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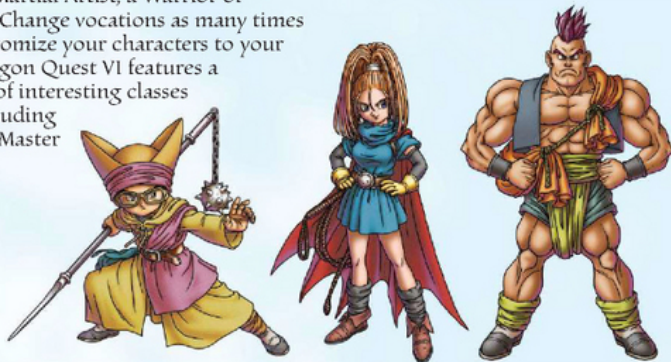
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NINTENDO DS.

Open Letter to Activision

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

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

Before I proceed to comment on why letting Bizarre Creations slip through your fingers is one of the most absurd things I have ever heard, I am going to grease the wheels a bit with some general love.

A little over a year ago, I had the opportunity to sit down and chat with Activision CEO Bobby Kotick (issue 202). He told me captivating stories of Activision's past and his vision of its future. I found him to be surprisingly charming, and I loved his passion for big, triple-A products in a time when some publishers seemed to be turning their gaze a little too intently toward social media.

Yes, he is the CEO and can't help but love when a game like Call of Duty rakes in a cool billion; who wouldn't love that? You can presume he loves the money more than the game, but that's beside the point. In speaking with him I could hear his conviction about making products that gamers love.

For the most part, I think Activision does a great job of delivering on that promise. That's a big reason why it is the number one publisher in the world. However, the way his company goes about its business tends to put people on the offensive.

You can now add Bizarre Creations to a long list of Activision faux pas along with the Infinity Ward divorce, over-exploitation of Guitar Hero, and running Tony Hawk into the ground. Activision would have you believe the mistake was acquiring Bizarre, but going after the James Bond license is the real mistake here. Bond just doesn't have the draw he once did, and that isn't Bizarre's fault. The sacrificial lamb should be the business manager who picked the franchise (mistake one) and merged it with Bizarre Creations (mistake two), not the studio.

Bizarre Creations isn't the first or last casualty in game publishing. But there is a lesson here that every video game publisher in the world needs to learn – talent is the most important asset in this industry. People that make great games don't make them accidentally, but they need support. They need good marketing *cough* Singularity *cough*. They need to be teamed up with the right license or concept. They need a publisher to back them when things don't go exactly as planned.

This is a cautionary tale. We watched Electronic Arts drive away talent en masse in the past, but now the company is doing everything it can to strengthen its relationship with its partners. The company discovered the hard way that creators and visionaries come from a finite pool.

If you want to stay on top, Activision, your passion for games that gamers love is crucial. And don't think just anyone can capture gamers' imaginations – it takes something special. Bizarre Creations is/was/forever-will-be an amazing developer, and once it's gone, it's difficult to get back.

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EVO HAS AN ALTER EVO.

Introducing the new HTC EVO Shift 4G. It's 4G fast and powered by Android,™ just like the EVO. But the Shift is smaller and has a slide-out keyboard to go along with its touchscreen. Now you can touch or type at the speed of 4G. Only from Sprint. The Now Network.™

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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

This month in Feedback we discuss Lara's new look, inform a hooligan that M-rated games still have rules, receive an award from our most distinguished reader, and save Christmas. That's right, we saved Christmas. You're welcome.

A New Lara

When my wife handed me the January 2011 issue of Game Informer I was instantly captivated by the cover. It didn't take me but a mere second to realize that the brilliant art work depicted Lara Croft. But what was different about her? She looked scared, broken, and scarred. I instantly turned to the story and disappeared into a new world. I am so impressed by the story and new direction they are going with Lara. With all the reboots of characters going on lately, it looks like we will be getting one that is deserving of a new look and story.

Tim Rosser
Hurlburt Field, FL

I'm aesthetically displeased by Tomb Raider's recent transformation. I'm a twenty-two year old female with a 34DD-24-34 physique. I won a year's supply of martinis for my Lara Croft impression last Halloween. How am I to emulate the small-chested, wider-hipped rendition? Crystal Dynamics' desire to take the game in a new direction is one thing, but Croft's figure had nothing to do with the franchise's sagging sales.

Valerie
Tampa, FL

I am extremely impressed with the look of the new Lara Croft. After seeing the new designs for Jill Valentine and Claire Redfield in Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D, I must say it's like watching two ships passing in the night. While Capcom is apparently trying to make my favorite Resident Evil ladies more appealing to a broader male audience by updating them with puffy lips and cleavage-exposing costumes, Crystal Dynamics is transforming the original male-fantasy heroine of video games into someone who looks not just attractive, but downright believable and practical as well. I truthfully hope to see more video game heroines in the future who dress to succeed rather than just dressing to impress.

Nic Holroyd
Via Email

Based on the majority of responses we've received from our readers, Tomb Raider fans are excited for a more realistic and vulnerable Lara. As for Valerie's lamentation, something tells us the judges of your contest probably won't mind if your costume next year doesn't accurately reflect Lara's new look. If they do, there are plenty of other buxom video game babes that can keep you flowing in free booze.
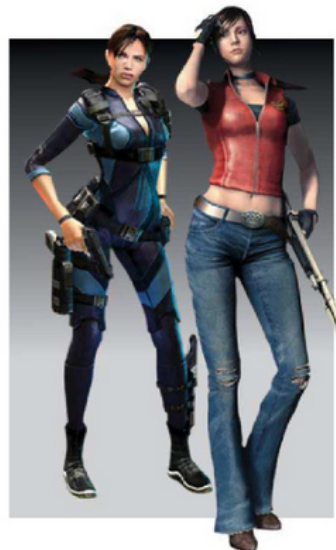
Question Of The Month:
What is the most disappointing game you have ever bought, and why?

Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com

The Ultimate Showdown

In issue 213 we asked readers who would win in a fight between Kevin Butler and Chuck Norris. We received many compelling arguments, but ultimately a response from one of the potential contenders settled the debate.

I think Kevin Butler would win, because he would use his superior advertising skills to get Chuck Norris on the PlayStation Move. Then, while Chuck Norris is playing video games, Kevin Butler would give him a roundhouse kick to the back of the head!

Jaime Barillas

Chuck Norris gave Kevin his last name to mark him as a servant of Chuck Norris. As Chuck's "Butler," Chuck Norris would make Kevin kick his own ass.

Christopher D. Wernham

I was wondering this just the other day. I came to this conclusion: Although Chuck Norris would beat KB in a man-to-man fight, KB has a cult following – he's the Charles Manson of the video game world. One tweet from KB and it would be like Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood; enraged gamers would descend on Chuck like a starved pack of rabid badgers, while KB sits back and sips his coffee.

Nick Oliver

Hey @gameinformer, please stop asking me to fight Chuck Norris. Mom taught us not to fight in our family.

Kevin Butler (Via Twitter)

No Spin Zone

I enjoyed your interview with Sega's Alan Pritchard [Charting A New Course For Sega, issue 213]. How refreshing to see a game industry executive being so candid and self-critical. I hope that other executives and game developers read it and come to realize that honesty, even about your company's failures, earns the trust and respect of fans. Trying to rhetorically spin failures into successes comes off as phony, complacent, and arrogant, and most readers can spot it from a mile away. Cheers to Pritchard for taking the high road.

Brian Howe
Durham, NC

You're right, Brian; honesty is always refreshing, and a company can't fix something if it won't admit it's broken. Kind of like that old saying: An error is only a mistake if…actually, we can't remember the rest. Probably because we're too cool to have ever made a mistake.

Asking For It

Okay, I've seen those ridiculous letters you guys get about printing something wrong in your mag. Well, I daresay, it's my turn! In his Sonic Colors DS review in issue 213, Tim Turi made a big mistake. He said his favorite power-up "transforms Sonic into an all-consuming black hole, which allows him to vacuum up enemies and coins..." Coins? Coins? This is not Mario. It's Sonic. I demand you fix this before I cancel my subscription. Not really; I'm just making fun of the readers who complain and threaten you. Please poke fun at me. It would be like getting your signed autograph.

Chris
Merced, CA

Okay Chris, here we go: If you really care that much – wait a minute. Did Tim really call them coins? Who mixes up rings and coins? We really need to fire that guy...

Play Nice

As of last night I found out that my player card in Black Ops is under investigation because it could be sexually explicit. Usually I wouldn't care, but I feel that Treyarch has been censoring too much of what is happening within Black Ops compared to Modern Warfare 2. In an effort to cover their butts they have chosen to cater to 12-year-olds and their parents who did not have enough sense to not buy their underage children the game in the first place. It is high time these companies take a stand, grow some balls, and back up the more mature gaming audience, instead of making restrictions that completely take away from the fun of the game – because nobody likes to log on to find that new things had to be restricted because some mom decided she needed to complain.

Steve
East Lansing, MI

If you're looking for sympathy over having an immature or offensive profile banned, you've come to the wrong place. While Black Ops may be an M-rated game, that doesn't mean the adults who play it want to be subjected to idiocy. Treyarch isn't trying to cater to children or disgruntled moms – it's attempting to pull the reputation of online gaming out of the gutter and create a respectful atmosphere where adult gamers can focus on what's really fun: competing with other players.

Best. Award. Ever.

The prestigious "Tom Barrett Best Cover of the Year Award" goes to Game Informer for the Cat Bat cover of issue 209, September 2010. Congratulations.

Tom Barrett
St. Petersburg FL

A bit of background information: Back in February 2006, we named then 75-year-old retired Navy photographer Tom Barrett Game Informer's coolest reader ever, for putting a whiny, self-proclaimed hardcore gamer in his place. Tom: After five years, it's good to see that you're still enjoying the magazine!

gi spy

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) MLB 2K11's Sean Bailey prepares to hit one out of the park, while Access Communication's Brian Roundy waits on deck **(Center)** Capcom's Melody Pfeiffer and GameDaily's EIC Libe Goad hang out at this year's CES **(Right)** Also in attendance were High Road's Alex Ryan and Plugged In's president, Heather Sorensen

GI SPY

A Whole New World

I am very impressed with your "Persian Market" article in issue 213. My father is from Iran (though he has lived in the U.S. for over 20 years) so this article immediately caught my eye. I am a gamer's wife, and do not play many games. However, I do read my husband's Game Informer avidly. Not only do I absolutely love the ESRA rating scale as a mom, but I never knew Iran was a part of the gaming world until now. The only time I have ever connected Iran to video games was with the recent release of Prince of Persia. So I am very excited to learn about Iran's strides in this field.

**Christiana Sayyah
Terre Haute, IN**

I would like to thank you for the very informative article on Iran's game ratings board that ran in issue 213. Not only was it interesting and insightful, I would also like to commend you for keeping it respectful, culturally sensitive, and unbiased which, as an American born to Iranian parents, is something you don't always come across in American media about Iran.

**Michael M. Hojjatie
Via Email**

Minecraft Review?

I was very excited when I saw the "On Your Mind" chart in issue 213's Feedback – Minecraft is finally getting noticed! I quickly flipped through the magazine, but to my disappointment, I saw no Minecraft review. I'm really hoping for a review next issue. Be sure to mention the creepers!

**Jacob Graber
Via Email**

You'd better not hold your breath, Jacob. Some games aren't conducive to covering in a traditional review. In Minecraft's case, the game has only recently entered beta, and isn't really even a "game" yet. There's no telling when or if we'll ever see a final version capable of being reviewed, but here's the good news: It sounds like you're already enjoying Minecraft as much as we are, in which case you don't really need a review to tell you that it's worth playing. Also, creepers are terrifying.

On Your Mind

- Lara's New Makeover **31%**
- Requests For Remakes Of Classic Games **22%**
- Gran Turismo 5 Love **17%**
- Net Neutrality **14%**
- Epic Mickey Less Than Epic **11%**
- Letters Containing Misspellings Of The Word "Wiener" **5%**

Wrapping Up Christmas

It was Christmas day and I didn't have any wrapping paper left. I had some DS stuff left to wrap for my daughter with only minutes until she arrived. I began to panic. Suddenly, my eyes fell upon issue 213 of Game Informer. I couldn't think of a better way to wrap my daughter's games up than with the pages of your awesome magazine. Thanks Game Informer, you saved my Christmas.

**Lucas Johnson
Saint Paul, MN**

Well, that's a better use of our magazine than some improvisations we've heard of.

GI SPY

(Left) Dan gets strapped into a chair at Rockstar to try out the impressive face capture system being used in L.A. Noire **(Inset)** The results are impressive to say the least. We can't wait to run him over **(Right)** Yet another developer meeting ends with Ben crying in the fetal position, as 505's Nick Goldsworthy, Reverb's Casey Lynch, and Kung Fu Factory's Ricci Rukavina happily wail on him

For the story behind Dan's transformation go to www.gameinformer.com/mag

gallery

WINNER **1 Victor A. Plajas** Before going up against Zeus and mountain-sized Titans, a Hydra used to feel like a formidable challenge to Kratos **2 Hugo Gonzalez** Concept art from the never-released "Metal Gear Solid Kidz" spinoff **3 Zach Barton** If the guys at the Umbrella laboratories started performing experiments on one of Mario's mushrooms, we're pretty sure it would resemble Link's new enemy here **4 Mike Kelly** Based on what we've seen from the Bioshock Infinite trailer, this big guy is capable of a lot more than lending a hand **5 Chris Mullen** Come on, Sackboy…we know you have hundreds of outfits. Put on some pants for crying out loud

CORRECTIONS:
In the review archive of issue 213, we incorrectly printed Fable III in the list of PlayStation 3 games. Fable III is an Xbox 360 exclusive.

GI SPY

(Left) Reiner, Dan, Phil, and Tim try on their commemorative T-shirts after completing a grueling Super Replay of Overblood for the website. Pipo! **(Right)** Adam's planning to start his own crime-fighting squad with Sony Online's Taina Rodríguez, Ryan Peters, Chris Cao, John Shipley, and Mark Tuttle

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Sony Introduces

PlayStation

Its Next-Generation
Portable

*Codenamed NGP,
it will be out by
the end of 2011*

At the PlayStation Meeting 2011 event in Tokyo, Sony revealed what everyone has been talking about already – the next iteration of the PlayStation Portable. The device was introduced with the codename NGP, and according to Sony it'll come out by the end of the year (no territory specifics were given), for an as-yet-undisclosed price.

Many of the rumored features of the device were thankfully true – two analog sticks, a bigger screen (a 5" OLED), a front touch screen, and rear touch pad. Our hands-on time with the unit proved that it was more than just the sum of its features. The twin analog sticks felt great, far better than the old nubs of the previous PSP design. Instead, they almost felt like those on the Xbox 360. The NGP impressed by rendering graphics almost on par with the PS3. The unit itself was thin, light, and comfortable given its form factor is larger than other PSPs.

The back touch pad might take some getting used to (both the front touch screen and back touch pad have multi-finger touch capabilities), but it's already being imple-

mented into titles like the system's Uncharted title and Little Deviants (see games sidebar for more). NGP games can also make use of its Sixaxis gyroscope/accelerometer. Other features of the unit include front and back cameras (possibly allowing for augmented reality gameplay), GPS technology, a built-in microphone, and a suite of communication functions. LiveArea is a hub that gives you the ability to buy downloadable content, view friends' progress in a game, and send them messages. The location-based application Near tracks where you've been throughout the day, lists games played near you, allows you to meet other players virtually, and more.

Titles for the unit will come in both physical and downloadable forms. The NGP has two card slots, one for games on flash media cards and the other for some version of Sony's proprietary memory cards. You can keep your saves on the game cart itself, but downloadable titles and other stored media will require the separate memory card. The unit's 3G capability (along with Wi-Fi) will make downloading games easy, but Sony hasn't detailed if there will be an extra payment plan for 3G, or if multiplayer utilizing the

connection would require a subscription fee.

The NGP sounds attractive so far, but any feature set is only alluring in relation to its price tag. Game Informer has heard a rumor that the unit will cost $400, but that could not be confirmed by the time we went to print. We asked Sony president of worldwide studios, Shuhei Yoshida, about the price, who said: "From the very beginning of the project – since 2008 – pricing was one of the considerations that we had. Hopefully when we announce the price, people will see the proper value." Yoshida's last comment regarding the unit's "proper value" could mean that Sony is trying to make gamers understand that the NGP is an expensive handheld because of its tech and features, but we could be reading too much into Yoshida's words.

The E3 convention in June will undoubtedly reveal more about the NGP. In the meantime check out more details about the system – including some of its games – on the following page.

Sony NGP Specs

CPU: ARM Cortex-A9 core (4 core)

GPU: SGX543MP4+

External Dimensions: Approx. 182.0 x 18.6 x 83.5mm (width x height x depth) (tentative, excludes largest projection)

Screen: 5 inches (16:9), 960 x 544 (touch screen). Approx. 16 million colors, OLED. Multi-touch screen (capacitive type)

Rear touch pad: Multi-touch pad (capacitive type)

Cameras: Front camera. Rear camera

Sound: Built-in stereo speakers. Built-in microphone

Sensors: Sixaxis motion sensing system (three-axis gyroscope, three-axis accelerometer). Three-axis electronic compass

Location: Built-in GPS. Wi-Fi location service support

Keys/Switches: PS button. Power button. Directional buttons (Up/Down/Right/Left). Action buttons (Triangle/Circle/Cross/Square). Shoulder buttons (Right/Left). Right stick, Left stick. START button, SELECT button. Volume buttons (+/-)

Wireless Communications: Mobile network connectivity 3G, Wi-Fi (802.11b/g/n for Infrastructure and ad-hoc), Bluetooth 2.1

Next-Gen Gaming
On the go

NGP development kits have reportedly been out to developers for many months, but apart from impressive footage of first-party titles like Uncharted, the NGP's debut was light on third-party demos. However, that doesn't mean that plenty of companies – including the likes of Activision (which is promising a Call of Duty for the NGP), Rockstar, Capcom, and Ubisoft aren't excited about the unit (see sidebar).

Video footage revealed NGP versions of games like Killzone, LittleBigPlanet, Resistance, and Wipeout, and a clutch of third-party developers took to the stage at the event to talk up the new unit. One of the main points stressed by multiple developers was that it was very easy to port PS3 games to the unit. Konami's Hideo Kojima showed off Metal Gear Solid 4 test images that almost looked as good as the real thing on the PS3, and Epic's Tim Sweeney showed off PSN title Dungeon Defenders (which uses Unreal Engine 3) which he said was ported to the NGP in less than a week. Overall, Sweeney

says the handheld has "roughly four times the power we've seen on previous mobile platforms."

Sega's Toshihiro Nagoshi said, "this is hardware with no excuses" while showing off ported Yakuza footage.

Electronic Arts – usually a solid software contributor to all the console manufacturers and their platforms – was absent from the event and Sony's list of supporting developers, but a spokesperson told us: "We are discussing the issue with Sony, but there are no announcements to make today. EA has a great relationship with Sony."

We got our hands on a few NGP games, and were impressed with the unit's feel and gameplay functionality. The back touch pad, front touch screen, and gyroscope were put to good use in Uncharted, allowing you to swing on vines, stealth kill enemies (with a tap), and target your rifle, respectively. These new input methods are optional, so you can still play the game like you always have. However, it's unknown if any of the gameplay elements in Uncharted will require these

new controls like the original Uncharted on the PS3, which used the Sixaxis to allow Nathan Drake to balance as he crossed logs.

Meanwhile, Little Deviants' glorified tech demo used the back touch pad to create hills for the cute little blobs to roll down. It also showed off the screens' multi-touch functionality by letting you pinch together your fingers to scrunch the world together before releasing it and sending the Deviants flying.

The NGP's cameras were put to effective use in both Uncharted and the Hot Shots Golf-like Golf Next. Uncharted has a camera mode that puts you in first-person perspective and has you move around the NGP unit to scan the environment and take in-game pictures. Similarly, Golf Next lets you rotate the game's camera 360 degrees by rotating the handheld in real life.

Neither Sony nor its partners detailed which of these games, or others, would be available when the system launches before the end of the year.

List of Third-Party Game Developers and Publishers (As of 01.27.11)

Killzone	LittleBigPlanet	Little Deviants	Reality Fighters	Resistance	Uncharted
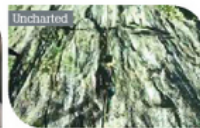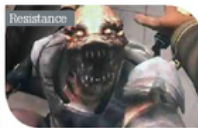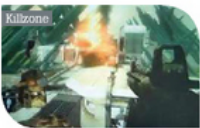
» North America
Activision Inc.
Capybara Games
Demiurge Studios
Epic Games
Far Sight Studios
Frima
High Voltage Software
Kung Fu Factory
Paramount Digital Entertainment
PopCap Games
Powerhead Games

Trendy Entertainment
Ubisoft
Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
2K Games
2K Sports

» Japan
Acquire
Alvion
AQ Interactive
Arc System Works
Arika Co.
Artdink Corporation

Ascii Media Works
Atlus
Capcom
Chun Soft
Codemasters
Crafts & Meister
CyberConnect2
D3 Publisher
Dimps Corporation
Edia
Enterbrain
From Software
Gameloft

Genki
Grasshopper Manufacture
GungHo Online Entertainment
Gust
Hamster
Hudson Soft
Idea Factory
Irem Software
Kadokawa Games
Kadokawa Shoten
Konami Digital Entertainment

Level-5
Marvelous Entertainment
Media5
Namco Bandai Games
Nihon Falcom
Nippon Ichi Software
Nowproduction
Q Entertainment
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SNK Playmore Corporation
Spike
Square Enix
SystemSoft Alpha

Tecmo/Koei
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Avalanche Studios
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Exient
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Gusto Games
Home Entertainment Suppliers
Impromptu Software
Rebellion
Rockstar Games
Sidhe Interactive
Sumo Digital
Team 17 Software
Ubisoft
Zen Studios

Cardboard Box (Metal Gear series)

This classic disguise has been a long-standing part of Solid Snake's repertoire. Despite all of the advances in enemy AI in the last decade, we're glad that guards still aren't smart enough to question a conspicuous cardboard box sitting in the middle of a top secret base. And why should they? After all, it's just a box.

Sheik (Ocarina of Time)
Here's a piece of advice: If you're trying to disguise yourself, you may want to try it in a series that has more than three recurring characters. Who could the mysterious Sheik really be? Well, "he" is obviously not Link or Ganon, so that leaves…

A Girl (Final Fantasy VII)
In one of the most half-baked scams in RPG history, the FF VII crew decides that dressing up Cloud in a dress and giving him pigtails is a good plan. However, since Cloud kind of looks like a girl already, this crackpot idea works like a charm.

Silver Ear (Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist)
As the only one-eared pharmacist in a small Old West town, Freddy Pharkas stands out. To anonymously resume his former life as a gunfighter, he crafts himself a metal replacement ear, becoming the "Silver-Eared Stranger." Score!

Santa (Hitman)
Santa suits are easily purchased around the holidays, but Agent 47 takes a Grinch-ier approach to his costume. By strangling a drunk guy dressed as Santa at a swank party, the hitman secures his place on the "naughty" list. That's right – Agent 47 kills Christmas.

Pint-Sized Slasher (Fallout 3)
Virtuous Fallout 3 players would never see this sequence, which has your character donning the signature mask of the maniacal clown called the Pint-Sized Slasher. Storming through Tranquility Lane wouldn't be the same without that crazy grin.

Mascot (Bully)
No one ever suspects the mascot! While the jocks are busy prepping for the big game, Jimmy Hopkins makes mischief dressed as the beloved Bullworth bull. Exploding footballs, tainted sports drink, and marbles on the field are his hilarious handiwork.

Road Crew (Psychonauts)
A good disguise doesn't need a lot of effort to be successful. To get past a road blockade in the mind of the Milkman, Raz just grabs a stolen stop sign and asserts, "I am on the road crew." If he says it, then it must be true.

The Gray Cowl (Oblivion)
Are you sick of being stopped by the town guards for various minor infractions? This cowl allows you to commit your heinous acts as the Gray Fox – without damaging your own reputation. "It wasn't me, officer. That storekeeper must have murdered himself!"

Ogre Suit (World of Warcraft)
Yeah, the whole "dress up as a guard to fool other guards" thing happens a lot in video games. What makes this similar deception in Dire Maul so special? Just /dance!

ICE-T

WORDS WITH THE ORIGINAL GAMER

interview by Matt Helgeson

I used to call myself "The Original Gamer" in the magazine in tribute to Ice-T's 1991 album *O.G. Original Gangster*, so I was excited to find out, via his many postings on YouTube and Twitter, that the gangster rap legend and actor is a devoted gamer. I recently got a chance to speak to Ice-T about his lifelong gaming habit, and he proved to be every bit as perceptive and entertaining as I hoped.

Photo courtesy of NBC Universal

Whenever we talk to athletes, they all seem to game. Is it like that in hip-hop now?

What people don't understand is that the video game industry broke right alongside the hip-hop industry. Video games, hip-hop, skateboards; all that kind of broke during the '80s. I had everything – the Ataris, the Segas. We grew up with it. The other thing they forget is that a lot of musicians spend their days on tour buses. If you've ever been on a tour bus, there's nothing much to do. In the back of the tour bus, they'll have a video game system. You start to learn to play the games. I've seen cats start a tour where they don't really game, and by the end, they're trying to get you to play them. You get hooked.

Obviously, it's a lot different now, because games have become so mainstream. But back in the '80s, games were perceived as more of a nerdy thing.

I don't think so, though. I guess in the nerd world, it was considered that. But there's a lot of mistakes [people make] with hip-hop. People watch us and they might pick up the low-riding and all that, but they miss the humor. We're still kids; we're just like y'all. We still f--- around; we still do pranks – all that same stuff is a part of our make-up. So, we don't really look at it as nerdy, we look at is as something to do. Go into a crack house, and they might have a video game! There's nothing I've found that really burns time like video games. I've always said that if you put games in the prison system, cats would get out of jail and be like, "Hold up, I gotta go finish this level." [Laughs] So, I'm here to say that it's an absolute misconception that gaming is nerdy. I've been in some dangerous goddamn spots and there's been a console there.

Do you go back to the Atari 2600 and arcade days?

Absolutely. My first game system was an Atari, and I had a Nintendo. When I first started making money, if you saw my episode of *MTV Cribs*, I had the actual video arcade games in my house. I had the first Mortal Kombat, the first Virtua Fighter, the first NBA Jam. I bought the arcade games because I found a place in L.A. where I could buy them. They were like $5,000, but I had them down in my studio in my house.

But back to the nerd stuff, I think there is a nerd side to it when you get too deep into it. One thing they do now, I've noticed, is they have these platform wars, like "Xbox is better than PlayStation." That's nerdy to me. What the f--- is the matter with you?

The weird thing is people are defending these huge corporations.

They could give a f--- about you! [Laughs] That's nerdy to me. Also, people get too deep into the games. I have a clan on Call of Duty, and when you start telling me your kill/death ratio – I don't give a f---. You really going to pick up a b---- by telling her your kill/death ratio? That doesn't really matter. I think there's a nerd element where you can get too deep into it that no one cares. But you can get nerdy with cars; you could start telling me the cubic displacement of an engine. At any point, you can go

into the nerd world if you want to go deep. One of the key things about nerds is that they like to correct you. They get off on correcting you. That's the part that we kinda fall back off of – we just want to play the games, we don't need the heavy details. How many ounces is the controller? Who gives a f---? [Laughs]

Do you play with other rappers you know online?
Absolutely. Snoop and them are big Madden fans. Warren G is in my clan. A lot of football. Early hip-hoppers mostly stick to the sports games. I never really went for the sports games because, early on, you couldn't play them online. That required you to have people at your house all the time. I'm not really the type of person that wants a bunch of dudes on my couch drinking beers and playing Madden. That's too much male bonding for me. But when the 'net came out and you could play with people online, that revolutionized the game. I play with Lord Jamar from Brand Nubian – he's in SMG. Xzibit is in SMG. Warren G is in SMG. There's different people from all over the world. The leader of my clan, he's named Coleman, he's from Liverpool, England. I got some kids from Boston – white kids, black kids, it doesn't matter. My son plays. My son lives in L.A., and we get to bond. I wouldn't be on the phone with him all day, but I can be on the game with him for five hours. It's really cool.

SMG is your clan, right?
Yeah, "Sex, Money, and Guns." That's what makes the world go 'round.

You're a huge Call of Duty fan, is that the main game you play now?
It's the only game I've been able to get into and actually feel a skill curve on it. A lot of the games I've played – Battlefield or Medal of Honor – have great single-player, but when you get into the multiplayer I personally don't feel like I'm getting better. Call of Duty, the way it's set up, you can actually get better. The game that really got me hooked was Resident Evil back in the day. I was always into Mortal Kombat and s--- like that, but once I got into Resident Evil I really got hooked – survival horror, all that s---. Then I got into all the single-player adventure-type games. I love the Max Payne games. I loved to play by myself and challenge myself.

Are you playing any single-player games right now?
The last one I really got into was me and Coco played Army of Two. My girl loves playing games. She has a theory of games, a one-sentence comment: "At least you know where they are." [Laughs] You wanna b---- about your man sitting in the house, but there's a lot of s--- he could be doing. Have him put that controller down and I bet he hits the door! She started learning how to play with me. I used to play Need for Speed: Most Wanted. I'd have her watch the map, so I wouldn't have to take my eyes off the action. So, she'd be like, "Left! Left! Right! Turbo! Turbo!" Also, sometimes, if I'm stuck I'll be like, "Coco grab the cheat book!" and she'll give me little clues. Being married, we also have code words that let me know it's time to stop. She'll go, "Okay, I'm going upstairs…" That's where our bedroom is, so I'm like, "Okay, last game." [Laughs]

You have to have priorities.
I think that's where guys lose it with their girls. Find a time when she's reading a book or doing something else and get into it. Don't let it override reality, or you're gonna pick your game over your girl and that's gonna be a bad move. Then, you'll have full-time to be f---in' gamer nerd. You'll be talking about your kill/death ratio with your buddies. F--- that.

You've also appeared in several games – San Andreas, for one.
Yeah, I was the last guy. Mad Dog I think his name was. I was in Def Jam: Fight for NY. I was in Scarface and San Andreas. Recently, I was in Gears of War 3.

How did the Gears of War 3 thing happen?
F---ing with Jace Hall. Jace Hall has a web series called the Jace Hall Show. He's a brother, kind of a big guy. A long time ago, he did a video game and I did the voiceovers, it was called Sanity. That was back in the day. So, he came back to me and had this show. He said, "Ice, I want to interview you, people don't know you're a real video gamer." He did this show at my apartment where he interviewed me and Coco. During the show, he told me that he was in Gears of War, and I was like, "Bull----, how you get in Gears of War?" He said, "I know the owner; I know Cliffy." I said, "Call Cliffy, tell him I should be in the game." So, on the show we did this thing where I told Cliffy, "Why the f--- is Jace in the game, no one knows who the f--- he is, use me instead." So, Cliff says, "You never know, maybe in Gears 3." Now, this was just a skit – this was bulls---, we were just f---in' with it. But sure enough, the game came around and I got a call saying "would you be interested in doing voice work?" So, a joke turned into reality.

Is doing voiceovers different than doing things like Law & Order?
Not really, because I'm a musician. I'm used to being in a studio and taking direction. These guys are masters at what they do, so first you see the script and say "read it like this." Then, the guy will say, "No, more angry." Right? And I'll say it again, then they'll say, "No, you're f---in' mad right now!" They direct you, and then they'll say, "That's the tone, now f---in' freestyle it" and you go in. My character probably swears more than anyone in the history of video games; Griffin is a bad mother f---er. Cliffy B and all the guys from Epic were first-class.

Push comes to shove, what's your favorite game of all time?
Honestly, I have to say that I've spent the most time playing the Call of Duty games. I didn't really like World at War, but I loved Modern Warfare and the new one. I've spent the most time playing those. But, from a classic perspective, I think the first Resident Evil in the mansion. That was the coolest s--- ever because it was new. I play the new Resident Evil, but it's not the same. [But] the O.G. Resident Evil – I've never been blown away by anything like that. That's a classic game. ◆

For more on Ice-T go to his official site: http://www.icet.com/ Or follow him on Twitter: http://twitter.com/FINALLEVEL

IRON SIGHTS

The *science* behind

by Ben Reeves

feature

Guns, set pieces, and multiplayer maps are not the only factors contributing to the success of a modern first-person shooter. Many critical systems are at work behind the barrage of firefights and explosions that control your targeting reticle. Designing a useful aiming system for consoles is an intricate science that many gamers take for granted because they don't even know that they are being assisted. Halo: Combat Evolved was an innovator in the field of console shooters, and introduced several aiming systems that are still used today. Bungie design lead Jaime Griesemer remembers spending many long hours tuning Halo's aiming code, and we got a chance to talk with him about how all these invisible systems work together to make us feel like we can't miss.

how *first-person shooters* help you aim
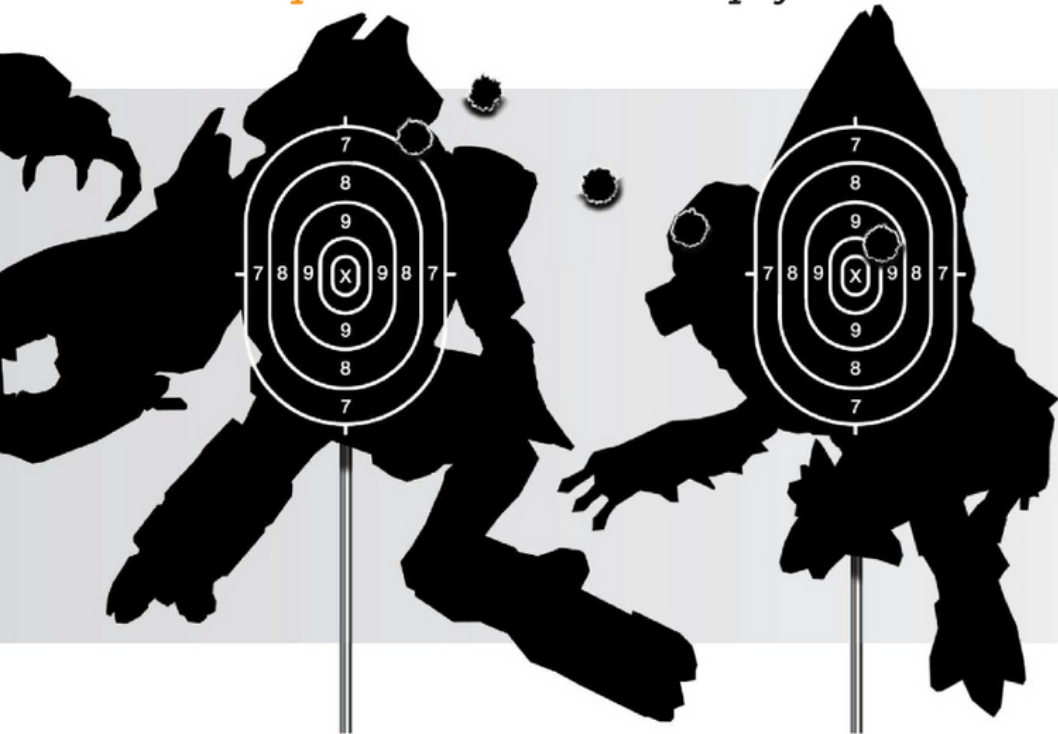
SNAPPING

Early first-person shooters on console struggled to make aiming feel intuitive and rewarding, since it was impossible to match the accuracy and speed of the PC's mouse interface. Snapping (also sometimes called auto aim) was the earliest solution to console control problems. Titles like Rare's GoldenEye 007 aided players by reorienting their gun barrels toward enemies whenever a player's crosshairs were in proximity of their target. It wasn't a flawless system, but it helped make shooters more accessible for console owners. "The problem with pure auto aim systems is that you're taking control away from the player," Griesemer says. "You want to make sure that players can be successful, but also feel competent – like they have some actual skill while playing the game." Snapping may be a primitive form of assistance, but it is still used today in a diminished form. "There is only a small amount of auto aim in the Halo franchise," Griesemer says. "If you look at all of Halo's auto aim code, it's only like a page or a page and a half."

