WE'RE GIVING AWAY 10 XBOX 360 DREAM PACKAGES!
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THE YEAR IN PREVIEW

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TEEN
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Blood
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terrain, upon which you've confronted
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MATURE 17+
M
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Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Drugs

PlayStation.2

XBOX

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

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eidos

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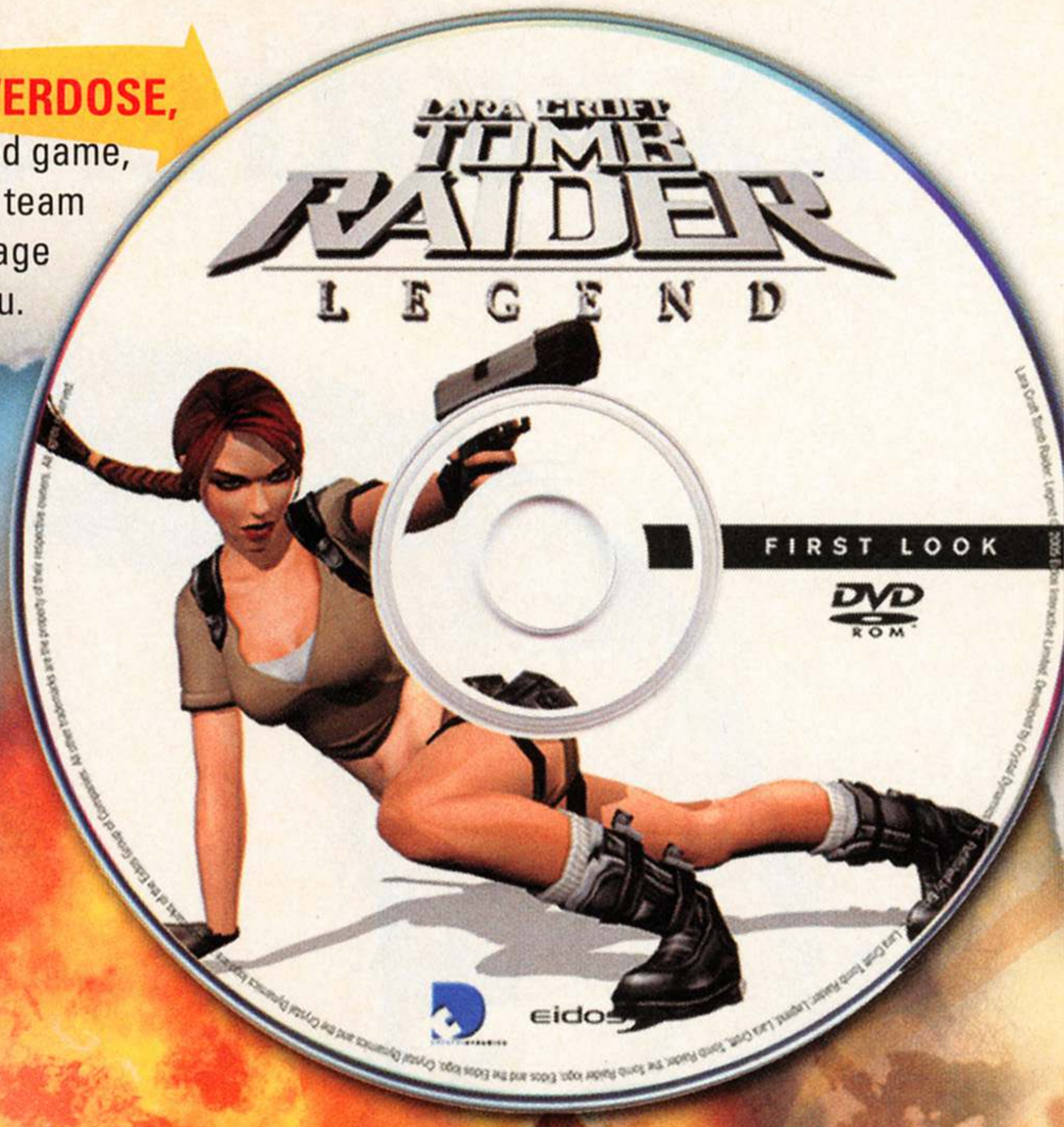

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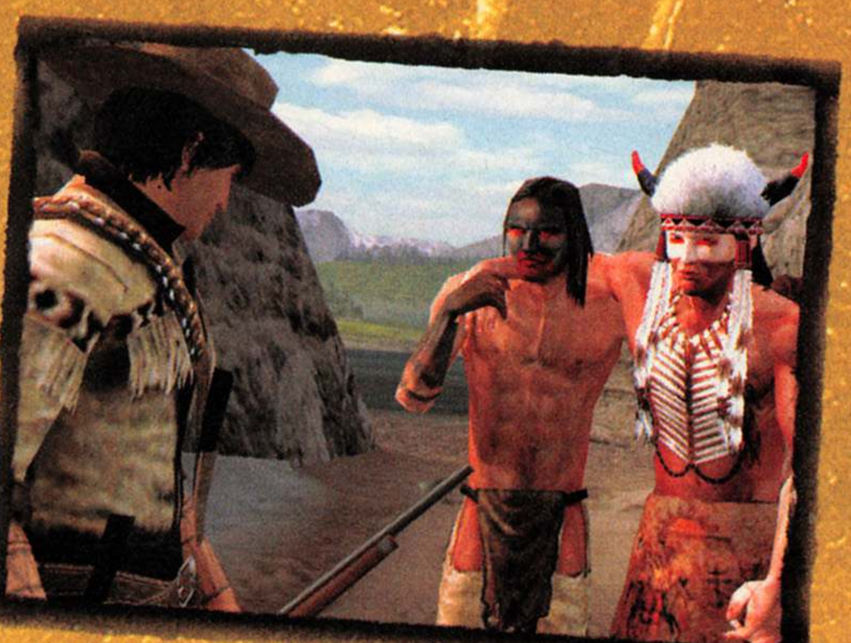

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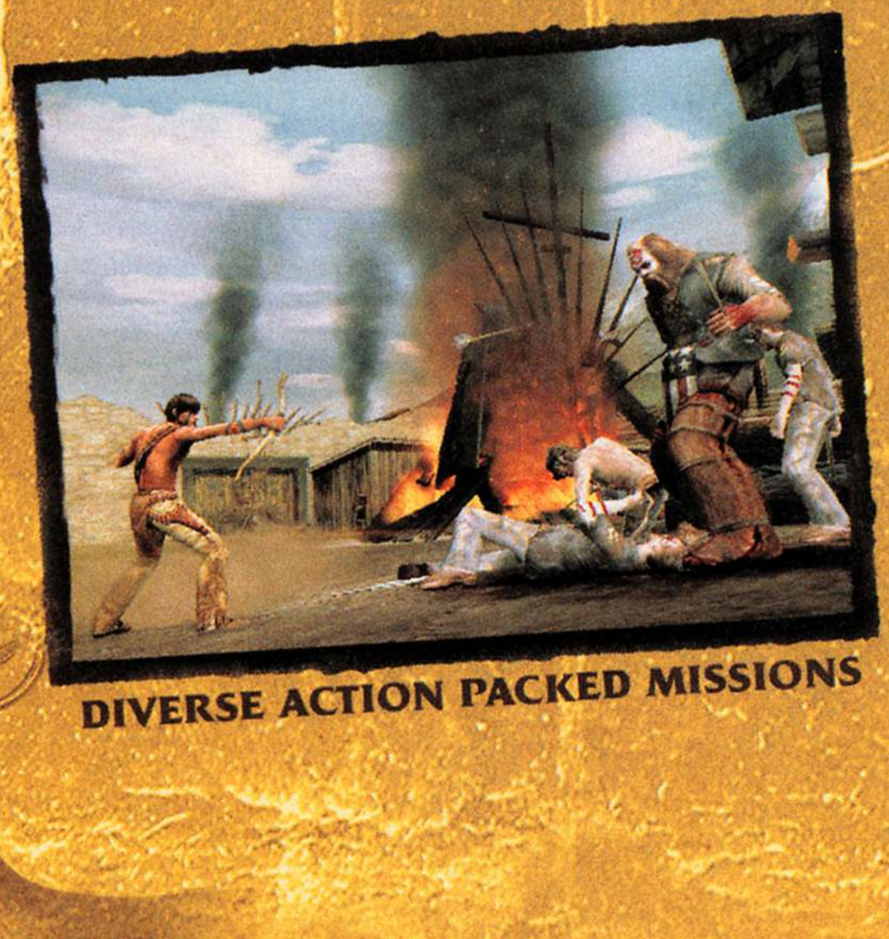

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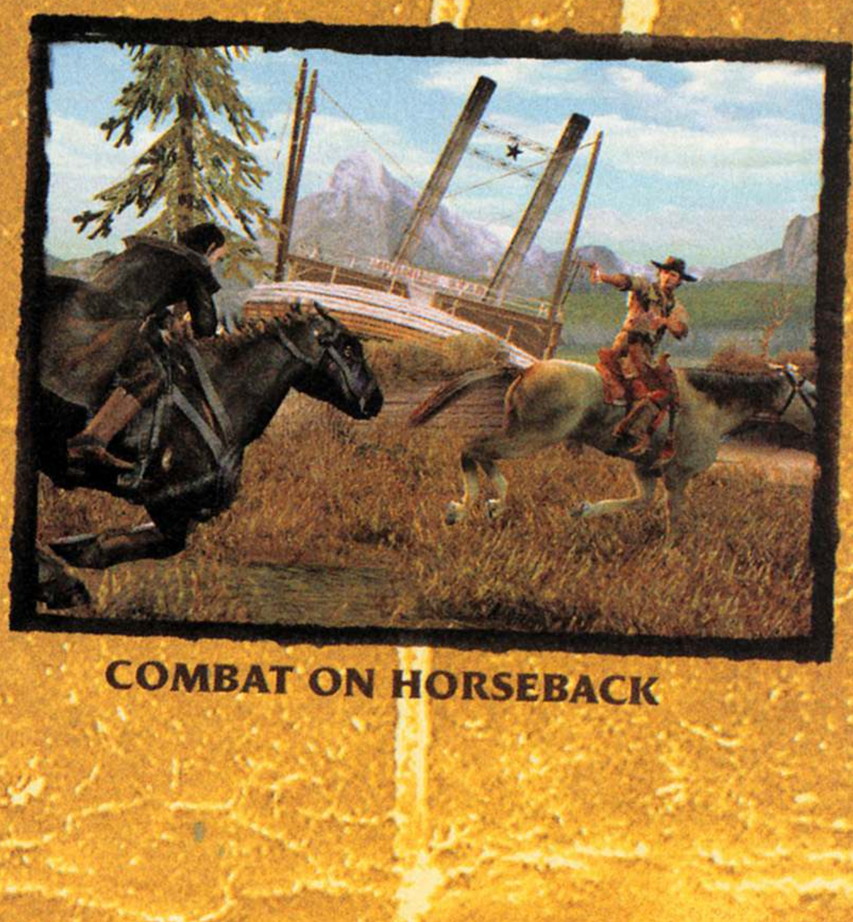

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Art Director Monique Convertito
Associate Art Director Stefan Belavy
Intern Melissa Tribur

CONTRIBUTORS
Robert Ashley, Tom Byron, Minerva Chihuahua, Che Chou, Karen Chu, Robert Coffey, Kevin Convertito, John Davison, Nigel Dennis, Randy Dodson, Jon Dudlak, Greg Ford, Jenn Frank, Garnett Lee, James Lee, Matt Leone, Nich Maragos, Kimi Matsuzaki, Patrick Mauro, James Mielke, Christian Nutt, Ryan O'Donnell, Jeremy Parish, Andrew Pfister, Joe Rybicki, Ryan Scott, Seanbaby, Gerry Serrano, Greg Sewart, Evan Shamoon, Justin Speer

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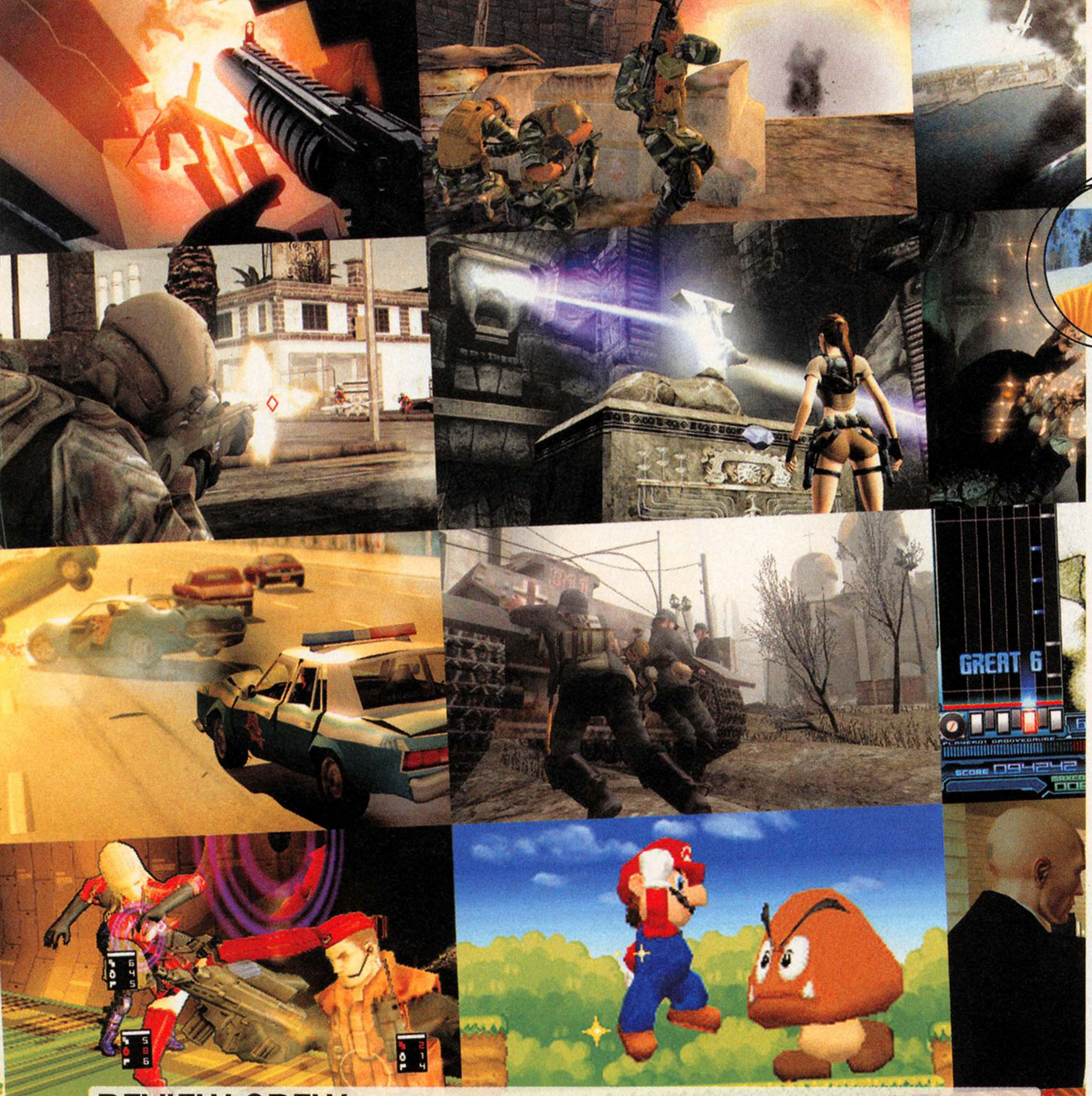

EDITORIAL

My industry pisses me off.

I was a little suspicious of the cover choices one of our competitors was making, so I checked in with a contact of mine from a major game publisher. "Yes," he confirmed. "We can pretty much get whatever cover we want from that magazine. All it takes is for us to meet with the publisher, promise that we'll buy some ads, and discuss the details from there." So...that magazine's cover stories are for sale. Great.

Recently, some publicists for another game company were lamenting the fact that they couldn't get any coverage on a certain, very high-profile website out there, because they weren't advertising with that site. To get stories written up on their games, they'd have to start spending the bucks. More editorial coverage for sale. Wonderful.

Sadly, I'm not making this stuff up.

I have no stake in these two situations, so why should I care so much? Because even though they're competitors, they affect my business and my reputation. Why do so many mainstream newspapers and periodicals command respect? Because they don't act like the idiots I referred to above. But how will gaming journalism, a relatively new field, gain any credibility when certain prominent outlets or even entire publishing groups whore out their editorial integrity (if I can even call it that)?

So now I have companies thinking they can treat *Electronic Gaming Monthly* the same way...that we're all like this. We even heard through the grapevine that one ad buyer recently told our sales department that their client wants Ziff Davis publications to start playing ball with them, or else they're pulling support (meaning, if we don't start putting their games on our covers, we can kiss that ad money bye-bye, as well as support for normal editorial coverage of their titles). You know what? Those guys can kiss my ass. With full backing from my editorial director (former *EGM* Editor-in-Chief John Davison), we're prepared to tell them to go ahead and pull that "support." We've never been and never will be beholden to any outside party. If we miss out on some coverage...well, too bad—ultimately, they're punishing their own customers (you guys), not us.

It looks like gamers won't be missing out on any of that coverage, though—a few of our competitors have editorial real estate for sale, and business is looking good for them.

—Dan "Shoe" Hsu, Editor-in-Chief

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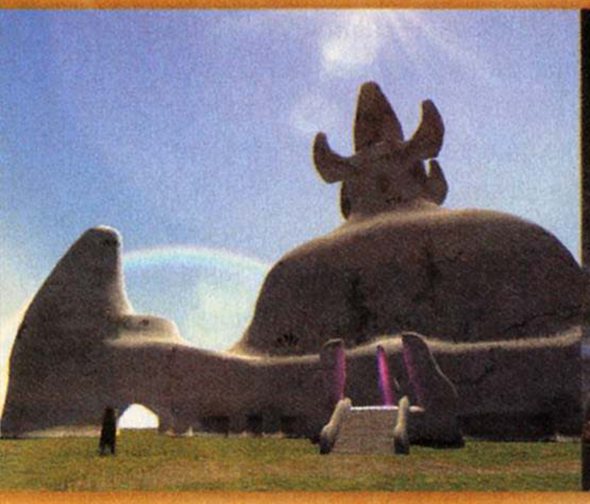

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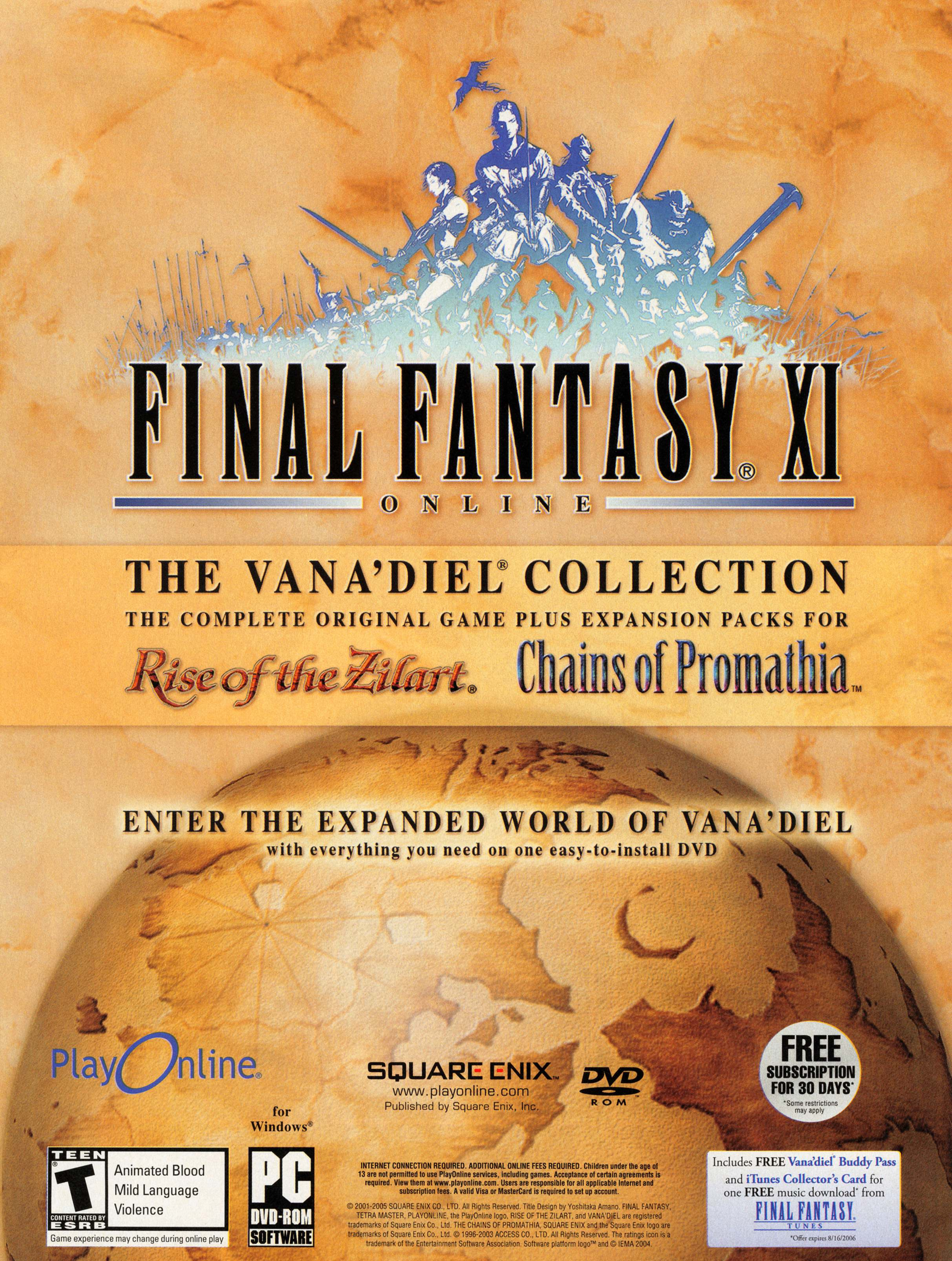

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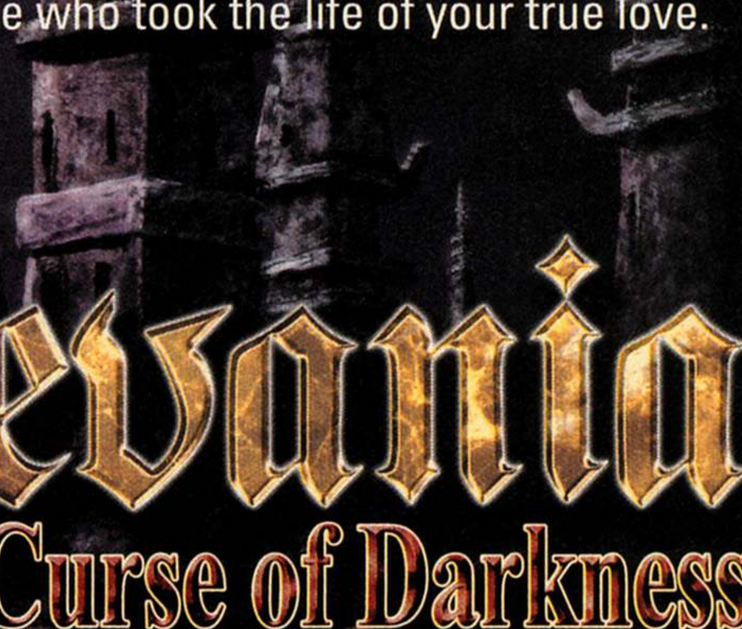

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letters

guns, nipples, and totally 733t videogaming

Tinfoil hat

You're owned by Sony! You must be! Reading your Xbox 360 launch guide [*EGM* #197] made me aware of that fact. How can you have five reasons not to buy a game system? And I don't want to hear about "getting the most for your gaming dollar." Gamers at every economic level buy systems. Kids living in poverty-stricken homes have them. I hope you have the same article for the PS3. If you don't like Microsoft, don't cover them.

—Joe Domanico

You're right. Our 24-page cover feature on Xbox 360 was just another clever ploy to destroy Microsoft, and it would have worked if it weren't for you meddlesome kids! Now no one can stop the "poverty-stricken" children from buying Xbox 360 Core systems.

Even overachievers play games

I'm an 18-year-old high school senior. My GPA is 4.5, and I'm the valedictorian of my class. I play soccer, run track, and have held down an after-school job for two years now. Next fall I'm going to an Ivy League college, and I hope to go to medical school after that. And to Jack Thompson and Hillary Clinton's utter shock, I am a gamer. I've played and loved *Resident Evil 4* and *Grand Theft Auto*, and I've yet to shoot up my school (actually, I want to be a doctor and help people) or fade into the cracks of the socially unacceptable. I'd just like to say to those two Joseph McCarthy wannabes: If you point out one extreme, please don't forget the other, because that's me and about 99 percent of gamers out there.

—Paul Goodnight

■ **Is this drawing corrupting our children? More at 11....**

Yeah, yeah, we're all geniuses. Call us back when life knocks the shine off your shoes, kid. Maybe then you'll understand the secret messages in *Grand Theft Auto* (must buy sequel, must buy sequel, must buy...).

Nerd gets pwned

It seems nowadays that everywhere you look there's a n00B. Personally, I pWn n00Bs for a living. Just the other day I rolled up in my drop top and pWned one with my +87 staff of n00B smiting. I really just want to know where all these n00Bs are coming from and if you have any advice regarding my problem.

—"Jam Masta n00B pWnr" Julian "Euthyphro" Levy

Well, you could get a job and save enough money to move out of your mom's house.

EGM makes kids do it

This is about your little sex comments. First of all: Your comments are lame—as in inappropriate, dudes! This mag isn't just for adults; kids about my age (12 to 17) are reading this crud. Not to mention my mom said three times in the past hour that she wished she never subscribed to it. Plus, you're contributing to HIV by making kids think they should go out and do it. So if all you can think about is sex, dudes, you need to get a life. And just because you can have sex in a game doesn't mean it's that great!

—Jacob C. Lenz

Dude, we haven't given anyone an STD—not that we know of, at least.

■ **No nipples = no fun**

Missing nipples

Looking at your review of *Trauma Center: Under the Knife* [*EGM* #197], I noticed the line that says, "Female patients: have no nipples. Sorry, Dr. Pervert." Getting to the point, what is the point of having female patients if we can't see their nipples? I know it's against Nintendo's standards, but come on. Oh, and being a guy has nothing to do with it.

—Ethan Saeedian

It's nipple-crazy gamers like you who make this mag too hot for kids. Not that we don't want hot pixelated nipple action in our surgery games.... ➤

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Real guns vs. virtual guns in D.C.

As I'm both a longtime gamer and a political junkie, it has always been interesting (and usually distressing) for me when gaming and politics cross paths, most recently in the fury surrounding the "Hot Coffee" mod in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* [see *EGM* #196]. But I was taken aback by Congress' action to insulate gun manufacturers from lawsuits [the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act], effectively saying that gun manufacturers shouldn't be held accountable for misuse of their product. So riddle me this, Batman: How can the same politicians say that gun manufacturers are not responsible for actions that coincide with the purpose of their product, but want game manufacturers held responsible for actions that may have been influenced by their product? I don't know, but that seems a bit hypocritical to me. Maybe all gaming needs is a lobbyist with NRA-level power. Every multibillion dollar industry should have one!

—Clinton Lindo

The videogame business does have a voice: the Entertainment Software Association. It's not quite as powerful as the National Rifle Association, lacking the semiautomatic "hunting rifles" and all, but its job is to stick up for the industry. If you're concerned about our right to bear virtual arms, you should check out www.theesa.com for more info.

Thanks for the comments, Clinton. For your Letter of the Month, you'll be receiving a (still-legal) game from the *EGM* vaults.

POST OFFICE

Rambling and ranting from our message boards, **boards.1UP.com** (look for *Electronic Gaming Monthly*'s forums)

Xbox 360 get: launch, later, or never?

Ragnarok_32: Later, when I don't have to sell my future children to Michael Jackson to afford one.

KadeMedion: I have two preordered. EBay, here I come!

Skett: Launch, thanks to one game: *Call of Duty 2*.

Jaundicejuice: Later. I wanna see how the competition stacks up (with actual games) before taking the plunge.

TheGamingIntern: Later. Probably five years later. I hate being poor.

NYCMajestic: What happened to maybe? Maybe...

Fedyakin: Maybe is not an option! Never give up! Never surrender!

Shadow_of_a_Doubt: Not for a new console. This year's PS2 lineup alone beats the 360's launch titles.

Botkiller: Launch. The launch lineup looks really good to me, and I'd end up getting one anyway.

Firestar46: Later, and only because I'll be able to stack my 360 on top of my original Xbox to form a Voltron of console goodness. It will run on *Perfect Dark Zero*... and love.

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E-mail us at:
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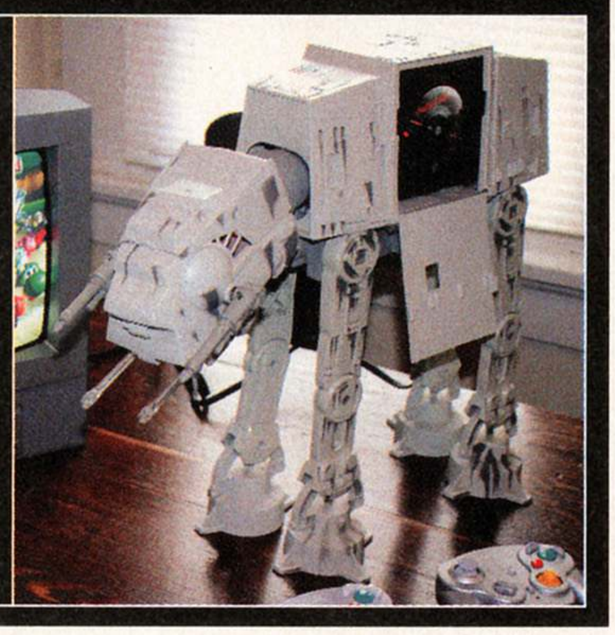
Jump in.

XBOX 360™

BONUS GALLERY

Going the extra mile for love of the game

Star Wars AT-GC

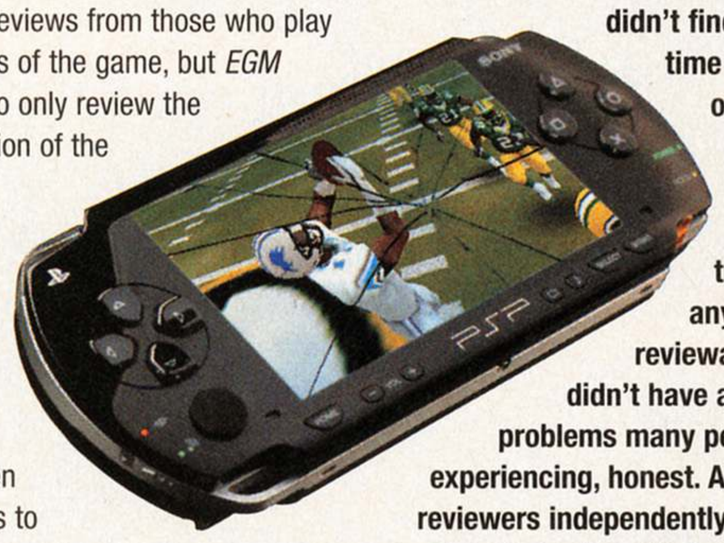


I fit the guts of a GameCube into an Imperial Walker (AT-AT), becoming quite possibly the coolest nerd ever! (Is that an oxymoron or what?) It sports two memory cards, four wireless WaveBird controllers, and a lovely red cockpit power light. I built it for display in my store, called The Gamers Haven, in Columbus, OH.

—Chett M. Muzzalupo

Bugged out over Madden

I cannot express my shock and dismay that *EGM* failed to recognize that EA shipped a defective product in the PSP version of *Madden NFL 06*. Anyone who has spent any amount of time playing the game knows that it causes random shutdowns of your PSP while playing franchise games. I expect such sloppy reviews from those who play preview builds of the game, but *EGM* is supposed to only review the shipping version of the game. I was counting on you to provide a real review. Instead, one of your reviewers even went so far as to give it a 9.0!



Clearly one of two things is occurring: 1) You have been lying to your readers for all these years regarding what version of games you review, or 2) You are so far down in EA's pockets that you can't give an honest review of a defective game. EA has even gone so far as to officially post a workaround for the problem (which doesn't work), yet there's no mention of it on your website or [in your] magazine.

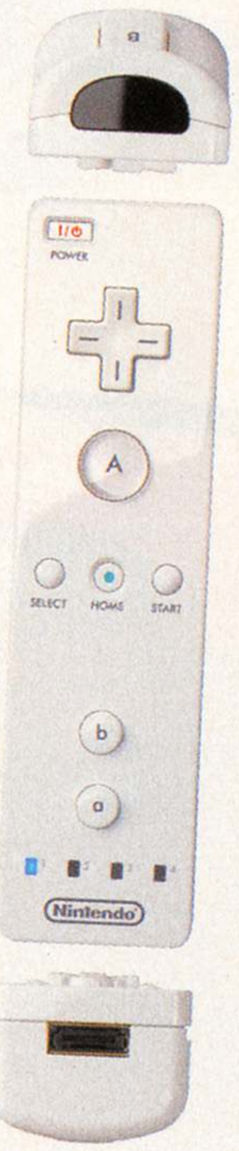
—Jay-Jay Lord

We didn't know about any problems with the game until a reader pointed it out to us on our message boards (boards.1UP.com) last month. We didn't find out about it in time to address it in our last issue, so we're doing it now.

We're not trying to hide anything—our reviewable versions didn't have any of the problems many people are experiencing, honest. All three of our reviewers independently played the game, then played it together for multiplayer, online, and so on, and didn't run into any of the bugs. Since not all of the PSP *Madden 06*s out there were affected, we're guessing we got burns of one of the healthy discs. We wish we could've warned our readers, but our discs (which were 100 percent reviewable, not previewable) were perfectly fine.

But now you all know, some PSP *Madden 06*s are bad. If you have problems, check out www.easports.com/madden06/psp_news.jsp for updates and a possible workaround.

Inclusive Revolution



I couldn't have been more then 5 years old when my dad brought home an NES, beginning my long gaming career. But a few months ago, I was in a surfing accident and am now a quadriplegic (technically now known as a tetraplegic). I'm not going to say the first thing to run through my mind was, "How will I hold a controller ever again?" But it was number two or three. I thought I was going to be forced to quit gaming forever. Then I read about the Revolution controller. It's perfect! I can hold a TV remote. I can swing my arm around. I can make small wrist movements (with my right hand at least). I can be a gamer again! Nintendo's willingness to think outside the box really will open up gaming to people who have never been physically able to play, and gamers like me, who for one reason or another are no longer able to play.

—Travis Taft

Gaming Gandhi

Recently, thanks to the scandal caused by *Grand Theft Auto*, gaming has once again found itself on the receiving end of negative press. Of the critics, none is more prominent than attorney Jack Thompson, who has repeatedly decried not only the videogaming industry but gamers themselves. As you can imagine, this angers me. But what really upsets me is the response from many gamers. The reports of large amounts of hate mail and even death threats directed at Mr. Thompson from gamers are, to say the least, very disappointing. This is like trying to smother a fire with kindling. I ask gamers to set aside your anger and prove to this man and those like him that we're not the violent, angry monsters he depicts us to be.

—Anthony Houdyshell

Honesty's the best policy

It seems like every month you guys print a letter from someone under 17 who complains that their parents won't buy them a Mature-rated game. Well, I'm 16, and I get M-rated games all the time. It's not because my parents are ignorant and don't know what they're buying me—it's the exact opposite. When I want an M-rated game, I tell them about all the "questionable" stuff inside. At the store I'll show them the ESRB rating and explain why the game got it. Sometimes I'll get on the Internet and show some screenshots of the most violent parts, and other times they'll do their own research.

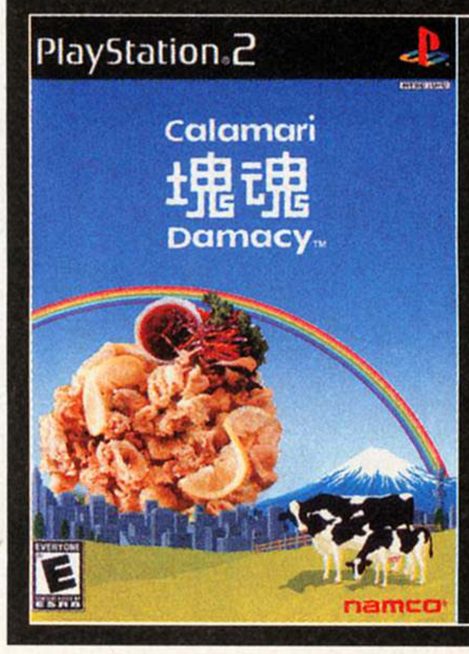
They know my personality and know I won't snap and bring an automatic rifle to school after playing *Halo 2* or take a baseball bat to my friend's head after playing *GTA*. Sometimes they say yes, and sometimes they say no. I don't call them four-letter words and run to my room screaming when they say no, either. I just deal with it. Maybe if more kids would stop calling their parents bad guys and told the truth about the games they wanted to play, they'd have better luck.

—Kevin Schram

Wow, we still throw fits at the toy store when our parents won't buy us stuff.

GAME DESIGN-O-RAMA

Got proof that game design is best left to the pros? Send your concept (with art) to EGM@ziffdavis.com, subject: Design-o-rama



Calamari Damacy

When the King of All Crustaceans accidentally destroys all the fish in the sea, he orders you, his shrimpy son, to put the inky lifeblood back in the ocean below. How, you ask? By frying everything and anything on Earth in a delicious beer batter, so he can start a fast food chain (Captain King's House O' Batter) and fund the Repopulate the Ocean Endeavor (ROE). The key to success? Sperm whales, of course! Try this game with some seaweed, or "reefer," as some folk like to call it. The shimmering water effects are amazing!

—Nate Zuckerman

Oops!

Reviewer David Chen lamented the lack of a tilt feature in his review of *Metroid Prime Pinball* [*EGM* #198] but discovered later that a tilt feature was included. David: "Players can, in fact, tilt the table by rubbing the screen, thereby obscuring the action. So yes, Virginia, there is a tilt feature, but it's a pain in the ass to use and won't really affect your enjoyment of this great game one way or another."

WIN THE GAME OF THE MONTH

We've hidden movie quotes in this issue—spot one and you can win our Game of the Month. Go to **EGM-GOTM.1UP.com**. There you can send us a message (subject head: **Movie Quote: EGM #199**) with the quote, the movie it's from, and the page number you found it on. Include your mailing address (no P.O. boxes!) and your full name. Three randomly selected readers will win copies of this issue's Game of the Month.

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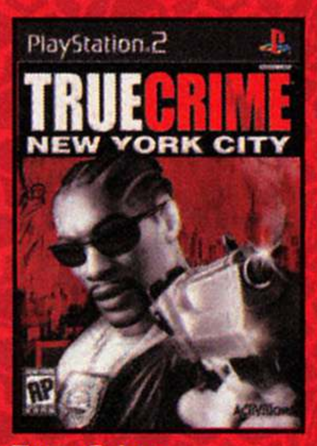
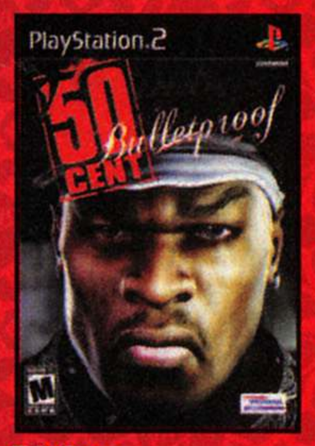
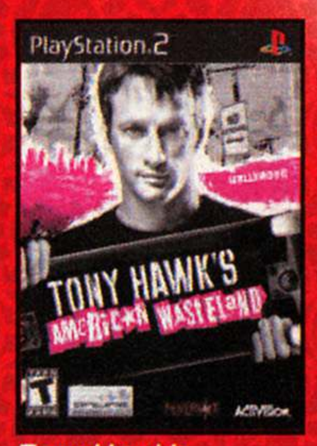
From Russia With Love
PS2, XBox, NGC



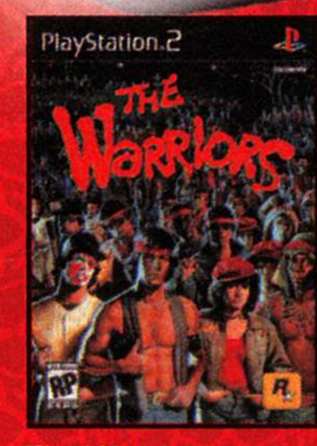
True Crime
PS2, XBox



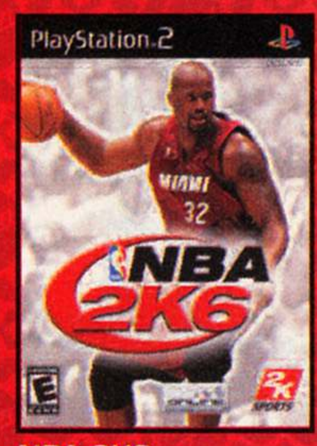
50 Cent Bulletproof
PS2, XBox



Tony Hawk's American Wasteland
XBox, PS2, NGC



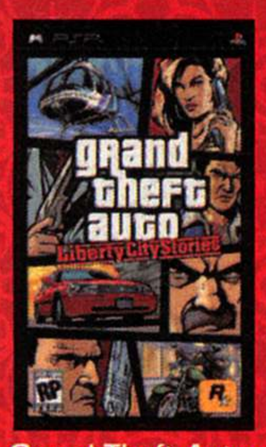
The Warriors
PS2, XBox



NBA 2K6
XBox, PS2

Matrix: Path Of Neo
PS2, XBox

NBA Live 06
XBox, PS2



Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories
PSP

Pelican Controller
PS2, XBox

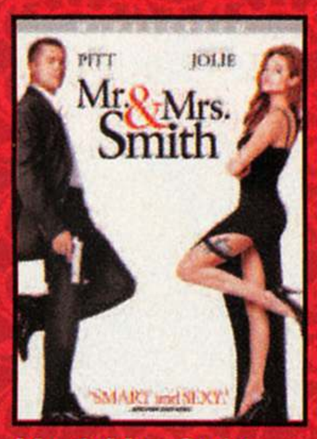
Shure E2C
Headphones

Sony CFD-G500
Boombox

IRliver H10Gray
MP3 Player

Resident Evil
PS2, XBox

MAKE ONE HOLIDAY STOP



Mr. & Mrs. Smith
DVD

HOLIDAY RESCUE KIT
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Lords of Dogtown
DVD

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—PSM

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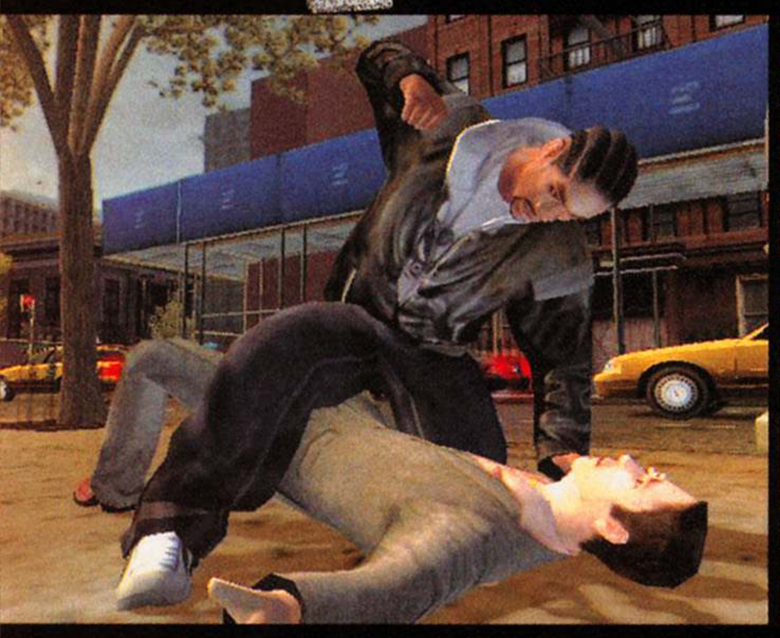

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MATURE 17+
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
Strong Sexual Content
Use of Drugs
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press start

gaming news, previews, solving world hunger, and other stuff

>> ELECTRONIC ARTS RECENTLY ANNOUNCED THAT BIG-TIME HOLLYWOOD DIRECTOR STEVEN SPIELBERG (*JAWS*, *JURASSIC PARK*) HAS SIGNED

THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF DS WI-FI

Everything you need to get your Mario mojo working...online

Online? It's-a-not-for-me. That's been Nintendo's attitude toward online gaming for some time now. (Company execs cited "lack of profitability" as its reason for staying offline.) The GameCube has only one Internet-ready title, the role-playing *Phantasy Star Online*, and it didn't even come from Mario's bunch. But the hardware maker is finally changing its tune; Nintendo just added online functionalities to its DS handheld (which before only featured local wireless play) and is releasing games that support it. Since we know some of you are new to this whole Internet-gaming thing (especially if you're a Nintendo fan), here's the 411 on playing your DS online. ***—Jeremy Parish***

Essential gear

Q: How do I take my DS online? Do I need some kind of special adapter?

A: Actually, the DS comes with wireless networking capabilities built right in to the hardware. The trick is getting it to connect to the Internet. First, you need a game that actually supports online action. Next, you need a Wi-Fi connection. Many wireless routers work with the DS out of the box, but even if your eyes go out of focus when people toss around terms like "802.11b," Nintendo's got your back with its wireless adapter. Simply plug this little guy into any USB-equipped Windows-based PC with an Internet connection and you can jump online with your DS: quick, simple, painless.

Q: Great! But what about when I'm away from my PC?

A: Nintendo will be offering tons of free hot spots across the country thanks to its partnership with McDonald's and Wayport. Drop in for a Happy Meal and humble your favorite *EGM* editor in *Mario Kart* all at once. Just be sure to wash your greasy fingers before using the touch screen.

Q: But I don't want Ronald and Grimace to supersize me!

A: That's cool—most free, non-password-protected 802.11b-compatible Wi-Fi networks should work. Other commercial networks (like the T-Mobile Wi-Fi available at Starbucks) won't, however: They require the use of a Web browser (and a credit card) for access. And right now, Nintendo has no plans to release browser software (like Internet Explorer) for the DS. But that can't stop someone else from doing so....

Making friends (and keeping them)

Q: Online gaming is cool, but most people on the Internet are jerks.

A: Don't sweat it. When you log on to the Nintendo network for the first time with a new game, you're given a friend code unique to you. This allows you to create a buddy list, so that you can be sure to play games only with the jerks you actually like.

Q: Nice. How do I add friends?

A: Simply exchange codes with your pals, then add their codes to your game. The resulting list is saved in your game card and is keyed to your hardware. Obviously, this means you can't simply use a single buddy list across every game. You need to add your friends to each game you wish to include them in.

Q: Does that mean I can't use my *Mario Kart* buddy list on a friend's DS, too?

A: Well, you can, but it's complicated and means that you'll overwrite the buddy info on your friend's DS. So you'd better hope your friend really, really likes you.

The name of the game

Q: What DS games can I look forward to playing over the Internet?

A: It's a short list for now. Nintendo's lead-off for the online launch is the one-two juggernaut punch of *Mario Kart DS* and *Animal Crossing: Wild World*. A few other titles in the near future will offer connectivity features, too, including the next *Tony Hawk* and, of course, *Metroid Prime Hunters* (which is slated for early 2006).

Q: So what else?

A: Well, it's all speculation at the moment, but Nintendo's always been a strong supporter of multiplayer gaming...it's just that until now the company has supported multiplayer of an offline nature. But some of those games are a natural fit for remote action. *Zelda: Four Swords Adventures*? Check. *Super Smash Bros.*? Definitely. Mario's sports spin-off du jour? Rock on.

Q: But I'm a sketchy communist/terrorist who hates *Mario* and *Zelda*!

A: Don't worry; the DS should get plenty of third-party support, too. Square Enix, for instance, is working on a DS version of *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles*, an RPG that's just begging for online gameplay. And the sports-heavy publisher Electronic Arts is a given.

"Is there anybody out there?"

Q: Voice chat—yay or nay?

A: At the moment, Nintendo says the DS won't support voice chat over its Wi-Fi connection. That's not to say it won't happen, though; Nintendo previously showed off a voice-over-IP demo that proves it's certainly possible. For now, any crude insults you want to hurl must be typed out one letter at a time in games that support text chat.

Backward compatibility?

Q: So will it be backward compatible? Can I play my older DS and GBA games online, too?

A: Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it rock to be able to go head-to-head against a stranger in *Pokémon Emerald*? Or to swap *Nintendogs* gifts with some dude in Kalamazoo? It totally would! Unfortunately, it's also totally not going to happen. This is simply due to technical limits (read: The games weren't designed for it).

Q: So...no online PictoChat?

A: Sorry, you'll have to wait until the next version of the DS if you want to send dirty doodles of Samus to fellow perverts across the country.

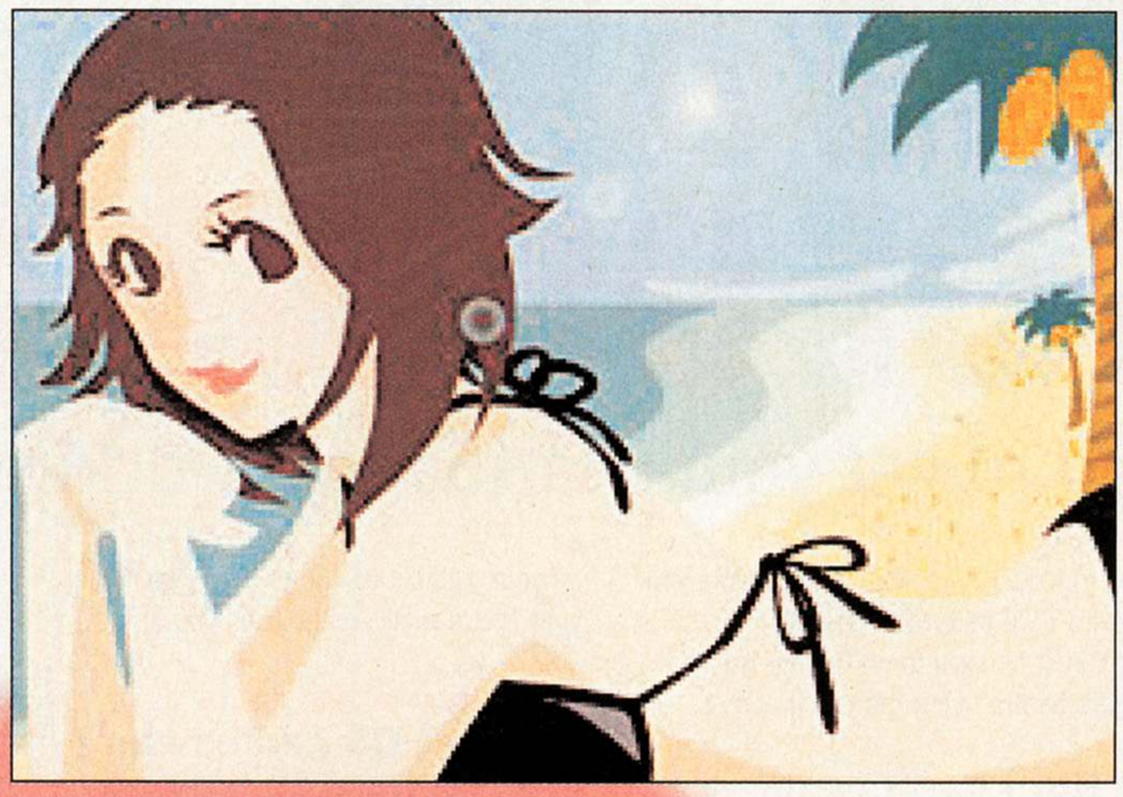
DS Online: Round 1

So what's the online DS experience actually like? Turn to pages 130 and 132 to see what our reviewers had to say about going online with *Mario Kart DS* and *Animal Crossing: Wild World*.

ON TO HELP CREATE THREE ORIGINAL VIDEOGAMES FOR THE PUBLISHER. EXPECT SOME INFO ON THESE NEW PROJECTS IN 2006.... >>

EGMINTERNATIONAL

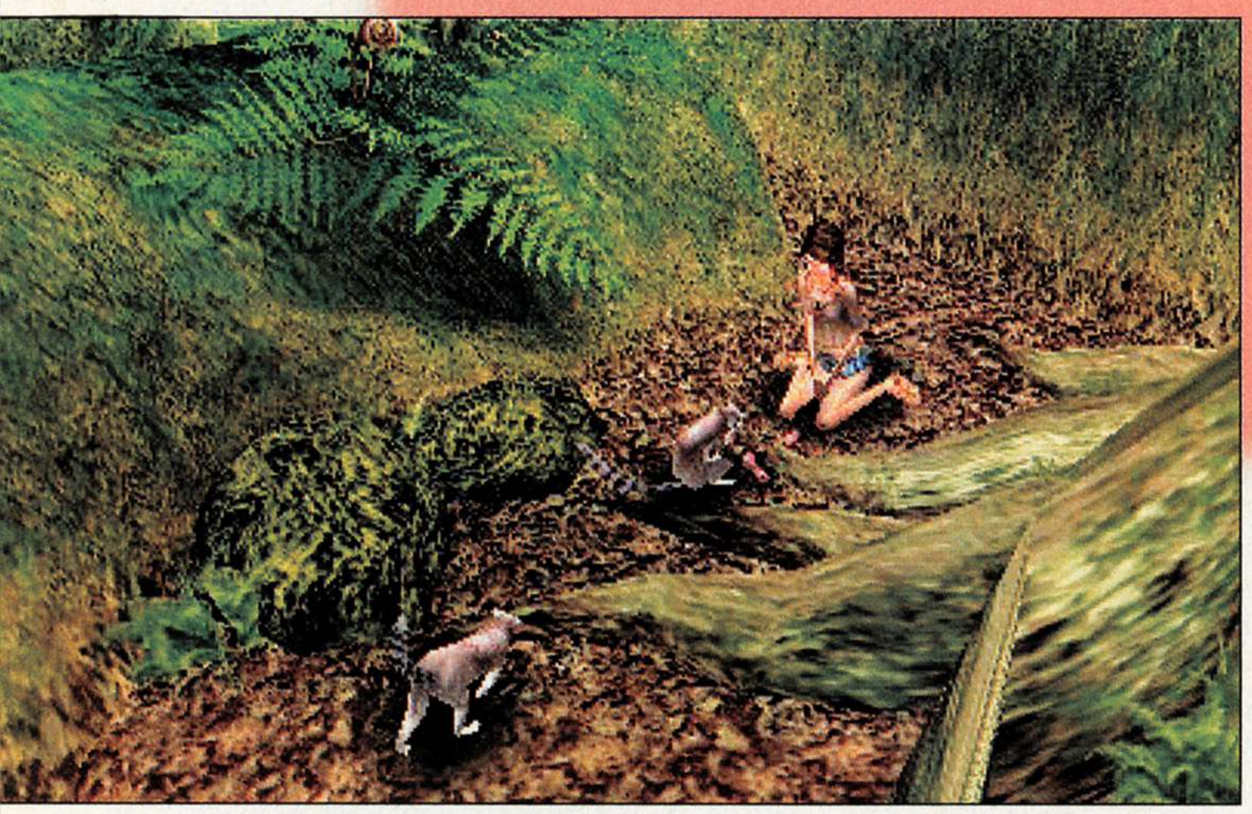
Work out (and then relax) your brain



Nintendo DS

SOUKAI! MACHIGAI MUSEUM

Is it me, or is the DS just swimming in "brain" games? It's not you: Ever since Nintendo's *DS Brain Training for Adults* broke six-figures in copies sold, third parties have been scrambling to get their own version on Japanese shelves. This take involves a rapid-fire volley of "find the difference between the two pictures" puzzles, the sort of thing you skip over to get to a newspaper's comics section.
How does this help my brain? Oh, it's *totally* scientific: "The game measures reflexes, concentration, cognition, judgment, and memory to determine an overall 'right-brain score' for the player," says publisher Namco. So if you struggle solving these puzzles, maybe it's time to consider taking the short bus to school.



PSP

PORTABLE RESORT

I'm sick of my PSP's crappy game library! Then why don't you take a vacation from it by visiting the polygonal tropical island inside your PSP? Namco is hyping *Portable Resort* as a "healing entertainment tool," a free-roaming, sun-drenched virtual resort where you're free to do what you want, *Animal Crossing* style. Take in the sunset while relaxing in a hammock? Sure. Feed the local fauna? You got it. Hold your PSP like a goof and play a virtual ukulele? No problem.
How is pretending to be on vacation restful? You'll start to feel it in watch mode, as the game plays soothing ambient sounds while you sleep. It's like that thing they sell in the Sharper Image catalog, except even fruitier!

■ You'd hide your face, too, if you got caught playing *Resort*'s makeshift ukulele (below left).

WHAT'S PLAYING IN THE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree...how you drain our gaming budgets. Another landmark year for PC games comes to a close—so what should you snag (and avoid) during the mad post-Thanksgiving shopping spree?

Shooty-Shooty Bang-Bang

At first glance, trigger-happy first-person shooter nuts have a veritable platoon of titles to choose from...but you'll want to be a little picky about which ones end up on your PC. ***Quake 4*** looks very enticing in its special-edition box, but a sad realization soon kicks in: The game's just a prettier version of *Quake III* with a by-the-books single-player mode. Better yet, go snatch a copy of ***F.E.A.R.***, which sports hair-raising thrills and some of the sharpest shooter A.I. in recent memory.

Strategery!

Real-time strategy buffs definitely get the lion's share of holiday games—at least in terms of quality. The *Dungeons & Dragons*–branded ***Dragonshard*** melds RTS gameplay with fast-paced role-playing-style action; ***Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Winter Assault*** goes beyond the typical expansion, giving fans an entire new game's worth of content; and Sid Meier devotees have ***Civilization IV*** to keep them busy. Just don't get too excited about ***Age of Empires III*** or ***Black & White 2***...unless you're in the mood to dampen holiday spirits.

—Ryan Scott, Computer Gaming World

>> NEXT SPRING, EA SPORTS WILL RELEASE *NFL HEAD COACH* (PS2/XB), A STRATEGY GAME THAT CENTERS ON RUNNING A REAL NFL TEAM.... >>

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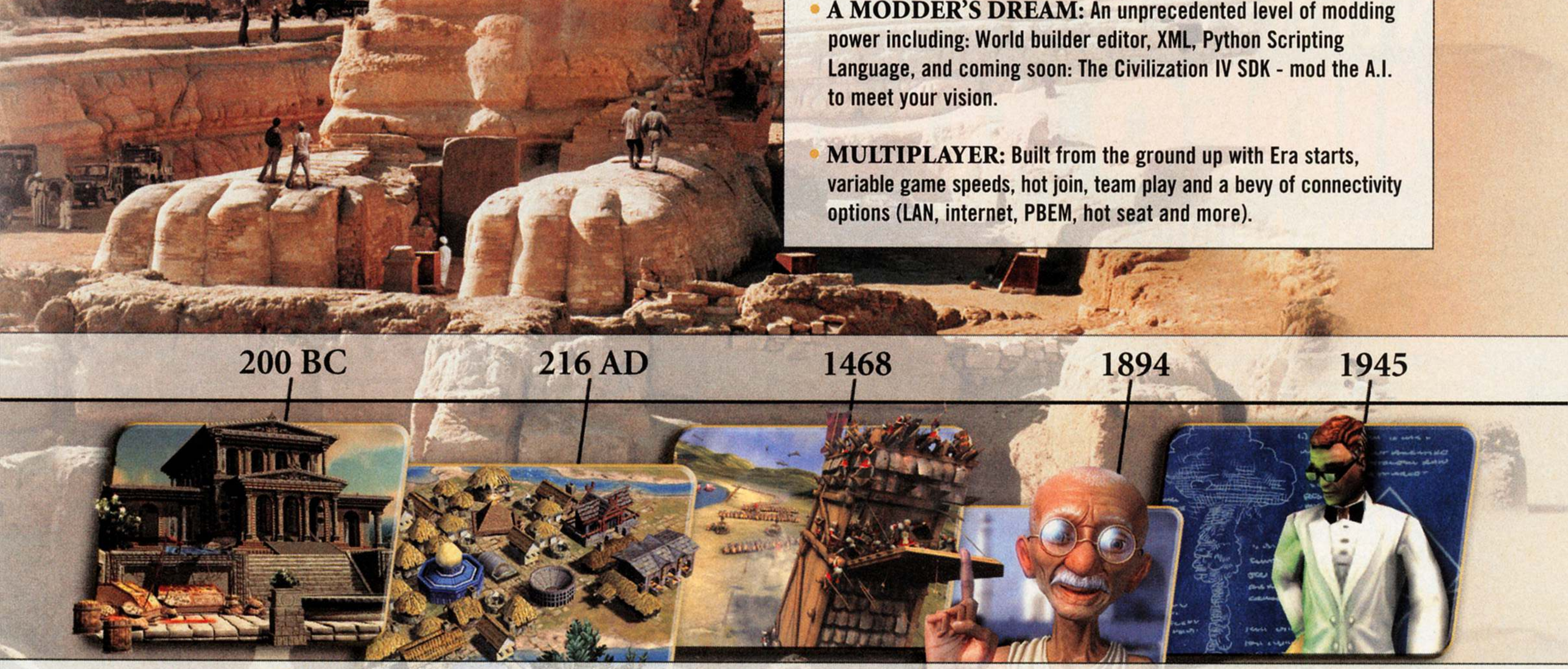
- **A MODDER'S DREAM:** An unprecedented level of modding power including: World builder editor, XML, Python Scripting Language, and coming soon: The Civilization IV SDK - mod the A.I. to meet your vision.
- **MULTIPLAYER:** Built from the ground up with Era starts, variable game speeds, hot join, team play and a bevy of connectivity options (LAN, internet, PBEM, hot seat and more).



9.4 out of 10
"The only reason to stop playing Civilization IV is to tell other people just how good the game is."
– IGN

IGN.COM EDITORS' CHOICE award

9.4 out of 10
"If you have even a passing interest in strategy games, world history, or getting less sleep at night, you owe it to yourself to give Civilization IV a try."
– GameSpot

GAMESPOT EDITORS' CHOICE

5 out of 5 stars
★★★★★
"Civilization IV stands alone. No fan of strategy games should leave this on store shelves."
– GameSpy

EDITORS' CHOICE gamespy

EVERYONE 10+
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

www.CivIV.com

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INTERVIEW: HIDEO KOJIMA

The man behind Metal Gear Solid 4 goes to war

Konami recently fired its first volley into the next-gen console conflict with a stunning trailer for *Metal Gear Solid 4*, the upcoming PlayStation 3 installment of the revered stealth-action franchise. Never one to shy away from daring surprises, series mastermind Hideo Kojima shocked fans with a grizzled, gray-haired Solid Snake, chaotic urban warfare against multiple Metal Gear robots, and unbelievably detailed visuals. Instantly, the PS3 had its must-buy game. Since *MGS4* isn't expected until the end of 2006 at the earliest, concrete facts about the story line and gameplay remain scarce, but we were able to squeeze a little info out of Snake's notoriously secretive creator....

—Shane Bettenhausen

EGM: Fans were a bit surprised by Snake's new mustache....

Hideo Kojima: Of course, the team researched many different beards and mustaches, and we eventually decided on this Lee Van Cleef–inspired look. And the power of the PS3 allows us to represent the facial hair with such amazing detail, along with his facial features, like wrinkles. It's very easy to create a simple texture, like the skin of a young, beautiful lady, so we decided to use the machine's power to create something far more complex...an old guy.

EGM: We were wondering if Snake's beard grew in real time and you had to shave it in a minigame?

HK: We actually first had that idea for *MGS2*, but we weren't able to do real-time whisker shaving. So, this time we also want to include that...hopefully we'll be able to get it in the final game. Also, we'd like Snake's face to look older and to show realistic expressions of fatigue as he goes through the game. Well, I told my team that, and they said, "Please, we don't want to have to do that." We're not sure what's going to happen with that.

■ Actor Lee Van Cleef inspired Snake's new look.

EGM: *MGS* has always seemed to be inspired by real-life events. With all the wars raging right now, have those conflicts inspired *MGS4*?

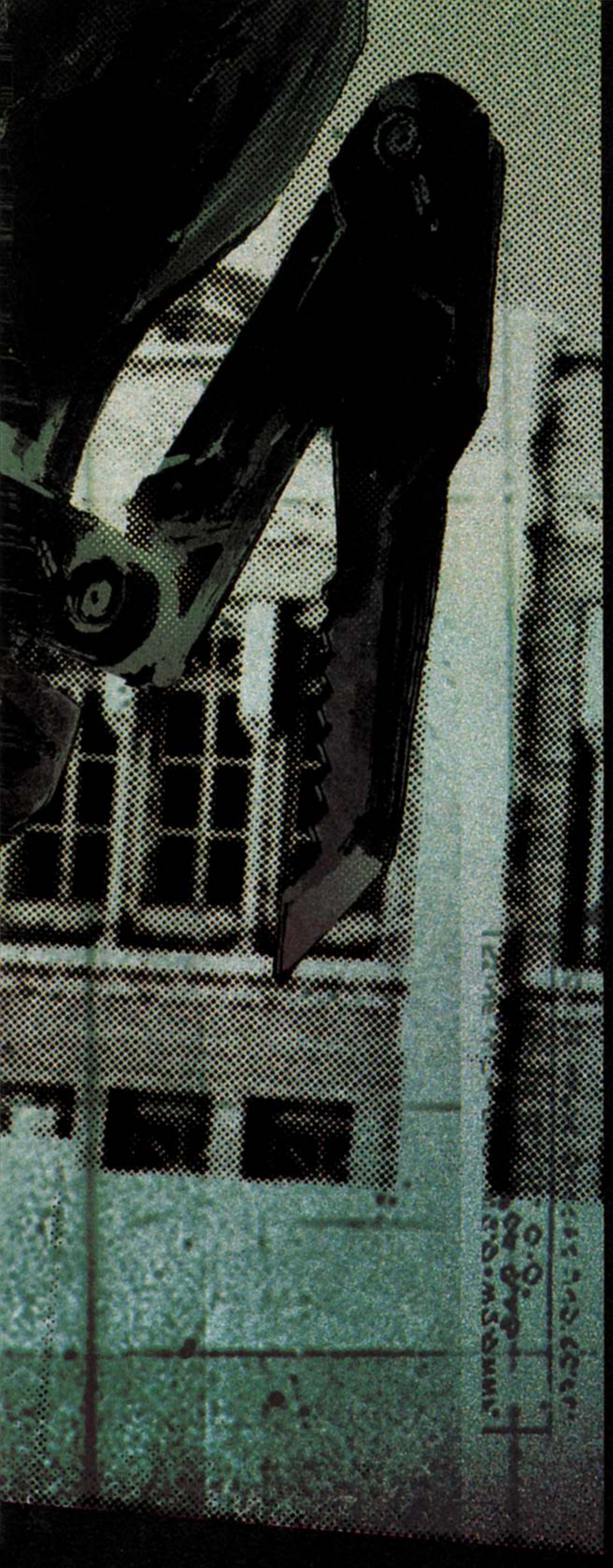
HK: Of course, what's happening today—not just one specific war, but all the global conflicts—influences my works. I haven't really gone to actually see the fighting, but I plan to go near it. I'm not sure if I'll come back alive, but I really want to go by the end of this year. *MGS4* will not be based on a specific location; we just call it "the battlefield." It's any location where a war is raging: many different situations and several different countries.

