THE No.1 VIDEOGAME MAGAZINE

EGM™

ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY

INSIDE:

HALO 3

HALF-LIFE 2: THE ORANGE BOX

THE EYE OF JUDGMENT

ROCK BAND

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ACE COMBAT 6

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BIGGER IN AMERICA?

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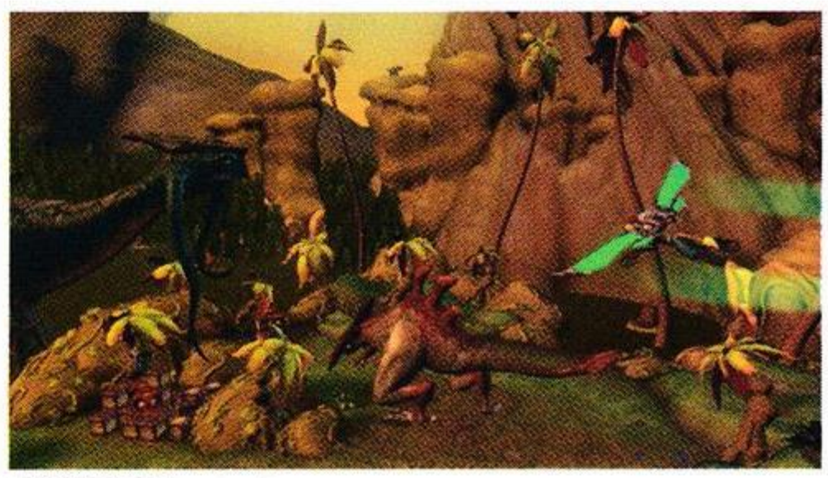

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22:01 Eliminate soldiers near ambassador.
22:02 Suppress fire on left building.
22:03 Cover northwest corner for extraction.

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22:02 Provide covering fire.
22:03 Move in to extract ambassador.

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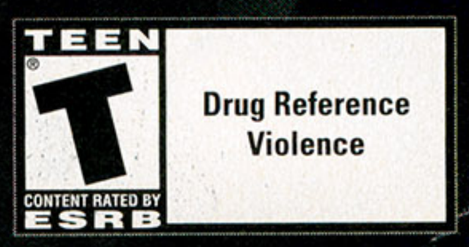

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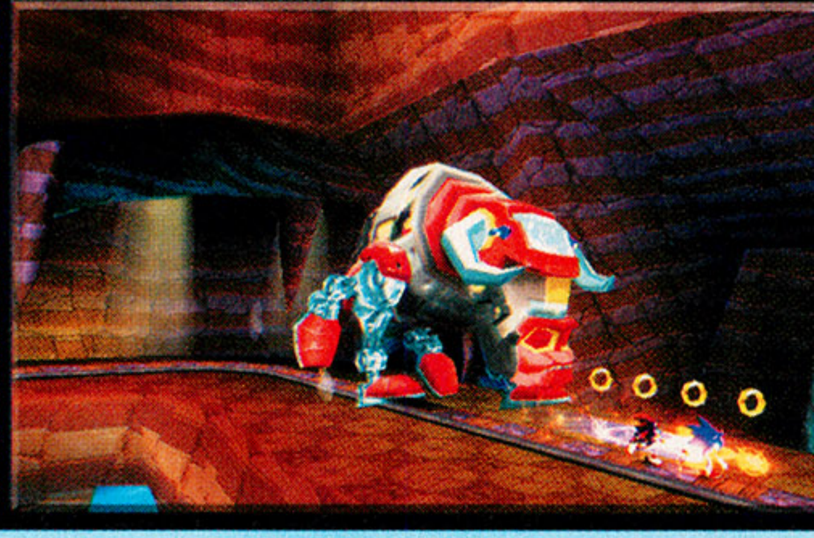

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HUMAN HISTORY JUST GOT
A LITTLE LESS HUMAN.

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> THIS MONTH'S EGM EXTRAS

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Ninja Gaiden II
Gameplay videos and exclusive interviews

***Halo 3* hubpage**
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> EDITORIAL

Have some fun

RECENTLY on our *EGM Live** podcast, I mentioned that the review score of 10 that I gave to *Halo 3* was a very different sort of 10 than the one I gave to *BioShock*. At least one reader/listener on our message boards laughed at that concept, implying that this thought process is nonsense. Of course, this person was really arguing that *Halo 3* doesn't deserve a 10—so many people so badly want to see this game fail for some reason—but the argument is an interesting one.

For some readers, that rare, top score should mean only one thing: a life-changing game of some sort—something refreshing, something genre-defining. And that's why *BioShock* got that 10 from me and the two other reviewers in *EGM* #220. It's an unforgettable experience—a haunting adventure that drew us into its world and aesthetic and audio style like few games have before. But I ask: Is that the only way to define a 10?

Let's look at TV sitcoms, for example. I'd consider *Arrested Development*, *The Office*, and *Seinfeld* to be some of the all-time bests—10s, if you will. But they're all 10s for very different reasons and for totally different styles, which I won't get into here since you probably didn't buy this magazine to get my take on comedies.

Halo 3 isn't as refreshing an experience as *BioShock* is, being the third game in an established series. But it *is* genre-defining in terms of its new modes and features. And it's incredibly fun...the type of game I won't put down for a long, long time. Another easy 10 for me.

People get a little too caught up in little details ("Hey, the enemy A.I. isn't as good. *Halo 3* doesn't deserve a 10!") or in their ideas of what that 10 should mean. But let's not forget: These are videogames we're talking about. They're meant to be fun. They're mean to entertain us. And I see nothing wrong with rating games based on how successfully they do that.

Relax a little...and enjoy your games!

—Dan "Shoe" Hsu, Editor-in-Chief

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ESRB

"...easily the PlayStation 3 (system)'s premiere, must-have title."

-Game Informer

"...a highly playable action game that will satisfy even the most demanding FPS junkies."

-GamePro

"5 out of 5"
-G4

"9.5 out of 10"
-Game Informer

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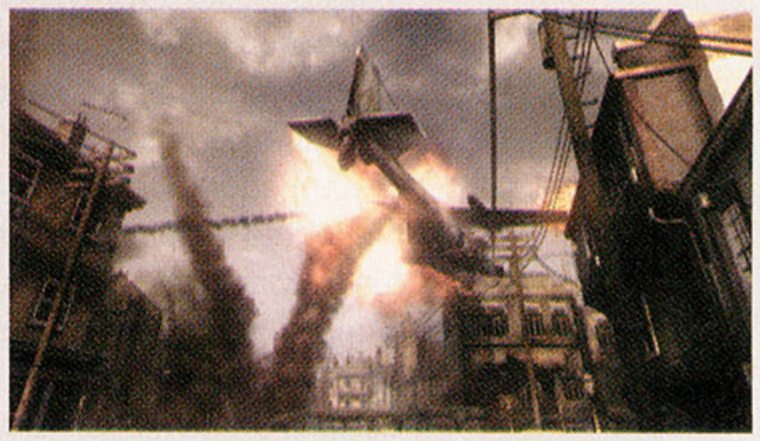

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LETTERS

adults-only ratings, playing with dolls, and cataclysmic system failure

TRIVIAL ISSUE

This month's *EGM* question:

Which Christian Slater flick had people playing the original *Ninja Gaiden* (NES)?

E-mail the answer to **EGM@ziffdavis.com** (subject head: Trivia: *EGM* #222) for a chance to win something potentially awesome.

Letter of the Month

The Man is keeping you down!

I read Hal Halpin's "Playing Politics," [*EGM* #220] and I think he's off the mark. He says Adults Only–rated games are "effectively a ban," but this is a ban from consoles only. So *Manhunt 2* won't appear at Toys "R" Us or on the Xbox 360...big deal. Both are private entities which can sell or publish whatever they choose. That is not censorship. That is private choice. [Director] Ang Lee's latest [movie] is NC-17, and we all know it won't be screening in the same theaters as *Hulk* did...but it's still screening in art houses. If [Rockstar] believes in *Manhunt 2* or some other AO title strongly enough, then design it as a PC game. Or for Linux, the operating system equivalent of the art house.

No, the mainstream consoles and mainstream retail establishments won't support your Adults Only product. But the choices involved in designing such a game are faced by every capitalist looking to market a new product: Who is your target audience? How are you going to reach them? Will it be profitable? If you're only willing to make your vision, then prepare to suffer like any fine artist.

Dare I say something like *Manhunt 2* will probably make as much of a cultural contribution as a low-budget, direct-to-video horror film.

It's candy for a niche market, but those horror DVDs make a lot of money. They found a way. Complaining that your fringe product won't be carried by Wal-Mart just sounds like whining to me. Make your violent-porn game and market it where it belongs.

—Chris Romano

■ ***Manhunt 2*: not your grandfather's virtual snuff film.**

The more mature solution

I believe that parents should be the primary line of defense when it comes to protecting their kids from the *evil* media options that exist in our world. So when I keep reading that Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo won't allow AO-rated games on their consoles as a method of brand management I get very frustrated.

Games are sold to anyone who can afford them. If a 12-year-old kid saves up his money to buy a PS3, then his parents should set the guidelines about what games are acceptable. I even support retailers not selling AO- and Mature-rated games to minors. But I see a much simpler solution to this whole thing if the console makers are truly looking to protect themselves and the kids: include a security option that reviews ESRB ratings.

With everything these latest-gen machines can do, why not include a program that allows parents to set password protection to control the games that a machine can load based on the ESRB? It's simple, easy, and gives more credibility to the ESRB. Then when the news and presidential candidates want to cry about a 12-year-old that was exposed to adult content, the parents have to be the first ones to answer the questions.

Until then, please give me my AO-rated *Manhunt 2* that my 32 years on this earth has made me mature enough to play without feeling any violent urges.

—Brent B.

That's a good idea, Brent. So good, in fact, that Sony, Nintendo, and Microsoft have all implemented it in

For writing this month's winning letter, Chris gets a copy of *Manhunt 2*... or maybe something else we have lying around.

Even though *Manhunt 2* has now been revamped and rerated to squeak in under the Mature rating, Chris makes some points worth considering. He and other folks interested in this controversial topic should definitely check out our lead story this month (pg. 32). We dive much deeper into why the AO rating is essentially the kiss of death, and whether we'll ever get hot, sexy, ultraviolent grown-up games in the future.

HOW HARDCORE ARE YOU?

Your proudest gaming moments

The next contestant in our monthly harder-core-than-thou competition arrives!

I've seen some hardcore gamers before, but not many who care about my favorite game: *EarthBound*. Some friends and I care about the old Super Nintendo game so much that we reenact scenes from the game in a public setting (imagine *Mega64* with an *EarthBound* twist). I've been a hippie, human slot machine, and many more just for the love of the game. Check out our videos at mestephen.com/earthbound.

—Stephen Georg

■ **That *is* hardcore.**

Want to see your own story in the pages of this mag? All you have to do is tell us how hard-effing-core you are. Dish up the goods on what makes you more into games than anyone else, and send it to **EGM@ziffdavis.com**, *subject head: "I Am Hardcore." Remember, it doesn't count if you can't prove it, so send photos, too!*

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Master Chief's latest advice: "Stop playing with yourself, you little freak!"

their latest consoles. Obviously that fact isn't widely enough known, or you wouldn't have sent this e-mail. (Either that or you're, you know, kinda slow.)

Say no to crack

For some reason, I have had multiple problems with my game discs lately. They keep cracking in the very center, and then they completely don't work. I try to get them refurbished but nothing seems to work. Please let me know how to prevent this.

—Gabe Shinn

Er...stop freezing your discs? Stop sitting on them? Stop storing them beneath a pile of encyclopedias? Stop performing experiments in cryogenic suspension in your game room? Stop using them as coasters? Stop taking them on roller coasters? Stop rolling them down your stairs? Stop rolling over them with your car? Stop practicing telekinesis on them?

Really, there could be so many things you're doing wrong that it's hard to recommend a course of action. In general, though, *stop doing stupid things* with your discs and they should stop cracking.

Oh, and you do know that pressing on the spindle that holds a disc in its case releases the disc from the case, right? Now of course you do.

"Yvan Eht Nioj..."

Last issue [*EGM* #220] I noticed an obvious trend in your letters column. Every other month, you print a letter from our boys in Iraq, and they all have one thing to say: "It's really quite boring and laid-back; we do nothing but surf the Internet and play videogames, plus we obviously have all sorts of magazine subscriptions."

Sounds pretty awesome. Kind of makes me wonder how many *EGM* readers honestly consider a career in the military simply based on these descriptions. Every day I keep reading about how horrible it is there, and how much the guys want to come back home. I watch trailers for the upcoming documentaries on the war, and there's only one [message] that's [consistent]: "Get us out of here!"

So I'm sorry, but it's kind of hard to believe in these so-called "letters" to a magazine that has advertisements for the Army, Navy, and Marines. In a magazine which, based on the ads, is obviously geared primarily at young men, there should be some level of balance when it comes to this. Those letters make it sound like every other guy over there gets access to a 360 for several hours a day.

—Irving Martinez

You could answer your own question, Irving, without resorting to tinfoil-hat paranoia, just by rereading your own letter. Can you guess how? How about if we tell you it's related to your statement about the soldiers surfing the Internet?

Bzzzt, time's up. The reason we get e-mail only from soldiers who aren't terribly busy is because soldiers who aren't terribly busy are *the only ones who have time to e-mail us*.

But here, if it'll make you feel better: Kids, war sucks. You could die. The recruiters never tell the whole story. Also, the sky is blue and fire is rather hot.

Why is it always a racial thing with you people?

When [writer] Nick Suttner implied that people playing "Clix" games (like *Halo* ActionClix) have no life ["Cash or Carbine," *EGM* #220], that was the pot calling the kettle black. To play a "Clix" game you have to have other players and a place to play. To spend all of one's time playing a game downloaded off of Microsoft's Xbox Live service takes no other players. Playing a "Clix" game at a local comic or game shop, or even at a buddy's house, seems far more social than playing *Heavenly Sword* in one's living room in one's underwear. I understand going for a laugh, but the joke really should be more well thought-out. For one set of gamers to insult another set is self-defeating. We have enough other people doing that. Let's not turn on each other.

—Brad Ahrens

You know, Nick, the kid with the little dolls does have a point.

Tech support

I have a PlayStation 3, and for the past few days of gaming in the hot weather, I have noticed some faint smoke coming out of the console's disc slot after about three hours of gaming. I know the system is hot, but none of the flashing indicator lights that would inform me of the overheated interior are on. I was wondering if you have heard of this and should I be concerned that there is something wrong with my system.

—Minh Lu

Let's get this straight. Your PS3 has begun emitting smoke, and your first instinct was to write a letter to a magazine to ask if that might perchance be an indicator that something isn't right with the unit?

Oh, something is definitely wrong (and it ain't just with your PS3).

A *Grand* delay

On page 52 of *EGM* #220 you have a preview of *Grand Theft Auto IV*. On this page the release date for *GTA4* is labeled as "Summer 2008." On page 62 of the same issue, however, *GTA4* is listed under the "More October Releases" section. So when exactly *is* the game being released?

—Steve White

Huh, they're both incorrect; the game is now scheduled for release sometime in February, March, or April 2008.

No contest

Why is it that contests in *EGM* aren't open to Canadian residents? The magazine is sold here so shouldn't we be allowed to participate in contests since we're giving money to your company? Is that too much to ask?

—Mathew Campbell

So health insurance doesn't cost you a thing, your dollar is suddenly as strong as ours, and you still think you deserve the chance to win free stuff? Talk about being greedy! But seriously, it's not our call—it's a legal thing.

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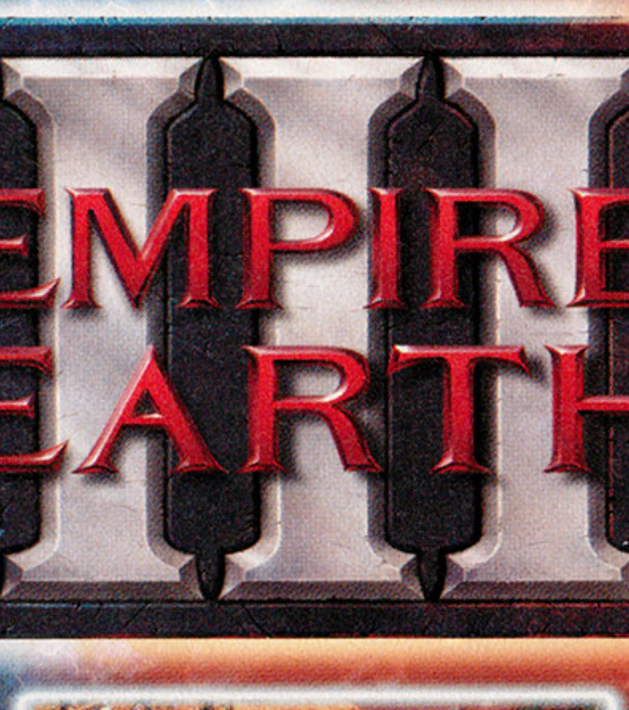

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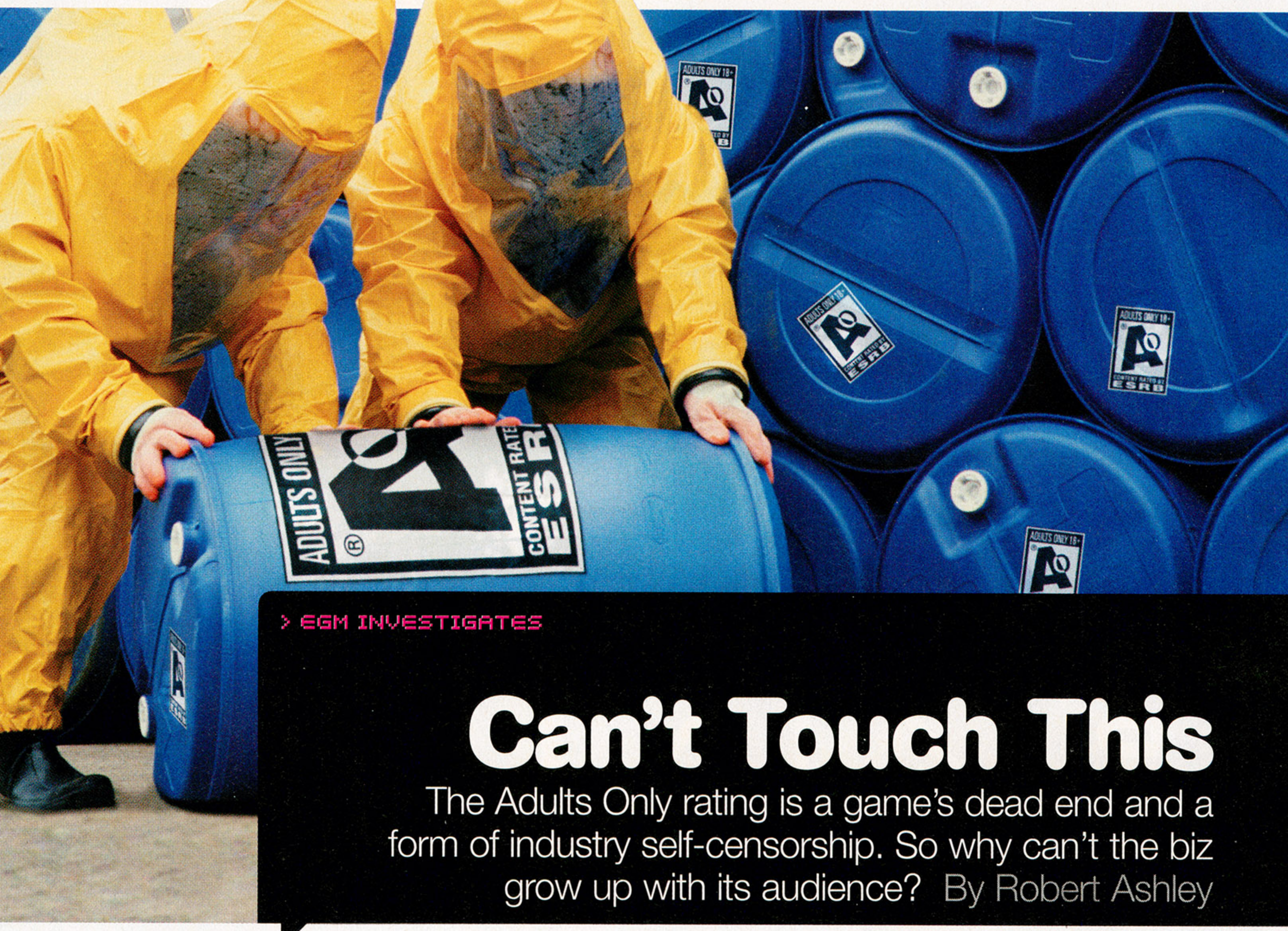


> EGM INVESTIGATES

Can't Touch This

The Adults Only rating is a game's dead end and a form of industry self-censorship. So why can't the biz grow up with its audience? By Robert Ashley

More and more developers are speaking out against the ESRB. Factor 5 even hid a "hot coffee" Easter egg in PS3 game *Lair*—but it's not what you think. See it at GameVideos.com.

IT WAS THE THIRD PIECE OF A BAD-NEWS TRIFECTA. Rockstar Games' *Manhunt 2* was cruising quietly along in development last June when, after being banned outright in the U.K. and Australia, the game achieved the American equivalent: the Entertainment Software Rating Board's Adults Only rating, which would have made the final game off-limits to anyone under 18.

Compared to the prequel's Mature rating—a rating that suggests players be 17 or older—an AO might not seem like a big deal. After all, it's only a year's difference in the age of potential buyers. But in reality, the rating is a kiss of death: Since Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo all have strict policies preventing the publication of AO-rated titles for their machines, *Manhunt 2* found itself homeless. And if it could somehow break through that barrier, essential retail chains like Wal-Mart and Target refuse to stock anything with the AO sticker on it, even though the rating isn't enforced by law. With millions of dollars invested in the already completed game, Rockstar could only send the game back to its developers for toning down (which it did, receiving a revised Mature rating in August).

With *Manhunt 2* (and last year's AO re-rating of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* after the discovery of its hidden Hot Coffee sex minigame), we seem to have reached a point where game designers are pushing the limits of the ESRB's Mature rating, yet the next step up is not a commercially viable option. Is there any place in the market for the AO rating, or has its reputation preceded it?

No Adults Only allowed

According to representatives from Microsoft and Sony (Nintendo declined to comment), Adults Only games won't be playing on your home consoles anytime soon. "We are extraordinarily comfortable with the policy that we have," say Jeff Bell, VP of global marketing for Microsoft. "It is difficult to strike the right balance, but we don't think that it's a contradiction to say that we

PAGE 38

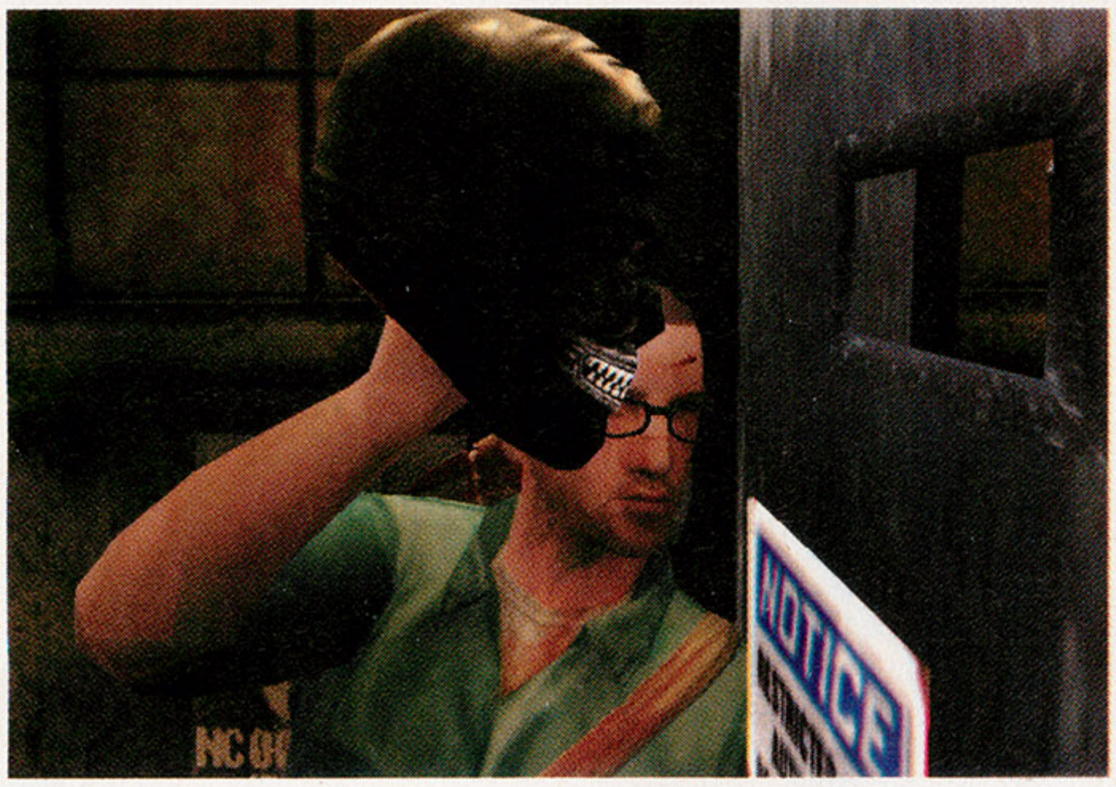
Preview: Skool of *Rock Band*

PAGE 56

Feature: Playing with power-ups

PAGE 60

Preview: *Assassin* slipping?



■ **The now Mature-rated *Manhunt 2* retains much of the horror of the original AO version—except kills are blurred by a filter (not shown) that'll have you calling LensCrafters.**

support free expression and at the same time take steps to create our own brand identity or communicate our message about a product or service." Translation: We support game developers' rights to unfettered expression up until the point that it tarnishes our family-friendly image. Even as the average gamer gets older every year, Bell says that Microsoft's policy is in it for the long haul: "From a demographic standpoint, I think we're sensitive to the fact that Generation Y is moving through adolescence to early adulthood and will soon be parents. And so we're focused upon the needs of the constituents in terms of providing the appropriate control to the consumer." Again, translation: You might think you want AO games now, but wait until *you* have children.

For once, Sony and Microsoft agree. "The vast majority of retailers in North America will not stock AO titles, and I think it's the right decision anyway," says Phil Harrison, president, Worldwide Studios, Sony Computer Entertainment. "It's completely consistent with what Nintendo and Microsoft are doing, so I don't believe we're any different. We have the same policy as the other platform holders."

Hal Halpin, president of the Entertainment Consumers Association, an organization that advocates on behalf of game consumers (read: gamers), finds this dismissive attitude troubling. "Simply blaming the next man over or stating that it's what your competitor does simply isn't good enough," he says. "If the average gamer truly is in his or her 30s, how about treating them as such?"

The double standard

Consistency of a different variety is something *God of War* creator David Jaffe finds lacking in the current ratings system. "We need ratings," says Jaffe. "I am a huge supporter of them. What irks me to no end—and where I think the ESRB needs to grow a f***ing backbone, or simply get over itself—is in the fact that the ratings are not consistent with movies and television and the rest of culture." It's a common criticism, that what the film industry accepts as an R rating would never make the cut for the game industry's M, and Jaffe believes it reveals something about the attitude of the industry at large. "I think the only rational reason the ESRB has for rating games in a different light is they feel games are—at the end of the day—for children," he says.

Al Lowe, a pioneer in adultcentric games when he created the raunchy *Leisure Suit Larry* series in the '80s, agrees. "The games business has been branded as children's toys since its inception and has for 30 years fought that moniker—evidently not very successfully," he says. "No one would think twice about *Brokeback Mountain* being in general release, but when adult titles in games are released, people act as if some horrible sin has been committed." Lowe has the rare perspective of an adult-oriented game designer who worked before the current ratings regime. "We started the whole ratings business," says Lowe. "Twenty years ago, when *Larry* came out, we wanted to make sure that people understood what was in the package, so we actually self-imposed a rating on ourselves. We labeled the box with a symbol that kind of looked like the movie industry symbol just to make sure that people knew that the content wasn't suitable for children." Lowe believes that it was actually easier to make games for an adult audience in the '80s. "There were no committees," he says, "no market research, no ratings board—none of the trappings that suck the soul out of today's products."

When will the biz grow up?

Ironically, the disproportionate leeway movies and television get when it comes to violent and sexually explicit material is literally built into our game consoles. You can watch any sort of movie you'd like on DVD in your

I think the ESRB needs to grow a f*ing backbone or simply get over itself....**

—**God of War *creator David Jaffe***

CAN'T TOUCH THIS (cont.)

Xbox 360, right up to hardcore pornography. Even Sony's own Blu-ray disc technology is allowed greater freedom on the PS3 when it's filled with video instead of videogames, as evidenced by the release of *Debbie Does Dallas... Again* on Sony's format (yes, really). "I understand the potential contradiction that is represented in that," says Sony's Harrison. "But the Blu-ray movie playback function is all defined by a standard. The Blu-ray disc forum defines that standard rather than Sony Computer Entertainment or the videogame industry, so you have two different rules occupying the same system: the movie-function rules and the videogame-function rules. And there aren't any rules for web browsing, so that kind of policy issue is really complicated to resolve."

These complications are actually a good sign for those who would like to see more explicitly adult games. Technology drives the games business, and technology may one day open the door to adult content. "One of the things that the digital-distribution business will allow us to do is that, if we can unequivocally prove that somebody is 18 years old or whatever the appropriate age is, then I think we can push the content boundaries a bit more," says Harrison. "As a creator, I want to do that because I think it will allow us to explore new directions that our industry isn't able to explore." Already, each of the three new-gen consoles features parental control options that allow parents to set what kinds of games they permit their kids to play. As we purchase more games online and fewer games in stores, the old rules and regulations could be brushed aside. "I'm not saying this is something that'll happen tomorrow, but I think it's something that the industry debate should include," Harrison says. "It used to be that swearing was unacceptable on television in any form, and today you hear it. So standards do change. They reflect and guide what's happening politically and culturally."

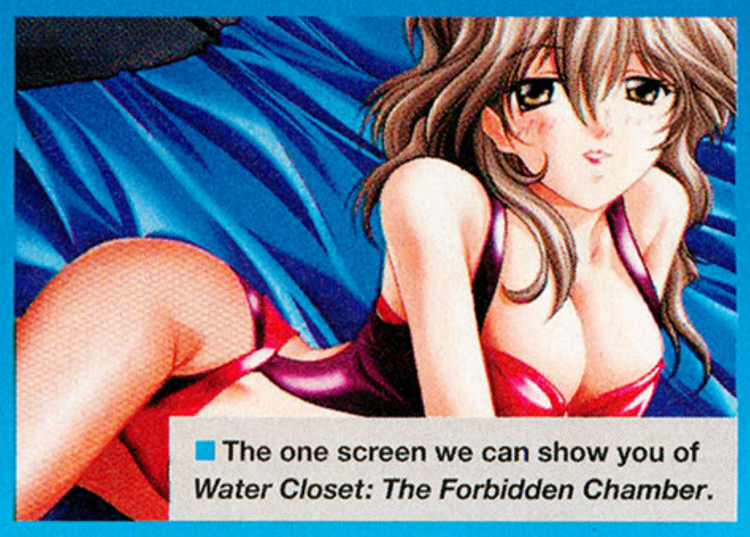
Until then, don't fret too much about the creative constraints placed on game designers. David Jaffe isn't too worried. "I think what's telling about the medium itself is that, so far, most of the stuff that we say is for adults is simply bloody and sexual—and I'm guilty of this more than most," says the man who put a ménage-à-trois minigame in *God of War*. "The idea that the AO rating is keeping deep, meaningful, *adult* games out of the marketplace is bulls***."

> ANATOMY OF AN AO RATING

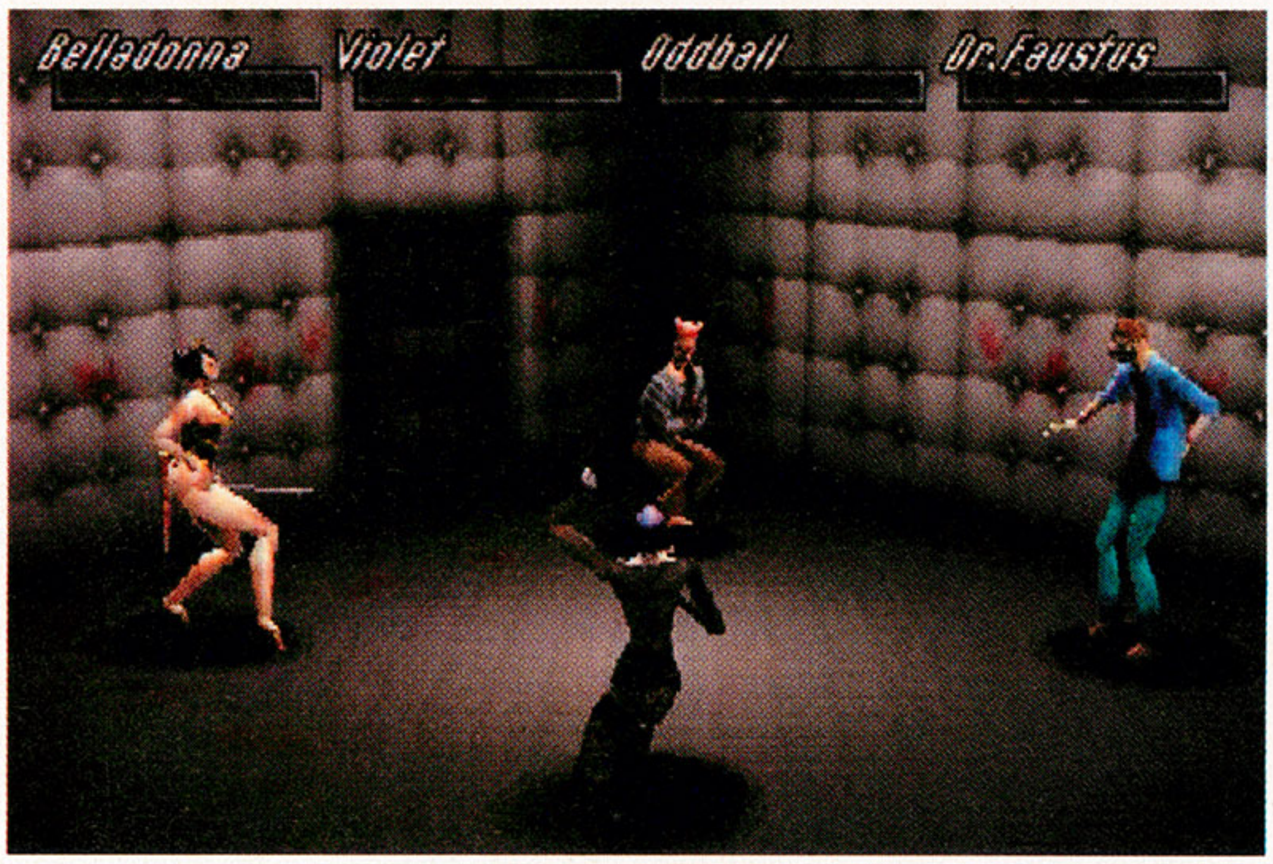
As it stands, with the doors to 18-and-up content officially locked at the hardware level, the ultimate arbiter of what you can and can't play is an organization created to help parents make educated game purchases for their children: the ESRB. The board, established by the industry to voluntarily police itself (the ratings aren't enforced by law), is in the business of assigning labels to boxes, from EC (Early Childhood) to the AO in question. Simple enough, but Adults Only is no ordinary label. According to the ESRB, only 24 games have been awarded that distinction since its inception, and most are PC titles with names like *All Nude Nikki*, *Wet: The Sexy Empire*, and *Water Closet: The Forbidden Chamber*.

The rating denotes "prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity," basically more of what makes an M-rated game "Mature." In fact, the line between the two labels is fuzzy. "We have definitions for our rating categories that describe the types of content that would typically be found in each rating category," says ESRB President Patricia Vance. "But ratings are not formulaic. The assignment of ratings is inherently subjective since it essentially boils down to human beings making judgments about the relative intensity of content and context in which it occurs."

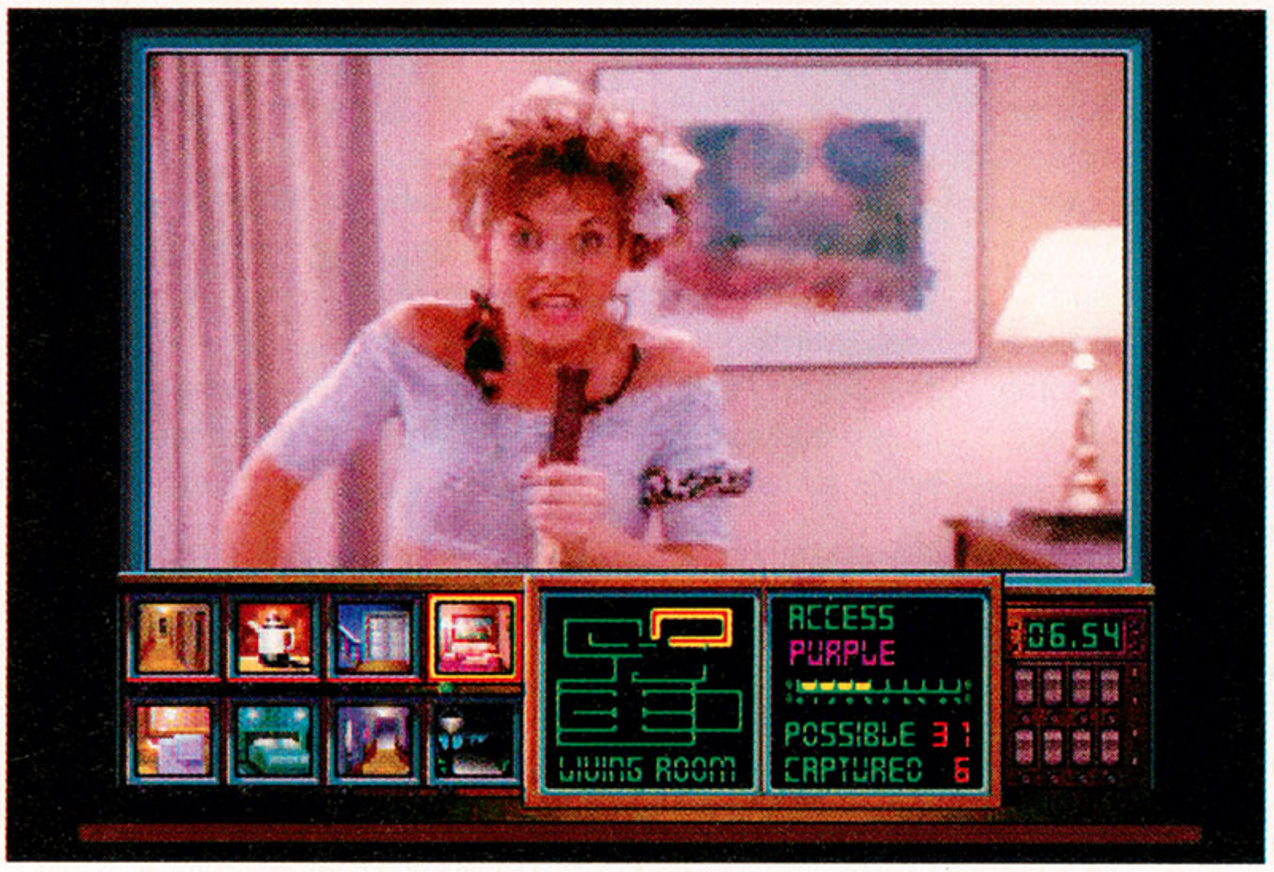
This might explain how *Manhunt*, a game in which you repeatedly gore a naked man who wears a decapitated pig's head for a mask, made it into the M-rated category, while the game's sequel did not. Vance says that previous ratings decisions do, however, come into play: "Historical parity is also a significant factor since it's important that the ratings remain relatively consistent to maintain the public's trust and confidence in them."



■ **The one screen we can show you of *Water Closet: The Forbidden Chamber*.**



■ **And we haven't even gotten to the sex yet: Content controversies so far have centered only on ultraviolence, as in the canned-for-its-gore PS1 fighter *Thrill Kill* (above) and the old CD game *Night Trap* (below), which helped spawn today's ratings system.**



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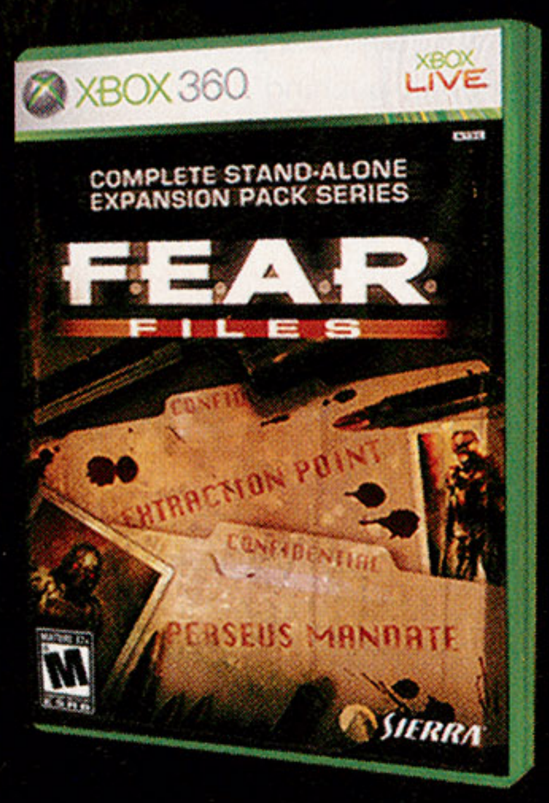

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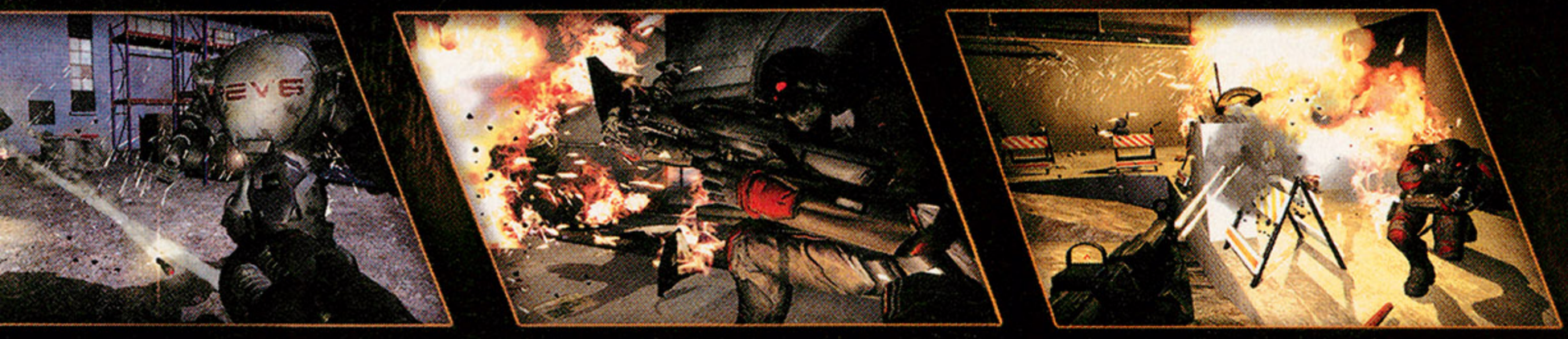

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> FAR-OUT FANS

Brainy Club Leader: Ben Decker

When you think about videogame clubs, snooty Ivy League institutions like Harvard don't exactly spring to mind. That might start to change, though, with the recent creation of the Harvard Interactive Media Group. Half academic consortium, half gaming club, the group is part of a new wave of interest in organizing gamers on campuses nationwide. We talked to HIMG President and Harvard senior Ben Decker about bringing together the Harvard gaming community.

EGM: Was this club originally set up as an academic organization or a way to unite fellow gamers?

Ben Decker: Well, the secret motivation was my roommate and I always played against each other and were looking for other people to game with.

EGM: How's your gamer lounge, Harvard GameSpace, going?

BD: It's amazing. It seems like people are meeting through it, pushing toward that goal of making gaming more social than it sometimes is.

EGM: The club also has a game development unit. What have they been up to?

BD: The first project they're doing is called *University*. It's a simple network-based role-playing game where, instead of the usual caste types—elf, warrior, whatever—there's going to be science major, English major...all the stats and attributes are like that.

EGM: So you're basically encouraging students to goof off?

BD: Definitely. [*Laughs*]

—Kyle Orland

> FOREIGN OBJECT/JAPAN

Railfan: TAIWAN HIGH-SPEED RAIL

Ticket to conduct

Platform: PS3

Likelihood it'll come here: Americans love cars and planes. But trains? Unless they transform into rocket ships, no.

