graphics, repetitive level design, and moronic A.I. that often killed itself. Unfortunately, there were no save points anywhere in the game, so if players died during any of Act Zero's 99 levels, they'd have to start over from square one. To top it all off, players could only access multiplayer while online.

► **Likelihood we'll see another: 100%**

Since Act Zero's release, Hudson Soft has released a few Bomberman titles that harken back to the character's cutesy roots. However, many of these are downloadable titles and mobile releases; Bomberman's days as a full-price retail headliner are probably over. ♦



Objection!

Video games in the courtroom

Every industry is rife with lawsuits seeking compensation and vindication among its competitors and (sometimes) partners. Video games are no different. Sometimes it's simply a matter of money, as was the case when Activision tussled with Call of Duty creators Jason West and Vince Zampella, or when Viacom butted heads with Rock Band creator Harmonix. Sometimes, it's about something larger than money, like changing the course of the industry by setting new standards or knocking down the old ones. These are some of the lawsuits that had the largest effects on the industry, changing the business of selling virtual interactive entertainment, or simply putting to law aspects of the industry that had previously been taken for granted.

by Kyle Hilliard

Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association

The Issue: The Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) is a self-imposed regulating body for the video game industry that rates video game content in the interest of consumer education. In 2005, the state of California attempted to pass a law making it illegal, i.e. punishable by law, to sell inappropriate games to minors. The Entertainment Merchants Association (EMA), in partnership with the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), brought forward a lawsuit against the bill, which eventually made its way to the Supreme Court.

The Conclusion: In a 7-2 vote, the Supreme Court found the California law to be unconstitutional. The ruling specifically called out video games as being protected by first amendment rights, saying they deserved as much protection against censorship as literature. In the opinion regarding the case, drafted by Justice Antonin Scalia, it also called out the fact that there was no substantial evidence linking violent acts to violent video games; they produced the same effects on childhood behavior as watching a Looney Tunes cartoon, or reading Grimm's Fairy Tales.

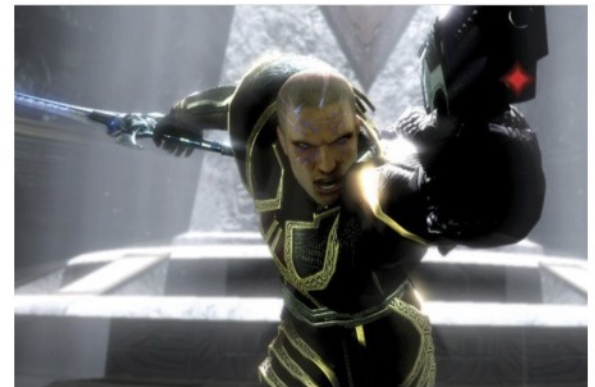
The 2011 verdict was an important turning point for video games. Fans of the medium have always considered video

games to be worth examining alongside literature, film, and other mediums, as an art form as opposed to a consumer product, and the case helped to enforce this ideal on a grander scale.

Silicon Knights v. Epic Games

The Issue: Following the poor reception and sales of Silicon Knights' *Too Human*, the developer sued Epic Games, claiming it withheld elements and features of its Unreal Engine – the engine licensed and used to develop the game. Silicon Knights claimed Epic missed deadlines for delivery and kept the engine's best features to use exclusively for its own games like *Gears of War*. Epic countersued, saying Silicon Knights did not pay the appropriate royalties for using its engine and willfully concealed elements of its code, falsely claiming it had abandoned the Unreal Engine through the course of development.

The Conclusion: The courts ruled in favor of Epic Games in 2012, forcing Silicon Knights to recall and destroy all unsold copies of its games using Unreal code, which included *Too Human*, *X-Men Destiny*, and three unannounced, unreleased games. Silicon Knights also had to pay a hefty fee, and never fully recovered.



Universal City Studios, Inc. v. Nintendo

The Issue: In 1984, following the success of Donkey Kong in arcades, film production company Universal sued Nintendo, claiming it had infringed on its King Kong license. Universal argued consumers would confuse the characters and plots of King Kong and Donkey Kong as being the same.

The Conclusion: The courts ruled in favor of Nintendo in 1984 after the differences between the two franchises were detailed. Nintendo also argued that regardless of the differences between King Kong and Donkey Kong, the former was public domain. Nearly 10 years prior, Universal had successfully sued RKO Pictures to make its own King Kong film, claiming the iconic ape was public domain.

Nintendo was so pleased with the outcome of the case, it supposedly named one of its new video game characters after the lawyer representing it in court – John Kirby.

Atari v. Nintendo

The Issue: In the late '80s, Atari began manufacturing NES games without the permission of Nintendo. This was supposed to be impossible thanks to a patented piece of software that, in layman's terms, required every Nintendo game to have a key, issued by Nintendo, to unlock the ability to play software on an NES console. Atari reverse-engineered this aspect of the NES and sued Nintendo, claiming it was in violation of antitrust laws by incorporating it into its hardware.

The Conclusion: The courts ruled in favor of Nintendo in 1992, saying Atari was infringing on a patent when it was discovered the once-powerful video game company had lied to the U.S. copyright office to acquire the necessary code to be reverse-engineered. The case is especially important, even outside of video games, as it set a precedent that the work of a programmer can be considered and protected under the same rules and laws as that of any other type of creative media.

Los Angeles v. Take-Two Interactive

The Issue: Discovered by modders a year after the release of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, the Hot Coffee mod revealed a hidden sex minigame cut from the game that was never disclosed to the ESRB. As a result of this discovery, senators Hillary Clinton, Joe Lieberman, and others drafted the Family Entertainment Protection Act – a bill meant to require federal mandate enforcement of the ESRB that never became a law – and Take-Two was sued by the city of Los Angeles in a class action lawsuit.

The Conclusion: Take-Two and Rockstar settled with the FTC in 2005 and went through a great deal of expense in order to scrub the explicit content from the game. A patch was issued for the PC version, deleting the content and preventing users from manipulating the game's code. A new version of the game was also issued to retailers and previous copies, which were now rated the rare Adults Only rating by the ESRB, were recalled. Take-Two also had to pay a large fine to the ESRB and others and pay fees to members of the class action lawsuit.

Immersion v. Sony

The Issue: Immersion owns some patents on tactile feedback for interface devices, like the rumble feature common in video game controllers. Immersion sued both Sony and Microsoft over the use of the rumble features in their controllers. Nintendo's patent for its rumble features are different than Immersion's, making it exempt from the case. Immersion claimed Sony and Microsoft were infringing on its patent by including the technology in their controllers.

The Conclusion: Microsoft settled its issues with Immersion out of court, purchasing a 10-percent stake in the company. Sony, however, continued to fight, and it is speculated the original PlayStation 3 Sixaxis controller did not include a rumble feature as a result of this lawsuit. Sony lost the case in 2007 and was forced to pay millions to Immersion based on the seven years the technology appeared in DualShock controllers. Immersion and Sony have since settled, allowing the continued support of the rumble feature for Sony controllers.

Nintendo v. Blockbuster

The Issue: In the interest of giving its consumers the full package, Blockbuster photocopied the instruction manuals of its inventory of video games to include with their rentals. Nintendo brought a lawsuit to Blockbuster claiming it was violating copyright laws by doing this, and sought to prevent the practice.

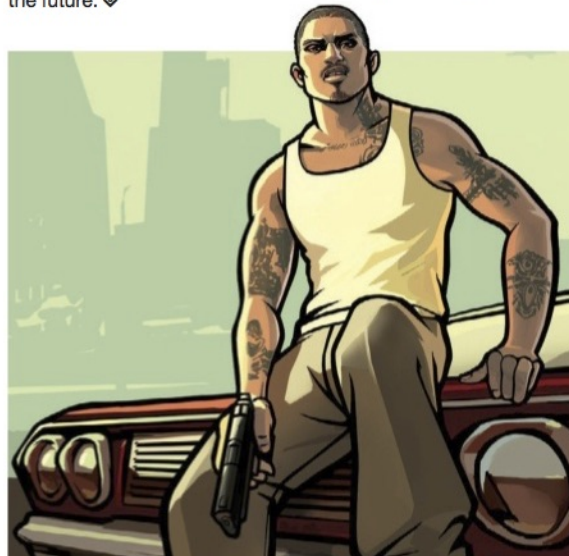


The Conclusion: Blockbuster acquiesced and stopped photocopying the instruction manuals in 1987. The short-term results (at the time when rentals were still popular) were the frequent absence of instruction manuals included with rented video games. It may seem frivolous, but Nintendo pursued the lawsuit not because it considered the text included in instruction manuals to be sacred, but because it knew the ability to copy and recreate data from a cartridge was right around the corner. The lawsuit was a way of heading off piracy among rental companies before they acquired the technology to copy a single video game and rent it to multiple patrons. It's an issue the video game industry struggles with more than ever today.

Keller and O'Bannen v. Electronic Arts and NCAA, Hart vs. Electronic Arts

The Issue: Electronic Arts had been profiting off its NCAA-licensed video games for over a decade, without the need to compensate the myriad players who featured prominently in promoting the game, as well as in the games themselves. Former quarterbacks Sam Keller and Ryan Hart brought lawsuits against Electronic Arts, claiming the use of players' names and likenesses were integral to the success of the series, and the use of those players were not protected by first amendment rights, as Electronic Arts had argued in the past.

The Conclusion: The NCAA, Electronic Arts, Keller, O'Bannen, and Hart worked out a settlement in 2013, and the publisher is currently in the process of issuing payouts to featured players in past titles. NCAA also did not renew its licensing contract with Electronic Arts, which expired this year. Though the video game publisher promises this is not the end of the college football franchise, future releases would no longer be affiliated with the NCAA. Despite the promise, there are currently no announced plans from Electronic Arts to release college football games in the future. ♦



The Investigation Is Ongoing

Two other pertinent lawsuits are currently working their way through the court systems.

Id Software v. Oculus Rift

The Issue: John Carmack, co-founder of id Software and creator of Doom, recently left the studio to become the chief technology officer at Oculus. ZeniMax, which owns id Software, claims Carmack misappropriated technology when he began working with Oculus. Prior to leaving id, Carmack had already begun working with Oculus with ZeniMax's blessing, but under strict contractual agreements over how the technology could be used and how the information would be shared. **Current State:** The lawsuit is ongoing. Oculus issued a statement responding to the lawsuit saying, "The lawsuit filed by ZeniMax has no merit whatsoever. As we have previously said, ZeniMax did not contribute to any Oculus technology. Oculus will defend these claims vigorously."

Rhode Island v. 38 Studios

The Issue: While developing its action-RPG Kingdoms of Amalur, 38 Studios relocated to Rhode Island, accepting a \$75 million loan from the state in order to continue development. The studio declared bankruptcy following the release of its game, leaving Rhode Island taxpayers in debt following the state's unfulfilled investment. The claim brought against 38 Studios states that its management, including former professional baseball player Curt Schilling, knew the company was on the verge of collapse and the running of the company was generally mishandled.

Current State: The case is still ongoing, with new developments appearing often. The latest update involves Rhode Island governor Lincoln Chafee successfully signing a bill that would help the state reach a settlement in the case. State police also questioned the Rhode Island lawmakers who originally approved the loan in 2012. Governor Chafee, who was not in office when the decision was made to bring 38 Studios to Rhode Island, also publicly called the studio's games "a lot of junk," and called the decision for the state to invest in the developer "insane" and "historically bad."

XCOM: THE BOARD GAME

FANTASY FLIGHT'S LATEST EFFORT BLENDS
TABLETOP FUN WITH DIGITAL FLEXIBILITY

by Matt Miller



The newest project from Fantasy Flight Games is a first for the celebrated tabletop-gaming studio. While the publisher has found strong success by adapting some of its best tabletop experiences to a digital format, XCOM: The Board Game takes a more unusual approach. Based on the excellent video games from Firaxis and 2K Games, this new XCOM game is a richly imagined cooperative board

game with a digital app that is core to the game experience. Fully integrated into the story, the digital app adds tension, adaptive difficulty, and a timed element, even as the gameplay remains rooted in a group of friends sitting around a table trying to save the world. We visited Fantasy Flight for an exclusive first look at XCOM: The Board Game and confronted the alien threat.

Designer Eric M. Lang is no stranger to either tabletop game creation or drawing the best

out of a licensed product. His design credits include Star Wars: The Card Game and Marvel Dice Masters, both of which tap their respective universes in clever ways. For XCOM, the video games already do a great job of capturing squad-based combat on a grid, so the board game moves more unconventionally. "The focus on the board game is a zoomed-out view of what managing an XCOM alien invasion looks like," Lang says. "It's focused more on the macro than the micro; you still have all of the elements like continental panic levels, sending squads out on missions, research, intercepting UFOs, and satellite coverage, but we treat each element as one of many 'spinning plates' the group cooperatively has to deal with."

Cooperative Play, Distinct Jobs

"We knew we wanted it to be completely cooperative, and we wanted each of the player roles to feel different," says developer Nikki Valens. "We wanted them to be asymmetrical, so that we could fulfill different play styles." The central officer handles communications, as well as ensuring that all the players receive their tasks and carry them out. He or she manages satellites, which can be sent into orbit to counter the UFOs that appear there. The officer also gets the job of interacting with the digital app.

ENHANCEMENT THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Like the soldiers in the fictional XCOM universe, the XCOM board game uses technology to enhance, but never to get in the way. "An essential digital component has been a part of this game's vision from day one," says designer Eric M. Lang. "XCOM is a face-to-face board game first; the app is there to enhance and accentuate the feeling of terror that you'd feel if you were in charge of the world's first and final defense against alien invasion." The free application required to play XCOM is planned for launch on iOS, Android, or any browser-enabled device. Anyone can snag it for free when the game launches later this year.

The app is integrated into the fiction. The player who takes on the role of the central officer is the only person interacting with the app. Even in its pre-release state, the onscreen prompts offer the sense of interacting directly with the nerve center of XCOM,

dishing out info to the other players, assigning tasks, and watching the onscreen map for clues about where the aliens might show up next.

The app also features reactive A.I. and adaptive difficulty. UFOs that remain in orbit after the turn ends begin to disrupt communications, forcing the team to make decisions about troop and technology resources before knowing about enemy deployments. The app also pays attention to how many missions you've completed, and what continents have begun to panic. "The more missions you've completed, the more the game knows it can ramp up a little bit, and push that difficulty," says developer Nikki Valens.

Independent of this adaptive challenge, the app also lets the players set a difficulty mode, including a tutorial mode, easy, normal, and hard. The app also includes all the game rules, and a complete glossary. Between the tutorial mode and the e-manual, XCOM sidesteps one of the biggest hurdles to getting new players into a game — having to read a booklet to learn how to play.

The commander is in charge of the base and manages XCOM's fragile economy. Research, soldiers, satellites, and everything else XCOM does costs money, and it's the commander's job to make sure the money doesn't run out. This role also chooses which crises the team will confront, usually trying to pick the lesser of two evils. Finally, the commander sends out interceptors onto the board to confront alien UFOs as they show up at different continents.

The squad leader is the hero of the group. He or she chooses assault, support, sniper, and heavy troopers, and sends them out to either defend the base or execute a mission in the field. Each troop type has its own specialties, and different enemy combatants and tasks can only be tackled by a squad member with the requisite skills.

Finally, the chief scientist is a classic support role. Each turn offers new opportunities to put individual researchers on a particular project. Complete that project, and the squad leader might get a plasma rifle, or the commander some better-protected interceptors. "The scientist has to weigh their options, but also can open it up to talk to everyone at the table," Valens says. "As you get more comfortable with a role, you get more comfortable talking with others about it."

Going Into Battle

XCOM: The Board Game plays fast and tense thanks to a simple resolution mechanic and timed countdown component. At the beginning of each turn, the central officer cues the beginning of the timed phase by tapping the screen, and the app delivers tasks for the players to accomplish. Often, the commander might be given only 15 seconds to choose between two crisis cards – fail to choose one, and both trigger. Similarly, the squad leader might be given just a few seconds to decide how many soldiers will defend the base. This timed phase flies by in a matter of minutes, and it's great fun to feel the excitement pass around the table as the central officer calls out jobs.

After the timed phase, an easy-to-learn system is used to resolve tasks. "We used one mechanic – a press-your-luck die resolution system – to resolve all of the intertwining systems in game, from shooting down UFOs to succeeding in research to advancing in mission," Lang explains. "To me that is essential because it lessens cognitive load, and keeps all players tactically engaged while slightly relaxed during the non-real time elements, but still provides some drama." Players roll dice equal to the assets they've put into play during the timed phases. With each roll, you also roll an enemy die – roll low, and your researchers might be killed, or satellites shot down. Players can choose to reroll to get more successes, but each time they "push" the chance of losing assets increases.

The game is lost if the XCOM base is overrun, or if too many continents panic and abandon all hope. But with each mission the team completes, they get closer to unlocking the final scenario mission. These final, challenging confrontations win the game – if you can last that long. ♦

THE FIRAXIS CONNECTION

XCOM: The Board Game has the full support of Firaxis, a development team with a deep love for the world of tabletop gaming. We interviewed Jake Solomon, lead designer on XCOM: Enemy Unknown, and Ananda Gupta, lead designer on XCOM: Enemy Within, to get their thoughts on the increasing ties between tabletop and video games.

What does the tabletop experience offer that is distinct from video games? Why do you think so many video game developers are so deeply involved with tabletop gaming?

Gupta: Board-game mechanics in some sense require more buy-in from players, since the players are the ones who have to internalize and enforce the rules (rather than let a computer do it), but on the other hand players' expectations for the visualization of actions are much higher in the digital arena. An important part of tabletop design is giving players good hooks for their imaginations. As a videogame designer, looking at how another designer implemented their idea can sometimes get you un-stuck from a problem you're facing in your own game. And there's really nothing like playing a new game, coming across something incredibly simple and intuitive and clever and thinking: "I really wish I had come up with that."

How do you feel that the app part of the game contributes to a better overall gaming experience for players?

Solomon: There are some things that a computer can do well (like sorting between many different elements, randomization, and some

of the math that would be tedious to do manually), and having an app as part of a game sort of bridges the gap between the board game and the computer game. It gives you some additional power and flexibility for certain kinds of game mechanics. It's probably something we'll see more and more of in the next few years.

What elements of the video game did you feel were important to be included in the board game?

Gupta: You can almost conceive of XCOM as two separate board games: the strategy layer, where you're managing the results of your tactical missions, and the tactical missions, where you're fighting aliens and recovering artifacts. Those two systems feed so tightly into each other that it's really hard to make an XCOM that doesn't have most of those elements present in some way. The beauty of the board game is how it takes elements from the video game and finds ways to do them with mechanics sensible to board games, but which retain the feel of the video game. That's quite a feat to manage. Also, many of our fans have wondered about the possibility of a co-op mode in the XCOM campaign; we think the fact that XCOM: The Board Game is a fully cooperative experience will really appeal to those fans.

What is your favorite feature in XCOM: The Board Game?

Solomon: The way the app paces the appearance of threats – that's a very clever implementation of the ramp-up that the invasion follows. Obviously we know how the video game does it, but seeing the way that it's done within the app, that's a very impressive piece of both game design and technical implementation.





The BEST MOBILE GAMES Of 2014 (So Far)

Twice a year we gather our favorite mobile games together in one place to separate the wheat from the chaff. Here are 15 games from the first several months of 2014 that offer great fun on your tablet or phone, but without the nonsense that sometimes accompanies the mobile gaming scene. *by Matt Miller*



1. Hearthstone

Platform: iOS **Developer:** Blizzard

Blizzard once again does what it does best – take an existing genre and polish it to perfection. The mobile version of Hearthstone is the preferred version for many, allowing players to build decks and play opponents from anywhere. It's a perfect entry point to collectible card games, with enough depth to satisfy longtime genre players as well.



2. Wayward Souls

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** Rocketcat Games

Combining some of the best features of roguelikes and action/RPGs, Wayward Souls grabs you in your first dungeon crawl and doesn't let go. Charming old-school art, challenging combat, and multiple upgradeable characters are just some of the reasons this fantasy adventure is worth a download.



3. Threes!

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** Sirvo LLC

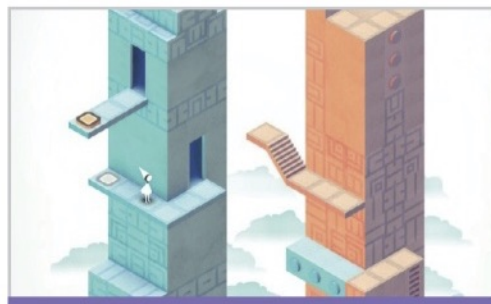
Plagued by clones since its inception, you still can't beat the original. The simple puzzle mechanic finds players manipulating a grid of numbers to create multiples of three, but complexity grows with each swipe. This is a fantastic, accessible title that has crossover appeal for both traditional gamers and those yet to catch the gaming bug.



4. FTL: Faster Than Light

Platform: iOS **Developer:** Subset Games

Mobile players waited a while for Subset's rewarding science fiction action/strategy title, but the anticipation was worth it. An excellent port channels all your spaceship's complex options into simple taps and swipes, and this newest version also includes all new advanced options for unexplored missions, aliens, and weaponry.



5. Monument Valley

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** ustwo

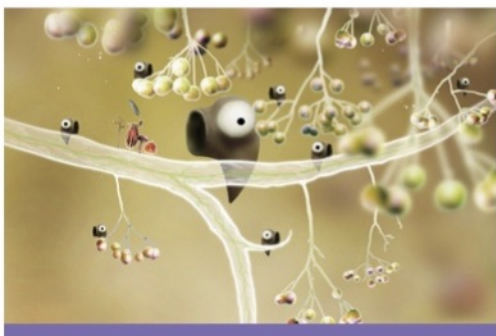
M.C. Escher offers the chief source material for this contemplative and beautiful puzzle experience, in which players guide Princess Ida through an illusory world of strange architecture that is never what it seems to be. Minimalist presentation and thoughtful but uncomplicated challenges make Monument Valley a serene mobile departure.



6. Kero Blaster

Platform: iOS **Developer:** Studio Pixel

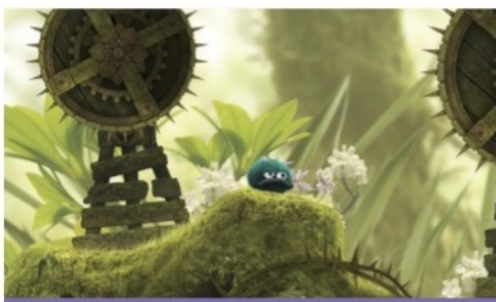
The creator of the excellent Cave Story returns with a new action/platforming adventure, this time about a frog on a monster hunt. Mobile platformers often struggle with controls, but Kero Blaster nails the touch experience with tight maneuvering and action. The classic pixel art, hefty challenge, and smart level design make Kero Blaster more potent than first glance might suggest.



7. Botanicula

Platform: iOS **Developer:** Amanita Design

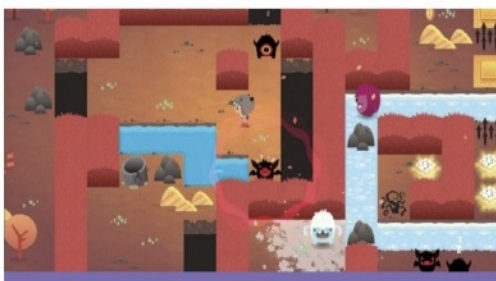
The creators of Machinarium once again get high marks for charm and whimsy in this adventure game about a group of bug-like friends on a mission to save a lone tree seed. The touch-based controls lend themselves perfectly to the story-book styling, and the puzzles are creative without feeling obtuse.



10. Leo's Fortune

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** 1337, Senri LLC

One of the prettiest games on mobile this year also happens to have a great gameplay hook. Leo is on a quest to recover his lost gold, and he can inflate his body to navigate around and over obstacles that might slow down his progress. The clever platforming, smartly built levels, and incredible graphical detail are a testament to how good mobile titles can be these days.



13. Monsters Ate My Birthday Cake

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** SleepNinja Games

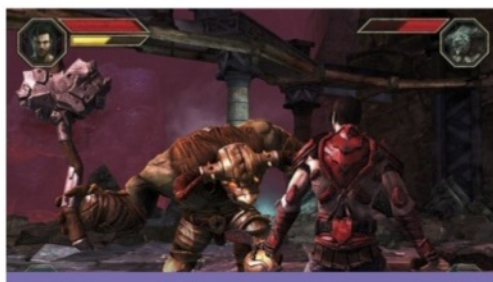
Don't be fooled by the gorgeous, childlike visuals – this puzzle game packs plenty of challenge. You control a boy named Niko on a quest to recover his unjustly burgled cake. Each level is a maze of switches and narrow paths, and it's not long before you have the creatures of the wilderness aiding you on putting everything in its correct place. Equal parts cute and captivating, Monsters Ate My Birthday Cake is a welcome surprise.



8. VVVVVV

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** Terry Cavanagh

It's been several years since the oddly named VVVVVV first hit PC and the 3DS, but this mobile port has the potential to bring the excellent platformer to a whole new audience. Your outer space ship captain navigates an increasingly dangerous series of immaculately designed levels, and must reverse the gravity plane to hop from the floor to ceiling to progress. If you never tried the original, this is a great time to flip into the action.



11. Godfire: Rise Of Prometheus

Platform: iOS **Developer:** Vivid Games/Platige Image

The Unreal engine powers this ancient world action game, which draws inspiration from God of War and Infinity Blade in equal measures. A broad selection of weapon and armor upgrades provides a sense of investment as you fight through one beautifully animated battle after the next. The combat challenge is limited, but few mobile games can match the visual splendor or ambition on display here.



14. Out There

Platform: iOS, Android **Developer:** Mi Clos Studio

If the idea of a science fiction, roguelike, choose-your-own-adventure is something that excites you, then Out There is the game you've been waiting to play. Your lone astronaut must survive as long as he can in the depths of space, visiting planets, encountering alien life, and managing his ship's inventory. The oddly existential storytelling and classic science-fiction vibe help Out There to stand apart in this year's many offerings.



9. Battleheart Legacy

Platform: iOS **Developer:** Mika Mobile

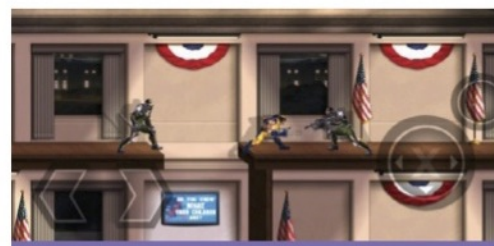
Cute visuals and deep customization are the highlights of Mika Mobile's latest action/RPG. You wander the countryside with your custom-built character, gathering treasure, building up XP, and conquering missions in the name of the king. This surprisingly lengthy journey offers endless opportunities to tweak and develop the perfect hero.



12. World Of Tanks Blitz

Platform: iOS **Developer:** Wargaming.net

The popular tank simulator gets an excellent mobile port. Streamlining to smaller player counts and maps is a good decision for the mobile experience, while the smart approach to monetization of this free-to-play experience isn't overly disruptive or exploitative. For multiplayer strategy and action on the run, Blitz holds the line admirably.