ACCELERATION

Many modern first person shooters also have highly tuned acceleration curves for reticle movement. When a player pegs their aiming stick in one direction his or her reticle will start moving slowly in that direction before picking up speed. This is noteworthy because it makes aiming at nearby targets easier without significantly sacrificing a player's ability to make quick turns.

FRICTION

Bungie introduced friction in the first Halo, and nearly every shooter uses it today. A simple way to describe friction is that it slows a player's turn rate as soon as their reticle passes over an enemy, but that's not the whole story. "What we really do is slow your top speed, and then dramatically decrease the rate at which the crosshair will slow down when you let go of the stick," explains Griesemer. A simplified way to look at it is that there are three different movement speeds for a reticle. When a player is looking at the environment and lets off their aiming stick, the reticle coasts a little before stopping. While a player is moving their sights across an enemy, the reticle applies the brakes. But when a player lets off the stick while their crosshairs are also passing over an enemy, the reticle hits a brick wall. Ultimately, the slowdown players experience when passing over an enemy isn't very dramatic; the goal of friction is to give players a longer window with which to stop moving and land on their target.

MAGNETISM

Some games stop with friction, but Halo adds another system to the mix. Once a player has locked onto a target, and that target begins to move, magnetism helps players stay trained on that target. Magnetism is why circle strafing has become such a popular maneuver in the Halo franchise. Tracking a moving target is challenging enough, but circle strafing compounds the difficulty. Players have to track their opponent's movements while counteracting their own. "You're basically adjusting for the movement of two sticks," Griesemer says. "This is way easier in Halo, because we kind of automate it. Anytime you're trying to circle strafe, we can tell, and we help you by adjusting your input to be exactly what it needs to be to follow your target. The math for this is super complicated, and that's why I think no one else in the industry has done it yet."

Whether we want to admit it or not, we need the help. Console controllers aren't designed to move a crosshair across the screen with the kind of fidelity first-person shooters require. Aiming systems are practically required from any FPS that wants to stay competitive. However, no one wants to feel like the computer is doing all the work, so these systems must stay hidden under the hood – only slightly tilting the odds in our favor while we're not looking. Aiming assists are the unsung heroes of console shooters, and that's how they should remain. ◆

The Other Guys

You know the developers who make your favorite games, but a game is rarely made entirely in-house. Developers often license other technologies to assist with a game's creation. Most times when you fire up a game, you see the logos for these middleware companies alongside the primary developer and publishers. Have you ever wondered what these logos mean? The list below provides clarification for many of the top middleware companies and development tools featured in today's video games.

A guide to understanding middleware and development tools *by Andrew Reiner*

Bink Video
Appearing on 14 platforms and in over 5,000 games, Bink Video is a video codec created by RAD Game Tools to compress audio and video files in games.

CRIware
Over 2,000 games utilize CRI Middleware's streaming audio and video technology. Games using CRIware include Bayonetta, Street Fighter IV, and Soul Calibur IV.

CryEngine
German developer Crytek created the CryEngine game development engine in parallel with its first game, Far Cry. CryEngine 3 was used to create Sniper: Ghost Warrior, and Crytek's upcoming Crysis 2 and Codename: Kingdoms.

Demonware
Although Demonware is a wholly owned subsidiary of Activision Blizzard, its networking software and services has been used by many publishers, including Ubisoft for Ghost Recon EndWar and THQ for WWE SmackDown vs. Raw.

Dolby
Specializing in surround sound, Dolby is a data and audio compression technology created by Dolby Laboratories.

DTS Digital Entertainment
Like Dolby, DTS provides audio technologies and high-quality surround sound for video games and all entertainment mediums.

Euphoria
Euphoria is an animation engine that generates motion on the fly by simulating body, muscle, and motor nervous systems. Euphoria was used to create the lifelike motions in Red Dead Redemption, Grand Theft Auto IV, Star Wars: The Force Unleashed, and Backbreaker.

FaceFX
FaceFX is OC3 Entertainment's lip-synchronization and facial animation technology featured in a wide selection of games, including Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood, Halo Reach, Red Dead Redemption, and Rock Band 3.

Facegen
Singular Inversions' Facegen middleware technology specializes in the modeling of human shaped faces for video games such as The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Top Spin 3, and the aptly named Facebreaker.

Frostbite
The Frostbite engine is DICE's proprietary game engine and was used to create Battlefield: Bad Company 1 and 2, and Battlefield 1943. It was also used for Medal of Honor's multiplayer component.

Gamebryo
Created by Emergent Game Technologies, Gamebryo is a cross-platform game development engine and toolset. Gamebryo has been used to develop over 200 games, including Civilization IV, Fallout 3, and Dark Age of Camelot.

Havok
Developers use Havok middleware for AI, animation, behavior, cloth, destruction, and physics solutions. Havok appears in most Halo games, as well as Assassin's Creed, BioShock, and Red Faction: Guerrilla. Outside of games, the Moving Picture Company uses Havok for motion picture special effects. The Matrix and Watchmen both used Havok.

id Tech
Often referred to as the "Doom engine," id Tech is a proprietary game engine created by id Software and programmer John Carmack. Doom 3, Prey, Wolfenstein, and the upcoming Brink are built with id Tech 4. Later this year, id Tech 5 will make its debut in id Software's Rage.

Infernal Engine
Built by Terminal Reality, the Infernal Engine is a cross-platform capable game development engine used in games like Def Jam Rapstar, Guilty Party, and Sega's upcoming Wii versions of Thor and Captain America.

PhysX
PhysX is a realtime physics engine and development environment deployed by Nvidia, and used in games like Mirror's Edge, Batman: Arkham Asylum, Deadly Premonition, and Mafia II.

RAGE
Rockstar Advanced Game Engine (RAGE) is a game engine created by the RAGE Technology Group at Rockstar San Diego. This engine was used to develop Grand Theft Auto IV, Red Dead Redemption, Midnight Club: Los Angeles, and the forthcoming Max Payne 3.

SpeedTree
SpeedTree is a middleware toolset that allows developers to create foliage in games. Bethesda Softworks used SpeedTree to create the lush forests in The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. SpeedTree was also used by ILM in the film Avatar.

THX
LucasFilm developed this audio quality assurance system to make sure theaters properly optimized their speaker systems. THX is now used for all forms of entertainment, including video games.

Umbra Software
Many developers use Umbra Software's occlusion system and rendering optimization middleware to enhance their games and speed up the development cycle. Umbra's clients include BioWare, Remedy, and Sony Online Entertainment.

Unreal Engine
Epic Games' Unreal Engine is this generation's most used game development engine. Most developers use Unreal Engine 3, and Epic is hard at work to bring Unreal 4 to the market. Gears of War, Batman: Arkham Asylum, and Borderlands are just a few of the success stories created with Unreal tech.

Read it and weep – for joy. Duke Nukem Forever has a release date: May 3, 2011

the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

news with a sarcastic spin
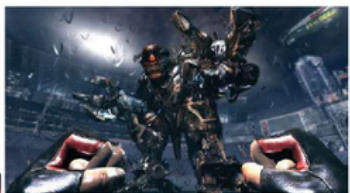
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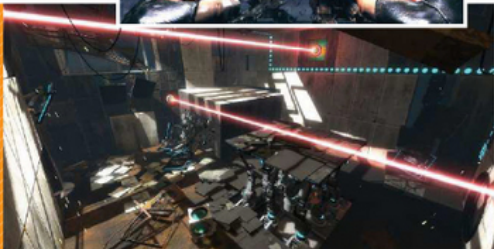
Valve promised that the PS3 version of Portal 2 would be awesome, and it looks like it will be thanks to its Steam support. The PS3 version of the game gets cross-platform play with PC and Mac users, a code for a free download of the PC and Mac versions, the ability to start playing on a PC/Mac and finish on the PS3 (or vice versa), and more. The game comes out on April 21.

Former Harmonix parent company Viacom sold the Rock Band developer to a holding company in what essentially amounts to Harmonix once again becoming an independent studio. Terms of the deal weren't disclosed, but Harmonix assumes all of its debt as well as the rights to its Rock Band and Dance Central franchises.

Bad

Activision is pulling the plug on Blur developer Bizarre Creations after it couldn't find any buyers. The publisher bought the company in 2007 and commissioned 2010's Blur and James Bond 007: Blood Stone. The games didn't do as well as Activision hoped, so it unsuccessfully attempted to sell the Liverpool developer late last year.

In other news, Disney has closed Propaganda Games after it released Tron: Evolution. This comes on the heels of the publisher already canceling the studio's other project – the once-promising Pirates of the Caribbean: Armada of the Damned.
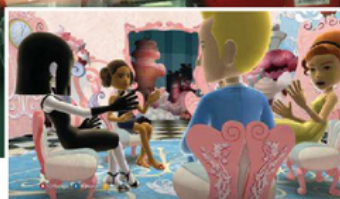
Avatars are getting Kinect support thanks to a free update (for Xbox Live Gold members) sometime this spring. When it launches, player will be able to chat with friends using the Kinect peripheral and have their avatars emote for them. Can the Kinect detect embarrassed blushing?

Ugly

Hacking and piracy keeps console manufacturers up at night, and the recent hacking of the PS3's root keys has Sony's lawyers and engineers working overtime. A rumor is circulating that Sony's scared enough of piracy that it's considering requiring gamers to input a serial code like in PC games that would verify your legitimate copy with Sony's servers. For the sake of convenience, let's hope this stays a dirty rumor.

Activision's legal battle with ex-Infinity Ward heads Jason West and Vince Zampella continues. Now the publisher has named Electronic Arts as a defendant in the $400 million lawsuit because it allegedly tampered with West and Zampella by encouraging them to break their contracts with Activision and sabotage the release schedule for Modern Warfare 2 map packs. EA vice president of corporate communications Jeff Brown responded by saying, "This is a PR play filled with pettiness and deliberate misdirection."

Quotable

"I just think Nintendo's blown it... So it's over – I don't think they can ever recover."

Michael Pachter, analyst at Wedbush Morgan, tells Industry Gamers that the company screwed up by not releasing a Wii successor.

[Re]Booted

The fine line between
alienation and innovation

by Meagan Marie

Developers have varying degrees of success with reinventing a popular series. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare marked a drastic departure for the brand, and was met with massive commercial and critical acclaim. On the other hand, Silent Hill's recent rebranding with Silent Hill: Homecoming garnered a lukewarm reception. The Sonic series' spotty reinvention record is often the butt of jokes, despite Sega's attempt to narrow the franchise's focus in recent releases. The line between alienation of fans and advancement of IP is thin, making the practice of iteration over innovation alluring.

Inspired by our recent cover detailing the upcoming reboot of the Tomb Raider brand, we've taken a look at the increasingly common practice of hitting the reset button on popular franchises. Rather than relying on superficial changes between releases, a handful of developers are embracing the idea of a fresh start. Speaking to several of these prominent game makers, we attempt to nail down the amorphous definition of "reboot," as well as assess the risks and rewards of gambling with one's brand capital.

The common denominator

The term "reboot" is often used carelessly – more so by fans than by developers who identify the trend with their work. Regardless, the concept itself is ill-defined. What's the difference between a reboot and a reimagining? Do long-awaited sequels constitute reboots when massive technological improvements result in a different experience by default? Does a reboot require a tonal change or a gameplay overhaul? A new development team with a fresh perspective? Is an origin tale mandatory, with established canon kicked to the curb?

One common thread that fuels the reboot flame is the ditching of subtext for slicker, streamlined titles. Tomb Raider leads the pack as the most recent example, but other established franchises have set the precedent – Mortal Kombat (2011), Twisted Metal (2011), Devil May Cry (TBA), Medal of Honor (2010), Bionic Commando (2009), and Prince of Persia (2008) established the trend. A simple name isn't all it takes; the common factor seems to be a desire

for a fresh start, but the actual implementation is unique to each developer.

"Certain ideas, characters, situations, and scenarios are timeless," explains David Jaffe, co-creator of the Twisted Metal franchise. "To me, a reboot is a conscious effort to retain and amplify the still-relevant core idea while updating or rethinking the failed and/or dated aspects of the idea's last iteration. This can be done in many ways: new play, new team, new tone, new story. The important thing is, even with all the new window dressing, is the spirit that defines the property still alive and kicking?"

Using the newly announced Devil May Cry as an example, Jaffe furthers his point. While not sold on the new look of protagonist Dante, as a fan of the franchise he is more concerned about core character expression – namely that Dante retains his "cocky, brash, stylish, and badass" nature through cinematics and gameplay. To the veteran developer, tone and mood are vastly more important than maintaining the established physical presentation. In this regard, Jaffe considers Twisted Metal: Black a reboot, rather than 2011's Twisted Metal.

"Twisted Metal: Black was a conscious effort

The video game industry is far from its infancy, with enough history to be cataloged in decades — and for early franchises to have hit both high points and low. While some intellectual properties flourish, others grow stagnant, and the idea of reinvention becomes a tempting prospect. Rebooting a long-running franchise is risky, but can have substantial rewards if handled properly.

to reinvent the franchise after a few poorly reviewed sequels had tarnished the brand name," explains Jaffe. "The new Twisted Metal isn't an intentional reboot. It's really a mash up of the world from Black (in reference to the dark and sinister mood and certain character designs) mixed with more of the fun and imagination of Twisted Metal 2."

Acknowledging how 2011's Twisted Metal could be perceived as reboot, he clarifies that he and co-creator Scott Campbell instead think they've found the best execution for the idea that's been swimming in their joint consciousness since 1995. "Twisted 1 and 2 were a bit too light and cartoony. Black was too serious and wanna-be bad ass. This new one feels like it's hitting the sweet spot between those two ideas," continues Jaffe. "It's aware of how absurd and over the top it is, but at the same time, it still takes itself and its world very seriously."

Also illuminating an oft-debated subject, global brand director at Crystal Dynamics – Karl Stewart – touched on the Tomb Raider trilogy prior to the recently announced franchise reboot.

"As we see it in the studio, neither Legend, Anniversary, nor Underworld were reboots of the Tomb Raider franchise," shares Stewart. "In 2004, when Crystal Dynamics was given responsibility for developing the IP, the story of Lara Croft and Tomb Raider continued pretty much along the same path. Minus a few small alterations, Lara's background didn't change and the lore and canon remained similar to previous communications. I think people perceived it as a reboot because we created a look and feel to the franchise that was inherently defined by Crystal Dynamics, and much fresher than the previous Tomb Raider titles developed by Core Design. I think when you look at what we've presented of late you can see that there's a very clear definition in our eyes of what a 'reboot' within a franchise means."

"I suppose a true reboot would be to start from the beginning as if none of the previous versions ever existed," says Ed Boon, Mortal Kombat co-creator and creative director at NetherRealm Studios. "The new Mortal Kombat is not considered a reboot by the team. The tradition with Mortal Kombat games, and why we've felt the game has maintained its popularity, is that we've always been willing to try new things and change things around. This game

is probably the most dramatic change we've made to the series since we introduced Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance in 2002. This game's story begins at the end of Mortal Kombat: Armageddon. It then does a (sort of) time travel back to the events of the first Mortal Kombat game and we do a retelling of the events of Mortal Kombat, Mortal Kombat 2, and Mortal Kombat 3. This time, however, we are telling that story with all of the new technology available that allows for things we could not have done in 1992."

Boon continues by saying that the new direction allows for a nostalgic return to the original games with a fresh twist, as well as offering a point of entry to the franchise for new players. "Return might be a better word to use than reboot. Our last game was T-rated, had a 'what-if' storyline, and a full 3D fighting plane. This new Mortal Kombat returns to an M-rated presentation, the 2D fighting plane, the original story of the first three titles, and tons of secrets."

Tomb Raider

Twisted Metal

To reboot, or not to reboot?

A reboot isn't so much a concrete concept as an adopted mantra. Even if our developers don't all brand their most recent projects as reboots, they seem to come to the consensus that drastic change was needed within their franchises. Why would a studio undertake such a change? Does opting to reboot or reevaluate mean that a franchise has fallen out of favor with critics? Does it indicate changing consumer tastes? Is a drastic overhaul the same as admitting defeat, or is it a preemptive attempt to forecast a changing market?

"We believe the latter," says Stewart. "Consumers tastes change quite regularly and the things we interact and play with need to feel fresh and relevant. Coming from the retail industry, I've seen firsthand how consumers develop tastes for new things several times each year and how mindsets can change in an instant. Successful communication of any IP in today's market means you have to be culturally relevant."

"It depends on the game," claims Jaffe. "Sometimes you do a reboot out of business necessity, such as losing a key creative from a project or if a team quits and the new one doesn't vibe with the old style. Other times it's because the franchise needs a shot of 'new' to keep it fresh, or because what you tried last time failed and you want to try a different approach."

"I don't think there is a point where someone deems a reboot necessary, and by no means do I consider it throwing in the towel," says Boon. "For Mortal Kombat, when you think about it, it had been six years since we'd featured the original style of fatalities (Mortal Kombat: Deception),

four years since we'd had Mortal Kombat-style blood (Mortal Kombat: Armageddon) and over 15 years since we'd been in the 2D fighting plane (Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3). Also, Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe was such a dramatic departure from the Mortal Kombat formula that it really set the stage for Mortal Kombat to make a big return in all those categories."

Even after the decision has been made, any change – visual, contextual, or mechanical – to an established franchise must be carefully considered. In some cases, fans garnered through decades of content releases are on the line. Despite the risks, there are alluring rewards to giving a franchise a fresh twist.

Origin stories have a particular advantage in this regard. If a series loses steam after years of iteration, fans may be ready for something drastic. Something new. A retelling of a character's origin has the potential to reignite fans' excitement and provide a point of entry to the series for new players. This is especially helpful when early entries in the series don't hold up without the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia. Castlevania: Lords of Shadow is a perfect example in this regard, providing a lauded balance of fan service and freshness, as well as a point of access to a franchise established over 20 years ago.

"If a reboot works, you've revived the patient and the core idea continues to excite and entertain," says Jaffe. "Usually if the reboot works it means you're correctly reading the tea leaves of the day and have brought the core idea into modern times by making it relevant again to the current audience. It's a great feeling because it means the core idea is strong and can survive for a new generation.

"The biggest concerns are if you have guessed wrong, your audience turns on you and thinks you're an idiot for messing with a world/

character they love dearly and feel – rightly so – some ownership in," continues Jaffe. "That said, in most cases if you are looking to make some serious changes to a franchise, it's because the old ways were no longer working."

Using the upcoming Twisted Metal as an example, Jaffe acknowledges that some fans are upset at the decision to remove all but three or four core characters from the game's main campaign. While he appreciates their stance on the issue, he also recognizes that the old model – repetitive campaigns for 10 to 12 characters, all boasting Flash-style comic endings that amount to "twisted knock-knock jokes" – wouldn't fly now. "It worked great in 1995. It kind of worked in 2001. But today? We'd rather roll the dice because we feel the old way is no longer relevant.

"Twisted Metal Black was a success in many ways," Jaffe concludes. "It got the best reviews of any Twisted Metal game. But it also sold the least. That either means the audience was telling us the core idea – despite a super cool new coat of paint – was just no longer relevant. Or it means we chose the wrong new coat of paint. But I think if we had not changed the series up, it would have died from irrelevance and lack of interest. We had to do something."

Not every developer is willing to make the wager, however, and old ideas repackaged in new box art are a testament to this fact. But without the risk, there is no reward.

Whatever terminology one chooses, rebooting, reinventing, or rebranding a franchise isn't the answer for every long-established IP. On the other hand, the willingness of developers to go out on a limb and take a chance – to recognize the need for change within a maturing industry – is something we can all appreciate. ◆

Mortal Kombat

A Clean Slate

While some IP holders are being proactive in their attempts to innovate, others are in dire need of a fresh start. Some of the franchises below have been resting on their brand names instead of attempting innovation. Others have failed to mature with the audience they once captivated. Others still are franchises we're dying to see make a return, that would do better with a clean slate rather than a direct sequel. Check out Game Informer's reboot wish list below.

Monster Hunter

"The Monster Hunter series has maintained popularity in Japan, but there's a reason it failed to take off in North America. I understand that Capcom is going for a balance of risk and reward, but I'd give anything for a 'Westernized' console Monster Hunter game with more responsive controls, faster action, and accessible online multiplayer."

– Phil Kollar

The Legend of Zelda

"The Legend of Zelda is one of my favorite series and I look forward to every new in-stallment, but it never strays from the same classic formula – no spoken dialogue, the princess is always in peril, and surprise, surprise, you have a boomerang. I wouldn't mind seeing a different take on this mythology, where we finally get to hear Link talk and engage in a different scenario. Perhaps outside of Hyrule."

– Andrew Reiner

Pokémon

"Game Freak has taken an 'if it ain't broke' approach to the Pokémon series by maintaining the fundamental mechanics that made catching 'em all so addicting in its 10-plus years of existence. Even though incremental improvements with each new installment show growth, it's safe to say that after five generations of titles it may be time for a reboot, and the 3DS presents an ideal opportunity for change. With features like glasses-free 3D and augmented reality, this can revolutionize the way we locate and capture wild Pokémon and engage in battles with friends. Plus it's about time we find better use of the system's dual screens outside of menu navigation."

– Annette Gonzalez

Metroid

"If anything, Metroid needs to be de-booted. When was the series most acclaimed? During its original, natural 2D times. With Nintendo's recent resurgence of 2D platform-ers in Mario, Donkey Kong, and Kirby, why wouldn't it give Samus the same deserved treatment on Wii or 3DS?"

– Bryan Vore

Madden

"EA has been steadily improving Madden over the past few years, but fans are sick of evolution. It's time to deliver a revolution with a brand new franchise mode, revamped superstar mode, and a physics-based animation system that ditches canned anima-tions for more varied tackling, blocking, running, and receiving. Football dominates American sports, and its video game counterpart should do the same."

– Matt Bertz

Legacy of Kain

"Long before the industry began to embrace violent anti-heroes in games like God of War or Assassin's Creed, Silicon Knights' Legacy of Kain franchise introduced us to the troubled Kain and Raziel. The last entry, Legacy of Kain: Defiance, was unsatisfying, but so much could be done with the haunted world of Nosgoth on today's powerful consoles. Plus, in an industry overloaded with zombies, it's time for these fascinating vampires to reclaim their turf."

– Matt Helgeson

Chrono Trigger

"Chrono Trigger is one of the most revered RPGs of all time, but Square Enix has let it lay dormant. A new entry could reach out to a new audience while drawing in the old-school fans. Who cares if the last game, Chrono Cross, came out almost 10 years ago? The series is all about alternate timelines and dimensions; it would be easy to capture the Chrono essence without being chained down by the events of the previous two titles."

– Joe Juba

Resident Evil

"Capcom has become too comfortable with over-the-top action. I think the series needs to rediscover what made it exceptional: fear. That's hard to evoke when you're delivering haymakers to gigantic boulders in the middle of volcano while your former boss turns into a meat tornado."

– Tim Turi

Devil May Cry

DmC

Release:
TBA

Publisher:
Capcom

Developer:
Ninja Theory

Tomb Raider

TOMB RAIDER

Release:
TBA

Publisher:
Square Enix

Developer:
Crystal Dynamics

Twisted Metal

TWISTED METAL

Release:
2011

Publisher:
Sony Computer Entertainment America

Developer:
Eat Sleep Play
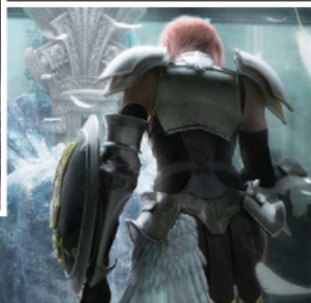
games

Lightning
Strikes Twice
FF XIII-2 Slated for 2012

Square Enix has announced a spin-off for Final Fantasy XIII called Final Fantasy XIII-2. The game is currently scheduled to appear for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 sometime in the winter of next year (and in 2011 in Japan). Whether "winter" refers to early 2012 or holiday 2012 is unknown.

The game is a direct sequel to FF XIII and stars Lightning. More than a just a new story, FF XIII-2 (directed by FF XIII's Motomu Toriyama) also features tweaks to FF XIII's lauded battle system as well as other additions that Toriyama says have been culled from fan feedback to FF XIII.
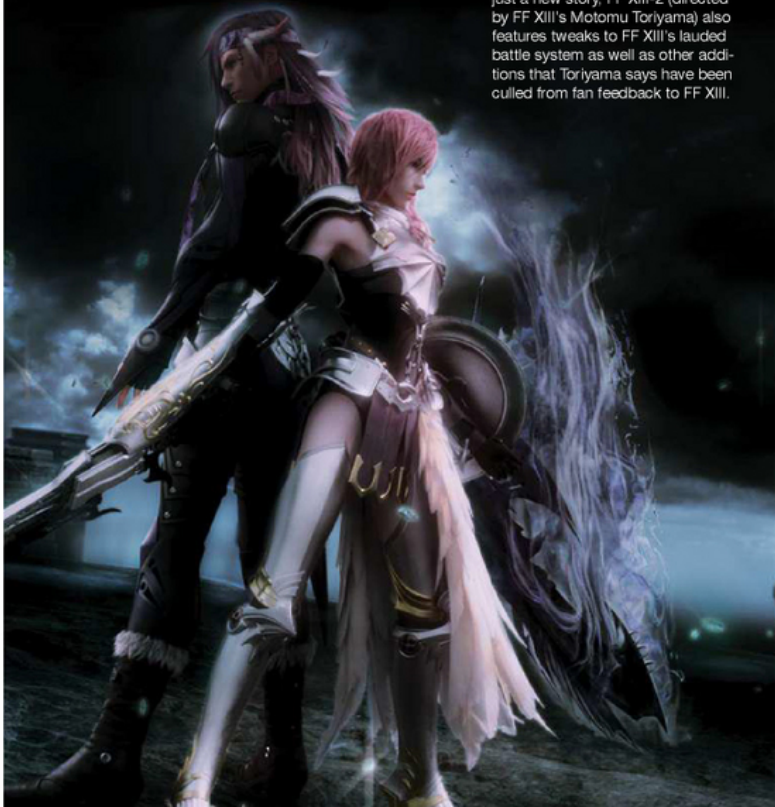
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Only Hydro has a water-activated gel reservoir that hydrates your skin as you shave.

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Only Hydro has skin guards that double the points of contact to smooth skin and reduce irritation.

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NEW NOUVEAU

Schick
HYDRO
3

Schick
HYDRO
3
FREE YOUR SKIN™

Who The Heck Is Ben Heck?

We Chat
With The Prolific
Hardware Modder

Ten years ago, Ben Heckendorn was just a graphic designer from Verona, Wisconsin, who dreamed of building a portable Atari 2600 gaming system. This was before $20 retro plug-and-play systems started cropping on retail shelves, so Heckendorn's portable Atari earned him a lot of attention online. Assuming the pseudonym Ben Heck, this self-taught engineer built an Internet empire, filling orders for everything from Xbox 360 laptops to one-handed guitar controllers. Two years before Sony had even announced the PSP, Ben Heck had created a portable PSone that he dubbed the PlayStation Portable (or PSp). In the last decade, Ben Heck published a book entitled *Hacking Video Game Consoles*, assisted Infinity Ward with the development of Modern Warfare 2, and started *The Ben Heck Show* – a popular mod show sponsored by modding community Element 14. Through it all, Heckendorn has remained an avid gamer. We sat down to chat with the Internet celebrity about gaming, mods, pinball, and Bill Paxton.

interview by Ben Reeves

Seems like your hands are pretty full with all the gaming mods you do for your site and the show. How did you first get involved in all of this?
I used to be a graphic artist way back in the olden days, and I just started doing this stuff as a hobby. In 2004, I got a book deal with Wiley Publishing, so I thought it was a good time to quit my job. I was sick of it anyway, but I never got around to working for the man again. So since 2004, I've been doing prototyping. I didn't starve or anything, but the first couple years were a little lean.

So you've always been into tinkering around with hardware?

About 10 years ago, I got it into my head that I wanted to build a portable Atari 2600 gaming system because I didn't think anyone cared about Atari anymore. I was wrong, obviously. A few months after I finished the portable Atari, I created a GeoCities site and posted it up there just for fun. There was this phenomenal interest. I was getting hundreds of emails a day about it. So, I built another one, and then another one, and the whole thing just sort of snowballed on me. The PS2 was just coming out at the time, so I made a PSone portable, and then I just kept building more and more stuff. As it got into the later part of the decade, I started working on stuff like turning Xbox 360s and Wiis into laptop form. Since I'm

Ben Heck spent five years building Bill Paxton pinball

Ben Heck's first project was building a portable Atari 2600, but he's done plenty of variations on the system like the Nestari, a portable unit that plays both NES and Atari titles

Turning Xbox 360s into laptops has proven to be one of Ben Heck's most popular projects

self-taught, I still manage to destroy plenty of stuff.

What do you do with all this stuff when you're done building it? Do you sell it all or do you hang on to some of it?
I get asked that question a lot, which I find kind of interesting. I don't have a *Citizen Kane*, Xanadu-like mansion where I can keep all this stuff, so it all goes out the door when it's done. I like building it, but I don't necessarily like keeping it. I do have my original Atari portable still, and a few other things that I've built for myself like the pinball machine.

You built a pinball machine?
Yeah, I built a Bill Paxton pinball machine earlier in the year. That was just a custom unit for myself; it wasn't for resale, because that would have been a licensing nightmare. Now I'm doing a *Lost*-themed machine for my friend, and then I'm going to do a Tesla vs. Edison steampunk, Victorian era-themed machine. I know pinball seems primitive, but it's actually an incredibly complicated kind of machine.

What made you want to do that?
I had just built a NeoGeo arcade cabinet for myself, which was a system that I loved, but after I got that done I thought that I should build a pinball machine next. That was my rationale. Why not? I thought I should base it off of Bill Paxton, because he's got a lot of great quotes, and it's a weird theme that will make people scratch their heads. Bill Paxton himself had nothing to do with it. I think a lot of geeks would have done Bruce Campbell or Tricia Helfer pinball, but I wanted to do something weird.

How do you decide what project you will work on next?
A lot of the time people send me requests, so I just choose the ones that I find to be interesting and worth the time. Sometimes I get interesting requests. Back in 2008, one of the guys at Infinity Ward contacted me wanting a latency monitor so they could test the latency in Modern Warefare 2. The problem with games is that when you push the buttons on a controller it has to go through the wires in your system and through all the game's code before hitting your TV. By the time your character jumps or shoots on screen it could be up to 50

milliseconds later – or an entire half-second if you're talking Kinect. Infinity Ward wanted something to measure the lag in Modern Warfare 2 so they could improve it. I built a device for them, and because of that project I've probably built 15 or 16 other units for different studios around the country. So a lot of the time I don't even come up with these projects, my customers do, but then that sort of piggybacks or snowballs into other customers. Back in the old days, I used to think of something I wanted to build and then I would build that thing and post it online, and then someone would contact me saying they wanted to buy it. Now I just sit around and read Facebook until someone sends me an email.

So Infinity Ward contacted you out of the blue?
Yeah, I even got credit for that in the game, which was awesome. At the end of Modern Warfare 2, I think I'm right above the Navy SEALs, so apparently I was more useful than the Navy SEALs.

Do you have a lot of projects that you don't end up putting on the site?
I did something for a quadriplegic. He wanted to make a sip and puff controller so he could play video games with his mouth. I never put that on the site, because I think he wanted to patent it. I don't know whatever happened with him. I actually do accessibility controllers quite a bit – take an Xbox controller and modify it so it can be used with one hand. It seems like I build one of those at least every other week. There are a lot of motorcycle accidents.

Last year you made a Portal shirt, which seemed to earn you a fair amount of attention. What gave you that idea?
Well, obviously, I was originally inspired by the game, because it's a great game. I actually had that idea a few years ago. I was like, "Wow, I could make a Portal shirt for Halloween." But then I thought, "Actually, that's kind of expensive to justify." But then when we started doing the online show I was like, "Hey look, I can do this for the show." I've done that a few times, where I've always wanted to build something and now the show affords me the opportunity to actually do it. For instance, I've always wanted to make a – don't laugh – portable Sega CD game system,

so hopefully we'll be looking at doing that in one of the upcoming shows.

What's been your favorite project to work on?
I don't know. The Xbox 360 laptop has been pretty popular, so I've enjoyed that. There are certainly projects that I've worked on that I hated. The N64 is the flakiest system ever built. You take it apart and it self-destructs. It's ridiculous. It's just terrible.

One thing that tends to set your work apart from other modders is that yours often looks more aesthetically pleasing. What's the main reason for that? Do you feel like something isn't really done until it looks good?
Of course, the aesthetics are the most important part. That's what sets these projects apart. My art background probably helps with that. But it's all advertising. It's all about making something look good and shiny.

What are you playing right now?
Well, I just completed Fallout: New Bug Vegas. I think it only took about 13 crashes to get through it. Then the patch came out, so it was perfect timing. My friends and I played entirely too much Battlefield: Bad Company 2, so I guess I've thoroughly stretched that $50. I also enjoyed Grand Theft Horse – that was fun. There are so many games that come out every year. You know, back in '83 there was that gaming crash where there were too many crappy games to play. Well now we have too many good games to play. How many $50 million games can they release in a year? You can only consume so much. And what is it? Elder's Scrolls V and Uncharted 3 are supposed to come out within a week of each other. It's like, "Come on!" I'm actually jealous of the people that only have one console, because there has got to be a lot less temptation in their lives. ✍

by Adam Biessener

Character creation involves all the customization sliders, bestial warriors, and scantily clad young ladies a gamer can dream of. You've got eight classes spanning the tank/heal/damage spectrum, six wildly different races to choose from, and a preview of what your character will look like in various tiers of endgame armor

Tera
The Other Action-Oriented MMO

En Masse hopes explosive action and end-game player-driven politics propel this Korean-developed MMORPG to Western success. Our hands-on experience shows promise.

The first impression Tera gives is of another me-too Korean MMO import. Developer Blue Hole is setting its sights higher than aping the brightly colored free-to-play grindfests that come to mind when many Western gamers think of Asian MMORPGs. The combat is closer to DC Universe's controller-driven brawling than traditional WoW-style auto-attacking, and it emphasizes positioning and facing to a greater extent than older MMORPG combat models. While the questing and dungeon runs are built on familiar templates, the developers hope that Tera's unusual political system will keep players around for the long haul.

Battles in Tera are hectic, interactive affairs. The two encounters I was able to jump into felt closer to Diablo than EverQuest, as the tank frantically mashed a variety of area-effect stuns and knockdowns while I tried to line up optimal paths for my fiery doom to spray along. Situational awareness plays a big role, particularly in the scripted two-player scenario I played. Monsters charged in from all directions, and my tank buddy and I were both scrambling to round them up and knock 'em down before they chewed on our quest NPC or the next wave spawned. Between laying down ground-targeted abilities, setting up cone-shaped areas of effect, managing energy bars, and trying to roll disabling effects like stuns and roots on enemies, we had our hands full – in a good way. Tera should launch with several smaller-scale instanced scenarios like this for single players or duos.