EGM: Has Mr. Mori, your military advisor, been by to teach you new tactics for urban combat?

HK: Yes, Mr. Mori is backing us up in the combat department. We're actually going to have more training sessions very soon. And since *MGS4* is a wrap-up for the whole series, I'm planning on visiting the most dangerous locations possible with Mr. Mori. But since we're a company, and I'm important to Konami, I have a hard time convincing my bosses to let me go. When I say dangerous, it isn't just the physical danger, though—this time we're also trying to highlight the psychological effects of war. I'm worried that some of my team might suffer some serious mental damage and be unable to return to the real world.

EGM: How will Snake's new "Solid Eye System"

>> WANT EVEN MORE DISH STRAIGHT FROM MR. KOJIMA'S MOUTH? SCOPE HIS SURPRISINGLY VERBOSE PERSONAL BLOG (IN ENGLISH) AT



"Snake is not merely just an old man..."

—MGS4 *Director Hideo Kojima*

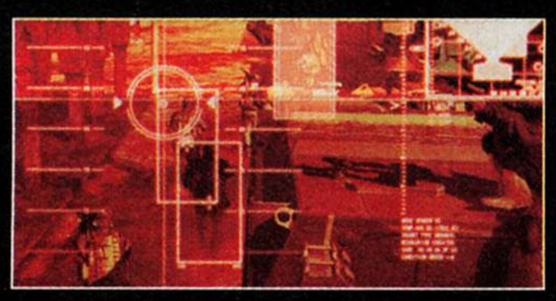
nature of genetics can be transformed into digital information, and you could control exactly how your DNA is passed on. At the same time, the Internet evolves, allowing all people the free and open transfer of information. And what's important is to digitally maintain the memory, the sense of a person, after they have passed. What's not possible is for their will, or their spirit, to be passed on or kept forever. People create society, and we felt that the "sense" of a person is the core of what everything is all about.

affect gameplay?

HK: In the past, Snake wore several different types of goggles, like the thermal or night vision [ones]. Now, those will be integrated with the radar system in order to make it more user-friendly. Of course, I thought about this from a gameplay point of view, but I also wanted Snake to wear an eye patch, so I said to the design team to integrate it all together.

EGM: You've chosen a specific keyword for the theme of each *MGS* game: meme (*MGS*), gene (*MGS2*), scene (*MGS3*), and now sense. What does "sense" mean in the context of *MGS4*?

HK: In the past *MGS* games, we focused on the theme of passing genetic information on to the next generation, and how the next generation evolves in its new era. So, with technology advancing, the very



■ The view from Snake's Solid Eye System.

EGM: Uh, yeah...we'll figure that out later. So, will the healing, hunting, and camouflage systems from *MGS3* return in *MGS4*?

HK: I felt that the new systems of *MGS3* were appreciated by many users, and in the end, the development team was very happy as well, even though there had been some internal battles about these systems within the team. Those systems all occurred, though, because survival was the theme of *MGS3*. Some of them might carry on into *MGS4*, but since the theme is battlefield, we might implement them differently. There are bullets flying around everywhere, so you don't have time to go hunting for a frog to eat.

EGM: In the trailer we see Snake's old friend Otacon operating a remote-controlled Metal Gear Mark II unit. It looks a lot like the one from your classic Sega CD graphic adventure game, *Snatcher*. Is there any connection between the two games?

HK: You should probably forget about that, since these are totally different worlds. I always dreamed of having a remote-controlled robot in *MGS*, but we never had enough memory to actually do it. But now with PS3, we can finally pull it off.

■ *MGS4*'s li'l Metal Gear looks oddly familiar.

EGM: In the trailer we see Snake fighting enemy troops in a city. Will there be bystanders in the final game?

HK: Yes, there will be innocent people in the game, just not in the trailer, since we didn't have time to show that many people onscreen. In the previous games, Snake infiltrates enemy facilities, so from his point of view, anyone inside of there is a bad guy. And from the bad guys' perspective, Snake is the bad guy. So, this time, the battlefield is vast and varied.

For example, imagine that Snake has teamed up with country C. And he goes into a battle where country A and country B are fighting and Snake is kind of neutral. So, in that situation, Snake's mission might be to sneak in and get something. It's possible that he could get in and complete his mission with neither side ever finding him. Or, if he's not successful and gets spotted by country A, then he'll have to fight against them. And of course, country B could also spot him, and then they'd fight him...so then it's possible for both of those countries to become your enemies.

There's also a strategy at work where if the item you need is in the area controlled by country A, you might team up with them to make it very easy to get the item. Of course, if you become their ally, you'll have to fight alongside them against their enemies. Or another strategy is that Snake can wait until the war between A and B is over and then get the item. Of course, I doubt anyone will play that way. So, the new thing is that Snake will definitely have to go to the battlefield, and he will have the opportunity to interfere with the war, and that interference will affect the next stages. This is the new plot.

EGM: Is it your intention to make this a more open-ended adventure?

HK: Well, there is still only one main story line, but heading toward that ending, you will alter the circumstances along the way. Here's an example: When you play in a battlefield with country A and B at war and Snake allies with country A and then destroys country B, in the next stage, there was supposed to an ongoing war between A and B, but now that will not occur.

EGM: Now that Snake is older, will that change the gameplay? We see him injecting himself in the trailer...

HK: Well, we don't want to cause the players a lot of stressful upkeep, but the player does have to be Snake. And our intention of Snake is an old man still trying to be a hero. There is something else that we're thinking about that's actually relevant, but we can't quite tell you. I want you to know that Snake is not merely just an old man....

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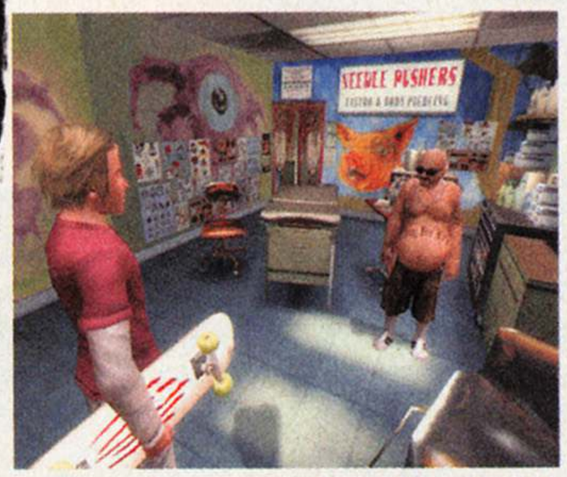

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AFTERTHOUGHTS: BLITZ: THE LEAGUE

Talking X's and O's with the makers of mature-rated football

Bar fights, gambling, late-night visits from some prostitutes—sounds more like *Grand Theft Auto* than a pro football game. But those are just some of the ways that *Blitz: The League* (PS2/XB), Midway's arcade-rich (and unlicensed) gridiron title, deviates from the genre norm. We spoke with *Blitz* Lead Designer and *EGM* alum Kraig Kujawa about how being freed from the NFL's shackles allowed his team to make the sports game they've always wanted to...both on and off the field. —*Bryan Intihar*

EGM: Who do think the game's non-*Madden* antics would shock more: a football mom or legendary coach Vince Lombardi?

Kraig Kujawa: I would definitely say a football mom. A lot of those cleaner, more sterile [football] titles shy away from anything controversial, so a football mom might be surprised that *Blitz* actually tackles these issues. But I don't think she's going to be surprised that this kind of stuff actually happens in football. Vince Lombardi's a tough ass; maybe some of this stuff wouldn't happen on his team.

EGM: Yeah, Lombardi probably wouldn't stand for a player pretending to piss on the goalpost. Which taunts didn't make it into the final game?

KK: We had some stuff that involved your sister and daughter. [*Laughs*] Let me put it this way: We're doing something completely different, and we have some really crazy stuff [in the game]. You have [the Lawrence Taylor character] sacking the quarterback and saying, "Turn over, bitch, I like it from the back." And at that point, we're like, "OK. We've sort of hit that line. People get it. Let's just see what the reaction is, and then maybe we'll put in some of the other stuff."

EGM: *Blitz* quarterback Mike Mexico is a dead ringer for NFL superstar Michael Vick...and pokes fun at his rumored sex-capade. Any other NFL players inspire those in your game?

KK: Tito Moss is a good Terrell Owens clone, if you hear some of the stuff he says. And then there's another guy who's a very "me-too" sort of player. And if you don't feed him the ball, he—in sort of a Keyshawn Johnson way—will start to get pissed at the quarterback.

EGM: Hall of Famer Lawrence Taylor plays the Quentin Sands role, your main adversary in *Blitz*. Did he have some good stories about his glory days?

KK: The Joe Theismann story was kind of crazy. When we talked to LT about it, he told us how he called the guy in the hospital, and Theismann was like, "Yeah, you got me pretty good." And LT told him, "Yeah, you're lucky. I usually don't do anything half-assed." And he's referring to only breaking one leg instead of two.

EGM: Late in the campaign mode, Quentin Sands plays *really* dirty. Can you exact revenge on that cheap-shot artist?

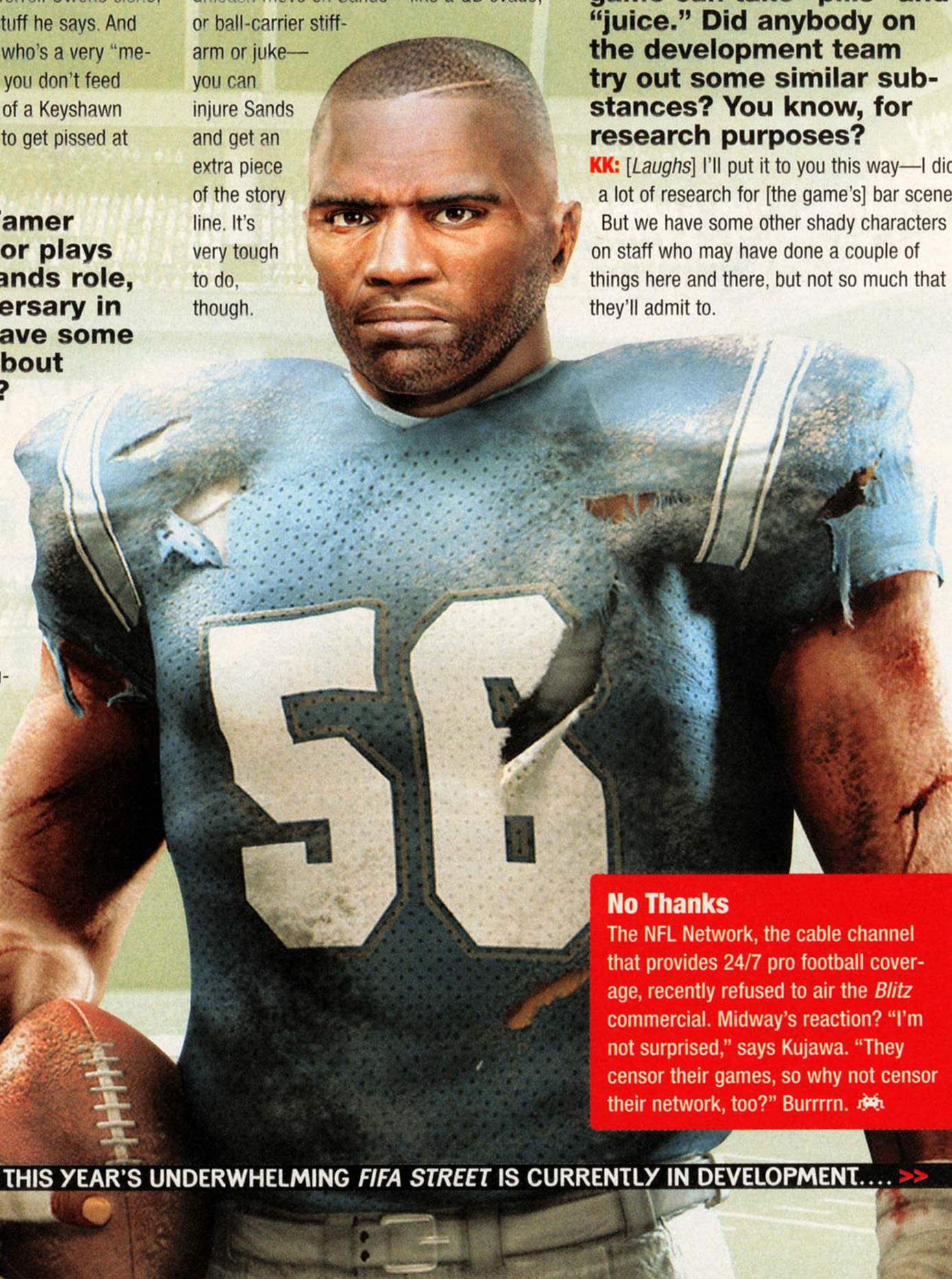
KK: I knew when we put this in that maybe only 10 percent of people would see it, and that's kind of a bummer. So I'm really glad to answer this question. In the championship game, you can do something that you can't do throughout the game, and that's injure the defensive player with an unleash [move]. So if you can perform any unleash move on Sands—like a QB evade, or ball-carrier stiff-arm or juke—you can injure Sands and get an extra piece of the story line. It's very tough to do, though.

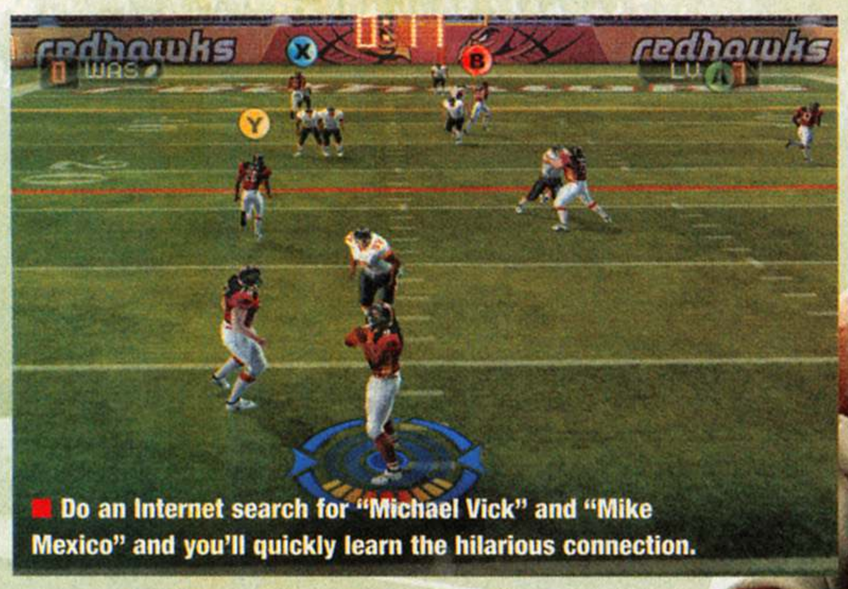
EGM: The cut-scenes were a long ways from earning an Emmy. Are we being too picky for a sports game?

KK: That's a valid point. I think one thing that might have contributed to that feeling is that we have over 25 minutes of cut-scenes. And I think we were really trying to make it so you got a little bit [of story] every game, but I think some scenes ended up being too short. Next time, we'll probably have more interactivity within the story, and probably do bigger yet less frequent chunks.

EGM: Players in the game can take "pills" and "juice." Did anybody on the development team try out some similar substances? You know, for research purposes?

KK: [*Laughs*] I'll put it to you this way—I did a lot of research for [the game's] bar scene. But we have some other shady characters on staff who may have done a couple of things here and there, but not so much that they'll admit to.





■ Do an Internet search for "Michael Vick" and "Mike Mexico" and you'll quickly learn the hilarious connection.

No Thanks

The NFL Network, the cable channel that provides 24/7 pro football coverage, recently refused to air the *Blitz* commercial. Midway's reaction? "I'm not surprised," says Kujawa. "They censor their games, so why not censor their network, too?" Burrrrn.

>> ELECTRONIC ARTS CONFIRMED THAT A SEQUEL TO THIS YEAR'S UNDERWHELMING *FIFA STREET* IS CURRENTLY IN DEVELOPMENT.... >>

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THE SALES CHARTS | FOR SEPTEMBER 2005

TOP 10 BEST-SELLING GAMES

John Madden loves being on top.

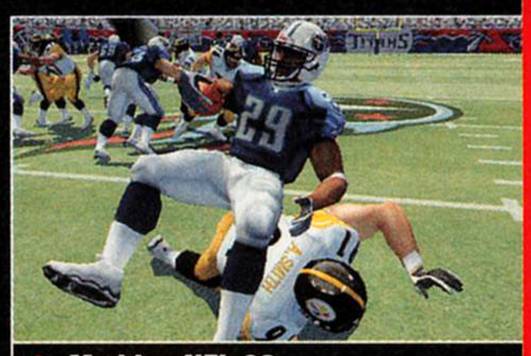
1	**Madden NFL 06**	PS2 • EA Sports
2	**NBA Live 06**	PS2 • EA Sports
3	**Mario Superstar Baseball**	GC • Nintendo
4	**Madden NFL 06**	XB • EA Sports
5	**Rainbow Six: Lockdown**	XB • Ubisoft
6	**NASCAR 06: Total Team Control**	PS2 • EA Sports
7	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06**	PS2 • EA Sports
8	**WWE Day of Reckoning 2**	GC • THQ
9	**Nintendogs: Chihuahua and Friends**	DS • Nintendo
10	**Burnout Revenge**	XB • EA

Source: NPD TRSTS Video Games Service. Call (516) 625-6190 for questions regarding this list.

TOP 10 PS2

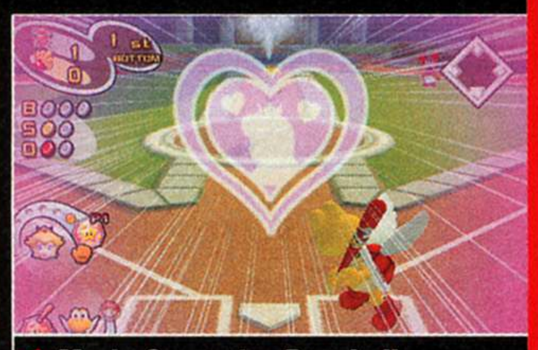
1. Madden NFL 06
2. NBA Live 06
3. NASCAR 06: Total Team Control
4. Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06
5. X-Men Legends II: ROA
6. NCAA Football 06
7. Burnout Revenge
8. Star Wars Battlefront
9. Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Dest.
10. Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks

TOP 10 XBOX



1. Madden NFL 06
2. Rainbow Six: Lockdown
3. Burnout Revenge
4. NBA Live 06
5. X-Men Legends II: ROA
6. Ninja Gaiden
7. Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06
8. NASCAR 06: Total Team Control
9. Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Dest.
10. Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks

TOP 10 GAMECUBE



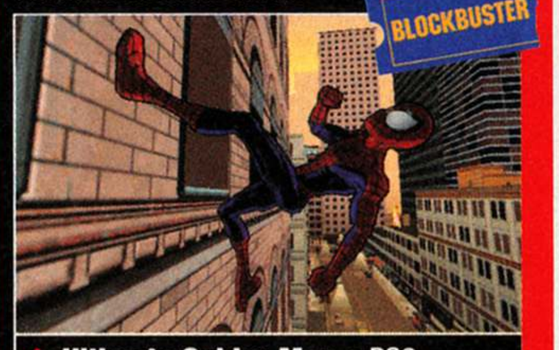
1	**Mario Superstar Baseball**
2	**WWE Day of Reckoning 2**
3	**Sonic Gems Collection**
4	**Madden NFL 06**
5	**Super Mario Sunshine**
6	**Pokémon Colosseum**
7	**Super Smash Bros. Melee**
8	**The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker**
9	**Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Dest.**
10	**Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness**

TOP 10 PORTABLES

1	**Nintendogs: Chihuahua** • DS
2	**Madden NFL 06** • PSP
3	**Nintendogs: Labrador** • DS
4	**Nintendogs: Dachshund** • DS
5	**Pokémon Emerald** • GBA
6	**Advance Wars: Dual Strike** • DS
7	**Burnout Legends** • PSP
8	**Yu-Gi-Oh! Nightmare Trou.** • PSP
9	**Namco Museum Battle Coll.** • PSP
10	**Lego Star Wars** • GBA

TOP 10 RENTALS

FOR THE WEEK ENDING 10/09/05



1	**Ultimate Spider-Man** • PS2
2	**Madden NFL 06** • PS2
3	**Burnout Revenge** • PS2
4	**NBA 2K6** • PS2
5	**Ultimate Spider-Man** • XB
6	**X-Men Legends II: ROA** • PS2
7	**Madden NFL 06** • XB
8	**Burnout Revenge** • XB
9	**Incredible Hulk: Ult. Dest.** • PS2
10	**NBA 2K6** • XB

Source: Blockbuster Video

WHAT'S UP AT 1UP.COM

EGM.1UP.COM

Sometimes, we've got so much to say that it won't all fit on the blessed printed page. That's when we turn to our cohorts at 1UP.com, who post additional content at the above-mentioned website. Go there now to read our interview with EA Vice President Neil Young, in which he discusses the company's recent partnership with Steven Spielberg and how the movie director has a thing for the PS2 cult classic *Ico*.

CHEATS.1UP.COM

Don't be mistaken; this ain't where you go to indulge your nefarious side and cheat on your significant other. That's a different site altogether. At this URL, you can figure out how to get around that monster that's been troubling you for so long on your quest to get with the hottie in danger.

Featured Club: 30-plus Single Gamers

We know you're out there. You're reading this alone. You've got a profile on several different dating sites. You're tired of hiding your racks of videogame consoles and action figures when it's time to show someone your place. Start off on the right foot and meet someone fully realized and at peace with their playful side at **30plus-singles-club.1UP.com**.

Featured Blog: Viva la Liberante

It's the brisk new flavor that's a little bit sunshine, a little bit salsa. While some groups champion women's rights, the rainforest, or products that haven't been tested by pumping kittens full of shampoo, Liberante believes in one thing and one thing only: Schweppervescence. Go. Now. **Liberante.1UP.com**.

>> HEAD TO INSOMNIACGAMES.COM AND READ THE PREQUEL WEB COMIC TO THE RECENTLY RELEASED *RATCHET: DEADLOCKED* (PS2).... >>

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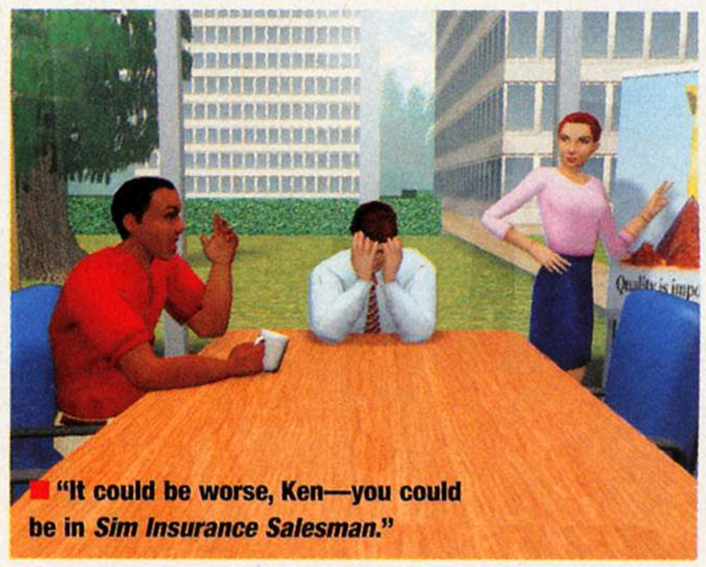
YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!

Five famous designers rehabilitate the world's most boring games

Photograph by R. Dodson/SFMISFITS Inc

The edutainment games that, back in our grade school days, taught us how to spell Connecticut and carry the zero have come a long way. Taking cues from military combat simulators, these so-called serious games now aim to simulate political conflicts, business deals, and the all-out action of the daily corporate grind. Not surprisingly, most of these specialized PC titles would put console gamers to sleep the second they started playing, so we tasked developers with punching up a particularly boring selection. And, yes, all these "games" are real.

—Robert Ashley



■ **"It could be worse, Ken—you could be in *Sim Insurance Salesman*."**

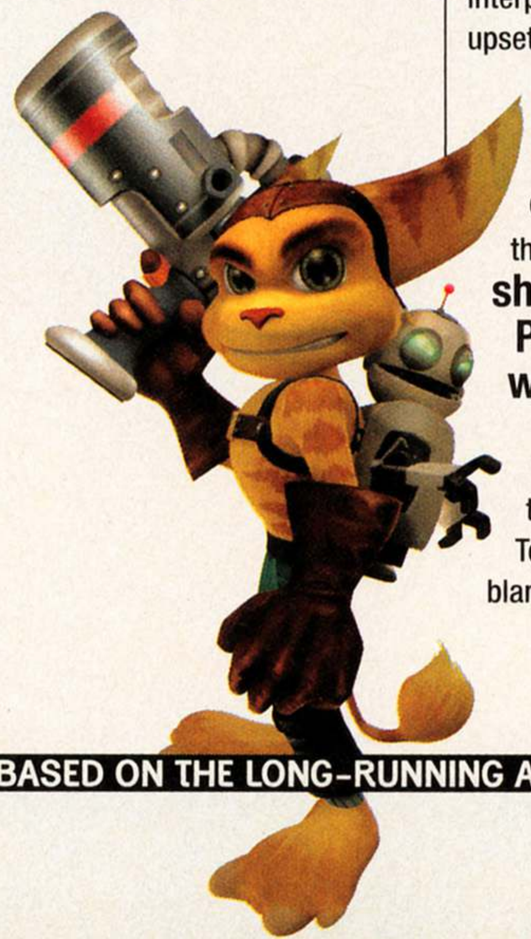
Virtual Leader

Original developer: SimuLearn

The serious specifics: Like a long staff meeting at the big conference table, but without the doughnuts, *Virtual Leader* teaches managers how to squash the hopes and dreams of worker bees. Well, not exactly. You learn to keep them happy and productive, sort of like *The Sims* meets *Office Space*. Gauge the emotional state of your underlings by reading over 200 possible body gestures, so next time the mail room guy urinates in the coffeemaker, you'll know whether to fire him or give him a raise.

Let's polish this turd: "First, all employees in the game should be armed. Weapons can be concealed or visible and widely varied—from damage-over-time devices (rabid squirrel in pocket) to giblet-makers (shoulder-mounted rocket). Having everyone packing heat means you'll need to be more careful when interpreting body language. Is that employee really upset? Should you have purchased full body armor before castigating your assistant for missing that deadline? Is that an evil 'I'm going to kill you...literally' smile or just a 'don't worry, I'll only stab you in the leg' smile? But to make things more interesting, **each employee should have a unique psychosis. Perhaps Linda has a real problem with paper clips.** If you give her a report that's clipped instead of stapled, you're going to lose an eye to her switchblade. Or Maybe Bill thinks he's female...on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Tell a sexist joke on the wrong day and—blam!—you better have life insurance."

—Ted Price, President of Ratchet & Clank *developer Insomniac*



>> ELECTRONIC ARTS HAS ACQUIRED THE RIGHTS TO MAKE GAMES BASED ON THE LONG-RUNNING ANIMATED TELEVISION SERIES *THE*

A Force More Powerful

Original developer: BreakAway Games

The serious specifics: "Teach the children well," saith Crosby, Stills, Nash, Young, and this here war game—err, make that antiwar game. Though the brace-for-police-baton-impact button probably won't replace the fire button anytime soon, *A Force More Powerful* still gives peace a chance by forcing the player to find nonviolent solutions to military conflicts. Taking its scenarios from the pages of recent history, *Force* explores the possibilities of not letting Dr. Strangelove types make foreign-policy decisions. Patchouli oil and hemp clothing sold separately.

Let's polish this turd: "Let's make it a whole country simulator, with millions of relatively intelligent A.I.'s that we must sway to our faction through various nonviolent means. Our enemy is a corrupt faction that would be devastating to the local populous should it win popular opinion. So, to start, the player seeds the media with a bit of slander aimed at the good faction—while leading the population to believe that the dark side is actually trying to launch the smear campaign. Popularity swings a tad toward our side, and it's only improved when our faction helps a neighboring disaster-prone country with relief aid.

"Now it's time to turn up the heat and get a major government body or two to go on strike. Hmm...how about the folks licensed to deliver liquor, and then the trash collectors, and then the mail force. I press the go-on-strike-now button (you know, the one right next to the win button). Time for the real nail in the coffin: We infiltrate people into the government and have them do something completely unacceptable—something so outrageous that the general population will have to force an impeachment. **We make the current government outlaw videogames!** Now the sober, garbage-ridden, no-mail-havin' oppressed masses simply have to act. Of course, they will side with our group—you know, the ones that promised to clean up the trash and continued to help the neighboring country out of its disaster. That country just happens to reward our lovely land with plenty of good single malt—its best export. And now that we've restored the mail and legalized games, all our loving country-folk can once again get their latest copies of *EGM* in the mail—the real reason peace has returned to the land."

—Ken Lobb, manager of the Microsoft studio overseeing Perfect Dark Zero

Virtual U

Original developer: Enlight Software

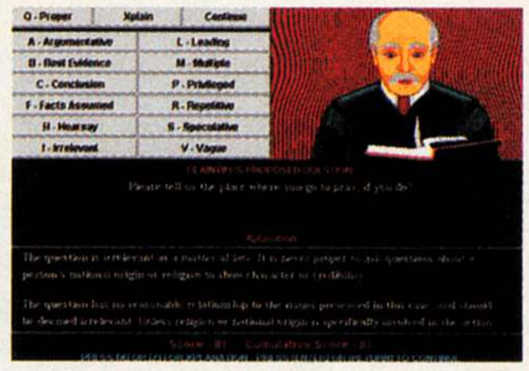
The serious specifics: From massaging the egos of self-important professors to keeping the football team off steroids (on paper, at least) to sweeping the latest frat-boy alcohol-poisoning incident under the rug, university administrators have a lot on their plates. That's where *Virtual U* comes in. Like a collegiate *SimCity*, this simulation forces you to make decisions at every level of your virtual school, from the number of parking permits issued to the salaries of basketball coaches. It might take a PhD just to understand the instruction booklet.

Let's polish this turd: "Higher education's mask of quiet dignity has fallen away, and now we see these viper pits as the for-profit enterprises they really are. Why not reward the players of *Virtual U* in a fashion similar to their real-world counterparts...**with slave girls and mountains of cocaine!** *Virtual U* players will be able to visit each other's campuses and show off their ill-gotten booty. After all, a little personal customization (even in a game with dry subject matter) is great for hooking people into the overall mechanic."

—Nate Fox, game designer with Sly Cooper *developer Sucker Punch*

Objection!

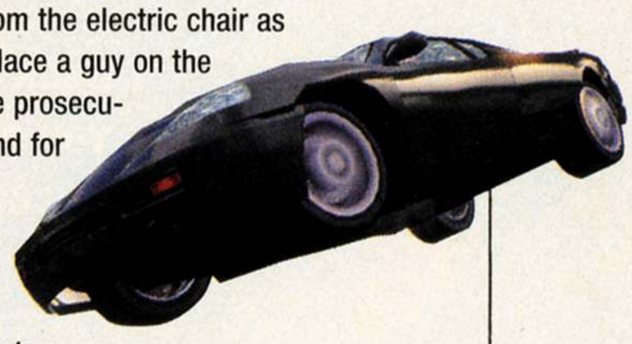
Original developer: TransMedia



The serious specifics: Imagine the fun and funny courtroom DS game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, but replace its modern graphics with those of a text adventure circa 1986. Oh, and instead of memorizing a few trivial details, try reading a shelfful of encyclopedia-size law books, and then use that knowledge to win simulated court cases. The *Objection!* series of law-education games is so hardcore, you can customize it for the different legal codes of all 50 states. Sadly, winning court cases in the game won't earn you a night of cocaine and hooker-fueled debauchery, a Jaguar X-type, or a trophy wife in the suburbs. So much for realism.

Let's polish this turd: "How about if it was called *Guilty!* instead, and you play a lawyer who has to do whatever it takes to get your guilty clients off the hook—and as far from the electric chair as possible. (Sounds like a cool "game over" screen already.) You could place a guy on the jury to rig its vote, then threaten or just plain beat up witnesses for the prosecution. This could be much more fun and probably a better training ground for would-be lawyers. **Lie on the stand, bribe witnesses, and cheat and steal to get the only verdict worth getting.** He's dead-to-rights guilty with 'I did it' written all over his face—do you have what it takes to get him off?"

—Alex Ward, creative director of Burnout 3 *developer Criterion*



Straight Shooter

Original developer: Games2Train.com

The serious specifics: Most of us have been forced to sit through a low-budget job-training video steeped in that glorious combination of '80s video-camera technology and sales-strategy acronyms (wait, what does T.E.A.M.W.O.R.K. stand for again?). The makers of *Straight Shooter* thought, "You know what would make those videos better? If they were first-person shooters." Roam the airports and hotels of the business world in search of clients. Along the way you'll zap "problems" with "ideas." Hey—just like *Halo*!

Let's polish this turd: "I'm thinking something along the lines of *Knights of the Old Republic* meets *Glengarry Glen Ross*. **Break through clients' defenses with intimidation, mass mailings, double talk, or the ol' bait and switch.** Or play nice—win them over with your winning smile. Go for a 'stealth sale' and recruit them into your word-of-mouth sales force to fight alongside you through the rest of the game. Perfect for the Revolution's motion-sensing controller for full control over the deadly Firm Handshake." *—Zak McClendon, game designer at Crystal Dynamics*

SIMPSONS. THE FIRST TITLE BASED ON THE LICENSE IS SLATED FOR THE NEXT-GEN CONSOLES, BUT THAT'S ALL EA WILL TELL US. D'OH! >>

OVERHEARD

They say it, we write it, you read it

"I view *Tony Hawk* as a franchise that we should be exploiting every year forever. I don't see any reason why we can't."

—Activision CEO Robert "Bobby" Kotick

"The end goal is that players at the end of the game are actually choked up—if not crying—because we've done our job so well."

—God of War *designer David Jaffe comments on his next project, a PSP game*

"I gotta go take a dump."

—Space marine Portman from the Doom *movie, an early favorite for a Best Screenplay Oscar*

"I think you all recognize this: It's a cute little movie player that also plays some music."

—Peter Moore, corporate vice president for Xbox, holding up a PSP to an audience at the Digital Life electronics show in New York City. He was demonstrating how the Xbox 360 can stream music from Sony's handheld

---

"We're trying to erase the first one from people's memories."

—House of the Dead 2: Dead Aim *actress Emmanuelle Vaugier talks about how great the first movie was*

"One of the things that's really important for us is answering the question that our company was founded on: Can a computer game make you cry?"

—EA LA's general manager, Neil Young, who announced a partnership with Director Steven Spielberg, also wants in on the crying game

---

"Don't kid yourself—you're gonna see more crappy, cheap, I-wish-I–hadn't-bought-it gimmick games based around that controller than you could ever possibly imagine."

—Epic Vice President Mark Rein discusses the motion-sensing controller for Nintendo's Revolution console at a panel on the next-generation systems

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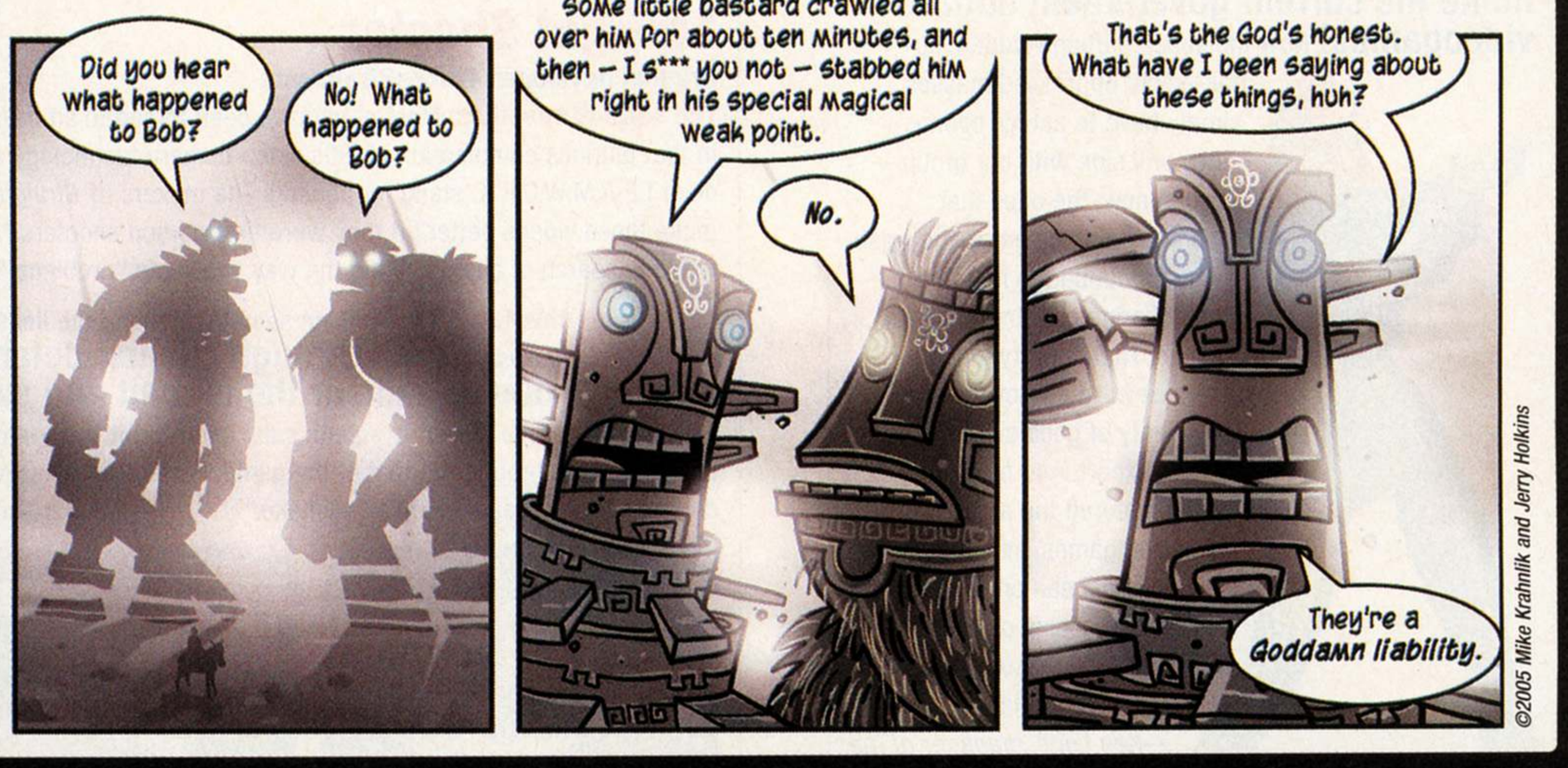

QUOTATION SOURCES FROM TOP TO BOTTOM, STARTING WITH LEFT COLUMN: DOOM, EGM, SCIFI.COM, THESTREET.COM, MTV.COM, MTV.COM, IGN LIVE NEXT-GEN PANEL

>> SPEAKING OF THE *DOOM* MOVIE, SOME CAST MEMBERS (BUT NOT THE ROCK) ARE UNDER CONTRACT FOR A (STRAGIHT TO VIDEO?) SEQUEL.... >>

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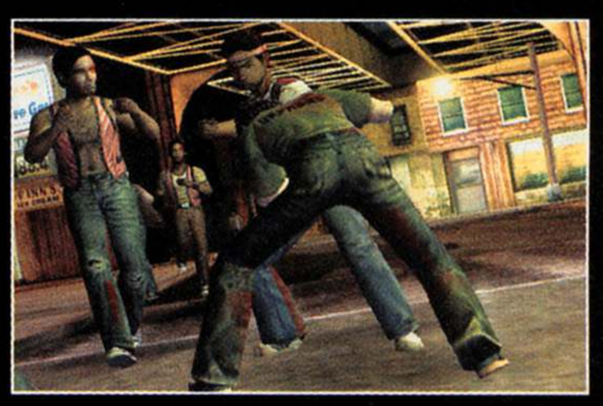

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Use of Drugs and Alcohol

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PlayStation 2

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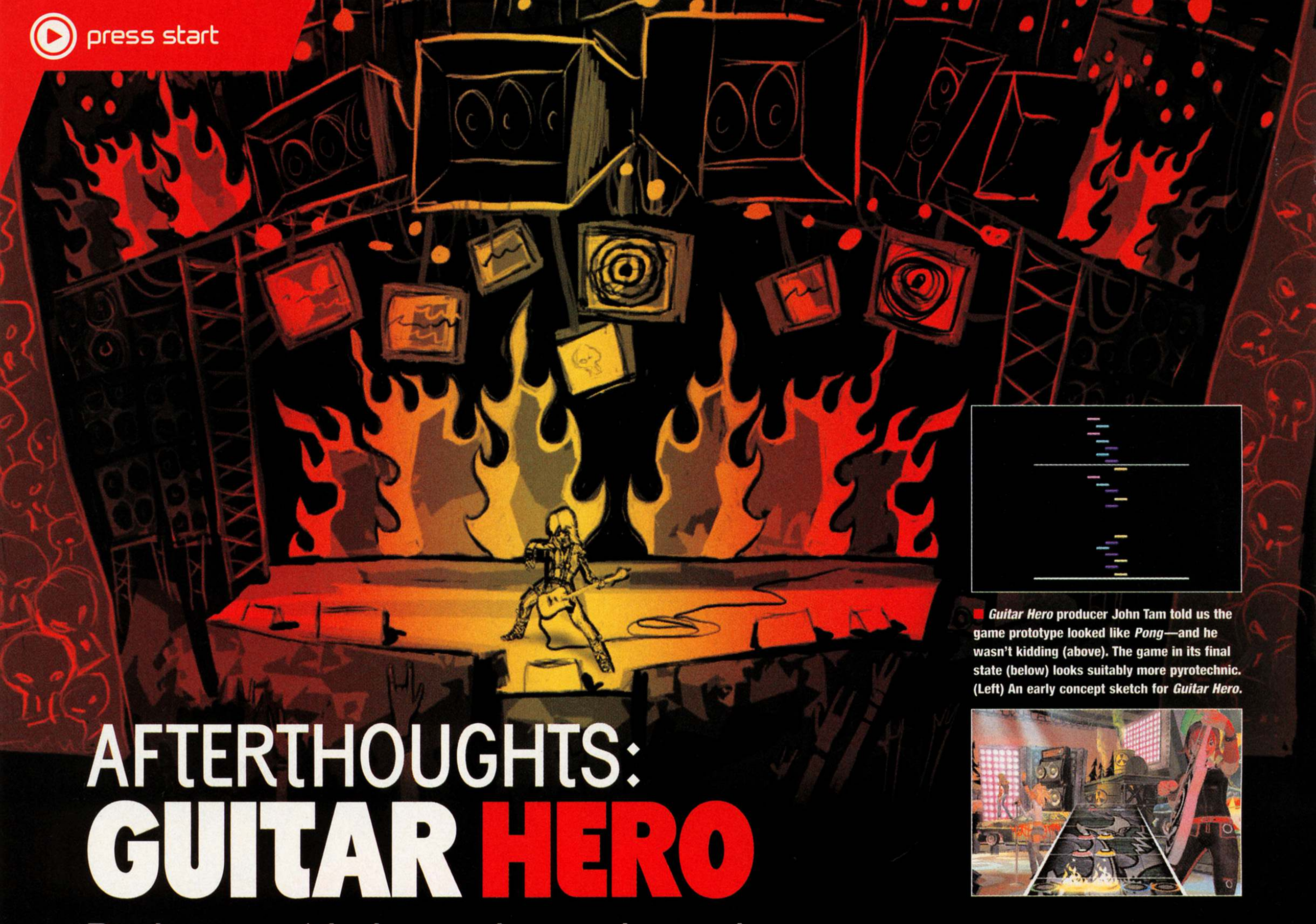

■ *Guitar Hero* producer John Tam told us the game prototype looked like *Pong*—and he wasn't kidding (above). The game in its final state (below) looks suitably more pyrotechnic. (Left) An early concept sketch for *Guitar Hero*.

AFTERTHOUGHTS: GUITAR HERO

Backstage with the producer who rawks

It's official. We've spoken with the producer of *Guitar Hero* and requested Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" for the sequel. Read on for our backstage tour with John Tam, producer at publisher RedOctane, who tells us all about making the game that uses a guitar controller to fulfill even a gamer-klutz's rock star dreams. ***—Jennifer Tsao***

EGM: Your song lineup is hot, but a bunch of stuff's missing. Fill us in.

John Tam: A lot of songs never made it through approvals because we just never heard back. Or we may have thought that certain songs may not have played well in terms of gameplay. Where "Stairway to Heaven" didn't make it into the game, Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" did. We only had 30 slots for licensed music. That was what was budgeted in.

EGM: What specific songs were you bummed you couldn't get?

JT: "Back in Black" by AC/DC was one of the ones we tried hardest to get. There were a number of Van Halen songs we were trying to get. The first prototype of the game was actually Weezer's "Dope Nose."

EGM: And...? Weezer rocks! What the hell happened?

JT: They never got back to us! They just didn't get it.... It's so frustrating to sit on something that you totally believe in, and either the artist or someone in between [us and them] doesn't get it. We had Velvet Revolver. We had Van Halen. We had these songs authored into the game. But they just never showed up in licensing. It was really sad that a lot of people didn't get it.

EGM: Could that change now that the game is out?

JT: One of our dreams is that someone goes up to Eddie Van Halen and says, "Hey, my kid's playing this game called *Guitar Hero*. Why aren't you in the game?" A lot of people just ignored us or didn't respond or we were below their budget. But we think the next round of licensing is going to be so much easier. This game teaches another level of appreciation for rock, and we think that once it gets out there, people will realize that. If this game does well, we want to increase the budget with *Guitar Hero 2*.

EGM: What's the strangest thing you've seen someone do while playing this game?

JT: A lot of moaning and groaning. The funniest reaction is when people really get into it and they want to start living out that rock star dream. Everybody's jumped around their living room and jumped off their couch and played air guitar, of course, but the funniest thing is that when they do it playing *Guitar Hero*, they start missing notes because they're so busy trying to look cool.

EGM: Have you started teasing your hair and wearing studded leather belts to work now?

JT: A lot of people here were already into that lifestyle. We see guys carrying the guitar [controller] on their backs around the office, unplugged. We're like, "What are you doing?" They think it's cool.

EGM: OK, who would rock harder: Ronnie James Dio circa 1983's *Holy Diver*, or Yngwie Malmsteen circa right now?

JT: Who was that second one?

EGM: Never mind. Next question: The guitar controller's complete lack of a flamethrower attachment is unfortunate. What happened there?

JT: Well...it's not...uh...rated for fire resistance. That's probably the main issue.

EGM: We have one more VIP request from *EGM*: Europe's "The Final Countdown."

JT: Huh?

EGM: Oh god.

JT: Europe?

EGM: [*Sings*] *"It's the final count-doooooooown...."*

JT: Wait, let me yell it across to a couple guys on the team. [*Covers phone*] They say, "That song's more keyboard driven."

EGM: Nice recovery. So can we blame you personally if your game causes the return of air guitar?

JT: We believe that, with *Guitar Hero*, air guitar is dead. But yeah, you can blame us.

>> SQUARE ENIX HAS PUSHED BACK THE RELEASE OF ITS CG MOVIE *FINAL FANTASY VII: ADVENT CHILDREN* (PSP/DVD) TO JANUARY 2006.... >>

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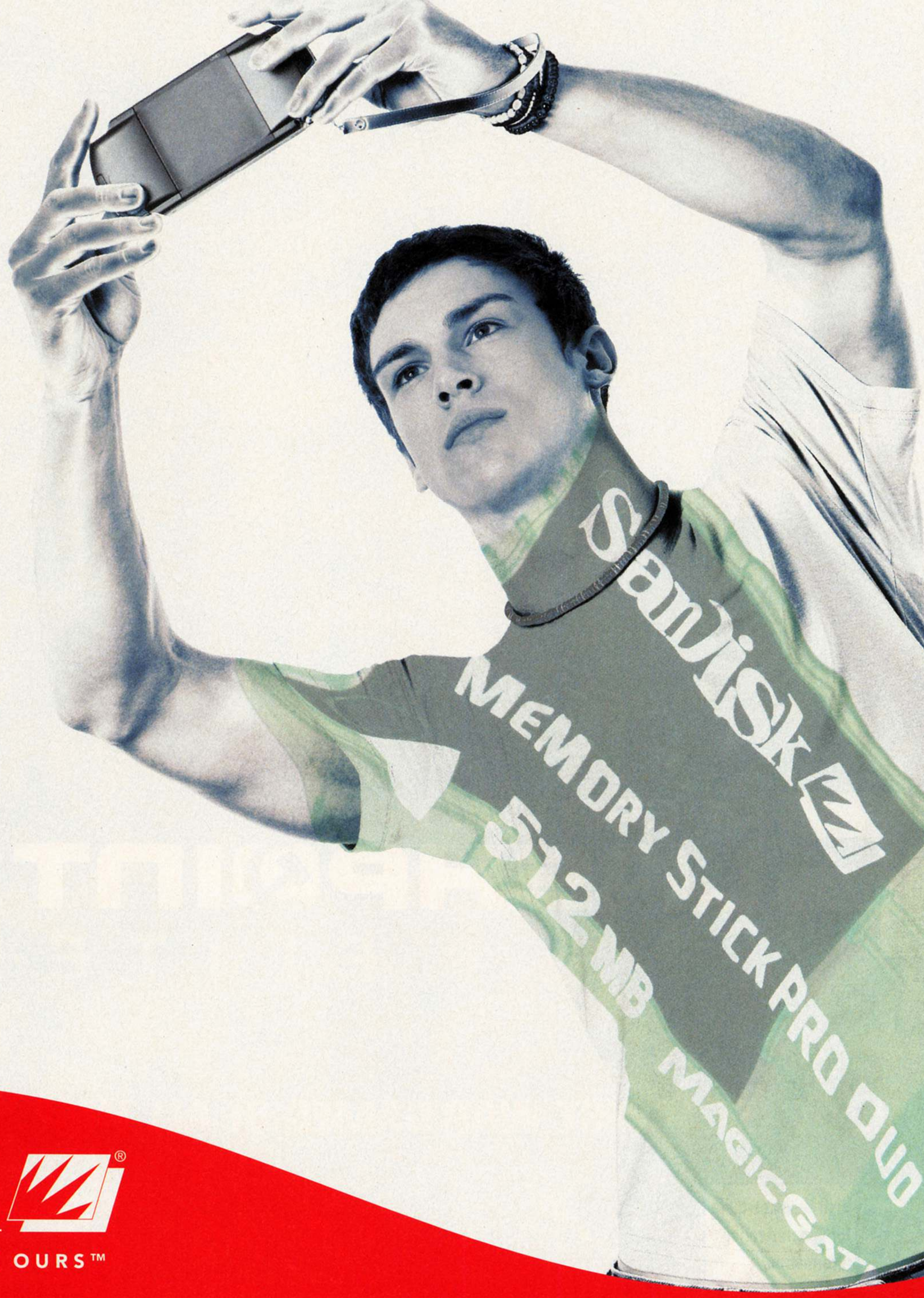

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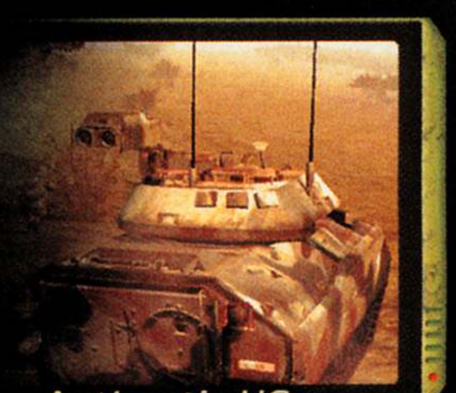

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LIVE WAR

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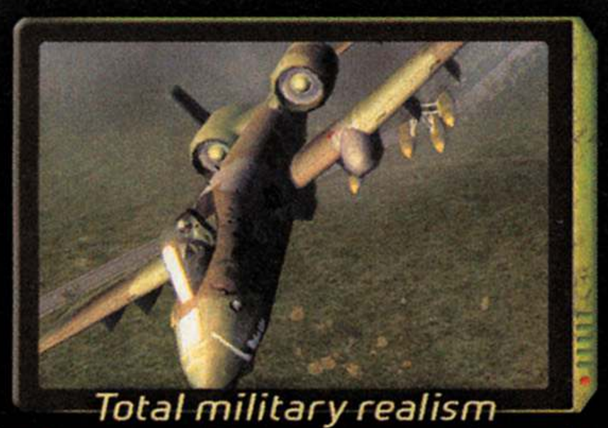

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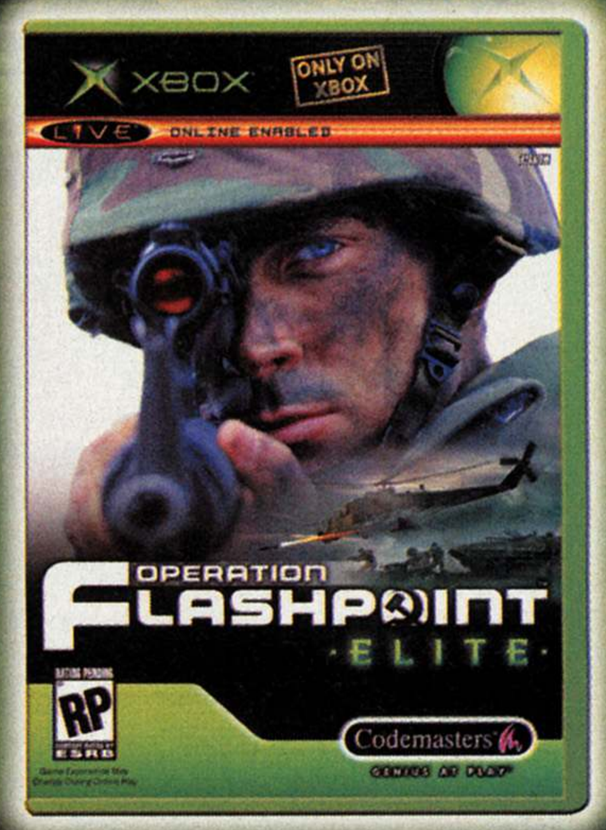

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GENIUS AT PLAY™

THIS MONTH:
MATT McMANUS
LEVEL DESIGNER AT CRYSTAL DYNAMICS

TAKE THIS JOB: LEVEL DESIGNER

Our monthly look at the jobs you want—with tips from the guys who have them

McMANUS' DETAILS

Experience: Six years in the industry
Notable games: *Star Wars Battlegrounds*, *Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb*, *Star Wars Republic Commando*, and *Tomb Raider: Legend*

Level designer job data

Salary range: $50,000 to $100,000-plus
Recommended education: McManus studied graphic design in school but says any sort of art background is really helpful. "Of course, since you can now go to a school to be a game designer, that's probably your best bet," he says.
Location of most jobs: West Coast—with some exceptions, like Austin, TX
Current level of demand: Medium

What's a level designer?

Someone who looks at an outline of a story, takes specific elements and sections of that story, and creates gameplay from them. Beyond that, the job's also about creating the moment-to-moment gameplay—the players' path as well as most everything they will see and do in the level are shepherded by the level designer. The gig also involves working with artists and programmers quite a bit to make sure things (like the difficulty) are ramped properly. Essentially, level designers create what players experience when they pick up the controller.

McManus' typical day

"Depends what stage—but first thing is always coffee," says McManus. After checking e-mail and the database to make sure no fires need putting out, he spends a lot of time playing through his level, implementing new features, and meeting with the level team. In fact, much of his time is spent walking around and checking in with people—seeing how far along certain in-game encounters are and whether they actually work. The job also involves a lot of sitting at his desk and playing things on the fly to see if they function the way he envisioned. Before any of this, in the early preproduction days, most of McManus' time is spent in meetings and creating design plans.

How'd he get the gig?

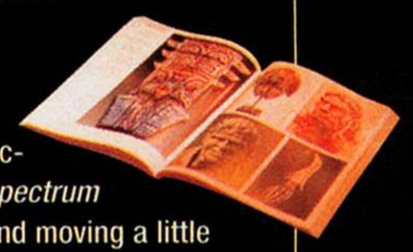
Six years ago, McManus was in graphic design when he expressed an interest in getting into games to his brother, who was already a tester. "It wasn't as tough as it might be today," says McManus. "At that time it was still somewhat early. Games were big, but not like they are now." Still, with what McManus calls "creative cover letters and creative résumés," you too can get your foot in the door. —*Evan Shamoon*

TOOLS OF HIS TRADE

Essential software

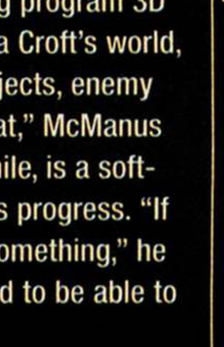
The team uses modeling program 3D Studio Max to build Lara Croft's world, "so I use it to adjust objects, enemy placement, stuff like that," McManus says. Perforce, meanwhile, is a software tool that tracks his progress. "If we've managed to fix something," he says, "other people need to be able to see what we've done."

Arty inspiration



Fantasy-art collections such this *Spectrum* book "get my mind moving a little bit," says McManus. "The page I was looking at had a great headdress-looking piece. It's inspirational."

Chart attack



McManus first charts out levels with a program called SketchUp. It maps out not only the level's layout but also what happens in each room.

War fare

McManus has been leafing through the *Jane's* series of weaponry guidebooks for combat ideas in *Tomb Raider: Legend*. It covers handguns, rifles—and pretty much everything else. "Kinda like an encyclopedia of weapons," he says.

Photographs by Michael Sexton

NEXT UP: MUSIC COMPOSER

>> IN A RECENT FINANCIAL REPORT, ROCKSTAR STATED THAT IT HAS PLANS TO RELEASE ANOTHER *GRAND THEFT AUTO* FOR PSP IN 2006.... >>

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200TH ISSUE

COUNTDOWN TO ISSUE 200:
THE TOP 10 WORST REVIEWED GAMES

Clock render by Chuck Ernst

This is it. Well, almost it. We're one issue away from our 200th magazine, and before that magical moment of ink-stained fingertips, blistered thumbs, and spontaneous fits of hugging happens, why not take the house lights down a notch and contemplate the 10 lowest-scoring games in *EGM* history? We had to actually play 'em for hours and hours—will it kill you just to read a few words about them? Possibly yes.

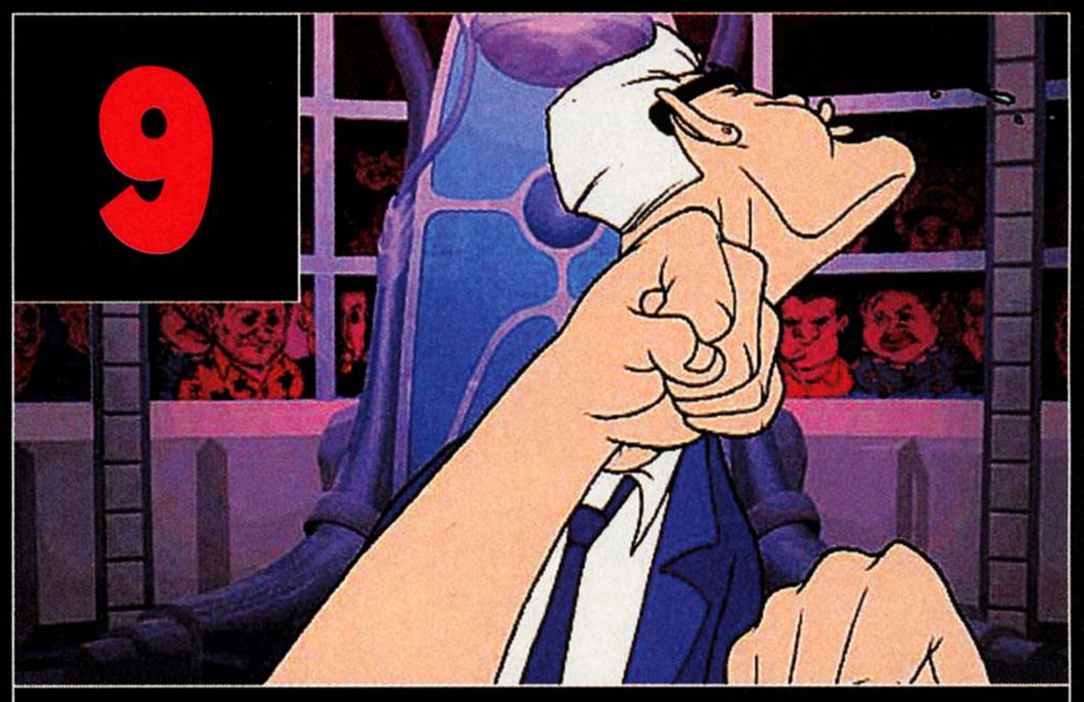
(All games are reviewed using a 10-point scale. In the case of a tie, we're ranking newer games lower than older games, because people should know better by now.)

10 Batman Beyond

PS1 • Ubisoft • *EGM* #138 (Jan. 2001)

History will show that *Batman Beyond* did its damnedest to uphold the formerly great tradition of superhero videogames that totally sucked ass. Inspired low points include the complete lack of a save feature, and jumping vacuums that fire lasers. Developers of *Catwoman 2*, class is now in session.

Scores: 1.0 • 1.0 • 1.0

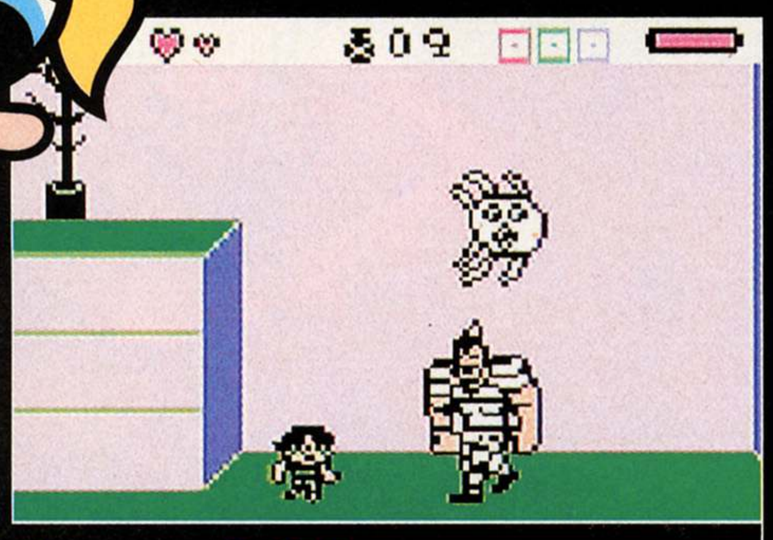


9 Who Wants to Beat Up a Millionaire

Dreamcast • Simon & Schuster • *EGM* #139 (Feb. 2001)

This may have been a big hit with militant Marxists, but *Beat Up*'s parody-with-fisticuffs twist on Regis Philbin's horrible game show is probably even worse than you can imagine, depending on the power of your particular imagination. As reviewer Greg Sewart put it, "Go into your local retailer, stand in front of the game, and direct people away. Wear a big sign."

Score: 1.0

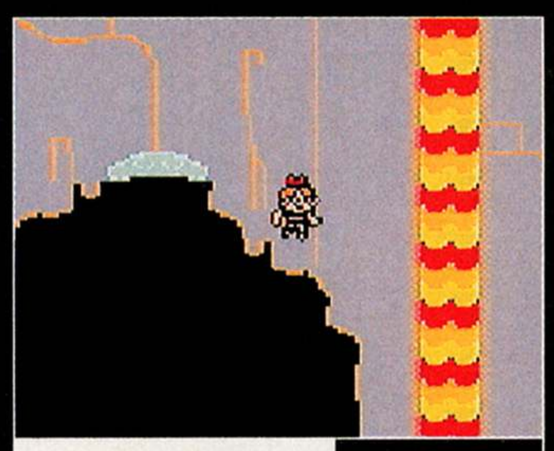


8 Powerpuff Girls: Paint the Townsville Green

GBC • Bam! • *EGM* #139 (Feb. 2001)

The best thing our reviewer had to say about this brand-name-embossed P.O.S. is that the cart had a battery backup, so you could save without having to enter a 16-digit code. And people wonder why (some) girls don't like the videogames.

Score: 1.0



7 Powerpuff Girls: Bad Mojo Jojo

GBC • Bam! • *EGM* #139 (Feb. 2001)

Just another *Powerpuff Girls* game. (Editor's note: To make this inside joke a no-longer-funny outside joke, it's a reference to 1985 U.S. National Video Game Team member Donn Nauert's review of *Flying Dragon* in *EGM* #2, which reads as follows, in its glorious entirety: "Just another karate game.")

Score: 1.0

6 KISS Pinball

PS1 • Take-Two • *EGM* #144 (July 2001)

You'd think that a game called *KISS Pinball* might have some actual music from the heavy-metal band included somewhere in there along with the totally crappy pinball. Nope. Consequently, we want our $10 back.