15. The Uncanny X-Men: Days Of Future Past

Platform: iOS **Developer:** Glitchsoft

Based on the original comic (but timed to hit near this year's big movie release), Days of Future Past recalls the heyday of '90s comic book action/platformers. Multiple playable mutant heroes and a fun time-travel story help prop up combat and movement that feels a little floaty. However, great production values and a smart treatment of the source material make this an easy pick for fans of the genre. ♦

THE MUTATING MEANING OF “INDIE”

by Matt Bertz

Thanks to the power of crowdfunding, digital distribution, and easier to use toolkits, you hear a lot of talk these days about devs “going indie.” This is often synonymous with ditching the shackles of working on massive teams, being forced to factor marketing into game design, and crunching on sequel after sequel. But when the majority of games in the contemporary landscape are already coming from outside the walls of big publishers like Electronic Arts, Ubisoft, and Activision, what does becoming indie really mean?

The fundamental definition of going independent in the context of the game industry is breaking free from the traditional publisher-developer model. As the cost of triple-A development rises and publishers focus their spending on a smaller pool of large-scale projects, we’ve seen everyone from famous developers, like Fable creator Peter Molyneux, to small teams from well-regarded studios, like the former BioWare designers who created *Stoic*, leave the traditional confines of game development to forge their own path.

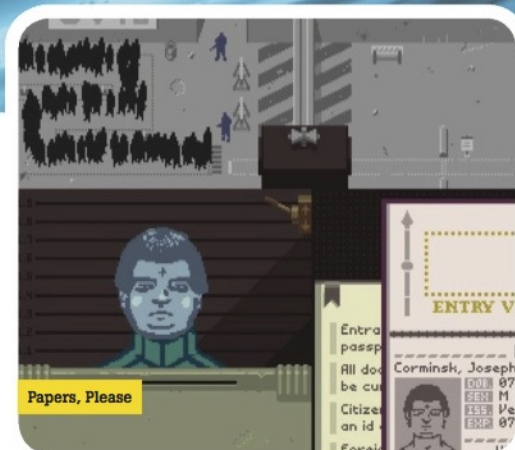
The scope and diversity of these indie projects is so varied that some can’t help but question how placing all the games under the “indie” umbrella is useful. Does Chris Roberts’ studio, Cloud Imperium Games, which raised more than \$40 million in crowd funding and hired on more than 200 developers for its “indie” project *Star Citizen*, really have that much in common with

Lucas Pope, who ostensibly created *Papers, Please* by himself? Can you be “indie” with that type of budget and that many staff members?

“For me, the word itself has lost a lot of its meaning,” Pope says. “If you look at mobile, for instance, a lot of the big hits are by one person or really small teams. And you could say that they’re indie being that they’re self-published on iOS. But I kind of feel like with self-publishing these days and digital downloads, the distinction is not that important anymore because you can have big teams that make hits and you can have small teams that make hits.”

Some companies dabble in both. Double Fine Productions and Obsidian Entertainment, both of which have traditionally operated under publisher overview, struck out on their own in recent years with the help of crowdfunding. Over the past several years, Double Fine has created games for Microsoft, Sony, Sega, Electronic Arts, and Warner Bros. while at the same time building independent projects like *Massive Chalice*, *Hack ‘N’ Slash*, and *Broken Age*. As Obsidian worked on the final touches for *South Park: The Stick of Truth*, it also debuted a Kickstarter campaign for a new RPG called *Pillars of Eternity*. Now, some of their projects operate in the same space as smaller teams like Team Meat, Playdead, and The Fullbright Company.

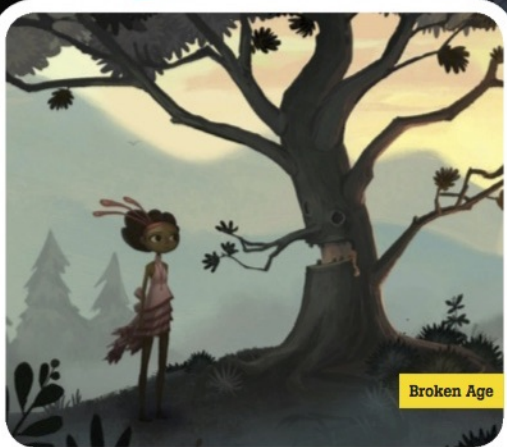
“We realize that we inhabit a weird corner of the indie scene,” says Double Fine senior publishing manager



Greg Rice. “The early days of our studio saw projects with publishers and larger budgets like *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend*. At the time, these robust digital stores that allow developers to directly reach their fans were still in their infancy and physical releases were much more of a necessity. But, even then, the studio was independently owned and maintained a dedication toward unique and creative games with a handcrafted feel and strong voice. In the years since, we’ve restructured a bit by dividing up the company into smaller teams working on multiple games. It very much feels like a collective of indie teams, and it allows us to explore a lot more ideas without putting all our eggs in one basket. The result has been really exciting, as it’s meant a wide range of unique games in very



Star Citizen



Broken Age

different genres and styles coming out more frequently from the studio.”

This process has become more common in recent years, as larger studios oversee small development projects that don't necessarily share the typical identity of the larger-scale games. Anyone who plays thatgamecompany's games *Flower* or *Journey* would probably identify them as indie, given their unique premises that explore game design in different ways than traditional console games. But these games were incubated at Sony's Santa Monica studio and published by the same company responsible for *God of War*, *Uncharted*, and the entire PlayStation brand. *Valiant Hearts* looks every bit an indie project, but it was crafted within the walls of

Rayman studio Ubisoft Montpellier.

“While [*Flower* and *Journey*] may not have been self-published or self-financed, they are definitely creative and unique experiences of great worth and beauty made by autonomous teams,” Rice says. “I don't believe the fact that these studios partnered with a large publisher changes the spirit in which they were made, and if the teams identify as indie, then they're indie in my book.”

Much like what happened with the DIY music scene in the late '80s and early '90s, the term “indie” in gaming has come to mean something more than just making a game on your own. It's not just about how you're making the game, it's about what you're making, as well. Certain aesthetic choices like retro graphics, 8-bit chiptunes, and hand-painted backgrounds have been adopted by a wide margin of indie developers. This is often what a person has in mind when they define a game as “indie.”

“The question ‘what is indie?’ used to really matter in terms of business, but now I agree it almost matters more in terms of aesthetics,” says Capy Games president Nathan Vella. “We've worked with publishers, we've worked with branded games, we've self-funded stuff, we've made a super arty iPhone game – we've been all over the place. For us, personally, being independent is just the ability to make our own decisions and define the path for our studio. The interesting thing is that that's just my personal definition as it pertains to Capy. There are other people who are using independent games as

a way to foster diversity in the industry or raise social issues or do crazy, ultra-artistic stuff. When you compare *Cart Life* to *Bastion*, they are vastly different games, but they are both capital-I 'Indie.' I think the biggest strength in indie is the diversity and the fact that we should not exclude anyone from that title if they want it. I think there are people who are making the most punk, disruptive stuff at the same time that people are making first-person shooters, and both are very independent. For me, that's a positive. I think there are people for whom 'indie' is more than a catch-all or have a different definition than me, and that's fine. The fact that it's an open, ethereal definition shows how far it's managed to come and how wide it's managed to spread. It shows how powerful the movement is.”

Perhaps that is the takeaway: People should concern themselves with the games themselves instead of arguing about which qualify as indie. Right now, games are coming from more corners of the world than ever before – from big teams, small teams, and every size in between. Some are self-financed, some crowdfunded, and others created under the roof of a giant publisher. This diversity is valuable. The more developers branch out from the pre-established norms, the better chance we have of entering a golden age of video games where creators challenge our preconceptions of what video games can be. I think we can all agree that would be a good thing. ♦

Airships

by Joe Juba



Delphinus *Skies of Arcadia*

A game all about sky pirates needs great airships, and *Skies of Arcadia* doesn't disappoint. The Delphinus is the unquestioned ruler above the clouds (though a nod goes to the Little Jack), and it's yours to upgrade and command. It has the size and the firepower to take down any opponent, and firing the experimental Moon Stone Cannon never gets old.



Highwind - *Final Fantasy VII*

Airships have been a fixture in the *Final Fantasy* series since the beginning, but the Highwind gave fans the opportunity to soar through the skies in 3D for the first time. Other ships from this era may be more advanced (the Ragnarok) or powerful (the Invincible), but that initial rush is impossible to duplicate.



Kirov - *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2*

Few things strike dread into your foes' hearts like seeing a fleet of Kirov airships advancing on their bases. With small numbers at your command, these blimps are powerful air-to-ground units. With large numbers, they are an unstoppable omen of your impending victory.



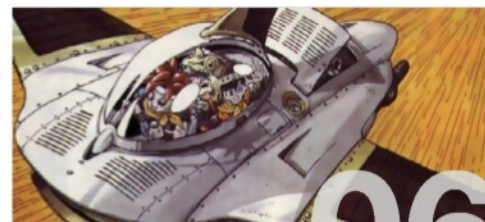
Gesellschaft - *Mega Man Legends*

The Flutter's fight against the Gesellschaft is basically the coolest moment in *Mega Man Legends*. As if that ship-to-ship battle isn't enough, the bumbling Bonne family's barge is also full of Servbots, which automatically makes it one of the best airships in gaming.



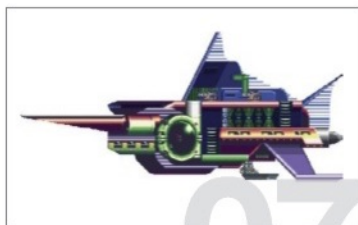
World 8 Airship - *Super Mario Bros. 3*

The third installment introduced airships to the Mario series, and the one in world eight is the most memorable of the bunch. It is simultaneously the hardest and the easiest. If you tried dodging the flames and wrenches yourself, it was brutal – which is why everyone saved up a P-Wing to fly above the gauntlet unscathed.



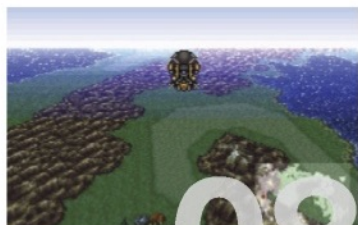
The Epoch - *Chrono Trigger*

When you're on the Epoch, the question isn't where you want to go – it's when. This craft travels through time, carrying Crono and friends through the skies of multiple eras. Whether you want to fight dinosaurs or see the End of Time, there's nowhere you can't go.



Death Rogumer - *Mega Man X*

It isn't as flashy as other airships on this list, and you don't even get to ride it for that long. This vessel's true value comes after its destruction; once you beat Storm Eagle, it crashes into Spark Mandrill's stage, eliminating the electrified floors that previously made the level harder to navigate.



Blackjack - *Final Fantasy VI*

Soaring around in the Blackjack gives players a new perspective on the world, but transportation isn't the only advantage to this airship. With luxurious accommodations and an on-board casino, passengers always travel in style – until the end of the world, at least.



Battleship Halberd *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*

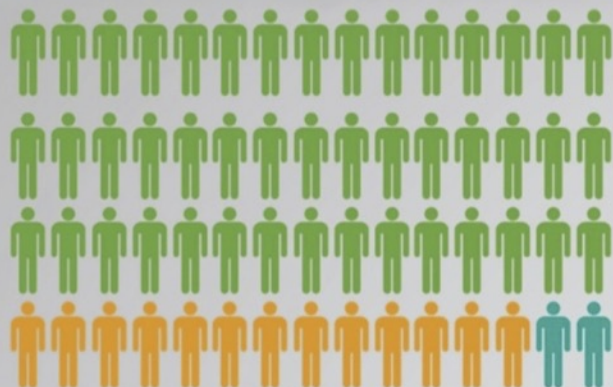
Meta Knight's flagship makes an impressive appearance as a level in *Brawl*. After going through the launch sequence and flying through the stratosphere, players eventually fight on the Halberd's deck – where they contend with blasts from the main cannon.



The First Lady - *BioShock Infinite*

All of Columbia might qualify as an airship, but The First Lady is special. Booker and Elizabeth are trying to reach this vessel to escape Columbia. The plan doesn't work out as intended, but this flying museum serves as a memorable turning point for *BioShock Infinite*'s story and characters.

The Good



FEMALE MAIN CHARACTERS in video games remains a hot topic, and their number could increase as more women enter the developer ranks. According to a recent survey from the International Game Developers Association, which had 2,202 responses, 22 percent of developer respondents in the industry are female – up from 11.5 percent in 2009 (two percent identified as transgender or androgynous). The Quality of Life survey also posted that 79 percent of respondents said that diversity in general was good for the industry.



The Bad

ROB PARDO, chief creative director and 17-year vet, at Blizzard is leaving the company. “I’m looking forward to new challenges in my career, but I will always cherish the time I spent with you all and the amazing and collaborative teams at Blizzard,” he wrote in a farewell blog post. “It was both satisfying and humbling, and it made me a better developer and a better person.” Pardo has not outlined what he plans to do next.



MICROSOFT SHUTS DOWN its Entertainment Studios division, which was tasked to bring original programming to Xbox One. At least both the Halo TV series and *Halo: Nightfall* web series will proceed as planned, as well as the *Signal to Noise* documentary series covering the E.T. Atari game excavation dig. Remedy’s Quantum Break game, which is tied into a planned show of the same name, is unaffected. Elsewhere in the company, up to 18,000 jobs are being shed by Microsoft by March of next year. MCV reported that the European Xbox operation will lose 75 percent of its staff. ♦

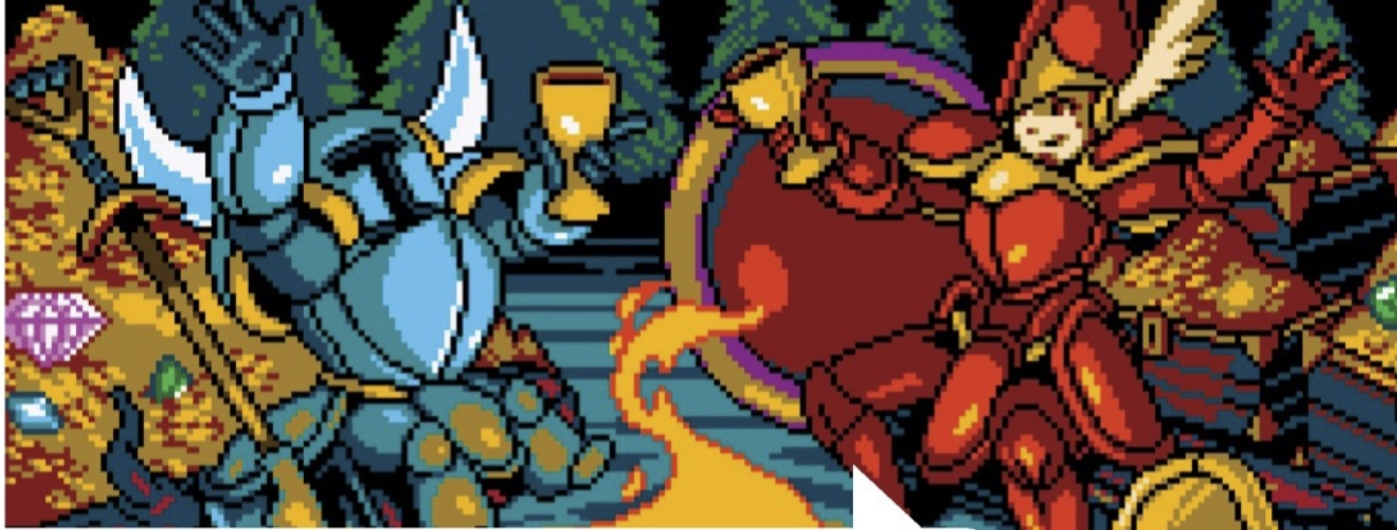
The Ugly

Quotable

“I believe the appeal of video games is not transient, and human beings have an instinctual love of games.”



– Nintendo’s **Shigeru Miyamoto** at a recent shareholder’s meeting



SHOVEL KNIGHT

Drawing heavily from NES influences such as Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse, DuckTales, and Mega Man, Shovel Knight is a game that feels like it fell out of a time warp from the '80s. Independent developer Yacht Club Games started out talking about their dream game over lunch one day and the project quickly turned into a Kickstarter campaign that raised over \$300,000, fulfilling every stretch goal the team could dream up. We sat down with developers Sean Velasco and Nick Wozniak to talk about that fateful lunch, if the team ever considered including co-op in the game, and the possibility of an Xbox or PlayStation port. *by Tim Turi*

Where did the idea for a game about a knight with a shovel come from?

Nick Wozniak: The inception of the idea last January happened sort of as a joke conversation over lunch that kind of got too serious. It's a serious conversation in terms that we were putting actual thought forth, but it wasn't like, "Let's spend the next year and a half of our lives making a shovel game."

Sean Velasco: We went into lunch talking about this NES game we knew we were going to be doing. It was going to be 8-bit and sort of simple and based around one mechanic. That's all we knew.

NW: We were thinking about what kind of mechanics we like a lot, and the down-thrust in Zelda II came up. As far as combat goes in that game, it's very satisfying.

SV: It's like the quintessential attack. It's like a Mario jump, it's a stab, and also in Zelda II it's a great sword fighting maneuver.

NW: That spawned the conversation of, "If you're hitting the guys from above, then you're also digging through blocks and you're also maybe flipping guys over to hit their underbellies." That motion of what we were describing didn't really fit with the theme of a

sword. Eventually, someone said to make it a knight with a shovel, and that spawned the discussion of, "I guess, if he's a shovel guy, then he's, like, Plummet Knight or maybe he's Shovel Knight, the shoveling knight."

Did you ever consider making Shovel Knight's partner, Shield Knight, a playable character?

SV: Because Shield Knight wasn't really conceived of until halfway through development, no. But as soon as she was conceived, of course we did.

NW: I had in my brain an ability that I'd love to see her use where she dashes forward and dashes downward using her shield as a projectile. I've always imagined a way that she could be really useful.

SV: And especially the way that her and Shovel Knight are supposed to work together.

That's what would excite me about doing a co-op game that would have Shovel Knight and Shield Knight playable. It's like how it's described in the story – she's the defender, up close and protecting Shovel Knight, who is coming in raining hell from above with the shovel drop.

How well is the game doing beyond the Kickstarter backers?

SW: I'd say it's doing very well. We are very pleased with where it's at, even this early in the sales time.

NW: Across all platforms, it's exceeding expectations.

The game is only available on Wii U, 3DS, and PC. Do you have any interest in porting to Sony or Microsoft systems?

SV: That's definitely on our radar, as are any other platforms that we can put Shovel Knight on and it would be 100 percent

the experience that it is. We're definitely looking to put it on any platform like that. But we don't have anything to announce yet.

Is Yacht Club committed to making retro-style games moving forward?

NW: I would say at this exact moment, yeah, because we're working on our stretch goals for Shovel Knight. But that's not necessarily something we're going to be doing forever.

SV: Our next game could very well not be an NES-style game. Even if we did a 2D game, maybe it would just not be within the NES restrictions. Maybe we could do a 3D game. Or maybe we would just do Shovel Knight 2, or another game that's straight-up NES style. It's something we can do.

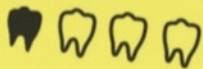
NW: It's up to the whim of the team at the point we're deciding our next game project.

SV: It'll be what we're excited about, what we think would be big or successful or interesting to people. Or maybe it would be something that's not on the market that we really want. I think a large part of the Shovel Knight thing was that nobody was making 2D character platformers. It was like, "Where's my Mega Man? I want new games like this but they don't have them." ♦



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Mike Uyama

Occupation

Director, Games Done Quick/Organizer of AGDQ

Twitter

@mikwuyma

Location

Arlington, Virginia



Andrew Schroeder

Occupation

Organizer of SGDQ/Twitch Speedrunning Partnerships Manager

Twitter

@romscoutSDA

Location

Chicago, Illinois

Speedrunning For A Good Cause

The Awesome Games Done Quick charity gaming marathon made waves in January when it raised more than a million dollars for the Prevent Cancer Foundation. Summer Games Done Quick followed up that performance with more than \$700,000 raised for Doctors Without Borders. Formed in 2010, these two marathons focus primarily on speedrunning classic games and have expanded exponentially with each iteration. We spoke with AGDQ's Mike Uyama and SGDQ's Andrew Schroeder about how it all comes together.

interview by Bryan Vore

How did you get started in the speedrunning community?

Mike Uyama: I used to go to [SpeedDemosArchive] every day to see if there was an update, and one day I saw one for Mega Man X4. Before I saw this run, I thought every speedrun was really good, but, when I saw that, I thought I could do better. I borrowed a copy of the game from my cousin and I decided to do a speedrun of the game myself. The rest is history.

As for how I got more involved with SDA, I just started participating in the site forums in late 2004 and eventually got a little more involved. Then it turned out the site's founder, Nolan "Radix" Pflug, was too busy to run the site because he recently got a full-time job and he needed some people to help him out with the site. Sometime around September 2006, I started taking over the site and doing the speedrun submissions and contacts.

Andrew Schroeder: I looked at SDA once in a while just to see random runs come up, but

I wasn't really involved in the community until I started watching this Mega Man X runner [Sattik 'Tiki' Ghosh]. I started watching him on Ustream in late 2008/early 2009, and it just inspired me because it's ridiculous how much of a machine this guy is.

Like Mike, I saw a Super Mario RPG run on the site that I was just like, "Wow, this is garbage. I can definitely do better than this." That's how I started getting involved in actual speedrunning.

How did the charity marathons begin?

AS: Before the first charity marathon we had, there was already a meet-up that the community had at MAGFest in 2009.

MU: Then I was like, "Well, we had this meet-up at MAGFest last year, let's hold this meet-up at MAGFest this year and have this charity event along with it." I decided on classic games as a theme because we needed something more coherent for the marathon.

Our event was supposed to start on New Year's Day 2010. We went to the hotel, and the wireless modems that they promised fell through because the provider was bought out and the new wireless modems didn't work. I was not informed of this until New Year's Eve. Instead of holding the event at MAGFest, where they were locked into a contract with the cable company, we went to my mom's house, which was about a 10-minute drive away, because it had better Internet. We ended up hosting our first marathon of Classic Games Done Quick there. This might sound like small potatoes now, but we raised \$11,000 for C.A.R.E. (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) in about 56 hours. We were never so happy in our lives because we had no idea how successful this event was going to be.

In the most recent Awesome Games Done Quick you passed the \$1 million mark. Why do you think it's growing so much each year?

MU: I think there are a couple factors here. Part of it is just that we've been around for a while and speedrunning in general has been growing. It has kind of a feedback loop: we're growing and we help speedrunning grow, but speedrunning also helps us grow. Another thing is that Twitch in general is just getting bigger. That's a big factor. We've always worked off a small budget, and we never had to put too much work into marketing and advertising. It's mostly been word of mouth.

AS: I think we do a better job of catering to people who have nostalgia for these old games. The way we play them is so different than they've ever seen them played before, so it's captivating and they just continue watching once they're hooked.

MU: It's kind of the opposite of eSports or a tournament, where it's more of a friendly cooperative feeling, and it's more intimate. Even as much as we've grown,



we still have the couch – we're always trying to have that "dudes on a couch" feel.

How do you come up with this massive schedule for marathon week?

MU: We have game submissions months before the marathon; at least three or four months. The one for the Awesome Games Done Quick next January is going to be in August. People submit up to five games, and we go through all the submissions and determine which ones are most appropriate for the event.

AS: It's him, me, and then we have like four other people on the committee that go over and begin selections with us. They have a diverse background from different parts of the speedrunning community, so we don't just have our personal bias dictate the schedules.

MU: In the end, for Awesome Games, I make the decisions, and

then for Summer Games, Drew makes the decisions. We have two rounds of [deliberation] so we can make this fit into 150 hours. While 150 hours sounds like a lot, it's a lot less time than you think it is.

AS: We have more than 1,000 hours of submissions at this point.

Do you guys ever get any sleep during these things?

AS: I probably slept like 15 hours tops.

MU: I averaged about four or five hours a day.

AS: I averaged about two hours.

MU: I probably got around 25 to 30, which is not very good, but better.

How do you feel toward the end?

MU: Very, very exhausted. You have that adrenaline keeping you up and the energy keeping you alive, and then, after it's over, you almost feel like you're on the verge of collapse. After I got back home, in a 72-hour period I slept 40 hours.

What positive changes have been made possible by your work?

MU: The money has gone to various research grants over the year, including one researching prostate cancer. It's also gone to community grants. These are two-year, \$80,000 research grants. I know in the past they've helped find the HPV vaccine and an X-ray scan that helped early detection of lung cancer, among other things. Prevent Cancer's been using it for their dialogue for action programs, spreading more

awareness to cancer prevention.

We've been going over being more transparent with donations, going over exactly where the money will go once we hit certain donation goals. But in general, it's awesome to see the money is going to a good cause and that it is making a difference.

AS: Yeah, it's great that we can just talk with the representatives from the charity any time during the year and get feedback and just feel like we're a part of their organization. It just feels great, really.

When can fans expect to hear some of the details for Awesome Games Done Quick 2015?

MU: I can give you the dates – it's January 4-10. I can't give you much more than that. The hotel will likely be finalized by early September, and probably a little after that in October people can start registering for the event.

AS: One thing we strive to do this year that we didn't we really didn't do in previous years is use the SDA Twitch channel a lot more, just to give you guys a better showcase of the whole community throughout the year. Starting in August, and then continuing all the way up to AGDQ, you'll be seeing a lot of different content on the SDA Twitch channel if you want to see more about the community at large instead of just watching individual streamers.

MU: Or instead of just the marathon. ♦

Stay on top of all the latest Games Done Quick happenings at gamesdonequick.com

Hulking Out

Games Done Quick has a great history of memorable moments, like blindfolded Punch-Out!! and four-way race through Super Metroid, but organizers Mike Uyama and Andrew Schroeder will always be nostalgic about Freddy "Frezy_Man" Andersson's Contra antics in the first marathon. Since the heroes are shirtless, donors paid for Andersson to play without a shirt. "It's very funny because he pretty much looks like a Swedish supermodel, but he's also the most gigantic nerd ever," Uyama says. After he beats Contra, he puts his shirt back on to play Super C and donors again want him to take it off. "We tell him, 'Chat wants you to go shirtless.' He says, 'Like this?'" and he just tears his shirt off in front of the camera and everyone just goes nuts," Uyama says. Naturally, they auctioned the tattered remains of the shirt to the highest bidder.



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Big Ambitions, Small Teams

by Ben Reeves and Matt Miller



The Vanishing of Ethan Carter
PC

The genre distinctions that once separated independent games from those by established publisher/developer teams continues to fade with each passing year. Larger publishers like Ubisoft and Warner Bros. are increasingly embracing the potential for smaller downloadable games, while games like E3 darling *No Man's Sky* and this month's featured project, **The Vanishing of Ethan Carter**, show that independent studios aren't afraid to dream big. The Astronauts' development team has been at work on its atmospheric mystery game for years now, but the title is finally nearing release. Inspired by the weird fiction of the early 20th century, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* is one of the most ambitious indie projects on the horizon.

When folks run into the kind of supernatural trouble that the police can't help with, they turn to Paul Prospero, one of the world's premier paranormal detectives. Throughout his years of service, Paul has amassed a small community of fans. Ethan Carter was one of them, and while his letters started out

like ordinary fan mail, the boy began to write about things that little boys shouldn't know about – places and things that few people see. Unfortunately, by the time that Paul was ready to meet with Ethan, the young boy had already vanished.

In *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, players step into Paul's shoes as he journeys to Red Creek Valley in search of Ethan. Paul's journey leads him down a number of different paths, and players are free to explore the haunted countryside at their leisure, picking up a variety of clues that point back to a common narrative puzzle.