The five-person dungeon run I tagged along on hewed closer to MMO traditions as we methodically pulled groups of monsters and focus-fired them down on our way to the boss. That three-story final encounter challenged each of us in different ways like a good group encounter should, forcing every member of the party to think on their feet and use all their skills to overcome each phase. What I saw here didn't top Cataclysm's excellent dungeon design, but it did showcase a solid foundation for the developers to build on.

Blue Hole is creating Tera's world with a focus on group content. On top of the expected instanced group dungeons, the company plans on having lots of cooperative zones where the questlines are meant to be tackled with friends. Player-versus-player battlegrounds come in 5v5, 10v10, and 15v15 varieties, and you queue for them through the UI and play across multiple servers. More importantly, success in the highest tier of PvP combat ties into the endgame political system that the developers have such high hopes for.

This player-driven, server-wide political system has several ramifications, but we only know the specifics of a few. The first is obviously bragging rights. Who isn't going to be proud to work with their guild and take over the world's high offices? Second, and more importantly, being elected the Vanarch of a province gives you unique mounts and buildings that announce your status to the server at large. Your guild will also set and collect taxes on that province – but if you bleed players dry with crippling taxes you'll have a hard time holding your office in the next election.

En Masse hasn't given out any further details of Tera's political structure, but it would be a missed opportunity for Vanarchs to not compete for a larger prize. We know that guilds will vie for political power of some kind in rated PvP battlegrounds, but not how powerful those boons will be.

Having played Tera, I'm not concerned about the moment-to-moment gameplay being fun. That's already there and it's not even in proper beta yet. The larger question is whether these vague promises of a far-reaching player-driven political endgame ever coalesce into a solid, engaging system that will keep players subscribing over the long term. ◈

Worldwide Warcraft

The Top 5 WoW Guilds

Paragon
Finland • Horde

Notable Achievements:
Though Paragon didn't hit its pace-setting stride until the middle of Wrath of the Lich King, the guild owns most of the Cataclysm heroic raid world firsts. At the time of this writing they are the only guild in the world to have defeated Nefarian in heroic mode.

Method
Europe • Alliance

Notable Achievements:
Was the first to defeat the hardest encounter of Wrath of the Lich King at the time: Sartharion with all three drakes left alive in 10-player mode. Method owns two heroic Cataclysm world firsts as well.

Gamers can be as ethnocentric as the next demographic, but the stats don't lie. The best of the best World of Warcraft guilds come from all over the globe. Depending on the day of the week, you won't see a single U.S. guild in the top five on raid progression tracking site wowprogress.com, from which these rankings were pulled. *by Adam Biessener*

For the Horde
Europe · Horde (Ouh)

Notable Achievements:
These hardcore Germans had the world-first kill of heroic Cho'gall, one of the hardest Cataclysm bosses. For the Horde has been just behind Paragon and Method on several Cataclysm boss kills.

Stars
Taiwan · Horde

Notable Achievements:
Stars had the world-first Alone in the Darkness achievement for killing Yogg-Saron in Ulduar with no assistance from the Keepers, and is just barely edging out fellow Taiwanese guild 夢想 as well as U.S.-based guilds vodka and Premonition for the #5 spot, despite having the same number of heroic bosses down as of press time. ◆

Ensidia
Europe · Horde

Notable Achievements:
The worldwide top guild for much of Wrath of the Lich King, boasting world firsts on some of the toughest fights of that expansion like Algalon and Mimiron's hard mode. Ensidia also has world firsts for three Cataclysm heroic raid bosses.

All rankings are per wowprogress.com as of January 24, 2011

PASSPORT

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Torchlight
Xbox Live Arcade

Atari gets serious about downloads, and updated impressions of some of

If you're not a PC gamer, you probably don't know much about **Torchlight**. That's about to change as the cult game makes its way to XBLA in just a few weeks. The loot-grabbing, monster-slaying concept invites comparisons to Diablo, and the team at Runic Games embraces the similarities. Runic has crafted a bewitching mix of leveling and treasure collection that is hard to resist. I asked producer Brock Jones about how the game is changing for consoles, particularly with PC-specific features like mouse-targeted powers. "We tested a lot of control schemes before settling on a set that really felt just right," Jones explains. "Targeted skills were an area that we invested a lot of effort. The exact way that 'placed' skills like the Vanquisher's traps behave is dependent on what button you map them to. If you map a trap skill to one of the controller's standard digital buttons, the trap will be thrown a set distance in front of your character. If, however, you map the trap skill to one of the controller's two analog triggers, you can control the distance you throw with how far you pull the trigger." Beyond targeting adjustments, there are also some minor tweaks to combat difficulty, as

well as a new UI and inventory. In addition, look for three sweet new armor sets exclusive to the 360, one for each class. Sadly, Torchlight is still only a single-player game, but there will be some special in-game unlocks for inviting other players to try the game – a devious way to recruit new players into the mix, if you ask me.

If I had to name the downloadable games I'm most excited about in 2011, **Bastion** would be right up there at the top of my list. A few months back, I wrote about my first time playing this debut title from Supergiant Games. The team sent along an updated build this month, and my impressions are only improving as I see more of the project. Bastion is a visually stunning action game with RPG overtones. Players explore a shattered world that comes into being as the main character moves through it. The rich fantasy backdrop is afforded an equally compelling story thanks to the Narrator, a character who describes the onscreen action as it occurs in a warm, sonorous baritone. The effect is one of a kind. The Kid, as the protagonist is called, sets out to reassemble his broken land by journeying out into its remnants after some awful calamity. The early levels I played were short and action-

packed, and each had something that set it apart. In one, the land was falling apart around me. In another, I had to escape as swarms of enemies continually crowded the stage. After each level, I returned to the Bastion, where my efforts helped to remake the old world. Role-playing dynamics enter the picture thanks to a number of upgradeable weapons and powers, and your character levels as you explore. The folks at Supergiant tell me that we'll all be able to play the complete game sometime this summer. It's likely to hit one console first, as the developers want to focus their efforts, but the team hopes that PS3, 360, and PC can get the full treatment eventually.

If you haven't played the cult classic favorite **Beyond Good & Evil**, the best chance you're ever going to have is on the way. The newly remade version, called Beyond Good & Evil HD, is about to hit Xbox Live. It's been years since I played through the original, but as I dug back into this visually enhanced version, I was reminded of just how fun it really is. Great characters and a remarkably original setting headline the act, but there's plenty more to love. Heroine Jade is tasked with snapping pictures along the

Bastion
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC

Yar's Revenge
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC

The four-player cooperative adventure casts the players as new Ghostbusters who join up after the days of Venkman and Spengler, though the old fellows are still referenced in the story. There's even some follow-up on events from *Ghostbusters 2*, if you'd believe it. A top-down action game, the main focus is on blasting hordes of phantasms that come pouring in from every direction. Dual-stick controls are easy to grasp; the whole thing feels pretty arcade-like. The big gameplay kink is the need to change weapons to match particularly colored ghosts coming your way. Incidentally, the whole crossing streams thing? That's been conveniently left behind. I'm all for a little co-op shenanigans – here's hoping the final version does justice to the well-loved property.

One of Atari's oldest games is finally getting a makeover, and my early sense of the new direction is positive. If you were born after 1980 you probably don't have much recollection of the best-selling **Yar's Revenge**, one of the more complex and unusual games that released on the 2600. The new game recasts Yar as a badass girl in a mechanized combat suit. Yar's Revenge plays as a rail shooter in the style of Space Harrier, Panzer Dragoon, or Star Fox 64, but it uses the twin-stick shooter mechanic found in the recent Sin & Punishment 2. The on-rails action is inspired by Hayao Miyazaki's animation, and the gameplay includes weapon and armor upgrades and branching level paths. There are even two different endings that determine the fate of Yar's homeworld. The game includes drop in/drop out co-op on either your own console or online – a feature that I've never heard anyone complain about in my history with video games. I've yet to play a lick of it, but I've got to admit to a fair bit of excitement about this title, which is said to release early this spring.

It's no secret around the office that I'm a big fan of classic tabletop games. So I'll be interested to see if **Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale** turns out to be a good time. The game is a hack-and-slash extravaganza that has players building a character, questing, and exploring the Dalelands. The Forgotten Realms world in which the game is set is the same that's been tapped by classics like Baldur's Gate and Neverwinter Nights, though this new affair seems decidedly more action-oriented than those previous efforts. The game will be solo-able, but four-player online co-op and two-player local co-op are both options. Of interest is the fact that Atari plans the game to be episodic in nature, so we could be seeing expansions in the future that connect up to this first release. Cross your fingers for a fun fantasy dungeon crawler to emerge upon release later this spring. ◆

2011's coolest upcoming titles *by Matt Miller*

adventure, and the photo collection mechanic is engaging and fun. A well-paced story mixes combat and exploration in equal measure, and some simple puzzles are peppered along the way. My time with the game revealed an in-game camera that is an artifact of its era, and some of the animation feels a little stiff by today's standards. Beyond that, the graphical makeover is gorgeous. It may be that Ubisoft is putting the

game out now to test the waters for the sequel.

Atari is in the midst of a big push on new downloadable games. I had the chance to check out three of those titles this month. I was able to play several hours of the first of them, entitled **Ghostbusters: Sanctum of Slime**. As the game is still in pre-alpha, it's hard to speak to its quality one way or another, but I did get a good sense of where they're going with the title.

Beyond Good & Evil HD
Xbox Live Arcade

Ghostbusters: Sanctum of Slime
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC

Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC, iOS

The Independent Spirit

INDEPENDENT GAMES FESTIVAL

by Meagan Marie

nother new year marks the return of the perennial Game Developers Conference, and subsequently the premiere festival celebrating the best games and the brightest minds in independent gaming. The 13th annual Independent Games Festival Awards heralds the convergence of indie icons and luminaries in San Francisco, where an elite few will walk away with a sizable cash prize – and perhaps more significantly, the eyes of the industry upon their work.

The awards are broken down into categories acknowledging excellence in design, art, audio, technical prowess, and more. Leading the pack of nominees are Frictional Games' Amnesia: The Dark Descent and Markus "Notch" Persson's sandbox phenomenon Minecraft, each garnering a trio of nods. Other prominent indie titles are up for accolades, including Supergiant's stunning debut title Bastion and Gaijin Games' colorful Bit.Trip Runner. In the true spirit of the show, nominees range from one-person startups to established studios, all united under the indie banner.

Competition was particularly stiff this year, with over 400 games submitted for consideration by the IGF, topping the record-breaking 306 entries catalouged in 2009. The 2011 festivities also welcome the Best Mobile Game award to the fold, marking a convergence of two previously segregated conference tracks. The decision seems particularly relevant this year, as 2009 Seumas McNally Grand Prize winner Erik Svedang's newest venture, Shot Shot Shoot, was developed and nominated for the iPad.

The influx of entries merited an even more stringent evaluation process this year. A pool of over 150 judges took on the daunting task of playing and evaluating each submission before nominating their top choices for a given category [disclosure: I was a part of this intitial pool]. From there, the nominations were passed onto smaller juries within discipline-specific fields, comprised of working professionals who could speak to an area of expertise – audio, technical, art, or otherwise. This pool is responsible for the final list of nominees, and the ultimate winners will be chosen by an even more select jury of experts.

Nearly $50,000 is on the line, with the winners slated to be announced on the evening of March 2 immediately preceding the 2011 Game Developer Choice Awards. The ceremony is the culmination of the Independent Games Summit, which packs lectures, presentations, and intelligent indie discourse into the two days prior to the main conference kickoff.

Regularly compared to the Sundance Film Festival, the attention garnered from an IGF nod is staggering for an indie developer, and often a launching point for a successful career. The developers of Darwinia, Braid, World of Goo, and more recently Limbo avoided potential obscurity when the IGF recognized their phenomenal work, and we expect to see more indie heavyweights born from this most recent showcase.

Be sure to visit gameinformer.com February 24 – March 2 for the return of Indie Week, where you'll find previews of all the IGF nominees as well as a breakdown of the winners as news breaks.

The Top 5 Contenders
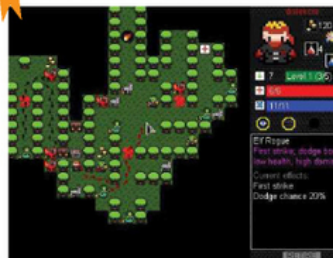
Desktop Dungeons

Desktop Dungeons takes the heart of the RPG subgenre roguelike and distills it into a short-and-sweet coffee break excursion. The finely tuned balance of superficial fun and surprising depth makes each playthrough unexpectedly fulfilling.

Every adventure starts the player as a level one character that must explore vast dungeons, best foes, gain experience, scavenge loot, purchase equipment, maintain favor of the gods, and ultimately take on a level ten boss.

Exploring new territory within a dungeon is valuable, as uncovering new ground via adjacent tiles renews both the player's health and mana reserves. In this regard, exploration is an art form. One must navigate about uncovered territory to attack monsters within their skill range, level up, heal through uncovering more tiles, and then begin the process of boosting their XP once again. The process feels almost like a puzzle at times, training you to explore and take on enemies in a formulaic, but undoubtedly fun, order.

Depth is added through ailments and status changes, potions and spells, equipment and upgrades, and so on. Desktop Dungeons derives longevity from the comprehensive race and class systems, all of which boast unique skills and unlockable challenges to further encourage replaying. If you're like me, little encouragement will be needed to dedicate hours upon hours to Desktop Dungeons.

- **Developer** QCF Design
- **Platform** Windows
- **Release** Available Now
- **Price** Free

2011 Independent Games Festival Finalists *and the nominees are…*

Seumas McNally Grand Prize:
- Amnesia: The Dark Descent (Frictional Games)
- SpyParty (Chris Hecker)
- Desktop Dungeons (QCF Design)
- Minecraft (Mojang Specifications)
- Nidhogg (Messhof)

Excellence In Visual Art
- Bastion (Supergiant Games)
- The Dream Machine (Cockroach)
- Cave Story (2010 Edition) (Nicalis)
- Bit.Trip Runner (Gaijin Games)
- Hohokum (Honeyslug & Richard Hogg)

Technical Excellence
- Minecraft (Mojang Specifications)
- Confetti Carnival (SpikySnail Games)
- Amnesia: The Dark Descent (Frictional Games)
- Neverdaunt:8Bit (Robot Loves Kitty)
- Miegakure (Marc Ten Bosch)

Excellence In Design
- Desktop Dungeons (QCF Design)
- Super Crate Box (Vlambeer)
- Nidhogg (Messhof)
- Faraway (Steph Thirion)
- Minecraft (Mojang Specifications)

Excellence In Audio
- Bastion (Supergiant Games)
- Retro City Rampage (Vblank Entertainment)
- Amnesia: The Dark Descent (Frictional Games)
- Bit.Trip Beat (Gaijin Games)
- Cobalt (Oxeye Game Studio)

The Seumas McNally Grand Prize is awarded each year to a title that most exemplifies independent development. With $20,000 on the line, a nomination isn't to be taken lightly. Read on for a peek at the IGF's top five contenders.

Minecraft

If there's been a single Cinderella story of 2010, the distinction goes to Mojang Specifications' Minecraft. Creator Markus "Notch" Persson first conceptualized the game in May of 2009 and it quickly garnered attention from the press and a rabid following of fans, nabbing hundreds of thousands in sales while still in alpha.

Built upon a foundation of tedium, the highly addictive and rewarding sandbox title is more a tool for one's imagination than an explicit game. The core functionality tasks players with constructing environments and objects out of textured cubes harvested in a simplistic 3D world. As the name implies, mining is paramount to crafting ever more complex items. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Minecraft, however, is the ingenuity of its fans. Some of the most dedicated players have gone so far as to recreate BioShock's Rapture, Portal's Aperture Science facilities, and even a scale model of the U.S.S. Enterprise.

Having met such massive success through Minecraft, Persson founded Mojang Specifications in Stockholm, and now employs a handful of staffers who support both Minecraft and the development of a yet-to-be-announced second game. As of January 12, Minecraft has passed one million sales.

» **Developer** Mojang Specifications
» **Platform** Java
» **Release** Beta Available Now
» **Price** $19.99
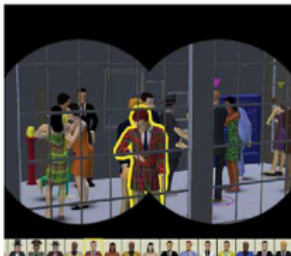
SpyParty

While SpyParty is more of a prototype than a fully realized game, the unique concept's potential is immediately apparent. A skill-based espionage game, winning is contingent on one's power of observation and ability to catalogue subtle human behavior.

Unfolding during a high society cocktail party, the player takes on the role of a sniper or a spy. Attendees converse casually, sip drinks, gaze at scenery, and examine art. As a spy amongst the throng of elite, you must practice these behaviors and move with confidence in order to survive long enough to complete four goals. Each goal has an associated tell, and a pair of eyes are always on the lookout for such standout behavior. As the sniper, the player must observe the partygoers, identify the spy, and eliminate him or her once confident in their intuition.

Experience is key to playing SpyParty successfully. Creator Chris Hecker has been quite transparent about his "depth-first, accessibility later" development model, making known that depth and replayability are prioritized over accessibility in this early stage. If you've played even a handful more rounds than your opponent, chances are you will best them in this skill-driven game. All of Spy Party's art, audio, and interfaces are placeholder assets for the time being, so the game isn't much to look at. That being said, the unique emphasis on behavior, perception, and ultimately deception makes it a standout title worthy of recognition.

» **Developer** Chris Hecker
» **Platform** PC
» **Release** TBA
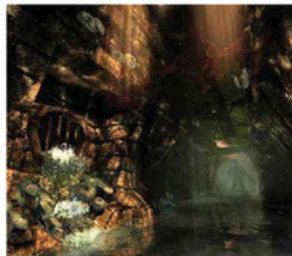
Amnesia: The Dark Descent

A first-person survival horror title with an emphasis on atmosphere, Amnesia: The Dark Decent is the brainchild of Penumbra creators Frictional Games.

Amnesia places you in the shoes of Daniel, a protagonist suffering from a case of self-inflicted memory loss. Wandering aimlessly through a dilapidated Prussian castle, letters penned by his own hand indicate that some things are perhaps best left forgotten. Daniel's past self assures him through written instructions that finding a man deep within the castle named Alexander, and subsequently murdering him, will set everything right.

Odd happenings occur around every corner and vastly effect the way the game is played. If Daniel spends too long in the dark he will begin to lose his mind. When his mental faculty dips into dangerous territory, the floor begins to waver, walls pulse, and his head spins. The effect is disorienting and makes it even more difficult to discern between what is real and what is a result of Daniel's fevered frenzy. Lurking enemies make exploration unnerving, as one never knows what sort of horror waits in the darkness.

Extremely polished for an indie title, Frictional powers its games with proprietary technology created by a studio of around five full-time staffers.

» **Developer** Frictional Games
» **Platform** Windows, Mac, Linux
» **Release** Available Now
» **Price** $19.99

Nidhogg

Nidhogg appears to be a simple pick-up-and-play game, but it boasts a surprising amount of strategy. Branded as a fencing game with light platforming elements, two individuals challenge each other as they vie to gain ground on their side of the screen. A quick jab to the torso will render your enemy a pile of pixels, and in the few moments between respawns ground is yours to gain. The ultimate goal is to make it to the furthest reaches of your side of the screen, where a cheering crowd celebrates your victory.

There is an inherent chaos to play, as combinations of moving, ducking, running, jabbing, sliding, and even throwing your weapon results in a constant ebb and flow. You may have the advantage at one moment, but be desperately on the defensive the next. A short match could last a mere minute, but seems an eternity.

According to developer Messhof, single-player and networked multiplayer are currently in development, in addition to more diverse levels. With intentionally simple graphics, sometimes jarring color combinations, and trance-inducing music, Nidhogg is a fast, frantic, and ultimately quirky title worth watching. ◆

» **Developer** Messhof
» **Platform** PC
» **Release** TBA

⭐ The Nuovo Award *and the nominees are…*

Best Mobile Game
» Shot Shot Shoot (Erik Svedang)
» Colorbind (Nonverbal)
» Helsing's Fire (Ratloop)
» Solipskier (Mikengreg)
» Halcyon (Stfj)

Created to honor "abstract, shortform, and unconventional game development that advances the medium and the way we think about games," a Nuovo Award nomination is one of the utmost IGF honors. A special jury of judges comprised of "the top thinkers on the future of art and the video game medium" cherry-picked the eight nominees below, including the likes of Jason Rohrer (Between), Paolo Pedercini (Every Day the Same Dream), Ian Bogost (A Slow Year), and Daniel Benmergui (Today I Die).

» Bohm (Monobanda)
» A House in California (Cardboard Computer)
» Nidhogg (Messhof)
» Dinner Date (Stout Games)
» Loop Raccord (Nicolai Troshinsky)
» The Cat and the Coup (Peter Brinson and Kurosh ValaNejad)
» Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now (B.U.T.T.O.N.) (Copenhagen Game Collective)
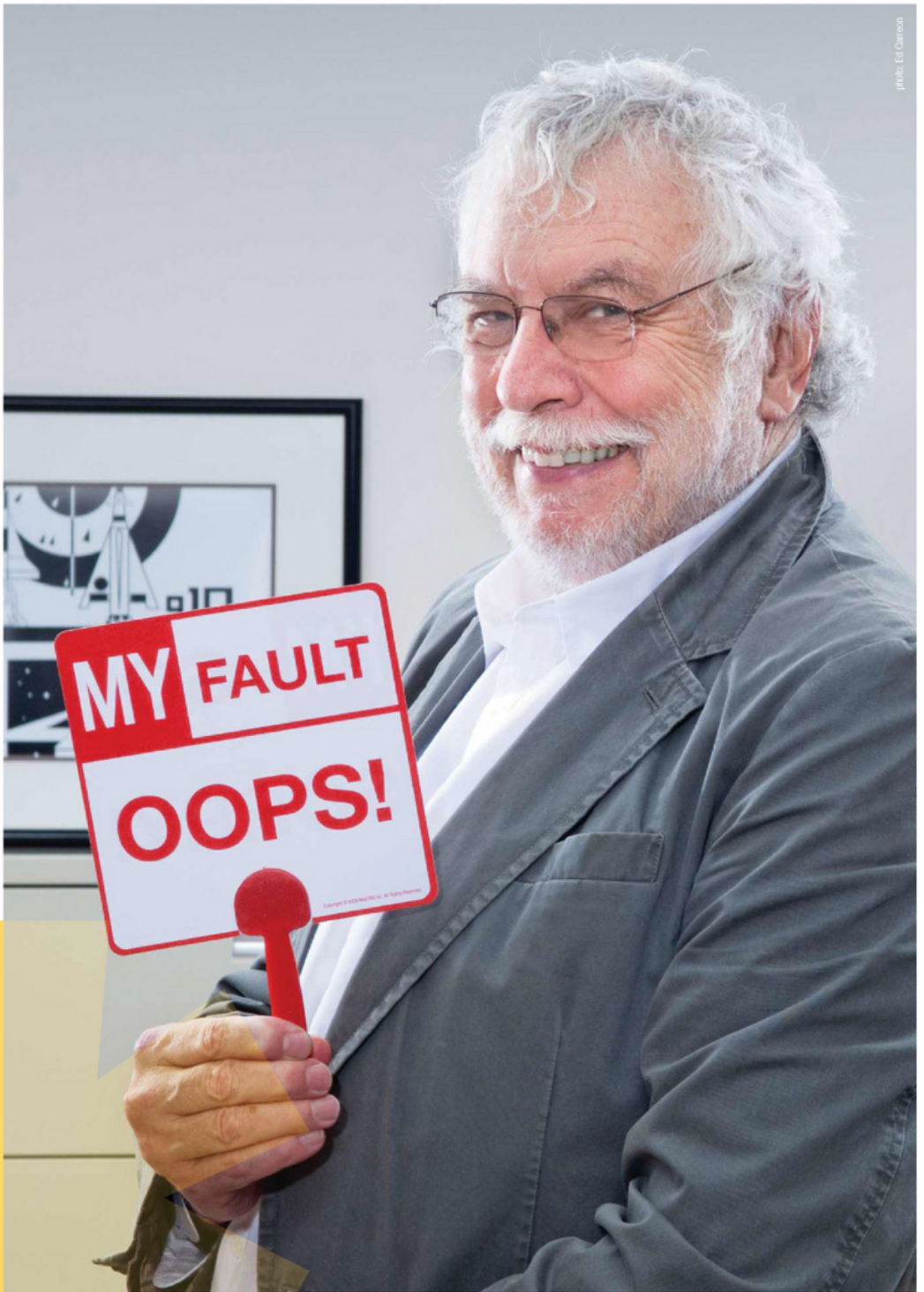» Hazard: The Journey of Life (Demruth)

The Father of the Game Industry Returns to Atari

Though others created video games before him, Nolan Bushnell is undoubtedly the father of the video game industry. The founder of Atari launched his career off the phenomenal success of the company's Pong arcade unit, and then established the home console market with the Atari VCS (or 2600). We were thrilled to have the chance to talk to Bushnell, who recently rejoined the board of the company he helped found, and hear him reflect on his career and the future of the industry he created.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Before Pong, you created Computer Space, based on Steve Russell's Space War. It's still one of the most gorgeous arcade cabinets ever made. Talk about how that project started.

I played Space War in college. I was probably the only guy that put himself through college managing the games department of an amusement park. I managed two relatively expansive arcades. It was what I considered to be an obvious thing: if you could take this multimillion dollar computer and put it in an amusement park, people would play this game like crazy. When I graduated, I figured out a way to cost-reduce it. I set forth to do that game in a public, coin-operated format. The cabinet was serendipity. I sat down with a bunch of modeling clay and actually sculpted an 18-inch model of it on my kitchen table.

Computer Space ultimately wasn't very successful.

I thought it was a marginal product, but we did end up doing about $3 million. The royalties from it did allow me to do Pong. We licensed Computer Space to a company called Nutting Associates. They had two important effects. The first was that it could not have been a more screwed up company. One thing about working for a screwed up company is that it gives you confidence. You say, "I don't know much, but I know I won't screw things up as much as these guys." [Laughs]

I interviewed Ralph Baer a few years ago, and he's still very adamant that Pong was based on his ping-pong game for the Odyssey, which he claims you saw at a demonstration he did. How do you respond to that?

Well, he's absolutely right in that I saw his Odyssey game and, candidly, I thought it was crap. But it did provide the genesis. What Ralph doesn't like to tell you is that the very first game ever made, by Wally Higgenbotham, was a ping-pong game. It was called Tennis for Two on the oscilloscope. Also, during the same time Steve Russell's Space War was going around on the PDP-1s. There were a whole bunch of other games we programmed for PDP-1. I played a ping-pong game in the computer labs in 1964. But, the Odyssey game retriggered it at the same time that I hired Al Alcorn. I put Al on the project of turning the ping-pong game into

a good one. Ralph's product definitely triggered that decision for me.

The legend is that when you put Pong into a bar, you got a call because they thought it was broken, but it turned out that it had filled up with quarters.

That's an absolutely true story, by the way.

When did you know you had a phenomenon on your hands?

The day we opened it and all the quarters came tumbling out. I remember the conversation with Alcorn. He said, "How do we know if this is successful or not?" I said, "Well, a good coin operated game will make $10 a day, a phenomenon will do about $20 a day. Pong was doing $35 to $40 a day." It was outside the realm of anything I'd experienced in the realm of the amusement park or the coin-op business. These were the days when you could buy a pinball machine for $700 and it would do $10 a week and you could make a lot of money.

Apple founder Steve Jobs worked for you at Atari. What are your memories and impressions of him?

I loved Steve, and I still do. He is a prickly, brilliant man. I had this attitude that, if you were good, and didn't fit – that was the problem of the company, not the individual. People come in a bunch of different sizes. So I saved Jobs from being fired a couple of times, because he was a little difficult. Ultimately, I got him to work on Breakout! on the night shift. The engineering department didn't have a night shift, but I put him on one just so he wouldn't piss everyone off! [Laughs]

Looking back at that era, with guys like you, Jobs, Alcorn, Steve Wozniak, even Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer, there was a generation of people who fundamentally changed the way we live with technology. What was it about those days that allowed people like you to do what you did?

In some ways, it was youth. When I started Atari, I was in my late twenties. No one had ever had a CEO in their twenties in the technology business. It was dominated by IBM and Hewlett Packard. You really didn't get any kind of management position until you had gray hair. I was the first guy that came along, and kept trying to hire a president, but every time I did they'd

screw it up worse than I did, so I'd fire him and take it over again. Pretty soon, it got to the idea that knowing your product and knowing the technology was more important than gray hair because things were changing so fast that you were throwing away that 20 years of experience every day. That's what changed the world. It really allowed the world to turn into a real meritocracy of dynamic change.

Atari was always purported to have a real crazy, party atmosphere. Was it that wild, or is that exaggerated?

It was much wilder than you could possibly imagine. At Atari, we had an average age of 21 or 22. All the executives were in their late twenties or early thirties. Al Alcorn, when he did Pong, was 26 years old. We found that bonuses and things like that weren't nearly as effective as having a party. So we would say, "Hit these quotas and we will have a kegger on the back dock." It was one of those things where it had a really interesting corporate culture. We were all friends, we all loved to party together, and we were really locked together in this thing to change the world. We had a lot of fun. It was pre-AIDS, and everyone was sleeping with everyone else. It was insane.

Things took a very different turn once you sold the company to Warner Bros. Do you regret that decision?

I regret it every day of my life.

Why did you feel you had to sell the company at that point?

Well, we had what looked like a monster product, which turned out to be true – the 2600. It was very clear that we needed a massive amount of capital to bring that to market in the right way. We were trying to take the company public to raise capital. I had never taken a company public and I distrusted Wall Street. I got a call from the underwriter saying, "The market's taken a hit; we're not going to be able to raise as much money as we thought." Scared the s--- out of me. What I didn't realize is that they make that call to everybody! [Laughs]

So, I thought that I would either do a faceplant trying to bring this product to market without enough capital or I need to get a big partner. Steve Ross, who was the head of Warner Communications at the time, was one of the

slickest talking sales guys around. He convinced me that everything would be the same, that they left their management alone. They'd put the money in and basically it would just be a bigger sandbox for us to play in. That was, of course, total bulls---. But he convinced us to take some money and we put in a bonus program so that we could all get rich. More than that, the amount of money they were offering was more money than I ever envisioned having. So I said, "Hell, why not?"

Ultimately, things changed at Atari. Depending on what you read, you were either forced out or left the company. What is the truth?
Well, it was one of those things where the first year was okay and the second year got very difficult for me. I started being a f------ pain in the ass. [Laughs] [I took] this attitude of "I don't care if I get fired, I'm going to continue to fight for what I think is right." There was this showdown in New York – "F--- you, Nolan, you're fired!" and "F---you, I quit!" [Laughs]

It must have been painful to leave the company that had been your baby.
It was, but understand that, the year before, I had purchased Chuck E. Cheese from Atari because they didn't want to do it. So I was doing that on the side and it was doing the equivalent of Pong – it was making more money than anyone had ever figured. So I thought I could spend my time at Chuck E. Cheese and let these jokers do their thing their way. They were going to do that anyway, so I thought it would be a lot less headache.

After you left, there was the great crash of the video game industry in 1983. Looking back, was there anything that could have been done to prevent that?
I know absolutely that it wouldn't have happened under my watch. On the day we shipped the first VCS systems, I said, "Okay, that's done, now we have to get a product that will replace it." Warner had just bought the company, and they were horrified. They said, "Are you kidding me?" But we had made so many tradeoffs in making that technology – the VCS only had 128 bytes of memory! That's nothing. We did it because of cost. But, from the time we did the final engineering until the time it came out, memory had dropped in cost by a factor of ten. So let's do the next version [of the Atari] with more memory. We didn't have quarter-inch pixels because we thought that was cool! [Laughs] We were trying to hit a price point under $200. We could have hit that with the next generation console. My view was that you always wanted to make yourself obsolete with the new stuff. Because – if you didn't do it – somebody else will. I believe that the meltdown in '82-'83 was strictly because they tried to push another 15 million VCS/2600 units into a market that was already saturated. If we had taken the early adopters – the guys that had bought units in 1977 – and upgraded them, we could have avoided all that.

After a few years, Nintendo stepped in and did that, which revitalized the home console industry. As an outsider, what's your view of Nintendo as a company?
I think they've been brilliant with a lot of things that they've done. The thing that's interesting about Nintendo is that it basically emulated a lot of what Atari did, just years later. In those days, Japan was an isolated market. When we tried to sell the VCS in Japan, it wasn't a tariff barrier, it was a business practice barrier. A product that could be bought at Sears for $170, if you tried to by it in a [Tokyo] department store, you'd have to pay the equivalent of over $400. There was the wholesaler and the importer and the jobber and the stocking distributor. Nintendo did a Breakout clone and sold it to the consumer market. That's what funded their ability to make the Nintendo Entertainment System.

You've said some things over the years that suggest you take a dim view of what the modern game industry has become. For one, you said in 2007,

"Videogames today are a race to the bottom. They are pure, unadulterated trash and I'm sad for that." More recently you described social gaming as "sitting in a dark room in your underpants talking to thousands of people... it's not cool." How do you feel about the industry?
What I was concerned about at that point in time was that the game business had truncated down to about 18 million players. When Atari was in full bloom, about 40 percent of Americans answered positively to the question, "Have you played a video game in the last week?" That was over 100 million people. What was happening was that the games got complex. That lost the casual player. They got violent, and that lost the women. The market didn't notice it because they were making so much money on the Mortal Kombats and things like that. It was all violence based. I felt it was unnecessary to alienate that much of the marketplace. The social games at that time were pretty silly, in my estimation.

What games specifically?
I don't want to trash any game too much. But I always took a dim view of Grand Theft Auto because it wasn't socially redeeming. You don't want to glorify anti-social behavior, and I felt it wasn't good for society. It sounds really quaint right now, but Atari had a prohibition against creating violence against another human being. If you notice, in the early days, we never had something where you would shoot a humanoid character. Any game that had that came from someone else. It wasn't until the late '80s until, all of a sudden, violence against people was acceptable. We said, "You can blow up a tank, you can blow up a plane, but you can't shoot a person" – let alone having blood spatter out of his head.

In the last few years, some of the new mobile and social platforms and companies like PopCap have brought back a lot of games that hark back to the simple style of games that you were making in the 1980s. Is that interesting to you?
Absolutely, and you're seeing participation go up to the levels it was in the early days of Atari again. It's good. If you look at the casual games space now, it's growing by leaps and bounds. Some of the companies in that space are doing extremely well. We put Asteroids online as a casual game and it's done wonderfully – surprisingly wonderfully.

Do you still play games as a hobby?
Yes. Recently, I've been diving into some of the Facebook games and trying to understand some of the metrics. I think there's some brilliant stuff there. You'll have to see some of the stuff that Atari has coming, it will knock your socks off.

As you just mentioned, you have come full circle and are now back with Atari again.
It's fun. It's like being a grandfather instead of a father. Instead of running the company, you advise.

How did you end up coming back to the company?
Well, Atari has always been interesting to me. I actually tried to buy Atari last year. I had written up a plan. A couple of things happened and the company was suddenly no longer for sale. They said, "We like some of your ideas, why don't you come back and join the board." That seemed like a good idea.

What is your role as at Atari now?
I know the deep, extensive catalog of Atari products – not just when I was there. I've always kept up and played everything they've done. I feel like I'm a keeper of the history. At the same time, I know that Atari stood for innovation and really good, sound products. I sit in on a lot of the greenlight meetings with our developers and talk about ways that we can make sure we maintain the legacy of Atari while pushing it into the future.