Which PlayStation 3 game really stretches the hardware to the absolute limit? Um, probably not *Railfan*, the first PS3 title developed for the Chinese-speaking Asian market (a Japanese version is due out in November). The second in a series of train-conduct-em-ups (think *Densha de Go!* [PS2], except even nerdier), *Railfan* simulates all 208 sprawling miles of Taiwan's brand-new high-speed rail network, letting you hit the tracks all up and down the island in the train model of your choice. Among the thrilling game modes available: Time Attack (how fast can your bullet train get from Taipei to Zuoying?), Trial Driving (just how good are you at keeping the schedules?) and Eco-Driving (do you think you can make it to Zuoying while using as little electric power as possible?).

Next. No, wait! You can't deny that *Railfan* looks nice—all the driving bits were shot in high-definition video, so pretending to work one of the most unglamorous jobs in all of Asia never looked so lifelike. And in case you wanted to grab a bite to eat out in the middle of nowhere, the game even includes a Tour Mode (in English, no less) that contains info on 300 restaurants, tourist hot spots, and other attractions nearby the THSR line. If you're the sort of person who knows your Shinkansen 700T series from the 500 series, you've got to be in some kind of bizarre train-station heaven here, right?

This is Vince Young.

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Most people don't know that Vince isn't just about football. He's also a volunteer teacher who's working to make sure every kid has access to the technology that drives today's world.

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> BAND AID

Rock Blocked

Glam-rock parody band Metal Skool tells us why they're no groupies of **Rock Band**'s setlist... By Alex Porter

Priced to groove: The complete *Rock Band* package—including the game, microphone, drum kit, and one guitar—will sell for less than expected when it hits stores November 23. The PS3 and XB360 versions are $170 (but only the PS3 guitar is wireless). Price for the PS2 edition: $160.

FOR THE SKILLED, SPANDEXED MEMBERS of Hollywood hair-metal band Metal Skool, rock is not simply music—it's a lifestyle, a killer strategy to nail chicks and party as if it's 1985 and, like, the Soviets might nuke us into microresidue at any moment. So who better to evaluate the playlist of multi-instrument supergroup simulator *Rock Band* (PS3/XB360/PS2) than Metal Skool singer Michael Starr and drummer Stix Zadinia?

EGM: Before we go into the playlist, what songs do you think are worthy of a game called *Rock Band*?

Michael Starr: Gotta start with Van Halen. "Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Love." It's got everything. Vocals with screams. And it's also really sexy.

EGM: It's not on the playlist, but—

MS: "Hot for Teacher" by Van Halen would be a good one for drummers.

EGM: Any bands besides Van Hal—

MS: "Panama" by Van Halen would be an excellent choice.

Stix Zadinia: At the advanced level, "Tom Sawyer," Rush.

EGM: Good call. That's on the playlist now.

MS: Is Van Halen's "Jump" on there?

EGM: I'll name some songs that are, and you give your take: Bon Jovi's "Wanted Dead or Alive."

MS: Totally awesome, sexy song. What's cool about it is that you can sing it and the chicks feel sorry for you and wanna bang you.

EGM: Weezer's "Say It Ain't So."

SZ: Not sexy.

MS: Not cool.

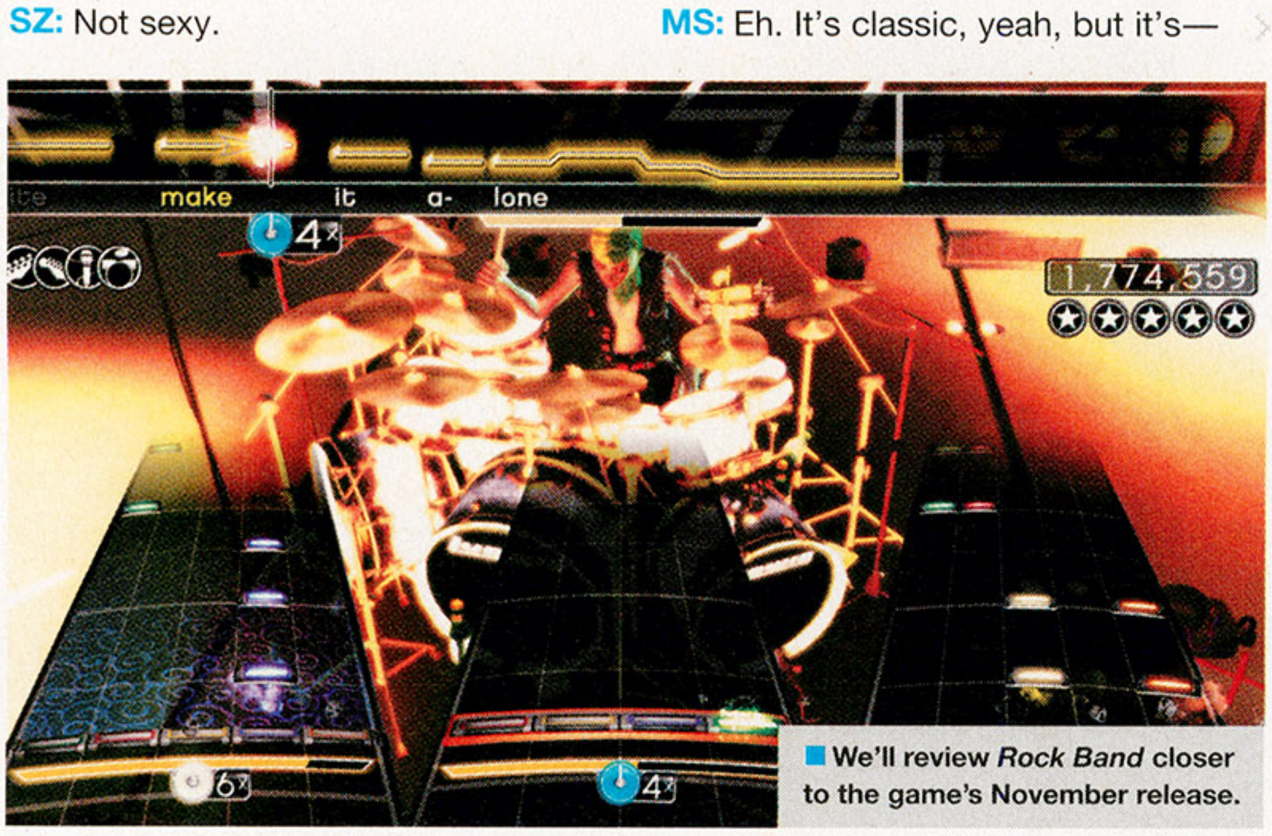
SZ: Weezer is not a cool band. And they don't get as many girls as, like, Van Halen or Mötley Crüe.

EGM: KISS, "Detroit Rock City."

MS: That song is pretty standard. That's a rock staple. You need to know that to be a rocker. KISS is like toddler rock.

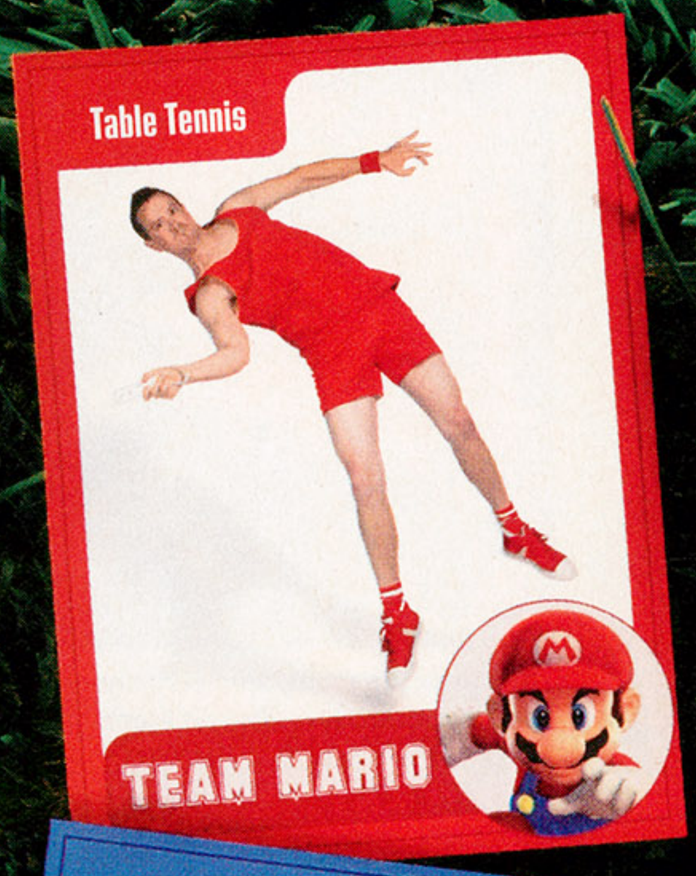
EGM: The Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again."

MS: Eh. It's classic, yeah, but it's—



■ We'll review *Rock Band* closer to the game's November release.

WHOSE TEAM ARE YOU ON?



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ROCK BLOCKED (cont.)

SZ: —for guys with moustaches. You might even get your dad to play with you on that song.

MS: It might inspire him not to be so lame.

SZ: Maybe take off his shirt while he's f***in' doing it.

EGM: Next one: OK Go's "Here It Goes Again."

SZ: Totally gay.

MS: G-A-Y, gay.

SZ: OK gay.

EGM: Yeah Yeah Yeahs' "Maps."

MS: I'm not fond of the band, but I like that song. But it does not rock. By no means should it be in a game called *Rock Band*.

SZ: That's like, you wanna rock and you're putting on f***in' Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time."

MS: I repeat: "Maps" does not rock.

EGM: Garbage, "I Think I'm Paranoid."

SZ: One word: garbage.

MS: Does not rock.

SZ: You wanna play bass, guitar, and drums to Garbage? No. You don't. You wanna f***in' throw down, man.

EGM: Black Sabbath's "Paranoid."

MS: If KISS is toddler rock, this is grade school. When kids get high and get paranoid, they can relate to that song. This is a building block to heavy metal. Easy to play on guitar, too.

SZ: Plus, Ozzy needs the money.

EGM: Jet's "Are You Gonna Be My Girl."

MS: A good, up-to-date rock band. Good song to learn to. Good energy to it. Good for vocals, 'cause that guy can sing. It's kinda like a pop AC/DC.

SZ: Good drums. Kind of a swing feel.

MS: Shuffle feel.

SZ: Kind of what we in rock refer to as a "shuffly swing."

MS: Swingy shuffle, also known as a "schwing."

EGM: Metallica's "Enter Sandman."

SZ: Our s*** is for guys who are good-lookin' to play. Metallica is for guys who aren't so good-lookin'. It's heavy metal, but you can't grab your c*** to it and play to a buncha chicks.

MS: Have to disagree. The drummer is awesome, so it's a great song to learn with. The guitar parts are pretty hard. If you learn that song, you'll be well on your way to rockin' out some chicks.

EGM: Deep Purple, "Highway Star."

MS: One of the first songs I learned to play guitar to. Killer song.

EGM: Any other bands you'd like to see on this list?

MS: Is RATT on there?

EGM: No.

SZ: How about Warrant?

EGM: Don't think so.

MS: How 'bout Slaughter?

EGM: Sorry.

SZ: What about Crüe?

EGM: No.

SZ: Let us know when they get up to date, bro. What about Skid Row?

EGM: You're digging deep into the archives, here.

MS: Dude, this is not archives. This is reality.

SZ: This is heavy metal. This is how we *live*, dude.

What's cool about it is that you can sing it and the chicks feel sorry for you and wanna bang you.

—Metal Skool frontman Michael Starr on Bon Jovi's "Wanted Dead or Alive"

■ **Metal Skool's Michael Starr (left) and Stix Zadinia (right) harken back to a time when guys dressed like hot chicks and hot chicks thought guys who dressed like hot chicks were hot.**

> TAKING THE STAIRWAY: CAN ROCK BAND GET THE LED IN?

It says so right in the rock bible: After the big man created the universe in six days, he said, "Let there be Led Zeppelin." The newborn band began filling the void with riffs and wails, forging heavy metal's sound. And that's why we get Sundays off.

But now that Zeppelin is back in the news with a reunion show so hot that fans have to win a lottery just to buy tickets, we're more curious than ever why the world's No. 1 rock band isn't *in* a game called *Rock Band*. Don't count the notoriously hard-to-license supergroup (Zeppelin only recently started working with iTunes) out yet. A rep at developer Harmonix says they're not finished listing the final game's tracks and unlockables. "And we have a ton more to announce regarding tracks and albums that'll be available for download after *Rock Band*'s release," she says. Harmonix better make with the dough, though: Reps at rival *Guitar Hero* franchise publisher Activision say they're in talks with Zeppelin's management, too. Whatever. As long as someone gives us "Immigrant Song."

■ **Above: the most famous member of Led Zeppelin. Also, Robert Plant.**

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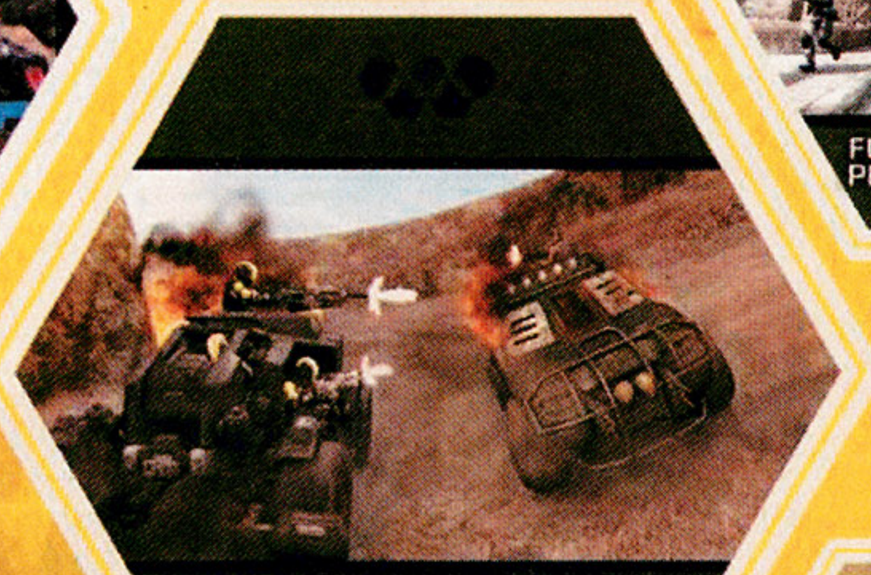

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> EGM INVESTIGATES

Not Like The Others

BioShock sure stands out, but will it inspire change or a bunch of poor Rapture rip-offs? By Michael Donahoe

In a recent 2K board meeting, the publisher announced its plans to turn *BioShock* into a franchise. Yes, it makes no sense if you saw the ending to the game, but we'll take what we can get.

KILLING LITTLE GIRLS is not kosher, but in the world of Rapture, it's A-OK...if you're a jerk. Sadistic, yes, but it's all about survival. And in order to stay alive, you have to keep ahead of the competition. Or in *BioShock*'s sense, cream it—developer 2K Boston's ambitious underwater first-person shooter is currently bathing in a sea of bucks because it's a game that actually cares about being creative.

And now that *BioShock* has proven chancy titles can stay afloat in today's sales stream, publishers and developers are realizing that taking risks can be beneficial. But will they take 'em? We set out to see if *BioShock*'s success will encourage developers to do just that, or if it will do the opposite: inspire tons of cheap clones.

Fishing for originality

It doesn't take long to realize *BioShock* is different. Once you dive in, you'll find a shooter that manages to give trigger-happy gamers what they want while also adding stuff they didn't know they wanted. Because of this, it earned a superb 96 rating on metacritic.com, a website that averages review scores from various gaming media. So unlike some games that sell really well (but don't score too hot critically), *BioShock* does both. But will this make developers whip out the wacky ideas? Not necessarily. "The thing that makes *BioShock* stand out is its 96 [metacritic] rating," says Wedbush Morgan analyst Michael Pachter. "I think had this game gotten an 86 rating and sold as well as it did, people would take chances. But to say [creating a title like *BioShock*] is really easy, let's go out and make one of the highest-rated game of all time? Probably not happening."

But it can happen. Sure, it's difficult to make an inventive game, but since tons of people are currently playing *BioShock*, it's not like it's getting lost in the shuffle. Cory Barlog, *God of War* series director, explains why timing is key to *BioShock*'s success. "I think that people are expanding their tastes a little bit based on the fact that there really wasn't anything else out there to buy," he says. "So they're kinda like, 'Oh, cool—*BioShock*! What is this?' Whereas if they had a huge library of games to choose from, they'd probably be like, 'Yeah, I'm not really going to try that—it seems kind of weird.'"

Don't think Barlog is dissing *BioShock*'s original nature, though.

If you're going to make a $60 game, you have to swing for the fences.

—2K Boston Creative Director Ken Levine

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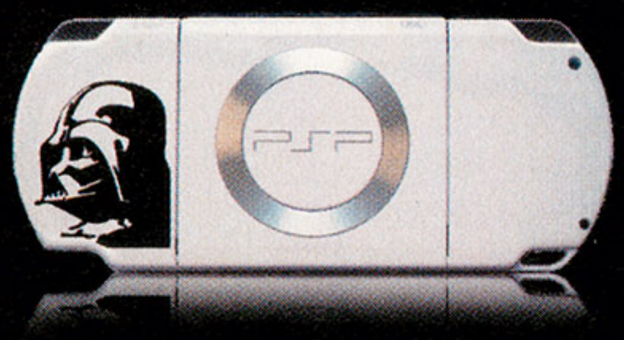

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NOT LIKE THE OTHERS (cont.)

"I do hope as a developer that everybody tries to do something different as opposed to just making an urban sandbox game," he adds. "I [predict] that once the market becomes crowded, developers will try the experiment of making a weird, out-there kind of game and it's going to fail—probably because they do it very poorly, or it's just so weird and out-there that it just doesn't make any sense."

■ Not all critically acclaimed titles win at retail—here are four gems that failed to sell a million copies (clockwise from top left): *Psychonauts* (PS2/XB), *Okami* (PS2), *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath* (XB), and *Beyond Good & Evil* (PS2/XB/GC).

Hard copy

So if *BioShock* doesn't encourage developers to wander down an unconventional path, we hope that they don't instead choose the easy road and try to copy it. While it seems likely that we'll eventually see developers who try to duplicate *BioShock*, it may actually be harder than battling a Big Daddy. "How would you even clone *BioShock*?" asks Ken Levine, creative director of 2K Boston. Good question. Obviously, making a shooter is a cinch (as is apparent by the dozens coming out this holiday season), but distilling the unique qualities of *BioShock* into a simplified copycat game would surely make for a crappy cocktail. "It's such a strange mix of elements: the story, the world of Rapture, the Big Daddies, the Little Sisters, the sound, the combat," says Levine. "I'm not sure how that can be replicated by another publisher."

Still, as hard as it may be to copy such an unique formula, clones are almost always inevitable. "You will more than likely see *BioShock*-esque type games," says Barlog. "Everybody tries to make a game that is successful in the same way that you saw everybody jumping on Take-Two's jock when they made *Grand Theft Auto*."

Bang for your budget

Epic titles sure don't come cheap, so if developers don't have dough to spend, odds are their games will not come off as slick as *BioShock*. "The one thing that developers aren't copying is the production values," says Barlog. "I think if we tried to make *God of War* a budget game, it wouldn't have the same response from people."

Obviously not every title is going to have a budget as big as *BioShock*'s, so this means game makers must make a decision: Play it safe or take some risks. "If you're going to make a $60 game for the PS3 or 360, you really have to swing for the fences, because the competition will be [doing just that]," says Levine. Yes, it's tough for developers to take chances, but if one does hit a home run, it can cement them as a company that people trust. "When you're gonna spend $60 [as a consumer]," says Levine, "are you going to buy something from second-tier developers with half-baked production values? No, you're going to go to the guys who made *GTA*, the guys who made *Guitar Hero*, the guys who made *Medal of Honor*, the guys who made *Gears of War*, and, hopefully, the guys who made *BioShock*."

Packed publisher

Talented developers are nothing without publishers willing to pimp their titles. And it's not much of a surprise that publisher 2K Games took their sweet time releasing *BioShock* to the public. "Take-Two [owner of 2K Games] continues to be a real game company," says EE Fund Management President Ted Pollak. "It takes real risks and makes real original intellectual properties." It may not seem like this is true, but that is only because Take-Two is very cautious about releasing games too early. "One of the differences between Take-Two and everyone else is that Take-Two's culture is [such that] you don't bring out a game until it's done," says Pachter. "So the turnaround cycle at Take-Two is three years."

Three years may seem like ages, but the lengthy wait gives developers more time to create something unique. Just look at *Brothers in Arms* developer Gearbox's recently announced first-person shooter/adventure game *Borderlands*. "The fact that *Borderlands* is being published by 2K Games—the publisher of *BioShock*—is not an accident," says Gearbox President Randy Pitchford. "[*BioShock*'s critical and commercial success] translates to bigger budgets, deeper commitment amongst the talent making and producing the games, and better results."

All this sounds good in theory, but it's impossible to know how well an ambitious big-budget game will do until it's actually placed on store shelves. But we do know that more time never hurts. Hell, remember when *BioShock* got delayed? Yeah, that sucked, but the extra wait was definitely worth it. So if other publishers are willing to give ballsy titles more time to bake in the oven, it could mean the difference between a franchise that starts strong and one that fizzles out—anyone remember *Advent Rising* (XB)? Yeah, didn't think so.

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> AFTERTHOUGHTS

Skate

Shredding it up with the maker of EA's four-wheeler

By Jennifer Tsao

He may be a videogame geek, but Scott Blackwood still manages to get on his skateboard about three times a week.

IT'S THE SKATEBOARDING GAME that's so straightforward, it don't need no frilly name. We talked to Scott Blackwood, executive producer at EA Black Box, about some of the thoughts that went into making the überrealistic *Skate*.

EGM: *Skate* has polarized gamers a bit—some love it, some hate it. But either way, we hear one question over and over: "Why can't my dude get off his damn board and walk?"

Scott Blackwood: [That] was actually in the original design for quite some time. However, as we started to build out our animation technology, we realized we weren't going to be able to have both skating and walking and do them both excellently. It would have tarnished the game—not be a positive.

I was certainly very nervous about not doing it. [It seems like] walking shouldn't be that hard, [but] it actually is. Imagine being in a bowl, and you get off your board and walk toward the edge. The ground starts to curve. You've got to orient the feet for that, and at some point you're not going to be able to walk up anymore, because the wall's too vertical. Now what do you do? Slide back down? Reach up and grab the edge?

All those animations would have [taken time away from] our skating animations [which] look, play, and feel the way they do because we were able to focus on them solely.

EGM: Were you worried that people weren't going to "get" this game? It's so different from that *other* skateboarding series....

SB: We knew that some people wouldn't have the patience—some people don't want to relearn. However, what we did feel was there's a lot more people who are looking for something new. Bringing the camera in close, changing the controls...so many of the things we did, we wanted to take risks. We focus-tested the crap out of them, so we didn't take unnecessary risks. But I can tell you there's a lot of veterans on this team who wouldn't have spent two-years-plus working on a game that was just copying something else out there.

EGM: Why can't you play as a girl? That seems basic....

SB: We really wanted women to be in there and have all sorts of cool stuff to wear and hairstyles.... Even to me, it sounds easy, but it's amazing how not-easy it is. You have to choose between watering the whole thing down and making it just really mediocre for everybody, or do you focus? We decided to focus. I will say, however, that was the hardest decision on this project. But we are going to make it up to you. When we do it—and we will—it's going to be done really well.

EGM: As downloadable content?

SB: [We're] not planning new content for *Skate 1*.... We didn't want to go back and ask [people] for more money to get more shoes and shirts. That's not how we wanted to enter this market.

EGM: How do you feel when you pick up a *Tony Hawk* game now?

SB: I'll be honest with you—I think it's hard after you've played this kind of skateboarding game for a long time, to go back and play it with button combos. It's just so different.

EGM: The world is really huge—any secret areas people might not have discovered?

SB: It's hard to say. Even after a year of playing our city, I still stumble across stuff I didn't know existed, like a backyard pool that there's a way into. And if you break every bone three times, you can unlock this other special character.

EGM: But breaking bones strategically can be kinda hard! Any tips?

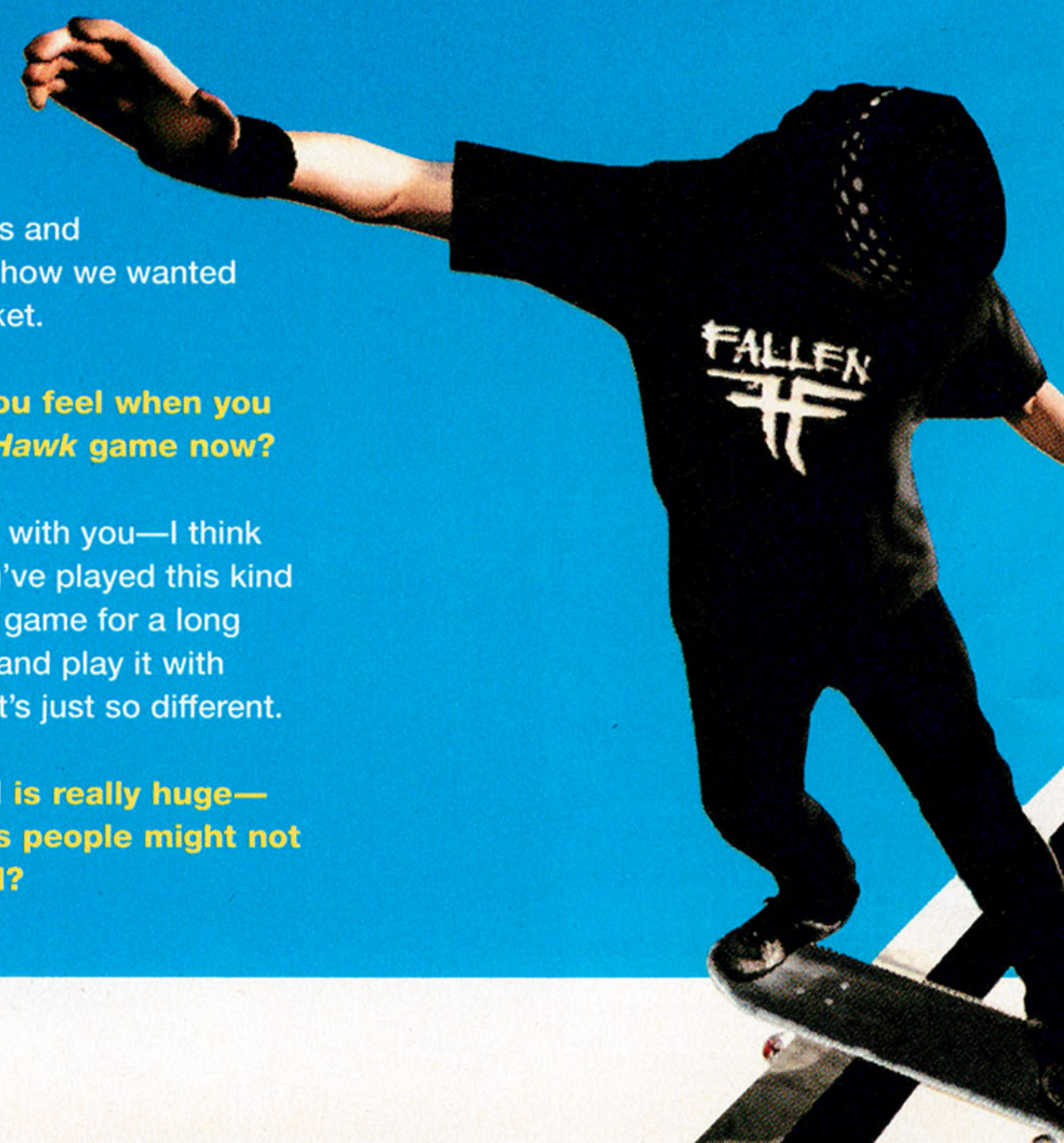
SB: Cars. You can break a lot of bones getting worked by cars.

EGM: What's up with all the pedestrians who get in your way?

SB: We always thought slaloming through a bunch of moving obstacles would be kinda fun—an additional challenge. But we think we can make them a little smarter next time.

EGM: So, in real life, if you see a bunch of skaters doing tricks in a parking lot, do you walk in front of the ramp right as one of them's about to ollie?

SB: Would I? No. But you know what? A lot of people do.



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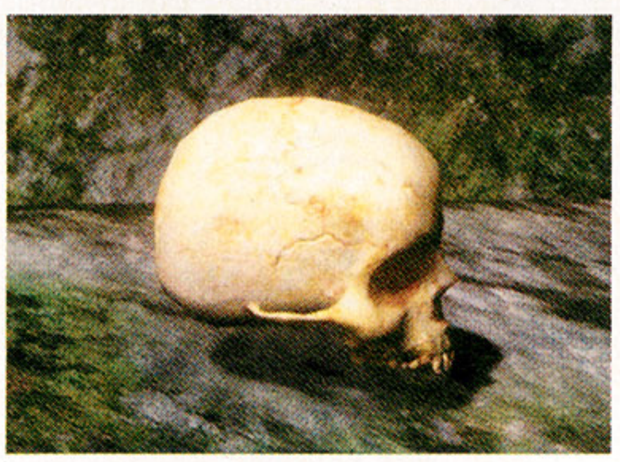
Check out GameVideos.com for any Tokyo Game Show footage you may have missed, or you can just visit **GameVideos.com/EGM** for our favorite picks this month....

WTF: Seaman 2
Apparently, the new *Seaman* is about raising cavemen, and the original Seaman dude is back, but he has a bird's body now. OK!

1337: Metal Gear Solid 4 hands-on
Gameplay impressions of the new *MGS* by 1UP editors and *EGM*'s own Shane Bettenhausen. It's kind of good.

ZOMG: Valkyrie of the Battlefield
This potential sleeper hit combines a tactical shooter with turn-based combat and an anime/cel-shaded art style. A must-see.



HAXX: MyCheats' Halo 3 skulls video
Find out where all those damn skulls are at in *Halo 3*.

> ONLINE SCENE

Self Service

Why publishers leave the hosting of online matches to you

By Joe Rybicki

Remember, if you lose a match online, always complain about the "host advantage." Not about how much you suck.

GO ONLINE WITH *WARHAWK* and you'll see a rare phenomenon: an array of persistent, 32-player, publisher-hosted games. Most titles support eight or *maybe* 16 players, and hosting duties are either assumed by one of those players (as in *Gears of War*) or split between all players (as in *Halo 3*). But if you've experienced a game with 32 or more players, or the lag of a user-hosted match, you may wonder why more companies don't provide their own persistent servers for gamers to connect to.

We did, too. In fact, we could only think of *one* example of a 360 game that's offering persistent servers over Live: THQ's forthcoming *Frontlines: Fuel of War* (pictured above). So we turned to some of the big names in online gaming to get some answers.

"The main reason is that [dedicated servers] usually come with additional costs to operate and maintain," says Jean-Pascal Cambiotti, lead designer for the *Rainbow Six* franchise. "Someone has to make sure the servers are constantly running and that there's no cheating going on."

Time and money aren't the only obstacles, though. A prominent developer (who spoke with us on the condition of anonymity) suggests that we don't see more publisher-hosted games because of specific difficulties with Xbox Live. "To provide a server for [a 360 game], you have to write a special program that runs on Live," he tells us, "and the servers have to sit behind Microsoft's firewall.... It creates a lot of extra layers and extra hassle."

But that same anonymous developer points out that dedicated servers aren't as important as they once were. "It's not really who hosts the server," he says. "It's the quality of the bandwidth and the performance of the machine." And gaming machines have gotten so powerful this generation that they can easily handle hosting duties even with a local player in the game.

Alongside this evolution in processing power comes ever-more-streamlined peer-to-peer networking code, which a persistent, proprietary network like Xbox Live can exploit. "With Xbox Live, we [give] the publishers a robust online [platform] without them having to invest as much time or money into creating one of their own," says Jeff Sullivan, developer account manager at Microsoft. "We have been perfecting the Live service for the past five years—most publishers do not have the resources to fine-tune their services to that degree."

Our anonymous source concurs. "There's much less reason to have dedicated servers on 360," he says. "For eight to 12 players, the machine is plenty powerful." And for more players than that? Well, there's always the *next* generation of consoles to look forward to.

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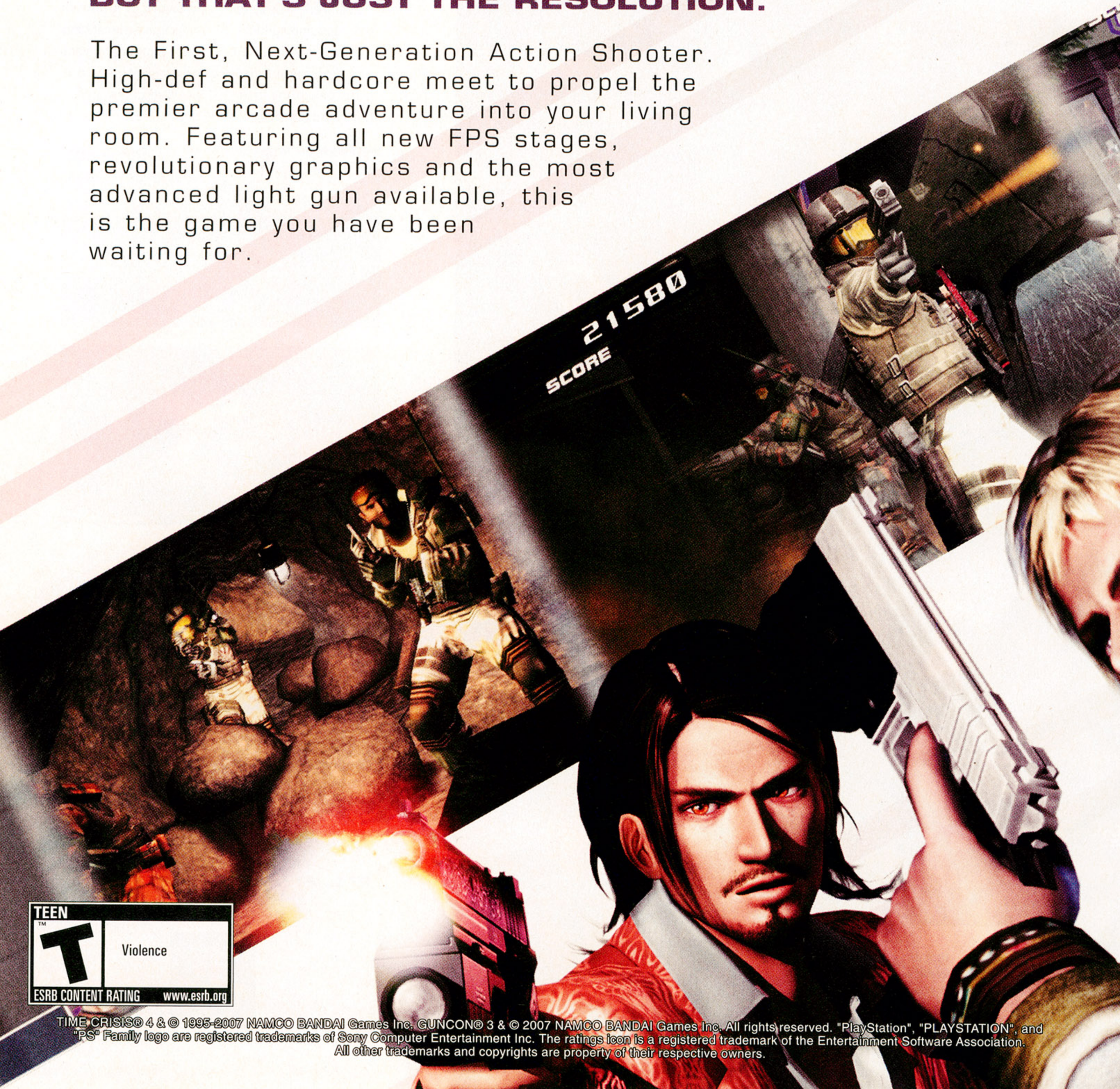

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> TOY SOLDIERS

World War TRUE

From brawn-boosting boots to stealth suits, war-game power-ups are more real than you think By John Brandon

Combat readiness, adaptive intelligence, defensive posturing—no, we're not talking about junior high gym class or even the war in Iraq. War-themed games pack so much from-the-future military heat, we're surprised half these titles aren't classified. We recon eight games that lock and load gung-ho gun tech that's hitting real battlefields in the next 20 years.

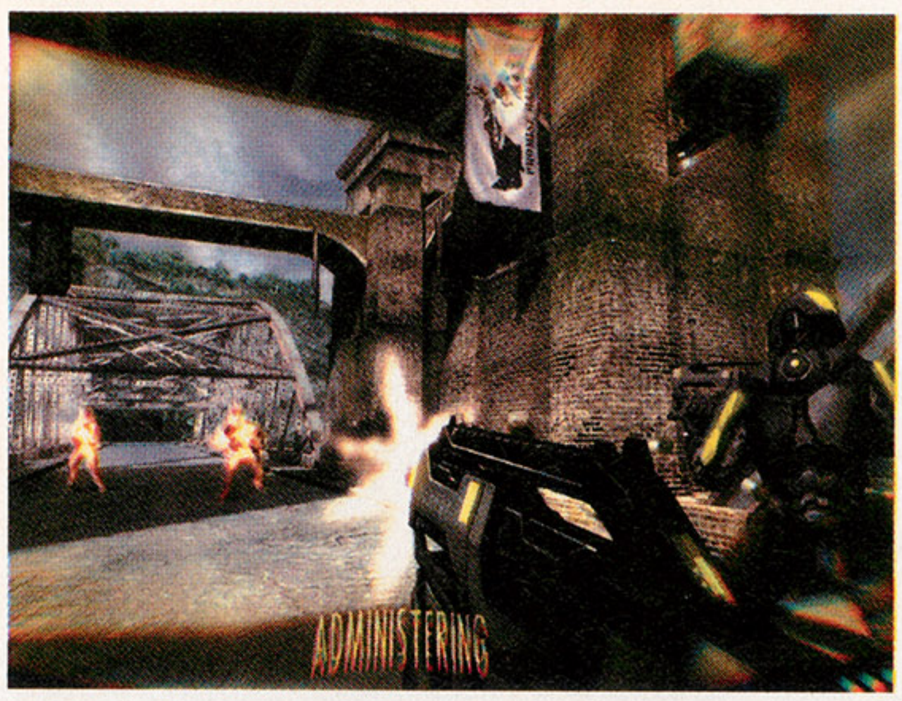
WI-FI WARRIORS

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2's Future Force Warrior

The futuristic heads-up display (HUD) in *Advanced Warfighter 2* lets you direct troops, see an icon overlaid on top of both enemy and friendly units, and call in airstrikes. It's designed as a monocle that soldiers wear over one eye, and it's linked with a command center.

You'll find a similar system today in Iraq, where a program called LandWarrior allows troops to identify enemies and call in air support. A more closely linked version is called Future Force Warrior, which is currently in development and shares many of the same attributes as *GRAW*. Via the monocle, the troops access a tracking system that shows friendly units as icons, a wireless link to a command center to call in supplies and direct airstrikes, and even night-vision capability. While *GRAW2* has "Red Force" tracking for enemy units, the Future Force Warrior has yet to implement a feature for that. Interestingly enough, some of the soldiers who have tested the real Future Force Warrior also play the *GRAW* series, and they noted one area of improvement: the game updates friendly information immediately—something that takes a minute in the real system—so the army is now working on an improved, faster version.

One of these guys is not like the other. Actually, they're all linked to Future Force Warrior, except the middle man is from *GRAW2*.



FIELD TRIP

Haze's chemical injectors

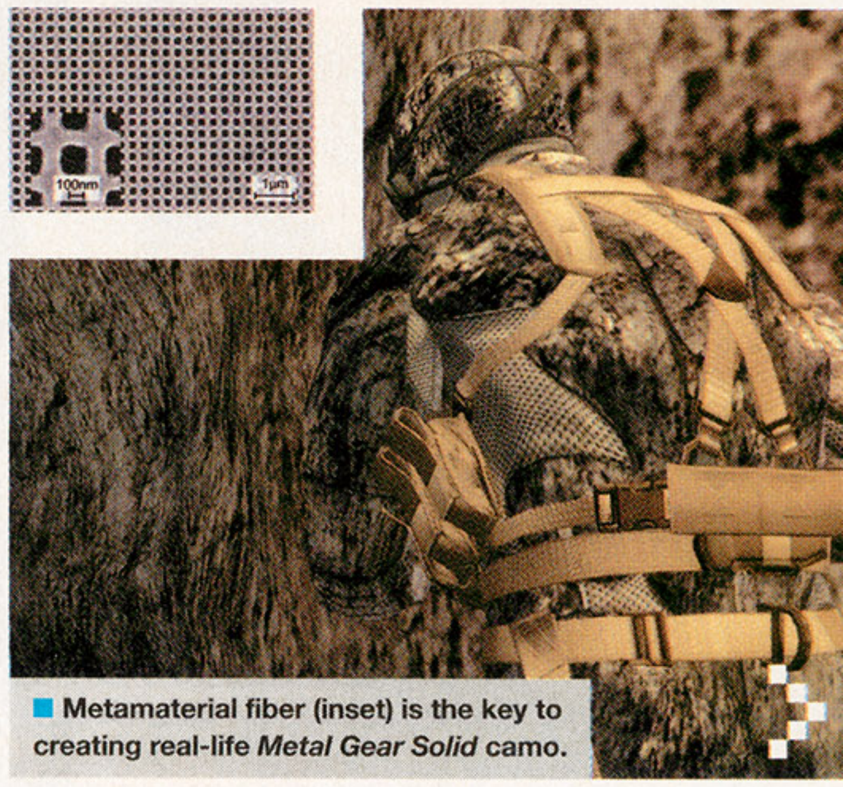
Upcoming PS3 shooter *Haze* (above) features an injection compound called Nectar, which enhances your strength and vision, boosts speed, heals wounds, warns you about imminent attacks, and helps you aim more accurately. It's clearly sci-fi, since chemical injections for war are illegal in civilized countries.

That's not to say that the military doesn't use medical advancements to aid in battle. Most soldiers these days have perfect vision thanks to free optical-correction surgery. And if a soldier is injured in battle, medics can apply a high-tech foam that seals the wound until they reach a health station. It's possible that the military will invent new chemical treatments for soldiers, since the current military rules say that a surgeon is not allowed on the battlefield. Yet chemicals that actually enhance strength or vision are "out of the question," says Jean-Louis "Dutch" DeGay, an Army equipment specialist.

DISAPPEARING DUDS

Metal Gear Solid 4's camouflage suit

Solid Snake's camo suit in next year's *Metal Gear Solid 4* for PS3 mimics the color and texture of the surroundings to hide our hero from his enemies. Meanwhile, in Iraq and Afghanistan, stealthy soldiers must rely on an ACU (Army Combat Uniform) that matches their surroundings. But the real goal, says Army specialist DeGay, is to develop a camouflage suit like the shimmery alien costume in the first *Predator* movie. One way to achieve this is with hundreds of tiny cameras, placed on a suit, that project a mirror image from behind the soldier—a technique that's been tried on a small scale in the private sector. It's more likely, however, that a true invisibility suit will use metamaterial fibers: tiny particles painted onto battle dress uniforms that create the same illusion as water flowing over a rock. Scientists have already had success with the fiber on microscopic objects.



Metamaterial fiber (inset) is the key to creating real-life *Metal Gear Solid* camo.

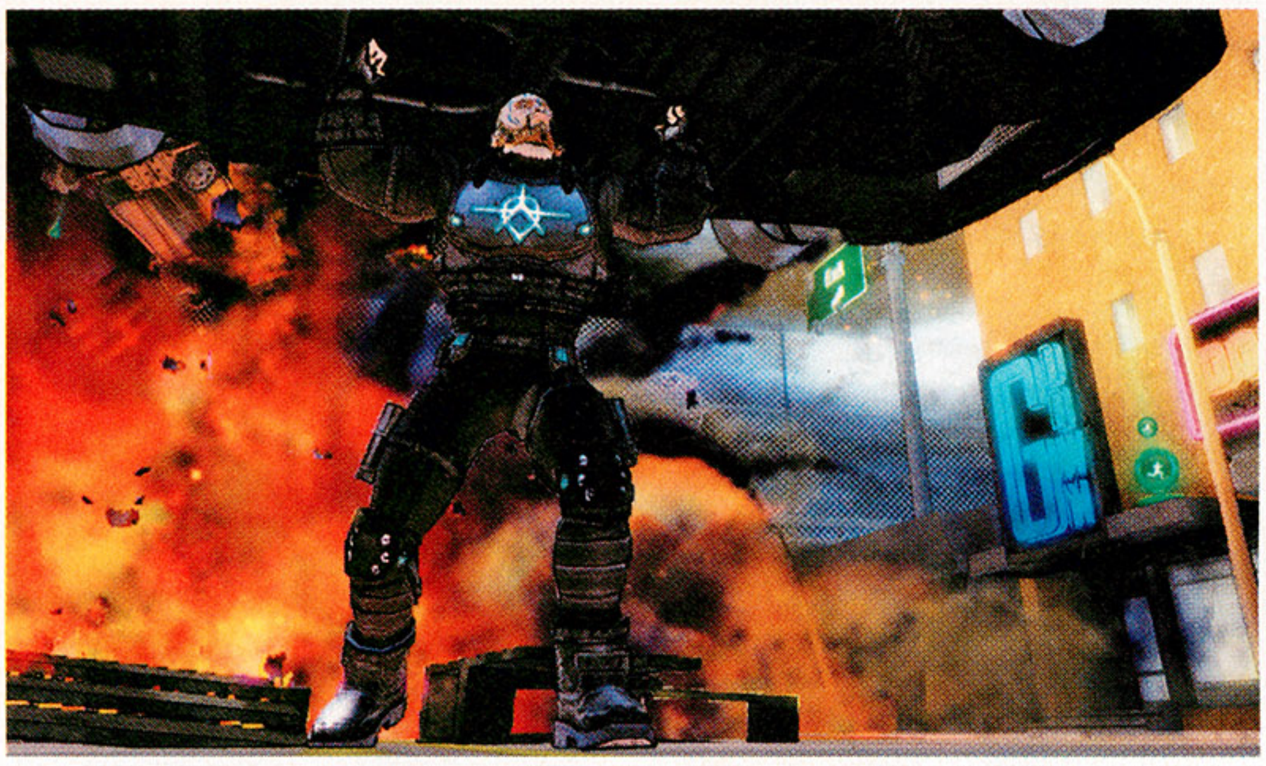
■ The motor-assisted boots on this DARPA prototype suit pack more leg-boosting power than Air Jordans.