The game opens with Paul exploring a foggy forest. Players can choose to head straight through the forest to a well-lit bridge that leads towards Red Creek's main town, but if they explore the forest they might uncover a few optional narrative surprises. Going off the beaten path, Paul approaches a tree and springs a trap that sends several spiked branches whizzing past his head. Paul investigates the trap and sees a small vision of another forest. After exploring the forest further and activating a

few more traps, the vision becomes clearer. Paul sees the same forest that he's standing in. However, in his vision, the forest floor is littered with skeletons and ash. The game is sprinkled with optional investigations such as this, which help flesh out the history of Red Creek Valley.

Moving back to Red Creek Valley's bridge, Paul encounters a railcar. Several words pop onscreen, highlighting areas of interest. As Paul inspects a red spot on the train, the words "Accident? Murder? Animal? Human?" appear briefly onscreen before the red spot is revealed as blood. These words represent the investigator's thoughts as he explores and solves the environment's riddles. Another investigation reveals scratches on the side of the railcar that point Paul to a spot somewhere in the distance as he receives a psychic vision showing him a crank located by a nearby river.

On the way down to the creek bed to retrieve the crank, Paul runs across a pair of disembodied legs and a trail of blood running down the hill. Following the blood, Paul discovers the rest of the body. Paul can commune with the dead, but this spirit isn't ready to show him anything until he resets the murder scene, so Paul first has to retrieve the crank and use it to move the railcar back to its original spot in front of the bloody legs.

After piecing together the clues, Paul returns to the body and several white sprites fly into the air, showing him a few snapshots of the murder scene. Players must correctly order these scenes before truly solving the crime. Once this is done, Paul witnesses a past sequence in which the dead man had tied Ethan Carter to the tracks and was prepared to run him over. But before he could step on the gas, an old man jumped out of the woods, hit the dead man on the head with a rock, freed Ethan, and then ran over the dead man's legs with the railcar.

Paul has solved the mystery of how this man died, but the crime has only added to the larger mystery of Ethan Carter's disappearance. During the brief flashback, both the dead man and Ethan refer to the old man as grandpa, implying that the man trying to kill Ethan could have been his older brother. Whatever terrible circumstances Ethan is involved in, the reality is more monstrous than Paul previously imagined. Thankfully, we won't have to wait long to help Paul solve the mysteries of Red Creek Valley; *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* releases this September for PC, and *The Astronauts* is looking into a possible console release.

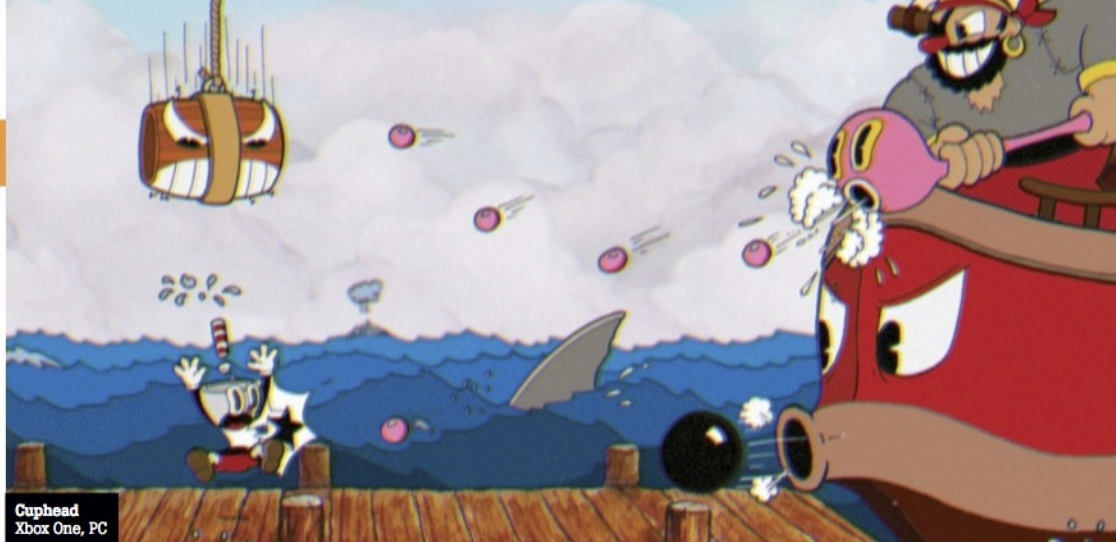
Looking for more independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, previews, and reviews. For more in this issue, check out our mobile game round-up on p. 28, and read our exploration of the meaning of indie on p. 30. We have previews of *Soma* (p. 79), *Path of Exile: Forsaken Masters* (p. 86), and *Strife* (p. 87), and reviews of *Wayward Manor* (p. 93) and *Divinity: Original Sin* (p. 94).



One of the awesome surprises at this year's E3 was a game that made a brief appearance on Microsoft's stage before being whisked away for more explosive fare. However, even a short glimpse of **Cuphead** was enough to get a lot of people excited. Developed by Studio MDHR, founded by two brothers, Cuphead is a fascinating amalgam of 1930s animation and '90s era run-and-gun action games – particularly the boss-fight sections of those games. Whether playing alone as Cuphead or adding in co-op partner Mugman, the action focuses on boss fights. Each boss is designed with multiple potential patterns, with a goal of moving away from strict memorization and more toward genuine reaction-based gaming. Cuphead moves through a Super Mario World-style overworld map, but Studio MDHR is exploring ways to make the map more of a playable space. Animation-wise, the gorgeous bouncy visuals seem directly inspired by early Disney films and other early classics like Pop-eye and Betty Boop. Cuphead is also aiming to feature a jazz soundtrack to match its visual throwback style. Studio MDHR is promising a 2015 release on Xbox One and Steam.

Jamestown Plus is an evolution of the excellent but underappreciated PC original from 2011. This alternate history featuring Martian colonial steampunk spaceships is coming to PS4 along with a host of new features. Coincidentally, Final Form Games is also a team formed by two brothers, and the team is eager to bring its vertical-scrolling shooter to a new audience. The core game sees up to four local players flying cooperatively through British-occupied Mars, with the Spanish and indigenous aliens also fighting over the territory. The multiple selectable ships have an impressive variety of armaments to use while flying through the insane bullet hell, including everything from spread beams to homing lasers. The PS4 version adds levels set on the Martian moons Phobos and Deimos, along with new story content and new ships. Jamestown Plus should hit PS4 in September or October if development continues as planned.

One can't help but be suspicious of a name like **Assault Android Cactus**, but the team at Witch Beam is quickly gathering believers



Cuphead
Xbox One, PC

to its twin-stick arena shooter. You play as the titular Cactus or one of seven other androids fighting their way through a spaceship filled with rampaging robots. Each of the playable characters has its own primary and secondary weapons, offering lots of opportunities for exploration and optimizing your course runs. Each arena level is filled with attacking enemies and their patterned bullet swarms, and constant movement and power-up pickups are essential to progress. Rather than use traditional lives, your android's battery drains when you're hit; the only way to keep your battery alive is constant aggressive play and

making it to the hard-to-reach battery recharges. This lends a frantic tone to the gameplay that's especially potent in the challenging boss fights. After the first few levels, Assault Android Cactus also distinguishes itself through its approach to level design. Stages begin to include shifting walls and barriers, so you can never rely on one safe zone for very long. Witch Beam's shooter may be just the ticket for players looking for high speed, quick thinking action when it releases on PC, Linux, and OSX in the next few months. The game is coming to PS4, Wii U, and Vita before the end of the year as well. ♦



Jamestown Plus
PS4



Assault Android Cactus
PS4, Wii U, Vita, PC, Linux, Mac

interview



photo: Jason Henry

Building PS4's Portfolio

After starting his career in games as a tester at Electronic Arts, Adam Boyes has risen through the ranks to become PlayStation's vice president of publisher and developer relations. In this role he helps Sony's outreach to game companies from Activision down to the smallest indie developer.

interview by Matt Helgeson

In an industry where triple-A games like Call of Duty or Grand Theft Auto can generate nearly \$1 billion in a day, are the indie exclusives a big source of revenue or more passion projects?

I think it's a mixture, to be honest. Everything is run as a business; we are not a charity. We need to make sure that the teams are happy with the performance of the games, so we work very closely to promote them on the storefront. As far as prestige, it's more about bringing things to people that they wouldn't have normally seen or experienced. I always use the analogy of a buffet of food. If you've never had sushi or a certain type of food, having it on the table gives you a greater variety of things to experience. We're just trying to give you as broad a range of compelling content as possible with people that we respect – people like Jonathan Blow, Team17, and Supergiant.

Do you ever help fund indie games that you don't expect to be lucrative if you think they will be very critically well received and add prestige to the platform?

A lot of that comes from your gut. You could look at Minecraft. I use the example of Dear Esther. I remember when I was at Capcom and Dear Esther came out on PC and I played it. You walked around an island with no weapon and you just explore. You can't even jump. I realized at that point that I don't know what the industry wants anymore, because it sold 100,000 units on the first day. So it's a mixture of following your gut and thinking, "This is an incredible experience," plus, "What has this team done before?" Sometimes, the most amazing games can come from people who haven't made a game before, other times what they've done in the past is really important. Then, there are things that we get really passionate about. Obviously, No Man's Sky, since the reveal at VGX, is something that we've been super passionate about. I remember the first time that Jonathan Blow explained to me what The Witness would be – the way his brain works is something I've never seen. Then there are games like Grim Fandango, where I had a personal relationship with that game.

Obviously, we wouldn't do a deal where we thought we'd lose money, but you never know what the next Minecraft or Angry Birds is going to be. You just hope that your gut is in tune with what a lot of the rest of the world wants, and the rest is up to the Internet.

Given the scale and cost of next-gen development, is it even fiscally possible for you to pursue triple-A third-party exclusives now?

I don't think anything is impossible. I'd be lying if I said we weren't looking at everything. That's a broad answer, but the reality is that if opportunities present themselves or if we have ideas, we'll go after them. We'll say, "We're really passionate about this project," or maybe it's a PC-only project that we can bring to console.

What we're trying to do now is create more benefits for the gamer. If you look at what we're doing with Far Cry and being able to invite your friend and play for free, stuff like that where more people can try games out. We're trying a lot of new things. Getting your GTA progress to come cross-platform is a big deal. Getting your Elder Scrolls Online PC account over to PlayStation.

Destiny is not a PlayStation exclusive, but you've been aggressive with the beta and the special edition PlayStation 4 bundle. Are you trying to create the impression that the PS4 is the premier platform for Destiny?

In general, we want to look at PlayStation as the best place to play. That's why we spent a lot of money going for 8GB of GDDR-5 RAM and high processing power – to ensure that it is perceived as the best place to play. Destiny is a critical part of that; we want people to see that custom white PS4 and say, "Where did you get that?" or see the custom gear on PS4 and say, "Where did you find that?" That's a part of ensuring that people feel special when they play on PlayStation.

Is the co-op game-sharing functionality on Far Cry 4 a test balloon for a feature that you'd like to implement in other third-party games or Sony-published games?

I think everything we do is trying it out and seeing how consumers feel about it. When we try new things, we do it and measure the results and see what can happen. We started doing that with indies on the PlayStation 3. Free-to-play is a big focus for us now. It's been uncharted territory on consoles and we're seeing how it works with Warframe and Blacklight.

A lot of the indie games you have backed are also on PC and Steam as well. Is that because you are fine with it just being a console exclusive or because the developers can't forgo the money they would make on Steam?

It's a couple things. The way that I personally game on my PC is different than the way I game on my console. I think that's true of most gamers and people who own PlayStations. There's a huge overlap. I don't have a PC in my living room or my bedroom; my PC is in my office. When I hunker down to play PC games like Rust or DayZ, it is in my office. I think Steam is doing a great job of Big Picture and trying to focus on that, but I don't think they are ever going to totally focus on that big TV experience. That's one of the benefits we have. I really have a lot of respect for the PC gaming

community. They are doing a lot of great things, and we don't want to get in the way of that.

Our whole thing with developers is that we want them to be very successful. I know it sounds crazy, but I want every developer that works with us to be able to pay off their house and put their kids through college and buy a nice car. That means they have achieved their life goal. They were able to split off, do their own thing, and succeed at that. By allowing them to have as many options as possible, that helps it. Obviously, we are competitive in the console space, but on mobile and PC we are very supportive of our partners in building content for those platforms.

Paid betas and early access are very big on Steam right now. Are you looking at paid betas and early access for PSN?

I think the whole idea of people getting to be a part of something before it's complete is very interesting. I also think that it's a very scary place for people who don't want those things. I like to use my brother as an example. He owns a PS4 but only buys two or three games a year. The last thing I would want for someone who is a casual gamer is to fire up a game that is broken, not knowing that they were in that type of experience and having a negative opinion.

However, going back to the buffet analogy, if there was an area of the buffet where it was blowfish and rattlesnake you might not want, but there were big caveats and clickthroughs, would you as a gamer not want to be able to have access to that? That's the question. If you have options, but they are cordoned off in a different area, it's not going to be that worrisome. There are people who want that stuff. For me, with my testing background, I love playing games that are unfinished and providing feedback.

We've seen a lot of cross-gen games. Before the systems came out, was there some skittishness among publishers about laying down bets on next-gen only games?

I don't think there was reticence at all. There are fewer publishers than there has been before. The ones that are still here are bigger, but they have fewer teams because they make bigger, deeper games. The challenging part of my job is not talking about all the games that are in development. But there are a ton of very amazing games coming to our platform. There wasn't any hesitation, but you can't ignore the 80 million PS3s that we've launched globally. That's an impressive number, and if you're running a business you have to be mindful of it. I've had indies who said, "We want to lead on PS3 then come to PS4," because there are just more PS3s in the world.

But that was more a business decision. Our job was to figure out how to migrate people. We're trying to be mindful of making that movement easy. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

**1996
TESTING THE WATERS**
Boyes gets his start in the industry as a game tester at Electronic Arts. He focuses mainly on sports games, including FIFA, NBA Live, and Triple Play Baseball

**2000
DOT COM BOOM**
Eager to learn more about business, Boyes leaves games for jobs in a string of dot-com startups in America and Ireland

**2002
BACK HOME**
Realizing he missed video games, Boyes joins the new studio Next Level Games, formed by ex-Black Box employees, working on NHL Hitz Pro

**2003
WINDY CITY**
After shipping NHL Hitz Pro, Boyes is offered the chance to go to Chicago and work on the Hitz franchise as a Midway producer

**2003
CURVE BALL**
As he arrives, NHL Hitz is abruptly cancelled, and Boyes goes to work on the MLB Slugfest franchise instead

**2007
GO WEST**
After producing NFL Blitz: The League, an ex-colleague offers Boyes the chance to move to California and oversee Capcom's Western development

**2010
PRODUCING RESULTS**
Boyes forms his own company in partnership with the Weinstein Company, TWC Games. They act as a production and business services agency for indie developers

**2012
THE BIG LEAGUES**
Boyes applies for and wins the job of VP of publisher and developer relations for Sony and PlayStation. He leads the company's efforts to court high-profile indie developers to the platform



MAD CATZ PRO RACING FORCE FEEDBACK WHEEL

The Xbox One doesn't offer many racing wheel options, but Mad Catz's Pro Racing Force Feedback wheel is a high-priced setup that gives you a degree of customization. The wheel comes with hardware for lap or desk setup, along with the ability to mount it to the Playseat Evolution and Revolution racing seats.

The pedal base's customization should help you find a comfortable sitting position. The angle, height, and spacing of the brake and gas pedals can be adjusted. You can even change the spring tension for the pedals to make them stiff or forgiving. The base has an optional plastic cowling, which ostensibly keeps your feet in, but isn't necessary.

The steering wheel feels nice, thanks to the suede leather wrap covering the wheel, and the sensitivity is spot on. The wheel tilts up to 15 degrees for added comfort and is adjustable to 200- and 900-degree rotation settings. While playing Forza Motorsport 5, the force feedback worked well and gave a little feedback when jamming on the brakes (the pedals themselves are not force feedback).

However, this feedback was inconsistent in registering contact with other cars.

Given the price, it's too bad the plastic lap rests don't anchor to your legs, making the desk setup the best option for those without cockpits. Even this requires re-tightening the desk clamps, which don't directly attach to the steering wheel's housing. The wheel is also not compatible with PCs, unlike the Thrustmaster Ferrari wheel, which has the same retail price. The Pro Racing wheel has some good

AVERAGE 

\$399 | madcatz.com

features, but falls short of being a definitive racing wheel for the price.

by Matthew Kato, Ben Reeves, and Michael Futter

1 Scuf One Controller

Scuf One is a highly modified controller for Xbox One designed for pro gaming. Each user-customized gamepad features two or four paddles on the underside (so you don't have to move your thumbs to push face buttons), which can be mapped to many of the controller features using a magnetic "key." The Scuf One also features an optional, removable control disc that fits over the directional pad for better handling in fighting games and sports titles. This provides noticeable improvement over a standard D-pad for games like *Killer Instinct*.

The sticks come in three different lengths, with concave and convex options available. The Scuf-branded concave tops feel comfortable, and the sticks offer a bit more tension than Microsoft's Xbox One controller, increasing precision. The controller is comfortable to hold thanks to the grip added to the reverse side, and the underside paddles are easy to use and offer a satisfying click.

Shooter fans should find that the removable, adjustable triggers help reduce actuation distance and provide faster firing and scoping. Rumble packs can be removed on request, making the controller lighter (and therefore easier on the arms and hands for extended play), and each controller can be decked out in a wide range of color schemes and decal designs. The biggest knockback for this controller is its price, but if your K/D ratio is important to you, it is worth investigating. Scuf also offers a PlayStation 4 controller.

VERY GOOD

Starting at \$109 | scufgaming.com



2 Origin Genesis/Millennium PC Towers

Customization has always been a big selling point for PC owners, and Origin's newest line of towers are some of the most versatile PC exoskeletons on the market. Both cases feature a simple industrial design, but what really makes these cases special is what's happening under the hood. A variable mounting system allows users to orient the motherboard and internal PC guts either vertically or horizontally in up to four different configurations. Budget gamers can start out with the Millennium mid-range tower and then upgrade to the full-tower Genesis at a later date thanks to an expansion base, which can accommodate additional radiators for liquid cooling or extra hard drive real estate.

Starting at \$1,699 | originpc.com



BATMAN: ASSAULT ON ARKHAM

This one-off animated feature returns to Rocksteady's vision of the Arkham universe. After the Suicide Squad breaks into Arkham Asylum to acquire top-secret information from the Riddler, the Joker breaks loose and threatens to blow up Gotham City.

\$24.98
wbshop.com

COMMUNITY: SEASON 5

NBC canceled Dan Harmon's critically acclaimed sitcom, but Yahoo! Screen has ordered 13 more episodes of the show. Before the new season starts, catch up on the antics of the Greendale Community College gang as they ape police procedurals, post-apocalyptic sci-fi, and beloved '80s cartoons.

\$35.99
nbc.com/community

SHOVEL KNIGHT ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK

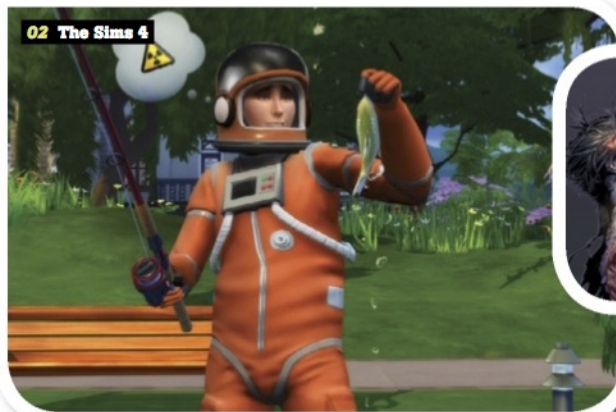
After designing the electric pop soundtrack for *Double Dragon Neon*, composer and sound designer Jake Kaufman got to work on the recent indie darling *Shovel Knight*. This 48-track album is painstakingly authentic to NES standards, but happens to be just as catchy as many of the classic franchises *Shovel Knight* mimics.

Name Your Price
biglionmusic.com

THE STAR WARS BY J.W. RINZLER, MIKE MAYHEW, RAIN BEREDO & NICK RUNGE

The winner of the 2013 Hugo award for Best Graphic Story continues the tale of two soldiers from opposite sides of an intergalactic war who fall in love and go AWOL to raise their child. Unfortunately, they discover that war is hard to run from.

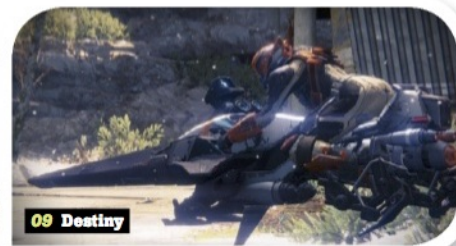
\$19.99
darkhorse.com/zones/starwars



02 The Sims 4



03



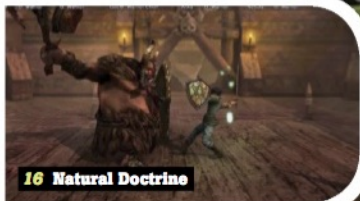
09 Destiny



10



12



16 Natural Doctrine



23.2 FIFA 15



26 Hyrule Warriors



30 Forza Horizon 2

September

2014

02 New Releases

- › Danganronpa 2: Goodbye Despair (Vita)
- › The Sims 4 (PC)
- › Tropico 5 (360)
- › Warriors Orochi 3 Ultimate (PS4, Xbox One)

03 The Death of Wolverine

Marvel is billing Wolverine's death as "the single most important X-Men event of the decade." This four-week event kicks off today. How can you kill someone who is indestructible? You strip him of his healing factor.

09 New Releases

- › Destiny (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)
- › MX vs ATV Supercross (PS3, 360)
- › NHL 15 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)

10 A New G.I. Joe

In this new series by Karen Traviss (writer of numerous Halo, Gears of

War, and Star Wars novels), Cobra is an international peacekeeping force, and the world doesn't understand the role G.I. Joe plays in it. Scarlett is one of the few G.I. Joe recruits left. Can she keep G.I. Joe running?

12 MagFest 8.5

A celebration of video games and music, MagFest returns to Alexandria, VA for a three-day encore performance. In addition to concerts galore, this event features an arcade room, an entire hall dedicated to multiplayer gaming, and a vendor sector.

16 New Releases

- › Ghostbusters 1 & 2: 4K-Mastered (Blu-ray)
- › Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm Revolution (PS3, 360)
- › Natural Doctrine (PS4, PS3, Vita)
- › Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call (3DS)

18.1 New Releases

- › Roundabout (PC)

18.2 Toyko Game Show 2014

Will Final Fantasy XV, Kingdom Hearts III, and The Last Guardian make appearances at this year's Tokyo Game Show? Out of all of the game shows, this is the place where we expect them to re-emerge. This four-day show kicks off today, but is only open to the public on September 21 and 22.

19.1 Oculus Connect

For two days, game developers descend upon Hollywood, CA to discuss the future of VR at the new Oculus Connect convention. Attendees will be the first to hear about new Oculus technology.

19.2 Finally, A Dystopia

Today's big theatrical release, *The Maze Runner*, is a film adaptation of the young-adult novel. We haven't read the James Dashner books that inspired this project, but we have seen *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* movies, so we already know the whole plot: In a dystopian future, a young boy or girl is not like the other kids. Their world is strange and harsh — everyone is tested, but not everyone survives. Something something destiny, and a much larger conflict looms in the shadows. The end...or is it?

20 New Releases

- › Falling Skies (PS3, 360)

23.1 D.I.C.E. Europe 2014

After a successful event in Las Vegas, D.I.C.E. returns to Europe for two days of talks from leading people in game development.

This year's speakers include Vince Zampella (Respawn Entertainment), Phil Harrison (Microsoft), Ted Price (Insomniac Games), and Jonathan Morin (Ubisoft Montreal).

23.2 New Releases

- › Ar Nosurge: Ode to an Unborn Star (PS3)
- › Fairy Fencer F (PS3)
- › FIFA 15 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)

26 New Releases

- › Hyrule Warriors (Wii U)

30 New Releases

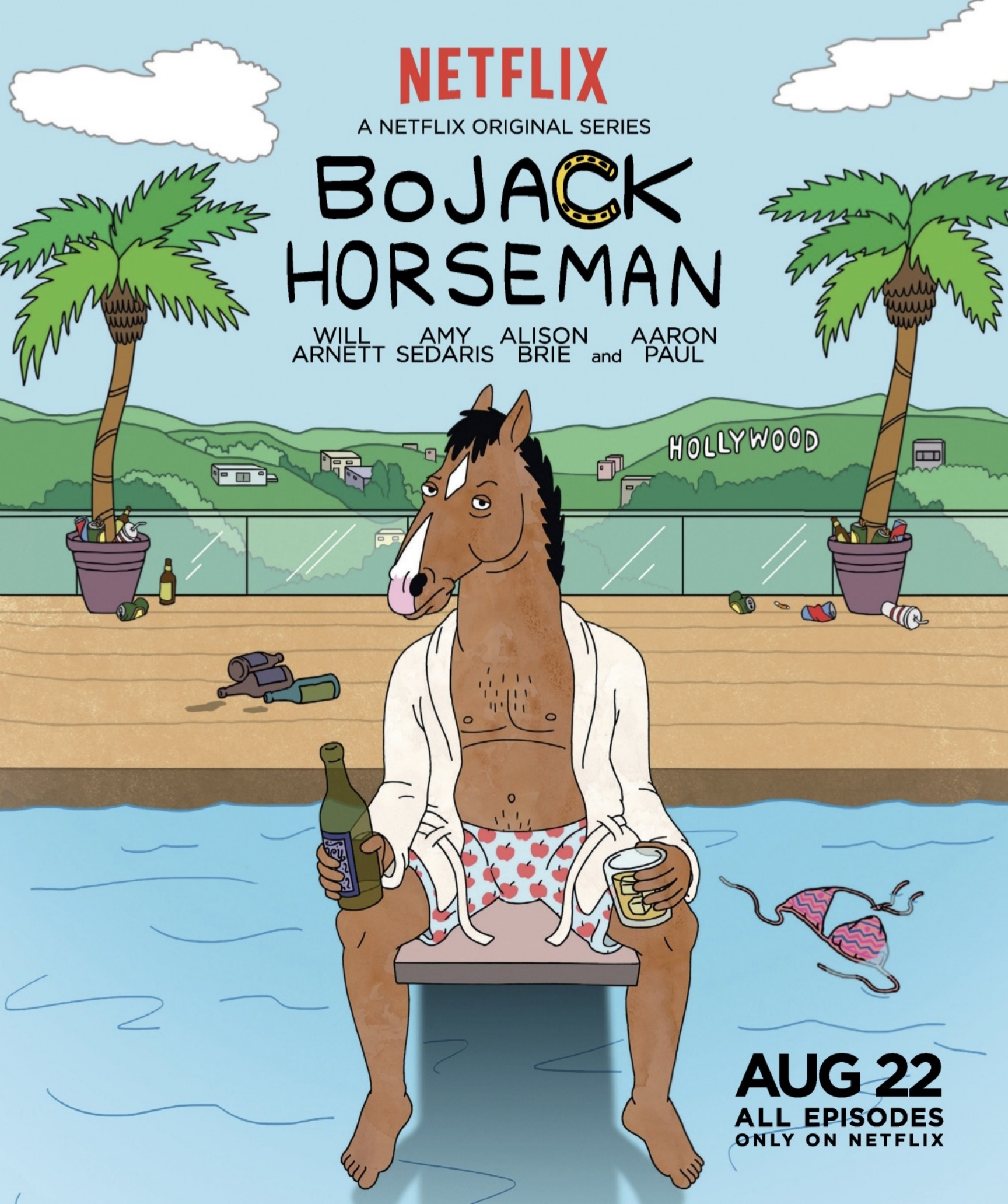
- › Arcana Heart 3: Love Max (PS3)
- › Forza Horizon 2 (Xbox One, 360)
- › Pac-Man and the Ghostly Adventures 2 (Wii U, PS3, 360, 3DS)
- › Persona 4 Arena Ultimix (PS3, 360)
- › Senran Kagura Shinovi Versus (Vita)

NETFLIX

A NETFLIX ORIGINAL SERIES

BOJACK HORSEMAN

WILL ARNETT AMY SEDARIS ALISON BRIE and AARON PAUL



AUG 22
ALL EPISODES
ONLY ON NETFLIX

The FUTURE of ASSASSIN'S CREED

It's hard to believe Assassin's Creed debuted close to seven years ago. The series brought us a new, unique concept of placing players in historical fiction and it showed off the power of the PS3 and Xbox 360 early in their life cycles. Today, the franchise is Ubisoft's juggernaut, with annual releases and large teams working together to ensure the games maintain quality and make sense within the sprawling storyline. As Ubisoft prepares for its first Assassin's Creed game exclusive to new-gen consoles, the stage is set to redefine the franchise's direction and once again prove what new console power can achieve with Assassin's Creed Unity. Ubisoft isn't done with the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, though; it's giving them a completely new entry called Assassin's Creed Rogue, which covers the Seven Years' War. This game bridges Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag and Assassin's Creed III, connecting to Unity.