Things haven't gone well for Atari in the last few years. What do you see as the vision for the company moving forward? Is it in the casual space? Will you still be making games for the home console market?
The home console business is where really good stuff happens. The casual space is fun and interesting and we'll be doing a lot of things like Asteroids Online. But we still believe that the Xbox, PlayStation, and the other platforms still have a presence in the marketplace that we have to be a part of.

The cost of development of triple-A games for the current consoles is extremely high, and a lot of companies are struggling with that. Do you feel you can still make big bets in the console space?
We feel we can make good bets, smart bets. "Big" is in the eye of the beholder, and we feel that there is a good way of walking that tightrope. We're not going to bet the company, but we think we can bring high production values to good products. Does that mean we're going to try to do the *Avatar* of games? Probably not, but at the same time there are some damn good stand-up singles that can bring a

Asteroids Online

good return on investment. We're trying to be pragmatic.
You mentioned Asteroids Online. Are you planning to bring other old franchises to new platforms?
Yeah, one of my favorites is Yar's Revenge...also Star Raiders. I could tell you some more but I won't. Comparing old Asteroids to Asteroids Online will give you an idea of what we're trying to do with some of our old IP. You have to admit Tempest was a tremendous game. All the way from Paperboy to some of these others, these are wonderful game dynamics. The fact that they were done in 8-bit graphics doesn't mean that you can't do some wonderful things through upgrading.

Looking back at your career, what's the one thing that you would do differently if you could do it over again?
Well, I wouldn't have sold Atari when I did. That's one thing. Also, when I sold Chuck E. Cheese, I would have gotten back into the game software business, which I didn't do at the time. There were a lot of interesting opportunities. So being back with Atari is really fun.

What would you like your legacy to be?
I'm the father of eight wonderful children. I have five sons, all of whom are involved in games to one degree or another. A couple of them have game companies that are fledgling and moving forward. It's fun to mentor. All of a sudden, instead of your kids saying, "Dad, I don't want to know about that!", they call up and say, "Dad, how did you do that? What should I do when they say this?" I just tell them, "The guys that are investment bankers are scumbags!" [Laughs] ◆

Razer Switchblade

Keys To The Portable Kingdom

by Ben Reeves

Traveling is fun, but PC games get neglected in the process. While you're away from home, your PC games are alone in the dark calling your name. It might not stay that way for long, however. Razer wants to revolutionize PC gaming by making it easier for travelers to play high-end PC titles in coffee shops and hotel rooms across the country.

Razer's Switchblade uses Intel's Atom processor to provide desktop-level gaming on a laptop the size of a tablet. Razer has replaced the traditional mouse-and-keyboard interface with an ultra-sensitive multi-touch screen and dynamic tactile keyboard. Every key on the Switchblade functions like a tiny LED. Based on game content and user requirements, the Switchblade's intelligent interface reconfigures key layouts on the fly to fit any computing need.

Feeling the urge to scratch that StarCraft II itch? The Switchblade will give you the perfect gaming layout. Want to send out a few emails? The Switchblade's keys morph into a keyboard. Need a media PC? The Switchblade has you covered with a variety of playback keys.

The only problem with the Switchblade is that it's just a concept design and Razer has made no promises regarding release or price. Still, if the unit works as well as advertised, Razer could reinvent portable PC gaming. **razerzone.com/switchblade**

1

2

3

1 Rock Band 3 Midi PRO-Adapter

The pack-in keyboard for Rock Band 3 gets the job done, but if you're a weekend Keyboard Cat then you've probably already got got the ivories to produce enough '80s synth beats, cymbal clangs, and cat noises to drive your neighbors crazy. It's time to put that rockin' Casio to use. Mad Catz Midi PRO-Adapter connects to any MIDI-compatible drum, keyboard, or guitar, turning your real instruments into fully functional Rock Band controllers. The PS3 and Wii versions are out now, and the Xbox 360 units should be hitting retail in late February.
$39.99
madcatz.com

2 Creative Sound Blaster Tactic 3D Omega

With built-in PC, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360 functionality, Creative's new wireless Omega headset should be crowned king of all headsets. The unit comes out in late February, so we haven't gotten our hands on one yet, but considering Creative's static reduction technology and proclivity for producing true-to-life audio, we've already put our other headsets on notice.
$199.99
soundblaster.com

3 Dragon Age Grey Warden Sword Replica

Cast using high-quality stainless steel, Epic Weapon's Dragon Age sword replicas are all custom-etched and molded to feature the Wardens' iconic gryphon symbol. Each blade is blessed by the Chantry and forged in eternal dragon flames from furnaces in Melbourne, Florida.
$349.99
epicweapons.com

DAYTRIPPER BY GABRIEL BA AND FABIO MOON

A heartbreaking story of one man's existence depicted through scenes from the different stages of his life. Each issue ends with his death, but the premise isn't as simple as it seems.
$19.99
dccomics.com/vertigo

JUSTIFIED: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

Timothy Olyphant only has one expression, but he only needs one in this modern-day western that sees U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens struggle to keep the peace in rural Kentucky.
$49.95
sonypictures.com

RED SPECIAL EDITION

When the government tries to frame a group of retired CIA agents for crimes they didn't commit, these old timers prove they have some fight left in them. Trust us, this movie is filled with more laughs and action than its tired synopsis implies.
$34.99
summit-ent.com

SUPER MEAT BOY! DOUBLE CD SPECIAL EDITION SOUNDTRACK

The brutal platformer Super Meat Boy! has an amazing soundtrack composed by Danny Baranowsky. All its classic gaming vibes are collected here in a 73 tracks set that include a few new remixes.
$10.00
dbsoundworks.bandcamp.com

opinion

by Tim Turi
associate editor,
Game Informer

The Greenhouse Effect:
The Importance of Atmosphere Over Aesthetics

In a generation where individual pores can be seen on a character's face in Heavy Rain and a suspect's eyebrows can furrow guiltily in L.A. Noire, some would argue we've hit a graphical plateau in video games. These advancements have been achieved within a single console generation, a remarkable feat. Despite what posts on comments sections and forums may want you to believe, great visuals do not make a great game – modern video game excellence lies in the atmosphere.

Don't get me wrong, graphics will no doubt improve in coming console cycles. However, the impact of seeing higher resolution character models won't likely pack the same punch as when you first saw Solid Snake transform from a blurry PSone character model to his fully articulated PS2 self. The way to keep an experience on a gamer's mind this generation is crafting believable environments that live and breathe the game's essence. The most highly anticipated modern games would be much lesser journeys without their respective backdrops.

Take away the claustrophobic, shadow-laden corridors of the *Ishimura* and Visceral Games' Dead Space would be a shell of a game sporting Resident Evil 4 gunplay and a vapid protagonist. With Dead Space 2, the studio perfected designing scary locales to the point that the bright, colorful, smiley-faced walls of a nursery elicit deep seated dread. Few gamers I've talked to recall a specific mind-blowing story twist or set piece moment in the Dead Space series aside from the infamous elevator scene. Instead, each horror enthusiast elaborately describes the game's suspenseful, harrowing air.

Sure, Dead Space would be devoid of thrills without its moody halls, but it would still be playable. Such is not the case with cult classic Deadly Premonition. Ignition's bizarre detective tale features horrendous gunplay, a sickening interface, and repulsive driving segments. Many of these missteps have been forgiven by patient gamers who made a home out of Greenvale, a place that hosts quirky personalities, a strange vibe, and a dark past. Gamers find worth in Ignition's open world adventure because of its unique *Twin Peaks*-esque atmo-

sphere. Agent York can spy on suspects during their daily routines and follow them around the sleepy town from dusk 'til dawn, resulting in a setting that fosters personable characters.

Then there are games like Rockstar's blockbuster title Red Dead Redemption. The game doesn't feature the greatest quest variety or most innovative gunplay in the world, but it succeeds in delivering a video game Western that actually feels like the Wild West. None of the game's individual components such as cacti, shrubbery, and trees are graphically astonishing, but Rockstar paints them across the frontier with the same loving stroke Bob Ross gave his "happy little trees." The developer's skills become even more impressive when you consider the Undead Nightmare DLC, which morphs the aura of the game from a gunslinging adventure to an oppressive jaunt across a zombified continent. By implementing drearier weather, a melancholy musical score, and shifting color palates, Rockstar dramatically mutates the same exact game world into something new. The company's ability to make a familiar world feel alien is testament to the influence of masterful atmospheric craftsmanship.

While many gamers have ridden the dusty trails of Red Dead Redemption, far fewer have traversed the terrifying passages of Amnesia: The Dark Descent, a game that owes all its success to atmosphere. Frictional Games' first-person horror title encourages brave gamers to do nothing but explore a castle oozing with mystery. Pre-game instructions insist players make sure they're wearing headphones and are alone in the dark before they begin. What may sound like a glorified haunted house simulator becomes an exercise in terror as Brennenburg

Castle slowly instills a feeling of unease with supernatural occurrences like constricting walls and echoing footsteps. Word of mouth and YouTube videos of screaming players communicated Amnesia's uniquely immersive creepiness to the world, and the upstart Frictional gained strong enough footing to produce more games – all due to an engrossing environment.

Conversely, there are examples of visually stunning games that lack a memorable world and suffer for it. Guerrilla Games continues to impress with its visual advancements in the Killzone series, but even after playing and enjoying all of Killzone 2, I can't recount one critical location from the game. Final Fantasy XIII sports the best graphics and arguably the most interesting combat system the series has seen in years, but the linear world feels sterile and contrived. Even as a longtime fan of the legendary RPG series, I feel no connection to Lightning's world, completing removing the story's impact. Crysis is a technical powerhouse still used as a benchmark test for PCs. Shiny nanosuit and tight gunplay aside, few I've talked to can mention one place in the game that evoked any emotion or feeling.

A quick look to the horizon reveals a plethora of upcoming video games showcasing unique settings and moods, the creators of which all boast their game's world before characters and gameplay. The original BioShock stands as a poster child for rich gaming atmosphere, and fans are dying to explore the floating, fiercely patriotic city of Colombia in BioShock Infinite. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim promises a rugged, fully traversable world players are ready to get lost in. Silent Hill: Downpour developer Vatra Games came right out saying that the iconic town is the main character of the series, and that focus has so far resulted in grim, unsettling locations which have stuck with me since I wrote last month's feature on the game. These examples and the buzz circulating around them has me convinced that gamers are hungry like never before for rich scenery to chew on.

Games today are gorgeous. It's getting harder to point at any one triple-A game as graphically head and shoulders above the competition. Each developer may have its own unique art style, but when everyone aims for hyperrealism, the most identifiable stamp that can set a game apart is atmosphere.

01 Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon

02 DEATH of SPIDER-MAN

03

04

01

06

09

08 Homefront

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18

15 Okamiden

25

27 NINTENDO 3DS

22 Crysis 2

29 Child of Eden
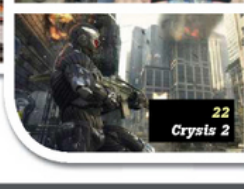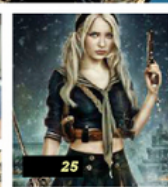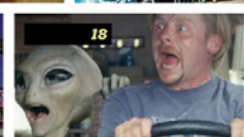
March

01 New Releases
› Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon (PS3, 360)
› Fight Night Champion (PS3, 360)
› Man vs. Wild (PS3, 360, Wii)
› Monster Tale (DS)
› PlayStation Move Heroes (PS3)
› Pokémon Character Kit (DS)
› Rift (PC)
› World of Warcraft: Cataclysm Atlas (Book)
› Yu-Gi-Oh! 5D's World Championship 2011 (DS)

01 Game Developer's Conference Kicks Off!
Keep your eyes glued to gameinformer.com today for breaking news from this year's Game Developer's Conference. The show kicks off with a keynote from Satoru Iwata, president of Nintendo. In the days that follow, many new games will make their debuts. You'll also get a look at gameplay from this month's cover story, Battlefield 3!

02 The Death of Spider-Man
Scribe Brian Michael Bendis hasn't shied away from putting young Peter Parker in harm's way. In Ultimate Spider-Man issue number 156 "The Death of Spider-Man," he's plotting the wall crawler's demise. We can't wait to find out which villain is responsible for this horrible act. This issue also marks the return of Mark Bagley on pencils. You'll be able to get it digitally on the same day as its retail release.

03 Your Shadow Buddy
NECA Toys' Sam Fisher action figure should not be displayed on a shelf; he should be hidden. No one should know that you have it. Go ahead and

hide him in a darkened corner that no one ever looks at. If you want to show off just how great a spy he is, put in your fish tank's sunken pirate ship. This detailed figure is available for purchase now, and is packaged with body armor, a pistol, and Sam's famed goggles.

04 Your Kids Will Love It
Johnny Depp reunites with Gore Verbinski, the director of Pirates of the Caribbean, in the computer animated film Rango. If you have little kids, they are going to eat this up…and then beg you to buy them a chameleon. Do not give in to their demands! That's how Jeff Cork ended up with two rabbits. And two kids.

06 Pokémon Mania Sweeps Across Nation
If you go outside today, don't be alarmed if you hear people using words like "Minccino," and "Gigalith." These are the names of new creatures hidden in today's releases, Pokémon Black and Pokémon White. Word to the wise: don't try to blend in by using words like "Flaaffy" and "Typhlosion." Those words are, like, sooooooo last year.

08 New Releases
› Combat Wings: The Great Battles WWII (Wii)
› Deus Ex: Human Revolution (PS3, 360, PC)
› Dragon Age II (PS3, 360, PC)
› Homefront (PS3, 360, PC)
› Major League Baseball 2K11 (PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS, PC)
› MLB 11: The Show (PS3, PS2, PSP)
› Patapon 3 (PSP)
› Shift 2 Unleashed (PS3, 360, PC)
› The Walking Dead: Season 1 (DVD, Blu-Ray)

09 Cole MacGrath's Electric Comic Book Debut
If you suffer from Infamous syndrome (similar to Avatar syndrome but with less of a focus on painting yourself blue), head to your local comic store today to pick up the first issue of DC's Infamous comic series. This story bridges the gap between Infamous 1 and 2, and should give you the fix you need.

11 Go Back Home To Space!
Battle: Los Angeles opens in theaters today. We're excited for this movie solely because it reminds us of the underrated game Earth Defense Force 2017. That may not be the best way to judge if a movie is worth seeing, but when has this logic ever let us down? Oh yeah…Skyline, The Day the Earth Stood Still, and Jackass 3D.

15 New Releases
› Ar Tonelico Qoga (PS3)
› Dance on Broadway (PS3)
› Fantastic Pets (360)
› God Eater Burst (PSP)
› Jikandia: The Timeless Land (PSP)
› Okamiden (DS)
› Sharktopus (DVD, Blu-Ray)
› Shogun 2: Total War (PC)
› Top Spin 4 (PS3, 360, Wii)
› Warriors: Legends of Troy (PS3, 360)
› Yakuza 4 (PS3)

18 Shaun of the Aliens
The idea of Seth Rogen playing a computer-generated alien might sound like a disaster, but what happens when you add the dynamic duo of Simon Pegg and Nick Frost to the mix? You get today's theatrical release Paul. We loved both

Shaun of the Dead and Hot Fuzz, so perhaps Pegg and Frost's genius will redeem Rogen after his performance in Paul Blart: Mall Cop.

22 New Releases
› Crysis 2 (PS3, 360, PC)
› Dungeon Siege III (PS3, 360, PC)
› LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars (PS3, 360, Wii, DS, PC)
› The Venture Bros: Season 4 (Blu-Ray)

25 Girls, Dragons, Mechs
Director Zach Snyder (300, Watchmen) returns to the silver screen today with Sucker Punch. The trailer makes this film look like a teenage boy's dream, complete with girls wielding swords, dragons blowing things up, and mechs stomping around. The only thing we see missing is a transforming car full of Mountain Dew. We'll leave that addition to Michael Bay.

27 Nintendo Launches the 3DS
Today you can go out and plunk down $250 for Nintendo's glasses-free 3D handheld, which comes in your choice of black or aqua blue.

29 New Releases
› Arcania: Gothic 4 (PS3)
› Child of Eden (PS3, 360)
› Darksiders (PC)
› Dissidia 012: Duodecim Final Fantasy (PSP)
› First Templar (360, PC)
› Hop (DS)
› The 3rd Birthday (PSP)
› Tiger Woods PGA 12: The Masters (PS3, 360, Wii)
› WWE All Stars (PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP)

2011

ARMED WITH A
VETERAN TEAM,
POWERFUL **NEW ENGINE,** AND A
BOLD VISION, DICE UNVEILS ITS
MOST AMBITIOUS GAME EVER

BATTLEFIELD 3

Loyalty is fleeting in game development. Nowhere is this more evident than the ever-shifting center of power in the highly competitive military shooter genre.

Medal of Honor was widely regarded as the pinnacle franchise in the early 2000s, wowing gamers with cutting edge tech that abandoned corridor shooting for jaw-dropping battle scenarios like storming the beaches of Normandy. Its stay at the top would not last, as EA lost the trust of the creative team and they fled to form Infinity Ward. It's been downhill for Medal of Honor ever since, with underwhelming entries that never recaptured the excitement of Allied Assault and Frontline.

In its place rose Call of Duty, the next project from Allied Assault creators Jason West and Vince Zampella. Each title gradually built on the core concept of full-scale warfare, and the series reached its apex in 2007 with Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare. The blockbuster shattered our expectations for first-person shooters with smart pacing, water cooler-worthy set pieces, and an addictive multiplayer progression system that hooked hardcore shooter fans and extended the brand's reach into the mainstream.

Again, a tumultuous relationship turned sour and ruined the good thing Infinity Ward had going. A bitter and litigious fallout between Activision and Call of Duty figureheads West and Zampella in March 2010 led to their firing and a high-level talent exodus from the studio. By racking up over a billion dollars of revenue last November, the Treyarch-developed Black Ops proved that Call of Duty can still decimate sales records like Godzilla rampaging through Tokyo, but future success is by no means a guarantee. New creative minds are taking ownership of the franchise, and only time will tell if they can keep the machine running on all cylinders. While Activision launches its contingency plan to maintain Call of Duty's dominance in the FPS genre, another studio halfway across the world has kept its nose to the grinder, churning out one critically lauded shooter after another.

Since the multiplayer-focused PC title Battlefield 1942 launched in 2002, Swedish developer DICE has delivered 15 Battlefield games and expansions, averaging an 82 Metacritic score across the titles and selling over 30 million copies in the process. The team has gradually fine-tuned its signature vehicle and infantry-based multiplayer combat, adapted to a console-driven market, and learned how to craft single-player campaigns without sacrificing quality on the multiplayer side. When Battlefield: Bad Company 2 launched last March, DICE solidified its standing on the console market, selling over six million copies and ranking alongside Call of Duty and Halo at the top of the multiplayer charts for several months. Unlike the Medal of Honor and Call of Duty teams, the core development team from Battlefield 1942 and Battlefield 2 is still largely intact.

"Even though we're up in the cold north and it can sound tempting to move to a sunnier place with palm trees and surfing to create games, most people choose to stay here or come back since we do what we love," says creative director and lead multiplayer designer Lars Gustavsson, who's been with the team since Codename Eagle, the spiritual predecessor to the Battlefield series. "It's the same studio, and many of the same people who created 1942 or even Codename Eagle are still here. If you remember the faces of those soldiers [from the early games] you can probably walk through the studio and find at least three, four, five of our faces."

When you've worked with the same people over several years, a valuable chemistry develops. Team members share an unconscious understanding of the studio's goals, and their sense of unity can't help but influence new team members who join projects. Given the low turnover at the studio, DICE is in a perfect position to capitalize on the leadership vacuum in the military shooter genre.

Armed with the new Frostbite 2 engine, a bold new approach to single-player, and grandiose ideas on how to advance its already stellar multiplayer philosophy, DICE is preparing to stake its claim as the pre-eminent military shooter developer with Battlefield 3. Now is as good a time as any to make a move. In 2008, the first-person shooter genre accounted for a mere 10 percent of U.S. console and PC sales. In just two years, the number has jumped to 20 percent. Shooters are hotter than ever.

This isn't just another new Battlefield game, either. It's the long-awaited true successor of the legendary PC exclusive that players still enjoy today. The lovable Bad Company characters Sweetwater, Haggard, Marlowe, and Sarge are being left on the sidelines as DICE returns to the large-scale warfare that put the studio on the map.

EA and DICE are so confident in the game that, for the first time in its history, Battlefield is joining the frenzied year-end release window. Instead of launching from the comforts of the less competitive spring and summer seasons, Battlefield 3 is going toe to toe with heavy hitters like Gears of War 3, Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Batman: Arkham City, and, if the previous six years are any indication, the unannounced annual Call of Duty installment.

by Matt Bertz

STAYING FROSTY

In the six years since Battlefield 2 launched in 2005, DICE has released a futuristic spin-off, two console games under the Bad Company banner, a downloadable blockbuster, and a free-to-play experiment in Battlefield Heroes. Many dedicated fans were left to wonder: *What the hell is taking so long for a proper sequel?*

While all these projects were conceived and executed on the two floors of DICE's Stockholm, Sweden office overlooking the picturesque Gamla Stan, the studio leads were continually honing the concept for Battlefield 3. Looking at the shooters on the market and discussing a direction for the franchise, DICE feels it often takes too long to get to the point where players become immersed in the action. To successfully draw players into the experience, the team believes that all of the technologies powering the game – rendering, animation, lighting, particles, sound, and gameplay mechanics – need to merge together seamlessly. "You need to feel the sun in your eyes, you need to feel the bullets raining around you," says executive producer Patrick Bach. "Everyone is trying to achieve that, but we think that we know how to create that emotion."

DICE decided on an ambitious plan to marry these disparate components under the Battlefield banner. All it needed to execute the plan was an engine that didn't exist.

The Frostbite engine, introduced with Bad Company in 2008, brought some of the necessary elements to the table like dynamic lighting, destructible environments, and believable animations. The problem was that delivering these features was a time-consuming process that wore down the development teams. When Bad Company wrapped, the brain trust already knew that the new engine wasn't capable of realizing their ambitions for Battlefield 3. Before the studio began working on Bad Company 2, they pulled aside a team of engineers and told them to start rewriting the entire engine to introduce workload-reducing tools and new components like streaming technology, deferred rendering, real-time lighting, high dynamic range audio, large-scale destructibility, and a rapid-prototype animation system. With these features at its fingertips, DICE believed it could finally start crafting a next-gen game for current-gen systems.

"You shouldn't have to wait for the Xbox 720 or PlayStation 4," Bach says. "We have to deliver this to you now, and we wanted to do it on all the platforms."

LIGHTING UP THE SKY

Bad Company 2 featured dynamic lighting, but the process for getting everything correctly lit and shaded was time consuming. Frostbite 2 comes equipped with powerful new features like deferred lighting, real-time radiosity, and dynamic shadowing that allow the art team to use pre-calculations to get the lighting up and running in a fraction of the time. The left image highlights the light sources – the sun bouncing into the alley and the fluorescent light. The middle image shows the light probes that control how light affects dynamic objects such as vehicles and characters moving through the alley. One probe contains more lighting information than an entire level from Bad Company 2. The right image shows the finished environment that realistically blends all light sources together in real time.

DESTRUCTION 3.0

Bad Company was the first Battlefield game to introduce destructible walls and objects, and Bad Company 2 upped the ante with fully collapsing houses. Given the feature's popularity, DICE wanted destructibility in Battlefield 3, but with dense urban environments, it needed to deliver real-time devastation on a much larger scale.

With the Frostbite 2 engine, nothing on the battlefield is safe from destruction. In the demos we watched, an earthquake ripped apart the city streets, and a seven-story structure collapsed in a plume of dust particles and rubble. When an RPG is fired at a building, the force of the explosion causes rippling splash damage as it would in real life, breaking windows throughout the blast radius and tearing the façade into hundreds of pieces. In theory, DICE could use the engine to destroy a replica of the Burj Khalifa in downtown Dubai, the largest building in the world.

"We're only starting to scratch the surface of what we can do with the engine," says art director Gustav Tilleby.

The power of the destruction is awe inspiring, but don't expect Battlefield 3 to play like the shooter equivalent to the natural disaster racing game Split/Second. "It needs to be believable," stresses executive producer Patrick Bach. "You can't have earthquakes all over the place while you're running and gunning. We want to have set pieces that fit the map. Set pieces can be more than big explosions and big animations. We have some cool things up our sleeves."
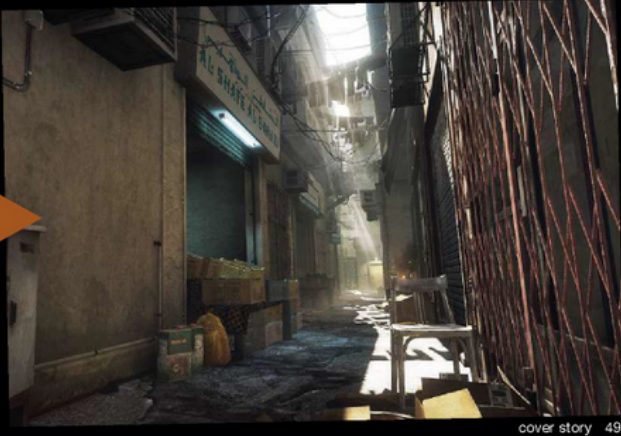
ANT

Like the lighting techniques, the character animations looked believable in Bad Company 2, but involved a laborious process on the developers' part. After finishing the project, DICE entertained middleware solutions from companies like Havok and Natural Motion before discovering the ANT technology that powers EA Sports games like FIFA. The system wasn't built for war games, but it essentially operates with a series of plug-ins that anyone at EA can create and use. With the goal of pushing the physicality and believability of the soldiers in Battlefield 3, DICE integrated the system into Frostbite and started adding its own variances to adapt the technology to the combat zone.

Using the rapid prototyping afforded by the ANT engine, DICE is creating two separate sets of animations for AI characters and multiplayer for the first time. The AI characters now move and act with a more profound sense of purpose, and the developers can rapidly condition their behavior with a convenient waypoint technology that issues directives depending on the character's location and the actions happening in the vicinity. The ANT technology also enables DICE to ditch the ugly gliding soldier animations that plague every multiplayer game on the market. Soldiers still have the responsiveness required in online fragfests, but they now move with a degree of realism, turning their heads and guns before their bodies, transitioning aggressively into and out of cover, and blending animations seamlessly between sprinting and dropping to the deck. "All of a sudden it's about what we want rather than 'can we build it?'" says lead animator Tobias Dahl.
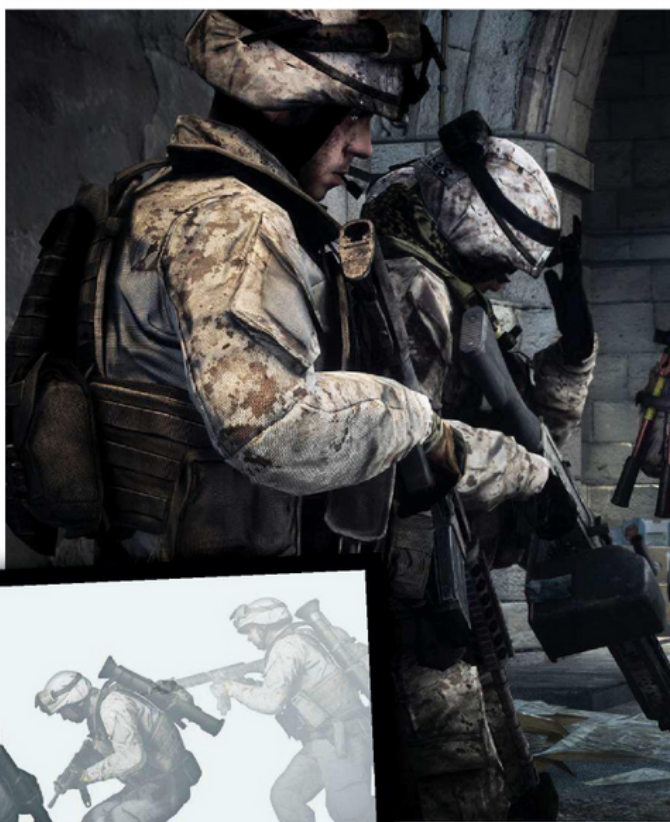
Battlefield: Bad Company 2 is already one of the best-sounding war games we've ever heard, but DICE's audio ambitions keep growing. For Battlefield 3, audio director Stefan Strandberg and his team took to the field to record the sounds of war up close and personal during a Swedish military exercise featuring infantry combat, tanks, and helicopters. With bullets whistling across the hot zone, Strandberg's team collected audio samples from various distances to make sure their game sounds true to real life.

"Just the sheer force of the weapons, it's intimidating when you're there," Strandberg remembers. "Bringing that into your speaker is a challenge, but we've done it before and we've improved on it."

When they got back to the studio, Strandberg's team analyzed its findings and created a new agenda for Battlefield 3. Rather than striving for a cinematic audio experience, the team decided to treat the sound as if it were the soundtrack to a documentary.

"Battlefield 3 sounds much cleaner," Strandberg proclaims, "It's a brighter sounding game. It's less noisy and easier for the player to locate stuff and hear what's what, and it's actually a much more accurate portrait of war."

By recording the choppers, tanks, and guns up close and personal, DICE is making it easier for players to use audio cues to aid their decision-making. Players will have a better sense of immediate threats thanks to the way the team is mixing the game. For instance, footsteps of a nearby soldier in the same house will be more audible than the shots being volleyed between two soldiers outside your window. It's also easier to hear the difference between when a vehicle is facing you and when it's moving in another direction. Subtle audio cues tip you off when your tank is struggling to climb a steep hill, and rather than giving you a visual indicator, sound effects inform you when a gun is about to overheat.

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT
MULTIPLAYER

Though we didn't see any multiplayer in action during the Battlefield 3 demo, that didn't stop us from prying some revealing answers from DICE in our Q&A with executive producer Patrick Bach.

Bad Company 2 came out of the gates quickly, placing in the top three on Xbox Live for several months. Then you went six months without delivering new maps and the community fell off drastically. Do you plan on taking a different approach with Battlefield 3?
We have a big focus on sustaining the game. To be honest, Bad Company 2 was a bigger success than we anticipated. We did not account for that. We sold a lot of copies and don't feel bad about where we were, but looking back, we should have released more, bigger content earlier. The challenge is to build a game, and then have more people coming on before the project is done to start building extra content because it takes a lot of time to get stuff out. Even if you're done with something it takes another one to two months to get it on the net, so to speak. We've learned our lesson now, and have a lot of really interesting plans for how to keep the attention of the players. We can do better in that area.

One of the things I felt went hand-in-hand with the lack of new maps was that, anecdotally, a lot of people stopped playing around level 25 because there was no longer a carrot dangling in front of them in terms of unlockables. Why did you decide on that approach, and do you plan on altering the progression in Battlefield 3?
It falls back on what I said earlier – we were much more successful with our approach than we anticipated. We didn't think most people would hit level 22 to be honest, and especially not so fast. Our calculations on how much people would play to hit level 20, 25, 50 were completely wrong. We thought people wouldn't play that much. We're looking into the numbers of

how we scale up, what we give away, how we give it away, with the understanding that some people put a lot of time into the game. There will be a lot more to unlock, not only weapons and other treats, but we have more things that you can unlock than in Bad Company 2. We're also making sure that there is a reason for you to reach the top rank. It doesn't just end. There will be a lot of focus on persistence and how we present stuff to the player.

One of the things that helps persistence is when you give the player an identity. For instance, you can carve your initials into your gun in Black Ops, and Rainbow Six Vegas let you customize your outfit. What are the challenges to this approach, and do you see Battlefield 3 going in this direction?
The more variation you have [in the characters] the less variation you can have in the rest of the world. I think it also has to do with the way you play more professionally. You don't want people to look completely different. It's team A versus team B. It's always a challenge – how do you personalize a uniform? Giving the pink rabbit hat to someone would make it fun, but if you're running around and you don't know what you're shooting at you don't take the professional gaming seriously in my book. So there's a challenge between personalizing and keeping it uniform. We will do more in that area, making sure that you can get your character to be more personalized both in a visual way and more specifically in the way you gear up. We did a good job I would argue in Bad Company 2 with specializations, different scopes, and different weapons – you can kind of find your way of playing the game, which broadens the game for

NEW BEGINNINGS

With a fiercely loyal PC fan base that religiously identifies with the concept of a multiplayer-only experience, introducing single-player is more complicated for Battlefield than it is with some franchises. "Some people care so much about Battlefield that they don't even want single-player," Bach admits. "Even if you gave it to them they're like, 'I don't want it. I only want the multiplayer.' So to us it's about making sure that the multiplayer can stand on its own legs and not having fans feel like we're setting people aside to build the single-player and taking quality away from the multiplayer. That's not the case. We have a huge team. I think we're almost double the size from Bad Company 2. That's about three or four times the size as Battlefield 2."

After its positive experience with the Bad Company offshoots, DICE feels it's in a good position to leave the rag-tag group of jokers Sweetwater, Haggard, Marlowe, and Sarge aside for the first single-player offering in a numerical entry to the series. Operating with a clean slate, the team analyzed the other offerings in the military shooter genre and came away with a good idea of what it does and doesn't want to do.

"We want to create a song, not a guitar solo, because a guitar solo lasting for five hours is a bit tiring," Bach says. "A great song consists of the lows and the highs, and you have this nice flow throughout the song so when it ends it feels like it's a complete piece. If you just want a guitar solo – and some people do – you can get that. But not from us."

The segment of the single-player campaign we saw in action says true to DICE's pacing parameters. The studio is clearly striving for a more gritty
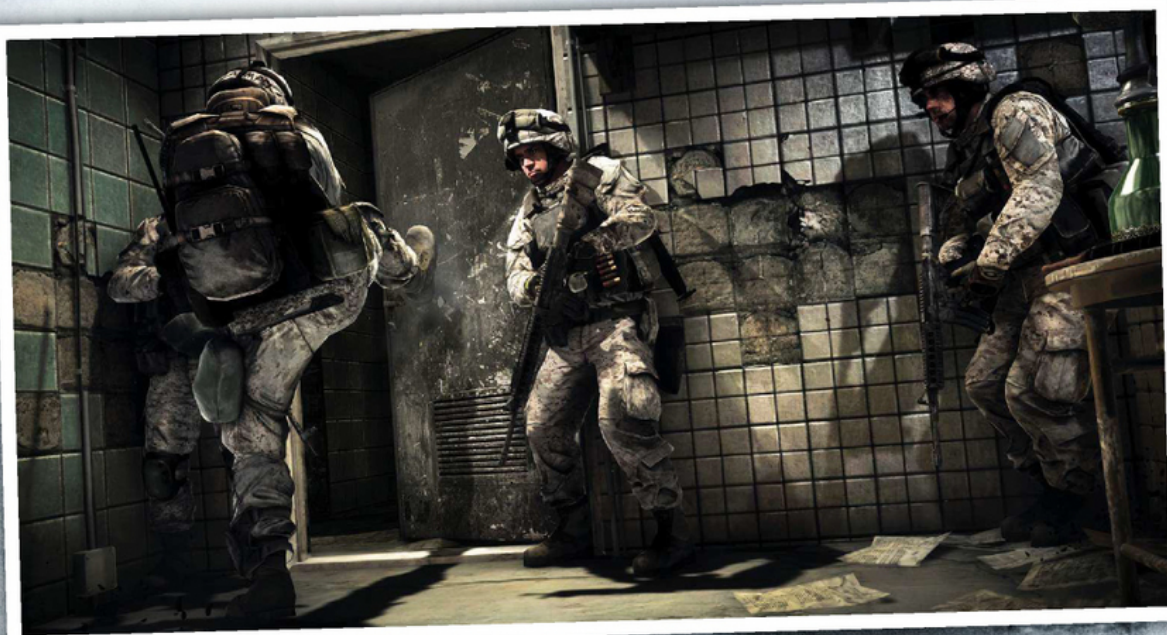
more people. The deeper you get into that the more you unravel figuring new things out every day. That was kind of the seed to what we're building now. We now know more than we've ever known about how to personalize a uniform team. Your friends will get very happy when they can see what they can do with their soldiers.