Score: 1.0

CONFLICT
GLOBAL TERROR

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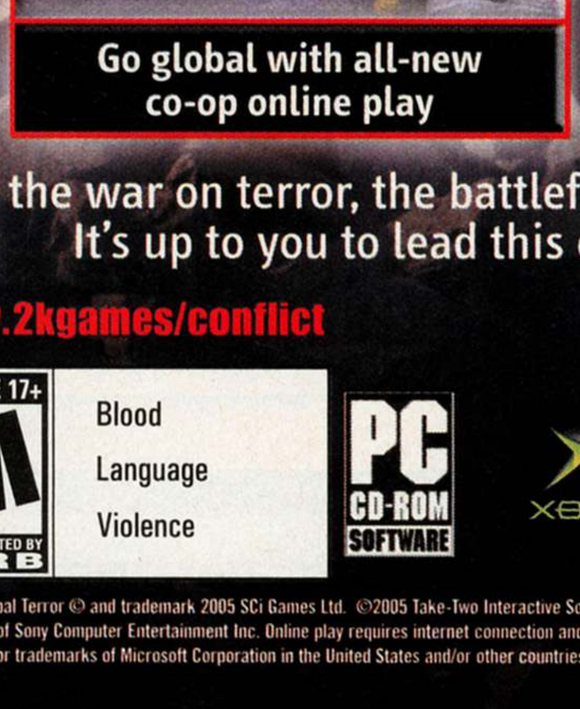
-TeamXbox.com



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THE TOP 10 WORST REVIEWED GAMES (CONT.)

5

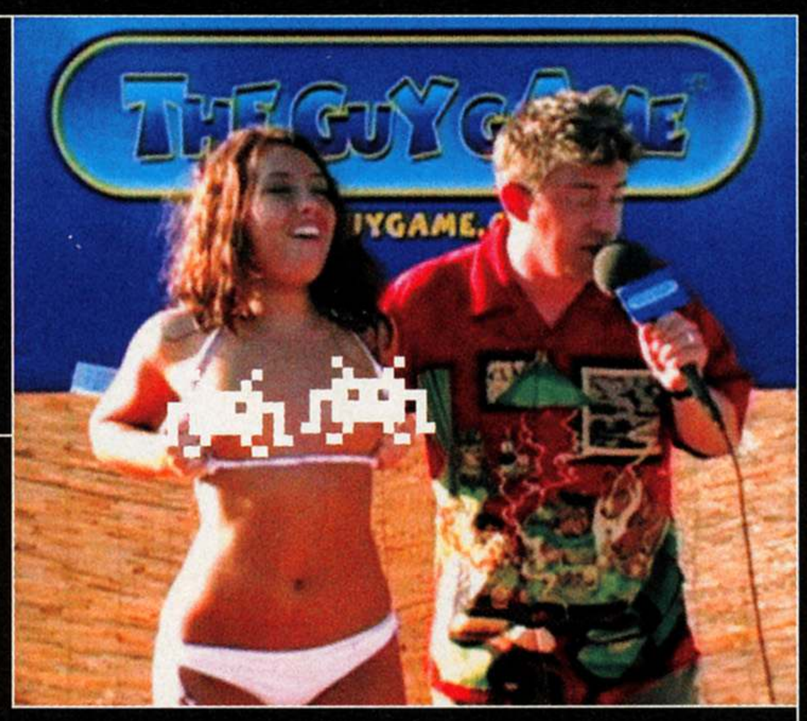
Urban Champion-e

GBA e-Card • Nintendo • *EGM* #163 (Feb. 2003)

To this day, Executive Editor Mark MacDonald can be heard periodically shouting from the depths of his office, "*Urban Champion* was really not *completely* terrible when it came out in 1984!" Perhaps, but it's still the worst Nintendo game ever published.

Score: 1.0

4



The Guy Game

PS2/XB • Gathering • *EGM* #184 (Nov. 2004)

The thing about the Internet is that it almost completely removes all barriers between naked breasts and the people who wish to view naked breasts. The thing about *The Guy Game* is that it makes you play through 40-plus minutes of crap, memorizing dumb trivia questions the whole time, just to see a few fleeting seconds of tit. And you get to pay for it. We hate *The Guy Game*.

Scores: 1.5 • 1.0 • 0.0

Mortal Kombat Advance

GBA • Midway • *EGM* #152 (Mar. 2002)

Mortal Kombat Advance has been called a lot of things. Unplayable. Krap. A million times worse than all other bad fighting games put together. But it's also the first title to ever receive a score of 0.0 from *EGM*—and that's something you haters can never take away.

Scores: 0.0 • 1.5 • 0.5

3

NOT QUITE HORRIBLE ENOUGH

The five games that, if only they'd tried a little harder, might have been something.

SPEEDBALL 2100

PS1 • Empire • *EGM* #138 (Jan. 2001)

Score: 1.5

GRUDGE WARRIORS

PS1 • Take-Two • *EGM* #133 (Aug. 2000)

Score: 1.5

MORTAL KOMBAT: SPECIAL FORCES

PS1 • Midway • *EGM* #135 (Oct. 2000)

Score: 1.5

BATMAN BEYOND

N64 • Ubisoft • *EGM* #138 (Jan. 2001)

Score: 1.5

BATMAN: DARK TOMORROW

GC • Kemco • *EGM* #167 (June 2003)

Scores: 1.5 • 1.0 • 2.0

2

The Flintstones: Bedrock Bowling

PS1 • Southpeak • *EGM* #135 (Oct. 2000)

Bedrock Bowling doesn't feature any actual bowling; instead, you slide around a track and knock the occasional pin over while wondering what you might have done in a former life to deserve this torture. So that's a problem.

Score: 0.5

1

Ping Pals

DS • THQ • *EGM* #187 (Jan. 2005)

Whenever we begin to feel bad about scoring this "game" so low—it's basically the same idea as the handheld's PictoChat feature, except with less functionality and lame avatars you can play dress-up with—we just remember that some poor fools actually paid 20 of your real American dollars for it. And our hate burns again with the fury of a thousand suns.

Scores: 0.0 • 0.0 • 1.5

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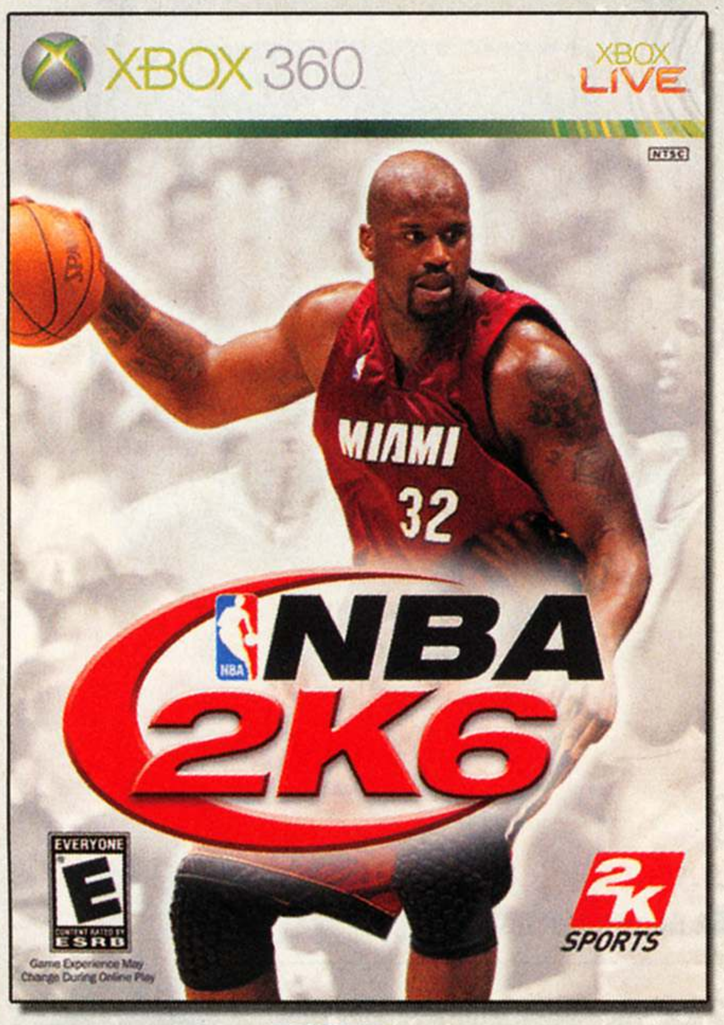

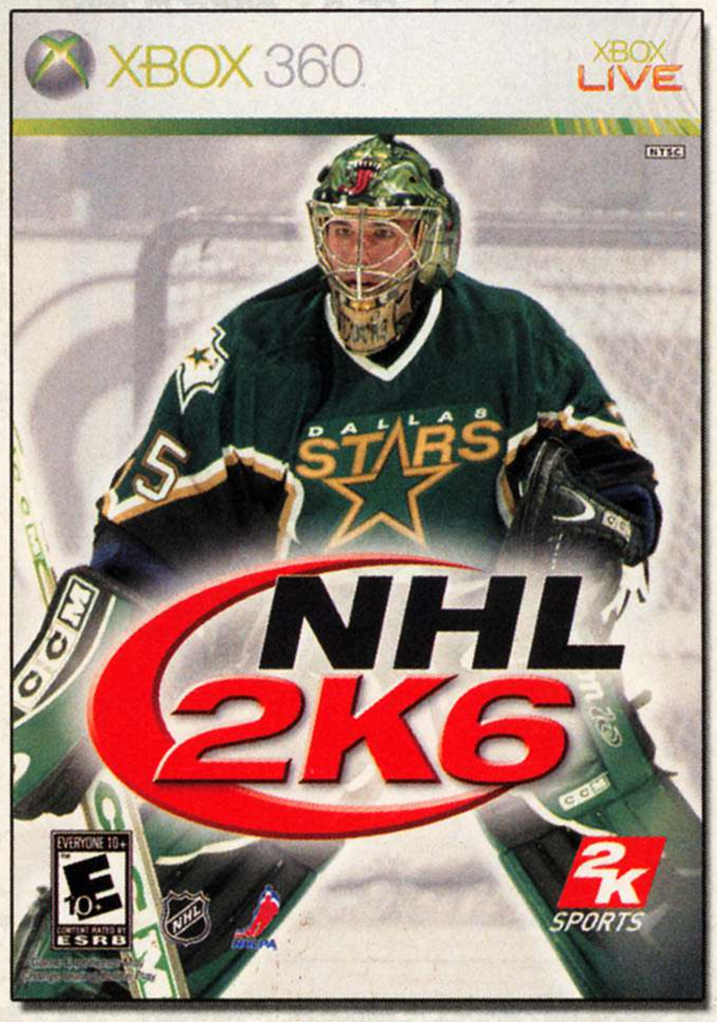

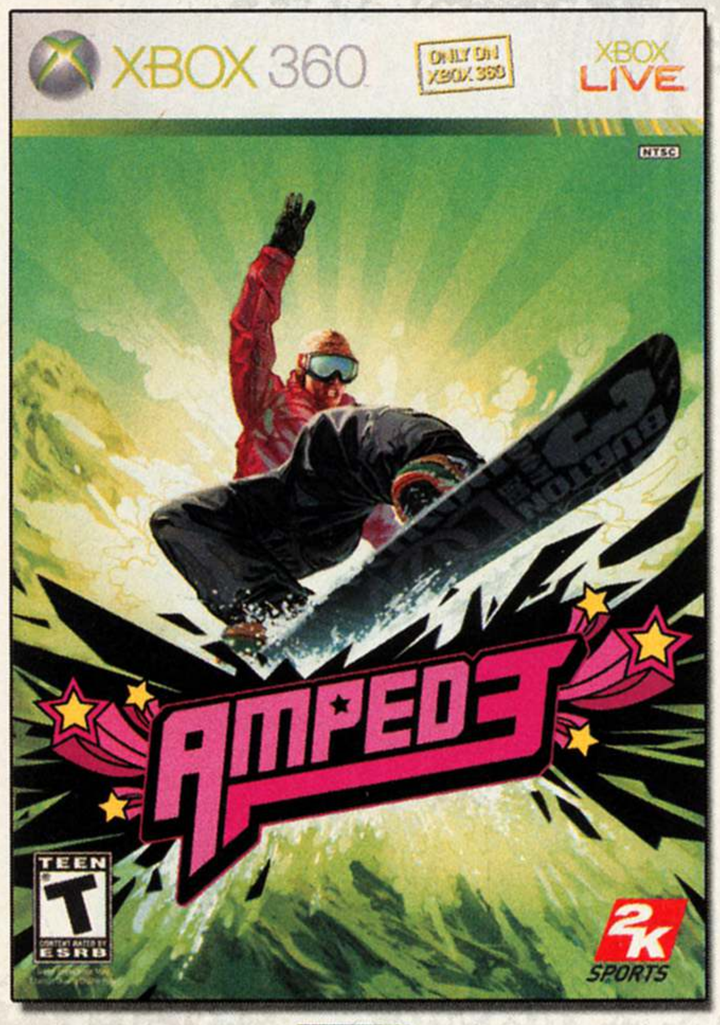

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FAMILIAR RING

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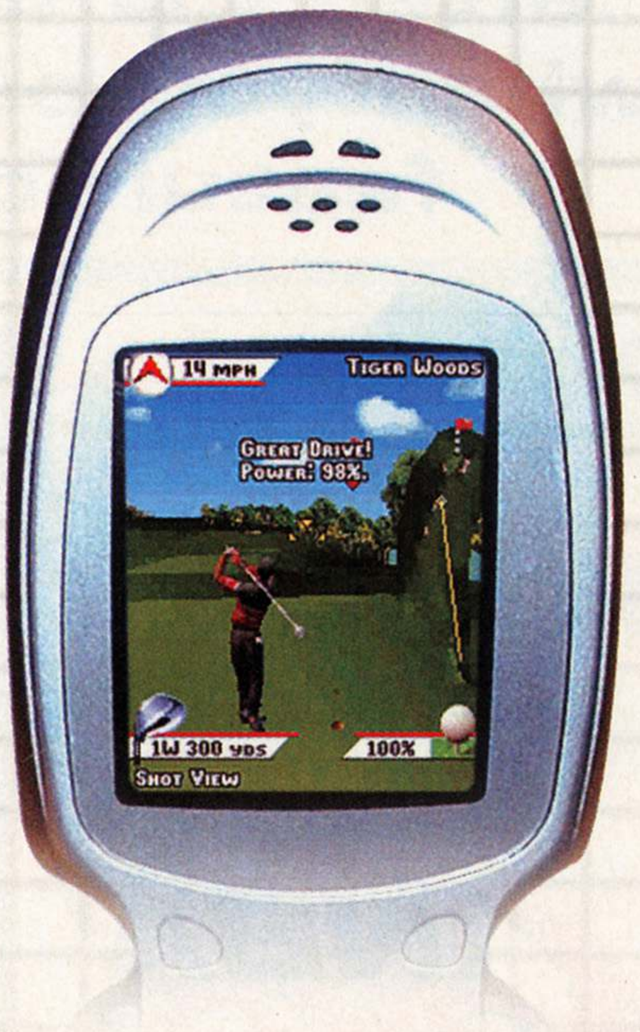

The Sims 2

EA Games Mobile

The basics: Watch your little computer people go to the bathroom while you go to bathroom—how meta is that? *The Sims 2* for cell phones is available in two versions: an online-enabled *Connected Edition* and a standard one that doesn't link to the Net. Both come with new items just for mobile phones, plus a slimmed-down interface.

The gimmick: The *Connected Edition* lets you download Sims from your PC version, play god on the go, and then upload them back to your PC or the Web, where you can trade them with other players.

The verdict: This is the long-awaited final step in any *Sims* fan's descent into complete immersion into their pretend life. The *Connected Edition* makes a lot of sense, but the game's interface is awkward enough to make the unconnected version too limited and cumbersome to be worthwhile.

Doom RPG

Jamdat Mobile

The basics: Cocrafted by *Doom* developer id Software and Fountainhead Entertainment, this role-playing shooter lets you rampage with 10 of the traditional *Doom* weapons—including the BFG—through 10 levels and even offers an end-game URL that lets you track your performance.

The gimmick: To make this classic shooter playable on the cellular level, the developers converted it into a simple turn-based role-playing game, then packed it with elements fans of the series should enjoy. Like Pinky Demon. It even has all the same MIDI music and sound effects.

The verdict: Id is proud that *Doom* is so beloved across so many systems—and it should be. The turn-based running and gunning is surprisingly well done, and all the *Doom* sights and sounds make it a one-handed trip down memory lane.

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06

EA Sports Mobile

The basics: Play with your choice of five famous golfers and courses as announcers whisper dramatically before every putt. It's styled after the handheld version of the game.

The gimmick: From its courses to your golfer to club selection, *PGA Tour 06* is highly customizable and littered with licensed icons, including Arnold Palmer and the titular Tiger. The developers also simplified the features of the handheld game to make it more playable on a cell phone.

The verdict: Simple pull-down/press-up swing mechanics provide a feel more realistic than what you'd get from a phony meter. Plus, now you can play with your putter on the bus and not get arrested. ➤

* Game prices vary based on the title and cell-phone carrier.

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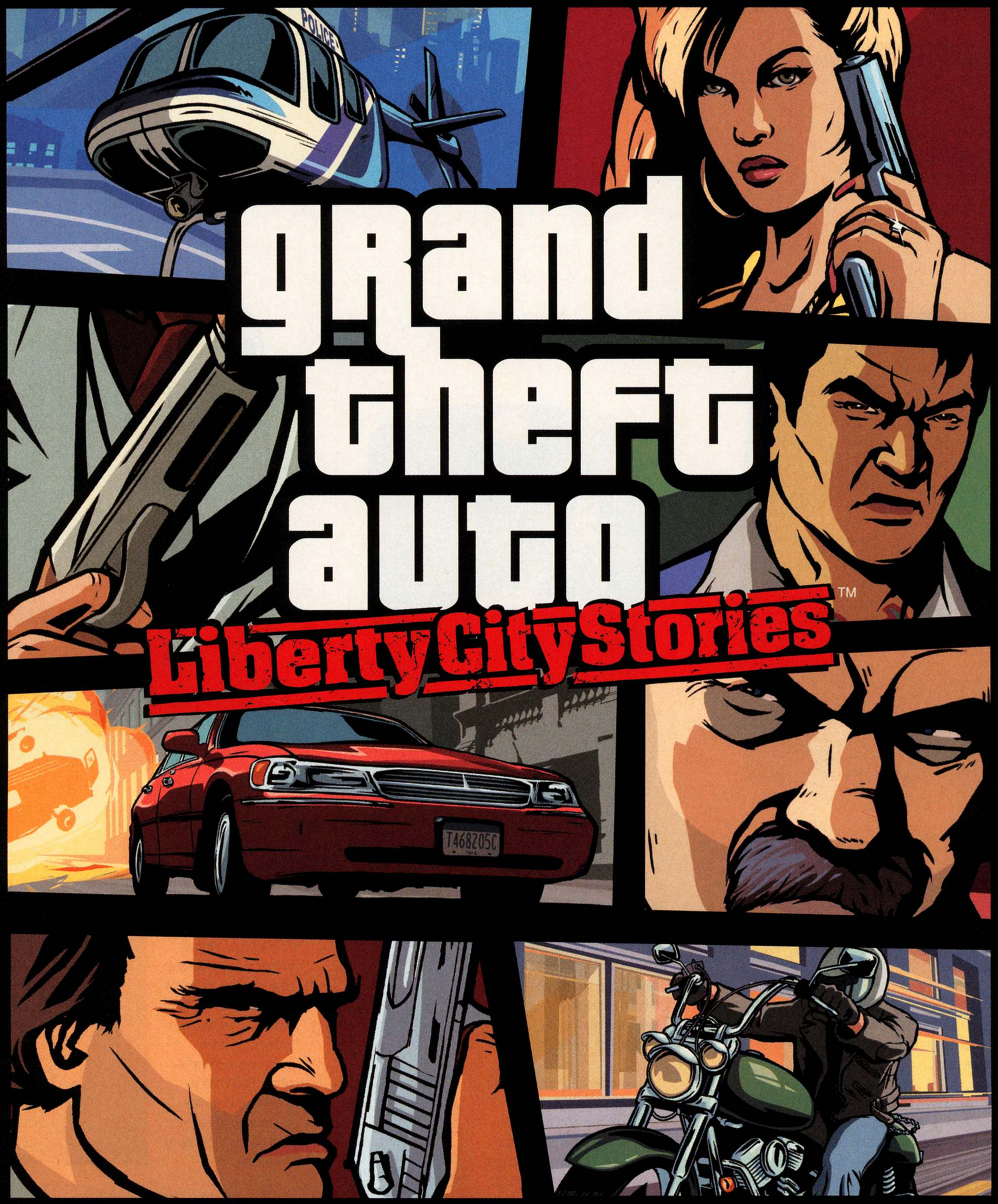
- PSM



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FAMILIAR RING (CONT.)

➤ Need for Speed: Most Wanted

EA Games Mobile

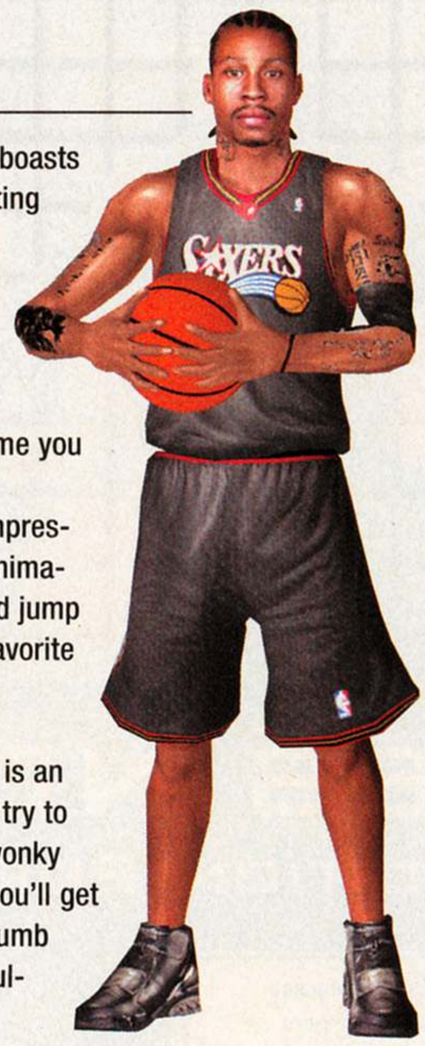
The basics: Rock on with your bad self with yet-to-be-announced licensed tunes as you race and chase through 42 challenges with eight customizable cars.

The gimmick: Part of the appeal of the *Need for Speed* console version is the ability to pimp your ride and take it to the streets against friends. The mobile-phone version offers half of that equation: You can customize your car, but you can only race against computer-controlled autos. The game also boasts eight vehicles licensed from real-world manufacturers.

The verdict: It honestly looks and feels a bit like playing an old-ass *OutRun* arcade game that hasn't been taken care of and has very gummy control. Trying to race using your phone pad might be something you just have to get used to, but why subject yourself to any more road rage on your morning commute?

NBA Live 06

EA Sports Mobile



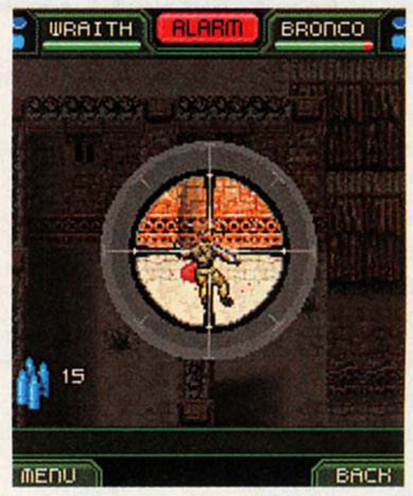
The basics: This baller boasts 3D graphics with a rotating camera and shows off 30 licensed NBA teams and real announcers' voices.

The gimmick: For a game you play on your phone, the 3D visuals are sort of impressive. You get different animations for slam dunks and jump shots starring all your favorite NBA players.

The verdict: Basketball is an awfully intense sport to try to play on a cell phone's wonky keypad. We guarantee you'll get frustrated when your thumb slips and you end up fouling out at the buzzer.

SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals Mobile Recon

Jamdat Mobile



The basics: Armed with supertiny assault rifles and adorable C4 charges, you'll hide in shadows, snipe, and order your team around in eight missions. Each has a briefing and an in-game map to help your squad achieve its objectives.

The gimmick: The 3D levels are pretty and somewhat interactive, and you'll even find vehicles you get to ride in and shoot from—hey, just like in *SOCOM 3*.

The verdict: You have to give the game credit for being so ambitious—although the A.I. might be dumber than even the console version's. Still, this is probably the best you could ask for from *SOCOM* for your phone.

—Kathleen Sanders

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Chart Ringtones [1]

	poly
1) Sugar, We're Goin' Down	poly7850
2) Naked	poly7851
3) Grind With Me	poly7852
4) Candy Shop	poly7853
5) Wake Me Up When September Ends	poly7854
6) Tubular Bells (Exorcist Theme)	poly7855
7) Wait (Whisper Song)	poly7856
8) Listen To Your Heart	poly7857
9) Drop It Like It's Hot	poly7858
10) Back Then	poly7859

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Real Tones [8]

	real
1-2 Step - Ciara & Missy Elliott	real5200
Alicia Keys - Unbreakable	real5201
And I - Ciara	real5202
Back In Black - AC/DC	real5203
Cold - Crossfade	real5204
I'm Sprung - T-Pain	real5205
Like You (Ciara Verse) - Bow Wow	real5206
Presidential - Youngbloodz	real5207
Run It - Chris Brown	real5208
Stay Fly - Three 6 Mafia	real5209

More Real Tones [7]

	real
Badd - Ying Yang Twins	real5230
Cute Without... - Taking Back Sunday	real5231
Ella Y Yo - Aventura Feat Don Omar	real5232
Get Low - Lil Jon	real5233
If You Were Mine - Marcos Hernandez	real5234
Lovers And Friends - Lil Jon	real5235
Naked - Marques Houston	real5236
Ohio Is for... - Hawthorne Heights	real5237
Shake - Ying Yang Twins	real5238
Wait - Ying Yang Twins	real5239

Top Sound FX [4]

	real
Anybody In There	fun5580
Are U Wearing Underwear?	fun5581
Bah Humbug	fun5582
Ding-Dong (Hot)	fun5583
Doctor Doctor - The Baby...	fun5584
Fluffy Laughs	fun5585
Hello Santa! Mr. Claus!	fun5586
Jingle Cells Song	fun5587
Leave Me Alone Its X-Mas	fun5588
Ice Cream Truck	fun5589
Is That A Cellphone In Your Pocket	fun5590
Mamma Calling	fun5591
Merry X-Mas Everybody	fun5592
Old Telephone Ringing 05	fun5593
Pick Up The Stupid Phone	fun5594
Police Siren	fun5595
Rasta Santa	fun5596
Sleigh Bells	fun5597
Tarzan Yell	fun5598
We Wish You	fun5599

Hot Real Tones [6]

	real
I'm A King - P$C	real5210
ASAP - T.I. (Hot)	real5211
Back Then - Mike Jones	real5212
Bad Chick - Webbie	real5213
Bet You Can't Do It Like Me - D4L	real5214
Dem Boyz - Boyz N Da Hood	real5215
Don't Trip - Trina	real5216
Down With The Sickness - Disturbed	real5217
Enter Sandman (Intro) - Metallica	real5218
Girl Tonite - Twista	real5219
Go Sit Down - Maceo	real5220
Grind With Me - Pretty Ricky	real5221
Helena - My Chemical Romance	real5222
Here We Go - Trina	real5223
Icy (Hook) - Gucci Mane	real5224
Laffy Taffy - D4L	real5225
Lighters Up - Lil' Kim	real5226
Sittin Sidewayz - Paul Wall	real5227
Wake Me Up When... - Green Day	real5228
We Be Burnin' - Sean Paul	real5229

Crazy Frog - Axel F

Real Tones [7]

	real
Crazy Frog - Axel F	frog2763
Crazy Frog - Axel F - Speed	frog2764
Crazy Frog - Axel F - Ringeding	frog2765

Ringtones

	poly
Crazy Frog [2]	frog2750
Crazy Frog - Axel F [1]	frog2751
Crazy Frog - Remix [2]	frog2752

Sound FX [4]

The Crazy Frog - Funky	frog2755
The Crazy Frog - Psycho	frog2756
The Crazy Frog - Original	frog2757

Wallpapers [3]

frog2758 frog2759 frog2760 frog2761 frog2762

Screensavers [5]

frog2753 frog2754

Color Wallpapers [3]

pic530

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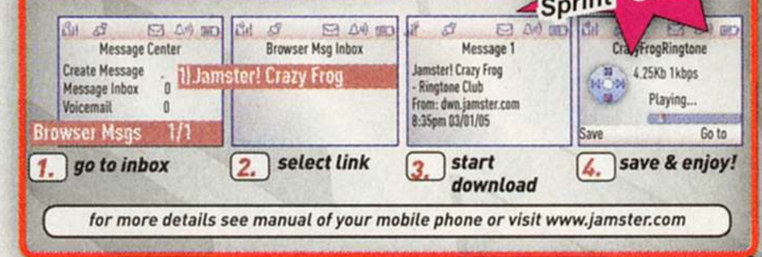

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THE RUMOR MILL

Some of this s*** is even true

We've all got a weakness. Some fall victim to chocolate. Others simply can't get enough of watching the boob tube. For me, it's *Dance Dance Revolution*; turn on any edition and I suddenly think I'm the next Michael Jackson. No, not in that way, perv. Shoot me an e-mail at quartermann@ziffdavis.com, and tell me your Achilles heel. And now, on with the scuttlebutt....

—The Q

Colossal happenings

When I say that I've got some really big news for this issue, I mean it both literally and figuratively. Hopefully by now you've completed the greatness called *Shadow of the Colossus*, but believe me—that's only the beginning of the ridiculously large creature hunting. I'm hearing that those artsy-fartsy developers are prepping a ***Shadow of the Colossus* sequel for PlayStation 3**. And here's the kicker: You'll be able to tackle these colossi alongside a friend over the Internet. Nice, very nice indeed.

Iron clad

No year in gaming would be complete without playing as some comic-book heroes (or Mega Man...or Tony Hawk...or about 70 other peeps). And 2006 will be no different, as a **game based on the *X-Men 3* flick** will mutate your consoles next spring (expect Wolvie to play a major role in this one). But that's not what has The Q all pumped: I've learned on good authority that the long-talked-about ***Iron Man* game** will head our way, too. And it's about damn time.

Visually impaired

The Q hates being the bearer of bad news, but it comes with the territory (at least that's what the rumormonger handbook says). During a recent powwow with a few well-known gamemakers, some discussed their hands-on time with early Revolution development kits. OK, here it goes: According to those fellas, **the graphics that Nintendo's next-gen system can produce are barely better than those on GameCube**. Hey, sounds a lot like Xbox-Xbox 360.

Killing spree

They say things happen in threes, and apparently, Guerrilla is taking that to heart. Right now, the Sony developer has **a trio of *Killzone* projects** in the works. I'm guessing one's for PlayStation Portable, another's for PS3, and—from the looks of that *Killzone* footage shown earlier this year—a first-person shooter for PS7. That's right; don't believe Guerrilla's prerendered warfare.

Old friends

Just because Microsoft now owns developer Rare (of *Perfect Dark* fame) doesn't mean the studio can't make games for its former boss...as long as they are of the handheld variety. **Rare is staffing up for two Nintendo DS projects, one of them being a *Banjo Kazooie* platformer**. I'm still trying to figure out the other's identity, but dear God let's hope it's not a portable *Grabbed by the Ghoulies*.

■ **One of three *Killzone* titles currently in development.**

■ **"Yep, Agro—we're screwed."**

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

■ ***Burnout* on an iPod? Don't think so.**

Q: Is the release of Apple's Video iPod a sign that the company will eventually bring out a version that plays games of DS or PSP quality?

A: Sounds cool, but the suits on Wall Street certainly don't think it'll happen. "The iPod already has games on it, but like the PSP—which isn't a great music device because of the storage, interface, and ease of use issues—the iPod doesn't lend itself to be a great game player," says one member of the financial community. But as with all new Apple products, if it does becomes a reality, we probably won't know about the handheld until it lands on store shelves.

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THE HOT 10

The cool stuff you tell your friends you discovered on your own

1 GAMETAP

It's like a genie agreed to grant you any wish and you said, "I want all the old videogames ever!" and he was like, "OK, it'll be just $15 a month and you'll need a PC with broadband." Deal! (No, you can't wish for more wishes.) Check it out at Gametap.com.

2 ANIMAL CROSSING DIARY

Head to animalcrossing-daily.blogspot.com and check out this hilariously twisted blog's dark spin on the innocent world of Nintendo games. "Poppy needs to be put to sleep."

Chihuahua shown for scale.

3 MAKING FUN OF THE XBOX 360's HUGE POWER SUPPLY

Apparently, the Shaquille O'Neal–sized guy who designed the original ginormous Xbox pad still works in the hardware department at Microsoft. Seriously, the thing is huge and heavy as hell.

4 VIRTUA FIGHTER 5

Arcade • 2006

A challenger comes....

5 THE IMPORT SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

The Japanese version comes with a bonus disc featuring early footage of the game (that shows *several* riders taking down one of the giant bosses—was it multiplayer?), plus a look at the original version of *Ico* for the PS1. Yep, the PS1.

6 HANDHELD FINAL FANTASY INVASION

FFIV is on its way to the GBA on December 12, with *FFV* and *FFVI* due sometime after that. *FFII* is coming to the DS, and *FFVII: Before Crisis* will be on cell phones in the next year. With God as our witness, we'll never be bored waiting in line again.

7 ARMIES OF THE NIGHT

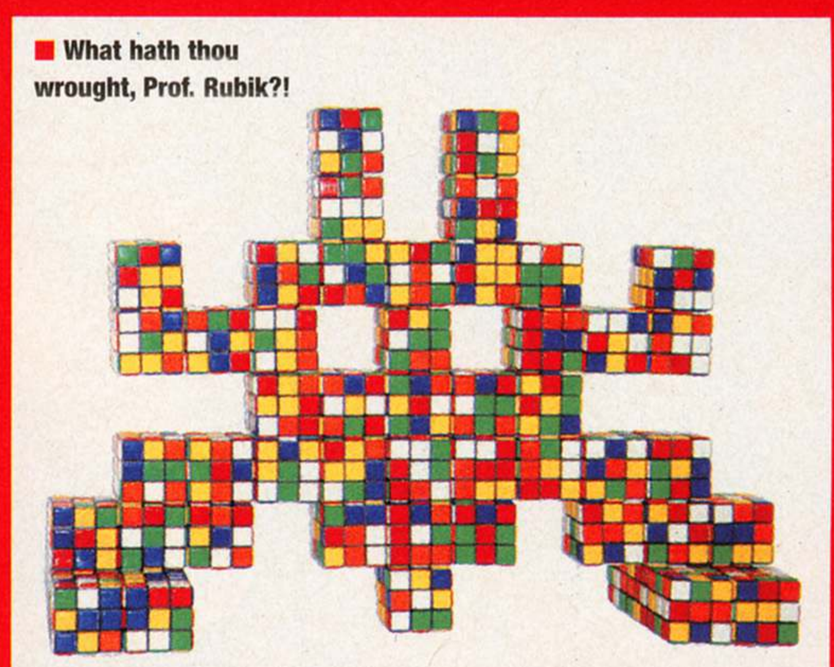
Rockstar tips its hat to beat-em-up classic *Double Dragon* in this unlockable *Warriors* minigame. Beat every mission in the game and try the arcade machine at your hangout.

8 THE NEW PSP HEADSET MIC

Sure, it's great for *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo* multiplayer chat, but we're more excited about the inevitable hack that'll basically turn Sony's handheld into a free cell phone.

9 MCDONALD'S

Cheap food, a Playland for exercise, and now free Wi-Fi access (at some locations) for online handheld gaming. Why would you ever leave?



What hath thou wrought, Prof. Rubik?!

10 INVADER

A French artist's awesome retro-gaming-inspired designs have found their way to public spots all over the world. Even better, his medium is often Rubik's Cubes (as with the Galaxian above). Check out more at www.sixspace.com/gallery/invader2005/. Maybe you'll find one in your hometown....

>> HAVE YOU TRIED PLAYING YOUR COPY OF *HALO* OR *HALO 2* IN THAT SPANKY-NEW XBOX 360 OF YOURS? TRY IT AND SEE WHAT HAPPENS.... >>

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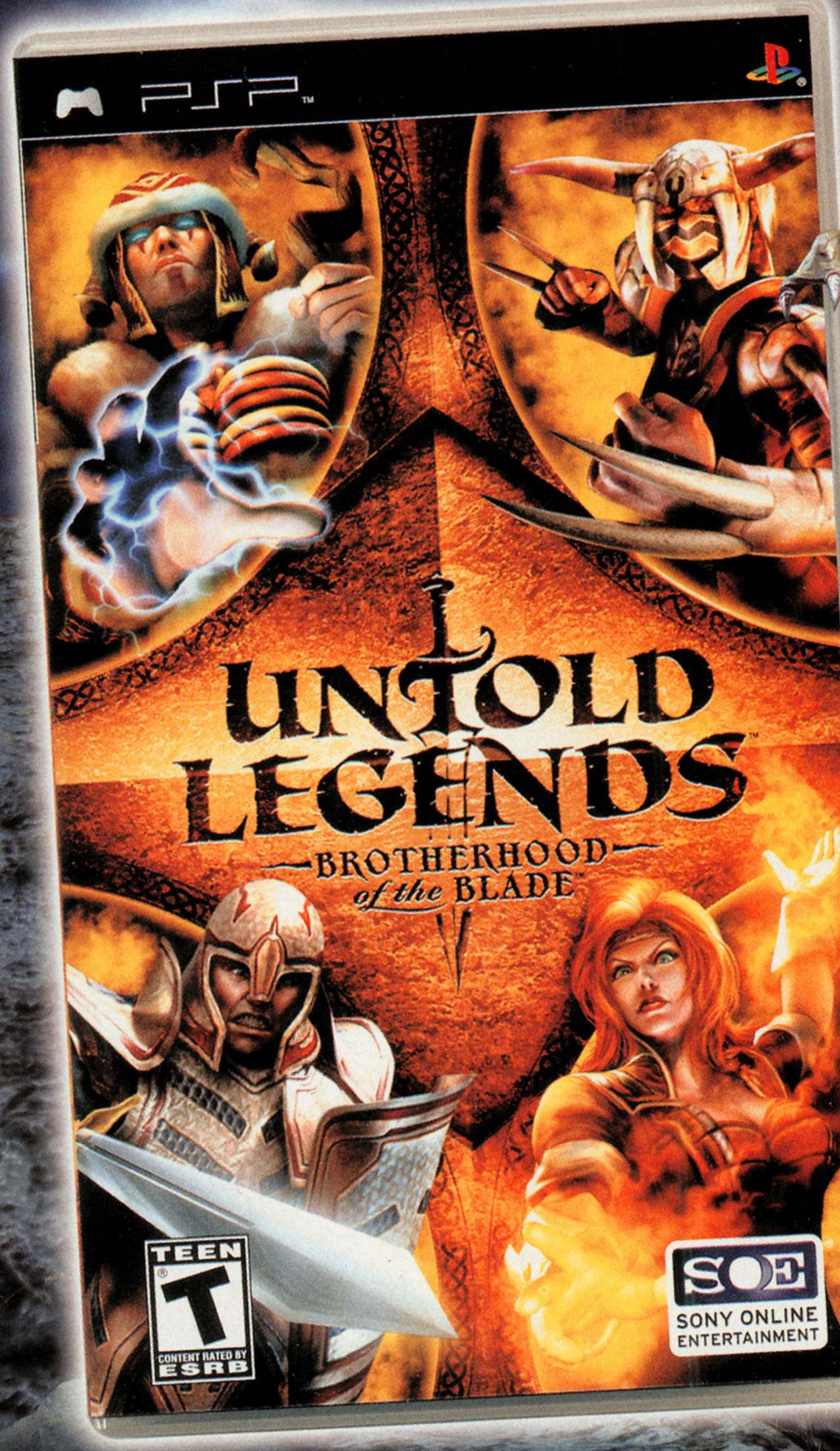

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* Based on the total franchise sales on the PSP™ system through August 2005 according to the NPD Group.

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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Strong Language

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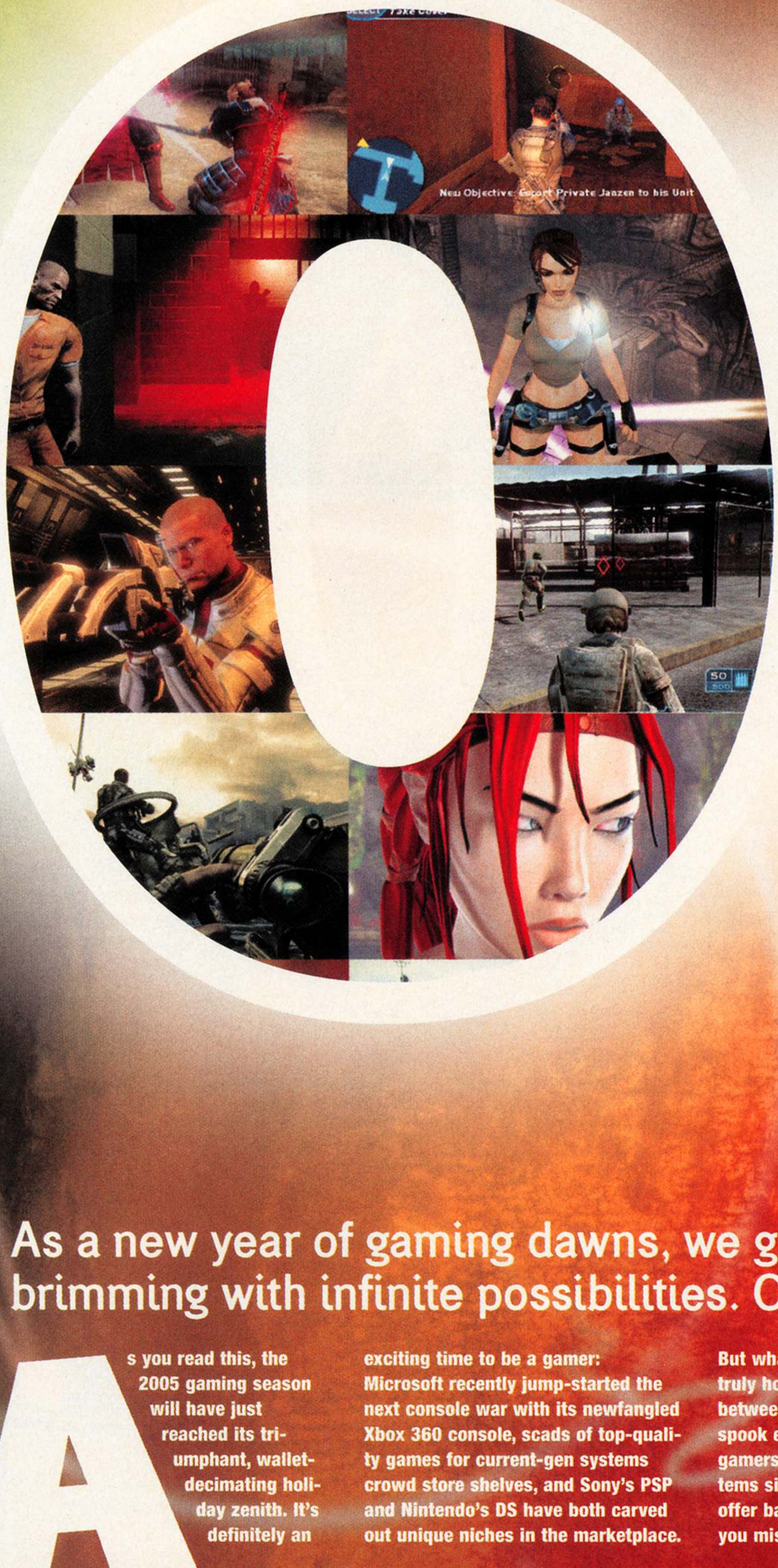
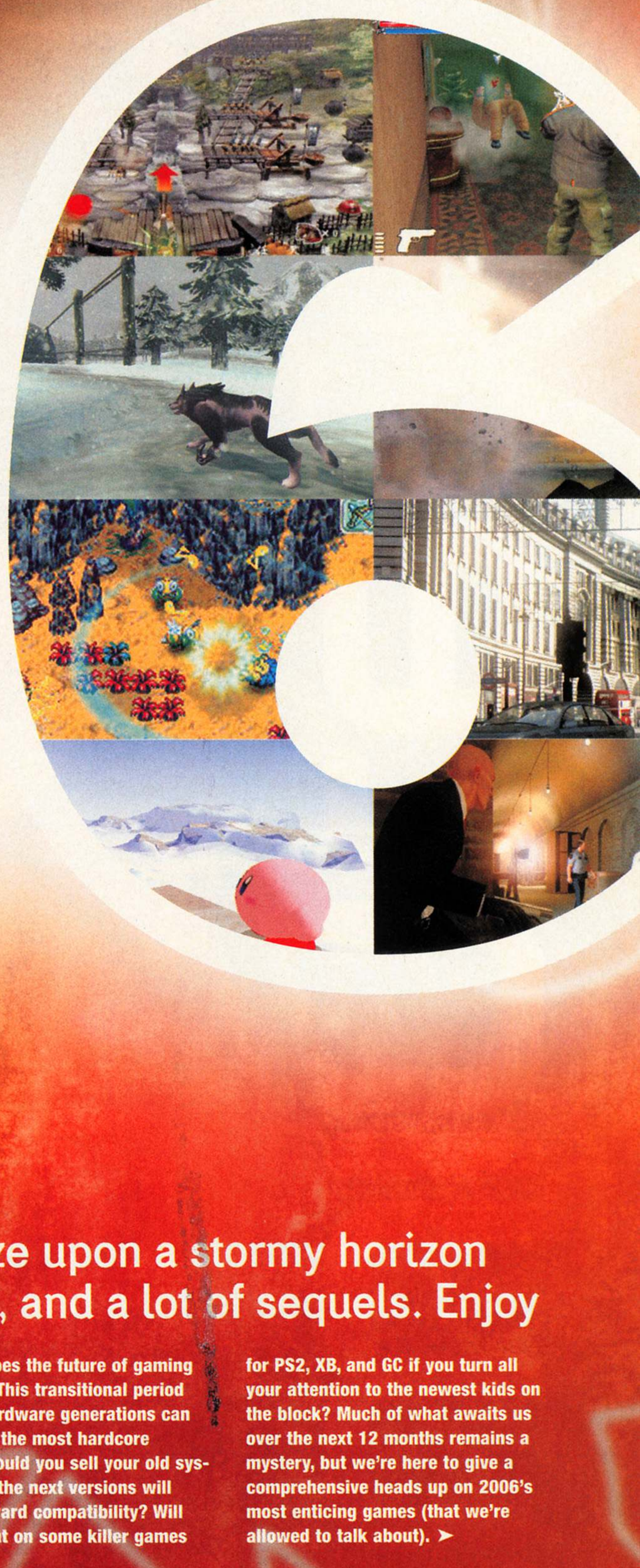
THE YEAR IN PREVIEW





As a new year of gaming dawns, we gaze upon a stormy horizon brimming with infinite possibilities. Oh, and a lot of sequels. Enjoy

As you read this, the 2005 gaming season will have just reached its triumphant, wallet-decimating holiday zenith. It's definitely an exciting time to be a gamer: Microsoft recently jump-started the next console war with its newfangled Xbox 360 console, scads of top-quality games for current-gen systems crowd store shelves, and Sony's PSP and Nintendo's DS have both carved out unique niches in the marketplace. But what does the future of gaming truly hold? This transitional period between hardware generations can spook even the most hardcore gamers. Should you sell your old systems since the next versions will offer backward compatibility? Will you miss out on some killer games for PS2, XB, and GC if you turn all your attention to the newest kids on the block? Much of what awaits us over the next 12 months remains a mystery, but we're here to give a comprehensive heads up on 2006's most enticing games (that we're allowed to talk about). ➤

1UP

■ Not pictured (because it's invisible): *GRAW*'s dynamic ambient musical score heats up multiplayer action for hipsters with 7.1-channel surround-sound systems.

■ Your cross-com eyepiece gives you a handy overhead radar of the area.

GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

Xbox 360 • Ubisoft • February 2006

Although *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* hasn't taken prospective fans on quite the emotional roller coaster that Rare's *Perfect Dark Zero* has, this latest installment in the hit squad-based-shooter series definitely hurled a few unexpected loops and corkscrews their way. The thrill ride kicked off with the game's announcement: *GRAW*'s stunning graphics instantly dropped jaws, but when new footage surfaced a few months later, the visuals looked drastically downgraded. Apparently, that early trailer was actually a dreaded "gameplay target" CG clip. Oh, and as if that wasn't enough bad news, Ubisoft dropped a bombshell by revealing that the game wouldn't be ready for the 360 launch, either. Cut to our expectations careening down the metaphorical hill at breakneck speed. "When you first show a game, you focus on the visuals," explains *GRAW* Designer Christian Allen. "But then development starts kicking in, and you're like, 'OK...now I gotta get 16 dudes in this map,' and everything had to be scaled back."

Armed only with skepticism and a desire to be thrown clear of the potential wreckage, we recently checked out the current state of *GRAW* on Xbox 360. The verdict? Stand down, soldiers—*GRAW* is officially back on track. One new map called Drydocks blew us away: Wispy clouds rolling past the moon cause brief periods of darkness, realistic water gushes down the sides of shipping containers, an ocean rages all around the edge of the map, and rain echoes through large pipes as bullet casings roll around the pipe floors. Now *these* are next-gen graphics. Did we mention the lighting effects? Stare into a spotlight for a few seconds, then gaze out at the dark ocean and watch as your "eyes" adjust to the lighting changes. (Head over to www.1UP.com for an exclusive look at this level.)

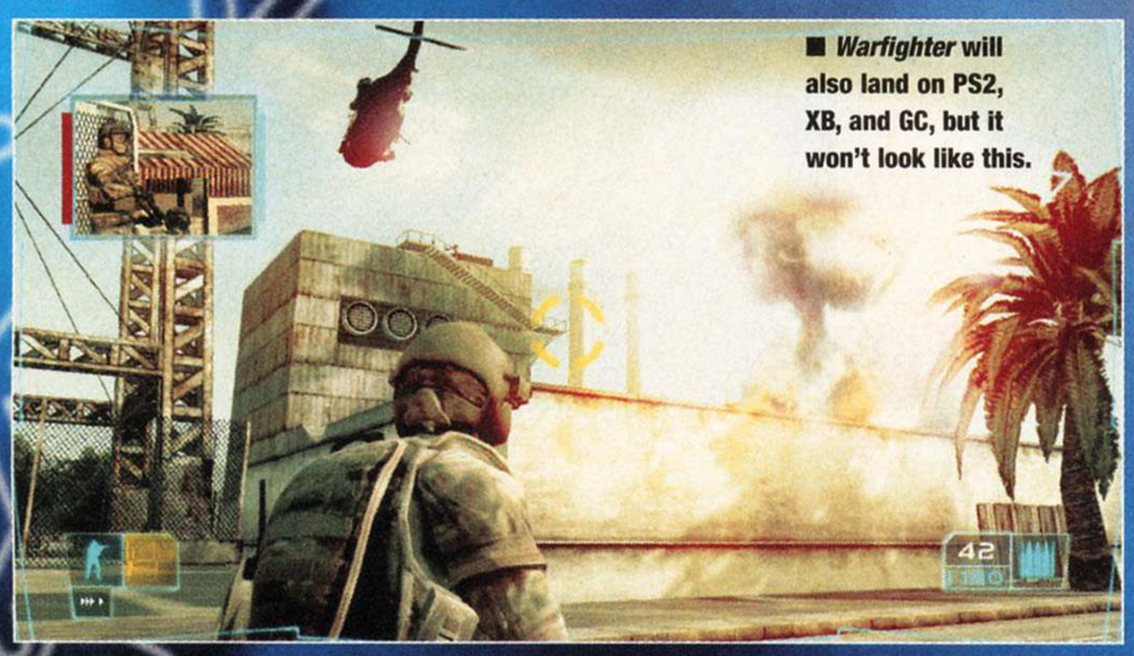
GRAW's slick audiovisual package could certainly validate your bank-breaking Xbox 360 purchase, but it's the gameplay that will determine whether or not your life needs more *Recon*. The core single-player action doesn't stray far from the past games' tense squad-based shooting. A near-future setting (war-torn Mexico City in the year 2013) does afford the game some nifty gadgets, though, including the swanky new cross-com system—a multipurpose monocle that lets you scope satellite recon maps, issue commands to your buddies, call in air strikes, control unmanned drones, and much more. Battles rage across both urban and rural landscapes, and Ubisoft promises that both friendly and enemy A.I.—crucial elements to this game's success—will impress in the final game.

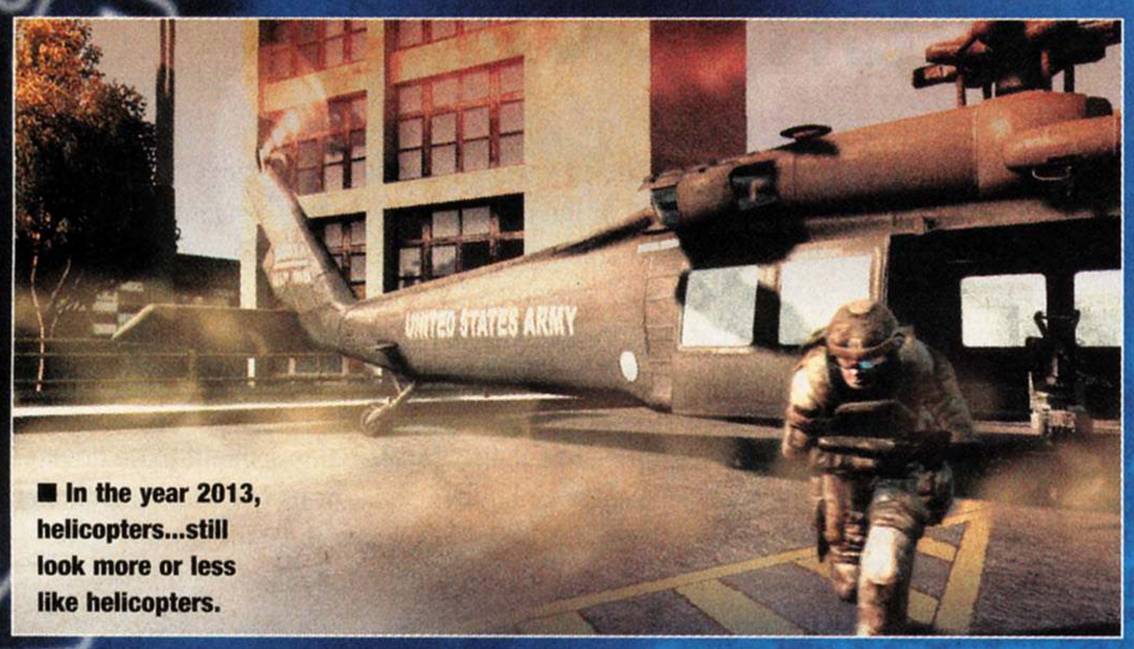
Customization reigns in *GRAW*'s 16-player online multiplayer action: Here, you can design your own game types by adjusting nearly 1,000 variables, including respawns, zones, and zone control. Also, the game wisely borrows *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*'s (XB) character identity system, allowing you to choose a persistent class, face, body type, headgear, and country of origin for your online soldier. And the online play isn't only about competition—you and your buds can tackle four specific co-op campaigns (also playable via splitscreen). More campaigns will be released as downloadable content via the Xbox Live Marketplace service after the game launches. *—Kimi Matsuzaki*

the buzz

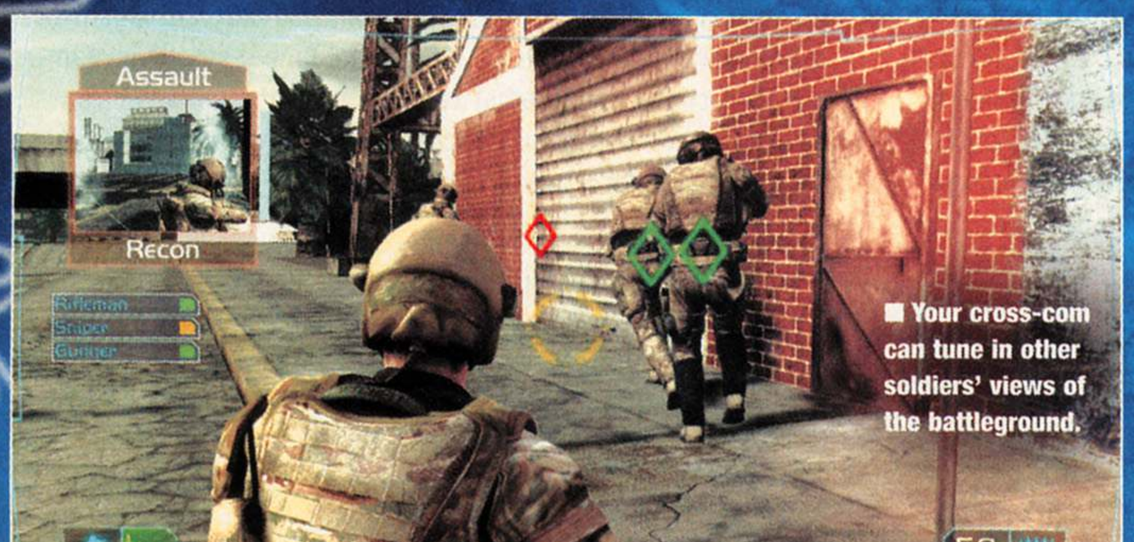
***GRAW*'s rocky ride keeps us from giving it an unconditional recommendation, but we will say that it's currently looking rather promising. If the visuals and gameplay deliver in the end, this could easily be the hottest post-launch Xbox 360 title.**

■ ***Warfighter* will also land on PS2, XB, and GC, but it won't look like this.**

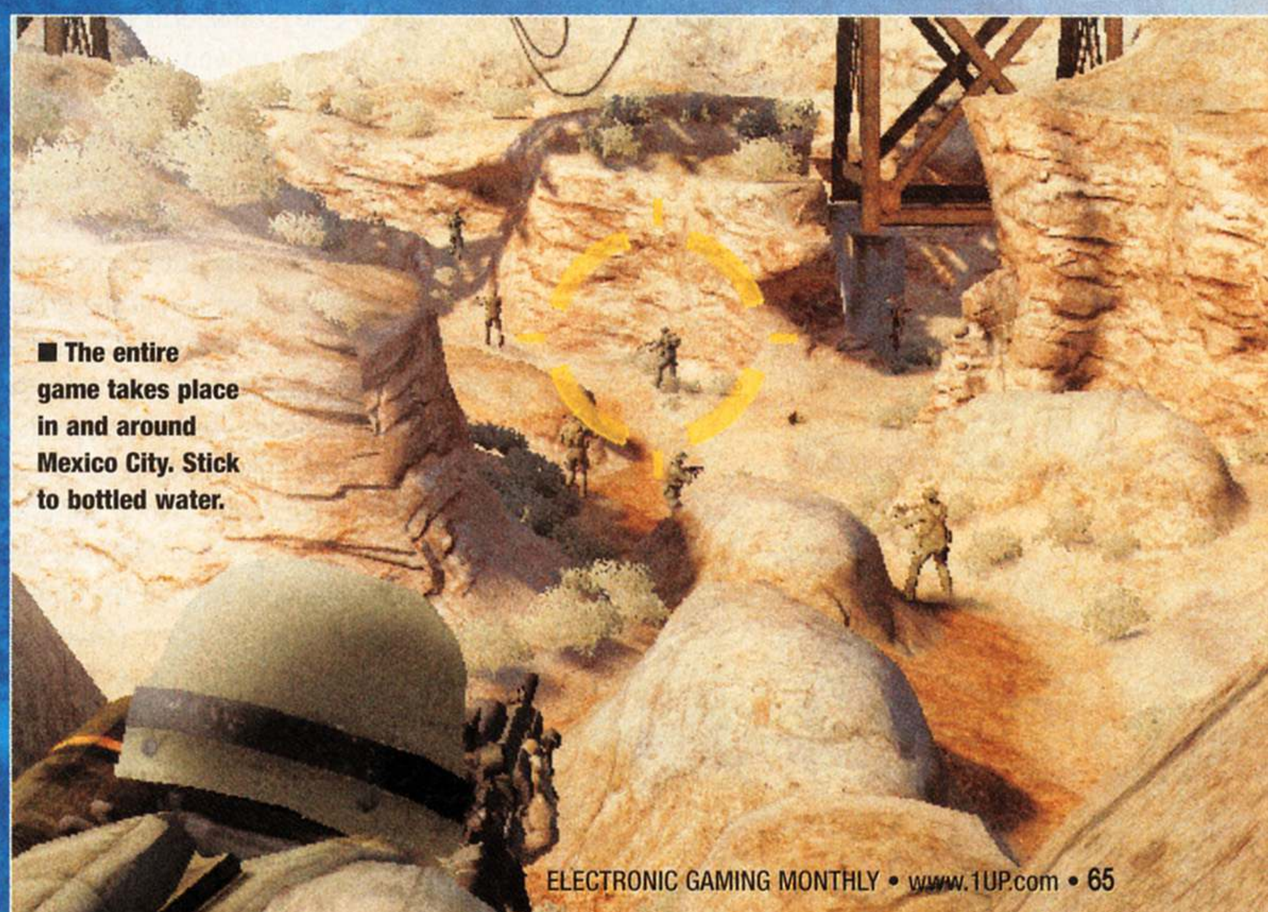




■ **In the year 2013, helicopters...still look more or less like helicopters.**

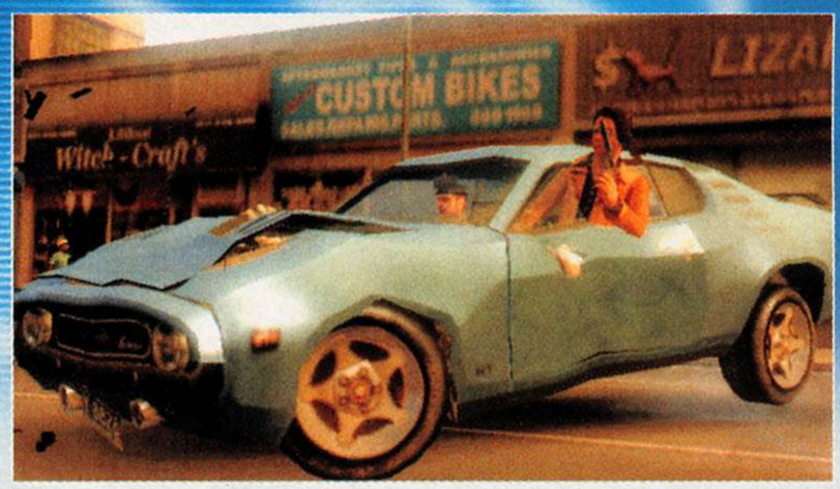


■ **Your cross-com can tune in other soldiers' views of the battleground.**

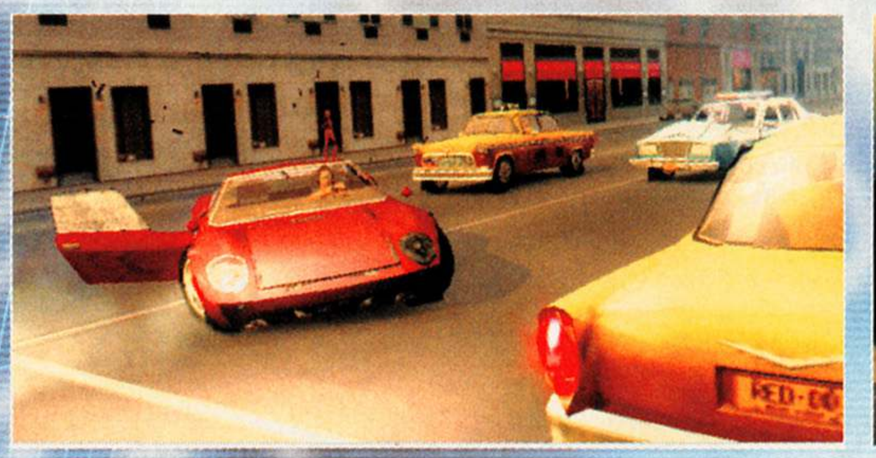


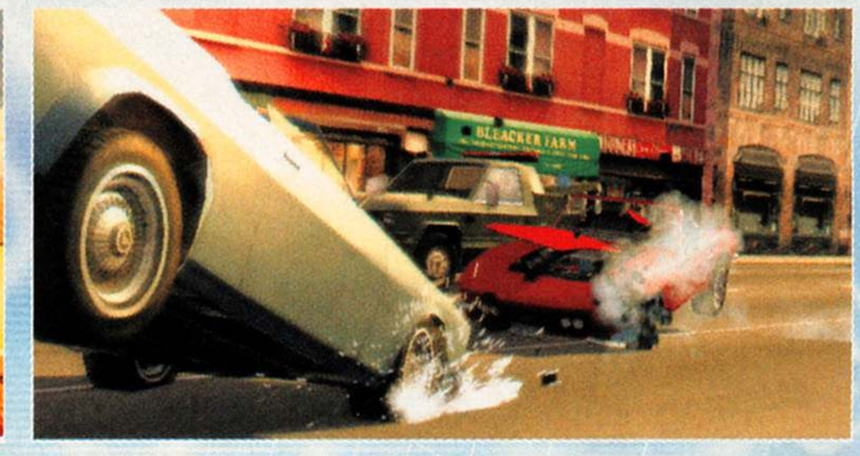
■ **The entire game takes place in and around Mexico City. Stick to bottled water.**

■ This time, most of the gunplay takes place from the safety of a driver's seat.



■ *Driver: Parallel Lines* inspires you to treat your stolen property with respect—you can now customize, upgrade, and repair your favorite cars.