UNITY

ROGUE



ASSASSIN'S CREED

UNITY



REINVENTING *the* FORMULA

UBISOFT AIMS HIGH WITH
ITS FIRST EXCLUSIVE NEW-GEN VENTURE

» *platform*
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

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

» *publisher*
Ubisoft

» *developer*
Ubisoft Montreal (lead)/Toronto
Quebec/Annecy/Montpellier/Bucharest
Kiev/Shanghai/Chengdu/Singapore

» *release*
October 28

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

N

None of the Assassin's Creed games have ever retained their development code name, but never before did one concept drive so much of a game's DNA. From its premise of uniting people for the French Revolution to seamlessly incorporating co-op into the experience, Ubisoft is creating its biggest, most cohesive game to date with Unity. To properly tackle a project of this magnitude, Ubisoft gave its first exclusively new-gen title a longer development cycle than the majority of its previous games. For four years, the team has been working on redefining the franchise for the new generation.





ENVISIONING NEW-GEN

After shipping *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* in 2010, a small group of developers split off and started envisioning the future of the franchise. The team knew it could do a lot with a few years in front of them, while annual releases kept fans engaged. "We wanted to make it big, have a lot of scope," says senior producer Vincent Pontbriand. "We've created precedence. Now people expect it. When we come up with an *Assassin's Creed* game it needs to be big."

The small team encountered its fair share of challenges, like guessing the specs of the new consoles using a high-end PC and also having to surpass two other titles that were planned, but weren't even made yet. While making *Assassin's Creed III*, Ubisoft saw potential in the naval battles and decided to make an extra game, *Black Flag*.

Assassin's Creed Unity has had plenty of time to cook, and some of its original ideas wound up in other titles, but one thing remained the same: Ubisoft knew that it couldn't just depend on superior graphics for a new-gen title. It needed to embrace change and reinvent the series.

To go forward, sometimes you must look back, so Ubisoft re-examined the franchise's beginnings to make sure it still retained what fans adore. "We said, 'Let's go back to the roots,'" Pontbriand says. "Let's go back to the fantasy of being an assassin, a blade in the crowd. [Take] the first things that made people attracted to the brand and try to go deeper, have more flexibility. Let's make the game more systemic instead of ingredient based."

Unity would preserve the large, historically driven open world, but some things needed to be redefined, such as the series' three pillars: navigation, stealth, and combat. The team also knew it wanted to make multiplayer, specifically co-op, integral to the experience, which also happened to be one of fans' most requested features. "It was just a happy coincidence that we were in line with that," Pontbriand says.

With annual releases, Ubisoft typically can't afford to reinvent entire systems, but with the extra time and resources, *Unity* was given that opportunity. "To be honest, it's really not a trivial thing," says creative director Alex Amancio. "We really went out on a limb to do this, and up until very recently, it was a big risk. We're asking the team to forget how far they can push the things they invented in 2007, become newbies again, and risk going into the unknown. Ultimately, what we ended up with is a game that is much more about what the player wants to do and about having a world that allows for that player expression."

Welcome to *Assassin's Creed Unity*, a game that polishes its former elements, pushes in bold new directions, and recaptures the essence of the franchise. The first exclusive entry on new-gen is set to make a statement about the franchise and its future.

A LOVE STORY SET AGAINST A BLOODY BACKDROP

For years, Ubisoft says fans have yearned for a game to be set in Paris during the French Revolution. After *Assassin's Creed III* took on the American Revolution, it seemed like the perfect lead in. "Every yearly feedback that we get, it comes out on the speculations," Pontbriand says. "It's in the top few." Ubisoft is excited to bring such a rich setting finally to fans. Paris' breathtaking beauty and architecture should provide a worthy playground that just may rival that of the series' previous outings in Renaissance Italy.

The French Revolution was a turbulent time, dating from 1789 to 1799. France was in financial ruin after two wars and was experiencing a famine. Massacres and paranoia were a part of everyday life in France as people fought for democratic ideals and fair treatment in an attempt to break away from the monarchy. The guillotine was one of its chief symbols, a gathering place in the center of the city where people watched its blade descend for public beheadings. It also was the most notorious instrument of the Reign of Terror, where people were murdered for merely looking suspicious. "It's the feeling of chaos, the feeling of something ongoing in the city of Paris," says Ubisoft's in-house historian Maxime Durand. "The scope of the events when you see them, you're like, 'Wow, this is something that changed history forever.'" Iconic events along with historical figures (see sidebar on page 55 for confirmed cameos) are present as always; expect to see the Storming of the Bastille, King Louis XVI's

infamous execution, and how Maximilien de Robespierre tormented people with the guillotine during the Reign of Terror.

History is ingrained in the game, but Ubisoft is not depending on it to tell *Unity's* story. "We didn't want to make the story about the French Revolution," Pontbriand says, "It was too constraining. So instead we decided to use it as a backdrop, where we have the coolest, historical memorable moments as the background, but you're not influencing it in any way. It was a revolution driven by the people, not this single guy who triggered it all."

Instead, Ubisoft is trying to tell a deeper story than ever before with its lead character, Arno Dorian. Arno is on a quest for redemption and he joins the Assassins as a means to obtaining it, but he's not the only one with a stake here. Enter Elise De LaSerre. After Arno's Assassin father is murdered, Elise's father, who happens to be a Templar, takes Arno in. "He feels [indebted] to Arno's father, not because he had anything to do with it, but just because of respect for his enemy, so he takes Arno under his wing," Amancio explains. "But he doesn't want to corrupt the memory of Arno's father by making him become a part of the Templars, so he hides the whole Templar thing. Arno has no idea."

Arno and Elise grow up together and



The beautiful Palace of Versailles. Did you spot Robespierre?

fall in love, without Arno ever knowing that she's part of the Templars. Arno has a sharp wit and is a no-nonsense type, while Elise is more of a free spirit. "She's that girl when you're growing up who always gets you into trouble," Amancio says. The two lose touch for a period, but are brought back together when Elise's father is murdered. "Arno

feels responsible for that death, so he tries to figure out why he died and who killed him," Amancio says. "Elise has the exact same objective, but she has no redemption desire because she doesn't feel guilty at all. It has nothing to do with her, so all she wants is to do the same thing, but her motivation is revenge: 'They killed my father, they're corrupting

Finding Your Own Stories In Paris

Not everything you can do in Paris is shown on your map once you sync a waypoint. A great deal of *Unity* is about exploration and finding your own stories. Ubisoft is adding many quests that revolve around history and some of its prominent figures. You can unlock these stories by reading newspapers and finding letters in houses. Once you uncover these tidbits, a question mark appears on the map. You can go there to find out more, unlocking a bit of the history and culture of the land. Ubisoft used the example of the Marianne, the national emblem of the French Republic. A cool story goes along with this quest, but we'll save that for you to find.

Arno also stumbles upon many murders. Eugene Francois Vidocq, who's basically the father of criminology, appears as a kid in the game. When you first meet him, he's in jail, telling you to stick with him and not buy into the corruption. You can actually accuse people of murders and put them in jail; hopefully, putting away the right culprit. After all, you'll see them behind bars in the game — do you really want to wonder if they really did it? "It's a game about exploring multilayered Paris and finding your own stories and carving your own path through it," says creative director Alex Amancio.





my order. I need to find who is behind this or why.”

One of the big dilemmas for Arno is being caught between duty and love. He must follow the order of the Assassins, but he also loves a girl whose methods for getting answers are significantly different. “[It’s] the Cornelian dilemma, a very specific form of Catch-22, where

you’re forced to choose between love and duty,” Amancio says. “It’s an impossible choice.”

This dilemma is a chance for Ubisoft to show two different sides of the Templars and Assassins; even Arno spends time questioning where he should stand. “We always try to portray, even more with this game, the Assassins and Templars not as good guys and villains, but as two opposite views on the same issue,” Amancio says. “Either freedom and make your mistakes and this is how you learn, or wait a minute, you people are going to blow each other up? Let’s structure this in a more

intelligent way so we can progress. No way of thinking is bad, it’s just different ways of thinking.”

Ubisoft knows love stories are hard to execute, and approached Arno and Elise’s relationship carefully by making Elise such a vital part of the plot. You couldn’t cut her from the game and have the same story. “This is something we’ve wanted to do for a very long time,” Amancio says. “We felt that with this generation it was a good opportunity to crank it up a notch and have a story that’s a bit more serious and more mature. Love stories are always a hard thing in video games because ultimately they can very easily become a tangent. By making Elise a Templar and making that part of the core, it’s part of the actual struggle of the character. It prevents it from becoming a B-plot or a tangent.”

The Templars find themselves at an interesting crossroads during the French Revolution. Make no mistake; Elise’s father’s death was no accident. He is the victim of a coup d’état – a shift in power and ideologies in the Templars. The French Revolution is the perfect metaphor for this turn in power. “This is when the world became run by businessmen, and not by politics and not by an aristocracy,” Amancio explains. “This coincides with a shift within the Templars. Before, it was like dogma

will dictate and rule. If we tell people what to do with strong dogmatic views, they will follow and if they don’t, we will beat the s--- out of them, and they will follow.”

One man reexamines those views and thinks if you give the people what they want, they’ll enslave themselves. You control them by keeping them busy. “This new leader wants to take the order in that direction, and he believes in his mind he’s right, and that’s the true path the Templars wanted to take,” Amancio says. “It’s all linked in history with the last official grandmaster of the Templars, Jacques de Molay, who died in Paris in the middle ages. It’s a complex story around that. This shift in power is really the revolution. Somebody is pulling the strings behind the revolution so the Templars can consolidate this new order.”

Arno tries to track down the man responsible for the death of Elise’s father for most of the game, but he has to go through many targets, a throwback to the first Assassin’s Creed. “In [Assassin’s Creed], you remember all your targets – they’re very iconic because we take the time to introduce you to these targets,” Amancio says. “The game is called Assassin’s Creed, so it’s about assassinations; here’s the target, here’s the background, get to know the target, and then assassinate them. This is something that we steered away from – not intentionally – but I really wanted us to go back to having these iconic targets. Then in the end, when you finally have the chance to assassinate these targets, it’s up to you to find a way to do it in a really cool way.”

Arno, caught between love and duty, gives the story plenty of potential, and could give Ubi’s other star assassin, Ezio Auditore da Firenze, a run for his money. Right now people in Ubisoft have been playing through the game and the feedback on Arno has been extremely positive. “The one thing I keep hearing is that Arno is a very likeable character; he’s very attachable,” Amancio says.

Arno only has a single blade, but he gets creatively violent with it



Customization 101

Customization boosts your skills in both co-op and in single-player. You earn skill points by completing missions and taking on activities in the world, and can use them to upgrade navigation, stealth, or combat. Ubisoft says there’s no right or wrong way to build a character; you can go as balanced or extreme as you like. If you like to fight, you could build a tank so you stand a better chance against multiple enemies. If you prefer sticking to the shadows, you can invest in the stealth tier to get your lockpicking skill up. For easier navigation, you might invest in a roll or soft-landing ability.

Another way to customize your assassin and earn perks is with equipment and weapons. We got a glimpse into the customization and it’s more than merely attire. You can customize your forearms, legs, boots, chest, hood, and mask. Different gear is suited to particular play styles. For instance, one hood might make you blend faster in crowds, and your belt might impact the amount of items you can carry. Ubisoft estimates it has over 200 pieces to collect.

Weapons also have more variety this time around. You have a few guns at your disposal, but they alert guards easily and you can only have so much ammo on hand at once. Ubisoft included some long weapons, such as spears, pikes, and staves, so you can attack at a distance with more power.



Sometimes you need a "time out" to assess what you're up against

BLENDING CO-OP AND SINGLE-PLAYER

When you're not pursuing the main storyline quests, the world is open for exploration with up to three friends. Co-op missions remain separate from Arno's narrative and can be completed solo as well. The co-op content has different difficulty levels highlighted by stars, and all have multiple degrees of success to garner replayability. Some of the co-op quests are better suited for smaller teams. You can still play with a larger group; it just means the mission will be easier.

To join up with a friend, you need to initiate a Brotherhood mission on the map by going to the icon, or you can invite friends through the menu. It will then ask if you want to play the mission together. Then a five-second countdown begins before you start. You can also find

"ghosts" of friends who are playing at the same time. If your friend is at a joinable part of the game, you can hop right in, starting from their latest checkpoint.

The missions make sense in the context of co-op: You're performing them as part of the Brotherhood. "All of our games are always about a character. That's normal, but we seldom talk about his responsibility to the Brotherhood," Amancio says. "Why not make that part of the co-op, brotherhood missions? This is the stuff that typical Assassins will do for the Brotherhood. It has nothing to do with [Arno's] own personal quest, but he's an Assassin, and this is what he has to do for the Assassins."

The cooperative missions center on the Assassins trying to stop the Templars' manipulation of the French Revolution. "These are as close as we will get in the game to actually

doing stuff for the French Revolution," Amancio says. "All this stuff is not about Arno's story. It's about the Brotherhood trying to figure out what the Templars are up to."

The road to implementing co-op into the open world was long and hard for Ubisoft. After trying several avenues, including competitive multiplayer, the developers came back to the drawing board because they found themselves making two separate games, which is exactly what they didn't want to do. They circled back and looked at what drives people to Assassin's Creed: the experience of being an assassin in a historical setting. Why make the mul-

tiplayer separate? As data suggested, when multiplayer was featured in a mode outside of the campaign, only a hardcore portion of the fanbase touched it. "People bought the game for the single-player, and then however good the multiplayer may have been, it was not the same [as the single-player] experience," Amancio says. "I think people didn't give that mode a chance."

Amancio worked hard to figure out a way to make the multiplayer cohesive to the experience. His team wanted customization in single-player that carried over into multiplayer. This led to them taking a cue from another Ubisoft franchise, Watch Dogs. In Watch Dogs,



From Elise's Side

Arno is the star of Unity, but his love interest, Elise, is the star of her own book. Ubisoft is planning a new novel that lets you see her perspective on the events from Unity. The story details her involvement with the Templars, something that couldn't be shown in Unity with Arno's allegiance to the Assassins. "It always bothered me that we could never show that part — all that stuff that was happening," says creative director Alex Amancio. "This is where the chess game is being played by all the Templars and everything, and to see the aftermath. We wanted to expose that part."





no matter what, you always play as Aiden Pierce in competitive scenarios. What if they did something similar with Arno, but with co-op? That way in every player's game they are Arno, complete with their customized skills and appearance, but they'd look like another member of the Brotherhood in another player's game.

This solved a big barrier. "It's like Batman – no two people can be Batman, and no one wants to be Robin," Pontbriand says. "That's why everyone is playing as Arno, because everyone wants to be the master assassin. But then you can customize so it still works, so when you see your friends they still look cool."

HANDS-ON WITH CO-OP: SEEING THE REFINEMENTS IN ACTION

During our visit to Montreal, my colleague Jeff Cork and I played a Brotherhood mission together. Our mission, called "Heads Will Roll," features Robespierre and the Law of Suspects, a decree passed during the Reign of Terror as a way to arrest anyone who looked suspicious. A wave of paranoia is sweeping Paris; one wrong response and you could be considered a counter-revolutionary. A spy named Paton found some valuable Templar secrets, which he shared with Robespierre. Robespierre has him arrested as a traitor, saying he's too gifted as a spy. Our job? Free Paton and find out the Templar secrets. The mission is split into three acts: get the warden's key, find Paton's secret notebook, then save Paton in prison before he gets executed.

Since this is our first time being unleashed in Paris for hands-on, we don't stick together. We're both too mesmerized by the world and all the things that we can do. An Assassin's Creed setting hasn't felt this wondrous since I spent time in Venice as Ezio, where the beauty and liveliness made me forget about missions and get lost in the atmosphere. Part of this is thanks to the added realism. The buildings are designed at a 1:1 scale, a first in the series, and it shows; you feel the height

as you traverse them. These are also the most buildings I've seen on one street in an Assassin's Creed game. Small touches like the lighting stand out, especially when entering interiors, which add great diversity to environments. The elegance and ambiance of Paris shines through wonderfully.

I immediately climb up a building, which feels natural and fluid, including the new ability to descend rapidly by pressing RT and B. Haystacks are still around for doing leaps of faith, but you're not dependent on them like before. The first thing I do when I climb up a building is go into the interior; this new feature opens up alternate strategies. You can go inside to avoid guards, but must be careful because sentries aren't just on the outside.

I quickly notice some new assassina-



Stealth is more important since enemies aren't pushovers. Use everything at your disposal

Taking A Slice Of History

Ubisoft doesn't want to spoil every historical figure appearing in Unity, but it did share some key individuals that you'll encounter in Paris.

KING LOUIS XVI

No surprise here, as King Louis XVI's inexperience and cowardice made him a central figure throughout the revolution. Louis didn't know what to do when France was in such a bad financial state after The Seven Years' War and the American Revolution. He tried to run from Paris, only to be brought back, imprisoned, and eventually beheaded by the sharp blade of the guillotine – an event Ubisoft promises we'll see.

MARIE ANTOINETTE

Marie Antoinette earned a lot of popularity through historical interpretations of her that may have been embellished, but as the wife of King Louis XVI, she had to go down with him. Some historians claim she was clueless to the state of things, but we're interested in seeing how Ubisoft portrays her.

MAXIMILIEN DE ROBESPIERRE

Robespierre will forever be associated with the Reign of Terror and the guillotine. Paranoia started to get to people as they worried another nation might try to reinstall their king. Insecurity bred needless bloodshed. Robespierre didn't need much reason other than he didn't like the way you looked at him that day to execute you. In the end though, Robespierre got a taste of his own medicine and we're hoping Ubisoft gives us front row seats.

MARQUIS DE SADE

Sade was a philosopher, writer, and an elected delegate to the National Convention who is best known for his erotic works. Did we mention he spent 32 years of his life in prisons and eventually wound up in an insane asylum? There's a reason "sadist" is derived from his name, and it's clear Ubisoft has appropriate plans for the character. "He's sort of a Hannibal Lector, always a step ahead, always trying to mess with you," says creative director Alex Amancio. "He knows the answer; he's like, 'If I tell you, it wouldn't be fun. I'm just going to let you guess it.' He's sort of a creepy character."

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

Napoleon was a gifted general, rising through the military ranks during the course of the French Revolution. The narcissist also manipulated his way to the power, assuming a dictatorship by the end of the French Revolution. France didn't end up with the democracy it aimed for, so it'll be interesting to see Ubisoft's portrayal of the self-obsessed general.



The Adaptive Mission Mechanic

Remember being detected by a guard and being desynchronized from the mission? Thanks to the Adaptive Mission Mechanic, you won't have to worry about that again. The mission adapts to what happens and doesn't just follow one script or have one set of rules to succeed. For example, say you're tailing an enemy and he spots you. The mission then turns into a chase, eventually becoming a locate target mission once you've lost him. If the target gets killed during the mission, you can loot him for the key, but that doesn't mean there won't be consequences. More guards might be waiting for you at the location now that a guard is missing. "We've been improving how we did missions for a while, but we had never fundamentally rethought the very core structure of how we do that," says creative director Alex Amancio.

tion animations; you can run up, trip enemies, and stab them in the chest. Arno's assassinations also look cooler; he has just one blade, but that doesn't stop him from being creative. Because you can now climb in interiors, you can exploit windows for assassinations. One lets me yank an enemy through the window and throw him to his death.

The new cover system allows you to hide easier, complete with peeking moves. You can also go in stealth mode, which softens your footsteps. Most games' stealth modes slow your character down, but in Unity, you still move swiftly. This is useful for approaching enemies from behind and easily sticking a blade in their back. However, it's not long before I get impatient and alert more than one guard.

Remember those days where you'd accidentally trigger more of a response than you wanted and have to run all over

the map, waiting for the alert level to go down? Those days are over. The guards are now governed by a new system that has them investigate your last known position. This makes it easier to move away from the area, and sometimes you can even exploit it to drop back in on them from the other direction.

Stealth is encouraged in Unity, since battles can turn deadly. Take on two or three enemies at once and you should be okay, but get five in the mix and the battle often leads to a game over screen. In this case, running away is usually the best option. Before jumping into the fray you must consider the enemy type and their weapon; maybe dodging won't work on an agile enemy, and forget trying to parry a giant ax. For the first time in Assassin's Creed, I pay attention to the enemies and their patterns, as opposed to in previous games where I hit the attack button without a

worry. With the higher battle difficulty, death is imminent. Thankfully, if someone in your cooperative group dies, they can be revived, but make sure you clear the area first or you're toast. You have only a short period of time to revive teammates; if they perish, their wallets take a hit before they respawn.

Ubisoft only showed us a small slice of the combat. The A.I. is smart and often teams up against you, and they have a slew of offensive options and aren't afraid to exploit the bombs at their disposal. That's not even touching on the boss battles, which amp up the tension. "Boss fights are challenging, not because we added some quick-time event, but because we're using the full extent of the fight system," says game

designer Alex Pedneault. "The enemy can pull off the same moves that Arno can, and it creates a challenge in a good way. Not so people can throw their controllers on ground in frustration, but because it's something we've never had. For the first time, we have boss fights that are about parrying at the right time, making sure you dodge, and not spamming the attack button."

I'm also impressed by different factions roaming the streets and their interactions, which are not only more realistic, but they also aren't blind to each other's presence. Thugs will attack you no matter what, the police won't attack unless provoked, and crowds of commoners might lend you a hand when you're in a jam. The interactions

Sometimes a good assassin has to know when to run





The game includes the infamous Catacombs of Paris, providing you even more options for stealth

between these groups bring new depth to the gameplay. Police target dissidents, so you could lure thugs toward the authorities and watch them engage instead of getting your hands dirty.

Cork gets to the warden's key first, but I take out all the Templar targets in the massive crowd, using eagle vision to proceed to Paton. The crowds are mesmerizing; the world feels more alive and denser than previous games. Couples hold hands, arguments occur, and fights break out. Ubisoft says it can have up to 30,000 people in a crowd. These large gatherings are meant to be both an obstacle and opportunity, but in the case of this co-op mission, I can't let myself get too caught up in them since I'm working against the clock. The more time you take, the more people are executed. We don't act quickly enough to prevent the first casualty, but there's still time to save Paton, and saving him gains the Assassins an ally.

As we search for Paton, we pass a cemetery, a landmark called Place des Innocents. The cemetery is overflowing

with bones heaped in piles. A central building in the cemetery is overflowing with skulls in the attic. Historically, all the decaying bodies caused such a health hazard in Paris that it led to the creation of The Catacombs of Paris, a network of underground tunnels and caverns that house the remains of millions of people. Although the game predates the catacombs by two years, Ubisoft is including them to provide more stealth opportunities to get around. Spotting these amazing structures is part of the fun. After we save Paton, we're free to explore together in the same session. We make a side stop in the Notre-Dame Cathedral, and the detail and scope of the building leaves us in awe. Seeing it is one thing, but trying to climb it is another.

STICKING THE LANDING

Unity is full of promise; a blueprint for a new breed of Assassin's Creed for this generation. But for Ubisoft, this game is merely the starting point for its new-gen ambitions. "We want to focus

on unifying the franchise and make sure that we continue to propose to fans and players in general really entertaining experiences that all fit within our universe," says brand content manager Jean Guesdon.

Only Ubisoft knows where the story takes us next. All we know is that from the pirate-infested seas of the vibrant 18th Century Caribbean to the beauti-

ful Renaissance architecture of Rome, we're enjoying the trips back in history. Soon enough, we'll be exploring Paris in Ubisoft's biggest affair yet.

Visit gameinformer.com/ac for a month of bonus coverage including developer interviews, profiles on Arno and Elise, and insight into the new phantom blade weapon

Present Day: Starting Anew

With Desmond's story over, Ubisoft took the present day setting in a very different direction for *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Unity is staying on a similar path; the present day is the start of a new cycle. "We're at a good point where we need to start anew without erasing anything that's happened, that's all part of the mythology, that's canon," says creative director Alex Amancio. While Ubisoft is keeping mum about the present-day plot, Amancio did tease that it would coincide with the new generation of consoles. "Our players already read about this stuff and live *Assassin's Creed* as if it was part of reality," he says. "We just want to give them a chance to do it more, to cosplay better, so we decided to make players the main protagonists for the story."

While *Black Flag* let you play as yourself as an Abstergo employee, Unity takes it one step further by removing the middleman. "We're removing that Abstergo layer and you are the protagonist ultimately," Amancio says.

You still have a reason to go in and discover Arno's memories, but it's ultimately you helping the Assassins. "The present day is what gets everything together and the spread that allows limitless possibilities," Amancio says. "I think we just need to find its voice, and seriously I think what we did, I strongly believe this is where it has to go, and it has to go even further with other games."

Amancio doesn't want to spoil much more, but he claims the first 20 minutes of Unity gives you the entire gist of where they're going. "Those first 20 minutes are cool, and they're very, very surprising," he says.





ASSASSIN'S CREED

ROGUE



The CREED BREAKER

AN ASSASSIN TURNS TEMPLAR
AS A CHAPTER CONCLUDES

» *platform*

PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» *style*

1-Player Action

» *publisher*

Ubisoft

» *developer*

Ubisoft Sofia/Singapore
Montreal/Quebec/Bucharest
Chengdu/Milan

» *release*

Fall

BY JEFF CORK

B

By now, Assassin's Creed players are intimately familiar with the Order of the Assassins. The clandestine organization has been waging a war with the Templars for centuries, even though the battlegrounds are often invisible and the victories aren't accompanied by trumpet blasts. Fans interested in learning more about the power struggle from the other side have had tantalizing glimpses through various comics and other side content, but the series has overwhelmingly sided with the Assassins' cause. That's about to change with Assassin's Creed Rogue.





"For several years now, we were always thinking about, 'Templar's Creed.' What if we could tell that?" asks Jean Guesdon, brand content manager for Assassin's Creed at Ubisoft. "We always said, 'This story isn't black or white, it's more gray somewhere.' It's hard to convey that in a very subtle manner sometimes. Still, it's always been at the core of our intentions to make sure that Templars were not depicted as just evil, sadistic beings."