When I think about Battlefield 2, I always come back to the Commander position and the game within the game that arose from having Special Forces objectives. Are those returning in the proper sequel?
We could implement it, but the question is "How do you get the threshold lower?" That's not by making it more complicated. Our challenge is to make sure that anyone that just jumps into the game will get it. One of the biggest problems with Commander was that only two people could use it. Some people liked it but most people didn't care. They just cared that some-one gave them an order or that their squad could play together having fun on their own more or less. Then the more hardcore

people went into the Commander mode and learned how to use that. You could argue it was a great feature, but looking at the numbers you could also say that no one uses it. We tried in Bad Company 2 to give that to the players, so you could issue orders to your squad, and you could use gadgets like the UAV that only the commander could use earlier – giving the power back to the players so everyone could use it. That made a big difference. More people could enjoy the game. We lowered the threshold for everyone because we gave it to everyone. We now know where the boundaries are for keeping the strategic depth and complexity while lowering the threshold to get in.

Since Battlefield 2 you've toyed with the amount of classes – that game had seven classes, Battlefield 1943 had only three, and Bad Company 2 had four. Do you think you've found the sweet spot?
Yes, I think the sweet spot is four. Looking at what we've done so far, we see the classes as a starting point. Classes are kind of "Who am I? Well, I'm this kind of person. I want to help out

or play in this way." As you go along you will find different nu-ances of that class. If you look at the amount of classes you ac-tually have in Bad Company 2 with all of the different loadouts, it's probably a couple thousand, compared to 1942, which was quite static. So the sweet spot for entry is around four. Then it's about how much you branch it. It's a never-ending discussion that's a matter of what kind of toys you want the player to have and how you balance it out. The rock, paper, scissors theory is still the foundation of every Battlefield game. A lot of people come up to me and say, "You should increase the power of that gun," or "You should make this gun better," or "You should add nukes." The easy response to that is, "How is that fun for the person getting shot at?" Because that needs to be the balance – if there's no counter to a weapon, then we won't put it in the game. There should always be a way of countering, so then you get this circle of death where if you have the means to kill me, I can switch gear and find means to get back at you. There shouldn't be an über class or über weapons. Some games have perks where you kill the game by using it, and you
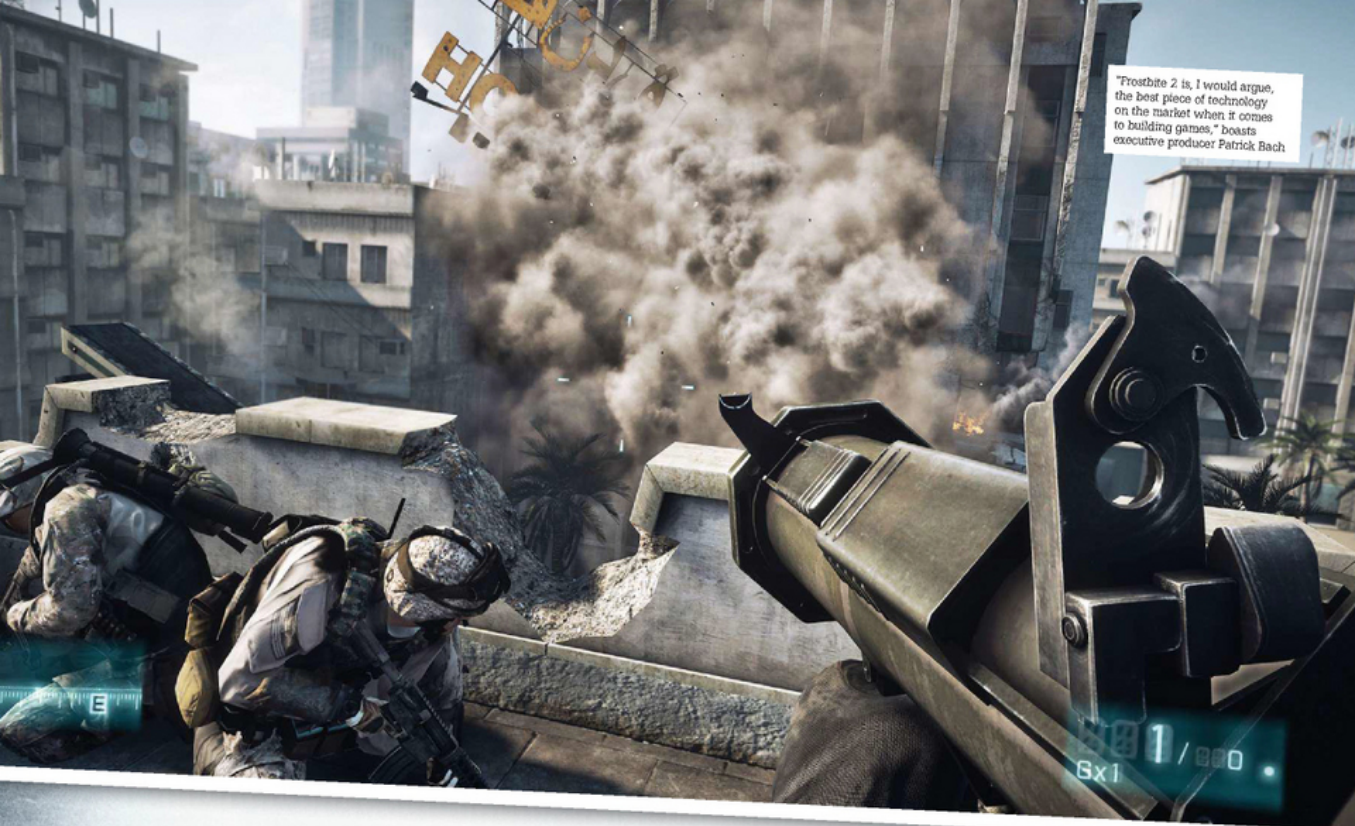
and realistic tone than its lighthearted endeavors of the past. The demo opens in a congressional hearing with intense mood-setting music droning over the proceedings.

"Do you recognize it?" an unidentified voice asks the military officer sitting in front of a microphone.

"That's near Sulaymaniyah, in Iraqi Kurdistan," the soldier replies.

The interrogator continues with his questioning before being interrupted. "Now this mission was the first time that you engaged PLR forces—"

"Our intel was limited. We got a high level brief about the PLR, general instability along the Iranian border, and talk of a possible coup," the

soldier reports.

"Were you aware of the WMD search teams that were participating in this operation? Let me remind you, Sergeant, that you are still under oath."

"I'm sorry sir, but what are you exactly asking me?"

"Sergeant Black, we only want to know what happened that day."

The scene fades from the hearing and transitions into the interior of an LAV being operated by the U.S. Marine Corps. The year is 2014, and the 1st Recon Marine team is traveling through Sulaymaniyah, the cultural and economic center of Iraqi Kurdistan. As the LAV rumbles through the urban center the sol-

diers are blasting Johnny Cash's "God's Gonna Cut You Down." Before the song finishes, a voice crackling over the radio interrupts the man in black.

"Misfit 1-3 this is Misfit actual. We have a situation developing. Get your team dismounted and into the staging area ASAP."

"F--- man, what the f--- are we stopping for?" asks a disgruntled soldier. "The objective is 20 clicks north!"

The LAV abruptly stops in the middle of rush hour traffic. As the soldiers pour into the dusty streets, drivers stuck in the traffic jam angrily slam on their

do it over and over again. That's no fun, that's a game breaker. If someone gets really good at flying a chopper, then people say the chopper is overpowered. No, you just haven't learned how to counter it, because there is a counter. That's the kind of depth you want in a Battlefield game. It actually takes time until someone figures it out. We often compare ourselves to sports. You have a game with a set of rules, but there are a million ways of playing that game still, even though the rule set is very solid and it hasn't changed for 100 years. Every game is completely new. There is always a way to counter the opponent. Like football, or basketball, or soccer, the game is always evolving, yet the rules are the same. People adapt and find new ways.

How was hardcore mode received? Was there a broad adoption?
I think it goes in waves, and it's also about your daily form. How are you playing? How do you feel today? How fast are you? I think the hardcore game mode is a brilliant idea, and

we could probably turn it up a notch to make it even more hardcore in the future because people are willing to try it out. It's the same game, but you turn it up to 11. ...You want that layer of complexity that you can just add on top of whatever game mode you have. It's a good way of seeing the same game through a new angle.

It was great to be able to squad up in the pre-game lobby, but limiting it to the four people in one squad was troublesome for larger groups who wanted to play together. Are you changing your approach for Battlefield 3?
Well, yes. It's actually a very crucial part of the game. We're thinking a lot about squads and team play – making that even more accessible. Like you said, squads are really easy to set up, but how can you take that further? We have some really cool things that we'll show later when it comes to dictating how you play with friends.

Call of Duty and Halo both have it, but with the crazy things

that happen in Battlefield matches, no game is better suited to having a theater mode. What are your thoughts on that?
We have functionality on our end that can capture movies. The hard part of course is our dedication to creating non-cheatable games contradicts the whole idea of doing that because we are running dedicated servers on everything and that actually makes it harder. We're definitely looking into ways of delivering our version of this functionality, but I can't give away any details.

What are your plans for co-op? Will you be able to play though the campaign with friends?
We will have a co-op mode. I won't go into exact details about if it's going to be connected to this or that, but we will have a co-op mode in the box.

During the summer you released the one-off Onslaught mode for Bad Company 2. How did you feel it was received?
Okay. Only okay. Onslaught was an experiment on our side to

horns signaling their discontent. The team of five soldiers makes its way through the side streets and back alleys to the staging area, routinely checking the corners and balconies for threats.

"You ever ask yourself how this part of the world gets so f-----d up all the time?" one soldier asks to the group.

"I just work here, Dave," another soldier replies.

Once they reach the commanding officer, he lays out the situation. They've lost contact with a squad that was investigating a possible chemical weapons site. Their last known location was a meat market in a hostile neighborhood. It's first recon's job to locate the Marines and bring them back before the People's Liberation and Resistance (PLR) finds them.

The Marines set out through the back streets, taking shortcuts through dimly lit warehouses and schools as the muffled sound of passing choppers, barking dogs, and the traffic jam echoes through the interiors. Suddenly a low rumble shakes the complex, sending objects to the floor.

"Someone needs to tell the D.O.D. to blow those ammo dumps further away," a soldier remarks.

"That's a quake tremor boys," another counters. "We're like 90 clicks from a major fault line."

The squad reaches a big cross street that leaves the Marines exposed to enemy fire. The team waits for a few weaponized jeeps to roll past before moving into the open area. A foreboding music track starts playing to amp the sense of danger.

Several minutes into the demo, the first shot finally rings through the square as the soldiers try to make their move. Sniper!

The bullet rips through one of the Marine's uniforms, and the once-quiet square turns into a death trap for the Marine group as the player drags him to safety in a frantic quick-time event. The Marines are yelling out the positions of enemies and returning fire, and once the downed man is in a safe place the player joins the fray, taking aim at the insurgents using the nearby cars as cover. Clearly outmatched, the enemies retreat into the side streets.

"Give me a sit rep!" the commanding officer yells to his four soldiers.

"I'm up."

"I'm up."

"I'm up."

"I'm f----d up, but I'm up," the wounded Marine yells.

The squad moves forward, and the greeting party gets even more hostile when an insurgent in an elevated position pulls out an RPG and opens fire.

"Historically, in Battlefield games we've been really good at using references for characters, weapons, vehicles – that sort of thing – but we haven't been as good as using it with our environments. In Battlefield 3 we really want to take that a step further, to create a world that feels more believable and more immersive," says DICE art director Gustav Tilleby
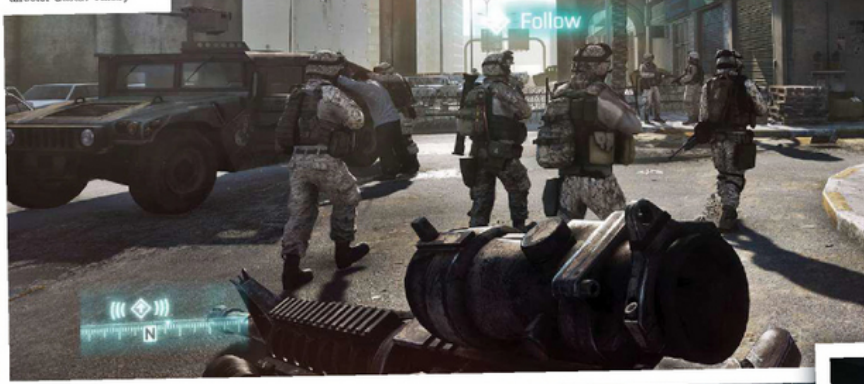
The squad spreads out, finds cover, and starts engaging the soldiers popping out of alleys. The player pulls the pin from a grenade, tosses it into the RPG nest, and watches from behind cover as it blows the attacker's cover into a hundred pieces and riddles him with shrapnel.

Jumping forward to another segment of the mission, the Marines have moved through a building to the door of the rooftop. Before they leave the stairwell the commander issues a stern warning. "That sniper is still up. Be careful out there."

The minute they open the door, a shot echoes through the sky. Their position has already been compromised. "Dude, that's a f-----g fifty!" a soldier yells.

Dropping into a prone position, the commander instructs the Marines to move from cover to cover while they triangulate the sniper's location. The battle plays out like the scene from The Hurt Locker, as the team can't get a clear look because they are too busy watching their cover erode with each sniper shot. The tension is palpable.

Finally, a Marine spots the sniper halfway up a large hotel roughly 50 yards away. The commander tells the Marines to provide covering fire on his cue, while Sgt. Black grabs an RPG and fires the deathblow. The commander signals the counterattack and a

slow motion sequence triggers as Black lines up the shot, launches the rocket, and watches it hit the target, creating a huge plume of smoke and knock the neon hotel sign off its hinges. The massive explosion is a jaw-dropping display of the Frostbite 2 engine's capabilities.

"Good effect on target," a Marine yells. "I'm f-----g deaf!"

The demo skips ahead once more to find Black separated from his squad in a darkened basement. A voice crackles over the airwaves, "Did you get that, Black? Follow the goddamn wire."

Foreboding music again plays over the scene, amplifying the tension. As Black shuffles awkwardly through an air vent, a rumble suddenly ripples through the building. Another tremor.

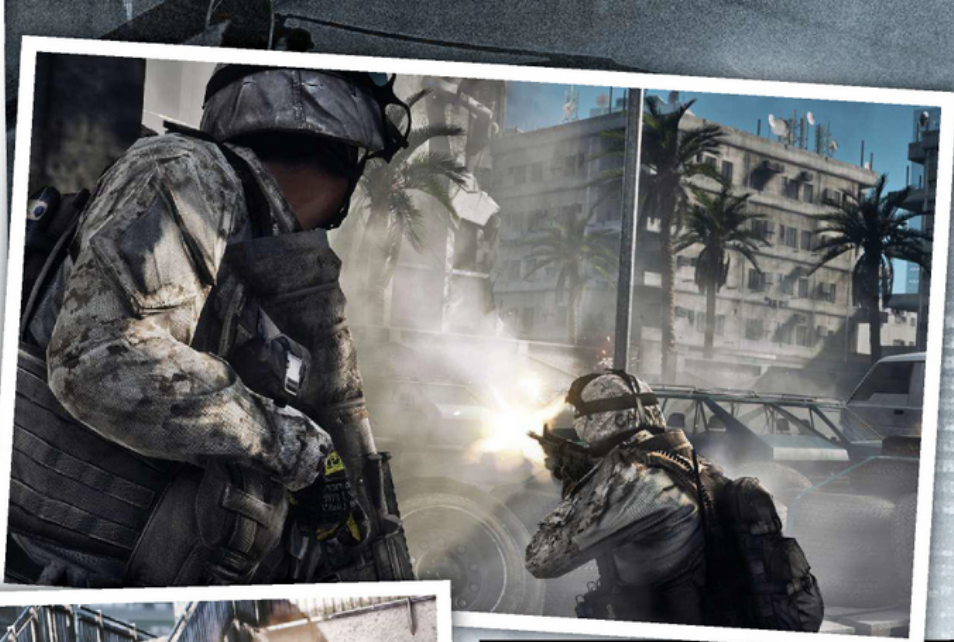"Nothing to worry about," the soldier says over the com. "Just get that wire cut."

Exiting the vent, Black hears the faint beep of the bomb. He locates the source, but as he begins to diffuse the charge, a man suddenly jumps him from behind. A quick-time event fistfight ensues, and Black struggles to turn the tide on his aggressor while the tempo of the beeps emanating from the bomb escalates. After slamming the attacker against a nearby chain link fence and dropping him with a series of punches, Black dashes to diffuse the bomb in the nick of time.

Heading back up through the building, gunfire

see what we could do with our technology on existing code, more or less. There was very little code change to the game because it was more or less supposed to be a little quirky mod for Bad Company 2. It was actually received better than we thought. We now know much better what is needed, and of course we have better tools that are designed to do these things. I can honestly say that we can now do whatever we want to do, and the choices we have made for the game are based on what we want rather than what we have.

One of the more controversial additions to Bad Company 2 was the killcam – snipers especially whined about it. Are you keeping it for Battlefield 3?
We still think that some kind of giveaway camera, no matter what it is, is something that you should be able to have. And you should have the opportunity to turn it off and play a game without it. I think it's not all bad. And again, if you look at how we reason when we build a game there should always

be a way to counter something, and if you're a good sniper you know that you're now on camera, which means that you should move.

Jets are coming back in Battlefield 3. How are you dealing with the maps to give them room to maneuver?
We're building bigger maps. Then again, the games are about fun, so if you have a Mach 2 jet on one of our maps you would pass it in 0.2 seconds. You still need to design the game to fit. It can't be as slow as a chopper, but then again it can't be Mach 2 so there's a sweet spot that we're hitting with map scale, scale of fight, and speed of vehicles so it will actually fit. And of course there should also be a way of countering something.

Prone is coming back as well. Why the change of heart from Bad Company 2, for which you defended your

reasoning to leave it out of the game?
First of all, Bad Company 2 was the spin-off. We had our own rule set. This is based on Battlefield 2, so we can go back and look at how can we solve the problem of proning, hiding in high grass, and there are a lot of ways of countering that. Muzzle flash is one of them, vapor traces are another – the bigger the gun the bigger the trace – stuff like that. And of course giving others tools to spot players and give away positions. We have more time to fiddle with those things to make them work. Prone is fun for the person proning. How fun is it to not see someone shooting you? It's not fun at all. That's our job to design around that and find ways to counter that.

POWER TO THE PC PLAYERS

Want to fight in the classic 64-player matches made famous by Battlefield 2? Start building a new gaming rig.

Far too often these days, PC gamers get the butt-end of the stick. Many developers focus on consoles to the detriment of the PC experience, and when they do get around to releasing the game for Windows (usually months after the console release), there's no guarantee it will play as well as the other versions. Not Battlefield 3.

A PC developer at heart, DICE recognizes that Battlefield still has a huge fan base rocking the keyboard and mouse. As such, they are using the PC as the lead platform in developing the sequel to the PC exclusive Battlefield 2. "We won't make it for console and port it to PC – that's not how we do things," says executive producer Patrick Bach. "We're focusing on PC first, and then we fiddle with it to fit it onto consoles."

Being the lead platform has its advantages, none more convincing than the return of 64-player matches – a PC exclusive. Why only PC? "The PC audience has been the one complaining," Bach says. "We actually haven't heard any complaints from the console audience. We are letting the PC audience make use of the very expensive hardware that they just bought so they can tick all the boxes and go for the 64-player fights."

If you have a rig packed to the gills with cutting-edge technology, you have access to the ultimate Battlefield 3 experience, with superior motion blur effects and advanced anti-aliasing that won't be possible on consoles. That said, the console version is no slouch. "We do care about the PC audience, and we will have a lot of extra goodies for the PC while also making sure consoles players won't be left out," Bach promises. "They will be part of this whole grandiose scheme that we have when it comes to playing our game."

The only bad news is that modders may not have the kind of access to the tools they had before. The Frostbite 2 engine is very advanced, and DICE claims it takes a lot of knowledge and manpower to deliver on that platform. Instead of shipping the SDK, the studio is exploring other options.

"We will not deliver mod tools in the way that we delivered them for Battlefield 2," Bach admits. "Creating mod tools today – dumbing them down – takes a lot of energy and what we are discussing more every day is, 'Where do we put our focus?' Right now our focus is to create the best possible multiplayer, single-player, and co-op game – the core game of Battlefield 3. We're still discussing how we handle modifications of any kind."

echoes from street level. He opens the door and is greeted with a full-scale military action. A dozen U.S. troops are advancing down a large street to return fire on an insurgent position. Black wastes no time joining the fray, advancing to an overpass to get a better vantage point on the enemies moving between cars and buildings. The task? Clear the LZ. Black grabs a heavy assault rifle and opens fire with the support of a hovering chopper that rains suppressing fire.

After denying the advancement, Black returns to the rest of the troops and jumps on a free .50 cal to unload on enemies pouring out of a nearby side street. Without warning, the tremors present throughout the demo manifest into a full-fledged earthquake that rips through the street, throwing cars and tearing apart blocks of pavement as if they were paper towels. The scene is breathtaking, but the devastation is just beginning. Black hears the pop of support cables and turns his vision toward the seven-story building standing directly in front of him. The building starts shaking and suddenly breaks free from its foundation, all seven stories tumbling directly toward Sergeant

Black. It's the most realistic building collapse we've ever seen in a video game.

The short single-player slice we witnessed deftly demonstrates the power of the new Frostbite engine and the more deliberate narrative pacing, but it tells us very little about the plot. DICE promises to reveal the source of the near-future conflict, but given the framed narrative construct of the congressional hearing, the story could jump from perspective to perspective to give players control of different soldiers in different scenarios. After all, if you're going to the trouble of adding jets to the multiplayer, why not add a single-player mission in the cockpit?

It's a possibility considering the Middle Eastern setting from the demo is only one of the environments players visit during the campaign. "I won't go into exactly where you will be going, but there will be more than one setting," Bach admits. "We have the ability and technology to go wherever we choose to go. We're not limited to being in this Iran-Iraq border town. You won't be in the Middle East all day. You will be in many places for a good reason that I won't give you." ◆

TREADING
NEW
GROUND

WE PREPARE FOR THE IMMINENT
3DS LAUNCH BY SPENDING
A DAY WITH NINTENDO'S
GAME-CHANGER

With a long history of dominating portable gaming,

Nintendo could have stayed on top by sticking with the tried-and-true Game Boy series. Even as the incarnations of the Game Boy Advance were flying off the shelves, the company wasn't content to rest on its laurels. In 2004, Nintendo announced the DS to mixed reactions. Some thought that the two screens were more of a gimmick than a way to enhance gameplay. As we know now, these reservations were unnecessary; the DS is a runaway success with an amazing library of games. Just last year, doubters were given new ammunition with the announcement of the 3DS – Nintendo's apparent attempt to cash in on the 3D craze. Claims of gimmick-based gaming resurfaced, but E3 2010 made believers out of almost everyone who got their hands on the system. With the March 27 launch of the 3DS on the horizon, we will soon find out if the positive buzz will translate into commercial success. We learned that the technology worked at E3, but I attended a Nintendo press event for some extended hands-on time with the 3DS to see how far the unit and the games have come.

by Dan Ryckert

What's in the box?

At $249.99, the 3DS is the most expensive portable device Nintendo has ever released. However, it also comes with a more robust collection of applications and features than we've seen in previous units. Here's what you'll be getting right out of the box.

AR GAMES

Each 3DS comes packed with an AR (augmented reality) card for this collection of games. Six activities are included, but only archery has been revealed as of this writing. When I laid the card on a table and pointed the 3DS at it, an assortment of targets appeared to pop out of it and scatter across the table. By moving the system around, my perspective of the targets changed appropriately. As you shoot at them, the real world environment seen through the camera can change. An object exploded at one point, causing the surface of the table to wobble and distort. Later, the part of the table that the AR card sat on appeared to sink into the ground. I was forced to place the 3DS above this hole and aim the camera straight down at the table to hit the buried target. It's not easy to get a mental picture of this concept without playing it, but you'll understand AR Games the instant you see a dragon sprout up in the middle of your dining room table.

PEDOMETER

Nintendo has tried to get gamers off the couch with the Pokéwalker and Wii Fit, but its attempts have never been tied to the system itself until now. As you walk around during an average day, the pedometer tracks your steps and rewards you with coins to use in particular games. I asked about specific examples regarding the implementation of these coins, but Nintendo was unable to provide any details as of press time. Let's hope the system's software actually utilizes this feature at some point.

INTERNET BROWSER

Reggie Fils-Aime promised an enhanced version of the DSi's Internet browser during his presentation, but further details are unknown at this time.

ACTIVITY LOG

You can technically track your gaming time with the Wii's message board system, but it involves laboriously leafing through messages with a calculator. The 3DS simplifies this process by tracking your gaming habits and placing them in an easily readable interface. Loading this app gives you a variety of stats and graphs so you can see exactly how much time you're spending with each title.

FACE RAIDERS

This wacky (and questionably named) title has you shooting down waves of your own face by using the 3DS's built-in gyroscope. Once you've taken a picture of yourself, the game pastes it over tons of flying enemies that will creepily wink, grimace, and scream at you as they attack. They enter the game space by breaking through the real world that the camera sees, leaving behind what appears to be outer space where a live image used to be. It's hard to not look crazy when you're spinning around frantically and pointing your 3DS at nothing, but it still managed to get a laugh out of everyone I saw playing it.

STREETPASS

Some DS titles utilized a form of tag mode, which allowed the transfer of data between certain games. StreetPass is the 3DS's version of this concept, allowing data swapping between multiple applications at once. If you walk by people on your way home that have StreetPass active, you might find their Mii data, Street Fighter records, and more on your system the next time you turn it on.

PHOTO EDITING

Like the DSi, you can warp and decorate any pictures that you take with the device. It's the same assortment of filters, googly eyes, and cartoon mustaches, but you plaster them all over 3D photos this time around.

SPOTPASS

While StreetPass transfers data locally between units, SpotPass connects to the Internet to wirelessly update leaderboard information, game data, and updates (like Wii Connect 24/7). This feature requires the 3DS to be within range of a wi-fi connection.

Mii MAKER

If you've played a Wii, you're familiar with this concept. The 3DS allows you to create a deformed representation of yourself, but the system's front-facing camera allows for a new feature. By taking a picture of yourself, the Mii Maker automatically selects facial features for your avatar (although you can completely discard its suggestions).

ACCESSORIES

On top of the included apps and features, the 3DS also comes packaged with a couple of tangible accessories. One is a charging cradle that you can set your system in, allowing a game to stay in sleep mode indefinitely. The other is a 2GB SD card that can be used to store photos and other information.

eSHOP

Like the DSi's shop channel, the 3DS eShop allows users to purchase new games, applications, and classic Game Boy and Game Boy Color titles on the Virtual Console (no word yet on Game Boy Advance games). Nintendo also announced that games you've purchased on the DSi are fully compatible with the 3DS.

STREETPASS Mii PLAZA

This parade of Miis resembles its Wii equivalent, but will be populated by people you've encountered in person rather than over the Internet. If you're in public with StreetPass active, your Plaza is populated by the Miis of any nearby 3DS owners. In addition to their likenesses, you'll also get data like their name and place of origin.

FRIEND CODES – NOT GONE, BUT NOT AS BAD

One of the most universally hated features of the Wii and DS is the friend code system for playing online. Not only did players have to swap a series of letters and numbers to connect their systems, they also had to swap specific game codes for many titles. While the 3DS still doesn't have a simplified 'add a friend' feature like the Xbox 360 and PS3, Nintendo is taking a step in the right direction by only requiring one code. Friend codes will never be software-dependent, meaning you'll only have to write down your buddy's code once. As an added bonus, friends are automatically added to the system without any codes if you connect with them locally.
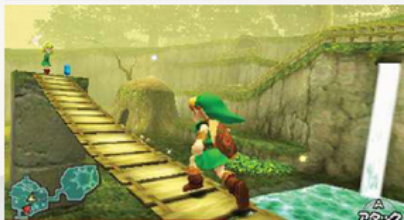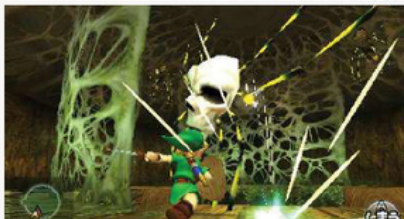
The Games

The 3DS could have all the features in the world, but it would sink faster than the Nomad if it didn't have a healthy game library to back the technology. Here's a look at what will be popping out of your system's screen in the near future.*

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME 3D

Nintendo launched the DS with an update to one of the greatest games of all time (Super Mario 64), and the company is about to bring another to the 3DS. While no release date has been confirmed, this updated version of Link's Nintendo 64 adventure looks and plays better than ever. The art style still resembles the original, but many textures are significantly improved and animations have been tweaked. The 3D effect looked fantastic as I wandered around Kokiri Forest, and the combat controls felt sharp as ever as I made my way through the Deku Tree and defeated Gohma. Even after beating the original numerous times, this 3DS version has me thrilled to play through it again. For a younger generation that might not be familiar with Ocarina, this should serve as an excellent introduction.

NINTENDOGS + CATS

Remember all that time you spent dressing up your dog and throwing Frisbees at him on your DS? Well, now you can do that with cats – in 3D. That's about all the demo made apparent, as the gameplay appeared virtually identical to the original game (only with fuzzier fur).
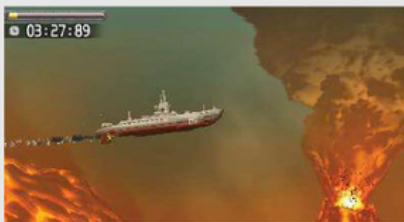
RIDGE RACER 3D

It's not a console launch without Ridge Racer, right? This long-running series makes its 3D debut in familiar form, offering Grand Prix races and a Time Attack mode as you earn points to buy upgrades. You can make one-time purchases like rocket starts or a full nitro gauge, or put your points on the line in wager matches.
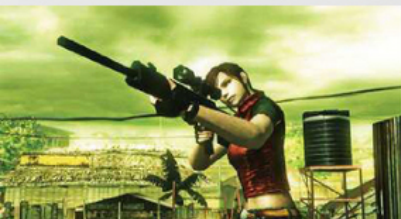
STEEL DIVER

This first-party offering started as a tech demo for the original DS, and it's been transformed into a full-fledged title for the 3DS. One mode still feels like a tech demo, as you look down the sights of a periscope while turning your body around and moving the 3DS to aim. The gyroscope performs this task admirably, but repeatedly diving and shooting missiles at enemy ships started to get old after only a couple of minutes. Campaign mode was painfully slow, and required little more than adjusting your submarine's speed and direction while shooting missiles at obstacles. The most exciting thing I saw involved holding my stylus over a leak on the touchscreen – and that's reason for concern.

ASPHALT 3D

Considering it comes from a Gameloft cell phone series, gamers shouldn't expect anything great when it comes to Asphalt 3D. It features over 40 cars and motorcycles, 17 tracks, and 6-player local multiplayer, but the driving felt downright awful with the circle pad. I was told that the final game would utilize the accelerometer for motion control, but I have major doubts that turning my 3DS like a steering wheel will make this title any better.

RESIDENT EVIL: THE MERCENARIES 3D

The Mercenaries bonus game in Resident Evil 4 and 5 was a fan favorite. This 3D edition turns that experience into its own standalone product.

Capcom is assembling a dream team of characters from the entire series' timeline, each of which comes with his or her own loadout. The demo I played featured Chris, Claire, Hunk, and Krauser. I blasted zombies (sorry, not-zombies) left and right with shotguns, pistols, and grenade launchers. Thanks to the touch screen, switching weapons and using healing items is easier than ever before. Both environments I saw (the village and shanty town) came from Resident Evil 4 or 5, but product manager Ryan McDougall tells me that he "wouldn't rule anything out" in terms of locales from earlier games. If you enjoyed teaming up with a buddy during the console versions of Mercenaries, you can do the same here thanks to its online co-op feature. The game played well, and the 3D was used to great effect. Looking down a sniper scope produced a very distinct separation between my scope and the target I was aiming at. Even with the standard weapons, the view while aiming shifts to an almost first-person perspective, giving you an up-close and personal view of that axe-wielding villager.
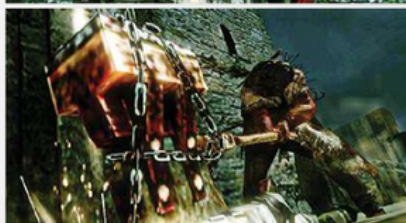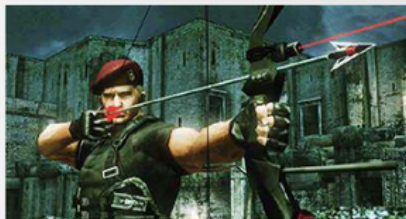
MIA?

E3 saw the 3DS debuts of Metal Gear Solid 3, Starfox 64, Paper Mario, and Resident Evil: Revelations, but they were nowhere to be seen at this event. They're all still slated for release, but their absence makes us think they won't appear anywhere near the 3DS launch window.

If you're the type of sports gamer that loves micromanaging your team throughout years of franchise mode, this probably isn't the installment for you. Resembling the Wii version more than anything, this Madden offers GameFlow and arcade mode if you don't want to spend too much time flipping through playbooks. Franchise mode may be absent, but you can still make basic trades throughout the year in the season mode.

MADDEN NFL FOOTBALL

Many of the best-looking 3DS games feature bright, vivid colors, making LEGO Star Wars III a perfect fit for the system. With its simple art style and approachable gameplay, it should be a great title for younger 3DS owners. It didn't feel any different than previous entries in the series; I swapped between Obi-Wan, Anakin, and R2-D2 while taking out droids and solving LEGO puzzles with the Force.

LEGO STAR WARS III: THE CLONE WARS
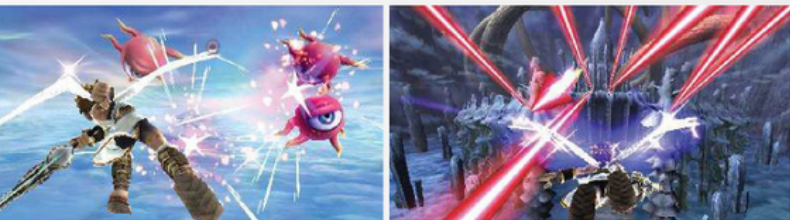
KID ICARUS: UPRISING

This long-awaited title feels more like a Starfox sequel than any Starfox game released in the last decade. You control Pit as he soars through the clouds and takes down waves of monsters in this fast-paced shooter. Movement is handled by the circle pad, while aiming and shooting are controlled with the stylus and L button, respectively. This control scheme is responsive and works great for the play style, but it also made Kid Icarus the only game I played during the event that caused my hand to cramp up. Pit will occasionally set his feet on the ground, but the controls don't change drastically (a "swipe the screen to turn" mechanic is the most notable difference). Out of all the games at the event, this one was the most visually impressive. Flying through a narrow ravine at high speed shows off the 3D effect better than any other title I saw.
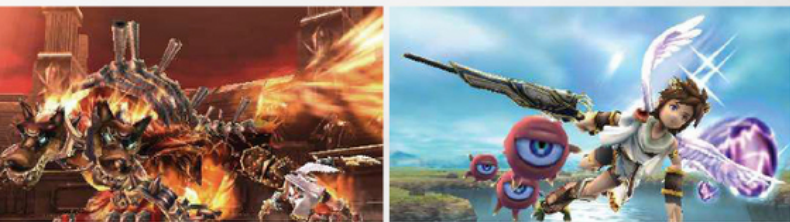
PILOTWINGS RESORT

Nintendo fans are familiar with Wuhu Island thanks to Wii Sports Resort and Wii Fit. Pilotwings Resort is located in the clouds above the island paradise. Your Mii pilots an airplane, rocket belt, and hang glider as you fly through rings and land on fuel pads. It does a good job of showing off the system's 3D effect, but the gameplay was too slow and simple to impress.