HARD CORPS

Crackdown's exoskeletons

The power suit in *Crackdown* (XB360) helps you jump higher—as much as 100 feet later in the game—withstand bullets, and lift cars to toss them across the city. In real life, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (or DARPA—no, Hideo Kojima didn't invent this organization for his *Metal Gear Solid* series) has been working on the Exoskeletons for Human Performance Augmentation program for several years. DeGay tells us the suits will enhance a soldier's own body energy by 10 to 15 percent and help him or her walk as far as 30 miles carrying supplies while barely breaking a sweat. DARPA is actually prototyping three different exoskeletons: one for the legs, one for the upper body, and one that's a full bodysuit.

Meanwhile, Canadian inventor Troy Hurtubise has developed a full-body suit called the Trojan that takes inspiration from the Master Chief's tough-to-kill armor in the *Halo* series. It weighs 40 pounds and can withstand an elephant-gun blast, a grizzly attack, and light explosives.



SKYLIGHTS

Gears of War's Hammer of Dawn

By far the most fearsome weapon in *Gears of War* (XB360) is the Hammer of Dawn, a space laser that draws a concentrated swath of fire across the battlefield while you direct it with a target designator. *Gears* Designer Cliff Bleszinski says the Hammer's inspiration comes somewhat from the Strategic Defense Initiative—or "Star Wars" program—championed by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, "except that ours is antipersonnel whereas theirs was built to take down ICBM nuclear weaponry," he says.

Still, equipment specialist DeGay says that the army does use a similar laser-tagging system today. Soldiers can "lase" a munitions depot, for example, and F-16s use smart bombs to destroy it. The main problem with a satellite laser blast is the energy required, the fact that laser technology for weapons doesn't really exist yet, and—oh, yeah—there's no current program for satellite-based weaponry.

SEE 'EM COMING

Call of Duty 4's night-vision goggles

The next *Call of Duty* game, *Modern Warfare*, ditches Dubya Dubya Two and adds modern weapons and Headline News war scenarios. Its night-vision goggles go beyond providing low-light vision enhancement—they'll also allow players to see enemy laser sights in infrared and track rocket-propelled-grenade trails by their heat signatures. Handy!

Soldiers today typically use either the PVS-7 (a two-monocle version) or PVS-14 (one monocle, seen above) night-vision goggles. Both provide the soldiers with the pale-green light-amplification view you see so often on the evening news. Soldiers can also use an infrared version, typically mounted on vehicles that can detect temperature changes in the human body by plus or minus one degree. If someone places his or her hand on a wall, for example, these goggles can immediately detect that heat signature, making it easy to track careless enemies. The goggles can also see vapor trails from rockets and laser sights from rifles, just like in the game.

FULL METAL JACKET

Too Human's glass gun

The futuristic action-RPG *Too Human* (XB360) uses a mostly fictionalized arsenal of weapons, but two particular guns—called Havoc and Malice—really seem like science fantasy. The guns and their ammunition are made from the same material, and by a complex series of charging and discharging areas of the material, ammunition's broken off from the core of the gun and sent hurtling down the barrel as if down a linear accelerator. "As bullets are fired," says Ken McCulloch, director of content at developer Silicon Knights, "the gun itself is consumed. Because there are no mechanical parts, or physical movement within the material aside from the bullets exiting the weapon, the firing mechanism is incredibly fast."

It may seem like McCulloch has an active imagination, but a futuristic real-world weapons technology called Metal Storm, from the company of the same name, relies on a similar principle. In a normal gun, the rounds and casings are separate, but the Metal Storm fuses them into one. So, while a typical handgun can fire 15 rounds per minute and an AK-47 can fire 600 rounds per minute, a Metal Storm gun (prototype shown here) could fire a million rounds in the same period. The gun barrel is preloaded with stacks of ammunition, so soldiers don't have to worry about loading it. The gun's makers plan to have a firing prototype ready any day.

■ **The Predator is larger than *Frontlines*' zippy RC craft (inset), but it's just as deadly. Batteries and Hellfire missiles sold separately.**

BUZZKILL

Frontlines' RC drones

Even though it's set in the future (2027, to be exact), multiplayer-battle game *Frontlines: Fuel of War* (PS3/XB360) will feature real military weapons and equipment. The most fun is a UAV—that's "unmanned aerial vehicle," small RC aircraft that will scan enemy territory or remote detonate to kill anyone standing nearby.

UAVs aren't a new concept, but General Atomics' MQ-1 Predator (see www.uav.com) feels like something out of a spy novel. This unmanned drone runs at a medium altitude, has a 49-foot wingspan, holds 665 pounds of fuel, and could spank you dead with a couple of Hellfire missiles. It's got a digital camera system that ground crews can control, or it can run by itself using sensors and GPS. Unlike the game, it's not designed to go all kamikaze on enemy troops—that'd be a waste of military engineering and cash the American government is better off spending on $600 hammers.

Assassin's CREED

We put Ubisoft's hired killer to the test

By Michael Donahoe

Platforms: PS3/XB360

Publisher: Ubisoft

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal

Release Date: November 2007

UBISOFT ALMOST KILLED OFF ITS OWN ASSASSIN—or at least his hype—during a live demo of upcoming stealth-action game *Assassin's Creed* at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3). Bugs and some awkward-looking gameplay had us going "hmmm," and playing it for the first time afterward didn't improve our opinion. We walked away worried, not stoked, about the fate of this new franchise—so much so that we gave *Assassin's Creed* the "Game We're Most Worried About" award in our October 2007 issue's E3 preview feature.

It wasn't (of course) the kind of award publisher Ubisoft was pleased to win. Once they caught a glimpse of our story, they came sprinting to us hoping to prove *Assassin's Creed* is not in bad shape. To see if the concerned company is actually telling the truth, we agreed to try a near-final version of the game to find out if our four main problems were taken care of....

We know that the controls take some getting used to.

—Assassin's Creed *Producer Jade Raymond*

■ If running across rooftops gets dull, you can always hop on a horse.

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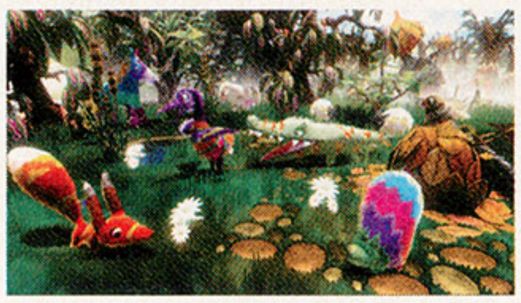

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Games for Windows

ASSASSIN'S CREED (cont.)

> CONTROLS

BEFORE: Watching *Assassin's Creed*'s trailer makes you want to learn the killin' trade: Nimble assassin Altair climbs up walls, hops along rooftops, and lunges in for kills in ways that would even impress cover-story ninja Ryu Hayabusa. Best part? All the amazing action looks so smooth. Well, there's a reason why—trailers don't need controls to look cool. Too bad games do. The first time we played the game, we didn't do anything that falls remotely into the category of "cool"—unless you count falling on our ass multiple times while guards poked us like a human pincushion. Part of the problem is the needlessly complex controls for seemingly simple actions. Want to bound from building to building? OK, first hold down the right trigger. Now you *also* hold down the A button, run with the right analog stick, and pray your don't die (or jump in the direction you don't want to go). Oh, one more thing: If you miss a jump but don't want to fall to your death, you can also press the B button to grab on to a ledge...if you can actually remember to do this (we sure didn't). Weirdly enough, this is coming from the development team that gave us the pick-up-and-play *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (PS2/XB/GC).

AFTER: Looks like we're not the only ones who had trouble controlling our medieval murderer. "We know that the controls take some getting used to for some players," says *Assassin's Creed* Producer Jade Raymond. "But playtesting has shown that both casual and hardcore players get the hang of it quite quickly." OK, we can see hardcore gamers gettin' into it, but the casual crowd? From what we've played, any videogame newbies who play the game will most likely kill themselves more often than their targets. Still, we have to admit that we did (sort of) get the hang of the controls the more we played. One of the game's interesting design choices is mapping each limb of main character Altair's body to the controller's face buttons. For example, feet are the A button, your head is the Y button, and the left and right arms are the X and B buttons. "Patrice Desilets, our creative director, wanted to find a control mapping that would be intuitive and easy to remember for all players," says Raymond. "Patrice wanted the player to be immersed in the experience, not trying to remember if the move he wants to perform is X+X+A or A+X+X."

In a way, Desilets' decision does make sense. But while we did start to move less like a buffoon and more like a trained killer toward the end of our demo, we still had a difficult time maneuvering around while being chased by a gang of guards. Not only is holding down several buttons annoying, it also seemed like Altair wouldn't obey our controller commands.

> The [futuristic effects] are partially linked to this story, but they also have a gameplay functionality.

—Ubisoft's Jade Raymond

> STORY/SETTINGS

BEFORE: It doesn't take a gaming genius to know something is fishy with *Creed*'s story. We just wish Ubisoft would give us a little more info. We know that you play as a Crusades-era assassin who is tasked with whacking a bunch of real-life medieval dudes. All that made sense until actress Kristin Bell (star of *Veronica Mars* and one of the voices in the game) let slip that the game will somehow incorporate futuristic elements. Great, so is it a period drama or some hokey videogame version of *The Matrix*? Seems like both—during the E3 demonstration, all sorts of techie effects appeared in the game, further hinting at the inevitable twist. Still, at the time we didn't know whether this theme would stay or go. But we do know that we're getting sick of seeing the same outdoor environments. We wanna know where the variety's at....

AFTER: It's official: The sci-fi "twist" is the second-worst-kept secret associated with *Assassin's Creed* (the first being its so-called PS3 exclusivity). "The [futuristic effects] are partially linked to this story, but they also have a gameplay functionality," says Raymond. "When you see a character with this effect, it tells you that you can interact with him to perform a variety of actions." It's blatantly apparent after our recent play sessions that Altair is not a medieval assassin, but someone (or something) from the future. Not only do you see wacky effects when you target foes—you also gain new moves by "remembering" them, making it seem as though you're reliving a world in the character's mind. Either way, the secret is practically blown. But at least we now know to expect something weird to happen; this is better than finding out the game has no reveal at all.

Our second issue involves the similarities of the areas. Yes, we know that the cities have different architecture and are based on actual historical locations, yadda yadda yadda. That still doesn't change the fact that they all play similarly. All we ask is for more indoor, *Prince of Persia*–like environments. "The game includes a vast kingdom and nine districts in three different cities, and we've only shown part of it so far," says Raymond. "What makes you think that there are no interior areas?" Well, we certainly know there are indoor environments (as seen in the E3 demo), but much of what we've played so far (two missions) was mostly limited to the outdoors. Not to say that travelling around the cities isn't cool, but it doesn't seem like the game is going to offer enough variety of environments to keep things interesting. But hopefully now that the futuristic stuff is real, the later levels will take place somewhere different.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED (cont.)

> A.I.

BEFORE: Unlike the other categories, the enemy (and friendly) A.I. is not the most prominent problem we noticed at E3. Still, our critical eyes did lock on to one questionable offense: the leap of faith. This fancy-looking move lets Altair dive off tall ledges into a barrel of hay to A) avoid enemies and B) remind us we're playing a videogame by performing an action that looks totally cool but is completely unrealistic. The latter makes perfect sense, but the former is still tripping us up. See, the development team prides itself on creating a realistic environment where crowds of people react to your every move. Knock over someone carrying a pot and people will notice. Do it again and guards will become suspicious of your dickish ways. Makes sense, right? Of course. But when you free-fall into a stack of hay—in the middle of a busy street—and no one notices...well, that's a little strange. The game is supposed to be a true-to-life re-creation of the Third Crusade, so maybe haystack jumping was a common thing back then.

■ Please ignore the assassin falling from space, citizens.

AFTER: Actually, it was. Wait, what? "The leap of faith is based on a story told by Marco Polo that illustrates how assassins had no fear and would willingly jump to their death at their leader Hassan's word," explains Raymond. "We thought that myth was cool and wanted to create a move based on what people have historically said about the assassins." Ah, that makes sense...we guess. We'll admit, even though it is a bit unrealistic, we grew to like taking the big leap while enemies hunted us down, mostly because it saved our ass a few times and, well, it looks cool.

Aside from people who are completely oblivious to humans falling from rooftops, the A.I. in the game is pretty darn impressive, especially when you factor in the amount of peeps populating the cities at one time. Guards are especially brainy. In our many chases with them, they always managed to keep up with our fancy-footed assassin.

> COMBAT

BEFORE: From the beginning, we've known that much of *Assassin*'s Creed involves going all Spider-Man around a medieval city. But this isn't a building-climbing simulator (well, not entirely, at least)—you *are* an assassin after all. So when we finally got a chance to see the combat at this year's E3, it didn't look nearly as impressive as scaling walls. It didn't help that the actual demo made the combat look clunky and slow.

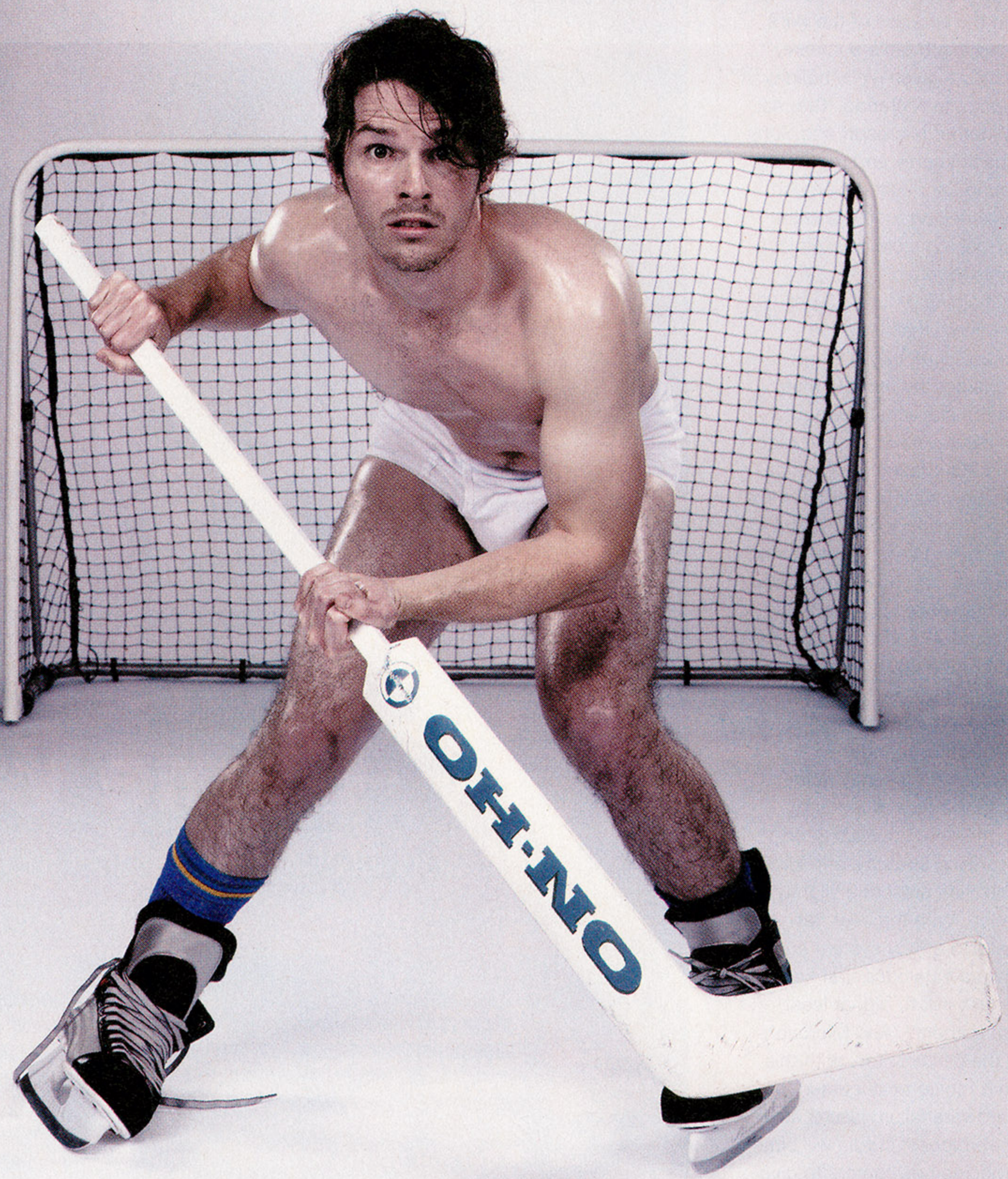
AFTER: Luckily, things have changed...a little. "One element that we tweaked after E3 is the combat," says Raymond. "We changed the speed at which enemies attack, tweaked the responsiveness of the fight as well as the depth." We will say that the combat does look (and play) a wee bit better, but we're still not all that jazzed about it. Once you enter a battle stance by locking onto an enemy, you can hold down the right trigger to block attacks. Pressing the X button the moment an enemy attacks allows you to counterattack. We found this method to be the best way to get our butt out of a jam. Less patient players can opt to simply duke it out, but since guards will almost always block your attacks, you must perform combo kills by pressing the attack button immediately after striking an enemy. Sounds easy, but we had a difficult time getting the timing down. You can also throw foes into each other (works best for chucking chumps off of buildings).

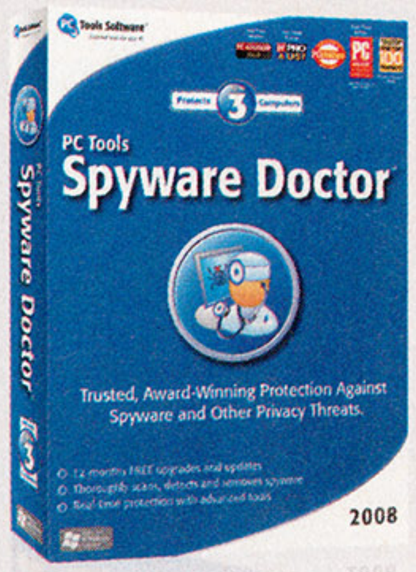
Still, while you do have a lot of options, it doesn't quite compare to the excitement of dashing around the city. Remembering to lock onto enemies while holding down various buttons (in addition to timing attacks while multiple enemies attack at the same time) made us want to skip combat altogether. Couple this with the frustration of trying to escape a scene while packs of disgruntled guards chase you and the fun immediately starts to falter when you realize you have to put up a helluva long fight to get away.

> THE VERDICT

Assassin's Creed may have worried us at E3, but some of the fear has faded away. We're not completely sold, however—the combat still feels slow, and the controls aren't as smooth as we would have hoped. Also, the game seems like it may get too repetitive. To officially assassinate your victims, you must conduct various investigations—like eavesdropping and pick pocketing—to gather info. This is fun the first time you do it, but it may get tedious after a while. Of course, we're not sure what is up with the sci-fi stuff, so maybe something different will pop up. Regardless, our opinions so far are only based on two missions of an unfinished game, so our review next month will really tell you if this assassin is worth hiring.

Do you have the right protection?





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> BIZ. NATCH

Playing it Forward

By Scott Steinberg

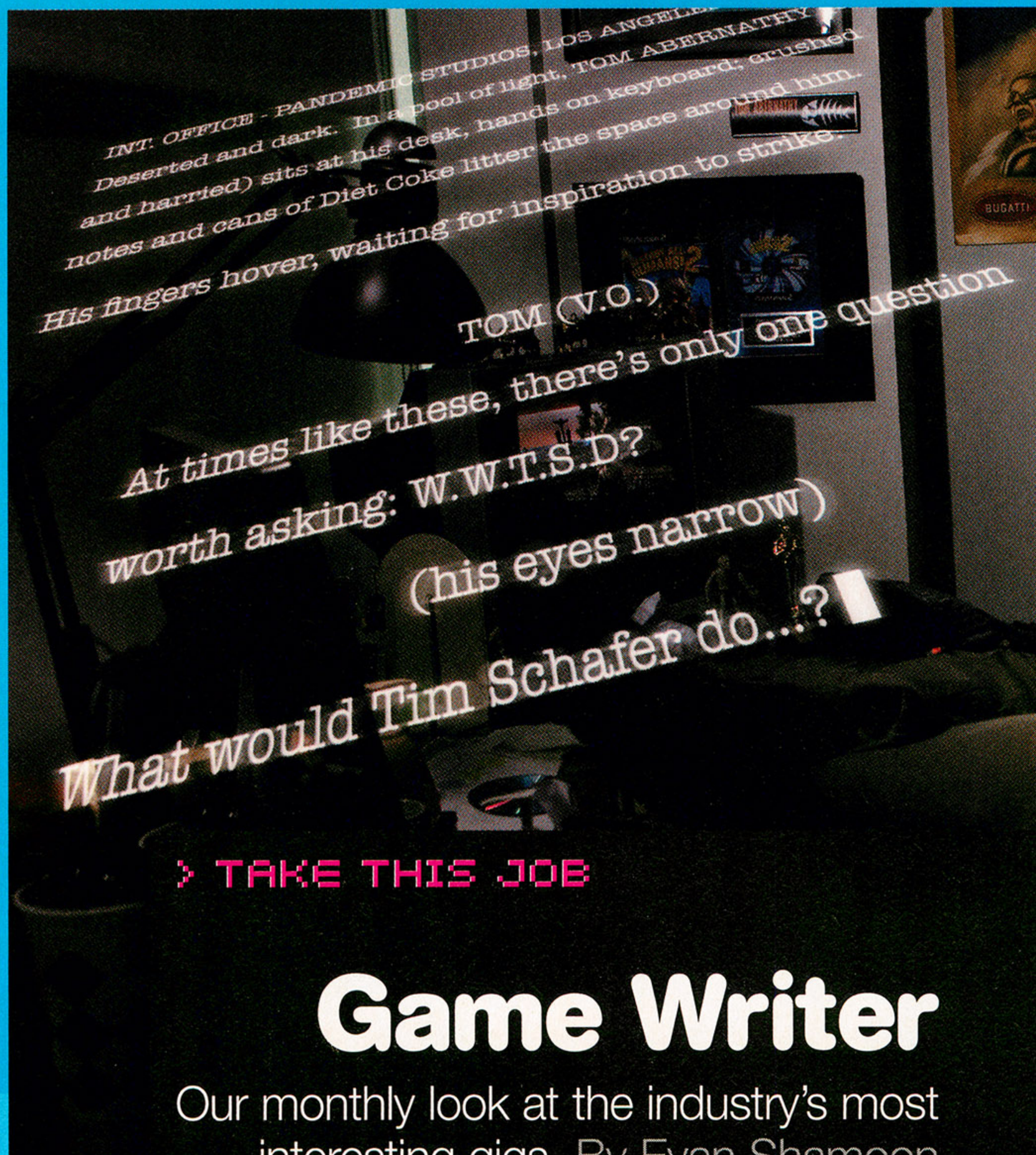
Let competitors hem and haw. Considering the success of the Wii's hardware and much of its software, at this point it's a given—this holiday season belongs to Nintendo. The real question: Whether Microsoft and Sony can strike back shortly and regain significant ground...and just how much of a rapidly shrinking foothold in the overall next-gen console marketplace they'll be able to retain.

Presently holding around 53 percent market share thanks to the PlayStation 2's incredible staying power, Sony's got the most to lose. The company's current strategy: banking on Blu-ray's massive storage capacity, the PlayStation Home initiative, and crowd-pleasing PS3 titles like *LittleBigPlanet* to turn the tides. But with release dates fuzzy, awe-inspiring exclusives dwindling, hardware prices still prohibitively expensive, and truly bar-raising game experiences unlikely to arrive before the 2008 holiday season, face it: It'll likely be a year minimum before the firm's fortunes experience positive change.

As for Microsoft, presently holding roughly 27 percent of industry mindshare, the debut of *Halo 3*, an aggressive pricing strategy, and killer online capabilities present a slightly rosier situation. With the best networking features of any system and a slick software catalogue that keeps growing, what's not to dig, at least for hardcore gamers? (And Microsoft is courting the casuals, too, with this fall's *Scene It* movie-trivia game.) Ongoing hardware failure issues aside, the machine's biggest hurdle will simply be convincing newcomers to give it—and not Nintendo's cheaper, more family-friendly alternative—a try.

The upshot: Personally, I think we're looking at a three-horse race, with Wii and Xbox 360 about to erode half of Sony's installed base until the system begins showing its real technical chops by early 2009. Let's hope so. Multiple systems with solid, but not domineering, fan bases ensure greater competition, which leads to cheaper hardware, better games, and a healthier industry for all.

Scott Steinberg is managing director of game industry consulting firm Embassy Multimedia Consultants (www.embassymulti.com) and author of the new how-to book Get Rich Playing Games *(www.getrichgaming.com).*



> TAKE THIS JOB

Game Writer

Our monthly look at the industry's most interesting gigs By Evan Shamoon

Take This Job

Missed a job from a past issue? Catch up with our job series online at takethisjob.1UP.com.

This month: Tom Abernathy, senior writer/designer at Pandemic Studios
Recommended education: Film school or English degree, along with knowledge of how to write screenplays and stage plays. Vast gaming experience a plus.
Salary range: $40,000 to $60,000

What's a game writer?

Good stories don't write themselves—they require the expert touch of a talented wordsmith. Story, dialogue, structure, voice acting, and the actual game flow all fall under the writer's jurisdiction to varying degrees. Still, "there aren't many full-time writers in the games industry," says Abernathy, who's busy penning Pandemic's newest game, *Saboteur*. "It's like Hollywood in the '20s—we're still trying to figure out the economics and what everyone needs."

Abernathy's typical day

Developing a game is a collaborative effort, and that collaboration applies to the writer as well. So that means meetings. He's designing story documents, gameplay-design documents, and writing dialogue—and working hand-in-hand with game designers, producers, and directors every step of the way. He even helps cast voice actors and aids with PR and marketing. "I'm pretty much the expert on the 'context' of the game," says Abernathy. "So if someone wants to know about the game's backstory or whatever, I'm often the one to provide it."

How'd he get the gig?

Abernathy got his first game job 10 years ago at Activision writing *Heavy Gear*, a mech-battling PC game. "I just came in with writing samples and they hired me onto the project." It was years later, while working as a

Photograph by Kate Romero/Text by Tom Abernathy

contractor on *Destroy all Humans!* for Pandemic, that he was speaking to staff there about the possibility of bringing in writers earlier on in the project to help create worlds, backstories, and the basic structure of the game. One thing led to another and, before he knew it, Abernathy became Pandemic's full-time writer. "One thing that's key, something I've learned over the years," he says, "is how to write dialogue with economy and elegance. So I say write in as many other media as you can. For aspiring writers, of course, they need to understand the limitations of the medium.... It's all about being able to convey story through environment and dialogue."

> TOOLS OF HIS TRADE

Words
Well, obviously.

White noise
Pandemic's sound guy whippd up a 10-minute white-noise file for Abernathy, which he plays when he needs to focus on writing.

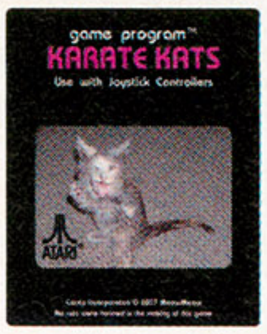
Final Draft screen-writing software
After spending college paying a roommate to transcribe his longhand term papers into a word processor, Abernathy has finally embraced a little something called "computers."

SMED
It's proprietary map-editing software, "which features a marvelous conversation-building and implementation tool that I use on a daily basis to directly create dialogue in the game," Abernathy explains.

> THAT'S COOL

NINTENDO IS FINALLY SIGNING ONTO REALITY—the current console leader recently announced that you'll be able to battle your buds online in this winter's *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* for the Wii. Like last summer's *Mario Strikers Charged*, you input "friend codes" in order to battle with your pals. But you can always skip this step and pound on anonymous peons if that suits your fancy...or if you have no friends.

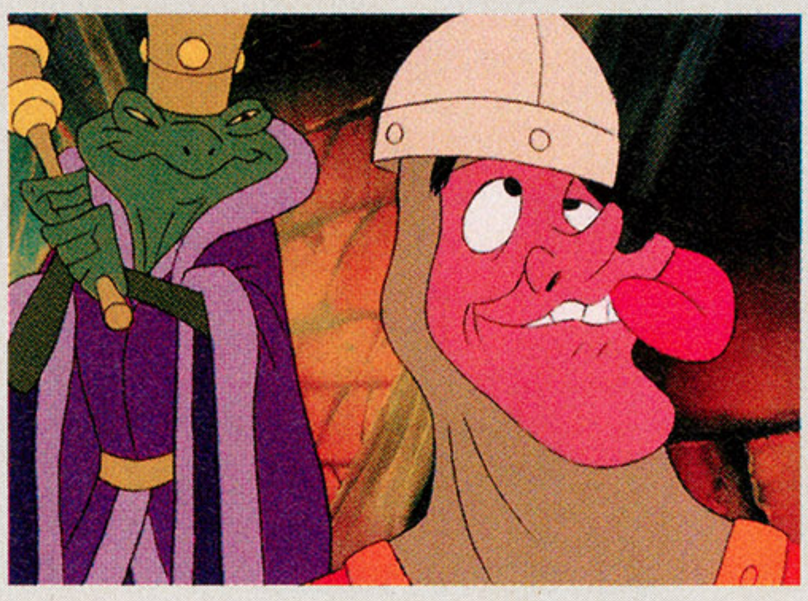
MAKING GAMES IS HARD, but creating hilariously bad box art is a cinch. Wannabe cover artists who want to show off their skills should check out www.labelmaker2600.com to craft some sweet covers based on crusty Atari 2600 games.



> OVERHEARD

"This is such an important gaming franchise [that] it falls into one of those conversations [like], 'Do you remember where you were when Elvis or Diana died?' except with this game it's 'Do you remember in which chip shop or arcade you first played this game?'"

—*Dragon's Lair DS* Lead Programmer and Executive Producer Hans Olsen asks an important question about his game.



Quote source: Conspiracy Entertainment Press Release

RUMOR MILL

Dirt fit for a deity By Quartermann

Resurrected Rumors: In case you don't believe the validity of my dirt, let me remind you of another rumor I recently called. If you kept up with your Tokyo Game Show news (or listened to *EGM Live**), you'd know that publisher Square Enix announced three new *Kingdom Hearts* games. And who broke that first? Oh, right—me.

HOLY CRAP—the holiday rush is almost upon us. With so many sweet games coming out so close to each other, I don't know when I'm going to find time to dig up all my juicy dirt for y'all. Worst of all, I have to baby-sit my Wii-loving family now. Who do you think is going to take Mama Q to play at the *EA Playground*? Sigh.... Anyway, go ahead and read this month's scuttlebutt.

Holiday wars

The PS3's launch last year wasn't all that impressive (save for developer Insomniac's *Resistance: Fall of Man*), but this winter is already lookin' a helluva lot better. And from what I'm hearing, next year may be even merrier; my Sony source tells me ***God of War 3* is hankering for a holiday 2008 release**. Don't worry, Xbox lovers—we're also hearing rumblings that ***Gears of War 2* is revving up for a release next holiday as well**.

Early bird

Game delays suck. A lot. But you know what's better? The opposite: games that get pushed ahead of schedule. Especially big-budget hits we can't wait to get our hands on. Well, the wait is apparently going to be a little shorter for one game in particular—I've caught wind that a **triple-A third-party game scheduled for later next year is on its way to store shelves a little sooner**, possibly before March. And if you're guessing *Metal Gear Solid 4*, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, or *Devil May Cry 4*, you're wrong. Nice try, though!

Seeing ghosts

Some game series never seem to die. And some live on for reasons we cannot explain without getting a horrendous headache. The otherworldly first-person shooter *Geist* for the GameCube is one game we thought passed away, but it seems its ghost is not down with dying. A chatty spectre recently spilled to me that **developer n-Space is working on a *Geist* sequel**. What system, you ask? Oh, you kiddos always want to know all the answers. Actually, I do, too, but it seems like this sequel may materialize on either the DS or the Wii.

Sky is falling

Ask any role-playing game nerd what sequel they want and they'll probably give you a list of a thousand games. Narrow that list down to Dreamcast RPG titles and one will probably be at the top of the list: *Skies of Arcadia*. Well, if my swashbuckling pirate is correct, a ***Skies of Arcadia* sequel is in the works**. Yes, really.

> Q-TIPS

- *Kingdom Hearts* director Tetsuya Nomura is mad busy. I'm hearing his recently finished DS game *It's a Wonderful World* is coming to our shores.
- Microsoft may start a war—word is they're making a massively multiplayer online first-person shooter for the 360. Hmm, wonder what Bungie is up to?
- Strategy-RPG fans who want to play the upcoming PS3 version of *Disgaea 3* online may be out of luck. Talk is this fancy feature will be in the next sequel.

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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language

XBOX 360 LIVE

Games for Windows

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NOVEMBER 2007

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COMING TO AMERICA

Are Japanese publishers arriving unfashionably late to the next-gen party?

OUR OVERSEAS FRIENDS HAVE IT ROUGH. The three-way console war that we're all enjoying has hit Japan's game publishers harder than Godzilla. Well, everyone except for Nintendo, that is. Mario's well-monied handlers now reign over the entire global industry: Both the DS and Wii have become huge international successes, and Nintendo's latest *Pokémon* release will most likely outsell *Halo 3* in the U.S. this year. You'd expect the task of besting Master Chief to fall upon Sony, but overcoming the PS3's late start and early image problems has the once-dominant platform holder playing catch-up. And although Sony's Western development partners have turned out good products, its home-grown PS3 output hasn't impressed. At the same time, relatively few big-name Japanese hits have landed on Xbox 360 due to the console's poor performance over there. Does this mean that Western titles will continue to dominate the U.S. gaming landscape for the foreseeable future? Or will our friends in the East finally get their acts together and start picking up the slack? Thankfully, the cavalry appears to be on its way, with Team Ninja's gleefully violent *Ninja Gaiden* sequel leading the pack. In this feature, we'll dive deep into that blood-soaked gem—and determine whether or not the next wave of overseas prospects has what it takes to succeed over here.

Illustration by Charles Ernst

NINJA GAIDEN II

Putting the red in red, white, and blue... By James Mielke

NINJAS? NOT VERY AMERICAN. NINJAS WITH ROCKET LAUNCHERS? Now we're talkin'! But men in black with bazookas—and a woman in black with even bigger bazookas—weren't the only reasons the first *Ninja Gaiden* on Xbox fired up a red, white, and blue audience (while it did just so-so in homeland Japan, but you can blame the Xbox's lousy installed base over there for that). With *Ninja Gaiden*, the American gaming public got an action game that took guts to play.

Famed as much for its difficulty as its cutting-edge graphics, the game redefined the 3D brawler, delivering weapons-based combat deep as any fighter. And developer Team Ninja—led by outspoken man-about-Tokyo Tomonobu Itagaki—began to build a name in America as a studio that could do more than T&A-flaunting fighters (the *Dead or Alive* series) and *Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. The public loved *Ninja Gaiden* so much that every follow-up effort—namely *Ninja Gaiden Black* (Xbox) and *Ninja Gaiden Sigma*

With *Ninja Gaiden*, the American gaming public got an action game that took guts to play.

■ When Ryu's blades get bloody—which happens a lot—he'll automatically shake them clean if you stand still for a moment.

■ We're going to assume the Black Spider Clan is a very literal organization.

(PS3)—was met at first with tolerance, but eventually impatience. Gamers wanted the real deal; they wanted *Ninja Gaiden II*.

Well, the real deal is finally coming exclusively to the Xbox 360 in spring 2008, and one late-summer afternoon we became the first folks outside of the development team to lay hands on *Ninja Gaiden II*—and not just the measly one-level Aqua Capital (the *Gaiden* equivalent of Venice) demo first revealed at the recent Tokyo Game Show. Our extensive controller time took us through four full levels of Team Ninja's most anticipated game. What we saw was a sequel even more poised to please American sensibilities, with a health system similar to *Halo*'s (stand still and hero Ryu heals), more guts and gore than the entire *Saw* trilogy (complete with *Gears of War*–style splatters), and even some glimpses of the good ol' U.S. of A.

But three years is a long time in the videogame world. Can *Ninja Gaiden II* possibly live up to the precedent set by the first game, or will it merely be more (well, way more) of that old ultra-violence? Let's get our hands bloody.

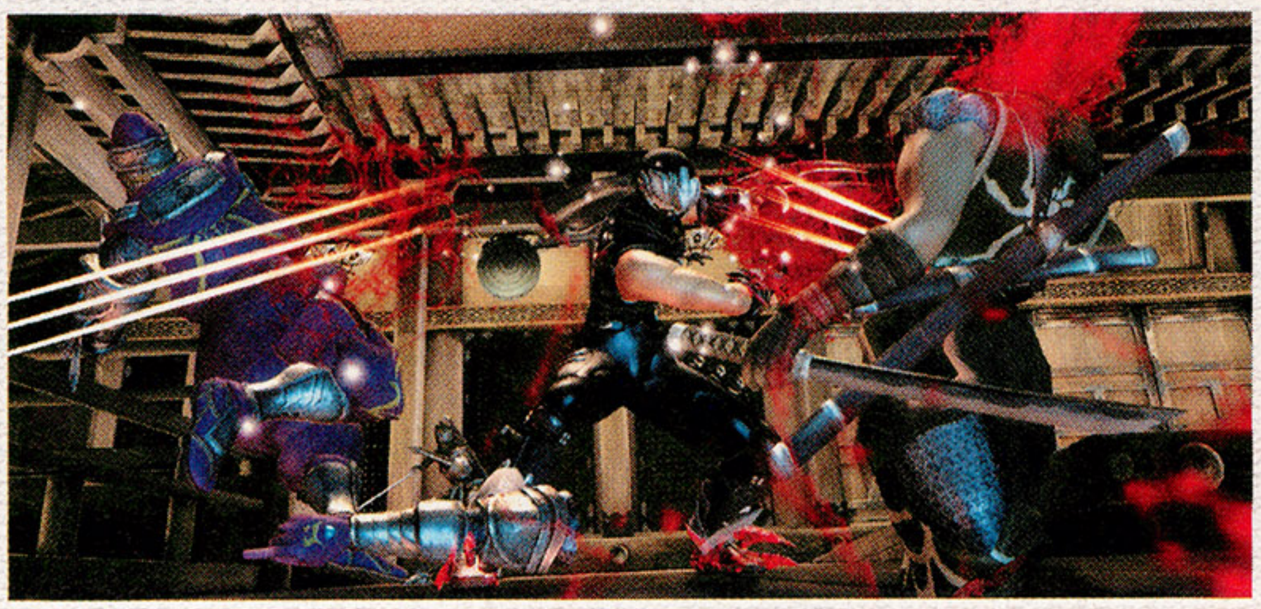
Beaut force

In terms of *Ninja Gaiden II*'s plot, Team Ninja's not saying much at the moment. What we do know is that it takes place about six months to a year after the conclusion of the previous game. We also know that neither the Vigoorian Empire nor first-game heroine Rachel will be featured in the sequel. Instead, the game focuses on the war between the Hayabusa Clan and its adversary, the Black Spider Clan. *Gaiden II* will also introduce a new female counterpart, although we're not sure if she'll be quite the

VIRAL ASSAULT

Oh say can you see...

In some of the levels—such as a Times Square stage—where the graphics call for interesting little details, billboards display curious items like advertisements for www.woodgrovebank.com, a fictional URL Microsoft created that will eventually point back to the Xbox or *Ninja Gaiden II* page. Don't expect to jump into some complex viral-marketing campaign, though—at least not yet. Right now it pulls up a webpage with links to financial services, but expect that to change closer to launch. Other details, like trailers for *DOA4* and *Ninja Gaiden II* (uh, why?) roll on giant monitors in the stage as well. Another in-joke, the Andy Burger outlets, mimics the logo design of popular Japanese hamburger chain Mos Burger, but actually references Team Ninja designer and localization specialist Andy Szymanski.



over-the-top, overly bouncy bondage-fantasy chick that Rachel was. What's most interesting, however, is that Ryu will now have a rival superninja to contend with (not like that Murai guy, with his steroidal physique and '80s hair, from the first game, either). This enemy superninja will be, according to Team Ninja, "bad ass–looking."

With development on the game around the 40 percent completion mark, the version we played wasn't exactly representative of the final product, but it gave us a reasonably satisfying taste of what's to come. (In addition to the four we played, we saw four other levels on the stage-select screen.) Each of the playable levels was extremely polished, displaying distinct visual details and graphic elements fine-tuned to the particular environment. The Lightning Necropolis, for example, is essentially a ruined Times Square, with shattered pavement, lightning effects that surpass what Team Ninja achieved in *DOA4*, and a rain effect that is absolutely torrential. Still, we couldn't help noticing the environments lacked pedestrians, making them look barren and unrealistic. "The ninjas scared everyone away," Itagaki says. Despite the empty streets, playing *Gaiden*

Even back in the NES days, we had Ryu going to New York....

—Team Ninja boss Tomonobu Itagaki on* Ninja Gaiden 2*'s real settings

II on a supersize 1080p widescreen television is hot stuff. And you can trust these screenshots—in action the game looks just as good and moves as fast as you'd expect it to.

It's not just the visuals that show how far along the game is; Team Ninja has put a lot of work into making sure that any elements from the previous game that could be perceived as lacking have either been improved or taken out back and hacked to pieces. "When I look back at the weapons from the first game," Itagaki mentions as an example, "there are some weapons where I say, 'You know what? This weapon wasn't that fun. This may not have been all that useful.' And so instead of trying to do something with those, we just cut them out." In case you're wondering what Itagaki's talking about, the megasword Dailhabro won't be back in Ryu's arsenal.

Team Ninja has also created a slightly more linear game this time around, with the intention of reducing the amount of backtracking that plagued players of the first game. The team found that there were too many "dead" areas in *Ninja Gaiden 1*, places where gamers lost sight of their objectives because there were so many places to go and so few clues to point them toward their goal. This time around, levels will be designed to push players in the right direction—while still offering plenty of freedom and space in the game's battlegrounds. Also gone are the contrived puzzles, which forced our hero to swim through underwater mazes to retrieve keys locked in chests guarded by mutant fish. Because, seriously, what was the deal with that?

■ Your life bar will partially regenerate on its own, although some damage is permanent until you chug a health potion.

THE REAL WORLD

Going where one ninja has gone before

While some areas of the original *Ninja Gaiden* on Xbox were certainly realistic-looking, the game was deeply based in fantasy settings. The sequel brings things to the real world (licensing issues permitting), and of the four levels we played, three were set in very familiar settings (the names are subject to change). While Castle of the Dragon takes place in a typical ninja village–type area, Sky City Tokyo is set in Tokyo, Lightning Necropolis is actually a replica of New York City's Times Square, and Aqua Capital is the water-locked city of Venice. The other four as-yet unplayable stages are called Captive Goddess, which takes place by the Statue of Liberty; Northern Purgatory, which is modeled after Russia in wintertime; and Niflheim and Lifeblood Shrine, two stages that return to the fantasy-type settings of the first game. Rationalizing Team Ninja's efforts in bringing a touch of reality to the franchise, Itagaki says, "I think it's part of the franchise to have a little bit of realism in there. Even back in the NES days, you had Ryu going to New York to avenge his father, so it feels like having a little bit of realism in there really kind of spices up the universe, and I really wanted to see Hayabusa fighting in a lot of different locations."