DRIVER: PARALLEL LINES

PS2/XB • Atari • March 2006

Driver developer Reflections has devised a cunning plan to make gamers forget about the glitchy, frustrating, and tragically named *DRIV3R*—disco music. OK, groovy tunes are just the beginning: *Driver: Parallel Lines* transports you to the heady setting of New York City in 1975, where you play as an up-and-coming wannabe mobster called "the Kid." Yep, that means that established series hero Tanner gets the boot (who wants to be an undercover cop when you can be a real crook?), allowing you to indulge in plenty of mission-based kidnappings, turf wars, and grand theft auto. Success requires skillfully driving gas-guzzling '70s vehicles through a pared-down version of the greater NYC area (with a detour to scenic New Jersey). "Since it is a period piece, we did our homework," explains Reflections Studio Manager Gareth Edmonson. "All vehicles—whether sports cars, sedans, trucks, motorcycles, tanks, bulldozers, or even semis—are relevant to the era in their design, and also in performance and handling."

Don't expect a full game of *Saturday Night Fever* trappings, though—about halfway through the game, a job goes awry, landing you in the clink for 30 years. (Thankfully, this part is not playable and you will not be subjected to a "don't drop the soap" minigame.) Fast-forward to modern-day NYC with its sanitized Times Square and wasteful SUVs. Hard time served, you emerge from prison middle-aged and hell-bent on vengeance. This means Ensure-fueled violence and death in a modern city, but those who flinch at the memory of *DRIV3R*'s disastrous on-foot missions should take comfort. "The on-foot side of the game is really very small," reassures Edmonson. "Allowing the player to exit the car is more to allow you to change cars rather than be involved in gunfights...players will find themselves driving almost all the time."

And really, in a game called *Driver,* gamers ought to be driving. "The real focus of the game has been for us to come up with any excuse we can think of to get players in the cars, driving fast through the traffic, crashing through stuff, breaking the law, running people over, and bailing out before your ride explodes," Edmonson explains. "So all the missions use different mechanics to achieve this—race, chase, be chased, time restrictions, damage restrictions, escort other vehicles, protect other vehicles, destroy other vehicles, or perform stunts." All things that, if done properly, make for a beautiful apology. *—Kathleen Sanders*

the buzz

It is no secret that Reflections knows it f'ed up with *DRIV3R*, and it looks like this game is a return to the roots that made the series great. If so, it could make amends.

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This title is available for the PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system and PSP™ (PlayStation®Portable) system.

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HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

PS2/XB • Eidos • February 2006

Agent 47 only wishes that male-pattern baldness was his biggest problem. Now this hired assassin has to contend with a rival agency that's out to acquire his contracts...and kill him. So begins *Blood Money*.

While watching your own back, you'll still be required to perform your usual criminal duties. Number four in the stealth-action series will feature "more normal-life killings," says Level Designer Peter Flech. This translates into realistic and heavily populated settings, such as a hotel on the Las Vegas Strip and a Paris opera house. Luckily, Mr. Clean has picked up a few tricks from another sneaky fella, *Metal Gear*'s Solid Snake. You can now use people as human shields, throw items to distract enemies, and even deliver some knuckle sandwiches.

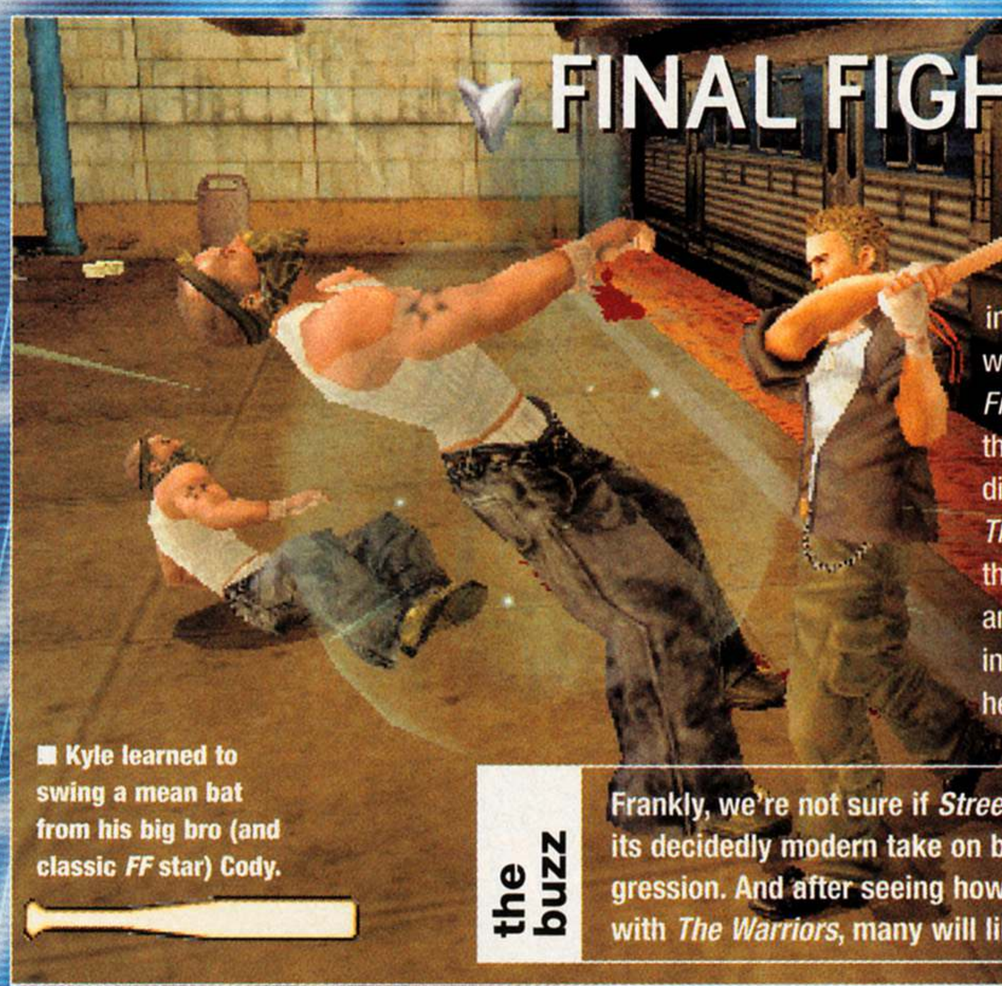
Also, as in every *Hitman* game, you'll always have more than one avenue to take out a target. For example, at the opera house, you can even dress up as though you're part of the show, head out on stage, and extinguish your foe in plain sight. And if you're caught, just say, "Hey, they told me I was supposed to be a Soprano."

—Bryan Intihar

the buzz

We like Agent 47's new (albeit ripped-off) moves, but hopefully, *Blood Money*'s enemies will finally have some brains.

FINAL FIGHT: STREETWISE



■ Kyle learned to swing a mean bat from his big bro (and classic *FF* star) Cody.

PS2/XB • Capcom • February 2006

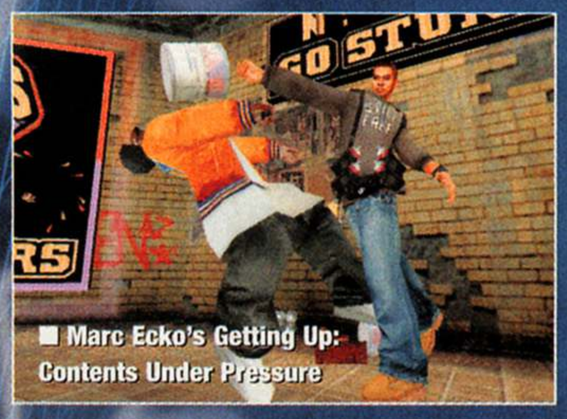
No, this isn't *Beatdown: Fists of Vengeance*...Capcom released *that* brawler back in September. "A while ago, even we were wondering why Capcom would release two similar games," muses *Final Fight* game designer Joe Spataro. "But even though the features seem similar, our gameplay is totally different." Here, gameplay unfolds in a vaguely *Grand Theft Auto*–inspired fashion, with required brawls across the city's various areas, optional missions to raise cash, and various minigames. Proceedings feel more familiar in the streamlined co-op mode featuring old-school heroes Haggar, Cody, and Guy. *—Shane Bettenhausen*

the buzz

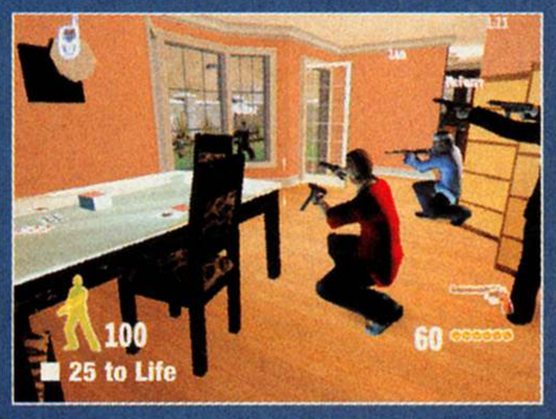
Frankly, we're not sure if *Streetwise* will please fans of the classic games with its decidedly modern take on brawling (guns aplenty) and sandbox-style progression. And after seeing how Rockstar raised the bar in terms of presentation with *The Warriors*, many will likely chuckle at this game's amateurish visuals.

HELD OVER

Despite publishers' powerful desire to get games to market in time for the lucrative holiday shopping season, setbacks and delays inevitably shove some titles into the New Year. Here are a few stragglers that couldn't quite make it into 2005. Here's to second (or in the case of *StarCraft: Ghost*, fourth) chances....

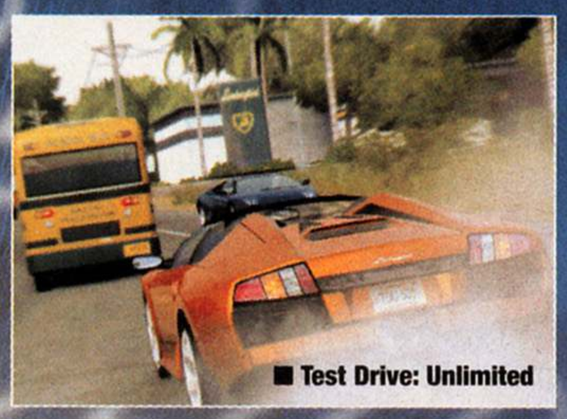


■ Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure

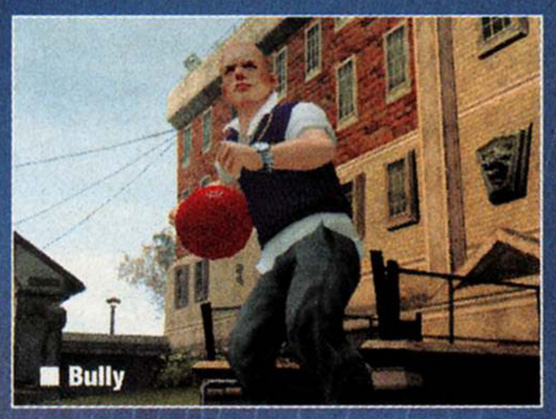


■ 25 to Life

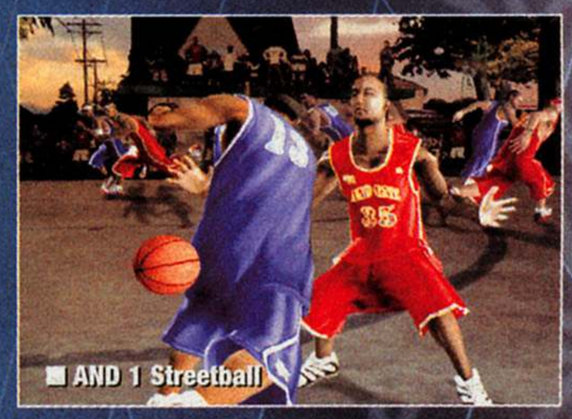
■ StarCraft: Ghost



■ Test Drive: Unlimited



■ Bully



■ AND 1 Streetball

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■ *PSU*'s online lobbies aren't all in cities—this one lies in a vast desert.

PHANTASY STAR UNIVERSE

PlayStation 2 • Sega • February 2006

Right now, publishers are tearing out their hair trying to figure out whether to make an engrossing single-player RPG or an online adventure that takes advantage of gamers' current obsession with questing with real, live human beings. Developer Sonic Team decided to take the tough way out: do both in one game.

While it was possible to play *PSU*'s predecessor, *Phantasy Star Online* (GC, XB, Dreamcast), offline—and more gamers did than those who bothered to hook up to the Net—it wasn't exactly optimal. This time, with three planets to explore and a large cast of characters contributing a fully cinematic, in-depth story, offline questers will actually get their money's worth.

And while we're sure that story mode hero Ethan Waber is an upstanding young chap, *PSO* diehards have other issues on their minds—specifically, how will this game's online feature set stack up to what came before? Many of the innovations fulfill long-standing *PSO* users' wishes, such as increasing the number of simultaneous party members (from four to six), adding a new ➤

■ You'll be able to buy, sell, and trade items in the lobbies while online.

AGE of EMPIRES III
PC

PHANTASY STAR UNIVERSE (CONT.)

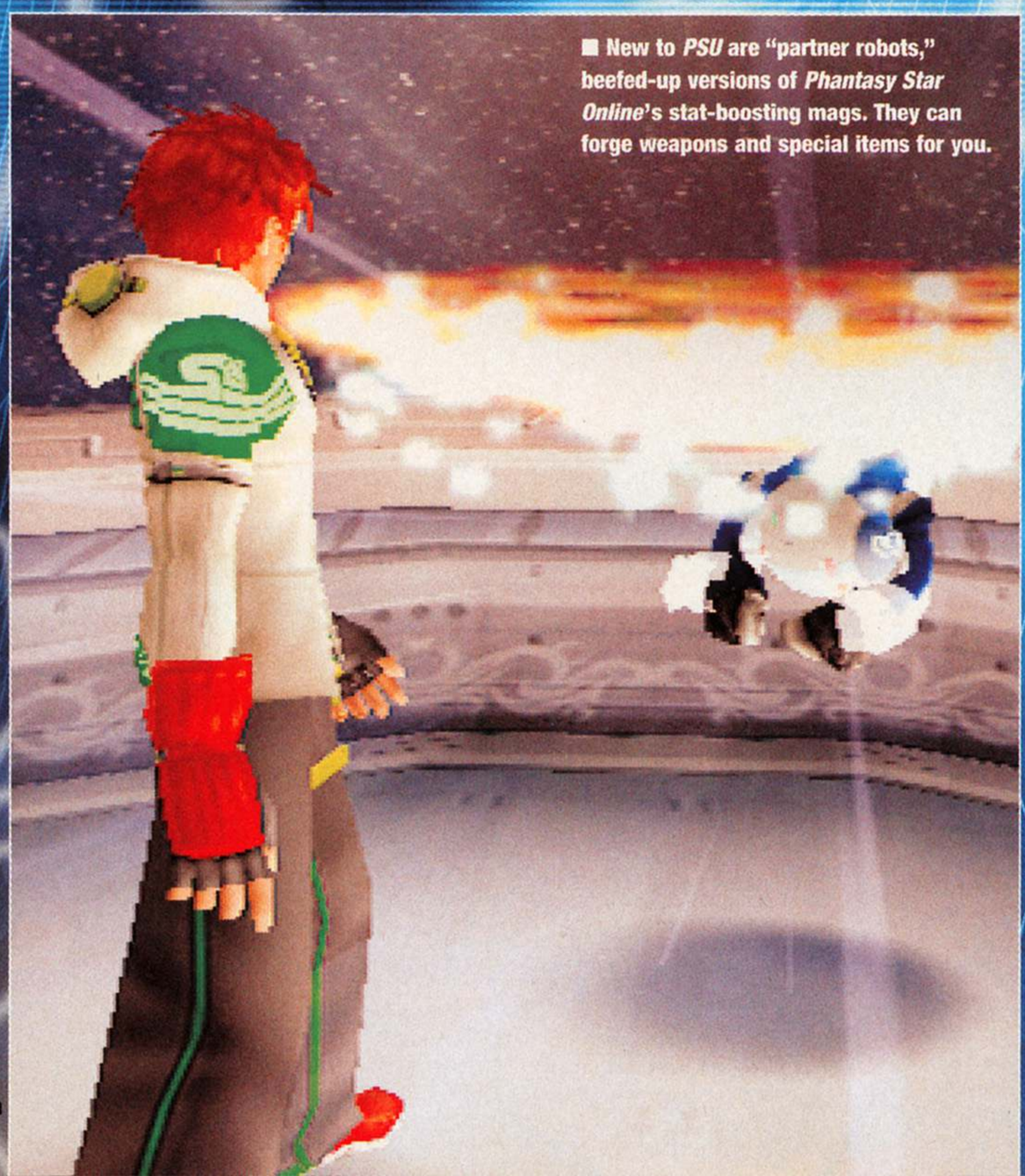
race (beastmen), offering the ability to change and customize your character's attire, implementing an item creation system, and building technology to avoid the rampant cheating that infected *PSO* (characters are now stored server-side). Combat receives some crucial tweaks, too—get ready to strafe around enemies, fire guns from a first-person perspective, and master longer, weapon-specific multihit combos.

The structure for online play appears fairly similar to that of *PSO*: You meet up in massive lobbies, form an adventuring party, and systematically tackle myriad dungeons and bosses, all the while amassing piles of jealousy-inducing equipment. Yeah, at its heart, *PSU* is still a treadmill RPG that dangles the carrot of cooler-looking, hyper-rare goodies in front of you...and we wouldn't have it any other way. *—Christian Nutt*

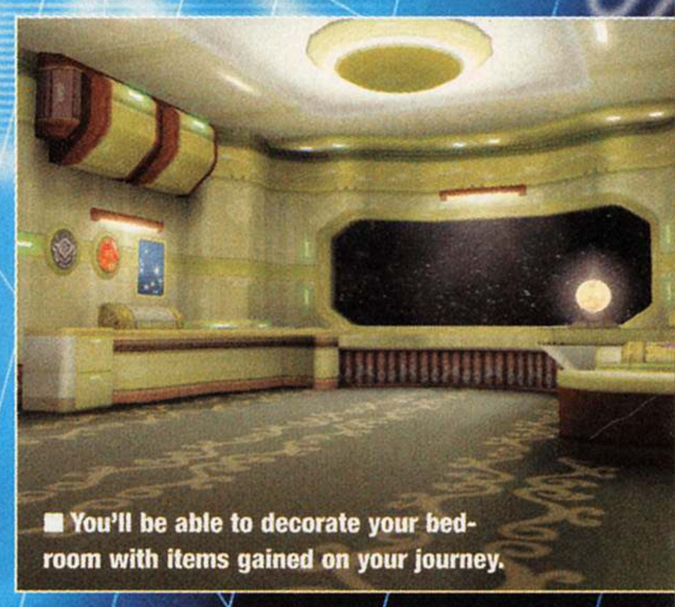
the buzz

PSO was fantastic. _PSU_ looks very like more of the same—but developed in 2005 instead of 2001, with the full power of the PS2 brought to bear. It's time to get ready to sideline your social life.

■ Your "partner robot" can even evolve into a sexy young robogal who fights alongside you.



■ New to *PSU* are "partner robots," beefed-up versions of *Phantasy Star Online*'s stat-boosting mags. They can forge weapons and special items for you.



■ You'll be able to decorate your bedroom with items gained on your journey.

AMPED 3

Bigger mountains,
deeper powder,
progressive tricks.
Gameplay so killer
it's got no filler.
All-new physics engine,
perfected controls, and
advanced customization.
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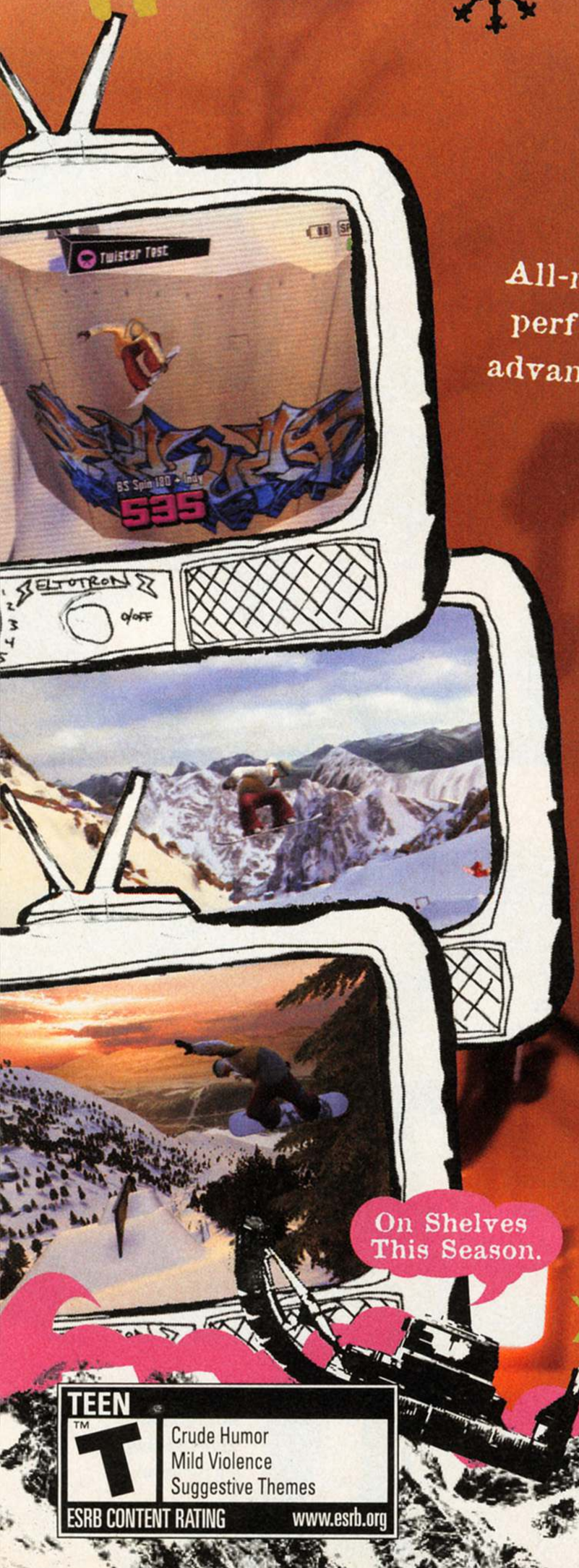
fast forward.



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SONIC RIDERS

PS2/XB/GC • Sega • February 2006

"We don't want gamers to view this as a normal racing game," explains Sonic Team's Takashi Yuda. "We know that a lot of gamers feel left out by the hardcore serious racing games, and we also want to reflect *Sonic*'s unique gameplay and style." *Gran Turismo* nuts hoping to adjust Sonic's gear ratios, prepare to look elsewhere.

Having Sonic strapped to a hoverboard ("...like the ones from *Back to the Future II*," notes Yuda) isn't the only thing different from the other 3D *Sonic* games—in fact, this game is being developed by an entirely new team, different than the one responsible for *Sonic Heroes* and *Shadow the Hedgehog*. What hasn't changed is Sonic's addiction to speed and glitz; this is a colorful, fast-paced racing game, with Sonic and his furry little pals on planks. A strong focus on landing massive tricks (you can score serious air time by hitting packets of "turbulence" zooming about the ether) should help to keep *Riders* from being just another *Mario Kart* clone.

—*C.N.*

the buzz

***Sonic* spin-offs are traditionally duds, but Yuda's team seems determined to pack *Riders* with high-flying, high-speed action, the kind *Sonic* is known for.**

ONIMUSHA: DAWN OF DREAMS

PlayStation 2 • Capcom • March 2006

After *Onimusha 3* jumped the shark with its laughable time-travel plot and bizarre starring turn by French actor Jean Reno, a return to form was in order. Enter *Dreams*, a back-to-basics slashathon that offers five playable characters (ranging from a traditional samurai to a dainty lass toting heavy artillery), oodles of equipment to discover, and towering bosses to topple. Dressing up the proceedings in some of the most detailed, beautiful visuals ever seen on the PlayStation 2 doesn't hurt, either.

An unlockable two-player co-op mode sweetens the deal even further, although we do wish that this mode would be made available from the outset.... —*S.B.*

the buzz

Strangely, we're not sensing much excitement in *Oni 4* from the general public...perhaps that last game damaged the brand even more than anyone expected. Hopefully, fans will return to the fold once they peep the additions and improvements in this sequel.

METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SUBSISTENCE

PlayStation 2 • Konami • February 2006

All right slackers, here's your second chance to finally play one of the PS2's finest games. This stealth-action prequel boasts a lengthy quest, killer bosses, stunning visuals, and a story line that's been known to drive grown men to cry. And those who've already solved Konami's Cold War epic will find plenty of original content here to validate a second purchase.

The core game receives few tweaks, but gets one crucial addition that players have requested for years—a fully 3D, adjustable camera à la *Splinter Cell*. In addition, returning players can tackle an extreme difficulty setting, Boss Rush mode, and new primate-packed Snake vs. Ape missions.

New mode *Metal Gear Online* represents *Subsistence*'s most substantive upgrade, offering eight-player simultaneous play, a host of original maps, playable characters, and voice-chat support. You'll be able to stealthily take out your pals in four different game types, including deathmatch and rescue, but the highly original Sneaking Mission mode—one player is Snake while the other seven play enemy troops—embodies the true spirit of *MGS*. —*S.B.*

the buzz

Now this is how to re-release a game.

■ **Raikov, shortly after administering the rohypnol.**

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I RETURNED HOME EXPECTING PEACE. INSTEAD I FOUND MY KINGDOM RAVAGED BY WAR AND MY PEOPLE ENSLAVED. NOW I AM A FUGITIVE, HUNTED BY HOSTILE ARMIES AND PLAGUED BY A CURSE THAT IS GRADUALLY POSSESSING MY SOUL. A DARKER PRINCE RESIDES IN ME NOW. AND I MUST EMBRACE HIS POWERS AND SKILL IF I WANT TO RESTORE PEACE TO MY LAND, MY PEOPLE, AND MY SOUL.

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XBOX

NINTENDO GAMECUBE

PlayStation.2

UBISOFT

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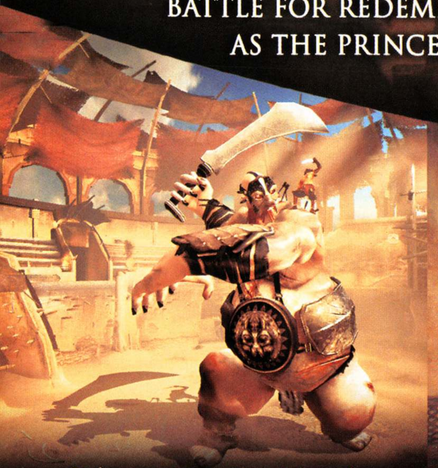
...The Other to Dominate Them

BATTLE FOR REDEMPTION
AS THE PRINCE...

EMBRACE YOUR CURSED SOUL
AS THE DARK PRINCE...



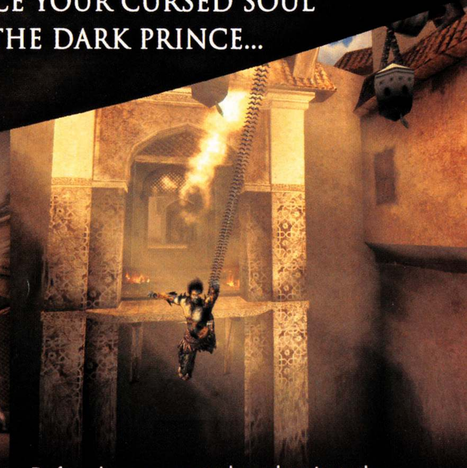
Craft your own combat style with Free-Form Fighting.

Surprise enemies with stealthy Speed Kills.

Seize the reins of a chariot and battle through the open-ended city of Babylon.

Inflict surprise decapitations and other crafty Speed Kills.

Deliver vicious new combo attacks unique to the Dark Prince.



Perform long-range attacks and navigate the environment with the deadly new Daggertail.

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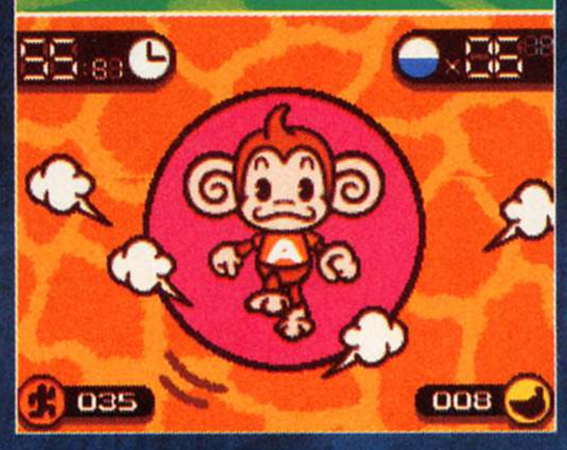

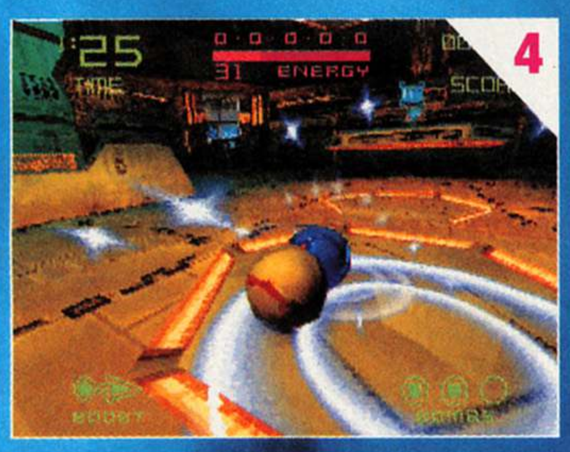

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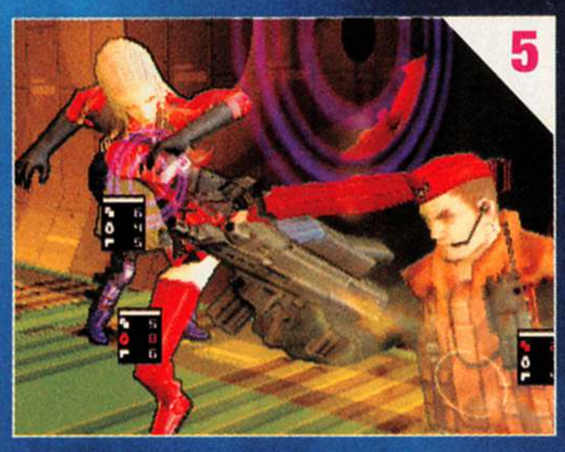
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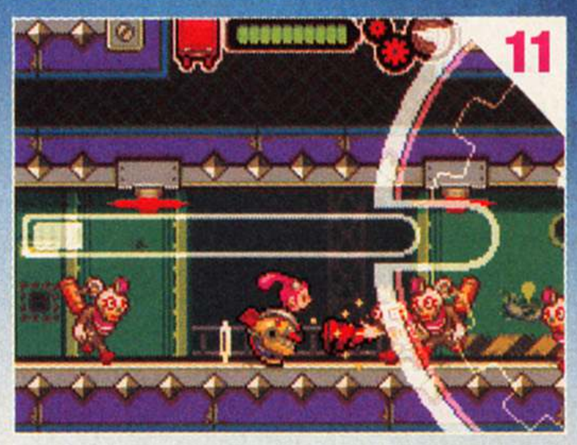
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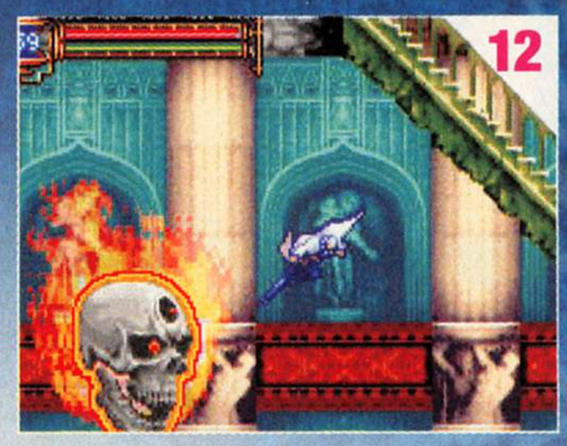
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PORTABLE PLEASURES FOR WINTER

The first few months of 2006 will play host to a surprising number of releases for PSP, DS, and even the dusty ol' GBA. Prepare to rock the daily commute.

Nintendo DS

Capcom's ***Resident Evil: Deadly Silence*** **(1)** represents the umpteenth remake of the original survival-horror zombiefest, but some neat touch-panel gameplay additions inject some fresh flavor. All you'll taste in ***Super Princess Peach*** **(2)** is saccharine—this über-cutsey title finally gives Mario's main squeeze her own platforming adventure. Also be on the lookout for ***Super Monkey Ball: Touch & Roll*** **(3)**, the perfect blend of touch-panel control and four-player wireless monkeyshines. If we're lucky, we'll also get the long-delayed ***Metroid Prime Hunters*** **(4)**, plus the U.S. version of the educational Japanese puzzling hit, *Brain Training*. Oh, and artsy types and druggies should trip out over interactive music "game" *Electroplankton*.

PlayStation Portable

Solid Snake once again plays with a full deck in ***Metal Gear Ac!d 2*** **(5)**, another dose of card-based strategy. This time, a wild new visual style and a creative stereoscopic 3D glasses attachment spice up the proceedings. Jak's wiseacre sidekick finally busts out on his own in ***Daxter*** **(6)**, an ambitious 3D platformer that fills in the story line gaps between the *Jak* titles. If you still need more sassy animal high jinks, check out ***Ape Escape Academy*** **(7)**, a collection of wild multiplayer minigames. Gamers questing for something less cuddly can tackle Namco's *Bounty Hounds*, a blistering third-person shooter offering 500 different pieces of equipment. Or maybe the serious strategic role-playing of ***Generation of Chaos*** **(8)** meshes with your grown-up sensibilities. Though if you prefer your tactical encounters 100 percent elf-free, sample *Field Commander*, a turn-based multiplayer war sim in the vein of Nintendo's *Advance Wars* series. Finally, ***Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code*** **(9)** adds true online play and new character classes to the previous game's successful formula.

Game Boy Advance

First up, look for ***Tales of Phantasia*** **(10)**, the grandpappy of Namco's long-running *Tales* series (see: *Tales of Symphonia* for GC, among others). It's a charming, old-fashioned RPG in the style of *Final Fantasy*. Of course, you could skip this wannabe and wait around for the inevitable GBA releases of both *Final Fantasy V* and *Final Fantasy VI*, both coming out at some undisclosed time in 2006. Also be on the lookout for ***Drill Dozer*** **(11)** (formerly known as *Screw Breaker*), a wildly entertaining platformer by the guys behind *Pokémon*. Oh, and even though it's not officially a new game, Konami's ***Castlevania 2 in 1*** **(12)** (with *Harmony of Dissonance* and *Aria of Sorrow* on one cart) isn't to be missed. ➤

ALSO IN WINTER

Perhaps winter really is the new fall—many of 2005's coolest games (*God of War*, *Resident Evil 4*, etc.) came out during the traditionally bleak first quarter. 2006's snowy months appear similarly jam-packed with releases. So many, in fact, that we didn't have enough room to cover them all. So here's a quick rundown of what's on tap for early 2006.

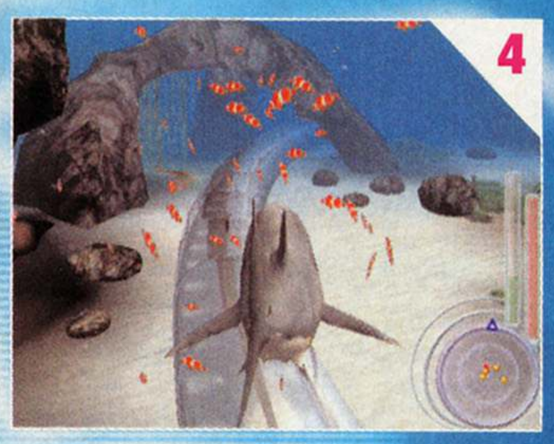
1

2

Xbox 360

Assuming you aren't already crashed out on the current-gen versions, ***Burnout Revenge*** **(1)** for Xbox 360 should make a worthwhile investment for reckless drivers. Likewise, the next-gen version of ***Battlefield 2: Modern Combat*** **(2)** won't stray too far from its already-released cousins, but it's a solid multiplayer shooter nonetheless. And THQ's squad-based tactical war sim ***The Outfit*** **(3)** might sneak onto shelves just before spring blossoms.

3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Multiplatform

Shark enthusiasts will finally assume the role of the legendary great white when Majesco's ***Jaws Unleashed*** **(4)** surfaces for PS2 and Xbox. Eidos' ***Commandos Strike Force*** **(5)** (PS2, XB) has also been a long time coming, and hopefully its gunplay has come a long way from the previous forgettable installment. The squad-based shooting in *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers* (PS2, XB) seems a safer bet. Don't expect any terribly daring innovations over the previous game, though. And if you want to be on the cutting edge of sports games, tackle EA Sports' inaugural *Arena Football* (PS2, XB).

5

6

PlayStation 2

Role-playing fans will be forced to choose between several different quests laden with sassy princesses. Square Enix offers ***Grandia III*** **(6)**, XSeed hits with a one-two punch of *Wild Arms 4* and ***Shadow Hearts: From the New World*** **(7)**, Namco delivers *Tales of Legendia*, and Ubisoft surprises with *Drakengard 2*. If you're sick of counting hit points, relax with Sony CEA's ***Ape Escape 3*** **(8)**, another breezy monkey-nabbing romp. And the hipsters among you can drop some dope beats with Konami's *Beatmania* DJ simulator, complete with a heavy-duty turntable controller.

7

8

Xbox

Looks like slim pickings on the black box, but a few stragglers should keep you entertained. DreamCatcher's ***Painkiller*** **(9)** brings the cult-hit PC first-person shooter to a new audience, while Ubisoft's ***Blazing Angels*** **(10)** breathes new life into WWII flight sims with Xbox Live action.

9

10

GameCube

Sorry guys, but the GC winter release list looks like a barren desert peppered with tumbleweeds. The only major releases on the slate are oddballs like ***Odama*** **(11)** (a military pinball sim) and ***Chibirobo*** **(12)** (action-puzzler starring a tiny robot).

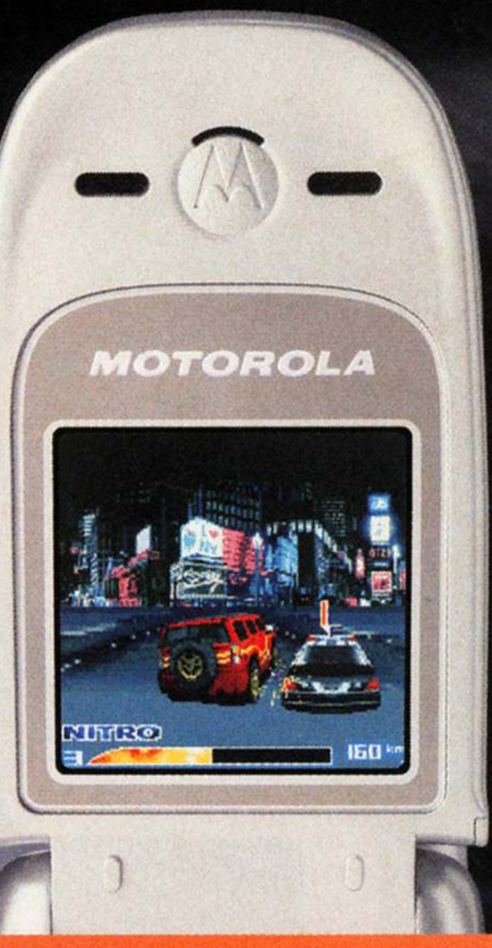
11

12

PUT YOUR MOBILE INTO HIGH GEAR!

ASPHALT 2™
URBAN GT

KEYWORD: A2



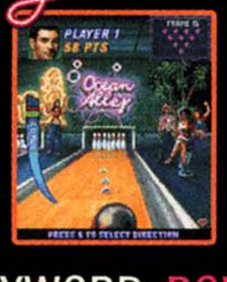
Text the game's keyword to 82174 or download directly from the game's category on your mobile phone!

* Standard SMS and data charges apply

BROTHERS IN ARMS EARNED IN BLOOD

KEYWORD: BIA

Midnight Bowling



KEYWORD: BOWL

KING KONG
THE OFFICIAL MOBILE GAME OF THE MOVIE

KEYWORD: KONG

MIDNIGHT POOL

KEYWORD: POOL

PRINCE OF PERSIA
THE TWO THRONES

KEYWORD: PRINCE

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KINGDOM HEARTS II

PlayStation 2 • Square Enix • May 2006

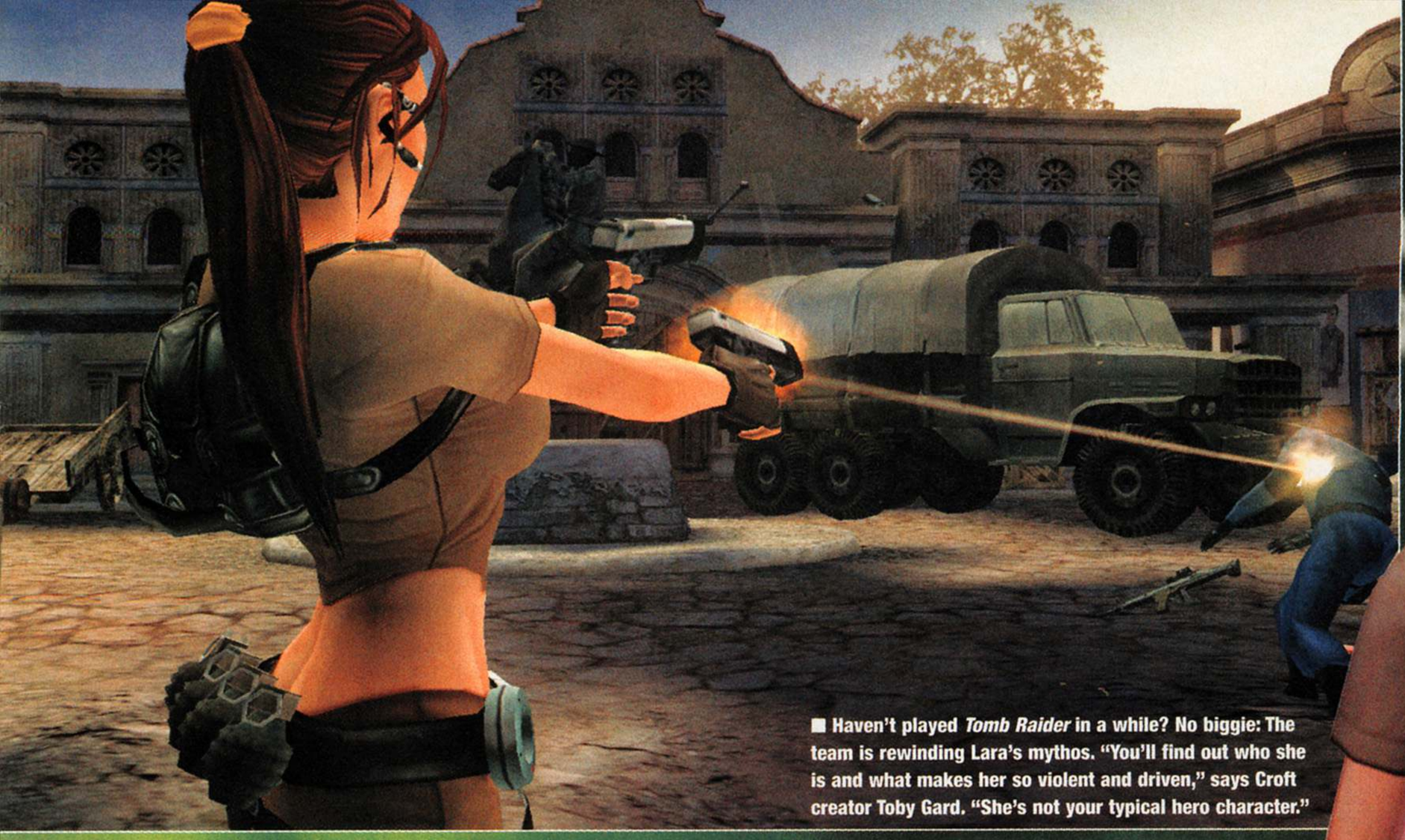
"I'm just very picky and very detailed," said *Kingdom Hearts II* Director Tetsuya Nomura earlier this spring. Yeah, no kidding—thanks to his obsessive-compulsive nature (plus being tasked with putting the finishing touches on Square Enix's CG-animated flick *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*), one of this year's most-anticipated titles will now carry those high expectations into 2006.

And a delay may be a smart move. Nomura has stated that he's aiming to make this action-RPG, which melds the worlds of Disney and *Final Fantasy*, roughly twice as big as the original. The game picks up one year after the events of the card-filled *Chain of Memories* (GBA), as a tad-more-mature Sora and animated buddies Donald and Goofy find themselves battling hordes of Heartless, the Organization (those shady dudes in the black cloaks), and famous Disney villains. Facing this trio of evil will take you to a number of Disney-themed worlds, many of which have never appeared in previous *Kingdom Hearts* titles. Some areas you probably could've guessed: the castle from *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*'s vast jungle, the snow-covered fields of *Mulan*, and so on. Other confirmed environments, however, may surprise you, like the ones based on the black-and-white *Steamboat Willie* (Mickey Mouse's 1928 coming-out party) and the live-action blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean* (which will see Capt. Jack Sparrow fight alongside Sora). And that's just the beginning; Square Enix reps tell us that almost half of *KH2*'s areas have yet to be revealed.

While these wonderful backdrops provide the game's sizzle, you could call its revamped combat system the hearty steak. Aside from tweaking the camera (the first *Hearts*' jittery view drew almost universal ire from critics), Nomura's group plans to introduce a host of new fighting mechanics. The first enables you to join up with select party members—such as *FFX*'s Auron—for some devastating double-team beatdowns. Another new twist lets you press the Triangle button at the appropriate time to perform Instant Command Actions—context-sensitive special moves like, say, swooping under *Mulan*'s hovering fish boss and going to town on its belly. And lastly, *KH2*'s new "Form Change" will have spiky-haired Sora merging with certain allies and transforming into a combo-crazy, dual-keyblade-swinging expert. —*B.I.*

the buzz

Skeptics balked at the first Disney-meets-*Final Fantasy* mashup, but fans ate it up. This sequel will be *huge*.



■ Haven't played *Tomb Raider* in a while? No biggie: The team is rewinding Lara's mythos. "You'll find out who she is and what makes her so violent and driven," says Croft creator Toby Gard. "She's not your typical hero character."

TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND

XB360/PS2/XB • Eidos • Spring 2006

It was *the* big decision, and the guys at Crystal Dynamics tackled it head-on. Inheritors of Lara Croft and the *Tomb Raider* legacy after previous handlers Core Design nearly entombed the franchise for good, Crystal had to decide whether to make 'em bigger, take 'em down a few sizes, or leave 'em be. In the end, "they're still a bit scary," says Lady Croft creator Toby Gard, whom Crystal hired to mastermind the she-daredevil's redesign and backstory, "but they're more reasonable. She's more athletic."

Oh, don't pretend that you don't know what we're talking about. It's her melons, man! "The fact that Lara's bra size is more reasonable," says Gard, "has to do with the overall goal to make the game more realistic." And that reality check meant plenty of tweaks beyond just cup size for this franchise's rebirth. Lara's backpack, like her front rack, is no longer magically boundless—instead, weapons and gadgets are now visible on her character model. She'll also get grimy when she tumbles in the dirt, and her tomb-raiding attire clings to her bod when she gets soaked. Don't get too excited: "She dries off over time," says Producer Morgan Grey.

The game's world is more rooted in reality, too, thanks to a true-to-life physics engine that has puzzles making more sense. In one tomb we raided, Lara rolls boulders, *Marble Madness* style, into niches to open a giant door. She'll use a new grappling hook to swing across chasms and yank down obstacles. In fact, Lara feels much more natural in your hands now that Crystal Dynamics has abandoned the archaic, rigid grid-based control scheme that plagued the series right up to 2005's *Angel of Darkness*. "We've taken her off the grid," says Grey. "She doesn't move like a cow anymore." She'll even stop herself automatically from falling off ledges and reach out her hands to make last-minute grabs. "She has her own movement A.I.," Grey says. "She's smart enough to put her hands where they should go and balance her body. She'll save herself from the simple mistakes so you can focus on the big challenges."

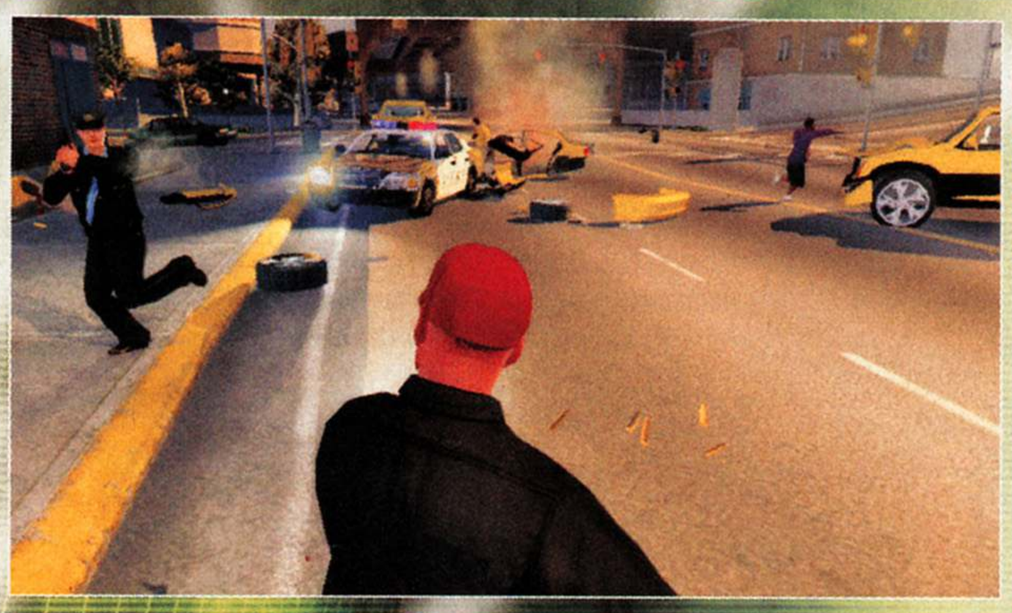
The team revamped the combat system, too, giving Lara more to do with her guns. Special "targets of opportunity," such as collapsible walls, power lines, and the requisite exploding barrels, become tagged with a button on your controller; tap the button and Lara will shoot the target. Slinking in close to bad guys lets her do special proximity attacks, such as jumping off enemies' heads or stunning them with her grapple gun. Tapping the right analog stick cycles through foes, although she can look down her gun sights for precise aiming. That's not to say that Crystal has turned Lara's game into a first-person shooter. "We never want the combat to be a slow, plodding experience," Grey says. "We want players to always have Lara in motion, always have her flipping and leaping. She's tougher than you or me, but she's still pretty easy to kill when she's just standing there."

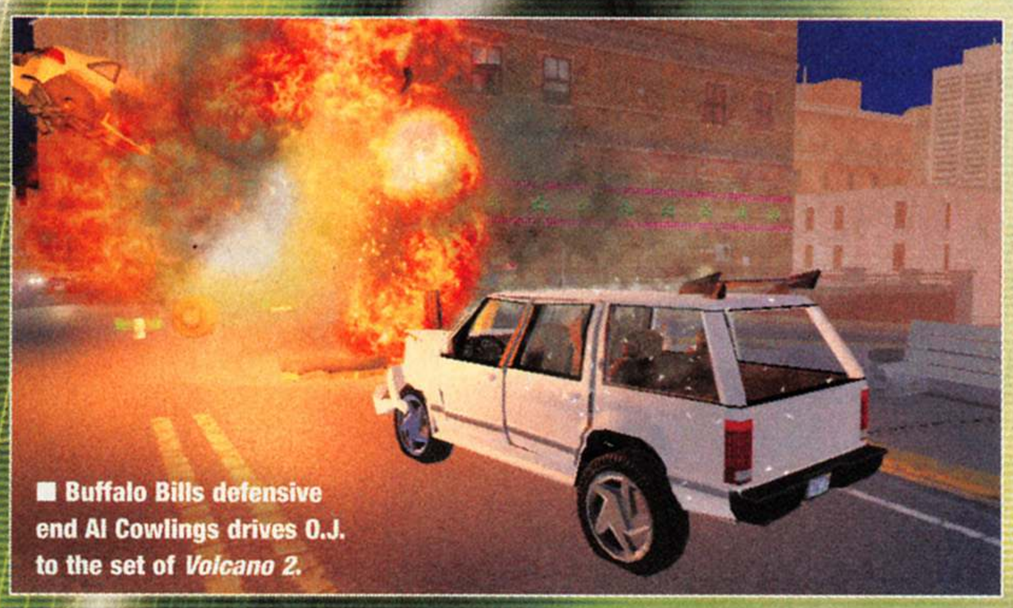
See—realism! But it's not like Crystal has gotten too carried away with bringing Lara Croft to the real world. "She's still not really proportioned like a normal human being," admits Gard of Croft's more athletic figure. "But then the *Tomb Raider* world is not the real world, although it's more real than before. It's more like a comic book now."

—Crispin Boyer ➤

the buzz

The *Legend* levels we tried—which feature some tomb exploration, puzzle solving, gunplay, and new *Dragon's Lair*–style action events during cinemas—have even the *Raider* haters on our staff itching to slip into Lara's pants...er, boots.





■ Buffalo Bills defensive end Al Cowlings drives O.J. to the set of *Volcano 2*.

SAINT'S ROW

Xbox 360 • THQ • April 2006

Ah, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*—the cars, the gang wars, the...bargain shopping? Bzzzt! Wrong game. Only *Saint's Row*, the first *GTA*-style title on a next-generation console, mixes shopping sprees with crime sprees. "Store commercials [on the radio] announce special sales and promotions in progress," says *Saint's Row* Design Architect Chris Stockman. "If the player visits the store during a sale, he'll actually receive the discount on those items."

OK, so maybe real-time deal hunting isn't enough to lure players to this thug-life simulator. But what about the character-customization options (enough to create a virtual clone of yourself)? Or—better still—the anything-can-happen physics engine? Vehicles explode into showers of auto parts. Just about all the objects in the world, from fire hydrants to dumpsters, tumble when you bump them. "One of my favorite physics moments is when the player takes a rocket launcher and destroys a police chopper," says Stockman. "The chopper blows up into a million pieces and the occupants fall from the sky and rag-doll to the ground."

Saint's Row even packs clever Xbox Live–enabled multiplayer games. Take the Blinged-out Ride mode, which has two teams driving junkers they can improve with money earned from killing enemies and tagging buildings. After pimping their rides to the max, players must haul tail to a final drop-off location. "It's a really hectic and entertaining mode," Stockman says, "because of all the different things you have to do—combat, driving, tagging, et cetera." —*C.B.*

the buzz

***Saint's Row*'s makers claim the game takes the "open-world genre to the next level." We're not so sure, but we can't wait to blow some stuff up.**

THE PLAYSTATION 3 FACTOR

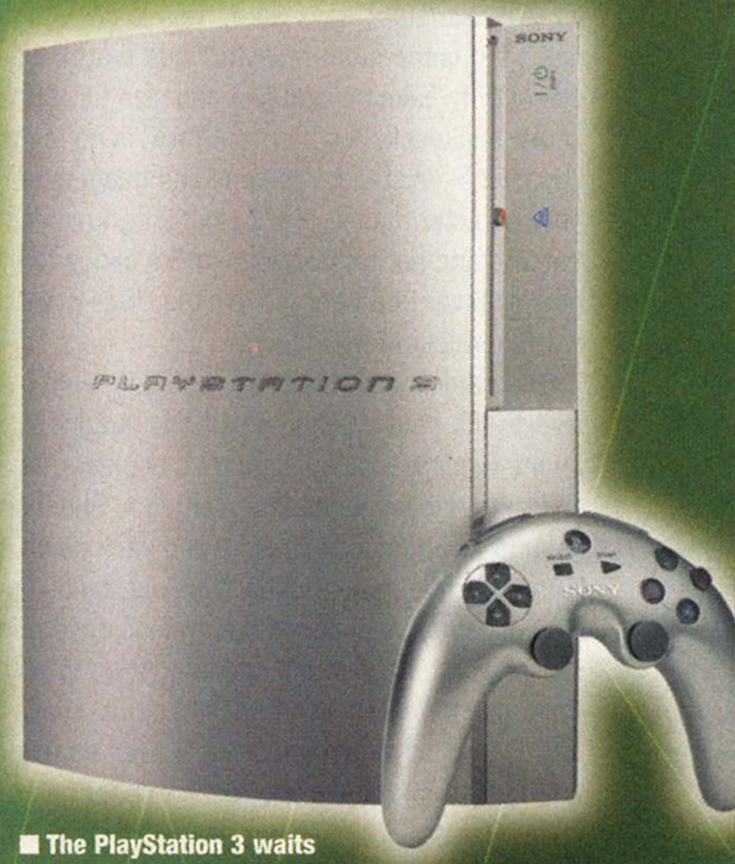
We game in uncertain times. While we try to maintain a brave face and pretend to be excited about new games for our dusty old consoles, the next-generation system war looms on the horizon. Xbox 360 is here now, but when will Sony bring its PlayStation 3 to market? Good question. At press time, Sony won't comment on specifics regarding price or a release date, but a spring 2006 launch in Japan still seems feasible, followed by a summer or fall debut Stateside. Luckily, despite all these unknown factors, publishers aren't holding back when it comes to announcing PS3 support. Here's a glimpse of some of the games you'll eventually be rockin' on the PS3. (Be sure to also head to pg. 30 for details on the PS3's first must-have title, Konami's *Metal Gear Solid 4*.)

■ *Heavenly Sword*

■ *Killzone 2*

■ *Sonic the Hedgehog*

■ *Gran Turismo 5*



■ The PlayStation 3 waits patiently in ambush.

BLACK

PS2/XB • EA Games • April 2006

Prepare for the true story behind *Black*'s creation: "We had just come out of a meeting where we had a massive argument for four hours over what style jeans the character in our third-peson shooter would wear," laughs *Black* Creative Director Alex Ward. "So I suggested we make a first-person shooter, because there's no character onscreen and we're not going to argue over what color the stop is on the AK-47."

Black aims to be an intensely serious shooter, packed with realistic guns, smart enemies, and huge levels for you to perforate. "No cut-scenes, no bulls**t—it really is just about you and your gun, shooting and blowing stuff up," Ward explains. "We're getting the best guns and the best sensation of pulling the trigger." Alex's weapon of choice? "You can't beat the AK-47," Ward says. "It's the loudest, scariest motherf***ing gun you could ever fire, and very popular with the children." —*K.S.*

the buzz

The guys behind *Burnout* bring their destructive streak to shooters...we're hyped. (And a little scared.)

■ **Blowing apart massive chunks of the levels is not only fun, but also highly effective at wasting fools.**

THE GODFATHER

XB360/PS2/XB • EA Games • March 2006

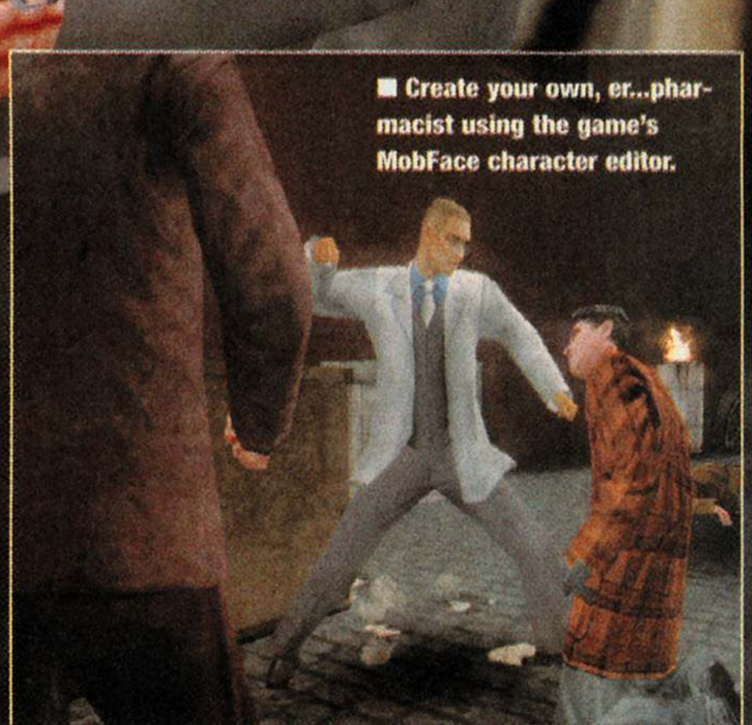
"It was a wonderful book," says Executive Producer David DeMartini of *The Godfather*, reminding dear readers that the seminal movie, the hallowed movie, the movie whose legacy must not be tarnished...didn't even start as a movie. "[It] evolved to become a great film," DeMartini continues, "and now it's our opportunity to put our own stamp on it by creating a fantastic game." DeMartini isn't being defensive; he's simply making the point that it's perfectly fair to extend *The Godfather* into another medium.

The game presents an open-ended videogame version of the world seen in the first movie: New York circa 1945. Players create their own main characters that must work their way up through the Corleone family, earning respect and attempting to become the Godfather. The MobFace system, which is used to customize your character, should add a personal connection to the story that can't happen in movies and books. "Being able to create someone totally unique, then see my character face-to-face with the Don is a fantastic feeling," he says.

Details about specific levels are scant, but it's clear that the core story missions will be familiar. "Can you say horse's head?" DeMartini jokes. "Our goal from the start has been to be respectful of this franchise but not in awe of it." —*Jennifer Tsao*

the buzz

***The Godfather* still seems like a difficult property to faithfully adapt to the gaming realm, but with new voiceover work from Marlon Brando (recorded before his death), Robert Duvall, and James Caan, it's gonna sound great.**



■ **Create your own, er...pharmacist using the game's MobFace character editor.**

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TEEN
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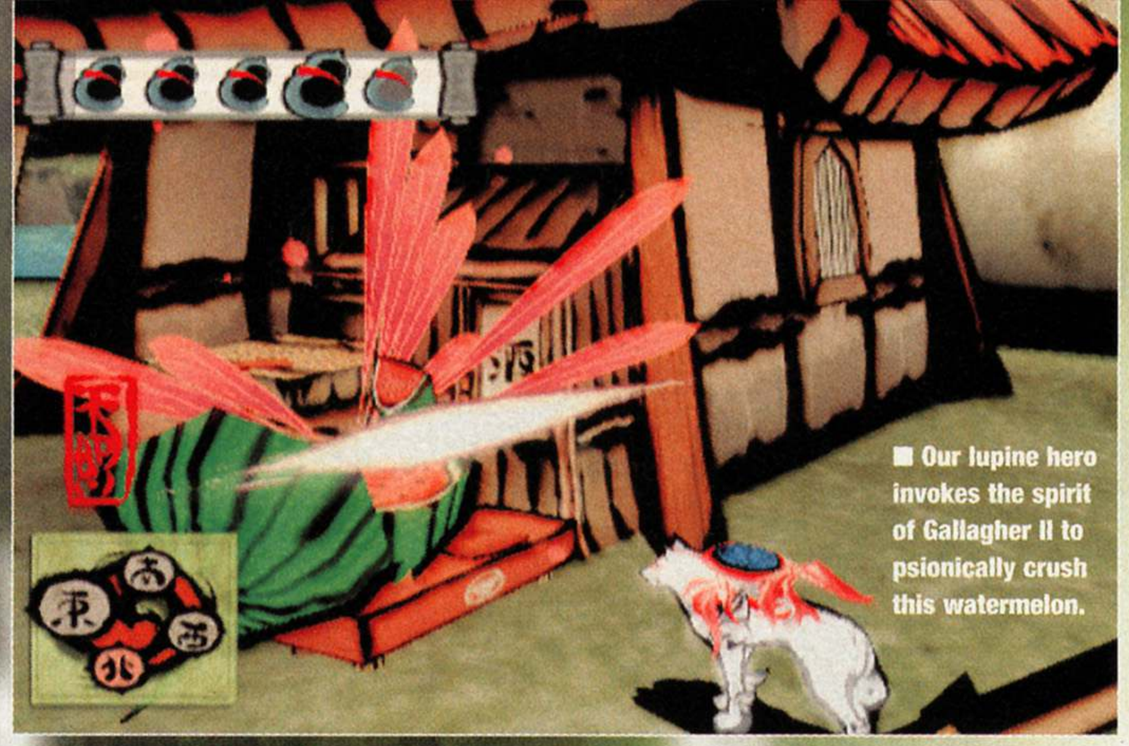
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language



■ Our lupine hero invokes the spirit of Gallagher II to psionically crush this watermelon.