DEAD OR ALIVE: DIMENSIONS

Most fighting fans will have their eyes firmly set on Super Street Fighter IV, but this new DOA looks and plays admirably. It didn't seem like a substantial update to DOA 4 from the demo I saw, but it features over 20 fighters and plenty of figurines to unlock. Being a 3D fighter, its environments seemed well-suited to the 3DS. Knocking an opponent over the edge of a cliff was fun in two dimensions, and it looks even better now.

SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV: 3D EDITION

The original DS was the king of pick-up-and-play titles, but it never had a great fighting game in its library. Super Street Fighter IV: 3D Edition will keep the 3DS from the same fate, as it matches the console version feature-for-feature. All of the bonus rounds, training challenges, online competition, cutscenes, special moves, and characters are making their way to the 3DS, and it plays almost identically to its console big brothers. One new feature is the ability to map special/super/ultra moves to four panels on the touch screen, meaning you can pull off even the most complex maneuvers without even touching the circle pad. For the hardcore crowd that would scoff at such a concept, you can filter out potential online opponents if they're using touch screen moves. The 3D effect was subtler than in other games at the show, but it still looked gorgeous. A "Dynamic View" over-the-shoulder option is available, but it's definitely an awkward shift in perspective for those accustomed to 2D fighting. No matter how you look at it, Super Street Fighter IV: 3D Edition was one of the most impressive games at the event.

COMBAT OF GIANTS: DINOSAURS 3D

Without a doubt, this was the worst game at the event. This title has you select a dinosaur and walk around until you find another dinosaur to fight. Fighting dinosaurs are almost always awesome in theory, but this game managed to make it unbearable. If the idea of customizing a dinosaur with equipment like it was a Call of Duty soldier doesn't sound stupid enough to you, just wait until you play it.

PLAYING TRICKS ON YOUR EYES

I kept the 3D effect turned all the way up for the majority of my six hours with the 3DS, turning it off only to compare it to the 2D option. While I preferred the 3D in virtually every instance, certain titles played with my eyes more than others. Pilotwings Resort, Ridge Racer 3D, and Asphalt 3D made me feel like I needed to refocus my eyes on occasion, and it was slightly disorienting. Considering that these were all racing games of sorts, perhaps this type of game will be more susceptible to an awkward 3D effect. It's too early to tell if this will be a common trend, but the only time I felt cross-eyed or annoyed by the 3D effect was during these games.

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Dragon Age II
THE FIRST FIVE HOURS

Hawke.
It's a name whispered in dimly lit taverns across the continent of Thedas.

Each retelling brings new embellishments. In one, Hawke is a headstrong, power-hungry female mage, decimating whole legions of Darkspawn in a single battle. In another, Hawke is a mysterious male rogue with questionable intentions. Each person seems to have a version of Hawke's tale. I'm five hours into Dragon Age II, and this is the story of my Hawke.

BY PHIL KOLLAR

Heroic Beginnings

Hawke's legend begins in Lothering during the events of Dragon Age: Origins. As the doomed village is overrun by the Blight, Hawke escapes with his antagonistic brother Carver, his sister Bethany, and their mother. The desperate family fights through several Darkspawn ambushes, and they save a Templar named Wesley and his wife, Aveline. Upon discovering that Bethany is an apostate – a rogue mage not under the guidance of the Circle of Magi – Wesley attempts to apprehend her, but Aveline's cool-headedness prevails. "Now is not the time for this," she reminds him as another wave of Darkspawn attacks the beleaguered group.

As a seemingly endless stream of Darkspawn continues to flow, the makeshift team begins falling to the beasts. One member of the group is killed, and another is mortally wounded. Just as all appears lost, a dragon flies over the horizon, burning a majority of the Darkspawn and scattering the remnants.

The dragon floats down to the charred battlefield and lands before the family, transforming into an old woman before their startled gazes. Aveline is the first to identify her: Flemeth, the Witch of the Wilds. The legendary figure has already saved Hawke and his kin from near-certain death, but she wants to cut a deal. She'll ensure that they find safe passage across the Waking Sea to the land known as the Free Marches. All she asks is that Hawke deliver an amulet to a Dalish elf tribe camped near the city of Kirkwall...

Dragon Age moves from tactical to tactile

From the moment we first saw Dragon Age II, it was clear that BioWare wasn't content with creating a sequel that was more of the same. The universe has not changed. Some characters will return. But for better or worse, the gameplay has shifted significantly.

Few would argue that Origins' transition from PC to console was graceful. While the PC version used pause-and-play tactical combat in the classic computer RPG style, the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 ports were dumbed down. The game wasn't bad on console, but it felt clunky and unsuited to the control format.

Dragon Age II has been designed from the beginning with the intention of being played with a controller, and it shows immediately. The game opens with the dwarf Varric telling a tall tale of Hawke fighting off a horde of Darkspawn on his own. In this segment, I had the chance to play as a fully powered Hawke with all of his high-level warrior abilities.

The biggest change was apparent immediately. In Origins, you would tap a button and watch your character move into place before using an ability or auto-attacking. In Dragon Age II, you're in full control. You have to move Hawke into attack range, and you have to press the attack button for each swing, arrow, or spell.

Combat doesn't consist solely of mashing one button. I also had access to a ton of special abilities, such as a shield bash, a jump attack, and a charge that swiftly closed the gap with ranged enemies. This kind of responsive combat is a far cry from the tactical approach of Origins, but when you're actually in control, it's a much faster game – and honestly, it feels good.

In addition to the refugees from the Blight, Kirkwall is now home to a group of stranded Qunari.

After I wiped out a healthy number of Darkspawn, the game cut (without loading) back to Varric telling the story. His interrogator, a Chantry seeker named Cassandra, interrupted: "Bulls---! That's not how it happened!" In Dragon Age II's framed narrative, Varric's exaggeration provided an opportunity for me to see how powerful Hawke will eventually become, but at this point the dwarf starts over from the beginning, stripping away those powers and taking the main character back to level one.

It may take another 20 or 30 hours before Hawke is as badass as he was in that introductory sequence, but every time I leveled up and gained a new ability, I felt like it genuinely changed the way I approached battles. Some abilities felt useless or buried in Origins. In Dragon Age II, I found myself using everything at my disposal.

To Kirkwall

With Flemeth's help, Hawke and company escape Ferelden and make their way to Kirkwall, where Hawke's uncle resides on a family estate. The situation in Kirkwall is dire. The bustling city is overwhelmed by refugees from the south desperate to escape the Blight, and the city guard is refusing entry to all newcomers.

After spending weeks stuck outside of the city gates, Hawke finally locates his uncle, only to discover that he gambled away the family fortune. This unsavory relative gets the family into the city, but only by cutting a deal that essentially sells Hawke and Bethany into indentured servitude with a group of mercenaries for the next year.

A year passes. The hero of Dragon Age: Origins ends the Blight in Ferelden. Aveline joins the Kirkwall city guard, while Hawke and his family eke out a humble existence in the slums. As his name becomes known amongst the locals, Hawke stumbles into a chance meeting with Varric, brother to the dwarven explorer Bartrand. With the Darkspawn retreating, Bartrand is about to lead an expedition into the Deep Roads, and Hawke wants to join him. Varric can guarantee Hawke a spot – in exchange for a bit of coin.

Hawke begins taking odd jobs around the city to help build up the funds he'll need. Aveline asks him to stop a caravan ambush. Another member of the city guard offers a bounty for hunting down a group of nobles who conspired against the Warden Commander in Amaranthine. In one of most run-down areas in Kirkwall, he meets a familiar face for those who played through Dragon Age: Awakening.
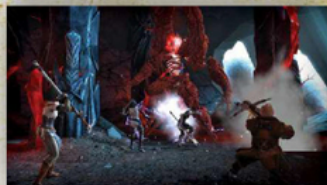
ANDERS

Dragon Age II features cameos from numerous characters from the first game and its add-ons, but one of the most stand-out examples – and one of the few who will actually join Hawke's party as a playable character – is Anders, the sarcastic apostate from Awakening. Having already abandoned the Circle of Magi and branding himself as an outlaw in the eyes of the Templar, Anders has also left the Grey Wardens by the time Hawke meets him in Dragon Age II.

Taking up residence in the poorest part of the poverty-stricken city of Kirkwall, Anders has seemingly turned over a new leaf, devoting his life to the pursuit of healing refugees. As you journey with Anders, though, you'll discover hidden motivations for his new way of life.

Hawke first seeks Anders out in an attempt to procure a map of the Deep Roads from the former Grey Warden. Anders agrees to hand it over only if Hawke helps him rescue a friend who has been captured by the Templar. After breaking into Kirkwall's Chantry under the cover of night, Anders discovers that his friend has been turned into a tranquil – an emotionless shell who has been cut off from magic.

Confronted by the Templar who did this, Anders goes crazy. His eyes glow blue, his voice booms, and his powers increase. After the battle, he explains to Hawke that he has been possessed by a spirit of justice – essentially the opposite of a demon in the Dragon Age world. It's uncertain what this spirit of justice wants with Anders or if it's the same Justice that journeyed with Anders and the Warden Commander in Awakening, but clearly BioWare is setting the mage up for some interesting developments as the game continues.

Not all of the fighting takes place in the wild or in dungeons. Many quests and combat encounters will happen within the huge city of Kirkwall

The PC version features a tactical mode that allows players to pause the game, pull the camera back a bit, and issue orders to their allies one by one

Upgraded sights and sounds of the Free Marches

Though combat provides the most startling changes from Origins, the dialogue and exploration have also been tweaked in noteworthy ways.

One of the biggest differences is the switch to a conversation wheel rather than just a list of responses. While this mechanic invites comparisons to Mass Effect, I noticed one major change that sets Dragon Age II apart from BioWare's sci-fi series. Each sector of the conversation wheel features a symbol that provides an easy-to-comprehend indication of the response's tone.

Like in Mass Effect, the upper-right and lower-right conversation options can broadly be interpreted as the good and evil choices, respectively, but in Dragon Age II they're better identified as positive and negative reactions to whatever was just said. Most conversations also provide a middle choice that is usually sarcastic or cynical, which allowed me to play Hawke as a smart-ass who asked Flemeth to teach him how to become a dragon. Sadly, she turned down this request.

Conversations flow faster and smoother, partially due to this new system allowing quick dialogue choices and partially because of the more cinematic feel. Lengthy discussions are punctuated with more action, emotion, and camera movement to help keep players engaged.

Faster-paced dialogue also helps maintain interest. Since the world and people of

Early purchasers of Dead Space II can get a special code to unlock powerful armor for "Ser Isaac of Clarke" in Dragon Age II

Dragon Age were already built up in Origins, the conversations in Dragon Age II are filled with less exposition. No more staring at a static, unmoving NPC as you slog through hours of dialogue explaining the intricacies of each culture and race in Thedas.

The early hours of the game primarily take place within the city of Kirkwall, a population center that covers more virtual ground than Origins' Denerim. That already increased size is made even bigger by the new ability to go to

the map and visit any area of the city at night as well. Certain story events and quests will only be available by exploring Kirkwall at night.

The map itself has also undergone some major improvements. Whether you're looking at Kirkwall or the larger map of the Free Marches, areas that currently have active quests are clearly marked, making it easy to jump into a zone where you know you have a quest, blast through it, and move on to whatever is next.

All of the common enemies in Dragon Age II have been redesigned, including Ogres and Hurlocks

One of Hawke's first goals in Kirkwall is to build up enough money to join an expedition to the Dark Roads. What awaits him there? A whole lot of Darkspawn, for one

Kirkwall and the surrounding areas have more varied geography than the bleak valleys and desolate forests of Ferelden. At one point, Hawke jokes that Kirkwall is "not brown enough for me," defending the drab visuals of the first game, but the stylized art direction of Dragon Age II gives the series a whole new life. It reminded me more of the unique aesthetic found in Final Fantasy XII than a standard fantasy game.

After playing five hours of Dragon Age II, I can already tell that a certain subset of hardcore gamers will be upset. If you're a PC elitist who was concerned that this sequel was being simplified to make it work better on consoles, well, you're kind of right.

So far, though, it doesn't seem like it has lost anything core to what made Origins great. The battles may be faster, but they're still difficult and require mastery of your abilities to overcome high-level opponents. The dialogue may be streamlined, but it has improved the pace and power of the storytelling. The game may have changed, but it's still Dragon Age, and you're still likely to give it hours of your life.

The Ritual

Taking a break from his search for money to join the expedition, Hawke remembers that he has a promise left unfulfilled. He has a delivery to make.

He journeys north of Kirkwall to Sundermount, a mountain pass where he was told that the Dalish elves have made camp. Immediately upon entering the area, he is intercepted by the Dalish and told to leave. He shows them the amulet from Flemeth, and they take Hawke to the Keeper of this clan, who informs him that he must travel to an altar on top of the mountain and perform a ceremony.

To help with this task, Hawke is joined by Merrill, an awkward Dalish elf who is supposed to be the First – the Keeper-in-training for this clan. Instead, for reasons that are left a mystery, she decides to join Hawke in Kirkwall after the ceremony, abandoning her people and becoming an outcast. But first, she and Hawke have an ancient ritual to perform.

Needless to say, the amulet hides a dark secret, leading to one of Dragon Age II's first exciting plot twists. I'd tell you more, but by this point in the game, your Hawke may be a totally different person than mine, and I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise. ◆

LEVELING UP LEVELS UP

As part of the effort to streamline and improve the feel of Dragon Age II, BioWare redesigned the UI around leveling up and choosing new skills. Abilities are now laid out in branching trees rather than a series of linear paths, with possible upgrades highlighted in blue as you level up. Each new upgrade also has a greater impact on battles than in Origins. Here are a couple of the most impressive skills I noticed for each class:

WARRIOR

Giant's Reach – This passive ability allows your regular swings with two-handed weapons to hit multiple enemies.

Scythe – This awesome charge attack sends you hurtling toward enemies. For regular opponents, it's a great opener, and weak foes will instantly explode into a puff of blood.

ROGUE

Evade – This stylish backflip makes any enemy trying to kill you retarget. When upgraded, it also has the potential to stun opponents.

Pinning Shot – Archery-focused rogues need to keep their distance, which is why they'll want this great skill to push enemies back or stick them in place.

MAGE

Winter's Grasp – This spell slows down enemy attacks and movements, allowing you to avoid powerful swipes by bigger creatures.

Walking Bomb – This fan favorite from Origins causes damage over time, if an enemy is killed while still under the effect, it causes them to explode and injure other baddies in the area.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

Real choices make a real difference

We've tracked the progress of Deus Ex: Human Revolution for many months now, eager to see how Eidos Montreal handles one of the most talked about series of the last decade. The first Deus Ex game demonstrated how choice could shape a gameplay experience. Over 10 years have passed since its release, and many of Deus Ex's design elements have spread across the gaming landscape. Can Human Revolution bring the series into a new era? We played the first couple of hours to find out.

Human Revolution takes place in the year 2027, a quarter century before the previous games in the series. Nanotechnology is not yet a major part of the human experience, but body augmentation is beginning to raise ethical, political, and military questions. Serif Industries is leading the augmentation initiative and is often the focus of these conversations.

Players assume the role of Adam Jensen, the chief security officer for this pioneering but ethically questionable corporation. The game begins at the company's home office, which features hundreds of futuristic details – appropriate to a cyberpunk story set 16 years in the future. Here I meet Megan Reed, the company's chief scientist and former flame of the soft-talking protagonist. As she walks me through the lab, scientists bustle nervously about. The new augmentation tech is about to be presented to Congress, and everyone's on edge. After separating from Dr. Reed, I meet the company's head, David Serif. Adam has doubts about his boss, which he keeps to himself. This opening sequence does a great job of setting all the pins into place, from character relationships to potential conflicts, which will undoubtedly be knocked down later in the story.

Sure enough, disaster strikes. A squad of highly augmented soldiers suddenly invades the company complex, and Adam jumps into action. Gun in hand, I rush through the labs dropping attackers. First-person combat is one of the core gameplay tenets in Human Revolution, but as with the previous games stealth is an equally viable option. At one point, I bypass a room of invading attackers without firing a shot. Things go well until Adam runs into some of the more powerful augmented invaders. Adam's purely human genetics aren't equipped to battle super-strength and invisibility. Our hero is taken down and left for dead as his ex-love is hauled away.

Cut to six months later. Adam Jensen survives, but only through extensive body augmentation. Returning to the job, he's already got another crisis to handle. A pro-human group has hijacked one of the company plants, and Adam needs to deal with the problem.

Before departing, I have plenty of time to

wander around Serif HQ and get the lay of the land. Conversations often have multiple dialogue paths. When two men strike up a conversation regarding their doubts about Adam being back on the job, I can either ignore the exchange or confront them. The role-playing elements take over in this area, as nearly every character in the HQ has something unique to tell me, expanding the storyline and character development. Unfortunately, I spend so long exploring the building that my boss angrily informs me over the intercom that the situation at the plant has gotten worse. It seems I'm making choices even when not doing so consciously.

Arriving at the plant, I take a minute to explore the body augmentation options. A plethora of cool upgrades are available in broad categories that tie to individual body parts like the eyes, skin, torso, or cranium. I opt for the quiet and deadly assassin vibe, selecting a stealth enhancer for Adam's cranium that displays enemy vision cones, tracks them at a distance, and shows their last known locations. An eye upgrade lets me see through walls to track bad guys, cameras, and turrets. I round out my arsenal with a cloaking system that turns Adam invisible for a short period of time and a stun gun for close encounters.

Moving through the level, nearly every situation allows for multiple solutions. You could sneak through an air duct to bypass a turret, hack a door to open it up, find the keycode in a nearby room, kill all the guards, or sneak past with no one the wiser. This early level has lots of ancillary content to explore, from datapads left out on tables to lockers filled with equipment and food. Confrontations with the enemies are fierce, fast, and deadly. Adam won't survive long in a straight up firefight, as right now the gunfights are extremely challenging. Limited ammo, highly intelligent enemies who communicate with one another, and limited power usage make for challenging and sometimes frustrating experiences. Using cover and managing abilities judiciously are the keys to success.

Whether or not you appreciate the higher level of difficulty, it's harder to find fault with Human Revolution's deep sense of choice and consequence. In this way more than any other, the

game channels its predecessors. After a couple of hours playing, I felt I had only scratched the surface. I suspect the final game will fall in line with traditional role-playing games in terms of length and complexity.

If the team can use these final months to nail that sweet spot between fun combat and stealth interactions, Deus Ex: Human Revolution has the potential to impress in the same way its first installment did a decade ago. » Matt Miller
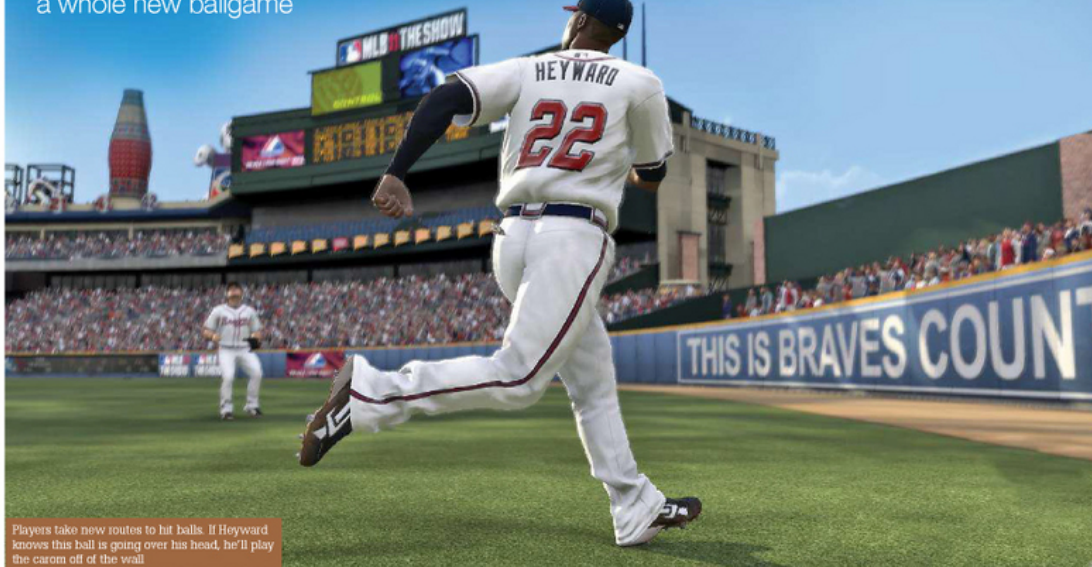

Combat is fast and lethal; using cover and abilities is essential

The setting is a fun mix of the familiar and futuristic

MLB 11: The Show

After a banner year Sony introduces
a whole new ballgame

Players take new routes to hit balls. If Heyward knows this ball is going over his head, he'll play the carom off of the wall

Minnesota Twins catcher Joe Mauer graces the cover of MLB: The Show for the second consecutive year. Mauer's appearance may imply that can we expect more of the same for Sony's game, but his endorsement is one of few things unchanged from last season.

The biggest change is to the core gameplay mechanics. Gesture-based analog controls have been implemented for pitching, hitting, and fielding. Hitting uses a stride and swing mechanic. When the pitcher's arm is at its apex, the batter will want to start his stride (performed by pulling down on the right analog stick). If the batter is too early or late in planting his back foot, he'll receive a massive penalty to power and contact when he applies his swing (performed by pushing the right analog stick up). Timing isn't the only challenge. If a ball is breaking to the left or right, the batter will be tasked to angle the swing with the break to put good wood on it.

Check swings are also possible, but the success of holding up a swing is based on the batter's eye rating, which is displayed through three animations (going too far, holding up right at the halfway point, and only a quarter of a swing). Hitters can still guess pitch location, and a new Contact swing option joins Power and Normal. Contact swing usually allows the batter to put the ball into play. If a man is on second or third and you just want to advance him, the Contact swing is the way to go.

Pitching follows a similar gesture-based system. After choosing the pitch's location, pulling down on the analog stick will start the pitcher's windup and shift his weight, starting a meter. If you pull back too far or not enough, speed, break, and accuracy will be affected. The follow-through motion is equally as important. If you spotted a pitch in the upper left hand corner, you'll want to angle the analog movement up and to the left. Mess up the gesture and the ball won't travel to its desired spot, possibly resulting in a Rodrigo Lopez-like meatball.

Fielding now uses an analog throwing system similar to The Show's traditional face button controls. Holding the right stick toward your target base's position on the diamond charges a meter. The release point determines the throw's strength and accuracy. The analog control system is complete with a fake throw command, which you can use to try and lure a player off of a bag.

These minor fielding control changes pale in comparison to the addition of custom animations for gold glove fielders like Troy Tulowitzki and Carl Crawford. These elite players' impact on the field is made obvious by their range and skill. If you're not controlling the fielders, the AI now features heightened reaction logic. Outfielders will react differently when balls are hit over their heads, as well as in those embarrassing moments when they drop a ball.

The weight of winning a game doesn't have to rest on just your shoulders. Sony has added co-op play. You and a friend can team up to play against two other players, one player, or the CPU. Friends can assign roles, such as alternating pitching duties each inning, or infield or outfield duties.

Given the short development cycles of sports games, we rarely see developers taking a risk by completely overhauling a mode. Over the last two console generations, Sony improved upon Road to the Show, a mode that tracks a fictional rookie (likely modeled after you) from riding pine in the minors to a Hall of Fame career in the majors. Rather than adding to this mode again, Sony has gone back to the drawing board to reinvent this experience. The new vision even

Clouds cast shadows across the field
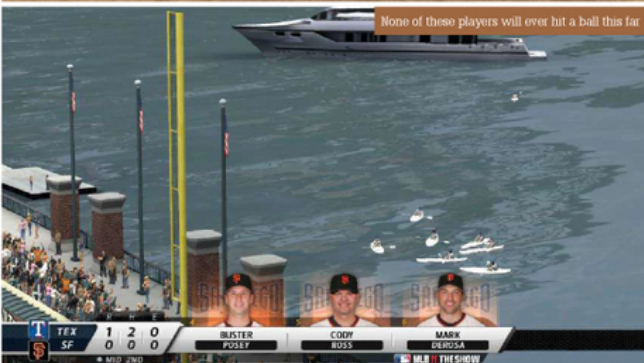
None of these players will ever hit a ball this far

The transition between day and night games is gradual. You'll see the lights come on before night sets in

affects Road to the Show's player creator.

While the player's appearance can still be tailored any way you see fit, Sony is introducing three sliders that will help you create the player type you desire, such as a speedy contact hitter or an inning-eating pitcher. For pitchers, the choices are stamina vs. power, pitching repertoire vs. dominant pitch, and control vs. movement. To create a closer, for instance, favor dominant pitch, movement, and power.

Rather than handing out experience points for goals obtained during a game, which can sometimes seem like an unreasonable request – like not swinging at the first pitch – Sony has scrapped the manager logic from previous Road to the Show incarnations and incorporated a new system that better represents the development of a player. This new system assigns grades to each at-bat. If you find yourself locked into a duel against a pitcher, and manage to tire

him out with 11 or 12 foul balls, you'll receive a high grade for your efforts. If you were the pitcher in this affair, you'd receive a lower grade. At the end of the game, your totals are tallied up and exchanged for training points.

If you couldn't lay off pitches outside of the strike zone for an entire series, the logic is smart enough to recognize you need to work on this aspect of your game. Before you start your next series, you will be entered into plate discipline training.

Road to the Show can quickly turn into Road Back to the Minors, as managers keep an eye on the performance of players on their Major League team and Minor League affiliates. If a rookie is crushing the ball in AAA, and you can't get anything going, you'll likely find yourself on a bus within a matter of days. Conversely, if you are knocking the cover off of the ball, you can ask the manager if you can start, see more

playing time, or move up in the batting order. Some of these actions are the same as last year, but the manager logic has been retooled to not penalize you as harshly if he disagrees.

If you really turn it on, and your team finds itself in the playoff hunt, Sony has implemented a live ticker that follows scores and statistics around the league as they happen. You can view this ticker mid-game or in any of the frontend menus.

MLB 10: The Show was Game Informer's unanimous choice for Sports Game of the Year in 2010. With dramatic changes to the gameplay and Road to the Show, I have to wonder if that "wow" factor is still there or if this will be a rebuilding year. » **Andrew Reiner**

To see video of MLB 11: The Show in action, visit www.gameinformer.com/mag

The resistance may be outnumbered, but they don't lack spunk

The resistance makes its home in a tree-shrouded suburb. Here it is in a quieter moment

The game opens with your character being rescued from a bus like this, which leads to a detention camp

Homefront

Atmosphere is king in Kaos Studios' new shooter
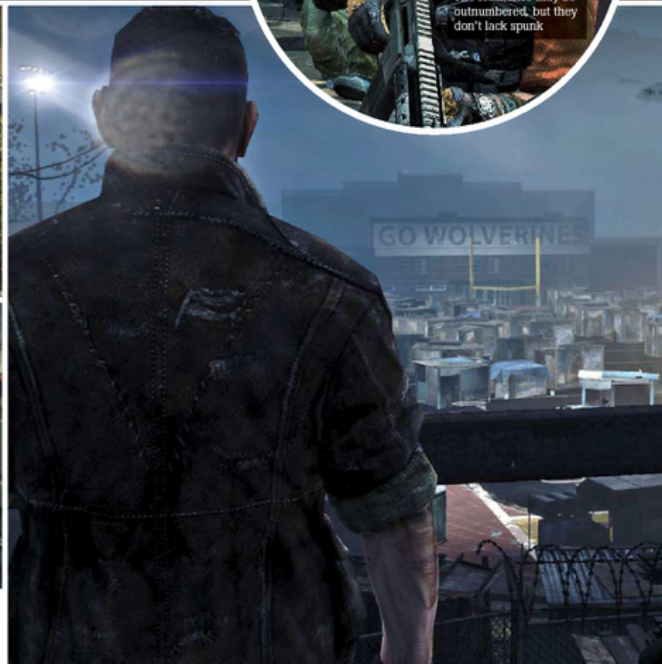
Goliath's cannon works all right in a pinch, but you'll want to use its manually targeted rockets as often as possible

Similarities between Homefront and *Red Dawn* extend beyond references like this sign – they share the same writer, John Milius

K aos Studios' Homefront is taking the familiar framework of a traditional shooter and setting it uncomfortably close to home. In case you've missed the setup, all you really need to know is that it takes place in a horrific version of the United States in 2027. North Korea has occupied the U.S. after rising fuel prices destabilized and ultimately crippled the nation. Under the regime, life is brutal. For people who dare fight back, it's also short.

If you're expecting a prolonged riff on the "Russians invade the suburbs" section of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, you're in for a surprise. You're not a part of an elite fighting force. Our hero, a former pilot named Connor, faces enemies who are better armed and equipped than his loosely organized band of resistance fighters, and the vibe is more Half-Life 2 than military shooter. Your friends are outgunned and outnumbered, and they know it.

While watching armed Greater Korean Republic soldiers patrol the streets of Montrose, Colorado, might be jarring, the streets themselves are eerily familiar. The locations in the opening few levels of Homefront resemble what you might find in any small town, with some unsettling twists. In this dystopian future, artifacts of our ordinary lives have been repurposed and modified for combat. Sometimes the resistance is the responsible party, like when I climbed atop a tree house and used it as an improvised sniper perch. Other times, the opposing military is manipulating the environments to suit its needs.

I saw an example of this early on in a nighttime raid. I was in a small group working its way through the suburbs toward an elementary school, led by a hothead named Boone Carlson. Some of our comrades were using the building as a drop point for equipment, and we needed to rearm before breaking into a nearby detention camp. Keeping a low profile here was critical, considering our tactical disadvantage.

Things were working out all right until we came upon a baseball diamond. Center field was swarming with soldiers, so the plan was to stick to the perimeter, working our way around by hiding behind the bleachers. Then we realized what was happening. A bulldozer was working near home plate, dropping bodies into an open grave. At that point, Carlson lost it, screaming at the soldiers and firing indiscriminately. We still worked through the back route, but with the added complication of having everyone within range on high alert.

After that, I faced an extended sequence featuring a raid on a big-box electronics retailer turned fuel depot. Outside the building, we ambushed soldiers with help from our six-wheeled, semi-automated vehicle called Goliath. The vehicle rolled around and targeted soldiers automatically with its .50 caliber machine gun, but it needed our help when it came to firing rockets. To do that, I held a reticle over Greater Korean Republic vehicles or soldiers until the target was locked, and fired away. Goliath's gun was surprisingly ineffective on its own, so it took a fair amount of intervention to survive the opening battle. It didn't help matters that soldiers took occasional shots with EMP rockets, temporarily disabling the vehicle and leaving it vulnerable.

Once we were inside the store, my team had to scout out more information about the enemies' fuel infrastructure. As with the rest of the game, it was hard to shake the strange feeling of fighting in such a familiar place. Even though taking cover behind a boulder or a checkout lane might be functionally similar, I found the game's setting to be effectively unnerving time and time again. Homefront doesn't seem to offer much new in terms of gameplay, but it makes up for some of its slightly musty mechanics with some incredible atmosphere.

I'm definitely sold on Homefront's premise and setting, and I can say with confidence that Homefront is one of the most atmospheric games I've played in some time. I haven't gotten my hands on the multiplayer yet, but if it's as interesting as what I played of the campaign, shooter fans have something to look forward to this March » **Jeff Cork**

Total War: Shogun 2
The future of historical warfare

Creative Assembly has earned equal amounts of praise for Total War's ambitious design and criticism for its significant bugs and lackluster AI over the franchise's lifetime. Shogun 2 addresses both sides of the Total War coin while returning the series to its medieval Japanese roots. The core design is being streamlined across the board, while a massive expansion of online options is where the developers are exploring new territory this time around.

The developers are attacking the game's sometimes overwhelming complexity on two fronts: cleaning up the relationships between unit types in the massive RTS battles and presenting the campaign map information players are bombarded with in more digestible chunks. The company has finally hired a full-time user interface artist, and the enormous difference between the older titles' cluttered UI and Shogun 2's elegant interface makes playing the game a much friendlier experience. The familiar political chess game at the heart of the campaign is presented better, asking players to manage everything from interclan diplomacy to the desires of their own noble family members.

Empire: Total War had over 300 unit types, but Shogun 2 has roughly 40. Sixteenth century Japanese warfare may not be as wildly diverse as 19th century European conflicts, but opportunities for tactical creativity present themselves nonetheless. The differences between peasants and proper samurai, katana and no-dachi, and mounted and ranged units are fertile ground for tactical innovation.

Sieges in particular promise to be better than ever. Fortresses have five possible levels of construction, multiple chokepoints and kill zones, and secondary objectives like defensive towers that can be captured by the attackers. They are situated atop mountains, along coasts, or in open fields as the terrain dictates. It's not unusual to have running battles moving through sections of a fortress as the defenders retreat to interior positions as the outer fortifications are

slowly overwhelmed. Losing half of your castle to the enemy while bleeding the opposing troops enough to ward off a final push for your keep is entirely possible.

Shogun 2's online is greatly expanded. The addition of co-op campaigns with shared victory conditions is great, but the new avatar and clan systems are the standout features. When you jump into a standalone online battle, you see a brief description of your opponent and his tendencies so you can tailor your army to the situation and your enemies. Win these battles and complete multiplayer achievements to earn new retainers and armor for your avatar, who is also your in-game general. Your experience also propels you along four skill trees that improve your combat ability and leadership. In addition to working your way up the ladders for 1v1 through 4v4 land, sea, and siege battles, your victories fuel your clan's attempt at dominating the map.

Clans don't play traditional Total War grand campaigns against each other. Instead, each territory on the map is controlled by whichever clan has won the most victories in battles set there. Controlling a province might give you access to a specific unit for future battles or a powerful retainer for your personal guard. More importantly, leagues are won and lost each season (which could be a few weeks or a few months long; the developers haven't finalized the numbers yet) based on territory control. Top clans get promoted to

higher tiers, while poorly performing clans are relegated to weaker leagues.

Even if the ambitious multiplayer plans flop, Shogun 2 has enough improvements to the base gameplay that it'll immediately replace Empire in many strategy rotations unless it's a disastrously buggy mess at launch. Creative Assembly has mouthed the usual platitudes about working hard on stability and AI, but Empire and Napoleon both had enough issues to raise concerns. Either way, we don't have long to wait, as Shogun 2 drops March 15. » **Adam Biessener**

Each of the four seasons has its own gorgeous ambiance

The usual improvements to the rendering engine make a startlingly pretty game

Dirt 3

Gymkhana in action

Dirt 3 is promising a lot of content. Not only is rally racing back in a big way (making up around 60 percent of the entire experience), but other offroad races from Dirt 2 are included (such as Landrush, Trailblazer, and Rallycross). Dirt 3 also introduces Gymkhana events designed to test your racing skill and offer variety to the overall career structure. I got my hands on an early copy of the game, and could feel some of the power under the hood.