Players get to see that firsthand in *Rogue*, as they play as a new character named Shay Patrick Cormac. With *Rogue*, Ubisoft wasn't satisfied with dropping a Templar into the world, giving players control, and calling it good. The creators felt it was important that Shay was a character that veterans of the series would find sympathetic – at least at first. Shay isn't your ordinary

Templar. He used to be an Assassin.

"Basically, Shay starts off as a brash young man," says narrative designer Richard Farrese. "He doesn't really take his role seriously as an Assassin, not because he doesn't believe in the cause, but because he's young and not quite wise yet."

Shay has a lot of questions about why the Order does what it does, and his unease eventually comes to a head. "You're going to play many missions as an Assassin," Farrese says. "You'll see Shay grow as an Assassin as well, up until a certain point in the game where he says, 'This is wrong, and I have to do something about it.'"

Farrese wouldn't say what that pivotal moment entails, but a nasty scar that snarls across his right eye points to it being more than just emotional trauma. Shay is willing to fight for his principals,

even though it means betraying his former comrades. He becomes a hunter of Assassins, tracking down and killing the people he once vowed to fight beside. As you'll soon learn from our demo, the hunt works both ways.

Rogue is set between 1752 and 1761 – a critically important time period in history and within the series' mythology. In reality, it was the time of The Seven Years' War, a global conflict that pitted much of Europe against itself (see *War of the Worlds* sidebar on page 63 for more). In the game, it spans the era in which Haytham Kenway organizes the Templars' Colonial Rite and sets up the near eradication of Assassins in North America. "The cool thing is we've gone with something that actually ties everything together," Guesdon says. "It's not just an addition to it. With *Rogue* you'll have something that will

tie perfectly to *AC IV* – so in a chronological order, you'll have a link between *AC IV*, *AC III*, and *Unity*." Farrese says there's an overt link between *Rogue* and *Unity*, but that it happens near the final moments of the game. "The thing is, if we say something there's the risk of spoiling two games," Guesdon adds. "There is a tie-in."

Players in *Rogue* divvy up their time between land and sea throughout the Eastern part of North America. On his ship, the *Morrigan*, Shay sails the rivers and frigid seas around Newfoundland and Labrador. New York City returns, though Ubisoft says it's been redesigned to allow for faster on-foot navigation. We didn't get to see the blossoming Big Apple during our demo, though we did check out Shay's impressive abilities during a gang liberation side mission.

THE ROGUE WARRIOR

Our demo begins as we approach the Lac Eternal settlement from Shay's ship. It's 1754, and he has fully committed to the Templars' side. The mission is to destroy the gang's poison reserves, locate and kill the gang's leader, and in one humiliating extra, cut down and burn the gang's flag.

Shay strolls off the deck of his ship, heading onto the dock and up the steps to the settlement. On the far side, we see a high-walled enclosure, but the buildings in the immediate vicinity are modest and rustic. Before moving too far ahead, Shay uses a familiar trick to scout the area. Eagle vision has been enhanced, and now a compass ring appears around your character, pointing out objectives and turning red to indicate serious threats.

A cluster of guards is stationed near the front of the settlement, so Shay takes a more stealthy approach, climbing onto a roof and then transitioning onto a nearby tree. From there we hear whispers – an audio cue from Assassin's Creed's multiplayer (Rogue itself is single-player only), and a sign that one of the new stalker enemies is nearby. Shay enters eagle vision again, and sees the Assassin lurking in a bush directly below him. It's a perfect time to use the rope dart, and in one fluid motion he throws it at the unsuspecting enemy and jumps over a branch and onto the ground. The would-be assassin is left hanging helplessly in the air by the deadly tether. Shay is safe, at least for the time being.

"As you continue going through the world as a Templar, you are hunted back by your former associates, the Assassins, who can air assassinate you, surprise you, and use cover," says Ivan Balabanov, general manager and producer at Ubisoft Sofia, the main studio behind the game, which also developed Assassin's Creed Liberation and helped develop Black Flag. "Because of this, we needed to enhance the general feedback of the player in order to avoid unnecessary frustrations by being totally surprised at all points in time."



Ship-to-ship combat is a big component of the game, and Shay's status as a Templar gives him a technical edge. New nautical tricks include a prototype machine gun, flaming oil, and more

Shay continues to move through the settlement from the right side, and one of the poison barrels pops up on the objective marker. He takes cover in a nearby shed. The barrels are being guarded by a few uniformed thugs. Shay may have moved to the other side, but his desire to stay in the shadows is tough to shake. Fortunately, he has access to a new high-tech weapon. Being a Templar has its privileges.

The Assassins are industrious and clever, but the Templars have traditionally had deeper pockets. In *Rogue*, that means players have access to sophisticated new gear. Balabanov insists that the items existed during the game's time period, whether as prototypes or as items that were deployed but were often prohibitively expensive.

Shay's air rifle is a great example. He pulls out the weapon and silently

launches a firecracker round. The multipurpose projectile can be used to attract attention or, in this case, puncture wooden casks of poison gas. A cloud emanates from the barrels, along with a helpful red-ring indicator to visually help players know if they're out of harm's way. Just in case, Shay can pull a bandana over his face as a primitive gas mask to prevent being harmed.

Sensing something out of the ordinary, a handful of guards lurk around to inspect the scene. Shay attacks them, but he's quickly in trouble. He uses a smoke grenade to temporarily stun the enemies, and takes them out, completing a three-kill chain Abstergo challenge in the process.

Shay approaches the walls of the fortified part of the settlement, which is where the other objectives are. A few other guards mill around the second gas barrel, and Shay uses another new weapon, the grenade launcher. Think of this as a less subtle blowgun, with primitive missiles that unleash shrapnel, sleeping gas, or berserker gas. Shay opts for the first option – effective, but also quite attention grabbing. A few fall immediately, but they weren't alone; he is in gang territory, after all. Shay leaves cover to take out a straggler with a stylish pistol shot before rushing another, sword first. One gangster remains, and Shay parries a few sword thrusts. The encounter ends with Shay





War Of The Worlds

The Seven Years' War serves as Assassin's Creed Rogue's backdrop. It was one of the first truly global wars, fought in North and Central America, Europe, India, the Philippines, and West Africa. Historians estimate that as many as 1.4 million people lost their lives in the war, which lasted between 1756 to 1763.

In the United States, we often refer to it as the French and Indian War, which is a reference to England's enemies on that front – the French and various Native American tribes that aligned with it. The fighting in North America doesn't align precisely to the Seven Years' War timeline. Here, it began in 1754 and ended in 1760. The war was used as the basis for creative works like James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Last of the Mohicans*.

In North America, it was largely a war over trade and territory. The French and British both sought to expand their presence on the continent, which had a booming fur trade. Tensions between the nations escalated following a series of incursions and territorial claims on both sides, but the first real act of war didn't occur until 1754, when George Washington (a 21-year-old major at the time) and his colonial troops confronted French troops in what is now Pittsburgh. A French officer was among those killed in the ensuing battle, which set up the larger war.

The British were ultimately victorious, acquiring New France, which included lands that we now know as Michigan, Minnesota, and Quebec. That victory came at a price, however, nearly bankrupting the British in the process. As Jean Guesdon, brand content manager for Assassin's Creed at Ubisoft, points out, the war directly set the stage for the war for American Independence, which in turn inspired the French Revolution.



As you hunt Assassins, you'll also find yourself being hunted. Enemies use many of the tools players are familiar with, such as smoke bombs and hidden blades

spinning his opponent around and doing a behind-the-back stab.

A nearby pulley provides a speedy way up the wall, and within seconds Shay has a great overview of the gang's main force. Entering eagle vision again, he spies loads of gang members, but none that have the captain's telltale indicator. It's no loss, since the ones he did see will now be visible through walls.

Moving along the wall, Shay spies another pile of poison barrels. It's not being guarded, but several gang members are in the area, including one who's tormenting some prisoners. Shay loads up a sleep grenade and fires it into the area. The larger group is quickly knocked out, and Shay takes out a straggler with

an air assassination. He destroys the final batch of poison manually.

The gang's flag is nearby – an orange banner with an emblem of three stars and a dagger-wielding fist – but that's best left until last, especially since it's near the captain. These high-level thugs are as skittish as they are deadly. If they sense that they're in danger, they take a potshot before attempting to hide again. Shay heads up a tree and onto another rooftop to try to see the captain first. He's too slow, unfortunately; Shay sees a quick alert, before a splash of blood hits his arm.

Hearing whispers, Shay turns eagle vision on again. From the vantage point on the roof, he can see a would-be

assailant hiding in a haystack. You can't blame him for trying what's always been an effective strategy. Careless players might find themselves on the pointy end of an assassin's blade, but it's not going to happen this time. Shay sees the captain nearby, and uses another rope dart to sling the assassin up before attacking the captain. The leader, a thug in a tricorne hat and striped pants, is tougher than other enemies, but his skillful parries and attacks are of no use. He's run through with Shay's sword, and the Templar moves on to claim his final prize. He cuts the banner down and puts it in a nearby brazier to destroy it forever.

The settlement is now under Templar control. In a traditional Assassin's Creed game, you might consider these people free. That's where Rogue differs, at least in the abstract. "The Templar philosophy is about essentially creating a golden cage within which every single human being can live comfortably within the confines of this limited frame," Balabanov says. "In other words, it's a part of the Templar mission in general to improve the lives of the

people around them."

"I think that's one of the exciting things about playing a Templar," Farrese adds, "in that you're experiencing all of that from the other side. Now you're part of the order, and you fight against the chaos that the Assassins bring."

That reversal manifests itself in gameplay, too. "One of my favorite activities of AC Rogue is what we're calling the Assassin Interception," says Ubisoft Singapore producer Karl van der Luhe. "As you know from previous AC games, you go to a pigeon coop and get an Assassin contract. What would a Templar see from that perspective? We had a lot of fun at the start of the game saying, 'What would the Templar see from all of these things that you're used to doing as an Assassin?' This, for me, is one of my favorites." Traditionally, players get their contracts and then pursue their targets. "What if the Templar finds that pigeon? What if he knows who the target is and wants to stop the Assassin? That's a question that we've answered with gameplay in Assassin's Creed Rogue."



This is the most recent in a long line of Shay's backstabs

ICE PIRATES

Ubisoft is painting Shay with as broad a brush as it can, but we do know that the character starts off with his sea legs. He has his ship, the *Morrigan*, from the start, and he's an accomplished seaman. It's smaller than Edward Kenway's ship, the *Jackdaw*, since he has to navigate through rivers and other narrow channels, and avoid the calving of nearby glaciers. We see how he fares in a naval-based demo.

This brief voyage begins in the North

Atlantic, with a fleet of ships visible in the frigid seas ahead. Shay pulls out his spyglass, and we see they're sailing under the French banner. As a Templar, they may as well be targets. Even though there are five ships, you almost feel sorry for them.

Shay sets course directly at them, softening his targets with mortar fire and then ramming the one closest while firing a barrage from his front-facing carronades. The rest of the battle may feel familiar to Black Flag players, with

cannon fire, explosions, and on-the-fly looting of fallen ships. There are, however, a few new tricks. Once again, there's a distinct advantage to being on this side of the Templar coin.

His ship is equipped with Puckle guns, prototypical machine guns that tear enemy ships to splinters in seconds. Shay's crew can also drop and ignite trails of burning oil, which can be used to keep ships from following – or risk being set alight. The seas are filled with their own hazards, too: icebergs. These can damage your ship if you aren't paying attention (there's a reason the carronades are so important). They also have a strategic role in combat. "You can use them as cover," Van der Luhe says. "If you see the red lines of the enemy ship that's about to fire, you can sneak

behind an iceberg at that moment and you wouldn't have to brace, so you can charge up your next cannon shot and have the iceberg take the hit for you. When you destroy an iceberg, it forms a ripple wave. That can disrupt an enemy ship for just a moment, so that can also be part of your strategy."

With those ships out of the way, Shay moves to investigate the wreck of the *Sapphire*. It requires smashing through a thick sheet of ice (a ship upgrade that will presumably act as a gating mechanism to players as they progress). Looking ahead, it seems that the French are aware of his latest antics.

Several brown-sailed ships approach quickly, with a single purpose: to ram the *Morrigan*. Shay attacks, but not effectively enough. In seconds, we see what

Achilles' Heel?

Ubisoft is guarding many of *Rogue's* story details, but thanks to the time period we can make a few educated guesses about some potential key moments. One in particular holds promise.

In *Assassin's Creed III*, players were introduced to Achilles Davenport. The former leader of the Colonial branch of Assassins lived an isolated life following the loss of his family in 1755 and the destruction of most of his order eight years later. He mentored the game's protagonist, Connor, into becoming an Assassin – reluctantly at first, in part because doing so violated an agreement he made with the Templars prior to abandoning his role. He also had an undercurrent of sadness and disappointment that was difficult to ignore.

The developers wouldn't provide confirmation, but *Rogue's* timeline fits neatly into the period preceding the Assassins' decline and Davenport's disillusionment. Is it possible that *Rogue's* antihero, Shay Cormac, could have been the Anakin Skywalker to Davenport's Obi-Wan Kenobi? The dates line up and it could also provide specificity to why Achilles hesitated so much in taking Connor under his wing. Did he train Shay before the character turned Templar? And if that's the case, has he forgiven himself?



it's like to experience a boarding mission from the other perspective. Shay's deck is overrun with the other crew, and he has to defeat five of these scallywags and their captain before they take out too many of his own crew. The captain is clad in a brown cloak, complete with an Assassin-like cowl. He falls, too, and Shay faces the same options Edward Kenway did in *Black Flag*: loot the ship, send it to the fleet, or salvage it. He decides to give the ship to a beaming crew member, and the ship is added to his fleet. As in *Black Flag*, players

can use these salvaged ships to conquer trade routes and generate income and unlockables, though it now spans the world.

Shay continues toward the shipwreck, choosing to ignore a prisoner of war escort mission but pausing to hunt a narwhal. The hunt is similar to those in *Black Flag*, though Shay wisely refrains from peeling layers of clothing off. He also has to steer his boat away from chunks of ice.

The frosty climate means that one of *Black Flag*'s mission types is a no-go,

but they've been replaced with on-foot exploration. "It would be unrealistic to have diving, so we've even gone a step further," Van der Luhe explains. "When you go in the water, you'll see your screen freezing up and your health bar going down, so you can't just go for a lengthy casual swim like you could in the Caribbean."

Shay approaches the wrecked *Sapphire*, which contains a valuable treasure: a piece of Templar armor. To get it, Shay needs to find hidden keys, as well as manage to scale through the

icebound ruins themselves. The flotsam from the wreck has arranged itself into an environmental puzzle, similar to Assassin Tomb missions from previous games. As he hops from post to post, we see several great auks dive into the sea. These penguin-like birds were hunted into extinction in the mid-19th century.

As he works his way up, we see a polar bear pawing around an ice cave. Hunting will have to wait, as Shay finally reaches the bow of the ship, which has been raised high above the rest of the sea. From this vantage point, we can see Shay's ship in the distance, as well as a spectacular view of the northern lights.



The aurora borealis may not be the most interesting thing in *Rogue*'s skies; Halley's Comet passed by Earth in 1759

CLOSING A CHAPTER

In a way, Ubisoft sees *Rogue* as closing a loose trilogy within the series. Ezio's tale was told in *Assassin's Creed II*, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*. Though it's nestled between them chronologically, *Rogue* completes the story of Haytham Kenway and the New World that began in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* and *Assassin's Creed III*.

"Three is a good rhythm," Guesdon says. "For those who have the previous games, it would make sense to have the three games as a whole."

Haytham and Shay are clearly on friendly terms. Kenway was on the deck of Shay's ship during the demo, and while he didn't disembark to join the action, he more than likely had a keen grasp of what was going on. Manipulation is an integral part of the Templar cause, after all.

The time period and setting is ripe for a good story, but it holds a special place in *Assassin's Creed* lore. It should be illuminating to learn more about these huge power shifts between the Assassins and Templars, where what we know as the "good guys" were swatted down – at least for a while. And, of course, we'll be seeing things from the dark side. Ubisoft says those boundaries aren't so clear, however, especially where Shay is concerned.

"Shay does things for the right reasons, or at least he thinks so," Farrese says. "I'll let you be the judge of that." ♦

Be sure to head to gameinformer.com/ac for more information on the new *Assassin's Creed* games, including video interviews with *Rogue*'s lead writer and the series' creative director, a look at *AC*'s evolving tech, and more

Shay's air rifle and grenade launcher are fantastic weapons, whether they're used to create diversions or pure chaos





Destiny

Bungie's beta offers new galactic insight

Bungie is doing all it can to ensure that its cooperative/competitive online first-person shooter, *Destiny*, is fully operational when it hits this fall. Following up on the playable alpha build, the online beta offers us a deeper look into the game's intro, leveling system, and cross-gen fidelity.

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

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer Shooter

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Bungie

» **Release**
September 9

Becoming A Stronger Guardian

Progression caps off at level eight in the beta build of *Destiny*. By the time you reach that level, you gain access to supercharged attacks, like a leaping smash or flaming pistol rounds. You also receive enhancements to vertical mobility, like a loftier double jump or increased hover mobility. I continued playing well after reaching level eight, and was happily surprised by how many subclass upgrades I continued to accrue. As a Warlock, my grenades became deadlier, with glowing shrapnel that hones in on enemies. I also unlocked handy gear upgrades like decreased cooldown on my melee strike and the ability to carry more ammo. These consistent enhancements, along with the steady drip-feed of better gear, kept me invested in the path of the character. The most agonizing part is staring at all the powerful gear waiting for me past the beta's level cap.

Introducing The New Solar System

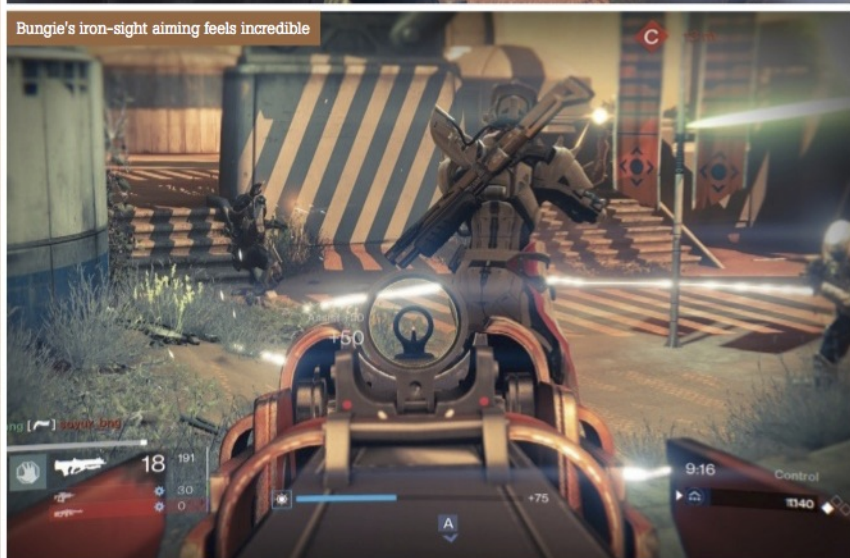
The beta offers a glimpse at the beginning of *Destiny*. A group of astronauts from our time land on Mars, traversing the red terrain to get a better look at a gigantic, moon-sized sphere that fills the horizon. This sphere, the Traveler, is a mystical interstellar being that has graced humanity with the knowledge to master space travel. However, the evils of the universe followed the Traveler to the Milky Way, setting the stage for battles with the Fallen and Hive enemies. The action kicks off far into the future, as a small flying robot resuscitates your freshly created character for an adventure in Old Russia. Beyond this intro, storytelling is sparse in the beta. We're hoping Bungie lives up its reputation for interesting interstitial scenes to offer greater context to all the fun.

How Does Last-Gen Hardware Stack Up?

The *Destiny* beta offers us a first look into how the ambitious game runs on last-generation hardware. The PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 4 versions both look remarkably similar. The core of the game seems identical for each, down to the pitch-perfect gunplay, huge sprawling environments, and fluid animations. However, at this point the PS3 beta build looks like someone smeared a thin layer of Vaseline over your screen. On top of the blurry appearance, the terrain of Old Russia is noticeably missing texture detail and flora pop-up is common when speeding along on your personal jet bike. The PS4's crisp visuals make it the obvious bet, but if you're holding off on new-gen consoles you may want to consider picking it up on last-gen hardware. Just keep in mind that Bungie isn't supporting cross-generation multiplayer, in case you were hoping to play with friends. » **Tim Turi**



Bungie's iron-sight aiming feels incredible



A Warlock launches a devastating void grenade into a group of enemies

Dragon Age: Inquisition

A dance with dragons (and mages and Templars)



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

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

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
November 18

If you've followed our coverage of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (beginning with our huge cover blowout in issue 245), you know about the changes BioWare has made to the series. After stumbling with *Dragon Age II*'s confined world and more aggressive action, some fans expressed concern about the series' direction. After over an hour of hands-on time, it feels like the studio is hitting its stride with an experience that borrows the best of both previous titles.

Our adventure starts in The Hinterlands, one of *Inquisition*'s many zones, which is larger than all of the playable space in *Dragon Age: Origins* combined. Our Inquisitor is a female Qunari mage, with a variety of spells from a number of magical schools. Alongside her are Sera, an archery-focused elf rogue; Iron Bull, a hulking warrior; and Vivienne, a fellow mage and former leader of the Circle.

Exploring The Hinterlands exposes greater freedom than we've ever had in a *Dragon Age* game. Creative director Mike Laidlaw describes it as "multi-region open world." It's not quite the fully connected outdoor expanse of a game like *Skyrim*, but rather offers massive zones similar to an MMO.

The world is dynamic, and culling wildlife

and foes diminishes their presence. After a time, plants will grow back, animals will return, and bandits will re-establish their footholds. You won't be able to fully clear an area, which is good news for avid crafters (and those with a penchant for thwarting highwaymen).

One of the most notable changes in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a revamped combat system that balances the strategic aspects of *Dragon Age: Origins* with the responsive action of its sequel. When tactical mode is toggled on, you have full control of the camera in three dimensions to position your team and queue up abilities. BioWare has added another control element that provides even deeper manipulation of the battlefield.

Pressing the right trigger slowly advances the battle in what Laidlaw calls "engage mode." This is supremely useful for timing cross-class combos. For example, using *Blizzard* could freeze enemies in the target zone. Winding the clock ahead just a bit allows you to see the results of your actions with less chaos than unfettered real-time battle, for a more satisfying feel of control.

The advantage became obvious when we realized we could hold Vivienne's Stone Fist

spell or Iron Bull's Massive Blow for a split second to more precisely target and time them against frozen foes for bonus shatter damage. The visual effects are impressive, especially the aforementioned *Blizzard* spell, which sees snow rapidly swirling and covering the ground as dark clouds gather overhead.

The ground catches fire, enemies become encased in ice (and eventually crumble with a death blow), and arrows and spells bounce off of huge shields. More than ever, *Dragon Age*'s combat feels alive and logical thanks to improved animations and smart design choices.

All of this came into play while encountering groups of warring mages and Templars (and drew the ire of both factions). Using the terrain to our advantage and herding foes into carefully placed flame walls let us stay in control of the battle and rout the opposing forces in a most satisfying way.

Things weren't nearly as easy when we encountered an enormous Ferelden Frostback dragon. This hulking beast set fire to the ground from the sky, slashed with its claws, and flapped its massive wings to knock us off our feet. Targeting its feet and tail provided an



advantage, as the beast was staggered and wounded. The pace is quicker than dragon battles in *Dragon Age: Origins*, but the winged beast we fought wasn't any less terrifying.

Combat isn't the only place improvements and changes appear. Character interactions have also been tweaked to better fit with *Inquisition's* more flexible open world. In previous BioWare games, encountering certain NPCs triggered cutscenes during which you would be offered dialogue options and quests. Now, you have the option to speak with most characters, who will attempt to flag you down when you're near.

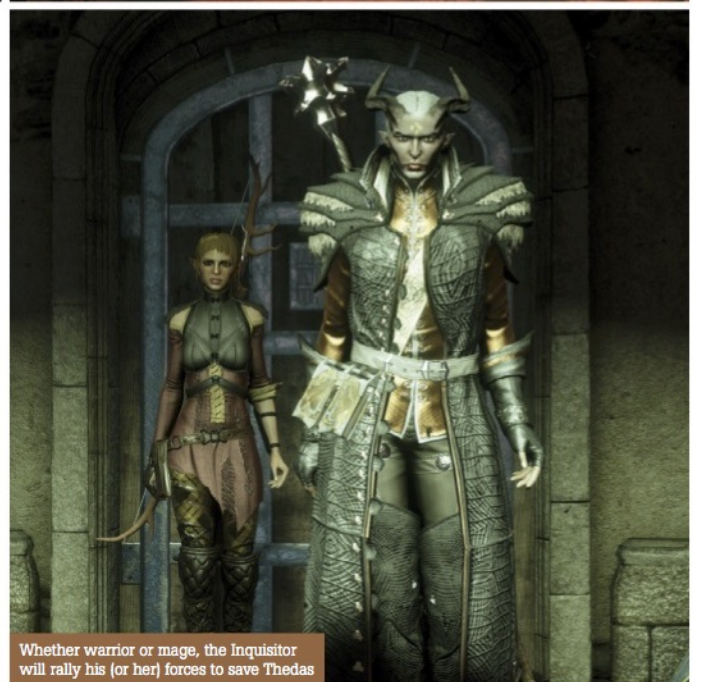
When close to someone who wishes to speak with you, a semi-transparent dialogue wheel appears at the bottom of the screen. You can choose to engage by clicking the right thumbstick or simply pass them by. If you do choose to pay attention, you can still back out before choosing a response by clicking the thumbstick again. Once you begin to converse, things play out in traditional BioWare fashion.

Should you find yourself tasked with retrieving a lost item, it won't be quite as easy as following a quest marker and looking for something shiny on the ground. No longer do

you see the shimmer of lootable objects as you wander. Instead, you need to search a location by pressing the right thumbstick to "ping" the immediate area. This makes items, corpses, and crafting components such as plants and ore appear.

Recipes you find have uses throughout the game, with better results from higher-grade ingredients. For instance, an armor recipe can use basic leather (from bears and other common animals), but you get better results later in the game from using drakeskin. All crafting happens at an Inquisition camp, which means you won't be taking a break to mix potions while demons are bearing down on you. Party members can once again be fully outfitted with armor (instead of the more streamlined approach of *Dragon Age II*), which means you will have use for the gear you find but can't equip on your Inquisitor.

Dragon Age: Inquisition is taking the series in exciting directions by capturing what fans loved about *Origins* and the improvements found in the sequel, while abandoning the elements players rejected. We've still only scratched the surface, and there is more to learn about the Inquisitor, the world, and the perils facing Thedas. » **Michael Futter**



Whether warrior or mage, the Inquisitor will rally his (or her) forces to save Thedas



Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel

Meet your team of miscreants

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

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

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Gearbox, 2K Australia

» **Release**
October 14

Borderlands games are loved by fans for their sharp writing, excessive loot, and extensive replay value. The latter is derived in large part from a colorful cast of characters offering different play styles and flexibility for solo excursions and group play. We had the chance to take three of Handsome Jack's team members out for a spin on the surface of Pandora's moon.

Since *The Pre-Sequel* is running on the *Borderlands 2* engine, the skill tree layouts are familiar. At the bottom of each, a "capstone" ability ties together the already synergistic skills in each group. Some of those trees culminate in a skill that modifies the character's active ability, but at least one is more about personality (and creating combat opportunities in new ways).