OKAMI

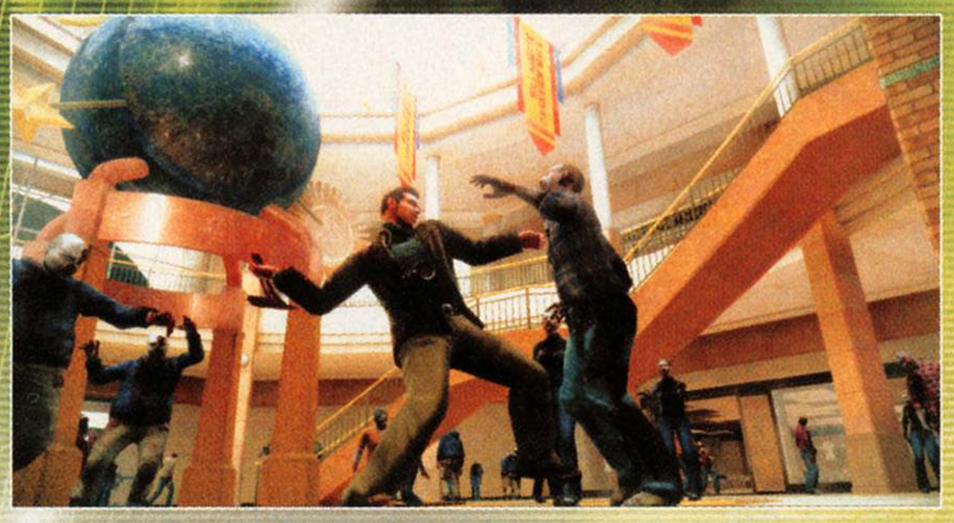
PlayStation 2 • Capcom • May 2006

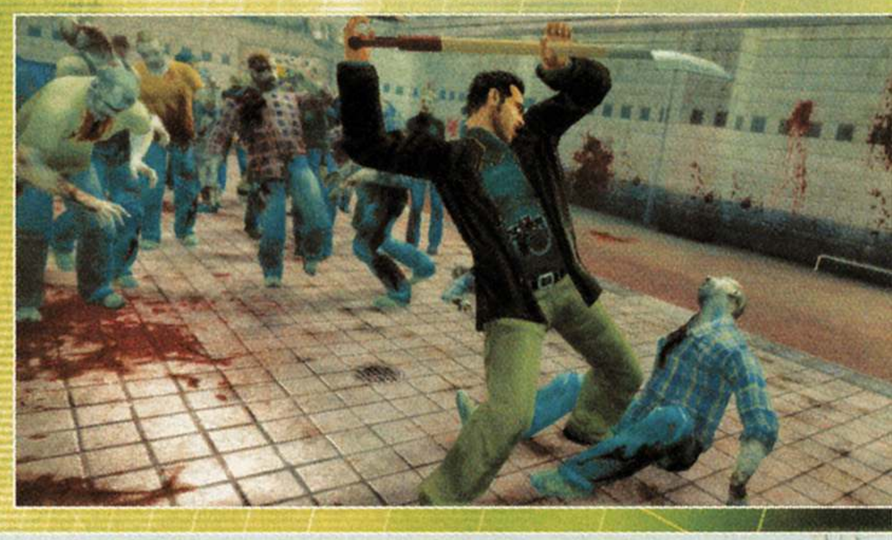
This game isn't for action fiends or twitch freaks. No, no, no—it's for artistes. Look at the environments—virtual paintings that are perfect for a game where your weapon is a brush (a *celestial* brush) and you play as a wolf (a *white* wolf—very artsy). You'll explore these gorgeous environments, drawing constellations to gain skills and solve puzzles. You can also destroy enemies directly with a few deft brush strokes.

Atsushi Inaba, president and CEO of Clover Studios, which is developing the game, doesn't worry that switching back and forth between the brush and the exploration will be disjointed. "Like with *Resident Evil 4*, players were not disoriented when switching between the gun and exploring," he says. "We feel the same can be said for *Okami*." —*J.T.*

the buzz

Inaba's right. In the Japanese demo we played, using the paintbrush felt very fluid, and the game looks beautiful. Better put your beret on—*Okami* could bring out the artiste in you, too.





DEAD RISING

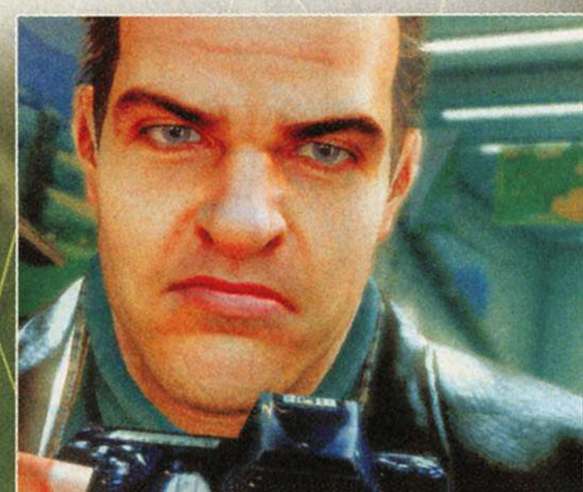
Xbox 360 • Capcom • May 2006

Rising seemed dead on arrival when Capcom first revealed it back in May 2005. This blatant retread of the classic *Dawn of the Dead* story line conjured up long-repressed memories of *State of Emergency* (PS2)—just because you can fight oodles of enemies in a shopping mall doesn't mean that you *should*. But we must admit that as development progresses, the whole shebang's looking more enticing. All that stands between you and becoming the food court for the walking dead is your trusty camera (you're a photojournalist), your primal drive to live, and the bounty of weaponry the mall provides (such as lawn-mowers and baseball bats). An early demo we tried looks bloody promising, but the shambling enemies didn't put up much of a fight. —*K.S.*

the buzz

If Capcom can continue to polish the visuals and gameplay, *Resident Evil* might have a respectable new cousin....

■ Blood enthusiasts will revel in *Dead Rising*'s wonderfully viscous arterial spray.



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MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Violence

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ALSO IN SPRING

Chirping birds, buzzing bees, enchanting fields of flowers welcoming the renewal of life...bor-ing. Bring on the next-gen murder simulators!

Xbox 360

So you plunked down a fat wad to be the first kid on your block with Microsoft's swanky new console, but by now you've played the living hell out of every launch game. The cavalry arrives this spring. First up, grizzly superspy Sam Fisher snoops around in Ubisoft's ***Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell 4*** **(1 & 2)** (also coming to PS2/XB/GC), the latest installment in the hit stealth-action franchise. Details remain sketchy, but these shots reveal that our hero has apparently gone all *Prison Break* on us. If you're in the market for something a bit more fanciful, check out 2K Games' ***Prey***, a first-person shooter that casts you as an American Indian mechanic who's been abducted by aliens. And no, we didn't just make that up. The gunplay in Atari's ***Timeshift*** **(3)** (also coming to XB) doesn't adhere to the laws of reality, either—you can rewind, pause, and fast-forward time at will. If you're still feeling trigger-happy after all of that, go for some third-person takedowns in Namco's ***Frame City Killer*** **(4)**, in which you play a hardened hit man inspired by Tom Cruise's character in *Collateral*. After spending all those clips, peel out in Sega's ***Full Auto*** **(5)**, an explosive racer blending equal parts *Burnout*, *Twisted Metal*, and *Destruction Derby*.

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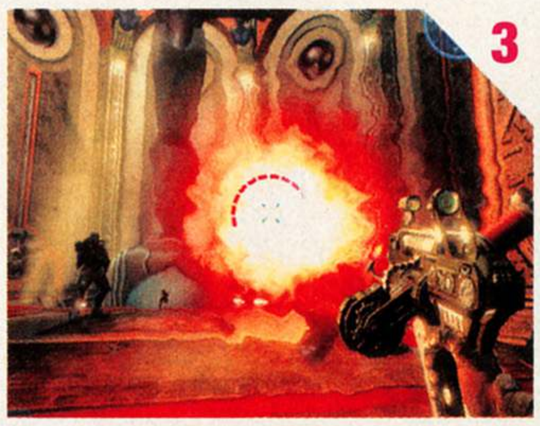
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Everything else

Square Enix might actually ship the long-awaited ***Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII*** **(6)** (PS2) sometime this spring, assuming it gets the online multiplayer action up and running. Normally we'd run something bigger on a *FFVII* spin-off, but this one still feels a bit iffy. Likewise, we're not entirely sure about Enlight's bizarre ***Bad Day LA*** **(7)** (XB), in which you play a deranged homeless man fighting terrorists, mascots, and zombies in a wildly stylized version of Los Angeles. The chaos in Midway's ***Rampage: Total Destruction*** **(8)** (for PS2/XB/GC) will be far more controlled—you topple buildings as oversized monsters, just like in the classic arcade games. EA Sports launches its devious plan to sell even more sports games with the oddly timed ***NFL Head Coach*** **(9)** (PS2/XB) and its first-ever college baseball sim, ***MVP 06 NCAA Baseball*** **(10)** (PS2/XB). If dumb fun isn't your style, get all brainy with *Atelier Iris 2* (PS2), the alchemy-centered sequel to 2005's quirky RPG.

Spring will feature scads of portable titles, but we can't pretend to care about the latest *Berenstain Bears* game for GBA. Let's pare it down to two safe bets. Square Enix's all-new ***Children of Mana*** **(11)** (DS) adds wireless co-op to the legendary action-RPG gameplay of *Secret of Mana* (SNES), while Sony CEA's ***Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror*** **(12)** (PSP) delivers an original mission for series hero Gabe Logan, along with online deathmatch action.

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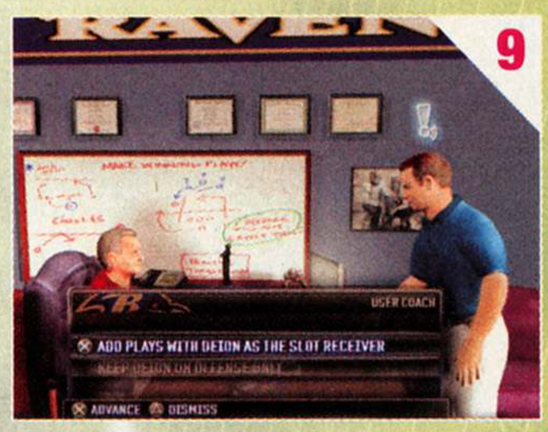

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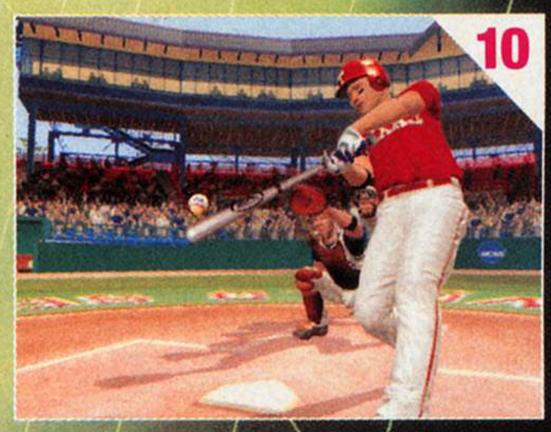
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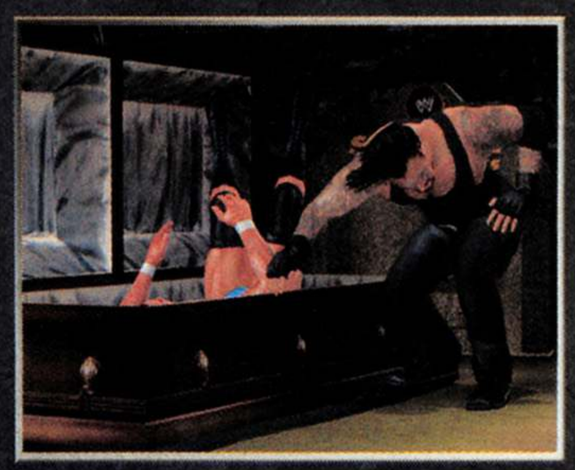

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Blood
Language
Sexual Themes
Violence

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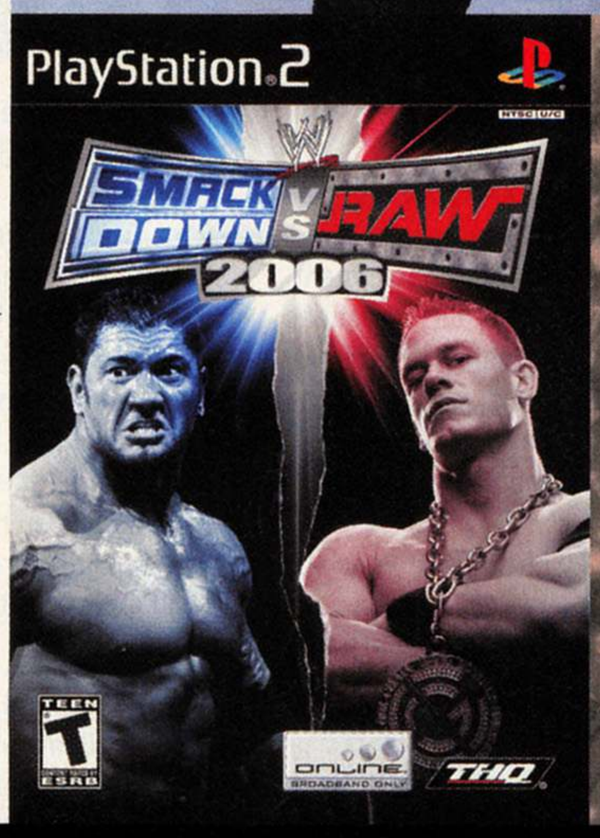
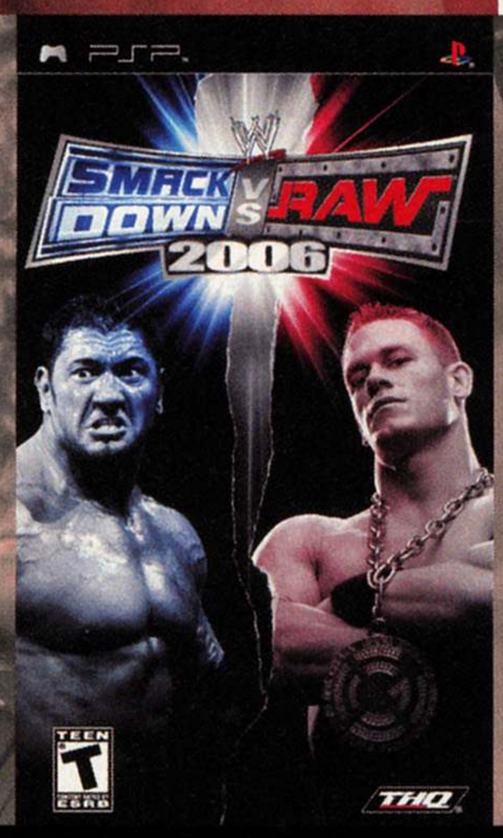
OH, AND IF YOU'RE A PENCIL-NECKED GEEK, STICK TO CHECKERS...





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■ Hey, ripping off *Little Shop of Horrors* worked for *Halo 2*....

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS

GameCube • Nintendo • Summer 2006

Man, talk about stating the obvious—when Nintendo announced last August that the next iteration in its beloved *Zelda* franchise wouldn't be available this holiday season, the company statement read, "This may come as a disappointment to many eager fans...." Ya think? The lack of Link this Christmas has, for the most part, turned the GameCube into an amazingly expensive paperweight. Still, the company promises the change in date is for the best, as this will give the development team the time needed "to add new levels, more depth, and even higher quality."

To be honest, though, our limited time with *Twilight Princess* has already mightily impressed us. Set a few decades after *Ocarina of Time* (N64), the game drops our favorite elf back into the land of Hyrule, where a mysterious force called "twilight" is threatening to turn this merry place into a desolate kingdom. Hyrule's in trouble...again? No surprise there, but what may shock you is what happens to Link when he enters *Twilight Princess*' mysterious alternate dimension: He transforms into a wolf, and an odd catlike creature named Midna will ride on his back, opening up a slew of new attacks. Also, when on all fours Link can converse with other creatures. "Maybe he'll even be able to talk with [his horse]," said Producer Eiji Aonuma earlier this year.

Yet *Twilight Princess* isn't all about Link sporting the hairier side of his personality; most of the time it's business as usual. The game will include a number of complex dungeons—a series hallmark—brimming with intricate puzzles and bosses that'll test both your mind and muscle. Your trusty steed returns in this adventure, and aside from using the animal to get from here to there rather quickly, you'll engage in some heavy-duty combat while on horseback. Plus, expect more than your fair share of lighthearted segments, such as canoeing, fishing, and even herding goats. —*B.I.*

the buzz

Several critics were pegging *Twilight Princess* as Game of the Year material, and the move into '06 won't change those predictions. Still, we've heard rumblings that the game won't make its summer ship date. And if so, does that mean Nintendo will give it a Revolution-ary makeover?

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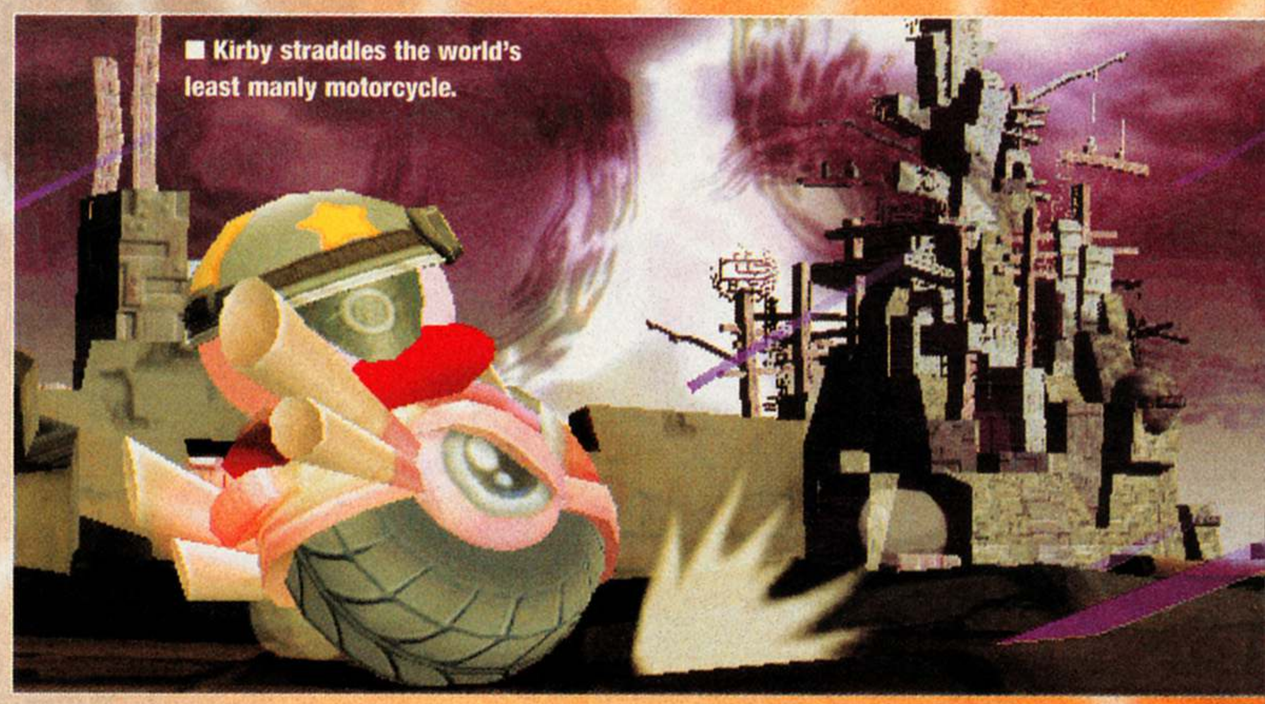
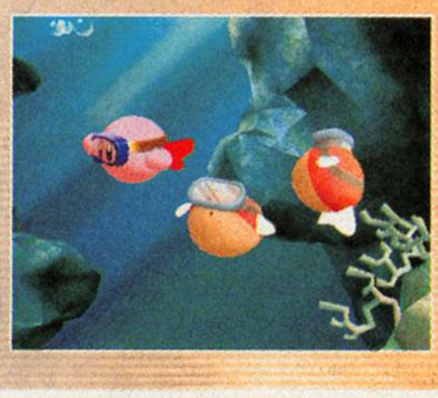
KIRBY


Kirby straddles the world's least manly motorcycle.

GameCube • Nintendo • Summer 2006

Sometimes it's the waning days of a console that see its most brilliant moments. Right? OK, maybe not. But it could happen, and wouldn't it be nice to see Kirby's first real GameCube platforming adventure (the one-button racing madness of 2003's *Kirby Air Ride* doesn't count) knock one out of the park in the final innings?

Don't expect any major change-ups—this is a *Kirby* game after all. He does have a new attack system, where he can team up with three helpers in bizarre totem pole fashion. The borrowed powers stack, so the more helpers, the stronger the attack. —*J.T.*



the buzz

After the brilliance that was *Canvas Curse* (DS), we think it's fair to keep hopes high for Kirby's next adventure.

ALSO IN SUMMER

As amazing as our powers of divination are, we'll admit to having a tough time channeling a vision of summer 2006's gaming landscape. The warmer months traditionally tend to be light on releases, but expect a lot of surprises.

Namco's ***Pac-Man World Rally* (1)** (PS2, XB, GC) represents the spherical yellow vanguard's first foray into the lucrative (yet wildly unoriginal) world of kart-racing games. Come to think of it, though, Nintendo actually hired Namco to make its recently released *Mario Kart Arcade Grand Prix*, so maybe this trek around the track won't be half bad.

The aforementioned plumber will get down to business in *New Super Mario Bros.* (DS), an all-new platformer that hearkens back to the old days of breaking bricks, munching 'shrooms, and the ilk.

Sony CEA plans to launch an original RPG franchise with ***Rogue Galaxy* (2)** (PS2). Comparable to *Final Fantasy* in depth and ambition, this game centers on swashbuckling space pirates. You'll explore huge, seamless planets utterly devoid of load times, effectively conveying the vastness of the game world. In addition to being huge, the landscape is also quite beautiful: Developer Level-5 (*Dark Cloud*) has come up with its most gorgeous engine yet in a game that pushes the PS2 to its absolute limits in the last days of the system. If the PS2 has to go out, it'll go out with a bang—and Level-5 will make sure it's a very big bang indeed.

HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD?

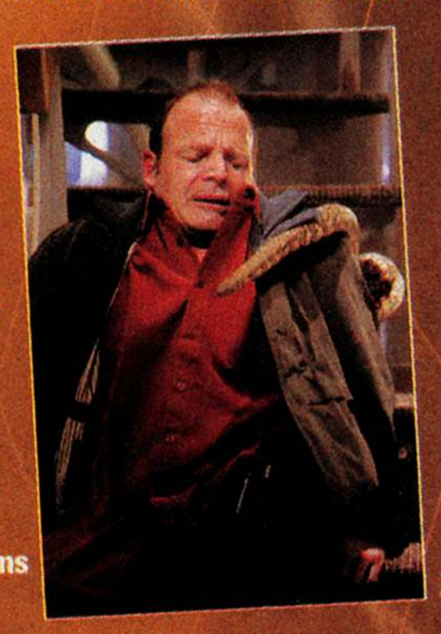
We won't waste precious space arguing that videogames based on movies aren't actually so bad these days…because, well, most of them still suck. But that won't keep li'l Jimmy from running directly from the theater to waste $50 on the latest big-budget tie-in. And for every 10 *Fantastic 4*s that make it to the market, one *Chronicles of Riddick* accidentally lands on store shelves. Who knows, maybe one of these cunning marketing tie-ins will totally rule. Also, we've come up with a bonus list of next summer's flicks that don't currently have game deals. Publishers, hurry up and sign these hot properties—we're sure you can throw something together in six months.

Announced Games:

- **Superman Returns** • EA Games • June 2006 ➤
- **The Da Vinci Code** • 2K Games • May 2006
- **X-Men 3** • Activision • May 2006
- **Cars** • THQ • June 2006
- **Spy Hunter** • Midway • Summer 2006
- **Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest** • Buena Vista • July 2006
- **Ghost Rider** • Majesco • July 2006

2006 Summer Movies That Deserve Games:

- **Snakes on a Plane** ➤
- **Nacho Libre**
- **Miami Vice**
- **Mission: Impossible 3**
- **The Omen 666**
- **Garfield 2**
- **How to Eat Fried Worms**



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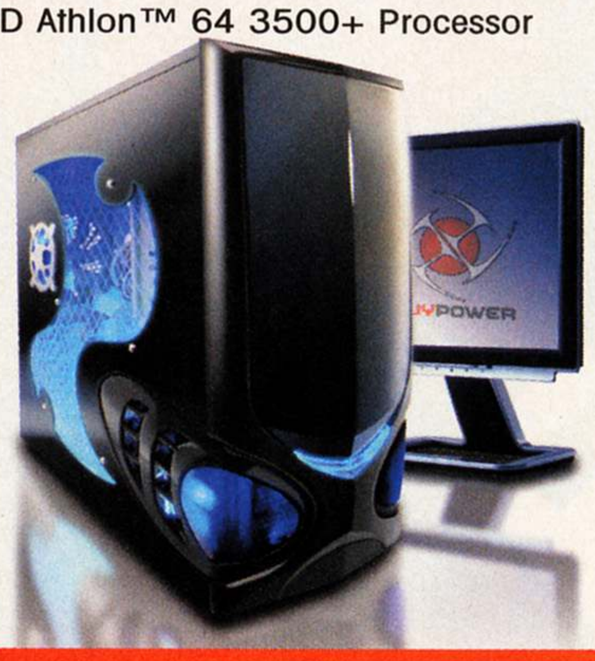

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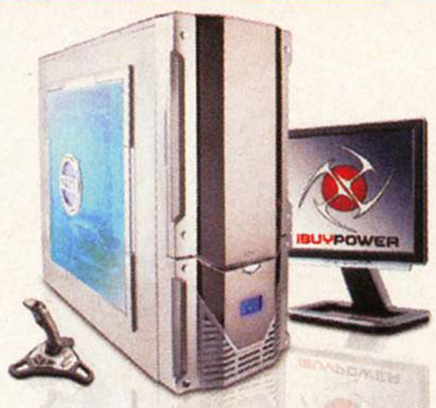

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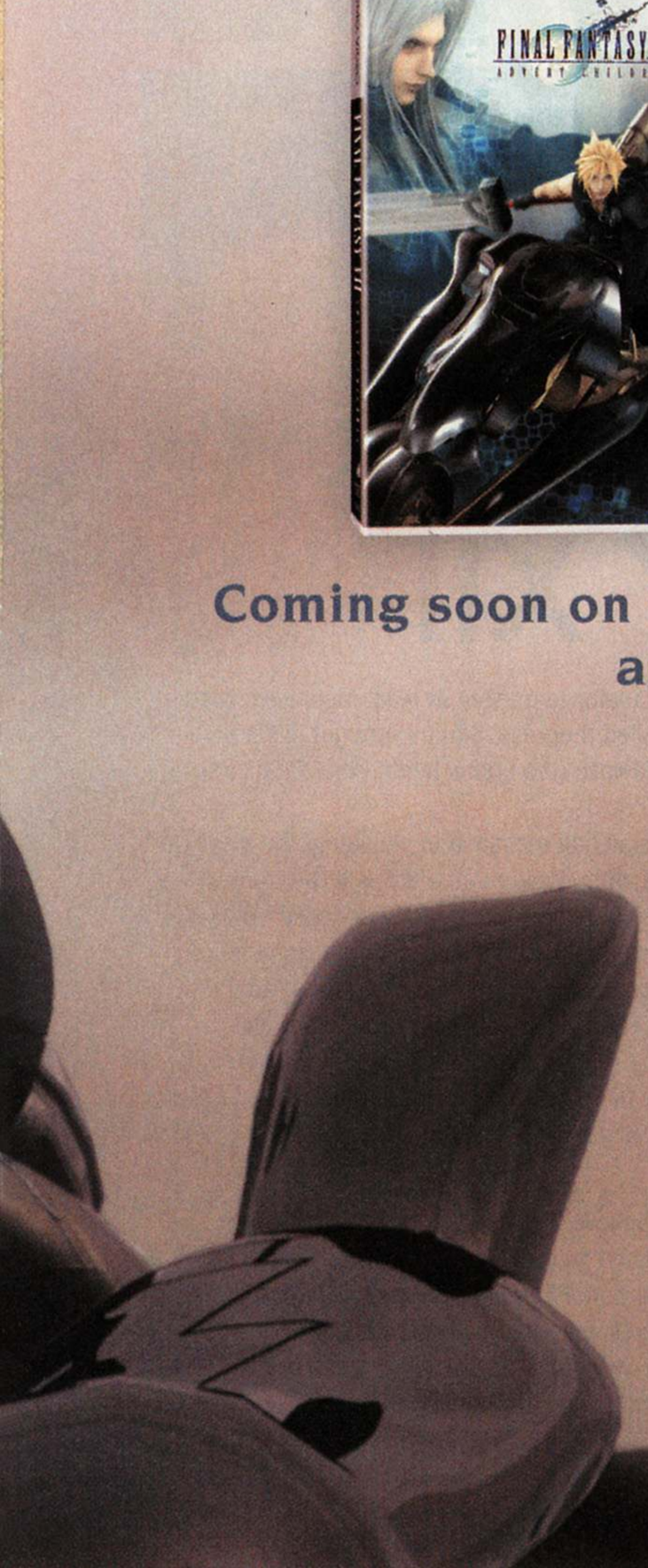

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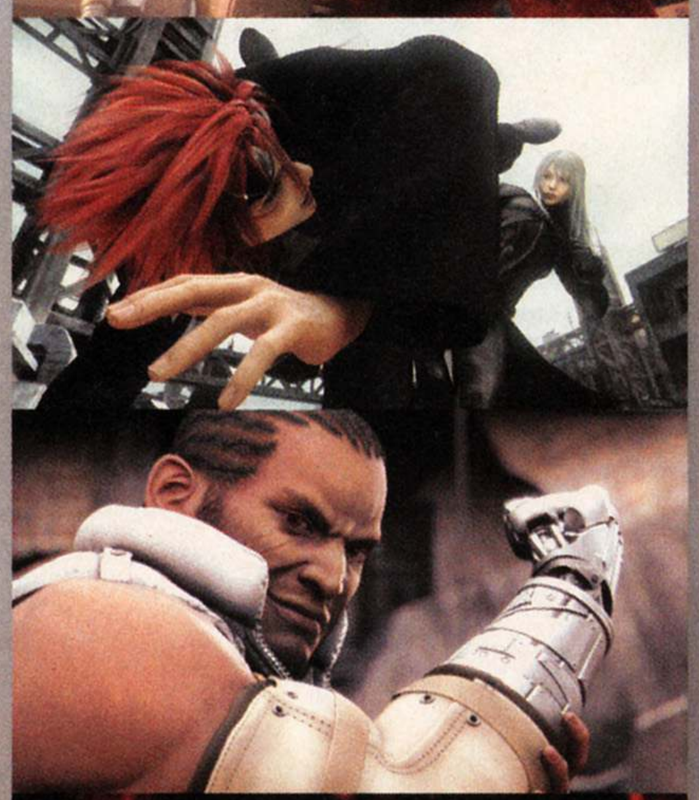

■ *FFXII*'s new semi-real-time combat represents a massive departure for the series.

■ Phew, at least the over-the-top summons spells persist.

FINAL FANTASY XII

PlayStation 2 • Square Enix • Fall 2005

Let's stop dancing around the subject: *Final Fantasy XII* has been delayed...a lot. We can rule out foul play—it's not as if Square Enix enjoys making fans endure an interminable wait for the latest chapter in gaming's most popular RPG series. But *FFXII* should have been out over a year ago, and it would have been if not for a maelstrom of behind-the-scenes drama that overwhelmed the game's development.

When Square Enix delivered a meaty playable demo of *FFXII* at 2004's E3 gaming trade show, everything seemed to be on track for a speedy release...but here we are nearly two years later without a firm date. What went wrong? We'll probably never get the full story, but we do know that Yasumi Matsuno, the visionary producer originally helming the game, quietly left the project last summer, citing health reasons. (Rumors claim everything from exhaustion from overwork to a full-scale mental breakdown.) Renowned for his work on PS1 role-playing classics such as *Tactics Ogre*, *Final Fantasy Tactics*, and *Vagrant Story*, Matsuno infused *FFXII* with his signature touches—a narrative dense with political intrigue, a cast of haughty royals with confusing names, and a bevy of intricate gameplay systems that might require a calculator to master. At least Matsuno's sudden departure hasn't halted progress: Square brought in veteran producer Akitoshi Kawazu (the brains behind the *SaGa* series) to finish up the game.

So by now, we've all had a chance to check out the playable *FFXII* demo bundled with *Dragon Quest VIII*. Is it the train wreck many of us feared? Not really...but it certainly doesn't play like your average *FF* title, what with its free-roaming exploration, vaguely automatic combat, and ornate art style. And although the game definitely feels like a departure from what we traditionally know as *FF*, the intangible feeling of wonder and gravitas that makes the series so special remains intact. Let's just hope the game actually makes it out next fall.... —*S.B.*

the buzz

Can you believe that it will have been five years since the last "normal" *Final Fantasy* (*FFX*) came out by the time *FFXII* hits shelves? Needless to say, gamers hold astronomical expectations for this title. Although we're still not sold on the new battle system, we're pulling for Square to deliver in the end.

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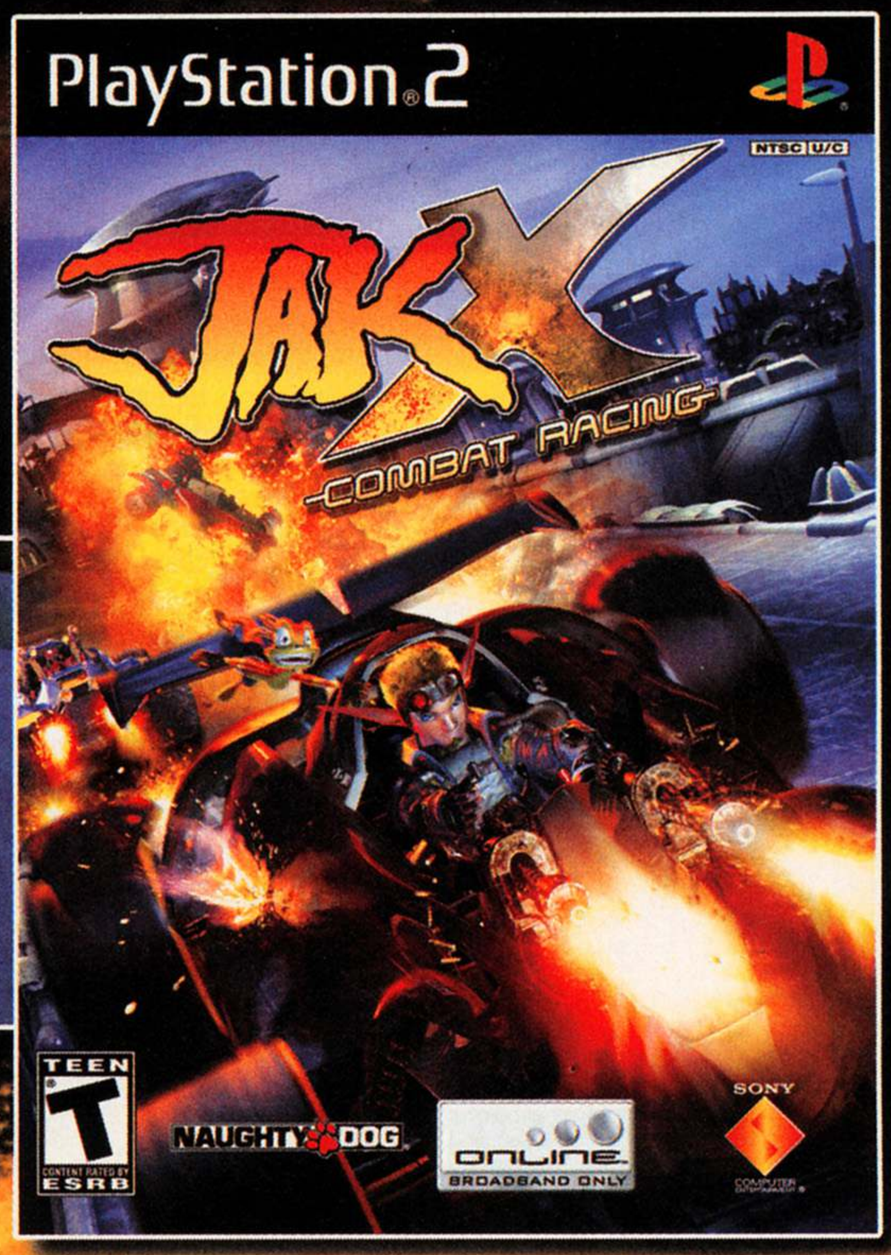

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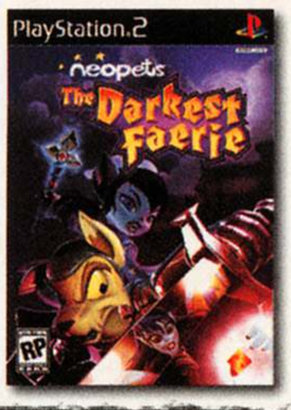

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Xbox 360

Gazing this far into the future without the help of a spirit guide can be dangerous, so we'll stick to known quantities. Back in October, Microsoft bravely played its first-party Xbox 360 hand early, revealing a lineup of exclusive original titles from top developers. Epic's gorgeous *Resident Evil*–meets–Unreal Engine third-person shooter ***Gears of War*** **(1)** continues to make most other 360 games look positively last-gen. On the other hand, we're still not quite sure what's going on with ***Crackdown***'s **(2)** art style—cartoony thugs wreaking havoc in a candy-colored virtual slum just seems wrong. Still, its promise of co-op online action in the vein of *Grand Theft Auto* has our interest piqued.

If you're in the market for something wildly ambitious, you have your choice between the first chapters in two different sci-fi trilogies: BioWare's action-RPG ***Mass Effect*** **(3)** or Silicon Knights' action-adventure ***Too Human*** **(4)**. (For further study into the hubris of multipart game series, see *Advent Rising* or *Xenosaga*.)

Finally, the first fruits of Microsoft's partnership with *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi may ripen in time for the holidays: ***Lost Odyssey*** **(5)** dishes up serious fantasy roleplaying, while ***Blue Dragon*** **(6)** rocks a lighter action vibe (with character designs by *Dragon Ball Z* creator Akira Toriyama).

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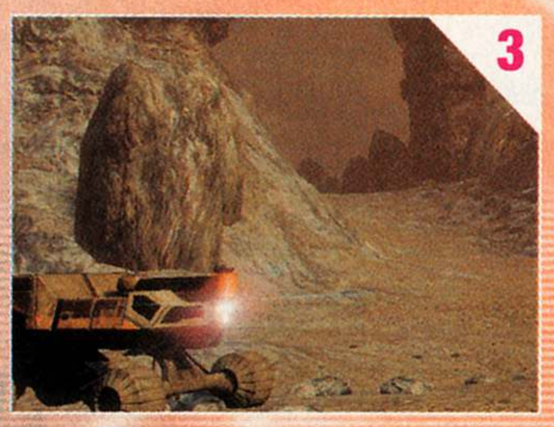
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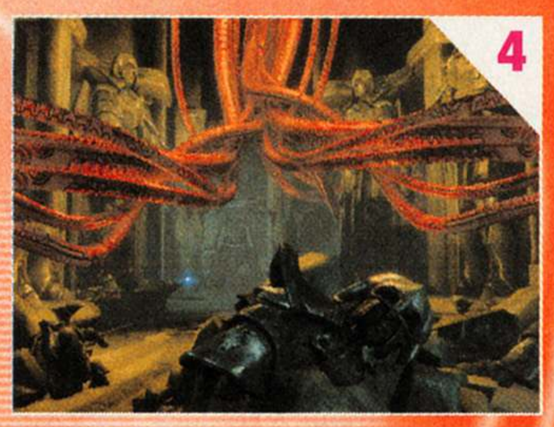
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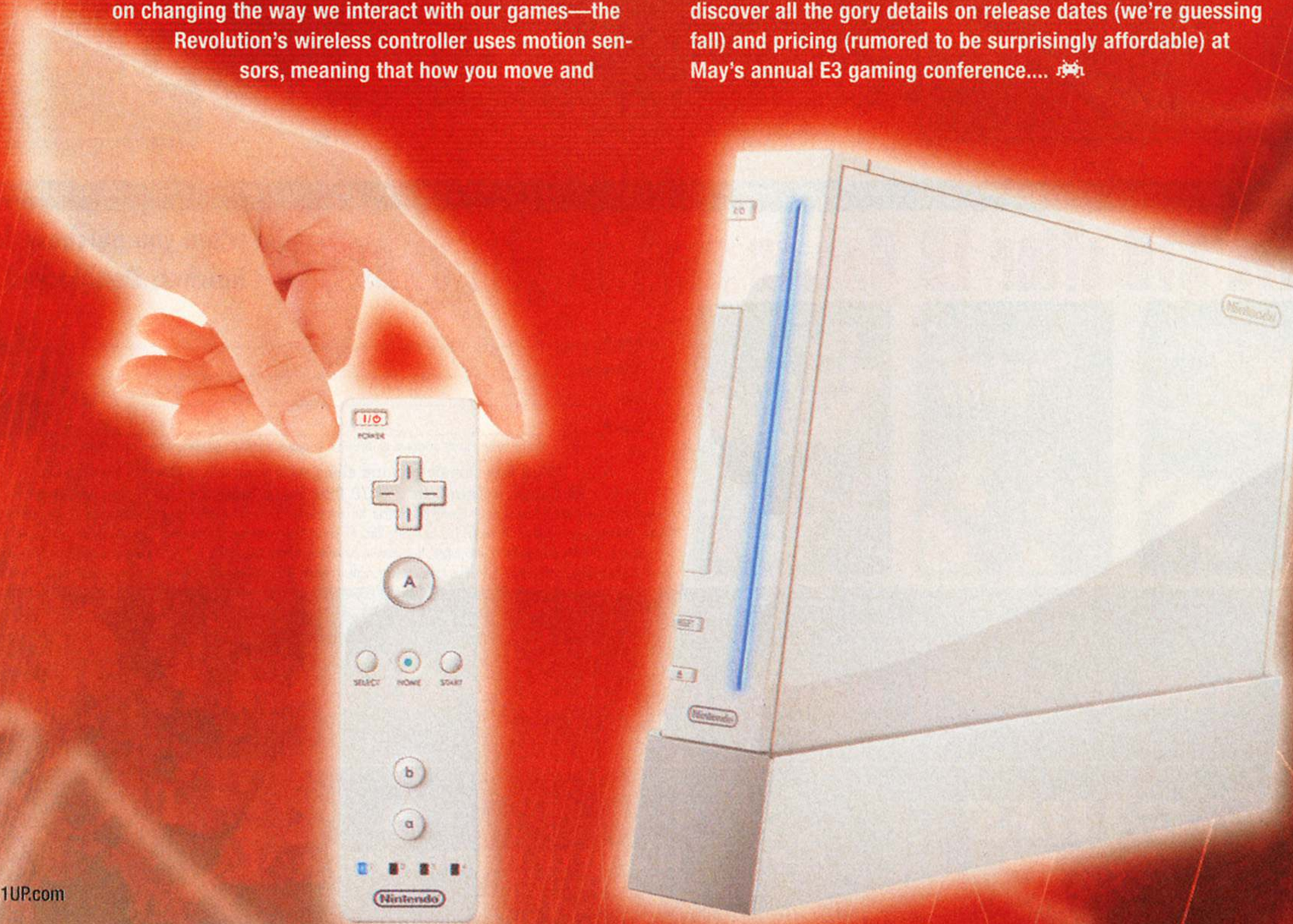
AWAITING REVOLUTION

The most unpredictable factor in 2006 has to be Nintendo's next-gen console, code-named Revolution. It's one helluva question mark: Unlike Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3, Revolution isn't all about gorgeous, high-def visuals. In fact, nobody has even seen what the games will look like yet. Instead, Nintendo opts to focus on changing the way we interact with our games—the Revolution's wireless controller uses motion sensors, meaning that how you move and where you hold the controller directly affect onscreen action. We're all still trying to wrap our heads around what this means for gaming—will game creators obliterate every paradigm and truly evolve the art form, or will we all be playing the same old crap with point-and-click minigames? We'll discover all the gory details on release dates (we're guessing fall) and pricing (rumored to be surprisingly affordable) at May's annual E3 gaming conference....



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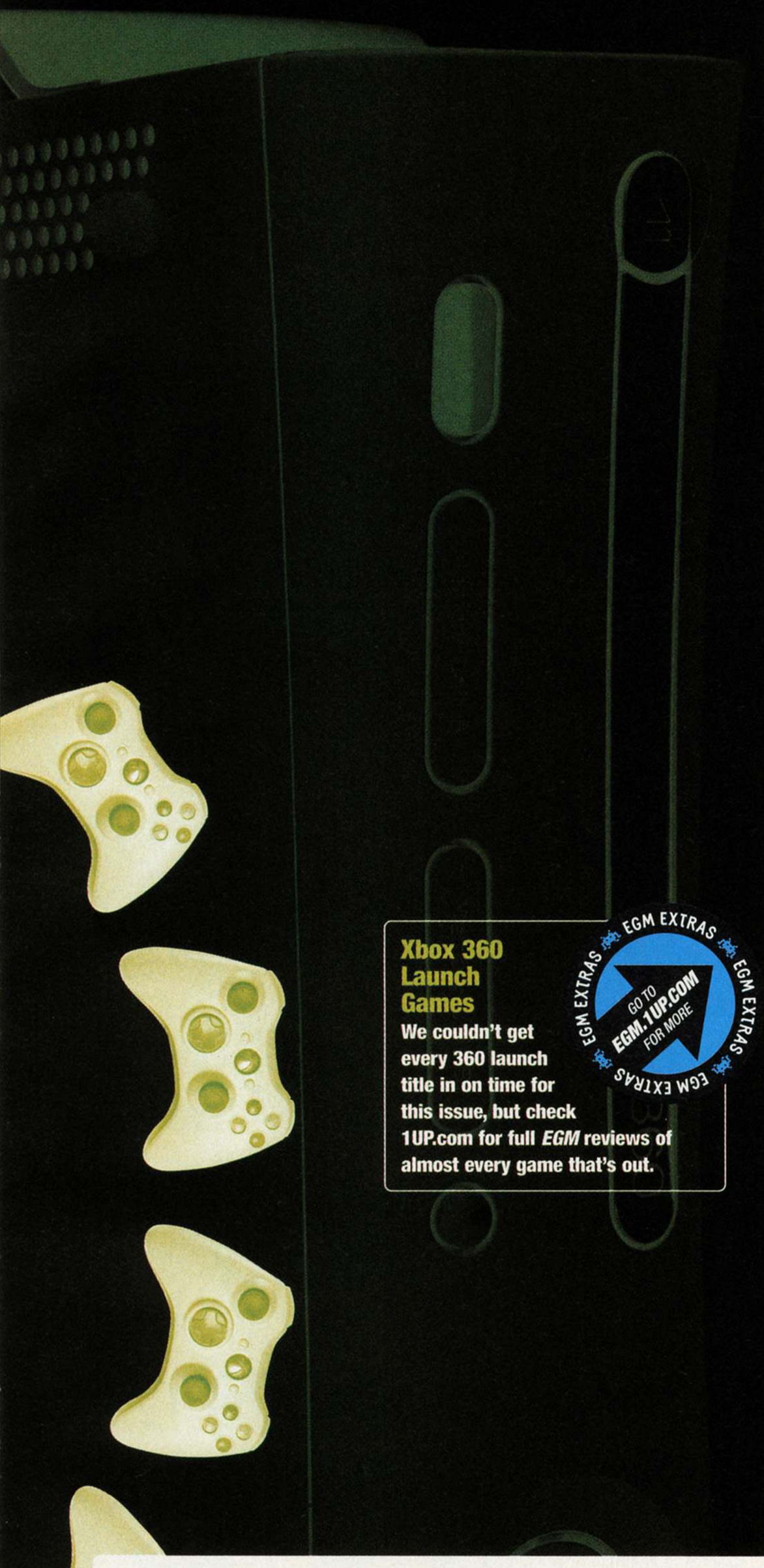
THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

XBOX 360

You say you want an evolution? Well the next next-generation is here, ready or not. But if you are ready, you've got deep pockets; those HD TVs don't come cheap, and neither does an Xbox 360—or the games, many of which are clocking in at $60 now.

We've reviewed as many Xbox 360 launch titles as we could get for this issue (and the ones we didn't get in time, including *Perfect Dark Zero*, we've reviewed on 1UP.com), but in some ways, the jury's still out. Are slightly prettier graphics matched with mostly traditional gameplay enough? You'll have to decide for yourself. Either way, the next gen begins when you turn the page....



Xbox 360 Launch Games

We couldn't get every 360 launch title in on time for this issue, but check 1UP.com for full *EGM* reviews of almost every game that's out.

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THE RATING SYSTEM & AWARDS

10-7 GOOD

6.5-5 FAIR

4.5-0 BAD

Platinum — straight 10s. For games that are life-changing.

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ESRB Ratings

The ESRB's game ratings range from "Everyone" to "Adults Only." Visit **www.esrb.org** for the full lowdown.

THE REVIEW CREW

DAN "SHOE" HSU • Editor-in-Chief

The snowboarding bug bit Shoe in the ass, thanks to *Amped 3*. New season, new injuries....
Now Playing: *Amped 3*, *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*
Blog: egmshoe.1UP.com

MARK MACDONALD • Executive Editor

When he's not working (playing games) or pursuing his hobby (playing games), Mark relaxes by playing games.
Now Playing: *Call of Duty 2*
Blog: egmmark.1UP.com

JENNIFER TSAO • Managing Editor

Jen's putting off home buying till she pays off her house in *Animal Crossing: Wild World*. One mortgage is bad enough!
Now Playing: *Amped 3*
Blog: egmjennifer.1UP.com

CRISPIN BOYER • Senior Editor

Crispin respects a game like *Gun* for naming itself what it is. Besides, *Grand Theft Mustang* doesn't have the same ring.
Now Playing: *Half-Life 2*
Blog: egmcrispin.1UP.com

SHANE BETTENHAUSEN • Previews Editor

When not playing review games or editing the 2006 previews, Shane watches *Laguna Beach*.
Now Playing: *Mario Kart DS*, *Soul Calibur III*
Blog: egmshane.1UP.com

DEMIAN LINN • Reviews Editor

After a crushing loss in *Mario Kart DS*, Demian decided that this whole online gaming thing is really just a fad.
Now Playing: *Mario Kart DS*, *Soul Calibur III*
Blog: egmdemian.1UP.com

BRYAN INTIHAR • News Editor

After writing his third *Madden* review this year, Bryan has discovered 43 synonyms for "football."
Now Playing: *Madden NFL 06*, *NBA Live 06* (XB360)
Blog: egmbryan.1UP.com

ROBERT ASHLEY • Staff Reviewer

Robert's grateful for the good games thrown his way this month, though his skin has turned Elmer's Glue white.
Now Playing: *Stubbs the Zombie*, *Indigo Prophecy*
Blog: robertashley.1UP.com

JON DUDLAK • Staff Reviewer

When not reviewing games, Jon tortures himself by making the *EGM* crossword puzzle!
Now Playing: *We ♥ Katamari*, *Shadow of the Colonoscopy*
Blog: egm_jonathan.1UP.com

GREG FORD • Staff Reviewer

Playing five *Kong*-based games (*Donkey* and *King*) in a month has Greg Ford thinking like an ape.
Now Playing: *King Kong*, *Mario Kart DS*
Blog: egm_ford.1UP.com

JENN FRANK • Staff Reviewer

Jenn's New Year's resolutions for 2006 will include finally defrosting the Thanksgiving turkey. Mmm!
Now Playing: *EyeToy: Play 2*, *The Legend of Heroes*
Blog: superjenn.1UP.com

JAMES LEE • Staff Reviewer

Jimmy loves Josie Maran from *Need for Speed*...and the 360 ain't half bad either.
Now Playing: The games that *EGM* gives him
Blog: egmwiley.1UP.com

PATRICK MAURO • Staff Reviewer

This syndicated radio guy can and will kick your ass next-gen-hoops style.
Now Playing: 360 sports titles, *The Warriors*
Blog: Patrick believes the Internet is a fad, thus no blog

CHRISTIAN NUTT • Staff Reviewer

Christian was late with this bio because he was reading a book. A book! And playing *Kameo*.
Now Reading: *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis
Blog: ferricide.1UP.com

KATHLEEN SANDERS • Staff Reviewer

Hopefully, excessive *Animal Crossing* is the reason Kathleen has been carrying an ax around.
Now Playing: *NFS: Most Wanted*, *AC: Wild World*
Blog: cookiecups.1UP.com

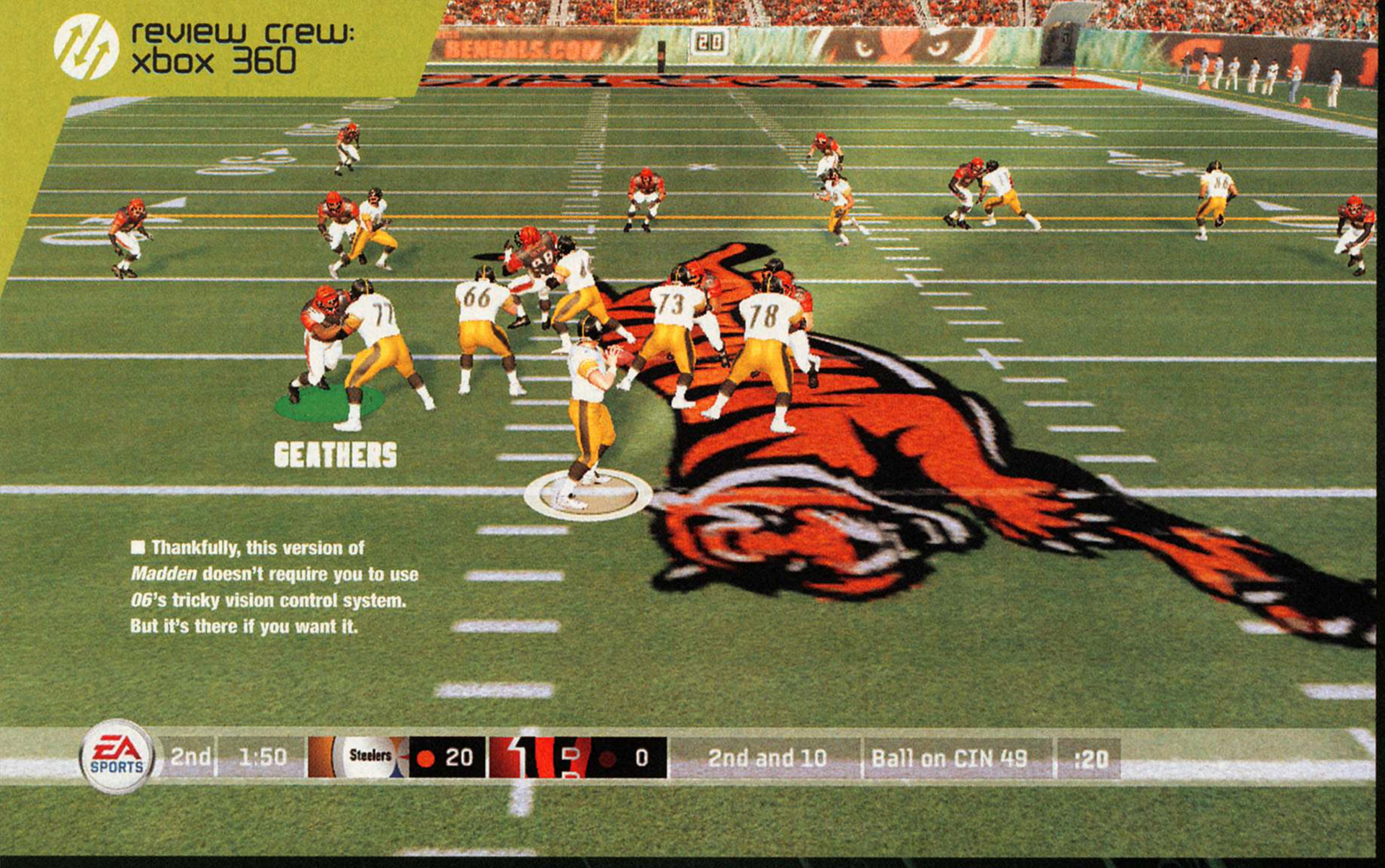
GREG SEWART • Staff Reviewer

Feeling lucky? Look for "DrJealousy" and prepare to suck exhaust in *Project Gotham Racing 3* on Live.
Now Playing: *Forza Motorsport*, *Resident Evil 4*
Blog: stewy.1UP.com

JUSTIN SPEER • Staff Reviewer

Justin believes exploding heads in videogames have lost all meaning. Where did we go wrong?
Now Playing: *Culdcept*, *Shadow of the Colossus*
Blog: zepyulos.1UP.com

■ Those beautiful birds at the **OFFICIAL U.S. PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE** and **1UP.COM** are always there to help us out with reviews and we love them so much! Even when they come home late and crawl into bed reeking of fast women and cheap liquor.



■ Thankfully, this version of *Madden* doesn't require you to use *06*'s tricky vision control system. But it's there if you want it.

■ Inclement weather like rain and snow now affect surface degradation. Nice touch.

■ Xbox 360

ONLINE

MADDEN NFL 06

Lean, but mean

BRYAN: It's third down and goal, and the ball rests inches away from pay dirt. The play calls for a lob pass to the sure-handed All-Pro receiver Marvin Harrison. Colts QB Peyton Manning surveys the D, and beyond the secondary he sees a picture-perfect home stadium with its working Jumbotron and screaming 3D fans. You hear Manning calling an audible (yes, that's his actual voice) and use hand signals to relay info to his wideouts. The defense notices the formation change—a linebacker barks out his own adjustments. It's a handoff to the ever-elusive Edgerrin James. The hole quickly closes, leaving No. 32 with one option: dive over the pile and into the end zone. James scores! The crowd erupts, and listening to the local radio announcer call the action only adds to the excitement.

Sickly detailed stadiums, all-new animations such as backpedaling screen passes and goal-line leaps, an emotion-filled broadcaster—this is a great start to next-gen football. And collectively, these elements (along with the series' continually stellar gameplay) make it nearly impossible for me to go back to the older *Madden*s. Some will bellyache about this version's skinny feature set (no create-a-player, no ego-heavy NFL Superstar mode)—legitimate complaints, for sure. But I'd say the fact that you can't challenge plays, which has a significant impact almost every Sunday, is a bigger deal. Even so, *Madden* fans won't want to miss this gridiron evolution.

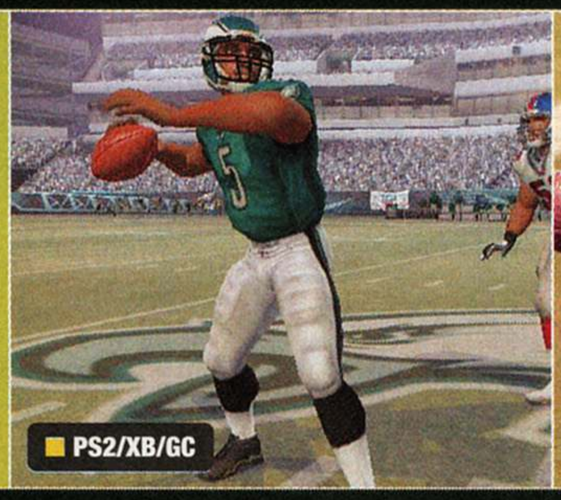
G. FORD: Let me say that yes, *Madden* on 360 is a great game. When you start playing, it's hard not to get sucked in as you easily slip back into your favorite routine. And from the gorgeous stadiums and incredible crowds (finally!) to the tons of new animations, you'll find plenty of visual upgrades. I'm going to be the voice of caution here, though. If you are expecting to ditch your 4-month-old current-gen *Madden* for a game that's worlds better, you'll be disappointed. While some people are fine with the graphical bump and other tweaks, others, like myself, would appreciate more substantial changes and not having multiple modes axed.

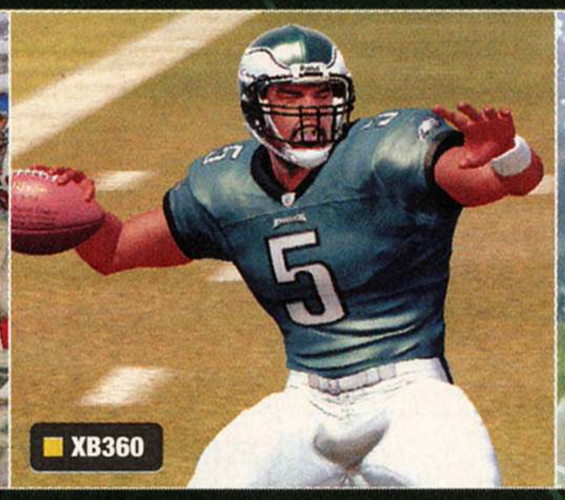
PATRICK: Next-generation *Madden* makes the Xbox 360 purchase an absolute must for this football fan. The mesmerizing visual details—grass stains on uniforms, a mega variety of tackle animations, awesome stadium re-creations—more than live up to the hype, but the actual gameplay is why I'm planning to upgrade my hardware.

The stripped-down QB control system allows for precision passing without making players worry about the vision cone. I also dig the easy-to-navigate play-calling screen and the fact that you can choose plays based on type, not just formation. Even though there's no owner mode—you won't be building a stadium and pricing the nachos—this makes *Madden* on any other system feel completely obsolete.

Overpromise and Underdeliver?

Earlier this spring when EA debuted a "visual target" computer-rendered video for a next-gen *Madden*, Executive Producer Jeremy Strauser swore that the final product would "look better." Did the dev team deliver the goods? See for yourself (right). While the game doesn't sport the same graphical quality as those first images, when compared to current-gen editions, the Xbox 360 version still looks mighty pretty.


■ PS2/XB/GC


■ XB360

■ Target video

Good: Lots of new animations, awesome audio
Bad: Fewer modes than the current-gen edition
Thank You: For shutting up John Madden (well, almost)

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	BRYAN	G. FORD	PATRICK
	8.0	7.5	8.0

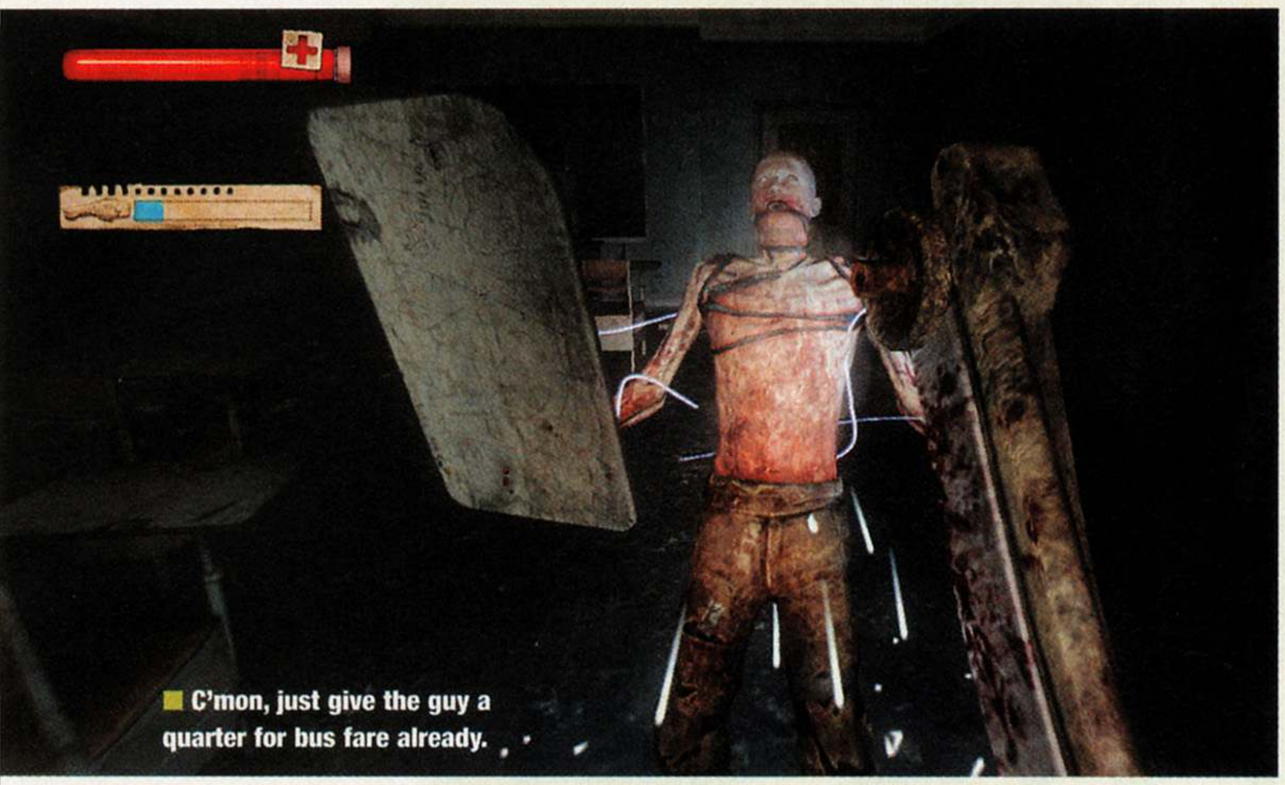
Publisher: EA Sports
Developer: EA Tiburon
Players: 1-2 (2 online)
ESRB: Everyone

www.easports.com

Xbox 360

CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

First-person gore



C'mon, just give the guy a quarter for bus fare already.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

JENNIFER	KATHLEEN	RYAN
7.0	6.0	8.5

Publisher: Sega
Developer: Monolith
Players: 1
ESRB: Mature

condemnedgame.com

Good: It's shiverrific!
Bad: So many silly inconsistencies, such as...
If I Have the Fire Axe: Why do I need a shovel to open the gate?

JENNIFER: *Condemned* is absolutely gorgeous—truly vivid in all its gory glory. Every severed limb, blood-sprayed wall, and dead bird in this first-person action-horror game looks stunningly detailed as you hunt down a freakish serial killer in a city mysteriously overrun by looters and psychos. One level was so creepy I called a friend over to watch as I played, tense and apprehensive, late into the night. If you loved *Doom 3*'s dark hallways and zombies springing from the depths, you'll be right at home here. It becomes comically predictable, though. (I laughed when my flashlight was smashed at one point in the game only to be conveniently replaced moments later.)

The enemy A.I. is great when they're hiding—it really adds tension when you know a baddie is lurking, ready to strike. But their smarts cut both ways; more than half the time they attack you from behind, when you're already in battle—too cheap, considering how clunky the fighting mechanic is.

Unfortunately, it all gets terribly repetitive after a while. I got the feeling the developers tacked on a bunch of hallways and enemies just to make the game a bit longer. I appreciate what *Condemned* almost was; its story is relatively rich and intriguing, with a cool twist at the end. Too bad the gameplay came out lacking.

KATHLEEN: Hey...you want to see something *really* scary? Sure, we all do. It's why you'd pick up a game like this. *Condemned*'s seedy, squalid spook-vironments simply scream, "I've seen all of David Fincher's movies," and are the best part of this title. Which is why it's a damn shame it just isn't much fun to play. Bludgeoning raging hobos as an FBI agent whose heart is apparently so clogged with fat that he can't manage to run the breadth of a lobby gets old fast. Ultimately, this game's truly creepy sights and sounds end up only slightly more shocking than your character's loafing stupidity.