I dropped into one of the three areas in the Compound – an area around London's old Battersea power station that serves as a training ground, venue for Gymkhana events, and a free roaming area filled with plenty of random objects designed to challenge your driving and drifting skills. I had a blast linking together whatever drifting runs and jumps I could string together, training both my imagination and my reflexes.

Apart from this free-form practice, the Compound also gives you a chance to tackle 75 DC missions, which are achievements such as drifting under two adjacent semi trailers or other in-environment challenges. These alone should goad gamers into spending lots of time in the Compound perfecting their skills and nailing some seemingly impossible feats with a car tuned by Gymkhana master Ken Block. Any four-wheel feats you pull off in the Compound or anywhere else in the game can be easily captured and put up on YouTube.

The game's career mode takes you through four years of races, including full-on multi-stage rally races, various offroad disciplines, and the change-of-pace Gymkhana events (in venues such as Monaco and LA). This schedule is managed by a group of managers, including your agent, and it allows you to break up the normal race-after-race grind by peppering in things like Gymkhana speed runs, which are sequences of staged tricks. Dirt 3's classic rally cars also figure in to your career events as well. These cars aren't just ye olde jalopies of yore, but ass-kicking rally machines that will deliver all the power you need.

Dirt 2 expanded the franchise's online component considerably, and Dirt 3 takes the series' multiplayer another step forward by offering two-player offline split-screen, Gymkhana events for online play, and Party games including Outbreak and Transport. The former is all about spreading an infection to other players, while the latter pits two teams in a capture-the-flag style game with cars. Online play will also feature a system that compensates for players using driving assists (their cars will be slightly slower with each assist used) and a hardcore setting that removes the HUD and locks the player into the first-person cockpit cam.

There once was a time when the Dirt franchise was seen as a sideshow to Codemaster's other big racer: Grid. Now, Dirt 3 is blowing out its feature set and demonstrating plenty of reasons why this series is charting its own path. » Matthew Kato

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Racing
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Codemasters

» **Developer**
Codemasters

» **Release**
May 24

This car is relatively unmolested as damage will be repaired 100 percent between rally stages

Major League Baseball 2K11

A year of tweaks

When Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Roy Halladay met with Major League Baseball 2K11's development team, he told them he always tries to throw strikes, but hitting the desired spot with each pitch is harder than it looks. Within minutes of playing 2K11, he pointed out that it was far too easy to place pitches.

The development team took this criticism to heart, and worked with Roy to better depict the art of pitching in the game. This means that the slightest error in a pitch's delivery will result in a different trajectory. If you're trying to paint a corner, the odds of throwing a ball are greatly increased, especially if your hurler's control attribute isn't stellar.

Tie the pitcher's potential to the difficult gesture-based mechanics (which are identical to last year's edition), and odds are you'll walk batters, even if you are trying to hit the strike zone every time. The deeper counts take their toll on the pitcher's arm.

Unless you manage your starters like Dusty Baker does, leaving them out there for 115-130 pitches, you'll want to keep an eye on their fatigue. If Johnny Cueto walks off the mound with no gas left in the tank, he won't magically regain all of his stamina for his next start. Even after five days of rest, he could enter the game at 70 or 80 percent. You'll probably have to pull him early, which will likely result in the bullpen burning up.

Rather than just thinking about the game at hand, you'll have to think about the entire season. If a division rival is coming to town next week, you may want to pull him early, even if he's mowing down the opposition.

Pitchers also have to worry about the teammates around them. If Alfonso Soriano is stationed in left field, odds are he'll eventually make a huge mistake. Conversely, a Gold Glover like Carl Crawford will get to more balls.

When Crawford stands beneath a routine pop fly, the ball's trajectory and landing zone are clearly painted. His margin of error is non-existent. If Soriano stands beneath the same pop-up, the ball's trajectory and landing zone are not clearly highlighted until it is rapidly racing toward the ground. He'll have a rough idea of where the ball is going, thanks to a large 10- to 15-foot circle overlaid onto the field, but if he guesses the landing zone wrong, he could give up a gift base hit.

Visual Concepts is still tweaking this system, but I am a bit worried that most balls hit to players like Soriano will result in awkward lunges and circus-like catches. Sure, he makes mistakes, but he is capable of making routine plays most of the time. I'm hoping the size of the catch zone for sure outs doesn't always require so much guesswork.

All of the fielding animations are new this year, and the focus behind most of them is to bring out the small details of the sport. On close plays, a first baseman will lunge toward the ball. If a shortstop doesn't have a chance of gobbling up a grounder, he won't sprint after it or oddly switch back to the default fielding position. He'll slow down and watch the play develop. Subtle touches are also incorporated to add realism to off the field or in between play moments. Players sitting on the bench no longer look like robots. They'll duck or scatter when a screaming liner heads their way. Pitchers will salute teammates who make nice plays and will show signs of frustration in extended innings.

Visual Concepts wasn't willing to discuss specifics for My Player or Franchise mode, but the studio says players can expect big things from both. Regardless of what these modes end up offering, it's clear Visual Concepts' focus is fixated on enhancing the gameplay experience, and making it as true to the sport as possible. We'll find out how close they come on March 8. » **Andrew Reiner**

Visit Reiner's blog at www.gameinformer.com to follow a live rundown charting a season in Major League Baseball's MLB 2K11's My Player mode.
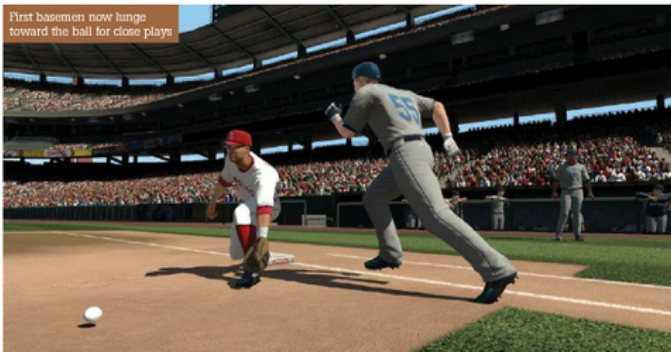
First basemen now lunge toward the ball for close plays

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters

Making a smoother swing

The game also features new courses and golfers and the ability to choke up on the club during difficult approach shots like this

The Tiger development team consulted heavily with Augusta officials to make sure the course's strict rules were followed as much as possible

Traditionally, the career mode focus for each Tiger Woods game has been split. Was the franchise a season simulator like other EA Sports games such as Madden, concerned with replicating the PGA schedule? Or was it about doing your own thing and beating the EA-created local pros (and ultimately Tiger himself) in the Tiger Challenges? You were supposed to move your golfer between the two, but I personally always concentrated solely on the latter. Tiger 12 is now making the smart move of combing the two different experiences more deftly, uniting the entire game around one of golf's most famous courses – Augusta.

You'll work your way to the top by starting out at the beginner-level EA Tour and continue on through the real-life Amateur tour, Nationwide Tour (which you can skip if you're good enough), Q-School, and finally the PGA Tour. Along the way, you can partake in Training and Sponsor Challenges, which effectively replace the old Tiger Challenges. Earning the right to play the Masters at Augusta is an achievement in anyone's career, and you can even get an exemption into the legendary tournament if you beat the game's Masters Moments: nine of the best holes or shots in Masters' history.

The pro career focus of Tiger 12 is mirrored in the prominence of equipment sponsorships. Instead of signing on with sponsors simply for more dough, having a good relationship with a club manufacturer is how you open up and earn different equipment through the game. While in past years, you bought new equipment and outfits for your golfer, now it's all about the four sponsorship levels. Sponsorship levels are unlocked as you meet certain criteria such as making certain shots or winning tournaments. Opening up tiers gets you new equipment, including high-end prototype gear. You're encouraged to stay with a sponsorship long term, as you lose some of the objectives you've already completed if you switch companies.

Similar to Madden NFL 11, the developers behind Tiger 12 are looking to streamline the golfing experience and get you to the meat of the game quicker. The main way they've done this, apart from dropping you immediately into playing the game as soon as you load it up, is to include caddies. Similar to the Madden's GameFlow feature that chose plays for you, your caddie will present you with pre-selected shots of varying difficulty and strategy for you to choose from before you strike the ball. Some – like a power shot over a bank of trees or a fade around a bend – will be riskier than others, and you'll see that indicated in the color of the ball arc. Of course, you can still line up all your own shots like you used to, but using the new caddie system seems like a no-brainer. Your caddie's skill at reading shots (which factor in the wind, club selection, course elevation, etc.) also improves as the two of you revisit courses through your career.

This year's Tiger isn't overhauling its gameplay mechanics, but its move toward streamlining and refining the overall experience is certainly welcome. Golfers, of all people, should know that there's always room for improvement in your game. » **Matthew Kato**

Motion-controlled Golfing

Golfing is one of the few sports that can thrive with motion controllers like the Move and the Wii (sorry, Kinect), and both versions see some improvements this year. Tiger 12 on the Wii (shown) is similar to the structure on the PS3 and Xbox 360 (including caddies and the Masters), and it'll also use the Balance Board to track your weight transfer during shots. The board offers two difficulty levels: Arcade gives you boost points for your power meter if you're balanced correctly during your swing, and Pro judges your balance and either adds or subtracts a percentage from your swing strength.

The Move, meanwhile, adds spin and boost, a first-person camera, and the ability to navigate the menus with the controller.

The 3rd Birthday

Brea returns with a slew of killer moves

On Christmas Eve 2012, pedestrians stroll around the streets of Times Square when rolling blackouts ensue. The ground begins to rumble as a tentacled monster emerges from the earth, toppling massive buildings in its wake. Vehicles overturn from the eruptions and a subway car lies in the grasp of a giant tentacle. The Statue of Liberty has the torch ripped from her hand as the massive beast called the Babel envelops the once majestic icon. These tragic events mark what will be known as the Sacrifice incident.

The 3rd Birthday celebrates the return of NYPD officer turned special agent Aya Brea in this PSP spinoff that takes place more than 10 years after the events of Parasite Eve II. The portable title deviates from the series' survival horror roots to make room for an action-oriented experience. The story kicks off on Christmas Eve 2013, one year after the Sacrifice. The response team, CTI, convenes in its headquarters where Brea's mission is made clear: Take down the Babel. Because of advanced mitochondria, Brea's the most resilient to take on the task. She hops into an Overdive machine that delivers her mind back to the day of the Sacrifice while her body remains in the CTI building. Upon her arrival, she takes over the body of a stationed National Guard soldier and begins tearing apart

grotesque enemies referred to as the Twisted.

Even though Brea is armed with standard firearms such as machine guns and pistols, she has an arsenal of special abilities that allow her to swiftly waste enemies that flood the streets of New York. When allies are within range during a combat scenario, Brea can use her Overdive ability to hop between host bodies, assuming both their position and firearms. This makes getting around battlegrounds a breeze and can quickly get the player out of potentially sticky situations.

Another helpful ability is Crossfire, which is triggered when Brea locks on to an enemy, waits for a gauge to fill prompting allies to take on the same target, and then unleashes a swarm of bullets from all sides. Once enemies are weakened, a triangle will appear prompting the player to deliver an Overdive Kill that launches Brea toward the targeted enemy causing them to implode. If that's not enough, she can also unleash her Liberation move that increases her speed and causes her weapons to deliver explosive blasts.

The 3rd Birthday's controls are tight, and combat sequences are smooth and satisfying once you get the hang of the PSP controls. From what we've seen so far, this fast, frenetic, action-oriented approach to Brea's triumphant return is entirely welcome. » **Annette Gonzalez**
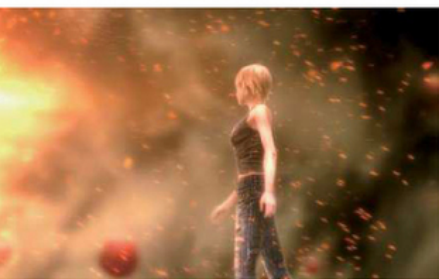
In typical Square Enix fashion you'll be treated to gorgeous cutscenes as the story unfolds
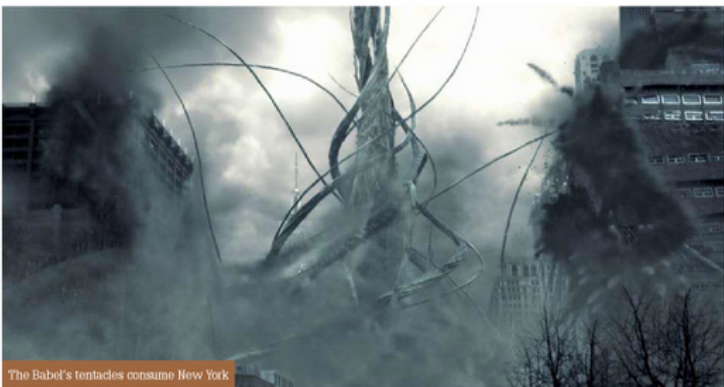
The Babel's tentacles consume New York

Knights Contract

More than an extended escort mission

Protecting an AI companion isn't a new concept; both Ico and Enslaved have you guarding a female partner through the entire experience. However, Yorda and Trip aren't nearly as crucial to their respective titles as your partner in Namco's upcoming Knights Contract. Playing as an immortal executioner named Heinrich, you must protect the resurrected witch Gretchen. Rather than playing like an extended escort mission, Knights Contract has you utilizing Gretchen's powers as an important part of combat.

Managing the health of two characters has always been a challenge; just ask anyone who has had to give a healing item to Ashley rather than Leon in Resident Evil 4. Knights Contract may involve two characters, but you only need to worry about Gretchen's health. Heinrich has been cursed with immortality, so he can be sliced, shot, or pummeled all day without fear of death. If he takes too much punishment in a short period of time, he'll drop to a knee, lose limbs, or have his head taken off. As long as Gretchen is safe, you can mash a button and she'll resurrect you. Heinrich's body parts could be scattered all over the level, but you'll reform as long as your witch buddy is alive and well.

While Heinrich is supernaturally durable, Gretchen is a mortal, so she can permanently perish if she takes too much damage. She's essentially a walking health bar, and it's important to pick her up and escort her to safety if she's taking too much damage. As long as she's in Heinrich's giant arms, both characters will recover health gradually. Protecting her requires you to pay close attention during hectic battles – you may be doing a great job slashing away at that two-headed snake boss, but you'll still fail if one of the heads wanders off and eats Gretchen.

Things might get a bit frustrating if she were just a helpless liability, but Gretchen grants Heinrich his most interesting combat abilities.

Utilizing her magic can summon giant clusters of thorns, drop rocks from the sky, and plant menacing skeletal bear traps on the ground. With her quickly regenerating abilities, battles devolve into chaos, with blood and effects taking up every inch of the screen.

If an enemy is weak enough, Heinrich can enhance Gretchen's magic with the well-timed press of a finisher button. When Gretchen executes her rock-dropping attack, you can leap up and slam the rock down with your weapon if you press the right button when prompted.

An early boss encounter involves a multi-eyed, crocodile-like mutation destroying clock towers and other buildings as it scorches the battleground with its fire breath. Rather than blindly hacking away at it between attack patterns, the game encourages you to cleverly use magic in conjunction with Heinrich's brawn. Use Gretchen's spike power near the beast's foot to pin it to the ground for a brief period, then send Heinrich in to deliver numerous unanswered blows to its head. After taking down its health bar significantly, it's time to summon a massive guillotine with a quick time event and decapitate the beast.

What I played in our preview build was extremely heavy on action, with very little puzzle-solving involved. The combat clearly draws on the stylish action tradition of games like Devil May Cry and Bayonetta, but the addition of Gretchen adds a unique element that could help Knights Contract stand apart. » **Dan Ryckert**

How many teeth do you really need for optimal witch consumption?

Top Spin 4

Top Spin attempts to bring hardcore depth to a mass audience

The Top Spin series has been one of most quietly consistent franchises in all of sports. While tennis doesn't have the mass appeal of sports like football, baseball, and basketball, it's always translated well into the video game realm, whether in lighter fare like Mario Tennis or Top Spin's hardcore, sim-oriented style.

Top Spin 3 won praise for its deep and demanding gameplay, but developer 2K Czech (which includes many members of the PAM Development team that created the earlier iterations of Top Spin) felt that the game's complex

mechanics are fairly typical of the genre, but you have to develop a good sense of timing to succeed. The improved animation (there are over 4,000 more animations than there were in Top Spin 3) means that each step your player takes feels accurate. If you overrun a shot, don't expect to magically turn on a dime and get back in position. As a result, court positioning feels like the chess game at the heart of the match.

The team has also improved the presentation to emulate the TV viewing experience. You'll see and hear the more animated crowds, which

react appropriately to the action on the court (the sound effects were recorded at actual matches). You'll see the pros coming out of the tunnel before the match to the roar of the crowd, lending the proceedings a sense of drama. As for the in-game pros, it's the most complete roster we've seen in a tennis game to date, balancing current day sensations like Federer and Nadal with old-school legends like Pete Sampras and Bjorn Borg (see sidebar for full list). The team insists all of the pros play exactly the style of their real-life counterparts. In fact, its biggest point of reference is the fighting genre, where you see how the combatant's attributes match up against each other. It will be interesting to see how a serve-and-volley player of the past stands up against the power base-line style of a modern player like Nadal.

Top Spin 4 lets these past and present pros square off in a large number of venues, both real and fictional. You'll play events like the ATP Finals in London's O2 Arena and the BNP Parabas Open. Three of the four Grand Slam Events are represented (the U.S., Australian, and French Opens), though unfortunately Wimbledon remains absent. Either way, 2K promises that this will be the most comprehensive tennis game to date, especially in the online feature, which it is not commenting on at press time. As a fan of the sport, both in real life and video games, Top Spin 4 has definitely piqued my interest. » **Matt Helgeson**

Meet the Pros

Top Spin 4 features an impressive list of 25 pros from today and yesterday. Also, 2K is planning a pre-order bonus character – the vintage be-mulleted '80s era Andre Agassi!

• Andre Agassi
• Bjorn Borg
• Roger Federer
• Jim Courier
• Rafael Nadal
• Boris Becker
• Serena Williams
• Patrick Rafter
• Michael Chang
• Dinara Safina
• Andy Murray
• Novak Djokovic
• Ana Ivanovic
• Ivan Lendl
• Pete Sampras
• Andy Roddick
• James Blake
• Caroline Wozniacki
• Nikolay Davydenko
• Gilles Simon
• Bernard Tomic
• Eugenie Bouchard
• Stanislas Wawrinka
• Vera Zvonareva
• Jelena Jankovic

control mechanics might have scared off some gamers. To that end, Top Spin 4 is being conceived as a more approachable title – one that hopes to balance the needs of its core audience and more casual fans.

The core of this philosophy is represented by the streamlined control scheme. Instead of the complex trigger modifiers of Top Spin 3, all shots are performed with a traditional, four-button system. Each face button is assigned a type of shot – flat, slice, top spin, and lob. However, by altering the timing of your shots you can get more depth of control. When charging a power shot, you'll see a red target meter begin to fill. To get a full power winner, you'll have to release at the perfect time. However, if you need to hit a safe, controlled shot, a brief tap on the button will suffice. Serves are performed the same way, although you do have the option of performing an advanced serve with the right analog.

So far, the game feels great. The shot

Mullet-era Agassi will be a pre-order bonus

Supremacy MMA

Exposing the gruesome underbelly of MMA

Mixed Martial Arts is popular, and it already has two dedicated video game series: UFC and MMA. Even in light of its success, has it reached the point where the sport needs three video games sitting next to each other on store shelves? Kung Fu Factory is hoping that its new fighter will be unique enough to carve out its own niche within the market.

Unlike its competitors, you won't see a lot of sponsor brands or television announcers in Supremacy MMA. Kung Fu Factory has chosen to focus on the true-to-life brutality of the sport as well as its underground past. The action remains fast and vicious, featuring combos more in line with traditional 3D fighting games like Virtua Fighter.

In the underground rings of Supremacy, fighters do whatever it takes to ruin their opponent so they can climb up the ranks toward the pro spotlight. With no refs to hold the fighters back, bloodied mats and broken limbs happen often in these cage matches. The arenas aren't fancy venues in Vegas; they're non-regulation rings that highlight the dangerous and illicit nature of the bouts. Don't be surprised if you see people betting on a cockfight before your big match.

However, style means little if you can't back it up with actual skill, which is why Kung Fu Factory has tapped former UFC champion Jens Pulver to serve as combat and story consultant. Pulver is also lending his personal story to the game. MMA fans may already be aware of the hard-earned image Pulver built for himself. As a fighter, Pulver competed above his weight class for years until the UFC finally created a lightweight class appropriate for his size. Afterwards Pulver continued to dominate the field by winning three UFC championship titles, so his story should provide an interesting backbone for Supremacy's action. Kung Fu Factory also plans to tell several other fighters' stories through a stylistic, Guy Ritchie-inspired lens, but the company isn't ready to mention any other fighters at this time.

Does Supremacy MMA bring enough innovation into the ring to hold its own against giants like THQ and EA? We'll have to wait until we can put the game up against the ropes ourselves to find some of those answers. » Ben Reeves

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(online TBA)

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Kung Fu Factory

» **Release**
2011

Thor: God of Thunder

The mightiest Avenger strikes out on his own

It seems like the Greek gods get all the attention, but Marvel has mined Norse mythology's rich legacy for decades, publishing Thor comics since 1962. As Kenneth Branagh's movie adaptation builds steam toward its summer release, it seems like the god of thunder is more popular than ever. Sega has been reluctant to reveal the game adaptation, but the publisher was kind enough to stop by the office and show us game in action.

While this summer's film focuses on Thor's banishment to Midgard (which we mere mortals know as Earth), the game covers the events surrounding the movie and also takes place all across the nine worlds of Norse mythology. In the movie and game universe, Thor and the rest of the Asgardians aren't actual gods, but rather an advanced alien race whose fantastic technology makes them appear godlike. While this liberal interpretation may rub some comic fans the wrong way, Sega is staying true to the property in many other ways. Eisner Award-winning comic author Matt Fraction is serving as a story consultant, and Thor will face off against many of his most fearsome comic foes, such as Ulik, Ymir, and Surtur.

We witnessed a point in the game where Thor entered Muspelheim, the land of the fire demons. Muspelheim is a black land, filled with craggy rocks and lava flows. As Thor walks through the mines of the fire demons, blazing embers waft through the sky like a late fall snow. Many of this land's inhabitants tower over Thor, but some enemies make a mad dash for the god and explode like suicide bombers if he lets them get too close.

Thor's primary weapon is his trusty hammer, Mjolnir. In addition to a variety of combos, Thor can throw his hammer at distant enemies, or swing the mallet aggressively in front of him to return projectiles back at his enemies.

Since Thor is classically the god of storms, he can also tap into several elemental powers. Thor can call vicious lightning storms down on groups of enemies, send his foes twirling through the air in tornados, or make the earth beneath a giant's feet quake by thumping his hammer against the ground. Each power has its own unique properties and uses. For example, Thor's wind powers deal extra damage to flame demons since it puts out their fire, but wind is also useful for dispelling the frozen mists of Niffleheim that will block his path.

Unfortunately, Sega doesn't have a very good track record when it comes to licensed Marvel games. Both Iron Man titles and the most recent Incredible Hulk game failed to live up to the hype generated by their films. However, Sega was quick to point out that Thor has been in development much longer than any of those titles, so we're hopeful that Thor's stormy winds will be the only thing that blows this summer. » Ben Reeves

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action
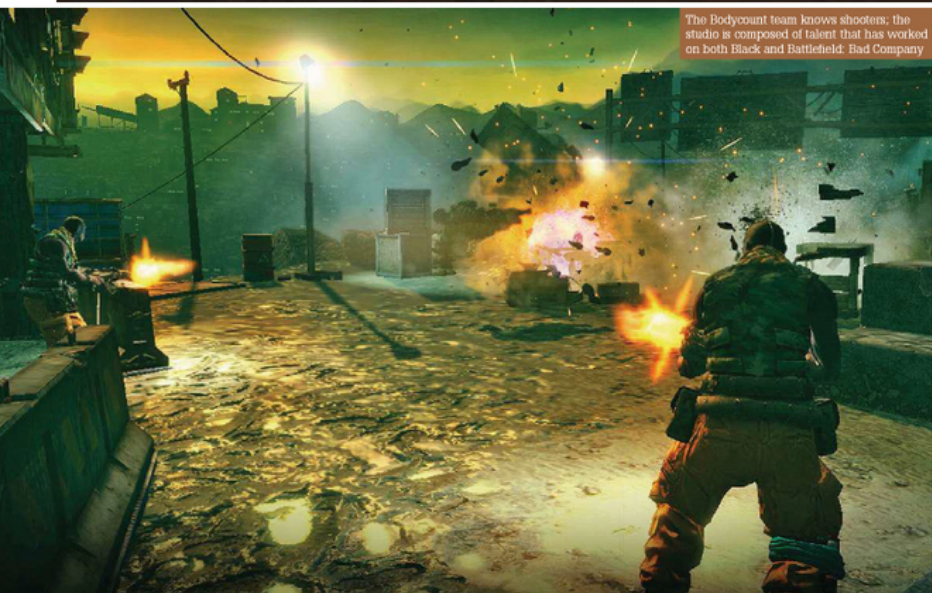
» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Liquid Entertainment

» **Release**
Summer

Film actors such as Chris Hemsworth (Thor) and Tom Hiddleston (Loki) will be reprising their roles for the game

Bodycount

Codemasters hopes to shred our world apart

With a surplus of first-person shooters flooding the market every year, dazzling gamers with spectacle is an increasing challenge. How do you amaze players who single-handedly conquer World War III every week? The team at Codemasters Studios is aware of this problem and wants to get back to the heart of FPS gaming – fast-paced, arcade style gunplay where the destructive talents of modern high-powered rifles take center stage.

Bodycount's main character is a Special Forces adept who gets recruited into an organization known as the Network. This vigilante group tackles the civil conflicts that the UN shies away from. Recent intel suggests a strange, coordinated force is secretly working in opposition to the Network. No one knows how old this group is, what their true motives are, or even what they call themselves. The Network simply refers to them as the Target. Target operatives are strong, efficient, and decked out with the latest in killer mercenary fashion.

The Target is an appropriate moniker for the enemies in a game that is all about shooting things until they explode. Bullets in Bodycount don't just make holes; they shred the environ-

ment. This means players don't always have to take the most direct path through a level. At one point during our hands-on demo, we were pinned between a couple enemies, so we doubled back into a nearby shack and used a shotgun to blast through a wall. The new hole opened into an alley we used to flank our opponents. Codemasters is aiming to let players destroy nearly every structure in the game.

With destructible environments, players must make use of whatever cover they can find. Bodycount's cover mechanic allows players to hold down the left trigger to fall back into a crouched position that focuses your aim down the barrel of your gun and allows you to safely lean around corners moving the right stick. This leaning functionality takes getting used to since the motions are pretty sensitive, but this position makes your character harder to hit, so it could be the optimal way to play if Codemasters fine-tunes the controls.

The environments may explode like piñatas, but this highlights Codemasters' aim to craft a fast-paced arcade experience. Enemies drop intel orbs, which players can spend on specialty tech like air strikes or temporary armor boosts. These tech bonuses have several levels. For example, one level of armor makes players temporarily invincible, but if a player spends a few extra orbs on a higher level they'll be so tank-like that they can burst through walls simply by running forward. Intel powers can also be mixed and matched. If a player calls an air strike down on their own position, they can quickly purchase temporary invulnerability so they can witness the destruction firsthand and be the only one to walk out of the smoke afterwards.

Codemasters hopes players will get a kick out of ripping the world of Bodycount to shreds, but we'll have to wait until summer to see if the game leaves the kind of mark the company is hoping for. » **Ben Reeves**

Fantastic Pets

Augmented reality brings exotic creatures into your home

Blitz Games Studios is no stranger to Kinect, having already brought The Biggest Loser Ultimate Workout to the fitness-minded at the peripheral's launch. Now the team is headed in a different direction, aiming toward a much younger audience with its upcoming release, Fantastic Pets. Less like Kinectimals and more like Sony's EyePet, Fantastic Pets uses augmented reality to bring a user's likeness into the game world to customize, care for, and play simple minigames with a variety of cuddly creatures.

Users can choose between ponies, lizards, dogs, and cats, and while you only start with one animal, you can eventually adopt up to four. Once an animal is selected you, your pet, and your play space will appear on screen for real-time interaction. Here you'll have the option to nurture it (pet, feed, wash), deliver voice commands or hand gestures to teach it tricks, or open up the toy box menu to engage in 12 unlockable minigames. These games include popping onscreen bubbles, playing fetch to get the animal to tip over blocks, and knocking around a piñata. With the simplistic nature of these games, children and parents can join in the festivities in order to collect the gems needed to unlock more games and pet customization options.

Customization allows you to transform Fantastic Pets' roster of everyday animals into exotic creations. Add a horn and a pair of wings to a pony, and you've got yourself a flying unicorn. Customize a lizard's skin for a fiery finish, add a few horns, increase its size, and you've got a fierce, fire-breathing dragon. You can even outfit a dog with a neon blue light pattern that looks like something straight out of Tron. With the breadth of customization options, users can let their imaginations run wild.

With colorful, cutesy visuals and an easy-to-use interface, Fantastic Pets is shaping up to be a good fit for parents looking for a kid-friendly title that exercises both body and creativity.

» **Annette Gonzalez**

» **Platform**
Xbox 360
» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Simulation
» **Publisher**
THQ
» **Developer**
Blitz Games Studios
» **Release**
April 15

Dissidia 012 Final Fantasy

More fighting with your favorites

If the first Dissidia did one thing right, it was giving hardcore Final Fantasy fans an opportunity to see the series' stars cross swords in fast-paced, ridiculous combat. Square Enix isn't changing much about that core concept for the sequel, Dissidia 012, instead focusing on refining the mechanics and adding new characters to the roster.

After some hands-on time with the follow up, I can say that fans of the original entry will feel right at home on the battlefield. Fights are still about depleting your opponent's bravery and hit points through an assortment of stylish attacks, but the addition of assist moves adds a new layer. These maneuvers are performed by first filling up your assist gauge with brave attacks, allowing you to call in a companion character for a quick attack or to shield you from damage.

Despite the addition of assist moves, most of my time was still spent running on walls, whipping around magic spells, and using the characters' signature attacks. All of the combatants from the last game return, but they're joined by some new faces like Kain from FF IV, Laguna from FF VIII, and Lightning from FF XIII. Each new character seems to fill a unique niche in the roster with moves that suit them well. For example, Kain has some cool lance attacks, and Lightning can switch between three different paradigms.

Another wise move is the inclusion of a more traditional overworld to the story mode. While you still have to shuffle through grids and chain encounters together, these stages are separated by sections of exploring a 3D world map. In these areas, you can find treasure, make purchases at shops, and chat with your fellow party members – a welcome change from the drab presentation of the original.

Dissidia 012 isn't a reinvention of the formula. At its roots, it feels like more of the same frenetic combat, but with extra characters and a few tweaks. For those who loved the original, that's not a bad thing at all. » **Joe Juba**

» **Platform**
PSP
» **Style**
1-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)
» **Publisher**
Square Enix
» **Developer**
Square Enix
» **Release**
Spring

A little distance can be good for a relationship, you know?

TIME
39
MARVEL VS. CAPCOM

AMATERASU

RYU

CHUN-LI

THOR

IRON MAN

CAPTAIN AMERICA

LEVEL

1

2

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

97

Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

88 **Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds**

Capcom's beloved fighter rises from its grave with a bounty of iconic characters and an art style that will make comic and video game fans purr. This tag-team clash replaces the overly complex controls of its predecessor with a new silky interface. Don't fear whether Capcom has once again created another fighting gem; worry instead about the time you'll lose honing your craft for hours to come.

THE **SCORING** SYSTEM

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

AWARDS

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

BECOME ONE OF THE FRESHEST SMELLING PLACES ON EARTH.

Old Spice

Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds

A fantastic fan service frenzy

Like the X-Men's Jean Gray, the fighting genre has risen from the ashes. Capcom is leading the fiery rebirth, finding success with Street Fighter IV by distilling the 2D fighting experience to its essentials, making it pretty, and hosting terrific online play. Since its announcement last April, hungry fighting fans have waited impatiently for Marvel vs. Capcom 3, hoping the company can hit it out of the park again. You can stop worrying. The long-awaited sequel will keep d-pads warm and arcade sticks clacking for months to come.

This entry continues the tradition of pitting stacks of memorable characters against one another. Capcom shaved the amount of Street Fighters down in favor of newcomers like Arthur from Ghosts 'n Goblins and Amaterasu from Okami. The Marvel crew is the best assortment yet, with fan-favorite Phoenix entering the fray and oddballs like M.O.D.O.K. adding color. Fans upset that Marvel vs. Capcom 3 features only 36 characters (20 less than MvC 2) should

relax. Every character has unique, robust move sets, a far cry from the previous game's glorified palette swaps. The game features a cornucopia of over-the-top mayhem – Nathan Spencer grabs foes from across the stage with his bionic arm while yelling "get over here," Deadpool yells "bang bang" as he unleashes a torrent of blazing gunfire, and Arthur is hilariously stripped to his boxer shorts.

The basic three-on-three tag team format from Marvel vs. Capcom 2 is intact, but the developers gave it much-needed renovation. Capcom trimmed MvC 2's ultra-narrow input windows down to more enjoyable SF IV levels, and the resulting gameplay is smooth as butter whether you pick up a controller or an arcade stick. I had no problem transposing skills I learned in Super Street Fighter IV into MvC 3, removing the steep learning curve that accompanies some new fighters. All aerial launches and character exchanges are now executed with a single button, and the change makes learning the ropes of aerial combat a quick and satisfying process. Even if you're new to the series, this game offers rewarding training and simple mode, a convenient, streamlined control scheme that maps key combos and special moves to single buttons. Accidentally wrecking your friends by button mashing is fun, but like training wheels, simple mode must eventually be ditched in order to contend with the big boys using traditional controls.

Players can create up to three custom "reserve" teams to speed up pre-match selection

Marvel
Captain America
Deadpool
Doctor Doom
Dormammu
Hulk
Iron Man
Magneto
M.O.D.O.K.
Phoenix
Sentinel (unlockable)
She-Hulk
Spider-Man
Storm
Super-Skrull
Taskmaster (unlockable)
Thor
Wolverine
X-23

Capcom
Akuma (unlockable)
Albert Wesker
Amaterasu
Arthur
Chris Redfield
Chun-Li
Crimson Viper
Dante
Felicia
Hsien-Ko (unlockable)
Mike Haggar
Morrigan Aensland
Nathan Spencer
Ryu
Trish
Tron Bonne
Viewtiful Joe
Zero

Future DLC
Jill Valentine
Shuma-Gorath

Everything from memorable back drops to the characters themselves are gorgeously rendered and shaded

Despite being riotously entertaining, a few elements hold MvC 3 back. Character endings consist of art stills with text overlays, a huge disappointment considering Super Street Fighter IV had fully voiced and animated conclusions (and only one less character). Fans expecting the suite of online features accompanying Super Street Fighter IV should regulate their excitement, because MvC 3's virtual arcade only has the basics like ranked and player matches, plus custom lobbies to recreate the "winner stays" arcade experience. SSF IV's successful tournament mode and multiplayer team battles are inexplicably absent. Why Capcom didn't simply borrow everything from its fighting cousin is a mystery.