Gutsy moves

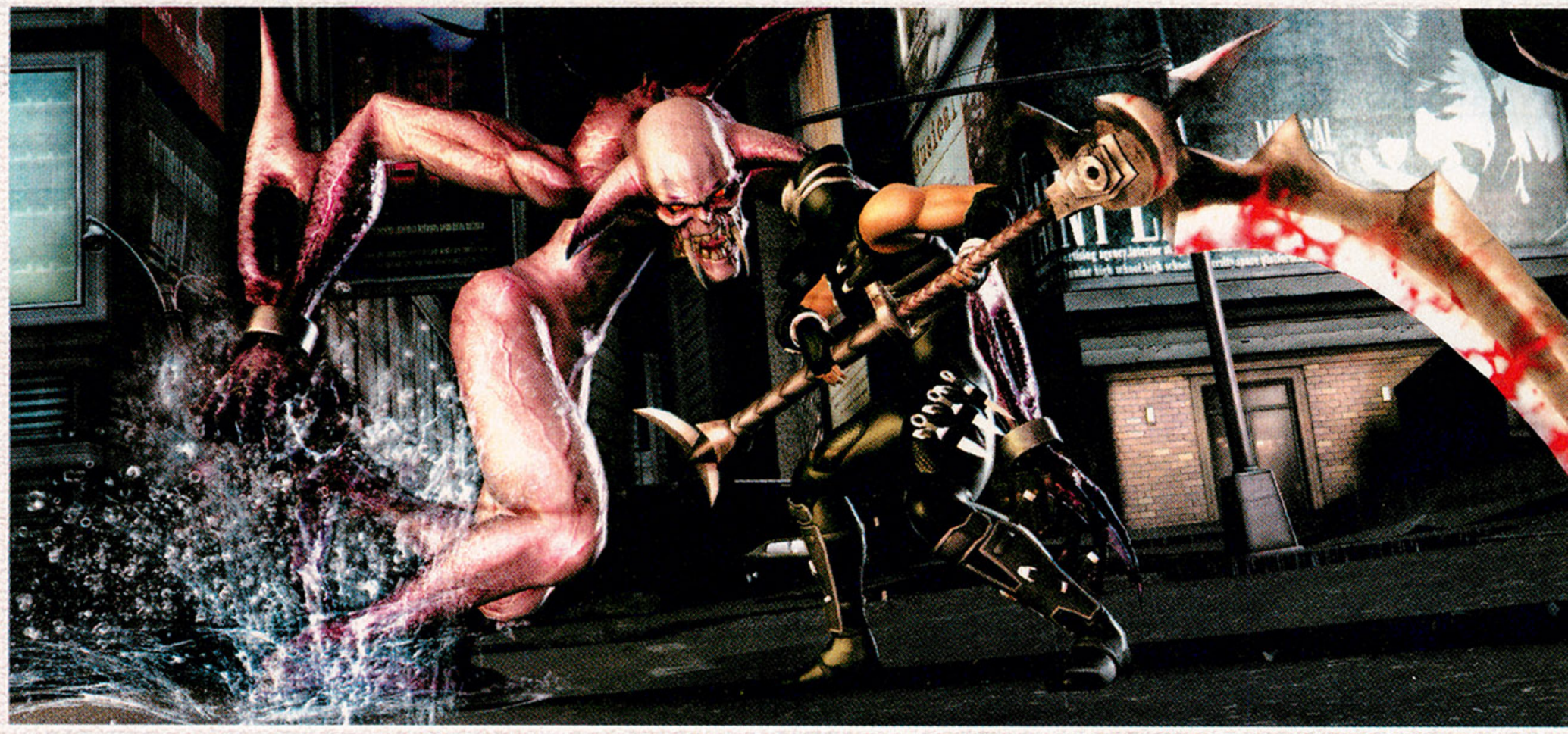
In case you're new to the series—and are reading the braille edition of this magazine—*Gaiden II* obviously centers on finger-bruising combat. And from our hands-on time, we're certain that even the most hardened veterans of the first game(s) will get a workout here. As the screens reveal, this game is superviolent. Heads roll, and so do arms, legs, and entire bodies, as Ryu Hayabusa cuts through his enemies using—among other very sharp things—claws, double swords (first seen in *Ninja Gaiden Sigma*), the classic Dragon Sword, tonfas, and ranged weapons like bows and arrows, shuriken, and much more. They're now activated through use of the D-pad, saving players from having to pause the game by opening a menu screen.

And if you want peace of mind in *Gaiden II*, you better make sure your opponents are in pieces. A weakened enemy—even one with missing limbs—is still a deadly opponent, especially if, say, one whose legs you've removed continues to crawl at you with a live grenade (kamikaze bad guys aren't afraid of going out with a bang here).

Luckily for Ryu, he gets a new

All of the limbs you chop off stay onscreen so you can remember the dismemberment.

■ Fight to the finish: Goals will be more obvious in the sequel. You can usually see them at the start of each stage and battle your way there.



game mechanic called the Obliteration Technique. If you should remove an enemy's limb, pressing Y while you're near the poor sap will activate the Technique, which zooms in the camera as Ryu basically goes apes*** with whatever weapon he happens to be wielding. Obliteration Techniques will come in many flavors, depending on the enemy you're facing, the weapon type that you're using, what limb you've removed from your target's body (including his head), and other grisly factors. What's impressive is that all of the limbs you chop off during battle—and you'll chop off a lot—stay onscreen so you can remember the dismemberment. It's a neat, if gory, technological accomplishment. Yet Team Ninja anticipates maintaining a Mature rating from the ESRB (as opposed to the dreaded Adults Only rating), since *Ninja Gaiden II* is more steeped in a fantasy world than *Manhunt 2* (see story on pg. 32).

Dead end

From what we played, it's clear that the game still needs plenty of balancing—which Team Ninja understands. Stages, such as they are, are currently overloaded with flocks of enemy ninjas trying to rip you to shreds, although in a beautiful way. The Castle of the Dragon, Aqua Capital, and Sky City Tokyo stages are pretty polished, though, with combat taking place in paced, measured doses and Black Spider Clan ninjas attacking you in predictable waves. Meanwhile, the Lightning Necropolis level is filled primarily with huge purple fiends that would have qualified as bona-fide boss characters in the last game. The fighting is fast and possibly *too* furious

at the moment; however, Itagaki estimates that the A.I. and animation are only around 30 percent finished, and cagier enemy attack patterns—some even involving cooperation with other ninjas—have yet to be implemented.

Team Ninja currently has no plans to include online multiplayer combat, which could have opened some intriguing new gameplay options—especially considering all the work they've put into researching online playability through *DOA4* and *DOAX2*. Perhaps online play will arrive at a later date via downloadable content on Xbox Live. (We hope!)

So maybe *Ninja Gaiden II* won't deliver *everything* that American gamers crave when Microsoft publishes it next year (we do like our online play, after all). But it's got all the red-blooded essentials: challenging gameplay, familiar locales, severed limbs aplenty, and a babe who—we can only surmise—maintains the series' standard of outlandishly impractical attire. It's obvious that Itagaki and his Team Ninja clan know how to please audiences over here in the land of the free and home of the brave.

And if you need any more proof, those rocket-launching ninjas are back, too.

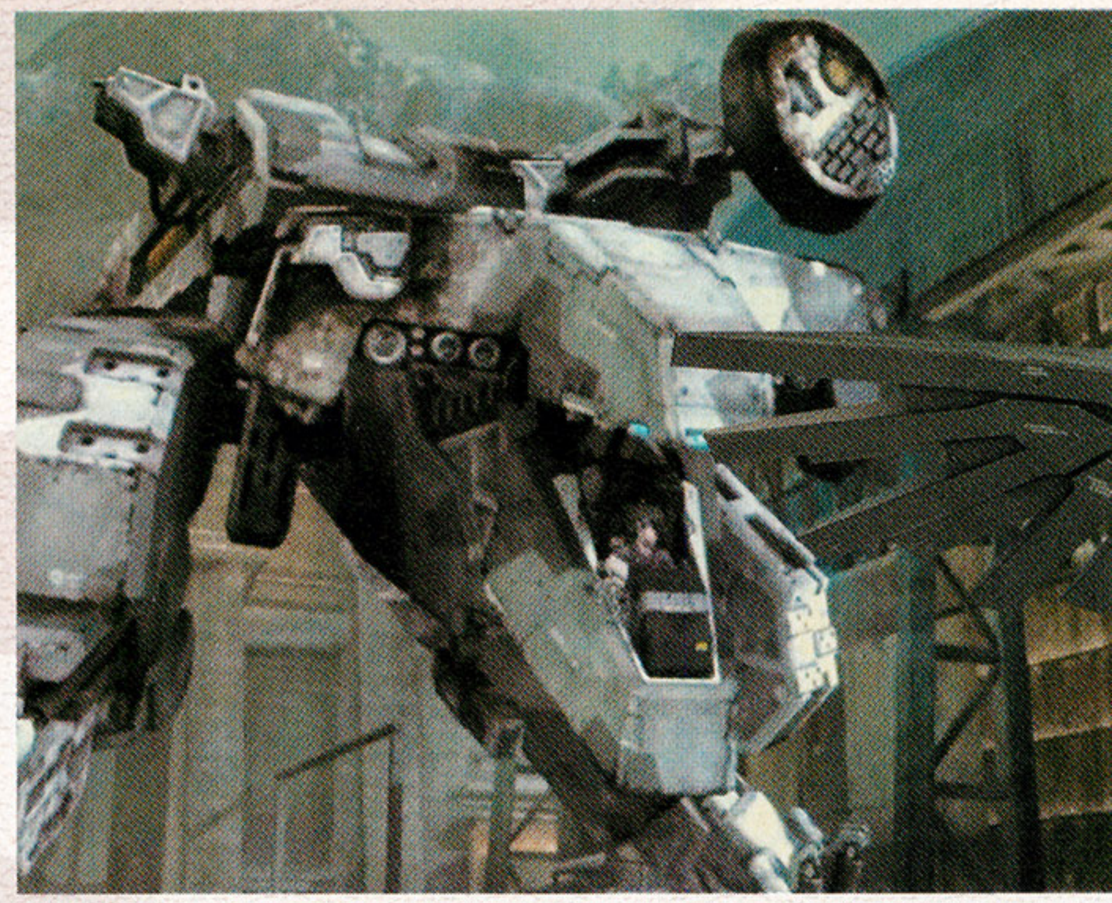
Instead of [doing] something with those, we just cut them out.

—Itagaki on weapons that were "no fun" in the first game

EGM Extras: *The blood keeps flowing at* **EGM.1UP.com**, *where you'll see exclusive game footage and video interviews with Itagaki-san. Now turn the page to see whether 15 other made-in-Japan titles have a shot at succeeding here....*

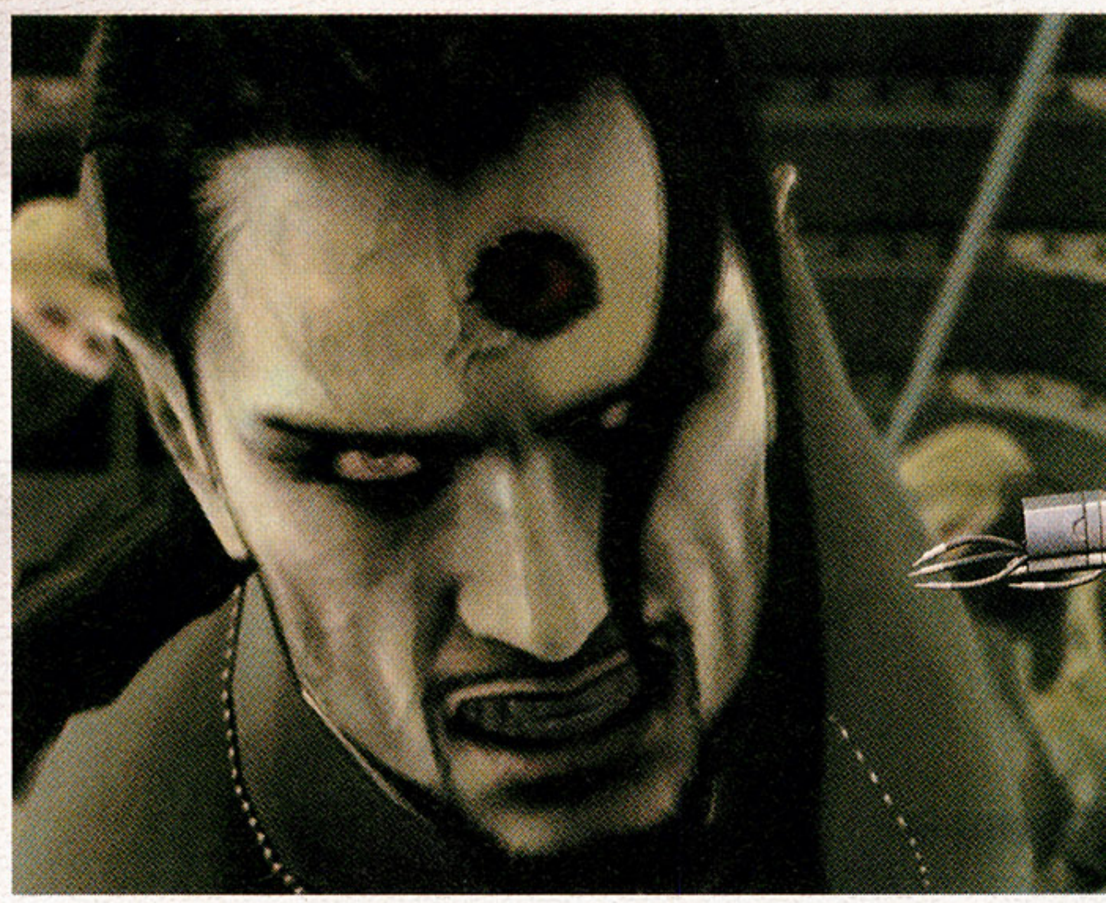
METAL GEAR SOLID 4: GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS

PS3 • Konami • March 2008



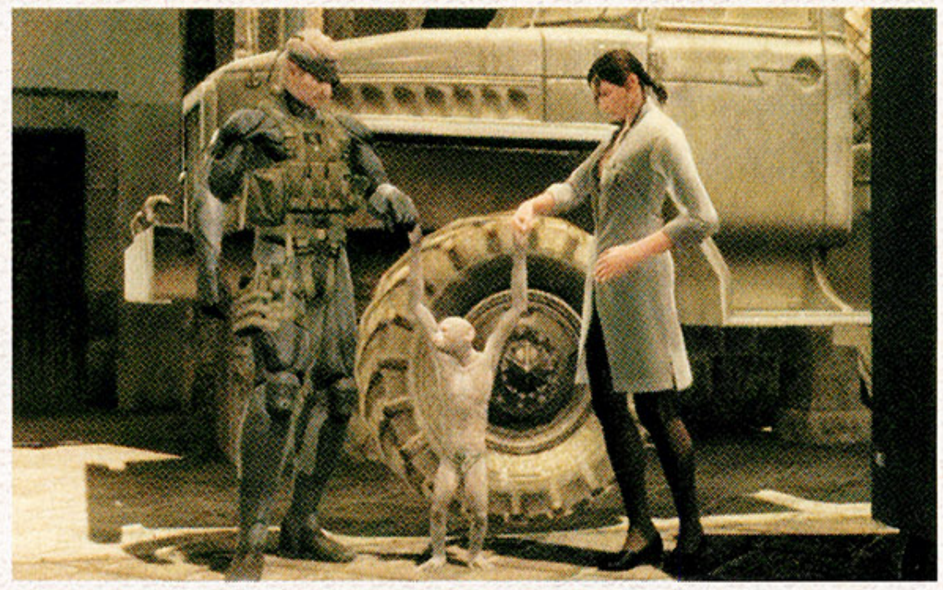
Basic Intel: With a gorgeous, spoiler-filled trailer at Konami's press conference, live stage shows celebrating *Metal Gear*'s 20th anniversary, and 48 playable demo stations (when most other games had four or less), *Metal Gear Solid 4* rightfully owned the recent Tokyo Game Show.

After spending over an hour experimenting with the demo—a slice of intense urban warfare packed with multiple paths and strategic gameplay approaches—we're incredibly impressed. The exacting attention to detail, unabashed creativity, and ribald humor you expect from *MGS* remains utterly intact, but a completely galvanized control scheme finally brings the series' antiquated gameplay in line with that of other third-person shooters.



Westward Leading: "*MGS4* is, without a question, the most Western-friendly game in the series," says *MGS4* Assistant Producer Ryan Payton. "And I think it's safe to say that it's the first game in the series that was consciously designed to appeal to both Japanese and Western gamers." Addressing accessibility meant that the game's notoriously rigid controls had to evolve. Tossing out the series' limiting top-down camera, clumsy kneeling/crawling interface, and several other convoluted controller commands revitalizes the gameplay and brings the series up to date with modern competitors. Now, it's actually *fun* to run-n-gun in *Metal Gear*: Simply turn off the autoaim, and it's just as exhilarating as *Gears of War*.

MGS4's more organic approach to level design also represents a huge change for the franchise: In the snippet of war-torn Medina we explored, you could choose to either assist or destroy local militia members embroiled in a larger conflict. While it's not quite *Grand Theft Auto*–level open-world stuff, it definitely expands the previously linear design of *MGS* and inspires you replay areas to see alternate outcomes. "A lot of our environments now have multiple paths, leaving the choice up to the player how they want to reach the goal," adds Payton. "Giving players a greater degree of freedom in how they approach the game is a direct influence from Western games."



MGS4 also promises to explain the myriad mysteries left unresolved after 20 years of baffling plot twists. "Snake's story really does end with *MGS4*," says series creator Hideo Kojima. "You won't see any more clones, either—that's out of the question." We want to believe him...but the diaper-wearing monkey in the latest trailer has us worried.

■ Meet Sunny, the daughter of *MGS2*'s Olga Gurlukovich.

I decided to use living, beautiful models for each member of the BB Corps.

—MGS4 Director Hideo Kojima on his sultry new bosses

■ Real-life hotties lurk inside the Beauty and the Beast Corps.

METAL GEAR ONLINE

PS3 • Konami • March 2008

Basic Intel: The mystery of whether or not *MGO*, an ambitious team-based PS3 shooter set in the *MGS4* world, would be a stand-alone product or simply part of *Metal Gear Solid 4* has been solved...well, kind of. *MGS4* will contain a "Starter Pack" of *MGO*—enough characters, weapons, and maps to get you snappin' necks online, but merely a slice of the overall content Konami has planned for the title. The rest of *MGO* will surface later, either via downloadable content packs or on a Blu-ray disc.

Westward Leading: "When designing *MGO*, we decided not to compete against the kings of deathmatch—*Halo*, *Gears of War*, *SOCOM*, and other Western-developed titles," says *MGO* Assistant Producer Ryan Payton. "Instead, our approach is to create an online experience that not only will appeal to Japanese gamers, but offer an experience that could also capture a huge audience in the West by offering a new diversion from standard head-to-head play." After some hands-on time with the new *MGO*, we're pleased to report that the team has learned from the mistakes of *MGS3: Subsistence*'s clunky online mode—implementing *MGS4*'s refinements makes a huge difference. Stealthy play remains a thrill, but now brazen gunplay feels just as rewarding.

MGO also takes a page from Western shooters such as *Team Fortress 2* and *Call of Duty 4* by including upgradeable skills (sniping, hacking, close-quarters combat, etc.) and unlockable characters like Old Snake and Psycho Mantis (complete with all of their abilities) as rewards for top players. The development team also encourages cooperative play with its new SOP (Sons of the Patriots) nanomachine link-up system, which keeps you abreast of your teammates' status and location while allowing two soldiers to share one another's skills.

■ Old Snake brings all of his old tricks to *Metal Gear Online*.

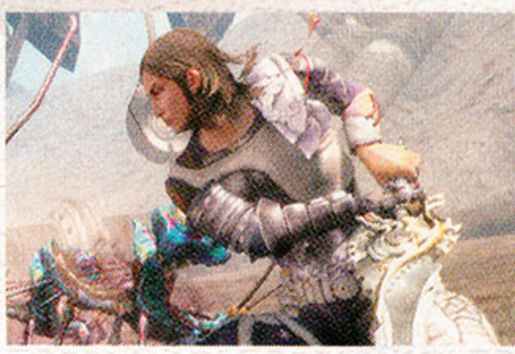
LOST ODYSSEY

XB360 • Microsoft Game Studios • February 2008

Basic Intel: Microsoft again teams up with Mistwalker (the new developer founded by *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi) to produce an original Xbox 360 role-playing game. The Gooch (as his friends call him) has enlisted the help of famed manga artist Takehiko Inoue (*Slam Dunk*, *Vagabond*) and legendary composer Nobuo Uematsu (*Final Fantasy*) to help tell the saga of Kaim, a stoic warrior who's haunted by the memories of his 1,000-year lifespan.

Westward Leading: Cartoony visuals and antiquated gameplay made Mistwalker's first 360 RPG offering, *Blue Dragon*, a tough sell to American audiences. *Odyssey* has a much better shot, though—its look is more *Lord of the Rings* than *Rainbow Brite*, and its flow sticks quite close to the modern *Final Fantasy* formula of turn-based battles, lovely CG cut-scenes, and over-the-top spell effects. But we're still a bit wary: Sakaguchi recently revealed that noninteractive cut-scenes and nonvoiced text interludes constitute roughly half of the estimated 40-hour game.

■ Combat blends *Final Fantasy*'s turn-based fare with timed button presses.



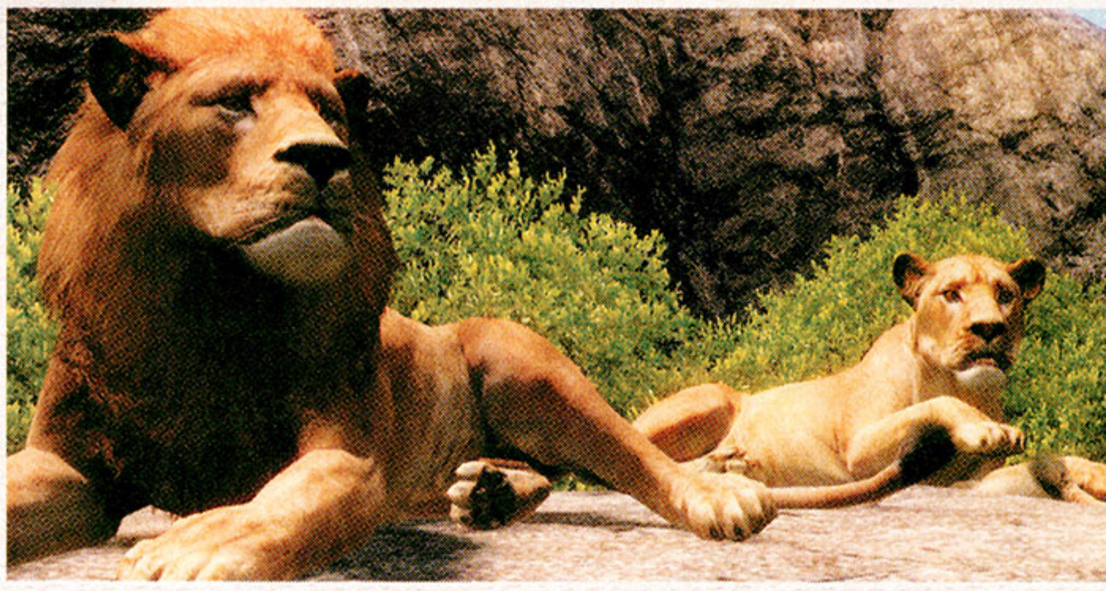
AFRIKA

PS3 • Sony CEA • 2008

Basic Intel: Ever since this title made its head-scratching debut back in 2006, we've been weirdly obsessed with solving the mystery that is *Afrika*. After seeing a few screenshots of lifelike fauna grazing on massive plains, we theorized that it could be an African safari photography game in the vein of the underrated N64 cult classic *Pokémon Snap*. Miraculously, it seems that we were right—a recent trailer revealed intrepid shutterbugs driving in jeeps and hiding in bushes in order to line up the ultimate cover snapshot for *Wildebeest Fancy*.

Westward Leading: While *Afrika* is by no means a normal game, its quirky concept and stunning visuals could have surprisingly broad-reaching appeal. With Nintendo's "nongames" such as *Nintendogs* and *Brain Age* roping in first-timers and lapsed gamers, this seemingly nonviolent exploration of the untamed world could have kids and grannies picking up Sixaxis controllers for the first time.

■ Unfortunately, we cannot confirm Toto's involvement at this time.



> JAPAN: YEP, STILL WEIRD

The Eastern and Western gaming markets weren't always as similar as they are these days. It may seem crazy now, but back in the 16-bit era, American gamers were forced to import classic role-playing games such as *Final Fantasy V* and anime-licensed titles like *Dragon Ball Z*. We've seen both audiences overlap more and more during the past decade (Japanese players have even warmed up to *Grand Theft Auto*), but some key cultural differences remain intact. For every potential international blockbuster we played at the recent Tokyo Game Show, we saw another incredibly Japanese game that left us beyond completely baffled.

Sure, we've come to expect simulations of popular Japanese pastimes such as horse racing, mah-jongg, and shogi, but a lot of the stuff we're seeing from third parties for the DS and Wii has absolutely no chance of making it over here. The most memorable offenders include Sega's bizarre *Miburi & Teburi*, an absurd full-motion video Wii spelling game starring a Borat look-alike; Konami's *Dream Skincare*, a "beauty navigation" DS tool aimed at older women; and *Yoga Anywhere*, another Konami DS offering. Even *Final Fantasy* powerhouse Square Enix is getting in on the crazy nongame action with DS titles like *Why Not Listen to Classical Music?*, in which you watch a cute cartoon dog enjoying pleasant chamber tunes.

■ Clockwise from top-left: Gamers in Japan enjoy classical music, yoga, skincare, and uh...what in the hell is that?

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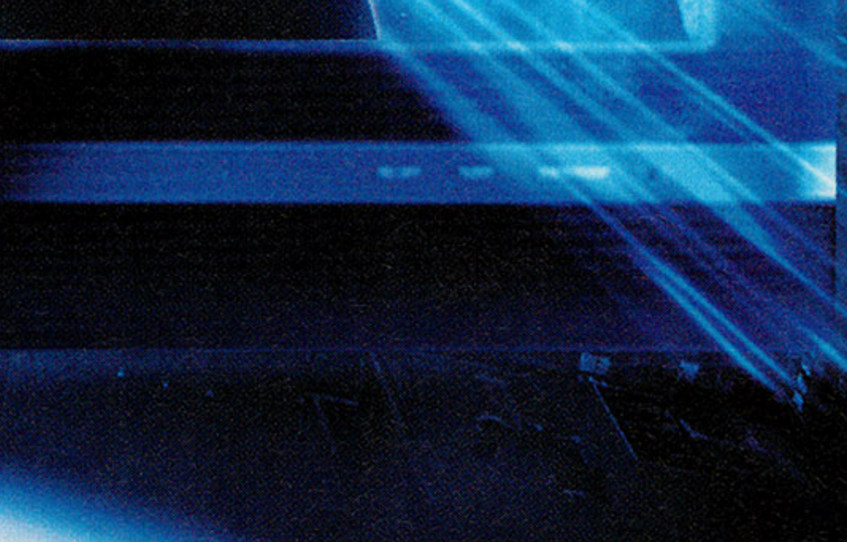

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PG-13

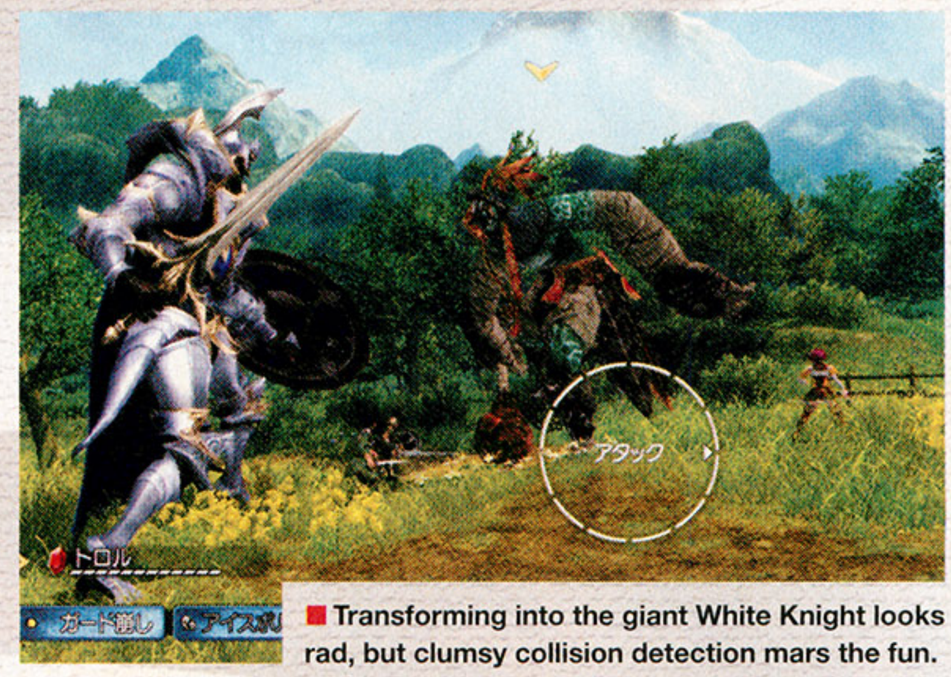
SONY PICTURES HOME ENTERTAINMENT

WHITE KNIGHT CHRONICLES

PS3 • Sony CEA • Fall 2008

Basic Intel: Hotshot Japanese development house Level-5 (*Dark Cloud*, *Rogue Galaxy*) turned heads with this ambitious PS3 role-playing game when it was first revealed at 2006's Tokyo Game Show. But now that we've had some hands-on time with its unique blend of real-time/turn-based combat (think: *Final Fantasy XII* with multihit combos) and mighty morphin' boss battles, we're slightly less psyched. Sure, it's an audiovisual tour de force, but the limited battle commands and underwhelming animation need work.

Westward Leading: *White Knight* is a shoo-in for a stateside release in 2008, and we've spied one new feature that's bound to connect with Western audiences—the ability to completely customize the appearance of your A.I. teammates. Why make do with generic swordsmen and doe-eyed anime chicks when you can populate your adventuring party with friends, relatives, or exacting replicas of Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie?



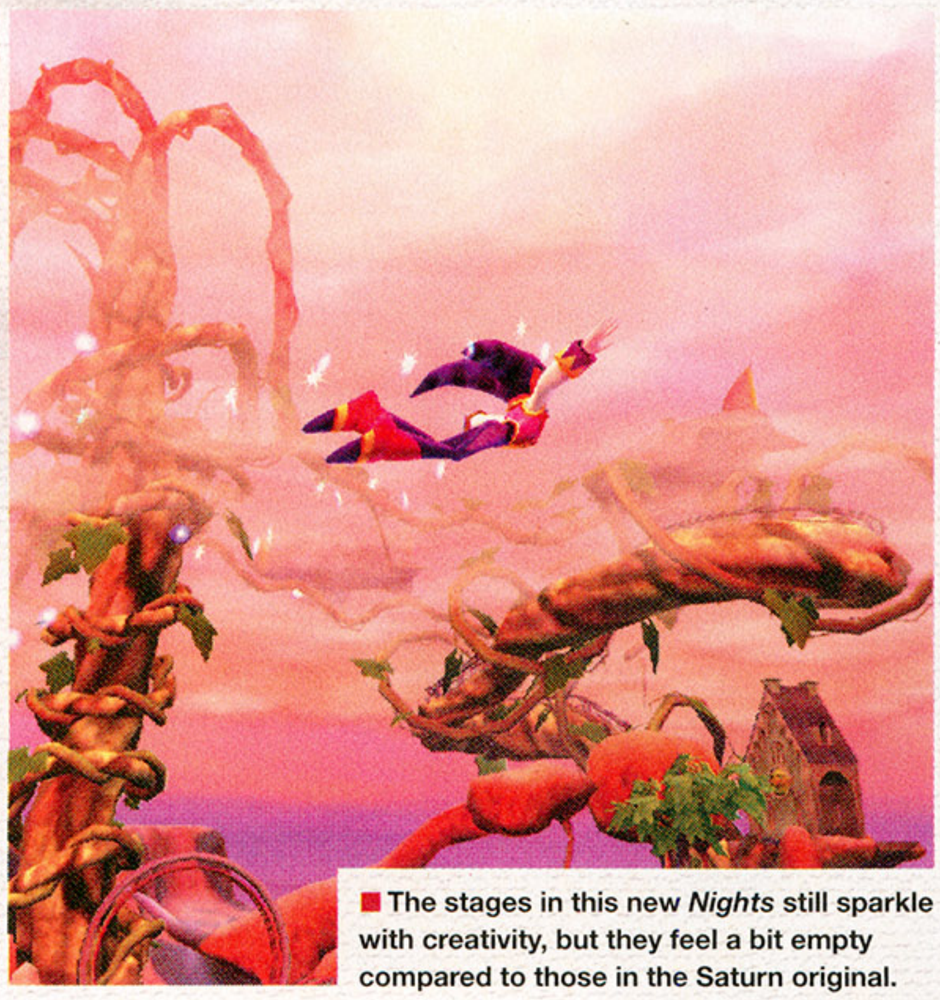
■ Transforming into the giant White Knight looks rad, but clumsy collision detection mars the fun.

NIGHTS: JOURNEY OF DREAMS

Wii • Sega • November 2007

Basic Intel: Over a decade after Sega first poised this violet-hued harlequin as a competitor for *Super Mario 64*, *NiGHTS* finally returns...to find itself going head-to-head with *Super Mario Galaxy* in a crowded holiday marketplace. Once again, expect a mismatched fight—*Journey of Dreams* isn't really a platformer, but rather a candy-colored blend of airborne trickery, skill-based score contests, and open-ended virtual-life minigames.

Westward Leading: The Sega Saturn's limited sales kept the original *NiGHTS* far from most gamers' radar, but perhaps its sequel can find a wider audience on the kid-friendly Wii. The game was obviously designed with younger gamers in mind: Basic find-the-key level design replaces the original's collection-based gameplay, and massively streamlined Wii-mote controls will allow young tykes to soar through the sky with ease.



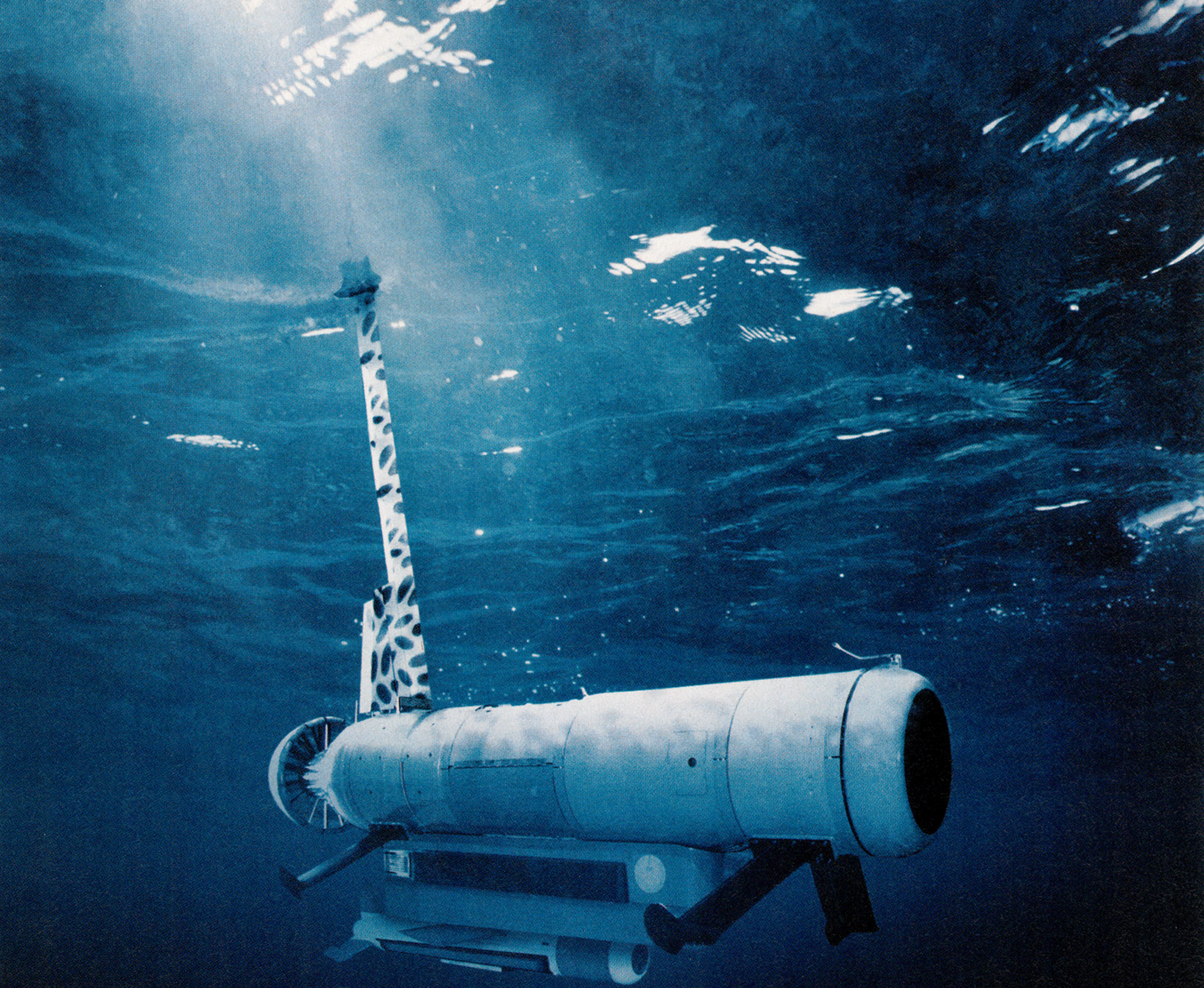
■ The stages in this new *Nights* still sparkle with creativity, but they feel a bit empty compared to those in the Saturn original.

> OFF THE HOOK

Now that we lucky Americans have our whiz-bang iPhones, we finally have a piece of cellular tech that makes our Japanese counterparts jealous...or so we thought. Seeing plenty of impressive, big-name cell phone games at the recent Tokyo Game Show further cemented the fact that U.S. mobile gaming still feels quite prehistoric. Phones capable of churning out PS2-quality 3D graphics are quickly becoming commonplace over there, so Japanese game publishers have fully embraced the platform as a repository for console ports.

Mobile transplants of *Resident Evil 4*, *Devil May Cry*, and *Street Fighter Alpha* don't inspire that much jealousy—how much fun will you have playing them on a keypad? But some of the sequels we spied have us plenty pissed: Why would Square Enix choose phones as the platform of choice for long-desired revivals of fan-favorite PS1 franchises such as *Parasite Eve* and *Tobal*? And the absurdly good visuals in *Kingdom Hearts: Coded* and *Final Fantasy Agito XIII* only serve to depress when U.S. gamers are still waiting for a phone good enough to run the now three-year-old *Before Crisis: FFVII* mobile game. Other covetworthy titles headed to Japan include *Metal Gear Solid Mobile*, *Silent Hill Mobile*, and an action-based *Breath of Fire IV* remake.

■ Experience cell phone envy, clockwise from top left: *Devil May Cry*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *TobalM*, *and Resident Evil 4*.



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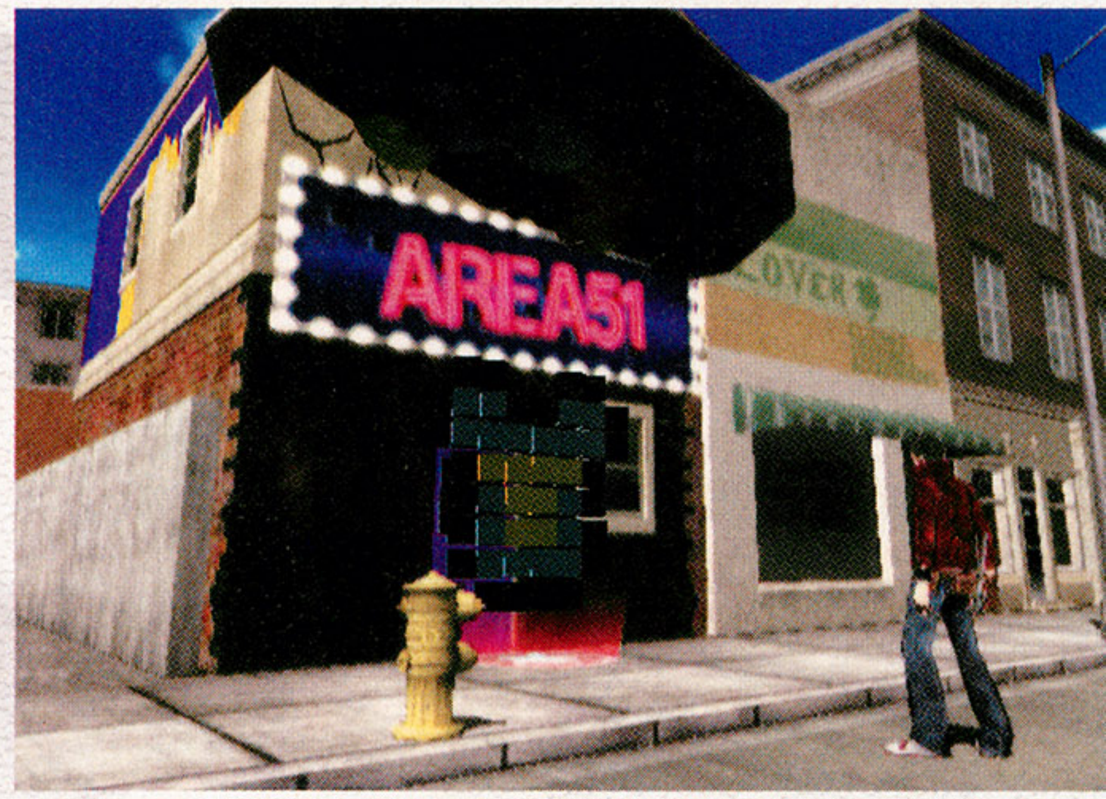
NO MORE HEROES

Wii • Ubisoft • February 2008

Basic Intel: *Heroes* hails from the developer of divisive cult hit *Killer7*, and it shows: Both games share the same bold visual style and wonderfully bizarre sense of humor. But the similarities end there—*Heroes* wisely ditches the stifling on-rails gameplay that sent its forerunner straight to the bargain bin. The game's still plenty insane, though, even if its controls aren't: You play as wannabe assassin Travis Touchdown, a random game geek who lucks into a light-saber and decides to take out 10 other professional killers. Initially, *Heroes* apes *Grand Theft Auto* by letting you loose in the fictional city of Santa Destroy, CA. From the back of your trusty motorcycle (no thieving autos here, unfortunately) you'll find plenty of optional diversions (like a part-time job as a garbage man), but once you decide to hunt down one of the rival killers, *Heroes* takes a page from *Zelda*. These killers' lairs are nothing more than blood-splattered, modern-day dungeons, each with a satisfying and absurd boss encounter at its end.

Westward Leading: *No More Heroes* creator Goichi Suda doesn't hide the strong Western influence in his work. Hell, one of the game's 10 assassins—actress Holly Summers—has a rocket launcher as a prosthetic leg. Not exactly the subtlest of nods to Robert Rodriguez's recent flick *Planet Terror*, now, is it? Likewise, the shadow of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* looms over the project, what with its list of wacky assassins to take out and its postmodern pastiche. But not all of Suda's muses are quite so mainstream: He cites *El Topo*, an obscure Mexican Western renowned for its stark violence and odd imagery, as an inspiration for the game. Suda's also been proactive about how his game will be marketed and received in different territories. He's already admitted that the Japanese version will be heavily censored, but we'll get to see all the nasty bits, from the crimson fountains that erupt from foes to Travis' incredibly inappropriate sword-stroking recharge animation (triggered by your own equally offensive Wii Remote jerking motion).



■ You'll only need to waggle your Wii-mote to pull off finishing moves.

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INFINITE UNDISCOVERY

XB360 • Square Enix • Summer 2008

Basic Intel: Microsoft first announced this joint production with renowned Japanese RPG powerhouse Square Enix and fan-favorite development squad tri-Ace (*Valkyrie Profile*, *Star Ocean*) back in 2006, and it's notable for more than just its laughably absurd title. With its lushly colored visuals, expressive characters, and a whimsical storyline (your average-joe protagonist gets mistaken for the legendary hero who's tasked with saving the world from being obliterated by a renegade moon), it's the next big Xbox 360 JRPG hope in the wake of the somewhat disappointing *Eternal Sonata* and *Blue Dragon*. Combat may end up being the game's strongest suit: Battles occur in real time on the field map à la *Final Fantasy XII*, with you controlling one character and the game's adept A.I. handling the rest of your squad. However, unpredictable events (such as a random dragon wandering into the fray) will help to guarantee that encounters remain fresh and fun throughout.

Westward Leading: It's tough to suss out exactly what went down during *Undiscovery*'s development, but we do know that Microsoft initially approached tri-Ace and Square Enix to develop an RPG...but somewhere along the line, Microsoft pulled out. Thankfully, the team soldiers on, and the game remains an Xbox 360 exclusive.

Considering how poorly the 360 has performed in Japan (it's selling even less hardware than the original Xbox did), *Undiscovery*'s international sales will determine if it's going to be a success. But the team believes that this game could possibly turn the tide in their home nation. "We want to make something that Japanese people would like," says Producer Hiroshi Ogawa. "Hopefully through this game, the 360 can gain more of a foothold in Japan." A noble goal, indeed, but possibly a shortsighted one—the game will reach a much larger potential audience in the U.S. "To be honest, our policy at tri-Ace is that we need to be satisfied with the game we're making, so we don't worry about how the market will receive it," says Ogawa. "But of course, we are aware of the 360's popularity in the U.S., so we wanted to make the game something that everyone could come to like." Perhaps adding online co-op would help with that....