Athena the Gladiator uses her shield in battle, and her active ability allows it to gather incoming fire (increasing its potential damage) before being thrown toward an enemy. Her Phalanx skill tree makes the most of this, with abilities allowing her to gather friendly fire damage, store and deal out absorbed elemental damage, and ricochet among up to four enemies. Phalanx is a great co-op tanking tree, especially since Athena can use it to automatically help allies up from a downed state.

For solo players, the Ceraunic Storm tree is a better fit. Most of the skills capitalize on Athena dealing shock and fire damage to enemies to earn Maelstrom "stacks." These build up rapidly, but deteriorate over time (and faster, the more you have). As you earn more, you'll deal more elemental damage, earn a portion of your shields back, and increase your swap and fire speeds. At the bottom of the tree, you can unlock a skill that capitalizes on the zero-gravity slam (activated while crouching in mid-air).

For those who want to mix melee into their mayhem, the Xiphos tree ups gun damage while adding a nifty bleeding effect to your sword attacks. Further down the line, enemies start exploding if they die while bleeding, you're faster with your guns when your enemies are spilling out on the dusty surface of the moon, and your butt slam causes a black hole. The capstone ability lets you chain together powerful melee strikes, with the cooldown timer reset every time one inflicts a bleed or kills a foe.

If Athena is your co-op tank, then Wilhelm is your support. His active ability summons two aerial drones: Wolf and Saint. Wolf is a search-and-destroy drone, while Saint hangs back to buff and heal Wilhelm and the party.

The Dreadnaught tree is the go-to for co-op

support, as it infuses Saint with the ability to overcharge teammates, heal them, increase their shields, and protect them from elemental damage. The Hunter-Killer line is all about getting Wolf and Saint into the fight faster and dealing more damage with the attack drone, culminating in an upgrade that gives Wolf missiles in addition to its guns.

Those who played *Borderlands 2* should remember Wilhelm as a largely robotic boss character. His Cyber Commando tree sets him on the path to a cyborg lifestyle. Along the way, you earn skills that replace Wilhelm's arm (and give him a powerful punch) and legs (to enable shooting while sprinting). These great visual effects come along with a cool change to his voice, making him less human as you progress.

The capstone skill in this tree is my favorite so far, especially since I usually find myself running headlong into combat. When Wilhelm's shields are empty, he gains access to a shoulder-mounted cannon for a limited time. Brash players will want to think seriously about Cyber Commando.

Nisha the Lawbringer rounds out our deep dive into (most of) the playable cast of *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*. Her active ability, Showdown, auto-targets enemies and



bestows increased gun damage, fire rate, reload speed, accuracy, and bullet speed. All of her trees are focused on hot lead, but with great variation among them.

Riflewoman is your typical first-person shooter "run-n-gun" tree, with upgrades that boost non-elemental weapon damage, fire rate, reload speed, and hip firing. She can also unlock the ability to ricochet bullets off walls, and The Unforgiven capstone skill not only sends bullets from one enemy to the next, but causes every hit target to explode when it expires.

The Fan the Hammer skill tree is all about killing faster and faster with each felled enemy, stealing bullets to minimize reloading, and doubling up your pistol with a duplicate thanks to the One for Each of Ya capstone. This version of Nisha is a speed demon with explosive shots unlocked halfway down the tree.

Nisha's most interesting skillset is her lawman-inspired Law and Order group. This mixes her whip melee attack into things a bit more, with the capstone Thunder Crackdown dealing shock damage in a wide area. Most of the abilities in this tree are based on stacks of "Order," which is earned by taking damage, dealing butt slam damage, and killing (or having an ally kill) an enemy.

Order stacks translate into instant healing, increased speed and damage, and more powerful Thunder Crackdown melee assaults. Law and Order pushes Nisha into the fray with a tankier build that benefits from taking on larger groups of enemies.

After playing with all three, the character variations are clearly the reason to play *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*. The combat doesn't vary much from previous entries (even with the new laser and cryo weapons). The Oz kits limit your time out of oxygenated environments, and are a bit more limiting than I would like. I found myself standing just inside doorways to replenish my air, breaking up the action when I just wanted to continue the fight.

The Aussie humor works, and one character I met threw out so many culturally foreign terms that I couldn't help but laugh. The writing is as punchy as ever, and the partnership between Gearbox and 2K Australia is paying off. I don't expect *The Pre-Sequel* will woo many new fans, but for those that have poured countless hours into the first two *Borderlands*, it will be worth looking into, even in a crowded holiday release season.

» **Michael Futter**



Skylanders Trap Team

It's good to be bad



- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
Wii • 3DS
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Activision
- » **Developer**
Toys for Bob
- » **Release**
October 5

For its fourth outing, Skylanders is back with series creator Toys for Bob. Since its inception in 2011, the original cast of characters has grown into an enormous family with a new gimmick each year.

After pioneering the “toys to life” genre, Activision added bigger figures for Skylanders Giants in 2012. Last year brought a host of new characters that could be taken apart and reconfigured with any of the other Swap Force type figures.

This year’s conceit, the overlarge Trap Master figures and their huge “traptanium” weapons, tie in with the new story and portal accessory. At the start of the game, perennial villain Kaos breaks a host of baddies out of Cloudcracker prison, where the titular Trap Team is stationed. It’s up to the Skylanders from across all four titles to capture and reform the escaped menaces.

Our hands-on opportunity takes us through the tutorial level, which includes simple block puzzles and an introduction to two of the 40-plus villains that can be captured, trapped in crystals, and then summoned into battle at the press of a button. Each crystal can hold a single prisoner, but their contents can be swapped out for any of the characters you’ve converted.

Wanted villains come in a variety of sizes. Our first encounter is with Sheep Creep, a deceptive criminal who hides two large guns under his fluffy coat. Once defeated by one of the Trap Masters, putting a crystal of the Life element (villains have elements just like Skylanders) in the portal sucks him in

and makes him available to be swapped in during battle.

After they are trapped, the speaker on the new portal delivers lines from the captive in time with lighting that makes the crystals pulse with life. Each of the villains can be called in for a limited time, and each has distinctive moves. Sheep Creep’s cannons are at your disposal, and he can also damage enemies with a wool explosion.

The trapped villains offer fun play diversity, but also help cut down on one of Skylanders’ ongoing problems: It takes time to switch figures and wait as they handshake with the

portal. By pairing a ranged villain with a melee Skylander, players can spend more time in combat and less time waiting for characters to pop in and out. Calling in a villain is instantaneous and works great.

The second villain, The Gulper, looms over the entire stage. Rather than combat him directly, our conquest of this enormous, soda-drinking slug is part of the level and requires puzzle solving. It was a brief taste of what’s to come this fall, but the new mechanics and clever trapping mechanic put a new twist on a series that is no longer the scrappy new kid.

» **Michael Futter**





Gearshift slices, dices, and shoots gears from a distance



Introducing Gearshift

Gearshift introduces a brand-new mechanic to the Skylanders series. She has three different "gears" she can cycle through, each of which puts her large hula hoop-like cog to good use.

In her default mode, Gearshift hits the enemies around her as she spins her huge traptanium gear. Her second mode splits the cog into two swords, for directed melee strikes against enemies.

Her third gear recombines the two halves into a curved construct. While swirling around her, Gearshift can shoot projectiles. These three modes make her one of the most versatile Skylanders yet and a true joy to play with.



Now we just need another Viva Piñata game!



Introducing Gusto

Gusto is an air elemental Trap Master, who carries a large boomerang that can be used as a club or a projectile. When upgraded, his boomerangs return to dance around him and protect him from danger.

Gusto also has a powerful set of lungs, and can damage enemies by forcefully sucking in the air around them. Then, he can deal more damage by ejecting the wind he's stored up.

When surrounded, Gusto can spin his boomerang around to do damage in a wide radius. He might not be the most agile of Skylanders, but Gusto packs a wallop.



Hyrule Warriors

Dynasty Warriors meets Legend of Zelda this summer

- » **Platform**
Wii U
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Koei Tecmo
- » **Release**
September 26

If you're a fan of Dynasty Warriors and The Legend of Zelda, then Hyrule Warriors is probably your most anticipated game of 2014. Heroes, allies, enemies, and locations from several different titles in the Zelda series fill the game. Players slash down enemy hordes as Link, Zelda, Midna, Sheik, and others with outrageous attacks and exaggerated side weapons like massive bombs. Even though The Legend of Zelda is at the core of the game, it won't include the "Z word" in the title.

"The essence of the gameplay is different from the Zelda franchise, so we're deliberately not using the 'Legend of Zelda' title," says series producer Eiji Aonuma. "It's a similar approach to the one we took to the previously released Link's Crossbow Training."

The story begins with a sorceress named Cia opening portals to alternate dimensions. "This is an original world, one where the events of previous games are passed on as legends, and now it features time rifts that are partially connected to the worlds of Ocarina of Time, Twilight Princess, and Skyward Sword," says Koei Tecmo producer Yosuke Hayashi. "Cia is summoning monsters into these alternate dimensions in an attempt to revive the 'evil one,' and Link and the other heroes are trying to stop her. Basically, the story features the characters of each world teaming up as you run into them in order to save the world from destruction."

The main story is told in Legend Mode. Stages, or "scenarios," last around half an hour, with several battles and objectives sprinkled around a large recognizable map like Hyrule Field or the Palace of Twilight. Players can burn through the campaign or

replay scenarios with alternate characters and weapons to unlock collectibles like heart containers and Gold Skulltulas.

Adventure Mode levels go much faster and include more variety. Earning high marks on these challenges unlocks new characters and weapons. The best part? It all takes place in the world from the first Legend of Zelda game (see sidebar).

Powering up Link and company works more like the Warriors games than a traditional Zelda title. Characters level up by slaying enemies, earning more hearts and attack power, and the Shop Mall allows more custom

upgrades. "The Training Ground allows you to level up by paying rupees instead of defeating foes," Hayashi says. "The Badge Shop is where you use rupees and material items to create badges that give you bonuses like additional weapons/combo flows, a higher number of special attacks, and so on. The Junk Shop allows you to change the skills associated with your weapons. Weapons may also be dropped by defeated enemies during battle, each with different skills and attack strengths."

In a previous interview with Game Informer, Hayashi said the team incorporated some



Zelda battles a giant Manhandla



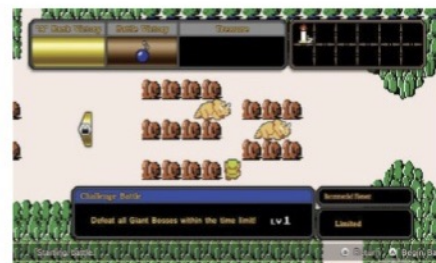
Ganondorf is one of several playable villains

ideas from fans excited by the initial reveal of the game back in December. At the time, he declined to offer specifics, but now he's ready to talk. "For one, we now have Cuccos in the game," Hayashi says. "They will appear during battle, and you'll have to play the game for yourself to see what will happen. In addition, we've made characters like Ghirahim and Zant playable. We originally thought of them strictly as enemy characters, but went this route in response to people who wanted to try playing as them, too."

These aren't the only playable villains in the game; Nintendo is also allowing players to control longtime series antagonist Ganondorf. "[He] fights while carrying a large sword with both hands – it's a giant blade, one a normal person could never even budge," Hayashi says. "He mows down enemies as he swings it, his expression never changing. He can also infuse the sword with lightning, which he can then launch to send multiple enemies flying."

Fans of co-op should be pleased to know that *Hyrule Warriors* includes an atypical local setup. One person plays on the television while the other uses the screen on the GamePad. The game doesn't support traditional online multiplayer, but there is still a way to connect with friends. "The Adventure Mode features a 'Network Link' feature," Hayashi says. "This allows you to add a 'Link' to your maps whose level is based on other users' play data. If you come to this Link's aid and fight alongside him, you'll get access to special bonuses."

If you're looking forward to this strange-yet-intriguing mashup, the wait isn't much longer. *Hyrule Warriors* launches in North America on September 26. » **Bryan Vore**



Adventure Mode

Adventure mode takes place on the entire overworld map from the original NES *Legend of Zelda*. Each piece of the grid represents a different challenge, represented by various icons. Some of the map sections allow players to zoom in and control 8-bit Link directly as he searches for secret missions. Once you accept a challenge, like defeating 300 enemies in 10 minutes, you are transported to a standard battle screen.

Madden NFL 15

Everyone's looking to improve



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

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

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
August 26

A fine line exists between making things simpler and simplifying too much. Madden NFL 15 does a good job of the former. Like a coach, EA Tiburon does its best to put players in a good position to execute via some new tools designed to make them better players. In my hands-on time with an early build, some of the additions made a positive impact, even for a Madden vet like me.

Madden 15 makes you a better football player both on and off the field. Before you start a game, you can go into the Skills Trainer mode and learn fundamentals such as how to recognize defensive coverages or understand specific wide receiver route concepts. These are conveyed in text/voiceover form as well as through drills. The mode has also added The Gauntlet – a mash-up of drills and boss battles that gives you five lives to see how long you can endure the escalating difficulty.

These drills are also present in the new Game Prep area of Connected Careers. Each week, you get a set number of hours (depending on how much time until your next game) to run players of your choosing through drills or study sessions designed to give them more XP or a boost in the new “confidence” player stat. Confidence also goes up and down from week-to-week based on players’ performance and how the team is doing, and can raise or lower their key stats. In Game Prep it’s applied

automatically, but all of the benefits in this new practice mode fluctuate depending on the individual player, your position coaches, and how well you perform in drills.

When you’re ready to dive into the game and put your knowledge to the test, the new playcalling menus are a little overbearing at first, but provide good information. I like to mix up the new format with traditional formation-based playcalling for the best of both worlds. The suggestions tab tells you what your opponent likes to run in that down/distance, while the strategy tab offers plays that work best against certain defenses, as well as the average yards gained or lost in your previous attempts. My strategy is digesting that info, backing out to the formations menu, and calling like I always have in Madden. I also like that the game shows what play the defense just ran and the result so I can keep that in mind for next time. It will be interesting to see how the game compiles all the data from you and the community moving forward, and how well it synthesizes it in order to give you an accurate picture of what’s going on.

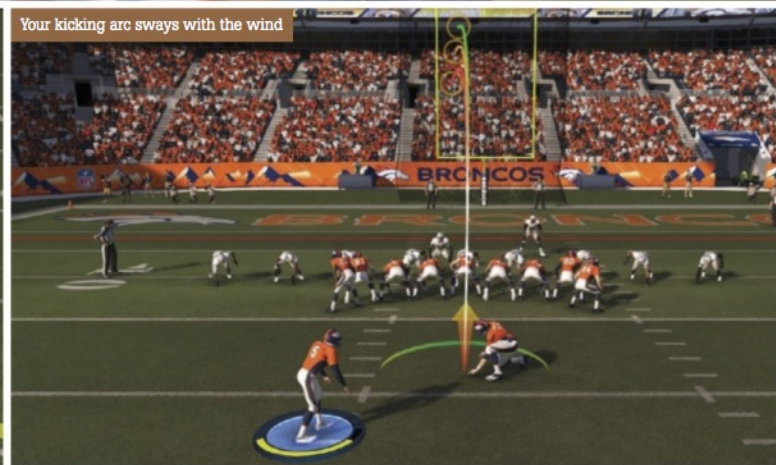
Finally, before you snap the ball, a new radial right analog menu lets you see player mismatches and your players’ individual strengths and weaknesses. All of this pre-play info is a lot to process before you’re hit with a delay of game penalty, but it’s worthwhile.

Defense also benefits from the playcalling

and pre-play info. In addition, EA Tiburon has added defensive linemen moves and a visual tackling aid. You can jump the snap like in the old NCAA games, and, once engaged with a lineman, steer him left or right before attempting to shed him to tackle a runner or press the face buttons for defensive-line moves (no more right analog stick). When you’re going in for the tackle, you can press L2 to bring up the tackle cone. This tells you where your player is facing before you go in for the kill. It’s useful information, but it does not guarantee you’ll make the tackle, which is good. Many of these visual indicators can be toggled on or off, but I like them.

Some of these additions classify as gameplay aids, and even with them on you may effectively play the game the same, but some areas of Madden 15 also feel different. Most noticeable is the passing game, which features more imperfect balls thrown by quarterbacks, new catching animations, and revamped total-control passing that lets you place the ball in more spots. Hopefully the game also has improved its pass blocking on the edge and second level, the general A.I. awareness, and its interior running game.

Madden 15 features a number of ways for you to improve your game, and I hope I’m up to the challenge. Given the so-so performance of last year’s title, there’s room for everyone to improve. » **Matthew Kato**



One of The Gauntlet's boss battles GAUNTLET 24



! BOSS - MEDIA DAY !

Score a Touchdown during Super Bowl Media Day. Tip: Do not Run into your on-field teammates or they will try and slow you down.

 CONTINUE

Pro Evolution Soccer 2015

Pro Evo's new-gen debut could rekindle old glories



» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One

» **Style**
1 to 7-Player Sports
(1 to 4-Player Xbox One)
(22-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Konami

» **Developer**
PES Productions

» **Release**
Fall

Konami chose to stay on last-gen consoles last year, letting rival FIFA get a head start on Xbox One and PlayStation 4.

Regardless, Konami spent the time productively. PES 2014 used the FOX engine for the first time, and the results were largely positive. Developer PES Productions hopes to make this investment pay off when the series debuts on the new systems this fall.

The franchise is going back to the fundamentals to give players the ability to create opportunities. Control is key; keeping the ball and beating opponents is less about the power

of skill moves and more about basic concepts such as using space, dribbling ability, controlled touches, and changing pace. PES titles historically have a complex range of controller inputs – including linked feints for skill moves – but it's unknown if these are being streamlined to facilitate 2015's focus on the importance of control.

Off the ball, A.I. players will hopefully play a better team game with runs, tactics, and defensive marking that adjust at quick intervals to keep up with the action. In general, Konami wants to extend its player ID feature

to replicate the real-life abilities, looks, and even the emotional state of licensed players. The series has always relied on a plethora of player stats, and if done accurately, this new evolution of player representation could make a visual and gameplay difference.

PES' online component previously has been barebones, but it's a focus of this year's title. Optional microtransactions allow users to add both players and managers to their online Master League clubs. A necessary evil in these transactions are agents (also in offline), who voice player demands. These need to be met, lest you have an unhappy player on your hands who disrupts the rest of the club. Form is also important to your success, and Konami plans to push live updates (including transfers) for some of its licensed teams and leagues.

I wasn't disappointed that the series didn't immediately jump on to the new home consoles last year – launch games can often be rushed, after all. However, Konami and the series need to seize this opportunity and establish a firm presence on the new systems. Part of this is establishing franchise building blocks early to build off of in successive iterations – whether that's rock-solid controls or restoring features to the Master League career mode that were left off of last year's game. The Pro Evolution/Winning Eleven series was at the height of its form in the PS2 days, and it can't afford to sit idle another console generation.

» **Matthew Kato**





Soma

Horrors of the deep sea

Like Frictional's previous work, *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Soma* is a survival horror adventure that is as much about exploring environments thick with tension as it is about running and hiding from mysterious creatures that can kill you in seconds. This suspense is palpable in the new demo we recently played.

While investigating the underwater research facility called Pathos-2, the protagonist Simon finds the majority of its staff either missing or dead. In a search for answers, Simon hijacks an underwater recovery vehicle and sets off for the mysterious site Theta mentioned in several of the researchers' notes. Unfortunately, a shock wave hits Simon's sub, disrupting its electronics and sending it on a collision course with the bottom of the sea.

After a momentary tumble, Simon is plunged into eerie silence. The lights in the sub go out, and he can't find a way to turn the power back on, leaving him trapped inside the watery tomb. After a few moments of frantic searching for a way out, a series of sparks light up the front door as someone begins cutting through the hull from the outside. The sub's door swings wide and Simon comes face-to-face with a small robotic drone. Simon thanks his rescue party before stepping out onto a dim seabed.

As players explore their environment, they slowly piece together the narrative. For example, as Simon explores the area surrounding his crash site, he finds another derelict recovery sub. Inside is the dead body of a woman named Maggie. All of the personnel on Pathos-2 have been outfitted with black boxes that record the last 20 seconds of their life. Simon taps into Maggie's black box and listens to her scream about a man named Akers who she claims can't be trusted. Maggie's fit is followed by a series of short gasps as she dies of oxygen deprivation.

A few nearby objects add to the mystery. Maggie's camera is filled with pictures of a mysterious blue figure floating near her sub, but most of them are distorted and difficult to make out. A nearby radio has a record of conversations between Maggie and a man named Strasky that explain how she was sent to retrieve Akers, but, after she left the facility, some of the other researchers began arguing over whether they should leave Akers quarantined from the rest of the staff. Maggie's current state implies that Akers might not have been fond of that idea.

Frictional says most of *Soma's* puzzles involve narrative and environmental exploration. For example, near the end of our demo, Simon is trapped at the bottom of a sunken ship. In one of the ship's rooms Simon can see an escape hatch and a ladder leading to the top of the ship. Unfortunately, a cable runs through the wheel that lowers

the ladder, jamming it and preventing Simon from escaping.

While pouring through the contents of a few nearby rooms, it becomes obvious Simon isn't alone in this sunken vessel. Through the ship's waterlogged hull, Simon hears the soft screech of what sounds like an electronic banshee. Simon eventually finds a cutting torch he can use to slash the cable and lower the ladder, but as he does, he alerts the ship's other inhabitant to his presence. As Simon climbs up the ladder, he sees a blurry blue figure out of the corner of his eye. Simon tries to run and hide, but it's too late; his pursuer quickly catches up to him, and we catch only a brief glimpse of the pale figure before the screen goes black.

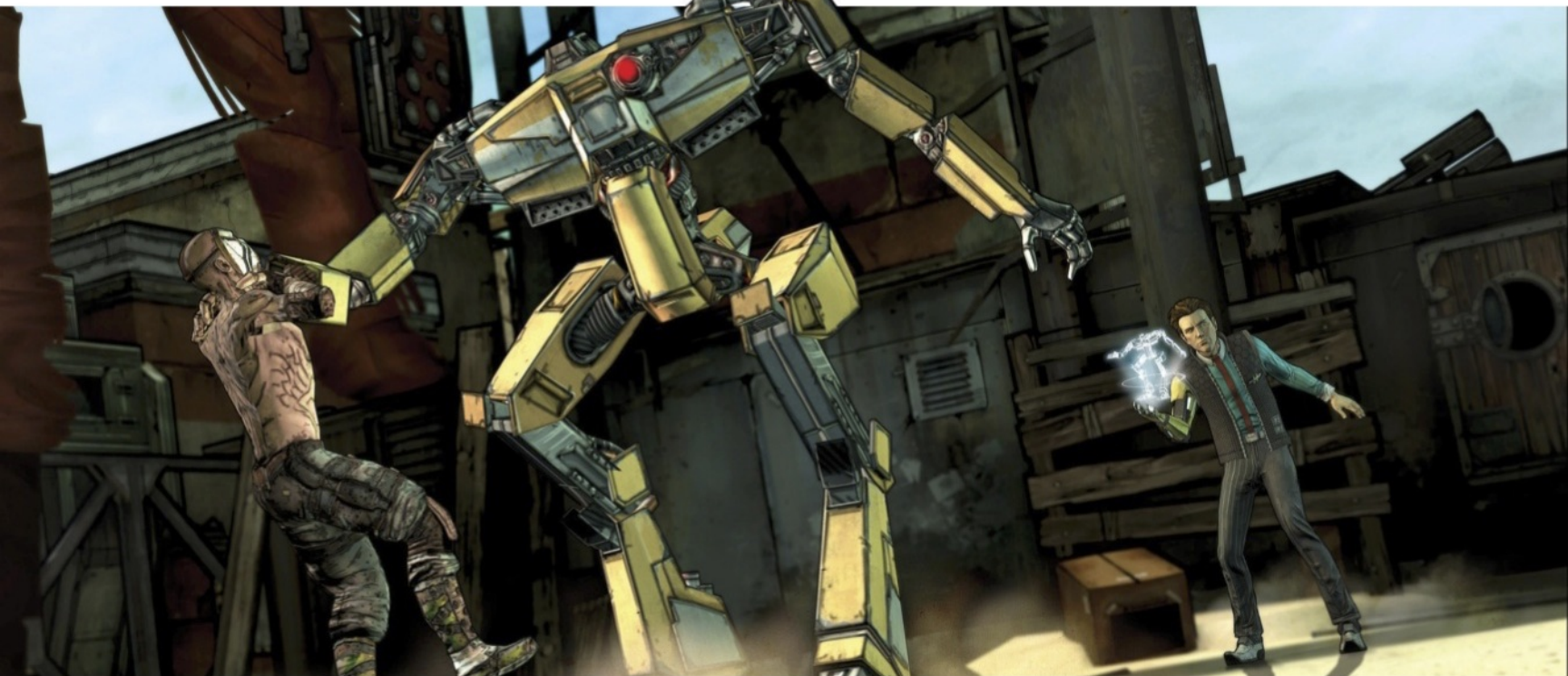
Simon's hunt for answers is likely to get him killed a lot, but that won't stop us from investigating what happened to the researchers on Pathos-2. » **Ben Reeves**

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



Tales From The Borderlands

A case of he said, she said



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

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Telltale Games

» **Developer**
Telltale Games

» **Release**
Summer

When Telltale announced it was working on an episodic adventure series based on Gearbox's loot-obsessed shooter series, *Borderlands*, we questioned whether the screwball universe was conducive to meaningful, player-driven storytelling. After a 40-minute demo that set up the main characters and narrative arc for the season, we're still not convinced.

Tales From The Borderlands focuses on two playable protagonists: Rhys, a Hyperion data miner looking to make his way up the corporate ladder, and Fiona, his shady friend/rival who we still don't know much about. In the first episode, the two characters take turns retelling recent events to a third party, which the player then plays through, crafting the direction of the story. This narrative structure is perhaps the best thing *Tales* has going for it, as it introduces the concept of an unreliable narrator to the mix, allowing the characters – and by proxy the player – to embellish the story with larger-than-life antics.

Unfortunately, our demo features few of these moments, and focuses primarily on Rhys, a character with virtually no redeeming qualities. Rhys is smug, selfish, and tries overly hard to be clever, but even with Telltale's standard multi-choice dialogue options, he rarely has anything interesting or funny to say. Rhys is determined to one-up his smarmy boss, Hugo Vasquez, by buying a vault key out from under him via a shady dealer named August. Players learn about the deal while overhearing a phone call in Vasquez's office, then hacking his computer with Rhys' cybernetic eye while his boss isn't looking. The simple interactions are what we've come to expect from a Telltale

adventure game, but they feel slow and out of place in the *Borderlands* universe, like a *Star Wars* film that focuses entirely on scenes of the Galactic Senate.

Things eventually heat up when the surreptitious deal leads Rhys to Pandora, accompanied by his cowardly best friend who's just waiting to be sacrificed, Vaughn. The sheltered yuppies stick out like sore thumbs on Pandora and it doesn't take them long to rub a group of psychotic bandits the wrong way.

The ensuing battle highlights how Telltale is attempting to capture the action of the *Borderlands* series. Rhys takes control of a Hyperion mech, and can choose between several weapon types, then aim them at the attacking bandits. These actions are more elaborate than those found in *The Walking Dead* and *The Wolf Among Us*, but it's still not compelling. In the same way that nobody plays *Borderlands* for meaningful story choices, nobody plays a Telltale game for the QTE action sequences.