Small gripes aside, you shouldn't miss Marvel vs. Capcom 3 if you have even a passing interest in Capcom, Marvel, the fighting genre, or good games. This pugilistic prize mimics the polished, accessible reinvention of Street Fighter IV, forming another strong leg for the resurrected fighting genre to stand on. » Tim Turi

Stacking

Wooden dolls make their mark on the adventure genre

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** THQ **Developer** Double Fine **Release** February 8 (PSN), February 9 (XBLA) **ESRB** E10+

With releases like Brûtal Legend and Costume Quest, Double Fine has cemented its reputation as a go-to developer for unique gaming experiences, even if the company's offerings don't always find an audience. Stacking may be Double Fine's most niche concept to date, but it's hard to imagine a player who wouldn't enjoy the game's clever puzzles and charming story.

You play as Charlie Blackmore, the innermost doll and youngest child of the Blackmore family, a Russian matryoshka set. After his siblings are kidnapped and forced into child labor by the evil Baron, it's up to Charlie to track them down and free them. Luckily, Charlie has the ability to hop inside larger dolls, each of which has a special ability. Some of these abilities are purely for entertainment, but many are vital to progressing through each level.

Despite this novel mechanic, the core gameplay of Stacking is the same as any good adventure game: creatively solving unique and humorous puzzles. Each level contains several challenges Charlie must overcome, which in turn have several unique solutions. Upon completion, a puzzle will instantly reset, allowing you to try it again without having to reload a save. This ingenious mechanic solves one of the most common problems with the genre: searching for an off-the-wall solution that only makes sense to the developer. Instead, virtually everyone will be able to come up with at least one solution (such as using a mechanic to open a traversable ventilation duct) and continue with the story, but dedicated gamers can wrack their brains for more obscure solutions (such as farting into said vent to clear out the adjoining room). An optional time-based hint system reduces the puzzle-based frustration to nearly nonexistent levels.

The Baron's evil traps aren't the only problems you have to overcome. Your character is about as responsive as you would expect a wooden doll to be, and his sluggish pace is annoying, especially on levels that require a lot of backtracking. Camera issues emerge in close quarters, and can make targeting dolls next to walls a pain.

The sense of progression also falters; while you unlock the ability to stack with larger dolls as you continue, it doesn't add much to the gameplay. The biggest changeup is the ability to combine characters' powers. This leads to some great puzzles, but this mechanic shows up too late in the game and isn't used enough. A few side objectives such as finding complete doll sets or performing mischievous acts add length to the gameplay, but there's not much payoff for completing them beyond unlocking models at your secret base. Thanks to a little eleventh hour variety, Stacking ends on a high note, but the rest of the game could have used more gameplay twists like those introduced in the final scenes.

Aside from creative puzzles, a good adventure game needs an engaging story, which in Stacking's case is simple, yet charming. Despite only the most primitive of animations (most dolls can only move at their midsection) the characters are memorable, and the Blackmore family is positively endearing. Humor plays an equally important role, and Stacking delivers in this regard as well. Most of the laughs are pretty adolescent, with no shortage of dolls that feature farting as their special ability (with a surprising variety of sounds). If you're too stuffy for this breed of humor, you can expect more sophisticated laughs as well. The Great Depression and child labor are two topics that might not instantly spring to mind when it comes to comedy, but Double Fine uses them to great effect.

Stacking is a bit rough around the edges, but the puzzles are clever, the humor hits the mark more than it misses, and the characters and story are delightful, leaving adventure fans with little more to ask for. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

Charlie is the classic underdog, except for the part where he jumps into other characters and bends them to his will
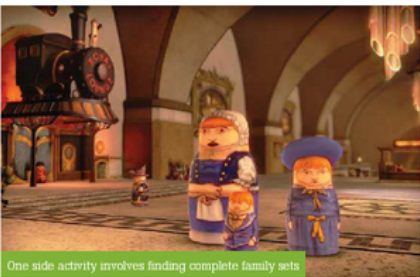
One side activity involves finding complete family sets

Two Worlds II

This time we're laughing with Two Worlds instead of at it

7.75

PS3 • 360• PC

» Concept
Take one of this generation's worst games and turn it around with a vastly improved sequel

Graphics
Environments and equipment are beautiful – as long as you don't look too closely

Sound
The sooner you learn to ignore the terrible voice acting, the sooner you can enjoy the game's quirky sense of humor

Playability
Quest objectives are laid out in an easy-to-understand manner. By the time you hit level 15, you'll be taking out hordes of enemies with no problem

Entertainment
A lengthy, occasionally busted, and surprisingly fun hack-and-slash RPG

Replay Value
Moderately High

Ever since Jeff Cork and I fell in love with the endearing-but-broken survival horror game Deadly Premonition last year, we've discussed whether there is a place in our industry for B-games – the interactive equivalent of low budget, badly acted (but strangely enjoyable) B-movies. Two Worlds II presents the latest argument in favor of this new style of game.

Like its 2007 predecessor, this sequel has significant problems. Though it features a new and improved game engine, slowdown occurs frequently, especially when you or enemies start slinging spells that put the in-game physics to work. The core story is generic, and the sloppy writing sometimes fails to explain what's going on or why characters are acting a certain way. Unlike the original, though, Two Worlds II is playable, with an improved user experience that shows how Polish developer Reality Pump has grown.

After a well-paced series of tutorial missions that set the stage for the story and introduce the numerous systems at work, players are dropped onto an island that comprises a small portion of the total game world but has tons of quests. The goals have plenty of variety, like "go here, kill this" jobs, pickpocketing missions for the thieves' guild, and exploration quests that take place in maze-like ancient tombs packed

with hidden treasure. Your quest log quickly becomes overcrowded, but current objectives are highlighted on the map and easy to navigate to thanks to a teleportation stone.

Two Worlds II's various mechanics weave together in a complex but enjoyable pattern. If you want to stick to cutting down enemies with giant blades, you can. Gamers looking for more depth can employ the crafting system, which allows you to break down and build up almost every weapon or piece of armor you receive. The spell system is even better; as you level up your various skills and collect spell cards, you can build your own set of insane, overpowered abilities. Reality Pump made the wise choice of letting players break the game's balance for the sake of fun.

As I mentioned, the overall story isn't anything new – the big baddie from the first game is now the emperor, and the main character must join a resistance against him to try to rescue his sister – but the tone of your interactions with NPCs is surprisingly original. From subtle references to the first game's poor quality to over-the-top scenarios such as encountering a woman who wants to feed you to her undead husband, the game's self-aware, tongue-in-cheek attitude is infectious.

The art design also impresses. Although

character models look rough, environments, armor, and weapons feature enough detail that I took time to look over my character whenever I equipped something new. Where the original Two Worlds was mostly based in generic medieval fantasy motifs, the Two Worlds II environments draw from Middle Eastern, Egyptian, and Asian influences. Even if the story and the process of cutting down hundreds upon thousands of beasts is the same old thing, at least you're doing so in a lively African savannah instead of boring grasslands and forests.

If the huge single-player game isn't enough for you, Two Worlds II also contains a handful of co-op and competitive multiplayer modes. The co-op chapters in particular provide a nice distraction, but it's frustrating that equipment and levels don't carry over between single-player and multiplayer. The other multiplayer options are forgettable.

Like other games that could fit under the "B-game" label, not everyone will embrace the elements I enjoyed in Two Worlds II. If you're looking for a lengthy and humorous (if somewhat unpolished) hack-and-slash RPG to tide you over while you wait for Dragon Age II or The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, it's worth giving Reality Pump a second chance. » Phil Kollar

Test Drive Unlimited 2

Drive into a virtual paradise

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Racing (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Atari **Developer** Eden Games **Release** February 8 **ESRB** T

Casinos and other lifestyle trappings are easy distractions to fall into

I've never been to Ibiza or the Hawaiian island of Oahu, but the way they are presented in this game is what I'd expect. Life on these two island paradises half a world apart is laid back and yet full of fun diversions everywhere you look. Still, you can take things at your own pace. Wait a minute – isn't this supposed to be a racing game? Where's the race for first place? Believe it or not, Test Drive Unlimited 2 encapsulates these two extremes to different degrees. The game's all-encompassing approach satisfies varying tastes and ends up being a versatile utility vehicle.

Developer Eden Games succeeds in creating an open-world racing title that blends online racing, single-player career competitions, and free ride exploration into one cohesive experience. Games like Burnout Paradise have done this before (and in some ways better), but two of the key things that make TDU 2 stand out are the locations and its various leveling categories that are all linked together.

You gain XP in the Social, Discovery, Competition, and Collection categories by

Racking up traffic violations in front of cops in both single- and multiplayer will trigger a chase mode

doing related activities such as making a community challenge (Social), completing photography assignments (Discovery), defeating other racers in competitions (Competition), buying houses (Collection), and much more. In turn, these four categories' make up your overall rank in the game.

Although the four categories' levels are separated, they feed into each other. For instance, cruising around and finding new roads and manufacturer-specific upgrade shops earns you Discovery points. Exploring the islands is how you find the various showrooms that may be required to compete in a race as well as further your burgeoning car collection for Collection points.

If anything, the Discovery category itself is a tad too important. A few times I felt like the game was pushing me to spend time free-riding around the islands just to find an upgrade shop or even a shirt I wanted. I also didn't feel I was getting enough Discovery points when I was staking out uncharted territory.

But every time I got uptight about this structure, I would find a wrecked car with my onboard metal detector, spontaneously challenge an online player to a race, or even take on a photography mission, and I'd be having fun again.

The islands themselves also prove to be a great tonic for my ills. Not only are the environments beautiful, but the varied terrain is great for racing. Hills, offroad switchbacks, tight city corners – there's a lot to tackle. Furthermore, the real streets mean you have a little less width to work with (sometimes there's even oncoming traffic), and plenty of roadside objects like signs

add a layer of danger. Even the time of day can become a factor. I once kept retrying a particular race so much that I had to race it from dusk until dawn the next day – and it was far easier once the sun was back out.

Unfortunately, this cool environment is filled with too many races that lack difficulty. The roads themselves are more of a challenge than the AI racers. I could routinely beat the competition while driving lesser cars. Even though you're racing against characters in the Solar Crown, on the track they showed no personality at all. Apart from some occasionally cool modes like an around-the-island endurance race, blowing through speed cameras in any order, or the online Follow the Leader race (where only the designated leader of the pack can see where the next checkpoint is), most of the Competition races don't have any sizzle.

Test Drive Unlimited 2 might be lacking in some areas, but this is one instance where the sheer quantity of features prevails since its structure is thoughtful enough to make this game more than just a lazy vacation. » **Matthew Kato**

Mario Sports Mix

Major league names can't save this minor league offering

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Square Enix **Release** February 7 **ESRB** E

Last year was my favorite year of being a Wii owner. After enduring countless minigame collections and shovelware titles, it was rewarding to sit down with the stellar Super Mario Galaxy 2, Donkey Kong Country Returns, and Kirby's Epic Yarn. I was thrilled to see the company making the most out of their iconic stable of characters, and hoped they'd continue down this path in the future. Fast forward to early 2011, and I'm playing a watered-down collection of what amounts to glorified Mario Party minigames. Oh well, 2010 was nice while it lasted.

Sports Mix technically contains four sports, but don't be fooled: These are by no means full-fledged experiences like the early Mario Tennis and Mario Golf titles. Basketball and hockey almost feel like the same game thanks to nearly identical control schemes. Dodgeball is slow and requires little to no strategy, and volleyball is repetitive and goes on for far too long. Outside of the stage-specific gimmicks, you'll see virtually everything these sports have to offer by the time the halftime buzzer sounds during your first game.

If you're playing alone, it's entirely too easy to dominate the AI every single time. Throughout my time going through the Mushroom, Flower, and Star Cups in basketball, I routinely beat my opponents by 30 or 40 points. By the time I reached the Star Cup, I'd get a 20-point lead at the half and win games without even touching the controller during the entire second half. I'd set it on the couch next to me and watch as the computer team ran around like chickens with their heads cut off, wildly flailing to steal a ball 10 feet away.

Adding human players does little to ease the pain. One court (Bowser Jr. Blvd) features various hotspots that add or subtract from your next shot's point value. Both of our teams played well, but the score still wound up being 53 to negative 8 at the half thanks to the unbalanced point modifiers.

Hockey proved to be similarly broken, as we discovered a way to fake out the AI goalie without fail. By simply skating from one side of the goal to the other before shooting, we were able to score an easy point every time.

The game tries to get by on Nintendo charm, but the character-specific special moves aren't doing it any favors. Luigi will use his vacuum from Luigi's Mansion, Diddy Kong will throw a giant banana boomerang, and Wario throws a stink bomb across the court. These moves don't require the slightest modicum of skill, reflexes, or timing to pull off. Rather than forcing you to activate specials at specific times or in certain situations, all you have to do is jam A and B together when your team has possession of the ball or puck. After that, it's just a matter of watching the overpowered move play out and score you some effortless points.

Sports Mix's core sports are available in exhibition matches or tournaments, but the only real variety you'll find revolves around the stages. Luigi's Mansion features ghosts that can assist you, Koopa Troopa Beach has shells and coins that wash up onto the shore, and in Western Junction a train barrels down the court if you don't score in time. It may shake things up to a minor degree, but these elements aren't nearly enough to make you forget about the repetition and simplistic gameplay.

When (not if) you tire of the four sports, there are a handful of party minigames to play with up to four players. The core sports may be glorified Mario Party minigames, but these party games are indistinguishable from the ones found in that series. Running around to grab colored balls in time to music, trying to push your opponents off of a floating block of ice, and throwing fruit into Petey Piranha's mouth will have you even more bored than the bare-bones sports offerings.

Mario and his pals starred in some great sports titles back in the Nintendo 64 days, but gameplay like this just doesn't cut it in 2011. There are plenty of $5 or $10 downloadable games that feature more complex gameplay than this full-priced release, and a handful of party games, some unlockable Square Enix characters, and online play don't do enough to justify a purchase of this hollow experience. **» Dan Ryckert**

Radiant Historia

Atlus travels back to a golden age

8.75

DS

» **Concept**
A well-crafted RPG that feels like an unreleased classic from 1995

Graphics
Even with a few 3D environmental details, the visuals have a charming 16-bit vibe

Sound
An excellent soundtrack, but a little more variety would have helped

Playability
The battle system is deep without being complicated, making it easy to learn

Entertainment
I'd recommend this to any fan of old-school RPGs

Replay
Moderate

Role-playing games have become complicated over the years. They feature lengthy cinematics, emphasize player choice, and present gigantic worlds to explore. These advancements aren't bad; they have given rise to some of the most compelling and successful titles in the industry. Even with these great modern RPGs, sometimes I wish I could go back to the genre's 16-bit era – a time where titles like Earthbound, Chrono Trigger, and Final Fantasy represented everything I wanted from a video game. If you've ever felt the same way, you should play Radiant Historia.

You control Stocke, a member of a secret intelligence agency who is the key to stopping a brutal war between two powerful nations. Stocke isn't your typical plucky young hero wading through a sea of fantasy clichés; he's a competent and efficient warrior who knows that dumb luck and hope won't lead to victory. This refreshingly novel attitude suits the plot of Radiant Historia well; events often take a turn for the worse, and rash decisions have dire consequences. Expect to see the death of multiple party members.

That may sound like a spoiler, but nothing is set in stone. By using a mysterious book called the White Chronicle, Stocke has the ability to travel freely between various key points in the game's timeline. You may see one companion fall in battle, but then return to that moment later with an item that will save his life. Adding to the complexity, the timeline splits into two parallel branches early on, and the alternate histories also affect each other. This structure is a brilliant way to deliver the plot, steering away from cookie-cutter moments and taking some surprisingly dark turns. Radiant Historia's storytelling provides an innovative twist that defies the predictability of traditional RPGs.

As much as I enjoyed the story, the most entertaining part of the package is the battle system. It seems to follow a worn pattern at first; you have three party members who are queued up in a turn order and proceed to unleash attacks and special abilities. Your enemies aren't just standing in a row, though. They are arranged on a 3x3 grid, where those in the front do more damage, and those in the rear have higher defense. Since many of your characters' skills involve batting foes around the grid, your battles are fun strategic endeavors that have you clustering enemies onto a single square to damage them all at once.

This mechanic is more than just arranging your opponents. The turn order isn't static, so you're free to swap one party member's turn for another's later down the line. You can even switch with an enemy, which sounds crazy until you consider that your damage increases with each consecutive ally attack. The result is a tactical system that has you prioritizing enemies, managing the turn queue, and setting yourself up for massive attack chains that lead to immensely satisfying victories.

The unique combat and story are supported by a traditional RPG framework that any fan of the genre will recognize. You level up, learn new abilities, visit towns, and buy new equipment. Side quests require you to hop around in time to solve problems, and multiple endings (most of them resulting in horrific failure) give you a reason to revisit previous decisions. These aspects – along with the visual style – comprise the game's familiar core and make it feel like an old-school RPG at heart.
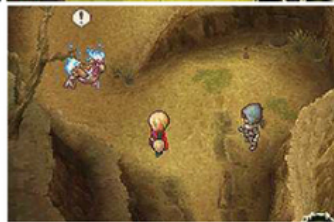
Some genre conventions in Radiant Historia have aged better than others. Retreading previously crossed areas is dull, and you do it a lot as you move between timelines. I also would have appreciated more unique enemies (instead of palette swaps), which could have added some extra flavor to the combat. Lastly, I got sick of skipping through a bunch of dialogue every time I jumped to a different point in history. These issues don't ruin the game, but they are enough to make small stretches more annoying than entertaining.

A top-down view and some sprites aren't all it takes to capture the essence of a classic RPG. Many titles have tried to capitalize on gamers' nostalgia for the 16-bit era, but most end up feeling like hollow and archaic imitations. Radiant Historia succeeds where those attempts fail; it is an inventive role-playing game that delivers the sensation of playing one of your old favorites for the first time. » Joe Juba

Pokémon Black/White

Game Freak revitalizes a beloved franchise

8.75

DS

» **Concept**
Pokémon enters the fifth generation with new critters to capture and train in order to become the ultimate champion

Graphics
The best-looking Pokémon RPG to date. Each city and the respective gyms are gorgeous and full of personality. Battle sprites are more animated than in previous entries

Sound
Each town has its own catchy tune. You'll also find yourself humming along to familiar favorites

Playability
If you've played a DS Pokémon game in the past, you'll be right at home

Entertainment
Plenty of new Pokémon to study and collect, plus exciting locales filled with fun diversions makes the Unova region worth exploring
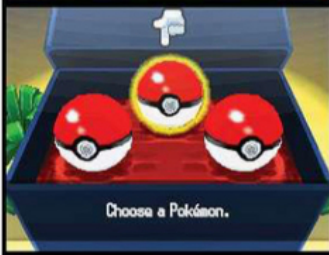
Replay Value
Moderate

Game Freak has spent years building upon a money-making gameplay formula that involves engaging countless critters in addicting rock-paper-scissors style battles on a quest to catch 'em all. Though the basic mechanics of the franchise have been effective, Pokémon fanatics have been clamoring for the series to evolve for years. While the latest franchise entries, Black and White, don't necessarily make any major leaps in innovation, they do take steps in the right direction.

Professor Juniper kicks off the action by sending our matured protagonist on a lengthy adventure to complete the Pokédex, battle trainers across the expansive Unova region, earn gym badges, and ultimately become the Pokémon champion – pretty much standard fare. While veteran trainers might be put off by some of the explanations on how to catch and train Pokémon early on, the action quickly picks up with the introduction of Team Plasma, a group bent on the liberation of Pokémon and releasing them from the selfish demands of their trainers.

Regular encounters with the team while exploring Unova unveil that their intentions of freeing Pokémon are not as benevolent as they seem.

Unova is home to memorable hot spots such as the business district of Castelia and the center of entertainment, Nimbasa City. Upon entering each location, you see how far the series has come from a technical standpoint as sweeping camera angles show off each city's amazing detail and scale. Towns scattered across the massive world map are home to a number of fun diversions such as Pokémon musicals, arena battles, and the occasional NPC who lost a Pokémon and needs your help. These tasks break up the hours spent scouring patches of grass for new captures.

Just like in any other Pokémon title, you'll spend a large amount of time engaged in battle. With the new Pokémon introduced in Black and White, finding a fresh face and developing new strategies based on the unfamiliar opponent's strengths and weaknesses is part of the fun. To mix things up, 3v3 battles are introduced for the

first time in the series, requiring a new level of strategy by determining which Pokémon to send out while being mindful of the elemental properties of your opponents. This addition injects a much-needed dose of variety, but you still spend the bulk of your experience in single and double battles, since 3v3 doesn't make an appearance until much later. Still, once you put together a winning team, battles of any size are just as addicting as ever, and only get more satisfying as your Pokémon evolve.

Pokémon Black and White do a great job building upon already solid features and taking them to the next level. With new Pokémon, fun characters, unforgettable locations, and changes to the battle system, Game Freak has given true fans a reason to become a trainer again. » **Annette Gonzalez**

Okamiden

The white wolf is reborn cuter and more focused

8.75

DS

» Concept
Amaterasu's cute puppy teams up with various kids for a sprawling adventure

Graphics
While the visuals are simplified from the original, the watercolor art style still impresses

Sound
Traditional Japanese tunes blend with Charlie Brown adult blabbing voices

Playability
Drawing with the stylus is hands-down the best way to control the Celestial Brush

Entertainment
The Zelda influence continues here with an epic journey filled with loads of exploration, huge bosses, and plenty of puzzles

Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer
SILVER
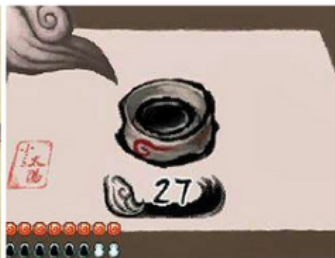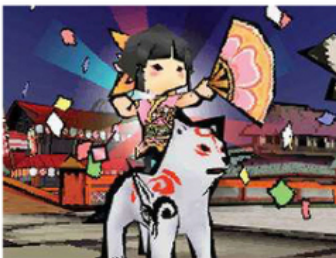
Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** March 15 **ESRB** E10+

When Okami came on to the scene, no one had ever seen anything like it. The gorgeous art style and music, the innovative Celestial Brush technique (where players draw on the screen to attack enemies and interact with the environment), and the sprawling quest all added up to gaming nirvana. Okamiden doesn't have that same shock value, but it creates its own identity within the framework laid by the original.

Veterans of the first game will recognize many environments and characters, and certain time traveling sequences will get fanboys pumped. However, Okami rookies shouldn't hesitate to jump right into this sequel. It's completely accessible, and the entire backstory is explained right at the beginning.

Okamiden begins nine months after the original when the land is cursed once again by demonic forces. Guardian Sapling spirit Sakuya once again summons Amaterasu, but gets her son, Chibiterasu instead. Issun (the sidekick from Okami) is too busy with Celestial Envoy duties, so Chibi has to recruit other partners throughout the quest to help battle the demons. The first partner is a young boy named Kuni, who is the son of Susano and Kushi from Okami. How they conceived, birthed, and raised a child in the span of nine months is one of the early mysteries.

This partner system allows Chibi to interact with a variety of personalities instead of running around solely with Issun. The rotating cast works well as a fresh storytelling device, too. Chibi serves as a wandering helper to assist the partners with their issues while still making progress on the overall quest. For example, you help Kuni live up to the legacy of his hero father, and assist child actor Kagu in clearing her family's theater of demons. I also liked experimenting with their

unique abilities to see how they'd affect puzzles and combat. The mermaid Nanami, for example, can swim in dungeons where Chibi can't and can shoot blasts of water if you draw a line from her to your target.

These powers figure heavily into Okamiden's puzzles, most of which utilize a new brush technique called Guidance that allows you to sketch out a route for your partner to walk, float, or swim. Some routes are more complicated than others and require you to defend your partner along the way. I never felt completely stumped by a puzzle, but they're not cakewalks either.

Battles take place in small circular arenas where you use a mix of melee and Celestial Brush techniques to finish off enemies. For those unfamiliar with the series, brushwork pauses the action and changes the screen to a sepia tone. Here you draw slashes on enemies to cut them, sketch a bomb to blow them up, and much more. This system handles better than ever on the DS, finally allowing players to draw onscreen rather than use analog sticks or Wii remote. The mix of foes forces you to use every power in your repertoire to get through their defenses, and it's never been easier to access them all so quickly.

The most intriguing battles are reserved for Okamiden's many bosses. Most of the time you have to send your partner off to accomplish a task while Chibi's handling the brunt of the attacks and mixing in the proper brush techniques. These large, menacing foes all present unique scenarios that are satisfying to figure out. That said, combat overall is not particularly difficult. The only time I died throughout the entire quest was during a minigame.

While Okamiden makes several strides forward, it does run into a few limitations on

the DS. Some of the larger outdoor areas are segmented into separate chunks to make them more manageable for the system. It's strange to sit through a brief load after going through a fake door outside. The framerate plummets in a couple areas, and Okamiden also commits the sin of having only one save slot so you can't share your cart with anyone or back up progress from earlier in the game. Also, for all of the drawing in this game, why can't I sketch on the maps to keep track of treasure spots?

Okamiden takes around 25 hours to complete, so it's much shorter than the original. I felt like the journey was just about the right length, with the only filler coming at the very end. Plenty of items to collect and sidequests to complete (not to mention a new game plus option) will satiate those looking for an even longer experience. Most exciting of all? The end hints heavily at more entries in this excellent series. **» Bryan Vore**

Dragon Quest VI: Realms of Revelation

Grinding through fantasy conventions at high speed

8.5

DS

While some RPGs blow their budgets trying to craft a complex world with reams of backstory, the Dragon Quest games have always painted in much broader strokes, dealing unashamedly in the style of fetch quests that have become stereotypes in the genre. Realms of Revelation may be the single most ambitious game ever to be stuck within this tried-and-true formula.

Dragon Quest VI doesn't try anything I haven't seen before. Whether you're helping a prince through a ritual to become king or rescuing a mountaintop town from a curse that has frozen all of the villagers, virtually every scenario has been done in other games, whether they came before or after this title's original Super Famicom release.

What sets it apart, though, is the manic pace at which these rote storylines are started and completed. You'll rarely spend more than an hour in one town or dungeon before you've helped the locals and moved onto your next objective. In fact, you'll often spend more time aimlessly wandering the world map to figure out where you're supposed to go next. The game's energy – during plot sequences at least – kept me eagerly pushing forward, too breathless from the barrage of new places and events to worry much about their familiarity.

Just because things move quickly doesn't mean Realms of Revelation is a remotely short game. From an early point, players can explore two massive world maps, and numerous plot twists expand those land masses even further. Discovering every secret in this strange world is addicting, especially as you start procuring bizarre methods of transportation such as a mobile island and a magical flying bed.

Gamers who played last year's Dragon Quest IX will notice the absence of certain upgrades in this entry. Armor and weapons don't appear on your character when equipped, and frustratingly frequent random encounters are back. Surprisingly, I found myself enjoying DQ VI more than its technically superior descendant. Maybe it's easier to forgive dusty design choices knowing that this was originally a 16-bit game, or maybe it's because DQ VI embraces the mile-a-minute imagination and sense of adventure that made me fall in love with RPGs as a kid. » **Phil Kollar**

» Concept
Finish off a trilogy of DS Dragon Quest remakes with this huge adventure

Graphics
A step down from last year's Dragon Quest IX, but still a good-looking handheld title

Sound
Fans of the series will recognize and appreciate the classic tunes

Playability
Old-school to a fault. Expect plenty of grinding and directionless exploration

Entertainment
An absurd amount of gameplay for those willing to put up with some aged mechanics

Replay Value
Moderately High

Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together

A new vision for an old masterpiece

9

PSP

If every remake were like this, we would hardly need new games. Every element of Tactics Ogre has been pulled apart, examined, and reassembled with an eye toward all the ways game design has changed in the intervening two decades since its original release. It's not perfect – this is still a complex, hardcore game whose charms require more than a little work to fully enjoy. Though it is less accessible than other games in the genre, Tactics Ogre is a surprisingly adult look at war, rebellion, and loyalty with as much rewarding strategy as any title out there.

Tactics Ogre follows the conventions of the strategy/RPG genre that it helped define in the '90s. Players are thrown into a massive variety of challenging battles and given a wildly diverse toolbox to cut their way out of their problems. You'll mix and match dozens of classes with a huge number of passive and active skills to create a battle party suited to any crazy strategy you can dream up.

As a rebellious orphan thrust onto the global stage by circumstance, players have significant control over how the story plays out. Far from the banal choices that many lesser RPGs tout, these defining moments ask you to choose honor or loyalty, friends or faceless crowds, and even your country or humanity. Most impressive is how these conflicts are presented in a mature, adult context. Rather than beating you over the head with overbearing morality like a Final Fantasy game, Tactics Ogre gives you real options that have tangible benefits and drawbacks, letting you make your own choice.

The majority of the changes from the original are for the best. Much of the tedium of grinding out levels has been removed, and while characters can still permanently die, training replacements is much less painful. The dialogue is written as well as any title I can think of, which is no small task given the sheer volume of it in the expansive story.

The only knock against the game is that character progression and item upgrading – both integral systems that players spend a lot of time in – are needlessly padded with trivial choices. Keeping your roster's equipment up to date is a time-consuming bore, and each piece of armor is stuffed with (no joke) up to 30 stats that only a savant could ever properly assess. Similarly, the tiny incremental bonuses you choose between while leveling are uninteresting.

Tactics Ogre isn't as accessible or inviting as Final Fantasy Tactics or Disgaea, but the rewards for putting up with its flaws far outweigh the cost. If nothing else, it deserves recognition for being a shining beacon of maturity in a sea of adolescent power fantasies. » **Adam Biessener**

» Concept
Remake the cult classic precursor to Final Fantasy Tactics with new graphics, new progression, and new dialogue

Graphics
This is no Gears of War, but the crisp sprites and colorful effects communicate everything in a concise fashion

Sound
The lack of voiced dialogue is a throwback to an earlier time in gaming. The score and battle effects are competent enough, but muting the PSP doesn't make much difference

Playability
Everything is as tight and responsive as a good racing game. Even turn-based strategy is improved by a lag-free interface

Entertainment
Putting up with a bit of tedium pays off big in story and strategy

Replay Value
Moderately High

reviews archive

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FIFA 11	8.75	Nov-10
Fighters Uncaged	4.5	Dec-10
Front Mission Evolved	7.75	Oct-10

the score

7 | Lord of Arcana
Platform PSP **Release** January 25 **ESRB** M

Originally perceived as a Monster Hunter clone, Lords of Arcana carves its own identity. Battles take place in contained spaces rather than large environments, combat controls are tighter, the action is more violent, and the pace is faster than Capcom's series. However, the rinse-and-repeat gameplay is just as tedious. For patient gamers and hardcore Monster Hunter fans, it's worth checking out. If you're looking for a varied experience that hits on more than one note, look elsewhere. — Dan Ryckert

6 | Rush'N Attack Ex-Patriot
Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** March **ESRB** M

Rush'N Attack looks like a promising entry in the Metroidvania genre, but it comes up short. It's split into three uninspired levels of repetitive knife stabbing, sloppy platforming, and switch hitting to drain out toxic sludge. There's no need to explore since the only upgrades are inconsequential health boosts. The boss battles are the most entertaining aspect, yet strangely the final encounter is the easiest of the three. — Bryan Vore

6 | Spare Parts
Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** January 19 **ESRB** E10+

Spare Parts is a cute game with likeable characters. That may be enough for a cool T-shirt or sticker, but EA Bright Light's game lacks substance where it matters most: gameplay…It all falls apart with relentlessly one-dimensional combat and mindless boss encounters that seem to go on forever. — Jeff Cork

5.5 | Venetica
Platform 360 **Release** January 18 **ESRB** T

Venetica offers plenty of quests, looting, and reasons why role-playing fanatics should raise a curious brow, but without any polish, the only people who should play it are fans of "so bad it's good" games. Think Syfy original movie. — Andrew Reiner

5 | Body and Brain Connection
Platform 360 **Release** February 8 **ESRB** E

Using your arms and legs to quickly solve math problems puts you to work, and other challenges like catching pizzas while avoiding their burnt counterparts fail to engage. Coupled with a few motion detection issues, these problems make Body and Brain Connection difficult to recommend. — Annette Gonzalez

6 | Trinity: Souls of Zill O'll
Platform PS3 **Release** February 8 **ESRB** T

The studio behind the Dynasty Warriors franchise, Omega Force, delivers an uninspiring hack-and-slash romp across a generic fantasy world. Repetitive quests that require taking down specific enemies or fetching items in areas you'll revisit multiple times over becomes dull quickly, and though combat occasionally allows interesting use of dynamic environments, it's not nearly enough to overcome the tedium. — Annette Gonzalez

5 | Mindjack
Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** January 18 **ESRB** M

Mindjack's hacking gimmick adds an interesting wrinkle to the third-person shooter genre, and the way it blurs single- and multiplayer gameplay is worthy of future exploration. However, its few innovations are vastly outweighed by old annoyances. Myriad control problems, brain dead AI, and a cringe-worthy storyline make Mindjack a shooter worth skipping. — Jeff Marchiafava

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Volume XXI ◦ Number 3 ◦ Issue 215

Sonic the Hedgehog 20th Anniversary Trivia Challenge

by Tim Turi

This year marks Sonic the Hedgehog's 20th birthday. Could there be any better way to honor the Sega mascot than with a collection of obscure questions testing your deepest Sonic knowledge? Take the quiz to find out if you're as cool as Knuckles or lame like Big the Cat.

1. What was Dr. Robotnik's original character design based on?

a. A walrus in suspenders
b. Teddy Roosevelt in pajamas
c. A fat cat scientist
d. A mustachioed Humpty Dumpty

2. What short-lived Sega Genesis character was derived from one of Sonic's original character concepts?

a. Pipo, the helpful robot
b. Awesome Possum, the environmentally-friendly marsupial
c. Ristar, the shooting star with stretchy arms
d. Bubsy, the embarrassing bobcat

3. Which pop star is rumored to have helped with Sonic 3's soundtrack?

a. Michael Jackson
b. Sting
c. M.C. Hammer
d. "Marky" Mark Wahlberg

4. For which game did Sonic receive his slimmer, green-eyed makeover?

a. Sonic CD
b. Sonic 3D Blast
c. Sonic The Hedgehog (2006)
d. Sonic Adventure

5. What is the name of the extra level unlocked after acquiring all the hyper emeralds in Sonic 3 & Knuckles?

a. Scrambled Chaos Zone
b. Doomsday Zone
c. Final Chase Zone
d. Death Omelet Zone

6. Sonic had some offbeat sidekicks in the Archie Comics series. Which of the following was not one of them?

a. Bunnie Rabbot
b. Antoine D'Coolette
c. Cammie Chameleon
d. Princess Sally

7. Including cameos and releases for multiple consoles across multiple countries, how many games has Sonic appeared in?

a. 20-50
b. 50-75
c. 75-100
d. 150+

8. What is the level select code for the first Sonic the Hedgehog?

a. Up, Down, Left, Right, Start + A
b. Plug the controller into slot 2 and press start during the title screen
c. Up, Down, Up, Down, Left, Left, Right, Right, C, B, A, Start
d. Play the game's release date in sound test (1, 9, 9, 2, 1, 1, 2, 4)

9. How many rings do you traditionally need to enter a bonus stage?

a. 25
b. 50
c. 100
d. 3

10. Despite popular belief, Sonic the Hedgehog first released on the 8-bit Sega Master System, but was quickly overshadowed by the release of the superior Genesis version.

a. True
b. False

ANSWERS:
1-b, 2-c, 3-a, 4-d, 5-b, 6-c, 7-d, 8-a, 9-b, 10-b