■ Sometimes, randomly rampaging foes interrupt your regularly scheduled battles.

> GAMING ON THE OTHER SIDE

Even though gamers in the U.S. and Japan share plenty of common ground (we all freeze our asses off in line waiting for a new console to launch, for example), some deep-rooted cultural differences set us apart from our Far Eastern counterparts.

Where Japanese buy games

Japan doesn't really have specialized gaming retail chains like GameStop and Game Crazy. Instead, large electronics and media chains such as Yodobashi Camera, Bic Camera, and Sakuraya devote large sections of their stores to console fare. Hardcore shoppers also frequent smaller, mom-and-pop operations that focus on discounted and used games. And the recent U.S. launch of *Halo 3* at 7-11 isn't so weird after all: Japanese convenience shops routinely stock big-name releases.

Where Japanese play games

Handheld and mobile gaming rules Japan, and it's no surprise—a large percentage of the country's urban population uses public transportation every day. It's not uncommon to see a plethora of DSes, PSPs, and game-equipped cell phones during your morning commute. It's also not weird to see adults headed to the local arcade after work. Compared to America, Japan's coin-op scene seems positively healthy, with plenty of games aimed at businessmen (think: multiplayer horse-racing and soccer sims), trading-card enthusiasts, and young girls.

How Japanese play online

If it seems as if Japanese developers are wary to fully embrace the glory of online console gaming...well, you're right. Explaining this cultural disconnect isn't easy. For example, American critics decried the lack of true online play in Capcom's *Monster Hunter Freedom 2*—but meanwhile, throngs of Japanese junior high kids happily meet up for four-player local Wi-Fi parties. We've even heard that some Japanese developers find the concept of cross-game invites to be rude, as you're essentially asking the player to stop playing one game to switch to another.

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UBISOFT

YAKUZA 2 & YAKUZA KENZAN

PS2/PS3 • Sega • 2008

Basic Intel: The original *Yakuza* (PS2) was a risky project for Sega to undertake—the company reportedly sank over $20 million dollars into developing this realistic modern-day role-playing game set in Tokyo's seedy underworld. Luckily for Sega, the final product (noticeably reminiscent of its own stalled *Shenmue* franchise) became a breakout smash in Japan, quickly recouped its development costs, and inspired a follow-up sequel. Unfortunately, the game found itself lost in the shuffle and failed to connect with an audience when it landed Stateside in the fall of 2006. Yet Sega's still not ready to give up on this genre-busting critical darling: Both *Yakuza 2* for PS2 and the recently-revealed PS3 spin-off, *Yakuza Kenzan* (working title) will make their way Westward in 2008.

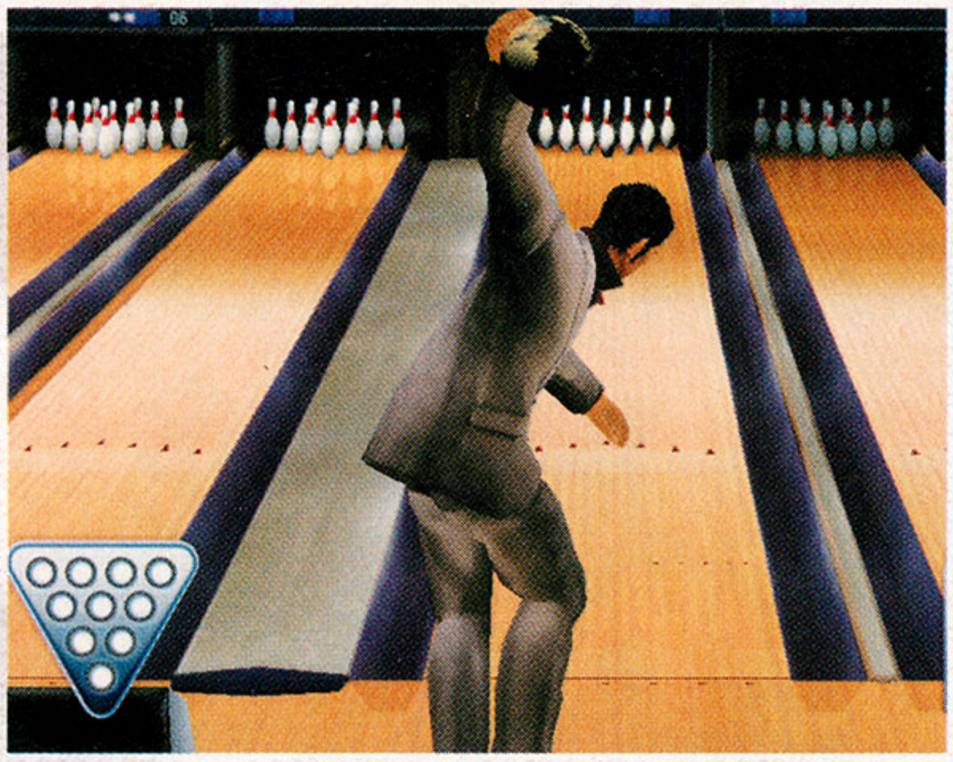
Yakuza 2 picks up roughly one year after the first game's climax, reuniting all the surviving cast members for a new plot involving the Korean mob. The scope has increased greatly, as you now explore both Tokyo and Osaka during your quest. Plus, refinements to the fighting engine and the addition of several new optional diversions (including bowling, running a cabaret club, and taking a hilariously engaging job as a paid "host," Japan's PG-13 version of a gigolo) help to flesh out the first game's somewhat repetitive vibe.

Yakuza Kenzan probably won't be called *Yakuza 3* when it finally releases stateside, because as you can see, it's not exactly a direct plot sequel. Instead, this PlayStation 3 offering transplants the series' themes and gameplay to the 17th century, during Japan's historic Edo period. But fans of the first two games will still feel right at home: Several of the characters here have obvious parallels to those in *Yakuza*. "They aren't exactly those characters' ancestors, per se," says *Yakuza* Producer Toshihiro Nagoshi. "But there is a connection, and you'll find that their personalities are similar." Gameplay appears to revive the open-ended mix of exploration, minigames, and combat from the PS2 games, but with a much greater emphasis on swordplay.

Westward Leading: Sega of America hired several big-name Hollywood actors (Michael Madsen, Eliza Dushku, and, uh...Mark Hamill) in an attempt to give *Yakuza* some street cred, but the F-bomb-laden narrative definitely lost something in the translation. For *Yakuza 2*, word on the street is that Sega may simply subtitle the excellent Japanese voice work in order to save some cash and preserve the title's authenticity. We couldn't be happier.

The jury's still out on how Sega will tackle the localization of the samurai-filled PS3 offering, but we're hoping they'll take a similar approach. Japanese language and culture seems so endemic to these games that trying to pass them off as anything else feels false. "I'll admit that I largely design these games for the Japanese audience," says Nagoshi. "But since ninja and samurai films are popular in the U.S., I feel that *Kenzan* should actually be more accessible to Western audiences, and I think that's great."

Considering the fact that many Japanese third-party PS3 titles are jumping ship to Xbox 360 for multiplatform releases, can we expect *Kenzan* to follow suit? For now, it's staying exclusive to Sony's machine. "I chose the PS3 for this game because I wanted to focus on the graphics," Nagoshi explains. "And I felt that PS3 was the best choice for this—even if it's had a slow start—and I do think that my game will help, but certainly *Gran Turismo 5: Prologue* and *Metal Gear Solid 4* should help increase its popularity in the near future."



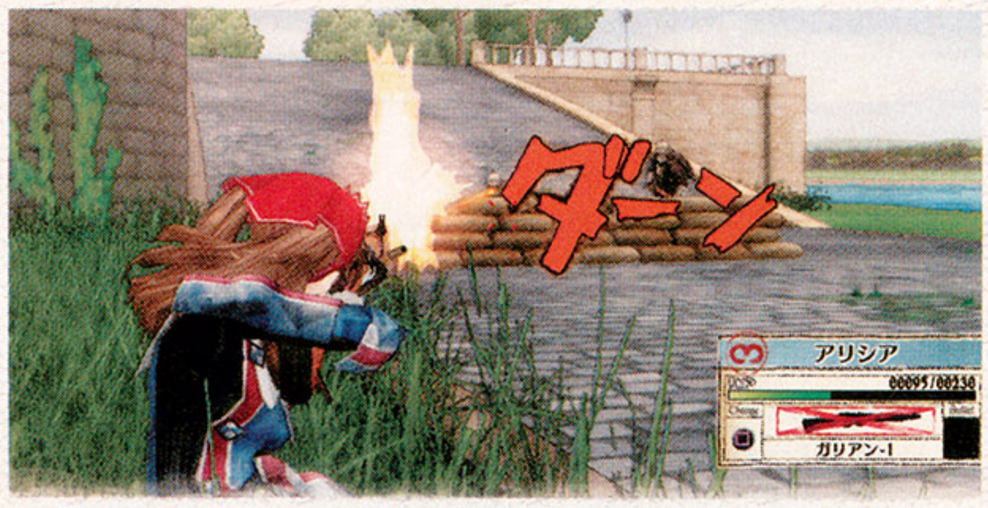
■ **The PS2 sequel (above) returns to the gritty streets (and lanes) of modern-day Tokyo, while its PS3 follow-up kicks it *really* old-school.**

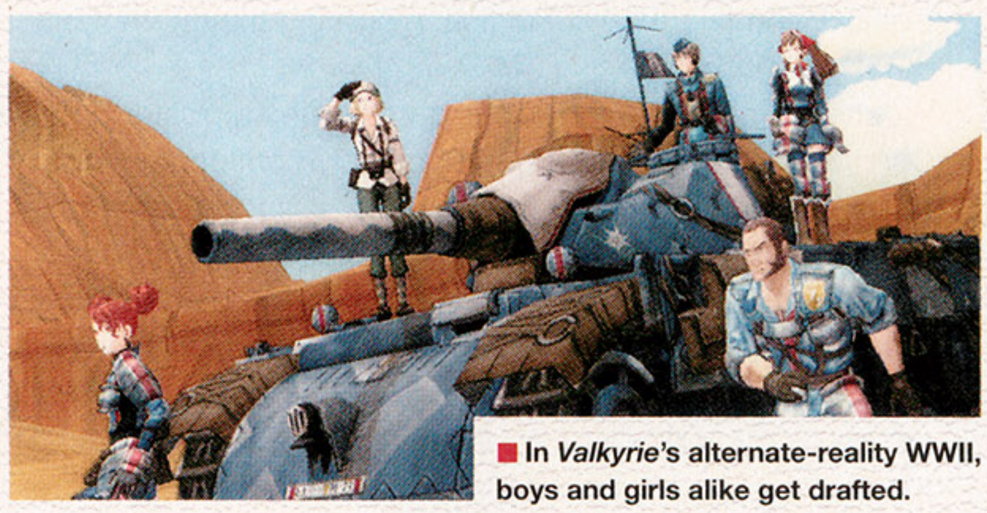
VALKYRIE OF THE BATTLEFIELD: GALLIAN CHRONICLES

PS3 • Sega • Fall 2008

Basic Intel: Sega was once a major player in the role-playing scene, but its scant RPG releases of late have had little impact. Thankfully, *Valkyrie* stands out from the pack for several reasons: First, unique "canvas-shaded" visuals further evolve the hip, cartoon look that Sega helped popularize with 2000's cutting-edge Dreamcast hit *Jet Grind Radio*. Here, stroke marks subtly move while colors bleed through thick black lines, creating a weirdly engaging 3D anime effect. The gameplay feels fresh, too—you still individually direct troops on the battlefield à la *Fire Emblem* or *Final Fantasy Tactics*, but here you also aim their weapons in real-time action scenes. Headshots ahoy!

Westward Leading: Producer Ryutaro Nonaka admits to choosing *Valkyrie*'s art style and European setting with an international audience in mind, and that the title's third-person shooting was "very much influenced by *Gears of War*."





■ In *Valkyrie*'s alternate-reality WWII, boys and girls alike get drafted.

> THE SQUARE ENIX FACTOR

It's no surprise that Square Enix remains Japan's most revered third-party publisher, as both *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* maintain massive, dedicated fan bases (including an army of spiky-haired, chain-wearing cosplayers). But just how patient are those role-playing faithfuls? Will they wait several years for the next real sequel?

Let's face facts: The interminable wait for *Final Fantasy XIII* (and the other titles in the ambitious multigame "Fabula Nova Crystallis" project) has negatively impacted the PlayStation 3's sales all over the globe. The console has been out for over a year now, yet Square Enix won't even commit to a potential release *year* for *FFXIII*. At this point, even a holiday 2008 Japanese launch seems like wishful thinking. In contrast, *FFX* came out a little over a year after the PS2's Japanese debut, clearly helping to catapult Sony's last-gen console to early success. While it's unclear what effect delaying the PS3's *FF* debut will have on the platform, at least Sony can rest assured that the games won't be going anywhere else. At the recent Tokyo Game Show, "Fabula Nova Crystallis" head honcho Tetsuya Nomura reaffirmed *XIII* and *Versus XIII* as true PS3 exclusives, telling Japanese gaming mag *Famitsu* that developing on the platform "allows all visions to come true."

Too bad we still have no clue as to when those beautiful visions might actually become real. Until then, here's a quick update on Square Enix's most anticipated future offerings.

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

This long-awaited PSP prequel might actually redeem the hitherto underwhelming "Compilation of Final Fantasy VII" project that birthed *Advent Children* and *Dirge of Cerberus*. With accessible action-RPG combat, stunning visuals, and an epic, fan-service-filled storyline (written by the author of *FFVII*, *VIII*, and *X*'s scenarios), *Crisis Core* easily outclasses rival PSP role-playing efforts.

Final Fantasy XIII

While a release date for this PS3-exclusive "Fabula Nova Crystallis" centerpiece remains elusive, we did ferret out some new *FFXIII* intel from a new trailer at the recent Tokyo Game Show. We spied a third potential party member—a scantily clad brunette with pigtails. In the clip, she was perched atop a cliff overlooking an expansive plain populated with lumbering dinosaurs. Perhaps she's a tarted-up retread of wild child Gau from *FFVI*? We could be so lucky....

Final Fantasy Versus XIII

Details about this action-oriented *FFXIII* game have been notoriously hard to come by, but Square Enix finally eased up with a shockingly revealing all-CG trailer at TGS. As promised, the game bears no resemblance to *FFXIII* proper: Here, the vibe isn't sci-fi/fantasy, but rather a slick mashup of gritty mafia drama, postmodern ultraviolence, and over-the-top *Final Fantasy* pyrotechnics. We peeped several new characters, including a scraggly vagabond that the protagonist is tasked with protecting and a smartly dressed brunette chick who seems glad to see our brooding antihero...until she decides to attack him, that is.

Dissidia Final Fantasy

We're trying to keep our expectations for this 20th anniversary *Final Fantasy* battle royale in check—Square Enix doesn't have the best record producing fighting games. But early footage of this 2008 PSP effort certainly looks better than previous *FF* fighter *Ehrgeiz* (PS1), with various well-known heroes (Zidane, Squall) and villains (Sephiroth, Kuja) flying around impressive 3D arenas hurling ostentatious magical attacks.

Kingdom Hearts

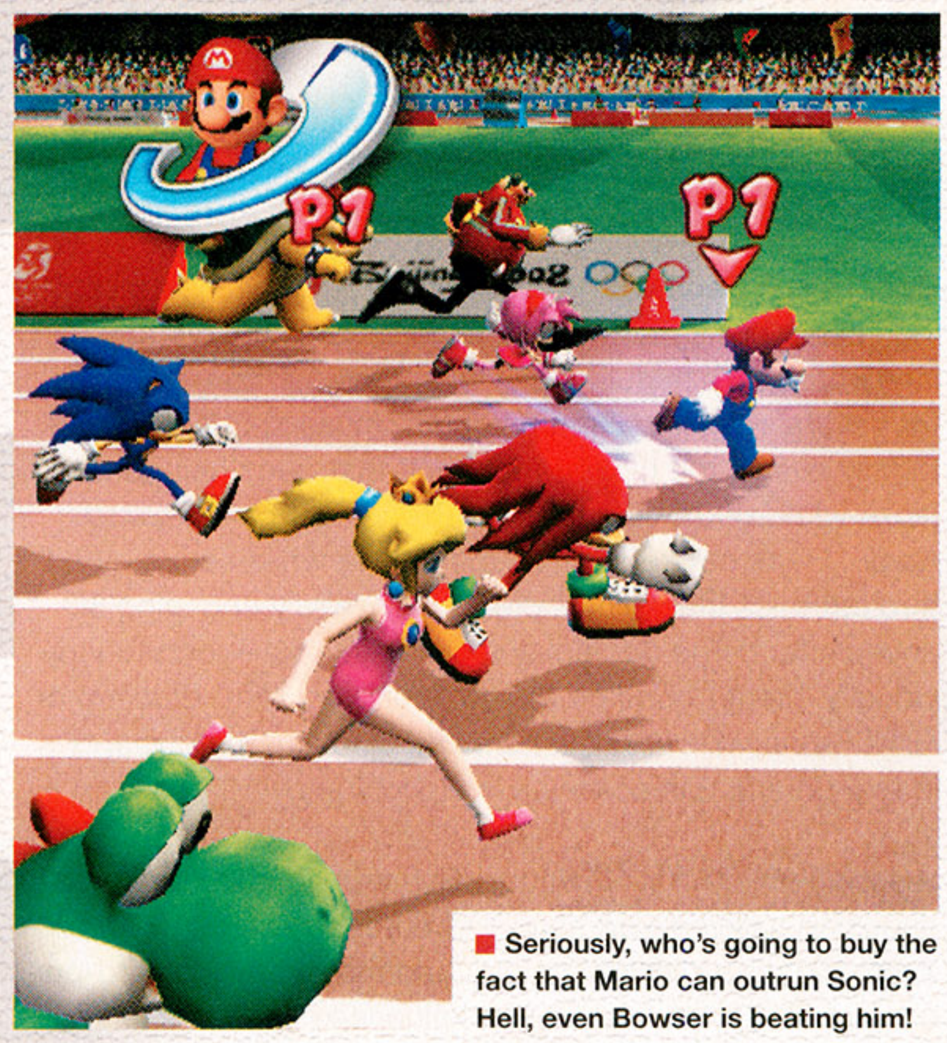
We won't see a proper *Kingdom Hearts 3* for several years, but Square Enix has three interim offshoots to keep mouseketeers occupied: *KH: Birth by Sleep* for PSP, *KH: Coded* for mobile phones, and the unfortunately titled *KH: 358/2 days* for Nintendo DS. *Sleep* serves as a prequel for the entire series, while *Days* centers on the mysterious Organization XIII and offers four-player co-op play.

MARIO & SONIC AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

Wii • Sega • November 2007

Basic Intel: Two rival mascots finally bury the hatchet to celebrate the Beijing 2008 Summer Games. Expect a roster of over 20 playable characters (although Sonic's crew clearly scrapes the bottom of the 32X barrel with Vector the Crocodile) and at least as many events, including track and field contests, swimming, gymnastics, and even sharpshooting. It's harmless, family-friendly fun, unlike all the Sonic/Mario fan art and fan fiction sullying the Internet.

Westward Leading: Given the game's all-star roster and Olympic license, Sega's understandably confident in its chances for broad-reaching international success. In fact, Sega's Corporate Director Masanao Maeda recently stated his intent to sell over 4 million copies worldwide (a feat that only the original Sega Genesis *Sonic* ever achieved). It's a lofty-yet-plausible goal, since *Games* should instantly appeal to the millions of *Wii Sports* fans—it'll even include the ability to compete using custom Mii avatars.



■ **Seriously, who's going to buy the fact that Mario can outrun Sonic? Hell, even Bowser is beating him!**

SOULCALIBUR IV

PS3/XB360 • Namco Bandai • Fall 2008

Basic Intel: Since *EGM* first blew the lid off this hotly anticipated fighting sequel a few months back, an unexpectedly steady trickle of info has kept fans of over-the-top 1-on-1 swordplay sated. The developers have recently confirmed six additional characters: goody-two-shoes Greek sisters Sophitia and Cassandra, fan-favorite freaks Astaroth and Voldo, prissy vampire boy Raphael, and newcomer Hilde, a sultry female knight from Germany who battles with both a lance and a sword.

Westward Leading: This series has traditionally been a smash in both Japan and America, and the development team strives to give *SC4* even broader global appeal. "Since it's set in the 16th century and features characters from all over the world, it's a very international experience," says *SC4* Director Katsutoshi Sasaki. And that international experience will finally involve some cross-cultural combat thanks to the addition of online play. "We'd heard that request from so many U.S. fans that we simply had to include it," says Sasaki. But the developers' biggest boon to Western gamers has yet to be revealed—the überfamous pop-culture "guest characters" this time around will make *SC2*'s Spawn seem positively D-list.

EGM Extras: *This feature covers only a sampling of the games we saw at the 2007 Tokyo Game Show. Head over to* **TGS.1UP.com** *for additional previews, trailers, and interviews.*

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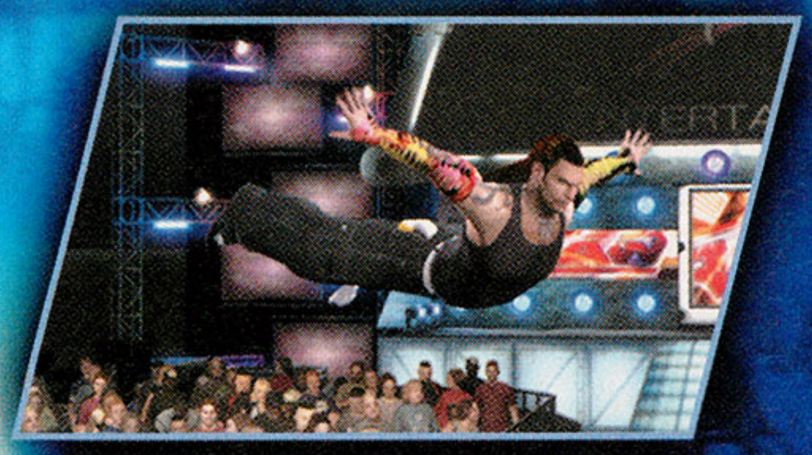

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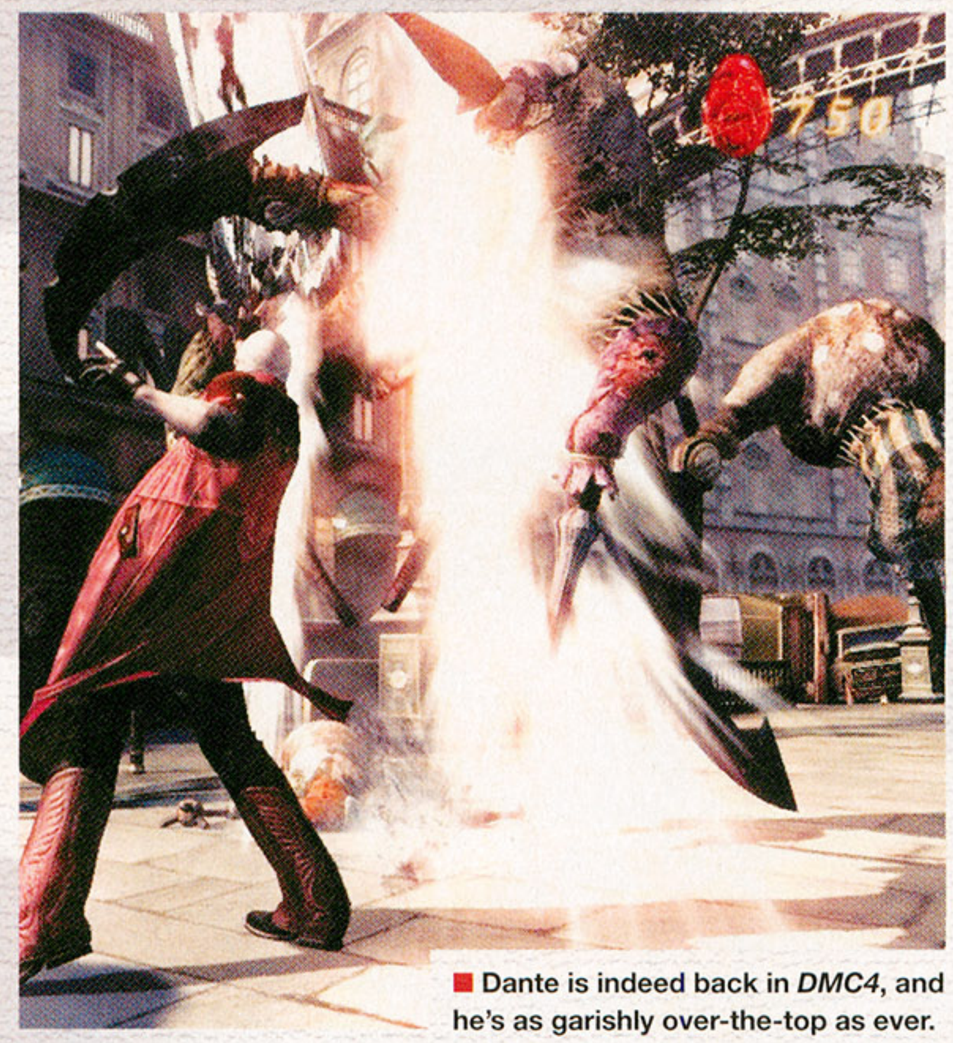
DEVIL MAY CRY 4

PS3/XB360 • Capcom • Early 2008

Basic Intel: Dante's corny one-liners and absurd sword-and-pistol combos helped redefine action gaming on PlayStation 2, so we're stoked for this overstuffed sequel—even if it doesn't do much to reinvent the genre. The game's big change isn't even that obvious: New protagonist Nero (who looks a helluva lot like Dante) fights with his magically enhanced arm named "Devil Bringer."

Westward Leading: *DMC*'s always been aimed squarely at an international market, with its accessible action, fashion-forward characters, and a storyline that blends equal parts blockbuster, film noir, and splatter horror. *DMC4* aims to please fans by bringing back the series' most memorable characters, including Dante (he's playable, but only in certain levels), Trish, and Lady. But Capcom has definitely made one concession for the U.S. market with this game—the decision earlier this year to reverse its former PS3 exclusivity gave a clear indication that Japanese third parties may need to go multiplatform in order to turn a profit.



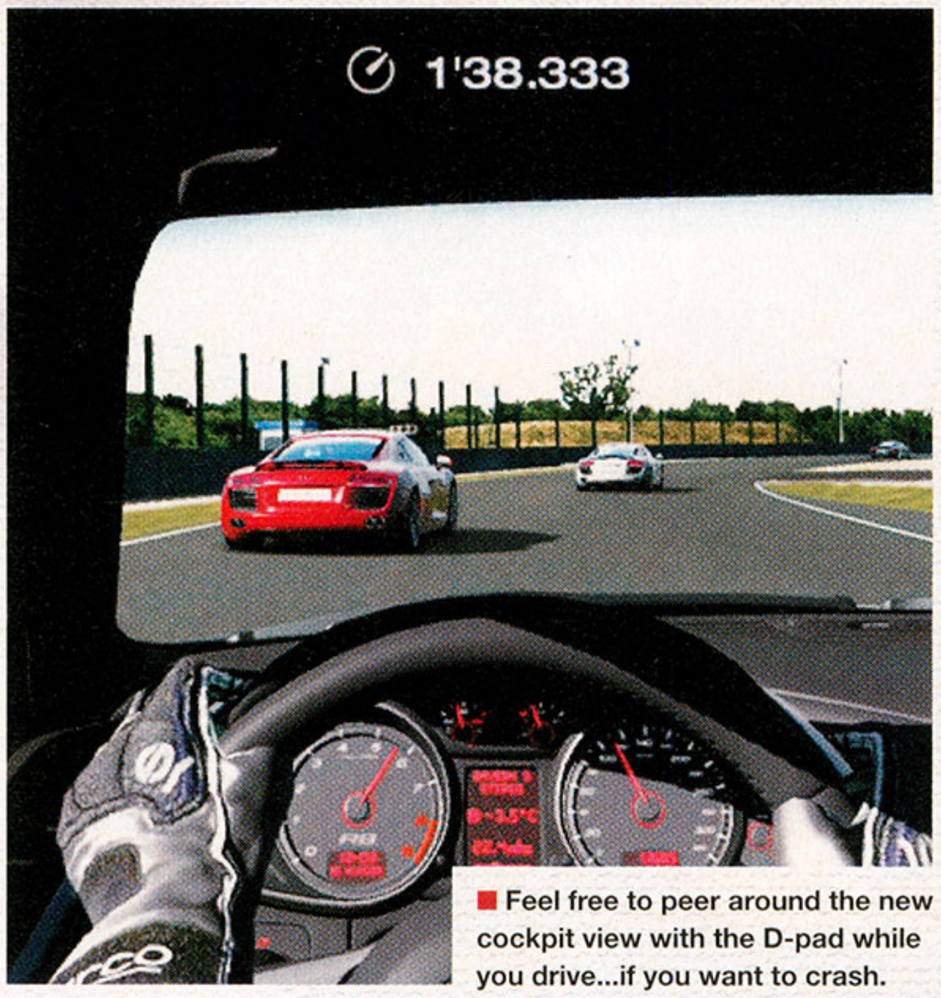
■ Dante is indeed back in *DMC4*, and he's as garishly over-the-top as ever.

GRAN TURISMO 5: PROLOGUE

PS3 • Sony CEA • Early 2008

Basic Intel: Positioned as some sort of high-end appetizer for 2008's *Gran Turismo 5*, *Prologue* offers a sampling of the stunningly lifelike auto-erotica that gearheads desire. Expect a lineup of over 40 real-world cars and five tracks (including the Eiger Nordwand, the London City Track, and Suzuka), along with 16-player online action (a series first), and a gorgeous new in-cockpit camera angle.

Westward Leading: Despite *GT*'s immense Stateside fan base, it's often considered to be most popular with Japanese and European players. Racers in those territories will be able to grab the game (either as a download on the PlayStation Network or on a retail Blu-ray disc) on December 13, but it appears that U.S. gamers may have to wait until early 2008 to get their race on. And since this is no ordinary demo, expect to pony up roughly $39.99 for this value-added test-drive.



■ Feel free to peer around the new cockpit view with the D-pad while you drive...if you want to crash.

> JAPAN, AMERICAN STYLE

The increased importance of Western game development in recent years has created an unexpected phenomenon: More and more Japanese publishers are enlisting the help of foreign teams to take over established franchises. These domestic developers understand the U.S. market and generally have a better grasp of the middleware (like Epic Games' Unreal Engine) that powers so many of today's most popular titles.

Capcom was ahead of the curve when it had Americans handling *Maximo* games and *Final Fight: Streetwise* last gen, and now a U.S.-based team is behind the downloadable *HD Super Street Fighter II* remake hitting PSN and Xbox Live this November. Likewise, Konami has handed *Contra 4* (DS) and *Silent Hill V* (PS3/360) over to U.S. teams that were hand-chosen based on their passion for the projects. Sega's also getting in on the franchise exportation: Legendary RPG developer BioWare (*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, *Mass Effect*) is working on a new *Sonic* role-playing adventure for DS, while *Brothers in Arms* developer Gearbox helms a motion-controlled update of *Samba de Amigo* for Wii. And although it's not a Japanese publisher, Ubisoft has asked its esteemed squad in Montreal to handle the highly Japanese *Naruto: Rise of a Ninja* for Xbox 360.

■ Western developers are turning Japanese to tackle new entries in the *Contra*, *Naruto*, and *Samba de Amigo* series.

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REVIEWS

> slayin' brutes, muddy pursuits, a lombax shoots, business suits, and sweaty men

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> THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS

Orange is the New Gold

The fall colors have arrived

***BIOSHOCK* ENDED SUMMER THE RIGHT WAY**, and now we've had a hell of a beginning to the fall. But who isn't surprised by our Game of the Month? I want to say *Half-Life 2: The Orange Box* topping *Halo 3* scorewise (sales will be a different matter) is akin to Little Mac flooring Iron Mike, but talk to any of your PC-playing friends (who have likely been playing *Half-Life* games for years) and they'll probably tell you it's no big shocker given the series' quality.

As it is, they are both incredible games, and both offer ridiculous value for your $60 (or $70...or $130, depending on the *Halo 3* package you get). You'll find stellar single-player campaigns (or not-so-single with *Halo 3*) combined with near-perfect multiplayer in each box. Makes for happy gamers and a pretty steep standard for other titles to reach. Not that I'd complain if they did.

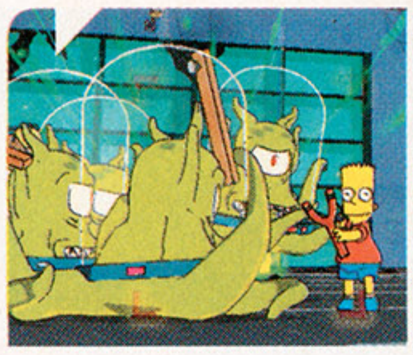
—Greg Ford, Reviews Editor

> HOW WE RATE

10 to 9 Excellent
8.5 to 7 Good
6.5 to 5 Average
4.5 to 3 Bad
2.5 to 0 Terrible

> SCORES AND AWARDS

Reviews: You can also find the lead *EGM* review on 1UP.com. The second and third reviews—you'll find those here.
Awards: We dole out awards to games based on their scores. Platinum: all 10s; Gold: 9.0 average and up; Silver: 8.0 average or higher. Game of the Month goes to the highest-scoring game with unanimously "Good" scores, and Shame of the Month is the reverse. Simple.



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***Simpsons*: Worth the d'oh**

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***Halo 3*: Master the possibilities**

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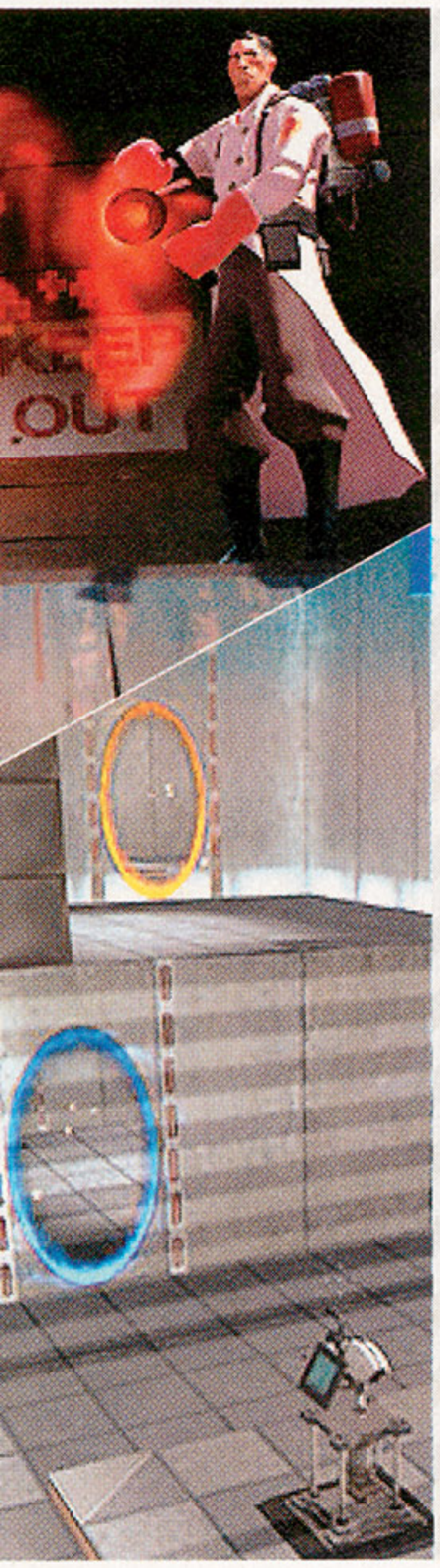
***Katamari*: Rolling on a rocky road**



THIS MONTH'S REVIEW CREW

The cause of *and* solution to all of life's problems

Dan "Shoe" Hsu

Editor-in-Chief

Seen here: Shoe playing *The Eye of Judgment*, a videogame and collectible card game hybrid (see pg. 110). Not seen here: Shoe's inability to summon "cool" in time to prevent a group of jocks from beating him up.

Now Playing: *Halo 3*, *Catan*, *The Eye of Judgment*

Blog: egmshoe.1UP.com

Shane Bettenhausen

Executive Editor

Don't let the rare smile fool you: Shane's still recovering from the jet lag, hangovers, and *MGS4* separation anxiety that stemmed from this year's Tokyo Game Show.

Now Playing: *Silent Hill 0rigins*, *Virtua Fighter 5*, *Metal Gear Solid 4*, *Everyday Shooter*

Blog: egmshane.1UP.com

Jennifer Tsao

Managing Editor

Motion sickness has prevented Jen from joining her fellow *EGM* editors online in *Halo 3*—or so she's told her hypercompetitive coworkers. Could it be she's playing under a pseudonym and practicing like a fiend? Nah.

Now Playing: *Guitar Hero III*, *Rock Band*, *Skate*

Blog: egmjennifer.1UP.com

Crispin Boyer

Senior Editor

From what Crispin played of *Skate*, he can already tell it's way more realistic than even his own real-life skateboarding, in which all his tricks rely on intense focus and natural athleticism. Or Photoshop.

Now Playing: *The Orange Box*, *Halo 3*, *Skate*, *Ace Combat 6*

Blog: egmcrispin.1UP.com

Bryan Intihar

Previews Editor

While in Wal-Mart's *Halo 3* checkout line, Bryan blacked out from an apparent overdose of *Halo 3* Doritos and *Halo 3* Mountain Dew game fuel. Thankfully, he made a full recovery at the *Halo 3* hospital.

Now Playing: *Halo 3*, *Ratchet & Clank Future: TOD*

Blog: egmbryan.1UP.com

Greg Ford

Reviews Editor

You'd think with *Halo 3* finally out everything would be good. But poor Ford needs to follow a Red Sox playoff run and the Patriots juggernaut season as well. Though it pains him to admit it, *GTA4* not coming out this year is for the best.

Now Playing: *Halo 3*

Blog: egmford.1UP.com

Michael Donahoe

News/Features Editor

Though Michael enjoys manhandling men in *SmackDown vs. Raw*, he's more excited that the obscure Japanese wrestling series *Fire Pro* is finally coming to the PS2 here in the States. 'Bout time!

Now Playing: *Rock Band*, *Phoenix Wright 3*, *Halo 3*

Blog: egmhoe.1UP.com

Brooks Huber

Editorial Intern

Working for *EGM* isn't always sunshine, candy, and videogames like it's cracked up to be. Deadline chaos, a nasty head cold, and a large pile of everyday busywork prevented Brooks from spending more quality time with the Chief.

***Finally* Playing:** *Halo 3*

Blog: egmbrooks.1UP.com

Nick Suttner

Reviews Intern, 1UP.com

After playing too many awesomely innovative games this month, Nick now wants a *Portal* gun in every game. And Saved Films. And a disco ball that makes enemies dance. And some cheesecake. Yeah, that'd be nice....

Now Playing: *Halo 3*

Blog: rocksolidaudio.1UP.com

Joe Rybicki

Staff Reviewer

As the holiday season advances upon Joe's fortress of dorkitude deep in the forests of Ohio, he dreams of sleigh rides and sledding hills and finally having the time to freakin' finish *BioShock* already.

Now Playing: *Halo 3*, *Puzzle Quest*, *BioShock*

Blog: opmjoer.1UP.com

Also on deck...

Garnett Lee
Managing Editor
1UP.com

Matt Leone
Previews Editor
1UP.com

Jeremy Parish
Features Editor
1UP.com

Andrew Pfister
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Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Shawn Elliott
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Gord Goble
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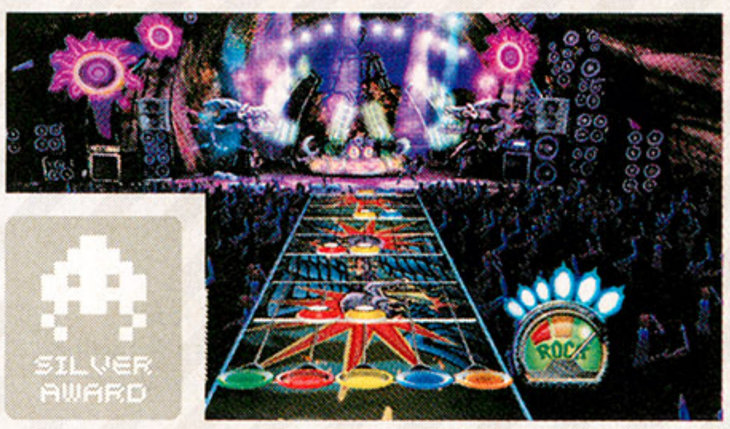
Todd Zuniga
Sports Guy
Staff Reviewer

REVIEW CREW
1UP NETWORK

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of writers from all of our publications, both online and in print. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as *experiences*.

Head over to ReviewCrew.1UP.com to meet all of the 1UP Network's expert reviewers. And check out 1UP.com for reviews of games we didn't have enough time or room for.

■ How come as the music gets better with each game, the characters get uglier?



SILVER AWARD

XB360 (also on Wii/PS3)

GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK

■ **Publisher:** Activision ■ **Developer:** Neversoft ■ **Players:** 1-2 ■ **ESRB:** Teen

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

ANDREW P. 9.0 EXCELLENT

JENNIFER 8.5 GOOD

MICHAEL 8.0 GOOD

The Good: Excellent note patterns, new boss battles
The Bad: Tenacious D's "The Metal"...ugh
The Characters: Look like they're allergic to bee stings

Carry on, our wayward son

+ANDREW P: When David Lee Roth left Van Halen in the mid-'80s, people assumed the worst—but the fans embraced Sammy Hagar, and the band soldiered on. So it is with *Guitar Hero III*—original developer Harmonix has left to do its own thing (*Rock Band*), but the series with new developer Neversoft hasn't skipped a beat.

The "ain't broke, don't fix" approach is evident: The fundamental rhythms and patterns of the game haven't changed, the structure of the career mode remains intact, and the set list is stocked with hits (as well as a few stinkers). Musical tastes will vary, but even on the songs you don't like, the note patterns remain exciting—a noticeable improvement over *Guitar Hero II*'s emphasis on dull chord work.

The new "boss battle" guitar duels are a great idea, although their difficulty level is abruptly higher than the rest of the game (i.e., Slash is a jerk). But overall, this is definitely the *Guitar Hero* you know and love.

+JENNIFER: I'm always saying that the song list makes the music game, and in this case, I was very happy with *GH3*. Even when I didn't have a fave to play, I felt like I had options. (Who knew I'd enjoy Slipknot?) That's largely due to the note patterns—fun to play, even more fun to master. I also loved attacking peeps—with double notes, broken strings, and more—in the new battle mode. But I'm pissed about the lack of offline quick-play co-op. A defining aspect of *Guitar Hero* is as a fun party game anyone can pick up and play; now it's a bit gimped.

+MICHAEL: Weird the name of the game is *Guitar Hero* and yet it doesn't allow you to slay the strings with a sidekick, co-op style, without going online first (or through the career mode). Didn't realize these heroes were so damn selfish. That major qualm aside, I still had a blast banging my head to the killer song list (it's about damn time Metallica made its way into this game). But, unlike these guys, I didn't think the boss battles were all that fun. I wanna jam to my favorite bands, not "battle" a bunch of real guitarists. Remember, this series is popular for one reason: It lets us play music we all know and love.

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PS3/XB360

SEGA RALLY REVO

■ **Publisher:** Sega ■ **Developer:** Sega
■ **Players:** 1-6 ■ **ESRB:** Everyone

A gorgeous flirtation but not the marrying type

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

GORD **7.5** GOOD

JOHN **7.0** GOOD

GREG S. **7.0** GOOD

The Good: Stunning racing venues, exhilarating multiplayer
The Bad: No damage, no setup options
Menus, Shmenus: *Revo* lets you get right to the road

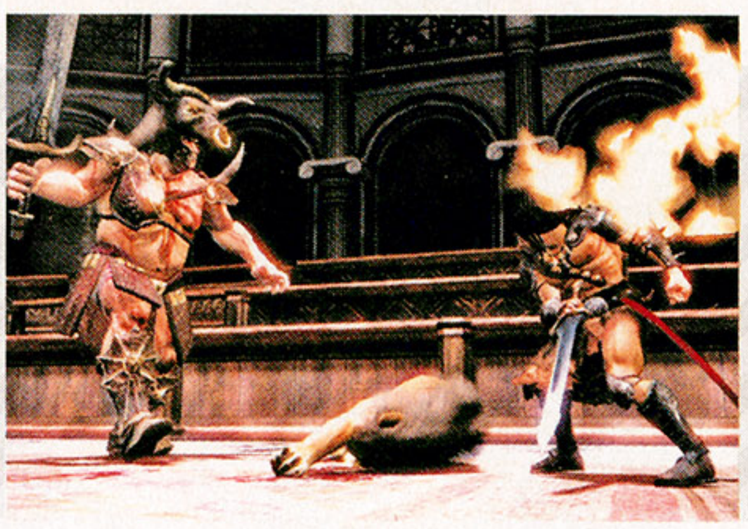
+GORD: One of the best party, newbie, and multiplayer racers on tarmac or dirt, *Sega Rally Revo* is a drool-fest in a box. The question isn't whether *Revo* looks realistic; it's whether reality is gorgeous enough to match *it*. It's not the snow or the slush or the swaying grass or the airborne debris—it's the obsessively sophisticated (and wonderfully exaggerated) manner in which it's portrayed. And if the graphics are exceptional, the all-inclusive soundscape is even better.