1UP.COM—RYAN: *Silent Hill 4* proved first-person games can be just as terrifying as those with a third-person view; *Condemned* confirms it. Graphically on par with the best of the 360 launch lineup, it also has the most memorable sound design of any recent horror title. Yes, the levels are clichéd; you'll visit subways, rotting department stores, and other genre mainstays that have been abandoned by all except some rats and homeless thugs.

The combat is startlingly visceral if a bit tricky to master, but your thumb may ache after hours of pressing in the analog stick to sprint. It's not a survival-horror revolution, but it's an adventure worth experiencing.

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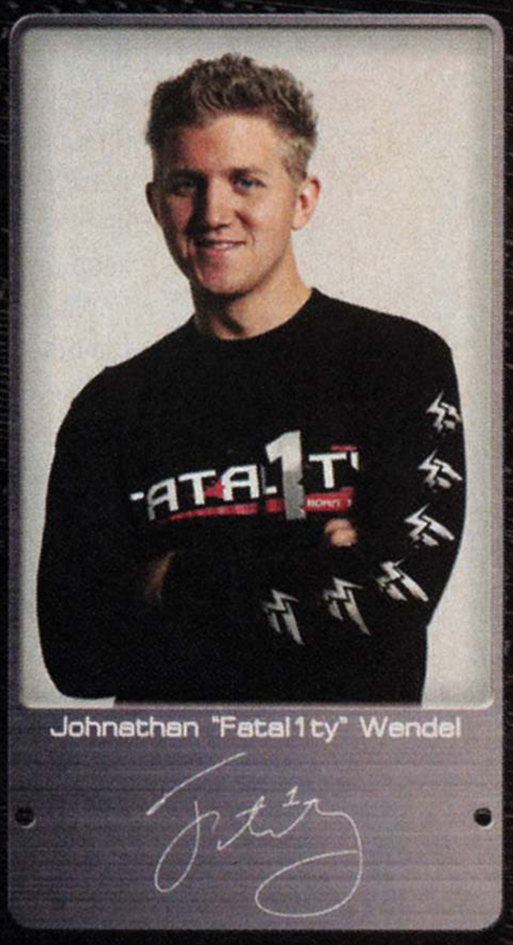

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During slow moments in the Great War, both sides enjoyed some friendly games of capture the flag.

Xbox 360

CALL OF DUTY 2

Spoiler: The Allies win again

MARK: True story: Almost every time I played *Call of Duty 2*, about 30 minutes in, my eyeballs would start to hurt. Nothing so serious that I stopped playing, but definitely distracting. At first I had no idea what was going on; I'd never had this happen with any other first-person shooter...I wasn't sitting too close to the TV...the room wasn't too dark...suddenly, I realized what it was: *I wasn't blinking*. I was so wrapped up in *Duty*'s intense firefights that I wasn't blinking enough to keep my eyes moist.

Which is ironic, because when playing most of the other 30,000 interchangeable World War II FPSes out there I have trouble keeping my eyes *open*. What makes *Duty* stand out? It's not the wow factor of next-gen graphics. From crumbling cities to sprawling rural villages, the sheer scale of *Duty*'s levels is impressive, but close-up and indoors things sometimes look like a pretty good Xbox 1 title. The game never looks bad by any means, but it's no showpiece for the power of the 360.

No, what makes *Duty* so special is the A.I. Enemies make great use of cover; they charge when it's to their advantage and give up positions when they know they're beat; they actually seem to understand grenades, running from them or tossing them at the perfect spot to draw you out of hiding. Same goes for your numerous, ever-present squadmates, who actually contribute (killing and dying all the time) and communicate (the fact that someone always seems to be shouting something—enemy positions, orders, taunts, curses—adds a lot to the experience), rather than acting as window dressing to make you look good. Add excellent, crisp audio and wide levels that rarely feel like preordained paths and you have a game that conveys the loud, confusing, and yes, exciting as hell chaos of war like no other. In my book, that's worth $60. Er, $65—don't forget the eyedrops.

JAMES: Heh, you said "Call of Doodie...number 2." Sure, I may not have grown up yet, but this series sure has. *Duty* continues to show how great a war game can get with its immersive environments and enemy A.I. that doesn't feel at all scripted. Imagine if you cut the strings on the puppetlike enemies from *Medal of Honor* and turned them into real boys, Geppetto.

A quick training lesson where you practice your shooting by firing at bottles proved to be one of the few unrealistic parts of the whole game—in my experience, Russians do not destroy perfectly good bottles of vodka. But you'll soon find yourself in the winter terrain of Mother Russia, your face in the snow with bul-

A View to a Kill

It's a testament to *Duty*'s solid controls and excellent variety of well-balanced weapons that multiplayer is such a blast, despite its and fairly standard assortment of modes. The mix of indoor and outdoor areas on most maps gives just the right ratio of action and strategy (we could write pages on smoke grenade tactics alone). Oh, and we love the feature that, while you wait to respawn, shows the last few seconds leading up to your death from the point of view of your killer. Brilliant.

Good: Excellent A.I., great sound and voice work
Bad: Graphics don't always impress
Perfect Excuse: To get that 5.1 surround-sound system

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	MARK	JAMES	GARNETT
	8.5	9.0	9.0

Publisher: Activison
Developer: Infinity Ward
Players: 1-4 (2-16 online)
ESRB: Teen

www.callofduty.com

This is what Meatwad's dreams look like.

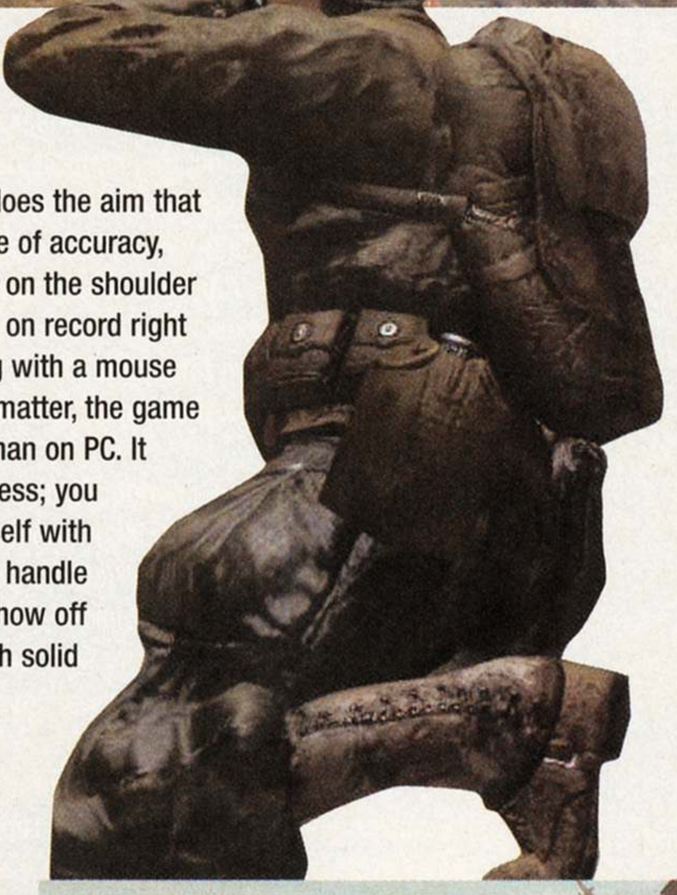
lets whizzing above you, as you repair telephone wires and always feel a sense of emergency—especially since the enemy A.I. is far superior than your Allied buddies' intelligence. You'll weep when you see your boys rushing out into ruthless machine-gun fire. But witnessing a neighboring soldier get perforated just adds to the chaotic environment and reminds you to duck once in awhile.

No need to lose sleep before a big battle, though—you're almost as hard to kill as John Rambo. You don't have a health bar, but it'll take a direct grenade hit or an absolute hail of bullets to take you out (get shot and the screen flashes crimson—maybe you die from pinkeye rather than bullet wounds?). Keeping you in the midst of the awesome action—rather than worrying about health packs—is what *Duty* is all about, and I must say, unrealistic or no, I dig it.

1UP.COM—GARNETT: *Call of Duty 2* makes a pretty strong statement about the capabilities of the 360. It's not the first WWII shooter to tap the whole *Band of Brothers*/*Saving Private Ryan* vibe, but it is the first to make it feel like you are really in the midst of battle. Bullets ricochet through the surround speakers, artillery shells boom through the sub, and anxious voices drift through the clouds of smoke and debris that obscure your vision.

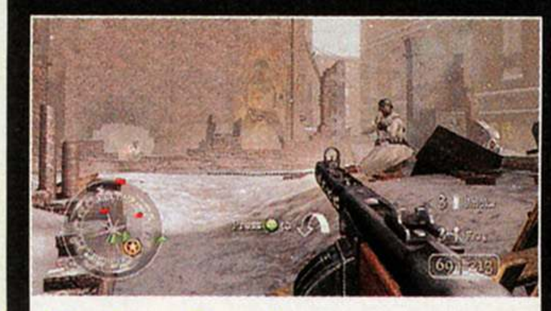
Unlike its brothers in film, though, *Duty* has no emotionally moving story. This is more Six Flags the WWII Experience, with intense snapshots of battles taken in the shoes of a Russian, Brit, or American soldier subbing in for the rides. Outside of a few missteps in North Africa, you're so swept up in the chaos of battle your brain doesn't register that it's being manipulated along a carefully scripted path.

There is more at work than just the show. For one, you're never taken out of the moment by fiddly controls. Movement maps intuitively to the sticks, as does the aim that strikes just the right balance of accuracy, and having grenades handy on the shoulder buttons is a godsend. I'll go on record right here: It's better than playing with a mouse and keyboard. And for that matter, the game itself works better on 360 than on PC. It runs with film-like smoothness; you don't have to concern yourself with whether your hardware can handle it; and this is the game to show off your home theater gear. With solid multiplayer (especially the excellent team modes) to keep you coming back, this one's well worth it.



Tour of Duty

You play as three different soldiers in *Call of Duty 2*, each in his own area of conflict

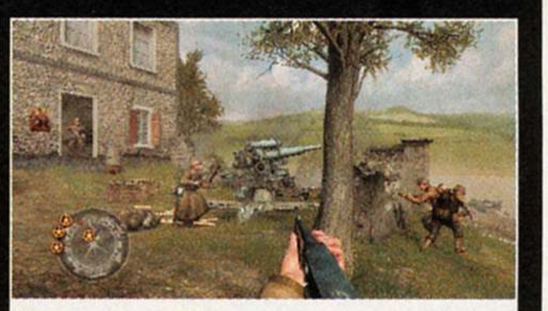


Eastern Front

Fighting as part of the Russian army (who all speak in English but with perfect Russki accents) offers a refreshing look at that often-forgotten part of the war, and the snowy streets of an absolutely devastated Stalingrad make for *Duty*'s most effective backdrop.

North Africa

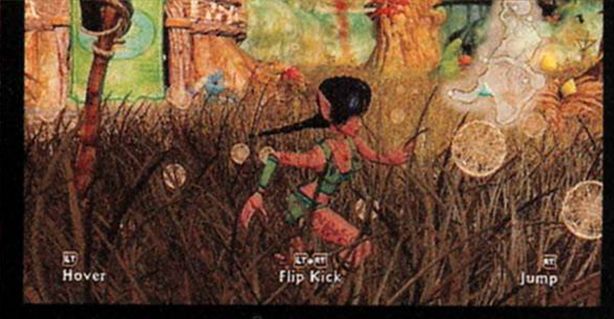
The open areas and vehicular missions of the British campaign in North Africa are a nice change of pace. A couple dusty desert-town battles are thrilling as well, demonstrating just how scary a single enemy machine-gun nest or tank can be.



Western Front

The American missions start off with, you guessed it, D-Day. Don't groan at the thought of another beach landing just yet—you haven't seen it like this before. Later, battling house-to-house in France adds strategy and freedom in the form of a few large, open levels.

■ *Kameo*'s most fearsome foe: Shrek in S&M gear.



■ Since Kameo is oddly incapable of diving, transform into Deep Blue for underwater action (above).

■ Xbox 360

KAMEO: ELEMENTS OF POWER

Scores a point for each year of development

CHRISTIAN: Nearly five years since its public debut, *Kameo* is finally here. Though developer Rare and Nintendo are long divorced, this game is heavily influenced by that rocky marriage; it references *Mario* and *Zelda* as much as it forges its own path.

Dopey characters aside, *Kameo* is a very attractive adventure game. Its Xbox 1 roots show, but Rare's artistry is intense. The fantasy realm of *Kameo* is so lush and vibrant that it can, at times, be distracting.

As for the gameplay—well, sometimes its shape-changing conceit leads to brilliant moments, but often the game's annoying or outright frustrating. Boss battles require perfect precision—OK, fair enough—but you have to repeat every step *ad nauseum*; by the death of each boss, I was invariably bored, not exhilarated.

The levels, on the other hand, do offer some interesting challenges. The fighting can get repetitive, but the powers of the warriors you can transform into offer a ton of variety. I wish these were explored more; you only scratch the surface of each warrior's abilities before you unlock the next.

Perhaps Rare spent so much time shuffling *Kameo* from system to system that it never got the chance to perfect the gameplay or levels. It's a brief, disappointing adventure with occasional flashes of greatness.

SHANE: Despite an abnormally long gestation period, *Kameo* arrives on Xbox 360 surprisingly bereft of content. It's kind of a short, straightforward take on *Zelda*, plagued by hit-and-miss level designs: Some sections sparkle with creativity (like the final area's thrilling chase across a fleet of airships), but many stages seem totally half-baked. Luckily, the central gameplay concept of using *Kameo*'s creature transformations to solve environmental puzzles remains engaging throughout. The same can't be said for combat, however—whether you're using Kameo's unresponsive flip-kick (her only move) or her googly-eyed alter egos' maneuvers, none of it feels particularly precise or fun.

Still, you might want to suffer through the sloppy battles in order to bask in the technically brilliant next-gen graphics, but some ugly Bratz-doll characters and tacky Day-Glo aesthetics conspire to ruin the art appreciation session.

1UP.COM—ANDREW: After all these years, it's comforting to see that Rare hasn't lost its ability to make moderately amusing Nintendo knockoffs. The problem is that *Kameo*'s design lacks the polish and finesse of the games it's trying to emulate. For instance, the Major Pain form is essentially Samus' morph ball from *Metroid*, but instead of it being fun, what with the zooming around, jumping off ramps, and crashing into enemies, it feels more like a chore. There seems to be a disconnect between your abilities and the level design—most of the cool upgradeable powers end up being unnecessary. *Kameo* certainly isn't bad, but as crazy as this may sound...maybe it needed a little more time.

Kameo's Long, Strange Trip: This elf's been around the block, from N64 to Xbox 360

1999: Nintendo 64
Kameo was originally planned for N64, along with *Perfect Dark* and *Star Fox Adventures*.

May 2001: GameCube
One of the first Cube titles, *Kameo* was originally more colorful and aimed at a younger audience.

May 2003-4: Xbox
Playable at the 2003 and 2004 Electronic Entertainment Expos. Bum *Pokémon*-esque gameplay bits later axed. "95 percent done" in 2004.

Nov. 2005: Xbox 360
After six-plus years in development *Kameo* is one of Microsoft's three first-party launch titles.

Good: Vibrant visuals, gameplay variety
Bad: Too short to make use of its ideas, frustrating
Best Warrior: Thermite. Shame you get him last

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	6.0	6.0	7.0
	CHRISTIAN	SHANE	ANDREW

Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Rare
Players: 1-2
ESRB: Teen

www.kameo.com

"5/5 STARS" – Maxim Magazine

MAXIM EDITOR'S CHOICE

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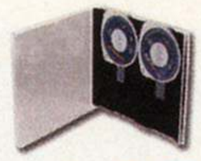

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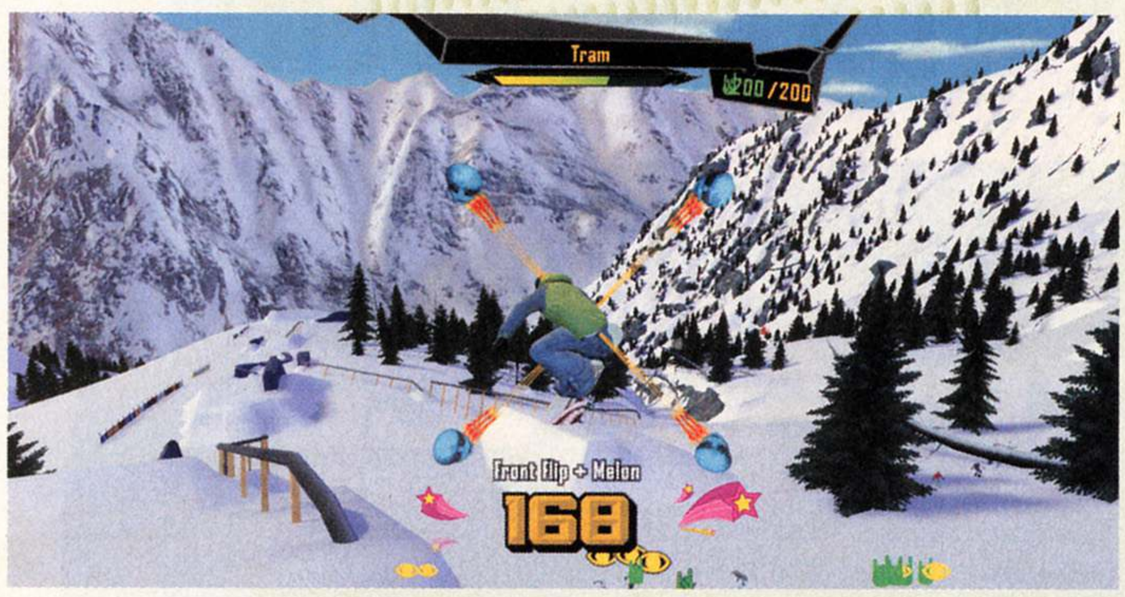
Xbox 360

AMPED 3

SILVER

We're stoked on it



Amped's cut-scenes feature a much higher than average unicorn quotient (below right).

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	7.5	8.5	8.0
	DEMIAN	SHOE	JENNIFER

Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Indie Built
Players: 1-2
ESRB: Teen

2kgames.com

Good: Ambitious cut-scenes, fun gameplay
Bad: Relentless wackiness may drive you insane, no online play
Minor Spoiler: There's an all-hands musical number at the end

DEMIAN: Yeah, *Amped* is a snowboarding game...but the weird thing is, all I really want to talk about are the cut-scenes. Developer Indie Built must have aspirations to break into Hollywood; the folks over there put some incredible effort into the game's diverse, manic story-advancing clips. Some are hilarious, some are annoying, and some were clearly filmed in the office hallway, but I give Indie Built credit for going all out.

Oh, and then there's the part with the actual snowboarding. Though *Amped*'s slopes are re-creations of real runs, the gameplay takes a sharp left away from semifrustrating sim territory and into you-have-to-try-really-hard-to-fall arcade powder wonderland. I'm OK with that (even though the last game's finicky control was part of its charm). While I really enjoyed some of the missions—such as sledding off a cliff to self-inflict the most damage possible—playing the same event types over and over gets boring. And the (optional) two-player missions are just plain bad.

I really enjoyed *Amped*, but it definitely could be more next gen. It's cool that you can drop terrain objects anywhere—every mountain is like your own custom level if you want to get nuts. But while *Amped* looks good and the soundtrack is incredibly huge, my socks remain unknocked off.

SHOE: Someone told these developers to crank up the Gen X/Y/Z/whatever irreverence to 11...thousand. I'm sure some of you won't be digging the MTV/Adult Swim vibe of these crazy-ass cut-scenes, but the effort that went into them is mighty impressive. (I liked them.)

On the slopes, the action's all a fresh snow day. You feel like you have more control over your character than you do in the *SSX* series. The mountains aren't as fun to traverse since they're more grounded in reality, but you get so much terrain to ride here—which you can customize on the fly. With so many different challenges, it's every snowboarder's dream game.

JENNIFER: *Amped* is known as the "realistic" snowboarding series, so you can imagine my surprise when I first glimpsed the Day-Glo art direction that's more wacky and psychedelic than extreme. Even if the actual snowboarding does retain a more realistic feel—you may not be doing all sorts of crazy monster tricks every three seconds—the game is a whole lotta fun. The pacing's a bit off—the story missions seem to take forever on the first few mountains, then you scream through the last three. Also, *Amped* may be next gen, but you wouldn't know it from the looks. I'll take fun gameplay over sparkling graphics any day, though.

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Xbox 360

ONLINE

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

Breakin' the law, breakin' the law

Good: Purdy graphics, fun chase scenes, more cops
Bad: Formulaic, doesn't do enough with the new console
Stupid Racer Names: Razor, Sonny, Izzy...you get the point

JAMES: I'm a nice, quiet boy at heart, really. But there's something satisfying about leading a dozen-odd cops on a long chase that doesn't end until they're all in a twisted, smoking heap.

Need for Speed: Most Wanted combines the free-roaming city from the *Underground* series with *Hot Pursuit*'s frantic runnin' from the law, then adds a new, bossy *NFS* hottie, cover model Josie Maran. But I have no problems obeying when she gives orders. My Beemer gets stolen, and Josie tells me to race against 15 drivers by first impressing them in racing events and evading-the-cops challenges. Yessum!

Thankfully, I didn't feel whipped because *Most Wanted* has its good points and looks gorgeous (the cars, too...not just Josie) from a next-gen perspective. The 360 version offers a larger swarm of cops on your ass than the PS2/XB/GC game—playing bumper cars with the law on the back nine of a golf course is like nothing else.

But I feel like *Most Wanted*'s open city wasn't really necessary, since I could just access the next events through the main menu. Plus, the formulaic gameplay gets a bit tiring halfway through, when you're still running the same few race types, just against tougher opponents. But who really cares when you're fueled by the thrill of the chase and the next Josie Maran cut-scene?

KATHLEEN: Next-gen *Most Wanted* is the same as the current-gen versions on the inside; it's just wearing a bit of lipstick. My score's going down slightly—360 has the muscle to make races and chases more intense, so it's disappointing to see mostly cosmetic changes and a higher price ($60). The same cars are closer to photo-realism...fog rises off a mountain road, and as you race along you stir up clouds of leaves...and urban areas of the city have just a bit more debris than in the current-gen game. Chases can support additional coppers, but you'd have to sit down and count them to notice. I ain't got time for counting when I've got a smokey on my six.

DEMIAN: Uh, yep. What they said. *Most Wanted* looks dang good on 360. Not *Project Gotham* good, but still very good, what with the sunsets, the violent weather changes, and the impeccably detailed car models. Aside from the high-shine gloss, though, a few extra pursuers in the cop chases are about all that differentiates this version from the current-gen game. My main beefs—the repetitive race events and not-very-challenging cop chases (especially earlier in the game)—are still here.

You'll enjoy it. It's probably the second-best racer at launch. But it's not an absolute must-have.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	JAMES	KATHLEEN	DEMIAN
	7.0	7.5	7.5

Publisher: EA Games
Developer: EA Canada
Players: 1-2 (2-4 online)
ESRB: Teen

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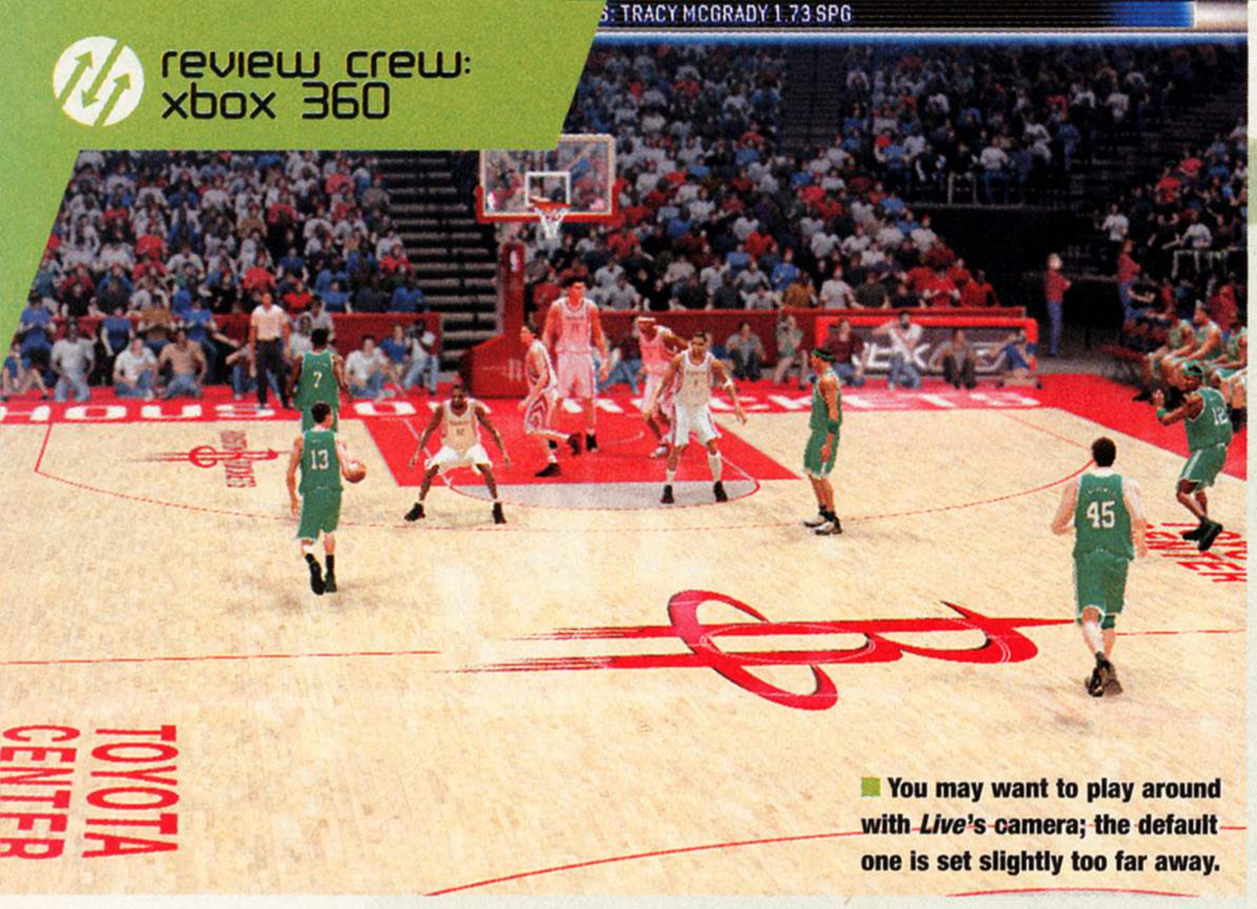


You may want to play around with *Live*'s camera; the default one is set slightly too far away.

Xbox 360

NBA LIVE 06

ONLINE

The prettiest baller around

Good: The best-looking sports game for the 360
Bad: Shooting free throws is way too tough
Requests for *07*: Slam-dunk and three-point contests

BRYAN: I admit it: When a new console arrives, I become something of a graphics whore. Sorry, but when I'm droppin' 300-400 bones on a system, I expect to see results. Thank you, *NBA Live 06*.

On the sports side of things, this baller is hands-down the most visually stunning game at the 360 launch. Actually, it's the only one that truly looks "next-gen." And it ain't just the incredibly accurate players dripping sweat; arenas—featuring banners of past championships, score-keeping Jumbotrons, and reactive 3D crowds—help deliver a sense of realism. The NBA superstars also now play a more physical game, as defenders will use their forearms to keep big boys like Shaq from getting position on the block, and you'll see guards take a jarring step back if they're pressuring too close. Next year, though, players need to show more emotion after committing a foul or hitting a big shot—these guys are soulless. Plus, I'd like to see *07* play faster; sometimes it feels like you're wearing cement shoes and can't explode to the basket. Minor issues aside, *NBA Live 06* is definitely the hoops game to buy...for the 360, that is.

Current-gen (left) vs. 360 *Live* (right).

PATRICK: The visual advances of the XB360 bring *NBA Live* to life. The beads of sweat, the stitching on the jerseys, the tremendous depth of the arenas...this game looks big time. I love warming up with some practice shots as the game loads, and it plays well for a first effort on a new system. If anything, the A.I. seems dialed down a notch—the pump fake, all but useless in the current-gen versions, is an easy way to get the defender in the air here. I'd like to see the speed of the game increased and the horrific default camera adjusted, and though it may be bare-bones in terms of game modes, you know you're embracing a next-generation hoops experience when you hit the court in *NBA Live*.

1UP.COM—GARNETT: I feel silly mentioning menu and loading screens, but it really shows how much EA Sports has elevated its basketball game for the next generation. You and up to three friends can shoot around while the game loads, and nothing compares to the moment when you get swept into the arena for your first game.

This is why you dropped four bills on a next-gen system. Players are so naturally proportioned that with Marv Albert calling the game it looks like a TNT "game of the week." But the rookie needs a season or two to really hit championship caliber. I struggled, unsuccessfully, to find a comfortable camera; the animations feel mechanical; and the right analog–based free throws...ugh, don't get me started.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

BRYAN	PATRICK	GARNETT
8.0	7.5	7.0

Publisher: EA Sports
Developer: EA Canada
Players: 1-4 (2 online)
ESRB: Everyone

www.easports.com

Xbox 360

NBA 2K6

ONLINE

Looks all too familiar

Good: Lots of modes
Bad: Basically the same game as the current-gen version
Most Next-Gen Feature: The way uniforms move during a jumper

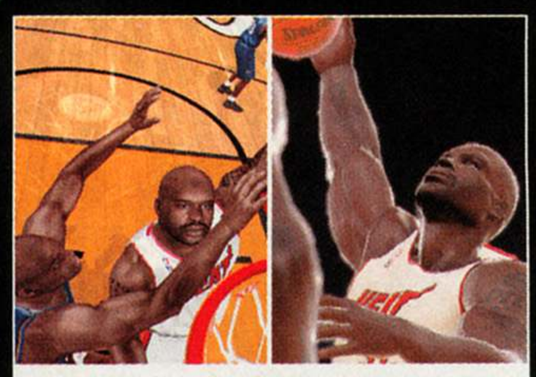
BRYAN: Now this a toughie, because on many levels *NBA 2K6* is one serious baller. Thanks to the all-new right analog stick shooting mechanics, it feels so natural burying a three-pointer or driving the lane for a rim-rattling jam. Computer-controlled opponents are fairly intelligent; they'll recognize open teammates around the key, run off picks and screens, and so on. And in terms of feature set, *NBA 2K6*—with its surprisingly interactive franchise and player-centric 24/7 modes—blows away EA's hoopster.

But here's the thing: The game is practically a carbon copy of the current-gen edition. Seriously, now I know why the words "Xbox 360" are scribbled on the score overlay—it's almost the only way to tell that you're playing a supposedly enhanced version of *NBA 2K6*. Sure, the close-ups look better than the older games', but they don't even compare to *Live*'s spot-on player models. Nothing about this one screams—or even whispers—"next-gen." And when you can pick up the PS2 or Xbox installment for $20 less (and, mind you, not have to worry about scratching up enough coin for a new console), you've got little reason to play on this hardwood.

PATRICK: *2K6* rocks on the current-gen systems; it's by far the best hoops game. And it brings all that good stuff to the 360 version, but I expected more than an enhanced version of current-gen *2K6*. The revolutionary shot stick plus all those game modes are cool on the 360, but the look falls way short of *NBA Live*'s. *Live* did a better job of layering all the visual elements into the complete basketball package, from the player models to the re-created arenas. Don't get me wrong: *2K6* delivers solid, fun basketball action, but it doesn't feel that much different than the *2K6* we've been playing. I wouldn't race out to buy the new system for this game.

1UP.COM—GARNETT: Don't think you're alone if you couldn't tell from the screens that this is a next-gen game. I dusted off the trusty Xbox and fired up *NBA 2K6* on it to compare. Sure, on 360, *2K6* plays a great game of basketball. Players animate naturally, the pace of play feels right, and the controls are dialed in. But it already does all of that on the Xbox (it appears some of the crowd-panning atmosphere shots are even absent from the 360 version).

My, how the tables have turned since developer Visual Concepts (now 2K Sports) took the world by storm at the Dreamcast launch. Then, its *NFL 2K* convinced thousands to go out and buy new consoles. Just the opposite is true today.



Current-gen *2K6* (left) vs. XB360 (right).

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

BRYAN	PATRICK	GARNETT
6.0	7.0	5.0

Publisher: 2K Sports
Developer: 2K Sports
Players: 1-4 (2-8 online)
ESRB: Everyone

www.2ksports.com

Xbox 360

RIDGE RACER 6

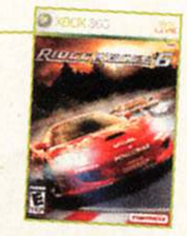
Just coasting

Cars inspired by obscure arcade shooter *Gaplus*? Cool. Billboards for *Death by Degrees*? Yuck.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	6.0	6.0	7.5
	SHANE	MARK	CHE

Publisher: Namco
Developer: Namco
Players: 1-2 (2-14 via Xbox Live)
ESRB: Everyone

www.namco.com



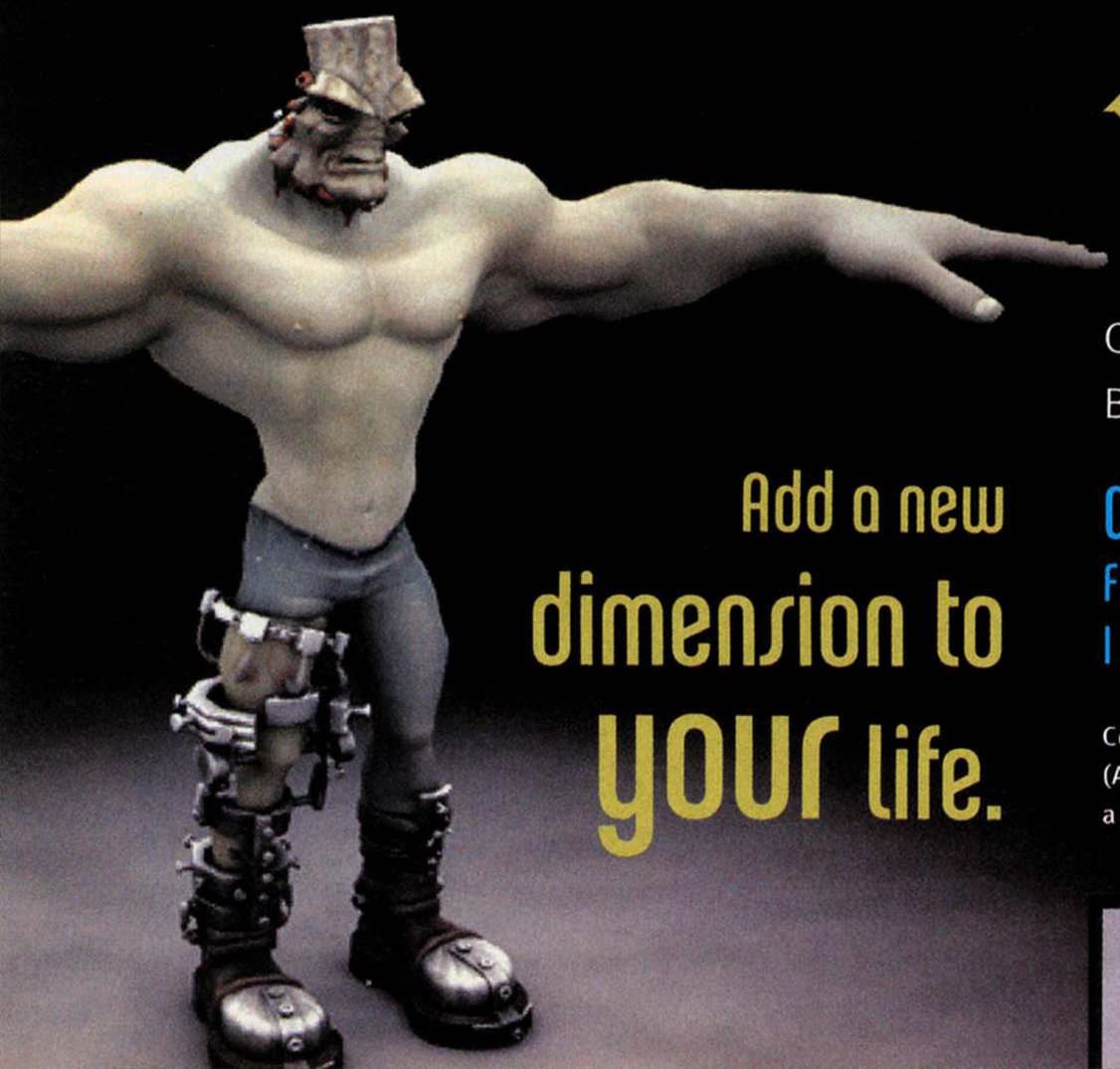
Good: Fun arcadey gameplay, plenty of tracks
Bad: Graphics barely next-gen, no customization or extras
Turn Off: The obnoxious announcer

SHANE: Color me confused—I thought *Ridge Racer* games were supposed to show off just how snazzy games look on your new hardware. *RR6* lazily limps into the 360 debut party wearing last year's fashions. Seriously, this doesn't look any better than *Forza* (Xbox) or *Gran Turismo 4* (PS2). The stages you're drifting through unanimously disappoint with simplistic structures and an utter lack of subtle, realistic details. Frankly, Namco should be embarrassed to have this on shelves beside *Project Gotham Racing 3*.

Thankfully, series fans will find a solid racer beneath the antiquated exterior. *RR6*'s gameplay packs relatively few surprises (it's more or less a beefed-up version of the PSP *Ridge Racer* game), but careening around corners at absurd speeds never loses its charm. Adding triple nitro blasts pushes the racing even further toward arcade-style insanity, but hey, it's not as if players flock to this franchise for its lifelike physics. A huge number of races (200-plus) and smooth online play help to extend the game's appeal, but really, there's little here that you haven't played elsewhere.

MARK: *Ridge Racer* is the cheese pizza of the 360 launch—a safe, no-frills arcade racer that is guaranteed to please, but only mildly. The graphics are fine but nothing special, the controls are solid (with the series' trademark easy drifting technique returning unchanged), and the...well, that's really all the game has to offer. I like how you can choose the order and tracks you'll race, but since new cars (that differ only in their top speed) are your only real reward for winning, beating your best time quickly becomes the sole reason to keep playing. I was impressed when Namco squeezed this very same game onto the PSP, but a modern home-console racer, much less one with competition like *PGR3*, needs more.

1UP.COM—CHE: Those of you familiar with the *Ridge Racer* series will know exactly what to expect from its latest 360 iteration: a brisk sense of speed; butter-smooth controls; ridiculous, over-the-top drifts; and the most irritating commentator since *Fight Night*'s Tigger. With the popularity of arcade racers like *Need for Speed*, though, I'd go out on a limb to say that the *Ridge* series has become a strictly acquired taste. But if you can subscribe to the game's quirky drift mechanics and old-school arcade-racing mentality (e.g., lifeless bumper-car A.I., major time penalties for slamming into walls), you'll unearth a certain Zen-like quality about the game as you scream around bends while bopping to its Eurobeat soundtrack. It's the same ol' game in a prettier package.



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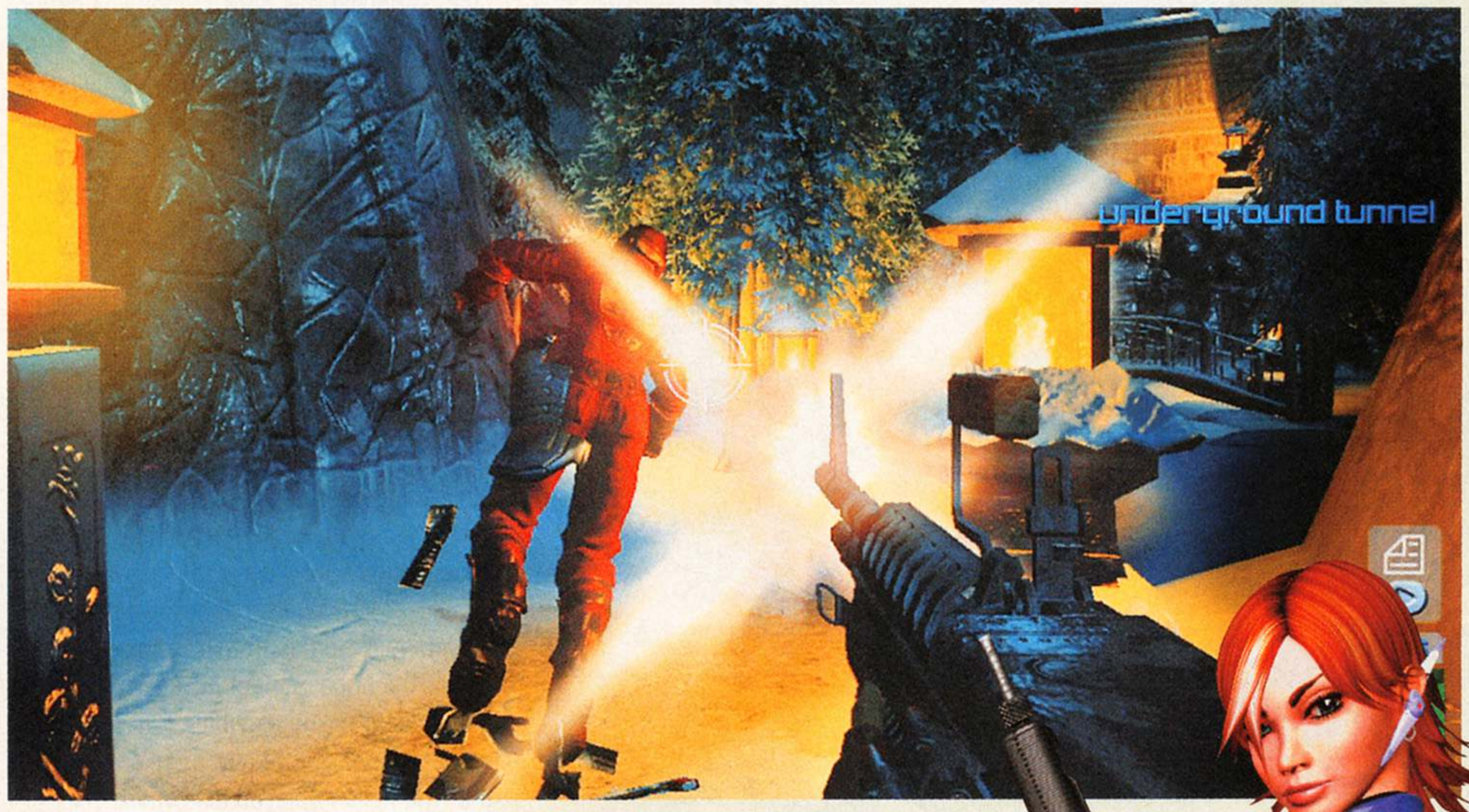
XBOX 360 WRAP-UP

Microsoft shows up late to its own party

Yeah, so no *Perfect Dark Zero* or *Project Gotham Racing 3* reviews yet. Don't get us started. We gave Microsoft the brow-beating of a lifetime, but our sighs and sour looks had no effect—MS wouldn't give us the final versions in time for this issue. Our reviews should be up on 1UP.com now, but if you don't believe in the Internet, you'll have to wait until next month to see 'em in *EGM*. For now, you'll have to do with our hands-on gameplay impressions....



PERFECT DARK ZERO

After hours of playing a near-finished *PDZ*, it seems the game really did come together in the nick of time. It may have slightly odd-looking and overly tanned enemies, and some of the more "Asian" enemy troops have voices straight from the Charlie Chan school of offensive stereotypes, but there's no denying the replay value of a large, sprawling single-player adventure you can run through countless times with different gadgets and guns.

The multiplayer seems to combine the best bits of *Counter-Strike*, *Halo 2*, and *Unreal*, but with jetpacks and hovercraft (and more content scheduled for early 2006). The novelty of "biggie sizing" your maps depending on the number of players ensures that quick or lengthy battles are as enjoyable as they are strategic, thanks to the sheer number of weapons and their various fire functions.

Co-op play is also a real bonus and allows for radio chatting while you wipe out goons. We just wished for more types of single-player opponents—ideally of the hulking dreadnought variety.

From what we've seen so far, *PDZ* should be the launch title you'll be playing well into winter.

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

Of the Xbox 360 launch games, *Project Gotham Racing 3* feels arguably the most "next-gen." Building on the core arcade racing gameplay developer Bizarre Creations established with its Xbox prequels, *PGR3* is a decadent slice of hyper-realistic graphics and a jaw-dropping suite of Xbox Live features. And since most of us don't drive a car while strapped to the bumper, *PGR3* includes a convincing in-cockpit view that simulates, to an amazing degree, the shaky-cam violence of shooting down the road at 150 mph. But the leap into next gen isn't just skin-deep. *PGR3* also rocks Xbox Live with a potentially huge online spectator mode that lets you watch the global *PGR3* scene as if you were tuning in to ESPN. And for that, we're entirely sold.

MORE SPORTS PORTS

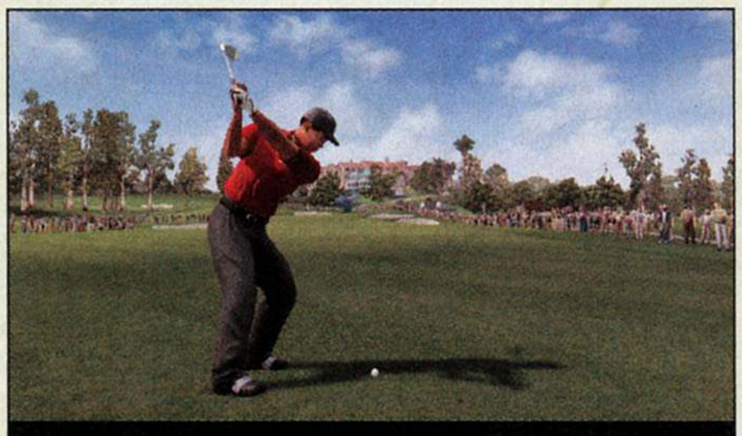
One improved game of footy to consider, don't even bother with the other two

FIFA 06: Road to the 2006 World Cup

XB360 • EA Sports • ESRB: E

Wow, soccer got a whole lot rougher with the move to a new console; you'll see players toss elbows as they jockey for position, do somersault tumbles after a slide tackle, etc. And we like it. The A.I. is also much smarter this go-around, very *Winning Eleven*–esque. Plus, we dig the 360-exclusive mode that's all about winning the popular gold trophy...er, we mean cup.

Bottom Line: Physical play—good. Brainier opponents—great. Players who look like they've been dipped in a vat of Crisco—ugggly.

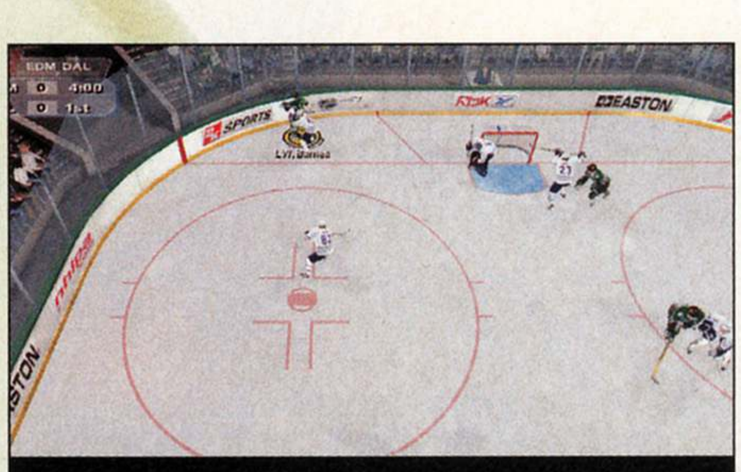


Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06

XB360 • EA Sports • ESRB: E

Wait a sec: *Tiger* on 360 comes packed with only six courses (compared to 15 in the current-gen edition), marginally improved visuals, and a stripped-down single-player game? And you want us to pay $60 for it? That's funny.

Bottom Line: You've got problems when you're biggest next-gen feature is crowd-filled courses. And you've got major problems when that next-gen power still can't produce foliage that doesn't look like it was pulled right from a pop-up book.



NHL 2K6

XB360 • 2K Sports • ESRB: E

From the looks of it, you'd never know *NHL 2K6* was a 360 title. Still, we do enjoy the new goalie mechanics, which for the first time in a hockey game really give you complete control over stopping the puck—money dekes in multiplayer are no longer gimmes.

Bottom Line: As much as we enjoy the greater emphasis on net play, we recommend taking this next-gen season off. Hopefully in '06, 2K will make its frozen pond faster and its skaters smarter (they still never break out for a two-line pass).

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■ *Kong* subscribes to the *Resident Evil* school of strict ammo conservation...and you can only carry one gun at a time.

What's the Diff? We'd sure like to know—we were only able to play the PS2 version for this review. We'll give the XB360/XB/GC *Kong*s a thorough going-over as soon as we can, and if there's anything to note (or that would change our score) besides minor graphics tweaks, we'll let you know in next month's Reviews Wrap-up. The 360 version is basically the same, but from what we've seen, it looks much prettier...which is saying something.

■ PS2/XB/GC

PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG

SILVER

Great ape

CHRISTIAN: Rarely does a game based on a movie actually manage to bring together the elements of both cinema and videogame as well as *King Kong* does.

As the action-adventure begins, *Kong* puts you in the shoes of Jack Driscoll, the writer of a (quickly abandoned) movie script for conniving filmmaker Carl Denham (portrayed in both the movie and the game by Jack Black). The script gets shelved, of course, because the marooned crew has bigger problems—like the giant, prehistoric beasts stalking them through Skull Island's untamed terrain.

I haven't seen the film yet, but the amount of story detail I picked up from the game is amazing. With Denham, Ann Darrow (Naomi Watts), or others tagging along with you, gameplay and cinema mesh. The characters subtly lead you if your pace slackens, effectively assist in battle, or just talk to keep things from getting stagnant.

The most impressive element of the game, though, is Skull Island itself. Grand and gorgeous, the environments never repeat, and the adventure never slackens. Though Driscoll's parts of the game take the first-person perspective, this isn't a shooter—it's a multimillion dollar Disneyland ride mixed with an adventure game: more *Ico* than *Halo*. Playing as Kong himself, on the other hand, is majestic in scope. As the ape, the island is no less beautiful, but the gameplay is more brutal; the gravity and weight of the beast is striking.

Nothing the developers do here is really complex (as Driscoll, you have only a few weapons; as either character, you have an extremely linear path to follow), but it's executed with such panache and artistry—and it's so compulsively entertaining—that I guarantee you won't care. This game takes simple elements, constantly reworks them, and as you master them, strips away more and more of your options, sliding the challenge up gradually as the game reaches its climax.

A very subtle and fine-tuned level of game design underpins this action movie/adventure game—and it's strikingly, consistently gorgeous. Its simple polish allows the game to shine. I knew *King Kong* was successful when I asked myself aloud while playing, "Do I really need to see the movie now?"

G. FORD: It's hard to explain how rewarding using a spear—yes, that most basic of all weapons—is in *King Kong*. Sure, when fighting the bigger, bosslike creatures, you'll prefer more powerful ordnance, a machine gun or shotgun, perhaps, but when it comes to taking out a lone raptor, it's hard to beat the feeling of perfectly lobbing a spear your target's way and pinning it to a tree. And if the sucker's still squirming, you can yank the

Turok: Dinosaur Hunter
The original shooter that pitted you against prehistoric beasts. *King Kong*'s first-person battles with dinos, mutant bats, and other creatures are simple but intense.

+

Pirates of the Caribbean
The way the game always pushes you forward, past tons of things to see (and kill), creates a very linear but exciting ride. But without actual pirates.

+

Ico
Simple combat. Intense mood. Clever puzzles. Cinematic flair. A girl at your side. Yes, *Kong*'s similarities to cult classic *Ico* can't be ignored.

=

King Kong

Good: Breathtaking adventure on a beautiful island
Bad: So linear you're never quite in control
Spears: Get good at throwin' 'em; you'll rely on them later

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

CHRISTIAN	G. FORD	ROBERT
8.5	8.5	9.0

Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montpellier
Players: 1
ESRB: Teen

www.kingkonggame.com

GRUDGE MATCH

KING KONG VS. DONKEY KONG

The big monkey of gaming versus the OG ape of films. Only one primate can win. Unless they stop fighting and opt to pick nits from each others' hair instead. Or tie—wouldn't that be lame?

HISTORY

1933's original *Kong* is a cinematic touchstone

1981's *Donkey Kong* is Shigeru Miyamoto's first game, and the debut of both DK and Mario
Advantage: Donkey Kong

MUSIC

Film score by the dude who did *Batman Begins*' soundtrack
Advantage: King Kong

That moronic, irritating "DK Rap"

LOOK

Huge, brutal, imposing
Advantage: King Kong

Clad in goofy necktie

ENCORE APPEARANCES

Trotted out for several cheesy remakes and sequels

Star of entertaining Nintendo games and their spin-offs
Advantage: Donkey Kong

WINNER: TIE

Both apes have their place: one in the hearts of Nintendo fans, the other occupying valuable vintage-poster real estate on cinemaphiles' bedroom walls.

weapon out and finish the job.

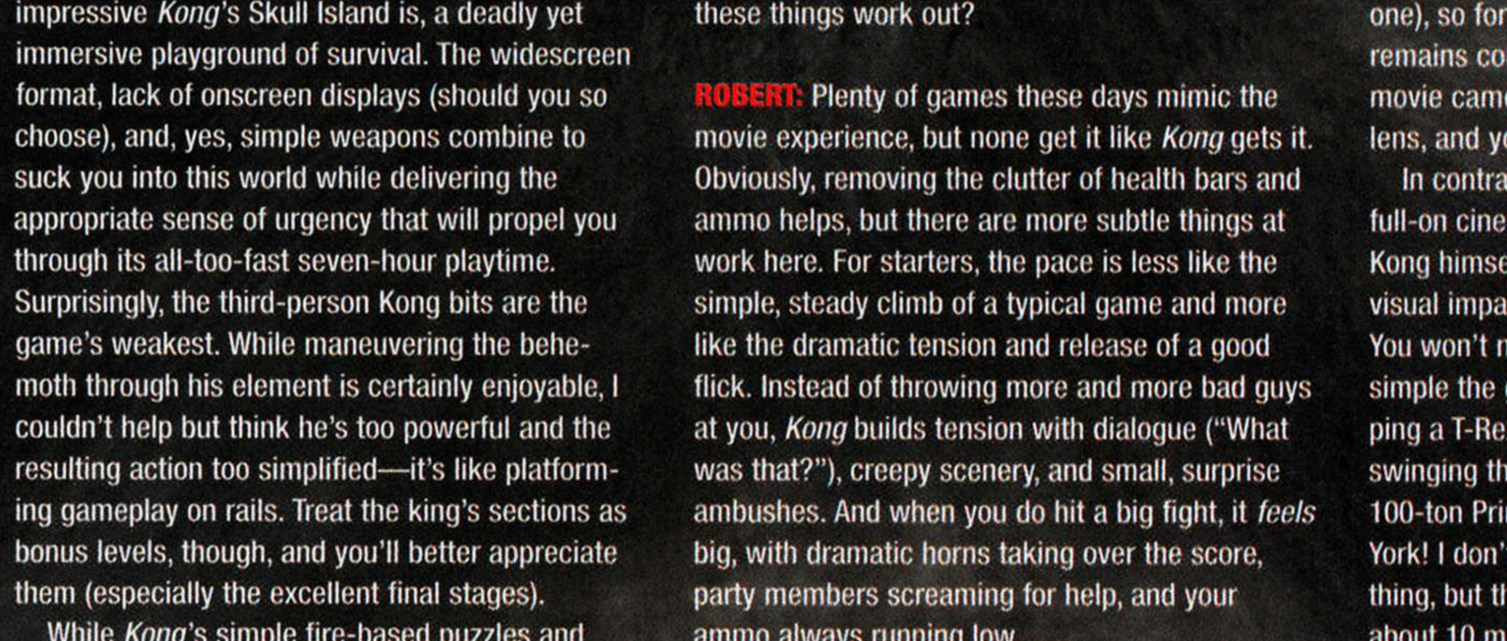
This whole spear spiel is testament to just how impressive *Kong*'s Skull Island is, a deadly yet immersive playground of survival. The widescreen format, lack of onscreen displays (should you so choose), and, yes, simple weapons combine to suck you into this world while delivering the appropriate sense of urgency that will propel you through its all-too-fast seven-hour playtime. Surprisingly, the third-person Kong bits are the game's weakest. While maneuvering the behemoth through his element is certainly enjoyable, I couldn't help but think he's too powerful and the resulting action too simplified—it's like platforming gameplay on rails. Treat the king's sections as bonus levels, though, and you'll better appreciate them (especially the excellent final stages).

While *Kong*'s simple fire-based puzzles and waves of generic enemies may not be overly inspired, the heart of this adventure is, as a classic tale begets a classic game—isn't it nice when these things work out?

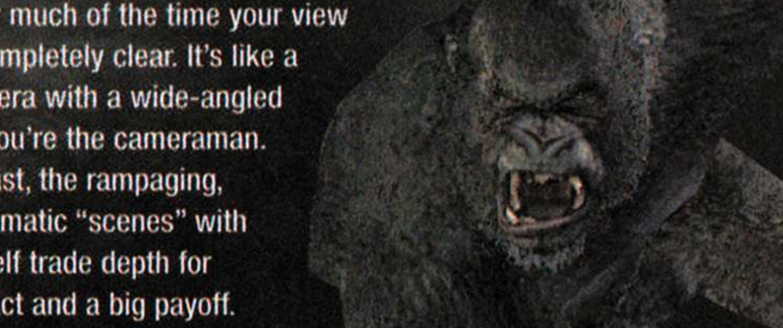
ROBERT: Plenty of games these days mimic the movie experience, but none get it like *Kong* gets it. Obviously, removing the clutter of health bars and ammo helps, but there are more subtle things at work here. For starters, the pace is less like the simple, steady climb of a typical game and more like the dramatic tension and release of a good flick. Instead of throwing more and more bad guys at you, *Kong* builds tension with dialogue ("What was that?"), creepy scenery, and small, surprise ambushes. And when you do hit a big fight, it *feels* big, with dramatic horns taking over the score, party members screaming for help, and your ammo always running low.

Keeping the player's gun holstered is another subtle stoke of genius. You have to hold down a button to draw your piece (if you have one), so for much of the time your view remains completely clear. It's like a movie camera with a wide-angled lens, and you're the cameraman.

In contrast, the rampaging, full-on cinematic "scenes" with Kong himself trade depth for visual impact and a big payoff. You won't notice how incredibly simple the game is when you're ripping a T-Rex's jaws apart and swinging through the jungle like a 100-ton Prince of Persia. And New York! I don't want to spoil anything, but though it lasts only about 10 minutes, I remember every second.



■ Kong's short stint as a valet attendant didn't end well.



PS2/XB

THE MATRIX: PATH OF NEO

Almost the one we had hoped for

Good: Tons of sick moves
Bad: Learning the combo system is mostly trial and error
Whoa: The ugly Keanu Reeves look-alike in the finale's cut-scene

BRYAN: OK, so maybe I was a bit too generous when I reviewed *Enter the Matrix*. What can I say? I'm a sucker for red pills.

Putting that aside, *Path of Neo* will go down as the *Matrix* game that should've been made two years ago. Instead of playing as a couple of nobodies like last time, you assume the role of the flying, kung fu fighting Mr. Anderson and relive the movie trilogy's greatest moments: the first flick's lobby scene, *Reloaded*'s brawl against a gaggle of Agent Smiths, etc. And thanks to a surprisingly deep combat system, you can look damn good in action. But here's the glitch in this *Matrix*: While the moves dazzle (slick-looking weapon strips, lightning-fast kicks to the face, dodging—and even stopping—bullets), the game does a poor job of showing you how to link these superhuman abilities together. So by the time I figured out the exact button sequence to leap over an enemy's backside, juggle him in the air, and then finish the punk off with a *Street Fighter*–like dragon punch, the credits were near. Also, too many of the non-movie-plot-related "filler" missions involve protecting A.I. characters. Stick to the script!

ROBERT A: Picture a close-up of Keanu Reeves at his Neo-playing, facial-expressionless best saying, "Whoa." That's about how I felt sinking my thumbs into *Path of Neo*. I avoided the last *Matrix* game, just based on word of mouth. So I was shocked to find myself sucked into this follow-up, with its flashy combat gracefully flowing from gunplay to sword-play to fisticuffs, crashing through walls and pillars, camera flying into re-creations of *Matrix* movie moments. But beating up dudes in 50 different ways is still beating up dudes. Another wave of Agent Smiths, and I would've passed out. Oh well. There are worse things. Like *Hardball* on DVD.

JON D: Although the game *offered* me the blue pill, I wasn't allowed to follow the adventures of "normal life" Neo—paying bills, picking up dry cleaning—who is blissfully unaware of *The Matrix* or any glitchy beat-em-ups that milk its aging name. Nope—instead, I was force-fed a red lozenge, destined to play out scenes *loosely* based on *Matrix* movies that just felt like *Max Payne* with more kick-ass kung fu. The game has a real bright spot between your mastering the first wave of slick, eye-pleasing special attacks and ultimately realizing you're doomed to repeat 'em for a long-ass time. Sloppy gunplay and normal action-game conventions like busting crates, shooting explosive tanks, and planting explosives make Neo's path an altogether forgettable trip down the rabbit hole. I don't know what pills my fellow reviewers swallowed, but that must have been some good s***.

Neo exterminates bald men on sight.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	BRYAN	ROBERT A.	JON D.
	7.0	8.0	4.5

Publisher: Atari
Developer: Shiny
Players: 1
ESRB: Teen

www.atari.com

PS2/XB/GC

JAMES BOND 007: FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

A good bonding experience

Good: Blockbuster production values, great-looking Bond
Bad: Simple, sometimes blah shooting
Shirtless Sean Connery Scenes: One too many

CRISPIN: As dapper and as charming and as shplendid as the real deal, *From Russia With Love*'s in-game incarnation of Sean Connery is a polygonal snapshot of the best Bond in his prime. It's just what you'd expect from a character built with the actor's cooperation (he gave the development team Bond-honing feedback, as well as recorded dialogue for the game, which is based on his favorite film in the superspy franchise). Just as faithful: the 1960s setting—the outfits, the gadgets, the hairdos—to the point where Bond fans weaned on Pierce Brosnan might think *Love*'s kitschy villains and underground lair are purposeful *Austin Powers*–style parody.

The game's retro world is boosted with *XXX* sensibilities. Bond's upgradeable arsenal includes armor-piercing cannons and rocket launchers. Special boat, car, and jetpack stages spark bigger explosions than the special effects guys thought possible back when the original film was made. It all makes for an action game kinda like your typical Bond girl: fun to look at but shallow. With simple mission objectives, cinch puzzles, and autoaim (that you can tweak for more skillful shots if you like), this game practically plays itself.

KATHLEEN: Connery is really getting on in years, but in his return to the role he defined he's still lovably misogynistic, and his unmistakable accent is the best part of the game. While a faithful adaptation of the classic action film into a game sounds good at first, you soon discover how ruthlessly linear it is. I couldn't shake that stuck on rails feeling...the lock-on targeting for dummies drives that feeling home in single player and absolutely neuters multiplayer. The whole experience ends up being about as exciting as the Universal Studios tour: a couple of neat explosions and stunts, but not a whole lot of substance.

OFFICIAL PS MAG—SCOOTER: Man, it's pretty rocking to hear Sean Connery pretend to be 42 years younger than he really is. If this is your first foray into playing Bond in the third person, then yeah, this is a decent game filled with lots of shooting, Connery-isms, and car chases. But if you've played *Everything or Nothing*, this will feel more like a lukewarm follow-up. Compared to *EON*, *Love*'s levels are shorter and more linear, and focus mostly on straightforward run-and-gun action; also, the vehicle sequences are kinda boring and padded out a bit. *Love* is a decent Bond game with the best Bond, but it pales in comparison to the previous, much superior Bond game that featured a not-the-best Bond.

Bond focus helps you target weak points.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	CRISPIN	KATHLEEN	SCOOTER
	6.5	6.0	6.0

Publisher: EA Games
Developer: EA Redwood
Players: PS2 1-2 (3-4 w/MultiTap), XB/GC 1-4
ESRB: Teen

www.eagames.com

PS2/XB/GC

SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

Armed and dangerously dumb

The second pipsqueaky Charmy Bee up there speaks, you'll wanna turn your gun on it.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	6.5	5.0	4.0
	SHANE	JON D.	MILKMAN

Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sonic Team
Players: 1-2
ESRB: Everyone 10+

www.sega.com

Good: Creative levels and bosses, unintentionally funny story
Bad: Frustrating control, annoying objectives, glitchy camera
You'll Want to Shoot: Charmy Bee's voice actor

SHANE: Are kids so jaded these days that they really need a hipper, tougher, and more 'tude-filled alternative to *Sonic the Hedgehog*? We're bordering on Poochie (see: *Simpsons* episode #167) territory here with Shadow, Sonic's more morally malleable twin. Apparently, tykes these days want their cuddly mascots to spew hot lead, angry expletives, and smoldering rage all over the place. Prepare to feel old.

Shadow desperately seeks relevancy by injecting elements of other successful titles into the aging *Sonic Adventure* mold. But our antihero's *Ratchet & Clank*–style firepower feels limp without customization or decent strafing, and multiple progression paths based on moral choices (à la *Knights of the Old Republic*) come off as artificial and confusing because both a good and evil sidekick follow you through each level barking conflicting suggestions in your ear. Even worse, *Shadow*'s control feels floatier than *Sonic*'s, and homing jump attacks inevitably lead to countless accidental deaths.

Still, the game has its moments. Some stages hearken back to the classic run-like-hell roller coaster design philosophy, and the visuals remain stylish throughout. Plus, the unique structure demands multiple playthroughs to see everything, extending the game's life span quite a bit.

JON D: Technically, this ain't a *Sonic* game, but it's peppered with high-flying, fast-dashing sequences that show off its *Sonic* lineage. I love a good speed dash, but more often I was scouring the surroundings for collectibles, firing blasters and stationary cannons, and jumping platforms in...cyberspace? Truth is, without the attachment to Sega's flagship series this game wouldn't have much on any early PS2 platformer (especially since the two-player mode is android-arena-battling crap). The light-dark path treatment gets minor props—the execution isn't perfect, but at least I can elect to be an SOB if I'm in the mood.