Once the bandits are dispatched, Rhys meets up with August and his distrusting girlfriend, Sasha. The sale quickly falls apart as Sasha objects to Vaughn's unplanned

presence, and the Telltale representative's dialogue choices only make matters worse. Eventually, August calls the deal off and tries to walk. Without warning, Rhys punches through August's chest and pulls out his still-beating heart. Sasha swoons at Rhys' display of bravado and falls lovingly into his arms, as Vaughn kneels down and makes it rain cash in slow motion.

Fiona promptly calls B.S. on Rhys' spontaneous power fantasy, snapping the narrative and the player back to present day. Now it's her turn to recall what "really" happened, but as Fiona prepares to launch into her version of the events, the demo ends.

Our look at *Tales From The Borderlands* constituted only part of the first of five planned episodes. During that time, some jokes landed, more than a few fell flat, and numerous callbacks to characters and elements of the series reminded us of what we love about *Borderlands*. Beyond those superficial references, however, most of *Tales From The Borderlands* reminded us of what doesn't matter in *Borderlands*. Now the rest of *Tales* needs to prove why it should.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**



Rhys can choose between the offensive capabilities of this Hyperion mech during combat, but the action sequences still aren't very engaging



The Legend Of Korra

Fight like the Avatar

Few licensed franchises today are as ripe for a game adaptation as *The Legend of Korra*. In the Nickelodeon TV series, protagonist Korra is the latest life of the Avatar – a reincarnating link between the spiritual and physical worlds. Korra possesses the unique ability to control or “bend” all four elements: air, fire, earth, and water. For the upcoming Legend of Korra downloadable game, Activision teamed up with Platinum Games to create an action experience aiming to capture the intensity of the show’s battles. I played a bit of *The Legend of Korra*, and I’m optimistic that it can appeal to hardcore Korra fans and stylish action enthusiasts alike.

The story, by series writer Tim Hedrick, takes place between the second and third season of the show. After a strange encounter with a vanishing old man, Korra awakens to find she has lost her bending. Determined to get her powers back, Korra sets out with mentor Tenzin to Air Temple Island and other locales from the show, where she encounters enemies old and new.

Cel-shaded graphics do justice to the animation of the show. All the areas I saw looked just the way they should; at Air Temple Island I could see the spinning air-bending training ring in the background, and Republic City’s Aang statue towered in the distance. All the show’s voice actors are reprising their roles for animated cutscenes and in-game dialogue, so the game sounds authentic.

Combat is the central focus, and should feel pleasantly familiar to action gamers. With fluid dodging, blocking, countering, and a deep combo system, it’s clear that Platinum Games was at home adapting the series’ trademark kung fu. Dynamic camera angles and over-the-top counter and finisher animations evoke games like *Bayonetta* with a Legend of Korra twist, and after each fight the



Members of the Triad bending gang are a little tougher than typical enemies, and use earth, water, and fire bending against Korra

player receives a ranking based on his or her performances. The show’s martial arts have been faithfully recreated in Korra’s combat animations, as each form of bending has its own easily distinguishable style modeled after the series’ choreography.

The difference between bending styles extends beyond animation, as every element has its own combo attacks based on light attacks and heavy finishers. At any point during a combo, Korra can focus her chi by holding down the button, charging up a light or heavy attack into a more damaging attack. A charged water whip might instead produce an ice attack, for example. Korra can also switch between styles on the fly, unleashing flashy multi-element combos like launching an opponent with earth bending and then juggling him in the air with water. Each element has its own strengths: Water bending is good for distance fighting, earth controls multiple enemies with knockbacks and launches, fire dispatches enemies one-by-one quickly, and air is versatile. Each element levels up

as Korra uses it, unlocking new attacks and combos. In tight situations, Korra can even tap into the Avatar state to deliver devastating special attacks.

Korra will need all the abilities at her disposal. Across the levels, the player faces off against technological chi-blockers and their mech-tanks, the Triad bending gang, and more. Multiple difficulty levels are offered, and even the casual setting was surprisingly demanding. Along with the fighting-focused areas, *The Legend of Korra* features an endless runner-style minigame between levels featuring Korra’s pet polar-bear dog, Naga, and a pro-bending mode separate from the story, featuring all the rules from the show and several tournament-style tiers of difficulty.

The Legend of Korra’s faithfulness to the show is bound to please fans, but its stylish visuals and dynamic combat have the potential to make it a good game in its own right. If you enjoy the cartoon, action games in general, or both, you should watch for this downloadable title later this fall. » **Harry Mackin**

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

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Platinum Games

» **Release**
Fall

Homeworld Remastered Collection

The intergalactic hunt for Hiigara begins again



» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Gearbox Software

» **Developer**
Gearbox Software

» **Release**
Winter

The '90s were a heyday for terrific PC strategy games like Warcraft and Civilization. Later in the decade, developer Relic traded out the real-time strategy genre's standard 2D gameplay perspective with ambitious 3D space exploration. Homeworld and its sequel delivered universe-spanning adventure like few games before it. Gearbox has not forgotten Homeworld's legacy. Since acquiring the franchise rights in 2013, the developer has been hard at work on HD remakes of the two celebrated RTS titles.

The story of Homeworld is about a civilization, Kharak, which discovers a crashed spaceship with technology far exceeding its own. This new tech, along with a map pointing toward their homeworld of Hiigara, sparks a united industrial effort to blast off into the stars. In the single-player campaign players harvest asteroids for resources, expand their fleet with new ships, and battle rival factions in open space. In addition to remaking both games with gorgeous new high-definition visuals, Gearbox is also unifying the multi-player experiences of each game under a single umbrella.

Puritanical fans of the original 1999 Homeworld and its 2003 sequel, Homeworld 2, should be happy to know that the Homeworld Remastered Collection includes the original games in addition to the updated versions. Speaking of the original Homeworld titles, Gearbox is working closely with former Relic developers to ensure the remake lives up to the series' vision. This new collection should be the perfect opportunity for would-be space explorers to fire up their hyperspace modules on the hunt for Hiigara. » **Tim Turi**



3D battlefields add a unique layer to real-time strategy



Your fleet harvests resources from asteroids to expand its numbers

Gauntlet

Co-op specialists tackle an old favorite

Arrowhead Studios is rapidly making a name for itself in the cooperative game space. The excellent *Magicka* games offer a tongue-in-cheek take on the classic fantasy wizard, and the upcoming *Helldivers* is a hotly anticipated sci-fi cooperative shooter on Sony platforms. The studio owes a lot to the original 1985 *Gauntlet*, which helped establish the potential for multiplayer dungeon crawl experiences, so it's appropriate that Arrowhead is taking its own swing at the classic franchise in the upcoming downloadable revival.

While the new *Gauntlet* can be played solo, just a few minutes playing that way establish that something important is missing. The cooperative vibe is central to what makes the game fun, and with each added character, the onscreen craziness becomes more compelling and tense. Like in the original games, players choose between four main characters (see sidebar) that have their own distinct abilities and strengths. The separation between characters goes deeper than different onscreen actions. Controls are also different for each of the four characters, each optimized to match that character's style. The elf's twin-stick shooting is a far cry from the warrior's button-mashing axe attacks.

The adventure finds the four heroes summoned by the villainous wizard Morak to run a gauntlet of fearsome dungeons in pursuit of the shards of an ancient sword. Morak offers a running commentary to the heroes as they progress, praising their feats of strength and agility, and ridiculing them for their mistakes – especially when someone shoots the all-important, health-restoring food. Morak's comments are just one of a few ways that

Arrowhead acknowledges the clichéd quality of the *Gauntlet* fantasy formula, and while the combat remains intense, the team isn't afraid to poke a little fun from time to time.

Levels are brimming with enemies, and in keeping with the tone of the original arcade classic, the bad guys tend to be destroyed much easier than in most action/RPGs of recent years. The challenge comes instead through the sheer number of attackers, and the devilish attack patterns they use to bring you down. Enemy archers sometimes aim and hold their shots until you stop moving. Shielded enemies keep their defenses high whenever you're facing them, waiting to attack until you've shifted your attention to other foes. Monster-summoning stones endlessly produce enemies, just like in the old games, forcing the party to wade deep into a sea of monsters to stop the flow. Spike and blade traps add an extra layer of challenge, threatening your already fragile health bar. Some players may balk at the surprising challenge presented by many of the levels, which demands smart teamwork to survive.

Dungeons are filled with gold and keys to open inaccessible areas, along with explosive barrels that might be placed next to cracked walls to uncover a secret chamber. Tracking down the extra gold is worth the effort, because in between missions you're able to head to the shop to upgrade. The merchant provides new armor and weapon options for your adventurer, along with ability-adding relics that map to the shoulder buttons. These abilities offer an intriguing way to customize your character, granting your warrior a burst of speed, or your wizard the chance to

create illusionary mirror images of himself.

I only played the first few levels of *Gauntlet*, hopping back and forth between heroes as I tried to pick a favorite. But even those brief hours left me both nostalgic about the old games and excited about Arrowhead's new direction. It's odd that *Gauntlet* remains a PC-only title, as its controller-based interface is the best way to play. Regardless of platform, Arrowhead is looking like it will have another cooperative title to help solidify its position as a leader in the field. » **Matt Miller**

» **Platform**
PC

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

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
Arrowhead Studios

» **Release**
September 3

Choose Your Hero



Thor the Warrior

Red-tinged Thor leads at the front of the pack, rapidly tapping his main attack button to clear the way. A leaping forward slash does significant damage, while a whirlwind strike takes out every enemy closing in. By aiming the right stick, he can charge forward, knocking foes aside that stand in his path. Thor's attacks necessarily put him near large groups of enemies, so his health can drop suddenly if overwhelmed.



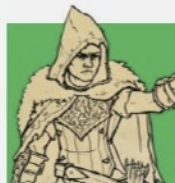
Thyra the Valkyrie

The blue-clad last of the valkyries wields spear and shield as the other front-line attacker. Her spear thrust can be devastating to a line of enemies, and her boomerang-like shield throw calls to mind a certain star-spangled Avengers hero. When overwhelmed, Thyra has an aimed shield block on the right stick that can offer some protection as she moves to safety.



Merlin the Wizard

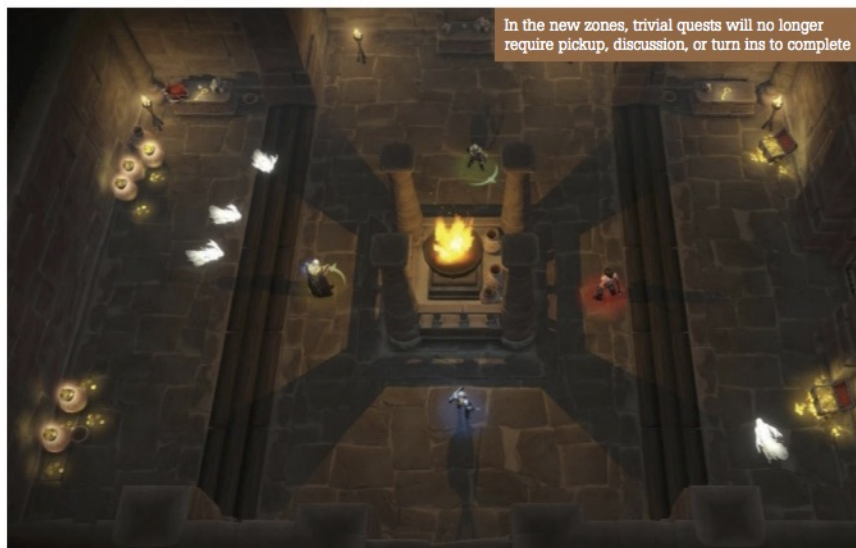
The most challenging character to master right out of the gate is the old, yellow wizard. Drawing clear inspiration from Arrowhead's own *Magicka* games, taps of the face buttons prep one of nine spells that Merlin can cast at will. Different combos lead to everything from a freezing ray to a spinning vortex of fire. Learning each spell and when to cast it is essential for success.



Questor the Elf

The fast-moving green elf focuses on ranged attacks, but with a handy trick when overwhelmed. The simplest controls of all the four characters still require some skill to use well; aiming the right stick sends out a flurry of arrows in that direction, just like any classic twin-stick shooter. He can also tap a button for a quick dodge that makes it easy to avoid traps and swarming enemies. When surrounded Questor can drop a bomb to gain a few precious seconds. Unfortunately, the elf is also the character voted most likely to shoot the food.

In the new zones, trivial quests will no longer require pickup, discussion, or turn ins to complete



ArcheAge

This Asian MMO entrenches itself firmly in the sandbox



- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
MMORPG
- » **Publisher**
Trion Worlds
- » **Developer**
XL Games
- » **Release**
2014

The new free-to-play MMORPG ArcheAge sets sail for the West this year as Trion Worlds brings the title over from Asia. Developer Jake Song of Lineage fame is realizing his vision of a game that combines traditional MMO aspects such as dungeon crawling and leveling with a sandbox-style world. Players can choose which style of gameplay syncs up with their preferences and engage in massive-scale competitive multi-player, single-player exploration and farming, or guild-centric crafting and sieging.

ArcheAge's open world allows players to craft and battle with ships, fight over trade routes and territory, and start their own farms and houses right out in the world itself. Forget instanced housing; players can make changes to the landscape and the actual game environment. Zones are designated as safe areas, battle areas, or areas that shift between safety and war, so players always know where they should set up camp based on these factors.

A focus on a player-driven economy forms the backbone ArcheAge, with the world's many resources up for grabs. Crafting encompasses everything from weapons and

armor to vehicles and food. Travel is major component of play, from standard personal mounts that are commonplace in today's MMO space to massive ships and special gliders that allow players to travel great distances in the air.

These methods of transport lead to new systems of combat and exploration. A solo player on a rowboat may discover a wayward island with some treasure buried off the coast. A group of seasoned wayfarers on warships may choose to square off against a massive kraken. Want to go on a fishing raid? You can.

With a focus on the world and travel, ArcheAge does not offer an easy form of instant travel via a looking for group system. Players can teleport, but they need to use

reagents in order to use these systems. The largest dungeon in the game currently is suited for around 10 players, but other open-world encounters and bosses may take many more.

ArcheAge also includes a player-run judicial system to punish players engaging in unsavory activities. Evidence is needed to conduct a trial, so you must discover a murderer's bloody footprints to bring the felon to justice. Imprisoned characters can try to break out of jail or work off their time, but these courts essentially give players the ability to police themselves.

With sandbox MMORPGs in short supply compared to the more common theme-park model, we're excited to see where ArcheAge takes us later this year. » **Daniel Tack**





World Of Warcraft: Warlords Of Draenor

For the next expansion, Blizzard takes a streamlined approach

World of Warcraft has been around a long time, and this next expansion is the perfect opportunity for Blizzard to dial things back on several levels, provide a welcoming point of entry for new players, and add some new features and mechanics. If you've never played WoW but always had a few friends trying to pull you in, now might be the time to look into one of the genre's longstanding titans.

Blizzard is cutting back numbers on items and stats to bring things back down to a manageable level. Players won't be hitting for meaningless millions of damage, as this "stat squish" keeps things the same without the ridiculous numbers on items, hits, and heals. Questing is experiencing another minor shift, as many of the kill and fetch missions have been moved to tasks to be completed when the player enters an environment rather than having associated adventures clog up the quest log.

Newcomers can enter the game at level 90 alongside all other players and be on relatively even ground on the trail to the new level 100

cap. This is a significant shift that gives new players the ability to party up and be on par with seasoned veterans that have been playing the game for years.

Blizzard is also cutting down on "ability bloat" so players won't have racks and racks of hotbars featuring abilities that might only be used once in a blue moon. With the new player experience in Warlords of Draenor, having instant access to a hundred different abilities and passives might be overwhelming, so players will be eased in gently by the expansion's intro, learning a few different core abilities and slowly moving into the full play experience.

Players get to experience WoW's take on player housing for the first time with the introduction of garrisons. Players can build up a base of sorts, complete with all kinds of beneficial buildings that confer special abilities, bonuses, items, and high-tier crafting materials and recipes. Buildings are unlocked and built via questing and resource collection, and can be slotted into locations of varying sizes on the garrison map.



Within the garrison structure, players also get to use the follower system for the first time. Players recruit NPCs to their garrison, sending them on missions. These missions are simulated encounters, with players sending out multiple followers to tackle various challenges and opponents.

A mission where a player sends out an Undead and Tauren hero to fight a Gronn may take 30 minutes or so, but there will be a wide range of available missions and tasks. Your followers level up as they complete missions and bring back treasure chests based on their level of success. It's a fun minigame where players queue up their army of followers to complete tasks while they go about their regular dungeon crawling, PvP, or questing endeavors.

World of Warcraft has continually proven itself year after year, expansion after expansion. With few changes to the successful formula, accessibility for new players, and player housing, Warlords of Draenor is poised to continue the legacy. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Developer**
Blizzard Entertainment

» **Release**
Winter 2014

Frostfire Ridge is just one of the new zones players can explore in Draenor





Path Of Exile: Forsaken Masters

Enlist the aid of new allies

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1 to 6-Player Online
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Grinding Gear Games

» **Developer**
Grinding Gear Games

» **Release**
Mid August

Path of Exile is bringing something for everyone in the upcoming Forsaken Masters expansion. While the Sacrifice of the Vaal expansion catered to endgame players, Grinding Gear Games is taking a holistic approach with Forsaken Masters to ensure that all players have plenty of content to explore. In this upcoming expansion, players can recruit the talents and services of the seven titular masters and engage in an all-new housing system that offers players their own towns and guild hubs.

Players come across the masters as they move through traditional game zones, and each adds their own special quests and events. Initially, the masters give the players tasks to perform in given zones, such as an assassination mission, but as players help the masters, they increase their reputation with each. Players can then invite them to their hideouts to assist with crafting and high-end item customization.

Masters can level up and unlock a wide range of special abilities and items that players can barter for. These expensive items are refreshed daily, and the masters occasionally have unique items and other high-end goods. These purchases all use in-game currency, but Grinding Gear Games is considering offering town decorations and a pet playground as microtransactions.

In addition to being special evolving vendors, the masters function as an avenue for players to curb the randomness involved

with crafting and customizing their items. For example, the Marauder master allows you to customize mods on your gear such as fire resistance. It won't be quite as potent as a rolled fire resist value, but it's an option for players looking to gain easy access to desired modifiers.

The Shadow master holds the secrets to socketing options, allowing players to link sockets and change socket colors in a much

easier fashion than current options allow. Players familiar with the game know that it can take thousands of hours to try to get a perfect six-socket item just the way they want; the Shadow master should help players roll the slots they need.

Getting a few masters to the hideout should be a task that many players can accomplish, but gathering a larger roster will require quite a bit of effort and play time. » **Daniel Tack**





Strife

S2 returns for round two

S2 Games' Heroes of Newerth was one of the first entries that brought the MOBA to the forefront outside of Warcraft III modded maps, and now the studio is back with another free-to-play genre title. Strife doesn't stray far from the three-lane map template so often associated with MOBAs today, but it attempts some things to separate itself from the rest of the burgeoning crop.

Fast movement speeds, a slightly smaller map to play in, pets, crafting, and a focus on reducing potential toxicity are at the forefront of Strife's approach. No more fighting over last hits; a resource-distribution system ensures that working as a team gets everyone paid.

There's also Krytos – the map's signature NPC monster that players can team up and tackle. In other games, this huge creature would be a source of large experience gain, currency, and other boosts. In Strife, the team that bests Krytos actually recruits the monster to push a lane, contributing to a team push victory into the opposing base.

Pets have both active and passive boosts and can be leveled up. If you're a fan of defensive characters, for instance, the turtle Tortus might be for you. If you're into gold gain, Luster is a good go-to companion. Pets provide accents to your characters and can be collected for multiple play style options.

Crafting allows players to take core items and modify them to their specific tastes and goals. Perhaps one item has health and damage on it but your character builds don't need the health, so the item can be modified to suit you.

All of this customization is tied to in-game currency acquisition and account-level unlocks as players move through the game. Players do not have to use any sort of currency to unlock characters.

We're interested in seeing how S2 applies the knowledge gleaned from Heroes of Newerth for this second go at one of PC's most popular genres. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
10-Player Online Action

» **Publisher**
S2 Games

» **Developer**
S2 Games

» **Release**
TBA

Dawngate

Joining the crowded MOBA fray

Dota 2 and League of Legends already command massive audiences, but that's not stopping EA from jumping into the increasingly crowded MOBA scene. Its free-to-play effort, Dawngate, follows the well-worn path of its influences. As with many other titles in the genre, players can unlock new characters and customizations through both in-game currency and microtransactions as they play match after match, but developer Waystone is bringing a few critical changes as well.

The core team from Waystone Games came over from Maxis after developing Darkspore

and pitched Dawngate in 2011 as a vision for EA to move into the MOBA space. After getting a green light, it began building out a full-fledged team.

The three-lane map template that serves as the basis for many MOBAs is modified significantly in Dawngate, moving to a two-lane system that may not seem like a huge shift but has powerful implications. Without three lanes to manage, the five-player team can allocate players differently, with two in each lane plus a jungler and perhaps a dedicated roaming position to set up ganks and focus

on other elements of gameplay, such as Vim font acquisition.

The map features a total of four Vim fonts that provide secondary objectives to capture and hold, and provide crucial extra resources to the team that owns them. If the game bogs down and the team in the lead is finding that the push into the final base is too tough, they can fall back and capture the Vim fonts to get a serious edge.

Waystone is also doing a few interesting things outside the map, as players pick roles before the game even starts and get rewarded for playing in a specific fashion. If you're playing a carry role and last-hitting is the most important thing you're doing in lane, there's a role to select that will give you additional rewards for doing your job.

The same goes for other traditional MOBA team positions, such as support, jungling, and ganking. This system rewards players for playing "correctly" and can make setting up balanced teams a little easier on everyone.

With a cast of colorful, flavorful characters and some changes to the tried and true MOBA template, it will be interesting to see how Dawngate fares for casual and competitive players when it moves into full release. If the game piques your interest, you can sign up and play the beta now. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
10-Player Online Action

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
Waystone Games

» **Release**
TBA





gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

94 Divinity: Original Sin

Divinity: Original Sin allows Larian Studios to show off what it means to be a great PC RPG. While some aspects of the title take things back to a different age of gaming, a modern style, complete freedom, and an incredible turn-based combat system set this title apart from the often derivative homages to the golden age of computer RPGs.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Diarrhables: diarrhea that gives you rabies.

AWARDS

<p>gameinformer PLATINUM</p>	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
<p>gameinformer GOLD</p>	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
<p>gameinformer SILVER</p>	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
<p>gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH</p>	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

Disney
INFINITY

2.0
EDITION

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Official Prima
Strategy Guide



Sniper Elite III

Rebellion misses the mark

6.5

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**

Blast German soldiers in the face from hundreds of yards away with brutally detailed X-ray kills

» **Graphics**

Impressively detailed at a glance. Upon closer inspection, enemy soldiers move like clunky puppets

» **Sound**

Lots of German and Italian chatter mixed with annoying sound effects that play when you're exposed

» **Playability**

The core sniping mechanics work well, but clumsy stealth mechanics and a variety of bugs sully the experience

» **Entertainment**

Shattering enemies' skulls with a well-placed rifle round is satisfying at first, but the see-through kill gimmick gets old quickly

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Style 1-Player Shooter (2 to 10-Player Online) **Publisher** 505 Games **Developer** Rebellion **Release** July 1 **Rating** M

Shooting someone in the face with a sniper rifle is nasty business. The Sniper Elite series has made a name for itself by embracing these skull-busting kills in all their gory detail. Developer Rebellion has ratcheted up the brutality of these slow-motion X-ray sequences with detailed musculature on every skeleton. Unfortunately, boring campaign missions and frequent bugs hold back Sniper Elite III from its sharpshooting potential.

Rebellion swaps out the grim, bombed-out European cities of the previous entry with the bright, rugged terrain of Africa. The arid, sun-bleached environments look beautiful at first, but despite the exotic surroundings, the mountainous terrain and dirt roads all start to feel the same after a while. The illusion dissolves further thanks to the erratic, dim-witted Nazi mucking up the scenery. The German soldiers have stiff, robotic patrol routes and swivel in place unrealistically when they get a bead on you.

Sniper Elite III's linear campaign is all about sneaking through Nazi encampments among the baking sands (but they're never called Nazis and all the swastikas have inexplicably become palm trees on their banners). Sometimes missions call for you to place explosive charges, offer supporting fire, or assassinate top-ranking German officers. It's old hat for the military shooter genre, and I eventually began mindlessly chasing down objective markers without thinking much about it.

The campaign objectives all serve as a framework for the solid long-range gunplay and mediocre stealth elements. Lining up shots with your rifle adheres to the familiar routine of pressing a button to hold your breath and dial in a shot. As in Sniper Elite V2, lining up a good shot and pressing the trigger initiates a satisfying slow-motion kill sequence. The camera follows your bullet's dramatic path from the rifle barrel all the way to the doomed soldier. For headshots, the X-ray vision shows the projectile's grisly path through the skull, complete with bone-splintering entrance and exit wounds. Femurs split, eyeballs pop, and testicles explode in these gruesome finishers. The macabre, unflinching executions are satisfying at first, but the thrill wears off after seeing someone's teeth erupt from their mouths for the umpteenth time.

For a game with the word "sniper" in the title, I used my silenced pistol an awful lot. You crumple quickly when facing off with too many enemies, so avoiding attention is important. This strategy is at odds with using a loud sniper rifle, however, so you mask your noise using thunder or backfiring generators. This mechanic is fun and novel, but I routinely avoided sniping when these obscuring noises weren't available. You can't fire off more than a couple shots without having to relocate so enemies don't find you. I understand the

logic, but you can still run away from your sniping perch and then just head back when the enemies lose your trail. It comes off as an annoying, half-baked attempt to keep players circulating around the map.

Speaking of annoyances, Sniper Elite III is filled with considerably more bugs than its predecessor. The game has a weird habit of resetting objects in the world when loading a save. Sometimes vehicles that blew up 20 minutes ago explode again or corpses wiggle around sporadically. Other times the effects are more troublesome, like one instance when an enemy vehicle suddenly appeared near my location and gunned me down instantly each time I reloaded. While most of the hiccups are aesthetic, they disrupt the mood of the high stakes trek behind enemy lines.

Whether you beat or abandon single-player, competitive and cooperative multiplayer modes are available. I enjoyed the tense, long-distance free-for-all sniper battles that tested my patience and perception. Laying down traps and relocating after taking a shot is more gratifying when facing off against human players rather than the idiotic A.I. foes. The entire campaign is also playable cooperatively, which helps spice up the mundane missions. Synchronizing your shots and covering one another's back injects excitement into the ho-hum mission structure. However, Rebellion has ditched split-screen co-op and doesn't support matchmaking, so hopefully you know someone with a copy of the game if you want to try it out.

I openly admit that I love gory kills and living the hero sniper fantasy, but Sniper Elite III only partially delivers on the latter. If you can't get enough of dramatic, transparent shots of enemies getting shredded by sniper fire, Sniper Elite III has you covered in spades. If you're interested in more motivation beyond the glory of the kill, however, look elsewhere. » **Tim Turi**





Transformers: Rise Of The Dark Spark

A slapdash insult to fans

Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Activision
Developer Edge of Reality **Release** June 24 **Rating** T

5

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Shatter the positive progress of the franchise established through the earlier Cybertron games by merging with the movie continuity and releasing an incomplete game

» **Graphics**

Muddy textures, jittery animation, overly reflective metal – the visuals are outdated and appear hurried

» **Sound**

The gravitas of Peter Cullen's voice acting can only carry you so far. The endlessly looping music and voice cues push far past that point

» **Playability**

Shooting and movement controls are functional, and transforming between vehicles and robots can still be fun

» **Entertainment**

A shameless cash-in attempt is only redeemed by passable cooperative multiplayer

» **Replay Value**

Low

Activision and Edge of Reality have squandered the goodwill established by High Moon Studios' strong Transformers Cybertron games, releasing a product that fails on several fundamental levels. It isn't entertaining, doesn't remain true to either of the disparate storylines (which should never have been linked), and can't overcome technical performance issues.