Yet it's a pure coin-op experience that may not please serious drivers. You won't find any garage, damage, or upgrades here. The cars are devilishly thrilling and the competition soars in the warp-free online world, but you're usually traveling so fast that the biggest challenge may be avoiding the trackside scenery, which always rebounds you magically back on course but sufficiently slows your roll.

An impressive sensory overload, *Revo* is a killer short-term rush but a questionable long-term proposition.

+JOHN: I couldn't disagree more about *Revo* being "one of the best" newbie-friendly games. If it were, it would not require the ability to tweak the analog stick mere nanometers at a time in order to keep your car moving in a straight line. This is mid-'90s simple-but-fun game design wrapped up in supersaturated 21st-century graphics *at best*. While it's enjoyable, I can't help thinking that Sega has a bit of a nerve asking full price for it. Far from being a modern "party" game, it strikes me more as unabashed nostalgic fan-service.

+GREG S: Speaking as a *Sega Rally* fan, I have to agree with John. This is totally old-school gameplay, and it's a bit jarring at first. The cars don't feel like they make major contact with the racing surface (especially on the rumbleless PS3 console), and sharp curves can initially be a pain in the ass to figure out. Basically, it all feels similar to the original arcade/Saturn game, and I dig it. Even for rookies, the learning curve really isn't that steep. No, *Revo*'s not bursting with originality or play options, but it's a solid racer that feels completely different from the competition.



PS3/XB360

CONAN

■ **Publisher:** THQ ■ **Developer:** Nihilistic
■ **Players:** 1 ■ **ESRB:** Mature

He's not homeless—he's just Conan

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

MATT **5.5** AVERAGE

BROOKS **5.5** AVERAGE

GREG S. **5.5** AVERAGE

The Good: Some cool combos and parries
The Bad: It's too superficial and unpolished
Nudity: Less tasteful than ever

+MATT: I'm pretty picky when it comes to *God of War* clones, so playing *Conan* I had lots of questions...and not enough answers. Why do I do a little dance during attacks? Why does a rock bigger than my body wrap around my wrist when I pick it up and float like a balloon when I throw it? Why do I look homeless? OK, on that last one there may be a lore-rooted explanation, but that doesn't explain the generally bad character designs across the board.

At times, the game shows admirable qualities—an animation here, a graphical effect there—and it does this nice thing where it doesn't hate the player, so the camera and save system work perfectly. But *Conan* doesn't attempt to do much beyond mimicking the *God of War* formula—it's the most blatant clone yet. Put simply, the story's not very good, it's short, and it just has too many small flaws to match Sony's game.

+BROOKS: Preach on, Matt. Right down to the button layout (light and heavy attacks with a grapple button), bare boobs (yes, boobs, and lots of them), and multicolored orbs—red (experience), green (health), and blue (magic)—*Conan* shares so many similarities with *God of War*, it's uncanny. Too bad the similarities fail to emulate that game's polish. The slow-as-a-barbarian-thinks heavy attack left me so vulnerable to a slaughtering that I ending up not bothering to use it midway through the game. Boss battles—though long enough to warrant their own checkpoints—offer far less reward: They had me saying, "Thank god *that's* over!"

+GREG S: My biggest beef with *Conan* is that the fighting system has so much depth, and yet it all feels next to useless since jamming on the light attack button is really all you need to do to progress. In fact, following up on what Brooks noted, sometimes it feels like light attacks are the *only* effective strategy. That being said, I do appreciate the option to pick up dropped weapons and shields, which then totally change Conan's move repertoire. Pretty cool. Despite that, though, the *Conan* experience is still solidly mediocre.

Lights, Sound and Motion

Yer mate here keeps a lookout for ships to plunder by *really turning* left and right!

Disney

Pirates of the Caribbean

The Black Pearl

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■ The Ultimate Hoe (check GameVideos.com) was actually right: Wrestlers do love pink.

XB360 (also on PS3)

WWE SMACKDOWN VS. RAW 2008

■ **Publisher:** THQ ■ **Developer:** Yuke's ■ **Players:** 1-6 (PS3), 1-4 (XB360) ■ **ESRB:** Teen

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

MICHAEL 8.0 GOOD

GREG S. 7.0 GOOD

TODD 5.5 AVERAGE

The Good: Struggle submission system
The Bad: Load times, career mode can be confusing
Should be in Next Year's Game: Wellness mode

Dissension in the ring

+MICHAEL: *SmackDown*'s greasy grapplers may look familiar, but they've added a ton to their repertoire. In addition to the ultimate-control moves added last year—maneuvers you actually perform by freely moving the right analog stick—this year's grappler adds cool user-controlled submissions. Wrenching back the body of your opponent adds yet another awesome layer of realism to the game.

Along with the new submission system, *SVR2008* also introduces various superstar fighting techniques. These styles give each wrestler unique advantages during a match. Sounds simple, but strategically picking the correct skills is an interesting way to keep matches fresh. I'm stoked to continue to see improvement in this series, but it's a shame small problems (like lengthy load times) still pin *SVR* down.

+GREG S: Michael mentions a lot of the little things that Yuke's changed here, but the best is the improved career mode. It's dropped the ridiculous façade of wrestling being a real sport and focuses on the business outside the ring. On days off you can train, build your strength, learn new skills, or spend your time schilling for the company by cutting promos or starring in movies. Every choice you make affects your fan count, stamina, and respect level. And all are integral to becoming the next champ...and making this a respectable game.

+TODD: Respectability? Impossible, since the impressively vast create-a-character allows garter belts over blue jeans along with a bonnet (and I'm talking about the men here). But never one to spurn homoerotic antics, I'd say my big gripe, outside of the soul-crushing load times and the 1991 menus, is the utter lack of tutorialship—especially in that career mode. During training, I had to do a "set amount" of attacks but was never told how many. Sloppy. And the announcing? Somebody body-slam me until I lose my hearing! From a strictly gameplay standpoint, this one's barely above average.

What's the Diff? While both versions look identical, the PS3 version gets slammed by some choppy gameplay.

SHAME OF THE MONTH

■ On the Barker scale, *Jericho* is miles away from *Hellraiser* and *Candyman*.

PS3/XB360

CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO

■ **Publisher:** Codemasters ■ **Developer:** Mercury Steam
■ **Players:** 1 ■ **ESRB:** Mature

Absolutely horrifying

✚JOE: I could see how *Jericho* would sound like a good idea. A secret division of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps devoted to paranormal missions, like a religious SEAL team? It's a pretty neat premise for a first-person shooter, and worthy of Clive Barker's name. Unfortunately, the rest of the game is most definitely *not*. The overwrought writing makes *Max Payne* read like a paragon of stylistic restraint, exacerbated by some horrendous voice acting. I'm perplexed by the long load times, given that the game looks like ass. And the infuriating scripted button-tapping events are so unforgiving as to be almost comical.

The only thing saving *Jericho* from legendary awfulness is the squad system: You develop the ability to possess teammates, which leads to some interesting dialogue (since they're aware you're, uh, *inside* them) and allows for a nice variety of attacks. But really, Mr. Barker? You're better than this.

✚DARREN: I don't know, Joe. The dialogue didn't bother me too much. I *was* busy vomiting blood out of frustration with other stuff, however. The wretched timed-button-presses cutscenes (ditch that *Dragon's Lair* crap!) made me see red, but you completely missed a gaping hole in the game's soul: A.I. minus the "I." When not directly controlling my squad of idiot Ghostbusters, I'd watch them stupidly sprint headlong into battle. The only things that kept me around were the creepy vibe, my teammates' cool paranormal powers, and taking control of those differently playing characters and the resulting mixed-up gameplay.

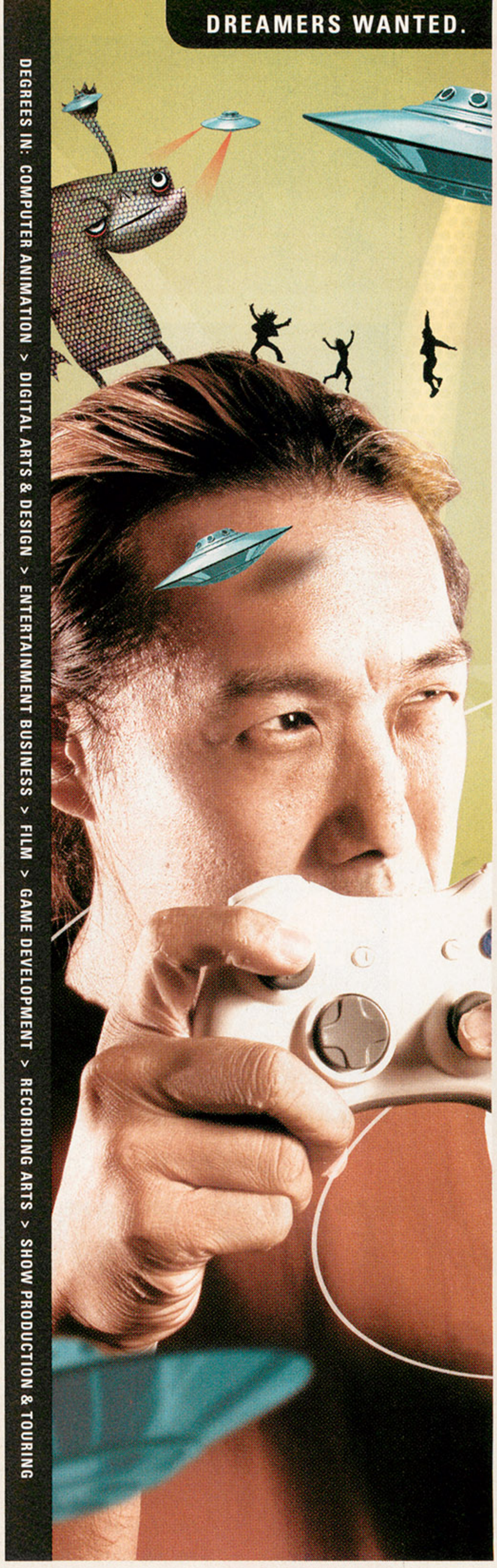
✚PATRICK: Joe and Darren are right about everything—Codemasters owes Barker an apology. *Jericho* is a mess of a shooter with nonexistent A.I., frustrating timed events, vague puzzles, and PS1-style load times. Even worse, *Jericho* arrives during a season with so many superior options. In Barker's defense, the story is fantastic, and everything about the gorgeous creature design is very much his style. But those positives are hardly enough.

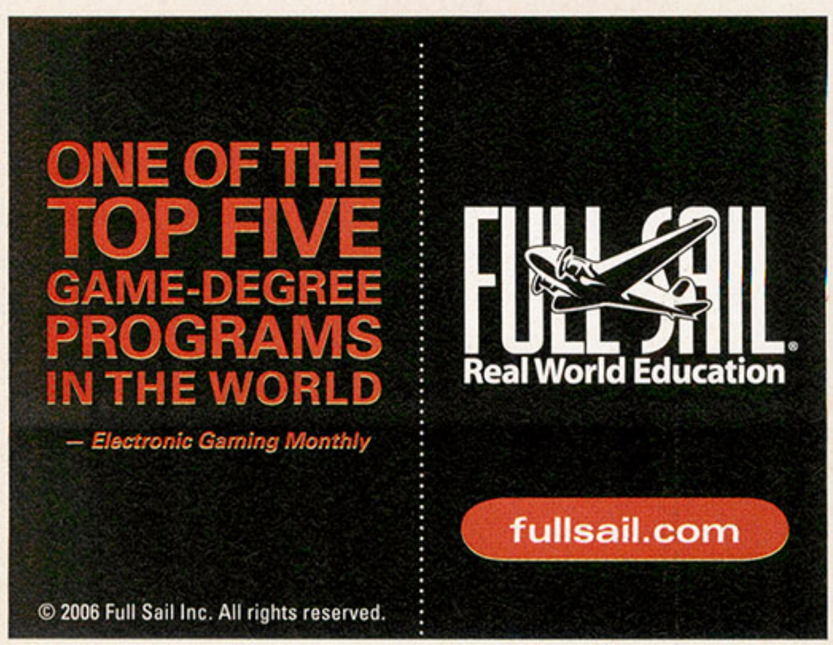
THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

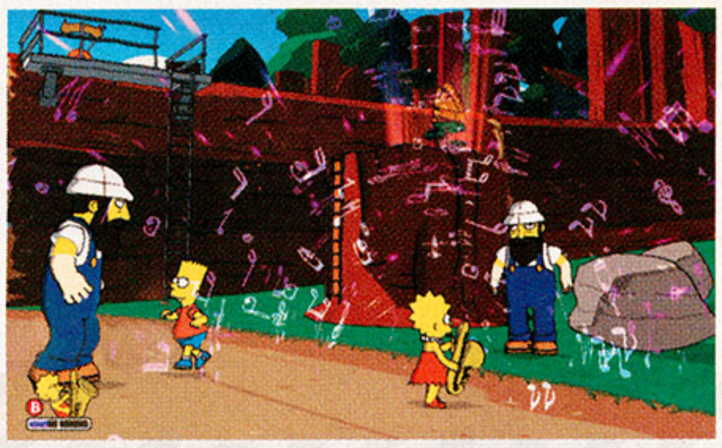
JOE	3.0	BAD
DARREN	4.5	BAD
PATRICK	4.5	BAD

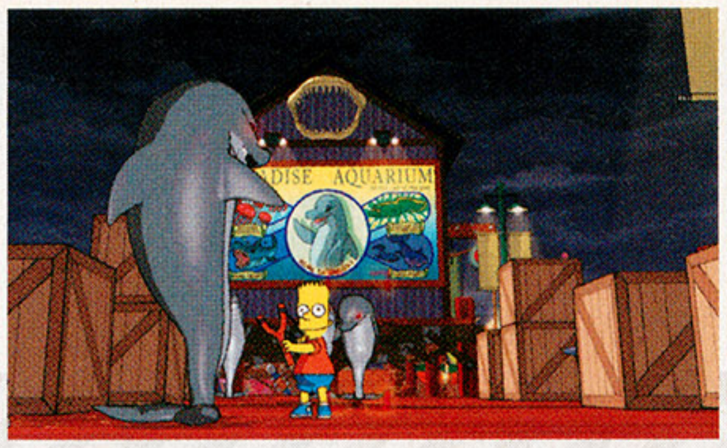
EGM Extras: *Need a helping hand through this one? Hit* EGM.1UP.com *for a SuperGuide.*

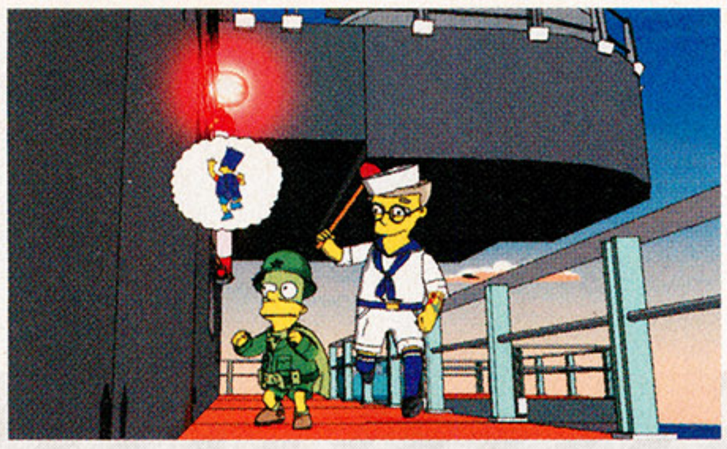
The Good: Interesting premise, unusual team system
The Bad: Oh god, everything else
The Real Horror: Seriously, what is *up* with the hideous environments?

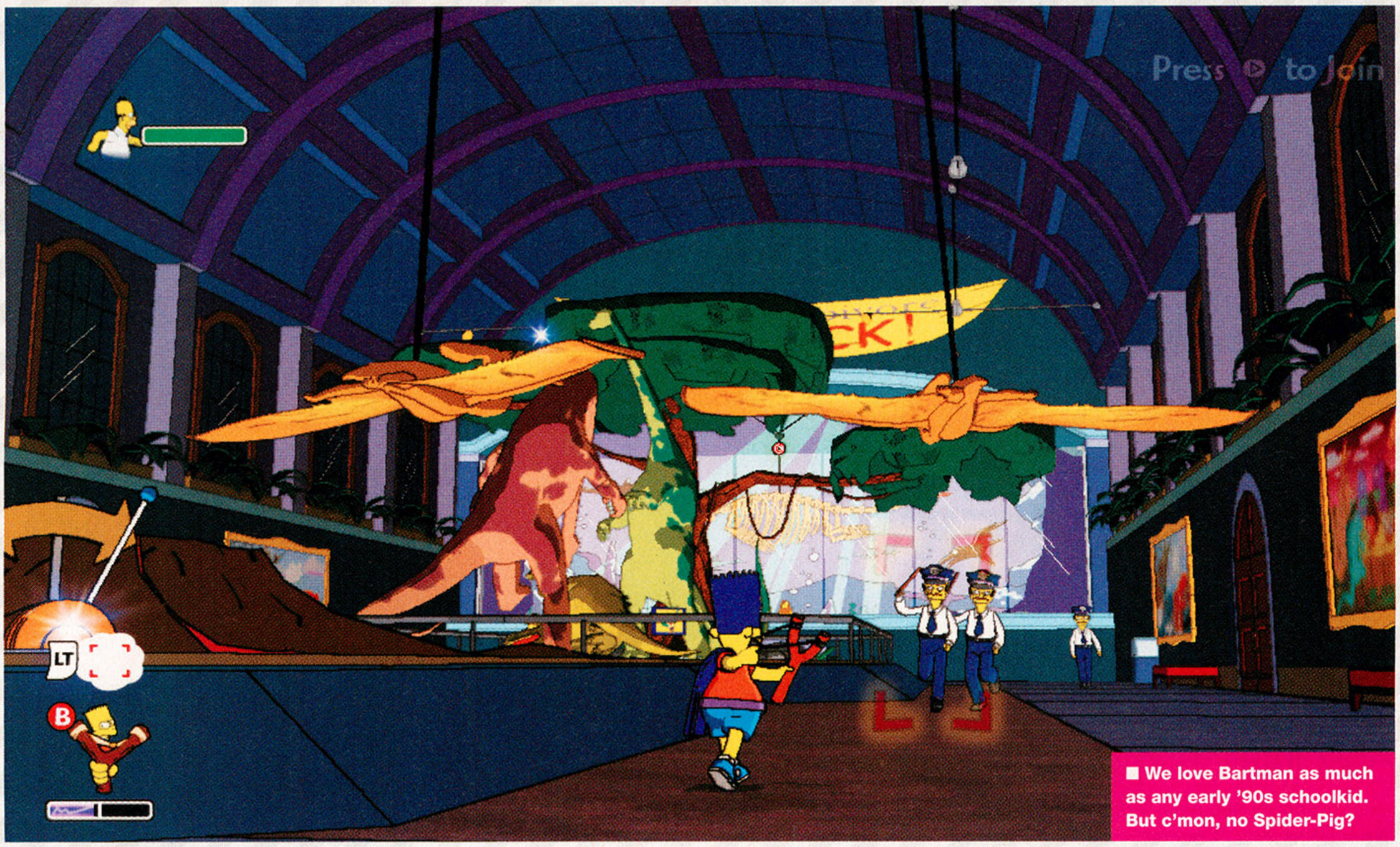












■ We love Bartman as much as any early '90s schoolkid. But c'mon, no Spider-Pig?

XB360 (also on PS3)

THE SIMPSONS GAME

■ **Publisher:** Electronic Arts ■ **Developer:** EA Redwood Shores ■ **Players:** 1-2 ■ **ESRB:** Teen

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

G. FORD
7.0
GOOD

JOE
6.5
AVERAGE

BROOKS
7.0
GOOD

The Good: Great use of *Simpsons* license, funny writing
The Bad: Standard-issue gameplay
***Futurama*!** Stay tuned for some late-game cameos

I will not break the fourth wall

✚G. FORD: Few games embrace their license's soul this well—*The Simpsons Game* nails the show's trademark humor, in-jokes, and social satire, plus it features impressive cartoony graphics and the real-deal voice actors. *Simpsons* fans—and apologists—will be pleased. But the standard-issue platforming and beat-em-up gameplay—in co-op or player-swapping form—are nothing special. Fortunately, a collection of game parodies pepper the missions. Players will pick up on riffs of *Medal of Honor*, *EverQuest*, and more, with levels to match. Some classics even get the treatment, as you'll tackle some hit-and-miss *Frogger*, *Gauntlet*, *Space Invaders*, and *Joust* segments.

At its best, the gameplay deftly blends creative objectives and the characters' unique play styles. "Grand Theft Scratchy," for one, sees Marge controlling a fleet of dogs *Pikmin*-style to clean up a cat-infested neighborhood. While *Simpsons*' action can be uneven, creativity and charm carry it to a higher level.

✚JOE: I wholeheartedly agree with Greg about the creativity and charm, particularly the sly self-reference—like in the scene where Lisa suggests reviewers will applaud the game's sly self-reference.

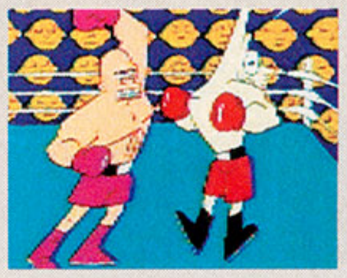
Trouble is, the gameplay is rarely more than mediocre. Hysterical as *Simpsons* is, it's hard to appreciate the humor when you're busy fighting with an annoying camera and unreliable controls. I wanted to love it, but some awful design choices made it hard to love in spite of its charm.

✚BROOKS: Like these guys say, *Simpsons* is not without its share of gameplay-hampering hiccups. But it's hard to get hung up on them when a gelatinous green-blob Homer spews jelly at numerous Comic Book Guy ice sumos, or when Bartman hook-shots his way across Matt Groening's oversized mansion (just a couple of the characters' unique abilities). Near-limitless parodies—a lethargic Sonic the Hedgehog, an oversized kidnapping ape—certainly liven up the otherwise chore-filled levels. How many door-opening switches do I need to find before enough is enough?

Simpsonizing

Just as Homer and his yellow-bellied clan have starred in lots of games over the years, lots of phony games have starred in their TV show. We pick the four we'd most like to see ported to real-life and—of course—reprogrammed to work with our freakish five-fingered hands...

SUPER SLUGFEST
Episode: "Moaning Lisa"
Original air date:
Feb. 11, 1990

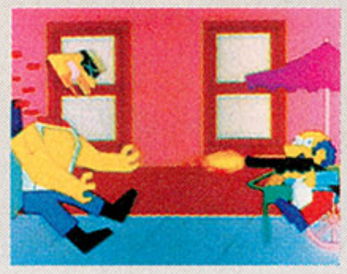


Gripping single-button joysticks, Homer and Bart pummel each other in a bout of arcade boxing.

Game it's most like: *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* (NES)

Why it would rock in real life:
Tell pop it's just like that *Wii Sports* boxing game he likes so much—then knock his block to the Mir.

LARRY THE LOOTER
Episode: "Radio Bart"
Original air date:
Jan. 9, 1992



Birthday-boy Bart plays this game of grand theft everything at Wall E. Weasel's animatronic pizza parlor.

Game it's most like: *State of Emergency* (PS2/XB)

Why it would rock in real life:
Actually, we want all the Wall E. Weasel games, set to the "It's your birthday, boy or girl" tune.

BONESTORM
Episode: "Marge Be Not Proud"
Original air date:
Dec. 17, 1995

Marge won't buy Bart this fighter. Milhouse plays it, inspiring gamertag variants of THRILLHO.

Game it's most like: *Mortal Kombat* (Arcade/Multiplatform)

Why it would rock in real life:
We'd love to see mom's reaction to the TV ads: "Tell your folks, 'Buy me *Bonestorm* or go to hell!'"

DASH DINGO
Episode: "Lisa Gets an 'A'"
Original air date:
Nov. 22, 1998

A bedridden Lisa recuperates with this Aussie-accented platformer and surprisingly becomes hopelessly addicted.

Game it's most like: *Crash Bandicoot* (PS1)

Why it would rock in real life:
It would be rad to run over crystal babies for turbo boosts in the inevitable kart-racing spin-off.

PS3/XB360

BLADESTORM: THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR

■ **Publisher:** Koei ■ **Developer:** Omega Force
■ **Players:** 1 ■ **ESRB:** Teen

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

BRYAN
4.0
BAD

JOE
6.0
AVERAGE

DARREN
4.0
BAD

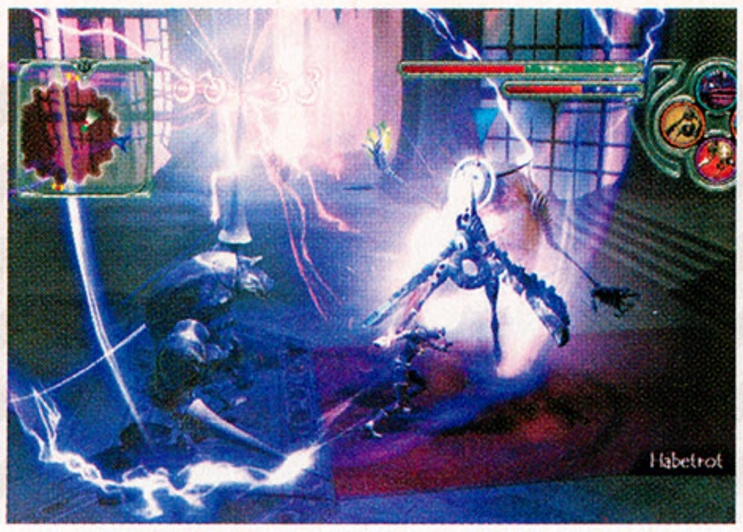
The Good: The setting
The Bad: Limited strategy options, boring combat
Totally Deadly: England's Prince Edward

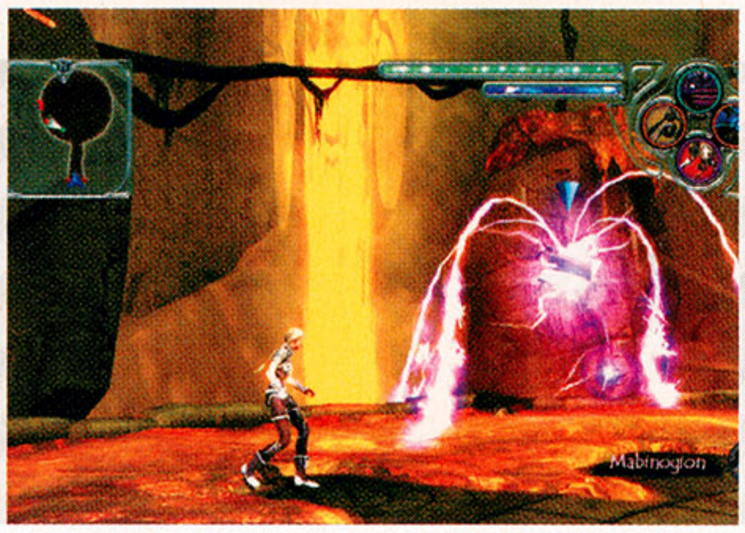
More like the hundred-year bore

+BRYAN: Somebody call a shrink—*Bladestorm* is suffering from a major identity crisis. Koei's latest history lesson (this one recounts the famous feud between England and France during the 14th century) thinks it's both an action and strategy game but ultimately falls awfully short of excelling at either. The combat, which at first glance looks like a button-mashing *Dynasty Warriors* affair, is actually way less interactive and exciting than that long-standing franchise. Here, you simply press a button and then watch your custom-created mercenary and his or her allies whack away (with no style whatsoever) until the slow-moving attack meter is full again—yawn. Things don't get any better with *Bladestorm*'s strategy elements. First off, limiting your control to only one troop makes it impossible to coordinate efforts on the game's expansive battlefields. Also, since you can't call for help during skirmishes, too often you'll encounter unfavorable matchups against enemy types that'll quickly wipe you out. With all these hiccups, I'm shocked this war lasted one year, let alone 100.

+JOE: Hey, I liked the setting, the huge scale, and the squad-level perspective...but *damn* is it hard to keep track of how you're doing in any given fight. Maybe this is what it was like to command during the real Hundred Years' War—but I doubt it was intentional. It's also annoying to have to run around to select new squads to control; a bird's-eye command view would have helped. It's too action-focused to be a true strategy game, and it's too strategy-minded to be a good hack-n-slasher.

+DARREN: Bryan, I know *exactly* why this war lasted so long—every warrior was an idiot...at least if you base it on *Bladestorm*'s interpretation. When I order troops around in other strategy games, they do what I say. Here, I'm breaking gamepads just trying to rally units. The second I jump to another squad, the dope brigade left behind runs back to base or dies in some stupid fashion. I really do like the game's idea, but without basic strategic brainpower, I started missing *Dynasty Warriors*' mashfests.





PlayStation 3

FOLKLORE

■ **Publisher:** Sony CEA ■ **Developer:** Game Republic ■ **Players:** 1 ■ **ESRB:** Teen

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

A. FITCH
5.5
AVERAGE

RAY
7.5
GOOD

MICHAEL
8.0
GOOD

The Good: Gorgeous art and music, addicting monster catching
The Bad: Targeting, camera, unclear hints
***Final Fantasy*'s Cait Sith:** See his Celtic origins here

Hit or myth

+A. FITCH: Ellen, a young Dublin lass searching for her presumed-dead mother, and Keats, a cynical journalist itching for a scoop, head to a mysterious (and possibly haunted) Hibernian hamlet in this action-RPG inspired by the rich world of Irish mythology. Fantastical beasties from authentic Celtic lore serve as *Pokémon*-esque companions on the duo's intertwining quest, so the monster-wrangling is both addicting *and* educational here.

Folklore's clever creature collection and captivating storyline drew me in, but the luck of the Irish sure isn't with the gameplay: A lousy lock-on system and too-shaky camera made me wanna give the PS3 a good ol' shillelagh shellacking. Also, the game lacks inventory-based healing, which compounds the frustration—unless enemies drop power-ups, you're outta luck. Oh, and then you've gotta play through the same levels all over again with the *other* character! The monster-nabbing motion controls work surprisingly well, so it's inexcusable that the conventional elements are a mess.

+RAY: For the most part, I dig *Folklore*. The action is shallow and frustrating (you fall on your back every time you're hit), but collecting the "folk" monsters and figuring out which critters to use creates an enjoyable challenge. While both protagonists traverse the same levels, their stories unfolded differently enough that I *wanted* to play their chapters alternately—that's right, Fitch. But a near-absence of voice acting makes the cinematic stylings feel wasted. It's not a mind-blowing epic, but *Folklore*'s style alone is worth experiencing.

+MICHAEL: Like Fitch, I also can't say I'm crazy for *Folklore*'s camera. Still, I don't think it's terrible—the fixed positions mostly present an acceptable view of the action. And I definitely didn't have trouble opening up to the lock-on system—fetching folks by yanking up the Sixaxis is both easy and fun. But man, those cut-scenes could benefit from more real-life banter, especially since the actual story interludes are pretty short. Of course, this didn't bother me too much because the unique plot kept me playing.

SILVER AWARD

PlayStation 3

THE EYE OF JUDGMENT

■ **Publisher:** Sony CEA ■ **Developer:** Sony CEI ■ **Players:** 1-2 ■ **ESRB:** Teen

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

NICK
8.0
GOOD

SHOE
8.0
GOOD

RAY
8.0
GOOD

The Good: Balanced, addictive card game
The Bad: Run-of-the-mill fantasy art
The Camera Likes Daylight: If you're playing at night, buy a lamp. Seriously

Hold a dragon in your hand

+NICK: *The Eye of Judgment* might seem like a hassle at first—a videogame that has you playing with real cards in front of a packed-in camera that summons the corresponding fantasy creatures onscreen—but it works. True, you'll want to skip the extended battle animations and turn down the obnoxious metal soundtrack, but that didn't stop me from having a blast. It's *Magic: The Gathering* without the arcane rule set, and an infallible, all-seeing eye takes care of the messy specifics associated with tabletop gaming (dice, paper, arguments).

Dueling your friends in person is the best way to go (the computer simply isn't as crafty), but geeking out with strangers online works almost as well thanks to some inspired anticheating measures. *EOJ*'s longevity will depend largely on the planned steady release of new cards (building your own deck is crucial to the fun), but this is a solid start to a potential phenomenon.

+SHOE: The computer may not be crafty, but it sure seems to win a lot. I blame it on the steep (but not difficult) learning curve. With 360 degrees of attacks in a 3-by-3 grid and multiple effects and powers, this strategy-intensive game gives you lots to think about. But if your brain is wired for this sort of thing, you'll have a blast. It's deeper than most collectible card games without being overly convoluted (see *Marvel Trading Card Game*). It is gimmicky, though—technically, you can play this game without the real cards and the camera—and single player needed a campaign mode so that it's not all just stand-alone battles against the CPU.

+RAY: For the first couple of days, *EOJ* is awesome. Then you realize you should get a friend to join you since the computer is ridiculously ruthless. Online play, while appreciated, isn't as appealing without a live person to humiliate. Regardless, the relatively easy-to-grasp tactical gameplay gets addictive, and the camera gimmick actually complements it (shocking, indeed). *EOJ* can be loved by strategy nuts and collectible-card-game junkies alike, but without other people to play against, you probably won't have it set up for months on end.

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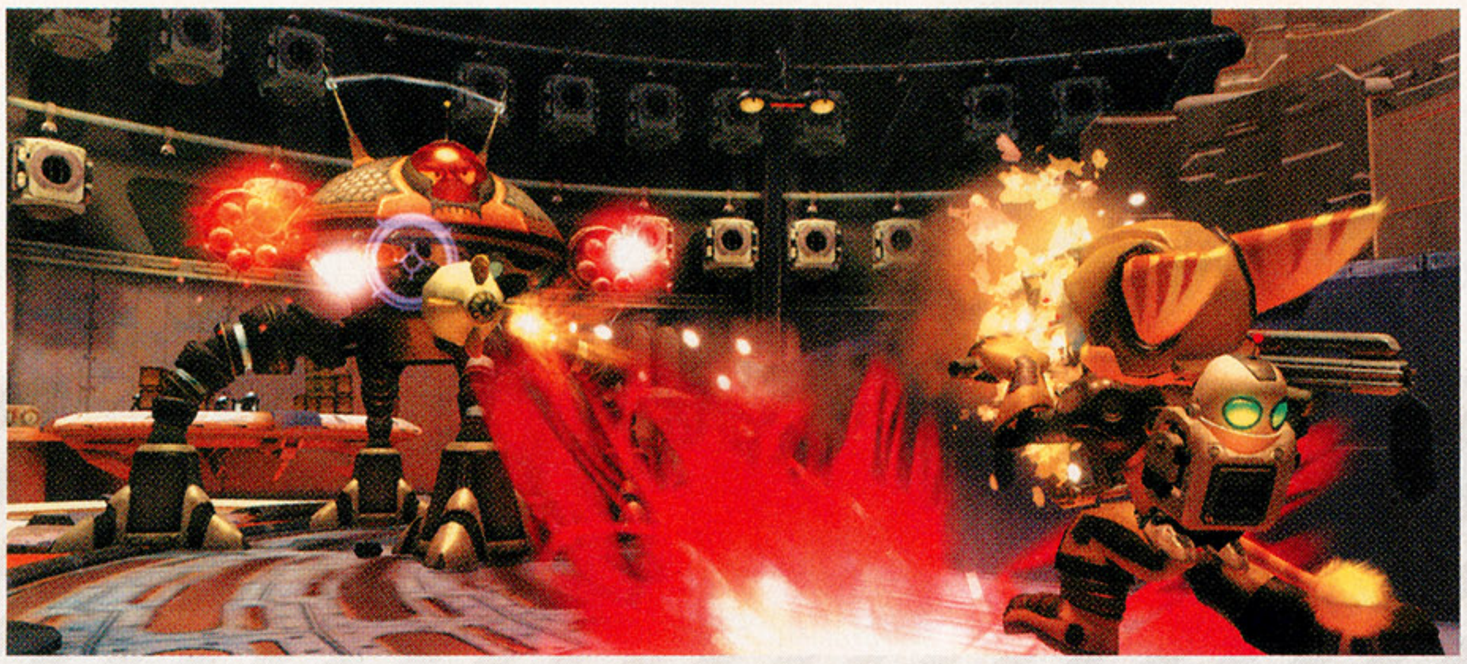

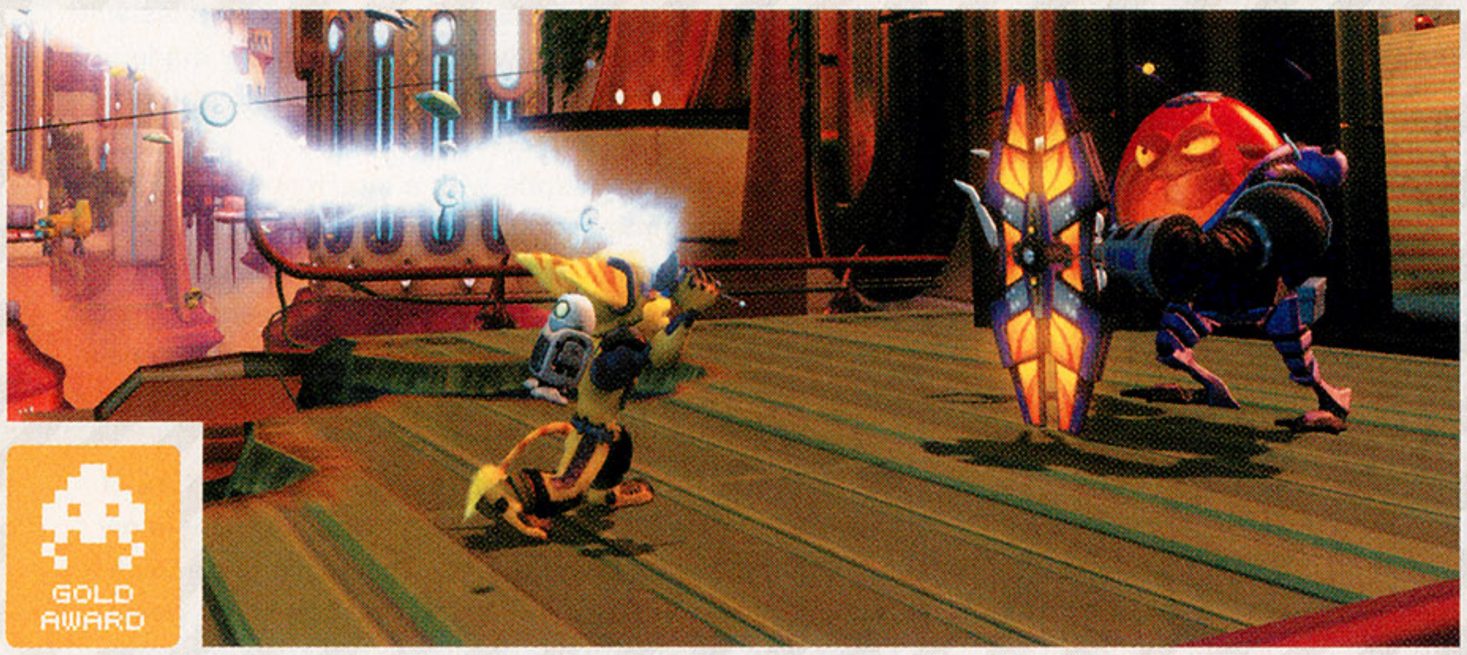

GOLD AWARD

PlayStation 3

RATCHET & CLANK FUTURE: TOOLS OF DESTRUCTION

■ **Publisher:** Sony CEA ■ **Developer:** Insomniac
■ **Players:** 1 ■ **ESRB:** Everyone 10+

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

JOE
8.5
GOOD

NICK
9.5
EXCELLENT

MICHAEL
9.0
EXCELLENT

The Good: Serious replay value, beautiful graphics, customizable gadgets
The Bad: Camera issues, some glitches
Yay Priorities: We don't miss multiplayer

Here's hoping for a future Future

JOE: *Ratchet & Clank* games are always easy to like, and this one is no exception. Friendly and funny, with the wacky weaponry and varied gameplay that are the hallmarks of the series, *Future* hits all the *Ratchet* notes with a well-balanced mix of platforming and gunplay.

And the move to PS3 has been good to our lombax pal. Levels are huge, detailed, and beautiful, and Ratchet himself is now noticeably furry—a nice touch. The completely overhauled weapon selection (now with additional upgrade options) makes for some spectacular effects and ridiculous firefights, and you'll get plenty of mileage from the new gadgets, especially the Robo-Wings, which allow the duo to fly around some levels.

Unfortunately, this sequel does suffer from an assortment of minor issues that keep it from reaching the standards set by its predecessors. Most troubling is the camera: In previous games it didn't even require a second thought, but here I grew frustrated by how often I had to fight the camera for dominance. Most egregious are instances where the camera locks to a distant, sideways perspective, making it difficult to aim properly.

I'm also moderately disappointed by the meandering, unsatisfying story (though I was surprised by its more serious themes of friendship and trust); the increasingly tiresome space-shooting segments; invisible

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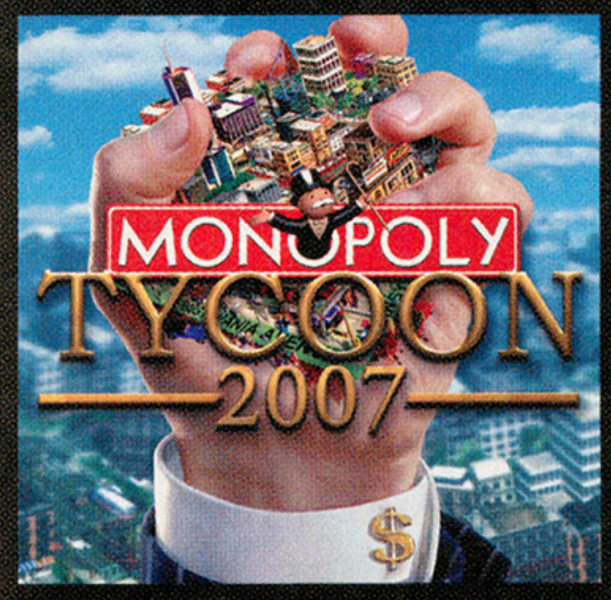

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DUCKY TO 46966

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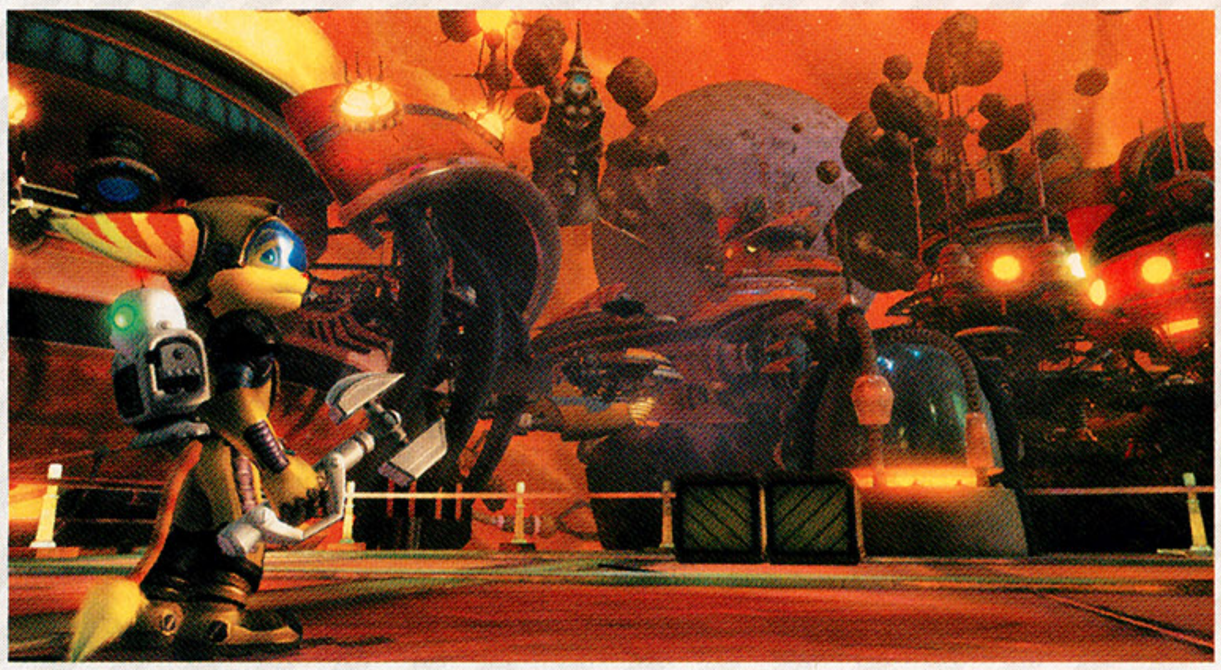
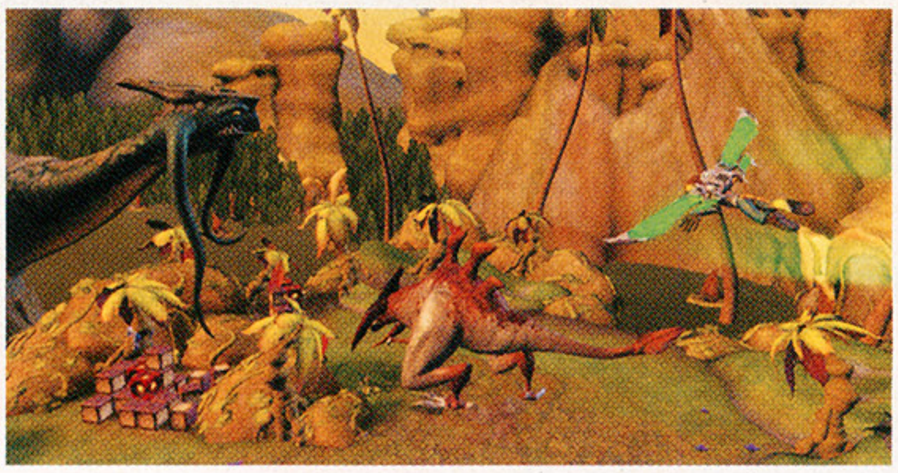
■ While these flight segments look sweet, they do get a little long-winded.