1UP.COM—MILKMAN: Seems like someone in Japan decided it was a good time to make a *Sonic* game that was "street" but had no idea of how to go about it. Shadow loses his memory, starts toting guns he finds on the bodies of characters he kills (both friends and enemies), says words like "damn," and is the angsty yin to Sonic's hopeful yang. This premise would still be stupid even if *Shadow* didn't suffer from slowdown issues, a nonexistent lock-on system, a horrible camera, and bottomless pits in which to fall. But it does, and it is stupid—just like this is a stupid way to spend 50 bucks.

PS2/XB/GC

GUN

How quickly the West was won

Milk *Gun*'s side missions—such as cattle herding—if you want the game to last past sundown.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	8.0	7.5	6.0
	ROBERT A.	CRISPIN	SCOOTER

Publisher: Activision
Developer: Neversoft
Players: 1
ESRB: Mature

www.gunthegame.com

Good: Plenty of side missions and odd jobs
Bad: Story missions over quickly
On the Rocks: Shot to hell? Whiskey refills your health bar

ROBERT A: You would think the American Wild West would make a great breeding ground for games, but you'd be wrong—mosey into your local game corral and you'll find more tumbleweeds than notable titles. *Gun* does its part to kick-start the genre by blending a third-person shooter and a go-anywhere, do-anything world. You might say *Gun* is *Grand Theft Auto* on horseback, but you'll find some pretty huge differences.

For one, *Gun* does gunplay better. The majority of the game is one long gunfight, shifting between a traditional free-looking aim to lock-on, slow-mo shooting. It's good stuff, if you don't mind your foes acting like targets in a carnival game.

The world of *Gun* is also a much prettier, albeit smaller, place than the cities of *GTA*. The stark beauty of the rocky West is rendered in muted colors, and at sunset the landscapes look like oil paintings. It's too bad, then, that the game constantly harasses you to move on to the next mission. And when you do, it's over sooner than you might expect.

CRISPIN: From its fun slow-mo gunplay to its glorious big-sky terrain to its *Deadwood*-meets-*Raiders of the Lost Ark* plot, *Gun* is a straight shooter that lights a stick of dynamite under the poke-along Western genre. But not everything here is high caliber. Enemy gunslingers sometimes fight like they're liquored up—I plugged one boss to death after he became wedged in a rock. And while you get plenty of rootin'-tootin' side missions (highlights include cheating in poker tourneys, riding for the Pony Express, and keeping the peace with your piece), the story pushes you along so quickly that if you begin at high noon, you'll reach the explosive finale by sundown the next day. Still, *Gun* is a high-horsepower start to a series that deserves a fully loaded sequel. You'll surely enjoy it while it lasts.

OFFICIAL PS MAG—SCOOTER: If you were hoping for *Grand Theft Auto: Dodge City,* sorry—all you get here is *Grand Theft Auto: Dodge City Block*. This "epic" tale of the West, while decent, is a mere 10 to 12 hours of gunslinging, not the 20 to 30 hours you'd expect. Besides being short, the game world is a bit small (it takes like, two minutes, to go from end to end), and the A.I. is way inconsistent (I was able to finish a nonstealth mission without getting shot at because the A.I. didn't detect me, even through I was running around in broad daylight). Still, the horse riding and general gunplay are enjoyable, despite how quickly they go by, and the voicework from the likes of Ron Perlman and Kris Kristofferson is awesome.

■ Missing: a CB radio and benevolent truckers, à la *Smokey and the Bandit.*

■ PS2/XB/GC

ONLINE (XB ONLY)

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

A total lack of respect for the law

Good: Huge, open world; fast cars; and plenty of smokeys
Bad: Can get a touch repetitive, unrealistic
Get Out of Our Heads: Kenny Loggins singing "Danger Zone"

KATHLEEN: *Most Wanted* combines the customizable street racing of *Underground*, the Bandit-worthy cat-and-mouse-ing of *Hot Pursuit*, and a brilliantly designed city—and mercy, it's a humdinger.

In career mode you earn cash in races and cred in chases. Build the bounty on your head and you'll attract the attention of notorious racers on the "Blacklist." Race them to work your way up, keeping an eye out for the men in blue all the while. And when the smokeys do spot you, the city is laced with with cop-foiling traps, like a huge donut-shaped sign on a rickety awning—knock it over and show that porky bear posse on your six that irony tastes like Krispy Kremes.

The gamemakers respect the player enough to offer choices: wander the city in free-roam mode looking for races and cops yourself, or warp right to them via a simple menu. Even cut-scenes, though pretty cool looking, are skippable. If you don't want to make a career of it, the challenge race mode drops you into different objective-based missions right away. It all comes together in a sweetly designed experience made to maximize fun.

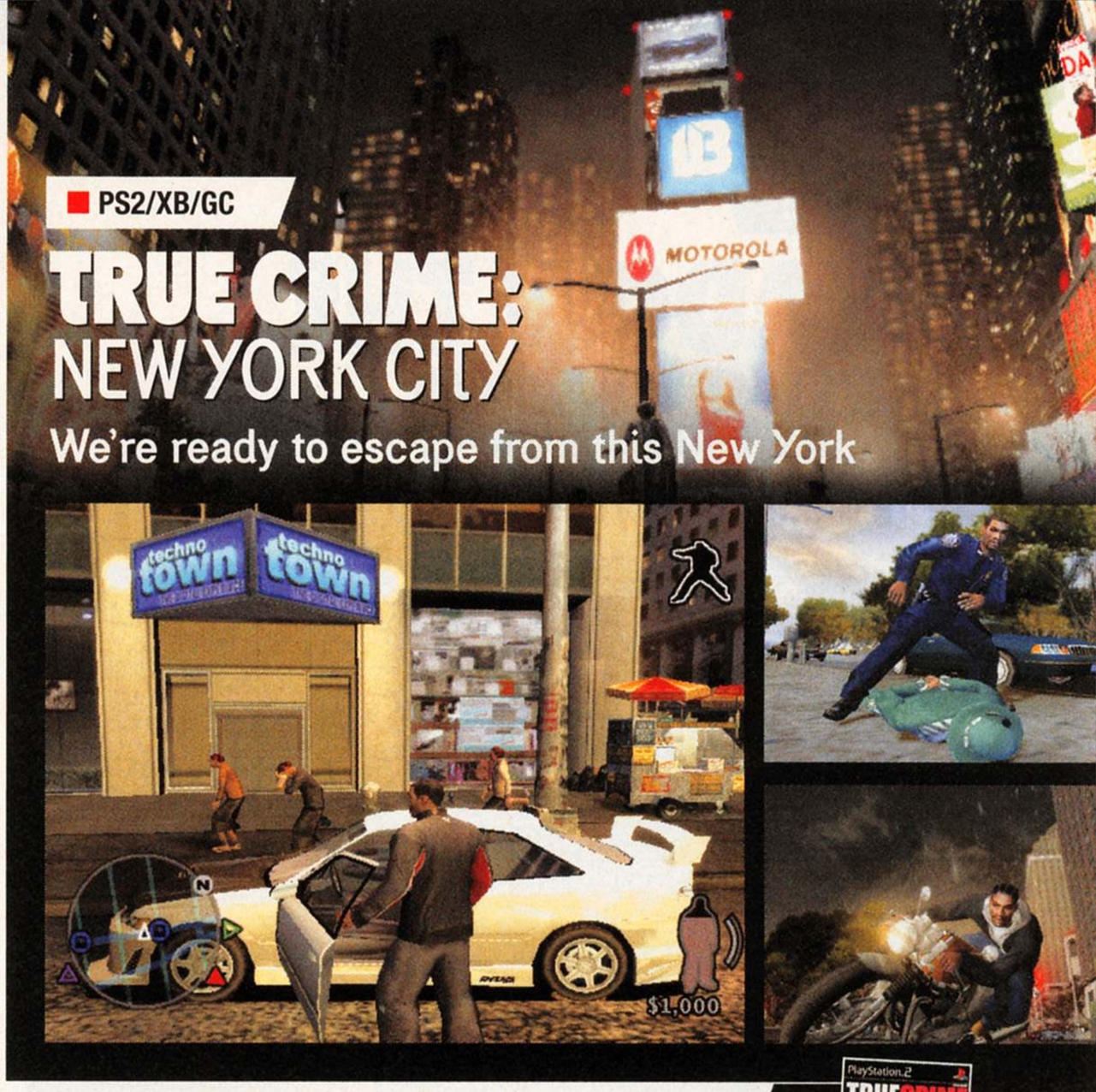
DEMIAN: After two years in the *Underground*, I'm glad to see the *Need for Speed* series tinker with its own engine again, even if the rides still drive more or less the same. Well, aside from the bullet-time "speedbreaker" feature (as seen in such games as *cough*Midnight Club 3*cough*), which can make for some cool moments, and the whole cop-chase thing. But the chases take forever to ramp up in difficulty, and early on you'll find yourself puttering around in white-Bronco-like low-speed chases, just so you don't accidentally lose your pursuers before you can rack up big points. *Most Wanted* is a solid, fun racer, but its repetitive single-player events and limp four-player online multi (Xbox only) sap its horsepower.

JAMES: I'll put a screeching halt to my stalkerlike infatuation with Josie Maran for a second. *Most Wanted*'s racing events don't add much to the street-racing genre—but the awesome cop chases pick up where *Hot Pursuit* left off. An on-screen meter shows how close you are to evading the Man (or not; get busted and it'll cost you). But when you lose smokey for the 20th time by setting off a *Road Runner* cartoony booby trap, it does get a little old. Plus, I found the slow-motion bullet-time mode somewhat useless, as it induces pretty much instant oversteer (though you can tap the Nitro button to minimize your slide). But there's no need to worry; buried underneath the new features, the fun's still here.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	8.0	7.5	7.0
	KATHLEEN	DEMIAN	JAMES

Publisher: EA Games
Developer: EA Canada
Players: PS2/GC 1-2, XB 1-2 (2-4 online)
ESRB: Teen

www.eagames.com



■ PS2/XB/GC

TRUE CRIME: NEW YORK CITY

We're ready to escape from this New York

Good: Nicely detailed version of Manhattan
Bad: Rampant bugs and occasional crashes
Ridiculous: Battlin' a fire-breathing dragon boat in an opera house

ROBERT A: New York City, once a rat-infested cesspool of punk rock and peep shows, is now well on its way to becoming Disneyland for urban-curious suburbanites. I prefer the NYC put across in old movies and TV shows, the dangerous city where you might get mugged in broad daylight. So the idea of a *Grand Theft Auto*–style crime game set in real New York (not Liberty City) has serious appeal. With its block-for-block re-creation of the entire island of Manhattan, *True Crime: New York City* could have been great.

Certainly, the setting is the game's best asset. I love cruising in a fast car, Sonic Youth blasting, looking for familiar streets and landmarks. But inevitably, a call from police HQ comes in, and it's off to fight/commit crime. That's when you discover that everything you do outside a car is a clumsy mess. The fisticuffs are convoluted and unresponsive. The lock-on aim for weapons is worse than in *GTA*, sometimes grabbing the guy a floor above instead of the one right in front of you. You'll be too distracted by technical gremlins to notice much else. The game is a circus of bizarre glitches and occasional full-on crashes. No thanks.

SHOE: Someone took a big bite out of *True Crime: NYC.* It's missing smooth animations, artificial intelligence, and that precise, clean programming that keeps bugs and crashes out. The gameplay can get molasses slow (especially on PS2 and GameCube). The nonplayer characters are idiots (they love running blindly into obstacles and getting stuck, or climbing into cars then sitting there when trying to escape from me). I've been unable to enter enterable buildings, gotten stuck trying to take the subway, and fallen through solid floors. But if you can just ignore *all* of that—a pretty tall order, mind you—*True Crime* is actually decent. The role-playing-game elements (like your cop rating or upgrading your skills and weapons) gave me plenty of incentive to keep playing through the mess.

GREG S: For everything I like about *True Crime*, at least two other things drive me nuts. I like that I can get into any type of vehicle and tear up the streets of Manhattan. I hate that the game's plot constantly asks you to travel to opposite ends of the island, and that the car physics are so screwed up that the lightest tap from a motorcycle can send a delivery truck spinning like a top. Then when I get out of the car for some crime fightin', the camera swings so wildly that I constantly lose my bearings.

Basically, it's a game with loads of potential, but awful physics and endless technical glitches are the real crime here.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	3.5	6.0	5.5
	ROBERT A.	SHOE	GREG S.

Publisher: Activision
Developer: Luxoflux
Players: 1
ESRB: Mature

www.activision.com

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COAC39B0

PlayStation 2

MAGNA CARTA: TEARS OF BLOOD

Nobody likes a crybaby

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

JUSTIN	CHRISTIAN	GREG S.
7.5	6.0	5.5

Publisher: Atlus
Developer: Soft Max
Players: 1
ESRB: Teen

www.atlus.com

Good: Strong visual design, technically solid
Bad: Slightly uneven battle system
Something In the Water: The gals are really...*big*

JUSTIN: Watch out role-playing fans—there's a sexy new RPG in town asking for your number. Using the same story-driven structure established by games like *Final Fantasy*, *Magna Carta* makes its pitch by coming across as both exotic and familiar.

As in any other RPG, slaying monsters is a top priority. When you make contact you'll manually position characters, select from multiple fighting styles, and execute a minimum of three timed button presses to unleash an impressive series of strikes and/or radiant bursts of elemental energy. It's interesting, but uneven. Major confrontations have some depth to them, but applying a complex and sometimes unwieldy battle system to frequent low-challenge battles with rabid wildlife amounts to nothing but empty hours.

Other than striking character designs by an insanely talented artist (Hyung Tae Kim) and a flashy, complex combat system, it's business as usual in *Magna Carta*. Level up, chase the semi-engaging plot around the world map, find and confront the *true* villain, etc. Hey, the formula works, and I can't call out any elements weak enough to deter role-playing afficianados.

CHRISTIAN: This game desperately wants to be *Final Fantasy X*, but it doesn't have the chops. Sure, the graphics are good and the main character looks so effeminate he might be a drag queen dressed as Christina Aguilera. The problem, then, is that the quest is dull. It's a simple rehash of everything you've done before in bigger, better games—and the storytelling is sloppy enough that it's not much of a motivator. The slow, awkward battles are probably the weakest facet of the game. Despite the clever ideas at play here, the different gameplay systems all put an unnecessary strain on each other. Fans of *FF*, *Star Ocean*, and *Grandia* will all find elements lifted from their favorites, but this game just isn't quite at that level.

GREG S: *Magna Carta* never really gets off the ground. The deep, unique battle system that has so much potential at first quickly bogs down with endless random skirmishes. You'll be doing more waiting than playing—waiting until somebody, *anybody* gets to actually do something during the fight.

The rest of the game doesn't fare much better. While the story should be engaging, everything moves at such a snail's pace that it's hard to care about what's going on.

Basically, what you're getting here is a visually interesting RPG with a broken battle system and gorgeous music. And a bunch of dudes who look like chicks, but that kind of comes with the territory.

PlayStation 2

ONLINE

WWE SMACKDOWN! VS. RAW 2006

Baby steps

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

GREG S.	BRYAN	KAREN
6.5	8.0	7.0

Publisher: THQ
Developer: Yuke's
Players: 1-2 (3-6 w/MultiTap, 2-4 online)
ESRB: Teen

www.thq.com

Good: New features like the stamina meter and ignoring rope breaks
Bad: Idiotic tag-team partners, laggy online play
Try This: Bodyslam The Big Show using The Hurricane

GREG S: Surely this can't be a *WWE* game that actually attempts to do something new with the genre. *SmackDown! vs. Raw 2006* isn't just a rehash of last year's game, which should give fans hope that, eventually, *WWE* games in general will be able to pull themselves out of the rut they've been in for the past few years.

The little things matter in *SmackDown*. I love that I can ignore a rope-break command on a submission hold and that the new stamina meter keeps gamers from endlessly pummeling each other without fear of tiring out. These new features actually break the endless grapple-after-grapple cycle of the standard *WWE* game.

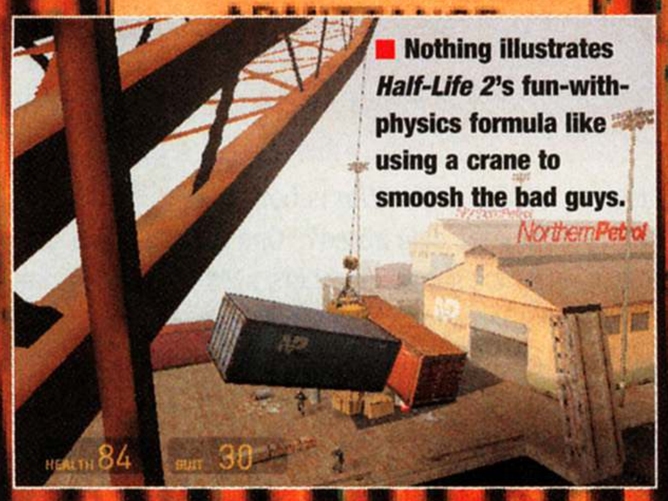
Of course, many of the old issues do remain. Matches still take way too long (my fellow reviewers might dig that, but not this guy); single-player tag-team matches are about as much fun as 1,000 paper cuts thanks to dumb-as-dirt tag partners whose punches and kicks can't break you out of a throw or hold.

SmackDown is a nice step in the right direction for the series. *WWE* games still have a long way to go before they're great, but this is the best so far.

BRYAN: First things first: Thanks to whoever made Hulk Hogan strut out to "Real American." Now that's entrance music, brother. Anyway, *SmackDown* continues to be the dominant wrestling brand because of its ability to play up the WWE's soap-opera-like atmosphere; excellent voiceovers add some much-needed drama to the cut-scenes, and fans will dig the subtle references to old story lines. As for inside the ring, the new stamina meter helps bring a slower, more realistic pace to matches—I only wish A.I. grapplers weren't so reversal-happy. And while online play is improved (tons of match types, trading custom characters), I can't believe that voice chat is missing again. Oh it's true, it's true.

1UP.COM—KAREN: Finally, a *SmackDown* game that's paced like real wrestling and veers away from the usual arcadey button-mashathon. The enormous roster of superstars are no longer superhumans, but rather real athletes whose moves actually affect their staying power, thanks to the humbling stamina meter (which also cuts down on cheapass-ness in multi).

Additions aside, the story is meh, the über-customization is excessive, and the sometimes overly cinematic camera may throw you off your game. But you can always take a break and jam in the office in the GM mode, where making moolah and keeping the bloodthirsty fans entertained is key. It's complicated, but scheduling my own *SmackDown* show and ad spots is a just reward for my anal-retentiveness.



Xbox

HALF-LIFE 2

GOLD

GAME OF THE MONTH

Magnificent desolation

CRISPIN: If you're a PC gamer who has already played *Half-Life 2* on your home supercomputer, stop reading. Go buy this month's latest graphics card or whatever it is you people do. Seeing your beloved first-person shooter compressed in resolution, debased in detail, and occasionally stuttering along will make you angry, as if your favorite sci-fi flick was redone as a basic-cable TV movie.

But so much of the PC original's greatness—its incredible physics, its moody atmosphere, its gameplay variety—has survived here that console gamers new to *Half-Life 2* will easily see what the fuss is about. You can have your way with any object, from barrels to buzz-saw blades to abandoned cars, in the game's dystopian wasteland—especially once you find the junk-chucking gravity gun (see sidebar below). It makes for lots of outta-the-box thinking. Overwhelmed by monsters in the *Resident Evil*–like Ravenholm town? Build a barricade with your gravity gun, then crowbar those nasties as they try to break through.

Unconventional to the extreme, *Half-Life 2* isn't divided into levels (despite frequent loading hiccups as you wander the world). The game instead is built of killer encounter after killer encounter, each one feeding into the next and not all of them mandatory. Pull your dune buggy off the seaside road in one of the game's two long vehicle commutes and you'll find creepy houses you can explore or choose to ignore. Explore! Explore! This game has nothing you'd want to miss.

G. FORD: About a third of the way through *Half-Life 2*, while playing catch with robopup Dog, I realized just how fun physics can be. He chucked a box, and I used my just-acquired gravity gun to rope it in, tractor-beam style, and launch it back. Soon, I was using similar techniques to create makeshift furniture ladders and barricades. Nifty physics engine aside, the game succeeds through its atmosphere: With little direction, you intuitively know you have to keep moving and make progress by engaging in tense firefights or traveling in a bouncing buggy. It's a shame then that frequent loading times and pauses spoil the otherwise engaging mood. Practice a little patience (or spring for a 3-gigawhatsit PC), though, and this scientists-gone-wild adventure will grip you.

1UP.COM—ANDREW: I played through the PC version of *Half-Life 2* last year and instantly fell in love. It offered a better single-player experience than *Halo 2*, and playing through it again on the Xbox just reaffirmed my love. Going from mouse and keyboard to gamepad is always a hairy transition, but developer Valve did it perfectly—*HL2* controls extremely well with the Xbox pad.

It doesn't look as good as it does on the PC...nor should one really expect it to. But it's completely serviceable, and at some points downright impressive considering the Xbox's age. And thankfully, the awesome physics remain intact, even if the visuals get sluggish sometimes.

G-spotting
Keep your peepers peeled for a briefcase-toting dude in a sensible suit interacting with the enemy or watching you from afar. He's the G-Man, last seen in the first *Half-Life*, and he's spawned an online cult that tracks his sightings as if he were a sharp-dressed Sasquatch. (Google him—you'll see.) Can you spot the G-Man more than once before the game's finale?

Gravity Games: Four Must-Try Tricks With the Zero-Point-Energy-Field Manipulator (aka the gravity gun)...

Best Defense
Need to run a goon gauntlet? Heft something heavy like a barrel or bookcase using the gun's alternate-fire mode (which lifts objects) and shield yourself as you dash.

Midair Grenade Grab
Suck tossed enemy grenades out of the air and launch 'em back before they explode. Works with your own grenades, too, giving you an impromptu bomb launcher.

A Thousand Cuts
When those annoying little manhack robots—basically flying chain saws—soar your way, snag one with the gun and use it to slice away at enemies. Ah, it's the little things.

Turrets Syndrome
While building up defensive perimeters with autoturrets, do yourself a solid and tote one around with the gravity gun. The turret'll mow down enemies so you don't have to.

Good: Phenomenal physics, terrific atmosphere
Bad: Sometimes choppy visuals, no multiplayer
For Comic Relief, See: www.hlcomic.com

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	CRISPIN	G. FORD	ANDREW
	9.0	9.0	9.5

Publisher: Valve
Developer: Valve
Players: 1
ESRB: Mature

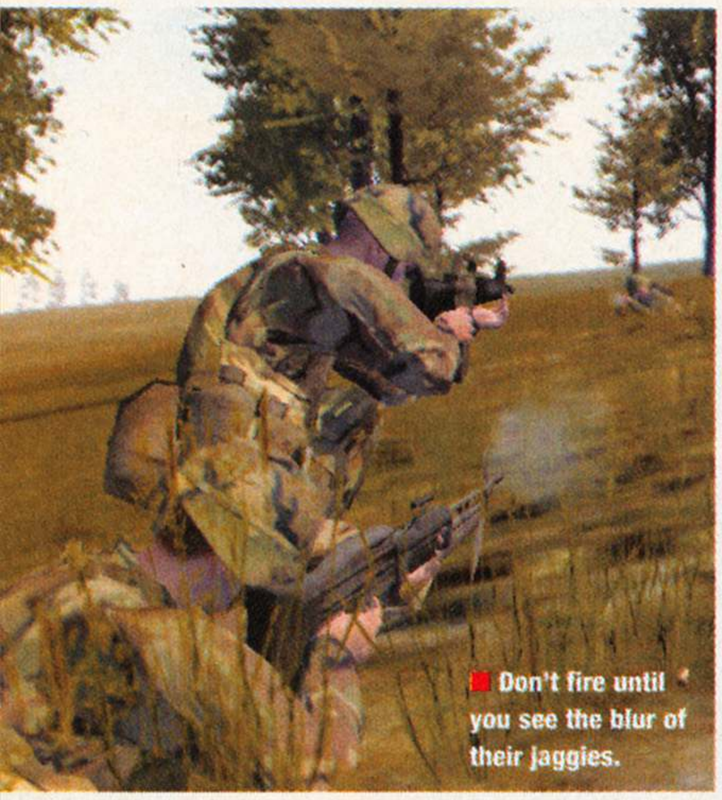
www.half-life2.com

Xbox

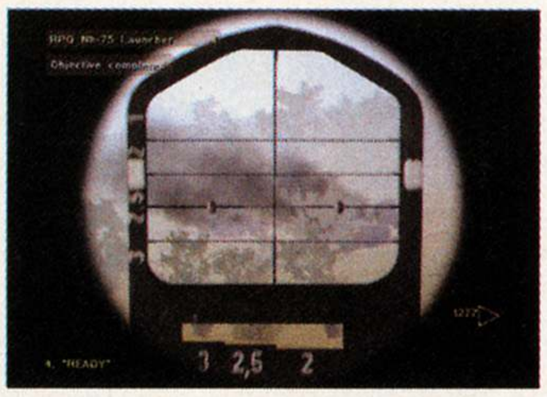
ONLINE

OPERATION FLASHPOINT: ELITE

War gets ugly



Don't fire until you see the blur of their jaggies.



THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	8.5	7.0	8.5
	GREG S.	KATHLEEN	CHE

Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: Bohemia
Players: 1-4 (2-14 online, 2-25 with a dedicated server)
ESRB: Teen

www.flashpointelite.com

Good: Superrealistic gameplay, gigantic maps, multiplayer modes
Bad: Awful graphics, easy to get lost
Ugly: Comical voice acting by Brits trying to sound American

GREG S: Disappointing is the only way to describe *Flashpoint* when you first fire it up. The game is downright ugly, especially when you see characters up close and personal. And they walk like they need to go to the bathroom really badly. Worse: The graphics grind along like an Abrams with a busted tread when the action gets intense.

At least, that's how I felt until I actually gave the game a chance. This is, hands down, the most realistic military shooter I've ever played. No running in where angels fear to tread in this bad boy, as sprinting down a street for a stand-up fight almost always results in a hail of lead, with you on the receiving end.

No, in this world where a single bullet can mean the difference between life and the afterlife, you have to plan every move, advance with extreme caution, and stay low and covered whenever you're stationary. The sense of tension in each mission of *Flashpoint* is unrivaled; you've got no hokey radar screens telling you where the next enemy is coming from, no warning about that squadron of tanks waiting for your butt over the next rise. It's just you, your allies, and your wits. It's awesome.

If you're looking for your next *Halo* fix, make no mistake, you will hate this game. But if you're looking for something different and challenging, *Flashpoint* is it.

KATHLEEN: "War is boring. Is anyone else bored?" One of your super-smart squad members asks this during one of the excruciating, real-time, inescapable cut-scenes. My answer? *Yes.* Although the game's A.I. is excellent—fellow troops and enemies march like they've got a pair—the game is just too freaking strict to enjoy. It may be realistic to sit in the back of a truck and ride to battle with only your ugly comrades to look at, but it is also boring. If you're the sort of gamer who takes their war games very seriously and can look past just how hideous it is (I wanted to put a paper bag over my TV), this title's brains should impress your camo pants off.

1UP.COM—CHE: From a technical standpoint, *Flashpoint* looks like an ugly, washed-out mess—but consider, for a moment, what it's doing under the hood. You're skirmishing with intelligent, hard-as-nails enemies in huge environments (in fact, an island you can traverse coast to coast at any time); at your disposal are vehicles, helicopters, and even jet fighters. And because the game is essentially the ultimate military gameplay sandbox, no mission ever plays out the same way twice.

Great online multiplayer modes and a mission editor ensure that *Flashpoint* has the legs to carry you well into the next gen.

Xbox

SILVER

STUBBS THE ZOMBIE IN REBEL WITHOUT A PULSE

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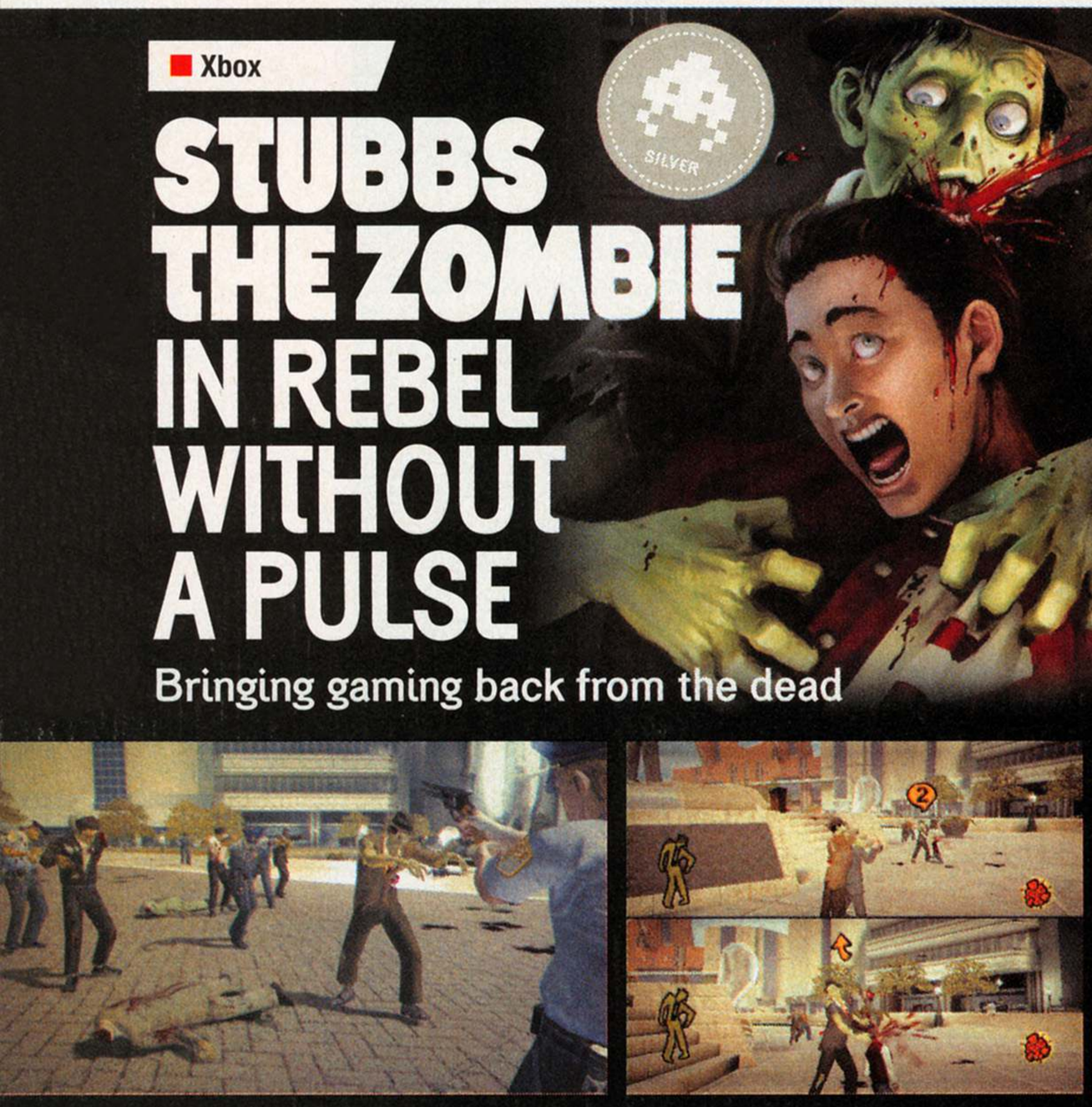

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	8.5	8.5	9.0
	ROBERT A.	JENNIFER	MATT

Publisher: Aspyr
Developer: Wideload
Players: 1-2
ESRB: Mature

www.stubbsthezombie.com

Good: Lovable character, fresh ideas
Bad: Patches of boring downtime
Sad: Occasionally tone-deaf humor

ROBERT A: As the well-worn story goes, Alex Seropian and a small cadre of fellow *Halo*-teamers left the relative safety and security of blockbuster game development to form a studio focused on eccentric games for weirdos. *Stubbs* is the (smelly, decomposed) fruit of their labor, a game starring a zombie let loose on a dead-boring, McCarthy-era town. While you'd never guess it from the out-there concept, *Stubbs* feels surprisingly like *Halo*.

Substitute Master Chief with a chain-smoking, charismatic corpse, pull the camera back behind him, shift the focus from gunplay to an array of gross-out attacks (gut-grenades, toxic flatulence, cranium bowling, and so on), and you get *Stubbs*. And just like *Halo*, it has great, open-ended battle options that encourage you to replay the scenarios in creative ways.

Stubbs is golden when there are plenty of brains to eat, but the first few levels get off to a slow, shambling start. The action-packed second half more than redeems the whole, though—*Stubbs* is required playing for anyone who craves more bold originality than our current gaming culture churns out.

JENNIFER: Robert's right—playing as a cigarette-smoking zombie eating brains, tossing explosive spleens, and possessing cops with disembodied flesh feels strangely similar to playing *Halo*. I didn't think it would work, but it does.

Stubbs presents a fun, frivolous package that I suspect everyone, from the jaded hardcore to the total novice, can appreciate at least a little. I wish the game had a more traditional third-person control scheme (you move Stubbs like in a first-person shooter), but you get used to it quickly. The humor is perfectly mainstream...a little raunchy here, a little gory there, and pretty clever most everywhere. Plus, with two-player co-op and four difficulty levels (you can even adjust difficulty midgame), this game has "Friday Date Night" written all over its decaying body parts. Check it out.

1UP.COM—MATT: I third the *Halo* comparison, but *Stubbs* is like *Halo* for lazy people. It's more about laughing than saving the world; you rarely need superprecise attacks or elite gaming skills—hell, even your main attack (the brain-eat maneuver) is designed to create zombie helpers to do your work for you. But don't look at this as a flaw; give it a shot and you'll find an amazingly charming and well-designed game. The novelty of building up a mess of zombies and then fighting alongside them doesn't fade, and your powers are both hilarious and effective. *Stubbs* may be short (6-10 hours), but I've spent more time hunting secrets and messing around in co-op than in any 20-hour game recently.

Luigi wasn't shot—he's just recovering from a bicycle kick.

GameCube

SUPER MARIO STRIKERS

What's next? Mario Cricket?

Good: Simple yet deep gameplay
Bad: Where are the minigames?
Frightening: Luigi break-dancing after a goal

BRYAN: Tennis, golf, baseball, and now soccer—who knew so many jocks lived in Mushroom Kingdom. And as *Super Mario Strikers* proves, some of these guys are even varsity material.

Just like the plumber's previous arcade-heavy sports titles, this one's quite accessible...and unconventional. Simple controls make it remarkably easy to fake out defenders, put some English on shots, or lob the ball to your teammate for a fancy schmancy bicycle kick. At the same time, though, the *Mario Kart*–esque power-ups add a welcomed element of unpredictably to the pitch; imagine being on a breakaway with only the goalkeeper standing in your way when—BAM!—out of nowhere a blue shell nails your backside. Even better, the A.I.-controlled squads are smart enough (especially on the higher difficulties) to use these special items to their advantage, helping keep matches competitive.

While the on-field action is as good (if not better) as other arcadey sports titles', *Strikers* leaves me wanting more because, man, the game's feature set is thinner than actress Lindsay Lohan after she hit the big time. So forget about any minigames or alternative game modes—all you'll find here is the option to face familiar Nintendo faces for trophies, which gets old *real* quick.

G. FORD: The latest stop on Mario's *Wide World of Sports* tour has a familiar feel to it—highly accessible gameplay, light on the simulation, good fun. By keeping the matches short, adding power-ups to the mix, and introducing the two-point superstrike goals that make you feel like you're always in the game, *Mario Strikers* appreciably livens up the sport.

But I have to blow the whistle (sorry) on a few points: The lack of minigames and multiple modes is shocking, switching characters midplay doesn't always select the most logical dude, and passing is a little too sensitive. Also, why can you have only one Mushroom Kingdom A-lister per team? But fire up the multiplayer and the problems all seem to melt away.

DEMIAN: It's funny what a little Mario can do. Somehow in *Strikers*, launching a barrage of turtle shells at an opposing soccer player makes a strange kind of sense. This exercise in Mario brand extension could just as easily be based on water polo, lacrosse, or hockey, but while the arcadey gameplay is simple to learn, it packs some real strategy in a two-player game, on both offense and defense. That feel-good Mario glow won't last too long if you're playing alone, though—once you suss the A.I.'s intricacies, the game holds little mystery or reason for replay.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	BRYAN	G. FORD	DEMIAN
	7.0	7.0	7.0

Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Next Level
Players: 1-4
ESRB: Everyone

www.nintendo.com

GameCube

MARIO PARTY 7

Partying like it's 1999...still

Good: Simple board-game gameplay has its charms...
Bad: ...but it still feels old
Most Creative New Board: Windmillville

G. FORD: You may notice some cynicism in these upcoming reviews, which is perhaps warranted considering this is the seventh entry in this board-game-on-the-screen series. Myself, I haven't played a *Mario Party* since the Nintendo 64 days...and I had no problem getting reacquainted with things. The same setup applies: Take on a group of friends in a variety of themed boards, each with its own tweaks on the get-the-most-stars rules. Got no friends? No prob, you sad social outcast; you can try solo mode, which pits you against one opponent, CPU or otherwise. And if you've got too many friends, there are some new supersimplified eight-player games, two players per pad (one uses the analog stick and L, the other uses the C stick and R).

So the options are there, the minigames are generally fun, and the content is safely Disney-fied. Same old story...and for a while, I enjoyed it, especially the constantly seesawing multiplayer matches. But as the minigames started repeating and the CPU turns dragged on (would anyone be against a TiVo-esque multispeed fast-forward feature?), even the various modes and boards couldn't help my enjoyment of the game from becoming tempered.

JENNIFER: Familiarity, as we know, can breed contempt. So it's really an accomplishment that *Mario Party* still manages to be fun at all, considering how shockingly unoriginal each installment remains. But it never fails: You get a couple people together and before you know it someone is saying something funny, another is doing something funny, and the game is just, well, being *Mario Party*. This doesn't mean I don't have some major complaints: The minigames are simply too short—newbies might find a game ending just when they've gotten the hang of it. The A.I. of the computer-controlled players also needs better balancing. They're either a little too good or a little too bad. And from now on, can we call these expansion packs, just to be fair?

KATHLEEN: Oh, bless your heart G. Ford. I learn so much from you and your child-like sense of wonder. See, I thought I understood the reason behind *Mario Party*'s popularity, because I have seen a lot of parents use videogames as a babysitter. *Mario Party* offers all the fun of your average board game, only the game literally plays itself, so adults don't have to waste time playing with their kids. G. Ford helped me understand that it is a great time for anyone who likes board games but hates thinking and moving. It does the job that it set out to do—*7* is a totally average *Mario Party* game and therefore earns the totally average score of 5.0.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	G. FORD	JENNIFER	KATHLEEN
	6.5	6.5	5.0

Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Hudson
Players: 1-8
ESRB: Everyone

www.marioparty.com

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PSP

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

A long, long, load time ago...

Good: All your *Star Wars* toys are here
Bad: But artificial intelligence is not
Long: Load times in between stages

SHOE: These guys sure know what *Star Wars* fans want. In the first three single-player levels of *Battlefront II*, you get to exterminate Gungans, Jawas, and Ewoks. Smart. But guess what else you'll get to fight in those first few stages? The control scheme. The PSP just isn't made for shooters, and this is one of the most ambitious around. Ground troops, tanks, spaceships...big army-versus-army battles can make for a fun time, but not on a portable system with only one analog stick. You'll feel more Jar Jar than master Jedi when you're awkwardly looking around for that stormtrooper who's blasting you from five feet away. It gets worse in Wi-Fi multiplayer, when the action gets choppy as all hell....

But if you can Jedi-mind-trick yourself into playing *Battlefront II* more as a shooting gallery than a plain ol' shooter, you'll have a much better time. Just a simple tap on D-pad Down and you can lock on to the closest foe, then fire away. Since the artificial intelligence is brain-dead, you can play through the entire game this way without any road-blocks. Sure, it's not challenging in the least, but hey, killing Ewoks was never about the challenge.

1UP.COM—ANDREW: It feels like I've consumed enough *Star Wars* lately to kill a metric ton of nerds, but one last version of *Battlefront II* must be evaluated. If I didn't already play the console game to death, then I'd be more than happy with this slightly stripped PSP version. Alas, I grew fond of multiplayer...*real* multiplayer, not four-player local Wi-Fi with crippling slowdown.

Granted, I'm impressed that they squeezed most of the game into portable form (a few notable sacrifices aside, like not being able to sabotage ship systems from the inside, making space battles more boring), and the story mode is strong enough to stand on its own, but the soul of *Battlefront II* is the huge multiplayer battles, which are AWOL on the PSP.

OFFICIAL PS MAG—SCOOTER: Oh man, I was all ready to totally dig this game. A faithful translation of the home console version, plus extra missions where you kill Ewoks and Gungans? Despite the lack of a second analog stick, I didn't get as tripped up as Shoe; the revised control scheme is a pretty good substitute (once you learn to use the D-pad for target lock-on). Even the quirky space combat is easy to adapt to. Except what blows a Death Star–sized hole into the whole experience is the utterly terrible slowdown in multiplayer (which is the primary reason most people would want to buy this game).

Vader dispenses Imperial justice on an Ewok, and the galaxy rejoices.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

SHOE	ANDREW	SCOOTER
6.0	7.0	6.0

Publisher: LucasArts
Developer: Pandemic
Players: 1 (2-4 via local Wi-Fi)
ESRB: Teen

www.swbattlefront2.com

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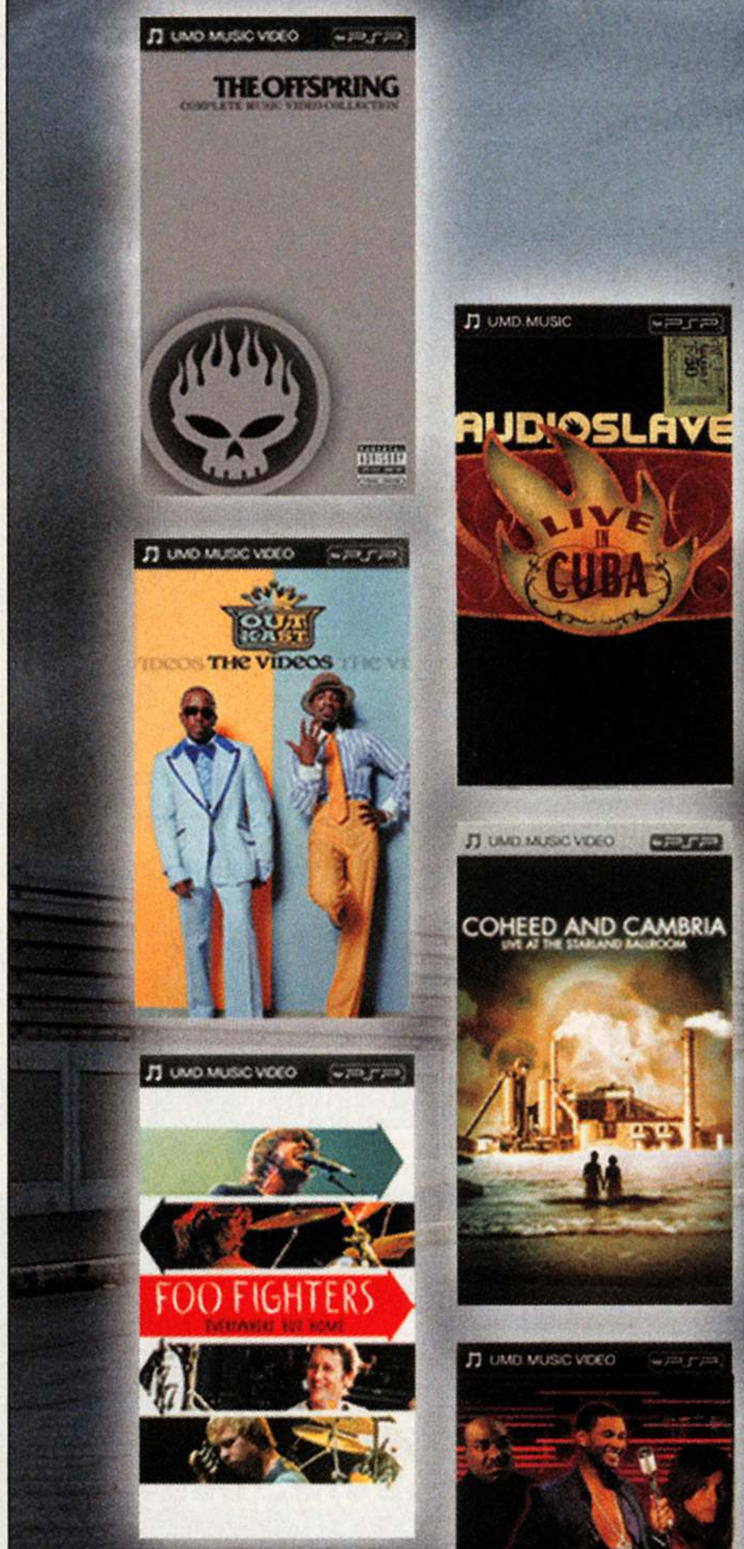

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PSP

KINGDOM OF PARADISE

I love the night life, I like to Bugei

Bust out customizable combos that would make the *Star Wars* kid (Google him) freak out.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	JENN F.	CHRISTIAN	SHANE
	7.0	7.5	5.5

Publisher: Sony CEA
Developer: Climax
Players: 1 (2 via local Wi-Fi)
ESRB: Teen

www.us.playstation.com

Good: Fast load times, great graphics, sweet moves
Bad: Dry story and dialogue, uneven A.I.
Enjoyable If: You mute the music right away

JENN F: In this hack-n-slash fest, you are Shinbu, one of the last members of an otherwise buried clan—and the hero of a really dry story. Despite your bizarre Larry Hagman eyebrows, Shinbu, your character model looks really good, even if your voice acting is stilted and scene chewing.

Nonetheless, you compensate for your shortcomings with fluid, responsive movements and nifty sword brandishing, making sweet combos with these Bugei scroll thingies you've collected. Unfortunately, Shinbu, you face infuriating opponents: Either they just stand there and take it like a sissy, or they whale on you relentlessly, which makes your quest a little bit no fun. Plus, weird glitches pop up once in a while, like that time you got a bomb stuck to your head and couldn't shake it off.

But we've got some terrific action going on here, Shinbu, and fast load times, to boot! So, Shinbu, if you can focus on your quest without getting frustrated or letting the terrible music distract you, you might be in for a good time.

CHRISTIAN: This game surprised me. At first, it looks like an unassuming action-roleplayer. The story never really gets interesting, but the action-heavy combat system is fresh and gets more fun the longer you play. The game is more of a brawler than an RPG, and dicing up hordes of enemies is kept very entertaining by the fact that you can find (or even create) a huge variety of combos from a massive pool of individual moves. It would be an innovative combat system even in a PS2 game. *Paradise* looks very good, too. If it weren't for the weak first two hours, the snore-inducing story, and the sometimes-rough translation, *Paradise* would be one of the best games on PSP.

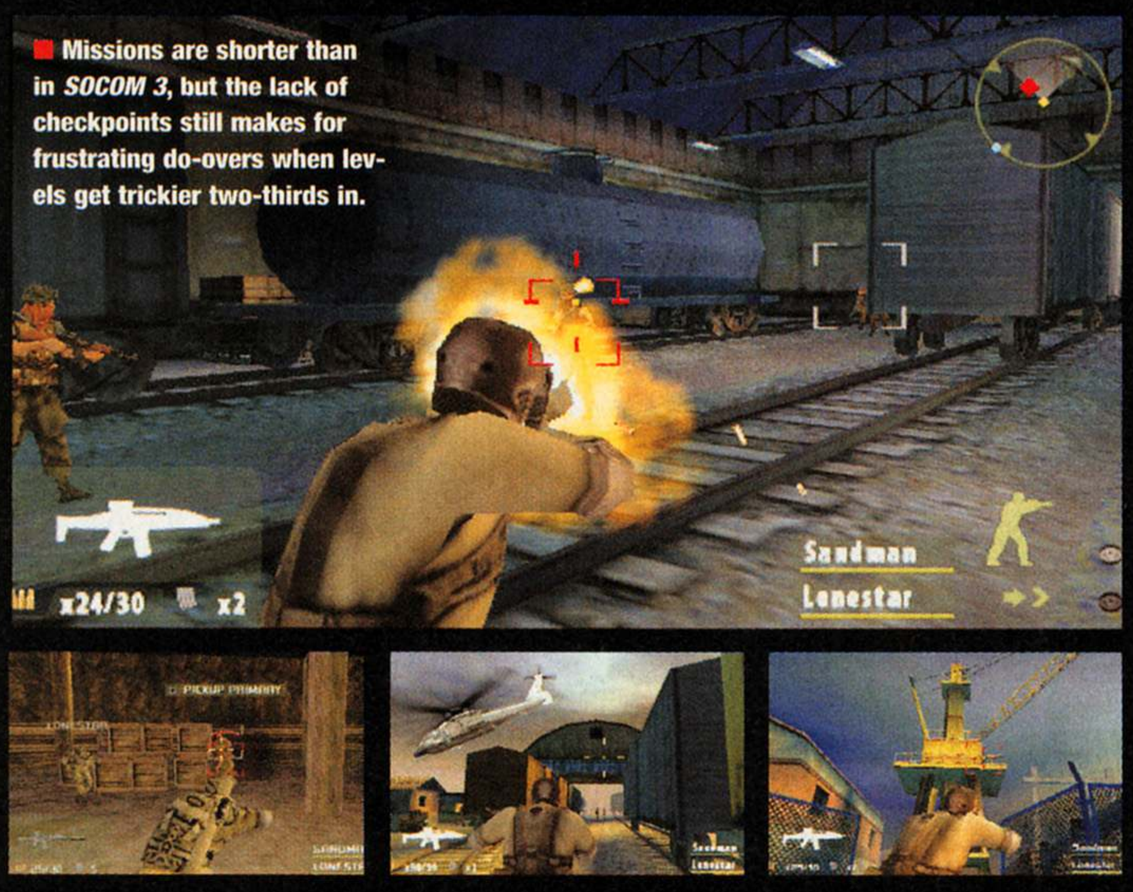
SHANE: While I want to encourage Sony to keep making original PSP properties, I'd gladly trade *Paradise* for a solid port of *God of War* or *Dark Cloud 2*. Gamers seeking a *Zelda*-esque action-RPG will surely be disappointed by this glorified hack-n-slash adventure. It cribs the most obnoxious parts of role-playing games—poor pacing, endless dull cinemas of people talking, and an obnoxious five-way rock-paper-scissors system of elemental effectiveness. The core combat system sports more ingenuity, but it's not entirely successful. Normal enemies offer scant challenge, while boss encounters unfold in lengthy canned combo exchanges. *Paradise*'s attractive visuals and plentiful customization might be enough to propel you through this lukewarm quest, but don't expect to like it all that much.

PSP

ONLINE

SOCOM: U.S. NAVY SEALS FIRETEAM BRAVO

Compact switches to full auto



Missions are shorter than in *SOCOM 3*, but the lack of checkpoints still makes for frustrating do-overs when levels get trickier two-thirds in.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	CRISPIN	MARK	JOE
	6.5	7.5	8.5

Publisher: Sony CEA
Developer: Zipper
Players: 1 (2-16 via local or online Wi-Fi)
ESRB: Mature

www.us.playstation.com

Good: Looks nearly as good as the series does on PS2
Bad: Auto-aim is kinda lame
Worth It for Multiplayer Chatter: The new PSP headset-mic

CRISPIN: If *SOCOM 3* for the PS2 is a steely-eyed, terrorist-terminating commando, this first PSP installment in the military-approved shooter series is his spazzy little brother who plays war by making machine-gun noises with his mouth. Try the default difficulty and you'll see why. You'll run from enemy to enemy, killing each with a button press, ticking off simple mission objectives that rarely require the skulk-through-the-shrubbery strategies of the big-console version.

Because no one has dreamed up how to make a PSP shooter shoot straight (see also: *Coded Arms*), developer Zipper has made its game aim for you. Holding the lock-on button levels your gun on the bad guys and even hones in for a head shot if you sneak close and hunker down. You *can* manually aim if you want to snipe, but then your movement options are limited. It's a feature that saps the skill out of the 16-player multiplayer modes, where survivors learn to tape down the lock-on button. *Fireteam Bravo* still makes for easy, breezy fun, but I figure fans of the series on PS2 may wonder what's the point in a shooter that does the shooting for you.

MARK: With all due respect, sir, go a little easier on the new recruit. I say bravo, Zipper, for squeezing so much *SOCOM* into *Fireteam's* teeny disc: a good variety of levels, lots of cut-scenes and voicework, and plenty of charges to plant, hostages to escort, and terrorist clipboards to retrieve. Just like the full console games, the controls are complicated yet exhaustive, and the enemy A.I. isn't always that bright. Online is a blast, but I think the new targeting system limits its long-term value; while the automatic lock-on keeps aiming smooth in the solo campaign, in multiplayer it removes two of the series' most enjoyable aspects: precision shooting and the use of camouflage.

OFFICIAL PS MAG-JOE: Don't expect an identical experience to the PS2 *SOCOMs*; we had a few casualties in the march over to PSP. Thankfully, the changes all work reasonably well once you get past the learning curve of the new controls. Losing an analog stick is a pain at first, but the combination of lock-on and several strafe options helps mitigate this problem. These changes do make *Fireteam Bravo* a much more fast-paced run-and-gun experience than its PS2 brothers in arms, especially in the astonishingly smooth and well-implemented 16-way online multiplayer (which sports two great new game types, the freeze-tag-like Captive and the every-man-for-himself Free for All). But the important thing is it still feels very much like a *SOCOM* game—only portable.

If you can read the elvish on this screen, give yourself six wedgies and three swirlies.

PSP

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: TACTICS

Frodo a-go-go

Good: New ideas for the tactics genre
Bad: Sloppy menus and general rushed feel
The Story: Is told with recycled movie clips. Yawn

CHRISTIAN: Though it takes some sloppy shortcuts, *The Lord of the Rings: Tactics* is an entertaining and, at times, original turn-based strategy game, with a combat system that feels fairly fresh. The twist: Both sides in the battle move at the same time, which makes precise strategizing difficult but also adds tension. The game's proprietary Zone of Combat system forces units to engage the opponents directly in front of them, and it's an interesting idea that makes sense in the context of battle.

Tactics, though, suffers from an extreme lack of polish, particularly in the awkward and disorganized menu system. It's easy enough to get used to, but the obviously rushed feel undercuts the game's top-tier aspirations. And in contrast to *Tactics*' novel ideas, character skills are pretty standard. Though all of your heroes raise levels, you can't use them all in most battles. Instead, generic, disposable stand-ins comprise your forces. What gives?

Still, these missteps can't wreck a fundamentally solid game—but with a little more thought, *Tactics* could have been much, much better.

MARK: Outside of its plentiful movie clips, stirring orchestral soundtrack, and sharp graphics, most every part of *Tactics* fails in one way or another. The interface is annoying, the movement system is a poorly thought out mess, and the quick-cutting camera makes following the battle phase a chore (especially in multiplayer, where you sometimes both control identical heroes). With so few character-building options, you never grow attached to any of your soldiers, and what little gameplay you'll find is generic and forgettable. Avoid this sloppy disappointment.

OFFICIAL PS MAG—TOM: Could publisher EA have made it any more obvious that *LOTR: Tactics* was a rush job? Let's examine the evidence: It's a basic by-the-numbers tactical role-playing game that seems to be using character models and environments from last year's *LOTR: The Third Age*; it conveniently relies on the *LOTR* films and footage for its story and cut-scenes—despite EA having finally snagged the book license—and it's short. The core Fellowship campaign took me around 13 hours to complete. In contrast, *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance*, EA's obvious inspiration, took me over 100 hours. Strategy-RPGs should be long games, period. Still, as an *FFTA* derivative, and despite a few graphic and camera glitches, *Tactics* delivers a competent and, at times, engaging ride through Middle-earth.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	CHRISTIAN	MARK	TOM
	6.5	3.5	6.0

Publisher: EA Games
Developer: EA Games
Players: 1 (2-4 via local Wi-Fi)
ESRB: Teen

www.lotr.ea.com

PSP

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: A TEAR OF VERMILION

Just like old times

The elcargots are excellent tonight.

Good: A return to RPG form: classic style and feel
Bad: A return to RPG form: boring battles and trite story
Remake: Of a 10-year-old PC game that never hit the States

CHRISTIAN: What, is everything new old again? Just as there's a fresh *Lunar* game for the first time in 10 years (the lackluster *Lunar: Dragon Song* on the Nintendo DS), someone else puts out a classic-style roleplayer that's even better at recapturing that long-gone magic.

Legend of Heroes has nothing to do with *Lunar.* The similarities are remarkable, though: A young swordsman and his best friend leave their village, searching for a girl with mysterious powers as an evil man seeks to control her. Dungeons need exploring, and turn-based battles need fightin'.

Remember when all RPGs were like this? Fans who clamor for a return to the days of old will be in heaven. In most respects, *Heroes* truly turns back the clock, but its visuals are very refined—they really shine on the PSP's clear, bright screen. All the same, the game is too stock to really excite me. I miss the old days as much as anyone else, but I love right now, too. Inane, sloppily translated prattling and "just hit X" battles take their toll. But as the years of RPG innovations melt away...I find myself charmed.

JENN F: Naysayers could call this game trite, but yea-sayers will call it "old school!" The adorably squat characters are totally Super Nintendo era, moving atop mind-blowingly gorgeous backgrounds. The story is pretty standard, and the fighting is overly simple, but whatever, man. Old school.

When you go old school, however, the same old failings apply: The top-down view often obscures your character, and the fetch quests can be tedious. It's disappointing that the battle screens don't look as impressive as the rest of the game—no pyrotechnics, just a sparse combat view. Still, even if this RPG isn't quite a classic, it takes a cue from the greats.

1UP.COM—JEREMY: The damsels in distress, youthful heroes, and corrupt churches that figure so heavily in *Legend of Heroes*' hoary plot are certain to earn a yawn from veteran RPG players. Nevertheless, they're the audience developer Falcom is catering to here. *Heroes* sticks comfortably to conventions, to the point that it seems to be jockeying for the title of Most Clichéd RPG Ever. Look more carefully, though, and you'll find that underneath the rote plot elements is a thoughtful tale packed with great characterization and surprising humor. And really, *really* good music. Sure, it's by the book, but aside from the absolutely terrible translation, *Heroes* has much more to offer open-minded adventurers than first impressions would suggest.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	CHRISTIAN	JENN F.	JEREMY
	6.5	8.5	7.0

Publisher: Bandai
Developer: Bandai/Falcom
Players: 1
ESRB: Teen

www.bandaigames.com

You can't drag power-ups behind you in online multi. And that sucks.

DS

MARIO KART DS

ONLINE

SILVER

Kart blanche

SHANE: Although plenty of wannabes have plopped their mangy mascots into go-karts, *Mario Kart* remains the undisputed champ of the genre. Chalk it up to some sort of magic formula that blends pitch-perfect control, creative track designs, frantic power-ups, and startlingly deep gameplay into an utterly addictive racer.

Yeah, it's still Mario and his goofy pals tossing banana peels at each other on candy-colored courses, but the competition here is just as fierce as in *Gran Turismo.* And while this DS installment eschews most of *Double Dash*'s (GC) clever innovations—two characters straddling each kart, thrilling co-op play, and weight-shifting physics—it wisely adds some new gameplay twists. NASCAR-style drafting makes overtaking opponents a breeze, new power-ups nicely mix up the balance, and old-school fans will surely celebrate the return of the hop. The controls take a little getting used to, however, due to the DS' unique layout—perfecting the all-important powerslide maneuver takes effort. (Also, don't even try to use the X button to fire weapons...your hand will instantly cramp into a gnarled claw. Use the L trigger instead.)

Mario Kart DS really shines in the level-design department, with 16 all-new tracks. While many are variations on established themes (snow level, Bowser's castle, Rainbow Road, etc.), a few bristle with unexpected creativity—Waluigi Pinball, Tick-Tock Clock, and Airship Fortress easily rank among the best *Mario Kart* tracks ever. Too bad the 16 classic *Mario Kart* courses chosen for the Retro Cup can't quite stack up. Who chose these, anyway?

G. FORD: Though the *Mario Kart* series has impressed on four systems now, the fifth version—as good as it is—misses the mark in a few spots. As Shane says, the lack of analog control and the disappearance of *Double Dash*'s gameplay advances sting—it definitely gives the game more of a retread, instead of innovative, feel. Plus, the new minimissions (drive through ordered gates, collect some baubles) prove to be nothing more than forgettable distractions. But the gameplay, graphics, and successful new content, from the excellent levels (add Luigi's Mansion to the list of greats) to the many multiplayer options (I'm sold on the battle modes, though Wi-Fi could use some tuning), will again have you wasting far too much time powersliding to victory. A great game, *Mario Kart DS* disappoints only when compared to its near-perfect predecessors.

DEMIAN: Online *Mario Kart* has one fatal flaw—you'll have to accept that you aren't actually the world's greatest *Kart* player. And even if you are the world's greatest, you can't rub it in, what with no chat options. Limited online courses and no more than four-player races (eight via local Wi-Fi, though) are also a minor bummer, but heck, it's online and it works, and in a lot of ways that's enough.

I do miss using an analog stick for those left-right-left turbo slides, but I can safely say there's no other handheld racer I'd rather play than *Kart.* It has the same old, pre–*Double Dash!!* gameplay that pretty much everyone loves (even if, like me, you love *Double Dash*'s even more), and the best selection of tracks in any *Mario Kart.*

Welcome to the WFC, bitch!

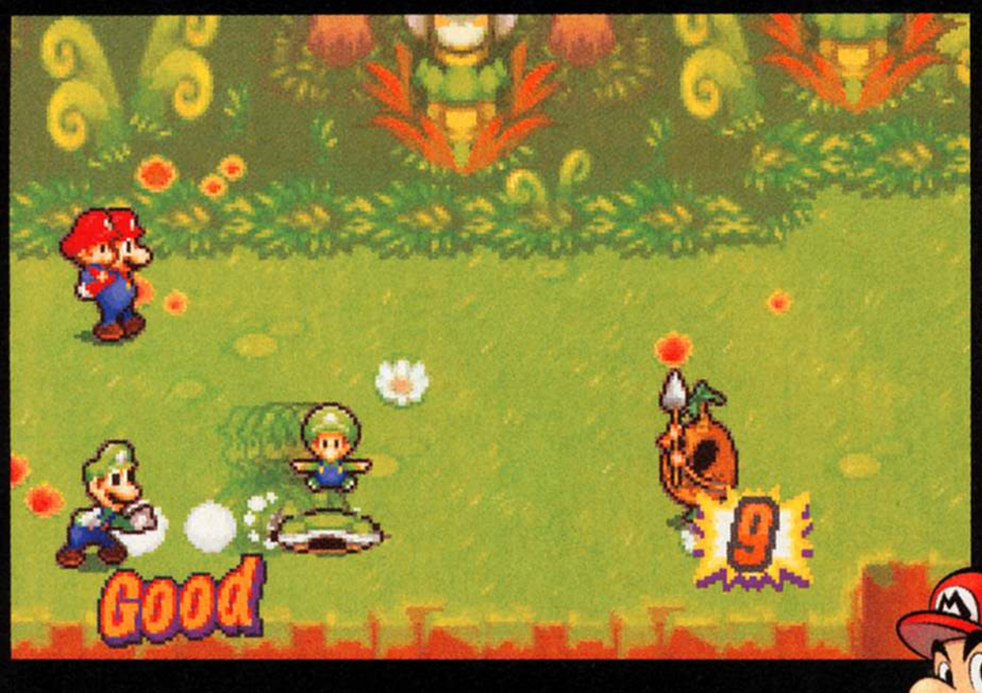
As Nintendo's flagship title for its new Wi-Fi Internet matching service, WFC, *Mario Kart DS* delivers the long-awaited online multiplayer goods. You can race three other players across 20 different tracks with no noticeable slowdown or latency problems. But it's not without some issues: You can't chat (neither text, voice, nor PictoChat) with your opponents, you can't race on many of the coolest tracks, and you can't play battle mode over WFC. Dang.

Good: Plenty of tracks, supremely fun gameplay
Bad: Some classic tracks are dull
Best *Mario Kart* Power-up Ever: Bullet Bill

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	9.0	8.5	8.5
	SHANE	G. FORD	DEMIAN

Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Players: 1 (2-8 via local Wi-Fi, 2-4 via online Wi-Fi)
ESRB: Everyone

www.nintendo.com



DS

MARIO & LUIGI: PARTNERS IN TIME

Another lucrative partnership

Good: Action-intensive combat, fun dungeons
Bad: Game Boy Advance graphics, cliché story line
Even: The animations are funny

MARK: Like its GBA prequel and the *Paper Mario* series, *Partners in Time* succeeds by paying close attention to the laws of the role-playing game genre...and then smashing them with a runaway turtle shell. Take RPG law No. 1: Combat is boring and repetitive. Not in *Partners,* where timed button presses (to dodge, inflict extra damage, or counterattack) turn every battle into a minigame. Or RPG law No. 2: The plot is as dry as it is serious. Sure, *Partners* has its share of clichés (a captured princess? Hunting for crystal shards *again*?), but its slapstick humor and memorable *Mario*-world characters keep you invested. RPG law No. 3: Dungeons are long, interchangeable mazes. Most levels in *Partners* are built around puzzles that make use of all four characters (Mario, Luigi, and their baby counterparts), their many powers, and a nice bit of platforming gameplay.

If you're a serious RPG fan looking for a change, a more casual gamer willing to give the genre a shot, or a fan of the last *M&L* eager for another fix, make time for these partners.

SHANE: Consider this a warning for uncoordinated role-playing fans out there: No RPG in history has required this many precision button presses. *Partners* demands your full attention with its brilliantly complex four-character, two-screen dynamic—everything from navigating dungeons to stomping Bullet Bills requires pinpoint jumping skills. Clever, addictive gameplay like this fits the *Mario* subject matter perfectly, but neither the story line (it's too cute to stomach, really) nor the visuals (can you say GBA?) do it justice. And what's with the lack of touch-screen gameplay? Nintendo chose to support the optional Rumble Pak but not the hardware's biggest innovation?