The story sees the Autobots and Decepticons competing over a MacGuffin called the Dark Spark. Two sections starring the movie characters bookend a larger middle section set on the Transformers' home planet, but the occasional moments that nod to the broader lore are ruined because the fundamental crossover concept is so ill-advised.

The Transformers franchise doesn't exactly live and die by great storytelling, so the narrative missteps could be forgiven if the action held up. It does not. The first few minutes of gameplay offer an ample illustration of Rise of the Dark Spark's most potent problems. Within minutes of hitting start, you're in the first of many wave-based fights that last too long. Bland, colorless buildings frame the environment as a poorly animated character runs forward along concrete platforms that exhibit little texture or variation. Enemies begin to spawn and run around in haphazard patterns that stand in for competent A.I. tactics. Level design and encounters are a mess throughout the campaign, including a few misguided attempts at platforming challenges and several points where checkpoints are too infrequent and set before cinematic sequences – never a good idea.

The return of the popular wave-based Escalation mode manages better than the single-player offering. New upgradeable defense installations fill every one of the eight varied four-player Escalation maps; laying out turrets, healing stations, and decoy holograms to bolster your team's defense is rewarding. However, Escalation is not without its problems. Awful enemy spawn placement, too few ammo drops, and the absence of difficulty modes all pull down the experience.

Even with a passable cooperative experience, Rise of the Dark Spark feels rushed and haphazard in execution. If Activision cares to know, fans are indeed hungry for a new Transformers game – just not one that shamelessly tries to make us trade our hard-earned cash for junk. » **Matt Miller**

The Wii U Difference » 4

Rise of the Dark Spark is available on modern home consoles and PC, and it performs similarly on all of them. Unfortunately, the Wii U version leaves out the occasionally enjoyable cooperative escalation mode – one of the only reasons anyone might enjoy the game.

Magic 2015 – Duels Of The Planeswalkers

Polish and customization make a great pair

Style 1-Player Strategy (2-Player Online)
Publisher Wizards of the Coast
Developer Stainless Games **Release** July 16 **Rating** T

8.75

Xbox One • 360 • PC
iOS • Android

» **Concept**

Travel through the planes while building up a deck and collecting cards

» **Graphics**

Slick and stylized UI brings the card game to life on digital platforms

» **Sound**

Nothing special here, but sounds are appropriate for alerting players to game actions

» **Playability**

As with the rest of the series, if you are looking up an entry into the world of Magic: The Gathering, Duels of the Planeswalkers is the best way to learn

» **Entertainment**

Deck customization has been something players have been asking for with this series, and it's a wonderful inclusion here, with the card pool borrowing from some of Magic's recent sets

» **Replay Value**

High

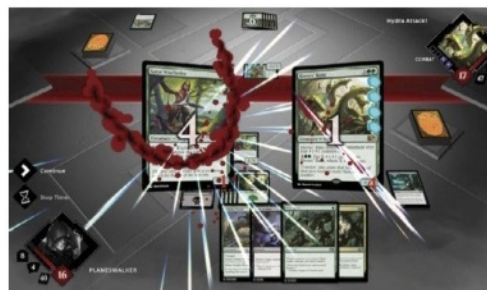
Even with many online card games entering the digital market, Magic: The Gathering still earns its place among the best. Magic 2015 – Duels of the Planeswalkers takes the classic tabletop card game and packages it so it's easy to learn and play. Though it is an annual series, this year's installment finally makes a change that players have been begging for: the ability to build their own decks. New players can use an automated deck builder to make sure things come together nicely without moving into advanced customization, and a solid variety of starter decks to suit any playstyle are available right out the gate.

Players unlock packs and cards as they move through the planes and encounters. In addition, the title allows players to unlock collections and packs of cards at various price points. This progression loop is fun and effective for moving through the campaign and getting together a collection for online play, but players looking for specific cards to "complete" the perfect deck for online duels may feel obligated to purchase some digital boosters. If you're on the iPad version, you can play through the tutorial and Innistrad for free before making a purchase to unlock the full game.

I started with the black/red starter deck, which focuses on stealing opposing creatures and then sacrificing them. After a few matches I had some spiffy new cards to consider adding to my deck, including Magic 2015's new Indulgent Tormentor. There's a good variety of cards to be had from Magic 2015 and from some of the most popular recent sets – including favorites from Theros, Ravnica, Innistrad, and Zendikar. Difficulty can be adjusted based on player preferences, so newcomers can jump right in against mild opponents and receive plenty of tips as they play cards. As with previous iterations of the series, the UI and gameplay feel excellent and intuitive.

While previous versions of Duels of the Planeswalkers often included an additional game mode – like sealed deck play or Planechase – deck customization is the only real extra here. It's a huge jump for the series and a fantastic addition to the game, but having another one of the signature game modes would have been nice. As it stands, players are restricted to traditional campaign crawling, extra NPC duels, and standard multiplayer modes.

Magic 2015 – Duels of the Planeswalkers is an excellent option for gamers interested in learning how to play Magic: The Gathering. Deckbuilding mode gives seasoned veterans an option to dive into the complexity immediately, and new players can become more comfortable exploring the customization that makes Magic great. » **Daniel Tack**



Tales of Xillia 2

Back for another round of banter and battles

7.75

PS3

» Concept

Reunite the old cast with two new characters while confronting the mysteries surrounding Rieze Maxia and Elympos

» Graphics

The graphics are subpar, and jarring framerate issues are distracting. Old cast members have been redesigned for a fresh look

» Sound

Competent voice actors bring sincere emotion to the scenes. The music gets repetitive, though

» Playability

The controls are smooth, and the difficulty can be changed on the fly to match your mastery of the mechanics

» Entertainment

Outside of a few bad choices, Tales of Xillia 2 tells an intriguing story with wonderful character interactions, and the battle system is fun and challenging

» Replay Value

Moderate



Style 1 to 4-Player Role-Playing Publisher Bandai Namco Developer Bandai Namco Release August 19 Rating T

The original Tales of Xillia won me over with the mature issues it tackled and the enhancements to the series' real-time battle system and overall structure. This sequel continues to build on its interesting characters while adding some new gameplay features, but Tales of Xillia 2 stumbles compared to its predecessor.

Tales of Xillia 2's issues first appear in the pacing; the plot starts slow, taking about 10 hours to get interesting. Part of this is due to a debt-paying mechanic introduced early to get players to engage with the side content and to better prepare for the challenging battles. The debt plays into the story and begins as a great way to get acquainted with the world, but later it becomes an annoying roadblock since you can't progress unless you pay off a portion. The frustration mounts quickly, since the side quests rely heavily on fetching objects and hunting monsters, which is not engaging. The only worthwhile extra content is the side chapters for the returning characters.

The narrative improves as it progresses, and held my interest more than its predecessor. Set a year after the events from the first game, Xillia 2 has interesting beats (like exploring alternative timelines), but its shining stars are the character relationships. The new protagonists, Ludger and Elle, have a growing, heartfelt bond that's fun to watch. Elle stands out as a child dealing with the hardships of losing a family member and finding her place in the world, quickly becoming my favorite character. The returning cast is also redeeming. I thought Leia was dead weight in the last entry, but Tales of Xillia 2 makes her much more interesting as she strives to become a successful journalist. Moments like these make me recommend playing the first game before entering Xillia 2. It's not required, but one of the highlights is seeing how the old cast has grown.

Tales' action battle system, which plays out like a fighting game, continues to improve, and is more fun than ever. Battles are fast-paced and frantic, and you're equipped with a wide variety of skills to handle the baddies. You can swap weapons this time around, taking down enemies with dual blades, a sledgehammer, or guns akimbo. Each weapon plays differently and works better for certain enemy types. In addition, a transformation skill also provides more powerful attacks for a short period, saving you from jams during tough boss battles.

Bandai Namco also brings back the wonderful link system, which pairs up two characters for bonuses as they flank enemies. The longer Ludger links up with another character, the more his affinity increases. Affinity also increases based on your responses in dialogue, giving you a reason to choose your words carefully. The affinity system is an excellent addition, as building relationships nets you new combat skills.

Learning special attacks and skills has changed. Instead of Xillia's sphere grid-like upgrade system, which I enjoyed immensely, this entry's progression system focuses on

elemental properties. You equip orbs, each with a number of the six elements, to learn and upgrade attacks and skills. Some orbs contain overlapping skills, so if a character already knows an ability, the new orb improves it. I didn't enjoy this as much as the previous streamlined system, but it's solid nonetheless.

Tales of Xillia 2's biggest crime is how much it reuses content. You visit new places in Elympos, but the Rieze Maxia environments are ripped from the first game. On top of that, you visit dungeons, towns, and fields multiple times, and it's even worse if you factor in the side content. Many of these places aren't anything to write home about, as the majority of dungeons are linear affairs devoid of puzzles. At least fields are cluttered with collectibles that help for customization and upgrades, but the lack of new environments is disappointing.

Tales of Xillia 2 has its flaws, but it also has plenty of what fans of the series love: Challenging battles, great character interactions, and a story full of twists. I'm still continually lured in by the series, I just wish this entry felt like more than a sideways step.

» Kimberley Wallace



Wayward Manor

A truly ghastly experience

Style 1-Player Puzzle Publisher Moonshark, Inc. Developer The Odd Gentlemen Release July 15 Rating NR

The indie studio behind *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom* teamed up with Neil Gaiman – the award-winning writer behind novels such as *Stardust* and *American Gods* – to create a new puzzle game about a ghost who terrorizes the inhabitants of a house. The concept sounds intriguing. Unfortunately, the final product is such a messy and unpredictable experience that I feel haunted by the ghost of disappointment.

Set in the 1920s, the tale begins when the eccentric Budds family moves into an old Victorian estate. Players take on the role of a disembodied specter who bullies the Budds until they run screaming from their new house. Gaiman's macabre, poetic prose stands on par with much of his work, but the story itself is not compelling. The sparse narration does not give much insight into the characters, so kicking the Budds out of their own home is never rewarding.

Unfortunately, *Wayward Manor's* weak narrative is actually its strongest element; the gameplay falls even flatter. As a ghost, you float above each room and possess certain objects in order to scare each room's inhabitant to the breaking point. In theory, this concept sounds ripe for unique puzzle challenges. In practice, *Wayward Manor* is a confusing



and repetitive experience that often left me wondering what to do.

One of *Wayward Manor's* biggest problems is that few of its puzzles are clever enough to be called puzzles. Most of the time you're turning on old-timey record players or opening windows so gusts of wind push objects across a room. Many of these tasks are repeated over and over – I can't even tell you how many bottles I knocked off rafters and onto people's heads. Even when *Wayward Manor's* puzzles are more involved, they don't make sense,

and you're free to click on every object in the environment until you hit the lucky combo that frightens whoever happens to be around – effectively removing any need for strategic thinking.

I kept asking myself, "Is this really the same studio that made *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom*?" At one point, I actually shut down the game because I thought maybe I'd booted up the wrong title by mistake. *Wayward Manor* isn't frightening, but it sure scared me away. » **Ben Reeves**

5

PC

» Concept

As a ghost, make statues shake and set off mousetraps, scaring a family until they flee from their home

» Graphics

Even for an indie game, *Wayward Manor's* boxy characters, humble environments, and simple animations leave something to be desired

» Sound

Narration by Neil Gaiman does a fine job setting up the story, but the sound effects for acquiring new fright powers are grating

» Playability

The simple puzzles don't take a lot of work to figure out, but random clicking could get you through most of them

» Entertainment

You'll enjoy turning this game off more than you enjoy any aspect of its gameplay

» Replay Value

Low



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Divinity: Original Sin

A truly divine RPG

9

gamerformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gamerformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (2-Player Online) Publisher Larian Studios
Developer Larian Studios Release June 30 Rating NA

PC • Mac

» **Concept**

Travel through an open world on a grand quest featuring turn-based combat

» **Graphics**

One of the best-looking games featuring the isometric old-school style

» **Sound**

An excellent soundtrack keeps things heated in combat and serene when appropriate. Plenty of spoken dialogue and sizzling fireballs are on point

» **Playability**

The action point system is straightforward and deep. With little direction offered, players need to do a lot of their own research, tests, and exploration

» **Entertainment**

Plan to lose hours of your life thanks to great character customization, stellar combat, random loot, puzzles, bosses, and mysteries

» **Replay Value**

High



We are currently amidst a great resurgence of PC RPGs that borrow from the greats of ages past while taking advantage of modern quality-of-life improvements, graphics, and sound. *Divinity: Original Sin* isn't just a great turn-based RPG; it stands tall on its own as an amazing title where players can truly blaze their own paths through the world as elemental wizards, crafty rogues, and brutal warriors.

You begin by choosing two main characters from a selection of presets. These templates are free to edit completely, but provide new players with some general class choices that come packaged with appropriate starting skills and stats. These two characters remain with the player, while two additional party members can join early on to create a full team of four.

Combat is turn-based, but never delves into a snoozefest. With no resources like mana or rage, action points do everything – from firing ricocheting arrows to summoning ice elementals. It's all about positioning, careful use of action points, and elemental combinations.

Here's one satisfying sequence: create a patch of poison, blow it up with a fire spell, then lay down a steam cloud and electrify it to place opponents in a state of perpetual stun. If you're not bringing any mage types into the fray, don't dismay – all classes have ways to deliver elemental attacks, which are the crux of combat.

Seemingly impossible encounters and epic boss battles can often be overcome by taking advantage of the environment or the elements. Have someone strong on your team? Have them hurl an oil barrel into the center of a pack of enemies. No fire arrows, flame spells, or other items on your team to light it up? Have a rogue flick a candle into the mix. The options a player has at their disposal is staggering at times, and there will be many moments as you move through the game where something will click and you'll say to yourself "Wait, I can do that?!"

If you want to be the traditional hero and follow quests by the book, that's your choice. If you feel like killing every NPC you come

across, that's your choice too. These decisions have consequences, but problems have many solutions. In one situation, I was faced with a suicide-explosion enemy positioned right next to an NPC I wanted to save. I chose to deal with the issue by simply using a rain spell to put out the bomb's fuse, but a teleport skill or stealth character probably would have handled it with equal finesse. You can even use these skills outside of combat, which means you can prepare for a fight with flame creatures by laying down a rainstorm, use explosive arrows to blow up landmines found by your perception skill before you ran into them and died, or use telekinesis to grab items from dangerous areas.

After digging into your abilities, you can also experiment with the crafting and bartering systems. I spent little time engaging in crafting during my run, but the option to create skillbooks and other various useful items is available. Instead of just using hard currency, players can also dump various goods from



Elemental combinations and interactions are the core of combat



Fail to dodge a giant fireball? You're gonna have a bad time

their pack into trade windows with vendors, who will give you credit for it at the store. Every NPC has an attitude toward the player, and these attitudes can be modified with gifts or skills that allow players to make better trades.

Whether you're making deals, killing town guards, or playing the hero, Divinity: Original Sin encourages you to explore the things that interest you. Will you spend hours in town without battling a single enemy talking to citizens, probing for information, and engaging in dialogue between your characters? Will you eschew the conversation and charge right out into the wilderness to battle beasts and undead? Will you wander from house to house, closing doors and taking down the inhabitants of the city until your pockets are bulging with stolen coin and treasure?

What Larian has done in this respect is incredibly impressive, and it gives the player true freedom and consequence for each action made. It's possible to complete the game "by the book" or as the annihilator of worlds, so

while decisions have consequences, nothing you do should lock you out of a playthrough. Just in case, save smart, save often, and try everything.

You're free to bring a friend along to control your second character with the game's co-op mode, and the modding community is sure to create additional scenarios to explore that will keep the title fresh long after your initial playthrough. My first run took about 60 hours, and I'm sure I missed plenty.

The experience is not without a few minor quibbles, such as disastrous misclicks that can occur from enemy/camera positioning and the inability to always have items show up on the ground. The complete freeform gameplay in Divinity: Original Sin can be quite daunting and frustrating, especially as a player navigates the minefield of the early game without any real direction. Embrace the lack of handholding and complete freedom, and you have an incredible title that provides many hours of entertainment.

» **Daniel Tack**



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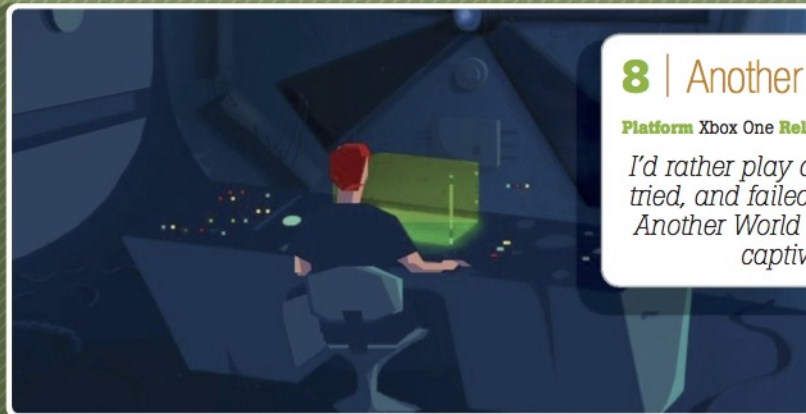
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the score



8 | Another World: 20th Anniversary Edition

Platform Xbox One Release June 25 Rating T

I'd rather play a faithful recreation of a classic than an attempt that tried, and failed, to tinker with what made it great in the first place. Another World holds up well all these years later, and it remains a captivating must-play for sci-fi fans. – Jeff Cork

9 | Dark Souls II: The Crown Of The Sunken King

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC Release July 22 Rating T

The zones themselves are among the most labyrinthine in Dark Souls II and include a huge amount of dead drops and lethal traps, which are often served up under duress from unwavering foes. This creates an atmosphere of claustrophobia and keeps an uncomfortable pressure bearing down on the player throughout the entire DLC experience. – Daniel Tack

7.5 | The Wolf Among Us: Episode 5 – Cry Wolf

Platform PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC

Release July 8 (PS3, PC), July 9 (Xbox 360) Rating M

I didn't walk away from the finale amazed, yet I did feel satisfied. Episode 5 ends smartly, leaving you with something to think about – one last mystery for the detective in you to examine. If only that last moment wasn't the only one in the five episodes that made me feel that way. – Kimberley Wallace

7.25 | Lifeless Planet

Platform PC Release June 6 Rating NA

The aspects of Lifeless Planet that succeed elevate it past the technical shortcomings, but only so far. You will find a compelling world and a story worth experiencing, but you do so at the expense of well-polished animation and gameplay. – Kyle Hilliard

6 | Tuffy The Corgi And The Tower Of Bones

Platform Vita Release June 24 Rating E

Tuffy's unforgiving design and reliance on rote memorization harken back to a time when I had nothing better to do than memorize tricky platforming sections. There's a reason I've moved on from those types of games, and why most developers have, too. – Jeff Marchiafava



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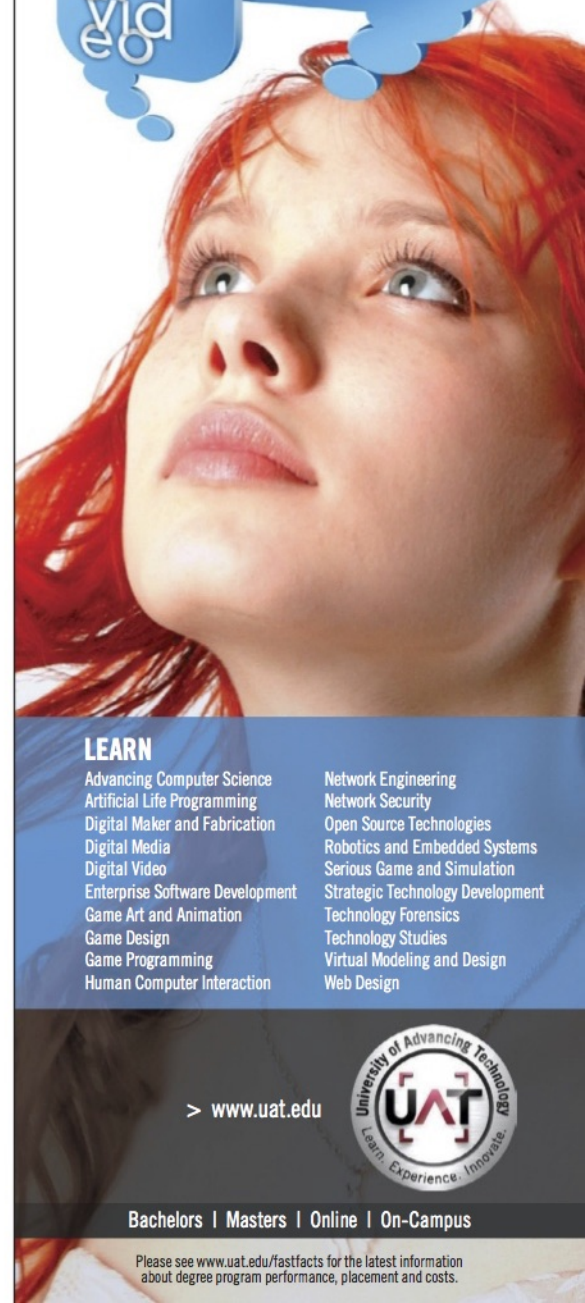
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Pac-Man, Off The Grid



by Jeff Cork

Looking back at an iconic character's strange forays into other game genres

Nintendo recently announced that Pac-Man would be joining the roster in the upcoming Super Smash Bros.

While the idea of watching the beloved character smack other heroes around might seem a little strange, it's not the weirdest thing he's done. Since he first rolled onto the scene in 1980, he's been a master of reinventing himself. Here are some of the most unusual games the mascot has appeared in during his long career.

1982



BABY PAC-MAN

Platform: *Arcade*

No cure seemed to exist for Pac-Man fever in the years immediately following the game's debut. The only treatment, in U.S. distributor Bally Midway's eyes, was to release sequel after sequel. While most were slight riffs on Pac's basic design – adding keys, faster monsters, and new mazes – this one stood apart, in large part thanks to its atypical design. Baby Pac-Man navigated a barren maze, which could be populated with dots by playing the attached mini pinball table.

1983



PROFESSOR PAC-MAN

Platform: *Arcade*

Rather than iterate on yet another maze game, Bally Midway opted out entirely with Professor Pac-Man. Instead, the character put on a graduation cap and took players to school. There, they'd answer a variety of puzzle-based questions. The game, along with Baby Pac-Man, was one of the breaking points between Namco and Bally Midway over unauthorized sequels. The friction eventually led Pac-Man creator Namco to dissolve its working relationship with Bally Midway.

1984



PAC-LAND

Platform: *Arcade*

Mario is often our go-to memory when we think about old-school platforming games, but Pac-Man did it in arcades a year before the plumber hit the pavement. Nintendo's game was arguably better in most ways, but it was fun to see Mr. Man stretch out his legs and go for an adventure. Though the perspective may have shifted, perhaps he and Mario can reminisce about the old days in Super Smash Bros.

1993



PAC-ATTACK

Platform: *Super Nintendo/Genesis*

Pac-Man boxed himself up again in this puzzle game. While screen-filling blocks were his most immediate concern, he did make time to gobble up those pesky ghosts. Players directed falling slabs into position, some of which included Pac-Man's nemeses. Connect a Pac-Man icon with those ghosts, and our hero goes into a feeding frenzy as he binges his way through all connected ghosts – providing combo opportunities.

1994



PAC-MAN 2: THE NEW ADVENTURES

*Platform: Super
Nintendo/Genesis*

This is probably the oddest entry in the bunch. In this action/adventure game, players interact with Pac-Man by shooting power pellets from a slingshot. You can choose to be helpful, plinking away at points of interest to catch his attention, or just be a jerk by peppering him with direct hits. Either way, its trial-and-error gameplay means you get your fill of seeing Pac-Man whimper.

1996



PAC-MAN VR

Platform: Arcade

The current wave of virtual reality has been trying to shake public perception of the concept – standing in a weird cage with a weird headset and holding a weird controller. That concept was popularized by Virtuality's arcade-based games. The company, which also made Dactyl Nightmare, tried its hand at a first-person Pac-Man game. It's laughably crude by today's standards, but it's probably the closest thing you can get to experiencing life through the character's eyes.

2005



PAC-MAN PINBALL ADVANCE

Platform: Game Boy Advance

His round body and family history make Pac-Man a perfect candidate for digital pinball, and Namco obliged with this handheld entry. Players use the flippers to help keep Pac-Man rolling, full, and happy. While the ghosts remain a perpetual annoyance, his biggest enemy is gravity. Fortunately, his open-mouth smile doesn't interfere with his smooth rolling.

2005



PAC-PIX

Platform: Nintendo DS

Nintendo's dual-screen handheld allowed players to scribble directly onto the touchscreen. Pac-Man is one of the most simple-looking characters in gaming. You'd think allowing players to draw their own version of the hero would be a cinch, right? Instead, we watched in horror as our misshapen creation fumbled around the screen, eating ghosts while probably wishing he were one, too.

2010



PAC-MAN PARTY

Platform: Wii

Minigame collections were all the rage on the Wii back in 2010. Pac-Man tried his noblest to get in on the craze, with poor results. It featured dozens of bland minigames, and reinforced the idea that, aside from Pac-Man himself, there simply aren't enough memorable characters in his world to support all types of games. Perhaps he should leave the partying to Mario and friends.

2011



=10

Platform: Android

If you enjoy Bejeweled-style match-three games and want to practice arithmetic, this is your chance to combine your passions. Okay, so it's not the best way to learn math, and it's not an especially great game. Still, it's further evidence of how versatile Pac-Man truly is, and how the genre-hopping character is absolutely here to stay. ♦



Assassin Or Templar?



Assassin's Creed has established a web of historical fiction connecting figures throughout time to one of the two competing factions in the series. Select (A) for a member or ally of the Assassins, or (T) to indicate a member, ally, (or puppet!) of the Templars, and find out how well you know the secret truth behind history. **by Matt Miller**

1. — Alexander II (1818-1881), emperor of Russia, king of Poland, grand prince of Finland

2. — Brutus (85 BC-42 BC), Roman senator, ally of Julius Caesar

3. — Henry Ford (1863-1947), founder of the Ford Motor Company

4. — Xerxes the Great (518 BC-465 BC), king of Persia

5. — Rashid ad-Din Sinan (c. 1132-1191), the Old Man of the Mountain

6. — Frank A. Vanderlip (1864-1937), banker, assistant secretary of the U.S. treasury

7. — Nikola Tesla (1856-1943), inventor, electrical engineer, futurist

8. — Marco Polo (1254-1324), explorer, Venetian merchant

9. — Alexander VI (1431-1503), pope

10. — Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321), poet, writer of *The Divine Comedy*

11. — Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), diplomat, philosopher, writer of *The Prince*

12. — Manuel Palaiologos (1455-1512), Byzantine nobleman

13. — Adolf Hitler (1889-1945), politician, leader of the Nazi Party

14. — Fang Xiaoru (1357-1402), Confucian scholar, bureaucrat

15. — George W. Bush (b. 1946), businessman, former president of the United States

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