Hold the Shake, Please



Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction complies with Sony Directive Alpha Prime (which we just totally made up, but it sounds cool, doesn't it?) by squeezing tilt control in wherever appropriate...and elsewhere.

Hacking doors is now done with a moderately entertaining roll-the-marble minigame, which works reasonably well. You'll also tilt and roll the Sixaxis during Ratchet's occasional airdrops into levels, which makes sense. The most sensible use of the tilt, though, is controlling the new Robo-Wings—essentially a personal powered glider. These all work, but they're far from necessary.

On the other hand, using tilt to control the trajectory of a tornado launched via the, er, tornado launcher is simply annoying. It makes the weapon too unreliable to be useful and is easily the worst use of motion control in the game.

Other than shaking the controller to dance with pirates. That's just *sad*.

walls; and the prevalence of graphical oddities and other minor glitches that pulled me out of the experience.

Don't get me wrong—*Future* is a *very* good game. I was just hoping for a *great* game. Maybe next time.

✚ NICK: Sorry, Joe. Not only is *Future* a great game, it's the best yet on PS3, arguably the best-looking game ever, and an absolute pinnacle of fun. It's been a few years since a *Ratchet* game focused on platforming gameplay, which is where this series is at its best. In a world of drab militaristic shooters, it's nothing short of refreshing to return to *Ratchet*'s colorful, welcoming worlds. The multilayered humor has something for everyone, and the stunning animation and attention to detail set a new standard.

And while *Future* isn't a huge departure from the previous games, it's also a formula that didn't need much tweaking. The awesome weapons and gadgets are more balanced (it's the first time I've used them all), and thorough explorers will find more goodies than ever.

Unlike Joe, I had no qualms with the camera, but the space segments and boss fights always seem to have room for improvement.

✚ MICHAEL: Sticking *Future* on the title may give you the impression that this *Ratchet & Clank* jettisons the wrench-swinger and his robo-pal into a new stratosphere, but that's not the case. In fact, it's borderline false advertising—everything about this game points to platforming's past. Now normally I'd have a beef with this, but for *Future*, the opposite is true: It's so damn nice to play an old-school hop and popper. Though I felt like I did take a trip in a time machine to review this, developer Insomniac wisely added enough new twists and tweaks to make this game feel fresh even today. Not only does the game look absolutely gorgeous, but you can definitely tell going back to its roots is the best thing for this franchise—every level is laid out so well and so perfectly paced that I never got bored doing anything. But, like Joe, I did get annoyed fiddling around with the camera. Seems baffling, because you'd think after so many *Ratchet*s, Insomniac would have the tools to make decent viewing angles.

EGM Extras: *Having trouble finding all the gold bolts? Head to* **EGM.1UP.com** *for some help from our SuperGuide.*

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■ It took three games, but the Chief can finally wield the fabled flamethrower.

GOLD AWARD

Xbox 360

HALO 3

■ **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios ■ **Developer:** Bungie ■ **Players:** 1-16 ■ **ESRB:** Mature

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

SHOE
10
EXCELLENT

G. FORD
10
EXCELLENT

JEREMY
9.0
EXCELLENT

The Good: The Forge map editor and campaign scoring
The Bad: It's back! More backtracking in the campaign...
Warning: Very minor spoilers here

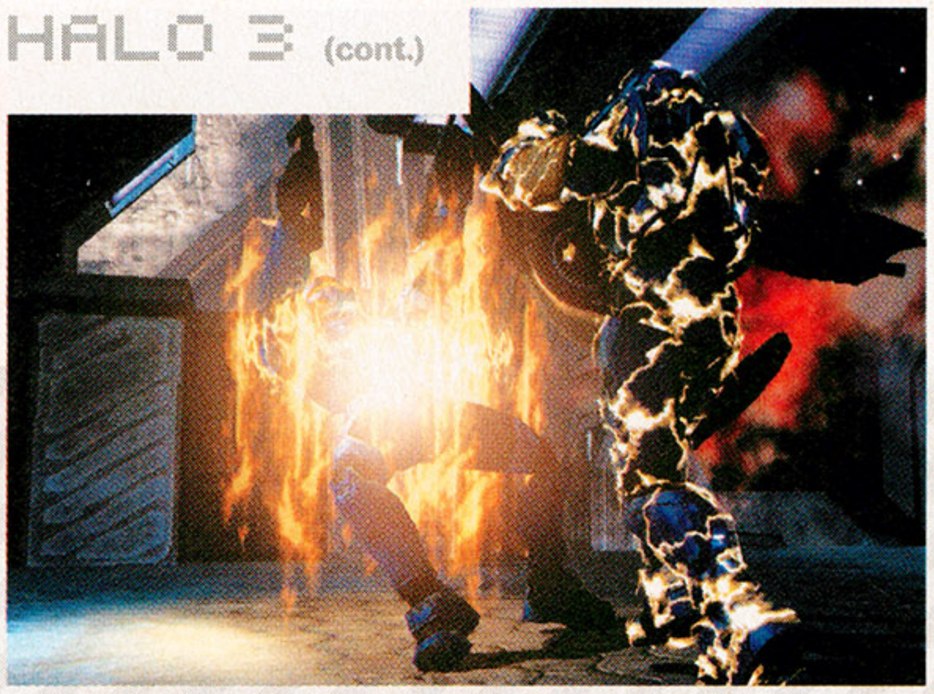
The fight may never end

+SHOE: Master Chief just wouldn't shut up. For a few years now, the sci-fi action hero has been going on and on about "finishing the fight" whenever video trailers and marketing materials would allow him. The conclusion to the epic first-person-shooter trilogy is here at last, so we finally get to see whether Mr. Green can really wrap things up.

Bungie Studios heard the collective "huh?" from the Halo Nation when a giant talking plant creature and a twisty storyline threatened to derail an otherwise fine piece of fiction in *Halo 2*. The narrative in *Halo 3* is more straightforward, but it won't be winning over any newcomers with very little setup or recapping of previous events. The tale does wrap up nicely, however, without straying too far into feel-good clichéd territory, keeping the storyline sophisticated and respectable by videogame standards.

The campaign's gameplay is better in every way imaginable. Beautiful, rich, and lush graphics, a heart-pounding orchestrated score, new weapons, vehicles, and enemies... and even better artificial intelligence overall. Everything is now pretty much a known quantity, however, so a bit of familiar, going-through-the-motions gameplay numbs the excitement (it doesn't help that some backtracking *still* taints this series, though it's not as bad as it was in the predecessors). So you won't be recapturing that feeling you got when you first fought the Flood or played as the Arbiter. The huge "oh wow!" moments just aren't there. But you will still come away with some fond memories from scenes like the Scarab fight, at least one (that we've found) off-the-beaten-path joke conversation, and a frantic stage at the end that's clearly a throwback to something everyone loved in the first *Halo*.

Like campaign mode, versus play is also very well built from top to bottom—and doesn't hold any huge surprises for fans of the last two titles. Online play will, however, give *Halo 3* a longevity that can't be ignored because, featurewise, it's unbeatable. New modes like the zombie-survival Infestation and twists on old favorites—like the new Mad Dash, where the designated "Juggernaut" must



The Real Halo Wars?

It's been suggested that *Halo* is the cultural equivalent of *Star Wars* for the modern gaming generation. The obvious comparisons are there—sci-fi setting, trilogy, ridiculous merchandising blitz (see our October issue, *EGM* #220)—but will people really be pining for *Halo* rereleases 25 years from now? We've found evidence for both sides of the argument.

How they compare

Some would say it's an apt comparison, as it's tough to ignore that both trilogies have set standards in their respective media and influenced countless others in their genres. And with a cast of iconic characters and a contingent of nerds who will keep its story alive for years, *Halo* will likely have a strong influence on the artists and taxpayers of the future.

How they don't

On the other hand, Sgt. Johnson and Cmdr. Keyes aren't exactly Chewbacca and Princess Leia, and it remains to be seen how the *Halo* universe holds up in an industry whose classics don't always age so well. The themes of *Star Wars* (light side/dark side, and so on) also seem more universally relevant than *Halo*'s (is green a theme?), and it's a fair bit different idolizing Luke Skywalker from a distance than becoming Master Chief on a daily basis.

It's certainly food for thought, and in the meantime we'll keep our fingers crossed that *Master Chief's Christmas Special* isn't in the cards quite yet.

touch certain objective markers to score—combine with way more customization options than ever before to provide a seemingly infinite number of ways to play.

Where *Halo 3* does surprise is in the other modes of play, stuff that may not seem like that big a deal in a bulleted list on the back of a box but is actually revolutionary for the genre. A map editor? Co-op play? You've been there—but you haven't done that.

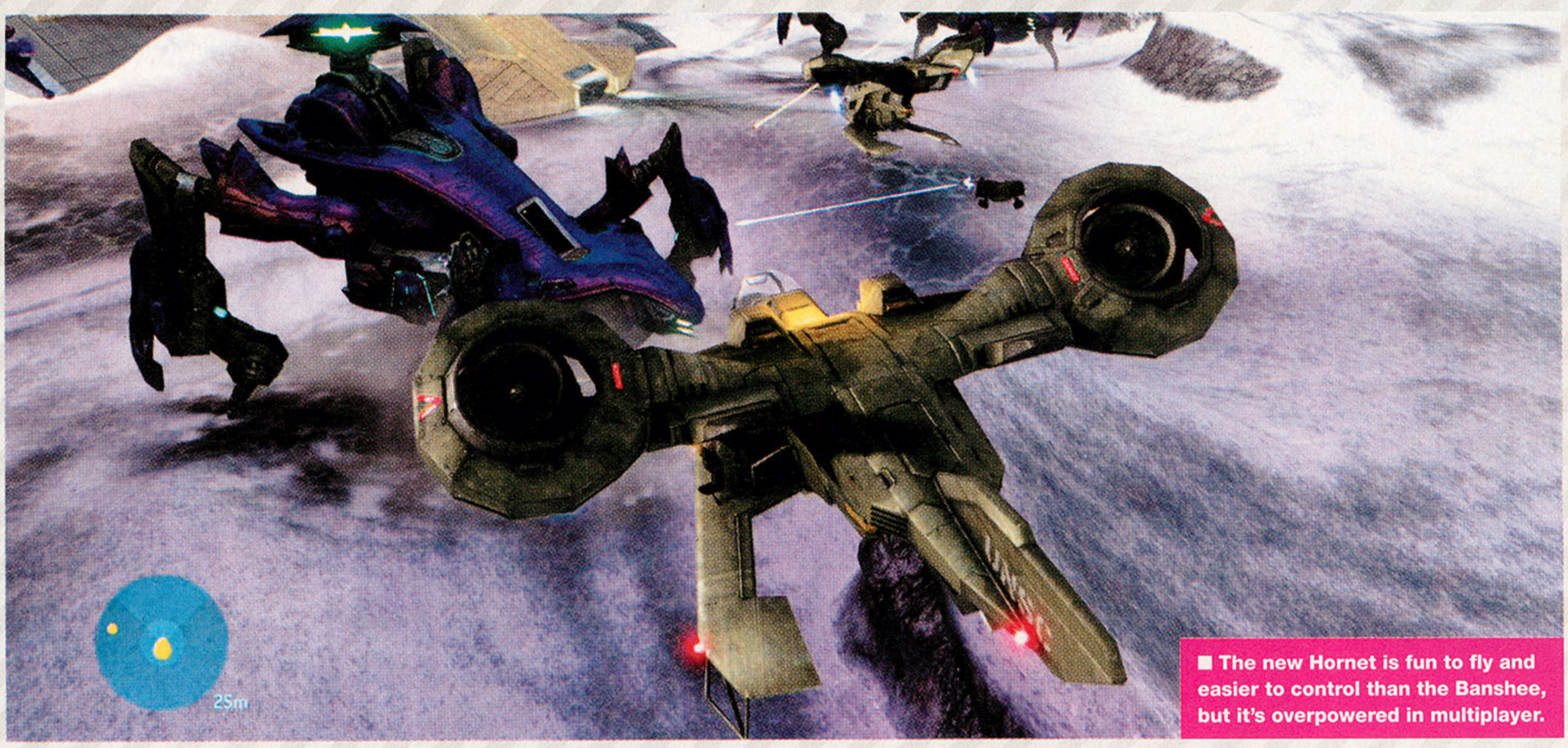
In Forge, you can edit maps and play in them at the same time. This leads to all sorts of impromptu madness, like matches that simulate sports (try playing baseball with Gravity Hammers and Rocket Launchers), free-for-alls where new weapons and powers are constantly materializing out of thin air, or...well, you should just experiment to see all the insane possibilities (or just download them from other users).

And you might think you know what to expect from four-player co-op, but turn on a new feature called campaign scoring, and all of a sudden, the main story-driven game becomes a fast-paced, arcadelike experience where everyone's racing to take out Covenant forces to get high scores. Further adding to the replayability are the hidden skulls, which increase the difficulty in unique ways and pump up the scoring multiplier at the same time. Campaign scoring has so many variables, no one knows what the high-score cap is for each stage. But a lot of people are going to have a lot of fun trying to find out.

It's hard to imagine a feature of this game that someone won't love (and I haven't even talked about file sharing, where you can swap gameplay screenshots, movies, game setups, and maps). Or you can just look at *Halo 3* as a sum of so many great, quality parts that it's as sure a thing as it gets. Sure, no one aspect of the game is life-changing on its own, but perhaps the package as a whole is. After all, the disc has enough content to keep you stuck to your controller for weeks, if not months or even years...literally.

Looks like we won't be finishing the fight anytime soon after all.

G. FORD: Shoe did a thorough job covering the basics, and he's right on most counts. One thing, though: His comment about not-as-common "oh wow!" gameplay may be accurate, but I found the game's big firefights to be an admirable alternative. What's



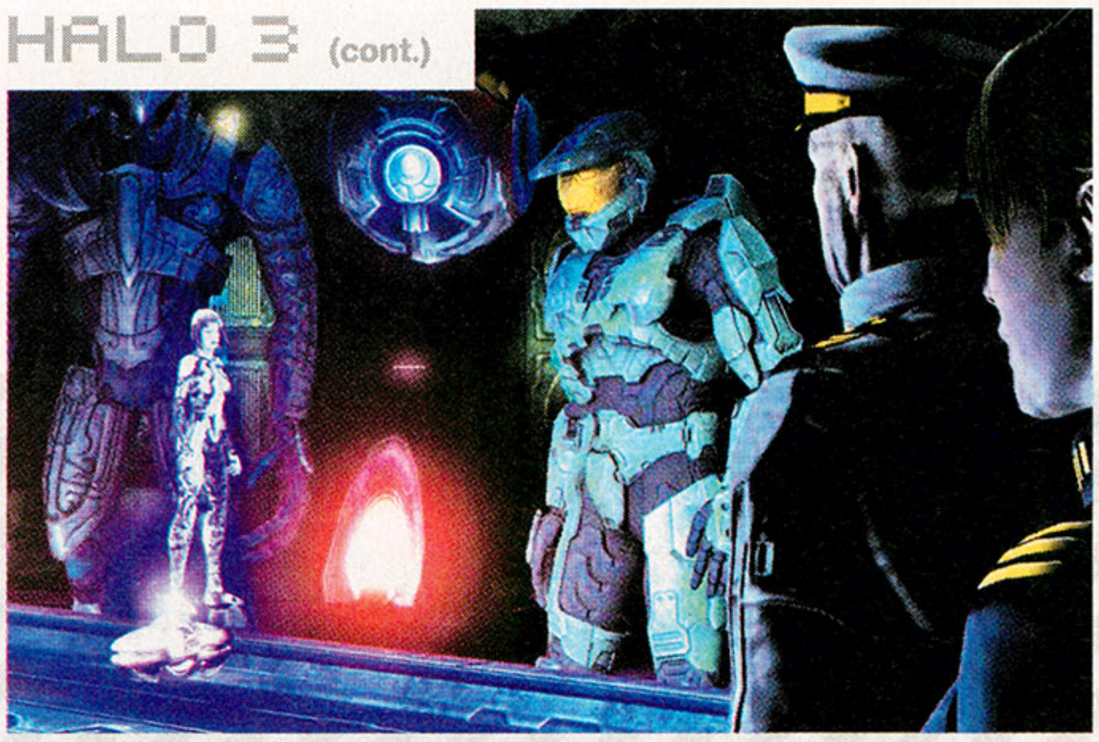
■ The new Hornet is fun to fly and easier to control than the Banshee, but it's overpowered in multiplayer.

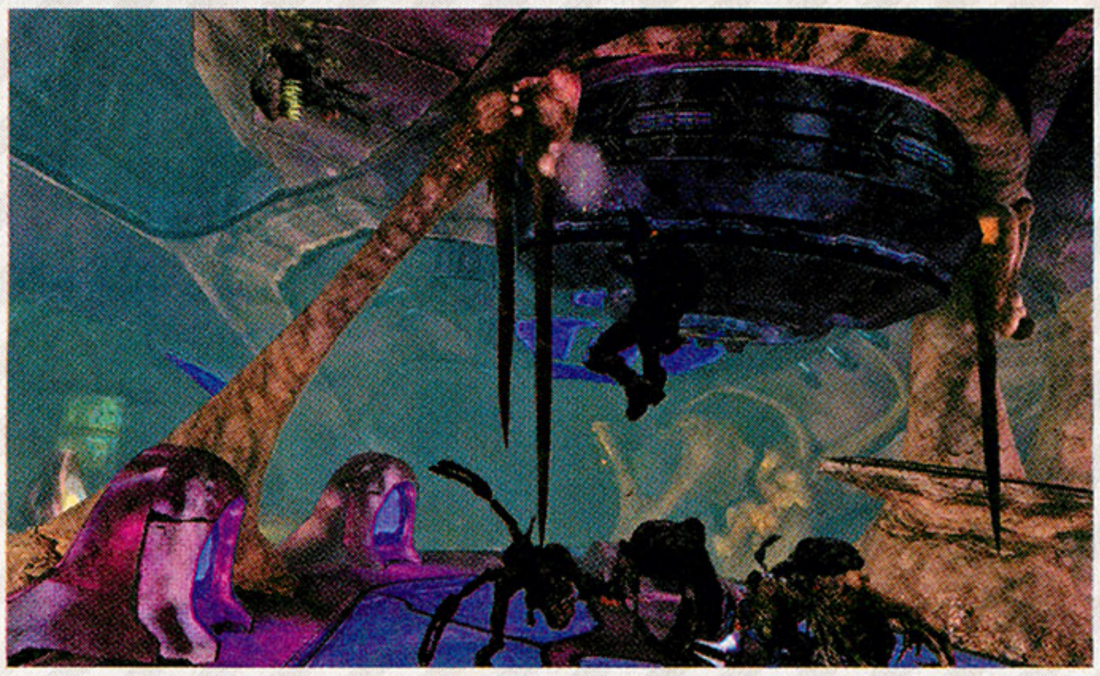
more valuable: a few moments that you will remember forever, or a constant, tense, and satisfying underlying game that you can replay ad nauseam (and that's before co-op)? It's a tough question, but let me address the latter. Among the showdowns you encounter, you'll be charged with taking out the heavily armored Wraiths in the midst of multiple enemies, challenging roomfuls of thick-skinned Brutes (who don't hesitate to use new items like the bullet-repelling bubble shield), and conquering those walking-tank, jumbo jet–sized Scarabs, who in this game actually sport A.I. (in *Halo 2* they were parts of scripted events). These confrontations feel wide open and winnable as much as they seem chaotic and overwhelming. And the beauty is that you can handle them in different, equally viable ways—head-on, all sneaky-like, or methodically with your compatriots (ideally, human ones).

Not only are these scenes impressive from a gameplay standpoint, but they also run smoothly. This is what I imagine Bungie strove for in the first two games but didn't have the proper power to fully realize until now. Oh, and you want an "Oh @*$% wow!" moment? Get to the dual Scarab fight and tell me you didn't just realize your Luke Skywalker versus the AT-AT walker dream (and I'd gladly take *Halo 3*'s new flying piece of devastation, the Hornet, over one of those rinky-dink snowspeeders).

I could go on, but we've got this whole multiplayer thing, too. Now tied in with the XB360's Xbox Live, it's easier than ever to get lost in the endless modes, jump from game to game, and create your own rules (killing the dude in first place gives you a bonus? Why not!). Through the first week of the game's release, which coincided with our deadline week for this issue, I spent far too many nights on the wrong side of 2 a.m. because, you know, you can't quit on a bad note. I love almost all the new maps, including the cathedral-like Epitaph, the beach-and-bunker High Ground, and the ramp-happy warehouse The Pit. I'm even softening on the super-big Valhalla, which I couldn't stand in the beta. The only one I don't like is the vertically confusing Construct. And provided you can get in matches with friends or decent folks (sigh... I know), it's hard to beat the intensity and camaraderie of the team battles. Even better, you can download user-created match types from Bungie.net,

HALO 3 (cont.)





■ Preserve special moments with *Halo 3*'s saved film and screenshot features.

The Experts Speak

We might be game reviewers, but get us in a match against these Major League Gaming (www.mlgpro.com) vets, and we're about as deadly as a Grunt with a plasma grenade stuck to his crotch. Let's see what the pros have to say about *Halo 3*....

"The Forge system really makes the game worth playing because you can customize anything.... It's a dream for competitive players, and I'm looking forward to seeing what the competitive game types from MLG will be."

—Ben Jackson (Karma), 2006 Halo 2 *FFA and 1v1 Champion*

"The [Battle Rifle] and Carbine seem like they take more skill to use because of less autoaim. Being able to customize the game types should allow for good, balanced tournament settings and weapon sets."

—David Walsh (Walshy), captain of No. 1–ranked team Final Boss

"There's a lot of skill involved in *Halo 3*. I think the skill curve is really high, and everyday I play, I get better at the game. I think in *Halo 3* it will be harder to max out your shooting/aiming skills, and it'll be difficult to fully master."

—Peter Dietrich (Foulacy), captain of team Perfect Storm and top-ranked player

"*Halo 3* and its new additions such as the bubble shield, radar jammer, and Forge are going to change the face of competitive gaming as we now know it. I expect a lot more strategies to show up as the game evolves."

—Tom Taylor (Tsquared), captain of team Str8 Rippin, MLG Orlando 07 winners

giving you near-endless possibilities.

Taken in pieces, *Halo 3* dazzles like few games. As a whole, its quality is simply staggering.

JEREMY: I've always appreciated Bungie's ability to spin an interesting story, and *Halo 3* delivers on that count—even if the dialogue drifts at times into tin-eared Hollywood hokum and makes no concessions to newcomers. The trilogy's satisfying conclusion comes wrapped in a superb nine-mission shooter that addresses and corrects the flaws that dragged down the first two games. Copy-and-paste level designs are gone, and backtracking is kept to a minimum. To build on what Greg said, combat is pitch-perfect; the series' always-impressive enemy A.I. is greatly improved—especially the Flood—and at higher difficulties the foes actually become even smarter rather than simply stronger. Every scrum becomes a tactical challenge on Heroic difficulty; on Legendary, you'll need to make use of the four-man online co-op to stand a chance.

It looks great, too. Give me *Halo 3*'s painterly, impressionistic approach to light and color over the competition's plastic, overly detailed comic-book "realism" any day. And you'll want to play with a great audio system to soak up every single effect and hear the enemy's tactical chatter.

I can't shake a bit of a been-there-done-that sensation, though. *Halo 3* often feels like a bigger, more polished take on its predecessors' ideas. I want more from a grand finale than a retread of *Halo*'s last level, more from the big set pieces than remixes of *Halo 2*'s Scarab encounter. Once was great; three times is pushing it. Likewise, the multiplayer matchmaking provides a ton of options, but it's more or less just *Halo 2*'s multiplayer with deeper menus. The few new modes like VIP are a step in the right direction, but next to the competition—say, *Team Fortress 2*—*Halo 3*'s online matches feel like a bunch of guys running around shooting haphazardly. The Forge sandbox, along with the game's (mostly) seamless integration with Bungie.net, offers hope for better things from those with the patience to bend game physics to their will. But out of the box, balance trumps innovation.

EGM Extras: *Go to* **EGM.1UP.com** *for our SuperGuide and* Halo 3 *hub, with videos, blogs, and more. Leave no skull behind!*

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

SIGNAL LOST

S.O.S.

S.O.S.

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S.O.S.

"DILEMMA" DOESN'T BEGIN TO DESCRIBE IT.

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XBOX 360 LIVE

■ Today's in-flight movie, *Norbit*, has been delayed because of incoming AIM-9 Sidewinders.

Xbox 360

ACE COMBAT 6: FIRES OF LIBERATION

■ **Publisher:** Namco Bandai ■ **Developer:** Namco Bandai ■ **Players:** 1-16 ■ **ESRB:** Teen

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

DEMIAN
6.5
AVERAGE

CRISPIN
6.5
AVERAGE

GARNETT
8.0
GOOD

The Good: Would you look at those contrails!
The Bad: Aside from graphics, not much different
$150: The flight stick bundle ain't cheap

An air force of one

+DEMIAN: *Ace Combat 6* certainly looks a hell of a lot better than the first five *Combat*s, but once you get past the incredibly detailed planes and crisscrossing contrails, you'll find the same old *Combat* still on autopilot. Something about a conflict between fictitious countries I don't care about, superlong missions with too few checkpoints (you can't save midway and revisit later, either), and a one-man-versus-the-world theme that puts an entire war on your shoulders.

The new allied support system is a step in the right direction; you can now order friendlies in the area to attack your targets or provide covering fire, but you'll still personally take out well over 50 percent of the enemy forces in any mission.

Online *Combat* offers a few co-op missions and a team-objective game to go with the expected (but 16-player!) skirmish modes. Namco Bandai says downloadable planes, maps, and levels are to come, but unless they fix the frustrating mission structure, I'm only mildly interested.

+CRISPIN: Frequent fliers of the *Ace Combat* series will feel like they've been on this flight before. Yeah, you get sorta-fun multiplayer modes and a better—although largely superficial—sense of participating in an all-out war, but the game still has the same too-dramatic plot and the same ground-pounding and dogfighting missions (with the occasional flying fortresses or Death Star trench–style tunnels). Still, this first 360 installment looks so breathtaking—from the all-hell-breaking-loose battles to the way the sun suddenly dazzles you when you break above the clouds—that it all makes for beautiful déjà vu.

+GARNETT: While I agree that as a series *Combat* has room to grow, my review wingmen must be somewhat dazed from getting shot down once too often. This outing nails the HD experience. Never has pulling a high-G turn, contrails pouring off the leading wing edge, missile alert screaming for attention, all while trying to get the right line for my shot felt better. With most every modern plane and weapon system in here, I can't think of a better way to get my Maverick on.

Xbox 360

PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 4

■ **Publisher:** Microsoft ■ **Developer:** Bizarre Creations ■ **Players:** 1-8 ■ **ESRB:** Everyone

The driving game they pack in with the new Geometry Wars

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

JOHN
8.5
GOOD

GORD
8.5
GOOD

DEMIAN
8.0
GOOD

The Good: A lot of game here, *Geometry Wars: Waves* included
The Bad: Starts off slow, a little dull
I'm Only Happy: When it rains. Which is nearly all the time

JOHN: The first hour or so of *PGR4* bored me senseless. It seemed like little more than a tedious makeover of *PGR3* with a gratuitous amount of rain and occasional snow. The tracks felt too tight and narrow, the kudos system too unforgiving, and the motorcycles little more than a gimmick.

With time though, it won me over. The car selection proved both broad and imaginative, and the bikes, once mastered, provided some genuinely exciting moments at the upper reaches of their performance. I even learned to love the kudos system (which also drives the in-game economy) once the tracks started to open up, giving me some wiggle room for powerslides and handbrake turns. This game has a lot to dig into. The career mode alone is an enormous undertaking, and the online functionality (including some *Forza 2*–like community stuff) will no doubt extend the game's life indefinitely for the hardcore.

GORD: John speaks the truth when he warns that the tracks are tight and the bikes are Gravol bait. However, quirks can be forgiven in a game this impressive. The new dynamic weather is wonderfully executed, the career mode is seriously diverse, and the physics model blends the ideal ratio of simulation authenticity with arcade thrills. But it's the lag-free, extraordinarily multifaceted online component that kicks this baby into overdrive. The A.I. is good, but human-versus-human *PGR4* is better. Perfectly tuned to the 360 controller, it's killer racing action for newbie and veteran alike.

DEMIAN: I can't imagine that anyone has ever driven a Maserati 250F around the Nürburgring during a snowstorm, but I have in *PGR4*, and it was glorious. I love the racer's expanded list of classic cars and the new weather effects—hit a deep puddle during a rainy race and you can totally feel the car hydroplane. I don't love the new motorcycles, though; the controls just never jelled for me and they're suicide in multiplayer if collisions are turned on. Ultimately, *PGR*'s signature mix of sim elements and arcadey powerslides remains fundamentally unchanged. Which is good—if you want more of the same, with polish.

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■ Think this guy is scary? You usually face a herd.

GOLD AWARD

GAME OF THE MONTH

Xbox 360

HALF-LIFE 2: THE ORANGE BOX

■ **Publisher:** Electronic Arts ■ **Developer:** Valve ■ **Players:** 1-16 ■ **ESRB:** Mature

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

CRISPIN
10
EXCELLENT

NICK
9.5
EXCELLENT

SHAWN
10
EXCELLENT

The Good: Five awesome games for $60!
The Bad: Everyone might be too busy with *Halo 3* to get it
The Wait: PS3 owners won't get *Box* for another month

Worth a Halo 3 break

+CRISPIN: It was hardly a gamer's natural habitat: A conference room filled with HDTVs and Xbox 360s manned by gaming journalists in office chairs adjusted to max recline. We were summoned to publisher Electronic Arts' Northern Cali offices to review *The Orange Box*, developer Valve's chest of treasured titles: 16-player shooter *Team Fortress 2*, warped first-person puzzler *Portal*, and legendary PC first-person shooter *Half-Life 2*, along with minisequels *Episodes One* and *Two*. Valve, burned before by game-code leaks, refused to send the press copies so we could review it in our own high-def bunkers.

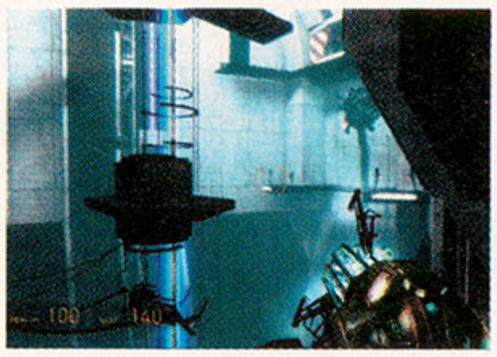
But while sequestering ourselves at EA was a pain, it drove home one point: *The Orange Box* is the greatest quantity of quality gaming ever. At any given moment during my multiday review process, I could look around and see a few players skirmishing in *Team Fortress 2*, the most well-balanced, deepest team-based shooter on consoles. Across the room, I'd see another reviewer contorting his spatial reasoning through the mental gymnastics of *Portal*, a revolutionary and hilarious—but too-short—puzzle game that delivers an "aha!" rush every time you use your dimensional-doorway gun properly (it's this year's smartest weapon). I'd see someone else engaged in a firefight in *Episode One*'s claustrophobia-inducing environments. Meanwhile, I was having the most fun with *Episode Two*, which rolls out showstopping encounters and culminates with a final battle that requires serious multitasking, from simple marksmanship to pedal-to-the-metal driving. Looking around, it was hard to believe all this stuff was in one box. Even at $60, this box is value-priced to the point of philanthropy.

+NICK: While it may be a ridiculous value, *The Orange Box* isn't uniformly awesome. The physics and storytelling of *Half-Life 2* aren't the revelation they were three years ago, and the *Episodes* combine the best (outdoor action) and worst (survival horror) of the series. The PC controls don't always translate well either, as the shooting feels strangely insubstantial, and changing weapons is awkward at best. That said, they're still good

■ A Combine Strider helps with suburban renewal.

Thinking Inside the Box

The pluses and minuses of *The Orange Box*'s many bits....



Half-Life 2

Crowbar-wielding scientist Gordon Freeman returns...with a gravity gun.

+ Looks better and plays smoother than 2005's Xbox version
- Weapon switching is awkward, requiring multiple taps of the directional pad

Episode One

Freeman fights alongside Alyx Vance and other evacuees to escape the about-to-go-thermonuclear City 17.

+ Alyx is an especially capable and personable A.I. buddy
- It lasts only five hours, and the action's too similar to *Half-Life 2*'s

Episode Two

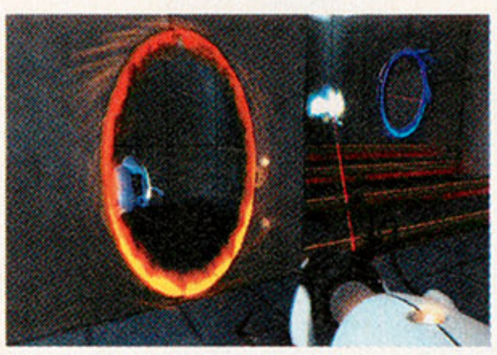
Freeman and Alyx encounter new Combine perils in the countryside.

+ Lots of new gameplay thrills and memorable encounters
- The cliffhanger ending is a downer considering we have no idea when *Episode Three* will finish the fight

Team Fortress 2

The long-overdue sequel to the classic PC team-based shooter.

+ Brilliant variety of well-balanced player types (we like the spy)
- Not everyone will love the art style (chosen to help players discern character types from afar)



Portal

Create multidimensional doors to puzzle your way through 19 levels.

+ Like no puzzle game you've ever played, and it's also the funniest
- Just when you find your stride, the game ends (although later levels come in trickier versions)

games and represent a solid 30 hours of inventive shooter action wrapped in an entrancing narrative (featuring computer-controlled characters imbued with an amazing sense of warmth and humanity). *Portal*, on the other hand, astounds while presenting you with complex spatial logic problems, and *Team Fortress 2* is as hilarious as it is polished, with a depth that will last years. Top the whole package off with a boatload of well-integrated developer commentary, and *The Orange Box* becomes an unbeatable bargain—despite its inconsistencies.

+ SHAWN: The QWERTY keyboard I type this on isn't efficient. Far from it. In fact, other, better typing interfaces exist. But habit keeps change from catching on. Likewise, this is the case with Valve's *Half-Life 2* episodes and *Portal*, which challenge the assumption that videogames are either eight- to 10-hour investments or Live Arcade impulse buys, but nothing in between.

Crispin's "too-short" *Portal* is enough for me: a three-hour head trip—no filler—with a plot as dizzying as the downside-up puzzler's warpgate-crashing concept. And where Shoe sees no "oh wow!" moments in *Halo 3* (page 116), *Episode Two* is composed of them—a reflection of the fact that with five-hour games, the developer's question is "Can we sacrifice that to the cutting room?" and not "How can we copy and paste scenarios until we've hit quota?" Whatever Nick says, *Orange Box* is a 10 in quality; consider the quantity a bonus.

EGM Extras: *Too much gameplay to handle here? We have some* Episode Two *help for you at* **EGM.1UP.com**.

Xbox 360

BEAUTIFUL KATAMARI

■ **Publisher:** Namco Bandai ■ **Developer:** Namco Bandai ■ **Players:** 1-4 ■ **ESRB:** Everyone

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

G. FORD
7.0
GOOD

JENNIFER
4.5
BAD

RYAN
4.0
BAD

The Good: Still-addictive gameplay, $40 price tag
The Bad: Camera, slow pace, difficulty
Best Way to Lose Friends: Play the co-op mode

Rolling away

+G. FORD: Going into this review, all I seemed to hear was how bad the ironically titled *Beautiful Katamari* looked. And maybe I'm just not that jaded yet, but the game's simplistic graphical style didn't bug me. In fact, I think the game would lose its whimsical charm if it took place in a land of hyperdetailed polygons. Likewise, the gameplay hasn't evolved much since the first game (the major addition is some unremarkable online versus multiplayer)—you still roll up ever-bigger objects onto your forever-sticky ball-like katamari, all to please an ever-demeaning king-god. But it still offers a strangely addicting and soothing experience that had me hankering for future play sessions.

What I can't get over, though, is the frustrating camera, which constantly gets caught behind objects, and some excruciatingly slow turning controls. Good thing the game's only $40.

+JENNIFER: At first the graphics didn't bother me either. I initially overlooked the more-of-the-same art, music, and gameplay. That lasted about, oh, one level. Once I realized that *Beautiful Katamari* consists of hardly anything that feels original, I was less forgiving. When I then got stuck on a later level and had to play it over 10 times before I came even close to achieving the goal, I turned irate. *Beautiful Katamari* does something very wrong—it tarnishes the series' hallmark simplicity and ease. And that's when the quirky style starts to feel like cheap schtick. Play a previous version...they're better, and hey, you may already own them.

+RYAN: Jen's on a roll about *Beautiful Katamari* having a bit of an ugly streak. Maybe I just suck at videogames or something, but I weathered multiple retries as early as the second level...and I sure don't remember having this much trouble with previous *Katamari*s. Whatever the case, nothing's new here for seasoned junk-collectors, unless you're itching to compare ball sizes online. With *Katamari* fast becoming a victim of its own success, I can't help but recall this King of All Cosmos quote from the original game: "It is not your fault. It is our fault for believing in you."

DS

PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY–TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

■ **Publisher:** Capcom ■ **Developer:** Capcom
■ **Players:** 1 ■ **ESRB:** Teen

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

RYAN
9.0
EXCELLENT

SHANE
7.0
GOOD

ANDREW P.
7.5
GOOD

The Good: The best game in the series
The Bad: Doesn't really take advantage of the DS hardware
Best Character of the Year: Prosecutor Godot

The Wright stuff

+RYAN: Maybe I've just grown comfortable with the *Ace Attorney* series' twisty logic, but I feel like this third courtroom adventure finally hits the sweet spot in terms of difficulty. Affable defense attorney Phoenix Wright sticks to his usual tricks: wandering between locations and interviewing murder witnesses during investigation phases, plus countering contradictory testimony with hard evidence during trials. But key clues dispense at a more reasonable rate than in the first two *Phoenix*es, ensuring fewer trial-and-error mistrials.

Some might dismiss the gameplay as formulaic—and maybe they're right. This *is* an adventure game: mostly menus and text. But as usual for standouts of the genre, the evolution's in the epic: It tells the series' best tale yet, cleverly touching on the history of every major recurring character. *Phoenix Wright* latecomers risk confusion, but invested fans get a well-plotted conclusion to the trilogy—and that's what's important.

+SHANE: I'm of two minds about *Trials*: The jaded miser in me scoffs at the endlessly recycled animations, tedious investigation bits, and utter lack of DS-specific interactivity in this obvious GBA port. If you've tried either of the previous titles, you'll find that little has changed here (the first, at least, had extra just-for-the-DS stuff). But the *Phoenix Wright* fan in me can't help but gush over this game's triumphant, everything-but-the-kitchen-sink final court case that reunites the series' entire cast of lovable characters for an immensely satisfying conclusion.

+ANDREW P: I'm a codefendant with Shane here. Everything about the gameplay is the same (more DS functionality, please)—which means the story and writing need to be spot-on. And mostly, *Trials* delivers excellent courtroom drama. Phoenix is more confident these days, which helps dampen the usual parade of loony-bin witnesses, prosecutors, and judges. With abundant characters, evidence, and plot twists, *Trials* does require you to be more attentive than in the previous games, but the "Not Guilty" verdict is always worth the effort.

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PSP

DISGAEA: AFTERNOON OF DARKNESS

■ **Publisher:** NIS America ■ **Developer:** NIS
■ **Players:** 1-2 ■ **ESRB:** Teen

The long, dark afternoon of soul

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

JEREMY **7.5** GOOD

RAY **7.0** GOOD

A. FITCH **7.0** GOOD

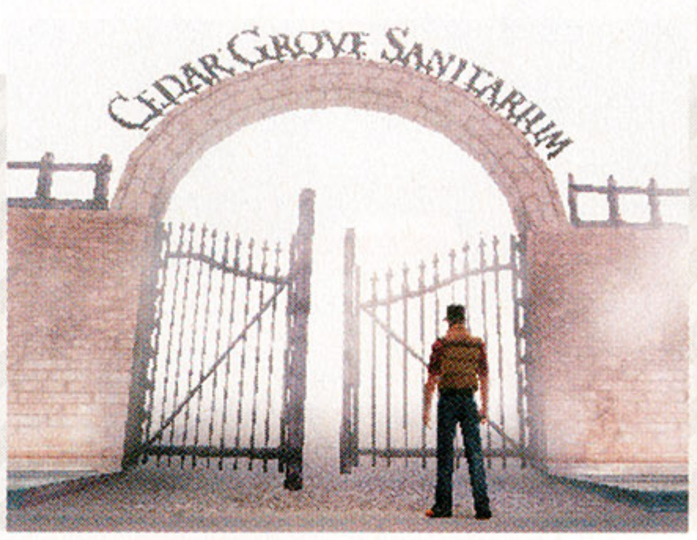
The Good: Story, breezy power-leveling
The Bad: Can easily become a full-time addiction
Dood: Exploding penguins are still awesome

+JEREMY: Strategy-RPG fans come in two flavors: those who love to be challenged, and those who love to totally twink out their characters. *Disgaea* for PS2 was unapologetically made for the latter, with level caps set in the *thousands* and a truckload of ways to beef up—transmigrations to boost character stats, dungeons to boost the power of items and equipment, and so on.

On PSP, *Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness* proves that old axiom about tactical games being best on portable systems. Bus rides were made for power-leveling, and being able to put the game to sleep in the middle of an item dungeon makes power-whoring much less of an ordeal. The new alternate story and head-to-head multiplayer make it even more compelling than the PS2 original.

+RAY: Revisiting *Disgaea*'s wacky world isn't nearly as impactful as the recent *Final Fantasy Tactics'* remix (*The War of the Lions*), since this is practically the exact same game you can get on PS2. That doesn't necessarily mean it's worse off, though: Like Jeremy says, portability definitely fits the game's obsessive tendencies (now you don't *have* to stay in the house grinding levels in quadruple-digits), and the Etna quest is a satisfying semisequel for fans wanting a new challenge. As long as you go for it *after* trying the likes of *Final Fantasy Tactics* or *Jeanne D'Arc*, *Disgaea* makes a nice strategy supplement.

+A. FITCH: Agreed, guys—the pause-anywhere PSP is the perfect way to introduce newcomers to the sometimes too-complex *Disgaea* franchise. Plus, the hilarious "what if?" scenario with devious devil babe Etna—my favorite character in the series (only partly because she's a scantily clad she-demon)—is a worthwhile reward for returning players. But what's up with the game burying its bonus material? Both Ray and I had a devil of a time figuring out how to trigger multiplayer (it's not an option on the title screen), and good luck unlocking Etna's mode without beating the game first. While it's nice to have a portable *Disgaea*, navigating maps feels a tad slippery and imprecise with the PSP's D-pad and analog nub.



PSP

SILENT HILL ORIGINS

■ **Publisher:** Konami ■ **Developer:** Climax UK
■ **Players:** 1 ■ **ESRB:** Mature

A foggy trek down memory lane

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

SHANE **7.5** GOOD

JOE **7.0** GOOD

GARNETT **7.0** GOOD

The Good: Looks and feels like classic *Silent Hill*
The Bad: Predictable storyline, breakable weapons
Conserve Your: Healing items

+SHANE: Considering *0rigins*' troubled on-again/off-again development process, the final product has turned out better than expected: This survival-horror prequel wisely mimics the fan-favorite early *Hill* games with exacting precision. Here, you once again traverse the famously fog-shrouded burg, dividing your time between thwacking shambling monstrosities and solving fetch-quest puzzles. As always, the audiovisual trappings provide most of the "wow" factor—evocative lighting, impressive cut-scenes, and a haunting original score lend it the eerie gravitas of its console forerunners.