Despite these missed chances, *Partners* succeeds as a charming, creative RPG with wide appeal.

1UP.COM—ANDREW: The last few *Mario* role-playing games had me writing off the "traditional" RPG battle system forever. The timing- and rhythm-based attacks and counterattacks make *Partners in Time* almost seem like an action game, and every battle—no matter how insignificant—is exciting. Even though some of the fights (especially with bosses) are drawn out longer than need be, the baby/adult dynamic adds another layer of strategy and makes sure you always pay attention.

And once again, developer AlphaDream's quirky humor gives *Partners* a great personality, despite another collect-the-shards story. The antics between the adult and baby characters lead to many LOL moments. Yes, I LOLed.

Despite the slightly dated look of the graphics, the animations are plentiful, incredibly smooth, and usually hilarious.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	8.5	8.0	9.0
	MARK	SHANE	ANDREW

Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: AlphaDream
Players: 1
ESRB: Everyone

www.nintendo.com

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DS

ANIMAL CROSSING: WILD WORLD

ONLINE

More like completely insane world

SHOE: If you've never played the original *Animal Crossing* on GameCube, then you've never stared into the face of total insanity. In the fairy-tale land of *AC*, you discuss nonsense with deformed animals, collect bizarre furniture, and, well, do a lot of boring, everyday activities (like catch insects or write letters). The "game" doesn't make any sense whatsoever, yet manages to tap into something that must be hidden way, way down deep in a lot of gamers (hardcore or casual, male or female) because so many of us just couldn't get enough. Now the sequel's here, promising online multiplayer and more stuff to do and collect. Technically, *Wild World* delivers on everything, but people don't say "technically" unless something's amiss....

Online multiplayer? We had problems (see boxout below), but even after connecting, it wasn't that fun. You can text chat, fish together, and steal some fruit, but that's about it—unless you want to make up your own games of Tag or Hide and Seek or Please Kill Me Because I'm That Bored. More things to do? Sure (see the other boxout), but they affect the gameplay so little, you'd hardly know they're there. Stuff to collect? While you'll find some funkier items, the coolest stuff is either MIA (classic Nintendo games) or near impossible to find (the musical gyroids from the last game).

I guarantee nine out of 10 fans of the original *AC* will be disappointed with this one. Oh, we'll still spend hours with it, sucked into its insanity, but this certainly isn't the sequel we were hoping for.

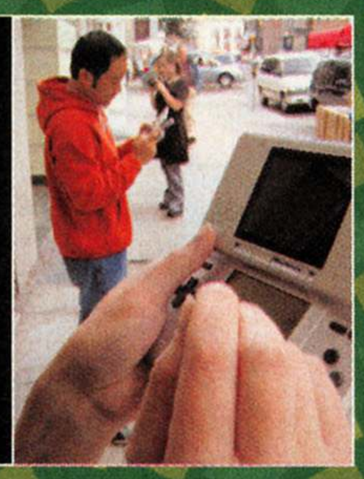
JENNIFER: *Animal Crossing* on DS has me perplexed. Nintendo's got three years of user feedback on the game, a truly innovative portable platform in the DS, and a few really ingenious titles recently...yet we get this? Sure, it's the same brilliant game that captivated me before, but anyone who played the GameCube version will find it far, far too familiar. The touch pad isn't used in very bold or creative ways, as it is in *Nintendogs* or *WarioWare*—a shamefully missed opportunity. I wanted *Animal Crossing* to feel fresher, maybe with more new fish or real minigames in multiplayer. But enough whining—I gotta go. Tom Nook might have something great in the store today....

KATHLEEN: That's cool, I'll be the lover. *Animal Crossing* on the Cube kept me spellbound for weeks, but it wasn't online and I couldn't play with my friends, which was ultimately the flaw that allowed me to kick my raging addiction. I took solace in my belief that Nintendo doesn't do Internets. Turns out, I wasn't safe.

With new temptations like the slingshot and improvements to original elements like the fossil-ID system, *Wild World* has the powerful hoodoo to bewitch me again. But chatting with the online visitors to my town is cumbersome enough (why isn't it more like PictoChat?) that I may well shake the addiction again in a few weeks...or months. If you don't hear from me by spring, please send help—and maybe a few hundred bells.

Where You At?

Wireless Internet is supposed to be a cinch to set up (see pg. 26), but our testing was full of hiccups. Kathleen connected via her wireless router at home, no problem, but Shoe couldn't do the same from his pad, even with firewalls turned off, the correct WEP key code inputted, etc. The crew then hit the streets of San Francisco but couldn't hook up to all that free, unprotected Wi-Fi just sitting out there...not even at the local McDonald's (Nintendo's official partner in all of this Wi-Fi business). Plus, we needed to coordinate offline anyway to decide when to meet up, which town we'd visit, and what everyone's friend codes were. Overall: not so cinchy.



What's New?

Nothing exciting, really: a touch screen (which is nice for drawing designs, writing letters, and moving inventory around), a 3D view, creating your own constellations in the night sky, a coffee shop for socializing, a slingshot for knocking presents out of the sky, a hair salon, and various other odds and ends. OK, maybe they're a little exciting...if you're *really* into *Animal Crossing*....

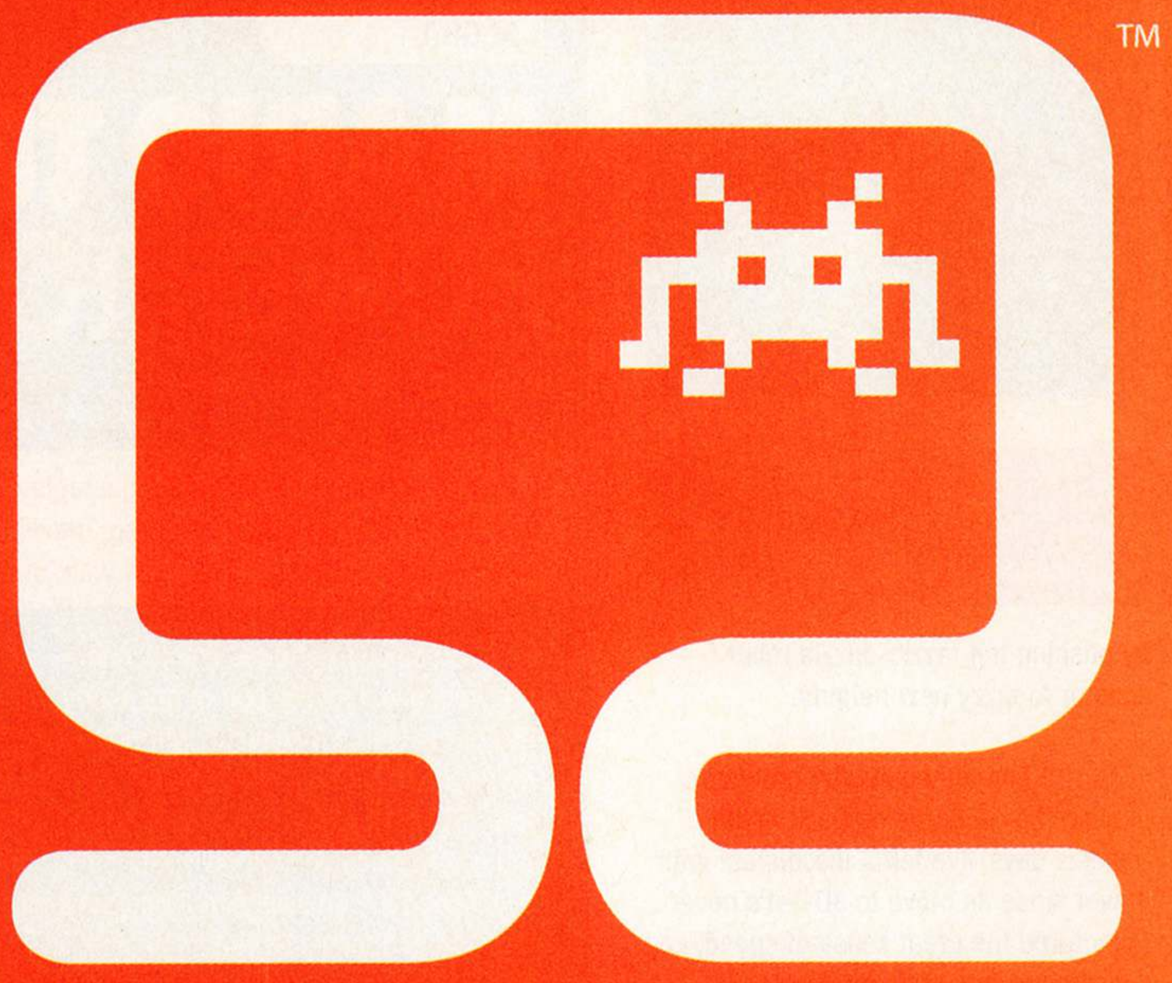
Good: Touch screen makes drawing and writing notes easier
Bad: Not much new here
Landlocked: No Animal Island to visit this time around

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	SHOE	JENNIFER	KATHLEEN
	7.5	7.0	9.0

Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Players: 1 (2-4 via local and Internet Wi-Fi)
ESRB: Everyone

www.nintendo.com

Coming Soon...



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DS

SONIC RUSH

Harder, better, faster, stronger

In *Rush*'s 3D bonus stages, you'll control the hedgehog with the stylus.

Good: Subtly enhanced, superfast classic *Sonic*
Bad: Still has those cheap deaths
Scary: When cute little woodland creatures pop out of dead robots

ROBERT A: A great *Sonic* game creates the illusion that you're in control of the blue blur zipping across your screen, even when you're not. Sure, when you run into a patch of robot baddies, you're fully in the driver's seat. But the real fun, and this is especially true for *Sonic Rush*, is in the speedier bits that feel more like a roller coaster. It's all about the looping, twisting tracks that propel our hero at ridiculous speeds, the spring-loaded platforms that launch him in the air, the impromptu shift to a parachuting/hang gliding/rocket riding bit. These elements induce maximum impact with minimum effort, making sure that everyone feels like a badass playing *Sonic*.

Which is not to imply that *Sonic Rush* is a pushover. On the contrary, I found my gaming credentials thrown into question by *Rush*'s relentless pace and split-second, button-pressing ninjitsu. The action is all the more overwhelming spread across both screens of the DS, requiring sharp changes in focus from screen to screen as Sonic sprints a one-minute mile. Did I mention that this game is fast? *Rush* makes *Sonic* relevant again by pushing the razzle-dazzle roller coaster to dizzy new heights.

G. FORD: For someone who grew up playing the *Sonic* series back in the Genesis days, I've felt a disconnect with it ever since its move to 3D—it's never recaptured the great sense of speed, and subsequent fun, of its forebears. By seemingly taking a step back, though, *Sonic Rush* proves that less is more. And it's not just the side-scrolling gameplay that makes things right; developer Sonic Team's excellent level design and creative use of the two screens open up the 2D gameplay, and you'll find yourself happily exploring the game world at warp speed. Yes, it's too short and deaths still come cheaply, but from the bosses to the graphics to the enjoyable multiplayer, *Rush* is a successful return to form.

1UP.COM—JEREMY: Finally, someone at Sega remembered that *Sonic* isn't about fishing or climbing or raising little blue pets or collecting anything but rings. *Sonic* is about speed, and that's what *Rush* delivers in spades. He's as fast as ever here—and when that's not fast enough, you can press the Nitro button to make him go even faster. The result: the first *Sonic* game worthy of the name in ages. All the nuisances that detracted from *Sonic*'s 3D console adventures are thrown out the window in favor of sheer adrenaline. A few too many untelegraphed pits and dead ends riddle the levels...but who has time to stop and complain when you're shattering the speed limit?

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	8.0	8.0	8.0
	ROBERT A.	G. FORD	JEREMY

Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sonic Team
Players: 1 (2 via local Wi-Fi)
ESRB: Everyone

www.sega.com

Like all greater apes, Donkey Kong thrives on positive feedback and compulsively grooming his partner.

GBA

MARIO TENNIS: POWER TOUR

Backhanded fun

Good: Simple controls and solid gameplay
Bad: Role-playing portion can drag; uneven difficulty
Hand-Cramp Inducing: The duck walk minigame

G. FORD: Yak, yak, emote. Emote, nod, yak, nod, nod. I swear, half of my nearly 18-hour playtime (believe it) with *Mario Tennis* was spent watching super-deformed characters spit out emoticons and nod like bobblehead dolls. Sure, it's nice having the dressings of a role-playing game around tennis tournaments and training exercises, but you sure waste a lot of time slogging through it.

Anyway, the game itself—the latest in the always solid *Mario Tennis* series—is as good as ever (never mind that hater James). The simple controls smoothly translate to the small screen, and besides the mostly enjoyable but sometimes tedious RPG-esque Power Tour (in which you put a rookie through the paces at a tennis academy, eventually competing against the Mushroom Kingdom crew), you get the typical exhibition mode and multiplayer action. *Mario Tennis*' unlockable minigames really have legs; some aren't even tennis related and instead just test your reflexes...plan on breaking bricks, climbing ropes, and even playing some rochambeau. Think of this as the lighter side to PSP's *Virtua Tennis.*

CRISPIN: Wait, you mean a country-club sport turned into a role-playing game is kinda tedious? Surprise, surprise. But for every minute I wasted wandering aimlessly or stuck in go-nowhere conversations, *Mario Tennis* made amends with fun minigames and solid tennis gameplay. It's just what you'd expect from the makers of the similarly themed *Mario Golf: Advance Tour.* You get easy-to-suss-out controls (which lack quite the same level of technique as *Mario Golf*'s), addicting skill-building challenges, and an intense multiplayer game—although it blows going back to GBA link cables after getting used to DS Wi-Fi. And you don't have to play the 18-hour role-playing quest if you don't wanna; *Mario Tennis*' quick-hit exhibition matches add love to your commute.

JAMES: Ew, they put RPG in my tennis, and what's worse, G. Ford and Crispin *like* it. This is like seeing Agassi cosplaying as a *Final Fantasy* character...with a mullet. It just got too repulsive for me—the big heads, challenging higher ranks on your varsity squad with *Pokémon* theatrics to level up...the cutie-pie with the nice forehand, I choose you! But only because I have to. When I wasn't force-fed line after line of dialogue in the pursuit of "sophisticated" character development, I was lectured with diagrams on proper backhand service reception. The tennis itself is tedious and a cinch; hilariously, the minigames that have nothing to do with tennis are really the only things worth playing.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)	8.0	8.0	4.0
	G. FORD	CRISPIN	JAMES

Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Camelot
Players: 1 (2-4 via link cable)
ESRB: Everyone

www.nintendo.com

GIZMONDO WRAP-UP

Not reviewed: the Taco Bell commercials

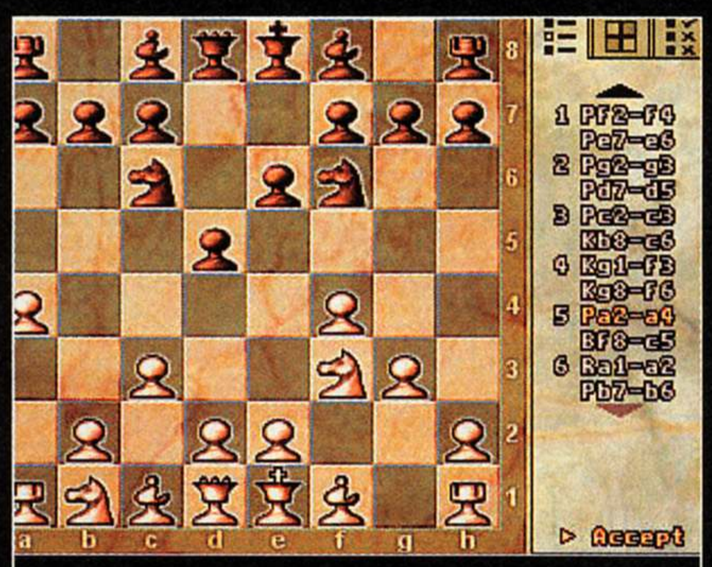
You can use the Gizmondo ($229 from gizmondo.com) to play MP3 music, view movies in Windows Media format, take photos, convert U.S. dollars to British pounds, or watch commercials (mandatory if you don't want to pay the full $399 price for the unit). You can even employ it as a semiaffordable GPS device.

Then there's the last thing you'll want to use "the Giz" for: gaming. Should you find yourself in some dire situation where you must play a game and you believe the Gizmondo is your only option, try checking for a public Internet connection or a group of schoolchildren playing hopscotch. After exhausting all other routes, your best hope is to boot up one of these four passable launch titles.

Sticky Balls

It's no killer app, but the billiards-like *Sticky Balls* has the simple playability of a semiaddictive Internet game—which is what it was originally. You'll crack balls around geometric boards, sticking similar colors together and playing for points.

Bottom line: As fun to play as it is to say out loud. Meaning...it's kind of fun.



Classic Compendium

Considering the high price and miserably low quality of Gizmondo software overall, getting four time-tested board games (checkers, chess, backgammon, and Connect Four) for $30 is actually somewhat appealing. Presentation is clean and crisp, and the A.I. players won't make fun of you.

Bottom line: Classics are infinitely better than crap.

FIFA 2005

This is the closest thing the Gizmondo has to a legitimate, full-featured game. The graphics are a bit of a letdown, but this soccer sim sports decent control, several game modes, and depth that goes beyond quick-fix arcade-style gameplay: three things the vast majority of Giz games sorely lack.

Bottom line: Fun. If you like soccer.

SSX 3

It's murder on the system's battery, but this accurate port of EA's shred-happy boarding series delivers the best audiovisual package on the system—provided you dig the music. D-pad controls aren't perfect, but the slopes feel surprisingly legit.

Bottom line: With *FIFA*, it's the nearest approximation to modern gaming on the Giz.

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REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too little...or too late

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION MARIO MIX

GC • Nintendo • ESRB: E

Sportos, gearheads, party animals—it was only a matter of time until Mario went after the club kids. It's *DDR* in the Mushroom Kingdom, and the fusion works pretty darn well. Dance numbers alternate with *Mario Party*–style minigames, all using the packed-in dancepad controller. Serious dancing feet won't find much of a challenge, though. This one's strictly for the kids.

Bottom line: Play it just to see Waluigi's moves—fantastic and scary at the same time.

Dr. Mario/ Puzzle League

GBA • Nintendo • ESRB: E

Two classic puzzlers meet on the GBA. You may know *Puzzle League* better as *Tetris Attack* or *Pokémon Puzzle League*. *Dr. Mario* you may recognize as the game no one gives a damn about.

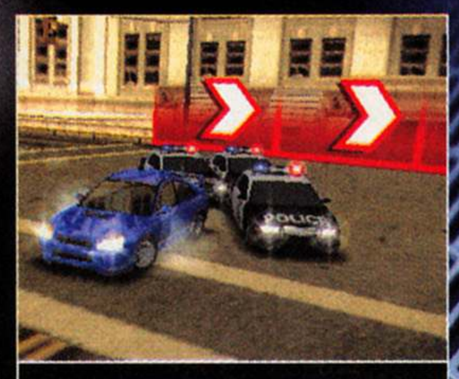
Bottom line: You'll find a few new, minor modes and head-to-head link play here, but nothing too exciting. But damn, that *Puzzle League* is a great game (more than one *EGM*er's all-time fave)....

NBA 06

PS2 • Sony CEA • ESRB: E

Apparently, story modes are the new "in" thing for sports titles. And that's OK, as *NBA 06* pulls it off pretty well (you'll find some surprisingly convincing voiceovers here). But the developers should've first made sure people would want to actually play the game. Major miscues plague this, especially when it comes to shooting the rock.

Bottom line: Take your ball to either *NBA Live*'s or *2K6*'s court instead.



Need for Speed: Most Wanted 5-1-0

PSP • EA Games • ESRB: E10+

You can really tell it's been less than a year since the last *Need for Speed* on the PSP, because *5-1-0* looks and plays almost exactly like its predecessor, aside from the new pursuit mode (where you play as a copper—something you can't do in the console *Most Wanted*) and updated car roster.

Bottom line: *Burnout Legends* is still the better portable racing fix.

Pac-Man World 3

PS2/XB/GC • Namco • ESRB: E

Pac-Man as a real character with friends, family, and voice acting is still a weird idea, but this solid, *Mario*-aping platformer is quality stuff. Distinct, surprisingly dark levels save it from the ever-present threat of blandness.

Bottom line: Good, clean fun, if you like that sort of thing. A bargain-bin find next year.

Taito Legends

PS2/XB • Sega • ESRB: E

Taito Legends makes up for the unevenness of its retro selections with sheer volume—29 games in all. It's easy to overlook duds like *Jungle Hunt* when you've got *Bubble Bobble*. Not every title here is as legendary as advertised...

Bottom line: ...but who cares? *Bubble. Bobble.* Definitely a must for retronauts.

REVIEWED ON 1UP.COM

Check out 1UP.com for full reviews of these games on or about the day they hit stores. Some may appear in our next issue, too.

Dead or Alive 4 (XB360)
Perfect Dark Zero (XB360)
Project Gotham Racing 3 (XB360)
Quake 4 (XB360)
Peter Jackson's King Kong (XB360)
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland (XB360)
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (PS2/XB/GC)
Call of Duty 2: Big Red One (PS2/XB/GC)
The Chronicles of Narnia (PS2/XB/GC)
America's Army: Rise of a Soldier (PS2/XB)
50 Cent: Bulletproof (PS2/XB)
Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones (PS2/XB)
Aeon Flux (PS2/XB)
EyeToy: Operation Spy (PS2)
Dynasty Warriors 5 Xtreme Legends (PS2)
Wild Arms: Alter Code F (PS2)
Samurai Shodown V (XB)
Metal Slug 5 (XB)
The Sims 2 (PSP/DS)
Infected (PSP)
Tokobot (PSP)

REVIEWS ARCHIVE

Guarded by well-dressed leprechauns

MAKING THE BAND

Here at *EGM* we like to rock. So, we've decided to form the first all-console music-peripheral music sensation! We use all the music-themed games with crazy noisemaking or dance inducing accessories we've ever reviewed. Ladies and germs, we present to you the Electric Groove Machine, the *EGM* rock 'n' roll fantasy supergroup! (All scores out of 10.)

Guitar Hero (PS2)

9.0 • 9.0 • 9.0

Donkey Konga (GC)

7.0 • 8.0 • 7.5

Karaoke Revolution Party (PS2)

8.5 • 9.0 • 7.0

Samba de Amigo (Dreamcast)

9.0 • 9.0 • 9.0

GAME	SYSTEM	VERDICT	SCORES (out of 10)	AWARD
Battalion Wars	GC	Cartoony real-time strategy-action shooter that's challenging and at times infuriating	6.0 6.5 7.0	
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	PS2/XB	What pretend war is good for: explosions, rad weapons, and online havoc with friends	9.0 8.0 8.0	Silver
Blitz: The League	PS2/XB	Controversial, arcade-soiled gridiron game will shock those uptight NFL execs	8.0 8.0 9.0	Silver
Burnout Legends	PSP	What sort of magiks shrink all the big crashes and breakneck speed into the PSP?	8.5 9.0 9.0	Silver
Burnout Revenge	PS2/XB	The series that turned homicidal road rage into art brings home another delight	9.0 8.5 9.0	Silver
Castlevania: Curse of Darkness	PS2/XB	Lacks a bit in looks and scope, but offers deep combat and weapon customization	8.5 7.5 7.0	
Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow	DS	Everything *Castlevania* should be: addictive, moody, great...and portable	9.5 9.0 8.5	Gold
The Con	PSP	Rotten camera and long-ass load times ruin this mishmash of strategy and brawling	5.0 2.5 4.5	
Crash Tag Team Racing	PS2/XB/GC	Kiddie-safe kartfest with weak platforming elements and lame minigames	5.5 3.0 5.0	
Devil Kings	PS2	An over-the-top, combo-driven battlefield brawler that repeats itself ad nauseam	7.0 5.5 6.5	
Dragon Quest VIII	PS2	A polished and perfectly respectable return to the style of rich, fun RPGs of the past	9.0 8.0 9.0	Silver
Evil Dead Regeneration	PS2/XB	A cliché-ridden, repetitive, and annoying horror-adventure starring Bruce Campbell	5.5 4.5 6.5	
Far Cry Instincts	XB	A beautiful first-person shooter with lotsa guns and teeth but brain-dead enemies	8.0 8.0 6.5	
Fatal Frame III: The Tormented	PS2	Going ghost-busting with young hotties and a camera should be more fun than this	6.5 7.5 7.0	
Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance	GC	Grid-based strategy series with a ton of characters brought into the 3D realm	8.5 8.0 8.0	Silver
Genji: Dawn of the Samurai	PS2	Pretty, passionless Bushido-bladed action-adventure with a one-hit-kill gimmick	7.0 7.0 5.0	
Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	PSP	Senators, lock up the children. The *GTA* experience is now portable	9.5 9.0 9.0	Gold
GripShift	PSP	Ride the brake around ugly tracks and play with a track editor that isn't so awful	7.0 6.5 3.0	
Guitar Hero	PS2	Now that ain't workin'—that's the way you do it. You play the guitar on the...PS2	9.0 9.0 9.0	Gold
Gunstar Super Heroes	GBA	A semi-disappointing, yet solid sequel to the beloved Genesis side-scrolling shooter	7.5 8.0 7.5	
Indigo Prophecy	PS2/XB	Unexpectedly smart murder-mystery game—mature movie-type adventure	9.0 8.5 8.5	Silver
Jak X: Combat Racing	PS2	Car combat that never really catches up to its peppier peers	7.0 7.0 6.5	
Karaoke Revolution Party	PS2	Vocal minigames and impressive song selection give reason to sing yourself silly	8.5 9.0 7.0	Silver
Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes	XB	This totally fugly action-strategy mix-up doesn't have the technical mettle to be good	5.0 6.5 5.0	
L.A. Rush	PS2/XB	This racing game offers a ton of cool cars that crash in random, frustrating ways	6.5 6.5 5.5	
Lost in Blue	DS	A survive-on-a-desert-isle simulator, like *The Sims: Cast Away Edition*, only no Wilson	7.0 7.0 7.5	
Lunar: Dragon Song	DS	Pretty graphics can't make up for an outdated RPG that's slow and cruel	3.0 4.5 6.5	
Madden NFL 06	PSP	Apparently, making mighty *Madden* tiny increases load times substantially	7.0 7.0 9.0	
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	PS2/XB/GC	Imperfect is right. Just a mediocre button masher with no-name heroes	5.0 4.0 7.5	
Metroid Prime Pinball	DS	The normally dignified Ms. Aran is dropped into a decent pinball game	7.5 7.0 8.0	
Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks	PS2/XB	A good action-adventure spin-off with a solid fighting system	7.5 8.0 7.5	
MVP Baseball 2005	PS2/XB/GC	Slick minigames help make this the best hardball sim yet	8.5 8.5 9.0	Silver
NBA Live 06	PS2/XB/GC	Easily the prettiest baller we've seen during this round of consoles	7.0 8.0 7.0	
NCAA March Madness 06	PS2/XB	A new defensive play-calling system makes lockdown D a reality	7.5 8.0 8.5	Silver
NHL 06	PS2/XB/GC	EA's hockey series finally battles its way back to respectability...	7.0 7.5 7.5	
NHL 2K6	PS2/XB	...while shoddy goalies let the 2K Games team down	7.5 7.0 6.0	
Nintendogs	DS	Who doesn't love walking, playing with, and training puppies? Serial killers	7.5 8.0 9.0	Silver
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney	DS	A lawyer simulator that is clever and involved but litigiously nasty and repetitive	7.0 6.5 8.5	
Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness	GC	The series makes some strides on the Cube with this passable RPG for pokémaniacs	7.0 6.0 7.0	
PoPoLoCrois	PSP	This repackaged roleplayer puts the "old" back in "old school"	5.0 5.5 6.5	
Ratchet: Deadlocked	PS2	Chicken guns and robots galore spice up this platformer-shooter	8.0 6.0 8.0	
Resident Evil 4	PS2	Stunning graphics, thrilling gameplay, and extras just for PS2	9.5 9.5 9.5	Gold
Romancing SaGa	PS2	Wide-open but totally confusing RPG means a ton of wandering and not much fun	7.0 6.5 5.0	
Shadow of the Colossus	PS2	A soulful, thrilling, and inventive action game whose reach exceeds its grasp	9.0 8.5 9.0	Silver
Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga 2	PS2	A sleek, smart, and addictive RPG that gives cosplayers cause to commit cannibalism	8.5 8.0 8.0	Silver
The Sims 2	PS2/XB/GC	Long load times keep this sequel from being all it should be	7.5 6.5 7.0	
Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves	PS2	An entertaining mix of stealth and action in this platformer will steal...*your heart!*	8.0 8.0 8.5	Silver
SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALs	PS2	Multiplayer, with vehicles and up to 32 players online, make up for the dumb-ass A.I.	8.0 8.0 9.0	Silver
Soul Calibur III	PS2	All the smooth, responsive fighting gameplay you've come to expect from this series	9.0 9.0 9.0	Gold
Spartan: Total Warrior	PS2/XB/GC	Gladiator-themed epic battles and a blah story round out this action game	7.5 9.0 8.0	Silver
Spider-Man 2	DS	If your spider sense is on the fritz, let us warn you to avoid this ho-hum adventure	6.0 5.5 3.0	
SSX on Tour	PS2/XB/GC	More of the same snowy excitement you'll find in *SSX 3*—now with skiing	8.0 9.0 8.0	Silver
SSX on Tour	PSP	Making it portable leaves it awkward to play, but it's still a decent snow-sport game	7.0 7.0 8.5	
Star Wars Battlefront II	PS2/XB	Ambitious and fun-filled action-shooter—everything that *Star Wars* fans could want	8.5 7.5 8.5	Silver
The Suffering: Ties That Bind	PS2/XB	A creepy but cheap survival-horror game with a thin story and a dirty mouth	7.5 8.0 7.5	
Suikoden Tactics	PS2	A decent strategy-RPG and a gentle intro to the rather confusing *Suikoden* series	7.0 9.0 6.0	
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	PS2/XB/GC	It's grrreat! A new putting system relieves typical golf-game tedium	9.0 8.0 7.5	Silver
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	PS2/XB/GC	A lack of fresh, new stuff makes this addition to the skater series a bit eh, whatever...	7.0 7.5 7.0	
Trapt	PS2	This build-it-and-they-will-come-to-be-impaled trap-building adventure is repetitive	6.0 6.5 7.0	
Trauma Center: Under the Knife	DS	This innovative supernatural surgery action game can be a bit too unforgiving	7.5 8.0 6.0	
Viewtiful Joe: Double Trouble	DS	A modern but repetitive update to the side-scrolling brawlers we grew up with	8.0 7.5 7.0	
Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble	GC	A chaotic, button-smashing frenzy of fighting, bubble gum, and moviemaking	4.5 9.0 6.0	
Virtua Tennis: World Tour	PSP	World tour mode is tedious, but smart A.I. and fun multiplayer make it worthwhile	6.0 8.0 8.0	
The Warriors	PS2/XB	We dig this sweet resurrection of both a '70s cult-classic film and the brawler genre	8.5 8.0 8.5	Silver
We ♥ Katamari	PS2	This game has huge balls	8.5 8.0 8.0	Silver
Without Warning	PS2/XB	There are no heroes in this lackluster third-person shooter with a preposterous plot	4.5 5.0 1.5	

***Games in red are previous Game of the Month winners.**

game over

please see your doctor if the effects of this story last more than four hours

SEANBABY'S PS2 PERIPHERAL EXTRAVAGANZMATAZ

Be glad money is an object

Man has always wondered what to get for the person who has everything. We thought we'd solved it a few years back when Macho Man Randy Savage released an album, but this was a false alarm. Macho Man songs, such as "Macho Thang" and "Perfect Friend," only serve to remind you that you'll never be No. 1, since that's Macho Man, brother. I knew that the only way to finally solve the problem would be to have everything myself and then try to want something.

It's not really possible to have everything, but with all the crap sent to our magazine, it was very possible to have everything for the PlayStation 2. So I got to work stealing peripherals from *EGM*'s hallowed vault of gadgets, which is by no means just a drawer of forgotten junk buried beneath Atari Linx cartridges and triple-XL game shirts. I'll rate each peripheral in the categories of luxury and performance. To give these numbers perspective, a luxury score of 0 percent would be the equivalent of your face being made into a milking machine at a nude-man dairy farm. A luxury score of 100 percent would be the same thing, only now you're Phil Collins. ***—Seanbaby***

SOUNDaround 1

Cost: $100 • www.xitel.com

With the SOUNDaround, you can turn any two speakers into a surround system. All for about the cost of a surround system! It's as if technology has finally combined with stupid to create the impossible! Imagine my disappointment when all this did was blink a few lights. You see, our brain determines audio sources through the vibration of hairs on our ear's basilar membrane. These are harder to fool than some filthy robot box might think.

Luxury: 24%
There is something aristocratic about spending $100 on maybe less than nothing.

Performance: 6%
In the end, SOUNDaround made me worse at videogames since I was gullible enough to keep listening for evidence of its claims as I played. For example, I was sure it was working when I heard a voice come from behind me and say, "What's that f***ing thing on your TV?"

GAMER DRUGS 2

Cost: $80 • www.mind-fx.com

These pills contain all the nuts and twig juices an "athlete's" thumb needs for maximum button-mashery, but it was hard to tell if they had any effect since I was trying to wrap my head around gamers calling themselves "athletes." I mean, I'd love for people to think I was totally rad for playing videogames, but is this semantic game fooling anyone? If we could choose to be called anything, why didn't we pick "Shirtless Jean Claude Van Dammes?" I already switched to calling fat people "Presidents of Ham." I don't have time to rethink what words mean to make a whole *other* group of people feel better.

Luxury: 8%
Something about swallowing dirt-flavored imitation meth didn't make me feel like a beautiful debutante.

Performance: 61%
With all the huperzine and guarana, my throbbing arousal acted as a handy extra appendage when I was playing EyeToy games.

ETERNAL LIFE RINGS 3

Cost: $29 • www.alexchiu.com

I ordered these on the Internet from Alex Chiu, who assured me that they would make me immortal and that the profits would be used to develop teleportation technology. I sent an e-mail back thanking him for my sweet new powers and to warn that teleportation dabbling is a good way to get torn apart by an Earth 2 monster-version of yourself. He ignored me and just ran my credit card, which seemed like a ballsy way to act toward a guy he knows he just made unkillable.

Luxury: 98%
Let the decadence of living forever wash over you.

Performance: 84%
At this point in the experiment, I was sitting in the explosion hazard epicenter of a tangled snarl of wires and power strips. If two people on my block switched a lamp on at the same time, the power surge would have created an electrical fire you could see from space. Being immune to death really helped get that off my mind and my head back in the game.

4 HIP GEAR SCREEN PAD

Cost: $100 • www.hip-europe.com

In virtually any conceivable circumstance, a tiny TV on your controller that still needs to be plugged into the wall is less convenient than a PS2 controller that dispenses mayonnaise.

Luxury: 12%
None of the luxury of a big screen TV, yet with none of the convenience of a handheld system! Incredible!

Performance: 90%
One of the trump cards the women in my life will always have is how they can stand in front of the TV when I'm using videogames to ignore their harpy, shrewish screaming. With the Screen Pad, I'm no longer at the mercy of their barbarism.

5 GAME SKINZ VIDEO GAME GLOVES

Cost: Priceless • www.gameskinz.com

These are revolutionary gloves that claim to "dramatically reduce finger pain and dramatically increase your cool factor!" Let me tell you what they really are, though. They're spandex gloves with two fingers and puffy pads glued on. Which would be sad enough, but the marketing platform for their coolness is *finger safety*. Finger safety isn't cool. That's something you learn about from Glippy the Sharicorn on the cloud bus so you and the other bunny bears don't injure your paws when you pick cookies from the cookie bush. Plus, these aren't even that safe. If the uncoolness of a hand-pain emergency did happen, your floppy, padded fingers couldn't dial the number to the glove removal center.

Luxury: 2%
These suck so bad that mine came with an apology letter from the Taiwanese toddler who stitched the things together. Tiny fingernails had scratched into a shard of slate, "Forgive my shame. I...I had no choice."

Performance: 98%
For added power, I wore the Nintendo Power Glove under them. Sure, this made it almost impossible to move my fingers, but when most games saw me coming, they just gave up and skipped to the final cut-scene anyway.

6 VIRTUAL FX 3D CONVERTER

Cost: $150 • www.i-glassesstore.com

This is a video conversion unit that turns an ordinary television into a portal to 3D adventure. It didn't really work, it added about 25 feet of wires to my home theater setup, and strapping wireless, infrared goggles to your skull is only slightly faster than just implanting your own tumor there.

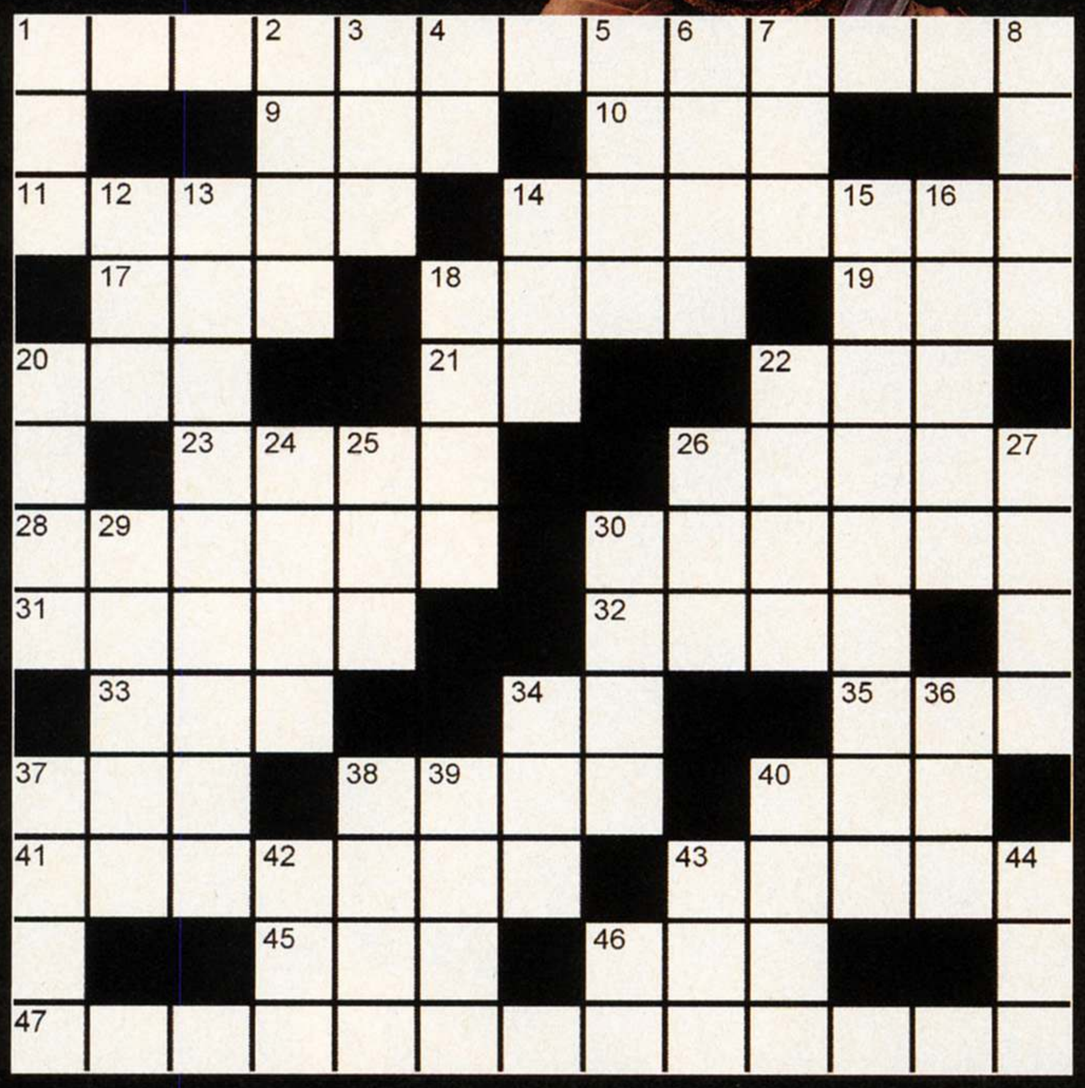
Luxury: ???
This rating is impossible to fathom without plugging your brain directly into all human knowledge.

Performance: 47%
Although sweet, it's hard to concentrate on videogaming when almost half your face is in the future.

Photographs by Michael Sexton

SEE YOU NEXT YEAR

(Solution on page 145)



ACROSS

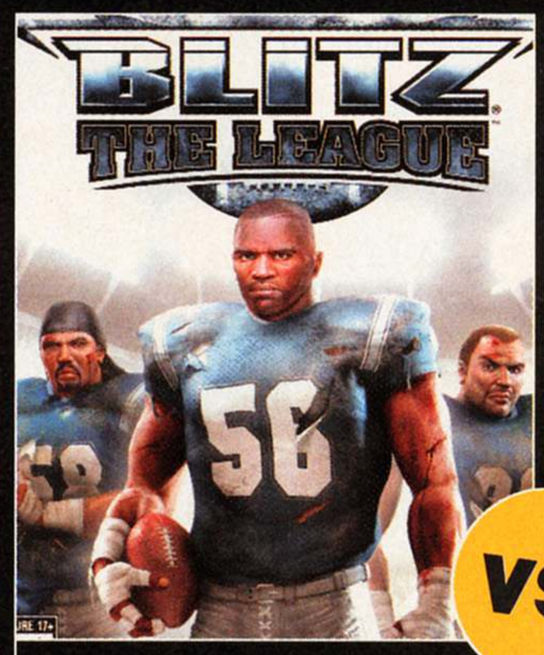
1. Nintendo series due for an '06 update
9. Red or White in *MLB 2006*
10. Measured per minute in *Gran Turismo 4* gauge (abbrv.)
11. *Metroid Prime* insect War _
14. Those concerned with 12 DOWN
17. Xbox 360 Wild West title
18. Blocky Xbox *Star Wars*
19. Pac-Man's job?
20. *Xenogears* protagonist
21. Like *GTA: San Andreas*' Loc
22. High-def output
23. *Donkey* or *King*
26. How one experiences DS' *The Magic*?
28. *Super Metroid* boss Spore Spawn's projectiles
30. Like *Grand Theft Auto* language?
31. *Ghosts 'n Goblins* setting
32. Faction and Alert
33. C64 political game _ *Prime Minister*
34. Microsoft's home state (abbrv.)
35. *Fantasy Zone* ship _ Opa
37. *King Kong*'s Darrow
38. Breaks cracks in *Zelda* walls
40. *Destroy All Humans!* basic transportation
41. *Tony Hawk 3* helpful tricks
43. Like PS2/Xbox *Echo*
45. *Clone Wars* Separatist hovertank
46. Like PS1's *Cardinal*
47. '06 sequel to hot PS2 RPG

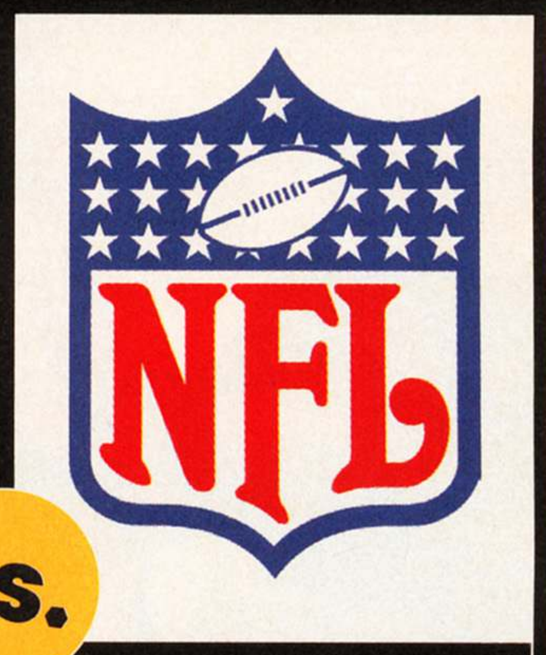
DOWN

1. *Tekken*'s Marshall
2. Sega sports affiliate
3. *Burnout* booster
4. How colorized Game Boy games are denoted
5. First-person shooter kill
6. *Mega Man X* sidekick
7. Square Enix's *Parasite* _
8. *Star Wars Battlefront* walking tank
12. ESRB breakdowns
13. '06 Konami RPG
14. Part of *Mat Hoffman's BMX*?
15. Developed 17 ACROSS
16. Sonic sidekick
18. *Frogger* floaters
20. Object of *The Black Bass*
22. *Evil* or *To Rights*
24. *Command & Conquer* currencies
25. Platform featuring 20 DOWN
26. Enemy
27. Company name, short for Service Games
29. Rockstar's Max
30. *Blaster Master* level 5 boss
34. Former pinballer parent company of Midway (abbrv.)
36. Guards graves in *Ocarina of Time*
37. *Drakan* dragon
38. *Resident Evil 3* Nemesis casualty
39. *Spider Man 2*'s Octavius
40. Next to Mr. Bones' radius
42. *SMB2* Birdo's projectile
43. *Wind Waker* pirate acknowledgement
44. *StarCraft* genre, for short

GRUDGE MATCH

Battle of the pigskin





VS.

BLITZ: THE LEAGUE | **THE NFL**

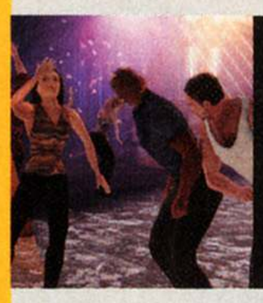
It's winter again—the time when our thoughts turn to burly men entangled in sport on a pristine field of green. Well, more so than in any other season. The latest *Blitz* bucks the National Football League with an establishment of its own, but only one can rule the gridiron. Let's call some fouls.

DELAY OF GAME

Takes a broken bone to slow down the action

Challenged calls, time-outs, halftime, commercials
Flag: The NFL

ILLEGAL USE OF THE HANDS



Bar fights, boinking cheerleaders
Flag: Penalties Offset

Just about anything Randy Moss has done
Flag: Penalties Offset

INTERFERENCE

Yeah, like every play. What are you, new?
Flag: Blitz

ESPN taking over *Monday Night Football*

UNNECCESSARY ROUGHNESS

The backbone of every good defense
Flag: Blitz

One of many nebulous, subjective penalties

PERSONAL FOUL

Not even a knee in the nads can draw this one

Paying to watch the Texans lose again
Flag: The NFL

ILLEGAL SUBSTANCES

Used openly to improve the weak and enfeebled

Used privately to improve the weak and enfeebled
Flag: The NFL

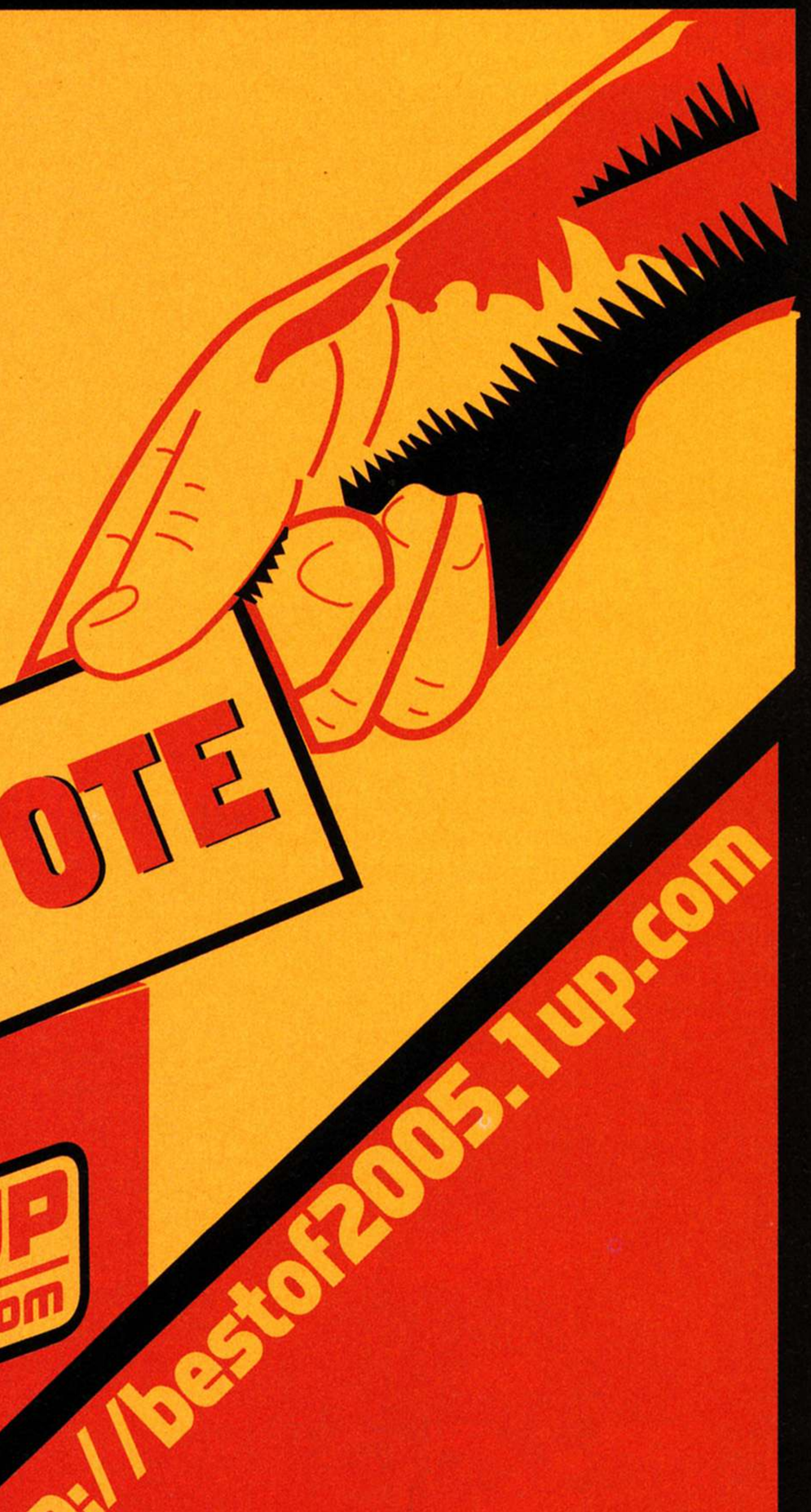
PENALTY: THE NFL

Down-n-dirty roughhousing can be a real treat if you're bored with the realities of today's professional football. And if breaking some spines and snapping some ligaments in *Blitz* doesn't do it for you, then you're beyond help.

2005 1UP AWARDS

1UP.com

http://bestof2005.1up.com



STAND UP AND DO YOUR GAMES PROUD

http://bestof2005.1up.com

Vote for the best games of 2005 in these categories:

2005 Game of the Year	Adventure	Innovation	Shooter
Action	Fighting	Racing	Sports
Online/Multiplayer	Hardware	RPG	Strategy

Voting ends 12/31/05. Winners will be announced in January

GAME GROUP

YOU HAVE A VOICE USE IT!

EGM RETRO: ONLY THE GOOD DIE YOUNG?

Games that croaked quietly before their release

They say that only the good die young, and it would stand to reason that the same holds true for videogames. But is that really the case? We look back at three games that died so young they never even made it out: They were cancelled before they could land on store shelves. Did gamers lose out on a great experience, or was it a lucky break for their unsuspecting wallets? ***—Jeremy Parish***

MEGA MAN BATTLE & CHASE

RIP 1998

PS1 • Capcom

What Was It? One of the first wholesale *Mario Kart* rip-offs, this PS1 racer featured classic Mega Man trying to thwart Dr. Wily's plans to conquer the world with go-karts. Of particular note was the ability to swipe parts from defeated foes to tune your own ride.

Why Did It Have to Die? Japanese and European gamers were able to enjoy *Battle & Chase*, and Capcom advertised it extensively in the United States. Rumor has it that Sony CEA (which must approve all third-party titles) was responsible for the game's 11th-hour cancellation; the awkward racing controls must have offended someone important.

Should We Mourn Our Loss? *Battle & Chase* wasn't too bad for what it was...but it doesn't matter, because Capcom's including it in the upcoming *Mega Man X Collection* (PS2/GC).

Photograph by Getty Images/John Rae

THRILL KILL

RIP 1998

PS1 • Virgin Interactive

What Was It? This would've been the first four-player brawler for a home console...had it been released. It would also have been the first fighting game in which you could perform lewd acts with a midget on stilts. And to think that some people argue that games aren't art.

Why Did It Have to Die? Good taste killed *Thrill Kill*; when megagiant Electronic Arts purchased the game's publisher, Virgin Interactive, it decided that dismembering a French maid in graphic detail wasn't really keeping with the company's family-friendly image. The game engine lived on and eventually powered the unremarkable *Wu-Tang: Shaolin Style* (PS1).

Should We Mourn Our Loss? *Thrill Kill* was designed around shock value and titillation rather than, you know, good gameplay. And four-player action is no longer a novelty; be content with your *Super Smash Bros.* and *Power Stone*.

■ Playing "horsey" suddenly doesn't seem so fun.

EARTHBOUND ZERO

RIP 1993

NES • Nintendo

What Was It? Nintendo's answer to *Dragon Warrior*, this seemingly generic role-playing game has two things that make it very different than its contemporaries: It stars normal kids in a modern-day setting, and it is strange to the point of being nearly nonsensical. The Super NES sequel came here as *Earthbound* and earned a frothingly loyal cult fan base.

Why Did It Have to Die? According to sources close to Nintendo, *Earthbound Zero* was finished up and ready to go but ultimately found itself delayed for marketing reasons. Then the Super NES arrived, causing interest in games for the company's first system to fizzle.

Should We Mourn Our Loss? Definitely, if you're a fan of *Earthbound*—its predecessor features the same kind of quirky gameplay and humor. Our advice: Skip the illegal ROMs and write to Nintendo and politely request that it release the Japan-only GBA *Earthbound* collection in America.

OLD SCHOOL

10 years ago in EGM

■ **On the Cover: Nintendo 64**
Mario's pudgy mug dominated this month's cover. And like him, we were impressed with the Nintendo's 64 unveiling (and its first *Mario* game).

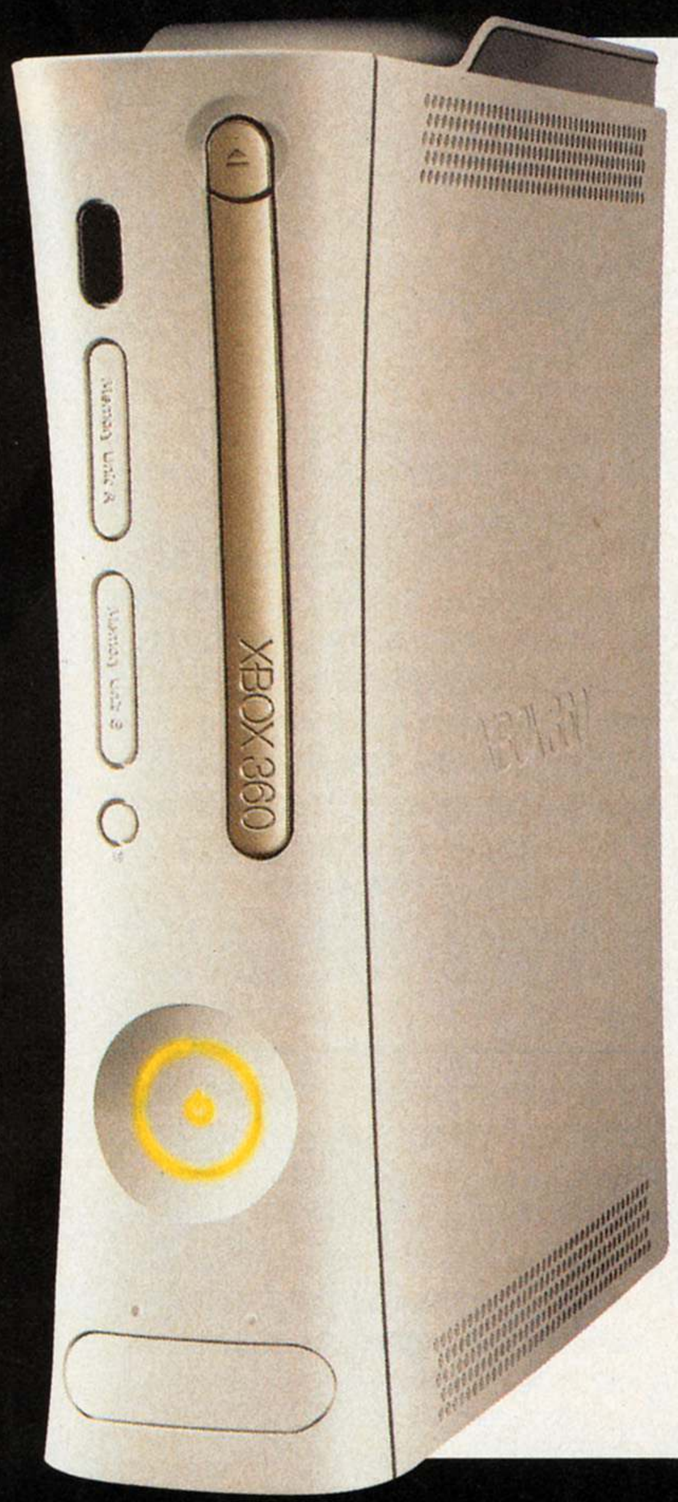
Game of the Month: X-COM UFO Defense (PS1)
This strategy game's alien-invader angle gave us a reason to own the PS1 mouse. It also prepped us to behold the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air saving the Earth in the summer movie *Independence Day*.

Extra Storage
During an interview, Nintendo's Howard Lincoln promised us that the Nintendo 64 would get a detachable magnetic optical drive (similar to a zip drive) by the end of the year. Fast-forward to 1999 and the peripheral was released in Japan, but never saw the light of day here.

Occupant Villainy
An early look at *Resident Evil* (PS1) definitely scared us. So much so that we screamed like little girls, causing us to spill a Big Gulp onto our laps. "It's soda, I swear! Hold me, I'm cold...."

THE ULTIMATE XBOX 360 GIVEAWAY!

EB Games and Microsoft are teaming up to give you stuff. Lots of stuff. Lots of really, really cool stuff! Several of you will win one of the awesome **Xbox 360** prize packages shown below. Check out what these crazy peeps are giving away:



THE ULTIMATE XBOX 360 DREAM PACKAGE

Ten (10) Grand Prizes

Prize package includes:

Hardware
- Xbox 360 Console (with hard drive!)
- 4 Wireless Controllers

Games
- *Perfect Dark Zero*
- *Kameo: Elements of Power*
- *Project Gotham Racing 3*

Official Xbox 360 Accessories
- Xbox 360 Camera
- 9 Xbox 360 Faceplates (including several that aren't available in the U.S.!)
- 4 Headsets
- Universal Media Remote
- Wireless Networking Adapter
- Memory Unit
- Play & Charge Kit
- 4 Rechargeable Battery Packs

Plus: A one-year membership to Xbox Live Gold (a $50 value)!

Five (5) Runner-up Prizes

XBOX 360 ACCESSORIES TRAVEL CASE

A metal, lockable hard case that can hold one game and comes packed with

- Wireless Controller
- Memory Unit
- Play & Charge Kit

To have a chance at winning, do this:

Go to

http://xbox360.egmmag.com

and submit this code:

TOBRUK

This is the code for the **JANUARY ISSUE** (the one you're holding in your hands). If you can get ahold of the last two issues of *Electronic Gaming Monthly* (November 2005 and December 2005), you can find extra codes there, too! Yep, you can enter this giveaway up to three times total (once for each issue/code, including this one), but alas, you can win only one prize in the end. This is your last month to enter, so good luck.

For full contest legal rules, restrictions, and details, visit http://xbox360.egmmag.com.

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Microsoft game studios

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FINAL WORD

The videogame universe is expanding...

The holiday season is upon us, so what do we here at *EGM* do to celebrate? Put the ultimate casual gamer on staff, Managing Editor Jennifer Tsao, and the hardest of the hardcore, Previews Editor Shane Bettenhausen under the mistletoe and see if somebody gets punched.

Most of us assume that the gaming audience has to expand. What do you guys think?

JEN: If you want to go way back, there was a time when the main literature that existed was religious in nature. OK, maybe that's not entirely true, but way back when, the vast majority of the literate population were priests. Now look where we are—we've got bloggers getting book deals to write about...blogging. We've got *Harry Potter*. We've got graphic novels, Harlequin romances, self-help books. Entertainment is always expanding, and it has to. I wouldn't want to see gaming go the way of comic books.

SHANE: Are we supposed to disagree here? Sorry, you're totally right.

JEN: Wow.... All idealism and rainbows and kumbaya over here. But do you think game publishers agree with us?

SHANE: I think that most gaming publishers only care about turning a quick buck. But I have heard from developers who want to create things outside the expected norm...hopefully they'll be allowed to.

JEN: *Indigo Prophecy* is definitely a start....

But really, do designers and publishers even know what it takes to expand the audience?

Nintendo's Revolution: a great leap forward for casual games?

"Yearly sequels will ultimately implode...."

SHANE: Products like EyeToy, games like *Nintendogs*, and the absolutely brilliant Nintendo Revolution controller are obviously key. If you think that the Revolution controller is dumb, you're part of the problem!

JEN: I'll grudgingly admit you've got a point, and yet the problem with *Nintendogs* is it got boring fast. Even EyeToy games aren't much fun single player. I want to see something with the magnitude of *Halo* for a casual audience.

SHANE: Hmm, it's pretty tough to reach 4 million casual people with the same single piece of software, but if anything can do it, it's the Revolution. I gotta believe!

We all know that graphics don't make a game good. So why the obsession—even at *EGM*—with them?

JEN: Technology is all about upgrading, and it's much harder to "upgrade" the basic foundation of gaming: competition and storytelling. You can't just decide to have better core gameplay mechanisms.

SHANE: Well, I'm a bit of a graphics whore, so I want to be blown away by the next gen. Sure, gameplay is king, but dazzling visuals help to make the $400 or so you spend on a new system feel worthwhile. Watching the *Metal Gear Solid 4* trailer fills my heart with joy: It looks so damned pretty. I want everything to look that good now.

JEN: Yeah yeah, we all know you cried when it played at Tokyo Game Show.... I just wish these technological improvements didn't force development costs to balloon—it just insures that "garage" game designers will have to stay underground, making experimental games that never see the light of day but might have real potential if given half a chance.

Meanwhile, we bask in sequel after glorious sequel. Any problems with that?

JEN: Sequels are great—they take a familiar quantity and expand on it. But coming out with a sequel every single year right around the holidays is a problem. It takes the fun out of it, when you know that the game you're playing this year is going to be obsolete in a year—and that next year's version won't be all that different. A year just isn't enough time to make wholesale changes. *Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow* is the only recent rapid-turnaround sequel that had radically different gameplay. (That's the only one that pops to mind, but then, my memory ain't what it used to be.)

SHANE: Wait, was that the second *Splinter Cell* or the third? Who can tell these days?

JEN: Right. Mostly, you get a decent revamped version of the game you played a year ago, which is fine. But I bet gamers would be willing to wait for revolution, rather than have evolution a bit too soon.

SHANE: I firmly believe that popular games should respawn every two years. That way, gamers have a chance to actually anticipate them and developers have proper time to upgrade and innovate. Yearly sequels will ultimately implode, losing fans as overly similar games clog store shelves. If you miss *Ratchet & Clank 3*, you know you can wait 11 months for part four.

JEN: I'm not even sure two years is enough.... I almost think you have to slightly forget what was so great about the original to really, really anticipate and appreciate a sequel.

SHANE: Maybe three years...but if you wait too terribly long, the fans tend to move on. If Nintendo actually were to make a new *Kid Icarus*, nobody under the age of 30 would care.

JEN: Who's Kid Icarus?

SHANE: Exactly.

Jen better bust out her NES and get cracking on *Kid Icarus* or else Shane threatened to come to work cosplaying as the fabled Greek hero.

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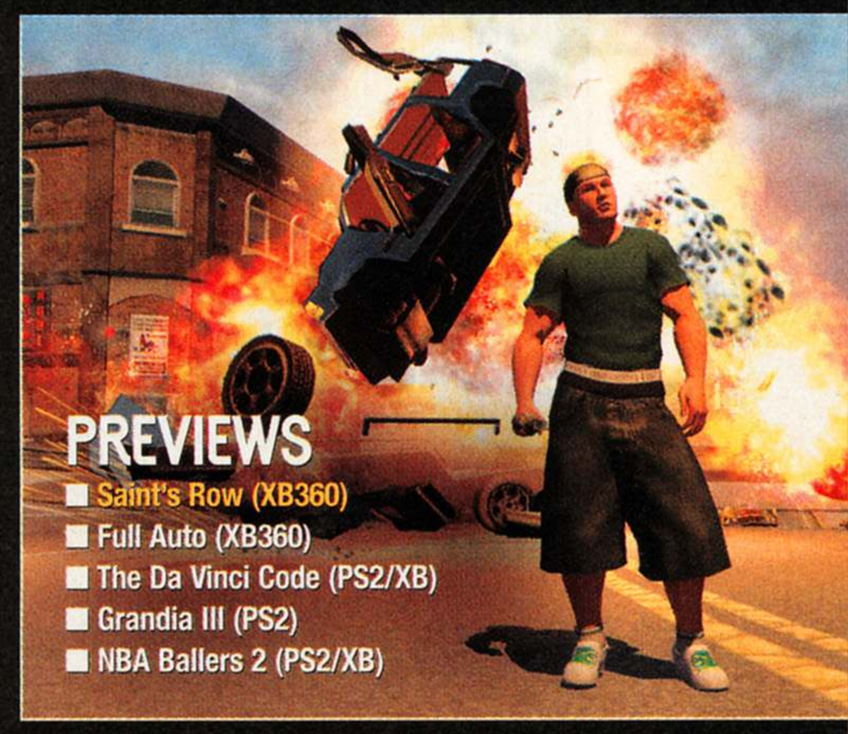

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