0rigins' narrative successfully fleshes out the franchise's overall backstory, even if its own protagonist suffers from an absurdly predictable character arc. *0rigins* unfortunately also falls prey to the series' most notorious pitfall—crappy combat. It's as unwieldy as ever, and when coupled with the game's breakable weapons, limited healing items, and quick-to-tucker-out hero, you're better off just avoiding combat in general.

+JOE: It bears repeating: What the *hell* is up with the breakable weapons? TVs I can see breaking. But why do monkey wrenches and meat hooks disintegrate after a couple swings?

I also take issue with the miniscule trigger points for picking up or activating items; you end up constantly jacking on the X button just in case there might be something tiny you're overlooking. The game's surprisingly solid otherwise for the reasons Shane mentioned, though, and a nice addition to the mythology.

+GARNETT: Survival-horror relies so much on presentation to create the atmosphere that I was really skeptical of *Silent Hill* working on PSP. But *0rigins* completely pulls it off provided you play in the dark with headphones on. That alone counts for a lot. The lighting, and particularly its ensuing shadows, completely drew me into the tense state of always wondering what's lurking out there. But, like Shane, I grew increasingly frustrated struggling to reach the next save point, out of healing items, with weapons falling apart in my hands.

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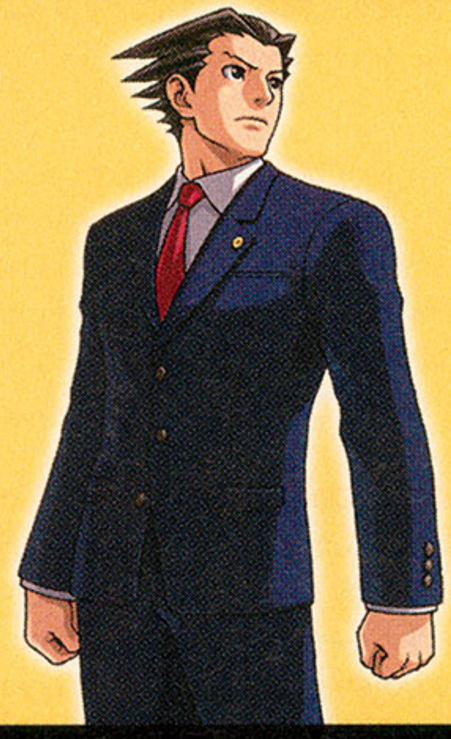
TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Use of Alcohol
Violence

Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney Trial of the Century

Case of the Missing Nintendo DS

Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney Trials and Tribulations



Interrogate the suspects to find out who did it!
And then send them to trial to Win cool prizes!

CAPCOM®

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence

REVIEWS WRAP-UP

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

PS3/XB360

TONY HAWK'S PROVING GROUND

■ **Publisher:** Activision ■ **ESRB:** Teen

We got this game too late for a full review (go to 1UP.com for that), but two of our reviewers of rival game *Skate* had some words about it.

+NICK: Just as I suspected, playing *Proving Ground* in a post-*Skate* world feels silly and unsatisfying—you simply can't go back. The Nail-the-Trick and Rig-a-Kit features keep it mildly interesting, but the competition seems to have scared off even the polish you'd expect after eight years. This is the most unfocused, rough-hewn *Hawk* yet. For a series that should have grown up with its audience, this is a pretty juvenile attempt.

+TODD: As a diehard *Hawk* fan, it surprises me to say this: Nick, you're almost right. *Skate*'s a total bore by my count, but *Proving Ground* feels uninspired and a little too over-the-top now. Developer Neversoft has packed so much into this game, though, and I loved getting sponsored, joining a team, and finally getting my own signature deck.

+BOTTOM LINE: Post-*Skate*, the *Tony Hawk* dev team needs to rethink its baby. We figure finding a middle ground between *Skate*'s real-world approach and this series' arcadey feel is the right way to roll.

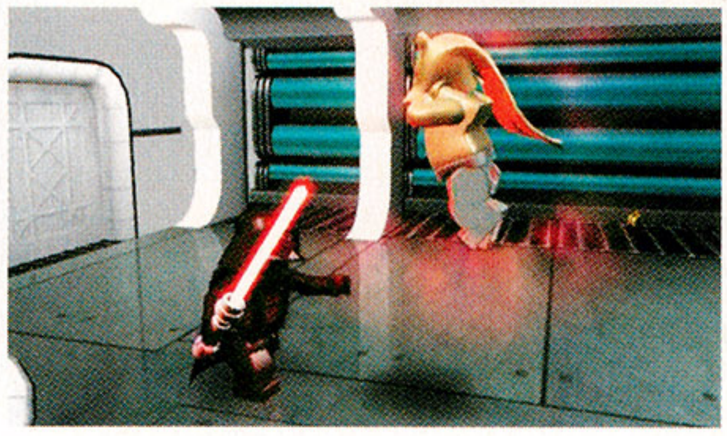
XB360

VIRTUA FIGHTER 5

■ **Publisher:** Sega ■ **ESRB:** Teen

Even though Sega said it couldn't be done... they went and did it anyway. Yep, the Xbox 360 version of *VF5* offers online versus play, a first for this hallowed 3D fighting franchise. Apart from that addition, this port appears to be nearly identical to its PS3 counterpart.

+BOTTOM LINE: The online matches we played suffered from absolutely no slowdown or latency issues, but that's no guarantee that you'll have the same experience. Even with the potential for lag, it's still hands-down the finest fighter on the platform—just be sure to pick up Hori's dependable EX2 fighting stick, as the 360 controller blows for *VF5*.



Wii/PS3/XB360

LEGO STAR WARS: THE COMPLETE SAGA

■ **Publisher:** LucasArts ■ **ESRB:** Everyone 10+

Encompassing all six Jedi-sporting, droid-blasting, vehicle-piloting episodes, *The Complete Saga* delivers a small-moon-size package of all things Lego...and *Star Wars*. A few improvements to the already immensely popular previous titles include new characters and levels. Best yet, the Wii version joins the party this time around, meaning you get to mimic lightsaber moves for battling foes by using the Wii Remote.

+BOTTOM LINE: If you happen to be a *Star Wars* and/or Lego guru, you owe it to yourself to pick this one up...*only* if you failed to arrive at the party on time in the first place.

Wii

ZACK & WIKI: QUEST FOR BARBAROS' TREASURE

■ **Publisher:** Capcom ■ **ESRB:** Everyone

Below the surface of *Zack & Wiki*'s unfortunately childish presentation lies a dynamite point-and-click puzzle-solving adventure. With roots in classic LucasArts adventure games and motion controls that are mostly intuitive and fun, the game offers much to Wii enthusiasts of all ages. The puzzles themselves are creative and addictive, and though a lack of multiplayer hurts (the game has two characters right in the title, after all), it's still a blast taking turns solving stages with a pal.

+BOTTOM LINE: Ignore the packaging and give *Zack & Wiki* a shot; you'll find it one of the most interesting Wii games yet.

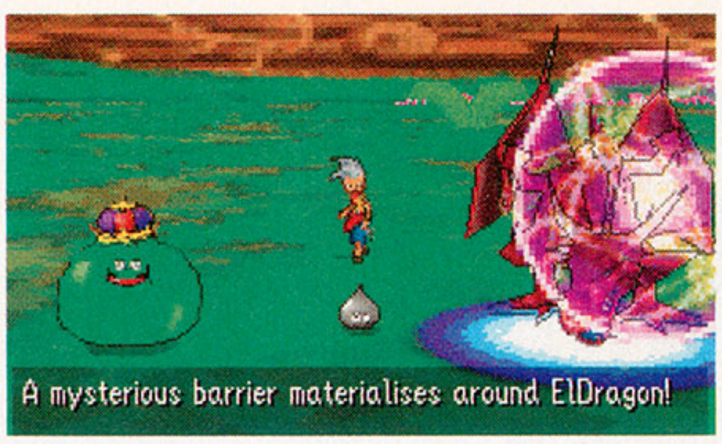
Wii/XB360

SPIDER-MAN: FRIEND OR FOE

■ **Publisher:** Activision ■ **ESRB:** Everyone 10+

It hasn't been long since Spider-Whore, uh, Man, graced us with *Spider-Man 3*. This time around, the established open-world formula swaps places with simple brawling gameplay, complete with tight-knit fixed levels, a large cast of Spidey's Saturday-morning-cartoon cohorts, and cheesy one-liners.

+BOTTOM LINE: Spider-Man's newfound constraints prohibit one of his greatest videogame strengths: webslinging. Instead, he's forced to battle crony after crony with a single attack button. It makes this one feel like a Marvel Comics edition of *Lego Star Wars*, only without the blocks...or fun.



DS

DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: JOKER

■ **Publisher:** Square Enix ■ **ESRB:** Everyone 10+

As little love as *Dragon Quest* gets in America (at least compared to its cousin *Final Fantasy*), its *Monsters* spin-offs get even less. Maybe that will change with *Joker*, the latest iteration of the series and a sort of high-class training wheels for the upcoming *Dragon Quest IX*. Sporting cartoon-style graphics and a preposterous number of monsters to capture and control, it's both a solid side story and an addictive portable diversion.

+BOTTOM LINE: Somewhere between *Pokémon Stadium* and *Dragon Quest* lies *Joker*. And really, who wouldn't prefer commanding slimes to Pikachus?

THE SALES CHART

Amazon.com's Top 20 for September

1	**Halo 3**	XB360	10	10	9.0
	Remember when a Spartan popped up in *Dead or Alive 4*? Well, to repay the favor, an unlockable *Ninja Gaiden* costume made it into *Halo 3*.				
2	**Halo 3 Limited Edition**	XB360	10	10	9.0
3	**Halo 3 Legendary Edition**	XB360	10	10	9.0
4	**Metroid Prime 3: Corruption**	Wii	9.0	8.5	8.5
	Developer Retro recently denied the rumored DS *Metroid* game it hinted at in *Corruption*. Whatever, guys. Just admit it's real already. Please?				
5	**BioShock**	XB360	10	10	10
	Some crazy analyst thinks the next *BioShock* will come to every platform, including the DS. Really? Who wants an extra-watered-down port?				
6	**Wii Play (with Wii Remote)**	Wii	4.5	6.0	5.0
7	**Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day!**	DS	8.0	7.0	6.0
8	**Carnival Games**	Wii	Not Reviewed		
9	**Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!**	DS	8.5	9.0	9.5
10	**Heavenly Sword**	PS3	8.0	8.0	9.0
	Heavenly Sword borrows not only *God of War*'s gameplay, but also its weapons—you can sneak a peek at Kratos' Blades of Chaos in the game.				
11	**Warhawk Bundle**	PS3	8.5	7.0	8.5
12	**Madden NFL 08**	XB360	9.0	9.0	8.5
13	**Madden NFL 08**	PS2	Not Reviewed		
14	**New Super Mario Bros.**	DS	9.5	10	8.0
15	**Guitar Hero II (Bundle with Guitar)**	PS2	9.0	9.0	8.5
16	**Pokémon Diamond**	DS	8.5	9.0	8.5
17	**Lair**	PS3	6.0	5.5	5.0
18	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08**	XB360	7.5	7.5	8.0
19	**Medal of Honor: Airborne**	XB360	6.5	8.0	5.5
20	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08**	PS2	Not Reviewed		

GAME OVER

press continue for gamerscopes, chinese democracy, and furry robots

> SEANBABY'S REST OF THE CRAP

Get the Most Suck for Your Buck

How much sadness can you buy for $100?

Despite his rugged good looks, Seanbaby has appeared on over 100 percent fewer romance novel covers than Fabio.

SINCE THE FIRST CAVEMAN handed a dollar to another caveman in exchange for a Nintendo game tape and was disappointed with his choice, we've wondered how much sadness you could generate from a single $100 bill. I put this to the test at my local game store. My mission: Take a $100 gift card and come out holding a shopping bag with the worst possible contents.

That part being simple, I now had to decide on the more complicated rules. First, I couldn't modify or misuse the product in any way. For example, I couldn't use a DS box to improperly contain poisonous snakes and then complain. It's unfair scrutiny, and as I learned the hard way, it violates the warranty on your snake. Next: the rating system. An average of each product's review scores might work, but if I'm going to go with a bunch of subjective opinions, I'm going with someone I trust: Phil Collins. Each item will be rated using Su-Su-Sudio Crystals. These are crystallized formations of pure unjoy that drop from Phil Collins as you damage him.

To train your mind to read this new form of rating system, look at it like this: Each item is in direct comparison to what it would be like if a child received singer/songwriter Phil Collins as a birthday gift and the family then had to fight him off with sorcery and magic.

Universal Studios Theme Parks Adventure (GC)

Cost: $6.99

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

From the box itself: "NOTICE: The game is not a true representation of Universal Studios(TM) Theme Parks, but an interactive game based on Universal Studios(TM) Theme Parks."

You know it must be good if the hokey thing it's named after is trying to distance itself. "WARNING: Universal Studios would like you to know that, look, a lot of this game was made by some guy in Korea who wouldn't listen to us and was going through a divorce at the time. And we're just learning polygons, so give us a break. Plus, one of the cut-scenes is footage of my colonoscopy, but that's so not my fault."

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer strategy guide

Cost: $14.99

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

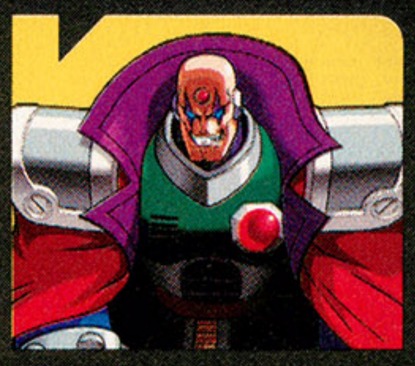
After 126 illustrated pages of explanation on how to move through a mazeless hallway and use the attack button in a game I'll never play, I put it to you that stupid people read terrible, terrible books. Did you know that the Super-Skrull possesses each of the Fantastic Four's powers *and* that he wields them with great ease? I swear I just read you the bottom three-fourths of page 36. In its entirety.

Soul Plane (DVD)

Cost: $5.99

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

Did you ever notice that white people and black people are comically different? Now imagine if those two



PAGE 134

Retro: Labyrinthine plots

PAGE 136

Grudge: Heroes of reality rock

PAGE 139

Comic: Ninja quality control

kinds of people were to get on a plane. This movie explores that concept and more, building to an Act 3 that shames you even if your people don't have an airline modeled after its racial stereotypes. This movie will make you ashamed of being an Eskimo—and speaking of, it's about damn time.

Unfabulous (GBA)

Cost: $14.99

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

This is, as of the second I type this, the very latest GBA game. Which means there's a real chance of this being the system's final performance. To put this in Hollywood terms, this would be like Sidney Poitier appearing in *Soul Plane* as a screaming Girl Scout and then dying. Or maybe I buried that analogy too deep in imagery for you to come out the other side with it making any sense. To my credit, *Unfabulous* is a collection of minigames about high school popularity featuring giant digitized heads of teen TV actors, and it's nearly impossible to share that experience with words.

Orphen: Scion of Sorcery (PS2)

Cost: $4.99

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

This role-playing game gets every shortcoming of the genre correct. Ludicrously childish Japanese cartoons tell one-eighth of some kind of story with confusingly underwritten peoplelike things in boring cut-scenes you can't skip. Opening each treasure chest is a 30-second spectacle where your character and the box spin alone in a void. The only way you could have a more dramatic distribution of healing herbs would be to have Liberace throw AIDS medicine from a luckdragon. You can't skip any of these countless chest-opening sagas, either. Fights are you standing still and choosing to push a button or not to push a button until blurry nearby things are dead.

James Cameron's Dark Angel (PS2)

Cost: $4.99 (Box not included)

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

Has someone done a study on why this show didn't work? We all agree as a society that we like James Cameron and Jessica Alba. There must be some kind of interesting explanation for why no one has ever seen this show. The fact that the game isn't good shouldn't surprise anyone, but from my understanding, this is a show about a superpowered karate girl by the guy who did *Rambo 2*, *Aliens*, and *Terminator 2*. That should have been President of TV, right?

James Cameron's Dark Angel (PS2)

Cost: $4.99 (Box not included)

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

The store had a second copy of *James Cameron's Dark Angel* without a box. I found it suspicious that every copy of *Dark Angel* featuring Jessica Alba was missing all the parts that included superhot pictures of Jessica Alba on it. I actually added two crystals to this copy's rating, since owning two *Dark Angel*s has such a helpless frustration to it. Seriously, what could I possibly do with two copies of *Dark Angel*? Write "Morrissey" on them and sell them to gay people 10 years ago? That isn't even close to a solution!

Get On Da Mic (PS2)

Cost: $4.99

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

A freestyle-rap game so scratched that it refuses to run in my PS2 is difficult to review, but perfect for a bag of things that suck! So instead of a critical examination of *Get On Da Mic*, here's a story that will help add context to the rating system I've chosen to use. Once, while I was working as a writer for some now-cancelled MTV cartoon, the topic of Phil Collins came up. Another writer at the table asked, "What does 'Su-Su-Sudio' even mean?" And, as I'd waited for my entire life, I responded with the best Phil Collins joke I've ever written: "That's what a normal song sounds like when you sing it with balls in your mouth."

Stolen (Xbox)

Cost: $5.99

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating

This is a ripoff of any 20 stealth games you'd care to name, and this particular copy's had a rough life. It was originally bought from Blockbuster, sold to EB, had its EB stickers torn off to be replaced with GameStop/EB stickers, and then had its price marked down twice more. After all that, the still very visible original Blockbuster price is *one dollar less* than what this store is selling it for. Amazing. *Stolen* has taken the form of some kind of quilt of consumer rejection. The game itself might be good enough to be called "generic," but this particular copy is the true meaning of "Su-Su-Sudio."

Mary-Kate and Ashley: Winners Circle (GBC)

Cost: $9.99

Su-Su-Sudio Crystal rating:

For reasons no god could explain to me, this was the only Game Boy Color game the store had on sale, and it was marked at $14.99. I knew it was bad, not only through obvious means, but because I've played every game these bony troll creatures have made. However, I only had $10 left on my card. I explained to the clerk the premise of this article and that these extraordinary circumstances were the very last chance his corporation had to sell this game. I don't know if he'll get fired or promoted for my saying this, but he gave it to me for $9.99.

I also picked up *Aeon Flux* (XB) for $5.99, *The Guy Game* (XB) for $12.99, and *50 Cent: Bulletproof* (PS2) for $9.99, which together yielded an impressive 24 Su-Su-Sudio Crystals. After tax, I had spent $99.70, leaving just enough for a tiny *World of WarCraft* pin that said simply "DRUID." But if I were busy owning that pin, some druid would have to carry his maps and inhalers in an undecorated backpack. And then how would the world know where to put its punches?

Final Tally:

Money Spent: $99.70

Su-Su-Sudio Crystals earned:

That's .9328 crystals per dollar, and the emotional equivalent of 9.3 Phil Collinses emerging from your birthday present. Take this experiment as a cautionary tale: While the explosive growth of our videogame consumer market will lead to bigger and better games and a wider fan base to enjoy them with, this proves that it can be used for great evil. I mean, look at what happened here. I took a small amount of money to a game store and, if Christianity is to be believed, almost certainly killed an angel with it.

> OLD-SCHOOL EGM

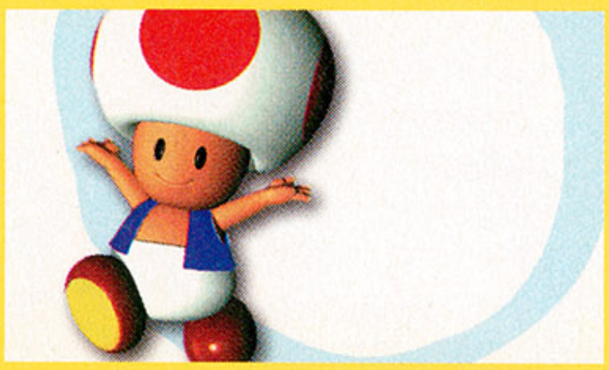
10 Years Ago...

On the cover: Diddy Kong Racing

Not only did Diddy and his posse score the cover, but those darn Rare critters also mustered the game of the month award. The Review Crew gushed over the game's multiple vehicles, hidden secrets, and the fact that it was a racer capable of matching *Mario Kart 64* on the tracks.

All you want for Christmas

Anyone who thinks *EGM* rarely goes above and beyond the call of duty ought to reconsider. After swapping jeans and T-shirts for matching elf costumes, the crew cast aside their manhood long enough to produce one classy Holiday Buyers' Guide.



What's the deal with Toad?

'Tis a question many mushroom lovers have asked, but only *EGM* felt the need to actually find out. So what exactly is Toad's gender? After numerous tests and theories, *EGM* concluded that it doesn't matter if Toad is male or female—all that matters is that you don't try to eat it. Because, well, that's just gross.

> RETRONAUTS PRESENTS

WTFiction!? No. 4: Mega Man

Deciphering silly stories

By Jeremy Parish

Our countdown of confusing stories is back this month with the *Mega Man* series. Yeah, a blue 'bot who fights evil androids may not seem strange, but factor in all the sequels, and it gets weird.

START HERE

1: DR. THOMAS LIGHT

Could Dr. Light have known the ramifications of teaming up with Albert Wily? Maybe! He did, after all, create arcane devices to let him send cool weapon upgrades to Mega Man X in the future.

CREATED

3: MEGA MAN

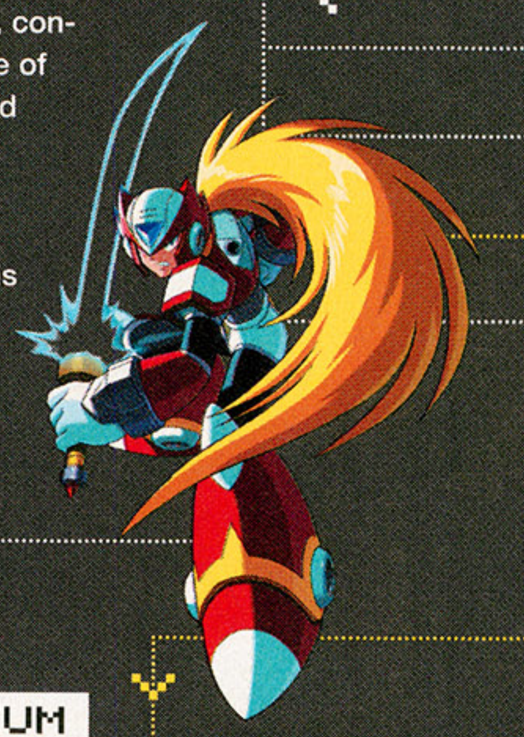
The simple household assistant named Rock volunteered to be converted into a fighting robot to combat the evil of Dr. Wily. He did this by fighting Wily's inventions with weapons filched from previous enemies. Mega Man's current fate is unknown, but his legacy lived on in his little brother, X.

ENEMIES

RIVALS

4: ZERO

Wily's final creation, Zero, converted to the glorious side of good after Sigma defeated him. After that, he sealed himself away, awakening after the end of the Elf Wars to battle Weil and his deranged clone of X. Though Zero won, he ended up sacrificing himself in a final battle with Weil.



2: DR. ALBERT WILY

Wily betrayed Light and turned their robots into cleverly themed engines of destruction. For a genius, he's pretty slow: It wasn't until a dozen or more robotic coup attempts failed that he went straight for the kill and invented Zero.

CREATED

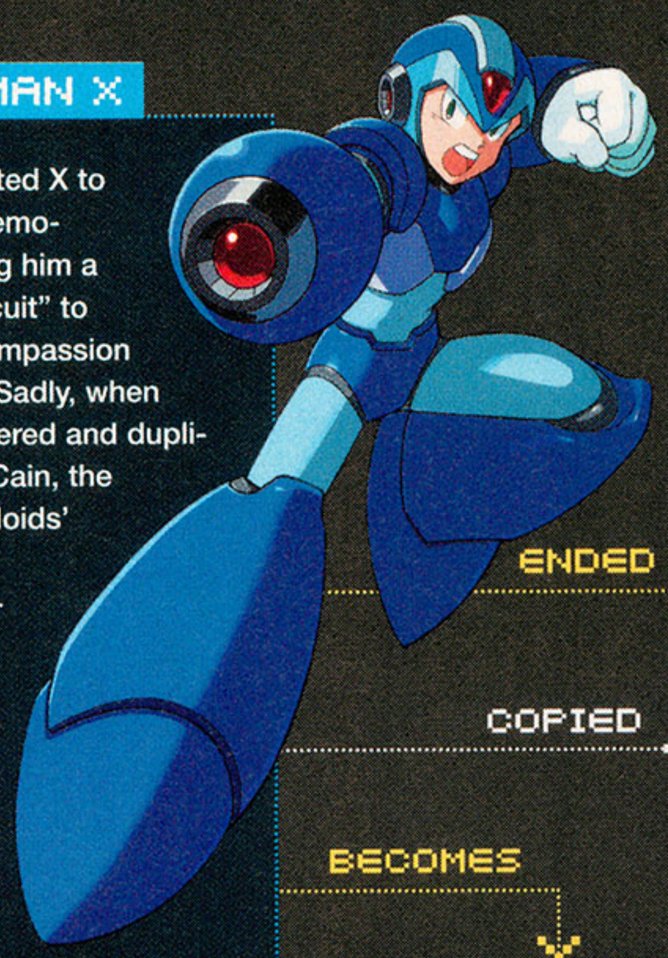
12: ELYSIUM

A space-borne sanctuary for mankind, the Elysium system eventually grew out of control and began doing more harm than good; it was subdued by Mega Man Trigger. Upon its final defeat millennia later, Elysium reverted to its original form, the mysterious Elder System.

DESTROYS

5: MEGA MAN X

Dr. Light created X to have human emotions by giving him a "suffering circuit" to ensure his compassion for mankind. Sadly, when X was discovered and duplicated by Dr. Cain, the resulting Reploids' imperfectly copied suffering circuits turned them into violent Mavericks. X, who hated fighting, then spent his life battling his own cheap copies before sacrificing himself to end the Elf Wars. Talk about a thankless life.



ENDED

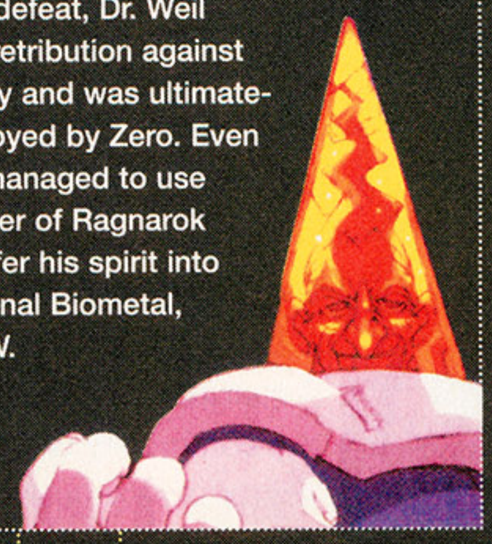
7: THE ELF WARS

No, this has nothing whatsoever to do with *Dungeons & Dragons*. Instead, it was a four-year war of genocide launched by Dr. Weil after the end of both the Maverick Virus and Sigma's final defeat. Ultimately, X sacrificed himself to stop the conflict.

STARTED

9: DR. WEIL

Exiled but immortal after his Elf War defeat, Dr. Weil sought retribution against humanity and was ultimately destroyed by Zero. Even so, he managed to use the power of Ragnarok to transfer his spirit into the original Biometal, Model W.



GAME OVER

COPIED

FRIENDS

BECOMES

ENEMIES

PROTOTYPE

CREATED

11: THE MASTER

The last true human being on Earth, the Master created a refuge called Elysium. When the Elysium system became too ruthless, he worked closely with his loyal assistant, Mega Man Trigger, to put a stop to it.

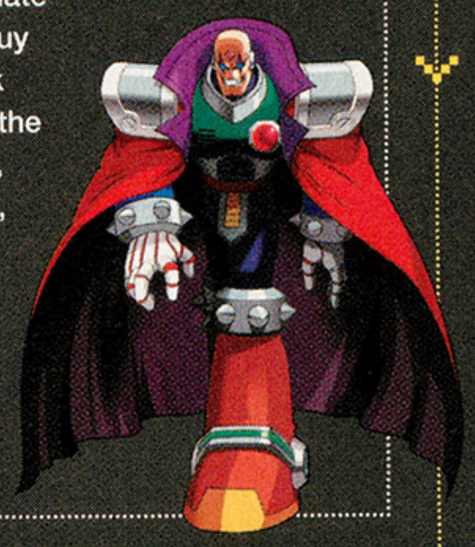
CREATED

8: CIEL

Bioengineered child genius Ciel created the genocidal Copy X. But it's OK, because she put things right by teaming up with Zero to stop her creation and the revitalized Dr. Weil. Plus, she transformed the spirits of X and Zero into Biometals. Nice gal.

6: SIGMA

Sigma, Dr. Cain's ultimate creation, was a nice guy until he went maverick and decided to crush the human race. Like Wily, he was easy to defeat, but not so simple to get rid of. That is, until he was (finally) purged by X with the Mother Elf program. 'Bout time.



FRIENDS

REVIVES

ENEMIES

ENEMIES

MUTUAL DESTRUCTION

BECOMES

10: BIOMETALS

Containing the essences of defeated heroes (and villains), Biometals allow humans and Reploids to take on those robots' personas, called "Mega Men." We can presume that this technology gave rise to Elysium's legion of Mega Man–class warriors and assistants.

13: MEGA MAN TRIGGER

Formerly an artificial-humanoid warrior for Elysium, Trigger honored his creator, the Master, by fighting to put a stop to its destructive tendencies. Trigger—later known as Mega Man Volnutt—gradually uncovered the secrets of Elysium and was last seen stranded on the moon, hanging out with his former enemy, Yuna, whose spirit is trapped in the body of his girlfriend's mom. Yeah, it's weird.

CREATED?

N/A: MEGA MAN BATTLE NETWORK

Mega Man Battle Network (and its successor, *Mega Man Star Force*) is a role-playing-game-like remake of the original series and is unrelated to the main timeline. Which is good, because god knows it's convoluted enough already.

Next Month:
No. 3 *Final Fantasy VII*

> GAMERSCOPES

Playing Fate
By Mr. Death

I may ring your doorbell this Thanksgiving. And god help you if you don't have a plate of mash ready—I'll stuff your immortal soul in a turkey. How's that for thanks? Oh, and here are this month's forecasts:

Aquarius (Jan. 20-Feb. 18): While the gaming community will applaud your Halloween costume as Vaan of *Final Fantasy XII*, everyone else will just think you're a transsexual.

Pisces (Feb. 19-Mar. 20): Making friends at school is tough, but making friends at school while wearing that *Oblivion* T-shirt is going to be damn near impossible.

Aries (Mar. 21-Apr. 19): With Wii-mote in hand, one of your trademark temper tantrums will finally pay off by accidentally earning you the high score in *Boogie*.

Taurus (Apr. 20-May 20): Your Dave & Buster's free credit scam will seem bulletproof until, upon implementation, you realize all the games at Dave & Buster's suck ass.

Gemini (May 21-June 20): The gods of gaming are with you this month, so take advantage, because man, are they gonna tear you a new one next month.

Cancer (June 21-July 22): Though you long for love, your princess will forever be in another castle. So you might as well hump the hell out of the next toadstool you find.

Leo (July 23-Aug. 22): Contrary to what you've been repeatedly and incessantly telling everybody, you actually *can*—and will—wait for *Mass Effect* to come out.

Virgo (Aug. 23-Sep. 22): You never thought games would matter in life. But you can't help thinking that if you'd beaten NES *Jaws* you might have a slight edge over the shark.

Libra (Sep. 23-Oct. 22): If you liked *Manhunt*, you'll love *Manhunt 2*. And if you love *Manhunt 2*, you're really going to get a kick out of the next several days.

Scorpio (Oct. 23-Nov. 21): It's true that patience is a virtue, but the fact is that Giant Boo is never going to move again unless you turn around.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22-Dec. 21): A sibling will accidentally lose your DS. And by "accidentally" we mean "with spiteful forethought," and by "lose" we mean "piss upon."

Capricorn (Dec. 22-Jan. 19): You'll realize that, while they're technically impressive, today's game controllers lack the skull-denting power of the classic NES pads.

Pixel art by eBoy

> GRUDGE MATCH

Reality Rock

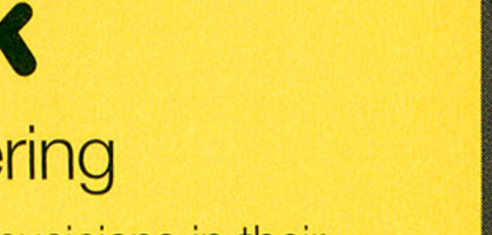
Heroes worth remembering

Nothing rocks more than watching musicians in their prime. But the glory days have come and gone for some *Guitar Hero* all-stars. Let's see where they're better off....

Guitar Hero III VS. Real Life

Fight Slash in the ultimate thrash-off!
Advantage: GH3

Guns N' Roses

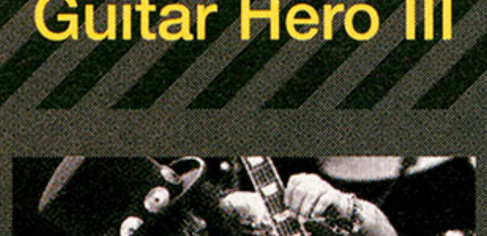


Over 20 years later, Axl's still trying to piece together an album

Rockin' lead-off track from their breakthrough '90s album
Advantage: GH3

Smashing Pumpkins

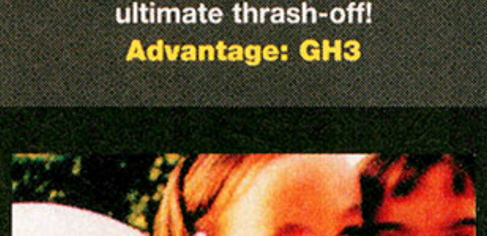
Corgan looks more like Lex Luthor than ever



1988: *Cult of Personality*
Advantage: GH3

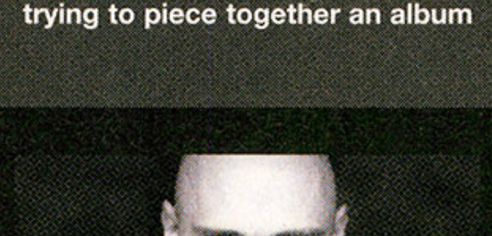
Living Colour

2007: Cult following, at best



Performing one of their songs from the '60s

Rolling Stones



Performing all of their songs from the '60s
Advantage: Life

Unlockable crooner in the game
Advantage: GH3

Bret Michaels

Like many before, riding the VH1-reality-show train to obscurity

Winner: Guitar Hero III

Leave it to videogames to bring out the best in everyone—even aging rockers!

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> NEXT MONTH

EGM Bonus Round

Holiday Issue (#223) • On sale November 20

A BAKER'S DOZEN

Deck the halls and...oh, whatever. Who has the time to fa-la-la-la-la and all that holiday crap with so many games to cover, which is why we're working overtime to produce a very special 13th issue of *EGM*.

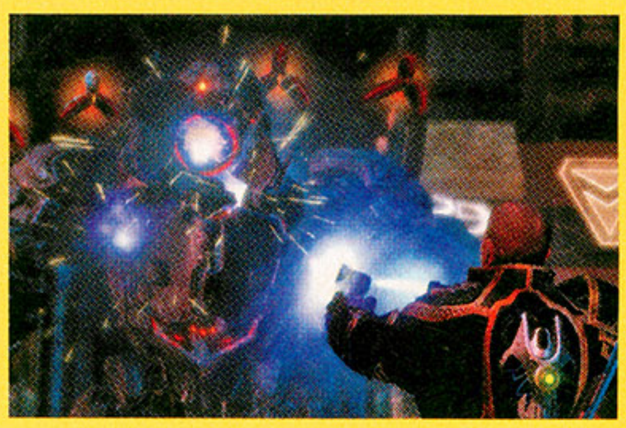
We can already hear the strain of the Review Crew as they noisily prepare to tackle this year's remaining top contenders. ***Super Mario Galaxy***, ***Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare***, ***Assassin's Creed***, and ***Unreal Tournament 3*** are just a few of the highly anticipated titles that we'll tackle in the coming issue.

This year, our ever-popular Holiday Buyers' Guide is back, and it's better than ever. We take the holiday's top games and pair them with the perfect gifts—from affordable tchotchkes to pure extravagances (camp ***Rock Band***?!). We even lay out a gift-giving guide for those not on your A-list—take that, *SkyMall* magazine!

Finally, on the preview end of things, we've got a huge progress report on the titles that were *supposed* to arrive this year. Find out whether these game delays (which include the likes of ***Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots***, ***Grand Theft Auto IV***, and ***Star Wars: The Force Unleashed***) were for the better.

(All planned editorial content is subject to change.)

> PREVIEWS



- **Too Human (XB360)**
- Burnout Paradise (PS3/XB360)
- Super Smash Bros. Brawl (Wii)
- Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep (PSP)

> REVIEWS

- **Manhunt 2 (Wii/PS2/PSP)**
- Uncharted: Drake's Fortune (PS3)
- Mass Effect (XB360)
- Contra IV (DS)
- Rock Band (PS3/XB360/PS2)

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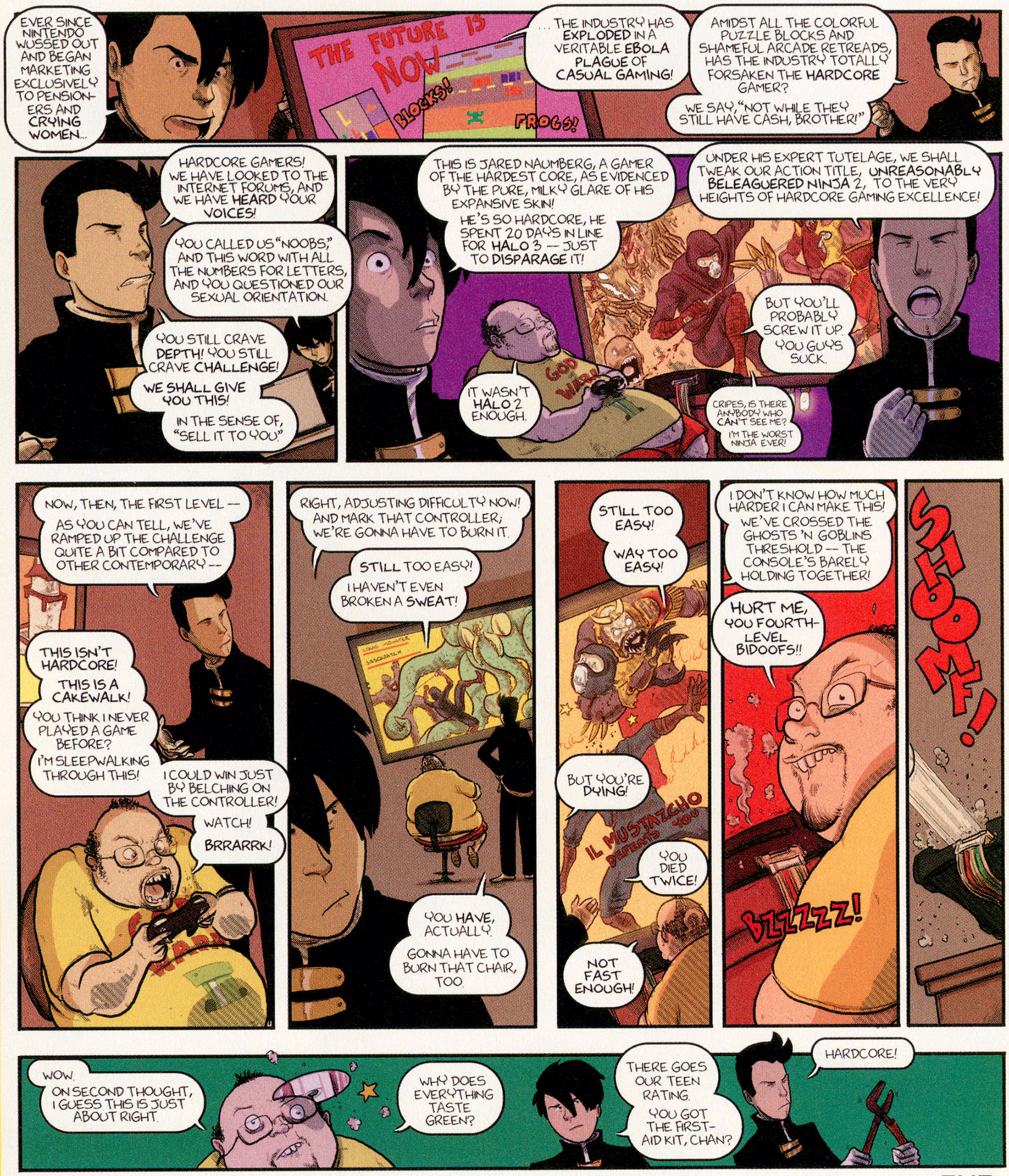
Ninja Gaming Stigma

By Jeremy "Norm" Scott



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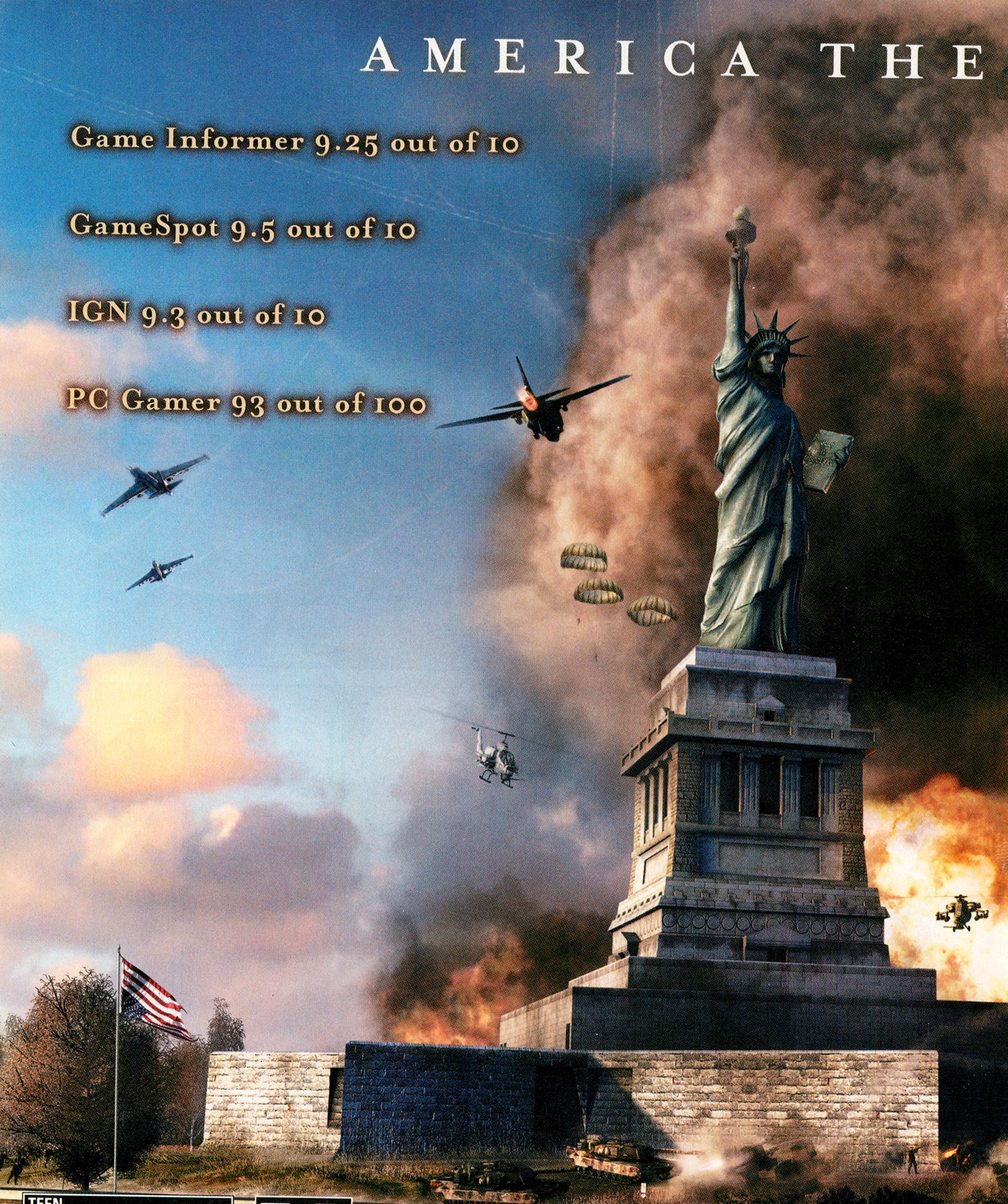
Game Informer 9.25 out of 10

GameSpot 9.5 out of 10

IGN 9.3 out of 10

PC Gamer 93 out of 100



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